PAUL'S CONVERSION EXPERIENCE AND HIS POST-CONVERSION VIEW OF AND RELATIONSHIP WITH JUDAISM

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Introduction

Paul's encounter with the risen Christ was a crucial event in his life and the life of the early Church. The divine-human encounter piloted his apostolic mission to the Gentiles and the propagation of the Jesus movement worldwide. It is common to speak of this life-altering moment as the beginning of Paul's spiritual conversion. However, conversion has been a subject of theological consideration for some time. In a general sense, conversion involves points of departure and arrival, from a former to a new way of living spiritually and morally, and teachings to which this new lifestyle is anchored, for example, religious or ideological beliefs.

The visible change in the life of Paul following his encounter with Jesus Christ was undeniable. Having been a zealous persecutor of the followers of the Way, all of a sudden, he became one of its most ardent promoters.[1] The points of departure and arrival are present in his shift from being a pious Jew who upholds the *Torah* and the traditions taught by his ancestors to being a follower of Christ. This article sincerely endeavors to understand this subtle yet radical change in Paul's life and its effect on Judaism.

[1]Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 302.

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Until the beginning of the twentieth century, scholars assumed that Paul abandoned Judaism for Christianity. However, there was a shift in perspective as scholars of the later 20th century argued against Paul's religious conversion.[2] Comprehending the nature of Paul's conversion experience and his post-conversion relationship with Judaism is complex. Thus, this article will raise relevant questions concerning Paul's conversion experience and his post-conversion adherence to the Jewish religion. What change did Paul undergo in his conversion? Did he change his religion? If the converted Paul remained a Jew, what do we make of his critiques on the *Torah* and the election of Israelites (vis-a-vis the mission to the Gentiles)? Having been raised in a broader Hellenistic world, Paul must have found Jewish exclusiveness quite disturbing. He did abandon Jewish particularism, which upheld the distinction between Jews and Gentiles, and declared that "there is no longer Jew or Greek" (Gal. 3:28). Hence, it would be proper to say that Paul discarded the narrow and exclusivist worldview of Judaism to embrace a universal Judaism, devoid of differentiation.

And finally, did Paul not see Jesus Christ as fulfilling Jewish hopes and expectations (Mt 5:17) and concluded with the Christ-faith as the "true development and completion of the Jewish faith?"[3] Can we not understand Paul's Gentile mission as a Christ-centered reinterpretation of one of the Israel-centered patterns of universalism?[4]

[2]Magnus Zetterholm, *Approaches to Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 1 and 9. The traditional view that there was an absolute contradiction between Paul and Judaism was challenged by the contemporary scholars. They also challenged the idea that Paul liberated Christianity from the burden of the Jewish law.

[3]Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 305.

[4]G. N. Stanton, "Galatians," *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, eds. John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1155

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Paul's Christ-Encounter in Pauline Letters and Acts: An Exegetical Study

This exegetical study focuses on the biblical texts that recount the foundational event—Paul's encounter with the risen Christ, which triggered his conversion. The biblical texts to be used will be the Lukan and Pauline narratives. Although the *Acts* and the *Pauline* letters differ in writing styles, purposes, theological motives, and addressees, they share the plot of Paul's conversion from a former Pharisee to a missionary of Christ to the Gentiles.[5]

Paul's Christ-Encounter in Paul's Own Words

Paul speaks of his encounter with the risen Christ on three different occasions (Gal 1:12, 15-16a; 1 Cor 9:1; 15:8-10; and perhaps 2 Cor 4:6; Phil 3:4b-11). Though the context may vary each time, "the consequences of the experience—the conviction that God had raised Jesus, making him Christ and Lord; the conviction that God had commissioned Paul, making him an apostle to the Gentiles—are everywhere present, as an assumption or as theme."[6] Paul did not voluntarily speak of his Christ encounter but always brought up the subject when provoked by his opponents.[7] Time and again, the legitimacy of his apostolic authority and his Gospel were disputed (Gal. 1:1; 2 Cor. 11:5; 1 Thess. 2:3-6) because he had not seen or met the historical Jesus and was not named among the Twelve. When

[5]While Luke situates Paul's Christ-encounter on the road to Damascus, Paul himself does not mention the place of his encounter with the risen Christ.

[6]Terence L. Donaldson, "Introduction to the Pauline Corpus," *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, eds. John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1065.

[7]Udo Schnelle, *Apostle Paul: His life and Theology* (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2012), 93.

challenged, he was forced to fall back on his Christ experience. In doing so, he linked his call to be an apostle directly with the resurrection appearance of Jesus.[8] Here, we shall look at the three Pauline texts recounting his encounter with Christ.

Galatians 1:12-16a

In Gal. 1:12-16a, Paul obstinately states that the Gospel he received is not from human authority or origin, ἀλλὰ δί ἀπὸ καλύψεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (but through a revelation of/from Jesus Christ—v.12). The key noun in v.12 is ἀποκάλυψις, which is usually understood in the light of apocalyptic writings, often referring to the unveiling of what was previously hidden (i.e. the 'revelation' or 'disclosure' of Jesus Christ).[9] The ἀποκάλυψις in v.12 refers to the all-important and unique Christ encounter that Paul reportedly experienced on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19a), and not the various visions and revelations of the kind mentioned in 2 Cor 12:1.[10] In this sense, God's revelation to Paul is understood as 'God's disclosure of his Son Jesus Christ.'[11] Here, Paul speaks of the revelation in terms of uncovering a

[8]James Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 99.

