

# PAUL'S DAMASCUS EXPERIENCE AS REFLECTED IN GALATIANS 1: Call or Conversion?

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## Abstract

*The question of Paul's call or conversion is still an unresolved problem, because of, among other things, the lack of conceptual clarity in the debate. By using the conversion model of Berger and Luckmann, it is argued that Paul's Damascus experience can indeed be seen as a conversion experience. That opens the way to understanding Paul's reference to that experience in Galatians 1 as a post-conversion autobiographical account which has important consequences for the use of the letter to the Galatians as a historical source for the construction of Paul's life, as well as the history of early Christianity.*

Indeed, it is now possible to speak of something fundamentally new in biblical studies, not in the sense that older and more traditional approaches have been rendered obsolete, but that a new set of assumptions has made it possible to understand early Christianity in significant new ways. (Gager 1982b:258)

## 1. Stating the problem

'Paul's so-called conversion to Christianity is still an unresolved problem' (Betz 1979:64). The problem of his conversion or Damascus experience is extensive. If it is dealt with as a historical question, a comprehensive approach is needed (cf for example the *Religionsgeschichtliche* problems of Paul's mystical experiences, Segal 1986). Therefore, in this 'experimental article' I want to focus on only two of the many questions:

- \* Is Paul's Damascus experience a call or conversion?
- \* If a conversion, what are the implications for the understanding of Paul's reference to it in the letter to the Galatians?

Insights from the social sciences will be used to understand these historical problems.

Since the publication of Stendahl's famous book (1976), it has become fashionable to talk about Paul's Damascus experience as a call rather than a conversion. Stendahl defines conversion as a change of religion, and seeing that Paul did not have a change of religion (cf also Watson 1986:15), he prefers 'call'. Paul was called to the specific task of bringing the message to the gentiles: 'Serving the one and the same God, Paul receives a special calling in God's service' (Stendahl 1976:7 and cf 1976:11). It is clear that he takes Paul's own statements about the call very seriously, and even interprets the Acts accounts in terms of the Pauline statements (cf 1976:9).

Both Betz and Koester agree with Stendahl: 'Strictly speaking, however, we cannot speak at all of a "conversion" of Paul. As Galatians reports, Paul was "called" to be a missionary to the Gentiles' (Betz 1979:64 and cf Betz 1979:69). According to Koester the term 'conversion' obscures what was in fact essential to Paul himself in this event, because, as he says, 'Paul never understood his experience as a conversion, but always as a call' (1982:100).

Perhaps the best example of this kind of protest against the use of the concept 'conversion' comes from Fredriksen who explicates the principles which govern this widely accepted (historical) interpretation (1986:15-16). To describe it as a conversion is an 'unwitting anachronism' (1986:15). He bases it on two arguments:

\*firstly, it is inappropriate in the year C 34 to see the Jesus movement as a new religion; Paul merely changed parties within Judaism from Pharisaism to Jewish Christianity (1986:15 and cf Betz 1079:64);

\*secondly, the polemical context in which Paul several years later refers to it as a call, should be taken seriously. He himself, within his religious tradition experienced it as a call to be an apostle to the gentiles (1986:16).

On the one hand, it is true that by the time of Paul's Damascus experience, the Jesus movement was still a movement within Judaism and therefore the question whether Paul changed from one religion to another, is redundant. The religious model used, however, does not convincingly explain all the data in Paul's letters connected to the Damascus experience. It limits the question to certain religious aspects, but there are clear indications that the Damascus experience did mark a definite change in Paul's life, attitudes, and beliefs. As Isenberg rightly observes, the question remains whether Paul is to be categorized as a 'convert' or not (1980:38). In order to answer this question we need a model of conversion in terms of which to decide whether it was a conversion or not. This model must be able to explain all or most of the relevant data.

On the other hand, it is undoubtedly true that Paul, in Galatians 1, refers to the Damascus experience as a call and not a conversion. Most interpreters' preference for a 'call' rather than 'conversion' in Galatians 1 rests on an uncritical use of the sources. That Paul's words are taken on face value, is proved *inter alia* by the following explanatory remarks in the various interpretations: 'As Galatians reports' (Betz 1979:64), 'Paul himself' (Koester 1982:100) and 'Paul's own account' (Stendahl

1976:8). The religious definition they use compels them to take Paul's own words in Galatians 1 on face value. Paul describes it in analogy to the call of some Old Testament prophets and as Fredriksen (1986:16) says, it can be accounted for within the terms of Judaism. That is done by saying it was an 'objektives, weltenwendendes Geschehen' (Bornkamm 1969:44), 'a genuine theophany' (Schoeps 1961:54), or an 'eschatological event' (Koester 1982:100). The way Paul sees it within his religious tradition is not yet a satisfactory explanation to us, because it does not explain it as an event understandable to us. How then can his emphasis on a call in Galatians 1 be understood?

