**PAUL OF ACTS AND THE STRATEGIC OF HIS MISSION**

The multifaceted crisis in Europe in the third millennium, which certainly is not only economic, gives Christianity the possibility to evangelize again his gospel. The following lines are concerned with interesting points of Paul’s second missionary journey, as it is described by Luke in *Acts*, which tend to be ignored by readers but they maybe be productive for those who want to function as *ministers of the word* (Luk 1, 2). In the first chapter I focus on the events of this journey which possibly surprised the first listener of the work and in the second on Paul’s adjustment on the special conditions in Athens during his stay in the city.

# The *Surprises* of a JOURNEY towards the end of times

1. The second journey is signified by the apostles’ stormy mobility in the East Mediterranean ring. While the Deuteronomist and the Prophets proclaim the nations’ pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the only temple of Israel where the light rises (Isaiah 60, 1. Zech 14, 7), Acts describe the reverse centrifugal movement from Jerusalem to the nations. The end of this movement is already defined in the introduction of the Acts with the proclamation of the Resurrected Christ: *you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth* (1, 7-8 see Is. 49, 6)[[1]](#footnote-1). ‘Mother Church of Zion’ does not expect the others to fall down in front of her feet. Nevertheless, it is she who radiates her ‘children’ in a globalised world. The whole book of Acts is an application and the development of the punch line in Matthew’s Gospel: *Go therefore and make disciples (!) of all the nations* (28, 28).

2. The occasion to start his missionary journey among the gentiles is given to Paul by the dispute between him and his *mentor* Barnabas (15, 37-39). The reason for this dispute was insignificant: the participation of the *apostate* John Mark in their missionary group which constituted of three persons. Mark has *departed from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work* (15, 38. comp. 13, 13) obviously not only because he was exhausted from the first journey in Cyprus, but probably because he did have objections about the acceptance of the nations in the Ecclesia. It is astonishing that a parallel quarrel is cited by Luke at the beginning of the church’s ‘exodus’ of Jerusalem (Kap. 6). It is the complaint (*γογγυσμὸς* 6, 1) that burst out between *the Hebraic* Jews of the Church of Jerusalem and the *Hellenists* (i.e. Greek speaking Judaeo-Christian from abroad)[[2]](#footnote-2). The problem was not only for the feeding of the widows of the latter, as Luke mentions. There were also deeper reasons[[3]](#footnote-3) for this complaint which relates itself with the attitude towards the law and the temple as it is formulated by Stephan in his very important for the theology of Acts Speech (ch. 7). However, these disputes and the following Stephan’s martyrdom contributed to the Gospel’s spread by the “Hellenists” deacons to the hostile and impure Samaria (8, 4-25). In both cases, the pluralism, the tension and the caused separation did not divide the Church but actually promoted her message in the world. The controversy between Paul and *Cyprian Levit* Barnabas about his *cousin* (Col. 4, 10) led the first also to do the well known great missionary work in the «West». On the other hand, this matter (which is described by an author who in other cases tries to hide other negative happenings in the First Church such as the quarrel between Peter and Paul [Galatians 2:11-14] or the failed end of *the collection for the saints* by Paul [1 Co 16, 1; 2 Cor. 8-10], shows that the conditions within the Church were never idealistic as it is concluded by the first reading of 2, 44-47. Acts’ protagonists, the Apostles Peter and Paul, are neither presented as Supermen nor being identified with the passionless Wise of the Stoics. The work of Ecclesia is finally successful because this is the will of the *known Unknown* who is proclaimed by Areopagus Speech in the heart of the Unity 15, 36-19, 40[[4]](#footnote-4) and the Holy Spirit, the *power from on high* (24, 49).

3.Strangely enough, while Paul was the first who argued against applying the Mosaic Law and especially the circumcision on gentile members, he did circumcise Timothy in the start of his journey *διὰ τοὺς Ἰουδαίους τοὺς ὄντας ἐν τοῖς τόποις ἐκείνοις· ᾔδεισαν γὰρ ἅπαντες ὅτι Ἕλλην ὁ πατὴρ αὐτοῦ ὑπῆρχεν* (16, 3)[[5]](#footnote-5). Consequently, Paul does not even hesitate to denounce himself for matters which are not essential for the preaching of the salvation which in Acts is focused on the Cross and especially the Resurrection. In this context it should be emphasized that the vision of Paul on the way Damascus, which is described three times in Acts (9, 1-19. 22, 6-11. 26, 12-18) because this event has crucial importance for the spread of Christianity in the Mediterranean world, doesn’t mean that he abandons his ethnical identity and the Jewish customs: *At Cenchreae he shaved his head because he had made a (Nazarite) vow* (18, 18. see Num 6). At Jerusalem Paul (who *received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized* by Ananias 9, 18) *took the men, having purified himself along with them, and entered the temple, announcing the completion of the purification days when the offering for each of them would be made* (21, 26). This action leads to his arrest. *Ιn the Sanhedrin he cried out "Brothers,* ***I am*** *a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees! I am being judged because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead*! (23, 6). He considered however these customs not essential for the message of Christianity, which can’t be a “marker” of national identity.

