TURNING TO GOD IN ACTS:

INSIGHTS FROM THREE KEY CONVERSION NARRATIVES BY LUKE

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

at

Charles Sturt University

By

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August 2018
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Certificate of Authorship

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Date: 11 July 2017
Acknowledgements

A part-time thesis is a long journey with many ups and downs. It is a journey that needs special companions to finish it.

Two people deserve special mention in regard to this thesis. First of all, my principal supervisor, Dr David Neville, Head of the School of Theology, Faculty of Arts and Education, Charles Sturt University. This thesis would never have reached this stage without his generous support and encouragement, unflagging patience and scholarly counsel.

I also need to thank my wife, Annette, for her continued encouragement and support, as well as her willingness to put up with an absent husband, isolated in his study over a long period of time.

I also thank Dr Bernard Doherty, a colleague in the School of Theology, for his valuable assistance with chapter 2, and Reverend Professor James Haire for his contribution to the early chapters of my thesis.
Abstract

In this thesis I use narrative criticism, supplemented by features of historical and textual criticism, to examine Luke’s accounts of the conversions of the Ethiopian (Acts 8:26–40), Saul (Acts 9:1–30) and Cornelius (Acts 10:1–11:18). Narrative criticism was chosen as a methodology to concentrate on what Luke wrote and to avoid unresolvable historical-critical issues (for example, sources and reconciling the Paul of his letters with the Paul of Acts). The stance adopted is that of a present-day reader who uses various critical tools such as the latest Koine Greek text, textual criticism and historical analysis of the Lukan text to read, as far as possible, the passages in Acts as the Lukan reader might have read them.

I propose that Acts 8:4–11:18 is a literary block which has a major theme of conversion and from which I have chosen to examine closely three conversion accounts: the Ethiopian eunuch, Saul and Cornelius. To better understand the Lukan narrative of Saul’s conversion in Acts 9 I have also looked at the Lukan Paul’s reflections on his conversion in Acts 22:1–16 and 26:1–23.
To contextualize the three conversion accounts I survey conversion in Second Temple Judaism (including John the Baptist), Hellenistic paganism and philosophy. My aim is to understand the likely influences on early Christians that shaped their understanding of conversion and how those who heard the call to repent and be baptized understood it? I conclude that the strongest influence, but not the only one, was most likely Second Temple Judaism.

While I consider how Luke structures his conversion narratives to create an impact, my main focus is on how Luke portrays the divine and human characters in each account. In the three narratives examined I find that the initiative in the conversion process is with divine agency, which also has a guiding role in the ensuing developments in each conversion. However, divine agency is manifested in different forms, including angels, visions, divine voices, providential ordering of events, the Holy Spirit, even a manifestation of the ascended Jesus.

There is variety also in those who are converted and how they are converted. I further argue that despite its prominence divine agency does not overwhelm human involvement. Rather, it is played out in ways that allow the human characters to remain fully human. At the least, these characters have to cooperate willingly with the divine. The
intersection of the divine and the human is most clearly seen in the act of baptism, which is common to all three conversion accounts. In baptism human agency responds to divine agency, the human embraces the divine and encapsulates the essence of the conversion experience as described by Luke. I am also interested in what Luke narrates about the changes that result from conversion. This is most clearly seen in the conversion of Saul, in which the persecutor of Jesus becomes the proclaimer of Jesus.

Within the three accounts considered, no fixed pattern of conversion is established; rather, the diversity found in the three narratives suggests that divine agency is suited to those converted and their circumstances.
### Abbreviations

Journals which have been abbreviated in footnotes are to be found in the Bibliography.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ag. Ap.</td>
<td>Against Apion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alleg. Interp.</td>
<td>Allegorical Interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ant.</td>
<td>Jewish Antiquities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Decalogue</td>
<td>On the Decalogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESV</td>
<td>English Standard Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jos. Asen.</td>
<td>Joseph and Aseneth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Life</td>
<td>The Life</td>
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<tr>
<td>LXX</td>
<td>Septuagint</td>
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<tr>
<td>MT</td>
<td>Masoretic Text</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nat. Hist.</td>
<td>Natural History</td>
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<tr>
<td>NIV</td>
<td>New International Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>NRSV</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spec. Laws</td>
<td>On the Special Laws</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtues</td>
<td>On the Virtues</td>
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<tr>
<td>War</td>
<td>The Jewish War</td>
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Students of Acts face an interesting paradox. There can be little doubt as to the importance of conversion in the book of Acts yet this importance has not, until recently, been matched by a corresponding scholarly interest in the subject.

Conversions figure prominently in Acts. As the gospel spreads, beginning in Jerusalem and moving out “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8), people are converted, sometimes in large numbers as on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:37–42) and in Samaria (Acts 8:4–24), sometimes in small groups as with Cornelius and his household and Lydia and her household (Acts 10:44–48; 16:11–15) and sometimes individually as with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–40) and the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:25–34). Luke also narrates in some detail the conversion of one of the most influential leaders in the early church, namely, Saul (later Paul) (Acts 9:1–18; 22:1–16; and 26:1–18). Talbert contends that conversion “is a central focus of Acts, maybe the central focus.”1 Talbert may overstate

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the case here, as from Acts 20 Luke focuses on Paul, the opposition he faced, his arrest in Jerusalem and journey to Rome, but by and large his contention holds true. Further, there is little doubt about the centrality of conversion in Acts 8:4–11:18, which I identify as a literary block and in which the three conversion narratives studied in this thesis are found.

Scholarly interest in conversion in Luke-Acts is increasing. Green notes, “If the study of this important Lukan motif has suffered neglect since the onset of scholarly interest in Luke-Acts in the mid-twentieth century, the renaissance of interest in more recent times has not yet exhausted the witness of Luke’s two volumes.”\(^2\) Despite the increased interest in conversion there has not been a lot written specifically about the conversion narratives in Acts from a narrative-critical perspective. I found only the following that made use of this approach. In her book, *From Darkness to Light*,\(^3\) which surveys conversion in the New Testament, Gaventa has one chapter on the conversion of Saul and

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another on the conversions of the Ethiopian and Cornelius. In his narrative commentary on Acts, Robert Tannehill has chapters on the conversions of Saul/Paul and Cornelius. From the mid-1990s there have been a few monographs dedicated to one conversion narrative in Acts from the perspective of narrative criticism, namely, that of Cornelius. In 1996 Matson, writing on household conversions in Acts, devoted a chapter to the conversion of Cornelius and his household. Babu Immanuel has a narrative-critical chapter on Cornelius in his Repent and Turn to God: Recounting Acts published in 2004, and in 2012, van Thanh Nguyen wrote a narrative-critical monograph on Peter and Cornelius.

As not a lot has been written with regard to the conversions in Acts using narrative criticism this thesis seeks to make a contribution.

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towards the filling of this lacuna. In this project I look in some detail at
the Lukan narration of the conversions of the Ethiopian (Acts 8:28–40),
Saul (Acts 9:1–30) and Cornelius (Acts 10:1–11:18) to see what insights
might be gained about Luke’s view of conversion. Of all the conversions
narrated in Acts these are the ones in which Luke has given us the most
information about the individuals involved and what happened to
them. To better understand the Lukan narrative of Saul’s conversion in
Acts 9 I have also looked at the Lukan Paul’s reflections on his

The methodology I use, set out in chapter one, is an eclectic one,
comprising narrative criticism supplemented by textual and historical
criticism. Narrative criticism, in biblical studies, is a critical examination
of biblical narratives as literary works and seeks to uncover such literary
qualities as the structure or plot of the narrative, its point of view, how
characters are portrayed and the role the narrator plays. Narrative
criticism is also interested in the author and reader who are implied in
the text. It is concerned to understand what the text says rather than
what might lie behind the text. In using this methodology I am
particularly interested in characterisation, that is, how Luke has
portrayed the different characters, divine and human, in each account, and what might be learnt from this.

What is the text? As the text is the focus of narrative criticism I argue that it is important, in dealing with an ancient text such as Acts, of which today we only have copies, to try as far as possible, using textual criticism, to determine what that text actually is. To this end I make use NA²⁸ and its apparatus to consider significant textual variants in the conversion narratives studied to come to a better understanding of the text we have today.

How was Acts originally read? The remaining feature of my eclectic methodology is historical criticism. With its focus on the text as narrative, narrative criticism runs the risk of creating a disembodied text, that is, one divorced from its ancient context and free to be anything the modern reader wants it to be. There is thus the risk of hermeneutical solipsism, that is, as many interpretations as there are readers! To ameliorate this I have proposed the reader, who is, in effect, the modern reader who reads the text as a narrative, who reads other relevant ancient documents and who also listens to members of the Acts “interpretive community,” represented in this thesis by scholarly commentators. In this way historical-critical resources are brought to
bear on the reader’s act of reading. The aim is to read these narratives as the original reader would have read them, an aim which, admittedly, can only be approximated but which is still, none-the-less, worthwhile pursuing.

The Jesus movement was born in a particular social/cultural/historical/religious environment. Can anything be known about this context, particularly in regard to conversion? On the matter of turning to God, does the Jesus movement have a lineage that can be discerned in the times in which it began? There is no doubt much that is new in this movement, without precedent, but did it have a heritage upon which it drew, which helped to shape its thinking? Therefore, in chapter two, to provide a context for the conversion narratives of the Ethiopian, Saul and Cornelius, I look into conversion in Second Temple Judaism, including John the Baptist, Hellenistic paganism and philosophy. What, if any, influence did they have on the early Christians’ understanding of conversion?

I then turn to Luke’s narratives of the conversions of the Ethiopian, Saul and Cornelius. As this thesis is an inductive textual study of three conversion accounts in Acts I have engaged with scholars of Acts who represent a cross-section of views on Acts. The conversion
of the Ethiopian eunuch is examined in chapter three, focusing on the parts played both by the divine agents, the angel of the Lord and the Spirit, and by the two human characters, the Ethiopian and the evangelist Philip. How does Luke portray each and what can be learnt from this portrayal? The story of the Ethiopian’s conversion is one of the divine guidance of Philip to a person prepared for what he had to say, an important government official in a foreign nation, one who, because of his physical condition, was excluded from Judaism. I then move on to the conversion of Saul in chapter four, a narrative full of high drama and irony. As with the conversion of the eunuch, I am interested in how the various participants, the risen Jesus and both Saul and Ananias, are characterised by Luke. Jesus and Saul are central to this conversion by confrontation but interestingly the reluctant disciple, Ananias, has an important role to play in Saul’s turning to Jesus. The conversion of Cornelius is examined in chapter five. Cornelius’ conversion is the result of divine guidance of the two human characters and a dramatic manifestation of the Holy Spirit.

In the final chapter I draw conclusions from my study of the three conversion narratives. In particular I note the superintending role of divine agency in each of the conversions. These conversions are
replete with divine activity and yet there is also considerable variety
between these narratives in the ways in which it is manifested. An angel
of the Lord and the Spirit guide Philip to the eunuch while he is reading
from the prophet Isaiah, whereas the risen Jesus confronts Saul on his
way to persecute Christians in Damascus. An angel of the Lord instructs
the gentile Cornelius to send for the apostle Peter, a Jew, and a voice
from heaven directs a hesitant Peter to this gentile’s house, at which
their meeting is climaxed by a dramatic manifestation of the Holy Spirit.

But is this divine activity at the expense of the human? Are the
people involved little more than puppets of divine agency as has been
suggested? At the least Philip, Saul, Ananias, Cornelius and Peter must
respond to the divine initiative and willingly follow divine directions. In
two instances, that of Ananias and Peter, the authenticity of human
involvement is seen in their overcoming their own misgivings to follow
divine instructions. Further, from the three conversion accounts we see
that baptism is central to each and it is here that we see an intersection
of the divine and human. In baptism the eunuch, Saul and Cornelius say
“yes” as human beings to the divine initiative. Luke’s human agents in
these conversion stories are not automatons.
Is there a common pattern of turning to God to be found in the conversions of the eunuch, Saul and Cornelius? While there are common elements in each of the three conversion accounts, such as the divine initiative and baptism, there is also diversity. This is seen in the different ways in which divine agency is manifested and the different people involved—an outsider, an enemy and a good man—and the different paths each follows to become a follower of Jesus. Variety is as prominent as commonality in these stories, so much so that no set shape of conversion is to be found. Rather, the implication is that the divine involvement with each person is suited to the individuals involved and their unique situations.

Green in his monograph on conversion in Luke-Acts lists eight “controverted questions” concerning conversion which emerge from “recent scholarship on the motif of conversion within the Lukan narrative”.

To situate this thesis in a wider context I have provided my own answers to Green’s questions. Further, in concluding my thesis I put forward an understanding of what it means to turn to God based on the three conversion accounts in Acts and compare this to the understanding of conversion by some other commentators working with Acts.

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This thesis seeks the insights to be gained about conversion from Luke’s narration of the conversions of the Ethiopian, Saul and Cornelius and begins by outlining the conceptual tools to be used in doing so.
1. Methodology

This chapter discusses the methodology to be used in the thesis. The aim of the thesis is to gain an understanding of conversion as seen from three conversion narratives found in Acts 8:4–11:18, a passage largely about conversion. From this passage I consider the three main individual conversions in it, those of an Ethiopian eunuch (8:26–40), Saul (9:1–30) and Cornelius (10:1–11:18). Because genre affects interpretation I begin by considering the genre of Acts in general and, by implication, of these conversion accounts in particular. Then I seek to answer the question: in the light of this genre, what critical methodology would be appropriate to the task of understanding conversion as found in this major literary block in Acts?

1.1 The genre of Acts

The book of Acts is unique in the New Testament canon in that it provides our only account of the beginnings of the Christian movement and its spread from Jerusalem to Samaria, north and west into Galatia and Asia and then to Greece and Italy. It is not the purpose of this study
to argue for or against the unity of Luke’s Gospel and the Book of Acts
or to attempt to identify its author, traditionally known as “Luke.” I
accept the tradition that Acts is the second part of the writings of one
Luke, the first part being the third Gospel.

Pervo observes that “genre is one of the most hotly contested
topics in the study of Acts.”1 The issue of genre is important because
genre guides the reader in what to expect from a text, how the text is to
be read.2 If a text fits into the genre of history then the reader would
expect veracity, a coherence with reality, that the things described in the
text took place. As Padilla argues, genre is important in the formation of
meaning.3 There is broad agreement that Acts is a narrative but
disagreement arises as to its genre. Opinions have ranged from seeing
Acts as a work of fiction, an apologia, or a historical monograph to the
view that it is a unique work that does not fit neatly into any of these
categories. The matter remains unresolved. Holladay, in surveying
different views regarding the genre of Acts, concludes that the general
view of Acts is that it is history and that the debate in recent times is

1 Richard Pervo, Acts: A Commentary (ed. Harold W Attridge; Minneapolis: Fortress
Press, 2009), 14. For a survey of some different approaches to the matter of the genre of
Apollos, 2016), 40–42.
over what kind of history. Nonetheless he cautions that those who regard Acts as history must be careful about “simply historicizing the Acts account, reading it as a historically accurate account of the events it reports.” \(^4\) Related to the genre of Acts is the purpose of Acts. Why was it written? Suggestions have included to entertain and to edify, to provide a defence of Paul to the Romans, to offer a means of helping the infant church understand its identity, or to narrate an account of the growth of the early church.

1.1.1 A work of fiction

Those who regard Acts as a work of fiction recognise the historical and literary features of Acts but emphasise the literary over the historical, considering Luke a poor historian. In 1923 Martin Dibelius wrote that Acts was “*Novellen, or tales,*” that is, a collection of short stories.\(^5\) Haenchen, in his commentary on Acts, considers Luke a poor historian but a good narrator. Luke lacks two important things: the qualities to be a good historian like Xenophon or Thucydides, and readers able to appreciate such history. So he offered “a work of edification,” “history

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in the guise of stories” using “the language of vivid and dramatic scenes.”

Pervo thinks that Luke was a better storyteller than historian so he regards Acts as a historical novel.

The leading characters are endowed with extraordinary powers and insight . . . The story is told in the form of adventurous episodes. The mode of narration is that of popular narrative.

Pervo further argues that although Acts may have the appearance of history, differences with Greco-Roman historiography far outweigh any similarities. The comprehensive activity of divine agency was not to be found in such histories and their authors tended to distance themselves from the supernatural, when it was mentioned, by reporting

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7 Richard Pervo, Profit with Delight: the Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 137: “For the type of audience Luke apparently addressed, the edifying historical novel was the genre most appropriate to his purposes and most available. Those who would defend the greater relevance of the historical monograph must not only engage in painstakingly detailed definition and description of the genre but also explain why Luke should have preferred a model remote from both his goal and his environment.” See also Pervo, Acts, 18: “Luke’s achievement as historian lies more in his success at creating history than in recording it.” In his Commentary (p. 8) Pervo makes special mention of two Greek novels, Callirhoe and An Ephesian Tale. Cf. the Acts Seminar which argues that Acts is based on “the model of the epic and related literature.” It regards Acts as “historically unreliable unless proven otherwise.” Pervo was a member of the Seminar. See Dennis E. Smith and Joseph B. Tyson, Acts and Christian Beginnings: The Acts Seminar Report (Salem, Oreg.: Polebridge Press, 2013), 3–4.
8 Pervo, Acts, 17–18.
9 As is to be found in the works of such authors as Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, and Polybius.
it as being claimed to have taken place.\textsuperscript{10} Such is not the case with Acts. Further, Greco-Roman historians tended to concentrate on affairs of state and “political and military leaders” rather than “fishermen and tentmakers”.\textsuperscript{11}

There is a certain appeal in Pervo’s approach as Acts is fast-moving and entertaining with its narrow escapes, mob violence, shipwrecks, imprisonments and political intrigue. What is more, this approach avoids dealing with any difficult questions about the historical veracity of Acts. But Pervo’s position has been criticised on a number of grounds. The historical novel probably did not exist as a literary genre in Luke’s time,\textsuperscript{12} and the literary devices Pervo claims Luke used could be found in works of history as well as in novels.\textsuperscript{13} Pervo undervalues the historical referents (see below) in Luke’s work that need to be seen as more than providing verisimilitude in a work of

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{10} Pervo, 	extit{Acts}, 17. Padilla, 	extit{Acts of the Apostles}, 47.
\bibitem{12} This assumes a late date for 	extit{Callirhoe}. Dating of this novel is difficult and possible dates range from the first half of the first century to a date around 200 C.E. Pervo argues for a dating of Acts around 115 C.E. Pervo, 	extit{Acts}, 5. An 	extit{Ephesian Tale} is dated in the mid-second century C.E.
\end{thebibliography}
fiction. Further, the characters of Acts are empowered by a divinely inspired mission, not passionate love as in Greek romantic novels.

This is not to suggest that Luke’s work does not have historical problems, such as the difficulty in reconciling the biography of Paul in Acts with the biography of Paul from his letters, but it does imply that his purpose was to do more than write an edifying work of fiction. Although Acts may be entertaining it was not written principally to entertain but to engage. Luke was writing about the redemptive purposes of God in and through Jesus Christ and he was doing this for one Theophilus, and through him, the church.

1.1.2 A historical work

Acts has been viewed as a historical work such as a “historical monograph,” a view that commands wide support still in both the academy and the church. Conzelmann writes, “The best way to characterize the book as a whole is with the common designation ‘historical monograph’.” Taking Luke and Acts as two parts of a larger

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work, those arguing that Acts is a historical work point to the need to give due weight to Luke’s claim in the preface to his Gospel (1:1-4):

Seeing that many had undertaken to compile an account of the matters that had been accomplished among us, just as they were handed on to us by the original eyewitnesses and servants of the gospel, it seemed good also to me, having followed everything carefully from the very beginning, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus.  

This preface suggests that Luke wrote in the “Greco-Roman historiographical tradition with its emphasis on truthfulness,” something his readers would have recognised. The ancient reader acquainted with Greco-Roman history would have found expressions in this preface that would be familiar such as “account” (διήγησιν), “matters” (πραγμάτων), “eyewitnesses” (αὐτόπται), and “followed everything carefully from the very beginning” (παρηκολουθηκότι ἀνωθεν πᾶσιν ἀκριβῶς) (Luke 1:1–3). Similar to a Greco-Roman

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18 Cf. Acts 1:1, “In the first book I wrote about all, Theophilus, which Jesus began to do and to teach,” which can be seen as a link to Luke’s preface to his Gospel.


historian, Luke claims to have carried out his own research, listening to the accounts of “eyewitness” and “servants of the gospel” who were involved from the very beginning of the Jesus movement. This he did in preparation to the writing of an “orderly account.” Lucian of Samosata in his *The Way to Write History* advises about the craft of history writing:

> Facts are not to be collected at haphazard, but with careful, laborious, repeated investigation; when possible, a man should have been present and seen for himself; failing that, he should prefer the disinterested account, selecting the informants least likely to diminish or magnify from partiality. And here comes the occasion for exercising the judgement in weighing probabilities.\(^{21}\)

Then there are in Acts the references to events and people which one might say were on the public record and could be checked as to their veracity.\(^{22}\) Luke does not use these references to provide verisimilitude, as has been suggested,\(^ {23} \) but as an integral part of his narrative of the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to the “ends of the earth.” Luke’s implicit claim “is that the Jesus movement and the rise of

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\(^{21}\) Lucian, *The Way to Write History*, 131 [Cited 10 April 2018] Online: http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/luc/wl2/wl210.htm. Lucian, born in Syria in 120 C.E., was a second-century satirist. It would be wrong to claim that Luke would have met all of Lucian’s criteria for a good historian but the quote from Lucian’s treatise suggests that he would have met some.


Christianity are real historical phenomena that at least from time to time touch on the larger historical events and processes of the Empire (hence the synchronisms) and so are subject to careful historical scrutiny in an ancient mode…. So similarities can be seen between Luke’s work in Acts and Roman and Greek historiography, especially Greek. Both were ostensibly concerned with research and accuracy. Greek historiography, for its part, emphasised personal observation, participation in events, an even-handed treatment of individuals and checking with eyewitnesses.

One problem with viewing Acts as an historical work is that it is far from being a comprehensive portrayal of the beginnings of the Christian movement. It basically concentrates on the work of Peter and Paul with some passing attention given to Stephen and Philip. The rest of the apostles, including the newly selected Matthias, are not mentioned apart from some passing references to John. We are not told how Christianity came to the capital of the Empire, Rome. The rather abrupt ending with Paul under house-arrest leaves readers up in the air.

If Acts is to be seen as a historical monograph, what then is its theme?

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25 Witherington, *Acts*, 27, 29. This is not to suggest that it always lived up to these aims.
26 James, the brother of Jesus, who became a leader of the early church is likewise only briefly mentioned by Luke.
1.1.3 An apologia

Thompson argues that Acts is an example of “apologetic historiography,” giving a “justification, explanation and defense” for the new Jesus movement. But to whom was this defence given? Thompson suggests two possible audiences. First, the Romans, showing them how, Paul in particular and by implication, Christianity in general, is not a threat to the Roman Empire. Luke, it is argued, tended to portray Roman officials in a positive light, and Christian leaders were shown as “friendly to the Romans.” Romans, therefore, need not fear the “followers of the Way.”

Another possible audience could be Christians. That is, this apologia was written for Christians to help them in their dealings with Gentile neighbours and local officials. It would provide them with the means to assure their neighbours and Roman leaders that they were not a threat to the peace of the Empire. It would also help Christians themselves to be less anxious members of the Empire and not as fearful about local leaders.

Another variation on Acts as an apologia for Christians is the idea that it was written to support the inclusion of the Gentiles in the church.

As the gospel was preached beyond Jerusalem, Gentiles were converted but the basis of their inclusion in the church became a matter of controversy, a controversy that threatened to split the church (see Acts 15). Thompson argues that Acts can be seen as a defence of the right of Gentiles to be accepted as full members of the church without becoming Torah-keepers. If the infant church was not to remain a sect of Judaism it had to find a way of including non-Jews.

While there are certain features to commend this idea of Acts as an *apologia* there are also problems with the argument. The suggestion that Acts is a defence directed to reassuring the Romans has to overcome the fact that much of Acts, for example, those sections dealing with Peter, would not be of interest to Roman leaders. C. K. Barrett argues that no Roman official would bother wading through a writing about an obscure sect to find the few references that showed Christianity was not a threat to the Empire.

The inclusion of the Gentiles undoubtedly created a serious threat to the unity of the early church, and the church in Jerusalem

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needed a wider vision of the intentions of God. However Luke’s purpose in Acts is broader than an *apologia* for the Gentiles. This broader aim has to do with the salvific purposes of God through Jesus worked out through the Church.

Marguerat has sought to link the idea of Acts as a historical work with that of Acts as an *apologia*. He has suggested that Acts is best viewed as an historical work with an apologetic purpose. Luke’s aim is to help the infant church understand its identity, who it is.

### 1.1.4 Mixed genre

As the above discussion suggests, assigning a genre to Acts has proved to be a difficult task and one that has yet to be satisfactorily resolved. This has led some scholars to classify Acts as one of a kind, *sui generis*. It cannot be adequately fitted into any existing categories of Luke’s time. It is entertaining and written persuasively but it is more than a work of fiction. It records the expansion of the church from Jerusalem to the “ends of the earth” but it is not only a narrative of what actually happened. While Luke is selectively recording the growth of the church he is also producing an exposition of the works of God through the newly forming church of Christ.

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As regards genre, a better approach is to regard Acts as mixed in that it contains elements of Greek and Jewish historiography. There is clearly a strong Jewish influence in Acts that marks it off from Greco-Roman historiography. This is seen in the central role divine agency plays in Acts. As Padilla puts it, “Acts . . . is unashamedly theocentric.”

Acts is Luke’s account of God’s salvific work in and through the Jesus movement. It is a theocentric message of salvation through Jesus Christ. Divine agency is both prominent and active in a way that cannot be found in Greco-Roman history. It is not that the religious is absent from Greco-Roman history, but rather that the divine does not play the direct, extensive and interventionist role it does in Acts.

In this theocentric approach to history Acts is more akin to Jewish historiography than Greco-Roman. Luke writes more in the style of the writers of the historical books of the Hebrew Scriptures and the Deuterocanonical writings. Central to these writings is God’s control of history. These writings give Luke examples of history written from a theological perspective. Palmer argues that the Hellenistic Jewish

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writings, 1 and 2 Maccabees and 1 Esdras, are examples of a Jewish understanding of history yet reflect Greco-Roman historiography and in different ways, in perspective and content, foreshadow Acts.\(^{36}\)

Further links between Acts and Jewish writings can be seen in Luke’s quotations from them. Forty times Luke cites the Hebrew Bible, 9 of these from the LXX.\(^{37}\) Only twice does Luke quote non-biblical sources, Aratus' *Phaenomena* (Acts 17:28), and Euripides’ *Bacchae* (Acts 26:14). More specifically, we can note the ways in which Luke interprets the growth of the Jesus movement as a fulfilment of Jewish scripture. This is seen in generalising statements by Luke to the effect that what God had spoken through the prophets had now come to pass (e.g. Acts 3:18, 21, 24; 10:43; 13:40). It is also seen in specific quotes from the Hebrew Bible indicating that what was happening was a part of God’s prior plan, for example, the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14–21; cf. Joel 3:1–5 LXX), the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 2:24–32; cf. Psalm 15:8–11 LXX), his ascension (Acts 2:33–35; cf. Psalm 109:1), his return (Acts 3:17–23; cf. Deut 18:15, 18), Jesus as God’s

\(^{37}\) NA28, 861.
chosen one (Acts 4:10–12; cf. Psalm 118:22), and opposition to early Christians (Acts 4:25; cf. Psalm 2:1 LXX), to mention just a few.38

I have stated above that genre is a guide to reading and have argued that Acts is best viewed as mixed in terms of genre, a blend of Greek and Jewish historiography.39 Padilla proposes that “Acts is a Hellenistic historical monograph in the Jewish tradition.”40 This has implications for the reading of Acts for it means that the implied reader, to read Acts as a mixed genre history, must be willing to accept the narrator’s point of view, for example, about the active role of divine agency in the narrative. In contrast to Greco-Roman historiography, Luke is no “arms-length” observer but one who is closely associated with the movement about which he writes; he is an insider41 and the implied reader reads as an insider. An insider reading is open to the “broadly factual status” of Luke’s work.42

42 Cf. Alexander, *Acts Literary Context*, 163. This does not imply an uncritical reading but rather a reading that is open to the possibility of divine intervention, something
1.2 Narrative Criticism

1.2.1 The rise of Narrative Criticism in biblical studies

In the 1970s and 1980s a new critical methodology emerged in biblical studies, a methodology that focussed on the text as text. Kupp calls it a change in direction, a “literary swerve” away “from history and theology to story and rhetoric,” towards viewing the text as an “art object.” This was narrative criticism and it drew upon secular narratology, that is the theory of narrative. Narrative criticism, a term that arose in biblical studies, applied narratology to the study of biblical narratives.

Until this time the field of biblical studies had been dominated by historical criticism for over one hundred years and narrative criticism was a reaction to it. Central to historical criticism were three critical methodologies: source criticism, form criticism and redaction criticism.

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Source and form criticism went behind the text to try to uncover original sources used by the writer and the life setting (*Sitz im Leben*) of the passage. Redaction criticism took a step towards viewing the text as a whole by trying to uncover the ways in which the redactor arranged and edited his sources and why. With its consideration of the text both historically in term of its parts and literarily as the overall work of a redactor there is a sense then that Redaction criticism formed a bridge to narrative criticism.\(^{46}\)

Important precursors to narrative criticism were Structuralism, or more accurately Structural Narratology, and New Criticism. Structuralism developed in France in the 1950s and 1960s. It analysed texts by seeking to uncover structures within the text. These can occur at various levels or strata ranging from the surface level (linear or sequential) of the text down to deeper levels (deep structures). Common forms of structures to be found at various levels include contrasting pairs such as good and evil, and life and death. Further analysis, particularly at deeper levels can uncover belief systems/paradigms.\(^{47}\) New Criticism was influential from the 1940s to the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in the United States. New Critics

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\(^{47}\) Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* 12–14.
focussed on the text which they regarded as autonomous, that is, closed to the real world, and unified, with its meaning embedded in the text itself. That is, the text was self-referential. New Criticism also emphasised a close reading of the text, and rejected the ideas that the intention of the author and response of the reader were important in understanding the text.\textsuperscript{48}

Although narrative criticism in biblical studies can be traced back to the 1970s the appreciation of Luke’s writings as literary works has a much longer lineage. Jerome (340/2–420 C.E.) in his \textit{Commentary on Isaiah} remarks that Luke’s language “is more elegant, and smacks of secular eloquence.”\textsuperscript{49} Streeter, in his work, \textit{The Four Gospels}, in 1924, regarded Luke as a “consummate literary artist.”\textsuperscript{50} Spencer points out that even in an era committed to the scientific analysis of pre-modern documents, an appreciation of their literary qualities was not overlooked. Since “the Enlightenment, ‘scientific’ criticism of ancient sacred texts has consistently utilised literary analysis in conjunction with historical


Moore could write that by the 1990s narrative criticism had not shown much development since its emergence in the 1970s and 1980s. “Generally speaking, New Testament narrative criticism had a frozen, fixed-in-amber quality by the 1990s.” There were, however, developments in narratology, influenced by postmodernism, from structuralism to post-structuralism. Gone was the structuralist project of seeking “ultimate explanatory models” in literature, of making literary criticism a science. In its place emerged “postmodern narratology” with not one narratological viewpoint but many such as feminist, cultural, post-colonial, queer, post-structural and cognitive.

Within narrative criticism, reflecting the developments in narratology, reader-response criticism moved from the edges of narrative criticism to take up a more prominent position in biblical studies. The range of questions asked of the biblical narrative broadened

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from questions regarding poetics and interpretation to questions about culture, society, politics, and gender. “We witness biblical narratives shifting their points of gravity under the weight of different kinds of interpretive questions, exposing their innate historical, political and social biases, while simultaneously being strangely hospitable to other, often incongruent, political and social visions.”

Powell in 1990 published one of the key texts in narrative criticism, What is Narrative Criticism? and characterized this approach as text centered. Eleven years later in his Chasing the Eastern Star he regards “narrative criticism as a subset or variety of reader-response criticism.” In 2001 Richard Horsley published Hearing the Whole Story: the Politics of Plot in Mark’s Gospel, a text which Stephen Moore regarded as “far and away the most decisive breaking of the standard narrative-critical mold.” Horsley developed a post-colonial reading of Mark in which he took issue with earlier classical narrative-critical readings of Mark as a story about discipleship. Further, he was willing to move

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55 Powell, What is Narrative Criticism? 14. He also believed at that time that narrative criticism was coming closer to reader-response criticism (see page 21).
outside the biblical studies discipline to seek insights from areas “such as anthropology, historical sociology, ethnography of performance, feminist and womanist theory, political psychology, and the perspectives of subjugated peoples in the modern world.”⁵⁹ As another example of a biblical studies author willing to reach outside the discipline, this time to the cognitive sciences, we can note Joel Green’s *Conversion in Luke-Acts: Divine Action, Human Cognition, and the People of God*, which can be seen as a biblical studies example of cognitive narratology.

That narrative criticism originated in secular literary criticism should not detract from its usefulness for biblical studies. A scholarly consensus emerged in the 1970s that the Gospels and Acts are more than a scissors and paste collection of individual texts and that their writers had shown literary skill in composing them.⁶⁰ As authors they wanted to do more than simply set out what actually happened.⁶¹ They wanted to persuade hearers and readers to a certain point of view.⁶² In doing so they selected what to include and what to leave out. They employed

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⁵⁹ Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story*, xii. For Horsley, the text was far from self-referencing.
⁶² Green, “Narrative Criticism” 90.
literary techniques to accomplish their goal. Literary features such as the
unity of the work, plot development, the use of a narrator, rhetoric,
style, setting, characterisation and the role of characters in the unfolding
of events could be found in the Gospels and Acts. If the Gospels and
Acts could be considered literary works in their own right, then, it was
thought appropriate to use a critical literary methodology from secular
literature in studying them. Narrative criticism has been particularly
influential in Lukan studies:

Perhaps the area of greatest scholarly interest in Luke-Acts in
recent years has been the study of these texts using literary or
narrative approaches. In fact, the development of literary-critical
approaches to the study of biblical texts has seen the greatest
scholarly activity in the Lukan materials.

1.2.2 What is narrative criticism?

Narrative criticism is a critical literary approach to reading the Bible’s
narrative passages, such as the Gospels and Acts in the New Testament.
It regards these as literary units and seeks to identify their poetic or
literary features such as plot, characterisation, role of the narrator, point
of view, setting. It is, as Merenlahti puts it, “a critical analysis of

(Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 19.
aesthetic form.” Historical criticism is interested in the referential function of the text, the historical, cultural, social information that lies behind the text. Narrative criticism, on the other hand, attends to the text and its poetic function. Narrative critics argue that the text is meant to be read as a whole, from start to finish. Attention is paid to the text in its finished form, not to the way it has come together. “Biblical narrative texts are to be analysed as internally interactive unities in their finished, canonical forms, not as composites of various sources.”

Paying heed to the text and not what lies behind it is, in fact, the way that most people read Scripture in any case. In narrative criticism the text is “an end in itself.”

I regard Acts as basically a historical work even though it cannot be readily related to any of the possible literary models of Luke’s time

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66 This is a simplification. Historical criticism includes a range of disciplines looking behind the text such as form, source and redaction criticism. It also seeks to help uncover the meaning of the text through historical investigation of people, places and events in the text.


68 Bartchy, “Narrative Criticism,” 787.


70 Powell, What is Narrative Criticism?, 7.
(see above). It is, I believe, a work of non-fiction rather than fiction. Luke wrote about what he believed, based on his investigations, had taken place. It may have its problems regarding historical veracity but I believe Luke’s intention in writing was that Theophilus might know the “certainty” of the things about which he had been informed (Luke 1:4).

What place then has narrative criticism, which has arisen out of modern literary criticism, in this thesis? History and literature are not incompatible; history is art as well as science. All history writing exhibits literary features such as selection, structure (“plot” in literary criticism), characterisation (characters are not made up but certain features are emphasised above others), not to mention style of writing. Although not aiming for “emotional effects or entertainment,” ancient historians recognised the need to engage the imagination so their work would have a “beneficial” impact. The use of artistic techniques was important in ancient historiography to contribute to the work’s impact. Powell uses the example of Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* as an example of a work that is both a work of history and a work of

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71 Subjectivity intrudes into the writing of history because decisions must be made on what to include and what to exclude and how to relate events. Green, “Narrative Criticism,” 86.
72 Although these may be features of all history writing it does not follow that all history writing is of the same quality. One thing that can differentiate writers of history is their literary skill. Accuracy is another.
74 Thompson, *Keeping the Church*, 12–13.
literature. It is just that in the writing of history the poetic function is in
the employ of the referential function. The referential function is
accomplished through literary technique. Consequently I consider
narrative criticism appropriate for the study of Acts, understood as
history.

1.2.3 Features of Narrative Criticism

(a) The implied author and implied reader

A feature of narrative criticism is the focus on the reader of the text.
Narrative critics do not try to go behind the text to uncover the actual
author or the actual reader, as historical critics attempt to do. The
narrative critic’s interest is not so much in the original author or reader
but rather the author and reader implied by the text. The implied
author and reader are hypothetical constructions derived from a careful

75 Powell, What is Narrative Criticism?, 94. In a later article he also mentions Gibbon’s
History of the Western World, Shelby Foote’s The Civil War: A Narrative, and Truman
Capote’s In Cold Blood. Mark Allen Powell, “Narrative Criticism: The Emergence of a
Prominent Reading Strategy,” in Mark as Story: Retrospect and Prospect (ed. Kelly R.
Iverson and Christopher W. Skinner; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 21. See
also Cornelius Bennema, A Theory of Character in New Testament Narrative
(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 53.

76 See Mark Allan Powell, Chasing the Eastern Star: Adventures in Biblical Reader-Response
Criticism (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 5. Van Thanh Nguyen,
Peter and Cornelius: A Story of Conversion and Mission (American Society of Missiology

77 Literary critic Wolfgang Iser has been significant for the use of the concept of the
implied reader in narrative criticism. See Wolfgang Iser, The Implied Reader: Patterns of
Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett (Baltimore: The John Hopkins
The narrative critic asks what the competent reader is supposed to know about the text to understand it as the implied author intended. What is this reader expected to believe, to do, and what gaps are the reader expected to be able to fill in? The critic seeks to uncover the literary techniques the implied author uses to engage, inform and persuade the reader. What has this author included in the text and what has been left out? How does the plot develop, and how are the characters portrayed? What is the implied reader expected to infer from the text?

Powell in his *What is Narrative Criticism?* diagrams a simple communications model of speech-act theory for the actual author, text and actual reader, then shows, diagrammatically, how narrative criticism relates to that model. I have altered Powell’s diagram by separating the “actual” model from the narrative criticism model as well as by showing arrows moving from the “narrative” to the “implied author” and “implied reader” (they moved from left to right in Powell’s

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79 Bartchy, “Narrative Criticism,” 788.
diagram). I have also included a “modern reader.” The real author and reader are external to the biblical “text” in the first model. The actual author, for example Luke, composes the text and the actual reader (Theophilus) reads it (or has it read to him). We depend on historical criticism to find what, if anything, can be known about them. In the narrative criticism model the author and reader are inferred from the text by the modern reader. However they are not the actual author and reader but the author and reader implied by the text.

As noted above, the implied reader is a construct of the modern reader, a hypothetical “reader” created by the one reading the text. Thus

81 See comments below by Powell about his changing view on the role of the reader, particularly in his *Chasing the Eastern Star.*
this implied reader will reflect the concerns, values, prejudices and views of the modern reader.\textsuperscript{82} Powell acknowledges this when he changes his view of narrative criticism from a text-centred approach to a subset of reader-response criticism (see above). Powell draws attention to the fact that since the implied reader is a “hypothetical concept” there are likely to be a variety of implied readers according to who is doing the reading.

How is the implied reader constructed? In attempting to detect the implied reader narrative critics focus on the text. Through an analysis of the literary skill of the implied author as evidenced in the text they seek an answer to the question: “how did the implied author expect the implied reader to respond to the text?” The text is treated as a closed world, an idea that can be traced to literary critics like Chatman.\textsuperscript{83}

While treating a modern work of fiction as a closed world may be acceptable to secular literary critics, it has shortcomings when applied to ancient texts. Many biblical critics, recognising the “distance” between

\textsuperscript{82} Powell, \textit{What is Narrative Criticism?}, 21.
modern and ancient readers, use extra-textual resources in their attempt to construct an implied reader. They recognise a need to use historical-critical resources to understand the world outside of the text, the world to which the text belongs. The text is not regarded as “closed,” that is, closed to external information. Spencer argues that because of the distance between the modern reader and the ancient text there is a need for the modern reader to acquire an “understanding of Luke’s world through rigorous and wide-ranging historical study.” Green similarly contends that the biblical text should not be considered a self-contained unit, sufficient unto itself. Acts has “external, historical referents,” as well as references to the Hebrew scriptures and the LXX. These need to be investigated. J. A. Darr, in referring to Luke-Acts, pointedly argues:

[W]e cannot ignore the distance between ourselves and the readers of this ancient narrative. Although we can never recover it in full, the intended (authorial) reader’s cultural repertoire remains the optimal extratext [sic] for understanding Luke’s story. Those who fancy themselves literary critics but not historians

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84 “Open” and “closed” are also used with reference to the extent a text requires the participation of readers. Green, “Narrative Criticism,” 91. Green refers to this distinction made by Umberto Eco in The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts (Advances in Semiotics; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), 33–4, 144–72.
85 Spencer, “Acts and Modern Literary Approaches,” 413 (Spencer’s emphasis).
86 Green, “Narrative Criticism,” 82.
87 Cf. Green, “Narrative Criticism,” 84, 85.
88 This is based on the assumption that Acts is an historical work. If Acts is a work of fiction, they can happily be left alone.
cannot contribute much of value to our knowledge of Lukan character (my emphasis).

Historical criticism is needed alongside of narrative criticism to help fill out certain historical details to assist in determining what the implied reader would have understood, for example, what a centurion is, who Candace, Philip, and Peter are, who “those of the circumcision” (οἱ ἐκ περιτομῆς) (Acts 11:2) are. Information on background material (people, traditions, beliefs, social structures, politics), the “common knowledge” of the world of the text, is needed so that we can attempt to understand as the implied reader understood and thereby understand what the implied author wrote.

In this thesis I explicitly acknowledge that the implied reader is a construct of the modern reader. Consequently I refer to the reader in italics. This reader is my attempt, using the NA Koine text and available critical resources, to approximate the implied reader of Luke’s work. Obviously none of these resources, which include modern reconstructions of the Greek text, lexicons, commentaries, textual search programmes (Accordance), were available to the original readers. Nor

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90 “There is no reason why a text that is examined with regard to its poetic function cannot also be examined by a different method that is interested in its referential function.” Powell, What is Narrative Criticism?, 96, 97.
were the original readers likely to devote themselves to a close reading and re-readings of the text.\textsuperscript{91} But then the original readers had the advantage of Koine Greek as their first language (even though we cannot be sure of the text they had access to),\textsuperscript{92} not to mention their immersion in their culture.\textsuperscript{93} We cannot re-duplicate their world, life experiences and knowledge nor their ability to fill in the gaps in the original narrative. But we can approximate them to a certain degree through the use of critical resources. In this approach this \textit{reader} does not independently determine the meaning of the text \textit{(reader over the text)}.\textsuperscript{94} Rather this \textit{reader} arrives at a meaning through engaging the text, using extra-textual resources and dialoguing with biblical scholars \textit{(reader with the text)}.\textsuperscript{95} Thus I argue that there is meaning in the text independent of the reader, meaning that Luke intended to convey to Theophilus. This thesis aims to develop a reading of that meaning in regard to conversion in Acts 8:4–11:18.

\begin{flushright}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{91} Spencer, “Acts and Modern Literary Approaches,” 413.
\item \textsuperscript{92} Given the differences between the Alexandrian and Western text this is not an insignificant issue.
\item \textsuperscript{93} Powell, \textit{Chasing}, 85.
\item \textsuperscript{94} Resseguie sets out three positions regarding the relationship of the reader to the text: (1) reader in the text, e.g. the reader implied by the text; (2) reader over the text, the reader determines (and dominates) meaning; and (3) reader with the text, the reader inter-reacts with the text. Resseguie, \textit{Narrative Criticism}, 30, 31. See also Powell, \textit{What is Narrative Criticism?}, 16–18.
\item \textsuperscript{95} See Powell, \textit{Chasing}, 68, and the first of his three different ways in which narrative criticism is used, i.e. as an “author-oriented hermeneutic.” That is, the response of the reader to the text reflects the historical intentions of the author.
\end{itemize}
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My reader is similar to Bennema’s “plausible, historically informed modern reader.” Bennema’s “reader” is ostensibly a first-century reader with

(i) a good (but not exhaustive) knowledge of the first-century Jewish and Greco-Roman world in which the New Testament documents were produced; and (ii) whose knowledge of a particular character comes primarily from the narrative he is reading but possibly from other sources.

But Bennema acknowledges this reader is in reality himself. He has constructed this reader through the choice of what sources to use and to what extent. This creation of the “reader” has also been influenced by Bennema’s social and cultural background, and his gender. Likewise my reader is my creation, a product of my use of ancient and modern resources. But while I can never fully re-create the original reader I believe it is possible, by an open, careful use of ancient and modern critical resources, to move significantly closer to this reader. I agree with Bennema when he concludes, “Perhaps all an interpreter must do is to give

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96 Bennema, A Theory of Character, 68.
97 Bennema, A Theory of Character, 68–69.
98 Bennema, A Theory of Character, 70. Powell argues that if both original and implied reader are critically determined then the difference between the two may not be great. Powell, Chasing, 73. He describes the quest for the implied reader as an asymptotic goal. This is a term from mathematics which refers to “a phenomenon that constantly approaches but never actually reaches its apparent goal.” In our situation it can refer “to any unattainable goal that is deemed worthy of pursuit due to the intrinsic value of the approach itself.” Powell, Chasing, 85. Powell later writes about modern readers aligning themselves with the implied reader. Powell, “What is Narrative Criticism?”, 35.
a plausible explanation for the ancient sources he presumes his reader has access to.”

(b) Meaning

Powell distinguishes between two different ways in which meaning in literature may be conveyed. Meaning may be understood in cognitive terms. The text is unlocked through careful reading, reason, judgement, taking note of the denotation of words and sentences in their context. This is an exercise of the intellect and the aim is to understand the author’s message. But meaning may also be understood in terms of its impact on the reader emotionally. How is the reader moved by what she reads? What feelings are aroused? Does he identify with or reject certain characters because of how they are portrayed? For Tannehill in his two-volume work on Luke-Acts, the issue is not historical accuracy but the impact Acts has in terms of the values it promotes and models it holds up for imitation. In this thesis I assume that Luke wrote firstly to inform (cf. Luke 1:4). However, I also acknowledge that his writing also aimed to have an impact, mainly in terms of portraying examples of sacrifice and dedication to follow, and alternatively, examples of hard-

99 Bennema, A Theory of Character, 71, Bennema’s emphasis.
100 Powell, Chasing, 23.
101 “The vital issue in the study of Acts is not whether it is historically accurate but whether it promotes values worthy of respect and presents models worthy of imitation.” Tannehill, Acts of the Apostles, 3. I regard the historicity of Acts as important but it is not the purpose of this thesis to resolve historical problems found in Acts.
heartedness and self-centredness to be avoided, as well as encouraging Christians in their faith.102

(c) Structure

So how does the implied author, whom for convenience I will call “Luke,” seek to communicate with this reader? Chatman makes the distinction between story and discourse, the story referring to what the narrative depicts and the discourse to how it is portrayed, the way in which the story is told.103 The story has to do with the events, the characters and the settings, and the discourse with how the events, characters and settings are treated by the implied author. Although in this thesis I will give most of my attention to character and characterisation, in attempting to uncover the compositional means used by the author of Acts I will also consider the structure of the passages, the “plot” in literary and narrative criticism, the settings, the role of the narrator and point of view. This, I argue, will help to understand Luke’s meaning.

The plot of the narrative is used to engage the reader’s interest as

102 Polybius in his Histories (10.21.24–8) writes about persons rather than buildings so that they might be imitated.
well as to “communicate the essential message of the narrative.” 104 An
author cannot include everything in his narrative. Some events will be
included and some implied. Not only does the author choose what
events to include in his narrative but he also chooses the structure or
ordering of these incidents. Further, in structuring these events their
relationship to each other needs to be evident. This structure, or plot, is
the “‘fictive’ substructure” created by the author and is his way of
constructing meaning from the data available to him.105 Green argues
that these incidents need not be chronologically ordered, however the
ordering needs to reflect not only how one event leads to another but
also show an implicit causal relationship. “What comes first is at least
implicitly understood to provide the grounds for the second, and so
on,” so narrative structure “is a form of persuasion.” 106 E. M. Forster
gives what has become a common illustration of the difference between
a story and a narrative structure or plot. “The king died and then the
queen died,” is a story, telling what happened. ”The king died, and then

104 Nguyen, Peter and Cornelius, 82.
106 Green, “Narrative Criticism,” 95. Chatman calls this “wholeness,” that is, the parts
relate to each other. Chatman, Story and Discourse, 21.

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the queen died of grief,” is a plot (discourse) in which the queen’s death is linked causally to the king’s death.\textsuperscript{107}

In Acts causality, in the way that Green and Forster have understood it, is more likely to be obvious in the micro-narratives such as the conversion accounts of the Ethiopian, Saul and Cornelius. At the macro level, such as the book of Acts as a whole or even the narrative block chosen for investigation in this thesis, plot manifests itself more broadly.\textsuperscript{108} For example, there is no causal connection between the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch (8:26–40) and the conversion of Saul which follows (9:1–30). But there is a connection. This connection is not causal but \textit{thematic}, that is, the theme of conversion (this is referred to below).

In literary and narrative critical discussions on plot, one of the necessary characteristics emphasised is unity. A well-constructed plot is made up of a beginning, middle and end, although not necessarily in that order, which can be seen to be parts of an obvious whole.\textsuperscript{109} However as this thesis deals with a narrative block (Acts 8:4–11:18, see below) that is a part of a larger unit, that is, the book of Acts, the matter

\textsuperscript{107} E. M. Forster, \textit{Aspects of the Novel} (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), 93. Cf. Powell, \textit{What is Narrative Criticism?}, 40; and Resseguie, \textit{Narrative Criticism}, 199, both of whom refer to Forster’s example.


\textsuperscript{109} Resseguie, \textit{Narrative Criticism}, 198. This definition can be traced back to Aristotle. See Aristotle, \textit{Poetics}, 7.3 (Fyfe, LCL).
of the unity of the passage is not stressed. Being part of a larger whole, the chosen passage does not meet Aristotle’s criteria for a good plot in which nothing precedes the beginning and nothing follows the end. This notwithstanding, an analysis of the structure of the text can be helpful in understanding the text. Consequently I pay attention to the structure of the three conversion events to see how the structure contributes to this reader’s comprehension of the passage.

(d) Character

As this thesis is about conversion a study of the “characters” and “characterisation” in the three conversion accounts being studied will be central. There has been debate over which is the more important, the structure (plot) or the characters? Aristotle, and Structuralists in the twentieth century, argue for structure. Chatman thought the debate meaningless and argued that both are necessary and that one should not be subordinated to the other. Structure and characters are interrelated. In Acts each depends on the other for they both contribute to the substance of the narrative and its development.

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110 This matter of unity is a controversial one in narrative criticism and is briefly touched upon below.  
111 Aristotle, Poetics, 7.4, 5.  
While characters are important in Acts, as in other ancient literature, they generally have to be inferred. In “ancient Hebrew and Greco-Roman literature characterisation tends to be indirect – information about a character is conveyed primarily through the character’s speech and actions rather than the narrator’s statements.”\textsuperscript{113}

That is, characterisation is more through showing what the character does and says, rather than telling what the character is like, through the observations of a narrator or another character. Thus the reader has to infer or deduce the character from what is shown. We learn about characters in Acts indirectly, mainly through what they do and what they say (including speeches), and occasionally through the narrator.\textsuperscript{114}

An author cannot write down everything that could be known about a character and as a consequence selects what is to be mentioned, what is to be emphasised, and what is to be left out. How the author does this is a part of their literary skill and affects how the character is portrayed and their impact on the reader.\textsuperscript{115} Because information about a character may be fragmentary and sparse, the reader has to reconstruct the character from the (limited) information in the text. This involves

\textsuperscript{113} Bennema, \textit{A Theory of Character}, 56. See also 33, 60.
\textsuperscript{114} Thompson, \textit{Keeping the Church}, 18, 20.
\textsuperscript{115} Resseguie, \textit{Narrative Criticism}, 121. Resseguie (121) adds that this does not imply “biblical characters are fictional.”
inference or “filling in the gaps” in the narrative.\textsuperscript{116} Through this inference the reader is drawn into the narrative.\textsuperscript{117} This engaging of the reader can be done through a reading of the text alone or through the text and the use of other resources outside of the text. In this thesis, as this reader attempts to approximate the implied reader, extra-textual information on the historical and social context of the text is used.

If the reader is required to use inference to fill in gaps in the narrative, are we left with a situation in which there are as many interpretations of a character as there are readers? No, there are limits on the reader. As Bennema points out, “rules of syntax and genre, relation to the wider text, and knowledge of the socio-cultural setting of the text provide the necessary hermeneutical parameters to control the process of interpretation.”\textsuperscript{118} The reader reads in a given context of shared language conventions and methods of interpretation which make communication possible. To use a sporting analogy, because the participants share the language, strategy and rules, a game of football can take place, be understood and appreciated.

\textsuperscript{116} Bennema, \textit{A Theory of Character}, 56, Bennema’s emphasis. See also Thompson, \textit{Keeping the Church}, 16.


\textsuperscript{118} Bennema, \textit{A Theory of Character}, 57.
As conversion involves change, any changes in characters will be of special interest. The categorisation of character in narrative criticism has tended to range from the simple to the complex. Forster proposed a simple classification of “round” and “flat” characters.\textsuperscript{119} Round characters are “three-dimensional,” “possessing several complex traits,” “unpredictable,” “lifelike” and “capable of surprising.”\textsuperscript{120} Flat characters, on the other hand, tend to be “two dimensional,” “constructed around a single idea or quality;” they lack what round characters have.\textsuperscript{121} Van Thanh Nguyen in his Peter and Cornelius uses this classification.\textsuperscript{122}

Bennema believes this classification to be too restrictive and in danger of forcing characters into unsuitable types. He argues for a classification that allows for more refinement by placing them along three scales or continuums.\textsuperscript{123} These are the continuums of complexity, development and inner life.\textsuperscript{124} Each scale has four ratings: “none,” “little,” “some” and “much.” Thus a character can be rated on the continuum of development from “no development” or “little

\textsuperscript{119} Forster, Aspects, 75–85.
\textsuperscript{120} Resseguie, Narrative Criticism, 123.
\textsuperscript{121} Resseguie, Narrative Criticism, 123.
\textsuperscript{122} Nguyen, Peter and Cornelius, 109, 116. See also Powell, What is Narrative Criticism?, 55.
\textsuperscript{123} Bennema, A Theory of Character, 73–78.
\textsuperscript{124} Bennema actually has a fourth scale which is an aggregation of the other three. For reasons given below this scale is not used in this thesis.
development” to “some development” and “much development.” In Bennema’s categorization the rating is done in relation to the other characters in a narrative and takes into account all appearances of the character by an author or authors.¹²⁵

My aim in this thesis is more modest. Only a portion of Acts is being studied (8:4–11:18). Further, the thesis is not an extended analysis of all the characters of the chosen passage in all their complexity (or lack of it) but rather a reflection on the change due to conversion. So, I will make use of Bennema’s continuum of development which seems the best suited to the issue of gauging this change.¹²⁶ However, as there is only one person converted in each incident, my estimate of the degree of change will not be solely on the basis of the relationship of the person converted to others in the narrative.¹²⁷ Rather, I will look for other evidence in the chosen passage (8:4–11:18) to gain some insight into the degree of change that has occurred. Where relevant to the issue of conversion, I will also consider other appearances of a character in the Lukan narratives in order to assess change in that person. In practice, this will only apply to Saul. While all characters in the three conversion

¹²⁶ Bennema, A Theory of Character, 76.
¹²⁷ It can be argued that in the Cornelius event two people are converted, Cornelius and Peter. While there is much to be said for this view, only one, Cornelius, is baptised, signifying a commitment to Jesus Christ. This is the understanding of conversion that I am interested in in this thesis.
accounts are examined, I am mainly interested in those who are converted. The others are considered from the perspective of their role in the conversion event.

