

Running head: THE CROWD IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

Two's Company but Three's a Crowd:
A Study on the Crowd in the Book of Acts

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Abstract

The book of Acts is an entity of its own. While it is a part of the canonical Bible as one of the sixty-six books, it is unique in that it presents the continuation of God's plan from Jesus Christ to the growth of the early Christian church. More than that, in the book of Acts God further develops his plan of restoration to include not only the Jews but also the Gentiles. With Acts being a unique work of literature, each component of the work uniquely moves the story along. One component is that of the crowd, specifically the Greek word *ochlos*. This study will trace and examine the development of the *ochlos* from Luke's authorship of his gospel through the book of Acts.

Two's Company but Three's a Crowd

A Study on the Crowd in the Book of Acts

Introduction

Crowds, or the Greek word *ochlos*, have long been used to develop narratives, allow for character development, and create lasting points within literature, dating back to ancient literature. A simple definition of *ochlos* is “a crowd or an unorganized multitude.”¹ More precisely, Colin Brown defines it as “a crowd or throng, the public, being in contrast to the individual people, and particularly in contrast to the nobility or people of rank.”² To add to this definition, Meyer defines the word as first meaning “a crowd or throng, the public, distinct from private persons, and then as the mass or even a mob.”³ With this explanation, Luke, the author of Luke and Acts, uses *ochlos* throughout his gospel and Acts to further the purpose and the mission of God. This statement will be examined further as the development of the “crowd” is analyzed in the course of this thesis.

The Original Word

The original word will first be examined by looking at the Greek text to understand its English occurrence. An alternate word that may be used to describe the crowd will be briefly examined before spending time analyzing the specific occurrences of the original Greek word.

1. George Berry, *A Dictionary of New Testament Greek Synonyms, with Indexes to Bauer's Greek-English Lexicon and Brown's Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, New ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1979).

2. H. Bietenhard, “People,” vol. 2 in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1975), 800.

3. R. Meyer, “*ochlos*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament Abridged*, ed. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1985), 750.

The Greek Text

In the Greek text, the word that is commonly used to describe the crowd in both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts is *ochlos*. This word appears a combined sixty-three times throughout the two books and twenty-two specifically within Acts. It is generally used in reference to a multitude of people or a company, and in some instances it can be referred to as a riot.⁴ Luke uses this word in Acts 8:6, “And the *crowds* (emphasis added within verse references) with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip when they heard him and saw the signs that he did” (ESV).

In some instances, *ochlos* does not appear in reference to the crowd in Luke-Acts; instead Luke uses another Greek word in its place, *laos*. This word does not appear as frequently in the development of the crowd scenes, but is interchanged throughout the book and used in a more generic sense. The word *laos* specifically means “people.”⁵ The word has been shown to reference the people of Israel specifically and was commonly used as such in the Septuagint.⁶ In comparison to *ochlos*, this word appears forty-eight times throughout the book of Acts. It can be examined in Acts 4:1, “And as they were speaking to the *people*, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them...” (ESV).

The Focus of the Study

While *laos* is important to the overarching narrative of the book, it will not be the main focus of this study. Instead, Luke appears to provide the greatest development of the

4. James Strong, *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek Testament and the Hebrew Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009).

5. Ibid.

6. Meyer, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*.

crowd scenes and their interactions with main characters when using *ochlos*. Before this statement is examined further, a brief examination of *ochlos* in ancient literature and the use of the crowd in Luke will be examined to understand its purpose in Acts better.

Ancient Literature

Both Luke and Acts were written in the first century. It is quite possible that both ancient and first century literature influenced Luke in his writing of both Luke and Acts. In fact, Richard Ascough states, “Luke’s presentation of crowds has a close affinity with crowd scenes in ancient Greek literature.”⁷ Within the Greek language itself, the language possesses a rich and varied terminology for the concept of crowds.⁸ While *ochlos* most generically means “a crowd, or throng” it closely parallels the term *homilos*, “assembled crowd” and *ochlagogeo*, literally a “led crowd. This is opposed to similar terms with broader political implications such as *laos*, “people or folk” and *demos*, “country, land, or citizenry.”⁹

The term, *ochlos*, appears 641 times in the Greek main corpus, from the tragic and comic poets, through the great philosophers Plato and Aristotle, and on to the New Testament. The Greek word appears for the very first time during the fifth century:¹⁰

Ochlos surfaces for the first time during a period of the first half of the fifth century BC which was active in word coining and appearance of new concepts. It was used on a par with ὄμιλος, well-known since Homeric times, which also had the meaning of “crowd,” “unorganized gathering.” But ὄμιλος had the primary meaning of “connection with something, contact, affinity,” whereas *ochlos* belongs to a completely different semantic group (“anxiety, difficulty,

7. Richard Ascough, “Narrative Technique and Generic Designation: Crowd Scenes in Luke-Acts and in Chariton,” *The Catholic Bible Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (1996): 69.

