

Acts

It is widely accepted among scholars that Luke is the author of this book as a sequel to his previous book, the Gospel of Luke. Luke was a Greek doctor who acquired his knowledge of the events of the apostles through research. He was also an eyewitness to some of the events in the book; some sections are written in the first-person plural, which can refer to Luke (Acts 16:10-40; 20:5–28:16).

Luke addressed this book to the Greek official Theophilus, whose Greek name means “friend of God.” Theophilus may have been a fairly recent convert to Christianity from Greek paganism. Luke’s main focus is presenting to a Greco-Roman Gentile audience the fact that the apostles were a continuation of the teachings and ministry of Jesus. Luke shows the growth of the church as a non-disruptive group, whose teachings benefited the Roman Empire and thus should be exempted from persecution.

The events of the book of Acts take place between Jesus’ ascension in 33 AD and Paul’s imprisonment in Rome in 62 AD. Practically all scholars believe that Luke wrote this book during Paul’s first Roman imprisonment, during which the book ends (60–62 AD).

Setting

The First Testament ends with Israel’s continual failure to live in obedience to Yahweh, enjoy His blessings in the Promised Land, and be a blessing to the world. As a result of their idolatry and lack of justice, Yahweh took them into exile under the oppression of foreign powers. Before and during their exile Yahweh sent many prophets to prophecy the coming of a messiah who would restore Israel back to the Promised Land, save them from their sins and rebellion, and establish the Kingdom of Yahweh on earth. Eventually they returned from exile, but it was clear from their continued lack of obedience that the exile had not changed them. And though they had returned to the Promised Land, their exile was not over, for they were still under the oppression of foreign powers. Eventually Yahweh stopped sending His prophets to the people. Empire after empire continued to oppress them in the four hundred years between the First and Second Testaments.¹ By the time Rome came into power, many of the Jews had lost hope that anything would change and had made moral and religious compromises with Roman culture. But the faithful remnant awaited the promised Messiah and the restoration of Israel.

Jesus fulfilled the promises of the prophets as the awaited Messiah. Through His death and resurrection He atoned for the sins of the world, making possible the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in believers as the prophets had foretold. The book of Acts begins with the promised indwelling of the Holy Spirit, which enables the growth of the Kingdom of Yahweh on earth through the believers, who would become known as the church.

Purpose

The primary purpose of the book of Acts is to show that the gospel of Jesus Christ is for all people regardless of their social status, ethnicity, and gender. The book of Luke focuses on the

¹ For a more thorough understanding of the time leading up to the Gospels, see *The Intertestamental History* at www.knowingthebible.net.

spread of the gospel to the culturally insignificant and the lost, as seen in Luke 4:18-21, whereas the book of Acts focuses on the universal geographical spread of the gospel throughout the Roman Empire, as seen in Acts 2:1-21. Acts proclaims that Jesus is the *one* savior for *all* peoples, and this is why He must be proclaimed to *all* peoples.² To make this point, Luke chronicles the successful growth of the church from Jerusalem to Rome and away from a purely Jewish religion to being a world religion for all nations. Luke is not trying to prove *that* something happened but to emphasize *what these things signify*.³

Themes

Four major theological themes are developed in the book of Acts: the resurrection of Jesus, the power of the Holy Spirit, the Jews and Gentiles united, and Jesus' superiority over the pagan gods.

The Resurrection of Jesus

The book of Acts begins with Jesus commanding His apostles to proclaim His nature and resurrection to the world and then ascending into heaven. Once the Holy Spirit indwells the apostles, Peter begins immediately to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus as what makes salvation for humans and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit possible (Acts 2:14-41), which enables the believers to have life to the fullest, making them unique to all other peoples and their worldviews. The resurrection is the emphasis of Paul's preaching when he speaks to both the Jews and the Gentiles.

This idea of Jesus' resurrection is what both the Jews and the Gentiles resist and then persecute the believers for. For the Jews, the resurrection is a return of the problem—the false messiah Jesus—whom they tried to eliminate for offering them a false hope of being delivered from Rome and for threatening their power base. For the pagan Gentiles, the concept of the resurrection is incomprehensible and illogical. They did not value the human body or the material realm and had no concept of the body surviving or continuing on after death. The Gentiles were very familiar with ascension of gods but were much less familiar with the idea of resurrection unless they had had some contact with Judaism. It is the resurrection that Luke must be convincing about. This, mixed with the idea of an exclusive sovereign God, threatened their economy, which was built on belief in pagan gods and the idols associated with them.

Yet for the followers of Jesus, it is the resurrection of Jesus that gives them hope and power to boldly proclaim Jesus and endure persecution, knowing that whatever they would lose—including their life—is not the end. For it is in the resurrection that death is not the end, and they can enter as citizens into the Kingdom of Yahweh and have eternal life in a great community.

The Power of the Holy Spirit

The book of Acts begins with Jesus telling His apostles to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit would come upon them. It is the Holy Spirit of Yahweh that will give them the supernatural power to courageously continue the ministry of Jesus (Acts. 1:8). Ten days later, on Pentecost (Acts 2:1-13), the Holy Spirit came upon and entered the believers and empowered them to

² See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p.69.

³ Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 69.

boldly proclaim the gospel of Jesus, whereas only recently they had been cowering in fear of the Jewish people during Jesus' crucifixion. The same Holy Spirit that empowered Jesus' ministry now empowers the disciples' ministry of teaching and healing. The event of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost becomes the basis for the book of Acts; the focus is not on any human being but on Yahweh and the Holy Spirit. More specifically, the focus is not on the person of Yahweh and the Holy Spirit but on their work in the events that would grow the church.⁴

Through the rest of the book, the Holy Spirit continually empowers the believers to proclaim the gospel of Jesus, to do miracles, and to be freed from or endure persecution, guiding them to the nations or the individual people ready to hear and receive the gospel and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

The Jews and Gentiles United

All throughout the prophets, Yahweh foretold of the day He would bring all nations into the covenant community of Israel (Mic. 4:1-7; 7:16-17; Isa. 2:2-4; 11:10; 19:18-25; 40:6-7; 49:6; 55:3-5; 56:3-8; 60:1-11; 66:12; Zeph. 3:9-12; 66:17-19; Jer. 3:16-18; Ezek. 17:22-24; Hag. 2:6-7; Zech. 8:20-23; 14:16-19). Jesus commissioned His apostles to go to the farthest parts of the earth (Matt. 28:16-20; Acts 1:8). As the apostles started sharing the gospel in Jerusalem and Judea, many Jews believed and received the Holy Spirit, but the vast majority rejected the gospel of Jesus.

The indwelling of the Holy Spirit, followed by the speaking in different languages, became the validation that a person had received the Holy Spirit. In the First Testament, the Holy Spirit never indwelt anyone, so when the Jews at Pentecost were the first ever to receive the Holy Spirit, their ability to speak in different languages (Acts 2:4) was an outward physical proof that a spiritual change had happened and that they truly were a part of the new covenant community of Yahweh. The Jewish Christians had a hard time accepting that the Gentiles could be included into the covenant community, especially without circumcision (Acts 15), so when Cornelius, the Roman Gentile soldier, received the Holy Spirit, he and his family also spoke in different languages (Acts 10:44-48), validating through a physical sign that they as Gentiles were also a part of the new covenant community. Paul continued the spread of the gospel to the Jews first and then to the Gentiles during his missionary journeys. This can be seen in the fact that Paul always went to the synagogue first. Luke is not trying to say that the church was displacing the Jews, for Paul was conferring with the Jewish synagogues—even at the end, in Rome, where some converted—and then going to the Gentiles throughout the book. Rather, Luke is trying to show that Jew and Gentile united in Christ are the true Israel.⁵

The growth of the church in Acts is not just about how many people became believers but about the tension of two different people groups unified into one body of Christ. Like the gospel of Luke, Acts is about social change and the structure of the community of Yahweh in a way that was upside down to the world.

⁴ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 72.

⁵ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 73.

Jesus' Superiority over the Pagan Gods

As the apostles and Paul began to reach out to the Gentiles, one of the major obstacles that they faced was their belief in many other gods and their seeing Jesus as a threat to their social-economic structure or wanting to add him to the many other gods they already believed in. They frequently misunderstood the uniqueness of Jesus. Simon the magician tried to buy the power of Philip (Acts. 8:4-13), the people of Malta thought Paul was a god when he was unfazed by a viper that bit him (Acts 28:1-6), and the people of Athens assumed Paul was just preaching about another god among the many (Acts 17:16-21). The uniqueness of Yahweh and Jesus stands out throughout the book of Acts in that they are proclaimed by the believers to be far superior to all the gods, validated by the many different miracles, which, unlike the pagan practices, did not require accompanying rituals or incantations.

Structure

The structure of the book flows out of Jesus' statement in Acts 1:8b: "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the farthest parts of the earth." Luke follows an essentially geographical outline of Acts 1:8b that moves from Jerusalem (Acts 1:1–6:7), through Judea and Samaria (Acts 6:8–9:31), into Syria in the north (Acts 9:3–12:24), then to the Gentiles in the eastern part of the Roman Empire (Acts 12:25–19:20), and then to Rome itself—the farthest parts of the audience's world (Acts 19:21–28:31).

There is also a certain symmetry in the fact that the last quarter of Luke's gospel (Luke 19:28–24:53) is about Jesus' trials, death, resurrection, and ascension, while the last quarter of the book of Acts (Acts 21:27–28:31) deals with Paul's arrest, trials, and arrival to Rome.⁶

⁶ See David E. Aune. *The New Testament in its Literary Environment*, p. 118.

Outline

- I. The Witness in Jerusalem (1:1–8:3)
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 - C. The Church in Jerusalem (3:1–4:37)
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- II. The Scattering (8:4–12:25)
 - A. The Ministry of Philip (8:4-40)
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 - D. The Church at Antioch (11:19–12:25)
- III. The Ministry of Paul (13:1–21:16)
 - A. The First Missionary Journey (13:1–14:28)
 - B. The Jerusalem Council (15:1-35)
 - C. The Second Missionary Journey (15:36–18:23)
 - D. The Third Missionary Journey (18:24–21:16)
- IV. Paul on Trial (21:17–28:31)
 - A. Paul's Arrest and Hearings in Jerusalem (21:15–23:22)
 - B. Paul's Trials in in Caesarea (23:23–26:32)
 - C. Paul's Journey to Rome (27:1–28:31)





I. The Witness in Jerusalem (1:1–8:3)

This first division begins with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-13), which empowers the apostles to proclaim the gospel throughout Jerusalem and Judea. As a result, many Jews believe and likewise receive the Holy Spirit. However, as the apostles continue to preach the gospel and as the community of believers grows, opposition to the apostles' message and the church increases from the Jewish elite. This opposition increases until it reaches its climax in the death of Stephen, which leads to the scattering of the witnesses. All the events in this division happened in 33 AD.

A. The Preparation and Establishment of the Apostles (1:1-26)

In this section Jesus ascends to heaven and leaves the disciples with final instructions to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit comes. While they wait, they cast lots to find a replacement for the disciple Judas, who had killed himself. The point is to prepare the apostles for the ministry that is about to come.

1:1-5 Luke begins by addressing Theophilus and briefly summarizing the very end of his previous account, the book of Luke, of how Jesus died and rose again and then presented Himself to many people as evidence of His resurrection. The emphasis here is that Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit. Jesus gave His apostles (meaning “one who is sent”) instructions to stay in Jerusalem until they received the Holy Spirit. They had previously been baptized with water by John the Baptizer, but Jesus was going to baptize them with and under the authority of the Holy Spirit of Yahweh (Matt. 28:16-20; John 14:15-31).

1:6-8 When the disciples were with Jesus just before He ascended into heaven (Luke 24:50-53), they asked Him whether now, after His resurrection, the Kingdom of Yahweh would come to earth as the prophets and He had talked of so frequently. Jesus answered them by saying that the Father had not permitted them to know the time when Yahweh would bring the Kingdom to earth.

However, they would be allowed to know what it looked like and how it would begin to unfold. The *what* and *how* were the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus told them that the Kingdom of Yahweh began with the coming of the Holy Spirit, which would endow them with supernatural power. This would not be like the power of the world—getting what they wanted and ruling over others—rather, the Holy Spirit would empower them to be Jesus' witnesses. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead would be in them, emboldening and gifting them to be a testimony to who Jesus was and what He did and to do miracles in order to validate their testimony, just as Jesus had done (Luke 7:22; John 2:23; 10:38). They were to take this witness from where they were to the ends of the earth. Jesus told them to begin witnessing in the city (Jerusalem) and then the region (Judea) in which they already lived and then to go to the neighboring regions, even the one they were prejudiced against (Samaria), until they reached the ends of the world. For Luke, the ends of the earth is the Roman Empire. This becomes the geographical flow of the book of Acts.

Luke believes that the coming of the Holy Spirit inaugurates the Kingdom of Yahweh, but witnessing to the world needs to happen before the full restoration of the Kingdom. Thus, the coming of the Kingdom was not going to be a singular, all-at-once event. Rather, it would come and grow gradually on earth through the power of the Holy Spirit and the faithful witness of the believers. This gradual process—the growth of the church through the Holy Spirit—would begin

with the event of the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8; 2:1-13) and would end with the event of the second coming of Jesus Christ (Rev. 21-22). The purpose of the Holy Spirit is to supernaturally empower one to do the will of Yahweh. In the First Testament, it was to execute the judgment of Yahweh against the Canaanites and to be a light to the world in the land of Israel. Now, with the great commission of Jesus (Mat. 28:16-20), it was to go out of the land of Canaan and be a witness to who Jesus was and had done for the world.

1:9-11 After Jesus had said this, He departed from them within the clouds and into the sky. This is an allusion to the Son of Man from Dan. 7:13-14. This passage portrays a human figure who approaches the throne of Yahweh and is riding the clouds. The fact that He approaches the throne without dying communicates that He is a sinless human. As well, the only beings that ride clouds are Yahweh and angels. This figure is portrayed as being both human and divine. In Daniel, Yahweh then hands this Son of Man all authority, power, and honor over all of creation. Jesus claimed to be this Son of Man and proved this claim and appointment of Yahweh by doing what only Yahweh could do—forgiving sins and healing people—which Yahweh would not have allowed Him to do if His claims were false (Luke 5:21-26). Throughout His ministry He continually claimed and validated His claim to be the God-man who sits at the right hand of Yahweh and rules over creation (Luke 20:42; 22:69).

According to Phil. 2:5-11 Jesus was fully God before His incarnation, but when He took on human form, He willingly gave up the right to fully exercise and exploit His godhood over others during His earthly ministry. As a result of His obedience to Yahweh in His death on the cross, Yahweh exalted Jesus and reenthroned Him over all of creation. Heb. 2:5-9 says He was for a little while made lower than the angels during His incarnation until He ascended and was reenthroned in Heaven. This is where Daniel's vision comes in. Daniel saw Jesus as human and God appearing in Heaven after His incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension into Heaven, approaching Yahweh on the clouds in order to be reenthroned. Then Yahweh exalted Him and gave Him back all authority, honor, and power over an eternal kingdom (Heb. 1:1-4). It is this reality that the disciples began to understand, and therefore they were compelled to worship Jesus as He ascended into Heaven. Jesus is being portrayed as a human who is also divine and worthy of a place in heaven alongside the Creator of the universe.

The angels appeared to the apostles and told them that Jesus would come back in the same way, riding on the clouds as Jesus Himself said in Matt. 26:64. The inauguration of the Kingdom of Yahweh would begin with the departure of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts. 1:8-11; 2:1-13) and then be fully realized on earth (Matt. 6:9-10) with the return of Jesus Christ (Rev. 19:11-16; 21-22).

1:12-14 After they returned to Jerusalem, the apostles minus Judas (Luke 23:1-5), and the women who followed Jesus all began to pray together, unified with one purpose and desire, to await the Holy Spirit. Peter then stood up and announced that they must replace Judas as in Ps. 69:25 and Ps. 109:8. Peter's speech was not about Judas' death but the need to replace him. He was using Scripture to explain the outcome of Judas's life and the divine justification for his replacement. Being a follower of Jesus did not guarantee salvation. Peter was talking about the plan of Yahweh as set forth in the Scriptures, which must be fulfilled.

Luke has no interest in trying to establish exactly what the structure of the early church was or precisely which roles various prominent people played; rather, he is interested in the restoration of the full strength of the group whose role is seen to be in relationship to Israel, not the church.⁷

The criteria for choosing a replacement was someone who had followed Jesus from His baptism to His death and resurrection. *Witness* means they have seen all that Jesus had said and done and would testify to who Jesus is as the Son of God. They proposed two candidates, prayed to Yahweh for guidance (for only He knew their hearts), and then cast lots to determine who was now to be the twelfth apostle. They cast lots as the priests of the First Testament did (1 Chron. 26:12-14), for they had not received the Holy Spirit yet to guide them in their choice. Matthias was chosen to be the twelfth apostle.

⁷ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 116.

B. The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit (2:1-47)

This section details the coming of the Holy Spirit, which is the basis for the whole book of Acts. Without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the believers do not have the power nor the guidance to successfully accomplish the ministry of Yahweh.

2:1-4 Fifty days after the death of Jesus and ten days after His ascension, at the Festival of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came down on the disciples of Jesus, appearing as little pillars of fire, and filled them with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-13). In the First Testament the Spirit of Yahweh never indwelt anyone; He only rested on them for a time, because, they being sinners, the Spirit of Yahweh could not indwell them. And the Spirit came upon only a select few, mostly the prophets, priests, and kings. Yet now, with the atonement of sin through Jesus' death, the Spirit of Yahweh could indwell any human of faith regardless of their social status or ethnicity (Hos. 2:16-17; Jer. 31:33-34; Ezek. 11:17-21; Joel 2:28). Thus, they all became prophets knowing the will of Yahweh.

The Holy Spirit coming as fire connects back to the Shekinah Glory of Yahweh. Just as the Shekinah Glory of Yahweh came down on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:16-20) and indwelt the tabernacle/temple (Ex. 40:34-38), so now the Shekinah Glory of Yahweh was entering the believers, making them the new cosmic mountain (Garden of Eden) and the new temple with “the many rooms” (Jn. 14:1-4; Eph. 2:19-22; 2 Pet. 2:4-8). This was the fulfillment of Ezekiel's temple (Ezek. 40-48). Christ and His body are the believers who fill the whole earth, making it a garden as they make disciples of all nations. The believers are the New Garden of Eden and the New Jerusalem.

Just as the Shekinah Glory of Yahweh wrote the Law on tablets at Mount Sinai, so now the Holy Spirit was writing the Law on the hearts of the believers (Jer. 31:33). This was the beginning of the circumcision of their hearts (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; Rom. 2:28-29), where they would be transformed into people who would have the desire and ability to love and obey Yahweh (Rom. 12:1-2; 1 Cor. 5:17).

Those who come to Jesus by faith and receive the indwelling of the Holy Spirit become the new Temple and Israel. This is seen by the fact that Peter uses the same language of the New Covenant believers as Yahweh did of Israel when He initiated the Mosaic Covenant (1 Pet. 2:9-10 alluding to Ex. 19:4-6).

What is here called a filling is also called a baptizing (Acts 1:5; 11:16), pouring out (Acts 2:17-18; 10:45), or a receiving (Acts 10:47). This is not a technical term. Without the Holy Spirit, there would be no prophecy, preaching, mission, healings, or conversions. The Holy Spirit empowers all to do the will of Yahweh.

The phrase “tongues [languages] of fire” (Acts. 2:3) means the Holy Spirit was communicating to people of every language, nation, and ethnicity in their own language. Yahweh was undoing the judgment at the Tower of Babylon and uniting humanity into the New Jerusalem in order to expand the Kingdom of Yahweh rather than their own corrupt kingdom.

The Greek word *glossais* refers to the tongue as a physical member of the body or as the speaking of a language or dialect that is known to a people group. The context of people from all different nations and languages who are miraculously understanding the believers in their own language makes it clear that the term *glossais* here would have been understood as speaking in

other human languages. If Luke had meant ecstatic speech, he would have used the term *etepais glossais* rather than *glossais*.

2:5-13 Most of the Jewish crowd, who were from across the Roman Empire and in Jerusalem for Pentecost, were amazed that these simple Galileans were speaking so many different languages. They listened as they heard the words and deeds of Jesus in their own language.

“Galileans had difficulty pronouncing gutturals and had the habit of swallowing syllables when speaking; so they were looked down upon by the people of Jerusalem as being provincial (cf. Mark 14:70). Therefore, since the disciples who were speaking were Galileans, it bewildered those who heard because the disciples could not by themselves have learned so many different languages.”⁸

However, some accused the believers of being drunk. They did not mean the believers were babbling incoherently as a drunk person might, for it has already been made clear that they were telling the crowd coherently about Jesus. Most likely this refers to early morning loud singing as a drunk might do.

2:14-21 Peter stood up to address the crowd, first to refute the charge of drunkenness, explaining to the crowd from Joel 2:28-32 that what they were witnessing was the fulfillment of the promised indwelling of the holy Spirit.

The phrase “all peoples” (literally “all flesh”) makes it sound like it would be for everyone in the world, but the reference to sons and daughters makes it clear that it was only for those who were a part of the covenant community. In the past, the Spirit of Yahweh rested on only a few—primarily prophets—but in this future day, all people in the covenant community would become prophets, knowing the will of Yahweh (Num. 11:29; Jer. 31:31-34). This event would also bring cosmic signs in the skies and on the earth that would signal the coming of Yahweh’s judgment. It is not clear whether these signs are a general picture of what happened at the crucifixion of Jesus (Luke 23:44-45) or whether they are yet to happen at the time of Jesus’ second coming. Most likely this refers to the final events before the second coming of Jesus, which means the coming of the Holy Spirit is an eschatological event that sets things in motion for those end times and is yet to come. Therefore, there is an urgency to repent, believe, and follow Jesus.

2:22-23 Peter then turned his attack to implicate certain Jews of killing Jesus. Peter made the point that it had been clearly revealed that Jesus was chosen by Yahweh through His words and deeds, yet the Jews and the Gentiles killed Him as if He were the enemy of Yahweh and the people. Even the Talmud affirms Jesus’ deeds (*b. Hul. 2:22-23*). Human opinion does not matter, for Jesus was accredited by Yahweh in several ways. Yet before Peter accused them of willingly choosing to kill Jesus, he said it was the predetermined plan of Yahweh to kill Jesus. Peter simultaneously stated that Yahweh predestined Jesus to die but that the Jews and Gentiles made a free will choice to kill Him. He held these statements as equally valid and did not try to resolve the tension. The point is that this was, from the beginning of time, Yahweh’s plan to redeem humanity, and yet the Jews and Gentiles will be held responsible for their choice to murder the chosen one of Yahweh. Thus, they were under the judgment of Yahweh for what they did to Jesus—but they could repent and escape the judgment through the redemption made available to them because Yahweh had Jesus killed.

⁸ Richard N. Longenecker. “The Acts of the Apostles,” p. 272.

2:24-33 However, Yahweh did not leave Jesus in the grave but raised Him from the dead because Jesus was so righteous and powerful that death had no hold over Him. What is interesting is that Peter did not argue for the resurrection; he simply proclaimed it. Peter then quoted Ps. 16:8-11 to make his point. Peter made the point that David was not talking about himself but was a prophet who foresaw his descendant, Jesus, whom Yahweh promised him He would place on the throne one day. Since David died and was left in the grave to decay, this scripture must be about Jesus, the descendant of David, who did not decay because He was resurrected, as Peter alluded to Ps. 16:10. Thus Jesus never lost sight of Yahweh, even as He was dying, because He knew that Yahweh would not leave him in Hades. *Hades* does not refer to hell but is the Greek term for the Hebrew *Sheol*, which means the grave or afterlife, to which all humans went after death.

From another perspective, Peter was saying that Jesus' conquering of death and the grave through His resurrection and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit are what gave David and all other believers the hope that the grave will not hold them; Yahweh will not leave them there because they have the Spirit of Yahweh.

2:34-36 Peter continued to make the point that David had Jesus in mind by quoting Ps. 110:1, from which Jesus quoted in order to demonstrate from Scripture that the Messiah was not to be just a biological son of King David but was to be greater than David, which would make Him God. Ps. 110 is about the coronation of a king over Israel. David is speaking and says that "the Lord said to my lord." In the Hebrew, the first "Lord" is the Hebrew word *Yahweh*, and the second "lord" is the Hebrew word *adonai*, which means "sir, master." David states that Yahweh is making the second lord—the lord over David—king over Israel, and he acknowledges that both of these lords are greater than he. But if David is king over Israel, then there is no greater earthly king, and Yahweh is the only one who is greater than he. So how can David have two lords over him? Some teachers of the Law taught that the second lord was Solomon, since his kingdom was greater than David's. However, in Jewish culture the son is never greater than the father, and the father would never refer to his son as lord. Jesus asked the Jewish leaders who this second lord is if only Yahweh is greater than David in authority over Israel (Luke 20:41-44). They could not respond, and so Jesus did not tell them the answer. The point Jesus was making is that the second lord is Himself and that, as David's biological descendant, He was greater than David because he was preexistent before David, making Him God. Jesus gave this answer to the priest at His trial in Luke 22:69.

"The beginning and ending of the main body of the speech emphasize the function of disclosure. Peter begins, 'Let this be known to you,' and concludes, 'Therefore, let the whole house of Israel know assuredly....,' forming an inclusion (2:14, 36). In the context this is a new disclosure, for it is the first public proclamation of Jesus' resurrection and its significance. Acts 2:22-36 is a compact, carefully constructed argument leading to the conclusion in v. 36: 'God made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.' Peter not only proclaims Jesus' authority but also reveals the intolerable situation of the audience, who share responsibility for Jesus' crucifixion. The Pentecost speech is part of a recognition scene, where, in the manner of tragedy, persons who have acted blindly against their own best interests suddenly recognize their error."⁹

⁹ Robert C. Tannehill. *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, p. 35

2:37-41 The crowd responded with distress to Peter's speech and asked what they must do in response to what he had said. Peter told them that the proper course of action was to repent to receive the forgiveness of their sins and then to be baptized by the Holy Spirit. This message of repentance would have been mind blowing to the Jews, for Jews did not really see the need to do. The Jews believed they were automatically right with Yahweh and safe from His judgment merely by the fact that He had chosen them and had given them the Law. It was the Gentiles who were outside the covenant and thus needed to repent. Peter believed that without the Spirit, the Jews faced Yahweh's judgment for their sins.

In some ways, compared to how many Jews had turned against Jesus and killed Him, 3,000 people repenting and receiving the Holy Spirit is a large number—but not an unrealistic or exaggerated one. During the Feast of Pentecost, the population of Jerusalem was between 180,000 and 200,000 people, so 3,000 people would have been a small number. Luke was not saying that exactly 3,000 people converted; rather, his point was that a large number of people responded. There was plenty of water in the pools of Bethesda and Siloam to handle the baptisms.

