

DIVINE RITUALIZING AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF PAUL IN ACTS 9¹

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The narrator's account of Saul's experience on the road to Damascus in Acts 9:1–20 is particularly rich in detail characteristic of rites of passage recorded elsewhere in Luke-Acts and in Greco-Roman narrative. This study will examine the account from the standpoint of ritual studies to consider the validity of such an approach and what it can tell us about the narrator's presentation of this event and its significance in the work of Luke-Acts as a whole.

Key Words: Paul, rite of passage, Acts, Luke, Josephus, Apuleius

1. Introduction

The story of Paul's encounter with the risen Lord on the road to Damascus has long been recognized as pivotal in Luke-Acts' narrative structure and in its presentation of Paul. While the accounts in chapters 22 and 26 highlight and elaborate upon Paul's commission to the Gentiles, the initial account in Acts 9 focuses on the process of his transformation from enemy to witness of Jesus, in his ongoing zealous pursuit of God's will.² The contention of this paper is that Acts 9 ritualizes its presentation of Paul's transition, building on ritual themes evident in the rest of Luke-Acts as well as in both Septuagintal and Greco-Roman literary traditions. By so doing, Acts demonstrates Paul's ensuing actions to be properly begun and firmly anchored in ancient tradition by the direction of the Lord himself.

2. Rites of Passage in Luke-Acts

In the world of the Lukan audience, little was done without proper ritual. From birthing rites to puberty rites, betrothals and weddings, and the final funereal good-byes, the movement to each important stage in the human

¹ The present study was first presented to the *Ritual in the Biblical World* consultation at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Diego, California, USA, on November 19, 2007.

² Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Conversion in the New Testament* (ed. Walter Brueggemann and J. R. Donahue; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 92.

life cycle was guarded by ritual.³ Rituals of *advancement* ushered into office those individuals receiving positions of authority in society, such as magistrates, senators, rulers, and priests.⁴ And *voluntary* rituals were available to men and women of various social levels for purposes such as healing or initiation into mystery religions and social associations.⁵ Labeled as rites of passage by Arnold van Gennep a century ago,⁶ these types of rituals share the common characteristics of involving purposeful and symbolic acts which accompany the transition of an individual or group from one stage or state in life to another.

Such rites are well-documented in the literature of the time. In narrative works such as Luke-Acts, however, where the lives of specific individuals are chronicled, these rites are often passed over as being too routine to be worthy of mention. Where a ritual is recounted, at least two primary factors seem to motivate its inclusion. In some cases the rite is the occasion for an event of dramatic interest, as in the attempt on Artaxerxes' life at his royal initiation as a Persian priest in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* (3.1–4). In other cases reporting of a rite can be seen to advance other purposes of the author. For example Josephus, in his *Vita*, uses Jewish and Greco-Roman ritual traditions as a model for his arduous apprenticeship to all three Jewish sects and to the hermit Bannus in the wilderness, in order to demonstrate his full preparedness to enter into public life as an adult aristocrat and ultimately, in his opinion, an exemplary Jewish leader and historian.⁷ And Galba's dream of Fortuna standing at his door at the time of his *toga virilis* ceremony, in Sueto-

³ See, for example, Gen 17:10–14; Josephus, *Ant.* 2.238–2.274; *Contra Ap* 2:205; Suetonius, *Nero* 6; Ovid *Fasti* 3.771–90; Pliny Ep. 10.116; Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical* (trans. J. Raffan; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 262–63; Fanny Lyn Dolansky, "Coming of Age in Rome: The History and Social Significance of Assuming the Toga Virilis" (MA thesis, University of Victoria, 1999); Mary Harlow and Ray Laurence, *Growing Up and Growing Old in Ancient Rome: A Life Course Approach* (London: Routledge, 2002), 3–4, 37–42, 60–64, 138–43; Nigel M. Kennell, *The Gymnasium of Virtue: Education & Culture in Ancient Sparta* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 38, 144–46; Paul Monroe, *Source Book of the History of Education for the Greek and Roman Period* (New York: Macmillan, 1902), 302.

⁴ Cf. Exod 28–29; 40:13–16; Lev 8:1–9:24; Plutarch, *Numa* 7.3–8.3; *Artaxerxes* 3.1–4; Suetonius, *Nero* 6.7–8.

⁵ See, for example, Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 12.33; Hippolytus, *Philosophoumena* 5.8; Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* 2.21; Burkert, *Greek Religion*; idem, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

⁶ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (trans. M. B. Vizedom and G. L. Caffee; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

⁷ Steve Mason, *Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary. Volume 9: Life of Josephus* (10 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2001), 9:110–13.

nius' *Lives of the Caesars* (4.3), points forward to his impressive destiny as ruler of the Roman Empire.

In Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* (bk. 11), both of the above-noted factors apparently stand behind the portrayal of Lucius' dramatic initiation into the mystery religion of Isis following his misadventures in the form of an ass and Isis' assistance in restoring him to human form. Here Lucius' initiation climaxes the novel, transitioning him to a newly pious life while also unveiling hints about the mysteries that have attracted readers from the second century C.E. onward. Both factors also seem to come into play in Luke-Acts, which gives particular attention to rites of passage, weaving together ritual with dramatic supernatural scenes to ground the unprecedented new beginnings there reported in both the solid ground of venerable tradition and in the sovereign will of God.

In the Gospel of Luke these rites are naturally clustered in the extended portrayal of the Gospel's momentous beginnings in Luke 1–2, the Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ which Mark (1:1) announces but describes simply in terms of John's baptism. The narrative opens with the ritual burning of incense in the temple where Gabriel announces the conception of a son, which would set the events of the Gospel in motion, and pronounces the name—and thus the identity—the child was to be given (Luke 1:5–25). The account quickly moves on to the traditional rites of circumcision and naming which follow John's birth (Luke 2:57–59; cf. Lev 12:3) and which are divinely attended by the Holy Spirit, who causes Zacharias to break out in prophetic poetry (1:58–79).⁸ The obedient carrying out of the rites of naming and circumcision are considered worthy of report at Jesus' birth, too, and the name given is directed by divine command (1:31; 2:21).⁹ In Jesus' case the ritual account is expanded with the reporting of a purification rite and a rite of dedication blended from earlier traditions (Exod 13:2, 12; Lev 12:2–8; 1 Sam 1:24–28) which again become the occasion of divine in-breaking and affirmation as two righteous individuals—Simeon and Anna—speak prophetic

⁸ The rite of naming, though not anciently a part of the Jewish circumcision ritual, was celebrated by Romans at this time and is later also attested in Jewish literature. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke* (AB 28; Garden City: Doubleday, 1985), 380.

⁹ Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 376, notes that in Luke's presentation of Jesus, the rite of circumcision with its symbolic reference to incorporation into Israel provided an important foundation for Luke's contention that Christianity was a logical outgrowth of Judaism.

words of exaltation regarding the child.¹⁰ Even the final pericope of the Lukan infancy narrative, Jesus' childhood visit to the temple, is centered in a ritual, the festival of Passover, thus concluding the tale of Jesus' birth and childhood just as it was begun—with a ritual celebration in the temple.¹¹

More dominant in the work of Luke-Acts as a whole than these childhood rites is the ritual of baptism by which Luke introduces the main body of the Gospel and, as Conzelmann has argued, a new era in salvation history. For what "John came preaching" at the instigation of the ῥῆμα θεοῦ in Luke 3 was a ritual—a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins"

¹⁰ By direct reference to Exod 13:2, 12, Luke 2:23 interprets this presentation as a response to God's command at the first "Passover" that every firstborn male, human or creature, be set apart as "holy to the Lord." In this passage, human first-borns were to be "redeemed" (Exod 13:13) and no requirement of a presentation at the temple is recorded in connection with this command either in the Hebrew Bible, the LXX, or the Mishnah, while in Numbers (3:47–48; 18:15–16), sons not of the tribe of Levi were exempted from the command by the payment of a five shekel redemption price. Luke's specific mention of a ritual presentation, then, may suggest a formal ritual enactment of Gabriel's declaration that Jesus would be a "holy child," remaining sacred to the Lord, as is also suggested by the omission of any mention of the redemption payment. François Bovon, *Luke I: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50* (Hermeneia; trans. C. M. Thomas; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 99; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 31; New York: Doubleday, 1998), 425–26. Although the purification law Luke cites specifically required purification only for the mother (Lev 12:1–8), Luke speaks in the plural of "their" purification [τοῦ καθαρισμοῦ αὐτῶν]. It is possible, as Bovon notes, that Luke alludes here not only to the ritual of purification for the mother, but also to a similar ritual to be enacted in certain cases for the purification of a Nazirite—one who, like Jesus, has been set apart as holy to the Lord (Num 6:1–12).

