

RESURRECTION ON THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS? EXPLORING PAUL'S PURVIEW ON HIS DAMASCUS EXPERIENCE

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Abstract. Scholars agree that Paul's Damascus experience was life-changing, but they disagree when it comes to how that is to be defined. This article delves into the resurrection-aspects present in how Paul describes this event. Romans 4,17 about God "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" is given a bearing on Paul's experience. The grace he found in this event is resurrection at work.

Keywords: Grace, transformation, resurrection, God, Abraham, paradigmatic.

Karl Wilhelm Niebuhr has contributed significantly to Pauline scholarship, not least through his *Heidenapostel aus Israel: Die Jüdische Identität des Paulus nach ihrer Darstellung in seinen Briefen* (WUNT 62; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992). In this study, he emphasizes also how Paul's biography impacted on his theology. It is, therefore, a pleasure to pay homage to him with a Pauline paper. Paul's Damascus-event was "life-changing,"¹ albeit what that entails, is indeed negotiable. This incident in Paul's life often works as a pointer to how his theology is viewed more generally in Pauline scholarship. The Damascus event is often presented primarily as a commission or mandate given in a call,² or that Paul came to realize that the "time" for the eschatological ingathering of Gentiles had arrived, like the prophets of old spoke about the pilgrimage of the nations to Jerusalem.³ No doubt, this may account for the life-changing effect of this event. Nevertheless, the way Paul himself and his way of thinking were altered and transformed, is, I think, not sufficiently accounted for.⁴ The most obvious change is put in the mouths of the "Judean churches." They noticed a change from previous

¹ Pamela EISENBAUM, *Paul was not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle*. New York: HarperCollins, 2009, 142.

² See the influential contributions of Krister STENDAHL, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976.

³ Paula FREDRIKSEN, *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle*. New Haven. Yale University Press 2017, 73–77 and EISENBAUM, 132–49.

⁴ See Karl Olav SANDNES, "Prophet-Like Apostle: A Note on the 'Radical New Perspective' in Pauline Studies," *Bib* 96 (2015): 550–64 and Karl Olav SANDNES, *Paul Perceived: An Interactionist Perspective on Paul and the Law*. WUNT 412. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018, 37–47.

persecutions to Paul presently being a proclaimer of what he used to fight (Gal 1:22–23). This points to a change which goes beyond a commission and being an eschatological herald.⁵ I will not delve into the debate on the Damascus event on a more general basis. My focus will be on the resurrection-aspects and how they might have a bearing on Paul’s way of addressing his life-changing experience. This is a neglected aspect regarding this topic. The view-point that will be substantiated here is that Rom 4:17 about God “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist,” is applicable to how Paul came to view his Damascus experience.

In three passages on which scholars generally agree that they refer to this incident, resurrection motifs are at play:⁶ 1 Cor 9:1; 15:8–10 and Phil 3:6–11. Scholars familiar with these texts will recognize this, regardless of what they make out of that observation. These passages have in common that Damascus and resurrection talks are intertwined. In spite of the scholarly efforts gone into understanding the Damascus-incident, this fact has not been given due attention. To explore this relationship is what I now embark upon. The incident as such, or what really happened, is inaccessible. What I am interested in is Paul’s retrospective purview on this past incident. The term “purview” is significant here, as it refers to the full scope or compass that can be anticipated of a statement. It refers to the range of things that comes with a statement. The idea is that there is a range of meaning which may not necessarily be sufficiently defined by the actual wording, but nonetheless implicit. This may be illustrated in the following dictum found in many of the dictionaries consulted: “such a case might be within the purview of the legislation.” A synonymous noun is “horizon,” and a possible German translation could be “Bereich.” Hence, this term is helpful as it conveys that texts often come with more than their mere wording.

The Damascus Event: A Christophany of Transformative Power (1 Cor 9:1; 15:8–10)

Paul’s rhetorical question “Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” (οὐχὶ Ἰησοῦν τὸν κύριον ἤμῶν ἑώρακα) in 1 Cor 9:1 is embedded in a context about his apostleship. The question substantiates Paul’s apostleship, manifesting that the Damascus incident is at

⁵ I am, of course, aware that prophetic vocations, as e.g. in the case of Jeremiah, penetrated deeply into their personal fate and life.

⁶ We may speak of a maximalist and a minimalist view regarding Pauline texts which refer to Damascus. A minimalist attitude refers to those mentioned above, in addition to Gal 1:15–16a. Surely, references to this event goes beyond the number given by the minimalists, although it may be hard to prove in each case. A maximalist attitude may be illustrated by Christian DIETZFELBINGER, *Die Berufung des Paulus als Ursprung seiner Theologie*. WMANT 58. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1985 and especially Seyoon KIM, *The Origin of Paul’s Gospel*, WUNT2.4. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981. An American edition is published in 1982, and a reprint also in 2007 (Wipf and Stock). Kim mentions (pp.55–56) the importance of resurrection language, but does not develop that further. Romans 4:17 does not figure in his index of references.

play here.⁷ The question works like his “you have heard” in Gal 1:13, referring to his biography which he assumes his converts to be familiar with. He reminds them of this now; conveying a piece of “old information.” The rhetorical question in 1 Cor 9:1 echoes John 20:18, 20 and 25, almost verbatim. Mary of Magdala and the disciples claim to “have seen the Lord,” a testimony encapsulating the Easter story. Paul is familiar with traditions which John 20 later gives witness to. The narrative Easter testimonies of the New Testament consist of what may be labelled “discoveries” and “justifications.” Discoveries are immediate and overwhelming and come without explanations, while justifications are attempts at coming to terms theologically with overwhelming observations.⁸ This distinction paves the way for the suggestion that ἑώρακα in 9:1 is more about discovery than ὤφθη (“he appeared”) in 1 Cor 15:8 which conveys more justification (see below). This implies that even a later text such as John 20 have preserved elements on the level of discovery, and that “we have seen...” is among them. In 1 Cor 9:1 the reference to the Damascus experience portray Paul as unique and foundational vis-à-vis his Corinthians converts.

