

## A HISTORICAL FIGURE'S CONVERSION/CALL (9:1–19A)

Now the author of Acts comes to his most prominent story in his recording—the conversion/call of the most zealous Pharisee and persecutor of the believers, Saul.<sup>2</sup> Luke turns his attention from the evangelists, Philip in the town of Samaria on the Gaza road with the Ethiopian eunuch, and Peter and John in the Galilean littoral plain, to Saul of Tarsus. New Testament scholars generally agree that the narrative account of [Acts 9:1–19](#) stands for pre-Lucan and more historical tradition.<sup>3</sup> What is the importance of Saul's conversion/call? Luke even mentions this same story two more times in Acts ([22:4–16](#) [before the Jews]; [26:9–18](#) [before King Agrippa]).<sup>4</sup> Why does Luke do so in this record of Acts? Is there any motive inherent to historical writing and/or to the evangelistic enterprise which both are at the heart of Luke's masterpiece? Could one deduce from the author of Acts the significance of Saul's conversion/call to the current NT canon? While some related questions may not be fully addressed in this section, the brief study of the narrative shall be of vital help in studying Luke-Acts in general, and especially Paul's subsequent ministry.

It should be noted first of all that this conversion/call is dramatic in order to highlight the decisiveness of “divine agency” in this moment. Luke never loses sight of the reality of God in the work and life of the church. This is his primary preoccupation as he

<sup>2</sup> Kern 2003: [63–80](#) argues in favor of the claim that Luke is not just a historian but also a writer who is concerned with this spiritual value of conversion. Though it is historically true that Saul was a monotheist believer in the same God of the Christians, he “was lacking the right relationship with [that] God.” Kern rightly observes the Lucan tactic of making the case of his historiography alongside his spiritual goals by depicting the great works of the Greek-speaking ministers such as Stephen ([Acts 7](#)) and Philip the evangelist ([Acts 8](#)), between which he has already announced Saul's presence and approval of Stephen's death ([Acts 7:58–8:1–3](#)).

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Barrett 1994: [444](#); Everts 1992: [159](#).

<sup>4</sup> Marshall 1980b: [166](#) concludes that while three separate versions of the story have been argued among some scholars, the general agreement is that “Luke had one account of the story and that he has presented it in three different ways.” If the differences are simply literary, there is no problem of harmonizing them. See also Fitzmyer 1998: [420](#). Cf. [1 Cor 9:1; 15:8; Gal 1:11–16; Phil 3:6–8](#) for Paul's own statement of the event.

records the history of the early church. As a Jew, Saul did not need faith in God nor did he need to be preached to in order to be introduced to Jesus for his conversion/call. He had enough Jewish heritage for the (new) way (Acts 9:2)<sup>5</sup> and what was needed was only his faith in Jesus. The case is made clear in the initial words of the Jesus-Saul exchange (9:4-6). In this short dialogue, we can see Jesus in person coming to meet Saul and deal with his mind because his heart was after God. It seems that Saul was a Pharisee who believed in a stricter enforcement of God's law than his teacher Gamaliel (5:34-39; 22:3), who, a few weeks ago, had convinced the Sanhedrin council to wait and see what this Jesus movement would become. Saul did not retain a passive faith. He would rather fight for God as early as possible to prevent the evil new religion from spreading too far (9:1). For Saul, stamping out the believers was an indispensable work of enhancing God's will by the law. The new faith movement looked like a blasphemous heretical teaching that was threatening the pure faith of God's people (the Jews) and the holiness of the law and Temple.<sup>6</sup> Saul was certain that it would please God if such people were to be silenced. And if Saul was as familiar with the Scripture as he should have been, he could have felt satisfaction in the desert, learning about his fathers' history, when hundreds of people could be pinned down with spears, stoned to death, or slaughtered because of their sins (cf. 1 Macc 2:21, 26, 54; 2 Macc 6:13). Phinehas, for example, killed an Israelite man and Midianite woman who were defying the law of God (Num 25:6-15). Elijah slayed the 450 prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 18:40). Thus, it can be seen that God's intervention was required to make Saul turn around.

