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Of Gods, Government, and Gospel: A Missiological Application of Acts 28:11

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Abstract: *Genuine Christian faith entails turning from idols. A question thus arises, why does Luke choose to mention the pagan* Διοσκούροις *(twin gods) figurehead in Acts 28:11? Most commentators say little on the subject. However, the final section of Acts, which details Paul's journey from Ephesus via Jerusalem to Rome, presents comparisons with the* Διοσκούροις*. In particular, the word two (*δύο*) or a cognate thereof occurs several times. The word group appears within a ring composition, which takes the form of a prophetic rhetorical template, with the climax in the center. In this case, the climax is a formidable Roman force, comprised of two centurions, two hundred soldiers, and two hundred spearmen (Acts 23:23), which left from Jerusalem with Paul and an official letter affirming his legitimate evangelistic activities. Validating Paul's ministry is a key Lukan concern. This concern is enhanced by the surrounding prophetic rhetorical template, which inter alia parallels the Ephesian crowd shouting for Artemis (Acts 19:34) with the* Διοσκούροις*. With this link, Luke subtly but clearly shows that the* Διοσκούροις *exemplify pagan folly. A three-part missiological application follows: Gospel proclamation by law-abiding Christians is legitimate in all contexts. Idolatrous tendencies should be identified in whatever form they appear. However, idolaters must have the freedom to worship their false gods without fearing Christians will ridicule or destroy them.*

Key Words: *Acts 28:11, Artemis, chiasm,* Διοσκούροις*, idolatry, ring composition, twin gods*

Abandoning Pagan Deities

In his affectionate letter to the Thessalonian believers, the apostle Paul recalls with gratitude how they "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess 1:9–10 ESV). Embracing Christ and his salvation is of course integral to genuine Christian faith. However, turning from idols is a key element in the process.

It may be asked to what extent "turning from" is necessary in any

given situation. How much of one's old life, culture, and religion must a believer in Christ relinquish? Answers will vary, but fidelity to Scripture surely requires abandoning idolatry and false gods. This is certainly the picture emerging from the book of Acts. As Fred Farrokh asserts in a piece challenging the proponents of insider movements,[1] Gentile believers abandoned their erstwhile pagan allegiances: "[T]hough they did not need to become circumcised Jewish proselytes to become disciples of Messiah Jesus, [they] nonetheless experienced dramatic discontinuity from their pagan religious past."[2] And that, of course, meant forsaking pagan deities like Artemis, the patron goddess of Ephesus.

Farrokh underlines this quite forcibly when he argues that Paul (in Acts) "sought to depose the Greek gods and render them powerless. Indeed, Paul does not even mention the name Artemis in his Epistle to the Ephesians. Neither does Jesus mention Artemis in his Revelation message to the Ephesian Church."[3] Since Artemis is downplayed in this way, it is a little surprising that Luke, the author of Acts, sees fit to mention two other pagan deities, in an apparently neutral context, in his account of Paul's journey to Rome.

The Διοσκούροις Problem

When Paul left Malta on the final leg of his dramatic but divinely protected journey, he boarded an Alexandrian ship bearing "the twin gods [Διοσκούροις] as a figurehead" (Acts 28:11). A scholarly consensus identifies these as the gods Castor and Pollux, whom superstitious sailors particularly favored. Indeed, seafarers' need for protection made perfect sense in an era when shipwrecks were common. However, Luke's narrative of Paul and his companions all surviving the shipwreck, which landed them in Malta, credits that positive outcome to God answering Paul's prayer for everyone on board (Acts 27:24), not to the manipulations of his pagan contemporaries' folk religion. The question thus arises why Luke chose to mention the detail of the twin gods at all.

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[1] According to such proponents, Christ-followers in certain missions contexts comprise insider movements, where as a group, they retain the socioreligious identity of their birth community.

[2] Fred Farrokh, "The New Testament Record: No Sign of Zeus Insiders, Artemis Insiders, or Unknown-God Insiders," in *Muslim Conversions to Christ: A Critique of Insider Movements in Islamic Contexts*, ed. Ayman S. Ibrahim and Ant Greenham (New York: Peter Lang, 2018), 227.

[3] Farrokh, "New Testament Record," 238.

Commentators' Positions

Many commentators pass over Acts 28:11 in silence, while those mentioning it typically name the twin figures briefly, with some suggesting they were placed on the ship for protective effect. Most of these present the reader with an interesting snippet of historical/cultural background but have little to suggest how that relates to the rest of Luke's narrative. Exceptions are nineteenth-century writers W. J. Conybeare and J. S. Howson, the eighteenth century's Matthew Henry, and the twenty-first century's Craig S. Keener.