2:42-47 Luke gives a summary of what the first groups of believers were like in the very beginning of the church's existence. First, the apostles, who had been trained by Jesus Himself and were led by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, were the teachers and leaders of the community. Those in the community devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles as they were taught by Jesus. Second, they were committed to being in community and fellowship with each other. Third, they celebrated communion together, which is the fellowship they had with each other through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Fourth, they prayed with each other on a regular basis. Fifth, the apostles through the power of the Holy Spirit began to perform miracles for those in the city just as Jesus had, thus helping people in need and validating their claims to who Jesus is. Sixth, they began selling their property and possessions and giving the money to those in need.

Some have argued that this was an early form of Christian communism, wherein everyone gave everything they had to the leadership of the community and lived off of what was equally distributed as they shared everything. But this is not what the text says. Their action was not forced but voluntary and done only when there was a need. It also does not say everyone did, nor does it say those who did sold everything they had; rather, they gave all the proceeds. Most likely, this was the wealthy believers, as Acts 4:34 states. This was not an ascetic lifestyle but of valuing people over possessions.¹⁰

They spent every day in the temple courts witnessing to others and then gathered in each other's houses for fellowship. And as a result, their numbers continued to increase. They are portrayed as true messianic Jews attempting to rescue other Jews so that they might all be part of the remnant of Israel. The main point is that because of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the early Christians were a connected community, where when someone saw a need they responded to meet the need. They valued loving others more than having material possessions and success in life. As a result, their communities were blessed by Yahweh, they thrived, and their numbers grew as others saw Jesus through their preaching and lifestyle and wanted to be a part of it. The

¹⁰ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 207-208.

early church was not without its flaws and did not always do this perfectly, but this was what they were known for. This is what it means to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

“This is the story Luke knows to tell, and he tells it with consummate narrative art and skill. The fact that he chronicles only part of the story of the development of early Christianity should not prevent us from appreciating his accomplishments. As a historian who may not even have made it to Israel before about A.D. 57–58, he was limited by the sources of information he had about what transpired in Israel. It should also not be said that he simply glosses over the problems of the early church that he knows about. The narrative chronicling the need for a new twelfth apostle, the narrative about Ananias and Sapphira, the narrative about Simon Magus, the narratives about Cornelius and the Acts council, the narrative about a Christian preacher who knew only of John's baptism (Acts 18), and more all show that he is well enough aware that all was not a bed of roses, or neat and tidy during the course of the history of the earliest period. He felt it necessary to tell Theophilus about some of these struggles and difficulties. Luke does not gild the lily, or simply an idealistic picture of the halcyon days of yore. His positive summary statements (cf. Acts 2:43-47; 4:32-37; 9:31) must not be taken in isolation from the narratives they connect. These things must be kept in mind as we proceed through Acts.”¹¹

“The plot of a work can often be illuminated by considering the major conflict or conflicts within it. Although Jesus' witnesses face other conflicts, the central conflict of the plot, repeatedly emphasized and still present in the last major scene of Acts, is a conflict within Judaism provoked by Jewish Christian preachers (including Paul). Acts 2:1–8:3 traces the development of this conflict in Jerusalem.”¹²

¹¹ Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 127.

¹² Robert C. Tannehill. *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, p. 34

C. The Church in Jerusalem (3:1–4:37)

In this section Peter and the apostles continued to proclaim boldly the gospel of Jesus and to validate it with miracles just as Jesus did. This leads to many more Jews repenting of their sin and believing in Jesus. Yet this is where the Jews' opposition to the apostles and the gospel of Jesus begins.

3:1-10 Just as Jesus healed people, so Peter and John healed a lame man in the temple courts. The difference between Jesus and Peter is that Peter performed in the name of Jesus rather than his own name. Peter did not do a ritual, recite an incantation, or use a relic of herbs. He was not a magician or a pagan healer but healed through the power of the Holy Spirit.

“...the similarity between Jesus' healing of the paralytic and Peter's healing of the lame man lies less in the healing itself than in the function of these scenes in the larger narrative. In both cases the healing becomes the occasion for a fundamental claim about Jesus' saving power, emphasizing its importance and general scope ('on earth,' Luke 5:24; 'under heaven,' Acts 4:12). In both cases the healing leads to proclamation of a saving power that goes beyond physical healing. In both cases the claim is made in the face of new opposition and is directly related to the mission announced in the Scripture quotation in the inaugural speech.”¹³

3:11-13 When the crowd gathered in amazement, Peter asked why they were amazed, for there was nothing special about them, as if they had power; rather, it was their God, Yahweh—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—who glorified Jesus and was now giving them, His apostles, the power to heal just as He had done with His servant Jesus. The title “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” connects Yahweh with the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 15). It also communicates that He is a God of people and relationships who makes covenants, unlike the pagan gods who were never associated with people but with elements in nature.

3:14-18 Once again Peter goes for the attack and summarizes their guilt in killing Jesus, the originator of life whom Yahweh raised from the dead. The irony is that the originator of life could never stay dead. Peter acknowledged that they acted in ignorance when they killed Jesus, but Jesus' death was orchestrated by Yahweh as foretold through the prophets.

3:19-24 Therefore, they should repent so their sins could be wiped away and so that Yahweh may restore the Jewish nation, which would happen in the return of Jesus, just as Yahweh had promised Israel in the First Testament. This would include the Garden of Eden as the Promised Land, Israel as the chosen image of God, and the blessings of Yahweh upon them. Peter then quoted Deut. 18:19, which says Yahweh would raise up a prophet like Moses whom Israel was to obey. If they did not obey, then they would be destroyed in the judgment of Yahweh. All the prophets since had spoken of Jesus as the fulfillment of this prophecy. Peter then quoted Gen. 22:18 to make the point that the Jews were the descendants of Abraham who were to be the first to receive the promises of Yahweh by turning away from their sins. The word “first” suggests the wider mission to Gentiles.

“The Pentecost speech emphasizes Jesus' resurrection and exaltation, but the temple speech recalls details of Jesus' trial. The Pentecost speech briefly refers to Jesus' earthly ministry, but the temple speech anticipates the Parousia. The Pentecost speech emphasizes God's oath

¹³ Robert C. Tannehill. *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, pp. 51-52.

to David; the temple speech recalls God’s promises to Abraham and refers to the Mosaic prophet. The Pentecost speech focuses on the titles “Messiah” and “Lord”; the Temple speech introduces other titles—“servant,” “holy and just one,” “leader of life.” The Pentecost speech cites a prophetic book and the Psalms, but the temple speech cites the Pentateuch... Both speeches emphasize repentance and release of sins, but the wording is mostly different. Both speeches refer to the future participation of others in salvation (2.39; 3.26); again the wording is different. Thus the two speeches are complementary, probably deliberately so, even though they address the same type of audience about the same situation. A much broader and richer understanding of Christian preaching to Jews emerges from hearing two speeches rather than one.”¹⁴

4:1-4 When the captain of the temple and the Sadducees heard Peter speaking, they became angry and came to stop Peter and John. The captain of the temple had oversight over the temple guard, the whole body of priests, and the activities that transpired in the temple. They arrested Peter and John and imprisoned them overnight. This was not a means of punishment but a means of holding a suspect until trial. Despite this, their resistance led to a greater growth of the gospel. The force used against the followers of Christ does not stop them; in fact, it often propels them.

4:5-12 The next day, the religious rulers, including Annas and Caiaphas, who crucified Jesus, came out to question Peter and John over the power and name in which they were doing these things. The issue here is one of authority and power. Peter did not answer with a lot of proofs but relied on ethos and the direct statement of facts as he saw them. Peter saw the main issue as the performance of the miracle.¹⁵ How could healing people be an illegal act? Peter answered that it was by the power of Jesus, whom they crucified and Yahweh raised from the dead. Peter quoted Ps. 118:22 to make the point that Jesus is the prophesied foundation stone of Israel that Israel rejected. Jesus referred to Himself as the foundational rock (Matt. 7:24-27); He prophetically referred to Himself as the rejected stone several times in the Gospels (Matt. 21:42-44; Mark 12:10-11; Luke 20:17-18). By calling Jesus the living stone, Peter was alluding to the temple, where Yahweh dwelt and to which the people had limited access under the old covenant. Christ declared Himself to be the new temple in John 2:18-22. As the living stone, He is not merely a stone building for Yahweh but is the living God and the fleshly temple that has been resurrected so that we may dwell in Him with Yahweh (John 14:4). This is the exact language that Paul uses in Eph. 2:18-22 when he refers to us dwelling with Yahweh in Christ at the living temple of God. Though humanity has rejected Christ as the true living temple, Yahweh has not. It is Yahweh who declared the tabernacle and temple as His, and now He has declared His precious Son as His true living temple. Rather than coming to the temple and the altar in Jerusalem, we now come “to Him” in whom “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col. 2:9).

4:13-18 The council was amazed by the boldness and eloquence of Peter and John, who were uneducated, and the miracle they had performed. As with Jesus, they did not like what Peter and John were saying and did not want it spreading throughout the city, but they could not arrest Peter and John; they had not yet violated any law, as there had been no ban on preaching before this meeting. So they commanded Peter and John to not speak about Jesus anymore. This command meant they could be arrested from this point on if they continued to preach. Peter and John knew what would happen to them if they disobeyed, for they had seen it with Jesus. Even

¹⁴ Robert C. Tannehill. *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, p. 2:58.

¹⁵ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 193.

so, they told the council that they could not disobey Yahweh over men and therefore could not stop speaking. It is clear that this boldness had come from the Holy Spirit, for just a couple of months earlier, Peter and the other disciples were cowering and hiding in fear in the presence of the council during Jesus' trials and crucifixion.

4:23-31 When Peter and John reported these events to the other believers, their immediate response to persecution was to pray to Yahweh, not for relief or deliverance but for boldness and power to continue proclaiming the gospel in the face of adversity. They quoted Ps. 2:1-2 in their prayer to express their frustration over the Jewish government's opposing Christ and His plan of redemption. Ps. 2 is a prophecy of the coming Messiah.

In Ps. 2 in the Hebrew First Testament, *nations* and *people* both refer to the Gentiles. In the Acts quotation, *nations* refers to the Gentiles, while *peoples* refers to the Jews. Also in Ps. 2, the original Hebrew refers to "His anointed" instead of "Christ" as it is in the Acts quotation. The Hebrew word for "anointed" is *māšîaḥ*, which is where we get the English word *messiah*. The Greek word *christos* ("Christ") is the Greek equivalent of *māšîaḥ*.

They prayed that Yahweh would give them the courage to speak the gospel of Jesus Christ despite the opposition. When they had finished praying, the power of the Holy Spirit filled them up, and they went out to the nations and peoples and spoke courageously. The emphasis here is on the power of Yahweh over the nations and peoples.

4:32-37 As mentioned earlier, in Acts 2:42-47, Luke does not say that everyone was selling their possessions nor that they sold everything they had; rather, they gave all the proceeds. Nothing is said of transference of property, and it is not the community that controls all property and possession but that the community controlled the distribution of the donated funds. It was given to those who needed it as the needs arose in the community, not on a regular daily, weekly, or monthly basis. Sharing without expecting anything else was a foreign concept in a debt-oriented culture, where people would owe someone who did something for them.

One of these wealthy landowners sold *a field* (not *all* of his land) and gave the proceeds to the apostles. This man was Barnabas, who would later vouch for Paul and go with him on his first missionary journey (Acts 9:26-30; 11:22-26; 13:1-3).

"...Luke presents the early Jerusalem church as being like other early Jewish groups, such as the Essenes who practiced a community of goods, but he also uses language that a Theophilus would recognize as reflecting the Greek ideals about how true friends should act. Aristotle said that true friends held everything in common and were of one mind (Nic. Eth. 9.8.2), much the same as is said here. What is interesting about the Christian use of such conventions is that while friendship in the Greco-Roman mold often involved reciprocity between those who were basically social equals, what Luke seems to be inculcating here is conventions whereby Christians with goods will provide funds to the community for those who are needy without thought of return, and thus he is suggesting something more akin to family duties."¹⁶

"On the whole the evidence suggests the following conclusions: (1) the earliest Christians ranged from reasonably high to quite low social status, with the level of the majority being moderate to lower status; (2) nevertheless the number of reasonably well-to-do converts in

¹⁶ Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 205.

Jerusalem was significant enough to make available some reasonably large houses as meeting places, even on Mount Zion; (3) earliest Christianity in Judea, to judge from Acts 1–8, was no proletarian movement; it appealed to a broad range of people up and down the social ladder; (4) the sharing of property and of food suggests an attempt to remove the extreme inequities that existed in ancient societies in the context of the Christian fellowship without reconstructing the external society per se. Early Christian meetings and meals seem to have moved things in a more equitable and egalitarian direction by means of sharing, and perhaps also by the avoidance of pecking orders and differences in food among the participants (unlike the case in Corinth, cf. 1 Corinthians 11). We will discuss the portrait of Antioch at the appropriate point in the commentary, but it is in order to point out here that the evidence there does not suggest a different conclusion about social level than what we have drawn about the Jerusalem church, except that the Jerusalem church seems to have had more needy Christians.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 213.

D. Conflict from Within and Without (5:1–6:7)

In this section Luke records the internal and external conflict that existed at this time along with everything that was healthy and flourishing. Luke shows how the demonic realm sought to corrupt the church within and destroy it from without. Throughout Acts 5–7 there is a crescendo of persecution, which becomes so severe that a great deal of the church is scattered to nearby regions. Despite this, Yahweh uses it for His own good in order to aid His mission and spread of the very thing the persecutors sought to eliminate.

5:1-6 Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of their property in order to give the proceeds to the community of believers. Ananias, without Sapphira, came to Peter, claiming to give him the entire proceeds from his donation. Their sin was not that they did not give everything but that they claimed they had in order to look good to the community, while keeping some of the money for themselves. This would not have been a sin if he had just been truthful. Secrecy and selfishness violate the character of openness and honesty already seen in the community.

The Holy Spirit had revealed this to Peter, and he accused Ananias of being filled with Satan’s influence and lying to the Holy Spirit. This is an invasion of the powers of darkness into the community, and Luke describes Ananias with the same terms used of Judas (Luke 22:3). At hearing this, Ananias collapsed and died. So they wrapped him and buried him without mourning (Josh. 7:25). The text does not say that Peter killed him or even that Yahweh had. It could have been from a heart attack from the shock and public humiliation of being discovered.

5:7-11 When Sapphira came in, she was questioned, and she too lied to them and then died as her husband had. This story is similar to the stories of Achan’s theft from Jericho (Josh. 7), Nadab and Abihu’s offering of strange fire (Lev. 10:1-7), and the ground opening and swallowing Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Num. 16:1-35). This shows that this is the same God over the covenant community of believers in Acts as the Yahweh of Israel in the First Testament.

As a result of this, great fear gripped the covenant community of believers. The point here is the believers saw themselves as a corporate community—the people of Yahweh. Thus, a grievous violation of their corporate identity and the holiness of the community simply reinforced in their minds who they were and to whom they really belonged.¹⁸

This is the first use of *ekklēsia* (“assembly” or “church”) in Acts, which is used fifteen times of the Christian community in Acts 1–15 and four times after that. This word should not be translated “church” as a technical term but as a neutral assembly of people. In Acts 17 it is used of a First Testament congregation, whereas in Acts 19 it is used of a secular assembly in the city of Ephesus.

5:12-16 The apostles continued to perform miracles in the temple. Luke makes it clear that the power came through the apostles and not from them. The fact that none dared join them could mean the crowds were afraid to get close to them because of Ananias and Sapphira. However, that would not make sense considering that Luke states that the non-Christians admired them and that they gained new converts. It could mean the rest of the Christians were afraid to join them in the temple because of what happened last time. This would mean there was tension in the

¹⁸ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 219-220.

community.¹⁹ Many people were bringing their sick to the apostles, much like they had with Jesus, and their numbers were growing.

5:17-26 Now the apostles were in violation of a direct order of the high priest (Acts 4:18), so they were arrested and imprisoned. During the night, an angel of Yahweh freed them from prison and instructed them to return to the temple to preach. When the Sanhedrin went to get the apostles, they were not found in the prison but in the temple courts, so they were arrested again.

5:27-32 When the apostles were questioned about disobeying the Sanhedrin, Peter responded by stating that they obeyed Yahweh above human authorities. Peter once again accused them of killing Jesus and summarized the death and resurrection of Jesus.

5:33-42 The Sanhedrin responded with fury and wanted to kill the apostles. Gamaliel, a leading Pharisee from 25 AD on, warned the Sanhedrin against acting rashly. In the book of Acts, the presentation of the Pharisees is more favorable than that of the priests and Sadducees, unlike in the book of Luke. In the book of Acts, the Pharisees are constantly presented as having an open mind toward Christians or as having accepted the Christian message (Acts 15:5; 23:6-9; 26:5).²⁰

So they took his advice, then beat the apostles and released them. The apostles continued to preach and praised Yahweh that they were worthy of the suffering they bore. Luke emphasizes the lack of power that the authorities had and the irony that the people of Yahweh win by losing.

6:1-7 Two types of Jews made up the Jerusalem Christian church. The first were native Hebrews who lived in Judea and Galilee. They spoke primarily Aramaic and then Greek and would be able to read from the Hebrew Scriptures. The second were “Hellenists,” who originally lived outside of Israel (the Diaspora) but were now living in Judea and spoke primarily Greek as well as the language of the area where they had lived. They used the Septuagint translation of the First Testament. Within Judaism there were frequent tensions between these two groups, and these cultural problems carried over into the Jewish Christian community. The Hellenistic Jews believed their widows were being overlooked in the distribution of food.

This is an example of how the early Christian community was neither perfect nor without problems. Luke does not idealize the life of the Christian community. However, he also does not dwell on these internal conflicts but briefly shows how they were resolved, for he is more interested in the external conflicts for the Christian community.²¹

The twelve apostles gathered a group of disciples and made it clear that the apostles’ job was to preach the gospel of Jesus; therefore, they were to select seven men to be put in charge of overseeing the community’s needs. The criteria for choosing these seven was that they were to be respected men of integrity, full of the Holy Spirit, and wise. The main focus here is on character and being full of the Holy Spirit, not special talents or abilities. This is the only time that the phrase “the twelve” is used by Luke. He is making a distinction between the twelve apostles and the seven.

It was the community, not the apostles, who selected the men, but the apostles laid hands on the seven, prayed for them, and commissioned them. With the internal conflict in good hands, the Christian community could continue to grow as the gospel of Jesus was preached. This should be

¹⁹ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 225.

²⁰ See Robert C. Tannehill. *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, p. 2:67.

²¹ See Robert C. Tannehill. *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, pp. 2:80-81.

seen as an act of commissioning for the task and so a giving of authority—but not a formal rite of ordination, which came later in church history (Acts 13:1-3).²²

“The early church had problems but, according to Acts, it also had leaders who moved swiftly to ward off corruption and find solutions to internal conflicts, supported by people who listened to each other with open minds and responded with good will.”²³

“This pericope helps us see several very important things about the priorities of the early church. First, the church showed concern for both spiritual and physical needs. Its leaders gave priority to spiritual needs (prayer and the ministry of the Word), but they also gave attention to correcting injustice and helping the poor. This reflects the Christians’ commitment to loving God wholeheartedly and loving their neighbors as themselves, God’s great ethical demands. Second, the early church was willing to adapt its organizational structure and administrative procedures to minister effectively and to meet needs. It did not view its original structure and practices as binding but adapted traditional structures and methods to facilitate the proclamation of the gospel and the welfare of the church. In contrast, many churches today try to duplicate the form and functions of the early church because they feel bound to follow these. Third, the early church did not practice some things that the modern church does. Rather than blaming one another for the problem that arose, the disciples corrected the injustice and continued to give prayer and the ministry of the Word priority. Rather than paternalistically feeling that they had to maintain control over every aspect of church life, the apostles delegated authority to a group within the church and let them solve the distribution problem.”²⁴

²² See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 251.

²³ Robert C. Tannehill. *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, p. 81

²⁴ Thomas Constable. *Notes on Acts*, p. 101.

E. The Climax of Persecution (6:8–8:3)

Luke presents the event of Stephen's martyrdom in Jerusalem in order to explain the means Yahweh used to scatter the Christians and the gospel from Jerusalem into Judea, Samaria, and the farthest parts of the earth.

6:8-15 Stephen was full of grace for others and had the power to perform miracles, which was not unique to the twelve apostles, who were not the only ones able to perform miracles (Acts 2:22, 43; 5:12). For the first time, the people and not just the authorities become antagonistic toward the followers of Jesus. But they could not resist the wisdom and the Holy Spirit in Stephen. Because they could not refute him, they chose to falsely accuse him with two accusations: first, that he was saying blasphemous things against the Law of Moses by changing the customs Moses established and, second, that he was speaking against the temple, specifically that Jesus would destroy it. To the Jews, their identity was found in being the descendants of Abraham, being marked by circumcision, have been given the Law of Moses, and having the temple. The Jews believed they were right with Yahweh because they were His chosen people as descended from Abraham and because they had been given the Law and the temple, which no other people group had. The Law was the whole basis on which the people of Yahweh were to conduct themselves in relationship to Yahweh and to others, and thus they would receive the blessings of Yahweh. The Law is where their identity was found and governed every aspect of their lives. The temple was where Yahweh had dwelt in the First Testament, and the Jews still believed Yahweh dwelt there. They believed Yahweh dwelled in the temple with them and nowhere else; therefore, true worship could be found only in the temple. The temple had become the center of the Sadducees' political power, and so to threaten it was to threaten their political power.

“Like the similar charge against Jesus (Matt. 26:61; Mark 14:58; cf. John 2:19-22), its falseness lay not so much in its wholesale fabrication but in its subtle and deadly misrepresentation of what was intended. Undoubtedly Stephen spoke regarding a recasting of Jewish life in terms of the supremacy of Jesus the Messiah. Undoubtedly he expressed in his manner and message something of the subsidiary significance of the Jerusalem temple and the Mosaic law, as did Jesus before him (e.g., Mark 2:23-28; 3:1-6; 7:14-15; 10:5-9). But that is not the same as advocating the destruction of the temple or the changing of the law—though on these matters we must allow Stephen to speak for himself in Acts 7.”²⁵

Thus, Stephen's words especially threatened their sense of identity and power, and so they attacked not so much to defend Yahweh but their identity and their social and political structures that gave them power. Yet, despite their attacks, Stephen was not riled up by them but maintained his calm and spoke with gentleness.

7:1-53 Stephen's speech is not specifically a defense of himself against the charges brought up against him. Rather, it is a criticism of those Jews throughout history who have rejected Yahweh and His prophets, and of the Jews' assumptions about Yahweh.²⁶ Stephen showed that the apostles of Jesus were carrying on Yahweh's plan, whereas the unbelieving Jews had committed themselves to beliefs and behavior that Yahweh had left behind and disapproved.

²⁵ Richard N. Longenecker. “The Acts of the Apostles,” p. 336.

²⁶ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 259.

“On the surface it appears to be a rather tedious recital of Jewish history which has little relevance to the charges on which Stephen has been brought to trial; on closer study, however, it reveals itself as a subtle and skillful proclamation of the Gospel which, in its criticism of Jewish institutions, marks the beginning of the break between Judaism and Christianity, and points forward to the more trenchant exposition of the difference between the old faith and the new as expressed by Paul and the author of the Letter to the Hebrews.”²⁷

As was a common way of giving speeches in the ancient Near East, Stephen reviewed the history of Israel and highlighted elements of that history that supported his assertion. The first section (Acts 7:2-8) deals with Abraham and the Abrahamic covenant. The second section (Acts 7:9-16) deals with Joseph delivering his family (the descendants of Abraham) from the famine by bringing them into Egypt. The third section (Acts 7:17-43) deals with Moses delivering Israel from Egypt, the giving of the Law and the tabernacle, and Israel’s rebellion in the wilderness. The fourth section (Acts 7:44-50) deals with the temple and its relation to Yahweh. In the fifth section (Acts 7:51-53) Stephen addresses his audience with an indictment of them being hard-hearted just as their ancestors were. He follows the flow of Deuteronomy—which cites the repeated disobedience of the Israelites—by which they are admonished by Yahweh’s prophets, whose words they rejected, bringing the judgement of Yahweh upon them.

Three major themes can be seen in Stephen’s speech. The first major theme that Stephen develops in his speech is Yahweh’s faithfulness to fulfill His promises to Israel. He begins by stating that Yahweh came to Abraham and promised to give him land and make him into a great nation (Gen 12:1-3). Though Abraham did not personally receive the land, Yahweh made a covenant with Him to give it to his descendants when He brought them out of Egypt (Gen. 15). Yahweh was faithful to take care of Abraham’s descendants, even saving them from famine through Joseph even though the brother’s did not deserve it.

Yahweh was faithful to raise up Moses, who delivered them from their slavery in Egypt, and to dwell with them in the tabernacle (Ex. 3-4; 14). Yet they worshiped pagan gods and rebelled against Yahweh in the wilderness (Ex. 32; Num. 25). Despite this, Yahweh still honored His promises to bring them to the Promised Land (Josh. 1-6). In all of this, Yahweh promised to lift up another great prophet like Moses to deliver the people (Deut. 18:15). Throughout his speech Stephen is leading to the point that Yahweh has been faithful to raise up Jesus as their Messiah in order to faithfully fulfill His promise of raising up a prophet like Moses in order to deliver them from their sins.

The second major theme Stephen develops in his speech is that Yahweh cannot be confined to a building and that true worship is not institutions and rituals but a focus on Yahweh. Stephen begins by pointing out that Yahweh and His glory appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia (Acts 7:2; Gen. 12:1-3) when there was no temple yet. Yahweh appeared again to Abraham to inaugurate the Abrahamic covenant (Acts 7:6; Gen. 15) and then to Moses at the burning bush (Acts 7:30-33; Ex. 3:1-6). Yahweh does not need a temple or house for people to truly worship Him. In fact, Stephen makes the point that the burning bush demonstrates that wherever the presence of Yahweh is becomes holy (Acts 7:33).

In the wilderness, when Yahweh was in the fire before them, they turned to a false idol *made by their own hands* (Acts 7:39-42; Ex. 32). So Yahweh handed them over to the idol *made by their*

²⁷ William Neil. *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 107-108.

own hands (Rom. 1:24-28). They even turned to the tabernacle or house of the pagan god Moloch and the star of the god Rephan in worship even though they had the tabernacle of Yahweh. Here Stephen quotes Amos 5:25-27 and replaces the word “images” with “tabernacle.” The word *tabernacle* means “dwelling,” as the pagan gods were believed to dwelling the image of their idols. Stephen uses the word *tabernacle* to keep the temple and house theme he is developing.

