Introduction

Whenever theology touches science, it gets burned. In the sixteenth century astronomy, in the seventeenth microbiology, in the eighteenth geology and palaeontology, in the nineteenth Darwin's biology all grotesquely extended the world-frame and sent churchmen scurrying for cover in ever smaller, more shadowy nooks, little gloomy ambiguous caves in the psyche where even now neurology is cruelly harrying them, gouging them out from the multi-folded brain like wood lice from under the lumber pile.

– John Updike

In any field, find the strangest thing and then explore it.

– John Archibald Wheeler

It would be presumptuous in a field like Pauline studies to claim that one had found the strangest thing because we are indeed blessed with many. Instead, this book is an exploration of the coincidence of two curiosities. The first curiosity, and the major interest of the chapters that follow, is Paul's ecstatic religious experience. This interest begins with the premise that a certain set of Pauline texts not traditionally read together forms an inherently meaningful grouping. In part, they belong together because in each text Paul is describing occasions in which he considered himself to be in contact with nonhuman agents (spoken of mainly as spirit – whether spirit of God, spirit of Christ, holy spirit, spirit of sonship, etc.). In another way, these texts also belong to the broad category of religious experience and, more precisely, can be categorized as involving altered states of consciousness (henceforth designated by the abbreviation ASCs). Furthermore, the same diversity of experiences reflected in this group of Pauline passages is frequently studied together in disciplines other than biblical studies. In short, these texts are a particular kind of data whether described

from the inside (emically) or studied from without (etically); yet they are not often considered as a whole in Pauline studies.

The relevant passages touch on ecstatic forms of worship, visions, spirit possession, and glossolalia. The latter is probably the most frequently studied in New Testament scholarship because Paul also gives it proportionately more attention – including his admission that he speaks in tongues more than any of the exuberant Corinthians (1 Cor 14:18) – while other of Paul's comments about his own ecstatic religious experience are often made in passing. For instance, he mentions ecstatic prayer (Rom 8:26; 1 Cor 14:14–15a) and singing in or with the spirit (1 Cor 14:15b); he alludes to "signs and wonders" that he was able to perform (Rom 15:18–19; 2 Cor 12:12)[1] and also the general category of being ecstatic for God (which he contrasts with being in his right mind; 2 Cor 5:13); and he speaks of revelations (in general, 2 Cor 12:1, 7; and, in particular, Gal 1:12, 2:2) and visions of the risen Christ (1 Cor 9:1, 15:8). Perhaps most noteworthy among these incidents, because it includes a description of the experience itself, is Paul's account of his ecstatic journey to heaven (2 Cor 12:2–4). Taken together, these details suggest that ecstatic religious experience was a frequent and significant aspect of Paul's life and his apprehension of the divine. These data also suggest that the drive toward religiously oriented ecstasy was an aspect of Paul's personality and social setting, not just a circumstantial contingency. In other words, Paul was not someone who was merely surprised by an unsolicited encounter with the divine in the course of his everyday business; Paul was, among other things, an ecstatic.

The second curiosity is not a feature of Paul's letters themselves but rather of method and what is possible in our scholarship on Paul. For some time, New Testament studies have been explicit in declaring that Paul cannot be thought of as a systematic theologian and that his writings are occasional – that is, driven by the needs of and ongoing conversations with particular communities. That fact seems to have been integrated to varying degrees into our actual readings, which now take more account of the audience and its social and rhetorical context. Likewise, exegesis is increasingly informed by attention to cultural influences, including material culture. The challenge that remains is how to integrate such contextual awareness into a full-blooded portrait of a human agent who does more than pick and choose from a menu of cultural options. Thus, although the view of the letters as communication has developed and the world in which they were written has become ever more interesting, often the understanding of the person behind

[1] For now, I will assert the performance of signs and wonders as an ecstatic state without offering the explanation for that assumption, which will be provided in Chapter 4.

the letters persists implicitly as that of the rational, if not systematic, generator of theological ideas. Yet an overly narrow focus on Paul's thought and words alone risks creating a distortion of both Paul and Pauline christianity[2] – as if speaking and thinking in themselves adequately constitute the man and the movement. When we consider the whole picture of what is produced in Pauline scholarship, even though more and more exceptions are appearing, it is the body that tends to remain absent or partial.

