

OpenTheo

Acts: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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Transcript

The book of Acts begins in a transitional place. Jesus is about to leave, and Pentecost is about to occur. But yet there are forty days between Jesus' resurrection and his ascension, and after that, ten more days until Pentecost.

Such a situation might remind us of the beginning of the book of 1 Kings. The Davidic king is about to leave, and his appointed successor and his regime are being established. Luke introduces the book with a dedication to Theophilus, the same person to whom he had dedicated the third gospel.

As almost all scholars recognise, there is a very close relationship between the book of Acts and the book of Luke. They are two books by the same hand, and beyond that fact, they have deep thematic unity and structural relationships. Rebecca DeNova remarks upon their structural similarities.

The baptism of Jesus with water in Luke chapter 3 is paralleled by the community's baptism with the spirit in Acts chapter 2. Jesus' message is rejected in Nazareth in Luke chapter 4, and the community's message is rejected in Jerusalem in Acts chapters 3-5. Herod Antipas intends to kill Jesus in Luke chapter 13, while Herod Agrippa attempts to kill Peter in Acts chapter 12. Luke chapters 14-18 contains the gospel to the outcasts, and Acts chapters 13-20 contains a gospel that includes Gentiles.

Chapters 9-19 of the gospel contain Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, and Acts chapters 19-21 contains Paul's journey to Jerusalem. Both Jesus and Paul suffer a passion and four trials, Luke chapters 20-23 and Acts chapters 21-26 respectively. The death of Jesus in Luke chapter 23 is paralleled in Acts chapter 27 with Paul's death at sea.

In Luke chapter 24, Jesus is resurrected, and Paul is resurrected in Acts chapter 28. Beyond this, we should also note similarities in the emphasis upon the temple at the beginning of the story, the emphasis upon the spirit, and then also themes of birth. The first volume was about all that Jesus began to do and teach.

Many have seen in this statement a suggestion of the fact that this following volume, the volume of Acts, concerns Jesus' continued work, that Jesus is working through his spirit in the ministry of the disciples that he has chosen. We might see similarities between this and the ministries of Elijah and Elisha, where Elisha is the one who completes the unfinished ministry of Elijah. And as in the stories of Elijah and Elisha, there will be an ascension followed by a Pentecost, a gift of the spirit, here and in the succeeding chapter.

Before Jesus is taken up, he gives commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. He gives them directions for what they ought to do. The apostles are his chosen messengers.

They have been set apart as his special emissaries, the ones who represent him in a very particular way. They will be the foundation of the church, with Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone. Their role is that of communicating his instructions and directives, and also bearing witness to what he has done, bearing witness most of all to the resurrection.

And for that end, he presented himself alive to them after his death and resurrection on multiple occasions and with many proofs. We have appearances to single individuals. We have appearances to a couple of people on the road to Emmaus.

We have sustained lengthy appearances and short appearances. We have appearances in Galilee next to the sea, and we have appearances in Jerusalem. We have appearances to men.

We have appearances to women. We have at least one appearance to over 500 people at a single time. As Paul notes in 1 Corinthians 15, if the apostle Thomas accepted Jesus' invitation in the book of John, then the apostles touched Jesus' very wounds that proved that it was he who had come back from the dead.

Jesus walks with them, he talks with them, he cooks for them, he eats with them. They see him indoors, they see him outdoors. They see him in daylight, they see him at night.

He is seen by members of his family and by some of his closest acquaintances, and then also by others that had slightly less familiarity with him. The sheer range of resurrection

appearances, and the many ways in which Jesus demonstrates that it is indeed he who has come back from the dead, all serve to ground the faith of the disciples and secure their witness to the resurrection. He appears to them over a 40-day period.

When we think of a 40-day period, we might think of certain parts of the flood narrative, or we might think of the story of Moses going up Mount Sinai, or Elijah going to Mount Horeb, or we might think of the time that Israel spent in the wilderness for 40 years. Jesus had spent 40 days in the wilderness at the beginning of the book of Luke. But I think there's a different 40-day period that relates more directly to this, which is the 40 days after the birth of Jesus and before his presentation in the temple.

According to the law of Leviticus chapter 12, after the birth of a male child, a woman would bring a sacrifice of a lamb for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or turtle dove as a sin offering, to the tabernacle or the temple. Within Luke's Gospel, we see a number of symmetries between the beginning of Jesus' life and his death. Jesus is born with a Mary and Joseph.

After his death, there are a number of Marys and also a Joseph of Arimathea. Jesus is wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. Jesus is wrapped in linen garments and laid in a tomb.

When Jesus rises, he will be the firstborn from the dead. This is a new birth event. And here I think we see an extension of that parallel.

Luke is the only one of the Gospels to record the events of the presentation in the temple. And there, there is a lot of emphasis upon the work of the Spirit. There is a prophetic declaration by a man called Simeon.

There is a woman called Anna who has been constantly praying in the temple. And here I think we see parallels. Jesus, the firstborn son from the womb of the grave, is going to go into the heavenly temple, and his mother and his disciples will go to the earthly temple and continue in prayer.

Perhaps we are even to associate Christ with the ascending sacrifice of the burnt offering of the lamb, and to associate the Spirit that descends on the day of Pentecost with the dove of the sin offering that applies his blood to us. Beyond giving them directives for their future mission, and giving them many manifestations and proofs that he was indeed raised from the dead, and not just some appearance but a living body, Jesus also gave his disciples much teaching concerning the kingdom of God. While he had taught them extensively within the Gospels, particularly in the form of parables concerning the kingdom of God, now they are prepared to hear much more.

They have seen the resurrected Christ, they have some idea of what the cross meant, and now they are prepared to hear about the next stage, the mission that they will

undertake, and what role that will have to play in God's purpose. It might seem strange, after all the events of the death and resurrection, that Christ is leaving the scene. However, to think this would be to miss the significance of the ascension.

Patrick Schreiner, in his book, *The Ascension of Christ*, observes the way that the ascension is the culmination and completion of Jesus' ministry, in each of its key aspects, its priestly aspect, its kingly aspect, and its prophetic aspect. In the priestly aspect of Christ's work, he observes that while Christ sacrificed himself and offered his blood on earth, he interceded for his people on earth and gave them his peace and blessing, in heaven he presents his blood, opening up the way for his people to enter into the heavenly sanctuary, in heaven he constantly intercedes for us, and from heaven he bestows his spirit which blesses his people and gives them peace and confidence to draw near to God. All of these points are central in the book of Hebrews.

He discusses the kingly aspect too. On earth Jesus is designated as king, he conquers the forces of darkness, and he lays the foundation for his church. But at his ascension he is installed as king, he is enthroned over all spiritual beings, and he becomes the head of the church.

Finally, as the ascended prophet, Jesus was filled with the spirit while on earth, but as he's ascended, he pours out his spirit, and he empowers many witnesses to go forth. Jesus, on earth, was the one who spoke the word of God, but after his ascension, he continues to declare his word of his gospel to the world through his messengers, through his apostles that he has appointed by the spirit. Again as a prophet, Jesus performs signs and wonders, but then as he becomes the head of the church as he ascends into heaven, he now performs signs and wonders through his bride the church.

The ascension then is not a strange epilogue to the story of Christ, it's the completion of the story, the point where it reaches its intended goal. This fact is borne out by studying the New Testament epistles, where again and again we see references to the ascension and its meaning and its significance. Although he had appeared to them after his resurrection in Galilee, on a mountain where he had delivered the Great Commission, and next to the Sea of Tiberias or Galilee where they were fishing, he now instructs them to wait in Jerusalem until they receive the promise of the Father, the Holy Spirit.

The gift of the Spirit had already been foretold, not least in the ministry of John the Baptist, who baptized with water but spoke about the one who had baptized with the Holy Spirit, the one who was his successor. John the Baptist had spoken about the baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire, and yet none of these things seemed to occur in the ministry of Christ on earth. It was not until after his ascension that those things could take place.

One key question rises in the minds of the apostles at this time though. Is this the time when the Lord will restore the Kingdom to Israel? This was something that was long

anticipated, mentioned throughout the works of the prophets, and now they're wondering, is it going to take place? Jesus does not deny that such an event is going to take place. Israel is going to have the Kingdom restored to it.

However, it is not for them to know the times or the seasons. It will happen in the Father's good time. Much of the book of Acts that follows will be wrestling with this question.

How is Israel going to respond to the message of the Messiah? How is this Kingdom going to play out? Jesus does not answer their questions about the timing of the restoration of the Kingdom. What he gives them is a mission and the power to perform that mission. They are first going to be anointed with the Holy Spirit, and when they have the Holy Spirit upon them, they will be his witnesses, bearing his spirit and his message as they go to Jerusalem first, then all Judea, which probably refers to the entirety of Jewish Palestine, then to Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth.

The book of Acts roughly seems to follow this pattern. It begins in the city of Jerusalem and it ends in the city of Rome. After he says these things to them, he's taken up and a cloud removes him from their sight.

How we relate such an event to a modern cosmology has raised many questions. There is no reason why the ascension of Christ, however, need demand the idea that Jesus is physically located above us. The ascension of Christ is not just the ascension to a physically higher location, it is an ascension to a spiritually higher realm.

It is perceived in our realm as a physical ascension into the sky, but the ascension is also a passing into a greater realm, a movement into heaven and God's special presence. A similar event, of course, is seen in 2 Kings 2, where Elijah is caught up in the whirlwind. Again, we might think of this as a cloud.

We've seen clouds earlier in the work of Luke, both in the event of the transfiguration and also in the Olivet Discourse as Jesus speaks about coming on the cloud. That, of course, looks back to the book of Daniel, chapter 7, verses 13-14. I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the ancient of days, and was presented before him.

And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. Jesus, coming on the cloud, is the son of man ascending to God's very presence, entering into his rule.

Gazing into heaven they see him taken from them. We should probably recognise some visionary aspect to what they're seeing here. It might be similar to the event of Jesus' baptism, as the spirit descends upon him in the form of a dove and the heavens are

opened.

That is seen by Christ and it's seen by John the Baptist, but there is no reason to believe that it was seen by anyone else present. The same thing seems to be true of the ascension of Elijah. Elijah says if Elisha sees him ascend, he will have the double portion of his spirit.

As the ascension is not just a physical ascension, but is a spiritual transition or translation between realms, it is not surprising that it should be seen only by those whose eyes are spiritually opened, to perceive not just regular terrestrial phenomena, but also spiritual ones. As they are gazing into heaven, two men appear in white robes. These might remind us of the angels at the time of the resurrection.

The two men in dazzling apparel who appear to the women and instruct them not to look for the living among the dead. As the two men instruct the women there, the two men instruct the apostles here, giving them a further sense of how this fits into the larger picture. Jesus was taken up from them into heaven and he is going to return in the same way as they saw him go up.

What this return will involve is not entirely clear. Perhaps our minds might be drawn to Zechariah chapter 14 verse 4. The Lord my God will come and all the holy ones with him. On that day there shall be no light, cold or frost, and there shall be a unique day which is known to the Lord, neither day nor night, but at evening time there shall be light.

On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea. It shall continue in summer and winter, and shall be a great flood. It shall continue in summer as in winter, and the Lord will be king over all the earth.

On that day the Lord will be one and his name one. After the ascension the twelve apostles returned to Jerusalem. The ascension occurred on the Mount of Olives.

In the final week of Jesus' life the Mount of Olives and the Temple Mount are set over against each other. This quite possibly was in the light of that prophecy from Zechariah. It seems appropriate that the Lord ascended from the Mount of Olives and now they will return to Jerusalem which will be the staging ground for the first phase of the mission that they have to undertake.

Entering Jerusalem again they go to an upper room where they have been staying. They are probably not living there, certainly not the full number of them, but they are based there as they spend their time in prayer and conversation in preparation for the day of Pentecost. A room that would have accommodated 120 people would have been uncommonly large within the city of Jerusalem.

Here in the ten days the deep breath before the Spirit descends upon them and plunges

them into their mission, the apostles are listed for us once again. After the apostasy and the betrayal of Judas, the twelve are only eleven. They will have to restore their full number in the verses that follow.

Here they are listed in a very similar order to that which we find elsewhere in the Gospels. Peter begins the list as usual and is succeeded by the other two of the core three disciples, James and John. Andrew, Peter's brother, heads up the remaining eight.

In Luke chapter 6 verses 12-16 he had been listed second before James and John and alongside his brother Peter. However, now that Peter, James and John have become a special group in their own right, he will take up the fourth position. The apostles are unified in the act of continued prayer in which they are joined by the women and Mary the mother of Jesus.

The women here are probably not just their wives but are probably the core women among the disciples of Christ who had followed him from the beginning. Luke had mentioned these prominent women in Luke chapter 8 verses 1-3. Among these women were found the first witnesses to the resurrection.

The presence of Mary the mother of Jesus at this point is also noteworthy. Mary had experienced her own sort of Pentecost back in Luke chapter 1 as the Holy Spirit came upon her and the power of the Most High overshadowed her as Christ was conceived in her womb. She will be personally present for this second great Pentecost also.

And while Jesus' brothers had doubted his mission earlier on in the Gospels, here they are present with the disciples. In 1 Corinthians chapter 15 verse 7 we read that Jesus appeared to James, presumably his brother, and seemingly alone. The scene is slowly being set for the events of chapter 2 as the Spirit will descend upon the church, fulfilling the purpose of the ascension.

A question to consider, how do the post-resurrection appearances of Christ differ from other sorts of miraculous appearances? How do they differ from the post-ascension appearances of Christ to figures such as Stephen in chapter 7 and Saul on the road to Damascus? Luke's account of the replacement of Judas in the number of the apostles at the end of Acts chapter 1 is an interplay of light and shadow. In the ten days between the ascension and Pentecost, the upper room is a site charged with expectancy, awaiting the promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit. However, Peter's recounting of the gruesome manner of Judas' death presents a grim image of the fate of those who oppose Christ's kingdom.

The upper room is a staging ground for the coming phase of Christ's mission through his church. In addition to intense communal devotion to prayer, the choice of Matthias to replace Judas within the twelve was a necessary part of the preparation that needed to occur. The need for a replacement for Judas is one of several reasons to believe that the

number of the twelve was not arbitrary.

The twelve represented the twelve tribes of a renewed Israel. Giving the numbering of the disciples at this point as 120, ten times twelve, is also likely significant. The twelve will represent the heads of the restored tribes at Pentecost, so it is important that a full complement be present.

The gory manner of Judas' death and Peter's application of imprecatory psalms to him sits uneasily with many modern Christian sensibilities. Yet, unsettling as such themes may be to our ears, it is difficult adequately to understand Luke's vision of Christ's mission without an appreciation of the deathly shadow that Christ casts over his opponents. Whether in Judas' prophetically foretold suicide, in the Holy Spirit slaying Ananias and Sapphira for their attempted deception, in Peter's cursing of Simon the sorcerer, or the angel striking Herod and condemning him to a gruesome demise, or even Paul's blinding of Elymas the sorcerer, Luke repeatedly presents the Spirit's mission as one that can have devastating and even fatal consequences for those who oppose it, for those who wrongly seek to claim God's power for themselves, like the seven sons of Sceva, or for those who attack his people.

Christ will place all his enemies under his feet, he will overcome the nations that rage against him, and he will judge his wicked servants. While Christ is good, he is far from safe. Not only Christ's salvation, but also the actions and the fate of those who oppose him are foretold in prophecy.

The destruction that Christ's reign brings to his enemies is an important aspect of his kingdom. The Gospel writer's accounts of Christ's enemies are often designed to recall the great adversaries of God's people in history and their fates. For instance, the Herods are depicted in a manner recalling the Pharaohs and Ahab, while Ananias and Sapphira are like Achan.

The account of Judas' actions and his death also stirs various scriptural memories, especially those concerning the treacheries and attempted coups experienced by King David in the latter years of his reign. Peter's declaration that the Holy Spirit spoke about Judas through David treats David's words concerning his own life as typologically revelatory of what will befall his greater son. In the Gospels we also see narrative parallels being drawn between David and Jesus.

Judas is the trusted familiar friend. He sits with Jesus at the table, yet he betrays him, as we see in Psalm 41 verse 9, which is quoted in John 13 verse 18. David is betrayed by Ahithophel, his close friend and advisor, in 2 Samuel chapter 15.

David leaves Jerusalem, he crosses the brook Kidron, and he weeps as he ascends the Mount of Olives in 2 Samuel 15. This is paralleled with the ministry of Christ in John chapter 18 verse 1. David is ministered to by a messenger, as Christ is ministered to by

an angel. David is assaulted by Shimei with violence and cursing, as the mob come out to take Jesus.

His right hand man, Abishai, like Peter, wants to strike the king's enemy down, but David prevents him, much as Jesus restores the ear of the high priest's servant after Peter has struck him. In Matthew's Gospel we are told that, like Ahithophel, a regretful Judas parted ways with the conspiracy that he had initially assisted, and hanged himself, in Matthew chapter 27 verses 3-10. In 2 Samuel, both the betrayer Ahithophel and the unfaithful son of David Absalom end up hung from trees.

In Matthew, both the betrayer Judas and the faithful son of David suffer a similar fate, although here it is the contrast that the juxtaposition of the two invite that attract our attention. Many have struggled to reconcile Luke's account of Judas' suicide with Matthew's, and solutions with various degrees of plausibility have been proposed. It seems most likely to me that Luke is foregrounding another connection between Judas and David typology here.

Judas is playing the role of Joab. Joab was the treacherous and Machiavellian commander of David's army. He was a man who was twice involved in coups.

The first, a successful internal coup, wresting control of David's army back from Amasa during the rebellion of Sheba in 2 Samuel chapter 20. Joab had been deposed in chapter 19 verse 13. And the second, his support of the pretender Adonijah in 1 Kings chapter 1. In 2 Samuel chapter 20 verse 8 to 12 we read the story of Joab's treachery towards Amasa.

So Joab struck him with it in the stomach and spilled his entrails to the ground without striking a second blow, and he died. Then Joab and Abishai his brother pursued Sheba the son of Bichri. And one of Joab's young men took his stand by Amasa and said, Whoever favours Joab and whoever is for David, let him follow Joab.

And Amasa lay wallowing in his blood in the highway, and anyone who came by seeing him stopped. And when the man saw that all the people stopped, he carried Amasa out of the highway into the field and threw a garment over him. Joab then is the one who betrays with a kiss.

He cuts Amasa's stomach open with his sword so that his entrails pour out. Amasa's bloody body is placed in a field, and everyone who passes it by is arrested by the sight of it. 1 Kings begins in the final days of David's reign, as he instructs his son Solomon concerning the kingdom and establishes him on the throne.

The opening chapter of the Book of Acts is comparably resumptive in its narrative character. It begins at a similar point. Jesus is about to ascend into heaven, and he instructs the disciples in preparation for the new administration.

At the start of his reign, shortly before his Pentecostal receipt of the gift of the Spirit of Wisdom from the Lord, in chapter 3, Solomon has to lay the foundations of his reign by exiling or executing unfaithful members of his father's administration and other rebels, Adonijah, Abiathar, Joab, and Shimei, and replacing them in their offices. In 1 Kings 2, verses 28-35, Joab is killed by his replacement, Ben-Aniah the son of Jehoiada. He is buried in his house in the wilderness.

We should carefully observe the close applicability of the imprecatory psalm cited by Peter in Acts 1 to Joab's situation. May his camp become desolate, and let there be no one to dwell in it, and let another take his office. These verses are from Psalms 69, 25 and 109, 8 respectively.

Judas here suffers a death strikingly similar to that of the man Joab betrayed with a kiss, an instance of the law of retribution. Like Joab, he has a desolate habitation. In the dawning stages of the glorious new administration of David's glorious son, soon to be heralded by the gift of the Spirit of Wisdom, his office is given to another.

Judas is a tragic figure, and one who understandably leaves many modern people feeling uneasy. In characters such as Judas, we see the glorious light of the Kingdom of Christ can cast some very dark shadows. Playing the part of Ahithophel and Joab to David's greater son, Luke presents Judas as one of several cautionary examples of the fate of those who oppose the Kingdom of Christ.

We are squeamish about death, destruction and judgment being brought upon or foretold for the enemies of Christ. This could be an obstacle for our understanding and acceptance of his Kingdom. We want a Christ who is safe, not the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who comes on a white horse against tyrants and rebels, striking the nations and ruling them with a rod of iron.

We want the Christ of the nativity narratives, some imagined wrathless lamb, rather than reckoning with the prominent presence of themes of vengeance and judgment in the full New Testament portrait of Christ. The replacement for Judas has to fit a number of qualifications. He has to be someone who has witnessed the entirety of Christ's ministry, beginning at the ministry of John the Baptist and going all the way to the resurrection.

It is especially important that an apostle have witnessed the resurrected Christ. The candidates have to be among those who travelled with Christ. It is important that the candidates have had extensive experience of interaction with Christ, hearing him teach, being alongside him and seeing the way that he lives, having been formed under his instruction.

They are also more particularly choosing one of the men. Although there were many women who had accompanied Christ for the entirety of his mission, the office of the Twelve was restricted to men. Even though figures like Mary Magdalene or Mary and

Martha or Bethany would have been closer to Christ than certain of the apostles, for the ministry appointed to the apostles it was important that they were males.

They were supposed to be the guardians and the founders of the new church. They were supposed to symbolise the Twelve Tribes of Israel in a restored nation. The fact that they had witnessed the ministry of John the Baptist was also a matter of great importance.

John the Baptist was the last great prophet before the advent of the sun, and so it was important that the apostolic witness would take the baton from John the Baptist and bring it forward and pass it on to the rest of the church. The ministry of the apostles would include elements of proclamation, they would be the chief witnesses of the resurrection, and also elements of pastoral oversight. They would have an especial responsibility for overseeing the life of the church, acting as pastors and as guardians.

Of the two suitable candidates put forward by the apostles, we don't know a great deal. Joseph called Barsabas, also called Justus, and Matthias. Of these two men, Matthias is the one who is chosen.

After a prayer that the Lord who knows the hearts of all would judge in the matter, Matthias is chosen by lot. The Twelve now being complete, the ground is prepared for the day of Pentecost. A question to consider, what are some of the other places in the New Testament where we see an especial emphasis upon the ministry and the witness formed by John the Baptist? The story of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2 is one of the richest texts in the entirety of the scriptures.

It's filled with typological connections. In a few verses, a vast array of biblical background and a great many lines of biblical narrative converge. Typology helps us to read the scripture.

It helps us to understand the significance of events. And it could be argued that Pentecost is a foremost example of this. Paying attention to the context of the story, the way the story is told, certain key details, and all these things will help us to see the way that the story of Pentecost fits into the far larger picture of the rest of the scriptures.

50 days after the resurrection of Christ, the spirit of Christ descends upon the disciples, preparing them for their mission. It is important to understand the story of Pentecost in its context within the wider story. The event of Pentecost is organically connected with the event of the resurrection and with the event of the ascension that preceded it.

The spirit can descend upon the church because Christ has ascended into the heavens. We see connections then with the events that have immediately preceded in the story of the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. But we also see connections with the beginning of Luke's gospel.

We've already noted the way that the book of Luke and the book of Acts have parallels.

The book of Luke begins with a lot of references to the spirit. The spirit overshadows the Virgin Mary so that Christ is conceived in her womb.

In the same way, the spirit will overshadow and the power of God will come upon the church so that they, in a way analogous to Mary, will bear Christ within their midst as a new temple of the Holy Spirit. The spirit is also important in the story of the presentation. The spirit leads Simeon into the temple where he prophesies by the spirit concerning this child that is presented there.

Much as the presentation in the temple occurred on the 40th day, so Christ ascends into the heavenly temple on the 40th day. And then a man called Simeon, Simon Peter, bears witness to the Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. There is also an Anna who is praying constantly in the temple.

After the ascension, the disciples are also characterized by constant prayer in the temple. Like Anna, they recall the character of Hannah at the beginning of the book of 1 Samuel. Much as Hannah was accused of being drunk by Eli the high priest, so they will be accused of being drunk by religious leaders of their own day who also lack perception.

After the narratives of Christ's infancy, there is another important story concerning the descent of the Holy Spirit, and that is the story of Christ's baptism. There is a transition from the ministry of John the Baptist to the ministry of Christ, and the spirit descends in the form of a dove in a theophanic manner, propelling him into his mission as the Son of God and the Messiah. The beginning of Acts is another transitional story, the transition from the ascended Christ to the ministry of the Church.

Once again, there is a passing of the baptism. The Church is baptized by the Spirit, the event foretold by John the Baptist. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

And when the Church is baptized by the Spirit, they go forward in the power of Christ and continue what he has started. In Christ's gift of his Spirit at Pentecost, we have the ground prepared for the continuation and completion of the ministry that Christ has begun. Christ's mission and the Church's mission is one unified mission.

And here we find ourselves held by reflection upon Old Testament parallels. The story of 2 Kings 2, where Elijah ascends into heaven and the Spirit of Elijah descends upon Elisha, who continues the ministry of Elijah, is a typological parallel that helps us to understand how the ministry of the Church continues from and completes the ministry that Christ has started. From a sense of the scriptural background of what's taking place at Pentecost, an entire New Testament ecclesiology can be formed.

We might see here themes of creation and new creation. In Genesis chapter 2, the Lord breathes into man the breath of life. And here he is breathing into a new humanity, the breath of his Spirit, so that this new humanity formed in knowledge according to the

image of him who created him, would be a place where there is neither Jew nor Greek, circumcised nor uncircumcised, slave nor free, but Christ is all in all.

And in this new creation we see a restoration of God's people. In Ezekiel chapter 36 and 37, God promised to restore Israel. In chapter 37, we see the way that Israel was like a field of dead and whitened bones, representing its whole house, following God's judgment that had fallen upon it.

However, as Ezekiel, according to the word of the Lord, prophesied to the dry bones, the wind of the Spirit comes and the dead, whitened bones become a mighty, living army. In Acts chapter 2, God is establishing his people once more. 120 disciples are gathered together, under 12 apostles, an Israel that is the first fruits of a greater harvest in the future.

Such themes of first fruits and harvest might also make us think back to the origins of the Feast of Pentecost, in an agricultural feast at the time of the wheat harvest. The grain harvest began with the barley harvest at the time of unleavened bread, and it ended with the wheat harvest at Pentecost. The Feast of First Fruits occurred during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and this was the basis for the numbering of the Day of Pentecost.

Seven full weeks were numbered off, and then on the day after the Sabbath, they would celebrate the Feast of Pentecost. The two tenths of an ephrah of flour that were presented at the Feast of First Fruits became two leavened loaves that were waved before the Lord. The attentive reader of the Book of Leviticus will notice a parallel between the numbering of the Feast of Pentecost and the numbering of the Year of Jubilee.

The Feast of Pentecost is a miniature jubilee. In Luke chapter 4, Jesus' public ministry began with a sermon declaring the acceptable year of the Lord, the year of the Lord's favour, the year of jubilee. And now, the beginning of the ministry of the Church occurs at a mini-jubilee, and the Feast of Pentecost.

The Feast of Pentecost had another important association. It was associated with the time at which God gave the law to Israel. The day on which the law was given was widely considered to be fifty days after the time of the Passover.

It was considered to have taken place on the Day of Pentecost. At Mount Sinai, Israel was gathered together. God promised to make them into a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

At Mount Sinai, the leader of the nation, Moses ascended into God's presence and received the law, which he brought down to the people of Israel. Fire and God's presence came down upon the mountain, but the people rebelled against the Lord and against

Moses, and three thousand of them were killed. In Acts chapters 1 and 2, we see that Christ, the head of a new people, ascends into heaven, where he receives the Holy Spirit from the Father.

On the Day of Pentecost, the day on which the law was first given to Israel, Christ gives his spirit to the church. At Pentecost, God made his people into a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Fire and God's presence come down, not upon a mountain, but upon a people.

Whereas the people in Exodus were not fit to come into God's presence, the spirit comes to dwell in the body of the church at Pentecost. Whereas three thousand rebellious Israelites were killed at Sinai, three thousand rebellious people are cut to the heart by Jesus Christ at Pentecost. Recognising the parallels and also the contrasts, we can see something of the deeper New Testament theme of the juxtaposition of the law and the spirit.

The spirit is the gift of the law, the gift of the law that is written upon the heart. That was always the promise of the new covenant. And at Pentecost, this is where it begins.

It's being written upon the heart of the people so that they might go forth in the power of the spirit of Christ, bearing that law not just as an external testimony upon tablets of stone, but upon something that is born upon their hearts and in their witness. The Day of Pentecost, then, is a great turning point in the history of redemption. The law, which had only resulted in bringing people into death, was fulfilled as God gave his spirit, which established people in the new life of Christ.

As Paul says in Romans 8, verses 2-4, the law of the spirit of life in Jesus Christ has made us free from the law of sin and death. At Sinai, the tabernacle was established and the church is established as a new temple at Pentecost. In Exodus chapter 40, the glory cloud descended upon the completed tabernacle, establishing the tabernacle as the place of God's special dwelling.

In Acts chapter 2, the spirit descends not now upon a building, but upon a people set apart to be a living temple, a dwelling place of God by the spirit. We should note the verbal ambivalence of the word that's used for tongues in Acts chapter 2. It refers to both speech and to flame. This explores a powerful conjunction of imagery that is found elsewhere in the Old and the New Testaments.

God's word comes down in the form of fire, and his word given to the church in such a manner enables the church to speak with the fiery power of prophets. The descent of tongues of flame upon the heads of the disciples might also recall other imagery from the temple and the tabernacle. In the book of Revelation chapter 1, the church is described as a candlestick.

The candlestick in the Old Testament is connected with the priest, is also a means of giving light to dark places. The church has been lit as a priestly body to give light to the darkened world, a light that is given by the power of the Holy Spirit that burns upon and within her. We should not quench the spirit.

As the people of God, we should fan into a greater flame the spirit that has been given to us. Perhaps we're also to think of ourselves as new altars. We might recall the twelve stones that are brought together to form the altar on Mount Carmel by Elijah, and then that altar is drenched with water, and then the fire of God comes down upon that altar, upon those twelve stones, and burns up the sacrifices upon them.

We are being created as living altars, our lives and our actions being presented to the Lord as a living sacrifice. Beyond such themes of Sinai, Tabernacle and Priesthood, we might also see kingly themes here. In discussing Judas in chapter 1, we've already noted the similarities between 1 Kings chapters 1 and 2 and the book of Acts chapter 1, as the Davidic king is about to leave and is giving instructions to his successor, who then has to establish the new regime.

Within that parallel, the event of Pentecost is framed in a particular way. It's framed as comparable to the event in which Solomon received the spirit of the Lord to judge the people, the spirit of wisdom. As the church is being established as a new ruling body, like Solomon, it is given the spirit of wisdom by which it will act in a way that is prudent and good.

Christ is establishing a new kingdom. In the book of 1 Samuel chapters 9 and 10, the prophet Samuel anoints Saul as the one who is designated to be the king, and he tells Saul that there will be three confirming signs that he will receive on the way back. First of all, he will meet people, telling him that the donkeys of his father have been found.

Second of all, he will meet people on the way who are carrying items of food, bread and wine and a goat, and they will give him two loaves of bread. And then finally, that he will meet prophets coming down from the holy place, and the Holy Spirit will come upon him and he will prophesy and become a new man. As he goes into Jerusalem, Christ gives his disciples a number of similar instructions.

First of all, they will go into the village and find the donkeys. Then they will go into the city and follow a man carrying a water pitcher to the place where they will celebrate the meal, in which he will give them bread and wine, and they will celebrate the Passover. And finally, they will wait in Jerusalem until power comes upon them from on high.

Like Saul, when the Spirit comes upon them, they will become new men and will prophesy. A kingdom is being entrusted to them, so we should not be surprised to find these signs of the kingdom befalling them. Having seen themes of priests and kings, we should not be surprised to find themes of prophets too.

We have already observed some of the parallels between the story of Christ's ascension in the Church's Pentecost, and the ascension of Elijah and Elisha's Pentecost in the book of 2 Kings 2. That story of prophetic succession is one that provides a paradigm for understanding what this story means. We also observed the tongues of flame that descended upon them, that lit their speech to give their speech power, so that they might speak with different tongues, and speak with the power of the Holy Spirit. Within the Old Testament Witness, we have a number of examples of prophetic installation, where people are established as prophets of the Lord and empowered to speak in His name.

We might think of Ezekiel's vision of the throne chariot in Ezekiel chapter 1, or Isaiah's temple vision in Isaiah chapter 6, or Moses' encounter with the Lord at the burning bush. Such initiatory visions prepare the prophets for their missions in a number of different ways. They give them strength and resources for their tasks.

They give them a firm awareness of their personal vocation, and they loosely sketch the contours of their mission. The appearance of non-consuming tongues of flame resting upon the heads of the disciples might recall the miraculous fire of the burning bush. Fire is an element associated with the Holy Spirit and His ministers.

In being raised to participate in the Divine Council, prophets were elevated to share the status of the angels. The prophet operates within the element of the angels, appearing with them in the Divine Council, or moving rapidly and miraculously from place to place in the wind and the fire of the Divine throne chariot. God's speech is like a consuming flame, and the mouth of the prophet has to be prepared and kindled to burn with the fire of God's word, as we see in places like Jeremiah chapter 5 verse 14.

In Isaiah chapter 6 verse 6-7, the mouth of the prophet is cleansed and kindled with a live coal from the altar of the Lord. The connection between the tongues of flame and the tongues of speech of Pentecost might draw upon this sort of association. The church is being lit as a witnessing lampstand and as a burning mouthpiece of the Divine word.

Here we might also think of events such as Numbers chapter 11 verses 16-30, where the Lord took of the spirit of Moses and empowered 70 elders of the people to exercise prophetic rule alongside Him. As the Lord descended in the cloud and placed the spirit of Moses upon the 70, they spontaneously began to prophesy in a remarkable but non-recurring manner. The desire that Moses expressed at that time, would that all of the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put His spirit on them, is alluded to in the promise of Joel chapter 2 verses 28-29.

And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out My spirit on all flesh. Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out My spirit.

In his sermon on the day of Pentecost, Peter claims that this prophecy is arriving at its fulfillment. In the pouring out of the spirit upon the church, a new prophetic people are being formed. As in Numbers chapter 11, the spirit of the leader of the people is distributed to others, who will exercise gifted prophetic rule alongside and under him.

And as in Numbers chapter 11, the reception of the spirit is accompanied by remarkable prophetic speech that manifests that something miraculous has occurred. At Pentecost the spirit descends and rests upon the church in a manner comparable to the descent and resting of the spirit upon Jesus at His baptism. Perhaps the most typically referenced background for the story of Pentecost is found in Genesis chapter 11, in the story of Babel.

At that point humanity is undivided. They all speak a single lip and a single speech. They settle in the plain of Shinar where forming and firing bricks and using asphalt for mortar, they undertake a vast building project.

It's a two-fold project. They want to build a city and they want to build a tower. One has a horizontal aim, gathering together humanity in a city, and the other has a vertical aim, connecting heaven and earth.

And within this mega city and the immense tower at its religious heart, humanity would be preserved from being spread out throughout the earth as God had intended them to be. God frustrated their designs as He descended from heaven and confused their lip so that they could no longer understand each other. Forced to abandon their building project, humanity was scattered abroad across the face of the entire earth.

This story of Babel provides a background for the story of the call of Abram in the following chapter, in Genesis chapter 12. God calls Abram and promises that He will make his name great. The tower builders had sought to make their own name great, but God would make Abram's name great.

God would make Abram a blessing to all of the nations that had been judged at the event of Babel. In the book of Galatians we are told that the blessing of Abram is the Spirit, and as we read through the story of Abram and his descendants, we might see how this connection is drawn. In the story of Jacob, for instance, when he reaches Bethel, we have a number of echoes of the story of Babel.

He gathers stones together, as the Babel builders had gathered bricks. He sees a ladder going from earth to heaven, connecting the two, and he names the place Bethel, the house of God, calling it the gate of heaven. One of the translations of Babel is gate of God.

It might seem that there is a connection between Babel and Bethel. The true Babel, the true tower between heaven and earth, is Jacob's ladder. In John's Gospel, chapter 1,

Jesus speaks of himself as if he were Jacob's ladder.

He says to Nathanael, Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man. Jesus is the tower between heaven and earth. He is the one who has ascended into heaven, and he has sent his spirit down, so that in his spirit his people might be raised up to where he is.

There is an ascent and a descent. What Babel sought to achieve in man's own power, God has provided in Christ. Pentecost also eclipses Babel's horizontal project, its attempt to gather humanity together.

Babel was the moment when humanity was divided into many nations under judgment, each speaking their own languages. At Pentecost, many nations are brought together in a new building project, the building project of the Church. Although speaking many tongues, they are now expressing a single religious voice, as divine prophecy is given in many languages and dialects, not just in the religious tongue of Hebrew.

The diversity of humanity becomes a vehicle for its religious unity, and the era of the exclusivity of Hebrew has ended. By implication, Pentecost is a definitive and seminal moment in the fulfillment of the promise that all of the nations will be blessed in Abraham. Seeing so much scriptural background, we should recognize something of the significance of the event of Pentecost, what it stands for, and how it provides a basis for so much of the New Testament's thinking about what the Church is and what its mission should be.

A question to consider, reflecting upon some of the New Testament teaching about the character of the Church, how can you trace it back to the event and the interpretation of Pentecost? On the day of Pentecost, in Acts chapter 2, Peter preaches to the crowd that has gathered to see the spectacle of the disciples speaking in tongues. He declares the fact of Jesus of Nazareth's ministry, divinely attested with mighty works, wonders and signs, his death divinely appointed by the determined plan and foreknowledge of God, and his resurrection divinely accomplished, as it was not possible for death to hold him. In Jesus, God has bared his arm, he has demonstrated his power in miracles and great deeds, through his ability to use the actions of his adversaries to achieve his own ends, and through the impotence of the grave to arrest him.

The very thing that the Jewish leaders presumed would destroy Jesus was the divinely intended means of his victory, determined by God in every particular beforehand. Peter quotes Psalm 16 verses 8-11, where David provides testimony for Peter's claim that Jesus is the Messiah. These verses are also used by Paul in his sermon in Acts 13.

Acts 13 verses 26-39 has pretty much the same pattern as Peter's Pentecost sermon. These provide two examples of the preaching of the early Church and how important these themes were within it. Psalm 16, like many other passages used in the New

Testament as witnesses to Jesus, is one that seems strange to us.

It seems like an over-reading of the text by Peter. However, such a way of reading was not unique to Christians, and some Jewish readings understood the meaning of the text to refer to the Messiah, who would rise from David. Such an understanding emerges quite naturally from the promise of the Davidic covenant in 2 Samuel 7 verses 12-16.

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son.

When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men. But my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me.

Your throne shall be established forever. The underlying themes are clear here. David would descend to his grave and lie with his fathers, but David the dynasty, coming from his own body, would be raised up and endure forever.

In Jesus, the son of David, David is raised up, as a dynasty and as a body. Isaiah speaks of this in chapter 11 verses 1-10, speaking of a time when the Davidic dynasty, which has seemingly perished beyond all hope of return, buried in the grave of exile, would be raised up and would flourish. The Lord shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear. But with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth. And he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins. The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples, of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.

The bold statements of Psalm 16 are but weakly fulfilled in the deliverances of David's own life. David seems to be speaking of rescue from a far more terrible foe. If David the

individual is the only subject of Psalm 16, then it is all very anticlimactic.

For all of its bold words, David lies in the grave. Yet when we read the psalm more closely, we might get a hint that it is about something much greater. It is about the body of the king in the fullest sense, about the dynasty arising from him, about the beautiful inheritance that God has determined for him.

Knowing that God had promised him an everlasting kingdom, his psalm of praise spoke of something beyond merely the ways in which God delivered him from death on occasions in his own life. It glorified God for his assurance of a dynasty arising from him that would not be ended by death, a dynasty secured in the raised body of Christ, the body of the son of David, also the political body of a people that participate in his life. We see this in Romans 1, verses 1-4.

Paul, the servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, concerning his son, who was descended from David according to the flesh, and was declared to be the son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead. The grave eventually swallows all kingdoms and empires, yet in the resurrection of Jesus Christ the kingdom of David is raised, and a king who has conquered death itself is set on the throne. Jesus may have been raised from the dead, but that presents the obvious question of where he is now.

From resurrection then, Peter turns to the ascension. Jesus was exalted to God's right hand, and the events of Pentecost are an initial demonstration and proof of the fact that Jesus is at God's right hand. Jesus pours out his spirit with dramatic phenomena that are evident to onlookers.

As the multitude witness men and women speaking under divine inspiration in languages not their own, it is evident that something remarkable has happened. The spirit is confirming the message of the ascension. The spirit is also the promised spirit, promised in the scriptures in places like Joel 2, which Peter has just quoted.

It is also promised in passages like Ezekiel 36, verses 25-28. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your guard. It is also promised in the ministry of John the Baptist, in Luke 3, verses 16-17.

John answered them all, saying, I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is

coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

The spirit was also promised by Jesus himself, in Acts 1, verse 8, for you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth. The ascension is a fulfillment of the words of Psalm 110, verse 1, the most frequently quoted verse from the Old Testament in the entirety of the New. The Lord says to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.

Once again the words of David are being quoted. Once again they cannot refer to David himself, but to refer to some greater person to whom David himself bears witness. In Luke, chapter 20, verses 41-44, Jesus himself had tested the scribes with this verse.

But he said to them, How can they say that the Christ is David's son? For David himself says in the book of Psalms, The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool. David thus calls him Lord, so how is he his son? A careful reading of the Psalms will reveal that Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises concerning David's kingdom. In light of all of this, the situation of the heroes can be seen in its true horror.

They had crucified the very one that God had made Lord and Messiah. Their response is one of great concern. They ask the apostles and disciples whether there is anything that they can do to escape the judgment that surely awaits them.

Peter charges them to repent and be baptized, promising that they will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit if they do so. John's baptism had been a baptism for repentance in anticipation of the future gift of the Spirit. Now baptism and the gift of the Spirit are offered together.

Those baptized now are being plugged into the community of Pentecost, being made part of a new community that is the temple of the Holy Spirit. This baptism is administered in the name of Jesus Christ by his authority and into union with him. It would seal to all who responded to the message of the apostles in faith and repentance the forgiveness of their sins.

The gift of the Spirit given here is not spiritual gifts, but the single gift of the personal presence of the Spirit within us both individually and communally, a presence that is ministered for the building up of the church in the exercise of his manifold gifts in mutual service. Peter alludes to Old Testament scripture in speaking about the extent of the promise. Isaiah chapter 57 verse 19 Peace, peace to the far and to the near, says the Lord, and I will heal him.

And Joel chapter 2 verse 32, a verse located immediately after those that he quoted in his sermon. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls.

Peter had earlier spoken about the way that those who called upon the name of the Lord would be saved, referring to Christ. Now he speaks about God calling people. God's call is the effective summons of the proclamation of God's kingdom, the gospel message, which assembles people to him.

This is addressed not merely to the house of Israel, but also to people afar off, both Jews of the dispersion and Gentiles. In context, Peter's reference to the promise being for them and for their children is most immediately a reference to the house of Israel. However, many have seen in this a suggestion borne out elsewhere in Acts that the gospel message does not address us merely as detached individuals, but as members of households and peoples, whose response to the word is at once collective and individual.

The children of those who respond favorably are implicated in their parents' response, which they in their turn are expected increasingly to internalize as they mature. Peter charges his hearers to act, expressing the severity of the situation and the urgency of their response. He describes them as members of a crooked generation, much as Christ himself had in passages like Luke 9, verse 41, and 11, verse 29.

Devastating judgment will fall upon them before the generation has ended, and it is imperative that they respond while they still can. The response to Peter's message was dramatic and remarkable. Three thousand people responded.

As three thousand had been killed at Sinai, now three thousand are brought to new life. Those who responded to his word were baptized and devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the fellowship of the Church, to prayer, and to the breaking of bread. In this description we see all of the core elements of the life of the Church.

Baptism, leading into a life under the apostolic teaching, fellowship with each other in the body of Christ, most notably in the celebration of the Eucharist, and prayer together. The baptism of such a large number of people wouldn't have been unreasonable given the very large number of pools within the city of Jerusalem, although I really don't think that we need to presume that all of the baptisms occurred in that single day. The people respond with a sense of fear and awe.

It is clear that God is doing something remarkable in their midst, and this is further demonstrated by the many wonders and signs that are being done through the apostles confirming their message. The original Feast of Pentecost, like the year of Jubilee, had concerns of economic justice near its heart. In Leviticus chapter 23, verses 21 to 22, Israel was directed to celebrate the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, in a way that has

special regard for the poor of the land.

And you shall make a proclamation on the same day, you shall hold a holy convocation, you shall not do any ordinary work. It is a statute forever in all your dwelling places throughout your generations. And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest.

You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner. I am the Lord your God. In a similar way, Deuteronomy chapter 16, verses 10 to 12, underlines the importance of the Feast of Pentecost as a time where the poor were especially recognized.

Then you shall keep the Feast of Weeks to the Lord your God with the tribute of a freewill offering from your hand, which you shall give as the Lord your God blesses you. And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite who is within your towns, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow who are among you, at the place that the Lord your God will choose to make his name dwell there. You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and you shall be careful to observe these statutes.

Pentecost was also a sort of mini-jubilee. Jubilee was the time when all of the poor of the land were restored to their ancestral properties. The life of the early Jerusalem church, where things were held in common, and rich and poor alike shared in the goodness of God's gifts, was something of a fulfillment of this.

As we read further, it seems that this wasn't a denial of private property, so much as a community of common concern. In having all things in common, they acted like a large or extended family, where individuals might have their own private property, which they were free to dispose of as they wished, but many resources were voluntarily pooled or mutually provided at the points where they were most needed. We should also note the power of selling property in Jerusalem as a prophetic symbol.

Jesus had foretold the destruction of Jerusalem within a generation, so his followers liquidated their property. When thousands of people, in a city of likely well under 100,000 people, did this, the population in general would sit up and start to pay attention. Jerusalem, we must remember, was also uniquely positioned as a city, as a site of frequent pilgrimage for Jews and proselytes, and also a city uniquely situated as a meeting place of East and West, North and South.

There were probably 2 to 4 million Jews outside of Palestine at the time, with only about 1 million within it. The death and resurrection of Christ, and now Pentecost, had occurred around the time of pilgrimage festivals, during which time Jerusalem's population would have swollen with visitors for the feasts. At such times, Jerusalem could be like a dandelion clock, from which new doctrines and movements could fly to all corners of the empire on the four winds of heaven.

The early church's practice seemed to have involved regular attendance of the temple, which provided lots of room for congregating as a group, along with meetings in private houses. Later in Acts 5, verse 12, we see that the disciples regularly met together in the precincts of the temple, in Solomon's portico, which was on the eastern side of the outer court of the temple. Perhaps this location was chosen not merely for reasons of practicality, but also as the site from which the waters of the Spirit were expected to flow, according to the prophecy of Ezekiel, chapter 47, verses 1-2.

The disciples have glad and generous hearts as they receive their food. Common meals had been an important theme throughout the Gospel of Luke, and now in the book of Acts they also retain importance, although an importance that is shaped by new events. After the resurrection, Jesus has demonstrated that he was alive to his disciples by sharing meals with them.

While we typically think of the celebration of the supper in the light of the Last Supper as a memorial of Christ's death, we must also recognize the importance of the breaking of bread as a way in which Christ demonstrated that he was alive. The celebration of shared meals, of which the breaking of bread was a central element, recalled Christ's presentation of himself as alive to the disciples in the joyful resurrection feasts, those shared meals that occurred between the resurrection and the ascension. All of this might also make us think of the appropriate character of the covenant people in relationship to the Lord and to their neighbours in places like Deuteronomy, chapter 26.

They are a community of joy, of thanksgiving, contentment, generosity, at peace with and honoured by all around. In Luke's Gospel we have a number of formulaic descriptions of the growth of John the Baptist and Jesus as young children. These follow the pattern of 1 Samuel.

Now we can see an example of a corresponding expression for the growth of the church, which might also recall Old Testament descriptions of the multiplication of Israel's population. A question to consider, how might the early Jerusalem churches' approach to their shared meals and their sharing of possessions be a response to the teaching and example of Christ as it is described in the Gospel of Luke? The events of Pentecost were a witness to the resurrection and the ascension of Christ, and the witness of the apostles continues in chapters 3 and 4 with a witness to the power of Christ's name. The power of Christ's name is a witness to the fact that he is above all principalities and powers, all authority has been given to him, and the apostles who act with the power and the authorisation of this name can do mighty deeds with it.

Beyond this development of the early church's witness, there is also a gradual movement towards increasing forms of persecution. In the previous chapter the disciples had been mocked by some of the people who had witnessed them speaking in tongues, but now they will be arrested and imprisoned by the authorities. The story begins with

Peter and John going to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour.

The hour of prayer was associated with the hour of incense. This hour was also an hour that was important in Luke chapter 1, where Zechariah was serving in the temple at the hour of incense while the multitude of the people were praying outside. Later on we'll also see Cornelius praying at this time.

Prayer in the temple was a feature of the early church's practice. Although the Lord was establishing a new temple through his people after Pentecost, they were still worshipping at the old temple as well. There were overlapping administrations for this period of time.

