

THE SAYING ATTRIBUTED TO JESUS IN ACTS 20.35

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1. *Introduction*

The literary background for Paul's farewell speech at Miletus is a much-debated issue. Although the speech is obviously constructed by the author of Acts for the purposes of his narrative, there is reason to believe that it is based on Pauline material.¹ However, Acts has Paul end his speech by quoting a saying of Jesus that is otherwise unknown (Acts 20.35). In this short study, I will discuss its origin and purpose.

There are three main possibilities for the origin of the ostensible saying of Jesus in Acts 20.35. Either it is an authentic saying of Jesus that is quoted, or it was invented entirely by Luke and put in the mouth of Jesus, or it is a Christianized version of a Greek saying, or a combination of these possibilities. Hypothetically, it could also be a quotation of someone else that is incorrectly attributed to Jesus. Regardless of the origin of the saying, it is an integral part of Paul's Miletus speech. Robert O'Toole regards the saying as the climax of the speech,² and I agree that Paul concludes his elaboration of his own ministry by connecting it to a saying of Jesus. Although it is rare that Paul quotes Jesus in his epistles, it is worth noting that the Miletus

1. Cf. Lars Aejmelaeus, *Die Rezeption der Paulusbriefe in der Miletrede (Apg 20:18-35)* (Suomalaisen Tiedeakatemia Toimituksia [Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae], 232; Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1987); Steve Walton, *Leadership and Lifestyle: The Portrait of Paul in the Miletus Speech and I Thessalonians* (SNTSMS, 108; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

2. Robert F. O'Toole, 'What Role Does Jesus' Saying in Acts 20,35 Play in Paul's Address to the Ephesian Elders?', *Bib* 75 (1994), pp. 329-49.

speech shows many connections to First Thessalonians,³ in which Paul also quotes Jesus.⁴ The emphasis on remembering what Jesus said is typically Lukan,⁵ but not uniquely so since there are many other examples of this kind of formulation in early Christian literature.⁶ So although the saying is clearly part of Luke's literary construction, its origin remains obscure.

2. *The Origin of the Saying*

The authenticity of the saying has been most elaborately argued by Joachim Jeremias, who proposes that it is based on a more antithetical saying of Jesus in Aramaic in the style of the beatitudes.⁷ This type of argumentation for a hypothetical Aramaic original is by nature speculative. Karl Heinrich Rengstorf has argued more generally that the saying shows signs of being of Palestinian origin, regardless of whether it is an authentic word of Jesus.⁸

3. Walton, *Leadership and Lifestyle*. See also H. Schulze, 'Die Unterlagen für die Abschiedsrede zu Milet in Apostelgesch. 20,18-38', *TSK* 73 (1900), pp. 119-25.

4. See discussion in Aejmelaeus, *Rezeption*, p. 177; however, the identification of the Jesus saying in this instance, too, is complicated; cf. Christopher M. Tuckett, *From the Sayings to the Gospels* (WUNT, 328; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), pp. 316-39.

5. Hans-Joachim Michel, *Die Abschiedsrede des Paulus an die Kirche Apg 20, 17-38: Motivgeschichte und theologische Bedeutung* (SANT, 35; Munich: Kösel, 1973), p. 90. Cf. Lk. 22.61; 24.6-8, 44; Acts 11.16. Furthermore, the comparative expression $\mu\tilde{\alpha}\lambda\lambda\omicron\nu \eta$ is typically Lukan; cf. Acts 4.19; 5.29; 27.11. However, it is also found in *1 Clem.* 2.1.

6. Cf. *1 Clem.* 13.1-2 and 46.7-8; Polycarp, *Phil.* 2.3 (see discussion in Aejmelaeus, *Rezeption*, p. 175).

7. Joachim Jeremias, *Unbekannte Jesusworte* (Zürich: Zwingli, 1948), pp. 67-69. Jeremias suggests that the saying should be translated 'Geben ist selig, nicht Nehmen' in order to understand the sense of the saying more accurately. He points to Acts 4.19 and 5.29 as other examples of gradual comparisons that really aim at expressing absolute opposites. Beatitudes were popular in Palestine in general and particularly with Jesus; cf. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, 'A Palestinian Collection of Beatitudes', in F. van Segbroeck et al. (eds.), *The Four Gospels 1992: Festschrift Franz Neiryneck* (BETL, 100; Leuven: Peeters, 1992), pp. 109-15.

