

## THE FIRST APOSTLES

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**Abstract:** Various New Testament writers do not use *ἀπόστολος* in the same way. Paul uses *ἀπόστολος* as his primary self-designation and fills that word with his particular experience – his call from Jesus on the road to Damascus, his life-long mission to the Gentile world, his willingness to serve, his proclamation of the Gospel, and even his sufferings. But it was not the only meaning, for Paul could use the term as a designation for other fellow workers (without explaining exactly what he means by that) and could even use the term broadly when speaking of “apostles and prophets.” For Paul, the term is specific to himself but also applies to others. Luke has a narrower range of usage. For the most part, the *ἀπόστολοι* are the twelve, especially in their roles as leaders of the community and authoritative witnesses to the words and deeds of Jesus. This usage also is replicated in most other occurrences of *ἀπόστολος* in the New Testament. The usage in the New Testament is not uniform. It depends on the writer and the situation being addressed by the writer.

### INTRODUCTION

In the letter to the Ephesians, likely a circular letter read broadly in the Roman province of Asia (cp. Col 4:16), Paul asserted, “Each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (Eph 4:7). Then he enumerated, “The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles...” (Eph 4:11). Who or what are these “apostles”? And what is the significance of this gift of Christ for the church today?

Over the next three days, we shall explore such questions under three topics:

- The First Apostles
- After the Apostles
- Apostles Today

Let us begin in the name of Jesus.

### WHO OR WHAT IS AN APOSTLE? AND WHO WERE THE FIRST APOSTLES?

To approach this question, we turn to the New Testament. In its texts, the key term is *ἀπόστολος*, which occurs 80 times. The related noun *ἀποστολή*, “apostolic ministry, apostleship,” occurs four times (Acts 1:25; Rom 1:5; 1 Cor 9:2; Gal 2:8), while *ψευδαπόστολος* “false apostle,” turns up once (2 Cor 11:13). The verb *ἀποστέλλω* “to send,” from which the noun lively derives, occurs just over 130 times.

Scholars typically turn to usage in Greek literature to discern the nuances of meaning. But such a turn is disappointing. Francis Agnew writes: “[T]he word *apostólos* had an extremely meager history in secular Greek. This history is bound up with the experience of seafaring and is not closely related to Christian usage.”<sup>1</sup> Moisés Silva expands slightly, “It is associated with maritime language, referring to a naval expedition (sometimes more specifically its commander) or to a ship about to be “sent off,” but it can also be applied to a band of colonists sent overseas and even to documents related to shipping. The

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<sup>1</sup> Francis H. Agnew, “The Origin of the NT Apostle-Concept: A Review of Research,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105, no. 1 (1986): 75.

sense "emissary, ambassador," referring to individuals, is rare (the usual terms for this are ἄγγελος, κήρυξ, πρεσβευτής).<sup>2</sup> In Herodotus, a usage of ἀπόστολος refers to the bearer of a message, such as the herald sent by Alyattes to Miletus (1.21). Josephus mentions a "delegation" (τὸν ἀπόστολον) of Jews to Rome appointed by Varus (*Ant.* 17.300); but that is the only sure occurrence of the word in his work.<sup>3</sup> Holger Mosbech is blunt, "There is no connection between the term of Herodotus and the ἀπόστολοι of the New Testament. For this reason, it is more likely that the Christian term appeared to the Greeks as something quite new."<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, when we turn to the LXX, "OT Greek is not much more productive of information on the origins of Christian usage [of the noun ἀπόστολος]. The LXX and Symmachus each have the word once, in the sense of 'messenger.'"<sup>5</sup> As to verbal forms, the LXX uses στέλλω only 7 times in the middle voice with various meanings, but ἀποστέλλω occurs more than 650 times. Where these terms render a Heb. equivalent, the latter is almost always a form of the verb. πῆψ which most often means "to send" in a fairly general sense.<sup>6</sup>

Apparently, the usage in the New Testament of nouns and verbs from the root στελλ with the prefix απο is a distinctly early Christian phenomenon. Who and/or what an apostle might be must be determined by usage in the New Testament itself. When we look more carefully at the distribution of the terminology within New Testament writings, we get our first clues as to that meaning.

