

Chapter 14

LUKE'S PORTRAIT OF PAUL IN ACTS 21:17-26

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In his book, *Paul: The Apostle's Letters, Life, and Thought* (2015), E. P. Sanders introduces Paul's writings and references almost every chapter of Acts, including Acts 21, but notably skips over Acts 21:17-26. The glaring omission is indicative of a general lack of interest in this passage in contemporary New Testament studies. Acts 21:17-26 is something of a marginal text in modern works on Paul. When mentioned, it is often in passing, and the little discussion that occasionally does take place usually tends toward dismissing its significance (the more important issue is the collection!).

Despite its marginalization, a compelling case can be made that Acts 21:17-26 is a principal passage in Luke's narrative. It is the mirror text of Acts 15, the center of a trajectory of seven defenses, and represents Paul setting the record straight, before God and his accusers, that *he remained a Torah-observant Jew and taught in a way consistent with these convictions*. Luke's penning of this passage is an attempt to resolve controversy over this crucial matter in the ekklesia of his day and provide a vital frame of reference for how Paul's teachings should be interpreted.¹

1. For discussion of the historical reliability of Luke's portrait of Paul in Acts 21:17-26, see Baur (1876, 1: 195-215); Esler (1987: 125-29); Lüdemann (1989: 58-59; 1996: 46-47); Bauckham (2003: 250-59); Le Cornu (2003, 2): 1183-192; Aune (2011: 287-320); Chepey (2000: 66; 2005: 173-74; 2012: 69-75); Keener (2014, 3: 3113-114). Scholars who question the reliability of Acts 21:17-26 typically do so because Luke (1) depicts Paul as a Torah-observant Jew and (2) describes the rumors in Acts 21:20-21, 24 as *false*, not true. Luke's Paul is regarded as an invention in light of the law-free Paul of the letters. Notably, the dismissal of Luke's portrait of Paul in Acts 21:17-26 for these reasons indirectly attests to the reading of Luke's narrative proposed in this chapter: Paul remained a Torah-observant Jew and taught in a way consistent with these convictions. If Acts 21:17-26 is reliable, and this narrative reading is accepted, then the passage has significant interpretive value since Paul's testimony that he remained law observant took place after he wrote Galatians, 1 Corinthians, and Romans. Modern exegetes often view Paul's position on the law in these

A Principal Passage

The pericope opens with Paul's arrival in Jerusalem where he is informed that rumors of him preaching a law-free gospel to Diaspora Jews had arrived ahead of him. While exegetes today often echo this anomalous image of Paul,² Luke portrays first-century Jerusalem Messianic leaders as contesting this evaluation. James and the elders give the lie to the rumor by asking Paul to purify himself in the temple among four Nazirites and pay for the sacrifices the Torah requires to complete their vows (Num. 6:1-21).³ The purpose of the public testimony in James's words is to demonstrate that (a) "there is nothing in what they [the members of the community] have been told about you" (v. 24b)—the rumor that Paul subverted Jewish law and custom was *false*; and (b) "you yourself *also* live in observance of the law" (v. 24c), that is, Paul himself remained a Torah true Jew like the "zealous for the law" in Jerusalem (v. 20). The prearranged testimony was to communicate this negative and positive message.⁴ Without objection, Paul follows the plan.

Luke shines the spotlight on Acts 21:17-26 by situating Paul among holy people, in a holy place, and at a singularly holy time. The presence of James and the elders in Acts 21:17-26 communicates to the reader that this is a key passage. James is the

letters as consistent with the rumor described in Acts 21:20-21, for example, N. T. Wright (2013: 359) on Rom. 14, "Paul did not himself continue to keep the kosher laws, and did not propose to, or require of, other 'Jewish Christians' that they should, either." However, if Luke's portrait of Paul in Acts 21:17-26 is reliable and Paul, ipso facto, kept the Jewish food laws because he remained a Torah-observant Jew, then such readings of Rom. 14 need to be reassessed as I have argued elsewhere (Rudolph 2016b: 151-81; 2005: 62-63). Given Luke's emphasis on how Paul's *teachings* have been misunderstood, Acts 21:17-26 seems to be aimed in part at prompting such reassessments (Thiessen 2016: 164-65; cf. Nanos and Zetterholm 2015). That Luke was familiar with some of Paul's letters is argued by Walker (1985: 3-23); Aejmelaeus (1987); Pervo (2006: 51-147); Tyson (2006: 15-22); Schellenberg (2015: 193-213).

