

Paul's Westward Mission in Acts and the Epistles:

Incidental, Deliberate or Prophetic?

Tony Costa, B.A., M.A., PhD (cand)

1. Introduction

The mission of Paul as outlined in the New Testament is described as one of outreach primarily to the Gentiles. While Acts shows Paul initially reaching out to his Jewish brethren following his encounter with the risen Christ, it becomes clear that following the Jewish rejection of Paul's messianic message Paul turns to the Gentiles as his main target audience. In Luke's account of Paul in Acts and in the Pauline letters there is an emphasis placed on Paul's special mission to reach the Gentiles with the gospel message. In Paul's own writings he affirms that he had a special mission to be the "apostle to the Gentiles" (Rom.11:13; Gal.2:2, 7-9) even though he never lost sight of his Jewish identity and the anguish and sorrow he experienced at the overwhelming rejection of Jesus as Messiah by the Jewish nation (Rom. 9:1-5). Moreover, he believed that his outreach to the Gentiles in preaching the gospel to them was one given to him by revelation of Jesus Christ and that such a call was not of human origin (Gal.1:11-12).

It was Paul's conviction that God had set him apart and called him for the express purpose of revealing "his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles" (Gal.1:16).¹ In Acts, the same picture is given. In the call of Paul on the Damascus road as recorded in Acts 9:1-8 (cf. Acts 22:6-11; 26:12-18), the emphasis is made that he has

¹ All biblical references are taken from *The Holy Bible. New Revised Standard Version*. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson,1989) unless otherwise indicated.

been called to bring the name of Christ to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15). In his outreach to the Gentiles, it is interesting that the canvassing movement of Paul as outlined in Acts and his letters is directed predominantly towards the western location along the Mediterranean and finally ending in Paul's imprisonment in Rome. Later according to Christian tradition Paul would be martyred in the imperial city of Rome. This is not to suggest in the least that Paul had not reached out to the eastern environs of Israel but only to stress that Paul had a significant interest in the western outreach climaxing as we shall see in his hope to reach Spain with his gospel message. Paul mentions Spain twice in Romans 15:24, 28.²

2. Paul's Mission

The intent of this short paper is to inquire as to why Paul's outreach and movement as outlined in Acts and the Pauline corpus tended to be more inclined towards the northwest regions of Jerusalem across the Mediterranean and specifically in Rome.³ It seems fair to say that Paul was keenly interested in taking his message to the extremity of the western world of his day.⁴ Perhaps in Paul's mind Spain would have been the western extremity

² Spain only appears twice in the Bible and only in these two passages (Rom. 15:24, 28). The only other source text which mentions Spain is the Apocrypha where it appears only once in 1 Maccabees 8:3, a text which contains a eulogy of the military might of the Romans and how they took control of the land of Spain, a place where there were 'silver and gold mines'. Thus Spain is already seen as a province within the jurisdiction of the Roman Empire in Maccabean times.

³ Luke places Paul at the end of Acts 28 in Rome under house arrest.

⁴ Louw and Nida state that Spain was "a country at the western end of the Mediterranean Sea". Louw-Nida. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd Edition (New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1988), 93. 586. While this geographical designation is readily accepted today, to the ancients before the discovery of the New World, Spain would have been seen as the western end of the known world in the first century.

of the known world of his day.⁵ While there was speculation of inhabitants of the earth dwelling in other parts of the earth, to many this was simple conjecture. Centuries later, the great doctor of the Western church, Augustine (AD 354 – AD 430), would argue against “the fable that there are Antipodes, that is to say, men on the opposite side of the earth... men who walk with their feet opposite ours”.⁶

While this is not to deny that Paul had no interests in moving eastward, there nevertheless appears to be a vested interest in reaching the extremities of the west. In Galatians 2:7-8 Paul states that while he was the apostle to the Gentiles, Peter on the other hand was “the apostle to the circumcised”, i.e., to the Jews. It is interesting that the regions mentioned in 1 Peter 1:1, “Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” were not reached by Paul with the exception of southern Galatia. Acts 16:7 specifically states that Paul wished to reach Bithynia, but was prevented from doing so by “the Spirit of Jesus”.⁷ Were the recipients of the letter of 1 Peter Jewish? The reference in 1:1 to the *diasporas* seems to suggest this since this term was used of Jews living outside the land of Israel and this would substantiate once again the role of Peter as the apostle to the Jews.⁸ There is admittedly a difference of opinion on these questions among scholars as to the readership

