

Apuleius and The New Testament: Lucius' Conversion Experience

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We have reason to trust Apuleius. The picture which he draws us is very remarkable...His [Lucius'] devotion is the devotion of a man delivered from evil straits: it is an outpouring of love and gratitude.¹

A.D. Nock's "trusting" of Apuleius in his chapter, "the Conversion of Lucius," is endowed with a sense of openness in taking him at face value which almost seems naïve today given the doubting and second-guessing that has so revolutionized Apuleian scholarship in the last generation,² a revolution that, in particular, casts doubt today on the sincerity and believability of the conversion experience described in Book 11 of the *Metamorphoses*. Yet I believe that it remains true that light can be shed on that experience by a comparison with the Christian conversion of St. Paul, another unlikely convert, in the *Book of Acts*. Both Apuleius' Lucius and Paul in the New Testament share such an eagerness to regain value in their lives that they are willing to undergo enormous risks and embrace a new reality which is almost too good to be true, containing as it does many unanswered questions and always implying the possibility of failure and ridicule.

My argument in this paper is not that the *Metamorphoses*, a comic novel, consciously uses early Christian literature as a source; Apuleius probably had nothing but contempt for Christianity and may have hoped that his pro-Isis propaganda would serve as a counter-force to the rapid spread of Chris-

¹ Nock 1961, 155. I want to thank the Rev. Carole McGowan as well as the anonymous readers of *Ancient Narrative* for a number of insights.

² For a humorous example of mockery of Apuleius the cunning pitchman, see Henderson 2001 (cf. 191, "...this two-faced text at once tricks and treats us...")

tianity in North Africa in his day (so P.G. Walsh³). There are several possible references to Christianity, but the most likely is probably 9.14.2 when the monotheistic baker's wife is denounced as *pessimam et ante cunctas mulieres longe deterrimam*, "the worst and by far the most depraved woman in the world,"⁴ addicted to continual whoring and drinking (the early Christians were suspected of unnatural practices and heavy drinking because of their secret meetings and use of wine in their rituals⁵), while her subsequent association with black magic and the hiring of a witch to murder her husband may reflect a popular association between Christianity and these practices.⁶ Though this passage has all the marks of the periodic hyperbolic denunciations made by Lucius the ass, in this instance it probably reflects Apuleius' contempt for the beliefs and practices of Christians (shared by Tacitus *Annales* 15.44 *per flagitia invisos* "hated for their notorious crimes;" compare Apuleius' description of the *flagitia* which had flowed into the soul of the baker's wife). Pliny the Younger is similarly disgusted at his discoveries about Christian ritual: 10.96, *superstitionem pravam et immodicam* "a degenerate sort of cult carried to extravagant lengths." Such parallels between the language describing the baker's wife and anti-Christian slurs are developed at further length by Victor Schmidt.⁷ Schmidt goes on to show how the language describing the Isis cult in Book 11 may continue a subtext in which Christian beliefs and practices are implicitly criticized. But as we campaign against the traits of our enemies we may end up by embracing them. I am attempting in this paper to show how readily the concepts and language of the final book of the *Metamorphoses* reflect the spiritual experiences of some of Apuleius' near-contemporaries and indeed, easily fall in with, and are parallel to, those of early Christian literature.

The final book of the *Metamorphoses*, in my opinion, shares with New Testament writings the hunger for spiritual renewal and a sense that change is in the air, that the time has come to take some drastic and even dangerous

³ Walsh 1970, 186 argues that the dramatic growth of Christianity in North Africa in the late 2nd century "may well have been influential in firing Apuleius to his glorification of Isis."

⁴ Translations from the *Metamorphoses* are by J.A. Hanson (Loeb edition).

⁵ See, for example Wilken 2003, 41–44 ("A Bacchic Society") and 44–47 ("An Obscure and Secret Association").

⁶ Wilken 2003, 98 (Jesus as a magician and this charge against Christians becoming common).

⁷ Schmidt 1997, who shows for example (53–56) the connotations of the ironic phrase *deus unicus*, comparing this supposedly narrow idea of monotheism with the wider Isaic concept of religious syncretism. Hunink 2000 extends this research to include the minor works of Apuleius. See also Ramellii 2001, 203–207.

risks in order to avoid being drawn into the evils of the age (“Save yourselves from this corrupt generation,” *Acts* 2.40;⁸ “...grant me rest and peace from the cruel mischances I have endured,” *Met.* 11.2.4). I do not agree with those who find in *Metamorphoses* Book 11 a satire or parody of Lucius’ conversion experience;⁹ Edsall indeed goes so far as to conclude that “...Lucius is transformed from a duped follower into a charlatan priest.” (Edsall 1996, 218). Such proposals stem in part from a reluctance to face the prospect that the final book of the novel might set a tone appropriate to the exploration of the meaning of divine revelation on a level more serious and probing than is ever attempted in any of Lucius’ earlier adventures, such as the encounter with the traveling Syrian priests. Nevertheless, these critics have raised some interesting objections which I here acknowledge against a “straight” reading, or more accurately, they have pointed to questions raised by Apuleius himself in his own text, and which have in fact caused me to look at the whole issue of Lucius’ conversion in a new light, as an intrinsically ambiguous though ultimately positive experience.

Paul’s adventures, like those of Lucius, bring him inexorably to Rome, in Paul’s case to preach the Gospel under house arrest until he can be put on trial, in Lucius’ case to worship daily at the temple of Isis and preach in the forum.¹⁰ Both are in Rome as the practitioners of an outlandish foreign cult. Tacitus puts it (*Annales* 15.44): “...Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular.” For the narrator of the *Metamorphoses*, however, reveling in his new identity, Rome is the “holy, inviolate city,” (*sacrosanctam istam civitatem*, 11.26.3), a fitting place for practice of his new religion. Paul as he approaches Rome is greeted by followers on the Via Appia, who give him new courage for which he gives thanks to God (*Acts* 28.15). Lucius in Rome is a new man, having been crushed and transformed by his youthful experiments with sex, curiosity, and magical arts. But Paul too has become a new person, having been guilty in the past of compulsive anger and violent rage, particularly as directed against the Christians (as described in *Acts* 8–9 and suggested by Paul himself in *Galatians* 1.13¹¹). If Lucius is puzzled and troubled by the financial sacrifices demanded of him as a follower of Isis, and finds the demand of celibacy very difficult to obey, Paul had his own counterpart in the

⁸ Biblical translations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

⁹ Winkler 1985, Harrison 2000, Edsall 1996.

