

Stephen’s Face and Paul’s Conversion to Nonviolence

ALDEN BASS

alden.bass@oc.edu

Oklahoma Christian University

When Paul recounts his calling to the Gentiles in Galatians 1, he frames it as a turning away from “violent persecution” to the nonviolent and inclusive way of Jesus. Indeed, his commitment to the way of suffering would become the most distinctive characteristic of his subsequent ministry. The change occurred dramatically with a revelation of the tortured Christ on the Damascus road. In this paper, I argue that this revelation may have occurred through the traumatic memory of the stoning of Stephen, the most immediate victim of Paul’s religious zeal. I will use war veterans’ experience of “moral injury” to illuminate Paul’s psychological state leading up to his revelation and illustrate the role of the victim’s face in the process of healing and transformation. Finally, I will highlight how some European Christian intellectuals who lived through the violence of World War II understood encounter with the victim’s face as redemptive.

Keywords: Galatians, conversion, religious violence, face of the victim, Paul, Stephen

Introduction

When Paul recounts his calling to the Gentiles in Galatians 1, he frames it as a turning away from “violent persecution” to the nonviolent and inclusive way of Jesus. Indeed, his commitment to the way of suffering would become the most distinctive characteristic of his subsequent ministry. The change occurred dramatically with a revelation of the tortured Christ on the Damascus road. In this paper, I argue that this revelation may have occurred through the traumatic memory of Stephen, a recent victim of Paul’s religious zeal. I will use war veterans’ experience of “moral injury” to illuminate Paul’s psychological state leading up to his revelation and illustrate the role of the victim’s face in the process of healing and transformation. Finally, I will highlight how some European Christian intellectuals who lived through the violence of World War II understood the encounter with the victim’s face as redemptive.

What Did Paul See?

In the only firsthand account of his call to ministry, Paul claims that he received the gospel through a “revelation of Jesus Christ” (*ἀποκαλύψεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ*—Gal 1:12). He

goes on in Gal 1:13-16 to offer a very brief description linking this revelation to his days as a persecutor.¹ Few details about this event are given in Galatians, but the story is elaborated in Acts 9 (and subsequently in Acts 22 and 26), an account which may be based on traditions preserved in the Damascus church.²

Paul affirmed in multiple places that he had “seen” Jesus (e.g., 1 Cor 9:1), yet Paul never met Jesus and would not have known what he looked like. It is possible that “sight” is merely a metaphor and that the revelation did not come through human senses. In describing another such experience, Paul was unsure whether he was “in the body or out of the body” (2 Cor 12:2). The Galatians account indicates that the vision was internal; he said that Jesus was revealed “in me” (ἀποκαλύψαι τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ ἐν ἐμοὶ—Gal 1:16). Moreover, in the Acts 9 account, Paul’s companions did not share his vision, which suggests that the visitation was personal (Acts 9:7; 22:9). Nevertheless, while it is possible that the visual language is metaphorical, Paul most often speaks as if he saw a body. In 1 Cor 15:8-9 Paul includes his vision alongside other post-resurrection encounters in which disciples met Jesus in bodily form. Daniel Boyarin observed that Jewish mystical experience was not identical to the platonic “eye of the mind”; rather, rabbinic experience always involved seeing fleshly bodies in time rather than atemporal spiritual visions.³ So what did Paul actually see? Jerome Murphy-O’Connor suggested that Paul simply invented a mental image of Jesus in the same way that some people “create a portrait in their minds of authors whose books they happen to be reading.”⁴ This is not convincing.

A Conjectural Reconstruction of Events

Assuming the historical veracity of the account of Acts 7-9, we can put together some sense of Paul’s psychological state on the Damascus road. First, he is introduced as a witness to the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:58). Paul’s level of involvement in the stoning is unclear; according to Acts, he did not personally throw stones, but his participation in the killing may have been downplayed by the writer. He was present at the execution and he “approved of their killing” (Acts 8:1). Paul was a “young man” at this point (Acts 7:58), and this may have been the first stoning he had observed personally. Little is known about the practice in the Second Temple period, and given the Jews’ lack of judicial authority, stoning as a death penalty may have been infrequent (there may also have been ritual

¹ For a history of the extensive research on Paul’s conversion, see Larry Hurtado, “Convert, Apostate, or Apostle to the Nations,” *Studies in Religion* 22 (1993): 273–84.

