

CHAPTER I

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES AS A DOCUMENT OF FIRST CENTURY HISTORY

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THE GENERAL RELUCTANCE OF HISTORIANS TO RECOGNIZE THE VALUE OF the Acts of the Apostles as a document of life and society in the mid-first century is a curious phenomenon to be explained only by some deep-seated suspicion of a biblical text. The book begins with the emergence of the Christian Church in Palestine, and traces one movement of its expansion through important tracts of the Empire. The central figure in this historic process was a citizen of Rome, a Jew by birth and heritage, a rabbi by education, a Greek by virtue of his Tarsian environment . . . in a word the first recorded person to combine in himself the three elements of Western European culture. The organization which he shaped and fashioned was destined to confront and ultimately overcome the political power of Rome, and to modify the whole course of history. To weigh the worth of such a genesis and such consequent biography would seem to be an obvious duty of research. To recognize that pages of the record are written with a vigour and a realism hardly to be matched in extant contemporary literature, prescribes no attitude towards the Christian faith. It demands no more than the acceptance of its ancient presence and significance.

Consider in illustration the article on Tarsus in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, by no less a scholar than A. H. M. Jones. In something like one hundred and eighty words the eminent historian outlines the story of Tarsus from its legendary founders to the end of the first century of the Christian era, concluding: "During the first century B.C. Tarsus was the seat of a celebrated philosophic school." Why did Professor Jones not claim two hundred words, and use the final score to say: "Tarsus was the birthplace of Paul who wrote a large part of the New Testament and founded the Gentile Church"?

The same scholar's monumental work on the cities of the eastern provinces¹ betrays a similar hesitation. Paul, the Church, Christianity are not listed in the index. In both the dictionary and his book, Jones describes the Syrian Antioch without mentioning its role as the second capital of the group which was to overrun the Empire. He writes with knowledge and in

¹ A. H. M. Jones, *Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces* (Oxford, 1937).

detail of the ecclesiastical organization of the later Roman world, and the eastern bishoprics command four lines of references in his index. The faith which all bishoprics presuppose lacks description. The same odd reticence marks a fine chapter on Syria. The fourth century is in view when suddenly Professor Jones notes that "Hadrian's attempt to paganize Galilee ultimately failed. It remained a stronghold of Judaism long after Judaea had become Christian, and in the fourth century Tiberias and Diocaesarea were so completely controlled by Jews that no pagan, Samaritan or Christian was allowed to set foot in them." Failing wider knowledge, the reader might search text and notes in vain to discover who these Christians might be. It should in fairness, but hardly in elucidation, be added that Jones' bibliography does full justice to the books and articles of W. M. Ramsay.

The conspiracy of silence is broken here and there with some timidity. Writing on Ephesus in the *OCD*, W. M. Calder notes the vivid light thrown on the story of the city by Acts 19, a theme more generously developed by Charles Seltman in 1957.¹ Writing on Corinth, P. N. Ure manages to confine Christian reference to one word. The city, he says, after its restoration in 44 B.C., was "visited by apostles, emperors . . . Gallic hordes and earthquakes". So much for Gallio on his judgment seat, and the light shed on the cosmopolitan port by the Corinthian epistles. Max Cary, who writes on Philippi, does mention that the colony was "the first city in Europe to hear a Christian missionary".

This almost studied disregard for the evidence of the New Testament by authorities on ancient history, has recently met a strong and refreshing challenge in the Sarum Lectures of 1960-61 by A. N. Sherwin-White.² This historian, writing with all the care, indeed with the distrust of unsupported evidence proper to his profession, is yet prompted to chide the unbalanced scepticism and fanciful theorizing of the New Testament "form critics". His restrained amazement at their gloomy conclusion that "the historical Christ is unknowable and the history of his mission cannot be written", while historians pursue with convincing optimism the truth about the motives and person of Christ's "best-known contemporary", Tiberius Caesar, is a sobering comment on New Testament criticism, both healthy and overdue.³ This of the Gospels, while, says the same authority, "for Acts the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming".

Neglect of the New Testament documents has been the more reprehensible in view of the paucity of alternative sources. In Nero's day no Cicero wrote a running commentary in letters to friends and relatives which sombre fate preserved from tendentious editing. No provincial Pliny consulted a patient Trajan on affairs of local interest and preserved the mutual letter file. It is interesting, in fact, to survey the contemporary

¹ C. Seltman, *Riot in Ephesus* (London, 1958), pp. 25-86.

