

CONVERSION IN LUKE-ACTS



Divine Action,
Human Cognition,
and the People of God

JOEL B. GREEN

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Contents

Acknowledgments vii

Abbreviations ix

1. Questioning Conversion in Luke-Acts 1

What Is Conversion?

Controverted Questions

The Road Ahead

2. Conversion and Cognition 19

A Cognitive Perspective?

The Embodied Self

Embodied Religion?

Neurobiology and Conversion

Conclusion

3. Orienting Conversion 45

Preliminary Considerations: Patterns and Lexemes

Luke 3:1–14: Restoration and Repentance

Conclusion

4. Texts and Metaphors 87

Jesus Calls His First Disciples to a Journey (Luke 5:1–11)

Conversion as Journey

	<i>Tax Collectors, Sinners, and the Lost: Three Lukan Texts</i>	
	<i>Conclusion</i>	
5.	Community, Agency, and Apostasy	123
	<i>Conversionary Community</i>	
	<i>Agency: How Does God “Give” Conversion?</i>	
	<i>Apostasy: The Threat of Deconversion</i>	
	<i>Conclusion</i>	
	Epilogue	161
	Bibliography	165
	Index of Scripture and Other Ancient Sources	184
	Index of Modern Authors	190
	Index of Subjects	193

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Abbreviations

General

cf.	<i>confer</i> , compare	MT	Masoretic Text
chap(s).	chapter(s)	n.s.	new series
ed.	edition; edited by	NT	New Testament
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , for example	OT	Old Testament
esp.	especially	p(p).	page(s)
ET	English translation	v(v).	verse(s)
i.e.	<i>id est</i> , that is	viz.	<i>videlicet</i> , that is, namely
LXX	Septuagint		

Ancient Texts

1QM	<i>War Scroll</i> (from Qumran Cave 1)
1QS	<i>Rule of the Community</i> (from Qumran Cave 1)
<i>Ant.</i>	Josephus, <i>Jewish Antiquities</i>
<i>Decalogue</i>	Philo, <i>On the Decalogue</i>
<i>Eth. nic.</i>	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>
<i>Jos. Asen.</i>	<i>Joseph and Aseneth</i>
<i>J.W.</i>	Josephus, <i>Jewish War</i>
Polybius	Polybius, <i>The Histories</i>
<i>T. Ab.</i>	<i>Testament of Abraham</i>
Thucydides	Thucydides, <i>History of the Peloponnesian War</i>

Contemporary Literature

AB	Anchor Bible
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
AcBib	Academia Biblica

ACCS	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture
AGJU	Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums
AnBib	Analecta Biblica
ANRW	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung</i> . Edited by Hildegard Temporini and Wolfgang Haase. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1972–.
BAFCS	The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting
BBR	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BC	Beginnings of Christianity
BDAG	Bauer, Walter, et al. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Revised and edited by Frederick William Danker. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
BDF	Blass, Friedrich, and Albert Debrunner. <i>A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . Revised and edited by Robert W. Funk. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961.
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
BibIntS	Biblical Interpretation Series
BThSt	Biblisch theologische Studien
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CBR	<i>Currents in Biblical Research</i>
CEB	Common English Bible
CIT	Current Issues in Theology
CTL	Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics
CTM	<i>Currents in Theology and Mission</i>
CTR	<i>Criswell Theological Review</i>
DJG	<i>Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels</i> . Edited by Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992.
DJG ²	<i>Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels</i> . 2nd ed. Edited by Joel B. Green. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013.
DSD	<i>Dead Sea Discoveries</i>
EDEJ	<i>The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism</i> . Edited by John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010.
EDNT	<i>Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider. 3 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993.
EKKNT	Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
ETL	<i>Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses</i>
ETSMS	Evangelical Theological Society Monograph Series
<i>EvQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>ExAud</i>	<i>Ex Auditu</i>
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
GNS	Good News Studies
GTA	Göttinger theologischer Arbeiten
HBT	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
HNT	Handbuch zum Neuen Testament

HTKNT	Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
IBMR	<i>International Bulletin of Missionary Research</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JPT	<i>Journal of Pentecostal Theology</i>
JPTSup	Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement Series
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
JTI	<i>Journal of Theological Interpretation</i>
JTISup	Journal of Theological Interpretation Supplement Series
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
KEK	Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament
KEKS	Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament: Sonderband
KJV	King James Version of the Bible
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
LSJ	Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> . 9th ed. with revised supplement. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996.
<i>LumVie</i>	<i>Lumière et vie</i>
MHT	Moulton, James Hope, Wilbur Francis Howard, and Nigel Turner. <i>A Grammar of New Testament Greek</i> . 4 vols. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1906–76.
MNTS	McMaster New Testament Studies
<i>ModT</i>	<i>Modern Theology</i>
NAB	New American Bible
NDBT	<i>New Dictionary of Biblical Theology</i> . Edited by T. D. Alexander and Brian S. Rosner. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000.
NETS	<i>A New English Translation of the Septuagint</i> . Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
NIB	<i>The New Interpreter's Bible</i> . Edited by Leander E. Keck. 12 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994–2002.
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIDB	<i>New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i> . Edited by Katharine Doob Sakenfeld. 5 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 2006–9.
NIDOTTE	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> . Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren. 5 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version (2011)
NLT	New Living Translation
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NovTSup	Supplements to Novum Testamentum
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version of the Bible
NTD	Das Neue Testament Deutsch
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology

OCD	<i>Oxford Classical Dictionary</i> . Edited by Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
OTL	Old Testament Library
OTM	Oxford Theological Monographs
OTP	<i>Old Testament Pseudepigrapha</i> . Edited by James H. Charlesworth. 2 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1983–85.
PBM	Paternoster Biblical Monographs
RBL	<i>Review of Biblical Literature</i>
RCS	Reformation Commentary on Scripture
ResQ	<i>Restoration Quarterly</i>
RevExp	<i>Review and Expositor</i>
RevRel	<i>Review for Religious</i>
RSR	<i>Religious Studies Review</i>
S&CB	<i>Science & Christian Belief</i>
SANT	Studien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLSP	<i>Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers</i>
SBLSymS	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
SJT	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
SNT	Studien zum Neuen Testament
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SNTW	Studies of the New Testament and Its World
SP	Sacra Pagina
STI	Studies in Theological Interpretation
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76.
TDOT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren. Translated by John T. Willis et al. 15 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–2006.
TLNT	<i>Theological Lexicon of the New Testament</i> . By Ceslas Spicq. Translated and edited by James D. Ernest. 3 vols. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994.
TNIV	Today's New International Version
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentary
TSc	Theology and the Sciences
TSS	Themes in the Social Sciences
TynBul	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
TZ	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
UCPNES	University of California Publications, Near Eastern Studies
VCSup	Supplements to <i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZS: NT	Zacchaeus Studies: New Testament

1



Questioning Conversion in Luke-Acts

As motifs in the narrative of Luke-Acts,¹ conversion and repentance are ubiquitous. Their importance is signaled immediately in the opening chapter of the Gospel,² in the angel Gabriel's summary of the anticipated consequences of John the Baptist's ministry:

He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God . . . he will go before him,
to turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and
[to turn] the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous,
to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. (Luke 1:16–17)³

1. I take it as axiomatic that the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles constitute a single narrative in two parts, and therefore I use the nomenclature “Luke-Acts.” Mikeal C. Parsons and Richard I. Pervo (*Rethinking the Unity of Luke and Acts*) appropriately called for critical attention to fuzzy, but pervasive, assumptions about the relationship between Luke and Acts held since Henry J. Cadbury had affixed that hyphen early in the twentieth century (*Making of Luke-Acts*, first published in 1927). Responses to Parsons and Pervo have been legion (for surveys, see Spencer, “Unity of Luke-Acts”; Bird, “Unity of Luke-Acts”), with the result that our understanding of what “unity” entails is now clearer and the basis for asserting the unity of Luke-Acts more secure. I have addressed recent challenges to the unity of Luke-Acts in Green, “Luke-Acts, or Luke and Acts?”—focusing my attention particularly on “narrative unity”; see also Marguerat, *First Christian Historian*, 43–64.

2. This is emphasized by Witherup, *Conversion in the New Testament*, 44–47.

3. Translations of texts in Luke and Acts are my own. Apart from Luke-Acts, unless otherwise noted, I follow the NRSV.

This opening reference to repentance (ἐπιστρέφω, *epistrephō*, “to turn”) signals, first, the degree to which this is God’s story. Repentance in Luke-Acts is centered on God. Gabriel’s sketch of John’s vocation is profoundly theocentric. He will turn people to *the Lord*, go before *the Lord*, and prepare people for the advent of *the Lord*. God is at work, the angel announces, and this invites response: repentance, obedience, and readiness. If the third evangelist proceeds to identify Jesus as the “Lord” before whom John will go (3:4–6), this is because, for Luke, Jesus shares in God’s own identity.⁴ This theocentrism is carried forward into the Acts of the Apostles, as in Peter’s directive to his Jerusalem audience, “Repent, therefore, and turn [to God]!” (Acts 3:19), for example, or Paul’s proclamation in Lystra, “Turn to the living God!” (Acts 14:15; cf. 26:20).

Gabriel’s Speech	Israel’s Scriptures
He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God . . . he will go before him, to turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. (Luke 1:16–17)	<p>“return to the LORD your God” (Deut. 30:2)</p> <p>“he turned many from iniquity” (Mal. 2:6)</p> <p>“. . . who will restore the heart of the father to the son” (Mal. 4:6 NETS)</p> <p>“to turn the heart of a father to a son” (Sir. 48:10 NETS)</p> <p>“I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me” (Mal. 3:1)</p> <p>“Prepare the way of the Lord . . .” (Isa. 40:3 NETS)</p>

Second, those with ears to hear will recognize how Israel’s Scriptures have influenced Gabriel’s speech (see table for comparison). These scriptural resonances embed John’s ministry of calling Israel to repentance deeply within Israel’s story and, especially, locate John squarely within the story line of Israel’s anticipation of God’s eschatological restoration of God’s people. Indeed, this is the first of two clear allusions in Luke’s birth narrative to Isa. 40:3, the second appearing in Zechariah’s song (1:76)—both of which anticipate the citation of Isa. 40:3–5 in Luke 3:4–6.⁵

Third, from the beginning of the Gospel narrative, we learn that repentance is for Luke no theological abstraction. Rather, “turning” is aimed at

4. According to C. Kavin Rowe, “The strong repetition within the passages 1:16–17, 1:76 and 3:4–6 in connection with the structure of the beginning of the Gospel is simply too significant to be coincidental. Rather, we should take it as part of Luke’s carefully crafted point, or narrative theological program. In this light the ambiguity in the referent [of κύριος, *kyrios*, “Lord”] expresses the fundamental correlation and continuity between the God of Israel and Jesus” (*Early Narrative Christology*, 76).