² See Gerd Lüdemann, *Early Christianity According to the Traditions in Acts: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989), 106–16.

³ Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), 126.

⁴ Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 78. Worth noting is the ancient Jewish tradition that God’s face cannot be contemplated (cf. Ex. 33:20–23).

forms of stoning which did not result in death).⁵ No eyewitness accounts of stoning from this period have survived, but if it bears any resemblance to contemporary stonings prompted by recent fundamentalist revivals of Sharia law, it was truly horrible.

Whatever his personal involvement, the experience of watching someone's head and body reduced to pulp by rocks would have had some traumatic impact on Paul. Killing another human being is inherently traumatic, especially for a young person with a sensitive ethico-religious training. In his classic work *On Killing*, Dave Grossman has written extensively on "moral injury," the traumatic psychosomatic effects of killing another human being at close range. Grossman found that the closer the target was situated before using a weapon, the higher the psychological repercussions. Explaining the tendency to distance oneself from the victim, he observes the lasting psychological damage of killing at close range:

The eyes are the window of the soul, and if one does not have to look into the eyes when killing, it is much easier to deny the humanity of the victim. The eyes bulging out 'like prawns' and blood shooting out of the mouth are not seen. The victim remains faceless, and one never needs to know one's victim as a person. And the price most killers have to pay for a close-range kill—the memory of the "face terrible, twisted in pain and hate, yes such hate"—this price need never be paid if we can simply avoid looking at our victim's face.⁶

Many veterans report that ending even one life is enough to haunt them with painful memories, flashbacks, and nightmares. Paul would have been close enough to Stephen to have seen his body crushed and his face contorted in pain. The biblical text does not indicate whether other disciples were killed, but the murder of Stephen set in motion a wave of violent oppression in Judea which may have involved other acts of terror. According to Acts 8, Paul violently enforced the socio-religious boundaries of orthodoxy by "dragging off both men and women" and "committing them to prison" (Acts 8:3; cf. Acts 22:4). In his own words, he was "violently persecuting the church of God and trying to destroy it" (Gal 1:13).

⁵ Little evidence remains on stoning practices in the Second Temple Period. The classic work is Josef Binzler, "Stoning in the New Testament," in *The Trial of Jesus: Cambridge Studies in Honor of C.F.D. Moule*, ed. Ernst Bammel (London: SCM Press, 1970), 147–61. Some have argued that Stephen was not killed by stoning, but precipitation (i.e., execution by means of being cast headlong from a high place or precipice); see M. É. Boismard, "Stephen," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:209.

⁶ David Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1995), 117. "As men draw near it becomes extremely difficult to deny their humanity. Looking in a man's face, seeing his eyes and his fear, eliminates denial. Instead of shooting at a uniform and killing a generalized enemy, now the killer must shoot at a person and kill a specific individual" (Grossman, 119). Cf. Robert Emmet Maegher, *Killing from the Inside Out: Moral Injury and Just War* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014). On moral injury and trauma of killing in Christian perspective, see Larry Graham, *Moral Injury: Restoring Wounded Souls* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017).

The text indicates that Paul was in a heightened emotional state as he set out for Damascus. When he applied to the high priest for permission to prosecute Christians beyond Jerusalem, he was “breathing threats and murder against the disciples” (Acts 9:1). He could have been in a near-manic state fueled by bloodlust and religious ecstasy.⁷ Alternatively, Paul could have been experiencing acute distress caused by the tension between his perceived religious duties and the need to harm other human persons. Either way, he was psychologically primed for an extraordinary experience. Referring to Paul’s state at this moment, Alan Segal notes that “anxiety combined with various deprivation states—lack of sleep, food, or water—and contemplation, meditation, or feelings of happiness in the company of a group of caring friends could bring on ecstasy.”⁸ Conversion literature is filled with stories of people in high-intensity situations linked to sensory deprivation or sensory overstimulation, including torture/terrorist situations.⁹