Yahweh gave Israel specific instructions on how to build the tabernacle, which they followed explicitly; therefore, it was not *made by human hands*. They then took this with them into the Promised Land of Israel under the leadership of Joshua (Acts 7:44-45). Stephen’s point is that Yahweh commanded Israel to build the tabernacle—but not the temple. It was the tabernacle that was then taken into the Promised Land and became the center of Israel’s worship. The tabernacle was simple and so did not become the focus of Israel’s worship like the temple had. It was also portable and moved frequently throughout the tribes so that it did not become an object of political power like the temple became. And Yahweh blessed Israel and the reign of David while they had the tabernacle.

David then wanted to build a dwelling for the “God of Jacob.” Some older Hebrew manuscripts read the “house of Jacob,” which has weight because it is hard to see how a copyist finding the reading “God” would change it to “house,” while it is easy to see how a copyist might assimilate the reading and change “house” to “God” since it is more natural to view the temple as a house for God and not for Israel/Jacob. However, this does not fit the original context of 2 Sam. 7:1-17 where David wanted to build a house for God to dwell in (Ps. 132:5). And it does not fit the context of Stephen’s speech where he is making the point that the Jews believed that Yahweh dwelled exclusively in the temple. Yahweh in 2 Sam. 7:1-17 said that He did not want a temple, nor had He asked for a temple. Therefore David was not allowed to build a temple. This is the point that Stephen is making here. That Yahweh knew that the temple would be made by human hands and the Jews would begin to think that Yahweh was contained in the temple and they would treat it like an idol.

But Solomon built a house for God (Acts 7:47), and the people saw it that way and began to revere the temple more than Yahweh. Stephen then quotes Isaiah (Isa. 66:1-2), who was prophet and had greater authority than the Sanhedrin, in order to refute their reverence of the temple. Isaiah made the point that all of creation is Yahweh’s temple made by His hands and that there is no house anyone could build for His grandeur and glory. The temple was made by the hands of humans, and Yahweh did not give instructions for its building. Just as Stephen began with Yahweh’s glory being found outside of Israel and the temple (Acts 7:2), he ends on the same note.

“Throughout his speech he has, of course, been undermining the superstition which exalted a place of worship. The first great revelations of God had, in fact, taken place in foreign lands, Ur, Sinai, Midian, long before the temple existed (2-4, 29-34, 44-50).”²⁸

The point is that allegiance to the temple *built by human hands* is the same as to the golden calf *built by human hands*. Stephen’s argument is that they have reduced Yahweh to a small house/box and have ended up revering the things they built to contain all *their* thinking/theology of Yahweh and their power—rather than truly worshiping the limitless and boundless God of

²⁸ E. M. Blaiklock. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 77

creation. Yahweh is not contained in the temple, nor can He be controlled by the temple and its rituals.

Israel had turned from Yahweh to idolatry of the temple of their making, and their high priest had helped them do so. They did not really offer their sacrifices to Yahweh, and He did not accept them since they had rejected His anointed Righteous One.

The third major theme Stephen develops in his speech is that the majority of Israel's leaders throughout history opposed the prophets and plan of Yahweh. Stephen begins this theme with Joseph's brothers rejecting him, though he was chosen by Yahweh to save them, and selling him into slavery (Acts 7:9). But when Joseph came to them a second time, revealing himself to be their brother, they received him and were saved (Acts 7:13). This pattern is the way it should be with Yahweh's sent prophets. Often, when Yahweh visits someone, they do not recognize Him. But when He visits twice, as with Egypt—the first time through the person of Joseph and the second time through Moses, whom Egypt rejected—they can no longer claim ignorance.

Stephen becomes more pointed and direct when he states that Yahweh sent Moses to Israel the first time before he fled Egypt, and they rejected him (Acts 7:35; Ex. 2:13-14). Then, when Moses came to them a second time in the exodus, they rejected him again in the wilderness (Acts 7:39-41; Ex. 15:22-17:7; 32). In the same way, Moses being sent by Yahweh as a prophet to Israel was a typology for the second and greater prophet, whom Yahweh would send to Israel (Acts 7:37; Deut. 18:15). This prophet was Jesus, whom the Jews rejected and killed (Acts 2:23; 3:13-15; 4:10; 7:51-53). There is a repeated pattern, where Yahweh sent leaders to Israel and Yahweh's people rejected them, ultimately killing the prophets of Yahweh after the time of David (Acts. 7:52).

Stephen then makes his final and climactic point, stating that the Jewish leaders were stiff-necked, had uncircumcised hearts and ears, and were always resisting the Holy Spirit like their ancestors had. This would have been incredibly insulting, for the Jews took pride in the fact that they, as the chosen people of Yahweh, were circumcised, which guaranteed that they belonged to and were accepted by Yahweh. But this was not true, for their hearts and ears were not circumcised. Moses called the Jews of the wilderness "hard hearted" and "stiff necked," saying that only when their hearts were circumcised could they truly belong to and worship Yahweh (Deut. 10:16; 30:6). Then Jeremiah said that Israel needed their hearts to be circumcised, or Yahweh would punish them (Jer. 4:1-4; 9:25). It is only the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, which the Sanhedrin did not have, that can circumcise the heart (Rom. 2:28-29).

Just like the Jewish rulers before them had done, they killed the Righteous One, Jesus, proving that they do not follow the Law of Moses like they claim. They are the ones who are guilty of blaspheming the Law of Moses and of false worship.

7:54-60 Their response to Stephen is the final proof of the point he was making. First, they did not lose control of themselves in fury at his critique of the temple but at his criticism of them, showing that this was not really about Yahweh but them. Second, their killing of Stephen proves that they were always rejecting and killing the prophets of Yahweh; they always opposed the one who has been chosen and favored by Yahweh. There is nothing said about the high priest offering a verdict, and no formal sentence was announced, showing that this was a lynching of violent passion. In contrast, Stephen remained serene even as evil men unjustly killed him for his righteousness. And like Jesus, he was able to forgive them as they killed him (Luke 23:34, 46).

Seeing Jesus standing at the right hand of Yahweh shows both that Jesus is the Son of God, as Stephen had proclaimed, and that He approved of Stephen. The idea that a human could stand at the right hand of Yahweh, especially a crucified laborer from Galilee, was blasphemy. In the ancient Near East, the king stood for no one unless he wanted to show the greatest of respect and approval to one of his subjects.

It is here that Saul/Paul is mentioned for the first time. The fact that they were all laying their cloaks at his feet shows that he was a powerful and respected man to take care of such valuables. It also shows that he stood in approval of their actions.

“Stephen confronts the Jews of Jerusalem with their own sacred history, showing that God has kept his promises. But the history has also another aspect, that of constant disobedience and opposition to God and his messengers. The Bible itself provided materials for this point of view, but Stephen sharpens it, contending that by their betrayal and murder of Jesus the Jews of Jerusalem have created a solidarity between themselves and the contemporaries of Moses and the persecutors of the prophets. Over against this continuous resistance to the prophetic Holy Spirit stands the succession of righteous sufferers Joseph, Moses, the prophets, Jesus, and Stephen himself. The conclusion to be drawn is, evidently, that along this line the divine promises are brought to fulfillment, while those who reject Jesus and his witnesses disinherit themselves from God’s promises to the offspring of Abraham... The account of Stephen’s speech and martyrdom is given as the last preaching of the early apostles and evangelists in Jerusalem. Stephen’s own history is the continuation of that history which began by God’s revelation to Abraham; it leads to the preaching in Samaria and beyond.”²⁹

8:1-3 Stephen’s speech riled the Jewish leadership so much that it sparked the built-up powder keg of their hatred of Jesus, exploding against His followers in outright persecution in Jerusalem. It is this persecution that drove the majority of the Christians out of Jerusalem and into the regions of Judea and Samaria as Jesus had commanded them to do (Acts 1:8). Saul led the persecution and sought to destroy the church.

²⁹ N. A. Dahl. “The Story of Abraham in Luke-Acts,” pp. 147-148.

II. The Scattering (8:4–12:25)

This division records the spread of the gospel past Jerusalem to all of Judea, Samaria, and beyond, in fulfillment of Jesus' mandate (Acts 1:8), due to the persecution of the Christians at the hands of the Jewish leadership.

Two things result from this. First, the focus is no longer on the apostles in Jerusalem, and they will gradually cease to be the driving force in the spread of the gospel. Other disciples, like Philip, will play a major role in the spread of the gospel and in the conversion of Saul and the beginning of his ministry to the Gentiles.

“As the mission begins to move beyond Jerusalem and Judea, it is useful to distinguish two roles within it: the role of the *initiator* and the role of the *verifier*. The apostles shift at this point from the former to the latter role. That is, their function is reduced to recognizing and confirming the work of the evangelists who bring the gospel to new areas and groups, or to working as evangelists in areas already opened for mission (cf. 8:25; 9:32-42).”³⁰

Second, the gospel will begin to move into the Gentile world. This is first seen with Philip's conversion of the Ethiopian and then Peter's conversion of the Roman centurion Cornelius, which opens the door to many Gentiles accepting Christ. This becomes the transition to the Saul's ministry to the Gentiles that becomes the focus in the following division (Acts 13:1-21:16).

A. The Ministry of Philip (8:4-40)

In this section, Luke records the ministry of Philip, who was not an apostle but was just as key to the preaching of the gospel. He opens the door to the Samaritans, who had already encountered Jesus during His ministry and became followers of Jesus. The Samaritan mission does not lead to the Gentile mission, for this is not the beginning of the Gentile mission.

8:4-8 Philip was one of the seven Greek Jews selected to take care of the needs of the Greek Jews in the Christian church (Acts 6:5). Philip went down from Jerusalem (topographically not geographically) to the city of Samaria, which was north of Jerusalem in the region of Samaria. Like Jesus and the apostles, Philip was preaching the gospel, healing people, and casting out demons. There is a good chance that the apostles would not have been as warmly received, being native Hebrews. But Yahweh sent a Hellenistic Jew, who would have understood what it meant to be outside pure Judaism like the Samaritans.

8:9-13 A man by the name of Simon was also doing “miracles” through the power of sorcery, and people were amazed by what he could do. But along with the other Samaritans, Simon believed in the gospel that Philip was proclaiming and was baptized.

8:14-18 The apostles were the divinely appointed leaders of the Christians, so it was natural that Peter and John came to investigate the Samaritans' response to the gospel. This was especially important in view of the hostility that existed between the Hebrews and the Samaritans. It was important that the apostles affirm the conversion of the Samaritans in order to validate the unity of the Samaritan Christians and the Hebrew Christians in Christ. They asked Yahweh in prayer to send His Holy Spirit to baptize them. This baptism of the Holy Spirit occurred somewhat differently here than it had in Jerusalem (Acts 2). There it happened spontaneously, but here it

³⁰ Robert C. Tannehill. *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, p. 102.

came in answer to the apostles' prayer and with the laying on of their hands. There they spoke in tongues accompanied by fire, here there is no mention of speaking in tongues.

“The Spirit comes sometimes with apostles present, sometimes without (cf. 9:17); sometimes with the laying on of hands, sometimes without (cf. 2:38); sometimes very close to the time of water baptism, sometimes not; sometimes before water baptism, sometimes after (as here). The point is that God's gift is in God's control. The book of Acts suggests God's sovereignty over the whole matter, not that the matter is in the control of clerics, not even apostles.”³¹

“But what if the Spirit had come upon them [the Samaritans] at their baptism when administrated by Philip? Undoubtedly what feelings there were against Philip and the Hellenists would have carried over to them, and they would have been doubly under suspicion. But God in his providence withheld the gift of the Holy Spirit till Peter and John laid their hands on the Samaritans—Peter and John, two leading apostles who were highly thought of in the mother church at Jerusalem and who would have been accepted at that time as brothers in Christ by the new converts in Samaria.”³²

8:18-25 When Simon, who had experienced demonic power, had seen the power of the Holy Spirit and saw that it was far greater than anything he had experienced, he offered money to receive it. This points to the fact that he had not received the Holy Spirit, for why would he have tried to buy something he already had? This, along with Peter's response, shows that something was lacking in his belief. Peter rebuked Simon harshly for his wicked desires and called him to repent and pray for forgiveness so that he might be saved. Yahweh's gifts are gifts and not to be bought. Simon wanted to be able to bring glory to himself rather than to Yahweh.

8:26-28 An angel of Yahweh came to Philip and commanded him to go south of Jerusalem to Gaza. To get from Jerusalem to Gaza, one would travel west through the hill country of Judah and down to the coastal plain. From there he would turn south onto a highway called the Way of the Sea, which ran along the Mediterranean Sea connecting Damascus and Egypt. Only as it left Gaza, the southeasternmost city in Palestine, did the road pass through desert.

Along this road, Philip met an Ethiopian eunuch returning home from worshipping Yahweh in Jerusalem. Somehow he had come to know Yahweh and was now a true worshiper. Ethiopia was a kingdom located between modern Egypt and the Sudan (i.e., Nubia). In the mythical geography of the ancient Greek historians, Ethiopia was frequently identified with the ends of the earth. Candace was the dynastic title of the queen mother, who at this time served as the head of the government in Ethiopia. Her personal name was evidently Amanitare (25–41 AD).

8:29-40 As instructed by the Holy Spirit, Philip ran up to the Ethiopian and asked him whether he understood what he was reading. The passage he was reading was from the First Testament, from Isa. 53:7-8, which is a prophecy of the Messiah, who would come and suffer for the sins of Israel as the final lamb sacrifice. Philip explained to him that this passage was about Jesus, who died for the sins of the world so that humans may have eternal life. The Ethiopian placed his faith in Jesus, and Philip baptized him right there and then. The Holy Spirit then took Philip away to Azotus, a city along the Mediterranean coast in the central part of Israel. There he began

³¹ Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 288.

³² Richard N. Longenecker. “The Acts of the Apostles,” p. 359.

to move up the coast, preaching the gospel, until he came to Caesarea. About 20 years later we find him still living in Caesarea (Acts 21:8).

The emphasis in this story is the leading of the Holy Spirit and Philip's obedience in the conversion of the first Gentile. Yahweh had prepared both Philip and the Ethiopian for their especially important conversation.

B. The Conversion of Paul (9:1-31)

In this section Luke recorded the conversion and calling of Saul (34 AD) to demonstrate the supernatural power and sovereign direction of Yahweh. Saul's conversion was one of the most miraculous and significant instances of repentance that took place during the early expansion of the church. Saul then then began to ministers in Damascus and Arabia (34-37 AD).

9:1-9 The *meanwhile* connects back to Saul in Acts 8:3. Since Stephen's death, Saul had relentlessly hunted down and persecuted the Christians with the authority of the Jewish Temple state. "The Way" was one of the earliest designations of Christianity (Acts 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). It meant the path characterized by life and salvation. The Christian movement involves a new way of thinking about Yahweh, the world, and of living. The latter was most distinctive about Christianity because the Jewish religion was largely a matter of orthopraxy, while Greco-Roman religion was largely a matter of the performance of rites and rituals. The deep theological content along with the absence of priests, sacrifices, and temples set the Way apart from both Judaism and paganism.³³

On the way to Damascus, which was north of Israel, Saul was struck to the ground by a flash of light from Yahweh. Yahweh identified Himself as one with Jesus. Saul most likely would have known that this was Yahweh, for as a Jew, he would have known that no other being would be capable of speaking to him to from heaven with such power and authority. His asking "who are you?" most likely expresses his confusion around how he could have been persecuting Yahweh when he had been so zealously devoted to serving him. Yahweh's answer was that Jesus and He were the same. Not only that, but they were so intimately connected to the Christians that what Saul was doing to them was as if he was doing it to Them. For Saul, this was all he needed to believe that Jesus is God, for Yahweh Himself had told him. This alone communicates how powerful of a divine experience this encounter with Yahweh was. That someone who had been so devoted to the extermination of the Christians in absolute devotion to Yahweh could so quickly relent, change course, and join Christianity is mind blowing.

The fact that those around him heard the voice but saw nothing shows that this was not a hallucination. Saul was blinded by the experience, thus matching physically his spiritual blindness to what he had been doing. Led by his companions, he continued on to Damascus as Yahweh had commanded.

9:10-16 Yahweh then came to and instructed Ananias in Damascus to go to Saul, telling him that Saul would receive him, for Yahweh had told Saul that Ananias was coming. Ananias was understandably confused and hesitant since he knew of Saul and how he had been persecuting Christians. Yahweh stated that He had chosen Saul to bring the gospel of Jesus to both the Gentiles and Jews and that he would learn much through his suffering.

"In highlighting these features of being a 'chosen instrument,' sent to 'the Gentiles,' and to 'suffer for my [Jesus'] name,' Luke has, in effect, given a theological précis of all he will portray historically in chapters 13–28—a précis that also summarizes the self-consciousness of Paul himself as reflected in his own letters."³⁴

³³ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 254.

³⁴ Richard N. Longenecker. "The Acts of the Apostles," p. 373.

9:17-19a The fact that, based on this encounter, Ananias went immediately to Saul, knowing who he was, shows once again how powerful these encounters with Yahweh were. Ananias laid his hands on Saul, and he was filled with the Holy Spirit, and his blindness fell off as physical scales. This shows that an apostle was not necessary for one to receive the Holy Spirit as one might think from the previous stories in Acts. Paul was then baptized, and he ate.

9:19b-25 It is hard to know how these verses fit chronologically into the events of Saul's life. The "immediately" could just mean very soon after his conversion. Saul later wrote that immediately following his conversion he did not consult with others but went into Arabia and later returned to Damascus in order to preach (Gal. 1:15-17). *Arabia* referred to the kingdom of the Nabateans that stretched south and east from Damascus. The implication is that he needed some time for quiet reflection and communion with Yahweh to rethink the Scriptures in light of who Jesus is. Once back in Damascus, he boldly preached Jesus as the Son of God. This is the only mention in Acts of someone proclaiming Jesus as the "Son of God." This fact reflects the clear understanding of Jesus that Saul had even shortly after his conversion. He used this title of Jesus frequently in his epistles (Rom. 1:3-4, 9; 5:10; 8:3, 29, 32; 1 Cor. 1:9; 15:28; 2 Cor. 1:19; Gal. 1:16; 2:20; 4:4, 6; 1 Thess. 1:10).

The crowds who heard him were amazed at how he had changed and the message he spoke. But to the Jewish leaderships in Damascus, he became the new threat, and they began plotting to kill him. But the disciples he had already gained in Damascus helped him escape the city.

9:26-31 Most likely his arrival in Jerusalem was three years after his conversion, as he states in Gal. 1:18. Paul tried to connect with the apostles, but they were extremely fearful of him. Barnabas, however, saw Yahweh at work in Saul and vouched for him before the apostles. Barnabas pointed out three indications that Saul's conversion was genuine. Saul had seen Yahweh, had talked with Him, and had proclaimed Jesus' name boldly in Damascus. What is amazing here is that they were the apostles of Jesus and very in sync with the Holy Spirit, but it was Ananias and Barnabas who saw the Holy Spirit at work in Saul.

Saul picked up where Stephen had left off in debating the Jews in Jerusalem. There is an irony in that the man who approved of Stephen's death was now continuing Stephen's work. And as with Stephen, the Jewish leadership turned against Saul and tried to kill him. So Paul went to Caesarea and then, by ship, to Tarsus in Cilicia, his hometown (Acts. 21:39; Gal. 1:21). In Acts 22:17-21, Paul testified that in Jerusalem he received a vision of Jesus, who told him to leave Jerusalem because Yahweh wanted to use him to evangelize the Gentiles. Thus, his departure from Jerusalem was willing rather than forced. After this, Yahweh granted the Christians throughout Israel peace from persecution for a time.

C. The Ministry of Peter (9:32–11:18)

In this section Luke highlights the similarities between Jesus' ministry and Peter's ministry, showing that the same divine Spirit that was at work through Jesus was at work in Peter. Yet the focus is on the conversion of the Roman centurion Cornelius and his family. Just as Peter first introduced the Jews to the gospel of Jesus and the significance of the first time indwelling of the Holy Spirit, so now he introduces the first group of Gentiles to the gospel of Jesus, which is validated by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It is here that the full ramifications of the gospel of Jesus can be seen: Yahweh has come to give eternal life to all peoples, uniting them to Himself and each other in the same Spirit that indwells them all.

9:32-35 Lydda (modern Lod) was on the Mediterranean Coast about ten miles from the sea. It was about 25 miles northwest of Jerusalem. It stood at the junction of the roads from Joppa to Jerusalem and the highway from Egypt to Syria. Peter healed the lame man and announced that the healing was the work of Jesus. This story was included to continue to testify to the power of Yahweh at work through the believers as a result of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This healing also affected the Gentile Cornelius, who will be prominent in the next chapter.

9:36-42 The site of Joppa (modern Yafo, a suburb of Tel Aviv) was on the Mediterranean Coast, ten miles west and a little north of Lydda. It was the ancient seaport for Jerusalem (2 Chron. 2:16; Jon. 1:3). Tabitha (lit. "Gazelle") was a Jewish Christian and a disciple. The name Tabitha is Aramaic, while Dorcas was her Greek name. She was highly respected for her servant's heart and ministry. When she died, the believers placed her in a room, expecting that Peter would be able to raise her from the dead like Jesus since the disciples had been able to perform the healings Jesus had performed.

Peter's actions and words were almost identical to Jesus' when He raised Jairus's daughter from the dead (Mark 5:41; Luke 8:51-56). Peter's praying here shows that he was relying on Jesus for His power. There is only one letter difference in what Peter said (*Tabitha qumi*) and what Jesus had said (*Talitha qumi*, lit. "Little girl, get up"). Many in Joppa began to believe because of the work of the Holy Spirit through Peter.

"Once it is recognized that these two narratives form a pair, then it is in order to note that Luke frequently deals in pairs, in particular in pairs of narratives one of which focuses on a man and the other on a woman. H. Flender long ago rightly concluded that this deliberate literary pattern is Luke's way of suggesting that the good news and all the aspects of salvation, including healing, are intended equally for men and women. 'They are equal in honor and grace; they are endowed with the same gifts and have the same responsibilities.' While it is true that Luke does not spend as much time on women in Acts as on men, he nonetheless provides us with a series of vignettes meant to show the various roles women assumed in the early church providing, material aid, hosting the house church, teaching, and prophesying (cf. below). What is especially striking about Acts 9:32-43 is that more time, attention, and detail is given to the narrative about helping a woman disciple than is given to the story about Aeneas, suggesting that Luke wants to single this sort of thing out as especially noteworthy about early Christianity."³⁵

"My own view was and remains that Luke and Paul, like other early Christians, believed that their faith committed them to the reforming of some of the existing patriarchal structures so

³⁵ Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 328.

that women could play more vital and varied roles in the community of faith. The reform was to take place within the community. To this end, Luke presents five cameos of important Christian women and the variety of roles they assumed. In the mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12-17) and in Lydia (Acts 16:12-40) we see women assuming the role of ‘mother’ or patroness and benefactor to the then fledgling Christian communities in Jerusalem and Philippi respectively. Like them, in the story of Tabitha (Acts 9), a notable female disciple with an ongoing ministry, we find someone providing material aid to a particularly needy group of early Christians — widows (cf. Acts 6). Luke’s mention of Philip’s daughters is brief (Acts 21:9), but when compared to Acts 2:17 it is sufficient to show that women played important roles of inspired proclaimers in the early church. Perhaps most important is Luke’s reference to Priscilla as a teacher of a notable early Christian evangelist, Apollos, in Acts 18. Luke’s portrayal of Priscilla is unreservedly positive.”³⁶

9:43 Peter ended up staying in the house of Simon the tanner (38 AD). A tanner was a person who worked with the skins of dead animals; touching a carcass made one unclean. The Mishnah and Talmud both suggest that tanners were despised because of their ongoing uncleanness, caused by their profession, and because of their bad smell from the tanning process.

10:1-8 Caesarea stood on the Mediterranean Coast about thirty miles north of Joppa. Herod the Great renamed it in honor of Augustus Caesar and made it the provincial capital of Judea (where Pilate lived) and built its magnificent harbor. It was the major Roman seaport for Israel and the most important center of Roman government and military activity.

Cornelius was a Roman centurion, which was a non-commissioned officer of the Roman army, each commanding 100 soldiers. A cohort contained 600 soldiers, and Cornelius’ cohort had connections with Italy. Every reference to centurions in the New Testament is positive (Matt. 8:5-10; 27:54; Mark 15:44-45; Acts 22:25-26; 23:17-18; 27:6, 43).

Cornelius was the second recorded Gentile conversion in Acts. Though the Ethiopian was a Gentile, the Jews would not have had a problem with his profession. Cornelius was a Gentile Roman soldier who was occupying Israel and represented Israel’s oppression. Roman soldiers were despised and avoided by the Jews. It is interesting that the first Gentile to whom Jesus went during His ministry was also a Roman centurion (Matt. 8:11). A “God-fearer” was a Gentile who worshiped the God of Israel and adhered to the Mosaic Covenant but had not been circumcised. Those who chose to be circumcised were called proselytes.

Yahweh sent an angel to Cornelius in a vision telling him that his offerings to Yahweh had been accepted. The idea of memorial offerings made to Yahweh was that spiritual sacrifices—like prayer and almsgiving—could be offered up to Yahweh in addition to regular sacrifices, or instead of sacrifices if one lived in the Diaspora and could not travel to Jerusalem, and Yahweh would accept them.³⁷ The angel told him to go to Joppa and seek Peter out. So Cornelius sent his servants to Joppa to find Peter.

10:9-33 At noon Peter had a vision of a large sheet filled with clean and unclean animals. Jews were not allowed to sacrifice or eat unclean animals (Lev. 11). As Israel distinguished between clean and unclean animals, they were reminded that holiness was more than a matter of meat and drink but also a way of life characterized by purity and integrity. Normalcy and wholeness were

³⁶ Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 338.

³⁷ See Johnson. *Acts*, p. 183. Also Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 348.

based on the requirements of the law. Living in accordance with the law made one different from the cultures that surrounded Israel; it made one holy. Thus, the immoral, self-serving cultures were not normal and clean, so Israel was to remain separate from them in order to maintain their cleanness and holiness. Because the care of animals and the sacrificial system were a huge part of their life, not only would these distinctions between clean and unclean animals keep them from intermixing with the pagan nations who did not have the same distinctions, but they would be a constant reminder to the people that they were to remain distinct and why. These regulations taught Israel to act with discrimination according to Yahweh's standard of righteousness because they had been distinctly separated from the rest of humanity. They were separate not because Yahweh was overly strict but because they do not function in a normal way according to the other animals of their classification. Yahweh used the distinction between clean and unclean animals to teach Israel to remain distinct from the Gentiles. However, there was no formal law that forbade Jews from associating with Gentiles.

Yahweh commanded Peter to kill and eat the animals on the sheet. Peter objected because of the unclean animals. Even though there were clean animals, Peter assumed that because of the considerable number of unclean animals on the sheet, the clean animals would have been contaminated, thus making nothing fit to eat. Yahweh told Peter that what He had made clean, Peter must not consider ritually unclean. Peter's Jewish cultural prejudices were overriding the Word of Yahweh in his thinking. For this reason, Yahweh repeated the vision two more times so Peter would be sure he was understanding Yahweh's command correctly.