The early Jerusalem church met from house to house but also met on a regular basis in the temple, seemingly in Solomon's portico. This was a covered porch that would afford some sort of shelter and shade and would have been a very good location for semi-public meetings. We read about the early church's practice of prayer in the temple first in Luke chapter 24 verses 52-53.

And they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy and were continually in the temple blessing God. The hour of prayer, or the ninth hour, was about three in the afternoon and this was one of the two hours of prayer of the day, the other being nine in the morning. It was also the time of Jesus' death.

While we are accustomed to see the three core disciples, Peter, James and John, here we have Peter and John. And they are paired here in chapter 4 and then also in chapter 8 verse 14. They seem to have a particularly close relationship.

We see this also in the Gospel of John, especially in the concluding chapters, where Peter and John are juxtaposed with each other in a number of different ways. The lame man is outside of the temple. Perhaps he's not able to get in, but more likely he's seeking alms from worshippers at one of the points of entry.

Concern for the poor and needy was one of the things expected of the people of God, so it is understandable that the lame man would see this as a promising place to beg. It isn't entirely clear what gate the beautiful gate was. Modern scholars more commonly identify this as the Nicanor gate, but we cannot be certain.

The Shushan gate at the east is the more common traditional suggestion and would fit best with Ezekiel chapter 47 verses 1-2. The lame man requests alms from Peter and John. Peter is the one who responds.

Throughout the Book of Acts, Peter is generally the speaking character of the apostles. He responds saying that they don't have silver and gold, regular money, but he has something even better. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, he instructs him to rise up and walk.

He takes the man's hand, he lifts him up, and immediately the Lord gives strength to his feet and his ankles. The man's leaping recalls the prophecy of Isaiah chapter 35 verses 5-6. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

Then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. In raising him up in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, there is a demonstration of the authority and the power of Christ through the miracle. Peter is confident in the power of the name of Christ and he appeals to Christ's authority in doing this act.

Such healings more generally serve as a testimony to the authority of Christ and to the truth of the apostles' message. Signs and miracles accompanying the apostles' message was a seal of the Lord upon the truth of what they were declaring. The people see him walking and praising God and they are astonished.

They recognize that this is the same man, lame from birth, whom they have seen at the gate of the temple many, many times before. They see the lame man praising God much as the disciples had praised God following the descent of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. There the astonishment was that it was done in tongues not their own.

And here the astonishment is that a man lame from birth has been raised up in this sort of way. Perhaps their minds turn to the prophecy of Isaiah and think that this must be a sign of the kingdom. The miracle also recalls miracles that Christ had performed.

Christ had declared that his disciples would perform miracles greater than his. They are continuing his ministry and much as Elisha had continued the ministry of Elijah, doubling the number of signs that he had performed, so the ministry of Jesus is continued in the ministry of his disciples. Acting in the name of their master, it is Christ that is doing the sign.

It is Christ that is showing the power. In Luke 5, 17-26, Jesus had forgiven and raised a paralyzed man. In John 5, he had raised up a man at the sheep pool.

Seeing this miraculous sign, the people all run together to the portico of Solomon. Presumably this is the place where Peter and John were going to pray. Perhaps they were meeting other members of the church there and might afterwards be teaching the people.

Seeing the multitude running to them, Peter delivers a sermon to the crowd. The miracle provides an occasion for explaining what God has done in Christ, a demonstration of his power, and once again a demonstration of the authority and the truth of Christ. The people addressed are addressed as men of Israel, and that will be important for a lot of the content of Peter's message here.

He will appeal to them as people who have received the promises that were given in Abraham, as those who have heard the words of Moses and the words of the prophets.

The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of their fathers. From the very outset he wants them to know that this is their Messiah that God has raised up.

This is not just a random person. This is the one that was promised for them. And yet the very one that was sent for them, they delivered over and denied.

They denied him in giving him over to Pilate and insisting that he be killed, and they denied him in choosing a murderer over him. Peter refers to Jesus using key Old Testament terms. He is called the Servant.

He is the one who is foretold in the prophecies of Isaiah. He is the Holy and the Righteous One. The Righteous One, again, was mentioned in Isaiah chapter 53 and elsewhere.

He is the Servant, the Holy One, the Righteous One, and also the Author of Life. As either the Prince of Life or the Author of Life, he is the origin of life. He is the one who gives life.

He has life in himself. Naturally, it would seem to be a futile endeavour to try and kill this one. Indeed, God raised him from the dead, and the disciples and their mighty works witness to this fact, that this has indeed taken place.

The raising up of the lame man was not achieved by some miraculous power on the part of Peter and John. It was achieved through the power of Christ's name, and more particularly, through the authority of Christ. It was by faith in this name, by faith in Christ's authority and power and goodness, that the man was raised up.

The raising up of the man demonstrates not only then the power of Christ, but the efficacy of a faith that calls upon Jesus. In the Book of Acts, there are a number of occasions where we see a sort of two-visitation paradigm, most clearly in the speech of Stephen. A deliverer visits the first time and is rejected, and then comes again, and is either accepted, leading to great blessing for those who accept him, or he is rejected, leading to their doom.

Peter declares that the people acted in ignorance. They did not truly know who this one was. They did not realise that he was the one promised for them, that he was the servant of the Lord.

Throughout the Gospels, there has been this element of a secret character to Christ's mission. Many scholars speak of the messianic secret, especially in the Gospel of Mark. The full identity of Christ is not truly revealed until the very end.

It is only after the resurrection that we begin to understand who Jesus Christ really was. What they did beforehand, then, was an act of ignorance. On the cross, Christ had called out for their forgiveness, because they did not know what they were doing.

And now they do know, they have the chance to repent, the chance to turn. It is noteworthy that Peter particularly emphasises the theme of denial. They denied the Holy One, the Righteous One, the One that was sent for them as the servant of the Lord.

This was the key sin, of course, that Peter himself had committed. He had denied Christ three times, and now he is the one who is sent bearing the message that the people who have denied Christ can be forgiven that sin. He particularly addresses the multitude here.

The rulers were in great sin, but the multitude bore their responsibility, even though they were whipped up. They played a very instrumental and willing part in condemning Christ to his crucifixion. However, what they did was not outside the purposes of God.

God foretold all of this by the mouth of the prophets. We might think about passages such as Isaiah 53. The Christ would suffer, and now God has fulfilled it, and they are now given the chance to repent.

If they turn back, their sins will be forgiven them. They will receive the benefits of the new covenant, and times of refreshing will come from the presence of the Lord. This is an unusual expression, but it seems to envisage some eschatological restoration of Israel.

If they respond to their Messiah, if they receive him, then the fullness of the promised kingdom will be realized. This is of course conditional. If they do not repent, they will not receive this.

We find this elsewhere in the New Testament, particularly in places like Romans chapter 11, where the expectation is that when Israel responds to the gospel, it will be the full flowering and realization of God's purpose. The Messiah has been appointed for them, and if they repent, the Messiah will be sent to them to bless them. However, until the time for the restoration of all things has come, Christ will remain in heaven.

This restoration of all things has been foretold by the prophets throughout the Old Testament. While many of the promises of the prophets are fulfilled in the church, many of them do look forward to something beyond that, to the restoration and the blessing of Israel, to the grafting in again of the natural branches, as the apostle Paul might put it. Perhaps one of the biggest questions that's hovering over the whole of the Book of Acts is will God restore at this time the kingdom to Israel? The apostles hope that the people of Israel will respond, believing that if they do, the time for the fullness of the blessing will have come.

However, as long as they fail to respond, something crucially important still has not been realized. As we go through the Book of Acts, we'll see that the vast majority of the Jews, save for a small remnant, do not respond positively to the gospel message. The disciples

end up turning to the Gentiles.

And all of this creates a very keen problem that Paul must address within the Book of Romans and elsewhere. How can we account for the failure of Israel? And what hope remains for them? As Stephen will later do in his speech, Peter here refers to the prophecy of Deuteronomy 18, where God promised that He would raise up a prophet like Moses from among their brothers. The response, positive or negative, to this prophet would be decisive for the fate of the people to whom he was sent.

Not only that, but this prophet was testified to by all of the prophets. Every single one of the prophets from Samuel and those who came after him all spoke about these days that have come upon them. This is not just one more event within Israel's history.

This is the climactic event. This is the event that it was all leading up to. In raising the Messiah from the dead and exalting Him to His right hand, God had marked out this one, this Jesus of Nazareth, as the one that all must listen to, as the one with all authority and power, to whom all knees must bow and every tongue must confess.

The destiny of the entire people rests upon His shoulders, and if the people are to be saved, it is upon Him that they must call. He is the one through whom all of the nations will be blessed. This is going to be a fulfilment of the promise of Abraham.

But they are the sons of the prophets. They are the sons of the covenant. God made the promises to their fathers, and they are the ones consequently that God has sent this message to first.

God has raised up His servant, and He gives them the opportunity to repent, to turn, to be forgiven all of their sins, and to be brought into the path of life. The response of the authorities to the message of Peter is an angry one. Throughout the Gospels we see the fear that the authorities had about the crowd, and the very great concern to maintain control over them.

One of the particular concerns here is that the apostles are teaching the doctrine of resurrection. The Sadducees in particular regarded this as a Pharisaic innovation, and they opposed the doctrine. And the fact that the early church taught this doctrine in the context of its witness to Christ's resurrection was a cause of great concern and annoyance to them.

They put Peter and John in prison. However, the movement of the early church is already getting out of their control. As people heard the word and saw the miracles, they believed, and the number of the men came to about 5,000.

Perhaps we might be reminded here of the feeding of the 5,000, in which 5,000 people were committed to the charge of the apostles. After the apostles had returned from their ministry of announcing the coming of the kingdom to the towns and villages, Christ had

instructed them to feed the flock of the 5,000, and now they have a new flock, perhaps the earlier multitude with 5,000 men anticipates this multitude with 5,000 men. From the way that Christ had empowered them miraculously to feed that multitude, he would empower them to feed this multitude also.

A question to consider, what parallels can you see between the account of the raising of the lame man in this chapter and the raising of the lame man in Acts 14, verses 8-10? What lessons might Luke be wanting to convey through this? After the healing of the lame man at the beautiful gate of the temple in chapter 3 of the book of Acts, in chapter 4, Peter and John, after being jailed overnight, are now placed before the Sanhedrin, who enquire of them what they are doing. They are being questioned by a who's who of Jerusalem's elite, the rulers, the elders, the scribes, Annas, Caiaphas, John, Alexander, and other members of the high priestly family. And the key question that they want to have answered is the power or name by which they perform the notable miracle.

The miracle itself is clearly evident, but as those who perform the miracle were known associates and disciples of the would-be messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, there is clearly a problem. Of course, it's possible that the situation might be salvaged. Perhaps these Galileans can be dissuaded from speaking in the name of Jesus, and can attribute their miracle to the power of God more generally, in a way that would allow them to fit in with the orthodoxy of the elite.

Perhaps these men have a few sectarian differences, but we should focus upon the commonalities. Jesus had promised his disciples that they would be brought before councils and kings and other rulers of the Gentiles, and that in the day that that happened, the Holy Spirit would give them the words to speak. Here, Peter is filled by the Holy Spirit, and he addresses the Sanhedrin.

In his answer, he exposes something of the surreal character of the situation. They are being examined concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, giving a lame man the power to walk again. Of course, the real issue is the power or name by which the deed was performed, and on that front, Peter immediately torpedoed any hope that the Sanhedrin might have had, that the apostles would attribute the miracle to God's power, apart from any reference to Christ.

No, the power of healing for this man came from the name of Jesus Christ, a man that God had raised from the dead, although they had crucified him. The Jewish leaders had a track record of persecuting and killing the prophets. Each successive generation could rehabilitate the prophets that their fathers had killed, yet they were within the same line of those who killed the prophets, as Christ pointed out.

Jesus, however, presents a problem. Jesus' disciples are still acting by his power, and declaring the message of his unjust crucifixion in a way that seems to delegitimize the authority of the Sanhedrin. God had decisively overruled them, in a death sentence no

less.

It is very easy to water down and domesticate the teaching of dead leaders and prophets. Just about everyone believes that if they lived in the days of Martin Luther King Jr., for instance, they would have supported everything that he stood for. The message of the dead is easily defanged, rendered safe and palatable to those in authority.

However, the spirit of Christ is stubbornly active and alive in his disciples, and the leaders cannot simply suppress it. This miracle, then, is a miracle that directly challenges and undermines their authority. As he does in the second chapter of his first epistle, Peter references Psalm 118 verses 22-23.

Christ is the stone that was rejected, and yet he has become the cornerstone. God is building a new temple, and the great builders and leaders of Israel have rejected the very stone that the entire edifice is going to be ordered around. Jesus made a similar point in his response to the authorities in Luke 20 verses 17-18.

He looked directly at them and said, What, then, is this that is written? The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him. As James Bajon notes, in the rabbinic discussion of this text, they noted the Jews' typical rejection of the chosen leaders that were sent to them.

This is similar to the message of Stephen in chapter 7 of this book. Jesus of Nazareth, then, is the promised Messiah, and the Jewish leaders' rejection of him made them profoundly culpable. While the layman may have been healed or saved from his crippled condition, Peter wants to make clear that the principle extends much further.

Jesus is not just one power among many others, perhaps a patron saint-type figure that people can pray to in a tight spot. No, there is no salvation in anyone else. There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

This salvation is not just physical healing. It also includes deliverance from sin, reconciliation to God, forgiveness of our sins. Christ is not just the saviour of Israel.

He is appointed as the universal saviour. There is no other name under heaven given among men. Wherever you are, whoever you are, Jesus is unique.

He is the only source of salvation. The boldness of Peter and John is absolutely astonishing. Only a couple of months ago or so, the same man that is speaking with such boldness here was denying Jesus in the courtyard of the high priest to a servant girl.

Now he is boldly proclaiming the authority of Christ to all of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. It is also clear to the authorities that Peter and John are not trained members of the scribal class. They are not philosophers, nor do they have extensive rhetorical

training.

While they may know the Hebrew scriptures, perhaps even being able to read them for themselves, they are not acquainted with all the different interpretations and readings of these things. They are lay people. They don't have the formal education that the religious leaders themselves would have.

It becomes apparent to the leaders that they had been with Jesus. When he had reasoned with them from the scriptures, Jesus had completely outwitted the leaders of the people. Obviously these men had learned from their master.

When we consider that the apostles had spent three years travelling with Christ, living with him, learning from him and hearing him speak to many different crowds, we should not be surprised at the depth of knowledge and insight into the scriptures and God's truth that they exhibit. And even after the resurrection, Jesus had spent much of the forty days teaching them concerning the kingdom of God. While they may not have had a formal education, Peter and John had had extensive training, and even more intensive than the rest of the Twelve.

The leaders now face a quandary, and they deliberate among themselves concerning what to do. It is very clear that a great sign has been performed. God's power has been manifested in the raising of this lame man.

But yet this miracle had been performed in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, a man whom they considered to be a false messiah and had put to death. Seeking to avoid the message spreading further among the people, they instruct Peter and John not to speak or teach any more in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John cannot accept the condition of silence.

Craig Keener notes the parallels between this and Plato's description of Socrates' response to the leaders of Athens. It is quite likely that Luke wants us to see the parallel. If Socrates was the gadfly of Athens, then Peter and John and the rest of the apostles are the gadflies of Jerusalem.

Peter and John's response invites the leaders to consider the situation from their perspective. If God has charged them with this message, to whose words should they give priority? The leaders of the people, or God himself? The New Testament puts a strong emphasis upon submission to and honouring of authorities, even authorities that are unjust. The apostles do not go out of their way to provoke confrontation.

Confrontations follow them wherever they go. But the confrontations are caused by other people's violence and injustice, not by their own behaviour. They will speak truthfully to rulers, in a prophetic way, but they do not willfully undermine or reject them.

Even here, in the case of the council that sent their master to his death, this general

posture of honour, submission and respect gives their resistance on these particular points so much more force. These are not the words of rebellious men, but men who are seeking to be obedient, and are respectfully speaking to the council in a way that encourages them to look at the situation differently. James Bajan notes that in Peter and John's response to the questioning, we see expressions that are typical of both Peter and John.

Doing what is right in the sight of God, or the description of Jesus as a living stone. These are Petrine statements that we find in the first epistle of Peter. On the other hand, the expression what we have seen and heard has a Johanine signature to it.

All of this seems to give some weight to the authenticity of these words. All of this leaves the council in a bit of a bind. The crowd is praising God for this incredible miracle, and they do not seem to have strong grounds on which to punish Peter and John.

So strictly warning them, they send them away. Peter and John return to the other disciples, and they join together in prayer to God. This prayer is of great importance in this chapter.

The whole mission of the apostles is driven by prayer. They are acting in the name of Christ as those who are continually seeking God's face. The ministry of the church begins with constant prayer in the temple, awaiting the gift of the Holy Spirit, and then the response to the gift of the Holy Spirit is constant prayer in the temple again.

Peter and John had been going to the temple to pray in chapter 3, and now again in chapter 4 they are returning to prayer. Prayer is the engine of the church's mission. Verses 24-28, with which the prayer begins, is a glorious statement of God's power in creation and providence.

God created all things, and he rules over all things. He is truly the sovereign Lord. They quote Psalm 2. The nations of the world are being gathered together against the Davidic king and against God.

The Gentiles are raging, the people are plotting, the kings and the rulers are gathering and scheming. Indeed, this is precisely what had happened in that very city. They had gathered together against God's holy servant, Jesus, the servant, the one that was promised in the prophets.

Although he was the anointed one, the leaders of the Gentiles and the leaders of God's people thought that they could withstand him. And the glorious irony of the whole situation was that they assembled together precisely in order to do what God had intended that they should do. Even as they sought to resist the Lord, they were merely performing his will and intent.

The king's heart is in the hands of the Lord. He can move it whatever way he wants.

They might have meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.

Peter, of course, had made similar statements on the day of Pentecost. Jesus of Nazareth, the man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst. As you yourselves know, this Jesus delivered up according to the definite plan and full knowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

The juxtaposition of human action and divine purpose has never been so stark. The apostles call upon the Lord not for relief from opposition and persecution, but for boldness to face it. Their task is to speak with this confidence, this faith in the power of the Lord, and the Lord will act, stretching out his hand to heal and bringing about signs and wonders through the name of Jesus Christ.

There is an immediate response to their prayer. It is a sort of aftershock of Pentecost itself. The place they are gathered in is shaken and they are filled with the Holy Spirit.

Going forth, they continue to speak the word of God, and they do so with boldness. A question to consider. There is a very strong presentation of God's power and sovereignty in human affairs in this chapter, even over the actions of his enemies, even over those most wicked actions involved in the crucifixion of his Son.

How can an understanding of divine providence and sovereignty in events in history help us to act with the sort of confidence that the apostles show here? In Acts chapter 4 and 5, we read another episode in the life of the early church in Jerusalem. We learn more of the behaviour of the early church in providing for those with need, and also of the sin and the punishment of Ananias and Sapphira. What stands out in the early church in Jerusalem is the intensity of the unity of the community.

They are of one heart and one soul. They don't even treat their possessions as their own, but hold things in common. As we read further on, it seems clear that they were not required to donate their possessions to become part of the church.

Rather, this was something that they voluntarily did. In some cases, it would involve selling and giving the proceeds. In other cases, it would mean putting things at the disposal of the church.

All of this is a result of the fact that they feel so bound up with each other, being one heart and one soul, that they don't withhold anything from each other. The benefit of the other is the benefit of oneself. In this practice, we can also see something of the practical import of the commandment to love your neighbour as yourself.

If you love your neighbour as yourself, you will not withhold from him and his need what you would not withhold from yourself. His good is not set over against or detached from your good. As he rejoices, you rejoice.

As he mourns, you mourn. The practice here might relate to what Roman Catholics have called the universal destination of goods. The fact that God has given the world to all humanity in common.

Private property is appropriate and a form of stewardship, but it does not ultimately undermine the fact that God intended the creation for all of his creatures. This can also be related to the church's spiritual ministry. The one united gift of the Holy Spirit has been given to the entire church at Pentecost.

However, that one gift is ministered in a great many different ways through the stewardship of the spiritual gifts that have been given to each one of us as individual members of the body of Christ. In the same way, we have all been given some stewardship in the common gift of the one creation that God has given to all of his creatures, and we will give an account of our stewardship, whether more or less has been given into our charge. We will have to answer for whether we have served others and glorified God with what he has given us, or whether we have used it merely for our own selfish gain.

Having a personal stewardship in the form of private property is a very good thing. It enables us both to enter into a fuller enjoyment for ourselves, a greater sense of God's gift as it relates to us, and also to serve others and to bless others with what has been committed to our charge. In Acts chapter 4 and 5 we have a sense of both aspects of this.

It is important that people love their neighbour as themselves, with their expression of the gifts that God has given to them. On the other hand, it is important that these things are not just taken from people. People can actually express these things as a true gift of themselves.

In this way, God makes us participants in his giving process. As we give to others what God has given into our stewardship, we share in God's own generous giving. No one requires Ananias or Sapphira or Barnabas to sell their property.

They do it of their own free will. But as they act freely in this sort of way, they are expressing something about the way the world really ought to be, a world where the rich do not get rich on the back of the poor, but where the needs of all people are met, and every single person knows something of the goodness and the grace of God and his generous giving. This was the vision set forth in the Old Testament, and in the practice of the early Church we should see something of a restored Israel.

Thinking back to chapter 1 of the book, we should recall the way that the numbers of people associated with the Church served to evoke the memory of Israel and the idea of the restoration of Israel. This is the core of a restored Israel, a sign of what Israel more generally could receive if they accepted the Messiah Jesus and had the times of

refreshing from God come upon them. This description of what Israel really ought to be can be found in places such as Deuteronomy chapter 15 verses 1 to 11.

He shall not exact it of his neighbour, his brother, because the Lord's release has been proclaimed. Of a foreigner you may exact it, but whatever of yours is with your brother, your hand shall release. But there will be no poor among you, for the Lord will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess.

If only you will strictly obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all this commandment that I command you today. For the Lord your God will bless you, as He promised you, and you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow, and you shall rule over many nations, but they shall not rule over you. If among you one of your brothers should become poor in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be.

Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart and you say, The seventh year, the year of release, is near, and your eye looked grudgingly on your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cried to the Lord against you, and you be guilty of sin. You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work, and in all that you undertake. For there will never cease to be poor in the land.

Therefore I command you, you shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor in your land. The meeting of all the needs of the poor in the community then would have been a sign of God's presence within the community and a sign of the community's faithfulness that was fulfilling the purpose of the law. Laying money at the apostles' feet for them to distribute among the community was also a way of devoting things to the Lord.

Back in Exodus, the people donated to the building of the tabernacle voluntary gifts that were brought forward that expressed the people's heart in the very materials of the building. Now God is building a new building, and these voluntary gifts are part of what will build it up, a building made of people. They are also a new family.

As families hold things in common, people do have their private property, but it is not held over against other people as something that will not be shared. If there is ever any need, the property of an individual person within the family will be shared with the others. Individuals like Mary, the mother of Mark, may continue to have large houses in Jerusalem, but they don't treat those houses as if they were purely their own to use as they wanted.

Rather, they want to use them for the benefit and the building up of God's people. At this

point, we are introduced to a character who provides an instance of this practice, an exemplary character called Barnabas. As Luke does elsewhere, he introduces this character as a minor one first, before he will become a major one later on in the story.

He does the same with the character of Saul a few chapters later. Joseph, called Barnabas, is a Jew, a Levite, from Cyprus. Cyprus would become a key location later on in the story.

In chapter 11, men of Cyprus spoke to the wholeness in Antioch, which then became a base for the Gentile mission. One of the prophets or teachers mentioned of the church in Antioch in chapter 13 verse 1 is Barnabas. It seems likely that he is one of the men who went from Cyprus at that point in chapter 11.

Selling property to give to the needs of the church was a means of laying up treasure in heaven. The early Jerusalem church was taking properties that would soon be quite depreciated in value after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, selling them and using them for something that would endure for eternity. They were also taking an approach to their money and possessions that was truly remarkable.

The love of money has destroyed many unwary souls and we will see in the example of Ananias and Sapphira two such examples. Later on, Simon the sorcerer will try and buy the power of the Holy Spirit from Peter and will be judged as a result. The selling of fields and possessions and using of the proceeds to build up the body of Christ is exactly the opposite of what Judas, who by love of money had been led to betray his master, had done back in chapter 1. Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out and it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem so that the field was called in their own language, Akkeldamah, that is, field of blood.

Judas had sold his master's body, taken the money, which had then been thrown at the feet of those who had taken his life, and then that money was used to buy a field. This is the exact opposite of the actions of Barnabas and others, who were taking the money of fields that they had sold to build up the body that Judas sold to be crucified. Barnabas is named Joseph.

Barnabas may be a nickname playing upon the meaning son of prophet. Here it is connected with the meaning son of encouragement. Barnabas, in his faithfulness, is juxtaposed with the characters of Ananias and Sapphira in the chapter that follows.

Luke often has husband-wife or male-female pairings and Ananias and Sapphira are a negative example of one of these. At first, Ananias and Sapphira's action looks very similar to that of Barnabas. They sell a piece of property with the intention of laying the money at the apostles' feet.

However, they only intend to lay part of the money. They secretly withhold some of the money for themselves. It is important to consider such gifts against the backdrop of the Old Testament commandments concerning devoted things and vows.

In Leviticus chapter 27 there is extensive treatment of devoted things. In verse 28, for instance, But no devoted thing that a man devotes to the Lord of anything that he has, where the man or beast or of his inherited field shall be sold or redeemed. Every devoted thing is most holy to the Lord.

What Ananias and Sapphira are doing then is devoting something, the proceeds of the item that they have sold, to the Lord and then withholding some of that for themselves. But having devoted that to the Lord, they are both lying to the Lord and they are stealing from the Lord. Both of those things are very serious offences.

The vow aspect of this can be seen in places like Deuteronomy chapter 26 verses 13-14, which although it speaks about the tithe of the third year, can give us a sense of the vow character of devoting something to the Lord. I have not eaten of the tithe while I was mourning, or removed any of it while I was unclean, or offered any of it to the dead. I have obeyed the voice of the Lord my God.

I have done according to all that you have commanded me. After Ananias lays the money at Peter's feet, Peter challenges him, declaring that Satan has filled his heart to lie to the Holy Spirit. Perhaps we should here recall Satan entering into Judas' heart back in the Gospels when he betrayed Christ.

Peter goes on to give a clearer sense of where the offence lay. It was not in the fact that the possessions were demanded by the Lord. If he had not vowed his possession to the Lord, he would have been able to keep it and he could have used it as he wanted.

If he had sold the property, he would still have been free to dispose of that money as he wanted. It was only when he devoted it to the Lord, lying to the Lord, and stealing from the Lord, that the judgment came upon him. Peter makes clear he has lied not to man but to God.

Connecting this to the claim that he lied to the Holy Spirit, we might see some proof of the Holy Spirit's divinity. He is immediately struck down dead. This is not something that happens that often in Scripture.

We might connect this with the judgment upon the rebels of Korah. There are also similarities with the sin of Rechab and Bayanah, presenting the head of Ish-bosheth to David, thinking that they will be approved when they are actually put to death for their actions and the young men take them out and bury them. There are similarities with the sin of Achan.

Achan was put to death because he took of the devoted things, and Ananias and

Sapphira are doing something similar. A further example would be Nadab and Abihu, who presumed to offer strange fire to the Lord, fire that had not been required. This occurs just after the worship of the tabernacle has been established.

They are killed by the Lord and fear comes upon the people. The same sort of thing happens here. After judgment fell upon Ananias, three hours later Sapphira came.

From Sapphira's name scholars surmise that she might have been a wealthy woman in Jerusalem. Peter gives her a chance to depart from the sin of her husband, but she confirms it. Consequently she is struck down just as her husband was.

The result of all of this is that a godly fear falls upon the church and the people round about. They can see that God's presence is among the disciples and they have a clearer sense of the seriousness of sin. A question to consider.

How would you describe the role that Peter and the apostles play within this passage? At the end of chapter 5 of the Book of Acts, following the judgment of Ananias and Sapphira, the apostles are once more brought before the leaders of the Jews. We discover that the apostles had been meeting together in Solomon's portico. Solomon's portico was already mentioned back in chapter 3 verse 11.

The temple was a site where the early church met, and particularly the apostles. Solomon's portico was a relatively public place where many people would see them as they came for worship. Within the gospel, if we read of Jesus teaching in the temple on several occasions, in John's gospel chapter 10, we see that he also taught the Jews in the context of Solomon's portico.

Having a vibrant new sect drawing great multitudes to them in the context of the temple would have been a threat to the authorities. They are performing many signs and wonders, and signs on a greater scale than even Christ himself. There are many different types of miracles and signs being performed here.

There are sick people being healed of various types, exorcisms being performed, and even the shadow of Peter is effective to perform miracles. While the woman with the issue of blood sought to touch the hem of Jesus' garment, even being touched by the shadow of Peter is enough to heal. In his farewell discourse in the gospel of John, Jesus had promised his disciples that they would perform greater signs than the ones that he had performed.

And here we see Jesus' word coming to pass. That Peter was especially associated with the power to perform these miracles again suggests that he was seen and was the leader of the apostles. None of the rest dared to join them.

Now who are the rest? There are a number of different positions that have been put forward. Some see it as the people more generally. They've heard about the events with

Ananias and Sapphira, and they are afraid of drawing near when God is so near to his people.

They know that God is a revealer of hearts, and also that he judges the unholy, and so aware of their sin and their failures, they do not want to come into the light of God's judgment. That is one possibility. Another possibility is that the people who were gathering together in Solomon's portico were the apostles more particularly, and the rest were the other disciples.

They did not dare to join them because this was a place of great confrontation, a place from which the authorities might take them and imprison them. Daryl Box suggests this particular reading. The apostles are held in high esteem by the people.

They are men of character and clearly men of power as well. The Lord is with them, and so they are recognized as approved by the Lord by the rest of the people. And as a result of their public ministry and the many signs and wonders that they are performing, a great multitude of people convert.

Considerable numbers of people, men and women, are joining the church, and the church is growing rapidly. This provokes the jealousy of the leaders. The apostles are gaining honor and influence among the crowd.

It may only be a few months after Pentecost, but huge numbers have joined the church by this point, probably well over 10,000 people. It's not surprising that the authorities will be jealous, seeing God's approval of the apostles, the great power that they are wielding, and the influence that they have with the crowd. They wish that they had the same thing, and because they do not, they strike out against the apostles.

The arrest and the subsequent trial of the apostles invites comparisons with the trial that they had after the healing of the lame man in chapter 4. Craig Keener identifies 17 parallels between the accounts of the two chapters. The parallels invite us to consider not just the similarities, but also the developments in the second account. All of the apostles are now involved.

Persecution is ramped up to a greater level. They are now beaten, not just sent away with a threat. There is also a reference back to the earlier gag order that the apostles had broken.

This is the first of a number of prison break stories in the narrative of Acts. While these stories can be connected to each other, they should also be connected back to the story of the resurrection. The authorities find an empty cell guarded by soldiers, and they also find an empty tomb.

And there's an angel involved. They enter the temple at daybreak, in the same way as Christ rose early in the morning. Much as Christ disarmed principalities and powers by

his resurrection, so the authorities are proved powerless and disarmed by the way that God works with the disciples.

Their gag order proves ineffectual. Their threats prove ineffectual. Their sanctions prove ineffectual.

A large percentage of the population of the city of Jerusalem has now joined the apostles. And what's more, the apostles and the disciples are undermining their authority by claiming that they are responsible for killing the Messiah himself. There is something of a comedic character to all of this.

God is outwitting his enemies, and doing so in a way that proves them to be utterly powerless to resist. When they hear that the men that they threw into prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people, they send the captain with the officers, seeking to bring them back to stand trial. The men that the authorities send are afraid of bringing the apostles in by force.

They know that they will be stoned by the people if they do so. The role played by the crowd in the gospel narratives and here in the book of Acts is a very important one. In Acts, as in the gospels, the crowd is a great concern.

The authorities cannot control the crowd. We read of crowds rioting, attempting to kill people, and authorities doing whatever they can to calm the crowds down. The crowds play an important part in the story of the crucifixion.

First of all, the authorities were wary of taking Christ during the feast, because of all the crowds that would be present. Then the Jewish authorities whip up the crowd to demand Christ's crucifixion, and Pilate, for his part, gives up on trying to bring about justice, giving in to the crowd because he knows that he is powerless to contain them. The authorities then are sitting on top of a volcano that might blow up at any moment, and this new movement is a hugely destabilizing influence.

Societies are built upon a fragile religious order in this time, and the gospel really shakes things up, not just here in Jerusalem, but later on also in the Gentile world. A lot of this is about maintaining political control in volatile situations, and the authorities are very concerned about their own legitimacy. The apostles are accused of intending to bring the blood of Christ upon them, that is, to hold them guilty of crucifying an innocent man.

In Matthew chapter 27, verses 24-25, we also encounter this expression. So when Pilate saw that he was gaining nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, I am innocent of this man's blood, see to it yourselves. And all the people answered, His blood be on us and on our children.

The message of the apostles then is undermining the authority of the council, and if they aren't careful, they won't be able to rule the people, and they will lose many of the

privileges that the Romans accord them. And this isn't just some private teaching of these apostles, they've filled all of Jerusalem with their teaching. It is quite likely that 10-20% of Jerusalem has converted by this point.

Yet Peter here presents God's gift of repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel and Christ. It will occur as Jesus' blood comes upon them, not in the sense of guilt, but in the sense of covering and cleansing. The message isn't designed to threaten the nation, nor even to overturn the authority of the rulers, but rather to secure the peace and restoration of Israel.

The council remind the apostles that they had been charged not to teach in the name of Jesus, but Peter and the other apostles once again respond by saying that they must obey God rather than men. This is not willful rebellion, it's driven by obedience to the Lord. Peter and the apostles immediately respond by summarizing the message of Christ.

The God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, raised Jesus, the Messiah that they crucified, and exalted him to his right hand as leader and saviour. In order that through him alone Israel might receive the forgiveness of sins. Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, is the one in whom Israel's story comes to its divinely intended climax.

It is easy to think of the early Christians over against Jews as a different movement entirely, but the difference that we're seeing here is a difference within Judaism itself, a fifth group alongside the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Essenes and the Zealots. This is a new way of understanding Israel's story and its destination, a new way of understanding what it means to live out life as Israel, a new way of thinking about the way that God is going to act, and has acted within Israel's history, to bring about his kingdom. The apostles are the appointed witnesses to the Christ, and the Holy Spirit is bearing witness through signs and wonders that are accompanying their message.

The council find themselves in a difficult position to rule in their case. While the majority may have been minded to use harsher measures, a Pharisee in the council, Gamaliel, stands up and gives a moderating position. Whether his moderating position comes from a more agnostic stance relative to the movement, or a more cynical one, is not entirely clear.

While the Sadducees seemingly dominated the council, the Pharisees were a minority that could counterbalance them in certain cases. Gamaliel, a Pharisee, was the former teacher of Paul. Later on in the book of Acts, Paul speaks of himself as follows.

educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God, as all of you are this day. Gamaliel is also a character that is mentioned outside of the biblical text. He is spoken of in the Mishnah.

He was also a grandson of Hillel, one of the most famous Jewish teachers of the period. Gamaliel mentions people who had stood up and started movements. Thudas and Judas the Galilean had both started rebellions, and both of them had come to nothing.

Judas the Galilean had resisted the Roman census and tax at the beginning of the first century. However, the movement that he started had not entirely ended. It would end up leading to the great Jewish war of the later 60s AD, and the downfall of Jerusalem that followed.

Gamaliel advises the council not to resist the movement. They should rather wait and see what happens to it. If it is merely of man, it will come to nothing.

But if it is of God, nothing will be able to withstand it. Reading these words of Gamaliel about 2000 years later, it might well seem that his implicit question has been decisively answered. The apostles are called back in before the council, beaten and then sent away with another gag order.

They leave the council and they rejoice that they are counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Christ. You might think back to Christ's words in the Beatitudes in Luke chapter 6, verses 22-23. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you and revile you, and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man.

Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold your reward is great in heaven, for so their fathers did to the prophets. Receiving dishonor for the name of Christ is actually a source of great honor. Despite the gag order, they continue to obey God rather than men.

Every day in the temple and from house to house, they continue to teach and preach that the Christ, the anointed and awaited Davidic Messiah, is Jesus. A question to consider. Within the Book of Acts, authorities respond to the mission of the early church in a number of different ways.

What would be some of the considerations that would drive the authorities to different sorts of responses to the early church and their message? In Acts chapter 6, we're introduced to the characters of Stephen and Philip, who will be the most prominent figures in the immediately following chapters. We might see this as beginning a new section. It's loosely paralleled with what preceded it, and it moves on and outward.

Chapters 1-5 had Matthias being chosen. Now we have 7 being chosen. Peter was preaching on the day of Pentecost and before the council.

And now Stephen is preaching. The apostles were tried and beaten, and now Stephen is tried and killed. The Spirit came in Jerusalem, the Spirit will later come in Samaria.

The greed of Ananias and Sapphira was judged, and later we will see the greed of Simon

the sorcerer being judged. We might also think back to the Gospel account, where the 12 were chosen, and then alongside the 12, 70 or 72. Or maybe thinking back even further to the selection of the 70 elders in Numbers chapter 11.

The numbers of the disciples are rapidly growing, and with this there needs to be a spread of the gift of the Spirit for leadership within the church. There are tensions within the early church that arise in part from cultural and linguistic differences. There are Hellenists and there are Hebrews.

These two groups seem to be divided primarily by language and also to an extent by culture. Diaspora Jews would live in Jerusalem, but they would not be speaking Aramaic as their first language. They probably had some Aramaic, but they would usually be speaking in Greek as their daily language.

The Hebrews on the other hand, while they would be able to speak in Greek, would generally be conversing in Aramaic. In chapter 2 on the Day of Pentecost we read about a great number of Diaspora Jews who were in Jerusalem. Some may have been just there for the feast, but a great number actually lived in Jerusalem.

It is this group that is likely referred to by the term Hellenists here. Craig Keener notes that 10-20% of people in Jerusalem at the time would probably speak Greek as their primary language. Almost 40% of inscriptions from Jerusalem in the period are in Greek.

The numbers of Jews in the Diaspora greatly exceeded the number that actually lived in Palestine at the time. But many immigrants of the Diaspora would have returned to live in Jerusalem. These are the sorts of people mentioned in chapter 2. They would have been faithful Jews, but acculturated to Greek over Judean culture in various respects.

In the early church there seems to have been a special concern for widows and great honour given to them. Without the support of a husband and perhaps lacking a family network, a widow was a very vulnerable character. And so having a community that would stand in and support such a person was very important.

Throughout the Old Testament a lot is said about God's concern for the widows and the fatherless. For people who have no man to support them and could easily be victimised or denied justice, they were quite vulnerable to mistreatment. It is possible that the Hellenist widows would have been more vulnerable than the Hebrew widows.

As immigrants they might not have had the same strong local kinship networks. Wider disparities in age between marriage partners in the Greek world might have meant that there were more widows of the Hellenist than of the Hebrews. However the task of overseeing the daily distribution was something that was distracting the apostles from their primary tasks, prayer and the ministry of the word.

As we've seen to this point in the Book of Acts, prayer was absolutely integral to what

the apostles were doing. They prayed constantly in the temple. Their ministry was also driven by prayers for boldness as we've seen in the preceding chapters.

Beyond this they have the task of proclamation. They are presumably teaching daily in the temple in Solomon's portico, reasoning with others and trying to persuade them of the truth of the gospel of Christ. Perhaps, as those who are entrusted with the word, they're also concerned to write things down at this point.

They are the appointed witnesses and if they're going to communicate their message it's important to have it in a solid and enduring form. They need people to oversee this process of administration. The seven need to be gifted administrators, people with a good reputation, people that would be trusted implicitly by those that they were ministering to.

It also is important that they have the spirit, they have to have the same anointing of the spirit that the apostles have and they need wisdom. This isn't going to be a straightforward task. There are some tensions between these communities, elements of distrust that need to be addressed and they need to act with the transparency and trustworthiness that places the process beyond reproach.

If the church is really going to have things in common, trustworthy administrators could not be more important. According to Josephus, councils of seven govern towns and some commentators have seen a connection between this and the seven that are chosen here. Others have seen connections with the seven that were appointed to oversee the almsgiving of particular towns.

Once again, as in the case of the apostles in chapter 1, it seems to be presumed, if not required, that the candidates will be males. The task of these men seems to go beyond what is traditionally thought of as diaconal. They are not just responsible for works of mercy in a very narrow sense.

As we see in the cases of Philip and of Stephen, these are ministers of the word and they seem to oversee the congregation in a broader sense. I think it is appropriate to see these not as deacons but as elders. And their ministry differs from that of the apostles.

The church is formed around the table and those who are administering the table are overseeing something central to the life of the church. The apostles themselves explicitly deny that this is their task, it's not their responsibility. The apostles are not actually appointing the seven.

They oversee the appointment but the congregation are the ones that appoint them. It's because the congregation's task is to engage in this daily distribution that they need to be the ones that appoint representatives to perform it for them. The laying on of hands confers a task that belongs to one party or group to a person or group of persons who

will act on their behalf.

Laying on of hands is used in sacrifices, it's used in ordinations and it has a similar meaning. Numbers chapter 27 verses 22 to 23 is a very good example of this. And Moses did as the Lord commanded him.

He took Joshua and made him stand before Eliezer the priest and the whole congregation. And he laid his hands on him and commissioned him as the Lord directed through Moses. Moses then confers his own authority to Joshua.

Moses makes Joshua his representative before the whole congregation. Israel has representatives of the congregation within itself but Joshua is a representative of Moses. As Matthew Colvin observes in his discussion of this passage, the apostles are the plenipotentiary representatives of Christ.

They represent Christ himself. And we might notice the differences between this appointment and the appointment for replacement for Judas. Many people come to this passage looking for an absolute system of church government.

But church government in the New Testament seems to be a lot more organic than people tend to think. It arises out of natural problems that the churches face to which responses are given from the natural structures that exist within human communities. Church government is more a matter of wisdom and prudence than a matter of absolute law.

However, as in the book of Exodus where elders are appointed in Exodus chapter 18 and in chapter 11 of the book of Numbers, the overseeing and administration of the life of the people of God in a way that's just and wise is a matter of great importance and of interest to the text on its own terms. One of the results of this response to this problem within the early church is that the church grows. It's fruitful.

It multiplies. It's like the growth of the infant Christ that's described in the book of Luke. Many priests are converted.

Luke begins his gospel with a priestly family and here we still see a number of people who are associated with priestly backgrounds who are drawn to the gospel. Priests were dependent upon the support of the people and perhaps as many of them might have lived in poverty, what we have in the support of the church in this community of goods is something that is of great appeal to them, a sign of the way things really ought to be where the Levite and the priest are welcomed in and supported by a community that's faithful to the word of God. Immediately we see Stephen standing out as someone who's faithful and powerful in his witness to the word of God.

He has great wisdom and no one could withstand it. In Luke chapter 21 verse 15 Christ has spoken to his disciples saying, I will give you a mouth and wisdom which none of

your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. He has this argument with those of the synagogue of the freedmen and they cannot withstand his wisdom or the spirit with which he is speaking.

Perhaps we should imagine a public dispute in which Stephen clearly outwits and outmatches his opponents, demonstrating from the scriptures that Jesus really is the Christ. Accusations are brought against Stephen, accusations that might remind us of those that were made against Jesus. Accusations are instigated, then the people are stirred up and the elders and the scribes with them and then there's the setting up of false witnesses.

It's very similar to the story of Christ. Stephen is walking in the path of his master. In Matthew chapter 26 verses 59 to 61, now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death.

But they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward and said, this man said, I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days. There is some measure of truth to the accusations of the false witnesses.

The accusations have enough resemblance to the message of Christ and the early Christians that it would seem that they were based on some measure of truth. The temple, in Jesus' indictment of it, had been treated as a den of robbers, a place for wicked people to retreat to, to find refuge, rather than as a house of prayer for the nations. Jesus has spoken about the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.

And so these false witnesses still had some element of truth to what they were saying. The people of the council gaze upon Stephen and they see his face like the face of an angel. This is, of course, reminiscent of the story of Moses, whose face shone when he had been with the Lord.

It's another sign of having been with Jesus. Stephen also goes on to reference angels on several occasions in his speech that follows. Throughout Luke's Gospel and the Book of Acts, an important emphasis is the continuity of Christ, the Gospel, and the Church with that which has preceded it.

Stephen here gives the longest speech of the Book of Acts. Its rhetorical structure is worth noting. As Darrell Bach observes, it begins with a call to hear.

It has a preparatory discourse. It presents a proposition. Then it moves to argument application, and then concludes with a polemical application.

Stephen tells the story of Israel here in a very particular way. And by telling the story in the way that he does, the characters are reframed. The ways that stories are told are of great importance.

By telling stories in different ways, certain characters can be brought to the foreground and others placed in the background. Certain themes can be foregrounded. Heroes and villains can be switched.

This is especially true when you're telling a story of a nation. For instance, you can tell the story of America in a number of different ways. You can tell the story in a way that foregrounds themes of faith and religious liberty, with the Mayflower Pilgrims coming to America in 1620.

Or maybe you can tell the story in a way that foregrounds themes of oppression and slavery, with the story of 1619 being foregrounded. Or perhaps the story is to be told as a story of nation-building, focusing upon 1776 and the founding of a new nation. Or maybe it's a story of empowerment of the marginalized, the story of Seneca Falls, Selma, and Stonewall.

While they can work with the same historical material, these different ways of telling the story can lead to very different understandings of who the heroes are, who the villains are, how contemporary Americans fit into the story, and how to continue the story appropriately. When reading Stephen's speech, then, we need to be very alert to the themes that he has brought to the foreground, who his heroes are, what his emphases are, what events he misses out, what events he brings to the foreground. All of these will help us to understand how he sees the different parties in the current conflicts fitting into the story, and how he believes people should move forward.

Stephen, in the way that he tells the story, presents himself and other Christians as being fundamentally loyal to the story of Israel, and his opponents as being disloyal to it. The early Christians also read the scriptures in the light of Christ, and what Stephen provides here is a typological and Christological reading of the Old Testament. We're supposed to see resemblances between the characters presented here and the character of Christ.

The story begins with Abraham. Jeff Myers remarks upon the relationship between the leader and their kindred. Each one of the great leaders that Stephen picks out is set apart from, or has to leave their kindred in some sense.

The story of Israel begins with a promise, a promise given to Abraham, and it also begins promisingly. This is common ground also with a typical Jewish reading. One can imagine that many of Stephen's readers will be tracking with him, agreeing with him, and then as the speech progresses, subtle themes that Stephen has introduced and highlighted, things that they can agree with in principle in their original context, will be brought to bear upon the current situation in a manner that will put them in a difficult position.

Stephen is reading the tension of the present time back into the narrative. The narrative of Israel, as Stephen tells it, is a narrative of rejection of those appointed by the Lord. It

is also a narrative of outsiders.

Abraham must leave his inheritance. He is dislodged from his kindred. He is a man without inheritance who must operate by promise.

From an initial focus upon Abraham, he moves to the character of Joseph. Joseph was initially rejected by his brothers, but later he was raised up by God and had influence with the Gentiles. One can also imagine that the character of Joseph would have invited comparisons with the story of Christ.

Joseph was betrayed for silver by his brother Judah. Jesus was betrayed for silver by Judas. Both Jesus and Joseph were cast into a pit.

Both of them were associated with two criminals. Both of them give bread and wine. Both of them were raised up to the height of power.

In both cases, their brothers must bow before them. Looking through Stephen's speech, we'll also see a double visitation paradigm, as Luke Timothy Johnson has identified. Within this double visitation paradigm, the leader comes the first time and he is rejected.

And then the second time he comes, he is rejected either to the doom of those who reject him or he is accepted to their salvation. Stephen includes a number of surprising details in the way that he tells the story. He is clearly joining the dots of the narrative in various ways.

And some of these might initially give the impression of carelessness. For instance, he seems to allie the purchase of the cave of Machpelah near Hebron, which was bought by Abraham in chapter 23 of Genesis, with the purchase of the land near Shechem that was bought by Jacob in chapter 33. Jacob was buried in the cave of Machpelah, but Joseph was buried in Shechem at the end of the book of Joshua.

Stephen, however, seems to conflate these two things, apparently confusing them. However, I think that this sort of allusion is a thoughtful one. Stephen is very aware of the fact that it is the burial of Joseph that truly leads to the people being brought back to the land.

At the end of the book of Genesis, it's Joseph's bones that must be brought up. In the book of Exodus, it's Joseph's bones that they carry back with them. And then at the very end of the story of the Exodus, at the very end of the book of Joshua, it's Joseph's bones that are buried at the same time as Joshua is buried.

While Jacob and others are brought back to the land and buried there prior to the Exodus, the true restoration to the land, the true carrying back to the land, occurs when Joseph is buried, and that occurs in the burial plot in Shechem. A question to consider, how might this way of telling the story have helped the early Christians in thinking about

their relationship with Jerusalem and Palestine? In the middle of Acts chapter 7, Stephen continues to tell the story of Israel as part of his defence before the council. The primary figures in Stephen's retelling of the Old Testament narrative are Abraham, Joseph and Moses, with references to David and Solomon at the end.