² A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford, 1963).

³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 187, 188.

literary scene, and to set Luke's narrative in its context. If the book was written in the early sixties of the first century, and this date may be reasonably accepted, there is little surviving of literary or historical significance to rival it. Curiously, the bulk of such surviving work came from Spaniards, a foretaste of what Spain was to contribute to Roman life. A host of senators, a dozen writers, and three emperors, including Trajan and Hadrian, were to come from the Iberian peninsula, a hint perhaps of Paul's foresight when he included a visit to Rome's western bastion in his strategic plan.¹

To list them is no protracted task, if enumeration is confined to those active in Nero's day. Caught like Paul in that evil confluence, and destined like Nero's Christian scapegoats for death, were an uncle and a nephew, both from Spain. Lucius Annaeus Seneca, the most considerable literary figure since Augustus' principate, was born in Corduba about the time of the Nativity, in 5 B.C. He came to Rome as a child, achieved a senatorial career and accumulated wealth, neither of which worldly successes he judged inconsistent with the profession and practice of an austere philosophy. Banished to Corsica in Claudius' day, Seneca endured eight years' exile with scant stoicism, and returned to Rome in A.D. 49 to be the youthful Nero's tutor, a thankless task shared with Burrus, the commandant of the Praetorian Guard. Together they managed the Empire well, and "Nero's Five Years" became a proverb in the provinces for sound government. A discreditable lampoon by which Seneca avenged himself on the dead Claudius can hardly be called literature, but in the early sixties, horrified by Nero's mounting lawlessness, Seneca retired to write his philosophical treatises and "moral letters", works of noble and enduring worth. There is a reference to the Campanian earthquake of 63, and to the great fire at Lyons of 64, and these give some indication of the date of composition. Seneca died in Nero's Terror of 65. He was a tormented man, easy unsympathetically to charge with inconsistency, one who, in happier circumstances, might have been a good man. His life and writing, says E. P. Barker in a hostile assessment, "present a fairly clear-cut picture of neurosis".² Such damage was difficult to escape for those entangled in that troubled and sinister environment. The story of the dialogue between Paul and Seneca is a legend whose invention pays a compliment to the ill-starred Spanish-Roman, for it finds in his sinewy Latin a mind which the apostle would have been glad to explore.

Seneca's nephew, who also died in the aftermath of Calpurnius Piso's clumsy conspiracy of A.D. 65, was Marcus Annaeus Lucanus, the poet. Lucan, as he is familiarly called, was only twenty-six years old, but a precocious writer whose epic on the civil war between Julius Caesar and Pompey survives. It is a considerable monument of Silver Latin,

¹ Rom. 15:24, 28.

² *OCD*, p. 827.

competent, epigrammatic verse which provoked Nero's artistic jealousy. It needed no more to earn a death sentence from that vulgar tyrant, although there is no reason to doubt that Lucan was involved in Piso's plot. The pity is that so salutary a project failed to find better leadership.

Yet another Spaniard was Lucius Junius Columella, who published his book on agriculture about A.D. 60. Columella was born at Gades, and in A.D. 36, the year of Pilate's recall, when the nascent Church was finding its second home in Antioch, he was serving as a tribune with the Sixth Legion in Syria and Cilicia. Retired and middle-aged, a practical farmer at Ardea in Latium, he turned his thoughtful mind to agriculture. While Nero was moving from Seneca's tutelage to youthful tyranny, and events in Britain were heating to the explosion of Boudicca's revolt, Columella was studying the agricultural treatises of Cato, Varro and Vergil, and deploring the importation of foreign corn, absentee landlords, and the decline of Italian farming. His book is brief, dim light on a quieter Italy, and an industrious countryside hardly aware of the tense and dark events in the crowded city.

