

PERSECUTION AND THE PURPOSES OF GOD: AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF ACTS 8:1B-8

INTRODUCTION

Based on an exegesis of Acts 8:1b-8, the thesis of the paper is that persecution of the church does not thwart the purposes of God; instead, it can serve in establishing it through the obedience and witness of the believing community. Accordingly, this paper aims to seek how the divine purposes play out in the community of believers as seen following the dispersion triggered by the martyrdom of Stephen and the great Jerusalem persecution.

When carefully observed, there is a notable progression of thought in the narrative concerning persecution and the purposes of God. While the passage begins with the destruction of the church in Jerusalem, it concludes with the extension of the community of believers to Samaria. Similarly, there is also a notable progression with regard to the experiences of believers through persecution. For instance, the narrative, which begins with the great lamentation made over Stephen's death, culminates with reference to the great joy experienced by the believers in a city in Samaria.

What makes the difference? How does God use persecution and pain of some believers to bring salvation and joy to others? What role does persecution play in the mission of God? How does persecution impact the purposes of God? These are some questions that would be explored in this paper.

OVERVIEW OF THE BACKGROUND AND STRUCTURE

The Acts narrative is considered to be a missionary document through and through.¹ Concerning the purpose of Acts, according to Robert H. Stein, there are four categories concerning the Lukan purpose: (1) to assure his Christian audience of the truthfulness of what they had come to believe; (2) to clarify their understanding of their relationship with Israel; (3) to correct the understanding of Christian concern about the parousia; and to (3) provide an apologetic work for both Christians and non-Christians.²

Moreover, there are some overarching themes of the Lukan discourse in Acts. For instance, the spread of the gospel across geographical boundaries and human barriers³ is a dominant idea running through the narrative. This is also vividly seen in the passage under discussion. Still more, the place of suffering on account of opposition to the gospel in the life of the church and the sovereignty of God in suffering are also some notable

¹ Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig, *Mission In Acts* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2007), Ch. 1, Ebook. See also I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2008), ebook.

² Gallagher, *Acts*, Ch. 1.

³ Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary: ACTS* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 264.

themes that run through the Acts narrative, which are of direct relevance to Acts 8:1b-8. Moreover, the portrayal of the triumphant course of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome and beyond also appears to be a primary motive or purpose behind Luke's work in Acts.⁴

With regard to the historical setting of Acts and, particularly, Acts 8:1b-8, the passage begins with reference to the great persecution that broke out against the Jerusalem Church following the death of Stephen. Subsequently, Luke reveals the mysterious figure, Saul, as the chief proponent behind the persecution. Accordingly, the tensions between the Church and the Jewish leadership appear to be at the crux of the passage. However, the telling of the events by Luke also appears to be indicative of the fact that the Church is an oppressed minority in Jerusalem, lacking any form of political backing or power base and are victims of the violent dispositions of the largely hostile Jewish majority in the city.

It is not surprising, as such, that relations with Jews are a strong emphasis in the Acts discourse. Moreover, the passage is also located in the context of hostile Jewish sentiment regarding the Church, which manifests itself in the form of violent opposition, including the killing of believers, resulting in displacement and scattering of the believing community.

The reference to Samaria in the text is also a window into the Jew-Samaritan relations, which was mostly strained and mostly hostile especially concerning their respective holy sites. It is interesting, therefore, to note that the hostilities of the Jews against the church, leads to believers, though mostly, perhaps, Hellenistic Jews but converts from Judaism itself, moving towards Samaria.

While the Acts narrative is intended for Theophilus, it is likely that through the narrative of Luke-Acts, the author is attempting to convince and influence literate Gentile readers and leaders of society, as part of Luke's persuasive rhetoric to the early Christian movement in the first century or early second century.⁵ Nevertheless, the allusions of Christianity's unique relationship to Judaism, and in fact, the Jewishness of the Messiah in the larger corpus of work, appear to be indicative of the fact that Luke is also addressing the concerns, questions, and confusions of the Jews of the day, regarding the substance of their beliefs and nature of the Christian community.

