



Luke's Political Vision

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Abstract

In order to understand Luke's political vision, we have first to understand the complex political situation in which Acts is written. This becomes clear in the trial of Paul, where Paul stands before a Roman tribunal but addresses a dispute arising within the Jewish community. Despite his protestations of innocence under Roman law, Paul's response embodies an inclusive political vision that is profoundly subversive of the imperial order.

Keywords

Acts, Luke, Paul, Roman Empire, *Apologia*, Political, Gospel

Introduction

The question about Luke's political vision is generally posed in terms of his attitude to the dominant political reality of his day: the Roman Empire. Is Luke pro-Roman or anti-Roman? Pro-empire or anti-empire? Is he writing to a Roman audience, to offer an apologetic defense of the church against charges of sedition? Or is he writing to a Christian audience, offering an apologetic defense of the empire, to reconcile Christians to their place in the imperial system? Does he offer a rosy, top-down picture of the empire? Or a radical but subtle critique? All of these have been put forward as plausible readings of Acts: and all to a greater or lesser degree stem from the observation that the final scenes of Acts depict Paul on trial in a Roman court, making his own defense (*apologia*) before a succession of Roman governors, and finally transported to Rome where his appeal will be heard before the emperor. This apologetic scenario, which is repeated time and time again in the dramatic narrative of Acts, is fundamental to understanding Luke's political vision, and it is there that we begin.

An Apology in Court: the Apologetic Scenario in Acts 25–26

The scene is the imperial *praetorium* in Caesarea, in the late fifties of the 1st century C.E. Porcius Festus, newly appointed Roman governor to the province of Judaea, is speaking to a visiting local dignitary about an unresolved case left behind by his predecessor. The judicial issue appears to fall under local jurisdiction; but the prisoner, one Saul (*aka* Paul) of the tribe of Benjamin, has claimed the privileges of Roman citizenship, and Festus (remembering, no doubt, that his predecessor was

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prosecuted on his return to Rome) is cautious.¹ The local authorities have requested “as a favor” (Acts 25:3) that the prisoner be returned to Jerusalem for trial, but Festus instead sets a date to hear the case in Caesarea. His decision (as he explains to Agrippa in Acts 25:16) is based on a fundamental Roman principle (*ethos*), that the accusers must appear in person to make their case against the accused, and that the accused must be allowed an opportunity (*topos*, lit. “place”) for self-defense (*apologia*).

This famous scene sets out with splendid clarity the complex political location of the Acts of the Apostles. In the last quarter of the book, Paul is depicted not as the successful missionary, but as a man on the defensive, making his *apologia* before a series of audiences on his return to Jerusalem. First the enraged crowd in the temple, ready to lynch Paul for defiling the holy place, until he is rescued by the tribune (Acts 21:27–22:24). Then the Sanhedrin, where Paul successfully causes a diversion by appealing to the Pharisaic party within the council (Acts 22:30–23:10). Until finally Paul ends up in Caesarea, facing trial before the tribunal of the Roman governor Felix, who keeps him in prison for two years awaiting trial (Acts 24:1–26). It is only on the arrival of the new governor, Festus, that Paul’s case is re-opened and he gets the chance to make his *apologia* before a full tribunal (Acts 24:27–25:12).

Luke is one of the great storytellers of the Bible, bringing to life the story of the Word and its progress in the world in a fast, action-packed narrative that moves outwards from Jerusalem, across the Eastern Mediterranean, and finally to the city of Rome. But Luke does not just *tell* his story; he *shows* us his characters in action in a series of vivid dramatic scenes that allow us to watch the interactions between speaker and audience and overhear their speeches and sermons. These dramatic set-piece speeches make up a significant proportion of the whole of Acts, and they are in many ways just as important as the narrative line that links them up. It is no accident that when, in the final quarter of the book, Paul comes into direct confrontation with the forces of the Roman Empire, Luke slows down the narrative pace to give us—and his first readers—the opportunity to hear Paul explain precisely what is this gospel and how he came to be where he is.