However, by far the most important of these characters is Moses. Moses in the Exodus narrative offers Stephen a paradigm for thinking about the coming and the work of Christ, and are the backbone of his speech. Stephen's telling of the story of the patriarchs was purposefully moving towards and focusing upon the event of their going down into Egypt, in the promises of the Exodus given to Abraham, in the selling of Joseph into slavery, and in the carrying back of the bodies of Jacob and later Joseph to Canaan for burial.

As he turns to treat the Exodus, Stephen also casts a look back. He refers to the time of the promise given to Abraham drawing near, and also to the king's forgetting of Joseph. Pharaoh commanded that the infants of the Hebrews, the baby boys as we see in Exodus chapter 1, be killed.

Moses however was spared. Moses is described as beautiful in God's sight. He is well favoured by the Lord.

On a number of occasions in scripture, we have descriptions of future leaders that speak of them as noticeably marked out from early on as persons favoured by the Lord. That there was something unusual about Moses that marked him out from other infants is suggested in Exodus chapter 2 verse 2. The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him three months. We have a similar statement in chapter 11 verse 23 of the book of Hebrews.

By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful, and they were not afraid of the king's edict. Moses was exposed next to the Nile in a basket, but was adopted and raised by Pharaoh's daughter, receiving education in all of the wisdom of Egypt, and being distinguished in his words and deeds. A number of these details from Stephen's account are achieved by joining the dots of the biblical narrative, by reading between some lines, and perhaps also rest in part on some extra biblical tellings of the story, much as modern tellings of the nativity story might involve the donkey, and somewhat more questionably, an innkeeper.

Here one of the details is the suggestion that the infant boys were to be killed by means of exposure, a common form of infanticide in the ancient world, infants being abandoned to die from the harshness of the elements. As commentators commonly note, another of these details that Stephen likely derives from extra biblical rabbinic tradition is the notion that Moses' life could be divided into three blocks of forty years. Moses appeared before Pharaoh at the age of eighty, in Exodus 7, verse 7, and he led Israel for forty

years in the wilderness, before his death at the age of 120.

Forty is a significant period of time in scripture, it is the length of the reigns of David and Solomon, for instance. It was the age at which Joshua was sent as a spy, it was the length of time in the wilderness. When he had attained to maturity, Moses intervened to defend a Hebrew who was being beaten by an Egyptian, avenging him by killing the Egyptian.

While many have regarded Moses' actions as sinful, Stephen presents his action as one expressive of being commissioned by God as a deliverer of his people. Moses was sent by God to deliver Israel, and they did not recognize him. He was rejected by his people as a mediator, who tried to get his brothers to be at peace with each other.

Stephen's description of the event portrays Moses more as a reconciler and peacemaker than the account of Exodus does, for which Moses is more a man opposing injustice. Stephen's Moses is a ruler and a judge, as Christ is. Moses' leaving Egypt is portrayed more as a result of the rejection of his people than due to the fear of Pharaoh, as it is in Exodus chapter 2, verses 13 to 15.

When he went out the next day, behold, two Hebrews were struggling together, and he said to the man in the wrong, Why do you strike your companion? He answered, Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian? Then Moses was afraid and thought, Surely the thing is known. When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses, but Moses fled from Pharaoh and stayed in the land of Midian. Moses had been sent by God to his people, but he was rejected by his own, and he fled to Midian.

Like Joseph, who would also be the saviour of his family, Moses was forced away from his brothers, becoming an exile. His brothers or his own people have not acknowledged him. Stephen mentions some interesting details in his account.

For instance, here he notes that Moses had two sons. If we were to read of an exile who had two sons, our minds might first go to Joseph, who fathered Ephraim and Manasseh in Genesis chapter 41, verses 50 to 52. That Moses had two sons is not actually mentioned in the account of Exodus chapter 2. Only Gershom is mentioned there.

Eleazar, his second son, is not mentioned until Exodus chapter 18, when Jethro, his father-in-law, brought Moses' sons and wife to meet him in Sinai. Perhaps part of Stephen's purpose here is to highlight resemblances between Joseph and Moses. Stephen also telescopes events on occasions, as he does in his description of the purchase of the tomb and the burial of the patriarchs in Shechem.

After 40 years passed, an angel appeared to Moses in a burning bush. The symmetry of the passing of two periods of 40 years parallels the two visitations. The first time when

he visited his brothers, the children of Israel, but was rejected, in verse 23 and following, and the second when the angel appears to him in the burning bush, initiating the story of the Exodus.

The commissioning of Moses to lead the Exodus at the burning bush displays the fact of the Lord's calling of him, even though Israel might earlier have rejected him. A question to consider. What parallels and contrasts can you recognise between Moses and Joseph? The end of Acts chapter 7 tells the story of Stephen's martyrdom, the first martyr in the history of the church.

Stephen has been accused and he is brought before the council. He stands accused of speaking blasphemous words against God and Moses, seeking to change the customs and also the holy place of the temple. In response to these charges, Stephen retells the story of Israel.

He particularly focuses upon the characters of Joseph and Moses. He tells the story of Moses as a periodised narrative. He is delivered as an infant.

Then he visits Israel for the first time as a 40 year old. And then at the age of 80 he leads the people out of Egypt. There is a sort of parallel within the biblical narrative between these different deliverances or events.

In his childhood he is drawn out of the water, taken from the Nile by Pharaoh's daughter. At the age of 40 he has a deliverance at the wells. He fights off the false shepherds and he delivers the bride.

And then on a second occasion leading a flock to Mount Sinai, there is another deliverance at the water. The nation now is drawn out of the water at the Red Sea. The Sea of Reeds would remind us of the fact that Moses himself was drawn out of the reeds.

Stephen wants us to recognise the symmetries, the symmetries within the story of Moses, but also greater symmetries. Stephen is especially concerned that we appreciate the themes of rejection that run throughout the story of Scripture. Those appointed by the Lord for the deliverance of the people are rejected by those people.

Joseph is the first one that is told and then Moses. Moses was called at the burning bush and he had been rejected at his first visitation. And now he is sent to them again.

Christ is returning to Israel in the message of his apostles. They have a chance to listen this time and to repent. There is a contrast between Israel's rejection of Moses and God's sending of him.

God had chosen this one and yet Israel turned their back on him. There is also an emphasis upon the role of the angel. The angel appears to Moses at Sinai in the burning bush.

The angel also accompanies Moses in the wilderness and angels are the means by which the law is given. Much as with Joseph, Stephen is likely telling the story in a way designed to help and encourage people to notice the resemblances between Jesus and Moses. Daryl Bock notes a number of these.

Moses is rejected but he becomes ruler and judge. Moses is a deliverer. He performs signs and wonders.

Moses is a prophet and a prototype of the coming prophet like Moses. He is a mediator. He receives and gives the words of God.

This is not a flattering telling of Israel's story. There is a parallel drawn between their past behaviour and their current condition. This is going to be only heightened at the end of Stephen's speech as he gives his indictment upon the nation.

We are used to telling the stories of our peoples in flattering ways, in ways that present us as the heroic protagonists of the narrative. This is not, however, how Stephen tells his story. In his telling of the story, Israel constantly rejects the ones that are sent to them.

This way of telling the story is not novel to Stephen. We find the same thing as Christ tells the story of Israel in the parable of the wicked vinedressers. Whereas he speaks over Jerusalem in chapter 23 of Matthew, he talks to his disciples in Matthew chapter 5 and the Beatitudes of how they persecuted the prophets that went before them.

Christ's people stand facing a tradition of rejection of the word of God. They are not the first to be rejected in this manner. This brutally honest and non-hagiographic telling of the story is possible because forgiveness is extended to Israel.

When forgiveness is extended, it is possible to tell the truth about what has happened. Indeed, forgiveness requires confession, the honest admission of our sins. For forgiveness to be received, there must be an act of telling the truth.

In telling the brutal truth of Israel's actions in this way, Stephen is inviting the people to repent. On the Day of Pentecost, a message concerning Israel's sinful rejection of their Messiah had been accepted and it led to forgiveness and repentance. But it does not have the same effect here.

Stephen summarises the whole story of the Exodus in verse 36. His concern seems to be to get to the point of the parallels between Christ and Moses. Moses had foretold the coming of a prophet like him in the future.

In Deuteronomy chapter 18 verses 15 to 19, The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers. It is to him you shall listen, just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, or see this great fire any more lest I

die. And the Lord said to me, They are right in what they have spoken.

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers, and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. This is not a promise that terminates upon Joshua.

It looks forward to something greater still. And this was an important promise for the early church. In Acts chapter 3 verses 22 to 24, Moses said, The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.

You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you, and it shall be that every soul who does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people. And all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came after him, also proclaim these days. We should remember that part of the accusation against Stephen was that he spoke blasphemous words against Moses.

Now Moses is absolutely integral to Stephen's defense. He is turning the accusation back on them. In rejecting Jesus, they are rejecting Moses, just as they rejected Moses in the past.

Israel rejected Moses when he was sent to them the first time. They rejected him the second time too. Moses mediated the law and brought about their deliverance.

But Israel wanted a golden calf as a replacement for him. Moses is also rejected or resisted on several occasions in the book of Numbers. The golden calf though was the great act of rebellion in Exodus chapter 32.

In consequence of their rejection of Moses and turning to worship idols, the works of their hands, God gave them over to the worship of the host of heaven. There is a reference to Amos chapter 5 verses 25-27 here. It is similar to Romans 1 where people are given up to idolatry and perversion as they reject God.

Again, one of the accusations against Stephen was that he taught that Jesus would destroy the temple. And indeed Jesus had taught that he would destroy the temple. However, Stephen wants to challenge the way that they regard the house.

They have turned the house of God into a sort of idol. It is treated as something that gives them a way of containing and controlling God. But God cannot be contained by such a building.

Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord? What is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things? Stephen tells the story in a way that makes the wilderness experience paradigmatic. When they feel rooted in the land, it can be easy for them to forget that they are always

strangers and sojourners before the Lord.

The temple itself as a symbol of God's dwelling with them can always turn into a sort of false idol, something that they presume upon. We might remember the words of Jeremiah chapter 7 verses 3 following. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, amend your ways and your deeds and I will let you dwell in this place.

Do not trust in these deceptive words. This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord. For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the sojourner, the fatherless or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own harm, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers forever.

Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house which is called by my name, and say, we are delivered, only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house which is called by my name become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the Lord. Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it because of the evil of my people Israel.

And now, because you have done all these things, declares the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently you did not listen, and when I called you you did not answer, therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, and in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your fathers, as I did to Shiloh, and I will cast you out of my sight, as I cast out all your kinsmen, all the offspring of Ephraim. Stephen, like Christ, is presenting a similar condemnation to that of Jeremiah. They have put their trust in this building.

It has become an idol to them, but no building can contain the Lord of hosts. He ends with a powerful denunciation. Their stiff-necked rebellion, their rejection of the messengers of the Lord, these have been consistent features of their behavior throughout their history.

Israel's history is not a glorious history of accepting the messengers of the Lord. Rather, which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed the ones who foretold Christ. It is not surprising that they have killed Christ himself.

They accuse Stephen of rejecting the customs. They received the law from angels and did not keep it. They accuse him of blasphemy against Moses, but they have rejected the prophet like Moses, just as their forefathers rejected Moses when he was sent to them.

Stephen's speech is a stunning defense. It is also a window into how deeply the early

church reflected upon Scripture and the way in which it was fulfilled in Christ. Jesus had foretold such persecution to his disciples in Luke 21, verses 12-19.

He had also foretold that they would be given the words to speak when the time came. This is all being fulfilled for the first time in the story of Stephen. He is the first of the martyrs.

And in this he is following his master. Christ himself had a very similar trial. The accusations faced by Christ are very similar to those faced by Stephen.

And the events of Stephen's trial also fulfill something that Jesus spoke of in his. In Matthew 26, verses 63-64. But Jesus remained silent.

But their response is to shut their ears. They stop their ears and they run at him. In this response we see them willfully closing themselves off to the message of Stephen and of the apostles.

And not just closing themselves off, but taking the position of utmost hostility to it. Stephen, on his part, commits his spirit to the Lord Jesus. There is a parallel between Jesus cast outside and Stephen cast outside.

Both cry with a loud voice. Both call for forgiveness for their enemies. And Stephen, when he is killed, falls asleep.

When he had foretold that some of them would be martyrs, Jesus had told his disciples, but not a hair of your head will perish. The description of Stephen falling asleep in such a violent form of death is a manifestation of the fact that they cannot really harm Stephen. They may be able to destroy Stephen's body, but they cannot kill his soul.

Ever since Luke chapter 19, Jerusalem was the stage on which all of these events were taking place. And now there is going to be a shift. As Jesus entered Jerusalem in the triumphal entry, people removed their garments and placed them before him.

Here they remove garments again to drive Stephen out. And the apostles are scattered to the four winds of heaven. They are scattered like a dandelion clock being blown.

And as they are scattered, they bring the message with them wherever they go. We also have another character introduced here. Those putting Stephen to death put their garments at the feet of a man named Saul.

This man named Saul becomes the instigator of great persecution for the church. A question to consider. Stephen's speech comes at a decisive moment in the narrative.

From this point onwards, the narrative will move away from Jerusalem and out into the wider world, to Samaria and then to the ends of the earth. How could we read Stephen's speech as a speech summing up the early stage of the mission and a verdict being

declared upon people's response to it? In Acts chapter 8, the mission of the early church starts to move beyond Jerusalem. Verse 4 is a transitional text.

God is achieving his purposes through his enemies. The persecution faced by the church in Jerusalem encourages the spread of the movement. At this point, it might also seem that the Jerusalem Christians have an advantage of not having deep roots within Jerusalem.

They had sold their property, their tent pegs had been removed, and now they can move on. Persecution here is a mechanism of fulfilling chapter 1, verse 8, the calling to go beyond Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. In this way, Stephen's death ends up kicking off the mission.

The scattering that happens to the church could be a negative thing or it could be a positive thing. People can be scattered as a form of judgment. They can also be scattered as a sowing of seed.

The Christians of Jerusalem are now being sown among the nations, sown throughout the empire where they will have a much broader influence. Philip is one of those scattered and it is in Philip that the movement from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria occurs. The Samaritans are an important feature of Luke's gospel.

A Samaritan village does not receive Christ in chapter 9, verses 51 to 56. There is the parable of the Good Samaritan in chapter 10, verses 33 to 35. There is the return of the Samaritan leper to express his thanks to Christ in chapter 17, verses 16 to 18.

In 2 Kings chapter 17 we read that after Israel was deported by the Assyrians, the Assyrians repopulated the land with people from other nations, pagan peoples. Presumably there would have been a remnant of Israelites in the land and now they have been mixed with these other groups of people. Samaritan villagers would have largely spoken Aramaic, but in the larger towns and cities they would probably have spoken Greek and would have been largely Hellenized.

They are neither Orthodox Jews nor Gentiles. In the conversation between Jesus and the woman of Samaria in John chapter 4, we have a window into some of the disputes that existed between the Samaritans and the Orthodox Jews. They worshipped the same God, but they were somewhere in between Jews and Gentiles.

For the Samaritans their holy mountain was Mount Gerizim, whereas the Jews worshipped in Jerusalem. A number of candidates have been put forward for the city that Philip probably came to in this chapter. Some have suggested that the city was Sebaste.

Sebaste was a Gentile city in the Samaritan region. It was built on the site of the old Samaria and was also a capital. Sychar, Gitto, Shechem and others have all been suggested.

It is likely impossible to be certain on what city it was, besides the fact that it was an important center of Samaritan population. Philip was introduced back in Acts chapter 6, and now he becomes a focus of the narrative. His ministry is accompanied by signs.

Unclean spirits are cast out, paralyzed people are healed, and lame persons are healed too. In Philip we see that it is not just the apostles that perform signs. Other leaders of the early church are performing signs too.

During the initial stages of the church's mission in a particular region, the signs and wonders would have played an important confirmatory role. The signs were the signs of the kingdom. In Luke chapter 7 verse 22 Jesus describes the signs that he performs.

The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the good news preached to them. This also draws upon Old Testament prophecy, such as Isaiah chapter 35 verses 5-6. As Scott Spencer observes, Philip is a character juxtaposed with Simon the sorcerer.

Simon works wonders in verse 11, Philip works wonders in verses 6 and 13. Simon draws crowds in verses 9-10, Philip draws crowds in verses 6-7. The people pay attention to Simon in verses 10-11, the people pay attention to Philip in verse 6. Simon is a great power in verse 10, Philip performs great powers in verse 13.

Simon amazes the Samaritans with his claims and with his magic in verses 9 and 11. Philip's miracles amaze the Samaritans in verse 13. Craig Keener adds to this.

He observes the contrast between Simon claiming to be someone great in verses 9 and 19 and Philip only acting in the name of Jesus in verses 12 and 16. There are a number of confrontations or contrasts with sorcerers and people performing magic arts in the book of Acts. Paul has a conflict with Elamus Bar-Jesus in chapter 13 verses 6-11.

Paul and Silas confront the Philippian slave girl in chapter 16 verses 16-24. And perhaps we could also include the failed exorcism attempts of the sons of Sceva in chapter 19 verses 13-16. Magic was a source of fascination and fear in the ancient world.

Potions and poisons, the invoking of spirits and demons, divination and a lot of other such practices were an important part of life in ancient society. Along with various forms of idolatry, this was part of the old order that the advent of the gospel disrupted. In the Old Testament we read of conflicts with the magicians in Pharaoh's court.

In Moses and Aaron, particularly in the first three plays, the Lord proved that his power exceeded that of the arts of the Egyptian magicians. Simon Magus is mentioned by a number of people in early Christian tradition. Justin Martyr, about a century later, who himself came from the region of Samaria, wrote of Simon Magus.

But much that he reports was probably later embellishment of the story. Simon claimed

to be someone great and many scholars have read this as a claim to some sort of deity. However, when the gospel came on the scene with Philip, there was a widespread conversion in response.

The Samaritans were baptised, which might have been a surprise to observing Jews. They were baptised without the theological differences between Jews and Samaritans seeming to provide an obstacle. The question of which earthly mountain you're supposed to worship upon is of slightly less import when the Lord is establishing a new temple.

Simon the sorcerer is also described as having believed at this point, presumably in response to the signs. This is an indication of the greater power of Christ and his name over the magical arts of people such as Simon. In verses 14-17, news reaches Jerusalem of the success of the Samaritan mission and they send Peter and John to confirm it.

They must acknowledge the validity and the membership of the Samaritans. The new Davidic king has been established in Judah and now the remnant of the Northern Kingdom must be joined with them so that as one people they might go forward. Such acts of mutual recognition are very important in the history of the Church.

They are a sign of the unity of the Church and of Christ that exceeds all the differences that might divide us. The Samaritans had been baptised by Philip but they had not yet received the spirit. They received the spirit as the apostles lay their hands upon them.

The Church is one apostolic Church. It is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets. And it is important that the Samaritan mission is built on the same foundation as the rest of the Church.

Seeing the power of Peter to communicate the gift of the Holy Spirit by laying hands upon people, Simon the sorcerer seeks to buy the gift from him. He sees this power as something that can be bought with money. He seeks to buy office.

Throughout the book of Acts money has been an important theme. Judas betrayed Christ for silver. The early Church sold their property in order to give money to the poor.

Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit over money. And now Simon the sorcerer is another example of someone led astray by his love for money. In his desire for money and power he risks his ruin.

The sin of simony, the buying and selling of church office and other such sacred things is derived from Simon the sorcerer's name. One of the things that Simon presumes is that if he has power and wealth and influence, he ought to be able to use these things to gain status and privilege within the Church. But that is not how the Kingdom of God works.

Peter, who could be juxtaposed with Simon, there are two Simons in this story, rebukes Simon in the very harshest of terms. Simon the sorcerer, as Peter presents him, is

standing in the very greatest spiritual jeopardy. If he does not repent, he and his money will perish together.

He does present Simon with hope though. He must pray to the Lord. And Simon, seemingly penitent, calls upon Peter to pray for him.

One of the things that the story of Simon the sorcerer reveals is the great danger among early converts of trying to put the Gospel and the message of the Christian faith into the structures that were familiar from pagan practice. Even though they might accept Christ, they might try and fit Christ within the familiar framework of the old pagan ways. The Russian Orthodox theologian Alexander Shmeman described the effect of a sort of piety that coloured everything that was received about the Christian faith.

He describes what he calls mysteriological piety as a faith in cult in its saving and sanctifying power. He observes the way that this pattern of piety inherited from paganism influenced so much about Christianity's development in those early years. It led to the idea of the church as a sanctifying cult, something that makes people holy through its buildings, through its practices, through its rites, through its clergy.

Simon the sorcerer is another example of a sort of piety that could be taken to the Christian message. Simon the sorcerer thinks in terms of magic and power and he sees the Gospel in those frames too. Familiar with the system of magic, he thinks that the Gospel can be slotted into that same pattern.

Just as one might be able to buy magical arts from someone, he expects that he should be able to buy the power to give the Holy Spirit. Simon needs to learn that this is not the way that the Kingdom of Christ works at all. A question to consider.

Why don't the Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit when they first believe? Why do you think that they have to wait until Peter and John lay their hands upon them? To this point in the Book of Acts, the second half of chapter 8, we have seen the conversion of various groups of persons. The next few stories, however, focus upon three key individuals. The Ethiopian eunuch, Saul of Tarsus and Cornelius in Caesarea.

The story of the Ethiopian eunuch, the second story that focuses upon the character of Philip, is a journey narrative, like that of Saul after it, and like the story of the two travellers on the road to Emmaus at the end of Luke's Gospel. Later, in Acts chapter 21, verses 8-10, we will discover that Luke stayed for some time with Philip. Presumably, during this period, Philip informed him of the events recorded in this chapter.

An angel of the Lord directs Philip to go to the south, to a road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. Being directed here by the angel of the Lord, and in a few verses' time by the Spirit of the Lord, we see that God is the one in charge of this mission. This is not a mission that is primarily directed by the apostles.

It is directed by God himself, who is sending the messengers where they really ought to go. On the road, he meets an Ethiopian, a eunuch, who is a court official of the Queen. While some have suggested that he might just have been a high-ranking official, it is almost certain that he was an actual literal eunuch.

Because they had no natural heirs, eunuchs could be of value to courts, as their personal legacy was entirely invested in the health and the continuance of the dynasty. The loyalties of such men could be more certain than those who had children of their own. Eunuchs were sometimes used to guard the harem, whereas other eunuchs like this were high-ranking officials who performed important state tasks.

This eunuch is in charge of the Queen's treasure. He has come to Jerusalem to worship, which suggests that he is at the very least a God-fearer. Perhaps he is some sort of proselyte.

Others have raised the possibility that he might have been a diaspora Jew. One way or another, he has a prior attachment to the worship of God. It is important to remember that when we read of conversions in the Book of Acts, many of them are conversions not from unbelief to belief, but from old covenant and the status that belonged to someone within that order, to new covenant and a new status.

The eunuch is a very effective illustration of this particular movement. Someone who would have enjoyed little to no status within the old covenant order, now being marked out as a full member of the people of God, the eunuch would have been restricted in a number of ways. First of all, as a Gentile or God-fearer, when he went to the temple, he would at most have been able to come into the court of the Gentiles.

Then we read in Deuteronomy chapter 23, verse 1, The Spirit directs Philip to go over to the Ethiopian eunuch's chariot. There, Philip hears him reading Isaiah the prophet. While modern readers are accustomed to read texts silently, ancient readers almost invariably read aloud, or while muttering the words under their breath.

We should bear this in mind, as we so often read the scripture without any regard for the ear and its place in receiving the word. There are certain passages in the Bible that are not in the original text, and certain things that the ear will hear in texts that eyes cannot see. The story here is similar to ones that we have read before, particularly to the story of Emmaus.

There is a stranger meeting someone returning from Jerusalem on their way. They enter into conversation. They speak to a lack of understanding.

They teach them the scriptures, beginning with some part in particular. As we go further, we will see that there are greater similarities binding together these two stories, similarities that might help us better understand the message that they have for us. The

fact that the Ethiopian eunuch has a copy of Isaiah probably indicates both his personal wealth and his interest in the Old Testament scriptures as a Gentile God-fearer or proselyte.

As the travellers of Emmaus invited Jesus in to share a meal with them, so the Ethiopian eunuch invites Philip into his chariot. The passage he is reading is Isaiah 53, a text that was of importance for the early church as a testimony to Christ as the suffering servant. However, this particular scripture might have had a resonance for the Ethiopian eunuch beyond its regular readers.

Peter Lighthouse observes, Isaiah 53, verse 8 Anyone reading the book of Isaiah beyond this point would also discover a reference to the eunuch that would have been an immediate source of promise to someone like this Ethiopian. It speaks directly to two aspects of his experience and his existence, to the fact that he is a foreigner and to the fact that he is a eunuch. Isaiah 56, verses 3-8 The Lord God who gathers the outcasts of Israel declares, I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered.

The eunuch then receives a promise that he will have an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. The eunuch, by virtue of the fact that he could not have children, would presume himself to be cut off, his name would die with him. Yet in this word of prophecy, there is a promise of a way in which his name need not be cut off.

Through the work of the suffering servant, one who himself was cut off, cut off from the land of the living itself, yet one who nonetheless saw his offspring and gave fruitfulness to others, he might receive a sort of fruitfulness and re-inclusion himself. The spirit is clearly working on both sides of this interaction. He's brought Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch, but he's also brought the Ethiopian eunuch to these particular texts to reflect upon those and then to invite Philip into his chariot.

The spirit is a sort of matchmaker, one who's doing the work of forming the kingdom of Christ beyond the walls of the church, beyond the purview of the church. He's bringing life in the wilderness to people that the church has not yet encountered, so that when the church, in people like Philip, encounters people like this Ethiopian eunuch, they will discover that the spirit has already been working there. Having been provided his text by the work of the spirit, Philip is well able to speak of the gospel and to explain the meaning of Christ from this text.

And like Jesus teaching the disciples on the road to Emmaus, taking this as his starting point, he goes all the way through to explain what Christ means. As they're passing through this wilderness, they encounter some water and the eunuch's response is to ask for baptism. In certain translations, there is a verse following this, in verse 37, a verse that almost certainly does not belong in the text, but is a later inclusion.

Nevertheless, it likely witnesses to widespread early Christian understandings of baptism. The charities stopped, they both go down into the water and Philip baptises him. While their both going down into the water suggests that this was something more than a sprinkling, it should not be taken as certain evidence of immersion.

It could, for instance, involve pouring the water upon the Ethiopian eunuch while he was standing in the water, to his waist. Such a form of baptism would capture different aspects of the symbolism of baptism. Baptism symbolically draws upon waters from above and waters from below.

The waters from below are the waters associated with death, the waters from which we are delivered, that we pass through. And the waters from above are the waters of God's heavenly blessing, most particularly the water of the Spirit poured out. Were there these two different dimensions of baptism, it might also help us better to explain how the church's later practice of baptism could involve either full submersion, or the pouring out of water, or the sprinkling of it from above.

Both of these forms then would be running with one particular aspect of the symbolism of the water, either the water from above or the water from below, whereas both forms could be included in a single rite. The story of the Ethiopian eunuch might also remind us of other stories. A high court official who comes in a chariot who is then washed in water.

It's the story of Elisha and Naaman the Syrian. There might also be some sort of reversal of the story of the Exodus. Here a Jewish man on foot is pursuing a descendant of Ham in a chariot.

This is the reversal of the story of the Exodus, where the Egyptians, descendants of Ham, pursued the Israelites who were travelling on foot in their chariots. And whereas Pharaoh and his men were submerged in the water of the Red Sea, here the Ethiopian eunuch goes down into the water, is washed, comes up, and is cleansed. In a reversal of the story of the Egyptians, this man is delivered through the waters.

As they come up from the water, the spirit of the Lord carries Philip away. It seems to be an instantaneous thing. He is instantaneously moved away from that place and snatched up and placed somewhere else.

We read of similar events in the context of Elijah and also in the book of Ezekiel. Philip's disappearing from the sight of the eunuch immediately after the baptism is completed might remind us of something. It should remind us of the story of Emmaus once again.

Luke chapter 24 verses 30-31 When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight. In the story of Emmaus, in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, and later in the story of Paul, we have three examples of an

encounter with Christ in speech or in the words of Scripture.

In all of these occasions, it is followed by an administration of the sacrament. Christ breaks the bread and is revealed in that act of breaking bread. Here it is in the act of baptism.

And then later on in the story of Saul, it is baptism once more. The story ends with Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch both going their own ways. The eunuch continues on his way back home rejoicing.

According to Christian tradition, he became the father of the Ethiopian church, a very powerful fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah. His name is not cut off. He has many sons and daughters, even though a eunuch.

Philip, for his part, finds himself at Zotus, the former site of Ashtod. And then he preaches all the way up to Caesarea. A question to consider, what lessons might we learn from Luke's three journey narratives about the proper form and purpose of Christian worship? The story of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus in chapter 9 of the book of Acts is a critical turning point in the narrative.

Much of the rest of the book will be concerned with the missionary journeys of the Apostle Paul. While we were introduced to Saul at the martyrdom of Stephen back in chapter 7, here we read about his conversion. This story follows on from the story of the Ethiopian eunuch.

Like that story, it is concerned with the conversion of a particular individual. The Ethiopian eunuch might have represented the ends of the earth. But Saul represents an extreme of another kind.

Saul is the leading persecutor of the church, as we see at the beginning of this chapter. He is breathing out threats and murder. Just as he was willingly involved in the stoning of Stephen, here he is trying to pursue the Christians that have been scattered after Stephen and bring them back to Jerusalem in chains.

The very fact that he is undertaking this mission might give an indication of the counterproductive effects of the persecution of the early church in Jerusalem. The early Christians had been scattered from Jerusalem by the persecution, bringing the message wherever they went, and now they are trying to bring them back because the message is spreading everywhere. Like the story of the road to Emmaus or the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, the story of the conversion of Saul takes place on a journey.

There is an encounter with the risen Christ. There is an opening of the understanding. Later on there is an opening of the eyes, and the story is completed by receiving baptism.

The story of the conversion of Saul is told on three different occasions within the book of Acts. It is that important. There are slight differences between each of the accounts, which means that we need to harmonize them in some way or other.

But as they are told for different ends, it is not surprising that different aspects of the story will be highlighted in different places. The early Christian movement represents a significant threat in Saul's mind, considering the rapid rise of the church in Jerusalem, and then its spread to many different parts following, not least the region of Samaria. It is not surprising that he was concerned.

Here we meet him searching out Christians in Damascus, 135 miles north of Jerusalem. Considering the fact that this movement had risen from nothing, and had grown to such huge proportions in such a brief span of time, Saul recognizes that this is not just a regular breakaway sect. This represents something far more serious, and he is driven by a sort of zeal, a zeal that probably takes the model of Phinehas, or the Levites that rallied to the side of Moses in Exodus chapter 32, or maybe the example of the prophet Elijah.

All of these great figures of zeal probably lie behind Saul's self-conception as he fights off this new movement. At this point, the Christian movement is described as the Way. In John chapter 14, Jesus spoke of himself as the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Throughout the Old Testament, there are various examples of two-way teachings. There's a way of wisdom, there's a way of folly, there's a way of righteousness, and there's a way of wickedness. Speaking of Christianity as a Way suggests that it is less a matter of teachings than a matter of life and practice.

It's a matter of how you live in a particular mode of discipleship, following a master, Jesus the Messiah. While doctrine was clearly not unimportant, it may not have been as prominent in the understanding of many early Christians as it is in the minds of Christians today. A good early example of teaching Christianity as the Way can be found in the Didache, a very early Christian document dating from the 1st century AD.

That document begins as follows. There are two ways, one of life and one of death, but a great difference between the two ways. The way of life, then, is this.

First, you shall love God who made you. Second, your neighbour as yourself, and all things whatsoever you would should not occur to you, do not also do to another. The text then goes on to elaborate upon these, the first and the second great commandment that sum up the law and the golden rule, at quite considerable length.

As Saul is approaching Damascus, a light comes from heaven and shines all around him, and he falls to the ground, hearing a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? This sort of divine address is very similar to ones that we find in the Old

Testament, as the Lord speaks to Abraham, or as the Lord speaks to Moses at the burning bush. Saul responds by asking who is speaking to him, and receives the answer that it is Jesus, whom he is persecuting. Within this response is contained a great mystery of the Christian faith, which will become later a subject of considerable theological reflection for Paul himself.

The people of God are united to Christ, and Christ is united to his body. What is done to his body is done to Christ, and the blessings of Christ are enjoyed by his body. Jesus asks Saul why he is persecuting him.

Here we might consider the many similarities between Saul of Tarsus and King Saul. Both are Benjaminites, both persecute the Davidic king. When King Saul persecutes David, David responds in 1 Samuel 26, verse 18, and he said, Why does my Lord pursue after his servant? For what have I done? What evil is on my hands? Christ's question as the Davidic Messiah to Saul of Tarsus is a very similar one.

We will see further exploration of the relationship between Saul of Tarsus and King Saul in a few chapters time. Jesus instructs Saul to go into the city, and to wait there until he will be told what to do. The men who are with him recognise that something has gone on.

They experience some aspect of the phenomena, but they do not truly understand what has taken place. They seem to hear the sound of the voice, but they do not understand what was said. When Saul gets up from the ground, he is blind.

Like Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist at the beginning of the book of Luke, his loss of a faculty is an indication of something of his spiritual state. Zechariah failed adequately to hear the word of the Lord, and Saul cannot see the truth of Jesus Christ. Saul spends three days without sight, neither eating nor drinking.

Perhaps we are supposed to see this as a sort of death of the old Saul, and then he is going to be raised from this state in a few days time. The Lord then appears to a man named Ananias, a second Ananias. The first Ananias was the negative example of Ananias, the husband of Sapphira.

And here we have a positive Ananias, one who is a faithful disciple, who will be the means by which the church receives Saul for the first time. Ananias is instructed in a vision to come and to see this man Saul of Tarsus who is praying. Understandably, Ananias having heard about Saul is apprehensive about coming to meet him, but yet the Lord reassures him.

Saul is a chosen vessel of the Lord's to carry his name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. This is a summary of the later mission of Saul that will occupy the book of Acts. In particular, this man who has inflicted much suffering upon the church

needs to learn how much he must suffer for the sake of Christ's name.

This might be seen as a negative thing, a sort of punishment of Saul, but quite the opposite. It is a form of honour that he might share in the sufferings of Christ. Once again, this will be an important theme within the writings of Paul himself.

He sees within his very own call something that indicates the importance and the value that the Lord places upon the sufferings that he experiences. His apostleship finds its honour in suffering for and in Christ, not in some supposed victorious Christian life free from all suffering and difficulty and hardship. Ananias visiting Saul places his hands upon him, informs him that he has been sent by Jesus Christ and that he will receive his sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Something like scales fall from his eyes, his sight is restored, he rises and he is baptised. There is a sort of paradigmatic conversion pattern here. A man who sees the light of Christ is convicted by it, his eyes are opened and he is enlightened and he rises up, not just physically but spiritually, and is baptised.

The change in Saul's character could not be more remarkable. He spends some time with the disciples at Damascus and immediately proclaims Jesus in the synagogues, declaring that he is the Son of God. Those hearing him are astonished.

They know that he was sent from Jerusalem to try and bring Christians back there in chains. And yet here he is, proclaiming the name of the One whose followers he once tried to destroy. Perhaps we could see some similarities between this account and the story of Christ's baptism and the events after it in Luke chapter 3 and 4. In that account the heavens are opened, there is a voice from heaven, there is a baptism and a time of fasting.

That's followed by going to the synagogue and preaching in the synagogue, where people are astonished, thinking that they had the measure of the person who is speaking, when clearly they have not. As there is an attempt to kill Saul in this chapter, there is an attempt to kill Jesus back in Luke chapter 4. And in both cases the protagonist escapes. Part of what is happening here, which Luke wants us to see, is that Paul is being conformed to Christ.

He is becoming like his saviour. The Benjamite Saul, who was like his Old Testament namesake earlier in the chapter, has now become more like David. As David was let down through a window by Michael, so Saul is let down over the wall by the people in Damascus.

Saul's escape here is also described by him in 2 Corinthians chapter 11 verses 32 to 33. In Galatians chapter 1 verse 17 he also describes going to Arabia before returning to Damascus. After leaving Damascus he goes to Jerusalem, and while he attempts to join

the disciples he finds that they don't trust him, because they know of his history of persecution.

It is only when Barnabas steps in and vouches for him that he is able to join. Barnabas, to whom we were introduced back in chapter 4, introduces him to the apostles and tells them his story. And while the story of Saul began with the martyrdom of Stephen, at the end of this section there may be no one whom Saul more reminds us of than Stephen himself.

Like Stephen he preaches boldly, he disputes with the Hellenists, and people are seeking to kill him. A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which Saul's vision of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus might have informed the later theology of the apostle Paul? Acts chapter 9 concludes with two miraculous healings performed through the apostle Peter. From here until the end of chapter 12 Peter will be the focus, before Peter largely disappears from the text of Acts, save for a brief appearance in chapter 15.

Luke often has male and female pairings in his gospel, and here we find another male and female pair of healings. There are also features of these two healings that might remind us of healings in the gospel, or healings in the Old Testament, as we will soon see. The section begins with Peter travelling from place to place, between various Christian congregations.

He seems to be consolidating these early gatherings of Christian disciples, encouraging them in the faith, and connecting them with the heart of the Judean Christian movement in the city of Jerusalem. As he's doing this he spends some time among the saints that live at Lydda. While there he encounters Aeneas, who's been bedridden for eight years, a paralytic.

Jesus heals a paralytic in Luke chapter 5, forgiving his sins at the same time. It's not clear whether Aeneas was a Christian or not, but Peter heals him in the name of Jesus the Messiah, instructing him to rise up and make his bed. He is immediately healed, and the news of this healing travels throughout the entire region, and many people turn to the Lord.

This gives a window into the spread of the gospel in Judean regions beyond Jerusalem. The church is clearly growing, expanding outwards into these various parts of the land. Only a year or two previously, the disciples themselves had gone throughout all these different regions as Jesus had moved towards Jerusalem.

At that time they had declared the good news of the kingdom of God that was coming. During that period they had performed signs and wonders. This work presumably prepared the ground for what was taking place now.

As they went to these various towns and villages, they were going to places that had

already received messages about Christ prior to his crucifixion and resurrection, and now they could be filled in on the rest of the story. The fame of Christ and of the gospel is spread by these marvellous works, works that are performed in the name of Jesus Christ. The apostle Peter does not claim miraculous power of his own.

Rather he claims to act as the emissary of Jesus Christ, speaking and healing in his name, As has happened in many other occasions in the history of the church, miraculous healings and signs are a means by which God's kingdom announces itself in a new region. The power of the name in which the church acts, and a reality filled promise of the healing and the restoration of the kingdom that it proclaims, are both conveyed in such signs and wonders. Some have seen in the name Aeneas some reference to the mythical founder of Rome.

Perhaps in giving us the name of this man, Luke is drawing our attention to the direction in which the gospel is moving. Lydda, where Peter was currently working, was about 12 miles from the city of Joppa. Joppa was a port, perhaps most famously where the prophet Jonah had sought to catch a ship to take him to Tarshish, when he was running from the mission of the Lord.

At Joppa a female disciple has just died, a woman named Tabitha, which is translated as Dorcas. Tabitha means gazelle, and Dorcas would be the equivalent name in Greek. Burial usually occurred quite swiftly after someone died, as we saw in the case of Ananias and Sapphira, but this woman after she has died is washed and placed in an upper room, and the disciples hurry to summon Peter from Lydda.

When someone dies, it is most common to bring their bodies down, to bring their bodies down towards the earth where they will finally rest. The bringing of a body up into an upper room might remind us of two stories from the books of 1st and 2nd Kings. In 1st Kings chapter 17, Elijah carries the body of the dead son of the widow of Zarephath up into his upper room.

In 2nd Kings chapter 4, the Shunammite woman brings the body of her dead son up into the upper room of the prophet Elisha. In each of these cases, there is a movement of the body away from the realm that is associated with death, the lower realm, and a raising of the body up. Tabitha is presented to Peter and to us as a woman noted for her good works and her charity.

Her ministry is one of making clothes for needy people, and she is particularly of service to the widows. After Peter places them all outside, he raises Tabitha up. As Tabitha is brought back to life, the miracle is another proof of the power of Christ to the surrounding region, and many people throughout Joppa believe in the Lord.

Peter had been present at a similar raising by Jesus in the Gospels. In Mark chapter 5 verses 40-43 we read, But he put them all outside and took the child's father and mother

and those who were with him and went in where the child was. Taking her by the hand, he said to her, Talitha kumi, which means, little girl I say to you, arise.

And immediately the girl got up and began walking, for she was twelve years of age, and they were immediately overcome with amazement. And he strictly charged them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat. Talitha kumi might remind us of Tabitha arise.

Only one letter differs between these two words, and it is one of many details that makes this raising of Tabitha reminiscent of Christ's raising of Jairus' daughter. It is also, as we have already noted, reminiscent of Elijah's healing of the son of the widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings chapter 17 verses 17-24, and of Elijah's healing of the son of the Shunammite woman in 2 Kings chapter 4 verses 18-37. Comparable miracles of Christ occur in Luke chapter 7 verses 11-17 and chapter 8 verses 41-42 and 49-56.

Robert Tannehill is one of various commentators who observe different family resemblances between these stories. Not every story has all of these details, but each one contains enough of them to connect them with the other stories. First, the dead body is placed in an upper room.

Second, the healer is absent and must be summoned. Third, the healer encounters people weeping. Fourth, the healer excludes the public.

Fifth, the healer prays in private. Sixth, there is a command to rise. Seventh, after the command or healing action, the dead person's eyes open.

Eighth, the dead person sits up. Ninth, the healer either grasps the hand of the dead person or, after they are revived, gives them their hand. Tenth, the healer calls relatives or friends to show them the person alive.

Eleventh, the report of the person being raised up goes round about. There will be another similar story in Acts chapter 20 when Paul raises Eutychus. The effect of all of this is for the Gospel to grow in its influence in these various parts of Judea.

More and more people are hearing and responding, and Peter's missionary journey, which anticipates the missionary journeys of Paul among the Gentiles, leads to a great number of converts in the land of Palestine. A question to consider, what might we learn from Luke's portrayal of Tabitha's ministry? In Acts chapter 10 we arrive at the great transition in the book of Acts as the Gospel starts to move to the Gentiles. Although we have already had some intimation of this move as the Gospel is received by the Ethiopian eunuch back in chapter 8, here in Acts chapter 10 it is Cornelius, a Roman centurion, and his household that are the key converts marking this shift in the history of the people of God.

As a centurion, as part of a larger cohort, Cornelius would have been in charge of about

100 men, one of six within the cohort that would have been part of a legion of about 6,000. Caesarea was an important site of Roman administration within the land of Palestine. It was where the Roman prefect lived and it was also an important harbour.

The reader of the book of Acts who is familiar with Luke's Gospel might recall at this point the centurion in chapter 7 who is commended for his great faith. Here Cornelius is described as a devout God-fearer. He fears God with all of his household, he gives generously, and he is committed to prayer.

It is worth bearing in mind at this point that conversions in the book of Acts are often not from unbelief to faith, rather they are from an old covenant faith to a new covenant faith, from a situation of a God-fearer in this case to the situation of a Christian. A similar thing seems to occur in the case of the Ethiopian eunuch. We might also recognise that with the three great conversions of the Ethiopian eunuch, Saul of Tarsus, and now Cornelius of Caesarea, we have representatives of all three families of humanity, Ham, Shem and Japheth.

The character of Cornelius might also remind us of someone like Naaman the Syrian, another foreign military commander who comes to believe in the God of Israel through the ministry of Elisha. Cornelius is praying around the ninth hour of the day. This is the hour of prayer and the offering of incense in the temple, and the angel who appears to Cornelius at this point speaks of his arms and his prayers ascending as a memorial before God.

There might be some suggestion here that his prayers and his arms are functioning as if they were sacrifices and offerings of incense. We see such a way of thinking about prayer in places like Psalm 141 verse 2, Also in the story of Daniel in chapter 9, when the angel Gabriel appears to him around the time of the evening sacrifice, when he's been praying, even though the temple is not in operation at the time. The angel who appears to Cornelius assures him that his prayers and his arms have been heard by the Lord, perhaps in a way that might remind us of the story of Zechariah back in Luke chapter 1, when the angel Gabriel appears to him.

The angel instructs him to send men to Joppa to find Simon Peter, who is staying with Simon at Tanna. Cornelius is not told why he should summon Peter, and this is a theme that goes throughout the story. People have only part of the picture.

Cornelius receives a vision, Peter receives a vision, and they need the two of them to come together to understand what the Lord is doing. The Lord is matchmaking two people, a Gentile and a Jew, and bringing them together in an act of mutual recognition. They should both see the work that the Lord is doing.

This might also help us to understand why the events are so often repeated within this story. We hear of the initial vision of Cornelius as it is narrated by Luke, then as it is

shared by the messengers to Peter, then as Cornelius tells it to Peter, and then as Peter tells it to the people in Jerusalem. Why all of this repetition? First of all, probably because it's emphasizing the Lord's initiative in the action.

The Lord has done something, and people are reporting and responding to that thing that the Lord has done. But also because the transmission of this information is very important. It's important that mutual recognition occurs.

God is bringing people together, and their appreciation that the Lord has worked on both of their sides to bring them together is much of the point of the story. The Lord is matchmaking Jews and Gentiles in one new body of the church. As the messengers of Cornelius approach Joppa to meet Peter, Peter has a vision of his own while he is in prayer in the middle of the day.

A great sheet descends from heaven with all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air, and he is instructed to rise, kill and eat. This happens three times, and each time he resists it, insisting that he will not eat what is common or unclean. As the vision ends, Peter is confused.

He doesn't understand what it means. But then the messengers of Cornelius arrive, and he is instructed to rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation. Perhaps we should see some similarity between this rise, kill and eat, and this rise and go down and accompany them.

The meaning of Peter's vision is not easy to discern. What might be the connection between eating these unclean foods and accompanying these men to see a Gentile? I think that the answer is probably found in the recognition that animals represent persons. The dietary requirements in places like Deuteronomy chapter 14 are associated with the fact that Israel bears the name of the Lord.

They have been set apart as holy. The dietary requirements are designed to mark out Jews from Gentiles. Peter's vision, then, is among other things a sign that this division between Jews and Gentiles is no longer operative in the same way.

In Christ, the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles has been broken down. God has called the unclean animals clean. He has made them part of his household.

Like the domesticated and herbivore animals that Israel could eat, the wild beasts of the Gentiles will also be tamed by the gospel of Jesus Christ, and will be included or consumed into the body of Christ. A number of commentators note the similarities between this story and the story of Ananias being sent to Saul. In both cases, two unlikely people are brought together in an important act of recognition.

In both cases, prayer and visions are very important. And in both cases, an important change of perspective has to occur. Peter has to change his perspective on Cornelius

and other such Gentiles, and Ananias has to change his mind towards Saul.

Both have initial reservations that have to be overcome. Peter has his reservations about associating with Gentiles, and Ananias has reservations arising from Saul's reputation as a persecutor of the church. In both cases, we also see the power of the Holy Spirit in orchestrating these events.

The Holy Spirit is the one that is ultimately building the church, and he is moving people around from place to place, bringing them in contact with each other, and through these meetings and acts of mutual recognition, helping them to see that the hand of the Lord is at work. James Spajan, Peter Lighthouse and others have also noted the themes of this story that connect it with the story of Jonah. In both cases, something rises up to heaven from Gentiles, bringing them to the attention of the Lord.

In the case of the story of Jonah, it's the wickedness of the city of Nineveh. In this story, it's the alms and the prayers of Cornelius. In both cases, the prophet of the Lord is found in Joppa.

They are sent to Gentiles. There is hesitation in both cases. There is a repetition of the number three in both cases.

And then, of course, there is the sheath that might remind us of a sail. Here, the fisherman Peter is sent to cities by the sea, where he will start to fulfill his calling as a fisher of men, starting to bring in people for the Lord from the sea of the Gentiles. Where the prophet Jonah was a reluctant prophet, Peter will prove faithful and will welcome the mission that the Lord has given to him.

A question to consider, why is it that Gentiles as Gentiles could not be full members of the people of God in the Old Covenant, but now can? What accounts for the change? In the first half of Acts chapter 10, two men had received visions. Cornelius had received a vision while he was praying, a vision that told him to summon Peter, who was staying with Simon the tanner. The apostle Peter had received a vision of his own.

Three times a sheet containing various unclean animals had descended from heaven, and he was told to rise, kill and eat. Each time he had resisted and been told that what God had cleansed, he should not call common. The explanation of the vision began to become apparent to him, as he was instructed by the Spirit to go with the three men who were to bring him to Cornelius.

Now in the second half of Acts chapter 10, these two men with their two separate visions are brought together, the Lord demonstrating in bringing them both together that the visions were ultimately from him, and that his purpose was to bring them together in an act of mutual recognition. Neither of them fully knows the information of the other yet. Peter does not fully understand why he has been summoned, and Cornelius does not yet

know the message that Peter has to give to him.

Much of Acts chapter 10 and 11 is concerned with the relaying of information from one party to another, communicating to other parties what we the reader already know. Cornelius' story is told first of all by Luke, then it's conveyed by the messengers to Peter, then it's related by Cornelius to Peter, and then later by Peter to the people in Jerusalem. The point of all of this is not merely that Cornelius and the people in his household receive the Holy Spirit, but that they and the Jewish Christians be joined together as one body by the Spirit.

