

THERE ARE a number of books in the Bible which have endings that are unusual or abrupt in some way. Jonah is one: “. . . and also much cattle”. Why end here? Isaiah is another: “for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh”—a bitter ending for a book with so many wonderful Messianic and Kingdom promises. Malachi is a third, and Deuteronomy a fourth. But the one I’d like to focus on now is the book of Acts. Consider the last couple of verses: “And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him” (28:30,31).

Although there is a certain stability to the scene being described, this hardly seems like the most obvious or exciting climax to a book that has contained so much adventure. Paul’s ‘sitting around’ in Rome (if we might crudely and colloquially characterise it as such), waiting for the next event (his trial) to happen, is quite uncharacteristic of everything else that happens in Luke and Acts, for they are packed with action and excitement. It is indeed a strange place to end; every reader would want to know what the outcome of Paul’s trial before Caesar was, and yet they are denied that knowledge. It is true that to some extent it can be reconstructed from the later epistles, but this misses the point as far as the tale being told in Acts as a self-contained work is concerned.

It is very likely that there is a reason why the book should end as it does, so it is worth spending some time thinking through some possibilities:

- 1 The ending is abrupt because Luke also wrote a third volume which takes the story further. Luke literally got to the end of a length of scroll, and was forced to finish where he did, ready to take up the narrative in Volume 3. God has not seen fit to preserve this further volume for us. Of course, this is pure conjecture.
- 2 Although first impressions might be otherwise, Paul’s impending testimony before Caesar is in fact a climax, for it is an incredible preaching opportunity. We might describe it as the most significant face-to-face witnessing opportunity Paul has yet had. The gospel has gone from Bethlehem and Nazareth to Caesar himself. If God were more concerned with the great men of this world, this explanation might be more convincing.

- 3 The ending is ‘incomplete’ because the reader has to take up his own part in completing the story. The book ends with Paul seemingly without opportunity (under house arrest), yet still able to preach, no man forbidding him. We may consider ourselves to be without any great opportunity, ‘bound’ with respect to our abilities or circumstances. The point is this: the Word of God is not bound, and what becomes of it now (in terms of people’s response and in terms of the preaching work) depends upon the reader. The baton is passed on.

- 4 Another idea is that Luke and Acts were written in connection with Paul’s trial before Caesar in Rome; at that very time of composition, Paul is awaiting his hearing, so there is literally no more that Luke can write, for history has not yet revealed the outcome. The suggestion is that the “most excellent” Theophilus (evidently an official of high rank, given the title afforded to him) was to be the counsel for defence in Paul’s trial before Caesar, and that for this he needed a briefing document—a detailed historical account, ordered and sure, which he would use for the basis of his defence. This would include an account not only of the life and work of Paul (which Acts supplies), but also of the much wider net of the whole movement of Christianity from the birth of its founder Jesus Christ himself, and his predecessor John the Baptist (to be found in Luke). It was not just Paul on trial; it was Christianity appearing before Caesar.

The fourth suggestion was originally put forward (as far as I’m aware) in a book called *Paul on Trial* by J. Ironside-Still. I haven’t met many people who agree with him (or even know of his suggestion), but the possibility is of sufficient merit (I think) at least to be considered. The focus upon the Jew-Gentile issue, so prominent in Acts, makes sense in this light. So does the tension between Peter and Paul and the authorities, and the scrupulous handling of the interactions between Paul and the Roman officials. There is, of course, much in Luke and Acts to suggest that they have a wider use than this, but such a theory of the origin of the document would account admirably for Paul’s many defences itemised towards the end of Acts. It is an interesting and thought-provoking suggestion.

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