

PAUL **A life between Jerusalem and Rome**

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Lystra and Derbe

Paul and Barnabas took the main road south to Lystra, journeying through a vast landscape. It was a small town, situated on a hill in a fertile valley and home to no more than three thousand people, most of them Roman veterans who had settled there when their successful campaigns were behind them. Hardly any visible traces of the town remain. Archaeologists have yet to excavate the hillside where Lystra was built, but scattered clumps of stone, fragments of pillars and countless shards of pottery suggest that it was once a hive of economic activity.

Luke chooses to emphasize a single event: the healing of a man who had been lame since birth. Paul called on him to stand up and the stricken man was able to respond (Acts 14:8-11). This surprising account is made even more arresting by the direct link that Luke creates with the miracles of Jesus, who gave the lame the strength to walk again and who restored sight to the blind. This outright miracle is the first of many in the narrative of Acts. At this point, Paul is following in the footsteps of Jesus not only as a preacher of the faith but also as a worker of miracles. Luke thus puts Paul on an equal footing with the other apostles, including Peter.

The response of the people of Lystra is just as remarkable. They have yet to become true converts and their minds are still swarming with symbols and images of pagan gods. Unable to fathom the situation unfolding around them, the townspeople saw the preachers as gods who had appeared on earth in human form. Barnabas is described in later Early Christian texts as tall, and this may explain why they hailed him as Zeus. They identified Paul, the spokesman, with the god Hermes. All the necessary preparations were made for a solemn sacrificial ceremony. The priest of the Temple of Zeus was even ready to offer bulls and wreaths in thanks to the supreme deity, as was the custom when they believed that the gods had come to their aid.

This scene in the small community of Lystra represents a confrontation between a polytheistic population, consisting primarily of Roman veterans, simple craftsmen and local farmers, and two men proclaiming a new monotheistic faith. The message the townspeople heard from Paul was that everything they had done until that moment had been meaningless. Paul urged them to renounce all their traditional expressions of faith as bearing testimony to a pernicious superstition. The time had come to turn away from their idolatry and to submit to the living God, creator of the heavens, the earth and the seas.

Initially, the people of Lystra failed to grasp Paul and Barnabas's intentions. To the apostles' amazement, they were keen to continue their sacrificial ceremonies. Paul and Barnabas tore open their cloaks and leapt into

the crowd, crying out that they must reject such superstitious practices and put their faith in God. It was only with the greatest difficulty that they were able to prevent the townspeople from making sacrifices to them. But the inhabitants of Lystra remained unconvinced and continued to regard Paul and Barnabas as representatives of the ancient gods. Clearly the Christian message had yet to sink in.

A familiar pattern then unfolded. The sympathy that the inhabitants felt towards the preachers turned to incomprehension, hatred and aversion when Jews from Antioch and Iconium, unable to stomach the willingness of many in the region to listen to the apostles, hastened to Lystra and interrupted their sermons. They succeeded in winning over the inhabitants and convinced them that Paul was in the wrong. The crowd advanced on him and began to pelt him with stones. He fell to the ground and they dragged him out of the town, thinking he was dead. Events then took a strange turn: Paul's disciples gathered round him, concerned for his welfare, but Paul picked himself up and went back into the town with them. The fact that the townspeople tolerated his presence in their midst is even stranger (Acts 14:19-20). Their rage appears to have been short-lived. Paul and Barnabas left the town the next day.

In this instance too, Luke makes mention of disciples but refers to only one of them by name – not in this account of Paul's first visit to Lystra but in the report of Paul's return to the town a number of years later on his extended missionary expedition through Turkey and Greece, when he revisited a handful of places where he had made disciples (Acts 16:1). The disciple's name is Timothy. Paul chose Timothy to be his companion on his travels, probably because he was held in such high regard by his fellow believers in Lystra. Paul would later entrust him with confidential assignments. Although Luke gives no indication of when Timothy converted to the Christian faith, we can safely assume that it was during Barnabas and Paul's first missionary expedition.

