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THE PROBLEM

The careful reader of Acts should be confounded by the way St. Paul is portrayed. While every astute commentator acknowledges that Paul plays an exceedingly important role in Acts, attempts to understand the portrayal and how it serves Luke's larger aim are inconclusive as they are unsatisfying. Some, like J. Jervell, R. Maddox, R. F. O'Toole, are convinced that Luke's foremost intention is to portray Paul as a loyal Jew.¹ While the Paul of Acts does indeed point with pride to his strict Jewish upbringing, he also is very proud of his Roman citizenship and his citizenship of the city of Tarsus. Not enough attention has been paid to this fact.

This lack of regard obscures a historical problem which is: what is the probability that a Jew of strict Pharisaic background would have held, let alone been proud of, these citizenships? This issue is important and requires careful consideration. While W. Ramsay, A. Deissmann, M. Dibelius, W. G. Kümmel, G. Bornkamm, and F. F. Bruce have offered well-known studies, their conclusions do not answer this pressing question.²

It has been argued that Luke's intention was to stress Paul's Jewishness in order to highlight early Christianity's continuity with Judaism and to assuage an inner church anxiety.³ While there is continuity, there is also a Lucan concern to show how Christianity has grown beyond its Jewish roots. Furthermore, the mood of Acts is hardly anxious; rather, it is triumphant. As is well known, Jesus

¹ Jervell, *God's Christ and His People; Luke and the People of God*; "Paulus in der Apostelgeschichte," 378–392; "Paul in the Acts of the Apostles," pp. 297–305; *The Unknown Paul*; Maddox, *The Purpose of Luke-Acts*; O'Toole, "Luke's Position on Politics and Society." See also Burchard, "Paulus in der Apostelgeschichte"; 881–895; Löning, *Die Saulustradition in der Apostelgeschichte*.

² Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller*; Deissmann, *Paul*; Dibelius and Kümmel, *Paul*; Bornkamm, *Paul*; Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Free Spirit*.

³ Karris, "Poor and Rich: The Lukan Sitz im Leben"; O'Toole, "Why Did Luke Write Acts (Luke-Acts)?", 66–77; Tiede, *Prophecy and History in Luke-Acts*.

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presents the early church's "marching orders": "and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Yet, what seems to be of greater concern to Luke is not just Paul the Jew, but Paul the Tarsian and Roman who showed himself to be comfortable in the company of the high and mighty of the first-century Greco-Roman world. In Acts, Paul is always in control. His authority is not only recognized among the Christians. He is also acknowledged as a man not to be taken lightly by the secular leaders as well. Luke is also intent on emphasizing that Paul, before his conversion, was a wild and zealous persecutor. Yet, after his conversion Paul is a model of sobriety, piety, and bravery.

It is obvious that, for most of the last eight chapters of Acts, Paul is on trial. Again, there have been several examinations of Luke's account of the Roman legal process from the time of Paul's arrest in Jerusalem to his house arrest in Rome.⁴ All the analyses offer enlightening insight. However, all are equally tentative in reaching firm conclusions, due to lack of sufficient evidence. The following important questions are, if noted, passed over quite quickly: how likely was it that an individual in the Eastern provinces of the empire would have been treated with the respect that Paul was – even if that individual were a Roman citizen? Did a person's social status have anything to do with how that individual was treated?

There is no paucity of confusion among scholars concerning the nature of Paul's appeal. Furthermore, the honest commentator will admit that Luke's accounts of Paul's trials are not exact in all their details. Yet, no one has fully investigated how Luke's report might have reflected the social and legal expectations of the first century.

The consensus agrees that what can be concluded is that the description of the legal scenes in Acts shows Roman justice to be fair and protective, which was an advantage to Paul. Despite the common agreement, this assertion is difficult to prove. As will be shown, the representatives of Roman law and order are at best uneven in their ability to control the proceedings and all seem to defer to Paul in matters of legal minutiae.

In increasing numbers, students of the New Testament have become sensitive to socio-historical issues and have used socio-

⁴ Most notably Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law*; Jones, "I Appeal to Caesar," pp. 51–66; H. S. Tajra, *The Trial of St. Paul. A Juridical Exegesis of the Second Half of the Acts of the Apostles* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1989).

logical vocabulary to describe the early church.⁵ However, no one has comprehensively and therefore adequately studied the Lucan portrayal of St. Paul in Acts with this sensitivity.

Many scholars have noted that Luke, in Acts, seems interested in showing that those of high social status were attracted to Christianity. Others, using Acts and Paul's letters, have attempted a social description of the apostle Paul.⁶ But no one has formally studied the social status of Paul as presented in Acts alone with the intent of understanding how this portrayal might uncover a specific Lucan intention.