Of the 80 occurrences of ἀπόστολος, there are two clusters: 34 usages are in the writings of Paul and 34 are in Luke/Acts. There are three occurrences each in Peter and Revelation, and one each in Matthew, Mark, John, and Jude. As Matthew and Mark are synoptics and may have been known by Luke, I include them in the Lucan cluster. While we often assume that Biblical writers use terminology in a uniform fashion, these two clusters open the possibility of variance in meaning, depending on the Biblical author. The one example from Hebrews affirms this possibility, as ἀπόστολος is used in reference to Jesus, "the apostle and high priest of our confession" (Heb 3:1). Therefore, we shall next look at usage in these two clusters, the Pauline usage and the Lucan usage, and from our examination we shall discover a differentiation in meaning among the biblical writers. ἀπόστολος has a different connotation depending on the writer using the term and the situation addressed by the writer. Christian writers are using ἀπόστολος in a new way and in different ways.

## THE PAULINE USAGE

Paul's writings are some of the earliest materials we have in the New Testament. One might expect to find in them a primitive understanding of apostleship in the church. However, Paul is a trail blazer. He is not active in the early community in Jerusalem. In fact, they fear him, understandably so after the lynching of Stephen. His is the Graeco-Roman world, a mission to the uncircumcised, with a distinct Gospel. When he writes to the communities he visited, whether in joy or in anguish, he frequently begins with the words Παῦλος ἀπόστολος (1 Cor, 2 Cor, Gal, Eph, Col, 1 Tim, 2 Tim). Since such a usage would be novel in the Hellenistic world, Paul provides additional explanation of what he means by the word ἀπόστολος, this gift from Christ.

Paul's claim of the designation ἀπόστολος is rooted in his experience on the road to Damascus.

Paul emphasizes that he is κλητός ("called," Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1; Gal 1:15), indeed ἀφορισμένος ("set apart," Rom 1:1; Gal 1:15) for the holy service of his apostleship. The calling occurred in a

<sup>2</sup> Moisés Silva, ed., "Ἀποστέλλω," in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Second edition, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2014), 366.

<sup>3</sup> Ceslas Spicq, "Ἀπόστολος, Apostolos," in *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, vol. 1 (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1994), 187.

<sup>4</sup> Holger Mosbech, "Apostolos in the New Testament: Two Lectures given at the University of Uppsala October 1947," *Studia Theologica* 2, no. 2 (1948): 167.

<sup>5</sup> Agnew, "The Origin of the NT Apostle-Concept," 75.

<sup>6</sup> Silva, "Ἀποστέλλω," 366.

christophany (1 Cor 9:1; 15:9; Gal 1:12, 16), during which, simultaneously, the content of the gospel was established (Gal 1:12).<sup>7</sup>

Paul also points to the divine *θελήμα* (1 Cor 1:1 and 2 Cor 1:1) which is the basis for this calling. "[H]e is not an apostle of his own will and certainly not dependent on any other human will (Gal 1:1; 2 Cor 3:5)."<sup>8</sup> Preaching the gospel is a divine necessity (1 Cor 9:16).

In tandem with *ἀπόστολος* and perhaps interchangeably, Paul uses the term *δοῦλος* or "servant" (Rom 1:1; Phil 1:1; 2 Cor 4:5; Titus 1:1; cp. *δέσμιος* in Philemon 1). "Paul assures the recipients of the gospel that he speaks only in accordance with his commission and not from motives of human deceit (1 Thess 2:3)."<sup>9</sup>

Paul has claimed the appellations *ἀπόστολος* and *δοῦλος*, but to what end. What is the commission of an apostle?

"The commission of the apostle consists in the fact that the mission is entrusted to him. He is to Preach Christ" (1 Cor 1:17; Rom 10:11; 2 Cor 5:20).<sup>10</sup> He is the apostle to the Gentiles (*ἔθνῶν ἀπόστολος*, Rom 11:13; Gal 2:8).