¹¹ Occurring at the age of twelve, this account may also suggest a ritual recognition of Jesus' passage from childhood to young manhood. Luke reiterates that this was "according to the custom of the feast" [κατὰ τὸ ἔθος τῆς ἑορτῆς], recalling certain traditions recorded in the Mishnah which suggest that boys of twelve were given special instruction toward a coming transition, at the age of thirteen, into a standing of full responsibility before God. *m. 'Abot* 5:21; *m. Nid.* 5:6; *cf. m. Meg.* 4:6; *b. Ketub.* 50; (*cf. Ant.* 5.348); *Str-B* 2.144–47; Frédéric Manns, "Luke 2, 41–50 témoin de la Bar Mitsva de Jésus," *Marianum* 40 (1978): 344–49; I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978). Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 440, suggests that regulations concerning the expectation of full Torah observance beginning at the age of thirteen were known by Jesus' time, along with a custom of pious Jews involving twelve-year-olds in this pilgrimage; *contra* Bovon, *Luke I*, 111. (There is no evidence at this time of the terminology or characteristic practice of Bar Mitzvah at the age of 13.)

modeled apparently on traditional rites of water-purification.¹² This baptism is participated in by Jesus himself and its importance is further underlined by the later narrative aside that the Pharisees and law-experts, in not having been baptized by John, “had rejected God’s purpose for themselves” (Luke 7:30). Acts further emphasizes John’s repentance-baptism (Acts 1:21–22; 10:37; 13:24), but enhances it so that it becomes above all a baptism “in the name of Jesus” (e.g., Acts 2:38; 10:48).¹³ Accompanied by the promised baptism of the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:17; cf. Acts 1:5), this ritual represents the pivotal act in a new believer’s transfer of allegiance to Christ and initiation into the Christian community (e.g., Acts 2:38–41; 8:12).

Rites of advancement are also highlighted in Luke-Acts, providing authority and empowerment at points of transition to new social positions using language from accounts of ancient commissioning rituals. These include (1) the interpretation, unique to Luke-Acts, of the descent of the Spirit on Jesus at his baptism in terms of the ancient Jewish rite of anointing (Luke 4:18; Acts 4:26–27; 10:38; 1 Sam 10:1; 16:13); (2) the formal appointment of twelve disciples to the role of apostle (Luke 6:12–16; 22:29–30; Acts 7:8; Josh 3:12); and later (3) the selection of seven to assist them (Acts 6:1–6; Num 8:10; 11:16–17); (4) of Paul and Barnabus to advance the mission (Acts 13:1–3; Num 27:18–23); and (5) of elders to lead the newly-formed churches (Acts 14:23; Num 11:16–17). In each of these rites, prayer is expressly noted as a key aspect, grounding these transitions, too, in the leadership of God.¹⁴

¹² In the LXX tradition, the priest, the unclean, and others were commanded to bathe, or wash, in order to achieve ritual cleanliness before God, and such washing comes to be used metaphorically in the Psalms and the Prophets to refer to a cleansing of human hearts (λούω Isa 1:16; πλύνω Ps 50:9). Ezekiel 36:24–27 further speaks of a future cleansing (βαίνω) at a time when God would put his spirit within his people. By the time of Luke-Acts, various sorts of ritual cleansings in water had become increasingly widespread as suggested by such evidences as the prevalence of miqvaot in the archaeological record and, in literature, the bathings at Qumran (1QS 3.4), Josephus’ mention of Bannus’ day and night washings (*Vita* 11), the Sibylline Oracles’ call to “wash your whole bodies in perennial rivers” in connection with repentance (4.165), and, possibly, certain references to the washing of the Jewish proselyte (*m. Pesah* 8.8; *m. cEd.* 5.2). By the time of Luke such ritual washings were often described using the actual term βαπτίζω (cf. Sir 34:24, 29; Jdt 12:7, 8; Mark 7:4).

¹³ See, for example, George Raymond Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1962), 100.

¹⁴ Yet it is baptism which predominates. There is no evidence of Jesus’ disciples practicing the rite of baptism in the Lukan Gospel. However, baptism is used in symbolic ways to interpret other major life transitions in the life of Jesus, such as his declaration in 12:50 “I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished!”

3. Ritual Interpretation of Acts 9:1–20

The narrative of Paul's transformation in Acts 9:1–20, is likewise a ritual account encompassing not one but a series of traditional ritual elements climaxing with Paul's baptism and subsequent incorporation into the Christian community and witness. Acts 9 is, in fact, the most extensive description of events surrounding the baptism of a single individual in a volume where baptism rites are ubiquitous. Such a layering of elements to create new ritual has been spoken of by Ronald Grimes as *ritualizing*—a ritualizing here presented as both divinely initiated, in the confrontation of Paul by the risen Lord, and divinely directed, through the agency of the disciple Ananias.¹⁵ These elements reflect not only Jewish ritual tradition but also aspects of ritual experience and vocabulary common in the Greco-Roman world of Luke-Acts' day, as will be demonstrated by viewing it alongside the earlier-mentioned accounts in Josephus' *Vita* and Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*.

