



The Acts of the Apostles

Acts 21-23: The Defense of the Gospel

In his thorough and helpful scholarly commentary on the Book of Acts, Richard Pervo wisely suggests that the last chapters remind us of the last chapters of the Gospel According to Luke. As we look at these two books we see that in each case the pace of the narrative hastens us toward the conclusion. In each case the protagonist (Jesus in Luke, Paul in Acts) faces danger, challenge and serious opposition. In each case he defends the faith. Luke takes us through Jesus' death as an exemplary and forgiving martyr; Acts takes us up to the point where surely the first readers knew that Paul was about to be martyred. In Luke, of course, the death of Jesus is trumped by his resurrection. For the community that reads Acts, we suspect that the death of Paul is trumped by the realization that the churches he founded remain and grow.

These last chapters of Acts continue the author's twofold focus on the gospel among the Jews and the gospel among the Gentiles. In chapters 21-23 Paul confronts Jewish opposition in Jerusalem. In chapter 25 after further trials (literally) and tribulations, Paul goes to Jerusalem where he will end his days.

Acts 21:1-16 succinctly trace Paul's journey from Ephesus to Jerusalem. There is a brief stop at Tyre where we see Paul's charismatic power – that he has so charmed the believers over the course of seven days that they all head to the beach to wish him a tearful farewell (21:1-6).

Then they ("we" in the telling) head to Caesarea by way of Ptolemais. In Caesarea Paul's story is linked to the early chapters of Acts and his mission tied to the earlier mission of the Jewish Christians when Paul visits with Philip, whom we last saw in Acts 8:4-40. After the brief mention of Philip's prophetic daughters (perhaps gifted like some of the women in Corinth, cf. 1 Cor 11:5). However, the only oracle Luke presents comes instead from Agabus who uses a kind of modest sign-act to predict Paul's arrest in Jerusalem. (Acts 21:11; for Agabus see also Acts 11:27-28). Agabus' prediction fills something of the role that Jesus' own predictions of his arrest serve in Luke's Gospel. Both the characters in the story and the readers of the story are warned of what is to come, and the characters urge Paul not to continue his journey. Paul, again imitating his Lord sets his face steadfastly for Jerusalem and eventual martyrdom. The community affirms Paul's intention with its prayer – "The Lord's will be done." Their prayer echoes Jesus at the Mount of Olives and the prayer he taught his disciples. (Luke 22:42, 11:2 in some texts).

It is almost impossible to figure out what features in the story of Paul's visit to Jerusalem are historically accurate. How does this visit to James correspond to Paul's description of his relationship to the Jerusalem church in Galatians 2:2-10 or to the account of his visit in Acts 15? Is this visit to be understood in the light of Paul's often stated intention to bring an offering to Jerusalem from the Gentiles (e.g., Romans 15:25-29)? Does the rather hostile reception he receives from the Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem indicate that the offering itself was refused? Most problematic, what sources and facts lie behind the account of Paul's joining the oath-takers in their visit to the temple and financing their offerings there? And why does James give the rules for observance by Gentile believers (Acts 21: 25) that had already been decided and promulgated in Acts 15?

What seems clear is that once again Luke is insisting that Paul did not intend to disrespect or disobey the leaders in Jerusalem. In Luke's estimation, Paul saw the Christian story to stand in continuity with the story of Israel, and Luke apparently understood that Jews were to continue in observance of the law. The whole episode emphasizes again the unity of the early church – Jew and Gentile, James and Paul. Reading between the lines, however, it is easy for us to see how tenuous that unity may actually have been.

The dramatic story of Paul's arrest in 21:27-36 is likewise lively but a little confusing. Jews from outside Jerusalem accuse Paul of destroying the Torah in his relationship to the Gentiles and specifically accuse him of taking a Gentile into the temple – though as we have seen his companions in the temple were vow-taking Jews. A riot breaks out, and in a classic case of blaming the victim, the tribune arrests Paul – in part to keep the peace and in part to find out, from the victim, what the riot was about. The cry of the crowds echoes the cries about Jesus in Luke 23:18-21. Now the cry is about Paul: "Away with him!" (Acts 21:36).

