

The Dead Sea Scrolls Deception

12 - The Acts of the Apostles

Apart from the Gospels themselves, the most important book of the New Testament is the *Acts of the Apostles*. For the historian, in fact, Acts may be of even greater consequence. Like all historical documents issuing from a partisan source, it must, of course, be handled skeptically and with caution. One must also be cognizant of whom the text was written for, and whom it might have served, as well as what end.

But it is Acts, much more than the Gospels, which has hitherto constituted the apparently definitive account of the first years of 'early Christianity'. Certainly Acts would appear to contain much basic information not readily to be found elsewhere. To that extent alone, it is a seminal text.

The Gospels, it is generally acknowledged, are unreliable as historical documents. Mark's, the first of them, was composed no earlier than the revolt of AD 66, and probably somewhat later. All four Gospels seek to evoke a period long predating their own composition - perhaps by as much as sixty or seventy years. They skim cursorily over the historical backdrop, focusing essentially on the heavily mythologized figure of *Jesus* and on his teachings. They are ultimately poetic and devotional texts, and do not even purport to be chronicles.

Acts is a work of a very different order. It cannot, of course, be taken as absolutely historical. It is, for one thing, heavily biased. Luke, the author of the text, was clearly drawing on a number of different sources, editing and reworking material to suit his own purposes. There has been little attempt to unify either doctrinal statements or literary style. Even Church historians admit that the chronology is confused, the author having had no direct experience of many of the events he describes and being obliged to impose his own order upon them.

Thus certain separate events are fused into a single occurrence, while single occurrences are made to appear to be separate events. Such problems are particularly acute in those portions of the text pertaining to events that predate the advent of Paul. Further, it would appear that Acts, like the Gospels, was compiled selectively, and was extensively tampered with by later editors.

Nevertheless, Acts, unlike the Gospels, aspires to be a form of chronicle over a continuous and extended period of time. Unlike the Gospels, it constitutes an attempt to preserve an historical record, and, at least in certain passages, to have been written by someone with a first-, or second-, hand experience of the events it describes. Although there is bias, the bias is a highly personal one; and this, to some extent, enables the modern commentator to read between the lines.

The narrative recounted in Acts begins shortly after the Crucifixion - generally dated at AD 30 but possibly as late as AD 36 - and ends somewhere between AD 64 and 67. Most scholars believe the narrative itself was composed, or transcribed, some time between AD 70 and 95. Roughly speaking, then, Acts is contemporary with some, if not all, of the Gospels. It may predate all four. It almost certainly predates the so-called Gospel of John, at least in the form that that text has come down to us.

The author of Acts is a well-educated Greek who identifies himself as Luke. Whether he is the same as 'Luke the beloved physician', mentioned as Paul's close friend in Colossians 4:14, cannot be definitively established, though most New Testament scholars are prepared to accept that he is. Modern scholars also concur that he would seem, quite clearly, to be identical with the author of Luke's Gospel.

Indeed, Acts is sometimes regarded as the 'second half of Luke's Gospel. Both are addressed to an unknown recipient named **Theophilus**'. Because both were written in Greek, many words and names have been translated into that language, and have probably, in a number of instances, altered in nuance, even in meaning, from their Hebrew or Aramaic originals. In any case, both Acts and Luke's Gospel were written specifically for a Greek audience - a very different audience from that addressed by the Qumran scrolls.

Although focusing primarily on Paul, who monopolizes the latter part of its narrative, Acts also tells the story of Paul's relations with the community in Jerusalem composed of *Jesus*' immediate disciples under the leadership of James, 'the Lord's brother' - the enclave or faction who only later came to be called the first Christians and are now regarded as the early or original Church. In recounting Paul's association with this community, however, Acts offers only Paul's point of view. Acts is essentially a document of Pauline - or what is now deemed to be 'normative' - Christianity. Paul, in other words, is always the 'hero'; whoever opposes him, whether it be the authorities or even James, is automatically cast as villain.

Acts opens shortly after *Jesus* - referred to as 'the Nazorene' (in Greek 'Nazoraion') - has disappeared from the scene. The narrative then proceeds to describe the organization and development of the community or 'early Church' in Jerusalem and its increasing friction with the authorities.