The injuries that Paul sustained during the stoning were not serious enough to prevent him from making the long journey to Derbe, 150 kilometres away. The apostles gathered up their few possessions and headed east. After six or seven days on the road, they reached their destination, a town which nowadays amounts to nothing more than a hill where large quantities of Hellenistic and Roman pottery have been found. This evidence is too scant to shed light on the town's history. Nevertheless, literary and epigraphic sources reveal that, shortly before Paul's visit, Derbe had been awarded the honourable title of *Claudioderbe* by Emperor Claudius.

The two men received a hospitable welcome and were at liberty to preach. In contrast to Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, they were spared encounters with furious Jews determined to stir up hostility among the local population. It would also appear that Derbe was far enough away from these places to ensure that Paul was not pursued by his vindictive adversaries. Here he found an oasis, a tranquil setting where he was free to spread his message. In his subsequent letter to the Galatians, it was the residents of Derbe he had in mind when he expressed his gratitude to those who had received him with kindness when he had been racked by illness. His injuries had left him very vulnerable and help of any kind was more than welcome (Gal. 4:12-15). In the second letter to Timothy, thought to have been written by a disciple after Paul's death and recounting the hardships and persecution that Paul had to endure on his travels, Antioch,

Iconium and Lystra are explicitly mentioned but Derbe is not listed (2 Tim. 3:11).

It would have been perfectly understandable for Paul and Barnabas to continue east and return to Antioch on the Orontes by way of Tarsus. However, they opted for another route, back through the towns and cities where they had encountered so many difficulties but had also won converts. In all likelihood, they wanted to see for themselves how many people had genuinely converted and whether these new believers had been able to keep the faith, surrounded by Jews who wanted no part of the new messiah and other inhabitants, who had difficulty understanding that their polytheistic tradition was being undermined by a new form of monotheism. It was a risky undertaking, as Paul and Barnabas were no doubt still acutely aware of the hostility that had been unleashed upon them, but they wanted to show the depth of their commitment to the new members of the Christian communities and they chose to ignore the dangers. Their return journey passed without incident; in any event, Luke does not tell of any violence befalling them in the towns and cities they visited along the way.

After a long journey, covering many hundreds of kilometres, the missionaries ended up back in Attalia, where they found a coasting vessel for the return voyage to Antioch. On board, they had ample time to contemplate the future. They agreed that this first great missionary journey through Cyprus and southern Turkey had laid a solid foundation for later expeditions, alone or together. In a world full of gods, they had converted many to the faith. We can only guess at the exact number of converts: perhaps dozens rather than hundreds. For most of the region's inhabitants, the preachers of the Christian faith were nothing more than a brief religious intermezzo. After their departure, life resumed its normal course and, as time passed, a fair number of new believers lapsed back into their old beliefs. But few in number or far more abundant, the basis for new Christian communities had been established.

Upon their return to Antioch, Paul and Barnabas reported their experiences to the city's Christian community. Paul also planned to inform the Christian leaders in Jerusalem about the new converts they had made. He could now appear before them with peace of mind, as his self-confidence – a quality he had never lacked in any case – had gone from strength to strength. He had cast off the burden of his ignominious past, secure in the knowledge that he had spread the Christian message in places that Peter and the other Christian leaders had barely even heard of. But his intelligence and his consuming desire for personal fame and glory must also have led him to anticipate that his actions, characterized as they were by a considerable wilfulness, would meet with opposition from the Christians in Jerusalem. His determination to proclaim the faith to Jews and Gentiles alike would not be readily applauded by all Christians. It was time for discussion, time to set the course for the future.

