2005

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Published Citation
UNCHAINED MINISTRY:
PAUL’S ROMAN CUSTODY (ACTS 21-28) AND
THE SOCIOPOLITICAL OUTLOOK OF THE BOOK OF ACTS

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For nearly two centuries, hypotheses concerning apologetic agendas in the Acts of the Apostles have fueled lively debates about the ways the book might pronounce words of legitimacy or denunciation upon various groups or systems. Proposals about apologetic messages expressed in Acts and about the most profitable methods for identifying them have eluded consensus, even as interpreters have endeavored to correct the reductionism inherent in earlier studies, such as a propensity to posit sharp distinctions between political apologetic and religious apologetic. Recent explorations of this landscape base their claims about Lukan apologetic in more nuanced approaches into the literary, rhetorical, and cultural contexts of first-century Imperial life, sometimes even questioning the value of employing the term apologetic.


Acts and Ethics

Despite the increased complexity of these inquiries, basic questions continue to occupy prominent places in scholars’ discourse about possible “apologetic” tendencies of Acts. One such question concerns the fledgling Christian movement’s relationship to Roman rule: What kind of harmony or discord does Acts envisage, as the church negotiates the social and political terrains regulated by Roman authority? Interpreters have reached a wide range of conclusions on this matter. Some—including Richard Cassidy and Walter Pilgrim—essentially deny that Acts offers positive apologetic commendations of Rome; these scholars interpret the book as expressing a decidedly negative view of Roman authority and as depicting Jesus’ followers assuming a “nondeferential” stance vis-à-vis the Empire. Others—often following the durable proposals of Ernst Haenchen or the *apologia pro imperio* argument of Paul Walaskay—find in Acts either a church that is conciliatory toward Roman power, or a state willing to confer positive benefits upon believers.

Any treatment of the book’s message about the relationship between the Christian gospel and the Roman state must obviously consider scenes where representatives of both groups directly engage one another. The accounts of

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6. The *gospel* functions herein as a shorthand expression to denote the general content of the proclamation delivered in the narrative of Acts, thus approximating Luke’s own use of the word *euangélion* in Acts 15:7; 20:24 (cf. *euangélizō* in Acts 17:18). For the purposes of this essay, the *gospel* also extends to the community of persons who have been transformed and compelled by the message of the gospel they declare. Other terms in Acts
Paul's arrest, detention, forensic examinations, and transfer to Rome in Acts 21:33-28:31 form the primary, but not sole, context for these meetings. In these chapters' tales of Paul's encounters with Roman authorities and institutions, we discover the greatest amount of data for exploring the narrative's "sociopolitical outlook," or the implied author's ("Luke's") attitudes toward Roman power and his vision of the ramifications of the church's divinely-impelled life and witness within its broader sociopolitical context. Since Luke articulates this outlook, of course, in the form of a narrative account, an analysis of the narrative dynamics of Acts illuminates contours of the vision as well as the variety of ways that it receives expression or literary instantiation.

Interpreters of Acts 21-28 have, of course, profitably directed their attention to these chapters' legal and juridical questions, to the content and rhetoric of Paul's so-called defense speeches, and to the actions and declarations of Paul's custodians. This essay contends that a narrative analysis of the display a comparable organic connection between the proclamation and the community. See the use of ἄφοδος (Acts 9:2; 18:25-26; 19:9, 23; 24:14, 22) and ὅ λόγος (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 13:26; 49; 15:7, 35-36; 17:11; 18:5; 19:20).

story of Paul’s prolonged detention warrants consideration in any attempt to determine Luke’s outlook on the difference the gospel makes for the Imperial context in which it is proclaimed. The narrative of Acts envisions the work of the gospel occurring in crucial and significant venues, reorienting and manipulating the world and its sociopolitical structures. As Rome stands as the authority behind and within these particular venues, the activity of these scenes reflects and molds a perspective on the relationship between the church and Roman rule.

The current essay focuses less on pronouncing judgments about the adequacy of specific definitions of Luke’s “apologetic” or “legitimating” interests, and more on exploring features of the narrative world of Acts 21–28. The first order of business is to demonstrate the import of several dimensions of the narrative for any efforts to characterize Luke’s sociopolitical outlook. The essay highlights three aspects of the narrative rhetoric of Acts 21–28 that have typically remained absent from, yet deserve consideration in, studies of Luke’s view of the church in its Roman context. These aspects are: (1) the surprising lack of attention given to physical violence or suffering involved in Paul’s detention; (2) Paul’s abilities, despite his incarceration, to seize opportunities to evangelize new audiences as a prisoner; and (3) Paul’s assumption of roles that defy his status as an imperiled captive. Analysis of these dimensions of Acts will show that Luke presents Paul’s custody as almost completely devoid of vulnerability, humiliation, or answerability to certain elements of political authority. Such a depiction poses implications for the overarching sociopolitical outlook(s) of the narrative. Luke’s story of Paul’s custody dramatizes, in implicit and subtle ways, the Christian gospel frustrating the most concentrated attempts to impede its influence in society, suggesting a kind of resistance that redefines the contours of power in the sociopolitical order. The narrative does more than focalize questions of Roman justice or complicity; it depicts the gospel manipulating and destabilizing the state’s mechanisms of sociopolitical control. There is a confrontational character to this portrayal, suggesting an outlook on the state that is hardly acquiescent, yet also well short of belligerent.

