

# Travellers' Tales and After-dinner speeches:

## The Shape of *Acts of the Apostles*

Cornelia Cook

*Acts* is a good story. But what kind of a good story it is has exercised scholars. For a long time Luke was regarded as an historian, but he was an historian who reported unhistorical speeches and constructed unlikely journeys. Theologians have tended to sum up *Acts* as (I quote from the New Oxford Annotated RSV) 'the triumphant narrative of the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome'. More recently, scholars with literary interests have begun to argue that *Acts* is not meant to be historiography. Richard Pervo argues in *Profit with Delight*,<sup>1</sup> that *Acts* is like ancient novels in its conventions and structures; therefore its fictionality is legitimate, and not a little bit of its agenda is to entertain.

Brian Reardon points out many elements of ancient romance in *Acts*: its setting in a near-contemporary familiar world, travel with the aspect of purposeful journey (quest) which generates plot, adventure with trials and successes, rescue or salvation.<sup>2</sup> Richard Pervo finds in the ancient world a sizeable body of prose fictions which he calls 'novels' and which display numerous conventions easily discoverable in *Acts*: adventures (including arrests, persecutions, plots, trials, shipwreck and snakes), miracles, riots and rowdy scenes, exotic and utopian elements, an active providence, a robust hero, an episodic plot. We may assume, then, that 'Luke' was a fiction-addict, also steeped in Biblical narrative and prophetic literature, who employed received conventions of historiography and fiction-writing to make *Acts* a readable story with recognizable features. He structures his story through a progress which gets Christianity—largely in the briefcase of the apostle Paul—from Jerusalem to Rome.

*Acts* is shaped by a geographical progress. It begins (where Luke's gospel left off) in Jerusalem where Jesus promises the apostles a baptism of the Holy Spirit and commissions them to bear witness 'throughout all Judaea and Samaria, and even to the end of the earth'. This is his parting word and it adumbrates the plot of *Acts*. From Jerusalem where the first part of the narrative—centred on the apostle Peter—will base itself, the story in *Acts* will move to Samaria and then

with the apostle Paul to Damascus, Antioch, Cyprus, Asia Minor, the Aegean region and Rome. The progress will not be without significant shape. The mission described by Luke has been characterised<sup>3</sup> as 'radiating out from Jerusalem in concentric circles' and indeed there is a pattern of circular journeys which make up and mark the spread of Christianity from the apostolic group to the Jewish followers to the Gentiles, and the progress from Jerusalem to Rome. We are so familiar with this pattern that it is hard to recapture the sense of uncertainty registered in the text among the apostles and within the new Church as to what the injunction will bring, what it will mean to witness to the 'end of the earth'.<sup>4</sup>

For the apostles who stand looking into the sky, and for many early Christians faced with an old way that now seems unfulfilled in itself and a new way uncharted; unpredictable and frightening, the moment of *Acts* is an anxious, uncertain moment. This anxiety is there in the text even before Jesus departs. Promised the Holy Spirit, the disciples ask 'Lord will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?' This is a question which recalls promises of the Old Testament and the New. But it is also a question about history, emerging out of a religious history of promises and fulfilments which has been told in the past (and which *Acts* will re-tell several times, in Stephen's and Peter's speeches), also out of a political history of changing rule, of power, subservience and sovereignty. It is a question of the moment: 'where are we now' (in history), a desire for knowledge of the moment and of themselves and of God's ways. And it is a question about the future: when will it happen (along with an element of how), which is also, therefore, a further effort to establish a secure sense of where they are now and where they are going. And of course it is a question asked by the apostles in the story, but implicitly still asked by the audience envisaged by the story: Theophilus, members of a young church, people who come after the death and resurrection of Jesus. And the answer is significant: 'It is not for you to know the times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority' (1:7). Side by side, then, are a promise of the Holy Spirit with an injunction to bear witness throughout the world and time, and a reminder that this act of belief will always be a matter of facing the unknown. It is a reminder that the promises of God are not predictions of the immediate future, that though the Father works in time, still those who live in time will proceed along uncharted paths as providence sends them.

This pattern of uncertainty, of progress in space and through time, of fear and expectation for the future, subject to the incalculable workings of providence gives us the plot—the travellers' tales—of *Acts*.