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The Jerusalem conference

The reception that awaited Paul and Barnabas on their return to Antioch in the late autumn of 45 was not what they had been expecting. While the members of the Christian community listened attentively to their accounts of their experiences and conversions, and even expressed admiration for the fact that they had made the faith accessible to Gentiles in far-off places, a handful were also quick to point out that their ideas diverged significantly from those of the visiting preachers from Jerusalem. The message these preachers brought to the Jewish and non-Jewish Christians of Antioch was that no man or boy could be saved without undergoing circumcision (Acts 15:1). All Christians, regardless of their ethnic origins, were required to live by the instructions of the Torah.

This requirement is bound to have caused considerable commotion in Antioch. Many uncircumcised Christians now felt less valued, as if the way to Christ had been closed to them. They found an ally in Paul and, to a lesser extent, in Barnabas. Opposition to the interpretation of the 'Jewish preachers' became so intense that the Christians in Antioch decided in the spring of 46 to send a delegation to Jerusalem to discuss the matters under dispute.

By this time, Paul had come to be regarded as a man of authority, admired and feared for his pointed language and for the uncompromising line he often took. Tales of his missionary expeditions had undoubtedly reached the ears of the leaders of the Christians in Jerusalem. No one, not even Peter, was in a position to write him off. Years later, Paul wrote with confidence in his letter to the Galatians that he had gone to Jerusalem to present to the leaders of the community there the gospel he preached among the Gentiles (Gal. 2:1-2).

Academics are far from unanimous on the question of whether Paul travelled on from Antioch to Jerusalem after his first missionary expedition. A number of scholars⁴⁴ are of the opinion that the conference Luke refers to took place five years later, after Paul's second great missionary expedition, which would take him not only to Asia Minor but also to Macedonia and Greece. Their main argument is a remark made by Paul in his letter to the Galatians that he visited Jerusalem again after fourteen years (Gal. 2:1). Since his previous meeting with Peter dated from 37, shortly after his conversion, this means that the conference must have taken place in 51, after the second great missionary expedition. I nevertheless favour an earlier date. Luke describes the conference immediately after his account of Paul's first mission to Cyprus, Pisidia, Phrygia and a part of Galatia, during which Paul and Barnabas had been confronted on a number of occasions with the issue of circumcision (Acts 15:3-4). There was therefore every reason for this urgent matter to be addressed immediately. This still leaves the problem of the interval of fourteen years mentioned by Paul. I am willing to entertain the possibility that several conferences took place, since Paul repeatedly expressed concern as to whether Peter and his sympathizers sufficiently appreciated that his work among the Gentiles was the work of God. Incidentally, we should be careful not paint too grand a picture of these conferences. They were not well-organized meetings but loosely planned

⁴⁴ See Murphy-O'Connor (1996), p.131 and Lietaert Peerbolte, p.64, among others.

gatherings of an unspecified number of people faced with the task of setting a course that was acceptable to all.

All the participants at this gathering were fully aware that the unity of the fledgling Christian community was at stake and that it was now essential to keep both Jews and non-Jews within the fold. The advocates of compulsory circumcision were mainly to be found among the ranks of the Jewish Christian believers with a Pharisaic background. They based their position on the Torah and cited Genesis 17, which states that God made a covenant with Abraham that he should undergo circumcision and that thereafter all male infants should be circumcised when they were eight days old. In the eyes of this group, salvation was to be achieved through circumcision and living according to the law of Moses. What God had done in Christ was an extension of the tenets he had laid down in the past in his agreement with Abraham.

The advocates of circumcision also recalled aspects of the life of Jesus, later to be committed to writing by the evangelists, and proclaimed that he too had obeyed the law. Luke (2:21) would later insist that Jesus had been circumcised and had also acted in accordance with the law by making a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem. In the words of fellow evangelist Matthew (5:17-19), Jesus said of the law and the prophets "I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them," adding that not a letter of the law would be changed until heaven and earth disappeared. The conservative Christians held similar views. In their world, there was no place for an exception for non-Jewish Christians: Gentiles also had to be circumcised and abide by the law of Moses (Acts 15:5).