(e) Narrator

The narrator tells the story and tells it in a certain fashion.\(^{128}\) The narrator is the “voice” of the implied author.\(^{129}\) In telling the story the narrator may be extradiegetic, outside the text, or intradiegetic, inside it.\(^{130}\) In Acts the narrator is, aside from the preface (Acts 1:1–2; cf. Luke 1:1–4) largely hidden, telling the story anonymously from outside the text. This is common in Jewish historiography and contrasts with the more intrusive role of the narrator in Greco-Roman historiography. It is possible, but not certain, that Luke makes an appearance in the “we” passages of Acts (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16).\(^{131}\) His “voice” may be detected through his portrayal of characters and their speeches, (for example, Peter, 11:4–17).\(^{132}\)

Characterisation in Acts is mainly indirect, through showing rather than telling. However the narrator, on occasion, does provide

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\(^{128}\) Nguyen, *Peter and Cornelius*, 15.


direct insight into an individual, for example, Cornelius (Acts 10:2).

Robert Alter argues that the most reliable indicator of finding out about a character is through comments by the narrator. This assumes that the narrator is reliable, which in Luke’s case, would depend on his sources.

(f) Point of view

Point of view can refer to two things in a biblical narrative. It can be the perspective from which the account is given. This may be the position of the narrator, which has been dealt with above, or it may refer to the perspective of one of the participants, including God. It can also refer to the worldview, values, and norms that are evident in the narrative as a whole. In this second understanding of point of view we may speak of the theological significance of the narrative. For example, in chapter 6 of his book, “The Theological Significance,” Nguyen steps back from the “what” and “how” of the narrative (Acts 10:1–11:18) to consider its theological implications. In the larger literary block considered in this thesis the narrative is recounted from the narrator’s perspective, that is, from outside of the text. But more importantly for this thesis, indeed, the crux of the thesis — the point of view or theological

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134 This does not require the assumption that the narrator, Luke, is “omniscient,” only that he had access to reliable sources, in this case Peter. On the narrator as omniscient see Kurtz, *Reading Luke-Acts*, 126–28.
136 Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?*, 23.
137 Nguyen, *Peter and Cornelius*, 133–156.
implications of Luke’s view of conversion are examined, particularly in the concluding chapter.

1.2.4 Criticisms

John Ashton argues that narrative criticism is “more of a fad than a fashion” and its contribution to biblical studies is “trifling if not illusory”.138 Spencer warns that the “burden is on the biblical critic informed by secular literary theory to demonstrate clearly and succinctly how such theory enhances comprehension of the biblical passage.”139 Narrative criticism has its critics and it is appropriate at this point, given the place this methodology has in this thesis, to look at some of the criticisms that have been levelled at it.

(a) Unity of the text

Narrative criticism, it is claimed, assumes a unity of the text that is illusory.140 Works such as the Gospels are not unified wholes but collections of texts brought together by the author/redactor.141 Narrative critics have neglected the work of source and form critics, and the contribution of their work has suffered as a consequence. The text is not

141 Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?*, 90. See also Ashton, *Studying John*, 144. Although Ashton writes about John’s Gospel his chapter on “Narrative Criticism” is applicable to the wider use of this methodology in New Testament studies.
the work of one author but of several, each with their own style. There is no one uniform text by one (implied) author. Even Acts is subject to this criticism. Earlier critics argued that Acts was not a unified work but a collection of stories from different sources. For example, some suggest the three accounts of Saul’s conversion came from three sources, from a Damascus source, from Paul himself and from Luke who combines the other two accounts.142

In fictional narratives the issue of unity is considered important and one of the indications of quality literature.143 Aristotle wrote regarding tragedy that it needed to be whole, having a beginning, middle and end.144 Chatman argues that a feature of a narrative structure is “wholeness,” that is, a “discernible organisation” with the parts relating to each other.145 When we turn to the matter of the unity of biblical texts such as the Gospels and Acts, the matter is controversial and unresolved. Merenlahti argues that discerning unity is a matter of interpretation, an “assumption”.146 Unity is in the eye of the beholder. Powell agrees, pointing out that, “narrative unity is not something that must be proved from an analysis of the material. Rather it is something

142 See Gaventa, From Darkness to Light, 53, 54.
144 Aristotle, Poetics, 7.2 3. He wrote that it also needed μέγεθος, greatness.
145 Chatman, Story and Discourse, 20–21.
146 Merenlahti, Poetics for the Gospel?, 3.
that can be assumed. It is the form of narrative itself that grants
coherence to the material, no matter how disparate that material might
be.”

The question can be asked: how far should the matter of unity be
pressed for a non-fictional, historical document? Its importance for
fictional works, modern and ancient, may be readily grasped. But what
of ancient historical documents written under different constraints?
Further, the matter is not simply a question of the narrative but also of
the text. What are the implications for the unity of the text in view of the
quality of the Koine text and its variants? This matter is further
considered below. All claims about the unity of a text are provisional.
My position regarding unity is that all that is required, narratively
speaking, is a broad coherence, a central theme, in which the parts show
a reasonable relationship to a theme and to each other. If this is the case
then Acts 8:4–11:18 shows a “wholeness” (see above) broadly
understood.

(b) Modern concepts and ancient narratives

Can modern literary-critical concepts be used on ancient historical
documents? Schnabel questions, in regard to Acts, whether is helpful to

147 Powell, What is Narrative Criticism?, 92. My emphasis.
write about plot, scene and stock, foil, flat and round characters? Were (ancient) writers, who set out to write about things they believed took place, interested in creating a plot or scenes or a narrative world?

As noted above, Acts has both referential (historic) and poetic (literary technique) features, the latter used in the service of the former. Luke’s literary skill serves his historical aims. It is appropriate then to analyse Luke’s skill using modern literary-critical concepts originating in the critical examination of fiction. Literature, whether fictional or non-fictional, modern or ancient, shares some common features such as the need to order the work in a certain way (plot), to select what to include and exclude, how to present the persons involved (characterisation) and writing techniques (for example, repetition, holding back information). So (modern) narrative analysis can contribute to our understanding of Luke’s (ancient) work.

(c) The issue of subjectivity

An important feature of narrative criticism is the concept of the implied reader. It has been noted above that the implied reader is a hypothetical construct by the (modern) reader. The implication of this is, as Bennema

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points out, that “there are as many implied readers as there are actual
readers.” As noted above, the matter is not as serious as might first be
thought. The slippery slope to solipsism is avoided by two factors. First,
the text itself sets limits on the possible range of interpretations.
Grammar, limited semantic ranges, context and knowledge of the
“world” of the text act to draw a boundary around how the text might
be interpreted. That being said, there still remains the possibility of a
band of plausible interpretations. The other factor at work is what
Stanley Fish calls interpretive communities who set limits on acceptable
meanings. In biblical studies one such community is made up of
academic readers of the text who make use of available critical resources
to read the text. While it is unrealistic to expect such a community to be
unanimous in their reading of a text, they can act to set limits on the
band of acceptable readings.

1.2.5 Benefits of narrative criticism

(a) Focus on the text

Narrative criticism focusses primarily on the text of Scripture rather
than what is behind the text. The attention is on the text as a whole and

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150 Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*
(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 14, 15. Fish was an early
proponent of reader-response criticism. He also noted that different communities
would produce different readings (16).
how it functions aesthetically or poetically.\textsuperscript{151} It asks how a text conveys meaning, cognitively and affectively. By concentrating on the text as narrative it avoids getting mired in behind-the-text issues such as sources, authorship, \textit{Sitz im Leben}, historicity and original readers, issues which often prove unresolvable and consequently unfruitful.\textsuperscript{152} In this study, behind-the-text matters are not disregarded entirely but are generally considered only with reference to how they help this reader understand the world of the text.\textsuperscript{153} Narrative criticism then seeks to let the text as text speak. It reflects the way that most Christians read biblical narratives, engaging with the words before them and asking questions about their meaning, although with less critical discernment.\textsuperscript{154}

(b) Close reading

Narrative criticism not only engages in a holistic reading of the text but also in a close reading. It is through a close reading that it seeks to uncover the subtleties, relationships and intricacies of the text.\textsuperscript{155} This, Resseguie argues, is one of the lasting contributions of New Criticism to

\textsuperscript{152} Powell, \textit{What is Narrative Criticism?}, 86. For some, this is a limitation of narrative criticism. See Richard Pervo, \textit{The Mystery of Acts: Unravelling its Story} (Santa Rosa, Calif.: Polebridge Press, 2008), 26.
\textsuperscript{155} Resseguie, \textit{Narrative Criticism}, 39.
narrative criticism.\textsuperscript{156} Close reading involves attention to such matters as grammar, words and how they are used (for example, metaphors, similes), imagery, and repetition.\textsuperscript{157} It moves from such details to the structure of the narrative, character and characterisation and point of view.\textsuperscript{158} Resseguie claims that, “like a complex and intriguing puzzle, narrative analysis enlivens the imagination and offers new ways of looking at the familiar.”\textsuperscript{159}

(c) Narratives and life

I would also add that narratives can be influential for human self-understanding. It is through narratives that humans, individually and collectively, make sense of their lives and develop an understanding of identity.\textsuperscript{160} A good narrative can engage a reader both cognitively and affectively, mind and heart. “Stories have the power to shape life because they formally embody the ‘shape of life.’”\textsuperscript{161} Non-fiction narrative enables the reader, in a sense, to “re-live” an event, to be a part

\textsuperscript{156} Resseguie, \textit{Narrative Criticism}, 23.
\textsuperscript{158} Resseguie, \textit{Narrative Criticism}, 24–25.
\textsuperscript{159} Resseguie, \textit{Narrative Criticism}, 241.
\textsuperscript{160} Green, “\textit{Narrative Criticism},” 93. “Next to the basic needs for physical survival, story is essential to life. It is how we make sense of our lives. Shared stories hold a community together. We are immersed in such cultural, national, and global stories. We interpret our personal lives as being in the middle of a story that has a beginning and strains towards a conclusion.” David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey and Donald Michie, \textit{Mark as Story: an Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel} (3d ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), xiv.
\textsuperscript{161} Powell, \textit{What is Narrative Criticism?}, 90.
of it. Jesus could have simply said, “help those in need,” but he told a story of a good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) which engraved itself on the minds and hearts of his listeners and of those in subsequent generations down to this very day, to the extent that many today who have not heard the story will still talk about being a “good Samaritan.” In this regard we can also reflect on the influence of the story of Anzac with its primal themes of sacrifice and loss, loyalty and compassion, victory and tragedy, life and death, in the shaping of Australian identity. The Book of Acts had an identity-forming function for the early church and for subsequent generations of Christians achieved through narrative.\(^{162}\)

### 1.3 Textual Criticism

The text of Acts raises some unique textual issues. There are two main textual traditions behind Acts, the Alexandrian and the “Western” or D-text.\(^ {163}\) The D-text is ten percent longer than the Alexandrian text and is considered to be “generally more picturesque and circumstantial, whereas the shorter text is generally more colorless and in places more obscure.”\(^ {164}\) Such issues become especially pointed in a methodology

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\(^{162}\) Marguerat, *The First Christian Historian*, 34.


that examines the Greek text to ascertain what Luke has written about conversion and how he has written it. Which text, the shorter or longer one, is the one to be studied?\footnote{Textual critics today distinguish between the “authorial text” and the “initial text.” The former does not exist in any extant form while the latter is a “hypothetical reconstruction” from existing textual witnesses and stands at the start of the manuscript tradition. As a “working hypothesis” the initial text is substantially the original text but “further investigation” is needed before “the hypothesis can be converted to an assumption or conclusion.” See Klaus Wachtel and Michael W. Holmes, “Introduction,” in The Textual History of the Greek New Testament: Changing Views in Contemporary Research (ed. Klaus Wachtel and Michael W. Holmes; Society of Biblical Literature: Text-Critical Studies, 8: Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 1–8.} “The text must first be critically established before it is examined, and, as is well-known, this is no simple matter with respect to the book of Acts.”\footnote{Spencer, “Acts and Modern Literary Approaches,” 410 (Spencer’s emphasis).} In this thesis I have chosen to work with the initial text as set out in NA28 making comment as I go along about any significant textual variations found in the NA28 apparatus.

Various theories have been put forward to explain the relationship between the two text traditions.\footnote{Metzger, Textual Commentary, 223–233.} These include the suggestions that the D-text is a second edition of the shorter and original Alexandrian text in which Luke elaborated upon the shorter first edition; the D-text is original and the Alexandrian text is a subsequent abbreviated form produced by Luke; or, the D-text is the result of interpolations by subsequent scribes or the work of a reviser. While the

In sum, the critical methodology proposed for this thesis includes attention to text-critical matters. Critical methodology is guided by genre and as Acts is considered a literary-historical work, narrative and historical criticism are considered well suited to study the text. However, they need to be supplemented by textual criticism. One cannot critically read Acts without becoming aware of the textual issues that it raises. So, while the state of the text of Acts is not the main thrust of this thesis, textual issues will be addressed as a part of the study of the conversion narratives.

1.4 The narrative unit chosen

This thesis looks at three prominent conversion accounts in Acts, those of the Ethiopian eunuch (8:26–40), Saul (9:1–30), and Cornelius (10:1–
11:18). Why were these three accounts chosen? The conversion of the
Ethiopian, Saul and Cornelius are found in a larger literary unit, 8:4–
11:18, which is dominated by conversion stories of these
individuals. Pervo says of this passage, “the dominant and unifying
theme of 8:4–11:18 is conversion.” Within this narrative unit we also
have the conversion of Samaritans (8:4–24), as well as summary
statements about many people from Lydda and Joppa turning to,
believing in, the Lord (9: 35, 42). Acts 9:31 also, in summary fashion,
implies the conversion of many. Further, there are conversions
elsewhere in Acts, but it is hard to find a narrative block like this one
which has so much detail on the conversions involved, more than in any
other of the conversions recounted in Acts. This is what makes them
attractive for an inquiry into Luke’s understanding of conversion.

Not all of the conversions in the literary unit were investigated
nor were those conversions found elsewhere in Acts. The main reason

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169 Commentators have remarked that Peter undergoes a “conversion” but as this
thesis is about conversion to Jesus Christ, marked by baptism, this undoubtedly
important event in Peter’s life is not the focus of the chapter on Cornelius.
170 In treating the conversion of Saul, I have occasion to refer to the other two accounts
171 There is a summarising editorial break at 9:31. Because of the unifying theme of
conversion in the larger unit, 9:31 is considered a break within 8:4–11:18. Cf. Babu
Immanuel, Repent and Turn to God: Recounting Acts (Perth: HIM International
Ministries, 2004), 174.
172 Pervo, Acts, 203.
19:5–6, 18.
for this is the relative lack of detail about the conversions experienced compared to those of the eunuch, Saul and Cornelius. Luke’s narrative of Philip’s ministry in Samaria, while it does relate a mass turning of Samaritans to the Lord (8:5–8), devotes a significant portion of that event to the confrontation between Peter and Simon the magician (8:9–24). Luke also narrates the ministry of Peter in Lydda (9:32–35) and Joppa (9:36–42). In both instances Luke recounts works of power, a healing in Lydda and Tabitha raised to life in Joppa. As a result many turn to the Lord (9:35, 42) but Luke’s interest is in describing the works of power. It is not that these accounts do not have anything to say about conversion, it is just that they do not have much to contribute as Luke’s focus is elsewhere, e.g. on controversy (Simon the magician) or works of power (Lydda, Joppa). Apart from the day of Pentecost the other conversions in Acts (see above) tend to be brief, thumbnail, sketches, and, for the purposes of this thesis, do not offer a lot of information about conversion.

How does the narrative unit chosen fit into its immediate context? Acts 8:1 and the effects of the “great persecution against the church in Jerusalem” is structurally important in Luke’s narrative for it relates how, because of the persecution, “all were scattered to the
regions of Judea and Samaria except the apostles.” From this point in Luke’s story the flow of his narrative moves in two directions. Luke follows two groups among those who were scattered, one starting at 8:4 and the other at 11:19. Both of these accounts start with a reference to “those who were scattered,” an allusion to 8:1. From 8:4 Luke traces the ministries of Philip in Samaria and on the road to Gaza, and Peter in Lydda, Joppa and Caesarea. In between Luke’s account of the ministries of Philip and Peter, Luke narrates the conversion of Saul. The account of Saul’s conversion is also linked to the “great persecution” in Jerusalem for Luke records how Saul was a part of that persecution against the church (compare 9:1 with 8:3). Then at 11:19 Luke comes back to the subject of “those who were scattered” because of the “great persecution” over Stephen and writes about a second group who travelled to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. Initially they spoke only to Jews but some, from Cyprus and Cyrene, on arriving in Antioch, preached the good news of the Lord Jesus to Hellenists resulting in a large number turning to the Lord (11:21). My thesis relates to the conversions narrated within the first group, that is, 8:4–11:18.

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174 8:4, Οἱ μὲν διασπαρέντες; 11:19 Οἱ μὲν οὖν διασπαρέντες ἀπὸ τῆς θλίψεως τῆς γενομένης ἐπὶ Στεφάνῳ.
175 There is a sense in which the two narrative streams which flow from the “great persecution” (8:1) join up when Barnabas goes to Tarsus to get Saul, converted in the
How does the literary block studied in this thesis fit into the book of Acts? Acts 8:4–11:18 marks the beginning of the outward expansion of the Jesus movement from Jerusalem, an expansion achieved through conversions. On the day of Pentecost (2:1–41) the Spirit is poured out and about 3,000 are converted. Luke then recounts some of the experiences of the first Christians in Jerusalem including their life in common (2:42–47; 4:32–37; 5:12–16; 6:1–7) and the opposition they faced (3:1–4:31; 5:17–42). Then opposition turns into persecution over the arrest and execution of Stephen (6:8–7:60). This is a pivotal event for the early Christians and as a result of the persecution the Christians, apart from the leaders, flee Jerusalem (Acts 8:1). The expansion of the church beyond its birthplace and Jewish roots, has begun through the most uncongenial circumstances. In 8:4–11:18 Luke recounts the expansion of the church beyond Jerusalem by means of conversions and in 11:19–30 he relates how some of the Christians who left Jerusalem made their way to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. Broadly speaking, in chapters 1–12, where my literary unit lies, Luke focusses on the ministry of Peter and from chapter 13 to the end of Acts he turns his attention to Saul, later Paul, whose conversion he had related earlier.

first narrative stream, to bring him to Antioch (11:25), the church there being a part of the second narrative stream.
1.5 Chapter outline

Before dealing with Luke’s account of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch I look at the background to Christian conversion. What influences shaped the early Christians’ understanding of conversion? To try to understand what these influences were, conversion in Second Temple Judaism, Hellenistic paganism and philosophy is investigated. The impact of John the Baptist’s preaching of a baptism for repentance is also considered. Then I turn to a detailed investigation of the conversion accounts of the Ethiopian eunuch (8:26–40), Saul (9:1–30) and Cornelius (10:1–11:18). In the closing chapter the results are drawn together and (provisional) conclusions drawn as to Luke’s understanding of conversion from the three key conversion accounts narrated in Acts 8:4–11:18.

Conclusion

The aim of this study is to investigate what can be learnt about conversion from the conversions of the Ethiopian eunuch (8:26–40), Saul (9:1–30) and Cornelius (10:1–11:18), as narrated in Acts 8:4–11:18, a passage dominated by the theme of conversion. Acts is viewed as an historical work written with literary skill. Luke is no mere chronicler but
has creatively crafted his narrative to inform and engage the reader.

There is an ongoing and unresolved debate as to what kind of an historical composition Acts is. Is it an historical monograph or an *apologia* or *sui generis*? In this thesis the genre of Acts is viewed as mixed, a compound of Jewish and Greek historiography. Luke wrote to tell about what he believed to have taken place, to make an impact, and he did it in a work that does not fit neatly into any of the existing literary types of the age.

In the light of this understanding of the genre of Acts I use an eclectic methodology made up of narrative, historical and textual criticism. To better understand Luke’s literary skill I make use of narrative criticism. Narrative criticism focusses on the implied reader and how this reader responds to the text. In this thesis while acknowledging the importance of the reader as emphasised in reader-response criticism I have not followed this approach to the more ideological readings it has ventured into, for example, feminist, post-colonial. Nor have I, because of a lack of expertise, reached outside of biblical studies into other fields such as psychology, including cognitive science, sociology, and anthropology to mention but a few. While genuine insights for the biblical scholar may be gained from such fields
there is also the risk of attributing (modern) concepts alien to the ancient writer to the ancient text.¹⁷⁶ Further, other disciplines may raise questions, for example, about the nature of conversion, that require the biblical scholar to re-think his or her interpretation. Having said that, the aim of the modern interpreter should be, as far as possible, to allow the ancient text to speak on its own terms. Other disciplines may illumine the biblical text but should not, as Green argues, “determine the results of NT exegesis.”¹⁷⁷

In this thesis I work with a modified form of reader-response criticism, namely the concept of a modern reader of the text attempting to bridge the distance between a modern and ancient reading. To read Acts in this way this reader uses critical historical resources to better understand the world of the text¹⁷⁸ and, as a consequence, the text itself.¹⁷⁹ So the reader is an attempt to approximate the original readers of the passage.

¹⁷⁸ Although not specifically referring to Acts, Dunn’s words are none the less relevant: “The plain ‘meaning’ cannot be fully read off the text without regard to its rootedness in its originating context.” James Dunn, Jesus Remembered (vol. 1 of Christianity in the Making; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 117.
¹⁷⁹ Many authors advocate this eclectic approach, also known as methodological pluralism. See Powell, What is Narrative Criticism?, 101; Green, “Narrative Criticism,” 83–85; Spencer, “Acts and Modern Literary Approaches,” 398; Darr, Character, 170; Schnabel, “Fads and Common Sense,” 277–78. Cf. Powell, Chasing, 70; Kupp, Matthew’s Emmanuel, 17.
There is also a need to understand what text we are actually dealing with. Acts has some unique textual issues relating to the two major text sources, the Alexandrian text tradition and the Western text tradition. Thus there will be a need to examine major textual matters as they arise in the conversion accounts of the Ethiopian, Saul and Cornelius. In addition to comments on the preferred readings it will be asked what, if any, difference the alternate readings make to understanding Luke’s conversion narratives.
The aim of this chapter is to look at conversion in Second Temple Judaism, including John the Baptist, Hellenistic paganism and philosophy, as the context for the study of three conversion narratives in Acts, the Ethiopian (8: 26–40), Saul (1:19a) and Cornelius (10:1–11:18).1 What were the likely influences on the early Christians that might have contributed to their understanding of what it meant to turn to God? How might those who heard the call to repent and be baptised have understood what was being said? Answers to these questions can only be tentative due to the fragmentary nature of the evidence scattered over a wide area, Judea and the diaspora, and covering several hundred years roughly coinciding with the periods known as Second Temple Judaism and the Hellenistic period.2 Conversion has to do with change. While it is hard to find in ancient literature a carefully crafted definition of conversion, words used to describe it such as the Hebrew shub and the Greek στρέφω carry the idea of movement from something to

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1 “Conversion” in this chapter is used in fairly broad terms to refer to turning away from something and turning to something. The terms “pagan” and “paganism” are used to refer to the polytheistic religions of the Roman empire of the Hellenistic Age.

2 The Hellenistic Age covers 336–63 B.C.E. and Second Temple Judaism is generally regarded as the Judaism(s) of the period from 516 B.C.E. to the destruction of Herod’s Temple in 70 C.E.
something else. In the Hebrew Scriptures *shub* is used to convey the idea of turning to and turning away from God, as for example in Deut 30:10, 1 Kings 8:33, Num 32:15 and Joshua 22:16. In the Septuagint compounds of στρέφω are used to translate *shub*. In Acts ἐπιστρέφω is commonly used for turning to God. The idea and language of turning can be found in Hellenistic literature as well.

2.1 Conversion in Judaism

The Christianity of the early chapters of Acts was a movement within Judaism. “One of the central themes of the book of Acts is that Christianity is a legitimate development of Judaism.” Writing about early Christianity Dunn notes that it, like the “Pharisees and Sadducees, functioned within the parent body of Second Temple Judaism, within which Jesus had also functioned.”

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4 *Shub* has been translated as “repent” as well (1 Kings 8:48). It also has other, commonplace, non-religious meanings.
6 See for example Plato, *The Republic* 7.518c, d, 7.519b.
participated in Temple services, and their scriptures were the Hebrew scriptures, including the Greek translation known as the Septuagint (LXX), which guided their understanding of what God was doing with them. Of course there were fundamental differences which would lead in time to a “parting of the ways,” of the child from the parent. These differences included the claim that the Messiah had come, Jesus had died on a Roman cross and risen from the dead, so it was now the age of the Spirit and people were called to “repent, and be baptised” (Acts 2:38). While the apostles would not have seen themselves as leaders of a separate movement outside of Judaism they now understood all things in the light of a crucified, risen and ascended Messiah. But when they and other followers of the Way proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah and called people to change their ways, they did so as Jews who had believed in Jesus. Thus it will be helpful to consider the background of Judaism of which they were a part as it relates to the matter of conversion.  

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11 While it will be necessary from time to time to refer to “Judaism,” the Judaism of the Second Temple period should not be thought of as homogeneous. Scholars prefer to speak of Judaisms to reflect the variety of beliefs and practices that could be found not only in Judea but also in the Diaspora. See Martin Goodman, Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire (Oxford: Clarendon Press,
What was Judaism’s attitude to converts and conversion?

Although there is no evidence that Judaism was a missionary religion it nonetheless accepted converts. In the early years of the twentieth century there was a general opinion among scholars that Judaism was a missionary religion whose evangelistic efforts peaked in the first century.\footnote{See Talbert, “Conversion” 153.} In more recent years this view has been challenged and it is now argued that while individual Jews may have engaged in aggressive proselytization among Gentiles there is no evidence of an organised missionary effort by Jews to gain Gentile converts.\footnote{Talbert, “Conversion,” 153. See also McKnight, A Light Among the Gentiles, 97; Goodman, Mission and Conversion, 61, 86. In part the issue turns on the definition of “mission.” McKnight defines it as behaviour that intends to win converts. See McKnight, A Light Among the Gentiles, 5. Dickson argues that this is too restrictive and should be widened to all those activities by which members of a religion promote their faith to outsiders. Although Dickson takes issue with Goodman about his understanding of mission Dickson’s definition of mission overlaps with Goodman’s. John Dickson, Mission-Commitment in Ancient Judaism and in the Pauline Communities; The Shape, Extent and Background of Early Christian Mission (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 8, 10. See Goodman, Mission and Conversion, 3, 4. See also James Carleton Paget, “Hellenistic and Early Roman Period Jewish Missionary Efforts in the Diaspora,” in The Rise and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries of the Common Era (ed. Clare K. Rothschild and Jens Schröter; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 49.} While there may have been no systematic attempt to win converts, Jews were, in general, welcoming to those Gentiles who wanted to convert to Judaism and
there was an expectation that on the Last Day there would be a large-scale conversion of Gentiles (Isa 2:2–4; Tob 13:13).¹⁴

The ways in which Jews related to Gentiles varied, particularly in the Diaspora. In some cases it meant being open to them, letting them participate in the activities of the synagogue and allowing them to become benefactors.¹⁵ Such sympathizers could be useful politically.¹⁶ In other cases it meant a willingness to help Gentiles to turn their back on “the immorality and idolatry of paganism” and to adopt monotheism and the ethics of the Torah.¹⁷

There was a tension within Judaism towards Gentiles between universalism on the one hand and particularism on the other.¹⁸ There was the belief by Jews that their God was creator of the world and had a concern for the world beyond the borders of Israel. He had promised to bless “all the families of the earth” through the patriarchs (Gen 12:3; 14–15; McKnight, A Light Among the Gentiles, 45, 47. Goodman, Mission and Conversion, 61. Eckhard J. Schnabel, Jesus and the Twelve (vol. 1 of Early Christian Mission; trans. Eckhard Schnabel; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2004. Translation of Urchristliche Mission. Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus Verlag, 2002), 171. Cohen, From the Maccabees, 47. See an inscription by one Capitolina, a Gentile woman of standing in Tralles in Caria and dated in the third century C.E. It records her contribution to a Jewish building (a synagogue?). Referred to in Paul R Trebilco, Jewish Communities in Asia Minor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 157–58. See also Josephus, Ant. 14.110. Good, Mission and Conversion, 87. Michael F. Bird, Crossing Over Sea and Land: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2010), 150. Cf. the conversion of Aseneth in Jos Asen IX.2; X.13–14; XII.4–12. See Michael F. Bird, Jesus and the Origins of the Gentile Mission (Library of Historical Jesus Studies; ed. Robert L. Webb; London: T&T Clark, 2006), 127.)
18:18; 26:4; 28:14). In the Psalms there are exhortations for the “nations” to praise God (e.g. Pss 46:10; 47:1, 2; 67:4; 72:11, 17), and Psalm 82:8 declares, “Rise up, O God, judge the earth; for all the nations belong to you.” Salvation is promised to the nations (e.g. Isa 11:6–10; 42:6; 45:21–23; 55:3–5; 56:6–7; 60:3, 10–14) and there is the promise for the end of history of “new heavens and a new earth” in which “all flesh shall come to worship before me” (Isa 65:17; 66:22, 23).

Yet Israel had been chosen by God to be a holy nation, separate from the surrounding nations. The Mosaic covenant set a boundary between Jew and Gentile and it detailed what it meant for Israel to be a holy nation before God. The Israelites were not to live as their neighbours lived and in particular they were sternly warned to worship God alone. Idolatry, seen by Jews as a feature of Gentile life, was emphatically forbidden. The Jews were not allowed to follow their neighbours and add other gods to their worship. The biblical record documents that this injunction was ignored with disastrous results. Contact by Jews with Gentiles had to be strictly limited lest the Jews become ritually unclean, for example by eating the unclean food that Gentiles ate. That this became a deeply ingrained attitude over time in

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19 McKnight, A Light Among the Gentiles, 29. See also Shaye J. D. Cohen, The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 54. He writes, for diaspora Jews, the observance of Jewish food laws was
the Jewish believer’s mind can be seen in the struggle that early
Christian Jews had with taking the gospel to the Gentiles (see Acts 11:2,
3; 15:1–21). We also have the evidence of the Temple inscription which
warned foreigners from passing beyond the outer court, the Court of the
Gentiles, upon penalty of death. Further, intermarriage was prohibited
(Tob 4:12; c.f. Ezra 9), there was an expectation of a future judgement
in which the Gentiles would participate (Sir 36:1–7) and there were the
sharp critiques of the folly of Gentile worship (e.g. Wis 13. Cf. Philo
Decalogue 66–81). Thus there were some important religious and social
boundaries between Jews and their Gentile neighbours. Most likely
these were more noticeable in the Diaspora.

But the issue of conversion was further complicated by what it
meant to be a Jew. Before the exile conversion to Judaism did not exist.

One was born a Jew and living in the land of Israel did not make one a

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“a barrier to free social intercourse between Jews and gentiles” although he adds that
this did not mean “complete separation of Jews from their gentile environment.” The
Roman historian Tacitus accused Jews of refusing to eat with gentiles, which he
regarded, amongst other things (see below), as an indication of misanthropy. Tacitus,
20 Josephus, War, 5.194. The inscription read, “Let no foreigner enter/within the
partition and barrier/surrounding the temple; whosoever/ is caught shall be
responsible/for his subsequent/death.” See Bird, Origins, 139.
21 The intermarriage prohibitions of Deut 7:1–4 and Exod 34:11–17 were initially
interpreted as applying to Canaanites. Later, as reflected in Ezra 9:1–2, the prohibition
of intermarriage was broadened, in the Second Temple period, to include all Gentiles.
to intermarry with Gentiles as another sign of their misanthropy. Tacitus, The Histories,
273.
The Mosaic covenant refers to aliens (ger) who could participate in community worship and legal life (see Num 15:26; 19:10; 35:15; Deut 16:11, 14; 29:11) and for whom the Israelites had to have special regard for they were once aliens themselves (Exod 22:21). But they remained aliens, they did not become one of the people of Israel (bny yrs’l). While one could change one’s beliefs one could not change one’s lineage, and in Israel before the exile, it was lineage that counted. “In pre-exilic times, conversion to Judaism did not yet exist because birth is immutable.”

The destruction of the Temple in 587 B.C.E. and subsequent exile changed that. In the Judaism that developed after the re-settlement in Judah and construction of the second Temple, “Jews developed a way of initiating non-Jews into the people of Israel,” although when this occurred is hard to determine. It became possible for Gentiles to become Jews, members of the people of Israel, even though their status was ambivalent. It is also not clear how a Gentile could convert to Judaism. As there was diversity in Judaism there was, on the available evidence, a diversity of opinion on how a person was to convert to Judaism. In broad terms conversion seemed to involve a belief in God as

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22 Cohen, From the Maccabees, 41.
24 Finn, From Death to Rebirth, 93.
the one and only God, submission to the authority of the Torah and
circumcision for men. Some ancient writers add baptism and
sacrifice.

For a Gentile to convert to Judaism meant a change of allegiance
from any gods they may have worshipped to the worship of the God of
Israel as the only true God. There could be no question of adding
Israel’s God to whatever other gods were served. The convert had to be
willing to accept a radical monotheism which was a feature of post-
exilic Judaism. But conversion involved more than acknowledging
God as the only god, it required a submission to the authority of the
Torah shown in a willingness to live by its 613 precepts. To become a
“convert” to Judaism meant, in most cases, “joining a group of people
whose way of life was governed by the law of Moses and was
distinguished from Greeks and Barbarians by that very fact.”
The Torah covered all aspects of life, the believer’s relationship to God and

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26 Finn, From Death to Rebirth, 93–95.
27 E.g. see McKnight, A Light Among the Gentiles, 78. See also Fernando Mendez-
26.
28 Finn, From Death to Rebirth, 93. Prior to the exile Israel’s belief about God was
henotheism, Yahweh was the greatest of all gods. Under the influence of the prophets
this changed to a radical monotheism, “the God of Israel was Lord of the entire
universe,” there were no other gods. The renunciation of the gods she worshipped was
a feature of the conversion of Aseneth. See Jos. Asen. IX.2; X.13; XII.5, 6.
29 Finn, From Death to Rebirth, 94; Porton, The Stranger, 197.
30 Bird, Crossing Over Sea and Land, 27.
to other members of the Israelite community. Its cultic, moral, legal and
dietary precepts were binding on the convert.

Circumcision was generally regarded as one of the requirements
for conversion. However, the fragmentary nature of the evidence makes
firm conclusions impossible.\(^\text{31}\) Among what we do have is the story of
the conversion of Achior, an officer in the Ammonite army, found in
Judith, a second century B.C.E. “novella” forming part of the
Apocrypha.\(^\text{32}\) In Judith 14:10 we read, “When Achior saw all that the
God of Israel had done, he believed firmly (σφόδρα) in God.\(^\text{33}\) So he was
circumcised, and joined the house of Israel, remaining so to this day.”
Cohen argues that the “central ritual for conversion was circumcision”
and that by the time of the Maccabees it had become the mark of
membership of the people of Israel.\(^\text{34}\) Thus it had by this time assumed
an importance for conversion not found in the Hebrew Scriptures.\(^\text{35}\)
Circumcision is mentioned only a few times in the Hebrew Bible (Gen
17; 34; Exodus 4:24, 26 and Joshua 5:2–11), and it is never put forward in

\(^{31}\) See Bird, Crossing Over Sea and Land, 7.
\(^{32}\) “The book of Judith is an ancient novella about a Judean heroine who orchestrates
the defeat of the Assyrian forces that fell upon Israel after the exile.” Michael F. Bird,
“'Waiting for His Deliverance': The Story of Salvation in Judith,” in This World and the
World to Come: Soteriology in Early Judaism (ed. Daniel M. Gurtner; London: T&T Clark,
2011), 15.
\(^{33}\) σφόδρα, “very (much), extremely, greatly.” BDAG, 796.
\(^{35}\) Finn, From Death to Rebirth, 95.
the Bible as *the* sign of Jewishness. Finn suggests, however, that by the
time of the Maccabees circumcision was regarded by Gentiles as “*the*
mark of the Jew.”

The available evidence suggests that opinions varied on the
importance of circumcision. Philo of Alexandria (c. 25 B.C.E.–50 C.E.),
for example, could refer to symbolic as well as physical circumcision,
the former referring to an excision of evil desires and opinions (*Special
Laws* 1:9–11). But he is not suggesting alternative forms of circumcision,
a spiritual and a physical, for he maintains the necessity of the physical
(cf. *Special Laws* 1:1–7). He notes that some of the Jews of Alexandria did
not insist upon it. The Jewish historian Josephus, accepting that
circumcision is necessary to enter the Jewish faith, argues that there
could be circumstances in which it may not be so because worship of
God is more important than circumcision.

Conversion to a sect such as the Essenes was much more
rigorous. Such conversion was not seen as conversion to a new religion
but from a lax expression of Judaism to a stricter form and joining was a

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36 Finn, *From Death to Rebirth*, 95, Finn’s emphasis. Cohen argues that this was the case
in Judea under the Maccabees although “over a century had to elapse before outsiders
37 Finn, *From Death to Rebirth*, 95.
carefully constructed process over a number of years. According to Josephus it was over three years, the first year being one of probation in which the candidate was to show “temperance” and in the following two years to demonstrate “endurance.” According to Josephus, joining the Essenes meant all family ties were “subordinated in some cases or more often renounced.” The community became the convert’s new “family.” Property was held communally and members no longer made sacrifices in the temple at Jerusalem. There had to be a willingness to surrender all.

From the Qumran library two groups can be identified, a “town-dwelling group,” most likely the parent group, and a “monastic group.” The exact nature of the relationship between these two groups is a matter of debate, however it seems likely that they were loosely associated with perhaps the community at Qumran belonging to the Essenes. Both “the town-dwelling group” and the “monastic group”

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39 Finn, *From Death to Rebirth*, 105.
were protests against what their members saw as a compromised Judaism, particularly the Judaism practised at the Temple in Jerusalem. The process of conversion to the community at Qumran was over two years which began with an investigation of the applicant. During the two years the candidate was tested for his (only males could join this group) suitability for full membership of the community and ascended in degrees of purification. The convert was required to follow a strict observance of the Torah and the community’s rules of purity. At the conclusion of the initiation stages the new convert had to contribute all his possessions to the community. In their pursuit of holiness members of the Qumran community withdrew from society and anything else they thought might defile them, including the religious observances of their fellow Jews.

The cost for a Gentile converting to Judaism was high especially if circumcision was involved. Becoming a member of the house of Israel meant turning one’s back on family and community. Simply to avoid involvement in the pagan cult, which would have been encountered in

1972), 118. The issue as to whether the community at Qumran were Essenes is not resolved. See Mendez-Moratalla, *The Paradigm of Conversion*, 41.


every aspect of life, including family, social, business and work, would have marked the convert as an outsider.\textsuperscript{50} But it was not just abandoning old beliefs for the convert was taking on a new social identity, becoming a Jew. This involved joining a community whose way of life was ruled by the Torah, which clearly marked it off from the Gentiles. In a world where religious identity and ethnic identity were synonymous the convert was turning his/her back on their former way of life.\textsuperscript{51}

Were there any other requirements for the Gentile convert to Judaism in addition to circumcision? Was the convert required, for example, to be baptised? On this issue it is hard to find conclusive evidence that proselyte baptism was practised before the third century C.E.\textsuperscript{52} McKnight believes that in all likelihood baptism as an initiatory rite was practised even in the first century C.E. but this cannot be confirmed by any evidence.\textsuperscript{53} Ritual immersion appears to have been practised in Second Temple Judaism but its meaning has been debated. Was it for the purpose of initiation or purification? Was it required

\textsuperscript{50} Goodman, \textit{Mission and Conversion}, 105.
\textsuperscript{52} McKnight, \textit{A Light Among the Gentiles}, 84.
\textsuperscript{53} McKnight, \textit{A Light Among the Gentiles}, 84, 5.
along with circumcision? Definite answers to these questions cannot, on
the available evidence, be given.\footnote{Porton, \textit{The Stranger}, 148; Cohen, \textit{From the Maccabees}, 44.}

McKnight refers to the dispute between the house (or school) of
Shammai and the house of Hillel over water purification before the
Passover meal.\footnote{D. A. Sola and M. J. Raphal, \textit{Eighteen Treatises from the Mishnah}. 1843. n.p. Ch. VIII.8. See also footnote 119.8. [cited 9 January 2017]. Online: \url{http://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/etm/etm066.htm}} The Shammites allowed a person who had converted to
Judaism the day before the Passover to eat the Passover sacrifice
provided he had undertaken his ritual washing. In this case his washing
was seen as initiatory, a conversion rite. The Hillelites, however,
required the convert to wash on the third and seventh days after
deciding to convert. He could not therefore eat the Passover meal
straight away and his washing was seen as purificatory.\footnote{McKnight, \textit{A Light Among the Gentiles}, 83, 4; Porton, \textit{The Stranger Within}, 18.} We thus do
not have here any clear guidance on the matter of washing with water
as a conversion rite.

Washings played a significant role in the life of the Essenes and
the Qumran community. Josephus (\textit{Ant.} 18:18) mentions the lustrations
of the Essenes as being of such a purifying nature that they did not need
to offer sacrifices in the Temple. Thus they do not appear to have been
for initiation but for purification. Finn refers to the initiation process
into the Qumran community which required repeated ritual washings and confessions over the period of initiation. According to Finn, “Ritual immersion was at the heart of Qumran’s rite of entry, the necessary condition for advancing to full membership.”\(^57\) Thus the evidence is suggestive but not conclusive as to the existence of baptism as an initiatory rite in Second Temple Judaism. McKnight suggests that on the basis of this relative silence in pre-rabbinic texts baptism may have been regarded as established practice that needed no comment.\(^58\) However, this is an argument from silence.

It is likely that certain features of Jewish life would have appealed to Gentiles, particularly to those discomforted by the grosser features of paganism. Moral behaviour, the care of the Jewish community for each other and the “rich religious and social life of the synagogue” would have commended the Jewish faith to seeking Gentiles.\(^59\) It was in relationship to the synagogue that Gentiles could come and see these features for themselves. Synagogues arose in Second Temple Judaism and evidence of their existence has been found as far back as the third century B.C.E. By the first century they had become a

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\(^57\) Finn, *From Death to Rebirth*, 106, 144.  
\(^58\) McKnight, *A Light Among the Gentiles*, 83.  
\(^59\) Cf. Josephus *Ag. Ap.*, 2.281–283, a passage in which Josephus may be engaging in some hyperbole. “It is most likely that the most effective and probably unconscious method Jews ‘used’ to attract Gentiles was the compelling force of a good life.” McKnight, *A Light Among the Gentiles*, 67. Note Cohen, *Beginnings*, 141 footnote 1.
central feature of Jewish life. Synagogues were not only places in which
the Hebrew Scriptures were read and interpreted but they also acted as
a “house of prayer, study center, meetinghouse, hiring hall, philan-
thropic center and hospice for Jewish travellers . . .” Gentiles
could attend the synagogue and participate in some of its activities, and
they could become benefactors of the Jewish community. Even if the
purpose of the synagogue was not proselytization, for some Gentiles the
synagogue was a doorway into the house of Israel.

Although converts were accepted into the Judaism of the Second Temple period their status as members of the house of Israel was
ambiguous. They were no longer outsiders as regards the nation of
Israel but they were not insiders either. They were “marginal beings,”
existing on the border between Israelite and Gentile societies. They were
not full Israelites and they were no longer Gentiles. They had cut ties
to their families to enter a society in which family was central. They
were members of the synagogue, they could participate in the religious
meals, be buried with Jews and use Jewish courts but they were not
native-born. As Finn explains,

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60 Finn, From Death to Rebirth, 98.
62 McKnight, A Light Among the Gentiles, 65–66.
The convert occupied the middle ground between Israelites and gentiles. On the one hand, the converts severed all ties with their previous gentile life and were responsible for observing most of the same rituals incumbent upon native-born Israelites. On the other hand, they were treated differently from native-born Israelites, often being listed as a distinct class of persons along with priests, Levites, Israelites, and so forth.\(^{64}\)

Gentile converts were proselytes and the idea of the proselyte as “a particular sort of Jew was retained throughout antiquity.”\(^{65}\)

If proselytes existed just inside the border of nation Israel there was a group of Gentiles who lived just on the other side of that border. They have traditionally been known as “God-fearers” but the adequacy of this term has been questioned as it has been shown to refer widely to Gentiles and Jews across the Roman Empire.\(^{66}\) Thus the traditional view that a God-fearer was a partial convert no longer holds.\(^{67}\) Even Luke can use the term “those fearing God” (οἱ φοβούμενοι τὸν θεόν) (Acts 13:16, 26) to refer to “devout converts [to Judaism]” (τῶν σεβομένων προσηλυτῶν)\(^{68}\) (Acts 13:43).

Nevertheless it is recognised that there were Gentiles, however they may be designated, who lived just outside the house of Israel, and

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\(^{64}\) Finn, From Death to Rebirth, 98–99.

\(^{65}\) Goodman, Mission and Conversion, 86, author’s emphasis.

\(^{66}\) See McKnight, A Light Among the Gentiles, 110.

\(^{67}\) McKnight, A Light Among the Gentiles, 110.

for a range of reasons were not prepared to become full converts. Most likely they were attracted by the morality and quality of life of Judaism. They would, to varying degrees, observe the Sabbath and Jewish dietary laws, attend the synagogue and participate in its activities. Some would act as supporters of the Jewish community by building synagogues, decorating their interiors and contributing to Jewish benevolent work. For some of these Gentiles it was a matter of adding Israel’s God to their other gods. To break ties to their family, community and gods, so central to their identity, was too big a step. Circumcision was a bridge too far. They participated in Jewish life but they did so as sympathetic pagans. It is not unreasonable to suppose that from these sympathetic

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69 Cohen, From the Maccabees, 46. Fredricksen, “Judaizing the Nations,” 341. Outside the timeframe of this thesis, a Jewish list of donors to a soup kitchen for people in need has been unearthed at Aphrodisias, western Anatolia, Turkey. The list is made up of ninety Jews and sixty-five “θεοσεβις” (“Godfearers”) some of whom occupied leadership roles in the community. Care needs to be exercised in what conclusions are to be drawn here from this contested inscription (was it a burial society?). The earliest date for the inscription is the third century C.E. with a later date of the fifth century C.E. also proposed. But it does suggest that the “θεοσεβις” could, in some communities, be numerous, be from community leaders. It is interesting to note that in the inscriptions προσήλυτος (convert) is distinguished from θεοσεβις. See Joyce Reynolds, Charlotte Roueché, Gabriel Bodard, Inscriptions of Aphrodisias (2007). Page 11.55 [cited 9 January 2017]. Online: http://insaph.kcl.ac.uk/iaph2007/iAph110055.html. See also Stephen Mitchell, The Rise of the Church (vol. II of Anatolia: Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 32. Unpublished evidence of inscriptions from Sardis suggests the existence of θεοσεβις but in lesser numbers. Mitchell, Rise of the Church, 32 footnote 180.

70 Cohen, From the Maccabees, 46.

71 Fredricksen, “Judaizing the Nations,” 340.
Gentiles there would have those who would have been responsive to
the Christian message that one does not need to be Jewish to be saved.\(^72\)

### 2.2 John the Baptist

Finn writes, “John and his followers cast a long shadow in early
Christian history…they soon established a pattern that shaped earliest
Christianity: preaching, repentance, a new way of living, the
anticipation of a final purification, with baptism as the focus – in a
word, *metanoia.*”\(^73\) This “shadow” is important for understanding some
of the influences on Luke with regard to conversion. John is important
for Luke in his Gospel for it is to John that Luke first turns after his
prologue (Luke 1:1–4) in the announcement of Gabriel to the priest
Zechariah that his wife, Elizabeth, would bear a son in her old age (Luke
1:5–25). In that prophecy the angel Gabriel tells Zechariah that through
his prophetic ministry John “will turn many of the people of Israel to the
Lord their God” (Luke 1:16 NRSV). In these words of Gabriel we find a
word Luke uses in Acts for conversion, namely, “to turn”
(ἐπιστρέψαι).\(^74\) This turning, as Gabriel indicates, is God directed, it is

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\(^72\) Fredricksen, “Judaizing the Nations,” 341.
\(^73\) Finn, *From Death to Rebirth*, 106–107.
\(^74\) See Acts 3:19; 9:35; 11:21; 14:15; 15:19; 26:18, 20; 28:27. The same Greek word,
ἐπιστρέψαι, is used to express a conversion of human attitudes in this prophecy by the
“to the Lord God.” Thus John is to prepare the way for Jesus and a part of that preparation will be the conversion of many.

Later, at the birth of his son, Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, prophesies that his son John will be called a “prophet of the Most High (who) will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins” (Luke 1:76–77 NRSV). Here, in John’s prophetic ministry, “salvation” (σωτηρία) is linked to “forgiveness of sins” (ἀφέσει ἁμαρτιῶν).

After recounting the birth of Jesus, his presentation in the temple and an incident in the twelve-year-old Jesus’ life in the temple, Luke turns again to John, this time to narrate the beginning of his public ministry (Luke 3:1–3). John “came into all the area surrounding the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” John is called by God (Luke 3:2) and comes in accordance with God’s plan as indicated through the quoting of Isa 40:3–5 in reference to John (Luke 4:4–6). In referring to the prophecy of Isaiah Luke links John’s preaching of baptism, repentance and forgiveness of sins to the last words of the Isaiah quote, “and all flesh shall see the salvation

angel, namely a turning of parents to their children and a turning of the disobedient “to the wisdom of the righteous.” Luke 1:17 NRSV
(σωτήριον) of God” (Luke 3:6; Isa 40:5; see also Luke 1:77). Not only is “salvation” linked to the ministry of John the Baptist but the scope of this salvation is universal, that is, “all flesh” will see the salvation of God, which is something that begins to be fulfilled in Acts.76

John’s challenge to his hearers is to repent, that is, to change their way of thinking and acting. His hearers were to indicate their repentance in two ways, by being baptised and by changing their behaviour; they were to show in their lives “fruits worthy of repentance” (Luke 3:8). Baptism by itself was not sufficient, there had to be a change in the way a person lived. Nave writes,

In Luke’s gospel, the preaching of John the Baptist explicitly identifies repentance as a radical and fundamental change in the way people think about and interact with others . . . Bearing fruits authenticates and renders visible the change in thinking involved in repentance.77

Only Luke in his Gospel indicates what such “fruits worthy of repentance” might look like in practice (see Luke 3:10–14). Further, both

76 The narrative block chosen for this thesis, Acts 8:4–11:18, shows the movement of the early church from Jerusalem to Caesarea, even, in the case of the Ethiopian, to the “ends of the earth.” Beyond this literary block Luke records the further expansion of the Jesus movement north and west.
Matthew and Luke record John’s warning to his hearers that they could not rely on physical descent from Abraham to escape God’s judgement (Matt 3:9; Luke 3:8). A changed life was needed.\(^7^8\) This inability to rely on physical descent reflects the change that had taken place in Second Temple Judaism in which membership of the house of Israel was no longer determined by lineage alone. Thus Gentiles could become Jews.\(^7^9\)

John also urged those who came out to hear him to indicate their repentance through baptism\(^8^0\) (Luke 3:3). But why baptism? Where did John get the idea of baptism from? This has proved to be a difficult question to answer with any degree of certainty. There is no suggestion in the New Testament that it was novel for no explanatory comments about John’s baptism are given except that it was a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; Acts 13:24; 19:4). McKnight concludes that John most likely took baptism over from Judaism.\(^8^1\)

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\(^7^8\) Mendez-Moratalla, *The Paradigm of Conversion*, 87.

\(^7^9\) Cohen, *From the Maccabees*, 42–43.

\(^8^0\) I do not accept the view of Mendez-Moratalla and Taylor that forgiveness results from repentance and not baptism. That is, no one was baptised until they had shown “fruits worthy of repentance.” See Mendez-Moratalla, *The Paradigm of Conversion*, 76; Joan E. Taylor, *The Immerser: John the Baptist within Second Temple Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 100.

\(^8^1\) McKnight, *A Light Among the Gentiles*, 85. Cohen goes as far as to argue that “the fact that gentile converts to Christianity were baptized is the strongest argument for the view that the gentile converts to Judaism must have been baptized already in the first century.” Cohen, *From the Maccabees*, 44.
washing and a change in behaviour (cf. Isa 1:16–17; 36:25–28). If he had been influenced by the Essenes or Qumran community he may have taken and developed the idea of ritual washing for cleansing. While it is difficult to say why John chose baptism we can say, with Jesus having been baptised by John, and Jesus, or at least his disciples, also baptizing (John 3:22, 26; 4:1, 2), that there is evidence of a direct link between the Baptist and the early church’s use of baptism. It is not too much to claim that the early church took over John’s baptism and used it as a symbolic action, not solely of repentance as with John, but of commitment to Jesus Christ and incorporation into the Christian community.

The significance of John’s baptism for the early church can be seen in the references to his baptism in Acts, for example, 1:5, 22; 11:16; 13:24; 18:25; 19:3–4. In Acts 26:20 Paul before Agrippa and Festus echoes the preaching of John the Baptist when he says, “But to those in Damascus first and then in Jerusalem and in all the region of Judea and among the Gentiles I preached (that people) should repent and turn to God, producing deeds worthy of repentance.”

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83 Finn suggests that John might have been a Qumran initiate. Finn, From Death to Rebirth, 106.
John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Luke 3:3). Those who responded to John’s words and repented, indicating this through baptism and a changed way of living, received forgiveness of their sins. In other words, they experienced the “salvation of God” (Luke 3:6). The Baptist preached to Jewish people but at the end of the third Gospel the Lukan Jesus directs his disciples, in words similar to John’s, to preach a repentance for the forgiveness of sins to all the Gentiles, words which echo the “all flesh” of Luke 3:6. We find further echoes of John’s preaching in Acts, for example, 5:31, 13:24 and 26:20, which has been mentioned above.

