

# Philanthropy, Hospitality, and Friendship

BY JOSHUA W. JIPP

The narrative of Paul's sea-voyage to Rome—with a violent storm, shipwreck, and adventures on Malta—provides not only a glimpse of Paul as one who was open to fresh encounters with all peoples but also, surprisingly, a lasting impression of Gentiles as receptive, friendly, and hospitable.

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The subject matter of the book of Acts is the living God as revealed. This simple fact means that while Acts provides the reader with a historical explanation for the expansion of the Church and its transformation into a multiethnic institution, the text also makes theological, existential, and epistemological demands upon the reader regarding the identity and activity of the living God.<sup>1</sup> Luke's description of the Church engaged in worldwide mission, devoted to prayer, sharing possessions, challenging idolatry, and discerning divine activity in human lives and events not only tells us what happened once upon a time but also makes claims upon us about who the living God is, how God is known, and the kinds of people the Church of the living God ought to be. If we are reading certain portions of Acts—e.g., Luke's summaries of the Church (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35; 5:12-16), then perhaps recognizing these claims will not seem to be too intractable a problem. As the Church once devoted itself to prayer, apostolic teaching, fellowship, and sharing possessions so the Church today must consider how to respond to the living God.

But what are we to think of Acts 27:1-28:10? This *lengthy* stretch of text narrates how Paul the prisoner was transported by ship from Caesarea to Rome, experienced shipwreck, and landed on Malta before finally arriving

in Rome. The text makes for enjoyable reading: Paul surprisingly experiences the kindness of a Roman centurion; he provides prophetic insight from God that proves instrumental in saving the lives of all on board the ship when they experience shipwreck; Paul also provides a Eucharist-like meal that encourages everyone on board; after the shipwreck Paul experiences more kindness from the barbarians on Malta; he is bit by a snake but is unharmed; and Paul and the Maltese share gifts with each other. This is an interesting story with some exotic encounters between Paul and strangers, undoubtedly, but does this text actually reveal something about God and the identity or character of the Church to us? Does it really make a theological and existential claim upon our lives and provide meaning for how the Church of God is to live today? Answering these questions requires that we explore first the literary and cultural context of Paul's sea-voyage in a bit more detail and then, secondly, Paul's relationships and interactions with those who do not belong to the Christian movement.

We will see that Luke provides his readers with a final and memorable depiction of Paul's positive interaction with Gentiles. The relationship between Paul and the Gentiles is characterized by mutual displays of philanthropy, hospitality, and friendship. This shared hospitality between strangers continues the ministry of Jesus as described in the Gospel of Luke, provides a fitting narrative representation of Paul's final words regarding the receptivity of the Gentiles to God's salvation (Acts 28:28), and calls the contemporary Church to place itself in the position of guest and host with outsiders today.

### **THE LITERARY AND CULTURAL CONTEXT OF PAUL'S SEA-VOYAGE**

Three literary and cultural observations about Paul's sea-voyage will aid our interpretation of the text. Perhaps the most striking element of Luke's narration of Paul's sea-voyage is its length—sixty verses in our Bibles devoted to showing how Paul was transferred from Caesarea to Rome (Acts 27:1–28:16). Travel and journeying are spoken of repeatedly throughout the book of Acts, but Luke usually avoids lengthy and technical descriptions about how the early Christian missionaries moved about from place to place.<sup>2</sup> Further, at this point in the narrative the reader is not expecting such a lengthy sea-voyage; rather, the reader has been anticipating Paul's trial in Rome before Caesar at least since Acts 19:21 ("after I have been there [Jerusalem] it is necessary for me to see Rome").<sup>3</sup> Thus, the length of the scene and its delaying effect suggest that the episode bears some special importance for Luke that goes beyond *merely* providing historical information about how Paul arrived in Rome.

At this point in the narrative, when Paul the prisoner undergoes his voyage to Rome, he has had no missionary interactions with Gentiles since his strengthening of the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:17–35. The Apostle to

the Gentiles has, rather, been occupied (from Acts 21:18 until 26:32) in giving forensic speeches and defending his orthodoxy with respect to Jewish customs, beliefs, and scriptures (a theme that will find some closure in the ending of Acts). Paul has made no Gentile converts during the period of his imprisonment, and this is a marked shift in Luke's characterization of Paul. The reader knows that one of Luke's concerns is to narrate how God's salvation goes forth to the Gentiles, and Paul plays the premier role in demonstrating how this takes place. Thus, in Acts 27:1–28:10 Paul re-enters a Gentile setting (i.e., the Mediterranean Sea) and encounters Gentile characters.<sup>4</sup> It will not be surprising if one of Luke's agendas is to tell us something of lasting significance about Paul's relationship with Gentile peoples.

