

The Use of the Term βάρβαρος in the Acts of the Apostles: A *Problemanzeige*

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Abstract

This article seeks to highlight the problematic use of the term βάρβαρος in the Acts of the Apostles (28:2, 4). In the ancient world this term could function as an ethnic and linguistic marker to designate another people group as the “other.” In taking the nature of the term into account in the context of its appearance in Acts 28:1–10, some hitherto unsolved problems in the Acts narrative are identified. The article then collects and groups suggestions for understanding the term within its context as a starting point for future studies.

1 Introduction

The ethnic and linguistic term βάρβαρος,¹ arguably the most well-known delimiter of “otherness” in the ancient world,² occurs only twice, in close

¹ Excellent summaries of the general development and problematic nature of the term already exist. The best starting point for understanding the term’s use in the New Testament remains to date Windisch’s entry in volume 1 of Kittel et al.’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Windisch 1964, 546–553). Windisch gives a cursory overview of the term’s use in literature up to the time of the New Testament. He discusses each occurrence of the term in the New Testament, and classifies them according to their broad semantic use. Windisch’s (1964, 551) conclusion on the use of βάρβαρος, after emphasising the use of the term as linguistic marker in Acts 28:2, 4, is telling: “When Luke says: οἱ τε βάρβαροι παρεῖχον οὐ τὴν τυχοῦσαν φιλανθρωπίαν ἡμῖν, he means that we met with friendly treatment which as shipwrecked travellers we had not expected, or had never met with elsewhere, from such ‘barbarians.’ Hence there is *either* a contrast between βάρβαρος and φιλανθρωπία, *or else* a protest against the dominant contempt for βάρβαροι” (italics added). In the first instance, then, Windisch implicitly acknowledges that Luke could be using the term *in accordance with* the

proximity, at the end of the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 28:2, 4). As the book of Acts remains to date one of our primary sources for understanding the early stages of the spread of Christianity, the mere occurrence of this term, which contains the potential of extreme prejudice (cf. Windisch 1964, 547–548),³ has significance for our reflection on the movement's views towards outsiders, and especially those of other ethnic groups. Within the Graeco-Roman world, the term could function to point out hierarchical differences between people groups; hence this division was not only of a literary nature (cf. Lissarague 2002).⁴ Yet, in discussions on “multiculturalism” in Acts the term and its context have largely avoided notice, taking second place to Acts' perceived Jew/Gentile dichotomy (Gaventa 2001, 31; cf. Witherington 1998, 293).⁵ With regard to the term's

“dominant contempt for βάρβαροι.” A more recent evaluation of the term, although not as elaborate, can be found in Balz (1990:197–198). For expositions and summaries of the term's use, meaning and development outside the New Testament, see Opelt and Speyer (1967); Funck (1981); Lévy (1984); and Hall (1989).

² Even Gruen (2011, 76), who recently stressed that the animosity between ancient peoples was not as great as modern-day scholars would have it, has to admit that the term “did at least provide a signifier of ‘Otherness.’” To a certain extent, this held true even in Hellenistic times (Browning 2002, 261).

³ Not all the uses listed by Windisch can be considered as pejorative (cf. also the much less negative assessment of the term by Balz [1990, 197–198]), but in the final stage of the term's development, he reckons the term akin to: σκληρός (harsh), ὠμός (savage), ἄγριος (wild), μανικός (mad), ἄπιστος (unfaithful), ἀνόητος (unintelligent), σκαιός (clumsy), ἀμαθής (unlearned), ἀπαιδέυτος (ignorant) and ἀναίσθητος (stupid)—an impressive list of derogatory adjectives. Even when the term was applied purely as a linguistic marker (see the discussion below), the potential for prejudice exists. To the Greek mind, there was a “close connection . . . between intelligible speech and reason” (Hall 1989, 199–200). The term itself has also played a great part in the development of slavery, even in the ancient world (cf. Harrington 2002, 3), where “barbarians” were viewed as slaves by nature; so much so that the ideas became “synonymous” (cf. Funck 1981, 34; Hall 1989, 101; Kyrtatas 2009, 93). With regard to the term's use in the context of slavery, see also Hengel (1980, 56).

⁴ Lissarague investigated the images of, amongst others, “barbarians” on Athenian vases and comes to the conclusion that this hierarchical division is certainly not a literary invention only.