There was one writer who survived the holocaust which followed the collapse of Piso's conspiracy¹ only to fall a victim, twelve months later, to the crimes of Ofonius Tigellinus, Nero's notorious commander of the household troops. This considerable literary figure and personality was Gaius Petronius, nicknamed Arbiter from his Beau Nash vocation as dictator of elegance in Nero's court. Tacitus devotes two chapters to this voluptuary, an aristocrat not unknown to the modern world from Henryk Sienkiewicz's brilliant portrait in his novel, *Quo Vadis*. Petronius once governed Bithynia with energy and efficiency, but nothing is known of this more reputable activity. He is rather known as the indolent director of the young Nero's pleasures, and as the author of the *Satiricon*, a picaresque novel unlike anything else in Latin Literature. Large fragments survive. They tell of the disreputable doings of three Greek scamps on the Campanian coast. Oddly enough, if a comparison between works so disparate may be hazarded, Petronius' satire, Columella's *De Re Rustica*, and the *Acts of the Apostles* must be bracketed as the only surviving publications of Nero's principate which consistently give some indication of a section of society outside the capital and its dominant minority. Apart from being a storehouse of popular Latin, Petronius' novel shows the common life of that age of money-making and vulgarity, of low crime and shattered morality, among the poor and the undeservedly rich, in the market-place and the slum. The reader becomes aware of the Roman proletariat, of a populace about its petty business and varied carnality, remote from the Palatine and aristocratic voice. It is a world glimpsed briefly in the Pompeian graffiti, or here and there in the Gospel parables. It is also visible in the story which Paul's physician-friend was writing at

¹ The story is told by Tacitus in *Annals* 15:48sqq.

the very time when the Arbiter *Elegantiarum* was amusing himself with the tale of his trio of rascals, of uncultured parvenus, and the underworld of the Italian coast.

Little more can be said in this survey of Luke's contemporaries. Two or three names might, for completeness, be mentioned. The satirist Aulus Persius died in A.D. 62 at the age of twenty-eight years. Over six hundred of his laboured and academic hexameters survive. His satire lacks contact with life. It is imitative and trite. Persius may have been acquainted with Nero, who may be the popular young Alcibiades whom the satirist addresses in his fourth poem, exhorting him to search his soul and scorn the crowd's acclaim.

It was also under Nero that Gaius Plinius Secundus wrote. This diligent man, called the Elder Pliny to distinguish him from the letter writer and future governor of Bithynia, who was his nephew, returned from his soldiering in Germany in A.D. 57. Shrewdly observing the perils of public life, he set about the harmless task of writing a history of Germany, unfortunately lost, and collecting the thousands of facts and fancies which survive in the thirty-six books of his *Natural History*. He had no style, and his work, built out of an industry equal to that of Isaac D'Israeli, tells nothing of life at large. Pliny survived Nero, returned to public life, and became an admiral. He died of cardiac failure and asthma, the victim of his scientific curiosity, when Vesuvius erupted in August A.D. 79. Quintus Asconius Pedianus, who became blind in A.D. 64, and some fragments of whose commentaries on Cicero precariously survive, may have been writing at the same time as Luke. Perhaps Quintus Curtius Rufus was busy on his account of Alexander the Great. The dates are quite uncertain. Silius Italicus, middle-aged at the time, elected to postpone his writing of the longest surviving epic in Latin until he was old. Flavius Josephus, still a priest in Palestine, could foresee neither his Latin name nor literary career in turgid Greek.

Such were Luke's contemporaries of the pen. The closing years of the decade saw the deaths of Paul, Luke and Nero himself, a squalid suicide in suburban Rome. The year 69 saw the ends of the earth march on Rome, and four claimants striving for imperial power. The Beast was "wounded to death", but, to the world's wonder, "healed of its deadly wound".¹ Rome was indeed doomed, slow though the deadly bleeding was, for the legions had the "secret of empire". It was the fatal fact that "an emperor could be made elsewhere than in Rome".⁵

It is a vital period fraught with the issues of the future. Tacitus, his account bisected by the lamentable gap of three years between the surviving books of his *Annals* and his *Histories*, tells the story of Nero's principate in powerful Latin. Tacitus is one of the great stylists of all literature, and

¹ Rev. 13:3-4.

² Tacitus, *Histories* 1:4.