Conybeare and Howson link the figures to Rhegium, a port of call on Paul's journey between Malta and Rome (Acts 28:13). They relate that Paul's ship "put into Rhegium, a city whose patron divinities were, by a curious coincidence, the same hero-protectors of seafaring men, 'the Great Twin Brethren,' to whom the ship itself was dedicated."[4] However, they do no more than note the coincidence. And for his part, Luke simply describes the ship's circuitous route to Rhegium and departure a day later. Since Luke shows no interest in the city's twin patrons, it seems fair to say that Conybeare and Howson's extra-biblical observation has no connection to Luke's reference to the twins.

Matthew Henry, for his part, considers the Alexandrian ship (and its twin figures), which Paul boarded in Malta, and looks back at the earlier (wrecked) ship, which came from the same city (cf. Acts 27:6):

> See what different issues there are of men's undertakings in this world. Here were two ships, both of Alexandria, both bound for Italy, both thrown upon the same island, but one is wrecked there and the other is saved.… Events are thus varied, that we may learn both how to want and how to abound.[5]

Henry thus suggests that Luke's mention of the twin figures adds intelligible detail to the account, but no more (although Henry does add some disparaging remarks about the gods themselves).

Craig Keener, in his magisterial work on Acts, muses that Luke may have a theological purpose in mentioning the gods. If so, it shows the irony of Paul and his companions sailing on a ship relying on pagan gods after God's intervention. God had worked powerfully in Malta, but "most of the world remains unconvinced and perhaps even unaware of the truth." Nevertheless, that sobering theological reality in no way stymies

[4] W. J. Conybeare and J. S. Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul*, new ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 663.

[5] Matthew Henry, *Acts to Revelation*, vol. 6 of *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), 353.

the accomplishment of God's intentions.[6] Keener then suggests Luke could mention the twins to point to Paul's coming destination. Castor and Pollux were associated with Rome in several ways and "Paul was now heading to the center of Roman paganism."[7] He quickly acknowledges the gods' far more important link to the sea than to Rome though. Thus, having examined an array of possible connections, Keener rests on the simple reality that the gods were well known in Paul's time. However, he asserts, "Luke's audience understands … that it is not the Dioscuri but Paul's God who stands watch over the voyage and protects his servant."[8] One might conclude, then, that Luke's mention of the twins is more incidental than deliberate.

Comparisons

A further idea, flowing from Henry's practical application, might be explored though. He points to *two* Alexandrian ships to underline the importance of knowing "both how to want and how to abound." Comparing two things in Luke's narrative allows him to derive a useful lesson. In a similar vein, Henry's approach might help explain why Luke saw the need to mention the twin figures. As already noted, Luke is not saying for a moment that pagan deities protected Paul. That is undergirded by Luke's specific mention of the Lord's assurance to Paul in Acts 23:11: "as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome." The Lord would see to it that Paul made it between the two cities in one piece, not the twin gods. Nevertheless, does Luke mention the two deities to make a specific comparison?

As Henry points out, the ship bearing the Διοσκούροις had a very different fate to the earlier one. While Luke says nothing about the Lord's provision (in contrast to implied pagan superstition) in Acts 28:11 itself, one may ask if comparisons might be drawn if the twins are viewed in a slightly wider context. In other words, since two Alexandrian ships from separate parts of the narrative are comparable, perhaps the broader story contains a link to the twin figures.

The Structure of Acts

The wider narrative for investigation should probably encompass Paul's movement from Jerusalem to Rome. Focusing on this last division

[6] Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 4:3696.

[7] Keener, *Acts*, 4:3698.

[8] Keener, *Acts*, 4:3699.

of Acts follows Keener's observations on the structure of the book. Noting the absence of a current scholarly consensus on Acts's structure, he points to widespread agreement on the existence of Luke's six "panels" (or sections), which are divided by key summary statements.[9] The sixth and last section covers Acts 19:21–28:31,[10] beginning with the words, "Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, 'After I have been there, I must also see Rome'" (Acts 19:21 ESV). While Keener concedes that Acts may be outlined in a number of ways, he asserts that several clear textual markers point "to the progress of the gospel toward Rome, which is the story that he [Luke] narrates."[11] This progress is relayed supremely in the last (and climactic) section, which encompasses the silversmiths' disturbance over Artemis in Ephesus, Paul's roundabout journey to Jerusalem, his travails there, his incarceration in Caesarea, and then his eventful journey to Rome, which includes that enigmatic reference to the Διοσκούροις.

We have already noted Luke's mention of two cities, two ships, and of course the two pagan deities. The question thus arises whether there are any other "twos" to be found between Acts 19:21 and 28:31. There are indeed. However, one may tally these in several ways.

The Search for "Twos"

One approach is to note any couple of items in the text. That results in a broad (and rather cumbersome) array. So, moving through the final section, one notes Macedonia and Achaia, then Jerusalem and Rome (19:21). These are followed by the dispatch of Paul's two assistants (Timothy and Erastus) to Macedonia (19:22), the Ephesians' seizure of Paul's two traveling companions (19:29) and the crowd loudly asserting the greatness of Artemis for around two hours (19:34). However, unless one counts the two Ephesian groups (Jews and Greeks) Paul had exhorted to repent and believe (20:21), Luke has no more couples until after Paul

[9] Keener, *Acts*, 1:574.

