

Paul the Jew — According to Acts

Reidar Hvalvik⁶²

When Paul — or rather: Saul — is introduced in the book of Acts, he is described as a zealous Jew persecuting the first Jesus-believers. On the road to Damascus he had a radical experience which is normally called his “conversion”, a term which denotes a turning around, a change of mind. According to modern usage, Paul’s conversion would thus mean that he turned away from Judaism and became a Christian. Such an interpretation does not, however, accord with the record in Acts: after his “conversion” Paul still talks and acts as a Jew, even as a Pharisee, and is loyal to his people and to his Jewish heritage.

The Paul whom we meet in his letters, particularly in Galatians, however, seems to be another Paul. There he stresses freedom from the Mosaic law and fights against those who demand circumcision and other forms of Torah observance.

These observations raise two questions. First, why does Luke emphasize Paul’s Jewishness? And second, is his picture of Paul trustworthy? In other words: is the “Lukan Paul” (the Paul described by the author of Acts) compatible with the “Pauline Paul”? We will try to answer these questions in this article. As an introduction, we will give a short survey of how Paul is depicted in Acts, focusing on his Jewishness.

The Description of Paul in Acts

Although Paul is the central figure in the last part of Acts (chapters 13-28), most of the biographical information given about him is limited to the four defense speeches in chapters 22-26 (before the crowd in Jerusalem, before the Sanhedrin, before the governor Felix, and before king Agrippa). In these speeches, Paul presents himself as a Jew, loyal to the law. The presentation may be summarized as follows:

1. Paul was raised as a Jew and educated at the feet of Gamaliel “in the law of our fathers” (22:3). He presents himself as “a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee” (23:6), and stresses that from the very beginning he lived as a Pharisee (26:5).

2. The God whom Paul serves is none other than “the God of our fathers” (22:14). Paul’s continuity with his ancestral faith is very much in focus in his defence before Felix:

I worship the God of our fathers as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, and I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked (24:14-15).

Again and again, Paul repeats that the charges against him are closely connected with his hope in the resurrection (23:6; 24:15; 26:6-8), a hope which he holds in common with most other Jews.

⁶² REIDAR HVALVIK has his doctorate from the Norwegian Lutheran School of Theology in Oslo where he also teaches New Testament Theology. He serves as Chairman of the Caspari Center Council.

3. After his “conversion” Paul continued to behave as a pious Jew. This is clear, for example, from the fact that he visits the temple to pray (22:17).⁶³ Furthermore, he describes the purpose of his last journey to Jerusalem as being to worship (24:11) or to “present offerings” (24:17).

4. Paul is loyal to the Jewish authorities. When he speaks against Ananias, he excuses himself by saying that he did not know that he was a high priest (23:2-5).

The picture based on Acts 22-26 can easily be supplemented by incidents elsewhere in the same book. Paul’s loyalty to his people is further evidenced by his missionary method: he always begins his witness in the synagogues, preaching the gospel to the Jews first (cf. 13:14; 14:1; 17:10; 18:4-6; 19:8f). His loyalty to the law and Jewish customs is exemplified by his participation in Jewish religious festivals (cf. 20:16) and his willingness to participate in a nazirite vow (21:18-28; cf. 18:18). Even in connection with such a burning issue as circumcision he acts according to the law by circumcising Timothy (16:3).

This brief presentation leaves no doubt about the “color” of Luke’s picture of Paul: it emphasizes his Jewishness. Why? Today there seems to be broad consensus within New Testament scholarship that Luke depicted Paul as a loyal Jew *for theological reasons*. A popular explanation is that Luke is defending Paul in connection with the charges brought against him by Jews or Jewish Christians, charges such as the one recorded in Acts 21:21: “that you teach all the Jews who live among the gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs.” In other words: “Luke’s brief biography of Paul is more than a report; it is an apology, arguing that Paul was ‘orthodox’ and belonged within the family of Jews who believed Jesus to be the Messiah.”⁶⁴

Although much can be said in support of this view, I think it is even more likely that the presentation of Paul is part of Luke’s overall purpose in Acts. Since this is not the place to discuss this question in detail,⁶⁵ I shall limit myself to a summary of the solution which I myself find most convincing.

