

A fundamental question has recently come to me, which involves one of the central issues in the study of the life and teachings of Paul. As most members of the blog may know, there are thirteen books in the NT that claim to be written by Paul, six of which are widely thought not actually to be by him. But that means, on the positive side, that we almost certainly have seven letters actually written by Paul, so that if we want to know about him, we can turn to his own writings (unlike, for example, Jesus, from whom we have no writings).

We also, however, have the book of Acts, the fifth book of the NT, which gives a narrative of the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman world, as the faith moved from being a sect within Judaism to becoming a world-wide religion for both Jews and Gentiles. The key figure in that transition, and the main character in the book of Acts, is Paul.

But can we trust that what the book of Acts says about Paul is accurate? That its author actually knew Paul - or at least that he knew what Paul did and said?

Here a reader of the blog raises a question directly germane to that issue.

### **QUESTION:**

What are some of the differences between Paul and the author of Acts in regards to Paul's theology and preaching? Thanks!

### **RESPONSE:**

I deal with that question at length in my textbook on the New Testament, at a simple level, but hopefully with enough detail to satisfy. In the book I argue that Acts is broadly accurate in its general portrayal of Paul in many ways, but also at odds with Paul in a lot of specifics. This is true both in what it says about Paul's life and about his preaching. This will take two posts. Here is what I say about the biographical information about Paul found in Acts.

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In evaluating the reliability of Acts we are fortunate that Paul and Luke sometimes both describe the same event and indicate Paul's teachings on the same issues, making it possible to see whether they stand in basic agreement.

### **Events of Paul's Life.**

In virtually every instance in which the book of Acts can be compared with Paul's letters in terms of biographical detail, differences emerge. Sometimes these differences involve minor disagreements concerning where Paul was at a certain time and with whom. As one example, the book of Acts states that when Paul went to Athens he left Timothy and Silas behind in Berea (Acts 17:10-15) and did not meet up with them again until after he left Athens and arrived in Corinth (18:5). In 1 Thessalonians Paul himself narrates the same sequence of events and indicates just as clearly that he was not in Athens alone, but that Timothy was with him (and possibly Silas as well). It was from Athens that he sent Timothy

back to Thessalonica in order to see how the church was doing there (1 Thess 3:1-3).

Although this discrepancy concerns a minor detail, it shows something about the historical reliability of Acts. The narrative coincides with what Paul himself indicates about some matters (he did establish the church in Thessalonica and then leave from there for Athens), but it stands at odds with him on some of the specifics.

Other differences are of greater importance. For example, Paul is quite emphatic in the epistle to the Galatians that after he had his vision of Jesus and came to believe in him, he did *not* go to Jerusalem to consult with the apostles (1:15-18). This is an important issue for him because he wants to prove to the Galatians that his gospel message did not come from Jesus' followers in Jerusalem (the original disciples and the church around them) but from Jesus himself. His point is that he has not corrupted a message that he received from someone else; his gospel came straight from God, with no human intervention. The book of Acts, of course, provides its own narrative of Paul's conversion. In this account, however, Paul does exactly what he claims not to have done in Galatians: after leaving Damascus some days after his conversion, he goes directly to Jerusalem and meets with the apostles (Acts 9:10-30).

It is possible, of course, that Paul himself altered the real course of events to show that he couldn't have received his gospel message from other apostles because he never consulted with them. If he did stretch the truth on this matter, however, his statement of Galatians—"In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie"—takes on new poignancy, for his lie in this case would have been bald-faced. More likely the discrepancy derives from Luke, whose own agenda affected the way he told the tale. For him, as we have seen, it was important to show that Paul stood in close continuity with the views of the original followers of Jesus, because all the apostles were unified in their perspectives. Thus, he portrays Paul as consulting with the Jerusalem apostles and representing the same faith that they proclaimed.

Moreover, the book of Acts portrays Paul as standing in harmony not only with the original apostles of Jesus but also with all of the essentials of Judaism. Throughout this narrative, Paul maintains his absolute devotion to the Jewish Law. To be sure, he proclaims that Gentiles do not need to keep this Law, since for them it would be an unnecessary burden. He himself, however, remains a good Jew to the end, keeping the Law in every respect. When Paul is arrested for violating the Law, Luke goes out of his way to show that the charges are trumped up (chaps. 21-22). As Paul himself repeatedly asserts throughout his apologetic speeches in Acts, he has done nothing contrary to the Law (e.g., 28:17).

In his own writings, Paul's view of the Law is extremely complicated. Several points, however, are reasonably clear. First, in contrast to the account in Acts, Paul appears to have had no qualms about violating the Jewish Law when the situation required him to do so. In Paul's words, he could live not only "like a Jew" when it served his purposes but also "like a Gentile," for example, when it was necessary for him to convert Gentiles (1 Cor 9:21). On one occasion, he attacked the apostle Cephas for failing to do so himself (Gal 2:11-14). In addition, Paul did not see the Law merely as an unnecessary burden for Gentiles, something that they didn't need to follow but could if they chose. For Paul, it was an absolute and total affront to God for Gentiles to follow the Law, a complete violation of his gospel message. In his view, Gentiles who did so were in jeopardy of falling from God's grace, for if doing what the Law required could contribute to a person's salvation, then Christ died completely in vain (Gal 2:21; 5:4). This is scarcely the conciliatory view attributed to Paul in Acts.

I will continue from here in my next post, to say something (directly to the questioner's question) about the teachings of Paul in his own words and in the book of Acts.

If you belonged to the blog, you could get meaty posts like this five days of the week, every week, till the sun blows up or I do, whichever comes first. It doesn't cost much to join, and all proceeds go to charity. So why not join?



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