A point of clarification deserves mention before the investigation of the three aspects of Acts 21–28 begins. This essay’s attention to the means by which the story of Paul’s custody articulates the gospel’s implications for

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11-12.
Roman authority does not deny that the majority of narrated activity in Acts 21–28 attempts to demonstrate Paul's fidelity to Jewish hopes and traditions. Paul's defense of both his call and the gospel as rooted in Jewish convictions emerges as the predominant concern of these chapters. At the same time, this defense occurs within (and reacts to) contexts of Roman jurisdiction. These contexts invite us to consider how Paul's overarching identity as a witness to the Christ is or is not affected by the oversight, permissions, and interests of the governing authorities that purport to limit his contact with other members of society. Paul's testimony in these contexts also beckons us to consider the converse: the consequences that his ministry of the gospel has for those same authorities.

**Hardships Diminished and Diverted**

In a surprising development, or at least a marked reorientation of expectations aroused elsewhere in Luke–Acts, the accounts of Paul's custody in Acts 21–28 do not focus on physical violence inflicted upon him. Instead, his carceral environment and his guardians offer him temporary refuge from multiple threats that others pose to him.

Earlier in Acts, Luke ominously foreshadows Paul's fate. A number of premonitions suggests that suffering and powerlessness await Paul. Three familiar scenes indicate that Paul should expect an agonizing end: Jesus' words to Ananias just after Paul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:15-16), Paul's farewell address in Miletus to the elders of the Ephesian church (20:17-38), and the prophecy of Agabus performed in Caesarea (21:8-14). In the first scene (9:15-16), Jesus declares to Ananias that Paul will have to suffer for Jesus' name. The verb suffer renders μακαρίζω, a word that, in every one of its other occurrences in Luke-Acts, refers to events of Jesus' passion or (in two instances) other occasions of serious harm and death. The suffering that Jesus foretells for Paul, therefore, goes beyond hardship created by any rejection or opposition he must face. In the shadow of the cross, Jesus' declaration makes more grisly promises of violence, shame, powerlessness, and probable execution. The second scene (20:17-38), Paul's

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12. For the sake of simplicity, this essay consistently calls Saul/Paul only by his Roman name, even when referring to passages from the narrative prior to the introduction of that cognomen in Acts 13:9.
farewell to the Ephesian elders, comes near the end of his final journey back to Jerusalem. Paul reveals that the Holy Spirit has been telling him to expect “imprisonment and hardships” to greet him (20:23). Again, the predicted “hardships” are not frustrated intentions or disappointments stemming from ideological opposition. The noun θλίψις and the broader context of the address point toward violence. Paul’s farewell and the reactions of his audience anticipate separation, physical hardship, and the certainty of death at the end of his journey. In a third scene (21:8–14), as Paul closes in on Jerusalem, the prophet Agabus—who is developing a reputation for sharing bad news (see 11:28)—ends the party at Philip’s house on a somber note when he ties himself up and announces that the honored guest can himself expect to be bound and handed over to gentiles when he reaches his destination. By having Agabus echo Jesus’ predictions of his passion in Luke 9:44 and 18:32-33, it appears that Luke does not want readers to miss the point. The anguish of

14. Taken alone, v. 23 gives an ambiguous picture of whether Paul refers to warnings of hardship that he has already experienced, to travails he should still expect, or to both. The present tense of διομορφυμαι and μένω adds to the confusion. The wider context, however, adds clarity. After Paul departs Ephesus in Acts 20:1, there follows a sparsely detailed itinerary of his visits to numerous cities. The narrator offers little reason to presume that anything of much significance happens to Paul in these settings (although it is a different story for poor Eutychus). One function of the rapid and recapitulative sense of the itinerary is that Jerusalem stands out as the anticipated telos of Paul’s travels (as established in 19:21; 20:16, 22). Joseph A. Fitzmyer’s translation of v. 23 therefore makes good sense of what Paul says about the Spirit’s revelation to him: “The Holy Spirit has been warning me from city to city that chains and hardships await me” (The Acts of the Apostles [AB 31; New York: Doubleday, 1998], 673). That is, the Spirit has been telling Paul (in the past and present) what awaits him in Jerusalem (in the future). The word διομορφυμαι in v. 23 is likely synecdoche, denoting imprisonment in general (see further n. 22, below).