The act of mutual recognition for which the conveying of the story again and again to different parties is so important, is at the very heart of what the chapters are about. When he arrives at the house of Cornelius, Cornelius responds by falling at his feet and worshipping him. This is clearly an inappropriate response to Peter, and Peter makes very clear that he is just immortal.

He is not divine, he is not worthy of worship, he is a human being like Cornelius himself. In a couple of chapters time we'll see a contrast between Peter and another man who accepts such worship. Herod at the end of chapter 12 receives the worship of the people, and as a result he is struck down by the Lord.

Cornelius, in anticipation of Peter's arrival, has clearly summoned a great number of people, his relatives, his close friends, and all of his household are gathered together. There is clearly going to be a sense of great anticipation. What is Peter, this man who has been sent by God, going to say to him? Peter begins by explaining how remarkable it is that he is coming into a house to socialise with a Gentile.

This is not something that a typical observant Jew would do, rather they would scrupulously maintain a distance that would enable them to remain clean. Yet Peter sees in his vision a message concerning this, that the Lord has taught him not to call anyone common or unclean. God is going to form his holy people from people of all nations, not just people of the Jews.

The very fact that Peter has come into a Gentile's house to socialise with him is already a sign that God has spoken to him, that his former opinions have been changed. Having related something of the vision that he has received, he asks why Cornelius sent for him. Cornelius proceeds to relate his own vision.

Cornelius' story begins four days previously. Presumably he had received the vision that day, the next day he had sent out the messengers, the day afterward, the third day, they had arrived in Joppa, and then on the fourth day they arrived back in Caesarea with Peter. Cornelius describes being visited by an angel in bright clothing, described here as a man.

The angel tells him that his arms have been remembered by the Lord. The Lord has seen Cornelius' acts of love and faith, and in response to those acts he is going to bless Cornelius. He instructs Cornelius to send to Joppa to ask for Simon Peter, who is lodging at the house of Simon Atanna by the sea.

The location of Simon Atanna's house might be interesting to us. Both of these places, Joppa and Caesarea, are towns by the sea. Within Luke's gospel he does not really talk about the sea in the same way as the other gospels do.

Each of the other gospels talk about the Sea of Galilee or the Sea of Tiberias, whereas Luke talks about the Lake of Gennesaret. In the Book of Acts, however, he talks about the sea, as the gospel goes out to the Gentiles and to the people who are farther off. Symbolically the sea represents the realm of the Gentiles, and as the gospel moves out to these seaside towns and cities, there is a sort of symbolic setting of the scene for the gospel going out from the land to other lands farther off.

Cornelius tells Peter that all the people have gathered together to hear the message that he has from the Lord. And Peter goes on to relate the gospel account. He begins by talking about the lesson that he has just been learning.

God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. The message of the kingdom is not just for Jews, it's for Gentiles also. While God might formally have focused his work and his message upon the people of Israel, this was always towards the end that one day it would spread out to the entire world.

Peter, as he goes on to relate the gospel message, does not at all disguise the fact that it is centred upon the Jewish people and their land. He talks about what has happened in Judea, in Galilee, talks about Jesus of Nazareth, and of the country of the Jews in Jerusalem. While the word of Christ can be delivered to people of other nations, Jesus never ceases to be the king of the Jews.

Peter's message begins with God. Jesus is the word that he sent to Israel. God declares his good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is the Lord of all.

The testimony of the apostles began with the ministry of John the Baptist and moved on to the resurrection of Christ. And Peter here tells the story in such a way. He begins with the ministry of John the Baptist, the baptism that John proclaimed, and then how Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit and with power at the baptism of John.

Then he goes about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil. Jesus is a man of the Spirit who acts in the power of the Spirit to deliver and to save people. In so doing he manifests the power of the kingdom that has been promised by the Lord.

He also achieves the victory of God against the devil, the one who oppresses, binds and

accuses, keeping people of all nations under his sway. Jesus was put to death by his people who hung him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him appear to people who had been chosen by God as witnesses of him. These people ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

We often downplay the significance of the post-resurrection meals with Christ. These served as a demonstration of Christ's embodied existence following the resurrection. They also served as a joyful manifestation of the meaning of Christ's victory.

Performing the actions associated with the Last Supper in the context of the meal at Emmaus, Jesus gives that action a new meaning. It is not just seen in the anticipation of his forthcoming death, it also serves as a joyful celebration of the victory looking back. When we celebrate the Lord's Supper it has both of these aspects to it.

In one respect it might take us back to that evening that Christ was betrayed, to the evening of the Last Supper, the sorrow of Gethsemane, and the great shadow of the forthcoming death hanging over it all. However, it should also take us back to the joy of the post-resurrection feasts, to Christ eating with the two travellers at Emmaus, or to Christ eating with his disciples on the shores of the Sea of Tiberias. Christ commanded the apostles to preach to the people, to testify that he was appointed as the one to be the judge of all.

Christ is the King of the Jews, he is the Messiah, but he is also the Lord of all, the judge of all. The message of Christ's universal lordship, and the fact that he will judge all persons, is very much central to the message of the apostles to the Gentiles in the Book of Acts. Although we can often speak about the Gospel as if it were a sort of salvation system, the Gospel at its very heart is the proclamation that Jesus is Lord.

It's the proclamation that God's kingdom has been established in him, that God has brought about salvation, deliverance, and forgiveness for his people, and that everyone should go down on their knees to pay homage to him, and every mouth should confess his authority and rule. As such, it is not just a message of personal salvation, it's a message of cosmic rule. It is a message about a public fact, a great fact in light of which everyone must live their lives differently.

The truth of Christ as the judge of the living and the dead is something that all the prophets have borne witness to. Everyone who believes in this one also receives forgiveness of sins through his name. Jesus' name comes with authority and power.

As people receive the summons that comes in Jesus' name and with his authority, their sins can be forgiven, their lives can be changed, they can be delivered from death to life, and released from the clutches of the evil one. Even as Peter is still saying these things, the Spirit comes down upon those who hear the word. Presumably they have received it, and as a result they receive the blessing of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit's descent is a sort of second Pentecost. It's like the event of Pentecost received in Acts chapter 2, when the Spirit descended upon the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, but here it's happening to Gentiles. This serves as the Spirit's imprimatur of the Gentiles, a sealing of them as true members of the people of God.

They've not been circumcised, they've not even been baptised, and yet they receive the Spirit. Both Peter and Cornelius had received visions from God, visions from God that when brought together, brought a degree of illumination. They began to understand why the Lord had brought them together.

But now in the descent of the Spirit upon the Gentiles, there is a powerful confirmation that the Spirit's hand has been directing all of these events. By the Spirit, Christ is forming his Church, and by giving the Spirit to Jews and Gentiles alike, he desires that they recognise each other as brothers and sisters, as those who truly belong to Christ on the same level ground. In Christ there will be no Jew nor Gentile.

At this point, baptism is pretty much a formality. It's a recognition of what God has already done within these people. They have received the Holy Spirit, they've been received by God, and so to withhold baptism would be going against God.

It would be refusing to recognise and receive and welcome those who had been welcomed by Christ. The act of mutual recognition, reception and welcome is confirmed by the fact that Peter remains with them for a number of days. In accepting the hospitality of Gentiles and living with them and eating with them, Peter is treating them as full brothers and sisters.

A question to consider. What lessons might we learn from our presentation of the Gospel to people from Peter's condensed Gospel message within this passage? In Acts chapter 10, the Gospel had been received by the centurion Cornelius and all of his household. Both Cornelius and Peter had received visions, and when brought together, Peter declared the message of the Gospel to his whole household.

They received it gladly and the Spirit descended upon them in a manner that resembled the events of the day of Pentecost itself. Repetition is an important feature of Acts chapter 10, and this feature of the narrative continues into Acts chapter 11. It's not just the event, but the communication and recognition of the events by others that is important.

Here the events will be recounted to other members of the Church in Jerusalem. Their acknowledgement that the Gentiles are true members of the people of God, as Gentiles, is an important part of the story. This is part of the means by which the two peoples, Jews and Gentiles, will be brought together as one within the Church.

Word of what has taken place reaches the Judean Christians and the Apostles, seemingly

not by Peter himself. When Peter goes up to Jerusalem, he has to put out some fires that the news has started. He's been criticised by the circumcision party.

The ground for their criticism does not seem to be that Peter did not circumcise Cornelius and his household, but that he received a Gentile's hospitality and ate with him in the first place. While Diaspora Jews may have held laxer customs concerning fellowship and hospitality with Gentiles, Judean Jews were far more conservative on the matter and regarded the separateness of Jews from Gentiles as maintaining a very important standard of purity, while they were very concerned that Peter remained separate from the Gentiles. In chapter 10 verse 20, the Holy Spirit had instructed him to rise and go with them without hesitation.

The Lord does not draw those sorts of distinctions. It seems fitting, given the background of the Gospel of Luke, that there should be such a focus upon eating and table fellowship here. Much of Jesus' ministry and teaching in the Gospel of Luke occurs in the context of the meal table.

Who you eat with, who is invited, where people sit, these are all issues that are prominent within Luke's Gospel, and their importance continues into the story of the early Church, which is formed around meal tables. Christ demonstrates his resurrection to his disciples by eating and drinking with them, and the early believers in Jerusalem break bread from house to house. In chapter 6, the appointment of the seven as important leaders within the life of the early Church centred upon providing for tables.

Now the meal table, as a place where the people of God are being gathered and formed, is going to be redefined in another way, as people who were not expected to be invited are invited to take their seats as no less honoured guests, even though many of those already sitting at the table might feel discomforted by their presence. In response to the concerns of the circumcision party, Peter proceeds to tell the story from the very beginning. While he was in the city of Joppa praying, he saw a vision, within which a great sheet descended from heaven by its four corners.

The sheet contained a great many different animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, birds of the air, unclean creatures that Peter as an observant Jew would have been forbidden to eat. Perhaps we are supposed to see the sheet as a sort of tablecloth, a tablecloth that spread with all these things that Peter can eat. In chapter 10 he is described as being hungry at the time, and he is being invited to a meal.

When he refuses, the word of the Lord comes to him, What God has made clean do not call common. This happens on three occasions, and then the sheet is finally removed. It is at that very moment that the three men sent from Cornelius in Caesarea arrive at Joppa, at the house of Simon the Tanner where Peter is staying.

The Spirit then instructs him to go with them, not making a distinction. Peter is also

accompanied by six other men, who will serve as Jewish witnesses of what is taking place among the Gentiles. As he delivers the message of the Gospel to Cornelius and his household, the Holy Spirit descends upon them in just the way that he had descended upon the disciples at Pentecost.

All of the significance of the event at Pentecost, all of the significance of the Spirit's descent upon the Church, was now being applied to the Gentiles, these people that would seem to be outsiders, not included in the covenants of promise, not counted among God's people, nor considered as the children of Abraham. All of this, for Peter, confirmed the word that Christ had given after his resurrection, that as John had baptized with water, they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit. The reception of the Holy Spirit was a sign of God's blessing, the fulfillment of His promise, and marked out the recipients as true members of the people of God.

In light of all of this, not to have fellowship with the Gentiles, would be presuming a holiness that exceeded God's own. God had given them His own Holy Spirit. Was Peter to refuse to eat with them? The heroes of Peter's account were silenced by it.

It was now apparent to them, as it had been to Peter, that the Lord had made the Gentiles recipients of His blessings, just as they had been. It is worth spending a few moments considering the role of Peter in all of this. Peter, elsewhere, is described as the Apostle to the circumcision.

Why is it that Peter was sent to Cornelius? Surely that would be the task for Paul, who, as we see in Galatians 2, was commissioned as an apostle to bring the Gospel to the uncircumcised. The answer, I believe, is that Peter was chosen for this task precisely as the Apostle to the circumcised. He is the one that could represent the Church of the circumcision, and in that capacity recognise his brothers and sisters, believers of the Gentiles.

Peter's bearing witness to God's reception of the Gentiles in this chapter is a very important part of the story then. It is for this task, particularly, that he has been set apart. While some other party, like Philip, could have brought the Gospel to Cornelius, it is Peter who is in the best position to recognise the Gentiles.

Just as Peter and John confirmed the work of God among the Samaritans back in chapter 8, so Peter confirms the work of God among the Gentiles in this chapter. The fact that he is called to give some account of himself suggests that, although Peter is the leading apostle, a fact that we see in a great many different ways within the Gospels, he is not a figure in which all leadership authority is concentrated. He is expected to give an account of himself to other leaders of the Church.

A question to consider. In Numbers chapter 11 we read of an event from which some illuminating analogies could be drawn with the story of the Gentiles' reception of the

Gospel. What is the event and how can those analogies help us to understand what is taking place here? From the end of chapter 11 of the Book of Acts, the central site in the mission of the Church will start to move out from Jerusalem to places like Antioch.

Antioch will become the sending church for the mission of Barnabas and Saul. Disputes in Antioch will also later precipitate the calling of the Jerusalem Council. Although we have just read the Gospel going to the Gentiles in the story of Cornelius, we go back to events before this to explain the movement out to places like Antioch.

It was with the persecution that arose after Stephen's death that Christians scattering throughout the empire began to spread the Gospel as they went. This was not a concerted, organised mission. It was just a natural outworking of events.

The Lord created the impetus through the persecution and then the Church grew as it followed this unexpected wind of the Spirit. It was a particular group of early disciples that spearheaded this movement, men of Cyprus and Cyrene. It was through such men that the Gospel finally arrived in Antioch.

Prior to this point, the people who had been scattering had been speaking only to Jews. Presumably the people in question here are both Palestinian Jews and Jews of the Diaspora. Antioch was a very natural location to go if you wanted to reach Jews of the Diaspora.

Not only was it one of the top five cities of the empire, it boasted one of the highest populations of Jews outside of the land of Palestine. It is important to remember that the majority of the population of Jews lived outside of the land of Palestine. Jews made up up to 10% of the population of the Roman Empire and they lived in many different regions of it.

By the time the Gospel was spread out through people like Paul, practically every city that they would go to would already have a Jewish community set up within it. All of this really prepared the ground for the Gospel to be spread. In Antioch, this new centre for Christianity outside of the land of Palestine, the Gospel spread not just to the Diaspora Jews, but also to the Hellenistic community of the city.

Proselytes and God-fearers similar to people like Cornelius were now being brought into the orbit of the Gospel message. Not only is the Gospel taking root in Gentile cities among Jewish communities, it is also being spread in those cities beyond their Jewish populations. The ministry of these Cypriots and Cyrenians receives great success and news of their work reaches the ears of the church in Jerusalem who send Barnabas to visit the church.

Barnabas back in chapter 4 is described to us as a Levite of Cyprus. As a Cypriot, he probably knew a number of the people who had gone and formed this church in the first

place. He might well have had personal reasons to want to visit, along with the official reasons for which he was sent.

The Holy Spirit leads the way in the mission of the early church, but the church is often sent to these places to witness to what the Lord is achieving. The Jerusalem church's official recognition of what God is doing in various parts of the world is an important part of the development that is taking place. As God spreads his people out in the mission of the church, he is also gathering in, joining people together in acts of mutual recognition, particularly in relationship to the source of it all, in the Jerusalem church from which the mission had first proceeded.

Barnabas had previously played a mediating role in his recognition of Saul as a true convert, advocating for him to the Jerusalem church, who distrusted the truth of his conversion. In visiting the church, Barnabas is able to encourage and build them up. His presence among them connects them more closely to the life of the wider church so that they are not just one isolated community.

This is something that will be happening throughout the story of the book of Acts, as many missionary journeys serve to connect the many different churches together in a greater fabric of union. As he did back in chapter 4, Luke presents the character of Barnabas in the most glowing categories. Barnabas is a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith, and his ministry is extremely successful.

And so he goes to Tarsus to seek Saul, in order that Saul might help him in his ministry. Barnabas had presumably heard Paul's testimony and knew that he was a man appointed to bear Christ's name before the Gentiles. It would only seem appropriate that Saul was involved in this mission in Antioch.

Tarsus, although it was Saul's birthplace and a site of significant learning, it was not a place where there was as large a Jewish community as there would be in Antioch. Although we might reasonably assume that Saul was engaged in evangelism in the city of Tarsus, he would have far more promising soil for such a ministry in the strategic city of Antioch. While the early Jesus movement referred to itself as the Way and other things like that, in Antioch they were referred to as Christians for the first time, seemingly by outsiders.

In this term, their opponents might have sought to characterise them as supporters of a pretended Messiah status. Although it does not seem to be a term that Christians first used of themselves, by the time that Luke wrote the Book of Acts we should presume that it was fairly widespread. Barnabas and Saul ministered in the city of Antioch for a whole year, and even after this year was over, Antioch continued to be a base for them, strengthening the communication between the cities of Antioch and Jerusalem.

During this period some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch, bringing word

of a famine that would afflict the whole world. This famine occurred in the days of Claudius, presumably in 45-46 AD. There are several examples of prophets in the Book of Acts.

Prophecy was one of the ways in which the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost was manifest, and as a gift within the life of the church it was given great significance. Prophets seemed to have played a more advisory than directive role. Later on Agabus would foretell the fact that Paul would be captured and imprisoned in Jerusalem, and many would seek to discourage Paul from going down there.

Yet Paul was free to persist in going to Jerusalem, without being seen to disobey the word of the Lord in so doing. Here the message concerns a worldwide famine that would particularly afflict the people in Judea. Although described as worldwide, this is hyperbolic.

The point is more that the famine is going to be comprehensively affecting the world around Jerusalem. Judea and all the places associated with it are going to be hit by this famine. Egypt, Syria, Judea and Greece are all going to feel its impact.

The disciples in Antioch respond by gathering together resources to send to the Judean Christians. This gift to the Christians in Judea and Jerusalem was a way of expressing the unity of the church. Each was giving according to his ability, in order to provide for the needs of another part of the church.

The church was knit together in one, as men from Jerusalem had served the spiritual needs of those in Antioch. So Antioch, in Judea's time of need, would provide for their material necessities. Later in the ministry of Paul, his mission to the Gentiles involved a collection for the saints in Jerusalem, as a very concrete manifestation of the unity of the church as Jew and Gentile that he proclaimed in his theology.

A question to consider, how in the story of the church's growth to this point, can we see that God is the one directing its growth and its movement outward? Acts chapter 12 tells of further persecution of the church at the hands of Herod. The Herod here is Herod Agrippa, who follows after Herod Antipas, who is the one who is involved in Jesus' crucifixion. Herod the Great was involved in the slaughter of the innocents at the beginning of the book of Matthew.

There is a further Herod later on in the book of Acts, Herod Agrippa II, who is the son of this Agrippa. Paul will speak before him later on in the book. Herod kills James the brother of John with the sword, and seeing that this action pleases the Jews, he proceeds to arrest Peter.

Both the Jewish and the Roman leaders seem to rule in large part by crowd pleasing, rather than actually out of a concern for justice. The timing of the arrest of Peter is

significant, he is arrested during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Herod intends to bring him out after the time of the Passover, presumably when the large crowd of the worshippers from other parts of Judea and the Diaspora have departed, as the greatest opposition to Peter and the early church is probably found among the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem.

On the very night before he is about to be brought out, Peter is sleeping between two soldiers, he is bound with two chains, and he has sentries guarding the door. Reading this account of Peter we might recall the story of Christ. Like the story of Christ's crucifixion, this occurs around the time of the Passover.

Like Christ, Peter is between two men, Christ was between two criminals on his cross, and Peter is between two soldiers. Like Jesus in his tomb, Peter is in a sealed prison, a prison guarded by people outside. As an angel of the Lord descends and rolls back the stone of Christ's tomb, so an angel of the Lord comes to Peter, removes the chains from his hand, opens up the gate of the prison, and leads him out into freedom.

The story then is a sort of resurrection for Peter, and this theme continues as we go further on in the narrative. Having been delivered by the angel, Peter goes to the house of Mary, the mother of Mark, where he knows that people will be praying for him. This would be the house of some well-to-do people.

They have a servant girl, they have a gate. Mary was most likely a widow, and a host of the early church. While many of the people in Jerusalem had sold their property and their possessions, there were certain people who still had considerable riches, and would use those to support the wider community.

She is the mother of John Mark, a character in the narrative in his own right later on in the story of Acts. Mark was a cousin of Barnabas, as we see in Colossians 4.10. Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, greets you, and Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, concerning whom you have received instructions. If he comes to you, welcome him.

It is possible that Mary and John Mark were also Levites, as Barnabas was a Levite. Mark was a Latin personal name, most commonly encountered in people with Roman citizenship. Like John, a Jewish name, it was an extremely common name.

It is likely that this is the same Mark as wrote the Gospel, and Peter going to his house suggests some association between the two, something that the tradition has generally recognised, Peter being regarded as a particularly important source for Mark's account in his Gospel. Many early church meetings would occur in private houses for prayer, worship and study of scripture. The earlier stage of the church's life involved this meeting from house to house, private associations meeting in domestic contexts, and without the same formal institutional and leadership structures, which would often develop later.

Such house churches would have been very small for the most part. Craig Keener suggests that the sort of number we should expect to have been there would have been over a dozen, but not more than fifty. When Peter arrives at the gate, Rhoda, the servant girl, hears and recognises his voice, and she runs to tell the people who are praying, but they don't believe her.

While they are praying for the protection and deliverance of Peter, they cannot imagine that their prayers will be answered in such dramatic fashion. This is the second of three deliverances from jails or prisons, the Lord demonstrating his power to open up prison doors, just as he has opened up the prison doors of the grave itself. Reading the story of the resurrection in the light of this parallel, we can also see the way in which the resurrection is a breaking open of a prison.

The sealed entrance, the armed guards, all of these are features of a prison. Christ opened up the prison of the tomb, and now his disciples are opening up the prisons of the tyrants of this age. Peter appears to a woman, who brings the news to the disciples, and yet they fail to believe.

The exact same pattern can be seen in Luke chapter 24, verses 10-11. Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, but their words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. One of the initial responses of the disciples to the appearance of Christ was to think that he must be a ghost.

Luke chapter 24, verse 37, but they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. Here they presume that the person who has appeared must be Peter's ghost. When they finally let him in, and there is a certain comedy to the way that this plays out, underlining something of the playfulness and unpredictability of the spirit, Peter then reports the miracle that had occurred.

He instructs them to pass on the news to James and the brothers. James here is almost certainly the brother of Jesus, who plays a prominent role in the leadership of the early church in Jerusalem. Peter's commissioning them as witnesses to his deliverance, tell these things to James and to the brothers, also reminds us of the story of Christ's resurrection, where those who witnessed the empty tomb are instructed to go and tell his disciples and Peter, in Mark chapter 16, verse 7. Peter goes on at this point to another place.

Presumably this is because a large house associated with the disciples, in the eyes of the authorities, would be the first place where he would be sought. Peter's experience is similar to that of Christ. He is released from prison during the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Christ was delivered from the grave. He appears to a woman, much as Christ appeared

to women, but her report is not believed, as the report of the women was not believed in the story of the Gospels. He appears to the disciples and then he disappears from the scene.

From this point in the story of Acts, Peter is no longer the centre of attention. The narrative gaze switches from Jerusalem and from Peter to Paul and his missionary companions. Much as Christ's resurrection was followed by his departure, so Peter's resurrection-like deliverance is followed by his departure from the scene.

Besides a parallel with Christ, there is a juxtaposition with Herod. Peter has gone up from Caesarea to Judea and Herod goes down from Judea to Caesarea. Peter goes to the Gentiles and eats with them.

Herod has hostility with the Gentiles and refuses to share food with them. Peter refuses worship in Caesarea in Acts chapter 10, verses 25-26. When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshipped him.

But Peter lifted him up, saying, Stand up! I too am a man. While Peter had refused worship there, Herod accepts worship in the city of Caesarea. And both of them were struck.

Peter is struck by the angel to wake him up and lift him up, and Herod is struck by an angel to bring him down. All of these things happening around the time of the Passover might also help us to think in terms of themes of Exodus. Peter is like the Jews instructed to dress for departure at midnight and then being brought out through this passage, while Herod is like the pursuing pharaoh and he is struck down by the angel of death.

One firstborn son is delivered at midnight and another firstborn son is destroyed. Josephus, in his Antiquities of the Jews, book 19, also recalls the death of Agrippa. He writes, Now when Agrippa had reigned three years over all Judea, he came to the city Caesarea, which was formerly called Stratos Tower, and there he exhibited shows in honour of Caesar upon his being informed that there was a certain festival celebrated to make vows for his safety.

At which festival a great multitude was gotten together, of the principal persons, and such as were of dignity through his province. On the second day of which shows he put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a contexture truly wonderful, and came into the theatre early in the morning, at which time the silver of his garment being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun's rays upon it, shone out after a surprising manner, and was so resplendent as to spread in horror over those that looked intently upon him. And presently his flatterers cried out, one from one place, and another from another, though not for his good, that he was a god.

And they added, Be thou merciful to us, for although we have hitherto revered thee

only as a man, yet shall we henceforth only as superior to mortal nature. Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery, but as he presently afterward looked up, he saw an owl, sitting on a certain rope over his head, and immediately understood that this bird was the messenger of ill tidings, as it had once been the messenger of good tidings to him, and fell into the deepest sorrow. A severe pain also arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner, and when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly, for five days, he departed this life.

The passage ends by describing the word of God increasing and multiplying. This language recalls the language of Genesis. It is being fruitful and multiplying.

This was part of the fundamental human blessing and calling, and now it is being fulfilled as the word of God is spreading out. It is also the language of growth, similar to that which we have at the beginning of the book of 1 Samuel, and of the young Jesus and John the Baptist in the book of Luke. A question to consider.

The experience of Peter in this chapter is closely modelled upon the experience of Christ in his resurrection. What are some other examples in the story of the book of Acts, where the experience of the disciples is modelled upon the experience of Christ? Acts chapter 13 begins Paul's first missionary journey. It is part of a transition from Jerusalem and out into the wider world.

With it comes a shift in focus, a movement into travel. There are several missionary journeys which accent travel much as we see in the book of Luke, as over a third of the book is concerned with the movement from Galilee down to Jerusalem. Barnabas and Saul going down to Jerusalem at the end of chapter 11 and returning at the end of chapter 12 bookends the story of Peter's deliverance from prison.

It also marks a sort of passing on of the baton. Whereas the focus has been upon Peter to this point, now the narrative focus shifts to Paul and his companions. John Mark accompanies them from Jerusalem.

He is the son of Mary and whose house the Jerusalem church met for prayer. The church in Antioch was introduced to us back in Acts chapter 11 verses 19 to 26. There the church had been founded primarily among a diaspora population, but the message of the gospel had been spread further by some Cyrenians and Cypriots.

Barnabas, a Levite of Cyprus himself, was sent there from Jerusalem at a later point. Here we learn of the prophets and the teachers in the Antioch church. They clearly have a number of gifted men working there.

The church has a number of leaders, perhaps overseeing different constituent communities of the larger Antioch church. One of the features of the early church, as we see it in Acts, is to have a number of teachers and leaders in each church, rather than

simply one. Some suggest that there are two different groups mentioned here, the first set of three, Barnabas, Simeon and Lucius, being prophets, and the second set of two, Manion and Saul, being teachers.

As Craig Keener claims, however, this is likely too neat a division, not least because we see Paul exercising prophetic gifts at various points. The earliest church had more charismatic forms of ministry, prophecy and other things like that, alongside more institutional forms of ministry, and the Antioch church provides an example of this. The list of prophets and teachers is a diverse one.

The cosmopolitanism of the early church is something that should always strike us as we read the book of Acts. Many of the leaders of the church were extremely widely travelled, familiar with several different cultural settings, able to speak in a number of different languages, and certain of them were also very well connected. Barnabas, of whom we have heard several things so far, is one of them.

Simeon, called Niger, is another. Many have reasonably speculated that, given his name, he might have been a black African. Niger was a common name among Romans, so this doesn't prove his ethnicity one way or another.

If he was an African, however, he wasn't the only one, as Lucius, who was most likely one of the founders of the church, was from Cyrene, in present-day Libya. The Roman Empire included within it much of the very north of Africa. The empire surrounded the Mediterranean on all sides.

As it is often a matter of modern concern, we should note that the groups populating Roman North Africa would in many cases be very similar to those found in other parts of the Mediterranean part of the empire. Cyrene was originally a Greek settlement, with a sizeable Jewish population. Much of the population of many parts of Roman North Africa would have consisted of Romanised North Africans, living alongside Greeks, Romans, Jews and others.

However, there would have been darker-skinned Africans in many of these places, so we shouldn't be surprised at the possibility that Simeon might have been one. We've already encountered a black African, the Ethiopian eunuch, as the first Gentile convert, back in chapter 8. Some have identified Lucius with Luke, an identification that has a long history in the church. It is, however, an unlikely one.

Mannion is another important figure. As he was raised with Herod Antipas, he was likely an older man of some social status, although it's possible that he was a higher-class slave, who might later have become a freed person. The Antioch church was engaged in worship and fasting, when the Holy Spirit instructed them, most likely through prophecy, to set apart two of their most valuable men for a work appointed to them.

They fasted and prayed for them, and then they laid their hands on them, appointing and charging them for their mission, and sending them forth. The church, directed to send them by the Spirit and laying their hands on them, is the means by which the Holy Spirit himself sends out Saul and Barnabas upon their journey. They begin by going to Seleucia, nearby on the Syrian coast, and then they sail to Cyprus, a large island in the eastern Mediterranean, beneath modern-day Turkey.

Barnabas, we should remember, came from Cyprus, and the church of Antioch had strong Cypriot connections. As Paul will generally do on his missionary journeys, he proclaims the word of God in Jewish synagogues on the island, his messages to the Jews first, and then later to the Greeks. We should recall that most of the Jewish population at this period lives outside of the land of Palestine, in many parts of the Roman Empire.

In practically every city the early church missionaries would visit, there would already be Jews to be found. Barnabas and Saul are assisted and accompanied by John Mark, who is Barnabas' cousin, who would join them in Jerusalem. They arrive at Salamis, the main port city, and they make their way throughout the island.

Salamis may have had as many as 150,000 inhabitants, something that's derived from the fact that it had a theatre that could sit 15,000. With its large population of Jews, there are a number of synagogues there, and after spending some time there, Barnabas and Saul go through the entire island, as far as Paphos, which is about 115 miles away by the southern coastal route. At Paphos they encounter a Jewish magician and false prophet named Bar-Jesus.

He is associated with the pro-consul, Sergius Paulus. Apparently word of the mission of Barnabas and Saul has spread, because Sergius Paulus wants to hear from them about the word of God. Yet this Jewish magician associated with him, Bar-Jesus, also called Elemus, seeks to oppose them and to prevent the pro-consul from turning to the faith.

Jeff Myers has highlighted the fact that this is a Jewish sorcerer. He's a false prophet who's providing false counsel to a Gentile ruler. He's like the character of Wormtongue with Theoden in the Lord of the Rings.

He's leading someone astray and making it hard for him to see the truth. In this particular conflict, we're seeing a broader conflict between the church as the counsel of the rulers of the nations, and the false Jewish counsel that is provided by unbelieving Jews like Bar-Jesus or Elemus. We've previously seen conflicts with magicians in the story of Simon the Sorcerer, back in chapter 8. There, Simon was juxtaposed with Philip, and here Elemus or Bar-Jesus will be juxtaposed with Saul.

Elemus has two names within the text, Bar-Jesus and Elemus, and here we see that Saul has another name. He's also called Paul, and hereafter that will be the name that Luke uses of him. Luke is always attentive to the names that he gives to characters, and when

he uses two different names for a character, those names are seldom used without close consideration.

It is noteworthy that Saul is called Paul in the same narrative in which we encounter Sergius Paulus, who has the same name. In verse 9 we read, But Saul, who was also called Paul, and we might wonder what the also refers to. Does it mean that Paul had two names, Saul and also Paul? Or is it rather about connecting the name of Paul with the name of Sergius Paulus, who's also called Paul? I think that might be the case.

In this context there are significant word plays with names. The name of the sorcerer Bar-Jesus does not seem to be the same word as Elemus. Bar-Jesus seems to mean the son of Jesus, much as Bar-Nebos is referred to as the son of encouragement.

Why is he called Elemus? What's going on there? How do you get from Bar-Jesus to Elemus, and what's the significance of these names? That is one question to consider. Another question is what sort of play is going on with Paul's name? Should we focus upon the meaning, which means small? Perhaps he is called that because he is the least of the apostles, not worthy to be called an apostle because he persecuted the Church. Maybe that's part of it.

But more likely in this immediate context is that it is related to the name of the proconsul. There is the conflict between a false counsellor and a true counsellor. Now it would seem that if your name is Sergius Paulus, your fitting counterpart might well be called Paulus too.

And so Paul is the fitting counterpart and counsellor to the man who is his namesake. Bar-Jesus is also an interesting name. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is the name that we associate with Christ almost exclusively.

In the Book of Acts there are a couple of occasions where we see another character called Jesus. We have a reference to Joshua as Jesus in the Greek form of that name. But it seems strange that we would have Bar-Jesus mentioned at this point, only for him to be called immediately afterwards by another name.

His name seems to connect him with Jesus or with the Jesus movement. Maybe his name, literally Son of Jesus, highlights this falsehood. It might indicate that he is someone who is seemingly affiliated in some way with the early Church, but he is a false Jewish prophet and an opponent.

His opposition to Paul is framed along these lines. You have a false Jewish prophet who has an identity, a name, that threatens the movement of the Church because of its proximity to the name of Christ Jesus. And he is named as if he was the Son of Jesus.

But he is in fact no Son of Jesus. He is not a disciple of Jesus at all. Later on we encounter the sons of Sceva who try to cast out demons in the name of Christ.

And then the demons attack them and drive them away, wounded and naked. Earlier on we have Simon the sorcerer who is confronted by Peter. He claims to be a magician and he wants the power of the Holy Spirit.

Once again there is a conflict with someone who is close, but in some way claims to represent or be associated with the Jesus movement, but who is actually false, he is actually an opponent. Paul's conflict with Bar Jesus here might highlight plays of identity, indicating that he is the true counsellor to Sergius Paulus, because he is Paulus himself, and on the other hand that he is the one who reveals the true identity of the magician, not as Bar Jesus, a true son of Jesus, but as Elimus the sorcerer. Now what does Elimus mean? Rick Strullen has suggested a connection with the character of Elam, who is a descendant of Shem.

Elam is the one whose line leads to the Persians, and the Medes and the Persians are associated with magic, they were famed for it. This name then would present him not as part of the Jesus movement, not as someone associated with Jesus Christ, a son of Jesus, but as a false magician, like the magicians of Pharaoh, or the false advisors that were in Herod's court in Matthew chapter 2. Beyond playing their names off against each other in different ways, there is also a play of the character of Paul over against the character of Elimus. Saul's name is switched to Paul in the narrative in the immediate context in which Paul speaks the word of judgement to Elimus the sorcerer, and what he says is quite arresting.

It's almost exactly the same as the judgement that befell him on the road to Damascus. Elimus is struck blind, and he has to be led by the hand. And there are other details that might recall that story.

In Acts chapter 9, Ananias is instructed to lay his hands upon Saul so that he would regain his sight. In this chapter, the hand of the Lord rests upon the false prophet Elimus so that he loses his sight. There is a play here with Saul's older identity and with his new identity, and this I believe is why his name is shifted at this point.

The judgement that falls upon Elimus is the judgement that fell upon Paul's old identity as Saul. Elimus is said to make crooked the straight paths of the Lord. We saw a street called Straight back in chapter 9 of Acts.

It was the street to which Saul went after his vision. Now he is no longer making straight paths crooked. The hand of the Lord came upon him in a street called Straight.

And this juxtaposition between the two characters, between Saul and Elimus, really comes to the foreground in the narrative as the two are held over against each other, as Saul judges the sorcerer. We saw a similar juxtaposition between Philip and Simon the sorcerer back in chapter 8. Paul, having his name changed, is dissociated from the old Saul, the false persecutor. His conversion was a judgement upon his old identity, a

judgement on persons like Bar-Jesus, who present themselves as false associates of Christ, like the sons of Sceva or like Simon, but who are not of Christ at all.

The juxtaposition of Saul or Paul and Bar-Jesus sets up Paul as the true counsellor to Sergius Paulus, the Christians as the true counsellors to the rulers of the Gentiles. And as the false counsellor is struck with blindness, something about his true spiritual state is revealed. Sergius Paulus can now be counselled by another Paul, one who has his same name, and now he will be advised well, taught the message of the kingdom, no longer guided by a blind man.

The false Jewish prophet, who in spite of his other name is not in fact associated with Jesus, but is a son of the Elamites, associated with the magicians, the Persians and that sort of false religion, he is judged. Here in Saul, who is also called Paul, we have the true wise man, a wise man who will bring counsel that will lead to the healing of the nations. A question to consider.

Looking at the references to the Holy Spirit in this passage, how can we see the Spirit working in the mission of Saul and Barnabas? The heart of Acts chapter 13 contains one of the great sermons of the book of Acts, comparable to Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost or Stephen's speech in chapter 7. This is Paul's inaugural sermon in the book of Acts and it might play a special role in characterising his message more generally. Craig Keener notes a number of elements of distinctively Pauline style and some prominent themes of Pauline theology within it. Paul, Barnabas and their companions had begun their mission on the island of Cyprus, from which they now sailed for the mainland of Asia Minor, modern day Turkey.

From Perga they go about 100 miles north as the crow flies, up to the highlands. Pisidian Antioch is a different Antioch from the one from which they set out. There were 16 different Antiochs in the ancient world.

According to Josephus there was a large Jewish population in the city and about 2000 Jewish families in the region. Paul and his companions go into a synagogue and there is a reading from the law and the prophets which would have been part of a regular synagogue service. It's important to consider that such public readings of the scriptures were commonplace and routine.

They would have sometimes been accompanied by some exposition, although this was likely less regular. Keener suggests that the messages were likely more focused on moral exhortation and comfort. Those attending such synagogues would be expected to have a substantial familiarity with the scriptural text though.

Paul and his companions are invited to speak by the rulers of the synagogue after the regular parts of the proceedings have occurred. This might be because it has become known that Paul is someone who has studied the law more formally and because

Barnabas is a Levite. Paul gets up to speak and he addresses the Jews present along with the God-fearing Gentiles.

It has been suggested that Paul would have been weaving together some of the liturgical readings in his message, connecting their message together and moving them into a greater message about Jesus. He retells in summary the entire history of the nation, from the Exodus to the raising up of David, recounting the wilderness wanderings and the conquest of the land, a period taking roughly 450 years. He skates over the period of the judges prior to Samuel, before discussing King Saul, Israel's first but unsatisfactory king of the tribe of Benjamin.

Saul of Tarsus' name has only just been switched to Paul in Luke's narrative and the reference to Saul here might make us wonder whether there is a connection between the two. I believe that there is. If we look through the Old Testament we see that King Saul is in many ways a paradigmatic persecutor.

He is the one who fights against the true king. He is the king of Israel but he opposes David, the rightful successor. He tries to kill him with his spear, he tries to put him in harm's way fighting the Philistines, he is implacable in his pursuit of and his opposition to David.

And yet God arrests him in his steps at various points and there are some very strange twists in that story. As we look through the story of Saul of Tarsus we will notice a similar pattern. Saul begins as a zealous persecutor of the church, breathing out murderous threats, seeking to take the disciples into prison and bring them before the high priest and eventually put them to death.

There is a similarity between these two characters. And within the book of Acts this is presented not just as a matter of persecuting the individual disciples but as persecuting Christ himself. Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Not just my disciples but why do you persecute me? The greater David is asking Saul of Tarsus why he is pursuing him, why he is persecuting him, what he has done to deserve his opposition.

In 1 Samuel chapter 20 we find David asking Jonathan a similar question about Saul. What have I done? What is my guilt? And what is my sin before your father that he seeks my life? Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? In 1 Samuel chapter 19 there is also an interesting incident that might remind us of Saul's conversion or his illumination on the road to Damascus. King Saul goes to pursue David to Niath in Ramah and the spirit of God comes upon him and he prophesies until he comes there.

And he too stripped off his clothes and he too prophesied before Samuel and lay naked all that day and all that night. Thus it is said, is Saul also among the prophets? It is a remarkable event and it might recall some of the things that are described in connection with Saul's conversion event on the road to Damascus. There is an interruption of his

course of persecution and pursuit and there is a period of waiting all day and all night in the story of King Saul and a number of days for Saul of Tarsus before Ananias comes and baptises him in the story of Acts.

These parallels, a potential conversion event in what happens to King Saul when the spirit comes upon him and he prophesies and the question that David asks Jonathan, why is your father persecuting me? recall the events on the road to Damascus. But whereas King Saul arrests his pursuit of David only for a time and it doesn't really amount to anything in the end the arresting of Saul of Tarsus leads to a complete change. From that point on his character is completely transformed.

He becomes the key apostle even though he was the least of the apostles on account of his persecution of the church. King Saul said that he was from the least tribe, from the least family of that tribe in Israel and yet God raised him up to be king. And there is something quite similar in the story of Saul of Tarsus.

He was the least qualified, the least worthy to be an apostle but God raised him up in many ways to be the greatest of the apostles or a leader among the apostles. Another thing to notice about these parallels is that David as he is pursued by Saul is let down through a window by Michael and escapes. A similar thing happens to Saul after his conversion.

He is let down through a gap in the wall of Damascus in a basket and escapes while they are guarding the gates. That pursuit of Saul of Tarsus might remind us of the pursuit of David and his escape from King Saul but there is a switch of the characters. The king who pursued the lion of the tribe of Judah is now changed to the one who is converted and is a true servant of the king and takes on the character of that king.

He too is trying to escape as King David did now, no longer the persecutor but the one who is being pursued. Saul is the king who is removed in order that David, from whom comes the Messiah, will come on the scene. So that framework of Saul being replaced by David is at play within the book of Acts.

This might help us to understand why in the immediately preceding passage to this there is a switch from Saul to Paul. That switch of names draws our mind back to that replacement, that changing of the character of Saul. In his speech Stephen had focused upon the characters of Joseph and Moses and now Paul focuses upon David because David is the ancestor of Jesus who is his true son and the one in whom the messianic hope of Israel is fulfilled.

Having introduced Jesus as the true son of David, he proceeds to tell the gospel story, beginning with the ministry of John the Baptist and ending with the resurrection and the appointment of witnesses to it. It's worth remembering that Paul is addressing diaspora Jews here who were distinct from the Jews of Palestine, whether in Jerusalem in particular

or Judea more generally. They had quite possibly gotten wind of some of the events that had happened in Jerusalem concerning Jesus and of the rapid rise of a new sect there but they might not have known much beyond that.

However they might be more familiar with the ministry of John the Baptist, which might be why Paul gives rather more attention to John's witness. Jesus was condemned by those who lived in Jerusalem and their rulers because of their failure to recognize him or to understand the scriptures. They ironically fulfilled the scriptures by condemning Christ.

Speaking to diaspora Jews, the gospel's unflattering portrayal of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem might have had a different resonance. It's important that we bear in mind how diverse the Jewish population was, how widely spread out they were, how many internal sects and factions they had and the differences between, for instance, a Jew of the ruling classes in Jerusalem, a poorer member of the crowd in Jerusalem, a Jew living in a Galilean village, a Samaritan, or an educated diaspora Jew with Jerusalem connections like Paul or even a diaspora Jew without such connections or extensive travel, living in a place like North Africa, for instance. Perhaps this might be one of the reasons why Paul mentions that Jesus' followers came with him from Galilee to Jerusalem.

They weren't Jerusalem insiders. In Jesus, God fulfilled the promises made to the fathers by raising Jesus up as the Davidic King. There is a fulfillment of the second psalm here, You are my son, today I have begotten you.

His raising from the dead fulfills the promises concerning the Davidic King, promises referenced in Isaiah chapter 55 verse 3 as being for the benefit of the whole people. The Davidic covenant concerns the elevation of the whole nation in which all of the people are glorified. As in Peter's Pentecost sermon in Acts chapter 2, Paul references Psalm 16 verse 10, making much the same argument from it as Peter did.

The psalm promises the raising up of David, but it can't ultimately refer to David himself, who died and was buried. Rather, it must refer to David the dynasty. The Davidic dynasty is raised up in Jesus of Nazareth.

Not just Jesus, but the Davidic dynasty seemed utterly dead. It's been removed, leaving only the stump of Jesse. But like a root out of dry ground, this one will rise up, the one who will fulfill the promises given to David, even when it seemed that David and his house were no more.

Through God's action in the resurrection, David does not see corruption, but reigns eternally in his greatest son, Jesus of Nazareth. Through Jesus, forgiveness of sins is proclaimed. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance in preparation for the forgiveness of sins that Jesus brings.

Through Jesus, justification is offered, total forgiveness, total clearing of the slate, which the law of Moses could never offer or achieve. The term that Paul uses here is the term that he typically uses for justification. Translated as freed here, it helps us to capture some sense of the term justified that is often neglected.

We also encounter such a use of the verb in Romans 6, 7. In Christ, people can be placed in good standing with God through him, which they could never be by the law. They are released from the debt by forgiveness. There is, however, a warning from Habakkuk 1, 5 attached, When God acts so powerfully and decisively in salvation, it is a most serious thing to reject, to neglect, or to scorn his deliverance.

Responding faithfully is imperative, a matter of the utmost urgency and importance. Those who scoff at God's salvation will perish utterly. The response of the people is very positive.

After the meeting is over, many of the Jews, and the proselytes and the God-fearers, follow after Paul and Barnabas. They want to find out more, and Paul and Barnabas urge them to continue in the grace of God. A question to consider.

In this, Paul's first sermon in the book of Acts, what are some of the connections that we could draw between his message here and various themes that he brings out in his epistles? At the end of Acts chapter 13, we see that the message of Paul and Barnabas has an impact on all levels of society in Antioch and Pisidia. The whole city, Jews and Gentiles, gathers together to hear them the next Sabbath. Despite the fact that they are gathering to hear the word of the Lord, the reaction of the Jews is not joy at the receptivity of their Gentile neighbours, but jealousy.

They dislike the fact that Paul is receiving such a response, and they try to slander Paul and to close people's ears to his message. Their concern is ultimately a selfish one, driven by their personal desire for influence and power, unwilling to allow this newcomer to receive such attention. Likely an important part of this jealousy comes from their conviction that the covenant gives them an exclusive status.

Preaching to Gentiles that they can become recipients of the promise of Abraham in the way that Paul and Barnabas are doing undermines their privileged status and lowers their standing relative to proselytes and God-fearers. Paul and Barnabas' message implies that Gentiles can enjoy equal standing in the people of God. Note the way that Jesus had also received an extremely hostile reaction when he had spoken about God's grace to the Gentiles and the failure of the people of Israel to receive it in Luke chapter 4 in his first sermon in Nazareth.

Paul had earlier concluded his sermon by quoting the prophetic warning Look, you scoffers, be astounded and perish, for I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you. This word of warning very directly applies to

the Jewish opponents in this situation. As the Jews reject the message of Paul and Barnabas they declare that they will bring the word to the Gentiles.

The Jews have cast judgment upon themselves by their failure to accept the message. They have judged themselves to be unworthy. Paul and Barnabas will now turn their attention to the Gentiles.

This is not yet a complete turn to the Gentiles, just a more local one. When they move on to Iconium, Paul will again begin in a Jewish synagogue. One of the Davidic promises associated with the Messianic servant is found in Isaiah chapter 49 verse 6, which Paul cites here.

Paul and Barnabas are fulfilling Israel's calling to be a light for the blind nations. This statement, though connected first and foremost with the servant of Isaiah, Paul and Barnabas take as an instruction for their own ministry. Presumably as the body of Christ, they extend and continue Christ's ministry by his spirit.

Even when the gospel message of Paul faces harsh rejection, God remains in control. Verse 48 speaks of as many as were appointed to eternal life believing. God makes the word of the gospel effective in the hearts of hearers.

The word of God is described as if it had a life and vitality of its own. God's word acts and brings about new situations. And here it is spreading throughout the whole region.

However, the Jewish leadership in the city is determined to stamp out Paul and Barnabas' influence. They achieve this by inciting the devout God-fearing women and the leading men of the city against Paul and Barnabas, so that they will be driven out. It's most likely, as Ben Witherington notes, that the high-status women among the God-fearers were the means by which the Jews influenced the leading men of the city.

It's important to appreciate some of the considerations that might have driven the Jews here. If Paul and Barnabas were to be successful, especially in gaining a large number of God-fearers, they stood to lose a great deal of their own social influence and status within the city, which would have depended in large measure upon groups such as the well-connected women, who would have been very effective at influencing the most powerful people in the city on their behalf, as they seem to have been here. Considering that women were typically much less educated than men in ancient society, yet could nonetheless enjoy considerable influence within their households, Jews and various other sects might have especially targeted women, as they were more open to conversion, less able to be critical of their teaching, and much more apt to spread it and to increase the social influence of the religious teachers who taught it.

In 2 Timothy, Paul warns Timothy about false teachers who would target weak women in such a fashion. Richard Hooker makes similar observations about the behaviour of

certain sectarian Christian teachers in his own day. The following passage is from a modernised version of his Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity.

He speaks here about the way that some radical Christian teachers particularly aimed at women. This eagerness to proselytise them, it would seem, arises from the fact that they are more apt helpers of the cause than men. They are more apt because, regardless of which side they are on, their great eagerness of affection makes them diligently draw in their husbands, children, servants, friends, and allies after them.