8. Jeffrey T Schnapp, *Crowds* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 278.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*, 279.

inconvenience”).¹¹

Luke was an extremely informed citizen of his day; as a medical doctor, he possessed both intellectual and scientific prowess. Without a doubt he was familiar with ancient literature. Regardless if it influenced his writings or not, there are similarities to be found. Richard Ascough references Richard Pervo in *Crowd Scenes in Luke-Acts*, who is able to identify thirty-three episodes of adventure in Acts which each function to “stimulate the reader but also to proclaim the mighty providence of God.”¹² These adventurous episodes include a full spectrum of action scenes – arrests, persecution, martyrdom, plots and intrigue, *crowds and riots*, and a shipwreck – each adding an element of entertainment that compares closely with the style of much ancient literature.¹³

It is suggested that Luke is using the presentation of these crowd scenes to serve several purposes: the crowd as an audience, the crowd as an indication of popularity, the crowd to prevent hostile action, the crowd as involved in disturbances, and the crowd contributing to the narrative flow.¹⁴ All of these are evident within the scope of Luke-Acts, and Acts specifically focuses heavily on the latter two. For example, the crowd often becomes unruly towards the “heroes” when they are incited to do so by Jewish leaders. The crowd scenes, like those of those of ancient literature, work to form one piece in the larger puzzle of the Luke-Acts account.¹⁵

11. Justin Schwab, “*The Birth of the Mob: Representations of Crowds in Archaic and Classical Greek Literature*,” (PhD Diss., UC Berkeley, 2011).

12. Ascough, *Crowd Scenes in Luke-Acts*.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

An Examination of Luke

The Gospel of Luke needs to be examined to understand the bridge into Acts as well as to see the beginning of the theological themes that continue into Acts.¹⁶ It is quite possible that it was never intended for the two works to be separated. Originally the two volumes circulated among the churches as a single work, but in the second century the gospel of Luke joined the other three gospels, and Acts began to circulate on its own.¹⁷ Beyond the selection and recounting of specific stories, Luke puts his narrative together in such a way that the Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry typologically precede the ministry of the Spirit-empowered church.¹⁸

Before the Crucifixion

Ochlos appears a total of forty-one times throughout the Gospel of Luke. The first two occur in relation to John the Baptist in 3:7 and in 3:10. "The narrator of Luke assumes that there is continuity between the crowds that come to be baptized by John the Baptist and those who will surround Jesus during his ministry, with John's response to them in verse seven foreshadowing the future."¹⁹ Verse seven reads, "He said therefore to the *crowds* that came out to be baptized him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?'" (ESV). John's harsh response to the *ochlos* is meant to

16. Ibid.

17. J. Scott Duvall, and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-on Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 292.

18. C. Marvin Pate, *The Story of Israel: A Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 180.

19. Tannehill, Robert C. *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts, A Literary Interpretation: The Gospel According to Luke*, Vol. 1. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1990)

leave the reader in doubt over the seriousness of their repentance, a note that would later be resounded in the preaching of Jesus.

Throughout chapters four through eight of Luke, the *ochlos* responds quite favorably to Jesus, who has now begun his ministry. Unfortunately, there are indications in chapter eight that the crowd's response is superficial and inadequate.²⁰ Chapter eight verses nine through fifteen details how he is encountering a lack of response to his word by the Jewish crowd around him. However, Luke never insinuates that all hope is lost at this point.

In Luke 9 there is an additional indication of a positive relationship between Jesus and the crowd, but there are also some hints of tension, a tension that will increase in chapters eleven through thirteen where the crowd is rejecting Jesus.²¹ The *ochlos* continues to come to Jesus for healing and even rejoice at the glorious things done by him. However in the next scene Jesus will respond to someone with a severe warning of exclusion from God's reign (13:22-30). There will be four major statements to the *ochlos* where the audience discovers that some of the crowd are opposing Jesus and that the crowds are accused of being unresponsive and are threatened with judgment and exclusion.²² The crowd is beginning to be portrayed in opposition to Jesus, foreshadowing what occurs later in Luke.

Jesus is teaching in the temple in Luke 19, and a contrast starts to form once more between the people and the leaders. This time, the support is overwhelmingly in favor of

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., 148.

22. Ibid., 152.

Jesus. The support is so robust that the religious leaders are unable to arrest Jesus. This strong support is undermined by the words of Jesus that indicate that popular support will not determine the course of events and that Jerusalem as a whole will be implicated with Jesus' rejection and suffer the consequences.²³ In fact, the story of Jesus and the *ochlos* will come to a climax in Jerusalem.

The Crucifixion

The Jewish leaders finally act to arrest Jesus in the section of Luke from chapters 22-23. Although the leaders instigate the arrest, the people and *ochlos* are directly involved. "When the narrator comes to the crucial scene in which the final decision for Jesus' death is made, the people support their leaders in calling for Jesus' death."²⁴ This will fit with the literary features of Luke-Acts, specifically with the speeches in Acts where the people of Jerusalem are said to share in the guilt of rejecting and killing Jesus. The second to last occurrence of *ochlos* in Luke takes place in 23:4 when Pilate tells the crowd that he finds no fault in Jesus, to which they respond for his crucifixion. The crucifixion and denial of Jesus Christ is the first violent context of the *ochlos*. While this may conclude the Gospel of Luke, it actually foreshadows what is to come with the *ochlos* of the continuing narrative in Acts.