⁵ Even though the term evokes notions of “racism” to modern ears, Edith Hall (1989, ix) warns against viewing the term as signifying such, as the division of people groups in the ancient world was not primarily based on biological differences. She suggests using the terms “xenophobia,” “ethnocentrism” or “chauvinism” to designate the deprecating view of Greeks towards “barbarians.” The use of “multiculturalism” or perhaps “different ethnic groups” is therefore also to be preferred in discussing different people groups in Acts.

immediate context, more historical questions, such as the true location of the island Μελίτη (Acts 28:1),⁶ have been the main line of inquiry.⁷ The same can be said for the assessment of Acts 28:1–10’s overall role in Lukan theology (cf. Gaventa 2001, 36; Clabeaux 2005, 604), even though the episode is at such an important juncture in the Acts narrative—forming part of the “epilogue,” so to speak (cf. Alexander 2006a, 211–212).

The primary aim of the present article is to serve as a *Problemanzeige*. Therefore, the reasons for regarding the use of the term βάρβαρος in Acts 28:2, 4 as problematic will be outlined below under the heading “The problematic use of the term βάρβαρος in Acts 28:1–10.” The next section of the article will identify previous suggestions, most of them implicit, on how to assess this term’s use within its context. As no study has hitherto been concerned exclusively with the use of the term in Acts, these suggestions will be culled from commentaries on Acts and scholarly works on related issues and the context of the term in the Acts narrative. For this reason, the suggestions will be grouped together as “trajectories” rather than full-blown proposals and will only give an indication along which further lines of enquiry could proceed.

It is of great import that the term’s literary function within the greater context of the narrative of the Acts of the Apostles be investigated and evaluated, especially in a multicultural and multilingual society such as that of South Africa. This article hopes to provide the impetus—and the necessary first steps—for such a study.

⁶ Much ink has been spilled on the question whether Μελίτη is modern-day Malta or not. For a survey and discussion of the proposals up to 1996, see Gilchrist (1996, 29–30). A thorough discussion of the problem and proposals can also be found in Börstinghaus (2010, 432–444). Of special note is the debate between Suhl (1991a, 1991b, 1992), who argues against Malta, and Wehnert (1991), who opts for Malta. The latest consensus seems to be that Μελίτη is indeed the island Malta (cf. Börstinghaus 2010, 442), and this will be the working hypothesis with which this article will proceed. Of course, interaction with this debate will not be entirely unavoidable, but this question will not be the main inquiry.

⁷ This is partly due to the fact/fiction question surrounding Acts, which has especially invaded discussion on Acts 27–28:10; for a discussion on this issue, see Hummel (2000, 40).

2 The Problematic Use of the Term βάρβαρος in Acts 28:1–10

2.1 *Paul's (and Luke's) possible lesser concern for missionary activity among the βάρβαροι*

Perhaps the most pressing concern in understanding Luke's use of the term βάρβαρος in Acts is that the normal missionary activity by Paul, the latter part of the Acts narrative's main protagonist, is lacking in the immediate context of the term's occurrence (Acts 28:1–6, but this should also be taken with Paul's further stay on the island, related in Acts 28:7–10) (cf. Schnabel 2004, 1267; 2008, 338).⁸ Indeed, the narrative of Acts 28:1–10 relates no clear move by Paul to evangelise the βάρβαροι or the island's other inhabitants (if these are to be taken as two separate groups), nor is there any straightforward account of conversion among them. In light of the normal missionary pattern found in Acts (cf. Tannehill 1986),⁹ tinged with what can be described as “universalism” (Witherington 1998, 511–512),¹⁰ this possible lack of missionary concern could be problematic. Various suggestions have been offered to attempt to alleviate this

⁸ Although they are clearly distinct episodes, many commentators group Acts 28:1–6 (in some cases 28:2–6, when 28:1 is taken as an introduction to both) and 28:7–10 together. It is important to include Acts 28:7–10 in an assessment of the literary function of the term βάρβαροι, so as to determine whether the characters in this episode include the βάρβαροι or not. Especially the relation between Acts 28:6 and Acts 28:10 should be investigated. In case it is the same group of people who honours Paul “with many honours” (πολλαῖς τιμαῖς) in Acts 28:10 and think him a god in Acts 28:6, there will be implications for understanding the term's use. The latest study concerned with Paul's stay on Malta—that of Börstinghaus (2010)—is more concerned with the literary motif of the perilous journey and subsequent shipwreck than the use of the term βάρβαρος in the Acts narrative; consequently, Börstinghaus ends his investigation at Acts 28:6. However, in a footnote, Börstinghaus (2010, 10–11) notes that in the bigger context of Acts, the section should run from 27:1 to 28:16. The present article is only concerned with the use of the term βάρβαρος and the possible presence of the βάρβαροι in the narrative plot of Acts (that is to say, up to Acts 28:10).

