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When was Acts Planned and Shaped?

Mr Moberly studied Greats at Oxford, but not until his retirement has he been able to use his knowledge of the ancient world in order to probe into some of the problems of New Testament study—with fascinating answers, illustrated in this fresh approach to the dating of the book of Acts.

I. The dating of what looks like a sequence; Mark, Luke, Acts

Luke was probably—not certainly—written after Mark. And Acts was surely written after Luke. Acts is presented as a Part Two; it refers back to its Part One.¹ It then proceeds, though its genre is disputable, as a kind of sequel to, and continuation of, Luke.

We are not thereby obliged to date Acts via and later than Luke; let alone Luke via and later than Mark. If a sequence is involved, Luke can just as properly be dated earlier than Acts, or/and Mark earlier than Luke. One can work forwards or/and backwards from the date for which there is most evidence; whether that is the date of Mark, Luke—or Acts.

There is to my mind more and better dating evidence for Acts than for Luke, Mark, Matthew or John. This is what one can and perhaps should expect. The later chapters of Acts are in some ways more verifiable than its earlier chapters or the gospel stories.² They relate to years of which we have other—and dateable—knowledge. They go to cities of which we have other and dateable knowledge. They mention people of whom we have other and dateable knowledge.

¹ Acts 1:1. I am indebted, for criticisms and encouragement, to (among many others) Prof. C. F. D. Moule, Prof. Fergus Millar, the late Prof. F. F. Bruce, Prof. J. L. Houlden, Sir H. Chadwick, Prof. W. H. C. Frend, Dr. Tom Wright and my son Dr. R. W. L. Moberly.

² A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford, 1963), Lecture Six and e.g. 189.

They embody tell-tale *current* attitudes to Nero, to Jerusalem, to Rome, to governors, to centurions, to Theophilus.

To my mind we need to consider, not when Acts was finished and in some sense published, but when it took shape. I hope to show that, surprisingly, it took shape, and was nearly all written, on collision course with Rome, wholly or mainly during an impatient wait for great things to happen; at the beginning of the AD 60s, within the 'two full years' to which 28, 30–31 (boldly added after the collision) allude.

Acts has been dated, via Luke, 2–3 generations after its story ends, in Cy 2.³ Such a date can seem plausible for Luke, if we choose to read lateness into its very ambiguous preface.⁴ But not for Acts. Harnack, who had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the early Christian literature as far as Eusebius, drew attention to the theologically early terminology of Acts.⁵ And Kümmel was surely right to regard Cy 2 origin of Acts as out of the question, for a work that presents Paul as an outstanding figure, while seemingly unaware of any Pauline letter.⁶

A date in AD 62 or 63, soon after its story ends, is not I think far wrong.⁷ But the evidence for it is, I fear, even flimsier than the evidence for when Mark and Luke were written.⁸ Most scholars date Acts—or imply that it was written—after AD 70, after Mark and

³ E.g. H. B. Green, *JTS* 40, 1989 1–25. H. Koester, *Introduction to the NT* (New York, 1982), II 308–323. J. Knox, *Marcion and the NT* (Chicago, 1942, R. c. 1980) Ch. 5. J. C. O'Neill, *The Theology of Acts* (London, 1961, ²1970) Ch. 1.

⁴ 'Many have written' (Lk. 1:1). The Greek says that many have compiled accounts; which could have been early and oral, with or without skimpy or (later) fairly full notes, in a papyrus notebook of some kind. 'Handed down' (Lk. 1:3). The Greek could mean just 'told', cp. 1 Cor. 15:1–3.

⁵ A. von Harnack, *The Date of Acts and the Synoptic Gospels* (Crown Theol. Library ET 1911) 103–114. For his knowledge of the literature, see his *Geschichte der altchristlichen Litteratur bis Eusebius* (Leipzig 1893; vols 2 (i) and (ii), 1987 and 1904, were about their 'chronology'). The secular vocabulary is also relevant. Tacitus, writing in Cy 2, called Pilate a *procurator*; Pilate was in fact a *praefectus*. But Acts is well enough informed to get its Cy 1 terminology right, over and over again. Sherwin-White (see note 2, 156) even regards the historical atmosphere of e.g. the reported 'Lysias incident' (22:26–29) as 'exactly right for the time of Claudius'. The same kind of argument has long been used in archaeological 'relative' dating, e.g. by stratigraphy and typology.

⁶ W. G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the NT* (London, 1975) 186. John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London, 1976) 87 notes a possible objection to the argument; the early language could have been faked. Possible, yes. But too sophisticated to be likely.

⁷ E. g. Harnack 1911 (see note 5) 90–116. Robinson (see note 6) 86–92. John Wenham, *Redating Matthew, Mark and Luke* (London, 1991) 243, 225–229

⁸ Robinson (see note 6) 336 ('how little evidence there is . . .'). Regrettably this applied to the evidence for his own suggested dates too.

Luke, 2–3 decades after the story's end, in about the AD 80s, under Domitian (AD 81–96).⁹

But suppose Acts took shape as a mid-Neronian front-line missionary brief, for urgent oral use elsewhere; religious journalism more than history. Its writer could have been looking forward, not back; with a lightly sketched link-up and build-up, to an eagerly expected future dénouement. Some of the indirect present Greek tenses, about e.g. Peter and Paul, could have been present English tenses; because the conditions that were being stated, by the use of indirect present tenses, still applied at the moment of writing.¹⁰ The writer could have been bringing his exciting story up to date; near here and soon, rather than here and now. Suppose he later brought it fully or nearly up to date; not once or (necessarily) at Rome, but—as the wait went on, and eventually ended—at least twice.

Rackham suggested some of this in 1900/1.¹¹ Harnack had learnedly commended, in 1897, simple-seeming Flavian dates for both works; dates that seemed more credible—and are more nearly right—than the ultra-late dates asserted in 1847 by Baur.¹² Rackham's early date therefore seemed, as Harnack's own early date of Acts did in 1911, a wishful and weakly argued aberration. But dates—even when ancient and retrospective—were being treated by both men as elementary data. To my mind neither had looked, nearly hard enough, for the abundant *indirect (contextual and textual) dating evidence*. There seems to me to be an Aladdin's hoard of it; more of it than—so far as I am aware—exists for the date of any other major book of the Bible except the two main Isaiahs, Daniel

⁹ For Loisy and Haenchen the date of Acts was perhaps too elementary to mention in an advanced commentary; students would know Luke's date, and that Acts is Luke's sequel. Nor did Lightfoot give a date; A. Plummer, *Luke, ICC* (Edinburgh, 1896 etc) xxix. Prof. Bruce used to date Acts early. But his mature judgment dated it later.

¹⁰ E.g. Peter and John, Acts 4:13 (ἔισιν). Paul and Silas, 16:38 (Ῥωμαῖοί ἐισιν). Paul, 22:29 (ἐφοβήθη . . . Ῥωμαῖός ἐστιν . . . ἦν δεδεκώς; note the present tense between two pasts). Sadducees, 23:6 (ἔστιν), 23:8 (λέγουσιν), cp 4:1; 5:17 (οἶσα). Paul from Cilicia, 23:34 (ἔστιν). Nothing meriting death, 26:31 (πράσσει). Cp. Lk. 6:15 (καλούμενον), 21:5 (κεκόσμηται).