2. "By virtue of Paul's activities and legacy, he could be labeled as a Jewish apostate (just as he is accused of in Acts 21:20-21, 27-28; 24:5-6)" (Bird 2016: 7-8).

3. "The Greek infinitive ξυρᾶσθαι ('to be shaved') used in the context of a Nazirite vow, as a translation of גללה connotes 'to bring the offerings of a Nazirite' (see *m. Naz.* 2.5-6), that is, to pay for the required sacrifices of a Nazirite who is ending his or her vow" (Aune 2011: 295). These sacrifices included a burnt offering, a sin offering, together with their respective grain offerings and drink offerings and a basket of unleavened bread (Num. 6:13-15). The final offering came from the Nazirite himself, his hair. It was shorn and thrown into the fire (Num. 6:18; Josephus, *Ant.* 4.72). See Tomes (1995: 191-92).

4. "Rather than resorting to a *textual* (letter) solution with its attendant risks of mishandling both in terms of delivery and interpretation, James proposes a *ritual* (Nazirite) confirmation of Paul's loyalty to the Jewish law (21:23-24, 26). As interpreters of Paul well know, letters can be 'hard to understand' (2 Pet. 3.16); acts often speak louder and clearer than words" (Spencer 1997: 200).

brother of the Messiah, a pillar apostle, head of the Jerusalem Council, leader of the mother congregation, and known as “the Just” (according to Hegesippus).⁵ Luke brings James into Acts when there is a need to resolve a major controversy (Jervell 1972: 185–87, 195–96, 199). In early Christian tradition, James is a Nazirite,⁶ a Jew set apart for the Lord who maintains a level of Torah observance that is beyond reproach, “James, whose authority as a law-abiding Jew is not questioned in the early church, can serve as witness to Paul’s faithfulness to the law” (Salo 1991: 266).

Similarly, the elders represent, next to the apostles, the highest level of ekklesial authority in the community of Jesus followers. This is the case in Acts 15 and 16 where Luke identifies “the apostles and elders” as the halakhic decisors who handed down the apostolic decree, a ruling binding on all Gentile believers (Acts 15:22; 16:4; 21:25). By bringing the elders into Acts 21:17–26, Luke conveys that it is a matter of utmost importance with implications for the whole ekklesia. The elders’ support for Paul attests to his Torah-faithful life.

The four Nazirites in Acts 21:17–26 also serve a narrative role in confirming that Paul is a Torah-observant Jew and does not preach a law-free gospel to Jews. Bart Koet notes:

After the accusations in Acts 18:12–13 about Paul not being lawabiding enough, this vow and the suggestion that it is a Nazirite vow, shows the reader, that Paul is even more than lawabiding, he is doing more than what is strictly necessary. . . . By connecting Paul twice with the phenomenon of Naziritism as an answer to critics on his attitude towards the Law, Luke demonstrates the importance of Paul fulfilling even supererogatory rituals to show his lawabidingness.⁷

The Nazirite exceeded the maximum standards of God’s law and was a symbol of Torah-observant Israel (Amos 2:11–12; 1 Macc. 3:49).⁸ As Koet puts it, James “(who himself is depicted as a lifelong Nazir and as an example of lawabidingness in Eusebius’ *Church History*; see Book II XXIII 4–6) suggests to Paul to pay for four Nazirites as a proof of his lawabidingness. By paying for the expenses of the sacrifices of those men Paul associates himself with their lawabidingness” (Koet 1996: 139). In the context of Acts 18:18—where Paul takes a Nazirite vow⁹—and

5. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.23.3–4.

6. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.23.4–6.

7. Koet (1996: 141). See Chepey (2005: 66, 173–74).

8. Cf. Num. 6:1–2; Judg. 13:7; 16:17; 1 Sam. 1:11; Lk. 1:15. See Bockmuehl (2000: 36–48).

9. Neusner (1999: 81) suggests that Paul was under a Nazirite vow in Acts 21 and that James advised Paul to fulfill his obligations with four other Nazirites. While the scenario is possible, Luke’s narrative suggests that Paul had already concluded a Nazirite vow in Cenchreae (Acts 18:18) and presented Nazirite offerings during a previous trip to Jerusalem (Acts 18:21–22). This conclusion is supported by the Western text of Acts 18:21 and Luke’s use of ἀναβαίω in Acts 18:22. For this reason, the NRSV translates Acts 18:22, “When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up to Jerusalem and greeted the church, and then went down to

Acts 21:17–26—where Paul pays for four men to fulfill their Nazirite vows¹⁰—Luke portrays Paul as a Jesus-believing Jew who is law-abiding and encourages fellow Jews to be law-abiding.