3.1. The Ritual Field as Laid Out in Acts 7–9

In the analysis of ritual and ritualized accounts, it has been recognized that ritual reshapes not only the ritual subject but relations between each of the individuals and institutions involved. In this saga, three named characters are gathered on the narrative stage, approaching events with markedly opposing goals and differing relationships. The *apparent protagonist*, Saul, has been portrayed thus far as an unremitting and increasingly passionate enemy of the ἐκκλησία of Jesus' followers, backed by a powerful faction of structural leaders in Jerusalem (Luke 20:1; Acts 4:1, 5–6, 17; 5:17, 21; 6:12). The risen Lord, whom Acts immediately displays as the *true protagonist*, has been identified in Luke as coming to preach the good news of God's reign to the marginalized (Luke 4:18, 43; 19:10), being crucified by this same power group, but ascending to God's right hand (2:33; 5:31; 7:55–56) and continuing to pursue his mission through the Spirit (Acts 3:6; 4:29–30) in his apostles (Luke 24:46–49; Acts 1:8) and followers (Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12, 36). The third named character, Ananias, is an apparently hapless disciple and *agent* of this Jesus. Ananias represents, in the story, the church as a whole, personifying the competing motivations of fear and faithfulness evident in their scattering before the persecution (8:1; cf. 11:19) and yet their ongoing

¹⁵ Ronald L. Grimes, *Reading, Writing and Ritualizing* (Washington, D.C.: Pastoral, 1993), 5. See also Ronald L. Grimes, *Ritual Criticism* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), 10.

preaching of the word (8:4–5, cf. 11:19–20).¹⁶ As the story begins these competing factions come into direct conflict, with power relations—even in Gentile territory outside the borders of Judea—seeming from an earthly perspective to be skewed in Saul's favor.

The stage upon which Saul's transformation is about to take place is portrayed spatially as the Syrian city of Damascus and its environs, far from the Jerusalem center of religious meaning and structural power on which Saul was dependent both for his worldview and his authority. It is also beyond the reported extent of the flight of the Jerusalem believers who were said in Acts 8:1 to have been scattered by persecution "throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria." Nevertheless the Lord is said to have a number of followers of "The Way" already attending the numerous Jewish synagogues there (Acts 9:2, 10, 19). The scene is located temporally, not according to the reckoning of calendar or empire, but within this ongoing saga of a marginalized people struggling in the face of persecution.

This multiply-emphasized distance from 'the center' has interesting correspondences with the observations of ritual theory regarding the process of a rite of passage. These rites have been described by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner as being comprised of three basic phases which Grimes points out are often interwoven and intermixed in the process of ritual.¹⁷ Elements of *separation*, such as those just noted in Acts 7–9, often open a ritual, operating to remove the individual being initiated from everything that characterizes his former state or position in life. Elements of *reincorporation* generally complete the ritual, reuniting the individual with society in her new persona. In the borderland amongst and between an individual's initial separation and her reincorporation can be found the condition of *liminality* where many of the normal patterns and statuses of daily life are suspended and the *initiant* may encounter various experiences of paradox and riddle; complex and puzzling symbolisms including those of death and darkness, birth and rebirth; ordeals and humiliations; and strange and supernatural appearances; which have the potential to deconstruct and reconfigure former beliefs and assumptions. In the liminal absence of societal controls and rankings, the individual may also experience a sense of *communitas* characterized

¹⁶ Daniel Marguerat, "Saul's Conversion (Acts 9, 22, 26) and the Multiplication of Narrative in Acts," in *Luke's Literary Achievement: Collected Essays* (ed. C. M. Tuckett; JSNTSup 116; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 139; Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light*, 67.