The point is that the new covenant community was to include Gentiles by faith as the prophets had foretold. Yahweh had declared Gentiles of faith to be clean, and the Jews were not to say or treat them otherwise (Mark 7:14-19; Rom. 14:14). There is a hypocrisy with Peter at this moment in that He was willing to stay with a tanner but was not willing to eat unclean animals or associate with Gentiles. The next day Cornelius's servant came to Peter, and the Holy Spirit told Peter to go with the men without hesitation. Peter went and met Cornelius. Peter wisely took six other Jewish Christians with him. A total of seven believers witnessed what took place in Cornelius's house.

10:34-43 Peter now understood that Yahweh had not chosen the Jews out of favoritism but had desired that all the nations be included by faith in the covenant community of Israel. All those who put their faith in Yahweh were accepted by Yahweh into the covenant community of believers. Since Jesus is the Lord of all, then the gospel was available for all. Peter then shared the gospel message with Cornelius and his family.

10:44-48 As Peter was speaking, the Holy Spirit entered Cornelius and his family. One of the regular features of these narratives about conversions is that Yahweh takes charge of the situation, even interrupting an apostle, to bring someone into the fold (Acts 10:44; 17:32; 22:22; 23:7; 26:24). We have here at least the fourth outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts. 2:1-4; 4:3; 8:17).

The Jewish circumcised believers were amazed when they saw the Holy Spirit indwell uncircumcised Gentiles, for they did not believe it was possible for someone to be considered a member of the Abrahamic covenant without physical circumcision. Yet Moses and Jeremiah spoke of a day when heart circumcision through the Spirit would be the true mark of the believer (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:1-4; 9:25; Rom. 2:28-29). With the coming of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, Yahweh made all who became a part of His covenant community clean. Therefore, the

distinction was not based on the cultural practices of a certain nation but on the indwelling of the Holy Spirit who made one clean. Therefore, all nations and people could now become clean and holy through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit then changes the person from the inside out so they begin to become whole and to act in a normal way according to the commands of Yahweh. The distinction between clean and unclean animals was therefore lifted because the Gentiles could become clean under a whole new criteria.

Cornelius and his family then spoke in tongues as the Jewish Christians had at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4), validating that the Gentile Christians were a part of the covenant community of Jesus just as much as the Jewish Christians were. Peter then baptized them, for they were now Christians. This was the Pentecost of the Gentile world, unlocking and opening the door to the Gentile expansion of the church. The Jew and Gentile were equal in Yahweh's eyes, and the Jew had no essential advantage over the Gentile in entering the church. Yahweh observes no distinction in race when it comes to becoming a Christian (Eph. 2:11-3:12).

11:1-18 The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem objected to Peter having had contact with uncircumcised Gentiles, particularly eating with them. Luke recorded Peter's retelling of these events to further impress the significance of this incident on his readers. Peter stressed particularly Yahweh's initiative (Acts 11:8, 9, 12, 15, 16, 17a) and his own inability to withstand Yahweh (Acts 11:17b). He also pointed out that there were Jewish Christian witnesses to these events as well (Acts 11:12).

Peter's explanation was satisfactory to the Jewish Christians. They agreed that Yahweh was saving the Gentiles simply by faith in Jesus Christ just as He was saving the Jews and that they should no longer regard Gentiles as "unclean." They recognized and yielded to Yahweh's initiative and will in this event.

"It is clear, however, that not all of those who accepted Peter's explanation also understood the larger issue. Probably few of them did. The larger issue was that God had created a new entity, the church, and that He was dealing with humankind on a different basis than He had for centuries. Those whom God accepted by faith in Christ were now under a new covenant, not the old Mosaic covenant, so they did not need to continue to observe the Mosaic Law. It was no longer necessary for Gentiles to come to God through Judaism nor to live within the constraints of Judaism. Opposition to this larger issue, the implications of what happened in Cornelius' home, cropped up later (15:1; cf. Gal.). Even today many Christians do not understand the implications of this change and their application in daily life."³⁸

"Even though Peter does not convert the first Gentile [in Acts, i.e., the Ethiopian eunuch], the Cornelius episode is a breakthrough for the Gentile mission. The conversion of the Ethiopian was a private and isolated event that had no effect. The conversion of Cornelius has consequences in the following narrative, as the reference back to it in Acts 15 makes clear. It is a breakthrough not simply because Peter and the Jerusalem church now accept Gentiles for baptism but also because they recognize the right of Jewish Christians to freely associate with Gentiles in the course of their mission."³⁹

³⁸ Thomas Constable. *Notes on Acts*, p. 162.

³⁹ Robert C. Tannehill. *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, p. 136.

D. The Church at Antioch (11:19–12:25)

This section records the spread of the gospel beyond Judea to cities that contained more Hellenistic Jewish and Gentiles (39-44 AD). At the same time, persecution is increasing at the hands of the Roman government. Yet, as before, this only leads to an even greater increase of the spread of the gospel of Jesus.

11:19-26 The Jewish Christians began to spread the gospel north of Israel into Phoenicia, Cyprus (a large island off the eastern Mediterranean coast), and Antioch but to the Jewish communities only. Antioch was about 15 miles inland from the Mediterranean Sea on the Orontes River and 300 miles north of Jerusalem. It was the capital of the Roman province of Syro-Cilicia, north of Phoenicia, and was one of the most strategic population centers of its day. It contained between 500,000 and 800,000 inhabitants, making it the third-largest city in the Roman Empire. About one-seventh of the city's population were Jews, and many Gentile proselytes to Judaism lived there. Antioch was also notorious as a haven for pleasure seekers. Now, since the murder of Stephen, not only had the gospel expanded beyond Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria, it was beginning to move to the ends of the earth.

But some Jews from Cyprus (Barnabas's homeland, not far from Antioch) and Cyrene, in North Africa, began to share the gospel with the Greeks in these regions as well, and they accepted the gospel of Jesus. When the Jerusalem church found out, they sent Barnabas to investigate and validate the legitimacy of what was happening. Barnabas rejoiced at what he heard and saw; he was a good man and full of the Holy Spirit, which allowed him to see the work of Yahweh. Barnabas is the only person in Acts to be called good and is said to have been like Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit and faith (Acts 6:5). This was a watershed moment in the Church, and much rode on how Barnabas interpreted and communicated to the Jerusalem church what he saw.

For whatever reason, Barnabas decided that the Antioch church needed the wisdom and efforts of Paul as the gospel began to move to the Gentiles. So he went to Tarsus in order to bring Saul back. For a whole year they worked together to disciple the Christians in Antioch. This is when the followers of Jesus first began to be called Christians.

The term Christian is used only here in Acts and in 2 Pet. 4:16. When early Christians described themselves, they spoke of being disciples, believers, saints, brothers and sisters, or followers of "the Way," and they were sometimes called Nazarenes (Acts 24:5). They did not call themselves "Christians" until the 100s AD. It was the early church father Ignatius of Antioch who used it and frequently. Luke uses it here to make a clear distinction between Christians, both Jews and Gentiles, and the Jews who were not followers of Jesus. Thus the term is not ethnic but is used to communicate religious loyalty. Christians are social not ethnic.⁴⁰

11:27-30 Some prophets came and predicted the coming of a famine in the Roman Empire. The Romans used the Greek word *oikoumene* ("inhabited world") in exaggeration to refer to the Roman Empire (Luke 2:1). Yahweh fulfilled Agabus's prophecy (Acts 21:10) during the reign of Emperor Claudius (AD 41–54). There is clear evidence that there was an unusually high Nile in Egypt during the reign of Claudius—a hundred-year flood that was eighteen cubits high in 45

⁴⁰ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 371.

AD, which in turn flooded the fields where the grain grew in Egypt. A famine in Egypt caused food shortages everywhere else.⁴¹

Famine affected the poor the most, and there is evidence that this was a common problem in the early Christian communities. So the disciples of Antioch raised money to take care of the church in Judea. Where before the Christians saw a need in their community and took care of it without hesitation (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37), now the Christians were taking care of needs beyond their immediate and local community. Barnabas and Saul were chosen to deliver this gift. This is the first place in Acts where Christian elders are mentioned.

“The summary of the establishment of the church in Antioch presents an important new development, both geographically and ethnically. The gospel reaches a major city of the empire and finds a ready response from people of Greek culture, including Gentiles. The narrator pulls together threads from the preceding narrative, especially chapters 2 and 8, and weaves them into a tapestry to describe the new phase of the mission.”⁴²

12:1-11 Herod Agrippa I (37–44 AD) ruled over Judea and moved his headquarters from Caesarea to Jerusalem. Herod Agrippa I was part Jewish, so he sought to maintain favor with and the support of the Jews he ruled over, which he did effectively. As the Christian Jews became increasingly offensive to the non-Christian Jews, Herod sought to please them by mistreating the Christians and by executing the apostle James. Persecution of the Christians now swung from religious to political. Herod Agrippa I also arrested Peter and planned to put him on public trial during Passover.

The night before Peter’s trial, Yahweh sent an angel to free Peter from prison. The picture of Peter being freed—where he had been chained to two Roman soldiers behind bars, guarded by two more Roman soldiers, and inside the city gates—shows the absolute power of Yahweh over the might of Rome. Yahweh did here for Peter what He had done for the Israelites in leading them out of their Egyptian prison in the Exodus.

12:12-17 Peter went to the house of Mary the mother of John Mark, the man who accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey (Acts 13:5) and was Barnabas’s cousin (Col. 4:10). When the slave girl Rhoda opened the gate, which admitted people from the street to the courtyard of the house, she was so amazed that she ran back to those in the house without letting Peter in. The believers could not believe that Yahweh had answered their prayers so directly and dramatically and thought it was his angel. The reference to Peter’s angel could allude to the Jewish belief in guardian angels (Gen. 48:16; Tob. 5:22; Matt. 18:10). Some believed that a guardian angel had the same appearance as the person they protected. It was also believed that one’s spirit or angel often lingered on earth and appeared on earth for several days after one’s death.⁴³ Eventually they let him in and were amazed at what Yahweh had done. Peter told them to tell James and the other believers. James was the half-brother of Jesus (Acts 15:13; 21:18; Gal. 1:19; 2:9, 12; James 1:1) and became the foremost leader of the Jerusalem church after Peter’s departure.

12:18-25 Herod Agrippa I executed the soldiers for negligence and returned to Caesarea in the north. Herod Agrippa I had become displeased with his subjects who lived in Tyre and Sidon on

⁴¹ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 373.

⁴² Robert C. Tannehill. *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, p. 146.

⁴³ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 387.

the Mediterranean Coast north of Caesarea. Because these towns depended on Galilee, which he ruled, for their food supply, they were eager to get on his good side again. But Yahweh sent an angel to strike him down. Josephus recorded Herod Agrippa I appearing in the outdoor theater at Caesarea and standing before the officials of Tyre and Sidon dressed in a silver robe. Some flatterers in the theater began to acclaim him as a god. Immediately severe stomach pains attacked him, and his attendants had to carry him out of the theater. Five days later he died. It is possible he suffered from appendicitis that led to peritonitis complicated by roundworms or that he had a cyst caused by a tapeworm.

In contrast, Peter was free, and the church grew and flourished. Nothing was capable of stopping the expansion of the church. Internal contention did not fracture it (Acts 5:1-11; 6:1-7). External forces of the Jews (Acts 4:1; 8:1, 3; 11:19) or Roman officials (Acts 12:1-23) could not control it or kill it (Matt. 16:18; Acts 1:8). Nothing can stop the Word of Yahweh.

After delivering the Antioch Christians' gift to the church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:27-30), Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch, bringing with them John Mark (Acts 12:12). This verse connects the life and ministry of the Gentile Christians in Antioch with the life of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and prepares the reader for what is to follow. Acts 12 records some events that happened before those in Acts 11. It would appear from Galatians 2 that Paul showed up in Jerusalem with the famine relief funds at least fourteen years after his conversion (about 48 AD). This places him in Antioch around 46–47 AD, after his time in Syria and Cilicia (Gal. 1:21). There is almost a decade of Paul's Christian life (37–46 AD) that we know nothing about. Luke states only that Paul was found by Barnabas in or around Tarsus (Acts 11:25; Gal. 1:21). Luke's purpose is to provide not a biography of Paul but rather an overview of the birth and growth of the early church.

“It is in order to ask what picture is painted of the social situation of the early church in this narrative. Four factors stand out. First, the early church in Jerusalem was not part of the Jewish power structure, nor was it well connected with either the Jewish kings or Roman governors who ruled Judea between 30 and 60 AD. Thus the church was marginalized and subject to persecution and prosecutions of various severity. Second, there were some Christians of social means, such as the mother of John Mark, who could help the Church grow and develop. Third, the narrative suggests not only were there multiple meeting places for the early church (Acts. 8:3) but that the early church had not required everyone to sell or give up property. Fourth, the example of Rhoda (see also Luke 22:56) may suggest that the early church did not immediately require the abolition of slavery within the community, though there is a slim chance she may have been a hired freedwoman.”⁴⁴

⁴⁴ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 383.

III. The Ministry of Paul (13:1–21:16)

In this division the focus shifts from the apostles to Paul and his mission in the greater Greek world as it presents the geographical expansion of the church into Asia Minor (modern western Turkey). Even though Paul becomes the focus of the book from this point, it is still Yahweh in the person of the Holy Spirit who is *the* major character and catalyst in all that happens in this salvation story.

As the mission to the Gentiles unfolds in Acts, Luke shows that the ministry to the Gentiles paralleled the ministry to the Jews. He did this by relating many things done by the missionaries to the Gentiles that were very similar to what the missionaries to the Jews did. This demonstrates that Yahweh was behind both missions and that they are really two parts of His plan to bring the gospel to all people. Luke's approach will be to give three major representative speeches of Paul to three different kinds of audiences: to the Jewish synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:16-41), to the pagans in Athens (Acts 17:22-31), and to the Christians at Miletus (Acts 20:18-35).

A. The First Missionary Journey (13:1–14:28)

This section records the first missionary journey (46-47 AD) beyond Syria, to the western coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Paul and Barnabas's mission was to take the gospel to the Jews first and then to the Gentiles as they moved through Asia Minor. This journey would bring a much greater increase in Gentile converts and in continued opposition from the Jews. Though there had already been success in converting Gentiles, it is Luke's intent to portray this missionary journey as being the church's inaugural efforts at planned evangelism of Gentiles as well as Jews.

“Paul's missionary work [during] this period has the best claim to being called a 'missionary journey,' as is customary on Bible maps. The later periods were much more devoted to extended activity in significant key cities of the ancient world, and we gain a false picture of Paul's strategy if we think of him as rushing rapidly on missionary journeys from one place to the next, leaving small groups of half-taught converts behind him; it was his general policy to remain in one place until he had established the firm foundation of a Christian community, or until he was forced to move by circumstances beyond his control.”⁴⁵

⁴⁵ I. Howard Marshal. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 214.



13:1-3 There were five prominent prophets and teachers in the Antioch church at this time. The Greek construction suggests that Barnabas, Simeon, and Lucius were prophets and that Manaen and Saul were teachers. The emphasis of Barnabas being named first suggests that he was the leader among the prophets and teachers. The Holy Spirit spoke to these men and specifically called Barnabas and Saul to head out on a mission trip to the greater Greek world. Though the leaders in Antioch endorsed and prayed for these two men and their work, it was the Holy Spirit who had commanded the church both to act and to send these two men. These men were able to hear the Spirit because they were in tune with Him through their character and fasting.

13:4-12 The journey begins in the city of Seleucia, which was sixteen miles from Antioch and served as a port, though it was five miles from the mouth of the Orontes River. Cyprus was Barnabas's homeland (Acts 4:36) and was an island of great importance from very early times, being situated on the shipping lanes between Syria, Asia Minor, and Greece. John Mark was also with Barnabas and Saul, serving as their assistant.

Barnabas and Saul first went to the synagogues—for which there is no success reported—and then came to a Roman proconsul. Sergius Paulus was a Roman proconsul, the highest Roman government official on the island by appointment of Rome's senate. Bar-Jesus, also known as Elymas, was a false prophet and an adviser to Sergius Paulus and opposed Barnabas and Saul openly, probably seeing Saul and Barnabas as a threat to their power base.

Luke introduces Saul's Greek name, Paul, by which he is referred to in Acts from this point on. The change at this point seems to be that this is when Paul's ministry to the Gentiles really began. *Paul* means "little," perhaps an allusion to his physical stature. Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, accused Elymas of being filled with deceit and wrongdoing and cursed him with blindness for opposing the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Paul probably did this to show that Elymas, as a magician connected to demonic power, was no match to the power of Yahweh. When the Gentile proconsul saw this power, he converted to Christianity.

This story is a significant moment in Luke's development of the growth of the church in several ways. This is the first time that Paul takes the lead. He is also able to command the power of the Holy Spirit and faces off with a magician as Peter had with Simeon (Acts. 8:9-24). This is where the mission of the church became more Gentile focused. Likewise, this is the first time the gospel was shared with a high-ranking Roman aristocrat.

"The conversion of Sergius Paulus was, in fact, a turning point in Paul's whole ministry and inaugurated a new policy in the mission to Gentiles—viz., the legitimacy of a direct approach to and full acceptance of Gentiles apart from any distinctive Jewish stance. This is what Luke clearly sets forth as the great innovative development of this first missionary journey (14:27; 15:3). Earlier Cornelius had been converted apart from any prior commitment to Judaism, and the Jerusalem church had accepted his conversion to Christ. But the Jerusalem church never took Cornelius's conversion as a precedent for the Christian mission and apparently preferred not to dwell on its ramifications. However, Paul, whose mandate was to Gentiles, saw in the conversion of Sergius Paulus further aspects of what a mission to Gentiles involved and was prepared to take this conversion as a precedent fraught with far-reaching implications for his ministry. It is significant that from this point on Luke always calls the apostle by his Greek name Paul and, except for 14:14; 15:12; and 15:25 (situations where Barnabas was more prominent), always emphasizes his leadership by listing him first when naming the missionaries. For after this, it was Paul's insight that set the tone for the church's outreach to the Gentile world."⁴⁶

13:13-15 Pamphylia was a Roman province that lay west of the kingdom of Antiochus, which was west of Cilicia, Paul's home province. Perga (modern Perge) stood ten miles inland from the major seaport of Attalia (modern Antalya), but it had an inland harbor on the Cestrus River. In Perga, John Mark left Paul and Barnabas to return to Jerusalem. Paul did not approve of his decision (Acts 15:38), but Luke did not record Mark's motives. Since he was not commissioned, he may have felt no compulsion to continue the journey once he left the territory where he no longer had relatives or contacts.

Paul and Barnabas proceeded north about 100 miles to Antioch of Pisidia, which was a Roman colony, as were Lystra, Troas, Philippi, and Corinth. Roman colonies stood at strategic places in the empire along frequently traveled roads. The majority of its population was Gentile, and it had a sizable, well-established minority population of Jews. Antioch was the most important city of southern Galatia, which would have made it a good place to plant a church.

Paul and Barnabas went to the local Jewish synagogue. Normally the synagogue service began with the Shema ("Hear, O Israel...") and the Shemoneh Esreh (a liturgy of benedictions, blessings, and prayers). Then leaders would read a passage from the Mosaic Law and a related

⁴⁶ Richard N. Longenecker. "The Acts of the Apostles," pp. 420-421.

passage from the prophets section of the Hebrew Bible. Then the synagogue rulers would designate a person to give an address. The service would conclude with a benediction. The synagogue leaders invited Paul and Barnabas to give an address.

13:16-41 Paul then gave an overview of the history of the Jews, from their exodus out of Egypt to the reign of David. He then connected Jesus to David as the promised descendant of David and followed that with an overview of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Paul quoted from Ps. 2:7 (Acts 13:33) and Isa. 55:3 (Acts 13:34) to make the point that Yahweh had *raised* up David and had promised a Savior from his descendants. Yahweh had fulfilled that promise by *raising* up Jesus as the Messiah, whom He identified as His Son by *raising* Him from the dead. Paul then quoted from Ps. 16:10 (Acts 13:35) to make the point that David had said that Yahweh would not let his body decay in the grave, but David did decay in the grave; therefore, David was speaking of his descendant Jesus, who did not decay in the grave but was resurrected by Yahweh. This is the same point Peter made in Acts 2:29-33. Paul then urged the people to find their salvation in Jesus, who could justify them—unlike the Law, in which they had been putting their hope. Paul ended by quoting Hab. 1:5, which was a warning to the Jews of Habakkuk’s day that Yahweh was sending the Gentile nation of Babylon to punish them for rejecting and disobeying Him. Paul’s point was that Yahweh would do this again with the Romans if the Jews rejected Jesus the Son of God and continued to be disobedient. Jesus had predicted the fall of Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans (70 AD) for the Jews’ continued rejection of Yahweh (Luke 21:20-24).

13:42-51 In Jerusalem, Luke, the Hellenistic Jews, and the Gentile God-fearers begged Paul and Barnabas to stay and continue to preach and teach them about Jesus. The next Sabbath, many gathered to hear Paul and Barnabas. Like in Jerusalem, there were many other Jews who were jealous of the following Paul and Barnabas had gained and began to contradict their message. Paul made it clear that they had come to the Jews first, but, because the Jews had rejected the message of Jesus, they were commanded by Yahweh to take the message to the Gentiles. Paul quoted from a merger of Isa. 42:6 and Isa. 49:6 that the whole point of Israel was to be the image of Yahweh and reflect His light to the Gentiles so that they too may be a part of the chosen people of Yahweh and experience His salvation. It is incorrect to say that this announcement about their turning to the Gentiles means either that the Jews would not be preached to or respond again or that the Gentiles were offered Yahweh’s word only because of the Jews’ rejection (Luke 2:30-32). But the Jews must be allowed to hear and respond first. The Gentiles rejoiced at this, and many were saved. In contrast, the Jews stirred up their wealthy and powerful to persecute Paul and Barnabas to the point that they had to leave the city. The shaking the dust off one’s feet was a graphic way that Jews illustrated separation from unbelievers (Matt. 10:14; Luke 9:5; 10:11). Now Paul and Barnabas were doing this against the Jews who had become the unbelievers.

14:1-7 Iconium (modern Konia) stood about 85 miles to the southeast of Antioch, also in Phrygian Galatia. Once again, Paul and Barnabas went to the Jewish synagogue first. And again, many Jews and Gentiles received them well and were saved, yet other Jews opposed them. But despite the opposition, Paul and Barnabas continued to preach because so many were being saved. Eventually Paul and Barnabas had to escape the city because the Jews were planning to stone them.

In Acts 14:4 Paul and Barnabas are called “the apostles.” Luke is not using the term *apostle* in the usual sense but in the sense of 2 Cor. 8:23 and Phil. 2:25 to refer to those being

commissioned and sent out by a local church to do the work of Jesus Christ. Everywhere else Paul uses *apostle* refers to a member of the Twelve.⁴⁷ Luke's use of this title indicates he is more interested in the authority and power of the Holy Spirit than the authority and power of Paul.

14:1-18 Like Antioch of Pisidia, Lystra (modern Zoldera) was a Roman colony. It was the most eastern of the fortified cities of Galatia. Lystra was about 20 miles south of Iconium. They did not go to the synagogue because there were too few Jews to have a synagogue in Lystra. While there, Paul healed a lame man in much the same way Peter had healed a lame man (Acts 3:1-8).

When the Greeks who lived there saw this, they began to exclaim in their own local language that Barnabas and Paul were Zeus, the chief god of the storm, and Hermes, the messenger god. There is a famous myth recorded in Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 8.626ff., which is set in Phrygia (or Lycaonia), that tells about the visit of Zeus and Hermes. When the two gods visited, no one would take them in except an elderly couple, who took them in and fed them well. As a result, the two gods killed all the people in the region except the elderly couple, whom they made the priests of the temple and allowed them to die at the same time when the time of their death came. An inscription has been found near Lystra with a dedication to Zeus and next to it a statue of Hermes, while another inscription speaks of priests of Zeus. There is also a stone altar found near Lystra dedicated to the Hearer of prayer, Zeus, and to Hermes.⁴⁸ Evidently the locals thought Zeus and Hermes had returned, evidenced by the divine power they had seen from Paul and Barnabas.

Paul and Barnabas were immediately grieved when they finally understood what the locals were saying, for they had come to help them turn away from these false gods. They began to proclaim Yahweh as the God over all creation and not just the storm like Zeus. Yahweh used the power of the storm as evidence of His rule and power, not for them to worship it as a god. Yet the people were not persuaded and tried to sacrifice to Paul and Barnabas.

14:19-20 When the Jews from Antioch and Iconium who hated Paul and Barnabas arrived, they turned the locals against them, and they stoned Paul and left him for dead. The new converts then laid hands on Paul, and he walked away. It is difficult to know whether the text means the new converts laid hands on Paul and prayed, causing him to be healed, or they surrounded him in order to prevent further abuse.

14:21-28 Derbe (modern Keti) was about 60 miles farther to the southeast on the eastern border of the Galatian province. Paul and Barnabas won many converts in Derbe. They then went back to Lystra, to Iconium, and to Antioch in order to strengthen the believers there, despite the persecution, and appointed elders to disciple the believers there. Perhaps some of these elders had already been elders in the synagogue or respected leaders in the Gentile communities and therefore had experience in leading people. It was at this time that Paul wrote the epistle to the Galatians, perhaps from Antioch (48 AD).

They then went to Pisidia, the southernmost geographic region in the Roman province of Galatia and Pamphylia, which was the province south of Galatia and east of the kingdom of Antiochus. In both places they preached the gospel. They then went back to Perga and then to the seaport of Attalia in order to sail back to Antioch, where they had been commissioned. There they reported everything that had happened on their missionary journey. The chronological references in Acts

⁴⁷ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 420.

⁴⁸ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 422.

and the Pauline epistles make it difficult to tell just how long it took Paul and Barnabas to complete their first missionary journey.

Paul and Barnabas's faith commitment in Yahweh despite the opposition and persecution they experienced is evident in these accounts. There are two major things that allowed Paul and Barnabas to persevere. First is that they truly believed that Yahweh and the eternal life He had given them through Jesus and offered to others was far greater than any harm anyone could inflict on them. Second is that their desire that the Jews and Gentiles know Yahweh and the life He offered allowed them to pursue the people.

