

# Paul's Odyssey in Acts: Status Struggles and Island Adventures

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Abstract

The story of Saul–Paul in Acts traces not only his remarkable transformation from archenemy of the gospel to its most avid, dynamic promoter—especially among Gentiles—but also his persisting struggle to *own and maintain* this new identity in the face of antagonistic human, environmental, and supernatural forces. Beyond the well-known Christophany on the road to Damascus, pivotal moments in Paul's character and status development come on the islands of Cyprus and Malta, strategically set at the beginning and end of his missionary journeys in Acts 13 and 28. The significance of this odyssey may be profitably explored through close attention to the narrative's plot sequences and comparative employment of anthropological models of status elevation rituals and honor–shame contests as well as symbolic “maps” of island territory in the ancient Mediterranean world.

In the topsy-turvy world of Acts in which social and cultural boundaries are regularly turned “upside-down” (17:6; Neyrey, 1991) and several characters find their values and vocations turned “inside-out” (Brawley: 182–211), no transformation is more dramatic or central to the plot than that of Saul from chief antagonist of the gospel to its most ardent proponent, especially among the Gentiles. But when, where, and how does such a remarkable “conversion” take place? Any student of Acts can answer that: in chapter nine, on the Damascus road, when the exalted Jesus confronts Saul in a flash of blinding light.

However, while Saul's transformation certainly commences in this famous story, it is far from completed here. For some time Saul struggles to fit his new status, to gain acceptance for his new vocation. The climactic fulfillment, I suggest, of Saul's destiny as a Christian missionary does not come until the decisive contest on the island of Cyprus in 13:4–12, coincident with the shift in name from “Saul” to “Paul” (13:9). Still, even after this pivotal event, all is not smooth sailing for Paul. While his standing as dynamic emissary of the congregation at Antioch (cf. 13:1–3) is firmly secured, his honor continues to be challenged by certain influential Jewish–Christian parties in Jerusalem. Such challenges are successfully answered in due course at two critical conferences superintended by James (15:1–35; 21:17–26).

With his good name thoroughly vindicated among fellow-believers, the last quarter of Acts turns to deal with Paul's reputation in the wider Roman world, particularly among imperial authorities. Here again we detect Paul's protracted struggle to gain and maintain honor. He ably de-

fends himself in a series of forensic speeches, rehearsing key details of his background and conversion (22:1–21; 23:1–10; 24:10–20; 25:8–11; 26:1–23). But the climax, I propose, of Paul's vindication comes once again in his exceptional displays of authority on Mediterranean islands, this time at Crete and Malta (27:13–28:10), culminating in his reception of “many honors” befitting “a god” (28:6, 10).

Mapping the odyssey of Paul's status struggles and island adventures in Acts requires close attention to the “orderly” plot sequences (*kathexēs*, Luke 1:3; Acts 11:4; Tannehill, 1986: 9–12) and descriptive patterns of the narrative through which Paul's character is “built” (see Darr). Also, this investigation will profitably draw on selected anthropological models of status transformation and symbolic conceptions of island territory in the ancient world sketched below.

## From Persecutor to Proclaimer in Acts 9–13

In tracing Saul's development in Acts 9–13, I utilize the interpretive model of status transformation sketched by the social anthropologist, Victor Turner, adapted from the

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pioneering work on “rites of passage” by Arnold van Gennep around the turn of the century, and effectively applied by Mark McVann in charting Jesus’ transition from private citizen of Nazareth to public prophet of Israel in Luke 3–4 (see also Spencer, 1992a: 161–63). Turner delineates a three-stage process of status transformation, moving from (1) separation to (2) liminality–*communitas* and ultimately to (3) aggregation (1969: 94–95; 1974: 231–33).

The first, *separation* phase detaches the initiand from the routine of everyday social life, allowing time and space for concentrated “reflection on the meaning of religious and cultural core-values” (Turner, 1974: 166–230). In Acts 9, Saul suddenly finds himself in just such an isolated state. While heading from Jerusalem to Damascus to seize followers of “the Way” (9:2), he is stopped dead in his tracks at some unknown spot along the “way/road” (9:17). Here the risen Jesus dramatically reveals himself to Saul in a blazing vision and piercing voice. Although Saul’s attendants also hear the voice, they “see no one” (9:7). Saul faces Jesus alone. Blind and perplexed, he is eventually led to Straight Street in Damascus, the main east–west thoroughfare through the city (Gaventa: 2074). But here Saul is sequestered off the beaten path in the private residence of Judas, where he prayerfully contemplates his ordeal and awaits further instruction (9:11–12).

The second stage combines two counterbalancing elements: one extending the disorienting experience of separation (*liminality*) and the other beginning to build new bonds of fellowship (*communitas*). Liminality marks the “threshold” (*limen*) of conventional society, a fuzzy realm “neither here nor there” hovering “betwixt and between the categories of ordinary social life” (Turner, 1967: 93–111; 1969: 95; 1974: 273) In this phase, the “liminar” or novice occupies a vertiginous “limbo of statuslessness,” preparing the way for a radical reorientation of values and character under the tutelage of an acknowledged expert—the “ritual elder.”

