

THE SPEECHES OF ACTS¹

I. THE EPHESIAN ELDERS AT MILETUS

†Colin. J. Hemer

This speech in Acts 20:17-38² has often been recognized as standing apart from others in the Book of Acts. It is the only one of the larger speeches addressed to a Christian audience, actually of leaders of a church previously founded by Paul, and so likely to be nearer to the pastoral function of Paul's writing in the epistles than any other.³ It therefore offers the best prospect of direct comparison between the Paul of Acts and the Paul of the letters. It is also the only speech embedded in a 'we-passage' account of a public occasion, with the implication that Luke was present, and also beginning to make an explicit and immediate record of his renewed companionship with Paul.⁴

¹As a chapter on the speeches in Acts by the late Dr. C. J. Hemer was not completed prior to his death, the decision was made to publish a general discussion of them in an appendix, 'The Speeches and Miracles in Acts' in his extend work on *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (WUNT 49; Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck] 1989; hereinafter *The Book of Acts*). As he had already researched two of these speeches viz. the Ephesian Elders at Miletus and the Areopagus address it was felt they would be best published with minimal editing of his initial draft in successive issues of the Tyndale Bulletin. Ed.

²Most recently see C K. Barrett, 'Paul's Address to the Ephesian Elders', in J. Jervell and W. A. Meeks (edd.), *God's Christ and His People, Studies in Honour of Nils Alstrup Dahl* (Oslo, Bergen, Tromsø: Universitetsforlaget 1977) 107-21. For a valuable survey of recent discussion of this speech see J. Lambrecht, 'Paul's Farewell-Address at Miletus, Acts 20, 17-38', in J. Kremer (ed.), *Les Actes des Apôtres: Traditions, rédactions, théologie* (Gembloux, Leuven University Press 1979) 30-37.

³Lambrecht, *op. cit.* 314 observes that 'all recent authors' discussed try to 'explain the Lucan ideas and concerns (or of the Lukan Paul)', and that the discourse is important 'as a witness to the way in which Luke endeavours to represent his own time as in continuity with that of Paul (and the apostles)'. This raises the underlying question whether in fact it is significantly removed in time: see discussion below.

⁴For a discussion of importance of the 'we passages' see 'Authorship and Sources', *The Book of Acts* ch. 8. Cf. F. F. Bruce, 'Is the Paul of Acts the Real Paul', *BJRL* 58 (1975) 304, 'I once suggested that he [Luke] might even have taken shorthand notes—a suggestion so preposterous to the mind of one distinguished commentator on Acts that, when he quotes it, he adds a

Literary Questions

The two evident questions are of genre and of the structure and purpose of the speech. The genre issue assumes a special importance in view of its place in Dibelius' argument.⁵ As this is Paul's last public address before his imprisonment it partakes of the character of a will or testament, comprising retrospect and provision for the future. The speech is thus a 'biographical encomium',⁶ or an *Abschiedsrede*.⁷ The abjuration of responsibility, which seems artificial to a modern reader, is thus explained; it 'obviously belongs' to the style of the speech.⁸ This recurring self-justification would be strange if addressed only to the Ephesian elders, but the whole is aimed at a wider audience, and is a carefully planned structure where every paragraph ends with reference to Paul's example. Yet the only specific parallel which Dibelius offers for the literary form is from Lucian, *Peregrinus* 32.⁹ Whatever the merit of Dibelius' explanation, this parallel will not help us, for the analogy fails at the two crucial points: *Peregrinus* is a tasteless self-exhibitionist, whose practice is anything but a norm, who delivers a funeral oration upon himself before self-immolation. But the argument requires the critic to show the creation of a speech by a biographer as reflecting a normal practice. No doubt Dibelius' case could be put better than he

parenthetical exclamation mark as the only adequate expression of his astonishment', referring to his *The Acts of the Apostles*, (London, Tyndale Press 1951) 377 and E. Haenchen's comment in *The Acts of the Apostles* (ET; Oxford, B. Blackwell, 1971) 590. The two writers are separated, not by any argued difference in the treatment of evidence, but by an incompatibility of outlook which Haenchen does not address.

⁵ M. Dibelius, 'The Speeches in Acts and Ancient Historiography', *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (ET; London, SCM 1956) 164 see this as one of the four important turning points in Acts, viz. Paul's departure from the mission where Luke 'adds speeches to his account to illuminate the significance of the occasion'.

⁶ It is 'an encomium of the kind that biographies are wont to give to their heroes' according to Dibelius, *op. cit.* 155.

⁷ H.-J. Michel, *Die Abschiedsrede des Paulus an die Kirche. Apg 20, 17-38. Motivgeschichte und theologische Bedeutung*, (SANT 35; München, Kösel-Verlag 1973).

