PARALLEL GUIDE 20
The Acts of the Apostles, Part II

Summary

This chapter concludes our study of the Acts of the Apostles by recounting Paul's ministry. It closes with a short essay on Luke's alleged enmity toward the Jews.

Learning Objectives

• Read the Acts of the Apostles, chapters 13-28

• Become familiar with Paul's journeys

• Define the meaning of Noachian commandments

Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

1. Perhaps in your Bible or in a Bible atlas you can find a map of the Mediterranean basin. Try to trace Paul's travels.

2. What is the importance of the Council in Jerusalem?

Preparing for Your Seminar

The Acts of the Apostles tell about the beginning of the church. One major issue was: how do you incorporate people who are not Jews (Gentiles) into a faith community which has emerged from Judaism? Must they follow all the old traditions and rules? Clearly Christianity abandoned some traditional Jewish practices. What does this say to us when we seek to bring in new members from other cultural, linguistic, or religious groups?

Additional Sources

C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936).

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Jacob Jervell, *The Theology of the Acts of the Apostles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

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Chapter 20
THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES, PART II

Paul's Ministry: First Phase 13:1-14:28

Barnabas and Saul are numbered among the "prophets and teachers" at Antioch (13:1). The two of them start out, "set apart" by the guidance of the Holy Spirit (13:1-3). The laying on of hands, as always, is a sign of identification and solidarity. Saul and Barnabas are representatives (apostles) of the church, not freelance evangelists. Thus they are "missionaries"—people who are sent by someone else, in this case the church, and ultimately the God whom they preach.

Seleucia ~~is~~was the port of Antioch (13:4a). Luke has a keen interest in geography and gives many such details. In general his geographical information seems correct. Cyprus (13:4b), since it was Barnabas' home (4:36) and had a large Jewish population, was a natural place to begin.

The first proclamation is in the synagogues (13:5). "John" is presumably John Mark (13:13; 15:37). Paphos (13:6) was the administrative capital. Luke's first picture of a Roman official outside Judea shows him as friendly to the apostles and willing to hear the word of God (13:7, 12). Fraudulent magicians were by no means unusual on the unorthodox fringes of Judaism, and the picture of the false prophet in 13:6-11—not without its comic elements—has parallels in Jewish writings (cf. 19:13-16; Josephus, Ant. 8.2.5; 20.7.2). The name Elymas (13:8) is something of a puzzle. It certainly does not mean "Bar-Jesus" ("son of Jesus" or "son of Joshua"). Possibly it derives from an Arabic word meaning "wise" and is a translation of the Greek magos, "magician," which is what Simon, the magician in chapter 8, came to be called ("Simon Magus").

Saul is also called Paul (13:9). Many Jews adopted a Greek or Roman name that resembled their Jewish name. Probably Luke thinks it proper to start using this name now that his story begins to deal increasingly with Gentiles and the empire as a whole.

The reason for John Mark's departure at Pisidian Antioch (13:13b) is not given and remains a mystery. It was obviously a source of anger for Paul (15:37-39). The apostles again begin in the synagogue (13:14). Luke presents his summary of the Pauline preaching (13:16-41), perhaps partly to show that in his opinion Paul's kerygma and that of the first apostles were, in all essentials, the same (cf. 1 Cor. 15:11). The emphasis on King Saul (13:21) is notable when one remembers Paul's own Benjaminite ancestry (Phil. 3:5). Paul's preaching meets with considerable success. "Many Jews and devout converts to Judaism" follow the apostles (13:43). On the next Sabbath there is a new development. "Almost the whole city"—which presumably includes a large number of Gentiles—gathers to hear the apostles (13:44). The members of the synagogue ("the Jews") object and contradict Paul (13:44-45). Jews were familiar with Gentile God-fearers in their synagogues. Some of these became proselytes or full converts to Judaism. Why then should Jews who had not been offended on the previous Sabbath by Paul's preaching of Christ now be offended by his preaching to Gentiles? Something in Paul's preaching is becoming apparent,

which Luke assumes we know. It is about to come to the surface in a fierce debate even within the Christian community. Does one have to become a Jew in order to become a Christian? If not, what is a Gentile Christian's relationship to the Jewish community?

Luke tells us only Paul's reaction. He quotes the prophets—and, most significantly, the prophecy that speaks of Israel's mission to the Gentiles (13:47; cf. Isa. 49:6), recalling Simeon's prophetic praise in the Nunc dimittis (Luke 2:32). If Paul is rejected by Jews, he will go to Gentiles, to whom he is also commissioned.