Knocked off his feet by the lightning bolt from heaven and jolted by Jesus’ pointed challenge of his mission (“Why do you persecute me?”), Saul’s experience of liminality becomes evident in both his perplexity over Jesus’ identity (“Who are you, Lord?”) and his three-day deprivation of sight and sustenance (9:4–5, 8–9). Confused and “in the dark” about his destiny, with no “appetite” for his former pursuits, Saul finds himself in need of fresh guidance. This comes in the person of Ananias, the “ritual elder” or “limit-breaking agent” (Malina, 1986: 143–53) authorized by divine vision to deal with Saul in his precarious state.

Overriding Ananias’ fear that Saul has come to Damascus only to wreak “much” havoc upon the church and

to “bind all who invoke [the Lord’s] name,” the Lord assures Ananias that Saul has in fact been “chosen” to do just the opposite: Saul himself “must suffer [much] for the sake of [the Lord’s name],” as he testifies to this name “before Gentiles and kings . . . and the people of Israel” (9:10–16). Saul thus becomes bound together in a new *communitas* of suffering servants and rejected prophets of the Lord, in the train of Moses, Isaiah, Jesus, Peter and Stephen (see Moessner, 1983; 1986). Moreover, Saul also begins to affiliate with with the present community of disciples. Upon entering Judas’ house, Ananias “lays hands [of fellowship and solidarity] on Saul,” addresses him as “Brother Saul,” and informs him of the Lord’s plan to restore his sight and anoint him with the Spirit (9:17). Saul is becoming part of the “fictive” family of enlightened, Spirit-imbued believers in Jesus the Lord.

In the final, *aggregation* stage of status transformation, the subject re-enters the flow of everyday life prepared to enjoy the privileges and fulfill the obligations of his new position within the community. Under Ananias’ care, Saul receives back his sight, submits to baptism, breaks his fast and ultimately “regains his strength” (9:18–19). Saul’s physical functions thus return to normal, and his membership in the corporate body of Jesus’ disciples is certified.

But what about his calling both to *witness* and to *suffer* in Jesus’ name? At first Saul’s new vocation appears to unfold according to plan. United “with the disciples in Damascus . . . immediately he beg[ins] to proclaim Jesus in the [local] synagogues,” and after some initial interest, even amazement, at his testimony, certain Jews turn violently against Saul, forcing him to flee the city (9:19–25). But following this set of events in Damascus, Saul’s course takes some unexpected turns—seriously complicating the aggregation process. When he returns to Jerusalem and “attempt[s] to join the disciples” there, he encounters widespread fear and suspicion; they want nothing to do with this notorious enemy. Barnabas emerges as Saul’s sole advocate and eventually persuades the apostles to accept Saul as a genuine ally. Again Saul begins to “speak boldly in the name of the Lord” throughout the city, and again he is threatened by the murderous plots of some resistant Jews, prompting his disciple-friends to send him away—this time to his native Tarsus via Caesarea (9:26–30).

In one sense Saul’s struggle for acceptance and his continuing marginal status are not all that surprising. We recall that a destiny of suffering lay at the heart of Saul’s commission, and as McVann has noted, appointments of certain religious figures (such as prophets, priests and shamans) often result in only “partial aggregation” into the community,

since, by necessity, their special role as mediator of the holy and supernatural alienates them in some measure from mundane society (341).

Still, however, Saul seems to be blocked from fully owning his new status as global missionary. He has witnessed to no Gentiles or kings yet, as far as we know, and finds refuge from persecution back home in Tarsus, where we learn of no further ministry. By contrast, at the beginning of Jesus' public prophetic mission, he fled from his hometown of Nazareth and directly continued his work in other, more receptive cities of Galilee (Luke 4:16–44). After reporting Saul's conversion in Acts 9:1–30, the narrator concludes that that "the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up" (9:31); but this state of affairs results more from defusing the threat of Saul the persecutor than from any constructive contribution made by Saul the proclaimer.

At this juncture, with Saul marooned in Tarsus, the narrative turns back to the apostle Peter, providing a lengthy and dramatic account in 10:1–11:18 of his breakthrough to the Roman centurion, Cornelius. Peter seems to take up Saul's calling, opening the door of the gospel to a Gentile household and officer of the king. With this door to the Gentiles now ajar, a group of unnamed missionaries from Cyprus and Cyrene fling it wide open by evangelizing a "great number" of Greeks in the Syrian capital of Antioch (11:19–21).