⁹ Of course, the very different circumstances in which the narrative has Paul find himself in Acts 28:1–6 should be taken into consideration. However, the stay on Μελίτη lasts three months (Acts 28:11), ample time for Paul to “recover” and resume his usual custom. For the general missionary method of the historical Paul, with ample discussion of his views towards ethnicity, see Schnabel (2008, 256–373). Schnabel (2008, 36) notes, for instance, that for the historical Paul, “*matters of ethnic identity, class, culture or gender did not control his missionary focus*” (italics in original).

¹⁰ The full statement by Witherington, in commenting on Acts 17, reads: “We have . . . repeatedly noted Luke's universalism—salvation is for all, for every sort of person.”

perceived difficulty, only some of which tie in with what is stated in the text: namely, that Paul “healed” Publius’ father (Acts 28:8) as well as the rest of the islanders who were sick (Acts 28:9). The two words used for “healing” are different (ιάσατο, Acts 28:8; ἐθεραπεύοντο, Acts 28:9), but the terms are synonyms and the difference should not be pressed.¹¹ Paul would have preached, then, while healing (e.g., Grosheide 1974, 214; Neudorfer 1990, 359; Schnabel 2008, 1267; cf. Schnabel 2008, 314, 338), or the healing action itself might be seen as evangelism (e.g., Krodel 1986, 480; Jervell 1998, 617; cf. Stenschke 1999, 237).¹² Another approach is to simply remark that Paul preached—without reference to the text at all—but that no faith community was grounded (e.g., Wikenhauser 1961, 284; Schlatter 1962, 312; Rapske 1994, 360); others suggest historical veracity as Luke’s reason: Paul did not preach or his preaching was not well received, and therefore Luke did not report it (e.g., Marshall 1980, 418; Roloff 1981, 367; Pesch 1986, 300). Schneider (1982, 401) notes the suggestion that Paul did not preach as he was a prisoner, but immediately dismisses the idea (and rightly so) as there is no mention of Paul’s captivity in Acts 28:1–10. Arguably the proposal taking the most of the Acts narrative as such in account is made by Johnson (1992, 463). Johnson opines that “[a]s always in Luke-Acts, the sharing of physical possessions is a symbol of sharing in the good news (Luke 6:32–36; 8:3; 12:32–34; 14:13–14; 18:22; 21:1–4; Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–37).” None of these suggestions directly addresses the lexical choice for the term βάρβαρος in this pericope.

2.2 *The possibly naïve nature of the βάρβαροι*

Another problematic issue in Acts 28:1–10 is the ascription of divinity to Paul by the βάρβαροι. Whereas Paul (and Barnabas) reacts very strongly to being equated with a god in Acts 14:14–15, nothing is made of the

¹¹ See, however, the discussion in Kirchschräger (1979, 512) for the effect of the finer nuance between these two verbs in this context. Kirchschräger opines that *ιάσατο* is the more specific of the two and forms the “Höhepunkt der Erzählung.”

¹² Stenschke (1999, 237; cf. Kirchschräger 1979, 516) notes about the laying on of hands in this context that “Paul’s action indicates [the “barbarians”] spiritual blindness and its persistency,” and that this action “served to avert false identifications and to correct Gentile notions. Paul was God’s servant and dependent upon him (cf. Acts 27:23), not divine himself.”

similar statement by the βάρβαροι in Acts 28:6.¹³ In addition, it should be noted that the narrative possibly depicts the βάρβαροι as naïve: in a mere three verses, their opinion goes from one extreme (regarding Paul as condemned murderer, Acts 28:4)¹⁴ to another (regarding Paul as a god, Acts 28:6). Opinions about the motivation behind Luke’s report of this sudden change of mind and/or the reference to Paul as a divine being are manifold, including¹⁵:

- Luke wants to depict Paul as a θεῖος ἀνὴρ (“divine man”), and this perception of Paul as a “god” forms the high point of this theme, emphasised by the sudden reversal of the βάρβαροι’s thoughts (Haenchen 1971, 715; Marshall 1980, 417; Roloff 1981, 365; Conzelmann 1987, 223; Hummel 2000, 51; Van Eck 2003, 553). Van Eck takes the καί (“also”—this can hardly be translated in any other way) in Acts 28:10, where Paul and company are “honoured” (ἐτίμησαν), as a clear indication that the ascription of divinity to Paul in Acts 28:6 is approved by the author. Also remarking that the “honouring” could be in line with taking Paul as divine are Lindijer (1979, 277) and Schille (1983, 473);
- Luke wants to write an apology for Paul as an apostle, showing him as a miracle worker (Marshall 1980, 234; Schmithals 1982, 234);
- Luke seeks to emphasise Paul’s innocence (Krodel 1986, 480);
- Luke wants to stress the unstoppable nature, through God’s help, of Paul’s movement to Rome (Roloff 1981, 367; Pesch 1986, 298);

¹³ Not so frequently noted with regard to Acts 28:1–6 is the episode of Herod’s death on account of not correcting the crowd’s view of him as divine in Acts 12:20–24; this link is noted by Gaventa (2001, 37).