Furthermore, there has not been adequate attention paid to the fact that one's social standing was not only judged by specific social credentials, but also by the perception of moral character, or virtue. Admittedly scientific measurement of self-control, one of the cardinal virtues, is difficult if not impossible. But, in simply overlooking the unmeasurable, it is possible to miss significant information. This is particularly so in the legal scenes in Acts.

The thesis of this book is that Luke portrayed Paul as a man of high social status and moral virtue. In other words, the Lucan Paul possesses high social credentials and personifies what would have been recognized, by the first reader/hearer of Acts, as the classical cardinal virtues. Luke accomplished this task not only by using descriptive words and phrases but also by emphasizing Paul's high social status through the use of common rhetorical devices and through the construction of his narrative.

The broader purpose of this book is to consider how Luke reflects the social expectations of his first-century environment. The more focused aim in fulfilling the larger objective will be to investigate the portrayal of St. Paul in Acts. The specific, more immediate tasks which will provide evidence for the thesis include: an investigation of the historical probability of the biographical data on Paul provided by Luke; a study of the more subtle literary techniques that Luke used to highlight Paul's authority and control; an analysis of the relationship between social status and legal privilege, which in turn will help interpret the legal scenes in the last eight chapters of Acts.

⁵ Judge, *Rank and Status; Social Pattern*; Kee, *Christian Origins in Sociological Perspective*; Meeks, *Urban Christians*; Theissen, *Social Setting*.

⁶ Clark, "The Social Status of Paul," 110–111; Hock "Paul's Tentmaking," 555–564; S. K. Stowers, "Social Status, Public Speaking and Private Teaching: The Circumstances of Paul's Preaching Activities," *NovT* 26 (1984), 59–82.

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In Acts one sees the movement from Palestine to Rome, from the parochial and the provincial to the capital of the civilized world. Of particular significance is the final section of Acts, 21:37 to 28:31. It is important because these final chapters possess a particular integrity that includes Paul's arrest and imprisonment prior to his arrival in Rome. In this section the reader is presented with a Lucan description of Paul that is fuller than earlier descriptions and places Paul on a pedestal above all others. His background and social standing, as will be shown, are impeccable by both Greco-Roman and Jewish standards. It is as if Luke intentionally presented Paul as one of the *splendidiores personae*.

The final section of Acts is significant, for it is longer than the section which describes Paul's mission. It will be assumed that just as Luke took consummate care in shaping his narrative throughout his two-volume work, so too, here at the conclusion, he is aware of the importance of this last picture the reader will receive. As R. Maddox has stated: "When we read Acts as a whole, rather than selectively, it is Paul the prisoner even more than Paul the missionary whom we are meant to remember."⁷

Even as a prisoner Paul is held up as the man representative of social credentials and moral virtue. With these characteristics in mind, Paul's arrival in Rome was important for Luke for, at last, his hero was where he belonged: in the captial, the center of power and prestige.

The question of how Christianity came to Rome is clearly secondary to Luke, for he writes at a time when these communities are already established. Of primary importance to Luke, particularly in the last eight chapters, is to show that Paul, and by extension, Christianity, belongs in the company of those of power and status.

As is true in our contemporary world, advertisements are directed not to those who possess what is advertised but to those who aspire to possess what is advertised. Luke's emphasis on Paul's high social status and moral virtue offered the reader a glimpse of the truly sophisticated, cosmopolitan Christian gentleman and extended to the status-conscious Greco-Roman world an invitation to join the ever-growing community of Christians which the Lucan Paul represented.

Admittedly the investigation of Luke's sensitivity to the issue of social status in Acts is not new. For example, H. J. Cadbury wrote:

⁷ Maddox, *The Purpose of Luke-Acts*, p. 70.

Furthermore our author is not above a sense of pride in the social standing of Paul's converts . . . The Asiarchs were undoubtedly some of the "best people" in Ephesus – the richest and the most élite . . . It is perhaps a mark of Luke's Greek view point, that this timarchic or economically aristocratic emphasis occurs so often in reference to the Apostle's converts.⁸

E. Haenchen takes for granted that the Paul of Acts is an idealized portrait and often notices the Lucan tendency to portray Paul as a man of high social standing and authority. For example, he commented:

What was significant for world history demanded as its framework high society, the world of the high and mighty . . . and Luke was convinced that Christianity is of decisive significance for the whole world. But he could only express this conviction in the style of the literature of the period, and impart it to his own age, by making Paul again and again confront the statesmen and princes (even Caesar 27:24) and converse on friendly terms with the Asiarchs as with men of equal standing, and thus rising above the hole-in-the-corner existence in which great things cannot come about.⁹

While both of these scholars, among others, have mentioned the status of the converts, neither of them, in any systematic way, has offered a full discussion of the portrayal of the Paul of Acts paying specific attention to the status characteristics which Luke chose to describe. Their attention is ultimately directed elsewhere.