However much we know about what happened (because for us *Acts* is a history, and one of several stories we may know of this past), we rely on the text to shape, with its patterns, our awareness of how it happened. However much or little the early audiences of *Acts* knew about the apostles and their mission they could not construct this story independently of Luke's text, which unfolds the miracles, earthquakes, angelic visits, coincidences and winds fair and foul which take us from Jerusalem to Rome. And however much the figures in the story know what they believe and what their mission is, none can tell the story of their own acts in advance. They may know what they hope, but they cannot write the scenario. They may know what has been promised but they cannot prescribe its time or season, or their role in it. *Acts* is a text full of surprises—happy and sad ones—the beautiful Stephen's death, the terrible Saul's conversion, Peter's encounter with the heavenly sheet-feeder and the extension of the mission to the Gentiles, Paul's pocket-full-of-passports which makes him a citizen of Tarsus, a Roman citizen, a perfectly respectable Pharisee all within about forty-five verses and turns his heavily hyped journey to Jerusalem into a two year anti-climax. It is, then, a text which places us all on a journey—or several journeys: a journey backwards in time to recapture the 'history' of the apostles' deeds and the growth of the early Church, a journey forwards in recorded time from the ascension to Paul's arrival in Rome, a journey which traces and characterizes the places and peoples converted by Peter and Paul and the others. It is a journey which brings us that sense which must always characterise our relationship to history, that the present moment is delicately poised between the history which is stories we know and can retell and the future which is an untold story which we can only cast in the form of an imagined repetition or projection of the past or of other stories.

This rather obvious awareness is everywhere in the plot of *Acts* and nowhere more than in the last two chapters, presenting Paul's sea journeys. These are the simplest of all representations of a journey with a goal but no reliable route plan. They are a kind of microcosm of the characteristic progress of *Acts*.

The sense of history which is so much with us in the earlier parts of *Acts* gives way in chapter 27 to the sharpest sense of presentness in the work. This is because the first person ('we') narrator who has been appearing on and off since chapter 16 takes over and, as he is in the midst of the action being described, so are we. The sense of present action also inheres in the frequent use of participles (along with infinitives and imperfects). First in an Adrymyttian ship, then an Alexandrian vessel, they travel from port to port (much as the

missionaries had gone from city to city earlier) always mindful of the winds which determine what is possible and what is not (they can first coast Cyprus but cannot go beyond Cnidus and have to sail round and put in at Crete). The influence of the winds is not entirely unlike that of the Holy Spirit who, in chapter 16 prevented them going to Asia and to Bithynia. At the mercy of the winds they are at the mercy of God, but Paul is assured by God that his mission is to be fulfilled. The angelic visitor who assures him of safe passage against all the odds is like the many angels who direct, encourage or protect the apostles in earlier chapters. Yet we are far from a sense of security as the journey is recounted. Much has been made of the centurion's failure to take Paul's warning advice in 27:10 and the ensuing experience of storm and shipwreck but here Paul's predictions only half come true. There is a bad time (as not only Paul but any seafarer would foresee, knowing from past experience and report that with the Day of Atonement over, the weather conditions would worsen), the cargo is lost and the ship—but not their lives. Paul writes a story of the future but Providence alters it. Paul's warning about the future of course contrasts with the captain's misplaced confidence when a useful south wind lulls him into projecting unthreatened safety and smooth sailing. And both are complemented by the desperation in the midst of the storm (27:20) when the voyagers abandon hope. Nobody gets it right; Providence puts it right. Thanks to the angel, to Paul's newfound authority, to the centurion's humaneness (and sense of duty) — all hands are saved.

The idea that we read the future according to our past experience, along with the idea that our future is not our story but God's, resurfaces as soon as Paul and his companions have dried off on the beach in Malta. A viper crawls out of the kindling and bites the apostolic hand. The Maltese believe this to be a sign that Paul is punished ('Though he has escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live'), and they read back from this a story of their own invention: he must be a murderer. But Providence again alters the script; Paul survives (and so they say he must be a god, just as the people in Lystra did in chapter 14) to heal their diseases in return for hospitality and then to enjoy good winds past Sicily and up the coast of Italy to Rome.