¹⁰ See Nock 1961, in his chapter “The Path to Rome,” 66–76.

¹¹ Actually, the phrase *kath’ hyperbolon* in *Gal.* 1.13, translated by the NRSV as “violently,” really means “beyond measure,” but the translators may have been influenced by the violence described in the *Acts* passage.

mysterious “thorn in the flesh” which he calls “a messenger of Satan” (2 *Cor.* 12.7). The thorn in the flesh is an unexplained ailment which tormented him after his conversion, on his missionary journeys, to keep him from being too elated and to more vividly illustrate God’s power by calling attention to his own weakness. But more broadly, the conversion experiences of both men subject them to suffering and hardship; in Lucius’ case, he learns at the outset of his conversion experience (*Met.* 11.19.3) that his life as a follower of Isis will be difficult, including a strict obligation of chastity and a life which, despite Isis’ protection, will continue to be subjected to “countless vicissitudes” (*multis casibus*). Paul for his part, in 2 *Cor.* 11.23–29 lists the many and varied hardships which he has been forced to accept as an inevitable part of being a minister of Christ, including beatings, cold, hunger, all part of his regimen in learning humility. Compare *Acts* 9.16, where the Lord says to Ananias “I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

Perhaps most painful of all for Paul was the separation from his own people which his conversion to Christianity seemed to entail, and he agonized about whether he had even made the right choice: “I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh” (*Rom.* 9.2-3). If the Israelites could not be saved who had received a blessing as God’s chosen people, and from whose number Christ himself arose, Paul in his darkest moments has doubts about his own salvation and indeed, which side of the issue he ought to stand on.

The reason both Lucius and Paul are willing to endure great sacrifices is the world-changing nature of the experience to which they have been introduced, that has caused them to look at everything in a new light. Both men speak about their encounters with the divine as a passage to a new and higher state of reality. Paul recalls that Moses put a veil over his face to protect him from gazing at the glory of God directly (2 *Cor.* 3.13), and claims that this veil is still present to prevent the minds of the Jews from a full perception of the divine, but that “when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 *Cor.* 3.16–17). The climactic vision of Osiris in the very last chapter of the *Metamorphoses* speaks of that deity with a series of superlatives as “mightiest of the great gods, the highest of the mightiest...” and says that when he addressed Lucius, “he had not transformed himself into a semblance other than his own, but deigned to welcome me face to face with his own venerable utterance...” (*Met.* 11.30.3). Paul too appeals to Jesus’ post-

resurrection appearance to him, after appearances to the apostles and others, as an important legitimizing factor of his ministry (1 *Cor.* 15.7-8).

Paul's understanding of the revelation of the glory of God is that as we gaze upon it "...with unveiled faces...we are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory into another..." (2 *Cor.* 3.18). In a striking passage describing his initiation, Lucius stands before the image of Isis in a multicolored robe, holding a flaming torch, and his "head was beautifully bound with a crown made of leaves of shining palm, jutting out like rays of light. After I had thus been decorated in the likeness of the Sun and set up in the guise of a statue, the curtains were suddenly opened and the people wandered round to view me" (*Met.* 11.24.4). He remains in the temple a few days gazing at the image of the goddess, himself now more than mortal, transformed in her presence into a radiant statue of light which reflects her divine glory. With this might be compared the description of the priests in the procession in 11.10.1-2, whose appearance suggests their dissociation from everyday human reality: "while the men's heads were completely shaven and their skulls gleamed brightly," (as Lucius' own will soon be), like "earthly stars of the great religion" again reflecting the glory of the goddess.

Apuleius' narrator stresses (even with a sense of mockery aimed at the reader, who is unlikely to believe his extravagant claims), the paradoxes of the extraordinary events which occurred at his initiation:

I came to the boundary of death and, having trodden the threshold of Proserpina, I traveled through all the elements and returned. In the middle of the night I saw the sun flashing with bright light. I came face to face with the gods below and the gods above and paid reverence to them from close at hand. Behold, I have told you things which perforce you may not know, though you have heard them. (*Met.* 11.23.7)

The language of Apuleius' narrator, though it may ring true for the initiate, is beyond the ordinary reader's power to understand meaningfully. Paul too recounts an ineffable mystical experience that he evidently underwent himself but from which he is strangely dissociated ("I know a person"), and one which, moreover, he lacks the power adequately to describe, in addition to the fact that it includes secrets which he has not been permitted to divulge:

I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. (2 *Cor* 12.2–4)

Lucius, while relating the secrets of his initiation, warns the reader that he will be unable to penetrate their meaning; Paul alludes to a mystery even while admitting that his account will bring no profit (2 *Cor* 12.1) Each of them teases the reader by hinting at miracles in store for the convert that are beyond human comprehension.

Paul, in a speech reported by Luke after his conversion, emphasizes the anger and violence of his early persecution of the church which caused him to abandon all moderation and to pursue Christians even to foreign cities (*Acts* 26.11). After his conversion, the change in Paul's personality is so great that at first the other disciples are afraid of him (*Acts* 9.26), and later the proconsul Festus suspects that his great learning has made him mad (*Acts* 26.24). In the *Metamorphoses* Apuleius uses language to describe Lucius' attraction to magic which stresses both the self-destructiveness and the madness of his thought-process; when Byrrhaena tells him about Pamphile he is so eager to pursue magic that he is like one ready to jump into the bottom of a pit in one quick leap (*Met.* 2.6.1) and when he actually beholds her transformation he is out of his mind with excitement, "amazed to the point of madness" (*Met.* 3.22.1).¹² The natural goodness of his noble upbringing provided no adequate defense against his lust for magic and the closely related sexual lure which almost seemed to turn him into a different person.