“Acts 13–14 presents a representative picture of Paul's mission and includes many themes that we will encounter again. He preaches first in the Jewish synagogue but turns to Gentiles when the synagogue preaching is no longer possible. He announces the one God to Gentiles who have no contact with Jewish monotheism. He repeatedly encounters persecution and moves on when necessary, but he does not abandon his mission. He works signs and wonders. He strengthens the new churches. In this mission Paul is fulfilling the Lord's prophecy that he would ‘bear my name before Gentiles, and kings and sons of Israel’ and ‘must suffer for my name’ ([Acts] 9.15-16).”⁴⁹

Yet Luke's focus is not on Paul and Barnabas; rather, he was careful to record Yahweh's initiative in this evangelistic mission. Paul and Barnabas had been extremely successful, but they were careful to give Yahweh the credit for it.

⁴⁹ Robert C. Tannehill. *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, p. 182.

B. The Jerusalem Council (15:1-35)

This section records a series of events in chronological order (not a singular event) that deals with the issue of the increasing number of Gentiles who were coming to faith in Jesus. Now that the planned missionary work to the Gentiles had been undertaken, the Jerusalem church, always playing catch-up with Yahweh's plan, had need of some major rethinking about what the church would be like and how it would go about its missionary work. Thus they convened a council (48 AD) in order to deal with the issue of Gentile conversion into a predominantly Jewish believing group.

The question at hand was how was the Jerusalem church going to handle the increasing number of Gentiles who were becoming Christians. This raised the question of what the relationship of the church was to Judaism. Some conservative Jewish Christians argued that Christianity was a party within Judaism (the true believers). They assumed that Gentile Christians needed to become Jewish proselytes, which involved being circumcised and obeying the Mosaic Law. This is what Paul was combating in his letter to the Galatians (Gal. 2:15ff to 5:2ff and 6:15-16). Other Christians, Jews and Gentiles, saw no need for these restrictions. The church was a distinct group separate from Judaism that incorporated both believing Jews and believing Gentiles.

“It is no exaggeration to say that Acts 15 is the most crucial chapter in the whole book. Marshall is right to note that this chapter is positioned both structurally and theologically at the very heart of the book. It raises all the key questions of what Luke's relationship to Paul was, what the relationship is between Acts 15 and Galatians 2, and therefore what sort of history Luke is writing. A measure of the importance of this meeting for Luke is shown in that after it the Jerusalem church virtually disappears from sight in Acts, and Peter does not appear again. In any case, after recording the council, Luke's focus is clearly on the missionary work in points west of council, Luke's focus is clearly Jerusalem from Antioch to Rome.”⁵⁰

15:1-5 Some Jewish Christians argued that the new Gentile Christians had to be circumcised in order to be saved. Their way of thinking made sense since Yahweh had commanded in Gen. 17:9-14 that every person, whether Jew or foreigner, had to be circumcised in order to be a part of the covenant community of Yahweh. Anyone who was not circumcised would be cut off from the covenant promises and blessings of Yahweh. Yet this form of thinking ignored the fact that Moses (Deut. 10:16; 30:6) and Jeremiah (Jer. 4:1-4; 9:25) stated that a day was coming when the true circumcision was of the heart, done through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 2:28-29). This indwelling of the Holy Spirit had been witnessed in the Gentiles (Acts 10:44-48).

Paul and Barnabas debated these Christians and then were commissioned by the church of Antioch to go to Jerusalem in order to settle the issue. In Jerusalem they told the believers all the amazing things that had happened on their missionary journey and how the Gentiles were coming to the faith. However, there were some Pharisees who had converted to Christianity but were unwilling to see what Yahweh was doing and were set in their Jewish ways of strict adherence to the Law.

15:6-11 As they debated the issue, Peter stood up and testified to what he had witnessed with the Holy Spirit descending on the Gentile family of Cornelius (Acts 10), stating that Yahweh no longer made a distinction between Jews and Gentiles but cleansed their hearts through the Holy

⁵⁰ Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 439.

Spirit. Peter told them to not put Yahweh to the test by putting a burden on the Gentiles that even the Jews could not carry. The Law always brought death because no one could meet its requirements. Instead, the Law was meant to reveal to the Jews that they were incapable of being righteous through their own works because of their sin and thus needed a savior. This savior was the Messiah Jesus, who fulfilled perfectly all the requirements of the Law and thus was able to save humanity from sin by His works and not their own. The believers were to follow Him now, not continue to try to meet the requirements of the Law through their own works, which was essentially a denial of the sufficiency of faith in Christ for salvation.

15:12-21 Paul and Barnabas then explained what they had seen Yahweh do with the Gentiles. Then James—the half-brother of Jesus, author of the book of James, and head of the Jerusalem church—stood up to talk. James agreed with what Peter had said about Yahweh including the Gentiles into the faith and quoted Amos 9:11-12 to make his point. James foretold that in the last days Yahweh would establish His kingdom on earth and rebuild the house of David/Israel as it was meant to be so that the Gentiles could become a part of His kingdom as He had originally intended. The First Testament taught that Gentiles would share in the promises made to Israel (Gen. 22:18, 26:4, 28:14; Isa. 49:6, 55:5-7; Zeph. 3:9-10; Zech. 8:22), and the prophets spoke of Gentile salvation as happening in the last days (Isa. 2:2, 11:10, 25:8-9; Zech. 8:23) through the witness of a restored Israel (Isa. 2:3, 60:2-3; Zech. 8:23).

“James’s major contribution to the decision of the council was to shift the discussion of the conversion of Gentiles from a proselyte model to an eschatological one... James is saying God’s people will consist of two concentric groups. At their core will be restored Israel (i.e., David’s rebuilt tent); gathered around them will be a group of Gentiles (i.e., ‘the remnant of men’) who will share in the messianic blessings but will persist as Gentiles without necessarily becoming Jewish proselytes.”⁵¹

James concluded that it was not right to put a burden upon the Gentiles that Yahweh had never intended for them, which would taint the gospel and potentially prevent them from experiencing salvation in Jesus. However, because the Gentiles had come from a much more immoral culture, they were expected to conform to the image of Christ and His teachings on righteous living. James recommended that Christian teachers encourage their disciples to avoid, first, anything like rituals and food that were associated with idolatry, which might draw them back into the temples and idolatry they had come from and thus sin against the exclusivity of their worship of Yahweh (1 Cor. 10:14-22). Second, they were to abstain from sexual immorality, which was a lifestyle commonly accepted and practiced among the Gentiles and in the worship of the gods in the temple. Third, they were not to strangle a sacrificed animal, which was done in order to transfer the life breath or spiritual vitality into the idol. Fourth, they were not to consume blood, which was common to the lifestyle and sacrifices of the Gentiles. This was a violation of the Noahic covenant, which was established by Yahweh for all of humanity and predated the establishment of Israel through Abraham and the Mosaic Covenant through Moses (Gen. 9:1-17). These were the most common things accepted by the Gentiles and common practices in the pagan temples, pre-conversion to Christianity; thus, they could become a pathway back into their former life. These ideas were not rooted in the Mosaic Covenant but in the character of Yahweh.

⁵¹ Richard N. Longenecker. “The Acts of the Apostles,” p. 446.

15:22-35 The council chose to send Judas and Silas back with Paul and Barnabas in order to communicate the spirit of the requirements to the church at Antioch. The council made it clear that this decision had been made unanimously through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Though there would be those who still preached false teachings, the Holy Spirit spoken through the authority of the apostles and elders had created a barrier from it entering the church. When the Gentiles in Antioch received the message, they rejoiced, for the burden they had felt from the Jews who had pushed the issue had been lifted.

“When one considers the situation of the Jerusalem church in A.D. 49, the decision reached by the Jerusalem Christians must be considered one of the boldest and most magnanimous in the annals of church history. While still attempting to minister exclusively to the nation, the council refused to impede the progress of that other branch of the Christian mission whose every success meant further difficulty for them from within their own nation.”⁵²

⁵² Richard N. Longenecker. “The Acts of the Apostles,” p. 450.

C. The Second Missionary Journey (15:36–18:23)

In this section Luke covers Paul's missions (48–49 AD) to the area of Galatia in Asia Minor. Paul continued to go to the Jew first and then to the Gentile. The opposition from the Jews continues to increase, as the Gentile acceptance of Jesus continues to grow. There is a sense in which Luke, for the rest of Acts, will compress the whole of the church's missionary work into the story of the Pauline mission, for Peter and the apostles basically disappear after this point, except when they intersect the story of Paul's work.



15:36-41 Paul and Barnabas decided to go back to all the places they had previously visited in order to strengthen the believers they had left behind. The intent is less of an evangelical focus, though that most certainly would have happened, and more a discipleship focus. In a time that the church was just beginning and the need for evangelism would have been so strong, Paul and Barnabas believed it was just as important to disciple and strengthen the believers so that the church would have a solid foundation. This is often missed in the modern American church.

However, Barnabas wanted to bring John Mark, but Paul refused to include him because he had abandoned them on their previous journey (Acts 5:37-38). Luke seems to side with Paul because he described the action of John Mark as a form of apostasy or desertion (Acts 5:37-38). It is hard to know who was right. Paul may be justified, for we know nothing of why or how John Mark left them. Or Barnabas could be right, for Paul could have too high standards and expectations of

himself and others. Barnabas is always portrayed as the one who is filled with the Spirit and sees in others what everyone else misses, including with Paul when he first converted.

As a result of their unresolved dispute, they separated, and Barnabas and John Mark went to Cyprus. They are not mentioned again in the rest of Acts. Paul chose Silas and went to Syria and Cilicia. Although they disagreed, there is nothing about them handling it in an ungodly way or disliking each other. It may have been that the Spirit was leading them to separate in order to be more effective since they both were able to bring others with them on their journeys this time.

16:1-5 When Paul came to Derbe and Lystra, he took Timothy on as his assistant. Timothy was part Jewish and Greek, as mixed marriages were more common outside of Israel. Paul had Timothy circumcised not because he believed it was necessary for his justification but because it was necessary for effective evangelistic ministry among the Jews (1 Cor. 9:20-22).

Some doubt that the Paul of the letters would have Timothy circumcised.⁵³ First, Timothy was part Jewish. Had he been only a Gentile, Paul having him circumcised would be more unbelievable. Second, there is no evidence that Paul was against Jewish Christians practicing their ancestral religion or rituals as long as they understood that doing so was not necessary for salvation, either for them or the Gentiles. Third, Paul's freedom allowed him to become a Jew to the Jews and a Gentile to the Gentiles (1 Cor. 9:19). Unbelieving Jews would not have given Paul a hearing if he traveled with an uncircumcised Gentile, even though Timothy was half Jewish. As they traveled, they communicated the edict of the Jerusalem church to those Gentile Christians they met.

16:6-10 They moved on to Phrygia and Galatia because the Holy Spirit had prevented them from going to Asia, which was one of several Roman provinces that occupied the larger district of Asia Minor. It is not clear whether this was a prophetic word or an internal leading of the Holy Spirit. They were also prevented by the Spirit of Jesus from going to Bithynia, which lay along the southern shores of the Black Sea and contained many Roman cities and Jewish colonies. This is the only reference to the "Spirit of Jesus" in the Second Testament and presumably another way of referring to the Holy Spirit, which Jesus sent (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8). Consequently, Paul turned west from where he was and proceeded to Troas. This city was a Roman colony, like Antioch of Pisidia and Lystra, located at a very strategic site, being one of the main seaports from which travelers entered Asia Minor from the West and departed from Asia Minor for the Roman provinces farther west. 2 Cor. 2:12-13, 2 Tim. 4:13, and Acts 20:7-12 suggest that Paul may have founded a Christian community in Troas.

This time Yahweh gave positive direction to Paul through a vision of a Macedonian man calling them his way. Macedonia was a Roman province that comprised roughly the northern half of ancient and modern Greece. Scholars have speculated about how Paul knew that the man was from Macedonia by the way he looked. Some have said the man was Luke because the next verse is when the first "we" section begins (Acts 16:10). However, he could not have been Luke because the man is in Macedonia, whereas Luke joins them in Troas. Most likely Paul would have just sensed from the Holy Spirit in the vision that the man was from Macedonia. These verses are the clearest picture of the Holy Spirit directing the path of Paul's mission. And it is clear that Paul was sensitive to all the different ways the Holy Spirit spoke to and guided him.

⁵³ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 476.

It is at this point that Luke joined Paul's group in Troas. This is clear because in his narration Luke changes from the third to the first person. Likewise, the narratives become more circumstantial and vivid with less dependency on set speeches and more on description and dialogue. This is the beginning of the first "we" section in Acts, where Luke was traveling with Paul (Acts 16:10-40; 20:5–21:18; 27:1–28:16).

16:11-15 The port of Philippi was ten miles northwest inland of Macedonia and stood at the eastern end of another major Roman highway that connected the Adriatic and Aegean Seas, the Via Egnatia (Egnatian Road). With Philippi lacking a synagogue, Paul assumed worshippers of Yahweh would be meeting on the Sabbath beside the Gangites River one and a half miles west of town. There he found a God-fearing Greek named Lydia, who was a wealthy business owner dealing in purple cloth. Roman women were normally called by their family's cognomen, not by a personal name. That Lydia is called by her personal name suggests she was of Greek origin and indicates she was a person of some status, since it was normal in such a Greco-Roman setting not to mention women by personal name in public unless they were either notable or notorious.⁵⁴ Such women of means were not unusual in Macedonia, a region that, since at least the Hellenistic era, had allowed women important social, political, and religious roles. Her hometown Thyatira was in the province of Asia, where Paul had been prevented from going (Acts 16:6), and was a city famous for its purple dye and cloth. Yahweh immediately opened her heart to the gospel, and she was saved.

16:16-24 The demon-possessed slave-girl who met Paul's group was a tool of her masters, who used her to make money through fortune telling. The demon within her knew of Paul and whom he served. Paul commanded the demon to leave in the name of Jesus Christ, and it immediately obeyed. Her masters seized the men and falsely accused them of creating chaos in the city and forcing the locals to adopt their customs. The crowd then beat them and threw them into prison. Whereas the Jews had persecuted the Christians for the ideas that threatened their power, the Greeks attacked the Christians for threatening their source of money.

16:25-40 Paul and Silas must have truly been filled with the Holy Spirit to have been able to sing hymns to Yahweh in prison after being beaten (1 Thess. 2:2). Then an earthquake from Yahweh opened up the prison gates. Thinking that the prisoners had escaped, the jailer prepared to commit suicide and so avoid the shame of a public execution. Paul and Silas's love for the jailer despite the hatred they had received is what won the jailer to Jesus. The jailer fed Paul and Silas and washed their physical wounds, and they baptized him and his family into the faith.

The next day the Roman magistrates returned with orders to release Paul and Silas. Evidently the magistrates intended only to teach them a lesson for disturbing the peace, not imprison them permanently. Paul then revealed that they were Roman citizens and that the soldiers magistrates had beaten him without a public trial. The Roman government guaranteed its citizens a public trial and freedom from degrading punishment such as beatings. It is possible that Paul carried a *testatio*, which was a certified private copy of evidence of his Roman citizenship inscribed on a waxed surface of wooden diptych.

Paul may have tried unsuccessfully to communicate his citizenship earlier during his arrest or during the frenzy of the mob. Or, presumably, Paul would not have wanted the reception of the claims of the gospel to rest on his claims to Roman citizenship. Paul did not recognize the

⁵⁴ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 491-492.

Roman Empire as the authority over his life; rather, Christ was (Phil. 3:20). Paul would have used his Roman citizenship, or anything else, only when it furthered the gospel, not merely for his own personal benefit.

Filled with fear over what they had done, the magistrates apologized and begged him to leave the city. Roman officials who were charged with mistreating Roman citizens faced the danger of discipline by their superiors. These magistrates meekly appealed to Paul and Silas not to file a complaint. However, Paul remained in the city and continued to gather with the believers.

“Luke is not one-sidedly interested in Jewish resistance or hostility to Christianity; here we see the clash between pagan religion and customs and the Christian faith, and we will see it again even more vividly in Acts 19:23-40. Luke seeks to show that the Roman authorities do not necessarily oppose or at least ought not to oppose the Christian faith, but ‘both Jews and Gentiles view the mission as a threat to the customs that provide social cohesion, to the religious basis of their cultures and to political stability through Caesar’s rule.’ They were right to do so—Paul and his coworkers are those who turn the religious world upside down, offering one God and savior instead of many (and also instead of the emperor), one way of salvation instead of many, one people of God that is not ethnically defined.”⁵⁵

Luke focuses on the conversion of one woman and one man in order to emphasize the equality of women and men in Yahweh’s plan of salvation and their equal importance in the new community.

17:1-9 Paul, Silas, Timothy, and perhaps others left Philippi and headed southwest on the Egnatian Road. Luke evidently stayed in Philippi (not going on with Paul) since he again described Paul’s party as “they” instead of “we.” Thessalonica (modern Salonika) was on the Thermaic Gulf of the Aegean Sea. Paul preached in the synagogue only three Sabbath days, but he seems to have stayed longer in Thessalonica (1 Thess. 4:1; 2 Thess. 2:5). He supported himself there by making tents (1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:7-10), and the Philippians sent two monetary gifts to him there (Phil. 4:15-16).

Luke described Paul as “reasoning” (Greek *dielexato*) from the Scriptures (Acts 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8-9; 24:25). This word does not mean “preach” but refers to presenting of arguments using Scripture as a basis for engaging in dialogue and debate over the meaning of scriptural texts. Luke shows that Paul did not appeal to emotions but presented reasonable arguments for his claims about who Jesus Christ is. Paul’s reasoning persuaded both Jews and God-fearing Gentiles to the faith. But once again, other Jews became jealous and instigated a mob against Paul and Silas. They then went to Jason’s house, who was evidently Paul’s host in Thessalonica as Lydia had been in Philippi (16:15, 40). And Jason welcomed them as guests. The Jewish antagonists charged the missionaries with revolutionary teaching, namely that another king, Jesus, would rule and reign (1 Thess. 3:13; 5:1-11; 2 Thess. 1:5-10; 2:14).

“At this juncture in the middle of the first century A.D. it is right to point out that the crime of treason (*maiestas*) was a matter of public law, not Caesarean decree. What decrees, then, could be alluded to here? E. A. Judge has plausibly suggested the reference is to a ban on certain kinds of predictions, particularly predictions that have to do with the change of rulers or that suggest the demise of the current one due to ill health or the like. Tiberius had already issued in A.D. 16 a decree (dogma) prohibiting the practicing of such an art in the cities of

⁵⁵ Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 499-500.

the Empire (see Dio Chrysostom 57.15.8). In other words, from a careful analysis of the Thessalonian correspondence one can deduce that Paul could plausibly be charged with violating the decree against predictions of the coming of a new king or kingdom, especially one that might be said to supplant or judge the existing emperor (see 2 Thessalonians 2 and cf. Dio Cassius, Hist. 56.25.5f.; 57.15.8). These charges would be serious if Jews and others could substantiate that Paul's discourse could be seen as potentially politically subversive."⁵⁶

The city officials could not find the missionaries to bring them to trial. Consequently, they made Jason and his friends pay a bond guaranteeing that Paul would cause no further trouble but leave town. If trouble continued, Jason would lose his money. If it did not, he would receive it back.

17:10-15 Paul and Silas left in the night for Berea (modern Verria) about 50 miles southwest of Thessalonica. Once again, they went to the synagogue to preach. The Jews in Berea did not react out of jealousy but listened carefully to what Paul preached and compared it to the teachings of their Hebrew Scriptures. The Jews from Thessalonica followed them to Berea and incited the crowds against Paul and Silas. Paul then left Silas and Timothy in Berea to strengthen the Berean church during the crisis, and he moved on to Athens. They would join him after some time.

17:16-21 Athens stood five miles inland from its port of Piraeus, which was on the Saronic Gulf of the Aegean Sea. Athens had reached its prime 500 years before Paul visited it, and it was still the cultural and intellectual center of the Greek world. Paul saw how many idols were in Athens and became infuriated (Greek word *paroxýnō*). This term is used elsewhere of Yahweh's extreme anger at the idolatry of His chosen people (Deut. 9:18; Ps. 106:29; Isa. 65:3; Hos. 8:5).

Paul preached to the Jews and God-fearing Gentiles and the pagan Gentiles in the marketplace. He also caught the attention of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. Epicureans were disciples of Epicurus (341–270 BC), who believed that pleasure (not wisdom) was the greatest good and the most worthy pursuit of man—but to be pursued in moderation in order to avoid the suffering incurred by overindulgence. Emphasis was placed on pleasures of the mind, enjoyment of life, and contentment rather than on pursuing physical pleasures for the sake of pleasure. They emphasized avoidance of pain and a life free from hassles and not desiring anything that one did not already have, for that creates suffering. Epicureans believed that the gods took no interest in human affairs, that everything happened by chance, that death was the end of all, and that one should not fear death.

Stoics followed the teachings of Zeno the Cypriot (340–265 BC). The name “stoic” comes from *stoa*, a particular portico where he taught when he lived in Athens. They believed that pleasure or meaning was found in individual self-sufficiency and rationalism (wisdom). They emphasized the dichotomy between things we can control and things we cannot control. Stoics believed that we must focus on the things that are under our control and not worry about external forces. They believed that virtue is the only good, and thus everything else as having no interest, and no external thing or circumstance can ultimately affect one's character. The only evil is the fear of pain and death since this leads to irrational behavior. Stoics were pantheists who believed that God is in everything, and everything is God. They were also fatalistic.

The Greek word *spermologos*, translated “babbling,” refers to someone who picked up the words of others as a bird picks up seeds. They accused Paul of just picking random beliefs from different religions and philosophies and then putting them together into a new religion devoted to

⁵⁶ Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 508.

new gods. They misunderstood his references to the resurrection (Greek word *anastasis*) as being references to a female deity and counterpart to Jesus.

They invited Paul to the Areopagus to learn more about what he was teaching. The Areopagus was either a reference to a rocky hill near the Acropolis (high place, with a temple) in Athens or a place in the marketplace at the foot of the hill. However, this term technically refers to the council of Athens, which dealt with ethical, cultural, and religious matters, including the oversight of education and regulation of the many visiting lecturers. Most likely the hill is where they meet.

17:22-33 The Greeks in Athens had an uncarved statue to the unknown god. There are three possible reasons they had an altar to an unknown god. First, altars were frequently reused and rededicated, especially after a natural disaster or war. If an altar was found partially destroyed and the original name lost, then it could be rededicated to an unknown or unnamed god.⁵⁷ Second, there is some evidence that God-fearers living in places like Athens, outside Israel, could have erected an altar to the God of the Jews with the inscription “to the unknown god.” To many Greeks, the God of the Jews was definitely an unknown god of superiority because He could not be named and had no image.⁵⁸ Third, it could be an altar to a god they knew existed yet did not know its name. This would avoid misnaming the god, which could bring its wrath upon the people. In the Greek mystery religions, they believed there was an unknowable and impersonal god over all of creation. The point is that Paul started with what they had in common religiously and then moved from there to connect it to Christianity and deepen their understanding of God and His Son Jesus Christ.

The Areopagus, in thinking that Paul was introducing new gods, may have concluded that Paul wanted to establish an altar in Athens to a new god he was proclaiming. They would then have to hear his appeal and approve his request. Paul would then have to buy a piece of land in order to erect an altar and temple and set up sacrifices. Paul’s argument is that He was not introducing a new deity to Athens but that Athens had unknowingly already been honoring His God.

“V. 23b strikes a balance notable throughout this speech, between making contact with the audience and condemning their idolatry. On the one hand, Paul says that the Athenians, in a fashion, worship this unknown God. On the other hand, they do not really know this God and need to repent and receive instruction on who this God is and what this God has done. In short, Paul is suggesting here that the Athenians have an inkling that such a God exists, as is shown by their actions, but they do not either really know or properly acknowledge this God. This way of putting it is not much different from what we find in Rom. 1:20-23. Rom. 1:23 shows that instead of proper worship, pagans have chosen to honor images or idols resembling humans or animals, just as Paul saw in his tour of Athens. Rom. 1:22 says their thinking was futile because they rejected what they could know of the true God from creation and so their minds were darkened. As well we shall see, this comports with what is said in Acts 17:27 about pagans groping around in the dark for the true God. In both texts there is an affirmation of natural revelation but not of anything that amounts to an adequate natural theology as a response to that revelation. This is why in Acts 17:23 Paul insists he must

⁵⁷ See F. F. Bruce. *The Acts of the Apostle*, pp. 380-381.

⁵⁸ See Van der Horst. “Altar to the Unknown God,” p. 187.

proclaim the truth about this God's nature and activities to his audience. Without such proclamation they would not really know it."⁵⁹

Paul stated that this Yahweh is not bound nor is a part of creation and does not need us in order to thrive, unlike their pagan gods, which were a part of creation and needed human sacrifices to survive. Rather, He created everything and sustains everything in creation. All humans came from one man, Adam, and their lives are orchestrated by this God. This refuted both the Epicureans, who believed that the gods were not involved in creation, and the Stoics, who believed that God was everything. This also refuted the Greek idea that they were unique and superior to all other people groups and that man could determine his own fate. Paul makes the point that Yahweh created humans in order to fill the earth and to seek Him out.

Yahweh placed them where they were and regulated their boundaries and time so that they would seek Him out. They had come to a basic understanding of God but were still groping around for a deeper understanding of who He is. In making his point that we are all connected to each other and to Yahweh, Paul cited lines from two Greek writers. The Cretan poet Epimenides (600 BC; cf. Titus 1:12) had written, "For in thee we live and move and have our being."⁶⁰ The Cilician poet Aratus (315–240 BC), and Cleanthes (331–233 B.C.) before him, had written, "We are also his offspring."⁶¹

The two main ideas here are, first, that there is one Creator God of all the universe and its contents and, second, that this God does not dwell in shrines made by human hands. Paul's conclusion was that idolatry, therefore, is illogical. If Yahweh created people, Yahweh cannot be an image or an idol. Paul was claiming that Yahweh's divine nature is essentially spiritual rather than material. Paul concluded by stating that Yahweh had previously overlooked their ignorance, in that they were not as guilty of not responding to Yahweh's former revelation as they are now that Yahweh (the unknown God) has revealed Himself through His Son Jesus Christ. There is proof of Jesus being the Son of God in that He was resurrected, and thus humanity will answer to Yahweh on the final judgment day for how they respond to Jesus and the proof of His identity as the Son of God, the Savior and Lord over creation.

"Paul appeals to the relation of Creator and creature, and to God as universal judge, in order to provide a foundation for a gospel that can address the whole of humanity. The internal impulse for this speech (internal to the implied author's perspective) comes from the need to speak of all humanity sharing an essentially similar relation to God as a basis for an inclusive gospel, a gospel commensurate with the inclusive saving purpose of God announced in Luke 2:30-32."⁶²

Luke is showing that Paul was able to stand on equal footing with the intellectuals of his day, even in Athens. When some of them scoffed at him, it was not for his lack of intellect or ability to debate ideas but rather at the ideas that he was teaching about Yahweh as the one true God, His judgment over humanity, and the resurrection. These ideas were novel to the Greeks. The major task Paul had to accomplish was convincing them of this foreign and seemingly absurd idea. Others, however, were convinced and believed in Jesus Christ. Once again, Luke makes the

⁵⁹ Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 523.