¹⁴ But cf. Marshall (1980, 416) with regard to Acts 28:4: “In this kind of thought-world the reaction of the Maltese to Paul’s experience is fully intelligible.” The motif of escaping Δίκη (“Justice”) is also taken by some as a motif to be found in Luke’s contemporary thought-world; the text most frequently cited as example is a poem by Statilius Flaccus in *Anthologia Graeca* VII 290, sometimes also listed is the even more appropriate epigram by Antipater of Thessalonica in *Anthologia Graeca* IX 269 (cf. Roloff 1981, 366; Pesch 1986, 298; Conzelmann 1987, 223; Jervell 1998, 615; Van Eck 2003, 552). However, Börstinghaus (2010, 414–415), points out that the direct correlation of Δίκη with snakes is not well attested in the ancient Mediterranean world at all. (Cf. Hemer 1989, 153, who notes that “[t]he snake as the agent of vengeance (v. 4) was a common idea.”)

¹⁵ It should further be noted that at least three scholars (Bruce 1954, 523; Marshall 1980, 417; Hemer 1989, 153) note humour in this account.

- Luke does not deem it necessary to have Paul correct the βάρβαροι as the reader has been prepared to see this point of view as false (Schmithals 1982, 233–234; Jervell 1998, 618–620);
- Luke wants to depict the fickleness of the pagans (or heathens), without much reflection on what is to be understood under that term (Grosheide 1974, 213; Schneider 1982, 403; Neudorfer 1990, 358; Jervell 1998, 616).

These suggestions, with the exception of the last, do not seem to take the nature of the term βάρβαρος into account. The last suggestion, lacking critical reflection on the nature of people groups in the narrative of Acts, is disconcerting in its own right. With all of these suggestions, one is left to wonder whether the reader was supposed to care about the βάρβαροι's salvation at all.

2.3 *Luke's possible predilection for selected people groups*

The religious framework in which the abovementioned episode at Lystra plays out in Acts 14 is clearly Hellenistic (cf. Schnabel 2008, 337–338). This is betrayed, not only by the roles assigned to Paul and Barnabas (Hermes and Zeus, respectively, Acts 14:12), but also due the fact that a “priest of Zeus” (ὁ ἱερεὺς τοῦ Διός) was stationed close by and ready to act (Acts 14:13). The same cannot be claimed with certainty for Acts 28:1–6. Some note that, with regard to the use of Δίκη in Acts 28:4 (if this is indeed to be taken as the personification of the Greek goddess “Justice,” which virtually all scholars agree on), “Luke has put a Greek idea into the mouths of the barbarians” (Haenchen 1971, 713; also arguing along these lines are Roloff 1981, 367; Schille 1983, 471; Pesch 1986, 298; Conzelmann 1987, 223). Others prefer the idea that Luke could be using the Greek equivalent of a Punic deity (e.g., Wikenhauser 1961, 284; Neil 1973, 254; Neudorfer 1990, 257). However, it should be noted that in Acts 28:6 Paul is not described as a specific deity, even though such identification could easily be made. In a Hellenistic setting, Asclepius, the god of healing, who was associated with snakes, comes to mind, especially in light of Paul's healing activity in Acts 28:8–9. That the βάρβαροι were really Hellenistic in their outlook is not a clear cut case—far from it. After all, it is striking that Paul's next move, related in Acts 28:7, is towards an individual seemingly of Graeco-Roman cultural allegiance.¹⁶ This could

¹⁶ For an in-depth discussion of the designation of Ποπλίος (i.e., “Publius”) as πρῶτος τῆς νήσου (“first of the island,” Acts 28:7) and especially whether an official Roman

indicate Luke’s predilection for—or maybe even sole interest in—converting people of Graeco-Roman and Jewish cultures.