[10] Keener, *Acts*, 1:575.

[11] Keener, *Acts*, 1:576. The import of Luke's essential story is captured by Richard N. Longenecker in his discussion on why he ends Acts the way he does, with Paul imprisoned for two years in Rome, albeit freely proclaiming God's kingdom: "The gospel that Jesus effected in his ministry from Galilee to Jerusalem has reached its culmination in its extension from Jerusalem to Rome. And with that victory … accomplished, Luke felt free to lay down his pen" ("The Acts of the Apostles," in *John, Acts*, EBC 9, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981], 235).

reaches Jerusalem. There, the Romans effectively rescue him from a Jewish mob, binding him with two chains (21:33). The next day he faces a Sanhedrin split between two groups, Pharisees and Sadducees (23:7). Shortly thereafter, the Lord himself encourages Paul that he would testify in Rome as he had in Jerusalem (23:11), the earlier reference to the two cities. Then, when the Roman tribune hears of the plot to kill Paul, he summons two centurions with orders to take him to Caesarea, protected by two hundred soldiers and two hundred spearmen—in addition to seventy horsemen (23:23).

The tribune's letter accompanying Paul mentions two penalties (death or imprisonment) which Paul didn't merit (23:29), although this might push the search for twos too far. However, the two years of Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea (under two Roman governors) is more specific (24:27). After this come the two ships of Alexandria, as Henry observes, although they are mentioned separately, in Acts 27:6 and 28:11. The latter verse, with its reference to the Διοσκούροις, is of course the subject of this inquiry. Finally, the last verses in Acts refer to Paul's proclamation in captivity for two years in Rome (28:30).

Another, certainly briefer, approach to identifying the twos in the final section of Acts is to limit one's observations to the word two or a cognate thereof. This produces Paul's two (δύο) helpers (19:22), the Ephesian crowd chanting for about two (δύο) hours (19:34), the two (δυσί) chains used to bind Paul (21:33), the two (δύο) centurions, two hundred (διακοσίους) soldiers and two hundred (διακοσίους) spearmen securing Paul's departure from Jerusalem (23:23), the passing of two years (διετίας) in Caesarea (24:27), the twin gods (Διοσκούροις) on the ship (28:11), and Paul's two-year (διετίαν) ministry in Rome (28:30).

Ring Composition

Did Luke deliberately insert these twos into his text? If so, it should be possible to discern a pattern apparent within the text itself. As we explore that possibility, Kenneth Bailey provides helpful guidance. Perhaps best known for his work on Jesus's parable of the lost sheep, lost coin, and lost son(s) in Luke 15,[12] Bailey has many insights on biblical composition. He displays a number of these in *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes*, a work focusing on 1 Corinthians.[13]

[12] Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*, comb. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 142–206.

[13] Kenneth E. Bailey, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011).

Taking a different tack to most commentaries on 1 Corinthians, he argues that this book's rhetorical styles (in particular) emerge from the parallelism of the Old Testament's writing prophets.[14] Without recapitulating Bailey's discussion, it is noteworthy that he especially underlines the importance of *inverted* parallelism (or chiasm), which is also called "ring composition."[15] He explains the importance of a ring composition's *center* for a text's rhetorical focus and then adds:

> The use of seven inverted cameos (the perfect number) with a climax in the center is so common it deserves a name. I have chosen to call it "the prophetic rhetorical template," and I have found seventeen of these prophetic rhetorical templates in the Gospel of Mark alone. Psalm 23 uses this same form and Paul employs it many times in 1 Corinthians.[16]

He thus argues that prophetic rhetorical templates occur in both Old and New Testaments, if one has the eyes to see them. The question then arises whether they may be discerned in Luke's writings.

A simple case from the Third Gospel occurs in Luke 16:13: "No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money." Bailey diagrams this verse as follows:

No servant can serve *two masters*;	Two Masters
For either he will *hate* the one	Hate
And *love* the other	Love
Or be *devoted* to the one	Love
And *despise* the other	Hate
You cannot serve *God and Mammon*.	Two Masters[17]

Since this verse has six rather than seven inverted cameos (or parts) it does not strictly follow a prophetic rhetorical template, but it does demonstrate Luke's use of ring composition.

A further question concerns the incidence of ring composition in longer portions of text. Apart from the challenge of finding the climax in the middle rather than the end of a literary portion (as Western readers would expect), a text's length may hide the rhetorical structure altogether. As Bailey puts it, "We modern Christians may have the Old Testament stories in the backs of our minds, but not their literary 'tunes.' The longer

[14] Bailey, *Paul*, 21–22. As an example, Bailey points to the use of straight-line, inverted, and step parallelism to enhance meaning in Isaiah 55 (pp. 34–38).

[15] Bailey, *Paul*, 36.

[16] Bailey, *Paul*, 39–40.