Concerning the structure of Acts with reference to the passage under discussion, the immediate context of the persecution of Acts 8:1b-8 is the stoning and death of Stephen in Jerusalem by the Sanhedrin. In the larger context of the narrative, the passage may be shown to be within the second part of the three-part structure of Acts, which marks the extension of missions to Judea and Samaria. In fact, Acts 8:1b could be identified as the starting point of this mission.⁶

⁴ Ronald F Youngblood, F. F Bruce and R. K Harrison, *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 1st ed. (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1995), 18.

⁵ Mikeal Carl Parsons, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2008), 20.

⁶ Gallagher, *Acts*, Ch. 1.

With reference to the two-part structure of Acts, even though the passage fits within the first-part of the narrative dominated by Peter, Acts 8 appears to be a key passage, which marks the introduction of Saul, soon to be, Paul, the missionary to the Gentiles and the key figure of the second part of the Acts discourse. The Samaritan episode of Acts 8 appears to also have great significance to the Acts 1:8 programme. Acts 8, accordingly, serves as the link between mission in Jerusalem and mission to the world. Somewhat of an in-between or middle point of this journey, Acts 8, emerges as the halfway stage of this movement of the gospel to Rome and to the ends of the world.

COMMENTARY: ACTS 8:1B-8

Concerning Acts 8, most commentators propose a division of the literary unit from Acts 8:1b-3 and vs. 4-25 or 40, surmising the persecution of Saul in Jerusalem in the first part and Philip's mission to the Samaritans in the latter part. This division is understandable and, in fact, clearly visible in the text. However, a closer reading of the narrative shows as an interesting development. In Acts 8:1b-3 Luke details a great persecution in Jerusalem, which is perpetrated by the Sanhedrin and the Jewish people. In verses 4-8, Luke then details the consequences of this persecution in Jerusalem, which reverberates across to Samaria by way of the journeying of the scattered community. Accordingly, a case could be made to view this portion as one literary unit.

Acts 8:1b-8, as such, in keeping with the thesis of this paper, could be outlined as follows:

- 8:1b-3: A great persecution, resulting in the destruction of the church in Jerusalem
- 8:4-8: A great joy, resulting from an extension of the church to Samaria

The passage, therefore, displays a contrast of experience in the lives of believers, from suffering in Jerusalem to joy in Samaria. At the same time, there also appears to be a contrast of experience in terms of the well being of the church. While destruction is the fate of the church in Jerusalem, a new experience in the gospel, befalls Samaria.

8:1-3: A great persecution, resulting in the destruction of the church in Jerusalem

In verse 1, Luke draws the attention of the readers' to the intensity of the persecution, stating that a great persecution broke out in Jerusalem following the martyrdom of Stephen. Luke then adds here that the apostles remain back in Jerusalem, while the rest disperse from the city. This is indicative of the fact that the attacks and violence, perhaps, was aimed at Hellenistic-Jews that were closely identified with Stephen⁷ and not the whole church per se.⁸ However, at the same time, despite the tensions in the city, it could also be stated that the apostles chose to stay back in order to

⁷ Donald Guthrie et al., *The New Bible Commentary Revised* (London: The Inter-varsity Press, 1970), 982.

⁸ Frank E Gaebelein, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 9 (John-Acts)* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Regency Reference Library, 1981), 353.

hold the church's fort in Jerusalem.⁹ Therefore, Luke could also be making an effort here to highlight the virtues of the church leaders in terms of their courage and perseverance.

Notably, the three-fold structure of the Acts narrative also emerges in this single verse. While the apostles tend to Jerusalem, the believing community, possibly, mostly, Hellenized Jews, disperse throughout Palestine.¹⁰ Persecution in Jerusalem, accordingly, is shown to serve the extension of the gospel to Judea and Samaria. However, it should be stated here that the dispersion of the believers does not appear to be thought through or planned on the part of the church community. Instead, it appears to be a swift reaction to the escalation of hostilities in Jerusalem. Up unto this point, the church Jerusalem had experience persecution, however, at a lesser intensity. In Acts 2, for instance, it is Peter and John who is at the receiving end of the hostilities of the Sadducees while in Acts 5 the Sanhedrin targets the apostles.