Though Lucius as a devotee of Isis finds the maintenance of celibacy very difficult, he shudders when he looks back at the time when association with Fotis was the start of his painful wanderings. The moving of the Christian mission into Macedonia caused Paul and his companions no end of fear and physical affliction, but the eventual success of his mission caused Paul to be filled with consolation and to be overjoyed in all his affliction (2 *Cor.* 7.2–7).

The ending of the *Metamorphoses* seems very abrupt; Lucius reports that he shaved his head displaying his baldness quite openly "wherever I went"

¹² Very useful here are Shumate's comparison with St. Augustine's account of the madness of his pre-Christian way of life, and her discussion of the connection between Lucius' madness and his intemperate curiosity (Shumate 1996, 240–249).

(*quoquo versus ... obibam*); the ending on this note surprises us almost as much as anything in the book, and leaves us with a sense that much is left to be said.¹³

Rursus denique quaqua raso capillo collegii vetustissimi et sub illis Sullae temporibus conditi munia, non obumbrato vel obtecto calvitio sed quoquo versus obvio, gaudens obibam.

Then, once more shaving my head completely, neither covering up nor hiding my baldness, but displaying it, I carried out the duties of that ancient priesthood [sc. of the college of *Pastophori*], founded in the days of Sulla, joyfully wherever I went. (11.30.5)¹⁴

Lucius' acceptance without shame of his baldness shows his renunciation of obsession with appearance which had manifested itself almost *ad absurdum* with Fotis' sensuous hair in Book 2. However, since the man with shaven head can also be a clown, a figure of ridicule, the likelihood of his mockery by others for his conversion is one of the unsettled issues, and when Lucius denies that he "covers up or hides" his shaven head, surely the implication is that baldness might normally be a mark of shame. (With this we might compare Paul's surprisingly defensive claim that, though born a Jew, he is "not ashamed of the Gospel," *Rom.* 1.16). That Lucius might be a comical rather than a triumphant figure is very much still lurking in the back of the reader's mind at the end of the novel; indeed some critics have drawn an analogy between the Isis-festival in Cenchreae at the start of Book 11 and the Risus-Festival in Hypata in Book 3, arguing that Lucius is once again being duped and exposed to the mockery of a crowd.¹⁵

But the experience of conversion, with its total change of priorities and life-style, may easily lead to mockery on the part of those who are startled by and incredulous of the changes in the new initiate. The god Osiris warns Lucius that he is bound to have enemies, when he bids Lucius "to continue as now to win fame in the courts as an advocate, and not fear the slanders of detractors which my industrious pursuit of legal studies had aroused in

¹³ Cf. Winkler 1985, 224, Shumate 1996, 326–327; but some Greek novels end similarly on a note of continued action rather than completion: Achilles Tatius' *Leucippe and Cleitophon* and Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe* in which the wedding night of the couple is interspersed with glimpses of the future. There is an Old Testament parallel for the ending of *Acts* with the unresolved fate of Paul: King Kehoiachin is treated kindly as a captive by King Evilmerodach of Babylon in 2 Kings 25: 28–30; see Trompf 1984, 227.

¹⁴ I have changed Hanson's translation here to call attention to the word-order of the Latin.

¹⁵ Examples of this interpretation are cited by Egelhaaf-Gaiser 2000, 91.

Rome” (*Met.* 11.30.4). Paul when he first preached to the Galatians (*Gal.* 4.12–15) was a trial to them because of his physical infirmity, but they did not reject him, indeed they would have torn out their own eyes to give him if it had been necessary (possibly he was suffering from a loathsome condition of running pus in the eyes)? The Galatians accepted his humble condition, but instead of rejecting him, they saw him as an angel of God (compare also *1 Cor.* 4.9–13 which concludes with “We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day.”). Such paradoxes, in which the moment of salvation also leaves the convert potentially exposed to ridicule, are familiar to Christian symbolism in which the mocked and humiliated Christ is also a triumphant figure. Harvey Cox points out that the new convert is left straddling two worlds:

Bergson’s theory that the comic occurs in a situation open to disparate orders of interpretation suggests that man is capable of living in these disparate spheres. Their very disparity supplies the leverage for the comic perspective.¹⁶

The end of the *Book of Acts* seems to leave the story in suspension with nothing resolved, though Paul’s death seems to lie ahead in the near future (“he lived there two whole years” implies an end to his house arrest); why is it not described? In the same spirit as Osiris’ warning at the end of the *Metamorphoses*, Paul has been divinely convinced that many of the Jews will never be convinced by his preaching, and he dismisses them by quoting from *Isaiah* 6.9–10 beginning “You will indeed listen, but never understand...” (*Acts* 28.26) and resigning himself to preach to the Gentiles. Then in the final two verses of the book:

Ἐνέμεινεν δὲ διετίαν ὅλην ἐν ἰδίῳ μισθώματι καὶ ἀπεδέχετο πάντας τοὺς εἰσπορευμένους πρὸς αὐτόν, κηρύσσων τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ διδάσκων τὰ περὶ τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ μετὰ πάσης παρρησίας ἀκωλύτως.

He lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. (*Acts* 28.30–31)

¹⁶ Cox 1969, 155.

The sudden ending of *Acts* with Paul still alive but awaiting trial has often caused controversy; was Paul actually still alive at the time of the writing of *Acts*, or, as seems more plausible, does the author prefer to leave the narrative in a hopeful and upbeat point rather than carry it through to the first great persecution of Christians which is on the horizon and leads to the death of both Paul and Peter? The last finite verb in *Acts*, “welcomed,” is in the imperfect tense (compare *obibam* at the very end of Apuleius’ narrative) and Paul’s freedom despite his house-arrest, and his ability to preach at will, as well as the prophecy that the Gentiles will be willing to “listen,” (*Acts* 28.28), set the tone for the tentative hope with which the book ends..