Paul took a different view. As he saw it, what God had done in Jesus surpassed all that had gone before. This made an irrelevance of circumcision: faith in God was the central tenet, not outward ritual. In his first letter to the Corinthians, written in 53, he expressed this view succinctly: "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing" (1 Cor. 7:19). In other words, it did not matter whether a believer was circumcised or not; it was more important that he put his complete trust in God. In stating his case, he spoke of the miracles that God had worked among the Gentiles through him and through Barnabas.

These two positions were difficult to reconcile. I cannot imagine that Paul, even for a moment, contemplated adopting the position of the Jerusalem group and asking Gentile converts to undergo circumcision. He may briefly have toyed with the idea of paying no heed whatsoever to the community in Jerusalem and simply continuing to go his own way. Had he done so, however, the leaders of the Christian community would undoubtedly have called him to account and would perhaps have denied him the right to continue his mission. Then again, the other participants at the conference, aside from those he regarded as 'false prophets' with their incessant demands for compulsory circumcision, were keenly aware that he could not simply be ignored. Peter too was convinced of this. He was an advocate of circumcision for all Christians and would ideally have liked Paul to comply with this instruction, but he also realized that Paul could count on widespread support and that he was not about to give in without a fight.

When no satisfactory solution was forthcoming, James spoke up. He was a figure of great authority among the early Christians, not least because he was referred to as "the Lord's brother" (Gal 1:19). He had not been one of the original apostles, which suggests that he was not among his brother's direct disciples and

was perhaps only inspired by his teachings at a later time. But once he had converted, he was quickly accepted into the leadership of the Christian community in Jerusalem.⁴⁵

Unlike Paul, James was not a man of the world. He had always operated within the Jewish community. Although he himself was in favour of circumcision, he now adopted a conciliatory role with his proposal that no unnecessary obligations should be imposed on the Gentiles who had turned to God, although they should be instructed to abstain from idolatry, from sexual immorality and from the meat of strangled animals and from blood (Acts 15:20). It was a compromise that most of those present could live with and that posed the least threat to unity within the Christian community. James's proposal was founded on practical considerations. For non-Jews, the obligation to be circumcised was a major obstacle to becoming a Christian. After all, they had no bond whatsoever with Judaism; they were followers of Christ, not of the law of Moses. Besides, Paul had demonstrated in the preceding years that a large number of potential believers were open to receive his message.⁴⁶

However, the proposed compromise did not put an end to the problems. The Jewish Christians had their roots in ancient Judaism, a tradition with which the Gentile converts had no affinity. The compromise certainly ensured that the Gentiles would not have to undergo circumcision, but now there was a very real danger that they would come to be viewed as second-class Christians. Both Paul and Peter were aware of this, but for the time being this solution seemed nevertheless to be the best available. Peter and his followers would continue to spread the faith among the circumcised while Paul and his sympathizers would focus their efforts on the uncircumcised. The most prominent figures present – James, Peter, John, Barnabas and Paul – sealed the agreement with the right hand of fellowship (Gal. 2:9).

All this was easier said than done, however, as the so-called Incident at Antioch was soon to testify. Peter's treatment of the non-Jewish converts does not demonstrate a firm commitment, at least not in Paul's view. In his letter to the Galatians (2:11-14), he wrote that Peter came to Antioch after the Jerusalem conference and ate at the same table with the Gentiles. But when he heard of the arrival of Christians close to James, who was in favour of compulsory circumcision despite having brokered the compromise, Peter was quick to withdraw and distance himself for fear of being criticized by the advocates of circumcision. Other Jewish Christians in Antioch, even Barnabas, went along with this hypocrisy, creating a division between Jewish and non-Jewish Christians. Paul confronted Peter directly, accused him of being inconsistent in his actions and addressed him in the following words: "You are a Jew, yet you live like a

⁴⁵ James would go on to play an important role but in 62 he was called before the Sanhedrin and was put to death. Flavius Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews* XX, Chapter 9.1) devotes a short passage to the death of James: "he [Ananus, the high priest] assembled the sanhedrim of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ, whose name was James, and some others, [or, some of his companions]; and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned" (translation by William Whiston).

