

The Companions of Paul in Acts

Glenn S Holland

Allegheny College

(18 March 2016)

The Acts of the Apostles portrays the companions of Paul in different ways and in greater or lesser detail. The portrayal of his companions contributes to a particular presentation of Paul as the figure that comes to dominate the second half of the book.

Barnabas

Barnabas is the chief companion of Paul in Acts. He first appears as one of those who exhibit the enthusiasm Acts presents as typical of the earliest Jesus communities:

Ac 4:32. Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common . . . [34] There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. [35] They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. [36] There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"). [37] He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Barnabas provides not only a particularly notable example of generosity towards the community, but also a striking contrast to the scheming Ananias and Sapphira, whose story immediately follows (Ac 5:1-11).

It is Barnabas – not only a Levite, but an exemplary follower of Jesus in Jerusalem – who acts as an intermediary between the newly-converted Paul and the other disciples in his native city:

Ac 9:26. When he [Saul] had come to Jerusalem, he attempted to join the disciples, and they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple. [27] But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus.

Barnabas' earlier financial generosity is paralleled here by a generosity of spirit, as he offers himself as Saul's patron and benefactor, someone who will vouch for him to the Jesus community in Jerusalem.

The collaboration between Barnabas and Saul as fellow apostles begins in Acts 11, when leaders in the church in Jerusalem hear of preliminary missionary activity in Antioch in Syria, and send Barnabas there to investigate (11:22). He encourages the new believers, "for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith" (11:24a). Barnabas then goes on to Tarsus to recruit Saul for the work in Antioch, where they stay for a year (11:25-26).

Barnabas and Saul then return to Judea with a monetary gift from Antioch, after a prophet from Jerusalem, Agabus, predicts a widespread famine (11:28-30). After that mission is completed, Barnabas and Saul return from Jerusalem, bringing John Mark with them (11:24).¹ But in the next verse (13:1), Barnabas is listed first among the five “prophets and teachers” at Antioch, with Saul appearing last. As a result of prompting by the Holy Spirit, Barnabas and Saul are commissioned by the congregation in Antioch to travel to Salamis. There “they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews” (13:2-5a). John Mark goes along “to assist them” (13:5b).

In Acts 13:13 the group is referred to as “Paul and his companions.” Saul earlier took the lead for the first time (and was redesignated “Paul”) during the conflict with the magician Bar-Jesus (Elymas) in the court of the proconsul Sergius Paulus (13:7-12). Now the group travels from Paphos to Pisidian Antioch. John Mark, however, returns to Jerusalem instead (13:13b). In Pisidian Antioch, the elders of the synagogue ask whether any of Paul’s group have “any word of exhortation for the people” (13:15b). But it is Paul alone who “stood up and with a gesture began to speak” at length (13:16b-41). Although the shift to Paul’s primacy is subtle, the leadership has at this point passed from Barnabas to Paul.

There are several other instances in the next two chapters where both Paul and Barnabas are asked to speak, and both apparently do so (13:42-43, 46). Notably, “both Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you [Jews]. Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are not turning to the Gentiles” (13:46). This statement outlines a missionary strategy (first Jews, then Gentiles) which Acts subsequently shows Paul pursuing in Corinth (18:5-6) and in Rome (28:25-28).² But most often Paul alone is the one who speaks. This point is emphasized in Acts’ account of a miracle in Lystra, when it is Paul who heals a crippled man with a command (14:8-10). As a result, the people hail both Barnabas and Paul as gods in human guise (14:11), but notably, “Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes, because he was the chief speaker” (14:12). These divine names may be meant to indicate a physical distinction: Barnabas the more physically impressive, Paul less so.³ Paul and Barnabas together reprimand the crowd (14:14-18). But when “Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and won over the crowds” (14:19a), it is only Paul who is stoned and left for dead (14:19b-20). Later, it is both Paul and Barnabas who “spoke the word” in Perga, and reported on their mission once back in Antioch (14:26-27).

In Antioch, the “circumcision party” arrives and disputes with Paul and Barnabas (15:1-2a), leading to “Paul and Barnabas and some of the others” being appointed “to discuss this question with the apostle and the elders” (notably, not the same group) in Jerusalem (15:2b).

¹Substituting, as many do, “from” for “to.”

²For another way in which these three passages may be related, see Brooks **Acts-Luke** 149f.

³Consider the hints of Paul’s unimpressive physical appearance in 2 Cor 10:10, or the description in the Acts of Paul and Tecla 3:5 (see Meeks **Writings** 212).

Once there, the party “reported all that God had done with them (15:4), with Barnabas and Paul doing so again at the meeting called to resolve the issue (15:12). The issue is in fact resolved immediately afterwards by a decree from James/Jacob (15:21). The resolution is to be conveyed to Antioch by Paul and Barnabas, but they are to be accompanied by two representatives of the Jerusalem congregation, Judas Bar-Sabbas and Silas (15:22), who also carry a letter reproduced in Acts 15:23-29.