Ronald Syme has brilliantly succeeded in establishing his accuracy and worth as an historian. Nothing, however, can replace the casual and contemporary record, especially the document which reveals the realities of life and society without immediately seeking to do so. Tacitus wrote half a century after the events. So did Suetonius, whose gossiping biography is of much less value. Other surviving history is inconsiderable. And all was Rome-centred, little concerned with provincial or proletarian life. For any touch of common humanity the very dust of history must be sifted, coins scrutinized, tattered papyri pieced together, inscriptions interpreted, and the fragments of the archaeologist's digging considered and assessed. Caesar's household, caught in one New Testament phrase, reveals, for one example, a few facets of its activity in the funerary inscriptions which have survived to find a modern listing.¹

It should therefore be with some sense of excitement and interest that the student of Roman history turns to Acts. If he can do so unimpeded by the perverse speculations of those who have expended too much sceptical ingenuity over the document; if he can come encouraged by some such assurance of the historical competence of the writer as that which, at the beginning of the century, converted W. M. Ramsay from sceptic to champion, he will realize with delight how illuminating a story lies in his hands.

A. N. Sherwin-White has written some enthusiastic pages on the theme.² He stresses the exactitude of the historical framework, the precision of detail of time and place, the feel and tone of provincial city life, seen, not through the eyes of Strabo or Dio of Prusa, but through those of an alert Hellenistic Jew. "Acts," he writes, "takes us on a conducted tour of the Greek and Roman world with detail and narrative so interwoven as to be inseparable." Detail need not here detain us. Since Ramsay's well-known demonstration, Luke's fastidious regard for exactitude in nomenclature, and his sure handling of elusive fact, is sufficiently accepted. "I may fairly claim," wrote Ramsay seventy years ago,

to have entered on this investigation without prejudice in favour of the conclusion which I shall now seek to justify to the reader. On the contrary, I began with a mind unfavourable to it, for the ingenuity and apparent completeness of the Tübingen theory had at one time quite convinced me. It did not then lie in my line of life to investigate the subject minutely; but more recently I found myself brought in contact with the book of Acts as an authority for the topography, antiquities and society of Asia Minor. It was gradually borne in upon me that in various details the narrative showed marvellous truth. In fact, beginning with a fixed idea that the work was essentially a second century composition, and never relying on its evidence as trustworthy for first century conditions, I gradually came to find it a useful ally in some obscure and difficult investigations.³

¹ *CIL* 6; M. P. Charlesworth lists others.

² *Op. cit.*, pp. 120-22.

³ W. M. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (London, 1898), pp. 7-8.

The whole of the chapter is worth reading. Historical criticism has obviously travelled far from the days when F. C. Baur could speak of statements in Acts as "intentional deviations from historical truth". Has any collection of ancient documents been subjected to such emotional denigration as those which form the New Testament?

Ramsay first gave expression to his testimony in the Morgan Lectures of 1894, and the Mansfield College Lectures of 1895.¹ A. N. Sherwin-White's confidence in the book was set forth in the Sarum Lectures of 1960-61. The men of Tübingen would have been horrified to turn the pages. There are classical historians who might open wider eyes . . .

The narrative in fact shows remarkable familiarity with the provincial and juridical situation in the last years of Claudius. An author familiar with the later situation in Cilicia, and the final form of the judicial custom of *forum delicti*, would have avoided the question of Paul's *patria*, or place of origin.

The scene belongs unmistakably to an era which did not survive the age of the Antonines . . . The evidence in Acts not only agrees in general with the civic situation in Asia Minor in the first and early second centuries A.D., but falls into place in the earlier rather than the later phase of the development.

The author of Acts is very well informed about the finer points of municipal institutions at Ephesus.²

The random quotations reveal the drift of the modern historian's conclusions.

There is no need here to list or to review evidence for the reliability and historical significance of Acts which the two scholars quoted, sixty-five years apart, have set out and developed with such careful competence. Luke's detail bears investigation. It may, however, be of some interest to take a wider view, to survey the canvas, as it were, and not, as Ruskin once said might so profitably be done with Turner's oils, examine the quality of the brushwork. We shall look quickly at the picture of life and events at large, as one might do who came fresh to the narrative with some knowledge of the mid-first century, and in quest of closer intimacy.

Glance first at Palestine, where one of the great traumatic events of that century was taking shape. The Great Rebellion, Rome's cruel Vietnam, ranks with the civil war of A.D. 69 as one of the darker experiences of early imperial history. Tacitus has told of the grim struggle in some vivid chapters. Josephus' awkward Greek cannot obscure its horror. But how vivid are the scenes from a tense and heated Palestine, where the coming clash, so precariously avoided in the mad Caligula's day, and inevitable a few years later, is in full and ugly view. One can almost hear the orders in the briefing-room at Caesarea before the alert Lysias marched his cohort up to Jerusalem. Swift, sharp action by his trained riot-squad snatches their

¹ *Op. cit.*, Introduction.