The community is vividly evoked in Acts 2:44—6:

'The faithful all lived together and owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and shared out the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed. They went as a body to the Temple every day but met in their houses for the breaking of bread...'

(It is worth noting in passing this adherence to the Temple. Jesus and his immediate followers are usually portrayed as hostile to the Temple, where, according to the Gospels, Jesus upset the tables of the moneychangers and incurred the passionate displeasure of the priesthood.)

Acts 6:8 introduces the figure known as *Stephen*, the first official 'Christian martyr', who is arrested and sentenced to death by stoning. In his own defense, Stephen alludes to the murder of those who prophesied the advent of the 'Righteous One', or the 'Just One'. This terminology is specifically and uniquely Qumranic in character.

The 'Righteous One' occurs repeatedly in the Dead Sea Scrolls as 'Zaddik' 1 The 'Teacher of Righteousness' in the scrolls, 'Moreh ha-Zedek' derives from the same root. And when the historian Josephus speaks of a teacher, apparently named 'Sadduc' or 'Zadok', as the leader of a messianic and anti-Roman Judaic following, this too would seem to be a faulty Greek rendering of the 'Righteous One'.²

As portrayed in Acts, then, *Stephen* uses nomenclature unique and specifically characteristic of Qumran.

Nor is this the only Qumranic concern to figure in Stephen's speech. In his defence, he names his persecutors (Acts 7:53) - 'You who had the Law brought to you by angels are the very ones who have not kept it.' As Acts portrays it, Stephen is obviously intent on adherence to the Law. Again, there is a conflict here with orthodox and accepted traditions.

According to later Christian tradition, it was the Jews of the time who made an austere and puritanical fetish of the Law. The 'early Christians' are depicted, at least from the standpoint of that stringency, as 'mavericks' or 'renegades', advocating a new freedom and flexibility, defying custom and convention. Yet it is Stephen, the first 'Christian martyr', who emerges as an advocate of the Law, while his persecutors are accused of dereliction.

It makes no sense for Stephen, a self-proclaimed adherent of the Law, to be murdered by fellow Jews extolling the same Law. But what if those fellow Jews were acting on behalf of a priesthood which had come to an accommodation with the Roman authorities - were, in effect, collaborators who, like many of the French under the German occupation, for example, simply wanted 'a quiet life' and feared an agitator or resistance fighter in their midst might lead to reprisals?³

The 'early Church' of which Stephen is a member constantly stresses its own orthodoxy, its zealous adherence to the Law. Its persecutors are those who contrive to remain in good odor with Rome and, in so doing, lapse from the Law, or, in Qumran terms, transgress the Law, betray the Law.⁴ In this context, Stephen's denunciation of them makes sense, as does their murder of him.

And as we shall see, James - James 'the Just', the 'Zaddik' or 'Righteous One', the 'brother of the Lord' who best exemplifies rigorous adherence to the Law - will subsequently, according to later tradition, suffer precisely the same fate as Stephen.

According to Acts, it is at the death of Stephen that Paul - then called *Saul of Tarsus* - makes his debut. He is said to have stood watch over the discarded clothes of Stephen's murderers, though he may well have taken a more active role. In Acts 8:1, we are told that Saul 'entirely approved of the killing' of Stephen.

And later, in Acts 9:21, Saul is accused of engineering precisely the kind of attack on the 'early Church' which culminated in Stephen's death. Certainly Saul, at this stage of his life, is fervent, even fanatic, in his enmity towards the 'early Church'. According to Acts 8:3, he 'worked for the total destruction of the Church: he went from house to house arresting both men and women and sending them to prison'. At the time, of course, he is acting as a minion of the pro-Roman priesthood.