At the time Acts was written, a majority of the Christian communities were composed of gentiles. Even if a considerable number of Jews had come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, the majority of the Jews were to be found in the synagogues rather than in the churches. This reality undoubtedly gave rise to a burning question: were the promises of the Old Testament fulfilled within the church, among the Christians? According to Luke, the answer was affirmative. In line with the promises, the gospel was first proclaimed to the Jews and was accepted by a considerable number of them (cf. Acts 2:41; 4:4; 5:14). The fact that the majority of the Jews had rejected the gospel did not mean that God’s word had failed (cf. Rom 9:6). The promises found their fulfilment in the *Jews and Gentiles* who came to faith in Jesus. Together they constituted the true people of God.

⁶³ It should also be noted that the Lord there appeared to him in a vision and commissioned him — just like the prophet Isaiah (Acts 22:17-21; cf. Isa 6:1-10).

⁶⁴ Donald Juel, *Luke-Acts: The Promise of History* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 86 — depending on Jacob Jervell, “Paul: The Teacher of Israel”, in *Luke and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), 153-183.

⁶⁵ See further, Robert Maddox, *The Purpose of Luke-Acts* (FRLANT 126; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982). My own interpretation is found in my (Norwegian) book, *Fra Jerusalem til jordens ender. Hovedtrekk i Apostlenes gjerninger* (Oslo: Credo forlag, 1992²), 23f, 131f.

This was Luke's conviction. For this reason he was eager to emphasize the *continuity* between Old Testament history and the history of the early church. He does this by emphasizing two factors:

1) He underscores the fact that the God who is acting is "the God of the people of Israel" (13:17), "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (3:13; 7:32), "the God of our fathers" (3:13; 5:30; 7:32; 22:14; 24:14). It is this God who raised Jesus from the dead (3:13; 5:30) and who chose Paul to be his witness (22:14).

2) He repeatedly focuses on God's promises and their fulfilment (cf. 2:39; 7:17). Typical is the record of Paul's saying in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch: "We tell you the good news: what God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm ..." (13:32).

In all probability, Luke's presentation of Paul should be seen in this perspective. The continuity between the people of Israel and the church comes to expression in Paul's person and teaching. Paul is a Jew and continues to live as a Jew — even if he has come to faith in Jesus. He still serves the God of his fathers and in his teaching says "nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen" (26:22; cf. 28:23). Moreover, Paul's missionary work explains why and how the gentiles were included in the people of God. Paul proclaimed the gospel first to the Jews, but when they (read: the majority of the Jews) rejected it, he turned to the gentiles (13:46; 18:6; 28:28) — quite in accordance with the promises in the Old Testament and his own calling (13:47; 22:21; 26:17f).

This way of explaining Luke's presentation of Paul seems well founded, and takes into account the fact that Luke writes not only as a historian but also as a theologian. However, in a situation where many scholars tend to focus solely on Luke as a theologian, I think it is necessary to emphasize that Luke was *both a historian and a theologian*. And I think it is likely that Luke managed to present his own theological concerns without creating a story *ex nihilo* — out of nothing. Undoubtedly he made a selection among the traditions available to him, stressing certain features which suited his purposes and coloring the material in varying degrees with his own language. But Luke wanted to be a historian (cf. Luke 1:1-4) and should be regarded as "no less trustworthy than other historians of antiquity."⁶⁶ In general, Graeco-Roman historians had three purposes: "History ought to be *truthful, useful, and entertaining*, but it should not be entertaining at the expense of truth or utility."⁶⁷ Since Luke is concerned with the reliability and certainty of the instruction which Theophilus had received (cf. Luke 1:4), it is most likely that he was also concerned about the truth of his own account. To what extent he succeeded in giving a reliable historical report is, of course, another matter. Undoubtedly there are historical problems with Acts.⁶⁸ However, there is no reason to radically suspect the books value as a historical source of early Christianity — including the picture of Paul. To this question we now turn.

⁶⁶ Martin Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity* (London: SCM, 1979), 60.

⁶⁷ David E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 95; cf. W.C. van Unnik, "Luke's Second Book and the Rules of Hellenistic Historiography", in *Les Actes des Apôtres: Traditions, rédaction, théologie*, ed. J. Kremer (BETL 48; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1979), 37-60 (50-51).

⁶⁸ For a short but helpful survey of the historical problems in Acts, see Gerhard A. Krodel, *Proclamation Commentaries: Acts* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 90-113.