⁴⁶ See also Murphy-O'Connor (1996), p. 138-141.

Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?" (Gal. 2:14)

The controversy had far-reaching consequences. No doubt Paul expressed his position less diplomatically in his battle of words with Peter than he does in his letter to the Galatians and he almost certainly made enemies in the process. Even Barnabas, Paul's faithful companion during his first great missionary expedition, turned his back on him. Luke's account (Acts 15:36-40) settles for the explanation that the two apostles did not see eye to eye on whether to take John Mark with them on a following expedition, after he had abandoned them in Pamphylia and returned to Jerusalem. Yet it is likely that the apostles' parting of the ways had everything to do with the agreements made in Jerusalem and the Incident at Antioch. As a devout Jew, Barnabas like Peter wanted to remain faithful to the old Jewish customs and was not prepared to give up the dietary prescriptions. In doing so, he reinforced the dividing line between Jewish and non-Jewish Christians. Paul reproached him for allowing himself to be led astray by Peter and his sympathizers. Harsh words were exchanged. Neither was able to convince the other. The result was an acrimonious parting. They never worked together again. Nevertheless, in his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul does express his regard for his former companion (1 Cor. 9:6).

Whatever we decide to make of the conflict between Barnabas and Paul, it is hard to escape the conclusion that, during the conference in Jerusalem, fissures had appeared in the fabric of the Christian community, fissures that could not be easily repaired. Neither Luke nor Paul reveals whether these disputes had a negative impact on the spreading of the gospel. The one thing we can be sure of is that Paul felt justified in going his own way. He knew that, by now, many of the early Christians shared his views and he drew strength from this as he looked to the future.

Theologians have devoted much time and energy to this 'schism', providing a variety of explanations. The most extreme is the theory that these days of dispute gave rise to two more or less definitive guidelines: one for Jewish Christians and one for the other members of the Christian community. According to this interpretation, the two groups were given two separate sets of rules to live by. Evidence for this far-reaching position is hard to find in the scant information supplied by Acts and the letter to the Galatians. However, it would appear that the Christian community in Jerusalem, which primarily consisted of Jews, lived in accordance with the old customs while the communities in Antioch and other Hellenistic towns and cities, where many non-Jews lived, followed Paul's more inclusive interpretation and did not embrace compulsory circumcision and observance of the Jewish dietary laws.

Paul can hardly have been content with the outcome of the Jerusalem conference. Although his vision could count on a good deal of support, he was forced to concede that he still had plenty of work to do before all leading Christians would be willing to accept his points of view. Peter, James and other Galileans would continue to keep a critical eye on him and call him to account as they saw fit. He must have been deeply hurt by the fact that Barnabas was among those who had turned their back on him. Yet Paul was not a man to mourn a lost friendship for long. Perhaps he also felt relieved to some extent that he was free to draw up an itinerary without first having to consult his former travelling companion, who had taken the lead in their partnership until that point. It was

Barnabas who had decided that Cyprus, his homeland, had been their first port of call and now he planned to return there, this time in the company of John Mark. Paul had loftier ambitions. His aim was to spread the new faith throughout the entire Roman Empire, even though he was fully aware that this would take him to towns and cities where his message would meet with even more resistance than it had in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium and Lystra.

Apollos

Paul's second visit to Ephesus was the fulfilment of the promise he had made a year earlier to return to the city and, from there, to spread the gospel far and wide across the region. He was greeted by his loyal sympathizers Aquila and Priscilla. Luke gives no inkling as to the content of their initial conversations, nor do they feature in Paul's letters, but we can be sure that one subject in particular dominated their time together: the preaching of the faith by Apollos, a learned Jew from Alexandria who had more than a passing acquaintance with the art of rhetoric. His arrival had caused quite a stir in Ephesus, as his sermons had sown doubt among his listeners. He had spoken at length of Jesus, but his account was incomplete, as he seemed to know little about Jesus except that he had been baptized by John (Acts 18:24-25). If Luke's words are close to the truth, Apollos probably heard about Jesus' life and death from snatches of stories he picked up in Alexandria. Disciples of John the Baptist may have told these stories in the city and he passed them on with fervour.