⁵ Acts 1:8 outlines that the apostles would be witnesses to Jesus beginning in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and “to the ends of the earth”. Compare Luke 11:31 (cf. Matt. 12:42) where the Queen of Sheba, called the “queen of the South” in the gospel accounts is described as coming from “the ends of the earth” to listen to the wisdom of Solomon. The south here is variously described as southwest Arabia, the eastern part of modern Yemen or according to Josephus possibly a reference to Ethiopia (See Luke 11:31 NET n. 96).

⁶ Augustine. *De Civitate Dei*, Book XVI, Chapter 9 — *Whether We are to Believe in the Antipodes*, translated by Rev. Marcus Dods, D.D.; from the Christian Classics Ethereal Library at Calvin College.

⁷ On this point see Donald Guthrie. *New Testament Introduction*. (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1970), 784, 792-793.

⁸ The reference in 1 Pet.5:13 to Babylon may refer to the actual city in Mesopotamia which contained a significant number of Jews. The Babylonian Talmud attests to the influence which Judaism exerted in Babylon.

audience of 1 Peter, but the technical use of *diasporas* seems to indicate a Jewish readership audience.

Why does Paul seem to focus prominently on the western districts of Asia Minor, Greece and Italy and lastly Spain? Was Rome the limit of Paul's intended outreach to the Gentile world of the first century? It is clear from Romans 15:24, 28 that Paul had intentions to reach Spain if at all possible. There exists Patristic evidence that Paul did in fact reach Spain. Clement of Rome writes thirty years after Paul's death (AD 65-66?), that Paul had in fact gone to the "limits of the Occident [the West]" or to "the extreme limit of the west".⁹ Other Fathers who concurred with Clement of Rome that Paul reached Spain are Cyril of Jerusalem, Epiphanius, Chrysostom and Jerome.¹⁰

3. Paul's Mission in Acts

There are many areas of agreement between Luke's record in Acts regarding Paul specifically in respect to his mission activity and that of the Pauline letters.¹¹ The first area of agreement is that both concur that while Paul had a special mission to the Gentiles, he nevertheless presented the gospel message to the Jews *first*, and then *secondly* to the Gentiles. This appears to have been Paul's *modus operandi* as he himself admits (Rom. 1:16). In the narratives of Paul's preaching mission in Acts he is

⁹ 1 Clement. *Epistles*, 1.5. Clement of Rome maintains that Paul preached both "in the east and west" but states he reached the extreme limit of the west only.

¹⁰ F.L. Cross, ed. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 1029.

¹¹ Werner Georg Kummel. *Introduction to the New Testament*. tr. Howard Clark Kee. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1973), 254.

consistently represented as going to the Jews first, and then subsequently, to the Gentiles. (Acts 9:20-30; 13; 14:1-7; 17:1-15; 18, etc). Even at the end of Acts (28:17-31), while Paul is under house arrest in Rome, he reasons primarily with the Jews, and then afterwards with the Gentiles.

4. Paul's Mission in his Letters

In his letters, Paul reflects the same *modus operandi*. In Rom. 1:16 he states that the gospel is “to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”¹² In 1 Cor. 9:19-23, Paul uses the principle of enculturation or communal identification. He becomes “...all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.” He begins first with the Jews, those “under the law” (vs.20), and then with the Gentiles “those outside the law” (vs.21). However, even though Paul believed that the gospel message was first for the Jews, he nevertheless saw his calling as a special one to the Gentiles as his letters readily attest.