The Roman experience seems less a surprise than a homecoming. It certainly does not read like an end of story. When they arrive 'brethren' — Christians—welcome them. When Paul summons the Jewish leaders we enter a familiar scenario: he explains his presence and preaches the new faith, and with the words of the prophet Isaiah chastises their unbelief and promises to preach salvation to the Gentiles 'who will listen'. We leave Paul there—preaching, teaching—with no hint of the

future, of the appeal to Caesar, of trips to Spain, or not, of the martyrdom to come. The 'open and unhindered' witness of Paul in Rome is a gateway to the future: the story does not end but is set to continue in Paul's life, in the lives of the audience, down generations. And yet, curiously, it is an ending which can only look back. We know where we are because we know (something of) Paul, we know what he teaches, we know how he got there. So we are left, as we always are in *Acts*, with a sense of an unknown future, of a present which is defined for us in relation to the past and a sense of the past as the only thing we can know. If, for instance, *Acts* ended with Paul packing his bags for Spain the emphasis would point us forward to another story. Or if prolepsis told us that 'soon Paul itched to be on his travels again and set out East, little knowing that the next return to Rome would be his last', we would be forced to remember another known story not part of *Acts*. As it is, the 'unhindered' may remind us of a less comfortable time to come (in *Paul's* history) but it preserves for us a continuing sense of the progress of Christianity—which is what *Acts* is about.

The travels in *Acts*, then, link the idea of topographical progress, journeys, with a sense of temporal progress, a sense of history. This is not a new idea. Conzelmann's salvation-history model of Luke's theology argued that the geographical structure of Luke's journeys, concentric circles radiating out from Jerusalem, provided a spatial metaphor for a view of history centred on and fulfilled in Jesus. The interactions of space and time in *Acts* suggest that there is more than a merely episodic structure to this work, that this structure is more complicated than 'how they brought the Good News from Jerusalem to Rome'. And indeed the powerful temporal sense in *Acts* is largely generated in the speeches.

There is, of course, only one genuine after-dinner speech in *Acts*, and oddly enough it is not reported. This is 20:7-10, when young Eutyches drops off to sleep under the influence of Paul's lengthy speech and falls from a third storey window (to his death, subsequent revival and the resumption of the talk). Whether or not strictly 'after-dinner', many of the speeches in *Acts* are associated with community gatherings or hospitality or are in contexts where we can assume some shared meal—sometimes probably eucharistic—might have been taken. Food is important throughout *Acts*: eating with people goes hand in hand with worshipping God with them (hence the angelic sheet which gives Peter carte blanche to use the Gentile menu). It is a sign of community and one which Jesus himself had made use of. But it is also a sustaining part of the life that people lead, that enables them to make their journeys, perform their witness, or just hear and see. As Paul says when he

encourages his despairing shipmates to 'eat, for it is in the interests of their salvation'(27:34)—your salvation depends on your being there to be saved.

The speeches in *Acts* have been said to crop up without adequate pretext, giving that uncomfortable feeling you used to get in old singing westerns when the tough cowboy suddenly and fairly irrelevantly burst into sentimental song. The 'irrelevant' notion bothered Dibelius who complained that the speeches often seem not to fit the contexts in which they are placed. (Why, for instance, should Stephen, on the verge of stoning, charged with blasphemy, launch into a summary of Old Testament history from Abraham to David?) And then the speeches are not historical: Luke put words into the mouths of Stephen and Peter and even Paul. It is not enough to counter commentators distressed by this fictionality with the argument that the speeches are there for Luke to show off his rhetorical skills for the sake of entertaining his readers. It is necessary to notice what words Luke put into the apostles' mouths, and this exercise suggests that the speeches in *Acts* are drawn with a consistent character and form a pattern in the narrative which nicely complements and even resembles the patterns discernible in the travellers' tales.