As Paul asserts in his letter to the Galatians (his first letter, I believe), his mission is apostolic "neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead" (Gal 1:1). His apostolic work is grounded on the call of Christ, thus his frequent use of the phrase *ἀπόστολος Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ* (1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; 1 Thes. 2:7; cf. Eph 1:1; Col 1:1; 1 Tim 1:1; 2 Tim 1:1; Titus 1:1). This call is an *ἀποκάλυψις* (Gal 1:12, 16). It involves vision (*ὄραμα*, 1 Cor 1:9; 15:7). Paul equates the appearance of Jesus with the commission from Jesus. Therefore, the gospel he preaches goes directly back to Christ.

Paul seems to view his call as service for a lifetime.

This is so obvious that Paul does not allude to this fact either for himself or for any other of the apostles. Thus, it is inconceivable that the apostle could, for example, give back his commission. The lifelong office, however, also apparently presupposes lifelong service. One cannot be an apostle without rendering the service of an apostle.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, Paul's commission involves suffering. In baptism, he is united to the death of Christ (Phil 3:10). So, Paul boasts in his suffering (Rom 5:3) and experiences power in weakness (2 Cor 12:9). Most explicitly, Paul writes,

I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to mortals. We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day (1 Cor 4:9-13).

The mission is an essential part of Paul's claim to be an apostle. But notably, not all missionaries are designated by Paul as apostles. Paul does not call Titus or Apollos *ἀπόστολοι*. But he does use the term for others such as Andronicus and Junia in Rom 16:7, James brother of Jesus in Gal 1:19, Silvanus and Timothy in 1 Thes 2:7, and Sosthenes in 1 Cor 4:9, likely because he saw in their experiences and calling a commonality with his own.

On the other hand, Paul does use *ἀπόστολοι* in a way that lacks the specificity of his own circumstance. He speaks of a class of people that are gifted to the church (1 Cor 12:28-29), mentions "all the apostles" (1 Cor 15:7), considers himself "least of the apostles" (1 Cor 15:9), speaks of "apostles

<sup>7</sup> J.-A. Buehner, "Ἀπόστολος," in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990), 143.

<sup>8</sup> Buehner, 143.

<sup>9</sup> Buehner, 143.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Schmithals, *The Office of Apostle in the Early Church*, ed. John E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), 22.

<sup>11</sup> Schmithals, 46.

before me" (Gal 1:17), cites the "foundation of the apostles" (Eph 2:20) and later "his holy apostles" (3:5) and "some who would be apostles" (4:11). So, even in Paul, the term is not used consistently.

When speaking of himself, as Paul writes to communities and individuals as part of his commission, Paul gives to a known term, *ἀπόστολος*, a distinct meaning. It is a word rooted in his experience on the road to Damascus behind which is the very will of God. It is for Paul a calling and servitude. It involves a direct revelation with an accompanying commission to engage in a mission to the Gentile world for the rest of his life preaching the gospel of and about Jesus, despite the hardships that will follow.

But Paul also uses the term *ἀπόστολος* in less specific ways. He names other fellow workers as *ἀπόστολοι*, but not all. And he is not clear why he uses such a designation. Moreover, he uses the plural *ἀπόστολοι* in a generic fashion without specific reference but in such a way that his hearers would call to mind a group of people.

From Paul, we conclude that *ἀπόστολος* was a term used in the gentile church, perhaps with a range of meanings, upon which Paul imposed a set of particulars to define his specific commission.