5. See Böhleemann, *Jesus und der Täufer*, 100; Pao, *Isaianic New Exodus*, 40–45.

a transformation of day-to-day patterns of thinking, feeling, believing, and behaving. This is decisively emphasized in Luke 3:7–14, where John identifies the markers of repentance in especially socioeconomic terms for the crowds, tax collectors, and soldiers. In the Acts of the Apostles, too, economic *koinōnia* and hospitality are typical correlates of conversion (e.g., 2:42–47; 16:13–15, 30–34).

What begins with the angelic message in Luke 1 continues throughout the Lukan narrative. John proclaims a “baptism of repentance” and urges the crowds that come out to him “to produce fruits in keeping with repentance” (Luke 3:3, 8; cf. Acts 13:24; 19:4). Jesus summarizes his mission as calling sinners to repentance (Luke 5:32), reports rejoicing at the repentance of even one sinner (15:7, 10), and informs his followers that the Scriptures themselves have it that repentance must be proclaimed to all nations (24:47). Early on in Luke’s second volume, at the close of the Pentecost address, Peter sketches the appropriate response to the good news: “Repent, and be baptized” (Acts 2:38). At Athens, Paul announces that “[God] now directs all people everywhere to repent” (17:30). Toward the end of Acts, Paul retrospectively summarizes his entire ministry as declaring “first to those in Damascus, in Jerusalem, and in every region of Judea, and also to the gentiles . . . that they should repent and turn to God, producing deeds in keeping with conversion” (26:20).

This judgment regarding the centrality of repentance and conversion to Luke-Acts finds easy support in recent scholarship. Thomas Finn detects twenty-one conversion accounts in the Acts of the Apostles and claims that “conversion is the major theme in Luke’s second volume.”⁶ Charles Talbert finds only ten such accounts in Acts, but refines Finn’s overarching judgment only slightly: “Conversion is a central focus of Acts, maybe *the* central focus.”⁷ Beverly Gaventa eschews any conversion “pattern” in Luke-Acts but, importantly for our purposes, devotes just over half of her important study of “aspects of conversion in the New Testament” to the Lukan narrative.⁸ For Guy Nave, repentance is “a keynote of the message in Luke-Acts,” and the book of Acts is “full of conversion stories.”⁹

Heightened emphasis on Luke’s part has not led to a long history of study of repentance and conversion in Luke-Acts, however, or to general agreement around what conversion entails for Luke. Until recently, conversion attracted little attention in Lukan studies. When scholars studied this motif, they tended to refer only to the second half of Luke’s two-part narrative, engaging little

6. Finn, *From Death to Rebirth*, 27.

7. Talbert, “Conversion in the Acts of the Apostles,” 135.

8. Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light*, 52–129.

9. Nave, *Repentance in Luke-Acts*, 3; Nave, “Conversion,” 729.

or not at all with the Gospel of Luke. This is true of Finn and Talbert, for example, and the same can be said of the important article by Jacques Dupont, which Talbert takes as the point of departure for his own study.¹⁰ Studying the “paradigmatic experiences [of conversion] found in the New Testament,” Richard Peace declares his interest in the Gospel of Mark and Paul, which leads him to consider the Lukan narrative only for its accounts of Paul’s experience on the way to Damascus.¹¹ Of the five dissertations published in recent years on our motif, one concerns itself with the book of Acts but not with Luke’s Gospel (Babu Immanuel), and one is focused on the Gospel but not Acts (Fernando Méndez-Moratalla).¹² Although the others examine conversion in the narrative of Luke-Acts, Mihamm Kim-Rauchholz deals with only two conversion accounts in Acts, Nave devotes a mere twenty pages to conversion in Acts, and David Morlan focuses on only three texts as he paves the way for a comparison of conversion in Luke and Paul.¹³ The earlier dissertation by Robert Allen Black, completed in 1985, concerns itself, too, with conversion in the Acts of the Apostles.¹⁴ If 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 years has not yet exhausted the witness of Luke’s two volumes.

What Is Conversion?

Before surfacing key issues and unanswered questions from recent contributions to the study of Luke-Acts, I should first register the surprising, general lack of explicit, critical reflection concerning how the biblical writers seem to have defined conversion. That is, recent study of the motif in Luke-Acts has focused on an array of significant and relevant issues—for example, whether conversion is a moral or a cognitive category, what conversion is from and/or to, or whether conversion and repentance are discrete categories. What conversion entails, however—how best to define conversion for Luke-Acts—seems largely to have been assumed.

The importance of *definition* can hardly be exaggerated. After all, what one assumes conversion to be will determine what one looks for in the Lukan narrative and how one knows when one has found it. With the rise of conversion

10. Dupont, “Conversion in the Acts of the Apostles.”

11. Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament*, 8.

12. Immanuel, *Repent and Turn to God*; Méndez-Moratalla, *Paradigm of Conversion*.

13. Kim-Rauchholz, *Umkehr bei Lukas*; Nave, *Repentance in Luke-Acts*; Morlan, *Conversion in Luke and Paul*.

14. Black, “Conversion Stories.”

studies in the past few decades, though, how best to understand conversion has become a topic of some controversy. In fact, in their introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, Lewis Rambo and Charles Farhadian begin their discussion of contemporary problems in conversion studies with this claim: “One of the most important and also most contentious issues in conversion studies is defining the term ‘conversion’ itself.” They go on to adopt a minimalist starting point, using the terms “change” and “transformation,” noting that the converting process is itself “dynamic and malleable.”¹⁵

A Question of “Frame”

Today, someone asking “Have you been converted?” could be heard in a variety of ways, depending on the context within which the question is asked. In an electronics store, the question might relate to one’s finally “seeing the light” and adopting one computer brand over another. Those witnessing a street-corner evangelist are likely to conjure images of an altogether different sort. In the field of cognitive linguistics, questions of context like this are understood in terms of “framing,” the larger patterns within which we locate, experience, and make sense of terms, concepts, and experiences. Thus, those of us who are interested in how institutions “think” can *frame* those institutions—like a university, a church, or a dot-com—so as to draw attention to their organizational charts, the giftedness of their people, the distribution and exercise of power, or the values they want to inculcate. An organization is all of these things and more, but different people visualize them through different frames, so they see different things.