Paul's treatise on resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 starts with presenting the foundations on which Easter faith is grounded,⁹ and mentions the many times the risen Jesus appeared: ὤφθη. Hans-Joachim Eckstein says with regard to this: “Die Besonderheit der Erscheinungsformel liegt in ihrer spezifischen traditionsgeschichtlichen Prägung. So dient ὠφθηναί τιμι in der LXX als *terminus technicus* zur Beschreibung von *Theophanien*...”¹⁰ This is language of theophany, found in the Septuagint, equivalent to God making Godself seen or revealing Godself. By carving the appearances into this tradition, justification or meaning-making takes place. A “room” or context for understanding the appearances is identified in the theology of epiphanies. Hence, I consider this a more sophisticated language than “we have seen.” Like in 1 Cor 9, apostleship and Christophany represent also here a tandem. Paul considers his Damascus event to justify enlisting himself among those to whom the risen Lord appeared.

Paul intends a rhetorical contrast between v. 9 and v. 10. While Paul according to v. 9 is not ἰκανός, not worthy, v. 10 emphasizes how God's grace (χάρις) changed this. There is no credit with Paul here. Three times χάρις is mentioned in v. 10, and in two of the

⁷ See e.g. Douglas A. CAMPBELL, *Pauline Dogmatics: The Triumph of God's Love*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020, 382–84.

⁸ See Karl Olav SANDNES and Jan-Olav HENRIKSEN, *Resurrection: Texts and Interpretation, Experience and Theology*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2020, 16–27, 120–24, 155–57.

⁹ See SANDNES and HENRIKSEN, *Resurrection*, 89–119. We argue that the empty tomb, albeit not mentioned, is implicit in Paul's Easter testimony.

¹⁰ Hans-Joachim ECKSTEIN, „Die Wirklichkeit der Auferstehung Jesu: Lukas 24,34 als Beispiel früher formelhafter Zeugnisse,“ in *Die Wirklichkeit der Auferstehung* (ed. Michael WELKER; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener 2010), 1–30 (at 14–16).

instances it is the grace of *God*, thereby highlighting a *theocentric* perspective. The noun *χάρις* encapsulates the transformative power of God: *χάριτι δὲ θεοῦ εἰμι ὃ εἰμι* (V.10). Paul's use of *χάρις* here is not quite uniform; the last case is more in line with e.g. 1 Cor 3:10 where it is about God's accompanying grace in his ministry, made visible in the *σὺν ἐμοί* attached to grace in 1 Cor 15:10. The two first appearances are more directly about the foundation of Paul's apostleship; that the persecutor was turned into an apostle. We will notice that the logical structure of vv. 9–10 is almost identical with how Gal 1:13–14 works vis-à-vis vv.15–16a and where *χάρις* forms the bridge between persecution and commission. Both passages mention Paul's Christophany against the backdrop of Paul's persecutions. What does not exist is brought into being by God. This is the subtext of Paul speaking about his Damascus event. I think this is confused when Seyoon Kim calls apostleship and grace a hendiadys in Paul's letters.¹¹ There are certainly passages where the two merge, but 1 Cor 15:9–10 demonstrates that the primary meaning of *χάρις* is to bring into being something which was not there beforehand. It then makes little sense to see the two as hendiadys here. Anthony C. Thiselton has formulated this aptly: "The emphasis lies in the *undeserved grace of God* (explicated further in v. 10), who chooses to give life and new creation to those reckoned dead, both a miscarried, aborted foetus whose stance had been *hostile* to Christ and the new people of God."¹² Thiselton here nicely formulates that grace in this context is about giving life to the dead. This insight needs further elaboration.

In Paul's metaphor of being a miscarriage (*ἔκτρωμα*) in 1 Cor 15:8 reverberates the motif of death. Matthew W. Mitchell argues that the lexical meaning of the term *ἔκτρωμα* is of little help for identifying how it works in this particular context.¹³ Mitchell argues that *ἔσχατον πάντων* ("last of all;" v. 8) provides the key to unlock Paul's language here. The key is the comparison with the other apostles. It "refers simply to his place among the apostles, that he portrays himself as something that is cast aside or rejected in the manner of an aborted fetus, most likely with respect to his claims to equal authority with the other apostles."¹⁴ I find Mitchell's argument that *ἔκτρωμα* has nothing to do with Paul's former persecution not convincing. Mitchell says: "Simply put, when Paul says that 'I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God (15.9), he is not referring to 'God's Grace'."¹⁵ Hence, focusing on "grace" is to Mitchell misleading here. I

¹¹ KIM, *Origin*, 25–26, 288–96.