This preference for Graeco-Roman and Jewish conversion should be considered together with Luke’s interest in languages.¹⁷ In the bigger context of the Acts narrative, as in Acts 28:1–10, linguistic markers regularly serve as designators of specific people groups. The most well-known of these is perhaps the Ἑλληνισταί of Acts 6 (cf. Bruce 1985, 644–645; Shillington 2007, 48–49),¹⁸ but reference should also be made to the different language groups present at the outpouring of the Spirit in Acts 2.¹⁹ It is not clear whether these linguistic designators refer to people

title is meant or not, see Suhl (1992, 220–226; cf. 1991b, 16; Hummel 2000, 43). Commentaries on Acts are divided between seeing the title as official and hence seeing Publius as Roman (e.g., Bruce 1954, 523; Blaiklock 1959, 192; Schlatter 1962, 311; Haenchen 1971, 714; Grosheide 1974, 214; Lindijer 1979, 276; Schmithals 1982, 234; Schille 1983, 472; Neudorfer 1990, 358; Van Eck 2003, 553) or as a title related to patronage, and thus not necessarily Roman (e.g., Wikenhauser 1961, 381; Roloff 1981, 367; Krodell 1986, 481; Pesch 1986, 299). Some remain indecisive (e.g., Neil 1973, 254; Johnson 1992, 462; Jervell 1998, 616). Whatever the case may be, Publius is a Roman name (cf. Blass et al. 1984, 34 [par. 41.1]) and betrays an association with the Romans, even though Luke’s use of the praenomen is unusual (Marshall 1980, 417).

¹⁷ Language plays an important part in the episode in the incident at Lystra recorded in Acts 14—the native language of the Lycaonians being expressly mentioned (Acts 14:11), probably to explain how things could go as far as they do before Paul and Barnabas act. However, as noted above, the group in question is Hellenistic. Cf. also the role language plays in Acts 21:37–40 with regard to identity/ethnicity, where Paul addresses the crowd in Jerusalem.

¹⁸ Both Bruce and Shillington note that the division was primarily linguistic, but that there must have been significant cultural differences between these groups too. The term Ἑλληνιστής seems to have “at least as its primary meaning ‘one who speaks Greek’” (Witherington 1998, 241). Witherington believes that the same linguistic prominence applies to the term Ἑβραῖος—in Acts, only found at 6:1—and its derivative, Ἑβραῖς. That Ἑλληνιστής does not simply mean “Greek” can be seen by the use of another term, Ἕλληνα, for this group (cf. Shillington 2007, 128); however, the term Ἑλληνιστής could embrace those who consider themselves to be Greek, e.g., Nicolas the proselyte in Acts 6:5. The Ἕλληνες are clearly not proselytes (De Boer 1995, 50), but in Acts, they can regularly be found in synagogues (e.g., Acts 14:1, 18:4).

¹⁹ There are considerable difficulties in determining the ethnic boundaries and affiliations of the groups described in Acts 2:5–11. The groups all have their own mother tongue (Acts 2:8), but they are introduced as Ἱερουσαλήμ κατοικοῦντες Ἰουδαῖοι, ἄνδρες εὐλαβεῖς ἀπὸ παντὸς ἔθνους τῶν ὑπὸ τὸν οὐρανόν (Acts 2:5). The first obstacle is a text critical one. However, the textual variants listed in NA²⁷ mainly concern word order, while the basic difficulty of the passage remains intact: the term Ἰουδαῖοι seems to stand in apposition with ἄνδρες εὐλαβεῖς, even though the qualification “ἀπὸ παντὸς ἔθνους

wholly unacquainted with Judaism or to those either within Judaism or at its fringes.²⁰ There might thus be some legitimate concern that the author of Acts cares only about drawing those groups already acquainted with Judaism into the Christian fold. A primary use of the term βάρβαρος in Greek literature is exactly this division between groups who spoke a different tongue (Windisch 1964, 546).²¹ A better grasp of the literary

τῶν ὑπὸ τὸν οὐρανόν” is added (and this part of the text knows no noteworthy variants). Only in one manuscript, the original hand of Codex Sinaiticus, is the problem completely removed—by omission of the term Ἰουδαῖοι. There can be little doubt that this change is secondary (Metzger 1975, 291). Thus, the groups are all described as “Jews” in Acts 2:5; but in Acts 2:14, Peter addresses both ἄνδρες Ἰουδαῖοι καὶ οἱ κατοικοῦντες Ἱερουσαλήμ πάντες. However, in Acts 2:22, clearly still part of Peter’s speech, the form of address is once again directed to the Jews—ἄνδρες Ἰσραηλῖται. Whatever the case may be, the εὐλαβεῖς of Acts 2:5 appears to place these groups within or close to Judaism. With regard to Acts 2 and Acts 28, the position of both these episodes—Acts 2:5–13 almost at the beginning of Acts and Acts 28:1–10 almost at the end—should also be considered. Could there be an intentional comparison between the uses of linguistic markers in these two outermost parts of the Acts narrative?

