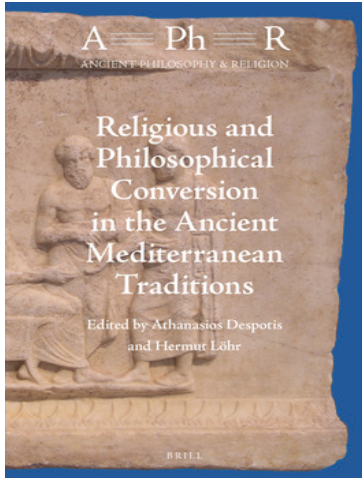


RELIGIOUS AND PHILOSOPHICAL CONVERSION



DESPOTIS, ATHANASIOS & LÖHR,
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ANDREW S. JACOBS
Harvard Divinity School
andrew@andrewjacobs.org

“CONVERSION” UNITES EVEN AS IT DIVIDES. Conversion brings religions together as interactive modes of being, even as it renders those religions distinct and (usually) mutually exclusive. As this recent volume demonstrates, conversion also unites and divides different disciplines within the broader study of religion. To invite fifteen scholars to think about, analyze, and theorize about conversion in their specific areas of research is to elicit fifteen different – yet sometimes productively interactive – ways of approaching religion in surviving ancient sources.

The essays emerge out of a 2018 conference at the University of Bonn and are here divided into five parts: “*Interdisciplinary Conversion Research*” (two essays), “*Conversion in Ancient Judaism*” (four essays), “*Conversion in Philosophical Tradi-*

tions” (three essays), “*Conversion in the New Testament*” (five essays), and “*Conversion in Mystery Cults and Late Antiquity*” (two essays).

The essays vary considerably in length, from fewer than 20 pages to more than 40 pages. They also vary considerably in depth and focus. Some essays present as more accessible overviews of topics, like editor Hermut Löhr’s discussion of conversion among Second Temple Jewish groups or Phillip Davis’s review of putative conversion terms and scenes in the Synoptic gospels. Others essays are close readings of texts that will appeal more to specialists; these offerings make narrower philological and historical arguments, like Karl-Heinrich Ostermeyer’s analysis of names in the book of Ruth or Anna Furlan’s rhetorical analysis of the “Jewish-Orphic *Hieros Logos*”. Some essays even read like summaries of full monographs, like Sharon Padilla’s thorough study of motifs of wakefulness and sobriety in early and Roman Stoicism or Matthew Williams’ detailed arguments about conversion and almsgiving across the *New Testament*. While the essays as a whole have a focus (conversion as social and narrative phenomenon), the volume does not necessarily have a cohesion that rewards reading cover to cover. Most scholars of the ancient Mediterranean will do well to read the introduction by editor Athanasios Despotis and then turn to offerings in their specific areas of interest or specialization.

The center of gravity for the whole collection is the *New Testament* and Christian origins. While the two “interdisciplinary essays”, by Pierre-Yves Brandt (“*Contemporary Models of Conversion and Identity Transformation*”) and Rikard Riotto (“*Using Behavioural Sciences to Understand Early Christian Experiences of Conversion*”), do engage explicitly with recent social and cognitive models for understanding religious conversion, their data come almost entirely from *New Testament* texts and reconstructions of the earliest communities of Jesus’ followers. The essays on Ancient Judaism likewise refer in ways large and small to the origins of Christianity. Ostermeyer’s detailed linguistic argument about names in Ruth and the theological redemption of Moabites and Ammonites (“*The Lost Daughter. A Philological Study on the Book of Ruth*”) ends with the observation that “Ruth’s conversion, both in a narrative as in a philological sense, made her suitable for the *New Testament* (see Matt 1:5) as an ancestress of the messiah” (p. 80). Löhr’s engagement with “Second Temple Judaism” (“*Conversion within Israel? An Essay on Old and New in Second Temple Judaism, and on Paul the Convert According to Phil 3:2–4:1*”), drawing on evidence from Qumran, Philo, Josephus, and Pliny is ultimately in service of unpacking Paul’s own account of his change in religious dedication in his letter to the Philippians. Due to how the text was preserved and used, Furlan’s discussion of the “Jewish-Orphic *Hieros Logos*” (“*Strategies of Conversion in a Jewish-Orphic Hieros Logos. A Cognitive Approach*”) brings it into conversation with Christian apologetic literature as well as Hellenistic

philosophy. Francesco Zanella's literary and philological survey of *tešubā* ("turning" or "repentance") in Tannaitic literature ("Making *tešubā*, לעשות תשובה, '(Re-)turning' in Tannaitic Literature") refrains from any *New Testament* comparisons (except in the footnotes) and while highly detailed also makes a concerted effort to explain terms, texts, and concepts to readers less familiar with early rabbinic literature.