So, although much corrective work is under way, the second curiosity in this study is the scholarly construction of what amounts to a disembodied Paul. In some cases, Paul is disembodied by exegesis that is restricted to the analysis and comparison of texts. I hasten to add that these questions and approaches are not wrong in themselves. Obviously, there is much that is both necessary and methodologically sound about such approaches because the surest access to Paul is through the texts he created, and concerns for accountability and responsibility in interpretation are met when one works from the evidence of the texts themselves. Thus, the problem is not attentiveness to the texts per se but perhaps begins when the nature of texts as words and ideas is allowed to be sufficient explanation. At some point, the monopoly of the text risks creating a misrepresentation. Two examples will illustrate this concern. These examples were not chosen because they are particularly glaring occurrences of this pattern; rather, the arguments are quite standard examples of New Testament exegesis and very useful in their own right.

The first example is taken from Luke Timothy Johnson's comments on Romans 8 in his commentary on that letter.[3] In his discussion of Rom 8:18–27, Johnson notes Paul's appeal to common knowledge: "For we know that the whole creation groans together and labors together in pain until now" (Rom 8:22). Johnson asks rhetorically how it is that Paul can confidently assert that everyone knows this, and he answers with the proposal that Paul "must be referring to the shared world of Torah." Johnson then supports that claim with a short string of prophetic texts that includes birth imagery as an expression "of hopefulness" or "of eschatological tribulation."[4] The proposal is quite reasonable within New Testament exegetical discourse, yet when we imagine Paul's letter first being read to the assembly in Rome, it at least seems worth considering other aspects of "shared world" that might be even more salient to the auditors than that of the "world of Torah." Their

[2] The lowercase "c" is intentional here, and throughout, in reference to early christians and christianity. I describe the purpose of this anomaly at the end of the introduction.
[3] Luke Timothy Johnson, *Reading Romans: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1997).
[4] Ibid., 128.

shared world included, for instance, the fact that the population density of Rome was greater than that of present-day Manhattan or Mumbai (Bombay) and that most of the christians likely lived in tenements having windows through which the sounds of neighbors' daily lives were audible.[5] Thus, their shared world ensured that everyone would at some point be privy to the birth of a child through the thin walls that subdivided the upper stories or the uncovered windows of their buildings. Given the high death rates in childbirth in antiquity, it is also safe to assume that everyone would have been privy to tragedy on some of these occasions as well.[6]

If we try to imagine a shared understanding of the suffering of creation in the passage, we also have recourse to something in addition to Torah. Rome in particular, but also many other parts of the empire, showed signs of environmental degradation of which ancient writers were well aware.[7] Both Pliny and Vitruvius speak of the dangers of lead and other contaminants and the need for purification of drinking water.[8] Furthermore, the human and animal sewage that was not immediately washed into the Tiber littered the streets of Rome.[9] During heavy rains and flooding, the water and sanitation systems were known to reverse, causing the fountain in the coliseum to spout sewage (hardly the stuff of tourist brochures). Other authors recognized especially the deadly effects of air pollution from industry in particular and urban life in general.[10] They did not rely on Torah to establish the suffering of creation in its decay, not only because they were not Judean but also because more palpable evidence was at hand. So, in this case, analysis that is restricted to textual correlates may in fact mask much that is more relevant to the meaning of the passage.

[5] Peter Lampe catalogs the evidence for the geographical and social location of the earliest christians in Roman tenements in his study *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* (London: T. and T. Clark, 2003), 19–47. For a discussion of population density, see Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 149–51. For a colorful description of some of the effects of such crowding, see Juvenal (*Satires*), whose third satire is devoted to complaints about the city.