[9]Stanton, "Galatians," 1154

[10]Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 88.

[11]Gordon D. Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 229. See also Schnelle, *Apostle Paul*, 89. When the construction of ἀποκαλύψεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ is taken as a subjective genitive, it indicates Christ as the Revealer or the Source of the Gospel. But when seen in connection with the phrase ἀποκαλύψαι τὸν Υἱὸν αὐτοῦ ἐν ἐμοί (to reveal his Son in/to me) in v.16a, the 'revelation of Jesus Christ' in v.12 appears to be an objective genitive, meaning, that it is the 'revelation about Jesus Christ' and not 'from Jesus Christ.'

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truth rather than the seeing of a person—a mental perception rather than a visual perception.[12]

In vv.15-16a, Paul's remarkable change is ascribed to God himself; his induction into the ministry was due to God's "good pleasure" (εὐδόκησεν), God's "separating" (ἀφορίσας), God's "calling" (καλέσας) and God's "revealing" (ἀποκαλύψαι).[13] The word εὐδόκησεν indicates God's purpose, resolve, and choice[14] and serves to emphasize the soteriological dimension of the event for the person of Paul. In contrast, the word, ἀφορίσας emphasizes the universal dimension of the event since Paul is 'set apart' to preach among the Gentiles.[15] In speaking about his call and commissioning, Paul alludes to the Old Testament narratives of the prophets. He understands that God called him in a prophet-like manner. His claim, '*God had set me apart before I was born,*" echoes Jer. 1:5 and Is. 49:1, 5. Like Jeremiah, God arrested him and summoned him into service (Jer. 1:4-19). Like Deutero-Isaiah, he is a servant of Yahweh separated from his mother's womb (before he was born). He was tasked with bringing light to the Gentiles (Gal. 1:16b; c.f. Rom. 1:1; Is. 49:1,6). He is to fulfill the proclamation, announced in the Old Testament but not yet carried out, of the saving will of God that includes the Gentiles.[16]

The key word in v.16a is ἀποκαλύψαι (to reveal) is an aorist infinitive active form of the verb ἀποκαλύπτω. In Christian theology, revelation refers to the significant self-disclosure of God to man. Ἀποκαλύπτω is a compound word formed from

[12]Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 104.

[13]Thomas Schreiner, *Paul: Apostle of God's Glory in Christ* (USA: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 31.

[14]Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 53.

[15]Schnelle, *Apostle Paul*, 90.

[16]Schnelle, *Apostle Paul*, 89-90.

καλύπτω (to hide/conceal) and preposition ἄπο (from), and carries the idea of unveiling something previously hidden.[17] The revelation Paul received during the Christ encounter was fundamental to his apostolic calling because the content of his proclamation to the Gentiles is contained in it. In this apocalyptic vision, he reached an understanding of the Son of God.[18] The words Υἱὸν αὐτοῦ (his Son) reflected Jesus' divine sonship in the unique, ontological sense (Rom 1:3f; 1 Cor 1:9; Gal 4:4; 1 Thes1:10) and indicated that Paul received an insight into Jesus' unique divine sonship as well as his Lordship and Messiahship.[19]

When the words ἐν ἐμοί in v.16a are translated as a simple dative (to me),[20] this heightens the subjectivity of the revelation of Christ as Paul's personal subjective experience.[21] But when translated literally as 'in me,' it entails that the Christ encounter left in Paul an indelible imprint of the presence of Christ so that through him, the glory of Christ will reach the Gentiles. "In me" also reflects the "inward and intensely personal character of God's revelation to him of the risen Jesus."[22] This does not rule out the seeing of an external object and should not

[17]*The New International Dictionary of New Testament Vol. III,* 309-310. Other words with similar meaning include δελόω, derived from δῆλος, which means 'make clear' or 'manifest,' calls more attention to the goal, i.e. as a result something becomes known and manifest. Ἐπιφάνεια, from the root φαν (cf. φαίνομαι, appear; φανερόω, let be seen) suggests a visual appearance or a manifestation of deity. Other relevant concepts include γνωρίζω, make known (knowledge, art. γινώσκω); ὅραμα, an apparition (something seen) and ὀπτασία, a vision.

[18]Lucien Cerfaux, *The Christian in the Theology of St. Paul* (Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967), 84.

[19]Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 55.

[20]Schnelle, *Apostle Paul*, 90.

[21]Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 105.

[22]Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 54.

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be taken as implying a merely inward revelation. The words ἀποκαλύψαι τὸν Υἱὸν αὐτοῦ connote a disclosure involving perception and understanding on the part of the recipient. The inward illumination and the physical vision are intimately linked and are part of God's revelation to Paul (1 Cor 9:1; 15:8).[23]

First Corinthians 9:1

In 1 Cor 9:1, Paul defends the legitimacy of his apostleship based on his Christ encounter. Without mentioning the time and place, he claims that he has 'seen' Jesus the Lord (9:1; c.f. 15:3-11).[24] He unleashes four rhetorical questions (9:1), "Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord?" Each question begins with the Greek negative particle οὐ, expecting a positive answer: 'Of course I am; of course, I am an apostle; of course, I have seen Jesus; of course you are.'[25]

In the sentence "οὐχὶ Ἰησοῦν τὸν κύριον ἑόρακα?" (Have I not seen Jesus the Lord – 9:1), we notice a question with a double emphasis, namely, the words "Ἰησοῦν τὸν κύριον" and "ἑόρακα." **ἑόρακα (Have seen)** in perfect tense and is deliberately[26] used to imply "an event which took place in the past and

[23]Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, 54.