Luke closes with the death and resurrection, while Acts opens with a review and the ascension.²⁵ Acts is furthering the plan of restoration that Luke first introduced in his gospel through Jesus Christ. Although, this plan of restoration is originally introduced to

23. Ibid., 158.

24. Ibid., 164.

25. Fowler, "Acts Outline."

the Jews, in Acts one can see a transition of the Gospel from the Jews to the Gentiles, and then rejection by the Jews and Israel. If Luke's purpose is to move this plan along, then what role will the "crowd" (*ochlos*) play in Acts?

Specific Examinations in Acts

While the brevity of this study does not allow for the complete examination of every occurrence of a crowd scene in Acts, the overall development will be shown to revolve around three stages in the account, involving primarily the use of *ochlos*, minus one specific instance where *laos* will be examined. These stages are broken into Acts 1-12, Acts 13-14, and then Acts 15-28.

Acts 1-12

In this section *ochlos* appears a total of five times, the smallest of the three stages, and is scattered throughout, appearing twice in chapter eleven. The first time that this word or reference appears is in Acts 1:15 which reads, "In those days Peter stood up among the brothers (*the company* of persons was in all about 120)" (ESV). Luke made the parenthetical remark that the group numbered about 120 believers.²⁶ This is in reference to the early community from which the church would start. It is a very generic use of the word and simply allows for the foundation of the church and gospel message to be laid. In fact, all five references to *ochlos* (Acts 1:15, 6:7, 8:6, 11:24, 11:26) allow for a foundation of the gospel to be laid throughout Jerusalem and the believing community. In no way does the crowd (*ochlos*) stand in opposition to the mission. The crowd serves as a way to further the narrative and the task that Jesus entrusted to the disciples at his ascension.

26. Polhill, *Acts*, 91.

The Account of Stephen. While the occurrences of the word in the section of Acts 1-12 do not present the “crowd” as being in opposition to the mission, the usage of this word needs to be understood in relation to the mini-climax that occurs in this section. The mini-climax is what takes place in Acts 6-7 with the stoning of Stephen. Up until the account of Stephen, the crowd or people do not stand in opposition or violence and do not employ violent opposition again until Acts 13-14. While the Greek word *ochlos* does not appear in this section (the stoning of Stephen), the word *laos* does; thus it is translated as “people” and not *crowd*. This account needs to be mentioned because it allows for the development of the *ochlos* throughout the book of Acts.

At the moment of Stephen’s speech and stoning the gospel had been growing tremendously. In fact, the second occurrence of *ochlos* appears directly prior to Stephen’s speech in Acts 6:7 which reads, “And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many (*ochlos*) of the priests became obedient to the faith.” (ESV).

According to Polhill, we may assume that at this point the Christian community consisted exclusively of Jews. The only exceptions would be the ‘proselytes,’ like Nicolas (6:5), who were Gentiles who had converted to Judaism. The Gentile mission as such had not yet begun.²⁷ However, the *ochlos* had been increasing to this point, and the mission of God was about to enter the next phase of his plan of restoration. With this in mind, Acts 6:7 is written and the issue with the widows in chapter six is solved, and the apostles have been freed to witness, allowing for the word of God to spread. The word of God unexpectedly reached “Jewish priests.” These were not the same Jewish priests that

27. Ibid.

would stand opposed later in Acts. Richard Bauckham describes these specific Jewish priests as the following:

There were many poor priests in Palestine, perhaps as many as 8,000. They received little support from the temple cult, had to support themselves primarily with their own hands, and had little in common with the Sadducean priestly aristocracy. From their ranks came these Christian converts. Luke's mentioning them at this point in the narrative may be significant. The next event would be Stephen's arrest and his stirring critique of the temple. Some of these priestly "insiders" may have shared the same viewpoint and longed for a purer worship of God.²⁸

The word for *ochlos* appears here in reference to the number of Jewish priests that would believe and "become obedient to the faith." This transitions into the account of Stephen's arrest and trial where the "people" (*laos*) are instigated into an act of violence for the very first time. Acts 6:12 reads, "And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council" (ESV).

This marks a significant shift in the mission of God. Due to this, when Stephen begins to preach his opponents instigate false witnesses who allege that he speaks against Moses, the laws, and the Temple.²⁹ Although the reader knows these charges to be false, there is an obvious change now, for the false witnesses are able to stir up the *people* against Stephen. Christianity has now been accused of aiming to overthrow Jewish tradition, and the temple-based opposition to Christianity is now solidifying with the inclusion of the Pharisees and many of the people.³⁰

28. Ibid., 183.

29. Steve Mason, "Chief Priests, Sadducees, Pharisees and Sanhedrin in Acts," in *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting-Palestinian Setting*. Vol. 4, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 1995), 151.