[6] Mary Harlow and Ray Laurence, *Growing Up and Growing Old in Ancient Rome: A Life Course Approach* (London: Routledge, 2002), 8–9. Harlow and Laurence report that the infant mortality rate in ancient Rome was roughly three in ten. That high probability of death was not matched again until individuals reached the age of 65 or 70.

[7] For an excellent discussion of ancient awareness of and theorizing about environmental pollution, see J. Donald Hughes, *Pan's Travail: Environmental Problems of the Ancient Greeks and Romans* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 51–53.

[8] Pliny, *Natural History*, 36.173; Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, 8.6.12–15.

[9] For example, Strabo (*Geography* 5.3.8) mentions the filth on the streets and in the river.

[10] They include Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, 3.6.12; Strabo, *Geography*, 3.2.8, 16.2.23; Pliny, *Natural History*, 33.122; and Artemidorus, *Interpretation of Dreams*, 1.51, 2.20.

The second illustration of this interest is taken from Andrew Lincoln's study of "the role of the heavenly dimension in Paul's thought," *Paradise Now and Not Yet*.[11] Lincoln's comments offer a more subtle example and hence possibly also a more provocative one. One of the texts that he considers is 2 Cor 4:16–5:10. After describing the epistolary context of the passage, offering a reconstruction of the purported background views of Paul's opponents, and examining the construction of the section along with its special vocabulary and its possible sources in other literature, Lincoln concludes:

> In the midst of decay and affliction Paul concentrates on the as yet unseen heavenly realities and *knows* that if he dies before the parousia he will assuredly still receive a heavenly body when Christ returns. He longs to be able to put on that body without first experiencing death. For him the disembodied state, though possible, is undesirable and he *knows* that ultimately God has prepared him for the reception of the heavenly body and has in fact guaranteed this by giving him the Spirit. In the light of this he is of good courage and *knows* that even if he dies before the parousia this is something to be preferred because it will mean that he will be present with the Lord.[12]

The recurring language of knowledge is one of the most striking features of the quotation. Doubtless here Lincoln is exercising appropriate academic restraint; he is describing rather than claiming to be able to explain how such knowledge came to be. Yet in the absence of either a caveat about the methodological limits of assessing Paul's knowledge or a less emphatic verb, the simple assertion of knowing is taken as sufficient explanation of the theological facts.

It is my sense that we might want to supplement such a description by considering how it is that Paul came to know such things, lest the certainty of the language become a distortion of the circumstances.[13] I raise this concern particularly as someone who is writing from within a department of theology and therefore bears some responsibility for the truth claims of institutional Christianity. An unintended effect of Lincoln's summary is that

[11] Andrew Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet: Studies in the Role of the Heavenly Dimension in Paul's Thought with Special Reference to His Eschatology*. Society for New Testament Studies 43 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), v.

[12] Ibid., 69, emphasis added.

[13] In general, Pauline scholarship indulges the reconstruction of Paul's opponents (complete with their purported belief systems and history of engagement with Paul), to whom Paul barely alludes; however, it is quite intolerant of attempts to reconstruct Paul's own experiences of the Lord, of whom Paul speaks directly and at length.

Paul's knowledge, like the authority of the biblical text itself, is a priori in nature. Paul's theological commitments do not need to be grounded in anything beyond the text itself. In part, this epistemological silence results from the recognition of the real limits of what can be claimed about Paul's knowledge. But the silence also serves in understanding the text as a particular kind of revelation. Perhaps, for example, somewhere between the idea that Paul invented Christianity[14] and the view of scripture as hermetically revealed there is room – and need – to consider fuller notions of knowing and coming to know.