¹¹ R. B. Rackham, 'Plea For An Early Date' *JTS* 1. (1900) 76–87. *Acts, Westminster Comm.* (London, 1901 & 1951) 1–1v.

¹² (a) Harnack's 1897 *Chronologie*, see note 5, 246–250 (AD 78–93). He was a very great scholar. But how scanty the discussion is! Note also where it comes, in an argument and 747–page layout that firmly distinguish between writings that either are or are not securely dateable within certain fairly narrow limits. (b) Baur dated the gospels and Acts AD 130–170. This did not allow nearly long enough, for the copying and diffusion of many works over a wide area; I hope elsewhere to trace the gospels back, by the use of several different kinds of evidence, all the way to—and into—Cy 1.

and (to my mind) Revelation.¹³ I urge that we still need to hunt for such evidence, wherever else it may have existed all along; with as few preconceptions as possible, about what the results must or cannot be. The results could clearly be important; dates are, as John Robinson saw, 'disturbingly fundamental'.¹⁴

II. Did Acts think of Nero as dead?

Luke attempted generation-dates *and* reign-dates; the latter, when referring to Herod, Augustus and Tiberius once each, by their names, and to Galilee's client-king (Herod Antipas) more often.¹⁵ Acts reign-dated the past, when referring to Claudius (AD 41–54) by name, and to Herod Agrippa I (AD 41–44).¹⁶ Acts referred to Nero.¹⁷ But Acts did not explicitly reign-date the past by him; or name him. If Nero was by then dead, how strange. For much of the story of Acts relates—as e.g. Clement of Alexandria could see, reading it in retrospect—to the reign of Nero (AD 54–68).¹⁸ And Nero, who died on 9th June AD 68, was not deified. He fell sensationally, at age 30. He had been deposed and declared a public enemy. He committed suicide. His fall led to a crisis in which Rome nearly fell. Pliny's uncle called Nero Nero, not Caesar; and 'enemy of the human race', and 'poison of the world'.¹⁹ Josephus called Nero Nero, not Caesar; and 'murderer of his brother, wife and mother'.²⁰ Martial, Juvenal,

¹³ The Cy -2 date of Daniel was pointed out in Cy 3; *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* LXXVa 771. R. B. Moberly, 'When was Revelation Conceived?' *Biblica* 73:3, 1992, 376–393.

¹⁴ Robinson (see note 6) 358. (A pity, that he called them data.)

¹⁵ Lk. 1:5; 2:1 (note the transliterated 'Caesar Augustus', the correct formula seen by early Christians in its original Latin form on many coins; for the probably monotheistic nuance of such a use, see Royce Morris in *NTS* 38 (1992) 142–144, and compare Josephus, *War* 1.20, 2.168, 2.215). See also Lk. 3:1 ('Tiberius Caesar', also the correct formula); 3.19–20, 8.3, 9.7–9, 23.7–12. Tiberius is referred to as 'Caesar', Lk. 20:24–5; after having been identified in Lk. 3:1 by name, and because the ruling was general.

¹⁶ Acts 11:28 (a straight reign-date), 18:2; 12:1.

¹⁷ Acts 17:7 (general but arguably under Claudius, see previous note); 25:8; 25:10–12; 25:25–26; 26:31; 27:24; 28:19. Did Christians know who was emperor? The 'images and superscriptions' of Caesars (Mk. 12:16, Hart and Bruce in Bammel and Moule (edd), *Jesus And The Politics of His Day* (Cambridge, 1984) 241–264) followed each other during the centuries of Roman rule, on innumerable coins, from many mints (including Antioch and Ephesus). Julio-Claudian and Flavian coins, and a surprisingly large number of Galba's, have been found far and wide. See e.g. C. H. V. Sutherland, *Roman Coins* (London, 1974). The domus of Caesars ended with Nero. But Vespasian's coins (see note 49) promptly showed Titus and Domitian as Caesars too.,

¹⁸ *Strom.* 7.17, 1.21.

¹⁹ *Nat. Hist.* 7.46, 22.92.

²⁰ *War* 2.250.

Tacitus, Suetonius and others called Nero Nero, not Caesar; and were scathing about him.²¹

Acts is a Christian document; from an era in which reign-dating came naturally (as it still did, to Eusebius; though Tacitus ponderously avoided it). Supposedly Flavian or post-Flavian in date, Acts had a habit of referring to Nero vividly, politely, hopefully, deferentially; as 'Caesar', His Majesty the current ruler, the worshipful Augustus, the impartial judge who *would* hear and acquit his eminent, loyal and law-abiding subject, Paul.²² At the time which I suggest, to call Nero 'Caesar' would have been proper, natural—and incidentally a way of implying 'in the present reign'. (Agrippa II was politely introduced, as 'Agrippa the'—ancillary but current—'king').²³

The Greek and Latin usages were straightforward.²⁴ The writer, if Flavian, had every reason to identify Nero, like the other dead rulers, to a Flavian Theophilus, and to other intended Flavian hearers and readers, at least once (preferably when first mentioned), by his familiar name; a name publicised by millions of coins. 'Nero' or 'Nero Caesar' was by then the basic, obvious and correct term for him. 'In-the-time-of-Nero' was the natural way of roughly dating events that had taken place during his reign. The failure to call Nero 'Nero' or 'Nero Caesar', even once—after naming Herod, Augustus, Tiberius, Antipas, Claudius and the Agrippas—is (like the dog that 'did nothing in the night-time', in the Sherlock Holmes story) curious.²⁵ By itself it may prove little. But it is not by itself.

III. What can constitute dating evidence, later?

Against Baur, Harnack defended the oldest literature of the Church; as, on major points and in most details, when considered from a literary-historical point of view, genuine and trustworthy.²⁶ But such

²¹ Martial, *De Spectaculis* 2, Loeb edn Vol 1 pp. 2–5. Juvenal, *Satire* 8. 211–230. Tacitus, Suetonius and Dio mention N. frequently; and play to the gallery about him.

²² Note 17.

²³ Acts 25:13. Agrippa II lived to AD c.100; so this verse is not by itself an argument against a Flavian date.

²⁴ Ovid called Augustus 'Caesar' in *Tristia* 1.1.30; 1.2.93, 104; but, when Augustus died, at once called him by his name in *Ex Ponto* 4.6, 10, 15. Pliny called Trajan 'Caesar' (in e.g. *Letters* 2.9.2, 2.11.11, 15; 3.7.7) and 'domine' in Bk. 10, *passim*); but called the many previous emperors by name, with or without a 'divus' as appropriate. I hope to enlarge on these (to my mind) very tell-tale linguistic points at a later date.

²⁵ A. Conan Doyle, *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*, Silver Blaze.

²⁶ Harnack's 1897 *Chronologie* (see note 5), Vorrede VIII (of XV).

a generalisation hardly covers dates; unless, like good petty cash accounts, they were kept fully, regularly and at the time. *Retrospective ancient dating traditions*, as such, are surely less not more objective, less not more reliable, than the (*prima facie* prior!) traditions, recorded at the same time and at the same distance (in time) after some event, about what had happened and who had written what.²⁷ One was constantly at risk of foreshortening the past.²⁸ To my mind Irenaeus foreshortened the date of a famous prophetic vision on Patmos; perhaps by inferring it from the date at which that vision was eventually shared with seven Asian churches.²⁹ If so, he was capable of foreshortening his dates of Mark and Luke.³⁰ He could have inferred them from someone's reported memories of, e.g., when MS copies of the two works had at last been afforded, and were first read out, on Sunday mornings, in some young orphan's aunt's large attic at Rome.