15. There are four additional occurrences of θλίψις in Luke–Acts. Three describe physical perils (Acts 7:10, 11; 11:19), and the precise sense of the other remains uncertain (Acts 14:22). The unlikelihood of this word referring to any kind of hardship other than physical is magnified by the fact that Luke’s typical terms for resistance and debate (viz., διομορφυμαι, αποδεικνυομαι, αποκαλυπτομαι, αποκαθιστομαι, αρνομαι, and ἐρωτευομαι) rarely appear after Paul begins his final trip to Jerusalem. The only two exceptional instances involve αποδεικνυομαι in Acts 28:19, 22.


other characters in the scene suggests that they perceive what is coming: Paul's fate in the hands of the gentiles will resemble the horrors that his Lord suffered in Jerusalem. So they declare in 21:14, nearly exactly as Jesus did immediately before his arrest (Luke 22:42), τό θέλημα γινέσθω.

Yet, in an unexpected reversal, suspension, or muting of these expectations, Acts 21–28 consistently shields readers from the physical hardships that they were led to believe Paul would endure as a prisoner. In contrast, the narrative depicts Paul's custody effecting a series of dramatic rescues out of potentially threatening situations. Roman soldiers pluck Paul from the violent mob outside the temple (21:30-33). Paul's matter-of-fact, eleventh-hour mention of his citizenship frees him from chaining and scourging in the Roman barracks (22:25-29).

18 Claudius Lysias, the Roman tribune, spirits Paul away from violent members of the Sanhedrin and later transfers him to Caesarea upon learning that his life is imperiled by a plotted ambush (23:9-35). Paul's defense before Felix results in increased leniency in his custodial conditions (24:22-23), as well as frequent opportunities for conversations with the governor and Drusilla (24:24-26). Paul's refusal to return to Jerusalem and his appeal to the emperor avert yet another conspiracy against his life and frustrate Festus's collusive intentions (25:1-12). Paul's legal appeal results in Festus arranging a grand occasion in which Paul offers testimony before King Agrippa, Bernice, and other elites of provincial politics (25:13–26:29). Even when Paul leaves

Luke 18:32). Given the fact that, when Paul is in Jerusalem in Acts 21:27-33, Romans (not Jews) bind him, Agabus's prophecy bears less resemblance to the events that purportedly fulfill it than to Jesus' prediction in Luke. The point is to emphasize that Paul's end will resemble Jesus' end. See further Tannehill, Narrative Unity, 2: 265-66.

18. The narrator does not explicitly declare that the soldiers remove Paul's bonds after his exchange with the tribune in 22:25-29, but the context strongly suggests it (probably explaining the so-called "Western" interpolation after v. 29: "and immediately he released him"). The fear expressed by the soldiers and Lysias makes it doubtful that they would keep Paul physically restrained in any way. The verb ἐλυσεν in v. 30 does not describe removing chains from a shackled Paul; it simply indicates that Paul is taken out of the barracks on the following day, so he can face the Sanhedrin (see F. F. Bruce, The Book of the Acts [rev. ed.; NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988], 422 n. 43). In this case, "released" or "let out" is the preferred translation of ἐλυσεν.

19. The details of Paul's detention in 24:23 remain ambiguous, although the mention of liberty (δωρεάς) and accessibility to friends indicate relative leniency. Even the "keeping" administered by the centurion does not have to imply an especially onerous environment. In Luke–Acts πρόκειται consistently refers to watching or keeping by a guard (see Acts 12:5, 6; 16:23; 25:4, 21; cf. Acts 4:3; 5:18). The term does not necessarily denote confinement to a prescribed space such as a cell or other lockdown conditions (see also LSJ, s.v. πρόκειται and BDAG, πρόκειται).

20. The verb χαρίζομαι in 25:11 indicates Paul's awareness that Festus means to make him a diplomatic gift to the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. He recognizes his value as political capital and the duplicity inherent in Festus's offer to transfer the hearing (v. 9).
the forensic venues and goes to sea as a prisoner, his circumstances remain potentially menacing yet ultimately without tooth: he faces storm, shipwreck, and snakebite with no ill effects (27:13–28:10). In the final two chapters of Acts, it is no longer the case that Paul’s identity as a prisoner results in other people or the legal system protecting him; the accounts of providential preservation in Acts 27–28 intimate that none of Paul’s rescues in Acts 21–28 stem solely or ultimately from the power of human hands or human institutions.