[17] Bailey, *Paul*, 48.

the 'tune' the more difficult it is to hear it."[18] His essential argument here is for the presence of such "tunes" in 1 Corinthians, which readers typically don't discern in the light of Old Testament parallelism.

Further discussion of 1 Corinthians lies beyond the scope of this article, but Bailey's insights, having indicated the presence of ring composition in Luke's work, prompt two questions as we return to our discussion of Acts: Did Luke insert twos into the text of Acts 19:21–28:31? If so, may one discern a "tune" in the way he placed them, possibly in terms of a prophetic rhetorical template?

Finding a Pattern

Using the broader set of couples noted above (seventeen in all) may be too unwieldy (and possibly discordant), especially considering the subjectivity behind some of the "twos." It is also difficult to find correlations between the couples in every case. For instance, it is hard to relate the first two, Macedonia and Achaia (19:21), directly to the last, Paul's two-year captivity in Rome (28:30).[19] If Luke is responsible for a ring composition, its contours should be fairly easy to trace.

The briefer approach, which identifies only the word "two" or a cognate thereof (between Acts 19:21–28:31), seems to offer better prospects or at least greater clarity. As already noted, the words concerned are:

Two (δύο) helpers (19:22);
Two (δύο) hours' chanting (19:34);
Two (δυσί) chains (21:33);
Two (δύο) centurions, two hundred (διακοσίους) soldiers, and two hundred (διακοσίους) spearmen (23:23);
Two years (διετίας) in Caesarea (24:27);
Two gods (Διοσκούροις, 28:11); and
Two years (διετίαν) in Rome (28:30).

The centurions, soldiers, and spearmen are grouped together because they form a coherent military unit. However, there is a crucial element in the text of Acts 23:23–35, along with the Roman military, that is central to Luke's purpose in writing Acts. In fact, this element lends itself as the climax of the set of twos above.

[18] Bailey, *Paul*, 50. Bailey uses an example from classical music here, noting his inability to discern a tune in a substantial work without the aid of a professional musician.

[19] A difficult correlation is not necessarily an impossible correlation though. Acts 19:21 mentions Paul's intention to visit Rome after Macedonia and Achaia, which is where the last "couple" finds him, at the end of the book.

The military accompany (and protect) Paul, of course, but also carry a letter from the tribune in Jerusalem to Felix, the governor in Caesarea. That letter gives the Roman commander's (slightly skewed) account of what happened to Paul in Jerusalem and the need to send him away under guard due to the plot against his life. Critically though, the tribune confirmed that Paul was "charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment" (23:29). This vital evaluation, as Longenecker remarks, "was of great significance not only for Paul's fortunes but also for Luke's apologetic purpose."[20]

Longenecker clarifies that Luke had more than one purpose in writing Acts. However, right after explaining Luke's kerygmatic purpose (to show that the gospel the church proclaimed continued Jesus's ministry), Longenecker underlines the apologetic purpose permeating the Book of Acts:

> Its author seeks to demonstrate that Christianity is not a political threat to the empire, as its Jewish opponents asserted, but rather that it is the culmination of Israel's hope and the true daughter of Jewish religion—and, therefore, should be treated by Roman authorities as a *religio licita* along with Judaism.[21]

In a similar vein, F. F. Bruce points to Luke's pioneering role in addressing a very specific apologetic "to the civil authorities to establish the law-abiding character of Christianity."[22]

This purpose was so important that Luke gives it center place in what appears to be a prophetic rhetorical template using an interesting series of "twos." Put differently, the assertion that Paul (and by extension anyone else proclaiming the gospel) was doing nothing to deserve prison or death is a keynote in Luke's overall "tune."

If that is so, a little more evidence that Luke utilizes ring composition here is in order. Returning to the couples noted above, is there a case for inverted parallelism, which would enhance Luke's central concerns? Yes, indeed.

The Structure of Luke's Prophetic Rhetorical Template

Paul's two helpers, Timothy and Erastus, in 19:22 parallel Paul's unhindered two years of ministry in Rome (28:30–31). Paul was about to experience a temporary hindrance in not being allowed to address the Artemis-maddened crowd in the theatre in Ephesus (19:30–31), but once the commotion ended, he left for Macedonia without hindrance (20:1). In

[20] Longenecker, "Acts," 536.

[21] Longenecker, "Acts," 218.

[22] F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 13.

contrast, Timothy and Erastus left to minister in Macedonia without any hindrance. This parallels the unhindered nature of Paul's ministry in Rome, which as Bruce notes ends the book "with the chief herald of the gospel proclaiming it at the heart of the empire with the full acquiescence of the imperial authorities."[23] That enhances a key Lukan concern, to show (ordinary) Christians like Timothy and Erastus ministering without hindrance, just as Paul was allowed to in Rome.