The first speech in *Acts* is an after-breakfast speech, when, following the Pentecostal miracle Peter addresses the crowd of 'devout Jews' who have gathered. Using the words of the prophet Joel, Peter explains that not wine but the spirit is speaking. The tongues they hear are a prophecy fulfilled. Again he alludes to prophecy—David's—which has been fulfilled in the resurrection of Christ. Present events are thus a fulfilment of the promise of the past. But Peter incorporates his audience into the history he tells: 'Men of Israel,' he says, 'This Jesus . . . you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men—but God raised him up . . .' and again, 'God has made him both Lord and Christ whom you crucified' (2:23). The audience is made to see its place in history as one of inglorious participation in a foreknown plan, unwilling agents of the prophets' foretellings. Audience reaction is registered: 'Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said . . . Brethren, what shall we do?' Peter urges them to repentance (metanoia—the turning we know so well from Luke's gospel and the pattern of urging and of conversion we will see repeated in many places and ways throughout *Acts*), and again incorporates them into the promise they knew of old and can know again in Christ: 'For the promise is to you and your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him' (2:39).

The speech clearly establishes many elements of theme and action

in *Acts*. History is an unfolding thing whose meaning is always being discovered. Prophecy, known in the past, can be seen to fulfil itself in past events and continues to fulfil itself in unfolding history. Turning to God is a turning to forgiveness and salvation. Christ's promise and mission is to all who respond to it. All these elements will be discovered in the continuing work of conversion within the Jewish community and in the mission to the Gentiles. The appeal to history and the repeated recitation of history—national, religious, personal—will be the means by which the speeches in *Acts* invariably instruct, persuade and enable their hearers to locate themselves in relation to a known past and uncertain (if promise-filled) future.

Awareness of the audience is always crucial to the speeches in *Acts*—crucial to their style and their contents. When Luke's Peter addresses the Jews, 'Men of Israel' as he does in the succeeding two speeches (3:12-26 and 4:8-12), he does not fail to recount the history of Christ's death and resurrection and to signal their part in it. 'You . . . killed the Prince of Life. But God raised him from the dead . . . you acted in ignorance, but this is how God fulfilled what he foretold through the prophets . . . From Samuel onwards, every prophet who spoke predicted this present time. You are the sons of the prophets, of that covenant which God gave to your fathers . . .' (3:14-25). It is proposed that the history is one that audience knows, the responsibility one they must understand in order to turn *with* God's promise, 'for there is salvation in no one else . . .' (4:12).

This history, this message is repeated—in the apostles' prayer at 4:24-30, in Peter's second reply to the high priest and Council, and at last, most strenuously, eloquently and tellingly, in Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin.

Stephen's speech is an address to fellow Jews (a reply to the charges of blasphemy and of prophesying the destruction of the Temple and change in the Mosaic law). He alludes to a shared history of God's promises to Abraham and their fulfilment, of Isaac, of Jacob and Jacob's sons, Joseph and his brothers. Fulfilment of the promise to Abraham seems forestalled by the kingship of Pharaoh, but Moses's history emerges, and the ups and downs of Moses's career become the focus of Stephen's story. It is a story of countrymen who fail to understand his mission (7:23ff), of God's promises of deliverance, of leadership, of rejection, idolatry, exile, and prophesy of a greater prophet. The image of the tent (tabernacle) in the wilderness and the extended sense of promise provide the threads along which Stephen's story arrives at David's favour, Solomon's temple, and the words of the prophet Isaiah. At this point Stephen turns on his audience with words again recalling



Isaiah 6:9-10, which Paul will quote at the conclusion of *Acts*, noting their stubbornness, their failure of openness, and their consequent history of persecuting prophets. That history comes up to date when he alludes to their fathers' betrayal of the prophets and to their part in the death of 'the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered . . .' (7:52). The significance of Stephen's angelic face and his inspired status as historian *and* prophet are clear when Stephen concludes with an apocalyptic vision, 'Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God' (7:56).

What is most interesting about Stephen's speech is not the evident passing reference to Moses, law and temple which (barely, Dibelius fears) links the speech to the accusation, or the traceable parallels between the rejections of Joseph, Moses (and outside the speech Stephen himself) and Jesus's experience at the hands of his countrymen, but the patterns of the speech and its emphasis on promise, prophecy and history. Stephen's preaching has struck his accusers as threatening change. His new message (and the success of its delivery) has unsettled their present experience, their vision of the future. By rehearsing their common history—what the text posits as known to Stephen and to his audience—Stephen reassures his listeners with the material of a familiar story which has yielded a sense of security—not least in laws, customs, forms of worship. It is a history by which they have read (or constructed a scenario for) their future. It is a story of promises and prophecies made and fulfilled. Abraham the childless would have posterity; that posterity would suffer and be led out of exile. The duration of promises overlap in the story: while Abraham's promise awaits fulfilment Joseph's favour is fulfilled and promises are made to Moses, and only with Joshua and David do we realise the completion of the initial promise. And yet the story does not end, because mention of Solomon's temple evokes Isaiah's words and that recalls the pattern of prophecy, persecution and rejection which carry the material of the stories of the fathers down through to the present of the sons. The Lord is still not known by these people; their idea of the future is as faulty as their keeping of the law.