30. Ibid.

Ben Witherington comments, “Stephen confronts the Jews of Jerusalem with their own sacred history, showing that God has kept his promises. But that history also has another aspect, the constant disobedience and opposition to God and his messengers.”³¹ Stephen brings into account that it was the people, along with the leaders, who killed Jesus in Jerusalem. It is the rejection by the Jerusalem authorities that will become a pattern of rejection that will show connections between Stephen and the series of episodes where Paul, in the face of Jewish rejection will turn to the Gentiles (13:44-48, 18:5-6, 28:23-28).³² Tannehill elaborates on this point, when he states:

Stephen’s speech is linked to the first of these scenes when Paul repeats the words used by Stephen to describe the wilderness rebellion and its consequences. Stephen described how the Israelites “pushed” Moses “aside” (7:27). The word for “push aside” is used only one other time in Luke-Acts, in Paul’s description of how the Jews of Antioch treated the word of God, the *ochlos*. In both passages it is associated with the idea of turning. The Israelites pushed Moses aside and as a result “God turned and gave them up to worship the host of heaven.” So when the Antioch Jews “push aside” the word of God, Paul and Barnabas also “turn,” now in a positive direction. In light of their mission mandate, they “turn to the Gentiles” (13:46). Thus pushing aside God’s message or messenger results in a fateful turning, in which the people turn away from God’s purpose while God’s purpose turns in a new direction.³³

Stephen’s account correlates to that of Jesus in Luke’s Gospel. The *ochlos* rejected Jesus as well, and God’s master plan moved on to the next phase. Here, the rejection of Stephen sets the stage for the *ochlos* in the remainder of the book of Acts.

Looking Ahead. This moment in Acts represents a foreshadowing of things to come. The people and Jews have been shown to stand as an antagonist to the gospel,

31. Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-rhetorical Commentary*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1998), 277.

32. Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts, A Literary Interpretation: The Acts of the Apostles*. Vol. 2. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990).

33. Polhill, *Acts*, 211.

acting in violence for the first time. They are also enticed easily by the Jewish leadership. This will culminate with the full opposition and shift of the *ochlos* in the next stage. What is important is that the next three occurrences of *ochlos* in Acts 1-12 (8:6, 11:24, and 11:26) show the gospel only being furthered by the persecution of the Christian church. “They were scattered like one scatters seed. But scattered seeds grow, and the irony is that the persecution and scattering of the Christians only led to their further increase. With the dispersal of the Hellenist Jewish Christians, the fulfillment of the second phase of Jesus’ commission began—the witness to all Judea and Samaria.”³⁴

Acts 13-14

This stage serves as the complete turning point for the development and purpose of the crowd in Acts. At this point, Paul has been converted and welcomed into the Christian church to be sent out along with Barnabas, on his first missionary journey. They eventually make it to Antioch in Pisidia where they enter into the synagogue, the “hub of the Jewish community” and the natural place to share the Christian message. Paul’s following sermons falls into three main parts:

Verses 16b–25 provide a sketch of Old Testament history that emphasizes God’s providence and promise to Israel. Verses 26–37 demonstrate by means of apostolic witness and scriptural proof how those promises are fulfilled in Christ. Finally, vv. 38–41 issue an invitation to accept the promises and a warning against rejecting God’s marvelous deed in Christ.³⁵

Paul knew that he was addressing both Jew and Gentile in his message. Polhill builds off of this thought, stating, “Though there had already been clear contacts with and successes in converting Gentiles prior to the time of the events recounted in Acts 13-14, it is Luke’s

34. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*.

35. *Ibid.*, 300.

intent to portray this missionary journey as being the inaugural efforts to evangelize Gentiles as well as Jews.”³⁶

Acts 13. At the invitation of the Jews, Paul and Barnabas are invited back the following Sabbath and that is when the situation and turning point occurs. Almost the entire city gathers to hear the message of Paul and Barnabas. Pisidian Antioch was predominantly Gentile, indicating that the Jews were vastly outnumbered. The “God-fearing Gentiles” who had heard Paul’s sermon the previous Sabbath had understood that the message of salvation from Jesus Christ included them and word spread like wildfire through the Gentile populace.³⁷ It is in Acts 13:45 that the turning point for the *ochlos* is found – not because of their response, but because of the Jewish response. Acts 13:45 reads, “But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began to contradict what was spoken by Paul, reviling him” (ESV).

This sudden switch in the receptivity of the Jews is because of their jealousy over the presence of all of the Gentiles. It was one thing to proclaim the coming of the Messiah to the Jews. It was quite another to maintain that in the Messiah God accepted the Gentiles on an equal basis.³⁸ Jesus had brought his message to the common people, to everyone, both Jew and Gentile, and the Jewish leaders who were present would not tolerate this message.

