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Literature and
Religious Experience:
Beyond Belief and Unbelief

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B L O O M S B U R Y

Interruption: Conversion as an Event in Paul of Tarsus and Paul of Burgos

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The last decade of the fourteenth century is infamous as the period of the most forced conversions to Christianity in Iberian history. In June 1391, riots broke out in Seville's Jewish quarter and quickly spread to nearby cities, interrupting daily life in the crowns of Castile and Aragon including Toledo, Valencia, Barcelona, and even beyond on the Mediterranean island of Mallorca. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Jews were killed, and many thousands were forced to convert to Christianity. Many of these *conversos* continued Jewish practice privately while maintaining Christian identities in public. A culture of suspicion emerged in Christian society in which *conversos* faced social discrimination, increased coercion, violence, and eventually, inquisition.¹

Not all Jewish converts of the late fourteenth century were forced, however. In 1390 or 1391—the evidence is not clear—rabbi of the northern city of Burgos, Solomon Halevi, converted willingly to Christianity and took the name Pablo de Santa María (Paulus de Sancta Maria in Latin, d. 1435). His conversion was of a very different sort from the many forced conversions of his brethren, and his experience after conversion was also unique. As a Christian, Pablo rose to a high social standing, becoming tutor to the Castilian king Juan II, close friend of the Avignon pope (or “Antipope”) Benedict XIII, and bishop of the city of Burgos. His name (often shortened in Latin to *Burgensis*, “the Burgosian,” and often given in English as Paul of Burgos) came to be known all over Europe through his writing, which included an influential Jewish-Christian dialogue known as the *Scrutiny of Scriptures* (*Scrutinium Scripturarum*), as well as a set of biblical glosses, the *Additiones* (Additions), appended to the commentary

¹ For an overview of the events of 1391, see Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, 2: 95–117.

of fourteenth-century Franciscan Nicholas of Lyra. Pablo's glosses were later included with Lyra's commentary in many early modern printed editions of the Bible, and in this way, they found their way "into hundreds of libraries across the Continent in scholastic, monastic, cathedral, and courtly settings."² Writers as diverse as Marsilio Ficino, Thomas More, and Martin Luther cited his work. Pablo is, without a doubt, the most illustrious convert from late medieval Iberia.³

Pablo recounted his experience of conversion in the prologue to his widely distributed biblical gloss. Pablo's conversion evoked the model most familiar to Christian readers, that of Paul (Saul) of Tarsus, as narrated in the Acts of the Apostles. While the influence of Paul is not surprising, Pablo's own narrative differs in many ways. His transformation of faith was not the result of a violent epiphany, nor was it the result of violent upheaval, such as the forced baptisms that took place around him in many Iberian cities. Rather, his was a gradual experience of grace and faith, a slow transformation premised on "rereading" Scripture and training his mind in a new understanding. Thus, despite the aesthetic parallel, considered side by side, the conversions of Paul of Tarsus and Pablo de Santa María seem dramatically different.

This chapter compares the conversions of Paul and Pablo in terms of the different experiences of religious change they represent. Unlike Paul of Tarsus, for whom a turn to Christianity signified a sudden interruption of the status quo that radically reconfigured his subsequent experience, Pablo describes a conversion that transformed his former Jewish identity, combining his "Levite" identity in dialectical fashion with his new Christian faith. Reading Paul through Pablo's example, this chapter proposes that the Pauline paradigm of conversion includes two very different, even incompatible, models of change, and that this contradictory duality has yielded and continues to yield opposed models of religious experience. The first model, suggested in Paul's own epistolary language, describes faith as a definitive interruption of the past through the revelation of a new reality. The other, employed in the narrative representation of Paul in the Acts of the Apostles, casts conversion as a climactic moment in a coherent, diachronic history, a present bridge between past and future. Pablo, modeling himself on Paul, invokes this double tradition of, on the one hand, a "theological" Paul who breaks with the past, combined with, on the other hand, a "narrative" Paul who sees the past as a foreshadowing of the present and future.

² Klepper, *The Insight of Unbelievers*, 6.