Finally, we should be aware that sea-voyages, storms, shipwrecks, and subsequent encounters with exotic peoples were standard fare for Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman authors. Homer's *Odyssey*, Vergil's *Aeneid*, and numerous Greek novels employ sea-voyages not only for the dramatic entertainment they provide but also as a means of providing a lasting impression of the hero's character and identity. Sea-voyages and shipwrecks provide the author with an opportunity to demonstrate the hero's strength, character, and destiny and to leave a memorable portrait of the hero's identity.<sup>5</sup>

These three literary and contextual features of Paul's sea-voyage position the reader to expect that Luke will provide significant information regarding Paul's identity and his encounter with non-Jewish peoples. When we hear Paul's final words in Acts—"God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, they also will listen" (28:28b)—Luke may intend us to agree with Paul's declaration based, in part, on his encounters with Gentiles in Acts 27:1–28:10. But when we turn to Paul's sea-voyage, what do we find?

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## **HOSPITALITY, PHILANTHROPY, AND FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN PAUL AND THE GENTILES**

Three distinct interactions between Paul and Gentiles provide a window into the lasting impression of Paul that Luke wishes to leave his readers.<sup>6</sup>

The first named character Paul encounters when he is taken on board the ship is “Julius a Roman centurion of the Augustan Cohort” (27:1). Mention of a Roman military figure entrusted with transporting prisoners *may have* activated the stereotypes of the brave soldier and faithful citizen, but nearer at hand may have been the stereotypes of the Roman soldier as violent, brutish, and willing to use force to keep the prisoners in order – as the soldiers are, for example, more than ready to suggest the use of violence in order to prevent the prisoners from escaping when the ship wrecks (27:43; cf. Luke 23:11).<sup>7</sup> But Luke’s characterization of the centurion is glowingly positive, rather than violent. To be sure, Luke says, “Julius demonstrated philanthropy to Paul by allowing him to be cared for by his friends” (27:3). Not violent, brutish, or greedy, the military man demonstrates the prized virtue of *philanthropia*. Philanthropy – often translated as kindness, love for humanity, or generosity – was considered to be one of the premier Hellenistic virtues and was often associated with the making and maintenance of friendships through acts of mercy, kindness, hospitality, and clemency. To show philanthropy was the mark of the educated, virtuous, and civilized person such that the term was often applied to rulers who showed philanthropy through the provision of benefactions to their subjects.<sup>8</sup> Later the centurion shows more kindness to Paul when he saves Paul’s life by disrupting the plan of the soldiers who want to kill all the prisoners when the ship wrecks on Malta (27:43). The motivation for the centurion’s kindness to Paul is left unexplained, and yet this display of a military man’s philanthropy toward Paul the vulnerable prisoner “unsettle[s] the authorial audience’s expectations” as it casts this Gentile man as favorable to Paul and as performing acts of mercy toward the vulnerable.<sup>9</sup>

But Paul not only *receives* the philanthropic kindness from Julius, Paul is also a prophetic and divine agent who secures the salvation of all of his shipmates. On three occasions, Luke portrays Paul as offering prophecies, exhortations, and encouragements that provide safety to those on board the ship. He frequently warns the leaders of the ship to refrain from immediate continuation of the journey due to the dangerous sailing conditions (27:9-11), and his prophecy comes to fruition when the typhoon threatens to destroy the ship (27:18-20). Later, after “all hope that we should be saved was taken away” (27:20), Paul receives a message from God’s angel that God will see to it that Paul makes it safely to Rome and that God “will freely give to [Paul] all those sailing with you” (27:24b). Paul is God’s prophetic instrument for the salvation of his shipmates, and as God’s prophet Paul encourages everyone on board with the angel’s message (27:25-26). When some of the ship’s crew tries to escape due to fear that the ship would break apart against the rocks, Paul is able to advise the centurion to keep the soldiers on board: “unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved” (27:31). As Richard Pervo notes, “Paul is the cause of their deliverance and thus their savior.”<sup>10</sup> On six occasions Luke uses forms of “to save” in order to refer to the salvation or

safety of the shipmates and Paul (27:20, 31, 34, 43, 44; 28:1),<sup>11</sup> and given that one of Luke's primary themes is God's salvation for all people, it may be that Luke intends the reader to view God's rescue of the crew through Paul as a metaphor for the salvation of the Gentiles.<sup>12</sup>