The location of Acts 21:17–26 also highlights the significance of the passage. Jerusalem is the geographic center of Luke’s space-time universe. The third gospel begins in Jerusalem and ends in Jerusalem. In the first chapter of Acts, the Messiah ascends to heaven from Jerusalem and angelic messengers foretell Jesus’s return to Jerusalem in the same way that he left (Acts 1:11–12; cf. Zech. 14:4). The gospel spreads from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. This spread, however, is not linear but circular. Paul keeps returning to Jerusalem (Acts 9:26–31; 11:27–30; 15:1–2; 18:22).¹¹ The lack of emphasis on Jerusalem at the end of Acts is likely Luke’s way of reminding the reader that the story is unfinished. The circle will be completed in Jerusalem after “the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (Lk. 21:24; Acts 1:6).¹² In this wider narrative context, Paul’s final visit to Jerusalem in Acts 21:17–26 is one of the pivotal moments in Luke’s story.

The focus on the temple in Acts 21:17–26 is also notable. Luke-Acts starts off in the temple (Lk. 1:5–25). The temple is where the earliest community of Jesus-believing Jews “spent much time together . . . in Solomon’s Portico” (Acts 2:46; 3:1–10; 5:12; cf. 5:42). Paul fell into a trance in the temple and saw Jesus say to him, “Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles” (Acts 22:17–21). That Acts 21:26 takes place in the temple signals to the reader of Luke’s story that it is a salient episode. Moreover, the temple serves to confirm Paul’s testimony. The temple was regarded in Israel as a “holy place” where people took oaths to resolve controversy.¹³ In Acts 21:26, Paul publicly testifies in the temple, before God and altar, that the rumors about him are false and that he remains a Torah-observant Jew. His ritual actions in this sacred place are the equivalent of a sworn testimony to set the record straight on this matter once and for all.

Antioch.” In Acts 18:21, Codex Bezae and the majority of Byzantine MSS insert, “I must at all costs celebrate the coming feast day in Hierosoloma” (Rius-Camps and Read-Heimerdinger 2007: 384). The case for the Codex Bezae insertion is argued by Ross (1992: 247–49). Against the Western addition, see Metzger (1975: 465); Strange (1992: 47, 163); Chepey (2000: 67). It would appear that Paul was only in need of ritual purification in Acts 21.

10. The four in Acts 21:24, 26–27 were in need of purification, possibly due to corpse defilement which necessitated the seven-day purification ritual described in Num. 19:1–13 (cf. Num. 6:9–12; 31:19; *m. Naz.* 7:3; Philo, *Spec. Laws* 3.205; Acts 20:9–10). Josephus mentions that Jews underwent ritual purification to enter the enclosure of the temple and that it was required of pilgrims who came to offer Shavuot sacrifices (*Ant.* 12.145; *J.W.* 1.229; cf. Lev. 23:17–19; Acts 20:16; 24:17–18; Jn 11:55). For a discussion of the possible reasons for purification in Acts 21:17–26, see Gane (2008: 9–17); Aune (2011: 290–318).

11. “Each of Paul’s missionary campaigns concluded with a visit to Jerusalem, so that Paul’s work began from and ended in Jerusalem in each case” (Marshall 1980: 301–302).