This will be a regular pattern of the Pauline mission as the Book of Acts describes it—first to the synagogue, then to the Gentiles (14:1-28).

Apostolic Council in Jerusalem 15:1-35

The mission to Gentiles is accepted as a part of the apostolic task. But the problems of admitting Gentiles as members of the people of God are by no means solved. On what conditions are they to be admitted? What is to be required of them? By what shall their newfound faith and hope be marked? There was an obvious answer, one that was in fact offered by some Christian believers (Acts 15:1, 5): Converts from paganism would be expected to respond with the same attempt at obedience as all other members of God's people—as did converts to Judaism. In other words, they would be converts to Judaism, for they would take upon themselves the privilege of Mosaic Torah—and, naturally, the men would be circumcised. Paul and Barnabas disagreed (15:2).

We are explicitly told of the element in Paul's preaching that Luke has merely implied: his assertion that the Gentiles as Gentiles, without becoming proselytes, can be joint-heirs and fellow members of the people of God (cf. Eph. 3:6). This is the principal burden of Paul's letter to the Galatians, where Paul himself recounts the same story that we see here in the Book of Acts.

In Luke's understanding, the difficulty of the church in preaching to Israel is more than the proclamation that Jesus fulfills God's promises to Israel. That is one thing, and it is not impossible for Israel to accept. The greater difficulty is the church's insistence that Gentiles too, without becoming Jews, can be heirs of the promises. The church's problem is to explain how Gentiles as Gentiles can be members of the covenant people of God. For us, the heirs of eighteen hundred years of predominantly Gentile Christianity, the problem is easily overlooked. If we do overlook it, however, we misunderstand much in Luke-Acts, to say nothing of Paul's letters.

It is also important that we not be foolishly superficial about why it was difficult for faithful Jews to understand how Gentiles could be heirs of the covenant promises without becoming Jews. Circumcision, the Sabbath, the *halakhah*—these things had been marks of Jewish faithfulness for centuries. Thousands had died for them. How could they no longer matter? Was not circumcision of males directly commanded for the people of the covenant by God's own word (Gen. 17:9-27)? Luke took the matter seriously, and this central chapter of the Book of Acts (15) presents what he sees as the church's solution.

In the messianic age the Gentiles—as Gentiles—may worship the Lord and be part of God's people. It must be recognized that this is a new age. The basis for this view is partly the church's experience of God's working (15:14) and partly its exegesis of scripture (see 15:16-17; cf. Amos 9:11-12; Jer. 12:15; Isa. 45:21; Zech. 14:16). What response, then, was expected of Gentiles if they were not to keep the full halakhah? Luke's understanding of the church's answer is found in Acts 15:20, 29—three instructions that seem to be based on an early form of what came to be known in later rabbinic tradition as the Noachian commandments, the basic forms of response to God's grace that would entitle a Gentile to be called "righteous."

According to Jewish tradition there are seven of these commandments, originally given to Noah (hence "Noachian"). They involve the forbidding of (1) blasphemy, (2) idolatry, (3) sexual immorality, (4) murder, (5) robbery, (6) eating a portion of a living animal, and (7) speaking evil of a judge (i.e., refusing to accept the administration of social justice within the community by those duly appointed for that purpose). The apostolic decree (15:23-29) makes no mention of (1), (4), (5), and (7). They are omitted, one suspects, not because the particular injunctions were regarded as unimportant but because even Gentiles, especially those who had become Christians, hardly needed to be reminded not to blaspheme, not to commit murder or robbery, and to accept some form of social justice. The decree does, however, enlarge on (2) and (3)—

regarded by Jews as characteristically Gentile sins—and actually strengthens all known forms of (6) by specifying abstention from "whatever has been strangled and from blood" (15:20). Why? The obvious reason is that the church was trying to create something new, a mixed fellowship of Jews who continued to honor their tradition (cf. 1 Cor. 7:18) and of Gentiles who were not Jews at all. It is clear (and, indeed, probably inevitable) that fellowship at table was one problem for such a community (Gal. 2:11-12). A minimum of attention by Gentiles to food laws, particularly in the matter of meat, might make continued table fellowship a possibility.[top]

This, then, is the solution to the problem as presented by the Book of Acts. It does not involve any abandonment of Torah by Jews or any basic violation of Torah by Gentiles. On the contrary, in the new fellowship Jews keep the Torah as appropriate for Jews, and Gentiles keep it as appropriate for Gentiles. Such a solution could work only in the messianic age.