It has only been possible to conduct a brief survey of the Lukan John’s ministry, but even in this we can note many links between John the Baptist and the early Jesus movement. John, as Finn noted (see above), “cast a long shadow in early Christian history.” The conversionary themes associated with John that Luke records in his Gospel are also to be found in Acts, themes such as “to turn,” “repentance,” “forgiveness of sins,” “salvation,” and “baptism.”

2.3 Conversion in paganism

The pagan’s world was full of powerful divine beings (δαίμονια), some benevolent and some harmful, and the religious cult was generally
the means by which they were kept onside. Such cults operated at all levels of society, from the state to the individual. All things, human and divine, were linked together in “cosmic sympathy” and the δαμονίονα were an ever-present reality in good times and bad, in all facets of life: work, business, family, birth, marriage, death, sickness, travel. Life was governed by forces beyond one’s control and one could never be sure about the influences of the δαμονίονα. People turned to astrology and divination as means for understanding their fate. Magic was another way of coping with the uncertainties of existence by attempting to influence the forces that controlled one’s life. Referring to Mesopotamia Jeffers writes that magic was used to influence “‘man’s success, well-being, health and wealth.’”

The idea of conversion is not absent from pagan religion and some examples can be found in surviving literature such as Apuleius’ novel Metamorphoses which tells of Lucius’ transformation into an ass

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86 Finn, From Death to Rebirth, 54. See also Luke Timothy Johnson, Among the Gentiles: Greco-Roman Religion and Christianity (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009), 32.
87 Finn, From Death to Rebirth, 63.
88 It is beyond the scope of this thesis to go into the problem of defining magic or to discuss its relationship to religion. See the discussion in Ann Jeffers, “Interpreting Magic and Divination in the Ancient Near East,” Religion Compass 1 (2007), 685.
and later back to a human through the intervention of the goddess Isis.

On being changed back into a man Lucius becomes a follower of Isis.\(^9^0\)

Other examples would include Plutarch’s *Obsolescence of Oracles* (434.45d–f) concerning the ruler of Cilicia and Horace’s *Odes* (ca. 23 B.C.E.). Horace in *Ode* 34 describes the poet’s turning from sceptical philosophy to the traditional state religion.\(^9^1\)

Conversion can also be found in the so-called mystery religions of the Greco-Roman world. Amongst these were the mysteries relating to Eleusis, Dionysus, Meter (or “Mater Deum Magna”), Isis and Mithras.\(^9^2\) Mystery religions can, in various forms, be traced back to prehistory but they developed and flourished in the Hellenistic period and filled a growing void that people felt towards the public religions, that is, that they were distant and did not cater to their personal needs.\(^9^3\)

The initiation into the mysteries of Eleusis was led by priests and took

\(^{90}\) Apuleius, *The Golden Ass* (trans. P. G. Walsh; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). Walsh, in his Introduction (xx), argues for a date around the 160s C.E. or later. The original title of Apuleius’ work was *Metamorphoses* but the work became more commonly known as *The Golden Ass* due to Augustine’s reference to it by this name in his *City of God*. See *St Augustine’s City of God* (trans. J. W. C. Wand; London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 290.

\(^{91}\) Talbert, “Conversion,” 147–48. Talbert (147) points out that these two works provide examples of conversion involving a turning from something, e.g., sceptical philosophy, and a turning to something, e.g., traditional state religion, as in Ode 34.


\(^{93}\) Finn, *From Death to Rebirth*, 69.
place in a special place, an “initiation hall (telesterion)” in Eleusis. In one form of initiation into the Meter mysteries, the taurobolium, the one being initiated was placed in a pit covered with wooden beams on which a bull was slaughtered with the blood dripping onto the person being initiated. Initiation in the Mithraic mysteries, prominent from about the first century to the fourth century C.E., was carried out in caves and had seven stages which involved getting the candidates ready (purification) then leading on to full acceptance.

Conversion in pagan religion was different from conversion to the Judaism of the Second Temple period in many regards but one is particularly notable. It is most likely that it did not of necessity involve the rejection of old god(s) for the new. This type of conversion sharply contrasted from conversion as understood in Judaism, in which pagan gods and practices had to be abandoned before one could become a member of nation Israel. However conversion here need not be confined to such sharply defined terms and because the ideas of turning from and turning to can be found in paganism, although not with the same wide-ranging implications as in Judaism, the term “conversion” is still

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94 Burkett, Mystery Cults, 5, 9.
95 Burkett, Mystery Cults, 6.
96 Finn, From Death to Rebirth, 70. Burkett, Mystery Cults, 6, 7.
appropriate for paganism because significant change can take place within it. The pagan attitude to a new religion was generally one of tolerance as long as community or family gods were not abandoned.\(^{98}\)

### 2.4 Conversion in philosophy

The idea of conversion was not absent from philosophy. Philosophy generally saw its purpose as improving the lot of human beings by helping them to a better life through a clearer understanding of the nature of life.\(^{99}\) A right understanding of life led to right living. In pursuing this goal of bettering the lives of men and women, philosophers often used the language of conversion, particularly that of turning from and turning to. In *The Republic* (Book VII, 514–517) Plato uses an analogy of a cave in which prisoners are chained in such a way

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that they can only face a wall. They cannot see the opening of the cave and the light outside. Plato, in *The Republic*, describing how the prisoners escape and come into the light, uses various forms of the (classical) Greek verb “to turn.” But this is more than simply cognitive. There is a process of turning from the old way of “seeing and existing to a new way.” For Cicero one of philosophy’s aims was to turn people from “carelessness to piety,” for Seneca it was to uncover the truth about the divine and the human and the author of *Poimandres* issued a call to repent of, change one’s mind and turn away from a life of “error and ignorance.”

Philosophers thus saw their role as helping their hearers to turn from their life of ignorance to a higher life through a better way of understanding. It was a type of conversion. While the philosophers may have started schools with a band of disciples they were not known for endeavouring to start a movement or trying to form communities. They saw themselves as teachers and would speak in different public

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100 E.g. στρέφειν (7.518c), μεταστραφήσεται (7.518d), περιεστρέφετο (7.519b).
101 Finn, *From Death to Rebirth*, 20, 21.
places or move from house to house talking to those interested.\textsuperscript{104} But their message was generally restricted to a few, to those whose personal circumstances allowed them the time to listen and engage with them. In fact the masses were regarded as unfit for their message although some Cynic and Stoic philosophers were willing to share their message with a wider audience.\textsuperscript{105}

Those who were persuaded by philosophical teachers may have changed the way they lived but not their situations. They were not asked to separate themselves from family and friends. To adopt the Cynic’s message could be costly, however. They advocated extreme individualism, self-sufficiency and a simple life-style that involved rejecting possessions in favour of poverty. To shock people into thinking about their lives the Cynics disdained popular conventions about dress and behaviour.\textsuperscript{106} So anyone thinking about adopting their point of view would have to think carefully because the social costs could be high.\textsuperscript{107}

\textsuperscript{104} Mendez-Moratalla, \textit{The Paradigm of Conversion}, 61.
\textsuperscript{105} Mendez-Moratalla, \textit{The Paradigm of Conversion}, 65.
\textsuperscript{107} Mendez-Moratalla, \textit{The Paradigm of Conversion}, 66.
To what extent did conversion in its various forms within paganism and philosophy form a context for Christian conversion? Were the evangelists of the early Church influenced by paganism or philosophy in their understanding of conversion? This is difficult to answer but it is likely that any influence was not all that significant as regards the content and context of the gospel. Judaism was the far greater influence. A case can be made that Hellenistic Jews who became Christians, for example, Philip, were more open to new ideas and ways of doing things such as crossing cultural boundaries to spread the gospel.

The influence of paganism and to a certain extent philosophy would have been greater on those who heard the gospel. Talbert has argued that the Gentiles of the Mediterranean world of the first century would have been able to discern some themes that were reasonably familiar. There is no doubt that there would have been the shock of the new but there would have been enough continuities with their own lives to enable them to understand the implications of the gospel and its call to turn. Talbert writes,

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Insofar as the formal components of conversion are concerned, non-Christian auditors in antiquity would have sensed enough continuities with the depiction of Christian conversion in Acts to be able to understand it. Their difficulty, if they felt one, would have been with the object/content of the Christian conversion experience (that is, Christ), not with its formal components.¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

From this brief survey what conclusions may be drawn as to the context of conversion for the early church? From the parent Judaism and its more radical children, the Essenes and the Qumran community, the early Christians would have learnt of the possibility of conversion and its costs. While the process of conversion to Judaism may not be clear in all respects there could be no doubting its possibility. A Gentile could become a Jew. But if one did it would involve a turning away from old gods and behaviour and even family and community. One could not add Israel’s God to those worshipped as a Gentile; former gods had to be abandoned. Bird notes that “the degree and intensity levels of commitment required for conversion to Christianity were not essentially different from that required by conversion to Judaism.”¹¹⁰ With this we may compare John the Baptist’s call for a change in behaviour, for “fruits worthy of repentance” (Luke 3:8).

¹¹⁰ Bird, Crossing Sea and Land, 156.
Early Christianity inherited from Judaism the importance of symbolic identifiers. It is probably true that circumcision was the main symbolic identifier for the male Gentile who became a Jew; for the infant church this was baptism. Baptism was central in John the Baptist’s message; it was “a baptism for the repentance of sins” (Mark 1:4, Luke 3:3), and it is not a great step from John’s baptism to Christian baptism as far as a rite of initiation is concerned, even though its meaning and implications would undergo far-reaching transformation.

We should also note the existence of those Gentiles who lived on the borders of Judaism. They were most likely attracted by the morality and community life of Jewish people, contributed to and even attended the synagogue and may have observed, in varying degrees, some Jewish festivals, for example, the Sabbath. But, for whatever reasons, they could not take the final step of becoming Jews, which for males would have meant circumcision. It is from this group that people responded to the preaching of the gospel, were baptised and became followers of Jesus (see, for example, Acts 10:1, 2, 22; 13:16, 26; 16:14; 17:4; 18:7).

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111 The issue of circumcision was a controverted one in the early church. Jewish Christians who made up the circumcision party, οἱ ἐκ περιτομῆς (10:45; 11:2) insisted on the need for Christians to be circumcised as well baptised (15:1).

112 John pointed to this in part when he spoke about Jesus baptising ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ (in, with or by the Holy Spirit) (Mark 1:8).
As far as Hellenistic paganism and philosophy were concerned, their influence would more likely be on those Gentiles of the Mediterranean world who heard the message of the Christian gospel. While there would have been much that was new to them, the idea of turning from and turning to was probably not all that strange. Philosophers sought to help people turn to a better life through a better understanding of the world in which they lived. Paganism was not without its stories of conversion. What may have been unusual was the stringent nature of the turning required, to turn away from their gods, ideas and behaviour that were inimical to the gospel. That notwithstanding, those ancient hearers would have heard echoes of that which was familiar, however faint, namely, the need to turn from and turn to.
3. The Conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26–40)

In this chapter I look at Luke’s account of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–40). The main question addressed is: what insights into Luke’s understanding of conversion are to be found in this passage? Prior to looking at this we need to consider the text itself and some issues raised such as its position in the narrative flow of Acts and what is to be made of some textual variants. Having considered these introductory matters I am then able to look at how Luke has portrayed the characters in the narrative. What implications about conversion can be drawn from what Luke tells the reader about them and what they do?

3.1 The passage: setting, structure and development

In this one-scene passage, the narrator Luke, working from outside the text, structures the narrative around the encounter between an Ethiopian eunuch, a government official, and the evangelist Philip. The reader is engaged and guided by the narrator’s setting of the encounter within a journey motif. The reader follows Philip who is directed by an angel to journey from Samaria to a road in the desert between Jerusalem
and Gaza to meet up with the eunuch journeying home from Jerusalem.

The culmination of the encounter is the baptism of the Ethiopian.

After the stoning of Stephen a “severe persecution” broke out against the church and Luke records how all the church, except the apostles, were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1). One of those scattered because of this persecution was Philip, whom Luke first introduces as one of seven selected to care for the Hellenistic widows who were being neglected in the daily distribution of food (Acts 6:1). Philip went into a city of Samaria and there “proclaimed to them the Christ.” Luke records how his preaching was accompanied by “signs and great miracles” (σήμεια καὶ δυνάμεις μεγάλας) – unclean spirits were cast out in dramatic fashion and many paralysed and lame were healed (Acts 8:5–6, 13). Many believed and were baptised. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard about this Peter and John were sent to investigate. They prayed and laid hands on those who had believed that they might receive the Holy Spirit. Their ministry in this city was not without incident for Luke tells of a certain Simon who had practised magic and had greatly impressed a number of people in the city. Simon had believed and been baptised but when he saw that the Holy Spirit had been given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands he attempted to purchase this authority from the apostles (Acts
8:18, 19). Peter’s severe rebuke of Simon led to a chastened change of mind (Acts 8:20–24). The apostles continued testifying and speaking “the word of the Lord” in the city before returning to Jerusalem.¹

Luke presses on with the story of Philip and narrates how an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip and directed him to go to the road that ran from Jerusalem to Gaza. Opinion is divided on whether “toward the south” (κατὰ μεσημβρίαν) should be rendered “south” or “midday” for both are possible. If Luke intends “midday” it underlines the divine arrangement of this encounter by placing it at a most unlikely time, in the heat of the day.² Not only does this meeting occur at an unlikely time, it occurs in an unlikely place, an isolated part of the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. Luke’s comment that “this is desert” (αὐτὴ ἐστὶν ἔρημος) more likely refers to the road (τὴν ὁδὸν), the place where the meeting took place, than Gaza itself.³ Gaza was one of the five cities of

³ As the road did not actually pass through desert, ἔρημος more likely means “deserted.” Spencer, Portrait, 156. That it could refer to Gaza, or more accurately, Old Gaza, is probably because it had been destroyed in war and was rebuilt by order of the Roman General Gabinius in the mid-first century C.E. Josephus, Ant 14.88. The rebuilding took place at another location. Bruce, The Acts, 190. See also BDAG “Γάζα, ἡς, ἡ, 186; David Peterson, The Acts of the Apostles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 293;
the Philistines and lay on a caravan route leading to Egypt, the way
along which someone travelling from Jerusalem to Ethiopia would
journey.⁴

Philip is not told why he should leave his productive ministry in
Samaria but he nonetheless obeys the angelic direction. Luke’s narrative
is spare but dramatic and to the point. “And he arose and went. And
behold (!) a man (an) Ethiopian eunuch…”⁵ The Ethiopian is returning
home after having gone to Jerusalem to worship.⁶ Here is no ordinary
person, he is “a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians.”
(Acts 8:27) As Philip catches up to the Ethiopian the Holy Spirit directs
Philip to join the eunuch in his chariot (ἀρματος) which would have
been travelling at a little more than walking pace.⁷ As Philip draws
alongside the chariot he hears the Ethiopian reading from the prophet

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⁵ Luke’s use of “behold” (ἰδού) is a literary device to enliven interest and draw
attention to the “man, an Ethiopian” (BDAG, 468). Is there an element of surprise here
at meeting a man in such a place just at this unlikely time? See also Gaventa, *Darkness
to Light*, 103; Spencer, *Portrait*, 134.
⁶ προσκυνήσων, future participle, expressing purpose. See Zerwick, *Grammatical
the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 635–637. See further comments
below.
Isaiah. Philip, ever the evangelist (cf. Acts 21:8), asks the Ethiopian if he understands what he is reading. The Ethiopian, apparently unperturbed by this intrusive stranger, is reading from the prophet Isaiah and puzzling over the prophet’s words in a certain passage (Isa 53:7–8 LXX). “Who is the prophet talking about?” he asks. Philip, beginning from this passage “proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.” (Acts 8:35) Luke does not tell the reader how Philip used this passage and whether he referred to the verses before and after the passage (Isa 52:13–53:12) which would have had, for the early Christians, a particular application to the death of Jesus.

Luke cleverly uses questions to develop his story and focus on the central issue. On drawing near to the Ethiopian’s wagon Philip asks, “Do you understand what you are reading?” Luke has already mentioned that the eunuch is reading the prophet Isaiah (Acts 8:28) and now it becomes the centre of interest. But then a problem is discovered:

“How can I,” the Ethiopian asks, “unless someone guides me?” By the

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8 It was the ancient custom to read aloud, a practice required by an uncial text (capital letters) with no punctuation. Pervo, Acts, 225 footnote 57. Bruce, The Acts, 191.
9 There is a play upon words here between γινώσκεις and ἀναγινώσκεις which is not obvious in the English translation. Bruce, The Acts, 191.
11 The use of γε may strengthen the sense of uncertainty in the question. Pervo, Acts, 225, footnote 58; Zerwick, Grammatical Analysis, 377.
use of questions and direct speech Luke draws the reader into the scene. Tension is created as the passage from Isaiah is read and the eunuch asks, “About whom … does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” Tension is heightened as the Ethiopian’s problem becomes clearer and the reader is cleverly drawn further in so as to ask how this problem is to be resolved? The way Philip phrases his question implies he is addressing a person of high status and the Ethiopian’s reply is even “more elegant.” Then comes the key question leading to the climax of this encounter: “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” (8:36) Again Luke uses ἵδιο (cf. 8:27) to highlight the unexpected in his narrative and draw the reader’s attention to what the eunuch is asking.

Whatever Philip said about Jesus had an impact for Luke narrates how, as they were going along, they came to some water alongside the road, which prompts the eunuch to ask: “Look here is water! What hinders me from being baptised?” (8:36) That there is water in this unlikely (desert) place, and the timing of the discovery would be reminders to the reader that this incident is a work of God.

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13 BDAG, 428.
14 Peterson, Acts, 296.
question about hindrances (cf. Acts 10:47) is intriguing and suggests that the eunuch, for all his seeking after God — he had after all made a long and dangerous trip to worship in Jerusalem — may have still felt like an outsider. But he need be an outsider no longer.\textsuperscript{15} The eunuch commanded the chariot to stop and both he and Philip went down into the water and Philip baptised him. Again Luke’s narrative is brief and the only indication that anything had changed for the eunuch is Luke’s words that he “went on his way rejoicing” (Acts 8:39; cf. 8:8). Philip is dramatically removed from the scene and is next found in Azotus.\textsuperscript{16} Luke records how Philip the evangelist goes from Azotus to his home town of Caesarea (Acts 21:8) preaching the good news in all the towns along the way (Acts 8:40; cf. 8:25).

3.2 The position of the passage in Acts

There has been discussion over the placement of the conversion of the Ethiopian in the book of Acts. For some (see below) it seems out of place and would be better placed following the conversion of Cornelius (Acts 10). Behind this view is the assumption that in Acts Luke has provided a narrative sketch of the development of the early church, beginning in

\textsuperscript{15} Cf. Pao, who argues that this passage is about the inclusion of an outcast in “the restored people of God.” Pao, \textit{Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus}, 141.

\textsuperscript{16} Philip is “snatched” (ἥρπασεν) away (8:39).
Jerusalem and moving out to the “ends of the earth.” Acts 1:8 is, by this understanding, seen as paradigmatic. This viewpoint further assumes that the spread of the church is achieved through steps that build upon each other. The Samaritans, both geographically and theologically, represent a progression outwards into a people who are geographically neighbours and theologically religious cousins, so to speak. It is a step outwards from Jerusalem but into territory not totally alien. While Jews may have had no dealings with Samaritans (John 4:9) John 4 recounts how Jesus did, thereby setting a precedent for his followers, and Luke in his Gospel records contacts between Jesus and Samaritans (Luke 9:52; 17:16).

But a problem is encountered when the next conversion account after the Samaritans (Acts 8:4–25) is an Ethiopian. It seems like the ends of the earth have been reached already. Of the nations found in the Hebrew Bible, Ethiopia, or more accurately Cush, is the southernmost foreign nation implying that, for Jews, it lay at the ends of the known earth. It was known as “the ends of the earth” in ancient literature.

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If the view that Luke’s overarching theme in Acts is the spread of the church through graduated steps from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth then the story of the conversion of the Ethiopian seems out of place. The story, Pervo argues, “has no tangible impact upon the rest of Acts.” It would be better placed after Cornelius, who, as one who was “devout and God-fearing” (Acts 10:2 εὐσεβής καὶ φοβοῦμενος τὸν θεόν), a benefactor of Jews, a Roman army officer and a resident of the regional seat of government, Caesarea, represents a more realistic progression from the Samaritans. The conversion of the eunuch, an outsider regarding his relationship to the house of Israel, marks a more “radical stage” in the expansion of the early church than does Cornelius’ conversion.

Others, while recognising that the story of the eunuch’s conversion seems out of place, argue that its importance to Luke’s narrative should not be underestimated. Tannehill agrees that the account does not contribute to the overall development of the theme of 19 Pervo, Acts, 221. He continues, “Rather than establish a precedent, as did the conversion of Cornelius (10:1–11:18; 15:7), this narrative trails off into the happy and literally wild blue yonder.”

20 Barrett, Critical Commentary, 420. Black argues this narrative is not out of place and that the primary function of the story of the Ethiopian’s conversion is “to narrate the acceptance of eunuchs into the restored Israel . . .” Luke is, according to Black, emphasising the eunuch’s outsider status, not his ethnicity. The story also represents “the first step beyond Samaria toward the end of the earth.” Robert Allen Black, “The Conversion Stories in the Acts of the Apostles: A Study of Their Forms and Functions” (Ph. D. diss., The Graduate School of Emory University, 1985), 141, 143.
the progress of the gospel to the ends of the earth, and the church in Jerusalem seems to be unaware of it, let alone grapples with the implications of this Gentile convert from a far country.\textsuperscript{21} Gaventa believes that the narrative is independent of the rest of Acts and “could be excised from the book without any logical difficulties.”\textsuperscript{22} However both agree that this event is anticipatory. “The Ethiopian is proleptic of all those who will be reached for God through the witness of the gospel.”\textsuperscript{23}

A corollary of seeing Acts as narrative is taking seriously the way in which the implied author (Luke) has ordered his book, that is, his plot and its development.\textsuperscript{24} Thus Luke’s ordering of the Ethiopian’s conversion in the larger story of Acts need not be such an issue. It should also be noted that although not seemingly linked to what follows, the conversion of Saul, there is a definite link to what has gone before, the conversion of the Samaritans, namely the ministry of Philip. One may accept that Luke’s overarching theme is the expansion of the church without questioning Luke’s positioning of the Ethiopian’s

\textsuperscript{22} Gaventa, \textit{Acts}, 140.
conversion. Luke develops his theme through two major characters, Peter and Paul, and some minor ones such as Stephen and Philip. It could be argued that the Jerusalem church takes interest in the Cornelius episode because more people are involved, including the apostle Peter and the Jewish Christians who came with him, and it did not occur in some remote place but rather at the centre of Roman administration for Judea, Caesarea.

3.3 Textual issues

There are two major textual issues in the Greek text (NA^{28}) of Acts 8:26–40. One has to do with the omission of verse 37 and the other, the addition of some words after “Spirit” (πνεῦμα) in verse 39. In the case of verse 37 the words omitted come from the D-text family of textual witnesses. “Western” witnesses insert one of the following after verse 36 (my translation):

37a And Philip said to him, “If you believe with all your heart, you will be saved;”
he answered and said, “I believe in the Christ the son of God.”
37b And he said to him, “If you believe with all your heart it is proper;”
25 And he answered and said, “I believe the Son of God to be Jesus Christ.”

\[^{25}\] ἐξεστὶ BDAG 1 a, 348.
Acts 8:37a has the support of the sixth century manuscript E while 8:37b is to be found in later, tenth century and following minuscules. The verse seems to be inserted to answer the question by the eunuch, which some scribe felt could not be left without an explicit response, namely, “What is to prevent me from being baptised?” The answer given is in the form of a confession of faith which shows that the eunuch is ready to be baptised. It is generally believed to reflect later Christian baptismal practice.\textsuperscript{26} Apart from the lack of support from early textual witnesses the question has to be asked why, if verse 37 is original, would a scribe want to remove it?\textsuperscript{27}

The other textual issue has to do with some words added between “Spirit” (πνεῦμα) and “of the Lord” (κυρίου) in verse 39. The amended verse would read, “When they came up out of the water, the Holy Spirit fell on the eunuch and (the) angel of the Lord snatched Philip away (added words in italics). The shorter reading is favoured by some substantial early witnesses including P\textsuperscript{45}, P\textsuperscript{74}, \textbullet, A*, B, and C while the earliest and most substantial witness for the longer reading is the corrected copy of A from the fifth century.\textsuperscript{28} While the additional words in verse 39 may not be original they do provide some insight into the

\textsuperscript{26} Barrett, \textit{Critical Commentary}, 433.
\textsuperscript{27} Metzger, \textit{Textual Commentary}, 315.
\textsuperscript{28} Metzger, \textit{Textual Commentary}, 316.
continuing importance for the church of the fourth and fifth centuries C.E. of the work of the Spirit in baptism, a matter which will be dealt with below.

### 3.4 Divine agents

In considering what Luke tells the reader about conversion I need to give attention to those involved in the Ethiopian’s turning to God. There are four “characters” in this narrative, Philip, the Ethiopian, and two manifestations of divine agency, an “angel of the Lord” (ἄγγελος κυρίου, 8:26) and the Spirit (τὸ πνεῦμα, 8:29) or Spirit of the Lord (πνεῦμα κυρίου, 8:39). This section examines the divine agents and their respective roles. It is clear that the eunuch’s turning to God is more than a human undertaking. Luke is at pains to stress that this is a work of God whatever else may be said from the human side. In this account the angel of the Lord and the Spirit act seamlessly, with Luke making no distinction between their contributions.29 The longer reading in 8:39 goes a little further and makes such a distinction with its depiction of the Spirit falling on the eunuch.

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29 See Pervo, Acts, 223.
3.4.1 An Angel of the Lord

The narrative opens in a dramatic fashion: “then an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip” (Acts 8:26). The Greek is even more emphatic with the narrative beginning: ἄγγελος κυρίου. The angel tells Philip to go to the road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza. Angles as divine beings acting on behalf of God figure prominently in Luke-Acts. They are mentioned 25 times in Luke’s Gospel and 21 times in Acts. Only on three occasions does “angel” (ἄγγελος) refer to a human messenger(s) (Luke 7:24, 27; 9:52). An angel plays a similar role in the conversion of Cornelius as with the eunuch. Luke records how an “angel of the Lord” on two occasions rescues Peter from prison (5:19; 12:6–10) and, on another, strikes down Herod the king (Herod Agrippa 1) for his arrogant usurpation of authority that rightly belonged to God (Acts 12:23).

Luke, through Stephen’s defence before the Council (Acts 7:1–53), links the work of God in Israel’s history with God’s work in the Jesus movement. As the angel of the Lord was God’s agent in the salvation history of Israel so an angel continues God’s work through the followers of Jesus. Angels are prominent in Stephen’s recounting of Israel’s

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30 In Luke-Acts angels are variously referred to as “an angel” (ἄγγελος), an “angel of the Lord” (ἄγγελος κυρίου) and “an angel (or angels) of God (ἄγγελος τοῦ θεοῦ). These terms are to be regarded as synonymous.
history (7:30, 35, 38, 53). Thus an “angel of the Lord” is no minor character but one of great import. While angels are subordinate to, and distinct from, God this distinction is at times almost lost in the Hebrew Bible.\footnote{Exodus 3:2–4; 14:19; cf. 14:24; 23:20–21; Zech 1:18–20.}

A textual interpolation in Acts 8:39 has an angel of the Lord “snatching” Philip from the scene. As a consequence the story of the Ethiopian’s conversion is given more literary balance in that it is an angel of the Lord who opens the conversion narrative by directing Philip to the eunuch and it is the angel of the Lord who leads him away from the eunuch at the conclusion of the account.

3.4.2 The Holy Spirit

Luke’s reference to the Spirit underscores the divine initiative in the eunuch’s conversion. While an angel of the Lord speaks to Philip, telling him to go to the road running from Jerusalem to Gaza where he meets the Ethiopian eunuch, it is the Spirit who tells Philip to join the Ethiopian in his wagon. As Philip draws near to the wagon Luke directs attention to his encounter with the eunuch. After he has baptised the eunuch Philip’s work with him is finished and the Spirit, who had earlier brought the two together, now, according to the Alexandrian text, “snatches” him away from the scene. A textual variant from the

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Western text family has the Spirit falling on the eunuch after his baptism. The effect of this addition is to bring the account of the eunuch’s conversion into line with what the reader might have expected to occur at baptism, namely, the Holy Spirit coming upon the convert (see for example Acts 2:38; 8:17–18; 10:44; 19:5–6). This addition is not as well-attested as the shorter Alexandrian reading. As noted above the inclusion of these words may give an insight into the importance of the work of the Holy Spirit in conversion for Christians of the fourth and fifth centuries.

The work of the Spirit in the eunuch’s conversion fits in with the emphasis given by Luke to the Spirit in Acts and his Gospel. Of the occurrences of the “Holy Spirit” and its variations in the Gospels and Acts (e.g., “Spirit,” “Spirit of God”) fifty-two percent are to be found in Acts, with fourteen percent in Luke’s Gospel. That is, of all the times the Holy Spirit or variants are mentioned in the canonical Gospels and Acts, two-thirds are in Luke-Acts and the vast majority of those are in Acts.

32 Of the 55 times the Spirit is mentioned in Acts, “(the) Holy Spirit” is the most common designation with just under half of the occurrences, in a little under a quarter of the occurrences the title “Spirit” is used. Rarer is “(the) Spirit of the Lord,” two times, and “the Spirit of Jesus” is found just once. The count of 55 includes three occasions (6:3; 19:21; 20:22) where “spirit” (πνεῦμα) might be translated as the spirit of a person. I have not included the references to “spirit” in 18:25; 23:8, 9, taking these to refer to the inner person. Πνεῦμα by itself and modifiers e.g. τοῦ θεοῦ, ἅγιος, in Accordance 11, accessed 11 March 2013.
The Holy Spirit’s role in the conversion of the eunuch is a guiding one, similar to that of the angel of the Lord. The Spirit’s part is clear and important and is seen particularly in the way Luke narrates the exquisite timing of the encounter. The angel of the Lord may have given Philip general directions but it is the Spirit who guides Philip to approach the chariot at the very moment the eunuch is puzzling over a passage from the prophet Isaiah. It is a passage about the Suffering Servant and Philip is able to use the eunuch’s question as to the subject of these verses to proclaim the good news of Jesus. But this is all that Luke tells the reader here about the role of the Spirit in the eunuch’s conversion. It may have been that some scribe felt this role needed elaboration to bring it into line with other parts of Acts (e.g. 2:38; 10:44), and thus added the longer reading of Acts 8:39, “the Spirit of the Lord fell upon the eunuch.”

After the Spirit guides Philip to join the eunuch Luke turns his attention to Philip and the Ethiopian. Then, after the eunuch is baptised, Luke brings the account to a striking end with a vivid reminder that the whole event is a work of God. Philip is “snatched” (ἥρπασεν) away by the Spirit of the Lord (Acts 8:39)\textsuperscript{33}. In Luke 24:31 we meet a similar occurrence of a dramatic exit, although here Luke notes how Jesus

\textsuperscript{33} Cf. BDAG, 134.
became invisible (ἄφαντος ἐγένετο) to them. Paul uses the same verb (ἁρπάζω) in telling about a man snatched away into paradise (2 Cor 12:2, 4). He also uses this verb to describe how those Christians, alive at the time of Christ’s return, “will be caught up (ἁρπαγησόμεθα) in the clouds … to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thess 4:17). The word however need not always convey the idea of supernatural travel and has been used to describe a more mundane, albeit forceful, movement. John in his Gospel (6:15) notes how those who had seen Jesus feed the five thousand wanted to “take him by force (ἁρπάζειν) to make him king.”

Whether Luke meant a supernatural removal or something more mundane, an inner compulsion to leave, his description, “the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away” (πνεῦμα κυρίου ἥρπασεν τὸν Φίλιππον), brings the narrative to a dramatic end that finishes the story where it began, with God’s initiative.

Thus, Luke in his narrative of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch emphasises that conversion is a work of God. He does this by beginning the account with an angel of the Lord and ending it with the Spirit of the Lord. In this way he brackets the work of Philip and the response of the eunuch with divine agency, thereby implying that their unique meeting and discussion of Isaiah and the eunuch’s baptism have

34 See also Acts 23:10.
been superintended by God. In this account the role of the angel and the Spirit are similar in that they guide Philip to the Ethiopian although it is the Spirit who effects the actual meeting. It is therefore very likely that Luke is suggesting that the Spirit is responsible for the eunuch’s actual turning to God. The textual variant in verse 39 may be an attempt to make explicit what the Alexandrian text left implicit.

3.5 Human involvement

If Luke portrays the Ethiopian’s conversion as a work of God he is clear that it is also a work of human beings. The other two characters in this conversion narrative are Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. Luke depicts Philip as one who is not only obedient to the guidance of the angel of the Lord and the Spirit but also has a good understanding of the Jewish prophetic writings and their application to Jesus. Further, he is able to explain and to apply these writings in such a way as to convince the eunuch to be baptised. The Ethiopian is a man who is ready to respond to what Philip has to say.

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35 There is also a driver present whom the eunuch commands to stop the wagon. Pervo goes too far in suggesting that by not mentioning the driver Luke is guilty of snobbery. Pervo, Acts, 225, n 56. He is not mentioned because he has no part to play in this event.
3.5.1 Philip the evangelist

We first meet Philip when he is selected as one of seven to deal with the matter of providing for the Hellenist widows who were missing out on the daily distribution of food (Acts 6:1). Luke describes Philip, along with the other six, as “of good reputation,”36 and “full of the Spirit and wisdom” (πλήρεις πνεύματος καὶ σοφίας, Acts 6:3). Next Luke mentions Philip as one of those scattered because of persecution who went about “preaching the word.” He comes down to a city of Samaria where he preaches Christ and does many “signs and great miracles” (Acts 8:5, 6). His ministry of preaching and signs is effective and many respond. Luke observes: there was “much joy in that city” (Acts 8:8). Perhaps it is because of his ministry here that Philip becomes known as “Philip the evangelist” (Acts 21:8). Luke then tells of the visit of the apostles, Peter and John, to the city of Samaria, their bestowing of the Spirit through the laying on of hands and the encounter with Simon the magician. After the apostles have returned to Jerusalem, Luke turns again to Philip and his encounter with the eunuch from Ethiopia.

Luke presents Philip as a model “servant of the word.”37 He is readily obedient to divine guidance, to the directions given by an angel of the Lord and then to the instruction by the Spirit to join the eunuch’s

36 BDAG, μαρτυρέω, 618.
wagon. As a good servant of Jesus, Philip obeys without any apparent
demurring. It is a characteristic of all of Luke’s servants of the word in
Acts that they are able to discern and are ready to follow divine
guidance. Ananias, despite his grave reservations, obeys the direction of
the Lord to go to Saul in Damascus (Acts 9:10–18). Peter obeys the
direction of the Spirit to go with Cornelius’ servants (Acts 10:19) and
when he arrives at Cornelius’ house understands the meaning of the
vision he had at Joppa (Acts 10:9–16). Paul and his missionary
companions follow the guidance of the Spirit of Jesus not to evangelise
in Asia or enter Bithynia (Acts 16:6, 7) and conclude from Paul’s vision
of the man from Macedonia to go there instead (Acts 16:9, 10). Philip fits
in with this characteristic of the Lukan servant of the word. Humans are
important in Luke’s conversion accounts in Acts but they, like Philip,
are attuned to heavenly direction. In this way Luke underscores that if
conversion involves human agency, behind this is the working of God.
Thus Luke brings together the divine and the human in conversion.

Philip is a servant of the word. That is, he understands the
prophetic writings and the way in which they have been applied to
Jesus. When Philip draws near to the wagon he hears the Ethiopian
reading from the prophet Isaiah. The passage he is puzzling over is Isa
53:7, 8, in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, that is, the
Septuagint (LXX). This passage is part of a larger section referring to the Suffering Servant (Isa 52:13–53:12). Like the eunuch (Acts 8:34) commentators have puzzled over the identity of the Servant. Suggestions have included Isaiah himself (cf. Isa 49:5), the Messiah (cf. 52:13; 53:11; 1 Enoch 37–71), and Elijah (cf. Sir. 48:10). In more recent times commentators have tended to favour “Israel or Israel and its leaders.”

However the early Church believed the Suffering Servant passage prefigured Jesus and his mission. The Lukan Jesus during the Passover meal claims Isaiah’s words about the servant, “he was reckoned with the lawless” (Isa 53:12), are fulfilled in him. Matthew sees Jesus’ healing ministry as a fulfilment of Isa 53:4. Jesus, in John’s Gospel, and Paul both quote Isa 53:1 in reference to the failure of many to believe.

The passage quoted poses problems at different levels. Apart from the question of what is not quoted there are some difficulties in

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42 Matthew (12:18–21) also quotes another Servant passage, Isa 42:1–4, as being fulfilled in Jesus. Paul’s words in Romans 4:25 echo Isa 53:4, 5. See also Heb 9:28 and Isa 53:12.
interpretation. These have more to do with the second verse quoted (8:33) than the first.

Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth

In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth. (Isaiah 53:7, 8 LXX)

The first stanza portrays the “uncomplaining sufferer” and is an elaboration of the opening line of the verse which is not quoted: “And he on account on what he suffers does not open his mouth.”44 The suffering is not elaborated upon here but there are suggestive hints pointing to the old covenant sacrifices with the use of words like “sheep” (πρόβατον) and “lamb” (ἀμνός).45

We encounter difficulties with the second stanza. Gaventa comments that “both in the Hebrew and in the LXX translation that

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43 Barrett, Critical Commentary, 431.
44 Καὶ ἀυτὸς διὰ τὸ κεκακῶσθαι οὐκ ἀνοίγει τὸ στόμα αὐτοῦ.
Luke quotes, the passage abounds in unclarity [sic].”\(^{46}\) One possible understanding is that the Servant suffered and died unjustly.\(^{47}\) That is, justice was denied him and the difficult to understand “who can describe his generation” would carry the meaning “who can describe a generation who would do such a thing?” that is, kill (“his life is taken away from the earth”) God’s Servant.\(^{48}\) An alternate, and opposite reading, is that although the Servant suffered he was vindicated, his condemnation (the judgement, κρίσις, against him) was taken away (ήρθη) and he was exalted to heaven (“his life is taken from the earth”).\(^{49}\) “In the very midst of his humiliation, and because he accepted it, the judgement against him was removed, cancelled. Cf. Phil. 2:6–11.”\(^{50}\) As a result his “generation,” understood as his posterity or disciples, become so numerous as to be uncountable.\(^{51}\)

Despite its difficulties Philip was in no doubt as to whom the passage referred.\(^{52}\) “And beginning from this scripture he preached to him the good news of Jesus” (Acts 8:35). This passage provided Philip with a point of departure from which to tell “the good news of Jesus.”

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Philip links these two verses to Jesus (Acts 8:35) yet there are other verses that could be seen to have a more explicit bearing upon Jesus’ death as a “saving event.” For example, the last clause of the second verse is not referred to, “because of the lawless deeds of my people he was led to death.” These words would seem to have a ready application to the death of Jesus as a sacrifice on behalf of others.

Looking further afield there are other verses from the Suffering Servant passage of Isa 52:13–53:12 that would have application to Jesus’ death, such as Isa 53:4–6 (LXX):

This one bears our sins, and suffers for us and we reckoned him to be afflicted and wounded and mistreated. But he was wounded on account of our sins and he suffered on account of our lawlessness and the correction for our peace [was] upon him, by his wounds we were healed. All, like sheep, have gone astray; humans in their way [of living] have gone astray; and the Lord has handed him over because of our sins.

Isa 53:12 would also be relevant in this regard.

Why weren’t these verses included? Did Luke wish to focus more on the humiliation of Jesus than his atoning death? Certainly the

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53 Pervo, Acts, 225.
54 ἀπὸ τῶν ἁνομιμῶν τοῦ λαοῦ μου ἠχθῆ εἰς θάνατον. Isa 53:8d, LXX.
55 ἄνθρωπος τῇ ὁδῷ αὐτοῦ ἐπλανήθη.
56 An intriguing question is how to translate the dative in καὶ Κύριος παρέδωκεν αὐτὸν ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις ἡμῶν.
passage quoted, at least in the first stanza, emphasises the humiliation of the sufferer, but are we to infer that this passage was all the scripture that was considered? Barrett points out that “on a long slow journey the Ethiopian would be likely to cover more than six lines, and that these are quoted as a summary of a longer passage.” Luke does not tell the reader why only these verses are quoted and inferences regarding Luke’s understanding of the atonement are, on the basis of these verses, poorly grounded. These verses may be quoted for no other reason than that they were not chosen by Luke but were the ones that the Ethiopian was reading aloud when Philip came up to his wagon. This is not unreasonable if the source of the story was Philip himself or someone who knew him.

There is a further possibility arising out of Luke’s words, “the passage of the scripture.” Here Luke seems to distinguish the verses quoted, “the passage” (ἡ περιοχή), from a larger text, “the scripture” (τῆς γραφῆς). What “the scripture” refers to is not clear. Luke, in other

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58 Barrett, Critical Commentary, 429.
61 ἡ περιοχή τῆς γραφῆς.
places, uses the plural form, “scriptures” (γραφάς), to refer to a large collection of writings, for example, “Moses and the prophets” (Lk 24:27), and “the law of Moses, prophets and the psalms” (Lk 24:44, 45). It seems reasonable to include the following references in this wider category:

Acts 17:2, 11; 18:24, 28. When he refers to a specific group of verses he uses the singular form “scripture” (γραφή) (Lk 4:21; Acts 1:16). The word translated “passage” (περιοχή) only occurs once in the NT, here in 8:32. It can mean the content of a written text or the text itself. If the latter meaning applies in 8:32 then the meaning would be as in the NRSV, and the “scripture” could refer to a larger body of verses, possibly Isa 52:13–53:12 or even larger, maybe the whole of Isaiah. The interpretation used in 8:32 will affect the interpretation of “scripture” in 8:35. There are good grounds for using the NRSV reading of 8:32 and to take “scripture” in 8:35 to refer to a block of verses such as 52:13–53:12, if only for the reason that Philip in “starting with this scripture” was hardly likely to begin with Isa 1:1.

Luke writes how Philip started from this passage but does not elaborate on exactly what he proclaimed about Jesus. If the other sermons in Acts are understood as Lukan summaries of what was said

62 BDAG, 803.

63 The NIV favours the former meaning of περιοχή, that is, the content of text. “The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture.”
the following tentative suggestions can be made. Philip would have begun by showing how Jesus fulfilled these verses from Isaiah. Further it is likely that Philip would have also referred to Jesus’ sufferings and death, themes that could be found in the Suffering Servant passage (Isa 53:3–13). He would also have referred to his resurrection and included the need to repent and to be baptised.

As the eunuch and Philip journey along they come to some water and the eunuch asks, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” (Acts 8:37) The question springs unexpectedly and is only intelligible if Philip had spoken about the meaning and purpose of baptism or if the Ethiopian had learnt about baptism in Jerusalem. This in turn implies some mention of repentance and how repentance and baptism were appropriate responses to what Philip had said about Jesus. Barrett notes, “Philip evidently claims that Jesus fulfils the OT; that God has acted in his death and resurrection; and that in consequence salvation is offered to those who will accept it in faith.” Apart from linking Jesus with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, Luke does not elaborate on what Philip said about Jesus but assumes that it is something the reader would

66 Barrett, Critical Commentary, 431. Fitzmyer, Acts, 413, argues that Luke understands this passage from Isaiah “to refer to the crucifixion and death of Jesus.”
understand, possibly from a knowledge of Luke’s Gospel and the story so far in Acts.

In this conversion account Scripture and its interpretation plays an important role. In fact it forms a key link between Philip and eunuch. The Ethiopian with his scripture scroll was not enough. The scripture is not self-explanatory, it needs an interpreter. But Philip is not just any interpreter but rather one who is familiar with the prophet Isaiah and the Christological understanding of the passage the Ethiopian was reading and by reasonable implication, the Suffering Servant passage (Isa 52:13–53:12). The reader is further reminded of the divine initiative in guiding to the eunuch a person intellectually prepared to answer his questions.

3.5.2 A prepared outsider

The other person in this conversion account is of course the one who is converted, the Ethiopian eunuch. We are not told his name, only that he is an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official with responsibility for the treasury in the court of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. “Candace” was not a name but a dynastic title that “was applied to a succession of...

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67 Barrett, Critical Commentary, 428; Gaventa, Acts, 143.
68 We can also note Luke’s earlier description of Philip, and others, as full of the Spirit and wisdom (Acts 6:3, 5).
69 “Court official,” δυνάστης, is literally a man who held power and is used to refer to court officials, rulers and chamberlains. Barrett, Critical Commentary, 425; Fitzmyer, Acts, 412. Cf. Jer 41:19, LXX.
queens over several generations.”

Ethiopia is not to be confused with the modern day nation of Ethiopia. “Ethiopia” in the Hebrew Bible corresponded to the Nubian kingdom of “Cush” with its capital at Meroe, which land today lies within Sudan. By not giving the Ethiopian’s name Luke focuses attention on the man’s ethnicity, high social standing and physical condition. A further indication of the eunuch’s high status is found in the conversation between the eunuch and Philip. Philip’s question and the Ethiopian’s answer imply the latter’s high status. Philip’s question is “relatively elegant” and that of the Ethiopian even “more elegant: a potential optative as the apodosis of a general condition.”

Ethiopia and the Ethiopians were known to the Jews. Contact between the Israelites and the Ethiopians went back for centuries. There is a tradition that Moses had married a Cushite woman (Num 12:1), and Ethiopians were to be found in important positions in Israelite courts. One prominent example is Ebed-melech who served in the king’s palace and who rescued the prophet Jeremiah from Malchiah’s cistern

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70 Peterson, Acts, 293. BDAG, 507. See also Strabo, Geography 17.1.54.
73 Pervo, Acts, 225. Barrett describes this as “a gem of a conversation.” Barrett, Critical Commentary, 427. See also footnote 12 above.
74 Fitzmyer, Acts, 412, notes that there was a language link in that “Ethiopic is a Semitic language related to Hebrew and Aramaic.”
(Jer 38:7–13). He is described in Jeremiah (39:18) as one who trusted in God and received from him a promise of deliverance from the besieging army of Nebuchadrezzer (Jer 39:17, 18).\textsuperscript{75} Israel fought wars either directly with Cush or with Ethiopia in alliance with other nations such as Libya and Egypt.\textsuperscript{76} Ethiopia is mentioned by Israel’s prophets, sometimes in prophecies of judgement (Ezek 30:4; Zeph 2:12) and at other times inferring that Ethiopia will participate in the blessings of the last days (Isa 18:7; Zeph 3:10). Jews settled and lived in Ethiopia although when and how they first arrived is difficult to determine (Isa 11:11). Psalm 68:31 indicates that Ethiopia is not outside of God’s concern: “let Ethiopia hasten to stretch out its hands to God.”\textsuperscript{77}

Although Ethiopians were known to Jews, the Ethiopian in this narrative is a religious and social outsider as far as the Jews were concerned. He is a eunuch, a physical condition Luke emphasises by mostly referring to him as a eunuch. Of the six times he is mentioned in this passage, only once (8:27) does Luke refer to him as an Ethiopian, whereas in the other five, Luke calls him a eunuch. Eunuchs often held

\textsuperscript{75} In the MT Ebed-Melech is a \textit{saris}, a eunuch. This can either mean a castrate, so the NRSV, or an official, so the NIV.

\textsuperscript{76} See 2 Kings 19:9; 2 Chr 12:3; 14: 9, 12; 16:8; Isa 37:9.

\textsuperscript{77} See also Ps 87:4, “Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon; Philistia too, and Tyre, with Ethiopia.”

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high positions in the oriental courts of antiquity.\textsuperscript{78} They were attendants to female royalty and put in charge of the harems of the royal court (see Esth 2:3, 14; 4:4–5). Eunuchs were commonly physically castrated men, although the term could also refer to men who were not castrated but held high positions in the palace (Gen 39:1; 40:2; 1 Sam 8:15).\textsuperscript{79} Given Luke’s emphasis that the Ethiopian is a εὐνοῦχος and his further description of him as a “court official” (δυνάστης), it is a reasonable assumption that he is a castrate, which heightens the sense of his being an outsider.\textsuperscript{80}

Attitudes towards eunuchs were ambivalent. On the one hand they held positions of status, power and prestige in society, yet on the other they were looked down upon. “Eunuchs in antiquity ‘belonged to the most despised and derided group of men.’”\textsuperscript{81} They were held in contempt because of their physical condition, being seen as effeminate

\textsuperscript{78} See Plutarch, Demetrius 25.5.
\textsuperscript{79} Fitzmyer, Acts, 412.
and disrespectful of life. The eunuch “was an ambiguous sort of creature like a crow, which cannot be reckoned either with doves or with ravens . . . neither man nor woman but something composite, hybrid and monstrous, alien to human nature.” Polemo regarded them as evil, greedy and full of a host of bad qualities. First century Greek-speaking Jews held similar attitudes. Josephus (Ant 4.292) noted: “Let those that have made themselves eunuchs be held in detestation.” Parsons describes the eunuch of our passage as a “liminal figure,” socially an outcast yet occupying a position of power and prestige.

Although this is not explicitly mentioned in the biblical text, some commentators believe that the Ethiopian’s situation was further complicated because he was dark-skinned. He was thus a likely target of racial prejudice of the kind found in pseudo-Aristotle, “Those who are too swarthy are cowardly; this applies to Egyptians and

84 Polemo, Physiognomonica 1.162 as in Parsons, Acts, 120.
85 See Wilson, “Neither male nor female,” 409.
86 Parsons, Acts, 120. Tannehill also notes: “An Ethiopian eunuch is a very strong representative of foreignness within a Jewish context. He comes from the edge of the known world, of the black race, is a castrated male, and probably a Gentile.” Tannehill, Acts of the Apostles 108.
Ethiopians.” His dark skin would have added a mysterious element to the narrative. For Pervo, this smooth black man from an exotic far-away country is a romantic touch to Luke’s story. For him the Ethiopia of Acts 8 is not the historical kingdom of Meroe but the Ethiopia of “legendary romance.”

The eunuch is also, for the Jew, a religious outsider. It would seem on the basis of Deut 23:1 that the eunuch in our passage, although he had been to Jerusalem to worship, would have only been able to enter the Court of the Gentiles in the Temple. Deuteronomy 23:1 forbade “those whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off” to be a part of the assembly (qahal) of the Lord. Schwartz suggests that as a Gentile the Ethiopian’s worship would have been limited to voluntary offerings such as gifts and sacrifices as part of a vow. These could be used for the upkeep of the temple or used by others in the temple cult but would not benefit the Gentile making the offering. He could not have offered the sacrifices that an Israelite could offer according to the Law. In Jerusalem the eunuch had been “no doubt, relegated to the outermost

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89 Gaventa, Acts, 141.
90 Pervo, Acts, 221.
chambers of the temple. The eunuch was impure and filled with shame."

Not all agree that the eunuch is that much of an outsider. Fitzmyer argues that he is either “a Jew or possibly a Jewish proselyte.” Barrett believes he may have been a proselyte. But what about the proscription of Deut 23:1? Fitzmyer points to Isa 56:3–5 which could allow for a eunuch to be a “diaspora Jew.” However the Isaiah passage points to a time in the future, to a set of circumstances which had not yet been realised in the eunuch’s own time (see Isa 56:6–8). Most likely Peterson’s description of the eunuch as a “would-be” proselyte is the best depiction of the eunuch’s status relative to Judaism. Despite his being unable to go no further than the court of the Gentiles he was still willing to undertake and long and arduous journey to worship God in the temple in Jerusalem (Acts 8:27).

The eunuch is on the fringes of Judaism. He is a person seeking God. When Philip meets him he is returning from Jerusalem where he had been to worship. The journey from Meroe to Jerusalem would

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92 Parsons, Acts, 120.
93 Fitzmyer, Acts, 410.
95 Fitzmyer, Acts, 410.
96 Peterson, Acts, 292.
98 Luke uses προσκυνήσας, a future participle expressing purpose, instead of a final clause. This reflects classical Greek usage and is rare in the NT, there being only twelve
have been long, over 2,000 km, and at times dangerous. That he undertook such a journey is an indication of the strength of his commitment to the God of Israel. How he came to be a worshipper of Yahweh Luke does not tell us, but it is plausible that it was through contact with Jews living in Cush. That he goes to Jerusalem to worship does not necessarily mean he is a Jew or a convert to Judaism. It is possible that he can be considered a God-fearer similar to Cornelius. As Gentiles could worship at the Temple in the outer court, the eunuch’s going to Jerusalem to worship is more an indication of the depth of his dedication to Yahweh than his being a proselyte.

His interest in the things of God is underscored by Luke who recounts that the eunuch, on his way home from Jerusalem, is reading the prophet Isaiah. His question to Philip shows he is giving a lot of thought to what he is reading. He is puzzling over a pericope from Isaiah. Whatever happened in Jerusalem, the eunuch returns from the Temple with unanswered questions, unsatisfied aspirations. Perhaps these had to do with his being unable to enter fully into the worship of Israel, forbidden to go beyond the outer court of the Temple. If his frame of

99 Gaventa, Acts, 143; Spencer, Portrait, 172.
100 Gaventa, Acts, 142. Cf. Josephus, War, 2.412–413. If he is not a proselyte then his willingness to undertake such an arduous journey heightens the reader’s appreciation of the eunuch’s desire for the God of Israel.
mind was that of an outsider he would be open to a message that showed him how he might be an outsider no longer. Thompson goes as far as to suggest that this “despised and rejected eunuch” would have special interest in a passage of Scripture dealing with a “despised and rejected Servant.”

Such a mindset would naturally lead to the eunuch’s question of Philip: “What hinders me from being baptised?” (8:37). This is the key question in the narrative that leads from Philip’s telling the Ethiopian about the good news of Jesus to his baptism. It is a question that implies the eunuch had in the past encountered hindrances in his quest for God. Assuming that he was not a proselyte, he was then a Gentile, excluded from the covenant. As noted above, the Mosaic Law (Deut 23:1) forbade his becoming a member of the Lord’s qahal because of his physical condition. At the Jerusalem Temple his worship of God was confined to the Court of the Gentiles. He was hindered from going any further to the Court of the Men and worshiping as a member of the covenant people. His journey to Jerusalem would have been a reminder

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102 See Acts 10:47 and Peter’s question. In the circumstances the reader could possibly anticipate significant hindrances to the Gentile Cornelius and his relatives and friends being baptised.
103 Spencer, *Portrait*, 172. Even if he was a proselyte, the position of the convert in Judaism of the Second Temple period was ambiguous. They were no longer outsiders with regard to Israel but they were not insiders either; they were not Gentiles nor were they full Israelites.
of his outsider status. His racial identity could have added to his sense of otherness and exclusion. Parsons observes: “It is this kind of person whom Philip is directed by the Spirit to approach (8:29) – a social outcast, living on the liminal in terms of his sexual identity, his religious identification, and his socio-economic status.”104 The reader understands that Philip was sent to a man ready for the good news of Jesus which told him that he could become a member of the people of God.105

3.6 Baptism

This change of status begins when the eunuch is baptised. It is the eunuch who asks for baptism. “And as they were going along the road, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “Look here is water, what hinders me from being baptized? (8:36). That the eunuch asks for baptism indicates that Philip’s words have had an impact.106 It also suggests that Philip has spoken about baptism or, possibly, that the eunuch had learnt about it in Jerusalem.107 Whatever the case the eunuch’s question implies that he understands baptism to be the necessary response to what Philip has said about Jesus. “Baptism is

104 Parsons, Acts, 120.
105 Parsons, Acts, 122.
106 Peterson, Acts, 296.
107 Peterson, Acts, 296.
integral to turning to Jesus and receiving the benefits of his death and resurrection.”