² *Op. cit.*, pp. 57, 85, 87.

victim from the mob's lynching. And, a sinister revelation in a dozen words, the havoc cry which set the crowd roaring, came from Asian Jews who had seen an Ephesian with Paul in the temple. Only a few weeks before Paul had been forced to change his travel plans because of a plot against him hatched by the Achaean Jews. The coherence of international Jewry, expressed and evident in more than one eastern Mediterranean city in the uprisings of both A.D. 66 and 132, is visible in both incidents. A man who openly declared a Roman citizenship was marked down as a renegade, and faced mortal peril all through the cities where Jews were settled, and tides of national consciousness were flowing. Claudius' expulsion of the whole Roman colony in A.D. 49 may have had some valid and weighty reasons in the mind of the ruler who wrote so sternly to the Alexandrian Jews in 42.¹

By the date of Paul's last ill-advised visit to Jerusalem the situation had deteriorated alarmingly. In Palestine itself, order in parts of the countryside must have practically collapsed, when it required an escort of four hundred and seventy men to slip one prisoner by night out of the turbulent city. The seventy cavalymen included in this task-force were no doubt the guard detailed to convey Paul down the exposed and guerrilla-haunted road to the coastal plain. It runs under boulder-strewn slopes, where today the rust-proofed ruin of Israeli jeeps and trucks lies as a reminder of the changeless ways of human strife. The clash between the Jerusalem mob and the garrison which sparked the ghastly war was still six or seven years away, but the darkening stage was clearly set.

The Romans, who were doing all in their power to avoid a confrontation, must by this time have been practically confined to their strong-points and garrison towns. Success in dealing with rural banditry, such as that which Tertullus, no doubt with some justice, mentions in his preamble before Felix, can have been little more than a temporary alleviation of a gravely deteriorating situation. Festus' care to honour a puppet-king, whose selfless efforts to avert disaster were to be demonstrated a few years later, is also a pointer to the anxiety which was mounting in Caesarea. The Romans did too little and too late. It was a fundamental error of frontier and provincial strategy to endeavour to hold so restless and difficult an area with a garrison at Caesarea of only 3,000 men, and the limited authority of procurators. The legate of Syria, who disposed of the nearest legionary force, was too remote for the swift intervention which a crisis might at any time require. Rome's reliance on the able Herod family, who served Rome well for a century, is evident all through Acts and was perhaps an element in the great miscalculation. Perhaps the Empire over-estimated the strength and hold of collaborating elements. It was always a policy to use available instruments of order, and to this end the Romans were prepared to overlook some abuse of authority. Stephen was

¹ London Papyri 1912.

riotously stoned. Saul, with the Sanhedrin behind him, was permitted to arrest and persecute as far as Damascus. All such activity was presumptuous under the rule of those who reserved and sequestered the power of capital punishment. Usurpation was being overlooked, provided that illegal violence was channelled and directed against a proletarian minority on whose goodwill no issue of security depended. Rome could act, as her able officer Lysias demonstrated, with vigour and decisiveness, when a critical situation demanded, and halt the action short of the provocation which precipitated disaster in A.D. 66.

The similarly illuminating Ephesian riot has attracted the attention of both Sherwin-White¹ and Seltman.² Ramsay³ regarded it as a most revealing chapter,

the most instructive picture of society in an ancient city which has come down to us. . . . We are taken direct into the artisan life of Ephesus, and all is so true to common life, and so unlike what would occur to anyone writing at a distance, that the conclusion is inevitable: we have here a picture drawn from nature.

