

PAUL'S OBSERVANCE OF THE SABBATH IN ACTS OF THE APOSTLES AS A MARKER OF CONTINUITY BETWEEN JUDAISM AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY

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The author of the book *Acts of the Apostles*¹ makes six direct references to Paul and his colleagues visiting a synagogue or a place of prayer on the Sabbath during their missionary journeys (Antioch of Pisidia: Acts 13:14, 42, 44; Philippi: 16:13; Thessalonica: 17:2; Corinth: 18:4). Traditionally these references have been interpreted primarily as a mission strategy used by Paul to win converts from the local Jewish communities. Paul went to synagogues on Sabbath as a matter of expediency. The fact that Paul himself may be observing the Sabbath, as his Jewish faith requires, is minimized if not avoided. Recent New Testament scholarship, however, has attempted to underline and rediscover Paul's Jewish heritage and tends to highlight some continuity between first-century Judaism and early Christianity. To what extent can these references to Paul's visits to synagogues on Sabbath affirm continuity between Judaism and early Christianity? Are these references indicative of Luke's intention to describe Paul's personal observance of the Sabbath?

This paper will review how these references to Sabbath are interpreted in recent commentaries (published in the last fifteen years or so) to see how commentators acknowledge this aspect of Paul's Jewish heritage. Attention will also be given to the reference to a gathering on the evening of the first day of the week in Acts 20:7. Through the years, commentators have approached this aspect of Luke's narrative in various ways and no attempt has been made to survey how they have interpreted these references to Sabbath. It is my conclusion that in recent years more commentators, but not many, are willing to acknowledge Paul's Jewish heritage and that he himself worshiped in synagogues on Sabbath. There is a developing trend in recent commentaries

¹This paper will not address issues of authorship and dating of the book of Acts. I am aware of objections to the traditional opinion that Luke, a disciple and colleague of Paul, wrote this book in the first century. Luke's picture of Paul has enough divergence from the Paul of the Pauline epistles that scholarly opinion varies greatly about the reliability of the narrative in the book of Acts. Be that as it may, in this paper, I will take Luke's narrative for what it says, that he had a personal knowledge of Paul's activities, and I will attempt to synthesize current scholarly opinion about references to Paul's visits to synagogues on Sabbath. The author's intended audience is also a matter of discussion, although in more recent times, scholarly opinion leans toward the likelihood that Luke may have had a Jewish audience in mind. I concur with this tendency.

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on the book of Acts that embraces these references to Sabbath as a genuine indication of continuity between Judaism and early Christianity, that Luke depicts Paul both as the apostle to the Gentiles and a practicing and faithful Jew, albeit one who claimed to belong to a new sect within Judaism and who maintained that Gentiles did not need to conform to all aspects of Jewish religious practices in order to be accepted by the God of Israel.

Markers of Continuity with Judaism in the Book of Acts

Few commentators acknowledge that Luke's references to Sabbath are part of a wider context in Acts that should be considered more carefully. Whether intentionally or not, Luke gives his readers numerous markers of continuity with Judaism. While many see evidence of markers of a new Christian identity in the New Testament, particularly when it comes to Pauline studies, our cultural and religious distance from first-century Judaism and early Christianity prevents us at times from seeing markers in other parts of the New Testament. Many people have often assumed that on the evening of the Resurrection, and thereafter, Jesus' followers began to keep Sunday as a day of rest, abolished or rejected observance of the Sabbath and other Jewish holy days, and ate freely of unclean and defiled foods. A more careful contextual and cultural reading of Acts gives a different picture of early Christianity in continuity with first-century Judaism and provides a better context to understand these references to Sabbath. To set the context for Luke's references to visits to synagogues on Sabbath, and how commentators have interpreted them, I'll start with a brief survey of some of these markers of continuity with Judaism.

The narrative begins with the ascension of Jesus. In a passing comment, the author indicates that the ascension occurred on the Mount of Olives, "a Sabbath day's journey" from Jerusalem (1:12).² The two most recent commentaries have briefly addressed this reference to Sabbath. Craig Keener assumes a positive answer to his question, "Should we infer from Luke's mention of the Sabbath day's journey that his ideal audience continued to keep the Sabbath?"³ On the other hand, Eckhard Schnabel does not think so: "This passage does not allow any inferences concerning the views of the early church regarding Sabbath observance."⁴ I think Keener's question aims in the right direction and this reference cannot be dismissed as insignificant. How could this reference be understood by someone who was not a Jew or at least somehow acquainted with Judaism? And why refer to this distance from

²All references are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*.

³Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 1:737.