Is there internal evidence? 'The conclusion of the Acts (xxviii. 30, 31)' insisted Harnack, 'must always form the starting-point for an attempt to ascertain the date of the work'.³¹ The 'conclusion' is, by itself, one of the poorer indicators; being, as Harnack admitted, very ambiguous. But again it is not by itself. For instance Acts does not end when 'we came to Rome' and 'entered Rome' (28:14, cp. 28:16); though that entry could conceivably be the point in time, up to which a chosen story was first brought, during the two years. Acts ends at an almost unexplained point in time after Paul has been brought to Rome, in his prime, for trial.

Why should the last two verses (the last Greek sentence) seem abrupt? They could seem abrupt because they were unplanned. They were to my mind a neat brave hurried switch-off, a different ending improvised because the trial had gone, or was going, or at long last seemed certain to go, very wrong. Gentiles had listened; as

²⁷ What we remember—even if we then forget or garble it—depends on what we positively noticed at the time. Most of our pre-modern ancestors lived in an almost wholly unparticularised and unchartered present—and therefore in near-total fog, about what had happened when, in the past.

²⁸ Archbishop Ussher—a very able man—has incurred posthumous obloquy for his date of the Creation (based on all the best and most prestigious ancient traditions). Prehistoric dating has pushed many an old beginning back. The great Varro dated the use of papyrus and parchment—and foreshortened both: Pliny *Nat. Hist.* 13.11–12 cp. F. Kenyon *Books and Readers in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Oxford, 1950) 3–9, C. H. Roberts and T. C. Skeat *The Birth of the Codex* (London, 1983) 65.

²⁹ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 5.30.3. See note 13.

³⁰ *Ib.* 3.1.1. What Irenaeus says is that Mark and Luke wrote after the departure (in context, quite possibly the deaths) of Peter and Paul.

³¹ Harnack (see note 5) 93.

28:28 says that—when and where Jews would not—Gentiles would. But these were lordly governing Gentiles; a court that could contemptuously reject everything for which Paul stood.

Suppose that Acts already lay there, almost finished—on over-optimistic assumptions about what was going to happen. The writer could have been tempted to erase and rewrite his papyrus roll; or just erase it. But he had worked hard at it, and was quite possibly pleased with it. He could also have been a brave man, who remained—though bewildered—an optimist. In the agony, haste and heat of a current moment, he could have chosen a substitute for the triumph which had been hoped for, planned, foreshadowed; first aid, damage limitation, a way of loftily evading what, as he saw it, could only be a misunderstanding of some kind, a very temporary setback to God's clear will for the near future. What we have was, to say the least, a neat short-term counting of blessings, thus far; the last of eight cheerful summaries of evangelistic progress thus far.³²

IV. The tell-tale shape and thrust of Acts

Roman disapproval of the new faith was duly shown, a few years later; by spectacular public slaughter, in Nero's presence, of what Tacitus called (*Annals* 15:44) a 'huge number' of Rome's Christians. We know this. But did the writer know it, while he was planning and shaping his brave sequel? We should consider, not just the end, or (as has been urged) the last eight chapters, but the whole prior shape and thrust of Acts. The writer could so easily have been preparing Theophilus, and other originally intended hearers and readers, for an exciting grand climax, or appropriate further great 'fulfilment among us'.³³ Such a climax could have included Paul's acquittal—and a declaration, by the known world's ruler (Nero), that Jesus had been innocent.³⁴ Such a climax could have seemed likely and imminent in 'the island called Melite' (Malta, 28:1). Paul had survived a storm, a shipwreck, and imminent death by snake-bite; and had healed the sub-governor's father. Then and there, in Malta and in euphoric mood, is where the author could conceivably have begun to plan, in his mind, the sequel for which a Theophilus had asked. He could even have begun work on it then: not expecting that Paul would need to wait, in Rome, for more than a few days or weeks, before Nero heard and acquitted him.

³² Acts 2:42–7; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 18:11; 19:20; 28:30–31. About their tell-tale spacing see note 34.

³³ Lk. 1:1

³⁴ R. W. L. Moberly, 'Proclaiming Christ Crucified: Some Reflections on the Use and Abuse of the Gospels', *Anvil* Vol 5, No 1, 1988, 31–52.

There are large omissions during the last twenty, not the last eight chapters. Room had thereby been left, on a papyrus roll, for description of some colourful but quite minor local events. Note the artistry of a spatio-temporal—but curiously empty—local foreground, created and staged by dove-tailed perspectives of space and time.³⁵ The lavish and leisurely details about a journey and storm complete the staging of a foreground. The focus narrows towards a foreseen—and different—climax. There is a coherent series of selective emphases, as the climax is approached. On (for instance) Saul. On the conversions of a Pharisee and then a centurion. On the emergence and growing recognition of a mission to Gentiles. On some encouraging precedents (for the endorsement and protection, by Rome, of a new and more outward-looking Jewish sect, the law-abiding ‘Way’?)³⁶ On the ‘us’ and ‘we’ who proudly were and are and, when it happens, will be there. On Paul the authorised missionary to Gentiles, Paul the Roman, Paul the miracle-worker, Paul the Roman by birth, Paul using his Roman right of appeal, Paul surviving hazards en route, Paul who is innocent, Paul who—by great Caesar, in great Rome—will be acquitted.

What a scoop it would have made; the eye-witness story of a more obedient Jonah, a man who—before he went off to convert Spain—had been free to convert great crowds in the great Forum of a greater Nineveh, with Caesar’s acquiescence or eager support.³⁷ To us now, such an idea would imply a wild dream, day-dreamt by an over-optimistic young man in a hurry. But in the very early AD 60s it would surely have been natural; in an eager young assistant missionary who—because he was capable of writing and believing 1:11, and knew and believed the tradition in e.g. Mk. 13:26–31 and

³⁵ In space the action begins at Jerusalem, stays there or thereabouts for a time, moves away and back several times (on the last occasion, with Rome already in mind, 19:21), then to Rome. In time the pattern is less clearly charted; human beings were not yet far from the chronoslessness of primitive man and Homer. But the time-scale slows up, whenever the story becomes detailed and continuous; and a perspective shows up in the spacing of the summaries (note 32 above; the recent 7th comes as early as 19:20).

³⁶ Acts 13:12; 16:38; 17:9; 18:12–17; 19:36–40; 23:29; 24:5; 24:23–27; 26:20–33; not to mention 28:30–1. Clearly analysed and set out in B. S. Easton’s ‘Purpose of Acts’, 1935, reprinted in *Early Christianity* (London, 1955). Easton went wrong on some points; notably about ‘religio licita’, and when he said (45) that ‘If a Gentile wished to embrace Judaism, in whole or in part, Roman law gave him an unquestioned right to do so.’ But his general approach remains perceptive and helpful.

³⁷ Little of what we call the OT could have seemed more apt, to Paul and to our author, than Jon. 4. See also Lk. 11:29–32.