The terse account⁴ reads, says Charles Seltman, who had no sympathy for Paul's puritanical and Christian invasion of the Asian city, "like a modern press report".⁵ It runs, if some attempt be made so to render it, thus:

At this juncture a considerable disturbance arose about Christianity. One Demetrius, a silversmith who made souvenir shrines of Artemis, provided plenty of work for his craftsmen. He gathered them together along with workmen in associated trades, and, addressing them, said: "Men, you are aware that our prosperity depends upon this business, and you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but through almost all of the province, this Paul, by his preaching, has turned away a great host of people telling them, as he does, that you cannot manufacture goods. Not only is our trade in danger of falling into disrepute, but the temple of the great goddess Artemis will cease to be respected, and her majesty, whom all Asia and the civilised world worships, will be heading for destruction." When they heard these words they were filled with rage, and shouted: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians." The whole city was a scene of confusion. They surged with one accord to the theatre. The Macedonians, Gaius and Aristarchus, who had come with Paul, were caught in the moving crowd. Paul wished to face the mob, but the Christians would not allow him; and some of the Asiarchs, who were well-disposed towards him, sent and urged him not to risk an appearance in the theatre. All this time some were shouting one thing, and some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them had no idea why they were all there. Some of the crowd explained it to Alexander, and the Jews put him forward. Alexander, waving his hand for silence, tried to make a speech; but when he was seen to

¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 83-88.

² *Op. cit.*, pp. 73-86.

³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 277-78.

⁴ Acts 19:23-32.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 83. Arnold Toynbee's striking testimony to the vividness of the passage is found in *The Study of History*, X, pp. 138, 139.

be a Jew, all voices merged in a chant which they kept up for two hours: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians." When the city-clerk had quietened the crowd, he addressed them: "Ephesians, what human being is there who does not know that the city of Ephesus is temple-warden of the great Artemis, and the Thing Which Fell from Zeus? These facts are beyond dispute, and it befits you to show restraint and not act recklessly. I say this for you have brought forward these men who are guilty neither in act nor speech of offensive behaviour towards our goddess. If therefore Demetrius and his fellow-tradesmen have a complaint against anyone, courts are set up and there are proconsuls. Let those concerned go to law. If you have any other matters to enquire about, they will be aired in the regular city-meeting. In fact we risk being called to account for today's civil disturbance, there being no valid reason we can give for this uproar." With such words he broke up the assembly.

The facets of life and history which glint in this plain and well-told story are worth examination. The characters stand out – the two Macedonians, recognized as friends of Paul, and hustled down the street on the wave of the moving horde; Paul, cool as ever in a crisis; the provincial custodians of the Caesar-cult, not sorry to see some damage to the religion of Artemis; Alexander, probably a Hellenistic Jew anxious not to be exposed to unpopularity or pogrom because of the conduct of a splintersect. . . . Observe, too, the germs of coming conflict with the proletariat, which Tacitus and Pliny note in their first secular accounts of Christianity. The metrical chant is almost audible, as it takes the place of reason in the collective mind of an eastern mob, which Luke describes with a phrase of classic irony.

Note, too, the sure touch of Luke's plural,¹ which slips like a remembered phrase into his report of the city-official's politic speech. "There are proconsuls," he reminds the promoters of the tumult. See this in the context of the speaker's anxiety over the privileged standing of his city with the watchful imperial authorities, and another of those small convincing marks of historicity emerges. The plural could grammatically be "generalizing"; but it is much more likely to convey a touch of obsequious respect for the two imperial stewards, who, having murdered the proconsul of Asia, M. Junius Silanus, the great-grandson of Augustus, must have been left with the administration of the province on their hands pending the appointment of a successor. The crime was of Agrippina's devising, shortly after Nero's accession in the autumn of A.D. 54. Tacitus takes occasion to make a bald account of it the preamble to his vivid narrative of Nero's principate. The tactful plural in the official's speech could be evidence in a syllable of the aftermath of political assassination.

Ephesus was a sensitive point in the imperial network. There were other corners of the Empire where Rome could afford to overlook some measure of disorder, especially where local and responsible diagnosis could judge its

¹ *Loc. cit.*, v. 38.

incidence as harmless or salutary. Hence the significance of the story of Gallio, Seneca's genial and polished brother, and his judging of the Jewish tumult in Corinth. In that cosmopolitan city the Jewish minority presented no Alexandrian peril, and a magistrate could afford an exhibition of Rome's liberal disregard of other laws than her own. Claudius' edict of expulsion was also a recent memory, and the ghetto, swollen by immigrant malcontents, may have been due for a rebuke. With a breath of anti-semitism in the air, Gallio judged it wise to allow a brief outlet for emotion, as long as it was in full view and under remote control. Corinth was an important centre on a crossroads of commerce, and it required a cool man, sure of support from Rome, to manage a riotous occasion with such skill. Sherwin-White has dealt with the point of legal procedure which the incident illustrates. Its more interesting significance is its demonstration of Rome in action. Her government was a rough-hewn art, at this time, not a science based on text-book rules. The varied incidence of persecution, even in later and more rigidly centralized eras of government, illustrates the survival of some measure of this juridical independence.