Missionary Journeys 15:36-21:14

In verses 15:36-40 the Greek text suggests that the quarrel over the matters addressed at the apostolic council was quite bitter, although other traditions outside Acts suggest that it was later reconciled (1 Cor. 9:6; 2 Tim. 4:11). In any case, the apostolic decree is immediately put to the test.

The account of Timothy's circumcision is given (16:1-4). Paul remains a loyal Jew. Timothy must be circumcised because, as the child of a Jewish mother, he is not Gentile but technically Jewish. (This passage is the earliest evidence for what later became the general rabbinic view.) By placing the narrative at this point Luke forewarns us that the later charge against Paul, that he encourages Jews to forsake the law (21:21), is false.

The next passage (16:6-10) continues to emphasize that the Holy Spirit is the guiding force in the church (16:6, 7, 10). The suggestion that Luke himself was the "man of Macedonia" is unlikely, since the description clearly suggests that the whole experience was a dream. Still, it is here that we find the first of the "we" passages. This section also marks the first preaching of the gospel in Europe.

The account of the mission continues in verses 16:11-17:15. Everywhere the church encounters opposition, sometimes Jewish and sometimes Gentile (16:19-24; 17:5, 13; 18:6, 12; 19:23-40), and everywhere it meets with some success, sometimes among Jews and sometimes among Gentiles (16:14-15, 29-34; 17:4, 11, 34; 18:7-11; 19:11-20). Even when opposed, the apostles are blessed by divine protection. When imprisoned, they are freed by an earthquake (16:26). Roman magistrates who condemn them are shown to have acted illegally against Roman citizens (16:35-40). Paul's Areopagus speech (17:22-31) offers Luke's view of the kind of address Paul might have given to a cultured pagan audience. The setting is important. Although Athens had long lost its political significance, it still ~~had pretensions to being the intellectual capital~~was one of the great intellectual centers of the world. Paul's main arguments are similar to those of other Jewish apologists of the period. In Luke's account the point at which he lost many of his audience was his treatment of the resurrection of the dead. To many schooled in the Greek philosophical tradition, the whole idea would sound like the resuscitation of corpses (17:31-32). Luke makes plain that Paul's presentation is not without fruit (17:34). According to church tradition the Dionysius mentioned here became the first bishop of Athens (Eusebius, Eccl. Hist. 3.4.10; 4.23.3).

The account of the mission to Corinth is given in 18:1-17. Corinth, a thriving, cosmopolitan seaport, was linked by important trade routes with the eastern Mediterranean and with Italy and the west. According to the Roman historian Suetonius, Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome in the ninth year of his reign (i.e., 49-50 CE) for "incessantly causing tumults with Chrestus [a mistake for Christus?] as the instigator" (Suetonius, Claudius 25; cf. Acts 18:2). This sounds like a garbled reference to tumults in the Jewish community at

Rome as a result of the arrival of Christianity. Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 1:14 that he personally baptized Crispus, the "official of the synagogue" (18:8)—this is an honorary title referring to responsibility for arranging the service. Apparently more than one member of the congregation might have the title. The pattern of the mission is as usual: first the synagogue, then the Gentiles. Only the length of stay is unusually long (18:11). Luke makes the point that it is Paul's opponents who are troublemakers and rabble-rousers. Earlier, when Paul was condemned by a Roman tribunal, he received an apology afterward (16:19-40); on this occasion the case is simply dismissed.

In the affair of Apollos (18:24-28), Priscilla is named as a teacher together with her husband, Aquila. Significantly, she is named first. To an extent that is difficult to specify, both Jesus and the earliest Christian communities seem to have resisted the subordination of women that was endemic in their environment, both Jewish and Gentile. The occurrence of names such as Priscilla's is a reminder that it was not part of the gospel to keep women away from service in the community, including

teaching the gospel itself. As a matter of fact, according to the Book of Acts the first Christian in Europe was a woman named Lydia, and the first European church met in her house (16:13-15, 40).