8. Karl-Heinrich Rengstorf, 'Geben ist seliger den Nehmen: Bemerkungen zu dem außerevangelischen Herrenwort Apg. 20,35', in O. Michel and U. Mann (eds.),

However, perhaps the most widely held scholarly opinion on this matter is that Luke himself Christianized a Greek proverb and placed it in the mouth of Jesus.⁹ As pointed out by R.P.C. Hanson, the author of Acts puts a well-known Greek proverb into the mouth of Jesus in Acts 26.14, so it would be in line with his literary pattern.¹⁰ Yet Hanson suggests that it is more probable that it was in fact Jesus who quoted a Greek proverb and made it into a Jewish expression in μακάριος-style than it having been later ascribed to Jesus by the author of Acts.¹¹ If the saying were indeed based on a widely used Greek proverb, it would be possible that Jesus had heard it and elaborated on it. The problem, however, is that there is no evidence of such a proverb circulating in Greco-Roman literature. Ernst Haenchen argues that Thucydides's account in the *History of the Peloponnesian War* of the cultural differences between the Odrysian and Persian kingdoms presents a plausible origin of the saying.¹² Thucydides claims that the Odrysians, in contrast to the Persians, consider λαμβάνειν μᾶλλον ἢ διδόναι (receiving better than giving),¹³ that is, the opposite of what Jesus is reported to have said in the Miletus speech. Whereas Haenchen is correct that this suggests that the Persians would give rather than receive, there is no evidence of a saying parallel to what is found in Acts 20.35.¹⁴ Haenchen lists other examples of this line of thought in Greco-Roman literature that giving can be advan-

Die Leibhaftigkeit des Wortes: Theologische und seelsorgerliche Studien und Beiträge als Festgabe für Adolf Köberle zum sechsigsten Geburtstag (Hamburg: Furche, 1958), pp. 23-33.

9. Cf. Alfons Weiser, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (ÖTK, 5; Gütersloh: Mohn, 1985), p. 580.

10. R.P.C. Hanson, *The Acts in the Revised Standard Version with Introduction and Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), pp. 206, 238-39.

11. Hanson, *Acts*, p. 206.

12. Ernst Haenchen, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (KEK, 3; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), pp. 569-70 and n. 5. So also Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), p. 176. On the other hand, Helmut Köster, 'Die außerkanonische Herrenworte als Produkte der christlichen Gemeinde', *ZNW* 48 (1957), pp. 220-37 (228), argues that this was originally a Jewish saying.

13. Cf. Thucydides, *History* 2.97.4.

14. John J. Kilgallen, 'Acts 20:35 and Thucydides 2.97.4', *JBL* 112 (1993), pp. 312-14.

tageous,¹⁵ but fails to prove that there was a Greco-Roman proverb with both similar meaning and wording.¹⁶ I concur with Lars Aejmelaeus who argues that the saying attributed to Jesus in Acts 20.35 is not based on a Greek proverb, but rather on a Greek maxim¹⁷ that could be expressed in various ways.¹⁸ Rhetorical handbooks of the time often suggested that speeches be ended by a maxim in the manner that we find in Acts.¹⁹ Discussing whether or not such a maxim could have been known and commented on by Jesus is entirely conjectural and must thus be left aside.

3. *Early Christian Parallels*

What is striking, however, is that the most significant contemporary parallels to the saying attributed to Jesus in Acts 20.35 are found in early Christian literature, rather than other Hellenistic literature. *First Clement* 2.1 reads ἥδιον δίδόντες ἢ λαμβάνοντες (giving more gladly than receiving) and follows the similar formulation ὑποτασσόμενοι μᾶλλον ἢ ὑποτάσσοντες (being submissive rather than forcing submission). Furthermore, the formulation μακάριος ὁ δίδους ... οὐαὶ τῷ λαμβάνοντι (blessed is he who gives ...