⁴Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 82. He finds support for his opinion in Max M. B. Turner, "The Sabbath, Sunday, and the Law in Luke/Acts," ed. D. A. Carson, *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 124.

a Jewish perspective? Could it be that not only is the intended reader familiar with the distance referred to but may be aware of the restriction as well? This I believe begins to set the context for the author's many other references to Jewish religious practices.

Luke tells us that the early followers of Jesus were in Jerusalem at the time of the Pentecost experience and used the Temple precincts as their gathering place. It is likely that Pentecost and Peter's sermon happened in the Temple or near it, in a place large enough for hundreds of people to listen to him. Following this first explosive surge of new believers, we are told that these believers along with the apostles met regularly in the Temple (2:46). References to the Temple continue to be made with the healing of the lame man as Peter and John enter the Temple area through the gate Beautiful (3:2) which leads Peter to preach a second sermon near the portico of Solomon (3:11).

Conflicts with religious leaders in Jerusalem appear regularly. Luke describes two incidents in which all the apostles are jailed for their teaching about Jesus. The first arrest and imprisonment is interrupted by an angel who delivers them during the night and tells them to "go, stand and speak to the people in the Temple," which they do immediately (5:17–21). The second arrest, it appears, comes a few days later. This time the apostles are jailed, flogged, and finally released only to find them again in the Temple where they keep "right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ" (5:40–42). With the Temple being so obviously at the heart of the early Christians' faith and religious devotion, it is hard to imagine them not being faithful Jews, at least it appears that Luke has no intention to give a different impression.

Then Luke relates the putative conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus. Obviously, Luke's narrative gives no indication of Paul converting from one world religion to another. Paul had received permission from leaders in Jerusalem to go to Damascus to arrest any believers in Jesus who might be members of local synagogues (9:2). Those believers in Jesus are Jews. Even the disciple Ananias, who is asked in a vision to find Paul and instruct him in his new mission, is described as a devout Jew—"a man who was devout by the standard of the Law, and well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there" (22:12; cf. 9:13, 14). Soon after this, Paul is said to be preaching about Jesus in the synagogues of Damascus (9:20–22). It appears that Luke is not intending to give any evidence of a break between first-century Judaism and early Christianity, at least not at this point in his narrative. The early Christianity espoused by Ananias and the other believers in Jesus in Damascus appears to still be agreeable with their local Jewish practices.

The story of Peter's strange vision in preparation for his visit to the Roman centurion Cornelius in Caesarea Maritima is also a marker of continuity between Judaism and early Christianity. As Luke tells it, Peter had never eaten any unclean or defiled food up to then. In this regard, Peter had been a faithful Jew and says so in his reply to the voice in the vision, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean" (10:14). James Dunn comments, "Here Luke portrays Peter as the model of the

devout Jew, loyal to the traditions that made his Judaism so distinctive—in this case, the laws of clean and unclean, which marked out the separation of Israel from the other peoples (Lev 20:22–26).⁵ Further details in the narrative tell us that Peter’s interpretation of this dream is to consider all men, including Gentiles, as deserving of the blessing of the gospel of salvation in Jesus and inclusion in the blessings of the covenant with Israel (10:28, 34, 35). This is something he is reprimanded for when he returns to Jerusalem and meets with other believers in Jesus who cannot understand why Peter would defile himself by eating with Gentiles, and in the home of a Roman military leader at that (11:2, 3).

One further marker of continuity is given in passing before the narrative of Paul’s three missionary journeys. Luke tells of another arrest of Peter, this time during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, again an incidental marker of Jewish holy time that both narrator and reader appear to be familiar with. Many other such time markers are given in the narrative of Paul’s three missionary journeys. As Keener comments, “Certainly, Luke can refer to common Jewish festivals such as the Sabbath (twenty-seven times [including the Gospel]), Passover (Acts 12:4; Luke 2:41; 22:1, 7, 8, 11, 13, 15), Pentecost (Acts 2:1; 20:16), and the Day of Atonement (27:9) without explanation, and sometimes he sounds as if Paul observed such festivals with other believers (cf. 20:6; perhaps 20:16), a not implausible scenario historically (cf. 1 Cor 16:8).”⁶ In spite of being branded as someone who neglects Jewish laws, Paul appears to be eager to celebrate Pentecost in Jerusalem at the end of the third missionary journey (Acts 20:16). And what can we say of James’ request of Paul to offer sacrifices of purification at the Temple, since he was defiled by having been in regular contact with Gentiles, and Paul readily acquiescing to this request (21:17–26)? Even toward the end of his narrative, Luke does not distance Paul from a faithful observation of the Law. Luke’s Paul remains a faithful and observant Jew throughout the narrative of his activities.