It was up until Acts 6 and Stephen that large numbers of the crowd had been added to the church and that the people had been receptive, or at least welcoming. Once

36. Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-rhetorical Commentary*, 390.

37. Polhill, *Acts*, 308.

38. *Ibid.*

the gospel would “officially” reach the Gentiles, the Jews would lash out. Paul and Barnabas now had a choice that would ultimately change the rest of the book of Acts and the *ochlos*. Acts 13:46 reads, “And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly saying, ‘It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold we are turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying...’” (ESV).

The Jews had rejected the gospel that embraced all people without distinction. Paul had to turn to those who would be receptive – the Gentiles.³⁹ And while one could view Paul’s action as rejection of the Jews, this would not be the case. Paul would never give up on his fellow Jews, even through the end of Acts. In fact he would turn to them first in the very next city on his missionary journey (14:1). Bruce Winter furthers this argument when he states, “In Acts 13, therefore, we see the fulfillment of prophecy motif in two key issues: God’s age-old intentions concerning the death and resurrection of the Messiah and his plan to bring salvation to the Gentiles.”⁴⁰ In the meantime, the mission to Antioch ended on a note of both opposition and success. The Jews would stir up the people, a pattern that will continue throughout the remaining development of the *ochlos* in the book of Acts and drive away Paul and Barnabas from the city. This rejection would only become stronger and persecution would now be the antithesis to Paul and his missionary journeys. On the contrary, the gospel was well received by the Gentiles and

39. Ibid.

40. Bruce W. Winter, *The Book of Acts in Its Ancient Literary Setting*. Vol. 1. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1993. 99.

spread throughout the whole region.⁴¹ In the face of persecution that would come by the Jews and the *ochlos*, the Gospel would spread to the “ends of the earth” (ESV, Acts 1:8).

Acts 14. The very next chapter begins with Paul entering into the synagogue to witness to the Jews first and then the Gentiles. A large number of both believe, signifying that the mission cannot be stopped or hindered. However, the unbelieving Jews try to incite the people against Paul and Barnabas, eventually leading to the threat of stoning, from which they are able to escape. “Their comically futile attempts to stamp out the budding Christian movement in the face of divine intervention reinforce their image as powerless pretenders, always fearful of powerful resentment.”⁴²

Readers of chapter 14 see a different image of the *ochlos* as the next four references describe the people as wanting to worship the missionaries as gods (14:11, 13, 14, 18). Acts 14:11 reads, “And when the *crowds* saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!” (ESV). Lystra seems to have mainly consisted of pagan Gentiles, and, unbeknown to Paul and Barnabas, these pagans thought they were gods, attempting to offer a sacrifice to them, which occurs in 14:13, the next mention of *ochlos*. Paul and Barnabas begin to sense something is afoot when the priest arrives with a sacrifice. They then run into the crowd, rending their garments and attempting to stop the sacrifice.⁴³

Paul pleads with the people to turn from their pagan gods and worship the one true God, the creator of all, but to no avail. Paul and Barnabas were cut short of their

41. Ibid.

42. Mason, *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting – Palestinian Setting*, 157.

43. Polhill *Acts*, 315.

witness; it is anything but a complete exposition of the gospel and Paul never got beyond the basic monotheistic message of one God.⁴⁴ The crowd cuts him short and is still intent on offering sacrifices to the apostles. Soon afterward the very next mention of the *ochlos* occurs in Acts 14:19, which reads, “But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the *crowds*, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead” (ESV).

The crowd had already been presented as being unresponsive to the gospel message. However, some must have responded. In the following verses, it says that disciples would attend to Paul, and later on Paul would return to strengthen those in the city of Lystra who had believed (Acts 14:20-22). However, the *ochlos* is now unresponsive to the gospel message, but unbelieving Jews also incite them to violence once more. This is the second of six times that the crowd would be incited because of the ministry of Paul and mission of God (13:50, 16:22, 17:5, 17:13, 19:25-34). In the remainder of Acts, the *ochlos*, will become an enemy of the gospel solely, incited by the Jews.

Acts 15-28

The final of the three stages to be examined encompasses the remaining development of the *ochlos* after the turning point, from Acts 15-28. Five specific passages will be briefly examined to showcase God’s remaining purpose for the *ochlos* through the writings of Luke, those being 16:22, 17:5-8, 17:13, 19:26-35, and 21:27-36.