*Where is Saul in all of this advance in the Gentile mission?* After a two chapter hiatus, he finally returns to the story, but still not as a leading, dynamic missionary. Barnabas becomes the chief overseer of the Antioch church and finally brings Saul back from Tarsus to assist him in nurturing the growing congregation. Saul functions essentially as a novice or apprentice to Barnabas, the ritual elder or mentor (11:25–26). This arrangement continues into ch. 13. The order of presentation is always "Barnabas [first] and Saul" (11:30; 12:25; 13:2). In the list of five prophets and teachers heading the church at Antioch in 13:1, from which Barnabas and Saul are selected for special missionary duty, Barnabas is mentioned first, while Saul appears not even in the second spot, but rather in the very *last* position.

However, just when Saul seems to be locked into playing Barnabas' sidekick, his role changes dramatically. At the first stop on their journey—the island of Cyprus (13:4–12)—Saul finally takes the reins of leadership and begins to realize the full potential of his transformation and commission in ch. 9.

## Saul Becomes "Paul" on Cyprus (Acts 13:9)

In the preponderantly agonistic, hierarchic and dyadic culture of the ancient Mediterranean world, one's character and reputation were strongly determined in relation to others on the social ladder. Deep "embeddedness" within the dominant social system typically produced "collectivist selves" rather than self-fashioning individuals (Malina and Neyrey, 1991a: 67–96; 1996: 153–201). Thus, Saul's new identity in Acts 13, intimated by the introduction of another name ("Paul," 13:9), most clearly emerges within an altered network of status relations vis-à-vis two prominent representatives of Cypriot society: Bar-Jesus/Elymas and Sergius Paulus.

### *An Influential Jewish Prophet: Bar-Jesus/Elymas*

At the heart of the Cyprus mission stands Paul's altercation with a Jewish wonder-working prophet named "Bar-Jesus," denoting "son of Jesus/Joshua" in Aramaic. "Elymas" does not really translate Bar-Jesus, as the narrator claims (13:8), but the use of a Greek byname signals this Jewish magician's syncretistic link to the pagan world and severs any possible kinship tie to another prophetic "Jesus" (the Christ) (Horsley: 1015–16). In any case, Bar-Jesus is an important figure to be reckoned with on the island. His designation as a "magician" (*magos*, 13:6, 8) identifies a powerful and popular public figure able to mesmerize the crowds and maximize his own profit (cf. 8:9–24; 19:19; Spencer, 1992b: 95–103). His reputation as a "prophet" (*prophētēs*)—although patently "false" (13:6) from the narrator's perspective—still characterizes a persuasive claimant to divine wisdom among certain devotees. Given his familiarity with the Roman proconsul in Cyprus (13:7), Bar-Jesus may well have enjoyed special standing as a high-level "consultant" (Witherington: 398) or "court magician" (Garrett: 81).

This privileged position provides a key context for understanding Bar-Jesus' strident reaction to the visiting missionaries. He has a lot to lose from these rival messengers of God: they pose a serious threat both to his honor among the Jews in the local synagogues (13:5) and to his patronage by the Roman governor, who becomes interested in their message (13:7). In short, Barnabas and Saul have invaded Bar-Jesus' territory, thus potentially disrupting his entire "occupation." Something has to give; the stage is set for a duel of honor following a typical claim–challenge–riposte–verdict sequence (Malina and Neyrey, 1991b: 29–32, 49–52).

Judging the missionaries' proclamation of the "word of God" as a *claim* of superior authority, Bar-Jesus mounts a

counter-challenge by “opposing” their work and attempting “to turn the proconsul away from the faith” (13:7–8). In turn, “Saul, also known as Paul”—acting alone, independent of Barnabas—follows with a direct *riposte*, hurling a string of insulting epithets and then inflicting a curse of blindness on Bar-Jesus (13:9–11). This miraculous debut for Paul reflects, as Arthur Nock suggests, precisely the kind of punitive hex someone like Bar-Jesus might be expected to perform; Paul is thus portrayed beating “the magician at his own game” (Nock: 185–86). The final *verdict* on this honor contest is effectively pronounced by the proconsul when he “believes” in Paul’s message after he “saw what had happened” to Bar-Jesus (13:12). Paul wins the match and solidifies his new missionary authority.

Closer examination of other elements in the Bar-Jesus incident, in light of wider Lukan and biblical contexts, uncover a fuller picture of Paul’s remarkable status transformation. First, through the power of the Holy Spirit, Paul exposes the so-called “son of Jesus” as in fact the “son of the devil . . . [the] enemy of all unrighteousness” (13:9–10). In other words, Bar-Jesus is actually Bar-Satan (Witherington: 402). Paul thus engages in a cosmic battle reminiscent of the experience of the Lukan Jesus and his earliest followers. In his study of Jesus’ transformation from private person to public prophet, McVann tracks Jesus’ passage not only through separation and liminality—*communitas*, but also through another phase of *ritual confrontation*, just before aggregation, in which the initiand must pass a strenuous final examination. In Jesus’ case, this “confrontation” comes with his famous “temptation” ordeal in Luke 4:1–13 just prior to commencing his public Galilean mission (McVann: 340, 353–55). For Paul, the Bar-Jesus episode serves a very similar function. As the Lukan Jesus, “filled with the Spirit,” proved his mettle at the outset of his public ministry in a desert clash with the devil, so Paul, “filled with the Spirit,” passes his first missionary test in an island showdown with the son of the devil. And later, as the Lukan Jesus, having “watched Satan fall like lightning from heaven,” transmitted his cosmic “authority . . . over all the power of the enemy (*echthrou*)” to seventy delegates (Luke 10:17–19), so Paul demonstrates his Christ-given authority over “the son of the devil, [the] enemy (*echthre*) of all righteousness” by enshrouding him in darkness (Acts 13:10–11).