Shortly before Paul arrived in Ephesus, Apollos had left for Corinth to preach the word of God there. In Ephesus, Aquila and Priscilla had given him a fuller understanding of the life of Jesus (Acts 18:26-27). It is likely that they gave him a recommendation to carry out his work in Corinth as a full apostle. This he did, to the full satisfaction of the Christians in Corinth, although Paul was probably less impressed. In the opening words of his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul hints at differences of opinion in the new community of believers. In addition to himself, he mentions both Peter and Apollos as representatives of different interpretations (1 Cor. 1:12; see page 229). By mentioning Apollos in the same breath as Peter, he indicates that he saw the new proclaimer of the faith as a formidable rival.

Paul viewed Apollos with suspicion. His scepticism went a good deal further than criticism of Apollos' subsequently amended interpretation of the significance of Jesus and John the Baptist. Paul had always prided himself on his reputation as a scholar, as a man who had been taught by philosophers in Tarsus and who had studied under the prominent Pharisee Gamaliel in Jerusalem. The other apostles had never disputed Paul's claims to be a man of learning, but Apollos was at least his equal in terms of education. Apollos had enjoyed a lengthy period of schooling in the Egyptian city of Alexandria, a centre of culture and academic endeavour at the time and a place where there was room for a wide range of philosophical movements. To Paul, he represented serious competition.

One of the philosophers active in Alexandria in the first half of the first century was the celebrated Jewish thinker Philo. He was born in around 20 BCE and died in 50 CE. Despite being a law-abiding orthodox Jew who looked to the Torah as the highest authority, he was not a man to ensconce himself within his own circle. He welcomed debate with other schools of thought and his writings attest to a considerable knowledge of the Greek philosophers.

It is unlikely that Philo's lectures included references to the life of Jesus Christ. In the years when Philo was teaching his students, Jesus' life was probably all but unknown to the people of Alexandria. A handful of believers may have spread stories of a messiah in the city, but a philosopher such as Philo

would have been unlikely to take a genuine interest in preachers spouting vague tales of Jesus and John the Baptist. After all, there were already more than enough messiah stories doing the rounds.

Luke makes a point of describing Apollos as a literate man, and it is possible that he attended lectures given by Philo. While we cannot be certain of this, he does seem to have absorbed something of Philo's way of thinking. Apollos' Alexandrian background explains why he took a different approach to Paul in his preaching of the faith. While Paul's weighty words thundered down on his opponents from on high, Apollos pulled out all the philosophical stops: he argued, he persuaded, he listened to both sides. This meant that it was less of a leap for him to change his point of view and to take on board Aquila and Priscilla's explanation that the faith did not centre on John the Baptist but on Jesus. In turn, the believers in Ephesus received his sermons enthusiastically and encouraged him to travel to Achaea, to Corinth, where the Christian community that had taken root after Paul's departure was not exactly a model of harmony and unity. They looked to Apollos as a worthy and capable preacher of the faith.