Acts 8 accordingly marks a progression of hostilities from individual leaders of the church to the entire leadership to, now, many of the believing community in Jerusalem. At the same, there also appears to be a progression regarding the proponents of hostility - from a single sect in chapter 2 to the Sanhedrin in chapter 5 to, now, the Sanhedrin and the people of Jerusalem.

In verse 2 Luke returns to the death of Stephen, portraying the respect and the grief of those burying him. Luke also here provides the readers insight into the characteristics of those performing the burial of Stephen, adding that they were godly men. Moreover, Luke also, once again, highlights the intensity of the experience of the men, stating that they mourned deeply for him. While it was normal to bury executed criminals, Jewish law prohibited mourning publicly for a condemned criminal.¹¹ However, the actions of the godly men, possibly friends of Stephen, disregarding the law to mourn for him, is not only a showcase of defiance and courage but also an insight into the character of Stephen, which warranted a show of such honour on the part of these men.¹²

In verse 3, the readers are introduced to Saul, who, according to Luke, is the chief proponent of the persecution. Luke's reference here that women, as well as men, were put in prison, portrays the intensity and ferocity of Saul's action, which is likely to have been more zealous and vicious than most of his contemporaries.¹³ Still more, the reference could also serve Luke's concern for women, highlighting through it the courage and faithfulness of the women disciples.¹⁴ At the same time, Luke also appears to be implying

⁹ Fernando, *Acts*, 262. Also, Acts 9:26-29 speaks of the of the apostles in Jerusalem during this time

¹⁰ Craig S Keener, *Acts Vol. 2* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2013), 1467.

¹¹ Craig S Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, n.d.), 342. See also I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2008), ibook.

¹² Darrell L Bock, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2007), Ebook, 728.

¹³ Keener, *Background*, 342.

¹⁴ Keener, *Acts*, 1483.

that women and men are equal members of the church and are equally offensive to persecutors.¹⁵

It is said here that Saul went from house to house, which is indicative of targeted, mass-scale mob violence against the Christian community in Jerusalem. When viewed in light of the dispersion of the believers subsequent to the persecution, it also seems that the hostilities could have resulted in severe economic consequences for the believing community. Perhaps, some Judeans could have also lost property during the persecution, increasing the church's poverty.

In extension, the abrupt mention and identification of Saul as the chief instigator of the persecution of the church appears to be an assurance given by Luke to his readers that the very forces that undermine the church could turn champions of the cause. Accordingly, even though unmentioned and seemingly absent in the narrative, underneath the storyline, Luke appears to be bearing witness to the sovereignty of God over the Church, affirming to his readers that the purposes of God could not be thwarted, despite the intense suffering and persecution experienced by the people of God.

8:4-8: A great joy, resulting from an extension of the church to Samaria

Verse 4 marks a geographical shift away from Jerusalem and a shift in focus to the believing community in the dispersion. While the persecution forced the believers to flee their homes and hometown, Luke highlights the missionary-status of the fleeing community, adding that they preached the word wherever they went. Moreover, the negative experience of believers in Jerusalem is seemingly redefined and reimagined by Luke, who attributes to the fleeing community a sense of greater purpose and positivity of experience, as bearers of the gospel in the dispersion. Still more, in a narrative dominated by individual figures who champion the gospel, Luke also, here, masterfully adds the community element of the gospel witness, reminding his readers that the church was a movement of believers, witnessing to Christ wherever they were.