Secondly, the narrator’s depiction of Bar-Jesus as both “false prophet” (*pseudoprophetes*) and sorcerer (*magos*) (13:6) associates this figure with the Canaanite mediums opposed to the true “prophet like Moses” in Deuteronomy (18:9–18) and before that, with the Egyptian wizards pitted against Moses himself in Exodus (7:9–12, 22; 8:7, 19; cf.

Acts 3:22–23; 7:35–37). Moreover, the charge that Bar-Jesus persists in “making crooked the straight paths of the Lord” sets him in polar opposition to the prophetic script outlined by Isaiah and fulfilled by John the baptizer (Isa 40:3–4; Luke 3:4–5). By besting such a fraudulent prophet, Paul thus establishes himself as an authentic “prophet like Moses” and messenger like John, speaking the true “word of God” (Acts 13:5, 7), striking a meddlesome “master of the dark arts” (Johnson: 227) with a plague of darkness (13:11; cf. Exod 10:21–29; Deut 28:28–29) and blocking his crooked path.

Finally, the “blinding” of Bar-Jesus by “the hand of the Lord” and his “groping” for others’ hands to guide him (Acts 13:11–12) also remind us of Paul’s own experience on the Damascus road (9:3–9; cf. Witherup: 65–68). Even after Paul regained his sight and began proclaiming the gospel, he continued to need others’ helping hands to usher him out of precarious situations and into preaching opportunities (9:25, 27–30; 11:25–26; cf. Spencer, 1997: 94–96). Now in Cyprus—after limited service in Damascus, Jerusalem, Tarsus and Antioch—Paul firmly takes charge of his own prophetic career, reversing, as it were, his former blindness and helplessness by imposing such a state on Bar-Jesus.

In sum, as Susan Garrett comments, Paul’s “triumph [over Bar-Jesus] confirms the change that has taken place in his own life, and brings him a new external status to match the new internal one: he departs from Paphos as the leader of the mission” (84–85).

#### *An Intelligent Roman Official: Sergius Paulus*

While in a limited way Paul has begun to fulfill his original commission to proclaim Jesus’ name “before Gentiles [at Antioch] . . . and the people of Israel [at Damascus and Jerusalem]” (9:15), he has had no contact as yet with the third and most specialized target group—“kings”—denoting the Roman emperor and various client-rulers permitted to use the royal title. Now, however, on Cyprus, Paul suddenly captures the attention and ultimately the respect of a member of the ruling elite. Although not a king, the resident proconsul Sergius Paulus, who “believes” in Paul’s dynamic word (13:7, 12), represents the highest ranking official on the island, part of the empire’s “governing class” appointed directly by Caesar (cf. Neyrey, 1996: 255–67). Moreover, according to Acts, Sergius Paulus genuinely merited such patronage by virtue of his notable “intelligence” (*synetos*, 13:7). Combining political clout with governmental acumen, power with wisdom, Sergius Paulus appears as a dignitary of consummate honor in Roman-Cypriot society.

Previously, as a police agent of the chief priests in Jerusalem (9:1–2), Saul functioned as a “retainer” to “the governing Jewish elite classes” (Neyrey, 1996: 260–61). Now, by impressing such an impressive figure as the sagacious governor of Cyprus, Paul evinces his honorable standing in the Greco–Roman world as well: he can hold his own before savvy politicians as much as before slick magicians. The coincidence of the missionary’s new name—Saulus *Paulus*—matching the magistrate’s—Sergius *Paulus*—may offer subtle confirmation that Paul is a worthy retainer, if not the social equal, of a Roman nobleman (cf. Nobbs: 287–89). Names seem to be suggestive in this story: while Bar–Jesus is patently shown to be no true “son of Jesus,” but rather a “son of the devil,” by contrast, Paulus the preacher, whose name means “little,” proves in fact to enjoy no little honor as the admired advisor of Paulus the proconsul.