¹² Anthony C. THISELTON, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2000, 1208. I have reservations about the phrase "the new people of God" though.

¹³ Matthew W. MITCHELL, "Reexamining the 'Aborted Apostle': An Exploration of Paul's Self-Description in 1 Corinthians 15.8," *JSNT* 25 (2003): 469–85.

¹⁴ MITCHELL, "Reexamining," 484.

¹⁵ MITCHELL, "Reexamining," 482.

find that γάρ in v. 9 serves as a continuation of v. 8, elaborating on in what way Paul differed from the other apostles. It is worth noticing that the superlative ἐλάχιστος somehow corresponds to ἔσχατον in v. 8. This takes us to Paul's persecutions, and also to the emphasis on grace in v. 10, a verse ignored in Mitchell's interpretation. The lexical meaning of ἔκτρωμα should not be easily dismissed, and I agree with Mitchell that "wretchedness" hardly catches what is implied here. All references in the Septuagint (Num 12:12; Job 3:16 and Eccl 6:3–5) associate the noun with death.¹⁶ Num 12:12 equals death and miscarriage: μὴ γένηται ὡσεὶ ἴσον θανάτῳ ὡσεὶ ἔκτρωμα ἐκπορευόμενον ἐκ μήτρας μητρὸς ("Do not let her be like unto death, like a miscarriage out of a mother's womb;" NETS). In the two last-mentioned passages, it is part of a rhetorical comparison. Job laments that he was not like an ἔκτρωμα or like "infants that did not see the light" (Job 3:16). According to Eccl 6:3–5, a miscarriage is better than having no burial. The rhetorical effect of the comparison is that life is worse than death. This background reverberates in "grace" here. In commenting on 1 Cor 15:8–10, Anthony Thiselton rightly, in my view, says that "grace gives life to the dead," and that the noun ἔκτρωμα fits into that line of thought, "reflecting the theme of resurrection as God's sovereign gift of life to the dead ... throughout this chapter."¹⁷

Advocates of "Paul within Jerusalem" take Paul's Damascus experience to be about time; the arrival of the eschatological time. According to Paula Fredriksen, this is motivated by Christ's resurrection as the "first-fruit" (1 Cor 15:20).¹⁸ This inspires Fredriksen's concept of "eschatological Gentiles" coming to Jerusalem to worship the God of Israel. But what about Paul himself? Fredriksen is right in pointing out that the resurrection of Jesus triggered Paul's view of time, but is he himself touched by this? By including himself in his treatise on resurrection, Paul conveys that his own meeting with the risen Lord changed him. He was touched by the transformative power of resurrection, to which the last part of 1 Cor 15 is devoted. Thus, 1 Cor 15:8–10 witnesses not primarily to the commission Paul received, but also to what happened to himself, when he looked back at the Damascus event. In this perspective, resurrection motives resonate. It is noticeable that Paul here portrays the Damascus incident as not only something setting Paul apart from his converts, but transforming him also, like them (cf. Rom 8:9–11).

¹⁶ See also the only occurrence in PHILO, *Leg.* 1.76 where Num 12:12 is commented upon. See also BDAG and LSJ s.v.

¹⁷ THISELTON, *Corinthians*, 1209–10. It confuses me that Thiselton goes on to say that this coheres well with his being appointed before birth by God's grace (see below). I think the metaphors "from mother's womb" and miscarriage are not analogous here.

¹⁸ FREDRIKSEN, *Paul*, 76, 132.

Phil 3:6–11: The Persecutor Justified

While 1 Cor 9 and 15 speak in terms of Christophany, Phil 3 explores the Damascus event as Paul being touched by the power of resurrection. Thus, it develops what is implicit especially in 1 Cor 15. Paul presents his credentials. In what happened to him on the road to Damascus, all his valued credentials are re-evaluated. This re-evaluation is introduced with *ἀλλά* in vv. 7–8. I call here upon the general view that Paul alludes to the Damascus incident here.¹⁹ The re-evaluation is given in terms rather pejorative (*σκύβαλα*), which means “rubbish.” The contrast between previous and present in Paul’s life does not portray the essence of Paul’s former credentials, but aims at *heightening* the role of Christ. Among his credentials, his former persecutions—presented in terms echoing Gal 1:13–14—stand out, because within a list of positive credentials is found this single negative. Paul who wrote Philippians would certainly not consider his former persecutions positively. The paradoxical nature of Paul’s credential is that his persecutions grew out of the “best” in Paul, his devotion to Torah: “In this lies the terror of these verse: it was the best and not the worst of Paul which led him into sin.”²⁰ The climax of his devotion to Torah was his persecuting Christ-believers.²¹

This insight is in v. 9 formulated in the language of justification: “... and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ.” Paul’s Damascus event is here conceived as a building-block in his theology. The contrast is sharply formulated in a righteousness which is either *ἐκ νόμου* or *ἐκ θεοῦ*. Thereby the Damascus event is written into Paul’s theology on law and sin (see below), and the perspective is ultimate theocentric.