⁶⁰ From his poem *Cretica*.

⁶¹ From Aratus' *Phaenomena* 5, and Cleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus*.

⁶² Robert C. Tannehill. *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, p. 211.

point that both men and women believed and were included in the covenant community of Christians.

18:1-11 Corinth was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia and was a Roman colony. It was about 50 miles southwest of Athens. Corinth was about twenty times as large as Athens at this time, with a population of more than 200,000 inhabitants. The city was infamous for its immorality, which issued from two sources: its numerous transients and its temple to Aphrodite. Aphrodite was the Greek goddess of love, and her devotees worshiped her through drunkenness and sex; her temple had 1,000 religious prostitutes (1 Cor. 5).

In Corinth Paul met the Jewish couple Aquila and Priscilla, who lived in Corinth because they had to leave their home. The Roman writer Suetonius referred to an edict by Emperor Claudius ordering non-Roman citizen Jews to leave Rome because they had become a continuous disturbance in the city, and he dated this expulsion at 49–50 AD. It is not clear whether they were Christians when Paul first met them, but it seems likely that they were since Luke did not mention their conversion. Paul lived and worked with them as a tentmaker and leather worker. Paul practiced his trade because he did not want to be seen as a con artist, peddling Yahweh's word and then disappearing with people's money or having abused the privileges of hospitality (2 Cor. 2:17). Paul also did not wish to get caught up in a social web of patronage, wherein he would be beholden to a person of high social status and obligated to locate in a specific place and teach in the house of his patron.⁶³

Silas and Timothy had evidently rejoined Paul in Athens (1 Thess. 3:1), but before leaving Athens, Paul sent Timothy back to Thessalonica (1 Thess. 3:2) and Silas back to somewhere in Macedonia (Acts 18:5), perhaps Philippi (Phil. 4:16). They later rejoined him in Corinth (1 Thess. 3:6). Once again, he preached to the Jews, and they rejected him, so he went to the Gentiles, shaking his robes as he left, a gesture familiar to the Jews (Neh. 5:13; Luke 9:5; 10:11; Acts 13:51). But there were those from the synagogue, like Titus Justus, a God-fearer, and Crispus, a Jew who responded to the gospel. Yahweh spoke to Paul here and assured him that He was with him despite the continuous opposition (Ex. 3:2-12; Josh. 1:1-9; Isa. 41:10-14; Jer. 1:5-10; Acts. 5:17-21; 9:10-18; 16:6-10). It was at this time Paul wrote 1 and 2 Thessalonians from Corinth (49–51 AD).

18:12-17 Gallio was the proconsul of Achaia (51–52 AD) and the brother of the Stoic philosopher Seneca, who referred to him as having an unusually pleasant disposition. The Corinthian Jews claimed that Paul was proselytizing for a new religion. The accusation made against Paul is somewhat ambiguous. Does it refer to the Roman law forbidding Jews from evangelizing among the Roman citizens or to the Jewish law that forbade the Christians to witness among the Jews, which Paul was persuading people to violate by the sort of worship he was advocating?⁶⁴ Three factors point to the Jewish law view. First, the reference to the worship of God is singular. Second is the reaction of Gallio that this was an internal matter about "your own law." Third is the emphasis on Paul's work in the synagogue and his teaching the Jews that the Messiah was Jesus. Is it possible that the Jews deliberately made the charge ambiguous so that Gallio would think Paul had offended against the Roman religion? They may have also been

⁶³ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 547-548.

⁶⁴ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 552.

suggesting that Paul was preaching a new religion that was illicit, thus upsetting the Jews, whom Claudius had said were allowed to practice their own religious customs in peace.

Gallio saw their claim as a matter of religious controversy, not a criminal charge, and dismissed them. It is interesting that he had no desire to hear from Paul. He may have also dismissed the charge out of sheer prejudice against them as Jews. The Romans regarded Christianity as a sect within Judaism even though the Jews saw it as a separate faith. As an extremely powerful and influential proconsul, Gallio, by this verdict, effectively made Christianity legitimate in the Roman Empire in the empire until 64 AD, when Nero blamed the Christians for burning Rome.

It is not clear who the “all” are who seized and beat Sosthenes. It may have been the Greeks who beat him in an anti-Semitic outburst, to which Gallio turned a blind eye. It is also possible that in an honor/shame culture the Jews beat their own synagogue leader because he had shamed them by not successfully prosecuting Paul. Or maybe the Jews beat him because Paul had converted him [Sosthenes?] to Christianity and he allowed Paul into their community. Some have conjectured that this is the same man mentioned in 1 Cor. 1:1^{65[66]} Either way, Gallio watched and did not care what happened to the Jewish man.

18:18-23 Paul then sailed to Jerusalem in the region of Syria in order to finish out his vow. Paul had taken a Nazarite vow that required growing one’s hair out during the time specified by the vow (Num. 6:1-21). Once the vow was complete, they would shave their hair off and offer it as a burnt offering to Yahweh in Jerusalem. The Jews would take vows in order to thank Yahweh for past blessing, as a request for future blessings, or to dedicate themselves to a task in service of Yahweh.

On the way to Jerusalem, Paul took Aquila and Priscilla with him to Ephesus and preached in the synagogues. Luke did not record what Silas and Timothy did. He then left Aquila and Priscilla behind, made his way to Caesarea in the northern part of Israel, and then went on to Jerusalem. He then traveled back to Galatia and Phrygia in order to strengthen the believers there. Paul was not going to north Galatia but revisiting previously evangelized areas. Luke could have easily left this brief summary of travels out and simply stated that Paul went to Ephesus in Acts 18:24. Tannehill points out that Luke wanted to make clear that Paul was accountable and kept contact with the church’s old centers of leadership.

“Paul is not a loner, founding a separate, Pauline church, but a major figure in the one mission which began in Jerusalem and was effectively continued from Antioch... [While in] Jerusalem he simply greets the church... in Antioch he spends some time (18.22-23). The stay in Antioch appropriately rounds off a missionary journey that had begun there (15.35-41)... Once churches have been established in an area, Paul will visit them again in order to strengthen them. Only then is Paul’s work in an area relatively complete.”⁶⁶

“Thus the motif of disciples being strengthened is a boundary marker, indicating the completing of one missionary task and the transition to a further work. What this means is that, while Paul could view his work in Galatia (and Cilicia) as complete after this journey through these regions, there was still unfinished work, more ‘strengthening’ to be completed in Macedonia and Greece. This latter task Paul undertakes by taking the circuitous route from Ephesus to Jerusalem by way of these Greek regions near the end of his third missionary

⁶⁵ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 555-556.

⁶⁶ Robert C. Tannehill. *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, p. 230.

journey (see 19:21; 20:1-3). Finally, we should note the recurrent pattern of Paul's three missionary journeys. Each journey began in Antioch and can be said to end either in Jerusalem or in Antioch. Luke gives us one major speech during the course of recounting each journey—in Pisidian Antioch to Jews during the first journey, in Athens to Gentiles during the second, at Miletus to Christians during the third. This reflects careful structuring by Luke of his source material."⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 560-561.

D. The Third Missionary Journey (18:24–21:16)

In this section the narrative turns to Ephesus, an extremely important city that Paul had wanted to visit on his second missionary journey but had been prevented from doing by Yahweh (Acts 16:6). Ephesus was the capital and chief commercial center of the province of Asia. It stood near the coast of the Aegean Sea. This was not a brief visit among many places like in previous journeys; rather, Paul would stay in Ephesus for three years (52–54 AD) to establish the Christian faith in this region. Ephesus is where he had the longest stable period of ministry without trial or expulsion. Here is where he most fully carried out his commission to be a witness to both the Jews and the Gentiles. The Jewish community in Ephesus was the largest in the area. Syncretism had affected both the Jewish and Christian communities there, who both dabbled in the magical arts. This is the last place Paul ministered to as a free man before his arrest and trials.

“It becomes apparent, on a close reading of Acts 18:24–20:38, that it is in various ways not all that useful to speak of a third missionary journey. For one thing we are told at 19:10 that Paul was in Ephesus for at least two additional years after already spending three months teaching in the synagogue there (Acts 19:8; cf. 1 Cor. 15:32; 16:8). The material we find in this section of Acts focuses almost entirely on Ephesus and its immediate environs. Even when Paul leaves Ephesus to strengthen churches in Macedonia, Greece, and elsewhere in Asia, the section draws to a close by recording a speech to the Ephesian elders in nearby Miletus (20:17–38). As Tannehill has rightly stressed, ‘Ephesus is not just another stop in a series. It is Paul’s last major place of new mission work as a free man... The fact that Paul’s farewell speech will be addressed to the Ephesian elders is a further indication of the special importance of Ephesus.’ One must assume that Luke is reliant on Ephesian traditions for what he records in these chapters. It may well be that he received not only these materials but also his information about what transpired in Corinth from Priscilla and Aquila. This would explain his knowledge of the story that begins this ‘Ephesian’ chronicle, which does not involve Paul. Even so, this story in 18:24–28 when compared with 1 Corinthians 1–4 sheds considerable light on the latter text, and the latter text sheds some light on what we find here, without suggesting that Luke knew 1 Corinthians.”⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 562–563. Quoting Robert C. Tannehill. *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, p. 231.



18:24-28 Apollos was a Hellenistic Jew from Alexandria, Egypt, who had converted to Christianity. “The way of the Lord” is another description of the Christian faith (Acts 9:2; 16:17; 18:26; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). He had a thorough understanding of the First Testament and the teachings of Jesus. He had a gift for communicating and defending the faith and enthusiastically proclaimed the word of Yahweh and Jesus to the Jews in the synagogue. It does not say specifically what “he only knew about the baptism of John” means or what Aquila and Priscilla further instructed Apollos on. It seems to imply that he did not know about Christian baptism, but it is not clear what that fully means either.

Some have concluded that he knew only some things about Jesus but was not yet a Christian because he had not been baptized in the name of Jesus and therefore did not have the Holy Spirit. However, this is an assumption about how baptism and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit work. In Acts, disciples received the Holy Spirit prior to receiving water baptism (Acts 10), and on other occasions they received the Holy Spirit after they received water baptism (Acts 8). Early Christians did not have a universally recognized approach to discipling people. Likewise, Luke never states that they shared the gospel with him and that he believed as in the following story. It is possible that he thought it was unnecessary to be baptized in the name of Jesus since he had already had the Holy Spirit. The issue was so minor that Luke did not give details. The point is that he humbly received instruction and adjusted his preaching accordingly. He went on to Achaia and continued to vigorously preach the gospel and refute the Jews.

19:1-7 After arriving in Ephesus, Paul met some of John the Baptizer's disciples, who did not know about the coming of the Holy Spirit. John's baptism movement went into the 300s AD and spread throughout all the ancient Near East. Paul then told them that John had predicted the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:32-33), and when they heard this, they believed, received the Holy Spirit, and spoke in tongues as authentication of the Spirit's indwelling. This is the last reference to speaking in tongues in Acts (Acts 2:4; 10:46; 1 Cor. 12:10, 28, 30; 13:1, 8; 14).

Luke continually separates the two experiences of the conversion of the person and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in order to highlight the fulfillment of Jesus' promise that He would send the Holy Spirit to be in and with believers (John 14:16-18, 26; 15:26). To do so, Yahweh made the coming of the Holy Spirit obvious until the church generally understood the fact that it normally occurred at the time of their salvation.

19:8-10 Paul continued to preach to the Jews in the synagogue at Ephesus as long as possible, as they were more tolerant than Jews had been in some other towns, and he was able to continue speaking there for three months. Eventually the Jews became unresponsive and tried to discredit his message. So, Paul moved to the classrooms of Tyrannus, who had opened his classrooms to Paul for a part of the day. For two years he preached there, converting both Jews and Gentiles. It was at this time that Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus (54–55 AD).

19:11-20 Paul has been portrayed as a man of powerful words, but now he is portrayed as a man of mighty deeds like Jesus (Mark 5:27; 6:56) and Peter (Acts 3:2; 5:15-16; 8:18; 9:36; 12:7; 13:6; 14:8; 16:18, 25; 20:9). The belief that the bodies of particular persons and whatever touched them had healing powers was widespread in antiquity (Luke 8:44). Evidently it was because of the multitudes of magicians and religious charlatans who worked in Ephesus that Yahweh demonstrated His power in these supernatural ways.

There was no high priest named Sceva before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. It is likely that Luke is not using the term in the same technical sense for high priest, as seen by the absence of the definite article *the* in the Hebrew. The point is that Sceva was acting as a priest from a priestly family who believed to know the divine names used in exorcisms.

The sons of Sceva, who was the Jewish high priest in Ephesus, tried to do the same thing as non-believers by merely invoking the name of Jesus. They wrongly concluded that the simple vocalization of Jesus' name carried magical power. The use of magical names in incantations to exorcise evil spirits was common in the ancient world. However, the unclean spirits did not recognize their authority, for they did not have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. As a result, the demon-possessed man attacked and beat them and fled. Many people in Ephesus praised Jesus for this incident; they became believers, confessing their sins and burning their books on magic. The total value of what they burned, assuming the coins were drachmas, was fifty thousand days' pay for a day laborer. The fact that they revealed and burned their secret magical texts shows how genuine their repentance was. The incident with Sceva's sons failing to master the demons by trying to use Jesus' name as a magical incantation showed how truly powerful the person of Jesus was as He worked through Paul. Luke normally does not give a great deal of attention to the demonic world but does here, for Ephesus had the reputation for being a haven of demonic activity.

19:21-23 Despite the danger, Paul was determined to return to Jerusalem, probably to provide them with more donations (Acts 24:17; 1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8-9). Paul evidently sensed that,

having laid a firm foundation in Asia Minor and the Aegean Sea region, he needed to press on to Gentile areas yet unreached, ultimately going to Rome (Rom. 1:15; 15:23). He sent Timothy, Erastus, and two assistants to Macedonia to await his return from Jerusalem.

However, before he returned to Jerusalem, Paul evidently stayed in Ephesus several more months, and it was probably during this time that the following incident occurred. The position of this episode here prepares the readers for the troubles Paul is going to encounter in the following chapters. The narrative provides us with the final confrontation between Paul as a free man and pagan religion and shows how Yahweh continued to work His plan, even in the face of serious opposition from one of the most powerful and widespread pagan cults.

19:23-27 The following event focuses on the threat of Paul’s preaching against the temple of Artemis. The Greek goddess Artemis was the most revered goddess in the Roman Empire at this time. She was so revered that the similar Roman goddess Diana was absorbed into the identity and worship of Artemis. She was the goddess of the hunt, childbearing, and chastity and was usually pictured as a young lady carrying a hunting bow or as a woman with many breasts. There was no other Greco-Roman metropolis in the Roman Empire whose “body, soul, and spirit” could so belong to a particular deity as did Ephesus to her patron goddess Artemis.

“[Artemis] worship was not very different from that of other deities in pagan cults. Not every goddess had processions, however...processions from the Artemision around Panayirdag occurred on certain days...probably during the *tsounvic*, the holy month of Artemis, which was called ‘Artemision.’ The wooden statue of Artemis, carved by Endios, was probably carried on a four-wheel carriage.... The statue would have been dressed and adorned with the necessary care that was given to her in the imperial period by women of the high society in that city who served as...‘adorners of the goddess.’ The procession presumably stopped at the altars along the road, where worshippers sang, prayed, and made offerings. All who participated were then invited to a common meal that took place after the procession, when Artemis had returned to her temple...in processions to the Artemision, the goddess represented by the most beautiful woman returned from hunting accompanied by hunters, dogs, and a crowd of people.”⁶⁹

“This last point [speaking of the quote above] brings to light the fact that Ephesian Artemis, even before Paul’s day, had taken on various of the attributes of the Greek Artemis while retaining some of her local traits as the Anatolian ‘Great Mother.’ There continues to be much controversy about what the numerous orbed objects on the front of the Artemis statue are, with the usual guesses being either breasts or bull’s testicles or some sort of eggs. In any of these cases, the image would connect the goddess with fertility. One of the reasons for debate on this issue is that the Greek Artemis was also known as a major supporter of chastity, being a virgin goddess.

Another matter of considerable importance is that the temple of Artemis was widely recognized as a place of asylum and sanctuary, and part of this involved its being a safe place to deposit one’s money. In such circumstances, there was always an economic significance to the temple, not limited to the religious tourist trade. The temple of Artemis and its precincts was some four times the size of the Parthenon (425 feet by 225 feet with 127 sixty-foot

⁶⁹ Dieter Knibbe, “Via Sacra Ephesiaca,” pp. 153-54. Some of this description is based on Xenophon’s Ephesiaca 2.2-3.3.

columns) and was considered one of the seven great wonders of the ancient world. Its religious significance and power were widely recognized. Pausanias, writing in the middle of the second century A.D., states: ‘All cities worship Artemis of Ephesus, and individuals hold her honor above all the gods. The reason, in my view, is the renown of the Amazons, who traditionally dedicated the image, also the extreme antiquity of this sanctuary. Three other points as well have contributed to her renown, the size of the temple, surpassing all other buildings among humans, the eminence of the city of the Ephesians and the renown of the goddess who dwells there’ (4.31.8).

One of the major points of our narrative is to show that Christianity could even challenge and be seen as a threat to one the greatest and most potent of the pagan cults. In fact Pausanias informs us that this cult was the most widely followed in the ancient world (*Descript.* 4.31.8), with some thirty-three worship sites from Spain to Syria in the Empire (Strabo, *Geog.* 4.1.5). Finally, the inscriptional evidence shows us the degree to which Paul’s proclamation would have seen to be challenging the claims about the benefits of Artemis worship. For example, I. Eph. 504 portrays Artemis as one who answers prayer. In other inscriptions she is acclaimed as Savior (I. Eph. 26.4, 18) and seen as having lordship over supernatural powers, including demons.

The temple statue of Artemis also wore a zodiac necklace indicating her power over fate and the control of the stars. Of course the salvation being asked of Artemis has to do with rescue from danger or the restoration of health or sanity, but, as we have seen, this is part of the salvation package from a Lukan point of view as well. We might have a tendency to think that what was at issue was two rival forms of private devotion and belief, but this would be a mistake. Religious activity in the Empire’s cities was in the main a very public affair intertwined with politics and beliefs about the well-being of the city as a whole.”⁷⁰

Demetrius was an influential artisan in the silversmith guild of Ephesus. The silversmiths in Ephesus took Artemis as their patron saint, and one of the things they made were miniature silver shrines with images of the goddess Artemis, which they sold to devotees. As Christianity spread, interest in Artemis and thus sales began to decline. Demetrius publicly blamed Paul for their decline in sales because Paul was convincing people that the images made of the gods were not gods at all. This claim shows, first, that Christianity had spread well beyond Ephesus during Paul’s three years in Asia. Second, the summary of Paul’s evangelistic preaching is very similar to his speech to the pagans in Athens, which means that neither he nor Luke saw his style of preaching in Athens as a failed experiment, to which Paul decided to never attempt again.⁷¹

Even if Demetrius had been exaggerating, the Ephesians would have taken any threat to the temple of Artemis seriously, for there are records of people being executed for simply scorning the temple. Likewise, the social status of the artisans was tenuous. Even though they may have made a lot of money, their social status was based only on their money. They did not come from a proper family background, they were not educated, and they worked with their hands, which meant they were looked down upon by the elite. They were some of the more easily marginalized members of society and were trying to climb the social ladder. Anything that

⁷⁰ Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 586-588.

⁷¹ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 591.

threatened their income threatened their standing in society and thus their ability to have a decent life in the Roman culture.

19:28-34 As a result of Paul's ministry being seen as a threat to their god and industry, the people turned into a violent mob, grabbing Gaius and Aristarchus, two of Paul's traveling companions, and dragging them into the theater. Archaeologists have in modern times restored the theater at Ephesus. It lay on the side of Mount Pion in the town and seated 25,000 people in sixty-six rows. Many of the people there did not even know who was inciting their fury. When Paul tried to go and help them, his friends persuaded him not to. Even some of the Asiarchs, provincial authorities who were friends with Paul, told him not to.

Some of the people in the crowd thought the rioting was about Alexander, a leading non-Christian Jew in Ephesus. Even though Alexander did not approve of Paul, the crowd did not distinguish between Christianity and Judaism. Both faiths stood against idolatry. Thus the people probably saw Alexander as responsible for the actions of Paul.

19:35-41 The city clerk then stood before the people in order to calm them and to reason with them. The city clerk was a city official charged with keeping records, being present when money was deposited in the temple, serving as a registrar, and the like. He was not appointed by Rome but was elected by the local assembly. He told the crowd that the men they had seized had committed no crimes and if they had, that they should be taken to the courts. If the crowds continued to riot, then they would be in danger of being punished by the Roman Empire for rioting.

This free assembly was under careful scrutiny of the Roman officials. Any irregularities might give the Romans an excuse to take away the city's freedoms, including the right to their popular assembly. Rome was not about to ignore an unlawful assembly. The rioting of the crowd had created a greater danger for Ephesus than Paul's preaching had. If there was an unlawful assembly, the city could be charged with "stasis," that is, with acting seditiously, creating factions in the Roman Empire, and rioting. Thus his words carried great weight with the crowd, and they disbanded.

While the Way was seen as threat to the religious Jews and local Greek cults, again and again Rome's authorities did not see the Way as being a threat to their primary interests. Luke's argument is that Christianity challenged society at the social levels but need not disturb Rome's legal and military authority.⁷²

20:1-12 Paul was not driven from Ephesus but wisely left of his own free choice and would continue to avoid Ephesus in his future travels (Acts 20:16). Paul traveled through Macedonia (55–56 AD) strengthening the believers. It was about this time that Paul wrote 2 Corinthians from Macedonia. Paul then moved on to Greece and wintered in Corinth. After three months, he returned to Macedonia because the Jews in Greece had plotted against him. It was about this time that Paul wrote his letter to the Romans from Corinth (57 AD).

Paul then made his way to Troas, where many of his traveling companions were waiting for him. On his way he stopped, and Luke joined him again for the "we" statements that resume in Acts 20:5, where the narrative also becomes very detailed again. In view of the fact that the "we" left off in Philippi at Acts 16:16 and now picks up from the same location, we must assume that the

⁷² See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 595-596.

first-person narrator is the one involved. Luke stays with Paul all the way to the end of the book (Acts 28:31). This is considered the second of the “we” sections (Acts 16:10-40; 20:5–21:18; 27:1–28:16).

While in Philippi, Paul and Luke celebrated the feast of Unleavened bread, which was the day after Passover. Mostly likely they had also celebrated Passover there because by this time the Jews had merged the two into one festival. Then they went on to Troas to meet the others. On Paul’s last night in Troas, he preached late into the night. Eutychus, a boy in the audience, fell asleep and then fell out of the window and died. A “boy” refers to someone between nine and fourteen years of age. Alternatively, it could mean he was a slave and may have been in his thirties. Paul raised Eutychus from the dead and continued to minister to the people. Luke does not make the miracle the focus of this narrative; rather, the proclamation is deliberately indicated to be more crucial, as made clear by the fact that Luke quickly return to Paul’s preaching in Acts. 20:11 makes clear.

20:13-17 “We” (not including Paul) went to the ship and sailed away to Assos to prepare the people of Assos for Paul’s arrival. Sailing by ship to Assos took longer than traveling by land because one had to sail around Cape Lectum. Taking the land route allowed Paul to stay longer in Troas. Paul then met the group in Assos, and then they all sailed to Miletus, which stood 30 miles south of Ephesus on the mainland. Paul’s goal was to be in Jerusalem by the Feast of Pentecost, which was fifty days after Passover, which they had already celebrated in Philippi (Acts 20:6). Paul sent for the elders of Ephesus to meet him in Miletus in order to say farewell to them since it was too dangerous for him to go to Ephesus. It was at least sixteen days since Paul had left Philippi. To summon the elders of Ephesus and then lead them back would have been at least five days. Paul had already lost five days crossing from Philippi to Troas, then a week in Troas, then a day of travel to Assos, then at least another three or four days to get to Miletus. He needed about another twenty-five or so days’ sailing to arrive in Israel in time to make it to the Feast of Pentecost.

20:18-24 As Paul spoke to the elders, he first reviewed his past three-year ministry in Ephesus. He emphasized his faithfulness in preaching the gospel, especially in the face of opposition. And he urged them to remain faithful in the faith as he had. Paul then turned to the present and stated that the Holy Spirit had compelled him to go to Jerusalem and that his future there was unknown. Paul did not see his life as more important than preaching the gospel. There was definitely an awareness of how volatile Jerusalem was and the reality that this may be the end for him. One sees the fear in Paul but his confidence that Yahweh would be with him and take care of him through it all—and that the risk would be worth it.

20:25-38 Whatever the danger he faced, he was confident that he would not see the elders again. Perhaps the Holy Spirit or a prophet revealed this to him. Paul declared that he was innocent of not proclaiming the Gospel everywhere he had an opportunity. They were also then to remain faithful in preaching the gospel and shepherding their flocks. They were to diligently protect their flocks from the fierce wolves—outside opposition and internal false teachers who would seek to destroy them. Paul then released them into Yahweh’s hands, knowing that only Yahweh could care for them. He then reminded them that he never took any money, with the implication that they should not either, as false teachers would do; it is far greater to pour into others’ lives than to receive. When he was finished, he prayed with them, and they wept as they departed from each other. This speech sounds more like Paul of the letters than do any other of his speeches in Acts.

21:1-9 Paul, Luke, and his companions sailed to Tyre, a Phoenician city north of Israel. Paul went on to Caesarea, which was 32 miles farther south, and stayed with Philip, who was one of the seven (Acts 6:5; 8:40). It seems unusual that Luke would refer to these daughters as prophetesses without mentioning anything they prophesied. Perhaps they gave him information that he did not record.

21:10-16 Agabus had come from Jerusalem to Antioch previously to foretell the famine of 46 AD (Acts 11:26-27). Now he came down to Caesarea and prophesied Paul's arrest in Jerusalem. He illustrated his prediction graphically, as many First Testament prophets had done (1 Kgs. 11:29-31; Isa. 20:2-4; Jer. 13:1-7; Ezek. 4). "This is what the Holy Spirit says" is the Christian equivalent of the First Testament's "Thus says Yahweh." Therefore, the arrest of Paul would not be the undoing of him by evil men but was ordained by Yahweh to send the gospel to Rome. Paul's friends tried to persuade him but ceased when they realized he was determined.

IV. Paul on Trial (21:17–28:31)

In this division Paul is charged for crimes by the Jews in Jerusalem, arrested by the Romans, put on trial, and sent to Rome for his final trial. This is the climax of the Jewish opposition against the gospel that becomes so intense they are willing to kill those who preach the gospel just as Paul had before his conversion. Yet the Gentile Roman officials will continuously find no fault in Paul and declare him innocent, and many Gentiles will come to faith.