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In sum: by confronting and overwhelming Bar–Jesus the magician, impressing and converting Sergius Paulus the proconsul, and emulating and extending the prophetic vocations of Jesus, John, and Moses, Saul–become–Paul decisively fulfills his new status in Acts 13:4–12 as leading promoter of the gospel among both Jews and Gentiles, including elites. The novice (Saul) has matched and even surpassed the mentor (Barnabas)—on the latter’s *home turf* of Cyprus, no less (cf. 4:36). When the missionary party moves on from Cyprus, it is now designated simply “Paul and his companions” (13:13). *We have “aggregation.”*

### Mapping Islands in the Ancient Mediterranean World

We turn now from charting Paul’s status–elevation in relation to *social boundaries* to exploring the significance of *spatial settings*. We have already pinpointed the isolated, wayside station between Jerusalem and Damascus and the private house on Straight Street as key liminal sites in the early stages of Saul’s transformation in Acts 9. We now consider the appropriateness of an *island* setting for Paul’s climactic elevation in Acts 13. My interest here is not with the geographical island of Cyprus in particular, but with the

broad social–symbolic concept of “island” (*nēsos*) in the Hellenistic–Jewish world. I propose a four–fold framework for understanding.

#### *Meteorology: Places of Refuge*

In both legend and history, Mediterranean islands commonly represented welcome havens of rest and safety for sailors imperiled at sea either by unexpected virulent storms or by marauding warriors or pirates. In Homer’s classic epic, for example, Nestor and Menelaus flee across the Aegean Sea, “fast as we could sail,” to the island of Euboea, in order to “escape a catastrophe” of battle with pursuing warships (ODYSSEY 3.180–200). The hero of Lucian’s *A True Story* finally finds refuge after being tossed at sea “hither and thither for seventy–nine days” on a sunlit, “mountainous, thickly wooded island close by” (1.6). And Josephus relates a report that Herod’s son, Aristobulus, had been harbored at the island of Crete to protect him from “dangers of the sea” (ANT. 17.334–335).

Since embarking on “the Way” of Jesus, Paul has been on the run from antagonistic Jewish forces. He has found some refuge in Antioch but is now on the move again. As he arrives at the island of Cyprus, we wonder: will this be a place of further acceptance (aggregation) or alienation for Paul? At first, he and Barnabas “proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews” without incident (Acts 13:5). Soon, however, Paul meets Jewish resistance once again—in the person of Bar–Jesus. But this time Paul stands his ground and successfully fights back, engulfing his opponent in shadowy, ominous chaos, rendering him “unable to see the sun” (13:11). This island thus marks a secure, luminous zone for Paul in the midst of turbulent forces of darkness swirling around him.

#### *Criminology: Sites of Exile*

Paradoxically, while islands offered refuge to desperate fugitives of bad weather and war, they also, by virtue of their isolated and sometimes desolate settings, provided ideal outposts for banishing troublesome enemies of the Roman state. The bleak, volcanic islands in the Sporades chain, for example, including Patmos where John the Seer was assigned, were especially suitable for political exile (cf. Rev 1:9; Tacitus, ANNALS 3.68; 4.30; 15.71; Juvenal, SATIRES 6.558–64; Caird: 21–23; Carroll; Filson).

Interestingly, the Lukan Paul’s very first encounter with a Roman official takes place *on a Mediterranean island*, with the territory’s proconsul, Sergius Paulus. Given the no-

tority of such stations as penal zones in the Roman empire, not to mention Paul's recent history of disturbing the peace in various places and his current agitation of the proconsul's valued advisor, Paul seems to be treading on very dangerous ground. Remarkably, however, this island ultimately proves to be a site of exaltation, not exile, for Paul. Far from being the target of banishment and resistance, Paul emerges on Cyprus as the object of astonishment and respect—even faith—on the part of the high-ranking Roman governor (Acts 13:12).

*Geology: Masses of Elevation*

In presenting the debate between Theophrastus and Stoic philosophers over “the eternity of the cosmos,” Philo conveyed a common geological perception of islands in the ancient world. Islands were typically compared with mountains as irregular protrusions from the earth's surface, having “gradually emerged and bec[o]me conspicuous” rather than been engulfed or eroded by the “great rains pouring down from everlasting each year” (ETERNITY OF THE WORLD 118–20; cf. 117–23, 132–42). From his island perch, John the Seer reflected a similar geology in portraying the cataclysmic transition between the old and new world as a *levelling* of islands and mountains: “And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found” (Rev 16:20; cf. 6:14). Such a connection between islands and mountains is naturally reinforced by the fact that rough, mountainous terrain marked the landscapes of many Mediterranean islands (e.g., “rocky Chios” and “a rocky island [Asteris] between Ithaca and Same's rugged cliffs” [ODYSSEY 3.189; 4.949–51]; the “rocky, volcanic hills” of Patmos [Filson: 677]).