They are more apt because of their natural inclination to pity, which makes them readier than men to be generous to their preachers when they suffer want. They are more apt because they have many opportunities to bring encouragement to the brethren. Finally, they are more apt because they especially enjoy sharing news with one another about where all of their friends and neighbours stand when it comes to the cause.

False teachers and religious leaders will often prey upon the virtues of the more vulnerable, whether the trusting innocence of children, the generosity of poor widows, the wholehearted passion of youths, the receptivity of new converts, the greater empathy of women, or the religious devotion of the devout yet unlearned. One of the tasks of faithful pastors is to guard the goodness of these traits, protecting such persons from those who would prey upon them, also over time to equip such persons with the means by which to protect themselves without hardening them. Jesus had instructed his disciples when he sent them out in Matthew 10, verses 11-23, And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it, and stay there until you depart.

As you enter the house, greet it, and if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you, and if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. Truly I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town. Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak, or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the spirit of your father speaking through you.

Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name's sake, but the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. Paul and Barnabas are then following this pattern as they leave Pisidian Antioch, putting the dust off their feet and moving on to Iconium.

However, they leave behind them a community of faithful new disciples, who are filled with joy and the Holy Spirit. The mission now moves east, continuing in the inland regions of Asia Minor, modern day central Turkey, in Iconium, then later moving southeast on to Lystra and Derbe. Once again in Iconium they have an initially very positive response to their message, with many Jewish and Greek converts.

Once again, however, unbelieving Jews oppose them and stir up the Gentiles against them. This new doctrine that Paul and Barnabas are bringing threatens to overturn the status quo and undermine the standing of the Jews in society. Nevertheless, Paul and Barnabas remain a long time, courageously speaking concerning the Lord, and their message is confirmed by signs and wonders by which the Lord bore witness to his word.

The people are divided by their message, into people for and against the missionaries. Gentiles and Jews join together with their rulers in an attempt to stone them. We see here a sort of false Jew-Gentile community emerging as the opposing shadow of the true Jew-Gentile community that has been formed through the message of the Gospel in the Church.

Hearing of the plot, they flee to Lystra and Derbe, where they continue to proclaim the Gospel. A question to consider. Comparing verses 46 and 48 of chapter 13, what are some of the lessons that we might learn about divine sovereignty and human responsibility? Acts chapter 14 is the completion of Paul's first missionary journey.

Paul and Barnabas had fled from Iconium after an attempt to stone them, and they had gone on to Lystra. At Lystra, they encounter a lame man, and Paul, either with prophetic insight or with careful observation of indications that the man was giving, recognises that the man has faith to be healed. He has been listening to Paul as he speaks, and after looking intently at him, Paul calls out in a loud voice, telling him to stand upright on his feet.

The man being healed, he immediately leaps up and walks. This is a fulfilment of prophecy as we see in Isaiah chapter 35 verses 5-6. It's also very similar to the healing of the lame man at the beautiful gate in chapter 3. It's similar to Jesus' healing of the lame man in Luke chapter 5 verses 17-26.

Craig Keener notes some of the parallels between this and Peter's healing of the lame man in chapter 3. The man in chapter 3 is a lame man from birth, and the man here is a lame man from birth. Peter gazes intently at the man in chapter 3. Paul gazes intently at the man here. Once healed, the man in chapter 3 leaps and walks, and the same thing happens with the man here.

The events of chapter 3 occur near the temple gates, and this occurs, as we see in verse 13, near the temple and the gates. The man is healed through faith in both cases, and in both cases the apostles resist the praise of the people, declaring that praise should go to

God alone. After healing the man, there is a surprising twist.

The people respond by treating Paul and Barnabas as gods, Paul as Hermes, and Barnabas as Zeus. There were various myths of the gods appearing as men, and the pagans of Lystra think of Paul and Barnabas in this way. The fact that Paul is the main speaker leads to him being identified as Hermes.

Zeus, whom Barnabas is perceived to be, would have been the principal deity in their pantheon. This, we should note, is the first direct interaction with purely gentile pagans that we've seen in the Book of Acts. And one of the things that it gives us a window into is the message that Paul brought to such people.

Misapprehension of various kinds is a common theme in the Book of Acts. We see it in tongues being recognised as drunkenness, Simon the sorcerer and his attempt to purchase the gift of the spirit. And here idolatry is challenged as another form of misapprehension.

The pagans of Lystra think that the gods have come down to earth in the likeness of men. And there is a measure of irony here, because in Christ, God has come in human flesh, yet God's manifestation in the flesh is a very different sort of thing from the supposed incarnation that this would represent. The idolatry of such pagans projected humanity onto God in a way that lessened God, whereas the Christian teaching of the incarnation never effaces or loses sight of the transcendence of God, the fact that he is the uncreated one, above all earthly things, and not reducible to the realm of idolatrous worship and its images.

The crowd has a purpose for Paul and Barnabas. They know who Paul and Barnabas are before they ever speak. They are Zeus and Hermes.

Idolatry is always characterised by this projection onto things, by a sort of spiritual ventriloquism, whereby inanimate objects or silenced persons or realities have the voice and the beliefs of the worshipper projected into them, leading to them being misrecognised as if they were other, rather than simply a mute receptacle into which the worshipper is projecting things that will confirm them in their own way. Paul and Barnabas respond to this blasphemy by tearing their clothes. They speak to the people of Lystra.

In contrast to places elsewhere, they are not summarising Israel's history and speaking about the way that Christ fulfils it in this speech or sermon, nor are they condemning the Jews for their crucifixion of Christ. This is a message tailored for pagans for this particular situation, where they are worshipping the apostles as if they were gods. Paul is mindful of the fact that his hearers do not share the biblical background that Jewish hearers and also God-hearers would share, and so he addresses them with a message that, though rooted in biblical history, does not depend upon a prior knowledge of it.

The message is one of good news, beginning with the news of creation. He is addressing them as the representative of the uncreated God who created all things, calling them to turn from these vain things to a living God who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. The time of God's permission and the ignorance of the Gentiles has passed.

The time of idolatry and spiritual blindness has passed, and worship of the Creator and the true God has come. As the hearer of Acts should recognise, the good news is one that is achieved by Christ. It is Christ who has brought an end to this time of ignorance, by coming in human flesh.

God has come down. He has not come down in a way that reduces God to the size of man, in a way that serves our idolatrous projections, but in a way that lifts man up to knowledge of and communion with his Creator. In Acts chapter 17 he develops this message further, in verses 30 and 31 of that chapter.

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. Even after all of this, it is only with great difficulty that the crowd is prevented from sacrificing to them. Yet the instability and volatility of the crowd is revealed when Jews come from Antioch and Iconium.

One moment they are treating Paul and Barnabas like gods, the next they are trying to stone them. The Jews coming from Antioch and Iconium seem to be tracing Paul and Barnabas' steps. There is a sort of a shadow missionary journey here, much as there is a shadow Jew and Gentile community forming in opposition to the Gospel.

Paul and Barnabas are opposing paganism, but the Jews here join with the pagans. Earlier in the book Paul had been involved in the stoning of Stephen, and now he himself is stoned. He is stoned and left for dead.

The disciples gather about him, perhaps to see if he is still alive, or maybe to pray for him. It would seem as though he was extremely seriously wounded, at the very least. But he rises up and he enters the city.

We should consider the possibility that some miraculous healing occurred here, as the next day he is well enough to go on with Barnabas to Derbe. He seems to have more success in that city, and makes many disciples, before returning to Lystra, to Iconium, and then to Antioch, retracing his steps. On the way back he encourages the communities of disciples that were formed on his first visits.

He exhorts them to continue in the faith, and he braces them for the sort of persecution that they will face in the future. He forms the believers in faithful churches, with elders

appointed for each one, and with prayer and fasting commits them to the hands of the Lord. From Antioch they go down through Pisidia, down towards Perga, where they had first landed in Asia Minor, and then from Attalia they sail back, returning to their sending church in Antioch, having completed the full mission.

With them they bring news of the way that God has blessed their mission among the Gentiles. These are not just Gentile God-fearers. Pagan Gentiles had been brought to the faith also.

Their sending church in Antioch will be blessed by the news of what God is achieving elsewhere in the world, knowing that they are part of a greater mission that the Spirit of God is accomplishing within the world in their day. A question to consider. Where else in the New Testament do we see Paul unpacking the message that he gives to the churches here, that it is through many tribulations that they must enter the kingdom of God? Acts chapter 15 is at the heart of the book of Acts.

The Gentile mission is underway. Peter has brought the gospel to Cornelius. Paul and Barnabas have recently returned from the first missionary journey in Asia Minor.

Now the question of the character of the new body of the church is an issue to be decided. What status should the Gentiles have within the church? Do they need to be circumcised and come under the Jewish purity requirements, and take on the covenant sign of circumcision? Most of the Gentile converts to this point had been God-fearers, associated with synagogue communities. It probably wouldn't have been seen as a big thing for them to be circumcised and become full members of Christian synagogues.

The Christian movement at this point was largely a Jewish one, and it might have seemed natural to most at this point that becoming part of such a movement would require becoming a Jew. The question of circumcision would become a much keener question, as the gospel went out to Gentiles with a pagan background, without any prior association with the Jews. The controversy that leads to the Jerusalem Council is first provoked by men coming from Judea to Antioch, teaching that Gentile converts need to be circumcised in order to be saved.

This was the cause of great dispute with Paul and Barnabas. Paul had already had the Gentile mission especially committed to him, and had just returned from his first missionary journey with Barnabas. Paul is naturally especially concerned that this question be settled adequately.

The issues at stake in the Jerusalem Council and other related matters are at the very heart of Paul's message in a number of his epistles, especially Romans and Galatians. The visit of Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem at the end of Acts chapter 11 is the visit that seems to be mentioned in the first part of Galatians chapter 2. It's a private visit, it's by revelation, by the prophecy of the coming famine, and it's bringing aid to the needy

saints in Jerusalem. This might help to explain why the leaders in Jerusalem are concerned that Paul take continued interest in the needs of the poor, the poor being the Judean Christians that need the support from those outside of the region.

The conflict in Antioch that provokes this visit to Jerusalem is the conflict with Peter described in Galatians chapter 2 verses 11-21. He was eating with the Gentiles, but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party, and the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews? We ourselves are Jews by birth, and not Gentile sinners, yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ.

So we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. But if, in our endeavour to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not. For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor.

For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.

And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose. This, I believe, fits the description of the events in this chapter.

The conflict occurs in Antioch, the teachers come from Jerusalem, from the churches associated with James. The false teachers here believe that Gentiles must be circumcised in order to be saved. As there had long been uncircumcised God-fearers, we might wonder what this belief exactly was.

My suggestion is that they believed that something had changed with the coming of Christ. God had formerly overlooked the situation of the Gentiles. They had formerly been able to be God-fearers, not part of the covenant, but relating to God from outside of it.

But now, in their understanding, God wanted all people everywhere to repent, to turn, to become part of his people and to be circumcised. At stake in such a form of apocalyptic Judaism, then, would be the question of what happens in the shift of the old age to the new age in the coming of the new covenant. It is a question of eschatology.

Are Gentiles to be saved as Gentiles, or do they need to become Jews to become part of

this new age of the Messiah? In response to the coming of people of the Circumcision Party to Antioch, Peter acted hypocritically. He acted out of fear of the Circumcision Party, rather than out of his true convictions. To have a clearer idea of what is at stake here, it is instructive to consider Paul's arguments in the book of Galatians.

There Paul argues that one of the reasons why the Judaizers want circumcision is to make a good showing in the flesh. The Judaizers can present Christianity as a sort of respectable Jewish sect, observant and conformist. They are making good proselytes of all of these Gentile converts, emphasising the fact that they are converting them to Judaism, not necessarily the fact that they are converting them to Christ.

In such a manner, they can avoid persecution. The problem, however, as Paul makes clear, is that such an approach carefully masks the distinctiveness of the Christian faith. It downplays the cross for something that is distinctively secondary.

Indeed, it latches onto that secondary and unnecessary thing, precisely in order to soft-pedal the cross, the way in which Christ is out of step with and at odds with the rulers of this present age, and the ways in which he fulfils the law. At such points, becoming all things to all men can be a dangerous thing. And the Circumcision Party seem to be concerned for more than just getting the Gentiles circumcised.

The Gentiles also need to observe the other requirements of the Mosaic Covenant in their minds. There are Jews who are members of the Pharisees who are Christians. These groups are not mutually exclusive, as we might commonly think.

Some of the early Christians were both Pharisees and Christians. And while there were clear tensions between these things, one did not necessarily rule out the other. Elsewhere, Paul will speak of himself as a Pharisee, although it is clear that he thinks of that identity very differently after his conversion.

The Apostles and the Elders assemble to consider the matter, and they have an extensive debate. Peter stands up to speak about the Gospel going to Cornelius through him. The Council needs to reckon with the way that God has welcomed the Gentiles, without making a distinction between them and the Jews.

One of the more surprising things here is the way that Peter describes the law, as a yoke to be put on the neck of disciples, that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear. It's not just a statement about the law at this present juncture in history. It's a more general statement about the law that applies to their fathers also.

Why would Peter seemingly present the law so negatively? It seems that he regarded the law as an incredibly onerous thing. And when we think about it, that's not surprising. It involves all these sacrifices, pilgrimages, these different forms of cleanness that need to be maintained.

To be truly and fully observant was incredibly difficult and costly. In many respects, it would be a very frustrating way to live, one that would constantly remind you of your sinfulness and your fleshly nature. And this frustrating character seems to be more intrinsic to the character of law-keeping.

If God had truly cleansed the hearts of the Gentiles by faith, why would they need to go through all of this rigmarole, just to keep some Jews happy? God had clearly accepted them as Gentiles, so why would they need to become Jews in order to be accepted? The law is not necessary for such converts. The law is being insisted upon purely out of fear of the Jews, rather than out of any true conviction. It is the grace of the Lord Jesus that gives salvation, the cross of Christ, rather than the law.

The contrast between the law and Christ is also present in Paul's message in Pisidian Antioch at the end of chapter 13, verses 38-39. Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. This is Peter's last appearance in the book of Acts.

James, from whose orbit the teachers who insisted on the circumcision of the Gentiles had come, makes the decisive statement, and tis against those teachers. Peter, here called Simeon by James, has given personal testimony of the gospel going to the Gentiles. Paul and Barnabas have given further confirming witness.

Now James references scripture, establishing the point more decisively. He quotes Amos chapter 9, verses 11-12. He declares the Lord who does this.

The Booth of David likely has in mind the dynasty and the house of David. Jesus is the son of David and the church is being set up as a new Davidic house. It might also be a reference not to the tabernacle, but to the tent that David set up for the Ark of the Covenant.

This was not the place of regular sacrifice, but it was a place of song and of prayer. The Ark of the Covenant had also been associated with Gentiles like Obed-Edom, the Gittite, foreigners dwelling in the land of Israel. Jesus of Nazareth, the new Messianic king, is forming a new house of prayer for all nations, in which Jews and Gentiles are brought together in song and praise around the presence of the Lord.

In verse 18 there is a likely reference to Isaiah chapter 45, verse 21. Declare and present your case. Let them take counsel together.

Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the Lord? And there is no other God besides me, a righteous God and a Saviour. There is none besides me. The inclusion of the Gentiles then was always part of God's purpose.

God had declared this beforehand. While this might have taken them by surprise, God

had foretold this beforehand. And when they look back in the scripture, they find confirming evidence.

They lay four requirements upon the Gentiles. They must abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things that have been strangled, and from blood. These issues also come up in Paul's Corinthian correspondence, and they seem to have different rationales.

His condemnation of sexual immorality in 1 Corinthians is far more categorical in chapters 5-7. However, idol meat is treated very differently by Paul in his argument. The arguments on that front seem to involve giving up rights for the sake of others.

The explanation that James gives here for the judgment seems to be driven in part by sensitivity to the Jews. As there are faithful, observant Jews in every city, it is important not to cause needless scandal or offense. So it is important that Gentiles act in a way that, without adopting all the practices of the Torah, that they act in a way that is sensitive and mindful of the scruples of their Jewish neighbours.

This is one of the ways that they would express their love for each other in the body of Christ. A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which we might be in danger of downplaying, distorting, or disguising key elements of the Christian message in order to blend in with our neighbours and avoid persecution? After the Jerusalem Council in Acts chapter 15, the Council writes a letter communicating their judgment and emissaries are appointed to bear it to Antioch, Syria and Cilicia.

The letter largely repeats the statements made by James at the conclusion of the Council's deliberations. The Apostles and elders of Jerusalem want to appoint some representatives of Jerusalem to accompany Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch. We should recall that Barnabas himself had initially been a representative of the Jerusalem Church, sent to Antioch in chapter 11 verse 22.

He had stayed in Antioch for at least a year after that, ministering there. And after that time he had accompanied Paul on a visit to Jerusalem at the end of chapter 11, bringing relief to the Christians in Jerusalem. They had returned at the end of chapter 12.

And we read nothing about what occurred to Paul and Barnabas on that particular journey to Jerusalem in the book of Acts. But the book of Galatians describes a private meeting with the pillars of the Jerusalem Church, after Paul went there with Barnabas and Titus. During the visit, according to Paul's account in Galatians, he set before the Jerusalem leaders the message that he and Barnabas bore to the Gentiles.

They had given Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, recognising that Paul had been entrusted with the mission to the uncircumcised, in a manner comparable to the way that Peter was the chief minister entrusted with the mission to the circumcised. If it

was not already his principal base before he had returned from Jerusalem, Antioch was definitely the focus of Barnabas' mission thereafter. At the beginning of chapter 13, Barnabas is listed as one of the prophets and teachers of the Antioch church, alongside Saul, whom he had brought there from Tarsus at the end of chapter 11.

The Antioch church then set apart Barnabas and Saul for the mission, according to the word of the Spirit. Now they are back in Jerusalem again, albeit under slightly more complicated circumstances. At this point in the church's history, Jerusalem is still very much the centre.

It is the place with the greatest influence and power. Antioch is a church of growing importance and the doorway to the Gentile mission. The relationship between these two churches is of immense significance.

If these two churches were to part ways, or if Antioch was simply to adapt to the demands of the Christians of a more Pharisaic persuasion in Jerusalem, the entire formation of a united Jew and Gentile church might founder, or never truly get off the ground to begin with. Strengthening the bonds between these churches could not be more important. At this juncture, the bond is mostly one forged by a few key ministers such as Paul and Barnabas, and also by the relief provided by the Christians in Antioch to the poor Christians in Judea.

The visit of the men from James, who had insisted that the Gentiles in Antioch needed to be circumcised, was near disastrous. It was a threat to the Gentile mission in its very infancy, and it was a strain upon the fragile relationship between the two churches. Arriving at such a favourable judgement for the Gentile mission was immensely important, and naturally it would be a cause for considerable rejoicing when it was shared with the church in Antioch.

The Jerusalem church sent some of their leading men, Silas and Judas called Bar-Sabbas, to strengthen the connection between the churches. They also laid to rest any confusion that might have arisen from the earlier visit of the Judaizers from Jerusalem. They were teachers that had gone out from Jerusalem, and they had unsettled the minds of the Christians in Antioch, but they had not been sent on their mission by the apostles and elders.

Their message was not approved. To make sure that the message is communicated beyond any dispute, the council sent these representatives of Jerusalem to confirm the judgement of the council by their own testimony, and to strengthen the bond between the churches by ministering among them for a time. The Jerusalem church also affirms their respect and love for Barnabas and Paul, commending their missionary ventures, which they did not consider controversial at all, but were in one mind in approving.

They list the only four requirements that they would place upon them, abstaining from

things sacrificed to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. The nature of these restrictions has been a matter of debate. Paul teaches against idol meat in 1 Corinthians chapters 8-10.

There he begins with some arguments focusing on giving up freedom for the sake of others, so as not to scandalize them or harm their conscience. In 1 Corinthians 8-13, Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

Later Paul moves to some more absolute arguments against certain forms of participation in idol meat, showing that such meat represented association with demons themselves. 1 Corinthians 10-14-22 I speak as to sensible people. Judge for yourselves what I say.

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel. Are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything? Or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagan sacrifice they offer to demons, and not to God.

I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.

Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he? In his teaching then, Paul makes allowances for the possible difficulties that Gentiles might have in obtaining food without any sort of association with idols. Making clear that the meat was not unclean in itself, and that outside of a context where they would knowingly and openly be participating in a meal that was associated with the worship of idols, they could eat any meat without asking any questions. 1 Corinthians 10 25-33 continues the argument in this way.

Eat whatever is sold in the meat market, without raising any question on the ground of conscience. For the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof. If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner, and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you, without raising any question on the ground of conscience.

But if someone says to you, this has been offered in sacrifice, then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience. I do not mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks? So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory

of God.

Give no offence to Jews, or to Greeks, or to the Church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. Much of the purpose of this commandment, as Paul describes it, seems to be to ensure that Jews are not given a cause of offence by Gentiles in the Church. The Gentiles should be mindful of Jewish scruples.

However, this commandment is also there in order that they might keep a clear distance from the idolatry that permeated the whole of pagan society, being careful not to compromise in a matter where it would be very easy to do so. We should also observe that restrictions upon food sacrificed to idols were applied to Gentiles living among the Israelites in the book of Leviticus, in chapter 17, verse 7-9 of that book. So they shall no more sacrifice their sacrifices to goat demons, after whom they whore.

This shall be a statute forever for them throughout their generations. And you shall say to them, Anyone of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who serve in among them, who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice, and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting to offer it to the Lord, that man shall be cut off from his people. The restrictions upon consuming blood and eating strangled animals go together.

The strangling of the animal was designed as a means of keeping the blood within. This goes back to Genesis and the commandment given to Noah in chapter 9, verses 3-4. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you, and as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything.

But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. The same requirement to refrain from blood is given to the Gentiles living among the Jews in Leviticus, chapter 17, verses 10-14, the passage that immediately follows the one that we read earlier. If anyone of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who serve in among them, eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut him off from among his people.

For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life. Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, no person among you shall eat blood, neither shall any stranger who serve in among you eat blood. Anyone also of the people of Israel, or of the strangers who serve in among them, who takes in hunting any beast or bird that may be eaten, shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth.

For the life of every creature is its blood, its blood is its life. Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, you shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of every creature is its blood. Whoever eats it shall be cut off.

This prohibition then was not exclusive to Jews, but was more general to all peoples. It arises from the connection between the life of creatures and their blood, a connection comparable to the connection between the soul and the eyes, for instance. It is not a literal identification of one with the other, but a symbolic manifestation of the one in the other.

It should also be understood in the context of a sacrificial system. As God said to his people, I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life. In a context where blood sacrifices were being made, ingesting blood would have great significance.

The question of whether this applies in the same way in societies where that symbolic bond does not function in the same way, where we are no longer sacrificing animals and engaging in blood rites, and where there is little chance of causing scandal to others, is a question upon which Christians differ. Many European societies, for instance, though traditionally Christian, have eaten blood puddings. The final prohibition is upon sexual immorality.

Why single out sexual immorality at this point? The other prohibitions concern foods, but this seems to be a more directly moral issue. A few things might be noted on this front. First, sexual immorality connected with the other commandments in its more direct relationship to purity concerns.

Sins such as, let's say, stealing, were morally prohibited, but didn't have the same relationship to purity as the defilement caused by sexual immorality. Second, attitudes to sexual conduct were among the most pronounced differences between Jews and Gentiles. Many of the other requirements of the law might have been affirmed by pagan ethicists, but attitudes to sexual behavior could be different in very pronounced ways.

Third, sexual immorality of various kinds was a further aspect of the commandments of Leviticus that applied to Jews and Gentiles alike. The Council, then, it would seem, is simply affirming that the Gentiles need to observe the commandments that were placed upon Gentile sojourners among Israel, rather than needing to observe the whole law of Moses. The emissaries return with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch.

When the congregation is gathered together, the letter from the Jerusalem Council is read, and it meets with great joy. Having considered the situation that the Antioch church was in, the cause for their joy should be quite evident. A very great deal was riding upon the response of the Jerusalem church.

Had their message been a rebuke, the entire direction of the church would have changed, and the nature of the whole Christian movement would have been plunged into uncertainty. Indeed, it had been in such uncertainty, after the teaching of the Judaizers who came from Jerusalem, until this letter resolved it. Judas and Silas, who had been

sent up from Jerusalem, remain there for some time, ministering among them, further strengthening the bond between the two key churches of Antioch and Jerusalem.

The Jerusalem Christians are then sent back to Jerusalem. Verse 34, which refers to Silas deciding to stay, is omitted by most texts. While it might help us to explain why Silas is seemingly in Antioch, to accompany Paul on his second missionary journey a few verses later, it probably is not in the original text.

And there are plenty of other explanations for why Silas could have returned, or not even left. Luke just doesn't explain why. Paul and Barnabas remain in Antioch, and continue to minister there, alongside many other ministers.

It seems that the work of Christ there is really growing. A question to consider. How does Paul's treatment of issues of sexual morality differ from his treatment of idol food in the book of 1 Corinthians? How might reflecting upon Paul's teaching, and the teaching of Leviticus chapters 17 and 18, help us better to understand the place of these commandments in the life of the people of God today? At the end of Acts chapter 15, Paul's second missionary journey begins.

Paul and Barnabas had returned to Antioch after their Jerusalem visit. Having ministered for a while in Antioch, they determined to go back to the churches that they had visited on their first missionary journey, and to see how they are progressing in the faith. They were very young in their faith, and one can imagine that Paul and Barnabas would be anxious to hear that they were progressing.

The fact that these churches would be facing persecution, and there were potentially false teachers going around, might also have increased their concern to engage in such a mission. Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them. John Mark was the son of Mary, in whose house Jerusalem Christians had met for prayer in chapter 12.

John Mark was Barnabas' cousin, as we discover in Colossians chapter 4 verse 10. John Mark has traditionally been identified with the author of the second gospel. Barnabas and Saul had a major falling out over the inclusion of John Mark.

He had originally accompanied them on the first missionary journey, but he had abandoned the mission in chapter 13 verse 13. The disagreement that they have is a very serious one. We are given the impression that it was very heated.

It is so sharp a disagreement that they have to part ways at this point. Reading through the book of Acts, in many respects we are seeing the highlights of a period stretched out over almost three decades in several different locations. We've just had a high point in the events of the Jerusalem Council, which had followed a very troubling period, as there had been a serious dispute between Peter and Paul themselves in Antioch, and teachers from Jerusalem had threatened the entire mission to the uncircumcised.

Now there is another setback, with a falling out between two key people whose shared mission had been so pivotal in the last few chapters. One can imagine that with such a young movement, and with so much riding upon particular key relationships, relationships that would have constituted bonds between churches, we should remember that Barnabas is originally from Jerusalem, and likely the strongest personal tie between the two most important churches, this would certainly have been a very serious discouragement and setback, potentially throwing much into uncertainty. As readers of the book of Acts in the 21st century, we know how the story turns out, but we should try to enter into something of the feelings of the early Christians, and to recognise just how vulnerable they might have felt at some of these junctures.

Knowing of the incredible success that the church has experienced from the days of the apostles onwards, we don't feel the full blows of the discouragements in the text. For those living through such history however, it might have felt like riding a roller coaster at times. Barnabas took along John Mark with him to Cyprus, as we should recall from chapter 4, Barnabas was a Levite from Cyprus, while Paul chose Silas to accompany him and goes throughout Syria and Cilicia to encourage and strengthen the churches.

These missions were incredibly important in forging a robust church. Much of the formation of the church at this stage was not merely about the development of lots of local churches, but about the development of a lively network between many otherwise isolated churches across Judea, Syria and at this point Asia Minor. Forging bonds of mutual love and trust would enable the movement to grow in ways that it could not if every church was isolated from the others.

Many of the new churches may not yet have had mature Christian ministers, but would have depended heavily upon visiting teachers, prophets and missionaries. Paul returns to Derbe and to Lystra. While at Lystra he encounters a disciple called Timothy, who is held in high esteem by the Christians in the region.

Timothy's mother was a Jew and his father was a Greek, which would certainly have provoked severe disapproval in some more observant Jewish quarters, although some diaspora Jews may have been more relaxed about it. The problem was not chiefly an ethnic one, but a religious one. Intermarriage with people outside of the covenant was seen as a very serious matter in many parts of the Old Testament.

From 2 Timothy 1.5 we learn that both Timothy's mother and grandmother were faithful persons and that he was taught the scriptures from a young age, so we should not suppose that Timothy's mother was indifferent towards her Jewish faith. We can speculate over whether or not Timothy's father was a God-fearer associated with the synagogue. However, the fact that Timothy had not been circumcised raises the possibility that his mother's marriage was less than ideal, perhaps arranged by an unbelieving father.

Timothy's religious status would have seemed rather ambiguous then, and might perhaps have been a cause of scandal to some. Timothy himself, though, is a living example of a Jew and Gentile union. He straddles these two worlds in his very person.

Considering the obstacle that Timothy's ambiguous status might provide for the mission, though, Paul determines that it would be best to circumcise him, a course of action that might seem surprising given how strongly Paul has recently opposed the circumcision of Gentiles. Timothy, however, is not a Gentile, but a Jew of ambiguous origins. Paul's concern is not circumcision, but the cause of the mission.

Circumcising Timothy will help them to accomplish this. The principle that Paul is following here is that which he describes in 1 Corinthians 9, verses 19-23. For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law, though not being myself under the law, that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law, not being outside the law of God, but under the law of Christ, that I might win those outside the law.

To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

In circumcising Timothy, Paul plays the part of a father to him. Timothy will come to be immensely important in Paul's later ministry, serving as Paul's personal representative. Timothy is Paul's shaliyach, the one who personally represents Paul where Paul himself cannot be.

As such, Timothy would come to participate in the exercise of Paul's apostolic ministry. He is the co-author of epistles, 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Philemon. He acts as Paul's personal emissary in places like Acts 19, verse 22, and 1 Timothy 1, verse 3. He is the one who served Paul, so that Paul could give himself to the primary task of preaching without any distraction, something that we may see in Acts 18, verses 1-5.

Timothy could participate directly in Paul's exercise of his apostolic power. Paul and Timothy are a pair. They are bound together in a single apostolic mission.

On occasions the distinction between them is made very plain. Only Paul is the apostle proper, while on other occasions their alignment is stressed. Timothy is a co-worker, he is a helper and sharer in Paul's calling.

Relative to the churches to which they were ministering, Timothy was to be treated as a bearer of Paul's own authority. However, relative to Paul, Timothy was a subordinate, without an independent commission of his own, but rather a share in Paul's. The

relationship between Paul and Timothy is exceptionally close, and Paul speaks of Timothy as his own son.

The language here is not merely that of emotional closeness, but of representation. The son represents the father, his authority, his presence and his interests. It also points to a relationship similar to that which pertained between Old Testament leaders and prophets and their shaliachs.

In Numbers 13, verse 16, we see that Joshua's name was given to him by Moses, who also lays his hands on Joshua in Deuteronomy 34, verse 9. A similar relationship exists between Elijah and Elisha. Elisha receives a double portion of Elijah's spirit, the inheritance appropriate to the firstborn, and as Elijah is taken into heaven, Elisha addresses him as his father. Matthew Calvin observes, that Timothy is a virtual copy of Paul is underlined by 1 Corinthians 4, verses 16-17.

I urge you, imitate me. For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere, in every church. The charge to imitate Paul then is accompanied by the sending of Timothy toward the fulfilment of this end, as the son is the pre-eminent imitator and representation of his father.

As a participant in his father's ministry, and as Paul's right-hand man, Timothy would come to have immense authority to wield, even being given the commission to choose and appoint church officers as Paul's representative. As the apostolic ministry was temporary, upon Paul's death, Timothy would cease to be the Apostle's apostle, and would presumably become a bishop. Timothy might not usually be in the foreground of the story in the Book of Acts, but his importance for Paul's missionary work should not be understated.

As Timothy accompanies Paul and Silas, they pass through the cities, giving them word of the judgment of the Jerusalem Council, encouraging them and strengthening them in the faith, knitting them in with the wider body of the church that has been formed in various parts of the world. A question to consider. Considering what we know of Paul and Barnabas's different characters, what might have been some of the factors influencing their falling out concerning John Mark? In Acts chapter 16, the Gospel finally arrives in Europe from Asia, and Paul and Silas carry out their mission in Philippi.

Paul and Silas had a plan for the second missionary journey. They intended to visit churches that they had already visited, and to spread the Gospel further in Asia. However, as they try to do this, they find that the Holy Spirit stops them from engaging in further ministry in Asia.

The Apostles depend upon divine guidance for their mission throughout. The mission is ultimately the Holy Spirit's mission. It's the mission of Christ continued from Heaven in

his ascended position.

We could perhaps draw comparisons here with the way that kings in the Old Testament seek the Lord's counsel before battles, military maneuvers or various campaigns. Paul and Silas are engaged in a different sort of conquest. The Gospel is spreading from Jerusalem and Judea, through places like Samaria, through Syria, through Asia Minor, and now into Europe.

And at each step, the Spirit is directing those who are spearheading the mission. How the negative direction of the Spirit came is not entirely clear. Perhaps it came in the form of prophetic words.

Maybe the missionaries received some strong internal intuition about the Spirit's direction. Or maybe there was a vision, or perhaps just some obstructing circumstances. Whatever it was, it was clear that this was not the way that the Lord wanted them to go.

In verse 6, the Holy Spirit forbids them. And in verse 7, the Spirit of Jesus does not allow them to go into Bithynia. The association between the Holy Spirit of God and the Spirit of Jesus is a very important indication of just how high Luke's Christology is.

In Luke's understanding of Jesus, Jesus is so identified with God that God's Holy Spirit is understood as the Spirit of Jesus. After this succession of obstacles or negative guidance, the missionaries go down to Troas. Troas was in the region of the famous city of Troy, about 25 miles away.

It was beneath the Hellespont and would have been an ideal place from which to sail to Macedonia. One way to see this perhaps is that Paul and Silas are engaging in an invasion of Macedonia and Europe from Asia. And this was the mirror image or reversal of Alexander the Great's invasion of Asia from Macedonia earlier in history.

Paul receives a vision of a man of Macedonia. The man doesn't seem to be a specific individual. Some commentators have suggested that the man might have been Alexander the Great, or perhaps the Philippian jailer.

However, no indication of either of these things is given us within the text itself. We should note that the first occurrence of the we pronoun for the missionary journeys occurs here. It seems as though Luke may have joined Paul and Silas in Troas, certainly indicating his presence by this shift in the language.

With this shift in the pronouns, we have an indication that we are now getting a first-hand report of what occurred. Following the vision, Paul and Silas set sail from Troas to Samothrace, and then on to Neapolis, from where they go to the small city of Philippi, which is a Roman colony in the region. The city of Philippi enjoyed autonomous rule and exemption from taxation, and would have had a far more Roman character than many other cities.

This is the first arrival of the Gospel in Europe, and the significance of this event should not be understated. From this small seed of an event arises vast swathes of human history. On the Sabbath, Paul and Silas go to a place outside of the city, by the riverside, where they expect that there will be a place of prayer, possibly a synagogue.

Some have suggested that Jews and God-fearers met there because it was outside a line restricting burials and small cults to a site outside of the city proper. Perhaps finding no evidence of a synagogue within the city, they looked for the most likely site of prayer for a small Jewish community. Beside a river would be a promising location for such a community.

It would be a place where ritual washings could be performed. It was also possible that they had heard reports in the city of a group meeting in such a location. The likelihood that it was a synagogue community is lowered by the fact that it seems to be primarily women engaged in prayer, rather than the male and female company that one might expect in a typical synagogue.

One of the people there is Lydia from Thyatira, a Lydian city that might help us to explain Lydia's name. She is a seller of purple goods. There's no statement here that she actually dyes the goods herself.

If she dyed the goods herself, she might have been kept outside of normal society as it was a smelly profession. Another example of such a smelly profession would be the work of tanning. We encountered Simon the Tanner at the end of chapter 9 and beginning of chapter 10.

It's likely that Lydia had some independent status and wealth, but as a foreign merchant she would have been looked down on by any member of the local aristocracy. Nevertheless, she seems to have a large enough house to be able to put up Paul and Silas without displacing the other members. She also seems to have a number of people working for her as slaves and others.

Lydia seems to be a God-fearer, not a Jew nor a pagan, but she opens up her heart to the gospel, and as a result her whole household is baptized. The description of the baptism of her household with her suggests that it's almost a matter of course that the faith of the leader of the household would be shared by all of the members within it, although the other members of the household would presumably largely be adult slaves. Lydia's reception of the gospel is expected to have implications for everyone within her orbit.

This is a feature of the reception of the gospel that we can see on a number of occasions within the New Testament. The reception of the gospel is not just a matter of personal heart conversion, it's a matter of public solidarities, alignments and allegiances. And where these sorts of things are expressed by the head of a household, everyone under them, children, slaves and others, are implicated within their decision.

While each person would be expected to affirm this within their own lives, it was presumed that they would do, and that their coming under the reign of Christ was not just a matter of private and personal individual decision. While they're going to the place of prayer, Paul and Silas are met by a slave girl, who has a spirit of divination and who follows them, declaring that they are servants of the Most High God. This girl is possessed by a Pythonian spirit, a spirit of divination, inspired by Apollo, the Pythian god, who defeated the Python servant.

This servant girl might be similar to some of the priestesses at Delphi. The confrontation with demons and evil spirits that we see here continues from the book of Luke. In the gospel of Luke we see Jesus confronting the spirits in his temptations in the wilderness, in rebuking and exorcising demons.

The same conflict continues here. The apostles are struggling against Satan's kingdom. Throughout this book of Acts we've already seen magicians like Simon the Sorcerer and Elymus, and in later chapters we will see more examples of people committed to magical arts.

Lest we forget, the missionaries are not struggling against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, and rulers of this present age. In carrying out this mission, they are facing many evil forces that will seek to oppose them or drive them back. The slave girl is bearing witness to Paul and Silas, but in a way that is quite troubling, perhaps not least in the fact that she is a voice of someone representing polytheism.

After many days of this, Paul becomes annoyed and commands the spirit to depart from her, and as a result the owners of the slave girl are angry, because of their loss of money. What happens here is a sort of threat to the social order, in the process of which the character of the social order is revealed. This is a society built upon demons, and upon the desire for money.

They are accused of threatening the customs and the laws of the city, when they are brought before the leaders. These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept, or to practice.

This is very similar language that we find elsewhere in the book of Acts, on the lips of the Jews. The movement of Christ is overturning both Jewish and Roman society. They are here blamed as Jews, but this is ironically similar to what we see the Jews accusing them of in chapter 21 verse 21.

The crowd attack them, and the magistrates align with the crowd. They strip Paul and Silas of their clothes and beat them with rods. This was probably a public beating designed to humiliate them, presenting them as threats to the peace.

After this humiliating beating, they are thrown into the prison and committed to the

charge of the jailer, who puts their feet in the stocks. There are a few examples of deliverances from prison in the book of Acts. These events take the pattern of the great jail break itself, the story of the resurrection, when Christ was delivered from the clutches of the grave, and from the tomb guarded by the soldiers.

Here Paul and Silas are engaged in prayer and singing hymns to God. Perhaps we may even imagine them singing imprecatory psalms, calling for God to act in their deliverance and in judgement upon those who have opposed them. There is a great earthquake, the foundations of the prison are shaken.

All the doors are opened and everyone's bonds are unfastened. This is truly remarkable. This is not just the release of the apostles as we see earlier on in the book of Acts, or the release of Peter as in chapter 12.

This is a more general release. This is something that shows the power of the gospel more generally, to loose every chain, to deliver not just Paul and Silas as the messengers of the Lord, but everyone associated with them. Waking up and seeing that the prison doors are opened, the jailer is terrified, and he seeks to kill himself.

He has failed in his charge, he presumes that all the prisoners have escaped. But Paul calls with a loud voice and reassures him, and the jailer goes in and sees that Paul and Silas are still there with all of the other prisoners. In his fear he throws himself down before them and asks, What must I do to be saved? These men were committed to his charge, presumably as missionaries of some foreign god.

And now a manifestly divine sign has occurred, one that does not look good for him. What can he do to be delivered from the wrath of this God, who is angry with him because he has mistreated his messengers? Paul and Silas' response is that he should believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. As he submits himself to Christ, he will know deliverance, both in the present and in the future, from the wrath to come.

And not just for him, but him and his household. The presumption once again is that the household is included in his response. Paul and Silas go on to speak the word of God to his household, and they all respond in faith.

They are all baptised, and then he tends to their wounds and puts food before them. The next day the magistrates send the police with instructions to release them. And the jailer tells Paul, but Paul is not willing to go.

They have been treated as disturbers of the peace. They have been humiliated and dishonoured. They have been falsely accused and badly mistreated.

And to treat a Roman citizen in this way was a very serious thing to do. The magistrates should come and release them publicly. The public wrong that they committed to them should be answered with a public apology.

When the magistrates come, they ask them to leave the city. And so they leave the prison, they visit Lydia, and then they spend time with the brothers, those who presumably had been converted during their time of ministry within the city. A question to consider.

How does the story of the ministry of Paul and Silas in Philippi reveal the character of Philippi as a city, serving as an indictment of the city and its values? In the first half of Acts chapter 17, Paul and Silas visit Thessalonica and Borea. Travelling from Philippi, where they had been asked to depart by the magistrates, Paul and Silas and their missionary group arrive in Thessalonica, about 70 miles southwest. Thessalonica was a major harbour town, the capital of Macedonia, and one of the most prominent and prosperous mercantile centres.

Estimates for the population of Thessalonica range from more conservative estimates of around 40,000 to larger estimates of up to 200,000. It was a free city, ruling itself without a Roman garrison situated within it. The missionaries, as they typically did, began their work in the synagogue.

The gospel was given to the Jews first and also to the Greeks, and there were Jewish synagogues throughout Greece at the time. The extent of the diaspora, both in geographical reach and ubiquity, and in numerical quantity, meant that the ground had been well prepared in many places for the message of the gospel. In virtually every place there would already be people who were knowledgeable in the scriptures.

The missionaries were not working with a blank slate, but the foundation of knowledge was already laid for many. While the gospel met with much opposition from the Jews, who often instigated persecution, the early Jewish converts would likely have been the backbone of the youngest churches. They had the scriptural background to understand the message of the gospel well and would have been able to instruct Gentile converts.

A further thing to consider is the possibility that, travelling as they were, the missionaries, even if they were to use the new form of the Codex rather than scrolls, would have found it very difficult to obtain and bring many scriptural books with them on their travels. It would have been both costly and cumbersome. A further benefit of starting their mission in various towns with the synagogue is the fact that the synagogue would likely have its own scriptural texts, which could be used for confirmatory witness.

Here we see something more of the approach of the missionaries. Going to the synagogue was Paul's custom, much as Jesus' going to the synagogue is described as his custom in Luke 4.16. Luke's description of Paul's reasoning with the people in the synagogue perhaps suggests that much of the teaching of the synagogue operated in a dialogic or question and answer style. Paul sets out a case for them that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead, and that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, the one who fit the prophecies.

We might imagine Paul using various strands of biblical reasoning, several of which we have already encountered in messages of the Book of Acts to this point. He could have used quotations from the Psalms, such as Psalm 110 in relation to Christ's ascension, or Psalm 16 in relation to Christ's resurrection. Isaiah 53 could relate to Christ's suffering, death and vindication in the resurrection, and other references from the books of the prophets.

Then he could use retelling of the biblical narrative, as we see in Stephen's speech, showing how the story both typologically anticipates and necessitates the Christ's suffering, and that Jesus fits the silhouette that the anticipatory scriptures projected perfectly. There are two stages to this argument, first, presenting the scriptures' portrayal of the Christ, and second, showing that Jesus of Nazareth uniquely fits it. While in Thessalonica, Paul reasons in the synagogue for three Sabbaths.

If we were to presume that this was the full time that Paul spent in the city, it might lead to questions about how to reconcile this with details that we have elsewhere in the epistles to the Thessalonians. In 1 Thessalonians 2, verse 9, For you remember, brothers, our labour and toil, we work day and night, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaim to you the gospel of God. In 2 Thessalonians 3, verses 7-8, For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labour we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you.

Beyond this, there is the fact that Paul was seemingly in Thessalonica long enough to receive support from Philippi over a week's journey away, as we see in Philippians 4, verses 15-16. And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again.

As Craig Keener notes, during the missionaries' stay, they had been able to teach the Thessalonians seemingly fairly extensively concerning the faith, and had also appeared to have appointed leaders. This suggests a stay longer than three weeks. Of course, the text merely speaks of the duration of Paul's period of Sabbath reasoning in the synagogue.

They might have been in the city for some period before that, and some period afterwards. Paul had a measure of success, especially with the devout Greek God-fearers and the leading women. One can imagine that the status of the uncircumcised in the teaching of Paul concerning the body of Christ would have been especially appealing to such persons.

The Jews respond with hostility, inciting a mob to violence and unsettling the entire city. They attack the house of one of the believers, who was seemingly hosting some of the

missionaries, but they could not find them. As they could not find the missionaries themselves, they brought Jason and some of the other Thessalonian believers to the city authorities instead, accusing them of supporting a movement that was in the process of turning the world upside down.

In particular, they focus upon the way that the declaration of Jesus' kingship threatens the claims of Caesar. The message of Paul and the missionaries was potentially subversive in a number of respects. They taught against idols, false gods and false religions, and the imperial cult would have been among the most obvious targets, whether it was explicitly singled out or not.

The language of Christ's kingdom, of his coming and of his divine sonship, was extremely similar to the language used of Caesar. Yet Christians declared that Christ's title was unique, implicitly presenting Caesar's claims as if they were the parody. While the claims of the Christian faith's subversive posture towards Rome have been rather overplayed by many of late, the Jews of Thessalonica would not have been the first to draw attention to the various ways, indirect and more direct, that the gospel message threatened Rome.

Perhaps one of the most notable and obvious ways that it threatened Rome was in the claims that the Christians made about Jesus being crucified under the authorisation of Rome. The unjust condemnation of Christ and his resurrection were an indictment of Rome's injustice, and challenged its claims concerning itself. The motives of the Jews should be considered here.

They are, we are told, driven by jealousy, presumably at the success that the missionaries had with the devout Greeks, and perhaps more especially with the leading women. Such elite women would have had more social freedom to convert than elite men, and could act as wealthy patronesses, and could exert their influence on behalf of their religious teachers. In the first missionary journey, while in Pisidian Antioch, the Jewish opponents of the missionaries had used the influence of God-fearing elite women to stir up persecution against them from the authorities.

If the Christian missionaries successfully converted large numbers of the leading women and devout Greeks, the Jews stood to lose a great deal of their social connections, financial support and influence. Indeed, it might even turn against them. As Thessalonica was a free city, its inhabitants would have been very nervous about losing its privileged status.

Any whiff of sedition would have been extremely troubling to the authorities. Thessalonica had a temple for the imperial cult, and leading Thessalonians were likely scrupulous in ensuring that Rome's interests were not threatened. They required Jason, as a host of the missionaries, to pay a bond.

In contrast to Philippi, here it is one of the early converts, rather than the missionaries

themselves, who is persecuted. Jason courageously suffers on behalf of the missionaries, and on behalf of Christ. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul describes them receiving the gospel in much affliction.

From Paul's description in 1 Thessalonians, we might also get the impression that a significant number of former pagans were among the earliest converts, not just Jews and devout God-fearers, as he speaks of their turning from idols to serve the living and true God. From Thessalonica, Paul and Silas are sent away by night to Berea. Berea was about 45 miles west-southwest of Thessalonica, according to Daryl Bach.

It was also on the way to Athens. Once again they began their ministry in the synagogue, receiving a far more favourable response this time. The Berean Jews received the message of the missionaries eagerly, and examined the scriptures to confirm their witness, something that wins them commendation as noble in character.

As modern readers of the text, we can easily fall into the trap of imagining the Bereans all flicking through their personal Bibles, perhaps when they go home, but it is entirely likely that the synagogue itself did not contain a full set of the scrolls of scripture, and the text that it did have would likely be in a Greek translation. Although communal reading of the scriptures would have been common, private ownership was very rare. The process of examining the scriptures quite properly took the form of a communal act of deliberation under the oversight of synagogue leaders, reading relevant passages from the Torah scroll and other scriptures that they had in their possession, and discussing them together as a community.

The process of examining the scriptures is described as a daily one, probably involving members of the synagogue community during the week, not merely on the Sabbath. In Berea, many of the Jews believed, and once again, a number of Greek women of the elite and some men. However, once again the missionaries are followed by a counter-mission, as Jews come from Thessalonica and whip up the crowds against them.

As Paul was apparently the chief target, Silas and Timothy remained, while Paul proceeded alone to Athens, conducted by some of the Bereans. He went down to the sea, and we can presume boarded a vessel to Athens. The fact that some of the Bereans accompanied him, not merely to the sea, but for the entirety of his journey, is an indication of their nobility and their commitment to hospitality.

A question to consider. Many Christians have described themselves as Bereans, on account of their commitment to confirming every teaching that they receive from the scriptures. How might closer attention to the situation of the Bereans help us to follow their noble example even more closely? Facing a threat to his safety earlier in Acts chapter 17, Paul was moved away from Berea by some of the believers in verse 15.