However, Paul goes on in v. 10 to speak about resurrection. His coming to know the righteousness offered by God through faith: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection” Vv. 10–11 speak of resurrection in a double perspective, present and future. Paul embarked on a trajectory marked by resurrection, which eventually will transform also his body (Phil 3:21). I notice that in Phil 3:21 the noun *ἐνέργεια* translates the transformative power at work in resurrection, and that in Gal 2:8 Paul uses the cognate verb in participle (*ὁ ἐνεργήσας*) to denote how the apostolic mandate was conveyed to Peter and to himself.

Philippians 3 continues what we observed in 1 Cor 15 regarding Damascus, namely that this event set Paul apart from his converts, but that it also embraced theological concepts applicable to both himself and his converts. It seems that the power of resurrection is the primary force uniting Paul and his converts. Romans

¹⁹ E.g. Gerald F. HAWTHORNE, *Philippians*. WBC 43; Waco TEX: Word Books, 1983, 136.

²⁰ Stephen J. CHESTER, *Conversion at Corinth: Perspectives on Conversion in Paul’s Theology and the Corinthian Church*. London: T&T Clark, 2003, 166.

²¹ SANDNES, *Paul Perceived*, 41–44. This is further developed in my Norwegian book, Karl Olav SANDNES, *Var Paulus kristen? Har kirken forstått hans teologi og tro?* Follese: Efrem, 2021, 98–120.

7:7–25 shows some remarkable similarities to Phil 3. The power of sin manifests itself in the best, namely in Torah. That culminates how Paul conceived of the power of sin. Torah, which was supposed to offer help,²² has itself become a victim. As demonstrated by John M. G. Barclay, “Paul repeatedly draws attention to the resurrection of Jesus throughout Romans 6–8.”²³ The power of resurrection is the ultimate expression of what grace accomplishes in these chapters, also vis-à-vis sin. For the purpose of the present paper, it is worth noticing that Rom 7:7–25 includes, among many other aspects, also a biographical note from Paul’s life, “a piece of biographical reconstruction.”²⁴

Gal 1:15–16a: Grace to the Persecutor

We now turn to the Damascus text *par excellence* within Paul’s epistles. He assumes his readers to be familiar with what happened to him. Hence, the pieces of information work like tags, serving as reminders to a larger and more developed story. Every element in this story is important, conveying both the past event and the interpretation thereof. Thus, keeping the idea of a purview in mind is highly relevant here. Thus, there is a surplus beyond the immediate wording to be imagined here. The key to identify the nature of this surplus is the way vv. 13–14 work as a contrast or backdrop for vv.15–16a: the persecutor is called by God’s grace. The text is calculated to convey a contrast between persecutor and proclaimer, overcome only by God’s grace which calls into being what is not there beforehand. Shortly put, Paul’s biography is structured around three key motives: persecution–grace–apostle, as it is in 1 Cor 15.

Vv. 15–16a are at home in a larger biography conveying the *unexpectedness* of Paul’s call. Within his biography, Damascus is an abrupt and unforeseen event, paving the way for a divine initiative solely. The noun χάρις bridges Paul’s former life and the mandate given to him. His identity now becomes “grace accorded.”²⁵ This is the only link, provided by God alone, and made possibly only by Godself. Hence, Paul’s apostleship manifests God at work. God calls into being what formerly was not there. The theocentric perspective can hardly be more emphasized. For an adequate reading of the Damascus event, it is compelling to notice this theocentric character, as we have seen already. This comes into view in this text as well. The theocentric perspective finds its full sense in resurrection talks. The fundamental structure of Paul’s story in Gal 1, organized according to human vs. divine (1:1.10–12), plays into this. While Gal 1:13–14 is told in 1. person singular (“I”), vv. 15–16 speak about

²² SANDNES, *Paul Perceived*, 144–48; SANDNES, *Var Paulus kristen?*, 160–61.

²³ John M. G. BARCLAY, *Paul and the Gift*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015, 500–503.

²⁴ CHESTER, *Conversion at Corinth*, 189–95; quotation on p. 195.

²⁵ John M. G. BARCLAY, “Paul’s Story: Theology as Testimony,” in *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment* (ed. Bruce W. LONGENECKER; Louisville, KE: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 133–56; quotation p. 139.

God's will and action towards Paul. This contrast is further emphasized by Paul saying that he did not confer with any human being (σὰρκι καὶ αἵματι). No idea brings out the theocentric perspective more emphatically than God bringing into existence that which is not. It is worth noticing that Paul in Gal 1:1 introduces himself by saying that his being an apostle was given him by God who raised Jesus from the dead, thereby associating God's power to raise Jesus from the dead with his own apostleship.

Although the noun God (θεός) is textcritically uncertain in v.15, there is no doubt that the revelation Paul refers to is seen as an act of God. The theocentric perspective is anyway spelled out in v. 16: ἀποκαλύψαι τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ ἐν ἐμοί. In biblical tradition, God is intimately associated with creation and new creation (resurrection). Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann gave their book on God in the Bible the title *Der Gott der Lebendigen* to convey this fact.²⁶ This title aims at God who gives or brings life into being, thus making God-talks into talk about creation widely understood. Biblical belief in God makes creation, new creation and resurrection coalesce.²⁷ The theocentric perspective on what occurred to him outside Damascus, has repercussions on how he came to think about it, paving the way for new creation or resurrection motifs.

