

Chapter 19

The Collection and its Aftermath

Paul's plans for the collection hit a snag when the Corinthians and other churches insisted that their representatives accompany the collection to Jerusalem. They didn't trust Paul. But Paul was always resourceful. From his diminutive size, he became "the least of the apostles." He transformed his "thorn," a messenger of Satan, into a gift of God. His scrawling, childlike penmanship became a brand identifier. When his churches saddled him with a requirement for guards, Paul once again made the most of it.

Paul managed to get several of his associates appointed as guards. One was "the brother who is praised in all the churches for his preaching of the gospel" (2 Cor. 8:18), traditionally thought to be Luke—who claimed to be an eyewitness on this trip. Paul also placed another "whom we often tested in many ways and found earnest" (2 Cor. 8:22). Luke mentions others, including Aristarchus from Thessalonica, who Paul mentioned in Philemon 24; and Tychicus and Trophimus of Asia, mentioned in pseudo-Pauline letters. Titus was almost certainly there as well. Half the convoy was probably his close associates.

Paul originally planned to travel to Jerusalem as directly as possible. Not only was this quicker, it was much safer as well. But he ended up making many stops, and spent up to a week in many of them. This is not what we would expect of someone intent on delivering a large collection of money. At some of the stops, Luke noted that Paul stayed with "brothers"—followers of Jesus. I suspect this was true at virtually all the stops. These "brothers" were obviously not followers of Paul, who had never been to most of these

places before. They were Jewish-Christians. Word of Jesus spread through synagogues, as it had in Antioch, Thessalonica, Corinth, Ephesus, Alexandria, and Rome. Paul discovered that the brothers were enthusiastic about his collection for the poor of Jerusalem, and were impressed by the dignitaries accompanying it. Paul made all those stops because he was banging the drum for his collection. He probably raised a great deal of money from the brethren, who far outnumbered his small group of householders. Paul told the Corinthians he was a Jew to the Jews and a Gentile to the Gentiles. This is a virtual definition of duplicity, though no one seems to have noticed. Paul also became a Jewish-Christian to the Jewish-Christians, though he vilified them to the Galatians and Corinthians.

In Miletus, Luke reports that Paul summoned his Ephesian church and said: "I am compelled by the spirit to go to Jerusalem, though I do not know what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit has told me that in city after city imprisonment and other hardships await me" (Acts 20:22-23). Not a word about the collection. Just some prophetic mumbo-jumbo about the Spirit committing him to serial imprisonment, for no particular reason, in an empire that almost never imprisoned anyone. Luke continues this prophetic drama, having Paul declare, "none of you . . . will see my face again." This prophecy came true. *In fact, Paul never even wrote any of his churches again, despite having every opportunity to do so.* Luke also records some excessive protesting by Paul: "I have never coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You know very well that these hands have served my needs and my companions" (Acts 20:33-34). In fact, Luke previously said that Paul didn't work during his Ephesian mission, and only briefly worked in Corinth. Besides, Paul could not have supported his mission by working.

Paul concludes his speech by urging his audience to "remember the words of the Lord Jesus, who himself said: 'It is

more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). There is no record of Jesus ever saying this. Since Jesus blessed the poor, who are more likely to receive, and cursed the rich, who are more likely to give, it’s not obvious he would have done so. But it’s a great fundraising ploy.

After Paul left Corinth, Luke said nothing about the composition of the convoy. By the time Paul met James, there was no sign of them. Luke described a formal meeting, attended by all the “presbyters” or elders. It is a council meeting, or some type of hearing. If it were a ceremonial meeting in which Paul and his dignitaries presented a large donation, it is inconceivable that there would be no attempt to acknowledge these dignitaries, much less thank them. What kind of upbringing do you think James and his associates had? There was no discussion of a gift at this meeting, much less a transfer of funds.

According to Luke, Paul spoke of his great success converting Gentiles. The presbyters in turn told him about the “myriads,” or *tens of thousands* of Jews that had joined the Jesus sect. Translators always (mis)translate “myriads” as *thousands*, possibly in an attempt to reduce the enormous disparity between Paul’s success and that of the apostles, or to disguise the fact that nearly all followers of Jesus at this time were Jewish. The Jesus-movement had grown rapidly, and was overwhelmingly Jewish. Given that one of Luke’s favorite themes is that Jews rejected Jesus, the criterion of dissimilarity implies there really were “myriads” of Jewish-Christians.