Paul was now in Athens alone, waiting for Silas and Timothy to rejoin him. No longer a

great centre of power and population, the population of Athens had dwindled considerably by Paul's day. Once one of the most powerful cities in the world, Athens was now overshadowed by the Roman city of Corinth.

Athens still had considerable symbolic value on account of its continuing association with culture and learning. Paul was deeply distressed at the abundance of idols and images within the city. This reaction was a characteristically Jewish one, much that Paul says in this passage will reflect common Jewish polemics against idolatry.

Consistent with the general pattern of his missionary work, Paul first focuses upon the synagogue, where he reasons daily with the Jews and with Gentile worshippers. He also speaks to the wider population within the marketplace. Among the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who encounter him, the accusation is made that he is a babbler or seed picker and a proclaimer of foreign gods.

They seem to think that he is just a dabbler. He picks up one philosophical notion here, another over there, and strings them together without any thought to how it all fits. These charges challenge both Paul's spiritual authority and the right of the religion that he proclaimed to a place within Athenian life.

Some commentators have suggested that the second charge, that Paul proclaimed foreign gods, arose from the misconception that resurrection was a female deity alongside Jesus. This charge also recalls the charge that was made against Socrates. This is not the first time that Luke seems to have referred to Socrates within his text.

In chapter 5 verse 29, there is another allusion to Socrates, as the apostles speak about the fact that they must obey God rather than the man. In aligning Paul with Socrates in this manner, Luke presents him as wise and the Athenians as foolish in repeating the mistakes of their ancestors. This likely serves Luke's apologetic ends.

Paul is then brought to the Areopagus. Whether this is a situation resembling a formal trial or merely an attempt by a curious council to get a clearer sense of where Paul's teaching stands is unclear. The softened form of the challenge to Paul might suggest the latter.

The description of the Athenians and the foreigners of the city is not a flattering one. They are, as Luke characterises them, driven by a lazy and a faddish curiosity rather than by a genuine love for and commitment to the truth. Robert Garland has argued that there were three criteria for the introduction of a new religion to the city of Athens.

First, the sponsor must claim to represent a deity. Second, he must provide evidence that the deity is eager to reside in Athens. And third, the deity's residence in Athens must benefit Athenians as a mark of its goodwill.

In the speech that follows, Paul subversively addresses each of these conditions. The

manner of Paul's speech provides evidence of his scholarly training. His opening reference to the extreme religiousness of the Athenians has an ambiguity that he will proceed to exploit.

As a reference to the piety of his audience, it could be regarded as a shrewd attempt to create a favourable impression. However, through his reference to the altar of the unknown god, Paul paints a picture of an excessive, superstitious piety. In the saturated market of Athenian idolatry, Paul identifies this monument to uninformed devotion as an object that epitomises the religion of the city, a religion characteristic of the times of human ignorance that he discusses in verse 30.

Paul declares the transcendence and the sovereignty of God as the creator of all things. This deity is related to all human beings and is involved in the life and the destiny of the race. God's engagement in, and ordering of humanity's life, occurs in order that humanity might grope for him and find him.

Such a transcendent deity, who is reflected in humanity as his offspring, cannot appropriately be represented by inanimate idols of our own creation. Having introduced this transcendent, personal, providentially active deity, intimately engaged in human affairs, Paul proclaims the end of the age of ignorance and groping in the darkness with the revelation of Jesus as the bearer of God's salvation and judgement. This message might remind us of one of the earlier run-ins that Paul had with idolatry, back in Lystra in chapter 14, where Paul delivered a similar message in verses 15-17.

Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways, yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness. While Paul is speaking to pagans, he is presenting them with a message that is very clearly shaped by a Jewish understanding of divine creation and providence.

This is not a God who is distanced from the world, rather he is a God who is very close to everyone. He is a God who is our Father, and he is the God in whom we live and move and have our being. He is the God who directs the affairs of men.

He has divided the nations, appointed their times and their places of habitation, and now he has brought to an end the age of their ignorance, calling all people to respond to the message of Christ, who holds the destiny of the whole human race within his hands. He is the one who will judge all, something that is demonstrated by the fact that he was raised from the dead. The religious marketplace of the Athenians may seem rather remote from that of the more secular world that we inhabit.

However, we can learn much from Paul's approach to the Athenians, particularly from Paul's initial move. As Timur Shalik argues, the altar to an unknown God is precisely the most appropriate place for proclaiming the Christian message. He claims, I am convinced that if anyone wants to preach the good news of the paradoxical God of the Bible, he has to find the altar to an unknown God.

To speak about Christ at the altar to familiar gods would be blasphemy, or risk even greater misunderstanding than on that occasion at the Athenian Areopagus. While Paul speaks of the altar to the unknown God, and announces that he is proclaiming that God to them, we should observe that although he is finding common ground, he is completely subverting their religious system. The God that Paul proclaims cannot just be fitted into the existing pantheon as yet another God to be worshipped.

He overturns the whole pantheon. He is, as Paul presents him, the God that shows the futility of all idolatry. He is the one true God, and he is beyond the control or the representation of man.

Paul's message at the Areopagus received a lukewarm response. His declaration of a God who lays claim to humanity in Jesus Christ, his revealed and appointed agent of blessing and judgment, cut entirely against the grain of both speculative and superstitious religion, the forms of religion that prevailed in the city of Athens. The listless Athenian preoccupation with hearing something new was answered with a demand for absolute commitment.

The darkness of superstition was scattered by the dazzling light of divine revelation. The council desiring to cast judgment on a new religion found itself called to account before the bar of heaven. It is this same message that we are called to declare to the powers and the rulers and the thinkers of our own age.

In our societies, God is often experienced as the thoroughly known God, the God who holds no surprises. We can talk about ourselves as living in Christian countries, and this claim, although it can be an encouraging one for some Christians to hear, should excite some concerns. In the comfortable alignment of Christianity and our national heritage and identity and culture, God is easily rendered familiar and unthreatening, a tame and mute idol to our cultural and social values.

This sort of dynamic can especially be seen in civil religion, where Christian values are routinely appealed to with the assurance that they align in all principal respects with our particular movements, identities and solidarities. In responding to this, we must join with Paul in proclaiming the transcendent God, who stands above and orders all human affairs, sustaining and upholding us in existence, closer to us than closeness itself. This God eludes all attempts to reduce him to an object of our mastery.

Like Paul, we must locate the gaps in the captive webs of our cultural idolatries,

declaring the identity of our God from these points and calling all to account. A question to consider, how does Paul's speech on the Areopagus represent something of the conflict between Jewish and Christian patterns of religion and belief, and the patterns of religious belief that were more common in a Hellenistic context? After leaving Athens, Paul moves to Corinth at the beginning of Acts chapter 18. Corinth was the capital of Achaia, a Roman colony and a strategic location for the mission.

It was a large, multicultural city, with strong connections to Rome. One could travel to Rome from it in about five days. New Corinth was designed using a Roman pattern, predominantly used Latin in its public inscriptions, and a number of the people mentioned in the church there had Roman names and connections.

Estimates of its size vary quite significantly. Craig Keener suggests that, if the capacity of the theatre of the city gives an indication of the city's size, being about a tenth of the population, we would have a median estimate of about 140,000 people. Estimates of the size of the city, however, vary by an order of magnitude or more.

The highest and quite excessive estimate that Keener mentions is 300,000 people with about 460,000 slaves. Compared to other ancient cities, it would have been very populous, and according to some scholars, might even have been one of the top three cities of the empire. Corinth was on the Isthmus, the narrow strip of land between the Peloponnese peninsula and the mainland of Greece.

Although attempts to build a canal between the two sides had failed or been abandoned due to excessive cost, there was a path specifically designed for the transport of ships and their cargoes from one side to another. Trade and crafts had made Corinth the wealthiest city in all of Greece. As a prominent location for trade and for travellers, it should not be surprising that Corinth would have had a reputation for immorality in certain quarters also.

In Corinth, Paul finds a Jew called Aquila, a native of Pontus and a former resident of Rome. With his wife Priscilla, Aquila works as a tentmaker. Corinth was a multicultural and cosmopolitan city, and Aquila and Priscilla would naturally have fit in in this respect.

Aquila was a Jew of the Diaspora, a native of Pontus on the south coast of the Black Sea, recently expelled from Rome and Italy, and now living in Corinth in Greece. Later on they would join Paul in going to Ephesus. When Paul writes the Epistle to the Romans, they host a church in their house there.

The importance of cosmopolitans and travellers like Aquila and Priscilla was immense for the early church. Such persons were instrumental in spreading the message of the Gospel to the most strategic hubs and broadly dispersing it throughout the empire. We get a glimpse of such cosmopolitanism in places like the final chapter of the Book of Romans, where Paul mentions over 20 Christians living in a city that he had yet to visit.

Cosmopolitan tradespeople like Aquila and Priscilla would have come in contact with a huge number of people and as such would be ideal for spreading the Gospel message extensively. Such persons also formed many of the strongest connections that existed between churches in various locations at that time. Paul didn't aim to go to Rome on this particular missionary journey, but a more Roman city like Corinth would have been a perfect preparation for such a mission in the future, acculturating him to a context that was far more Roman than Syria or Judea, with which he was more familiar.

As nothing is mentioned of the conversion of Aquila and Priscilla, many commentators reasonably assume that they were already converted by this point. Paul may have started the church in Corinth, but this need not mean that he was the first Christian in the city. Although Luke's narrative in Acts closely focuses upon the Apostle Paul, we should definitely not presume that he was the only person spreading the Gospel to new regions of the Empire during this period.

Indeed, some have suggested that the expulsion of the Jews from Rome by Claudius was a response to unrest in the Jewish community after the arrival of Christians and the Gospel in the city. The historian Suetonius claimed that the Jews were expelled from the city as a result of a disturbance caused by Crestus, which many scholars have argued might be a reference to Christ. The expulsion of the Jews from Rome likely occurred in AD 49.

Some have estimated that around 50,000 Jews lived in Rome at that time. The expulsion and later return might further help to explain why Paul knew so many people in Rome before he visited. Aquila and Priscilla were tent makers, a trade which Paul shared.

Paul would often work with his own hands to support his ministry. The fact that, of all the possible tasks that he could have done, Paul was a tent maker is worthy of notice. The first disciples were fishermen, an occupation given symbolic importance in the Gospels as the Lord declared that they would be made fishers of men.

Tent making might recall the great tent of the tabernacle. Paul, Aquila and Priscilla are all part of the task of constructing a new tabernacle, the tabernacle of the church. They are like Bezalel and Aholiab in the book of Exodus.

Aquila and Priscilla are a husband-wife pair, one of a number of male and female pairs in the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. The way that Priscilla is spoken of alongside Aquila might reasonably be seen to suggest that she played a very prominent part in their shared ministry. Paul's missionary approach here is the same as he adopts elsewhere.

He focuses upon the synagogue and tries to persuade Jews and Greeks within it. After Silas and Timothy arrive from Macedonia, perhaps with further support, Paul seems to have been freed up to engage in more ministry, without the same need to devote much

of his time to earning his keep. Once again, Paul is largely rejected by the Jews of the city.

His response is to shake out his garments, like shaking the dust off his feet, and to declare himself free of the guilt of their blood. This might recall the task of the watchman, as described in Ezekiel 33, verses 1-6. Paul, as the Lord's appointed messenger, is responsible to deliver his message faithfully.

However, if he delivers that message and it is rejected, the blood of the hearers lies on their own heads. Paul then declares his determination to go to the Gentiles. This wasn't a complete rejection of the Jews on Paul's part.

From Paul's letters to the Corinthians, it seems reasonable to believe that a significant number of the earliest converts and core members of the church in the city were Jews. Furthermore, when he moved on, he would once again begin with the Jewish synagogue. This didn't represent a fundamental re-evaluation of his mission strategy then, just the focus of his mission in the city of Corinth.

There are many converts at this time. Two especially noteworthy converts are mentioned here, Titius Justus and Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue. Some have suggested that Titius Justus might be Gaius, mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1.14 and Romans 16.23. Crispus is also mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1.14 where we learn that Paul baptised him.

The Lord, presumably Jesus, appears to Paul at night in a vision, calling him to continue teaching boldly in the city. He will be preserved by the Lord and will have success in the city, as the Lord has many people there. It seems most likely that this is a reference not to people already converted to the gospel, but to people either marked out for salvation or people who are faithful Jews and God-fearers who have yet to hear the message of the gospel.

Usually, when cast out of the synagogue, Paul would leave the city shortly thereafter. However, on this occasion, he remains much longer. He has a lengthy stay of 18 months in the city, presumably enabling him to teach the young church extremely extensively.

Gallio, the Roman proconsul, was the son of Seneca the Older and the elder brother of the famous Stoic philosopher and statesman Seneca the Younger. He was in Corinth during the period of AD 51-52, which helps us to date Paul's visit. The Jews focus their attack upon Paul, claiming that he is teaching people to worship contrary to the law.

This continued opposition from the Jews might give the impression that, even some time after Paul has been thrown out of the synagogue, his message is making significant inroads among the Jews of the city. The claim of the Jews might be that Paul is proselytizing for a religion unrecognized by the Roman authorities. The Jews' claim might be that Paul is not teaching Judaism, a recognized religion, and for this reason is not a

legitimate religious teacher in the city.

However, the Christian movement is still regarded as a Jewish sect by the Roman authorities. It is important to recognize that, at this point in history, the Christian church is still generally a Jewish one, operating primarily within the social and conceptual world of Judaism. Gallio dismisses the case, seemingly regarding the issue between the Jews and Paul as one between sects of Judaism, rather than between two different religions.

Had the Jews accused Paul of some clear crime or wrongdoing, Gallio would have accepted their complaint, but he sees no reason to accept them on this matter. The identity of the all who beat Sothisnes, the ruler of the synagogue, in verse 17 is unclear. Are they the rejected delegation of the Jews? Are they Gallio's men, Gentile observers? Or are they a mixture of Jews and Gentiles? It isn't entirely clear, but it's most likely that the all were a crowd of Gentile observers who beat Sothisnes as the leading representative of the trouble-making Jews.

Gallio's inaction might remind us of Pilate. As a character called Sothisnes is mentioned in association with Corinth in 1 Corinthians 1.1, many have speculated that this Sothisnes was either already or later converted. Keener remarks upon how many details of Paul's visit to Corinth are either confirmed or possibly strengthened by other references in the New Testament, including but not limited to the fact that Aquila and Priscilla were a married missionary team.

They made their homes available for Christian work and were known to the Corinthians. They had connections with Rome and Ephesus. Paul supported himself while in Corinth.

Crispus was converted and baptised. Timothy and Silas were both involved in the Corinthian work. Paul began his work there before Silas and Timothy arrived.

He passed through Athens en route there. Sothisnes was possibly a convert associated with Corinth. The Corinthian church had a significant Jewish element and Paul later spent a period of time in Ephesus.

After staying for a lengthy further period, Paul returns to Syria and his sending church of Antioch, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. At Sancreia he cut his hair as part of a vow. Whether a Nazarite vow or a private vow, this was likely a Jewish practice and would have been completed by a sacrifice in the temple in Jerusalem, which he may have visited before returning to Antioch.

Paul spends a brief period in the city of Ephesus, reasoning with the Jews in the synagogue and leaving Priscilla and Aquila in the city, declaring his intention to return if the Lord permitted at a later point. Ephesus was another sizeable city, likely even larger than Corinth, with a stronger claim to have been the third or fourth largest city in the Roman Empire. Paul returned to Antioch by way of Caesarea.

After spending some time in Antioch, he began his third missionary journey in verse 23, going throughout Phrygia and Galatia, mostly consolidating work that had already been established, rather than starting anything new. A question to consider, how did Paul explain his reasons for his practice of supporting himself with his own hands to the Corinthian Christians in his correspondence to them? In Acts chapter 18 verse 23, Paul begins his third missionary journey, not long after returning to Antioch after his second. On his return from that journey, in verse 19, he had left Aquila and Priscilla at Ephesus, which is the location of the events at the end of chapter 18 and the beginning of chapter 19.

Paul had intended to spread the gospel in the region of Asia on his second missionary journey, but had been prevented by the Holy Spirit. Now, on his third missionary journey, he probably intends to visit places that he hadn't been able to visit previously. Ephesus was a huge city by ancient standards, one of the largest in the entire Roman Empire.

It was thriving and prosperous in one of the wealthiest regions of the Empire, with possibly more than a quarter of a million inhabitants, although estimates of ancient city sizes are very vague in most cases. It would be a perfect hub from which the message of Christ could spread further, and would provide a stronger bond between the churches in Galatia, Phrygia, Pamphylia and Cilicia, with the newer churches in Macedonia and Achaia. Ephesus historically had ties to Athens, but was a very cosmopolitan place, with lots of foreign religions, within a primarily Hellenistic cultural setting.

Ephesus in Asia also seemed to have been a focus for the Apostle John's later ministry, with the book of Revelation being addressed to seven churches in the region, Ephesus being one of them. The story is picked up before Paul arrives in Ephesus, however. Aquila and Priscilla are still there, where Paul had left them, but an important new figure comes upon the scene, Apollos.

Apollos is, like the others, a Diaspora Jew, whereas Paul is from Cilicia and Aquila from Pontus, Apollos is from Alexandria. Alexandria was second only to Rome as a city of the Empire. It was the largest city in the East, was an important site of learning, and had a large and influential Jewish community.

Alexandria, while in Egypt, was founded by Macedonians, and elite status was held by Greeks. It had a huge Jewish population, with lots of tensions between the Greeks and Jews of the city. Philo of Alexandria had likely died only a few years previously, and it is entirely possible that Apollos had encountered him, and not beyond the bounds of possibility that he had studied under him.

Philo was a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher, most famous for his more allegorical reading of the scriptures, which harmonized them with Stoic philosophy. Apollos is a gifted orator, and powerful in the scriptures. The extent and nature of his knowledge when he first came to Ephesus is unclear.

It seems that he had heard about the message, and even the death and resurrection of Christ. He had received instruction concerning Jesus, but he might have been ignorant of the Church and its mission. He knew about John the Baptist and the movement formed around him, but was unaware of the form that the Jesus movement was taking.

One can imagine, as early disciples scattered and passed through various parts of the empire, many people in places that wouldn't have a church for several years yet would have had a rudimentary but incomplete knowledge of the message, and many others would have had a distorted second-hand impression. He is described as fervent in spirit, which might be a reference either to the fervency of his own spirit, or to that of the Holy Spirit. If it is a reference to the latter, it suggests that Apollos had received the gift of the Holy Spirit, even though he was not yet a member of the Church.

Given the contrast between Apollos and the twelve disciples of John the Baptist in the passage that follows, this might be a reasonable supposition. The Holy Spirit, throughout the Book of Acts, frequently displays his power through bold and effective speech, which Apollos undoubtedly manifests. Indeed, the description of Apollos here might remind us of no one so much as Stephen, back in chapter 6. Apollos speaks in the synagogue, where he is heard by Priscilla and Aquila, who take him aside and instruct him further and more accurately in the way of God.

It seems likely that this was a more extended process of further instruction, delivered in the context of hospitality in their own home, rather than just being a few words exchanged after the synagogue meeting. Their taking him aside implies that they did not publicly respond to him or confront him. Apollos would likely not only have been more receptive to such further instruction, but might well have been eager to receive it from people with a clearer and more extensive knowledge of the message of Jesus than he had received.

Priscilla's role in Apollos' instruction here has provoked much discussion in various quarters concerned with the question of women in pastoral ministry. Priscilla's active participation in the explanation of the way of God is implied, as is the fact that she is educated and informed, and well suited to pass on such instruction. While this was noteworthy, and would have presented Priscilla as an exceptional woman, it wouldn't have been that scandalous or out of keeping with societal norms.

The areas that would have been more restricted would be in public realms, with women acting in public disputation or in the oversight of communities, both of which are matters that Paul speaks of in his letters. Having been so instructed, Apollos crosses over into Achaia, with the commendations of the Ephesian Christians. In this move, Apollos would have strengthened the bonds between the churches of Ephesus and Corinth.

Priscilla and Aquila had come to Ephesus from Corinth, and now Apollos was sent as a sort of return gift from Ephesus to Corinth. In Achaia, he once again demonstrated his

giftedness in speech and argument, publicly refuting Jewish opponents of the Christians, demonstrating from the scriptures themselves that the Messiah was Jesus. This would presumably have involved showing that the Old Testament texts concerning the Messiah clearly pointed to Jesus, that he fit their description.

A different encounter is described at the beginning of chapter 19. Apollos had only known the baptism of John, and when Paul arrives in Ephesus, by which time Apollos was in Corinth, he met some disciples of John who were in a somewhat similar, though contrasting, condition. The contrast between the two is well observed by Robert Tannehill.

Both know only the baptism of John, but they differ at two significant points. First, the effect of the spirit is manifest in Apollos' speech, but the disciples in Ephesus have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit. Second, Apollos, knowing only the baptism of John, is nevertheless able to teach accurately the things concerning Jesus.

In contrast, Paul must instruct the other group that John's baptism of repentance was meant to prepare the people for faith in Jesus, the one coming after John. In the case of Apollos, John's baptism led him to teach about Jesus, because he accepted John's testimony about the coming one, and recognised Jesus as its fulfilment. However, the response by the so-called disciples to Paul's first question in chapter 19 verse 2 seems to lead him to doubt whether they even knew about Jesus, and the need for faith in him.

Paul has to instruct the disciples of John further in the message of John, and then to connect that to Jesus, to whom it was supposed to point. The ministry of John was the starting point for the telling of the gospel in the gospel narratives, and its importance was also underlined at the beginning of the book of Acts, and on a few further occasions within it. Once the twelve disciples of John received the message of Jesus, they were baptised, Paul laid his hands upon them, and they received the Holy Spirit, demonstrating the reception of the Spirit by speaking in tongues and prophesying, whereas Apollos seemingly did not require baptism, they did.

One of the things that these two accounts illustrate is the manner in which the ministry of the early church and its missionaries would have involved the delivery of updates through the many nodes in the growing network of churches and ministers to people who needed various degrees of upgrades or patches of their knowledge and experience of God's recent work in their days. A question to consider. What do we learn of Apollos elsewhere in the scripture, especially in the book of 1 Corinthians? In the middle of Acts chapter 12 we find the apostle Paul in Ephesus, in one of the longest periods of his ministry in any single city.

He spends three months teaching in the synagogue. The fact that he can remain there for so long suggests that they are more receptive than they were in other parts of the empire. Perhaps in a large cosmopolitan city like Ephesus they are more open to new

ideas.

However, there is a progressive hardening of the opposition to Paul. Some become stubborn, they continue an unbelief, and then they speak evil of the way before the congregation. Paul at this point responds by withdrawing from them and he starts teaching in the hall of Tyrannus.

As he withdraws from the synagogue he takes the disciples with him. It seems that a number of people have converted through Paul's message and now they follow him out of the synagogue and into this new context of teaching. Whereas in previous cities when he had left the synagogue no mention had been made of him taking a community with him and starting up a new site of teaching, here a new community of learning seems to have been formed immediately.

The hall of Tyrannus was likely a sort of lecture theatre. Tyrannus might have been the lecturer for the main hours of the day and then after those hours were over Paul could use the hall to teach and debate with other teachers in the city, perhaps spending special time at the end of the day instructing the new disciples. Some versions of the text give the hours of his teaching as from the 5th to the 10th hour at the end of verse 9. That would be from about 11am to 4pm.

Paul would likely be working for his keep in the early morning, during which time Tyrannus was using the hall, and then he would teach for the rest of the day. People would be able to come in during the siesta time in the afternoon and listen to him speak. In such a way Paul would have become one of the known philosophers or teachers within the context of the city of Ephesus.

And the result seems to have been a spread of the word of the gospel from this urban centre throughout the whole region of Asia. We might presume that this context would also have been more familiar to Greeks, to persons who did not come from a Jewish background, and as a result people might have been more receptive outside of the Jewish community. Alongside the founding of this new school, Paul also is performing great miracles.

Even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were used to heal the sick. These handkerchiefs or aprons may perhaps have been sweat rags that he used during his work as a tentmaker. One can imagine people surreptitiously obtaining these and then using them for the sick.

This might also recall the story of the woman with the issue of blood, who touched the garment of Christ and was healed from her condition. The nature of these miracles seems somewhat magical. This is not the typical form in which exorcisms and healings occur.

Darrell Bok raises the possibility that God is dealing with people in a way that they would understand. In a city preoccupied with magic, the healings have a character that is somewhat similar to magic. However, as already noted, we should recall that there are events like this in the Gospels, and also a few events like it in the Old Testament, such as in the stories of Elijah and Elisha.

The summary of the healings and exorcisms that we find here might recall similar summaries of the miracles of Jesus in places like Luke 4, verses 40-41. Now when the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them. And demons also came out of many, crying, You are the Son of God.

But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew that he was the Christ. The difference between magic and miracle becomes clearer in the case of the seven sons of Sceva. He is a chief priest, not a high priest.

A high priest wouldn't be so far from Jerusalem. The healings and exorcisms performed by Paul don't occur through skills or arts, through incantations or formulas, but through the action of God through him. The name of Christ is not used as something by which to manipulate or control God, but has something that is a sign of authorization.

Appealing to Jesus' name by itself does not convey power. The sons of Sceva presume that Jesus' name is a source of power that enables them to manipulate him to act, rather than something that can only be used by faithful persons to whom that power is entrusted. Faith is entirely absent in their more incantational approach.

And the story here indicates the degree of syncretism that existed between Ephesus' culture of magic and Jewish practice. The demons know Jesus and they recognize Paul. Some have suggested a distinction being drawn here between knowing and recognizing.

Whether or not there is, we see examples of this both in the Gospel and earlier on in the story of Acts. Luke chapter 4 verses 33-34. And in the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.

Acts chapter 16 verses 16-17. As we were going to the place of prayer we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination, and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. She followed Paul and us, crying out, These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.

This is a reminder that Paul is fighting against the kingdom of Satan itself, and all these minions are part of that struggle. The demon enables the man to overpower all of the seven sons of Sceva, badly wounding them and stripping them naked, humiliating them.

In this process there is also a humiliation of their false form of religion.

They are shamed, but the name of Jesus is extolled. His name is not just a name that people can use to manipulate things, but it is a name that has been given to faithful persons to proclaim, and to act in terms of as a means of deliverance to oppressed persons. Fear falls upon people, much as after the judgment upon Ananias and Sapphira.

This event provokes many new believers to confess their dabbling in magical practices, openly divulging practices whose power supposedly lay in their remaining secret, bringing them into the light and destroying them. The syncretism of the Jewish sons of Sceva suggests that Ephesus was fertile ground for syncretistic practices, so such a radical disavowal of magic is noteworthy and necessary. The demonic realm is real and powerful, and to thoroughly abandon its powers and turn to Christ alone would be a very powerful public demonstration of the confidence that believers had in the fact that Jesus was Lord over all principalities and powers, that there were no spiritual forces above him.

The burning of the books was a public rejection of the way of life that they represented, an abandonment of the false power that they offered, and a surrendering to Christ. This wasn't a forced confiscation of magical books from others, and the immense value of the material burned is probably an indication of the number of people involved, as well as the huge part that magic played in people's lives. The fact that they would invest so much money in it suggests that this was a major preoccupation for them, born of a desire for power and also extreme fear of these spiritual forces.

Christ has set them free from all of that. The cost of all of the books has been estimated by some as equivalent to 50,000 days wages for an average worker. This would be a catastrophic blow to the Kingdom of Satan within the realm of Asia.

One of the dangers for the early church was always that of displacing the old paganism, yet still being conceived of as a form of religion that functioned in the same way as that old paganism. Alexander Schmemmann discusses the way that the sense of religion of a period can distort Christian faith and practice according to its image. He writes, This means that piety can accept the cult in a key other than that in which it was conceived and expressed as text, ceremony or rite.

Liturgical piety has the strange power of transposing texts or ceremonies, of attaching a meaning to them which is not their plain or original meaning. He gives the example of something that he calls Mysteriological Piety. This was essentially the old patterns of religion that existed before the gospel was accepted, into which Christian notions were then slotted.

As such, it was only half of a conversion. The powers of the old paganism had been swapped out for those of Christ, but the fundamental notion of what religion is, of what it

means to relate to God, had not been sufficiently transformed. As a result, there was a general desire for Christianity to perform the purposes of the old paganism, so church buildings started to be seen as sacred and sanctifying places, and certain holy sites started to attract cults to them.

The external rites and ceremonies of worship started to become more and more elaborate and complicated. This established a sort of external solemnity which sacralised certain ceremonies and actions, emphasising that they were not regular things, in order to develop an atmosphere of sacred and religious fear. Along with this was a sharper distinction between clergy and laypeople, the clergy performing these sacralising rites.

All of this was a distortion of Christianity, which in some of these quarters was trying to do what paganism had done, albeit in a Christian key. Framing Christianity in terms of magic was a huge danger in Ephesus. In these verses we see how God communicated his power in a way that grabbed the attention of such a culture, while decisively distinguishing the Christian faith from it.

A question to consider, what are some of the cultural notions and models of religion that are prevalent in our own day that we might be tempted to reframe the Christian faith in terms of? At the end of Acts chapter 19, Paul is still in Ephesus, where he has been for a few years now. The hearer might even be wondering if he will settle in Ephesus for the long term, expanding his influential school there. However, Paul's eyes now turn to the next stage of his mission.

He is primarily a travelling missionary, not a settled teacher. His plan is to pass back through Macedonia and Achaia, and then go back to Jerusalem. The purpose of this itinerary seems to be in part one of gathering a collection for the saints in Jerusalem.

He has already delivered aid to Jerusalem back at the end of chapter 11. It was at this juncture that Paul seems to have written 1 Corinthians. He describes his travel plans in more detail in 1 Corinthians chapter 16 verses 1-12.

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come. And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem.

If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me. I will visit you after passing through Macedonia, for I intend to pass through Macedonia, and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may help me on my journey, wherever I go. For I do not want to see you now just in passing.

I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. But I will stay in Ephesus until

Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries. When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am.

So let no one despise him. Help him on his way in peace, that he may return to me, for I am expecting him with the brothers. Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brothers, but it was not at all his will to come now.

He will come when he has opportunity. This time seems to have been an important epistle writing period for Paul. During the conclusion of his time in Ephesus, he wrote 1 Corinthians.

After leaving Ephesus and passing through Macedonia, he would write 2 Corinthians. At some point on the return leg of his journey to Jerusalem, he would write Romans. Romans chapter 15 verses 23-28 gives further indication both of the time of its writing, of Paul's further travel plans at the time, and also of the purpose of the collection for the saints in Jerusalem.

The collection for the saints in Jerusalem was a concrete expression of the unity of the people of the land. It was a concrete expression of the unity of the church, of the bringing together of Jews and Gentiles. There might have been few, if any, Gentiles in the church in Jerusalem, but such a gift was a way of expressing the bond that existed between the different parts of the church of Christ.

This was one of the reasons why Paul's missionary journeys, his epistle writing, and his gift collecting were so essential. They knit together churches scattered throughout the empire, establishing a unified and communicating network, where otherwise there might have been isolated and divergent groups. It is interesting, however, that in the book of Acts, we do not have the same emphasis upon the collection for the saints in Jerusalem as we do in the Pauline epistles.

This might be surprising. One can imagine that an emphasis upon the collection for the saints in Jerusalem would bring the story full circle. It would be a way of expressing the way that the Gentiles were being included in the pattern of giving to each other and supporting each other that was so emphasised in the pattern of life of the Jerusalem church.

It would also underline the unity of Jew and Gentile in a single body supporting each other, confirming the message of the Jerusalem council. The fact that this theme is present but very clearly put to the background might be an indication that the themes that Luke foregrounds are of extreme importance in his mind. Only a theme of such prominence and significance might explain why these themes are not so emphasised.

Paul sends Timothy and Erastus ahead to prepare the way for him. This is particularly

important because they need to prepare the gift of the churches, to give the churches time to gather something together. Paul's expression of his need to go to Jerusalem and then on to Rome might remind us of the geographical destiny that was marked out for the church's mission at the beginning of the book of Acts.

Jerusalem and all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. It might also remind us of Christ's purposeful movement towards Jerusalem in the gospel. Like his master, Paul has a destiny to fulfil and that destiny involves travel to two key destinations.

Paul's success and the success of the Way, the name for the early Christian movement at the time, leads to disturbance in Ephesus. The Jews had opposed him earlier when he had been teaching in the synagogue but now persecution is instigated by pagan idolaters. Paul is largely absent from this particular episode which focuses upon Demetrius and the mob that he forms, literally the Ecclesia, a chaotic parody of the true assembly of the people of God.

We might, as Darrell Bark notes, have an allusion to this event in 2 Corinthians 1, verses 8-10. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. Bark, along with other commentators, observes that Luke seems to have particularly robust sources for the events in this section with a seemingly strong local knowledge.

The unrest that we read of at the end of this chapter is similar to other events that we read of in 1st century settings. It is entirely believable in its context. The disturbance is provoked by the concerns of Demetrius and other Ephesian craftsmen that the success of Paul's labours are threatening the success of their trades, which depend heavily upon the demand from a now decreasing pool of idolaters.

A host of commercial enterprises rested upon the cult of Artemis or Diana as she was known in Roman religion. Her temple in Ephesus was tremendously large. According to some estimates it was four times the size of the Parthenon and much larger than a football pitch.

Her cult was hugely influential and the commerce surrounding it correspondingly immense. Support for the cult of Artemis in Ephesus seems to have arisen in part from the falling of a meteorite in the region, as the town clerk notes in verse 35. Demetrius is a silversmith and he makes silver shrines of Artemis.

Perhaps his construction of idolatrous things through silver might be contrasted with the way that the disciples destroyed a vast quantity of books that were worth an incredible amount of silver. In the verses preceding, Demetrius gathers together the craftsmen and the workmen and rouses them to action by alerting them to the fact that their trade is going to suffer if Paul's mission succeeds. The more that Paul gains followers, the more that demand for their services, for their products, will diminish.

So much of the commerce of the city depends upon the cult of Artemis and the civic pride of the place also. He is concerned that not only will there be less demand for their products, they may even start to come into general disrepute, people starting to look upon the worship of idols and the trade that surrounds them as something to be rejected as false and depraved religion. Given the success that Paul had been having in the region, this was not an entirely unreasonable fear.

The response of the craftsmen and the workmen is anger, and the commotion that they cause spreads throughout the city, so that all sorts of people are joining in, in a movement that they do not entirely understand. They rush to the theatre and take with them Gaius and Aristarchus, who had been Paul's companions from Macedonia. One of the things that is revealed here is the mercenary character of both pagan and Jewish worship.

So much that presents itself as piety is really about business concerns, about the service of mammon. What's also happening here is an anticipation of the riot that will occur in Jerusalem when Paul is taken in the temple, presumably because he has defiled it when he has done no such thing. The disciples surrounding Paul do not allow him to go into the assembly in the theatre, while people would not be able to prevent him going to Jerusalem, where they knew that he faced imprisonment.

Here they do have success. Paul has friends also among the Asiarchs, rulers of the city, who also persuade him not to go into the theatre. Recognising the parallels between this account and the story a few chapters later of Paul being taken in the temple, we might see some sort of parallel being drawn between the temple and the theatre.

In the confusion and the commotion, many in the crowd do not know why they have been assembled. Some of the crowd put forward a Jew named Alexander, who wants to make a defence to the assembly. It is not impossible that this Alexander was the same Alexander the coppersmith that Paul refers to in 2 Timothy 4, verse 14, a man who according to that text caused him much harm.

However, as Alexander is recognised to be a Jew, he is considered by the general crowd to be aligned with Paul. Like Paul, he is a Jew who opposes the idolatry of the city. Their response is to cry out in support of Artemis for almost two hours.

Finally, the town clerk is able to bring some quiet to the situation. He settles the crowd and delivers a speech. As he points out, neither Paul nor his companions had committed sacrilege.

They did not blaspheme Artemis. Paul and his disciples did not have an iconoclastic approach to pagan artefacts. They were respectful and they kept the peace.

Paul had friends among the authorities of the city, among the Asiarchs. Throughout the

epistles of the New Testament, the posture of Christians in society is described as one of keeping peace, of not causing nuisance, of not being busybodies, of being at peace with people around and seeking to be held in high repute by all. The anger of Demetrius and the other craftsmen are without grounds.

If they had any reasonable grounds for complaints against Paul, the courts are open. They can go to them. However, they are the ones causing a disturbance.

They are the ones that are really the threat to the city. The city of Ephesus enjoys a free city status and if it has commotion and riots like this, it may find that status severely curtailed. Demetrius and his companions are the ones that are really putting the city at risk.

A question to consider. Reading this account, how can it help us to understand the way in which the church did and did not turn the world upside down? After the riot in Ephesus, Paul now leaves Macedonia at the beginning of chapter 20. He is now working his way back to Jerusalem where his third missionary journey will be completed.

Going through Macedonia, he goes through Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea before moving down towards Corinth. He is retracing the steps of his second missionary journey. While he is doing this, he is encouraging and building up the churches along the way, bringing news from one place to another, bringing ministers from one place to another and collecting gifts to bring back to Jerusalem.

Alongside this, he is also writing some letters. He most likely writes 2 Corinthians at the time in Macedonia, as we might see in 2 Corinthians 9 1-3. Now it is superfluous for me to write to you about the ministry for the saints, for I know your readiness, of which I boast about you to the people of Macedonia, saying that a chair has been ready since last year, and your zeal has stirred up most of them.

But I am sending the brothers so that our boasting about you may not prove empty in this matter, so that you may be ready, as I said you would be. Paul on this journey is accompanied by several companions, including Luke himself, the wee returns at Philippi. These companions represent various churches in the various regions, many of whom seem to intend to return with Paul to Jerusalem.

Why such a large company for a missionary journey that has seemingly completed? It seems most likely that they are a delegation of many of the churches in various parts of the empire, bringing their respective gifts back to Jerusalem with Paul, representing their congregations and so doing. This is a sort of harvest of the nations, which Paul is eager to bring to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost, the feast of the harvest. This would bring the narrative full circle back to the initial gift of the spirit at Pentecost in Jerusalem at the beginning of the book.

Now there is a new gift being given at Pentecost. Now the spirit is bringing in a much greater harvest, and perhaps Paul is intending to perform a sort of symbolic presentation of the harvest of the Gentile mission field with these men. The fact that there are seven named persons might even relate to the seven lambs that are offered as part of the Pentecost sacrifices.

They have been gathered together around the time of the feast of first fruits, and they will be presented in Jerusalem at Pentecost with their gifts for the poor. This will be an expression of the unity of the church in Christ. Like Jesus his master, the apostle Paul is also travelling towards Jerusalem and his capture there, surrounded by a company of disciples.

Paul will also write the epistle to the Romans shortly after this, as we can see from Romans chapter 15 verses 25 to 26. At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem, bringing aid to the saints, for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. We can easily fall into the trap of reading Paul's letters as abstract theological treatises.

We can forget that they were delivered to particular bodies of people, in particular places, in particular times. This is really a critical juncture in Paul's ministry. He is trying to bring back this large group of Gentiles that will represent the harvest of the Gentiles, and he is writing to churches, preparing them on the way.

He is also writing to prepare ahead of time for his fourth missionary journey, which he hopes will take him to Rome. We can easily read Paul's letters as books abstracted from time, as if Paul was writing about theology in a vacuum. But reading Paul's letters against the backdrop of the book of Acts, we can see that Paul was a traveller, he was a missionary.

He was a man of action, and his letters are actions too. His letters would often be designed to prepare the way for him in his mission, or perhaps on occasions as an alternative to a visit where he lacked the time or the opportunity. This, of course, is especially the case for the prison letters.

In Troas, around the time of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, he gathers with the disciples there for a meeting on the first day of the week. He is trying to instruct them more deeply in the truth, and it seems that he talks for a very long period of time. He talks for hours until midnight, and then beyond that, to the daybreak.

It is of very great importance to him that he grounds them as firmly as he can in the truth during the time that he has. In some respects, we might see some Passover themes here. There is a sort of Last Supper in an upper room.

There is death at midnight, just as the angel of death came at midnight upon Egypt. Paul

is also preparing to leave for a long journey that will lead him up to the time of Pentecost. The reference to the Christians meeting on the first day of the week here raises the question of whether this had become more common practice by this time.

1 Corinthians 16, verse 2 also mentions the importance of the first day of the week. Whether or not this was just a pragmatic shift at this point, later on it would become clear that the movement from the last day of the week as the day of worship to the first day of the week was a significant theological movement. The celebration of the Sabbath on the seventh day of the week commemorated the conclusion of the creation.

It also commemorated the formation of the covenant at Sinai. A shift to worship on the first day of the week seems fitting when the event that is being recalled is a new creation, established on the first day of the week, the day of resurrection, and also the establishment of a new covenant, established in Christ's resurrection too. Paul speaks at length in a room where many are gathered together, and one of the young men, Eutychus, falls asleep.

In this room where they gathered there are many lamps. Many commentators suggest that the lamps might have something to do with Eutychus falling asleep. The lamps affect the air quality, but Eutychus is sitting in an open window, so he is probably not experiencing the worst of the air quality.

And the fact that Paul is speaking on and on around midnight is likely reason enough to explain why he fell asleep. The emphasis upon the many lights does draw a distinction between a realm of great light and a realm of darkness. It's midnight and it's pitch black outside, whereas inside, where the disciples are gathered, there is great light.

Lamps in the upper story of a house might also make us think of lights in the heavens, the third story of the created cosmos. Beyond this we could think about the connection between lights and Pentecost. At Pentecost, the disciples were lit like lamps, with tongues of flame descending upon their heads.

Eutychus falls down from the window and he is taken up dead. This is the fourth of four stories in scripture that involve the raising of a dead body in an upper room. The other examples are found in the books of the kings and then earlier on in the book of Acts.

Elijah raises the son of the widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17. Elisha raises the son of the Shunamite woman in 2 Kings 4. And Peter raises Dorcas in Acts 9.36-42. In each of these cases, it is associated with an upper room. Paul's bending over Eutychus as part of the means by which he is raised up might remind us of the way that Elijah and Elisha lie upon the bodies of the children that they raise up.

The contrast between light in the room and darkness outside, death outside and the raising to life inside, might help us to see some symbolic import in this story. Feeling

keenly the death and the darkness that surrounds them, it would be comforting and encouraging to the church at Troas to know that God is more powerful than all of the death and the darkness that might assail them. This section concludes with a lengthy itinerary of their journey back past Ephesus.

The detailed character of this itinerary is perhaps understandable because Luke is with them. This is a first person account that he is giving at this point. Beyond that fact, however, the itinerary might remind us of certain stories that we find in the Old Testament, as Abraham goes throughout the land, or maybe as the people conquer the land going from one place to another.

The story of Paul's missionary journeys is in many ways achieving something similar. A question to consider, this passage ends with an expression of Paul's intention to get back to Jerusalem before the day of Pentecost. It's important to him to be there at that point, and as we have seen, there may be some symbolic connection between what he's doing in bringing the gift from the Gentiles and the Gentiles themselves at the time of the Feast of Harvest.

Nevertheless, the reference to a Jewish feast, and Paul's eagerness to get back in time to celebrate it, might surprise some hearers. Yet this is by no means the only occasion where we see something like this. Where else in the Book of Acts can we see references to Jewish feasts, and what significance is given to them at these different junctures? The second half of Acts chapter 20 contains a very important farewell speech from Paul to the Ephesian elders.

He had worked in Ephesus for about three years, one of the longest single stretches of his ministry. He had formed a school of disciples who had left the synagogue and gathered around him at the Hall of Tyrannus. Many Jews and Gentiles had been converted from across the whole region of Asia.

Now, knowing that he will never see them again, he instructs the elders concerning how they should carry on in the ministry. This speech provides a sort of formal close to his regular ministry before he is imprisoned. It focuses upon Ephesus, but for the hearer of Acts it has a broader reference.

It is a handing over of the ministry of the Apostle to the ministry of the elders, from the first generation of the church to the second. Robert Tannehill observes that there is a chiasmic, or there and back again, structure to the sermon. Verses 18-19, you know, serving the Lord with all humility, is paralleled with verse 34, you know that these hands served.

The second half of verse 18 to verse 20, the whole time, tears, in public and from house to house, is paralleled with verse 31, three years, night and day, with tears. Verse 20, I did not shrink from announcing, is paralleled with verse 27, I did not shrink from

announcing. And verse 21 is paralleled with verse 24, bearing witness and to bear witness.

At the centre of this pattern in the text is the statement that the Holy Spirit is constraining him to go on to Jerusalem, where he knows that he will face persecution. Paul is presenting himself here as one who has faithfully fulfilled his charge. It is reminiscent of 1 Samuel 12, verses 1-5, where Samuel declares to Israel that he has been faithful in all that was committed to his charge.

And Samuel said to all Israel, Behold, I have obeyed your voice in all that you have said to me, and have made a king over you. And now, behold, the king walks before you, and I am old and grey. And behold, my sons are with you.

I have walked before you from my youth until this day. Here I am, testify against me before the Lord and before his anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Or whose donkey have I taken? Or whom have I defrauded? Whom have I oppressed? Or from whose hand have I taken a bribe to blind my eyes with it? Testify against me, and I will restore it to you.

They said, You have not defrauded us, or oppressed us, or taken anything from any man's hand. And he said to them, The Lord is witness against you, and his anointed is witness this day, that you have not found anything in my hand. And they said, He is witness.

Paul here is setting a model for the elders as well. He is presenting the way that he has been faithful in his ministry, and he is thereby preparing them to be faithful in theirs. He seems to be especially concerned to absolve himself of any accusation of omission.

He has taught them every part of the message of God. He has taught them in every context, in public, and then also from house to house. He has taught every person, both Jews and Greeks.

Every person is made aware of every part of the truth that they need to know, and he pursues them with a passion and a commitment. He is deeply emotionally involved in the task, with all humility and with tears and with trials. He was doggedly determined that no scintilla of God's truth would pass any person by.

As a minister, Paul is exemplary, and he presents himself as an example, and calls for other ministers to act as examples. Titus 2, 7-8 2 Timothy 3, 10-11 1 Timothy 3, 11-12 Paul is going on to Jerusalem. Later the Holy Spirit will reveal his fate in Jerusalem, that he will be imprisoned.

As Agabus the prophet, for instance, declares that he will be taken in chains, other disciples seek to dissuade him from going. But here we see that the Holy Spirit is the one who first directs him to go. Paul's great concern is to be faithful in the task that he has been given.

He does not account his life to be of value in and of itself. Rather, all that matters to him, whether it be by persecutions and sufferings and hardship, is that he will go on to complete his course, that he will do what God has called him to do, that he will end his race as a faithful servant. Especially poignant is the fact that he will not see any of the faces of these men again.

This is the last time that he will be with them. He knows that he is going on to afflictions and imprisonment. This is a final parting.

Paul has poured out his life for these people for a number of years, and now, like a father declaring his final will and blessing, he is about to pass away, and they must take up the charge. In his insistence that he is innocent of all of their blood, we should recall Ezekiel 33, verses 1-9. He said, Speak to your people and say to them, If I bring the sword upon a land, and the people of the land take a man from among them, and make him their watchman, and if he sees the sword coming upon the land, and blows the trumpet and warns the people, then if anyone who hears the sound of the trumpet does not take warning, and the sword comes and takes him away, his blood shall be upon his own head.

He heard the sound of the trumpet, and did not take warning. His blood shall be upon himself. But if he had taken warning, he would have saved his life.

But if the watchman sees the sword coming, and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any one of them, that person is taken away in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at the watchman's hand. So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me.

If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul. Paul is especially concerned to vindicate himself from any charge of shrinking back.

The danger for an overseer of a flock is to be obliging, not to upset people, particularly the people who are paying your bills. It is very easy to think yourself speaking prophetically when you are speaking loudly about the sins of outsiders, but when you speak to the sins of insiders, you lose friends and alienate people. In such situations, you may be tempted to shrink back, not to actually declare the word that needs to be declared.

There are few people that we can be more afraid of than our friends. And the danger of shrinking back also comes from outsiders too. Standing up to outsiders can lead to the

possibility of persecution and attack, standing up to insiders to isolation and ostracization.

The Christian minister, the guardian of the flock, must be fearless in the face of both. He has been given the most serious of commissions, and he must discharge it faithfully. The portrayal of a shepherd here is not just someone with theological training and expertise.

While he is supposed to be emotionally involved at the deepest of levels with the congregation, he is not to be just a therapist and encourager. He is someone who is a guardian, a protector, someone who must be defined by love, courage, wisdom and other such virtues as he defends and he provides for the flock. He will lay down his life for the flock.

That may not be in death, it may be in his labours. We can see the example of Paul here again. Paul was working tirelessly.

He supported himself. If the version of Acts chapter 19 verse 9 that gives the hours of his teaching is accurate, or if it at least communicates an original tradition, we get a sense of how tireless Paul was. He would be providing for his own needs in the morning presumably, working from daybreak until about 11 o'clock, and then teaching from 11 until about 4. We have another sense of his diligence in the meeting at Troas, where he will speak through the entirety of the night to make sure that no piece of God's truth escapes them, that they have everything that they need to go forward as he departs from the scene.

We can think a lot about the sacrifice that it takes to lay down your life in martyrdom or in suffering for other people. But Paul is an example of someone who is laying down his life in his labours, not just in his suffering. Paul knows that he must faithfully perform his commission as a servant of God.