Once Paul arrived in Jerusalem, the narrative slows tremendously. Less than twelve days are covered in Acts 21:17–23:35 (see Acts 24:11), while Acts 24:1–26:32 covers two years (see Acts 24:27). The legal proceeding against Paul covers about two years.

A. Paul's Arrest and Hearings in Jerusalem (21:17–23:22)

In this section Paul returns to Jerusalem and is charged by the Jews for teaching in violation of the Law and for defiling the temple with Gentiles (57 AD). Roman soldiers arrest Paul for disturbing the peace. All the discussions before Acts 24 are pre-trial hearings, where the Romans are trying to figure out what conflict the Jews have with Paul and how to deal with it.

The “we” material comes to an end here, not picking up again until Acts 27, not because Luke was no longer with Paul but because he was not directly involved in the actions he is recounting. The focus is on Paul on trial. He was still present as an observer in the audience during the court hearings and trials.

21:17-26 Paul shared with James and the Jerusalem elders what Yahweh had done on his missionary journeys among the Gentiles. Though the elders rejoiced in Paul's ministry, they also shared the complaints of the Torah-observant Jewish Christians. At this time, the Jerusalem church was divided between those Jewish and Gentile Christians who saw the gospel as a fulfillment of the Mosaic Law and thus were free from it (Acts 15; Gal. 4:9; 5:6; Rom. 2:25-30) and those Jewish Christians who believed the Gentile Christians must adhere to the Mosaic Law. The latter group was growing in number and power within the Jerusalem church.

This may be why Luke did not record the giving of the offering that Paul had brought, because it did not have the desired effect Paul had hoped for. Paul had feared that the offering would not be acceptable to the Jerusalem church (Rom. 15:31) because the Jerusalem church was so divided and the timing was all wrong.⁷³ Likewise, the apostles who requested the offering were no longer there, and the only one left from the original leadership was James, who was dealing with the radicalization of Jewish sentiments of the church at this time. Thus, the elders were more concerned with the impact the arrival of Paul would have on these Torah-observant Jewish Christians.

“Josephus described the period of the mid-50s as a time of intense Jewish nationalism and political unrest. One insurrection after another rose to challenge the Roman overlords, and Felix brutally suppressed them all. This only increased the Jewish hatred for Rome and inflamed anti-Gentile sentiments. It was a time when pro-Jewish sentiment was at its height, and friendliness with outsiders was viewed askance. Considering public relations, Paul's mission to the Gentiles would not have been well received. The Jerusalem elders were in somewhat of a bind. On the one hand, they had supported Paul's witness to the Gentiles at

⁷³ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 646.

the Jerusalem Conference. Now they found Paul a *persona non grata* and his mission discredited not only among the Jewish populace, which they were seeking to reach, but also among their more recent converts. They did not want to reject Paul. Indeed, they praised God for his successes. Still they had their own mission to the Jews to consider, and for that Paul was a distinct liability.”⁷⁴

The complaints of the Torah-observant Jewish Christians against Paul were that he had taught *all* the Jews who lived among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, that he had taught them not to circumcise their children, and that he had taught them not to observe the customs.

The elders had a plan to help make Paul more “acceptable” to these Jewish Christians. Paul was to take four Jewish Christians who had taken a vow to Yahweh, and he was to join them in their purification rite and also pay their expenses in having their hair shaved. Then all the Jewish Christians would see that Paul is in alignment with the Mosaic Law. And the Gentile Christians have the written letter of Acts 15 to assure them of the Gospel requirements.

This ritual could not have been the taking of a temporary Nazarite vow (Num. 6:2-21) because it was less than thirty days. It must have been some kind of purification ritual for those who come from foreign, unclean lands. This ritual could be completed in seven days (Num. 19:12). Some say Paul would have never submitted such a request since it was contrary to what he believed about the gospel. However, Paul was not against obedience to the Mosaic Law but the belief that one had to follow the law in order to obtain or maintain salvation. Paul also was willing to be a Jew to the Jew and a Gentile to the Gentile in order to remove the unnecessary obstacles to the gospel. Likewise, this was a one-time action to which Paul freely chose to submit (1 Cor 9).

Some have argued that this plan was a trap to get Paul arrested at the temple since this ritual would have made it known to everyone when he would be at the temple. The problem is that James, who is the main speaker, would never have consented to it.

21:27-29 The unbelieving Jews from Asia, possibly from Ephesus, seized Paul and charged him with teaching against the Jewish people, the Mosaic Law, and the temple and with defiling the temple with Gentiles. This was the same accusation the Jews of Jerusalem levied against Stephen (Acts 6:11, 13-14). The Jews permitted Gentiles in the outer court of the temple, the court of the Gentiles. They could not, however, go beyond that into the women’s court, the court of Israel, or the court of priests. The Romans allowed the Jews to execute any Gentile, even a Roman citizen, for proceeding beyond the Gentile court. They believed a defiled court remained profaned until the trespasser was executed. Paul as a Jew could go into the court of Israel. The Jews had seen Trophimus the Ephesian, one of Paul’s Gentile traveling companions in the temple area, and had either falsely accused or assumed that Paul had taken Trophimus into the court of Israel.

21:30-36 Many people from the city came and dragged Paul out of the temple and began to beat him. News of this commotion reached the Roman commander of the Fortress of Antonia, which connected with the temple area on the northwest and was responsible for keeping the peace in the city. The title of the commander in Greek was the *chiliarch*, literally a “commander of a thousand.” But it was used as the standard translation for the Latin *tribunus militum*, the military tribune who commanded a cohort of 600 men. The tribune, Claudius Lysias (Acts 23:26), sent his cohort to deal with the riot and arrested Paul, assuming that he was a criminal. When the tribune could not get a straight report from the Jews, he commanded that Paul be taken to the

⁷⁴ J. P. Polhill. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 447.

Fortress of Antonia for questioning. The crowd became so violent that Paul had to be carried away. To anyone who has read Josephus and knows this time period, this was typical of Jewish and Gentile relationships.

21:37-40 Paul then requested to speak in an articulate Greek that suggested to the tribune that he was no mere local Jewish troublemaker whose Greek would not be as good.⁷⁵ The tribune assumed Paul was a certain Egyptian who had appeared in Jerusalem three years earlier (54 AD)⁷⁶ claiming to be a prophet and leading a group of dagger-carrying assassins. This Egyptian had declared that the wall of Jerusalem would collapse at his command and that he and his followers would defeat the Romans. The Romans had attacked and killed his followers, but he had escaped. The tribune evidently thought this man had returned to the temple area to recruit more followers and the Jewish people had recognized him and turned against him.

Paul denied that he was an Egyptian, and his response may even suggest he took the suggestion that he was as a racial slur. Paul stated that he was from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city. People in antiquity were judged by the importance of the place they were born. Their own honor and dignity came from the rating of the place they came from. Paul was claiming to be a person of considerable social status, probably a higher status than the tribune himself. This is why the tribune allowed him to address the crowd. The tribune had no reason not to believe Paul's claims, and it was always unwise to refuse or offend someone of equal or higher social status than oneself.

22:1-21 Paul first spoke to the crowd about how he was a devoted Jew trained under Gamaliel, the most respected Pharisee of his day. Paul's zeal for Yahweh was undisputed as he persecuted the Christians as an agent of the Sanhedrin, which gave him authority to pursue Christian Jews as far away as Damascus. He probably began to learn the law around five years old and the Pharisaic traditions around ten years old and was sent to pursue training in teaching the law around thirteen years old.⁷⁷

He then told of his conversion to Christianity after seeing Jesus, which explained the radical change in his life. Jesus sent him to Ananias, a devout Jew who carefully observed the law and one who had a good reputation among his fellow Israelites. This respected Jew had also received a revelation from Yahweh about Paul's mission. Paul sought to impress his hearers with the fact that a pious Jew had communicated Yahweh's mission to him. The title "God of their fathers" is distinctly Jewish. Paul was then baptized as a symbol of the spiritual cleansing that had already taken place in him (1 Cor. 6:11; 1 Pet. 3:21).

Paul then shared that he had received another vision early after his conversion (Acts 9:26-29; Gal. 1:18-19), in which Yahweh had called him to go to the Jews and the Gentiles with the gospel. The main point of Paul's speech was to prove that he was a loyal Jew, thus refuting the charges against his teachings. Because of the hostile opposition of the crowd, Paul had to spend a long time detailing his historical background, establishing the facts of the case before moving to the proofs.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 661.

⁷⁶ See Flavius Josephus. *The Jewish War*, pp. 2.261-263 and *Antiquities of the Jews*, pp. 20.168-172.

⁷⁷ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 669.

⁷⁸ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 667.

22:22-30 Despite the eloquence of Paul’s speech, the crowd erupted in verbal and physical violence against Paul because of what he had said about going to the Gentiles. Though Israel’s history was full of Gentiles being favorably accepted into Judaism, now, after years of oppression under the Roman government, many conflicts with the government, and the Gentiles’ increasingly abhorrent ways of worshipping idols, there was no love among the Jews for the Gentiles.

The tribune did not fully understand what Paul had said since he gave his speech in Aramaic, but he did see that Paul had angered the crowd. He ordered that Paul be taken back to the barracks and be flogged. Earlier Paul had been given the lictor’s rod or lashes; now he was to be given the flagrum.

The “flagrum” or “flagellum,” was a short whip made of two or three leather (ox-hide) thongs or ropes connected to a wooden handle. The leather thongs were knotted with a number of small pieces of metal, usually zinc and iron, bones, or heavy indented pieces of bronze, attached at various intervals. The criminal was tied to a low pillar with his hands above his head. He was then beaten by several “lictors” (professional whippers). The flagrum was thrown down onto the back so that the lead and bone pieces could dig into the back, and then the flagrum was ripped down the back in order to cause shredding. The scourging would have gone from the shoulders down the back, buttocks, and back of the legs. The scourging would quickly remove the skin so that part of the spine and bowels were exposed. Eusebius, a third century historian, described a flogging by saying, “The sufferer’s veins were laid bare, and the very muscles, sinews, and bowels of the victim were open to exposure.”

At this point Paul revealed that he was a Roman citizen and therefore could not be flogged. To bind a Roman citizen was a crime, to flog him was an abomination, and to kill him was an act of murder. The tribune in disbelief asserted that Paul had bought his citizenship through bribery, which was not uncommon at this time in the Roman Empire. Paul revealed that, in fact, he was born a Roman citizen, making his social status higher than that of tribune.

Paul may have waited so long to reveal that he was a Roman citizen because he knew only a little Latin and his understanding of the conversation around him may not have been very clear. It could also be that he was waiting to give himself legal room to maneuver against them, as in Acts 16:37. He brought up his Roman citizenship only when his life is in danger and only with Romans in order to influence them to not harm him. He did not want the gospel to be connected to his Roman social status. The tribune had no reason to doubt him because the penalty for a false claim to Roman citizenship was extremely severe and may include death.

After finding out that Paul was a Roman citizen, the tribune immediately became afraid because it was his responsibility to find out the social status of the person he was investigating before interrogating and punishing them. Even if there was no absolute legal obligation to find out, it was still unlawful to put Paul in chains, and in an honor-shame culture, this could hurt the tribune’s social status tremendously. The tribune, wanting to figure out now what exactly was going on, released Paul from the chains but kept him in custody in order to bring him before the Sanhedrin for further clarification.

23:1-5 Paul was arrested by the Romans, so Roman procedures, not Jewish ones, were being followed. Paul needed to impress Lysias because he wanted to be judged by the Romans and not the Jewish Sanhedrin. If he could convince the Romans that the dispute was over matters of Jewish law and belief—rather than an offense deemed as treason—he would be in a good

position legally and might even be dismissed. If he were given over to the Sanhedrin, then they would falsely convict him, without evidence, of defiling the temple and then have him executed, which the Romans gave the authority to the Sanhedrin to do for this crime. This is also why the Sanhedrin wanted to obtain Paul's extradition from the Roman authority.

Paul intended to give his testimony again but was prevented by Ananias. His claim of having a clear conscience meant that what he was about to relate was not contrary to the will of Yahweh contained in the Hebrew Scriptures, specifically that his Christian beliefs did not compromise his Jewish heritage. Paul was not just about defending himself but bearing witness to the gospel.

Ananias commanded that Paul be struck, which was an unlawful punishment according to Jewish law since he had not been convicted. Paul prophesied a judgment against Ananias and called him a white-washed wall, referring to a wall that was frequently inferior on the inside but looked good outwardly (Ezek. 13:10-16; Matt. 23:27). Paul condemned Ananias for judging him in his supposed violation of the law while Ananias himself was violating the law. Paul quoted Ex. 22:28 to sarcastically make the point that he did not know he was talking to the high priest since Ananias was not acting like one. Ananias was an extremely corrupt high priest, taking bribes by allowing his servants to steal the tithe intended for the priests, and was prone to violence. Later he was summoned to Rome to answer for his ambush of various Samaritan pilgrims.⁷⁹

22:6-11 Paul realized he was not going to get a fair hearing, so he changed his tactics to pitting the Pharisees and Sadducees against each other in order to show the tribune how ridiculous all of this was. So, he stated that he was on trial for believing in the resurrection, knowing this was an extremely controversial topic among them, as the Pharisees believed in resurrection and the Sadducees did not. The Pharisees declared that perhaps a spirit or angel of Yahweh revealed this to Paul, which was even more controversial, since the Sadducees also did not believe in the afterlife or in angels.

“Paul keeps coming back to the theme of hope and resurrection even when it no longer provokes disruption (cf. 24:15, 21; 28:20), and it will be a central theme in Paul's climactic defense speech before King Agrippa (26:6-8, 23). Paul is doing more than injecting a controversial subject into the Sanhedrin hearing. He is trying to change the entire issue of his trial, and he will persist in this effort in subsequent scenes. Therefore, the significance of Paul's statement that he is on trial ‘concerning hope and resurrection of the dead’ can be understood only by considering the development of this theme in later scenes.”⁸⁰

The tribune, most likely frustrated for a second time that he could not get answers as to why the Jews hated Paul, commanded that Paul be taken into protective custody in the Fortress of Antonia.

That night Yahweh appeared to Paul again to reassure him in a time of crisis and frustration. Even though there would be no more miraculous escapes, Yahweh told Paul that all of this was to get Paul to Rome in order to share the gospel there.

23:12-22 Forty Jewish men took a vow to kill Paul. They went to the chief priests and told them to falsely request another hearing from the tribune so that they could kill Paul. The chief priests'

⁷⁹ See Flavius Josephus. *Antiquities of the Jews*, pp. 20:131, 205-213.

⁸⁰ Robert C. Tannehill. *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, p. 2:287.

willingness to do this substantiates Paul's rebuke of Ananias in his willingness to violate the law while he claimed to be defending the law against Paul's supposed violations (Acts 22:3-5).

Paul's sister's son heard of this plot and reported it to Paul, who sent him to the tribune. At this news, the tribune realized that Paul was not safe in Jerusalem and sought to have him transferred north to Caesarea. This was another step in Yahweh's plan to get Paul to Rome.

B. Paul's Trials in Caesarea (23:23–26:32)

In this section Paul is moved north to Caesarea, the heart of Roman power in Israel, and put on trial by the Roman officials. Paul will spend the next two years (57–59 AD) here in custody and will continue to preach the gospel at his trials.

23:23-35 This is the first time the tribune's name is mentioned as Claudius Lysias. The tribune wrote a letter to Governor Felix, who resided in Caesarea. The tribune put himself in the best light possible, mentioning his rescue of Paul in the temple courtyard, but left out the part where he almost flogged Paul. He had rescued Paul because he knew Paul was a Roman citizen; however, he had only learned of Paul's Roman citizenship after he had arrested him. It is here that he specifically states for the first time that he believed that Paul was not guilty of any crime and that Paul's case involved only disputes over Jewish theology. This is another time Roman officials looked favorably upon Paul and Christianity (Acts 19:40; 23:9; 25:25; 26:31-32).

Paul was sent under guard that night to Caesarea to be handed over to Felix. Upon hearing that Paul was from Cilicia, which did not have its own Roman governor, he agreed to hear Paul's case but not until his accusers arrived in Caesarea.

The governor (procurator) of Judea at this time was Antonius Felix (52–59 AD). Felix had a reputation for being a harsh ruler over the Jews and had risen from a lowly background. The Roman historian Tacitus described him as follows.

“...Antonius Felix, practiced every kind of cruelty and lust, wielding the power of king with all the instincts of a slave.”⁸¹

24:1-9 Five days later, the Jewish leadership arrived with their own hired attorney, Tertullus, showing how much they wanted to eliminate the Paul problem. The “we” here (Acts 24:2) suggests that he was a Jew, but he also seems to distance himself from the Jews (Acts 24:5, 9), and Luke distinguishes him from the Jews. There would be an irony in their using a Gentile to prosecute Paul for going to the Gentiles. Tertullus opened by flattering Felix, which was a common part of addressing Roman officials. The title “most excellent” usually applied to men who enjoyed a higher social rank than Felix. Felix brought “peace” as a result of terror, and his “reforms” were more like purges. The word *gratitude* (Greek, *epieikeia*) in Acts 24:4 was a quality that involved one's willingness to go beyond the strict bounds of the law because of one's mercifulness or reasonableness. The Jews knew it would be hard to prove Paul guilty within the strict bonds of the law and therefore were relying on Felix's willingness to bend the rules to convict Paul in order to maintain “peace and order.”⁸² The Jews were hoping that their over-flattery and their high social status would help them, but Felix did not like the Jews, and he was the most responsible of the governors for bringing the Jewish wars. And what they were unaware of was Lysias's report and that Paul was a Roman citizen.

The two charges the Jews brought against Paul were, first, that Paul was a pestilence of a disease on Israel and was a ringleader of a Nazarene sect causing riots and, second, that he attempted to profane the temple.

24:10-16 Paul addressed the first charge by stating he had been in Jerusalem only twelve days and therefore had not had time to gain a following for his “gang” and become a pestilence upon

⁸¹ Cornelius Tacitus, *The Histories*, p. 5:9

⁸² See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 707.

the city. Not only did he not cause riots, but he was not arguing with anyone. Paul then testified that he was a member of the Way, which followed Jesus and believed in the hope of His resurrection. The implication is that this was what he was really on trial for before the Jews.

24:17-21 Paul then addressed the second charge by stating that he had not come to the temple to defile it but to bring an offering for the poor and the temple and to perform a ritual of purification. Paul was presenting offerings to Yahweh and was not creating any disruptions when a group from Asia began to attack him. The most powerful of Paul's argument is that some Jews from Asia stirred up the crowd against him, but they were not present to charge him with anything. Roman law imposed heavy penalties upon accusers who abandoned their charges and had no witnesses, and it meant the withdrawal of a charge.⁸³ Paul ended by stating that the real issue was theological, in that Paul believed in the resurrection of Jesus.

24:22-27 Felix had been governor of Israel long enough to know that the Nazarenes were not rabble-rousers. He was also aware of the Way and how the Jews felt about it. He knew that the charges were bogus and did not want to do injustice to a Roman citizen, so he dismissed the charges. But he still kept Paul in custody for two years. Felix's brutality with the Jews put him in a tenuous position with Rome that valued maintaining peace as the highest priority. He had to placate the Jews in order to not create problems for himself. In fact, during the early part of Paul's time in custody, in 58 AD, violence broke out between the Gentiles and the Jews. Felix took the side of the Gentiles, which led to a strong Jewish protest against Felix's policies, which led to him being removed from office.⁸⁴ As a favor to the Jewish leadership, whom he could not afford to alienate any further, he left Paul in custody because they could make trouble for him at his hearing in Rome.

During Paul's custody in Caesarea, Felix brought Paul to him on many occasions to hear him speak about Jesus Christ and the gospel. Even though he was hoping for a bribe from Paul to set him free, Yahweh used this opportunity for Paul to share the gospel with all those who would have been in the court to hear him talk. Once again, we see that the gospel is for everyone, even the social elite.

After two years of keeping Paul in custody, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus (59–61 AD) who now had to deal with the Paul problem.

25:1-5 When Festus arrived in Jerusalem, the Jews brought their charges against Paul and requested that he brought up to them, hoping to ambush and kill Paul. After two years of Paul being in custody in a different city and causing no "problems" for them, they still desperately wanted him dead. Festus refused and said they could come to Caesar to present their charges.

25:6-12 There is not much known about Festus, and he died in office after only two years of serving. He was more moderate, wise, honest, and able than Felix and all the other governors. He also dealt very quickly in removing the Jewish assassins, whom previous governors did not deal with. But he may have also been a political novice among the Jewish power groups and their theological, political, and social stances and conflicts. He also had very little knowledge of the charges against Paul.

⁸³ See Richard N. Longenecker. "The Acts of the Apostles," p. 541.

⁸⁴ See Flavius Josephus. *The Jewish War*, p. 2:13:7 and *The Antiquities of the Jews*, p. 20:182.

When the Jews came down and presented their unfounded charges against Paul before Festus, Paul once again defended himself. Festus, wanting to do the Jews a favor and not wanting to turn the Jews against him as he had seen with Felix's record, asked Paul if he was willing to go to Jerusalem to be tried. It is not clear what Festus was truly proposing. Was it a change in venue with a Roman trial in Jerusalem, a change in jurisdiction, or judgment by the Sanhedrin after which he would ratify what they decided? He seems to be reassuring Paul that he would still be the authority over the trial. However, Paul read something between the lines and became angry and defensive. Paul's response should be seen as a vigorous and strong rebuke to Festus. Paul wants to stay under the jurisdiction of Rome, even if he has to go over Festus's head. Paul states that he is not trying to escape death. Paul had come to realize that there was no more audience for the gospel among the Jews in Israel and that he had been called to Rome in order to present the gospel to the Gentiles there. He was not trying to escape death, for he was not afraid of dying. He played his trump card and appealed to go to Caesar, which was his right as a Roman citizen. He did this only under considerable pressure.

It has become clear that being tried by the providential governor brought long delays with political games. The Jews, seeing Rome as intrusive in their affairs and not doing what they wanted, had and were likely to take matters into their own hands. There may have been no need for an appeal if one had a good governor. Clearly Paul did not trust him. Though Paul's appeal would cost a lot financially to get to Rome, he had been promised by Jesus that he would testify before the Roman emperor. One might think it was unwise for Paul to appeal to Caesar, when Caesar at this time was the infamous and psychotic Nero. However, during Nero's early years of reign (54–61 AD), he showed no signs of insanity or the injustices he would later become known for. During this time, he was under the tutelage of a great Roman philosopher, the Stoic Seneca, and he was helped along by the prefect of the Praetorian Guard, Afranius Burros.⁸⁵

“The narrator shows unusual interest in Felix and Festus. They are complex characters with conflicting tendencies. Felix is attracted to Paul and his message yet seeks a bribe and leaves Paul in prison to appease Paul's enemies. Festus presents a favorable image of himself to the public, but his handling of Paul's case is tainted with favoritism. Neither one is willing to offend the high priests and elders by releasing Paul. The narrator's characterization of the Roman governors contributes to a portrait of Paul as one caught in a web of self-interested maneuvers by people who vie for support within the political jungle. However, Paul is not just a helpless victim. As opportunity comes, he continues to bear witness to his Lord. Although Paul continues to be denied justice and freedom, the saving purpose of God still has use for this resourceful and faithful prisoner.”⁸⁶

25:13-22 Marcus Julius Agrippa II (27–100 AD) was the son of Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:1-11) and the great grandson of Herod the Great (Matt. 2:1). He had grown up in Rome and was a favorite of Emperor Claudius. He was the last in the Herodian dynasty and was the best king over the Jews of the Herods. Luke does not call him Herod in the book of Acts, and he is presented in a favorable light. At the time he visited Festus, Agrippa II was the king over the territory northeast of the Judean province, was also appointed the king of Chalcis, and he lived in Caesarea Philippi. Agrippa II's sister Bernice married her uncle, the former king of Chalcis, but

⁸⁵ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 726.

⁸⁶ Robert C. Tannehill. *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, p. 2:314.

when he died in 48 AD, she moved in with her brother Agrippa, which led to rumors of an incestuous relationship with her brother.

Festus brought Paul's case to Agrippa II because he was quite knowledgeable about Jewish affairs and could give council on whether to approve Paul's appeal to Caesar. Festus had to approve Paul's appeal to Caesar, but he also did not fully understand the charges and so had nothing definitive to report to Caesar about why Paul was being sent to him; thus he risked looking incompetent to Caesar and risking his political career. Agrippa II's insight and approval of how Festus handled this situation and whether to approve Paul's appeal or not would secure his position greatly.

First Festus blamed Felix for not resolving the matter and then portrayed himself as the great upholder of Roman law who quickly dispenses justice in the face of persistent harassment of the Jews. He accused the Jews of being incompetent by bringing charges that did not align with Roman law. Since there were no official Roman charges nor evidence, he did not know how to investigate or examine the charges. So, it was very reasonable for him to ask Paul whether he wanted to go to Jerusalem to be tried for the religious charges. Nothing is said of Festus's desire to do the Jewish leaders a favor. Festus painted a favorable picture of himself, but neither he nor Felix was willing to be brave by dismissing the charges against Paul and setting him free. Agrippa II agreed to see and hear Paul out.

25:23-27 The next day, when Paul stood before them, Festus used the occasion to honor Agrippa II and Bernice before the local Caesarean leaders. Once again, he talked about how competent he was and that though the Jews wanted Paul dead he could find no guilt in Paul. Therefore, they were meeting together to know what to write to Caesar in the face of the incompetence of the Jews. Even though Paul was faced with another useless trial, he saw it as an opportunity to share the gospel.

26:1-11 Paul's speech in Acts 26 is the longest and most detailed speech in Acts 22–26. The primary audience is Agrippa II, not Festus, therefore it is primarily a Jewish speech in which he presents his testimony. Paul did not operate in his usual way of offering rebuttals against the charges or extended attacks on his opponents; rather, his speech was more of an apologetic for the gospel. Nothing was said of defiling the temple by bringing a Gentile in or upsetting the Jews in the Diaspora.

Paul's opening flattering remark was that Agrippa II would be more knowledgeable in the various Jewish religious parties and practices and about the theological and social disputes among them. He made it clear that the Jews knew him as an orthodox and devoted Jew, for they had known him all their lives. The real issue was not whether he was a threat to Judaism, as the Jewish leaders had claimed; rather, the main issue of contention was the essence of the gospel, which is the resurrection of Jesus, which Paul called the hope of Israel.

Paul then made a crucial point: that a Jew like Agrippa II, who knew Jewish Scriptures, beliefs, and customs, should not find the resurrection an incredible, novel, or offensive idea. If one believed in an all-powerful God, why should the resurrection be hard to believe?