³ For an overview of Pablo's writing, see Szpiech, *Conversion and Narrative*, 41–2, which is the basis of the following discussion.

Pablo's model, bridging medieval and early modern perspectives, serves to highlight in part the medieval legacy of this dual model of conversion. At the same time, a reading of Pablo's narrative points to themes that are still relevant in present-day debates about Paul's conversion. Thus, before turning back to Pablo's reading of Paul, this chapter will begin by considering the place of Paul's conversion in contemporary thought, including both philosophical discourse that cites Paul's conversion in debates about the nature of historical "events" and also theological debates that invoke it as part of what Lieven Boeve calls a "theology of interruption." Moving backward in time from this debate to a similar dual reading of Paul in the late medieval example of Pablo de Santa María, it will argue that Paul's complex legacy serves to illustrate a broader methodological challenge in the dialogue between theology and religious studies about how to characterize religious experience.

1. A Theology of Interruption

The question of how to understand Paul's experience on the road to Damascus is, for many Christian thinkers, part of a broader debate about the nature of God's intervention in history itself, which has emerged as an acutely important issue for theologians in the second half of the twentieth century. Johann Baptist Metz (d. 2019) has asserted that "the shortest definition of religion is *interruption*."⁴ Metz's dictum provides the foundation of what Lieven Boeve calls a "theology of interruption" in which "God interrupts history" first through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and thereafter by the indelible memory of that violent interruption. "The category of 'interruption' also stands at the very heart of the Christian faith," he affirms because it "takes on its ultimate shape in the resurrection of Jesus crucified on the cross."⁵ While for Metz, writing in the shadow of Auschwitz, "interruption" was most palpable in the confrontation with suffering and evil, for Boeve, working in a postmodern context, it becomes a confrontation with secularized "otherness" and the loss of tradition more generally in the face of a plurality of religious traditions. Theologically, this can take the shape of the radical otherness of God, but ethically it can mean also the irreducible reality of human others and their differences. The contemporary opposition between secular and religious worldviews is, for Boeve, itself a

⁴ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 158, on which, see Ashley, *Interruptions*.

⁵ See Boeve, "The Shortest Definition," 19.

manifestation of the interruption of “all grand identity-forming narratives (the Christian one included)” with otherness.⁶

For Boeve, this amounts to a challenge to but not a destruction of Christian identity. In his words, “Interruption ... should not be equated with rupture.” Boeve’s assertion seeks to rethink the core semantic sense of the word, which is in fact directly linked with “rupture” (Lat. *rumpo*, *-ere*, “to rupture, to break,” the core of *interrumpo*, *-ere*, “to rupture between” or “break apart”). In this, “interruption” (unlike related terms with the prefix *inter-* such as “intermission,” “intercession,” or “interlude”) denotes a break or division, and in a temporal sense, a stopping of the course of things, even though, as Boeve insists, “what is interrupted does not cease to exist.” Taken in figurative terms, the biblical imagery of “rupture” and interruption serves some thinkers as a fitting description for God’s interaction with the world and intervention in human history through Providence, theophany, and miracle.⁷

The appeal made by some thinkers to the resurrection as the prototype of interruption follows Paul’s apocalyptic theology. As Kevin Hart observes, “one could argue that Paul, the earliest documenter of the resurrection, invites us to consider the gospel as a blow that comes from outside all human knowledge, including religious knowledge.”⁸ René Girard approaches interruption as an intervention that can stop or change cyclical behavior. He sees the crucifixion and resurrection as the ultimate interruption of sacral violence, the “mimetic cycle” of ritualized scapegoating. As he explains, “the sacrificial crisis is a mimetic escalation and it is of such a nature that it takes a tremendous shock, something tremendously violent itself, to interrupt the scapegoat mechanism.”⁹ Drawing on Girard, Sandler Willibald describes “interruption” as a key aspect not only of Jesus’s passion but also of his pastoral mission, noting that “Jesus had to interrupt the inherent dynamics of the law as a moral system (with Paul: the law that took sin into its service).”¹⁰ The emphasis in these readings is on interruption as rupture, an event with the power to break closed and repetitive systems of thought or behavior. For both, “Jesus interrupts the systems” (in Willibald’s words), albeit in different ways. For Girard, that interruption enables a new freedom outside of

⁶ Boeve, “The Shortest Definition,” 21. See also his “The Interruption of Political Theology,” 55–6.