Paul's mediation of salvation for his shipmates is portrayed in a striking manner when Paul initiates a meal with his shipmates and takes the lead as host (27:33-38). Twice Paul exhorts everyone to "share in the nourishment" of the meal together (27:33, 34). Paul's actions whereby "he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of everyone, he broke it and began to eat" (27:35) clearly mimics Jesus' sharing of meals with all people in the Gospel of Luke (e.g., Luke 9:11-17; 22:14-23; 24:28-35). Just as Jesus' meals were marked by their inclusive character, so is the meal between Paul and his shipmates characterized by the involvement of "everyone" on board the ship (see 27:33, 35, 36, and 37). Luke is clear about the purpose of this meal: "it exists for your salvation" (27:34b). The meal literally does provide salvation in that it provides the hungry crew with the needed strength to endure the impending loss of their ship, but Luke may intend his readers to view the meal as mediating divine salvation whereby the prisoners are saved by sharing in divine hospitality. The echoes of Jesus' table-fellowship with sinners in the Gospel of Luke, the reference to "all 276 souls on the ship" (27:37) – which reminds the reader of earlier scenes in Acts where Luke had recounted the number of "souls" saved (2:41; 4:4) – and the repeated references to salvation throughout the sea-voyage suggest that "Paul allows the Gentiles to taste God's salvation through his extension of hospitality, and thereby Luke symbolically portrays the Gentiles as being incorporated into God's people."<sup>13</sup>

Paul's interaction with non-Jewish peoples continues in Acts 28:1-10 where he receives another remarkable display of philanthropy and hospitality from the Maltese islanders. Paul's prophecy is fulfilled as the ship breaks apart and the crew lands on Malta (27:26; 27:44-28:1). Paul, of course, is a total stranger to the Maltese, and so this is a potentially dangerous situation. Luke refers to the Maltese as "barbarians" (28:2, 4) and thereby activates widespread cultural connotations that associated barbarians with *inhospitality* toward shipwrecked strangers. Odysseus, for example, when encountering a new land and people in his voyages often spoke the phrase: "Alas, to the land of what mortals have I now come? Are they insolent, wild, and unjust? Or are they hospitable to strangers and fear the gods in their thoughts?" (Homer, *Odyssey*, 6.119-121).<sup>14</sup> Luke activates an impending *inhospitality* scenario, however, only to overturn it: "the barbarians showed us no small philanthropy" through their provision of a fire to keep the prisoners warm (28:2). Further, their kindness to the prisoners is, according to prominent Hellenistic moralists, the height of virtue since shipwrecked strangers have no means to reciprocate for hospitality received. Once again, the philanthropy of the barbarians toward the needy and vulnerable demonstrates that the

Maltese belong to the same Lukan exemplars of hospitality such as Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), Cornelius (Acts 10:1-11:18), and Lydia (Acts 16:11-15).<sup>15</sup>

After Paul's triumphal incident with the viper reveals that he is no ordinary prisoner but rather bears the powerful presence of God (28:3-6), Publius (the first man of Malta) wisely shows hospitality to Paul and his companions: "he welcomed us and for three days extended friendly hospitality to us" (28:7b).

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This display of hospitality and friendship to Paul elicits Paul's Jesus-like healing of Publius' father (28:8) and the healing of all the sick on the island (28:9). Luke's narration of these healings recalls Jesus' healing of Peter's mother-in-law (Luke 4:38-39) and his initial healing ministry in Capernaum (Luke 4:40-41) and suggests that Jesus' ministry is continuing to spread to the ends of the earth.

The episode concludes with the Maltese cementing their relationship with Paul: "they bestowed many honors upon us, and when we were about to sail, they put on board all the provisions that we needed" (28:10). The Maltese "barbarians" are anything but uncivilized or ignorant of the ways of hospitality towards strangers, for they reflect the attributes of ideal hosts by providing a safe conveyance for the next stage of their guest's journey. Luke may, in fact, intend for his readers to view the Maltese as eliciting a formalized guest-friendship with Paul through their hospitality. When two distinct ethnic parties engage in a mutual back-and-forth sharing of hospitality, gifts, and friendship, it was often seen as creating a permanent, binding relationship which is on par with friendship or even non-biological kinship.<sup>16</sup> The Maltese barbarians, then, through their *continued* enactments of hospitality appear to have initiated a binding kinship-like relationship with Paul.

#### **LESSONS FOR THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH**

When Paul claims that God's salvation has gone forth to the Gentiles who will provide a listening and receptive audience (28:28), the examples of Julius the Roman centurion, the shared meal between Paul and his shipmates, and the hospitable Maltese barbarians provide good reason for readers to expect that the legacy and mission of Paul will continue even after his imprisonment and death. Philanthropy, shared hospitality, and friendship have been on abundant display between these Gentile characters

and Paul throughout his journey to Rome. The sea-voyage, then, provides both a memorable glimpse of Paul's character and identity as one who was open to fresh encounters with all peoples and, surprisingly, a lasting impression of Gentiles as receptive, friendly, and hospitable.

Today when we read Acts 27:1–28:10 as Christian Scripture, we are challenged to bestow (as hospitable hosts) and receive (as receptive guests) the kind of hospitality and kindness that would result in the creation of friendship and kinship relations.<sup>17</sup> In this text, the gifts of God – table-fellowship, the salvation/safety of the shipmates, and healing – are not hoarded or held back as the exclusive property of Paul but are shared liberally and freely with those not belonging to Paul's own kinship network. They are, furthermore, shared without requiring or asking for a response.