After these pleasantries, they get down to the real purpose of the meeting. The leaders tell Paul, “you are teaching all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to abandon Moses and that you are telling them not to circumcise their children or to observe their customary practices” (Acts 21:21). Apparently, they had heard about Paul’s preaching to the Galatians—how he called the Torah a curse, denied its life-affirming powers,

and insisted that if you were circumcised, Christ was of no value to you. The charge was not apostasy, though that was understood. It was teaching Jews to reject and violate the Torah, which Jesus said was damnable. Luke undoubtedly whitewashed these proceedings.

To atone for his sins and demonstrate his obedience to the Torah, James told Paul to shave his head and take a Nazirite vow: "Take these men and purify yourself with them, and pay their expenses that they may have their heads shaved. In this way everyone will know that . . . *you yourself live in observance of the Torah*" (Acts 21:24). A Nazirite vow was an extreme act of ritual purity, one which very few people undertook. Paul, who ate meat sacrificed to pagan gods, and whose gospel claimed that Christ nullified the Torah, agreed to publicly demonstrate his "observance of the Torah." Paul always spoke contemptuously of James to his churches, and boasted to the Corinthians that he was at least his equal. The Corinthians said Paul talked big in his letters, but wasn't much in person. They were right. Face-to-face with James, he crumpled. He said nothing about his resurrected Christ nullifying the Torah or declaring it an accursed instrument of death. Paul agreed to display his loyalty to the Torah, which obviously remained in force. Luke didn't invent this humiliation, and almost certainly minimized it.

About a week later, Luke says that Paul was in the Temple, on the verge of completing his Nazirite vow, when "Jews from the province of Asia" grabbed him, shouting: "'This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place, and what is more he has even brought Greeks into the Temple and defiled this sacred place.' For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with him and supposed that Paul had brought him into the Temple" (Acts 21:28-29).

It was in fact a capital crime for a Gentile, or Greek, to enter the inner courts of the Temple. The outer court of the

Temple—named the Court of the Gentiles—had signs around it saying that any Gentile proceeding beyond this point did so on pain of death. This was the only case in which Jewish authorities had the right to inflict capital punishment, and they could do so on the spot. *But that was not the charge.* Had they found Trophimus inside the Temple, they could have killed him, no questions asked. It is not clear what liability Paul would have had. But had they found and killed both Paul and Trophimus in the Temple, claiming Paul was responsible for the crime, there probably would have been no problem. But Luke says nothing about them even *looking for* Trophimus. They charged Paul with bringing a Gentile into the Temple on some unspecified *prior* occasion, and did so because they had previously seen Paul with Trophimus in Jerusalem, *well outside* the Temple. This makes no sense. There were no Gentiles in sight when they made this claim. Trophimus was not even in the outer court, which would have been legal in any case. If such charges were permitted, it would have created chaos. There could be countless murders in the Temple on the grounds that the victim had previously been seen with a Gentile. The charge is absurd, and would not have been taken seriously. (The other charge about Paul teaching against the Law is a Lucan red herring. If they were really so angry about it, they would have killed him back in Ephesus, or at least when they saw him earlier with Trophimus.)

Since this was not long after Shavuot [Pentecost], one of the three Temple festivals, the Temple would have been crowded. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims came to Jerusalem for this festival. (One scholar believes over a million people attended each Temple festival¹; my estimates are conservative.) Pilgrims were not a lynch mob, and would not have pursued such an absurd charge. Furthermore, the chance of a few Jews from Ephesus spotting Paul inside the Temple was vanishingly small—far less than that of spotting him inside a sold-out

Yankee Stadium. This alleged incident occurred in the outer court of the Temple, the Court of the Gentiles, which was a flat area of about ten acres. Even if Yankee Stadium could hold the hundreds of thousands that were likely attending the Temple at this time—Yankee Stadium has a capacity of about 50,000—its bowl-shaped construction would have made Paul far more visible. Given Paul’s diminutive size, he would have been almost invisible to others in the Court of the Gentiles. The Asians would practically have had to stumble over him to spot him.