⁷ In the Vulgate, *interrumpere* is used for verbs of destruction or breaking, such as *paratz*, “to break through” (2 Kgs 14:13, Isa. 30:13), corresponding to *rhégnumi*, “to break asunder” or “burst” in the Septuagint; and *baqa’*, “to cleave, break through, divide” (2 Kgs 25:4 and Ps. 77(78):13–15), corresponding to *diarréssó*, “to rend” in the Septuagint.

⁸ Hart, “Absolute Interruption: On Faith,” 192.

⁹ Müller, “Interview with René Girard.”

¹⁰ Willibald, “Systematische Theologie,” 11.

the mimetic cycle of sacrificial violence. For Willibald, it also provides a model for how grace, and religion itself, can break open “self-contained systems” of human relations that are defined by secular social sciences.

By contrast with this focus on the interruption of systems and cycles, the use of “interruption” in the theology of Metz and Boeve depends on the subjective “encounter” with suffering and otherness. Like Willibald, they see interruption as an ongoing process in the world, thus situating the events of Jesus’s life within a broader, open-ended Christian history. Such a reading moves between two different poles of Paul’s conversionary persona, that of a sudden and singular “calling” and that of a character in a developed story of blindness and insight. Boeve himself insists that the impulse to characterize “interruption” both as a single force from outside time, but also as an ongoing opportunity for encounter within it, moves between these two Pauline views. Despite the power of interruption to “break open” closed narratives, he also stresses that religious experience itself can be conceived of as a perpetual form of interruption.¹¹ Jürgen Moltmann emphasizes the importance of that ongoing process, because interruption alone is not something that can be meaningfully integrated into Christian salvation history. “Interruption is not an eschatological category. The eschatological category is conversion.”¹² One might paraphrase this as suggesting that the singular interruption of Paul’s experience only takes on meaning in Christian history when it is incorporated into a temporal narrative.¹³

The dual readings of Paul’s conversion are not unique to theologians. Contemporary philosophers have similarly turned to Paul as a case study of religious experience, diverging sharply over how Paul’s conversion might or might not represent a dialectical understanding of history. For example, Alain Badiou insists that Paul’s thinking was not dialectical, in which the present and future would be premised on the past, but is based only on rupture and the possibilities of a new creation. He states unequivocally, “Paul’s argument is foreign to all dialectics ... Paul is obviously not the dialectician he is sometimes taken to be ... Ultimately, for Paul, the Christ-event is nothing but the resurrection. It eradicates negativity.”¹⁴ Badiou turns to Paul to exemplify his ontological ideal of “the event,” which he defines as that which is beyond

¹¹ Boeve, *God Interrupts History*, 82.

¹² Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, 22; quoted in Hart, “‘Absolute Interruption,’” 193.

¹³ In a similar but nontheological vein, Jack Miles elaborates this view in purely literary critical terms, seeing the crucifixion and resurrection—and one might extrapolate this to include Paul’s conversion as well—as structuring points that acquire meaning within a longer narrative timeline. See Miles, *Christ*, 207.

¹⁴ Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 70–3.

ontology, an unthinkable multiplicity that suddenly “interrupts” the unity of the state of affairs (the “world”) with something new and therefore “belongs to that-which-is-not-being-qua-being.”¹⁵ In contrast to Metz, he proposes that religion “supposes a continuity between truths and the circulation of sense”; philosophy “is subtractive, in that it ... interrupts ... the circulation of sense.”¹⁶ Interruption, indeed, is nothing less than “the possibility of philosophy.”¹⁷ By characterizing Paul as a “poet-thinker of the event,” he invokes him as the very embodiment of philosophy itself. This reading not only depends on Badiou’s peculiar ontology but also on his idea of Paul’s conversion, asking, “Is the term ‘conversion’ appropriate to what happened on the road to Damascus? It was a thunderbolt, a caesura, and not a dialectical reversal. It was a conscription instituting a new subject.”¹⁸ By stressing this subjective “thunderbolt,” Badiou can also affirm, “Paul emphasizes rupture rather than continuity with Judaism.”¹⁹