In Acts 15 Luke relates the events at the council at Jerusalem. While we too quickly assume the discussion centers around the inclusion of Gentile converts into the Christian church, it is obvious that for James and the elders, the question is about how to include them within the covenant people of God. In the end, some guidance in principle is provided by the Prophets (Amos 9:11, 12) and the Torah (Leviticus 17, 18).⁷ Gentiles do not need to become Jews by being circumcised, but they need to respect some specific principles of purity and morality as given in Leviticus. James, as a matter of fact, even implies that these principles should not raise any major objections since they are well-known even to Gentiles because the Law of Moses “is read in the

⁵James D. G. Dunn, *New Testament Theology: An Introduction* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2009), 112.

⁶Keener, 1:737.

⁷These stipulations for Gentile Christians resemble the regulations required of aliens within the community of Israel in Leviticus 17–18, a kind of application of Noahic stipulations as well (Genesis 9:1–7). See Parsons, 215; Schnabel, 641–646.

synagogues every Sabbath” (15:21). Although what James is saying about the reading of the Law in the synagogues on Sabbath is not entirely clear, and commentators vary greatly in their opinions, David Peterson comments that “James implies that there are observant Jews everywhere and that Gentile Christians will know why the requirements of v. 20 are being suggested. . . . It also seems that James expected synagogue worship to go on in every city and that the issue of obedience to the law would not quickly be resolved for Jewish Christians.”⁸ “The long-standing and widespread practice of reading the law and teaching about the law in every synagogue of the Jewish Diaspora should have alerted Gentile Christians to the concerns of faithful Jews.”⁹ Again, the continuity with Judaism is obvious in this discussion and in the conclusion the council arrives at.

In the various trials and conversations that Luke recounts after Paul’s arrest in the Temple, Paul does not distance himself from his Jewish heritage, to the contrary he affirms and claims it. In the Temple, the day he is arrested and saved from the lynching mob he states, “I am a Jew from Tarsus” (21:39; 22:3). Before the Sanhedrin, he claims to be “a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees” (23:6). To governor Felix Luke states that Paul presents himself as a Jew of the sect of the Way who nonetheless believes “everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets” (24:14). And to king Agrippa also Paul describes himself as a Jew in conflict with Jewish leaders, something that Agrippa seems to personally know about (26:3). In the end, Luke tells his readers that for the commander of the Roman garrison in Jerusalem, Claudius Lysias, governors Felix and Festus, and king Agrippa, the conflict between Paul and religious leaders in Jerusalem that opened the way for Paul to go to Rome is about differences of interpretations of Jewish laws and customs (23:26–30; 24:27; 25:14–21; 26:30–32). Clearly, and intentionally, Luke portrays Paul as a Jew, faithful to his faith and heritage.¹⁰

If we are to take Luke’s comments about Paul’s faithfulness to his Jewish faith for what they say, that Paul believes and observes “everything that is in

⁸David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 436. Also arriving at a similar conclusion are: John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary, v. 26 (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1992), 332; Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 507; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Anchor Bible, v. 31 (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 558; Paul W. Walaskay, *Acts*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 147; Bruce Milne, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Focus on the Bible Commentary Series (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2010), 319.

⁹Peterson, 435. Of course, that would be assuming that the Gentiles were previously Jewish proselytes or God-fearers or had previously attended synagogue with their Jewish Christian friends. See also Schnabel, 646.

¹⁰Commenting on Paul’s Nazirite vow and shaving his head in Acts 18:18, Keener observes, “Certainly Luke emphasizes Paul’s personal law-keeping practice more than Paul does in his letters.” Keener, 3:2783. Bock, however, plays down the importance of this vow as a personal “private vow.” Bock, 586.

accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets” (24:14), then it becomes more likely that for Luke Paul’s observance of the Sabbath was genuine, authentic, and not a subterfuge to *convert* Jews to Christianity. For Luke, Paul was a Jew and intended to remain one, albeit as a member of a new sect. Mark Nanos provides a summary of this evidence in the book of Acts and its implication: “Acts emphasizes that Paul remained a Pharisee and practiced Torah and temple sacrifices (cf. Acts 21:23–26), and that Paul advocated observance of appropriate Jewish ritual behavior for non-Jews joining his communities in agreement with the views of the other apostles (i.e., the Apostolic Decree of Acts 15–16), because, notably, his subgroups were part of the larger Jewish communities into which these non-Jews were being included.”¹¹

So given this contextual setting to Paul’s missionary journeys, how have recent commentators interpreted Luke’s references to Paul’s visits to synagogues on Sabbath? Is there a movement toward a greater acknowledgment of Paul’s Jewish heritage? My survey of many recent Bible commentaries on the book of Acts as well as a few recent works on the theology of the New Testament reveals that not many commentators acknowledge Paul’s Jewish heritage or refer to it in their interpretation when it comes to these references to Sabbath. Still, by far, the majority of commentaries continue to interpret these references only as a mission strategy, “to the Jew first” (Romans 1:16).¹²

Paul’s First Missionary Journey (13:4–14:28)

There are three direct references to Paul’s visits to synagogues on Sabbath during the first missionary journey, all three in the context of Paul’s visit at Pisidian Antioch.

