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Is Paul Proclaiming The Way
or a Way of Salvation in Acts 16:17?

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οἵτινες καταγγέλλουσιν ὑμῖν ὁδὸν σωτηρίας (Acts 16:17): Is Paul Proclaiming The Way or A Way of Salvation?

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1) The Exorcism of the Slave Girl

Acts 16:16-19 narrates one of the series of events that occurred during Paul's visit to the city of Philippi, a very important Roman colony city, during his Second Missionary Journey. After the conversion of Lydia (Acts 16:11-15), Paul and his co-workers were met by a slave girl possessed by πνεῦμα πύθωνα, literally, "a spirit of Python" or "a Pythonian spirit." It is interesting to note that while πύθων (Python) is a reference to soothsaying divinity, it is originally conceived as a snake or dragon who served as the guardian of the Oracle at Delphi. This spirit was subsequently defeated and slain by Apollo. Priestesses at Delphi that uttered the oracles of Apollo were later known as Pythiai. As such, a spirit of divination is mostly intended here.¹ Her ability to provide fortune telling to the people had brought her owners a considerable amount of fortune.

¹ Cf. the translations of NRSV, NASB, KJV, and ESV, amongst others, which rightly translate the phrase πνεῦμα πύθωνα as "a spirit of divination." The NIV slightly obscures the translation by rendering the phrase πνεῦμα πύθωνα as "a spirit by which she predicted the future." The NLT's generalisation of the phrase as "demon-possessed" is not particularly helpful.

In Philippi, this slave girl followed Paul and his co-workers by crying out these words: οὗτοι οἱ ἄνθρωποι δούλοι τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ὑψίστου εἰσίν, οἵτινες καταγγέλλουσιν ὑμῖν ὁδὸν σωτηρίας, typically translated as “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation” (Acts 16:17, ESV). This constant shouting concerning their identity and the content of their message continued for an extended period of time (Acts 16:18). Paul was deeply troubled by this and made a decisive choice by performing exorcism on this girl.

2) The Source of the Slave Girl’s Utterance as the Ground of Exorcism?

Encounters with sorcery, magic, pagan or false religions are nothing new in Acts.² Similar stories are found in the narratives of Simon Magus in 8:9-24; Bar-Jesus/Elymas in 13:6-12; and the seven sons of Sceva in 19:13-20.³ It is interesting to note that in both the incidents of Simon Magus and Bar-Jesus, there is no indication that exorcism was being executed by Peter or Paul respectively. Instead, the apostles spoke words of judgement to these individuals who became obstacles in the progress of the proclamation of the gospel (8:20-23; 13:10-11).

However in Philippi, the situation seems different. Here, Paul was so

² For further discussion on religious pluralism in the Greco-Roman world, see Dan Cohn-Sherbok & John M. Court, eds, *Religious Diversity in the Graeco-Roman World: A Survey of Recent Scholarship* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001). See also the useful survey of magic and paganism in Hans-Josef Klauck, *Magic and Paganism in Early Christianity: The World of the Acts of the Apostles*, translated by Brian McNeil (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000).

³ Cf. Acts 5:16; 8:7; 19:12.

deeply troubled by what the slave girl uttered that it ultimately led to the act of exorcism. Why was exorcism necessary? I. Howard Marshall suggests that the girl's cry "may not seem dangerous at first; indeed there is no suggestion that she was hostile to the missionaries."⁴ If she was not hostile and appeared harmless to the missionaries, how would the drastic acts of exorcism be justified? After all, was the slave girl not correct to say that Paul and his companions were servants of the Most High God and they were the ones telling the people *the* way of salvation or *the* way to be saved, as reflected in most of the English translations?⁵ If this is the truth, why did Paul not acknowledge that even this girl possessed by the spirit of Python recognised who they were and understood the content of their message as pointing people to the way of salvation?