Badiou’s conception of the “event” as fully new can be contrasted to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s more dynamic ontology of the event as a process of becoming rather than a happening or interruption. Although Deleuze and Guattari do not engage Paul as Badiou does, they nevertheless invoke his legacy obliquely by advocating for “empiricist conversion” in the fact of “happening.”²⁰ But Badiou’s argument that Paul represents a form of pure rupture is countered even more strongly by Giorgio Agamben, who sees in Paul’s thinking “an unusual dialecticism,” and in fact attributes the development of the Hegelian dialectical *Aufhebung* to Luther’s German rendering of Paul’s messianic terminology.²¹ Agamben affirms that Paul’s idea of a “soteriological dialectic” characterizes time after the coming of the Messiah. This messianic and dialectical interpretation of Paul builds on earlier uses of Paul by Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin, and it parallels contemporary readings concerning Paul’s Jewish identity by Emmanuel Levinas and Jacob Taubes.²²

¹⁵ Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 2; Also, *Being and Event*, 189.

¹⁶ Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, 166.

¹⁷ Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, 94.

¹⁸ Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 17.

¹⁹ Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 35. On Badiou’s engagement with Paul, see Cimino, *Enactment, Politics, and Truth*, especially ch. 1; Stephen Fowl, “A Very Particular Universalism: Badiou and Paul,” 119–34; and Depoortere, “Badiou’s Paul: Founder of Universalism and Theoretician of the Militant,” 143–64.

²⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 75. See Brent Adkins, “Deleuze and Badiou on the Nature of Events,” 507–16; and Clayton Crockett, “Radical Theology and the Event,” 210–23.

²¹ Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 99.

²² Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 57. See Alain Gignac, “Agamben’s Paul,” 165–91; Griffiths, “The Cross as the Fulcrum of Politics,” 179–97. On Heidegger, see Cimino, *Enactment, Politics, and Truth*; and Kerekes, “The Figure of the Apostle Paul in Contemporary Philosophy (Heidegger, Badiou, Agamben, Zizek),” 27–53. On Taubes’s reading of Benjamin, see Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 70–5; and Gignac, “Taubes, Badiou, Agamben,” 155–211. On Levinas, see Bettina Bergo, “The Time and Language of Messianism,” 178–95.

Like Metz's reading, Badiou's and Agamben's use of Paul is also overtly political, offering a premise for enacting reform and change in society. Unlike Metz, however, their different ideas of political interruption are both revolutionary, albeit in dissimilar ways. A notably different philosophical reading—no less ethical but in no way messianic or militant—is offered by Paul Ricoeur, who argues that Paul's understanding of salvation is premised on a dialectical understanding of the Law itself.²³ Unlike other philosophers, Ricoeur insists above all on the irreducible and paradoxical multiplicity in Paul's thinking. While one might see a strand of Paul's thinking in Badiou's emphasis on rupture and "caesura," Ricoeur argues that one should not let this universalizing discourse predominate over other parts of Paul's view of time, including the genealogical and autobiographical. Rather than simply side with Agamben's dialectical reading, however, he insists that one must "respect the diversity of Pauline discourse," accepting without resolution the paradox of both a *kairos* and a *chronos* in Paul's vision.²⁴ Interruption, for Ricoeur, must always involve an ongoing combination of historical event and narrative memory.

2. A Tale of Two Pauls: Conversion in the Epistles and Acts

These different theological and philosophical readings of Paul as a thinker of "rupture" in messianic terms or a thinker of "dialectic" in historical terms are not unique to modern interpretations. In fact, they replay an interpretive debate that has persisted through the history of Christian interpretation of Paul, a dichotomy that has its origins in the varied representation of Paul's religious change in the New Testament itself. How does Paul describe his experience and how does this compare with the description of him by others? Looking at the little he says about himself, we find language describing not "conversion," "return," or "repentance," but rather sudden insight.²⁵ He claims his faith was "received . . . through a revelation (*apocalypseos*) of Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1:12), an unveiling that came to him from without. "Before faith came," he explains in Gal. 3:23, "we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be *revealed*." Paul's change, in his words, is one of vision, literally and metaphorically, making him

²³ Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 140–1.