“Paul is arguing that he has been consistent in his loyalty to the Jewish hope, whereas vv. 7-8 imply that his opponents are strangely inconsistent; what the people earnestly desire, the focus of their hope, is rejected when it arrives.”⁸⁷

As a Pharisaic Jew, Paul had at one time also opposed the reality that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah and had been resurrected. He had angrily and relentlessly pursued and killed the Christians for believing in the resurrection of Jesus.

26:12-18 Paul then related the events of his conversion to Christianity. In this account, he brought together the appearance of Jesus and His words on the Damascus road (Acts 9:5-6; 22:8, 10), His instructions through Ananias (Acts 22:14-15), and His command in Paul’s Jerusalem vision (Acts 22:18-21). He did this to emphasize his calling from Yahweh to bring the gospel to the Gentiles.

26:19-23 Paul concluded by declaring that he had been faithful to his calling to go to the Gentiles. This was the real reason the Jews hated him and had attacked him. Yet Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles was consistent with the message of Moses and the prophets. Christ died and rose again in order to bring salvation to both the Jews and the Gentiles so that they all might be brought into the light. Paul had successfully shown that his message of the resurrection of Jesus and of Yahweh’s salvation for the Gentiles was rooted in the First Testament, making him the rational Jew and consistent with the Scriptures. It was the Jewish leadership that was irrational and inconsistent in their anger and charges against him.

26:24-29 It was at this point that Festus interrupted Paul, accusing of him of being insane. What was not meant was that Paul was incoherent or literally had become insane; rather, he had become so impressively learned and knowledgeable that he had become disconnected from reality, no longer having common sense. Remember that, to the Greeks, the idea of a bodily resurrection was incomprehensible and unnecessary. This, coupled with the idea that the Jews and the Gentiles could all get along, seemed ridiculous to Festus.

Paul stated that he was very much rooted in reality and rationality and that he was not addressing Festus but Agrippa II, who, as a Jew, had a better understanding of these ideas. Paul then directly asked Agrippa II if he believed in the prophets. If Agrippa II said yes, then Paul would claim that Agrippa II must also believe what he had said about the Messiah—like a good rational Jew must, according to the argument that he had just made in his speech. If Agrippa II said no, then he would no longer be seen as a good Jew or as a good Jewish leader. Paul did not wait for his answer but answered in the affirmative for him. This put Agrippa II even more on the spot. Agrippa diverted by asking sarcastically whether Paul was trying to convert him. He was incredulous, and his tone was sophisticated avoidance with slight embarrassment.⁸⁸ Many translations have Agrippa saying, “in such a short time.” But what is mostly likely meant is “with so few words,” meaning Paul had not given enough of an argument or points to truly convince Agrippa II. Paul answered by saying that his ultimate desire was that he and all who were listening would convert to Christianity—that was his purpose and drive in life.

26:30-32 By Agrippa II standing, he signaled to all that the conversation was over. Agrippa II concluded that Paul was innocent of all charges and could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar. Previously, the Pharisees (Acts 23:9), Claudius Lysias (Acts 23:29), and

⁸⁷ Robert C. Tannehill. *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, p. 2:318.

⁸⁸ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 751.

Festus (Acts 25:25) had all declared Paul innocent. Now Agrippa II, a Roman ruler with Jewish blood who was sympathetic to the Jews, declared Paul innocent.

“Inherent in Luke’s account are at least three apologetic themes: (1) Paul’s relations with the Roman provincial government in Judea did not end in dissonance but with an acknowledgment of his innocence (cf. 25:25; 26:31); (2) even though the Jewish high priests and Sanhedrin opposed Paul, the Jewish king who in Rome’s eyes outranked them agreed with a verdict of innocence (cf. 26:32); and (3) Paul’s innocence was demonstrated not only before Roman and Jewish rulers but also publicly before ‘the high ranking officers and the leading men of the city’ (25:23).”⁸⁹

Legally they still could acquit Paul and set him free. It was not a question of the law but of social relations between the emperor and his subordinates. No one with desires of promotion would short circuit an appeal to Caesar. It would be better to not dismiss the appeal, even as flimsy as the evidence was, than to make the mistake of dismissal and anger both the Jews and the emperor.

But the main point is not that Paul had falsely become a pawn of politics and unjustly cheated of his freedom but that he was now going to Rome to share the gospel as Yahweh had promised him and which was in alignment with the calling he had stated throughout his hearings and trials in the last two years.

⁸⁹ Richard N. Longenecker. “The Acts of the Apostles,” p. 550.

C. Paul's Journey to Rome (27:1–28:31)

In this section Paul finally makes it to Rome in order to preach the gospel as Yahweh had promised him (60 AD). The opposition moves from that of the Jews to that of nature trying to destroy Paul and his crew, as in many famous Greek stories such as Homer's *Odyssey*. Yet once again, the providence prevails, and the gospel moves on throughout the world.



27:1-8 The “we” section begins again here and is considered the third of the “we” sections (Acts 16:10-40; 20:5–21:18; 27:1–28:16). However, as stated earlier (Acts 21:18), Luke had been with Paul ever since he arrived in Jerusalem two years previously and had been with him during all of his hearings and trials while in custody; he just was not actively involved in what was happening since it was Paul who was on trial. Here he was actively participating with Paul as they made their journey to Italy.

Paul and some other prisoners were given over to the command of the Roman centurion, who demonstrated fairness and mercy throughout their journey. A ship from the port of Adramyttium, which was just south of Troas opposite the island of Lesbos, arrived in Caesarea to take them to Italy. Aristarchus, another of Paul's companions who stayed with him during his Caesarean imprisonment (Acts 19:29), traveled with Paul and Luke to Rome (Col. 4:10; Phile. 24).

They sailed to Sidon, which was 70 miles north of Caesarea. Paul was allowed to visit the Christians who lived there. They then sailed north of the island of Cyprus and along the southern coast of Cilicia, docking at Myra in Lysia, the southernmost region in the province of Asia. There, Julius transferred everyone to a different ship bound for Italy. This was a grain ship from Alexandria, Egypt (Acts 27:37-38), that had accommodations for at least 276 passengers. Egypt was the major supplier of grain for Italy. These large ships were usually 180 feet long, 50 feet wide, and 44 feet deep from the deck to the hold.

They sailed to Cnidus, which stood on the southwestern tip of the province of Asia where the Aegean Sea met the Mediterranean. A northwesterly wind forced Paul's ship southwest to the

island of Crete. Sailing along Crete's southern coasts, it reached the port of Fair Havens, near a town called Lasea.

27:9-12 The Day of Atonement was around late September or early October. People considered it dangerous to travel by sea between mid-September and mid-November, and the harbors closed for the winter from mid-November to mid-February. But the problem with Fair Havens was that it was not enough of a haven for a good-sized boat to be able to winter storms. Yet Paul prophesied a warning that continuing on would be dangerous. The implication is that Yahweh would take care of them if they stayed despite what they thought was reasonable. But the centurion went with the expertise and experience of the pilot of the ship. Grain ships of this kind were part of a fleet that was under the control of the Roman government even though private individuals owned the ships. Fair Havens was suitable for wintering but not as desirable as Phoenix (modern Phineka), which was 40 miles farther to the west along the Cretan coastline.

27:13-20 After they headed out, they were hit by a hurricane that would last for the remainder of the chapter. The strong wind drove them to the small island of Cauda (modern Gavdos or Gozzo), which lay 23 miles south of Crete. Though there was no harbor, it did provide enough temporary shelter for the sailors to haul the trailing lifeboat on board, which was probably taking on water and acting like an anchor. The passing and tying of ropes under the haul of the ship is called "frapping" and is used for reinforcement against the waves smashing against the haul. The Greek word translated "sea anchors" or "gear" is not clear as to what it was referring to. It could refer to a sail or some kind of anchor, or other techniques. The wind then began to drive them toward the sandbars of Syrtis, which is on the coast of Cyrene (modern Libya) of north Africa. Though they were over a hundred miles from this, the storm was so great that they feared this was where they were going to end up. They began to throw much of the grain overboard in order to lighten the ship. The picture that Luke is painting is one of growing desperation.

27:21-26 At this point, Paul pointed out that his previous prophecy of coming danger had come true. Paul is human, so there may have been a little bit of an "I told you so" tone. Yet Paul was a passionate person who truly cared about people. He was a prophet, and they had failed to listen to him, and it was necessary to listen to him now. Also, the fact that he had been right the first time was to encourage them that what he was now about to prophecy would also come true. An angel from Yahweh had come to him and promised that he and all the people on the boat would make it to Italy safely despite their circumstances. Ancient people evaluated the sincerity of a philosopher by how calm he stayed under pressure.

"This announcement that all will survive is remarkable... This announcement is a key to understanding the rest of the episode, for it determines what must happen, and the acts of sailors, soldiers, and Paul are to be judged in light of it. From this point on, no method of escape is acceptable that doesn't include all."⁹⁰

27:27-32 The ancient name of the central part of the Mediterranean Sea was the Adriatic or Hadriatic Sea. Luke is referring to an area that includes the Ionian Sea and the northern part of the Mediterranean between Greece and Italy and all the way down to Crete and Malta. They were now somewhere between Crete and Malta. The winds and currents had carried the ship in a northwesterly direction. They might have known they were close to land because, as experienced sailors, they could smell it. To determine the depth of the water, the sailors tied a weight to a line

⁹⁰ Robert C. Tannehill. *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, pp. 2:332-333.

and threw it overboard. The weights would have had hollowed spots on the bottom filled with grease so that when they pulled them up, if the weights had touched the bottom, there would be debris stuck to the grease. The depth to which the line sank indicated the depth of the water. The sailors, fearing for their lives, decided to escape the ship on the lifeboat and leave the soldiers and passengers behind. Paul warned Julius that they all had to stay together in order to survive as he had predicted. At this point, Julius took the word of Paul and cut the ropes on the lifeboats to prevent the sailors from escaping.

27:33-38 Even though they had grain, they may have not been eating because they did not have time to bake bread in the midst of surviving. They may have also been using the grain they had not thrown overboard as ballast for the stability of the ship. Now Paul said they needed to eat the grain in order to have the strength necessary to get ashore alive. By giving thanks to Yahweh for the meal in front of everyone, Paul was connecting their coming deliverance to the sovereignty and care of Yahweh. Paul had become the leader of the ship not because of his expertise in sailing, of which he had none, but because he was being led by Yahweh and so had confidence in what they should do. Then they threw the rest of the grain off the ship to lighten it and allow it to ride high into shallow water when the sailors beached it.

27:39-44 The sailors came to a land they did not recognize, and they did not see the sandbar and inadvertently ran the ship aground. The soldiers, concerned with their own survival, wanted to kill the prisoners so that they would not have to keep track of them and try to survive at the same time. This action would likely only be taken against those who were already condemned criminals. The soldiers' motivation for doing this was to avoid having to pay with their own lives if the prisoners escaped. However, Julius, wanting to spare Paul's life, and maybe even on what Paul said about their survival, prevented from doing so. Finally, everyone made it ashore alive just as Paul had prophesied. The overall force of this passage is of Yahweh's providence overruling all the natural circumstances that would mostly likely have killed some of them, if not all. Paul, as the representative of Yahweh, who had placed His hand of protection over them, was demonstrating Yahweh's sovereignty and care over them.

28:1-6 Malta lies about 60 miles south of the island of Sicily and 500 miles west of Crete. The island is about 18 miles long and 8 miles wide. They were shipwrecked, it was raining, and, at this time of year, the temperature would have been about fifty degrees Fahrenheit. Paul had unknowingly picked up a viper while gathering firewood. The viper would have been lethargic because of the cold weather, but the heat of the fire woke it up. Vipers do not normally fasten on what they bite; they strike and then retreat. Most likely the viper was still lethargic and did not behave normally. When the viper bit Paul, they thought at first he was being punished by the gods, but when he did not become ill, they thought he was a god. There is no mention of them worshiping him, and so there was no rebuke as there was in Acts 14:8-18. Knowing Paul, he would have used the opportunity to preach the gospel of Jesus to them.

28:7-10 The Publius was the Roman governor of Malta. Yahweh gave Paul the ability to heal the Publius's father and many of the people on the island in order to share the gospel with them.

“The account of Paul's healings on Malta is quite similar to the account of Jesus' healings at Capernaum at the beginning of his ministry (Luke 4:38-40). In both cases the healing of an individual is followed by the healing of 'all' or 'the rest' in a region. The individual, a relative of the healer's host, has been 'seized (*sunexomene, sunexomenon*)' by fever. There is also reference to laying on of hands. The similarities show that Jesus' healing ministry still

continues through his witnesses, with benefit both to the host who receives the healer and to the whole community. A scene from the beginning of Jesus' ministry is echoed in the last description of healing in Acts, suggesting a chiastic relationship."⁹¹

28:11-16 Paul and his companions spent the winter on the island of Malta. Julius was able to secure another Alexandrian grain ship, and they sailed for Rome. Oddly, Luke pointed out the figurehead of the ship was the twin Greek gods Castor and Pollux, the deities to whom the sailors prayed for protection. They were also represented by the constellation Gemini. Luke may have pointed this out in order to contrast Yahweh's real protection over the crew in contrast to the superstitious protection sought by the pagans. But there could be a more specific reason. These gods were related to the imperial cult, and the Romans viewed them as connected or even identified with the Roman emperor, especially during the Claudian and Neronian periods. Therefore, Luke may have been intending to communicate to this Gentile audience that not only was Paul innocent in Yahweh's eyes but that this is a foreshadowing of how Paul would be vindicated and released by the Roman emperor ("Castor and Pollux").⁹²

They first came to Syracuse, which stood on the east coast of the island of Sicily. They then sailed to Rhegium (modern Reggio di Calabria), which was near the tip of the "toe" of Italy's boot opposite Sicily. They then sailed to Puteoli (modern Pozzuoli), which was 180 miles farther north of the western coast of Italy. It was a very large port and the final destination of many Egyptian grain ships at this time. Here Paul found other Christians who wanted to hear him preach.

It is mentioned twice that Paul arrived in Rome (Acts 28:14; 28:16). The first mention most likely refers to his entering the greater district of Rome, especially since people came from Rome to hear Paul preach. The second mention is Paul entering into the actual city of Rome. The journey from Rome to the Forum of Appius was a 33-mile walk and another ten miles to the Three Taverns. Most likely Paul met these Christians in these towns after he left Puteoli and along his way to Rome. Paul did not establish the first church in Rome; rather, it was already established (Rom. 1:8-15; 15:22-24; 16:3-16). These were the first Roman Christians, to whom he had written three years earlier (in 57 AD) in his epistle to the Romans.

They traveled 130 miles on foot to Rome, which would have taken about five days of hard walking through hilly country and passing through the Pontine Marshes. In Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself under the most lenient form of military custody, with only one soldier guarding him. This means Rome did not see Paul as a very important person or give much validity to his charges due to the weakness of the case. Knowing Paul, he would have seen this as an opportunity to share the gospel with the guards, who would have been rotated out every four hours (Phil. 1:13; 2:19-30).

This is the end of the "we" sections (Acts 16:10-40; 20:5-21:18; 27:1-28:16). We know that Luke and Aristarchus remained with Paul for some time. Luke would come back and visit, for he was with him in Rome when Paul wrote his epistles to Philemon and to the Colossians (Phile. 24; Col. 4:14). This brings Luke's account of the spread of the gospel to a climax. The gospel had gone from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, and now to Rome, which was not the uttermost part of the earth but had the means to take it to the uttermost parts (Acts 1:8).

⁹¹ Robert C. Tannehill. *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, pp. 2:342-342.

⁹² See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 770.

28:17-22 Despite everything the Jews had put Paul through, he once again went to the Jews in order to preach the gospel to the Jews first and then the Gentiles in Rome (Acts 13:42-48; 18:5-7; 19:8-10). This means that clarifying Paul's relationship with the Jews was extremely important to Luke. Paul invited the Jewish elders to his house in order to explain to them why he was in Rome so that they would not come to false conclusions based on rumors and to share the gospel with them so that they might come to a saving faith found in Jesus' resurrection, which is the hope of Israel. Paul began by assuring them that, despite what many Jews had done to him, he had nothing against them. He stated that the Roman authorities in Judea had already declared him innocent and that he had appealed to Caesar because the Jews in Judea had challenged the Romans' verdict, not because Paul had any grievance against the Jews. Paul could have brought a countersuit against the Jews of Jerusalem, and he would have had a strong case according to Roman law. Ultimately, he was in chains not because he opposed them but because of his hope for their salvation (Acts 23:6; 24:21; 26:6-8).

The elders responded by stating that they had no knowledge of what had happened in Jerusalem because no letters had been sent and nobody who had come from Israel brought any news. They had heard of the message Paul preached and were interested in hearing it for themselves.

28:23-28 The Jews arranged to meet with Paul again with a greater number in order to hear his message. All day he preached to them, explaining how the First Testament had spoken of Jesus and His resurrection. Once again, the Jews were divided over whether to believe his message. When they began to reject the gospel, Paul quoted Isa. 6:9-10, which was about Yahweh telling the prophet Isaiah to preach a message of repentance to Israel so that they would not be judged by Him and be carried off into exile by the Babylonians. Yet Yahweh told Isaiah that they would not listen or repent. When Paul applied this passage to them, they became angry and left. At this, Paul told them he was going to the Gentiles since they had rejected the message of Yahweh.

The first time the Jews massively rejected the gospel message Paul preached, in Acts 13, he quoted Isa. 49:6 (Acts 13:47) to emphasize that he was going to go to the Gentiles. Now, in this last Jewish rejection of the gospel, he quoted Isa. 6:9-10 to emphasize the Jews' rejection of the gospel. This does not mean that this was the final and fateful turning away from sharing the gospel with the Jews and that only the Gentiles would hear the gospel from this point on. Rather, to the Jews first and the Gentiles second would continue to be the pattern as the Jews continued to reject the gospel, while they should have been the ones going to the Gentiles as Paul did. Even though the Jewish community as a social entity, controlled by its corrupt leadership, was deaf and blind, the fact that some were persuaded gives hope that some in Israel would still come to Jesus Christ. The conclusion of Acts is part triumph and part tragedy.

28:30-31 For two whole years (60–62 AD), while Paul was in custody in Rome, he continued to preach the gospel with all his boldness and no hindrance from the Roman government even though he was in their custody. It was during these two years that Paul wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon.

Then the book of Acts ends abruptly, leaving the modern reader with two big questions: What happened to Paul after Acts? What about the trial before Caesar? Some say Luke was writing Acts at the time Paul was in custody in Rome, and the story caught up with Luke, and therefore he did not know what happened after that because it had not happened yet. Or perhaps Luke died before he could finish writing.

The problem with either of these views is, first, Acts 28:30 indicates there were two years after the story of Acts, and Luke knew what happened in those two years and that something happened after them. Second, Acts 27:24 makes it clear that Luke knew Paul appeared before the emperor, so he knew enough to write about it. Third, Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1 suggest that a good amount of time separates the time of Luke writing the book and the events of the book.⁹³

Some say Paul was executed. This still does not explain why Luke did not record it. This is also not likely since many of Paul's letters make it clear that he went on to other places in the Roman empire and wrote letters from those locations. While Paul was in custody in Rome during the two years Luke mentioned (Acts 28:30), he wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon. After his release and departure from Rome, he wrote the pastoral letters of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus sometime between 63 and 66 AD. Paul spoke of meeting Timothy in Ephesus later (1 Tim. 3:14; 4:13).

Most scholars believe that Paul stood before Caesar and that after two years in custody, the charges against him were dismissed and he was released in 62 AD. Many times Luke has made it clear that Paul was not guilty of any crime under Roman law and that many Roman officials said he was guilty of no crime. The charges against him had to do with Jewish law and theology, and to that there was no evidence against him, nor anyone from Jerusalem to press charges or testify against him. Mostly likely the Sanhedrin had decided to avoid the very expensive expense of sending a delegation to Rome, thus they had to withdraw from the case.⁹⁴ Likewise, none of this mattered to Caesar and Roman law. Nero at this time was still under the tutelage of the great Roman philosopher, the Stoic Seneca, who preached clemency as a major virtue, and he was helped along by the prefect of the Praetorian Guard, Afranius Burrus, with whom Paul would have had contact since he was under guard by Burrus's men. Thus he was released in 62 AD but was later taken captive again and executed during the reign of Nero during the Neronian crackdown following the fire of 64 AD and when Nero had gone off the rails mentally.

“The words of Eusebius, though from a much later era, should not be ignored or dismissed since they are based on earlier tradition. He states: ‘tradition has it that after defending himself the Apostle was again sent on the ministry of preaching, and coming a second time to the same city suffered martyrdom under Nero... We have said this to show that Paul's martyrdom was not accomplished during the sojourn in Rome which Luke describes’ (Hist. Ecl. 2.22.1-7). This is also what the much earlier testimony of Clement of Rome (see J Clem. 5.5-7) suggests, and one would think he was in a perfect position to know what transpired. This text may in fact suggest Paul was exiled, perhaps in the ‘West’ in A.D. 62, but that in any case he preached at the furthest reaches of the West, which would likely mean Spain, a place Paul stated in Rom. 15:24 he wished to reach.”⁹⁵

But this does not answer the second question of why Luke did not record the trial before Caesar and Paul's release. Would the original audience have felt that this ending was abrupt? There are other books that end abruptly as well, like the book of Kings. It ends with Judah in exile and the last king of Judah, Jehoiachin, being let out of prison in Babylon by the Babylonian king and set

⁹³ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p.807.

⁹⁴ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 791.

⁹⁵ Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 792.

at his table as a free man, and then it ends. The book of Jonah ends with Yahweh asking Jonah a question, and the reader never gets Jonah's response.

In the ancient world, there was a widespread belief in the Greco-Roman world that the gods punished the wicked, and so misfortunes at sea were no accident. This can be seen in many Greek stories, the most famous being *The Odyssey*, where the Greek god Poseidon entraps Odysseus on the sea for years as a punishment for blinding his son. Conversely, rescue from such perils at sea are also the work of the gods in granting rewards or favors. The trial in Rome is omitted because a Gentile audience would see it as superfluous, for Paul's rescue at sea had already demonstrated his innocence.⁹⁶

The abrupt end also only seems abrupt if the book of Acts is seen as a biography of Paul, but it is not. Rather, Luke was writing a historical work about the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome in order to defend the legitimacy of the Christian movement and message. Luke's interest primarily lay in the message that Paul preached and the growth of the social movement he was a part of, not Paul's life specifically. Therefore, Paul's arrival in Rome was a fitting end to Luke's historical record about the spread of the gospel through the Roman world.⁹⁷ It is then understood by the reader that the gospel making it to Rome, the major hub of the world, means the gospel would most certainly go to the ends of the world. After all, if the obstacles and calamities, the demonic, antagonistic humans, and the forces of nature could not stop the gospel from getting to Rome, then nothing could stop it from going to the uttermost parts of the world. The summary statement is the unstoppable nature of the Word of Yahweh.

“Luke–Acts is basically a story about a mission. Acts 28:28 comments on the mission's future. The narrative prepares for this comment by reports of the Gentiles' friendly response to Paul on the voyage and the Roman Jews' contrasting response. When we recognize the careful reflection on the possibilities of mission among both Gentiles and Jews in Acts 27–28, the impression that the ending of Acts is abrupt and unsuitable is considerably reduced.”⁹⁸

“In seeming to leave his book unfinished, he [Luke] was implying that the apostolic proclamation of the gospel in the first century began a story that will continue until the consummation of the kingdom in Christ (Acts 1:11).”⁹⁹

Luke ends the story abruptly so that the reader does not think that Acts is a biography of Paul. The book did not start with Paul, and it does not end with Paul. It ends with all kinds of people coming to hear the gospel without restriction (Acts 28:30-31). The book started with all the disciples and then abruptly moved to Peter with no mention as to what happened to the other disciples. Then it abruptly moved on to Stephen, then Phillip, and then Paul, with no mention of what happened to any of them. Likewise, there is no mention of what happened to Barnabas, Silas, Apollos, Luke, or any others. The pattern fits as the book ends abruptly on Paul. The book is not a biography of any of these people. It is not the Acts of the apostles but the Acts of the Holy Spirit. The point is that the Spirit is at work in each person, and though their lives come to

⁹⁶ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 769.

⁹⁷ See Ben Witherington III. *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 792-793.

⁹⁸ Robert C. Tannehill. *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, p. 2:343.

⁹⁹ Richard N. Longenecker. “The Acts of the Apostles,” p. 573.

an end, the Holy Spirit and His work do not. The Holy Spirit continues to work in each person who comes to Christ in order to spread the gospel throughout the world with no restriction.

Conclusion

The main focus of the book of Acts was on giving an account of how the gospel spread from the Jewish world of Jerusalem and Judea to the ends of the Gentile world of the Roman empire (Acts 1:8). Luke begins where his previous book, the gospel of Luke, left off, with the resurrection of Jesus, which makes possible the coming and indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2) in fulfillment of Scriptures. It is the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit that makes the spread of the gospel possible despite all opposition. Through the many speeches, Luke emphasizes the first main point of the gospel, that Jesus Christ's death and resurrection makes salvation possible as the Scriptures had promised and are the hope of Israel's restoration from exile as Yahweh had promised.

It is through not only the speeches in the book but mostly the ministries of Peter, Philip, Paul, Barnabas, Apollos, and others that Luke emphasizes the second main point, that the gospel is for the Jews and the Gentiles, to not only restore the Jews back to Yahweh but to bring unity between the two groups as one new covenant people of Yahweh. Though the gospel was for the Jews first, it was not because the Gentiles were second-class citizens in the Kingdom of Yahweh but because the Jews were chosen in order to go to the Gentiles. And they were the ones who should have had a better understanding of Yahweh and His plan of redemption for the world as spoken through the law and the prophets in order to teach the Gentiles. And though the Jews continuously rejected the gospel, they were and are never excluded from salvation; rather, the church is called to go to them in order to bring them back into the fold.

The spread of the gospel was made possible only by the power of the Holy Spirit, who emboldened and gifted the believers to preach the gospel courageously and eloquently. They never passed up an opportunity to share the gospel, even in the face of all kinds of opposition and when their own survival was at risk. The Holy Spirit supernaturally empowered them to spread the Word, and nothing can stop the Word of Yahweh.

Acts ends by making the point that the same Holy Spirit who was working in all these people is also at work in all believers throughout time. The same power that came upon them at Pentecost is the same power that comes upon the believers when they accept Christ, empowering and emboldening them to go out and share the gospel, doing miracles, laying hands on the sick, and speaking in tongues. Not that Yahweh is saying all will be able to demand miracles, but they will be able to do it when Yahweh wills it for the purpose of spreading the gospel.

And just as neither the Roman Empire, the Jewish elite, the storm, nor the viper could stop the spread of the gospel, so no power throughout history nor into the future can stop it. This does not mean the church throughout history should model themselves exactly the way the early church did it, but it does mean the same God with the same power and the same mission and the same ways—in that He works outside the box—is at work in the church today.

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