These observations about Paul’s custody do not go so far as to suggest that his conditions resemble luxurious living, only that the narrative’s consistent refusal to speak explicitly or emphatically of suffering and discomfort in Acts 21–28 paints a picture of a very different kind of custody than readers observe earlier in the narrative. Because Luke’s other accounts of detentions make efforts to emphasize the constraints and afflictions that prisoners endure as a result of their witness to Jesus (Acts 5:40-41; 12:4-6; 16:22-24), the contrast in conditions is striking. Even when Paul’s situation appears the most cruel, when he is confined to the Caesarea praetorium for two years (24:27), the scene’s mood is mitigated by the narrator’s attention to Paul’s frequent conversations with the governor. Likewise, at the end of the book, the negative sense of Paul’s “chain” in his Roman dwelling (28:20) is overshadowed by his unfettered freedom to proclaim to all who come to him. Custody in Rome might still prevent Paul from engaging in some activities, but it also is

21. In fact, Paul’s presence has beneficial effects in the face of potential hardship on Malta. After he cures numerous diseases (28:8-9), he and his traveling party (including his military custodians!) receive from the Maltese both goodwill and the material support needed to complete the voyage to Italy.

22. At the end of Felix’s rule, in Acts 24:27, Paul remains “detained” (δεσμύων) in the praetorium complex, not necessarily “chained” (cf. LSJ, s.v. δέσμος). Some commentators point to this word as possible evidence of Paul being held in literal chains, claiming that this is a persistent characteristic of Paul’s incarceration in Caesarea and Rome and that such circumstances indicate the severity and humiliation of his custody (see, e.g., Rapske, *Paul in Roman Custody*, 157, 169, 288-91, 307-12 and Richard J. Cassidy, *Paul in Chains: Roman Imprisonment and the Letters of St. Paul* [New York: Crossroad, 2001], 211-34). Luke’s narrative, however, offers very little evidence that supports Paul being restrained in such a way. The mood of Paul’s stay in the Caesarea praetorium is one of lenient keeping (see n. 18, above). Even in 26:29, when Paul makes an ambiguous reference to his δέσμος, in his defense before Agrippa and others, he appears to be indicating his status as a detainee, not any literal chaining, as suggested by Agrippa’s ensuing use of the same word in an obviously synecdochic sense (26:31). In Acts 28:20 the reference to δάκρυσ may indicate an actual chain, or it could be additional synecdoche. Whatever the case in all these instances, the narrator’s emphasis on Paul’s freedoms and abilities as a prisoner consistently overshadows any sense of hardship. For additional discussion of Luke’s terms for binding and the ambiguity of their application to Paul’s situation in Acts, see Matthew L. Skinner, *Locating Paul: Places of Custody as Narrative Settings in Acts 21–28* (SBLAB 13; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 139-41, 165 n. 46.
hardly oppressive and does not prohibit the testimony that Jesus called him to deliver (see 23:11).

Expectations of Paul’s ultimate demise never dissipate completely, however, for they hover over Acts 21–28 and lurk in the shadows at the end of the story. The narrative implies that the “two whole years” (28:30) in Rome are Paul’s last. But the relative ease of Paul’s entire extended detention, precisely in stark contrast to the repeated promises of hardship, nevertheless invites us to regard his experiences as peculiar, accentuating the deeds Paul is able to perform and minimizing the elements of peril or subjugation associated with his custody. When Paul’s sufferings are deferred, when he finds safe space as a prisoner, the implication is that his imprisonment can and will serve a different kind of function, at least for the time being.

An Incarcerated Evangelist

Tales of sufferings averted and narrow escapes make for thrilling adventure and perhaps also strong acclamations of divine authority, as Richard I. Pervo argues. But there is also more to the story. The narrative emphases of Acts 21–28 extend beyond insinuations that physical limitations pose no match for God and God’s agents, or that Paul is exceptionally clever in his ability to avoid certain hardships. Paul’s circumstances, insofar as they provide him with unexpected relative safety, permit chances for him to continue his missionary efforts. He can still perform this work, even as his detention attempts to restrict or halt it. This constitutes the second aspect of Acts 21–28: as a prisoner, Paul leverages his situation, capitalizing on unique opportunities that custody affords him to evangelize new audiences composed of prominent figures who lead and represent sociopolitical institutions and power.