The next parallel places the crowd yelling for Artemis for two hours (19:34) with the Διοσκούροις (28:11), which is of central concern in this article. That being the case, Luke is subtly putting the twin gods in the same category as the confused yet passionate Ephesians whose monomania continues for two hours. In fact, their folly is highlighted by one of their own officials who points out their "danger of being charged with rioting … since there is no cause that … [they] can give to justify … [the] commotion" (19:40). In other words, using the parallel, Luke takes a very dim view of the Διοσκούροις indeed! Taking his cue from the events of 19:34, Luke firmly but gently shows how pointless the Διοσκούροις are. Moreover, in the light of the Lord's ample provision, Paul and his companions have no need of Castor and Pollux (or any other pagan deity) for their protection. That reality, of course, has already been noted by Keener. So, a direct link with the Ephesians' two hours of foolishness goes a long way toward explaining Luke's mention of the twin gods in 28:11.

Interestingly, Luke leaves the Ephesian citizens (but not the Ephesian church) still believing in Artemis and the myths associated with her (19:35–36) undisturbed. In a similar way, by noting Paul's peaceful passage on a ship with the Διοσκούροις as a figurehead, he shows that Christians were not in the habit of openly ridiculing the gods as they proclaimed the gospel.[24] That important demeanor serves Luke's apologetic purpose: Christianity was no threat to Roman power. Also note his demonstration that the disturbance in Ephesus was occasioned by local hotheads who ignored due legal process (19:38), not by Paul and other law-abiding Christians. This has missiological implications, as noted below.

The third and final parallel associates the two chains used to bind Paul (authorized by the tribune) on his arrest in Jerusalem (21:33) with the two

[23] Bruce, *Acts*, 8.

[24] Paul certainly showed the wrong-headedness of worshiping gods in his Areopagus address (see 17:29), but the speech did not resort to ridicule or iconoclasm.

years he spent incarcerated under Felix the governor in Caesarea (24:27).[25] Neither was justified, as the tribune discovered on hearing of Paul's identity as a Roman citizen (22:25–29) and as Felix's successor Festus (together with Agrippa) determined once he heard Paul's testimony (26:31–32). Once again, Luke's apologetic concern emerges from this parallel. Yes, Paul was bound by two chains, but that should never have happened to a Roman citizen (22:29), and yes, Paul was kept captive (bound!) for two years, but that was a miscarriage of justice since Felix kept him only to pander to his Jewish opponents (24:27), while Festus would surely have released him, had he not appealed to Caesar (26:32).

We thus return to the center or climax of what certainly seems to be a ring composition (or prophetic rhetorical template). A formidable Roman force comprised of two centurions, two hundred soldiers, and two hundred spearmen (23:23) left Jerusalem both with Paul and an official affirmation, in writing, of his legitimate evangelistic activities. As Keener notes, "The letter includes nine legal terms, confirming that it functions as an official referral."[26] More than a referral though, it declares Paul's innocence in the tribune's eyes. Reflecting on the insights of a number of scholars, ancient and modern, Keener points out "that Lysias [the tribune] states Paul's innocence in a manner that fits Luke's pattern of Roman declaration of innocence for Paul and Jesus."[27] It seems that Luke clusters the "twos" here to emphasize his point that Paul's activities were legal. The letter carried by the Roman military plays a key role in the lengthy narrative of Paul's travails in Jerusalem, in Caesarea, and on the journey to Rome: Paul wasn't a criminal; in fact, significant authorities (the tribune, Festus, and Agrippa) agree that nothing he was doing merited death or imprisonment (23:29 and 26:31).

Before diagramming Luke's ring composition using all these insights, one needs to deal with a potential objection surrounding the seventy

[25] It seems that Luke deliberately inserted the (factually correct) detail of two chains in Jerusalem to complete the parallel with the two years in Caesarea. Otherwise, the narrative would flow well enough if he simply recorded the fact of Paul's arrest. In addition, both verses concerned (21:33 and 24:27) use cognates of δέω ("bind" or "tie"). In Jerusalem, Paul was "bound [δεθῆναι] with two chains" while in Caesarea, Felix literally left Paul bound (δεδεμένον). This adds to the evidence that Luke intentionally links the two incidents.

[26] Keener, *Acts*, 3:3332.

[27] Keener, *Acts,* 3:3332. Earlier examples of Paul's declared innocence include Acts 16:39 (where the magistrates came and released him [and Silas] from the Philippian prison) and Acts 18:14–16 (where the proconsul Gallio refused to consider a Jewish complaint against him).

horsemen accompanying the Roman force (23:23). If twos and their cognates are vital to Luke's composition here, why does he mention *seventy* horsemen? He probably does so because they play an important role in the story. They continue with Paul from Antipatris to Caesarea the next day, after the others return to Jerusalem (23:31–33). Thus, it is horsemen (the cavalry!) who present Paul to the Roman governor. However, they don't present a miserable prisoner on foot. Paul himself is mounted (23:24), together with his Roman companions, which says a good deal about his status in the tribune's eyes, and that, once again, serves Luke's apologetic purpose. Finally, most likely, Luke says there were seventy (a considerable number) because that is how many there were.[28] It doesn't interfere with his prophetic rhetorical template.