## 2. The Damascus experience as conversion

The first question is whether the Damascus experience can be called a conversion? In answer to it, we need a model of conversion which would enable us to make a decision. The conversion model of Berger and Luckmann will be used. Because conceptual clarity is one of the obstacles in the debate, the use of a model can help us to understand a certain aspect of early Christianity in a 'significant new way'. Other models of conversion have already been used successfully in describing the Damascus event as a conversion (cf Gager 1981 and Isenberg 1980).

### 2.1 Berger and Luckmann's model of conversion

'The two statements, that society is the product of man, and that man is the product of society, are not contradictory' (Berger 1967:3). This is one of the basic presuppositions of their theory. It means that society is both an objective and a subjective reality.

On the one hand man is born into a world which he experiences as an objective reality. It existed before he was born, and will continue after his death. On the other hand a baby is not born as member of a society, but by means of internalization the new infant is able to become a member of society (subjective reality). Internalization is twofold: 'Primary socialization is the first socialization an individual undergoes in childhood, through which he becomes a member of society. Secondary socialization is any subsequent process that inducts an already socialized individual into new sectors of the objective world of his society' (Berger & Luckmann 1966:150).

The continuing existence of both these worlds, objective and subjective, require a social base which is called a 'plausibility structure' (Berger 1967:45). Social maintenance processes like continuous legitimation of these worlds, ensure their survival. At its highest level it is legitimated by what Berger and Luckmann call a 'symbolic universe' (1966:113). This is a body of theoretical tradition that helps the individual to integrate his world of meaning. The symbolic universe is an 'all-embracing frame of reference, which now constitutes a universe in the literal sense of the word' (Berger & Luckmann 1966:114). Reality is experienced by the individual in terms of this symbolic universe because, by the process of legitimation, literally a 'whole new world is created' (Berger & Luckmann 1966:114). When an alternative symbolic universe is developed within a society, it means that the members of that society who share it will have an 'alternative definition of reality'

(Berger & Luckmann 1966:124) or enter into 'another world entirely' (Petersen 1985:61).

What has been said on the social construction of reality, as Berger and Luckmann call this process, implies that conversion is always possible in principle. Although the 'world of childhood is massively and indubitably real' (Berger & Luckmann 1966:155), and it 'takes several biographical shocks to disintegrate the massive reality internalized in early childhood' (Berger & Luckmann 1966:162), it is possible that this subjective reality can be transformed (cf Berger & Luckmann 1966:176). Such transformations which imply that the individual 'switches worlds' are called 'alternations' by Berger & Luckmann (1966:176). This alternation of conversion requires processes of re-socialization which means that reality is 're-made'.

For conversion to be successful, both social and conceptual conditions are required. The most important *social condition* is the availability of an effective plausibility structure. By 'plausibility structure' they mean the 'social base' on which every word rests (cf Berger & Luckmann 1966:177 and Berger 1967:45). It has to be mediated by 'significant others' who ensure that the transformation will be successful and that the individual is guided into the new reality. Berger and Luckmann strongly emphasise that no radical transformation of subjective reality (including, of course, identity) is possible without identification with the plausibility structures that are mediated to the convert by means of 'significant others' (cf 1966:177).

Religious conversion is the historical prototype of alternation (cf Berger & Luckmann 1966:177). 'Saul may have become Paul in the aloneness of religious ecstasy, but he could remain Paul only in the context of the Christian community ...' (Berger & Luckmann 1966:178). It is not the conversion experience itself that makes the difference, but the taking it seriously afterwards. This new plausibility structure becomes the individual's new world, displacing all other worlds, including the previously held one. The religious community provides this indispensable plausibility structure for the new reality of the convert (cf Berger & Luckmann 1966:178 and Berger 1967:50-51). As in the case with the pre-alternation world, subjective reality is maintained *inter alia* by conversation (Berger & Luckmann 1966:172 and Berger 1967:17).

The most important conceptual requirement for alternation is 'the availability of a legitimating apparatus for the whole sequence of transformation' (Berger & Luckmann 1966:179). This does not only include the legitimation of the new reality, but also the reputation of all alternative realities, especially a repudiation and reinterpretation of the old reality (cf Berger & Luckmann 1966:179). Important for our purpose is the fact that the pre-alternation biography is reinterpreted, which may even include the invention or fabrication of events that have never happened in order to 'harmonize the remembered with the interpreted past' (Berger & Luckmann 1966:180).