¹⁷ Ronald L. Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 107; van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 11–14. On pp. 102–7 Grimes demonstrates the connections between van Gennep's three phases and Eliade's mystical death, return to origins, and spiritual rebirth that is part of his idea of initiation as a revelation of the sacred, and Joseph Campbell's (invented) separation, initiation, and return in the myth of the hero.

by a deep sense of egalitarianism and intense bondedness with others. As Carol LaHurd has pointed out, Acts 9 evidences aspects of each of these three phases.¹⁸

3.2. Saul's Transformation to Christ Follower

In the divine plan, according to Acts 9, the tale of Saul's transformation begins at the furthest reaches of *separation*. Like the setting of Josephus' apprenticeship to Bannus in the wilderness and Lucius' encounter with Isis in the darkness of a deserted beach, the sense of separation is further deepened by the setting of the first scene outside even the safety and social structure of the foreign city of Damascus (Acts 9:3). In this marginal position between two cities, Saul is involuntarily halted by an overwhelming experience of heavenly light (cf. Ezek 1:27–2:2)¹⁹ which, in one brief moment, places him on the threshold of an unexpected and divinely guided rite of passage, separated from the high position signified by the high priestly letters, and flat on the ground like a dead man in the presence of a heavenly light.²⁰

The voice Saul next hears does not immediately identify itself, but places him in suspense and even greater discomfiture with an interrogation challenging him with the mind-bending charge that his zealous persecution of the lowly Christians has actually and paradoxically been directed against a being of obviously heavenly status. To his stunned question, "Who are you, Lord," the reply comes, "Jesus whom you are persecuting," leaving Saul in a state of uncertainty concerning his suddenly perilous fate. This further isolation and confusion is in contrast to Josephus' ritual account, where Josephus makes no missteps and remains in full control throughout. It differs also, to some degree, with the narrative of Lucius, who receives little criticism from Isis who, rather, pities him for his "misfortunes." (Her priest, however, points the next day to his misadventures as reward for his "pursuit of slavish pleasures" and "ill-starred curiosity" [*Metam.* 11.5, 15].)

Saul next, in one liminal moment, is separated from his important status, from the mission he had set for himself, and from his control over his own life and future. There is a ray of hope however, as Beverly Gaventa notes, in the adversative ἀλλά (9:6) which introduces Jesus' command, "But get up (ἀνάσθηθι) and enter the city and it will be told you what you must

¹⁸ Carol J. LaHurd, "The Author's Call to the Audience in the Acts of the Apostles" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1987), 198–99.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 193.

²⁰ Marguerat, "Saul's Conversion," 141.

do."²¹ In the deeply symbolic atmosphere of ritual this use of ἀνίστημι also augments the sense of hope, recalling Luke-Acts' repeated use of it both in commands of the Lord to his faithful ones (Luke 17:19; 22:46; Acts 8:26; 9:11; 10:13, 20), and also in reference to rising from the dead (Luke 9:19; 16:31; 18:33; 24:7, 46; Acts 2:24; 10:41; 13:34; 17:3, 31). Such symbolism of death and rising is found, as well, in the *Metamorphoses* (23) where Lucius describes coming to the boundary of death and returning as central to his own formal experience of initiation. Such a symbolic ritual appeal to such natural cycles as death and birth, Catherine Bell suggests, causes the underlying worldview of the ritual leaders, and/or text, to appear "nonarbitrary and grounded in reality," for it "roots the value system with people's most intimate experiences."²²

In contrast to Lucius' restoration to human form hours after his initial encounter with Isis, Saul's humiliation and liminal status continue, as he is further ground down by his blind condition which places him in complete dependence on fellow-travelers to lead him by the hand into the city. This blindness and inability to find his own way, in juxtaposition with the heavenly light he has just experienced, may have reminded audiences of what they knew of the mystery religions, which Plutarch describes as involving "wanderings," and "frightening paths in darkness," followed by "some wonderful light"²³—though for Plutarch the light came at the climax of the dark wanderings. This brilliant light as well as a divine encounter, is witnessed to also by Lucius who is said to experience it in his own later experience of formal initiation into the mysteries (*Metam.* 11.21, 23).

Though Saul has risen, he now moves into a new kind of separation, an alien in a city not his own, without sight and apparently alone in the darkness in a womb-like experience of liminal waiting.²⁴ Further emphasizing the dramatic distance between Saul's isolation and the normal routines of life, he abstains entirely for three days from eating and drinking, recalling Lucius' abstention from meat and wine in preparation for his initiation (*Metam.* 11.22–23, 28, 30), and Josephus' eating, with Bannus, only what grew of itself (*Vita* 11). This action also echoes Septuagintal traditions where fasting is practiced while seeking divine help and forgiveness in times of

²¹ Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light*, 58.

²² Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 135–36.

²³ Plutarch frg. 168, Sandbach = Stobaeus 4.52.49 cited from Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 91–92.