For Vyvyan Evans and Melanie Green, “frame” refers to “a schematisation of experience (a knowledge structure) . . . represented at the conceptual level and held in long-term memory. The frame relates the elements and entities associated with a particular culturally embedded scene from human experience.”¹⁶ We associate terms and experiences with whole patterns of thought and belief. “Student” is thus automatically associated with “teacher,” and a host of related terms—aspects and types related to the student experience—are signaled: syllabi, textbooks, exams, papers, online discussion groups, and library hours. The experience of being a student extends into other realms as well: increased coffee consumption, concerns about future repayment of student debt, balancing time, and so on. Like knocking over a single domino, thinking of a single concept sets in motion an entire experience structure.

15. Rambo and Farhadian, “Introduction,” 9.

16. Evans and Green, *Cognitive Linguistics*, 222.

The question then is what experience schema or knowledge structure is signaled by the term “conversion”? The way questions about conversion are typically framed—for example, “change of mind versus change of behavior” or even “moral versus cognitive”—reflects the enduring and pervasive status of a particular definition of “conversion”: *the resolution of a subjective, inner crisis of an autonomous individual*. Accordingly, the conversion frame would entail an interest in crisis events, interior change, and an individual converting or being converted in his or her relative solitude. If these are the typical entailments of conversion, then it is not difficult to conclude that modern-day thinking about conversion—in the study of Luke-Acts as well as more generally—is deeply indebted to the century-old perspectives of William James. Not only because of its extraordinary influence, but also because my focus in the present study is guided by an interest in the potential contribution of the cognitive sciences to the question of conversion in Luke-Acts, James’s work merits brief attention.

William James’s Influence

William James (1842–1910) was a polymath whose interests occupied the interstices of numerous disciplines, especially psychology, physiology, and philosophy. He received an MD from Harvard Medical School, established the first laboratory for psychological research in the United States, and was appointed to a professorship at Harvard to teach both psychology and philosophy. Our particular interest lies in his 1901–2 Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh University, published in 1902.¹⁷ Here, James articulates his view that religious experience is primary for human nature and gives rise to myriad theologies, philosophies, and religious institutions. Primary, then, are “*the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men [sic] in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.*”¹⁸ Given this dual emphasis on individuality and interiority, James’s definition of “conversion” is as unsurprising as it may be familiar, at least in its broad strokes:

To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities. This at least is what

17. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

18. *Ibid.*, 31, emphasis original.

conversion signifies in general terms, whether or not we believe that a direct divine operation is needed to bring such a moral change about.¹⁹

Following the lead of the American psychologist Edwin Diller Starbuck (1866–1947), James differentiates between two types of conversion: the “volitional type,” in which “the regenerative change is usually gradual, and consists in the building up, piece by piece, of a new set of moral and spiritual habits,” and the “type of self-surrender,” marked by a crisis generated by “first, the present incompleteness or wrongness, the ‘sin’ which he [*sic*] is eager to escape from; and, second, the positive ideal which he longs to compass.”²⁰ His parade example of conversion-as-self-surrender is Paul, whose conversion, he avers, represents “those striking instantaneous instances . . . in which, often amid tremendous emotional excitement or perturbation of the senses, a complete division is established in the twinkling of an eye between the old life and the new.”²¹ We might be tempted to celebrate James’s use of the language of old and new life in his characterization of Paul’s conversion (cf. 2 Cor. 5:14–17), but the wider context of his extended discussion of the need for and experience of conversion makes clear that, by “life,” James refers more narrowly to nothing other than the inner self—that is, the movement from self-estrangement to that place where the “spiritual emotions are the habitual centre of the personal energy.”²²

For James, then, conversion follows a pattern grounded centrally in the experience of “the sick soul” and “divided self,” which he describes in terms approaching the psychopathological: “Not the conception or intellectual perception of evil, but the grisly blood-freezing heart-palsying sensation of it close upon one.” From here, he is able to identify “the real core of the religious problem: Help! Help!”²³ Framed in this way, conversion is the resolution of the individual’s inner, subjective crisis.

19. *Ibid.*, 189.

20. *Ibid.*, 206, 209; he is dependent here on Starbuck, *Psychology of Religion*, for which James wrote a preface.

21. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 217. James is able to achieve this reading of Paul by conflating Luke’s accounts of Paul’s Damascus Road “conversion” with Paul’s presumed preconversion turmoil, his “divided self,” as witnessed in Rom. 7:15: “Wrong living, impotent aspirations; ‘What I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I,’ as Saint Paul says; self-loathing, self-despair; an unintelligible and intolerable burden to which one is mysteriously the heir” (171, citing the KJV). It was against reading “a trembling and introspective conscience” into Rom. 7 that Krister Stendahl directed his landmark essay, “Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West”; he did so, however, without touching on questions related to the experience of conversion.

22. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, 271.

23. *Ibid.*, 162.