## 2.2 Aspects of Paul's biography in the light of Berger and Luckmann's model

In terms of the above model it seems as if the important questions are:

- \* Did the Damascus experience mark a 'change of worlds', in other words, was there a difference between 'before' and 'after'?
- \* Was the social condition met, in other words, was there a new community with a new plausibility structure to mediate the new symbolic universe?
- \* Was the conceptual requirements met, in other words, did Paul repudiate and reinterpret his pre-alternation biography and world in the light of the new reality?

### 2.2.1 Did Paul experience a change of worlds?

It is no secret that very little is known about Paul's pre-Christian life. The very fact that it is not strange to talk about his pre-Christian life, confirms that there was some kind of a change in his life. Paul connects the change with his Damascus experience. What is sure, is that prior to the Damascus experience he was very much aware of the Jesus movement, and as a matter of fact was involved in the persecution thereof (see Hultgren 1976). However, after that experience, he identified with the movement he previously persecuted. It is also known that he considered himself to be very zealous for the Jewish law and traditions (Gl 1:13-14; Phlp 3:5-6).

Paul certainly uses images of radical transformation to express some aspects of his life-story. In the above passages he refers to his 'former life in Judaism', and talked about the past and present as 'loss and gain' (see also Phlp 3:7). One can certainly agree with Lyons: 'The stark contrast between Paul the persecutor and Paul the persecuted preacher, between his "formerly" and "now", is well attested throughout the Pauline corpus' (1985:146, and cf Gager 1982:209-210). This is confirmed by both Isenberg (1980) and Gager (1981). Isenberg, using the cultural anthropological model of Mary Douglas, concluded that 'Paul's "lenses" were radically altered' (1986:39). His interpretations allows even a more substantial difference between 'before' and 'after' than could have been achieved without that model.

### 2.2.2 Was there a new community which provided a new plausibility structure?

That the Jesus movement was still a movement or sect within Judaism by the time of Paul's Damascus experience, is widely accepted (cf Fredriksen 1986, Hultgren 1976, Betz 1979, Koester 1982, Watson 1986, Theissen 1978, Holmberg 1978, Gager 1983). This, however, does not mean that those people who confessed Jesus as Messiah were not an 'identifiable' group. According to Hultgren (1976:100) the reason for Paul's persecution of the Christian movement was because he understood it to be a 'heterodox movement', which had to be brought back in line with 'normative' Judaism. Paul joined the Jesus movement which had an alternative confession, which included the confession of Jesus (crucified) as Messiah, and 'an apocalyptic understanding of the immanent transformation of the world' (Wanamaker 1986:4). Wanamaker has shown that at Thessalonika confession led to a questioning of the existing symbolic universe (1986:2-4). It cannot be doubted that besides Paul, there were other people who shared this 'deviant' confession which affected their whole view of reality.

To my mind, more important is the fact that Paul can be seen as one of the creators of this new symbolic world of early Christianity (cf Remus 1982:47, Petersen 1985:61-62 and especially Isenberg 1980). According to Isenberg, Paul moved 'from follower to leager, from culture maintainer to creator'(1980:37). Although he wrote only about 17 years later, the 'taking serious' of his conversion indicates that as early as 34 B C there were people who presented a new plausibility structure to Paul.

### 2.2.3 Did Paul repudiate and reinterpret his former life?

The last question is whether Paul repudiated and reinterpreted his previous life. As Gager says, 'to put the question is to answer it' (1981:701). Remarks like 'my conduct formerly in Judaism' (Gl 1:13), 'I died to the law ... I no longer live ...' (Gl 2:20), and 'I certainly do count all things to be sheer loss ...' (Phlp 3:7), indicate that Paul did later reinterpret his former life in Judaism. As Isenberg says, Paul did not reject the significance of his former life, but 'the present values of those categories' (1980:39).

By using what Festinger described as the phenomenon post-decision dissonance, Gager explains why Paul tended to repudiate his former life. 'Having earlier followed the law and rejected the Christ, he later followed the Christ and rejected the law' (Gager 1981:700), and that caused dissonance which he tried to reduce in his letters.