²⁴ LaHurd, "The Author's Call," 198, points out Paul's status as an alien in Damascus.

transition and crisis (Neh 1:4–6; 9:1–3; Esth 4:3, 16; Dan 9:3–5).²⁵ In the context of various other symbols of death and new birth in the rite of passage experience, the oft-suggested allusion to the three days of Jesus' time in the tomb gains additional support. Allusion might also be seen to other times of *transition* and *liminal waiting* in Luke-Acts including Jesus' three days in the temple at the age of twelve, and the three years Stephen depicts the infant Moses spending in his father's home before emerging to his life as grandson of the Pharaoh and deliverer of Israel (Acts 7:20–21). A period of three years is likewise the time Josephus claims to have spent with Bannus in his ritualized transition to adulthood (12).

Saul's blindness continues during these days not only in a physical sense, but metaphorically in his uncertainty of what lay ahead.²⁶ Acts gives no explanation of what happened during these days, but in view of the connection of fasting and repentance and the transformation he undergoes, the three days in blindness and prayer suggest both time and impetus for the liminal activity of examining and restructuring some of the building blocks of his former culturally-shaped ways of thinking, in dialogue with the true "ritual director" who has confronted him with this riddle and with whom Ananias is told Saul is in prayer.²⁷ An even more extended period of waiting may be seen in the experience of Lucius before his full acceptance through initiation into Isis' cult. However, in contrast to Saul, Lucius already had assurance of what was to come, beginning with the physical restoration which was given to him within hours of his encounter with the goddess.

As the spotlight shifts to Ananias, one of Saul's erstwhile victims, the Lord who spoke to Saul outside Damascus continues to shape and direct events toward the desired conclusion. For Ananias, Jesus enacts a ritual of

²⁵ Martin Hengel and Anna Maria Schwemer, *Paul between Damascus and Antioch: The Unknown Years* (trans. J. Bowden; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 84.

²⁶ "Though physically blind, Saul's eyes are being opened spiritually." Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 426. Hans Conzelmann notes that Saul's blinding is not to be viewed as a punishment, but an indication of the great persecutor's sudden helplessness. See Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 72.

²⁷ As Stendahl suggests, there is no evidence here of a "psychological conversion" in which Saul completely disposed of all of his former beliefs, or of a previous load of guilt. Cf. Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *HTR* 56 (1963): 199–215. While Saul disposed of the conception of Jesus as threat, and Christian as enemy, he also continued on as a devoted servant of the God of Israel. While the accounts of Acts 22 and 26 interpret this more in terms of the prophetic call Stendahl suggests, however, Acts 9 plays down this aspect of the story (contra Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990], 7).

commissioning similar to the traditional pattern of prophetic calls recorded in Scripture, including the formalized sequence of address, response, commission, objection, reassurance, and compliance (Exod 3:1–4:20; Judg 6:11–24; 1 Sam 3:10–14).²⁸ Despite the widespread fear evidenced in Ananias' expression of strong reluctance to carry out this apparently ill-conceived and suicidal mission (Acts 9:13–14), upon the revelation of the divine plan for Saul, Ananias passes the liminal test and submits to this reversal of his assumptions. In his obedience Ananias is now placed, despite his initial uncertainties, in the position of human ritual leader, a role similar to John in the foundational baptism account in Luke 3, the priest for Lucius (*Metam.* 11.22–24) and Bannus for Josephus (*Vita* 1.11).

Meanwhile, the still-blind Saul remains in an emptied, betwixt-and-between state as Ananias—paradoxical victim-rescuer—approaches as the Lord's chosen ritual leader and emissary of reincorporation. Ananias' next portrayed movement is pivotal but succinct as he moves directly to lay his hands on Saul (Acts 9:12), following in a ritual tradition of Scripture, witnessed in Luke-Acts itself, of the laying on of hands for healing (e.g., 2 Kgs 5:11; Luke 4:40; 13:13; Acts 28:8). In addition to a generalized act of blessing,²⁹ this reference to a laying on of hands may also suggest the bestowal of the Spirit (Acts 8:17, 19; 19:6; cf. Deut 34:9), which often accompanies the same gesture in Acts, and even a traditional ritual transfer of power and authority (Num 8:10–12; 27:18, 23; Acts 6:6; 13:3).

