CHAPTER NINE

CONVERSION IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES: ANCIENT AUDITORS’ PERCEPTIONS

Conversion is a central focus of Acts, maybe the central focus.\(^1\) There are at least ten conversion narratives in Acts\(^2\) plus numerous statements by the narrator about such phenomena. In 1979, Paulist Press published *The Salvation of the Gentiles* by Jacques Dupont, which contained an essay on ‘Conversion in the Acts of the Apostles.’\(^3\) Dupont contended the following concerning conversion in Acts: (1) that it belonged to the moral category of conversion which was concerned with sin and forgiveness, (2) that it involved a ‘turning from’ as well as a ‘turning to,’ (3) that its catalysts were miracles and preaching, (4) that its roots were in divine grace, and (5) that it resulted in a continuing change of life. Looking back on Dupont’s study, one may conclude that the only point that needs modification is the first one. In Acts, instances are identifiable of both the moral and the cognitive types of conversion (e.g., the account that includes Simon in Acts 8 is an example of cognitive conversion because his worldview, even after his baptism, includes magic; 13:4–12; 14:8–18; 17:22–31).\(^4\) With this one adjustment,

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1 Thomas M. Finn, *From Death to Rebirth: Ritual and Conversion in Antiquity* (New York: Paulist, 1997), 27, says conversion is the major theme of Acts.

2 Finn, *From Death to Rebirth*, 27, says there are twenty-one. In the summer of 1995, my student, Craig Joseph, and I attempted to build a database of ancient conversion accounts and, on the basis of an examination of that collection to determine whether or not there was a set form for a conversion story. We concluded that it is possible to isolate five stable components in these ancient conversion narratives: (1) the context, (2) the catalysts leading to conversion, (3) the counter-forces which pose an obstacle or opposition, (4) the conversion itself, and (5) the confirmation of the genuineness of the conversion by postconversion evidence. These results essentially confirmed an earlier attempt by Robert Allen Black, ‘The Conversion Stories in the Acts of the Apostles’ (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1985). A reading of Acts then showed ten narratives which contained these five components: (1) 2:1–47, (2) 3:1–4:37, (3) 8:4–25, (4) 8:26–40, (5) 9:1–22, (6) 10:1–48, (7) 13:6–12, (8) 13:13–52, (9) 16:11–15, and (10) 16:25–34.


4 Nancy Shumate, *Crisis and Conversion in Apuleius’ Metamorphoses* (Ann Arbor: Univer-
I want to employ Dupont’s description of conversion in this study of Acts and ask a further question: How would ancient auditors have heard Acts’ description of Christian conversion? An answer to this question will be attempted, mostly but not exclusively, on the basis of a comparison of Acts with selected conversion narratives from antiquity. We will take up in order the five parts of our modified version of Dupont’s description of conversion in Acts.

_Moral and Cognitive Conversions_

First, if we grant the modification of Dupont’s proposals as stated above, Acts describes some conversions as primarily moral, which involve issues of sin and forgiveness (e.g., 2:38; 3:19; 5:30–31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:17–18), and others as essentially cognitive, which involve a shift of basic paradigms about the world, that is, a movement from idolatry to the worship of the living God (e.g., 13:4–12; 14:8–18; 17:22–31). How would people outside of messianic Judaism have heard this depiction?

On the one hand, a moral type of conversion was known to both Jewish and pagan persons alike.

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5 The audience-oriented approach taken here is like that of Peter J. Rabinowitz, ‘Whirl Without End: Audience-Oriented Criticism,’ in _Contemporary Literary Theory_ (ed. G. Douglas Atkins and Laura Morrow; Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 81–100; idem, ‘Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences,’ _Celt_ 4 (1977): 121–42; and idem, _Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation_ (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987), 15–46. Rabinowitz defines the ‘authorial audience’ as the readers that the author has in mind in creating the text. These readers possess the sociocultural knowledge and interpretive skills necessary to actualize the text’s meaning. Unlike some contemporary uses of the expression ‘implied reader,’ the term ‘authorial audience’ locates the interaction of text and reader in a particular sociohistorical context.

6 The database of conversion narratives from antiquity may be found in my _Reading Acts_ (New York: Crossroad, 1997) in the section on Acts 9:1–31. Some scholars would also include Dio Chrysostom’s _De exilio_ and Aelius Aristides’ _Ἑξοδον λόγον_. I have reservations about both and so have omitted them.

7 See Finn, _From Death to Rebirth_, 45–46, for a discussion of the term.