BARNABAS OR SAUL: WHO IS DESCRIBING SAUL’S CONVERSION IN ACTS 9:27?

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Abstract

This article examines a problem of translation in Acts 9:27 regarding who should be the subject of the sentence – Barnabas or Saul. Through a close examination of the Greek text in its broader pericope, it explores whether Barnabas was the one who told the apostles in Jerusalem about Saul’s conversion. It also discusses the importance of eyewitness testimony to Luke in his Gospel and Acts. The article closes with a fresh observation about the conversion account’s significance within the narrative structure of Acts.

Key Words: Barnabas; Saul; Eyewitness Testimony; Conversion

Introduction

In his 2010 article entitled “The Role of Barnabas in the Book of Acts,” Murphy discusses Paul’s conversion in Acts 9 wherein “Barnabas is portrayed in the narrative not only as an advocate for Saul but also as an intermediary between him and the people. Barnabas told the apostles of Saul’s encounter with the Lord as well as his courageous proclamation of Jesus in Damascus. Barnabas used his relationship with the apostles to speak up for Saul.”1 This article will explore whether it was indeed Barnabas who told the apostles about Saul’s conversion, by examining afresh the text in Acts 9:26-28. Introduced into the discussion is the significance of eyewitness testimony in antiquity as it relates to the early church. The article will close with a fresh observation about the account’s contribution to the narrative structure of Acts.

Barnabas in Acts

Joseph, called Barnabas by the apostles, is introduced in Acts 4:36-37 as a Levite from Cyprus. He generously sold a piece of land to provide for the needs of the nascent community of believers, unlike Ananias and Sapphira whose parsimonious dissimulation follows. Luke’s depiction of Barnabas in the early chapters of Acts, according to Bonneau, functions in two ways: he is a model for the community and he is a model for all the believers.2 The first thirty verses of Acts chapter 9 present the account of Saul’s conversion. The pericope ends with his escape from Damascus and his return to Jerusalem. The church there is skeptical about the arrival of this interloper who had formerly persecuted them. Barnabas lived up to his appellation as “Son of Encouragement” and introduced Saul to the

Who is the Storyteller?

But is it Barnabas or Saul who is telling the story? The Greek text of 9:27 is ambiguous: Βαρναβᾶς δὲ ἐπιλαβόμενος αὐτῶν ἦγαγεν πρὸς τοὺς ἀποστόλους καὶ διηγήσατο αὐτοῖς πῶς ἐν τῇ ὁδῇ εἶδεν τὸν κύριον καὶ ὅτι ἐλάλησεν αὐτῷ καὶ πῶς ἐν Δαμασκῷ ἐπαρρησίασάτο ἐν τῷ ὄνοματι τοῦ Ἰησοῦ. Most contemporary translations resolve the ambiguity by making Barnabas either the implicit or explicit subject of διηγήσατο. Only the NKJV translation provides a more literal translation by preserving the ambiguity in the Greek text: “But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord…” The NLT translation reads similarly. The ESV translates: “But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord…” The KJV, NASB, and NRSV read similarly to the ESV in their translations. Only the NKJV translation provides a more literal translation by preserving the ambiguity in the Greek text: “But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road…”

So is Barnabas or Saul the subject of διηγήσατο? A look at the broader pericope can perhaps provide a clue:

24 ἐγνώσθη δὲ τῷ Σαῦλῳ ἡ ἐπιβουλή αὐτῶν. παρετηροῦντα δὲ καὶ τὰς πύλας ἡμέρας τε καὶ νυκτὸς ὅπως αὐτῶν ἀνέλωσιν. 25 λαβόντες δὲ οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ1 νυκτὸς δία τοῦ τείχους καθήκαν αὐτῶν χαλάσαντες ἐν σπηρί. 26 Παραγενόμενος δὲ εἰς Ἰερουσαλήμ ἐπείραζεν κολλάσθαι τοῖς μαθηταῖς, καὶ πάντες ἐφοβοῦντο αὐτὸν μὴ πιστεύοντες ὅτι ἦστιν μαθητὴς. 27 Βαρναβᾶς δὲ ἐπιλαβόμενος αὐτῶν ἦγαγεν πρὸς τοὺς ἀποστόλους καὶ διηγήσατο αὐτοῖς πῶς ἐν τῇ ὁδῇ εἶδεν τὸν κύριον καὶ ὅτι ἐλάλησεν2 αὐτῷ καὶ πῶς ἐν Δαμασκῷ ἐπαρρησίασάτο ἐν τῷ ὄνοματι τοῦ Ἰησοῦ. 28 καὶ ἦν μετ’ αὐτῶν εὐπορευόμενος καὶ ἐκπορευόμενος εἰς Ἱερουσαλήμ, παραγενόμενος ἐν τῷ ὄνοματι τοῦ κυρίου, 29 ἐλάλητε καὶ συνεζήτετε πρὸς τοὺς Ἐλληνισταῖς, οἱ δὲ ἐπεχείρησιν ἀνελεῖν αὐτῶν. 30 ἐπειγόντες δὲ οἱ ἅγιοι κατήγαγον αὐτὸν εἰς Καισάρειαν καὶ ἑξαπέστειλαν αὐτὸν εἰς Ταρσόν.