According to Luke, after these Ephesians announced Paul’s alleged crime, “The whole city was in turmoil with people rushing together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the Temple, and immediately the gate was closed.” Luke is fond of angry mob scenes. In this case, the Ephesians would have needed a very powerful voice to alert the whole city, whose residents would have needed wings to get there in time. Furthermore, the Temple gates were massive, and required many Levites to open and close them. With people milling about, it would have been impossible to close them immediately after Paul was dragged outside.

Luke next reports, “While they were trying to kill him, a report reached the cohort commander that all Jerusalem was rioting. He immediately took soldiers and centurions and charged down on them. When they saw the commander and the soldiers they stopped beating Paul.” That is, we have a huge, murderous mob beating Paul. The commander is notified and then arrives with his troops to stop it. The Antonia fortress was beside the Temple, but it would have taken at least several minutes for the commander to be notified and arrive with his troops. You don’t have to be a martial arts expert to realize that Paul, who has been helplessly dragged and beaten—no bombast here about Paul’s having the power to destroy fortresses, as he told the Corinthians—would have been a bloody pulp long before the troops arrived.

But instead, our hero emerges without a scratch, not even breathing heavily. He introduces himself to the commander, then climbs a set of stairs and launches into a long oration, after which he is finally arrested and taken into custody.

Virtually nothing about Luke's Temple tale is credible. The basic premise, that all of Jerusalem rose up because at some prior point in time Paul was seen with a Gentile, is ludicrous. Furthermore, there's almost no chance that the Jews from Ephesus could have spotted Paul in the Temple. Finally, the idea that a mob of thousands, bent on the destruction of Paul, could have attacked him without mercy for several minutes without having any discernable effect, is absurd. Even Luke did not take this tale seriously. We will see that he repeatedly contradicted it. Luke needed a way to account for Paul's arrest. Rather than divulge the truth, he created a Temple mob scene with his favorite villains.

After arresting Paul, the Roman soldiers were about to scourge him as part of their normal questioning procedure, when Paul asked, "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman citizen and has not been tried?" Earlier, Paul also claimed to be a citizen of Tarsus. Such dual citizenships were impossible when Paul was born, and only became possible under the emperor Claudius.² Moreover, Paul offered no evidence that he was a Roman citizen, and the centurion never asked him for any. The chances of a circumcised Jew in Jerusalem being a Roman citizen were less than 1 in 5,000. A centurion would not have simply taken Paul's word for it, especially since it was a capital crime to falsely claim Roman citizenship³. If Paul were a Roman citizen, he would have an ID card, a small wooden tablet⁴. The centurion had every reason to require proof.

The centurion told his commander that Paul was a Roman citizen. The commander in turn asked Paul, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" 'Yes,' he answered. The commander replied, 'I acquired this citizenship for a large sum of money!'

Paul said, 'But I was born one' " (Acts 22:27-28). According to Luke, not only did the centurion simply accept the word of the prisoner at face value, his commander did as well, despite the odds. And not only did the commander fail to ask for ID, he confessed that he bought his Roman citizenship—a very serious crime.

This story is fiction. First, as Joseph Fitzmyer acknowledged in his commentary on Acts, the commander would have had Roman citizenship⁵. Furthermore, even if he had not received Roman citizenship, he would have no reason to purchase it. Soldiers were effectively above the law, and could only be tried by a military tribunal. Soldiers were infamous for abusing this privilege. Juvenal wrote: "Your teeth are shattered? Face inflamed, with great black welts? You know your doctor wasn't too optimistic about the eye that was left. But it's not a bit of good your running to the courts about it. If you've been beaten up by a soldier, better keep it to yourself."⁶

Even ordinary soldiers were given Roman citizenship on retirement⁷. The commander had no reason to purchase citizenship. Even if he had, he certainly would not divulge this crime to someone he didn't know. This is about as likely as being hauled off to jail on a drunk and disorderly charge only to have the precinct commander confess to you that he is running drugs.

I suspect Luke created this story as an oblique way of saying that Paul purchased Roman citizenship. Citizenship would give him preferential treatment in Palestinian legal proceedings, and might even come in handy in Rome. Nothing in Paul's prior history suggested he had Roman citizenship, nor did he ever claim to in his letters. At the time, sales of Roman citizenship were common and relatively cheap⁸—a modest investment with potentially large returns.