Paul and Barnabas subsequently remain in Antioch (15:35), but Paul proposes returning to the various cities where they have established congregations (15:36). Barnabas wishes to take John Mark (15:37), “but Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work” (15:38). This leads to a “disagreement [that] became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and set out, the believers commending him to the grace of the Lord” (15:39-40). And that is the last we hear of Barnabas in Acts.

John Mark

He is first introduced in the story of Peter’s escape from prison (12:1-17), when Peter goes “to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many had gathered and were praying” (12:12). When Barnabas and Saul return to Antioch from Jerusalem, they take John Mark with them (12:25) and he assists Barnabas and Saul during their missionary journey to Salamis (13:5). But John Mark returns to Jerusalem from Paphos, instead of continuing to Antioch of Pisidia with Paul and Barnabas (13:13b). Paul and Barnabas part company, and “Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus” (15:39b) and out of the story.

Silas

The name first appears in Acts 15:22 as one of the two emissaries from Jerusalem sent to Antioch with Barnabas and Paul (15:27), though it is not clear whether this is meant to be the same Silas who later travels with Paul. Silas is one of two “prophets” who encourage the faithful in Antioch (15:32). Paul takes Silas with him, in lieu of Barnabas himself, on the trip to the cities where he and Barnabas had established congregations (15:40). Compared with Barnabas, Silas is more an assistant than a partner; still, as with Barnabas, what happens to Paul also happens to Silas. “They seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace” (16:19b); “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God” (16:25); “The jailer . . . fell down trembling before Paul and Silas” (16:29); “After Paul and Silas had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia” (17:1), “Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas” (17:4a); “While they were searching for Paul and Silas to bring them out to the assembly” (17:5b); “That very night the believers sent Paul and Silas off to Beroea” (17:10). But when Paul leaves Thessalonica, Silas stays behind with Timothy, and is thereafter associated exclusively with him and only secondarily with Paul (17:14, 17:15b, 18:5a).

Since Judas and Silas are sent back to Jerusalem in Acts 15:33, the reappearance of Silas at 15:40 may represent a later intention of the author of Acts.

Timothy

He first appears with a full introduction:

Ac 16:1. Paul went on also to Derbe and to Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. [2] He was well spoken of by the believers in Lystra and Iconium. [3] Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew his father was a Greek.

Timothy later joins Paul while Paul is already being assisted by Silas (15:40), and both are later “left behind” when Paul leaves Thessalonica (17:14-15). Together they join him in Corinth, where “Paul was occupied with proclaiming the Word, testifying to the Jews that the Messiah was Jesus” (18:5b). Timothy is also sent with Erastus to Macedonia, perhaps to prepare Paul’s intended journey to Jerusalem (19:21), while Paul himself remains in Asia (19:22). Timothy is again associated with Macedonia when he goes there with a coterie of associates to await Paul at Troas (20:3-5). This is not a mission errand, and Timothy’s role is not enhanced by his association with it.

Erastus

In Acts, only at 19:21, abovementioned. He was undoubtedly a real person, at one point serving as an official in Corinth,⁴ but his promotion to mission associate in Acts is without support elsewhere.

The seven companions of Paul listed in Acts 20:4 are Sopater, Aristarchus, Secundus, Gaius, Timothy, Tychicus, and Trophimus. Neither Sopater nor Secundus appears anywhere else in the New Testament. Four of the other five appear in Acts:

Aristarchus and Gaius

Aristarchus first appears in 19:29 with Gaius, as a “travel companion” of Paul, who gets caught up in a riot in Ephesus. The two are also companions when Paul goes to Macedonia (20:4), and again when Paul sails for Italy (27:2). These are not mission associates. They appear otherwise only in the personalia (always dubious) of Paul’s genuine letters or in the deuterio-Paulines. Gaius is probably not the one mentioned in 1 Cor 1:14 (“I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius”).

Trophimus and Tychicus

They appear in Acts only in the list of companions in Acts 20:4. They are absent in Paul’s genuine letters, and appear otherwise only in the deuterio-Paulines. In Acts, they can be said to be companions, but not mission associates.

Luke

He is not directly mentioned in Acts, but the “we” passages invite the inference that Luke in those passages is recounting his own service as a companion of Paul.

⁴For Erastus, with evidence from archaeology, see Harrison **Paulines** 100-105.

Overview

Luke and Acts present Jerusalem as the center of the Jesus movement, as the place where it began (Lk 24:46-49, Acts 2) and as the seat of its authority (Acts 15:1-19). Of the various companions of Paul, three – Barnabas, John Mark, and Silas – are identified with Jerusalem (4:36, 12:12, 15:22). The others are identified with the Diaspora: Timothy is from Lystra (16:1), and the other companions are associated in some way with Macedonia or with Paul's travels there.

Barnabas is presented as exemplary in every respect. He is a model of generosity towards the Jesus community in Jerusalem, he acts as Saul's benefactor and patron, and he recruits Saul for his first missionary journey, commissioned as an apostle by the community in Antioch. He is an equal partner to Paul, the "Zeus" to his "Hermes," until they split over whether to include John Mark in a second journey, after his earlier desertion. Barnabas' willingness to give John Mark a second chance is commendable, even if Paul's objections are also understandable. Though the two apostles go their separate ways, neither Barnabas nor Paul is shouldered with the blame for the split.