Acts 9 tells us of Saul's conversion. Shortly after Stephen's death, he embarks for Damascus to ferret out members of the 'early Church' there. He is accompanied by his hit-squad and bears arrest warrants from his master, the high priest. As we have noted, this expedition is likely to have been not to Syria, but to the Damascus that figures in the 'Damascus Document'.⁵

En route to his destination, Saul undergoes some sort of traumatic experience, which commentators have interpreted as anything from sunstroke, to an epileptic seizure, to a mystical revelation (Acts 9:1-19; 22:6-16). A 'light from heaven' purportedly knocks him from his horse and 'a voice', issuing from no perceptible source, demands of him:

| *'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?'*

Saul asks the voice to identify itself. 'I am *Jesus*, the Nazarene,' the voice replies, 'and you are persecuting me.' The voice further instructs him to proceed to Damascus, where he will learn what he must subsequently do. When this visitation passes and Saul regains a semblance of his former consciousness, he finds he has been stricken temporarily blind. In Damascus, his sight will be restored by a member of the 'early Church' and he will allow himself to be baptized.

A modern psychologist would find nothing particularly unusual in Saul's adventure. It may indeed have been produced by sunstroke or an epileptic seizure. It could equally well be ascribed to hallucination, hysterical or psychotic reaction or perhaps nothing more than the guilty conscience of a susceptible man with blood on his hands.

Saul, however, interprets it as a true manifestation of *Jesus*, whom he never knew personally; and from this his conversion ensues. He abandons his former name in favor of 'Paul'. And he will subsequently be as fervent in promulgating the teachings of the 'early Church' as he has hitherto been in extirpating them. He joins their community, becomes one of their apprentices or disciples. According to his letter to the Galatians (Gal. 1:17-18),

he remains under their tutelage for three years, spending much of that time in Damascus. According to the *Dead Sea Scrolls*, the probation and training period for a newcomer to the Qumran community was also three years.⁶

After his three-year apprenticeship, Paul returns to Jerusalem to join the leaders of the 'community' there. Not surprisingly, most of them are suspicious of him, not being wholly convinced by his conversion. In Galatians 1:18-20, he speaks of seeing only James and Cephas. Everyone else, including the apostles, seems to have avoided him.

He is obliged repeatedly to prove himself, and only then does he find some allies and begin to preach. Arguments ensue, however, and, according to Acts 9:29, certain members of the Jerusalem community threaten him. As a means of defusing a potentially ugly situation, his allies pack him off to Tarsus, the town (now in Turkey) where he was born. He is, in effect, being sent home, to spread the message there.

It is important to understand that this was tantamount to exile. The community in Jerusalem, like that in Qumran, was preoccupied almost entirely with events in Palestine. The wider world, such as Rome, was relevant only to the extent that it impinged or encroached on their more localized reality. To send Paul off to Tarsus, therefore, might be compared to a Provisional IRA godfather sending a new, ill-disciplined and overly energetic recruit to muster support among the 'Shining Path' guerrillas of Peru. If, by improbable fluke, he somehow elicits men, money, materiel or anything else of value, well and good. If he gets himself disemboweled instead, he will not be unduly missed, having been more nuisance than asset anyway.

Thus arises the first of Paul's three (according to Acts) sorties abroad. Among other places, it takes him to Antioch, and, as we learn from Acts 11:26, 'It was at Antioch that the disciples were first called "Christians".' Commentators date Paul's journey to Antioch at approximately AD 43. By that time, a community of the 'early Church' was already established there, which reported back to the sect's leadership in Jerusalem under James.

Some five or more years later, Paul is teaching in Antioch when a dispute arises over the content of his missionary work. As Acts 15 explains, certain representatives of the leadership in Jerusalem arrive in Antioch, perhaps, Eisenman suggests, with the specific purpose of checking on Paul's activities.⁷ They stress the importance of strict adherence to the Law and accuse Paul of laxity.

He and his companion, Barnabas, are summarily ordered back to Jerusalem for personal consultation with the leadership. From this point on, a schism will open and widen between Paul and James; and the author of Acts, so far as the dispute is concerned, becomes Paul's apologist.

In all the vicissitudes that follow, it must be emphasized that Paul is, in effect, the first 'Christian' heretic, and that his teachings - which become the foundation of later Christianity - are a flagrant deviation from the 'original' or 'pure' form extolled by the leadership. Whether James, 'the Lord's brother', was literally *Jesus*' blood kin or not (and everything suggests he was), it is clear that he knew *Jesus*, or the figure subsequently remembered as *Jesus*, personally. So did most of the other members of the community, or 'early Church', in Jerusalem - including, of course, Peter.

