The Yale Divinity School Bible Study
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The Book of Acts

VIII: The Gospel, the Romans, the Jews
Acts 24-28

The final chapters of Acts have the flavor of courtroom drama as Paul defends himself and the movement of which he is a part, in the face of both Jewish and Roman authorities. In the process, Luke offers an apology to the wider world both for his favorite apostle and for his community. His overarching goal, as has been evident for some time, is to show that the Christian movement, which fulfills the hopes and aspirations of Biblical Israel, is not a danger to the Roman civic order. Whatever negative reputation it may have has been generated by its enemies, mainly leaders of the Jewish community, who reject its key claims. This defensive strategy makes Jews into villains, and contributed both to the short term and long term difficulties between these two Abrahamic traditions. Yet Luke is not entirely negative in his attitude toward the Jewish people. As has been the case throughout his narrative, he portrays some Jewish interlocutors as at least willing to listen to their Christian contemporaries and some indeed accept its message.

The legal drama begins in Caesarea with a hearing before the governor, Felix, in the presence of the high priest. Tertullus presses the charges against Paul and claims (24:1-8) that, as a "ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes," Paul tried to profane the Temple, a crime that we know merited capital punishment. Paul's defense (24:10-21) disputes the facts and makes himself out to be a pious Jew, "believing everything laid down by the Law." Paul suggests that the matter under dispute is simply his belief in the resurrection (24:21), as he had already argued in his earlier confrontation with the council (23:6-10).

The governor, Felix, defers a decision, although he takes the opportunity to learn what Paul has to say, hearing about "justice and self control and future judgment" (24:35). Unable to secure a bribe from Paul, he leaves him in prison for two years, until he is replaced by a new governor, Porcius Festus. We do know from other sources that these two governors served in succession as the Roman procurators of the region, but we do not know the exact date of when the change of leadership occurred, although it is probably close to 60 CE.

With a new governor there is a new hearing, in which Paul insists on his rights as a Roman citizen (cf. 22:25-29), and Festus promises to send him, as requested, to Rome (25:1-12). But before he goes, he has the chance for one more apologetic speech. The Jewish king, Herod Agrippa II, the grandson of Herod the Great, and his wife Bernice were paying a courtesy call on the new governor. Agrippa ruled a territory, primarily in what is now Lebanon, that included a small portion of the land governed by his father and grandfather, but he maintained some jurisdiction over the activities of the Temple in Jerusalem. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, he tried in vain to stop the Jewish revolt against Rome that broke out in 66. Conversations between Festus and Agrippa apprise the Jewish king of the details of Paul's case and reveal the judgment of Festus that Paul "had done nothing deserving death" (25:25), the typical judgment of Roman authorities about the Christians in Acts. In order to gather materials for his memo of transmittal, Festus proposes one more hearing for Paul in the presence of Agrippa (25:13-27).

Paul's final defense speech is directed primarily toward the Jewish king, whom he addresses with a typical *captatio benevolentia* (26:2-3), an effort to gain the good will of his addressee. Most of the points in the speech are familiar from Paul's earlier appearances. He recalls his life as a pious Pharisee and claims that he is now persecuted because of his belief in the (Pharisaic) belief in resurrection (26:4-8). The claim serves Luke's insistence on the authentic Jewish roots of the Christian faith.

Paul reminds Agrippa of his service as a persecutor of Christians (24:9-11), then tells of his Damascus Road experience (26:12-17). The account differs in minor details from the two previous versions of the story (9:1-9; 22:6-11). One interesting feature of this account is the remark attributed to Jesus, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? *It hurts you to kick against the goads*." Luke's readers familiar with classical literature would catch here another allusion, this time to a Greek proverb found, for instance, in the remarks of the god Dionysus in the *Bacchae* of Euripides (794-95). The point of the proverb is that it is useless to resist the divine will, and Paul duly accedes to the will of Jesus to make him an apostle so that gentiles might "receive forgiveness of sins and a place among" the sanctified (26:17). Paul continues with an account of his missionary activity, with its focus on a call to repentance and the continuity of his message with Moses and the prophets (26:19-23).