The “Lukan” and the “Pauline” Paul

To what extent does Luke’s picture of Paul fit the picture Paul gives of himself in his letters? If we start with Paul’s Jewishness in general, Paul plainly expresses this himself. He calls himself “a Hebrew born of Hebrews” (Phil 3:6; cf. 2 Cor 11:22), a statement which corresponds to the information in Acts that Paul spoke Hebrew (or rather, Aramaic) (21:40; 22:2; cf. 26:14). Twice he says that he was a member of the tribe of Benjamin (Rom 11:1; Phil 3:5), a detail which fits the information that his Jewish name was Saul (Acts 7:58ff; 13:9); in all probability he was named after the most distinguished member of that tribe, the first king of Israel (cf. 1 Sam 9:1f). In line with the record in Acts Paul also claims to be a Pharisee (Phil 3:5) and stresses his zealous attitude to the traditions of the fathers (Gal 1:14).

With regard to his theology, the “Pauline Paul” is eager to stress the connection between God and people of Israel. The gospel he proclaims is “promised beforehand through his [God’s] prophets in the Holy Scriptures” (Rom 1:2); what happened to Christ is “according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3f). Paul is proud of being a descendant of Abraham (Rom 11:1) and frequently uses his ancestor as an example (cf. Rom 4:1ff; Gal 3:6ff). His Jewish heritage lies in the background of all his letters. Nor can there be any doubt of his sincere sympathy towards his own people — even when many of them rejected his gospel (cf. Rom 9:1ff; 10:1).

In general terms, therefore, few, if any, scholars would deny the Jewishness of Paul and his theology. When it comes to his practice, however, opinions differ. We shall thus focus on some disputed features concerning Paul’s Jewishness as recorded in Acts.

1. We start with Luke’s picture of Paul’s missionary practice, a practice which presupposes a continuing relationship with the synagogue. When Luke depicts Paul as always visiting the synagogues this is, according to a widespread opinion, nothing more than an expression of “the Lukan scheme of going to the Jews first”.⁶⁹ In other words, it is part of Luke’s theological concern and, consequently, its historicity is suspect. In his treatment of this question, E.P. Sanders asserts that the picture in Acts differs quite substantially from the picture which emerges from Paul’s letters. There, his ministry is restricted to the gentiles (cf. Rom 11:13; Gal 2:9), with no special concern for the Jews in the diaspora. “Paul was apostle to the Gentiles. So he styled himself, and so he acted.”⁷⁰

Paul undoubtedly understood himself to be an apostle to the gentiles. But that did not exclude him from also embracing the Jews. This situation is clearly presupposed, for example, in Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 9:20 (“to the Jews I became as a Jew in order to win Jews”).⁷¹ His continued contact with the synagogues is also confirmed by the fact that he “five times ... received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one” (2 Cor 11:24).⁷² Since the context clearly refers

⁶⁹ Gerd Lüdemann, *Early Christianity according to the Traditions in Acts: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 159 (in relation to Acts 14:1; cf. a similar evaluation of 17:2-3, p. 185).

⁷⁰ E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 190; cf. 181.

⁷¹ Cf. Günther Bornkamm, “The Missionary Stance of Paul in I Corinthians and in Acts”, in *Studies in Luke-Acts: Essays presented in honour of Paul Schubert*, ed. Leander E. Keck and J. Louis Martyn (London: SPCK, 1968), 194-207 (200); and Arland Hultgren, *Paul’s Gospel and Mission: The Outlook from his Letter to the Romans* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 137-143. I am not convinced by E.P. Sanders’ argument to the contrary (187ff).

⁷² On this, see A.E. Harvey, “Forty Strokes Save One: Social Aspects of Judaizing and Apostasy”, in

to his apostolic ministry there can be little doubt that these incidents are related to his missionary work among Jews.