Another area of agreement is the scope and direction of Paul's work among the Gentiles. According to both Acts and the Pauline letters, Paul's outreach was leaned more so towards the Mediterranean region. Why was this western area particularly of interest to Paul? Why did Paul not show an equally invested interest in the far limits of the east such as the region of Mesopotamia? The reason behind this may lie in a number of passages from the Old Testament particularly from the book of Isaiah which may have deeply influenced Paul's spiritual calling and mission work. Two notable passages would

¹² Although Paul uses the word *Helleni* which means “Greek”, this word came to have a wider application to anyone who spoke and adapted Hellenistic culture. In Rom. 1:14, Paul claims that he is under obligation to both *Hellesin* and *Barbarois* ie. Greeks and Barbarians, the latter being a designation for non-Greeks.

be Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6 which constitute part of the “Servant Songs”. In these two passages, the servant of the Lord is said to function as a “light to the nations” or the Gentiles. In Isaiah 49:5-6, the task of the servant is twofold, 1) to bring Jacob/Israel back to God and 2) to proclaim God’s salvation as a light to the nations to the end of the earth. The sequential order given is that of Jacob/Israel first, and then secondly, the Gentile nations. This would appear to agree with Paul’s *modus operandi* as noted above in Rom. 1:16. Did Paul see his mission as a fulfillment of these passages? As mentioned above, Paul operated in the same sequential order, the Jew first, and then the Gentile. There is also a similarity for instance with Isaiah 49:1, 5 “The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me... And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant...” and Paul’s own words in Galatians 1:15, “But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace”.¹³ The passage of Isaiah 49:6 is applied by Luke in Acts 13:47 to confirm Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles. Oddly enough, Paul never refers directly to this passage in his letters, even though he sees his mission as especially germane to the Gentiles.¹⁴

¹³ Jer.1:5 could also equally apply here, ““Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

¹⁴ Paul may be *alluding* to Isa.49:6 in Rom.2:19. In this passage Paul is addressing the Jew who is supposed to be “a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness”. Some commentators have detected an element of sarcasm being used here by Paul. He points to the hypocrisy of those who claim to adhere to the law and yet violate its precepts (2:21-23). He then cites Isa.52:5 and Ezek.36:22 in Rom.2:24 as a charge against his Jewish audience that God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of their hypocrisy. The idea of the Jews being a “guide” to the Gentiles is used in the gospel of Matthew but in a negative and pejorative sense where Jesus denounces the Pharisees as “blind guides” (Matt.15:14; 23:16, 24) It is interesting that Matthew 23:16 is immediately followed by the statement that the scribes and Pharisees will cross sea and land to make one convert and the charge of hypocrisy is also levelled against them by Jesus. (Matt.23:15) This passage (Matt.23:15) at least infers that there was an interest in the first century to proselytize Gentiles to the Jewish faith. Luke also attests the presence of proselytes in Jerusalem during Pentecost (Acts 2:10). The relation between Gentile conversion and the Jews being “guides” to them is clearly insinuated in the Matthean text.

5. Paul and his Western World

What do we make of Paul's *loci operandi*? Both Acts and the Pauline letters show that Paul's outreach stemmed from Jerusalem, up to Antioch, and across the Mediterranean. Why this westward trek? Why were the eastern regions such as Mesopotamia not given the same type of attention? It seems that Paul had a desire as shown in Rom. 15:24, 28 to take his message to the farthest western point of the known world, namely Spain. His desire is to meet with the Christians in Rome, but he earnestly desires to go to Spain as well. In Romans 15:23, Paul asserts that there is "no further place for me in these regions, I desire, as I have for many years, to come to you [Christians in Rome]". Paul has knowledge that the gospel message has already been planted in Rome and thus he sees no need to build on another person's foundation where Christ's name has been made known (Rom. 15:20). Rather, Paul is arguing that he wishes to go where Christ has not been named and he sees Spain as such a place. Whether Paul actually made it to Spain is as we saw above¹⁵ is answered in the affirmative by some Church Fathers. However, this question remains debatable in current New Testament scholarship, but it is generally rejected.¹⁶ The point still remains that Paul did earnestly desire to reach Spain for reasons he felt would fulfill his mission. He comments on the distance of his work and how he had taken the gospel message from Jerusalem all the way as far around as Illyricum

¹⁵ See n. 9 and n.10.