The essays on "philosophical traditions" likewise engage to various degrees in comparison with *New Testament* and earliest Christian literature. Padilla's very long essay on wakefulness and sobriety as literal and metaphorical expressions of personal philosophical transformation among the Stoics ("*The Awake and Sober Way of Life. A Key Motif in the Stoic Conversion*") touches on a few Jewish and Christian texts (although not, interesting, somewhat later Gnostic materials that might have provided interesting *comparanda*), while remaining primarily focused on classical works of early and Roman Stoic exhortation. Despotis's investigation of "philosophical conversion" in Plutarch's *Moralia* ("*Philosophical Conversion in Plutarch's Moralia and the Cultural Discourses in the Ancient Mediterranean*") is primarily an attempt to bring that philosopher's ideas about "philosophical education, moral progress, and character development" (p. 206) into alignment with other "imperial-era" texts like Luke, Joseph and Aseneth, and the works of Philo. Despotis concludes that "it is too simplistic to differentiate between philosophical and biblical or Christian *metanoia*" (p. 214). Sergi Grau's finely grained study of "philosophical conversion" in Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, by contrast, treats its subject in relative isolation ("*Conversion to Philosophy in Diogenes Laertius. Forms and Functions*").

The longest section on "*Conversion in the New Testament*" ranges widely across those twenty-seven texts. Phillip A. Davis, Jr. ("*Is There Conversion in the Synoptic Gospels?*") asks "Is There Conversion in the Synoptic Gospels?" and, after considering modern studies of conversion and the language of religious change in the gospels (particularly *metanoia*), answers "no". Raul Heimann, by contrast, takes it as a given that conversion undergirds Jesus's message in the *Gospel of Matthew* and, after a lengthy exploration of *metanoia* in Greek and Jewish contexts, argues that it structures and undergirds the entire message of the *Sermon on the Mount* ("*Metanoia in the Sermon on the Mount. A Philosophical Approach*"). In his second contribution, Athanasios Despotis ("*Religious and Philosophical Conversion in Paul and John*") likewise takes the presence of "conversion" in the *New Testament* for granted and uses it as a way to compare the messages of religious-philosophical transformation in the writings of Paul and John (i.e., the Gospel and 1 John). As in his earlier offering, Despotis' primary aim is to show the congruity of Greek philosophical and Christian biblical notions of religious transformation, as "Paul and John draw on several Jewish-Hellenistic amalgams" (p. 317; Despotis makes reference to Homi Bhabha's

notion of “cultural hybridity” but seems to mean by it simply what earlier generations of scholars understood as synthesis or syncretism).

Stephen J. Chester’s essay on “death” in Paul’s letter to the Romans (“*Consider Yourselves Dead*’ (Rom 6:11). *Biographical Reconstruction, Conversion, and the Death of the Self in Romans*”) is one of the essays that is likely to appeal to specialists on Paul, as it offers a novel interpretation of Paul’s innovative theology of “death” in *Romans* 6. Matthew Williams’s essay (“*A Cost of Discipleship? The Relationship between Conversion and Almsgiving for the New Testament Authors*”) on almsgiving and conversion will likewise probably be mostly of interest to *New Testament* scholars as it takes readers on a whirlwind tour of places where almsgiving and conversion interact in complicated ways throughout those texts before drilling down into a close reading of the two concepts in *2 Corinthians* 8-9.

The final two essays bring us into the period of Christian late antiquity. Miguel Herrero de Jáuregui (“*Back to a Classic Debate. Conversion and Salvation in Ancient Mystery Cults?*”) engages with Birgitte Bøgh’s recent attempts to find religious conversion in the so-called mystery cults. Herrero de Jáuregui is unconvinced and maintains a distinction between initiation and conversion through a close reading of Origen’s apologetic treatise *Against Celsus*. In the final essay, Carl Johan Berglund (“*The Sychar Story as a Standard Conversion Narrative in Heracleon’s Hypomnēmata*”) takes issue with the way modern scholars (such as Elaine Pagels, in 1973) have understood the second-century “gnostic” commentator Heracleon’s interpretation of the Samaritan woman at the well in *John* 4 as the paradigmatic convert awakened to her innate “spiritual” nature. Instead, Berglund argues, Heracleon’s idea of conversion is much more in line with how modern studies understand conversion: as processual, social, and transformative.

As this overview demonstrates, these essays range far and wide in both subject and focus, although the central organizing principle – sometimes manifestly, sometimes latently – seems to be the role of conversion at the origins of Christianity: how it informs and is informed by its broader ancient Mediterranean contexts. Despite the distinctiveness of the individual essays, however, they also attempt to create bridges across the volume. There is, in many essays, an attention to the ancient terminology of conversion, especially terms like *metanoia* and *epistrophe*, even when (as in Davis’ case) authors conclude these terms should not be assimilated to some common idea of “conversion”. Many of them also engage with recent social and psychological theories of conversion, laid out in the introductory essays but also dealt with in original and thoughtful ways throughout. Theorists like Lewis Rambo serve as a guide away from the overly interiorizing views of William James (who was so influential on

Arthur D. Nock): for most of the essays here, conversion emerges as a slow, unfolding, ongoing process, inevitably shaped by social expectations and patterns.

As it does in so many recent collections that bring together disciplinarily diverse (if closely related) scholars to think about the topic, conversion in this volume becomes capacious: it can refer to initiation, transformation, personal alteration, and/or intensification; it can be exclusive or inclusive; it can be explicit or implicit; it can create bridges between ancient traditions and between modern theories and it can show the distinctiveness of individual texts, communities, and schools of thought. The student of conversion in antiquity will find several moments of insight in this long collection; the student of the *New Testament* and Christian origins will likely reap the most benefit.