The speech places its listeners in history—in a known story. It does not explain the future—it explains the present by reference to the past. This is typical of nearly all the speeches in *Acts*. The only known story is the story of the past; we only recognise our present in relation to it (of likeness or difference, repetition of or progress from it). We can only imagine a future in those same terms—as a repetition of, or a progress from a known past. All the stories we can tell of the future—whether apocalyptic visions or *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are in reality just stories of the known past informed by present fears or hopes.



Prophecy is a special kind of story. It generally appears, as here, as a story within a story, as a promise realised in that story—but often in combination with other promises which extend themselves as directions (instructions), warnings or consolations for future conduct outside (by readers/audiences of) the story. Old Testament history, therefore, (and the New Testament history which develops from it) which incorporates much prophetic material is always reaching out—in a way not quite common to other historiographic modes—for a fulfilment of its meaning. It signals the unfinishedness of its own moment by recording the overlapping completions and initiations of other moments and by looking forward. It always has its teleological and latterly its eschatological character, and it adopts forms of narrative from Genesis to Revelation consistent with these characters. In that way a return to history such as we find in the speeches of Peter and especially Stephen is not just a revisitation of the past, but an unfolding of an unfinished story. In the context of these speeches—and Paul's later—there is a transaction by which the ongoing progress of the story is handed over from past to present, from speakers to audience, in a pattern which is paradigmatic of the whole structure of *Acts*.

Another motion is also visible in the history in Stephen's speech. Ups and downs—as those in Moses's career brilliantly encapsulated in verses 35-41—are patent everywhere in this account. Welcome promises are made to Abraham, but time must elapse before they are realised. Joseph is sold by his brothers and rescued by God. Moses is exposed as an infant, and adopted, misunderstood by his countrymen and chosen by God. The Israelites are exiled and return home. All of these twists and turns of history are the product of the people's actions and God's plan. Even when the future is foretold (promised) there is an element of uncertainty as to how the promise will be fulfilled, or when. All this generates a sense of providence, which I would describe as a combination of God's promise which is known and God's plan which is not.

Again, then, we find in Stephen's brief history a paradigm which is repeated in the structure of *Acts* itself. Christ's promise of salvation is never in doubt; the power of the Holy Spirit is unfailing; the mission to 'witness' is unquestioned. But the direction(s) of the journey, the times and seasons and surprising means of the mission's (ongoing) achievement, of salvation's realisation are elements of uncertainty in the story. These are the elements which constitute the unknown future in the story, which unfold to the reader's (and the apostles') present and which become the material for a ripping tale of the apostolic past. *Acts* is skillfully situated. It casts known material in unlooked-for ways. It

allows the story to finish at a point which is not its end. It employs the wavelike interaction of prophecy and history, of circular journey and forward progress. Through all these devices it reads as a story which moves into the audience's present and future, encouraging the mission which is its occasion and sustaining the promise which is its inspiration long beyond the moment of its historical content. Overlapping motions in the text of *Acts* extend to its dramatic content. While Stephen is being stoned to death and the heavens are opening, a young man called Saul is holding coats. He will soon be known as Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles, our hero, renowned traveller, martyr, and after-dinner speechmaker. Paul's speeches, some of the most stirring passages in *Acts*, significantly display patterns found in Stephen's speech, in Peter's speeches and in the structure of *Acts* itself. The story of Paul's conversion is first told—graphically and dramatically—by the narrator of *Acts*.

Now as he journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him. And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' And he said, 'Who are you, Lord?'