[24]John Barclay, "1 Corinthians," *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, eds. John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1122

[25]Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 393-94. Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord (1 Cor 9:1-2).

[26]Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics* (Michigan: Zondervan Academic, 1996), 573. As Moulton points out, the perfect tense is most important, exegetically, of all the Greek tenses. The perfect is used less frequently than the present, aorist, future, or imperfect; when it is used, there is usually a deliberate choice on the part of the writer.

whose effect is still operative – an event which made possible and constituted Paul's existence as an apostle."[27] In other words, it means that Paul had seen Jesus at a point in time in the past, and its effect continues in the present in such a way that his initial experience of the risen Christ once and for all constitutes his existence as an apostle.[28] It also means this initial experience was distinctive and unique, different from the subsequent experiences.[29]

The introductory οὐχί is emphatic, insisting on the affirmative response[30] it requires, while the surrounding questions have the simple οὐ(κ). It implies Paul declaring affirmatively, "Surely I have seen Jesus, our Lord, have I not?" The reference to Christ, Ἰησοῦν τὸν κύριον ἡμῶν also comes in the emphatic expression "Jesus, the Lord of us," implying that "the earthly Jesus who by resurrection has assumed his place of lordship, and that lordship is over us as well."[31] Here, Paul adopts a semi-technical language to speak of the risen Christ. He is "Jesus," the name of the Son of God in his incarnation, and he is "our Lord," having become so through his resurrection from the dead.[32]

[27]Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 103.

[28]Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 573. The force of the perfect tense is simply that it describes an event that, completed in the past, has results that are existing in the present time. Or as Zerwick puts it, the perfect tense is used for "indicating not the past action as such but the present 'state of affairs' resulting from the past action."

[29]Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 103. James Dunn notes that in 1 Cor 9:1, Paul refrains from using the word ὀπτασίας (visions) to describe his Christ-encounter as he does in 2 Corinthians 12:1.

[30]Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (London: Yale University Press, 2008), 355.

[31]Fee, *Pauline Christology,* 126. The only other place in the corpus where this exact combination occurs—both Jesus and Lord, followed by "our"—is Rom 4:24, which is likewise a reference to the risen Lord.

[32]Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 395.

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First Corinthians 15:5-10

In 1 Cor. 15:5-8, Paul includes himself among the series of witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus while addressing the question about bodily resurrection.[33] Paul emphasizes the objective reality of Christ's death and resurrection by mentioning the four truths of the Christian faith: that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures (15:3); that he was buried (15:4a); that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures (15:4b) and that he appeared on different occasions to Cephas, to the twelve, to the five hundred brothers and sisters, to James and all the apostles,[34] and finally to Paul himself.

The point of Paul's rhetoric is that Christ's appearing to him, "abnormal" as it was (15:8), fulfills for him one of the criteria to be an apostle, i.e., to have 'seen' the risen Lord (1 Cor. 9:1; c.f. Acts 1:21-22). These texts (9:1; 15:8-10) serve as an apologetic for Paul's apostleship and his apostolic ministry among the Corinthians. This is evident from "the parallel uses

[33]John Schutz, *First Corinthians*, 82. In general, the Greeks believed in the immortality of the soul, but they did not accept the resurrection of the body. To them the resurrection of the body was unthinkable in view of the fact that they held the body to be the source of man's weakness and sin. Death, therefore, was very welcome, since by it, the soul would be liberated from the body; but resurrection was not welcome, because this would constitute another descent of the soul into the grave of the body.

[34]Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 731. An appearance of the resurrected Jesus to James is recorded in the apocryphal Gospel of the Hebrews, and Acts 1:6-11 reflects a tradition of several appearances to those who would come to be known as apostles. This James is the Lord's brother, who, along with his other brothers, "did not believe in him" during Jesus' earthly ministry (John 7:2-9), but who appeared with the disciples after the Resurrection. At some early stage he became a leader in the church in Jerusalem. In Gal 1:17-19, Paul uses the term "apostle" to imply that both Peter and James were apostles before him. The words "to all the apostles' may either refer strictly to the Twelve or it could also mean a larger group to whom the Lord appeared and who came to be known as apostles.

of ὁράω (to see) in 15:5, 7 and 8 and in the way 15:8 is connected to the rest of the paragraph."[35] In each case, the listing and the use of the same verb (o`ra,w) indicates that Paul understood his encounter with the risen Christ to be the same as the others. The only difference in Paul's case was the timing; it happened after such appearances had ceased.[36] The ὤφθη of 1 Cor. 15:5-8 demonstrates that all those listed here were convinced that it was the same reality, the same Jesus crucified, dead, and buried who appeared to them.[37]

