

Celebrating Arthur Darby Nock

Choice, Change, and Conversion

Edited by

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ISBN 978-3-16-161000-4 / eISBN 978-3-16-161001-1

DOI 10.1628/978-3-16-161001-1

ISSN 0512-1604 / eISSN 2568-7476

(Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament)

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data are available at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

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The book was printed on non-aging paper by Gulde Druck in Tübingen and bound by Buchbinderei Spinner in Ottersweier.

Printed in Germany.

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“Conversion” as “Sea Change”

Re-thinking A. D. Nock’s *Conversion*

Paula Fredriksen

Clarity is the hallmark of “conversion” in A. D. Nock’s great classic.¹ And the heroic individual, sketched from William James’s equally great classic, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, is the psychological site of this clarity. The convert experiences “a reorientation of the soul ... a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right.”² An allegiance to any of antiquity’s various pagan socio-cultic communities or “religions of tradition” emphasized “action, and not belief.”³ Such allegiances could rest on mere association, *adherence*. Conversion – whether to philosophy or, with a difference, to Judaism or to Christianity – demanded decision, conviction, conscious commitment.⁴

Nock attends both to the big picture, Roman society’s eventual conversion to Christianity (chapter 12), and to the detailed miniature. He looks to Paul, “the first conversion to Christianity of which we have knowledge.”⁵ He considers the interesting, anomalous case of Apuleius/Lucius, for whom “adhesion” acquired the emotional values of conversion due to “special personal

¹ Arthur Darby Nock, *Conversion: The Old and New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1933), repr. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019).

² Nock, *Conversion*, 7.

³ Nock, *Conversion*, 3, 2 (respectively).

⁴ Nock’s analysis accommodates Judaism only awkwardly, as we will see. And his anti-thesis of ritual to belief or faith (*Conversion*, 10, 13, 16; cf. 216 on pagan temple’s requiring ritual purity rather than moral purity) seems haunted by the Reformation revenant that prioritizes individual internal convictions (“belief” or “faith”) over external actions (“ritual”). On the 16th century origins of this polarizing dichotomy – one of the scholarly sequelae of Protestant anti-Catholic rhetoric – and the ways that this still affects modern historiography on ancient religions, see Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianity and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); on Roman religion and this scholarly “mépris du ritualisme,” John Sheid, *Quand faire, c’est croire: Les rites sacrificiels des Romains* (Paris: Aubier Flammarion, 2011), 7, with further bibliography.

⁵ Nock, *Conversion*, 191.

circumstances” (presumably, something to do with transfiguration).⁶ Briefly examining Justin,⁷ then Arnobius,⁸ Nock lifts his final chapter to its crescendo with the West’s premier convert, Augustine.⁹

As a social movement, concludes Nock, Christianity succeeded because of its limber hybridity, its effective mix of sacramentalism and philosophy. (This mix was presumably why the watching pagan would find it an “ungentlemanly popular religion.”)¹⁰ Intellectual heft, escape from Fate, the offer of security in the afterlife, satisfaction of social needs, a cure for loneliness, “uncompromising [ethical] demands”:¹¹ all of these virtues combined to propel Christianity to its crowning success, the conversion of the Empire.¹² Moral and intellectual clarity motivate both Roman society at large and the individuals who star in Nock’s close-ups. Conversion, whether social or individual, is for Nock a heavily intellectualized process that culminates in a decisive, punctiliar psychological event.

I loved this book, the first time I read it.¹³ And I have loved it thereafter. Nock’s quiet authority. The richness and ease of his reference to ancient arcana. The clarity of his presentation. The ennobling *tristesse* evoked as he narrates humanity’s quest for truth, for beauty.¹⁴ The sheer grace of his prose. Reading *Conversion* felt like listening to a fine cello sonata, its minor key notes

⁶ Nock, *Conversion*, 138.

⁷ Nock, *Conversion*, 255.

⁸ Nock, *Conversion*, 257.

⁹ Nock, *Conversion*, 259–266.

¹⁰ Nock, *Conversion*, 203.

¹¹ Nock, *Conversion*, 210–211.

¹² Nock’s reasons for Christianity’s “triumph” echo those ventured by Edward Gibbon in chapter 15 of *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*: the “intolerant zeal” of the Christians; their doctrine of a future life; their power to work miracles; their pure and austere morality; and their superior social organization (“the union and discipline of the Christian republic”). More on these themes as I conclude this essay. For reconsiderations of these causes, the excellent essays assembled in William V. Harris, ed., *The Spread of Christianity in the First Four Centuries: Essays in Explanation*, Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition 27 (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

¹³ This would have been in 1971–1972, when I as an undergraduate also encountered, all at the same time, Peter Brown’s Augustine (*Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* [Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967]), E. R. Dodds’s anxious late antique Romans (*Pagan and Christian in the Age of Anxiety: Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965]), Krister Stendahl’s analysis of the introspective conscience (“The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West,” *HTR* 56/3 [1963]: 199–215); and, finally, the master himself: the Augustine of the *Confessions*. It took years thereafter to unknot them all, and to learn how to write about Augustine in a verbal tense other than the future perfect.

¹⁴ Elegiacally gesturing toward their unattainability when citing “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (Nock, *Conversion*, 271).

lingering as Nock closed the whole with his quotation of Keats. A brilliant, beautiful book.

This time through, though – a half-century later! – a host of agitated objections swarmed between Nock’s lambent pages and my mind’s eye. Eighty-six years of subsequent scholarship since his publication have complicated Nock’s clarity. Henri Marrou. Pierre Courcelle. Ramsay MacMullen. Peter Brown. Serge Lancel. Brent Shaw. E. P. Sanders. Maijastina Kahlos. Jonathan Z. Smith. Elizabeth Clark. Averil Cameron. Benjamin Isaac. The ancient Mediterranean is just not the same place that it was in 1933.

In the terms that matter for appreciating Nock’s presentation, what has changed? I would like to consider this question by focusing on three specific topics that have grown in complexity with recent scholarship. The first is the definition of ancient “religion,” and, the second, how this particularly complicates Nock’s (and our) understanding of Paul. The third is the historical transparency of that depiction of “religious conversion” tendered by Augustine in Book 8 of his *Confessions*. I will then conclude by touching, albeit only briefly, on ways of thinking about the Big Picture, the “religious conversion” of the Empire. Having traversed this terrain, we will turn back to *Conversion*, to close with some observations about the enduring value of Nock’s great book.

A. Gods and Humans

“Religion.” We all use this term for the period we study – let’s say, the seven centuries between Alexander the Great (d. 323 BCE) and Augustine of Hippo (d. 430 CE). We do so for convenience, because we all know more or less what we mean by it. Some of us even have advanced degrees in it.