With the eunuch’s baptism Luke has brought the reader to the climax of this conversion narrative.

Luke does not reveal what was said about baptism or what the eunuch’s understanding of it is. Here it may be asked what the reader would be expected to understand about baptism and where this knowledge might come from. The most likely source is Luke himself in his Gospel and the book of Acts. It is unrealistic and contrary to authorial practice to expect an explanation of an activity, e.g., baptism, every time it is mentioned in a narrative. An author can reasonably expect his or her readers to draw upon what has already been written to provide an understanding of a particular action when they come across it again in the narrative. Thus the reader of Acts has some understanding of baptism by the time s/he comes to the narrative of the eunuch’s baptism. Green proposes an “axiom of narratology.” Using the example from Acts of repentance and baptism, he argues that the action and consequences need not be mentioned every time repentance and/or baptism are. That is, “what precedes not only comes before but also

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109 This assumes the narrative unity of Luke-Acts. See also Pervo, *Acts*, 226, who notes that nothing is said regarding the ritual “with which the implied reader of Acts is familiar.”
exists in a causal relationship with what follows.”¹¹⁰ While Luke’s Gospel and Acts may not be the reader’s only source, they are a good place to start with to gain an insight into the reader’s likely understanding of baptism.

In Acts Luke links conversion and baptism. “The accounts of conversion in Acts ordinarily include mention of baptism.”¹¹¹ This is because of what baptism signified, namely, repentance, forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. While it is difficult to determine the source of John’s baptism a line can be drawn from his baptism to Christian baptism. John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance, and the act of baptism was in effect an act of repentance which led to the forgiveness of the sins of those baptised. God called John out of the wilderness and he “went into all the countryside around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:3). He urged those who were baptised to demonstrate the genuineness of their action by bearing “fruits worthy of repentance,” that is, changed moral behaviour (Luke 3:8 NRSV).¹¹² Beasley-Murray sees John’s baptism as a “baptism of conversion” in which people turned from sin

¹¹¹ Ferguson, Baptism, 184.
¹¹² Green, “From ‘John’s Baptism,’” 163.
to God.\textsuperscript{113} It is this because it is a baptism of repentance (βάπτισμα μετανοίας) and “repentance” in the NT indicates a turning from sin to God.\textsuperscript{114} In Acts 11:18 Luke writes about “the repentance that leads to life,” referring to the conversion of Cornelius.

There was a prophetic element to John’s preaching on baptism. He pointed ahead to one coming after him who would “baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16).\textsuperscript{115} Luke in Acts 2:38 provides, through the words of the apostle Peter, what may be regarded as a pattern-setting statement linking baptism, repentance and the Holy Spirit.

“Luke puts representative or programmatic material early in his narratives that are then treated more briefly in other occurrences.”\textsuperscript{116} In response to the question of the conscience-stricken crowd on the day of Pentecost, “what shall we do?” Peter replies, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”(Acts 2:38)

\begin{footnotes}
\item Beasley-Murray, \textit{Baptism}, 34. Bruce, \textit{The Acts}, 97.
\item G. R. Beasley-Murray, “Baptism, Wash,” \textit{NIDNTT} 1: 146. The reference to “fire” is a reference to purification, which could possibly have a “now-not yet” aspect. Those who are baptised in the Spirit are now purified from sin which in turn anticipates the purification of the final judgement (cf. 1 Cor 3: 13).
\item Ferguson continues, arguing that Acts 2:37–41 shows the “normal pattern of response to Christian preaching.” “Those who receive the apostolic message (2:41), recognize Jesus as Lord and Messiah (2:36), repent, and are baptized in his name (2:38), receive forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, and salvation (2:38–39, 46), then participate in the life of the community (2:41–47). Variations from this pattern would be noted for their special significance.” Ferguson, \textit{Baptism}, 170.
\end{footnotes}
Here, as in the case of John’s baptism, repentance, forgiveness and baptism are connected but with a crucial difference, namely, the gift of the Holy Spirit. We see then that both the human and divine are linked in the physical act of Christian baptism. The individual is called upon to repent, consciously to turn away from sin and turn to God. As a result their sins are forgiven and they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

It is important to note Peter’s words about baptism being carried out in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38). Four times the phrase “in the name of Jesus” is found with reference to baptism although three different prepositions are used:

2:38 ἐπὶ τῷ ὄνομα Χριστοῦ
8:16 εἰς τὸ ὄνομα κυρίου Ιησοῦ
10:48 ἐν τῷ ὄνομα Χριστοῦ
19:5 εἰς τὸ ὄνομα κυρίου Ιησοῦ

The use of the different prepositions suggests slightly different emphases with regard to the use of the name of Jesus Christ in baptism.

In 2:38 the implication of the preposition ἐπὶ is that baptism is carried out with the authority of Jesus Christ and the one being baptised is, through the act of baptism, calling upon that name (cf. Acts 22:16).\(^{117}\) In 8:16 and 19:5 εἰς suggests that a relationship with Jesus Christ is entered into through baptism, and in 10:48, baptism is carried out “while

\(^{117}\) Cf. BDAG, 366, section 17.
naming or calling on the name” of Jesus. The use of these prepositions do not suggest three kinds of baptism but rather provide finely nuanced perspectives on the meaning of baptism “in the name of Jesus Christ.” It is reasonable to conclude that Philip baptised the eunuch “in the name of Jesus Christ,” with Christ’s authority, and that through baptism the Ethiopian submitted himself to and entered into a relationship with Jesus Christ.

While Acts 2:38 may be regarded as a paradigmatic statement I do not think it provides a pattern that must be followed in all cases. It is clear from Acts that this is not the case, that there is in Luke’s narratives of conversion, including those that are not covered in this study, a variety in the way the human and divine agents play out their roles. There is variety but there are also common, essential elements linked to baptism such as the use of the name of Jesus Christ, repentance, forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit. Although these essential elements are not explicitly mentioned in the eunuch’s conversion, we can reasonably assume that they were present. That the Spirit is not mentioned explicitly in the Ethiopian’s baptism and conversion may

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118 Cf. BDAG, 713, 1 d β 2.
119 For example, regarding baptism and the receiving of the Spirit, the Spirit is given without mention of baptism (the disciples, 2:4), is given upon baptism (2:38; 19:1–6), is given after baptism (8:17), is given before baptism (10:44), and the highly effective Apollos is, apparently, not required to update his baptism (the baptism of John) to that in the name of Jesus (cf. Paul and the Ephesian disciples, Acts 19:1–6).
have led a corrector of the fifth century Alexandrinus text to add, “the Holy Spirit fell on the eunuch . . .,” and so bring this account more into line with other conversion stories in Acts.

Luke quickly brings this conversion narrative to an end. Philip and the eunuch come up out of the water and the Spirit “snatched Philip away” (Acts 8:39). After the dramatic interruption the Ethiopian treasurer resumes his journey to his home country. The only clue Luke gives that a change has occurred is found in the enigmatic words, he “was going on his way rejoicing” (8:39). While Luke uses the verb “to rejoice” (χαίρειν) in a secular way, with the meaning to be glad or pleased as when “the chief priests and officers of the temple police” were “quite pleased” when Judas arranged with them to betray Jesus (Luke 22:5, NRSV, cf. 23:8), he also uses it, or its substantival equivalent, “joy,” to express the response of people to an encounter with God either directly or through the agency of others. As a result of Philip’s preaching in the city of Samaria, there was “great joy in that city” (Acts 8:8). In Acts 13:48 Luke writes of the response of many in the city of Antioch in Pisidia to the preaching of Paul and Barnabas: “When the Gentiles heard they began to rejoice (ἐχαίρειν) and glorify the word of

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120 This further strengthens the implication that the Spirit was present at the Ethiopian’s baptism.
the Lord and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.”  

Gaventa observes that Luke’s comment that the eunuch went on his way “rejoicing” (χαίρων) is one “that bristles with significance, since it later becomes a hallmark of the response of the Gentiles to the gospel.”

Conclusion

What can we learn from Luke’s narrative of the Ethiopian eunuch about turning to God? The answer has to do with those involved, Philip, the Ethiopian eunuch, the angel of the Lord and the Holy Spirit. As we have considered the different roles each has played we note that Luke portrays this conversion as a work of God. Luke brackets the entire incident within God’s providential working. God, through the angel of the Lord, directs Philip the evangelist to the eunuch. It is the Holy Spirit who directs Philip to join the Ethiopian treasurer in his chariot at the very time when the eunuch is puzzling over a passage from the prophet Isaiah. It is not just any passage but one with Christological implications. After the eunuch’s baptism the Spirit of the Lord takes Philip to further evangelistic ministry.

121 See also Acts 13: 52; Luke 1:14; 2:10; 24:52.
122 Gaventa, Acts, 144.
If Luke portrays conversion as a work of God he also sees that it involves prepared people. Luke presents Philip as a good “servant of the word.” He is obedient to the divine guidance to go to this important government official from a far country and is familiar with a Christological understanding of the Servant passages of Isaiah. He is able to give an answer to the eunuch’s question, “who is the prophet speaking about?” From that key question Luke narrates how Philip proclaims to the Ethiopian “the good news about Jesus.” The eunuch is a man ready to hear this message of a despised and rejected Servant. Religiously and socially he is an outsider, excluded from the people of God by his physical condition yet still a worshipper of the God of Israel.

Luke brings us to the climax of his narrative when the eunuch grasps the meaning of Philip’s words and shows he wants to respond by asking to be baptised. Whatever the level of piety the eunuch had reached prior to his encounter with Philip, the implication of his response is that there is still something lacking. In this account, baptism marks the occasion of change for the Ethiopian. Luke does not elaborate on the meaning of baptism as he has already done this earlier in Acts and in his Gospel. In drawing this encounter to a close, Luke provides another clue that a change has taken place in the eunuch. He writes, the eunuch “was going on his way rejoicing” (8:39).

I turn now to consider the conversion of Saul which in so many ways is different from that of the eunuch’s turning to God. Of all the conversions in Acts this one must rank as the most important, seen in that Luke provides three accounts, one which he narrates and two others which are in the form of testimonies by the Lukan Paul.\(^1\) Luke’s account is full of high drama and striking divine intervention unique to Saul’s conversion. After surveying the passage itself and considering some textual matters I look into Luke’s portrayal of human and divine agency in Saul’s turning to God.

4.1 The passage: setting, structure and development

Luke starts his account of the conversion of Saul in dramatic fashion:

“Saul, still breathing murderous threats\(^2\) against the disciples of the

\(^1\) Parsons notes, “It would be difficult to overestimate the significance of the conversion and call of Paul for the narrative of Acts, or indeed, for the course of early Christian history." Parsons, Acts, 135.

\(^2\) ἀπειλῆς καὶ φόνου is taken as a hendiadys.
Lord . . .” (Acts 9:1). In this way Luke reminds the reader of the first time Saul appears in his narrative, namely, at the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 7:58–8:1a). As the mob stoned Stephen Luke records how those accusing Stephen (οἱ μάρτυρες) placed their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. But Saul was doing more than looking after clothes; he approved (συνευδοκῶν) of Stephen’s execution.

Luke’s story of Stephen is then linked to Philip. After Stephen’s death a “great persecution” breaks out against the church in Jerusalem and the Christians there are scattered except for the apostles. Luke tells how Philip, first mentioned along with Stephen in Acts 6:5, goes into Samaria to preach the gospel, with many turning to the Lord. From this ministry among many Philip is then directed by an angel of the Lord to an Ethiopian eunuch, the Treasurer of the court of Queen Candace, returning home after worshipping in Jerusalem. After this encounter in which the Ethiopian is converted Philip heads home to Caesarea and Luke takes up the story of Saul, reminding the reader that Saul was still an enemy of the Jesus movement: “Saul, still breathing murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord . . .” (Acts 9:1).

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3 Gaventa is of the opinion that the “story beginning in 9:1 represents the best of Luke’s narrative art.” Gaventa, *Darkness to Light*, 56.
There are three main characters in Luke’s account of Saul’s conversion: Saul, Jesus, and Ananias. Of the three key conversion accounts examined in this thesis, in fact in the whole of Acts, this is the one in which Luke gives the reader the most information about the person converted. Luke informs the reader about what Saul was like before his conversion, the actual conversion itself and some of the consequential changes in Saul’s, later Paul’s, life. Thus the reader is able to infer something of the nature of the changes that take place in Saul’s life as a result of his experience on the road to Damascus. The other character of significance is Ananias of Damascus who Luke uses to link the human and divine, Saul and Jesus. Luke also notes how Saul, on his journey to Damascus, was accompanied by some people who are simply designated as those travelling with Saul. Their role is minor yet significant.

Saul’s conversion is notable in that Luke relates it three times in some detail on three separate occasions in Acts. By this repetition Luke lets the reader know how important this event is. Without question, the

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4 See Barrett, *Critical Commentary*, 439; Gaventa, *Acts*, 52; Peterson, *Acts*, 298. Repetition to stress importance can also be found in the story of Cornelius’ conversion. However Cornelius’ turning to God is repeated only once (11:4–17) and can be found as part of Luke’s account of this event (10:1–11:18), not separately as with Saul in the form of two defence testimonies (22:1–16; 26:1–18). The conversion of Cornelius and his Gentile friends is briefly alluded to at the Council of Jerusalem (15:8).
story of Saul’s ‘conversion’ is one of the most important events, if not
the most important event that Luke records in Acts.”

In the first account, a narrative (9:1–30), Luke writes about Saul’s
encounter with Jesus and its immediate aftermath. There is a change in
the point of view in the second and third versions (22:1–16; 26:1–18),
which take the form of testimonies or defence speeches by Saul, by then
known as Paul. The roles the characters play in the three accounts vary
according to the situation, for example, Saul and Jesus appear in all
three with variations in what they do and say, but the important link
figure of Ananias is missing from the third version.

Due to Luke’s relatively detailed description of Saul’s conversion
in Acts, as noted above, the reader knows more about the changes that
take place with Saul than with the other conversions covered in this
thesis. Of the three versions, Luke’s narration of Saul’s encounter with
the risen Jesus and Saul’s response (9:1–30) will be the main focus for
this thesis on conversion. Chapters 22 and 26, later reflections by the
Lukan Paul on his conversion, while outside the literary block, 8:4–

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5 Its importance is seen in that Luke gives it “three full treatments, from three slightly
different angles . . .” Witherington, Acts, 303.
6 Parsons argues that with Luke as narrator, “this particular version carries a certain
rhetorical and theological authority.” Parsons, Acts, 126.
7 Within this section attention will be mainly on 9:1–19a, Luke’s record of Saul’s
meeting with Jesus. However reference will be briefly made to 9:19b–30 to consider
some of the changes that Luke writes about in Saul’s life following his meeting with
the risen Jesus.
11:18, being used in this study, will also be referred to in as much as they contribute to a better understanding of Luke’s narrative account of Saul’s conversion in Acts 9.

Drawing upon Paul’s later descriptions of his conversion raises further issues, the most important being how the three passages relate to each other. This is a matter on which “much ink has been spilt,” so to speak, and is, strictly speaking, outside the scope of this thesis. The matter cannot be avoided altogether, however, and comment will be made on some of the major differences between the three accounts as they are encountered. There is a core element to the three accounts, but there are also noticeable differences, for example, what Paul’s travelling companions see and hear. These differences will be briefly commented on below.

Commentators argue that the basic picture of Saul’s conversion is clear while the differences between the three accounts can be explained by Luke’s narrative purposes and the expression of those purposes in different contexts.² Acts 22 and 26 fall within a larger block of material, marked by opposition and trials, relating Paul’s journey from Ephesus

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² “Readers are expected to treat the accounts as accumulative.” Pervo, Acts, 629. The “three narratives are now part of a literary account written up for the benefit of Theophilus, and perhaps others, and so their effect is meant to be collective, cumulative, and supplemental to each other.” Witherington, Acts, 309. See also Keener, Acts, 2:1601.
to Rome via Jerusalem and Caesarea (19:21–28:31). Acts 9 focusses on Saul’s conversion whereas in Paul’s defence speeches in Acts 22 and 26 he not only describes his encounter with Jesus but also his call⁹ to testify to what he had seen and heard (Acts 22:15; 26:16).¹⁰

Within the larger context of the book of Acts there is development in the three conversion accounts in that there is a shift of focus from conversion in Acts 9 to conversion and call in Acts 22 and 26.¹¹ This fits in with Luke’s overall purpose of outlining the growth of the Jesus movement. As regards conversion, there is, differences notwithstanding, a “cumulative effect” on the reader in the portrayal of Saul’s conversion. Information about this conversion is to be found in chapters 22 and 26 which is absent from chapter 9. This underlines the

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¹⁰ Cf. Gaventa, *Darkness to Light*, 65, 76. Gaventa asserts that the differences between the conversion accounts can be traced to “the demands of diverse contexts” (67). See also Witherington, *Acts*, 313. Barrett suggests that the “second and third accounts of Paul’s conversion differ from the first partly through Luke’s liking for variation but partly also through adaptation to the settings in which they are delivered.” Barrett, *Critical Commentary*, 1144.

need to include references to the later chapters in this study of major
conversion narratives in Acts.\textsuperscript{12}

Luke has written a historical narrative in line with the
conventions of his age. For example, speeches are his summaries of
what he believed to have been spoken.

We must realize that ancient historians were not nearly so
concerned as we are today about minute details. Often they were
satisfied with general rather than punctilious accuracy so long as
they presented the key points, thrust, and significance of a speech
or event. It is thus wrong to press Luke to be precise at points
where he intended only to give a summarized and generalized
account.\textsuperscript{13}

Commenting on the differences between the three conversion accounts,
Tannehill remarks that the “addition or subtraction of details causes no
problem so long as the accounts do not conflict. A narrator is free to
decide how much to include. Even slight conflicts of detail are of little
consequence so long as a central affirmation does not rest on them.”\textsuperscript{14}

Scene 1: Jerusalem (9: 1–2). Saul approaches the high priest.

The settings of Luke’s story of Saul’s conversion in Acts 9 begin in
Jerusalem then move to the road to Damascus and finally, to Damascus

\textsuperscript{12} Peterson, \textit{Acts}, 598.
\textsuperscript{13} Witherington, \textit{Acts}, 311; Keener, \textit{Acts}, 2:1600.
\textsuperscript{14} Tannehill, \textit{Acts of the Apostles}, 321.
itself. Luke takes the reader from one scene to the next by means of journeys. It is a story full of drama and irony. It begins with Saul, still breathing “murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord” (9:1) approaching the high priest to ask for letters to the synagogues in Damascus allowing him to bind and take back to Jerusalem any followers of “the Way” that he might find (9:12).15

Scene 2: The road to Damascus (9:3–9). Jesus confronts Saul

In the next scene the reader finds Saul and his companions drawing near to Damascus. Suddenly there is a blinding light and a voice asks, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” The prostrate Saul asks, “Who are you, Lord?” The voice replies, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.” Saul is then instructed to go into Damascus where he will be told what to do. Heightening the tension, Luke adds that those travelling with Saul stood speechless; they had heard a sound but did not see anything. Saul had been on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians. In a fine touch of irony the scene closes with Saul the persecutor blinded and entering Damascus where he stayed for three days without eating or drinking. The intended place of persecution is to become the place of salvation.

Scene 3: In Damascus (9:10–16). Jesus appears to Ananias.

The following scene opens with Ananias, who will form an important link between Saul and Jesus, but when the reader first meets him he is not yet ready for this task. Jesus, who first appears to Saul directly in blinding light, now speaks to Ananias in a vision. He tells Ananias that he is to go to the house of one Judas in Straight Street and ask for Saul of Tarsus. As if to forestall Ananias’ anxiety Jesus tells him that Saul is expecting him because he has had a vision of Ananias himself coming to him and healing him. This is not enough for Ananias. Saul’s reputation and how he had treated Jesus’ followers in Jerusalem had preceded him so Ananias knew why he was coming to Damascus. The Lord continues, telling Ananias that Saul is his chosen vessel to bear his name before Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. In another piece of irony Luke records how the one who persecuted Jesus will now suffer for that name.

Scene 4: In Damascus (9:17–19a). Saul is converted.

Luke, through the character of Ananias, brings us to the denouement of his narrative of Saul’s conversion. Acts 9:17–19a, set in the house of
Judas in Damascus, can be viewed as Luke’s conclusion of his narrative of Saul’s conversion for it is in this scene that the remaining, and needed, elements of his conversion are put in place. Following the instructions of Jesus (9:11–12) Ananias enters and laying his hands on Saul says, “Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus who appeared to you on the road on which you were travelling—sent me.” Ananias tells Saul that he has been sent so that Saul might be healed and filled with the Holy Spirit. Immediately something like scales fall from Saul’s eyes and he sees. One thing yet remained. Getting up Saul was baptized. Luke rounds the narrative off by getting Saul, and the reader, ready for the beginning of Saul’s new life: eating food he (Saul) was strengthened (9:19a).

Luke, as narrator of this passage, has worked from outside the text.\(^{16}\) He has not only given the reader a story (what happened) but also a discourse (how it happened).\(^{17}\)

Luke’s story is about the conversion of Saul. His discourse is the organization of the story into four scenes, Saul and the high priest, Saul’s encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, and then Ananias’ vision of Jesus and Ananias and Saul.


\(^{17}\) On story and discourse see Chatman, Story and Discourse, 123.
Luke has kept his narrative to the bare essentials, including only what he thought central to his purpose. It is not surprising then that there are gaps for the reader to fill in. Filling in gaps engages the reader. For example, the reader has to assume that Saul was indeed filled with the Spirit. Luke does not mention this but it is a reasonable assumption that he was. Some gaps are hard for the (modern) reader to fill in, for example, the nature of the letters Saul sought from the high priest. As characters are the main focus of this narrative-critical approach they will be looked at in detail below.

As observed above, Luke recalls Saul’s conversion on two other occasions in Acts (22:1–21; 26:1–18), in the context of Paul making a defence before two different audiences. In chapter 22, on the steps leading to the Roman garrison in Jerusalem, Paul addresses a mob trying to kill him. In chapter 26, in Caesarea, Paul, a prisoner of the Roman governor Festus, is called to explain himself before the governor and his guests, King Agrippa and his wife Bernice, along with other dignitaries. In chapter 9 Luke narrates Saul’s conversion, whereas in the

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18 This matter is taken up in the sub-section 4.5.2 below, on the “The Holy Spirit.”
19 This is considered in a little more detail below.
20 Referring to Paul’s speech on the steps to the Roman barracks, Gaventa writes, “Paul offers a formal defense speech . . . that conforms to the general pattern of defense speeches in Roman historiography.” Gaventa, Darkness to Light, 68. See also Keener, Acts, 3:3199.
later chapters it is the Lukan Paul who speaks. The different audiences for each speech result in different emphases. In making his defence before both audiences Paul relates his conversion but also tells more about his call. What is relevant for this thesis is that in these two later accounts of Paul’s conversion there is both information that is to be found in chapter 9 as well as new information not included by Luke in his first account. This new information, which is treated below, is important for a fuller understanding of what Luke intended to convey about what happened to Saul on the road to Damascus and is therefore referred to in this study. Even Paul’s more detailed description of his call in chapter 26 is important for the matter of conversion because it contains what could be described as the Lukan understanding of conversion (see the discussion on 26:18 below in sub-section 4.6.1).

4.2 Textual issues

None of the textual issues in 9:1–30 is significant enough to affect the meaning of the passage, although several are of interest in that they evidence attempts to harmonize the passage with the later two accounts

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21 In narrating Paul’s speeches Luke, following the literary customs of his time, has given a summary of what he believed Paul to have said.  
of Paul’s conversion. For example, there is the insertion of σκληρόν σοι πρὸς κέντρα λακτίζειν (“it is hard for you to kick against the goads”) after διώκεις in verse 4 (E, syrh mae) or before ἀλλ’ in verse 6 (629, gig, vgms) in an apparent attempt to harmonize with 26:14 where the text, including this proverb, is well attested. Both of these additions come from the Western or D text tradition. The Textus Receptus has in verses 5b and 6a: σκληρόν σοι πρὸς κέντρα λακτίζειν. τρέμων τε καὶ θαμβῶν εἶπε, Κύριε, τί με θέλεις ποιῆσαι; καὶ ὁ Κύριος πρὸς αὐτόν. “The spurious passage came into the Textus Receptus when Eramus translated it from the Latin Vulgate into Greek and inserted it in his first edition of the Greek New Testament (Basel, 1516).”

In verse 5, A C E 104 h p t add ὁ Ναζωραῖος (the Nazarene), perhaps in an attempt to bring the verse into line with ἐγώ ἐμί Ἰησοῦς ὁ Ναζωραῖος of 22:8. In verse 8 καὶ A C E L Ψ 81. 323. 614. 945. 1175. 1241. 1505. 1739 TR have οὐδένα (”no one”) instead of οὐδὲν (“nothing”) read by P74 καὶ A B 6. Οὐδὲν seems to be slightly better supported in the quality of manuscript evidence as well as contextually

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23 Metzger, Textual Commentary, 317.
24 Metzger, Textual Commentary, 317; Pervo, Acts, 230.
25 Metzger, Textual Commentary, 318. The Authorized Version translates, “it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. And he trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him.”
in that several verses indicate that Saul was totally blind, for example,
9:8c, 12, 18; 22:11, 13.

The text of verse 12 is problematic, even though its intent is clear,
with each of the possibilities having manuscript support. Ἄνδρα [ἐν
όραματι] “a man in a vision” is retained in the text of NA28 and
supported by B C 1175. Ἄνδρα alone (“a man”) has the support of P74 κ
A 81, ἐν ὀραματὶ (“in a vision”) is in Ψ and ἐν ὀραματὶ Ἄνδρα (“in a
vision a man”) is to be found in E L 33. 323. 614. 945. 1241. 1505. 1739. As
can be seen ἐν ὀραματὶ is found in different positions and, after
weighing the various possibilities, Metzger writes, “a majority of the
Committee decided to retain the words in the text enclosed within
square brackets.”26

The expression “his disciples” (οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ) in verse 25
raises problems in that, as Metzger points out, it is unlikely that any
Jewish followers of Jesus in Damascus would be called disciples of
Paul.27 The common Lukan usage of μαθηταὶ in Acts refers to followers

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26 Metzger, Textual Commentary, 319–20. Pervo suggests “the variation in word order
could be an attempt at improvement of the construction.” Pervo, Acts, 230. Haenchen
believes that the word order of Ἄνδρα [ἐν ὀραματὶ] is unusual “though not unheard-of
27 Metzger, Textual Commentary, 321.
of Jesus.\textsuperscript{28} The text is supported by $P^{74} \& A B C 81$. Several manuscripts, including E L Ψ 33 323 and 614, have attempted to alleviate this problem and bring the reading into line with the usage of μαθητής in verses 19 and 26, by inserting αὐτόν instead of αὐτοῦ (“The disciples took him . . .”). Metzger concludes, “The most satisfactory solution appears to be the conjecture that the oldest extant text arose through scribal inadvertence, when an original αὐτόν was taken as αὐτοῦ.”\textsuperscript{29}

4.3 The conversion of Saul

In this narrative-critical study of conversion, character and characterization are important. So it is to the Lukan portrayal of Saul, Jesus, Ananias and, briefly, of those who were travelling with Saul and also the Holy Spirit, that I now turn. As in the chapter on the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, and in the next chapter on Cornelius, the study of the characters is grouped into human agency (Saul, Ananias, the companions) and divine agency (Jesus, the Holy Spirit).

\textsuperscript{28} The only other exception to this is the reference to the disciples of John the Baptist in Acts 19:1.

\textsuperscript{29} Metzger, \textit{Textual Commentary}, 322. See also Barrett, \textit{Critical Commentary}, 466–67.
4.3.1 Saul before his conversion

It will be helpful before looking at Acts 9 to recall briefly Luke’s first mention of Saul, at the execution of Stephen, because this is what the ετε (“still”) of 9:1 suggests the reader to do. Saul’s entrance into the narrative of Acts is, as Pervo describes it, “unobtrusive” but that will quickly change. Barrett considers it “a fine touch of Luke’s dramatic instinct.” At the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7:58b Luke tells how “the witnesses placed their garments at the feet of a young man called Saul” (οἱ μάρτυρες ἀπέθεντο τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτῶν παρὰ τοὺς πόδας νεανίου καλούμενου Σαῦλου). These “witnesses” are most likely Stephen’s accusers to whom Luke refers in 6:11, 13, and who give false testimony against him. Possibly they are those who were stoning Stephen (cf. Deut 17:6, 7).

What is Saul’s part in Stephen’s execution? Was he, as Gaventa suggests, “merely a bystander at whose feet the participants place their garments”? Presumably he was more than this. The fact that witnesses left their garments with Saul indicates they trusted him and possibly knew him from the trial. In other words, perhaps Saul was present at the trial of Stephen. Peterson goes as far as to propose that the laying of

32 Barrett, Acts, 386.
33 Gaventa, Darkness to Light, 55.
garments at the feet of Saul “suggests that he was already the acknowledged leader in the opposition to the early church.” This may be going too far but the narration of Saul’s presence at Stephen’s stoning implies more than an onlooker. Luke’s remark that Saul was “approving” (συνευδοκῶν) of Stephen’s execution, while possible for an onlooker, suggests a deeper involvement. This is supported by Pervo’s comment that the “periphrastic ἦν συνευδοκῶν stresses an abiding conviction.” Luke underscores Saul’s involvement when he later records Paul’s encounter with Jesus in the Jerusalem temple where Paul points out to Jesus that not only was he looking after the garments of those stoning Stephen but was consenting to his death as well (22:20).

Luke describes Saul as νεανίου, “a young man.” Contrary to modern views as to what constitutes a “youth,” in Luke’s time it could be a person aged anywhere between 24 and 40. Keener suggests that the term could refer to someone aged between 21 to 28 or even a person under twenty. Barrett refers to Philo’s De Cherubim 114, which states that the “νεανίας falls between the πρωτογένειος (the youth with the first beard) and the τέλειος ἀνήρ.” Thus while it is hard to determine

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34 Peterson, Acts, 268.
36 BAGD, 667.
38 Barrett, Critical Commentary, 386.
what age Saul was, that Luke felt it important to describe him as υεανίου suggests that what Saul was doing was out of the ordinary for one of his years. 39

Thus Luke introduces the reader to Saul and begins to build a picture of what Saul was like before he went on his journey to Damascus. Saul was not moved by Stephen’s death; to the contrary, as has already been noted, he was convinced it was the right thing to do. 40 But Saul does more than approve of Stephen’s killing. Using vivid, dramatic language, Luke writes, “But Saul was ravaging the church, entering house by house and dragging out both men and women and delivering them into prison.” (8:3) 41 Luke uses strong words to portray the intensity of Saul’s attack on the church (τὴν ἐκκλησίαν). The verb “was ravaging” (ἐλυμαίνετο) conveys the idea of causing harm, injuring, even destroying and is in the imperfect tense, suggesting continued action over time. 42 Saul even enters homes and drags (σύρων;

39 This further suggests that he was at the younger end of the 24 to 40 range. Pervo raises the question as to whether νεανίου may imply “innocence” or “inexperience.” He also asks how come Saul, minding the garments of the “witnesses,” so quickly becomes the leader in the persecution against the church in Jerusalem? He adds, “Ancient readers may have been less perplexed by Paul’s rapid advancement than are contemporaries.” Pervo, Acts, 198, 201.
41 Σαῦλος δὲ ἐλυμαίνετο τὴν ἐκκλησίαν κατὰ τοὺς οἴκους εἰσπορευόμενος, σύρων τε ἄνδρας καὶ γυναῖκας παρεδίδου εἰς φυλακήν.
42 BDAG 604. In the LXX the word is used to portray mistreatment or physical harm, for example, 2 Chr 16:10; Pss 79:13 (or 14); Sir 28:23; Amos 1:11; Isa 65:25; Jer 28:2;
cf. 4 Macc 6:1) away men and women and has them put in prison.\textsuperscript{43} The context and present tense of σύρων suggests action over some time.

To emphasise this aggressive pursuit of Christians by Saul, Luke mentions it two more times: first, when he records how, on the steps to the Roman barracks, Paul tells the crowd that in Jerusalem he bound those of the Way and committed them to prison (22:4); and again a little later when Jesus appears to Paul in the temple (22:19). In this encounter in the Temple Paul also mentions, in addition to imprisonment, that he was “beating” (δέρων) those who believed in Jesus.\textsuperscript{44} This is the only occasion in the recounting of the life of the persecutor that beating is mentioned. It is new information. In the Lukan literature the verb δέρω is found in Luke 12:47; 20:10; Acts 5:40; 16:37, and all refer to physical beatings. It is not clear that Saul himself physically beat Christians. Perhaps it was his companions who did so when they entered the synagogue or maybe it refers to something that happened before, during or after Christians appeared before the Sanhedrin. The reader cannot be sure.

\textsuperscript{31:18. The translation of this clause in BDAG (604) seems innocuous, “Saul was making it hard for the (Christian) community.”}

\textsuperscript{43} Pervo comments, “The harsh verbs (λυμαίνω, “wreak havoc,” “attempt to obliterate,” and σύρω, “drag”), topped off by his willingness to arrest women as well as men attest to Saul’s extreme ferocity.” Pervo, Acts, 201.

\textsuperscript{44} Cf. BDAG, 218, 9, originally, “skin, flay.” In the NT and other Christian literature it carries the idea of beat, whip.
To the Jerusalem mob Paul also states that “this Way I persecuted to the death” (ὁς ταύτην τὴν ὀδὸν ἐδίωξα ἄχρι θανάτου) (22:4). This is also new information, not found in chapter 9, which Gaventa believes intensifies the nature of Saul’s persecution. “Readers learn for the first time that the object of these arrests was execution of the believers . . . Zeal this man did not lack.” What does “to the death” (ἄχρι θανάτου) imply? Did it mean personally killing Christians? Or did it mean bringing them to a trial by the Sanhedrin that resulted in their execution? I favour the latter view that, for Luke, Paul did not actually kill Christians but his actions did result in their death. This is probably the intent of 22:5, and the expression “in order that they might be punished” (ἵνα τιμωρηθῶσιν) with the use of the passive suggests others were doing the punishing. In 22:19 Paul declares to Jesus, “I was imprisoning and beating” the believers (ἐγὼ ἠμὴν φυλακίζων καὶ δένων) but he does not mention putting them to death.

In Paul’s speech to Festus and Agrippa he states about the followers of Jesus, “when they were about to be killed I cast the vote

45 Cf BDAG, 160. The NRSV has “up to the point of death” while the ESV reads “to the death” retaining the ambiguity of the expression.
46 Gaventa, From Darkness to Light, 68.
47 Pervo, Acts, 563.
Acts 26:10 raises several interesting issues. Was Paul a member of the Sanhedrin, did the Council have the right to carry out capital punishment and how many Christians were put to death? Further, the grammar is confusing. The participle ἀναιρουμένων is in the present tense and implies contemporaneous action. Thus the verse should read, “while they were being put to death.” However it would seem to be too late to cast a vote while the Christians were actually being killed. Barrett agrees but adds, “but one knows what Luke means.”

BDAG provides the gloss, “be condemned to death,” which is followed by the NRSV.

Literally 26:10c translates as “I cast a pebble against” (κατήνεγκα ψήφον) and is a reference to a method of voting using black and white pebbles, black for a conviction and white for acquittal. In the situation to which Paul was referring, to “cast a pebble against” was, in effect, a vote for the death penalty. It is possible that Luke intends the reader to link Paul’s words with his earlier claim to the Jerusalem mob that he

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48 This translation follows Zerwick, Grammatical Analysis, 444, in translating the present participle, ἀναιρουμένων, “when they were about to be killed.” Cf the NRSV translation of this verse.
49 Barrett, Critical Commentary, 1115.
50 BDAG, 64.
51 BDAG, 529.
52 BDAG, 1098.
53 Barrett, Critical Commentary, 1155. The problem of whether the Sanhedrin actually had the authority to inflict capital punishment (cf. John 18:31) is not dealt with in this thesis nor is the implication of verse 10, that many Christians were executed when Luke mentions only Stephen.
pursued the followers of the Way “to the death” (22:4). It also provides a possible Lukan insight into Saul’s “murderous threats” mentioned in 9:1. Commentators are divided as to the implications of this expression. Rapske, for example, believes that this is not a figure of speech because of the juridical context of Paul’s situation.\textsuperscript{54} He also argues that “on this evidence it appears that Paul was a full member of the Sanhedrin.”\textsuperscript{55} Marshall acknowledges that a literal reading of the verse implies that Paul was a member of the Sanhedrin but suggests that Paul’s statement is “somewhat rhetorical.”\textsuperscript{56} Keener is more forthright and argues that Paul’s claim, “I cast a vote against,” is to be taken metaphorically, expressing approval of the decision of the Council to execute the Christians.\textsuperscript{57} He was too young, at the time of Stephen’s execution, to hold a position on the Sanhedrin and he was from a Hellenist family.\textsuperscript{58} Luke gives further insight into the relentless intensity of Paul the persecutor when he records Paul’s testimony before Festus and Agrippa: “And in every synagogue often punishing them, trying to force them to blaspheme, boiling over with rage against them, I was


\textsuperscript{56} Marshall, \textit{Acts: Introduction}, 393.

\textsuperscript{57} Keener, \textit{Acts}, 4:3507 footnotes 1287–1289.

\textsuperscript{58} Keener, \textit{Acts}, 4:3507. Most “of the elders of the Sanhedrin came from aristocratic Judean (and very often priestly) families.” See also Witherington, \textit{Acts}, 742; Peterson, \textit{Acts}, 663.
persecuting them even to the outside cities” (26:11). Luke builds intensity layer by layer. Paul, in his unrelenting pursuit of those who believed in Jesus, travels to all the synagogues, one after another (κατὰ πᾶσας τὰς συναγωγὰς). This is the first time that Luke has told the reader about this. Paul punishes those he finds “many times” (πολλάκις) (cf. 22:5). He goes further by trying to get Christians to blaspheme (ἡνάγκαζον βλασφημεῖν). Ἱνάγκαζον is in the imperfect tense, and can be translated as an iterative imperfect, “I used to force them to blaspheme.” Barrett points out that we cannot assume that Paul was never successful in this assault. But ἡνάγκαζον can also be translated as a conative imperfect, “I tried to force them to blaspheme.” This most likely refers to the Lukan Paul’s attempts to get followers of the Way to deny Jesus in some fashion.

The narrator continues to build intensity. Paul tells his hearers in Caesarea that he was “boiling over with rage” (περισσῶς τε

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50 καὶ κατὰ πᾶσας τὰς συναγωγὰς πολλάκις τιμωρῶν αὐτούς ἡνάγκαζον βλασφημεῖν περισσῶς τε ἐμμαινόμενος αὐτοῖς ἐδίωκον ἕως καὶ εἰς τὰς ἔξω πόλεις.
60 Travelling from one synagogue to another is another indication of Paul’s “zeal for Pharisaic Judaism.” Peterson, Acts, 664.
61 See Wallace, Greek Grammar, 546.
62 Barrett, Critical Commentary, 1156. Barrett argues that this imperfect is also repetitive.
63 Wallace, Greek Grammar, 1150. This is the way in which the NRSV and ESV translate this imperfect. See also BDAG 60; Peterson, Acts, 664.
64 Marshall, Acts: Introduction, 393, argues that Paul was trying to get Christians to “curse Christ or disown their faith.” See also Peterson, Acts, 664. Bruce suggests that it meant, in this case, to call Jesus “accursed.” “Paul did not want to make martyrs out of the Christians so he tried to get them to ‘blaspheme.’” F. F. Bruce, The Book of the Acts (Revised Edition; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 464–5.
ἐμμαίνωμενος). BDAG notes that περισσῶς is an “adverbial marker of exceptionally high degree on a scale of intensity” and provides the gloss, “exceedingly, beyond measure.” Εμμαίνωμενος occurs only here in the New Testament. Josephus uses it to describe the rage of Herod. So angry was Paul that he pursued the Christians (literally), “to the outside cities” (εἰς τὰς ἔξω πόλεις). This is most likely a reference to cities outside Judea and it is the first time Luke has indicated that Paul hunted Christians in more than one city outside of Judea. It is possible that Saul actually visited other cities but Luke mentions (in any detail) only one of them. It is possible that, for rhetorical effect, Paul before his audience in Caesarea uses a categorical plural.

Luke characterizes the young Saul as a vigorous and determined persecutor of the church. But Luke does not tell us why. Jesus’s question to Saul, “why do you persecute me?” (9:4) goes unanswered although it does, according to Parsons, add “to the characterization of Saul as the

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65 The NRSV has “furiously enraged.” Zerwick and Grosvenor suggest, “be furious with . . . boiling over with rage against, my fury against them knowing no bounds.” Zerwick, Grammatical Analysis, 444.
66 BDAG, 806.
68 Bruce, Book of the Acts, 465.
70 The categorical plural is also known as a generalizing plural. See Wallace, Greek Grammar, 403–6. Wallace, 404, states that “the force of this usage is to focus more on the action than the actor.” (Wallace’s emphasis).
archenemy of the church”⁷¹. To Festus and Agrippa the Lukan Paul says, “Now I thought to myself it was necessary to do many things against the name of Jesus the Nazarene” (26:9), but he gives no reason why.

There is evidence of conflict among Jews in the first century C.E. that at times led to violence.⁷² Josephus writes of tension between the Pharisees and Sadducees and with the Essenes who were barred from making offerings in the temple.⁷³ While it is less likely that the Romans would have permitted widespread, systematic persecution it is not improbable that zealous Jews may have been able to carry out targeted campaigns against members of small groups.⁷⁵

It is possible that the young Saul saw in the Jesus movement a potential threat to Judaism. There had been movements critical of Judaism who had not been persecuted so why should he be concerned about a movement that taught that a dead teacher was the Messiah?⁷⁶ It could have been because this “messiah” was different. He had been

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⁷¹ Parsons, Acts, 127.
⁷² Ἐγὼ μὲν οὖν ἐδοξά ἐμαυτῷ πρὸς τὸ ὄνομα Ἰησοῦ τοῦ Ναζωραίου δεῖν πολλὰ ἐναντία πρᾶξαι. The emphatic use of the ἐγὼ and δεῖν, “to be necessary,” are Lukan indications of the mindset of Saul.
⁷⁶ Arlund J. Hultgren, “Paul’s pre-Christian persecutions of the church: their purpose, locale and nature,” JBL 95 (1976), 103.
executed by crucifixion (Luke 23:33; Acts 2:23, 36b; 4:10) and hence was under a curse (Deut 21:23). It was claimed that he was now seated at God’s right hand and had inaugurated a new age (Acts 1:9–11; 2:32–33, 36; 3:20–21). Further, belief in this “messiah” was the key to being related to the God of Israel (Acts 2:38; 9:42; 10:43; 11:17). “The rise of a sect within Judaism which confessed Jesus as Messiah and which carried on zealous missionary activities was naturally to be opposed as a form of national apostasy.”

This new movement did not call Jews back to a reformed Judaism but “forward to something new.” Saul would have seen it as a “profound perversion of Judaism.”

Luke narrates how Saul came to the high priest and asked from him letters for the synagogues in Damascus so that if he found any followers of the Way, men or women, he might bind them and bring them back to Jerusalem (9:1c, 2, 14). That the narrator, Luke, mentions Saul had access to the high priest gives the reader an insight into Luke’s conception of Saul’s status with the Jewish elite of Jerusalem. Rapske observes that Saul “is familiar with, and has access to, the highest levels

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77 Hultgren, “Paul’s pre-Christian persecutions,” 103.
80 προσελθὼν τῷ ἁρχιερεῖ ἤτησατο παρ᾿ αὐτοῦ ἐπιστολὰς εἰς Δαμασκὸν πρός τὰς συναγωγὰς, ὡς εὰν τινας εὕρη τῆς ὁδοῦ ὄντας, ἀνδρὰς τε καὶ γυναῖκας, δεδεμένοις ἀγάγη εἰς Ἰερουσαλήμ (9:1c, 2; see also 9:14; 22:5; 26:12).
of Jewish officialdom.” 82 This is underscored by Paul’s speech in Caesarea where he tells Festus and Agrippa that he went to Damascus with the authority (ἐξουσίας) and commission (ἐπιτροπής) of the high priests. Ἐπιτροπής is only found here in the New Testament and has the idea of an “authorization to carry out an assignment, a commission, full power.” 83

The reader is also to note that it is Saul who takes the initiative in pursuing Christians. Pervo, in commenting on 26:9–11, argues that Luke presents Paul “as an authorized agent of the Jewish leadership . . . rather than portraying him as an opponent of the Jesus movement who acted on his own initiative.” 84 This is partly true in that Saul did not act without the approval of the Sanhedrin, but Luke portrays Saul as taking the initiative in pursuing the followers of Jesus. Luke narrates how it was Saul who came to the high priest and asked from him (ἵπτησατο παρ᾿ αὐτοῦ) letters for the synagogues in Damascus (9:2). 85 The Greek of 26:9 stresses Paul’s personal determination to oppose the Jesus

82 Rapske, Book of Acts, 100. See also Peterson (commenting on 22:5), Acts, 598.
84 Pervo, Acts, 631–32.
85 Did Luke get it wrong in implying that the high priest had authority to order the seizure of people in Damascus and their deportation to Jerusalem? Pervo, Acts, 240, regards this and Saul’s access to the high priest, as “Lucan fictions.” This is a difficult question to resolve. While there is some evidence of the Romans giving authority to a Jewish envoy, Numenius, to extradite “scoundrels” from Egypt to the high priest in Jerusalem (1 Macc 15:15), there is little else to be found to support Luke’s claim. Possibly the synagogues in Damascus, while autonomous, “would have acted out of respect for the high priest.” Keener, Acts, 2:1625. Cf. Barrett, Critical Commentary, 446.
movement. He also tells Festus and Agrippa that he was impelled by a necessity (δὲ ἐν) to hunt down those who believed in Jesus (26:9). Of the three accounts of Saul’s conversion, it is in the first account that Saul’s initiative is most clearly seen. It is more muted in Paul’s speeches to the Jerusalem mob and the dignitaries at Caesarea, most likely because of the different contexts (see 22:5; 26:10).

Luke does not tell us why Saul chose Damascus nor how Christianity came to this city. Damascus lay about 215 km north-west of Jerusalem and would have taken six days to get there travelling by foot.\textsuperscript{86} Pliny described it as a “large and prosperous commercial city, a member of the Decapolis league.”\textsuperscript{87} The Jewish population would have been significant, a fact suggested by Josephus’ reference to the slaughter of 10,500 Jews (men?) in Damascus during the time of the first Jewish-Roman war (66–73 C.E.).\textsuperscript{88}

In considering the way in which Luke has characterized Saul as one who has gone to the high priest for authorization to arrest Christians in Damascus, it is necessary to look further at his two defence speeches in chapters 22 and 26. It is pertinent to reflect on Luke’s

\begin{itemize}
  \item Keener, \textit{Acts}, 2:1628.
  \item Pliny, \textit{Nat. Hist.}, vol. II, 277.
  \item Josephus, \textit{War}, 2.561. In 7.368 Josephus mentions 18,000 killed, a number that included “wives and families.”
\end{itemize}
purpose, as Peterson puts it: “this description of Paul’s former life and
calendar is meant to highlight the transformation he goes on to
describe.”

Paul begins his defence before the Jerusalem mob, “I am a Jew,
born in Tarsus of Cilicia . . . “ (ἐγώ εἰμι Ἰουδαῖος, γεγεννημένος ἐν Ταρσῷ τῆς Κιλικίας) (22:3). As he had earlier reminded the Roman
tribune, Tarsus was not an insignificant city and he was a citizen of that
city (21:39). Tarsus was the capital of Cilicia, prosperous through trade
and known for its political and intellectual attainments. Raspke notes
that “Tarsus was in its intellectual prime about the time of the apostle
Paul.” An inscription read, “Tarsus, the first and greatest and most
beautiful metropolis.” To be a citizen of such a city was, for Paul, no
small thing. “To claim citizenship of a renowned city such as Tarsus was
an indication of personal standing and prestige.”

But was Paul really a citizen of this prominent Hellenistic city?

Has Luke got it wrong here? Pervo believes this is the case. “It was

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89 Peterson, Acts, 596.
90 Rapske, Book of Acts, 74. Porter observes, Tarsus was “a city known as a center of
learning especially in the areas of philosophy and rhetoric (Strabo 14.5.3), and one with
a fully-developed Greco-Roman educational system.” Stanley Porter, Paul in Acts
(Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999), 104.
91 Orientis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae (OGIS) 578.7f. Cited 11 December 2015. Online
92 John Clayton Lentz, Jr., Luke’s Portrait of Paul (SNTSMS 77; Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 1993), 43.
highly improbable that Paul possessed the wealth and prestige to have
gained Tarsian citizenship. Acts 21:39 stems, not from a source but from
the author’s imagination.”  

93 There is not a lot known about Jews in Tarsus. On the available evidence, which is mainly centred on
Alexandria, there are indications of individual Jews being granted
citizenship but not Jews as a group.  

94 Citizenship of Tarsus could be purchased and perhaps Paul’s father purchased it, which would imply
he was well-off. If his father was a citizen presumably Paul would be also.  

95 But would a strict Jew want to be citizen because of its obligations
to the city’s patron god or gods?  

96 Possibly not but there is evidence of Jews holding Greek citizenship without apostatizing.  

97 The issue is hard to decide one way or the other. Barrett thinks the term “citizen” may have been used by Luke in a loose sense meaning “a resident in, rather than enrolled citizen of, Tarsus.”  

98 Others such as Keener and Rapske believe, while there are uncertainties, the Lukan Paul’s claim is credible.  

99 Even if the matter cannot be resolved, in narrative terms we

93 Pervo, Acts, 555.
96 Lentz, Portrait, 43.
98 Barrett, Critical Commentary, 1026.
can note Luke’s portrayal of Paul as a person of significant standing and prestige.

On the steps to the Roman barracks Paul tells the crowd that he “had been brought up in this city and had been instructed by Gamaliel in accordance with a strict interpretation of the Jews’ ancestral law (ἀνατεθραμμένος δὲ ἐν τῇ πόλει ταύτη παρὰ τούς πόδας Γαμαλιήλ πεπαιδευμένος κατὰ ἀκριβείαν τοῦ πατρῆς νόμου) (22:3). Later Paul tells Festus and Agrippa in Caesarea that “according to the strictest party of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee” (κατὰ τὴν ἀκριβεστάτην αἰσθήσει τῆς ἡμετέρας θρησκείας ἔζησα Φαρισαῖος) (26:5). To what city was Paul referring when he says that he “had been brought up in this city,” Tarsus or Jerusalem? The NRSV translation of this verse implies that while Paul was born in Tarsus, he was brought up in Jerusalem. Most of the commentators consulted agree with this. While Porter notes that the grammar is ambiguous, it does favour, in my opinion, the meaning that Paul was brought up in Tarsus but received his instruction in the Mosaic law in Jerusalem. An issue is the antecedent of “this” in the phrase “in this city” (ἐν τῇ πόλει ταύτῃ). Grammatically,

100 “Brought up” translates ἀνατεθραμμένος which according to BDAG, 74, refers to “mental and spiritual nurture” and can be translated, “bring up, rear, train.”
102 Porter, Paul, 104.
the obvious candidate is Ταρσῷ. To follow the NRSV and the
commentators mentioned above, one must treat “this” (ταύτῃ) as an
adjective rather than as a near demonstrative pronoun.103 Is the matter
important? It has to do with trying to determine the influences on the
young Saul. Were they solely Pharisaic or were there some Hellenistic
influences? While Saul may not have gone very far in a Hellenistic
education in Tarsus, he most likely received a “primary” education
there which would have ensured a fluency in Greek and a little
exposure to Hellenistic thought forms.104 Rapske argues that Hellenistic
influences might be found in Jerusalem if Paul was influenced in his
education there by Diaspora synagogues (6:9). It was possible to gain a
knowledge of Greek in Jerusalem which would not have been confined
to the elites.105

What is more significant for this study is Paul’s religious
instruction, which he says was by Gamaliel106 in accordance with a strict

103 If it is treated as an adjective Paul is, in effect, saying: “I was brought up in this city
(of Jerusalem).”
105 Rapske, Book of Acts, 93.
106 Also known as Gamaliel the Elder or Gamaliel 1. He was the son or possibly
Books, 2005), 94. Gamaliel had a grandson named Gamaliel, referred to as Gamaliel II.
interpretation of the Jew’s ancestral law. Paul says he had been “instructed” or “educated” (πεπαιδευμένος) by Gamaliel. Gamaliel makes only one appearance in Acts, earlier in the Lukan narrative. The Sanhedrin, increasingly anxious about the growing popularity in Jerusalem of the Jesus movement, was trying to contain it (see 5:17–42). In the scene when the apostles, after their miraculous escape from custody, are brought before the Sanhedrin Luke reveals that Gamaliel is also a member of that body. In the tense atmosphere he counsels caution in how the Council responds to the apostles. Luke describes him as a Pharisee, a teacher of the Law and held in honour by all the people (Φαρισαῖος ὄνοματι Γαμαλιήλ, νομοδιδάσκαλος τίμιος παντὶ τῷ λαῷ) (5:34). Rapske contends that Gamaliel was “arguably the most significant and influential Pharisaic educator in early 1st century AD [sic].” By including Paul’s claim to have been educated by such an honoured and prominent teacher as Gamaliel, Luke gives the reader an insight into Paul’s intellectual ability and attainments. Keener notes that “Paul’s education was indeed far beyond the average . . .” In a

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108 The verb παιδεύω is found only in one other place in Acts, in 7:22, where it refers to Moses being instructed in “all the wisdom of Egypt.”
reference to 21:40 (“he addressed them in the Hebrew dialect”) Keener suggests by revealing that Paul’s Greek impressed the tribune and his Aramaic impressed the crowd “Luke emphasizes Paul’s intellectual acumen and linguistic versatility.”

But is Luke, in trying to impress the reader with Paul’s advanced education, saying too much when he associates Paul with the illustrious Gamaliel? Is Luke attempting to impress the reader with Paul’s association with Gamaliel but also indicating that Paul was no slavish follower of this great teacher and was prepared to follow his own convictions? For example, Paul did not follow his teacher’s advice in dealing with the followers of Jesus (cf. 5:34). Further, the Lukan Paul claims that his education was “according to the strictest party of our religion” (26:5). However, Gamaliel was known as a “moderate” and in the tradition of the school of Hillel. The school of Hillel was thought to be not as strict as the school of Shammai. Marshall rejects the idea that

\[111\] Keener, Acts, 3:3190.
\[112\] Pervo, Acts, 563.
\[113\] Marshall, Acts: Introduction, 354. Bruce, Book of the Acts, 114–115, argues that the contention that Gamaliel belonged to the school of Hillel arose from a later tradition. Earlier traditions “which reflect some direct memory of Gamaliel and his teaching do not associate him with the school of Hillel; they speak rather of others as belonging to the school of Gamaliel, as though he founded a school of his own.” Because so little is known about Gamaliel, it is hard to decide on this matter. Even if it were true, the Lukan picture of Gamaliel as a “moderate” is at least supported by 5:34.
\[114\] Keener, Acts, 3:3216. In the first century C.E. there were two main schools: “those of Hillel and Shammai, leading rabbis who flourished in the later part of Herod’s reign.” Both schools were influential towards the end of the first century B.C.E. and the early
Paul was not a student of Gamaliel, arguing that he handles the Scriptures in “the rabbinic manner, but more precisely in the manner of the school of Hillel.”\textsuperscript{115} Possibly Keener is right when he suggests that Paul was a student of Gamaliel who respected but did not agree with him.\textsuperscript{116} Thus Luke gives the reader further insight into the character of Paul as a person of a great independent intellect.