12. Tannehill (2005: 120–24); Fuller (2006: 257–64); Bauckham (2001: 435–87).

13. Acts 6:13; 21:28; 1 Kgs 8:31–32; 2 Chron. 6:22–23; Neh. 5:12; cf. Mt. 23:16.

The timing of Acts 21:17-26 adds to the case that a principal passage is in view. It is the third month of the Torah's calendar and the Jewish world is celebrating the pilgrimage festival of *Shavuot* (Pentecost).¹⁴ Josephus records that on the "arrival of Pentecost . . . a countless multitude flocked in from Galilee, from Idumaea, from Jericho, and from Peraea beyond the Jordan" to present festal offerings (*War* 2:42-43). Paul was one of these Jewish pilgrims "in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the day of Pentecost" to "offer sacrifices" (Acts 20:16; 24:17).¹⁵ Notably, Pentecost coincided with the anniversary of the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, an event witnessed by all Israel (Exod. 19:1; 20:22[19]). In Luke's narrative, Pentecost continues to be a time when spectacular events are witnessed among God's people. In Acts 2, the Holy Spirit is poured out on the day of Pentecost and Jews from "every nation under heaven" witness it (Acts 2:5-12). In Acts 21:17-26, Paul (surrounded by Nazirites who drew crowds because of their piety and lion-like appearance)¹⁶ testified in the temple on Pentecost that he remained a Torah-observant Jew, and Jewish pilgrims from around the world, including many of Paul's accusers, witnessed this public declaration (Acts 21:27-28). James's plan was for this picture of Paul to be widely seen and shared, "Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law" (Acts 21:24).

The False Rumor and Seven Defenses (Acts 16:3; 18:18; 21:17-26; 23:6; 24:14, 16; 25:8; 28:17)

Given this portrait of Paul as a Torah-observant Jew, how does Luke account for the rumor that Paul taught Diaspora Jews not to keep the law and not to circumcise their sons (Acts 21:21)? According to the narrative, the Jerusalem leaders appointed Paul and Barnabas to inform the "Gentiles" about the Jerusalem Council's decision to exempt Jesus-believing Gentiles from circumcision and full Torah observance (Acts 15:19-31; 16:4). It may be reasonably assumed from the story that some people thought the exemption applied to Jews as well, leaving the impression that Paul taught Jews that they no longer had to circumcise their sons or keep the Torah. It is easy to imagine Paul's detractors misreporting the facts about who was exempt in order to denounce Paul as an apostate. James's reference to the Jerusalem Council decision in Acts 21:25 may allude to how Paul's direct involvement in announcing the apostolic decree indirectly led to the accusations (Jervell 1972: 195-96; Le Cornu 2003, 2:1188).

14. Acts 20:16; cf. Lev. 23:15-21; Deut. 16:9-11, 16.

15. See Lev. 23:16-20.

16. "Nazirites would have been a popular site in the temple during Pentecost and easily noticed because of their appearance. . . . By being present with such figures, Paul's action of purifying himself and paying for the four men to have haircuts and sacrifices offered to renew their vows would likely have been easily witnessed" (Chepey 2005: 173).

Luke's use of διδάσκειν in Acts 21:21 may also refer to Paul's discourse with Gentiles about the law that was taken out of context and applied to Jews. For example, Paul wrote, "Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you" (Gal. 5:2). The implied audience of the passage is Gentile believers since Gentiles are the "uncircumcised" (Gal. 2:7-9). Moreover, Paul's "rule in all the churches" explicitly states that Jews should remain circumcised and Gentiles uncircumcised (1 Cor. 7:17-24).¹⁷ Despite the Gentile *Sitz im Leben* of Gal. 5:2, Paul's words may have been misconstrued to mean, "Listen! I, Paul, am telling you [Jews] that if you let [your sons] be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you." For centuries, on the basis of this text, Jesus-believing Jews have been admonished by Gentile Christians not to circumcise their sons. From a narrative point of view, it is not difficult to see how a misunderstanding about Paul's intended audience in Gal. 5:2, or a deliberate distortion of his words by his critics, could have led to the false rumor in Acts 21:21 ("you tell [Jews] not to circumcise their children").¹⁸ Gal. 5:2 is but one of the many Pauline texts that could have been misrepresented by Paul's opponents to depict him as an apostate Jew.¹⁹

The rumor of Paul's law-free gospel to Jews spread to Jewish communities throughout the Mediterranean world and resulted in numerous occasions like Acts 21:21 where Paul had to defend himself. Acts 21:17-26 may be seen as the center of a trajectory of seven defenses in Luke's narrative aimed at responding to this false rumor and convincing the reader that Paul remained a Torah-observant Jew. This is a major theme of Acts. As Isaac Oliver puts it, "It seems likely that Acts was written precisely to counter the rumors circulating among Jewish followers of Jesus and Jews in general that Paul was an apostate" (2016: 4).