Standing up in court to make your own defense is a scary proposition: in one sense, it means you have reached the end of the road, lost your independence of movement, and run out of places to hide. Paul the adventurer, Paul the missionary, has become Paul the prisoner. It is not the first time: Paul has found himself on the defensive many times throughout his missionary career, thrown into prison and summoned before the forces of law and order.² And Paul is not the only character in Acts to find himself in this position: Peter, John, and Stephen all find themselves in a similar position (cf. Acts 4, 5, 7, and 12). Nevertheless, the law-court setting provides an unrivaled opportunity to “go public,” to make a definitive statement of your beliefs and principles before the wider world. This is how Paul himself seems to envisage the prospect of making his own defense when he is writing from prison to the church at Philippi: pray for me, he says, in my *apologia* and confirmation

1 Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.182.

2 Acts 16:19–39; 17:5–9; 18:12–17; 19:23–41.

(*bebaiosis*) of the gospel, “that I may not be put to shame, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death” (Phil 1:7, 20). To be hauled into court to make your *apologia* is not a disaster, but an opportunity for the “confirmation” of the gospel. And this is precisely how Luke depicts Paul’s *apologia* in Acts: not as a tragic interruption to his mission, not just about deciding Paul’s personal fate (though it is that), but also as an opportunity to state the claims of the gospel on the public stage.

But what is the political framework of Paul’s *apologia*? To understand what is going on here, we need to unpack the apologetic scenario that lies behind Acts. In the ancient Greek city-state, the law-court provides a public stage on which the accused is called to address the charges brought by the accusers, before the 500-strong citizen jury. One of the most famous and influential trials in antiquity was the trial of Socrates in Athens in 399 B.C.E. At its heart is the philosopher, on trial for his life as a citizen exercising his right to be tried before an audience of his peers. Socrates’ defense speech addresses a double audience: the jury of 500 citizens, representing and enacting the judicial authority of the democratic city-state; and the accusers who have brought against him the twin charges of disbelieving in the city’s gods, and corrupting the young.³ The case of Socrates soon came to assume an iconic status, made all the more piquant by the philosopher’s refusal either to defend himself or to plead realistically for a lenient sentence, and by his subsequent execution. Socrates, in this speech, is already starting to extend the boundaries of the law-court setting: his speech becomes a justification for (and an exposition of) a lifestyle, a lifestyle lived under obedience to the promptings of the divine voice.

The scenario described in Acts, however, belongs to a more complex world, and reflects quite precisely the legal and political framework of the Greek East in the 1st-century Roman Empire.⁴ Rome sought not to eliminate but to support local jurisdiction in the cities of the East; in civil cases, each local city or community had its own laws and could make its own judicial decisions. But above and behind the legal patterns of each local administration was the over-arching authority of the empire. As the town clerk in Ephesus puts it, “there are courts, there are proconsuls” (Acts 19:38): the phrase captures accurately Rome’s interest in upholding and supporting the due processes of local law, but also the lurking menace of Rome’s displeasure when local law enforcement broke down. As streetwise provincials like Paul quickly realized, the presence of Rome created multiple tiers of authority, which could profitably be played off one against the other. Roman jurisdiction could be invoked directly in the case of an offense against Roman law: but in many of the cases heard by provincial governors, and even more by the emperor himself, Rome was being invoked not as prosecutor but as arbitrator, called to cast the deciding vote in a dispute between two provincial parties. It seems clear that Paul’s trial in Acts belongs to this second category.

3 Plato, *Apology*; Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1:1.

4 On the legal background, A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963) is still indispensable; also see H. W. Tajra, *The Trial of St Paul* (WUNT 2/35; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989), and Brian Rapske, *The Book of Acts and Paul in Roman Custody* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

Rome's role as arbitrator in community disputes surfaces frequently in the 1st-century history of the Jews. One of the most graphic examples is provided by the 1st-century Jewish philosopher Philo, who gives us a vivid account of the emperor's role as arbitrator in the tripartite disputes between the Jewish community of Alexandria, the Greek citizen-body, and the Roman governor.⁵ Philo describes with approval the emperor's ideal role as independent arbitrator in a dispute between the Greeks and the Jews. The accusations come from the Greek residents of Alexandria, but the dispute is played out on a very public stage in front of a Roman audience. The Jewish embassy here is speaking on behalf of a whole community, and indeed of the whole Jewish nation.⁶ The charges vary from precise political issues ("We want to hear what claims you make about your citizenship") to general matters of religious practice ("Why do you refuse to eat pork?").⁷ Philo's account highlights both the adversarial nature of the appeal process, with each side seeking to score points off the other, and its essentially arbitrary character. Getting the emperor (or the provincial governor) on your side is as much about soliciting favors (*charizesthai*) as about seeking justice—a point that Luke makes with equal force in his account of Paul's trial (cf. Acts 24:27; 25:3, 9, 11, 16).⁸ Gaius' final good-humored response to the Jewish delegation is, for Philo, a testimony not to Roman justice but to the grace of God.⁹