Congregations who would continue to embody the same message and values should reflect upon where and how their gifts and resources may be put to use in service of the larger world. Paul demonstrates no hesitation in receiving kindness from a Roman military man, happily and freely shares a meal with prisoners, and shows no fear to stay in Publius's home and receive his hospitality. Thus, Luke leaves his readers with a portrait of Paul as entering into host and guest relationships with outsiders as a means of extending God's salvation to all people. Luke seems, in fact, to make a point of invoking cultural stereotypes (of Roman centurions, prisoners, and barbarians) only to overturn them – namely, to show that these are the people to whom God's salvation has and will extend and that they are not only worthy of receiving but are supremely capable of practicing and initiating friendship, hospitality, and philanthropy. As we seek to hear and be shaped by God's Word in Acts 27–28, we would do well to reflect upon whether we are intentionally seeking opportunities to bestow divine hospitality and create friendship relationships with so-called outsiders. Perhaps we would do well to reflect upon whether soldiers, prisoners, and the ethnically 'other' *still* represent some of the same cultural stereotypes needing to be overturned. Congregations that would take seriously the message of Acts 27–28 would, however, not *only* reflect upon how and to whom they should dispense hospitality, but would also seek ways in which they might receive, learn, and experience the gifts from others who are not part of their friendship-kinship network.

## NOTES

1 I have argued this point more fully in Joshua W. Jipp, "The Beginnings of a Theology of Luke-Acts: Divine Activity and Human Response," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 8:1 (2014), 23–44. See also C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 156–176.

2 On the importance of travel as a theme in Acts, see Loveday C. A. Alexander, *Acts in Its Literary Context: A Classicist Looks at the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007), chapters 4 and 5.

3 Scripture quotations are my translations.

4 See further Daniel Marguerat, *The First Christian Historian: Writing the 'Acts of the Apostles,'* translated by Ken McKinney, George J. Lauhery, and Richard Bauckham, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 121, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 217.

5 Especially helpful here is Vernon K. Robbins, "By Land by Sea: The We-Passages and Ancient Sea-Voyages," in *Sea Voyages and Beyond: Emerging Strategies in Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation*, Emory Studies in Early Christianity 14 (Blandford Forum, UK: Deo Publishing, 2010), 47-81; Cf. Marguerat, *The First Christian Historian*, 231-256.

6 For a detailed discussion of what follows, see Joshua W. Jipp, *Divine Visitations and Hospitality to Strangers: An Interpretation of the Malta Episode in Acts 28:1-10*, *Novum Testamentum Supplements* 153 (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2013).

7 On stereotypes of soldiers and their relevance for understanding Luke's positive depictions of the Roman centurions, see Laurie Brink, *Soldiers in Luke-Acts: Engaging, Contradicting, and Transcending the Stereotypes*, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 2, 362 (Tübingen, DE: Mohr-Siebeck, 2014).

8 See further, Ceslas Spicq, "La philanthropie hellénistique, vertu divine et royale (à propos de Tit 3:4)," *Studia Theologica* 12 (1958), 169-191; Mikael C. Parsons, *Acts*, *Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Press, 2008), 367-370.

9 Brink, *Soldiers in Luke-Acts*, 124.

10 Richard I. Pervo, *Acts*, *Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 662.

11 See the fine article by Susan M. Praeder, "Acts 27:1 – 28:16: Sea Voyages in Ancient Literature and the Theology of Luke-Acts," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 46 (1984), 683-706.

12 On the theme of salvation in Luke-Acts, see Luke 1:47, 69, 71; 2:11, 30; 3:4-6; 6:9; 7:50; 8:12, 36, 48, 50; Acts 2:21, 40, 47; 4:9, 12; 11:14; 13:47; 14:9; 15:1, 11; 16:30, 31; 28:28.

13 Jipp, *Divine Visitations and Hospitality to Strangers*, 256.

14 For further examples, see Jipp, *Divine Visitations and Hospitality to Strangers*, 39-44, 257-259.

15 For a wealth of information on hospitality in Luke-Acts and the broader ancient Mediterranean world, see Andrew Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in its Mediterranean Setting*, *New Testament Monographs* 8 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005).

16 On the relevance of the custom of ritualized friendship (guest-friendship) for understanding the book of Acts, particularly the Peter-Cornelius episode, see Walter T. Wilson, "Urban Legends: Acts 10:1-11:18 and the Strategies of Greco-Roman Foundation Narratives," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 20 (2001), 77-99.

17 Thankfully, there is now a wealth of literature devoted to recovering the Christian tradition of hospitality to strangers. The most helpful and accessible work is Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1990).



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