Luke's ring composition from Acts 19:21–28:31 may thus be diagrammed as follows:

Two helpers (19:22)	Unhindered ministry
Two hours' chanting (19:34)	Pagan folly
Two chains (21:33)	Unjustly bound
The Roman force (23:23)	Legitimated ministry
Two years in Caesarea (24:27)	Unjustly bound
Two gods (28:11)	Pagan folly
Two years in Rome (28:30)	Unhindered ministry

Simply put, this captures the story of Acts: Proclaiming the gospel is (or should be) perfectly legitimate under Roman law.[29] Moreover, despite the fact that Christians, such as their exemplar Paul, are bound unjustly and encounter pagan folly, gospel ministry continues unhindered.

Seen from this perspective, Luke's mention of the Διοσκούροις makes perfect sense. They are part of a prophetic rhetorical template that enhances a key Lukan aim. However, before concluding this is indeed the case, one might explore whether Luke uses a slightly different ring composition involving the Διοσκούροις to see if it points in the same direction.

A Possible Variation

Conceptually, Paul's final and dramatic journey (as Luke relates it) begins with antagonistic Jews seizing Paul and falsely accusing him in the temple in Jerusalem (21:27–28) and ends with him freely proclaiming the kingdom of God in Rome (28:30–31). Although shorter than Keener's

[28] Luke may also have mentioned the number of horsemen because it conveniently coincided with a biblically significant number.

[29] This assumes that Luke completed Acts before official Roman persecution of Christians was entrenched.

sixth and last section (or panel) of the book (19:21–28:31), Paul's movement from Jerusalem to Rome echoes the movement of the gospel between those symbolic cities. That is a key theme of the book, as already noted.

So how may Luke's twos be arranged within Paul's final journey? An adaptation of (and addition to) the relevant elements diagrammed above looks like this:

Two chains (21:33)
  Two factions, Sadducees and Pharisees (23:6)
    Two cities, Jerusalem and Rome (23:11)
      The letter-bearing Roman force, in twos (23:23–30)
    Two years in Caesarea (24:27)
  Two gods (28:11)
Two years in Rome (28:30)

This schema goes beyond use of the word two (or a cognate thereof), and one needs some imagination to see linkages. It still demonstrates the centrality of the tribune's legitimating letter, bracketed between the start and end of Paul's final journey and the time it took, by way of Caesarea, to get there. However, the other connections are a harder sell. It is unlikely that Luke means to imply that the Sadducees and Pharisees are no better than two pagan gods, especially since the Pharisees (in the Jewish council) came to Paul's defense (23:9). Also, Paul had far more freedom during his two years in Rome than he did right after his arrest in Jerusalem (although he did manage to address the Jewish crowd at the time, 21:37–22:22). It thus seems best to downplay if not eliminate this variation, even though it points in the same direction.

Summary

Further options might present themselves as others investigate Luke's use of ring compositions in both his Gospel and Acts.[30] For now, it seems best to settle on the ring composition based specifically on twos and their cognates as presented, drawing from the last section of Acts (19:21–28:31) in its entirety. It certainly fits well with Acts's overall account of the gospel's advance and strengthens the important Lukan claim that the early Christian movement was legitimate in official Roman eyes.

[30] This could involve shorter or longer text portions in Luke-Acts, depending on the complexity of the literary tune. In addition, ring compositions used by Luke (and other biblical authors) might be investigated for the inferred meaning of God's providence in the details of history: I am indebted to John Burkett for this insight.

To summarize, impressive evidence indicates that Luke mentions the Διοσκούροις deliberately. He uses them in a prophetic rhetorical template to support his point that the Roman authorities had no legal problem with Paul's ministry. That is the central idea in Luke's ring composition involving twos and their cognates. However, seeing them within that ring composition (instead of being just a superfluous detail in Luke's narrative) gives them a role of their own. They highlight the folly of paganism by virtue of their link to the crazy crowd in Ephesus. Yet Luke makes his point, for those with eyes to see it, without being unnecessarily offensive.

Lessons for Christian Missions

Luke's skillful (and Spirit-inspired) structuring of the Ephesus-to-Rome narrative in Acts 19:21–28:31 has more than literary impact. In fact, one may draw at least three missiological principles from this carefully crafted ring composition. First, one can assert the legitimacy of gospel proclamation by law-abiding Christians in all contexts. Second, one should identify idolatrous tendencies in whatever form they appear. But third, one must give idolaters the freedom to worship their false gods without fearing Christians will ridicule or destroy them. A few applications of these principles follow.

The Legitimacy of Gospel Proclamation

Freedom to share one's faith varies considerably from one context to another. All too many believers in Christ are "unjustly bound," to use the phrase from Luke's ring composition, in a country like Iran, for instance. Yet their number continues to grow, as exemplified in the title of Mark Bradley's book on Christians in that country, *Too Many to Jail*.[31] While ministry in Iran is not unhindered, it is certainly apparent that the Lord Jesus Christ is building his church (Matt 16:18). However, looking beyond the reality of simultaneous persecution and church growth in Iran and beyond, the principle of *legitimacy* presents itself as something anyone sharing the good news of Jesus might grasp.