Lystra is another illustration of the Empire's working. Popular superstition, based on a local legend of a theophany of Zeus and Hermes, led to an attack on two visitors by a disappointed rout of native Lycaonians. There was no riot-squad to rescue the victims, no city-clerk voiced concern in a popular assembly. No proconsul noted the outbreak of lawlessness with nicely calculated inaction. It was a remote edge of the Empire, a border town with highland territory beyond, where pacification was marked rather by the absence of armed turbulence than by Romanized or Hellenized living. Cicero in Sicilia a century before, Quirinius on the central plateau, half a century earlier, had dealt with back-country banditry by force of arms. "Perils of robbers" formed a traveller's hazard in the rugged peninsula, and it seems clear that Rome did not expect to police its remoter borderlands as effectively as she policed Italy. Edmund Burke once expounded that principle of rule when he urged colonial restraint upon an obdurate and unheeding English government. He said:

Three thousand miles of ocean lie between you and the colonies. No contrivance can prevent the effect of this distance in weakening government. Seas roll, and months pass, between the order and the execution; and the want of a speedy explanation of a single point is enough to defeat a whole system. You have, indeed, winged ministers of vengeance, who carry your bolts in their pounces to the remotest verge of the sea. But there a power steps in that limits the arrogance of raging passions and furious elements, and says 'So far shalt thou go and no farther.' Who are you that should fret and rage, and bite the chains of nature? Nothing worse happens to you than does to all nations who have extensive empire. The Turk cannot govern Egypt and Arabia and Kurdistan as he governs Thrace; nor has he the same dominion in Caria and Algiers.¹

¹ *Causes of Disobedience in the Colonies.*

Rome had discovered that principle of imperial government a millennium and a half before the Turk became a power on the rim of the Inland Sea. Gaston Boissier expounded it in a perceptive book published over sixty years ago:

When Roman rule under the Empire is mentioned, everyone has the notion of an overwhelming despotism, and a suffocating centralisation. Times and places are, in fact, confused. Despotism prevailed only in Rome; centralisation came only later. When Rome had subdued the world she treated it less harshly than is supposed. Pitiless during the struggle, she became merciful after victory, whenever she could without danger. She had too much political sense than to take pleasure in useless severity. In general she asked of conquered peoples no more than the sacrifices necessary to secure her conquest. She left them their customs and religion and played on their vanity – last consolation of the defeated.¹

Acts shows how inventively Rome was able thus to adapt, conform, and accommodate. She accepted the local customs and patterns of power, she used the terminology of time and place. The “politarchs” of Thessalonica, the “praetors” of Philippi, the “first” of Malta, all demonstrations of Luke’s careful reporting, are also an indication of governmental adaptability and indigenous rule. The intelligent use of the Herods, the role of the Asiarchs, the functioning of the Areopagus, are severally illustrations of the same multilateral state craft. Add the procurators and the “free city” leaders in varied action.

The Areopagus merits a final word. Here is a prime example of the statecraft which Boissier noted – “she played on their vanity”. The story of Athens, and Paul’s appearance before the philosophers, is another example of Luke’s superb reporting. The picture of the great Greek city is utterly convincing, the Athens of the afternoon, her glory shorn to a self-conscious preoccupation with the past. The speech, which may be read in exquisite lettering on a bronze plaque fixed to the flank of the Areopagus rock under the magnificence of the temple-crowned Acropolis, contains less than two hundred Greek words. In such brevity Luke caught the feeling of a great oration, the pattern of its argument, its allusive reference and quotation, the form and nature of its subtle persuasiveness, and the uncompromising point of its challenge. The whole report contains only three hundred and seventy words but reveals the city in a flash as a disapproving and ironical eye saw it, and yet the eye of one who had a way of moving to the centre of the stage. Like Socrates, and donning the manner of the Attic Greek, he argued in the market-place. He dismissed the Parthenon with a hand’s sweep, an exhibition as theologically absurd as Ephesus’ Fallen Thing. Hadrian and Herodes Atticus were soon to see the city with different eyes. It required the Christian to see what Thucydides and

¹ G. Boissier, *L’Opposition sous les Césars* (Paris, 1913), p. 29.

