Saúl Zuratas: A Type of Paul the Apostle

“Where I find it impossible to follow him,” says Mario Vargas Llosa, “is in the next stage: the transformation of the convert into the storyteller. It is this facet of Saúl’s story that moves me the most” (243-244). As one who shows audacity in the face of cultural assimilation, Saúl’s conversion from Mascarita into Tasurinchi the Storyteller appears unprecedented and mysterious. Yet, Saúl’s conversion is not without precedence; as his name shows, Saúl Zuratas shares similarities with Saul of Tarsus (Zuratas is almost an anagram of Tarsus (148 Standish) who converted to Christianity and became Paul the Apostle. Indeed, although Saúl experiences a unique conversion, its structure resembles Paul the Apostle’s, for their conversions involve an innate blemish, the purifying of that blemish, and a divine revealing of their effective identities.

Before he engages Machiguenga culture, Saúl is a social outcast, the “ugliest lad in the world,” because of an enormous and hideous birthmark across his face. Furthermore, while Saúl feigns indifference towards the negative remarks, he inwardly hates his innate scar. “Before, this stain used to matter a lot to me. I didn’t say so, only to myself, to my souls. I kept it to myself, and this secret was eating me alive. Bit by bit, it was eating me up, here inside. I was sad, it seems” (Llosa 208). The mark on his face, the scorns from others, and his inward hate eats away at Saúl, as he struggles to find his identity.

Likewise, for Paul, the innate blemish was the “old man,” the “body of death,” the intrinsic sin that he inherited from his father Adam (ESV Romans 5:12-14). In his letter to the
Romans, Paul claimed that before his conversion, he carried an “old man” who “was crucified with [Jesus] in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing” (Romans 6:6). Indeed, the phrases “body of death,” and “old man” are allusions to Virgil’s account of the Etruscan King Mezentius (Aeneid 8:485), “who tormented his living captives by tying them to decomposing corpses” (Bruce 147). Therefore, for Paul, sin was an inward, innate mark and, like a decomposing corpse, it masticated his heart causing him to say, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24).

Like Paul, Saúl is born with an innate blemish, one that he believes is eating away at his soul. Furthermore, both Paul and Saúl are born into cultures whose ideals constrain them from purifying their blemishes. The post-colonial Peru ostracizes Saúl, gaping and scorning at his enormous birthmark. Indeed, while at a restaurant, Mario Vargas Llosa reminisces on the reaction of the waitress, who saw Saúl and “crossed herself.” She later remarks to Llosa that she felt sorry for Saúl, which evinces the belief that Saúl is hideous and an unidentifiable outlier, a social iniquity whose birthmark breeds gazes. Although he later becomes an effective and innovative student, Saúl still remains an outlier, traveling away from society to visit the Machiguengas.

Similarly, Paul, born under the Hebrew Law, found the same kind of incarceration. To Paul, the Hebrew Law must be obeyed for one to receive purity; thus, when he discovered the impossibility of a sinner obeying all 614 laws, Paul considered himself a cursed man, fettered to his sin and unable to work his way above the Law (Gal. 3:10-18). Indeed, Paul described himself as a “captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed” (Gal. 3:23).

This coming faith, the gospel that Jesus entrusted to Paul at Damascus, saved Paul from his innate sin and moral restraint: “a person is not counted righteous by works of the law but
through faith in Jesus Christ...” (Gal. 2:16). Because of Paul’s faith, God imparted purity upon him. “[God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). Indeed, Paul experienced what Martin Luther later coined the “Great Exchange”: Paul’s inherent sin was imparted upon the crucified Christ, and Christ’s holy righteousness was imputed upon Paul. Consequently, Jesus purified Paul and delivered him from the “domain of darkness,” into the “kingdom of light” (Colossians 1:13).