Chapter 19 is dominated by the account of the anti-Christian riot at Ephesus (19:21- 41). There were obvious ways in which Christianity and Judaism represented an economic threat to others. In the circumstances described by Luke, social and political hostility toward Christianity is understandable. The Asiarchs (19:31) were elected representatives who formed a council responsible for the cult and for maintaining relationships between the Asian cities and Rome. The relationship between Paul and the Greek and Roman officials is, as usual, shown to be good. We note that the mob apparently does not make a distinction between Jews and Christians (19:33-34), although that part of the narrative is not entirely clear. "Temple keeper" (19:35) was a title sometimes given to a city, especially to one that maintained a temple of the imperial cult. A surviving inscription gives that honor to Ephesus. Before describing Paul's departure from Ephesus for Macedonia and the beginning of the journey to Jerusalem (20:1-6), Luke has already made clear that this was a decision made under the guidance of the Spirit (19:21), not a reaction to the riot. Paul's speech to the elders at Ephesus is the only speech in the Book of Acts in which Paul addresses Christians. Luke no doubt offers it as an example of Christian *paraklēsis* (Greek "exhortation," or "comfort" in the sense of "strengthening"). The speech is strongly defensive and perhaps represents Luke's desire to defend his hero against misrepresentation. It is also a movingly written speech of farewell. The saying of Jesus in verse 20:35 is not recorded in the gospels, reminding us that the early Christians no doubt had other such sayings in their oral heritage; there certainly are many such sayings recorded in writings that did not make it into our New Testament canon.

Paul's Arrest and Trials 21:15-26:32

At Jerusalem (21:17) Luke makes clear that there is no problem in the relationship between Paul and the Jerusalem church, which glorifies God for the Gentiles who have believed (21:20). Despite James' warning about not offending Jewish Christians who are "zealous for the law" (21:20)—a warning that Paul shows himself quite willing to heed (21:26)—when the trouble comes, it is caused by "the Jews from Asia" (21:27), i.e., Diaspora Jews, not Jewish Christians. The account of the riot and what followed is so graphic that one is led to think that an eyewitness report—possibly Luke's own, though this is not in a "we" passage—lies behind the account.

The trial scene continues to show Paul as the loyal Jew (23:1, 3, 5, 6), and he claims to speak as a Pharisee. Ananias, the high priest, represents Sadducean Judaism. According to Josephus, whose portrait of the high priest is a good deal kinder than Luke's, Ananias was murdered by terrorists at the beginning of the Jewish War (War 2.441).

Paul's vision (23:11) emphasizes once more that nothing can stop the gospel. The arrest itself will be the means of bringing Paul to preach in Rome. The plot to kill him (23:12-15) and its exposure by "the son of Paul's sister" (23:16) give us a glimpse of Paul's own family life.

The rest of the Book of Acts is chiefly a story of Paul's going from tribunal to tribunal. In the course of these trials he tells the story of his conversion twice (22:6-16; 26:12-18), a story he does not tell in his own letters, although he alludes to it in Galatians 1. Paul is always vindicated at these trials. The tale of his imprisonment is told, and its intention is plain enough. The storm, shipwreck, and escape to land (27:1-28:10) make a splendid climax. Throughout, Luke is able to stress once more the divine blessing and protection that surround the apostle of Christ (e.g., 27:23-24; 28:3-6) so that Paul is the hero of a kind of saga, so much so that some scholars have argued that Luke has constructed something very like a historical romance. Such literary models were certainly available to Luke and may have influenced him, but literary form alone is no index of either historical or theological value.

Paul in Rome 27:1-28:31

Paul enters Rome not as a threatened prisoner but as a victor, despite his captivity. The Christian community meets him and encourages him on his way. "On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage" (28:15). One cannot help recalling Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, strengthening the impression that Luke is intentionally paralleling the story of Jesus and the story of Paul in his two-volume work. Luke has one last point, a suggestion that the resistance the gospel has met in Israel is theologically significant. In the closing scene of the Book of Acts, Luke presents Paul preaching to Jewish leaders in Rome with partial success: "Some were convinced by what he had said, while others refused to believe" (28:24). Paul makes a comment on the meaning of this disagreement, and in particular on the significance of those who have not believed. Some interpreters speak at this point of God's "rejection" of Israel, but Luke's Paul says nothing of that. He claims that rejection of the gospel by some Jews is a fulfillment of prophecy and a sign that the salvation of God is now also sent to the Gentiles, who "will listen" (28:28). One of Luke's chief aims is clearly to emphasize that the mission to the Gentiles is directed by God, which is itself proof that we are now in the messianic age. How could such things be happening if Jesus were not who the Christians claim?

Luke's view is, basically, the same as Paul's as expressed in Romans 9-11. Here we have an aspect of Paul's theology by which Luke may well have been influenced and that he may indeed have understood better than some later critics. Luke now comes to the end of his narrative. Two years have elapsed, during which Paul has been under house arrest (28:16) but has "welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (28:30b-31). Even in the capital of the empire nothing can stop the gospel.