But going on from Perga, they arrived at Pisidian Antioch, and on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down (Acts 13:14).

As Paul and Barnabas were going out, the people kept begging that these things might be spoken to them the next Sabbath (Acts 13:42).

The next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of the Lord (Acts 13:44).

Since these three references to Paul and his colleagues visiting the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch on Sabbath are the first ones we encounter in the book of Acts, commentators tend to spend more space on these references than on the later ones. By the time we get to the references in 17:2

¹¹Mark D. Nanos, “A Jewish View,” in *Four Views on the Apostle Paul*, ed. Michael F. Bird (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 174–175; see also 175–177.

¹²One example of this approach: “Contacts with the synagogue . . . were important in Paul’s missionary activity *only* as opportunities to initiate the proclamation of the gospel” (emphasis mine). Arthur G. Patzia, *The Emergence of the Church: Context, Growth, Leadership and Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 187. To be fair, however, Patzia also readily acknowledges the Jewishness and Sabbath observance of early Christianity. Patzia, 41, 187, 212.

and 18:4, most commentators simply omit any comment about Sabbath or visits to the synagogues in these cities.

In his description of Paul's activities in the first two missionary journeys, Luke consistently reports that Paul's custom is to visit the local synagogue when he arrives in a new place.¹³ While only four of these visits are said to be on Sabbath,¹⁴ we can assume at least some of the other ones may have been on Sabbath as well, although the Diaspora synagogue was more than a place of worship and served also as a social gathering place or a school for the Jewish community on other days of the week. However, on other days, it is less likely that proselytes or God-fearing Greeks may have attended these events.¹⁵

This discussion then must involve how Luke portrays Paul's relationship to the synagogue. As John Polhill comments, "If one wished to make contact with the Jewish community in a town, the synagogue was the natural place to begin. It was also the natural place to begin if one wished to share the Christian message. Jesus was the expected Jewish Messiah, and it was natural to share him with 'the Jews first.'"¹⁶ Actually, Paul's usual approach to begin his outreach to people attending the synagogue speaks in favor of his Jewishness, a fact that is recognized by some commentators. Schnabel briefly notes, "the missionaries go to the synagogue . . . the first Sabbath after their arrival in Antioch in order to worship."¹⁷ Paul Walaskay points out also, "As was the custom for Paul and Barnabas, they went to the synagogue on the sabbath day. . . . Certainly these men were competent to comment on the scripture reading: Paul was a respected Pharisaic teacher educated in biblical interpretation in Jerusalem, and Barnabas was a Levite qualified to perform priestly duties in Jerusalem. They would be highly honored guests of the synagogue and the congregation would eagerly wish to hear from them."¹⁸ And Keener concludes that, "any Jewish proclaimers starting in a given community would have begun with the synagogue anyway" and "no place in the Diaspora was better suited for religious discussion with gathered Jews than the synagogues."¹⁹

Some commentators remark on the similarities between Luke's descriptions of Jesus' first public address in Nazareth (Luke 4:16–30) and

¹³Salamis in Cyprus (13:5), Pisidian Antioch (13:14, 43), Iconium (14:1), Thessalonica (17:1), Berea (17:10), Athens (17:17), Corinth (18:4), Ephesus (18:19; 19:8).

¹⁴In Pisidian Antioch (13:14, 43), Philippi (16:13); Thessalonica (17:1, 2); Corinth (18:4).

¹⁵Polhill, 297; Keener, 2:2002.

¹⁶Polhill, 297.

¹⁷Schnabel, 573.

¹⁸Walaskay, 128–129.

¹⁹Keener, 2:2002.

Paul's in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:14–43).²⁰ Is it only an anecdotal fact that both happened on a Sabbath? For most commentators it appears to be so. But in both accounts Luke reveals a familiarity with the order of worship in a synagogue service on the Sabbath: people listening to the reading of the Law and Prophets, followed by an exhortation given by a distinguished guest.²¹ This familiarity seems to be an indication that Luke and early Christians are more than just acquainted with Jewish customs; these customs are their customs as well. While Luke states that Jesus' attending a synagogue on the Sabbath is according to "his custom" (Luke 4:16), this reference is omitted from the Pisidian Antioch account; but Luke gives it later in reference to Paul's visit to the synagogue in Thessalonica (Acts 17:2).