Acts also puts a curious emphasis on Paul’s ability to live ἐν ἰδίῳ μισθώματι (“at his own expense” or “in his own hired dwelling”), which is presented as part of the relative independence he enjoyed which made it possible to preach the word of God boldly and freely. With this financial independence mentioned by *Acts* should be compared Paul’s own account of his insistence in his epistles that he always supports himself in his preaching by working with his own hands, (1 *Cor.* 4.12), as part of his duty as a servant of Christ (cf. 1 *Cor.* 4.1). This emphasis on the new convert’s ability to support himself is matched in the *Metamorphoses* where the narrator (*Met.* 11.28.6) describes being able to support himself by pleading in the courts in Latin, though it is not his native language (similarly 11.30.2).¹⁷ Recent commentators (Winkler¹⁸ and Harrison¹⁹) have called attention to the series of demands made to Lucius for money and the overkill of his three stages of initiation, as placing an extraordinary emphasis on the financial cost of initiation, an emphasis which raises a red flag with the reader. Yet the triple initiation which these critics find so astonishing may have a literary purpose as much as a religious one: it is really another example of Apuleius’ fondness for triads, which (as Bernhard demonstrates²⁰) are found in the novel at all levels and can be used either to nail down a point or bring in some thematic variation (three robber stories, 4.9–22; three heroic maiden stories: Psyche,

¹⁷ Likewise Habrocomes, in Xenophon’s *Ephesian Tale* 5.8, is forced to take on the unpleasant job of a stonecutter to support himself.

¹⁸ Winkler 1985, 223–223: “Surprises at Rome: More and More Initiations”.

¹⁹ Harrison 2000, 245: “These constant mentions of the high cost of Lucius’ various initiations...suggest to the reader less naïve than Lucius that he is being duped by the cults of Isis and Osiris...”.

²⁰ Bernhard 1927, 62–74.

Plotina, and Charite).²¹ The emphasis on the financial burden is indeed extreme, to the point where Lucius is obligated to sell the very clothes on his back (11.28.3 “I sold my clothing, little as it was, and scraped together a sufficient sum,” *veste ipsa mea quamvis parvula distracta, sufficientem cor-rasi summulam*), though he is eventually rescued from his indigence when he arrives at Rome and finds a way to support himself as a lawyer.

But the Isiac cult’s requirement for extreme financial sacrifice which has troubled some readers of Apuleius, even at one point makes Lucius himself a doubter of the sincerity of the priests (11.29.3), seemingly giving the reader permission to do the same. The raising of the possibility that the Isiac clergy may after all be running a scam, like the eunuch priests of the Syrian goddess earlier in the novel (8.24-9.10) or the organizers of the Festival of Laughter in Hypata, throws a great burden on the reader, in a manner typical of Apuleius as author, to decide how to interpret the tone of the entire episode. Lucius’ doubts, however, should not be immediately accepted as exposing the venality of the cult and its priests; as Egelhaaf-Gaiser points out in her important book on Apuleius and the worship of Isis in the Roman empire, his doubts may be raised but they are ultimately removed as his faith grows in the Egyptian gods and their religion.²² Nor is the emphasis on the financial demands of the cult necessarily a ground for suspicion. It should be emphasized that the repeated requests for payment made to Lucius are presented as part of a regimen and sacrifice, including forced celibacy, which are an integral part of the worship of Isis. In 11.19.3 Lucius reports that he has found by investigation that the obligations of her cult were difficult, that he would be required to maintain strict sexual abstinence and that he would have to observe discipline with caution and circumspection (*cautoque circumspectu*). He soon has a vision of “shares” being sent him from Thessaly, and is assured of a sure profit (*lucrum certum*, 11.20.3) clearly in some sense other than monetary profit. Mithras the high priest in 11.21.3, “a serious man famous for his observance of austere religious discipline,” assures him that Isis’ providence is controlling everything related to the initiation, including the expenses. After his trip to Rome, Lucius finds that the meager funds from his inheritance have been used up, so that he is introduced to the priest Asinius Marcellus in a dream as *Madaurenses sed admodum pauperem*, “a man from Madauros ... [who] was quite poor,” Lucius reflects that he would

²¹ See now Relihan 2007, intro. xxx-xxxı, on the repeated initiations as part of a chronic hesitation experienced by Apuleius in bringing each book of the novel to a neat conclusion.

²² Egelhaaf-Gaiser 2000, 88-89.

not have hesitated in the past to spend his last possessions on pleasure, nor should he hesitate now to commit himself to a poverty he would not regret (11.28.4); moreover favoring Success (*favens Eventus*) is now on his side and he is able to support himself sufficiently as a lawyer. Poverty is part of the new life to which he now commits himself, and, along with sexual abstinence, it is part of his new training in self-discipline, while at the same time he is able to work in order to provide for his own support.

The demand for total sacrifice, which of course includes financial sacrifice, can also be paralleled in the Jewish and early Christian literature. In *Deuteronomy* there is an urgent appeal to give to the poor, and to do it in the right spirit, that is, with a generous heart: "Give liberally [to your needy brother] and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake" (*Deut.* 15.10). It is understood that giving will involve sacrifice, often to the point of personal risk and extreme discomfort. In the Gospels, both the wealthy and the poor are asked to contribute all that they have; at one extreme, the wealthy young ruler is asked to sell all of his many possessions and give to the poor (*Matt.* 19.22); at the other extreme, a widow (*Mark* 12.41–44) is praised by Jesus for putting her last two small coins, "all that she had to live on" (lit. "her whole life"), into the offering in the temple; it is the spirit of giving, a willingness to give until it hurts and beyond, which God honors. The reward each one receives will be in proportion to his or her generosity; as Paul says in *2 Cor.* 9.6, "...the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully." A story like the Parable of the Talents (*Matt.* 25.14–30), where a slave is thrown into the "outer darkness" for failing to invest and make a profit on the talent entrusted to him, is a reminder that a failure to contribute aggressively to the finances of the church can have dire consequences. Such demands for total sacrifice are certainly not welcomed by all, and can be met with protest from those on whom they are imposed, like the rich young man who goes away grieving when Jesus, even in a spirit of love, tells him he must sell all his possessions (*Matt.* 19:21–22). As Luke Johnson writes,

...God's good news is for the poor and not for the rich. By stripping ourselves of all our possessions and becoming destitute, we can place ourselves among the 'poor' and can therefore both receive and respond to God's invitation to the kingdom.²³

²³ Johnson 1981, 17.

