

# How Acts Constructed the Itinerary of Paul

Conclusions Excerpted from the *Acts Seminar Report*

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Acts has long been used as a resource for reconstructing the itinerary of Paul. Such usage is supported by the presupposition that the author of Acts did not use the collection of Paul's letters as a source. Building on this presupposition, many scholars have concluded that the author of Acts had an independent "itinerary source" which he used to provide a basic framework for telling the story of Paul. The Acts Seminar, however, became convinced that the author of Acts *did* have access to Paul's letters and made use of them as major resources. This means that the burden of proof has shifted, particularly in regard to hypotheses about proposed sources of Acts. When one works from the perspective that the author had access to the itinerary data in Paul's letters, the evidence for a separate itinerary source is not only seriously undermined, it evaporates. It is now possible virtually to look over Luke's shoulder and watch him in action creating his itinerary out of bits and pieces of itinerary material in Paul's letters.<sup>1</sup>

## Paul's Journey to Greece

### The Itinerary According to Paul<sup>2</sup>

For you know from your own experience, friends, that our stay among you was not without power, but despite having just been assaulted and insulted in Philippi, as you know, God gave us the courage to speak God's world-transforming message to you in the face of great opposition (1 Thess 2:1-2).

Therefore, since I couldn't leave Athens, we decided to send Timothy, a dear friend and fellow advocate of our message about the Anointed, both to bolster you and to allay the threats to your confidence in God so that none of you would be shaken by these attacks (1 Thess 3:1-2).

I will come to see you once I have made my way through Macedonia, because I am planning to go through Macedonia ... (1 Cor 16:5).

1. This paper is based on conclusions excerpted from Smith and Tyson, eds., *Acts and Christian Beginnings: The Acts Seminar Report*, where the research resources supporting these arguments are also found.

2. Quotations from Paul are taken from Dewey, et al., eds., *The Authentic Letters of Paul*.

### The Itinerary According to Acts<sup>3</sup>

We sailed from Troas on a straight course to Samothrace and came to Neapolis the next day. From Neapolis we went to Philippi, a city of the first district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We spent several days in that city. On the Sabbath we went beyond the city gate to the riverside, where we thought there would be a place for prayer (Acts 16:11–13).

After leaving Philippi, Paul and Silas took the road through Amphipolis and Apollonia and came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As was his normal practice, Paul visited the congregation (Acts 17:1–2).

As soon as darkness fell, the believers sent Paul and Silas on to Berea. When they got to Berea, they entered the synagogue. Now the Jews there were of a better quality than those at Thessalonica (Acts 17:10–11).

The believers immediately sent Paul to the seacoast, while Silas and Timothy remained behind. After those who were conducting Paul had got him to Athens, they returned with instructions for the other two to join him as soon as possible (Acts 17:14–15).

After his encounter with the Areopagus, Paul left Athens for Corinth, where he came upon a Jew, Aquila, from Pontus, and his wife Priscilla, who had recently arrived from Italy because the Emperor Claudius had ordered all Jews out of Rome. Paul presented himself to this couple and came to live with them because they, like him, crafted with fabrics. So Paul went to work (Acts 18:1–3).

### Deconstructing the Acts Itinerary

Based on the bits of data in Paul, namely, traveling from Philippi to Thessalonica to Athens, Acts adopts an itinerary in which Paul travels into Greece by the northern route through Macedonia. Notably, this was also the route Paul chose for his second trip to the region (1 Cor 16:5). How Paul actually gets to Macedonia is Luke's creation and has a clear literary purpose. As Acts has it, Paul went to Macedonia because it was God's idea that he do so, a motif that drives the plot in Acts. In Troas, Paul has a vision of a Macedonian (how does he know it is a Macedonian?) calling for him to come into Macedonia. Why Troas? As Dennis MacDonald has pointed out, Troas was associated in antiquity with ancient Troy. Paul's sea voyages throughout Acts will be reminiscent of the voyages in Homer's *Odyssey*. Like the *Odyssey*, this voyage is recounted using the first person "we" (16:10–17).

Paul's first stop is Philippi (Acts 16:11–13; 1 Thess 2:1–2). In the Acts story, following a pattern found throughout its story of Paul's journeys, Paul first finds a Jewish meeting place. In this case, instead of a synagogue it is a *pro-seuche*, perhaps chosen for his story because the author will populate this particular meeting place with women. Following the conversion of a certain Lydia,

3. Quotations from Acts are taken from the Richard Pervo translation as utilized in *Acts and Christian Beginnings*.

Paul and Silas end up in prison from which they will eventually miraculously escape. The story is Lukan throughout.