The keywords in both these texts (1 Cor. 9:1 and 15:8-10) are ἑόρακά and ὤφθη, forms of the verb ὁράω. In 9:1, where the verb ἑώρακα (I have seen) is used in the perfect tense, where Paul is the active subject, but in 15:8, the passive form ὤφθη κἀμοί (he also appeared to me) is used to show Paul as a passive object.[38] The passive ὤφθη implies that the initiative was indeed Christ's 'to appear' before the apostles and lastly to Paul (15:5-8). The initiative in the 'seeing,' lay not with the seer but with the one seen, who appeared and showed himself to (dative).[39] Paul himself was convinced that what he saw was external to him; it was Jesus alive from the dead, alive in a new mode of existence (spiritual body). Both the verbs, ἑώρακά and ὁράω carry an exclusively Christological-soteriological meaning, and both the texts, 9:1 and 15:8, "manifest a firm connection between vision/appearance and election to apostleship."[40]

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[35]Schnelle, *Apostle Paul*, 88.

[36]Fee, *Pauline Christology*, 126.

[37]Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 133.

[38]*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, trans. Joseph Henry Thayer, D.D. (New York: American Book Company, 1889), 451-452.

[39]Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 108.

[40]Schnelle, *Apostle Paul*, 88-89.

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Although the object of Paul's seeing appears to be indescribable, if not ambiguous, he confidently lays claim to the changes it effected in him, namely, his call and commission to be an apostle to the Gentiles (Gal. 1:16) and the Corinthian community coming to faith in Christ (1 Cor. 9:2; 15:2,11). According to James Dunn, his Christ experience is neither subjective nor objective; it lies somewhere in between, a visionary perception, the content of which remains disputed.[41] His seeing was visionary in mode (Gal. 1:12, 16, Acts 26:19) but also an accurate perception of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 9:1, 15:8).

The Lukan Accounts of the Christ-Encounter (Acts 9:1-19a; 22:1-22; 26:2-29)

In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke gives us a three-fold narrative of Paul's encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. He emphasizes the conversion of Paul, who earlier persecuted the church of Christ but then became its greatest advocate. Though Luke does not address Paul as an apostle, he has all the features that an apostle should have, namely, he has seen the risen Christ, the κύριος, he has been filled with the Holy Spirit, and has begun to proclaim the Gospel of Christ. He refers to Paul as a 'chosen instrument' to carry the Good News to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15), a "witness" of the risen Christ (Acts 22:15) who has perceived the "light" and the "glory" (22:6, 9, 11) and is designated to know His will and see the Righteous One (22:14); he is called in a prophet like manner as he is commanded by the Lord to get up and to stand on his feet (Acts 26:16a; c.f. Ezek. 2:1-3); is appointed a servant and witness by the Lord (26:16b, Jer. 1:4-10) and is sent to open people's eyes (26:18, c.f. Is. 35:5, 42:7).

[41]Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, 106.

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Summary

In his writings, Paul emphasizes the God-given revelation of his Son Jesus Christ and his call and commission in a prophet-like manner (Gal 1:15-16; 2 Cor 4:6; Phil 3:4b-11). He makes the all-important claim that he has seen Jesus alive from the dead (1 Cor. 9.1; 1 Cor 15:8). In his narration of the event of his Christ encounter, Paul's answer concerning what he saw is wide-ranging, "Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1:12), "his Son" (Gal. 1:16), "Jesus our Lord" (1 Cor. 9:1), the pronoun "he" (1 Cor. 15:8), and "light from heaven" (Acts 9:3; 22:6; 26:13). Paul's 'seeing' appears to be non-physical, non-objective and something that appeared from heaven (Acts 26:19; 2 Cor 4:6; Gal 1:12, 15-16a), except in 1 Cor. 9:1 and 15:8, where he claims actually to have seen something objectively just like the other apostles did. His words, "*Have I not seen Jesus our Lord*?" (1 Cor. 9:1), and "*he appeared also to me*" (1 Cor. 15:8) establish the belief that his Christ experience was more than a mere vision.

From the exegetical study of the biblical texts emerges the crucial insight that Paul saw the risen Christ, and in his seeing, he received the decisive revelation that Jesus is the Son of God. This God-given revelation of his Son triggered in Paul his conversion to Christ. In his conversion experience, Paul saw a higher purpose that God was calling him to be an apostle to the Gentiles (Gal. 1:16; c.f. Acts 26:13-18), and from it, he deduced the heart of his Gospel.[42]

Defining Paul's Conversion

The significant themes in this discussion include the idea of conversion, the conversion terminology in the Bible, and the definition of Paul's conversion to Christ.

[42]Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 314.