The same kind of point is made in the passage in *Acts* 4.32–5.11, describing the early church's brief experiment with communism: the disciples agree to turn over all their possessions to the church, and even though we are told that "the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul," the system does not last for long, as some rebel against it almost from the start, and a deadly curse is put upon Ananias and Sapphira when they join the group but hold back on some of their property. With Lucius as with Paul the ability to become self-supporting through hard work is a double sign, first of the freedom and independence of the religious convert, but secondly and somewhat paradoxically, combined with his willingness as a servant of the divine to undergo the strict discipline of labor. There is an irony underscored in both cases since Paul, though acting freely, is under a kind of house arrest, whereas Apuleius' narrator has accepted the tenets of a sect that will severely restrict his personal freedom, and he finds the demand of celibacy also very hard to obey.

Despite the difficulties of the sacrifices, both Paul and Lucius gladly accept those restraints that replace their former involuntary servitude. In Paul's case, as he himself reports, he rebelled against the law of God and became subject to the law of sin which dwelt in his members (*Rom.* 7.21 ff.). Lucius, as is claimed in the often-quoted words of Mithras, the priest, despite all the advantages of his birth and upbringing, became subject to *serviles voluptates* "slavish pleasures," 11.15.1), where one level of meaning must surely be, "pleasures to which you were enslaved." In some sense this lesson means for Lucius the equivalent of a renunciation of the ethics of love poetry, in which the ideal lover sacrifices his personal freedom by proclaiming his enslavement to the beloved.²⁴

But Apuleius and Luke do not present the new life after conversion as one of acceptance by all; there are bound to be detractors who will mock the new convert's efforts. Paul is mocked by the skeptical Athenians, particularly when he preaches the resurrection of the dead (*Acts* 17.32), indeed, amusingly enough, some think that "Resurrection" or *Anastasis* is the name of some outlandish foreign deity (*Acts* 17.18.) Paul's reported words in *Acts* end on the expectation that his preaching will continue to be rejected by many Jews but will be well received by the Gentiles outside Israel, picking up on Jesus' prediction in *Acts* 1.8.²⁵ Osiris in his vision to Lucius in *Met.* 11.30.4 urges him to pursue his speechmaking in the courts of Rome and not

²⁴ On the ethos of Ovid's love poetry and its influence on the Middle Ages see e.g. Allen 1992; Pollmann 2005.

²⁵ Haenchen 1971, 726–737.

to fear the slanders which his fame will arouse among detractors, a definite sign, especially given its position at the very end of the book, that Lucius' new way of life will not automatically be accepted by all, and that since he cannot always accept approval from outsiders, he must find a way to provide his own encouragement.

Those who read irony and satire into Lucius' conversion story, though I disagree with their final conclusion, have called attention to something that needs to be confronted. They have done a service to criticism by pointing to doubts which are not modern inventions but are expressed in the text itself, and raise the whole conversion story of Lucius to a new level of complexity in which there are no simple and easy answers; and even Lucius is driven to question the motives of the priests in pressing him to undergo a third initiation. Osiris does warn Lucius that he will have detractors, and there is a surprising emphasis on the cost of initiation. In the long run, it adds to the depth of the Isis-book that the presence of skeptics about the motives of the clergy, with the ensuing suspicion that Lucius is all too willing to believe them and become their victim, are acknowledged and accepted as inevitable. But it must also be added that skepticism is not the final word offered in the text. It can be argued that the narrator provides a sufficient answer for his earlier doubts in 11.30.2, when the narrator explains that the expenses are provided for by the will of the gods:

Non Hercules laborum me sumptuumque quidquam tamen paenituit—quidni? Liberali deum providentia in stipendiis forensibus bellule fotum.

Yet, by Hercules, I felt no regret for my toil and expense: after all, through the bountiful care of heaven I was comfortably provided for by the income I earned as a lawyer.

This is the narrator's final word on the subject of the cost of his initiation, and a final reminder that his problems are solved by the care of all-seeing *providentia*, which in itself, considering what he has been through at the hands of *fortuna*, ought to be a sufficient answer to doubters. The emphasis on the costs required of the initiate and the necessity for securing a source of income in the outside world have been a sobering reminder to Lucius that the worship of Isis has not removed all his worldly needs, and that she is a mistress who demands total sacrifice; however, even in this duty he is not left on his own but is helped along by a friendly divine providence.

A different kind of religious enigma in Apuleius comes from an episode which has received much attention in recent criticism because it relates to

the meaning and tone of the Isiac intervention in Book 11, an intervention which leads to Lucius' transformation back into a man and his devotion to the cult of Isis. Specifically, we will focus on the speech made by the priest Mithras that immediately follows Lucius' restoration, and the crowd's reaction to it. First of all it should be mentioned that in the Greek epitome which shares Lucius' source, the sight of Lucius turning back into a man does not cause an outburst of joy but an uproar from the crowd (πάντες ἐκπεπληγμένοι δεινὸν ἐπεθορύβησαν, "all were amazed and made a terrible outcry"), and the theatre of spectators is divided in opinion:

Some thought that I should be burnt to death immediately as a scoundrel versed in terrible spells and able to adopt many shapes; the others advocated waiting and learning what I had to say before deciding on the matter. (ps.-Lucian *Onos* 54)

Lukios is soon after rescued by appealing to the governor of the province who knows his family, and we tend to remember the *Onos* in terms of that happy ending and the bawdy "Milesian" episode that follows when the woman who had loved him as an ass now rejects him because of his small member. It is worthwhile remembering, however, that in the Greek epitome and presumably in the lost *Metamorphoses* which was Apuleius' model, the change of the protagonist back into a man seems to have involved the serious threat that he would be burned to death by the crowd on the charge of witchcraft, though in the *Onos* that same crowd had shouted with applause just earlier (53) at the prospect of watching Lukios couple with the condemned woman. In writing his version, Apuleius, who introduced witchcraft at many points in his narrative, had to deal with the negative implications of his change back into a man, that is, the likelihood that it might be interpreted not as an occasion for joy but as a proof that he was a dabbler in the knowledge of the occult (and his own trial for witchcraft described in the *Apology* must have also been in the back of his mind). In dealing with this issue in his own novel, Apuleius perhaps wanted to give Lucius' reformation a more positive interpretation and to tilt the scene away from the danger expressed in the original. However, in so doing he has embedded in the ensuing scene an apparent contradiction which has caused some recent critical controversy, and I want to look at this episode in detail as one that underlines the complexity of the author's clues and of the double-edged blessing which conversion can mean to the reader.