Ultimately, a Christian's legitimacy stems from God himself. Just as Peter and John refused the Jewish authorities' order to stop mentioning Jesus, surely everyone transformed by an encounter with him "cannot but speak of what [they] have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20).[32] Yet, as Luke's

[31] Mark Bradley, *Too Many to Jail: The Story of Iran's New Christians* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2014).

[32] Unfortunately, this is not always the case in practice. Many believers are

ring composition would imply, the faith we proclaim should be presented not as a threat but as a characteristically law-abiding way of life. Practically then, as a first resort, Christians should seek to obey the law as they share the good news. This applies whether legal freedoms are granted or withheld.

In a restrictive context like Iran, as Bradley points out, evangelism occurs out of the public eye, in family settings, and new churches meet in homes. Iranian believers, drawing on the legitimacy God himself provides, are fulfilling the Great Commission to make disciples. However, they do so in an unobtrusive, non-threatening (and hence legitimate) way.

Interestingly though, some secular Iranians challenge the laws of their country head-on. Masih Alinejad documents examples in her *The Wind in My Hair*, covering the brutal repression of dissidents after the rigged 2009 elections and courageous women who deliberately removed their hijabs in public.[33] Despite the human rights validity of publicly protesting the Iranian regime's policies, this has not been Iranian Christians' approach. Instead, they are exercising their God-given legitimacy in a way that poses no direct challenge to the regime. And that fits well with the central theme emerging from Luke's ring composition.

Unfortunately, while Christians avoid direct challenges to the authorities, regimes in Iran and elsewhere nevertheless treat Christians harshly. As an example, *Release International's* periodical *Voice of Persecuted Christians* gives many details of Christian persecution.[34] One account from Pakistan is of interest for our purposes. Akbar, a pastor, was arrested after he intervened to stop a police-supported mob from confiscating a home belonging to two Christians. He was mocked and beaten in jail. However, when a guard heard him praying for the prison authorities, word reached the superintendent, who allowed him to hold an unprecedented Sunday service for the nominally Christian prisoners. In response to his preaching, twenty-two prisoners repented and put their trust in Christ. He was released shortly thereafter.[35]

This remarkable prison experience recalls Luke's central claim that the early Christian movement was legitimate in official Roman eyes. Pastor

afraid to share their faith. My encouragement here is to see one's relationship with Christ not as something to be "sold," but what flows naturally out of one, as with other significant things one sees and hears.

[33] Masih Alinejad, *The Wind in My Hair: My Fight for Freedom in Modern Iran* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2018).

[34] *Voice of Persecuted Christians*, July–September 2020, https://issuu.com/ releaseinternational/docs/r111-mag-ps-linked.

[35] "Sharing the Gospel Behind Bars," *Voice of Persecuted Christians*, July–September 2020, 10–11.

Akbar found favor with the Pakistani jail superintendent in a way reminiscent of the tribune's affirmation of Paul's ministry.[36] The takeaway here is Christians should look for (and even expect) allies in high places as they legitimately exercise their ministries, even in dire circumstances.[37] However, seeking such allies never implies compromising one's faith. In other words, speaking to and working with unbelieving authorities must accompany a personal recognition and rejection of idolatry. This is especially the case when the trappings of power or the establishment tempt us, as suggested in the next application.

Identifying Idolatrous Tendencies

Luke's ring composition shows his clear repudiation of idolatry. As already noted, he links the (prominent) twin gods on the ship with the Artemis-crazed crowd in Ephesus. Applying this example to an instance from our own era, it is easy to condemn a Hindu mob in India, with the name of the god Ram on their lips, as they bay for their Muslim compatriots' blood.[38] More subtle though, is one's own propensity for idolatry.

G. K. Beale explains that idolatry encompasses anything (other than God) that one loyally embraces for supreme security.[39] It is not restricted to gods depicted in physical images. Beale goes on to identify (Jewish) idolatry in the first century as "trusting in tradition instead of God and his living Word."[40] Moving to the Book of Acts, he identifies the idolatry of the Jews (who were enraged by Stephen's testimony) as the belief "that one was blessed by God's unique presence in the temple and not in Christ."[41] In contrast, God's ultimate design was not worship in a hand-

[36] It may also be compared to Joseph's jail experience in Egypt, where at the Lord's instigation, the prison-keeper favored him to the extent that he effectively ran the establishment (Gen 39:21–23).

[37] This principle should probably be coupled with Jesus's promise that his followers would be given the words to say when brought before all kinds of authorities (Matt 10:19).

[38] Hanan Zaffar and Hasan Akram, "Fear, Silent Migration: A Year After Anti-Muslim Riots in Delhi," *Al Jazeera*, February 23, 2021, https:// www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/23/fear-migration-a-year-after-anti-muslim-violence-in. The report cites a Muslim witness who "heard shouts of 'Jai Shri Ram' (Hail Lord Ram)—a Hindu chant that has lately become a rallying cry for murder—reverberating at some distance from her home."