Paul used *ἀπόστολος* to state that

- he had a call and commissioning to lifelong apostolic service not dependent on human beings; Paul claims to have been sent directly "by Jesus Christ and God the Father." ...
- [His] call to the Christian apostleship is bound with the duty of mission among the Gentiles....
- Suffering is an inescapable part of the apostle's service....
- Like the prophets, the apostle has a special insight into the mystery of Christ....
- His spiritual gifts are there to fulfill definite functions in the church. His authority is not derived from some special quality in him[self], but from the gospel itself in its truth and power to convict.<sup>12</sup>

## THE LUCAN USAGE

In Luke there is little equivocation. Luke employs the title *ἀπόστολος* exclusively for the twelve. Whether he is speaking of "the twelve apostles," "the twelve," or "the apostles," the meaning is the same. Even the number "twelve" seems important, for Luke recounts the election of Matthias to fill the gap left by Judas' betrayal and suicide (Acts 1:16-28).

There are two exceptions. In Luke 11:49, the term is used more generically in parallel with "prophets" in a paraphrase by Jesus of a Wisdom of God saying, which Jesus uses in a warning directed at experts in the Torah. In Acts 14:14, Luke uses *ἀπόστολοι* when referring to Barnabas and Paul, although Hans Conzelmann thinks that Luke may be relying on a source in this case (Luke 1:3).<sup>13</sup> Luke has more to say about the Twelve.

These apostles have distinct authority in the church. They commissioned the Seven (Acts 6:6...), speak for the church (Acts 2:37), defend against attacks (Acts 5:26), authorize the Gentile mission (Acts 8:14, 18; 15:22-23; 16:4), and make important decisions (Acts 15).<sup>14</sup>

Acts 1:15-26 names the essential criteria which an apostle must meet: he is one who has accompanied the earthly Jesus from the beginning, has been chosen by him (1:17; cf. Luke 6:13; 9:1), has been with him the entire time up to the ascension, and is thus also a witness of the resurrection (Acts 1:21f.; cf. vv. 2f.; Luke 24:36ff.).<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Silva, "Ἀποστέλλω," 368–69.

<sup>13</sup> Hans Conzelmann, Eldon Jay Epp, and Christopher R. Matthews, *Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. James Limburg, A. Thomas Kraabel, and Donald H. Juel, Hermeneia--a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), (double check).

<sup>14</sup> Silva, "Ἀποστέλλω," 368; Buehner, "Ἀπόστολος," 144.

<sup>15</sup> Buehner, "Ἀπόστολος," 144.

There is a direct connection from the commissioning of the earthly Jesus (Luke 6:13) to the announcement of the mission (Luke 24:46-48; Acts 1:8) to the promise and bestowal of the Spirit (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:5, 8). Such a construct would deny Paul this title.

Luke's usage is essentially uniform. The *ἀπόστολοι* are the apostles. Other writers in the New Testament reflect this perspective as well. In Matthew (10:2) and Mark (6:30), the *ἀπόστολοι* are the twelve. In both Petrine letters, the author uses *ἀπόστολος* as a self-designation in the opening greeting of each letter as did Paul, but without addition explication about the claim other than the synonymous use of *δοῦλος* in 2 Peter 1:1. In 2 Peter 3:2, the apostles are the authority behind the oral tradition about the sayings of Jesus. Revelation 21:14 also references the "twelve apostles."

But generic usages, such as those in Paul, also occur albeit less frequently. In John 13:16, an *ἀπόστολος* is one who has been sent (in parallel with *δοῦλος*, as in Paul). Jude 17 refers to false apostles, which clearly do not reference the twelve. A generic usage also occurs in the apocalyptic address to "O heaven, you saints and apostles and prophets!" (Rev 18:20).

The works of Luke reflect a specific understanding of the term *ἀπόστολος*. The referents are the twelve. For the most part the rest of the New Testament employs this same usage.