Several notable Pauline scholars including Alan Segal, N.T. Wright, and Daniel Boyarin have argued that his condition may have been further exacerbated by a kind of ecstatic meditation known as Merkabah prayer.¹⁰ Rooted in the mysterious prophetic visions of Ezekiel, this type of contemplative practice was relatively common among Pharisees in the first century. Through a series of meditations on the images of Ezekiel 1, the contemplative could ascend through the heavens and behold the face of God. As a devout Pharisee, Paul may have regularly engaged in this particular prayer practice, or he may have been praying on the Damascus road in an effort to psych himself up for the horrible business at hand. As Wright dramatized the moment,

In his mind’s eye, then, he has the four-faced creatures and the wheels. He focuses on them. He sees them. He ponders them. Will he dare to go further? . . . Upward again, from

⁷ See James Jones, “Religion and Violence from a Psychological Perspective,” in *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁸ Alan Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 291.

⁹ Foundational research on this phenomenon was collected by Philip Solomon, et al., *Sensory Deprivation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961). See also Joel Allison, “Recent Empirical Studies of Religious Conversion,” *Pastoral Psychology* 17 (1966): 21-34; and Virgil Gillepsie, *Religious Conversion and Personal Identity: How and Why People Change* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979), 95-108. More recently, S. Moscovici and M. Doms, “Compliance and Conversion in a Situation of Sensory Deprivation,” *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 3 (1982): 81-94.

¹⁰ Segal, 39. See also David Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot: Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel’s Vision* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1988); James Tabor, *Things Unutterable: Paul’s Ascent to Paradise in Its Greco-Roman, Judaic, and Early Christian Contexts* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986); Christopher Rowland, with Patricia Gibbons and Vicente Dobroruka, “Visionary Experience in Ancient Judaism and Christianity,” in *Paradise Now: Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism*, ed. April DeConick (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2006), 41-56; Timo Eskola, *Messiah and the Throne: Jewish Merkabah Mysticism and Early Exaltation Discourse* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001); Timothy Churchill has argued that the Acts narratives do not fit the Merkabah pattern. See *Divine Initiative and the Christology of the Damascus Road Encounter* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010).

the chest to the face. He raises his eyes to see the one he has worshipped and served all his life. And he comes face to face with Jesus of Nazareth.¹¹

As noted above, Paul did not know the face of Jesus. He did, however, know the face of Stephen. In fact, that face, bloody and contorted in pain, would likely have been imprinted in his mind. The sudden impression—in his psychologically fragile state—of a tortured face may very well have been the stimulus for Paul's dramatic life change. Grossman observed this phenomenon in the soldiers he studied: "Combatants often acknowledge that killing another human being causes them to begin a process of reconciling actions with personal convictions. The trigger for this process is not always the knowledge of killing 'someone,' but a view of the face and the impact of killing 'someone in particular.'"¹²

Is it possible that Christ appeared to Paul in the face of Stephen, the man he had recently tortured and executed? The text itself invites this conclusion. The voice Paul heard said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:4–5). This identification as "Jesus, whom you are persecuting" is consistent across the Acts accounts (Acts 9:5; 22:7; 26:15). Paul had not directly persecuted Jesus—he had never known Jesus—but he had done violence to Stephen and other disciples. That Jesus could be known through or manifest in his followers is a common idea in the New Testament, most notably in Matthew 25 where Jesus is identified with "the least of these." Paul himself would go on to proclaim that Jesus could be known through his own sufferings (Gal 2:20). Moreover, Stephen is intentionally depicted in the Acts 7 text *in imitatio Christi*, yielding his spirit, crying out in a loud voice, and begging God to forgive his murderers, just as Jesus had done on the cross.