As Charles Taylor (1931–) recognizes, James thus participates in ways of understanding human experience that continue to pervade the modern world.²⁴ These perspectives include James’s emphasis on individual experience rather than corporate life and his notion that the real locus of religion lies in experience, that is, in feeling. Of course, Taylor is quick to recognize that James distills in his understanding of religious experience a lengthy history of influences, some of which we find in Scripture itself (e.g., Ps. 51, with its interest in a contrite heart over against ritual offerings of bulls and sheep). Nevertheless, James articulates well what is axiomatic for many, namely, this stress on individual-oriented, feeling-based, interior religion.

References to James do not pervade contemporary study of the NT, but this is hardly relevant. In fact, the lack of explicit engagement with James is something of a barometer of his influence. James’s work has come to us indirectly, as though it were in the air we breathe. On the one hand, he has bequeathed to us a conversionary frame, a way of ordering our experience, a taxonomy with which to categorize religious life, a kind of pen for drawing lines separating one period of life from another or one class of people from another. On the other hand, James’s thought was mediated to a generation of NT scholars by the British classicist Arthur Darby Nock (1902–63), who taught at Harvard from 1929 to 1963. He writes in his landmark study, “By conversion we mean the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his [*sic*] deliberate turning from indifferent or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which involves a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right.” Explicitly referring to the work of William James, Nock goes on to write of “a passion of willingness and acquiescence, which removes the feeling of anxiety, a sense of perceiving truths not known before, a sense of clean and beautiful newness within and without and an ecstasy of happiness.”²⁵ Here are reverberations of James’s interest in individuality and interiority, with affective turmoil playing a pivotal role.

Questioning James

For many of us, James’s understanding of conversion seems right at an intuitive level. It just seems right. This could be because, at key points, his conversionary frame shares central ingredients of the “modern self” as these are sketched in another work by Charles Taylor.²⁶ Taylor’s work is a compelling

24. James’s “blind spots . . . are just as operative in our age as in his” (Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*, 4).

25. Nock, *Conversion*, 7–8.

26. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*.

historical reconstruction of the making of modern identity aimed at articulating what many of us take for granted as factors composing human selfhood in the modern West. Among Taylor's overarching theses is the claim that a certain inwardness is central to "modern identity." We construct ourselves not so much in external terms—for example, in our relation to the cosmos or with regard to how we measure up (or fail to measure up) in our networks of social relations—as by turning inward. Taylor finds that personal identity has come to be shaped by such assumptions as these: human dignity lies in self-sufficiency and self-determination; identity is grasped in self-referential terms; persons have an inner self, which is the authentic self; and basic to authentic personhood are self-autonomy and self-legislation. The resultant portrait is represented well in that thoroughly modern cartoon figure, Popeye the Sailor man: "I yam what I yam, and I tha's all that I yam." Although Taylor does not focus on the notion of a metaphysical entity commonly referred to as the "soul," it is nonetheless clear from his analysis that this view of personal identity has been cultivated in the garden of anthropological dualism. Indeed, he (as others before him) identifies the precondition for the modern emphasis on the human sense of the "authentic, inner person" in the Platonic concept of the "soul" (*ψυχή*, *psychē*).

James's psychological description of conversion finds a ready home in this understanding of the human person, so it is critical that we recognize that this "modern self" is not only modern but non-Eastern—or, to put it more succinctly, this description of the "self" is neither transhistorical nor transcultural. Nor is it particularly biblical. For example, in an important essay Robert Di Vito locates OT anthropology in relation to Taylor's sketch of the modern self, urging in the case of the OT a very different portrait. For Di Vito, the OT presents a human who

(1) is deeply embedded, or engaged, in its social identity, (2) is comparatively decentered and undefined with respect to personal boundaries, (3) is relatively transparent, socialized, and embodied (in other words, is altogether lacking in a sense of "inner depths"), and (4) is "authentic" precisely in its heteronomy, in its obedience to another and dependence upon another.²⁷

Similarly, in his "biblical psychology," Klaus Berger concerns himself with the NT's portrait of several related motifs: personal identity, the nature of embodied existence, and the notion of an "inner" and "outer" person. In the NT world, he urges, the elements of such polarities as visible and invisible,

27. Di Vito, "Old Testament Anthropology," 221. See also his essay, "Here One Need Not Be One's Self."

knowledge and behavior, and faith and works resist unambiguous differentiation; moreover, the self is experienced as outer directed, in terms of one's community.²⁸ With such emphases as these, we have moved a country mile away from the mainstay of James's definition of conversion: a "self" experiencing subjective crisis and inner resolution.

Psychology, Sociology, Cognitive Science

Psychological study of conversion did not end with James, of course. Lewis Rambo, for example, urges that, since human beings are socially embedded in local contexts as well as participants in larger cultural and religious patterns, any attempt to explain conversion must go beyond the parameters of psychology. An interdisciplinary study of conversion would include psychology but also sociology, anthropology, theology, history, and religious studies.²⁹ Rambo's work has done little to influence biblical studies directly, but some scholars have begun to create separation, with varying degrees of distance, between the seminal work of James (and Nock) and the witness of the NT materials. Gaventa herself criticizes prevailing notions of conversion for their monochromatic approach to this religious phenomenon and finds in the NT evidence of three types of conversion: the pendulum-swing *conversion*, the *alternation* from one religious affiliation to another, and the *transformation* found in one's reinterpretation (but not rejection) of one's past.³⁰ Immanuel goes further. Warning against transposing modern categories of conversion onto the pages of the Acts of the Apostles, he draws a sharp line between psychological approaches that construe conversion as a mental process and Luke's interpretation of conversion as an actual turning to God.³¹ Although Immanuel's concern with the potential reductionism of psychological approaches is well grounded, the distinction he wants to draw makes little sense. This is because there is no actual turning to God that does not involve human psychological processes.

