

THE NARRATIVES OF CONVERSIONS IN THE ACTS OF APOSTLES
IN THE EXEGETICAL WRITINGS OF JOHN CHRYSOSTOM: ITS RECEPTION AND SIGNIFICANCE

Fr Konstantin Papathanasiou

cmpap@theol.uoa.gr

1. My short paper is mainly relying on two kinds of source material, on the book of Acts in NT (28 chap.) and the on exegetical writings of John Chrysostom, basically on the followings, his series of 55 exegetical Homilies of the Acts of the Apostles and on the famous seven homilies On St. Paul. It's a brief approach to conversion experiences in the NT (1st cent) and their reception from Chrysostom in the 4th cent.
2. Conversion is a central focus of Acts, maybe the central focus. It's the major theme of Acts. And its particular hero and the one whose character is most clearly drawn is Saul who becomes Paul, persecutor becomes advocate, Pharisee becomes apologist, ardent Jew becomes missionary to Gentiles. His conversion, his travels and many crises, his preaching and encounters, disappointment and success, even his long drawn out defence in the final chapters of Acts, is the stuff of adventure yams.
3. Apart from his dealing with the general statements of conversion (Acts 2:41; 8:5,12 et.al.), he approaches the following seven episodes: (a) The eunuch from Ethiopia as the first of the Gentiles to be converted to Christianity (8:26-40). (b) The call of Saul, i.e. how the persecutor Saul is transformed by the risen Christ and became not only a witness to Jesus Christ, but also the hero of the second half of Acts (9:1-19a; 22:6-16; 26:12-18). (c) The conversion of Cornelius and his household in Caesarea (10:1-11:18). (d) How Lydia is converted to Christianity (16:13-15). (e) The conversion of the Roman warden (16:25-34). (f) The conversion of Dionysius of the Areopagus and Damaris (17:34). And (g) the conversion of Crispus, the leader of Synagogue (18:8).
4. In Chrysostom writings is used verbal expressions such as συμφερόντως ἐπιστρέφειν, τὸ ἐπιστρέφειν ἀδελφούς ἀπὸ τῆς πλάνης, ἐπαναστρέφειν, τὰ πεπλανημένα ὑποστρέφειν, ἀποστρέφειν ἀπὸ τῶν πονηριῶν, νοθετεῖν καὶ ἐπιστρέφειν, καταστρέφειν τὴν πλάνην, τὰ πράγματα μεταστρέφειν and many other similar expressions.
5. First of all, there are several accounts of the general statements of conversion (Acts 2:41; 8:5,12 et.al.) . We find in most times that way of conversion: Preaching, response, believe or disbelieve. In more details, the convertors into Christianity –men and women in first century– were required to: (a) receive gospel teaching; (b) believe the message; (c) profess their faith in Jesus; (d) repent of their wrongs, and (e) be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sin .
6. Chrysostom refers this image: “Just as a person on the point of shipwreck (ναυάγιον), upon seeing the pilot, or in sickness the physician, would put all into his hands, and do his bidding in everything; so have these also confessed that they are in extreme peril, and destitute of all hope of salvation. They did not say, How shall we be saved? but, “What shall we do?” .
7. The above statements of the first century have been explained by Chrysostom in his Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles giving emphasis on these viewpoints: The conversion seems as a result of great gentleness and all possible mildness by the disciples of Christ.

The ultimate and final result is the penetration of preaching into their soul, in order –by the way of attracting their brotherly affection and kindness– the converted ones will ask “What shall we do?” In those instances they utter somewhat midway between strong desire and reverent fear; coming to the end of conversion, they surrender themselves to the disciples, mainly to Peter and Paul later, and they remain under their authority. It’s also very obvious to observe that many of them are chosen by the Holy Grace.

8. Paul is not a paradigmatic convert –in the sense of every day case–, there are certain assumptions operative in Luke's narrative, which Chrysostom underlines, that are important to note:
 - a. Paul's conversion results from divine initiative;
 - b. conversion is not an end in itself but a means to the growth of the gospel;
 - c. the narratives in Acts treat an individual conversion, but not an individualistic conversion, since Paul is not converted in order to savor the experience (to have a description of a transformation), but always in order to witness the Gospel among the Gentiles .
9. In the Homilies of Chrysostom *On St Paul*, he underlines three points:
 - a. The Paradoxical blindness. The first point concerns the interpretation of the paradoxical blindness that preceded the call and which was the result of the overly light that had infused everything at the time of Christ's appearance.
 - b. The identity of Christ. The second point concerns the identity with which Paul was presented to Christ: I am Jesus of Nazareth, do not persecute
 - c. Supporting the option and freedom of choice. A third point that reveals Chrysostom's interpretation is the display of the option and the freedom of choice associated with the acceptance of the call by Paul himself.
10. The narratives of conversions in the Acts of Apostles have great religious and theological interest in the exegetical writings of John Chrysostom. As the Acts is considered not only as a major account of the early history of the Christian church, but also as a book recording conversions to Christ, the reception of them through the theological lens of Chrysostom has an important influence in the human anthropological perspective of eastern Christian thought.
11. The reception and significance of the conversions' narratives in Acts of Apostles in Chrysostom's exegetical writings has clearly for him eschatological dimensions. Christian conversion means essentially –in Chrysostom's teaching– the salvation event and in other words the transcendence of one's human nature, where a person surpasses the limits of his humanity, his natural talents, weaknesses or sins, by the grace and power of God's Spirit, so that he might ascend to spiritual levels higher than that of the angels, namely, deification.
12. In Chrysostom's preaching and pedagogical way of approaching the conversions of Acts the principal concept is that “nothing is more frigid than a Christian, who cares not for the salvation of others.” (Hom. 20). The spiritual conversion follows, in general, the form of “preaching – response/repentance – believe/baptism”. Indeed, it relates sometimes greatly with the whole Christian teaching about Incarnation, Passion, Resurrection, Ascension, and Judgment to come. John Chrysostom regards individual conversion as a volitional process in which lies selfdetermination since he chiefly focuses on the energetic (ἀρετήν) character of the person; however, in the call of Saul the influence of external forces is clear, but it is considered to be a dynamic rather than a static process.