In Greek mythology, as Richard Buxton has amply illustrated, mountains (*oros*) are commonly depicted as marginal, “wild” areas where conventional boundaries are “collapsed,” where “things normally separate are brought together”—such as divine and human realms—and where “social relationships and normal social behaviour may be reversed” (Buxton: 6–11). Similarly, from Israelite lore, we are familiar with mountains as isolated, liminal peaks, separated from and rising above mainstream society, closer to the divine, heavenly sphere and thus propitious sites for status *elevation*—as with Moses on Mt. Horeb/Sinai (Exod 3:1–4:17; 32–34), Elijah on Mt. Carmel and Mt. Horeb (1 Kgs 18:20–19:18) and Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Luke 9:28–36 par.).

I suggest that the *Isle* of Cyprus represents a similar, symbolic high point for Paul in Acts—the locus of his eleva-

tion as a divinely empowered captain of gospel expansion. This scenario fits into a typical pattern of ancient seafaring adventures, as sketched by Vernon Robbins, which featured “the establishment of new leaders” during the voyage who “speak eloquently and perform some unusual feat” (218, 230)—just as Paul does at Cyprus. From this point, Paul is poised to return to the mainland to spearhead a new phase of Christian witness.

*Ethnology: Habitations of Gentiles*

The landlocked Israelites reflected in the Jewish scriptures viewed coastal borders and islands of the sea as remote habitats of the Gentile nations. Genesis 10 refers to the seventy (MT) or seventy-two (LXX) peoples spread throughout the earth after the flood as “the islands/coastlands of the Gentiles/nations” (*nēsoi tōn ethnōn*, 10: 5, 32 LXX). Deutero-Isaiah appropriates this same worldview in relation to both the cosmic authority of the Creator God and the salvific witness of the Lord's servant, Israel. Note the parallelism between islands and nations, first as “dust”-like objects of God's sovereign control and then as summoned targets of Israel's “light”-bearing mission.

Even the nations are like a drop from a bucket,  
and are accounted as dust on the scales;  
see he takes up the islands like fine dust [Isa 40:15 MT].

Listen to me, O coastlands/islands (*nēsoi*), pay attention, you nations/peoples (*ethnē*) from far away!

The Lord called me . . . and said to me, “You are my servant, Israel. . . . It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a *light to the nations* (*ethnōn*), that my salvation may reach to *the ends of the earth*” (Isa 49:1–6 LXX).

In Luke's infancy narrative, the Spirit-anointed Simon models the Messiah's mission after that of the Isaianic servant (Luke 2:29–32//Isa 49:6). In Acts, Paul appears destined to further this agenda begun by the Lukan Jesus, bearing witness to his own fellow-Israelites and extending the light of salvation to Gentiles at the earth's outer limits. How fitting, then, in view of Isa 49:1, that he starts this pioneering expedition on an *island* in the sea, calling both Jews and Gentiles far away to pay attention to the Lord's message. In the next episode, at Pisidian Antioch, Paul will actually cite Isa 49:6 as the blueprint for his mission (13:47; cf. 26:23).

As isolated, liminal outposts rising from the sea, providing a home for remote peoples and at times a haven for imperiled travellers, islands like Cyprus in the ancient Mediterranean world afforded an optimum setting for the strug-

gling Paul's climactic elevation to his appointed role as chief missionary to the Gentiles.

With Paul at last fully aggregated into his new vocation, we must still inquire: *can this high honor attained in the middle of Acts be maintained to the end of the narrative?*

### **Prisoner's Progress in Acts 21–26**

In the fiercely competitive (agonistic), limited-good culture of Mediterranean antiquity—in which limited honor was prized as the highest good—one's honor was constantly under siege from rivals. Honor won represented a commodity to be defended and potentially lost (see Malina, 1993: 28–62, 90–116). We have seen that Paul's path to achieving honor in Acts 9–13 was a rocky one. Perhaps preserving this honor will be similarly fraught with struggle.

After his success at Cyprus, Paul regularly encounters hostile reactions to his mission in the form of inquisition, expulsion, incarceration, and even (attempted) execution (14:19–20), sometimes from agitated Jewish synagogue rulers and vigilante bands (13:44–52; 14:1–20; 18:1–17; 17:1–15; 19:8–9; 20:18–19); at other times, from threatened Roman magistrates and businessmen (16:17–40; 19:23–41); and even, occasionally, from anxious Jewish-Christian elders and believers (15:1–2, 36–41; 20:29–30; 21:17–26) (see Spencer, 1997: 133–36). Such opposition comes to a head with Paul's arrest and imprisonment at the end of ch. 21, which inaugurate a protracted series of legal trials and other assorted ordeals in Jerusalem, Caesarea, and Rome over several years.