3 “apostles” they are not specified. In Galatians 1:17-18 Paul claims that he only saw Peter and James, the Lord’s brother, at this time. FF Bruce, The Acts of the Apostles. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990:243, sees “apostles” as a generalising plural wherein Peter represents all the apostles. Martin Hengel and Anna Maria Schweimer, Paul between Damascus and Antioch. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997:138, write dismissively: “At all events the scene in which Luke has Paul appearing ‘before the apostles’ is unhistorical.”


5 The translation of ἔλαλησεν αὐτῷ has also been questioned. Is it “the Lord spoke to Saul” (as in NIV, NLT, ESV, NRSV) or “he (Saul) spoke to the Lord?” The KJV again preserves the ambiguity: “that he had spoken to him,” while the NKJV interprets by capitalising the first pronoun: “that He had spoken to him.” In the account of Saul’s conversion just narrated, both Saul and Jesus speak (Acts 9:4-6). According to CK Barrett, Acts 1-14. London: T&T Clark, 1994:1.469, “[t]he grammar of the sentence gives no indication of a change of subject and this suggests that ἔλαλησεν has the same subject as ἔδει and ἐπαρρησίασατο – Saul.” Nevertheless, Barrett concedes that “Luke is not so rigidly bound by the rules of grammar as to invalidate the thought that may indicate the initiative of Jesus, who in the conversion story opens the conversation (9.4).” Since Saul is primary referent in this pericope, it is preferable to understand him as the subject, not the Lord.
But their plot became known to Saul. Day and night they were closely watching the gates so that they might kill him. But one night his followers took and let him down through the wall by lowering a large basket. After arriving in Jerusalem he tried to join the disciples, but everyone feared him because they did not think he was a disciple. But Barnabas took and brought him to the apostles, and he described fully to them how he had seen the Lord on the road and had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. And he was with them going in and going out of Jerusalem preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. He began to speak and argue with the Hellenistic Jews, but they attempted to kill him. When the believers learned this, they brought him to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.

Using a bold font, we see that Saul is last named as an explicit subject or object in verse 24. In the verses that follow he is the understood pronoun, subject, or object six times before verse 27 when Barnabas is the named subject of the sentence. In the narrative that follows διηγήσατο Saul is again the implied subject or object twelve times, although there is no explicit antecedent identifying Saul except back in verse 24.

So the question still remains whether the subject of διηγήσατο should be understood as Barnabas or Saul. Schnabel translates διηγήσατο as “explained,” which rather suggests the nuance of reported speech. However, of Luke’s five uses of δηγέομαι (Luke 8:39; 9:10; Acts 8:33; 9:27; 12:17) two of them are used of direct address (Luke 9:10; Acts 12:7) and one implies such (Luke 8:39). Thus a better translation is simply “tell, relate, describe,” which is how the contemporary translations cited above translate it. Bock is typical of translators and interpreters who understand Barnabas as the speaker: “There is debate about the subject of the verb here, but that Barnabas speaks up for Saul is the most natural way to read the passage.” However, like recent interpreters he fails to discuss the ambiguity in the Greek text.