But the term itself nests within concepts and presuppositions that do not quite fit antiquity, and this is for good reason. “Religion” as defined for our discipline was born within (Enlightenment period) universities affected and configured by post-Reformation Christianity. “Religion” thus privileges “belief” or “faith,” a mental operation indexing conviction, the intellectual assent, and the psychological and emotional commitment to a proposition. (One “believes” sincerely or strongly.) It is, thus, in a primary way, the domain of the individual. Further, “religion” is embodied socially in institutions and communities that one can move into and out of. In brief: modern religion is a detachable aspect of individual identity.¹⁵ All of these modern predispositions affect

¹⁵ Of the several recent studies dedicated to this issue, for me the single best remains Brent Nongbri’s *Before Religion: The History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013). Teresa Morgan provides an exhaustive examination of the range of ancient definitions of *fides* or πίστις, ancestors of our word “belief,” in *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches* (Oxford:

Nock's study, because they define Nock's study, most particularly his prize construct, "prophetic religion."¹⁶

I want to dwell on just one aspect of the differences between modern "religion" and ancient "religion," which affects how we read Nock's first chapter. Leaving Israel's god to one side for the moment, I concentrate now on his Mediterranean colleagues. If modern religion, as parsed above and as presumed (for his "prophetic" category) by Nock, is primarily individual and psychological, ancient "religion" – recalling, again, that there was no contemporary word for the term – was about relations between heaven and earth, between humans and their gods – and between gods and their humans. The key concept here is *συγγένεια*, "kinship."

This kinship was often constructed realistically, as biological lineage. Back in the day, Greek gods and Roman gods, Etruscan gods and Lycian gods, Phoenician gods and Punic gods – from what I can tell, most ancient gods – had sexual relations with humans. People groups, or especially their leaders, sprang from these unions.¹⁷ These people groups often shared with their gods specific languages and locations (altars, temples, cities, caverns, mountains: *loca sancta* were as varied as they were ubiquitous), and they received from their deities their preferred protocols for being shown respect. These protocols, passed down as a people's ethnic and cultural inheritance, were not casual considerations. Ancient gods were very particular about being shown honor. Bad things could happen when they were displeased.¹⁸

Oxford University Press, 2015); cf. Nock, *Conversion*, 10, on paganism's displacement of "faith" with "myth and ritual," evincing "attitude" rather than "conviction." Ancient *πίστις*/*fides* conveys primarily the idea of allegiance: loyalties both to a god and to a group. On modernity's gradual development of the emphasis on individual religious sensibility ("faith"; Schleiermacher), Stanley K. Stowers, "Gods, Monotheism and Ancient Mediterranean Religion" (paper presented at the Brown University Seminar for the Culture and Religion of the Ancient Mediterranean, Providence, RI, 11 September 2012), 18–21. I thank Professor Stowers for sharing his seminar paper with me.

¹⁶ Nock, *Conversion*, 3–16.

¹⁷ For an examination of the political possibilities of divine/human sexual encounters, which ultimately served to cement inter-city treaties, see Christopher P. Jones, *Kinship Diplomacy in the Ancient World*, *Revealing Antiquity* 12 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). Romans, for example, claimed to be "Aeneadae" (12, also 154 n. 16), descendants of Aeneas and, thus, of Venus, a privilege claimed particularly by the Julii. Imaginative genealogies, construed concretely, established "kinship" between cities, their *syngeneia* tracing back to a shared divine progenitor. Jones notes that this "belief that such [divine] heroes were also the ultimate ancestors of cities or nations was widespread in Greek thought and was then taken up by the Romans" (12). The sexual isolation of Israel's god occasioned ingenious improvisations on the part of Hasmonean diplomats, on which see *ibid.*, 72–80; Paula Fredriksen, "How Jewish Is God? Divine Ethnicity in Paul's Theology," *JBL* 137/1 (2018): 193–212, 195.

¹⁸ Ancient gods were "powers first, persons second, and moral agents a long way third," notes classicist J. K. Davies, "The Moral Dimension of Pythian Apollo," in *What Is a God?*

Peoples, places, deities, languages, sanctuaries, ancestral traditions: from these elements, ancients built the idea that we now call “ethnicity,” people-group-ness.¹⁹ Israelite ethnicity participated in this construction. Israel’s relationship with their god – unusually – was not genealogical, but they still formed a “family” unit, modulated by family metaphors, with power patterned accordingly. Israelites were the (non-biological) sons of their divine father,²⁰ a scriptural commonplace echoed by Paul, who uses the language not of “begetting” but of legal or covenantal “son-making,” *υιοθεσία* (“adoption of a son”; Rom 9:4). Or, Israel was to God as wife to husband (Isa 54:5), joined in a mutually covenanted marital relationship, with God, again, in the dominant male role.

My point is that “religion” – these divine/human family connections – was inherited. Whether pagan or Jewish, ancient peoples were born into their relationship with their god(s). “Religion” was constituted by protocols for showing one’s god(s) deference, respect, affection, and loyalty, protocols which were passed down from one generation to the next. Words that we frequently translate as “belief” (*πίστις*, *fides*) and as “piety” (*εὐσέβεια*, *pietas*) in their ancient

Studies in the Nature of Greek Divinity, ed. Alan B. Lloyd, repr. (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2009), 43–64, 58. “Any account of pagan worship which minimizes the gods’ uncertain anger ... is an empty account,” Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 38; cf. 98, “Power was the essence of divinity.” Disasters were never theologically neutral events, but the consequence of alienating divinity. Deities of any ethnicity might grow angry at breaches of ritual protocol, which is why Paul, post-Damascus, warned his Corinthian assembly against unseemly deportment at eucharistic meals: “That is why some of you are weak and ill, and some have died” (1 Cor 11:30).

¹⁹ On divine-human etiquette as a defining element of ethnic patrimony (*τὰ πάτρια, παραδόσεις τῶν πατέρων, mos maiorum, fides patrum*, all translatable as “ancestral tradition,” cf. Gal 1:14), and the ways that this idea both conforms to and resists modern definitions of “religion,” Fredriksen, “How Jewish Is God?,” esp. 194–197. Herodotus (8.144.2–3), conjuring τὸ Ἑλληνικόν, “Greekness,” listed the concept-cluster of shared blood (*δμαιομον*), language (*ὁμόγλωσσον*), shared sanctuaries and sacrifices (*θεῶν ἰδρύματα τε κοινὰ καὶ θυσίαι*) and, governing these, the heritage of shared customs (*ἥθεα ὁμότροπα*). Jewish definitions of “ethnicity” give similar identifiers. Genesis 10 envisages the plenum of the non-Jewish world, the descendants of Noah, as divided into seventy people-groups, distinguished by their lands [*יָרְדְּן / ἐν τῇ γῆ αὐτῶν*], according to their tongues [*לשונות / γλώσσα*], after their families [*משפחות / φύλα*], in their nations [*גוים / ἔθνη*]. When Moses “repeats” this episode in Deut 32:8–9, he adds another defining category of ethnic distinction, “gods”: “When God apportioned the nations [*גוים / ἔθνη*], when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples [*עמים / ἔθνη*] according to the number of the sons of God” [RSV; NRSV: “number of gods”: *בני אלֹהים* (“sons of God”) of 4QDeutj; cf. LXX ἀγγέλων θεοῦ; MT *בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים*]. Paul, in his list of ethnic identifiers for his *συγγενεῖς*, “Israelites,” refers also to the temple in Jerusalem and to its protocols of sacrifice (*λατρεία*, “cult”), as well as to Israel’s “sonship,” on which more below (Rom 9:3–5).