And he said, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting; but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.' The men who were travelling with him stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one. Saul arose from the ground; and when his eyes were opened he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. And for three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. (9:3-9)

This is a direct revelation of a piece of history we did not know before (and a better story than *Galatians* 1:13-17). But it is immediately given a context and explanation by a cunning move of the Lucan narrative which links it to prophecy in the Lord's ensuing dialogue with Ananias, 'Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and Kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name'. Now we know what Paul is there for and what kind of adventures are likely to ensue, and indeed this chosenness and the hardship of apostolic witness (along with escapes and heroics appropriate to chosen-ness) are the keynotes of Paul's history as told in *Acts*. Providence sends Paul, and the reader, on a journey; and Providence, not Paul nor the reader, scripts the story.

The mission of the apostles is primarily to tell the story of Christ's resurrection and its promise. As the mission grows and progresses, its own history becomes part of the story it tells. In *Acts* 15:3 we are told that Paul, Barnabas and the others 'travelled through Phoenicia and

Samaria, telling the full story of the conversion of the Gentiles', Their activity of witness is storytelling, and like the text displays a constant movement to bring the story up to date. (This is also the function described when the returning disciples report to Jerusalem their evangelistic progress throughout early *Acts*.)

Paul's speeches show that this is a movement characteristic of the structure of *Acts*. A notable aspect of the speeches in *Acts* is repetition. There is repetition of material from one speech to the next (concerning prophecy and its fulfilment) in the early speeches. Peter's speech in 11:5-18 repeats as one story the two previous episodes of Cornelius's visitation by an angel and Peter's visitation by the heavenly picnic blanket. His speech complements Cornelius's own retelling to Peter of his vision. It is a momentous story in *Acts*, for it initiates the mission to the Gentiles. But the repetition is not there simply to prolong and emphasize the episode. Retelling the past experience becomes part of the process by which Peter understands (and we understand) its meaning. The descent of the Holy Spirit on the Gentiles reminded Peter of his own Pentecostal experience. Recalling that visitation in his retelling, Peter says 'And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said "John baptized with water but you shall be baptizing with the Holy Spirit"'. We, too, remember the first words in *Acts* (1:5). History, incorporating prophecy, interprets the present moment: 'Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life'(11:18). Paul's speeches, too, constitute repetitions of experience and contain repetition. His address to the Jews at Antioch (13:16) repeats the address to 'Men of Israel' and Old Testament material familiar from Stephen's speech in chapter 7. When the account reaches David, however, he does not stop but goes on to tell the history of David's posterity and the fulfilment of God's promise and David's prophecy in Jesus. Preaching forgiveness, he also goes beyond Stephen's attack those who fail to keep the law of Moses, to announce that through Jesus 'every one that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses'. At the end of the speech he generates a sense of the present by using a quotation known from the past and referring to a future which acknowledges the present experience as the material for a future story !

Behold, you scoffers, and wonder, and perish; for I do a deed in your days, a deed you would not believe, if someone were to tell you.

Reference to the past is always a starting point in Paul's speeches. When reference to a shared religious or national history is not

possible—as in Paul’s address to the Lycaonians at Lystra (14:15-17) - he nevertheless enforces their kindred humanity by evoking the living God who at the beginning created everything and continues to show himself in the natural world which sustains them all. ‘In past generations,’ he says, ‘he allowed all the nations to walk in their own way; yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good and gave you from heaven rain and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness’. Recalling their separate pasts he unites their experience of a common creation and testifies to their common creator.

This tactful and rather beautiful address, perfectly judged for its confused but enthusiastic Gentile audience anticipates the more polished oratorical arguments of Paul’s ‘who-says-I am not-a-philosopher’ speech at the Areopagus in Athens (17:22-31). Indeed the second might be considered a more elaborate repetition of the first. Again Paul alludes to the creator of all things (and as he told the Lycaonians that men were not to be mistaken for gods so here he says that God is not to be found in shrines and idols made by men either). Again this reference to the origin is followed by a review of the historical evolution of the nations, with their allotted times and boundaries, from a common humanity. And as he earlier found God in the rain and crops now he finds him, by poetic assertion and genetic backtracking, in people: ‘For we are indeed his offspring’.

History, then, is God’s creation, as we are, as nations are. But here Paul—addressing the present audience—posits a radical break between past and present. ‘The times of ignorance God overlooked but now he commands all men everywhere to repent’ (17:30). He concludes by looking to the future—a future unlocated but as immediately envisaged as tomorrow—which is the location of a promise fulfilled, the promise signalled in Christ’s resurrection:

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 men by raising him from the dead.