Robert C. Tannehill’s analysis of a number of Paul’s speeches in Acts 21–28 demonstrates the ways in which the prisoner’s efforts at self-defense frequently transition into evangelistic appeals. This is particularly evident in Paul’s brief speech before the Sanhedrin (Acts 23:6) and in his culminating defense before Agrippa, Bernice, Festus, and other dignitaries (Acts 26:22-29). Paul’s conversations with Felix also afford him frequent opportunities to speak about the gospel to a high-ranking Roman figure (24:24-26). Paul’s custody in Jerusalem and Caesarea places him squarely in the company of

new and powerful audiences for his missionary activity. Although his efforts do not result in conversions, Paul does benefit (and his ministry does endure) when he emerges into a different sort of custody at the end of Acts—one marked by quasi-public opportunities for continuing his bold proclamation (Acts 28:30-31). Within his custody settings in Jerusalem and Caesarea, Paul enters a new culture of contact with the highest local representatives of Jewish and Roman sociopolitical authority. One of the tacit intentions of the Romans who place and keep Paul in custody is to remove him from the public sphere, to restrict his ability to proclaim his controversial gospel to others. Paul thwarts these intentions by proclaiming regardless of the limitations imposed by his setting. In proclaiming to the public officials who come his way, he transforms his environment so that it permits the activity he wants to perform, and has been called to do. As a result, the concluding seven-plus chapters of Acts, depicting four years of detention under Roman authority, hardly sketch a portrait of Paul suffering isolation or censure. Instead, Paul’s ministry adapts readily to his new arenas, despite limitations in his access to the wider society. His “mission” of being a witness to Christ remains very much the same as when he was a free man. What changes, now that Paul is in custody, are the locales in which this ministry happens and the people to whom Paul has access. If custody brings Paul into contact with such prominent political figures as Lysias, Ananias, Felix, Drusilla, Festus, Agrippa, and Bernice, then these are the people who must hear Paul witness to Jesus and the resurrection.

26. This may echo a theme in other ancient literature. Trial scenes in Greek novels create occasions for differing ideological perspectives to contend with one another within the political matrices and forensic arenas of Roman power (Saundra Schwartz, “The Trial Scene in the Greek Novels and in Acts,” in Contextualizing Acts, 105-33).

27. That in these encounters Paul apparently fails to win any new converts to the gospel leads several interpreters to conclude that in Acts 21-28 Paul shifts to a new kind of existence and work. These writers generally describe him as a prisoner giving defense speeches instead of as a missionary uttering proclamation (e.g., Jacob Jervell, The Theology of the Acts of the Apostles (NTT; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 86-87 and Cassidy, Society and Politics, 162, 220-21. nn. 10-11; cf. Maddox, Purpose of Luke-Acts, 67). Against this, the narrative of Acts does not offer reasons to assess the success of Paul’s evangelistic efforts on the basis of conversions alone. The primary emphasis of Jesus’ call to Paul is that he will testify to Jesus’ name (9:15; 22:15, 18; 26:16-18). The sprinkling of ἀποκάλυψις language throughout Acts 22-28 does suggest a particular emphasis concerning Paul’s activities in these chapters, even as it recalls Luke 12:11-12; 21:12-15. But to conclude (as does Jervell) that the speeches Paul gives as a prisoner lack any kerygma may result from reliance on form-critical criteria (such as a call to repentance) than on the details of Luke’s narrative account.

28. For a detailed analysis of the effects of Paul’s custodial conditions on the nature of his ministry, and the ways in which his ongoing ministry transforms readers’ perceptions of custody, see Skinner, Locating Paul.
Paul’s new venues for proclamation have implications for an understanding of Luke’s sociopolitical outlook. Paul’s ability to make missionary appeals as a kept prisoner suggests that the intentions of his custody are being manipulated and undermined. The Romans detain Paul to hold him and his behavior in quarantine. They keep him for an extended period in Jerusalem and Caesarea, either to protect him, to examine him, or to keep the peace. They do not show a pressing interest in prosecuting him. As the plot progresses through Acts 21–28, he slides almost effortlessly into deeper levels of Roman jurisdiction as officials are eager to let those with greater authority determine his fate. Nevertheless, their decisions to keep him incarcerated, along with his transfers to authorities progressively higher in the Roman chain of command, make a claim for the state’s purported power to control Paul’s ability to propagate his ideas. The Romans consistently mean to confine him to a netherworld situated in the seams between governing authorities and governed society. Precisely within these structures meant to seclude him and limit his potential to influence others, however Paul confronts those present—his custodians and judges—with the claims of the gospel. The authorities in Acts 21–28 prove to be unable to accomplish what others temporarily did to

29. A sense of ambiguity pervades Paul’s custody insofar as Luke never provides a clear or consistent explanation of the Romans’ motivations or legal bases for detaining Paul. Although Paul’s arrest consists of a de facto rescue from a lethal mob (21:31-33), and his incarceration continues to shield him from the threat of additional violence (23:20-35), this is not purely “protective custody.” Roman authorities voice serious suspicions of Paul (21:38; 22:24, 30; 25:18, 26-27), and they grasp his importance for the maintenance of civil harmony among the Jewish population (24:27; 25:9-11). Several factors therefore fuel the persistent and determined Roman interest in exercising jurisdiction over Paul and restricting his access to the public sphere. Through all the confusion, two factors remain relatively consistent. First, a group of Jewish opponents in Jerusalem exhibits hostility toward him and pursues his prosecution, although this antagonism vanishes from sight when Paul reaches Rome. Second, Roman authorities (and Agrippa) fail to identify any serious wrongdoing on Paul’s part (see 22:30; 23:28-29; 24:27; 25:10, 18-20, 25-27; 26:30-32). When Paul finally appeals his case to the emperor, he lands himself irrevocably in Roman custody (25:11-12, 21, 25; 26:32).

