

7.4 Paul in Rome or The Ending of Acts

After his arrest in Jerusalem and a supposedly two year period of indecision when Paul was held captive in Caesarea he is finally sent to Rome .

The travel route via Malta is not unusual and other details of that route give the impression that Luke knew what he was talking about. It is an accurate description of a common route, landing Naples and then continuing the journey on the Via Appia which led straight into Rome.

Significantly upon arriving in Italy Paul is welcomed by Christ-followers in the cities he passes through and the narrator makes no attempt whatsoever of portraying Paul as the founder of the church in Rome. The narrative gives the impression of significant historical and geographical accuracy here.

However, the ending of Acts, or of the whole work of Luke-Acts when as is presupposed here it is a unity causes problems:

Although Paul arrives safely in Rome there is no further mentioning of the occasion of the actual journey, Paul's appeal to Caesar. This is all the more remarkable since this upcoming trial is mentioned again and again in Acts (23.11;25.11-12;26.32;27.24) The silence of Luke about Paul's fate has troubled exegetes since the Fathers - was he not able to tell what happened, was it too disturbing or was he just an incapable writer? (Numerous reasons for this unsatisfactory ending have been proposed from lack of papyrus, to the intention to write a third volume, internal conflicts, or even that there was nothing more to say since Paul just live an unspectacular life from now on). John Chrysostom referred to the open end as a literary technique which was supposed to activate the reader's reflection, in that the gaps should be filled by extrapolation from the preceding narrative.

In addition to the silence about the fate of Paul, there is the question of how to interpret the final scene in which it is asserted that Paul preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ openly and unhindered (28.31), in relation to the previous statement to the Jews who are divided concerning the gospel of Christ (28.24).

Daniel Marguerat is of the view that Acts 27.1-28.16 actually prepare the enigmatic ending, alerting the audience to an ending which is not as one might expect, it is not the story of Paul's trial before Caesar, or his release, or his death. But it rather provides reflections on the relationship between Jews and gentiles and the future of the Christ-movement. The last scene is a reflection on the relation of the Christ-movement to Judaism (28.17-30).

The narrative of the sea voyage in the previous chapter presents a reflection in narrative form on the relation to gentiles. This the particular focus of the episode on Malta 28.11. Remarkable encounters with gentiles are recorded, which would appeal to a gentile audience:

1. Paul is immune to a viper's bite, which leads the 'barbarians' of Malta to recognize Paul's innocence
2. They regard Paul as a god – a perception which here is not corrected (different from the Lystra incident 14.14-18)
3. Many islanders are healed and honour Paul
4. 28.11 The ship continues the journey under the sign of the Discuri, the twin sons of Zeus, who are not only protecting sea voyagers but also were perceived to be guardians of the truth and punishers of perjury.

To sum up: storm, shipwreck and being bitten by the viper in Malta are presented as a number of trials, which function as an ordeal. Paul's innocence is repeated, in the form of a chain of signs which are adapted to an understanding from a pagan perspective. The pagans

are depicted as friendly and supportive, although they cannot really understand what is at stake and Paul makes no attempt at converting any one of them. The image depicted is encouraging for a future mission: there are great opportunities among these gentiles and Paul will refer to this in 28.28 'they will hear'. This is not to say that Paul sees a gentile mission without any problems – he remains a prisoner of the Roman Imperial Power – and the portrait of the people of Malta demonstrates that they have far to go in understanding and accepting faith in Christ. Jews and God-fearers are the foundation upon which the mission will build. There was no such foundation in Malta, thus the mission cannot get a foothold. The difficulties in Lystra and the scene in Athens reflect on the problem of gentiles with no connection, knowledge, and familiarity with Judaism. Nevertheless the scenes on Malta express confidence that good relations with gentiles are possible.

The Ending (Acts 28.17-31)

The last major scene in Acts neither presents Paul's trial before Caesar nor Paul's relationship with the Christ-followers of Rome. Its focus is on Paul's message to the Jews in Rome. Despite the central role of Paul in the second half of the narrative of Acts it becomes obvious that this is not so much a focus out of interest in Paul as a person but Paul represents the spreading of the gospel throughout the 'world'. The final scene is thus set up to clarify central aspects of the plot of the narrative and to make a final lasting impression on the readers.