It has been argued on the basis of Galatians 2:7-9 (“we should go to the gentiles and they to the circumcised”) that Paul restricted his ministry to the gentiles. This is an unconvincing argument, however. In the framework of the texts just mentioned, I think it is more plausible to understand the “Jerusalem agreement” as implying a division of missionary responsibility in geographical rather than ethnic terms.⁷³

The picture of Paul’s missionary practice found in Acts is also supported by Paul’s theology as it is reflected in Romans. In the same letter in which he calls himself an apostle to the gentiles (11:13), he stresses that the Jews have a prerogative of the gospel (1:16).⁷⁴ Paul also demonstrates his deep concern for the salvation of Israel (cf. 9:1-3; 10:1) and explicitly links his ministry to the gentiles with the hope that he may save some of his fellow Jews (11:13-14).⁷⁵ It would therefore be natural for Paul to start in the synagogue. Even if Paul wanted to reach gentiles, the synagogue was a useful place to be, since not only Jews but also a considerable number of god-fearers, i.e., gentiles who believed in the God of Israel and observed some part of the Torah, congregated there. The synagogue was thus an important bridgehead for his mission to the gentiles.⁷⁶

2. According to Acts 16:3, Paul took steps to circumcise Timothy. How could the author of Galatians who says, “I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all” (5:2), himself circumcise someone else? In Galatians, Paul further emphasizes that the Jerusalem authorities did not even compell the Greek Titus to be circumcised (2:3). According to one scholar, “the statement about the circumcision of Timothy stands in direct contradiction to the theology of Paul”; for Paul, “circumcision is never a matter of indifference”.⁷⁷

Although this conclusion seems convincing, on a second reading it loses much of its validity. The situation in Galatia was quite different from the circumstances of Timothy’s circumcision. According to Acts 16:1, Timothy was the offspring of a mixed marriage: his mother was a Jewess, his father a Greek. According to modern thinking, Timothy was thus a Jew. This may also have been the case in New Testament times. Although the principle that Jewish descent was traced matrilineally cannot be dated with certainty before the Mishnah (see *m.Qidd.* 3:12; *m.Yeb.* 7:5), Acts seems to presuppose the same principle.⁷⁸ Luke explains Paul’s action by saying that the Jews

Alternative Approaches to New Testament Study, ed. A.E. Harvey (London: SPCK, 1985), 79-96, especially 93.

⁷³ Cf. Bengt Holmberg, *Paul and Power: The Structure of Authority in the Primitive Church as Reflected in the Pauline Epistles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 30.

⁷⁴ On this text, see my article, “‘To the Jew First and also to the Greek’: The Meaning of Romans 1:16b”, *Mishkan* 10 (1989), 1-8.

⁷⁵ On Paul’s view of the salvation of Israel, see my article, “A ‘Separate Way’ for Israel? A Critical Examination of a Current Interpretation of Romans 11:25-27”, *Mishkan* 16 (1992), 12-29.

⁷⁶ On the god-fearers, see R. Hvalvik, *The Struggle for Scripture and Covenant: The Purpose of the Epistle of Barnabas and Jewish-Christian Competition in the Second Century* (WUNT 2/82; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1996), 249-267.

⁷⁷ Philipp Vielhauer, “On the ‘Paulinism’ of Acts”, in *Studies on Luke-Acts: Essays presented in honour of Paul Schubert*, eds. Leander E. Keck and J. Louis Martyn (London: SPCK, 1968), 33-50 (40, 41).

⁷⁸ See Luke T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Sacra Pagina; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), 283f. For a different interpretation, see Shaye J.D. Cohen, “Was Timothy Jewish (Acts 16:1-3)? Patristic Exegesis,

“all knew that Timothy’s father was a Greek” (16:3). The clear implication is that Timothy was expected to be a Jew and therefore to have been circumcised, but that his father had prevented his circumcision — being a gentile. In order not to cause difficulties amongst the Jews in the area Paul thus circumcised him, following the missionary principle stated in 1 Corinthians 9:20f.

The case of Titus was quite different. He was a Greek and accompanied Paul to a meeting in Jerusalem where the issue under discussion was whether circumcision was necessary for salvation. Some maintained that unless the gentiles were circumcised they could not be saved (Acts 15:1; cf. Gal 2:4). In such a situation Paul was unshakeable: he would not accept circumcision and Torah observance as conditions for salvation. That meant setting aside God’s grace, “for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” (Gal 2:21).

Ultimately, however, circumcision was an indifferent matter for Paul; he explicitly says that “in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value; the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (Gal 5:6; cf. 6:15; 1 Cor 7:19). Paul thus had no objections against circumcision among Jewish believers; for them it was part of their Jewish identity. As soon as circumcision was preached among gentiles, however, Paul raised fundamental objections because it impinged on the gospel and threatened Christian freedom.