Paul then traveled to Thessalonica before turning south toward Athens, passing through Beroea on the way. This route too was constructed out of comments in Paul's letters. He wrote to the Thessalonians that he had already been in Philippi, and had been shamefully treated there, before arriving in Thessalonica (1 Thess 2:1–2). His next stop was Athens (1 Thess 3:1). Luke simply adds other cities to the route that Paul does not mention. The road from Philippi to Thessalonica is the Via Egnatia, and any traveler on that road would pass through Amphipolis and Apollonia. To go south, however, one would have to leave the Via Egnatia and travel to Athens either by a sea route or by a coastal road. Luke prefers the coastal road option, and this allows him to create a stop in Beroea.

Nothing about the rest of Luke's narrative in this segment of Paul's journey matches anything from Paul's letters. According to Paul, the opposition he met was in Philippi, not Thessalonica. In contrast to Acts, Paul's letter to the Thessalonians assumes a gentile community with whom he had built a close relationship (1 Thess 1:6–10); there is no hint of trouble there except for 1 Thess 2:13–16, which is a vague reference to the Thessalonian community having been "harassed by your fellow citizens" (1 Thess 2:14).<sup>4</sup> If this is the source for the story in Acts, it has been reset as a story about Paul utilizing typical Acts themes. According to Acts, Paul escaped from the persecution in Thessalonica and went next to Beroea, but there is no mention of Beroea in Paul's letters or anywhere else in the NT.

On the other hand, Luke's narrative is constructed out of favorite themes found elsewhere in his story of Paul. As is common in Acts but not in Paul's letters, Paul begins his preaching in the synagogue, both in Thessalonica and Beroea. He faces fierce opposition from Jews in Thessalonica, is carried before the magistrates by an unruly mob, and has to leave under duress. In this case, the Jewish response is all Luke wants to talk about. Though he mentions that there were Greek converts, there is little information about them. According to Paul, the community of believers in Thessalonica became renowned throughout Macedonia and Achaia. According to the story in Acts, it was the Jewish opposition that became renowned. The Acts version, since it is built out of favorite narrative themes of Luke, is simply not credible as history.

The entire sojourn in Beroea seems to have been created by Luke to expand on the adventure tale he is constructing. The escape by night is a favorite device of Luke (see, e.g., Acts 9:23–25). Beroea is handy as the nearby city to which he could escape. In Beroea, Paul followed standard practice according to Acts and preached in the synagogue. Luke's emphasis that the Jews were friendlier in

4. Many scholars consider 1 Thess 2:13–16 to be an interpolation; see further Dewey, et al., eds., *Authentic Letters of Paul*, 25.

Beroea fits the contrast that the narrative needs; that is, Beroea functions best narratively as an escape route if in fact Paul is safe there. And he *is* safe, at least until the rabid Jews from Thessalonica pursue him there. Then Paul has to escape surreptitiously again. According to the Acts story, Paul could hardly have had time to catch his breath. How could he have overlooked saying something about those events in his letter to the Thessalonians? The answer is, because they never happened. Luke made them up.

The detail that Paul visited Athens is historically accurate. Paul tells us that himself. After leaving Thessalonica, after a “short time” he sent Timothy back to visit the Thessalonians while Paul waited in Athens (1 Thess 2:17; 3:1–2). After Timothy reported back, Paul wrote them the letter we know as 1 Thessalonians (1 Thess 3:6). By that time, Paul may have been in Corinth, the next stop in his travel itinerary. Luke’s source for a visit to Athens is undoubtedly 1 Thessalonians, especially since he includes the unusual detail that Paul was in Athens without Timothy. But Luke tells a different story about Paul’s coworkers. According to Acts 17:15, Paul arrived in Athens after fleeing in haste from Beroea, but Silas and Timothy remained behind, intending to join him later. They only catch up with him in Corinth (18:5). Luke omits the detail that Timothy was dispatched by Paul from Athens to check up on the Thessalonians (1 Thess 3:2). Such an intentional omission must have a reason. It is one of many examples in Luke-Acts in which the author changes details in his sources so as to follow his own agenda. Here leaving the coworker behind adds to the drama of the adventurous escape from Beroea.

It is not entirely unlikely that Paul preached in some form while in Athens, but, if so, he himself makes no mention of it. In fact, in his recounting of his itinerary, Athens seems to be no more than a stopover for him. In any case, the story in Acts is not reliable in any of its details: both the speech and the list of converts are Lukan creations. According to Paul, his first converts in Achaia were not in Athens but in Corinth (1 Cor 16:15; see also 1:16).