To the end of enabling Lucius to re-enter human society, the speech of Isis to Lucius in 11.6 helps smooth his path. The goddess instructs him that she is already giving orders to the priest in his sleep about what to do next; that the crowd will give way before him, and no one will shrink from the sudden sight of an ass, *Neque...vel figuram tuam repente mutatam sequius interpretatus aliquis maligne criminabitur*, “Nor will anyone misinterpret your sudden transformation and prefer charges against you out of spite” (*Met.* 11.6.4); in other words, Isis is working to avoid the same angry confrontation of the mob which was probably found in the lost original epitomized by pseudo-Lucian. (Jesus’ miracles too sometimes received a hostile reception; after he cast demons into a herd of swine in *Matth.* 8.28-34, “the whole town...begged him to leave their neighborhood.”)

The next day dawns and, in a beautiful paragraph, Lucius pays tribute to the beauty of nature and the joy of happiness which surround him, as a crowd fills the streets (*Met.* 11.7.3-4). The crowd passes by with people dressed up in humorous costume, prompting laughter (*rideres* 11.8.4) As has often been observed, this is not the laughter of mockery and cruelty as was so often the case earlier in the novel, but the laughter of joy and celebration,²⁶ marking a notable change in mood from the cynical atmosphere of the earlier books. The ensuing scene, remarkable as it is, reflects traditional elements of Christian miracle literature. The details including the approach of the crowd, the reaching out by the priest to help the suppliant, the transformation of Lucius into human form, the astonishment of the crowd, and the spreading abroad of the story of the incident, all have parallels in the healing and other miracles of Jesus in the Gospels, as Egelhaaf-Gaiser has carefully demonstrated.²⁷

In the midst of the pageant were devotees of Isis (11.9.6) and initiates and priests (11.10.1), then Egyptian gods (11.11) and the “priest who carried my destiny and my very salvation” (11.12.1). Lucius eats the roses held out by the priest (11.13.2), and the crowd is amazed, while the devout give thanks for the gift of the goddess; clearly Isis’ influence has already tempered their reaction, as one can gather from a comparison with the negative reaction of the crowd in the *Onos*. The priest orders one of the faithful to cover the naked Lucius with a piece of linen, and then addresses him

²⁶ Schlam 1992, 124: “The tide turns to joy and release, reflected in the narrative by the thematic resolutions characteristic of comedy in its fullest sense. Laughter for most of the novel has been hostile mockery. It is only in sacred light that joyousness of mankind and nature finds safety from malice and misfortune.”. See now May 2006, on humor in this scene and how it may be taken as a parade of characters from the entire novel.

²⁷ Egelhaaf-Gaiser 2000, 81.

(11.14.5), apparently in private; at least there is no explicit mention that the crowd hears his address.

The priest, whose name is later revealed as Mithras, is not speaking on his own behalf but has been inspired by Isis to know all about Lucius and his wanderings, a fact which is repeated with great emphasis (11.6.3; 11.14.3; 11.14.5). He stresses that Lucius' nobility and good education were no help to him,²⁸ but that rather he received the reward for servile pleasures and ill-starred curiosity. (With this, compare Paul's struggles with the Law described in *Romans* 7, where it seemed that what was "good" threatened to bring death to him). The power of Fortune has now been broken, and Lucius must devote himself to the cult of Isis, in fact becoming her slave.

As the priest ends his utterance, gasping with the effort of transmitting the divine message, Lucius joins the sacred procession in attendance on the shrine. It is the passage just following that has given rise to considerable recent discussion:

Totae civitati notus ac conspicuus, digitis hominum nutibusque notabilis. Omnes in me populi fabulabantur: 'Hunc omnipotentis hodie deae numen augustum reformavit ad homines. Felix hercules et ter beatus, qui vitae scilicet praecedentis innocentia fideque meruerit tam praeclarum de caelo patrocinium, ut renatus quodam statim sacrorum obsequio desponderetur.

The whole city knew about me and I was the centre of attention as people pointed their fingers and nodded at me. Everyone was talking about me: "He is the one who was transformed back into a human being today by the majestic force of the all-powerful goddess. How fortunate he is, by Hercules, and thrice blessed! It is doubtless because of the innocence and faithfulness of his past life that he has earned such remarkable patronage from heaven that he was in a manner reborn and immediately engaged to the service of her cult." (*Met.* 11.16.2–4)

Winkler collects the testimony of critics who have found a puzzling contradiction here between the words of the priest, who condemned Lucius for having fallen into low pleasures and curiosity, and the admiration of the crowd, who assume that he has been favored by the goddess because of the

²⁸ With this might be compared in the ancient novels, for example, the nobility of Habrocomes in Xenophon's *Ephesian Tale*, which did not prevent him from constant suffering; or the nobility of the hero of *The Story of Apollonius King of Tyre*, which does not prevent his shipwreck and the loss of his fortune.

innocence of his former life.²⁹ More recently Harrison thinks that “the gap between these two interpretations...encourages the reader to think that not everything in the narrative of the Isis-cult is to be taken at face value.”³⁰ Kenney is concerned “that Lucius has done nothing to earn his salvation, as the ignorant comments of the crowd ironically remind us... A Platonic philosopher would surely have held that enlightenment had to be actively sought and worked for.”³¹ Tatum on the other hand tries, not entirely convincingly, to bridge the gap between the two passages by arguing that the crowd’s interpretation is “not ironic or a slip on Apuleius’ part, but an accurate explanation of his (Lucius’) credulity and inability to recognize evil,” in other words that the faults mentioned by the priest are not necessarily incompatible with the innocence praised by the crowd.³² Sandy is willing to accept without irony the crowd’s judgment of Lucius’ previous innocence, and thus thinks that Isis’ salvation is imposed on Lucius without any sense that she is delivering him from a wicked life.³³