²⁰ E.g., Exod 4:22; Deut 14:1; Ps 82:6; Hos 11:1 (famously repurposed in Matt 2:15); cf. Jub. 1:24; 2:19. Israelite rulers of Davidic lineage were in a special way also “sons” of the deity, e.g., Ps 2:7; 89:20, 26; 2 Sam 7:14.

context meant “loyalty to” or “faithfulness to” or “confidence in” or “correct deference toward” these ancestral customs, which choreographed observances, food ways, cult acts, calendars, and rituals both domestic and urban. “The idea of a religious identity distinct from one’s ethnic, civic, or family identity was unthinkable.”²¹ This binding family connection coordinated and stabilized divine/human relations. Ethnicity corresponded to cult.

B. Paul the “Converter” and Paul the “Converted”

This family hardwiring, divine/human *συγγένεια*, complicates Nock’s distinctions between “ethnic” and “prophetic” religion when he characterizes ancient Judaism. It also complicates the way that he envisages conversion to Judaism. First, his description of “socio-cultural” religions, “religions of tradition the essential element [of which] is the practice”²² also suits Mediterranean Jewishness. Given that all ancient religions were ethno-religions, intrinsically corporate (vertically with gods and horizontally/historically with people groups), the heroic individual seems somewhat decentered as the primary site of a punctiliar psychology: the person’s *pietas* or *εὐσέβεια* or *fides* was precisely enacted as loyalty or faithfulness to the group’s *παραδόσεις*.

And these groups mixed and mingled. Jews entered into the politics and culture of that great pagan religious institution, the ancient city; while Hellenistic and Roman-period synagogue assemblies made room for interested pagans, especially as patrons. In Nock’s terms, these Jewish participants in Graeco-Roman urban life were “adherents” (not “converts”) to paganism; the pagans involved in Jewish community activity were “adherents” (not converts) to Judaism. These interested pagans – accommodated by diaspora communities, which encouraged the broadband interest of outsiders – are otherwise known by the (etic *and* emic) term “god-fearers.”²³ If the interested pagan chose to affiliate further (for men, via circumcision) that decision probably developed out of such adherence.²⁴

²¹ Greg Woolf, “Empires, Diasporas, and the Emergence of Religions,” in *Christianity in the Second Century: Themes and Developments*, ed. James Carleton Paget and Judith Lieu (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 25–38, 30.

²² Nock, *Conversion*, 3.

²³ *Pro*, Paula Fredriksen, “‘If It Looks Like a Duck, and It Quacks Like a Duck ...’: On Not Giving Up the Godfearers,” in *A Most Reliable Witness: Essays in Honor of Ross Shepard Kraemer*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey, et al., BJS 358 (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2015), 25–33, a response to Ross Kraemer’s *contra*, “Giving Up the Godfearers,” *JAJ* 5/1 (2014): 61–87.

²⁴ Especially in the western Diaspora, where once a week God publicly spoke in Greek. Juvenal complains that the sons of a Judaizing father will eventually “convert” (the marker being circumcision), *Sat.* 14.96–102. Note, again, that Juvenal has no word for “conversion.”

Nock – writing, again, in the early 1930s – construed and constructed “prophetic Judaism” as a missionary religion. That idea has since been retired by further research.²⁵ And, given the ethnic embeddedness of ancient religion, and the ethnic essentialism of ancient culture more generally, the concept of cross-ethnic “missionizing” scarcely makes sense.²⁶ The idea of what *we* think of as “conversion” to Judaism was, rather, conceptualized and articulated by those who witnessed it as a political or legal decision: one moved from one’s own native ἥθη to a foreign *ius*, or joined a different πολιτεία (again, for men, usually by receiving circumcision; for women, most likely through marriage).²⁷

For extensive discussion, see Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of the Sciences and Humanities, 1974–1984), 2:102–107 (no. 301); also, Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C. – A.D. 135)*, ed. Geza Vermes, et al., repr., 3 vols. (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 3:150–176. For the argument that Paul’s Christ-following ex-pagans would most likely have been drawn from this pool of adherent Judaizing pagans, see Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans’ Apostle* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 146–147, 167–169, with bibliography in corresponding end notes.

²⁵ On the context of the idea that Roman-period Jews ran missions to turn pagans into (more) Jews, a position developed by James Parkes, Marcel Simon, and Bernhard Blumenkranz *contra* Harnack’s presentation of post-70 Judaism as withdrawn and inward-focused, see Paula Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), xiii–xvii and notes. Against the missionary position, Martin Goodman, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994); Shaye J. D. Cohen, “Was Judaism in Antiquity a Missionary Religion?,” in *Jewish Assimilation, Acculturation, and Accommodation: Past Traditions, Current Issues, and Future Prospects*, ed. Menachem Mor, *Studies in Jewish Civilization* 2 (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992), 14–23.

²⁶ On ancient ethnic essentialism, see esp. Benjamin H. Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); on its determinative effects on Paul’s mission, Matthew Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Caroline E. Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Cf. Gal 2:15, where Jews are Jews, and pagans are sinners φύσει, “by nature”; also, Rom 11:24, where Jews belong to the eschatological olive tree κατὰ φύσιν (and the tree is “their own,” τῆ ἰδίᾳ ἐλαίᾳ), the ex-pagans are engrafted παρὰ φύσιν.

²⁷ Pagan comments on circumcision as a marker of Jewish males whether begotten or made are collected in Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*: see the index, vol. 3, s.v. “circumcision.” Women (as the Roman-period novella *Joseph and Aseneth* attests) were a more complicated case: see most recently, the work of Jill Hicks-Keeton, “Covenant without Circumcision? What to Do with a Woman,” *Ancient Jew Review* (19 September 2018) (<https://www.ancientjewreview.com/articles/2018/7/28/arguing-with-aseneth>); also, Daniel R. Schwartz, “Doing Like Jews or Becoming a Jew? Josephus on Women Converts to Judaism,” in *Jewish Identity in the Graeco-Roman World / Jüdische Identität in der griechisch-römischen Welt*, ed. Jörg Frey, Daniel R. Schwartz, and Stephanie Gripenotrog, AGJU 71 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 93–109. As Shaye Cohen pointed out some time ago, women usually followed the gods of their husband, so that marriage to a Jew functionally made the female

And given (most?) ancient Jews' normal engagement with divine powers lesser than their own θεός ὑψιστος – for divination, for healings, for “magic,” for making business or travel decisions – we have to wonder to what degree the ex-pagan Jew-by-choice had to break off or attenuate all relationships with native godlings. The line in the sand was probably drawn at participation in public (thus, urban) cult.²⁸