Philo's text also alerts us to a third kind of audience: those who read such stories in a written text. For Philo and his readers, the tribunal of justice has itself proved corrupt, and much of the treatise functions as an invective against Gaius himself. Philo implicitly appeals over the heads of corrupt rulers to wider values of justice and equity, and seeks to demonstrate the proper virtues of kingship by invoking the example of Augustus.¹⁰ The dominant theme of the treatise is the divine protection of the Jewish people worldwide and the un-wisdom of tampering with their institutions or infringing their rights—a message simultaneously of warning to the persecutor and comfort to the persecuted people. By reading the dramatic story of the delegation to Caesar within this narrative framework, we can begin to glimpse the political vision that lies behind it. Philo's indictment of Roman misgovernment lies within the well-established Jewish tradition of prophetic and historical narrative detailing the relationships of Jewish communities with the pagan empires. Daniel, Esther, Judith, and the books of the Maccabees all explore this theme in different ways and in very different narrative styles, but common to all of them are the linked themes of the corruption of power, the hubris of the pagan monarchies, and the vindication and miraculous deliverance of a faithful Jewish community by a merciful and all-powerful God.¹¹

5 Philo, *On the Embassy to Gaius* (*De Legatione ad Gaium*) 350; compare *In Flaccum* 106.

6 Philo, *Embassy* 350; 355; 370–71.

7 Ibid., 363; 361.

8 Ibid., 359–68.

9 Ibid., 365, 367.

10 Ibid., 143–58.

11 P. R. Davies, "Daniel in the Lions' Den," in *Images of Empire* (ed. Loveday Alexander; JSOTSup 122; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991). For a more recent exploration of this theme, see K. Yamazaki-Ransom, *The Roman Empire in Luke's Narrative* (LNTS 421; London: T & T Clark, 2010).

Paul's *Apologia* and the Political Vision of Acts

It is against this complex background that we need to assess Luke's political vision. Within the dramatic setting of the courtroom, there is a double audience: Paul is speaking before a Roman tribunal to address charges brought against him by the Jewish authorities. But this dramatic scenario is now embedded in a written narrative, which appeals to a third-level audience of readers, above and behind the dramatic audiences inscribed in the text.

"I have in no way committed an offense against the law of the Jews, or against the temple, or against the emperor." (Acts 25:8)

On the traditional view of Acts, Luke, like his hero, is offering an *apologia* for the gospel before a Roman audience, designed to prove that Christianity is a *religio licita* and is not breaking any of the empire's laws. And on the surface, this is precisely the message of Paul's Roman trials in Caesarea. In the trial before Felix (Acts 24), Paul faces the charge of being "a pestilent fellow, an agitator among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes" (24:5) "He even tried to profane the Temple," says Tertullus, the orator brought down to speak for the prosecution, "and so we seized him" (24:6). Both these charges are potentially damaging. Profaning the temple by bringing Gentiles into the court of Israel was a capital offense under Jewish law, explicitly upheld by the Romans. This charge, if proved, could have been fatal for Paul, and Paul takes care to deny it (24:13; 25:8). Luke the narrator also makes sure that readers know the charge was unfounded: see 21:29. This assessment is endorsed by the judgment of Festus and Agrippa: Paul has not committed any offense under Roman law, and could have been released if he had not appealed to Caesar (25:18; 26:31–32).