4. Paul, who is an offspring of the cosmopolitan Tarsus, follows a certain strategic during his missionary course (i.e. he visits Mediterranean cities and Roman colonies, which are in central arteries such as Via Egnatia in Macedonia and he always begins preaching from the Synagogueof the Jews). However his scheduling is twice being called off and actually this is happening from his early beginnings. Following the Via Sebaste, he and his two co-workers (Silas and Timotheus) are impeded by the Holy Spirit (16, 6-7) from preaching in Minor Asia (in Ephesus’ area, where Christianity will be flourished) and also in Bithynia where it lived a jewish community. Finally, at the Alexandrian Troas (18 km southern of ancient Troy) the Macedonian (the angel [;] of one folk who has subjugated Jews and provoked the Maccabean revolution[[6]](#footnote-6)) “sends a SOS signal” through his vision (16, 9) and they arrive at Greece (Philippoi).

5. In the end, Christianity, after the adventurous “homeric” journey of the castaway prisoner and Apostle of the Nations via Meliti[[7]](#footnote-7), reaches the eternal city of the West from the East. Moreover, the route having been mapped out was a reverse route from that which Great Alexander’s had followed. The Way (as Christianity was initially called; Acts 9, 2) not only accepts the positives of the globalised empire but also uses the Koine (Hellenistic common language), the “internet” (communication network)[[8]](#footnote-8), and the “European”-Roman citizenship through Paul for the use for totally different targets from those of each Ruler. Instead of origin, education, wisdom, and Tyche that distinguish the great conquerors of the common people, the disciples, the servants of logos (Lk 1, 2 !) possess the Hl. Spirit. It is noteworthy that while the historical works of the Greco-Roman period were prevailed by the genealogies and the battles of nations and generals, about 25% of the total content of the Act is composed of twelve lengthy speeches. Especially Stephen’s Apology (Acts, 7) and Paul's Areopagus Speech (Acts, 17, 23-31) “sweep” the foundations of every religion (Jewish and Greek): temple and sacrifice.

From what is written above it is clear that Luke doesn't actually narrate the *Acts of the Apostles* (as this book was later named). It doesn't expose the parallel lives and the legendary achievements of the two hero-protagonists, Peter (ch. 1-15) and Paul (ch. 16-27), who “conquered” the European continent with their tremendous charisma and work. The Mission is a testimony of the Holy Spirit who follows his own paths and builds the Church transforming the deficits of His deacons to a positive aftermath. Strangely enough Acts have no epilogue. Although the end *of the Acts* of each *Worldruler* is usually written with his death (i.e. the end of Herod; Acts. 12, 2-23), the epilogue of the Acts of Jesus and his Spirit and the testimony of the Word have not been written yet. Every “Theophilus“ is invited to listen to Acts especially at Easter Vigil (when the whole book is read in the Orthodox Church after the Baptism), to join to “the us” of the Church and become a witness and martyr in order to be fulfilled the following prophecy of the Old and New Testament: *so the Lord has commanded us, saying, 'I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'* (13, 47. 28, 28. Isaiah 49, 6).

## Paul’s adjustment: The *example* of Athens

Although the apostle Paul is appreciated as *the First Among the Apostles* who was actually exhausted for the spread of the Gospel, most interpreters consider that the fifteen years he preached his thought and way of expression remained steady and unchanged. Contrastively, Origen has already emphasized in the Prologue of his Commentary on *To the Romans* that the Apostle of the Nations “matured” during his missionary path. In this article, we will observe some of the changes that can be observed in his attitude and his preaching since he set foot on Athens, on the port of Peiraia or Phaliro. This event is described by Luke in the Book of Acts and is without a doubt one of the most striking scenes in the entire narrative (17, 16-33)[[9]](#footnote-9).