The Lukan Paul tells the Jerusalem mob that his education was according to the strict understanding of the Law (22:3). Further, to Festus and Agrippa, in Caesarea, Paul declares, “according to the strictest party of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee” (26:5).\textsuperscript{117} Regarding the latter, this is the second time that Paul has declared himself to be a Pharisee.\textsuperscript{118} On the meaning of “strict” (ἀκριβείαν) Peterson comments that it “refers to the punctilious performance of the law by the Pharisaic

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\textsuperscript{116} Keener, Acts, 3:3216.

\textsuperscript{117} ἀκριβείαν in 22:3 and ἀκριβεστάτην in 26:5 convey the ideas of exactness, strictness. Cf. BDAG 39. Cf. Josephus’ similar use ἀκριβεία in reference to the Pharisees. The Pharisees “have the reputation of being unrivalled experts in their country’s laws” (τῆς δὲ φαρισαίων αἱρέσεως, οἱ περὶ τὰ πάτρια νόμιμα δοκοῦσιν τῶν ἄλλων ἀκριβείᾳ διαφερέσθαι). Life, 191. Cf. War, 2.162.

\textsuperscript{118} In 23:6 Paul states, “I (ἐγὼ, emphatic) am (ἐμι, present tense) a Pharisee” while in 26:5 he claims “I lived (ἐζήσα, aorist tense) as a Pharisee”. It could show a change in attitude towards his former life. More likely the difference is due to Paul striving for different rhetorical effects before different audiences.
school. By implication, Paul excelled in the study and practice of Pharisaic teaching.”

Luke provides no explanation as to who the Pharisees are. They were known for their commitment to the careful observance of the Law. The name “Pharisee,” in the Aramaic and Hebrew form, carries the idea of “separated ones” although it is not clear what they were separated from. Probably this is an indication of “a general tendency to keep aloof from contact with those who were careless about ceremonial purity.” It may have also referred to “their withdrawal from association with the Hasmonaeans during the rule of John Hyrcanus (134–104 B.C.E.). They were the spiritual heirs of the hāsîḏîm (the Hasideans, Ἀσιδαῖοι, of 1 Macc. 2:42; 7:13; 2 Macc. 14:6), the pious members of the community who in Hellenistic times gave themselves to the study, exposition, and practice of the written and oral law and opposed the popular Hellenizing tendencies.”

Of the three conversions in this study, Saul’s is the one for which Luke gives the reader the most information about what he was like before his conversion. Luke portrays Saul as one who pursued

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120 Bruce, Book of the Acts, 114 footnote 51.
121 Bruce, Book of the Acts, 114 footnote 51.
Christians relentlessly and mercilessly, which in turn implies a person of strong self-belief, strong will, and strong determination. Peterson writes about the “cruel thoroughness” of Paul’s persecution.\textsuperscript{122} He is an enemy of the Jesus movement.\textsuperscript{123} The Lukan Paul is intelligent, energetic and well educated in a strict understanding of the Mosaic Law. He is portrayed as a zealous member of the strictest version of the Jewish religion, a Pharisee who saw in the Jesus movement a threat to his religion. But all this was about to change.

\textbf{4.3.2 The road to Damascus: Saul encounters Jesus}

The scene moves from Jerusalem to the road leading to Damascus. Saul has his commission from the high priest, and he and his party are drawing near to their destination. Suddenly a light from heaven flashes around Saul and he falls to the ground and hears a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Saul asks, “Who are you, Lord?” and the answer comes, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting” (9:3–5).

In the first scene in Jerusalem Luke builds tension as he describes Saul’s seeking out the high priest for authority to hunt down any of the Way and bring them back to Jerusalem. The tension continues into the

\textsuperscript{122} Peterson, \textit{Acts}, 35.
\textsuperscript{123} Cf. Gaventa, \textit{Darkness to Light}, 56.
next scene, which although briefly described, is full of drama and stands in the Jewish tradition of manifestations of the divine to humans. Near to Damascus the persecutor is dramatically confronted by Jesus. Saul falls to the ground most likely in dread and reverence. Keener notes that “prostration, often in terror, was a standard response” to manifestations of God in the Hebrew Scriptures, for example, Ezek 1:28; Dan 8:17; 2 Macc 3:27. Also common in encounters between God and people is the double vocative, “Saul, Saul,” for example, Gen 22:11; 46:2; Exod 3:4; 1 Sam 3:4. The double naming would also secure Saul’s attention. So also would the confronting accusation, “why are you persecuting me?”

The narrative reaches a critical point with Saul’s question, “Who are you, Lord?” Luke narrates how Saul initially is unsure of who confronts him. Who is this one that has confronted the enemy of the church? Saul’s question “enhances the drama of the conversation.”

The reader is drawn in, awaiting the answer. But the question itself raises

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124 While Luke shows Hellenistic influences such as classical Greek usage (26:2, 4) in his writing, his understanding of the sovereignty of God, for example, indicates that the major influence on Luke as a writer is Judaistic.
125 In the popular imagination Saul is knocked off his horse by God. For example, see the paintings by Caravaggio on Saul’s conversion. While it is possible that Saul was riding a horse it is not mentioned. Verse 7, which has Saul’s companions standing, implies that the journey was on foot. Cf. Pervo, Acts, 241.
129 Gaventa, Darkness to Light, 57.
further questions. Did Saul have any idea of who was confronting him? The text suggests not, but then how is “Lord” (κύριε) to be understood? Pervo believes the question is not Lucan as the typical response of a Jew to an epiphany is “Here am I, Lord” or something similar, as for example, Ananias’ response (9:10).\textsuperscript{130} Gaventa suggests “sir” as a possibility.\textsuperscript{131} Barrett argues that κύριε in context requires something stronger. “Saul is aware that he is confronted by a superhuman being.”\textsuperscript{132} “Sir” is not strong enough for this situation, especially for a strict Pharisee, and I would argue that Saul, while not aware of the actual identity of the speaker, is aware that he confronts divinity in some form.\textsuperscript{133}

The reader waits for an answer. “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.” Saul’s question leads to the discovery that he is confronted by Jesus, once dead but now alive.\textsuperscript{134} Luke uses two personal pronouns, “I” (ἐγώ) and “you” (σύ) for emphasis and contrast, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.”\textsuperscript{135} This emphasis stresses the “distance between Jesus and Saul.”\textsuperscript{136} This is high drama. The persecutor is directly

\textsuperscript{130} Pervo, Acts, 241.
\textsuperscript{131} Gaventa, Darkness to Light, 58.
\textsuperscript{133} See Keener, Acts, 2:1637; Peterson, Acts, 304.
\textsuperscript{134} Barrett, Critical Commentary, 450.
\textsuperscript{135} Cf. Keener, Acts, 2:1637.
\textsuperscript{136} Gaventa, Darkness to Light, 58.
confronted by the real object of his persecution. For further dramatic impact, in answering Saul’s question, Jesus repeats the accusation against Saul.\textsuperscript{137} The Lukan Paul will later reveal his inner conviction that he had to strenuously oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth, which he did by attacking his followers (26:9–11). Saul’s view of Jesus and his followers is about to be overturned.\textsuperscript{138}

Verse 6 represents the turning point in the narrative of Saul’s conversion. Jesus tells the prostrate Saul, “but (ἀλλ′) arise and go into the city and you will be told (λαληθήσεται) what it is that you have (δεῖ) to do.” Gaventa argues that in “a single word, but, stands the disjuncture between Saul the enemy and the new figure who emerges from this event.”\textsuperscript{139} The narrator skillfully positions this “but” to follow immediately on from “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting” (9:5). But if a turning point in the narration of Saul’s conversion has been reached, the narrator still maintains suspense in verse 6.\textsuperscript{140} All that the reader learns is that Saul has to go into the city where he will be told what he

\textsuperscript{137} Keener,\textit{ Acts}, 2:1637, sees in the repetition of διώκεις, an example of \textquotedblleft rhetorical antistrophe.	extquotedblright\ Antistrophe or epiphora “denotes the repetition of a word or words at the end of two or more sequential verse lines, sentences, or strophes.” Richard N. Soulen and R. Kendall Soulen,\textit{ Handbook of Biblical Criticism} (4th ed.; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 61, see \textquotedblleft Epiphora.\textquotedblright

\textsuperscript{138} Peterson,\textit{ Acts}, 304; Gaventa,\textit{ Darkness to Light}, 58.

\textsuperscript{139} Gaventa,\textit{ Darkness to Light}, 58.

\textsuperscript{140} Pervo,\textit{ Acts}, 241, observes that the \textquotedblleft literary function of v. 6 is to raise suspense.\textquotedblright
has to do. The use by Luke of the passive, λαλήθησεται, “introduces a note of mystery” and δεὶ implies “divine purpose.”\(^{141}\)

The narrator turns briefly to Saul’s companions (9:7, see below) then takes up the account of Saul again. Saul got up from the ground and opening his eyes could see nothing.\(^{142}\) Most likely Saul’s blindness was physical, a result of the dazzling light (see 26:13) that shone around him.\(^{143}\) This is preferable to Dunn’s view that the cause was psychological, the sheer and overwhelming shock of the encounter with the risen Jesus, whose followers Saul was persecuting.\(^{144}\) But the realization of what he has done comes after Saul’s exposure to the light.

The narrator simply states that Saul was blinded, leaving the reader to fill in the gap as to its reason. Was Saul’s blinding a divine punishment, as suggested by Peterson and Pervo? Peterson compares Saul’s blinding to that of Elymas (13:11), which was clearly a punishment. “Saul is humbled until he realized his need to be delivered from physical and spiritual darkness by the Lord’s gracious

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\(^{142}\) “No one” (οὐδένα) is found in א C E L Ψ 81. 323. 614. 945. 1175. 1241. 1505. 1739 TR. In the light of 9:9 οὐδὲν is to be preferred.

\(^{143}\) Barrett, *Critical Commentary*, 452.

intervention.”¹⁴⁵ Barrett rejects the idea of punishment and argues, following Conzelmann, that blindness is “not a punishment but a mark of the powerlessness of the hitherto powerful persecutor.”¹⁴⁶ I would argue that probably both factors are at work here. Saul is being punished for his persecution of Jesus by his attacks on the followers of Jesus, a punishment that reduces the strong and aggressive persecutor to abject weakness.¹⁴⁷ This Saul, approaching Damascus to round up those of the Way and lead them back to Jerusalem, now enters the city led by the hand.¹⁴⁸ But does Luke intend the reader to pick up on an interplay between physical and spiritual sight? Parsons thinks there is. He writes, “Luke uses the blindness/sight, darkness/light metaphor to make the point that Saul, thought physically blind, has his eyes opened spiritually to ‘see the Lord’ (in contrast to his companions).”¹⁴⁹ Is there also a note of irony at work here? Saul is now physically blind, symbolic

¹⁴⁷ On being struck blind as punishment in the Hebrew Scriptures (and LXX) see Gen 19:11; 2 Kgs 6:18 (4 Kgdms 6:18); Zeph 1:17.
¹⁴⁸ Pervo, Acts, 242. Barrett, Critical Commentary, 452, picking up on the passive form of ἠγέρθη (literally “was raised”) suggests that Saul could not even get up from the ground without the help of others. “Overall, Saul’s encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus leaves him passive, powerless, and dependent on others.” Brittany E. Wilson, “The Blinding of Paul and the Power of God: Masculinity, Sight, and Self-Control in Acts 9,” JBL 133 (2014), 374.
¹⁴⁹ Parsons, Acts, 128.
of his current spiritual condition. But soon he will “see” physically and spiritually (cf. 9:17; 22:14; 26:16, 18).

4.3.3 In Damascus: Saul is healed, baptised and filled with the Spirit

The scene now shifts to Damascus (9:8c, 9) where the rest of the story of Saul’s conversion will be played out. Luke tells how Saul spent three days in Damascus, still blind, and not eating or drinking (9:9). The reader learns a little later that he is staying in the house of a certain Judas. Who Judas is the narrator does not say, nor why Saul was taken there. Further, the reader is left to surmise why Saul was not eating and drinking. Is he overcome with grief and mourning over his attacks on Christians? Is it a time of repentance?¹⁵¹ In Peterson’s view, “Saul may have been overcome by penitence as well as the shock of his experience.”¹⁵² Haenchen goes further and states that this is a penance, which “demonstrates his inward transformation.”¹⁵³ However, as Gaventa points out, the narrator does not state this “and the evidence elsewhere in Luke-Acts does not require that conclusion (cf. for example Luke 4:2; 7:33; Acts 23:12).”¹⁵⁴ Nor can we say at this point that Saul’s “inward transformation” is complete. Most likely Saul is in a profound

¹⁵⁰ On spiritual blindness see also Acts 28:27; cf. Isa 6:9, 10.
¹⁵¹ See Keener, Acts, 2:1643.
¹⁵² Peterson, Acts, 305.
¹⁵⁴ Gaventa, Darkness to Light, 60.
state of shock and grief.\textsuperscript{155} The three days reflects something of the profound impact the encounter had on Saul. All that he believed and stood for had been shaken to the core.\textsuperscript{156}

Luke now introduces the other major human agent in his narrative of Saul’s conversion, Ananias, who is to perform a key role in Saul’s conversion. “Now there was a certain disciple in Damascus by the name of Ananias” (9:10).\textsuperscript{157} Jesus appears to him in a vision and directs him to seek out Saul in the house of Judas in the street called Straight.\textsuperscript{158} Then Jesus adds that “he is praying,” something Jesus draws Ananias’ attention to by the addition of “behold” (ἰδοὺ). So in addition to fasting Saul is praying, which Peterson notes, “suggests that he [Saul] has been humbled and is seeking God’s help.”\textsuperscript{159} Further, Jesus tells Ananias that Saul has had his own vision of Ananias coming to him, so he is prepared for his visit and assured thereby that God is continuing to work in his life.\textsuperscript{160}

Thus Luke has prepared the reader for the denouement in his narrative of Saul’s conversion. It is a scene in which the reader will be

\textsuperscript{156} Dunn, \textit{Baptism}, 75, 76.
\textsuperscript{157} ἤν δὲ τις μαθητὴς. Τις with a noun is characteristic of the Lukan style of introducing new characters in his narrative. For example 3:2; 5:1, 34; 8:9; 9:36; 10:1; 14:8.
\textsuperscript{158} Ananias is treated in more detail below.
\textsuperscript{159} Peterson, \textit{Acts}, 307.
\textsuperscript{160} Peterson, \textit{Acts}, 307.
required to fill in some gaps. Ananias, the reluctant envoy of Jesus, approaches Saul, places his hands upon him (while still praying?) and begins, “Brother Saul.” Gaventa observes, “With his first words to Saul, Ananias enacts the changed identity of Saul”\textsuperscript{161} and Barrett notes that Ananias recognizes Saul as a “fellow Christian.”\textsuperscript{162} He tells Saul that he has been sent by Jesus that he might be healed and filled with the Holy Spirit. Immediately something like scales (\textit{λεπίδες}) falls from Saul’s eyes and he regains his sight.\textsuperscript{163} “Like” (\textit{ὡς}) implies that “scales” is used as a simile.\textsuperscript{164} But is the reader expected to go further and understand that as Saul not only sees physically he also “sees” spiritually?\textsuperscript{165} This is possible if the reader makes the link between Saul’s healing and the filling of the Holy Spirit. On this matter of conversion as seeing spiritually see the Lukan Jesus’ commission to Paul in Acts 26:18.\textsuperscript{166}

Ananias had come to Saul not only that he might be healed but also that he would be filled with the Holy Spirit. This is not mentioned by Jesus in his directions to Ananias nor is there any indication of Saul

\textsuperscript{161} Gaventa, \textit{Darkness to Light}, 63.
\textsuperscript{162} Barrett, \textit{Critical Commentary}, 457.
\textsuperscript{163} \textit{λεπίδες}, “flattened plate covering the skin of marine creatures,” BDAG 592. Barrett, \textit{Critical Commentary}, 458, points out that the word has a range of meanings including the shell of an egg and the skin of an onion. Pervo, \textit{Acts}, 244, regards this as a “novelistic detail.”
\textsuperscript{164} Cf. Galen \textit{Corpus Medicorum Graecorum} V 4, 1, 1 p. 77, 3 οίον λεπίς απέπτυτε “something like a scale fell off.” Taken from Barrett, \textit{Critical Commentary}, 458.
\textsuperscript{165} Cf. Pervo, \textit{Acts}, 244 footnote 96.
\textsuperscript{166} This is elaborated on below.
actually receiving the Spirit. As Barrett observes, “no visible or audible phenomena mark the giving of the Spirit.”167 Is the reader to understand that in light of what Luke has written up to this point about the work of the Spirit in conversion (for example, 2:38; 8:15, 17) there is no need to mention it explicitly here? Or is Ananias reflecting the understanding of the early church about the Spirit and conversion? While it is not explicitly mentioned there is no reason to suppose that Saul was not filled with the Spirit. Ananias tells Saul that Jesus has sent him that he, Saul, might be healed and be filled with the Holy Spirit. The reader sees that he is healed and can safely fill in the gap, that is, Saul was also filled with the Spirit.168

Following his healing Saul is baptized (ἐβαπτίσθη).169 This is something that Luke does not record Ananias receiving any instruction about from Jesus nor does Luke mention in this narrative that Ananias directed Saul to be baptized. The reader is left to infer that this was the standard practice of the Jesus movement (cf. 2: 38, 42; 8:12, 36, 37; 10:37, 47, 48; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 19:3) so that Ananias did not need to be directed to

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167 Barrett, Critical Commentary, 457.
168 See Gaventa, Darkness to Light, 64, 94 footnote 23.
169 C2 E L as well as “many minuscules” add “immediately” (παραχρῆμα). Metzger, Textual Commentary, 320. Perhaps this reflects their understanding of early Christian practice.
carry out. Barrett suggests that the baptism was “almost certainly”
carried out by Ananias.\textsuperscript{170}

Luke, as noted above, narrates two other accounts of Saul’s (now, Paul’s) conversion, in the form of personal testimonies as part of Paul’s defence (ἀπολογίας 22:1; 26:1, 2), before the Jerusalem mob on the steps
to the Roman barracks, and then, later, before Festus and Agrippa and other leaders in Caesarea. There are similarities between the three accounts. In all three while drawing near to Damascus, a bright light flashes around Saul and he hears the voice accusing him of persecuting Jesus. Saul is further directed as to what he is to do next. But there are differences between the accounts and it is to these that I now turn to see what the Lukan Paul, later in his life, recalls of his conversion.\textsuperscript{171}

In the second account Paul provides a few more details of the circumstances of his conversion not found in the first account. The reader learns (22:6) that it was around midday (περὶ μεσημβρίαν), as he was drawing close to Damascus, that the light from heaven flashed around Paul. Further, it was a light of great intensity (ἱκανόν).\textsuperscript{172} In his testimony before Festus and Agrippa, Paul will further add that the

\textsuperscript{170} Barrett, Critical Commentary, 458.
\textsuperscript{171} The differences between the three conversion accounts are not only considered in this section but also in the other sections of this chapter.
\textsuperscript{172} BDAG, 472, “a very bright light.” Note also 22:11.
heavenly light was “brighter than the sun” (26:13, λαμπρότητα τοῦ ἡλίου). What is also of interest is that in the three conversion narratives examined in this study, the middle of the day (μεσημβρίαν) is significant. It is when two of the conversions take place while in the third, it is an important time in the account of the conversion (8:26 and 10:9). That, in Paul’s case, the light from heaven occurs at midday, when the natural light is at its brightest, adds to the reader’s appreciation of its power.

The Lukan Paul is more responsive in this account than in the first. In response to Jesus’ revelation, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting” (22:10), Paul asks, “What will I do, Lord?” Jesus’ response is a little more specific than in the former account, “Arise, go into Damascus and there you will be told about all the things I have appointed you to do.” Paul also provides a little more information about the cause of his blindness and how he got into Damascus: “as I could not see because of the brightness (δόξης) of that light, being led by the hand by those who were with me, I came into Damascus” (22:11).

Paul does not mention Jesus’ appearance to Ananias but briefly states that Ananias visited and healed him.\(^{176}\) New information is given to the reader when Ananias tells Paul that God has chosen him “to know his will and to see the righteous one and to hear his voice” and that “he will be a witness for him to all people of what he had seen and heard” (22:14, 15). Then Ananias adds, “Why delay? Arise and be baptized and wash away your sins calling upon his name” (22:16).\(^{177}\) In the earlier conversion account baptism receives only brief mention but in this second account the reader is told more by Paul. Here baptism is associated with the washing away of sins.\(^{178}\)

This is the only place in Luke-Acts, or the New Testament for that matter, in which the image of the washing away of sins is associated with baptism.\(^{179}\) Some passages in the Hebrew Scriptures associate the forgiveness of sins with the idea of cleansing, for example, Lev 14:19, 31; 16:30; Num 8:21 Pss 19:12; 51:2. There are a number of scriptures that

\(^{176}\) Saul’s healing is handled in “a very cursory fashion in order to concentrate on Paul’s calling,” Gaventa, *Darkness to Light*, 74.

\(^{177}\) καὶ νῦν τί μέλλεις; ἀναστὰς βάπτισαι καὶ ἀπόλουσαι τὰς ἁμαρτίας σου ἐπικαλεσάμενος τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ.

\(^{178}\) Based upon the middle voice of the imperative, “be baptized” (βάπτισαι), which only occurs here and at Mark 7:4, Keener, *Acts* 3: 3235, suggests that Paul’s baptism may have been self-administered under supervision. See also Pervo, *Acts*, 565. The use of the passive voice in 9:18 (ἐβαπτίσθη) suggests that Saul was baptized by someone else, most likely Ananias. Peterson, *Acts*, 603 footnote 46, prefers the idea that “Paul gets himself baptized” rather than baptizes himself.

\(^{179}\) There are a few passages in the New Testament which link salvation and washing, e.g., 1 Cor 6:11; Titus 3:5; cf. Eph 5:26; 2 Pet 1:9.
associate washing, including ritual washing, with cleansing, for example, Lev 13:6, 34, 14:8, 9; 15:8, 13; 17:15; 19:19; 31:24; 2 Kgs 5:10, Pss 51:7 (50:9 LXX); 73:13 (72:13 LXX); Isa 1:16; Jer 4:14. While a direct source cannot be established for the idea of the washing away of sins, the link between washing and cleansing might be said to be a part of the religious tradition that Luke could have drawn upon.

The connection between baptism and the removal of sins (and therefore conversion) would take the reader back to the Day of Pentecost. To the anxious crowds on that Day the apostle Peter declares, “Repent and be baptized each one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.”(2:38). An earlier connection between baptism and dealing with sin can be found in Luke’s reference to the preaching of John the Baptist as a preaching of “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (κηρύσσων βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιών)(Luke 3:3).

But Paul goes further and links the outward act of baptism with “calling upon his name” (ἐπικαλεσάμενος τὸ ὅνομα αὐτοῦ). Pervo

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180 See also the discussion on washings in Judaism and in the life of the Essenes and Qumran in chapter 2.
181 To “call upon the name” would suggest an attitude of commitment to and dependence upon Jesus. According to Barrett, Critical Commentary, 1043, “calling upon his name” is a way of interpreting baptism in/into the name of Jesus Christ. “The name is not a magical instrument effecting supernatural results; the name is invoked, that is, it signifies faith and obedience directed towards Christ.” Cf. 2:28; 10:48.
suggest that “grammatical logic” points to God as the “referent” of “his name,” but the meaning of verses 15 and 16 and the proximity of references to Jesus with “his” (αὐτοῦ) imply that “Jesus” is the name to be called upon.\textsuperscript{182} In two other places Luke describes members of the Jesus movement as those who “call upon the name” (9:14, 21). The context is revealing regarding Paul’s conversion for this is the only context in which we find this phrase. In 9:14 and 21 the expression is used to describe those whom Saul is persecuting. In Acts 22:16 Ananias directs Paul to “be baptized and wash away your sins calling upon his name” (my emphasis). Now Paul is to join those whom he had come to persecute! Perhaps Luke intends the reader to see here a fulfilment of 2:21, “and everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.”

By the time the reader has reached Paul’s defence speech before Festus and Agrippa (26:1–18), the conversion of Paul is summarized to give more attention to the commissioning of Paul.\textsuperscript{183} The core elements of his conversion remain but some details have been omitted and others added. The speech reflects the Caesarean context and Luke has shaped

\textsuperscript{182} Pervo, \textit{Acts}, 565.

\textsuperscript{183} The “narrative of the encounter (with Jesus) moves quickly over its initial aspects and concentrates on Paul’s call (16b–18).” Gaventa, \textit{Darkness to Light}, 82. Witherington, \textit{Acts}, 312, comments that the fact that Paul’s commission comes, in this account, directly from Jesus and not Ananias, is another example of Luke’s “literary license.”
his work to maintain the interest of his readers.\footnote{Barrett, *Critical Commentary*, 1159.} There is no reference to Ananias or to Paul’s blindness or to his being led into Damascus.

Paul’s call is not given by Jesus through Ananias (22:14, 15) but by Jesus directly to Paul on the road to Damascus. As in his speech in Jerusalem (22:1–21), Paul mentions that the encounter with Jesus took place in the middle of the day (26:13; 22:6) and also refers to the intensity of the light, which in this speech was “brighter than the sun” (26:13; cf. 22:6).\footnote{There is no reference to the time of day or the intensity of the light in the first account of Paul’s conversion.}

Paul explicitly states that on encountering the light, both he and his companions fell down.\footnote{After “when we had all fallen to the ground” some Western manuscripts add “because of fear, only I heard . . .” Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 438.} In the earlier accounts only Paul falls to the ground although it cannot be ruled out that others did not as well. The reader also learns that Jesus spoke to him in “the Hebrew dialect.”\footnote{It is suggested that Paul possibly adds this linguistic comment to explain the use of “the barbarous name ‘Saul’” before his sophisticated audience. See Barrett, *Critical Commentary*, 1157–58; cf. Peterson, *Acts*, 665.}

Of interest is the Lukan Paul’s addition to what Jesus said to him on the road to Damascus. After “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Jesus says, “it is hard for you to kick against the goads” (σκληρόν σοι πρὸς κέντρα λακτίζειν).\footnote{A goad is “a sharp pointed stick” used to guide animals. Peterson, *Acts*, 665.} Although attempts have been made to harmonize the earlier accounts with this third account of Paul’s conversion by inserting the proverb in them, for example, at 9:4 or 6 and
22:7, the best textual evidence places this saying only at 26:14.\textsuperscript{189} It is a Greek proverb found in Euripides’ \textit{Bacchae} (794–95).\textsuperscript{190} The meaning of the proverb is that it is futile to resist the divine will; it is not a reference to a guilty conscience.\textsuperscript{191} Peterson sees the saying referring to the “intense struggle Paul experienced before turning to Christ” and the power of the Lord to draw Paul to himself.\textsuperscript{192} It is unlikely that these words were actually spoken by Jesus; the saying is an example of “Luke’s literary freedom.”\textsuperscript{193} It is more likely to be the Lukan Paul’s later reflection on his life leading up to his conversion. That it is found in the third conversion account is an indication that this account “has been adapted for the scene” for it would have “little meaning in Acts 22.”\textsuperscript{194} 

\textsuperscript{189} Cf. Metzger, \textit{Textual Commentary}, 318, 430.

\textsuperscript{190} Euripides, \textit{Bacchae}, 394–395. Pervo, \textit{Acts}, 631, regards the Euripides quote as the most important in this context but the proverb can also be found, for example, in Aeschylus, \textit{Agamemnon}, (vol. 2 of \textit{Aeschylus}), 1624; and Terence, \textit{Phormio}, (vol. 2 of Terence), 15. Cf. also Peterson, \textit{Acts}, 665–66, footnote 38; Barrett, \textit{Critical Commentary}, 1158; Keener, \textit{Acts}, 4:3514–15. Busch argues that this quote along, with the quote from Aratus’ \textit{Phaenomena} (Acts 17:28), suggests, \textit{inter alia}, that Luke was influenced by Greek classical literature. It lies outside the purpose of this thesis to pursue this claim, a project made difficult by the lack of “direct quotations and discrete verbal allusions” from ancient Greek authors in Acts. Austin Busch, “New Testament Narrative and Greco-Roman Literature,” in \textit{The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative} (ed. Danna Nolan Fewell; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 65, 66.

\textsuperscript{191} Lentz, \textit{Portrait}, 84; Peterson, \textit{Acts}, 666; Barrett, \textit{Critical Commentary}, 1158.

\textsuperscript{192} Peterson, \textit{Acts}, 665–6.

\textsuperscript{193} Witherington, \textit{Acts}, 311. Cf. Keener, \textit{Acts}, 4:3514. Against this view Peterson, \textit{Acts}, 665–66 footnote 38, suggests, “There is no reason why a common proverbial expression could not have been employed by the risen Lord as a way of describing the resistance Paul had been offering to the divine will.”

\textsuperscript{194} Gaventa, \textit{Darkness to Light}, 83.
4.3.4 *The dramatic change in Saul*

As pointed out in chapter one of this study of conversion, the matter of character and characterization is central. Important also to this matter of character, particularly as the thesis is about conversion, is that of the change a character undergoes. How does the character develop? Using Bennema’s categorization of change along a continuum of development allows for four broad possibilities: “no development” or “little development” to “some development” and “much development.”

How does this apply to Saul?

I noted above that, of all the conversions recorded in Acts, the conversion of Saul is the one about which Luke gives us the most information regarding his character and the changes due to his conversion. In this chapter I have carefully considered what Luke tells the reader about Saul before his conversion. Luke characterizes Saul as a persecutor of the Jesus movement and in persecuting the followers of Jesus he was, in effect, persecuting Jesus. To put it another way, he was an enemy of the early church and regarded as such by those belonging to the Way (9:13, 14, 21). But Saul was converted in a dramatic fashion and Luke informs the reader about some of the changes that followed, mainly by showing what Saul did following on from his conversion.

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have briefly considered these changes as well as making some references to Paul’s speeches before the Jerusalem crowd (22:1–24a) and Festus and Agrippa (26:1–23). In passing it is not being glib to suggest that a large part of the remainder of Acts is Luke’s portrayal of the far-reaching nature and impact of Saul’s conversion.

Luke narrates how, after his baptism, Saul was “with the disciples in Damascus some days” (Ἐγένετο δὲ μετὰ τῶν ἐν Δαμασκῷ μαθητῶν ἡμέρας τινὰς) (9:19b). Luke in Acts uses “disciple” (μαθητής) almost universally to refer to a follower of Jesus. Saul joined the Jesus movement, the movement he was only a little while before persecuting. Later, Luke recounts how Saul attempted (ἐπείραζεν) to join the disciples in Jerusalem (9:26). The Jerusalem church was fearful (ἐφοβοῦντο) of Saul and did not believe he was a “disciple.” Saul’s previous reputation as an enemy would take time to dispel. It took the good offices of Barnabas to act as a link between Saul and the apostles. He steps in and personally brings Saul to them,

196 The only exceptions are references to the disciples of Saul (9:25) and the mention of the disciples of John the Baptist (19:1). In these instances μαθηταί could be understood to refer to followers of Saul or John respectively. The textual difficulties associated with 9:25 and the use of ὁι μαθηταί αὐτοῦ have been treated above in 4.2, Textual Issues.

197 Peterson, Acts, 300.

198 The use of the imperfect tense suggests several attempts.

199 The use of the imperfect tense here implies that this fear lasted for some time.

200 Luke does not say why Barnabas (a.k.a. “Joseph) was chosen. Presumably he was selected because he was well-known and respected by the apostles (4:36, 37).
explaining how Saul had seen the Lord and the Lord had spoken to him and also how, later in Damascus, Saul had spoken out “boldly (ἐπαρρησιάσατο) in the name of the Lord.”

(ἐπαρρησιάσατο) in Acts “always denotes bold, open Christian proclamation” (cf. 13:46; 14:3; 18:26; 19:8; 26:26). The narrator uses this testimonial by Barnabas to the leaders of the church in Jerusalem to underscore the reality and significance of Saul’s conversion to the reader. Barnabas’ intercession on Saul’s behalf is successful and the narrator records how Saul was active in Jerusalem arguing with the Hellenists (9:29).

To join the followers of Jesus now that he was converted would seem to be a natural next step for Saul, whatever reservations he or the Damascus Christians may have had. But the narrator adds that he “immediately” (εὐθέως) began to preach in the synagogues that “Jesus is the Son of God” (ἐκήρυσσεν τὸν Ἰησοῦν ὅτι οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ) (9:20). Further Saul “confounded” (συνέχυνεν) the Jews in

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201 I think this is the best understanding of 9:27, that is, it was Barnabas who spoke to the apostles. However it is possible to read it as though Saul explains to the apostles what had happened to him. This reading reduces the role of Barnabas. It is also possible to understand that it is Saul who speaks to Jesus and not the other way around. I regard this as less likely. Cf. Barrett, Critical Commentary, 469.

202 Barrett, Critical Commentary, 469.


204 This is the only place in Acts where the title “Son of God” (υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ) is to be found. Cf. Pervo, Acts, 246 footnote 4. Only here does Luke elaborate on what is meant by giving the content of Saul’s preaching. In other places the object of the verb
Damascus by demonstrating that Jesus is the Messiah (συμβιβάζων ὅτι οὐτός ἐστιν ὁ χριστός) (9:22). This is a great theological leap for Saul the Pharisee and a Lukan indication of the profound nature of the change that Saul had undergone.206

It is relevant to note in 9:19b–30 how Luke first reprises Saul’s former life as an enemy of the church, narrating the astonished testimonies of those Jews in the synagogues of Damascus who heard him (9:21).207 Then later, in Jerusalem, through Barnabas, Saul’s encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus and his preaching in that city is recapitulated (9:27). In this way the narrator reminds the reader of the profound changes that have taken place in Saul. Further, it is surely not without irony that Luke brings his narration of Saul and his conversion and its immediate aftermath (9:1–30) to an end by narrating how the converted persecutor, after two threats on his life, returns to Tarsus (9:30) where he was born. The stage is being set for Saul to become Paul.

“preach” (κηρύσσω) is simply stated as “the Christ” (8:5), or “baptism” (10:37), “Moses” 15:21, “Jesus” (19:13) or “the kingdom” (20:25; 28:31). Barrett, Critical Commentary, 465, does not believe that the expression “son of God” here has any metaphysical implications but rather is “a correlate of Messiahship” (9: 22).

205 A participle of means, from συμβιβάζω, “to present a logical conclusion, demonstrate.” BDAG, 957. See also Wallace, Greek Grammar, 629.

206 Luke does not relate how Saul learnt this knowledge. Pervo, Acts, 246, notes, “those wishing to discover how Saul learned these beliefs may take refuge in v.19b.”

207 The use of the pluperfect “had come” (ἐληλύθει) indicates “a state of things that has now ceased to be.” Barrett, Critical Commentary, 464.
In Paul’s defence before the Jerusalem mob (22:1–21) he does not
tell what happened in Damascus after he was healed and given his
commission, as it would not have been relevant to the situation. Rather
he tells how he returned to Jerusalem and while in the temple praying
Jesus appeared to him and warned him to flee Jerusalem and go to the
Gentiles. Of significance is his confession to Jesus, “I was imprisoning
and beating in every synagogue those who believed in you” (ἐγὼ ἦμην
φυλακίζων καὶ δέων κατὰ τὰς συναγωγὰς τοὺς πιστεύοντας ἐπὶ σέ) (22:19). Noteworthy is the emphatic use of pronouns and the description
of Christians. The use of “I” (ἐγὼ) and “you” (σέ) adds emphasis, firstly
to Paul and his actions, and then to Jesus, in whom Christians had
believed. This is the only place in Acts where Luke uses the article and
the participle “believing” (πιστεύοντας) with the object of belief, “in
you” (ἐπὶ σέ), that is, Jesus.\footnote{The article with the participle only, that is οἱ πιστεύοντες, occurs nine times in Acts.} The use of the Greek pronouns “I” and
“you” suggests a poignancy to Paul’s words by emphasizing his
involvement and who, ultimately, he was attacking. “Lord I (ἐγὼ) was
imprisoning those who believed in YOU (σέ)?

In his defence at Caesarea the reader is not told a lot more that is
new after what happened to Paul following his conversion. He declares
to Agrippa, “I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision” (26:19), and
then briefly recounts his preaching in Damascus, Jerusalem and the region of Judah. What is new here to the reader is the scope of his preaching. Not only in Damascus and Jerusalem (as in chapter 9) but Paul also preached in the region of Judah. Not only to Jews (as in chapter 9) but also to Gentiles (26:20). Possibly because of his Caesarean audience he does not mention that he was proclaiming Jesus to be the Son of God, the Messiah (9:20, 22). Rather he tells his hearers that he preached that Jews and Gentiles should repent and turn to God and do deeds worthy of repentance (26:20). He adds that his testimony that “the Messiah should suffer and be the first to rise from the dead and be a light to the Gentiles” is supported by the prophets and Moses (26:22, 23). Further, the Lukan Paul declares that he has testified to “small and great” (26:22).

In sum, using Bennema’s classification, Luke characterizes Saul as undergoing “much development” (which seems a gross understatement!) as a result of his conversion. As Luke presents it, Saul’s life has turned completely around and the Jesus whom he was persecuting becomes that one he proclaims. What is more, he proclaims Jesus with that same single-minded, vigorous, fierce determination with which he had formerly persecuted those who belonged to the Way. The
strong beliefs that he once held have been turned upside down, as it were, and now he proclaims that this Jesus, whom he would have regarded as a threat to his Pharisaic beliefs, is the Messiah, the son of God.

4.4 Human involvement

4.4.1 Saul's travelling companions

At the end of his account of Saul’s encounter with Jesus Luke, in a further development of the narrative, writes that there are some others travelling with Saul. This is new information for the reader as to that point only one person is mentioned journeying to Damascus, but who these others are and how many of them there are is not mentioned. Brief accounts of their involvement are found in only two of the three accounts of Saul’s conversion, 9:7–8 and 22:9, 11. Their role, although anonymous, brief and controversial, is significant in the story of Saul’s conversion. As to who they are Rapske suggests that those accompanying Saul were “probably Temple police assigned by the high priests and Sanhedrin not only to lend dignity to Paul’s mission but
physically to enforce the punitive or custodial actions which Paul might call for.”

Their role is that of a foil to Saul. Their anonymity allows the reader’s attention to remain focused on Saul. Luke records how, upon the appearance of the dazzling light, they “stood (ἐστήκεισαν) speechless (ἐνεοῦ), hearing the voice (φωνῆς) but seeing (θεωροῦντες) no one” (9:7). Their presence gives an objectivity to what is happening and supports the idea that it is something more than a vision to an individual, that it is external to Saul. Gaventa argues that they “underscore the importance of the encounter because their own experience is so different.”

The way in which they participate emphasises that Saul, and only Saul, participates in the revelatory experience. Luke does this in a couple of ways. When he writes that Saul’s companions see no one he uses the participle form of the verb θεωρῶ which he often, but not

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210 Nguyen, *Peter and Cornelius*, 172, defines a “foil” as “a simple character whose role is to enhance the quality of another character in the story.”
211 This suggests that they were walking.
exclusively, uses with regard to seeing a “manifestation of God’s activity” (for example, Luke 10:18; 24:37, 39; Acts 7:56; 10:11). “That the companions do not see may imply that they are unmoved by what has occurred.” Luke also emphasises that only Saul perceives both the light (φῶς) and the voice (φωνή). Meyer argues that participation in the Christophany is indicated by experiencing both light and voice. To miss out on one or both indicates that, in this instance, Saul’s companions did not participate in the Christophany.

Exactly what Saul’s companions see and hear has been the matter of no little debate. In Luke’s narration in chapter 9 those with Saul hear the voice but see no one (9:7), while in his defence before the Jerusalem mob Paul states that those with him saw the light but did not hear the voice (22:9). Peterson attempts to reconcile the two accounts by arguing that both stress that Paul’s companions “shared to some extent in the experience” but did not “enjoy the full revelation granted to Paul.” They heard the sound (φωνή) (9:7) but did not understand the voice.

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216 Gaventa, *Darkness to Light*, 60.
(φωνή) of the one speaking (22:9).\textsuperscript{219} They saw the light “but did not see the risen Jesus,” as Paul did.\textsuperscript{220} While φωνή can be translated as “sound” or “voice,” the reason Peterson gives for favouring the former in 9:7 is not a compelling one.\textsuperscript{221} Further, it is not clear from Acts that Saul saw the risen Lord Jesus or only a bright light.\textsuperscript{222} Attempts to reconcile the accounts of what Saul’s companions saw and heard on the basis of grammar have not been successful.\textsuperscript{223}

The contradictions remain. Some commentators have regarded them as an acceptable part of ancient historiography. Keener suggests that the “contradictions” left by Luke were not important to him. This “suggests that he did not view variation on such details as problematic, in contrast to some of his modern commentators. It would be anachronistic to read modern historiographic definitions of errors into

\textsuperscript{219} See the NIV translation of 9:7 and 22:9.
\textsuperscript{220} Peterson, \textit{Acts}, 599–600.
\textsuperscript{221} Both the NRSV and ESV translate φωνή as “voice.” Peterson, \textit{Acts}, 599–60, argues that because τῆς φωνῆς is used “absolutely” it may take the meaning “sound.” However it is clear from the context that the φωνή of 9:7 is the same as that of 9:4. The noun is also used “absolutely” to refer to human voices, e.g., Luke 4:33; Acts 7:57.
\textsuperscript{222} See Gaventa, \textit{Darkness to Light}, 59.
\textsuperscript{223} Attention has been drawn to the use of the genitive (φωνῆς) after the participle (ἀκούοντες) in 9:7 while the accusative form (φωνήν) is found in 22:9 as the object of the verb (ἠκούσαν). The implication is, it is argued, the grammar here suggests a different kind of hearing in 22:9 from that of 9:7. In 9:7 the companions hear a sound while in 22:9 they understand the voice. But this explanation founders on 9:4 and its equivalent in 22:7 where it is clear that Paul understands the voice yet different cases are used for the same kind of hearing (i.e. with understanding), the accusative in 9:4 and the genitive in 22:6. See Barrett, \textit{Critical Commentary}, 451–2, 1038–39; Peterson, \textit{Acts}, 600 footnote 32. Peterson concludes the footnote with the comment: “in short, we cannot say that the difference between 9:7 and 22:9 can be explained simply in terms of the use of different cases after the verb.”
Luke’s ancient historiography, which allowed greater flexibility on
minor details than we do.” Others have emphasised the literary point
that Luke was trying to make. Gaventa admits that the contradictions
are not removed but suggests that “Luke has two somewhat different
points to make with the same story and the minor [sic] contradictions
that arise are a result of those different points.” Barrett believes we
have to accept the contradictions as a part of the literary purpose of
Luke. “We must conclude that Luke was writing up a familiar story
freshly, and in each case included what seemed to him to be impressive
details in the most impressive way he could think of.”

One other literary function that Saul’s companions perform is to
link his encounter on the road to his experiences in Damascus. Luke
narrates how Saul was blinded by the light (9:8; cf. 22:11). So how was
he then to obey the command of Jesus to go into the city (9:8)? Luke tells
how he was led by the hand into Damascus. Paul’s later description is a
little clearer on how Paul obeyed Jesus’ direction. It is, perhaps, also a
touch more dramatic. “As I was not able to see because of the brightness
of that light, those who were with me led me by the hand and I came

225 Gaventa, Darkness to Light, 72.
226 Barrett, Critical Commentary, 1039.
into Damascus” (22:11). The stage is set for Paul’s meeting with Ananias.

4.4.2 Human involvement: Ananias

Ananias is the other major human agent in the story of Saul’s conversion. He is the link between the divine agent and Saul. As Luke narrates it in chapter 9, Jesus completes the work he began with Saul on the road to Damascus through Ananias. Ananias is the means by which God’s will for Saul is made known to Saul and Saul is healed from his blindness, filled with the Spirit and baptized as well as (presumably) introduced to the Christians in Damascus.\(^\text{227}\) In Paul’s subsequent recounting of his conversion, because of the demands of different audiences, the role of Ananias is first summarized so attention can be paid to Paul’s call (22:12–16) and then, later, it is not mentioned at all (26:1–18).

Luke has brought the reader to Damascus with the blind Saul in the house of one Judas where he has been for three days not eating or drinking (9:9). The reader wonders, “what next?” It is then that Ananias appears. Luke describes him as a “disciple” (μαθητής), a Jewish

\(^{227}\) Peterson, Acts, 306.
Christian living in Damascus. He is a moral man whose good character is widely recognized. Paul later describes him as “devout according to the (Jewish) law and thought highly of by the Jews living in Damascus (εὐλαβὴς κατὰ τὸν νόμον, μαρτυρούμενος ὑπὸ πάντων τῶν κατοικούντων Ἰουδαίων) (22:12). This is a description particularly suited to Paul’s angry Jewish audience in Jerusalem. How the Jews of Damascus felt about Ananias after he became a disciple of Jesus the reader can only guess. So, it is with another fine touch of irony that Luke positions Ananias, one of those Saul was coming to Damascus to persecute, to be the human means by which Saul’s life will be transformed.

Jesus appears to Ananias in a vision in which he addresses Ananias by name (9:10). Ananias responds, “Behold I, Lord” (ἰδοὺ ἐγώ, κύριε.) (9:10). This is the only place in Luke-Acts where both “behold” (ἰδοenance) and “I” (ἐγώ) are found together in a response to God or Jesus. It is, however, a common response of people to God in the

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228 On his being a Jewish Christian, note his words, “the God of our fathers,” recalled by Paul (22:14). Regarding Ananias as a resident of Damascus, see Barrett, Critical Commentary, 453; Peterson, Acts, 306.
229 Cf. Gaventa, Darkness to Light, 61.
230 Addressing recipients by name in divine manifestations is not uncommon in Acts, for example, in addition to 9:10, see 9:4; 10:3, 13.
LXX, for example, Gen 22:1, 11; Exod 3:13; 6:30; Isa 6:8. Unlike Saul, Ananias recognizes that the one speaking to him is Jesus because in responding to Jesus he refers to “your saints” (9:13) and “those who call on your name” (9:14).

In the vision Jesus tells Ananias to go the house of one Judas on Straight Street to look for a man called Saul from Tarsus who is praying (9:11). Most likely “Straight Street was the large east-west street, then colonnaded with large porches on each end” and what remains of it today in the Old City in Damascus is called Derb el-Mustaqim. Jesus further informs Ananias that Saul has had a vision as well in which he sees a man named Ananias come to him and place his hands upon him that he might regain his sight (9:12).

In 9:11 Luke, for the first time, mentions that Saul is from Tarsus. But why it is mentioned here is initially puzzling. As far as Ananias is concerned in this scene the important thing would appear to be that Saul has come from Jerusalem. Pervo regards the reference as gratuitous, something that the readers of Acts would not have expected. He believes that it reflects a Lukan source with the

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231 It is widespread in the LXX where it is also used by God in addressing people (e.g., Jer 28:1; 33:14; Ezek 13:20) and by people in addressing other people (Gen 48:21; Exod 17:9).
233 Pervo, Acts, 243.
implication that he has not edited it consistently. Barrett agrees that it reflects a source but considers that it is not a gratuitous inclusion at this point because Luke will later take up the matter of Paul’s birth in this important city for example, 21:39; 22:3. Further, Luke concludes his narrative of Paul’s conversion in chapter nine by including his escape from Damascus and return to Tarsus, his place of birth (9:30). Tarsus will be become more important later.

Ananias is alarmed and remonstrates with Jesus. He has heard about Saul from many people concerning the evil things he has done in Jerusalem and how he had received authority to come to Damascus to bind all who call upon the name of Jesus (9:13–14). The reader, who knows more than Ananias, is reminded that many still see Saul as the enemy. Here Ananias speaks on behalf of the Christians in Damascus. Through this reminder and the fear of Ananias, Luke increases the tension and prepares for what is about to happen: the conversion of Saul.

The Lukan Jesus does not reply to Ananias’ fears but tells him that Saul is a “chosen vessel” to make his name known to Gentiles and Jews and also that he will find out that this involves suffering for that

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235 Barrett, Critical Commentary, 455, observes that “Ananias’s continuing hesitation serves to emphasize the incredible wonder of this conversion.”
name. The reader might plausibly assume that this vision helps Ananias overcome his fears of Saul, as does Jesus’ comment, “for behold (ἰδοὺ γὰρ), he is praying.” So Ananias goes to the house of Judas in search of Saul. The narration approaches a climax. Ananias finds the house, comes to Saul, and lays hands on him. He tells him that Jesus, who had appeared to him on the way to Damascus, has sent him that he might be healed and filled with the Holy Spirit (9:17). Luke is brief and to the point so the reader is left to infer what Jesus told Ananias to say and do when he came upon Saul.

Luke elaborates on Ananias’ role as the human link between Jesus and Saul. Ananias begins, “Brother Saul,” and with these words a significant moment is reached. Saul is no longer considered the enemy of the Jesus movement but a member of that which he came to destroy. “With his first words to Saul, Ananias enacts the changed identity of Saul.” Ananias’ words, “the Lord—Jesus who appeared to you on the road on which you were travelling—sent me” (Ἰησοῦς ὁ ὄφθαλμος σου ἐν

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τῇ ὁδῷ ἔρχον (9:17), confirm for Saul “the authenticity of his encounter with the glorified Christ.”

Ananias places his hands on Saul (9:17) as indicated by Jesus in the earlier vision (9:12). In Luke-Acts the laying on of hands is associated with healing (Luke 5:13; 13:13; Acts 28:8), the receiving of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:17; 19:6) and commissioning to ministry (Acts 6:6; 13:3). It is a way in which the work of God is made manifest through human agency. Barrett observes that in Acts the laying on of hands “is a sign of blessing, to be interpreted as the occasion suggests.” Luke narrates that as a result of Ananias’ action Saul was “immediately” healed of his blindness. The reader is to assume that Saul was also, at this time, filled with the Holy Spirit. Then Saul is baptized, presumably by Ananias (see above). After Saul’s baptism Ananias’ work is done.

In his defence before the Jerusalem mob Paul gives an abbreviated account of Ananias’ part in his conversion suited to his audience. The reader does not learn a lot that is new about Ananias. There is no mention of Ananias’ vision of Jesus, a significant part of Luke’s narrative in chapter 9, nor is Ananias a “disciple” but now a


240 Barrett, Critical Commentary, 457.

man, devout by the standards of the Jewish law and respected by the Jews in Damascus (22:12). In Paul’s speech, Ananias’ role starts with his visit to Paul with no reason given as to why he came. Ananias simply tells Paul to receive his sight and there is no mention of the laying on of hands (22:13). Ananias’ role in Paul’s speech in Jerusalem has as much to do with Paul’s commission as with his healing and conversion. In Acts 22:12–16 Paul’s commission explicitly comes through Ananias.

Reflecting a different situation requiring a different response, in Paul’s speech to Festus and Agrippa, Ananias is not mentioned. The Lukian Paul this time shapes his defence around his former life, his persecution of Christians and then on what Jesus did in his life, first in his conversion and then in his calling to serve him (26:4–18). The demands of his defence before the elite in Caesarea do not need a mention of Ananias whereas it made good sense before a hostile Jewish mob to mention one who was devout according to the Law (22:12).

Further evidence that Paul’s conversion is genuine is provided by Luke when he narrates Ananias’ words of commissioning (22:14–15), particularly its scope, “to all people” (πρὸς πάντας ἀνθρώπους). Also his words to Paul, “and now why do you wait?” (καὶ νῦν τί μέλλεις),
implies that Ananias, and the reader, accepts Paul’s conversion to be genuine.\textsuperscript{242}

Ananias has the role of the human agent in Saul’s conversion. In Luke’s account of Saul’s conversion in chapter 9, in terms of space given by Luke, Ananias’ role is crucial. If there is divine agency at work in Saul’s conversion there is also human agency involved as well. Ananias’ words to Saul, “the Lord has sent me to you” (ὁ κύριος ἀπέσταλκέν με), encapsulates his role. Ananias is, in effect, the link between the divine and human in Luke’s narrative of Saul’s conversion.

4.5 Divine agency

4.5.1 Jesus

Luke portrays Saul’s conversion as a work of divine agency but what makes this conversion account unique in Acts is that the divine agency is specifically named as Jesus. In response to Saul’s question, “Who are you, Lord?” the voice replies, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting” (ἐγώ εἰμι Ἰησοῦς ὁν σὺ διώκεις) (9:5; cf. 9:17).\textsuperscript{243} The use of

\textsuperscript{242} Peterson, Acts, 603.

\textsuperscript{243} Gaventa, Darkness to Light, 57, believes that Saul’s question “enhances the drama of the conversation” by creating a situation in which the speaker has to identify himself. The specific identification of Jesus here is not to suggest that the risen Jesus is not active in other conversions in Acts. References such as 2:47; 11:20 and 16:14 where
the personal pronoun “I” (ἐγώ) makes Jesus’ reply emphatic. Jesus is sovereign in Paul’s conversion. It is Jesus who initiates the encounter with Saul and appears to him directly (a Christophany). Later Luke narrates how Jesus also appears to Ananias in a vision and directs him to go to Saul (9:11). As Keener observes, Saul did not solicit this encounter, it was an act of grace.244 Perhaps the Lukan Saul would have begun to realise the profound magnitude of this grace as the words of the ultimate target of his persecution, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,” began to sink in.

Saul’s conversion is replete with divine manifestations. The dazzling light appears “suddenly” (ἐξαίφνης). “Its sudden arrival is an indicator of supernatural origin (cf. Luke 2:13).”245 Light (φῶς) is a regular characteristic of divine appearances.246 Kern notes that “light indicates divine presence within Luke’s narratives.”247 The description of the light as “from heaven” (ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ) is probably a further indication of the light’s divine origin, although the expression could

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244 Keener, Acts, 2:1599.
246 Barrett, Critical Commentary, 449. See Exod 13:21; 19:16; Ps 78:14 (77:14 LXX); Isa 9:2; 60:1. See also Parsons, Acts, 126.
mean “from the sky.” Saul’s experience of this Christophany reflects the theophanies experienced by Moses (Exod 3:1–6), Isaiah (Isa 6:1–12) and Jeremiah (Jer 1:4–19). However, for the reader, the most recent divine manifestation would have been the Christophany experienced by Stephen (7:55, 56).