### **Paul’s Ephesian Itinerary**

#### **The Itinerary According to Paul**

I planted, Apollos watered, but God’s power is what made it grow (1 Cor 3:6).

But I’m going to stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, because a large and promising door is open to me even though we have many opponents (1 Cor 16:8–9).

The communities of the Anointed in Asia send their greetings. Aquila and Prisca send their warm fraternal greetings to you as does the gathering that meets in their house (1 Cor 16:19).

#### **The Itinerary According to Acts**

Paul stayed on for a number of days before saying his farewells to the believers and sailing off to Syria with Priscilla and Aquila. At the Corinthian port of

Cenchreae he had his hair cut off, because he had undertaken a vow. When they reached Ephesus, Paul separated from the couple. He himself went to the synagogue and engaged the Jews. They asked that he spend more time, but he could not agree, and bade them farewell, promising, "God willing, I shall come back to you at another time." Leaving Ephesus by ship, Paul arrived in Caesarea and went from there to Jerusalem, where he paid his respects to the church before continuing on to Antioch. He spent some time there and then set out again, moving through Galatian territory and Phrygia, strengthening all the believers in each community as he traveled (Acts 18:18–23).

An Alexandrian Jew by the name of Apollos came to Ephesus. Apollos was an eloquent fellow who knew how to make effective use of the scriptures. He had received instruction in the way of the Lord, could speak with spiritual ardor, and propound the story of Jesus with precision, but he was aware only of the baptism proclaimed by John. Apollos launched a vigorous preaching mission in the synagogue. After Priscilla and Aquila had heard him, they took him aside and expounded the Movement more fully. When Apollos expressed a desire to go to Achaia, he received support from the believers, who wrote to encourage the disciples there to receive him. After his arrival he was of considerable value to those who had come to believe through grace, for he decisively routed the Jews in public debate, demonstrating from the scriptures that the Messiah is Jesus (Acts 18:24–28).

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul made his way by the inland route to Ephesus ... Paul devoted the next three months to preaching in the synagogue, where he vigorously sought to persuade people about the nature of God's dominion. Since some of his hearers stubbornly refused to be convinced and publicly maligned the Movement, he withdrew, and, taking the followers with him, continued his daily presentations in the facility of Tyrannus. This lasted for two years, with the result that everyone in Asia, Jews and Greeks alike, heard the message about the Lord (Acts 19:1, 8–10).

### **Deconstructing the Acts Itinerary**

After a lengthy and significant stay in Corinth, Luke inserts a convoluted, brief travel narrative prior to what will be a lengthy and significant stay in Ephesus (Acts 19). He already knows Ephesus is in the future; he gets that from 1 Cor 16:8. So he has Paul travel directly to Ephesus, but on this first visit Paul does not stay there. Instead he takes a long, seemingly inconsequential detour that takes him to Jerusalem and Antioch before he finally arrives once more in Ephesus for a longer stay (Acts 19:1). To better discern why Luke tells his story in this way, we need to reconstruct what he started with.

Luke starts with three pieces of data, all of which he gets from 1 Corinthians. First, 1 Cor 16:8 tells him that Ephesus was visited after Paul left Corinth. Second, 1 Cor 16:19 tells him that Priscilla and Aquila settled in Ephesus. Third, 1 Cor 3:6 tells him that Apollos arrived in Corinth after Paul had left. With these building blocks, Luke creates the travel narrative in Acts 18:18–28.

Luke's fingerprints on this narrative can be seen in the underlying purpose for all of the details. First, Paul stops in Cenchreae, the port city of Corinth and a necessary component of a journey to Ephesus. It did not have to be mentioned; after all, Luke is often vague about how Paul gets from place to place. Luke could have learned from Rom 16:1–2 that Paul had made converts in Cenchreae, one of which was a prominent woman, Phoebe. However, he did not use this information. Rather, Luke's reason for the stop in Cenchreae is to insert the note that Paul shaved his head for a vow. The alert reader would recognize that this is a Jewish vow. Second, when he arrives in Ephesus, Paul goes directly to the synagogue, by now a practice easily recognizable as a mark of Lukan creativity. Third, he makes an unlikely stop in Caesarea and visits a Christian group there, followed by a quick visit to Jerusalem, which is likely to be the only reason for such a roundabout detour. Fourth, he next goes to Antioch. After that, he makes an unremarkable overland trip back to Ephesus. The vow and the synagogue visit remind the reader of Paul's Jewish *bona fides*. The visits to Jerusalem and Antioch remind of Paul's subservience to these two cities and their leadership. These are themes distinct to Acts. Adding these details at this point in Luke's story is simply a way to reinforce such ongoing themes.

