

Introduction

Hell Without Fires: A New Place to Call Home

I

And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind. Romans 12:22

The conversion of Saul, as recorded in the book of Acts, occurred around A.D. 34, along the sandy, sun-baked road on the outskirts of Damascus. It was a physical, mental, moral, and spiritual experience, which revolutionized Saul's life and turned Christianity's most vigorous persecutor into Paul, its most ardent defender. First, a supernatural event occurs, as a light brighter than the midday sun shines around Saul. An audible voice sounds, although Saul and his companions see no one. In violent physical response to these wonders, Saul falls to the ground, blinded, in awe of the light and the voice. As Saul lies there, he undergoes a spiritual transformation: he is made aware that he is a sinner, in need of God's forgiveness. The voice does not ask Saul why he is persecuting the church and its believers; instead, the voice asks: "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou *me*?" (Acts 9:4). Saul, with fear and trembling, recognizes the voice as God's, and his response is the only one befitting the repentant and astonished sinner: "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" (Acts 9:6). Saul receives his calling and is told to arise and go into the city to discover his new mission. This extraordinary event ends with a change of name and identity: "Saul" goes down in Christian history as the persecutor of the early church; "Paul" is still heralded as the church's fiercest advocate and apostle of modern Christianity.

Of all the conversion experiences recorded in the Christian Bible, this is perhaps the most dramatic and the most often repeated in detailed accounts by several apostles. Paul's written record of his experience in his epistles to the early Christian church sets the precedent for written conversion narratives. It served as encouragement and inspiration to others and offered

proof that Paul had indeed been called and chosen, despite his initial persecution of the church.

Yet perhaps the most compelling reason for Paul's written account is his desire to express an almost inexpressible supernatural experience—that personal encounter with a divine God, who alters the laws of nature and the universe to communicate a calling to him; a divine God who is instantly recognizable as “Lord” and who has the power, in an instant, to communicate both a change of identity and a change of name. In his book *Sacred Estrangement*, Peter Dorsey calls the conversion of Paul “the model for future spiritual autobiographers” (18). And it is clearly this biblical account that has the most influence on the often-neglected body of African-American spiritual narratives.

Compare Paul's experience to the conversion experience related orally by a former slave in Clifton Johnson's collection, *God Struck Me Dead*:

One day while in the field plowing, I heard a voice. I looked but saw no one. Again the voice called . . . with this I stopped, dropped the plow and started running, but the voice kept on speaking to me. Everything got dark, and I was unable to stand any longer . . . I tried to cry and move but was unable to do either. Plants and animals . . . began to cry out “I am blessed, but you are damned!” With this I began to pray . . . an angel came and touched me, and I looked new . . . there came a soft voice saying “you are a chosen vessel unto the Lord. Preach the gospel, and I will preach with you.” (Johnson 15)

Paul's experience on the road to Damascus is a sudden and emotional encounter; it occurs without warning or preparation. Paul is instantaneously changed forever. Likewise, as the slave plows his master's field, he experiences the supernatural darkening of the daylight; he hears an audible voice; he has a physical reaction to these wonders. He immediately recognizes that this is the work of God, repents of his sin, and receives his calling. He is changed forever and even “looks new.” He is no longer to be called a slave but a “chosen vessel.” This fairly typical account of an African-American conversion experience does not simply model itself after Paul's experience; it takes Paul's experience to another level. While Paul is left blinded, the former slave is unable to move or even speak. While Paul's travel companions witness the effects of this supernatural encounter, the former slave's conversion is attended even by the exclamations of plants and animals. And while Paul dutifully receives his calling, the former slave is literally touched by an angel and offered a promise: that God himself will preach with him.

Within this analysis of five antebellum African-American spiritual nar-

ratives, we will discover that these narratives are not simply imitations of existing literary forms (religious or secular), but that they, in fact, offer new ways of thinking about the intersections of race and religion for early African Americans. Simply put, African-American spiritual narratives are those first-person autobiographical accounts, usually written by formerly enslaved persons, which give a detailed account of religious conversion, most often conversion to Protestant Christianity. While the spiritual narrative (also called the conversion narrative) is often grouped within the larger body of slave narratives and autobiographies, the central thematic issue of the spiritual narrative is how, why, and when the narrator “got religion.” As we examine such narratives, we must ask ourselves why these men and women chose to share their most intimate religious experiences with an audience. What questions do their narratives answer (and ask) about slave life and religious faith? For what reasons was the conversion experience—explicitly the conversion to Protestant Christianity—such a fundamental and life-altering experience for the first generations of African descendants in America?