The following day the commander "ordered the chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin to convene." The Sanhedrin

consisted of about seventy people, and met at regular hours. The commander had no authority to convene the Sanhedrin. Furthermore, it takes time to notify and assemble seventy people. But according to Luke, they assembled almost immediately, whereupon the commander brought Paul before them to stand trial.

Luke then describes a trial in which no charges were brought against Paul, and no witnesses were presented for either the prosecution or the defense. Instead, with no prior discussion of the case, Paul was invited to speak. No trial was ever conducted like this. Recognizing that the Sanhedrin was split between Pharisees and Sadducees, and knowing that these parties differed regarding the resurrection of the dead, Paul declared, "I am a Pharisee, the son of Pharisees, on trial for hope in the resurrection of the dead" (Acts 23:6). Whatever Paul may have been arrested for, it was not his beliefs about the resurrection of the dead, nor would such an issue be brought before the Sanhedrin. Luke says, "a great uproar" broke out, somewhat reminiscent of the old beer commercials in which two parties fight over "more taste" versus "less filling." The Pharisees declare Paul innocent, and the commander, "afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them" (Acts 23:10), had to bring in his troops to rescue Paul.

The Sanhedrin was a council of distinguished *elders*, in effect the Supreme Court of Judea. Luke's description of them in Acts 5 is closer to reality. They were not more riotous than opponents in a beer commercial, and the idea that they would be driven to a murderous frenzy over the mention of the resurrection of the dead is absurd. More importantly, no mention was made of Paul's bringing Gentiles into the Temple or any related charge. Luke's story is merely entertainment, with a dash of slander.

Luke tells us that the next day, "the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul" (Acts 23:12). In the land of Israel, Luke does not

bother being more specific than “the Jews.” He assumed it would set his audience foaming at the mouth. Luke claimed there were over forty in this conspiracy, and that they collaborated with “the chief priests and the elders,” telling them, “You and the council [Sanhedrin] must notify the tribune to bring him [Paul] down to you, on the pretext that you want to make a more thorough examination of his case. And we are ready to do away with him before he arrives” (Acts 23:14-15). Although only yesterday the Sadducees were fighting the Pharisees over Paul, today they are united in their murderous rage against him. If such agreement existed, the Sanhedrin would have convicted Paul. The story makes no sense.

These conspirators were supposed to represent the *sicarii*, or dagger-men. In the years prior to the Jewish War in 66 CE, they were assassins who fought to free Israel from its Roman occupiers. They hid daggers under their clothing, approached their target in a crowd, stabbed him, and then disappeared back into the crowd. Depending on your point of view, they were either terrorists or freedom fighters. Naturally, they were hated by the Romans. Felix, the Roman governor of Judea, claimed to have killed thousands of them, though many of his victims were innocent. Life was cheap, and Romans gave law and order far higher precedence than civil rights. In addition to entertaining his audience, Luke wanted to show that Christians and Romans were natural allies, having the same enemies. But the *sicarii* and the Sadducees were enemies, and would not have collaborated. In fact, Sadducees were among the principal targets of the *sicarii*.

Needless to say, the plot was foiled. Luke tells us that Paul’s nephew, his sister’s son, happened to hear of the plot, “so he went and entered the fortress and reported it to Paul” (Acts 23:16). Never before have we heard anything about Paul’s nephew or sister. As far as we know, Paul never visited them on any of his trips, including this one. On the other hand, Paul’s sister never visited him at all, nor did his nephew ever

make another appearance after reporting this plot.

Luke does not say how Paul's nephew heard about the plot. Perhaps the conspirators were plotting in public, and he miraculously overheard them. Or perhaps the very day they concocted the plot, the conspirators leaked it to so many people that everyone knew, even Paul's nephew. But despite the fact that everyone knew about the plot, only Paul's nephew bothered to report it. Despite the widespread rage against Paul that kept everyone from reporting the plot, they not only told Paul's nephew about it, but did nothing to prevent him going to the authorities, thus endangering the conspirators and many others as well. Go figure.

Apparently security at the fortress was quite slack, as Paul's nephew simply entered it and walked over to Paul. Had the conspirators realized this, they could have saved themselves a good deal of trouble. After hearing his nephew's report, Paul called over a centurion—not a mere guard—and told him, "Take this young man to the commander; he has something to report to him." Paul offered no explanation to the centurion, nor did the centurion ask for any. According to Luke, he just obeyed. Centurions had considerable stature. That's why it was so notable when Peter converted one. The people of Capernaum asked Jesus to heal a centurion's servant, as the centurion had built their synagogue (Luke 7). But here we find that Paul, a prisoner, commands a centurion, who simply obeys his prisoner. This is hardly plausible.