The overall effect of this speech is to generate a sense of time, to locate the present minute in history and to locate the listeners in that present, by establishing a relation to past creation/ignorance, and future repentance/judgment. Just as in the speeches to the Jews where repetition of the past generates necessary consequences for the future, the philosophical pseudologic of Paul’s argument here makes a pattern of growing cultural and religious sophistication the basis of an imperative for an informed turning to the one ‘living God’.

Paul's remaining speeches continue to exhibit the patterns of repetition, of history and of a movement from past to present with implications or injunctions for the future with which we are now familiar. His speeches in Jerusalem might seem like the ravings of a compulsive autobiographer if we were not by now accustomed to finding significance in repetition. There is, I think, an air of repetition and certainly a significance about the manner of Paul's going to Jerusalem. It is clearly a momentous and dangerous journey. There is a sense of urgency ('he was hastening to be at Jerusalem . . . on the day of Pentecost'), and a sense of foreboding. When he takes his leave of the elders of Ephesus Paul reminds them of his past activities among them and his difficulties. From our knowledge of those sufferings we shrink from the future prospect when Paul says 'I am going to Jerusalem, bound in the spirit, not knowing what shall befall me there; except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me'. Placing his mission before his life he says 'I know that all of you among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom will see my face no more.' It is a hero's farewell, a witness's testimony, and there's not a dry eye in the house.

Here and in the ensuing rhetoric, the response of those Paul meets, the foreboding generated by Paul's readiness 'even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus', and our own recollection of the end of the road to Jerusalem in Luke's gospel all provide us with an expectation—a sense of fatality—a fear which even our awareness that Paul-got-to-Rome-in-the-end cannot quite dispel. This is the effectiveness of literary convention, of rhetorical skill and of our inveterate habit of reading the future by the past which we know.

That Paul does *not* die in Jerusalem is important. This is not to be a repetition of Jesus's story, or of Stephen's. The providence which holds Paul's ticket to Rome produces a passport from Tarsus, a proof of Roman citizenship, a demonstrably orthodox Jewish practice—and some effective speeches. To the Jews outside the barracks Paul begins his speech with a history, the history of his own birth, his upbringing, his persecution of Christians and his conversion. He locates himself in terms of race, citizenship and opinions. He tells the story of his conversion as dramatically as 'Luke' did (and in very similar terms) but he carries it further, filling us and his listeners in on the method by which the Lord made known to him his mission to the Gentiles.

The same material is repeated in Paul's speech before King Agrippa (26:2-28) except that he compresses the conversion scene, giving Jesus more lines, specifically emphasising the conversion of the Gentiles. This mission, this *saving* of the Gentiles, he explains to the pro-Gentile king,

is why the Jews oppose him. Once again history—here his own personal history as a Jew and an apostle, a witness to Christ—is linked to prophecy: ‘I say nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass . . .’ Paul’s retelling of his personal history, notably the history of his conversion, has the same effect we have seen to be a regular pattern of the speeches in *Acts*. The audience is made to remember a story it can relate to through common history or experience (Paul relies on Agrippa’s acquaintance with the substance of the story, for ‘none of these things has escaped his notice’). The history is of human events and of God’s workings glimpsed in promise or prophecies fulfilled or made anew. The speech brings the audience up to its present moment—indeed Agrippa comments on the process of evangelisation to which he is being subjected.

We may now recognise yet another motion characteristic of the pattern of the speeches in *Acts*. Just as each one moves back to past history, reaching back to creation in some cases, through Old Testament history in others, to recount that history as it progresses through the promises and realisations, the ups and downs, the providential workings of the living God in the world, towards the present, so the overall pattern of speeches takes us from the history of the Jews in Old Testament times, through the death and resurrection of Christ, to the experience of persecution, conversion and witness among the early Christians, to the arrival of Paul in Rome itself. For it is not out of line with this motion that Paul, upon arriving in Rome, calls together the Jewish community to explain to them the very recent history of what went on in Jerusalem and of how he got to their city.