¹⁶ It is possible that *I Clement* was merely reflecting an oral tradition. See Donald Guthrie, J.A. Motyer, A.M. Stibbs, & D.J. Wiseman. *The New Bible Commentary Revised*. Third Ed (Grand Rapids, Michigan : Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1984), 1045.

(Rom.15:19). It is very possible that the Isaiah passages reviewed above may have inspired or confirmed Paul mission to be an apostle to the Gentiles following his calling by the risen Christ. There is another Isaiah passage that may help to explain Paul's interest and desire in reaching Spain, the western limit of Paul's world. The passage that may have influenced Paul may have been Isaiah 66:18-19,

18 For I know their works and their thoughts, and I am coming to gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come and shall see my glory, 19 and I will set a sign among them. From them I will send survivors to the nations, to Tarshish, Put, and Lud—which draw the bow—to Tubal and Javan, to the coastlands far away that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory; and they shall declare my glory among the nations.

The context of this passage refers to the glorious restoration of Jerusalem and the return of the Diaspora Jews from the nations. In addition to the return of the Diaspora, Gentiles will also be admitted into the city of Jerusalem (Isa.66:18, 23). The themes of hope, restoration, and the Gentiles turning and coming to a knowledge of the God of Israel are themes that are also used by Paul in his letters (1 Thess.1:9-10).

The nations mentioned in Isa.66:19 are significant when seen in their contemporary geographical settings. "Put" is Libya, "Lud" is Lydia, in Asia Minor or in North Africa, "Tubal" is also in Asia Minor, and "Javan" is Greece.¹⁷ What is of particular interest in light of this paper is the first land mentioned in the series, "Tarshish". Tarshish is believed to have probably been Tartessus in Spain.¹⁸ If Tarshish

¹⁷ See Isa.66:19 footnote q in *The Holy Bible. The Berkeley Version in Modern English* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1963).

¹⁸ Donald Guthrie, J.A. Motyer, A.M. Stibbs, & D.J. Wiseman. *The New Bible Commentary Revised*. Third Ed (Grand Rapids, Michigan : Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1984), 625.

was understood to be Spain¹⁹, could this passage have influenced Paul in his desire to visit Spain via Rome as he indicated in Romans 15:24, 28 and thereby see his mission as fulfilling the Isaiah prophetic passages? This of course cannot be stated with absolute certainty, but it is at least possible. Did Paul see himself as one of the faithful members of the surviving Jewish remnant who would not only bring the message of salvation to his own people, the Jews, but that he would also go out to the nations, to the Gentiles, to share with them the glory of Yahweh revealed in Jesus? Again, this is speculative, but it is certainly consistent with Paul's mission and outreach to the Gentiles.

6. Summary

Paul's desire to reach Spain via Rome seems to indicate that Paul saw such an aspiration as a mission he wished to achieve. The reasons given as to why he feels he must reach this far western point seems implicit, it is possible as suggested above that Paul may have felt a sense of finality or fulfillment to his Gentile mission if he could reach Spain. It was the last place in his westward trek that still needed to hear the gospel. His desire is made more emphatic in that he hopes the Roman Christians will aid him perhaps financially and prayerfully in his endeavour to reach Spain (Rom. 15:24). While Paul does not cite any Scriptural support for such an endeavour it is possible that the Isaiah passages above may have profoundly influenced him especially Isa. 66:19 with its reference to "Tarshish" which may have been the ancient name for Spain. Thus it would appear that Paul's interest in reaching Spain was to put closure to his mission by planting the gospel

¹⁹ See Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Boston and New York : Houghton Mifflin, 1906), 1076.

there. Behind this Pauline vision may have been the prophetic passages particularly those found in Isaiah that may have served as his impetus. In so doing Paul would have felt that he had indeed completed his calling as the apostle to the Gentiles.

Rev. Tony Costa, B.A., M.A., PhD (cand)
PhD Candidate in New Testament Studies, University of Pretoria, South Africa
Pastor and President of 'Tony Costa Christian Apologetics Ministry'
Ordained Minister