Two aorist participles indicate the role of God here (ἀφορίσας and καλέσας); both are embedded in a narrative structure and in biblical language bringing to mind prophetic commissions.²⁸ A key question is whether these participles should be considered a call in two stages or refer to a singular call which took place in his mother's womb. Paul's presentation of what happened to him is carved in language taken from e.g. Jer 1:5 (πρὸ τοῦ με πλάσαι σε ἐν κοιλίᾳ ἐπίσταμαί σε καὶ πρὸ τοῦ σε ἐξελεῖν ἐκ μήτρας ἡγίακά σε, προφήτην εἰς ἔθνη τέθεικά σε) and Isa 49:1 (ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς μου ἐκάλεσεν τὸ ὄνομά μου) in which "mother's womb" holds a central position. In the words of Susan Eastman: "Specifically, the apostle shares with the Servant of the Lord in Isa 49 the distinction of being 'called (καλεῖν) 'from my mother's womb' (ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς μου) with a message for the Gentiles (Isa 49:1)."²⁹ This reading finds substantiation in Rom 1:1 (κλητὸς ἀπόστολος ἀφορισμένος εἰς εὐαγγέλιον θεοῦ). We recognize here key terms from Gal 1. The

²⁶ Reinhard FELDMIEIER and Hermann SPIECKERMANN, *Der Gott der Lebendigen: Eine biblische Gotteslehre*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2011.

²⁷ James D. G. DUNN, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998, 38–43. FELDMIEIER and SPIECKERMANN, *Gott*, 261–72, 515–46. James P. WARE, *Paul's Theology in Context: Creation, Incarnation, Covenant & Kingdom*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019 puts creation and resurrection up front in his presentation of Paul's theology: "God as creator was the very foundation of Paul's thought" (p. 8).

²⁸ Karl Olav SANDNES, *Paul—One of the Prophets? A Contribution to the Apostle's Self-Understanding*. WUNT 2.143. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991, 59–68; Susan EASTMAN, *Recovering Paul's Mother Tongue: Language and Theology in Galatians*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007, 63–88.

²⁹ EASTMAN, *Recovering Paul's Mother Language*, 69.

two participles, rendered here in passive voice, appear as more or less synonymous. However, in Gal 1:15–16a καλεῖν is not attached to “my mother’s womb,” but to God’s “grace.” In other words, καλεῖν is to be interpreted against the backdrop of Paul’s persecutions.

I want to urge the difference between the two participles stronger than I did in my dissertation *Paul—One of the Prophets?* (1991). This is due to the fact that the backdrop of καλέσας is Paul’s persecutions, like it was in 1 Cor 15 and in Phil 3, as nicely put by Thiselton (see above). It is, therefore, confusing that Thiselton, in commenting on Gal 1:15–16a, says that Paul is appointed *before birth* by God’s grace, emphasizing that grace has thus shaped his whole life.³⁰ This is not in accordance with what he stated on καλεῖν in 1 Cor 15:9–10. If the point is that Paul’s life from his mother’s womb has been shaped by the grace he experienced outside Damascus, his persecutions hardly serve as a backdrop. The narrative structure of Gal 1:13–16a, urging the contrast between Paul’s former persecutions and God’s call, is disturbed if it all refers to the election from his mother’s womb. The participle καλέσας does not refer to a pre-natal calling, but is chronologically to be connected to ἀποκαλύψαι in v. 16.a.

In my book *Paul One of the Prophets*, I argued that “all the essential elements in a prophetic call narrative ... are found in Gal 1:15–16a.”³¹ Stephen J Chester comments that “one single fact means that this is not so.”³² Although I still think that the prophetic model goes a long way to explain Paul’s presentation of his Damascus event in Galatians 1, I think Chester has made a highly relevant point in saying the following: “The Septuagint contains not a single narrative relating the call of a prophet which contains the verb καλέω.” This means that καλέω is not sufficiently accounted for by pointing to prophetic call narratives. According to Chester, καλέω can only be accounted for as a “conversion,” one that did not involve a change of religion though.³³ The present article offers the context of creation or new creation (resurrection) as the backdrop for this term, both here and in 1 Cor 15:9–10. This conclusion will find affirmation in Rom 4:17 (see below).

In his magisterial work *Paul and the Gift*, John M. G. Barclay has delved into the meaning of gift or χάρις in Paul’s letters.³⁴ He summarizes his findings in terms like “unconditioned” and “incongruous” grace. “Grace” is characterized by misfit, and even contradiction between the recipient and God who gives. Barclay’s presentation of χάρις in Galatians matches precisely how Paul lays out the basics of

³⁰ THISELTON, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1210 and 1212.

³¹ SANDNES, *Paul—One of the Prophets?*, 59.

³² CHESTER, *Conversion at Corinth*, 157.

³³ CHESTER, *Conversion at Corinth*, 163–64.