⁸ Dibelius, *op. cit.* 156.

⁹ Dibelius, *op. cit.* 155 n. 42.

puts it, and better parallels could be found.¹⁰ Whether this exercise is very profitable is uncertain, for the validity of the comparison is the very thing at stake. The term 'biographical encomium' itself begs the question. It is a presuppositional, not an argued statement of literary relationships. The mere statement provides no ground for discriminating between this and alternative explanations, of which the simplest is that the emotional farewell, the introspective retrospect, and the admonitions for the future were the natural reflection of a real situation. There is of course no reason to doubt that Luke saw that occasion as deeply significant, that it passed through the sieve of his redactional selectivity and functions in his overall purpose, and so reaches a wider audience. But none of that detracts from the option that this is a report of Paul speaking on a real and emotional occasion.¹¹

It may be argued that the speech is very carefully structured to bring out motifs intended by Luke irrespective of Paul's perspective. There are several obvious considerations here. There is some measure of agreement that the speech seems loosely structured but proves on analysis to be much more formalised,¹² but the question remains whether the essential structure is to be attributed to Luke or to Paul, or whether a Luka précis has in the very process of summarizing formalized the shape while preserving the content of a more discursive Pauline original.¹³

Then there is the curious factor that, while several scholars have focused on the question of structure, they have

¹⁰ Such parallels might be sought in Plutarch, in something like Croesus' confession to Cyrus, *Solon* 28.3-4. But the parallels are not at all close, and in this case the incident arises from traditional material (cf. Hdt. 1.86).

¹¹ There is an ambivalence here in the function of speaking of genre. In a weak sense of the term it may be innocuous to call this a 'farewell speech' or the like, when that is an apt description and may be illustrated elsewhere. But as soon as genre is given a stronger significance, as of a rigid type which exercises control upon the content and character of its examples, it ceases to be a useful classification and becomes a breeding-ground of fallacies induced from outside.

¹² Thus e.g. C. Exum and C. Talbert, 'The Structure of Paul's Speech to the Ephesian Elders (Acts 20, 18-35)', *CBQ* 29 (1967) 233-6 (233). See further Lambrecht, *op. cit.* 314-18 and Dibelius, *op. cit.* 157.

¹³ On the speeches as précis see *The Book of Acts* 418 ff.

offered oddly different conclusions.¹⁴ Further, when they relate their different conceptions of structure to the attempt to highlight what they take to be the centrepiece or climax of Luke's own thrust, they find different key-motifs in different places in the speech.¹⁵ Such a brief survey will serve to underline one point, that there is not a simple, scientifically verifiable kind of agreed answer on this ground, to serve as an effective catalyst of opinion.

One point, however, requires special treatment, the significance of the farewell and its implication that these friends will see Paul's face no more, Acts 20:25. This issue has already been discussed from a different aspect, that of the dating of the book and Luke's perspective at his time of writing.¹⁶ It may then be the more briefly handled here.

Alternative reconstructions here are apt to be more or less systematically exclusive. If Luke actually wrote before Paul's death, and even perhaps penned this section before the outcome of his trial, the assumptions of some influential literary studies are excluded. If conversely the speech is indeed subsequent to Paul's death and attempts to justify Paulinism or claim Pauline sanction in controversies of a later Lukan church situation, our view is excluded in its turn.

¹⁴ Thus Dibelius, *op. cit.* 157 divides the speech into four paragraphs, each ending with reference to the apostle's example. Exum and Talbert, *op. cit.* 235 offer an elaborate chiasmic structure, concluding with the judgement that Dibelius' arrangement gives the wrong emphasis, and thus obscures the central point of the speech, 236 n. 23. Michel, *op. cit.* 27 points to a fourfold parallelism between Acts 20:18-24 and 20:28-35, leaving 20:25-7 as the focal culmination of the speech. Lambrecht, *op. cit.* 318 finds two main divisions, with a chiasmic arrangement of three smaller units within each. These, and their like, are mutually incompatible.

¹⁵ In this way different understandings of the speech are apt to follow very directly from judgements of structure. Thus Dibelius, *op. cit.*, 157 is led to emphasise the apostle's example, while Exum and Talbert, *op. cit.*, 236 reject this very explicitly as a misunderstanding in favour of a central culmination at 20:25: they shall see his face no more (cf. 20:38). For Lambrecht, *op. cit.* 318 the primary purpose is exhortation. For Michel, *op. cit.* 27, 20:25-27 is the culminating point. I think there is no solid ground here. I take the speech to be abbreviated, and no doubt somewhat formalised, even unconsciously, in the process. But it contains several motifs, for Paul (and Luke) expected this to be a last farewell, and he had much to say urgently.