Acts 16:22. This verse appears when Paul and now Silas are in Philippi. Lydia’s conversion takes place in the preceding verses and they are visiting the synagogue presenting the gospel. On the way to the “place of prayer” (ESV, Acts 16:16) a slave-girl

44. Ibid., 317.

with a demonic spirit meets them. She agitates Paul and he eventually commands the spirit to come out of her. Her owners had used her to tell fortunes, and when the spirit left her, she was no longer of any gain to him. They seized Paul and Silas and brought them before the city magistrates, bringing false charges against them. These charges would win the crowd over, which would win the magistrates over. Verse twenty-two reads, “The *crowd* joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods” (ESV). The following verse says they were given a severe flogging and then thrown into a prison with strict orders to the jailor to keep them secure under the tightest security.⁴⁵

The crowd was the means of silencing the mission, of causing harm to both Paul and Silas. They were probably placed in the innermost cell of the prison, shackled, and fastened to the wall. The entire emphasis of the passage is on the tight security in which the two were held, making the miracle of their subsequent deliverance all the more remarkable.⁴⁶ The miracle to come would be the earthquake that would free Paul and Silas from their chains and the opportunity to share the gospel with the jailer and his entire household. The *ochlos* had tried to stop the mission, but God allowed it to be furthered.

Acts 17:5-8. This is the very next section where *ochlos* appears, much in the same story line of Acts 16:22. The gospel message is continuing to be preached to “the ends of the earth.” Paul is taking the gospel to the Gentiles in Thessalonica, there is success, people are being added to the Christian church, but opposition arises from the Jews who

45. Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-rhetorical Commentary*, 497.

46. Polhill, *Acts*, 353–354.

successfully incite the *ochlos* against the missionaries. In this specific section the Jews are jealous of the success of the mission. Acts 17:5 reads, “But the Jews were jealous, and taking some wicked men of the rabble, they formed a mob, set the city in an uproar, and attacked the house of Jason, seeking them to bring them out to the crowd” (ESV).

Notice that it is the Jews who cause all this violence to erupt. In fact, *ochlos* does not appear in verse five; it instead appears in verse eight, which reads, “And the *people* and the city authorities were disturbed when they heard these things” (ESV, Acts 17:8). This is important because the authorities would take immediate action because of the *people*. They could not let a riot continue in their city, and because of the Jews, they saw Paul and Silas as the issue. They would, in effect, banish Paul and Silas from returning to Thessalonica during their rule.⁴⁷ Their missionary journey would now move on to the next city.

Acts 17:13. The pattern continues in Berea, where Paul and Silas enter the synagogue. They speak the message of the gospel, and, unlike in Thessalonica, these Jews are said to be nobler than their contemporaries receiving the word with eagerness. Acts 17:13 is the turning point, which reads, “But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was proclaimed by Paul at Berea also, they came there too, agitating and stirring up the *crowds*” (ESV). “As had happened to Paul before in Lystra (14:19), when Jews in the city Paul had just visited (in this case Thessalonica) got wind of what was happening in Berea they came to Berea to stir up the crowd against Paul.”⁴⁸ With this in mind, the new Christian believers take quick action to send Paul off. Silas, stays behind, probably to support this new Christian church.

47. Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-rhetorical Commentary*, 509.

48. *Ibid.*, 510.

Acts 19:26-35. This occurrence of the *ochlos* is the final one before Paul returns to Jerusalem at the close of Acts. It is also one of significant depth. Over these verses *ochlos* will appear three times in this account (19:26, 33, 35) and Paul will have significant interaction with the crowd. The context revolves around Paul's stay in the city of Ephesus. While there, the gospel flourished and nothing short of a miracle ensued with the growth of the Ephesian church. Acts 19:20 reads, "So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily" (ESV).

The common theme of Acts has been, the greater the success of the work of God, the more intense the opposition, resulting in a common factor in Luke's literary stage. Before Paul could leave Ephesus, a riot ensued, brought about by Demetrius, the silversmith. Silversmiths made silver statues of the Greek goddess Artemis, whose temple was found in Ephesus. Due to the power of the Gospel, their business had taken a turn for the worse.⁴⁹ The silversmiths, enraged at Paul by Demetrius' speech, instigated a riot and rushed to the Ephesian theater, the largest place for an assembly of people in the city, capable of seating 25,000.⁵⁰ The artisans were acting in haste in order to take quick action while the crowd was still aroused, so they did not take time to search for Paul; therefore, Gaius and Aritarchus are dragged into the theater as two of Paul's travel companions.⁵¹

What ensues is nothing short of chaos. Paul is ready to enter into the theater to defend the gospel, but his fellow Christians will not let him, probably by divine

49. Stanley D. Toussaint, "Acts," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 411.

50. Ibid.

51. Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-rhetorical Commentary*, 594.

intervention as the showdown between Paul and the people would come in Jerusalem, as it was with Jesus, and not in Ephesus. In the meantime, many in the *ochlos* are not sure why they are there and the mob refuses to listen to anything the Jews say, resulting into an hours long chant of “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” Eventually the city clerk appears to tell the people that their rioting was not legal and that there could be political consequences from Rome.⁵² Paul is, therefore, cleared of any charges for fear of the Roman government. Witherington clarifies this encounter by stating:

While the Gospel may be a threat to this or that local cult, or to a basically ethnic religious group like the Jews, time and time again Rome’s authorities do not see Christianity as being a threat to their primary interests. It is Luke’s tack to suggest that Christianity challenged society at the social levels below the imposed Roman superstructure.⁵³

The *ochlos* was the common people; it was not made up of the Roman leaders, and the Jews did not want the common people, the Gentiles, being a part of the gospel message. They despised the teachings of Paul and utterly rejected his presentation to them. In light of this, the success of the Christian church parallels the intensity of the opposition. This sets the stage for the final showdown that would come in Jerusalem, a few chapters later.