So far, so good: Luke is the first of a series of Christian apologists seeking to demonstrate that Christian practice is not contrary to Roman law, and that Christians should be allowed to live and operate freely within the empire. To conclude from this, however, that Luke (or Paul) is "pro-empire" is to make a serious misjudgment. What Luke shows us is a Paul solidly rooted in the political realities of his day, a Paul who knows how to survive within an oppressive system and who will use all the weapons at his disposal to do so. This becomes obvious in the rhetoric of the trial speeches. The hired orator Tertullus, speaking for the prosecution, begins his speech with a rhetorical flourish, complimenting the Roman governor on the "peace and reforms" brought about under his administration (24:2–3). Given Felix's reputation, this must be taken as a piece of dramatic irony. Paul, by contrast, uses the same conventional courtesy, but sticks to incontrovertible fact: "For many years you have been a judge over this nation" (24:10). Having played the Roman citizenship card more than once at exactly the point where it will cause the maximum embarrassment to harassed local officials, Paul knows the legal system well enough to make his appeal to Caesar at the point where all other options appear to be exhausted: it is the only way he can avoid being sent back to Jerusalem and ensure his passage to Rome (25:11).¹² Moreover, it is—within the top-heavy bureaucracy of the imperial system—an unrivaled opportunity to take the message of the gospel to the very heart of the empire.

12 Rapske, *The Book of Acts and Paul in Roman Custody*, ch. 4.

"Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who is uncondemned?" (Acts 22:25)

But it would equally be a mistake to read Luke's Paul as a cynical manipulator of the system. Like Socrates, Paul has a solid respect for the due processes of law and order: in fact his whole defense would be meaningless without it. Individual Roman officials within Luke's narrative may be corrupt or incompetent (18:17; 24:25, 26). But the laws of the state and the principles of justice have validity above and behind the deficiencies of any individual governor, and must be respected: "If I am in the wrong, and have committed something for which I deserve to die, I am not trying to escape death" (25:11).¹³ Even an unjust state, in other words, can act as the agent of a just and holy God: no human institution is flawless, but nevertheless it is to be obeyed "for the Lord's sake" (1 Pet 2:13). There is a glimpse here of a political vision deep-rooted in the experience of Jews living under pagan (and often oppressive) empires, a vision succinctly expressed in Romans 13. The same philosophy is expressed in narrative form in the book of Daniel, which sets the immutability of God's law against the frailty of individual rulers (Daniel 6)—or in Philo's exhortation to the flawed emperor Gaius to live up to the vision of the ideal ruler expressed in the person of his grandfather Augustus.

"These people have been turning the world upside down . . . saying that there is another king named Jesus." (Acts 17:6–7)

Nevertheless, respect for the divine economy of justice and equity underlying the political system does not mean mindless acquiescence in the social values of the empire, and any Roman official who troubled to read further into the narrative of Acts might find serious cause for concern. Paul's missionary career was dogged by the charge of political subversion, and this charge was not one to be taken lightly in the highly-charged political atmosphere of the mid-first century empire (19:40). Riots and civic disturbances seem to follow Paul wherever he goes.¹⁴ The issue comes to a head in Thessalonica, where Jason is accused of harboring "these people who have been turning the world upside down . . . saying that there is another king named Jesus" (17:6–7). It is hard to escape the implication that the message Paul brings is intrinsically destabilizing to the imperial status quo: even if he is not actively breaking the law, Paul's message embodies an alternative political vision that is profoundly subversive.¹⁵

"It is for the sake of the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain." (28:20)

Having summarily dismissed any charges under Roman law, Paul turns to address his Jewish accusers. Here again, the most damaging charge, that of violating the temple, is firmly but briefly dismissed. Paul is fully aware that behind the charge is a deep unease about his mission to the Gentiles and its implication for Jewish religious life (21:21). What he offers to counter this is not a blow-by-blow analysis of the charges, far less an "apology" (in our sense) for what he has done, but

13 Cf. 1 Pet 3:16–17; 4:15–16.

14 Cf. Acts 14:19; 16:19–23; 17:5; 18:12–17; 19:23–41.

15 Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (Oxford: University Press, 2009), ch. 4.