Such work requires a mastery of oneself first. He teaches this to Timothy in 1 Timothy chapter 4 verse 16. Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching.

Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers. He will absolve himself of any blood that would be on his head. He will also offer himself as a model and example to all the others.

Paul is also drawing upon a greater model and presenting them with such a model in verse 28. They must pay careful attention to themselves, they must guard their own lives, and in guarding that they will be more equipped to guard the flock. But that flock has been committed to them by the Holy Spirit, and they are taking care of the Church of God which he obtained with his own blood, the blood of his own dearly beloved Son.

In this verse we see the work of the Trinity in bringing the Church together. The Holy Spirit has committed the ministry of the Church to particular ministers. They are caring

for the Church of God the Father, the assembly that is named for Him, that he obtained with the blood of his Son.

The Son laid down his life for this. The Holy Spirit has committed this charge to people. The charge is of the Church of God, the Church that is named by the Father, and it is a Church that has been bought at the price of the Son's blood.

Could any commission be greater than this? Nothing is more important than being diligent and faithful in performing it. He warns them that a time is coming when fierce wolves will come in among them. These are presumably false shepherds and false teachers that will divide and devour the flock.

These fierce wolves will seem to be driven by their own glory. They speak perverted things and are designed to draw people after themselves, to set up their own groups of disciples. Elsewhere in the New Testament there are several warnings of the fact that false teachers will arise in the last days.

As they near the time of judgment upon Jerusalem in A.D. 70, as they face rising persecution from Rome, they must be prepared for the descent of the wolves upon their flock, wolves that will seek to scatter and to devour. Paul's example of three years of tireless and passionate ministry is something that they must remember. They must be alert.

Night or day they need to be prepared. We might recall the way that our Lord teaches His disciples to be prepared for false teachers and to be awake as He delivers farewell instructions after three years of ministry among them. Paul is following once again the example of his Master.

He commends them to God. God is the one that will be able to protect them. As they look to the word of His grace, that will be able to build them up, that will assure them of the inheritance that belongs to the people of God.

He concludes his speech by stressing that he did not seek any material gain from them. He coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. He worked with his own hands to support his ministry.

This was not strictly necessary nor required of him, but he wanted to make clear to them that the ministry of the Gospel was a gift, not something that was a means of gain for him. His concern was to build up the weak. False teaching in the Gospel of Luke and in the Book of Acts is often associated with a desire for money.

It was a desire for money that led Judas astray. It was a desire for money that led the scribes and the Pharisees to devour widows' houses. It was a desire for money that led Ananias and Sapphira to lie to the Holy Spirit.

It was a desire for money and the offer of money that led Simon Magus to ask for the power of the Holy Spirit, as if it were some magical power. It was the desire for money that sparked so much of the opposition to Paul and his fellow missionaries from both Jews and Gentiles. They saw that their status and their trades were being threatened, and as a result they opposed the Gospel.

Paul is not driven by a desire for money. He is driven more than anything else with the desire to help the weak, to be faithful to his Lord, and to follow the example that it is more blessed to give than to receive. Departing from them with prayer, with which people who are far distanced from each other can be held together in the unity of the Holy Spirit, and with much weeping, embracing and kissing, Paul departs for the ship, never to see them again.

A question to consider, drawing from the many different threads of this chapter, how should we describe the task of an elder and the virtues that he will need to perform it? Earlier in chapter 20 Paul had interrupted the return journey to Jerusalem at Miletus to deliver a final charge to the Ephesian elders. Now, after an emotional parting, at the beginning of Acts chapter 21, he rejoins the company on the ship and they continue their journey. The we section continues here, Luke is present as part of the company and now they are going to be moving towards Jerusalem together.

There is a detailed itinerary here of their journey, as there was in chapter 20, with each brief stop on the way mentioned. It's perhaps reminiscent of the itinerary that we find on the Wilderness Wanderings, given in places like Numbers chapter 33 or Deuteronomy chapters 1 to 3. They're moving from the west coast of modern Turkey, round past Korea in the Roman province of Asia, dropping off on the islands of Kos and Rhodes before landing in Patara in Lycia. At Patara they board another, presumably larger ship to go beyond the islands and out into the wider Mediterranean, travelling towards Phoenicia.

The distance from Patara to Tyre was about 400 miles and has been estimated to take about 3-5 days of sailing. Their journey seems to be going smoothly, when they arrive in Tyre they have the time to spend a week with the disciples there, presumably they are well on target to be in Jerusalem for Pentecost. The disciples here express concern about the fact that Paul is going to Jerusalem.

It is revealed to them by the Spirit what awaits Paul there and presumably they infer from that that he should not go. However, Paul's journey to Jerusalem is itself by the constraining of the Spirit, as we see in Acts chapter 20 verses 22-23. And now behold I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.

Such sufferings were always essential to Paul's mission, as we see in the instructions given to Ananias in Acts chapter 9 verses 15-16. But the Lord said to him, Go, for he is a

chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel, for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name. Paul is being conformed to Christ.

In the Gospels, as Jesus had travelled with his disciples towards Jerusalem, he had revealed to them on a number of occasions what awaited him in the city, and they had sought to dissuade him, as they realised what lay ahead. Paul experiences much the same thing. On the one hand, the Spirit has told him that he must go towards these sufferings.

He is constrained by the Spirit. On the other hand, the Spirit is revealing to the people around him that he is about to go and the fate that awaits him. And in the process, the Spirit is actually increasing pressure against him.

Now he needs not only to follow the constraining of the Spirit against all the weakness of the flesh within, he also has to follow it against all the persuasions of his friends without, who have been given part of the picture by the Spirit, but not the full picture. The Spirit in the process is testing and proving Paul. All of the disciples at Tyre, with their families, go with Paul and his company down to the beach, praying with them before sending them off.

They stop off at Ptolemaeus and visit the Christians there for one day, and then on to Caesarea, where they stay with Philip. Philip the Evangelist was one of the seven who was called back in chapter 6, and it describes him as having four unmarried daughters here who prophesied. Luke might have several reasons for mentioning the daughters at this point.

First of all, it draws our minds back to Acts chapter 2, verses 17-18, and the prophecy of Joel, as it was quoted by the Apostle Peter in his sermon on the day of Pentecost. And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even on my male servants and female servants in those days, I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.

Luke often has male and female pairings. We've seen this at several points in the book of Acts. We also see the same thing in the book of Luke, for instance with characters like Simeon and Anna.

In chapter 2 of his Gospel, he describes Anna as a prophetess. These four young girls are not described as prophetesses, but they do prophesy. Perhaps Luke reserves the terms prophet and prophetess for people who have more established ministries.

Whatever is the case, these young women reflect very positively upon their father. A spiritually gifted father has raised spiritually gifted daughters. And here, their activity of

prophecy parallels with the character of Agabus, a male prophet who delivers a message concerning Paul.

Caesarea is for this company the last stop before Jerusalem. This is the point where Paul faces the crunch moment, the temptation to turn back. It is a significant point for Luke as well.

Spending time like this with Philip and his family would give him an extended period of time to spend in conversation with one of the important sources for his book of Acts. Much of the content of chapters 6-8 of the book would rest upon Philip's testimony. The prophet Agabus was previously mentioned in chapter 11 verse 28, where he foretold the famine that would come upon the world.

Now he performs a prophecy with Paul's belt to symbolise what will happen to him in Jerusalem. In Luke's account here of the prophecy of Agabus, he's drawing attention back to previous events within his Gospel of Luke. The moment of decision that Paul faces here is being compared to the choice that faced Christ as he moved towards Jerusalem, and then later in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Agabus declares this is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles. This is a somewhat inexact description of what actually happens as the Romans take Paul into custody after their commotion in the temple. One could make a case that he's not really delivered into their hands by the Jews.

However, although Agabus' statement can be defended in its accuracy, its main effect is to parallel Paul and Christ. We have statements in Luke that are very similar to this concerning Christ. Luke chapter 18 verses 31-33 The delivering over to the Gentiles will happen in Paul's case as well.

When the disciples hear about this, they weep and try to urge Paul not to go to Jerusalem. Paul begs them not to weep. It will only make his journey harder.

He must go to Jerusalem. He must suffer for the name of Jesus Christ. He's ready to be imprisoned and even to die.

Here Paul takes up the language of the apostle Peter that is given to us in Luke chapter 22 verse 33. Peter said to him, Lord I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death. In contrast to Peter's overconfident and failed commitment, Paul will carry his commitment through.

Eventually they resign themselves to Paul's determination. Let the will of the Lord be done. And this again recalls events from the Gospel of Luke.

In Luke chapter 22 verses 41-42 If you are willing, remove this cup from me.

Nevertheless, not my will but yours be done. Paul is facing his Gethsemane moment here and he faithfully moves on in the steps of his master.

Looking at the description of prophecy in this chapter, it's worth reflecting upon the way that prophecy can be incomplete. In chapter 20 verses 22-23, Paul knows that suffering and imprisonment awaits him. But he does not know exactly how things will play out.

Prophecy can be inexact as we see in chapter 21 verse 11. As Agabus describes the way that Paul will be handed over to the Gentiles. It may also lead to false conclusions as we see in verse 4 of this chapter.

Where the disciples infer from the message of the Spirit that Paul is going to face persecutions and imprisonment. That he should not go up to Jerusalem. This further suggests that prophecy can be conditional.

The prophecy declares what will happen if Paul goes to Jerusalem. The prophecy does not declare that Paul going up to Jerusalem and being imprisoned is inevitable. Paul has a choice.

He could turn back at this point. All of this description of prophecy suggests that prophecy needed to be handled with great care. It would reveal part of the picture but people could easily be misled concerning it and follow it in false directions.

The prophet also seems to be in danger of giving an interpretative spin upon his prophecy. As we see in the case of those who tried to dissuade Paul from going to Jerusalem. Because they mistakenly took the prophecy concerning his imprisonment there to be an indication that he should not go.

Even beyond the discernment between true and false prophecy then. Prophecy seems to have required considerable amount of wisdom in its handling. The prophecy that we see in this chapter is limited counsel.

It isn't firm, authoritative and infallible direction. Some of the disciples from Caesarea go up with them to Jerusalem. They bring them to the house of Natan of Cyprus.

He is an early disciple. Perhaps as a Jerusalem Christian with connections to Cyprus he would somehow have had connections with Barnabas. They all stay with him and the fact that they are staying with an early Christian in Jerusalem perhaps serves as an indication that he is another important source for Luke's account of the early years in Jerusalem.

Someone who had been present for the early years in Jerusalem would be able to fill in many parts of the story that we see in chapters 1-8. A question to consider. Where else in the New Testament do we see Paul tested concerning his sufferings in a way that is reminiscent of Christ? Paul in the second half of Acts chapter 21 on his return from his third missionary journey has just arrived in Jerusalem from Caesarea.

He has been accompanied by some Christians from Caesarea and a company of Gentiles and others that he had brought with him. This is presumably near the time of Pentecost as it had been Paul's intention to be in Jerusalem for Pentecost, perhaps as a symbolically appropriate time to present the Gentile believers as first fruits of the harvest field of the nations and to present the gift that had been gathered among the Gentiles for the poor Christians in Jerusalem to the church there. It had been foretold that suffering and persecution awaited him in Jerusalem and many of the disciples had tried to discourage him from going there on his journey back but the Holy Spirit was constraining him to go so he wasn't going to turn aside.

Luke has been framing Paul's journey towards Jerusalem as a playing out of the pattern of Christ's life in Paul's own. Paul is walking in the footsteps of his master. However, there are other matters more immediately at play.

The Gentile mission had been rapidly growing and the appropriate relationship between Jews and Gentiles was an issue of great concern and has been throughout the book to this point. The more that the Gentile mission expands and the more that pagan Gentiles convert and come into the church, the more that the relationship between Jews and Gentiles would be a cause of concerns, suspicions and tensions. A very great deal depends upon Paul's relationship with the Christian leaders in Jerusalem.

The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem would largely have been pious Jews who followed Jesus. The rising numbers of Gentile Christians, who by now would have been far more than a merely peripheral group around a Jewish movement, would have caused tensions for Judean Jewish Christians who might have been wondering what implications the rise of a Jew-Gentile church had for their relationship to their Jewish heritage. The situation had been exacerbated by rumours that had been spreading concerning Paul, that he had been opposing Jewish practices and traditions among the Diaspora Jews, that he was intentionally Gentilising the church.

If the issue of Judaising was the pressing problem when the first Gentiles were converting, now that great numbers of Gentiles are converting, the fear of Gentilising is the more pressing one. As Craig Keener makes clear, at issue here is the spirit of the Jerusalem Decree. The Jerusalem Council had determined to ensure that the Gentile converts would be free to live as converted Gentiles.

Implicit in this agreement was the reciprocal recognition of Jews by Gentiles. The Jews should not Judaise the Gentiles and the Gentiles should not Gentilise the Jews. Also at stake was the witness of the church to the observant Jews in Jerusalem and elsewhere, who had heard the slander that Paul was a subversive Gentiliser.

John Berkeley, cited by Keener, offers three helpful categories for thinking through some of the issues at stake. The first is that of assimilation, which is integrating into Greco-Roman society and abandoning distinctive Jewish customs. The second category is

acculturation, which is the acquisition of the language and literary heritage of the majority culture through education and other means.

And the third is accommodation, which refers to the ways in which Jews could express their own faith in terms of the values, ideals and forms of Hellenistic culture and literature. In terms of these three categories, Berkeley argues that Paul was highly assimilated on account of his eating and associating with Gentiles. He was only moderately acculturated, his canon was clearly scripture, and while he had some knowledge of rhetoric and a rudimentary awareness of Greek literature and philosophy, he does not seem to have been especially knowledgeable in these areas, and he operated principally in traditional Jewish categories.

Finally, he wasn't very accommodated. For Paul, the Gentile world was a sinful one, and he clearly sets himself against it and its moral values. Paul doesn't try to transpose scriptural, conceptual structures and language into those of the wider Gentile society.

His approach on issues such as sexuality, idolatry and scripture are manifestly those of an observant Jew. Paul's assimilation was, as we see elsewhere, for the sake of mission, as he puts it in 1 Corinthians 9, verses 19-23, For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews.

To those under the law I became as one under the law, though not being myself under the law, that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law, not being outside the law of God, but under the law of Christ, that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak.

I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. Paul doesn't seem to have completely abandoned Jewish practices, however he is prepared to put such practices to one side for the sake of mission.

Although this does not mean that he is requiring Jews in general to lay aside their culture, it does serve to relativise those practices in a way that would have led many to view Paul as a serious compromiser or even as an apostate. Especially as claims about Paul were exaggerated through the spread of rumours concerning him, this would cause particular problems for the Jerusalem Christians as they related to the Jews around them. They were presenting themselves as pious and observant Jews and yet they countenanced Paul's supposedly gentilising mission.

Meeting with James and the elders, Paul and his companions were welcomed and recounted all that God accomplished through them, leading the elders to glorify God. However, James and the elders are concerned to deal with the rumours that have been spreading, which have been dismaying observant Jewish Christians and harming their

witness among their fellow Jews. Paul has seemingly come to Jerusalem with the express aim of strengthening relations between Jews and Gentiles within the church.

The collection for the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem has been a repeated issue of concern in his epistles as a very practical expression of the union of Jews and Gentiles that he proclaims. Now he arrives in Jerusalem, it seems as if this great unifying gesture of Paul and the company of Gentiles that he has brought with him, bringing the gifts of their various churches, is in danger of being entirely in vain, as unsettling rumours concerning him are provoking deeply damaging distrust in the very place where he is seeking reciprocal recognition and love. We should also consider the tensions that have been rising in Jerusalem for some time.

Jewish nationalism had become much more pronounced and there were a number of instances of serious violence. News will have gotten around that Paul is now in the city and people's eyes will be trained upon him and upon the Jerusalem leaders in their handling of him. Without compromising the understanding of salvation that had been presented by the Jerusalem council, the Jerusalem leaders want Paul publicly to perform an action that manifests the fact that he honours Jewish customs and isn't a Gentiliser.

The leaders make clear that this is not in any sense meant to compromise the statement they made at the Jerusalem council. Such Jewish practices are not being required for standing before God. Nor do they themselves believe that the claims of Paul's accusers really have great substance to them.

Although Paul may be more assimilated in the context of the Gentile mission, this does not mean that he ceases to regard himself as a Jew or that he has just shrugged off Jewish customs. In chapter 16 verse 3, Paul himself circumcised Timothy in order to respect Jewish scruples. Jewish customs may not be required for standing before God, but they have a continuing cultural significance and more than that represent a sort of religious practice, in a somewhat older sense of that term religious.

Like the monastic might adopt religious orders as a form for their Christian piety, for these Jewish Christians, Jewish practices may have been regarded as a context for the practice of their Christian faith. The practices are not incumbent upon everyone, they don't establish the person who adopts them on a special footing with God, but they do represent a framework of piety that can assist them in their spiritual practice, in their growth, in their witness and in their enjoyment of faithful community. The Jewish leaders propose a plan, there are four men under a vow and Paul should pay their expenses and join with them in purifying himself, thereby demonstrating his respect for and support for the continued practice of Jewish customs.

The exact nature of the vows of the men in question is not entirely clear and a number of suggestions have been advanced. Darrell Bach lists four of these. First, Paul is being purified for travelling in Gentile areas, whereas for the others it is in connection with the

Nazarite vow.

Second, Paul is sharing in the end of the men's vow for the remaining week. Third, the four men have contracted uncleanness and need to be cleansed. Or four, Paul's cleansing is for his own vow, mentioned in chapter 18 verse 18.

The text doesn't seem to settle the question for us and while a few of these options are possible, none is without its attendant questions or problems. The men performing a Nazarite vow does seem more likely though. Paul seems to be entirely willing to comply and he initiates the process of purification with these four men in the temple.

The purification period is almost over when some diaspora Jews from Asia recognise Paul in the temple and stir up the crowd against him. It is likely that this was during the Feast of Pentecost, for which Paul had wanted to be back in Jerusalem, and that the Jews from the province of Asia were visiting for that. Paul had been the cause of ructions in the Jewish community in Ephesus.

A number of people had split off from the synagogue there and joined his school. While the Judean Jews had their issues with and their suspicions of Paul, they were unlikely to be quite as fiercely opposed to him as the Jews from the province of Asia. They accuse Paul of two things.

The first charge is that he teaches everyone everywhere against the people and the law and the temple. The accusation here is similar to that made against Stephen in chapter 6 verses 11-14. The accusation that he taught against the people might have arisen from his assimilation with Gentiles in certain contexts.

The second charge is that he has brought Trophimus, an Ephesian Greek, into the temple, defiling it. This was a mistaken charge, albeit one that they seemed to think was accurate. A Gentile was not supposed to enter the court of the Israelites in the temple.

Hearing these charges, the whole city was stirred up. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple. Word of the mob and the commotion reached the tribune, who led a cohort of a thousand men.

He took a large contingent of soldiers with him. As he was accompanied by centurions, we might surmise that at least 200 men would be present, as Bach reasons. And he rushed to defuse the situation.

When the Jews saw the soldiers coming, they stopped beating Paul. The tribune tried to discover the cause of the commotion, but he could not get a clear picture from the crowd. The crowd was confused.

They didn't agree among themselves. Unable to discover the cause, the tribune removed Paul from the scene. The soldiers actually have to carry him up the steps because the

crowd is so violent.

Much as they had done with Christ, the crowd followed, crying out that Paul should be executed. The description of the confused violent mob here is also very similar to the violent mob of chapter 19 in Ephesus. A question to consider.

The limitations of ancient channels of communication made inaccurate and hostile reports and rumours a very real danger, instilling distrust and stirring up anger in situations where the record often could not be set correctly swiftly or straightforwardly. Are there any lessons that we can learn from the New Testament church's handling of and defusing of rumours? In Acts chapter 22, Paul gives the first of his speeches in his defence, in which he speaks of his Jewish upbringing and his former persecution of the church. He recounts his conversion event on the road to Damascus, his calling and Christ's sending of him to the Gentiles.

This is the beginning of Paul's time as a prisoner. Luke gives extended attention to defence speeches in the book of Acts. Daryl Bach notes that there are 97 verses of defence speech, representing 39% of the prison defence section, but only 47 verses of missionary speech, representing only 21% of the missionary verses.

Perhaps most surprising is the fact that there are 239 verses narrating Paul's imprisonment and defences, but only 226 verses narrating his missionary work. Bach suggests that this is because, for Luke, Paul the defender of the faith is as important as, if not more important than, Paul the preacher of the faith. Paul's defence of the faith involves distinguishing it from violent revolutionary or political movements, while showing its continuity with and fulfilment of Jewish faith.

Such defence of the faith would be particularly important in the earlier years of the church, as it was an unknown quantity, with lots of rumours circulating about it, and its status relative to the state and to Judaism still unclear. Paul has just been taken by the Roman Tribune after the crowd was stirred up by the Jews from the province of Asia. They seized Paul in the temple and sought to kill him.

Coming on the scene after Paul was seized, the Roman Tribune is under the misapprehension that Paul is an Egyptian insurrectionist, a character who is also mentioned in the writings of Josephus. When Paul makes clear that he is not, but speaks Greek because he is a diaspora Jew of Cilicia – the Greek speaking was likely a factor in the Tribune's misidentification of Paul – he also asks to address the people. That the Tribune allows Paul to address the people is very surprising.

A number of scholars have argued that this is proof that the speech is inauthentic. However, it makes more sense when we consider that the Tribune might believe that the crowd are under the same misapprehension as he was. He is giving Paul this opportunity because it would potentially calm the crowd down by clarifying his true identity.

Paul addresses the people in what Luke calls the Hebrew language, by which he probably means Aramaic, which was the language that most of the people would have spoken. Hearing him speak Aramaic, the people quieten down even more. The fact that he addresses them clearly in Aramaic would itself have been a mark in his favour with the audience.

The diaspora Jews from the province of Asia that were accusing him would likely not have been able to speak good Aramaic, but would probably have spoken Greek. Paul's Aramaic was the Aramaic of someone who had lived many years in Jerusalem, which would have inclined the audience to listen more favourably to him than they might otherwise have done. Elsewhere, Paul seems to be able confidently to describe himself as a Hebrew of the Hebrews.

His speech itself would reveal that he is not just an outsider. Paul gives a potted autobiography, an autobiography in which he mentions certain details that are unique to this speech. He was born in Tarsus in Cilicia, a highly cultured city towards the east of the Mediterranean coast of modern day Turkey.

However, he was brought up in Jerusalem, where it later seems that Paul's sister still lives. He studied under the great rabbi, Gamaliel. He was trained as a strict Pharisee and was zealous for God and his law.

In Galatians 1.14 he writes of himself, Paul was an outstanding student of the scriptures, who seems to have had advanced training, beyond the typical Jewish student, likely receiving both secondary and tertiary education in Jerusalem. In this opening part of his speech, Paul identifies with the heroes of his defence. He was once where they are, he knows where they are coming from.

Indeed, with the support of the high priest and the council, he once persecuted the people of the way, a fact to which the Jewish leaders can testify. So zealous was he in his persecution, that he persecuted some of them to the death. Paul's Damascus road experience is narrated three times in the book of Acts, once by the narrator himself and then twice by Paul in his defence speeches.

The accounts all differ from each other. While they can be harmonised as faithful accounts of the actual events, they each emphasise different details. Paul was addressed from heaven, the voice from heaven asking why Paul was persecuting him.

Upon requesting the identity of the speaker, the speaker revealed himself to be Jesus. From this account we learn that the dazzling light from heaven shining around him came around noon and that the light was seen by Paul's companions, even though they did not see anyone. Chapter 9 verse 7 says that the companions heard the voice, which Paul's account here might be seen to contradict.

Although Paul probably means that they did not understand the voice. A similar hearing of the sound of a voice from heaven, but failure to understand it, is described in John chapter 12 verses 28 to 29, where some of those present think that the voice from heaven was thunder. The fact that Paul's companions see the light around him and seemingly hear the sound of the voice, even if they don't understand it, makes apparent that this is not merely a vision or a dream and would serve to confirm Paul's testimony.

These are real world phenomena, albeit ones that might need the opening of people's spiritual perception fully to perceive. Blind because of the dazzling light, presumably the light of the Shekinah glory, Paul is led by the hand into Damascus. While chapter 9 mentions the Lord's direction to Ananias, here that is not recounted, but Paul begins with Ananias' coming to him.

Ananias was a man with a good reputation among the Jews of Damascus, who observed the law. As with his reference to his studies under Gamaliel earlier, Paul is underlining the fact that he and the Christian movement that he represents have respect for the law. Paul receives his sight again through Ananias, who delivers God's call to him.

This is further information from that which we received in chapter 9. Paul has been privileged to know God's will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth. The blessing of knowing God's will grounds Paul's confidence that he has been given the revelation of a mystery hidden from before the foundation of the world, something that he speaks of on a number of occasions in his epistles. He also sees the Righteous One, the risen Christ, becoming an apostle as one born out of due time.

He is, by this vision, made one of the witnesses of the resurrection. He also hears Christ speaking to him, establishing him as one who both hears and sees Christ as a witness and as one called. Ananias then instructs him to rise, to be baptized and to wash away his sins, calling on the name of the Lord.

The washing away of sins is connected with baptism, not because there is something magical about the waters themselves, but because the faithful performance of the ritual of baptism receives the promise that God gives in it. Paul has been accused of teaching against the people, the law and the temple. He has shown his connection to the people in various ways, from his use of Aramaic to his description of his upbringing in Jerusalem.

He has indicated his respect for the law at a couple of different points as well. In his description of his upbringing and also in his description of Ananias. Now we see the Christian Paul praying in the temple and receiving a vision there.

This is not the sort of thing that we might expect from one opposed to the temple. The vision is not recorded back in Acts chapter 9. Within the vision, the Lord directs Paul to leave Jerusalem quickly, as his message will be rejected and his life is apparently in danger. In Acts chapter 9, it is the Jerusalem Christians who discover the plot against him

and send him away.

It seems that Paul had a confirmatory vision from the Lord about this danger. The moment that Paul mentions that Jesus instructed him to go to the Gentiles though, the mood of the crowd completely turns. They raise their voices in anger and they call for him to be killed.

This is not the first time in the book of Acts where someone was cut short before they had finished a speech. For differing reasons, Stephen's speech, Peter's message at Cornelius' house and Paul's Areopagus speech were all cut short. A question to consider, in what other places in the New Testament do we have accounts of Paul's pre-conversion life? What were some of the things that might have made Paul rather unusual or especially prepared him for God's later purpose for him? In Acts chapter 21, Paul was taken in the temple by the Romans after the Jewish crowd were on the verge of killing him, following the accusations of the Jews from the province of Asia.

What had initially been intended to serve as a visit to strengthen relations between Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and Judea and Gentile Christians elsewhere in the empire, was now provoking the most hostile of reactions among the Judean Jews. Of course, Paul had been told this already by the Holy Spirit and various prophets had warned him about what awaited him in Jerusalem on his journey back. However, now he is in captivity, with people seeking his life.

His first attempt to defend himself before the crowd in the temple had just failed. The moment that he mentioned that he was sent by God to the Gentiles, the crowd wanted him to be put to death. The extreme hostility provoked by the prospect of the Gentile mission might recall the reaction that Jesus received after his sermon in Nazareth back in Luke chapter 4 verses 25-29.

But in truth I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land. And Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian.

When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath, and they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. To the Jews in the temple, Paul's reference to going to the Gentiles would seem to confirm the accusations of the Jews from Asia, showing that Paul really had pro-Gentile beliefs and that he was probably compromising the covenantal purity and uniqueness of Israel. The fact that all of these things are occurring in Jerusalem should be considered.

Jerusalem is the city that kills the prophets in the New Testament. Jesus was rejected as

a prophet in Jerusalem, and his servant Paul must be rejected there too. Taking up the story at the end of chapter 22, the tribune, who had let Paul speak to the crowd to try to calm things down, now wants to get to the bottom of why the crowd so violently worked up about him.

The tribune probably did not understand Aramaic, so didn't hear what it was that made the crowd so furious at him. The tribune determines to take Paul back to the barracks and to flog him, hoping thereby to get the truth out of him. While Paul had received a beating with the rods in Acts chapter 16, here a whip would have been used, and the whip would be one with a wooden handle and leather thongs, with bits of metal and bone within it.

In Acts chapter 16 in Philippi, Paul had revealed that he was a Roman citizen after he had already been beaten. Here he does so just as they are stretching him out on the whipping frame to be whipped. Daryl Bach notes that this is likely at Gabbatha, where Jesus was probably also whipped.

On several occasions in the book of Acts, Paul uses some aspect of his identity to his advantage. He will do so again shortly after this, when he will identify himself as a Pharisee, suffering on account of his belief in the resurrection of the dead. We see Paul becoming all things to all men in 1 Corinthians 9, verses 19-23, so it was better to reach them with the gospel.

That sort of adoption of different identities is in order to remove any obstacle to the acceptance of the gospel. However, here Paul is employing his ability to move between identities as a means of disguise and evasion. One moment Paul is a Hebrew of the Hebrews, a man raised in the city of Jerusalem, learning at the feet of the great Rabbi Gamaliel, speaking fluently in Aramaic and deeply conversant in the Jewish law.

A few moments later he is an eloquent Greek-speaking Roman citizen from a cultured city in Cilicia. The next day he will be the Pharisee born of Pharisees, who is being tried because of his belief in the resurrection of the dead. None of these identities is a false one, but Paul's adeptness in adapting his identity and approach to his circumstances and audiences is very clearly an important skill for his mission.

Bock quotes Cicero and Roman citizenship. To bind a Roman citizen is a crime, to flog him an abomination, to slay him is almost an act of murder. Paul presumably has evidence on his person to demonstrate his identity.

Paul received his citizenship from birth, while the tribune had to pay a large sum to obtain his, possibly with a bribe. We might wonder whether Paul's father was a man of some status. Ben Witherington makes the point that Paul was probably reluctant to reveal his Roman citizenship, especially in a situation where he was being accused of compromising with gentile identity and behaviour.

As soon as Paul's Roman citizenship is known though, they withdraw and call off the flogging. The next day, however, the tribune wants to discover the nature of the accusations against Paul and summons the Sanhedrin to meet, placing Paul before them. Paul begins by looking intently at the Sanhedrin.

Perhaps he is seeking to get their attention, or perhaps he is carefully sizing them up in preparation for his use of their divisions against them later on. He was presumably fairly familiar with the Sanhedrin from past involvement with them. He had lived in Jerusalem for several years, been an outstanding student of the law, was taught by Gamaliel, one of their members, and had also been authorised by them in his persecution of the church.

There are probably still a number of familiar faces on the Sanhedrin, even though many of them have changed. Luke draws close parallels between Jesus' trials and Paul's trials. Jesus was tried before the council, before Pilate, before Herod, and then was brought before Pilate again.

In Acts, Paul is tried before the council, before Felix the governor, before Herod Agrippa II, and before Festus. Luke is eager for his heroes to recognise that Paul, like other key figures in the book of Acts, is conformed to his master. Paul begins his defence by declaring that he has lived his life before God in good conscience, similar to the claim that he will later make in chapter 24 verse 16.

As Craig Keener notes, he is almost certainly speaking in Greek, the Jerusalem elite would be fluent in Greek, and more importantly the tribune would be able to understand and finally discover what the nature of the complaint against Paul actually was. The high priest Ananias, before whom Paul is being tried, was high priest from around 47 AD to 58 or 59 AD. He had a reputation as a corrupt man, using wealth and force to get his way.

Ananias orders that Paul be struck on the mouth by those standing near him. Paul rebukes him in response, calling God to judge him, saying that God will strike him, describing him as a whitewashed wall, perhaps a reference to his hypocrisy, in the same way as Christ refers to whitewashed tombs in the book of Matthew. He accuses Ananias of sitting to judge him, according to the law, but yet actually not observing the law.

As a whitewashed wall, he appears clean, but there is nothing behind the surface. He is not offering the impartial justice that the law requires, but has already determined Paul's case in his mind. He is immediately rebuked by those standing nearby him.

Why would Paul declare such a judgment or a curse upon the high priest of God's people? And strangely enough, Paul seems to accept this rebuke. He says that he would not have declared this, had he known that he was the high priest, and then goes on to quote Exodus 22, verse 28. You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people.

It is a strange series of events, and a number of different proposals have been made to try and explain it. Some have suggested that, for some reason or other, Paul did not recognise that it was the high priest that gave the order. He was struck by those standing alongside him.

Perhaps the signal was given by the high priest, and Paul was looking elsewhere. Or perhaps his failure to recognise was a result of his poor eyesight, an affliction that many scholars have speculated that Paul suffered from. Maybe he has just been away from Jerusalem for so long, and he doesn't know that Ananias has become the high priest.

Maybe it is just an immediate reaction, and he doesn't consider that it is the high priest that he is speaking of. Or perhaps he is giving a response that is purposefully ironic. He is affirming the law, and his knowledge of it, but he is implying that the high priest is not to be recognised as the legitimate high priest.

Determining between these positions is not easy, though perhaps we should see, whatever position we hold, that there is some irony here. Whether Paul intends it to be so or not, his statement concerning the high priest is true, and though seemingly retracted, it still stands as such. Paul, as we have noted, is familiar with the Sanhedrin, and as he looks out at them, he can recognise that there are different camps among them.

They are divided among themselves, between the sect of the Pharisees and the sect of the Sadducees. Perhaps now that he recognises that he is not going to get a fair hearing, he decides to exploit this, and also to make his trial about the resurrection. This serves in part as a calculated means of causing confusion, but it also functions to make Christ central to the trial, rather than the hearing merely being about Paul himself.

The reason why he is on trial, he insists, is because he believes in the resurrection. That is the hope of Israel, but it is also the reason why he has faced so much opposition. Paul knows the Sanhedrin well, and as a result of his statement, they are instantly divided between the two camps of the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

The Sadducees, as Luke describes them, deny that there is a resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit. The exact meaning of these denials is not entirely clear. The resurrection, presumably, is the bodily resurrection.

The angel or spirit might be a reference to different modes of intermediate state. Perhaps it is a reference to different angelic hierarchies. Or maybe it is a reference to speculation about angels.

Or maybe it is a reference to not different modes of post-mortem life prior to the resurrection in an intermediate state, but different modes of resurrection itself. Resurrection as a sort of angelic being, or resurrection as a spirit. There is immediately

after this a reference to an angel or spirit in verse 9. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him? Elsewhere in the Gospels, and also in Acts chapter 12, there are references to angels or spirits in association with persons.

These angels or spirits seem to be some sort of post-mortem manifestation of the person, a post-mortem expression that isn't just connected with the shadowy beings of Sheol. The Pharisees raise the possibility that some spirit or angel has spoken to Paul. As the assembly is thrown into tumult and becomes violent, the tribune takes Paul away from them, fearing that he will be torn to pieces.

That night the Lord appears to Paul again, declaring that he will testify concerning him in Rome, just as he has in Jerusalem. Whatever dangers face him on the way, whatever dangers await him, to all intents and purposes, Paul is immune until he reaches the city of Rome, where the Lord has a great purpose for him. A question to consider.

In this chapter we see Paul using different aspects of his identity in a chameleon-like fashion, using them as shrewd means of disguise and evasion. Are there any ways in which we might follow his example in our own situations? Paul was taken in the temple by the Romans, delivering him from the mob who were about to kill him. The tribune, Claudius Lysias, was trying to get to the bottom of things, to discover why the Jews so hated him.

In chapter 23 he has just testified before the Sanhedrin, but his mention of the resurrection had produced such dissension in the council that he once again had to be rescued by the Romans. That night the Lord appeared to him and told him that he would have to testify concerning him in Rome. Paul has faced a number of plots to this point in the book of Acts, and has been delivered from each one of them.

There were plots against him in Damascus and Jerusalem in chapter 9, and in Greece in chapter 20. Now he faces a seemingly more serious plot, about which he is alerted by his nephew. Jesus of course had plots against him during the period of his ministry also.

Once again this plot is instigated by the Jews. Their oath not to eat or drink until they kill Paul might recall the rash vow of King Saul back in 1 Samuel chapter 14. There are 40 of them involved, which is a very large number, and they go to the chief priests and the elders, telling them about their conspiracy and getting them involved.

The chief priests and elders would have to ask the tribune to bring Paul down to them, and then while they were on the way, they would strike Paul when he was exposed. The involvement of the chief priests and elders is important here. The Jewish authorities and aristocracy, for all of their supposed lawfulness and their cooperation with the Romans, are only too happy to employ assassins and to align themselves with bandits, going against the law of Rome.

Paul has been accused of subversion, but here the very authorities are corruptly acting against the law, and quite purposefully seeking to circumvent the justice of Rome. The sort of corruption and violence from the authorities that we see here is also testified to by the writings of Josephus, who describes the sort of intrigue that was found among the Jewish authorities of the period, and the collusion of the aristocracy and chief priests with robbers and brigands. Earlier in this chapter Ananias the high priest clearly acted contrary to the law in his handling of Paul's case.

Now we are beginning to see how deep the lawlessness of the rulers and the aristocracy goes. This sort of corruption would ultimately contribute to the downfall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Here it also serves an apologetic purpose for Luke.

Paul and the Christian movement, while they are accused of breaking the law and being seditious, are law-abiding and not seditious, whereas the accusers from the Jews are profoundly compromised and complicit with brigands and robbers. News of the plot gets to Paul's nephew. Considering the number of people involved, 40 people, presumably younger men, and the chief priests and the elders, it might not be entirely surprising that word leaked out.

Paul had spent most of his earlier life in Jerusalem. His sister presumably moved to Jerusalem at the same time as he did, and likely married there. We know that Paul was a very well-connected person prior to his conversion.

He studied under Gamaliel, he had access to the high priest, he advanced in his studies more than others, and he was a Roman citizen. It is likely that his sister, his brother-in-law and his nephew moved in the higher parts of Jerusalem society, where his nephew might have gotten wind of the plot. As a relative of Paul, Paul's nephew would also have had access to him to provide needed support when he was in the barracks.

Paul is in the barracks, not a prison, and various allowances would be made for him to receive visitors, particularly visitors of family that would support him. After Paul's nephew informs him of the plot, Paul instructs the centurion to bring his nephew to the tribune. The tribune listens carefully to the testimony of the nephew.

He presumably knows enough about the Jerusalem authorities not to trust them. The report of this plot presumably had the ring of truth to it. Knowing that 40 men lie in ambush, presumably well armed, in a place where they would be unseen and where terrain would be to their advantage, he determines to send a large contingent of soldiers with Paul.

Paul was also given a mount to ride, presumably to allow him free movement if they were attacked. The size of the force sent with him is surprising. It is very large, about 470 men, 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen and 200 spearmen.

It might be the case that hearing these rumblings and plots, the tribune is concerned to give a show of strength. Whatever is the case, we should see God's providence in this situation. The Lord has delivered Paul out of plots before, and now he does so again.

The tribune, Claudius Lysias, sends a message with the contingent to the governor Felix. It is possible that Luke had access to the original letter. The letter briefly describes the tribune's part in Paul's case, and the plot against him.

The tribune clearly skirts over certain details that might be inconvenient to him, for instance the fact that he only found out that he was a Roman citizen as he was about to whip him. Along with sending Paul to Felix, he has also instructed the accusers of Paul to bring their case before Felix. The group escorting Paul splits up at Antipatrus.

The most dangerous leg of the journey having been completed, the soldiers can return to Jerusalem while the horsemen go on with Paul. Antipatrus was about 37 miles northwest of Jerusalem, about halfway to Caesarea. Upon his arrival, Paul was presented before the governor Felix along with the letter that Lysias sent.

Felix promises a hearing when Paul's accusers arrive. A question to consider, what can we say about the relative presentation of the Jewish and Roman authorities within the book of Acts? After the plot to kill Paul in chapter 23, Claudius Lysias the tribune sent Paul to the governor Felix in Caesarea. In Acts chapter 24, Paul makes his defence before Felix after the spokesman Tertullus presents the case against him.

Paul is walking in the footsteps of Christ here. As we have seen, Paul's trials and hearings in the book of Acts can be mapped onto Jesus' trials and hearings in the book of Luke. Jesus was tried before the council, before Pilate, before Herod and then was brought before Pilate again.

In Acts, Paul is tried before the council, before Felix the governor, before Herod Agrippa II and before Festus. One of the effects of Luke's focus upon speeches of defence at the end of the book of Acts is that of presenting the hearer with a more forensic framework for thinking through the issues at stake in the book. These are issues of justice, issues of truth as well as being issues that have ramifications for social order and for political allegiance.

Beginning the book focusing upon crowds and ending the book focusing more upon kings and rulers is a way in which Luke communicates the implications of the gospel for every area of social life. Only five days after Paul has come to Caesarea, Ananias, some elders and a spokesman or legal advocate Tertullus come up from Jerusalem. The fact that the high priest himself comes up to Caesarea might be an indication of how significant a threat they view Paul as, as Jeff Myers has observed.

Notable by their absence, however, are Paul's original accusers, the Jews from the

province of Asia. Perhaps they were only in Jerusalem for Pentecost and have since returned. However, the seeming absence of any witnesses is very telling.

It is possible that Luke was able to get access to the notes of this trial, as various commentators have noted. Many of the details have a clear ring of historical veracity. Tertullus begins with ingratiating praise for Felix.

He associates Felix with and praises him for his establishment of peace. This might add force to his case against Paul. Felix's honour lies in his being a peacemaker and a peacekeeper.

And Paul is a man who stirs up riots and provokes the masses by being prepared to desecrate a temple. He is a threat to civil peace and order. He is a political agitator, a leader of a dangerous sect and someone who is prepared to profane the temple.

It is worth noting that there is no mention of the very specific charge that was made against Paul, that he actually brought the Ephesian Trophimus, the Gentile, into the temple. Rather, there is merely the general claim that he attempted to profane the temple. And while the original claims against Paul were that he spoke against the law, the temple and the people, here Tertullus tries to lean more into the fact that he is a political and social agitator.

He is someone who is causing unrest. A figure like Paul should not just be the concern of the Jewish authorities, he should be the concern of the Romans who try to keep the peace. This can't be dismissed as merely a religious matter.

Verse 7 is missing in many translations, because a chunk of verses 6-8 are not found in many more reliable manuscripts. And we would have judged him according to our law, but the chief captain Lysias came and with great violence took him out of our hands, commanding his accusers to come before you. Tertullus invites Felix to examine Paul.

He will discover from Paul the confirmation of everything that he has been accused of. In the absence of any other witnesses, they are hoping that Paul will end up giving evidence against himself. When Tertullus has finished, Felix indicates that it is Paul's turn to speak.

Paul, like Tertullus, begins with a reference to Felix as the governor, in a way that is designed to make Felix serve his defence. Tertullus had tried to use Felix's character as a peacekeeper, as something to push him to act against Paul, and now Paul employs Felix's longer tenure as governor as evidence that he is not a troublemaker within the region. Indeed, it was only 12 days from the time that Paul first went down to Jerusalem to the time he was brought up to Caesarea.

He went for the purpose of worship, and there was no evidence whatsoever that he was a troublemaker. He wasn't disputing with anyone, he wasn't stirring up a crowd, he

wasn't found in the synagogues of the city making trouble, nor was he found in the temple doing so. The claims that his adversaries bring against him have no proof to go with them.

However, if they want a confession, he is only too happy to give a confession. His confession is that he worships God according to the way. They might call it a sect, but Paul believes everything written in the Law and the Prophets, and this is the way he is worshipping the God of their fathers.

Even the men who are accusing him seem to have belief in God that there will be a resurrection, and this is the conviction that informs Paul himself. Beyond that fact, Paul takes pains to have a clear conscience towards both God and man. While riots may often start in response to Paul's message, Paul is not someone who goes around trying to cause trouble.

He doesn't instigate riots, he doesn't purposefully try to incite people by profaning temples or speaking directly against deities. He seeks to live at peace with men, and he seeks to live faithfully before God. Although trouble follows Paul around, he can honestly say that he is not the one who really causes it.

While Tutullus' accusations have a more political edge to them, Paul is also concerned here to answer the claim that he speaks against the Law, the people and the Temple. He presents himself as a faithful and observant Jew. He has been absent from Jerusalem for many years, for about five years, and then he comes up to bring alms to the nation.

He's someone doing a good work, he's presenting offerings at the Temple, and he's providing relief to the people. When he was found in the Temple, he was purified, he was not profaning it. His accusers don't mention Trophimus here, so he doesn't mention Trophimus.

That charge brought against him by the Jews from Asia may have been dropped as there was no evidence to substantiate it, nor witnesses to corroborate it. We should also note that this is the one place in the Book of Acts where we have confirmation of the fact that Paul was going to Jerusalem to present the offering to the Jerusalem Church. While it may be surprising that something that occupies so much of Paul's attention within his epistles is largely passed over in silence in the Book of Acts, it seems that the other events of this visit overshadowed the gift somewhat.

Paul underlines the importance of the absence of the Jews from Asia. Their absence, as the people who made the accusation that first provoked the riot, is a very strong point against his opponents. He makes clear that the only thing that the people who are actually present have witnessed is his time in the Council.

Unless they have a meaningful accusation to make against him on account of that, then

they really do not have a case. The major incident in that whole hearing was Paul's statement that he was being tried on account of the resurrection of the dead. Once again, at the end of his response, Paul is underlining the point that he is on trial because of his witness to Christ, and it seems clear that Luke wants his hero to notice that it is really Christ and his message that is on trial here.

Paul is the apostle of Christ, and he is being tried as the apostle of Christ. It is the message that is really on trial. This is seen in part as the more specific accusations fall away, and the more general accusation that he is a troublemaker, that his message is that of a sect, and other such more general accusations come to the forefront as the main thing that Paul's accusers have against him.

To sum up then, Paul points out that his accusers do not have a strong case against him. The actions that he is being accused of are against his known character. There are no witnesses to the things that he is being accused of.

The claims being made against him are implausible. He had very good reason to be in Jerusalem as the bearer of the gift to the Jerusalem Christians, and it could easily be substantiated that he was with the people who had taken the vow. He was only there for 12 days before he ended up in Caesarea.

The first day he came from Caesarea and arrived in Jerusalem. The second day he met the elders. On the third to the ninth days he was probably being purified with the men who had taken the vow.

On the tenth day after he was taken in the temple, he was before the Sanhedrin. On the eleventh day the plot was discovered, and on the twelfth day he was brought to Caesarea. It doesn't leave him a lot of time to foment rebellion.

He makes clear that the real reason he is on trial is because he believes in the resurrection of the dead. This belief in the resurrection, at the very core of Paul's faith, something that is bound up with his witness to Christ, is the reason why they are opposed to him. They are opposed to him because of Christ, not because of anything that Paul himself has done.

Having heard the case from Paul's accusers and Paul's response, Felix does not cast judgment. Rather he puts them off, saying that he will wait until Lysias the Tribune arrives. We are informed that the reason for this is that he had rather accurate knowledge of the way.

Perhaps he had learned from someone like Cornelius. As the governor in Caesarea, it would not be surprising if he had some dealings with the centurion living there. Likewise, his wife Drusilla is a Jew and would probably have knowledge of elite Jewish women, among whom there were a number who were associated with the early Christian

movement.

Presumably he knows enough to recognize that the Way is not a political movement designed to be a threat to Rome's authority. He probably also recognizes that the Jewish authorities are not to be trusted, that this is really a religious dispute, and that what is really at stake is the authority and power of the religious leaders. He is not about to let himself be drawn into such a situation.

Paul is returned to the custody of the centurion, but he is given more liberties, while prison rations were mostly just designed to keep the person alive, his friends can bring him extra support to make sure he is healthy and provide for other needs, perhaps even making it possible for him to do some writing. Because the centurion has been given these orders, it will also mean that the visitors will not be harassed as they would usually be by the guards, who would often expect bribes or take things from visitors before they would be allowed to see the prisoner. A question to consider.

Looking at Tertullus' speech and Paul's speech, how specifically does Paul respond to the accusations brought forward by Tertullus, and how does he play after Tertullus' speech in other ways in his response? After the high priest Ananias, the elders and Tertullus had come before Felix, and Paul had given his defense, Felix adjourned the trial until Lysias the Tribune would arrive. Now at the end of chapter 24, we discover that he summoned Paul before him again, this time with his Jewish wife Drusilla present. As Craig Keener notes, Drusilla might have appreciated having someone like Paul, who was familiar with Greco-Roman thought, and was able to express traditional Jewish convictions within that sort of idiom, having a potential influence upon her husband.

Paul's speaking before Felix and Drusilla here is also part of the way in which he fulfills what Christ foretold in Luke chapter 21 in the Olivet Discourse, in verses 12-13, And Paul takes this opportunity to bear witness here, he speaks boldly about faith in Christ Jesus, shorthand for the gospel message. More specifically, he speaks about righteousness, self-control, and the coming judgment. These are core implications of the Christian message for someone in the office of civil authority.

Felix is such a ruler, and he must submit the authority of Christ as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Civil authority comes under the rule of Christ. A governor like Felix bears the sword, but he is responsible to Christ for the way that he does so.

He must learn about righteousness, he must learn about self-control, a classic virtue for rulers in Greco-Roman thought, but here framed in terms of Christian teaching. The ruler without self-control is apt to be tyrannical. The leader, however, who has controlled himself, will be much less likely to use his power to prey upon others, or to fulfill his lusts.