Acts 21:27-36. This is the final stage that will be examined in the development of the *ochlos* in Acts. The interaction and development reach their culmination at this point. It is fitting that where the *ochlos* interactions began (Jerusalem), is where they also end. In this section, *ochlos* appears a total of three times. It does appear after this section, but only during conversations between Paul and authorities.

52. The Ephesians had no legal basis for their behavior and could be charged with insurrection by Rome, possibly leading to restrictions on their self-governing privileges. The clerk clarifies that it is the *ochlos* who poses the real threat to Ephesus, and not Paul.

53. Ibid., 596.

Paul has finally returned to Jerusalem after his third missionary journey, along with the offering for the Jewish church. Upon coming to the city, he meets with the Jerusalem church and gives a report of what God had done among the Gentiles in his ministry. When the leaders hear of this testimony, they praise God (21:20).

Soon after this, Paul and several of his companions are in the temple area when Jews from Ephesus spot them. Acts 21:27 reads, “When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole *crowd* and laid hands on him” (ESV). This opposition to Paul did not come from believers but from unbelieving Jews. Some Jews from a province of Asia, a place where the gospel had enjoyed great success, instigated the riot. These men, in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost, immediately recognized Paul in the temple, incited the whole crowd, and seized him. This is the sixth and final time a crowd is incited because of Paul’s ministry.⁵⁴

The crowd that seizes Paul is ready to kill him until the Roman guard hear the commotion and run from their barracks to seize him. The Roman tribune arrests Paul and attempts to discover what had taken place. There is such chaos amongst the *ochlos* that 21:34 reads, “Some in the crowd were shouting one thing, some another. And as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought to the barracks” (ESV). Before he can be brought in, Paul asks to speak to the crowd. In the greatest act of violence against Paul to this point, he shares the gospel with more Jews than he ever had. It is a fitting fulfillment to Paul’s mission. Paul begins to share his testimony to the thousands of the gathered *ochlos*, presenting the gospel message one last time to his

54. Toussaint, “Acts,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 416–417.

fellow Jews. They quiet to listen to him, and all is at least calm until 22:21, when he mentions his commission to the Gentiles. “And he said to me, “Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles” (ESV).

With the very mention of his mission to the Gentiles, the crowd is moved to instant violence. As a defense speech it is an utter failure, for the verdict that is pronounced by the *ochlos* is negative.⁵⁵ Paul’s message that infuriated the mob was that Jews and Gentiles were equal without the Law of Moses. Their response is important to the argument of the Book of Acts because it indicates the Jews in Jerusalem had irrevocably refused the gospel of Jesus Christ.⁵⁶

Paul’s Testimony

Paul never wavered from his mission. Acts 20:19-21 reads, “You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; how did I not shrink from declaring to you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.” He faithfully preached the gospel, never giving up on his fellow Jews, even if they may have turned against him.

In Paul’s entire mission, it was never he who stirred up the *ochlos*. From the point of Stephen’s death until the end of Acts, it was always the Jews, as it was with the trial of Jesus. When Paul is before the governor Felix, arguing his case, he makes the statement, “...and they did not find me disputing with anyone or stirring up a *crowd*, either in the temple or in the synagogues or in the city” (ESV, Acts 24:12). While the *ochlos* may

55. Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-rhetorical Commentary*, 675.

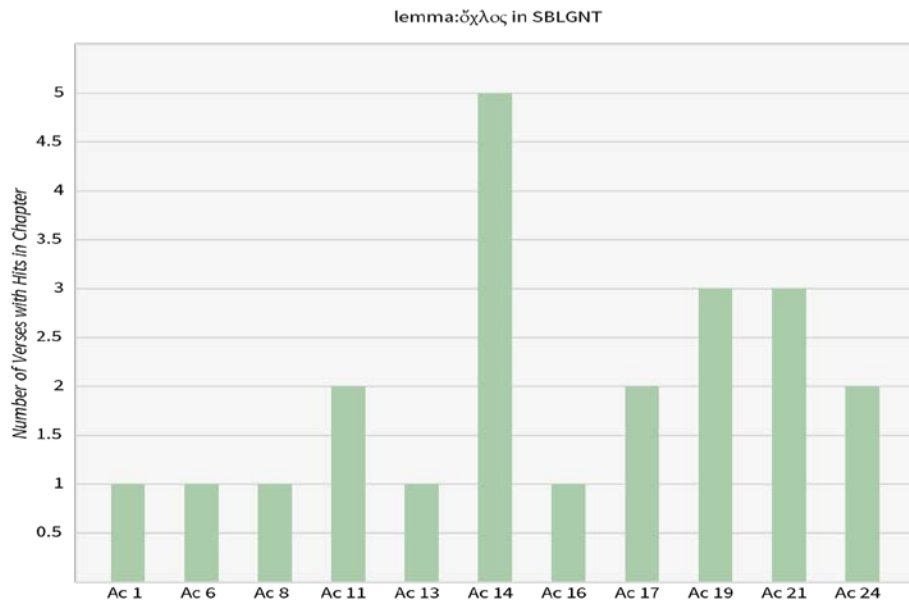
56. Toussaint, “Acts,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, 418.

essentially stand for opposition, the key verse is Luke’s summary statement in 19:20, “So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily” (ESV).