1. Most habitants and especially the young nobles of the Roman Empire considered that the coming to the famous city had an “immigration” character. The *κλεινόν ἄστυ* charmed them not because of its present but because of its “classical” past. However, the Jew Paul, who was led to Athens due to the persecution of his compatriots of Thessaloniki against him, not only gets disappointed but he also feels as Jew sacred wrath (*paroxysm* Dt. 9, 7-8. 29, 27. Is. 63, 10-11). This feeling, which also gets intensified due to his loneliness he is living for the first time in his missionary journey, is caused due to the fact that the great City of Wisdom, where Socrates (469–399 B.C.E.) lived and taught, bows to vain things. Despite the beauty of the *statues* (ἀγάλματα < ἀγάλλομαι), for Paul the city is full of *idols* (εἴδωλο = model, ghost, shadow). It is not looking for the actual Being (the one who really exists and acts) but seems to feel pleased *in listening anything new* only for satisfying its curiosity even if this new words are empty in their content. Therefore, when Paul meets the “spiritual atmosphere” of Athens, the reader of *Acts* lives the experience of the meeting of two different worlds[[10]](#footnote-10): *The Jew was asking, “What must I do?” whereas the Greek was asking, “Why must I do that?” [...] The Jew believed in the beauty of holiness whereas the Greek believed in the holiness of beauty* (Abram Leon Sachar[[11]](#footnote-11)).
2. The striking thing in the case of the Pharisee Paul is that his initial paroxysm does not lead him to his excommunication from the “impure world” (comp. *Leave, leave, go out from there!* Is. 52, 11. 2 Cor 6, 17), but it gets transformed to a missionary “zeal” for conveying the Gospel (the good message) to those with no hope (1 Thes 4, 13). The Apostle of the Nations, who announces *the Way* (τὴν ὁδὸν; 9, 2; 19, 23. 24, 22) does not remain static but *passes through* the famous city. The verb *διέρχεται* denotes not only his tour within the city but also “the diving path”. He “dives“ from the deceiving phenomena, the unclean/disgusting idols, into the anxious existential quest *to feel and find* the divine, which the idols express. This move leads him to another sober approach of Greek religiosity, which can be expressed with the words: *διερχόμενος γὰρ καὶ* ***ἀναθεωρῶν*** (= revised) *τὰ σεβάσματα ὑμῶν εὗρον καὶ βωμὸν ἐν ᾧ ἐπεγέγραπτο· Ἀγνώστῳ θεῷ. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions* (i.e. he did not call them idols)*, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD* (Acts 17, 23).

3. Moreover, Paul does not preach in Athens only in Synagogues and exclusively on Saturdays (as he used to) in the other cities of Greek) but he makes discussions daily in the market in the centre/ heart of the city. His speech was directed to an audience of great diversity (philosophers, strangers and people who happened to be there). However, his face is not as radiant as Stephen’s’ before his Apology (6, 8-15) and great signs and wonders (2, 43). Exorcisms and excommunications are not performed in order to charm and silence especially the wise men he is facing (see in contrast *Acts of Phillips* 4 AD).