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Conversion Terminology in the Bible

The process of conversion, which involves giving a new direction to one's life and thought processes and a judgment on one's previous views and behavior, is expressed in the New Testament by three words, namely ἐπιστρέφω, μεταμέλομαι and μετανοέω. The words ἐπιστρέφω and μετανοέω, both mean 'turn round' or 'turn oneself round,' referring to an individual's conversion brought about by the influence of the Holy Spirit.[43]

Ἐπιστρέφω is used for an individual's conversion, which involves a complete transformation of his/her existence under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Μεταμέλομαι, on the other hand, expresses regret, remorse, and repentance for error, debt, failure, or sin.[44] There is a looking back, but it does not necessarily involve a turning to God. Whereas, μετανοέω is much closer to ἐπιστρέφω (cf. Acts 3:19; 26:20). It expresses a conscious turning from sin, a change of mind and of the whole inner attitude to life, without which true conversion is not possible.[45] Ἐπιστρέφω has a broader meaning than μετανοέω,

[43]Frank Laubach, "Conversion (ἐπιστρέφω)," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Vol. I,* ed. Colin Brown (Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), 353. Also see, James Strong (Strong's Concordance), "ἐπιστρέφω," *Bible Hub*, accessed 23 September, 2022, https://biblehub.com/greek/1994.htm.

[44]James Strong (Strong's Concordance), "μεταμέλομαι," *Bible Hub*, accessed 23 September, 2022, https://biblehub.com/greek/3338.htm. *Metaméllomai* from *metá*, which means "change after being with," and *mélō*, meaning "care, be concerned with" means "to experience a change of concern after a change of emotion and usually implying to regret, i.e. falling into emotional remorse afterwards. *Metaméllomai* in the papyri (P Thead 51.15, iv/ad) also means "regret" and for example is used of a thief, "Otherwise you will have reason *to be sorry* for it," (*MM*, 403). Also see, Barclay M. Newman, *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament* (Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2010).

[45]Barclay M. Newman, *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament* (Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2010), 117.

for it always includes faith, while μετανοέω and πιστεύω can stand together and complement each other.

The Greek word ἐπιστρέφω in the Septuagint is translated from the Hebrew word *shub* (שׁ וּ ב).[46] The word *shub,* which means to turn round, to return, to bring back, to restore,[47] appears in the Hebrew Bible 1,146 times.[48] Its various usages include, "Abraham returned home" (Genesis 18:33, similar usage in Ruth 1:6); "He himself turned back to Eglon..." (Judges 3:19; similar usage in 1 Kings 19:21); the people "turn from their sin" (1 Kings 8:35); he turned against Nebuchadnezzar and rebelled (2 Kings 24:1).[49] For the ancient Israelites conversion did not mean change, but a specific and goal-oriented redirection, or an active and deliberate interaction with, and choosing the will of YHWH.[50] Closest to the contemporary use of 'convert,' *shub* can also refer to the prominent prophetic motif of Israel's return to God (Jer. 3:1– 4:4; Isaiah 55) that leads to a renewed relationship with God.[51]

[46]Laubach, "Conversion (ἐπιστρέπω)," 354.

[47]James Strong (Strong's Concordance), "*shub*," *Bible Hub,* accessed 25 September, 2022, https://biblehub.com/hebrew/7725.htm.

[48]Bailey V. Gillespie, *Religious Conversion & Personal Identity: How and Why People Change* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1979), 12-17.

[49]Atkinson, "Pauline Conversion and the Resurrection Narrative," 70.

[50]Gillespie, *Religious Conversion & Personal Identity*, 13.

[51]Jervis, "Conversion," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1539. What is necessary is that the people sincerely repent and return to God in truth and justice (Jer 4:1–4),a move that itself requires God's strengthening of Israel(Jer 3:22). This return is not a conversion in the sense of a change of religious affiliation but a renewed relationship with God (See page 15).

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In its classical and common usage, ἐπιστρέφω did not carry spiritual or religious connotations.[52] Ἐπιστρέφω is found 36 times in the NT. Eighteen times it has a secular meaning implying physical returning or turning away (Matt. 10:13; 12:44, 24:18; Mark 5:30, 8:33; Luke 2:39, 8:55; 2 Pet. 2: 22). However, it also carries a spiritual meaning and is used 18 times with its theological meaning of conversion especially in the Synoptics, Acts and the Epistles (Mk. 4:12; Lk. 1:16f; 22:32; Acts 15:19; 2 Cor. 3:16; Jas. 5:19f). Ἐπιστρέφω also has a related form ἐπιστροφή (ῆς, ἡ) which appears only once in the NT in Acts 15:3 and it means 'conversion or turning' of Gentiles from idolatry to true God.[53] In the epistle of James, ἐπιστρέφω implies 'bringing back' a sinner (turn away) from wandering from the truth (5:19-20). In Acts 3:19, ἐπιστρέφω carries the theological sense of repentance and turning to God. Thus, the essential meaning of the term is "that of a turn, a change of direction, a reversal of life."[54]

In describing his encounter with Christ, Paul also uses the term καλέω to capture the motif of the prophetic call (Gal 1:15-16). Referring to this experience as a moment of divine calling, he uses the verb καλέω, on 26 occasions; the noun κλῆσις, four times; and the adjective κλητός, seven times in his letters. The word καλέω could mean 'call, call in, name, invite, summon, designate.'[55] In Gal. 1:15-16a, Paul also speaks of revelation (ἀπὸ

[52]Atkinson, "Pauline Conversion and the Resurrection Narrative," 71

[53]James Strong (Strong's Concordance), "ἐπιστροφή (ῆς, ἡ)," *Bible Hub*, accessed 30 September, 2022, https://biblehub.com/greek/1995.htm.