Other NT scholars have attempted to sidestep psychological approaches to conversion in favor of sociological analysis. Setting aside the cerebral aspects of conversion in favor of the social, for example, Nicholas Taylor attempts to sketch a model for further study of conversion in the early Christian world

28. K. Berger, *Identity and Experience*.

29. See Rambo, "Current Research on Religious Conversion"; and, especially, Rambo's own interdisciplinary study, *Understanding Religious Conversion*.

30. Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light*. See also Morlan, *Conversion in Luke and Paul*, 11–15.

31. Immanuel, *Repent and Turn to God*.

involving conviction, conformity, and community socialization.³² Zeba Crook offers a wholesale rejection of approaches to conversion indebted to Western psychology, favoring instead an understanding of conversion determined by the reciprocal nature of ancient social interaction. “The ancient conversion experience would have been framed not within the religious experience of the idiocentric psychological self, but the dyadic (sociocentric, allocentric, collectivistic) experience of an unbounded self.”³³

I take it as axiomatic that sociological work has much to offer our understanding of conversion in the NT materials, and that the work of Peter Berger (which synthesizes earlier work in the sociology of religion) in particular has much to offer, with its emphasis on the religious ordering and reordering of reality.³⁴ It almost goes without saying, though, that these attempts to reconsider the NT materials on conversion from social-scientific perspectives are themselves subject to the now-familiar criticisms of anachronism and reductionism. Even Peter Berger develops his understanding of coming to and having faith (we might say, “conversion”) in terms inimical to the narrative of Luke-Acts, for example, finding in Luke’s portrait of Paul’s encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus a prototype of modern individualism in the West. As we will see, such a reading is possible only when one brings to the Lukan narrative a preunderstanding of the nature of conversion that is alien to that narrative.³⁵ Moreover, however fully human beings can be understood in sociological terms, there is always more to the human story than sociology can recount, not least when the materials before us compose the NT, those manifestly theological documents that can hardly be mistaken for raw materials awaiting social-scientific analysis.

Nor can psychology be so easily set aside, even if one might wish to set aside the particular psychological approach to conversion articulated by William James. Instead, one must account for how psychology has been transforming itself both in its intercultural sensitivities and in relation to the cognitive

32. N. H. Taylor, “Social Nature of Conversion”; cf. Meeks, *Origins of Christian Morality*, 18–36.

33. Crook, *Reconceptualising Conversion*, 253. Crook’s pessimism regarding the potential contribution of psychology to NT studies is not complete (51), but it is unclear what shape that contribution might take.

34. E.g., Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction of Reality*; Berger, *Sacred Canopy*.

35. Berger claims that the immediate consequence of Paul’s encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus “was to tear him, radically and painfully, out of the community in which he had previously invested his entire being” (*Far Glory*, 88). It is hard to reconcile this with Luke’s representation of Paul’s apologetic speeches in Acts—e.g., his claim before the Jerusalem Council, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead” (23:6).

sciences. In fact, in an admirable soft apology for anthropological study of the biblical materials, Louise Lawrence seeks to overcome the reductionism of social-scientific analysis in part by underscoring the importance of our recognition of the embodiment of human behavior;³⁶ although this is not Lawrence's point, it remains the case that this recognition arises from and is central to the cognitive sciences. Hence, even if we may appreciate the direction Nicholas Taylor has taken our understanding of conversion in the NT, the bottom line is that the cerebral aspects of conversion simply cannot be set aside in favor of the social. Psychology will not go away. Human beings and their experiences in the world, even their religious experiences in the world, are not part cerebral and part social but fully integrated in their embodiment.

I have permitted myself this introductory foray into how conversion has been defined, and particularly the influence of psychology on our understanding of conversion, because of my own methodological interests. I have become increasingly convinced that those who practice NT study have never been hermetically sealed off from other disciplinary influences, despite the typical aspirations and claims of NT scholars to their relative objectivity. New Testament exegesis has never existed and cannot exist in such a vacuum. Although many would agree with this last observation, its sequelae are less immediately recognized. More often than not, perhaps, the influence of other disciplines, especially the sciences, has been unacknowledged because of their taken-for-granted status. Conversion, for example, *simply is* such-and-such a phenomenon, or so it was thought until the prevailing Jamesian psychological model itself began to come under critical scrutiny. Being explicit about one's perspective within the sciences, then, is simply a means of engaging more fully in the critical task of NT scholarship, that is, of pulling back the curtain to reveal more fully one's own interpretive horizons.

My attempt in what follows to explore the contribution of the cognitive sciences to the question of conversion in Luke-Acts should not be read as an attempt to allow contemporary science to determine the results of NT exegesis. There is a dialectical relationship between the presumptions brought by the interpreter and the enterprise of interpreting these texts. As a result, the question is not *whether* scientific preunderstandings will be allowed a voice in the conversation, but rather, *which* science(s) will be allowed to speak. Doing exegesis in an age of science increases our awareness of the scientific assumptions at work in the history of interpretation—indeed, that have shaped the history of interpretation itself—and that have the potential to set artificially the parameters for our own understanding of biblical texts. Situating

36. Lawrence, *Reading with Anthropology*.

our exegetical work in relation to the cognitive sciences has the potential to liberate us from certain predilections that might guide our work unawares and to allow questions to surface that might otherwise have remained buried. Reading biblical texts in the light passing through this prism, what do we find in these texts that would otherwise have remained in the shadows?