²⁰ Discussions on this ambiguity are generally situated within the “God-Fearers” debate, investigated by De Boer (1995). This debate concerns whether the φοβούμενοι, occurring only up to Acts 13:26, and the σεβόμενοι, occurring only after Acts 13:43, are the same group, and these groups’ relation to Judaism. De Boer (1995, 57) concludes that, for Luke, both “the σεβόμενοι are, like the φοβούμενοι, Gentiles who venerate the God of Israel.” De Boer also notes—and this applies more directly to the question of Luke’s estimation of the βάρβαροι—Jervell’s (1988) and Esler’s (1987) suggestion that Luke is only interested in converting God-fearers and not Gentiles *per se*. Also see Squires (1998, 615–616), who has similar arguments, and McRay (1992), who takes the term Ἕλληνας to refer to “non-Jews who worship the one true God.” (but see Sanders (1991, *passim*); the debate up to 1995 is summarised in De Boer (1995, 65–66; also see his conclusions on page 69). Here, the discussion mainly centres on the terms φοβούμενοι, σεβόμενοι, Ἕλληνας and τὰ ἔθνη—the βάρβαροι are left out in the cold.

²¹ No express mention of language is made in Acts 28:1–6. However, the term’s function as a linguistic marker would have been enough to designate these people as constituting their own group. The language they are supposed to speak can only be guessed. In the narrative, the βάρβαροι speak “to each other” (πρὸς ἀλλήλους), which could, although this is seldom assumed, just as easily have been in Greek. Their speaking “to each other” might very well exclude Paul and company from their discussion, irrespective of the language used. The fact/fiction question (on this question, see Hummel 2000, 40) has led Zahn (1927, 840) to propose a solution as to where this snippet of information (i.e., what the barbarians are saying “to each other”) might come from. According to him, there was enough mutual intelligibility between Aramaic and Punic, the language of the Phoenician population of Malta, for Paul to understand what the barbarians were saying. Such concerns with fact/fiction and how the saying got “preserved” have even slipped into dictionaries (e.g., Windisch 1964, 551).

function of the term βάρβαρος within the context of Acts will therefore contribute to a better understanding of this issue.

To summarise: it is possible that the author of Acts harbours prejudice towards the βάρβαροι and is not concerned with their conversion or inclusion within the Christian ranks, even though they are depicted in a positive light (cf. the term φιλανθρωπία and its use in Acts 28:2).²² As can be clearly seen in the exposition above, this problem has not received any significant attention by the scholars. The above-mentioned problems in reading the narrative of Acts, especially those dealing with possible ethnic and cultural discrimination by the work's author, could be addressed by a careful study of the literary purpose (if there is any) of the word βάρβαρος in this specific context. Such a study remains a desideratum. The remainder of this article will give an overview of implicitly proposed suggestions to lay out lines along which such a study might proceed.

3 Proposed Trajectories for Understanding the Use of the Term βάρβαρος in Acts 28:1–10

Four trajectories for understanding the term βάρβαρος in Acts 28:1–10 have been proposed.²³ Different nuances are present within each of these four trajectories, as they are an amalgamation of the opinions of different scholars, often not concerned with the term βάρβαρος as such. These four trajectories only serve as broad groupings of how the term can be understood.

3.1 The term as a purely linguistic and cultural marker

Not surprisingly, many commentators, who have, after all, an edifying purpose as their goal, simply state that the word is used in a neutral fashion and as a purely linguistic and cultural marker (e.g., Wikenhauser 1961, 283; Lindijer 1979, 275; Marshall 1980, 415–416; Schneider 1982, 401; Hemer 1989, 152; Balz 1990, 198; Neudorfer 1990, 356; Johnson 1992, 461; Jervell 1998, 615). Some see no negative connotation to the word in the context of Acts 28:1–6, but still take the trouble to point out that the βάρβαροι (on Malta) were indeed civilised people (e.g., Blaiklock 1959,

²² Also see the discussion under §3.4 below (“The term as a marker of the next stage of Christian missionary activity”)

²³ Börstinghaus (2010, 404–406), although not explicitly categorising, identifies the first two of these trajectories, and points out the use of φιλανθρωπία, an important component of trajectories three and four.