Together with the physical ritual enactment, Ananias enacts the spoken word. His opening address, "Brother Saul," communicates an immediate *communitas* between former target and persecutor. As Ananias proclaims the good news that what Saul faced from this Lord who had arrested him on his way was not retribution or punishment, but sight and the gift of the Holy Spirit, Saul's spiritual vision clears further. It is with the combined ritual action of body and word that Saul's literal sight is now restored, as "scales" fall from his eyes, averring, like the dove which came in bodily form upon Jesus following his rite of baptism, the physical divinely-caused reality of this ritual event.³⁰ One acquainted with the general story of Paul would expect that with the solving of the riddle of Saul's immediate fate,

²⁸ Marguerat, "Saul's Conversion," 143; Norman C. Habel, "The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives," *ZAW* 77 (1965): 297–323; Raymond F. Collins, "Paul's Damascus Experience: Reflections on the Lukan Account," *Louvain Studies* 11.2 (1986): 115–16; and Hans-Martin Storm, *Die Paulusberufung nach Lukas und das Erbe der Propheten: Berufen zu Gottes Dienst* (ANTJ; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1995); cf. Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light*, 62.

²⁹ C. K. Barrett, *A Critical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 1:454.

³⁰ Cf. Tob 11.13; Habel, "Form and Significance," 76.

the riddle of his future destiny would also be addressed. But this question is left by the text of Acts 9 still a riddle to Saul, though Ananias, and with him the Lukan audience, has been alerted as to what is to come. This glaring absence suggests that Saul's prophetic call is not the main point of this particular ritual account, but that it instead carries the aim of explaining the more fundamental transformation in Saul's general orientation and state through this divine ritualization.

Rather than undergoing the long waiting period experienced by Lucius between his physical restoration and his initiation, Saul's physical healing is immediately followed by his spiritual restoration as can be seen by his movement into the new world of the physically *and* spiritually sighted by partaking in the embodied ritual act of baptism. There is no need for the typical preaching of Jesus here, for Saul has personally met the risen Lord. Neither is there need to point out the appropriate and apparently well-known ritual act. Acts simply states that "*arising* (ἀναστὰς), he was baptized" (9:18)—with this second use of ἀνίστημι giving connotations not just of a necessary physical act, but of Saul's movement into a brand-new life, a movement which is now, for the first time since his blindness, of his own volition. Like most other baptism accounts in Luke-Acts, and like the account of Lucius' initiation, the physical details of this pivotal ritual event are not stated, being either assumed or even, like the mystery initiations, reserved for insiders.³¹ As Adela Collins has pointed out, "the enactment of baptism in Acts is similar to the way in which other initiatory rites reenacted a foundational story and the identification of the participant with its protagonist in initiating individuals into certain mystery religions."³² This skeletal reporting of the baptism leaves the audience to view the act through their own past experience of its symbolic meanings of cleansing and separation, and more recently of the new beginnings in Jesus with which Luke-Acts portrays it.

Saul's liminal time between what he had been and what he would be is concluded, as with Lucius (*Metam.* 11.24), by his taking of food, thereby entering, as Robert Brawley has suggested, into communion with the disciples of the Lord through shared table fellowship.³³ Saul's *incorporation* as a

³¹ With the exception of a few details regarding that of the Ethiopian in Acts 8:36–38.

³² She states: "Reenactment of a foundational story and the identification of the participant with the protagonist of the story are strikingly reminiscent of what is known about the initiation rituals of certain mystery religions." See Adela Yarbro Collins, "The Origin of Christian Baptism," *StudLit* 19 (1989): 55.

³³ Friedrich Avemarie, *Die Taufenzählungen der Apostelgeschichte. Theologie und Geschichte* (WUNT 139; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 336; Robert L. Brawley, *Centering on God: Method and Message in Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 153.

member of the Christian community has already been suggested by Ananias' greeting, "Brother Saul," and also by the reporting of Saul's baptism in the passive voice (ἐβαπτίσθη), vaguely leaving the enactment of the rite to the community in general. The subsequent report that "he was with the disciples in Damascus" witnesses to the remarkably open acceptance of this former persecutor into the Christian community. Like the gifts and feasting given Lucius following his initiation, and the generous *κοινωνία* of the newly baptized in Acts 2:41–47 and 16:15, such behavior is typical of the *communitas* associated by Turner more normally with the *liminal* phase of a rite of passage.³⁴ The disregard of societal barriers, and the interest in the welfare of all also associated with *communitas*, is immediately evidenced in Saul's proclaiming "in the synagogues" (Acts 9:20) what he had learned about Jesus.³⁵