²⁴ See Ricoeur, "Paul the Apostle," 77–8.

²⁵ On the authorship of Paul's Epistles, see Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul*.

a witness to the risen Christ. The resurrection interrupts the world and augers a new time in which “there is neither Jew nor Greek” (Gal. 3:28).

The word *apocalypsis* (revelation) with which Paul repeatedly describes his witnessing of the risen Christ hardly appears in the Gospels or in Acts, which instead describe conversion as a “turning,” employing *epistrephō* (from the root *strephō*, “to turn”) and its derivatives, meaning “to turn or return.”²⁶ Forms of *strephō* (patterned on the Hebrew verb, *shuv*, and its derivative, *teshuvah*, “return”) appear frequently in the Gospels, often in citations of the Septuagint, to convey the ideal of returning to a better moral condition, thus linking “conversion” to repentance, *metanoia*.²⁷ At the same time, they are rarely found in the undisputed Pauline Epistles, and Paul never uses them to describe his own experience.²⁸ In fact, he never refers to himself in his Epistles as a “convert” of any sort but instead identifies as a “servant” (*dolos*) and “apostle” (*apostolos*) who was “set apart” for God (Rom. 1:1). What one reader calls the “seeming lack of conversion language” in Paul’s writing has led some scholars to claim that Paul was merely “called” but not converted, and led others even to question “the formal appropriateness here of the word ‘conversion’ itself.”²⁹ In the few passages where Paul mentions his change from being a Pharisee to being a witness of the risen Christ (e.g., Gal. 1:13-17; 1 Cor. 9:1, 9:16-17, 15:8; 2 Cor. 4:6), he consistently describes his new understanding as a revelation from without rather than an internal change or “turn.” Similarly, in other passages describing they who have gained faith through a vision (1 Cor. 15:5-7; 2 Cor. 12:2-4; Rom. 7:4), he does not characterize the following of Christ as a form of “return” or repentance but rather in terms of revelation and witnessing.

To understand Paul’s conception of the resurrection as an “interruption” in history, it is helpful to consider his vocabulary not only for his experience but also for time itself. The New Testament makes varying use of traditional Greek conceptions of time, above all the basic distinction between chronological time, *chronos*, and incidental or seasonal time, *kairos*. While *chronos* indicates linear, quantitative time, the time measured by a clock and a calendar, *kairos*

²⁶ On the use of *epistrephō*, see Balz and Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 2: 40–1; Beverly Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light* 40–4; Aubin, *Le problème de la “conversion,”* 70–7.

²⁷ The terms are found together in Matt. 12:41–2; Lk. 17:4; Acts 3:19, 11:18–21, 20:21, and 26:20. See Jacobo W. Heikkinen, “Notes on ‘epistrephō’ and ‘metanoō,’” 313–16.

²⁸ While *epistrephō* and *metanoia* / *metanoō* are used seven and fourteen times, respectively, in Luke, and eleven times each in Acts, they are used but three and four times, respectively, in Paul’s Epistles (2 Cor. 3:16; Gal. 4:9, 1 Thess. 1:9; Rom. 2:4–5; and 2 Cor. 7:9–10, 12:21). *Apocalypsis*, which appears ten times in the Epistles, is found only once in the Gospels (Luke) and not at all in Acts.