Mid-first century CE, of course, we do have evidence of a mutagenic form of “prophetic Judaism” as defined by Nock. It made energetic efforts both to “convert” other Jews – that is, to achieve ethnically internal sectarian commitments – and to “convert” ethnic others, whether to an extreme form of Judaizing (“acting like a Jew,” i.e., Paul’s version) or, via circumcision, to full-on Jewishness (the version of Paul’s circumcising, Christ-following colleagues). I am speaking, of course, of the first generation of the Christ-movement(s). In all forms that we can reconstruct from Paul’s letters, our earliest evidence, the central prophecy of all of these streams of messianic “prophetic Judaism” was that their own generation was history’s last generation. God had sent his son, the final Davidic messiah, and raised him from the dead. Christ’s own resurrection pointed ahead to the immediately impending general resurrection, the transformation of the cosmos, the defeat of pagan gods, and the establishment of God’s kingdom. An essential aspect of the εὐαγγέλιον’s message was realizing what time it was on God’s clock.²⁹

Some of Paul’s apostolic colleagues, by mid-century, wanted to incorporate (male) ex-pagan gentiles into Jewishness via circumcision. Paul, however, was

partner Jewish (or Jewish), *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties*, HCS 31 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 169–170.

²⁸ Apotropaic charms and amulets show that Jews, whether as clients or as adepts, attributed much power to Mediterranean gods, angels, and πνεύματα, especially in local, multi-religious contexts: e.g., the Sicilian amulet that calls on angels to help Judah escape the negative attentions of a Greek goddess: “Artemis, flee from Judah!” (Roy D. Kotansky, *Greek Magical Amulets: The Inscribed Gold, Silver, Copper, and Bronze Lamellae*, part 1: *Published Texts of Known Provenance*, Papyrologica Coloniensia 22/1 [Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1994], 155–166 [no. 33], ll. 13–14); cf. Mika Ahuvia’s analysis of an incantation bowl, “An Ancient Jewess Invoking Goddesses: Transgression or Pious Adaptation?,” *AJS Perspectives* (2019) (<http://perspectives.ajsnet.org/transgression-issue/ancient-jewess-invoking-goddesses-transgression-or-pious-adaptation/>); also, eadem, “Gender and the Angels in Ancient Judaism,” *JSQ* (2021, forthcoming). Gideon Bohak addresses the ambiguous invocation of gods’ names in the PGM in *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 247–257. Further on the local variations and quotidian practicalities of Jewish “reciprocal exchanges” with lower divinities (designated in his article by the etic term NEBs, or “nonevident beings”), see Stanley K. Stowers, “Why ‘Common Judaism’ Does Not Look Like Mediterranean Religion,” in *From Strength to Strength: Essays in Appreciation of Shaye J. D. Cohen*, ed. Michael L. Satlow, BJS 363 (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2018), 235–255, esp. 247–251.

²⁹ Fredriksen, *Paul*, xi–xii, and passim: see Subject Index, 309, s.v. “apocalyptic eschatology.”

committed to incorporating such gentiles – quite literally, as we are about to see – not through *σάρξ* (the site of circumcision), but through *πνεῦμα*. His ex-pagan gentiles, immersed into Christ’s death and resurrection, awaiting their own transformation with the Kingdom’s arrival, are in the (brief) meanwhile possessed of and by Jesus’s *πνεῦμα*, or of holy *πνεῦμα*. They thus become members of one body, the pneumatically constructed trans-local “body” of Christ (e.g., 1 Cor 6:15; 12:27; 2 Cor 13:5). Their current in-spirit-edness – another measure of the nearness of the End – was a down-payment toward their ultimate transformation from bodies of flesh to bodies of spirit.³⁰ Spirit enabled as well the necessary moral behaviors, shaped by Jewish anti-pagan rhetoric, that Paul demanded of his ex-pagan gentiles.³¹

Still, Paul lives, thinks, and works within a culture where peoples and pantheons are bundled together in family groups. And a non-negotiable condition of pagans’ participation in Paul’s *ἐκκλησία* was their becoming ex-pagans *without* “becoming” Jews. In other words, despite his disavowal of proselyte circumcision, Paul’s two key demands of his ex-pagan gentiles are, precisely, *ritual*, and thus ethnically specific.³² His gentiles are to worship Israel’s god *alone* (the real existence of their own, lesser gods notwithstanding), and they are to eschew *λατρεία* before images of these native and local deities.³³ Paul,

³⁰ For two recent and generative redescriptions of “spirit” in Paul’s letters, see esp. Giovanni Bazzana, *Having the Spirit of Christ: Spirit Possession and Exorcism in the Early Christ Groups* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), interpreting Paul’s language and his assemblies’ performative charismata by appeal to cross-cultural studies of spirit-possession, 103–205; and, Jennifer Eyl, *Signs, Wonders, and Gifts: Divination in the Letters of Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), situating such taxonomies of empowerment within their broader Mediterranean context of divine/human reciprocity and allegiance (*πίστις*). On pneumatic sidereal bodies and eschatological transformation, Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem*, 129–160; cf. his metaphor of Pauline in-spirit-edness as “deep gene therapy,” 117, for ex-pagan gentiles.

³¹ Paul gives examples *con brio* of such anti-pagan sin lists, these sins attributed to the worship of idols which lead the *ἔθνη* inevitably to live lives mired in wrongdoing: unnatural sexual acts, distempered societies, dysfunctional families. “They not only do such things [as lie, cheat, and steal], but they consent to those doing them!” (Rom 1:18–32, a re-mix of themes from the Wisdom of Solomon). The pagan Corinthians, before Paul reached them, were adulterers, idolaters, sexual miscreants, thieves, drunks and robbers (1 Cor 6:9–11). Those who indulge in immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, drunkenness, and so on (and on), he reminds his Galatian assemblies, will not inherit God’s kingdom (Gal 5:19–21). Left to their own devices, this, *φύσει* (“by [their] nature”), is how *ἔθνη* behave.

³² Paula Fredriksen, “Judaizing the Nations: The Ritual Demands of Paul’s Gospel,” *NTS* 56/2 (2010): 232–252.

³³ 1 Cor 8:5, *ὡςπερ εἰσὶν θεοὶ πολλοὶ καὶ κύριοι πολλοί*: note the indicative mood of the verb. On “lords” as another term for “gods,” see Nicole Belayche, “*Kyrios* and *Despotes*: Addresses to Deities and Religious Experiences,” in *Lived Religion in the Ancient Mediterranean World: Approaching Religious Transformations from Archaeology, History and*

in short, taught a form of messianic Jewishness to pagans. He was, in this light, an apocalyptic Jewish extremist. Far from being trans-ethnic or non-ethnic (as the tired “universalist” vs. “particularist” contrast would have it), the Jesus movement in its first generation – *Paul’s version included* – was a form of radical Judaizing.