[54]Atkinson, "Pauline Conversion and the Resurrection Narrative," 72

[55]Newman, *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament*, 93. See also Atkinson, "Pauline Conversion and the Resurrection Narrative," 72.

καλύπτω), saying, "God...was pleased to reveal his Son to/in me (Gal 1:16a)." In this case, he thinks of his "conversion" not in terms of what happened to him but in terms of the revelation taking place in him. The one revealed in Paul is Jesus Christ, God's own Son.[56]

Thus, the Biblical understanding of conversion implies a fundamental turning to the principles and the will of God, return home from blindness and error to the source of light and life, Jesus Christ our Savior (Acts 26:18; 1 Pet. 2:25). The use of ἐπιστρέφω also suggests that we are not merely concerned with 'turning away' from the old life, but that the stress is on 'turning to Christ,' and through him to God and so to a new life. It involves a fundamental change in life (Acts 26:20) with a new outlook and objectives.[57] Though Paul's conversion may not have necessarily involved repentance,[58] it gave him a new outlook and objective. It led him to re-evaluate his thought processes concerning the actions of God in the salvation of the world and to reorient his life to be a missionary to the gentiles.

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[56]Fee, *Pauline Christology*, 221. The surprise (in terms of our expectations) is twofold: (1) Paul thinks of his "conversion" not in terms of what happened to me, or what Christ lovingly did for me, but of the revelation taking place in me; and (2) who is revealed is not "Christ" or "the Lord Jesus" but God's own Son. See also discussion on Gal 1:15-16a in Chapter 2, pg. 14-20.

[57]Laubach, "Conversion (ἐπιστρέπω)," 355.

[58]Steve N. Ransome, "Paul's Transformation and how it has shaped his Christology and Pneumatology" (MA Thesis, Regis College, University of Toronto, 2019), 74. Commenting on Galatians 1:15-16, Ransome notes that "the words set apart, call, reveal, are used with great consideration and yet, Paul does not articulate a sense of turning around, repentance, or rejection of his past - he does not use the word for conversion."

Also see, L. Ann Jervis, "Conversion," The *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1538. The story of Saul's conversion makes no reference to his repentance(although his behavior might reflect such change). Similarly, there is no reference to repentance in the Cornelius episode and the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch (8:26–40).

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Paul's Conversion to Christ

In this discussion on Paul's conversion, we have been able to ascertain that there was a radical change in Paul's life following his encounter with Christ. Paul himself divides his life into 'former' and 'present' (pre and post-Christ periods), a time characterized by zealous observance of the *Torah* and persecution of the Church of Christ, and a time of grace and the proclamation of the Gospel (Gal. 1:13-16).[59] How do we explain this change/transformation in Paul? The traditional and psychological approach to Paul's conversion, while emphasizing Paul's disillusionment with the Jewish law and the Jewish religion, asserted that Paul walked away from Judaism to embrace Christianity as his new religion. The recent scholarship, however, has moved on from such an understanding of Paul's conversion. K. Stendahl, while dismissing the idea of a switch of religions, understood Paul's conversion as a change in Paul's understanding of the figure of Jesus Christ, from a crucified criminal to a glorified Messiah and Son of God.[60]

Earlier, Paul upheld the Deuteronomic position that '*anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse*' (Deut. 21:23). Following his encounter with Christ, Paul had to rethink everything that he had come to believe about Jesus of Nazareth. He became convinced that Christ was the Lord, who is now seated at the Father's right hand (Ps 110:1; Phil 2:9-11). According to A. G. Lyons, the contrast between Paul the persecutor and Paul the persecuted preacher, between his 'formerly' and 'now', is well attested throughout the Pauline corpus (cf. Phil 3:6; 1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:110-2:21). This has to do with how Paul understood Jesus before and after his conversion. Before his encounter with

[59]Donaldson, "Introduction to the Pauline Corpus," 1070. In Gal 1:13, Paul uses the term πότε, meaning 'formerly', or which is left behind.

[60]Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 314

Christ, he viewed Jesus from a fallen human perspective, but he no longer does so (2 Cor 5:15-17).[61]

We see here a transvaluation of values and a change in Paul's understanding of things such as the nature of the Godhead, the law, the basis of the salvation of Jews and Gentiles, and a host of other things.[62] As a zealous Pharisee, Paul had theological reasons to persecute the followers of Jesus. He believed it was blasphemy to proclaim a crucified man (Deut 21:23; Gal 3:13) as God's Messiah and that if Jesus was the Way to salvation, then the law's centrality was compromised. But after his Christ encounter, Jesus took center stage, and the law was demoted accordingly. Although he subsequently abandoned the Mosaic Law as a rule of life, he never lost the sense of the scriptures as God's communication with his people.[63] His newfound convictions were not simply the inversion of the old. He continued to believe in the God of Israel, in Israel's election, and even in the divine origin of the *Torah*. But these native convictions were redrawn around a new center, the foundational conviction that God had raised the crucified Jesus.[64] Thenceforth, the crucified Christ became the content of his proclamation. Paul's conversion experience thus becomes the source of his Christological doctrine[65] , and his conversion can be considered an intra-Judaism change in teaching revolving around the figure of Christ.[66] It involved "a radical reassessment of

[61]George Lyons, *Pauline Autobiography: Toward a New Understanding* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 146.