Burchard objects to this prevailing view: “According to today’s most represented opinion, it is Barnabas, the subject of the previous verb, [who is reporting.] not Paul, the subject of the following, even there, where you, in the then given indirectness of the reporting, cannot find evidence of the mediation of Paul, as it is done by Klein … then Barnabas may know nothing he could tell, and the characteristics of the report should suggest to the reader to choose as the subject of ‘told’ the one who alone knew everything.” Marshall similarly suggests: “It may be that we should translate the sentence

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6 The translations from the Greek texts are my own unless otherwise identified. This translation is more literal since Greek uses pronouns more sparingly than English.


differently, so that it was Paul himself who gave his testimony before the apostles.”\footnote{12} Barrett’s objection to making Saul the subject is that “Barnabas’s role is reduced to very small proportions.”\footnote{13} But the initial introduction of Barnabas in 4:36-37 was small in comparison to the space given to the entire pericope of 4:32-5:11 in which Ananias and Sapphira feature. Barnabas remains a minor character, so to speak, until the first missionary journey begins in Acts 13.


Eyewitness testimony was important for Luke in his two written documents.\footnote{14} Writing about the significance of *autoptai*, Bauckham states that “there is no doubt, from the total context in Luke-Acts, that it carries the historiographic meaning of people who witnessed firsthand the events of Luke’s gospel story.”\footnote{15} Köstenberger writes similarly, “From the very outset of his Gospel Luke stresses the importance of eyewitness testimony (Lk. 1:1 -4; cf. Acts 1:3).”\footnote{16} Just as witnesses introduce primary evidence in Luke’s Gospel, for example, Mary (Luke 1:5-80) and Peter (Luke 5:3-8),\footnote{17} witness is an important theme in the book of Acts as well.\footnote{18} As Soards writes, “Indeed, one encounters the theme of Spirit-empowered witness from the beginning (1:8) to the end (28:23) of Acts and all along the way, so that the speeches either articulate this witness, attack the witness (as testimony or person), or affirm some dimension of the validity of the witness.”\footnote{19} Jesus’ familiar charge to the apostles in Acts 1:8, just mentioned, states that “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” The replacement for Judas had to be a witness of the resurrection (Acts 1:22). Speaking to the crowd on the day of Pentecost, Peter declared: “God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact” (Acts 2:32). In his subsequent speeches first in Solomon’s stoa (3:15) then twice before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:20; 5:31), and to Cornelius and household (10:39-41) Peter emphasised that he and the apostles were witnesses of the Jesus events about which they were testifying.

Likewise in his address at the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch Paul made the same point: “And for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people” (Acts 13:31). Although Paul could
not testify to the earthly ministry of Jesus, his eyewitness testimony about seeing the risen Christ was important for Luke. In the second retelling of Paul’s conversion before the Jewish crowd in Jerusalem Paul recounts the words that Ananias told him: “You will be a witness for him to all people of what you have seen and heard” (Acts 22:15). Paul then recounts a vision that he received in the temple after his return to Jerusalem (unmentioned in Acts 9) in which Jesus warned him: “Hurry and depart Jerusalem quickly because they will not accept your testimony about me” (Acts 22:18). When Paul relates his conversion story before Festus, Agrippa, and Bernice, he states that Jesus himself gave him a charge on the road to Damascus: “For this reason I have appeared to you: to appoint you as a servant and a witness both of what you have seen and what I will show you” (Acts 26:16).

Given the importance of eyewitness testimony for Luke and the early church, would the apostles have wanted or even allowed Barnabas to recount Saul’s conversion account with Saul present beside him? Burchard makes a significant observation: “Moreover, it is according to style that a person who is affected by a supernatural experience should tell it himself.” Indeed protocol and civility within eastern Mediterranean culture suggest that Saul himself was the narrator. A comparable narrative situation is found in 2 Kings 8:4-6 where Gehazi is recounting to the king of Israel Elisha’s wondrous works including the raising of the Shunammite woman’s son from the dead. At that moment the woman herself appears before the king to appeal for the restoration of her property. Gehazi introduces the woman and her son to the king who then asks her to finish telling the story of her son’s resurrection. Since the Shunammite and her son – the subject of Gehazi’s story – are now present to provide a firsthand account, the king wants her and not Gehazi to complete the story since she witnessed this event firsthand. Similarly, Saul would have told his own story.