192; Neil 1973, 254; Grosheide 1974, 212), although perhaps uneducated (cf. Stenschke 1999, 94). Another group would have the term point only to a linguistic and cultural difference, but in a demeaning way, ranging from “patronizing” (Bruce 1954, 521)²⁴ through the expected feeling of Greek superiority (Roloff 1981, 366) to describing the βάρβαροι as such “in alle betekenissen van het woord” (Van Eck 2003, 548–549).²⁵ Some of these latter proposals might also fit in with the other proposed trajectories for understanding the term’s use.

3.2 *The term as a marker of the ἔσχατος τῆς γῆς (“end of the earth”)*

An enticing proposal with regard to the ἔσχατος τῆς γῆς (“the end of the earth”) has been put forward by Loveday Alexander. That Acts 1:8 sets up the lines along which Acts unfolds geographically has been well established in New Testament scholarship. This is usually taken to mean that the narrative has Rome as its final goal; that is to say, witnessing in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and finally, Rome. However, this is not necessarily the case for Paul’s missionary work. There already is a church at Rome,²⁶ and what can almost be considered an honorary guard awaits and escorts Paul on the last stage of his journey to the Eternal City (Acts 28:14–16). Alexander’s (2006a) main proposal needs to be quoted at length:

Given the symbolic significance of “the islands” in biblical geography, it is not unreasonable to suggest that readers might see this as a rather subtly-hinted fulfilment of the commission of Acts 1.8. This island turns out rather prosaically to have a name (28.1), but it is still peopled by “barbarians” (28.2: the only βάρβαροι in the whole of Acts), who, like the Lycaonians of 14.11, show a satisfying readiness to attribute divine status to the apostle. (p. 214)

She continues in the following paragraph: “But it is not so easy to be confident that the voyage’s final destination, Rome, has this symbolic significance.” Alexander goes on to argue that the reader is guided from the miracle-filled and missionary world of Acts to a more quotidian

²⁴ Later editions of the commentary by Bruce (cf. Bruce 1990, 531) do not contain this description of the βάρβαροι.

²⁵ An English translation would be “in all the meanings of the word.”

²⁶ Cf. Grumm (1985, 334), who also points out this fact.

existence in Rome, starting with “the ‘first man’ with the very Roman name of Publius”, and the easy accessibility of an “Alexandrian grain-ship wintering on the other side of the island”; that is, that the move from the exotic location of the shipwreck to civilisation is a literary technique guiding the reader back to reality (see esp. Alexander 2006a, 229). Alexander’s suggestion calls for a closer look. In the ancient Mediterranean world it is at the periphery that the “other” is encountered. Although remarking upon Herodotus, the following quote by Redfield (2002) has general application:

We place the fabulous beyond the edges of the known world, [Herodotus] suggests, not only because they are beyond our knowledge, but because, as we move toward the edges, we encounter more extreme conditions and atypical forms, both natural and cultural. The ends of the earth, for Herodotus, are districts full of oddities, monsters, and rare valuable substances. The center, by contrast, is a sphere of mixtures. (p. 40)

This is also true for the ancient novels (cf. Alexander 2006c, 113), although they place the “barbarians” at the eastern border; Alexander has also suggested that the move from East to West in Acts is a protest against the Graeco-Roman worldview (Alexander 2006b, 84). Within this interpretation, the term βάρβαρος would serve to announce the arrival at the “end of the earth.”

3.3 *The term as designation of the inhabitants of the island as literary props on Paul’s way to Rome*

A third proposed backdrop against which the term βάρβαρος can be understood in Acts 28:2, 4 is that Luke’s concern is only with Paul’s journey to Rome; he is at pains to show that nothing will stop the apostle reaching this destination (e.g., Jervell 1998, 617). Pesch (1986, 298) has suggested that this is to be understood in light of Acts 26:22a—through God’s assistance, Paul is heading for Rome. An even more applicable text would be Acts 23:11b—Paul “must” go to Rome.²⁷ Within this interpretation, the term βάρβαρος can be understood as a literary prop: the βάρβαροι is connected with, yet stands in contrast to, the term φιλανθρωπία (Acts 28:2; in the New Testament, to be found only here and

²⁷ Acts 23:11b: ὡς γὰρ διεμαρτύρω τὰ περὶ ἐμοῦ εἰς Ἱερουσαλήμ, οὕτω σε δεῖ καὶ εἰς Ῥώμην μαρτυρῆσαι.