In verse 5, Luke then zooms out of the community of believers and zooms in on Philip and his mission in Samaria. While the region of Samaria, was not necessarily perceived as Gentile territory, owing to the Samaritans being viewed as those on the margins of Judaism, it nevertheless, marked the movement of the gospel away from Jerusalem to its rival town. However, at the same time, it also appears here that Luke narrates the Samaritan mission as a bridge, which sets the stage for Gentile outreach.¹⁶

Unlike the witness of the scattered community, the tone of Luke's narration of the event is indicative of a sense of deliberateness on the part of Philip in undertaking the mission

¹⁵ Charles Kingsley Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Edinburgh.: T & T Clark, 1994), 393

¹⁶ Darrell L Bock, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2007), Ebook, 728.

to Samaria. Luke, accordingly, states that Philip went down to an unnamed city in Samaria, and proclaimed the Messiah there.

In verse 6, Luke narrates the success of Philip's mission, stating that he performed signs, which attracted the attention of the Samaritans. Signs and wonders, which complemented teaching and preaching in Luke-Acts is an upshot of the activity of the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, the presence of signs in Philip's mission, which accompanies the preaching of the Messiah, is indicative of the approval of God for the ministry. Here, too, once again, the narrative bears testimony to the sovereignty of God in the larger scheme of affairs, directing and governing the life and destiny of the believing community even through the unconventional means of persecution and violence and subsequent dispersions.

Verse 7, details some of the miracles and signs performed by Philip. Interestingly, Luke appears to be making an effort to highlight that many benefited as a result of the miracles and the ministry of Philip. Accordingly, verse 8 then serves as a summary statement of the whole episode, stating that there was great joy in that city. Joy is a notable feature of conversion in Luke-Acts.¹⁷ As such, it appears that Luke is clearly making reference to the fact that the persecution in Jerusalem and dispersion across Palestine had served in the effective expansion of the gospel in the region. Moreover, the suffering in Jerusalem had worked its way to bring joy to the people of Samaria. Still more, death and destruction in one place had also transpired to bring life and growth in the gospel elsewhere.

Acts 8:1-8, therefore, bears testimony to the overarching truth that the mission of God cannot be thwarted. In fact, persecution appears to only serve the divine purposes, in achieving the mission of God. In the narrative, Luke affirms this truth by showcasing progress in the experience of the church from one of great persecution and suffering in Jerusalem to great joy and relief in a city of Samaria. Similarly, the devastation of the community of believers in Jerusalem had been used as a means to create new communities of believers elsewhere.

In the introduction of the paper, it was mentioned that the following questions would be answered during the course of this work. Accordingly, the question was posed: How does God use persecution and pain of some believers to bring salvation and joy to others? The answer to this question, as evidenced in the passage, appears to be hidden in the sovereignty of God that is able to make something beautiful out of the ashes of trouble and superimpose good upon the evil plans of people.

With regard to the role that persecution plays in the mission of God, it appears that God uses persecution as a means to fulfill his purposes and will. According to the narrative, Luke is unequivocally communicating the truth that God is sovereign over persecution and the church. As such, believers are not mere victims in the hands of powerful persecutors and opponents; but instead, enveloped in the safe and sovereign hands of God. This is evidenced by the missionary status granted by Luke to the believing

¹⁷ Keener, *Acts*, 1499. See also: Luke 15:5-7, 9-10, 23-24, 32; Acts 11:23; 13:48; 15:3

community in dispersion and the success credited to Philip's pioneering mission in Samaria. Moreover, Luke's identification of Saul as the chief persecutor also bears undeniable testimony to this fact. Emphatically, therefore, it could be stated that persecution does not thwart the purposes of God; rather it serves the divine will—be it to activate the community of believers for the mission of God or fulfill greater purposes in the kingdom of God.

APPLICATIONS

As a ministry worker involved in the life of the persecuted church in my nation as well as South Asia, Acts 8:1b-8 provides much-needed wisdom and guidance to persecuted believers' in our region. The great persecution of Acts 8 is not a distant experience to believers in the 21st century. Today, according to statistics, at least 100 million people face persecution daily for their faith. From beatings to ridicule to restrictive laws and death – Christian persecution is perhaps the greatest untold story of today.