[62]Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 315

[63]Jerome M. O'Connor, *Paul: His Story* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 5.

[64]Donaldson, "Introduction to the Pauline Corpus," 1070.

[65]Ransome, "Paul's Transformation," 74.

[66]Atkinson, "Pauline Conversion and the Resurrection Narrative," 24.

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the person of Jesus and a thoroughgoing reconfiguration of his foundational convictions."[67]

In his letter to the Philippians (3:4b-11), Paul sees his experience as a paradigmatic expression of the great contrast between life under the law and the transforming grace of the new life 'in Christ.' Coming to know Jesus Christ brought about a reversal in Paul's life. His judgment on all the former advantages, everything that he considered gained, was now considered lost (Phil. 3:7–8). Commenting on Paul's emptying in Phil. 3:4b-11, Pheme Perkins says, "Conversion implies an 'emptying' analogous to that of Christ."

In the encounter with the risen Christ, Paul had the profound experience of 'being found/captured' by Christ (Phil 3:9, 12). Paul's entire life was shaped by his sharing in Christ's death and resurrection (Phil 3:10–11). This process of being transformed 'in Christ' was a continuing and ongoing process in Paul's life as he responded to the call of God in Christ Jesus (Phil. 3:12–14). And because Paul underwent a total transformation 'in Christ,' he saw his relation to his readers as a type to be imitated (Phil 3:15–17).

Summary

After his encounter with the risen Christ, Paul continued to worship and serve the same God, but "his framework of service shifted decisively from one organizing center (*Torah*) to another (Christ)."[68] What term best describes this decisive shift? The term 'conversion' may not be the most suitable to describe Paul's experience. Ransom Steve observes that "nowhere in his description (nor anywhere in his letters) does he mention the word conversion or μετάνοια. The words, "set apart," "call," and

[67]Donaldson, "Introduction to the Pauline Corpus," 1070.

[68]Donaldson, "Introduction to the Pauline Corpus," 1066.

"reveal" are used with great consideration, and yet, Paul does not articulate a sense of turning around, repentance, or rejection of his past—he does not use the word for conversion."[69] One alternative is to use less loaded terms such as transformation or reconfiguration. L. Ann Jervis suggests that "the term transformation be used for Paul's particular conversion since it is not a change of religions but a radical reinterpretation of his understanding of God's actions in and will for the world."[70] Another alternative is to redefine the word "conversion" to preserve continuity and discontinuity.

In conclusion, Paul's conversion experience can be plainly understood as a movement from his false notion of 'who Jesus is' to the true notion concerning Jesus' identity. If earlier, he deemed Jesus to be a crucified criminal (Deut. 21:23), in his conversion, he recognized the Lordship, the Messiahship, and the divine Sonship of Jesus Christ. Thus, his conversion experience can be seen primarily as accepting a new set of convictions about Jesus rather than abandoning an old set of convictions about Judaism. As Steve Ransome explains, "Paul still maintained his Jewish identity as was evident in key parts of his letters and as was revealed on his circumcised body, and yet there were some aspects that evolved, changed and that Paul took on that were very new – his Christ identity."[71] In this way, it is possible to accept that Paul was not frustrated with Judaism or misunderstood it, but he was convinced that the God of his ancestors, the God of Israel, had raised Jesus from death. His conversion is neither 'a consequence of' nor 'a solution to'a problem in one religion. Still, it is a reconfiguration or

[69]Ransome, "Paul's Transformation," 75.

[70]Jervis, "Conversion," in The *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1540.

[71]Ransome, "Paul's Transformation," 75. The complexity of the two realities, his life in Judaism and his life 'in Christ,' somehow co-existed in the life, ministry, and writing of Paul.

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revaluation of the set of values within the ambit of the same religion.

Converted Paul's Rootedness in the Jewish Religion

Having defined Paul's conversion as a conversion to Christ, we now examine Paul's post-conversion view and his allegiance to the Jewish religion. The essential claim of this study is that Paul's conversion to Christ did not lead him to abandon his Jewish faith. It necessitates explaining how his new life 'in Christ' was still a continuation and development of the Jewish faith. To explain Paul's continued dependence on Jewish categories, I have presented four arguments.

First Argument: Paul's Universal Judaism

Paul's mission among the Gentiles resulted not from a rejection of Judaism, but it had basis in attitudes already present in Judaism, namely, Jewish universalism which the prophets spoke about in the Old Testament (Is. 2:1-4; 25:6; 49:6; Mic. 4:1-5; Zech. 2:11, 8:20-23). Jewish universalism found ways to accommodate Gentiles within the realm of God's plan of salvation. One such pattern was proselytism, by which Jews were willing to accept those Gentiles who embraced the *Torah* and its Way of life, as full members of the family of Abraham.[72] Another pattern is assumed that in the future, the Gentiles would be included among the righteous, even if they do not adhere to

[72]G. N. Stanton (ed.), *Paul: Crisis in Galatia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 17. The Hebrew Bible contains rules for the sojourner who lives within the land of Israel (Lev. 17-25). The sojourner who conforms to Israel's customs was to be treated on equal footing with the native-born Israelite with regard to the civil law (Lev. 24:22) and he was to have the same religious duties and privileges as the native-born Israelite in regard to the religious law (Lev. 17:8-15). This includes the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29-34; Num. 19:1-10) and the Passover (Num. 9:14; Ex. 12:19).

the aspects of the *Torah* (Josephus. Ant. 20.34-48).[73] The last pattern required the Gentiles to acknowledge the God of Israel and be granted a place among the righteous in the end times (cf. Isa 2:2-4; Tob 14:5-7).[74] The expectation was recognizing Israel's God, resulting in a great influx of Gentiles into God's Kingdom. Such Gentiles, who were not required to undergo conversion to Judaism, are "God-fearers," and along with the Jews, would witness to the one God and His ethical standards of righteousness.