Paul’s “conversion policy,” should we chose to frame his position in this way, thus means that the family status of these ex-pagan ἔθνη vis-à-vis ethnic Israel and Israel’s god is also and thereby altered. Such gentiles are adopted into God’s family as ἀδελφοί, “brothers,” sons via Christ through pneumatic υἰοθεσία, which Paul also speaks of as “the circumcision” (e.g., Phil 3:3: n.b. the RSV’s introduction of “true” before “circumcision,” unwarranted by the Greek). As the “eschatological gentiles” long foreseen in Jewish prophecies, they represent a καινὴ κτίσις, a “new creation” (Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17).³⁴ Finally, these gentiles-in-Christ, pneumatically though not physically reformatted *qua* adopted heirs to the (Jewish god’s) Kingdom, are also and thereby enabled (or entitled) to address the Jewish god by his “Jewish” family name, in the “native” γλώσσα of the Jewish family tongue: God’s new, ex-pagan gentile sons also call him Ἀββᾶ (Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15).

With all this as context, then, how does Nock help us to understand the individual case of Paul himself? Nock states, “Conversion implies turning *from* something *to* something else. *You put earlier loyalties behind you*” (emphasis mine).³⁵ Paul indeed turned from antagonist to advocate; but he never left his “earlier loyalty,” that is, his παραδόσεις πατριχαί, behind. Quite the contrary. Paul lived in a world with two religious options: his own people’s practices, principles, and commitments, and those of everyone else. “Everyone else” was the pagan ἔθνη; their “religion” the ancestral practices of their particular people groups. Paul stuck with his own.³⁶ This is one of the reasons why Stendahl,

Classics, ed. Valentino Gasparini, et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 87–113. On δαιμόνια (“godlings”) as pagan gods, thereby lesser to Israel’s god, see 1 Cor 10:20; cf. Ps 95:5 LXX. The issue of eating animals sacrificed to these deities was more complicated: 1 Cor 10:14–29; cf. Rom 14:14–21. The variable observances within Paul’s own ἐκκλησίαι might very well reflect a similar variability of food practices within the larger synagogue communities, E. P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah: Five Studies* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 281.

³⁴ For the full argument that Paul’s “new creation” refers not to the “church” in general but to “eschatological gentiles” in particular, my essay, “‘Circumcision Is Nothing’: A Non-Reformation Reading of Paul’s Letters,” in *Protestant Bible Scholarship: Antisemitism, Philosemitism, and Anti-Judaism*, ed. Hindy Najman, et al., JSJSup (Leiden: Brill, 2021, forthcoming). Such gentiles join *with* Israel, but they do not “join” or “become” Israel; cf. Rom 15:9–12.

³⁵ Nock, *Conversion*, 134.

³⁶ Matthew V. Novenson, “Did Paul Abandon Either Judaism or Monotheism?,” in *The New Cambridge Companion to St. Paul*, ed. Bruce W. Longenecker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 239–259. Novenson concludes, “Paul did not abandon Judaism.

following Munck, sounded the summons to rethink Paul’s shift of enthusiasms not as “conversion” (what was there to convert *to*, other than “paganism”?) but as “call.”³⁷ Paul never quit the synagogue (2 Cor 11:24–26). He always esteemed as uniquely authoritative his own people’s “central asset,” God’s *λόγια*, the Jewish scriptures in Greek.³⁸ And he was, by his own estimate, one of the Best. Jews. Ever. (Phil 3:6). Also one of the best apostles. Ever. (1 Cor 15:10; 2 Cor 11:23; 12:11). And the best wonder-worker. And best speaker of angelic tongues (1 Cor 14:18). And the best diviner of Jewish textual arcana. In all these categories, both traditional and pneumatic, Paul was, said Paul, the best (“[God’s] grace toward me was not in vain,” 1 Cor 15:10).

Alas, he was also controlling. Paul viciously trash-talked fellow *ἀδελφοί* in the movement who, by mid-century, urged proselyte circumcision as the means for Christ-following *ἔθνη* to prepare for the approaching End. Read generations later by gentile Christians, Paul’s letters served, and serve still, as a sustaining source of Christian anti-Judaism and as a sustaining source of racist anti-Semitism. “Justification by faith, and not by the works of the Law,” Luther’s (16th-century) anti-papal war cry, still provides many (21st-century) New Testament scholars with their key to Paul’s (1st-century) intra-movement – thus, intra-Jewish – arguments.³⁹ You would think that Paul’s chief message to his assemblies was “Do not circumcise!” It was, instead, “No more *λατρεία* to *δαίμονια*! Be loyal to Israel’s god alone! Abide by idealized Jewish community ethics, and thereby fulfill God’s law! Put aside donations for me to take back to Jerusalem! And meanwhile, do not listen to the hypocrites, the dogs, the mutilators of the flesh, the false brethren, the so-called super-apostles: Listen only to me!”

It’s hard, always to be right. But it was a burden that Paul shouldered cheerfully. After all, the fast-approaching, Jewishly conceived end of history would

Over the course of late antiquity, Christianity abandoned Judaism, and it did so using Paul’s words. But that is a very different thing” (259).

³⁷ Stendahl, “Paul and the Introspective Conscience”; idem, *Paul among the Jews and Gentiles, and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976); idem, *Final Account: Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995). Before him, Johannes Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind*, trans. Francis Clarke (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1959). See esp. his first chapter, “The Call.”

³⁸ Tessa Rajak, “The Mediterranean Jewish Diaspora,” in Paget and Lieu, *Christianity in the Second Century*, 39–56, 49. God’s *λόγια*, Rom 3:2.

³⁹ This “Law vs. Grace” binary is 21st-century Pauline Studies Protestant theological boilerplate, shared by scholars who otherwise disagree mightily with each other, e.g., N. T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 4: *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2013); cf. John Barclay, *Paul and The Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015). For a refreshing and persuasive rethinking of these issues, see Matthew V. Novenson’s forthcoming study, *The End of the Law and the Last Man: Paul between Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), especially his chapter 3: “*Quis Dicit* Justification from Works of the Law?” I thank Dr. Novenson for sharing a pre-publication version of his book with me.

soon provide vindication. In terms of his mid-first century context, then, and of his principles of pagan persuasion and his personal commitments, does Paul indeed provide us with “the first conversion to Christianity of which we have knowledge”?⁴⁰ According to the ways that Nock defines both “conversion” (renunciation of prior loyalties) and “Christianity” (as a “religion” other than Judaism in the early 30s CE), we must answer, “No.”

C. Rhetoric and Retrospect: Augustine the Convert

Historians might dither over Paul’s experience, given his singular historical circumstances in the pre-Christian phase of Christianity. Surely, with Augustine, we are on firmer footing. Augustine is *the* prototype of the Christian convert, redeemed from the error of his earlier ways by a single, dramatic moment of conversion. Paul’s experience of the post-mortem Christ’s being “revealed *in me*” might be variously interpretable (Gal 1:14). Augustine’s Milanese moment of dramatic reversal – described by the subject himself – surely is not. If anything, Augustine provided Nock, as indeed he provided western Christianity, with *the* defining description of a religious conversion.

But should we as historians consent to this construct? To gain some purchase on Augustine’s powerful self-representation in the *Confessions*, we need first to attend to the circumstances within which he shaped that presentation.