15. Further examples are listed by Eckhard Plümacher, 'Eine Thukydidessremniszenz in der Apostelgeschichte (Acts 20,33-35 – Thuk. II 97.3f.)', *ZNW* 83 (1992), pp. 270-75 (271).

16. Helge Almqvist, *Plutarch und das Neue Testament: Ein Beitrag zum Corpus Hellenisticum Novi Testamenti* (ASNU, 15; Uppsala: Appelbergs, 1946), pp. 81-82, argues that the saying is inspired by Cynic thought. See also Anton Fridrichsen, 'Observationen zum Neuen Testament aus Aelians *Varia Historia*: Ein Beitrag zum Corpus Hellenisticum Novi Testamenti', *SO* 5 (1927), pp. 60-66 (63); Gunnar Rudberg, 'Die Diogenes-Tradition und das Neue Testament', *ConBNT* 2 (1936), pp. 36-43 (42).

17. Also, Donald Alfred Hagner, *The Use of the Old and New Testaments in Clement of Rome* (NovTSup, 34; Leiden: Brill, 1973), p. 142, speaks of the saying as a maxim rather than a proverb.

18. Aejmelaeus, *Rezeption*, p. 179. As pointed out by Jan Stenger, 'Apophtegma, Gnome und Chrie: Zum verhältnis dreier literarischer Kleinformen', *Philologus* 150 (2006), pp. 203-21, gnomes derived their authority from the universal wisdom they conveyed rather than from their attributed source.

19. Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (4 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012–2015), III, pp. 3062-67.

woe to him who receives) in *Did.* 1.5 shows the same line of thought. These similarities have naturally led to speculations regarding the literary relationship between Acts, *First Clement* and the *Didache*. Clayton Jefford argues that Acts 20.35 points to a common Christian tradition behind Acts and the *Didache*.²⁰ Jonathan A. Draper points out that *Did.* 1.5 is placed within a context (*Did.* 1.3–2.1) that alludes to the Jesus traditions that can be found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.²¹ This fact further strengthens the idea that the tradition in *Did.* 1.5/Acts 20.35 was part of some early Jesus tradition. Draper suggests that this common tradition is in fact Q.²² This identification has been questioned by Christopher Tuckett, who argues that since the *Didache* knows redactional material from both Matthew and Luke, the didachist probably knew the Gospels in their final form.²³

20. Clinton N. Jefford, 'Rethinking the Relationship of Acts and the Didache', in H.W. Attridge, D.R. MacDonald and C.K. Rothschild (eds.), *Delightful Acts: New Essays on Canonical and Non-Canonical Acts* (WUNT, 391; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), pp. 19-39 (25); Kurt Niederwimmer, *The Didache: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), p. 79, prefers to connect *Did.* 1.5 to Lk. 6.30.

21. Jonathan A. Draper, 'The Jesus Tradition in the Didache', in Jonathan A. Draper (ed.), *The Didache in Modern Research* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), pp. 72-91 (76-85). Only *Did.* 1.5c and 1.6 lack parallels in Matthew and Luke. Bentley Layton, 'The Sources, Date, and Transmission of Didache 1.3b–2.1', *HTR* 61 (1968), pp. 343-83 (365), points out that *Did.* 1.5 also resembles *Herm. Mand.* 27.4-6.

22. Jonathan A. Draper, 'The Jesus Tradition in the Didache', in David Wenham (ed.), *The Jesus Tradition outside the Gospels* (Gospel Perspectives, 5; Sheffield: JSOT, 1985), pp. 269-89. Willy Rordorf, 'Does the Didache Contain Jesus Tradition Independently of the Synoptic Gospels?', in H. Wansbrough (ed.), *Jesus and the Oral Synoptic Tradition* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1991), pp. 394-423, argues that the Didachist uses an oral source that is also used by the Synoptics.