In his mission to the Gentiles, Paul adopted a Christ-centered approach, in which the ultimate goal is the final salvation of all people (Rom. 10:9-13; 11:26-32). Jewish ethnocentrism, which Paul saw as particularism or patriotism, was to be replaced by his Gospel's vision of an inclusive humanity. Recent scholars such as James Dunn and N. T. Wright have shown that with Christ's coming, the Jewish identity markers, such as Sabbath, circumcision, food habits, etc., were replaced by the all-inclusive identity marker, 'faith in Jesus Christ.' These observations should encourage us to identify Paul's notion of an all-inclusive Judaism as universal Judaism.

The Second Argument: Paul and the Relevance of the Torah

The second argument addresses the issue of the significance of the *Torah* in the Messianic era ushered by the coming of Jesus Christ. The argument, while underlining the interim and pedagogical role of the *Torah* to discipline and to prepare people for the coming of Christ, points out that with the arrival of Jesus Christ, the law of Christ takes precedence over the Mosaic Law. Paul's critique of the *Torah* is not to be construed

[73]Donaldson, "Introduction to the Pauline Corpus," 1068.

[74]Donaldson, "Introduction to the Pauline Corpus," 1067-68.

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as his rejection of Judaism. His *Torah*-critique merely emphasizes his firm conviction that justification comes through faith in Jesus Christ, not through *Torah*-observance. Though the *Torah* remained the norm for moral/ethical conduct after Christ's coming, it lost its divisive power, which held back the universal unity destined to come. Christ redeemed all people from the discriminating suppression of the law to bring about the universality of faith (Gal. 3:13-14).

The Third Argument: Paul's Doctrine of Justification by Faith

The third argument focuses on the theme of justification brought about by faithful obedience to Jesus Christ and by a believer's faith in Jesus Christ. It explains how Paul's doctrine of justification by faith was a means to actualize Jewish universalism. The non-Jews who earlier had no part in the covenant community had become participants in the community of God's people through their faith in Jesus Christ. As a mode of responding to God and as a universal capacity deeply embedded within every human being, faith transcended ethnic identity (Rom. 10:1–17). Faith was a time-honored way of relating to God since the time of Abraham. Christ manifested the same faith principle in his total obedience to the Father's will. Christ's faith and the believer's faith in Christ are the basis for our justification and a means for the inclusion of the Gentiles among God's people.

The Fourth Argument: Paul's Call to be an Apostle to the Gentiles

The fourth argument is grounded on Paul's calling to be an apostle to the Gentiles. In his calling, he resembles the outstanding figures of the Old Testament, such as Moses, Joshua, Isaiah,

Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, who were predestined before their birth and "called" at the chosen moment by God (Gal. 1:15-16). When God calls someone by his name (Is 43:1; 45:3; 49:1), it is to entrust him with a mission. Similarly, Paul was called to be the bearer of a mission to be carried out among the Gentiles to whom he would transmit the Gospel he received. At the heart of his Gospel was the proclamation that the faithful obedience to Jesus Christ, whom God raised from the dead, has fulfilled the promise made to Abraham (that all nations will be blessed in him (Gen. 12:3)). In carrying out his apostolic mission among the Gentiles, Paul became a servant of the Lord and a light to the nations in fulfillment of the prophetic mission announced in the Old Testament, but yet to be executed.

Conclusion

We have set out to define Paul's conversion experience and the nature of his relationship with Judaism after his conversion. Through our study of the relevant biblical texts, as well as the views of scholars at different times, we have inferred that Paul's conversion experience was a conversion to Christ. His conversion was about accepting a new set of convictions concerning Jesus, namely his Messiahship, Lordship, and divine Sonship, rather than rejecting Judaism as a belief system. The converted Paul remained loyal to the God of Israel, the God of his ancestors. He believed in the promises God had made to his ancestors, and in his Christ experience, he realized that Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of God's promises ands Jewish hopes and expectations.

In this article, we have approached Paul as an insider and a reformer within Judaism. As an insider, he took the liberty to correct the errors of his Jewish brethren concerning the Lordship and Messiahship of Jesus Christ. He critiqued the *Torah* only to present Christ as the only means to salvation

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and to give the Gentiles an easy passage into the community of faith. He was convinced that faithful obedience to Jesus Christ manifested in His passion on the cross and a believer's faith in Jesus Christ were the only means to justification. As a faithful Jew called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ, he set out to proclaim this Gospel to the Gentiles and to establish a universal community of faith united in Jesus Christ. Christianity, for Paul, was a logical continuation and fulfillment of the Jewish religion.