As we learn more about Felix as a character, we will see that he has failed in this regard,

and is a corrupt ruler in many respects. A message of judgment to come was also very prominent within the teaching of Paul and the other apostles. There was a higher throne to which this world's authorities must answer, and the fact that such judgment would come, and the one by whom it would be rendered, was announced by the raising of Christ from the dead.

Paul makes the same point in his Areopagus speech in Athens in Acts chapter 17. Here we might get some indication of the fact that Paul has a particular form of his message that is especially targeted at those who exercise civil or political authority. Felix seems to be rattled, and he sends Paul away, saying that he will call him again when he has the opportunity.

He continues to talk to him on regular occasions, but he does not free him. This is not the brief postponement of Paul's trial that we might have anticipated. We begin to realize that Felix is a corrupt ruler.

He is hoping to be given a bribe. The longer he delays, the greater the pressure would be for Paul or his friends to give one. He also wants to appease the Jews by keeping Paul imprisoned, and yet he knows that Paul is innocent, so he does not want to condemn him.

Two full years elapse before Porcius Festus replaces Felix as the governor of the province. Three days after Festus arrives, he goes up to Jerusalem, and at the very start of his tenure as governor, the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews present him with Paul's case. They want him as a favor to them to bring Paul back to Jerusalem.

They are hoping to ambush and kill him on the way. This is the second time that they have played the part of brigands in trying to take Paul's life through an ambush. Festus' rejection of the petition of the chief priests and the leading men of the Jews highlights divine protection of Paul.

Festus was a very new ruler, and they are requesting a favor at this point, which would have put them in his debt and created goodwill at the outset of his governorship. The petition seems to have been made with some insistence too. Festus, however, seems to be wary.

He invites the leading men of the Jews to join him in going down to Caesarea, where they can bring their charges against Paul if there is anything wrong about him. Unbeknownst to Festus, he is protecting Paul in this way. The providential protection of God should clearly be seen to lie behind all of this.

God has a purpose for Paul, and Paul will come to no harm before that purpose has been fulfilled. Festus only stays in Jerusalem for a few days, 8-10 days, and then he goes down to Caesarea, and immediately, on the very next day, he takes up his seat in the tribunal

to judge, and orders Paul to be brought. As Kena observes, there is likely a great irony here.

There was quite likely a backlog of cases after Felix's tenure as governor. As we have seen, he used his power to imprison people as a means of extracting bribes. However, the Jewish authorities' concern to get rid of Paul actually leads Festus to expedite his case, and to deal with him immediately.

The Lord actually uses the enemies of Paul to move his case up the queue. What's more, seemingly as a result of this expediting of his case, he gets to speak to Agrippa and Bernice shortly afterwards. It is possible that Luke had access to Roman archives.

There were carefully kept records, and speeches would be of similar length to those that we see in this chapter. Festus is accompanied by a number of Jews from Jerusalem, who come to present the case against Paul. They take a very confrontational tone, but they cannot prove their charges.

Paul's response gives some indication that both Jewish and Roman legal concerns are at play. Is Paul a rabble-rouser among his own people, opposing the law, the people and the temple, as he was accused of a few chapters ago? Is he seditious against Caesar? He insists that both are not the case, he's a good Jew, and he's a good citizen. The Jews had earlier asked of Festus that Paul be brought to Jerusalem to be tried there.

Although Festus was wary, he still wishes to do the Jews a favour in offering him a trial in Jerusalem. He might be suggesting a Jewish proceeding over which he presides. But Paul recognises that the Jews are not to be trusted.

He had been involved in their murderous plans against Christians before, so he has seen things from the inside. He knows better than to trust them. He wishes for justice to be done.

He isn't seeking to avoid death. And there is an implicit criticism of Festus here. He knows that Festus is too much swayed by political concerns, and that he might not get justice from him.

He makes clear that he knows that Festus is aware that there is no substance to the allegations made against him, and that if Festus were to do this favour for the Jews, he would effectively be handing Paul over to them. At this point then, he makes the key move of appealing to Caesar. He gives himself over to the protection of the state.

He rejects Jewish oversight of the Christian church in the process too. This turning away from the court of the Sanhedrin, and turning towards the Emperor for justice, is one more sign, one more step, on the parting of the ways of the early Christian movement and the Jewish authorities. Daryl Bach notes that what became an appeal for Caesar's judgement was originally the right to have the people, rather than an official, render

judgement.

By the time of the first century, this had become a matter of the highest official casting judgement in the case. This request was outside of the official code of law, so Festus would have enjoyed some latitude in how he handled the appeal. This also gives Festus an out, a way of escape.

Paul knows that Festus is entangled in Jerusalem politics and its machinations, and that it would make a righteous judgement very unlikely. Festus, in some ways, has his hands politically tied. The exact character of an appeal to Caesar is not entirely clear.

In what cases was it permitted, for instance? Just in capital cases? Just in cases with the Roman citizens? The Caesar in question would have been Nero. Paul isn't necessarily expecting to find justice, but he knows that his chances would likely be greater. Throughout the book of Acts, Paul shows great shrewdness in the way that he approaches Jewish authorities and Roman authorities, the way that he will take advantage of certain laws, the way that he will use certain situations to his advantage.

He is adaptable and resourceful, always alert to clever ways in which he could turn things to his favour. In Paul's appeal to Caesar, he is doubtless thinking about something else, though. In Acts 23, verse 11, the Lord had declared to him, Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.

He knew that the Lord wanted him to go to Rome, and this would be a way of precipitating that movement. A question to consider. Considering Paul's teaching in his epistles, what do you imagine that his message to Felix concerning righteousness, self-control, and the coming judgement might have contained? In the second half of Acts chapter 25, Agrippa and Bernice visit Festus, and Festus invites them to hear Paul's case, as he would appreciate their insight.

Paul had appealed to Caesar, and so, if Festus is to send him to Rome, he wants to be able to give a clearer sense of the case. Help and counsel from two powerful people closer to Judaism would be very useful in this situation. Herod Agrippa II was the only surviving son of Herod Agrippa I, who had died in Acts chapter 12.

He ruled over north-eastern parts of Herod the Great's old kingdom. He was a faithful vassal, trusted by the Romans, and he was allowed to appoint the high priest by them. He was pious, he was an expert in Jewish matters, and his sister Drusilla was the wife of the previous governor, Felix.

He would later side with Rome in the war, and he was the last ruler of the house of Herod. By asking this favour of him, Festus would also be strengthening his relationship with another key ruler within the land. Bernice is the sister of Agrippa, although it was rumoured that she was also in an incestuous relationship with him.

Later, she would be the mistress of both Vespasian and Titus, and is mentioned by several ancient historians for this reason, Diocassius, Suetonius, Josephus, and a number of others. As Festus suspects that the case is really about matters of Judaism, these are good people to consult. Paul here is protected by pagan procedure, and by Festus' unwillingness to hand him over.

Nevertheless, we should not take all of Festus' statements at face value. Festus, as commentators like Ben Witherington and Robert Tannehill observe, is really serving his own interests here, and putting a positive spin upon all his dealings with Paul. In the Book of Acts, neither Roman nor Jewish justice are portrayed in flattering ways.

Nevertheless, Roman justice is generally the more desirable of the two for Paul and the early Christians. The Jewish authorities don't even plan to administer justice. Their intention is to have Paul ambushed and killed on the way to Jerusalem.

Felix delayed for over two years, while Festus seems to be more eager to deliver justice more speedily. However, he doesn't seem to be able to bring himself to free Paul, even though, by his own admission, there don't seem to be any charges that a Roman governor could reasonably deal with. Relating the case made by the Jerusalem authorities, Festus makes clear that the substance of their case concerned religious questions, which he was not competent to judge, nor were they within his jurisdiction.

Paul had seemingly done nothing contrary to Roman law. The situation is complicated by the fact that Paul has appealed to Caesar. Paul understandably won't go to Jerusalem to be tried before his own people, as there is no justice for him to be expected there.

The Roman governor has a difficult relationship with the Jewish authorities and can't easily free him, but doesn't feel able to condemn him either. Now Paul has appealed to Caesar, but it isn't clear that he has done anything that should be tried within a Roman court. Festus has got to get a better sense of this complicated case if he is going to inform Caesar.

The following day, they all gather together with great pomp. This is quite the hearing. There are military tribunes, prominent men of the city, Agrippa and Bernice, and Festus, the Roman governor.

This is, among other things, a fulfillment of the prophecy of Christ in Luke 21, verses 12-13. But before all this, they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness.

And then also, in the calling of Paul, in Acts 9, verses 15-16, the Lord had said to Ananias, Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel, for I will show him how much he must suffer for the

sake of my name. Verse 22 raises the possibility that Agrippa had already heard about Paul and was eager to hear him for himself. He was curious about what this man had to say.

Given the opportunity to hear him by Festus, he readily jumped at it. Festus presents Paul to the gathered authorities and dignitaries. He describes the hostility that the Jewish people had against this man, and the way that their authorities had sought a death sentence from him.

Yet he had not found anything in Paul worthy of death. As Daryl Bach notes, this is the second of three declarations of Paul's innocence within these chapters of the Book of Acts. The first is from Claudius Lysias in chapter 23, verse 29.

I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment. A similar statement is made at the end of this scene in chapter 26, verse 31. Festus presents the situation as if he knew that he was not qualified to judge the case.

It belonged to the area of Jewish law, and so as an act of reasonableness he was going to send him to Jerusalem to be tried there. However, in the earlier account we see that he was going to grant him to the Jewish authorities, a far less favourable presentation. He knew that he was sending Paul to his death, that Paul would not get justice, but doing such a favour for the Jewish authorities would be to his advantage.

Paul's appeal to Caesar was in part to avoid this situation, in hope that he might find more justice in another court. The Caesar to whom he appealed here was Nero. It would be absurd for him to be presented before him without some sort of charge, and so at this point Festus is largely fishing for a charge.

Even though he's found nothing wrong in Paul, he can't set him free without causing friction with the Jews, and so he's going to send him to the Emperor, but he needs some sort of charge to send him with. What follows is less a matter of Paul answering specific charges that have been levelled against him, and more a matter of a hearing to ascertain whether there are any charges that he could reasonably be sent with. A question to consider, reading the narrator's description of Festus and his actions, and Festus' own descriptions of his actions, where might we see disparities and tensions? How do you think Luke wants us to regard Festus as a character? Acts chapter 26 contains Paul's last major discourse, and it is by far the most stylised.

Herod Agrippa II and his sister Bernice are visiting the governor Festus, and together with the military tribunes and the prominent men of Caesarea, they have gathered together to hear Paul present his case. The purpose of the hearing is to assist Festus in knowing what to write concerning Paul, who has appealed to Caesar. Ben Witherington notes nine elements of Greek rhetorical style that Paul employs within this speech.

The speech is a presentation of, and witness to, Paul's entire mission and vocation. It is not just narrowly addressing the matters in which he has been accused. Witherington argues that it is important to recognise that Paul is not playing the part of the defendant here.

Rather, he is playing something more akin to the role of a witness in his own trial. The speech that he gives serves an apologetic purpose. It presents Paul, his mission, and the Christian church to the reader and hearer.

It gathers together Paul's story in one, at its very conclusion, as Paul presents an apologetic for his entire course of life. Within it, Paul makes appeal to many witnesses. Daryl Bok lists seven.

Paul's companions on the way to Damascus, the Jews of Jerusalem, Agrippa's knowledge of Judaism, the Scriptures, a heavenly revelation, Paul's own testimony, and Paul's presence before the dignitaries as proof of God's protection. Once again, it is not impossible that Luke worked with forensic sources when writing it. He may well have had access to court records.

The chapter begins with Agrippa inviting Paul to speak. Bok suggests that Agrippa might be chairing the meeting, as it is his counsel that is especially being sought by Festus. Paul's speech takes a rhetorical form that would have been familiar from other ancient rhetorical settings.

According to Witherington's proposed structure, which differs from that offered by Bok, it starts with a prologue in which he addresses and compliments Agrippa in verses 2-3, followed by a narration in verses 4-21, a statement of his fundamental theme and case in verses 22-23, a refutation in verses 25-26, and a concluding appeal in verses 27-29. Agrippa is someone with a greater knowledge of Judaism, who is better situated to speak to the Jewish matters at stake in Paul's case than Festus is. From verse 4 onwards, Paul recounts his life story.

He grew up as a Jew, and he lived as a member of the strict sect of the Pharisees. He trained under the feet of Gamaliel, as we read elsewhere. Paul has not simply turned his back on this.

Although Paul can elsewhere speak of accounting all of these things that he once considered gain as loss, here his purpose is to stress continuity. He has not rejected his Jewish background. He continues to speak of himself as a Pharisee, as he did before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem.

He also uses language that makes clear that he identifies with the people. My own nation, our religion, our fathers, our twelve tribes. He claims that he is on trial on account of his hope in the promise that God made to the patriarchs and the nation of

Israel in the past.

This is a communal hope, a hope of the nation, and Paul has not rejected it. Rather, he sees himself as holding on to its fulfillment. Elsewhere in his Gospel, Luke underlines the continuity between the piety of Israel and the coming of Christ.

Zachariah and Elizabeth, Mary, Simeon and Anna are all figures that have an Old Testament faith that looks forward to Christ, and for which Christ, and the expectation of what he will achieve, is the realization of the hopes of the nation. Paul singles out resurrection, as he did before the Sanhedrin. It is this key belief, this presentation of the hope of Israel, that he is on trial for.

The irony is that for his faithful commitment to the faith of his fathers, he is being condemned. And he makes his appeal here to Agrippa in particular. Agrippa has a reputation for piety in some quarters.

He has a knowledge of the Scriptures. And so Paul is doing more than just presenting a defense here. This is an evangelistic claim, and he is calling on Agrippa to make a response to it.

Of course, Paul did have a radical change of mind. He describes his former life as a persecutor, and his complicity in the imprisonment and death of Christians. His involvement in the martyrdom of Stephen might be in view here.

Stephen was stoned, not as a legal sanction, but as the action of a lynch mob. The language here is Paul casting a pebble, which is an idiomatic way of speaking about voting. However, in the context of an act of stoning, Paul may not literally have cast stones in executions for which the Jewish Sanhedrin did not have the authority.

But he approved of them by casting the pebble of his vote in favor. We get a fuller picture of Paul's life as a persecutor here. He punished them in the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, presumably failing.

He then pursued them to foreign cities. Before Paul ever became a missionary for Christ, he was a counter-missionary. Someone who was opposing the mission of the church by undertaking missionary journeys against it.

This is the third time that we read of Paul's conversion in the Book of Acts. The first time is in the voice of the narrator in chapter 9. The second time Paul tells the story as he addresses the crowd in the temple in chapter 22. It's important to pay attention to the differences of accent and content here.

For instance, here he expands upon his commission, and he excludes the figure of Ananias. This is part of a shift in the telling of the story, from one that focuses more upon Ananias, to a telling of the story in a way that leaves Ananias out of the picture. In the

first account of Paul's conversion in Acts chapter 9, Ananias receives the commission for Paul that he's supposed to give to him.

In the second account, when Paul relates it in chapter 22, he tells of Ananias delivering the commission to him. And here, Ananias is not present at all. The commission is given to him directly by Christ.

This serves a number of purposes in Paul's telling. It places a greater accent upon the commission than you have in the other accounts. And as we will see, it also allows Paul to fill the role played by Ananias in a number of key ways.

There is a greater focus here also upon the light. It is midday when the vision occurs, but the light from the heaven is brighter than the sun, and all fall down to the ground, which only this account records. On the surface of things, this is also in tension with chapter 9 verse 7, where Paul's companions are standing there speechless.

While there are ways in which these details could be harmonised, it may perhaps be instructive to think about the way that Luke is quite happy for these different accounts to stand alongside of each other, not overly concerned about the apparent tensions between them. While the concern of the modern Christian reader can be to get behind the text, to see what really happened, and to peel away the level of the text, for Luke and other biblical authors, there is a lot more attention given to the way that the story is told. The historical details and their accuracy certainly matters, but the way that the story is told will direct the hearer to certain parallels and connections, and certain resonances that they might miss if they just focused upon the underlying historical events.

The voice of Christ speaks to him in Hebrew, or presumably Aramaic, and the form of Saul's name given here reflects that fact. However, even though he is being addressed by Christ in Hebrew or Aramaic, there is a surprising possible allusion to a text from Euripides in the statement, kicking against the goats. Many have argued that that turn of phrase is not a Hebrew or Aramaic one, but is borrowed from the Greek.

Gerhard Cattell summarises the argument that some have made. He writes, They point to the similarity of situation in Acts and the Bacchae. In both cases there is question of opposition to a new divinity, in Euripides of Pentheus to Dionysus, and in Acts of Paul to Christ, of a senseless course from which a man should be restrained.

In each case the attacked god himself utters the saying to warn his opponent. Indeed, this is the third suggested parallel with Euripides in the book of Acts. The first supposed parallel is found in chapter 5, verse 39, in the opposing of God, and the second is found in the story of Silas and Paul in the jail in Philippi.

On closer examination, these parallels do not seem to be quite as strong as they first

appear. Furthermore, the expression kicking against the goats, even if of Greek origin, may have become naturalised into Aramaic or Hebrew in the interim. Paul is established by his commission as a witness and a servant, and the surprising thing here is that he plays the role of Ananias.

He is sent to a persecuting people to open their eyes. While mentioned in the other two accounts of his conversion, his blindness is not mentioned here. Rather, the blindness is that of the Jews and the Gentiles to whom he is sent.

He is sent to open their eyes and to turn them from darkness to light. He has seen the light, and now he must bring the light. To the hearer of this passage familiar with the other accounts, this sets up a number of key connections.

Paul is now aligned with Ananias, and blind Paul is now associated with the Jews. The theme of light is prominent as a metaphor here, and this might connect it with the language associated with the servant of Isaiah. Isaiah 42, verses 6-7 Also Isaiah 49, verses 6. We might hear further allusions to the language of Isaiah 61, verses 1 in the calling of Paul.

Paul's mission is based upon what he has seen. He bears witness to the risen and ascended Christ, and his mission is in continuity with the Old Testament prophets. He has promised deliverance from the Gentiles and from his own people.

Describing what follows to Agrippa, he shows that he followed the instructions of the vision. He carried out the mission in Damascus, in Jerusalem, through the region of Judea, and also went to the Gentiles. The reader might be surprised to hear the reference to the region of Judea here.

We don't read of any such mission in the story of Acts previously. It was, he argues, on account of this mission that the Jews seized him in the temple and tried to kill him. It was the reference to his going to the Gentiles that particularly aggravated them.

However, the very fact that he is standing there before Agrippa at that time is evidence in favour of the claim that God is on his side, that God commissioned him and promised that he would deliver him from his own people. Summing up the heart of his message, in verses 22 and 23, he says that he is teaching nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass. The Christ must suffer, and that by being the first to rise from the dead, he will proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.

At this point, Festus, who is probably presiding, interrupts Paul with a loud voice. In all of his studies, he thinks, Paul has lost grip of reality. He is out of his mind.

Paul insists that he is not. Indeed, he is speaking true and rational words, and he appeals to Agrippa in particular. Agrippa has better knowledge of the Jewish teaching, and he would know that what Paul is saying is in accord with the teaching of the prophets and

also of Moses.

He presses Agrippa on the point, which perhaps puts Agrippa in a difficult position, Agrippa feeling pressure to come out against Festus in defence of the prophets. Whatever tone we read in Agrippa's response, it is likely in part an attempt to deflect the force of Paul's statements. Here it becomes very clear that Paul is not just engaging in a defence.

He is approaching this as an act of evangelism. He has been given the opportunity to bear witness before kings, and he is not going to let it pass him by. He openly declares his desire that Agrippa would convert, that he would become a Christian.

Expressing it as the desire that they would become like him, that what he has described in his own life, the way that the calling of Christ has come to him, that that would be true for them as well. At this point, Agrippa rises up, and the governor Festus, Bernice, and the other authorities there join together in deliberation concerning his case. They determine that he has done nothing wrong.

This is the third time that such a declaration has been made concerning Paul. However, since Paul has appealed to Caesar, their hands are tied. He must be sent.

A question to consider, what truths might Paul have discerned and later expressed in his theology from the vision and the commission that he received from Christ? The story of the journey to Rome and the shipwreck in Acts chapter 27 is an exciting episode of the narrative, highlighting the Lord's protection of his servant Paul. However, one might wonder why this account is so lengthy, when much of it, exciting though it may be, might not seem to advance the larger narrative of the book in which it is found. The question of what it is doing here should be considered.

Is it simply a result of the fact that Luke is an eyewitness to these events, and as a result is more long-winded in his description? That might well be part of it, but I think there might be something more going on. Luke wants us to pay attention to the significance of this story within the wider framework of his narrative. Both in his Gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles, Luke frames his narrative around journeys, and there are parallels between the two accounts.

Jesus sets his face towards Jerusalem, and Paul sets his face toward Rome. N.T. Wright observes a deeper parallel between this particular account and the account of the crucifixion in the Gospels. At the equivalent point where in the Gospel we come to the crucifixion itself, we come in Acts to the shipwreck, the moment when the forces of wind and wave do their worst, and it looks as though Paul will be drowned at sea, or smashed on the rocks, or killed by the soldiers, or finally, in an almost comic touch, poisoned by a Maltese snake.

The darkness and hopelessness of the storm at sea mirror the dark hopelessness of Gethsemane and Calvary itself, and then finally, after the sailors have used one anchor after another to slow the boat down and prevent it simply accelerating into the waiting rocks, they manage to steer close enough into land so that when the ship finally runs aground and starts to break up, everyone on board comes safe to shore. We have already seen parallels between Paul's hearings and trials and those of Jesus. There are further details in the narratives that fill out the associations, such as the presence of a centurion who gives some sort of favourable witness in both.

Sea imagery is prominent in Matthew, Mark and John. Luke, by surprising contrast, does not employ the language of the sea in the same way or to the same degree in his Gospel. What is referred to as the Sea of Galilee or the Sea of Tiberias in the other Gospels, for instance, is consistently spoken of as the Lake in Luke.

Luke's sea imagery waits for the Book of Acts, where it is associated with the Mediterranean, and especially at this point with the journey to Rome. The sea is connected with chaos, it's a realm beyond human mastery and order, yet it's bounded by God's sovereignty. In revealing the destructive might of the sea, the event of the flood also reveals the radical dependency of creation upon a gracious providence more generally.

Through the flood we can see the whole world as a sort of arc, a realm whose hospitable elements - stable ground, gentle rains, fertile earth, light winds, meandering rivers, changing seasons - are a fragile environment that can only be enjoyed because the terrifying forces of chaos that lie just beneath the surface are held at bay by the might and the goodness of God. The sea is a realm where providence can come into a new focus, as it does in Acts chapter 27, in ways that accentuate and foreground broader narrative themes. Among other things, in the Gospels and now in the Book of Acts, the sea serves as a powerful metaphor for the new field of mission that the Church has been called out into.

It's a dangerous realm, in which they must depend upon the provision and the protection of God from the immense powers that surround and will assail them. While the typical servants of God in the Old Testament are shepherds, in the New Testament we see disciples commissioned to be fishers of men. There are also several stories in the Gospels that focus upon the threatening sea.

In her treatment of the sea in the Gospel of Mark, Elizabeth Struthers Malburn describes the boat as a mediator between the land and the sea. Peter Lighthouse develops this imagery. The fact that Jesus teaches from a boat shoved out in the sea perhaps gives us an image of the Church.

The Church is a little ark, a little bit of Israel, tossed about on the sea of nations. But there's no danger, because the Lord of the Church walks on the sea as dry land. Like the

ark during the flood, the Church is a microcosm, the seed of a new humanity, waiting to find its purchase in the soil of a renewed creation.

Like the ark, it is exposed to all the terror of the elements, subjected to the winds and the waves, being radically dependent upon God's good care to guide it through them all. While people of the land may seek to control their environment, people of the sea must adapt themselves more to its conditions and look to the heavens for their care. The sea is also connected with the Gentiles.

It is no accident that aside from the story of the flood, the one great boat story in the Old Testament is the Book of Jonah, the Israelite prophet who ascent the Assyrian city of Nineveh. One of the important features of Jonah's story is the way that the experience of the prophet symbolizes the experience of the nation. The disobedience of the Israelite prophet Jonah mirrors the disobedience of Israel, and is a lesson to them.

His sleep is like their spiritual insensibility. The storm is the turmoil of conflict that the region is cast into. Jettisoned from the ship, Jonah is like Israel, cast into exile.

The big fish is Assyria, an appointed beast, nations being represented by beasts in the prophets and elsewhere. It swallows Jonah and later vomits him out after he prays for deliverance. This is a lesson that Israel is supposed to learn from.

As a symbol of international relations, Israel as the sleeping prophet, fleeing from the calling of the Lord, caught in a storm on the ship with pagan mariners, is a powerful one. Israel can no more control the storms of regional conflict and unrest than Jonah can control the storm in the deep. However, Israel's disobedience has consequences for the surrounding nations, as the waves of Assyria may overwhelm them too.

In Jonah chapter 1 and 2, God presents a different way of thinking about Assyria, as an appointed beast to protect a disobedient prophetic nation from utter destruction, as it has forsaken its calling. The Gentiles are associated with the sea in scripture, and the seething fury of the storm-tossed sea threatening to overwhelm the weak vessel symbolizes the vulnerability that the land of Israel stood in relative to the surrounding nations. As we will see, there are several noteworthy similarities and contrasts between the story of Jonah and the story of Paul's shipwreck.

Once again, the Jewish prophet in the boat with pagans symbolizes something greater, standing for the people of God in the vessel of Christ. The chapter begins with a description of the first stages of the journey to Rome. Paul was entrusted to Julius the Centurion, and Luke here joins them.

We see the narrative changing to We. The ship that they board is a ship of Adramitium, in Mysia, in the province of Asia. Even though there was a network of roads throughout the empire, sea travel was generally the swiftest way to move about, even though it was

more hazardous.

Carl Laney discusses the fact that the Mediterranean was largely, but not entirely, closed to sea travel in the winter months. Severe storms, winter fog and cloud cover made it very difficult to move about in those times. Conditions varied considerably, however, from one part of the Mediterranean to another.

Conditions were much milder in the southeastern quadrant. For much of the Mediterranean, though, travel was exceedingly dangerous between November and February, which was why Paul suggested staying in fair havens. Passengers lived on the deck of the ship.

Beyond water, provisions usually were not offered. Ships were for cargo and for troops, they were not for passengers. There weren't schedules, you would board whatever boat you could find, and travel was extremely dangerous.

2 Corinthians 11, verse 25 was written before the events of this chapter. Within it Paul says, This then will be Paul's fourth shipwreck, at the very least. As these were sailing vessels, the speed of travel also depended heavily upon the direction of the wind and how favourable it was to the direction of intended travel.

Paul and his company are sailing against the winds, which is why they had such a slow going. They travel along the coast, to the north of Cyprus, along the Mediterranean coast of modern day Turkey, until they reach Myra. There they take an Alexandrian ship to Italy, presumably a much larger vessel.

As a vessel bringing Egyptian grain to Rome, it would have been one of the largest vessels in the Mediterranean at the time. Laney gives their dimensions as about 180 feet, or 55 metres in length, 50 feet, or 15 metres in width, and about 44 feet, or 13.5 metres, from the deck to the bottom of the hold. He notes Lucian of Samosata's claim that a ship of this kind could carry enough grain to feed every person in Attica for a year.

Luke records the number of persons aboard the ship as 276, which seems surprisingly large to some commentators, but others point out that Josephus reports 600 persons on the ship that took him to Italy. The course of travel needed to be determined in no small measure by the wind. Just as they had sailed under the lee of Cyprus earlier, the side shielded from the wind to the north, now they must sail under the lee of Crete, which is this time on the south side, until, with difficulty, they reach Fairhavens, which would offer temporary shelter.

The fast, or the Day of Atonement, in September or October had passed, but they had tarried in Fairhavens, presumably waiting for better weather conditions. Paul strongly warned them about going on. We should bear in mind here that Paul was not just a mere landlubber.

He had three shipwrecks under his belt already, and might have learnt some things from the experience. If they stayed at Fairhavens for the winter, while it would not be ideal, it would save the passengers and the cargo. However, as they determined that Fairhavens wasn't suitable to stay in for the winter, they decided to go to Phoenix, another harbour in Crete, which would provide them with better winter shelter.

They travelled then west along the Cretan coast, with a gentle south wind, but suddenly an east-north-east wind hit them, and it drove them down away from the protection of the shore, preventing them from reaching Phoenix. They get some protection from the small island of Cawda, and they take three actions at that point. They haul up the ship's boat, a much lighter boat that could be towed behind the ship in good weather.

They undergird the ship with cables or ropes, to prevent the spars or the hull from breaking apart. They lower the ship's gear, sail, tackle, rigging. Concerned about running aground on the Sirtis, dangerous sandbanks and shallows off North Africa, they want to be as high in the water as possible.

On the third day, they cast the ship's tackle, all the spare gear, and perhaps even the mainsail, overboard. To make matters much, much worse, there was no sun or stars for many days, preventing navigation. In contrast to the boat stories of the Gospels, the ship of Acts chapter 27 has a mixed multitude of passengers.

It's saved through the message of the Apostle. A tempest striking a pagan ship bearing a Jewish prophet towards the west is quite reminiscent of the story of Jonah. However, whereas in the book of Jonah the disobedient prophet places the lives of everyone else in danger, here the situation is reversed.

God grants Paul all of those who sail with him, as we see in verse 24. This is a powerful image of salvation, and as in the literary structure of the book of Acts, it is paralleled with the story of the crucifixion in Luke, it invites our attention. A Jew and Gentile multitude are saved by observing the Apostle's teaching, by faithfully remaining on the ship, and by being sustained through blessed and broken bread.

And parallels with the Church are not difficult to identify. The vision of the Church that appears here is one formed of many different peoples, enduring suffering and hardship, formed together in a communion that serves to break down former oppositions, surrounded by threats and tempests, persevering and overcoming through the divine guidance and aid upon which they depend. God gives Paul assurance for himself and also for everyone else who is with him.

Until Paul has completed his mission, he cannot be harmed by all of these things that come at him, and as long as he is in the boat, the other people are safe with him. This is all in stark contrast with Jonah, who threatened other people by his presence. A ship like Paul's in such conditions would drift about 36.5 miles or 58.4 km a day, bringing them

near to Malta.

Presumably hearing sounds of breakers, they realise that they are approaching the land and start to take soundings. They discover that they are nearing the land, and so they let down four anchors from the stern. They then pretend to let down anchors from the bow, but the sailors are actually attempting to lower the ship's boat in order to escape the vessel.

Paul tells the centurion and the soldiers, and they prevent them. Paul then, as if he were the natural leader of the company, instructs them to eat a meal. Many have seen here an allusion to the Last Supper.

There is a very similar context. If the crucifixion is paralleled with the shipwreck, it comes at the right point. There is a reference to the arrival of the 14th night, and the strict instruction to the centurion and the soldiers that everyone must stay in the ship or be destroyed.

Both of these things evoke a Passover context, and by extension, the context of Christ's death. The 14th of Nisan was the day of the Passover. We read that Paul took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and began to eat.

And the echo should not be that hard to hear, in Luke 22, verse 19. And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.

From the plague of darkness, they are going to be delivered through this evening meal. They are going to pass through the waters. They are going to be delivered from the hands of soldiers that want to kill them.

And they are going to come out safely on the other side. The specificity of the number of the company, 276, is also interesting. Like 153, 120 and 666, it is a triangular number, which fascinated many ancient thinkers.

St. Augustine and others refer to such numbers in their works. What symbolic meaning it might have, if any, is quite unclear to me, perhaps something related to 24 minus 1. F.H. Coulson argues for some significance, and several early church writers speculated about some spiritual meaning. However, while the number is tantalisingly specific, no clear symbolic import suggests itself.

They cast out the remainder of the food. This might again remind us of the Passover meal, of which nothing was to be left until the morning. This also serves the practical purpose of lightening the ship even further.

When the day comes, they have some visibility at last, and they see a bay and a beach, although it is land that they do not recognise. This part of Malta was not a normal part of

the sea route. They are making for the land to run aground, so they cast off the anchors, they loosen the rudders so that they will be able to steer towards the beach, and they hoist the foresail.

However, before they reach the beach, they strike a sandbank, and the vessel's stuck. As the soldiers would be liable for the escapees, they plan to kill the prisoners, but the centurion prevents it from being carried out, as he desires to protect Paul. Those who could swim were ordered to swim, and the rest were given planks from the ship.

According to the word that the Lord had given to Paul, all were brought safely to land. A question to consider. Where can we see themes of providence in this story that connect with broader themes of providence in the larger story of Acts? In Acts chapter 28, we are in the finishing straight of the book.

Paul and his companions have been shipwrecked, and after spending some time upon the island of Malta, they finally complete their journey to Rome. Through miraculous divine protection, Paul and all of the 276 persons aboard the shipwrecked vessel made their way safely to land. The soldiers had planned to kill all of the prisoners, but the centurion prevented them from doing so.

Having been driven by the wind for 14 days, without sight of sun or stars, they didn't have a clear idea of where they were. When they arrived, they discovered that they had landed on Malta. There are competing claims about the identity of the island, arising in part from a narrower construal of the Sea of Adria, mentioned in chapter 27 verse 27.

Some have seen it as a more limited region of the modern Adriatic Sea, between Italy and the Balkans. The island of Miliet, off the Croatian coast near Dubrovnik, is suggested as a possible alternative to Malta. However, this identification is unpersuasive and rejected by most scholars.

When we consider the direction of the wind that drove them away from Crete, their concerns about the sands of the Sirtis, and the fact that the ship that they later board goes via Syracuse, which a vessel of Miliet would not have done, Malta is by far the more likely location. Several commentators note that the name of Malta means refuge, although Luke does not seem to make anything of the etymology here. Malta is a smaller island than Crete or Cyprus.

It's about 95 square miles, or 250 square kilometres. It's 27 kilometres, or 17 miles long, and 14.5 kilometres, or 9 miles wide. It's about 93 kilometres, or 58 miles, south of the island of Sicily, in the middle of the Mediterranean.

The local people are here described as barbarians, in verse 2, neither Greek nor Latin speakers, and likely without the Greco-Roman culture associated with those languages. They would probably chiefly have been people of Phoenician origin, speaking Punic,

although there would be Greek and Latin speakers around, such as Publius. The distinction between Greeks and barbarians is one that Paul himself employs in Romans 1, verse 14.

It need not be taken in a derogatory sense, as it principally refers to the linguistic differences. Luke presents the Maltese natives very positively. He praises their hospitality, which would have been most important for survivors of a shipwreck, who would have been greatly at risk if they had been among inhospitable peoples.

The survivors are presumably soaked through from the swim, so the natives kindle a fire. Possibly several fires were made for various groups of the shipwrecked persons, but Paul here might refer to a fire made for his own group of survivors. Paul gathered wood with the others, but a viper came out and bit him on the hand.

Having been tempest-tossed and shipwrecked, many pagans might have speculated that the gods were against Paul. The goddess Justice, a daughter of Zeus, clearly had fated Paul to destruction for some wickedness, and wasn't going to allow him to escape. However, Paul shook off the viper and neither suffered immediate harm nor swelled up and fell down dead afterwards.

Some have raised questions about the plausibility of this account, as there are no poisonous snakes on Malta today. Indeed, this is one of the considerations some advance in favour of a different island being in view. As the reasons for identifying the island as Malta are strong on other grounds, it seems reasonable to suppose that the locals are Maltese.

They seem to expect that Paul would be injured by the snake, which would be surprising if no poisonous snakes were to be found on the island. It is quite possible that there were once poisonous snakes there, but that they went extinct or were destroyed by humans, as they have done in other places. The story of the viper might remind the hearer of statements of Christ in the Gospels, speaking of his followers' power over serpents as symbolic of their power over the evil one, the great serpent of old.

Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. The longer ending of Mark's Gospel also has a teaching of Christ on the subject, Mark 16, 17-18. And these signs will accompany those who believe.

In my name they will cast out demons, they will speak in new tongues, they will pick up serpents with their hands, and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them. They will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover. Given Exodus' themes in the preceding chapter, we might also think of some connection with the character of Moses, who also shows power over serpents as the messenger of the Lord and as a sign of his authority.

He turns his staff into a serpent and then picks it up as a rod again. Paul seemingly picks up a serpent as if it were a stick for the fire, but is unharmed. In Numbers 21-49, the Israelites are judged for their grumbling by fiery serpents, but Moses sets up the brazen serpent, to which they can look and be healed.

The response of the natives is to regard Paul as a god, much as the pagans in Lystra had done in Acts 14. In that city, there was a sudden shift of the people's attitude to Paul, from regarding him and Barnabas as gods to regarding them as people to be put to death. Here the movement goes in the opposite direction, but it illustrates the same level of superstition among the pagans.

Publius is the chief man of the island, presumably a procurator and a Roman citizen. The fact that his father is present on the island suggests, as Craig Keener notes, that Publius was from the island. Publius receives them in his house for three days, presumably not all of the survivors of the shipwreck, but the people of higher status.

While they probably don't have much, if any, money to pay for lodgings after the shipwreck, the centurion and the soldiers would probably have been able to secure some lodgings by virtue of their military status. This is also an example of fellowship between Jews and Gentiles. Publius' father was suffering from fever and dysentery.

Depending on its kind, a fever could last for an extremely long time, for months or even a few years. Darrell Bock is one of several commentators who mentions a microbe found in goat's milk in Malta that could be the cause of such fevers. However, Keener cautions against taking this identification as certain, given the fact that there were many other potential causes of such fevers, and there was also the additional symptom of dysentery.

It is likely that the events of the voyage and Paul's vision and prophecy came up during their conversations with Publius, for Paul visited Publius' father, prayed for him and put his hands on him so that he was healed. After this remarkable healing of a man with a serious medical condition, many people from around the island came to Paul and his companions and were also healed. Another thing that we see here is Paul's common dealings with people of authority.

We've seen this throughout the Book of Acts. He deals with Sergius Paulus in chapter 13. He has friends among the Asiarchs in Ephesus.

He speaks to the Sanhedrin, to Agrippa, Festus and Felix, and now also to Publius. The Gospel is addressed to all people, but it is also for people as groups, and so it addresses their leaders in a special way, the ones who represent them. It calls for them to repent, not just individuals as detached persons.

The people of Malta send them on their way with everything that they need. Considering the huge quantity of possessions that they have presumably lost in the shipwreck, this

was an immense blessing. Finally, after wintering in Malta, they take another Alexandrian ship heading up the western coast of Italy.

The ship has the twin gods, the Dioscuri, Castor and Pollux as its figurehead, for which the ship would likely have been named. The twin gods, of course, are Gemini in the Zodiac. They were patrons of navigators and were also regarded as the punishers of perjuries and the guardians of truth, so the fact that they are figureheads on Paul's ship might be apt.

While I see no clear evidence that there is something more going on here, it is curious to see a number of signs of the Zodiac randomly appearing throughout Luke's narrative, in his Gospel and now in the Book of Acts. The Virgin, two fish, a man carrying a water pitcher, and now the twins. Several scholars have speculated also upon a Zodiacal ordering of the nations in Acts chapter 2. Whilst scripture clearly does not advocate the practice of astrology, in various places it does seem to use some celestial symbolism for its own purpose, such as in Revelation chapter 12 and perhaps also in the story of the Magi.

This is likely around February of 60 AD. This would be the earliest time when sailing would have opened up again in the region. Presumably they didn't want to stay too long in Malta, imposing on their hosts without money to pay them or in requisitioned lodgings.

The most dangerous stretch of the journey would be from Malta to Sicily. Julius the Centurion would probably have requisitioned passage on this vessel to Italy, another Alexandrian ship. Their journey there seems to have been safe and fairly uneventful.

Paul finally gets to meet the Christians from Rome here. Paul was presumably well known by many of the Christians in Rome already, as his letter to the church there indicates, but he had yet to visit. By this point Paul had seemingly obtained great favour with those holding him, and he was permitted considerable freedom, even while technically still in custody.

A question to consider. What are some of the cheap miracles associated with each of Paul's four journeys in the book of Acts? It is the end of Acts chapter 24. Paul has finally reached his destination of Rome, where he is under house arrest, awaiting his trial.

Luke, who has accompanied Paul on his journey, leaves off his telling of Paul's story rather inconclusively. We don't discover the outcome of his trial. However, the themes of the book of Acts are given some degree of recapitulation and receive some resolution in this chapter, while leaving the story of the church, which continues far beyond its pages, still open-ended.

In Rome, Paul is granted a high degree of liberty, especially considering the fact that he is a prisoner. He is permitted to live by himself, presumably in rented accommodation in

an apartment building, perhaps supported at the beginning by some local Christians. He only has one soldier guarding him.

Julius, the centurion to whose charge Paul was delivered, and who accompanied him on his journey, was favourably disposed to him before they left, and the journey must have impressed upon him much further that Paul was a divinely gifted and pious man, a man of good will who could be trusted. He had saved Paul's life and had seen fulfilment of Paul's prophecies and Paul's healings on Malta. Perhaps in part due to his influence, Paul is consequently quite trusted, to the point that he is able to have large numbers of visitors at a given time in his accommodation.

He was presumably also able to write. Many scholars have dated letters like Philemon and Philippians to this period, although the dating of Paul's prison letters depends greatly upon the location from which they were sent, and considerations such as the likelihood or unlikelihood of an Esymus fleeing to Rome. There are many advocates of the claim that they were sent from Ephesus.

Paul invites the local leaders to meet him after only three days. He is presumably regarded as a leader of the Nazarene sect, so they would be quite interested to have an audience with him to hear what he and his movement were all about. Kraikina describes the large Jewish community of Rome.

Most Jews lived on the other side of the Tiber from the centre of Rome, and the Jewish population of Rome, a city of about one million, was likely between 20 and 50,000. Earlier in Acts chapter 18, Luke had mentioned that Priscilla and Aquila had left Rome after the expulsion under Claudius. Many scholars have speculated that the expulsion of the Jews from Rome had to do with this early Christian movement and the divisions that it caused among the Jews in the city of Rome.

Presumably now, after Claudius' death, the Jewish community is again thriving in the city. They are mostly a poorer population, although there was a range and most of their leaders would have been well educated. Kraikina suggests the main division with the Jews had occurred earlier, with the Christian community moving into house churches.

C.K. Barrett notes that there are 11 synagogues mentioned in the sources. The Jewish community does not seem to be especially integrated. There isn't a single Jewish leader representing the whole Jews of the city, but a number of independent synagogues with their various leaders.

Paul lays out his situation to them. He is innocent, this is a fact that has been recognised by the Romans and testified to already on three occasions in Luke's account. He is not opposed to the Jewish people, to the law or to their customs.

However, the Jewish opposition meant that he needed to appeal to Caesar. His

imprisonment arises from his commitment to the truth of the resurrection. This is the truth that is the hope of Israel.

This summarises Paul's earlier speech at his various trials and hearings and brings to a nice, tidy conclusion the story of Paul's defences. He has not done anything worthy of death or condemnation. He has been recognised as innocent by the Romans.

He has walked in good conscience and he is loyal to Israel's God. The Jewish leaders have not yet received any letter from the Judean leaders about Paul. Perhaps letters had been sent but had not yet arrived.

Given the difficulty of Paul's own passage to Rome and the fact that his company tarried as little as possible on the island of Malta, sailing up towards Sicily and Italy at the earliest possible opportunity in the season, it is quite likely that any message that had been sent had yet to arrive. The Jewish leaders, however, are aware of the widespread opposition to the Christian movement and they are curious to hear a leader of the movement explain it. Paul teaches concerning the Kingdom of God.

This is language used over 30 times in Luke's Gospel, but only six times in the Book of Acts, twice within this chapter. It is also used in verse 31. It is similar to the way that the content of Christ's teaching is described.

Paul presents his case, arguing from the Law of Moses and from the prophets. The whole scripture testifies that Jesus is the Christ and some of them are in the process of being persuaded, but others disbelieve. Tannehill suggests that they were not actually fully believing, they were in the process of being persuaded, but they had not yet committed themselves.

This might help to explain the force of Paul's response that follows. As a community, the Jews make some promising moves in the direction of Paul's message, but apart from a few exceptions, they turn away. Paul makes a strong statement against them.

He references the prophecy of Isaiah, taken from Isaiah 6, the chapter of Isaiah's call. There this prophecy precedes a statement of coming judgment in verses 11-13. This continues motifs that have been playing throughout the Book of Luke and the Book of Acts.

We can think about Zechariah, who was struck deaf and dumb. Paul was struck blind and then later received his sight at his conversion. Elymas the sorcerer was struck blind.

Paul referenced blindness in the context of describing his commission in chapter 26, verses 16-18. This is not a final rejection of the Jews. A similar sort of scene has occurred in several cities previously.

Paul will be rejected by the Jews in one city and he will go to the Jews in the next.

However, this is part of a progressive judgment of blindness falling upon them. We should also appreciate the importance of the quotation from Isaiah at this point.

It sums up something of the thrust of the book. Among other things, we should notice that it alters the quotation. Isaiah reads as follows.

And he said, The imperatives of Isaiah have become finite verbs. For instance, make the heart of this people dull has become, for this people's heart has grown dull. The situation that Isaiah was supposed to bring about through his ministry has now come about.

The judgment has fallen. The book began with Jesus teaching in chapter 1, verse 3. He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during 40 days and speaking about the kingdom of God. And it ends with Paul speaking in the same manner.

The fate of Paul is not actually given to us in this book. Considering that so much of the book is concerned with Paul, this might seem anticlimactic. It might seem as if Luke has left us hanging.

Very early tradition in 1 Clement 5, verses 5-7, likely written before the end of the 1st century, suggests that Paul survived this trial. Through envy, Paul too showed by example the prize that is given to patience. Seven times was he cast into chains.

He was banished. He was stoned. Having become a herald, both in the East and in the West, he obtained the noble renown due to his faith.

And having preached righteousness to the whole world, and having come to the extremity of the West, and having borne witness before rulers, he departed at length out of the world, and went to the holy place, having become the greatest example of patience. Eusebius, in his Ecclesiastical History, writes in Book 2, chapter 22, Festus was sent by Nero to be Felix's successor. Under him Paul, having made his defence, was sent bound to Rome.

Aristarchus was with him, whom he also somewhere in his epistles quite naturally calls his fellow prisoner. And Luke, who wrote the Acts of the Apostles, brought his history to a close at this point, after stating that Paul spent two whole years at Rome as a prisoner at large, and preached the word of God without restraint. Thus, after he had made his defence, it is said that the apostle was sent again upon the ministry of preaching, and that upon coming to the same city a second time, he suffered martyrdom.

In this imprisonment he wrote his second epistle, Timothy, in which he mentions his first defence and his impending death. But hear his testimony on these matters. At my first answer, he says, no man stood with me, but all men forsook me.

I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge, notwithstanding the Lord stood with

me and strengthened me, that by me the preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear, and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. He plainly indicates in these words that on the former occasion, in order that the preaching might be fulfilled by him, he was rescued from the mouth of the lion, referring in this expression to Nero, as is probable on account of the latter's cruelty. He did not therefore afterward add the similar statement, he will rescue me from the mouth of the lion, for he saw in the same spirit that his end would not be long delayed.

Various theories for why Luke ends at this point in the story of Paul have been given. Daryl Barke lists four. First, that Luke might have planned a third volume.

This is highly unlikely. There is very little within this volume that points forward to an expected third. Second, that Paul was released after two years because his opponents failed to appear as witnesses.

Joseph Fitzmyer defends this position. Again, this suggestion seems unlikely. Third, that Paul died or was martyred, and the outcome was negative or anticlimactic.

That again would be surprising. Luke already recounted the martyrdom of Stephen, and it would seem to be quite fitting for him to bring the book to an end with the martyrdom of Paul, who was first introduced to us as a participant in the martyrdom of Stephen. Fourth suggestion is that the book was about the arrival of the word of Christ to the highest levels of Rome.

The eye of the narrative is following Paul on his missions, but the book is not ultimately about him. It is about the continuing work of Christ and the growth of the word of the gospel. Hence the book ends with the bold preaching of the kingdom of God in Rome, rather than with the outcome of Paul's trial.

The book began with the movement out from Jerusalem. Fittingly, the book ends in Rome, the heart of the empire. This movement out is anticipated in chapter 1 verse 8. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

Paul's arrival in Rome has been anticipated at several points previously as well. Acts chapter 19 verse 21 Now after these events Paul resolved in the spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, After I have been there I must also see Rome. Acts chapter 23 verse 11 The following night the Lord stood by him and said, Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.

Acts chapter 27 verse 23 to 24 For this very night there stood before me an angel of the God to whom I belong, and whom I worship, and he said, Do not be afraid, Paul, you must stand before Caesar, and behold God has granted you all those who sail with you.

Ending with this quotation from Isaiah also throws our mind back to the ministry of Christ himself. In Luke chapter 8 verses 9 to 10 he also refers to this quotation.

And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant he said, To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand. The book of Acts begins with the question of what Christ's death and resurrection means for Israel and whether Israel will accept it. Will the kingdom be restored to Israel at that time? The book relates not just the movement of the gospel out into the wider world, but the Jews' ongoing rejection of the message, anticipating the judgment that will later fall upon Jerusalem in AD 70.

Paul still has hearers among the Jews as we see in these final verses, but for the most part the people have rejected their Messiah. A question to consider, are there any other prominent themes from the book of Acts that you can see reappearing in this final passage?