1. Although possibly the Epicureans call him as σπερμολόγο and the Stoics name him as δαιμονολόγο, the Apostle of the Nations having the cause of the Hermes and the phalluses in the entrance of the Agora and the crossroads in the streets of ancient Athens, does not diminish the immorality of his audience. That happens in Rom. 1-3 where he emphasises that immorality is a result of the alteration of the concept of God, which leads to the outburst of His wrath. It is noteworthy that the ambient “Dionysian” atmosphere, the general corruption of the society and especially of the Athenian society were considered as a sign of decay even from the itinerant gentile preachers such as Apollonius (Philostratus, *Apollonius* 41-42). The only thing that Paul criticizes is the ignorance that abides for many years. However, God forgives even that.
2. Strangely enough, Paul doesn’t take advantage of the fulfilment of the messianic prophesies which were preached centuries ago. He uses something different from what he used to do in his preaching. Alternatively, as a mean for motivating his Speech functions the idolatrous altar of the Unknown God and as evidence of each human’s creation in God’s image is used the passage of his countryman, the popular stoic Aratus (*Phenomena* 5). In his Speech’s introduction we see an attempt to gain his audience (captatio benevolentiae) by praising it for the awe and respect they have for the divine. Therefore, he uses an ambivalent term that is the “δεισιδαίμων” with the meaning of being devout and also superstitious. This bipolarity of terms is applied in his following speech with terms such as *faith, knowledge/ ignorance and repentance*. These terms could not only be interpreted differently from the audience of Paul and that of Acts (as Given[[12]](#footnote-12) states) but also from the different groups audience which was consisted by ordinary Athenians (men and women), philosophers (Stoic and Epicurean who considered the folk religion as δεισιδαιμονία), aristocrats Areopagites and foreigners (most of them were young Romans 'noble').
3. Although the listener is expecting that the main theme of the Speech would be the dedication to Jesus Christ and the Resurrection since this is the “couple” that led Paul to the Hellenic Supreme Court, he is focusing on the *known Unknown*. It is true that one cannot understand the oikonomia/management of salvation that was fulfilled by Jesus Christ for the world if He is alienated (as it is common nowadays) from the “Jewish” God of the Old Testament. Paul’s Speech is based on three negations (vetos): God has no need of a) Temple/ temples and b) treatment/ sacrifices whereas c) we, the humans, who are looking for him/our father in the darkness of our ignorance, must stop idolizing him by creating idols of His in our image and likeness. It is obvious that the main body of the Speech is dominated by (a) the motive of *the human hand* as the main agent in religion and art trying to de*scribe* the divine and (b) verbs which relate themselves with the hypostasis of God who is simultaneously next to each human personally while on the same time he vitalizes and maintains the Universe and especially all human beings independent of tribe, sex or nationality since we all come from the One (that means Adam).
4. Jesus himself and the forefather of the human kind (Adam) are not named at all. While Paul could contrast crucified Jesus (who in John 1, 1 is identified with *Chokma*) with the armed Wisdom, Athena (which was raising against him in Parthenon) or the Logos of Stoics, he refers to Christ as the man (vir) in the Epilogue of his Speech. In this way, the Apostle of the Nations responds to the need of his time for a wise intercessor between God and humans, who will function with the power of God and His Spirit as His ideal-Image. This means he bears the heavy load of mankind’s guilts through his passion (see Plato, *Πολιτεία* ΙΙ 361ε-362α)[[13]](#footnote-13) in order to establish a different type of worship/ relation with God that will be distant from sacrifices and *religio* which often functions as commercial exchange (do ut des = "I give so that you may give").
5. Paul doesn’t describe the true and perfect incarnation of God, which was fulfilled in the right time according to the prophecies (Gal. 4, 4), but still was a scandal for the Greek thought although there were similar narrations about virgin births of divine men (Alexander, Octavian). Also, there is no reference to the unjust passion of the Cross of Jesus although he could parallelize it with the end of Socrates and other figures of the Greek tragedy. Perhaps, all these would be preached after having attracted the interest/ πάθος of his listeners. Paul attempts to do a selective jump from the many years of ignorance (including the golden years of Socrates who inspired all the following philosophical schools) to the future universal Judgement, which will perform on “the **one** Day” the one who is resurrected by the known Unknown. Paulaims at the repentance (*μετάνοια* = change of mind and life attitude) of his listeners hic et nunc (here and now).
6. As soon as Paul preached Resurrection of the dead, his Speech started being interrupted since this hope was inconceivable for the philosophers. The reactions against Paul’s Speech in the Supreme Court of Athens can be categorized to two types: a) taunts; Epicureans considered death as disintegration of the human existence (i.e. *when I live there is no death and when death comes I will not live* **Epicurus** 341 BCE – 270 BCE), and b) postponement *ad calendas graecas[[14]](#footnote-14)* by the Stoics, since they believed that post death existence relates itself with soul and nοt with body (σωματίδιον). The only people who respond to Paul's preaching are (a) Dionysius the Areopagite (matter that proves the persuasion/ πειθώ of his Speech), (b) Damaris and (c) some others with them. There is no reference to establishment of a home church and Paul doesn’t mention something like that in his letters. If Luke had **created** this story on the presence of Paul in Athens, he would have given a solemn tone in the response of the audience to Paul's Areopagus Speech in order to satisfy his target to explain that Christianity is not a *new / empty superstition* but the greatest philo-Sofia. It meets the quests of the philosophical schools that really attempted through the “art of death” to give meaning of life to the world-citizens of the Roman Empire. Paul himself is presented after the Speech to withdraw from the middle of the Supreme Court, to be disappointed from the failure of his adjustment and finally *χωρισθείς* from Athens (18, 1) not only locally but also existentially, to return in Corinth to his old strategy finding shelter near his compatriots Aquila and Priskilla who were also exiled from Rome. The Christianity will take five centuries to be established in Athens.