Correspondingly, Saúl experiences a similar birth into purity. The coming faith for Saúl, however, is the Machiguenga concept of perfectionism. To the Machiguengas, if a baby is born with imperfections, then the baby is drowned in the river. On the other hand, an unstained baby is always internally pure no matter what happens externally. Thus, although Saúl is born with a hideous scar on his face, the Machiguengas believe that his soul is still pure, for they cannot understand how Saúl could have survived with an innate imperfection. Indeed, the Machiguengas purify Saúl by giving him a new status, a new name, a new identity. “Do you think I’m a devil? Is that what my face means?” ‘No, no, no, and you’re not a monster. You’re Tasurinchi, the Storyteller” (Llosa 212). Just as Paul’s old identity as a sinner was exchanged for Jesus’ righteousness, Saúl’s identity as Mascarita is exchanged for his new identity as el hablador (Newmark 18). Therefore, the Machiguenga’s concept of perfectionism is imputed on Saúl, who, subtly, transfers his old identity upon his parrot, Mascarita.

After he becomes immobilized by a thorn in his foot, Saúl is beleaguered by parrots, who reveal Saúl’s identity. The thorn is an obvious allusion to Paul, for in his Second Letter to the Corinthians, Paul spoke about his own “thorn in the flesh.” While the nature of the thorn is disputable, it was meant to humble Paul and to manifest his weaknesses (2 Cor. 12:7). In fact, as Paul prayed three times for the removal of this thorn, Jesus answered him, “my grace is sufficient
for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12: 8-9). In this revelation, Jesus recalled the nature of Paul’s conversion and identity change: Paul was weak when Christ saved him at Damascus, and without his identity in Christ, Paul would still be dead in sin and weak (Barnett 573-574). Therefore, if Paul was inflated by the surpassing power of his divine revelations, then surely Jesus reminded him that “the one thing denied to [Paul], which is exactly what most people demand above all, was to control [his] own destiny” (Barnett 574).

Saúl’s experience can be interpreted similarly: the parrots remind Saúl that he is not in control of his destiny. The parrots are Saúl’s shadow, which means the mother of the parrots chose Saúl to be the one whom her children follow and look after. Saúl identifies with the parrots, as he and the parrots are habladores. Therefore, as the parrots remind Saúl of his destiny and his new identity, Saúl finds strength knowing their presence and their companionship is with him always. Saúl is weak without his shadows, for without the parrot’s identity shifted to him, Saúl is still an impure outlier and without his companions. As Peter Standish points out, “The parrot on his shoulders is the symbol which heralded his destiny, which was to become hablador and in so find peace in his spiritual home” (150).

Furthermore, Saúl’s new identity as el hablador affects the Machiguengas, for through the stories that Saúl recounts, the culture stays together. “The hablador is at the hub of Machiguenga society; in his absence that society turns to diaspora” (Standish 146). Therefore, Saúl is the unifying force of the small, itinerant tribes who feed upon his wisdom and mythology. Consequently, Saúl becomes an effective and influential communicator, as he subtly fights against the cultural assimilation pushed by the post-colonial Peruvians.

Likewise, Saúl is to the Machiguengas what Paul was to the early Christian communities. Indeed, Paul found his identity in Christ, which was to be an influential and charismatic teacher.
In fact, Paul, like Saul, had an effective mode of communication. According to biblical scholar Stephen Harris, “Paul consciously uses letters as substitutes for his own presence, making them an effective means of influencing people and events from a distance...His letters are potent weapons for shooting down opposition to his teachings” (315). Furthermore, Paul kept the kerygma, the oral tradition of Jesus Christ’s story, alive by unifying his churches under the same doctrines and the same ethics prevalent in Jesus’ teachings (Harris 310). Consequently, just as Saúl fights to keep the Machiguengas from cultural assimilation, Paul fought to keep his churches rooted and grounded in Christ, unstained from worldliness.

“Where I find it impossible to follow him is in the next stage: the transformation of the convert into the storyteller. It is this facet of Saúl’s story that moves me the most.” The strangest part about Saúl’s conversion is its resemblance to Paul the Apostle. Indeed, the transformation from convert into Tasurinchi the Storyteller occurs because Saúl’s innate mark is purified, which allows Saúl to take on his new identity. Therefore, although Saúl experiences a unique conversion, the structure of his conversion resembles that of Paul the Apostle, who also was purified from his innate sin and given his new identity as an effective church planter.

Work Cited