The commander took Paul's nephew by the hand, and asked, "What is it you have to report to me?" Apparently the nephew is a young boy. After hearing the boy's report, the commander summoned two centurions and ordered them, "Get two hundred soldiers ready to go to Caesarea by nine o'clock tonight, along with seventy horsemen and two hundred auxiliaries. Provide mounts for Paul to ride and give him safe conduct to Felix the governor" (Acts 23:23-24). The commander simply accepted the word of a boy without

any attempt at verification, and immediately dispatched 470 soldiers.

During most of the year, the commander had about six hundred soldiers at his disposal. However, during festivals the Jews were known to get unruly, and occasionally launched violent protests against their Roman overlords. During these festivals, the commander was usually provided with one or two hundred additional soldiers to help keep the peace. But Luke would have us believe that the commander decided to jeopardize the safety of Jerusalem by devoting one-half to three-quarters of his troops to escort Paul to Caesarea—and did so only on the word of a boy. (One scholar noted that the horseback ride from Jerusalem to Caesarea would have required nine changes of mount, and rejected Luke's account on this basis.⁹) Furthermore, the commander knew that if anything happened in Jerusalem, it might cost him his life.

The commander reported to Felix. He knew that Felix's campaign against the sicarii and the bandits was a top priority. In fact, eliminating bandits was the *highest* priority of Roman governors¹⁰. The commander would have used Paul as bait to capture or kill the sicarii, and had every reason to expect a reward if he succeeded. He would not have risked everything to save Paul, even if he had reliable information, rather than the mere word of a boy. Even if he believed Paul was a Roman citizen, this would have made little difference.

Many New Testament scholars claim that as a Roman citizen, it was only natural for Paul to receive such reverential treatment. This is nonsense. Less than a decade after this, Florus, the governor of Judea, not only scourged Roman citizens, including equestrians, he even crucified some. While Felix was better behaved than Florus, he certainly would have placed far greater value on the security of Jerusalem than on the life of Paul. Luke's story is fiction, designed to glorify Paul while concealing the truth.

Luke also said that the commander wrote a letter to Felix about Paul, noting "he was accused in matters of controver-

sial questions of their law and not of any charge deserving death or imprisonment” (Acts 23:29). Earlier, Luke said that no charges were made before the Sanhedrin, and that the Pharisees declared him innocent of these non-charges. But prior to that Luke told us that all of Jerusalem was rioting because it was alleged that Paul brought a Gentile into the Temple. If all of Jerusalem knew about it, the commander and his men had to know it. This was a capital crime. Thus the commander’s assertion that none of the charges against Paul merited “death or imprisonment” was false. But having Roman officials proclaim the innocence of Christians is one of Luke’s recurring motifs. He used it earlier in Acts with Gallio, and used it in his gospel with both Pilate and Herod Antipas. He will use it again in Acts with Festus and Herod Agrippa II.

This marked the end of Paul’s stay in Jerusalem. Throughout his stay, there was no sign of the dignitaries who accompanied the collection. Nor, with a single exception, do any appear later. Many scholars claim they simply went home after they delivered the collection with Paul. But the collection was never delivered, and it is unlikely that Paul’s loyal followers would simply go home and leave him in the lurch. Paul was supposedly charged with bringing a Gentile—one of *them*—into the Temple. Trophimus could have testified that he never went into the Temple, and his colleagues could have testified they were with him at the time of the alleged incident. Given that the prosecution had no witnesses, this almost certainly would have won Paul’s freedom. These men would have been willing to stay in Jerusalem a little longer to save Paul’s life. Yet none appeared before the Sanhedrin or any other venue.

If Paul had indeed stolen the collection, would he have been likely to leave witnesses behind to inform on him? Roman soldiers were known to use their professional skills on a freelance basis, and were famous for exercising their legal

immunity. If Paul used them as escorts and bodyguards, as I suspect, he could also have used them to destroy unwanted evidence or witnesses. Earlier, Luke depicted Paul saying, “I testify to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men” (Acts 20:26). Someone obviously accused him of bloodshed. (Admittedly, Luke posited a different, and implausible, cause of that bloodshed.)

