

My book on the “Triumph of Christianity” will deal with how and why people converted to the Christian faith. (As I think I’ve said, unlike some scholars I have no problem calling the earliest followers of Jesus who came to believe in his resurrection “Christian.”) The best known and most important conversion was Paul. Seeing how/why he converted is a key for understanding his own subsequent mission to convert gentiles to the faith. Here is my current thinking on the issue

To start with, it is impossible to know either what led up to Paul’s conversion or what exactly happened at the time. We do have a narrative description in the book of Acts, and it is this description that provides the popular images of Paul seeing a blinding light on the road to Damascus, falling from his horse, and hearing the voice of Jesus asking “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me” (Acts 9:1-19). The account of Acts 9 is retold by Paul in both chapter 22 and chapter 29. The historical problems it presents have long intrigued and perplexed scholars. For one thing, the three accounts differ in numerous contradictory details. In one account Paul’s companions don’t hear the voice but they see the light; in another they don’t see anyone but they hear the voice. In one account they all fall to the ground from the epiphanic blast, in another they remain standing. In one account Paul is told to go on to Damascus where a disciple of Jesus will provide him with his marching orders, in another he is not told to go but is given his instructions from Jesus himself on the spot. Clearly we are dealing with a narrative that has been molded for literary reasons, not with some kind of disinterested historical report.

The other problem is that

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