So, to ask another set of rhetorical questions: At what point does attention to textual interplay function as a de facto denial of other, more common forms of knowledge? At what point does disciplined specificity become distortion? Driving these questions is an epistemological concern because it is precisely at the level of *knowing* that the curiosity of Paul's ecstatic religious experience and the curiosity of the sometimes-disembodied scholarly imagination of Paul and his religious life are connected. These questions of theory and method cannot be pursued at much length in this project. They do, however, constitute a subtext that runs throughout the ensuing chapters. Throughout this examination, it is worth considering not just the fact that Paul alludes to or reflects on ecstatic experiences in his letters but also that they took place "in Paul." It is worth exploring not only how one talks about such experience but also how it feels, why one might want to talk about it, and how it is fundamentally constitutive of theological reflection. For some time, others – for example, art theorists, philosophers, and historians of other periods – have been interested in the meaning-making that takes place apart from language.[15] "Human reason is a polyglot," as William Grassie puts it, and some of the "languages" that it speaks are not verbal at all.[16]

With these questions in mind, this examination of Paul's ecstatic experience is lodged in the larger and much broader category of "religious experience." Religious experience is a term with a substantial and significant

[14] Hyam Maccoby, *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986).

[15] In the 1960s, these questions were addressed in art theory in Rudolf Arnheim, *Visual Thinking* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), and from a philosophical perspective in Susanne K. Knauth Langer, *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, 3 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967). The historian Margaret Miles has worked at historical reconstruction from nontextual, experiential, bodily bases; see, for example, her *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1985).

[16] William Grassie, "Postmodernism: What One Needs to Know," *Zygon* 32 (1997), 88.

history, especially in the philosophical study of religion. In reality, the term might be accurately applied to any experience connected with one's religious life or to participation in any religiously construed occasion. However, in practice, it has often been mired in philosophical debates about the possibility of direct knowledge of God. In fact, William James introduced the category of religious experience precisely in order to account for what he took to be a distinct, and objectively trustworthy, source of knowledge of the divine; he described religious experience as "pure experience" distinct from (and untainted by) other ways of knowing or apprehending.[17] For the better part of the twentieth century, the term was caught up in a debate about whether or not one can have "a veridical experience of the presence or activity of God."[18] In that debate, the term "religious experience" functioned with a more limited range of defining characteristics, which have been summarized by William Alston. First, this early definition of religious experience was concerned with the experiential – rather than with "abstract thought" – as the means to knowing. Second, religious experience was understood to be a direct apprehension of the divine as opposed to "being aware of God by being aware of something else." Third, and closely related to the second, it was described as "completely lacking in sensory contact," which is not to say that it has no bodily or sensory manifestations; rather, this point is a more specific expression of the previous one. Finally, according to Alston, religious experience comprised a "focal experience" in which "awareness of God attracts one's attention so strongly as to blot out all else for the moment."[19]

Partly in response to such views, some theorists have argued that all religious ecstasy is inherently and essentially cultural. Certainly it is true that in many societies the means to attain mystical ecstasy, the adept's behavior while in trance, and the interpretation of the trance can all be informed by culture. So, for example, the Christian Shakers of St. Vincent and the Christian Apostolics of Yucatan, who share the same religious texts and who claim possession by the same spirit, nonetheless demonstrate significantly different behavior while in trance.[20] Ethnographers have

[17] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Triumph, 1991); first published New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1902.

[18] William P. Alston, "Religious Experience," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* vol. 8, ed. Edward Craig (London: Routledge, 1998), 250–55.

[19] Ibid., 250–51.