Note on Luke's Alleged Anti-Jewishness

Luke is critical of any, either Jew or Gentile, who oppose the gospel (e.g., Acts 13:45; 14:2). Accordingly, some scholars have accused Luke of being anti-Jewish. This is hardly fair. Luke is not anti-Semitic any more than he is anti-Gentile. His use of the Greek word *Ioudaios* (NRSV "Jew") is basically neutral. He uses it to refer to those who have believed in the gospel (e.g., Acts 13:43; 14:1; 18:2; 21:20),

including Paul himself (21:39; 22:3). He uses it to refer to those who are on the way to belief (18:24). He uses it to refer to those who may come to belief (Acts17:17; 18:4; 19:10). And, finally, he uses it (certainly

with some hostility) to refer to those who oppose the church. But the hostility arises from their opposition, not from their Jewishness. This neutrality in Luke's usage of *Ioudaios* is complicated by two facts that we should note.

First, for Luke, the resistance to the gospel on the part of some among God's people is of theological significance. It is a fulfillment of prophecy and an indication that it is God's moment for Christian apostles to turn to the Gentiles—the messianic age, in other words. At times, therefore, Luke dwells on Jewish resistance to the gospel with an attention that may sound "anti-Jewish" to those who do not share his concerns. Second, the Greek word *Ioudaios*, as used in the first century, contains an ambiguity that was perfectly obvious to Luke and his readers but not apparent in the NRSV translation "Jew." The word "Jew" in modern English means chiefly either a "person of Hebrew descent" or a "person whose religion is Judaism," two meanings that often (but not always) overlap, since not all ethnic Jews are religious and some religious Jews are converts. This is one meaning of *Ioudaios* for Luke. But *Ioudaios* also had the purely geographic meaning of "Judean," and quite often, even in the Book of Acts, this is probably its dominant sense (e.g., 22:30; 23:12, 20, 27; 24:9). In these cases, as well as in a number of others, the translation that would be both closer to Luke's intention and less anti-Jewish to our ears is "Judean" rather than "Jew." The same kind of ambiguity attaches to the modern English word "European." This is sometimes used to refer to a historic and cultural tradition with which, say, Britons and Americans would normally identify. At other times it is applied to a particular geographic area with which neither would identify, and which both may even in certain connections regard with hostility. As with many other terms, simple "word study" is not sufficient to establish meaning. Overall context, not just of words but of ideas, must be considered as well.

End of Chapter

Richard I. Pervoback

Aren't you glad that, whatever troubles you may have, your name isn't Richard I. Pervo?

When we seek to bring in new members[back]

This could easily occupy the whole session. Possibly should.

Fraudulent magiciansback

And were generally common at this period.

Saul/Paulback

There's much more to it than his being a Jew and adopting a Roman-sounding name. He was by Jones a Roman citizen, and male Roman citizens almost always had three names. *Praenomen*, *nomen*, and *cognomen*. And there could be more. The *praenomen* was a personal name, like John or William. The *nomen* was the name of the man's *gens*, or tribe. The *nomen* always ended in the letters *ius*. It has no exact equivalent in our nomenclature. The *cognomen* was the name of a branch within the *gens* - something closer to our surname.

But foreigners who were granted Roman citizenship always took the name of the influential Roman who procured it for them. Certainly the *nomen*, and probably the benefactor's entire name. The new citizen might add a fourth name to distinguish himself. Research might even help us guess who had given Paul's family its citizenship. Paul's full name might have been, for example, Marcus Aemilius Paulus, and Saul would have been almost a nickname. We know how proud he was of his Roman citizenship.

Gentile God-fearers[back]

This was the only period, as far as I know, when Judaism did any serious proselytizing.

Something in Paul's preaching[back]

No circumcision, perhaps? Just wondering.

Died for themback

And of them.

The messaianic ageback

This is where it gets radical. You first have to believe that the messaianic age has come, and that it isn't a military thing.

Paul's presentationback

Some have seen it as an entertainment, such as any wandering philosopher might be invited to give.

Chrestus[back]

See my note to Year 2, Chapter 5.

That Suetonius was referring to Jesus is no more than a 50-50 chance. He lived approximately 69 - 122 AD, so he should have been somewhat familiar with Christianity, enough to know whether the riots involved Christians or not. "Chrestus" is Greek for "good" or "worthy," and might have been anyone's name.

not as a threatened prisoner[back]

Note that Paul, as a Roman citizen of this period, wouldn't have been under close arrest, and would have been treated with some respect. No perp-walk here.

In the messaianic ageback

I believe this is circular.