The hearers' amazement (ἐξίσταντο), stimulated by this witness from one who came to destroy, makes even more emphatic the transformation that has taken place through this series of ritual events. Indeed, as the subsequent narrative demonstrates, the transformed Saul finds no place for *reincorporation* into his former social context, for his erstwhile allies now plot to do away with him, first in Damascus and then in Jerusalem, and he is forced repeatedly to flee (Acts 9:26–30). In the rest of Acts, an ongoing lack of full *reincorporation* into the larger society outside the marginal Christian group is also suggested: in his constant journeying, and in his flouting of societally-dictated social boundaries between Jew and Gentile, male and female, citizen and slave (e.g., Acts 16:14–24).³⁶ This is reminiscent of Turner's contention that the experience of the rite of passage may, at times, "result in the transformation of what is essentially a liminal or extra-structural phase into a permanent condition of sacred 'outsiderhood.'"³⁷ Such an individual "assumes a statusless status, external to the secular social structure, which gives him the right to criticize all structure-bound personae in terms of a moral order binding on all, and also to mediate between all segments or components of the structured system."³⁸

³⁴ Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 157.

³⁵ This act of witness attests to the Spirit's presence, for it enacts the very work for which Luke-Acts portrays the Spirit being given (Luke 24:46–49; Acts 1:4–8).

³⁶ Cf. Christian Strecker, *Die liminale Theologie des Paulus: Zugänge zur paulinischen Theologie aus kulturanthropologischer Perspektive* (FRLANT 185; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999).

³⁷ Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), 116.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.

Such a dramatic shift is made partially conceivable, for Lukan audiences who understood a person's future to be determined by family lineage and birth, by their own previous exposure to events of liminal passage in experience and story. This process is described by Bell as the bringing together of *bodily enactment*, *words*, and *sensory symbols*, to operate on the *non-dualized body/mind* in constructing a new 'social being' through "the internalization of basic schemes and values" inscribed upon the body.³⁹ Acts 9 evidences such a process: in Paul's *bodily* travel, falling before the light, denial of food, and watery immersion; in the *words* communicating both confrontation and hope; and in *sensory symbols* evoking light and darkness, death and new life. Lucius' initiation in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, likewise, involves a transformation of direction and purpose growing out of a similar series of liminal body/mind events in the creation of a *re-socialized body*, giving rise, as Bell states, to dispositions that generate their own structured and structuring practices.⁴⁰

4. The Place of the Acts 9 Rite of Passage Account in Luke-Acts

The Acts 9 account thus appeals to a number of traditional Jewish and more widely-shared Greco-Roman ritual motifs to provide an engaging and convincing portrayal of the transformation of Paul, a transformation which underlies and elucidates the new role in which he will come to dominate the last half of the book of Acts. Such a grounding in ancient tradition gives credence to this unlikely transition from zealous persecutor to unswerving ally of Christ by anchoring it properly in ritual traditions known and respected from the hallowed past. As in the carefully laid-out series of ritual accounts in Luke-Acts as a whole and in other contemporary ritual narratives, ritualization also creates an ideal setting for a divine in-breaking which demonstrates that Paul's transformation does not come about by happenstance but is not only divinely-attended but divinely-directed from the start.

The ritualized account of Acts 9 also functions to adjust perceived relations among the larger set of characters and social structures. The original apparent power imbalance between Paul (as representative of Jesus' powerful enemies) and Ananias (as unsuspecting representative of Jesus' followers) is reversed by the subsequent portrayal of divine ritualization, which

³⁹ Catherine Bell, "The Ritual Body and the Dynamics of Ritual Power," *JRitSt* 4.2 (1990): 304-5.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 304-5. Thus as Comaroff states, the body mediates all action. Jean Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 6.

not only subverts Paul's original goal of persecuting believers, but also re-shapes alliances. For, though ostensibly set on the margins of established social structure (where ritualizing most often takes place⁴¹), this rite proves itself to be enacted by a truer and higher structure against which earthly structures are powerless. Thus with the baptism of Paul, it is the powerful enemies of Jesus who are left without their advocate while his friends go free and act with (unearthly) power. By this means the perceived experience of contradiction for the Lukan audience, between their current historical experience of marginality and their sub-cultural worldview of Jesus as Lord, is redefined and addressed in terms of a fundamental dichotomy of earth/heaven by means of embodied ritual action in which the audience has shared, to some degree, through baptism. A particularized sense of identity is thereby created not only for Paul, but also, secondarily, for the Lukan audience.⁴² Such an appeal to traditional ritual elements generates "privileged contrasts," as Bell states, "between the acts being performed and those being contrasted or mimed so as to produce ... actors imbued with the dispositions to engender practices structured by such privileged contrasts—which are perceived in turn to promote the restructuring of the larger cultural milieu."⁴³

⁴¹ Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone*, 28.

⁴² Bell, "The Ritual Body," 306–10; Comaroff, *Body of Power*, 6–9.

⁴³ Bell, "The Ritual Body," 304–5.