a Socratic *apologia pro vita sua*, a repeated insistence on his absolute fidelity to the religion of his ancestors. What is perpetually puzzling to the Roman auditors of this debate is that when he is addressing the Jewish authorities, Paul uses a range of theological and scriptural arguments that make very little sense in a Roman law-court—such as the argument about the resurrection to which Paul appeals before the Sanhedrin (24:6–9). But it would be a mistake to dismiss this as a cynical political maneuver. When Paul says to Agrippa, “I stand here on trial on account of my hope in the promise made by God to our ancestors, a promise that our twelve tribes hope to attain” (26:6–7), he is totally in earnest: and is expressing something integral to the political vision of the book of Acts. Right from the start of his Gospel, Luke has proclaimed the gospel message as the fulfillment of Israel’s hopes, the “horn of salvation” (NRSV, “mighty savior”) born in the house of David (Luke 1:67). John the Baptist came with a message of national repentance, “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17, cf. 1:76–77). Pentecost sees that promise beginning to be fulfilled, with the outpouring of God’s prophetic Spirit presaging the restoration of Israel and the gathering in of scattered Israel from around the inhabited world (Acts 2)—with its firstfruits in the mission to the Samaritans (Acts 8) and the baptism of the African proselyte in Acts 9. The sermons of Acts constantly look back over the sweep of Israel’s history, building up a dense foundation of scriptural argumentation to support the theme that the whole Jesus event is the climax and culmination of God’s dealings with Israel.

“Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.” (Acts 22:21)

But the restoration of Israel is not tied to military action or land-grabbing. The gospel message is the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham (Luke 1:55, 73), but it is a promise carefully redefined to focus on the worship of God rather than the possession of the land (Luke 1:73–74). Stephen’s speech in Acts 7 highlights the pilgrim status of the people of God rather than their entry into the land, and even downplays the significance of the temple (Acts 7:48–50). The important aspect of God’s promise to Abraham is the promise that “in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Acts 3:25)—a promise that begins with Israel (Acts 3:26) but cannot be limited to Israel’s horizons. Central to the whole narrative of Acts is a political vision of inclusiveness. Israel restored is a people that includes the poor (Acts 2), the lame (Acts 3), the sexually disfigured (Acts 8). The outpouring of God’s Spirit gives a voice to those marginalized by fossilized social structures and religious conventions, including country folk (2:7), immigrants (2:9–11), and women (2:17–18). And at the heart of the story is the gradual (and often painful) realization by Jesus’ disciples that the commission to act as his witnesses “to the ends of the earth” (1:8) actually includes not only witness to scattered Israel but also witness to the Gentile world. This is the theme of Peter’s encounter with Cornelius, which recounts with psychological insight the slow and painful steps by which God is calling Peter to redefine his concept of holiness, come down from his rooftop, and find out how God’s Spirit is already at work among those whom his Bible had taught him to dismiss as “unclean” (Acts 10). This is the theme of the apostolic council in Acts 15, where representatives of a more restricted vision are brought face to face with those who have crossed the borders and found God already at work before them. And this is the focal theme of Paul’s final “speeches for the defense” in Acts 22 and 26.

"I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision." (Acts 26:19)

One of the striking and at first sight puzzling aspects of Paul's final speeches in Acts is the amount of time given to the Damascus Road encounter. This story is so familiar that we are inclined to overlook the significance of the fact that it is told three times over in Acts, once by the narrator (Acts 9), and twice by Paul, first to the Jewish crowd in the temple (Acts 22) and then (with small variations in circumstantial detail) before Festus and Agrippa in Acts 26. In his letters, Paul himself constantly reverts to this moment, treating it both as an encounter with the risen Christ and as a commissioning for his apostolic mission (1 Cor 15:8–11; Gal 1:13–16). But why does Luke give it so much narrative space? Repetition means significance: and we must conclude that for Luke, as for Paul, the political vision begins with the vision of Jesus, raised, ascended, and Lord.