23. Christopher M. Tuckett, 'Synoptic Tradition in the Didache', in Draper (ed.), *Didache*, pp. 92-128; Helmut Köster, *Synoptische Überlieferung bei den apostolischen Vätern* (TU, 10; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1957), pp. 217-39 (Köster argues that the author of *Did.* 1.3–2.1 knew Matthew and Luke, but not the compiler of the *Didache* as a whole); Jean-Paul Audet, *Le Didachè: Instructions des apôtres* (Paris: Gabalda, 1958), pp. 183-86; Bentley Layton, 'The Sources, Date, and Transmission of Didache 1.3b–2.1', *HTR* 61 (1968), pp. 343-83. While Tuckett is criticized by Aaron Milavec, 'Synoptic Tradition in the Didache Revisited', *JECS* 11 (2003), pp. 443-80, he gives a fair response to the critique (see Christopher M.

The connection between Acts 20.35 and *First Clement* has received greater scholarly attention. Jürgen Roloff suggests that the connection between Acts 20.35 and *1 Clem.* 2.1 builds on common Roman traditions.²⁴ Donald Hagner prefers to speak more widely of oral traditions used for catechetical instruction.²⁵ This conjecture presupposes that Acts was written in Rome, which is not self-evident.²⁶ Roloff argues that the author of Acts falsely believed it to be a saying of Jesus.²⁷ Roloff's thesis is developed and modified by Lars Aejmelaeus who argues that it was in fact the author of *First Clement* who Christianized the Greek proverb/maxim that was later taken over by the author of Acts as a saying of Jesus and suggests that the final phrase of *1 Clem.* 2.1 allows for such a development.²⁸ H. Benedict Green also views *First Clement* as the background for the saying attributed to Jesus in Acts 20.35 and points out that the phrase ὑποτασσόμενοι μᾶλλον ἢ ὑποτάσσοντες (being submissive rather than forcing submission), which directly precedes the Clementine parallel to Acts 20.35 is a clear summary of the saying of Jesus in Mk 10.42-46, Mt. 20.25-28 and Lk 22.25-27.²⁹ He also points out that the Actan μνημονεύειν τε τῶν λόγων τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ (remembering the words of the Lord Jesus) clearly resembles the presentation of the sayings of Jesus in *1 Clem.* 13.1 and 46.7.³⁰ Green also lists numerous other parallels that suggest that the author of Acts knew and used

Tuckett, 'The Didache and the Synoptics Once More: A Response to Aaron Milavec', *J ECS* 13 [2005], pp. 509-18).

24. Jürgen Roloff, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (NTD, 5; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981), p. 307.

25. Hagner, *Use of Old and New Testaments*, pp. 258, 306.

26. See discussion in Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), pp. 5-7.

27. Roloff, *Apostelgeschichte*, p. 307.

28. Aejmelaeus, *Rezeption*, p. 179. The phrase that he argues allows for this development is τοῖς ἐφοδίοις τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἀρκεούμενοι καὶ προσέχοντες τοὺς λόγους αὐτοῦ ἐπιμελῶς ἐνεστερισμένοι ἥτε τοῖς σπλάγχθοις (content with the provisions of Christ, and heeding his words, [you] diligently stored them up in your hearts).

29. H. Benedict Green, 'Matthew, Clement and Luke: Their Sequence and Relationship', *JTS* 40 (1989), pp. 1-25 (18).

30. Richard I. Pervo, *Dating Acts: Between the Evangelists and the Apologists* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2006), pp. 228-29; Pervo, *Acts*, p. 529, considers it possible that a Greek proverb was first Christianized in *First Clement* and then developed in Acts. But he considers it unlikely.

First Clement.³¹ If Acts should indeed be dated to the early second century,³² as an increasing number of scholars have argued, it is not improbable that the author of Acts could have known and used *First Clement*.

4. *The History and Development of the Saying*

Regardless of how and when the saying attributed to Jesus in Acts 20.35 was constructed, possibly on the basis of a Greek maxim, it is probable that it was widely circulated in the Christian circles of the author of Acts. Rather than suggesting that the author of Acts misunderstood the saying of *1 Clem.* 2.1, Hans-Joachim Michel argues that it was already circulating as a saying of Jesus in Luke's context.³³ James M. Robinson even argues that there are indications that the author of *First Clement* viewed it as a saying of Jesus.³⁴ Although this particular saying is unknown from other written sources, it may have been one of many other sayings of Jesus that were circulating at the time.³⁵ This does not automatically mean that Acts here records an authentic saying of the historical Jesus, but it does indicate that it reflects a common pattern in early Christian thought.³⁶ The author of Acts indicates that the saying was circulated as a saying of Jesus, whereas *First Clement* and the *Didache* suggest that it was at least thought to summarize a significant aspect of Christian teaching. As such, it may have circulated in various forms, of which some might be styled as sayings of Jesus. The use of