We are here in a dramatically analogous situation to the old Israel; stories of the deliverance from Egypt by the outstretched hand of God under the leadership of Moses show that when the Jews were camping in the plain of Moab, the prophet Balaam, blinded by a corrupt king, wanted him to curse that blessed nation. The new Israel, the church, is delivered from sin by the incommensurable grace of God and is like a tender sprout of a new people getting rooted in faith through the resurrected Messiah. The mighty miracles these new people performed and the good news they spread from Jerusalem to the surrounding region are just as praiseworthy as the victories God had

<sup>5</sup> Bruce 1988: 181 notes that the term *hodou* is Luke's expression of the new movement and it was used by the early followers of Jesus (Acts 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22).

<sup>6</sup> Longenecker 1998: 20-23; Hultgren 1976: 97-111.

given to the Israelites over the Egyptians and other kings who opposed the Jewish people on their way. Just as Balaam was told on his way by the angel of the Lord instructions of what he should say to his people, Saul was confronted in a similar way, having no power to resist Jesus ([Acts 9:8–9](#)). Balaam was then given a clear vision not only of the redeemed people endowed by irrevocable power and blessings but also of the Messiah represented by his star ([Num 24:17–19](#)). Saul also was not having a daydream nor was he controlled by nightmares because of the rage he had fought against the church. He had met Jesus in person.<sup>7</sup> Saul was having a clearer vision than the one Balaam had seen distanced from his people only by time.

Curiously enough, Saul responds to Jesus' words (**Saul, Saul,**<sup>8</sup> **why do you persecute me?**) in deep reverence, as to someone he already knew was more powerful than himself ([Acts 9:5](#)): **Who are you, Lord** (*kyrie*)? It seems clear that Saul did not use the term *kyrios* here in a christological sense at this moment but, nonetheless, regarded him (his voice) as the heavenly one in the vision.<sup>9</sup> The significance of Saul's conversion/call lies first in the fact that it illustrates the radical change that was happening in Judaism, and thus Saul's encounter with the Lord stands out to highlight this change. Hence, it can be argued that for Luke, this experience includes both conversion and call. He has made a great effort to demonstrate Saul's need for a radical transformation by placing his conversion experience between two most dramatic conversion experiences; the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch and Roman centurion. In the ending of [Acts 7](#) and the beginning of [Acts 8](#), Luke has placed Saul in the company of those who had rejected Stephen's call to repent from their rebellion against God. Naming Saul as the one who gave consent to Stephen's murder makes him a killer; later, he went on dragging men and women from their houses and possibly threatening to kill them. Luke puts such a man in between two Gentiles who are close to God. The eunuch came to Jerusalem to worship while Cornelius's prayers were heard by God. However, for Saul, it was a blind zeal without the true knowledge of God in which he did not know

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Recently, Porter 2016, by examining three sets of the NT texts, including [Acts 9 \(22, 26\)](#), [1 Cor 9:1](#), and [2 Cor 5:16](#), argues that Paul had already encountered Jesus before this meeting.

<sup>8</sup> Culy and Parsons 2003: 171 argue that here “the use of the vocative doublet intensifies the address.”

<sup>9</sup> Johnson 1992: 163; Bock 2007: 358.

the righteousness of God (cf. [Rom 10:1–3](#)). Thus, for Luke, Saul needed a conversion and this conversion would only be possible with “divine intervention.” It was not Saul converting from Judaism to Christianity but rather, it was God converting a man from his self-righteous zeal to self-sacrificing surrender to the lordship of Jesus. In Keener’s words, “God revealed himself to Paul not because of, but in spite of, Paul’s behavior.”<sup>10</sup>

Second, the story of Saul’s conversion/call is prefaced by institutional opposition to the church.<sup>11</sup> Luke reminds us of Saul traveling with rage in his heart, but also with **letters** written by religious leaders authorizing him to imprison **whoever was found** to be worshiping unlawfully ([Acts 9:2](#)). One can deduce that such **letters** of the high priest had some right of extradition over Jewish communities outside Palestine, although it is uncertain whether the high priest possessed such powers of extradition (cf. [1 Macc 15:15–24](#); [Josephus, Ant. 14.190–195](#)).<sup>12</sup> In any event, this institutionally organized and supported persecution led by Saul is historically important for Luke as it is for the entire church history. According to Luke, persecution started by a clearly identified synagogue of those who opposed the establishment of the new way. However, though the opposition seemed like a simple chaos of rioters at first ([Acts 6–7](#)), [Acts 8](#) and more clearly [Acts 9](#) under discussion show that the message of Jesus’ resurrection and faith in him was stipulated to be an illegal faith, and all who worshiped him were candidates for

<sup>10</sup> Keener 2013: 1611. See also 1614–17 for a comprehensive discussion of “calling or conversion.” Note his conclusion: “We should reject the common dichotomy (Was Paul called or converted?) and recognize that Paul was both converted and called.” Once Saul accepted the Lordship of Jesus on the Damascus road, he was immediately given the call to apostleship. For a further discussion concerning Saul’s conversion/call experience, see Peace 1999: 25–36; Stendahl 1976: 7–23.