A Fourth Conversion Account

The description of Saul’s conversion in Acts 9:27 is clearly an abridgment of the longer accounts in chapters 9, 22, and 26. Nevertheless, it shares three features with them. First, on the road to Damascus “he had seen the Lord.” Each describes how Paul saw a light (9:3; 22:6; 26:13). In 9:17 and 22:14 it is Ananias who declared that Saul had seen the

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20 Eyewitness testimony was also important to Paul as he recounts those who have seen the resurrected Lord including himself as “last of all he appeared (ἀφίη) to me, as to one with an untimely birth” (1 Cor. 15:8).
21 These words of Ananias are unmentioned in the initial account in chapter 9, although Jesus’ statement to him about Saul, “This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the people of Israel” (Acts 9:15), is functionally equivalent. In the third account in Acts 26:17-18 Jesus himself gives the call.
22 A narrative feature of Luke is to add details to subsequent retellings of an event, which has caused some scholars to question their historicity rather than recognise this as a literary device of ancient storytellers and historiographers; see Keener, Acts, 2:1598.
23 In his conversation with the Lord in Acts 22:20 Paul mentions to his shame that he was an eyewitness to an event that he would rather forget: the murder of Jesus’ witness Stephen.
24 Speaking about the well-known “we” passages in Acts in which the author purports to be an eyewitness, F Scott Spencer, Journeying through Acts: A Literary-Cultural Reading. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004:172-73, writes: “Whatever the historical cause of introducing ‘we’ at this juncture (which in the absence of synoptic sources remains indeterminable), the rhetorical effect injects a fresh sense of both intimacy and legitimacy into the narrative.”
25 Burchard, Der dreizehnte Zeuge, 147-48; German text: “Im übrigen ist es stilgemäß, daß eine von einem übernatürlichen Erlebnis betroffene Person dieses selbst erzählt.”
Lord/Righteous One, while in 26:16 Jesus himself announced his appearance to Saul. Second, he spoke to the Lord (9:5, 22:8; 26:15).\textsuperscript{27} And third, he had spoken boldly in Damascus in the name of the Lord. Though the verb παρρησίαζομαι is not used in the other three accounts, Luke uses it five in other places in Acts to characterise Paul’s preaching as bold and fearless: Jerusalem (9:28), Pisidian Antioch (13:45), Iconium (14:3), Ephesus (19:8) and Caesarea (26:26).\textsuperscript{28}

An observation often made in commentaries on Acts is that Luke records three accounts of the conversions of Cornelius and of Saul. For example, Keener writes: “This is a strategic section of Acts, which includes two events that Luke ultimately reports three times: the conversions of Paul (9:1-8; 22:4-16; 26:6-18) and Cornelius (10:1-48; 11:5-15; 15:7-9).”\textsuperscript{29} Why such repetition? Haenchen affirms: “Luke employs such repetitions only when he considers something to be extraordinarily important and wishes to impress it unforgettably on the reader.”\textsuperscript{30} Although unstated by Luke, there may be an assumption that “a matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses” (Deut. 19:15).\textsuperscript{31}

Nevertheless, a significant observation to make here is that Acts 9:27 provides a fourth account of Saul’s conversion regardless of whether Barnabas or Paul is the speaker. Like Peter’s third retelling of the conversion of the Gentiles at the Apostolic Council (Acts 15:7-9), this fourth retelling of Saul’s conversion is brief. Apart from the initial narration of each conversion, either Peter or Paul is the speaker for subsequent recounts of these conversions. This observation lends further support for the interpretation that Saul is likewise the speaker in 9:27.

**Conclusion**

This article has demonstrated that the preferred subject of Acts 9:27 is Saul, not Barnabas, as is stated in many English translations. Various arguments have been offered to show that the ambiguity of the sentence’s unstated subject is better resolved as a reference to Saul. The significance of eyewitness testimony in Luke-Acts suggests that individuals recounted their own experiences rather than have others tell the story. Thus in this case Saul recounted his conversion story to the apostles rather than Barnabas. This account provides a fourth telling of Saul’s conversion in Acts, an observation previously overlooked by most commentators.

\textsuperscript{27} See note 5 regarding the translation issues behind this interpretation.

\textsuperscript{28} These bold proclamations, as Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 243, suggests, were “perhaps under the Holy Spirit’s impulsion.” Apollos is likewise characterised as someone who spoke fearlessly (Acts 18:26).

\textsuperscript{29} Keener, *Acts*, 2:1598; see note 7. Witherington, *Acts*, 303 likewise notes that there are three full treatments of Paul’s conversion, but in his discussion of 9:27 (326) he fails to mention the brief treatment there or Barnabas’s role in it.


\textsuperscript{31} Paul himself cites this verse, not in the context of a capital crime (Deut 17:6; cf. Heb 10:28), but rather warns of corrective measures to the Corinthians on his third visit (2 Cor 13:1; cf. Matt 18:16; 1 Tim 5:19). For Paul’s use here, see Frank J Matera, *II Corinthians*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2003:305-6.