The abovementioned show that Christianity cannot be formalized since it does not clone his preachers and believers. The preachers in their turn are invited to adjust their logos (without changing the essence of the message, Jesus Christ and his resurrection to their listeners experiencing the path to personal perfection but also failure. The challenge is the known Unknown (God) to be finally glorified in the way he wants through the different "languages"!

1. *The end of the earth* wasn’ t identified with Rome but withSpain/ Gadeira(Rom. 15, 24. 28). See E.E. Ellis, The Ends of the Earth, *Bbr* 1 (1991) 123-132. According to Strabo (3.1.8), *Γάδειρα͵ πορθμῷ στενῷ διειργομένη νῆσος ἀπὸ τῆς Τουρδητανίας͵ διέχουσα τῆς Κάλπης περὶ ἑπτακοσίους καὶ πεντήκοντα σταδίους· οἱ δὲ ὀκτα κοσίους φασίν. ἔστι δ΄ ἡ νῆσος αὕτη τἆλλα μὲν οὐδὲν διαφέρουσα τῶν ἄλλων͵ ἀνδρείᾳ δὲ τῶν ἐνοικούντων τῇ περὶ τὰς ναυτιλίας καὶ φιλίᾳ πρὸς Ρωμαίους τοσαύτην ἐπίδοσιν εἰς πᾶσαν εὐτυχίαν ἔσχεν* ***ὥστε καίπερ ἐσχάτη ἱδρυμένη τῆς γῆς ὀνομαστοτάτη τῶν ἁπασῶν ἐστιν****. ἀλλὰ περὶ μὲν ταύτης ἐροῦμεν͵ ὅταν καὶ περὶ τῶν ἄλλων νήσων λέγωμεν.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Joachim Gnilka, Die Nazarener und der Koran: eine Spurensuche, Freiburg im Breisgau; Basel; Wien: Herder 2007, 37-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ben Witherington II, *The Acts of the Apostle. A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Michi­gan/Cambridge (UK) 1998, 240-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. T. Witulski, „Apologetische Erzählstrategien in der Apostelgeschichte – Ein neuer Blick auf Acts 15,36-19,40“, *Nov.T.* XLVIII (2006) 329-352. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostle* (see Footnote 3) 475-476. Surprisingly the next verse notes the following: *Ὡς διεπορεύοντο τὰς πόλεις, παρεδίδοσαν αὐτοῖς φυλάσσειν* ***τὰ δόγματα τὰ κεκριμένα ὑπὸ τῶν ἀποστόλων*** *καὶ πρεσβυτέρων τῶν ἐν Ἱεροσολύμοις.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See S.S. Despotis, Η Ιεραποστολική περιοδεία του Παύλου στον Ελλαδικό χώρο (Μακεδονία-Αχαΐα - Ασία), Athens 2011, 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. S.S. Despotis, „Die Seefahrtperikope (Apostelgeschichte 27,1-28,10)“ *Orthodoxes Forum* 24:2 (2010) 153-160. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. M. Thompson, The Holy Internet: Communication Between Churches in the First Century Generation, *The Gospel for All Christians:* *Rethinking the Gospel Audiences,* (ed. R. Bauckham; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1998), 49-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See S.S. Despoti, *Ο Απόστολος Παύλος στην Αθήνα*, Athens: Athos 2009 passim for more details. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Tertullian, *Quid ergo Athenis et Hierosolymis* - What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? [*De praescriptione haereticorum*](http://www.tertullian.org/works/de_praescriptione_haereticorum.htm) 7, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. «Η συνάντηση του Ελληνισμού και του Ιουδαϊσμού» *Chronika* [Organ of the Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece] 182 (2002) 3-8, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Mark Given, Not Either/Or but Both/And in Paul’s Areopagus Speech, *Biblical Interpretation* 3,3 (1995) 356-72. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *ὅτι οὕτω διακείμενος ὁ δίκαιος μαστιγώσεται͵ στρεβλώσεται͵ δεδήσεται͵ ἐκκαυθήσεται τὠφθαλμώ͵ τελευτῶν πάντα κακὰ παθὼν ἀνασχινδυλευθήσεται καὶ γνώσεται ὅτι οὐκ εἶναι δίκαιον ἀλλὰ δοκεῖν δεῖ ἐθέλειν (*361.e.3-362.a.3). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. At the Greek calends; that is, never; or when hell freezes over. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)