³⁴ For his interpretation of Galatians, see pp.351–422.

his biography: the misfit between persecutor and apostle of Christ is overcome by a divine gift of grace, bringing into being what was not there beforehand. He also points out that Paul's biography becomes a pattern or model for his converts: "... what has reconstituted Paul's life as a divine act of grace without regard to his ethnicity, tradition and excellence, and without regard to his former opposition to God."³⁵ Obvious evidence is how Gal 1:6 (τοῦ καλέσαντος ὑμᾶς ἐν χάριτι [Χριστοῦ]) echoes Gal 1:15. Furthermore, Barclay points out that the resurrection is presupposed throughout as the source of the life which grace brings into being, creating something new (Gal 5:25; 6:8, 15). God "creates new realities without regard to conditions of capacity, status or moral worth."³⁶ Here Barclay adds Rom 4:17 as a reference. It is all predicated on the resurrection and the transformative power of God Creator at work in resurrection, or in other words, the antithesis between what God does and what humans do.³⁷

Based on these observations, I draw attention to the word "purview": what horizon may be glimpsed through the indications left in these texts? How do we make sense of these findings? The pieces of the jigsaw are clearly there to be joined into a more complete picture. The piece which guides us to put this picture together is *God* who gives life. We notice that Paul in Gal 3:21 is engaged in the question whether Torah gives life (ζωοποιῆσαι) or not.³⁸ This brings us to Rom 4:17 where precisely "giving life" is an act reserved God of Abraham.

Rom 4:17: Calling into Existence What Is Not: Grace as Resurrection at Work

What the rhetoric of 1 Cor 15:9–10 and Gal 1:13–16a conveyed in biographic and narrative terms (persecution – χάρις – apostle), Rom 4:17 formulates theologically in such a way that it has repercussions for how to understand "grace". Unconditioned grace is an act of God Creator who brings into life what does not exist. In Romans 4, Paul addresses the meaning of Gen 15:6: "And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness." Abraham is presented here, not only as father of a multinational family, but also the paradigmatic believer.³⁹ A key term here is "grace" (χάρις) (Rom 4:4), which Paul reiterates in v. 16, the running up to v.17: ἐπίστευσεν θεοῦ τοῦ ζωοποιούντος τοὺς νεκροὺς καὶ καλοῦντος τὰ μὴ ὄντα

³⁵ BARCLAY, *Paul and the Gift*, 359; see also p. 356.

³⁶ BARCLAY, *Paul and the Gift*, 353–54.

³⁷ SANDNES, *Paul Perceived*, 44–47.

³⁸ Paul's aim here is to address Lev 18:15; see Preston M. SPRINKLE, *Law and Life: The Interpretation of Leviticus 18:5 in Early Judaism and in Paul*. WUNT 2.241. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008, 138–42.

³⁹ BARCLAY, *Paul and the Gift*, 480–81; Karl Olav SANDNES, "Justification and Abraham; Exegesis of Romans 4," in *God's Power for Salvation: Romans 1,1–5,11* (ed. Cilliers BREYTENBACH; Colloquium Oecumenicum Paulinum 23. Leuven: Peeters, 2017), 147–81 (at 157–60).

ὡς ὄντα. This is God in whom Abraham put his trust. In the words of Christiane Zimmermann: “Der Gott, an den Abraham glaubte, ist der, der die Toten lebendig macht und das Nicht-Seiende ins Sein ruft.”⁴⁰

God, creation and resurrection coalesce. There are numerous passages portraying God in terms similar to this.⁴¹ Worth noticing is that in some of these passages God's act of creation or new creation is given in the verb *καλεῖν*: Isa 48:13 LXX: “And my hand laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand bolstered heaven; I will call (*καλέσω*) them and they will stand together.” (NETS). Joseph's prayer for Aseneth addresses God “who gave life to all (things) and called (*καλέσας*) them from the darkness to the light,” asking Godself to “make her alive again (*ζωοποιήσον*)” (*Jos. Asen.* 8.10–11 cf. 8.2). According to *Jos. Asen.* 15.4 this act of God, which is defined as “conversion” (*μετάνοια*) is spelled out in the following verbs: *ἀνακαινισθήση*, *ἀναπλασθήση*, *ἀναζωοποιηθήση*. According to Christine Zimmermann, *Joseph and Aseneth* speaks in a way expressed most palpable in Jer 38:22LXX: *ἔκτισεν κύριος σωτηρίαν* (“... the Lord has created salvation ...” cf. Isa 45:18). She calls this “die soteriologische Schöpfersaussage.”⁴² Similarly, the language of calling is found in Rom 8:28, 30 where Paul speaks of the regenerative power at work through the Spirit, and in which resurrection talks is intertwined (vv. 9–11). In the words of Beverly Roberts Gaventa: “Here calling is calling into existence, an act of creation, not simply an act of selecting one person or group rather than another.”⁴³ It is an act of bringing into being (creative act), not of selection. This applies to Paul's addresses in Rome, to Aseneth, and to Paul the apostle; all are called into being by God.

These texts pave the way for the observation that God creating τὰ μὴ ὄντα, as in Rom 4:17, is a shared way to speak of God as Creator.⁴⁴ Philo speaks thus in

⁴⁰ Christiane ZIMMERMANN, *Die Namen des Vaters: Studien zu ausgewählten neutestamentlichen Gottesbezeichnungen von ihrem frühjüdischen und paganen Sprachhorizont*. Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity 69. Leiden: Brill, 2007, 366.

⁴¹ Ps 33:6, 9; 148:5; 2 Bar. 21.4 (“O hear me, you who created the earth ... the one who in the beginning of the world called that which did not yet exist and they obeyed you”, OTP1:628); 48.8 (“And with the word you bring to life that which does not exist, and with great power you hold that which has not yet come”; OTP 636–37), *Jos. Asen.* 12.1–3; 20.7; Rom 11:36; 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:16–17; see Halvor MOXNES, *Theology in Conflict: Studies in Paul's Understanding of God in Romans*. NovTSup 53. Leiden: Brill, 1980, 241–47.