Transformation through Encountering the Victim

Biblical scholars associated with the "New Perspective" on Paul have firmly established that Paul did not convert from "Judaism" to "Christianity," modern categories which were not developed in the first century.¹³ Acceptance of the Messiah was not incompatible with "Judaism," and Paul continued to observe Jewish practices until his death. Paul's conversion was not to a new religion, but to a new way of living out his faith in the God of his ancestors. The revelation of God as a victim of torture and persecution led Paul to repent of his former violent zealotry and to commit to the way of suffering embodied by Jesus (cf. 2 Cor 11:16–33, which specifically references his time in

¹¹ Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2018), 50.

¹² Grossman, 119.

¹³ On the language of conversion, see Moisés Mayordomo, "Conversion' in Antiquity and Early Christianity: Some Critical Remarks," in *Religiöse Grenzüberschreitungen*, ed. C. Lienemann-Perrin and W. Lienemann (Weisbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012), 211–26.

Damascus). It is fitting that Paul's insight about suffering and nonviolence came through confrontation with the face of his victim.

Thinking specifically about the events surrounding the Holocaust, Jewish philosopher and ethicist Emmanuel Levinas argued that ethics always begins with a view of another's face. The face is a sign of common humanity and provokes an ethical response to another's suffering. Specifically, seeing the face of the victim is a traumatic (literally, a "wounding") experience which disrupts one's personal narrative and sense of meaningfulness, forcing one to grapple with the role of violence in establishing their own subjectivity.¹⁴ Echoing Grossman's research on soldiers who avoid killing, Levinas states that looking at a human face makes killing nearly impossible; in fact, the human face manifests the basic ethical rule: "Thou shalt not kill."¹⁵ The consequences of violating this sacred covenant by eliminating the other are severe and lasting.¹⁶

The Christian theologian Jürgen Moltmann, who was directly involved in the war as a Nazi soldier, has likewise devoted himself to reflecting on religious violence and its victims. In his experience, it is the encounter between torturer and victim that leads to insight and healing. In that face-to-face encounter, "the mask falls. The torturer recognizes himself for what he is."¹⁷ He goes on to argue that if that victim is identified with Christ, who is the "substitute for the face of the victims," new life and reconciliation are possible. Another veteran of the war, French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, similarly argued that we are transformed by "listening to the victim," a process which engenders mutual recognition and responsibility.¹⁸

Paul's vision on the Damascus road led to his identification with the victim of persecution. A deep empathy allowed him to see the horror of stoning and all forms of sacred violence, to the point that he himself became a victim of religious violence (2 Cor 11:25–30; cf. Gal 2:19; Rom 6:6). Some scholars, especially followers of René Girard, have even seen a connection between his renunciation of violence and his later theological critique of Torah. In an insightful analysis of Galatians, Hamerton-Kelly wrote: "By mimetic identification with the victim, Paul broke free of the system of sacred violence

¹⁴ For a more detailed analysis of some of these concepts, see Ruud Weltin, "In the Beginning was Violence: Emmanuel Levinas on Religion and Violence," *Continental Philosophy Review* 53 (2020): 355–70. The psychological, social, or spiritual distress caused by harming another or exposure to violence is called "moral injury."

¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1979), 199.

¹⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 10.

¹⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today's World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), 69.

¹⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 165–68. An excellent article, which considers moral injury of soldiers through the writings of Levinas, Moltmann, and Ricoeur is Seth George, "Moral Injury and the Problem of Facing Religious Authority," presented at the Command and General Staff College Foundation Ethics Symposium, 2015, <https://bit.ly/34MYoXe>.

and opened himself to the possibility of love in relationship with true transcendence, within the new community of non-acquisitive and non-conflictual agape love.”¹⁹

Conclusion

Ultimately, Paul’s vision on the Damascus road revealed to him a nonviolent God, a God who identifies with victims rather than those in power. With the help of the disciples who cared for him and taught him, Paul discovered a new way of being human and of practicing his faith by confronting not only his own murderous action, but the use of violence for any reason. Violence perpetrated in God’s name is still violence. He saw that God sides with the victim, the outcast, the exiled, the humiliated, the shamed, the tortured, and the sacrificed. Through the face of Jesus, the face of Stephen, and thus potentially through the face of any victim of violence, we are able to do what Moses could not—see the nature of Divine power as suffering rather than punishing love: “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor 3:18).