What is noticeable also in this account is the reaction of Jews and God-fearing proselytes after the service (13:42–44). What at first appears to be overwhelming support and acceptance turns into jealousy and persecution on the part of some Jews. The proselyte Greeks, however, continue to rejoice in the message Paul and Barnabas have shared with them. This pattern of visiting the local synagogue, sharing the good news about the Messiah, and arousing joy in the hearts of some Jews and proselyte Greeks and rejection and jealousy in some other Jews, repeats itself over and over in Luke's account of Paul's activities (cf. Acts 14:1–7, 19; 17:5; 18:12). A number of commentators have carefully analyzed this jealousy and its implications for Paul's mission.²²

The positive reception Paul receives from some Jews and proselyte Gentiles causes some of the Jewish leaders to be jealous and oppose him. A power struggle ensues. Some are jealous that he is drawing to his message Gentiles who are then offered entrance into the covenant people of Israel without having to undergo circumcision. The nature of this conflict is the process of admission of Gentiles into God's people. "It is one thing to proclaim the coming of the Messiah to the Jews. It was quite another to maintain that in the Messiah God accepted the Gentiles on an equal basis."²³ As Bradley Chance explains, Luke understands that the salvation of the

²⁰J. Bradley Chance, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary, v. 23 (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007), 214, 228; Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts*, Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 191; M. Dennis Hamm, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The New Collegeville Bible Commentary, New Testament, v. 5 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2005), 63; James Montgomery Boice, *Acts: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), 236; Fitzmyer, 509; Schnabel, 573.

²¹First-century sources provide some details about synagogue services; see Polhill, 297–298; Chance, 214; Keener, 2:2044–2050.

²²James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1996), 182–184; Chance, 222–224; William J. Larkin, Jr., *Acts*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 205; Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 97; Keener, 2:2093–2096.

²³Polhill, 307. See also, Larkin, 204–205; and Bock, 462, 463.

Gentiles has been part of God's plan from the beginning. Preaching the gospel to the Gentiles is not "the mechanical result of Jewish rejection in Antioch, as though God offers the Gentiles the gospel only because the Jews of Antioch rejected it. [...] God does not turn to Gentiles because Jews reject the gospel; Jewish rejection is the secondary cause for the gospel's movement toward the Gentiles."²⁴

James Dunn also explains that Paul is in some sense threatening Jewish identity and hard-won concessions as a recognized religion in the Roman Empire. The Jewish community in Pisidian Antioch appears to be substantial in number and influential in local politics. The same is evident in other cities. In Luke's narrative, "it was not so much Paul's message which caused the offence to the bulk of Antioch's Jews as its surprising appeal to Antioch's wider citizenry. The fear would be of an untried and untested new sect upsetting and undermining the good standing and good relations which the Jewish community had established for itself within the city."²⁵

Thus, as some commentators explain, what Luke is describing is not Paul inviting Jews and Gentiles to form a new religion; rather, he is proclaiming the fulfillment of God's promise of a Messiah and this promise is for both Jews and Gentiles. Seen from this perspective, Paul's visits to synagogues on Sabbath are not merely a strategy to win converts. Paul can be seen as a faithful Jew and observing the Sabbath: at this point in early Christian history, Paul and his colleagues are Jewish believers in Jesus the Messiah and keep the Sabbath.²⁶

Paul's Second Missionary Journey (15:36–18:22)

The other three references to the Sabbath occur in Paul's second missionary journey.

And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled (Acts 16:13).

Now when they had traveled through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And according

²⁴Chance, 223.

²⁵Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 183. Keener also comments, "When Gentiles whom the synagogue had not reached responded now to Paul's message (13:44), apparently because he demanded only faith in Israel's God without full conversion to Jewish culture and ethnicity (13:38–39), much of the synagogue responded with hostility (13:45). Paul then turned to the Gentiles (13:46–47), to the joy of the Gentiles (13:48) and the further annoyance of local Jewish people of influence (13:50)." Keener, 2:2093.

²⁶This fact is readily recognized by some commentators: Georg Strecker, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 289; James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 237–239; Patzia, 212; and suggested by Keener, 1:737.

to Paul's custom, he went to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scripture (Acts 17:1, 2).

And he [Paul] was reasoning in the synagogue [at Corinth] every Sabbath and trying to persuade Jews and Greeks (Acts 18:4).