Lk. 21:27–32?—expected an early and literal De-ascension from the sky.

V. Some tell-tale silences

We have noted a small negative indicator; Acts does not seem aware of Paul's letters. At that time this would be natural. Only the letter to Romans is likely to have been accessible; almost uncopied—and somewhere else, in a city that had 14 districts, a million inhabitants, no printed A-to-Z, no telephones, no buses. We have noted the words 'we came to Rome' and 'entered Rome'; at that time they would have been the *mots justes*. We have noted a belated—and perhaps improvised—eighth summary. At that time there would have been, to say the least, a risk of needing to improvise it. We have noted the distinctive prior shape and thrust of Acts; at that time such a shape and thrust—towards triumphant acquittal—would have been premature and ill-informed but brave and understandable.

Others have noted the lack of the least uncommon form of human wisdom, the kind shown 'after the event'; i.e. about things that go wrong, but not until after they have gone wrong. The argument is negative and (by itself) tricky. But hindsight, when it is vivid, tends—as in the gospels—to affect the shaping and telling of the whole of a familiar story, not just its climax. Acts shows no nostalgia, blames noone; offers no incidental hindsight about what had led up to such relevant developments as the fall of Jerusalem, the killings of Peter and Paul, the persecution, the fall of Nero; not to mention the result of Paul's trial. Lack of such hindsight would have been wholly natural; the future was unknown.

None of this amounts, by itself, to dating evidence. It has been plausibly explained on other assumptions. For it is, at best, inadvertent indirect evidence. Such evidence, since it is often very ambiguous, can be very misleading; which is perhaps why a great Victorian like Lightfoot (a gifted mathematician, as well as a precise and old-fashioned classical linguist) still preferred direct, simple and explicit 'external dating evidence'.³⁶ But the supposed external dating evidence can be just as misleading; if it is retrospective, and

³⁶ In dating the Apostolic Fathers (Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Hermas, Papias), Lightfoot (AD 1828–1889) dutifully mentions but consistently discounts what might be internal pointers. He was a keen and fine historian. But he had presumably (a). studied little history at school (b). received no training at all in historical method (Stubbs and Seeley were appointed, at Oxford and Cambridge, in 1866 and 1869; and they had to start largely from scratch) (c). was therefore anachronistically inclined (like Finegan, at times?) to over-value precise old indicators.

therefore (as we have noted) arguably worth less not more than any related traditions about what had happened or who had written what.³⁹ To call the results approximate does not help; retrospective old dates, true or legendary, were almost bound to be. Or to have reinforced some so-called external evidence by a few pieces of so-called internal evidence. An answer can be required, to a harder question. Is there enough—indeed is there any—evidence? The answer is not a simple Yea or Nay, to one possible pointer, or to a few possible pointers that point in the same direction. As with the dates of Daniel and (in my view) Revelation, but in this crucial case more so, we need to weigh the *cumulative* effect—with luck, a simultaneously cascading ‘jackpot’—of many possible indicators. If they are valid, they have a clear temporal pattern; and add up, to being textual-and-contextual (indirect textual, fitted and stitched into dateable indirect contextual) evidence.

VI. Tell-tale amounts and kinds of emphasis on two people and a place

Two people (Peter and Paul) and a place (Jerusalem) dominate Acts. But had the people been martyred, and had the place fallen, when Acts was being planned, shaped and written? Lampe was able to dispose of Robinson’s arguments about AD 70, impressively and with fair ease.⁴⁰ But ordinary human words were used, after the event, in the most obvious surviving references to the AD 70 recapture of Jerusalem by Titus. *Flavius Josephus*, a Jewish Flavian writing during the AD 70s, described the siege, recapture and near-total obliteration of Jerusalem. Himself a priest, he lingeringly noted, with past verbs, that the Sanctuary had had, before being destroyed by fire, everything that could amaze mind or eyes; and described its former (often dazzling) marble-and-gilt glory, in graphic detail.⁴¹ Pliny’s uncle (Pliny the elder, a Roman Flavian writing in the same decade) noted that Jerusalem had become, ‘like Engedi, a burnt-out funeral mound of ashes’.⁴² A few pages later he noted that Jerusalem

³⁹ Robinson (see note 6) 337–8 describes it as, in the main, ‘virtually worthless’. This was arguably too kind.

⁴⁰ Lampe, ‘AD 70 in Christian Reflection’ (Bammel and Moule, see note 17) 153–171. Robinson (see note 6), Chapter II.

⁴¹ *War* 5.222–4. Written in the AD 70s because presented to Vespasian and Titus, *Life* 361. (Greek version, wholly or partly after the dedication of a Temple of Peace, which is dated AD 75 in Dio 65.15.)

⁴² *Nat. Hist.* 5.70. Written after the fall of Jerusalem and before Pliny died on the second day (25th August AD 79) of a great eruption of Vesuvius (Pliny the Younger’s *Letters* 6.16, 6.20).

had been 'by a long way the most distinguished city, not only of Judaea but of the entire East'.⁴³ (This was a generous western assessment, when one considers Alexandria, Antioch, Ephesus and Pergamum. But it honoured Vespasian, Titus and yet another major exercise of Roman armed might.) Tacitus, a Roman writing later (in AD c.106–9), was anti-Semitic, anti-monotheist, hostile. He looked forward to describing the 'last hours' of Jerusalem; and of a Temple 'of immense opulence'.⁴⁴ Laudable or not, such varying sentiments convey vivid, specific and natural human hindsight about what had happened in AD 70. As fellow-humans, we can empathise.

In Acts, note also the degrees of prominence. Paul, not one of the Twelve, is mentioned more than Peter (largely or partly because of what a Roman citizen was about to achieve for the Way, at Rome in the near future?); and Jerusalem is mentioned more than Rome. Paul is the unmartyred hero of more than half a gospel sequel. Jerusalem is the vivid scene of more than a third of it; an intermittent and overlapping third. Acts mentions or alludes to Jerusalem, without even one instance of specific post-AD 70 hindsight, more than 60 times.⁴⁵ More than 50 times, Acts mentions or alludes to the Temple, or to places and people that in AD 70 lost their importance for ever; again without even one instance of specific post-AD 70 hindsight.⁴⁶ If Acts was Flavian, its author and audience had perhaps become zombies; re-living old days, and ignoring rather than facing life's recent and present-day realities. But if Acts was nearly all written during the long wait in question, it was simply a morning hymn, not an evening hymn. It was written too early to show post-diluvian hindsight, about a wistfully remembered glorious morn before storms.

I sometimes naughtily wonder whether some of Paul's towering posthumous fame is due to two pieces of—in plain human terms—luck. He, like Peter, was in the end martyred at or near Rome; and by then he was already the prominent hero of a gospel sequel. He wrote marvellous letters. But the general demand for copies of them could have been triggered by the existence of Acts, as well as by Paul's recent martyrdom at Rome. And on the present hypothesis, what Acts says about Jerusalem, and how Acts says it, was natural, for current thoughts uttered by some proselyte or keen young Christian. In the early AD 60s Jerusalem was still a small but major,

⁴³ *Ib.* 5.73.

⁴⁴ *Hist.* 5.2, 5.8, Written AD c.106–9, see Sherwin-White's comm. on Pliny's *Letters*, and Syme's *Tacitus*.