Back in 1986, pondering the historiographical mess made when scholars considered both men’s rhetorically powerful presentations of their former selves – the apostle’s weaponized narration of his past in Galatians 1 and in Philippians 3; the throbbing Book 8 of the bishop’s *Confessions* – I suggested that our problems as historians arose less from the uneven quality of our primary evidence (5 million words from Augustine! 24,000 words from Paul!) than from our habits of question-framing. In this particular instance, the problem (pure Nock) was the Quest for the Historical Moment of Conversion, and the way that that idea has shaped our expectations of what a “conversion experience” – whether for Paul or for Augustine – is “really” like.⁴¹

Historians, like novelists, write narratives: stories that have a beginning, a middle, and an end. The rhetorical/narratological *punctum* shapes story powerfully – so powerfully, that the historian, as both reader (of ancient literary evidence) and as writer (of historical narrative) too often and too easily falls under its sway. The clear historical *punctum*, like “the moment of dramatic reversal,” is a literary device, deployed by the storyteller, be that storyteller an evangelist,

⁴⁰ Nock, *Conversion*, 191.

⁴¹ Paula Fredriksen, “Paul and Augustine: Conversion Narratives, Orthodox Traditions, and the Retrospective Self,” *JTS* 37/1 (1986): 3–34.

an apostle, a bishop – or an historian.⁴² Narrators, telling their accounts, use such rhetorical devices because of their architectural elegance and their emotional punch. For writers of fiction, such stylistic considerations entail no epistemological or ethical complexities. For writers of history, they do.

In much current scholarship, for example, this narrative device – the dramatic, pivotal *punctum* – prevails as historical description when speaking whether of the post-mortem Jesus or of the post-Damascus Paul or of the post-Milanese Augustine. The New Testament guild refers regularly to “*the* Christ-event,” meaning (usually) Christ’s (one-off) resurrection.⁴³ Similarly, Paul’s “conversion” commonly appears as a punctiliar Christophany (“When he who had set me apart from before my birth ... revealed his son to me ... I did not confer with flesh and blood ... but I went away into Arabia,” Gal 1:15–17 RSV). Luke narrativizes Paul’s shift from opponent to apostle differently, but he too emphasizes a Single Dramatic Event (Acts 9:3–6; cf. 22:4–16; 26:9–18). And by reading Paul’s words in Rom 13:14, claims Augustine, he also, instantaneously, changed course (“At once, a light of relief from anxiety flooded my heart, all shadow of doubt dispelled,” *Conf.* 8.12, 29).

But “the” Resurrection is a rhetorical construct. Gospel writers (though Mark less so) used it to shape their stories about the effects of the post-crucifixion Jesus on his followers. (Visually reformatted, it gave us Grünewald.) Luke-Acts used a similar construct to proffer Paul’s “conversion.”⁴⁴ (Think Caravaggio.) Augustine (no mean rhetorician himself) similarly used it – the bolt-from-the-blue Event – to tell a story about how he became Augustine. Then modern scholars (whether of Jesus, of Paul, or of Augustine) interpret this device as description, deciding that there actually was some such historical *punctum*. And off they go, chasing after the wild goose of “what really happened.”

Unlike the historical Paul but very much like the Lukan Paul, Augustine did have something to convert to. He went from one form of Christianity (Mani-

⁴² See John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), esp. 91–122, on historical causation and whether history has “phase changes.”

⁴³ By which I mean such scholars’s focus (while claiming that it is Paul’s focus) on Christ’s resurrection, while quietly dropping Paul’s immediate inferences from that particular pneumatic phenomenon to its (now somewhat awkward) entailments: community spirit-possession, Christ’s imminent public Parousia, the defeat of pagan gods, the resurrection of the dead, and the transformation of the living into bodies of *πνεῦμα*: see Paula Fredriksen, “How High Can Early High Christology Be?,” in *Monotheism and Christology in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, ed. Matthew V. Novenson, NovTSup 180 (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 293–319, esp. 313–315.

⁴⁴ By the time Luke writes (early 2nd c?), “Paul” does have something other than paganism to “convert” to: namely Christianity, cf. Acts 11:26; 26:28 (“Christians/Christian”). On the early second-century debut of this and related terms, see Paula Fredriksen, “Christian” (<https://www.bibleodyssey.org/people/main-articles/christian>).

chaeism) to another (the imperially patronized Nicene variety). And in the decade-plus interim between his shift in Christian affiliation and his writing about it in the *Confessions*, he also shifted from being a minor, and foreign, lay intellectual in Milan to being a bishop – thus, an ecclesiastical politician, an imperial power broker, and a combat theologian – once back in North Africa. Therein lies the tale.

Back in 386, through his reading translations of Plotinus and of Porphyry, and through his shrewd assessment of the lay of the land (unlike Rome, Milan could offer no network of Manichaean patrons), Augustine had long let his dualist allegiances lapse. In that summer of his discontent, he staggered to three fatigued decisions. He would stop sleeping with women. (Monica had sent the mother of Augustine's son packing. Augustine immediately acquired another concubine in her stead; *Conf.* 7.15, 25.) He would be baptized, some nine months thence, by Ambrose. And he would resign his professorship.

Luckily for future historians, he also wrote four treatises in the immediate aftermath of this series of decisions, and they famously contrast with Augustine's great classic in telling ways. In 397, at the moment of crisis, the face of Contenance is revealed to him (*Conf.* 8.9, 27); in 386, it was the face of Philosophy (*Acad.* 2.2, 5). In 386, he wrestled with the problem of evil (naively) philosophically conceived; in 397, tossed in the exegetical cross-chop of Romans 7 and 9 on sin, will, and grace – but much more sophisticated philosophically – he as a sinner fallen into time searches hungrily for how he can know the timeless god.⁴⁵ The real work of “conversion” occurred, lurching and slow, back in Africa, over the course of the 390s. Only thereafter did the dispirited decisions of 386 transmute, through the alchemy of retrospect and rhetoric, into a single and singular dramatic Event: *the* conversion of Book 8.

The architecture of Book 8's conversion scene, further, rests on the foundation of an understanding of Paul, and especially of Romans, that Augustine had achieved only during the course of the 390s. In a series of closely dated works, arcing from 392 to 396, Augustine repeatedly banged his head against Paul's famous epistle, striving to hold onto his idea of a just god, thus the will's freedom, while trying to account for the prenatal choice of Jacob over Esau in Romans 9.⁴⁶ It was not until wrestling yet again with this passage in his response to questions posed by Simplicianus that Augustine has his exegetical breakthrough: Human will, he now argues, is itself chosen (or, we could say, manipulated) by God (*Div. quaest. Simpl.* 1.2, 12; cf. *Prop. Rom.* 62.9: *fides inchoat*

⁴⁵ For a condensed version of this interpretation, see Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews*, 201–210; more fully, eadem, “The *Confessions* as Autobiography,” in *A Companion to Augustine*, ed. Mark Vessey, Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World, Ancient History (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 87–98.