However, various recent studies have emphasized that, even in the midst of these dire circumstances in the final chapters of Acts, Paul continues to be distinguished as a noble friend, if not a fellow, of the upper crust. For example, Richard Pervo shows that Paul the prisoner, though a target of sinister conspiracies, still manages to survive as a protected "VIP" in the mold of heroic protagonists from popular Hellenistic novels (e.g., 23:12–35; Pervo: 32–34). John Lentz focuses on Paul's "high-society" image as a native citizen of the important Greek city of Tarsus as well as the Roman empire at large and a precocious member since youth of the respected Pharisaic "philosophical school" (21:39; 22:3, 25–29; 23:6; 26:4–5; Lentz: 23–61). And Jerome Neyrey views the Lukan Paul as a sophisticated, "forensically adept" urbanite, persuasively holding his own before prominent officials in major judicial centers across the empire (Neyrey, 1996; Malina and Neyrey, 1996: 64–99).

While such studies have exposed a key facet of Paul's

characterization in the last quarter of Acts, they run the risk of flattening this portrait into a single, "superstar" dimension without sufficient appreciation for the hardship which Paul experiences along the way in a persisting, precarious struggle to defend his honor. In a critique of Lentz's work in particular, Robert Tannehill has rightly observed a tendency to "think in terms of static social status." Accordingly, "it would be interesting to see the results if Lentz would reconceive his project by following the dynamics of the narrative and considering how [Paul's] honor might be lost or won in successive scenes" (Tannehill, 1994: 218–219).

In the "loss" column of the trial segment in Acts 21–26, we must acknowledge that, despite receiving periodic "VIP" treatment, Paul remains a bound prisoner in fortified, military "barracks" for an extended period (21:33–34, 37; 22:22–29; 23:10, 16; the more congenial "house arrest" arrangement comes later in Rome [28:16, 30]). His mission is thus virtually stifled, except for the witness he offers in court. While such testimony is certainly eloquent and erudite, it leads to no converts as far as we know. The famous "almost persuaded" comment of King Agrippa (26:28) may just as easily be interpreted as a derisive dismissal of Paul's audacious rhetoric ("Do you really dare so quickly—and naively—to persuade *me* to become a Christian?") as a sympathetic confession of sincere interest in Paul's gospel. The former reading pairs more readily with Festus' judgment that Paul has pushed his newfangled ideas to the brink of good sense, even sanity (26:24)! As well as winning no converts over the course of these legal proceedings, Paul also performs no miraculous feats to silence his critics and impress the authorities, as in the Bar-Jesus incident. Likewise, there is now no timely earthquake (cf. 16:26–27) or other momentous "act of God" to effect Paul's release.

As for the handling of Paul by Roman officials, a somewhat mixed picture emerges. While, on the one hand, the governors accord Paul a measure of respect due a Roman citizen, on the other hand, they toy with him to advance their own positions. Felix, for example, though rather spooked by Paul's stern message of justice, still sends for the prisoner on an off for two years, hoping to receive a suitable bribe (24:24–27). In one sense, such dealings reflect standard elite conduct. Felix obviously regards Paul as a man of some means with well-placed friends who might bale him out (cf. 17:6–9). In fact, however, no support, financial or otherwise, is forthcoming for the accused (Rosenblatt: 94–97). Paul, like Jesus before him, faces his trials alone (Kurz: 121).

Paul, as it were, finds himself back in limbo (liminality),

his missionary vocation again in the balance. Will he ever rise again to resume his calling, fulfill his destiny? As it happens, Paul's status as a prisoner, although formally unaltered up to the end of Acts, functionally changes in the closing two chapters. The voyage to Rome (27:1–28:16)—ostensibly just another means of transferring Paul to his next trial venue—becomes in fact a fresh missionary journey for Paul in which he re-emerges as a dynamic leader and benefactor (Robbins: 237–38). And, interestingly, *islands* also re-emerge as strategic sites of salvific demonstration and status elevation.

### Paul Becomes “God” on the Island of Malta (Acts 28:6)

At the outset of the trek to Rome, we suddenly observe that Paul is no longer an isolated prisoner. On the one hand, he is herded together with “some other prisoners” (27:1), that is, “counted among the lawless,” like Jesus and the suffering Isaianic servant (Luke 22:37; Isa 53:12). On the other hand, Paul is reunited with former supportive travel companions—the “we”—party—who have been conspicuously absent since his arrest in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–16; 21:1–18; 27:1–8). The officer-in-charge, a distinguished “centurion of the Augustan Cohort named Julius” (27:1), at first shows a certain kindness to Paul by allowing him to visit friends in Sidon (27:3), but then, as the trip ensues and turbulence increases, Julius pays him little mind. When Paul, for example, attempts to warn Julius of severe impending storm damage, the centurion heeds the counter-advice of the ship's pilot and proprietor to press on with the voyage (27:9–11).

Paul is, for all intents and purposes, ignored as a meddling prisoner—*until he is proven to be right!* When, as Paul forecasted, a titanic tempest arises and threatens to engulf the vessel around the island of Crete, Paul emerges again as a figure of benevolent authority. As an agent of the God of Israel, his Divine Patron, Paul promises safety to all who sail with him (27:21–26), supplies bread to all 276 famished shipmates (27:33–38), and effectively preserves the lives of his fellow-prisoners, whom the guards intend to kill but Julius spares for Paul's sake (27:41–43).