After Paul arrived at Caesarea, Felix read the commander’s letter, and told Paul he’d hear his case. In a few days, the high priest arrived with several elders and a lawyer, but no witnesses. The lawyer told Felix, “We found this man to be a pest, he creates dissension among Jews all over the world and is a ringleader of the sect of Nazoreans. He even tried to desecrate our Temple, but we arrested him” (Acts 24:5-6). Being a pest is not a criminal offense, nor is causing dissension among the Jews. Even if Paul were a ringleader of the Nazoreans—followers of Jesus of Nazareth—that was not a crime. Neither the high priest nor the Romans were persecuting the movement at that time. Most importantly, Paul was *not* charged with bringing a Gentile into the Temple. He was charged with *trying* to desecrate the Temple. The lawyer not only failed to mention the nature of his attempt, but implied that Paul did not succeed. Furthermore, he said that the *Temple police* arrested Paul, contradicting Luke’s story of the *Roman army* arresting Paul. No one would confuse the Roman army with the Temple police. Luke doesn’t even bother keeping his story straight.

After these charges, Paul responded by denying that he instigated a riot—even though this wasn’t one of the charges. He also said he came to Jerusalem “to bring alms for my nation and offerings.” Many commentators claim this refers to the collection for the poor. But no one would have described donating a fortune in this way. When you went on a pilgrimage to the Temple, you always offered alms. The Bible required it. Commentators are desperate to find evidence of the collection in Acts, and grasp at straws or mirages.

Paul noted that the Jews from Asia had not registered any accusations or appeared as witnesses. In fact, none of the charges even involved the Jews from Asia. That was from an older version of the story. Luke said that Felix postponed the trial until the commander appeared to testify. But the commander *never* appeared, even though he was a subordinate of Felix. Luke tells us that Felix “postponed” the trial for two years while he was “trying” to obtain bribes from Paul. This is an indirect way of saying that Felix extorted Paul. During this time, nothing more was heard from the high priest or anyone else in Jerusalem, though Luke claimed they were still irate.

What really happened in Jerusalem? It almost certainly was not what Luke would have us believe. In fact, Luke didn't even bother keeping his story straight. First he says Paul was accused of bringing Gentiles into the Temple, but that charge disappeared when he was tried before the Sanhedrin, and later he was charged with *trying* to desecrate the Temple. First Luke said that Paul was arrested by the Roman army, but later said he was arrested by the Temple police. Luke said that forty assassins were willing to risk their lives by killing Paul while he was in the custody of the Roman army, and that many others risked their lives by collaborating with the assassins. But Luke would also have us believe that no one was willing to testify against Paul, even though that involved much less risk. Luke said the bad guys produced false witnesses against Stephen (Acts 6:13f). Certainly they would not have forgotten this trick. Having a few people swear they saw Paul take a Gentile into the Temple might well have justified a death sentence. Luke's story is not credible. He drops some useful clues, but Luke doesn't want us to know what really happened.

Perhaps the most important clue is Luke's admission that Felix was seeking bribes from Paul. Luke would not have made this up, since it contradicts claims of Paul's poverty. Felix would only seek a *large* bribe from Paul, nothing that

a poor itinerant preacher could pay. Felix obviously knew that Paul controlled a lot of money.

How did Felix know about Paul's money? Paul did not have it on him when he was arrested, or Felix would simply have taken it. The most likely explanation is that Paul was charged with stealing it, and probably with offenses concerning its guardians as well—nothing like Luke's ever-changing charges. Luke's tale of the Temple was just a convenient and entertaining fiction with his favorite group of villains.

The fact that Luke tells us the name of the commander of the Antonia fortress, Claudius Lysias, is also significant. Given Luke's limited knowledge of Palestine, I suspect he only knew that name because of the commander's involvement with Paul. The Western Text of Acts, one of its major variants, said that Lysias was afraid "he would incur the accusation of having taken the money¹¹" (Acts 23:24)—that is, of taking bribes or payment from Paul. Again, this is not the kind of charge that Luke would have made up. Lysias was probably hired by Paul.