After reading this perplexity of interpretation, one is almost tempted to conclude that there has in this instance been a resurrection of the old critical style of attributing careless errors to Apuleius whenever we encounter one of his puzzles, and indeed that kind of presupposition does apply to Lesky and Helm, two of the objectors cited by Winkler, as Winkler admits. But in fact Winkler and Harrison are implying something different, that the author has deliberately inserted two opposing points of view, both of which cannot possibly be true, to plant a doubt in our minds about the Isiac interpretation of Lucius’ transformation and life. Let us look closer. Winkler argues that “it would have been easy enough for Apuleius to specify that the second interpretation (that of the crowd) comes from the *profani*.” Although Apuleius does not in fact say this, if one wants to press the passage, what it describes is the priest addressing Lucius, not the crowd, (contrast his accuser at the Festival of Laughter, *Metamorphoses* 3.3–4, whose speech is aimed at the crowd):

Quo facto sacerdos vultu geniali et hercules inhumano in aspectum meum attonitus sic effatur:

²⁹ Winkler 1985, 212.

³⁰ Harrison 2000, 244.

³¹ Kenney 1998, intro. P. xxviii.

³² Tatum in Harrison 1999, 162 n. 2.

³³ Sandy 1978, 127.

After this the priest, staring in astonishment at me with a kindly and—by Hercules—more than human expression on his face, addressed me as follows. (*Met.* 11.14.5)

So Lucius is the person addressed; the person used is the second person singular and his name *Luci* is actually used once in the vocative, and the serene and kindly expression on his face again is aimed at Lucius as an individual. Though the priest wants the irreligious to draw a lesson from his “error,” this wish is expressed in the third person, *videant irreligiosi*, in other words he does not make this address directly to his intended audience, so this too may be meant for Lucius’ ears alone (again contrast the reminder of the crowd as audience in the Festival of Laughter in 3.8.5, *ad populum talia*).

If the speech of Isis (for these really are her words, merely being channeled through the priest) is heard or understood by Lucius alone, there is a possible parallel for this in the *Book of Acts* in the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus. The story is told three times, each with different details: in the initial account only Paul falls to the ground, while those accompanying Paul hear the voice of the one speaking to him, but see no one (*Acts* 9.7); in the second account, only Paul falls; the others see the light, but do not hear the voice (22.9). Finally, in the third account everyone falls to the ground, but apparently only Paul hears the voice: 26.14 “When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice...” The differences in the accounts are certainly surprising, especially considering that they do not come from different Gospels but from the same author’s single narrative; and yet, all three versions do agree that the bystanders did not share the same complete visual and auditory experience as Paul, the intended recipient of the divine visitation; as Haenchen says in his commentary on *Acts* 9.7, the details of the account may vary from one passage to another but the main point is that “...the witnesses may not participate in the revelation.” (One thinks also of Athena’s appearance to Achilles in *Iliad* 1.198, where Homer specifies that none of the others see her.) The difficulties of the profane in interpreting the divine message are also shown in John 12.28–29, where the voice of God proclaims “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again,” but these words are heard by the crowd as “thunder” or the voice of an angel.³⁴ Also in the case

³⁴ Compare also the inspired Sibyl in Vergil *Aeneid* 6.258–259, bidding the profane to depart from the sacred grove, followed by the poet’s own prayer, 264–267, to be allowed to reveal its secrets. On the *Acts* passage see Haenchen 1971, 322–323. He goes on to say: “When in 22.9 Luke writes that Saul’s companions saw the light but heard nothing, it is only the means of expression which are changed, not the sense of the statement.

of the description of Paul's conversion in *Acts* 9.7, it is possible that Luke's point is that Paul's companions hear the sound of Jesus' voice but cannot understand the meaning.³⁵ Egelhaaf-Gaiser makes the broader point, in reference to the crowd's remarks about Lucius' transformation into human shape, that misunderstandings tend to accompany miracles both before and after their occurrence (from the Gospels she cites John 5.7 and 2.10).³⁶

Thus the misinformed reaction of the crowd to Lucius' conversion, and their mistaken assumption that he has been favored by the gods because of the purity of his life, create a parallel with Christian miracles in which the wonders performed by the gods and their ineffable, life-altering communications are opaque to the profane. In particular, the astonishing favor of Isis to one not only undeserving, but detested by her for his asinine appearance, is not only an unexpected miracle but creates a special relationship between Lucius and Isis and her priests. Though the reader is invited to have a share in this relationship, it can only be discussed in the most general terms, and inevitably these cannot be fully comprehended or penetrated by the unenlightened, who are in danger of laughing at the whole idea.

At the conclusion of the speech, whose importance is highlighted by the repeated references to its divine inspiration, Lucius joins the procession and marches along. The "whole city" that greets him are the spectators who watch the procession go by, pointing and nodding, until it arrives at the seashore (11.16.5), so that, to pick up on Winkler's point, they may indeed be *profani* or non-believers; they are at least not part of the Isiac procession.³⁷ It is possible after all, despite Winkler's doubts, that Apuleius wants to make a distinction between the opinion of non-believers and that of the Isiac worshippers (and this possibility cannot be avoided by pressing the argument that the Isiac community is itself part of the "whole city.") The people's comments on Lucius are recorded with the verb *fabulantur*, a verb found only here in the *Metamorphoses*, hardly a word of weighty pronouncements but used of the light, relaxed conversations of travelers—"told stories" or

Needless to say, such cases show how little documentary, historical reliance may be placed on auxiliary details of this kind."