31. Green, 'Matthew, Clement and Luke', pp. 18-24.

32. Cf. Knut Backhaus, 'Zur Datierung der Apostelgeschichte: Ein Ordnungsversuch im chronologischen Chaos', *ZNW* 108 (2017), pp. 212-58.

33. Michel, *Abschiedsrede*, p. 91.

34. James M. Robinson, 'LOGOI SOPHON: On the Gattung of Q', in James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), pp. 71-113 (97).

35. So Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts* (Paideia; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), p. 295.

36. Plümacher, 'Eine Thykydidesremniszenz', p. 270, argues that it is 'extrem unwahrscheinlich' that the saying goes back to the historical Jesus, since Jesus would not have known and commented on Thucydides. Whereas this argument is not without value, it presupposes that Acts 20.35 is a direct correction of Thucydides, a presupposition that is not warranted. Plümacher compares Acts with Josephus, who alludes frequently to Thucydides, but fails to show that the author of Acts exhibits such a tendency.

μακάριον³⁷ together with the formulation with μακάριος in the *Didache* indicates that the saying could have been circulated as a tradition in the same style as the Beatitudes (Mt. 5.3-11; Lk 6.20-26).³⁸ In any case, it should be quite clear that the author of Acts presents the saying in 20.35 as an allusion to the Lukan Beatitudes.³⁹

Hans Windisch asks why the saying was not included in Luke's Gospel if it was circulated as a saying of Jesus but concludes that he must have come across the saying only after finishing his Gospel and embarking on the composition of Acts.⁴⁰ However, such speculation is unfruitful. The saying serves a significant literary function in Acts 20.35 and is included on this basis, rather than from a desire for comprehensiveness.⁴¹ F.F. Bruce argues that μνημονεύειν (remembering) indicates that the recipients would have been acquainted with the saying,⁴² thus indicating that it cannot be an Actan novelty.

37. It is worth noting that D has μακάριος also in Acts, thus suggesting that a connection to the Beatitudes was not uncommon in reception history.

38. I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: A Commentary* (TNTC, 5; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), p. 688, argues that the use of μακάριος indicates that the saying is of Semitic origin.

39. See Keener, *Acts*, III, pp. 3062-67. As pointed out by Christopher M. Hays, *Luke's Wealth Ethics: A Study in Their Coherence and Character* (WUNT, 2.275; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), pp. 259-63, Luke's position on wealth is rather consistent throughout Luke-Acts.

40. Hans Windisch, 'The Case Against the Tradition', in F.J. Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake (eds.), *The Beginnings of Christianity, Part I: The Acts of the Apostles* (5 vols.; London: Macmillan, 1920-1933), II, pp. 298-348 (331).

41. Although Paul's collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem is not mentioned in Acts, it is possible that it serves as a significant background for Acts 20. The delegation is mentioned in Acts 20.4, and Paul's own example (Acts 20.33-34) together with the Jesus tradition in Acts 20.35 rhetorically strengthens the urgency of Paul's collection.

42. F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 3rd edn, 1990), p. 436. Bruce here has the audience at Miletus in mind. However, his point is of significance even without historicizing the account, since it rhetorically indicates that the author of Acts would have expected his audience to be aware of this saying. In Bruce, *Acts*, p. 437, he also argues that the spirit of the saying is also expressed in Lk. 6.38, 11.9 and Jn 13.34.

All in all, the available evidence suggests that the content of the saying as such is not a Lukan innovation but rather part of early Christian tradition. The evidence of similar formulations in *First Clement* and the *Didache* makes it plausible that the saying was indeed circulated as a saying of Jesus in the early Christian movement. This does not, of course, prove that the saying goes back to the historical Jesus, but is an indication that it was widely held to be a saying of Jesus already before the composition of Acts.