Most commentators believe that since the confession of their identity as servants of the Most High God and the content of their message came from a demoniac source, exorcism needed to be carried out in order to silence the confession of the slave girl. Marshall argues that "it became clear to Paul that she was in the grip of an evil *spirit*"⁶ and, as such, exorcism becomes necessary. Marshall is not alone in his observation. Simon Kistemaker offers similar comments and they are worth quoting

⁴ I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 269. See also similar observations by David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 464 and Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 502.

⁵ See ESV, KJV, NASB, NET, NIV, NKJV, and RSV, amongst others. The NLT has "they have come to tell you how to be saved."

⁶ Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 269, italics his.

in full:

“In itself, this confession is noble, provided it comes from the heart of a believer and in the form of a declaration of faith. But the acknowledgment comes indirectly from Satan, who, by using this girl, is trying to diminish the effectiveness of Paul’s ministry...Indeed, if Paul had accepted Satan’s testimony without discernment, he would have given the devil credit and thus approved his motives...(T)he continual shouting of the girl became a hindrance to Paul in the preaching of the gospel, and the distraction so perturbed him that he had to intervene and address the demon residing in the girl.”⁷

Likewise, David Peterson believes that Paul was so concerned that the slave girl was saying these things under the influence of an evil spirit and thus confused the pagan audience that he was trying to reach them with the proclamation of the gospel.⁸ Peterson further suggests that Paul’s greater concern was that the audience might have further mistaken him as

⁷ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 593. Cf. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 464: The message of the slave girl “was false because it was being proclaimed by someone who did not really know what she was talking about.” See also Richard Belward Rackham, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Exposition* (London: Methuen & Co, 1901), 287: “...the gospel was to be propagated neither by the testimony of evil spirits, nor by the methods of excitement.”

⁸ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 464. Cf. William J. Larkin, *Acts*, IVP New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995), 237-238; Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Acts*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville, Abingdon, 2003), 238.

being possessed by similar spirits as in the slave girl and this subsequently drove Paul to carry out exorcism on her,⁹ perhaps as evidenced in the experience in Lystra where Paul and Barnabas were mistakenly identified as Hermes and Zeus respectively (Acts 14:8-18). Still, others suggest that the need for exorcism could be attributed to the fact that the slave girl was preaching Paul and Silas instead of Christ;¹⁰ that Paul and his coworkers were not being appreciative of her “unsolicited testimonials”;¹¹ and that the slave girl “picked up phrases used of and by the missionaries, following them round and calling them out in the way Luke records.”¹²

Based on the above observations, many questions either remained unanswered or unsatisfactorily and inadequately addressed. Does the demoniac source which inspired the utterance of the slave girl constitute a sufficient ground for Paul’s annoyance that led to act of exorcism? This hardly seems reasonable, and if this is so, why was there no exorcism carried out on Bar-Jesus, described as “a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right” (Acts 13:10), who actually opposed Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:8)? After all, did the girl not do a great service to Paul by providing free publicity concerning the gospel to the crowd? Were her ceaseless shouts, a nuisance to Paul, deserved to be silenced?

⁹ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 464.

¹⁰ Daniel Rakotojoelinandrasana, “The Gospel in Adversity: Reading Acts 16:16-34 in African Context,” *Word & World* 21 (2001): 192.

¹¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 313. Cf. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 269, writes of her “unexpected publicity.”

¹² James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Narrative Commentaries (Valley Forge: Trinity, 1996), 221.

How could it possibly be that her actions, despite not being hostile to the missionaries, caused Paul to be annoyed and deeply troubled? If in fact the girl was really acknowledging what Paul was doing, it seems reasonable to suggest that at least some form of appreciation would be rendered to her and that Paul would have at least let her proclamation continue. Furthermore, would Luke have likely portrayed Paul as someone being simply annoyed at the presence of evil that led to exorcism which in turn created all the troubles with the girl's owners that ultimately resulted in Paul suffering from severe flogging and unjust imprisonment (Acts:16:18-40)?

3) The Content of the Slave Girl's Utterance as the Ground of Exorcism: Proclaiming A Way of Salvation?