In Acts 16, Paul and his three colleagues reach the Roman city of Philippi and on the Sabbath seek a place of prayer outside the city walls, likely because there is no synagogue in that city. In contrast to all other references to Sabbath, this one is not directly linked to a synagogue, but simply to a place of prayer where the worship may be more informal.²⁷ The prominence of women in this narrative suggests that the lack of Jewish men in the city may have hampered the formation of a synagogue assembly.²⁸ Most commentators, however, comment briefly that Paul's usual strategy is to reach out to Jews first even if there is no synagogue.²⁹ Few commentators indicate that Paul and his companions are "true to their Jewish identity . . . and in keeping with their typical missionary pattern" in seeking the local worshipping community of Jews on the Sabbath.³⁰

The last two references to visiting a synagogue on Sabbath are barely referred to by most commentators, even though both references suggest that Paul visited these synagogues on a weekly basis for a period of time—"for three Sabbaths" in Thessalonica (17:2) and "every Sabbath" in Corinth (18:4).³¹ The reference to the synagogue in Thessalonica, however, includes Luke's added comment that Paul visited the synagogue "according to his custom"—an allusion to Jesus' identical custom in Luke 4:16. But for those

²⁷The absence of a synagogue in the city may also be explained by the anti-Judaic sentiments held by people of Philippi (Acts 16:20, 21). See Keener, 3:2472–2477.

²⁸See Bock, 533.

²⁹Commentators who offer the strategy interpretation are Larkin, 235; Chance, 283; Keener, 3:2384, 2538–2539; Justo L. González, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 189; Bruce B. Barton et al., *Acts*, Life Application Bible Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1999), 280.

³⁰Parsons, 229; Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, Reading the New Testament Series (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 149. Keener, however, points out "That Paul went to synagogues fits the pattern of his ministry in Acts (13:5, 14; 14:1; 17:10, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8), continuing that of Jesus (Luke 4:44)." Keener, 3:2538.

³¹Very few commentators say something in reference to the Sabbath in Acts 18:4, and for those who do it is the usual context of Paul's missionary strategy: Derek W. H. Thomas, *Acts*, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2011), 513–514; Parson, 251; Barton, 312; C. K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Shorter Commentary* (London: T & T Clark, 2002), 277. In a strange departure from his prior arguments in favor of Paul's Jewishness, Dunn makes this comment: "On the sabbath, however, he focused his energies on the synagogue. . . . Despite the tiredness which such physical labour must have caused (cf. I Cor. 4.11–12; II Cor. 11.27) he did not take the day off, but continued to use the synagogue as the obvious place and platform for his preaching of the word." Dunn, *Acts of the Apostles*, 242.

who comment on this phrase, the custom is a simple reference to Paul's missionary strategy.³² A few commentators, however, indicate that this custom may refer to Paul's Jewish devotional habits. For Dennis Hamm, "When Luke notes that Paul joined the local synagogue community according to 'his usual custom,' he could be referring to Paul's usual missionary strategy. He could as well mean that Paul attended synagogue as his Jewish practice, much as Jesus attended the Nazareth synagogue 'according to his custom' (Luke 4:16)."³³

Paul's Third Missionary Journey (18:23–21:16)

When it comes to Paul's third missionary journey, we find no direct reference to visits to synagogues on the Sabbath but we have two references to the synagogue in Ephesus that deserve some attention. In Acts 18:24–26, we are told that in Ephesus, Priscilla and Aquila, two of Paul's co-workers, met "a Jew named Apollos" who was well educated in the Scriptures and who spoke and taught about Jesus in the synagogue. What is interesting here is that this acquaintance happened in the Ephesus synagogue and in all likelihood on Sabbath. Luke, again in a matter-of-fact style, describes this meeting of Priscilla, Aquilla, and Apollos in the context of the synagogue: Paul's co-workers are also faithful Jews who observe the Sabbath. In fact, Luke describes Apollos as "teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus" without a prior knowledge of Paul and his mission. It seems obvious then that Apollos' purpose for being in the synagogue is not part of Paul's mission to the Jews first, then to the Gentiles if the Jews refuse his gospel. Apollos is a Jew and therefore he attends services in the synagogue.

A little later, Luke states that while in Ephesus Paul "entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God" (19:8). Here also, it appears that this is the same pattern we find in prior references to Paul's visits to a synagogue on Sabbath. If that is the case, although there is no direct reference to a day of the week, these visits also must have happened on Sabbath and can be described as part of Paul's Jewish custom. In that context, other earlier references to visits to synagogues in the first two missionary journeys without a time reference (Acts 13:5; 14:1; 17:10, 17; 18:19) may also likely be happening on Sabbath. The connection between the synagogue and early Christians during Paul's three missionary journeys is indicative of continuity between first-century Judaism and early Christianity. Looking carefully at all this evidence can support the conclusion that for Luke Paul visited the local synagogue not only because he wished to share his faith in the Messiah with fellow Jews, but also because as a Jew he observed the Sabbath.

³²See Boice, 286; González, 197; Peterson, 477.