Leading up to Acts 21:17-26, Luke informs his audience that Jews in Corinth accused Paul of "persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to the law" (Acts 18:13). The narrator addresses the false charge by placing it between Paul's circumcision of Timothy in Acts 16:3 and Paul taking a Nazirite vow in Acts 18:18—two sacred rituals that demonstrate Paul not only observed the Torah but went above and beyond the call of duty to the Torah.²⁰ Acts 21:17-26 then puts the nail in the coffin of the slander.

17. Rudolph (2010: 1-23). Paul notes in Gal. 5:3 that the circumcised are "obliged to obey the entire law." For a discussion of erasure language in 1 Cor. 7:19; Gal. 3:28; 5:16; 6:15, see Rudolph (2016a: 27-33); Thiessen (2016: 8-11, 164-65). Despite Paul's rule that Jews should remain in their calling as Jews and not assimilate (1 Cor. 7:17-18, 20), it is possible that some Jesus-believing Jews in Pauline churches became (or appeared to be) more relaxed in their commitment to Jewish law due to close association with Gentile believers and thereby contributed to the rumor. See Oliver (2013: 214, 322, 360, 394-95).

18. Keener (2014: 3126-27); Thiessen (2016: 165-66); and Jervell (1984: 64).

19. Cf. 2 Pet. 3:15-16.

20. Paul's circumcision of Timothy implements the implication of the Jerusalem Council decision that Jews should be circumcised in keeping with the "covenant of circumcision" (Acts 7:8; Gen. 17:9-14). From a literary perspective, Paul's circumcision of

In the chapters following Acts 21:17-26, Paul confirms four times that he keeps the Torah, and that he has done nothing against the law or the customs of his people:

Confirmation 1: “Brothers, I am [present tense] a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees.” (Acts 23:6)²¹

Confirmation 2: “But this I admit to you . . . I worship the God of our ancestors, believing everything laid down according to the law or written in the prophets . . . I do my best always to have a clear conscience toward God and all people.” (Acts 24:14, 16)

Confirmation 3: “I have in no way committed an offense against the law of the Jews, or against the temple, or against the emperor.” (Acts 25:8)

Confirmation 4: “Brothers, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our ancestors, yet I was arrested in Jerusalem.” (Acts 28:17)

In literary context, each of these four confirmations point back to Acts 21:17-26 (Balch 2015: 103–04; Koet 2000: 104). One may ask what more Luke could have included in his narrative to express that Paul was a Torah-observant Jew. Acts is replete with statements that describe Paul as faithful to Jewish law and custom (Oliver 2013: 28); statements to the contrary are consistently identified as false rumors.

A more detailed examination of the text of Acts 21:17-26, the chief defense, adds lexical and contextual support to the above conclusions:

1. James maintains that Paul “observes the law” (φυλάσσω τὸν νόμον [Acts 21:24]). The language (in the present active tense) refers to careful observance of the law as a whole (cf. Gal. 6:13; Rom. 2:26):

Many NT occurrences of φυλάσσω speak of *observing* the law or commandments (used thus also in the LXX). The basic idea of “keeping a law, etc. from being broken” (BAGD s.v. 1.f) yields the meaning *observe*,

Timothy informs the reader in advance that the later accusations leveled against Paul, that he taught Diaspora Jews not to circumcise their sons (Acts 21:21), are false. The context of Acts 15–16 suggests that Luke’s explanatory statement (“because of the Jews who were in those places”) does not mean that the *act of circumcision* was an expedient, but that the *timing of the circumcision* was an expedient. See Rudolph (2016a: 23–27); Bryan (1988: 293); Oliver (2013: 433); Thiessen (2011: 120–22).

21. Cf. Acts 26:5. Ellison (1970: 199) notes that “the RSV is probably correct in translating the aorist ἔζησα by ‘I have lived,’ instead of by the past tense as in AV, RV, NEB. Not merely would there have been little point in stressing to King Agrippa what he had done, if he no longer did it, but in addition it hardly brings out the force of the καὶ νῦν that follows, which implies not a contradiction but rather an intensification.”

follow, keep. Initially this refers to observance of the Torah, the law as a whole (νόμον: Acts 7:53; 21:24; Gal. 6:13), the commandments (ἐντολάς: Mk. 10:19; Mt. 19:17; Lk. 18:20), or individual provisions among them (δικαιώματα: Rom. 2:26). In the Synoptics as in Acts and Paul this usage is linked with criticism of Jewish observance of the law (a significant exception is Acts 21:24, where Paul is presented as being in agreement with the Jewish Christians).²²