⁴⁵ Acts 1:4, 8, 12 (twice), 19; 2:5, 14 etc.

⁴⁶ *Ib.* 2:46; 3:1–3, 8, 10 etc.

proud, prosperous and crowded eastern Mecca, a Holy City in its brief prime. It still had innumerable Dispersion pilgrims, massive assured income of several kinds (all thrown away by a failed revolt), a glittering new Temple on its widened Hellenistic acropolis, a Beautiful Gate thereto, High Priests, a Sanhedrin, Sadducees; as duly noted in Acts. Nobody knew that, within ten years, Jerusalem would again be a desolate ruin, of the kind described in Lamentations. The insistent emphasis on Jerusalem, and the lack of specific hindsight despite all that emphasis, fit an 'early' date like a fully reversible glove.

In AD 66 Judaea was provoked into revolt. In AD 70, after a prolonged but illusory reprieve (due to the fall of Nero and the civil war), the city was retaken by Titus. Its fate soon became at least as widely known as the reported fates of other cities (Tyre, Carthage and Corinth, as well as Nineveh and Babylon).⁴⁷ Such news was what a thriving equivalent to the modern 'gutter press', the 'bush telegraph', excelled at spreading, and ghoulishly exaggerating.⁴⁸ Augustine, in the *City of God*, could take it for granted that the (very relative) leniency of the Goths, to Rome in AD 410, had been unique in human history.⁴⁹

Vespasian chose to underline what was thus reported. He had the empire flooded with *Judaea capta* coins, of many values.⁵⁰ He and Titus celebrated a spectacular triumph at Rome; and encouraged Josephus to write his *Judean War*.⁵¹ And Vespasian imposed a tax. The voluntary Temple Tax had been payable by adult male Jews between certain ages. The new Jewish tax was compulsory and empire-wide. It was separately accounted for; and thereby served, both as a convenient guide to the number of Jews in each province and as a check on due local enforcement in future years. It was backdated to AD 70. It was payable, in respect of all members of the household—male and female, old and young—by the head of household. And it was payable by those whom Rome deemed to be Jews—a category which could have included all known Christians.⁵² The fall of Jerusalem was therefore widely—and painfully—known. Reading what Acts says about Jerusalem, Peter and Paul, and how Acts says it, is rather like reading a German pamphlet about

⁴⁷ Tyre 332 BC. Carthage and Corinth in the same grim year (146 BC).

⁴⁸ *Aeneid* 4.173–190 cp 665–6.

⁴⁹ *City of God* Bk 1, Ch. 2.

⁵⁰ *Judaea capta*, H. Mattingly, *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum* (London 1930) Vol II (Vespasian to Domitian), xxviii–xxxv (general), 1 & 5–8 (Rome), 95–6 (Ephesus), 104–6 (Antioch), 111ff, 131–2 (Rome, aes).

⁵¹ *Life* 342, 361, *Ap.* I 53–6, *War* 3.108

⁵² E. M. Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule* (Leiden, 1976²1981) 371–6.

Rommel.⁵³ Suppose that such a work described his many victories; but did not mention El Alamein, the invasion of Normandy or the plot against Hitler. Suppose too that—like Lord Acton's 1895 Inaugural Lecture at Cambridge—such a work was printed without title-page or date. One might incline to date it before the events it failed to mention; and would probably soon find further evidence of when it was written.

VII. Two other tell-tale names; 'Gallio' and 'Felix'

Next, two tiny nuances; which by themselves carry no weight at all. Acts takes the liberty of referring to a Roman governor of Achaëa as 'Gallio'. Nero was a household name; not least because of coins.⁵⁴ So, to a lesser extent and perhaps mainly in Rome, was Gallio's younger brother, Seneca. But only Acts has made Gallio a kind of household name, for some. In the very early AD 60s the usage would have verged on name-dropping. But it would have been natural; at Rome, while Seneca was still in power. Burrus died in AD 62, and Seneca was pushed out in that year. In AD 65 Seneca was ordered to commit suicide. His relatively obscure elder brother appears to have followed suit. I do not see that Lucius Junius Annaeus Gallio, *dim pro-praetor* of a quiet province in Greece for a year under Claudius, would have been known to Christians, in places like Antioch or Ephesus, during the Flavian decades; let alone familiarly, as 'Gallio'.⁵⁵

Acts also refers familiarly to a Roman governor of Judaea as 'Felix'. Again the usage would have been natural—at Rome, in the very early AD 60s. For 'Happy' (Marcus Antonius Felix) was the brother of Pallas. In Rome Pallas was still a familiar name, a name to be reckoned with, a household name. Pallas was no longer in office. But he was alive and very rich. In AD 62 Pallas was killed; because Nero wanted his money. Felix, the less famous brother, had also risen spectacularly. Like Pallas he was a bright slave who had been manumitted by Mark Antony's daughter Antonia, mother of Claudius. He was able, self-made, unscrupulous, a deft social climber. He was said by Suetonius to have succeeded in marrying 'three queens', of whom a (by then) unyoung granddaughter of Antony and Cleopatra was apparently the first, and beautiful young Drusilla (sister of King Herod Agrippa II and Berenice) was the

⁵³ Or a life of Field Marshal Lord Montgomery of Alamein, without mentioning Alamein until the book reaches it.

⁵⁴ See note 17.

⁵⁵ Acts 18:12–17. The *Annals* mention him (15.71); but devote much less space to him than to his brothers Seneca and Lucan. Dio 62.25.3.

second. Though a freedman (freed slave), Felix was appointed governor of Judaea by Claudius; and he managed to keep his post for several more years, under Nero, after Pallas had been forced out. He therefore made more of a mark than Gallio; and he may (as we shall see) have played a major role, behind the scenes, in getting Christians persecuted. But he too was primarily known as someone else's less famous brother. He was not likely to be remembered by, let alone to be a household name among, eastern Christians during the Flavian decades.⁵⁶

VIII. The tell-tale hope that 'Caesar' (Nero) would hear and acquit Paul

Did Paul stand before Nero? We do not know. We are told that an angel encouraged Paul, in a dream, not to fear death (in the storm), because 'you must stand before Caesar'.⁵⁷ But on the present hypothesis those words were written before the trial. Claudius enjoyed being a judge. But Nero did not—and had been able, as a minor, to delegate the job to Seneca or/and Burrus. The long delay suggests that by AD c.60 Nero wished in principle to do more of the work himself; but lacked application. By AD 62 the unpleasant Tigellinus was available, and could have brusquely cleared the backlog on Nero's behalf; reporting to Nero, and proposing penalties, between brief first and ultra-brief second hearings.⁵⁸ But Sherwin-White suggested that a mere *princeps castrorum* may have decided the case, on Nero's behalf.⁵⁹

Was Paul acquitted? Acts implies that he was—or would be. But cases were rarely dropped.⁶⁰ And in governing Roman eyes Paul was understandably obnoxious. He was in such eyes an overt monotheist proselytiser, of decent gods-fearing polytheists. He even tried to convert Roman governors and puppet-kings. Rome was willing to tolerate, indeed protect, Judaism; which was an ancient, high-minded and—in the main—safely tribal faith.⁶¹ But Rome remained a polytheist power; it tolerated and protected monotheism, if at all, on its own terms. Rome did not tolerate overt monotheist proselytism—

⁵⁶ *Hist.* 5.9, Suet. *Life of Claudius* 28. Pallas: Oost *A. J. Phil.* 79 (1958) p. 113. Both brothers: *Oxf. Class. Dict.*, *Pauly-Wissowa* or *Kleine Pauly*. Drusilla: *Ant.* 18.132, 19.354, 20.141–3, 20.158.