Apart from Paul's humiliating scene with James and the elders, nothing else in Luke's account of events in Jerusalem demands our acceptance based on the criterion of dissimilarity, or any basis besides sheer faith. Nearly all of Luke's account contains highly improbable elements, and much of it is inconsistent.

Scholars assume that Luke's story is the only account we have of this period in Jerusalem, but that's not so. We have a detailed chronicle of Judea during this time by a well-known historian who was eyewitness to some of these events—Josephus' *The Jewish War*. Furthermore, Josephus was particularly concerned with the very kinds of events that Luke describes—riots at the Temple and elsewhere; sicarii; and religious fanatics and troublemakers. In fact, Josephus is our primary source for such matters. If all of Jerusalem rioted because of Paul, Josephus would have noted it. If there were

a well-known plot to assassinate Paul by the sicarii with the aid of the high priest and the Sanhedrin, Josephus would have noted it. If the high priest fought a lengthy campaign with Felix and later Festus against Paul, Josephus probably would have noted it. But Josephus never describes anything remotely like Luke's story. He does not even know Paul. Josephus had no reason, religious or otherwise, to suppress such evidence. Like both Paul and Luke, he was a Roman apologist who had every reason to present a story of Roman governors providing justice in opposition to Jewish fanatics—and did so. Josephus is the dog who never barked. This is another reason to reject Luke's account.

Luke says that Paul remained in Caesarea under Felix for two years, and after Felix was recalled, for several months under Festus. However, none of the proceedings with Festus are credible. The highlight of these proceedings is the supposed meeting with Paul, Festus, King Agrippa II, and Berenice. Luke portrays Paul as saying that Agrippa II was "an expert in all the Jewish customs and controversies" (Acts 26:3). In fact, Agrippa II was raised and educated in Rome as a Gentile, and there is no evidence he had much religious knowledge or interest. He was living incestuously with his sister Berenice, hardly indicative of religious knowledge or piety. Both Agrippa and Berenice would soon ally themselves with Titus, the general who sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and killed about a million Jews¹². They were hardly good Jews, as Luke would have us believe. This scene was another attempt to demonstrate Paul's affinity with the elite.

Luke claims that Paul asserted his right of appeal as a Roman citizen. However, there was never a verdict rendered in his case, so there was nothing to appeal. In fact, it was never even clear what Paul was charged with. Furthermore, either Felix or Festus would have had the authority to render a verdict in Paul's case: "any Roman provincial administrator was entirely free to make his own criminal rules, there being

no criminal code for the provinces.¹³ Similarly, “a governor was supreme in his province. Everyone—civilian or soldier, Roman citizen or alien—was bound to obey his orders. In principle, Roman citizens had some right of appeal; in practice, however, this might prove difficult to exercise.¹⁴” If either Felix or Festus thought Paul was innocent, they could have rendered that judgment. In addition, there are almost no documented cases of the Roman citizen’s right of appeal being exercised¹⁵.

I suspect that Felix demanded and received a large bribe, in return for which he released Paul. This was commonplace. In fact, Josephus complained that the only men in jail were those who couldn’t afford to buy their way out¹⁶. It is not clear how Felix could have managed to bribe Paul and his colleagues over a period of years. It is hard to believe that Paul’s colleagues would agree to an open-ended extortion in which their payment only provided a short-term lease on life for Paul. At best, they would soon be bled dry. Furthermore, at this time Nero was cracking down on delays of capital cases¹⁷; there would have been pressure on Felix or Festus to reach a decision, and little reason not to. Multi-year imprisonment was virtually unknown. Given that Luke’s descriptions of the trials in Palestine contradict each other, and given the absence of any historical data, there is no compelling evidence of any trials. I suspect Paul was arrested, bribed Felix, was released, and went to Rome.

One further report by Luke seems plausible. He says that Aristarchus made the trip back to Rome with Paul. In his letter to Philemon, Paul called Aristarchus his “fellow laborer.” The letter to the Colossians said he was Paul’s fellow prisoner. Evidently, he was a close associate of Paul’s. According to Luke, he was lying low during the years Paul was in Palestine, never appearing at his trials or anywhere else. He just showed up for the trip to Rome. Furthermore, Luke never again mentioned him. If Luke simply created

Aristarchus' appearance for the journey to Rome, he did an utterly incompetent job of plotting, and for no apparent reason. I suspect Aristarchus was one of Paul's co-conspirators who had access to the collection, and was known to have accompanied Paul.