Demosthenes would undoubtedly have seen, could they have but returned, the fading glory, fastidious decadence, effete culture.

The story is found in the seventeenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. Simply translated, it runs thus:

While Paul was waiting for his friends in Athens, he was deeply stirred to see the city given over to idols. And so in the synagogue he debated with the Jews and their adherents, and in the market-place every day with any he chanced to meet. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers met him, and some of them said: "What is the purpose of this picker-up of oddments?" And others said: "He appears to be a preacher of foreign deities" – for Paul was preaching Jesus and the Resurrection. So they brought him urgently to the Hill of Ares, saying: "May we know this new teaching of which you speak? For you bring to our hearing matters quite strange to us. And so we want to know what these things mean." (All the Athenians and the strangers residing there spent their leisure in nothing else but talking and hearing about the latest novelty) . . . Paul stood in the middle of the Hill of Ares and said: "Athenians, I observe that in every way you are uncommonly religious, for going about and looking at the objects of your worship, I even found an altar on which was inscribed TO THE UNKNOWN GOD! That which you worship, therefore, in ignorance, I am making known to you. God who made the universe and all that it contains, He, the Lord from all time of the heavens and the earth, does not dwell in temples which hands have made, nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed something, giving, as He does to all, life, and breath, and everything. And He made of one blood every race of men, causing them to dwell upon all the face of the earth, marking out for them their boundaries in time, and their place of habitation, and prompting them to seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and discover Him, though He is not far from any one of us. For in Him we live, and move, and indeed, exist, as some of your own Stoic poets have said: 'For we are also His offspring.' Being therefore, by the nature of things, God's offspring, we ought not to think that the Divine is like gold, or silver, or stone, carved work of man's devising. Well, then, the times of ignorance God overlooked; but now calls on all men everywhere to repent, because He has set a day in which He purposes to judge the world in righteousness, by the Man Whom He has appointed, giving assurance to all men by raising Him from the dead." On hearing of a resurrection of the dead, some scoffed. Others said: "We shall hear you again about this." So Paul came out from their company. But some men remained with him and believed. Among whom was Dionysius a member of the Court of the Hill of Ares, a woman named Damaris, and others along with them.¹

A glimpse so vivid of the great Greek city could be matched only here and there in the writings of Demosthenes and Plato, already four centuries old.

But perhaps it is too easy for the classical historian, preoccupied with the picture of Athens in the early afternoon of Rome, to miss the true historical significance of the remarkable story. Surely the abiding meaning of the

¹ Acts 17:16-34.

chapter, and of all the second half of Acts, is found in the person of a man. Paul was no figure of the afternoon. He was the representative of a world unborn, the prototype of a Europe yet to be.

The strains and stresses which were to destroy the ancient world tug and bend around him – in Jerusalem, where the symbolic shout for Barabbas was moving to sanguinary conclusion; in Ephesus, where the spectre of proletarian persecution was taking a shape soon to walk more widely; in Athens, world-weary and too proud for violence in her rejection; in Corinth where a cultured Roman disdained a moment of history.

The choice which was to confront the Empire was becoming clear, along with the first shadow of the Empire's disastrous mistake, that move to repression and persecution, not commonly her policy, which was to weaken and divide her body when weakness and division were most likely to harm and enervate. Paul had seen the vision of a wider Rome, one which Julius and Vergil had fleetingly apprehended, and he tried to implant in the moribund system the seeds of a new life. With varied inventiveness and supreme audacity, he sought to conquer Rome for Christ.

And failed, yet in that failure demonstrated what could be. He was the first citizen of Europe, if the true European is one who carries in his culture, character and outlook, the threefold heritage of the ancient world. The rabbi of Jerusalem, the Greek of Tarsus, the citizen of Rome; trilingual, participant in three civilizations, interpreter of East to West; Paul, the apostle of Christ, emerges from the record more real than any other personality known to us from his generation. To know him and to understand him is to understand the next nineteen centuries. So meaningful is Acts.