⁵⁷ Acts 27:24 is explicit. 9:15 and 23:11 may hint at an intention to preach to and convert Caesar.

⁵⁸ *I Clem.* 1.5.7 uses a vague term; ἐπὶ τῶν ἡγουμένων.

⁵⁹ Sherwin-White (see note 2) 109–110.

⁶⁰ *Ib.* 112–118, for a general reason why charges were rarely dropped.

⁶¹ Smallwood (see note 52) 124, 126, 128, 134–43, 147, 201, 207, 214, 246–7, 249, 365–373, 539 (good summary).

ing; i.e. (from a Greco-Roman point of view) interfering and intolerant atheism. It was atheism because it foolishly denied the existence of—and was thereby bound to offend—all the many goddesses, and all the many gods but one.⁶² Rome took particular umbrage at such proselytising, among or by members of the élite or their families.⁶³

It does not follow that Paul was executed forthwith, or imprisoned; though he could have been imprisoned for a while, before his trial or/and between two brief hearings. Clement of Rome says that Paul was, among other things, exiled; and reached the 'limit of the west'.⁶⁴ Where? In principle, beyond the empire.⁶⁵ Perhaps south of the narrow west end of Roman Mauretania; see any map of the empire, as it then was. Or the Canaries, which were known.⁶⁶ Or some small island in the bay of Biscay. Or conceivably Iviza; in the Mediterranean, but (from Rome) well west. Anywhere, in the opposite direction from—and far enough from—Cilicia and Tarsus. If Paul was exiled, he was presumably stripped of his Roman citizenship.⁶⁷ Ovid was not; but knew he was lucky not to be.⁶⁸

IX. The tell-tale attitudes of Acts to governing Romans— and to Rome

These quite numerous and varied possibilities may begin to tie up with the curiously starry-eyed *current* attitudes of Acts to governors,

⁶² Proselytising not allowed, *ib.* 130, 206–10, 212, 219, 379–81. Avi Yonah and Shatzman, *Illustr. Encyclop. of Classical World* (Jerusalem 1976), s.v. Jews. 'Atheism', refs in *A New Eusebius* ed. Stevenson, rev. Frend, index. *The City of God* was written in reply to pagan who blamed the fall of Rome, in AD 410, on such atheism.

⁶³ Smallwood (see note 52) 203–4.

⁶⁴ *I Clem.* 1:5; 'seven times in chains, exiled, stoned . . . came to the limit of the west'.

⁶⁵ For convenience, and to ensure maximum isolation, important exiles were often held inside the empire, on small and remote Mediterranean islands. Tiberius ruled that the island should have water, *Ann.* 4.30; Lesbos was too noble and agreeable, *ib.* 6.3. But in principle exile was a city-state punishment, to beyond the 'polis'-territory; which under the empire came to mean beyond the empire, as when Ovid was exiled to Tomi. *Oxf. Class. Dict.*, s.v. *Exsilium*, *relegatio*, *deportatio*.

⁶⁶ Canaria, Pliny the elder, *Nat Hist.* 6.205.

⁶⁷ Loss of citizenship went with exile, as a mark of disgrace, and of exclusion from living under the protection of Roman law and order. Exile was traditionally not so much a punishment as an option, for a citizen condemned to death. In a sense exile became a suspended death sentence, to be put into effect at any time if thought appropriate, or if the exile (who could have no further legitimate use for the privilege of citizenship) tried to escape back to the comforts of civilised life. *Aquae et ignis interdictio*, *Oxf. Class. Dict.* s.v. *Exsilium*.

⁶⁸ Ovid, *Tristia*, 5.2.55–60.

to centurions—and to Rome (i.e. to Roman rule). Pilate was a household name among Christians. But Philo and Josephus are highly critical of him—and Acts is only mildly critical of him.⁶⁹ Sergius Paullus (13:7–12) and Gallio (18:12–17) are praised. They had been minor governors, under Claudius, of minor provinces which had relatively few Jews. Both men could have been impressed by Paul, as an eminent Jew. But they are also likely to have felt bound by imperial policy. Claudius at some stage reaffirmed the major empire-wide privileges of Jews—strictly subject to good behaviour.⁷⁰

Judaea, also a minor province, was Jewish and focally so. 'Happy' the freedman had a royal Jewish second wife; and she or/and he could have had a personal grudge against Paul.⁷¹ Things had changed since the days of Sergius Paullus and Gallio; not least because of Paul and his fellow-missionaries. By the AD mid-50s it would have been a legitimate and proper part of official duty, for any alert and zealous Roman governor of Judaea, to consider whether this new Jewish sect was entitled to the benefits of Roman toleration and protection throughout the empire. Felix was Caesar's man in Caesarea; and, when Pallas fell, could have needed (a). to acquire much quick merit in Rome (b). to protect himself against a plausible and damaging charge of extortion (c). therefore to 'curry favour with the Jews', as much as and as fast as he could.⁷² Felix could have faced both ways; by posing, to Paul, as a kind of God-fearer, a polite, well-informed and interested enquirer, making excuses for keeping a Roman citizen (by birth) shut up, and seeing the prisoner often.⁷³ Felix may or may not have suggested a bribe.⁷⁴ If he did, that could imply that Paul was in deep trouble. Felix could have obtained, by talking often to Paul, what—thanks to first-generation candour—was easy to obtain; evidence that by Roman standards these Christians should *not* be tolerated and protected.

⁶⁹ Pilate, Acts 3:13; 4:27; 13:28. Philo, *Legatio ad Gaium* ed. Smallwood (Leiden, 1961, ²1970), paras 201–5, *War* 2.169–77, *Ant.* 18.35–64, 87–9, 177. Smallwood (see note 52) 160–172.

⁷⁰ Acts 18:2 refers to local action taken by Claudius against Rome's Jews. For the context of this action, see Smallwood (see note 52) 210–216.

⁷¹ Acts 24:25 says that the talk turned to questions of morals. Did the prisoner perhaps comment, or appear to comment, on the fact that Felix and Drusilla had married, when Drusilla was certainly already married to King Aziz, and Felix may still have been married to his first 'queen', the Mauretanian granddaughter of Antony and Cleopatra? If so Paul was rasher, with a relative of Salome, than John the Baptist, had been; Paul was already in custody, and in the power of a holder of almost unlimited imperium.

⁷² Sherwin-White (see note 2) 3, 53–4.

⁷³ Acts 23:24, 33; 24:22, 24; 27.

⁷⁴ Acts 24:26.