<sup>11</sup> Peterson 2009: 92–97 demonstrates how Acts reveals that the church is a knowable, visible, countable, and identifiable body. In fact, the persecution of the church in Acts is described as the persecution of Jesus in person. In doing so, Luke starts the narrative of the life of the church by its relationship to the risen Lord and his ministry. In addition, it is remarkable that from the beginning of Acts Luke alludes to a “new Israel” in relation to the messianic community of faithful believers. See [Acts 2:36–47](#); [3:17–26](#); [4:32–37](#). To mean the church, Luke also uses expressions such as “those who had believed his Word” ([2:41](#)); “all the believers” ([2:44](#); [4:32](#)); and “those who were being saved” ([2:47](#)).

<sup>12</sup> See Barrett 1994: 446–47 for a fuller discussion.

imprisonment by Jewish priests. Hence Saul's official mandate was to pursue them whenever they were found. Saul was fit for this self-righteous traditional faith of his fathers as he himself revealed later ([Gal 1:13–14](#); [Phil 3:5–6](#)). The quickly growing Jesus group movement is thus considered to be more than blasphemy for a Pharisee like Saul. His experience **on the road to Damascus**, therefore, opens the window for a double call. The first is his existential, drastic change as a consequence of the eventful encounter with Jesus.<sup>13</sup> The reality of Jesus makes Saul realize not only his finite knowledge of God but also his wrong understanding of what is right before the God of his fathers. This call turned out to be very personal by the fact that amid the mission team, Saul was singled out specifically by the caller, the light went straight to his eyes ([9:7](#)), and the instructions were directed to him alone ([9:6](#), **Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do**).<sup>14</sup>

Another related element of the scene **on the Damascus road** concerning Saul is his ultimate purpose of life that was made clear to him during the incident. He would soon become a missionary of the resurrected Jesus and would even suffer for Christ, whom he had just met.<sup>15</sup> This clearly appears in the words Jesus used to explain to Ananias in [Acts 9:15–16](#): **“Go! This man is my chosen instrument (*skeuos*)<sup>16</sup> to proclaim my name (*tou bastasai to onoma mou*)<sup>17</sup> to the Gentiles, their kings, and the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name (TNIV).** Jesus had

<sup>13</sup> Malina and Pilch 2008: 185–86 classify Saul's experience along with other cases in Acts such as [2:5–13](#) (glossolalia), [7:55–56](#) (Stephen), and [12:5–19](#) (Peter's escape) as an “alternate state of consciousness” defined by its characteristics of modifying a person's relation to his/her self, body, sense of identity, and the environment of time, space, or other people.

<sup>14</sup> Tannehill 1994: 116.

<sup>15</sup> Kelhoffer 2009: 25–35 considers that Luke's progressive description of Saul's testimony as presented in Acts aims at demonstrating how as early as [Acts 8](#) or [9](#) the narratives would have made it plain that even from the very initial stage of Saul's missionary work, what Saul did in persecuting believers earlier on in Jerusalem, Judea, and the environs is exactly what the Jews were trying to do to Saul ([9:16](#)).

<sup>16</sup> This term refers to a human who has a special role. [BDAG 927](#).

<sup>17</sup> Culy and Parsons 2003: 176 argue that the phrase *bastazō onoma* (to carry a name) is “an idiom meaning to spread information extensively about a person.”

chosen Saul as his instrument and gave Saul a new burden for [Jesus](#)' name. Although indescribable suffering will lie ahead of Saul, it was his destiny to sign up for bearing [Jesus](#)' name before all people. This must be Saul's life purpose.<sup>18</sup> It would not be an exaggeration then to assert that Luke's interest in the one individual transformation of Saul—as his faithfulness will be demonstrated by his ministry to both Jews and Gentiles ([Acts 9:20ff.](#); [Acts 13–28](#))—and Judaism's institutional implication in the resistance to and at the very beginning of the Christian church would rightly and meaningfully serve as turning points of the history of Christianity. It is indeed a decisive stage of growth as Luke later comments about the relief the church enjoyed: **Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was edified. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the [Holy Spirit](#), it increased in numbers (9:31).**