30. Because the historical Herod Agrippa II was a client king subordinate to the governor of Judea, the claim that Paul gradually progresses higher up the political chain of command may appear to stumble when Festus consults with Agrippa in Acts 25:13-26:32. In this narrative, however, Agrippa appears as a royal figure in his own right, eclipsing Festus at least in function by presiding over Paul’s hearing as if a reigning king and Paul’s primary audience. On Agrippa as president of the assembly, see the evidence in Acts 26:1-3, 30 and Heusler, Kapitalprozesse, 112-15.

31. On prison and other custody locations as places where the power of the state intersects and confronts the social world that it controls, see Barbara Harlow, “Sites of Struggle: Immigration, Deportation, Prison, and Exile,” in Reconfigured Spheres: Feminist Explorations of Literary Space (Margaret R. Higonnet and Joan Templeton, ed.; Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 108-24 (109).
various incarcerated apostles and Paul earlier in Acts (Acts 5:17-42; 12:1-19; 16:19-40). They fail to torture or completely silence Paul; they fail to prevent him from doing what Jesus called him to do—to bear Jesus’ name, including bearing it before gentiles and kings (Acts 9:15). The hallmark of Paul’s custody experience, then, is not abject suffering, risk, loss of influence, failure, or isolation, but the unique opportunities that this liminal world affords him in his role as a witness to the Christ.

The Ironies of Paul’s Custody

In his attempts to evangelize elite audiences in Jerusalem and Caesarea in Acts 23–26, Paul’s captivity does not force him to relinquish his role as missionary. There are additional occasions in Acts 21–28 where Paul asserts himself within and over his circumstances in similar ways, defying or reconfiguring certain aspects of his custodial environment. In several scenes, as Paul’s activity surmounts the constraining effects of his imposed circumstances, Luke depicts ironic relationships between Paul’s character and his situations. Paul’s roles and these relationships form a third noteworthy dimension of Paul’s custody in Acts 21–28.

Sometimes the irony emerges when Paul, the supposedly imperiled prisoner, exercises authority over his Roman keepers. Within moments after his seizure in Jerusalem, Paul easily convinces the arresting Roman tribune to permit him to address the vehement mob, which he silences merely with a gesture and a sentence in Aramaic (Acts 21:37–22:1). A few minutes later, after the speech to the crowd fails to win him any support, Paul demonstrates his social superiority over the tribune, winning a contest of one-upmanship by revealing that, not only is he a Roman citizen, but he was born with this status (22:25-29). Paul’s influence upon his treatment and Lysias’s jurisdiction continues when Paul’s nephew announces a plot against Paul (23:16). The prisoner responds to the news by summoning a centurion to escort the nephew to the tribune. The verb προσκαλέω describes Paul’s summons, or dictate (23:17). While recounting this event to Lysias, the centurion uses the same verb in explaining why the tribune should speak to Paul’s nephew (23:18). When προσκαλέω appears again, five verses later as Lysias quickly summons a pair of centurions and on (23:23) the tribune.

32. Cf. Stolle’s comments about the coherence in Paul’s witnessing activity as both a free man and as a prisoner (Zeuge als Angeklagter, 74, 71).
and orders them to prepare a military escort to conduct Paul to Caesarea (23:23), one gets the impression that Paul’s “summoning” authority mirrors the tribune’s. Both men direct and employ centurions to accomplish their goals. Paul’s transfer to Caesarea also enhances the sense of Paul’s prestige. Indeed, the dramatic size of the escort (470 soldiers!) is overkill, casting Paul more as an esteemed ambassador than as a prisoner. Paul’s notable importance reemerges later in the narrative, in Caesarea. The spectacle of great φαντασία that attends Paul’s appearance before Agrippa and Bernice (Acts 25:23–26:32) attests to the authority of the monarchs and (indirectly) to the reputation and importance of the prisoner who generates curiosity among such an esteemed audience.35

