

Paul in Ecstasy

The Neurobiology of the Apostle's
Life and Thought

Colleen Shantz

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PAUL IN ECSTASY

Although many readers of Paul's letters recognize how important his experience was to his life and thought, biblical scholars have not generally addressed this topic head-on. Colleen Shantz argues that they have been held back both by a bias against religious ecstasy and by the limits of the biblical texts: How do you responsibly access someone else's experience, particularly an experience as unusual and debated as religious ecstasy? And how do you responsibly account for the role of experience in that person's thought? *Paul in Ecstasy* pursues these questions through a variety of disciplines – most notably neuroscience. This study provides cogent explanations for bewildering passages in Paul's letters, outlines a much greater influence of such experience in Paul's life and letters, and points to its importance in Christian origins.

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Paul in Ecstasy

*The Neurobiology of the Apostle's
Life and Thought*

COLLEEN SHANTZ

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PAUL IN ECSTASY

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 christianity² – 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 Christianity¹⁴ 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. 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 Kabbalists 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 Brain Science 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.

theoretical vagueness allows for a broad field of comparison that is nevertheless meaningful in the minimal level of similarity that it identifies. He illustrates it through the metaphor of translation: "Translation has to do with expressing the relatively specific in terms of the relatively vague, and then doing the same with some other relatively specific category, so that both specific things are expressed in the language of the vague level of categories that function as their unifying context."³⁴

Vague categories can counterbalance the distorting tendencies of specificity. They assert the significance of foundational similarity between specific incidences that have been elaborated in diverse directions, they provide a perspective within which given differences can be seen according to their actual proportions and significance, and they help theorists to see much more than they otherwise might.

It is in that capacity that the vague category of religious experience is especially useful to a study of Paul and his letters. Pauline scholarship is quite adept at accounting for the specific. Luke Timothy Johnson has described the way some of these specific categories can blind scholarship to the larger and often more necessary issues:

On one side, we possess marvelously intricate and methodologically sophisticated scholarship about early Christianity, a veritable mountain of learning about every word of the New Testament and its milieu, every literary seam, every possible source, every discernible pulse of historical development. On the other side, we are virtually ignorant concerning a remarkable range of statements in the New Testament that appear to be of first importance to the writers, that seem to express fundamental convictions, that demand some kind of account, but that all of our learning does not touch. This range of statements has to do with religious experience.³⁵

If Paul's theology takes place in the complex context of experience, so, equally, does our discussion of his experience take place in the complex context of this historical moment. Contemporary interest in religion has shifted both in its perspectives and its motivations. Postmodernism's vital, if scant, conclusion that we have constructed not only the means by which we come to know but the objects of knowledge themselves has given new, albeit diffuse, impetus to the examination of religion. More direct provocation arises from the fact that the broad and troubled context of international relations continues to be played out against religious backdrops. In response,

³⁴ Ibid., 61.

³⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Religious Experience in Earliest Christianity: A Missing Dimension in New Testament Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 3–4.

factions within world religions vie with one another for authoritative descriptions of their own traditions with renewed urgency. Coincident with these changes in ideological context, an intriguing bit of happenstance has provided new means by which religion might be assessed. Neuroscience is now probing the pathways to its own description of religious phenomena, and evolutionary psychology is theorizing about the origination of religious impulses.

The interplay between these two sets of contexts – the social-political and the scientific – holds potential for important correctives of and tempered insight into religion. Unfortunately, all too often, their combined effect makes religious experience vulnerable to competing totalizing claims. Reductionisms abound on all “sides.” Even some recent philosophical contributions have been cast in simplified either-or propositions. *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, the latest contribution of the well-known philosopher of mind Daniel Dennett, is a case in point. However complex and nuanced his views are at heart, Dennett’s argumentation often presents the situation as one of a single choice between purely religious explanations on one side and purely scientific on the other. As one reviewer put it,

Dennett lives in a world in which you must believe in the grossest biologism or in the grossest theism, in a purely naturalistic understanding of religion or in intelligent design, in the omniscience of a white man with a long beard in 19th-century England or in the omniscience of a white man with a long beard in the sky.³⁶

Because of the importance of Paul’s letters to Christian religious claims, it seems necessary that this larger context affect the objects and means of knowledge in Pauline studies as well. In addition to their crucial critique, postmodern perspectives make a constructive contribution through the obligation that we pursue both approaches and solutions – means and ends – that are inherently complex. (In fact, because this book is an attempt to describe *experience*, one might assume that complexity is a necessity.) I have argued earlier that the practice of traditionally good exegesis in itself is prone to creating unintentional distortions; likewise, some of the other methods employed most energetically in this book are predisposed toward their own totalizing visions. For these reasons, this study is fundamentally interdisciplinary. It is concerned not only with viewing Paul’s religious experience

³⁶ Leon Wieseltier, “The God Genome,” *New York Times*, February 19, 2006, online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/19/books/review/19wieseltier.html?ex=1147924800&en=c0448e8f57c4bb21&ei=5070>.

from many perspectives but also with the ways in which each of those diverse perspectives require the tempering and completion found only in their relation to the others. They come to their fullest expression through interrelationships rather than in isolated articulation, no matter how lucid it may be.