In a way the scene in 28.17-28 has similarities to a trial situation but with reversed roles, Paul is a prisoner and others come to his place. To this Jewish (!) audience the summary of the preceding trial narrative and imprisonment speeches of Acts 22-26 are presented, and via these the audience of the narrative are reminded what was essential in this previous sections of the account. Although Paul's address formulates the recognition that he has not done anything which would be problematic in the eyes of the Roman authorities, the primary emphasis is on his claim, that he has 'done nothing opposed to the people or the customs received from the fathers (28.17). (Such charges had been made in 21.21; 24.5-6 and Paul had denied them 25.8,10) Paul thus assures the Roman Jews here that in his appeal to Caesar he does not bring forward any charges against his own people. The stress here is on Paul's loyalty to Israel and its way of life which demonstrates the continuing concern with the charges that Paul is supposedly acting against the Jews or a Jewish way of life (cf. chapter 21). Acts 28.17 not only asserts that Paul is a loyal Jew but that his mission is not anti-Jewish which actually means that what is emphasized here is that the Christ-movement is not an anti-Jewish movement. He remains loyal to his people despite the opposition he has experienced (cf 28.20) when he says that 'because of the hope of Israel I wear these chains' (28.20). The response of the Jews in the scene is similarly reassuring in that they emphasize that they have not heard of Paul, which means nothing negative has been reported and they are open to hear for themselves what he has to say.

We encounter Paul then preaching the kingdom of God to great numbers and as throughout the narrative the reactions are divided (28.23-24). There is division in the audience – the recognition of the Kingdom of God brings disunity among the Jewish people. This is not a new feature introduced here at the end but the reaction of Jewish people is depicted as divided throughout the narrative. In the course of the narrative so far this did not lead Luke to depict the proclamation to the Jews as having come to an end and there is no indication that this is what would be the intention of the narrative here. The quotation from Isaiah 6.9-10 is the same as referred to in Rom 11.25;28-29 and contextualizes the events within the world of the Jewish scriptures (28.26). Despite these harsh prophetic words they provide no indication that this means a closing of the door to Judaism. As in the passage in the letter to the Romans the hardening of the heart of some Jews is set in relation to the spreading of the mission to the gentiles not in the sense that the message of the coming of the kingdom of God is now for gentiles only and Paul had turned his back on the Jews. The perception of the negative response of some Jews as a hardening of the heart

should not be mistaken as a sentence of rejection, it is rather an indication that God is at work here, in ways not always understandable. It is to God that the mystery of the hardening of the people is returned (cf Rom 11.33). But it certainly leaves open the possibility of a future redemption by a salvific intervention of God.

Paul is the ideal model of the Christ-follower living under circumstances of the Roman Empire and with the ambivalent response by Jewish people. He is an apostle in chains who testifies in freedom of speech and without hindrance, which represents promise to the future, he is a prisoner but at the same time he is free. And the concern for the Jewish people remains a concern, in as much as it is God's concern and their lives are in his hands.

The final verses of the entire Lukan account emphasize that Paul is proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ unhindered for two years at the heart of the Roman Empire. He provides hospitality for all – which includes all – Jews and gentiles, Christ-followers and others. Thus the message of the gospel has now reached out to 'all', beginning from Jerusalem. This emphasis on 'all' and the proclamation of the gospels to gentiles is not exclusive! Any exclusivity would be contrary to the scope of the entire work. With this – unexpected – open end Luke closes the circle indicated at the beginning in the birth narrative of the gospel – what had been announced by Simeon the prophet is now fulfilled (Lk 2.32). The division within the people Israel announced there has also been evidence throughout the narrative, however, here at the very end no mention of a persecution by Jews nor by gentiles can be found. This may be an indication for an emphasis Luke wishes to make on unity in diversity rather than on an ongoing conflict.

Despite this open end the Lukan work comes to a sort of conclusion in that its final statement is that the kingdom of God is proclaimed freely at the heart of the Empire. And it is open in the sense that the mission has not come to an end but actually requires the response of the audience. The narrative has to have a sequel in the lives of the Christ-followers.

Essential Reading

- ** Gaventa, Beverly, *Acts*, pp. 349-370.
- ** 7.6 Tannehill, Robert C., 'Paul and the Roman Jews', in *ibid. The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts. Vol. 2 the Acts of the Apostles*. Minneapolis: Fortress 1990, pp.344-357.
- ** 7.7 Marguerat Daniel, 'The Enigma of the Silent Closing of Acts (28.16-31)', in Moessner, David P., *Jesus and the Heritage of Israel*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International 1999, pp. 284-304,

Further Readings

Fitzmyer Joseph, *The Acts of the Apostles*. New York: Doubleday, pp. 766-799.

Marguerat, Daniel, *The First Christian Historian: Writing the Acts of the Apostles*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002, pp.205-230.