Often, believers hold on to the belief that persecution brings church growth. A surface reading of the Acts 8:1b-8 narrative could perhaps support this claim. However, a closer reading of the text reveals that persecution is a double-edged sword. While on one hand, it could bring about an extension of the church, as evidenced in Samaria and across Judea as a result of the dispersion caused by the greater Jerusalem persecution, it could also bring the destruction of the church as evidenced in Jerusalem and, in particular, the demise of Stephen. Therefore, a pertinent application that could be drawn from this passage is the importance of communicating this biblical truth to the church. Persecution is dangerous and could spell disaster for communities of believers. Accordingly, it is important to take all steps necessary to pray for, teach, disciple, and safeguard vulnerable communities, serving on the frontlines of persecution.

At the same time, while persecution brings disaster, it is nevertheless a phenomenon that lies within the sovereignty of God as seen in Acts 8:1b-8. Persecution does not define the destiny of the church. God does. This, too, therefore, is a crucial exhortation that needs to be made to persecuted believers, urging Christians to bask in and embrace the sovereignty of God, especially in times of suffering and persecution, remembering that God determines their destiny and not their persecutors – whether the State, an extremist group, members of family, or even the wider community.

Moreover, often, persecuted Christians in rural villagers in South Asia, such as in places like Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka, resolve to remain and serve in contexts of persecution, despite relentless attacks on their families and places of worship. While this is commendable, and perhaps like in the case of the apostles, is a showcase of their courage and perseverance. However, to such communities, it is also, nevertheless important to reveal the whole will of God in times of persecution as seen in the Scriptures. In certain circumstance, because of the sovereignty of God, fleeing persecution is an appropriate response in the sight of God. In fact, fleeing or dispersing could serve the broader purposes of God, as clearly evidenced in the Acts 8 narrative.

This, too, therefore, should be granted as an option to believers facing intense persecution in hostile localities.

Like in 1st century AD Palestine, often, even today, prominent figures direct the persecution of Christians. However, with the intervention of God, such characters too could be transformed to become champions of the church. As such, a clear application in our context is to unceasingly pray for these personalities, that God would meet them and transform them from Saul's to Paul's, who champion the cause of God in our nations and region.

According to Luke, the common conduct of the dispersing community was that they preached the word of God. Often persecution could serve in distracting believers from ministering the gospel. This should not happen. Preaching through persecution, therefore, is a key factor that determines the effectiveness of a community in times of trials. However, as mentioned above, the preaching need not be in the same locality as before, as fleeing, dispersion, or even relocation are not responses entirely outside the will of God.

As demonstrated in the life of Stephen, which was cut short violently and abruptly, persecution is a difficult experience for believers. Today, persecuted Christians often are isolated, alone, and denied basic dignity in their communities. Based on this reading of Acts 8 and particularly the responses of the men regarding Stephen's burial, the church would do good to shower persecuted believers with honour, love, and solidarity for their witness and struggles in Christ. However, in light of the devastation and danger that persecution brings, careful effort should also be taken to ensure that persecution is not unhealthily glorified to the peril of believers.

Finally, the experiences of the believing community as seen in Acts 8 runs in stark contrast to the Prosperity Gospel, which continues to enjoy great popularity in our contexts. The gospel of Jesus Christ invariably brings contention and struggles in a hostile world. Suffering, as such, is every Christian's lot. Accordingly, there is a pressing need to today to equip our churches with regard to the theology of suffering and prepare believers to face persecution.

CONCLUSION

The thesis of this paper was that persecution serves the purposes of God. A closer reading of the narrative revealed that the sovereignty of God, although not visibly present in the text, is discreetly and decisively present, directing the affairs of the church through persecution.

The death of Stephen and the consequent persecution were instrumental in the movement of the gospel beyond the limits of Jerusalem, in fulfillment of the Acts 1:8 mandate. Accordingly, Luke's narrative in Acts 8:1b-8 testimony to the fact that persecution does not thwart the purposes of God; instead it can serve in establishing it through the obedience and witness of the believing community.

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