I have tried to give some indications that in terms of Berger and Luckmann's model we certainly have enough proof to say that somewhere in his life Paul had a conversion experience. Paul himself connects that 'change of worlds' with his Damascus experience (Gl 1:17). If his life is seen through the lenses of Berger and Luckmann's model of conversion, the result confirms that of Gager: Paul's Damascus experience was a real conversion, in other words, it shares important features with 'an otherwise well known religious phenomenon' (Gager 1981:698) and Isenberg (1980:39).

The application of this model confirms that Paul's Damascus experience can be seen as a conversion, and therefore stands in opposition to the model used by Stendahl and others. This, however, is not enough reason to accept this model and not the one of, for example, Stendahl. One of the obvious advantages of this model is that it is able to integrate a great deal of the data in Paul's letters concerning his life-story. Another advantage seems to be the fact that it enlightens Paul's references to the Damascus experience. In what follows, it will be seen that it enables us to interpret his reference to the experience in Galatians 1 in a satisfactory way.

### 3. References to conversion experiences

According to Isenberg, Paul 'experienced a call, and the result of that call was a conversion' (1980:39); in other words, the call caused the conversion. That conclusion certainly does not follow from his reasoning, but is the result of a confusion concerning the interpretation of the call, or the lack of interpretation thereof. This emphasises the need for the interpretation of Paul's reference to a call. I shall try to give an acceptable explanation to that problem.

If the Damascus experience was indeed a conversion experience (as I think can be accepted from the perspective of Berger and Luckmann), Paul is then, some 17 years later, referring to that 'moment' of change in his life. This is not an unknown phenomenon: post-conversion autobiographies are part of conversion realities. I therefore take Galatians 1 as a post-conversion autobiographical account. Hopefully this will explain why he refers to it as a call rather than a conversion, and secondly, provides a useful tool with which to understand his references to the Damascus experience. This will be done by looking at sociological studies that have been done on post-conversion accounts, which will then be applied to the text of Galatians 1.

### 3.1 Post-conversion autobiographical accounts

Very interesting sociological research has been done on conversion and especially on the nature of post-conversion self-reported accounts. The effects of an alternation, in this case a religious conversion, is that both the identity and the biography of the person involved, are changed. Therefore Taylor concluded that data from converted individuals 'are not data relating to pre-conversion circumstances or identity, but only to the post-conversion situation' (1978:316; cf 1976:18).

Taylor has demonstrated that there is an empirical relationship between 'membership of society in the present and recollection of its past as a re-remembering of its history' (1978:317). This can be explained as follows: since the individual can only account for his conversion as a member of a new society, this account 're-members' the convert in a new world. From this perspective his descriptions of the past are seen as 'self-fulfilling retrospective re-cognition' (Taylor 1978:320). Thus a personal account of conversion is possible, because conversion was a success and because of conversion's successful accomplishment. The implication is clear: the description of pre-conversion activity is an account from the perspective of the successful convert. In the words of Berger and Luckmann, the past is socially constructed from the perspective of the present.

It is at this point that Beckford makes an important contribution. His research has demonstrated that 'conversion accounts depart in significant respects from what is commonly thought of as conversion' (1978:258). That implies that accounts of conversion are constructions (or reconstructions) of the conversion experience which heavily draw upon resources available at the time of construction. Taking this argument to its extreme implies that the personal account of conversion cannot be trusted as a reliable source for the experience nor for the pre-conversion situation. However, it can enable one to understand the conversion account better as giving information about the present situation of the convert. A conversion autobiography 'is not merely the raw report of one's personal experience, but the creation of the convert which combines personal experience with the expectations, theology and symbolism of the group which the person wants to join' (Rambo 1982:149).

In summary: research on post-conversion self-reported accounts has indicated that such accounts are not reliable as sources for either the experience or for the pre-conversion situation, and secondly, that they give information on the present situation of the convert, drawing heavily on the available resources of the present situation. It should be clear that it does not imply that the person is consciously

deceitful, but, rather, that he is influenced by a group to reinterpret reality in a certain way.

The conclusion of this sociological field study is supported by the study of Fredriksen who compared the conversion narratives of Paul and Augustine. He came to his conclusion by means of 'field work' done in the sources of especially Augustine's conversion accounts. His argument is basically that Paul's Damascus experience was perceived by himself as a call, but Luke influenced our understanding of it so that it was seen as a conversion, and Augustine further compounded Luke's influence when he modelled his own conversion on a characteristically unique, but initially Lucan, reading of Paul' (Fredriksen 1986:5). Within this historical process of evolution, he tried to grasp the essentials of conversion accounts: they are both anachronistic and apologetic (cf Fredriksen 1986:33). In other words, the past of the conversion is not preserved so much as remade in the image of the present. What actually happened is not accessible to the historian, but only the narrative which is a retrospective account (cf Fredriksen 1986:34). Although he did not use the same model, his study confirms the results of the sociological studies on the nature of post-conversion accounts. It can even be used to support that theory.