Imperial policy was involved; an empire-wide policy made by Julius Caesar, reinforced by Augustus, policed by Tiberius, imperilled by Gaius, reaffirmed by Claudius. Felix could make recommendations, through his superior the governor of Syria; and await instructions.⁷⁵ But he was due to be replaced, after having served longer than usual. The risk of an extortion charge thereby became acute; and governors usually remained until their successors arrived.⁷⁶ Felix is therefore likely to have discussed Paul with Porcius Festus; and to have handed him a zealous dossier, containing the gist of whatever Paul had said, and all or some of the reasons why a Roman citizen (by birth) was in custody. The silence of Acts about such a discussion and dossier is natural; Paul and the author would not have been present, or meant to know.

Paul, it seems, took Felix at face value, as a searcher after Truth; perhaps the idea of an appeal was kindly suggested to him, by Felix, in a farewell chat. Be that as it may, Paul appealed. Little could have suited Felix or Festus better. But Festus had to make a written report to Nero.⁷⁷ He could have needed to know whether Paul would repeat, before witnesses, the deeply self-incriminating oral admissions which he had voluntarily made to Felix in private; or would deny them, and insist that he was being framed. Did Paul innocently sense no trap? He appears to have said his usual candid piece, before more than enough witnesses; to a loyally pro-Roman client king (Agrippa II), to a woman soon famous for her long affair with Titus, and for her efforts to become empress (Berenice), to a Roman governor (Festus), and to others—who could have included a *notarius*, quietly taking Paul's speech down in shorthand.⁷⁸

X. The tell-tale recollection of a disastrous day

If Paul said, to such an audience, anything like what chapter 26 of Acts says that he said, 250 years of pagan Roman persecution for 'the Name' (i.e. for overt atheism, overt Christian faith) are easy to

⁷⁵ Sherwin-White (see note 2) 55–57.

⁷⁶ Unlike the emperor, a governor could not delegate his imperium. And the governor of a turbulent minor province would have run an unnecessary risk, of trouble, by leaving before the next imperium-holder arrived. Sherwin-White (see note 2) 4, 39. Pilate was relieved of his duties—but by the governor of Syria, who thereby became personally responsible for the time being. Festus died—and the opportunity was promptly taken, before a successor arrived, to get rid of James the brother of Jesus.

⁷⁷ Acts 25:26.

⁷⁸ Ancient shorthand, as invented (*Encyclop. Brit.*) by Cicero's freedman and friend Marcus Tullius Tiro. Plutarch's *Life of Cato the younger* tells how speeches were taken down in shorthand by *notarii*.

understand; and condemnation by Nero became an almost foregone conclusion.⁷⁹ We are cheerfully told, in Acts, that Paul defended himself by proclaiming a mission to the Gentiles; and that Festus firmly and very distinctly (i.e. for the benefit of all concerned, including any *notarius*?) intervened. 'You are mad.'⁸⁰ To a civilised Roman, madness would have been a possible excuse. Paul rejected it. The report could be terse and factual. It needed to state the Jewish charges, against a Jewish Roman citizen from Cilicia.⁸¹ It surely then reported, again or for the first time, what Felix had been told; and, more or less verbatim, what Paul had abundantly confirmed, in public, before numerous and important witnesses. Such a report might again be forwarded to Rome through the governor of the great eastern super-province, Syria; partly because Cilicia was another Syrian sub-province.⁸² (Despite the time of year, and the risk of delays en route because of storms, Julius was apparently in no hurry to get to Rome.)

Why, in Caesarea, might Paul have been led to think—after a brief conference between his principal hearers—that he was doing nothing wrong?⁸³ Formally, perhaps, because the decision was for Nero. But perhaps also in the unethical hope that Paul, having conveniently appealed, might make his own counter-productively candid defence, yet again, to someone at Rome. (2 Tim. 4:17, if genuine, might imply that he did.) He would thereby serve as his own *de facto* accuser.⁸⁴

The names of Paul's visitors, in Rome, could conveniently be noted. The persecution began with a round-up of known Christians.⁸⁵

⁷⁹ For the Name, Pliny's *Letters* 10. 96. 2–3, 97.2. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (London 1986, Penguin 1988) p. 434: 'Paul's defence and sentence brought about the age of persecution'.

⁸⁰ Acts 26:24. Note the rashly overt *καὶ τοῖς ἔθνεσιν, τὸ ἀπολογουμένου, τὸ στερν and vivid μεγάλη τῇ φωνῇ φησιν*. Festus was not, pace the eminent *NEB* translators, necessarily shouting at the top of his voice. But he surely wished to be heard, and was heard, by those present.

⁸¹ Acts 23:34.

⁸² Sherwin-White (see note 2) 55.

⁸³ Acts 26:32.

⁸⁴ Sherwin-White (see note 2) 18, 21, 23, 48, 52, 55; with 189–193, on the value of Acts as a source for secular Greco-Roman practice. An accuser was needed on the Jewish charge or charges which Paul thought he was facing; not on how Paul freely chose to defend himself against that charge (see also Lane Fox, note 79 above). So long as there was a charge, the judge appears to have enjoyed almost complete discretion as to whether and how he dealt with many types of case; as Sherwin-White demonstrates, in several (admittedly, provincial rather than Roman) contexts.

⁸⁵ *Ann.* 15:44.

XI. Why had an 'Excellency' become interested? And who was he?

Further written evidence was hardly needed. But Theophilus appears to have been an 'Excellency'; a man of Roman citizen and Eques rank, possibly another Roman governor or ex-governor.⁸⁶ He could easily have been nudged, by Felix, to pose as another eminent, polite and God-fearing searcher after Truth (i.e. an *agent provocateur*); and after a while to ask, perhaps in Caesarea, for the story—of what had happened under several emperors, and was happening in the present reign—to be at last put together and written down please. And at the surprisingly early date in question he could, just conceivably, have been someone quite well-known.

Philo's rich and distinguished apostate nephew, Tiberius Julius Alexander, was a man who moved in the same circles as Agrippa II, Berenice, Drusilla, Felix and Festus. He had been governor of Judaea from AD 46 to AD 48. His talent was military; he had a largely military career, and served as the great Corbulo's Chief of Staff, in highly successful campaigns against Parthia in the early AD 60s. He was rewarded for this by being made Prefect of Egypt in AD c.65; and has the historic distinction of having launched the Flavian régime, by proclaiming Vespasian emperor at Alexandria on 1st July AD 69. He was useful to Titus during the siege of Jerusalem; and—with Agrippa II and Josephus—did what he could to save the Temple.⁸⁷

There were other rich eastern Equites; one of the Judaeen grievances in AD 66 was that Gessius Florus had had one or two Jewish Equites summarily crucified.⁸⁸ And I doubt if many first century Equites, Jewish or not, would have unreservedly admired Luke or Acts, let alone both works. For much of what the two works say—and that Luke rejoices in, and plays up, more than the other gospels do—would have seemed subversive, anti-social and foolish, to most men of that ilk. But the liberal Jewish tone of Lk. 1 & 2 would be particularly apt, in a work addressed to a lapsed but polite and seemingly interested 'Theophilus', who was an Egyptian Jew by birth—and nephew of the great Philo.⁸⁹ Such a man, being a rich

⁸⁶ κρᾶτιστε, Luke 1:3. Bauer (*Gk-Eng Lexicon of NT and other early Chr. Lit.*) distinguishes between a formal and an informal usage. But the formal usage is attested in Acts 23:26, 24:3, 26:25 and arguably in Josephus *Ant.* 20.12, ὁ κρᾶτιστος . . . Οὐτέλλιος, father of the emperor.