¹⁶ The Date of Acts, *The Book of Acts* ch. 9.

There is then a delicate matter of the balance of the question. It is one where nobody is likely to convince easily somebody already committed to a contrary approach. It must suffice to make a reasonable case for the plausibility of taking the speech as what it purports to be. Any alternative may be hard to disprove, but it may be questioned whether there was ever occasion for it in the first place. The most that is needed, or possible, is to question the relative plausibility of alternative explanations.

The motifs of this speech, the Pauline's self-justification and future prospect, and the emotional farewell, may be as well or better explained in the natural Pauline situation. The literary form is after all a very natural one, and the difficulty in paralleling it as an example of a genre in the stronger sense may be itself a ground of caution. The speaker's apologetic and abjuration of responsibility is natural to Paul's circumstances. The dramatic date of this scene falls very soon after the prolonged Corinthian controversy, persisting through and beyond the Ephesian residence, when Paul's credentials had been under fundamental attack. The speaker may be thought lightly-stung and overemotional in his insistent self-defence. But such was Paul, as we know him from 2 Cor 10-12, and the Ephesians had been close to the occasion of that conflict. Further, Paul had earlier experience of persistent and indictive enemies dogging his steps, cf. Galatians 1:6-7 with Acts 20:29. His 'departure' might of course be taken as a euphemism for his death, but in this context there seems no reason why it should be, apart from the assumption that the whole scene anticipates his death.¹⁷ On Luke's own showing, the climax of Paul's trial was still some years distant, and the

¹⁷ The word ἄφιξις poses a further question against this interpretation. Such a metaphorical sense might more easily be attached to a term like ἔξοδος (thus in Lk 9:31). I suggest upon reflection that the best rendering of ἄφιξις here might be 'visit', which does more justice to its natural meaning 'coming' without affecting the appropriateness of the warning against opponents following the end of that sojourn. The lexica do not seem to offer any specific support for this rendering. It may however be observed that neither of the cases quoted from Josephus, *Ant* 2.2.4.18; 4.8.47 is clear support for the meaning 'departure', though that may be a necessary rendering, for both are used with reference to a *destination* (ἐκεῖσε πρὸς ἐκείνου), and the rendering is rather a matter of perspective than semantics.

point of the warning would then be made to relate to an indefinite future rather than being concrete counsel appropriate to an immediate danger. The generalised form of reference suits well enough personal antagonism and sectarian conflict, within and without, attacking a Pauline balance from different sides. There is no reason to read into the case any specifically identifiable false teaching, still less for attempting to date a Lukan *Sitz-im-Leben* from it.

The Paulinism of the Speech

Important Pauline linguistic, biographical and theological features in this speech have been discussed elsewhere.¹⁸ Further observations are therefore directed to drawing together the strands of that discussion to assist in the assessment of Pauline parallels.

Something needs to be said of the *alogon* of Acts 20:35. A preliminary question is raised of its genuineness as a saying of Jesus, for it has no parallel in the Gospels. Haenchen takes it as a Greek proverb placed by Luke in the mouth of Jesus in a section otherwise 'loosely composed', supporting this from parallels with similar sayings in Greek literature.¹⁹ The sentiment is likely to be quite a widespread one, but the forms of these similar sayings are not close, save at Thucydides 3.97.4. For that matter similar sentiments are found also in Judaism and early Christianity, and the like spirit in passages of the Gospels themselves.²⁰ Such a statement might be deemed to fall foul of the 'criterion of dissimilarity', but the argument here may as plausibly proceed to a reversal of that in favour of 'coherence'.²¹ From a different aspect, the very oddity

¹⁸ For a discussion of these linguistic, biographical and theological characteristics see *The Book of Acts* 425-6.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.* 595 n 5. Cf. also K. Lake and H. J. Cadbury, *The Acts of the Apostles*, *The Beginnings of Christianity* IV (London, Macmillan and Co. 1933) 264.

²⁰ Haenchen, *op. cit.*, 594 n. 5 stresses that a Jewish parallel is not known, but cites Ecclus. 4:31 for a somewhat similar saying about the greedy man. Cf. in early Christianity *Didache* 1.5; 4.5; 1 Clem 2.1. From the Gospels, Bruce, *Acts*, 383, cites Lk 6:38; 11:9; Jn 13:34. Perhaps only the first of these is at all near in actual sentiment.

²¹ In the case of such an isolated saying, coherence with a concept of Jesus derived from other sources is rather an authenticating point than otherwise,

in the appearance here of an otherwise unknown saying, and the reverential manner of its introduction, may be held to bespeak its authority.