Before entering fully into the study of the relevant data, some brief, general comments about the presuppositions employed in this book are in order. Many scholars assume that an individual, whom tradition has called Luke, is the author/compiler of the two volumes that are known as Luke-Acts. Additionally, Luke should be taken at his word when he writes in his preface to Theophilus (Luke 1:1–4) that he has used sources, presumably both written and oral, some perhaps even from eye-witness accounts, to construct his narrative.

Furthermore, it is supposed by many modern Lucan scholars that Luke's narrative is only of secondary worth as an historical source

⁸ Cadbury, *Book of Acts*, p. 43.

⁹ Haenchen, *Acts*, p. 679. See also Plümacher, *Lukas*.

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for the life, mission, and theology of Paul. This is not to say that Acts is worthless in this respect. Colin Hemer has recently shown that Luke offers precise geographical details and presents important material which can inform an historian about the world in which Luke lived.¹⁰ However, proving that Luke knew details does not excuse Luke from possibly manipulating his sources and shaping his finished product.

The focus of this book is to seek a fuller understanding of how the characterization of Paul in Acts would have been perceived by those who first read or heard the Lucan narrative.

¹⁰ C. J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1989).

2

**DEFINING SOCIAL STATUS AND MORAL
VIRTUE**

The first readers of Luke-Acts were introduced to a panoply of individuals who would have appeared in the life of the cities, villages, and rural outposts of the Roman empire. The characters mentioned by Luke include individuals of every contemporary ethnic and political community. Furthermore, in his narrative Luke introduces shepherds, vinedressers, fisherfolk, tanners, silversmiths, purple-dye sellers, charismatic leaders and their followers, priests and scribes, prostitutes, tax-collectors, beggars, Roman soldiers of every rank, slaves and freemen, landowners, tenant farmers, stewards, representatives of Roman authority, local non-Roman officials, rich and poor, men, women, and children. These *dramatis personae* represent every position on the social scale, suggesting that it may be appropriate to use modern sociological terminology when studying Luke-Acts.

Social stratification

“Social status,” “rank,” and “class” are concepts that are often used indiscriminately; however, they should be more clearly distinguished. “Class” denotes a group of people who, from the standpoint of specific interests, have the same economic position. “Status” is a “quality of social honor or lack of it and is, in the main, conditioned as well as expressed through a specific style of life.”¹ Hence, class is a term which more strictly defines economic earning power.

Social status is a term which possesses wider connotations denoting various levels of prestige, not limited in its definition by economic factors. A person’s class is one factor in determining their social status, but it is not the only criterion. This point does have a

¹ Bendix and Lipset, *Class, Status and Power*, p. 31; Grant, “Social Setting,” p. 17; Meeks, *Urban Christians*, p. 53.

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bearing on the ancient world: a tax-collector and a centurion might have a similar economic standing, but possess differing social status within specific communities.

A person's "rank" in society is important for determining their social status. However, "rank" and "status" are not synonymous. One's rank marks any formally defined position in society. Status refers to positions of influence that may not correspond to the official pattern of the social order.² E. A. Judge notes that status tends to convert itself to rank which is "the fossilized status of the past . . . defending itself against the aspirations of those who have only status, often newly acquired."³ The term "rank" is useful when discussing formal groups within the Greco-Roman world such as senators or equestrians. However, in Acts there is such a variety of individuals possessing differing status credentials that "rank" is not precise enough.

Furthermore, in the Greco-Roman world, the ideal man of social status possessed true dignity and moral virtue. Judgment concerning an individual's moral excellence should be included in a comprehensive understanding of a person's status. Of the three terms, "class," "status," and "rank," "status" is more dynamic, flexible, and inclusive than the other two and hence most appropriate for a discussion of the description of Paul in Acts.

There is yet another term, crucial to the study of the Roman world, which needs to be defined carefully: "social stratification." This is the sociological concept "that refers to the fact that both individuals and groups of individuals are conceived of as constituting higher and lower differentiated strata, or classes, in terms of some specific or generalized characteristic or set of characteristics."⁴

Inherent in this definition of social stratification is an evaluation of an individual's worth in society depending upon his or her placement on the social scale of that society. The Roman world perceived a moral distinction between those who were of the *ordo senatorius* (senators) and *ordo equester* (equestrians) on the one hand, and freedmen and slaves on the other.