The climax of Paul's renewed elevation comes on the island of Malta, where the battered ship finally runs aground and the beleaguered sailors find refuge. Having successfully weathered the “ritual confrontation” (McVann: 340) with the raging storm—a classic, primordial symbol of chaos and liminality (cf. Gen 1:1–2; Job 38:8–11)—Paul now survives

another quintessential, life-threatening test, in the form of a lethal serpent (cf. Gen 3:1–5, 14–15; Luke 10:18–19). Expecting Paul to succumb to the viper's venom as an act of punishment from the Greek goddess, Dike (“Justice,” *dikē*, Acts 28:4), the island natives quickly reverse their opinion—as Paul shakes off the creature unharmed—and regard *Paul himself as some kind of god!* (28:5–6). Unlike a similar situation of hero-worship at Lystra (14:8–18), here Paul makes no special effort to disabuse his admirers of their extraordinary claim. Rather he proceeds to act very much like a “god” or at least like a chief client/broker of an invincible Heavenly Patron, miraculously curing the infirmities of the island population, in particular the afflicted father of a resident named Publius, Malta's “leading man” (28:7–9). Such charity results in an outpouring of “many honors” and “provisions” on Paul and his companions (28:10).

These transformative events on the island of Malta recall several dimensions of the pivotal Cyprus episode discussed above. Both display Paul's dramatic boost in honor—after a period of separation and liminality—through his conquest of diabolical forces (villainous wizard [Bar-Jesus]/poisonous viper) and approbation by local dignitaries (proconsul [Sergius Paulus]/leading man [Publius]). And again, a remote Mediterranean *island*, rising out of the deep, provides an ideal stage for Paul's elevation in status and renewal of his mission to distant Gentiles. Deriving from a Semitic term (*melita*) denoting “refuge” (Gasque), Malta fittingly offers Paul not only a haven from natural disaster but also a venue for rekindling his supernatural powers, which had lain dormant during his imprisonment. Far from being a place of exile—or even worse, given the guards' plan to execute Paul and the other prisoners after the shipwreck—Malta, like Cyprus, serves ultimately as a site of exaltation for the God-commissioned Paul.

What happens after Malta in terms of Paul's (re-)integration (“aggregation”) into his missionary vocation? Though still technically a prisoner, Paul sets off on the final leg of his journey to Rome in a commanding position, ready to face local believers, Jewish leaders, and the emperor himself as an honored hero and benevolent broker of divine blessing. Of course, he never sees the emperor before the Acts story breaks off, but Paul does enjoy full and eager acceptance among the Roman believers (28:14–15) and even attains “partial aggregation” (McVann: 341) into the wider Jewish community: “some [among Roman Jews, including leaders] were convinced by what he had said, while others refused to believe” (28:24; cf. vv.17–23). Finally, he reaf-



firms his original commission to bear salvific testimony to Gentiles, as well as Jews, and receives "all" who come to hear his message. Paul ends on a high note in Acts, (re-)elevated to his role as proclaimer of the gospel "with all boldness and without hindrance" (28:26–31).

## Conclusion

Paul's dramatic odyssey in Acts tracks his persisting struggle to actualize and win acceptance for his new role as chief advocate of the Christian gospel. Such a struggle is scarcely surprising, given both Paul's prior determination to stamp out the Jesus movement (8:3; 9:1–2) and his present commission to "suffer much" for Jesus' sake (9:16).

Climactic moments in the process of Paul's "aggregation" into his new vocation come in intense "ritual confrontations" on Mediterranean islands with antagonistic human, environmental and supernatural forces. Although he had passed through initial phases of status transformation—"separation" and "liminality—*communitas*"—on the way to Damascus in Acts 9, Paul (Saul) does not experience ultimate "aggregation" and full vindication of his honor until his decisive defeat of the "son of the devil" on the island of Cyprus in ch. 13. Hereafter, Saul—become—Paul successfully defends his honor against a variety of opponents in a series of missionary journeys across the eastern Mediterranean world (chs. 13–21).

In the last quarter of Acts, however, Paul finds himself, as a bound prisoner, in an extended state of "partial aggregation"—partly honored by his captors as a noble citizen meriting a full and fair hearing, but also seriously "liminalized" in jail, put "out of commission," as it were, making no converts and performing no miracles throughout the sequence of trials. At the point, however, when "all hope of being saved was lost" (27:20)—much less, all hope of resuming Paul's mission—Paul in fact re-emerges as a dynamic leader and benefactor, miraculously withstanding the ravages of storm, serpent, and sickness on the islands of Crete and Malta. More than simply restoring hope, Paul fully regains his honor (28:10) and returns to active duty up to the end of Acts. Having passed herculean tests of his character and vocation on island outposts, Paul is equipped at last to bear witness "before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel" in the very heart of the empire.

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