⁴⁶ Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews*, 122–189, beginning with his debate with Fortunatus, which turned upon verses in Paul (392) and ending with his response to Simplicianus (396).

meritum). Faith affirms that God does so justly, but divine reasons and discernment of merit are *occultissima* and *remotissima* from human understanding (*Div. quaest. Simpl.* 1.2, 16). By 396, Paul provides Augustine’s parade example of the effects of divine choice: the apostle was saved “by one word from on high ... whereby his mind and will were ... set on the right way toward faith.” This description of Paul’s conversion both nods to the Lukan *punctum* in Acts (*Div. quaest. Simpl.* 1.2, 22), and anticipates Augustine’s description of his own experience as rendered in *Confessions* (8.12, 29).⁴⁷

No one would ever accuse Augustine of ineffective rhetoric. Book 8 is soaring, operatic, gorgeous. Peter Brown, in his classic biography, *Augustine of Hippo*, simply quoted from the *Confessions*’ account when retelling Augustine’s struggles back in the summer of 386 in Milan.⁴⁸ Later, Brown characterized Augustine’s composition of the *Confessions* itself as “an act of therapy.”⁴⁹ When writing *Confessions*, claimed Brown, Augustine had “felt compelled to reveal himself” through an “anxious turning to [his] past,” thereby achieving the “therapy of self-examination.”⁵⁰ And Brown raised the issue of the emotional authenticity of Augustine’s depiction of his past, as well as the psychotherapeutic benefits of that depiction.⁵¹

Three scholars in particular have challenged this assessment: James O’Donnell in 2005, Brent Shaw in 2011, and Jason BeDuhn in 2013.⁵² O’Donnell – author too of the definitive three-volume commentary on the *Confessions*⁵³ – insisted that the book conformed not to modern standards of psychological candor, but to ancient standards of rhetorical presentation. The *Confessions*, he contended, is a work of brilliant artifice, a rhetorically powerful act of self-invention and self-justification.

BeDuhn and Shaw both contextualized and detailed the good reasons for Augustine’s self-justification. Augustine had come back to North Africa,

⁴⁷ For Augustine’s intermediate works on the Pauline epistles, Fredriksen, “Paul and Augustine,” 21–24.

⁴⁸ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967), chapter 10, “The Lost Future.” This telescoping of time was also noted by Augustine’s more recent biographer, James J. O’Donnell, *Augustine: A New Biography* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 73.

⁴⁹ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 165.

⁵⁰ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 160, 164, 181 (respectively); so similarly Nock, on the *Confessions*’ “wealth of introspective analysis,” *Conversion*, 261; describing 386 by repeating Augustine’s re-interpretation of 397, *ibid.*, 261–266.

⁵¹ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 170.

⁵² O’Donnell, *Augustine: A New Biography*; Brent Shaw, *Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Jason D. BeDuhn, *Augustine’s Manichaean Dilemma*, vol. 2: *Making a “Catholic” Self, 388–401 C.E.* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

⁵³ James J. O’Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), repr. (2012).

where his past as a successful Manichaean spokesperson lurked in broad daylight, waiting to catch up with him. Over-educated, ambitious, impatient to get ahead, Augustine then carefully orchestrated his (highly irregular) promotion to co-adjutor bishop of Hippo (the region's second see, after Carthage). A lightning rod for local resentments, he was accused – by catholic prelates as well as by scornful Donatists – of continuing covertly in his old heresy. BeDuhn minutely analyzed the *Confessions*' magisterial spin-control as Augustine's public performance of a catholic self; Shaw unpacked his shrewd maneuvering as he finessed his way into the powerful North African catholic hierarchy.⁵⁴ Book 8 of the *Confessions* masterfully depicts God's choice of Augustine. How, then, could Augustine still be a heretic? Whom should one trust: local ecclesiastics, or God?

The *Confessions*, in brief, is a calculated virtuoso performance of theology-cum-autobiography. Augustine declaims this new self before an audience of skeptical Donatist rivals and of resentful catholic colleagues chafing at his shrewd self-promotion up the ecclesiastical ladder to a plum church office. If you see all this as achingly introspective “candor,” you are going along for the ride.⁵⁵ It's a great ride, and you are in excellent company. William James. A. D. Nock. In the mid-1960s, an astonishingly young Peter Brown. Still: *caveat lector*.

By Nock's standards, then, did Augustine “convert” back in Milan in the summer of 386? Certainly, giving up sex – not to mention a tenure-track job – was not nothing. But the deep emotional tones and passionate intellectual conviction evoked by Nock and by James – a reorientation of the soul; the old was wrong, the new right – seem missing. Augustine sounds these notes only in his post-396 retrospective retelling.

What most conforms to Nock's intellectual and emotional criteria of conversion, then, is not a point but a zone, that period back in North Africa in the 390s that saw Augustine's intensive work on the epistles: debates, notes, a failed commentary, scholia, his response, in 396, to Simplicianus, and then, finally, *Confessions*.⁵⁶ These efforts did not produce a single “moment” of insight: let us resist the dramatizing pull of traditional conversion narratives. Augustine slashed his way through the overgrown exegetical briars of his own conflicting convictions, not helped by bad Latin translations of the Pauline epistles. What was “wrong,” Augustine was finally convinced, were not “his old ways,” but his own earlier readings of Paul.

⁵⁴ Brilliantly discerned and narrated by Shaw, *Sacred Violence*, 388–390.

⁵⁵ As did I, *Augustine and the Jews*, 137–138.

⁵⁶ *Contra Fortunatum* (392); question 61 of *De diversis quaestionibus LXXXIII* (393); *Expositio quarundam propositionum ex epistola ad Romanos*; *Expositio in epistolam ad Galatas*; *Epistolae ad Romanos inchoata expositio* (all 394/95); *Ep. 28 to Jerome, on Galatians* (394/95); questions 66–68 of *De diversis quaestionibus LXXXIII* (395/96); *De diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum* (396); *Confessionum libri XIII* (397–400?).

D. Concluding *Conversion*

Augustine’s construction of Paul’s conversion and his powerful re-telling of his own have had abiding effects, both synthetically and historiographically, on the ways that scholars of ancient (and of modern) religions think about “conversion.” And, alas, Augustine’s readings of Paul have also continued to exert tremendous gravitational pull on modern New Testament scholarship as well. Weaponizing Romans against Pelagius and Julian of Eclanum in the 420s, Augustine had suddenly insisted that the tormented “I” of Romans 7 was Paul himself, speaking autobiographically. Picked up and reused by Luther against Reform’s enemies, this interpretation continues to haunt modern commentaries on Romans – though it might yet be exorcised by the work of Stanley Stowers, Runar Thornsteinsson, Matthew Novenson, Matthew Thiessen, and others.⁵⁷