When they spoke, they did so with first-hand authority. Paul had never had such personal acquaintance with the figure he'd begun to regard as his 'Savior'. He had only his quasi-mystical experience in the desert and the sound of a disembodied voice. For him to arrogate authority to himself on this basis is, to say the least, presumptuous. It also leads him to distort *Jesus*' teachings beyond all recognition - to formulate, in fact, his own highly individual and idiosyncratic theology, and then to legitimize it by spuriously ascribing it to *Jesus*.

For *Jesus*, adhering rigorously to Judaic Law, it would have been the most extreme blasphemy to advocate worship of any mortal figure, including himself. He makes this clear in the Gospels, urging his disciples, followers and listeners to acknowledge only God. In John 10:33-5, for example, *Jesus* is accused of the blasphemy of claiming to be *God*.

He replies, citing Psalm 82,

'Is it not written in your Law, I [meaning God in the psalm] said, you are Gods? So the Law uses the word gods of those to whom the word of God was addressed.'

Paul, in effect, shunts God aside and establishes, for the first time, worship of *Jesus - Jesus* as a kind of **equivalent** of Adonis, of Tammuz, of Attis, or of any one of the other dying and reviving gods who populated the Middle East at the time. In order to compete with these divine rivals, *Jesus* had to match them point for point, miracle for miracle. It is at this stage that many of the miraculous elements become associated with *Jesus'* biography, including, in all probability, his supposed birth of a virgin and his resurrection from the dead.

They are essentially Pauline inventions, often wildly at odds with the 'pure' doctrine promulgated by James and the rest of the community in Jerusalem. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that James and his entourage should be disturbed by what Paul is doing.

Yet Paul knows full well what he is doing. He understands, with a surprisingly modern sophistication, the techniques of religious propaganda;⁸ he understands what is necessary to turn a man into a god, and he goes about it more astutely than the Romans did with their emperors. As he himself pointedly acknowledges, he does not pretend to be purveying the historical *Jesus*, the individual whom James and Peter and Simeon knew personally.

On the contrary, he acknowledges, in 2 Corinthians 11:3-4, that the community in Jerusalem are promulgating 'another *Jesus*'. Their representatives, he says, call themselves 'servants of righteousness' - a characteristic Qumranic usage. They are now, to all intents and purposes, Paul's adversaries.

In accordance with instructions issued to him, Paul returns from Antioch to Jerusalem - around AD 48-9, it is generally believed - and meets with the community's leadership. Not surprisingly, another dispute ensues. If Acts is to be believed, James, for the sake of peace, agrees to compromise, thereby making it easier for 'pagans' to join the congregation. Somewhat improbably, he consents to relax certain aspects of the Law, while remaining adamant on others.

Paul pays lip service to the leadership. He still, at this point, needs their endorsement - not to legitimize his teachings, but to legitimize, and ensure the survival of, the communities he has founded abroad. He is already, however, bent on going his own way. He embarks on another mission of travel and preaching, punctuated (Acts 18:21) by another visit to Jerusalem.

Most of his letters date from this period, between AD 50 and 58. It is clear from his letters that he has, by that time, become almost completely estranged from the leadership in Jerusalem and from their adherence to the Law.⁹ In his missive to the Galatians (c. AD 57), he alludes scathingly to 'these people who are acknowledged leaders - not that their importance matters to me' (Gal. 2:6).

His theological position has also deviated irreparably from those who adhere rigorously to the Law. In the same letter to the Galatians (2:16), he states that 'faith in *Christ* rather than fidelity to the Law is what justifies us, and... no one can be justified by keeping the Law'.

Writing to the Philippians (3:9), he states:

| *'I am no longer trying for perfection by my own efforts, the perfection that comes from the Law...'*

These are the provocative and challenging statements of a self-proclaimed renegade. 'Christianity', as it will subsequently evolve from Paul, has by now severed virtually all connection with its roots, and can no longer be said to have anything to do with *Jesus*, only with Paul's image of *Jesus*.