²⁹ See Segal, *Paul the Convert*, 19–20, and also 9–10; Stendahl, “The Apostle Paul,” 204–5. See also Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 13–14, 47; Fredriksen, “Paul and Augustine,” 15–16.

is understood as qualitative time, the “right” time or opportune moment, the season of ripeness or stylistic time of measure and decorum.³⁰ In the Epistles, *kairos* refers most often to the present moment, the moment of the resurrection, the moment of messianic time. Paul’s *kairos* is a radical interruption in time in which the uniqueness of the incarnation and resurrection divides mundane *chronos* into separate ages, into historical time and messianic time, the time that passes and, in Agamben’s words, the “time that remains” between resurrection and apocalypse. For Agamben, Paul’s “messianic” time begins with the novel interruption of the resurrection, a “now” that is, properly speaking, outside of history but not eternal.³¹ In the wake of the resurrection, time is nearing its completion and “the end of the ages (*aionon*) has come” (1 Cor. 10:11). “You know what time (*kairos*) it is,” Paul insists (Rom. 13:11). “The present form of this world is passing away” (1 Cor. 7:31). In this messianic “time that remains,” conversion means recognizing that a new time is at hand.

Paul’s own description, however, was not the image most associated with his experience, which instead depended on the narrative in the book of the Acts, likely written as much as half a century after his vision of Jesus.³² Because the “epistolary Paul” speaks so little about “conversion” as such, and because the character of Paul figures so prominently in the narrative of Acts—more than any other character, including the Apostle Peter or the risen Jesus—the medieval understanding of his experience as a paradigm for Christian conversion derives principally from the latter representation. This is complicated by the fact that in Acts, Paul’s “conversion” is represented not once but three times, first in Acts 9:1-19 (in a third-person voice), then in Acts 22 (as a direct quotation of Paul in the act of retelling his experience to a hostile Jewish crowd), and finally in Acts 26:9-18 (again as a quotation of Paul recounting his experience yet again to King Agrippa). With each retelling, Paul’s “apocalypse” becomes less abrupt. Acts 9:1-19 depicts a sudden rupture, paradigmatic of the “Damascus Road” experience associated with Paul in Christian tradition in which “suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground.” This rapid action continues when Ananias later speaks to him and “immediately, something like

³⁰ On the *kairos/chronos* dichotomy, see the entries in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3: 833–39 (*kairos*) and 9: 581–93 (*chronos*).

³¹ Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 62. The contrast between the characterization of time in the Epistles and in the Gospels can be seen by reading the only example of *kairos* and *chronos* being used side by side in the Gospels, in Lk. 20:9-10, with the only such instance in Saul/Paul’s letters, in 1 Thess. 5:1.

³² Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 3–19, and throughout. On what Brevard Childs calls “the canonical effect of Acts within the New Testament,” see *The Church’s Guide for Reading Paul*, 237; and Christopher Mount, *Pauline Christianity*, 11–58.

scales fell from Saul's eyes." Acts 22, retelling this story from another perspective, provides more narrative context, situating the sudden events between preamble and aftermath. Paul "stood on the steps and motioned to the people for silence ... saying: 'While I was on my way ... a great light from heaven suddenly shone about me. I fell.'" When Ananias speaks, Paul says "in that very hour I regained my sight." Acts 22 embeds the immediate action of conversion within the frame of a quotation, locating the suddenness of Paul's blindness and insight within the past-tense speech of Paul's retelling. This narrative embedding takes on another aspect in Acts 26, when Paul retells the same story, in slightly different words, to King Agrippa.

Each retelling further narrativizes the action, developing brief moments in the past into longer scenes that are elaborated in each retelling. For example, Acts 9 emphasizes the suddenness of the events in the use of the words *exaiφnēs*, "suddenly," in Acts 9:3 when Saul loses his sight, and *eutheōs*, "immediately," in 9:18, when he regains it. This unfolds more slowly under an added narrative layer in Acts 22, and Paul's "immediate" regaining of sight now becomes only *autē tē ōra*, "in the same hour" (22:13). This rapid reversal disappears entirely in Acts 26, in which blindness and insight no longer appear. The change in language in Acts 26 is even more apparent in the shifting of Paul's future mission from the mouth of Ananias to that of Jesus, who tells Paul of his mission to the Gentiles, "to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn (*epistrepsai*) from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God." Acts 26 leaves behind the "sudden" imagery of blindness and vision reminiscent of Paul's own description of "revelation," adding in its place the new language of "turning" that was entirely foreign to Paul's words in the Epistles.