So much for Nock’s two close-ups, Paul and Augustine. What of The Big Picture, the conversion of the Empire?⁵⁸ On this topic, Nock’s presentation seems more than a bit idealized. Stalwart resistance to pagan culture’s *force majeure* (“For the Christian, there was no doubt how he must act”);⁵⁹ a widespread admiration for those who volunteered because of their “fascination with death,” love of theatricality, and a generalized “pessimism”;⁶⁰ Christianity’s “uncompromising demands”;⁶¹ these themes cannot serve as social/historical explanation in light of recent work on martyrdom itself, which has emerged as less of a social phenomenon than as a type of identity-producing discourse.⁶²

⁵⁷ Stendahl’s “introspective conscience” rightly identified Augustine as the source of this reading, though he attributed it to the *Confessions*. Romans 7 becomes autobiographical only in anti-Pelagian works, e.g., *C. du. ep. Pelag.* 1.8, 13–14; see Fredriksen, “Paul and Augustine,” 25–26. Stowers and, now, Thorsteinsson are revolutionizing Paul’s *prosopopoeia* in Romans by reading Paul’s rhetorical interlocutor as consistently representing a(n unsuccessfully) Judaizing *gentile* passim: see Stanley K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994); Runar M. Thorsteinsson, *Paul’s Interlocutor in Romans 2: Function and Identity in the Context of Ancient Epistolography*, ConBNT 40 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2003); Rafael Rodríguez and Matthew Thiessen, eds. *The So-Called Jew in Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), and, within that collection, Matthew V. Novenson, “The Self-Styled Jew of Romans 2 and the Actual Jews of Romans 9–11,” 133–162.

⁵⁸ Nock, *Conversion*, 187–211.

⁵⁹ Nock, *Conversion*, 193.

⁶⁰ Nock, *Conversion*, 198.

⁶¹ Nock, *Conversion*, 211.

⁶² See especially the work of Candida R. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions*, AYBRL (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 17 (on discursive goals and strategies), 52–57 (Ignatius). “Describing martyrdom is about the production of identity categories and the creation of meaning ... martyrdom [is] a set of discursive practices that shaped early Christian identity, mediated ecclesiastical and dogmatic claims, and provided meaning to the experience described by early Christians as

Clear demands about behavior? A quick perusal of the Canons of the Council of Elvira reveals crowds of Christians, in a Thoreauvian moment, marching merrily to their own drummers. These canons specifically condemn intermarriage (c. 16), soliciting Jewish blessings over fields (c. 49), accepting Jewish hospitality (c. 50), and “interfaith” sexual relations (c. 78). Awkwardly, some baptized men of financial means saw no problem with serving as *flamines*, participating in liturgies directed toward the divine (and at that point, still pagan) emperor (c. 1–4).

Disciplined community and stalwart embrace of persecution? In the wake of the mid-third century imperial initiatives, Carthage (to Cyprian’s enormous irritation) had no fewer than *three* “orthodox” bishops. Their contesting claims had been generated by the crisis of how to re-integrate the swollen ranks of the lapsed – including, said his council of presbyters, Cyprian himself.⁶³ The habitual deployment of “Christianity” and of “church” in the singular masks the vigorous variety of all of these various Christian movements – as well as the fact that more Christians were persecuted by the Roman state *after* the conversion of Constantine than before.⁶⁴

And, finally, Nock never addresses the greatest conversion story of all during these centuries: the steady Romanization of one particular subgroup of Christians. It is *this* community, designated as “orthodox” and “universal”

persecution” (17). The *idea* of “persecution” became profoundly significant for Christian identity, leading to the lush production of post-Constantinian “martyrs” and martyr stories: Michael Lapidge, *The Roman Martyrs: Introduction, Translations, and Commentary*, OECIS (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). For a recent reconceptualization of these issues, Éric Rebillard, *The Early Martyr Narratives: Neither Authentic Accounts nor Forgeries* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021).

⁶³ For a still valuable orientation in this internecine episode of Carthaginian name-calling, Hans Lietzmann, *A History of the Early Church*, 4 vols. (London: Lutterworth Press, 1961), 2:225–238. Éric Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 47–55, analyzes the post-persecution problems when dealing with the large numbers of the lapsed; more generally, on the rhetoric of unity, 34–60; cf. too Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 444–445.

⁶⁴ Powerful bishops in major cities will eventually have their own militias of marauding monks and *parabalani*. On the bishops’ strategic applications and orchestrations of coercive force, Michael Gaddis, *There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ: Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005). Eusebius proudly narrates Constantine’s suppression of various Christian sects other than Eusebius’s own, *Hist. eccl.* 10.5.16, 6.4, 7.2; *Vit. Const.* 64–66; cf. *Cod. Theod.* 16.5.1. “Religious coercion on a large scale was mainly practised by Christians on other Christians” (Peter Brown, “Christianization and Religious Conflict,” in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 13: *The Late Empire, A.D. 337–425*, ed. Averil Cameron and Peter Garnsey [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997], 632–664, 642). G. E. M. de Ste. Croix leans toward this same opinion in “Heresy, Schism and Persecution in the Later Roman Empire,” in idem, *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy*, ed. Michael Whitby and Joseph Streeter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 201–229.

(*katholika*) by the imperial government, that will themselves unhesitatingly embrace the opportunity to apply coercive force to religious others: first, to Christians of different persuasions (“heretics”), and eventually to pagans and to Jews. How did this charismatic Jewish messianic movement, with its odd and improvised outreach to pagans in the face of the world’s imminent end, transmute within three centuries into an arm of Roman imperial government? How does Mediterranean culture “convert” in the period between Paul the apostle and Theodosius the emperor? It was this phenomenon – the conversions of Christianity – that was indeed the period’s greatest “sea-change | Into something rich, and strange.”⁶⁵

And yet, somehow, all this makes no real difference. By the time I was finished with my most recent rereading of *Conversion*, I was once again under Nock’s spell. All my disputatious facts and historical revisioning shrank to mere unobliging details.

How had Nock done this, again? Did his power lie in his tale? Less, I think, than in his tone, and in the way that his tone communicates the sheer humanness of its author. He thus keeps company with those other great humanists whose works illumine the war-scarred previous century. Gilbert Murray’s *Five Stages of Greek Religion*,⁶⁶ with its closing elegy for human rationality. E. R. Dodds’s minor-key meditations in *Pagan and Christian*.⁶⁷ James’s *Varieties*.⁶⁸ And Nock’s study on conversion.

Factually, methodologically, interpretatively, these great books by these great scholars do not fit our times. But they still serve to mark and to communicate moral nobility and spiritual courage as they meditate on the fragility of goodness. For this reason, in appreciation of Nock’s moral tone, I join with Clare Rothschild in her *homage* to Nock’s luminous essay.⁶⁹ And I rejoice that this reprinting, together with her sensitive introduction, has made it once again available to another generation of students. May their times be more peaceful than our own.

⁶⁵ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 1.2.403–404.

⁶⁶ Gilbert Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, 3rd ed., Doubleday Anchor Books A51 (New York: Doubleday, 1955).

⁶⁷ Eric R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in the Age of Anxiety: Some Aspects of Religious Experience from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

⁶⁸ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1902).

⁶⁹ Clare K. Rothschild, “Introduction,” in Nock, *Conversion* (2019), xi–xxxii.