[39] G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 17.

[40] Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 28.

[41] Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 188.

made temple, since "his presence would break out of that human structure and spread throughout the earth through Christ, his Spirit and his people. Thus to continue to worship at the old architectural temple and not to worship Christ is to make an idol out of the temple."[42] It is thus fair to say that Luke's condemnation of idolatry in Acts extends even to the Jewish temple, in addition to the cases considered in Ephesus and on the ship.

The application for evangelicals today is to watch carefully for idolatrous tendencies in ourselves. Like the Jews' trust in structural traditions, evangelicals are tempted to rely on and defend outward trappings—as ultimate things—rather than Christ himself. Such trappings would include comfortable (and legitimate) societal values, such as the traditional family unit. The trappings of medical science too, for all their twenty-first-century benefits, easily claim priority when illness strikes. However, given the brevity of life, families and medicine can only go so far in taking care of us. We need the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ for our eternal (ultimate) needs.

Over the years, Christian missions have rightly facilitated family values and medical advances as gospel byproducts. But if they, rather than the biblical God and his ways, are embraced for supreme security, that embrace fits Beale's explanation of idolatry. So, along with rejecting the Ephesians' idolatry, one must exercise careful vigilance to avoid being sucked into reliance on non-ultimate things. That means constantly prioritizing gospel hope and behavior as Christians navigate progressive challenges to traditional values and the far-reaching claims of medical science. Otherwise, idolatry will ensue.[43]

Giving Idolaters Freedom to Worship

Finally, a challenge presented by Luke's linkage of the Ephesian crowd with the Διοσκούροις is the task of condemning idolatry unequivocally but inoffensively. Returning to the Hindu mob mentioned above, the path of wisdom would indicate that one recognize the blinding idolatry controlling the crowd and, if possible, stay out of the way. That was the approach of the disciples (and others) in Ephesus when they kept Paul away from the crowd (Acts 19:30–31), even though Luke's account leaves one in no doubt about the folly of idolatry.

With the fatuity of idols established, Luke gives no hint that Paul or

[42] Beale, *We Become What We Worship*, 191.

[43] It may well be necessary to call out idolatrous Christian behavior for the sake of gospel integrity. However, that is not the right response when one deals with unbelievers who have yet to embrace Christ, as the following section makes clear.

his (Christian) companions took any action, verbal or physical, against the Διοσκούροις on the ship. As a prisoner, Paul had to travel on that vessel and was in no position to tamper with the gods. But he could have delivered a few choice comments about them, if not to everyone on board, at least to his companions. There is no record that he did so. By the same token, ridiculing Hindu gods is not the way to win Hindus to Christ. To illustrate this, W. Stephens shares the story of Suresh, an Indian student who was actively seeking Christ (though still a Hindu):

> On one of his first visits to a Bible-believing church, the pastor made some unkind remarks about Eastern religions. Even his American friend who brought him was uncomfortable. A few weeks later the same thing happened at a different church with a different pastor. Sadly, he did not … return to any Bible-believing churches and his quest was interrupted.… Our focus is to lift up the gospel and the Lord Jesus Christ and not belittle other religions.[44]

Put differently, one must develop the skill of presenting the hope of the gospel while overlooking idolatry, at least in the beginning stages of relationships with unbelievers.[45]

My wife and I have a ministry to international students, most of them Hindus. We are aware of their devotion to Krishna and other deities from the artifacts they have in their rooms and elsewhere.[46] However, we acquiesce in that devotion as we show our concern for their regular needs and share our faith in Christ with them through everyday experiences of life. This is hopefully in the spirit of Paul, who concluded his (extended) third missionary journey in the presence of the Διοσκούροις but paid them no heed, idols though they were.

Conclusion

Luke's deliberate mention of the Διοσκούροις in Acts 28:11 not only demonstrates his skill as a writer, but it also carries helpful principles for Christian missions. Just as the Roman authorities of Luke's day saw Paul's ministry as legitimate, it is always warranted for law-abiding Christians to

[44] W. Stephens, *Connecting with Hindu International Students: Sharing the Good News with Cultural Wisdom* (USA: InterVarsity International Student Ministry, 2019), 67.

[45] A time must come when an unbeliever embracing Christ abandons his or her idols (cf. 1 Thess 1:9–10). Paul was certainly aiming for such an eventuality with his speech to the Areopagites (see Acts 17:30). However, that did not require him to attack their idols (or those on the ship).

[46] Interestingly, Hindus call physical manifestations of their deities "idols," but without any negative connotation.

proclaim the gospel. At the same time, idolatrous tendencies should be identified, especially when Christians resort to them, in whatever form they appear. However, since the Διοσκούροις (and even Artemis of Ephesus) remained undisturbed, unbelievers to whom Christians witness should have no fear that they will openly ridicule their false gods.