

7.3 Paul, Travelling Messenger

After the call/conversion narrative in ch.9 and the crossing of boundaries ch.10 and acknowledgement of this in ch.11.1-18, Luke tells us in 11.19-30 how Paul got involved in the movement. Significantly Barnabas finds Paul in Tarsus(11.25). This happened after the Christ-movement had spread to Antioch and Barnabas seems to have been an important figure there. Obviously they were travelling for some time together, with Paul being the junior partner. After the issue of Jews and non-Jews has been settled in the Apostolic Decree, Paul and his co-workers intend to embark on a new journey. But a dispute arises between Barnabas and Paul who should be their travel companion and in this context Paul and Barnabas part company (15. 36-41).

In a number of subsequent travel episodes Luke demonstrates that the routes the missionaries followed and the encounters with people en route were not straight forward success stories nor do the travelling missionaries always seem to be in charge of their plans. Thus e.g. in 16.6 we learn that the missionaries could go to Asia –to preach the gospel, but were hindered from travelling to Bithynia. Thus Luke points to a mission which expands through trial and error with the Spirit's intervention at times as a frustrating force. The picture Luke depicts of the earliest independent mission of Paul is one which does not develop according to clear directions. Luke demonstrates that human and divine purpose interact with each other and even Jesus' witnesses must endure frustration and error – until they discover opportunity to accord with what apparently was God's plan!

The fact that Silas, Paul's first travel companion after the separation from Barnabas comes from Jerusalem emphasizes the importance of the Jerusalem agreement for Paul's mission, and vice versa the support of Jerusalem for the Jewish-gentile mission led by Paul. Paul, committed to the agreement, delivers the regulations to the communities (cf. 16.4) which is part of the process of strengthening them (16.5). It enables Jews and gentiles to live together in harmony and mutually supporting each other. Paul who represented the gentile mission at the Jerusalem meeting and Silas a delegate of the Jerusalem church are seen here as working together to make the agreement effective and achieve thus unity and harmony in diversity. Here we cannot deal with all the instances narrated in the following chapters of Acts - for detailed comments read the respective chapters in Gaventa, Acts.

We will focus instead on a select number of characteristics in Acts;

The Pauline Mission under Accusation

In chapters 16-19 we find four scenes that feature accusations against Paul and co-workers: the episodes narrate similar sequences of events:

1. In Philippi gentiles accuse them of un-Roman activities
2. In Thessalonica Jews raise a mob and, upon not finding Paul, they drag Jason to the magistrates
3. In Corinth the Jews bring Paul before the tribunal of Gallio
4. In Ephesus Demetrius stirs up his trade colleagues and gentiles accuse Paul and his colleagues of destroying their trade.

Through these incidences Paul is presented as coming under attack from two sides : He is accused of disloyalty to Jewish customs by Jews (18.13) and he is accused of preaching Jewish customs and thus of acting in a non-Roman way by Romans/gentiles (16.20-21). Thus Paul seems to be an outsider and troublemaker in the eyes of members of both, Jewish and Greek communities as apparently both feel that his preaching and activity is threatening their way of life. However, Luke is concerned to demonstrate that Paul and the message the early disciples of Christ proclaim is not critical of Judaism but to the contrary true to the traditions of the scriptures and their ancestors. In addition Luke seems to present the

movement carefully as not being in opposition to Graeco-Roman society. We will come to these aspects again below.

The Mission in Corinth 18.1-17

Paul stays in Corinth for 18 months, the narrative of this long stay is constructed as a series of short events:

- 1-3 Aquila and Priscilla
- 4-8 In and Out of the Synagogue
- 9-11 'Do Not be Afraid'
- 12-17 Before the Tribunal

The missionary couple, Aquila and Priscilla, are introduced 18.2. They are important not only because they are fellow Jews but in addition they enable Paul to work in his trade. Later we learn that they will travel with Paul to Ephesus and play an important role in the community there during Paul's absence (18.18). They are examples of Christ-followers who support the local community, but are themselves apparently also travelling and thus contribute to keep the emerging communities linked with each other thereby creating a network of communication and relationships. Aquila is clearly introduced as a Jew, his wife Priscilla here is mentioned after him, but often she is mentioned first, above all by Paul in his letters (1 Cor 16.19; Rom 16.3) which may indicate either her higher social status or her prominence in the movement.

Their presence in Corinth is explained via reference to an incident in Rome, the so-called edict of Claudius by which Jews were expelled from the city of Rome in 49 CE. The narrative of Acts which tells that Paul, Prisca and Aquila together travelled to Ephesus, and the greetings to them at the end of 1 Corinthians has given rise to the hypothesis that this letter had been sent from Ephesus. The fact that Paul in his letter to the Romans sends greetings to Prisca and Aquila indicates that at that time the couple were back in Rome.

In 18.4-8 we find a typical example of the pattern of the mission of Paul according to Acts: first he is preaching to the Jews, and in a second step he turns to gentiles. In the scene here his preaching clearly is successful among Jews and God-Fearers (18.4). Thus the pattern is not always one of rejection by the Jews and thus turning to the gentiles. After a while opposition seems to have formed against Paul and he solemnly declares that he now will turn to gentiles. He only moved to the house of a god-fearer which was 'next to the synagogue'. In addition the following verse mentions that actually the ruler of the synagogue had joined the movement. Thus, although Paul is depicted as turning to the gentiles, the partial negative response of Jews does not imply that Paul turned away from the Jews nor does it mean that the mission to the Jews was a failure.

The difficult passage in 18.6 where Luke has Paul saying '...your blood be upon your heads' should not be seen as an emphasis on any blood guilt as in Mt 23.35; 27.25. Rather the implication here is that Jews are responsible for themselves. The situation is comparable to that of a prophetic 'watchman' as described in Ez 33.1-9. Paul seems to borrow directly from this passage (Ez 33.4 'His blood will be on his head'). The watchman is one who hears the word of God and is obligated to speak to his people. If he does not conform to his obligation the blood of those who perish will be demanded from the hands of the watchman. Paul declares himself clean because he has fulfilled the obligation to speak God's word to God's people. They are now responsible for their own fate. This also strongly indicates that according to the narrative of Acts Paul felt responsible in a prophetic way for his people – he is released from his obligation after he has proclaimed the message 'to the Jew first' and only when there is strong resistance within the respective Jewish community.

Essential Readings

** Gaventa, Beverly, *Acts*, pp. 254-261

Further Readings

Fitzmyer Joseph, *The Acts of the Apostles*. New York: Doubleday, pp. 617-632.