Luke's story of the trip to Rome is a fantasy. There is no reason to believe any of Luke's reported adventures and miracles. Paul's letters reveal no such miracles before his trip, and tradition reveals no such miracles after his trip. It is hard to believe that Paul suddenly gained miraculous healing powers and then lost them once he reached Rome. Keep in mind that Jesus gained fame by healing people in the backwater of Galilee. Yet we are expected to believe that Paul cured an epidemic and all other disease on Malta, a more prominent location, yet no one ever learned of it. Similarly, we know that the Corinthians said Paul was unimpressive in person. Presumably they were not unique in this regard. Yet Luke would have us believe that Paul was so impressive that the ship's captain and crew exalted him, and even bowed to his superior maritime knowledge; and that Paul's guards were so impressed that they willingly risked their life by giving him opportunities to escape. Luke tells us that Paul even shrugged off the bite of a venomous snake—on an island that was never known to have any venomous snakes. This is all part of Luke's epic story of Paul.

Luke's ending for Acts has always been a mystery. Some say he wanted to avoid Paul's martyrdom. But Luke was fond of the subject, and portrayed other martyrs. Acts is the only known account of Stephen's martyrdom, and Luke treats it at length. (Despite Luke's claim that Paul played a role in it, Paul said nothing about it.) One thing is clear. Despite Paul's effusive declarations of love to his flock, and despite ample quantities of time and money, he never attempted to contact any of his churches. He just took their money and ran. He rented a *domus* and lived large.

I think it's likely that Luke suppressed other embarrassments. Perhaps Paul started a new collection, or perhaps he began baptizing the dead again. Perhaps he simply grew old with Timothy and died, or perhaps some of his old flock finally caught up with him. We don't know. Even a Pauline apologist notes that the first "solid" mention of Paul's martyrdom was in the late second century¹⁸, hardly what we'd expect from such an important historical claim. Furthermore, apart from the faithful's inordinate fondness for martyrdom, it doesn't really matter. No one claims that Paul's death atoned for anyone's sins or had any other serious consequences.

Notes

¹ Wolfgang Reinhardt, "The population size of Jerusalem and the numerical growth of the Jerusalem Church", in Richard Bauckham (ed.), *The Book of Acts in its Palestinian Setting*, 1995, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 262.

E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, 1993, Allen Lane, Penguin Press, London, p.250, says there were between three and four hundred thousand pilgrim attending each festival in the Temple.

² Brian Rapske, *The Book of Acts and Paul in Roman Custody*, 2004, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, p. 83.

³ F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 1977, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 39.

⁴ A.N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Law and Roman Society*, 1963 (reprinted 1992), Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 148.

⁵ Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 1998, The Anchor Bible, Doubleday, NY. p.449.

⁶ Cited in Nicholas Purcell, "The arts of Government"; in John Boardman, Jasper Griffin, Oswyn Murray, (eds.), *The Roman World*, 1986, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK., p. 165.

⁷ David Potter, *Constantine the Emperor*, 2012, Oxford University Press, p.42.

⁸ Colin Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, 1989, Tübingen: Mohr. p. 27; p. 171.

⁹ Brian M. Rapske, "Acts, Travel, and Shipwrecks," in David Gill and Conrad Gempf (eds.), *The Book of Acts in its Graeco-Roman Setting*, 1994, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, p. 11.

¹⁰ Gregory S. Aldrete, *Daily Life in the Roman City*, 2004, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, p. 39.

¹¹ see Witherington, *Acts*, p. 698.

¹² Martin Goodman thinks these numbers came from Roman records. In *Rome and Jerusalem*, 2007, Alfred Knopf, NY, p. 434.

¹³ W.F. Albright and C.S. Mann, *Matthew*, 1971, Anchor Bible, p. 335.

¹⁴ Mary T. Boatwright, Daniel Gargola, Richard Talbert, *The Romans*, 2004, Oxford University Press, p. 176.

¹⁵ Ramsay MacMullen, *Changes in the Roman Empire*, 1990, Princeton University Press, p. 60.

¹⁶ Josephus, *Ant.* 20.215; *Jewish War*, 2.273

¹⁷ Colin Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, 1989, Tübingen: Mohr. p. 391.

¹⁸ Hemer, *op. cit.*, p. 402.