⁴² ZIMMERMANN, *Namen*, 352, 369–71. A Pauline passage like 2 Cor 4:6 where Paul alludes to Gen 1:2–3 to reference the enlightenment of the hearts, is also relevant here. Kim and Dietzfelbinger may be right when they see this as referring to the Damascus event, but not exclusively so. The plural “in our hearts” should not be limited to Paul alone.

⁴³ Beverly Roberts GAVENTA, “On the Calling-Into Being of Israel,” in *Between Gospel and Election: Explorations in the Interpretation of Romans 9–11* (ed. Florian WILK and J. Ross WAGNER; WUNT 257. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 255–69 (at 260).

⁴⁴ See the detailed work of ZIMMERMANN, *Namen*, 345–83 and 384–531.

several passages: God called that which had no existence into existence (τὰ μὴ ὄντα ἐκάλεσεν εἰς τὸ εἶναι; *Spec.* 4.187; *Opif.* 81; *Mut.* 46; *Migr.* 183; *Her.* 36). All these passages revolve around God's creation. In some texts, like in 2 Macc 7:28 the creation motif is extended to resurrection: "... recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed (οὐκ ἐξ ὄντων ἐποίησεν αὐτὰ ὁ θεός). And in the same way the human race came into being" (NRSV).⁴⁵ For the father praying for his martyr-sons, this belief serves as buttress for faith in resurrection: "... Accept death that I may get you back again along with your brothers" (v. 29).⁴⁶

Paul finds this language appropriate to convey the radicality at play in God's grace. It also catches the nature of God' election of his Corinthian converts: "... God choose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not (... ἐξελέξατο ὁ θεός, τὰ μὴ ὄντα), to reduce to nothing things that are" (1 Cor 1:26–28). We notice the marked theocentric perspective here: *God* has chosen them, and this is put in the noun κλησις, cognate to καλεῖν. Likewise, in Rom 9:24–26 where the theocentric perspective involved in καλεῖν paved the way for bringing into being a people who were not God's people: "Those who were not my people I will call 'my people'." Paul applies Hosea to Jews as well as Gentiles. Just as Abraham was called into being (Rom 4:17) so are also Jews and Gentiles together (Rom 15:7–12). The present future καλέσω and the passive future κληθήσονται imply more than «naming» here. Resurrection language is at work. Election is spelled out in a way that brings to mind Deut 7:7 (cf. Rom 11:1–6) and construes it as an act of grace. Worth mentioning is also 2 Cor 4:14–15 where the grace (ἡ χάρις) received by the Corinthians and Paul himself ("we"), is explained with explicit resurrection language. The grace given to them is included in the trajectory of God having raised Jesus from the dead.

What does this creation and new creation language refer to in the biography of Abraham? Scholars often refer to the impossibility which grace brought into being regarding Abraham becoming a father in spite of his age. Likewise, Sara, the old woman, gave birth to a son. Both illustrate the impossibility at play here, and which is overcome by God' power to bring into being what is not existent. Another analogy which goes to the heart of what Paul is arguing in Romans 4 is that Abraham as "ungodly" (v. 5) is reckoned righteous.⁴⁷ This particular aspect brings to mind the logical structure we have identified in 1Cor 15, Phil 3 and Gal 1, namely that the persecutor is turned into an apostle. "Grace" refers here to *how* Abraham as

⁴⁵ The living God" who gives life is intimately connected with the raising of the dead, not only in Rom 4:17, but also in Tob 13:2; 2 Macc 7:33. 36 and Rom 8:11. The idea of God creating out of nothing is in Wis 11:17 presented in Greek philosophical terms: κτίσασα τὸν κόσμον ἐξ ἀμόρφου ὕλης ("... created the world out of formless matter.").

⁴⁶ On this as resurrection witness, see SANDNES and HENRIKSEN, *Resurrection*, 57–59.

⁴⁷ The connection between Rom 4:5 and 17 is emphasized also by ZIMMERMANN, *Namen*, 445.

ungodly (ἄσεβής) became “friend of God.”⁴⁸ This logic echoes what we noticed in 1 Cor 15:8; Gal 1 and also in Phil 3, namely how Paul the persecutor ended up being an apostle of Christ. According to John M. G. Barclay, “the Abrahamic family is marked by a peculiar trait,”⁴⁹ which is incongruity between God’s action and what Abraham was previous to that. Barclay emphasizes incongruity and misfit. The idea of *creatio ex nihilo*, which he also points out, should include also the transformative power intrinsic to this grace. In the words of Reinhard Feldmeier: “Der Gott der Rechtfertigung wird hier in der Sprache von Schöpfung und Neuschöpfung beschrieben.... Als *deus iustificans* ist Gott auch der *deus vivificans*.”⁵⁰ God—justification by faith—grace—called into existence— all these summarize the basis for making Abraham a paradigmatic believer. Likewise, Otfried Hofius says that Rom 4:17 makes it obvious that “die *iustificatio impii* nur als das Wunder göttlicher Neuschöpfung und Lebensgewährung verstanden werden kann. Eben deshalb ist der Glaube an den Gott, ‘der den Gottlosen rechtfertigt’ (v.5), als solcher der Glauben an den ‘der die Toten lebendig macht und das Nichtseiende ins Dasein ruft (v. 17b).”⁵¹ The verb καλεῖν is thus rooted in God’s power to bring into being what is not there beforehand. Furthermore, Rom 4:17b is conceived as an act of resurrection. This is reinforced by Paul introducing v. 17b as an act of God “who gives life to the dead,” which is also substantiated in the final part of Romans 4.⁵²