3. Another example of Paul’s attitude to Jewish customs and rites lies in his observance of Jewish religious festivals, such as Pentecost (20:16). The question is, however, if Paul actually observed certain days. Did he not consider “every day alike” (Rom 14:5)? Would the man who was dismayed that the Galatians observed “special days and months and seasons and years” (Gal 4:10; cf. Col 2:16) observe Jewish festivals? Again, we have to stress the difference in circumstances: Paul was a Jew; the Galatians were not. As F.F. Bruce points out:

They were Gentiles: there was no reason for them to adopt the observance of the Jewish sacred calendar, least of all to adopt it as a matter of legal obligation. Once he himself had inherited the observance of that sacred calendar as a legal obligation, but now he had learned to exercise complete freedom regarding its observance or non-observance, and it was deplorable that gentile believers who had no ancestral motivation for doing so should place themselves under the yoke of the commandments in this or any other way.”⁷⁹

It is clear from Paul’s letters that he regarded Christ as “the end of the law” (Rom 10:4; cf. Gal 3:25; Eph 2:15; Col 2:14). That meant freedom from the law with all its commandments and regulations. Freedom, however, is not the same as non-observance. For Paul, freedom also meant freedom to observe the law if that served his ministry. What freedom meant is clearly expressed in the important passage in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, a text already referred to more than once:

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this

Rabbinic Law, and Matrilineal Descent”, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105 (1986), 251-268.

⁷⁹ F.F. Bruce, “Is the Paul of Acts the Real Paul?”, *Bulletin of John Rylands Library* 58 (1975-76), 282-305 (295).

for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

Although this passage should not be used as a blanket explanation to cover inconsistencies of any kind neither should its significance be minimized.⁸⁰ In fact, it provides a plausible explanation of Paul's continuing contact with the synagogue, his participation in temple worship, observance of Jewish festivals, performance of a nazirite vow, and participation in the vows of others.⁸¹ The last example illustrates the point particularly well. To make a nazirite vow was a purely voluntary undertaking, not a general commandment. It consequently did nothing to compromise Paul's law-free gospel at the same time as it illustrates his freedom to observe the law. It has been argued that the motivation behind his participation in the vow (Acts 21:20-24) is "highly suspect".⁸² Admittedly the whole episode is "imposed" on Paul; he did not choose to make the vow himself. It could be that he was slightly hesitant but nevertheless wanted to demonstrate that he was willing to become "all things to all men". We do not know. What seems clear, however, is that Paul certainly could have acted as Luke says that he did. His letter contains no evidence that he hindered Jesus-believing Jews from continuing to live as Jews. On the contrary, he admonishes his readers to *remain* in the same state or situation as they were when God called them (1 Cor 7:17.24) — and that includes being a circumcised Jew (7:18). The point is made clear by the Greek word *peripatein* (v. 17), which means to "walk" and is often used in the sense "to conduct oneself" or "to live". Those who were Jews by birth should go on behaving as Jews.⁸³

Conclusion

Our investigation has shown that the "Lukan Paul" is compatible with the "Pauline Paul". Or, as Jacob Jervell puts it: "The Lukan Paul, the picture of Paul in Acts, is a completion, a filling up of the Pauline one, so that in order to get at the historical Paul, we cannot do without Acts and Luke."⁸⁴ That means that the historical Paul was more multifaceted than some critical scholars would lead us to believe solely on the evidence of the so-called undisputed letters of Paul. It must be remembered, however, that his letters give us only a partial picture of Paul. Jervell is probably right when he says that "that which lies in the shadow in Paul's letters Luke has placed in the sun in Acts."⁸⁵ What lies in the shadow in the letters is precisely the Jewish Paul. For that reason Acts is an indispensable source to the historical Paul, i.e., Paul, the Jew.

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⁸⁰ Bruce, 294.

⁸¹ So also Vielhauer, 39.

⁸² Vielhauer, 39.

⁸³ There was only one possible exception: if their conduct compromised or distorted the gospel for gentile believers. In a mixed congregation this could be a problem, as it became in Antioch; cf. Gal 2:11ff.

⁸⁴ Jacob Jervell, "Paul in the Acts of the Apostles: Tradition, History, Theology", *The Unknown Paul: Essays on Luke-Acts and Early Christian History* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 68-76 (70).

⁸⁵ Jervell, "Paul in the Acts", 71.