The key here is that the voice of Jesus, the voice of the persecuted, speaks to Paul from heaven. Behind the Damascus Road is the empty tomb and the exaltation to heaven, graphically dramatized by Luke as a discrete series of events happening over 40 days (Acts 1:1–14). Recent studies on the book of Acts have highlighted the pivotal importance of the ascension for the whole of Luke's narrative: heaven acts as a kind of "third-space" from which the ascended Jesus controls the whole of Luke's story.¹⁶ Festus, describing the case to Agrippa, confesses he is struggling to understand this story about "a certain Jesus, who had died, but whom Paul asserted to be alive" (25:19). But Paul's final appeal to Agrippa makes the connection abundantly clear: when Paul talks about resurrection (26:8), he is not talking about an eschatological event, or the common fate of humanity, but about a radical reversal that puts a crucified criminal, executed under Roman law, on the throne of heaven, and gives him the authority to speak as Lord. This is the ultimate and irreducible motivating cause for Paul's Gentile mission: "I will rescue you from the Gentiles — to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God" (26:17–18; cf. 22:15). And Paul expects Agrippa to understand—as Socrates knew well, as in fact most ancient readers would understand—that a heavenly vision is not lightly disobeyed.

*"Whose I am and whom I serve" (Acts 27:23)*¹⁷

Paul's final *apologia* thus brings to dramatic life the conflict of allegiances that has been latent in the whole of Luke's narrative. When the Thessalonians accused Paul and his friends of serving "another king, named Jesus" (17:7), they were both right and wrong. Wrong, in the sense that Paul intends no political takeover: Luke, in Rowe's words, raises the issue precisely so as to narrate it off the agenda.¹⁸ But right, in the sense that Paul demonstrates an ultimate allegiance that transcends the real, but strictly limited, authority given to earthly rulers (which they transgress at their peril; cf. the story of Herod's death in Acts 12:20–23). To acknowledge Christ as "Lord of all"

16 Matthew Sleeman, *Geography and the Ascension Narrative in Acts* (SNTSMS 146; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

17 NSRV "to whom I belong and whom I worship".

18 Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 87–88.

(Acts 10:36), is to enter an alternative sphere of authority that radically deconstructs the emperor's claim to absolute allegiance.¹⁹

This is the political vision that underpins Paul's *apologia* before Festus and Agrippa, and provides a key to the whole of Luke's narrative. It leads forward to the final verses of Acts, with Paul under arrest in Rome, but "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (28:31). It leads back through all Paul's adventures of travel and mission to the Jerusalem apostles, refusing to be silenced for teaching and healing in the name of Jesus ("We must obey God rather than any human authority," Acts 5:29). It explains the undercurrent of awe and wonder that accompanies the preaching of the gospel,²⁰ as well as the recurrent motif of warning that Luke puts into the mouth of thoughtful observers in the Sanhedrin: "What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?" (23:9); "Keep away from these men and let them alone: . . . [in case] you may even be found to be fighting against God!" (5:38–39). And it leads back ultimately to the mount of the ascension, where the apostles are commissioned by the risen Christ to be his witnesses "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Luke's political vision encompasses the whole *oikoumene*, the whole inhabited earth to which Rome laid claim (Luke 2:1), but which in actual fact (as Luke and his Jewish readers know well) reaches beyond the borders of the empire (Acts 2:9–11).

"Are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?" (Acts 26:28)

Commentators debate the exact tenor of Agrippa's response to Paul's speech: is he "almost persuaded" or simply mocking? Festus' response is in no doubt, "You are out of your mind, Paul! Too much learning is driving you insane!" (26:24). Paul's final plea leaps off the page, speaking out of the dramatic scenario in Caesarea to the book's readers, whoever they may be: "Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today might become such as I am—except for these chains" (26:29). To "become a Christian"—the word is almost certainly a pejorative coinage, only used by outsiders in the Acts narrative—is to acquire a publicly recognizable identity, to become party to a set of discursive practices in which an alternative political vision is publicly embodied.²¹ Luke gives us glimpses of what such an alternative vision might mean in practice. It is a community committed to the abolition of poverty, to the utopian (but also biblical) ideal of a group "where no one claimed private ownership of any possessions," a group that pools its resources in direct practical action to actualize the biblical injunction that "there shall be no poor among you" (Acts 2:44–45; 4:32). It is a political vision that demands absolute integrity, where any attempt to utilize the Word of God for private financial gain is met with summary punishment (Acts 5:1–11; 8:18–24). It is a prophetic community, where both men and women participate in the outpouring of God's Spirit (Acts 2:17–18), but where also both men and women may be asked to meet the prophetic challenge of facing imprisonment and death (Acts 8:4, 9:1–2). It embodies the ancient Greek virtue of *parrēsia*, a term we usually translate as "boldness" (e.g., NRSV 4:13), but which

19 Ibid., 103–16.

20 E.g., Acts 2:43; 3:10; 5:11; 19:17.

21 Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 126–35.

includes much more than personal confidence: *parrēsia* means freedom of speech, the proper exercise of the right of a free citizen to exercise and express moral discernment over against unjust authority—or the courage to stand up and speak with equal frankness to friend or tyrant.