By AD 58, Paul is again back in Jerusalem - despite pleas from his supporters who, obviously fearing trouble with the hierarchy, have begged him not to go. Again, he meets with James and the leadership of the Jerusalem community. Employing the now familiar Qumranic formulation, they express the worry they share with other 'zealots of the Law' - that Paul, in his preaching to Jews living abroad, is encouraging them to forsake the Law of Moses.¹⁰

It is, of course, a justified accusation, as Paul has made clear in his letters. Acts does not record his response to it. The impression conveyed is that he lies, perjures himself and denies the charges against him. When asked to purify himself for seven days - thereby demonstrating the unjustness of the allegations and his continued adherence to the Law - he readily consents to do so.

A few days later, however, he again runs foul of those 'zealous for the Law', who are rather less temperate than James. On being seen at the Temple, he is attacked by a crowd of the pious.

| *'This', they claim in their anger, 'is the man who preaches to everyone everywhere... against the Law' (Acts 21:28ff).*

A riot ensues, and Paul is dragged out of the Temple, his life in danger. In the nick of time, he is rescued by a Roman officer who, having been told of the disturbance, appears with an entourage of soldiers. Paul is arrested and put in chains - on the initial assumption, apparently, that he is a leader of the Sicarii, the Zealot terrorist cadre.

At this point, the narrative becomes increasingly confused, and one can only suspect that parts of it have been altered or expurgated. According to the existing text, Paul, before the Romans can trundle him off, protests that he is a Jew of Tarsus and asks permission to address the crowd who had just been trying to lynch him. Weirdly enough, the Romans allow him to do so.

Paul then expatiates on his Pharisaic training under Gamaliel (a famous teacher of the time), on his initial hostility towards the 'early Church', on his role in the death of Stephen, on his subsequent conversion. All of this - or perhaps only a part of it, though one cannot be certain which part - provokes the crowd to new ire.

| *'Rid the earth of this man!' they cry. 'He is not fit to live!' (Acts 22:22)*

Ignoring these appeals, the Romans carry Paul off to 'the fortress' - presumably the Antonia fortress, the Roman military and administrative headquarters. Here, they intend to interrogate him under torture. Interrogate him for what? To determine why he provokes such hostility, according to Acts. Yet Paul has already made his position clear in public - unless there are elements of his speech that, in a fashion not made clear by the text, the Romans deemed dangerous or subversive. In any case, torture, by Roman law, could not be exercised on any individual possessing full and official Roman citizenship - which Paul, having been born of a wealthy family in Tarsus, conveniently does. Invoking this immunity, he escapes torture, but remains incarcerated.

In the meantime, a group of angry Jews, forty or more in number, meet in secret. They vow not to eat or drink until they have brought about Paul's death. The sheer intensity and ferocity of this antipathy is worth noting. One does not expect such animosity - not to say such a preparedness for violence - from 'ordinary' Pharisees and Sadducees.

Those who display it are obviously 'zealous for the Law'. But the only such passionate adherents of the Law in Palestine at the time were those whose sacred texts came subsequently to light at Qumran. Thus, for example, Eisenman calls attention to a pivotal passage in the 'Damascus Document' which declares of a man that 'if he transgresses after swearing to return to the Law of Moses with a whole heart and soul, then retribution shall be exacted from him'.¹¹

How can the violent action contemplated against Paul be reconciled with the later popular image, put forward by the consensus, of placid, ascetic, quietist Essenes? The clandestine conclave, the fervent vow to eradicate Paul - these are more characteristic of the militant Zealots and their special assassination units, the dreaded Sicarii. Here again there is an insistent suggestion that the Zealots on the one hand, and the 'zealous for the Law' at Qumran on the other, were one and the same.

Whoever they are, the would-be assassins, according to Acts, are thwarted by the sudden and opportune appearance of Paul's hitherto unmentioned nephew, who somehow learns of their plot. This relative, of whom we know nothing more, informs both Paul and the Romans. That night, Paul is removed, for his own safety, from Jerusalem. He is removed with an escort of 470 troops - 200 infantry under the command of two centurions, 200 spearmen and 70 cavalry!¹²

He is taken to Caesarea, the Roman capital of Judaea, where he appears before the governor and Rome's puppet king, Agrippa. As a Roman citizen, however, Paul has a right to have his case heard in Rome, and he invokes this right. As a result, he is sent to Rome, ostensibly for trial. There is no indication of what he will be tried for.