Before launching directly into this tour of the several facets of Paul's ecstasy, a moment of orientation to the chapters that follow is in order. Readings of Paul's letters have proceeded quite nicely with little more than a curious or embarrassed footnote or two to the possibility of Paul's occasional exuberance. The premise of this book is that ecstasy is actually a significant feature of Paul's life and impetus to his thought, and thus it seems necessary to account for its absence in the usual journeys through the letters. [Chapter 1](#) of this study begins with an assessment of the ideological influences that make it difficult not only to view ecstatic experiences positively but even to discern them as present in the biblical texts. New Testament scholarship has been affected by broader cultural biases against ecstasy: In European, Russian, and North American cultures, there is a long history of viewing the use of ASCs as psychologically and socially deviant. In the formative generations of academic anthropology, shamans, for example, were routinely understood to be either mentally ill or socially manipulative. These evaluations were supported by a pervasive tendency in modernity to value the rational over all other forms of knowing, a tendency that Michael Harner has dubbed "cognicentrism."³⁷ Even while anthropology was publishing those early biases, biblical studies were taking them up in confessional polemics. For example, in the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth, mysticism became one of the means by which the contest for authoritative Christian origins was waged.³⁸ Mysticism, in some discourse, served as shorthand for many phenomena, including most forms of ecstatic religious experience. Furthermore, mysticism was routinely depicted as world-negating and solipsistic. By extension of these arguments, it was important for Protestants (who were the vast majority of biblical scholars) to show that Christian origins were free of "Catholic" tendencies, including the sacramental and the mystical. Paul, in his role as the "patron saint of thought in Christianity,"³⁹ provided a Protestant champion against these

³⁷ Michael J. Harner, *The Way of the Shaman*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990).

³⁸ The broader effects of these polemics on early historiography are outlined in Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*, Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion 14 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

³⁹ This image is from Albert Schweitzer, *Die Mystik des Apostels Paulus* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1930), translated into English as *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, trans. William Montgomery (New York: Henry Holt, 1931), 377.

Catholic “abuses.” It was in such circumstances that Albert Schweitzer was able to write an entire book on Paul’s “mysticism” that barely touched on any of Paul’s ecstatic experience. For example, Schweitzer devotes a chapter to Paul’s ethics (thus demonstrating the apostle’s engagement in the world) but attributes Paul’s “conversion” to an epileptic seizure.⁴⁰

Although these broader confessional and cultural views have changed, their effects have been encoded in certain patterns of interpretation of Paul’s letters. One of these patterns is the preference to see the christian assemblies as susceptible to ecstatic abuses while viewing Paul as an opponent of those tendencies. Therefore, the second half of [Chapter 1](#) examines some of the means by which Paul has been viewed as an opponent of ecstatic religious experience. That examination focuses on two test cases: 1 Cor 14:18 and 2 Cor 12:1–4. In these two passages, Paul’s own religious experience is mentioned explicitly, and therefore the attempts to subvert it even here are all the more noteworthy. Finally, [Chapter 1](#) considers the fact that the occasion of Paul’s conversion and/or call has remained the one relatively widely accepted category in which Paul’s experience can be considered.

Part of the argument in [Chapter 1](#) is that exegetical method (necessarily) favors certain questions and obstructs others. As Paula Fredriksen put it with regard to historical Jesus studies, “once method determines our perspective on our sources, *how* we see is really what we get.”⁴¹ Because of that inherent difficulty, and because Paul’s ecstatic experience has fared poorly in much exegesis, the ensuing chapters are deliberately interdisciplinary in their perspectives. [Chapter 2](#) begins the process of accounting for Paul’s ecstasy by lodging it, in the first place, as firmly and physically as possible in Paul’s own person. For a number of reasons, the examination relies on medical science, and the relatively new field of neurocognitive science in particular (“new” at least in terms of what can now be measured), as a primary tool in this process. The primary and most obvious among these reasons are the fact that medical science is of manifest relevance to understanding human bodily experience and that neuroscience is the only direct means to describe brain functioning during normal and altered states. Thus, neuroscience provides a lens through which some details that are normally out of our range of vision can be brought into focus. It also provides a language with which to discuss what has been observed and the means to compare variant forms of a

⁴⁰ Schweitzer, *Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*. The chapter on ethics comprises pages 293–333. The diagnosis of Paul’s “seizure” appears on page 153. The book was less an examination of religious experience than it was an attempt to rehabilitate the category of mysticism.