φυλάσσω . . . serves esp. to express the divinely required attitude of man to the divine covenant, Exod. 19:5 etc., and to the cultic statutes, laws, commandments, admonitions and warnings; in this sense it becomes a *terminus technicus* in the legal traditions from Exod. to Deut.²³

φυλάσσω . . . to continue to keep a law or commandment from being broken.²⁴

Luke’s use of covenant imagery—zealous for the law, Moses, circumcision, Nazirites, ritual purification, temple, sacrifice, Pentecost season (when the law was given)—adds to the covenant keeping connotation of φυλάσσω τὸν νόμον in Acts 21:24.²⁵

2. The καὶ in ἀλλὰ στοιχεῖς καὶ αὐτὸς (Acts 21:24) is emphatic,²⁶ as in the ESV (“*you yourself also* [καὶ] *live* in observance of the law”), and identifies Paul with the antecedent—the thousands of Jesus-believing Jews in Jerusalem who are “zealous for the law.”²⁷ Paul’s identification with *frum* Jews is also vividly expressed in the picture of him leading the four Nazirites (the most zealous of the zealous) into the temple (“Then Paul took the men . . . he entered the temple with them” [v. 26]). Here Paul is numbered among the “zealous for the law” (Chepey 2005: 174). James’s plan is for the Jewish world to know that Paul, whom Luke describes as “a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees” in the present tense, continues to “observe the law” like the “zealous for the law” and teaches in a way consistent with these convictions (Acts 21:20, 24; 23:6).²⁸ Luke’s positive emphasis on Paul being “zealous for the law” may explain why the Muratorian Canon (c. 170 CE) comments that “Paul had taken [Luke] with him as one zealous for the law” (Metzger 1989: 305).

22. Kratz (1993, 3:442).

23. Bertram (1974, 9: 237).

24. BDAG (2000: 1068). Cf. Louw and Nida (1989, 1: 468).

25. See Balch (2015: 116).

26. “The conjunction is emphatic (‘you *also*’)” (Parsons 2003: 412). See Zerwick and Grosvenor (1996: 427). Most English translations of Acts 21:24 leave the καὶ untranslated; exceptions include the NRSV, ESV, NJB, NASB, ASV, KJV. Cf. Jn 7:10.

27. “Consistent with its ancient roots, ‘zeal’ in Second Temple Judaism had to do with an impassioned defense of the covenant by observance of the Law” (Smiles 2002: 461–62).

28. See Jervell (1996: 14; 1984: 71; 1972: 159, 163, 169); Gowler (1991: 288); Davies (1980: 70).

3. The use of *στοιχεῖν* Acts 21:24 (cf. Rom. 4:12; Gal. 5:25) suggests a consistency of lifestyle (Miller 1994: 141–42). It can be variously translated: “live in” (ESV, NET) or “way of life” (NJB). James’s point is that Paul *walked the walk* of a Torah-faithful Jew.
4. Acts 21:17–26 is the mirror text of Acts 15. James anticipates Paul’s concern that his public testimony may be misinterpreted by Gentile believers to mean that they too should be fully Torah observant. He reassures Paul that the Gentile believers will not misunderstand because “as for the Gentiles who have become believers, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication” (Acts 21:25).²⁹ Here James restates the Acts 15 Jerusalem Council decision that exempted Jesus-believing Gentiles from circumcision and other Jewish-specific requirements of the Torah, “James parallels the necessity of Jews keeping the law with the necessity of Gentiles to keep the Apostolic decree (21:25).”³⁰ This mirroring between the Jerusalem Council decision and Acts 21:17–26 is reinforced by Luke’s reference to Moses in Acts 15:21 and 21:21. There is also a parallel use of *φυλάσσω* in Acts 16:4 and 21:24 (Rudolph 2016a: 53–59; 2002: 67–70). Matthew Thiessen sums up the significance of Acts 21:17–26 in relation to Acts 15, “While both Paul and the Jerusalem assembly believe that Jews ought to continue in their observance of the law, both agree that gentiles should not,³¹ a decision of the Jerusalem Council that Luke reiterates here (21:25) . . . not only does God not require Jewish Christ followers to abandon law observance, he actually requires them to continue in law observance.”³² Paul’s testimony in the temple in verse 26 confirms that he is in accord with this view.