The Lukan Jesus’ instructions to Saul further underscore the divine initiative in Saul’s conversion. Jesus tells Saul to go into Damascus where he will be told what he must do (λαληθήσεται σοι ὅτι σε δεῖ ποιεῖν) (9:6). Here we have the grammar of divine sovereignty. The use of the passive voice (λαληθήσεται) keeps the reader’s attention on Saul who is reminded that he is not in control and that he will be told what he is to do next. The use of “must” (δεῖ) implies a necessity that arises out of Saul’s encounter with Jesus. It points to the next step in his conversion, a step that must be taken if his conversion is to be fully realized. Not only does Jesus meet Saul as he draws near to Damascus, but he is also at work in that city preparing for Saul’s arrival.

Jesus also appears to the disciple Ananias in Damascus but not in the same way as to Saul. This time it is through a vision (9:10–16). Visions (from ὁράμα) are common in Acts; eleven of the twelve

248 See Barrett, Critical Commentary, 449, who suggests that for Luke they “were not distinguishable.”
occurrences of the word in the New Testament are to be found in Acts.\textsuperscript{251} Instructions are given through visions, for example, 10:3, 17, 19; 16:9, 10; 18:9.\textsuperscript{252} What Luke narrates, however, is not one vision but two. The narration of double visions is important for it confirms to the reader that God is at work.\textsuperscript{253} “Doubling a vision or dream even to one individual made it emphatic (cf. Gen 37:7, 9; 41:1–7), but paired visions or dreams given to different individuals were recounted as the strongest evidence (cf. Judg 7:9–15).”\textsuperscript{254} Through these paired visions the reader realizes that not only is Jesus getting Ananias ready to go to Saul, but he is also preparing Saul to receive Ananias. We will encounter this phenomenon of double visions again in the story of Cornelius’ conversion (10:3, 11, 17).\textsuperscript{255}

In Jesus’ instructions to Ananias the reader again meets the language of divine sovereignty. To assure the alarmed Ananias about going to Saul, Jesus tells him that he, Jesus, has chosen Saul to serve him. “This one (i.e. Saul) is a chosen vessel for me” (ὅτι σκέψης ἐκλογή ς

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{251} The only other occurrence of the word in the NT is in Matt 17:9. The synonym ὀπτασία occurs four times in the New Testament, twice in Luke, once in Acts and once in 2 Cor 12:1.
\item \textsuperscript{252} Cf. Gaventa, Darkness to Light, 61.
\item \textsuperscript{253} “The double revelation to Saul and Ananias highlights God’s control of the action.” Parsons, Acts, 129.
\item \textsuperscript{254} Keener, Acts, 2:1644.
\item \textsuperscript{255} See also Luke 1:11 and 1:26–27 for another double vision episode. Pervo, Acts, 243, comments on the “vision within a vision” as a “novelistic,” “Chinese box technique.”
\end{itemize}
ἐστίν μοι οὗτος) (9:15). Luke, in the construction of this clause, emphasises “chosen vessel” by placing it at the beginning of the clause. It is a divine choice of Saul for service as the rest of verse 15 indicates. However in this narrative conversion and call are closely linked so that behind the choice for service is the choice for conversion. Luke, by including the nature and scope of the work to which Jesus commissions Saul, provides another indication of the transformation that Saul undergoes.

Divine sovereignty is again stressed when the Lukan Jesus informs Ananias, “for I will show him (i.e., Saul) those things that are necessary to suffer for my name” (ἐγὼ γὰρ ὑποδείξω αὐτῷ ὅσα δεῖ αὐτὸν ὑπὲρ τοῦ ὄνομάτος μου παθεῖν) (9:16). The use of the first personal pronoun “I” (ἐγὼ) adds emphasis to Jesus’ words. The converted Saul’s life will now be under the sovereign guidance of the one he was persecuting. Luke interweaves this language of divine choice and conversion around “the name of Jesus.” Ananias protests to Jesus that this Saul is the one who was coming to Damascus to bind all

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256 “Chosen vessel” (σκεῦος ἐκλογῆς) is a “Semitism for a vessel that God has chosen.” Keener, Acts, 2:1655. See also BDAG, 306.

257 Gaventa, Darkness to Light, 62.

258 “To carry my name before Gentiles and kings and Israelites.” See Barrett, Critical Commentary, 456; Peterson, Acts, 309.

who “call upon your name” (9:14). That may have been the case but Saul has changed. Jesus tells Ananias that Saul is now a chosen vessel to carry his name to Gentiles, kings and Jews. Further, Jesus tells Ananias that the one who was pursuing the name will now suffer for it (9:16).

The Lukan Paul’s reflections on his conversion in his defence speeches in Jerusalem and later in Caesarea do not add anything significant regarding the divine sovereign initiative in his conversion. There are, however, a few variations upon this theme. As noted above, Jesus identifies himself as “Jesus the Nazarean” (Ἰησοῦς ὁ Ναζωραῖος) which is the only specific mention of the name “Jesus” in this speech, presumably a reflection of Paul’s situation before an agitated Jewish audience (22:8). Later, Paul before Festus and Agrippa uses this title again (26:9). The language of divine choice is added to when Jesus directs Paul to “go into Damascus where it will be told to you about all which I have appointed (τέτακται) you to do” (22:10). Barrett notes that the use of the perfect tense (τέτακται) “shows that the order is already in the thought of Jesus, having been in the eternal thought of God.”

260 Peterson, Acts, 599, argues that this title “means no more than ‘from Nazareth.’” For other uses of this expression in Acts see 2:22; 3:6; 4:10; 6:14; 24:5.

261 petheinou eis Damasekou kakei sou laleidhsetai perip pantwn avn tetaktai sou poihsai.

262 Barrett, Critical Commentary, 1039.
most likely an accommodation by Paul to his audience, it is “the God of our fathers” who had “chosen” (προχειρίσατο) him to know his will and to see the righteous one and hear his voice (22:14). In Paul’s account of his conversion before Festus and Agrippa, it is Jesus who states that he “chose” (προχειρίσασθαί) Paul to be a servant and a witness (26:16). While these variations are most likely due to different contexts, the import seems to be the same. As Peterson comments, Paul’s “change of direction and subsequent ministry can be explained only in terms of God’s unmistakable intervention in his life.”

Before leaving this section and in the light of this thesis’ theme, it is worth commenting on some words of Jesus found in Paul’s defence speech at Caesarea which reflect a Lukan understanding of conversion. These words mirror Paul’s own experience as narrated in chapters 9 and 22. Of Luke’s three accounts of the conversion of Paul, they are only found here. As he brings his speech to an end Paul recounts Jesus saying that he is sending Paul to Jews (τοῦ λαοῦ) and Gentiles “to open (ἀνοίξαι) their eyes, that they might turn (τοῦ ἐπιστρέψαι) from

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263 BDAG, 891, “to express preference of someone for a task, choose for oneself, select, appoint” and followed by infinitives of purpose, that is, “chosen” “to know . . .,” “to see . . .,” and “to hear . . .” (22:14).
264 Peterson, Acts, 605.
266 In the Greek “I send,” with the “I” being emphatic (ἐγώ), is a further Lukan indication of divine sovereignty.
dusk to light and from the authority of Satan to God, that they might receive (τοῦ ἀλφείν) forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (26:18).

Acts 26:18 uses the language of the Hebrew Scriptures and possibly philosophy; Gaventa notes that this verse uses “stereotypical conversion language.” The ideas of blindness and sight are Lukan concerns and have to do with perceiving spiritual realities, especially in relation to Jesus Christ. The opening of eyes probably reflects Isaiah 35:5 and 42:6–7, 16, as well as Luke’s own use of this image of spiritual perception. Witherington argues that throughout “Luke-Acts the movement from darkness to light is used as a metaphor for salvation in dependence on the Isaianic ideas.” On a wider canvas, Pervo notes that “movement from the dominion of darkness to the bliss of light” is common in descriptions of conversion in both religion and philosophy. For Luke’s interest in this imagery see Luke 1:79; 2:32;

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267 The first infinitive (ἀνοίξαι) expresses purpose while the following articular infinitives (τοῦ ἐπιστρέψαι, τοῦ λαβεῖν) indicate purpose or the (intended) result. Cf. Wallace, Greek Grammar, 590–93; Barrett, Critical Commentary, 1162.

268 Gaventa, Darkness to Light, 85.


270 Witherington, Acts, 745.

271 Pervo, Acts, 633. Pervo, 633 footnote 71, provides the following examples: Plato, The Republic, 518C–D; Philo, Virtues. 179; Poinardres 28; Jos. Asen. 8:10; 15:13; 1 Pet 2:9; 1 Clem. 59:2–3; Apuleius Metamorphoses a.k.a. The Golden Ass, 11.23; Lucian Nigrinus 4.1. Whether Luke was familiar with these texts is another matter but, if nothing else, they
To turn (ἐπιστρέψαι) reflects the Hebrew 

In Luke’s view Satan, or the Devil (διάβολος), is an evil spiritual being at work in the world and opposed to God and those who serve him. This verse suggests that people are “held captive by Satan, and by the Gospel are liberated.”

To open the eyes, spiritually speaking, also results in the “forgiveness of sins” and “a share among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (τοῦ λαβεῖν αὐτοὺς ἁφεσιν ἀμαρτιῶν καὶ κλῆσαι ἐν τοῖς


Another intended result of the opening of eyes is a turning from the authority of Satan to the authority of God. This the only time that Luke describes conversion as “turning from Satan.” In Luke’s view Satan, or the Devil (διάβολος), is an evil spiritual being at work in the world and opposed to God and those who serve him. This verse suggests that people are “held captive by Satan, and by the Gospel are liberated.”

To open the eyes, spiritually speaking, also results in the “forgiveness of sins” and “a share among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (τοῦ λαβεῖν αὐτοὺς ἁφεσιν ἀμαρτιῶν καὶ κλῆσαι ἐν τοῖς

do indicate a possible common cultural description of conversion that Luke may have been aware of, directly or indirectly.

Gaventa, Darkness to Light, 87.

In 26:18 the reader is given an insight into the Lukan view of conversion. It is not a comprehensive view of conversion but rather focusses on the human side with divine agency implicit rather than explicit. From a human perspective conversion involves a change in understanding, described as an opening of the eyes, spiritually speaking. It also entails volition, a (metaphorical) turning from darkness or ignorance to light or understanding, as well as a re-alignment of one’s life, from Satan to God. All of this is in reference to Jesus Christ, as is clear from the risen Jesus’ concluding words to Paul, “faith in me.” Those whose eyes are opened and turn from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God, receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who, by faith, set their lives apart to Jesus.

276 Keener, Acts, 3:3054; Gaventa, Darkness to Light, 87.
4.5.2 The Holy Spirit

Paul does not refer to the Spirit in his speeches in Jerusalem and Caesarea. The role of the Holy Spirit in Saul’s conversion receives only a brief mention in Acts 9. Ananias tells Saul, “the Lord sent me, Jesus who appeared to you on the road on which you were travelling, that you might receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit” (9:17).

Although this is not mentioned explicitly, the reader must fill in this gap and assume that Jesus instructed Ananias about the role of the Spirit. This is implied in Ananias’ words, “the Lord sent me” (that Saul might receive his sight and be filled with the Spirit). Luke does not specifically say that Saul was filled with the Spirit, but the reader is led to assume this did happen. Ananias was directed by Jesus to Saul that he might be healed and filled with the Spirit. Luke narrates that Saul was healed immediately (9:18) so the reader reasonably assumes he was also filled with the Spirit, probably at the time of the laying on of hands and his healing. Barrett comments that “illumination by the Spirit is parallel to the physical gift of sight.”

Gaventa believes that what Luke narrates about Saul’s subsequent actions in Damascus (9:19–22) “indicate that he has received all that is needed.”

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278 Gaventa, Darkness to Light, 94 footnote 23.
Was the fullness of the Spirit to do with Saul’s actual conversion or his subsequent mission to proclaim Jesus? Keener believes it was the latter. “Luke speaks of Spirit empowerment primarily in terms of empowerment for mission (1:8), not regeneration.”\(^{279}\) Pervo argues that this mention of the filling of the Spirit is not a reference to “the baptismal gift of the Spirit” but rather to an “apostolic ordination.”\(^{280}\) It is difficult to decide on this matter because Luke does not tell us. It is more likely that being filled with the Spirit is related to both Saul’s conversion and commission to mission. Luke connects the Spirit with conversion (for example, 2:38; 8:15, 17; 10:44, 47; 11:15, 16) and also with mission (for example, 1:5, 8; 4:8; 10:38).

**Conclusion**

Luke’s narrative of Saul’s conversion is accomplished mainly by characterization, particularly of Saul, and by the way in which he structures his story. By portraying characters through showing rather than telling the narrator draws the *reader* into the story. There are gaps for the *reader* to fill in and thereby enter the story. Luke has structured his narrative of Saul’s conversion through his own narration in chapter 9.

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\(^{280}\) Pervo, *Acts*, 244 and footnote 95.
and in his record of the defence speeches of Paul in Jerusalem and later in Caesarea in chapters 22 and 26, respectively.

The importance of Saul’s conversion to Luke is seen in that there are three accounts of it in Acts. Furthermore he gives more information on Saul as to his life before and after his conversion than with any other conversion account in Acts. Before Saul was converted, Luke characterizes him as a zealous Pharisee who believed it was his duty to stop the Jesus movement. Beatings, imprisonment, pursuing Christians “to the death” were all a part of Luke’s portrayal of Saul, the enemy of the church. But then, on the road to Damascus, he encountered Jesus, and the persecutor of Jesus became the ardent proclaimer of Jesus. By skillfully building a picture of Saul before and after his Damascus road experience, Luke “shows his readers that even the hardest heart can be softened by God and the most formidable opponent can become a servant of Christ and a vigorous agent of his gospel.”

Luke depicts Saul’s conversion as a divine work. In what is a unique feature of this conversion story in Acts, Jesus is the divine agent who confronts Saul in blinding light. It is Jesus who directs the abject Saul to go to Damascus where he will be told what to do. The one who was heading to Damascus to hunt down the followers of the Way

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completes the journey, blind and led by hand into the city. All the while Jesus is at work in this city preparing for Saul’s arrival. In a vision Jesus appears to Ananias telling him to seek out Saul.

Ananias is the human link between Jesus and Saul. It is Ananias who, under the guidance of Jesus, completes what Jesus began on the Damascus road. Through the reluctant emissary Ananias, Saul is healed, filled with the Holy Spirit and baptized. Saul’s conversion was a process lasting at least, and probably more than, three days starting on the road to Damascus and finishing in Damascus with Saul’s baptism. But Luke is clear that Saul’s conversion was but the beginning of a radically different life for the former persecutor.

“There was a certain man in Caesarea by the name of Cornelius” (Acts 10:1). Thus Luke begins his narrative of the conversion of Cornelius and his friends and relatives.¹ This conversion account is the longest narrative in Acts, Paul’s journey to Rome being the only other story that comes close to it in length. The length of the passage gives an indication of its importance for Luke.² This importance is further underlined by three other factors: by the fact that of the two main characters one of them is the leading apostle Peter, by the use Luke makes of repetition and by what Pervo calls, “the dense supernatural apparatus of vision and epiphany.”³

Considering Acts as a whole, Cornelius’ conversion marks an important development in Luke’s account of the growth of the early church. It is with the conversion of this Gentile centurion and his friends and relatives that the early church, Jewish in background, realises that

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¹ The Gentile Cornelius is the main Lukan focus of this conversion narrative and at times I will refer to Cornelius alone which should not be taken to diminish the conversion of those who were with him in his house. The matter of household conversion has been more fully explored in Matson, Household Conversion Narratives, 86–134.

² Pervo, Acts, 264. In addition to the account of Cornelius’ conversion within the literary block of 8:4–11:18 Peter briefly recounts the story in general terms at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:6–9). Cf. Immanuel, Repent and Turn to God, 198–199.

³ Pervo, Acts, 264.

Despite this realisation tensions remain over the inclusion of Gentiles in the church. Did they need to be circumcised and follow the law of Moses (Acts 15:1, 6–11; cf. Gal 2)?

5.1 The passage: setting, structure and development

Following the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:28–40) Luke records the conversion of Saul (9:1–30), which he relates two more times in Acts (22:6–16; 26:12–18). After a summary statement following the conversion of Paul, of how the church in Judea, Galilee and Samaria knew peace, spiritual strength and numerical growth (Acts 9:31), Luke returns to the ministry of the apostle Peter. He records how Peter, as he was going throughout the region, came down to visit the Christians in Lydda where he came across a certain Aeneas who had been paralysed for eight years. Luke tells how the apostle spoke words of power to Aeneas, “Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you, get up and make your bed yourself” (Acts 9:34). While in Lydda he was called to nearby Joppa on the coast by the Christians there. A disciple, Tabitha, had died. Going upstairs to where the dead woman lay Peter put the gathered mourners

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outside, prayed, and again spoke words of power but with even greater
effect, “Tabitha, arise,” and the dead woman sat up (Acts 9: 39, 40). As a
result of these works of power Luke notes that “all those living in Lydda
and Sharon turned to the Lord” (Acts 9:35), and in Joppa “many
believed in the Lord” (Acts 9:42). Joppa will form an important narrative
link to Caesarea and the conversion of Cornelius.

The story of Cornelius’ conversion is set in three cities, Caesarea,
Joppa and Jerusalem, and involves two main human characters,
Cornelius and Peter. But, as in all of Luke’s conversion accounts, it is
also a story of the working of God. In broad terms the Cornelius
conversion narrative may be divided up into four scenes which are
linked by journeys.

Scene 1: Caesarea (10:1–8). Cornelius and his vision of an angel.
Here we are introduced to Cornelius and told of a vision he has of “an
angel of God” around the ninth hour of the day. The heavenly
messenger tells Cornelius that God has heard his prayers and instructs
him to send for the apostle Peter who is staying in Joppa. The story
unfolds and tension builds.⁶ Luke does not reveal everything at once.

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The reader is left wondering what will happen next? What role has Peter to play in all of this? What will be the outcome of these things?

Scene 2: Joppa (10:9–23a). Peter’s vision of a large sheet.

Luke links the first two scenes by describing how, while Cornelius’ messengers are approaching Joppa, Peter goes onto the roof of Simon the tanner’s house, where he is staying, to pray. He falls into a trance and has a vision of a large sheet being lowered to the ground by its four corners, full of “all the four-footed (animals) and reptiles and birds.” A voice tells Peter to kill and eat but Peter protests strongly, “definitely not, I have never eaten anything common or unclean” (10:14). To which the voice replies, “what God has cleansed you must not call common” (10:15). This happens three times. While Peter is pondering the meaning of what has happened Cornelius’ messengers arrive at the entrance to the house. Highlighting Luke’s interweaving of the divine and the human, the Spirit tells Peter that three men are seeking him but not why they are seeking him; that will be left to Cornelius’ messengers. Tension further builds when the Spirit instructs Peter to go with the men without hesitation, but why would he hesitate and why should he go? The men explain why they have come, telling Peter about Cornelius and how a “holy angel” told him to invite Peter to his house to speak to him.
Luke maintains the reader’s interest by revealing critical information piece by piece. In the first scene Luke simply records that Cornelius was told by the angel to invite Peter to his house. Now he reveals that Peter is to go to Cornelius to speak to him. In the following scenes the reader is given more information about what Peter is to say.


By means of the journey of Peter, with some of the believers from Joppa and Cornelius’ servants, the reader is taken from Joppa to Caesarea. Step by step Luke prepares the reader for what is to happen next. He shows how God is at work preparing the two main characters in this event. As far as the conversion of Cornelius goes, this scene is climactic.

Anticipation builds as Peter and his party arrive in Caesarea. Cornelius has been expecting him and has gathered together a number of his relatives and close friends. On meeting Peter Cornelius falls at his feet. Peter, reflecting orthodox Jewish belief, is very clear on the difference between the human and the divine and is eager to remove any misconceptions Cornelius might have as to Peter’s nature. He promptly directs Cornelius to get up, telling him that he, Peter, is very definitely human.

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7 Witherington suggests verse 24 indicates that Cornelius was “expecting someone or something momentous.” Witherington, *Acts* 352.
God has been at work in these characters individually and now here they are, face to face. It is clear that by the time Peter reaches Caesarea he has begun to understand the meaning of the threefold vision he had had at Simon’s place. Peter explains to Cornelius and the others who had gathered that God had shown him, contrary to what he had believed, that Gentiles were not to be considered “common or unclean” (Acts 10:28). The stage is set for what is about to happen and a key question from Peter draws the reader further into what is happening, “What is the reason you sent for me?” (Acts 10:29).

In an example of Lukan repetition to emphasise the importance of what is happening, we read, for the third time, about Cornelius’ encounter with the angel of God and his being directed to send to Joppa for Peter (Acts 10:30–32; cf. 10:3–6, 22; see also 11:13, 14).\(^8\) Having explained why Peter was sent for Luke readies the reader for what Peter has to say through Cornelius’ words, “we are all here before God to hear what the Lord has commanded you” (Acts 10:33).

Peter continues, stating that God does not show partiality towards any one race. He then goes on to speak about Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit for his ministry of healing and doing good, how he was crucified and raised on the third day and his

\(^8\) The problems with the Greek of 10:30 are looked at below.
subsequent appearances to his followers. This Jesus had been
designated by God judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:42). It was
by faith in his name that those who believed in him would receive
forgiveness of sins.

Then comes the unexpected and shocking climax. While Peter is
still speaking the Holy Spirit falls upon those Gentiles listening to the
message and they begin to speak in tongues and to praise God. The
Jewish Christians\(^9\) who had come with Peter were astounded that the
gift of the Spirit had been poured out on Gentiles. Peter sizes up the
situation and directs that the new converts be baptised in the name of
Jesus Christ. In words that echo Acts 8:36 Peter asks, “is there anyone
who would refuse (from κωλύω, cf. 8:36) water to baptise these who
have received the Holy Spirit as we (Jewish Christians) did?” (Acts
10:47).

Scene 4: Jerusalem (11:1–18). Peter explains himself to his critics in
Jerusalem.

By means of another journey Luke takes the reader from Caesarea to
Jerusalem. As regards Cornelius’ conversion Scene 3 is the climax yet

\(^9\) The circumcised believers (οἱ ἐκ περιτομῆς πιστοί).
the story does not end there. The news of the Gentile conversions\(^\text{10}\) in Caesarea reaches the ears of the apostles and the Christians in Judea, and when Peter journeys to Jerusalem Jewish Christians take issue with him because he had eaten with uncircumcised men (Acts 11:3). The importance of Cornelius’ conversion is underlined by Lukan repetition, Peter recounting his own vision in Joppa and the Spirit’s direction to go with the three men from Cornelius (Acts 11:4–12), and then the encounter of Cornelius with the angel in his house in Caesarea (Acts 11:13, 14). It is only in this final scene that the reader is told that Peter will speak to Cornelius words by which he and all his household (πᾶς ὁ οἶκος σου) will be saved (σωθήση) (Acts 11:14). It would seem that this additional information is redundant as Cornelius’ conversion has already occurred. Perhaps Luke includes them here for the sake of those who had doubts, like Peter’s Jerusalem critics, about the inclusion of the Gentiles into the Jesus movement.

By repeating the events in Cornelius’ house Peter links the coming of the Spirit on those gathered there with the words of Jesus prior to his ascension and recorded by Luke at the beginning of his second work: “John (the Baptist) baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 11:16; cf. 1:5). In so doing Luke

\(^{10}\) Described by Luke as receiving the word of God (ἐδέξαντο τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ) (Acts 11:1).
emphasises that Cornelius’ conversion is a genuine work of God (see 11: 17).

Luke begins this conversion account with a “certain man in Caesarea named Cornelius.” He structures his story around four scenes beginning in Caesarea, then to Joppa, back to Caesarea and then finally to Jerusalem, transitioning from one scene to the next via journeys. In each of these scenes Luke narrates how God works with and through two main characters, Cornelius and Peter, to bring about the conversion of Cornelius with his relatives and close friends. It was fitting that Luke should bring this story, the longest in Acts, to an end with the words of Peter’s detractors: “when they heard these things (from Peter) they were silent and glorified God saying, ‘God then has given repentance that leads to life to the Gentiles also.’”\(^\text{11}\)

5.2 Textual issues

The passage has a number of textual issues of varying degrees of significance. There are major concerns with the quality of the Greek text of 10:30 and 10:36–38 which remain unresolved. There are several other

\(^{11}\) ἀρα καὶ τοῖς ἔθνεσιν ὁ θεὸς τὴν μετάνοιαν εἰς ζωὴν ἔδωκεν.
textual problems, which, while puzzling, do not cause significant concerns for the meaning of the text.

The text of 10:11 and 12 is uncertain. The Western text of 10:11 does not have καταβαίνον ("coming down") and describes the sheet as "tied (δεδέμενον) at (the) four corners,"\(^\text{12}\) not "being let down." The omission of "coming down" (καταβαίνον) may be to avoid redundancy with "being let down" (καθιέμενον). In what appears to be an attempt to harmonise the text of verse 12 with 11:6, "wild beasts" (θηρία) was added in by copyists.\(^\text{13}\)

In 10:19 "two" (δύο) has the support of the fourth century Vaticanus (B) while "three" (τρεῖς) has good external support such as 11:11, not to mention 10:7, and was preferred in NA\(^\text{28}\). In 10:28 it is not clear how Cornelius knew when to get his relatives and friends together and when he should go to meet Peter. In an apparent attempt to overcome this perceived omission the Western text (D) inserts,

> And while Peter was drawing near to Caesarea one of the servants ran ahead and announced that he had arrived. And Cornelius got up quickly and met him.\(^\text{15}\)

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\(^{12}\) For example P\(^\text{d}^\text{v}^\text{i}^\text{d}\) C\(^\text{v}^\text{i}^\text{d}\) Ψ \(^\text{v}^\text{i}^\text{d}\). Metzger, Textual Commentary, 326.

\(^{13}\) As, for example, in (E) L Ψ C \(^\text{v}^\text{i}^\text{d}\). Metzger, Textual Commentary, 326–27. See also BDAG, 455–56.

\(^{14}\) See also Metzger, Textual Commentary, 328.

\(^{15}\) προσεγγίζοντος δὲ τοῦ Πέτρου εἰς τὴν Καισάριαν προδραμῶν εἰς τῶν δούλων διεσάρθησαν παραγεγονέναι αὐτῶν. ὁ δὲ Κορνήλιος ἐκπερήσας καὶ συναντήσας αὐτῶ.

"One of the servants" most likely refers to one of the servants sent by Cornelius to find Peter. Metzger, Textual Commentary, 329.
The first part of 10:30, “from the fourth day until this hour I was praying at the ninth (hour?) in my house,” has caused translators and commentators many problems. Pervo believes it has been corrupted, “possibly through an authorial error,” and Witherington regards it as “convoluted” but suggests the document has not been revised. Problems lie with how to understand the prepositions ἀπό (“from”) and μέχρι (“until”). Literally this suggests the unlikely meaning that Cornelius was praying for four days “until this (very) hour,” that is, when Peter arrived. Some manuscripts add “fasting” to suggest that Cornelius was fasting from four days ago and was praying at the Jewish ninth hour of prayer, or from the sixth to the ninth hour. The likely sense of the words seems to be that four days ago Cornelius was praying in his house at the ninth hour when the angel of God appeared to him. This would appear to be the least unsatisfactory resolution to this textual issue.

16 ἀπὸ τετάρτης ἡμέρας μέχρι ταύτης τῆς ὥρας ἡμήν τὴν ἐνατὴν προσευχόμενος ἐν τῷ οίκῳ μου
18 Barrett, Critical Commentary, 517.
19 See for example P56 Α' Δ'E 33. 614. “And Cornelius said, Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house” (Acts 10:30 KJV).
20 See Metzger, Textual Commentary, 330; Witherington, Acts, 353. See also NRSV, NIV.
Verses 36–38 are hard to understand as they presently stand in NA and emendations have been suggested (e.g. NRSV) to overcome what are thought to be errors in the Greek text. For Witherington this is further evidence of the unrevised state of the text. Pervo suggests that the text is either corrupt or the author has made a mistake, and Barrett believes the Greek text is “untranslatable.” The NRSV and NIV have gone as far as to emend the text. While this does not affect the larger narrative of Cornelius’ conversion it does make it difficult to follow what one of the major human agents, Peter, is saying at this point and raises a question regarding the relevance of Peter’s vision (see below) in the narrative.

One of the problems is the relationship between verses 36 and 35. Another is how to understand the relative pronoun ὁν (“which”). The transition to verse 36 is abrupt and Codex Bezae (D) has attempted to

21 τὸν λόγον ὑμῖν ἀπέστειλεν τοὺς υἱοὺς Ισραήλ εὐαγγελιζόμενος εἰρήνην διὰ Ἰσουῦ Χριστοῦ, οὗτός ἐστιν πάντων κύριος, ὡς ἔχεις οἴδας τὸ γενόμενον ὑμῖν καθ’ ὅλης τῆς Ἰουδαίας, ἀρξάμενος ἀπὸ τῆς Γαλιλαίας μετὰ τὸ βάπτισμα ὁ ἐκηρύξεν Ἰωάννης. Ἰησοῦν τὸν ἀπὸ Ναζαρέω, ὡς ἔχεις οἴδας τὸν θεόν πνεύματι ἀγίῳ καὶ δυνάμεις, ὃς διήλθεν εὐεργετῶν καὶ ἰόμενος πάντας τοὺς καταδυναστευομένους ύπὸ τοῦ διαβόλου, ὅτι οὗτος ἦν μετ’ αὐτοῦ. (NA 28) The word which he sent to the sons of Israel preaching the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, he is Lord of all, you know the matter that happened in all of Judea beginning from Galilee after the baptism which John preached, Jesus from Nazareth, how God anointed him with (the) Holy Spirit and power, who went about doing good and healing all those oppressed by the devil, because God was with him.

22 Witherington argues the “Greek syntax of vv36–38 is enormously convoluted, yet another hint of the unrevised state of this document.” Witherington, Acts, 356.

23 Pervo, Acts, 279; Barrett, Critical Commentary, 521. See also Metzger, Textual Commentary, 378.
soften this with the insertion of γὰρ (“for”).24 Verse 36 could stand without the relative pronoun with God understood as the subject of ἀπέστειλεν (“sent”), “He (i.e. God) sent the word (or message).”25 If the relative pronoun ὅν is to be taken as part of the text it would be the object of “sent” (“which he sent”) and “word” (λόγον) would be “left in suspension.”26

A further difficulty is encountered if we are to understand “the word which he sent” as in apposition to verses 34 and 35. If the message that Jesus preached included the notion that all who fear God and work righteousness are acceptable to God, there would have been no issue with the acceptance of Gentiles. Peter then would not need a vision to convince him not to call anyone common or unclean for it was a matter already settled by Jesus himself.27 Witherington, despite the difficulties, believes that the relative pronoun should be retained and verse 36 seen as in apposition to verse 35.28

The NRSV attempts to ameliorate these problems by transposing ὑμεῖς οἴδατε (“you know”) from verse 37 to verse 36 so that τὸν λόγον (“the word” or “message”) becomes the direct object of οἴδατε. “You

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24 As also in Cʰ 614 I p t sy.gr But if “for” was original why would it have been removed? Metzger, Textual Commentary, 379.
25 Barrett, Critical Commentary, 521.
27 Pervo, Acts, 279.
know the message he sent to the people of Israel. 29 This is a solution considered by Barrett but which he also regards as creating problems for verse 37. 30 Verse 37 would have to be regarded as a second apposition to verse 36, which is how the NRSV translates it: “That message spread throughout Judea.” 31 The NIV’s solution is to treat verses 36 and 37 as grammatically independent of each other. It does this by inserting an additional ὑμεῖς οἴδατε at the beginning of verse 36 but leaving the other ὑμεῖς οἴδατε where it is at the beginning of verse 37 so that the two verses read,

36 You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. 37 You know what has happened throughout Judea …

In verse 37 it is hard to relate ἀρξάμενος (“beginning”), which is in the nominative case, grammatically to the verse. 32 The third century papyrus P45, as well as L and minuscules 33 and 81, alter this participle to the accusative (ἀρξάμενον) and so relate it to τὸ γενόμενον ὁμα (“the matter which happened”). Metzger regards it as a pendent (or

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29 The NIV adds “you know” to verse 36 leaving “you know” in place in verse 37.
30 Barrett, Critical Commentary, 523.
31 The NRSV translates ὁμα as “message.” It may also be translated as “matter,” “event,” “happening” as in the NIV.
32 Zerwick, Grammatical Analysis, 385.
hanging) nominative “to be taken in a quasi-adverbial sense,” and while “awkward” Pervo concedes that it is not “impossible.”

Peter’s command for Cornelius, his relatives and close friends “in the name of Jesus Christ to be baptized” (ἐν τῇ ὅνοματι Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ βαπτισθῆναι) has good manuscript support. Metzger notes that some manuscripts have moved “in the name of Jesus Christ” (ἐν τῇ ὅνοματι Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ) to follow “to be baptized” (βαπτισθῆναι) so that it is clear that “in the name of Jesus Christ” relates to baptism and not Peter’s command. Codex D has expanded the baptismal formula by adding “Lord”, so that it reads “to be baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ” (βαπτισθῆναι ἐν τῷ ὅνοματι τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ).

Other witnesses have “in the name of the Lord” and “in the name of the Lord Jesus.”

The Western text (D) has an interesting expansion of 11:2:

Therefore Peter for a considerable time wanted to go to Jerusalem and when he had summoned the brethren and strengthened them [he left] and with many words was teaching them (that is other Christians) through the region; who (i.e. Peter) also met with them (the Jerusalem Christians) and reported on the grace of God. But the brethren of the circumcision took issue with him.

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33 Metzger, Textual Commentary, 334; Pervo, Acts, 279, footnote 167.
34 For example: P74 Ν A B E Ψ.
35 Metzger, Textual Commentary, 336.
36 See also Metzger, Textual Commentary, 337.
It is difficult to know why this addition was made to D. Metzger and
Witherington argue it solves a problem and presents Peter in a more
favourable light. It allows time for the news about Cornelius to reach
Jerusalem and avoids the impression that Peter was being called to
explain himself by the church in Jerusalem. After further missionary
activity Peter, “on his own initiative,” goes up to Jerusalem and meets
with the members of the church there.37 Barrett does not think it really
makes a “serious defence” of Peter and regards it as a piece of “free
story telling by one who liked to embroider.”38 I am inclined to see it not
so much as a defence of Peter as the expansive Western text completing
the missionary work he began on leaving Jerusalem (see Acts 9:32).

5.3 Divine agents

The conversion of Cornelius, along with his relatives and close friends,
is an event in which divine agency plays a prominent role manifest
through two visions and four “characters” in the narrative: an angel of
God, the Holy Spirit, a voice from heaven and God. In the first vision an
angel of God appears and in the second a voice from heaven is heard.

“The pattern of divine guidance here is unique and complex, though it

37 Metzger, Textual Commentary, 338; Witherington, Acts, 362.
38 Barrett, Critical Commentary, 537.
combines elements found elsewhere in Acts.”\(^\text{39}\) In the account of the conversion of the Ethiopian divine agency is seen acting through an angel of God and the Holy Spirit, and both are involved with Cornelius’ conversion. But Luke also includes in this account a “voice” and it is clear that this is no human voice for Luke describes it as “from heaven” (ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ) (11:9). Moreover, the reader could not miss perceiving the working of God in the way the paths of the characters intersect at crucial points in the story.\(^\text{40}\)

In the Bible God communicates with humans through visions. In the LXX, of the forty-two times the word “vision” (ὁράμα) occurs, over eighty per cent of these have to do with the revealing of God’s will.\(^\text{41}\) In the New Testament divine direction by vision is almost exclusively found in Acts. Eleven of the twelve times the word is used, it is by Luke in Acts.\(^\text{42}\) On seven occasions the word is associated with a verb of seeing or appearing although the exact nature of this is not spelled out.\(^\text{43}\)

\(^{39}\) Peterson, Acts, 327.
\(^{40}\) “The various divine ministries in the present narrative are fitted together with some care, and have the effect of showing that Peter’s visit to and conversion of Cornelius are due to God’s initiative.” Barrett, Critical Commentary, 502.
\(^{41}\) 25 occurrences or 60 per cent are in the Book of Daniel.
\(^{43}\) Acts 12:9, “he thought he was seeing a vision,” suggests that distinguishing between (mundane) reality and a vision, could, at times, be difficult for humans.
There are two visions in this narrative, one seen by Cornelius of an angel, and later, one by Peter, of a great sheet. What is important is what is communicated through the vision and by whom, not so much the exact nature of the vision, that is, how it is “seen,” whether interiorly or externally to the one who sees. The reader understands that God is communicating either directly, as with Peter, or through an intermediary, as with Cornelius.

5.3.1 An Angel of God

As with the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch it is an angel of God that initiates the action. In both stories the role of the angel is that of a messenger giving guidance, although in the Cornelius account this guidance is more elaborate. After introducing him (10:1, 2) Luke describes how Cornelius, while praying, saw clearly in a vision “an angel of God” (εἰδὲν ἐν ὀράματι φανερῶς . . . ἄγγελον τοῦ θεοῦ) coming to him and speaking with him. In the story of the eunuch Luke simply states that the “angel of God” spoke to Philip and directed him to go to the road that ran between Jerusalem and Gaza (8:26). In the Ethiopian episode it is the human agent of conversion, Philip, whom the

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44 Keener, Acts, 2:1760, argues that complementary visions “reinforce their validity.”
angels directs. In Acts 10 it is the would-be convert that meets the angel of God.

Cornelius’ meeting with the angel of God is more than one of simply receiving guidance, as with Philip. The narrator provides a detailed account which cannot but impress the reader with the importance and God-initiated nature of this visit. Luke tells how the angel appears to Cornelius in a vision (ὁράματι) in which Cornelius sees (εἶδεν) the angel entering his house, as a human visitor might, and then speaking to him (εἰσελθόντα πρὸς αὐτὸν καὶ εἰπόντα αὐτῷ). The angel addresses Cornelius directly by name, “Cornelius.” Angels speaking to people are familiar in both the New and Old Testaments, but occasions in which people are addressed by name are not common. We probably have here a Lukan means of emphasising the personal nature of this revelation to, of all people, a Gentile.

Interestingly Luke tells the reader that Cornelius saw this vision “clearly” (φανερῶς). This is the only time Luke, either in his Gospel or in Acts, uses this adverb. It occurs in only two other places in the New Testament, in Mark 1:45 and John 7:10, where it has the meaning of

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45 See for example Gen 16:9f; 22:11f; 31:1; Num 22:32; Judg 2:1; 6:12f; 1 Kgs 19:5; Zech 1:14.
46 For example Luke 1:13; Matt 1:20; Gen 31:11.
“openly” or “publically,” that is, in a physical sense.\(^47\) In 2 Macc 3:28 it is used with regard to clear (mental) perception.\(^48\) As the conversion of the Gentile Cornelius breaks new ground for the fledgling Jesus movement, Luke is most likely emphasising that Cornelius was not deluded.\(^49\) This is a genuine work of God.

Cornelius, fearful, stares intently at the heavenly visitor.\(^50\) The angel of God informs Cornelius that God has, in effect, responded to his prayers and acts of charity. The directions he gives Cornelius are detailed. Not only does he tell Cornelius what to do but why. To build and maintain interest Luke does not reveal all at once. In his first appearance (10:3–6) the angel tells Cornelius to send men to Joppa and invite Simon, who is also called Peter. The angel helpfully adds that Peter is staying with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is beside the sea. Later, Cornelius, in relating to Peter his encounter with the angel, repeats, almost word for word, the angel’s instructions (10:32).

However, in Luke’s narration of Peter in Jerusalem defending himself against some Jewish Christians, Luke makes a most significant addition to the angel’s reasons as to why Cornelius should invite Peter

\(^{47}\) Josephus, *Life*, 277, uses φανερῶς only once, with reference to speaking openly.
\(^{48}\) “They recognised clearly the sovereign power of God.” NRSV.
\(^{49}\) “There was no possibility of mistake on Cornelius’s part.” Barrett, *Critical Commentary*, 502.
\(^{50}\) This is not an uncommon reaction when humans encounter angels, e.g. Luke 1:12; 2:9; 24:5; Matt 28:4, 8.
to Caesarea, namely, that Peter “will speak words to you (Cornelius) by which you will be, you [emphatic] and all your household will be saved” (11:5). It is hard to overestimate the importance of these words in the context of Cornelius’ conversion for here his conversion is described as being saved (σωθήση). These words also give insight into the skill of Luke as a narrator as they form part of his climactic conclusion (11:18) to the story of Cornelius’ conversion, a conclusion he has been carefully building to by holding back important information and revealing it as the narrative progresses.

5.3.2 Ecstasy

The second vision in Luke’s narrative of Cornelius is the one that Peter has on the roof of Simon the Tanner’s house in Joppa. Luke describes how this took place in a state of ecstasy (10:10). “And it happened that he got hungry and wanted to eat. While they were preparing (food) an ecstatic state came upon him” (ἐγένετο ἐπ᾿ αὐτὸν ἐκστάσις).

53 While in this state of ecstasy or trance Peter has a vision of a great sheet. Luke

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51 I consider it to be emphatic because the clause can stand without it.
52 ὃς λαλήσει ρήματα πρὸς σὲ ἐν οἷς σωθήσῃ σὺ καὶ πᾶς ὁ οἶκος σου. In 10:32 where Cornelius tells Peter about the angel’s instructions, the Western text has added “who, when he has arrived, will speak to you” (ὁς παραγενόμενος λαλήσει σοι). The addition is interesting in the light of 11:14 which it seems to anticipate but it is clumsy in that ὃς, by virtue of proximity, refers to Simon the tanner. Metzger, Textual Commentary, 331–32.
53 Some scribes probably felt “came” (ἐγένετο) was too bland and substituted “fell upon him” (ἐπέπεσεν); see E L Ψ 33. 614. 1241. 1505.
later describes how something similar happened to Paul in the temple in Jerusalem. “And it happened to me when I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple an ecstatic state (or trance) (ἐκστάσει) came upon me and I saw him (Jesus) saying to me …” (Acts 22:17, 18a)

On both occasions in this state of ecstasy a divinely initiated vision occurs through which God speaks to Peter and the risen Christ to Paul. The LXX uses ἐκστασις to describe Abram’s state when God met with him to confirm his promise that his descendants would receive the land of Canaan (Gen 15:12).

The Greek word “ecstasy” (ἐκστασις) can have a supernatural and a mundane sense. We find the latter in Mark 5:42 and 16:8 where it may be translated “astonishment” or “amazement.” In the supernatural sense it refers to a “state of being in which consciousness is wholly or partially suspended,” and it is “frequently associated with divine action,” as would be the case in Acts 10:10; 11:5; 22:17. It is largely a Lukan word for of the seven times it occurs in the NT five are to be found in Luke-Acts, and Luke alone uses the word to refer to a supra-mundane state.

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54 See also Gen 27:33; Num 13:32; 1 Sam 14:25; 2 Chron 15:5.
55 See BDAG 309. Cf. Oepke’s understanding of this word as a “beneficial apprehension and infilling by a higher power . . .” A. Oepke, “ἐκστάσις, ἔξιστημι,” TDNT 2:449–460.
“It happened that he was hungry” (Acts 10:10). Opinion is divided as to whether Peter’s state of ecstasy was understood by Luke to be induced by a lack of food. For example, Pervo rejects the idea that Luke is suggesting that the vision came about because he was hungry.⁵⁶ Peterson, on the other hand, argues that “Luke implies that his [Peter’s] physical condition and his prayerfulness made him receptive to the vision.”⁵⁷ Keener suggests that Luke mentions Peter’s hunger not to give a “psychological explanation for the vision . . . but to emphasise the piety of his resistance to the idea of eating non-kosher food in 10:14.”⁵⁸

But even if there is in the case of Peter some kind of conditioning, we should not, as Oepke points out, let this tell against the vision. Even genuine experiences of God will have “historical and psychological conditioning” which should not be regarded as devaluing them.⁵⁹ What is important to Luke’s narrative is his use of “ecstasy” (ἐκστασις) to emphasise the divine initiative in the conversion of Cornelius.

In a state of ecstasy Peter has a vision of “heaven opened and a large sheet being lowered by its four corners to the earth” (10:12). The expression “heaven opened” (τὸν οὐρανὸν ἀνεῴγμένον) is an

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⁵⁷ Peterson, Acts, 329.
⁵⁸ Keener, Acts, 2:1771.
⁵⁹ Oepke, TDNT, 450.
indication of divine revelation (cf. Luke 3:21; Acts 7:56). In the sheet Peter sees four-legged animals, birds and reptiles, and he hears a voice, “Peter, kill and eat.” Peter protests strongly, “Certainly not, Lord, because I have never eaten anything common or unclean.” The voice comes to him a second time, “That which God has cleansed (ἐκαθάρισεν), you (are not to consider ritually) unclean (κοίνου).” This happens three times and then, in the vision, the sheet is taken up into heaven (Acts 10:11–16).

It is outside the scope of this thesis to go into some of the matters raised by these verses. Would there not have been some “clean” animals in the sheet that Peter could have chosen? What is meant by “cleansed” (ἐκαθάρισεν) and what is its theological basis? Is it creation when God declared “good” all that he had created (Gen 1:31)? Was it on the basis of Cornelius’ piety which secured for him cleansing but not salvation? Is it a proleptic reference to the cleansing of the Gentiles by faith in anticipation of what was shortly to happen (see 15:9)? What is the point of this vision in the light of the Markan Jesus’ declaration that all

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62 Acts 15:9, τῇ πίστει καθαρίσας τὰς καρδίας αὐτῶν. Here “cleansing” seems synonymous with “salvation.”
foods are clean (Mark 7:19)? What is the difference between “common” (κοινόν) and “unclean” (ἀκάθαρτον)?

What is important with regard to the conversion of Cornelius is that by means of this vision God prepares the human agent, Peter, to speak to Cornelius words by which he and all his household will be saved. As Luke narrates this story Peter was not, in himself, ready to preach the gospel to a Gentile. Thus while an angel of God directs Cornelius to send for Peter, God speaks directly to Peter through a vision, a vision that needs to be repeated twice. All that is “seen” is the great sheet being lowered full of animals, birds and reptiles. Luke recounts how a “voice” (φωνή) directs Peter to “kill and eat” (10:13; 11:7).

5.3.3 Divine voice

Whose “voice” (φωνή) is this that directs Peter to “arise, kill and eat”? It is described by Luke as a “voice from heaven” (ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ) (11:9). Luke uses a similar expression in recounting the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist and the coming of the Spirit in bodily form as a dove on Jesus. At that event there is also a “voice from heaven,” which is obviously the voice of God, declaring, “this is my beloved son in whom

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63 Pervo, Acts, 269; Barrett, Critical Commentary, 493.
I am well-pleased” (Lk 3:22). In the LXX both God and angels are portrayed as speaking from heaven (ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ). If it is an angel speaking to Peter this may explain why the third person, “what God has cleansed …,” is used and not the first person, “what I have cleansed ….”

Peter’s use of “Lord” (κύριε) does not settle the matter for this is the way Cornelius addresses the angel that speaks to him (10:4). Whatever the case might be, what is important is the expression “from heaven” (ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ), which implies the “voice” was from God, something Peter (10:28) and the reader knows.

5.3.4 Divine timing

Another way in which Luke highlights divine agency is through what Peterson calls the providential ordering of events. In Caesarea Cornelius sees his vision of an angel while he is praying (10:3, 30), “around the ninth hour” (ὡσεὶ περὶ ὀσμῆς ἡμέρας), that is, in the middle of the afternoon. This was the Jewish time of prayer at the Temple and was “associated with the evening sacrifice.” That

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64 See also Acts 7:31; 9:4, 7; 22:7; 26:14.
65 Regarding God speaking from heaven see: Exod 20:22; Deut 4:36; Dan 4:31. For angels see Gen 21:17; 22:11, 15.
66 Pervo, Acts, 271 footnote 66, observes that “voice” (φωνή) with “happened” (ἐγένετο) occurs “at important moments: Mark 1:11 (baptism of Jesus); Luke 9:35 (transfiguration); Acts 7:31 (burning bush).”
67 Peterson, Acts, 331.
68 Peterson, Acts, 327.
Cornelius has this vision of an angel while praying underscores the divine initiative.

The Cornelius story is one of movement, between Caesarea and Joppa, and impeccable timing. Obeying the angel’s directions Cornelius sends two of his servants and a soldier to Joppa, around fifty kilometres away, to invite Peter to Caesarea. Luke narrates how, the next day, as Cornelius’ emissaries are “providentially drawing near” to Joppa, Peter goes up on the (flat) roof of Simon the Tanner’s house to pray. While on the roof Peter has the vision of the great sheet being lowered to the ground. Interest mounts as Luke writes that while Peter was pondering over the meaning of the vision Cornelius’ men arrive at the house asking if a Simon Peter is there. That Cornelius’ messengers should arrive, after a fifty kilometre journey, at that particular moment when Peter is reflecting on the vision cannot help but impress the reader and underline that God is ordering these events. As in the story of the Ethiopian, Luke’s use of “behold” (ἰδοὺ) draws attention to what follows and adds emphasis to what is happening, “Behold, three men are seeking you …” (10:19). In Peter’s recounting of the timing of the

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71 Perhaps giving an indication of Luke’s engaging style of writing, of the 200 occurrences of ἰδοὺ in the NT 40 per cent are to be found in Luke-Acts. It is also a
men’s arrival to the Jerusalem Christians, Luke gives this timing even greater stress by the use of “at once” (ἐξαυτῆς).

The divine initiative is even further impressed upon the reader through the dramatic intrusion of the Spirit later in the story. While Peter is still speaking about Jesus (10:37–43) to Cornelius, his relatives and friends, the Holy Spirit “falls” on all those listening to Peter’s message. Tannehill observes that this is a “decisive indication of God’s will ...”

There is some question over whether Peter had actually finished all that he had to say. Barrett believes he had preached all that he needed to about Jesus’ life, death and resurrection along with a challenge to believe (10:43). “There was nothing else for Peter to say.”

Keener, commenting on 11:15, believes that Peter was interrupted and had more to give. With regards to 11:15 it is hard to reconcile Peter’s “When I began to speak” (ἐν δὲ τῷ ἀφεσθαί με λαλεῖν) with Luke’s narration in 10:44, “while Peter was still speaking these words” (Ετι

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favourite of Matthew with 31 per cent of the occurrences. Accordance 11, accessed 26 July 2013.

72 “Behold, at once, three men stood at the house ...” (11:11).
73 Ἐτι λαλοῦντος τοῦ Πέτρου τὰ ῥήματα ταῦτα ἐπέπεσεν τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον ἐπὶ πάντας τοὺς ἀκούοντας τὸν λόγον.
λαλούντος Πέτρου τα φήματα ταύτα). Further, as Barrett points out, it is difficult to square both with Luke’s record of Peter’s words (10:34–43) which appear to cover, even if they are a summary, “the usual content of the proclamation characteristic of the early chapters of Acts.” That is, he had said all that he needed to say. Despite the difficulties it is not unreasonable to assume that the Spirit cut short Peter’s sermon, even if the basics had been covered, as Keener believes (see above). More could have been said by way of elaboration but the main points had been presented.

5.3.5 The Holy Spirit

The role of the Holy Spirit is much more prominent and complex in Luke’s account of the conversion of Cornelius than in that of the Ethiopian eunuch. In the story of the eunuch’s conversion the Spirit’s role is a behind the scenes one, limited to speaking to Philip, directing him to join the chariot in which the Ethiopian is riding (8:20), and, after the eunuch is baptised, snatching Philip away from the scene (8:39). In the Cornelius episode the Spirit not only speaks to and directs Peter but

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77 Barrett, Critical Commentary, 541. See also Bruce, Book of the Acts, 222 footnote 13. Bruce suggests that ἀρξασθαί is “not to be pressed unduly” as “in several places in the narrative parts of the NT, ἀρχομαι is little more than a semitizing redundant auxiliary.”

78 A corrected copy of the fifth century manuscript Alexandrinus expands the work of the Spirit by adding “the Holy Spirit fell (ἐπέπσεν) on the eunuch.”
comes upon Cornelius, his relatives and close friends in a powerful and
dramatic way that has visible effects and also echoes Luke’s account of
the coming of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2).

The Holy Spirit is both a director and prominent actor in the
Cornelius episode. The Spirit links Peter with Cornelius. While Peter is
pondering the meaning of the vision he had just seen three times, and
Cornelius’ messengers are asking for Peter at Simon the Tanner’s house,
the Spirit speaks to Peter. He informs him that three men are downstairs
seeking him and that he is, without hesitation (μηδὲν διακρινόμενος),
to go with them (10:20; 11:12). If the visions he had just seen were
puzzling to Peter, the Spirit’s words would have added to his
perplexity. What was it about these men that Peter should not be
hesitant about? But not only does the Holy Spirit direct Peter downstairs
but in doing so the Spirit also moves Peter towards an understanding of
what he has just seen so that Peter will shortly be able to say, “God has
shown me …” (10:28).

The Spirit does this by bringing Peter and Cornelius’ messengers
together. It is here that Luke reveals the directing role of the Spirit. The
Spirit directs Peter that he should go with the men without hesitation,
“because I have sent them” (ὁτι ἔγω ἀπέσταλκα αὐτοὺς) (10:20). The
“I” (ἐγώ) is emphatic in this clause. The words are striking and cannot be underestimated in their implications.

This directing role of the Spirit can be found elsewhere in Acts. In his account of the church at Antioch Luke goes further in attributing a calling as well as a sending role to the Spirit. He records (Acts 13:2) how the Spirit instructed the gathered prophets and teachers there to set apart Barnabas and Paul to the work to which the Spirit had called them. Luke then describes Barnabas and Paul as those who had been sent out by the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:4). After the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), as Paul, Silas and Timothy visited churches in Cilicia, Galatia and Phrygia, the Spirit did not allow them to preach in Asia or Bithynia (Acts 16: 6, 7). In Acts 16:7 the Spirit who stops them is described as the “Spirit of Jesus” (τὸ πνεῦμα Ἰησοῦ). This is a reminder that in Luke-Acts the role of the Spirit is placed on a level to that of Jesus. The Lukan Jesus sends his disciples out as sheep in the midst of wolves (Lk 10:3) and later sends the promise of the Father (that is, the Spirit) upon them (Lk 24:29). It is the risen Jesus who tells Paul that he sends him to the

79 εἶπεν τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἀγιον ἀφορίσατε δή μοι τὸν Βαρναβᾶν καὶ Σαῦλον εἰς τὸ ἐργὸν ὃ προσκέκλημαι αὐτούς.
80 Αὐτοὶ μὲν οὖν ἐκπεμφθέντες ὑπὸ τοῦ ἀγιον πνεῦματος.
81 This unusual expression which only occurs here has good textual support. However some copyists seem to have struggled with it. The fifth century uncial Ephraimi Rescriptus, replaced “Jesus” with “Lord” and an eighth century manuscript, L, removed it altogether.
Gentiles (Acts 26:17). Pervo observes that this “is another example of the interchangeability of Jesus and the Spirit in Acts.”

The Spirit, however, has more to do than simply set up this meeting between Cornelius and Peter. Luke in his narrative has been building to this meeting and has yet more to tell. Cornelius explains to Peter why he has sent for him and tells him that he and his friends and relatives have gathered together “to hear all that you had been directed by the Lord (to say)” (Acts 10:33). Then, suddenly and dramatically, while Peter is speaking, the Spirit “fell” (ἐπεπέσεν) on all those who were listening to the message (Acts 10:44; 11:15; cf. 8:16). Here we come to the heart of Cornelius’ conversion. Luke also describes this coming of the Spirit as a “pouring out” (ἐκκέχυται) of the Spirit (Acts 10:45). The reader would, most likely, have picked up a link, through the use of the related verb (ἐκχέω), to the prophecy of Joel quoted by Peter on the Day of Pentecost, “In the last days, says God, I will pour out (ἐκχέω) from my Spirit on all flesh” (Acts 2:17; cf. 2:33).