Postscript: “I had no charge to bring against my nation” (28:19)

But there is no guarantee of impunity: to belong to this community, to own allegiance to this Lord, is to face suffering and imprisonment, even death. The commission to become a “witness” (*martus*) to the risen Christ is first and foremost about speech, about being prepared to open one’s mouth in public (1:8; 22:15). But the concomitant calling to face suffering, to become a “martyr” (the same word in Greek), is never far behind, as Paul recalls when he looks back with shame on his involvement with the death of Stephen (22:20). So it is no accident that Ananias, hesitating over visiting the blinded Saul in Damascus, is told: “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before the Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (9:15–16). The prophetic vocation is also a call to suffering. The final scene of Acts shows Paul in Rome, after the drama of the shipwreck, free to preach the kingdom, but still a prisoner, and still awaiting the outcome of his appeal to Caesar. Luke does not tell us Paul’s eventual fate, but I think leaves us to infer (what his readers would in any case have known) his eventual martyrdom. This seems to be the implication of 23:11: “That night the Lord stood by him and said, ‘Keep up your courage! For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also in Rome.’”

But what Luke actually shows us in the final scene of Acts is not the expected confrontation with Caesar but a much more low-key encounter within the Jewish community in Rome. As we have seen, Paul’s confrontation with the empire was always much more complex than a simple face-off between the individual citizen and the state. In Luke’s world, the empire provided the public framework in which inter-communal disputes could be argued out before a (theoretically) independent tribunal. It was, however, a risky strategy. Once they entered the public domain, communal issues could not be pushed back under the carpet: they became effectively issues of public order. The law-court setting makes this an inherently adversarial process: the temptation for both sides is to use the opportunity to throw the opprobrium on the opposing side, to raise the stakes so that your opponents end up having to justify their whole way of life. We can see this happening in the example cited above from Philo’s *Embassy*, and this is effectively what happens to Paul when he opts for his case to be heard before a Roman tribunal. What begins as a dispute over an alleged infringement of temple law escalates into a dispute over the legitimacy of a whole way of life, and sees Paul offering what is in effect an *apologia* for the gospel.

Paul is careful, however, to insist that his appeal to Caesar does not mean that he has a quarrel with his own people: “I had no charge to bring against my own nation” (28:19). This is a refusal of adversarial politics that deserves to be taken seriously as an overall expression of Luke’s political vision. And it is matched by a remarkably open-minded approach from the leaders of the Jewish community in Rome: “We have received no letters from Judea about you, and none of the brothers

coming here has reported or spoken anything evil about you. We would like to hear from you what you think, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against" (28:21–22). Paul's troublesome reputation has not followed him to Rome, it seems, and he has an open invitation to make the case that the gospel he preaches is solidly based on the law of Moses and the prophets (28:23). The fact that he does not succeed in convincing the community to follow *en masse*, but leaves it in "disharmony" (28:24), is (from Luke's point of view) part of the tragedy of the Roman church, and Paul meets it with the classic quotation from Isaiah 6 that was used by the early church to find a scriptural understanding for what was for the early Christians a tragic fact of life.²² (Paul's own perspective can be read in Romans 9–11.) As he has done already within the Acts narrative, Paul uses this rejection as a justification for his own mission to preach to the Gentiles (28:28): but he does not, here or anywhere else in Acts, use it as an argument for eliminating the Jewish people from the purposes of God. To the end, Luke remains faithful to the promise glimpsed in the Song of Simeon (Luke 2:29–32), that the coming of the Christ is "a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."

22 Craig Evans, *To See And Not Perceive: Isaiah 6:9–10 in Early Christian and Jewish Interpretation* (JSOTSup 64; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989).



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