After recounting his adventures on the journey - including a shipwreck - Acts ends. Or, rather, it breaks off, as if the author were interrupted in his work, or as if someone had removed the original ending and inserted a perfunctory finale instead. There are, of course, numerous later traditions - that Paul was imprisoned, that he obtained a personal audience with the emperor, that he was freed and went to Spain, that Nero ordered his execution, that he encountered Peter in Rome (or in prison in Rome), that he and Peter were executed together.

But neither in Acts nor in any other reliable document is there a basis for any of these stories. Perhaps the original ending of Acts was indeed excised or altered. Perhaps Luke, the author, simply did not know 'what happened next' and, not being concerned with aesthetic symmetry, simply allowed himself to conclude lamely.

Or perhaps, as **Eisenman** has suggested - and this possibility will be considered later - Luke did know, but deliberately cut short his narrative (or was cut short by later editors) in order to conceal his knowledge.

The last sections of Acts - from the riot inspired in the Temple on - are muddled, confused and riddled with unanswered questions. Elsewhere, however, Acts is ostensibly simple enough. On one level, there is the narrative of Paul's conversion and subsequent adventures. But behind this account looms a chronicle of increasing friction between two factions within the original community in Jerusalem, the 'early Church'.

One of these factions consists of 'hardliners', who echo the teachings of Qumranic texts and insist on rigorous observance of the Law. The other, exemplified by Paul and his immediate supporters, want to relax the Law and, by making it easier for people to join the congregation, to increase the number of new recruits. The 'hardliners' are less concerned with numbers than with doctrinal purity, and seem to have only a cursory interest in events or developments outside Palestine; nor do they display any desire for an accommodation with Rome.

Paul, on the other hand, is prepared to dispense with doctrinal purity. His primary objective is to disseminate his message as widely as possible and to assemble the largest possible body of adherents. In order to attain this objective, he goes out of his way to avoid antagonizing the authorities and is perfectly willing to come to an

accommodation with Rome, even to curry favor.

The 'early Church', then, as it appears in Acts, is rent by incipient schism, the instigator of which is Paul. Paul's chief adversary is the enigmatic figure of James, 'the Lord's brother'. It is clear that James is the acknowledged leader of the community in Jerusalem that becomes known to later tradition as the 'early Church'.¹³

For the most part, James comes across as a 'hardliner', though he does - if Acts is to be believed - display a willingness to compromise on certain points. All the evidence suggests, however, that even this modest flexibility reflects some license on the part of the author of Acts. James could not, obviously, have been excised from the narrative - his role, presumably, would have been too well-known.

In consequence, he could only be played down somewhat, and portrayed as a conciliatory figure - a figure occupying a position somewhere between Paul and the extreme 'hardliners'.

In any case, the 'sub-text' of Acts reduces itself to a clash between two powerful personalities, James and Paul. **Eisenman** has demonstrated that James emerges as the custodian of the original body of teachings, the exponent of doctrinal purity and rigorous adherence to the Law. The last thing he would have had in mind was founding a 'new religion'. Paul is doing precisely that.

Paul's *Jesus* is a full-fledged god, whose biography, miracle for miracle, comes to match those of the rival deities with whom he is competing for devotees - one sells gods, after all, on the same marketing principles that obtain for soap or pet food. By James's standards - indeed, by the standards of any devout Jew - this, of course, is blasphemy and apostasy. Given the passions roused by such issues, the rift between James and Paul would hardly have been confined, as Acts suggests it was, to the level of civilized debate.

It would have generated the kind of murderous hostility that surfaces at the end of the narrative.

In the conflict between James and Paul, the emergence and evolution of what we call Christianity stood at a crossroads. Had the mainstream of its development conformed to James's teachings, there would have been no Christianity at all, only a particular species of Judaism which might or might not have emerged as dominant. As things transpired, however, the mainstream of the new movement gradually coalesced, during the next three centuries, around Paul and his teachings.

Thus, to the undoubted posthumous horror of James and his associates, an entirely new religion was indeed born - a religion which came to have less and less to do with its supposed founder.

[Back to Contents](#)