Luke-Acts uses a number of words in addition to “fell” (ἐπεπέσεν) and “poured out” (ἐκκέχυται) to describe the Holy Spirit’s encounter with humans. The Spirit “comes upon” (ἐπελθόντος) (Acts

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82 Pervo, Acts, 272.
83 ἐπεπέσεν τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον ἐπὶ πάντας τοὺς ἀκούοντας τὸν λόγον.
84 Cf. Joel 2:28 (3:1 LXX). On the relationship between the two verb forms see BDAG 312.
A person may “receive” the Spirit (λήμψεσθε) (Acts 2:38), and be “baptised” in the Spirit (βαπτισθέσθε) (Acts 1:5; cf. Luke 3:16). Cornelius’ experience of the Spirit can also be described as a “baptism of the Spirit.” This is seen from what Peter says to his detractors in Jerusalem (Acts 11:3–17). Reflecting upon the implications of what he had recently experienced in Caesarea with Cornelius Peter draws a direct line to the words of Jesus on how John baptised with water but the disciples would be baptised in the Holy Spirit (Acts 11:16; cf. 1:5). 85

Peter’s use of “gift” (δωρεάν) to describe the Spirit in 11:17 recalls the same description in his Pentecost message (Acts 2:38; cf. 8:21).

Is there any difference in the import of the various descriptions? Barrett does not think so. 86 By and large I believe he is right and that all these expressions broadly describe the human encounter with the Spirit. However, one can detect in Luke’s use of these words some slight nuances. Words like “fell” and “come upon” point to the initial contact with the Spirit which in turn leads to a changed state of being, described by such words as “filled” and

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85 The matter of whether Peter was getting the words of Jesus mixed up with the words of John will be discussed below.

86 Barrett, Critical Commentary, 529.
“baptised.” The difference is one of nuance and not substance for Luke is describing different aspects of the one experience of the Spirit.

The falling of the Spirit has a visible and startling outcome, occurring in the narrative as much for the benefit of Peter and his Jewish Christian companions as for Cornelius and his friends. That this is so may be seen from the way in which Luke continues with his narrative. After telling of the falling of the Spirit (Acts 10:44) he first relates the amazement of the circumcised believers who had made the journey from Joppa with Peter (Acts 10:45). Why were they amazed? The gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 2:38) had been “poured out” on the Gentiles and they knew this to be so because they heard them “speaking in tongues and extolling God in praise” (Acts 10:46). On this occasion these were the visible signs of the conversion of Cornelius and the other Gentiles with him. The use of the imperfect (ἤκουον) and present tense participle (λαλούντων) suggests that this might have gone on for some time.

What was the nature of this speaking in tongues (γλώσσαις)? Speaking in tongues is mentioned three times in Acts, here in the conversion of Cornelius, in the account of the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:3, 4, 11) and in the encounter of Paul with the disciples of John in Ephesus (19:6). Luke narrates how, on the Day of Pentecost, “tongues of fire”

87 Καὶ ἐξέστησαν οἱ ἐκ περιτομῆς πιστοί.
88 ἤκουον γὰρ αὐτῶν λαλούντων γλώσσαις καὶ μεγαλυνόντων τὸν θεόν.
(γλῶσσαι ὡσεὶ πυρὸς) were distributed on the apostles and the other followers of Jesus with them and how they were “all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues (ἐτέρας γλώσσας) as the Spirit was giving them utterance” (2:3, 4). These “other tongues” are identified by the hearers from different nations (ἐθνοὺς) as “our tongues” (ἡμετέραις γλώσσαις) (2:11), that is, known languages (see also 2:6). In the episodes of Cornelius (10:46) and the Ephesian disciples (19:6) Luke notes only that they spoke in tongues.

According to Luke, did Cornelius, his relatives and close friends speak in known languages (xenolalia), as on the Day of Pentecost, or was their tongues-speaking of the ecstatic kind mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14? It is difficult to decide one way or the other. In favour of xenolalia is how Peter understands what was happening before him. He makes the connection between this and what had occurred on the Day of Pentecost, stating that Cornelius and the other Gentiles with him had “received the Holy Spirit as we also did” (τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἀγιὸν ἐλαβον ώς καὶ ἡμεῖς) (10:47). To his Jewish Christian critics in Jerusalem Peter points out that the Holy Spirit had fallen upon the Gentiles “as also upon us in the beginning” (ὡσπερ καὶ ἐφ' ἡμᾶς ἐν

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89 That this is a miracle of speaking and not hearing, as Pervo argues, is suggested by Luke’s observation that what was inspired by the Spirit was speaking, not hearing. The 120 spoke in “other tongues just as the Spirit was giving them utterance” (καθὼς τὸ πνεῦμα ἐδίδου ἀποφθέγγεσθαι αὐτοῖς) (my emphasis). Cf. Pervo, Acts, 64.
ἀρχῇ (11:15). “In the beginning” could only refer to the pouring out of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2).⁹⁰ God had given “the same gift” (τὴν ἰσήν δοθέαν) to the Gentiles as to the Jews present at Pentecost (11:17). If it was “the same gift” then it would be reasonable to conclude that the Gentiles also spoke in known tongues.⁹¹ On the other hand, in contrast to the Day of Pentecost, it is not unreasonable to surmise that Peter and his companions spoke the same language as the Gentiles present, Greek, so what would have been the foreign language spoken by Cornelius and his close friends that they did not know and that Peter and companions could recognise? Further, Luke makes no comment as to xenolalia being spoken. I think it more likely that the tongues-speaking was a form of glossolalia as mentioned by Paul in his Corinthian correspondence. Peter’s reference to “the same gift” is a reference to the Holy Spirit and not to the Spirit’s audible manifestation.⁹²

There is a thematic link between Cornelius’ conversion, that of the eunuch and what happened on the day of Pentecost. That link is praise. Luke records Cornelius praising God through speaking in

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tongues (μεγαλυνότων τὸν θεόν) (10:46). On the day of Pentecost Luke, using a related word (μεγαλεία), narrates how those “from every nation under heaven dwelling in Jerusalem” gathered to hear the apostles and those with them “speaking in our languages the great things (μεγαλεία) of God” (2:5, 11). In this way Luke links an inner work of the Spirit in a person with an audible expression of joy, manifested in praise of God. So it seems to be also with the conversion of the eunuch who after his baptism “went on his way rejoicing.”

Tongues and praise were, in Cornelius’ case, a visible and audible sign of a genuine and life-changing work of the Holy Spirit.

Luke’s use of “then Peter responded …” (τότε ἀπεκρίθη Πέτρος) suggests Peter’s insight into what was occurring and what needed to happen next. Barrett points out, “Peter was not, strictly speaking, answering anyone; he was in fact answering the situation, a not uncommon use of ἀποκρίνεσθαι” (cf. Acts 3:12). Even though Cornelius and friends had been baptised in the Spirit Peter still directs that they be baptised in water. Peter does not seem to think that Spirit

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94 See also Acts 8:8.
96 This understanding of ἀπεκρίθη is to be preferred to the NRSV and NIV’s bland “then Peter said . . .”
97 Barrett, Critical Commentary, 530.
baptism is enough even though it had been accompanied by remarkable signs of tongues and praise. The inner work of the Spirit had to be accompanied by the outer sign of water baptism.

Does the use by Peter of a rhetorical question, “can anyone refuse (κῶλυσαι) water to baptise these” Gentiles (10:47; cf. 11:17), hint at the possibility that some might object to Gentiles being baptised without being circumcised? Though God had shown Peter not to call anyone “common or unclean” (10:28) he is aware of the contentious nature of what is about to happen. The question also heightens tension and draws the reader, who is aware of Peter’s recent struggle (10:13–16), into the unfolding narrative.

In the conversion of Cornelius, is the work of the Spirit limited to directing Peter and testifying to Cornelius’ conversion? It is the Spirit who prepares the apostle Peter and directs him to Caesarea and Cornelius. While Peter is preaching the Spirit falls upon Cornelius, his relatives and close friends and they start speaking in tongues and praising God. Some commentators have characterised the Spirit’s role in Cornelius’ house (10:44–46) as the “Spirit of Prophecy.”

98 “Spirit of prophecy” implies that the Holy Spirit is the source of revelation and words in various forms such as visions and dreams, guidance, instruction, tongues, praise, preaching and testimony. The expression “Spirit of prophecy” derives from the pouring out of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, in fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel (2:16). Turner, Power, 349–350. Cf. also Peterson, Acts, 339.

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to the work of the Spirit than giving audible testimony? Comparing
11:14 with Peter’s words at the Jerusalem council (15:7–8) suggests that
it is Peter’s preaching that initiates faith whereas the Spirit’s role is to
confirm this through audible testimony.99

If Acts 2:38–39 can be regarded as the norm100 for Luke, and
conversion involved repentance, baptism and the receiving of the Holy
Spirit, then the role of the Spirit would be more than testifying to
conversion but would be involved in the act of conversion itself. As
Luke understands it, after Jesus ascended to heaven it was the role of
the Spirit to make Jesus known. The Lukan Jesus tells the eleven
disciples and those with them in Jerusalem (Luke 24:33) that

it was written that the Christ was to suffer and to rise from the
dead on the third day and that repentance for the forgiveness of
sins was to be preached in his name to all nations . . . and behold
I send the promise of my Father upon you . . . (Luke 24:46–49)

The salvation that Jesus had obtained was to be made known after Jesus’
ascension through the Spirit. In Acts Luke links “repentance for the
forgiveness of sins” to baptism and the receipt of the Spirit. Turner
argues,

In the period of the ministry [of Jesus], it was the presence of the
Son, revealing the Father, in the power of the Spirit, that made
the disciples’ experience of ‘faith’ and ‘salvation’ possible (cf. e.g.
Lk 10:21–24). Beyond the ascension there was no corresponding

99 Turner, Power, 382.
means of the God-revealing presence of Jesus, other than in and through the gift of the Spirit.\textsuperscript{101}

Hence Turner concludes that the Spirit of prophecy is “simultaneously the soteriological Spirit.”\textsuperscript{102} As well as the outward manifestation of the Spirit in tongues and praise, Peterson also argues there was an implied inner work

by which he [i.e. the Spirit] moved them to believe that Jesus was Saviour and Lord and gave them the assurance that all the blessings of the messianic era were theirs, thus enabling them to praise God.\textsuperscript{103}

If Acts 2:38–39 may be regarded as a standard for Lukan conversion, it should not be seen as fixing a certain order, that is, repentance, then baptism and then the receiving of the Spirit. In Cornelius’ case the Spirit “falls” upon Cornelius and his Gentile companions before they are baptised. Earlier in his account Luke narrates how the Samaritans believe and are baptised then later receive the Holy Spirit (8:14–17). But 2:38–39 can be regarded as a “norm” in that conversion for Luke involves repentance, baptism and receiving the

\textsuperscript{101} Turner, \textit{Power}, 358 (Turner’s emphasis).
\textsuperscript{102} Turner, \textit{Power}, 386.
\textsuperscript{103} Peterson, \textit{Acts}, 346.
Holy Spirit, although not necessarily in that order. I argue, therefore, that
the reader would understand this and where one of these elements is
missing would assume that the missing element is present even though
not explicitly stated. Thus Turner contends that with Cornelius we
are back with the “norm” of receiving the Spirit associated with “conversional
repentance and baptism,” even if not in the order of 2:38. From this point of view
the Samaritan experience and that of Paul’s encounter with the Ephesian
disciples (19:1–6) fits the Lukan “norm” broadly understood.

Luke, in a variety of ways, stresses that the conversion of Cornelius, his
relatives and close friends, is a work of God. An angel appears to Cornelius
directing him to invite the apostle Peter to his place, the apostle experiences
the same vision three times and a voice “from heaven” informs Peter not to call “common” what God has
cleansed. Cornelius’ messengers providentially arrive at the place where
Peter is staying at the moment when Peter is pondering the meaning of his
vision. The Holy Spirit tells Peter to go with them and later “falls” on
Cornelius and his companions while Peter is speaking about Jesus. So

104 To round out the Lukan picture it must also be added that faith is also important for his understanding of conversion. See 2:44; 4:4, 32; 5:14; 8:12; 9:42; 10:43; 11:17 to give but a few examples.
106 Turner, Power, 384.
emphatic is the divine working in Cornelius’ conversion that Haenchen could complain that “in endeavouri
ng to make the hand of God visible in the history of the Church, Luke virtually excludes all human decision.”107 Is this claim justified? The nature of human participation in this conversion account is taken up below (5.4 Human involvement).

5.3.6 God

While divine agency is prominent in Luke’s portrayal of Cornelius’ conversion God is rarely mentioned explicitly. It is only in the conclusion to this conversion narrative, when Peter is being called to account by “those of the circumcision” in Jerusalem, that Luke includes two summarising statements that clearly indicate that all that has happened is a work of God. For emphasis, the reader is told this twice from two different points of view, both testimonies being compelling because both sources experienced what they did not expect.

In the Lukan summary of Peter’s defence before “those of the circumcision” Peter concludes, “therefore if God gave them the same gift as to us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, how was I able to hinder God?”108 Peter is referring to the falling of the Spirit on Cornelius and his friends (11:15–16), but by implication, what he has related about

108 εἰ οὖν τὴν ἴσην δωρεὰν ἐδώκεν αὐτοῖς ὁ θεός ὡς καὶ ἡμῖν πιστεύσασιν ἐπὶ τὸν κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν, ἐγὼ τίς ἡμῖν δυνατὸς καλύσαι τὸν θεόν;

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the events leading up to that (11:4–14) are also to be understood as
God’s working. In being led to Cornelius Peter was undergoing a
dramatic, if somewhat hesitant change in attitude towards Gentiles. In
light of the vision of the sheet and then the falling of the Spirit on the
Gentiles before he had finished speaking, the apostle Peter can only
conclude that what happened was from God. It was something that he
had no control over, it was something he had not expected.

Luke reinforces Peter’s conclusion by including the response of
his critics. “When they heard these things they were silent and glorified
God saying, ‘So then, also to the Gentiles God has given the repentance
to [resulting in] life.’” 109 It is clear that these are words of the Jewish
Christians Luke refers to in 11:2, those “of the circumcision” who had
criticised Peter for fellowshipping with the “uncircumcised” (11:3). As
these Jewish Christians are also confronted by the unexpected, the reader
may detect an element of surprise in their words, “so then, also to the
Gentiles . . .” (ἀρα καὶ τοῖς ἔθνεσιν). Keener raises the question as to
why they should have been surprised for would they not have been

109 Ἀκούσαντες δὲ ταῦτα ἤσύχασαν καὶ ἐδόξασαν τὸν θεὸν λέγοντες ἀρα καὶ τοῖς ἔθνεσιν ὁ θεὸς τὴν μετάνοιαν εἰς ἔως ἐδωκεν. In the clause “They were silent,” ἤσύχασαν is to be understood as indicating that the circumcision party stopped
criticizing Peter for they continued to speak and praise God. As Acts 15:8 shows the
matter of how the Gentiles were to be included in the church was not completely
resolved at this time.
aware of Gentile proselytes (2:11; 6:5)? It is hard to resolve this matter but their surprise has the literary effect of emphasising that what has happened is God’s work. In the Lukan narrative those who begin by taking Peter to task for fellowshipping with Gentiles (11:2, 3) end up by praising God for giving to the Gentiles, “the repentance to [resulting in] life” (11:18).

The conclusion of the Jewish Christians that “God has given the repentance to [resulting in] life” to the Gentiles is of interest to this thesis. In what sense did God give repentance? Is the reader to understand this as God giving an opportunity to repent or that God gives repentance itself? Conzelmann argued that it meant God gave the opportunity to repent. Green agrees with Conzelmann, pointing out that the wording of 11:18 (and 5:31, a verse with a similar expression) cannot be taken at face value because only a few Gentiles repented. That is, God did not give repentance as such to “the Gentiles” (τοῖς ἔθνεσιν) because all Gentiles did not repent, only a small number.

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Against Conzelmann Stenschke argues that in 11:18 (and 5:31) God gives repentance rather than the opportunity to repent.\footnote{See also Bruce, \textit{Book of Acts}, 223; Gaventa, \textit{Acts}, 173; Peterson, \textit{Acts}, 349.} He points out, \textit{inter alia}, that the wording of these verses does not mention an “opportunity” to repent even though Luke had at least one Greek word, τόπος, to use.\footnote{Christoph W Stenschke, \textit{Luke’s Portrait of Gentiles Prior to Their Coming to Faith} (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 158.} For the use of this word meaning an opportunity to repent, see Wisdom 12:10 (LXX).\footnote{Only in Wisdom 12:10, 19, do we find together the words μετανοία and δίδωμι in the LXX. In 12:10 referring to the Gentiles, an “opportunity” (τόπος) for repentance is mentioned which in the text is seen as futile (see NRSV translation). In 12:19, referring to God’s people, God gives “repentance for sins.” (NRSV). In 12:19 a τόπος is not mentioned. “Both ideas, ‘granting repentance’ and ‘granting an opportunity for repentance’ not only appear as different concepts but are also expressed differently.” Stenschke, \textit{Luke’s Portrait}, 157–58.} Stenschke refers to the narrative of Cornelius’ conversion (10:34–48) where, as described by Luke, there is no opportunity to repent given, rather while Peter is speaking the Spirit falls. According to Stenschke, “nothing in Luke’s account suggests that God gave anything but repentance itself.”\footnote{Stenschke, \textit{Luke’s Portrait}, 162.}

Is the reader to understand that God gave repentance or an opportunity for repentance? Either view requires the reader to fill in some gaps, to understand the text in a certain way, either that “God gave the opportunity of repentance to the Gentiles” or “God gave repentance to some Gentiles.” I understand 11:18 to refer to God giving repentance, i.e. the latter reading, and not just the opportunity for
repentance. This is supported in Peter’s speech to his detractors, particularly by the way he links the falling of the Spirit on his Gentile hearers in Caesarea with God’s gift of the Spirit at Pentecost in Jerusalem (11:17; 2:33). The Gentiles receive the same gift of the (soteriological) Spirit as was given at Pentecost. The reader would further note that Luke, in his opening comments to this scene (11:1), describes those Gentiles who had believed as receiving the message about Jesus (“the Gentiles received the word of God”) which is similar to how he describes those who were baptised on the Day of Pentecost (2:41), “those who received his word (about Jesus) were baptised.”

5.4 Human involvement

The two key characters in the Cornelius episode are the centurion Cornelius and the apostle Peter, and Luke structures his narrative around them. Three groups, the messengers sent by Cornelius to Joppa, Peter’s Jewish-Christian companions and Peter’s detractors in Jerusalem, play minor but important supporting roles. As I will endeavour to show, these characters, especially Cornelius and Peter, are more than marionettes moved by the hand of God. They have a genuine contribution to make.
5.4.1 Cornelius

Luke describes Cornelius as a “centurion of the Italian cohort.” (10:1)\textsuperscript{117}

A centurion was in charge of around 100 soldiers and a cohort was the “tenth part of a legion” with usually 600 men although this number could vary.\textsuperscript{118} The centurion of the Roman army reported to a tribune and was regarded as “the backbone of the Roman army.”\textsuperscript{119} The Roman historian Polybius describes them as “good leaders, of steady and prudent mind, not prone to take the offensive or start fighting wantonly, but able when overwhelmed and hard-pressed to stand fast and die at their post.”\textsuperscript{120} Despite the dangers of serving in the military the rank could be attractive for it conferred a certain honour particularly for men from the lower strata of society.\textsuperscript{121}

There is a difficulty in that on the available evidence the Italian cohort was not stationed in Syria before 69 C.E.\textsuperscript{122} Information on what Roman military units were in Palestine and Syria is sketchy and it is possible this cohort was in the area before 69 C.E. but we cannot be

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{117} ἐκατοντάρχης ἐκ σπείρης τῆς καλουμένης Ἰταλικῆς.

\textsuperscript{118} BDAG 299, 936. Parsons, \textit{Acts}, 142. Keener, \textit{Acts}, 2:1743. Keener notes that the centurion’s charge could be as low as 60 men.

\textsuperscript{119} Keener, \textit{Acts}, 2:1742.

\textsuperscript{120} Polybius, \textit{The Histories}, 6.24.

\textsuperscript{121} Keener, \textit{Acts}, 2:1743.

\textsuperscript{122} Witherington, \textit{Acts}, 346.
\end{footnotesize}
sure.\textsuperscript{123} Cornelius may have been a member of a local auxiliary unit that later became a part of the Italian cohort.\textsuperscript{124} It is also possible that Cornelius was secondered from the Italian cohort to an auxiliary force stationed in Caesarea.\textsuperscript{125} We cannot be sure that Cornelius was retired or was still on active duty. Keener believes that he may have been retired but the reference to a soldier,\textsuperscript{126} who, along with two servants, “waited on” him\textsuperscript{127} suggests that Cornelius was still a serving soldier. If he was retired then the soldier would also have been retired and out of loyalty and shared religious beliefs, had remained with Cornelius after serving in the military.\textsuperscript{128}

It is likely that Cornelius was a Roman citizen. To belong to a legion a man had to be Roman citizen.\textsuperscript{129} If he was a member of the Italian cohort then it would follow he was a citizen by birth. If he was member of an auxiliary then he may have received his Roman citizenship upon retirement as a reward for military service.\textsuperscript{130} Keener suggests that he is a Roman citizen from the East, that is, ethnically he is

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{124} There is evidence of units recruited by Herod Agrippa in 41–44 C.E. passing into Roman military service after Herod died. Josephus, \textit{Ant}, 19.364–65; Witherington, \textit{Acts}, 346.
\textsuperscript{125} Keener, \textit{Acts}, 2:1740.
\textsuperscript{126} If he was retired then it was not necessary that the Italian cohort be actually present in Caesarea at the time. Dunn, \textit{Beginning}, 390 footnote 49.
\textsuperscript{127} δύο τῶν οἰκετῶν καὶ στρατιῶτην εὐσεβή τῶν προσκαρτεροῦντων αὐτῷ.
\textsuperscript{128} Keener, \textit{Acts}, 2:1759.
\textsuperscript{130} Keener, \textit{Acts}, 2:1741.
\end{footnotes}
non-Roman.\textsuperscript{131} That he had assembled in his house his “relatives” (συγγένεις) lends weight to the idea that Cornelius was native to Caesarea or nearby.\textsuperscript{132} His name also suggests that he was a Roman citizen although this is a matter about which we cannot be certain. “Cornelius” was a popular “name especially since 82 B.C.E., when Publius Cornelius Sulla freed ten thousand slaves who then adopted the name from his \textit{gens}.”\textsuperscript{133} Although much is unclear Luke portrays Cornelius as a man of some “status and rank.”\textsuperscript{134} He was reasonably well off with servants\textsuperscript{135} and a house large enough to accommodate his relations and close friends.\textsuperscript{136}

Luke makes much of Cornelius’ piety and he is in many ways “an exemplary believer in the God of Israel.”\textsuperscript{137} Luke describes him as “devout and fearing God with all his house.”\textsuperscript{138} The use of “devout” (εὐσεβὴς) implies a godly person of deep reverence. Luke adds that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{131} Keener, \textit{Acts}, 2:1739; cf. Alan Ryan, \textit{On Politics} (London: Penguin, 2012), 10. Ryan contrasts the Romans who, he observes, were more “politically astute” than the Athenians in that they made “new Romans of the people they conquered.”
\item \textsuperscript{132} συγγενεῖς refers to those outside the immediate family such as “first cousins and other close relatives.” Keener, \textit{Acts}, 2:1780; BDAG 950.
\item \textsuperscript{133} Keener, \textit{Acts}, 2:1739.
\item \textsuperscript{134} Witherington, \textit{Acts}, 347. Keener goes as far to suggest that Cornelius was of high status, similar to Theophilus. Keener, \textit{Acts}, 2:1749.
\item \textsuperscript{135} The Greek implies that the two servants and the soldier were drawn from a larger group of those that “waited on” Cornelius.
\item \textsuperscript{136} See 10:27. Pervo, \textit{Acts}, 267.
\item \textsuperscript{137} Peterson, \textit{Acts}, 327. Tannehill observes, “The emphasis on Cornelius’ piety is a noteworthy feature of the narrative rhetoric of this episode.” Tannehill, \textit{Acts of the Apostles}, 133.
\item \textsuperscript{138} εὐσεβὴς καὶ φοβούμενος τὸν θεὸν σὺν παντὶ τῷ οἴκῳ αὐτοῦ.
\end{itemize}
Cornelius feared God (φοβούμενος τὸν θεόν), that is, lived a life of respect for and worship of God.\(^{139}\) Luke emphasises this by repeating it later when Cornelius’ messengers meet Peter in Joppa and describe their master as one who fears God.\(^{140}\) It is not my intention here to get into the debate as to whether Cornelius could be considered a “God-fearer” or whether there was indeed such a category of persons at all.\(^{141}\) The participle “fearing” in “fearing God” (φοβούμενος τὸν θεόν), which occurs in 10:2 and later in 10:22, lacks the article and is stressing Cornelius’ devout character rather than being a technical term for a class of people who, while respecting and in some ways following the Jewish faith, did not become proselytes.\(^{142}\) Such was his godly life that it had had an influence on his household who, Luke narrates, also feared God (10:2). Further, Cornelius prayed “always” following the Jewish pattern of prayer. Thus Cornelius sees the vision of the angel of God while he was praying at the “ninth hour,” the time of prayer at the Temple during the evening sacrifice.\(^{143}\)

Cornelius is also described as “upright” (δίκαιος, 10:22), which, in the case of humans, refers to behaviour which comes from a sense of

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\(^{139}\) Peterson, *Acts*, 326.

\(^{140}\) See my discussion on God-fearers in chapter 2.


\(^{143}\) Peterson, *Acts*, 327. The “ninth hour” was around 3 pm.
responsibility to God. In Cornelius’ case, his uprightness expressed itself in generous acts of charity to those in need. In this regard Cornelius can be compared to an exemplary believer of the Septuagint, namely Tobit, who was also known and commended for his acts of charity (ἐλεημοσύνας) (Tobit 1:3, 8; 12:8). Literally, Luke narrates that Cornelius made many acts of charity (ποιῶν ἐλεημοσύνας πολλὰς τῷ λαῷ). Interestingly Luke uses the same expression to describe Cornelius’ acts of charity (ἐλεημοσύνας πολλὰς) as is used to describe Tobit’s (1:3). The expression “to the people” (τῷ λαῷ) suggests, in the context, that these acts of charity were (mainly) to Jewish people (the people of God) in need.

The influence of Cornelius’ life went beyond his household. His servants tell Peter that the Gentile Cornelius is “well-spoken of by the whole nation of the Jews” (10:22). By means of this hyperbole they imply that Cornelius is, in Caesarea and the surrounding area, universally well thought of by the Jews. This supports the idea that Cornelius’ acts of charity were mainly made to the Jews. The description of Cornelius by the messengers sent to Peter (10:22) contains additional

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144 BDAG, 246.
146 Tobit 1:3, ἐλεημοσύνας πολλὰς ἐποίησα.
147 μαρτυρούμενός τε ὑπὸ ὅλου τοῦ ἔθνους τῶν Ἰουδαίων.
information to what is given earlier by Luke (10:2).\textsuperscript{148} It reflects his skill in maintaining the interest of the reader. Witherington comments that holding back information “so that when he (Luke) repeats himself it will not involve redundancy … is a rhetorically apt approach when one has limited source material and still wishes to be persuasive without losing one’s audience.”\textsuperscript{149}

Luke’s reader would likely recall another centurion mentioned by Luke in his Gospel (Luke 7:1–10). This centurion is stationed at Capernaum and has a highly regarded servant who is very sick and on the point of death (Luke 7:2). Hearing that Jesus is in the town he sends Jewish elders to Jesus to ask him to come and heal his servant (Luke 7:3). By implication he could be described as one who feared God for he had a strong affinity for the Jews of the city and indeed is, like Cornelius, a benefactor to them, in his case having built a synagogue in Capernaum.\textsuperscript{150} His high opinion of the Jews is reciprocated because the Jewish elders are willing to speak on his behalf to Jesus.

\textsuperscript{148} δίκαιος καὶ φοβούμενος τὸν θεόν, μαρτυρούμενος τε ύπο οὖλου τοῦ ἐθνοὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων.
\textsuperscript{149} Witherington, \textit{Acts}, 351 footnote 101.
\textsuperscript{150} Luke 7:5, ἀγαπᾷ γὰρ τὸ ἔθνος ἡμῶν καὶ τὴν συναγωγὴν αὐτὸς φιλόδομησεν ἡμῖν. See also Keener, \textit{Acts}, 2:1744. While there are obvious similarities between this centurion and Cornelius, Pervo goes too far in suggesting that Cornelius was “modelled in part on the centurion of Luke 7:2–10.” Pervo, \textit{Acts}, 267.
Cornelius’ piety is noticed by God. In his vision the angel of God tells Cornelius that his prayers and alms have “gone up as a memorial before God” (10:4). This language is reminiscent of Tobit 12:12, 15, where the angel Raphael tells Tobit that his prayers are a “memorial” which he, the angel, has brought before the “Holy One.” Pervo argues that Tobit 12:12 “may have served as a direct source of v. 4b.” We cannot be sure but Luke could have used the language from Tobit to describe Cornelius, however this should not be taken to imply that Cornelius is a creation of Luke, only that he (possibly) found the words of Tobit apposite for describing Cornelius.

The use of “memorial” reflects the cultic language of sacrifice although here it is used figuratively. It is language that Cornelius and the reader is expected to understand. That Cornelius is expected to comprehend it gives an implicit indication of his knowledge of the Jewish faith. Cornelius’ prayers and alms acted as a (spiritual) sacrifice which are accepted by God.

Luke relates that Cornelius has an active faith. He prays regularly, gives generously to those in need and he has some

152 Pervo, Acts, 268.
153 See Lev 2:2, 9, 16; 5: 12; Sir 35:6; 38:11; 45: 16 (LXX). BDAG, 655.
154 See Witherington, Acts, 348.
understanding of Jewish beliefs. However he could not take the step of circumcision and become a proselyte. Even this suggests an acute awareness of the costs of such a step which could have included having to resign his commission as a Roman soldier.\textsuperscript{155} When the angel of God instructs him to send men to Joppa to invite Peter to his place he immediately (ἐξαυτῆς, 10:32) obeys and sends two servants and a soldier to find Peter in Joppa. While these three are on their journey Cornelius, on his own initiative, sets about gathering his relatives and close friends for he has been told that he will hear from Peter words by which he and his household will be saved. The expression “relatives and close friends” (10:24) along with “many had come together” (10:27) suggest that Cornelius gathered more than just his “household.”

Luke has carefully set the scene creating a sense of anticipation. Cornelius with his relatives and close friends have gathered together and they are expecting that something significant is about to occur. When Peter and his Jewish Christian friends from Joppa arrive at Cornelius’ place he tells Peter, “Now then we are\textsuperscript{156} all here before God to hear all the things that were commanded to you by the Lord” (10:33).

\textsuperscript{155} Cf. Pervo, \textit{Acts}, 268.
\textsuperscript{156} D* adds “wanting to hear from you.”
For preaching to be beneficial there must also be hearing. Marshall observes, “Apart from hearing the word there can be no salvation.”\footnote{I. Howard Marshall, \textit{Luke: Historian and Theologian} (Exeter: Paternoster, 1970), 192.}

Upon hearing Peter’s words Cornelius, with relatives and friends, is baptised. This is his response to what Peter says and to what the Spirit does. Peter’s saving words (cf. 11:14) and the work of the Spirit, dramatic as it is, are not enough; a human response is needed and that response is, as with the Ethiopian, baptism. Dunn points out:

[T]he prior bestowal of the Spirit did not lead Peter to the conclusion that baptism could or should be dispensed with (10:47). Baptism in “the name of Jesus Christ” (10:48) closes the circle already drawn with the proclamation of belief in him and of forgiveness of sins in his name and with the outpouring of the Spirit.\footnote{Dunn, \textit{Beginning}, 400.}

Despite his piety, a piety recognised by God and which had influenced others, and despite his generous deeds of kindness to those in need, Cornelius is not “saved.” As Pervo observes:

The reader must assume that Cornelius has gone as far as possible on his “spiritual journey” toward membership in the people of God . . . He is at the “dead end” of God-fearing piety, unable to take the final step of full conversion, which would presumably require abandonment of his office.\footnote{Pervo, \textit{Acts}, 268. Pervo adds in footnote 28, “It is equally true that baptism would appear to prevent one from participation in the religious life of the Roman army.”}
It is through baptism in the name of Jesus Christ that Cornelius takes the “final step of full conversion,” commits himself to be a follower of Jesus and is “saved.”

The divine initiative is clear in Cornelius’ conversion but not to the extent of overwhelming the human element. Luke introduces the centurion Cornelius as a man with an active faith expressing itself in prayer and acts of charity. He readily obeys the guidance given by the angel of God and sends two of his servants and a soldier to seek out the apostle Peter in Joppa. While they are gone he sets about arranging for his relatives and close friends to be present when Peter arrives. In response to what Peter says and to what the Holy Spirit does Cornelius commits himself to Jesus Christ in baptism. Cornelius is no mere passive participant. Nor is the apostle Peter.

5.4.2 Peter

(a) The vision and Peter’s response

While staying in the house of Simon the tanner, around the sixth hour of the day, Peter goes onto the roof of the house to pray. Here we catch a glimpse into Luke’s depiction of Peter’s spirituality and his understanding of his relationship to God. Since the “sixth hour” was not the usual time for prayer, his praying had a flexibility to it and was not
confined to the Jewish hours of prayer. Perhaps this less formal approach to praying indicated a more personable, relational view of God.

It is at this time that Peter falls into a state of ecstasy and has a vision of a great sheet being lowered to the earth. In the sheet are animals, reptiles and birds. A voice from heaven directs Peter to kill and eat, which Peter strenuously refuses to do. As noted above, this vision has given rise to a number of questions, one of which is: would there not have been clean creatures in the sheet that Peter could have chosen? From Peter’s reaction it appears that there were only, or Peter only saw, unclean creatures which he refuses to touch. “Certainly not, Lord, because I have never eaten anything common or unclean” (10:14). In his refusal Peter stands in a long Jewish tradition of others who refused to defile themselves by eating unclean food. The voice responds to Peter, “That which God has cleansed, you must not regard as common” (10:15). That this happened three times is an indication of its significance for Peter and what is about to take place.

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162 Dunn emphasises this significance: “It is important, then, for the twenty-first-century reader to appreciate that the issue was not a minor matter of insignificant
The import of the vision is not immediately obvious to Peter, nor to many commentators since. Gaventa wryly observes, “verse 17 indicates that Peter did not understand the vision, and most exegetes would be sympathetic with Peter’s confusion.”\(^\text{163}\) The meaning of the vision is not given to Peter; rather, it is something that he has to work out for himself, and Peter’s pondering the meaning of the vision underscores the human contribution in Cornelius’ conversion.\(^\text{164}\) First Peter is “greatly perplexed” (διηπόρευ) as to what the vision might mean.\(^\text{165}\) Then he begins to think carefully (διενθυμούνεν) about what he has seen.\(^\text{166}\) New matters arise which Peter must respond to such as the arrival of Cornelius’ messengers immediately after his vision of the great sheet (10:18) and the direction of the Spirit to go with them. Later Peter meets Cornelius face to face and hears his story firsthand.


\(^\text{163}\) Gaventa, Darkness to Light, 113.


\(^\text{165}\) BDAG, 235. In the New Testament this word is found only in Luke and Acts.

\(^\text{166}\) διενθυμοῦνεν occurs only here in existing ancient Christian literature. BDAG, 244. It is a compound verb made up of δια and ἐνθυμέομαι. The latter verb can be found in Matt 1:20 and 9:4 and carries the meaning of “to process information by thinking carefully about it.” BDAG, 336. If Gaventa is right in arguing that δια is here an intensive prefix then Peter’s personal contribution is strengthened. Gaventa, Acts, 167.
Thus over time Peter comes to the conclusion that the vision is not about clean and unclean creatures but about human beings. So when in his house in Caesarea Peter can say to Cornelius, “You know how it is forbidden for a man [who is] a Jew to associate with or to approach a foreigner (gentile); but God showed me not to call any person common or unclean”\(^{167}\) (10:28). God may have “shown” Peter but this included Peter’s careful reflection on the vision and the voice from heaven. Pervo correctly observes, “Despite all the apparatus of divine control, Peter is no puppet here.”\(^{168}\)

The issue however is not about a breaking of the Jewish law, for there was no commandment forbidding association with Gentiles.\(^{169}\) The Greek \(\alpha\theta\epsilon\mu\tau\omicron\) “refers primarily not to what is forbidden by ordinance but to violation of tradition or common recognition of what is seemly or proper.”\(^{170}\) Rather, the matter was one of avoiding the risk of defilement in a social setting by eating non-kashrut food that Gentiles ate. That this is the issue can be seen in that on his return to Jerusalem Peter is taken

\(^{170}\) BDAG, 24.
to task by Jewish Christians (οἱ ἐκ περιτομῆς) for visiting un-
circumcised people and eating with them (11:3).\textsuperscript{171}

But Peter still has more to learn. After Cornelius has personally
related to him his vision of the “man in shining clothing” (10:30–33)
Peter responds, “in truth I understand that God is not [one] to show
partiality but in every nation the one fearing him and working
righteousness is acceptable to him” (10:34, 35). “Understand” translates
καταλαμβάνομαι which here carries the idea of learning “about
something through a process of inquiry.”\textsuperscript{172} Presumably Peter has come
to this understanding through his reflection on the vision of the great
sheet, the declaration from heaven, “what God has cleansed you must
not call common,” the fortuitous arrival of Cornelius’ messengers and
now Cornelius’ own testimony to Peter.

That God does not show partiality is something that Peter could
be expected to know already (see Deut 10:17; 2 Chr 19:7; Sir 35:14–16).
Perhaps here Peter realises that God’s impartiality means that he is
more than a just (impartial) judge and his acceptance goes beyond the
chosen covenant people to include Gentiles.\textsuperscript{173} That is, God’s acceptance
is impartially available to all. This in turn means that the experience of

\textsuperscript{171} εἰσῆλθες πρὸς ἄνδρας ἀκροβυστίαν ἔχοντας καὶ συνέφαγες αὐτοῖς.
\textsuperscript{172} BDAG, 520, (4). See also Acts 4:13; 25:25; Josephus, Ant, 8.167.
\textsuperscript{173} Cf. Pervo, Acts, 278.
conversion is not confined by race or religion or culture. It is for those in “every nation” (ἐν παντὶ ἑθνεῖ). Verse 35 marks a further development not only in Peter’s life but also in the theme of Acts, that the gospel is for all, a development that has been anticipated with the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. That God accepts those who fear him and do works of righteousness (10:35) does not mean that Cornelius is saved. If it did his baptism in the name of Jesus Christ (10:48) would be meaningless. It does refer to a person’s being open to God, able to “receive the message of salvation and release from sins.”

Questions remain. Luke does not relate how Peter made the leap from the creatures in the great sheet to the Gentiles, he only recounts that he did. Why use this vision? If the issue is about people why confuse the issue by “using food imagery in the vision?” Given what Luke has already narrated in his Gospel and in Acts (Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8; 2:39) should not Peter already have known that God accepts all people? The vision is not as clear as that given to Zechariah (Luke 1:8–20) or Mary (Luke 1:28–35) or Paul (Acts 9:1–9; cf. 22:16–26; 26:12–18). Perhaps in Peter’s case the vision is deliberatively enigmatic and not

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175 Witherington, Acts, 356. See also Keener, Acts, 2:1797.
176 Gaventa, Darkness to Light, 114.
sufficient without the events that follow. Thus at this pivotal point in Luke’s narrative the apostle Peter is given space to come to an understanding that he, as a key leader in the Jesus movement, can own in that he has, in a sense, come to it himself. He is enabled to embrace with his whole self what he knows cognitively. Not only will this be important for him but also for the whole fledgling church.177

As a further example of human involvement we can note that, like Cornelius, Peter has to obey the divine guidance. Luke gives hints that this, for Peter, is not a straightforward matter. While Peter is puzzling over what the vision and voice mean Luke heightens tension when he relates the Spirit telling Peter about three men who are downstairs looking for him. Then the Spirit adds that Peter is, without hesitation (μνήσθη διακρινόμενος), to go with them for “I have sent them” (ὅτι ἐγὼ ἀπέσταλκα υἱός). The implication of these words is that Peter is still far from certain as to the import of the repeated vision and there is a likelihood that when he finds out why these Gentiles were looking for him he may demur.178 The Spirit reinforces the direction to go with the Gentile messengers by adding, “for I have sent them.”179 It is not clear in the English, but in the Greek there is a definite emphasis

177 Cf. Gaventa, Darkness to Light, 114.
178 Visiting a Gentile in his house would be a situation over which Peter would have little control. See Peterson, Acts, 332.
179 This is an interesting Lukan Trinitarian insight.
that the Spirit has sent them. Whatever doubts Peter may have had, he had, in effect, to obey the Spirit’s direction in faith. In other words, Peter’s obedience is far from automatic and easy. There is an implied human struggle.

Peter has to go to Caesarea because Cornelius’ messengers inform him that he is to speak to Cornelius. Peter is told that the holy angel who appeared to Cornelius instructed him to send to Joppa and invite Peter to his house that he might hear what he had to say (10:22). Commenting on the developing narrative Marshall observes that this is “‘new information’ for the reader, Luke having saved it up for this point to add to the literary and dramatic effect of the story …”\(^{180}\) But Luke has even more significant information for the reader which he keeps to the very last, namely, when Peter confronts his critics in Jerusalem. There Peter relates how Cornelius had been informed that he, Peter, was to speak “words by which he (Cornelius) and his household would be saved”\(^{181}\) (11:14). This is the first time in the Cornelius narrative that the term “salvation” is used.

In spite of the clear and extensive divine guidance in Luke’s narrative of Cornelius’ conversion, it is not an angel who is the instrument of conversion but a human being, Peter. It is Peter who is to


\(^{181}\) ὃς λαλήσει όρματα πρὸς σὲ ἐν οἷς σωθήσῃ σὺ καὶ πᾶς ὁ ὀίκος σου.
speak words by which Cornelius, his relatives and close friends will be saved. Without these words it would appear that even the dramatic intervention of the Spirit is not enough. According to Luke the work of the Spirit is necessary but not sufficient for the salvation of men and women. It is the way in which, according to Luke-Acts, God has chosen to act. It is certainly here that the genuine contribution of human beings is seen. Peter reminds the Jerusalem Council that “from the early days from among you God chose that through me the Gentiles would hear the message of the Gospel and believe” (15:7; cf. 10:42). Here we have speaking, hearing and believing linked together as we also find them linked in the narrative of Cornelius’ conversion.

(b) “Words by which you will be saved”

Peter’s message (10:34–43) is, according to Witherington, “the most comprehensive review of the career of Jesus found anywhere in any of the sermons in Acts.” Luke has only given a summary of Peter’s message as he did with Peter’s Pentecost sermon (see 2:40). The theme of the sermon is Jesus Christ and covers “some of the main emphasises

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184 “Apart from hearing the word there can be no salvation.” Marshall, Luke, 192.
185 Witherington, Acts, 358.
of Luke’s Gospel.”186 If the theme of the message is Jesus Christ it is a theme with a universal application.

God sent a message of peace (εἰρήνην) to Israel through (διὰ) Jesus (10:36).187 “Peace” in Luke-Acts is synonymous with salvation.188 It is to be understood in terms of reconciliation to God, the removal of enmity between God and humankind.189 Peter recounts the ministry of Jesus in Judea, beginning in Galilee after the preaching of John the Baptist. This Jesus from Nazareth, whom God anointed with the Holy Spirit and power, went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil. This sermon is also personal testimony because Peter and the apostles are witnesses of all that Jesus did (10:39a).190

Peter moves from Jesus’ ministry to his death and resurrection. Jesus was killed by being executed.191 Who killed Jesus is unclear and, in this context, not as important as the fact that he was executed. This one who died was also raised from the dead by God on the third day. Again Peter intrudes an element of personal testimony this time to stress the

186 Peterson, Acts, 336.
190 It is not clear who the “we” (ἡμεῖς) refers to in verse 39. It seems unlikely that it could refer to Peter’s companions from Joppa (10:45). Pervo regards it as “a careless repeat of 2:32, etc. Peter is not surrounded by apostles here.” Pervo, Acts, 280. It is most likely a reference to the apostles as is the “us” (ἡμῖν) of verse 41.
191 Literally “by being hung on a tree” (ἔξωλον). The Greek word refers to an object made of wood and so “a wooden structure used for crucifixion.” BDAG 685 #2.
reality and physical nature of Jesus’ resurrection. The resurrected Jesus did not appear to all the people but to witnesses chosen by God, that is, Peter and the apostles, who actually ate and drank with Jesus (10:41).\footnote{According to Pervo, verse 41 reveals Luke’s “unabashedly materialistic view of the resurrection.” Pervo, \textit{Acts}, 281.}

Peter presents an exalted view of Jesus. This Jesus is “Lord of all” (10:36), and as such can claim the allegiance of all.\footnote{This is a political statement as much as a theological one and we can only guess its implications for Cornelius who, as a centurion, had to acknowledge Caesar as lord. Cf. Keener, \textit{Acts}, 2:1801.} Note in this verse both particularity and universalism. Jesus was sent to the people of Israel but he is Lord of all people, Jew and Gentile. All, Jew and Gentile, must give an account of their life to him as he has been designated by God as judge of the living and the dead (10:42). What is more, everyone, Jew and Gentile, who believes in this Jesus receives the forgiveness of their sins through his name (10:43).\footnote{Peter does not elaborate on “all the prophets.” It is an expression Luke has used elsewhere, e.g., 3:18, 24; 26:22. It could be a general reference to the Scriptures of Israel similar to Luke 24:25, 27. Possible references could include: Isa 53:10–12; 55:6, 7; Jer 31:34; Ezek 36:25.} Although no direct appeal is made to Cornelius to respond, it is at this point in Peter’s sermon that we reach the practical application of the salvific potential of Peter’s words, that they are words by which one might be saved. Here salvation is expressed as believing and the forgiveness of sins.

Luke has only given a summary of Peter’s sermon and this makes it hard to classify it. Pervo regards it as more catechetical than
missionary, directed to the reader as Cornelius and friends could not have been expected to understand a lot of what was in it.\footnote{Pervo, \textit{Acts}, 276, 278.}

Witherington argues that it has rhetorical elements to it and that it is “an evangelistic speech meant to persuade the audience to come to a decision about Jesus Christ.”\footnote{Witherington, \textit{Acts}, 355. He believes it could be “forensic or deliberative rhetoric.”} Whatever might be the case, we can claim that this Lukan summary contains the basic elements of the gospel about which a potential convert needed to be aware. Forgiveness of sins was available to all who believed in Jesus (10:43) but those who believed were not left to their own devices to construct a Jesus of their own imaginings. According to Luke, the Jesus they were to believe in was an actual person who had ministered in Galilee, Judea and Jerusalem, had been executed and physically raised to life.

\subsection*{(c) Peter in Jerusalem}

Peter returns to Jerusalem where he is confronted by Jewish Christians who were arguing that it was necessary for new believers to be circumcised. They take issue with Peter for eating with uncircumcised Gentiles.\footnote{Separation of Jews from Gentiles was a “fundamental guiding principle of Jewish human relationships and communal living.” “And the testing point again and again was the meal table, the main expression of hospitality or friendship and the principal occasion for the transmission of impurity.” Dunn, \textit{Beginning}, 394–395.} In his reply, in which Peter explains what happened in
Caesarea, he draws an implication from these events relevant to the issue of conversion.

Peter describes the conversion of these Gentiles as a baptism with the Spirit (11:16). He is at pains to point out to his detractors in Jerusalem that Cornelius, his relatives and close friends have received the same Spirit that was manifested on the day of Pentecost (11:15).

“And I remembered the word of the Lord how he said, ‘John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit’” (11:16). While, according to the synoptic tradition, it is John the Baptist who originally utters this statement (Luke 3:16; see also Matt 3:11; Mark 1:8), Peter is referring to the Lukan Jesus’ final words prior to his ascension (Acts 1:5). 198 It is not necessary to claim, as Barrett does, that Peter has a lapse of memory. 199

However, according to Luke, when Jesus spoke on the matter of Spirit baptism it was with reference to his followers, but here (11:16) Peter sees Jesus’ words as also applicable to the conversion of Cornelius. 200 It would seem that Luke understood the expression

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198 The use of the imperfect tense (ἔλεγεν) in 11:16 could suggest that Jesus had said this more than once. Keener, Acts, 2:1826.
199 Barrett, Critical Commentary, 542.
“baptism with the Spirit” to have a wider reference than only empowerment for ministry, as implied in Jesus’ words (1:5, 8).201

We can go further and make a link between baptism with the Spirit (11:16) and baptism with water (10:47). “Peter links baptism and the gift of the Spirit, even if the link is not causative or sequential.”202 In this way the initiatory aspect of baptism is maintained for Spirit baptism as well as for water baptism. For conversion, just as there is an immersion in water, there is also an immersion in the Spirit. This association between water baptism and Spirit baptism indicates that conversion is a spiritual act as much as a cognitive and volitive one. The person being converted enters into a spiritual relationship with God, the ascended Christ and the Spirit. He or she becomes a member of the church which is both a physical and a spiritual entity.

Peter concludes the defence of his actions: “Therefore if God gave them the same gift as to us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, how was I able to hinder God?” (11:17).203 Here we have another summary

201 Unless we entertain the thought that Jesus is speaking about the “conversion” of the apostles. If so, for the apostles, their “conversion” would have been a process that began with their call by Jesus and culminated on the Day of Pentecost and the outpouring of the Spirit. In this case then “baptism with the Spirit” refers primarily to conversion. See Richard V. Peace, Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 12ff. Peace argues, using Mark’s Gospel, that the conversion of the twelve apostles was a process over time.


203 D adds “so as to not give them [the] holy spirit after believing in him.”
expression of Cornelius’ conversion. If it can be described as a “baptism with the Spirit” it can also be described as believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. In his sermon to Cornelius and companions Peter declares that all the prophets testify that those who believe in him, that is, Jesus, receive forgiveness of their sins through his name (10:43). Barrett notes that “one may reasonably suppose that the reaction to Peter’s address was belief in Jesus.”

Some problems arise over the participle translated above as “believed” (πιστεύσασιν). In the above translation it is understood as relating to “us” (ἡμῖν) adjectivally, that is, further describing “us” as those who believed. Grammatically this has the advantage not only of being of the same case (dative) as “us” (ἡμῖν) but also of having close proximity to this pronoun. The point Peter is making is that, on the Day of Pentecost, Cornelius and his friends received the same Spirit as did Peter and those with him (1:15) who, like Cornelius, believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the way the NIV translates the participle.

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204 Barrett, Critical Commentary, 542. In the light of 10:43 Barrett’s claim that “Belief is not mentioned in ch.10” is puzzling.
205 Peterson, Acts, 348.
However, the participle can also be understood to function adverbially and relate to the verb “gave” (ἔδωκεν). The meaning then would be that Cornelius received the same Spirit that Peter et al. did when they believed. This is the way the NRSV and ESV translate the verse. The problem here is the implication that Peter believed on the Day of Pentecost when the Spirit was poured out. But were not Peter and the apostles believers already? Peterson argues that we are dealing here with a totally unique situation. That the Spirit was poured out after Peter and the apostles believed “resulted from their unique position in salvation history.” Barrett argues for the participle relating not only to “gave” but also to “them” (αὐτοῖς). This entails the meaning that when Cornelius et al. believed they received the Holy Spirit. My preference is for the NIV translation mainly because of the close proximity of the participle and the pronoun “us.” The participle immediately follows the pronoun.

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206 Peterson, Acts, 348.
207 “Peter and his fellow apostles had believed in Jesus long before the day of Pentecost.” Barrett, Critical Commentary, 542.
208 Peterson, Acts, 348.
210 Barrett, Acts, 542.
5.4.3 Supporting characters

There are a number of people who play “supporting” but important roles in Luke’s narrative. Luke uses them to move from one scene to another. Cornelius’ messengers (10:5, 7–9, 17–18 21–23) help take the reader from Cornelius in Caesarea to Peter in Joppa. The timing of their arrival in Joppa is also important in that it reinforces the idea that Cornelius’ conversion is a work of God. The timing of their arrival at Simon’s place would also have given Peter further “food for thought” as to the meaning of his visions of the great sheet.

Jewish Christians211 from Joppa bring, in company with Peter and Cornelius’ messengers, the reader back from Joppa to Cornelius at Caesarea. They play their “supporting” role by adding their voice of testimony to the new thing the Holy Spirit is doing in Caesarea with these “outsiders.”212 When the Holy Spirit fell on all those listening to “the word” (τὸν λόγον, 10:44), “the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles” (10:45). Although Christian they still held to Jewish traditions regarding Gentiles. Hence their amazement that even Gentiles could be granted the Spirit. Further,

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211 Luke variously describes them as “some of the brothers” (τινες τῶν ἀδελφῶν) (10:23b) and “the circumcised believers” (οἱ ἐκ περιτομῆς πιστοί) (10:45).
212 Cf. Dunn, Beginning, 398.
because their reaction reveals they did not expect this to happen, the genuineness of the conversions as a work of God is further validated. By their own words, that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been “poured out” (ἐκκέχυται), they link what happened in Cornelius’ house to the pouring out of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (2:17, 33).

It is “those of the circumcision,” Peter’s critics in Jerusalem, who bring the Cornelius episode to an end and in doing so provide another summary description of conversion. “When they heard these things they said no more and glorified God saying, ‘So then, also to the Gentiles God has given the repentance resulting in life.’”213 The Jewish Christians draw the conclusion from Peter’s defence that not only for Cornelius and his companions but for all Gentiles, God has made available repentance to life. “Life” (ζωή) is best understood as “eternal life.” It is a word not commonly used by Luke in his Gospel and Acts.214 In the Gospel it occurs only five times, three times with regard to eternal life (ζωὴν αἰώνιον) and twice indicating one’s present life.215 Of the eight times Luke uses this word in Acts, three times it is in regard to eternal life (2:28; 13:46, 48) and twice indicating one’s current life (8:33; 17:25). On two other occasions the meanings are not straightforward but

213 τὴν μετάνοιαν εἰς ζωήν. NRSV: “the repentance that leads to life.”
214 Nearly fifty per cent of the occurrences in the New Testament are to be found in the Johannine literature with twenty-two per cent in the uncontested Pauline letters.
probably carry the main meaning of eternal life (see 3:15; 5:20).

Although Lukan usage is not high in Acts, the preponderance of this limited usage and context suggest a meaning for ζωὴν in 11:18 of eternal life.