Of the other companions of Paul, Silas' role in Acts is similar to that of Barnabas, although on a smaller scale. Silas is Barnabas' replacement after Paul and Barnabas separate (15:40). Although subordinate to Paul as an assistant, Silas takes an equal share in Paul's adventures in Philippi (16:11-40), Thessalonica (17:1-9), and Berea (17:10-14a). But after he stays behind with Timothy when Paul departs for Athens (17:14b-15), Silas does not again appear as Paul's partner, although Silas and Timothy are later reunited with him in Athens (18:5). Paul thereafter travels with a series of companions, but none are as closely associated with him as either Barnabas or Silas had been. Nor do any of the other companions of Paul – with the exception of John Mark – have any discernible personalities.

What sets John Mark apart is his decision to leave Barnabas and Paul at Paphos and return to Jerusalem (13:13b). We are not told why he does so, but he is from Jerusalem, where his mother Mary also lives (12:12). Whether John Mark was culpable or not (the reference to "the one who had deserted them [τὸν ἀποστάντα ἀπ' αὐτῶν] implies culpability, at least in Paul's eyes), he had forfeited the right to join a triumphant return to the cities where the missionary work – work he did not share in – had been done. Mark instead joins Barnabas as a companion in his missionary journey to Cyprus (15:39), an account of which Acts neglects to include.

Acts 15 is in many ways the center of the book, at least in regards to Paul's work as an apostle, which consumes the remainder of the history. In Acts 15 Paul separates from Barnabas, cutting Paul's ties to Antioch as the source of his apostolic authority.⁵ From this point on, Paul acts as the undisputed head of his missionary work, the apostle to the Gentiles, without partners but with various companions who assist him in his work. If none of them are as fully developed as Barnabas (who himself remains a somewhat underdeveloped figure), this only allows Paul, the star of the second half of Acts, to shine all the brighter.

⁵Lüdemann *Acts* 169, "The parting is necessary at this point because from now on there is no longer any room in the Pauline mission for a representative of the Antiochene community."

Comment

E Bruce Brooks, 2016

There are striking differences between the Acts picture of Paul's companions and the impression we get from Paul himself. These may bear on the agenda of Acts.

Barnabas. In Acts, Barnabas vanishes after 15:39, implying that the rift between him and Paul over John Mark was permanent, but Paul mentions Barnabas as a fellow worker, and as one familiar to the Corinthians, as late as 1 Cor 9:6. Acts has thus exaggerated the split, which in any case Paul himself never mentions.

John Mark is the only companion negatively portrayed in Acts. As the likely author of the Gospel which Luke (the presumptive author of Acts) sought to replace, a negative report of him might be meant to advance the cause of Luke's own Gospel.

Silas is most often equated with the Silvanus who twice appears in Paul's genuine letters (2 Cor 1:19 and, as co-author, in 1 Thess 1:1). Silas or Silvanus in Acts has a distinctly lower status than co-authorship, and Acts has thus subtly downgraded him.

Timothy is the associate most often mentioned in Paul's own letters.⁶ So also in the Pastorals (1 and 2 Tim) and as a co-sender of the deutero-Pauline 2 Thess (1:1). But as Glenn notes, his function in Acts is sometimes merely that of an arranger.

Erastus is mentioned in the perhaps dubious personalia of Romans 16; his only other mention outside Acts is in 2 Tim 4:20 ("Erastus remained at Corinth"). His promotion to companion status in Acts does little more than lower that of Timothy, with whom he is associated in Erastus' minor errand to Macedonia.

Luke. Paul is the star of what I have called Acts II, but who of all his companions is most faithful? Surely the "we" persona of Acts, whom we are invited to infer is Luke himself. He accompanies Paul along the seacoast from Macedonia around to Caesarea and into the lion's mouth at Jerusalem; he is with Paul thereafter, witnessing his miracles en route and then (it is to be inferred) his preaching in Rome. In this view, the deutero-Paulines (and the personalia of the otherwise genuine Phm 24) concur. "Only Luke is with me" says 2 Tim 4:11. "Luke the beloved physician" coos Col 4:14. If Luke is in fact trying to insinuate himself into the Paul picture which is drawing, he would seem to be getting massive support from the deutero-Paulines.

What all this would look like, if and when it should be untangled, who can say? Meanwhile, it might be fruitful to regard Acts II as just one more deutero-Pauline text. A text with an agenda; a text with something to prove – including, about its author.

Works Cited

- E Bruce Brooks. Acts-Luke. Alpha v1 (2017) 143-157
 E Bruce Brooks. Mark at Perga. Alpha v1 (2017) 99-103
 P N Harrison. Paulines and Pastorals. Villiers 1964
 Gerd Lüdemann. Early Christianity According to the Traditions in Acts. Fortress 1989
 Wayne A Meeks et al (ed). The Writings of St Paul. Norton 2007

⁶1 Cor 4:17, 16:10; 2 Cor 1:1, 1:19; Php 1:1, 2:19, 2:22; 1 Thess 1:1, 3:2, 3:6; Phm 1