Certainly one can propose that Luke is using here an independent travel itinerary for Paul, but, if so, one can only reconstruct from such a source the raw data that Paul traveled from A to B. What happened on the journey from A to B is clearly attributable to Luke's own narrative interests. But the existence of such an itinerary without any accompanying narrative is highly unlikely, and the pertinent information is readily available in 1 Corinthians. On the other hand, using such plausible geographical details as a context for creating new stories about Paul is a recognizable mark of Luke's attention to verisimilitude.

In Acts 19, Ephesus emerges as a major center of the Pauline mission, which is remarkable since Paul only makes brief references to Ephesus, all of which are in 1 Corinthians. He identifies it as the location from which he writes 1 Corinthians and where Aquila and Prisca have settled down (1 Cor 16:8, 19), and it is a location where he had a trying experience that he describes metaphorically as having fought "wild beasts" (15:32). Paul provides little information about a mission in Ephesus, but Acts provides a great deal. As a result, the stories in Acts about Ephesus have been highly influential in most reconstructions of Paul's mission.

Luke has promoted Ephesus as the site of healings, of the defeat of magic, of success over against the great goddess Artemis, and of friendly judgment, almost endorsement, by the city officials—all of which are identifiable themes in the Acts saga. There should be no doubt at this point in Luke's story that Ephesus has emerged as the pinnacle of the Pauline mission. And just in time, for it is the last major missionary endeavor of Paul in Acts. From this point on, he will be on a journey that will end with his imprisonment in Rome.

## **Paul's Trip to Jerusalem and on to Rome**

### **The Itinerary According to Paul**

But I'm going to stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, because a large and promising door is open to me even though we have many opponents (1 Cor 16:8-9).

The communities of the Anointed in Asia send their greetings. Aquila and Prisca send their warm fraternal greetings to you as does the gathering that meets in their house (1 Cor 16:19).

Now about the money we are collecting for God's people in Jerusalem, you should follow the directions I gave to the communities of the Anointed in Galatia. On the first day of every week each of you should put aside and save up whatever your prosperity may permit, so that contributions need not be solicited when I come. And when I arrive, I will send those whom you have approved, with letters of introduction, to convey your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems worthwhile for me to go also, they will go with me. I will come to see you once I have made my way through Macedonia, because I am planning to go through Macedonia, and I may possibly stay with you a while or even spend the winter with you, so that you may help to send me on my way wherever I may go. I don't want to see you right now just in passing, because I am hoping to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits it. But I'm going to stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, because a large and promising door is open to me even though we have many opponents (1 Cor 16:1-9).

This is why I have repeatedly been prevented from coming to visit you. But now, since there are no more good locations [for my mission] in these areas, and since for many years now I have wanted to pay you a visit, I hope to see you while I am passing through on my way to Spain and to have your support for my travel there – but only after I have had the time to fully enjoy your company. However, before I come to see you, I am going to Jerusalem on a mission for the people of God there. I am going there because [the Anointed's people in] Macedonia and Achaia want to express their sense of community by aiding the needy among Jesus followers in Jerusalem (Rom 15:22-26).

### **The Itinerary According to Acts**

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul made his way by the inland route to Ephesus ... Paul devoted the next three months to preaching in the synagogue, where he vigorously sought to persuade people about the nature of God's dominion. Since some of his hearers stubbornly refused to be convinced and publicly maligned the Movement, he withdrew, and, taking the followers with him, continued his daily presentations in the facility of Tyrannus. This lasted for two years, with the result that everyone in Asia, Jews and Greeks alike, heard the message about the Lord (Acts 19:1, 8-10).

In the wake of these accomplishments Paul resolved, with the guidance of the Spirit, to travel through Macedonia and Achaia and then on to Jerusalem.

"After I have been there," he said, "I must see Rome as well." He sent two of his assistants, Timothy and Erastus, on to Macedonia, but he himself spent some more time in Asia (Acts 19:21–22).