Following the speech there is a bit of repartee, with Festus declaring Paul mad, and Agrippa dismissively asking whether Paul was really attempting to persuade him (26:24-29). The grandees leave, declaring Paul innocent of any crime and worthy of being freed if he had not appealed to Caesar (26:30-32). The usual pattern of a declaration of innocence thus concludes the chapter and Paul's time in Israel.

The journey to Rome follows, a chapter full of peril for our hero. It begins with one of the "we" passages (27:1-8), either a fragment of a diary of someone who was with Paul on the voyage or a literary device that brings the audience into the dramatic account of the voyage. Danger increases as the ship, sailing late in the season, encounters a storm off the southern coast of Crete (27:13-20). As the storm continues, Paul encourages his fellow-sailors to endure, since an angel had told him that he would stand before Caesar (27:21-26). After two weeks of being driven in heavy seas, Paul celebrates a eucharist (27:35) and prepared for the worst. Finally the ship runs aground, with all hands safe and sound, as Paul had predicted (27:39-44).

The landfall turns out to be Malta, where Paul encounters natives reminiscent of the inhabitants of Lycaonia (14:8-18). These locals see a viper on Paul's hand and expect him to die of poison. When he does not, they think him a god (28:1-6). Fortunately another local aristocrat, Publius, received Paul and his entourage, and Paul returns the favor by curing his father. After winter on Malta, Paul and his companions sail to Rome (another "we-passage," 28:7-16). Paul has finally reached a goal envisioned in Jesus' proclamation in 1:8 that the gospel would be preached throughout the world. It remains for Paul to do so.

The book of Acts closes with Paul preaching. After summoning leaders of the Jewish community, who profess ignorance about him (28:12-22), he tries to convince them in the usual way, arguing about Jesus from Moses and prophets (28:23). As has been the case throughout Acts, the results are mixed, with some accepting and others rejecting Paul's message (28:24). The account of Paul's preaching ends on a solemn note of judgment that encapsulates one of the major themes of the whole book. As Isaiah 6:9-10 said of the Israelites of his day, they listen but do not understand, look but do not see. Paul draws the inference that Luke's narrative illustrates: salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, who will listen (28:29). Luke concludes with the note that Paul continued preaching in Rome for two years, "with boldness and without hindrance" (28:30).

Why Luke ends here has intrigued many readers over the years. Tradition stemming from the end of the first century in the First Epistle of Clement, sent from Rome to Corinth by the leadership of the Roman community, attests that Paul died as a martyr with Peter under the persecution of Christians launched by Nero in 64. Later sources give varying accounts of his martyrdom, which is monumentally memorialized in the Church of St. Paul Fuori le Mura ("Outside the Walls"). Acts, probably written well after that event, chooses not to tell the tale of martyrdom, which becomes a focal point of much later Christian hagiography. No, for our author, the true tale ends on what he takes to be the most positive note: the Gospel has been proclaimed, and as his readers would know, it took root in the soil of Italy.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Now that you have worked through all of Acts, how would you evaluate the various examples of Paul's rhetoric? Do his speeches in Acts reflect what you know of Paul? Do they offer models of how contemporary Christians might address problems confronting the Church today?

2. By now you have read a good deal about the apologetic dimensions of Acts, particularly its stance toward the Roman empire. Having weighed all the elements, how would you characterize that stance? Do you think it offers a model of how Christians should relate to our contemporary political environment? If not, why not? Do other scriptural texts play a role in your answer to the question?

3. The ending of Acts has puzzled most commentators. What do you make of it? If Luke knows of the death of Paul, why does he not describe it?

4. If you have studied Paul's letters, does the portrait of Paul in Acts conform to your understanding of the Apostle? If not, how does the image of Paul in Acts differ from what you might create from study of his letters?

For Further Study:

- Colin Hemer, "The First Person Narrative in Acts 27-28," *Tyndale Bulletin* 36 (1985) 79-109.
- G. W. Trompf, "On Why Luke Declined to Recount the Death of Paul: Acts 27-28 and Beyond," In Charles H. Talbert, ed., *Luke Acts* (New York: Crossroad, 1984) 225-39.