My agenda, then, is to join a small number of recent students of Luke in addressing the neglected topic of conversion in the Lukan narrative. My interests will be guided by the potential contribution of the cognitive sciences to this inquiry. Having first surfaced some of the controverted issues, I will demonstrate that the cognitive sciences both provide a prophylactic against the shallow dualisms or polarities (e.g., repentance versus conversion, intellectual versus moral, internal versus external, event versus process) that have plagued much of the discussion heretofore, and help to map a more textured terrain for understanding conversion in the Lukan narrative.

Controverted Questions

Before sketching the potential of a cognitive approach to our study and turning more pointedly to the narrative of Luke-Acts to see how perspectives from cognitive science might move us forward in an exploration of conversion, some stage setting is necessary. A brief sketch of recent issues in the study of Luke's theology of conversion will provide us with the lay of the land.

Even though the concept of conversion has become associated especially with the Christian faith, it is not a particularly biblical term, nor is this concept peculiar to early Christian proclamation and literature in the ancient world.³⁷ As in Greek literature more widely, so in the NT, the concept is typically lexicalized with the noun *μετάνοια* (*metanoia*, “repentance”) and its verbal form, *μετανοέω* (*metanoēō*, “to change one’s course”), or the noun *ἐπιστροφή* (*epistrophē*, “a turning [toward]”) and its verbal form, *ἐπιστρέφω* (*epistrephō*, “to turn around”). On the basis of word usage alone, however, many issues important to the interpreter remain ambiguous. Is conversion an event, a process, or both? Is conversion a cognitive or a moral category, or both? What is the relationship between “rejection of one way of life for another” and “embracing more fully the life one has chosen”? Is conversion a crossing of religious boundaries? If we move beyond lexical explanation to pragmatics—that is, to an analysis of the assumptions in place and the contextual implications of the use of this terminology, and not simply to the

37. See, e.g., Finn, *From Death to Rebirth*; Rousseau, “Conversion”; Nave, *Repentance in Luke-Acts*, 39–144.

terms themselves—what might we say about conversion? And what are we to make of those potential appearances of the concept of conversion in those cases where the usual terminology is lacking?

Collating the issues raised by recent scholarship on the motif of conversion within the Lukan narrative brings to the surface a number of controverted issues, including the following.

1. *Is conversion a cognitive category, a moral category, or both?* Originally published in 1960, Dupont's essay on conversion in Acts set the stage for subsequent discussion of the human situation that makes conversion necessary in Luke's theology.³⁸ Dupont's interest is captured by Luke's emphasis on salvation as forgiveness of sins and, thus, on the person's consciousness of his or her own sinfulness and need for pardon. This leads Dupont to articulate the nature of conversion in moral terms, concluding that "we remain faithful to the spirit of the early preaching when we contemplate the details of Jesus's passion in such a way as to grow increasingly aware of the ugliness of sin and arouse in ourselves that sincere repentance to which the promise of forgiveness is tied."³⁹ The next major voice in the discussion reaches the opposite conclusion. Jens-W. Taeger finds that the human condition in Lukan thought is characterized by ignorance needing correction, not sin needing forgiveness; hence, he concludes his monograph in a single sentence: "People do not need salvation, but correction."⁴⁰ Responding to Taeger, Christoph Stenschke seeks to provide balance by insisting that the choice between salvation and correction is for Luke a false one. For Luke, Stenschke writes, gentiles have misconceptions that need to be exposed, corrected, and replaced, but Luke's portrait also embraces God's work of removing sin, purchasing a people, and releasing people from Satan's power.⁴¹ Reflecting narrowly on Dupont's work, Talbert reaches what appears to be a similar conclusion, namely, that conversion is for Luke both a cognitive and a moral category. This similarity may be fleeting, though, since Talbert infers that conversion is sometimes cognitive and sometimes moral (rather than saying that conversion is both cognitive and moral). Thus, he writes, "In Acts, Jews and God-fearers are offered forgiveness for sins through Jesus (a moral type of conversion) while pagans are called upon to experience a shift from polytheism to monotheism (a cognitive type of conversion)."⁴² Can this distinction be sustained?

38. Dupont, "Conversion in the Acts of the Apostles."

39. *Ibid.*, 69.

40. "Der Mensch ist kein salvandus, sondern ein corrigendus" (Taeger, *Der Mensch und sein Heil*, 225).

41. Stenschke, *Luke's Portrait of Gentiles*.

42. Talbert, "Conversion in the Acts of the Apostles," 135–36n4; at this point, Talbert is dependent on the analysis of Shumate, *Crisis and Conversion in Apuleius' Metamorphoses*.

2. *Are repentance and conversion discrete or convergent categories?* Talbert distinguishes between two categories of conversion, one for Jews and God-fearers and the other for pagans, thus preparing us for Nave's distinction between repentance and conversion. Repentance, Nave argues, has to do with a change of thinking with regard to Jesus, so this is the appropriate response category for the Jewish people in Acts. Conversion, on the other hand, refers to a change of religion, so it is descriptive of the gentile response. Is this an accurate assessment of Luke's theology?

Corollaries of these two points of discussion are easy to identify. For example: (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?* This potential distinction is important for identifying how best to represent Paul's experience on the Damascus Road: Was Paul "converted"? If so, in what sense? This distinction also bears on the more general question of whether Jews, like gentiles, "convert." (4) *What is the relationship between conversion as a "change of mind" and behavioral transformation?* (5) *Is conversion an event or a process?* In recent discussion, the nexus between "change of mind" and "transformation of behavior" is tightly drawn, with the result that conversion, it would seem, would need to be understood especially in terms of an ongoing process. Nevertheless, scholars tend to portray conversion in event-oriented, static terms, even when developing its logical consequences in terms of behavioral change.