Once the uproar had died down, Paul summoned the followers for an uplifting farewell speech before setting out for Macedonia. He traveled through those regions, delivering many an uplifting message, arriving eventually in Greece, where he spent three months. As he was about to take ship for Syria, a Jewish plot against him led to a change of plans, and he returned by way of Macedonia. Associated with him were Sopater the son of Pyrrhus, from Beroea; Aristarchus and Secundus, both Thessalonians; Gaius of Derbe; Timothy; and the Asians Tychicus and Trophimus. They had gone ahead and were awaiting us in Troas. We sailed from Philippi after the Days of Unleavened Bread and joined them in Troas five days later. There we remained for a week (Acts 20:1–6).

We, meanwhile, had gone ahead to the ship and sailed for Assos, where we intended to take Paul on board, for he had told us to do so, intending to travel by land, himself. He did meet us at Assos, so we took him aboard and went on to Mitylene. From there we sailed on the following day to a point opposite Chios, and on the next we crossed to Samos, arriving in Miletus the day after, for Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that, if the possibility permitted, he would not spend too much time in Asia. He was in a hurry to be in Jerusalem at Pentecost, if that were at all possible. He did, however, send a message from Miletus to Ephesus, directing the presbyters of that church to report to him. When they had arrived, he addressed them (Acts 20:13–18).

### **Deconstructing the Acts Itinerary**

The itinerary data presented in Acts 19:21–22 allow us to look over the author's shoulder and see how he works. Once again, his primary source is 1 Corinthians 16. At the time of the writing of the letter, Paul is in Ephesus (1 Cor 16:8) but plans to go to Jerusalem with the collection (16:3), a journey that will take him first to Macedonia, then Corinth (16:5). Luke also used Romans 15–16, from which he got the rest of his itinerary data. Here Paul adds the detail that he will travel to Rome after he has visited Jerusalem, using a phrase that is repeated almost verbatim in Acts. Compare "I hope to see you [the Christians in Rome] while I am passing through ... However, before I come to see you, I am going to Jerusalem" (Rom 15:24–25) with "After I have been there [Jerusalem] ... I must see Rome as well" (Acts 19:21). This is one of the few times Luke puts words in Paul's mouth that actually came from Paul. Finally, while Luke was delving into Romans for itinerary data, he likely picked up the names "Erastus" (Rom 16:23; Acts 19:22) and "Gaius" (Rom 16:23; Acts 19:29), although he created a different identity for each of them.

From chapter 20 to the end of Acts, Paul is on a farewell journey which will eventually take him to Jerusalem and then to Rome. As noted above, Luke has derived from Paul's letters the building blocks of the itinerary he is following

for this journey. What Luke does not get from Paul is the story of an arrest and imprisonment in Jerusalem, with the result that, according to Acts, Paul will arrive in Rome as a prisoner.

Luke's story of Paul's arrival and imprisonment in Jerusalem and eventual journey to Rome as a prisoner is Luke's own creation. This is seen from the many details that are characteristic of Luke's themes throughout Acts: Jewish plots, a variety of trials, numerous speeches by Paul and others, a first person account of a sea voyage to Rome that includes a shipwreck, and an arrival in Rome where Paul's only business is to settle accounts with Jewish leaders. Since the story is built throughout out of Lukan themes and since the idea of an independent itinerary of Paul's journeys has been discounted, it is highly unlikely that Luke's story of the journey to Rome is built out of any reliable data other than Paul's plans for the future in Rom 15:22–26. This may apply as well to the assumption that Paul died in Rome, an assumption promoted by Acts 20:25 and 21:10–11. Why Acts does not relate the death of Paul in Rome has been much debated, usually based on the assumption that Acts knew that Paul had died there and intentionally decided to omit it. This assumption is based on the elusive idea that, in this case, Acts had access to reliable historical tradition. However, since Acts has proven to be unreliable in so many other details, there is no reason to privilege Acts in this instance. The issue of the death of Paul deserves a thorough re-examination.<sup>5</sup>

### Conclusion

The work of the Acts Seminar, as presented in *Acts and Christian Beginnings: The Acts Seminar Report*, has established a new paradigm for the study of Acts as history. The burden of proof has now shifted so that Acts must be considered unhistorical unless proven otherwise. In particular, the itinerary of Paul presented in Acts can no longer be considered reliable in any of its details. Even those details derived from Paul's letters have been compromised; that is to say, Acts is an unreliable interpreter of Paul. In the future, only the authentic letters of Paul can be used as reliable resources for his life and thought.

5. See also Koester, "Paul and Philippi: The Evidence from Early Christian Literature," 49–65; Callahan, "Dead Paul: The Apostle as Martyr in Philippi," 67–84.

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