[20] See Felicitas D. Goodman, "Apostolics of Yucatán: A Case Study of a Religious Movement," and Jeannette H. Henney, "The Shakers of St. Vincent: A Stable Religion," in *Religion, Altered States of Consciousness, and Social Change,* ed. Erika Bourguignon (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1973), 178–218, 219–63, respectively.

documented these differences in numerous societies, and members of such groups themselves sometimes recognize their distinctiveness in almost precisely the same categories. For example, in his study of a ritual trance cult in Jamaica, William Wedenoja notes that the participants themselves identify (1) the process of transformation from temporal consciousness to a trance state, (2) "the ritual means for effecting transformation," (3) the expected behavior while in trance, and (4) "the 'gifts' and obligations" of participation as aspects peculiar to the distinct subculture of the cult.[21] On the basis of such observations, some argue that mysticism is nothing but a cultural construct.[22]

Perhaps the most zealous champion of this position is Steven Katz,[23] who ascribes not only the ritual accoutrements and the preconditioning of religious experience to cultural control but also the character of the experience itself: "The ontological structure(s) of each major mystical tradition is different and this pre-experiential, inherited structure directly enters into the mystical occasion itself. As a consequence, Christian mystics, as we have shown, have Christian experiences . . . while Jewish Kabalists meet Elijah and 'see' the *Merkabah*"[24] and "The Hindu mystic does not have an experience of x which he then describes in the, to him, familiar language and symbols of Hinduism, but rather he has a Hindu experience, i.e. his experience is not an unmediated experience of x but is itself the, at least partially, pre-formed anticipated Hindu experience of Brahman."[25]

Katz's position is known as constructivist; that is, the understanding that all experience is constructed by the terms, beliefs, and particularly the *language* that the subject brings to them. In effect, constructivism extends the cultural control of religious ecstasy into a kind of absolute: Without language, there is no experience.

[21] William Wedenoja, "Ritual Trance and Catharsis: A Psychological and Evolutionary Perspective," in *Personality and the Cultural Construction of Society: Papers in Honor of Melford E. Spiro,* ed. David K. Jordan and Marc J. Swartz (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990), 275–307 at 279.

[22] It is noteworthy that none of the ethnographers I have cited here make this argument themselves but are rather drawn to the similarities between cultures.

[23] Also in this company are Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), esp. 123; and Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1961). See also Nils G. Holm, "Ecstasy Research in the 20th Century – An Introduction," in *Religious Ecstasy,* ed. Nils G. Holm Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksells, 1982), 7–26 at 7.

[24] Steven T. Katz, "The 'Conservative' Character of Mystical Experience," in *Mysticism and Religious Traditions,* ed. Steven T. Katz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 3–60 at 40.

[25] Ibid., 4. Katz's argument may have more validity in the case of the "masters" in various mystical traditions, from whom many of his examples are drawn. But in many ways even they are the exception that proves the rule.

Not surprisingly, Katz's subordination of experience to cultural control goes beyond the tolerance of some who are otherwise sympathetic to the idea of cultural influence, and indeed it goes beyond the claims of this book.[26] One of the most significant and convincing objections is represented by Sallie King.[27] King counters Katz's view with the criticism that it reduces experience to language – that language is in fact inextricable from culture, but that religious ecstasy, like all experience, cannot be reduced to the attempt to describe it. In other words, the whole of the mystical experience cannot be subsumed in the adept's description of that experience. In fact, there are many who find that mystical experience is in its very nature a nonlinguistic experience. Thus, as Wayne Proudfoot argues, terms such as "ineffable" and "paradoxical," which are often applied to religious ecstasy, are not vague reports of the experience but in fact quite precise descriptions of what it is.[28] These views are supported by Natika Newton's observation that language was a tool for communication before it became a primary shaper of cognition. Thus, says Newton, other forms of cognition still exist alongside this newer linguistic dominance.[29]

More recently, the term "religious experience" has been freed from the debate about veridical experience and has come to be seen as interesting and valuable in itself rather than only for what it may demonstrate about the nature and existence of God. This interest has grown partly through a lively interdisciplinary conversation between philosophers, theologians, and