The citation then prompts diverse reflections. If this is of Pauline substance, how does it square with the common assumption that Paul was not interested in the historical Jesus? But I believe Paul was interested in the historical Jesus: the relative, and only relative, limitation of this perspective in the evidence of the Epistles is quite simply due to their nature as occasional documents, which presuppose this stratum of his initial teaching.²² A complementary question is why Luke should choose to insert here a saying absent from his Gospel. The ostensible answer is that Paul actually cited it at Miletus. There is no difficulty to my mind in the assumption that both Paul and Luke were aware of more Jesus-tradition than we have preserved in our Gospels; indeed, if my arguments for Luke's early date and privileged access are justified, this seems assured. He had some facility to select contextually controlled material from within a wider range of tradition. And if the Lukan Paul, like the Paul of the Epistles, cited pagan poets in a Gentile gathering, is it so strange that he cited words of Jesus to Christian colleagues?

It might be argued that the absence of this saying from the Gospel has some further light to shed on Luke's method, and so to fix our focus again on Luke rather than Paul. If so, it is hard to specify exactly what that light is. Luke is shown, no doubt, to have been less than exhaustive in his Gospel, but I have never supposed he was. It might be argued that he used the speech to work in a logion he had discovered later, or which came to him without ascertainable context, but such a practice seems alien to his method. One may as readily

and Haenchen, *op. cit.* 594-5 n. 5 himself uses Greek parallels in just this way in suggesting a Greek origin. The sentiment is however unlikely to recur, and the Greek expressions are not so stereotyped or so verbally alike as to further the proverb theory. It is likely enough that Jesus' actual sayings included many thoughts akin to popular Jewish or Greek wisdom, without that possibility invalidating the fact that his particular use and expression of them were treasured as his by his disciples.

²² On Paul and the Historical Jesus cf. R. V. G. Tasker, 'St Paul and the Earthly Life of Jesus', *ExpT* 46 (1934-5) 557-62; D. M. Stanley, 'Pauline Allusions to the Sayings of Jesus', *CBQ* 23(1961) 26-39.

speculate that Luke picked up with special interest Paul's actual citation of a distinctive saying which had not previously reached him through the digest preserved in Synoptic tradition, or from his independent inquiry. It is not clear otherwise what purpose the saying serves for Luke's redactional concerns, and the commentaries do not help much.²³ If however we refer it to Paul's ostensible situation, a different possibility may merit mention. It is a commonplace that Acts never mentions the 'Collection', though we have argued that the occasion of its delivery is implicit in this section of Acts, and the likely delegates of the churches are named in Acts 20:4.²⁴ Paul, then, was actually travelling in possession of a large sum in voluntary contributions, and vulnerable to the particular line of slander which affected to doubt his integrity when his pockets were filled at the expense of his churches. A gift for Jerusalem may not have had the profound significance for Gentile Christian sentiment which it had in Paul's strategic vision. A breath of pursuing slander would stress the need and sharpen the edge of Paul's words in 20:33-35.²⁵

There are two ways in which advocates of Lukan creativity attempt to handle the ostensible Paulinisms of the speech. Either, like Michel, they may deny the Paulinisms absolutely, by saying that Pauline words and phrases are used for radically un-Pauline conceptions, or, like most other scholars in this group, they may say that Luke is here imitating Paul, and has partly succeeded.²⁶ This debate must further be seen against a complementary issue, less prominent in the present instance, for many infer a Lukan character of the speeches from the similarities in the (other) speeches attributed to such apparently diverse personalities as Paul and Peter. If the Lukan Paul is so like the Lukan Peter, are not both perhaps just Luke *tout simple*? There is of course a double edge to this kind of argument in either direction. On one side the Pauline characteristics here are taken to argue in Luke some

²³ E.g. Haenchen, *op. cit.* 597-8.

²⁴ Hemer, *The Book of Acts* 187ff.

²⁵ Admittedly this is no more than conjecture.

²⁶ Cf. Lambrecht 319-23. Haenchen, *op. cit.* 590 believes that Dibelius 'finally proved the speech to be Luke's work'.

success in imitating distinctively Pauline language and thought. But this factor might be enlisted with better justification on the other side, that Pauline distinctives are really Pauline. On the opposite front, the continuities between Luke's representations of Paul and Peter may testify rather to an actual underlying harmony in the teachings of the two apostles. In the present case, let us be content at the moment with saying that there seem to be real Paulinisms here, in a context nearer than elsewhere to the purpose and audience of the Epistles, and the natural force of that observation ought not to be underplayed. We are not concerned to deny Luke's editing or Luke's technique of abbreviation, but may suggest that the parts of speaker and eyewitness recorder fell so close together from the outset that there is little scope for the attempt to separate their contributions.