Paul should have been happy that another man of intellect was preaching the word of God, but nothing of the kind can be found in his letters. Perhaps he anticipated that others would seek to emulate the rhetorical techniques Apollos used. This unsettled Paul in all his zeal. He was not one to enter into discussion with other schools of thought; his performance on the Areopagus in Athens had taught him that debating was not his strongest suit. He had not taken to heart the remarks made by his opponents at the time, that he was in fact an anti-philosopher who avoided discussion. By appealing to the omnipotence of his God, he had sought to disqualify them as the devotees of a harmful superstition. But he could not simply ignore a man who was bringing his knowledge of the schools of Greek philosophy to bear within the faith. In order to secure his own position without throwing Apollos to the wolves, Paul let it be known in his first letter to the Corinthians (which he wrote in Ephesus) that a discussion about the correct interpretation of the Scriptures was not desirable, as it could only serve to alienate people from the word of God, which he saw as being utterly unambiguous. From Paul's perspective, it was a sensible decision not to say too much about Apollos. His reticence was a way of preventing the cracks that had started to appear in the early Church from causing too much damage in the short term. In his capacity as Paul's 'biographer', Luke was equally reluctant to cast Apollos in a more prominent role. By devoting too much attention to him, he would have deflected attention away from his protagonist and undermined the power of his own narrative.

Reviewing the evidence

This brings Paul's voyage to Rome to an end for the time being. We can summarize by saying that Luke's account of the three interventions enables Paul to undergo a transformation: from a prisoner who dares to interfere with the course set by the skipper to the man of God who is no longer governed by the everyday realities aboard a sailing vessel. The first time Paul speaks, Luke has him warn that the decision to sail from Fair Havens to Phoenix will bring grave danger to the ship and all those on board (Acts 27:10-11). The crew disregard his words and even the writer himself has to admit that Paul's advice is far from sound, as Fair Havens was not a place where they could realistically shelter for long. Paul's second intervention (Acts 27:21-26) is of a different order altogether. Although the conditions aboard the ship have done nothing but deteriorate in the teeth of the unrelenting gales, Paul's warning only concerns the loss of the ship. He makes no more mention of victims. The ship's salvation no longer depends on the ability of the seamen but is entirely in the hands of God, who has made Paul his instrument through the apparition of an angel. The third time Paul speaks up, it is to warn the seamen that the lives of all on board will be in danger if they lower the lifeboat into the water (Acts 27:31). Although this was a standard manoeuvre for dropping the anchors, Paul sees it as an attempt to abandon ship. The soldiers on board heed Paul's advice and take preventive action.

By describing how the soldiers cut the ropes that held the boat and the supposed unmasking of the seamen's attempt at desertion, the writer has achieved his goal. In effect, Paul has taken over command of the ship from the skipper and goes on to lead the 276 souls on board in a shared meal. The interventions in Acts 27 form the overture to Paul's 'starring role' in Acts 28. The seamen, the soldiers and the other passengers seem to have disappeared from the stage: all attention is focused solely on Paul.

In transforming Paul in this way, Luke has misled many a reader. Through the centuries, praise has been heaped on Paul for saving the ship. Commentators have portrayed the skipper and the crew as unworthy seamen, yet to the very last they did everything that might have been expected of them in the extreme circumstances. They sailed around Crete when the route via the southern Cyclades proved to be impossible and they refused to moor in Fair Havens because it could not provide enough protection. When they were unable to make harbour at Phoenix and the gales threatened to tear the ship apart, they passed ropes under the keel to hold it together. They dropped a sea anchor to slow the ship down, they chopped down the main mast and, as a last resort, they threw part of their grain cargo overboard. They even came within striking distance of rounding the north coast of Malta, from which point it would have been possible to set a course for the south coast of Sicily.

The question remains as to whether or how the ship would have run aground if the soldiers had dismissed Paul's advice to forbid the crew to lower the lifeboat into the water in order to drop the anchors from the bow. Perhaps the ship would have lain at anchor for a while and the skipper could have waited until the gales had subsided to some extent. But since this point was never reached, it was inevitable that the ship would run aground. Through his

protagonist's words, Luke leaves no doubt whatsoever that Paul is in the right. By giving Paul full credit for saving the lives of all on board, Luke depicts him as a man of God and brings him ever closer to Christ, but in doing so he has drifted far from the maritime tale on which he based his account. The seamen vanish into thin air and play no part in the rest of the story.