¹⁹ Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, *Sacred Violence: Paul's Hermeneutic of the Cross* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 69. See also Hamerton-Kelly, “Sacred Violence and the Curse of the Law (Galatians 3.13): The Death of Christ as Sacrificial Travesty,” *New Testament Studies* 36 (1990): 98-118.

Bibliography

- Allison, Joel. "Recent Empirical Studies of Religious Conversion." *Pastoral Psychology* 17 (1966): 21-34.
- Binzler, Josef. "Stoning in the New Testament." In *The Trial of Jesus: Cambridge Studies in Honor of C.F.D. Moule*, edited by Ernst Bammel 147–61. London: SCM Press, 1970.
- Boismard, M. É. "Stephen." In *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Noel Freedman, 6:209. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- Boyarin, Daniel. *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994.
- Churchill, Timothy. *Divine Initiative and the Christology of the Damascus Road Encounter*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Press, 2010.
- Eskola, Timo. *Messiah and the Throne: Jewish Merkabah Mysticism and Early Exaltation Discourse*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001.
- George, Seth. "Moral Injury and the Problem of Facing Religious Authority." Paper presented at the Command and General Staff College Foundation Ethics Symposium, April 20-23, 2015. <https://bit.ly/34MYoXe>.
- Gillepsie, Virgil. *Religious Conversion and Personal Identity: How and Why People Change*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979.
- Graham, Larry. *Moral Injury: Restoring Wounded Souls*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2017.
- Grossman, David. *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1995.
- Halperin, David. *The Faces of the Chariot: Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel's Vision*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988.
- Hamerton-Kelly, Robert G. *Sacred Violence: Paul's Hermeneutic of the Cross*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991.
- . "Sacred Violence and the Curse of the Law (Galatians 3.13): The Death of Christ as Sacrificial Travesty." *New Testament Studies* 36 (1990): 98–118.
- Hurtado, Larry. "Convert, Apostate, or Apostle to the Nations." *Studies in Religion* 22 (1993): 273–84.
- Jones, James. "Religion and Violence from a Psychological Perspective." In *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, edited by Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts, and Michael Jerryson, 385–96. Oxford: Oxford University, 2013.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998.
- . *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1979.
- Lüdemann, Gerd. *Early Christianity According to the Traditions in Acts: A Commentary*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989.

- Maegher, Robert Emmet. *Killing from the Inside Out: Moral Injury and Just War*. Eugene, OR: Cascade 2014.
- Mayordomo, Moisés. " 'Conversion' in Antiquity and Early Christianity: Some Critical Remarks." In *Religiöse Grenzüberschreitungen*, edited by C. Lienemann-Perrin and W. Lienemann, 211–26. Weisbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012.
- Moltmann, Jürgen. *Jesus Christ for Today's World*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994.
- Moscovici, Serge, and Machteld Doms. "Compliance and Conversion in a Situation of Sensory Deprivation." *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 3 (1982): 81–94.
- Murphy-O'Connor, Jerome. *Paul: A Critical Life*. Oxford: Oxford University, 1998.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Oneself as Another*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992.
- Rowland, Christopher, Patricia Gibbons and Vicente Dobroruka. "Visionary Experience in Ancient Judaism and Christianity." In *Paradise Now: Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism*, edited by April DeConick, 41–56. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2006.
- Segal, Alan. *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.
- Solomon, Philip, Philip E. Kubzansky, P. Herbert Leiderman, Jr., Jack H. Mendelson, Richard Trumbull, Donald Wexler, eds. *Sensory Deprivation*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961.
- Tabor, James. *Things Unutterable: Paul's Ascent to Paradise in Its Greco-Roman, Judaic, and Early Christian Contexts*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986.
- Weltin, Ruud. "In the Beginning was Violence: Emmanuel Levinas on Religion and Violence." *Continental Philosophy Review* 53 (2020): 355–70.
- Wright, N. T. *Paul: A Biography*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2018.