On the other hand, Luke describes Ananias<sup>19</sup> with characteristics of a **disciple** (*mathētēs*), certainly a Jewish proselyte, because later Paul refers to him as a **devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there** ([Acts 22:12](#)).<sup>20</sup> Although Ananias first hesitated to follow what [Jesus](#) had specifically instructed about what to do and where to do it due to fear of Saul ([9:13–14](#)), he was finally willing to obey the divine commandment ([9:17](#)). This implies a long-term intimate relationship between [Jesus](#) and Ananias. Thus, this believer knows the Lord conversationally. Unlike Saul, when Ananias was called by name, it is with a sense of familiarity that he responded to the voice of the caller: **Here I am, Lord** ([9:10](#)). This shows that he is comparatively more acquainted with the Lord's voice than Saul, who was wondering whose authoritative voice was calling upon him when he responded ([9:5](#)): **who are you, Lord?** However, to both Ananias and Saul, almost simultaneously, the Lord appeared in a vision<sup>21</sup> to coordinate Saul's sight recovery and Spirit filling by Ananias's prayer and

<sup>18</sup> Schnabel 2012: 449.

<sup>19</sup> The name Ananias appears three times in Acts as individually different persons: a husband of Sapphira in [5](#); a Christian disciple in [9](#); and a high priest in [23](#). Ananias in this passage is the only figure who is positively described.

<sup>20</sup> Bock 2007: 359–60 argues that “how Christianity reached Damascus is not noted, showing Luke's selectivity. The new faith is present and active there.”

<sup>21</sup> Witherington 1998: 318, commenting on Ananias's and Saul's experience in [9:11–12](#), considers

laying on of hands (9:12, 17).<sup>22</sup> Therefore, even though Ananias as an unknown Christian appears only here in Acts, his role in making Saul into a historical figure in Christian history is really important and meaningful.<sup>23</sup>

In Acts 9:17, Luke depicts Ananias saying: **Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here has sent me so that you may see again and be filled the Holy Spirit (TNIV)**. What was anticipated is immediately achieved, and Saul rose and was baptized (9:18). Scholars generally consent that the actual time of Saul's reception of the Holy Spirit is not explicitly described here in this passage.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, based on Ananias's statement in 9:17, a possible supposition is that Saul received the gift of the Holy Spirit when Ananias prayed for him with the laying on of his hands (cf. 8:17–19; 19:6).<sup>25</sup> Also, there is a certain difficulty in determining the time of Saul's conversion experience in relation to the role of the Holy Spirit. Some argue that Saul was converted when he was baptized at Ananias's instruction,<sup>26</sup> while others contend that Saul's conversion had happened prior to the reception of the Holy Spirit.<sup>27</sup> No matter what it is, a much clearer outcome of Saul's Spirit experience is linked to his missionary activities. As will be seen in what follows, as a chosen vessel to bear witness to Jesus' name, Saul **proclaimed Jesus to be the Son of God in the synagogue (9:20) and testified that Jesus was the Messiah to the Jews who dwelt in Damascus (9:22)**. Luke reports that **he continually spoke boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus** even in Jerusalem (9:28–29). This narrative strand brings a reasonable conclusion that the portrayal of the Spirit in this story is presented as empowering Saul to bear witness to Jesus.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>22</sup> On the question concerning Saul's three-day prayer, Thomas 2011: 257 has reasonably argued that Saul prayed both for his sight and forgiveness before the Lord who had just confronted him on his way to the city when he had been severely mistreating and killing God's followers. The prayer was therefore a moment of true repentance and eventually a time to redirect his heart to the proper will of God.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Barclay 1955: 74.

<sup>24</sup> Johnson 1992: 165; Barrett 1994: 457.

<sup>25</sup> E.g., Roloff 1981: 162.

<sup>26</sup> E.g., Turner 1996a: 376.

<sup>27</sup> Barrett 1994: 457.

At any rate, for sure, Luke is evidently motivated by the miraculous in his historical writings. Supernatural workings and manifestations of the Holy Spirit are always central to Luke's narratives. No wonder why the visions, the healing of Saul, his being filled with the Spirit, and even the foreknowledge of what he would suffer for the sake of Christ are the core of what the historian will retain about Saul's conversion/call story.