After Paul leaves Caesarea, bound for Rome under military guard, the narrative continues to portray him assuming roles that appear incongruous with his prisoner status. During the sea voyage westward, he offers travel advice that goes unheeded (27:9-11), and later issues a stern reprimand to those who refused to obey his prior warnings (27:21).36 Soon the centrality of his role in the maritime crisis leaves him looking more like the ship’s captain than a prisoner undergoing transfer. First he recognizes that sailors are trying to slip away in the lifeboats at night, and he takes steps to stop them (27:30-32). Later he seems to have authority over the distribution of food among the desperate travelers (27:33-36). After finally arriving on the Italian peninsula, Paul’s identity as a prisoner threatens to slip from the narrative’s scope altogether when he, along the first-person-plural narrator and perhaps others, accepts an invitation to stay with Christians in Puteoli for an entire week before resuming the journey northward toward Rome (28:13-14). Readers find in this brief scene no mention of soldiers sanctioning the visit or accompanying Paul. Nor does anyone express any haste to complete the trek to the capital. The image of Paul’s extended stopover in Puteoli highlights his autonomy and conduct in ministry more than it suggests the conveyance of a prisoner under guard.

Once Paul arrives in Rome, however, the narrative recalls clearly that he remains in Roman custody, guarded by a soldier in a private dwelling (28:16). Yet, again, here in this final context of detention recorded in Acts, the narrator describes Paul engaged in activities and roles that stand in ironic tension with his status as a prisoner. In Paul’s interactions with the local Jewish leadership in Rome, he plays the part of a judge. As Daniel Marguerat explains, Paul’s two meetings with representatives of the local Jewish population

35. The term φαντασία suggests an ostentatious display. See LSJ, s.v. φαντασία.
36. In v. 21 Paul says, “You should have obeyed me by not putting to sea at Crete.” Consistently in biblical literature, πειθορχέω means “obey” (and not merely “listen,” as in the NRSV). See the term referring to obedience to a greater authority in 1 Esd 8:90 LXX; Sir 33:29 LXX; Dan 7:27; Acts 5:29, 32; Titus 3:1. See also LSJ, s.v. πειθορχέω.
effect a reversal of juridical roles. In the first meeting (28:17-22), the leaders declare that they have no reason to condemn Paul. Then, at the second meeting, described in 28:23-28:

...the issue has changed: the debate is no longer about the apostle’s innocence, but about the culpability of the Jews before the gospel (28:23). Paul interprets the audience’s split reaction to his preaching by means of the word of judgment in Isa. 6:9-10 (28:25-27). The role reversal is then complete. The accusers, who first became judges, have become the ones judged. In accordance with the Holy Spirit (28:25), the accused wields the word of judgment. 37

The irony in the depiction of Paul as an adjudicating prisoner stems from his exercising a type of authority to which he is supposed to be subject in his current context. Luke’s account does not aim at sparing imperial justice, but rather at an exchange of roles. The prisoner reaches the capital and stays there with the authority of one who shall not be judged, but who shall be the bearer of judgment. 38

Although Paul brandishes Isa 6:9-10 to indict a Jewish and not necessarily a Roman audience, still the irony generated by his status as one in Roman custody indicates his manipulation of the mechanisms of sociopolitical authority that assume to manage him. Being in custody will not prevent Paul from making judgments; in fact, this condition offers him the avenue for engaging in such activity.

In the book’s final image of Paul, as he lives under house arrest, the narrative portrays him again finding opportunities to evangelize within the relative constraints of his detention. Although a prisoner, confined to a dwelling until the emperor will decide his case, Paul departs the literary stage exercising his ability to proclaim the gospel with great boldness and without hindrance (28:31). 39 In the end, Luke refuses to let Paul be defined by the expectations or intentions of his incarceration. As Paul assumes all these ironic roles, the narrative intimates that things with this prisoner are not quite what one might expect. His custody cannot make him fully subject to its control.

When considering these roles, it is important to recognize that Luke does not attribute Paul’s ability to exert such influence solely to Paul’s rhetorical prowess, forceful personality, or rights as a Roman citizen. A number of


passages offer a theological explanation. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus promises supernatural empowerment to his followers when they come before political authorities: in Luke 12:11-12, he declares that the Holy Spirit will provide words for a person’s defense; in Luke 21:12-15, he promises to give his followers traveled and wisdom (“speech and wisdom”) that will overwhelm any opposition when they have opportunities for testimony before governors and kings. In Acts, during the course of Paul’s custody, first Jesus (23:11) then an angel (27:23-24) stand by Paul and announce the necessity (each of the two heavenly visitors uses the conspicuous word ἔμπνευσις) of both his ongoing testimony about Jesus and his safe arrival in Rome. These passages declare that Paul exists in these situations as God’s representative and a recipient of divine assistance. Against this theological backdrop, Paul’s social standing, legal rights, and adroit abilities magnify neither himself nor the privileges that Rome’s legal system might provide. Instead, they point to his divine authorization, precisely despite the putative constraints enforced by the legal mechanisms that hold him. Luke presents Paul as an obedient and inspired witness, not a superlative individual or exemplary leader.