³³Hamm, 79. See also, Keener, 3:2538–2539. Dunn also concurs: "as with Jesus (Luke 4.16), it was his custom to attend the synagogue on the sabbath anyway, that is, as the appropriate place for a Jew to take part in communal devotions." Dunn, *Acts of the Apostles*, 226.

More intriguing and at the same time more conclusive is the reference to a gathering in Troas in the evening of the first day of the week:

On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them, intending to leave the next day, and he prolonged his message until midnight (Acts 20:7).

Many commentators recognize that the timing of this event is difficult to establish with any degree of certainty. Either the event happened on a Saturday night after the Sabbath if Luke uses Jewish time reckoning, from sunset to sunset—the evening of the first day of the week is our Saturday night,³⁴ or, it happened on Sunday evening if Luke uses Roman time reckoning, from midnight to midnight.³⁵ But if the context I have described so far is any indication of Luke’s pattern regarding time periods and seasons, his repeated use of Jewish time markers tells us this event likely happened on a Saturday night, after a day-long gathering on the Sabbath. A few commentators, note that traditional Sabbath activities in a Diaspora synagogue included day-long sessions during which people argued or reasoned various points of law or doctrines. This type of activity is seen in Luke’s descriptions of Paul’s visits to the synagogues in Thessalonica (Acts 17:2), Corinth (18:4) and Ephesus (19:8). Commenting on Acts 17:2, Malina states, “Such discussions could be day-long affairs that involved a vigorous, even heated exchange of opinions, here specifically about the significance of the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth and God’s plan realized in him.”³⁶ Schnabel also concurs that this type of day-long activity on Sabbath was a normal occurrence and intimates that it is likely what happened when Jewish leaders from the Roman community visited Paul in house arrest in Rome (28:23).³⁷ It is possible, then, that this may be the pattern we see in Acts 20:7. Paul’s desire to speak with the believers in Troas started earlier that Sabbath morning, and lasted well after sunset, into the night of the following day. Far from being a harbinger of a new Christian identity marker, this gathering is the evidence of continuity with Jewish identity. This view is also supported by Alistair Stewart in his study of early Christian leadership and celebration of the Eucharistic meal.³⁸

However, the majority of recent commentators interpret this event as the decisive evidence that early Christians are now beginning to keep Sunday as the new day of worship in distinction from the Jewish Sabbath. Some commentators are effusive with their comments about this gathering. I have

³⁴Among those who favor a Saturday night gathering: Kenneth O. Gangel, *Acts*, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1998), 340; Fitzmyer, 668–669; González, 234; Chance, 366; Walaskay, 186; and Barton, 342.

³⁵Among those who favor a Sunday evening gathering: Larkin, 288; Dunn, *Acts of the Apostles*, 268; Boice, 340; Peterson, 557; Barrett, 306; Bock, 619; Thomas, 567–569; Gangel, 340; and Schnabel, 835.

³⁶Malina, 123.

³⁷Schnabel, 1070–1071.

³⁸Alistair C. Stewart, *The Original Bishops: Office and Order in the First Christian Communities* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 252–253.

found that commentators who say little if anything about Paul's Jewish heritage when it comes to references to Sabbath observance and visits to synagogues are more likely to comment at length on the meaning of this Sunday event as a marker of a new Christian identity in distinction from Judaism.³⁹ In contrast, very few commentators ascribe little or no significance of this gathering.⁴⁰

But if Luke's presentation of Paul's faithful observance of Jewish religious practices is to be taken at face value, it becomes hard to see this gathering as a marker of new identity. In the following decades, as Christians came to intentionally distance themselves more and more from Judaism, for various religious, social, and political reasons that are too many to discuss here,⁴¹ Luke's reference to this gathering on the evening of the first day of the week came to be a marker of Christian identity in distinction from Judaism, but I doubt it was intended to be one in Luke's narrative.⁴² Craig Keener concurs and provides a long analysis of the time and purpose for this event

³⁹Among some of these commentators who *clearly* see this gathering as the herald of the new Lord's Day: Larkin, 288–290; Dunn, *Acts of the Apostles*, 368; Boice, 340–341; Hamm, 93; Thomas, 567–569. On the other hand, some commentators are less emphatic on the nature of this gathering but see some evidence of the new Christian day of worship or the institution of the Eucharist and the Lord's Supper. See Fitzmyer, 668–669; Chance, 366v367; Malina, 144. Justo González sees this event happening on Saturday night as a precursor of vigils second-century Christians would celebrate in honor of the resurrection of Christ. González, 234.