This narrativization of Paul has consequences for the meaning of his conversion. What was for the "epistolary Paul" a singular revelation becomes in Acts just one moment of a linear narrative, thus fusing back together the historical and messianic time that was interrupted by the resurrection. While the "epistolary Paul" writes of revelation and the division of time by the resurrection, the "narrative Paul" in Acts embodies a dialectic of blindness and insight and "turning" from darkness to light. From a narratological perspective, Paul's unrepeatable experience of revelation becomes a completed, past experience within a linear narrative of development, a retrospective moment retold by another, acquiring exemplary meaning within the parameters of its wider narration. Just as the history of God's unique revelation to the Israelites later becomes, in Christian understanding, a closed chapter encapsulated within the larger narrative of

Christian supersessionism, so Paul's *apocalypsis* is contained within the narrative evolution from blindness to insight imposed by Acts. Contrary to the traditional image of Paul's Damascus Road experience as a unique event, conversion now becomes a *kairos* within a *chronos*, a teleological drama of evolution that follows an inexorable sequence of conflict, climax, and resolution.

3. Paul Redux: Rereading and Return in Pablo de Santa María (d. 1435)

Fourteen centuries after Paul's Damascus Road experience, Bishop of Burgos Pablo de Santa María wrote of his own conversion and naturally patterned his story on that of his namesake. His text, which was directed to his son Alfonso de Cartagena, is revealing in its recapitulation of both, contrary aspects of the Pauline paradigm of religious experience. Pablo's evocation of Paul is explicit in his choice of baptismal name as well as in his use of "Saul" and "Paul" to name the Jewish and Christian interlocutors in his *Scrutiny of Scriptures*. Both Paul and Pablo speak of their former Jewish identity in describing their new faith. Paul calls himself a "Hebrew born of Hebrews" (Phil. 3:5), speaking "to the Jews as a Jew (1 Cor. 9:20), and Pablo stresses to Alfonso (who converted with his father as a child) to remember that they are both "descendants of Levi." Moreover, just as Paul's conversion interrupted his own campaign of persecutions of early Christian communities, so Pablo's conversion took place on the eve of widespread attacks on Iberian Jews.

References to Paul are clearly evident throughout Pablo's conversion narrative, which begins with a reference to his childhood education:

Since I had not received this [truth] in my boyhood, but [rather] was born under the perfidy of Jewish blindness, I had not learned sacred letters from holy teachers but I extracted erroneous meanings from erroneous teachers, always busy to rashly enwrap the correct letters with incorrect sophistries, like the other leaders of that perfidy. But, truly, when it pleased Him whose mercy knows no measure to recall me from darkness to light, from the murky whirlpool to the clear air: somehow the scales fell from the eyes of my mind, and I began to reread Holy Scripture somewhat more assiduously, [and I began] to seek after the truth, not faithlessly any longer, but humbly.³³

³³ *Patrologia Cursus Completus*, 113: 35B. My translation. On Pablo's text, see Szpiech, "A Father's Bequest," 177–98; and the overlapping discussion in Szpiech, *Conversion and Narrative*, 41–50.

Pablo commented extensively on Paul's epistles in his biblical commentary, and it is not surprising that traces of Paul's epistolary language appear in Pablo's conversion story.³⁴ Yet unlike Paul, who stresses that his message came from God (Gal. 1:12), Pablo stresses first what mistakes he received from other humans ("I extracted erroneous meanings from erroneous teachers"). Paul does not criticize his past as a Pharisee in the law as "erroneous" but as something he has left behind, noting, "I regard everything as loss" (Phil. 3:8). Pablo inverts Paul's self-characterization in Phil. 3:5 ("a Hebrew born of Hebrews"), instead characterizing his Jewish past as "the perfidy of Jewish blindness." Overcoming such "perfidy" did not amount to exchanging present for past but of progressing from erroneous to correct understanding.