Fredriksen, however, fails to understand Paul's own account in the same way. Paul's accounts are taken almost at face value, whereas Augustine's are seen as a construction by the convert from the post-conversion perspective. This is confirmed by Fredriksen's insistence that Paul's understanding of it as a call should be upheld. Logically, Paul's own accounts should be seen in the same light as Augustine's.

### 3.2 Galatians 1 as a post-conversion account

Galatians 1 should be interpreted as a post-conversion autobiographical account. The first implication of this is that the historian should be very careful to use this text as historical information about Paul's conversion experience. Galatians 1 cannot be used as proof that it was a call rather than a conversion. As a matter of fact, the question whether the call was simultaneous or not with the conversion (cf Dupont 1970:193), or that the conversion was the result of a call (Isenberg 1980:39), are in this light not even legitimate. What happened at Damascus and what caused the event, cannot be known from Paul's account. The same principle applies to Paul's emphasis on the fact that he did not receive his gospel from men. To him it was important to link the reception of his gospel to his call: he received it by way of revelation from the risen Lord.

Secondly, his account does not provide reliable information about his pre-conversion life. Of importance are his remarks about his former life in Judaism, especially the remarks about his fearful persecution of the church (G 1:13) and his zealous conduct in Judaism (G 1:14). These remarks are usually used to construct Paul's pre-Christian life. In the light of our model this clearly is a re-interpretation of his former life, and in all probability, quite doubtful information for that purpose. It is very difficult to decide whether any of the remarks are reliable or not, and if so, to what extent. However, it does not mean that some of the remarks might not be true. What this study does emphasise is that the historian should be very careful when



using Paul's post-conversion accounts as information about the event or his pre-conversion life.

However, if it does not provide reliable information about the event and the pre-conversion biography, at least a personal post-conversion account opens up something about the present situation of the convert and the important issues of that time. Perhaps this may also help one to decide on questions such as why the letter was written. Galatians 1 seen as a personal post-conversion account, however, supports the conclusion of Lyons on the function of Paul's autobiographical remarks in his letter to the Galatians (1985:123-176).

What is possible is that Paul's conversion account was told from a certain post-conversion situation where his call to be an apostle was of the utmost importance. Such a situation probably gave rise to his emphasis on a 'call'. He had to establish his authority amongst the Galatians who were to reject him, and one way to do that was to ground his authority in the command of Jesus. This is supported by Fredriksen who says: 'Paul responds not to relay personal information, but to defend his concept of apostolic authority' (1986:29). The implication is clear: Paul did not say that he was called rather than converted; he was referring to his conversion, but he couched it in language important to his current situation, and in that situation his apostolic call and authority was of importance.

Seen as a post-conversion account it is further intelligible that he not only uses the language of his time, but he even makes use of the literary mould of his day known from the Old Testament. It is widely accepted that Paul sees the experience at Damascus as a call in analogy to the call of the Old Testament prophets like Jeremiah (cf Betz 1979:64 and Wilckens 1974:13). For Schoeps (1961:54) this 'event of his call' is a genuine theophany. Interestingly enough, this same literary technique was used by the author of Acts. According to Lohfink 'anyone in the primitive Christian Church who might want to reflect on "vocation" would be almost forced by necessity to refer to the great Old Testament prophets' (1976:72).

Galatians 1, seen in this way, opens up new possibilities for further research. It not only restricts the researcher from using the sources uncritically, but it also opens the way to using the sources in a new creative way.

#### **4. Conclusion**

There can be very little doubt that the use of sociological models like these can be of much help for the historian of New Testament times who usually has very few documents at his disposal. The two models used in this experiment supplement each other. On the one hand, they bring conceptual clarity to a study that was choked by a lack of clarity. On the other hand, they can be used with great imagination to open up new research, especially on the question of early Christian history and the sources used in it.

What is very common to the interpretation of social phenomena was implemented here: there was a movement between the interpretation of the parts and the whole, and between the results of the different models used. It all compounded to the net

result where I tried to understand the reference to the Damascus experience in Galatians 1 on the basis of the individual remarks, and interpret the specific remark on the basis of a post-conversion experience. This led to the conclusion that it is not a question of call or conversion, but rather of a conversion account which has as content the reference to a call which was of importance at the time of writing.

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