[26] See especially the volume of essays in Robert K. C. Forman, ed., *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). This is not to say that all counterproposals are well reasoned. For example, some object that a mystical experience exists that transcends cultural confines because it is in fact an encounter with the "Absolute." For example Huston Smith, "Is There a Perennial Philosophy?" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 60 (1987), 553–66, esp. 560–64), appeals to Piaget's model of higher-order thinking in general, and to the concept of "decentration" in particular, as corroborating evidence for his view of an acultural mysticism (558). However, his description is so ideologically loaded – in part with the baggage of social Darwinism – that it serves more to illustrate Katz's viewpoint than to refute it. Smith's explanation of the acultural mysticism is as follows: "[T]here is one God. It is inconceivable that s/he not disclose her saving nature to her children, for s/he is benevolent: hence revelation. From her benevolence it follows, too, that her revelations must be impartial, which is to say equal; the deity cannot play favorites. . . . The great historical religions have survived for millennia, which is what we would expect if they are divinely powered (562)." He continues on with several equally circular arguments.

[27] Sallie King, "Two Epistemological Models for the Interpretation of Mysticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56 (1988), 257–79.

[28] Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 125.

[29] He outlines the behavioral, evolutionary, and neurocognitive findings that support his thesis in Natika Newton, *Foundations of Understanding* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1996).

scientists, and culture is now understood as a contributing factor rather than an absolute limit on such experience.[30] The theories of Pierre Bourdieu, for example, have helped us to imagine how human behavior can be both culturally conditioned and innovative, while the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty has discussed the indeterminate nature of perception, in which the human body is the grounds and basis of knowing.[31] With this shift has come a greater focus on what such experience reveals about human thinking, knowing, practice, and culture, as well as a turn toward the "socially informed body."[32] Minimally and most importantly in the context of this project stands the claim that human experience includes elements that are known apart from language; elements that are essentially human, not cultural. Although I will touch on cultural contributions throughout the book, the primary focus of the ensuing chapters will be these embodied elements.

In the renewed conversation about ecstasy, the broader valences of both "religious" and "experience" are active, so the term religious experience functions as a "vague" category.[33] Although that designation sounds pejorative, it is used to define precisely what can be most useful about categorization. As the philosopher Robert Cummings Neville explains it,

[30] Among those interested in a reinvigorated conversation about religious experience are Carol Rausch Albright and Joel Haugen, *Beginning with the End: God, Science, and Wolfhart Pannenberg* (Chicago: Open Court, 1997); James B. Ashbrook and Carol Rausch Albright, *The Humanizing Brain: Where Religion and Neuroscience Meet* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim, 1997); Eugene G. d'Aquili and Andrew B. Newberg, "Religious and Mystical States: A Neuropsychological Substrate," *Zygon* 28 (1993), 177–200; Eugene G. d'Aquili and Andrew B. Newberg, *The Mystical Mind: Probing the Biology of Religious Experience Theology and the Sciences* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999); Bstan Dzin Rgya Mtsho et al., *Consciousness at the Crossroads: Conversations with the Dalai Lama on Brainscience and Buddhism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 1999); Andrew B. Newberg, Eugene G. d'Aquili, Vince Rause, and Judith Cummings, *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief* (New York: Ballantine, 2001); Proudfoot, *Religious Experience;* Fraser Watts, "Cognitive Neuroscience and Religious Consciousness," in *Neuroscience and the Person: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action,* ed. Robert J. Russell (Berkeley, Calif.: Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, 1999), 327–46; Wesley J. Wildman and Leslie A. Brothers, "Religious Experience" in Russell, *Neuroscience and the Person,* 347–416.

[31] The watershed studies for the two authors are: Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice,* trans. Richard Nice, Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology 16 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), originally published as *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique* (Geneva: Droz, 1972); and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Humanities Press, 1962), originally published as *Phénoménologie de la perception,* 15th ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1945).

[32] This phrase comes from Thomas J. Csordas, "Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology" *Ethos* 18 (1990), 5–47.

[33] The notion of vagueness was first articulated by Charles Peirce and has been described in Robert C. Neville, *Normative Cultures* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), esp. 61–68.