Despite these references to the epistles, however, Pablo's conversion narrative relies even more heavily on the narrative representation of Paul's experience in Acts. The most salient example of this is Pablo's emphasis on repetition and return rather than rupture and revolution. Pablo claims he is "recalled" and, as he says twice, begins to "reread." This language echoes Acts by describing how he was called back, "from darkness to light," (echoing Acts 26:18) and stating that "the scales fell from the eyes of my mind" (as in Acts 9:18). In finding this new sight, Pablo does not fight against God, as Paul does when he "kicks against the goads" (Acts 26:14) but instead presents himself as one hopeful and passive, noting, "Night and day I awaited His help. And so it happened that the desire for the catholic faith was more strongly enkindled in my mind from day to day, until I professed publicly that very faith I was carrying in my heart."³⁵ For Pablo, conversion is less an experience in the world than an internal change in perception (with the "eyes of my mind"), less an external event that interrupts than an internal understanding that returns him to the text. His baptism is the end point of a long, slow process of inner transformation, not of a sudden revelation.

Pablo's narrative of conversion as a return to the core meaning of the Bible—unlike those "erroneous teachers" who would "rashly enwrap the correct letters with incorrect sophistries"—points to the dominance of the "narrative Paul" over the "epistolary Paul" in Pablo's vision. The combination of Pablo's appeal to the former in some aspects and the latter in others exemplifies the way that medieval readers conflated the two different Pauline models, transforming the

³⁴ On Pablo's commentary on Paul's epistles, see Levy, "Nicholas of Lyra (and Paul of Burgos) on the Pauline Epistles," 283–91.

³⁵ *Patrologia*, 113: 35B.

conception of conversion as an “interruption” in time into a form of narrative climax, a point now followed by the denouement of a longer chronology.

4. Conclusion: Interrupting Religion

The personal narrative of late medieval convert Pablo de Santa María provides a valuable point of comparison with its model by responding not only to Paul’s theology but even more to his narrative persona. Pablo’s depiction of conversion is emblematic of the medieval conception of conversion in the Latin West and can stand in for a long tradition of readings that responded to the disparate models of conversion offered in Christian scriptures. Reading Pablo’s narrative in light of present-day invocations of Paul’s conversion further brings to light the enduring influence of Paul’s double conversionary model in secular philosophical discourse. The legacy of Paul’s multifaceted persona is not only a legacy of his own theology; it is also in part a result of the textual elements—both first-person and third-person, both testimonial and narrative—of the broader Pauline paradigm of conversion in Acts. The ongoing and robust debate about Paul’s “dialectical” or apocalyptic thinking is indicative of a deeper question about how the shape of texts and the context of their presentation and reception affect their meaning over time.

The tension between rupture and dialectical return, interruption and continuity, that obtained in medieval Christian conversion narratives like Pablo’s is still an integral part of our current epistemic formulations today. The multiple ways that Paul’s and Pablo’s models present conversion, both as a single and unique event in historical time and also as a climax in a broader narrative of faith, cannot be reduced to a single paradigm. The event of revelation—the *apocalypsis* that interrupts—gains new meaning when we turn again to reread its record with the new insight of historical context. This fraught tension between event and narrative provides a challenge to different disciplinary approaches to religious experience and thought—as Boeve notes, “The relation between theology and religious studies can ... be grasped in terms of interruption”³⁶—and also underscores the value of approaching conversion in a comparative context that does not exclude a literary critical view. Reading Paul not only in his own words, nor only through Luke’s eyes in Acts, but also through Pablo’s eyes in his confession and commentary, it is clear that Paul’s conversion ought not be

³⁶ Boeve, “Mutual Interruption,” 14.

understood in only one way—as Badiou proposes—but rather that, as Ricoeur stresses, the paradoxical diversity of Pauline discourses must be respected and embraced.

In this way, the characterization of Paul's conversion might stand for the possible methodological and intellectual approaches to religious experience itself, whose multiplicity of discourses must likewise be maintained and recognized, not subsumed into any single totalizing model. Pablo's recapitulation of the Pauline paradigm can be read as a bridge between Paul as he appears in the biblical texts by and about him and Paul as he is invoked in contemporary theological and philosophical theories of history. As this reading of Pablo's narrative in the context of modern debates makes evident, our understanding of conversion, like that of religious experience of any kind, cannot rely on only one interpretive model but must always allow itself to be productively interrupted by the hermeneutics of a manifold and widening horizon of understanding.

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