R. Brown provides four criteria for a meaningful understanding of social stratification. First, a given population must be conscious of social division, and agree on number and membership; second, the styles of life are "strikingly uniform within the stratum" and clear contrasts between the strata are recognizable; third, social

² Judge, *Rank and Status*, p. 3.

³ Judge, *Rank and Status*, p. 9.

⁴ B. Barber, "Introduction to Social Stratification," in *IESS*, vol. XV, p. 289.

interaction is sharply patterned by stratum; fourth, “the boundaries suggested by the three kinds of data are coincident.”⁵

These criteria give precision to what every student of the classical society intuitively recognizes: that the Greco-Roman world of the first century was socially stratified. Although overdramatic, M. Rostovtzeff’s description of the stratification of the Mediterranean social order is useful:

The senator and knights of the capital smiled at the boorishness of the municipal *gransignori*. The latter, in their turn despised the rich freedman and others. And separated from all stood the lower classes of the freeborn population, the mass of free peasants, free artisans, half-free farmers, and manual workers. Among the lower classes, again those resident in the city looked with a kind of contempt on the peasants, the *pagani* or *rustici*. In the background there was the enormous mass of slaves, servants, artisans, miners, agriculturalists, sailors and so forth.⁶

The sense of higher and lower status pressed heavily upon the people. In his influential evaluation of the legal privileges expected by and afforded to those of high social standing, P. Garnsey begins his study with the following recognition of the those of the social environment:

The Romans saw men as subordinated to or raised up above one another by their involvement in conventional social relationship (as father was placed above son, a patron above a freedman, and a master above a slave); by their involvement in political relationships (the magistrate was placed above the private citizen); and by their respective positions in society.⁷

However, despite the rigid social barriers and the social hierarchy placed from above, it would be incorrect to conclude that there was no social mobility from below. Everybody, it seems, sought to improve their social position and it would be fair to say that those who most bitterly complained about the breakdown of the strict social hierarchy were those whose high social status was most threatened.

⁵ R. Brown, *Social Psychology* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 114.

⁶ Rostovtzeff, *SEHWW*, vol. II, pp. 46f.

⁷ Garnsey, *Social Status and Legal Privileges*, pp. 1–2.

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Slaves worked hard for, and more often than not received, their freedom⁸ (see Acts 6:9). Furthermore, if they had been owned by a Roman citizen, the slaves could expect to gain citizenship as well. Freedmen could amass vast fortunes and, in some cases, advance to positions of great authority.⁹ However, while the freed slave was in a superior social position *vis-à-vis* those who had not yet been freed, it was hardly the case that he was a social equal of the one who had been freeborn. A slave's name often indicated his former status and it would take at least several generations for the ignominy of slavery to be forgotten.

Generally speaking, women as a group did not possess a high status and were subordinated to their husbands or fathers.¹⁰ Yet, there are many examples of women who owned their businesses and were influential members of their communities. In Acts, Luke mentions Lydia who was a seller of purple goods (Acts 16:14), Priscilla, who, with her husband, was a tent-maker (Acts 18:3), and the women of Thessalonica and Berea whose high status was acknowledged by Luke (Acts 17:4, 12).

Nevertheless, clear social boundaries remained and those individuals who succeeded in raising themselves above the station into which they were born were exceptions that proved the general rule. Therefore, while it is no doubt true that the world in which Luke lived and wrote can be described as one which was socially stratified, this concept is in need of further refinement.

Traditionally, the discussion of social stratification concerned the description of a single hierarchical structure within which each member of the society occupied a single position. For example, a senator held a recognized social position above an equestrian who, in turn, possessed a higher social status than that of the decurion, who was above the ordinary Roman citizen. At the lowest end of the

⁸ For recent socio-historical studies of slavery see Barty, *Slavery*; P. R. C. Weaver, "Social Mobility in the Early Roman Empire: The Evidence of the Imperial Freedmen and Slaves," *Past and Present* 37 (1967), 3–20; P. R. C. Weaver, *Familia Caesaris: A Social Study of the Emperor's Freedmen and Slaves* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972); Gager, "Religion and Social Class," pp. 9–12; M. B. Flory, "Family and Familia: A Study of Social Relations in Slavery," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1975; Koester, *History, Culture, and Religion*, pp. 54–67; Meeks, *Urban Christians*, pp. 20–22.

⁹ Duff, *Freedmen*; Barty, *Slavery*; Gager, "Religion and Social Class," pp. 107–109; Macmullen, *Roman Social Relations*, p. 100; Meeks, *Urban Christians*, pp. 21–22.

¹⁰ A. Oepke, "γυνή" in *TDNT*, vol. I, pp. 776–789; Pomery, *Goddesses*; Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*; Meeks, *Urban Christians*, pp. 23–25.