There is an interesting issue here about Cornelius’ conversion, namely, from what did Cornelius repent? Luke presents Cornelius as a devout person who prays regularly and gives alms to those in need, all of which is recognised by God (10:2, 4b). There is no appeal to repent in Peter’s message (cf. 2:38; 14:15; 17:30–31) nor is there any indication in Luke’s narrative that Cornelius repented of anything.²¹⁶ However, even though not explicitly stated, Cornelius’ baptism may imply repentance. This is suggested in the linking of baptism and repentance in Luke-Acts (Luke 1:3; Acts 2:38; 13:24; 19:3). Further, in this chapter I have argued that 2:38–39 could be regarded as setting out the elements of Lukan conversion although not the order in which they occur. In this connection I have also argued that where one of these elements is missing from a conversion account, such as repentance in the Cornelius story, the reader would assume it to be present. But what would repentance imply for a person like Cornelius? It would mean a new direction in his life centred on Jesus and a turning from everything that

²¹⁶ Peterson, Acts, 349.
stands in the way of that. Peterson argues: “Yet even for those described as devout and God-fearing (10:2), turning to Christ involved a radical reorientation of allegiance and devotion . . . Not simply repentance of particular sins, but a rejection of everything that hinders the reception of salvation through faith in Christ is meant.”217

Conclusion

An indication of the importance of Cornelius’ conversion for Luke may be seen in its narrative length within Acts and in the amount of repetition to be found in it. Cornelius’ encounter with the angel is recounted three times, for example. Luke portrays the conversion of Cornelius as a work of God. An angel of God appears to Cornelius, a “voice from heaven” speaks to Peter and the Spirit directs Peter to Cornelius in Caesarea. Further, while Peter is speaking to Cornelius and his close friends and relatives, the Spirit “falls” on these Gentiles and they begin to speak in tongues. Finally Luke brings his account of Cornelius’ conversion to an end using creative repetition to emphasise that it is a work of God.

217 Peterson, Acts, 349.
One may wonder if the human involvement was overwhelmed by God. However Luke also indicates that the human actors, Peter and Cornelius, were no mere puppets but were genuine players in the drama. Peter was not given the meaning of the vision of the great sheet but came to this through reflection on what he had seen and what happened to him after that. He had to obey the divine guidance which was not easy for him. Likewise Cornelius had to follow the directions of the angel of God. As regards Cornelius’ conversion, the human element is perhaps most pointedly seen in that it came about through Peter and his preaching and Cornelius’ response in baptism. Whatever else may be said about the working of God Peter spoke those words by which Cornelius was saved, and Cornelius personally responded by committing himself in baptism to follow Jesus.
6. Conclusion: Reflections on Turning to God in Acts

In this study I have sought to make a contribution to the filling of a gap in the narrative-critical study of conversion in Acts and this chapter brings together my findings. I have attempted to answer several questions. What insights into conversion can be gained from this narrative study of the conversions of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–40), Saul (Acts 9:1–30) and Cornelius (Acts 10:1–11:18)? Why use a narrative-critical approach? How are these ancient conversion narratives to be read today? Did the context in which Luke wrote contribute to his understanding of conversion? I have focused mainly on characterisation in this thesis. So, in the conversion narratives, who are the main characters and what role do they play? Further, I ask what can be said about the encounter between the divine and human in these conversion accounts?

6.1 The approach taken

In studying the conversions of the Ethiopian, Saul and Cornelius I have used narrative criticism and the concept of a modern reader who
attempts to read Acts in a way that approximates the way Luke’s
readers would have read Acts. The reader does this by using the best
available text of Acts, that is, the 28th edition of the Nestle-Aland Greek
text in conjunction with textual criticism as well as critical historical
resources to try to understand the text within its world.

Luke is considered to be a skilled historical writer according to
the literary conventions of his time. For this reason, I believe a narrative
critical methodology is well suited to reveal not only what Luke has
written but how he has written it, the Lukan discourse. In examining how
Luke has written his narrative I focus largely on characterisation, that is,
the way in which Luke portrays the divine and human characters in
each conversion account. I also pay some attention to the way in which
Luke has structured his conversion accounts and the point of view of
the narrative as these can shed light on the how of Luke’s narrative.
Point of view not only refers to the perspective from which the account
is given, extradiegetic in this case, that is, outside the text, in the
narrative block considered. Point of view can also refer to the implied
worldview or theology of the conversion narratives. The latter is
covered below.
Narrative criticism is not without its problems as a tool in biblical studies, one of these being the danger of undervaluing the referential (historical) features of the narrative in favour of the poetical. That is to say, what is important is the literary features of the narrative, not so much whether it is historically grounded or not. However the referential need not be overshadowed by the poetic; the two can live side by side. Modern readers have examples of historical works known for their literary accomplishment and it is not unreasonable to assume that the same may be said of ancient historical works.

Does not the emphasis on the reader increase the risk of subjectivism? Does it not suggest that there are as many readers as there are actual readers? This potential shortcoming is telling as no reader, ancient or modern, can escape his or her own personal contingency. I have attempted to ameliorate this contingency and to approximate Luke’s original readers by the use of historical critical resources to better understand the world of the text.¹ What narrative criticism does offer is that through a close reading of the text along with an investigation of the how (discourse) of Luke’s writing the reader is helped to see anew the familiar.

¹ The use of historical critical resources places me in what Fish would call an “interpretive community” which sets limits on acceptable meanings. See Fish, Is There a Text?, 14, 15.
Before examining the three conversion narratives I looked at the environment in which Luke wrote with regard to conversion. I contend that the main influence on Luke would have been Judaism and possibly the Essene and Qumran communities. From these the early church would have learnt that conversion was possible and that it involved a high, and potentially costly, commitment. This is reflected in the ministry of John the Baptist with his preaching of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Luke 3:3) and his call for those baptized to live lives consistent with their repentance. But John proclaimed more than costly commitment; he pointed his hearers to one who followed him, Jesus the Christ. His preaching was preparation for the Messiah (Luke 3:4-6, 15-17) who would be the centre-point of Christian conversion. I suggest that the early Christian movement took up baptism from John and gave it a Christological focus, to be used as a rite of commitment to Jesus.

The idea of conversion is to be found in Hellenistic paganism and philosophy but their influence on the emerging Jesus movement would have been not so much on its message but on those in the Mediterranean world who heard it. While there was much that was new in this message, such as the focus on a crucified and risen Jewish

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2 What this could entail for John’s hearers is spelled out by Luke in 3:10-14.
saviour, and much that was demanding, such as an exclusive monotheism, the call to “turn from and turn to” would have had some resonances for those of a Hellenized background.

6.2 Divine agency

It would seem clear from Luke’s portrayal of the conversions of the eunuch, Saul and Cornelius that divine agency plays a primary role in turning to God. It is a primary role but one that is manifested in a variety of ways. In these three Lukan narratives the reader encounters the full array of divine manifestations. From the initiation of the conversion event to its culmination, divine agency appears in various forms: an angel of the Lord, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, God, a voice from heaven and the providential ordering of events. This emphasis on the centrality of the divine in conversion led to Haenchen’s complaint, made with reference to the conversion of Cornelius, that “in endeavoring to make the hand of God visible in the history of the Church, Luke virtually excludes all human decision.”4 This is a matter that will be taken up below.

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6.2.1 The Conversion of the Eunuch

In the Lukan account of the conversion of the Ethiopian, there are two human agents, Philip and the eunuch, and two divine actors, the angel of the Lord and the Holy Spirit. Of the three conversion accounts in Acts 8:26–11:18, this is the one in which divine agency has a less intense role.

The role of the angel of the Lord and the Spirit is, as Luke narrates his story, one of guiding the evangelist to the Ethiopian. An angel of the Lord speaks to Philip directing him away from his successful evangelism in Samaria to go to the road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza.\(^5\) Angels are divine servants and are prominent in Luke-Acts.

Further, the angel of the Lord is also important in the history of God’s people. So the reader can conclude that Philip is involved in a work of God. In this account it is the angel of the Lord who initiates the conversion event by sending Philip to a particular place without any explanation as to why he should go.

The role of the Spirit in this account is similar to that of the angel of the Lord, that is, one of guiding. If it is the angel who gets Philip moving to a particular location, it is the Spirit who speaks to Philip telling him to approach the eunuch returning from Jerusalem and to join

\(^{5}\) Luke does not tell the reader whether this was an audible voice or inner conviction. The same may be said with regard to the Spirit speaking to Philip. As far as the narrative goes it is not of great moment.
him in his chariot. Luke, in bringing this conversion account to an end, relates how the Spirit “snatched” Philip away from the scene after the eunuch had been baptized (8:39). So, Luke “bookends” the conversion of the eunuch with divine agency. It begins with an angel of the Lord speaking to Philip and ends with the Spirit taking Philip away from the scene. The reader can be in no doubt that this has been a work of God.

Further evidence of the divine is to be seen in the providential timing of Philip’s encounter with the eunuch. The eunuch had made a long and potentially dangerous journey from Meroe in Cush to Jerusalem to worship at the temple. In Luke’s narrative the Ethiopian is on his way back to his home when Philip approaches him sitting in his chariot reading. The reader cannot but be impressed by the timing of Philip’s arrival for he hears the eunuch reading a passage about the Suffering Servant from the prophet Isaiah. In particular he is wondering about whom the prophet was referring to in two verses in particular (53:7, 8 LXX). Luke narrates how Philip, beginning with these verses, makes known to the Ethiopian the good news about Jesus (8:35). Through the Spirit’s timing in this encounter Luke could be inferring that the Spirit is principally responsible for the eunuch’s turning to
In other words, angels, although servants of God, can only play a guiding role that leads to conversion, whereas conversion itself is a work of the Spirit.

**6.2.2 The Conversion of Saul**

In the Lukan narratives, if the conversion of the eunuch has, relatively speaking, a muted divine involvement, in the conversion of Saul it is more intense. This account is a story full of high drama and irony. The two main human actors are Saul and Ananias while, as far as divine agency goes, the risen Lord Jesus is the sole agent but whose appearance takes different forms. The Holy Spirit is mentioned but only indirectly.

As Saul, armed with authority from the High priest in Jerusalem, approaches Damascus to arrest Christians, suddenly a dazzling “light from heaven” shines around him and he hears a voice, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (9:4). This is the only occasion in all of the Lukan conversion accounts in Acts that the risen Lord Jesus himself appears. The manifestation is in the form of a brilliant light and a voice; there is no human form. As with the Ethiopian and Cornelius, the initiative in conversion lies with divine agency. It is Jesus, the persecuted, who confronts Saul the persecutor in an act of grace.

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6 A textual variant at verse 39, “(the) Spirit fell on the eunuch,” might be trying to make clear what is ambiguous in the canonical text.
The rest of Luke’s narrative about Saul’s conversion emphasises this sovereign grace of Jesus. Luke brings the reader to the high point in this dramatic scene with Saul’s question, “Who are you, Lord?” to which the “voice” declares, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting” (9:5). Jesus tells Saul to stand up and go into Damascus where he will be told what he “must” (δεῖ) do. Luke’s writing expresses the grammar of sovereignty. The passive voice reminds Saul, and the reader, that he is not in control, as also does Luke’s use of “must” (δεῖ).

But Luke has more to tell the reader about the sovereignty of Jesus in Saul’s turning to God. If the risen Jesus is at work in Saul’s life, he is also at work in Damascus, preparing for the arrival of Saul. He appears in a vision to a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. In fact, Luke records two visions, to Ananias and to Saul. In his appearance to Ananias Jesus directs him to go Saul and at the same time, to reassure Ananias, tells him that Saul also has had a vision of Ananias coming to him. A double vision confirms for the reader that God is at work. In this narrative of Saul’s conversion, Jesus calls Saul into his service through Ananias, a call to service that is grounded in the divine choice, for, Jesus tells Ananias, Saul is a “chosen vessel” (9:15).
The Holy Spirit also is at work in Saul’s conversion although in Luke’s narrative it is a role about which the reader is required to fill in some gaps. Ananias comes to Saul and tells him that the Lord Jesus has sent him that he might be healed and filled with the Holy Spirit (9:17). No signs are mentioned in regard to Saul’s being filled with the Spirit, but Luke records how Saul is healed and so the reader assumes that, as Saul was healed, he was also filled with the Spirit. If the reader assumes that in Acts 2:38-39 Luke has given the basic elements of conversion, but not their order, then there would be no need for Luke, in Saul’s account, to elaborate on his being filled with the Spirit. But was this filling an empowering for mission or was it related to Saul’s conversion? Both the Spirit’s work in regard to conversion and empowerment for mission are to be found in Acts. As Saul’s call is intricately related to his conversion, and there is no call without a prior conversion, so the Spirit works in Saul’s life in regard to his conversion and call.

6.2.3 The Conversion of Cornelius

Divine agency is clearly at work in Cornelius’ turning to God and again the reader can note the different forms it takes: visions, an angel, ecstasy, and the Holy Spirit. As with the Ethiopian and Saul, Cornelius’ turning to God is initiated by divine agency. An angel of God comes to
Cornelius in a vision and directs him to send for the apostle Peter. In the case of the eunuch’s conversion, an angel appears to Philip directing him to the Ethiopian, whereas in the Cornelius narrative an angel speaks directly with the would-be convert, calling him by name and giving detailed guidance as to what he is to do.

Following on from this vision Luke narrates how Peter, in Joppa, while in a state of ecstasy, also has a vision. This is another example of a double vision. Peter’s vision is of a great sheet full of four-legged animals, birds and reptiles. He hears a voice telling him to kill and eat, which he refuses, for as he says, he has never eaten anything common or unclean, to which the voice replies, “that which God has cleansed, you are not to regard as unclean” (10:9-16). Peter recognizes this voice as the voice of God (10:14, 28; 11:14). The vision is repeated two more times. It can be said that Peter is undergoing his own conversion, albeit of a kind different from Cornelius, whereby God is preparing him for what is to follow.

Of the three conversion accounts narrated by Luke in Acts 8:26–11:18, it is in the Cornelius event that he gives the most detail about the part played by the Holy Spirit. As in the case of the Ethiopian, the Spirit works to bring people together, linking Cornelius and Peter. While Peter
is pondering the meaning of the vision he has seen, Cornelius’ messengers arrive at the house in Joppa in which he is staying. The Spirit speaks to Peter, telling him that three men are seeking him and that he is to go with them. Subsequently, they bring him from Joppa to Cornelius in Caesarea (10:20). The reader cannot but be impressed by yet another example of providential timing. As with the conversion of the eunuch, so also with Cornelius’ turning to God, the Spirit brings people together at strategic moments — when the Ethiopian is reading Isaiah and when Peter is pondering the meaning of the vision of the great sheet.

Peter arrives in Cornelius’ house and, after Cornelius has explained why he has sent for him, he begins to speak to those whom Cornelius had called together. As Luke narrates it, while Peter is speaking, suddenly and dramatically, the Holy Spirit “fell” on those who are listening in a visible way (10:44). Cornelius and his friends begin speaking in tongues and praising God (10:45). This is Cornelius’ Pentecost (cf. Acts 2), his baptism of the Spirit, a conclusion Peter himself later reaches (11:15-17).

I suggest that the Spirit’s work with Cornelius, as Luke has narrated it, is more than simply testifying to his conversion. If, as has
been argued, Acts 2:38-39 can be regarded as normative for Luke’s understanding of the constituents of conversion, then the role of the Holy Spirit in conversion is more than testifying that conversion has taken place; rather, the Spirit is involved in a person’s actual turning to God. As Turner puts it, the Spirit of prophecy (testifying to conversion) is “simultaneously the soteriological Spirit.”⁷ In support of this, the Lukan Peter explains to the circumcision party in Jerusalem about what had happened to Cornelius and his friends and concludes, “Therefore if God gave them the same gift as to us who believed in the Lord Jesus, how was I able to hinder God?” (11:17).

Divine agency performs a central role in Luke’s narrative of the conversions of the eunuch, Saul and Cornelius. It is hardly claiming too much to suggest that in Luke’s understanding of conversion from the narratives studied, there would be no conversion without divine agency. Luke saw turning to God as a work of God. However, the reader notices the variety in manifestations of the divine and concludes that there is no set pattern of divine working. Indeed it could be suggested that the divine involvement is suited to the characters and their circumstances. Saul the aggressive persecutor of the church was confronted by the one he was persecuting. The Spirit sent Philip to

⁷ Turner, Power, 386. See also Peterson, Acts, 346.
explain scripture to an outsider who was seeking God. Divine agency brings the apostle Peter to the virtuous Gentile Cornelius and while Peter is proclaiming Jesus the Spirit baptises Cornelius.

The question arises, in the light of this divine involvement in turning to God, what if any part does the human have to play? Was Haenchen right to complain that Luke, in relating the conversion of Cornelius, “virtually excludes all human decision”?  

6.3 Human agency

From this study of the conversions of the eunuch, Saul and Cornelius, I argue that while divine agency plays a determinative role, the role of human agency is also significant. The human agents are more than passive subjects under the irresistible influence of divine agency. To use an expression from logic and also used by Joel Green, divine agency is necessary but not sufficient in turning to God. In Luke’s narrative of the conversions of the eunuch, Saul and Cornelius, humans also play significant roles.

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6.3.1 Philip

In each of Luke’s conversion accounts God works through human beings. Further, in each case these are humans suited to their particular task. An angel directs Philip to go to the road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza and the Spirit tells him to join a chariot moving along the road. Philip is a spiritual man sensitive to divine guidance. Luke describes him as “full of the Spirit and wisdom” (6:3). He is also an evangelist and his ministry in Samaria had seen works of power and many had been converted (8:6-8). What is more, Philip also has an understanding of the prophetic writings and their application to Jesus.

Philip is also one to take opportunities as they arise. He had been providentially guided to the eunuch but the divinely created opportunity must be taken. As Philip approaches the chariot he hears the Ethiopian reading from the prophet Isaiah so he asks, “Do you understand what you are reading?” The Ethiopian replies, “How can I unless someone guides me?” The passage is from Isaiah and the eunuch is puzzling over whom the prophet is referring to. This passage is important in the Ethiopian’s conversion but it is not to be interpreted by an angel or the Spirit but by a human, namely, Philip. And Philip is the person for this task. He sits alongside the eunuch and starting from this
passage Philip makes known to the eunuch the good news about Jesus, presumably drawing upon the teaching and reflections of the early Jesus movement on Isaiah. As Stenschke points out, even when asking the right questions the eunuch was not able to find an answer to these questions.\textsuperscript{10} He needed help and it was provided for him in the person of Philip whom Stenschke characterizes as an “essential ingredient” in the eunuch’s conversion.\textsuperscript{11}

The Ethiopian knew about baptism, most likely from Philip, and as his chariot is passing by some water the eunuch asks to be baptized (8:37) so they both go down into the water and Philip baptizes him (8:38). The encounter between Philip and the eunuch was arranged by divine agency but the eunuch’s actual conversion was through the involvement of Philip. Philip was the essential human link between God and the eunuch.

\textit{6.3.2 Ananias}

In the Lukan account of Saul’s conversion it is a fearful disciple, Ananias, who provides the human connection between the risen Jesus and Saul. In his account Luke devotes almost as much attention to Ananias as he does to Jesus. From Luke’s narrative of Saul’s conversion

the reader reasonably concludes that Ananias completes what Jesus started on the road to Damascus. Again Luke has portrayed a person suited to the task to which Jesus will ask him to carry out. Ananias is, like Philip, an obedient follower of Jesus, whatever his own misgivings might be, and his character will be important in introducing Saul to the Christians in Damascus. In this, the reader can assume he will play a role like Barnabas will later undertake for Saul in Jerusalem (9:27). Luke describes Ananias as a devout Jewish disciple of Jesus living in Damascus whose good character is well known amongst the Jews living in that city (9:10; 22:12).

Saul’s reputation as a persecutor of the church has preceded him to Damascus and Luke uses Ananias’ knowledge of this to highlight the dramatic changes that will soon take place in Saul’s life through an unlikely human agent. The risen Jesus appears to Ananias and tells him to go to Saul who is in a house in Straight Street. Ananias protests, telling Jesus that he knows all about this man and all the evil things he (Saul) had done to his (Jesus’) people in Jerusalem and how he had come to do the same to Jesus’ followers in Damascus. Luke has set the scene for what is about to happen through, of all people, the reluctant Ananias. In a strange way Ananias’ very human apprehensions about
Saul underscore that he is a human agent of the divine. That is, what will happen will, in a fashion, happen in spite of Ananias’ own human fears.

Ananias obeys Jesus’ directions and goes to Judas’ house where Saul is. Here Luke brings the reader to the culmination of Saul’s conversion which occurs through Ananias. As Luke narrates the scene in Judas’ house, Ananias comes to Saul, places his hands upon him and addresses him as “Brother Saul” (9:17). He goes on, “the Lord—Jesus who appeared to you on the road on which you were travelling—sent me that you might see and be filled with the Holy Spirit” (9:17). Straight away Saul is healed and can see again. He is then baptized, most likely by Ananias, and, the reader presumes, filled with the Holy Spirit.

Through what Ananias says and does Saul’s own recovery of his sight, Saul is assured of the genuineness of his encounter with Jesus and that he has crossed a boundary and has a new identity. He is no longer the persecutor of the Jesus movement but now a disciple of Jesus along with Ananias and those he had come to arrest and lead away. Ananias’ words to Saul, “The Lord has sent me,” aptly points to the role of this human agent in Saul’s conversion. Jesus may have dramatically appeared to Saul as he drew near to Damascus but it is the very human
Ananias, acting on behalf of Jesus, who is the (human) means of Saul’s turning to Jesus.

6.3.3 Peter

As in Luke’s narratives of the conversions of the eunuch and of Saul, so also in Cornelius’ turning to God, there is a human link between divine agency and the person who is converted. In Cornelius’ case, it is Peter who is the human agent of salvation. Divine agency may initiate the process that will eventually lead to Cornelius turning to God, but it is Peter who will be the facilitator of this. The Holy Spirit is obviously important in this turning to God and the role of the Spirit is both dramatic and visible, but the Spirit “falls” on Cornelius and his guests only after Peter has begun speaking about Jesus.

But before Peter can play this part he himself must undergo a conversion of a different kind. This occurs in Joppa on the roof of Simon the tanner’s house where Peter has the ecstatic vision of the great sheet lowered from heaven (10:11-16). As if to emphasise its importance, this vision happens three times but its meaning is not immediately obvious to Peter. Its meaning is not given to him but it is something that he has to work out for himself over time. Initially he is greatly perplexed but then he starts to think carefully over what he has experienced.
As Luke narrates it, the reader learns that by the time Peter arrives at Cornelius’ house or perhaps when he sees those who are there, he has grasped the significance of what he saw in Joppa. He can say to Cornelius and those with him that “God has shown me to call no-one common or unclean” (10:28). God may have “shown” Peter this but the insight came about through Peter’s thinking about the sheet and the voice from heaven (10:17, 19). To re-iterate Pervo’s observation, “Despite all the apparatus of divine control, Peter is no puppet here.”12

Peter’s conversion involves a breaking down of a boundary against conversion, namely, the Jewish kashrut traditions of his time. He now “understands” (10:34) that conversion transcends race and religious and cultural boundaries; it is for all people (10:35).

Not only is Peter engaged in an enlargement of his understanding but he is also confronted by the matter of obeying divine guidance. While he ponders over the import of the vision, the Spirit tells him that three men are seeking him and he is to go with them without hesitation (10:20). Luke in his narrative hints at a possible struggle for Peter here. Why else would Peter have to be told to go with the three visitors “without hesitation”? There is here the suggestion that obeying this command would be, for Peter, not easy.

12 Pervo, Acts, 274.
All this is preparation for the crucial part Peter is to play in Cornelius’ conversion. Cornelius had earlier been directed by an angel of God to send for Peter in Joppa who, the angel says, “will speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and your household” (11:14). Here Luke again succinctly sets out for the reader the need for human agency in turning to God. An angel may initiate the process of conversion but it is a human who will actually speak words by which the hearers are saved. Even the extraordinary irruption of the Spirit is, in this instance, not enough. Later Peter reminds the Jerusalem Council that “from the early days from among you God chose that through me the Gentiles would hear the message of the Gospel and believe” (15:7c). The Lukan Peter links the human activities of speaking, hearing and believing, all of which are to be found in the narrative of Cornelius’ turning to God.

6.3.4 Supporting characters

In Luke’s narrative of the conversions of Saul and Cornelius supporting characters play, in different ways, a small but significant role in confirming the conversion experience. Luke uses them to underline his understanding that conversion is more than a subjective, solitary experience, that it has observable, social dimensions. Luke does not tell
the reader who those journeying with Saul to Damascus are, and their function in the story has been controversial regarding what they actually heard and saw. Notwithstanding this, their presence gives a certain objectivity to Saul’s encounter with the risen Lord Jesus. That is, Saul’s experience was more than subjective and private; it was something that was observed by others. Further, Luke uses Saul’s travelling companions to emphasise that it was Saul and Saul alone who participated in the revelatory experience because Saul experienced both the light and the voice. Despite the contradictions between the two accounts in Acts 9 and 22, it would seem that Saul’s companions did not experience both light and voice. In this way these companions act as a foil to Saul, keeping the reader’s attention on him and reinforcing what had happened to him.

In the Cornelius episode there are three groups who play supporting roles, Cornelius’ messengers and two groups of Jewish Christians. The latter, in their own way, confirm the conversion of Cornelius. “Circumcised believers” (10: 45) travel with Peter and Cornelius’ messengers from Joppa to Cornelius’ house in Caesarea. They are there when the Spirit falls on Cornelius and his friends and are amazed “that even on the Gentiles the gift of the Holy Spirit had been
poured out” (10:45). Their reaction shows that they did not expect this, thereby underscoring the genuineness of the conversion of Cornelius and those with him. When Peter returns to Jerusalem he is criticized by “those of the circumcision” (11:2) for mixing and eating with uncircumcised people. After hearing Peter’s account of what had happened, they stop criticizing Peter and glorified God and declare, “even to the Gentiles, God has given the repentance that leads to life” (11:18).

6.3.5 Those converted

I turn now to look at the foci of Luke’s conversion narratives, namely, those who are converted. As with divine agency so here as well, there is a great deal of variety. Not only does the reader encounter three very different people but also three very different paths to conversion as well. It is difficult, therefore, to develop from these accounts a Lukan paradigm of conversion. Having stated that, however, there are common elements as well in the three conversion narratives which need to be noted.

(a) The eunuch

In his narration of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, Luke introduces the reader to a prepared outsider. As Luke describes him, he
is a man of high status in his own country, being in charge of the
treasury in the court of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians (8:27).

Ethiopia, or more accurately Cush, would, from the perspective of a
Judean, have been regarded as the ends of the earth. The reader meets
him returning home from Jerusalem where he had been to worship.

From a Jewish perspective he would have been regarded as a religious
outsider. He was a eunuch, a castrate. This is something Luke stresses
by mainly referring to him as a eunuch rather than an Ethiopian. As
such, if he wished to worship God in the temple he would have only
been allowed to go into the outer court of the temple, the court of the
Gentiles, and no further. Not only was he a religious outsider but
possibly he was a social outsider as well. The position of a eunuch in the
society of Luke’s time was ambivalent at best and despised at worst.

Further, if his skin was dark it would have likely made him the object of
racial prejudice.

As the narrative unfolds the reader can fill in some gaps and
deduce something of the eunuch’s mindset. He was a person seeking
God. Despite being a religious outsider he had made a long and
potentially dangerous journey of over 2,000 km to worship in the temple
in Jerusalem. On the way home he is reading from the prophet Isaiah
and is carefully thinking about one passage in particular. The reader could realistically surmise that he had left Jerusalem with lingering questions and unfulfilled aspirations and that he would have been open to a message which showed him how he might cross a boundary, gain a new identity and be an outsider no longer.

Enter Philip who, beginning with the passage over which the eunuch was puzzling, preaches the good news of Jesus. There is thus a cognitive element to the eunuch’s conversion, something to be understood, and this cognitive element is centred upon Jesus. Luke does not tell the reader exactly what Philip told the Ethiopian about Jesus, only that he did and the reader is to infer that this information was essential to the Ethiopian’s turning to God.

But all this is preparation because in this Lukan narrative the eunuch is not yet converted. Again the reader has to fill in some gaps and assume that, amongst other things, Philip most likely told him about baptism and at least something of its significance. Seeing some water the Ethiopian pointedly asks Philip, “what hinders me from being baptized?” The mention of possible hindrances may reflect the experience of the eunuch as an outsider. There are none and Philip baptizes the eunuch there and then. If baptism can signify repentance,
forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit, which Acts 2:38 suggests it can, although not always in that order (cf. 5:31; 10:43-48; 11:15-18), then there are some gaps for the reader to fill in here as none of these is explicitly mentioned.  

There is no catechumenate. Philip obviously believed that it was appropriate to baptize the Ethiopian straight away. I would argue that baptism for the eunuch represents his crossing a boundary and committing himself to be a follower of Jesus, in other words, his conversion.

There is very little said about the changes the Ethiopian underwent after his baptism. All that Luke tells the reader is that the eunuch “went on his way rejoicing” (8:39), with the reader left to (reasonably) assume that it was a result of his turning to God. In a couple of other incidents in Acts, joy is described as the result of people’s positive response to the preaching of the gospel (8:8; 13:48). So the narrator’s words, “he went on his way rejoicing” are, to quote Gaventa, “bristling with significance,” but it is left to the reader to tease out what this might be. It suffices to say that Luke indicates change has taken place.

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13 The insertion of verse 37 into the Alexandrian text and an insertion at verse 39, regarding the Spirit, suggests some copyists attempted to bring the text into line with what they regarded as proper baptismal practice and belief. See Barrett, Critical Commentary, 433.

14 Gaventa, Acts, 144.
Was the Ethiopian’s conversion inevitable? Did divine agency so work as, in effect, to leave him with no choice? This will always be an issue when divine and human agency meet. It is a question that the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament describe but do not resolve. The reader could legitimately reason that the eunuch’s conversion was highly likely given his background and his seeking after God. Highly likely, but not such as to exclude his own volition. The eunuch’s question, “what hinders me from being baptized?” suggests a genuine and free expression of his desires.

(b) Saul

In the Lukan description of Saul’s conversion the reader encounters the conversion of an enemy. Of the three conversion accounts studied, this is the one for which Luke provides the most information about what Saul was like before his encounter with Jesus and what he was like after. Indeed a large part of the book of Acts following on from Saul’s conversion is Lukan testimony to the changes in Saul’s, later Paul’s, life resulting from his conversion. This is most likely because of the significance of Saul/Paul in Acts.

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15 Cf. Gaventa, Darkness to Light, 56.
The Lukan portrayal of Saul before his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus is one of a “young man” zealously committed to the destruction of the Jesus movement. In other words, he is an enemy of the church. Drawing upon some comments from outside of the literary block examined in this thesis, Luke describes Saul as one who approved of Stephen’s execution (8:1), and one who was “ravaging” the church and dragging men and women off to be imprisoned (8:3). In a later testimony before the Jerusalem mob Paul states how he had persecuted members of “the Way to the death” (22:4). In his defence before Festus and Agrippa, Paul explains how he was “boiling over with rage” towards Christians and had tried to force them to blaspheme (26:11).

Luke opens his account of Saul’s conversion by telling how Saul, “breathing murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord” (9:1), had, on his own initiative, gone to the high priest seeking authority from him to search the synagogues of Damascus and bind and bring back to Jerusalem any men and women of the Way (9:3). That he had access to the high priest gives the reader insight into Saul’s status with the religious leadership in Jerusalem. In his persecution of the church the Lukan Saul was thorough and relentless.
From his two defence speeches before the Jerusalem mob and in Caesarea Luke provides information about Saul’s religious, intellectual and political pedigree. The Lukan Paul was born in and a citizen of the prominent city of Tarsus of Cilicia (21:39; 22:3). Paul tells Festus and Agrippa that “according to the strictest party of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee” (26:5). His religious instruction had been, according to Luke, by Gamaliel, who was highly honoured in Jerusalem (22:3; cf. 5:34). Possibly the reader is meant to infer something of Saul’s intellectual ability and independence of thought from the fact that, in Luke’s narrative, Saul did not follow the great Gamaliel in all matters.

It is this Saul, determined, relentless and ruthless, who sets out for Damascus to arrest any Christians he might find in the synagogues there. But drawing close to Damascus Saul is suddenly confronted by the risen Lord Jesus himself. While Jesus, in different ways, is to be found in the other conversion accounts studied, only here does Jesus appear directly. Luke is not concerned with Saul’s internal response but only with recounting what happened. The reader must fill in the gaps here. Saul falls to the ground blinded by the dazzling light from heaven. Saul’s question, “who are you, Lord?” suggests that Saul did not, at that

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16 The Greek proverb quoted by the Lukan Jesus (26:14) is not regarded as an indication of a guilty conscience but a reminder that it is futile to resist the divine will.
point, know who confronted him, only that it was a manifestation of divinity in some form. But this soon changes. The voice replies, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (9:5).

This dramatic confrontation, while sparse in details, is pregnant with narrative meaning. At one level, it is the narrative of a persecutor who, on the way to persecute the church, is met by the one he is in reality persecuting. The aggressor is cast down to the ground and blinded. He is now in “darkness” and has to be led about by his companions. At another level, this account is about one who came in power but had to be led forward in weakness. He was travelling on one “journey” but he is led away to start another, to become a servant of the Way. Later, in Damascus, he will be healed and see again. Saul had, in a real sense, “seen the light,” not only physically but spiritually as well. He had encountered Jesus directly. His devastating physical experiences become an analogue of conversion. As the Lukan Paul later recalls, his missionary commissioning by Jesus is to “open their eyes, [so that] they may turn from darkness to light …” (26:18).

However the process of Saul’s conversion has only started. What was begun by Jesus on the road to Damascus is to be completed in Damascus. But what more could Saul still need, after all he had directly
encountered the risen Jesus himself? Would not the impact of such a unique and dramatic encounter be enough to bring about Saul’s conversion? In the Lukan portrayal of this conversion it is not. Ananias arrives at the house where Saul is staying and tells him that he has been sent by Jesus so that he might be healed and filled by the Holy Spirit. Saul is healed and (by implication) filled with the Spirit. He is also baptized. While it may be argued that a conversion, be it Saul’s, the Ethiopian’s or Cornelius’ (or anyone’s), is never complete, I would argue that in the narratives studied the conversions have both a beginning and an end. The beginnings are marked by divine activity and the endings by baptism.

In this account of Saul’s conversion the reader is expected to fill in some gaps on the basis of what Luke has previously narrated about the significance of baptism and the role of the Spirit in conversion. Nonetheless, Luke provides some further insight into the significance of baptism and the removal of sin. The Lukan Paul, before the Jerusalem mob, recalls Ananias’ directions to him, to be baptized and wash away his sins (22:16). Baptism is likened to a purifying washing, a cleansing with water an idea that is not found elsewhere in the New Testament.
but which may have come from the connection between washing and cleansing to be found in the Hebrew Scriptures.

In that same narrative echo of chapter 9 Luke recounts how Ananias instructs Saul to be baptized and wash away his sins, “calling upon his name,” that is, the name of Jesus (22:16). Baptism also indicates a commitment to Jesus. In his recounting of Saul’s conversion Luke appears to present Saul as overwhelmed by the risen Jesus. Resistance seems futile. I would argue, however, that it is by baptism that Saul confirms his agreement with and consent to the divine. It is here that Saul, of his own volition, crosses a boundary to be counted as a follower of Jesus the Nazarene. In crossing this boundary Saul leaves behind his former life as a zealous Pharisee. It is by undergoing baptism that he receives a new identity as a disciple of the Way.

As I have mentioned previously, it is only with the narrative of the conversion of Saul that Luke provides the reader with insights into the extent of the change that the convert underwent. He does this by outlining aspects of Saul’s life before and after his meeting with Jesus. Using Bennema’s continuum of development, which ranges from “no development” to “much development,”17 in words that seem, with

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regard to Saul, a masterly piece of understatement, Saul undergoes “much development.” Such development occurs attitudinally, behaviourally and cognitively.

Saul’s attitudes were turned upside down. The followers of Jesus were no longer the “other” to be destroyed; they were now brethren. Luke records how after his baptism Saul joins with those he previously come to imprison (9:19b) and later he tries to join the disciples in Jerusalem. Saul may have crossed a boundary into the church but not everyone on the other side of the boundary was persuaded. It took the good offices of Barnabas, who was convinced of the genuineness of Saul’s change, to act as a facilitator with the Jerusalem leadership. He brought Saul to the apostles and explained to them how Saul had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him (9:27). In recounting these things, Luke reinforces to the reader the dramatic change that has taken place in Saul’s life.

The behavioural changes in Saul relate to what he did next. Luke narrates how Saul “immediately,” in the synagogues of Damascus, began to proclaim that Jesus is the Son of God (9:20). He debated with Jews living in Damascus, demonstrating that Jesus was the Christ (9:22, see also 9:27c). Later in Jerusalem he went about speaking out boldly,
debating with the Hellenists (9:28, 29). In the Lukan Paul’s later testimonies in Jerusalem and Caesarea, the reader learns that he preached in Judah to Jews and Gentiles (26:20). Luke uses the opposition of the Damascene Jews, who knew why Saul had come to Damascus, to underscore the extraordinary change in his life. They were “amazed” at what he was now saying (9:21) and later they even hatched a plot to kill him (9:23).

Just as incredible is the content of Saul’s preaching: this Jesus is the “Son of God,” “the Messiah” (9:20, 22). This is what he is now saying about the one whom he would have seen, a few days before, as a threat to Judaism. But is this almost too good to be true? Is it an example of Lukan hyperbole to make a point, namely, that Saul, the former enemy, is now the ideal example of true repentance? Where did this complete turnaround in his theology come from in such a short space of time? In the Lukan narrative there is no explicit cognitive element such as with the eunuch, and, as will be shown, with Cornelius through the preaching of Peter.

It needs to be recognized, however, that Saul is different from the other two converts in a particular way relevant to this matter. He is a Pharisee and he has had an extensive theological education at the hands
of the illustrious Gamaliel. He was immersed in Pharisaic traditions.

Perhaps the reader is meant to infer that this man did not so much need re-education as a re-orientation, a new centre to his extensive learning. This is not to suggest that Saul’s new understanding was complete, needing no development or refinement. Rather, it is to propose that he had a new frame of reference, Jesus Christ, that would need to be developed over time.

Was Saul’s conversion inevitable? Did he have a genuine choice?

In the light of Luke’s portrayal of his conversion, centred on the vivid encounter with Jesus himself, the reader might be forgiven for thinking that he did not. He appears to be overwhelmed by the divine. But the reader notes that Saul was not a prepared person as the Ethiopian and Cornelius were. To the contrary, before he set out for Damascus Saul was zealously committed to the destruction of the Jesus movement. So perhaps the reader is meant to see in the Lukan narrative an example of the mode of divine agency being suited to the person, in this case a dedicated enemy. I would further argue that even though the divine agency appears overwhelming, in baptism, if nowhere else, Saul is given space to consent to what is happening to him. To borrow an idea from Green, baptism is an embodied form of cognition, where a physical
activity is linked to a change in thinking. Baptism involves the material, water, as well as the volitional and physical, that is, willingly and physically entering and being immersed in water.

(c) Cornelius

Cornelius is a centurion described by Luke as “devout,” “righteous” and “fearing God” (10:2, 22), indeed, one who had had a godly influence on his household (10:2). He is a man with an active faith. He prays “always,” following the Jewish pattern of prayer (10:3, 30) and is a generous supporter of Jewish people in need (10:2). Such is his character and generous acts of charity that he has a good reputation amongst the Jewish people of Caesarea. Not only that, but his piety is recognised by God (10:4). In so many ways Luke portrays Cornelius as an exemplary believer in God: devout, fearing God, upright and a benefactor to the people of God.

Yet for all that, this exemplary man was not saved. If he was not saved he certainly was a prepared person, as was the eunuch. Both stood on the boundary of Judaism, a boundary they could not cross, for

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different reasons. As Luke describes them, however, they are receptive to a new way.

Cornelius is told by an angel in a vision to invite Peter, who is in nearby Joppa, to come to him and his friends and relatives so as to hear “words by which he will be saved” (11:14). He had gone about as far as he could go spiritually as one standing on the boundary of Judaism. As Pervo puts it, he is at the “‘dead end’ of God-fearing piety.” The words by which he would be saved concerned Jesus Christ. As Peter speaks about Jesus to Cornelius with his friends and relatives, the Spirit “falls” upon them and they begin speaking in tongues and praising God (10:44-46). Yet Cornelius is still not converted and Peter recognizes this. Cornelius had heard about Jesus from Peter and he had been baptized in the Spirit, but he needed to make his response, his commitment to Jesus. So Peter commands that Cornelius be baptized “in the name of Jesus Christ.” As Dunn puts it, “Baptism in ‘the name of Jesus Christ’ (10:48) closes the circle already drawn with the proclamation of belief in him and of forgiveness of sins in his name and with the outpouring of the

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Spirit.” 21 Cornelius thereby crosses a different boundary and receives a new identity, a disciple of Jesus.

Was Cornelius’ conversion inevitable? Certainly, as with the other conversions of the Ethiopian and Saul, divine agency is central to Cornelius’ conversion. It is in regard to Cornelius’ conversion that Haenchen made his complaint that divine agency was such as almost to discount entirely human involvement (see above). Indeed, Cornelius, as described by Luke, does not appear to be the kind of person to disobey the direction of an angel. Nonetheless the reader reasonably concludes that Cornelius willingly obeys. While his messengers are on the way to Peter in Joppa, Cornelius, apparently on his own initiative, gathers in his house his relatives and friends to hear what Peter has to say. Moreover, it is in baptism that Cornelius makes his willing response to what he has heard and experienced. Baptism is Cornelius’ “yes” to Jesus Christ.

6.4 The importance of the conversion experience

Another insight from this study of the three conversions is the importance of the conversion experience itself for the individuals. It is

21 Dunn, Beginning, 400.
not unreasonable to conclude that this experience would have been central to their understanding of what it meant to be a Christian. After escaping a plot to kill him in Damascus, Saul made his way to Jerusalem and attempted to join the disciples there. But they were afraid of him because none of them believed he was a disciple of Jesus (Acts 9:26). Barnabas stepped in to convince the Jerusalem believers that Saul was a genuine disciple by recounting Saul’s conversion experience. He told how Saul had seen the Lord who had spoken with him, and how, after that, Saul spoke boldly in Damascus in the name of Jesus (Acts 9:27). The disciples in Jerusalem were convinced and Saul was able to join them (Acts 9:28).

Later the Lukan Paul would recount his conversion twice. His conversion is important to Paul for many reasons, not the least being its link to his call to proclaim Christ. There could be no call without conversion. Before the Jerusalem mob (Acts 22:1–16) and before Agrippa and Festus and military leaders and prominent citizens of Caesarea (Acts 25:23–26:20) Paul relates his conversion experience and call to explain himself and his actions to his hearers. Paul believes he is a different person since his encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. His understanding of God and how God has made himself
known in Jesus, his comprehension of himself and his life’s purpose
have all been radically changed through his conversion. Although it is
not explicitly stated in the cases of the Ethiopian and Cornelius, it is
hard to believe that they would have forgotten their conversion
experiences or failed to realize its significance for their lives as
Christians. It is plausible to claim all three knew they had been
converted. Their understanding of who they were had changed because
of their conversion.

6.5 The church grows by conversions

Conversion in Acts is part of a larger picture, the growth of the early
church from Jerusalem. This growth occurs through conversions. This is
seen by the position and content of this narrative block, Acts 8:4–11:18.
This block is placed after the “great persecution” from which Luke
traces the spread of the Jesus movement through several conversion
narratives, namely, the Samaritans, the eunuch, Saul, those in Lydda,
Sharon and Joppa, and Cornelius.
6.6 Wider implications


To draw out some implications of my thesis for a Lukan understanding of conversion I will provide my own responses to these questions.

Question 1 *Is conversion a cognitive category, a moral category, or both?* Based on the three conversion accounts in Acts 8:4 – 11:18, we see that it is at least a cognitive category. In each case there is something to be understood about Jesus. For the eunuch, what is to be understood is conveyed through preaching. Philip, beginning from a passage in Isa 53, preaches the good news about Jesus (Acts 8:32–35). Although Luke does not tell us the content of Philip’s preaching it is enough for the Ethiopian to request baptism. In Caesarea, Peter preaches to Cornelius and his relatives and friends, and again this is centred on Jesus, his ministry, death and resurrection (Acts 10:36–43). It does not appear from

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the text that in these two cases wrong ideas about Jesus are being corrected.

However this is not the case with Saul although there is no preaching involved. What is involved is Saul’s direct encounter with the risen Jesus by means of which his life is turned around. Saul leaves Jerusalem for Damascus to arrest Christians there. Nearing Damascus Jesus appears to him and the one who was coming to Damascus to persecute the church actually enters the city a follower of Jesus. Jesus’ question to Saul, “Why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4) implies that Saul saw Jesus, and his followers, as a threat to the faith of Israel that had to be dealt with. Saul had undergone a total re-orientation of his understanding of Jesus through his encounter on the road to Damascus.

Conversion as a moral category is not as prominent as is conversion as a cognitive category in the three conversion narratives. However it is present. Peter concludes his sermon in Cornelius’ house with the words, “All the prophets testify [about] him that all those who believe in him receive forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43). Further, in the Lukan Paul’s reflections on his conversion before the mob in Jerusalem, in the words of Ananias to Paul, Luke links baptism to cleansing from sin, “And now why delay? Arise, have
yourself baptised, wash away your sins having called upon his name” (Acts 22:16). We find in these words of Ananias an echo of Peter’s exhortation in 10:43 and in his concluding words in his appeal on the Day of Pentecost, “Repent and be baptised each one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38). Thus we see in the preaching of Peter and in the act of baptism itself, common to all three conversions, that conversion is a moral category as well as a cognitive one.

Question 2 Are repentance and conversion discrete or convergent categories? Nave argues that in the Lukan writings the command to repent applies to all, Jews and Gentiles. However he goes further in claiming that the term “conversion” only refers to Gentiles because only the Gentiles change their religion. Jewish repentance, according to Nave, does not involve a change of religion but only a change in their understanding of Jesus. Providing an answer to this question from the three conversion narratives examined in this thesis is complicated by an ambiguity about the nature of the relationship of the eunuch and Cornelius to God. While not proselytes, and if the term “God-fearers” is inadequate, as argued above, they were certainly attracted to the Jewish faith, an attraction that in Cornelius’ case expressed itself in regular

prayer and acts of charity (almsgiving). Can their subsequent
experience, encapsulated in their baptisms, be described as a change of
religion? In the case of Saul, on the surface it does not appear that he
does change his religion, as Nave argues. The matter is further
complicated by the difficulty for modern Westerners living in a secular
society to get a proper understanding of “religion” in the first century
C.E. Religion was then pervasive and not as stringently demarcated
between different beliefs as it is today. So it is probably better to talk
about allegiances. Therefore I would argue that if we understand
Christian “conversion” as a turning to God who is the God and Father
of Jesus Christ (see below) all three, the eunuch, Saul and Cornelius,
were converted, that is, they changed their allegiance to God made
known in Jesus. Thus, on the basis of these three narratives we can say
that, for Luke, repentance and conversion converge.

Question 3 Is conversion a crossing of religious boundaries and
rejection of one manner of life, an embracing more fully the life one has chosen,
or both? Question 4 What is the relationship between conversion as a “change
of mind” and behavioural transformation? The third question is related to

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24 Nave, Role and Function of Repentance, 208–209.
25 It is interesting to note that in 26:18 the Lukian Paul recounts the charge by the risen
Jesus to him, to “open their eyes, so they might turn from darkness to light and (from)
the authority of Satan to God so they might receive forgiveness of sins.” Jesus charges
Paul to go to both Jews and Gentiles with this message (Acts 26:17).
the first two questions and the extent to which this thesis can contribute an answer is to be found in my responses to these questions above. As regards the fourth question, the relationship between conversion as a “change of mind” and behavioural transformation, this is not dealt with by Luke in the conversions of the eunuch and Cornelius. But it is seen most clearly in the case of Saul who after his conversion starts preaching in the synagogues of Damascus that Jesus is the Son of God (Acts 9: 20). The persecutor of Jesus had become the proclaimer of Jesus in a most dramatic fashion. Luke provides further testimony to the extent of the behavioural change in Saul by narrating the amazement of those who heard him for they had learnt why he had set out for Damascus (Acts 9: 21). However, Saul did more than preach Jesus, he debated vigorously with the Jews living in Damascus arguing that Jesus is the Messiah (Acts 9:22).

Question 5. Is conversion an event or a process? If conversion is understood as turning to the God who has revealed himself in Jesus then Luke, in the three conversion accounts, portrays it as an event. There is variety in the roles of the human and divine agents in each of the conversions but the focal point of conversion is to be found in the baptism each person undergoes. It is in baptism that divine and human
agency coalesces. While Luke does give some brief information about the lives of Saul and Cornelius prior to their conversions he does not relate what, if any, part they contributed to their turning to God. However, we should not conclude that previous life experiences prior to conversion are unimportant in turning to God it is just that they are not an issue for Luke in these three narratives and so answers to this question must be sought elsewhere in Luke-Acts.

Question 6, Is conversion a matter of human self-correction, or is it the consequence of divine initiative? In the three conversions studied it is clear that the initiative lies with divine agency. In each case Luke portrays divine agency initiating events that lead to the conversions of the Ethiopian, Saul and Cornelius. The form this takes varies. With the eunuch and Cornelius it is through the appearance of an angel of the Lord while in the case of Saul it is the risen Jesus who confronts him as he comes near to Damascus to arrest the Christians there. But, as I have argued above, divine agency is necessary but not sufficient. Human agency is also significant. The eunuch, Saul and Cornelius must all respond to this divine agency as it is manifested in different guises and this response is most importantly seen in each saying yes to baptism. It
is in baptism that each person makes their affirmative reply to the divine.

**Question 7, Does Luke’s narrative support a “pattern” of conversion?**

As I argue below, on the basis of this study of Luke’s three narratives of conversion there is no one pattern of conversion. Each account is marked by variety in the roles played by divine agency and the humans involved.

**Question 8, What catalyses conversion in Luke-Acts?** As far as the conversions of the eunuch, Saul and Cornelius go, the catalyst for conversion is the miraculous although manifest in different ways. The events that lead to the conversion of the Ethiopian begin with an angel of Lord directing Philip to the eunuch journeying home in his chariot and it is an angel of God that speaks to Cornelius in a vision. Most dramatically of all, Saul is confronted by the risen Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus. Thus, divine agency is the catalyst for conversion, as Luke narrates his conversion accounts in Acts 8:4 – 11:18, even though a human response is required.

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26 I am taking here “miraculous” to include the intervention of the supernatural into the mundane sphere of life.
In conclusion

One of the notable features of Luke’s narrative of the conversions of the eunuch, Saul and Cornelius is variety, both with the divine and the human agencies.\textsuperscript{27} I conclude that there is no one paradigm of turning to God to be derived from these accounts. As for divine agency, there is variety in the intensity of divine involvement ranging from the role of an angel and the Spirit apparently limited to guiding the eunuch and Philip to the dramatic appearance of the risen Jesus himself to Saul. As Peterson puts in, “Luke illustrates the sovereign freedom of God to bring about faith in Christ in a way that is suitable to the situation of each individual.”\textsuperscript{28}

There is variety on the human side as well. The would-be converts and their circumstances are very different. There is a black-skinned outsider, an enemy of the church and an exemplary man. Further, the means by which each turns to God varies. In the Lukan narrative, it is the proclaiming of Jesus, starting from a text in Isaiah by Philip, that is important for the eunuch. In Saul’s case, it is the appearance of the risen Jesus and the ministrations of Ananias. For Cornelius, it is the vision of an angel, the preaching of Peter and the


\textsuperscript{28} Peterson, \textit{Acts}, 311.
irruption of the Holy Spirit. Each crosses a boundary but the costs of
doing so appear to vary. As far as Luke’s narrative goes, the reader could
presume that the costs are great for Saul and Luke documents them in
his narrative. While there would be costs for the eunuch and Cornelius,
y they do not appear to be of the same order as for Saul.

There are, however, features that are common to all three conversions. There is the work of divine agency in initiating the
conversion process and in its development. For Luke, turning to God is
not an autonomous process but one for which there can be no
conversion without divine agency. Not only is divine agency common
to all three conversions but, at least in the conversions of Saul and
Cornelius, the Spirit is central to the actual conversion. With Cornelius
this is explicit and with Saul it is implied.

As I have argued above, however, divine agency is necessary but
not sufficient for turning to God. If, in these Lukan narratives, divine
agency is necessary, so also is the part played by human agency, which
is another common feature of the conversion stories. The eunuch, Saul
and Cornelius are not automatons. In his own way, each is actively
involved in his conversion, particularly through baptism.
Another common feature is the Christological focus of each conversion account. Jesus is proclaimed in the conversions of the eunuch and Cornelius, reminding the reader that there is something to believe about Jesus. In Saul’s conversion Jesus directly confronts Saul. But a proper awareness of Jesus is not enough because the Lukan understanding of conversion in these narratives involves a commitment of the individual to Jesus, entered into through baptism in the name of Jesus. The reader is also reminded that conversion is not solely private, a transaction of the inner self, but it takes, particularly through baptism, an embodied form. Through this Christological focus of turning to God, Luke emphasises, particularly with Cornelius, that conversion is not so much a matter of making bad people good but of making a commitment to Jesus. Luke deals with changed behaviour only with regard to Saul, whereas in each conversion account baptism centres the conversion in a practical way on Jesus.²⁹

Can the expression “turning to God” be used with reference to the eunuch, Saul and Cornelius? Each of them, in his own way, could be said to be a believer in the God of Israel so how could they be said to

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²⁹ Cf. the comments by Witherup, “Baptism in the name of Jesus is the appropriate response to the call of conversion, and it both wipes away sinfulness and incorporates one into the Christian community.” Ronald D. Witherup, *Conversion in the New Testament* (ZS:NT; Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1994), 59.
turn to God in whom they already believe? It is interesting to note in this regard how Luke uses the idea of turning to God with reference to Jews, for example, in Luke 1:17; Acts 3:19; 26:20. So the idea of Jewish believers turning to God is not alien to Luke. The sense in which the eunuch, Saul and Cornelius can be said to turn to God is that they turn to the God revealed in Jesus Christ. They all turn to the God who sent Jesus, whose salvific plans are worked out through Jesus not Torah. The idea of God being revealed through Jesus and not Torah is a major discontinuity with Second Temple Judaism. Thus the three conversions have a very definite Christological focus. Saul’s conversion is the most Christological of the three, as he is confronted by Jesus himself.\(^3\)

Cornelius is directed to Jesus through the preaching of Peter and the eunuch through the preaching of Philip. This turning to God is expressed in commitment to Jesus Christ through baptism.

Finally, on the basis of these three Lukan conversion narratives, I offer the following tentative (and limited) understanding of turning to God. Turning to God involves both divine agency initiating and guiding

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\(^3\) Schnabel writes concerning the conversion of Saul, but his words would be relevant to the conversions of the eunuch and Cornelius (apart from the physical encounter), “Conversion involves the conscious acceptance of the claims concerning the life and identity of Jesus as crucified, risen and exalted Lord who is Israel’s Messiah and the Savior of the world. It is in this comprehensive sense that authentic conversion always involves an encounter with Jesus. For Saul it was a real, physical encounter.” Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 459.
the process and the human response of actively cooperating with the
divine and commitment to Jesus Christ signified through baptism
resulting in the forgiveness of sins and a new way of living.
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