Luke cleverly sets up the opportunity for Paul to defend himself to the people. Apparently, the tribune has mistaken Paul for a major Egyptian terrorist (leading four thousand assassins!). When Paul speaks fluent Greek, the tribune realizes this is no Egyptian. Paul claims citizenship in Tarsus and his Jewish heritage as the reasons he should be allowed to speak; the tribune permits it. Paul speaks his defense in Hebrew (Aramaic); apparently only his Jewish audience is to understand what he says.

Paul's "defense" turns out to be entirely offensive to his Jewish audience. Luke is leading us toward the conclusion of his story where the Gospel has become the Gentiles' heritage. Paul recites autobiographically what Luke has presented biographically in Acts 9 – the story of the Road to Damascus experience, now with an epiphany in the Jerusalem temple added on.

Paul starts by setting himself firmly among the Jews. The claim that he grew up in Jerusalem and studied with Gamaliel is not confirmed by any of his letters, but it does strengthen his credentials as an observant Jew. Paul expands the description of his role as persecutor of Christians beyond the descriptions in Acts 9 and Galatians 1:13. His goal was to put believers in prison and from there they would be delivered to death. Surely there is a hint of irony here as those who know Paul's story realize that he will soon follow the fate of his earlier victims.

As Richard Pervo points out, the story of Paul's Damascus experience shifts from the emphasis on conversion (in Acts 9) to an emphasis on call – and the mission to the Gentiles. In this sense

Acts 22 is closer to Galatians 1 than is Acts 9. In Galatians Paul clearly sees his encounter with the risen Lord as a moment of call, very much like the call that came to Jeremiah. (See especially Galatians 1:15-16).

In Acts 22, the amount of space devoted to Ananias is severely cut and Ananias' vision is omitted. The missionary call is moved from the Damascus road to the temple, where the risen Lord tells Paul to be on his way to the Gentile mission. This is a charming combination of prophetic call and prudential advice: "Get out of here before they take your life, and while you're at it, just keep going till you reach Gentile territory." (Acts 22:17-21)

At the end of our episode the tribune has again both apprehended and rescued Paul. As he has before, at the very last-minute Paul pulls out his "Roman citizen" card. It turns out that he has done even better than the tribune, who had to buy his citizenship while Paul inherited his. The bystanders are filled with awe, and the tribune is moved to try to sort this out in yet another way, by convening a meeting of the chief priests and their council to try to figure out what it is they have against this Jew who is also a citizen of Rome (Acts 22:30-31).

We think it is fair to say that Acts 23 is narrated in such a way as to put "the Jews" in the worst possible light. In Acts 23:1-10 the High Priest acts like a boor, and the members of the council are tricked by the clever Paul into having a House of Representatives like debate between the right and the left. The Left (the Pharisees who think that Scripture is to be interpreted more flexibly than the Sadducees) agree with Paul about the resurrection, and Paul is right enough that he is a defender of resurrection, though here he fails to note that it is Jesus' resurrection in particular that is the heart of his gospel. The Pharisees, because they do believe in angels and spirits, think it's possible that Paul has had a genuine revelation. Apparently, the debate becomes so violent that Paul, once again the victim, is in danger of being torn in pieces and again Lysias, the tribune, intervenes to save his life.

There is a pattern in this latter part of Acts. Neither the Jews nor the Roman/Gentile authorities have any very clear sense of what's going on, but the Jews usually act out of malice and the Romans/Gentiles out of compassion, or at least a rough sense of justice.

Almost certainly Luke continues to write his work in ways to encourage Roman support and to praise Roman wisdom.

In Acts 23:11 we have another of those divine messages that sets the agenda. (Remember our early claim that in this book God is in charge.) Now Paul's mission is clear; he is to testify in Rome.

The plot thickens with the effect of making the Jews look even worse and the Romans even more accommodating. In 23:12-25 forty Jews take an oath to assassinate Paul. Paul's unnamed nephew conveniently brings the word to the tribune. The tribune goes to extraordinary length to Felix, the regional governor who lives in Caesarea. Secular sources tell us that Felix was a freed slave who rose to considerable power and married into the ruling Herodian family, perhaps not entirely out of romantic motives.

Almost certainly Luke's account here recalls something of Paul's actual progress from Jerusalem through Caesarea to Rome. What we as readers notice, however, is that in complicated and

conflict-ridden ways, God is moving Paul to where Paul is supposed to be: to Rome to bear witness.

Yale Divinity School, 409 Prospect Street, New Haven, CT 06511

www.yalebiblestudy.org