In this short essay, I suggest that an explanation from a different angle is necessary in order to resolve the above questions. A closer examination of the Greek text reveals the most likely ground for Paul's anger and exorcism. The slave girl described Paul and his companions as "οἵτινες καταγγέλλουσιν ὑμῖν ὁδὸν σωτηρίας" (Acts 16:17).¹³ Notice that there is an absence of the definite article before ὁδὸν σωτηρίας. This anarthrous construction of the noun and the dependent genitive could mean that ὁδὸν σωτηρίας can be either definite or indefinite, as the Apollonius' Canon suggests.¹⁴ As such, the context must determine

¹³ It is not particularly helpful that Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 101, labels the genitive σωτηρίας as "genitive of destination."

¹⁴ For further discussion on the absence of the article, see A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*

whether the phrase ὁδὸν σωτηρίας should be translated as “the way of salvation” or “a way of salvation”. In this respect, close attention should be given to the use of the word ὁδός and σωτηρία.

In Acts, the use of ὁδός is significant and distinctive, and it appears a total of twenty times¹⁵ of which eight times refer explicitly to the followers of the Christ movement or the followers of the teachings of the Lord (Acts 9:2, 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22; cf. 18:25, 26).¹⁶ As such, when ὁδός is used specifically in relation to the gospel, Luke always uses the article. This suggests that the omission of the article in ὁδὸν σωτηρίας is not only significant but deliberate.

The notion of salvation is also a dominant theme in Acts.¹⁷ While the understanding of salvation in the Lukan perspective involves the forgiveness of sins through faith in Israel’s Messiah (e.g., 4:12; 7:25; 13:26, 47, 27:34), in the context of Philippi, it could hardly refer to the Christian message. Philippi, as a Roman colony, was predominantly a Gentile city, and without the presence of a synagogue, Jewish influence in this city would have been almost negligible.¹⁸ In this respect, it is

(Nashville: Broadman, 1934), 790-796 and Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 243-254.

¹⁵ See Acts 1:12; 2:28; 8:26, 36, 39; 9:2, 17, 27; 13:10; 14:16; 16:17; 18:25, 26; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22; 25:3; 26:13

¹⁶ For further discussion on possible background of ὁδός, see C. K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles*, International Critical Commentary, Vol 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 448.

¹⁷ For further discussion on the notion of salvation in Acts, see Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles*, I: 230-233.

¹⁸ A minimum of ten male Jews were required to establish a synagogue. In

reasonable to argue that in the ears of the Gentile hearers, σωτηρία would not have carried with it any notion of the gospel message that was alien to them. What would have resonated in their minds would most likely be the understanding of σωτηρία within their Greco-Roman context that connotes the notion of well-being; healing or rescue from illness, battles and any other forms of dangers; bodily health; and perseverance and safekeeping.¹⁹ As such, salvation could also be considered as “the object of vows and prayers to many gods in the Greco-Roman world.”²⁰

In other words, with the absence of an article before ὁδὸν σωτηρίας, it can be convincingly argued that the phrase takes on an indefinite nuance, and should be rightly translated as “a way of salvation” as rendered by the NRSV. In this respect, what the slave girl was in fact proclaiming in her shouts was that Paul was merely preaching **a way of salvation**; and not **the way of salvation**.²¹ This would have been confusing and

Philippi, there was no evidence of a synagogue, and this led Paul to go to “a place of prayer” outside the city gate on Sabbath (Acts 16:13). This suggests that there was hardly any Jewish presence in this city.

¹⁹ See TDNT, VII: 965-969. See also Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 495. Contra Barclay M. Newman & Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1972), 318 who suggest that in this context, “Luke certainly intends for his readers to understand that there is but one way of salvation; and for this reason ‘way of salvation’ must be understood in the sense that Luke himself would have taken it, ‘the way of salvation’”.

²⁰ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 464. Cf. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 313 who commented that salvation in “a religious sense was as eagerly sought by Gentiles as by Jews.”

²¹ So Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles*, II: 774; Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007),