## MODERN SCHOLARSHIP

Modern study of apostleship began in 1865 with the publication of Lightfoot's commentary on Galatians and its excursus, "The Name and Office of Apostle." J.B. Lightfoot proposed a parallelism existing between the New Testament apostles and a figure of late rabbinic Judaism called the *שליח* (*sālīah*) or "sent man."<sup>16</sup>

This position is developed most fully by Karl Rengstorf in his highly influential article in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*.<sup>17</sup> He maintains that Christian apostleship was derived from the Jewish institution of the *שליח* as is demonstrated by passages like Mark 6:7-13 and 9:28-32, Matt 10:40-42, and Luke 10:16. After accompanying and learning from Jesus for a time, he appointed them as apostles by sending them out with specific tasks (Matt 10:1-5; Mark 6:7-11; Luke 9:10). In other words, the apostolate was originally not an office but a commission "in the sense of the authorization which is limited in time and space, and which is conditioned materially rather than personally, as in the Jewish concept of *שליח*."<sup>18</sup>

As commissioned and sent to act for another, each figure so named is formally like every other, whatever the specific task undertaken. The basic sending-convention at the root of the concept involves a strong sense of solidarity between sender and sent. Although the concept is formally secular and legal, it could be and often was employed in a religious context.<sup>19</sup>

But, the *שליח*-convention does not appear clearly in antiquity until the rabbinic period, well after the time of Jesus. While antecedent ideas may have existed in the time of Jesus, one cannot infer dependence on an institution from a later time. Moreover, the commission of a *שליח* was a temporary one, nothing like the life-long mission of Paul or the exclusive and authoritative role of a Lucan *ἀπόστολος*.

A second claim of derivation comes from Walter Schmidhals who, having dismissed dependence on the *שליח*, posits instead that that apostolic role derives from Gnosticism, claiming that the type of the apostle is the gnostic redeemer-figure. Within Gnosticism, Schmidhals distinguishes two basic types—the heavenly redeemer-figure and the earthly redeemer-figure—the former of divine origin and the latter of human origin. It is the second type for which Schmidhals finds substantive similarities in Paul's self-

<sup>16</sup> J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians: With Introductions, Notes, and Dissertations* (Lynn, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1981), [add page numbers].

<sup>17</sup> Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, "Ἀποστέλλω (Πέμπω), Ἐξαποστέλλω, Ἀπόστολος, Ψευδαπόστολος, Ἀποστολή," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. G. W. Bromiley, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1964), 398–447.

<sup>18</sup> Rengstorf, 427; Silva, "Ἀποστέλλω," 369.

<sup>19</sup> Agnew, "The Origin of the NT Apostle-Concept," 84.

description.<sup>20</sup> But again, "there is no extant documentary evidence for the existence of this gnostic figure from the period of NT origins outside of the NT documents themselves."<sup>21</sup>

Contemporary biblical scholarship assumes too often that concepts in the New Testament must have origins elsewhere rather than being uniquely developed in response to the teaching of Jesus and his death and resurrection. It is best to draw a definition of the Christian *ἀπόστολος* from the New Testament itself. "The primitive church chose, as it so often did, an unfamiliar word, seldom used in the secular language, with little ready-made content, in order to fill it with one expressing its own conceptions. Missionaries specially called by the Lord bore this title."<sup>22</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Who or what is an apostle? And who were the first apostles? The most important conclusion of this initial study of apostolicity is that we must seek our understanding from the words of the New Testament and in so doing to recognize that various New Testament writers do not use *ἀπόστολος* in the same way. Paul uses *ἀπόστολος* as his primary self-designation and fills that word with his particular experience – his call from Jesus on the road to Damascus, his life-long mission to the Gentile world, his willingness to serve, his proclamation of the Gospel, and even his sufferings. What God made of and did through Paul is the primary meaning that Paul gave to the term *ἀπόστολος*. But it was not the only meaning, for Paul could use the term as a designation for other fellow workers (without explaining exactly what he means by that) and could even use the term broadly when speaking of "apostles and prophets." For Paul, the term is specific to himself but also applies to others.

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Who or what is an apostle? And who were the first apostles? The usage in the New Testament is not uniform. It depends on the writer and the situation being addressed by the writer.

What happened after the apostles is the subject for tomorrow's lecture.

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<sup>20</sup> Schmithals, *The Office of Apostle in the Early Church*, 114–229.

<sup>21</sup> Agnew, "The Origin of the NT Apostle-Concept," 89.

<sup>22</sup> Silva, "Ἀποστέλλω," 374.

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