What Paul does in Rome is familiar to us from the history we know, the content of previous episodes in *Acts* and a previous religious tradition. Indirect discourse is here enough to fill us in as we see Paul repeating in Rome what we have seen him repeat in earlier speeches. ‘And he expounded the matter to them from morning to evening, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets.’ The result is inconclusive: some believe and some do not. There is therefore still no resolution, no ending, no victory. Just as the arrival in Rome was not a new beginning but an insertion of Paul into an existing Christian (and Jewish) community, so his preaching is not a triumphant end but a continuing work of witness, implying the need for a continued witness.

Not that Paul likes that: his parting shot is another pilfered prophecy from Isaiah—echoing that of Stephen—and a repeated assertion that ‘this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles. *They* will listen’. It is all very repetitive, and it gives a sense of continuity. *Acts* concludes:

And he lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered.

It is a strange ending but in keeping with the overall structure, strategy and progress of *Acts*. It is not an ending; we are left with a continuing situation. We can visualise that situation—Paul’s activity of preaching and teaching—because we have been told that story before. The ending tells us nothing of the future except that for us, in the absence of further information, the present continues: openly, unhindered. It is a present we know because we know the past. What we know is primarily the substance of Paul’s teaching. The focus shifts from the hero-Apostle, intrepid traveller to Rome, back to the substance of his witness, to the continuing spread of the gospel, and the unfinished history of Christianity. We know where we are and, curiously, here all audiences come together: the implied audience of new Christians, hearing Luke’s details for the first time, a wider audience of Luke’s contemporaries and a future audience including ourselves. This story is complete in itself, though only *completed* in the most obvious topographical way by the accomplishment of a movement (of a reading experience and of Christianity) from Jerusalem to Rome. It is complete because we have rehearsed a past and arrived at a present. That present, inconclusive or arbitrary as it is, stands for any present in the history of the Christian era—with its sense of fulfilment awaited, a promise known and believed in, a future incalculable in its twists and turns, ups and downs.

The structure of *Acts*, then, joins two elements—the travellers’ tales and the after-dinner speeches—in a pattern which traces a similar movement in space and in time. The journeys are circular but they trace a progress from Jerusalem to Rome. The speeches repeatedly trace a movement from past to present (and on), a motion which in its repetitions seems to circle back again and again. But this circularity, too, discovers a forward progress from the times and beliefs of the Old Testament through the life of the apostle Paul, to a present which in Paul’s last speech makes history literally yesterday’s events. The incorporation of the audience’s past in an ongoing narrative locates the audience in a purposeful present. The sense of progress which is generated out of a movement in time and space which spirals reassuringly from the familiar towards the unknown, recalling promise and fulfilment, origins and rebirth, colours with a sense of possibility and direction a mission with a clear occasion and unknown paths. Confidence in the future is generated by stories of the past.



*Acts* makes it very clear that the only story you can know is that of the past. It shows us that our present is placed in relation to the past and our future imaginable only as a retelling of familiar stories. What makes *Acts* different from the romance it resembles or the historiography it imitates is that the past in it remains open, its meaning richly awaiting future realisation. The end is not conclusive, not a happily-ever-after that our past experience must label 'escapist', or at best, fictitious. It, like the audience's present moment and moments yet to come, is a point in a history foreknown, promised, meaningful already because of the presence in that history of the death and resurrection of Christ.

- 1 Richard I. Pervo, *Profit with Delight*, Philadelphia, 1987
- 2 Brian Reardon, *The Form of Greek Romance* (Princeton, 1991)
- 3 H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, London, 1960, p.213.
- 4 I prefer this translation to that which reads 'in the farthest corners of the earth', as it contains, if only implicitly, the temporal dimension along with the spatial which is essential to the vision of progress in *Acts*, as it was in Luke's gospel.

## Silence, Metaphor and the Communication of Religious Meaning Part I

Chris Arthur

### A Tale of Two Thought-Worlds

In his important study of *The New Era in Religious Communication*, Pierre Babin offers a startling juxtaposition of two very different thought-world.<sup>1</sup> First, he introduces us to the practice, among some Indian tribes living in the Canadian wilderness, of plugging children's nostrils and covering their eyes soon after birth, the better to attune them to the noises of the forest in which they will have to survive. Then, in stark contrast to these "hyperauditory" individuals, made alert to the subtlest natural sounds: the whisper of snow falling on the leafless branches of aspen and birch, the footfalls of deer in soft summer mud, the long indrawn breath