In various ways yet consistently throughout his detention, Paul’s actions and roles place him in a position of control over his manner of custody, and occasionally over those characters charged with enforcing the custody. The result is an ironic portrait of Paul in which the “rules” of detention do not fully apply to him; the system that incarcerates him cannot altogether define him and his behavior. In fact, this system and Paul’s varied circumstances become surprisingly useful to him as new arenas for his labors as a divinely commissioned witness. This state of affairs prompts readers to reassess Paul’s relationship to the forces that administer his detention, and to question the fundamental ability of these forces to limit Paul and the gospel he bears as he lives out his calling.

Conclusion

At least three aspects of Luke’s narrative portrait of Paul’s custody negate assumptions that the Roman government—represented by various officials and juridical procedures—exercises effectual control over Paul and the


41. Contra John Clayton Lentz, Jr., Luke’s Portrait of Paul (SNTSMS 77; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Neither is it adequate to characterize Acts as a story of the church’s (human) leadership (for such a critique, see Gaventa, Acts, 42-43).
movement he represents. Through these three aspects Luke also declares that the authorized ministry of the gospel perdures, in old and new ways, despite the opposing powers, interests, and indecision of the Roman state. The ministry manipulates these powers, from within their loci of operation. The narrative presents Paul, empowered by God, reconfiguring or taking advantage of many of the expectations and possibilities of custodial relationships, finding room for new contacts and avenues of proclamation, even as powerful forces suppose to enforce his censure and isolation through those same venues. Paul’s exercise of authority and his attempts at evangelistic witness occur as the state attempts to limit him. His story thereby asserts that his vocation and the gospel he represents will not or cannot ultimately acquiesce to the dictates and priorities of the world’s sociopolitical structures.

Other studies make similar observations about the political forces in Acts coming to serve God’s designs for the propagation of the gospel. But the current essay demonstrates that it is incorrect to conclude from these observations that Acts depicts a church or gospel that is “politically harmless, no threat to the state.” Because Paul’s manipulation of the Roman custodial apparatus contravenes the quarantining intentions of the authorities, Luke portrays the government’s institutions as, not merely advantageous or neutral to the gospel, but ultimately ineffective in light of the gospel. This sociopolitical outlook certainly does not issue a call for revolutionary defiance or subversion, but it does insinuate that the Empire is on notice that its structures and authority are not at all absolute. In this, Luke’s sociopolitical vision casts its gaze more on theology than ethics, although clearly there are social implications to the narrative’s primary interest in what God accomplishes through Paul in Acts 21–28. These dimensions of Acts hold the potential to exhort and embolden sympathetic readers trying to find their way in the world. Beyond exhortation, the narrative shapes readers’ perspectives on the church’s relationship to the Roman context, dramatically denying authority to the Empire and its interests. Moreover, since none of these sociopolitical dynamics in Acts comes across as uniquely or exclusively limited to the first-century Roman context, the narrative implies that the gospel holds the potential to undermine or commandeer any human construals of authority in other social systems.

42. Judith Perkins makes similar arguments about apocryphal Acts literature portraying the transformation of power relations, in that these narratives deny the ability of prisons to exercise power when these places are proven to be unable to enforce physical and social boundaries (“Social Geography in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles,” in Ancient Narrative, Supplementum 1: Space in the Ancient Novel [Michael Paschalis and Stavros Frangoulidis, eds.; Groningen: Barkhuis, 2002], 118-31).
43. E.g., Jervell, Theology of Acts, 134.
44. Jervell, Theology of Acts, 134
Luke’s account of Paul’s custody therefore characterizes the ministry of the gospel as an implicit challenge to certain interests, functions, and prerogatives of Roman rule. When Paul’s divinely empowered actions subtly manipulate and rearrange the means the state employs to maintain control over him, his story effectively declares the gospel’s ability to challenge and incapacitate Rome’s sociopolitical authority. To be sure, this is a subtle confrontation, less about retributive domination and more about a reorganization of the state’s social and political functions. Paul’s ministry perseveres in custody and sets its agenda amid efforts to restrict it; yet in so doing it nevertheless continues to extend benefits to those whose structures are being challenged, just as Paul’s refusal to be an acquiescent prisoner on the storm-tossed ship results in the salvation of all who are with him. Luke leaves no question about where true power lies. By depicting the mechanisms of Roman power as ripe for Paul’s exploitation and manipulation, Acts emphasizes that the gospel transforms, outruns, and potentially destabilizes any system of governance that presumes to make the rules.45

45. My colleagues in Luther Seminary’s Bible Division read an early draft of this essay and offered helpful comments. I am grateful for their assistance.