29. Tannehill (1990: 269).

30. Miller (1994: 142). Cf. Marguerat (2009: 111); Bauckham (2007: 75; 1995: 464, 475); Wyschogrod (2004: 209); Bockmuehl (2000: 168–72); Jervell (1984: 143); “V. 25 recalls the decision by the Apostolic Council (cf. esp. 15:20). This verse reveals the whole paragraph as a thought that, in the spirit of Luke’s interest, is central: the differentiation between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians with regard to Torah observance’ (STEGEMANN, *Synagoge*, 177)” (Ganser-Kerperin 2000: 275, n. 15).

31. That is, in the sense of Gentiles taking on circumcision and full Torah observance (Acts 15:5–10, 19, 24, 28; cf. 1 Cor. 7:17–18) as Thiessen confirmed in personal correspondence, January 5, 2017. A reasonable case can be made that the four “essentials” of the apostolic decree are based on Lev. 17–18. See Jervell (1972: 144; 1984: 121); Bauckham (1996: 154–84); Wehnert (1997: 72–73); Bockmuehl (2000: 165); Ådna (2000: 159–61); Oliver (2013: 394–98).

32. Thiessen (2016: 167). The “ought” is the implication of the Jerusalem Council decision that only Gentiles are exempt from full law observance. Cf. Oliver (2013: 394, 416–17, 436–37, 442, 450); Thiessen (2011: 122–23); Marguerat (2009: 109–117); Kinzer (2005: 108–22); Carras (1999: 693–708); Jervell (1984: 143).

Conclusion

Luke’s portrait of Paul in Acts 21:17–26 is the most explicit statement in the New Testament that Paul remained a Torah-observant Jew after becoming a follower of Jesus. It is a principal passage in Acts, the center of a trajectory of seven defenses, and represents Luke’s attempt to (1) restore an authentic image of Paul to the *ekklesia* and (2) provide a critical frame of reference for how Paul’s teachings should be interpreted in relation to Jewish law and identity (Wyschogrod 2004: 193–95, 209, 234). Regrettably, neither objective was achieved. The false rumor that Paul repudiates in Acts 21:17–26 became the traditional reading of Paul—amid the parting of the ways between the church and the Jewish people—and approximates what has become the normative view in Pauline studies today (Thiessen 2016: 167), even within the New Perspective.³³ It is not surprising, therefore, that most modern exegetes do not take Paul’s testimony in the temple seriously. The story is either ignored, dismissed as fiction, or highly imaginative readings are employed that transform Luke’s Paul into the apostate Paul described in Acts 21:21.³⁴ Despite these attempts to downplay the significance of Acts 21:17–26, this marginal text remains a perennial problem for the normative view because Acts is “the earliest *Wirkungsgeschichte* of Paul’s life and teachings with respect to Torah observance.”³⁵ For this reason, renewed interest in the early reception of Paul the Second Temple Jew will always lead to a renewed interest in Acts 21:17–26.

References

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33. “He [Paul] had abandoned the most basic markers of Jewish identity. . . . If he simply went on keeping Torah, insisting that continuing Torah observance was mandatory for Jewish converts, he could not have said what he did to Peter in Galatians 2.14” (Wright 2013: 1429, 1440). See Rudolph (2016a: 46–53) for an interpretation of Gal. 2:14 that makes room for a Torah-observant Paul.

34. See Rudolph (2016a: 59–73). Some argue that Paul did not teach Jesus-believing Jews to stop keeping the law but only to regard its requirements as superfluous now that Christ had come. However, if Paul taught that Jewish law was a matter of indifference then the Acts 21:21 rumor would have been *true*, “For anyone who stayed by the letter and spirit of the law, Paul’s regarding some of its requirements as matters of indifference, his treating as optional things that the law laid down as obligatory, must in itself have constituted ‘apostasy from Moses’” (Bruce 1988: 406). Cf. Wright (2013: 359). By contrast, Luke clarifies in Acts 21:17–26 that the rumor of Paul’s apostasy was *false*.

35. Markus Bockmuehl, personal correspondence, June 3, 2006.

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**THE EARLY RECEPTION OF PAUL THE
SECOND TEMPLE JEW**

Text, Narrative and Reception History

Edited by

Isaac W. Oliver and Gabriele Boccaccini with Joshua Scott

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