⁸⁷ *Hist.* 1.11, 2.74, 2.79, 2.79, *Ann.* 15.28. *War* 2.220, 2. 223, 2.309, 2.492-3, 497 etc.

⁸⁸ Jewish equites crucified, *War* 2.308.

⁸⁹ 'Luke plunges his reader immediately into the atmosphere of Judaism and the' OT. R. Maddox, *The Purpose of Luke-Acts* (Edinburgh, 1962) 14.

Alexandrian of Jewish blood, and an ex-governor of Judaea, would have been an obvious person for Felix to consult, at the time when Felix was seeing Paul often. And such a man would have been at risk of being unfairly blamed by Nero, for not having spotted the 'Christian problem' himself.

XII. On collision course with Rome

Paul may soon have realised the risk—to others, as well as to himself—that he had run by appealing to Nero. And one may doubt whether he remained sanguine about the outcome for long (through two long years at Rome, on top of two at Caesarea, and after a long journey). He was likely to learn, soon enough, from one or more of his visitors, what kind of a ruler and man young Nero was becoming, and who had—or no longer had—influence with him.⁹⁰ In due course Paul may have realised that the one usable defence ploy, if things went wrong, was to win time by plausibly taking the full blame for the Gentile mission himself.

But one can begin to see how Acts could be shaped and nearly all written; by an able young 'country cousin', solitarily continuing his immortal two-part work. One can see why Acts, though at times hostile to 'the Jews', could be confident of acquittal, proud of Paul's status (as, then still, a Roman citizen and privileged prisoner), starry-eyed and unwary about Rome and Nero.⁹¹ Centurions are also prominent, in Luke too; as Dixons of Dock Green, not as ruthlessly obedient chief executioners.⁹²

Human beings tend to be unwary about A, when and because wrapped up in B. Paul and the writer, on collision course with Rome, were—it seems—human enough not to realise what was

⁹⁰ Read the *Annals* (in translation if necessary); and (to help counter certain obvious Tacitean biases) any good modern account (such as Miriam Griffin's *Nero: The End of a Dynasty* (Batsford 1984).

⁹¹ Often anti 'the Jews' (despite being carefully Jewish in some ways), e.g. 12:3; 13:45, 50; 14:4, 19; 17:5. Pro-Roman; note e.g. how Roman magistrates in a Roman colony (Philippi) take prompt and effective action in defence of 'us Romans'—and at once retract some of it, when told that Paul and Silas are 'us', not 'them'. And note how Acts exults in the fall of Agrippa I, but not in the fall of Nero—and tactfully ignores the deeds and fall of Gaius. (One of many points which can be taken much further.)

⁹² Dixon of Dock Green, BBC TV series about a nice policeman. Particular prominence is given to Cornelius (Acts 10) and, in Lk. 7, to the centurion at Capernaum. Julius is prominent in Acts 27; though perhaps only because the whole voyage is presented in such detail. These men were centurions in various auxiliary forces, rather than 'regular' Roman centurions; Sherwin-White (see note 2) 160. But our author need not have realised this. Obedient, *I Clem.* 37 (in reproof of some Corinthians who had not obeyed their duly appointed leaders?)

going. The writer seems to have been a hero-worshipper; and a (probably) young man who trusted others, not always wisely. He seems to have been misled by the interest that a few friendly-seeming and polite but sophisticated and above all discreet governing Romans—men like Felix, Festus, Agrippa II, and perhaps ‘Theophilus’—had been taking. He seems to have failed to ask himself why they were taking an interest; and whether their behaviour was official and far from candid. He seems to have assumed that the Way, being so divinely ordained, high-minded, reputable and law-abiding Jewish sect, would be tolerated and protected by divinely-ordained and high-minded Rome.⁹³

The trial was liable to reveal, almost at once, what some of those polite governing Romans really thought. On my hypothesis the writer presumably felt shattered, puzzled and resentful; not least, if no Nero appeared. He would have needed to hurry back, as soon as he could, to Jerusalem, in order to report what has happened. (Perhaps his report was what decided Peter to go, for the last time, to Rome?) But on the journey the writer would have had time to re-read and ponder his almost finished roll. On my hypothesis he erased little or nothing, rewrote little or nothing. Instead he added, while still close to the event, an eighth cheerful—well, outwardly cheerful—summary; the defiant (and for once less candid) ending which we have. All this candour had been doing more harm than good.⁹⁴ ‘Theophilus’ may or may not have been sent, by then, a copy of Luke. But there would have been time to have second thoughts about sending him a copy of Acts—and about what to call him in future copies.

XIII. Concluding remarks

Prehistoric dates are a success story; having been worked at, hard, during the last 150 years. Most modern dates are mature by-products of a completed calendar, noted and recorded at the time. But ancient dates were immature—and were often formulated later. We remain

⁹³ Easton (see note 36) 46, on what is meant by αἰρεσις. Also Rom. 13.

⁹⁴ Cp. 2:29; 4:13; 4:29; 4:31; 9:27–8; 13:46; 14:3; 18:26; 19:8; 26:26 (with its proud claim that ‘this has not been a hole-and-corner business’, as well as a παρρησιαζόμενος). Contrast, in *A New Eusebius* (see note 62), 178 (Minucius Felix), 131 (Fronto), 36 (Lyons), 67 (Athenagoras); Justin, *Dial.* 10.1, and the derogatory language already used about Christians by Tacitus and Suetonius. When did Christianity go underground? My guess would be, almost immediately after the grim AD 60s and AD 70; and that the currently supposed gospel dates have perhaps succeeded in giving a (chronologically!) ‘preposterous’ picture of how the Christian community was evolving during the very obscure Flavian decades—a picture that has put the pre post, the early later, the before after.

astonishingly casual, if not primitive, in our attitude to such dates. Someone having converted them into AD or BC quasi-dates, with a year-beginning that was eventually determined by a Counter-Reformation Pope (Gregory XIII) in 1582, we often learn and use them as if they were elementary factual data.

What I am trying to say about Acts would not suffice to convict anyone of a criminal offence; legitimate doubt would remain. But consider the 'methods' so far used to ascertain such important and difficult old dates as those of Mark, Luke and Acts? How viable have those methods been? How rigorous are they? How relevant are they to some far from easy problems?

History and theology often have to make do, like civil law and human life, with what is genuinely probable, or least improbable. What is important is not always fully provable; what is fully provable is by no means always important. Do these many inadvertent indicators, of an ultra-early date of Acts, co-exist by coincidence? (They could, by the way, include some which I have failed to notice.) They can no doubt be made to make sense in other ways. They do not, I think, thereby 'go away'.

Abstract

Note how Acts names Nero and others, expects Nero to hear and acquit Paul. Note its current attitudes to Nero and others, its amounts and kinds of emphasis on people and places, its silences, shape, thrust. Such things can 'add up'—to an Aladdin's hoard of inadvertent but tell-tale textual and contextual dating evidence. Acts presents Nero (AD 54–68) as alive. Acts unexpectedly emerges as a forward-looking missionary brief, a gospel sequel planned, shaped and nearly all written a little *before*(!) its story ends; on collision course with Rome, during the two years (c. AD 60–62) to which 28:30–31, added after collision, allude.