⁴⁰For Peterson the meal shared at this gathering appears to be an ordinary meal during “a very unstructured and informal meeting.” Peterson, 557. C. K. Barrett, for his part, comments, “There is nothing to suggest that this was anything other than a church fellowship meal, accompanied by religious discourse and conversation.” Barrett, 306. Although Walter Schmithals sees hints of Sunday subsequently becoming the Lord's Day in Acts 20:7, he nonetheless concludes that “we cannot show—nor is it very likely—that this custom was first instituted by Paul himself.” Christian Sunday celebrations originated first with gatherings in the marginal times of the day, before the beginning or after the end of the day on Sunday. Walter Schmithals, *The Theology of the First Christians*, trans. O. C. Dean, Jr. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 190–191.

⁴¹See, Samuele Bacchiocchi, *From Sabbath to Sunday: A Historical Investigation of the Rise of Sunday Observance in Early Christianity* (Berrien Springs, MI: Biblical Perspectives, 1977); D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982); Kenneth A. Strand, ed., *The Sabbath in Scripture and History* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1982); Sigve K. Tonstad, *The Last Meaning of the Seventh Day* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2009).

⁴²As commentators downplay the references to the observance of the Sabbath as an identity marker of the early Christian community, and in continuity with its Jewish heritage, it is interesting to note also how they deduce from this gathering in Acts 20:7 principles or elements of Christian worship, overlooking that such elements can also

and believes the event may likely have happened on a Sunday evening.⁴³ Yet, in his opinion, Luke's narratives in the Gospel and Acts never challenge "the timing of the Sabbath but the restrictions against benevolent activity then."⁴⁴ Luke's many "references to the Sabbath . . . make clear that the traditional Sabbath day was not supplanted by a new day so designated; even if we were to argue from complete earliest Christian silence to support the latter, it would render the many explicit references to the former utterly confusing."⁴⁵ Thus, this event in Acts 20 is not a meeting in honor of the resurrection of Christ, "rather, it was just what Luke suggests: a meeting with Paul, who planned to leave the next morning. The text says nothing about Sunday worship (or the lack of it)."⁴⁶

Conclusion

My survey of Luke's references to Paul's visits to synagogues on the Sabbath leads me to conclude that an analysis of what is happening in the book of Acts should acknowledge a genuine continuity between early Christianity and first-century Judaism. More recent commentators are willing to recognize the Jewish character and nature of early Christianity. Thus it is no longer strange to affirm that early Christian believers worshiped on the Sabbath, in the context of the Diaspora synagogue, and that this was according to their custom and reverence for the Law.⁴⁷ For James Dunn, "*It is almost impossible to overemphasize the fact that Christianity began within and as a part of Second Temple Judaism.* Jesus was a Jew. . . . The first Christians were all Jews, including Paul, the most controversial figure for non-Christian Jews."⁴⁸ Some New Testament scholars now recognize this fact, among them Walter Schmithals, Georg Strecker,⁴⁹ and Craig Keener (being the most explicit), but many more do not even mention or note it.

be deduced from Jesus' worship in the synagogue in Nazareth and Paul's worship in Pisidian Antioch and other places in Acts. See Polhill, 418; Boice, 340-341; and Larkin, 289-290.

⁴³Keener, 3:2967.

⁴⁴Keener, 3:2965.

⁴⁵Keener, 3:2966. Keener adds, "The idea that the Sabbath was changed to Sunday is not attested in our earliest sources (the NT documents), though it appears not long afterward and eventually became dominant in the churches of the empire and those they influenced." Keener, 3:2966.

⁴⁶Keener, 3:2967–2968.

⁴⁷See Patzia, 212.

⁴⁸Dunn, *New Testament Theology*, 107.

⁴⁹Walter Schmithals: "in principle Hellenistic Jewish Christians observed the sabbath, yet here it is only a question of the extent of sabbath holiness, not of matters of worship." Schmithals, 195. Georg Strecker, "the church presented itself as 'an eschatological sect within Judaism.' After the experiences of the epiphanies of the risen Jesus and the constituting of early Christian community life associated with these

This acknowledgement should consequently provide a better context for a continued study of Luke's description of the relationship between Jews and early Christians, the relationship of early Christians and the Diaspora synagogue, the context for Paul's witness to Jews, proselytes and Greeks, the conflicts that arose between Paul and some Jews, and the cultural barriers between Judaism and paganism in first-century Roman society. Luke's depictions of the conflicts Paul experienced should no longer be perceived as conflicts between Christianity and Judaism, but between two forms of Judaism—one of them allowing Gentile inclusion into the covenant without undergoing the rite of circumcision. All these insights bring out new possibilities in the study of early Christianity in the context of first-century Second Temple Judaism.

experiences, this cohesion with Judaism was maintained. Thus Christians continued to observe the Sabbath." Strecker, 289.