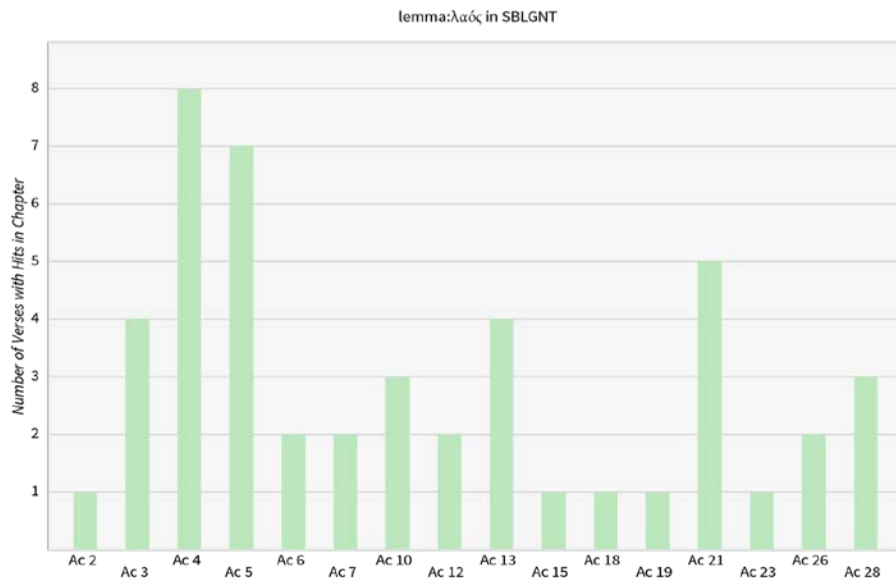
Conclusion: The Lasting Effect of the Crowd in Acts

Below are two charts. The first (see graph one) shows the overall dispersion of *ochlos* in the writing of Acts and the second (see graph two) shows the overall dispersion of *laos* in Acts. This is an important visual in understanding the overall vision and mission of Acts.

Use of *Ochlos* by chapter in the book of Acts⁵⁷



57. “Graph Bible Search Results from the morphological search on: lemma:ὄχλος,” in *Logos Bible Software* (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife Corporation, 2014).

Use of *Laos* by chapter in the book of Acts⁵⁸

In the case of *ochlos*, the single greatest concentration of the word occurs in the second stage of Acts, chapters 13-14. It is here that Paul officially declares the Jewish rejection and the turning from the Jews to the Gentiles with the Gospel. Before this stage, in Acts 1-12, the *ochlos* is relatively quiet by comparison. However in looking at the second chart detailing, *laos*, one can see that it spikes during this relatively quiet period for *ochlos*. That is because the foundation for the Christian church is being laid. The crowd and people during this first stage are the people that will be the cornerstone to the Christian church in Jerusalem. They are not at all in opposition. If they would have been in opposition, it is probable that the mission would have died off before it could have started. This was the core people who would witness Pentecost and the spread of the gospel before the stoning of Stephen.

58. “Graph Bible Search Results from the morphological search on: lemma:λαός,” in *Logos Bible Software* (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife Corporation, 2014).

Upon the rejection of the gospel by the Jews, specifically in Acts 13, the *ochlos* erupts. Coincidentally, the gospel erupts. On the coattails of the opposition brought by the *ochlos* and the Jews, the gospel heads to the “ends of the earth.” This would not be possible if it were not for the crowd (*ochlos*) in the book of Acts.

While the Jews may have wanted to stop the message from spreading through their violent anger, Paul and God never gave up on the Jews. They were His chosen people and God’s steadfast promise to Abraham in Genesis still remained. This would be something that Paul would wrestle with in Romans 8-11.

What the Jews did not understand was that this was all a part of God’s plan from the beginning. The gospel was for all people without barrier or hindrance. The gospel was for the Jew, the Gentile, the Greek, the Samaritan, and even the *ochlos*. In the book of Acts, Luke continues what he started in his gospel. The crowd serves as a display of God’s beautiful omnipotence, overcoming any barriers to see the fulfillment of his master plan for restoration. As with the account of the *ochlos* turning against Jesus and against Stephen, rejecting the gospel message, God had a master plan every step of the way, with each rejection by the *ochlos* allowing for one more stage to come to fruition. His master plan would include all people, the image bearers of God.

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