6. *Is conversion a matter of human self-correction, or is it the consequence of divine initiative?* Taeger's work, mentioned earlier, raises this question in a pointed way. This is because, for his reading of Luke-Acts, the problem of human understanding can and must be addressed by self-correction. Other studies have championed the priority of divine initiative.⁴³ Here is a central question in conversion studies today, namely, the question of *agency*: Are converts portrayed as seekers who make plans and decisions, or as recipients of life changes?

7. *Does Luke's narrative support a "pattern" of conversion?* Some recent studies suggest that Luke follows an orderly form in his conversion accounts. Méndez-Moratalla claims to have identified a consistent paradigm of conversion in the Gospel of Luke: divine initiative especially among the marginal, conflict or polarized responses to God's plan, the universal need for a response of repentance, the expression of repentance in the proper use of possessions, the offer of forgiveness (sometimes expressed in joy and

43. Bovon, *L'œuvre de Luc*, 165–79; Kim-Rauchholz, *Umkehr bei Lukas*; Stenschke, *Luke's Portrait of Gentiles*; Wenk, "Conversion and Initiation."

table fellowship), and a climactic statement regarding the nature of Jesus's ministry.⁴⁴ Talbert identifies five stable components in ancient conversion accounts (context, catalyst leading to conversion, obstacles to conversion, the conversion itself, and postconversion confirmation of the authenticity of the conversion), allowing him to identify ten such accounts in Acts.⁴⁵ Neither Méndez-Moratalla nor Talbert extends the inquiry into the other volume of Luke's two-part narrative, however, so neither resolves the question whether Luke has plotted throughout his narrative a consistent pattern for portraying conversion.

Apart from such form-critical interests, what of conversion itself? Does Luke narrate a step-by-step sequence of actions or process of conversion? Two texts might urge that he has identified a paradigm of response, following as they do the direct questions, "What shall we do?" (Acts 2:37–38) and "What must I do to be saved?" (16:30–34).⁴⁶ In the first case, though, Peter counsels his audience to repent and be baptized. In the second the jailer is told (simply) to believe, though he and his household respond also with hospitality and baptism. If these texts were to be understood as establishing a pattern of response, then, they do so poorly. After all, the instructions given in the one case may complement but certainly do not mimic the other. If one were able to discern an "order of salvation" in these accounts, it might appear on a much grander scale—for example, God initiates → people hear the message of salvation → people respond. In fact, this is the heart of Peter's defense of the inclusion of gentiles in the community of God's people in 15:7–11: "God made a choice" → "gentiles hear the message of the good news" → they become "believers." Since Gaventa's important study of conversion, we find little support for the view that the Lukan narrative has identified a technique or pattern of conversion.⁴⁷

8. *What catalyzes conversion in Luke-Acts?* The importance of miracles and preaching as catalysts for conversion has long been observed.⁴⁸ What is less clear is why or how miracles and preaching might function in this way.

This is not an exhaustive list, but it does provide us with something of the horizons within which contemporary issues related to conversion in the Lukan narrative have been discussed.

44. Méndez-Moratalla, *Paradigm of Conversion*.

45. Acts 2:1–47; 3:1–4:37; 8:4–25, 26–40; 9:1–22; 10:1–48; 13:6–12, 13–52; 16:11–15, 25–34 (Talbert, "Conversion in the Acts of the Apostles," 135n2).

46. See also Luke 3:10–14.

47. Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light*, 52–129. See also O'Toole, *Unity of Luke's Theology*, 191–224.

48. E.g., Dupont, "Conversion in the Acts of the Apostles"; Black, "Conversion Stories"; Immanuel, *Repent and Turn to God*. See also Talbert, "Conversion in the Acts of the Apostles."

The Road Ahead

In the pages that follow, I will begin to craft a different set of lenses by which to appreciate the Lukan material on conversion, then take up a series of questions, issues, and texts that together allow for a representative—though not exhaustive—exploration of Luke’s narrative theology of conversion. Chapter 2 asks what the cognitive sciences bring to our discussion, then sketches some of the relevant research in the cognitive sciences and considers the ramifications of that research for Luke’s portrayal of conversion. I urge that we cannot think about conversion in narrowly religious and/or spiritual terms, since there can be no transformation that is not transformation of the self, understood in embodied, holistic terms and set within a web of relationships. Chapter 3 begins with the problem of trying to identify a conversionary pattern or schema within the Lukan narrative before arguing against attempts to find a meaningful distinction in Lukan usage between the two terms “repentance” and “conversion.” Most of the chapter is given over to further orientation to Luke’s theology of conversion, framed as an analysis of Luke 3:1–14. We see that Luke’s introduction of John the Baptist and his ministry is pivotal for understanding the larger Lukan themes of restoration and repentance, and particularly the primary contours of Luke’s theology of conversion. With an emerging, working definition of conversion in hand, our interpretive work in chapters 4 and 5 allows us to expand on and clarify further Luke’s presentation by taking up a series of representative texts—including some of the usual suspects that are obviously concerned with conversion, as well as others that are not so obvious. Along the way, we explore a number of important motifs, such as conversionary practices, the nature of conversion as movement from one sphere of influence to another, the question of divine versus human agency in conversion, and the possibility of deconversion. Again and again, we will find ourselves pressed to conceptualize conversion as a journey, including emphases on the trajectory of one’s life path, the practices that are integral to this journey, and the quality of one’s traveling companions along the way.