

SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCE FOR CHAPTER 3

Conversion, Call, or Commission?



Paul's so-called conversion, especially as narrated three times in Acts (9:1-9; 22:6-11; 26:12-18), has become almost the quintessential conversion story of the Bible. Paul's version recounted in Galatians is far less dramatic as narrative. But was it really a conversion?

Scholars debate the proper label for Paul's experience. If, by conversion, we mean a change of religion, then this is not the proper term. Paul remained a Jew, albeit one who now accepted Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God. Yet it is true that he did a 180-degree turnaround, which constitutes a type of conversion. He changed dramatically from persecutor to proclaimer.

The language Paul uses in Galatians is more akin to that of a prophetic call, such as that of Isaiah or Jeremiah. Paul's emphasis on the apostolic mission he received to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ indicates it was also a commissioning, being sent on a mission. So, there are aspects of all three dimensions—conversion, call, commission—in this revelatory event. In any case, Paul clearly attributes his experience totally to God's grace. (Corresponding text begins on p. 31.)

Judaism in Paul's Day



Galatians 2:13-14 is the only place in the NT where the noun *Judaism* occurs, though the adjective *Judaic* occurs elsewhere (cf. Titus 1:14). For modern ears, however, the term can be misleading. We tend to think of a monolithic, uniform religion, when in fact there were multiple types of "Judaism" in NT times. Paul admits that he was a Pharisee (Phil 3:5), thus a member of a particularly pious group of Jews seeking to preserve authentic Judaism according to their understanding. There were also other groups, such as the Sadducees, the Essenes, and eventually the Zealots. Judaism, therefore, was far more complex than the word might imply.

Much of our knowledge of Judaism in the NT comes from the Jewish-Roman historian [Josephus](#) (ca. 37- 100 CE), whose writings describe many aspects of Jewish customs and faith. The sect of Jews who believed in Jesus as the Messiah, and who became known as Christians, complicated the matter even further. What is essential for Paul, however, is that Judaism was a distinctive religion apart from paganism. It was characterized by Sacred Scriptures (thus, Jews were known as "the people of the book") and a highly developed ethical stance, which even many pagans in the ancient world admired. The heart of the controversy in Galatians is Paul's insistence that one does not need to become a Jew to be a follower of Jesus Christ. (Corresponding text begins on p. 32.)

Paul and the Christian Tradition



Paul's insistence that he did not consult with the apostolic authorities immediately after his own apostolic call does not mean that he had no contact with Christian tradition that predated him. In fact, although Paul's letters antedate the four Gospels, there are allusions to the "Jesus traditions" that form the background of the Gospels. Certain passages in Paul reflect knowledge of earlier Christian tradition, such as the Philippians hymn (Phil 2:6-11), the Last Supper tradition (1 Cor 11:23-25), and the traditions about the resurrection appearances of Jesus (1 Cor 15:1-11). Paul clearly distinguishes what he received (Gk. *paralambanō*), usually "from the Lord," and what he himself teaches without earlier instruction (cf. 1 Cor 7:12, 25). While we cannot know exactly whence these traditions came to Paul, they demonstrate continuity in the Catholic tradition at an early stage. We should also remember that when Paul was evangelizing, the Jesus traditions were in flux and circulating in oral form. The written Gospels would come decades later. (Corresponding text begins on p. 35.)

The Council of Jerusalem



Resolving the tensions between Galatians and Acts on the so-called Council of Jerusalem is difficult. The notion of council perhaps implies more than the meeting really was, since this word connotes an official gathering of church leaders more typical of later periods of ecclesial history. Complicating matters is also whether Acts 11 or Acts 15 provide the essential parallel with Galatians because the issues are different. Acts 11 concerns dietary regulations, while Acts 15 involves circumcision (v. 5) but also includes dietary issues and marriage regulations (v. 20). (Corresponding text begins on p. 41.)