³⁵ Witherington 1998, 313: "...the companions did not hear intelligible words so as to understand what the voice was actually saying to Paul." Another example of such a vision is found in Eusebius *Historia Ecclesiastica* 1.13 where King Abdarus after appealing to Jesus has a vision which is not seen by his companions (I owe this reference to the anonymous reader of *Ancient Narrative*).

³⁶ Egelhaaf-Gaiser 2000, 81.

³⁷ Cf. the priest's phrase in 11.15.4, *videant inreligiosi*, an epithet which may, as Schmidt argues (1997, 56–58), have a special relevance to Christians.

“gossiped.”³⁸ The crowd calls Lucius “fortunate” using a phrase *felix Hercules et ter beatus* “How fortunate he is, by Hercules, and thrice blessed” which is bound to take us back to *felix et certius beatus*, the phrase that Lucius used in his wish expressed to Fotis in 2.7.6 that anyone “would be lucky—surely even blessed” if he could put his finger in her stew (*Felix et <certo> certius beatus cui permiseris illuc digitum intingere*). Startlingly, the happiness that Lucius attributed to anyone who had sex with Fotis is now echoed as the crowd exclaims at the depth of his joy in the new relationship with Isis. And what a moment for that scene—which exemplifies Lucius’ lapse into folly—to be recalled and used in an elevated context, one in which the crowd is denying the guilt of Lucius’ former life! The word *scilicet* marks the crowd’s opinion as a conjecture,³⁹ and often the word marks a false conjecture and calls attention to an irony, as in the scene with the innkeeper and Aristomenes quoted above (1.14), cf. also 5.17.9, 5.31.6, 6.8.19, and especially 7.25.6, *agasonem necatum scilicet*, where a group of herdsmen falsely conjecture that a passerby is guilty of murdering a boy. The crowd in Cenchreae has no idea that they are using a phrase which echoes the incident in which Lucius started down the wrong path (at the very moment when they are declaring his innocence!) but rather the echo is a wink by the author at us showing their ignorance.

It seems to me unjustified to argue that Apuleius is putting two equally valid explanations of Lucius’ transformation side by side in *Met.* 11.14.5–11.16.4. What seems rather to happen is that the priest’s homily to Lucius, apparently addressed to him alone either by design or divine will, is not heard or understood directly by the entire city who pass along a gossipy (*fabulantur*) version of it, indeed their pedestrian version of divine favor, that it must fall only on the deserving, misses the paradox and profundity of Lucius’ unearned favor from the divine. Contrary to the desire of the priest who wishes the irreligious would draw a lesson from Lucius to apply to their own behavior, the crowd think that the blessing of the goddess must be due to innocence of life, an idea put into their minds by Isis, as she had predicted, to avoid arousing their wrath over the suspicion that Lucius turned himself into an ass by witchcraft (which in fact he did). The opinion of the crowd is put into ironic perspective by *scilicet*, calling attention to their mistake, and also by their inadvertent use of a phrase that recalls Lucius’ seduction of Fotis, an affair where all of Lucius’ trouble started. The crowd’s version of his reformation is presented as a popularized or humorous distortion

³⁸ On *fabulor* see also Hunink on Apul. *Florida* 21.

³⁹ As admitted by Winkler 1985, 212.

of what we as readers already know to be the case, but it also serves as an early reminder of the gap which will continue to exist between the popular perception of Lucius' recruitment by this alien cult and the inner reality of his rebirth which he as narrator shares with us. As Kenney says, "Apuleius is slyly indicating that the idea that salvation is earned by works rather than faith is a popular misconception;"⁴⁰ similarly in the *Acts* (9.20–21), those who hear the newly converted Paul speak of his Christian faith find it hard to believe he has been singled out for the favor of Christ, are shocked by the discrepancy between Paul's new faith and his former behavior as a persecutor of Christians, and continue to be "afraid" of him. Paul himself willingly acknowledges this discrepancy between his old and new life in his letters (*Gal.* 1.13) but tries to downplay the awkwardness of his initial reception by the apostles by saying that "they glorified God because of me" (*Gal.* 1.24). Isis had raised the possibility that the Corinthian crowd would make spiteful accusations against Lucius after his transformation (*Met.* 11.6.4), and Paul is rejected by Jews who try to kill him (*Acts* 9.23–24) and initially, by the disciples, who are afraid of him (*Acts* 9.26). Lucius, like Paul, is saved by his acceptance of the divine protection despite the errors of his former way of life.

In the case of Apuleius, the discrepancy between the religious message of Book 11 and the bawdiness and satire of the racy novel of the first 10 books has long been noticed, and it is this discrepancy which now prompts some to speculate that the piety of the Isis book may actually be a veil for mockery, and contain a level of irony in which Lucius is himself duped by the priests of Isis, presumably for purposes of financial gain. It need hardly be pointed out that Paul's listeners are shocked at the extravagance of some of his new beliefs as well as the contrast between his zeal for Christianity and his earlier zeal to destroy it, and that if we had writings from Paul dating before his conversion there would be a startling contrast with the message of his Christian letters. This is the result of religious conversion in which concepts change meaning, creating skepticism in the non-believer at the evident contradiction. Lucius is confronted by the paradox of a new set of values when Mithras the priest concludes his speech by saying: "for as soon as you become the goddess's slave you will experience more fully the fruit of your

⁴⁰ Kenney 1998, 258; to which it should be added that the Psyche tale already gives the same message about divine favor being capable of overriding the believer's transgressions: Psyche disobeyed Cupid when she lit the lamp to behold his face, and she opened Persephone's jar against orders, but still is saved by Cupid and has his child.

freedom” (*Met.* 11.15.5). This paradox is also implicit in the Christian message that the truth will make us free (*John* 8.31) but that the acceptance of this freedom may lead to our imprisonment and bind us in slavery to Christ (*Rom.* 1.1, *Philemon* 1 and 9, *Phil* 1.1, *Col.* 4.18) Lucius’ devotion to Isis causes what he previously regarded as pleasure to recede in importance and brings about “the outpouring of love and gratitude” to which Nock refers (in the quote which opens this paper). Paul also delights in pointing to the reversals and new meanings to terms which have been brought about by his new state of being: “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1 *Cor.*1.27).

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