In what way does this have a bearing on καλέσας in Gal 1:15? This suggests that “calling” in Gal 1:15 is not identical with ὁ ἀφορίσας με, and takes us to what God did to Paul in the Damascus event. I am not claiming that Rom 4 is yet another Damascus passage. What I do observe, however, is that there is a point of converging between Paul and Abraham. They were both changed by grace. The non-correspondence between what they were and what they become is due to the divine gift of grace. In Abraham’s case this is explicitly formulated in the language of resurrection. With Paul this is not so explicit, but his many references to his Damascus experience as a meeting with the risen Christ, finds in his expose of Abraham its full explanation.

⁴⁸ Karl Olav SANDNES, “Abraham, the Friend of God, in Rom 5: A Short Notice,” *ZNW* 99 (2008): 124–28.

⁴⁹ BARCLAY, *Paul*, 481–90.

⁵⁰ Reinhard FELDMEIER, „Vater und Töpfer? Zur Identität Gottes im Römerbrief,“ in *Between Gospel and Election: Explorations in the Interpretation of Romans 9–11* (ed. Florian WILK and J. Ross WAGNER; WUNT 257. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 377–90 (at 379).

⁵¹ Otfried HOFIUS, „Die Gottesprädikationen Röm 4,17b,“ in *Paulusstudien II*, edited by Otfried HOFIUS. WUNT 143. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002, 58–61 (at 61). ZIMMERMANN, *Namen*, 370 puts it like this: „Der Glaube an den Schöpfer ist der Glaube an den permanent schaffenden, lebendig machenden, die Toten auferweckenden, Christus auferweckt habenden Gott (Röm 4,17.24).“

⁵² SANDNES, “Justification and Abraham,” 171–78.

Conclusion

Paul judged his Damascus experience as an event setting him apart from other prophets or visionaries in his churches, as it was foundational to the ministry which brought them into being.⁵³ The way he explains this event as a Christophany also serves this end. Paul's "last of all" in 1 Cor 15:8 conveys, albeit in humble terms, that he has been given a mandate vis-à-vis his churches. However, when he explores the implications of what this means in terms of being touched by the transformative power of resurrection, he becomes less unique and more paradigmatic to his converts. In this paper we have observed this with regard to the role assigned to God's grace in the Damascus event. Paul never uses τὰ μὴ ὄντα with reference to Damascus, but the logic of the persecutor becoming an apostle of Christ, solely dependent on divine initiative, works synonymously. To this comes also that his being a "miscarriage" in 1 Cor 15 works in the same way. This logic makes Paul and Abraham kindred figures. They were both affected by God's grace, becoming what they were not beforehand. Paul uses the language of creation or resurrection to bring about the transformative power of God's grace, which turns an ungodly into a friend, and a persecutor of Christ into his apostle. Thereby Paul's Damascus event no longer is only to be considered unique and foundational. It takes on a paradigmatic aspect a well.

I have argued that Paul's purview on this incident in his life goes beyond what is stated directly in e.g. Gal 1:15–16a. To identify what goes beyond, I found that the logical structure of that passage—the persecutor becoming apostle of Christ—echoes Abraham's biography in Rom 4, in which v. 17 about God who brings into being what was formerly not there, forms the hub. Thus, the Damascus event is inscribed in the history of God's grace which makes the impossible possible and manifest. In that perspective, Abraham, Israel, Paul and his converts participate in the same experience, i.e., being faced with God's transformative power.

Krister Stendahl's work on Paul's Damascus experience as a call, not a conversion, marked a turning point in Pauline scholarship. In my view, Stendahl rightly challenged "conversion" as a helpful category, albeit his definition is surprisingly more modern than ancient.⁵⁴ Anyway, to present-day readers "conversion" is a Trojan horse, as it easily comes with anachronistic connotations prone to misguide rather than offering adequate insight.⁵⁵ Following the lead of Stendahl, many scholars understand the Damascus event primarily as his receiving a commission, his being entrusted a

⁵³ SANDNES, *Paul—One of the Prophets*, 102–105, 245.

⁵⁴ CHESTER, *Conversion at Corinth*, 153–59.

⁵⁵ For a nuanced view on Paul and the category of "conversion," making use also of sociological theory (change of networks, relations and fellowship), see Douglas A. CAMPBELL, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009, 125–66.

mandate, in short, his being *called*. The material presented in the present paper implies that such an understanding does not sufficiently account for the way Paul describes his experience in terms taken from creation and resurrection. This should in no way be interpreted as Paul leaving one religion for another. In that regard Stendahl is right. But his interpretation is given in strokes too simple to come to terms with how profound and radical this experience was to Paul himself. It went far beyond being given a mandate. By tracing God's *creatio ex nihilo*, not only in the story of Abraham, but also in his own biography, Paul places himself in the trajectory of creation, new creation and resurrection, and God bringing into being what was previously not there. Nothing less!

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