⁴¹ Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 7.

phenomenon. Thus, it has robust explanatory power for this question. Another invaluable feature of neuroscience is its investment in both experience and understanding. The second set of reasons for choosing neurology concerns academic responsibility. The use of data from the natural sciences is recommended by the fact that such findings are inherently falsifiable. The ability to falsify the claims seems especially important in an examination of human experience, where there is concern both about undue subjectivity on the one hand and opacity on the other.

However, scientific approaches are not without their pitfalls, and I have tried to keep these in mind while choosing and evaluating scientific conversation partners. One of the dangers of the “hard sciences” is, as mentioned, their inherent intolerance for phenomena that cannot be directly tested and measured. Still, the tendency to reduce God to neural blips is no stronger in science than is the parallel tendency in theology to abstract God from embodied knowing. At the very least, each set of interests provides a natural check on the absolute claims of the other. At best, the two make fruitful conversation partners, as demonstrated, for example, by the ongoing consultations between the Dalai Lama and a group of neuroscientists.⁴² The neurological model of religious ecstasy used in [Chapter 2](#) is unabashedly scientific, but not reductionist. It was developed by Eugene d’Aquili in collaboration with Andrew Newberg,⁴³ but it is built on generations of clinical observation of and experimentation on the functioning of the brain and central nervous system. Although the authors attempt to describe as fully as possible the mechanisms of human neurology that accompany religious ecstasy, they do not believe that religious experience is merely neural noise. Put another way, they do not claim that God is generated by the brain, but they do claim that God cannot be known apart from the brain.⁴⁴

After presenting the model and the rationale for a neurological approach to ecstatic religious experience, [Chapter 2](#) applies that work to Paul’s account of his experience of ascent to paradise (2 Cor 12:1–4). This account is noteworthy among Paul’s various comments because it is the fullest description and, arguably, the most powerful of the experiences that Paul

⁴² Transcripts and commentary on the proceedings are published in Bstan Dzin Rgya Mtsho et al., *Consciousness at the Crossroads*.

⁴³ The model is outlined in greatest detail in d’Aquili and Newberg, *Mystical Mind*.

⁴⁴ Furthermore, they argue, if human certainty about the reality of an object is the measure of its realness, then God as experienced in religious ecstasy “wins hands down.” See Eugene G. d’Aquili and Andrew B. Newberg, “Liminality, Trance, and Unitary States in Ritual and Meditation,” *Studia Liturgica* 23 (1993), 33. The comment on “realness” is based on reports of ecstasies’ sense that their visions of God are “more real” than anything they experience in ordinary states of consciousness.

discusses. Two authors in particular – Alan Segal⁴⁵ and James Tabor⁴⁶ – have assessed the passage in some detail, and both of them approach it primarily through comparison with other texts and interpretive traditions. But these assessments cannot adequately account for two details in Paul’s brief description. The first is Paul’s repeated claim that he does not know the status of his body during his trance, and the second is his claim that he heard “unutterable utterances.” The remainder of the chapter attempts to show that these details are intelligibly described as neurological features of a particular bodily state.

Chapter 3 expands the conversation to consider how such rich experiences are constitutive of Paul’s theological reflection. Here the focus broadens in two ways: First, it moves from primary experience to secondary reflection on it, and, second, it moves beyond the close examination of a private and superlative event to follow its ripples through a number of passages and themes from Paul’s letters. Following a detailed examination of one of Paul’s ecstatic events in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 shifts to considering what difference an understanding of such experience can make to a broader reading of Paul’s letters and circumstances.

The focus on Paul’s religious ecstasy, by its very nature, moves experience to a more central place in exegetical reconstruction. As a result of reading from experience, certain features of the text that are frequently glossed over are instead seen to be unpolished attempts to express what is known apart from words. Reading from experience also reorders what is privileged in any given passage. For example, passages such as 2 Corinthians 3–5 and Romans 8 have been comfortably discussed under traditional (etic) rubrics of pneumatology and eschatology. However, some of these taxonomies are quite slippery and loosely defined, and it is not at all clear that such labels identify the most meaningful and distinguishing features of the discourse. For example, both the Romans and the 1 Corinthians passages mention the future and Paul’s claim that change is already under way, but recognition of that content says little about how Paul came to understand the present in this way. Instead, I argue that Paul is speaking out of both his experience of an alternate reality of his own body and his ecstatic relationship to the figure of the resurrected Jesus. If religious experience is epistemologically significant (and that, you may have guessed, is the wager of this book), then its influence cannot be limited only to the specific occasions in which it took

⁴⁵ See especially Alan Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990), 34–71.

⁴⁶ James D. Tabor, *Things Unutterable: Paul’s Ascent to Paradise in Its Greco-Roman, Judaic, and Early Christian Contexts*, Studies in Judaism (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1986).