at Titus 3:4)²⁸ (cf. Bruce 1954, 521; Windisch 1964, 551; Marshall 1980, 416; Neudorfer 1999, 360; Van Eck 2003, 554), and this contrast symbolises the difficulties removed (by God) from Paul’s way (cf. Grosheide 1974, 212; Krodel 1986, 479). This interpretation would have God influence the βάρβαροι to be exceptionally friendly towards Paul. Still, within this category of “literary props” is a suggestion by Van Eck (2003, 549–551), one of few commentators to muse at length on the literary use of the word βάρβαροι (and its contrast with φιλανθρωπία). Van Eck notes the parallel of Paul’s journey to Rome with that of Vespasian in 69 C.E.—for instance, the reported healings by Vespasian in stopping over at Alexandria—and concludes that “[h]oe dichter Paulus bij Rome komt, hoe meer hij op een keizer in aantocht gaat lijken” (Van Eck 2003, 554). For Van Eck, the contrast of the terms βάρβαρος and φιλανθρωπία is a critique on Graeco-Roman culture, as is the rest of Paul’s journey to Rome.

3.4 *The term as a marker of the next stage of Christian missionary activity*

This last proposed theory is sporadically hinted at; or rather, it can be surmised when different statements of various scholars are considered together. This theory also makes much of the use of φιλανθρωπία in conjunction with the βάρβαροι. Lindijer (1979, 262)²⁹ quite rightly links this term with the centurion Julius being φιλανθρώπως in Acts 27:3 (a *hapax legomenon* in the New Testament), and Publius acting φιλοφρόνως in Acts 28:7 (another *hapax legomenon* in the New Testament), and since all of the entities connected with this group of words are non-Jewish, states that the terms’ use demonstrates the nations’ “openness.”³⁰ Johnson (1992, 461) remarks on the Acts 28:1–6 episode that “[t]hroughout Luke-Acts, the theme of hospitality has been an important symbol of receptivity to God’s visitation . . .”³¹ He does not develop this theme or link it explicitly

²⁸ The term itself, however, is not a strange choice for the narrative of Acts 28:1–10. On hospitality within the ancient Mediterranean world, with an extended discussion of terminology and an in-depth discussion of Luke-Acts, see Arterbury (2005, esp. 150–152 for Acts 28:1–10).

²⁹ Also see Krodel (1986, 479) and Johnson (1992, 445).

³⁰ The full statement by Lindijer (1979, 262) reads: “Op de weg naar Rome blijkt de openheid van de volken.”

³¹ He notes the following passages: Luke 5:29; 7:36–50; 9:4–5; 10:1–16, 38–42; 19:1–10; Acts 10:24; 16:11–15.

with the lack of preaching or conversion among the βάρβαροι or the island's other inhabitants. If, indeed, the statement by Witherington (1998, 439) about universalism (made in the context of Acts 15) holds true that,

[a]t least a significant part of Luke's purpose is not merely to display or explore ethnic diversity in the Empire, as might be the case if he merely intended to entertain or inform the curious, but to show how out of the many could come one, a united people in a saved and saving relationship to the one true God,

perhaps this final “ethnographical” marker, occurring in a context where no preaching or conversion take place, is an invitation to the reader with an interest in missionary activity to move beyond the people-groups of the Graeco-Roman world.³²

4 Conclusion

This article has sought to point out the problems connected with the use of the term βάρβαρος in Acts 28:2, 4. In the ancient world the term could be used to distinguish between people groups, and to do so in a pejorative way. The term's use to designate only one specific group of people within Acts becomes conspicuous in the face of the content of the Acts narrative—a narrative replete with various ethnic groups and languages. In Acts 28:1–10 the occurrence of the term leads to questions concerning the author of Acts' possible lack of a missionary concern, the possibility of the view by the author of the inhabitants of Malta as naïve, and the possibility of a concern that salvation is only for people of a Jewish or Graeco-Roman cultural allegiance.

After pointing out these problems, mostly implicit suggestions with regard to the term's use were gathered and amalgamated into four possible trajectories along which the problematic use of the term may be understood. The term could be understood as a purely linguistic and cultural marker; as a marker of the “end of the earth”; as indicating this specific people group as “literary props” on Paul's way to Rome; as a marker of the next stage of Christian missionary activity; or as a combination of any of these. The four suggestions need to be evaluated against the bigger context of the Acts narrative, especially since this book

³² In similar vein, Schneider (1982, 401) has remarked upon the healing actions of Paul among the inhabitants of Μελίτη: “Der Leser erkennt, was gegenüber den Heiden in der Welt noch zu tun bleibt.”

has become in the eyes of many present-day Christians—rightly or wrongly!—a missionary manifesto of the early church.

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