Spiritual narratives represent just one form of a larger tradition: African Americans’ engagement with Christianity and the Christian Bible, particularly the signs, symbols, and stories that comprise Christian dogma. Christianity represents a contradictory faith for African Americans; its signs, symbols, words, and messages were used to physically and mentally enslave. When all other arguments for continuing chattel slavery failed, the Bible’s teaching for “slaves to obey their masters” succeeded. Its rhetoric has consistently been used to exploit, denigrate, and discriminate. And yet, much of African-American writing, from the early spiritual narratives we will examine, to the works of contemporary novelists like James Baldwin and Toni Morrison, is still self-consciously about a process of faith and belief—a faith that leads to wholeness for an individual and for a community and the struggle between the rhetoric of “slave-holding Christianity,” as Frederick Douglass terms it, and a Christianity that liberates mind and body.

Antebellum spiritual narratives imply that for African Americans, the adoption of a religious faith was an *epistrepho*, a turning to and, thus, a turning away from something or someone. Religious conversion is also a *metanoeo*, a change in heart and/or a change in mind. In the broadest Christian sense, conversion is most often used to signify a turning away from sin (repentance) and a turning to and belief in God (faith). Secondly, conversion also involves a change in mind or a change in heart, which usually implies the abandonment of one set of beliefs (or lack of a formalized belief

system) and the adoption of a new set of beliefs. Yet, our antebellum narratives suggest that this is just the beginning of the conversion experience. While religious faith is supposed to involve repentance and the consequent blotting out of sin, African-American spiritual narratives transform “repentance” to include the blotting out and forgiving (though not *forgetting*) of the sins of others.

Within the Johnson collection of oral spiritual narratives, Charlie, an ex-slave, gives an account of a chance meeting with his former slave master after the Civil War. The slave master had severely beaten Charlie many times during his bondage, and Charlie bore lacerations on his back as evidence of this abuse. When asked by the former slave master if Charlie has forgiven him, Charlie reveals that he has indeed forgiven his former master:

For the God I serve is a God of love and I can't go to his kingdom with hate in my heart. I have felt the power of God and tasted his love and this has killed all the spirit of hate in my heart . . . whenever a man has been killed dead and made alive in Christ Jesus, he no longer feels like he did when he was a servant of the devil. (Johnson 40)

It is clear here that the “devil” Charlie indicates is not just a reference to the spiritual bondage of Satan, but to the physical bondage he experiences under a human devil. After his spiritual transformation, Charlie not only turns from sin and toward Christ, but taking on the role of a Christlike figure, he graciously forgives the sins committed against him. As Charlie’s extraordinary story reveals, for African Americans, religious conversion was such a “fundamental reorientation in approach to life” that the “historical and narrative evidence indicate that the black conversion experience was of a qualitatively different level” than the experiences of white Christians (Lincoln & Mamiya 231). While the manifestation of religious faith for Charlie allows him to forgive, he does not forget. Charlie’s spiritual conversion is of such a fundamentally singular kind that he is able to live with a memory of hate, *but not with the hate itself*.

In addition to turning away from sin and accepting a new belief system, conversion can also be, as Peter Dorsey implies, a turning away from self toward community; conversion is itself the desire to work within and transform one’s community. This community-centered spiritual transformation in African-American literature usually involves the convert’s telling and retelling of his story, actively teaching and instructing others. Referring to the day of his conversion, one former slave says that “since that day I have been preaching the gospel I am not a bit tired. I can tell anyone about God

in the darkest hour of midnight, for it is written on my heart” (Johnson 18). Another convert relates: “it gives me pleasure to talk about God, for he has done so many wonderful things. I could not, if I would, refrain from talking about him” (Johnson 96).

Adopting a new faith system is not, then, merely a passive and inward acceptance of God’s grace, but an outward, active, and continual process in transforming one’s life and one’s community. Ideas about spiritual conversion in African-American literature can be framed around this verse from Romans:

And be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. (12:2)

The concept of transformation by renewing one’s mind suggests that while religious faith is a psychological activity, it has ramifications in the physical world for the individual convert and for his or her community. For our antebellum narrators, conversion is proof that God has divinely entered into an intimate relationship with an individual; conversion is proof, as Paul indicates in Galatians 6:3, that “neither Greek nor Jew, slave nor free, male nor female” is superior; all can have access to this relationship with the divine. Religious conversion is ultimately proof of one’s status within humanity—that one is a human being, not chattel or the last rung on the Great Chain of Being. As William Clements explains, the rite of passage of the “conversion trauma accompanies a profound change in the subject’s identity from sinner to Christian, from a person immersed in the world’s carnality to one bathed in spiritual glory, from profane to sacred” (110). For African Americans, conversion offered the possibility of being recognized within a religious system, the right of “membership” (though in many instances not full membership) in a sacred body that does not call you other, outsider, or sinner, but fellow Christian.

The significance of the conversion experience represented in African-American spiritual narratives resides in a singular balance of creative power: the Christian God presented to African Americans did not so much convert them as they completely transformed traditional understandings of God. As these narratives make abundantly clear, through their words, African Americans transformed the power of the “Word.” Or, as Paul Radin writes in his foreword to *God Struck Me Dead*: “the Negro was not converted to God. He converted God to himself”(6). He converted God to himself by not believing that the only faith needed was faith in God; by faith he