

# Apollos of Alexandria

## Portrait of an Unknown

SAMUEL VOLLENWEIDER

Alexandria has found its way into the Bible – at least at its margins – due to Apollos’s activities in Ephesus and Corinth.<sup>1</sup> Little is known about the emergence of Christianity in Alexandria, the famous metropolis, and thus the association between Apollos and this city seems to be like a lightning flash that comes without warning and briefly illuminates the sky before dissipating and being replaced by prolonged darkness.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the portrait that the New Testament paints of Apollos is vague, providing fewer answers than it does elicit more questions. Despite the meager evidence available and the inherent difficulties of studying this remarkable early Christian figure, I will

---

<sup>1</sup> In addition to Alexandrian ships (Acts 27:6; 28:11), the New Testament also mentions members of a “Synagogue of the Alexandrians” in Jerusalem which seems to be identical to that “of the so-called Freedmen and Cyrenians” (Acts 6:9). See Michael Zugmann, ‘*Hellenisten*’ in *der Apostelgeschichte: Historische und exegetische Untersuchungen zu Apg 6,1; 9,29; 11,20*, WUNT 2/264 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 273: “als Verband dreier Landsmannschaften”. Robin G. Thompson discusses further possibilities in “Diaspora Jewish Freedman: Stephen’s Deadly Opponents,” *BSac* 173 (2016): 166–81. For a recent view on Alexandria as a multicultural site, see the synopsis by Luca Arcari, “Introduction: Cultural and Religious Cohabitations in Alexandria and Egypt between the 1st and the 6th Cent. CE,” in *Beyond Conflicts: Cultural and Religious Cohabitations in Alexandria and Egypt between the 1st and the 6th Century CE*, ed. idem, TSAJ 103 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 1–24.

<sup>2</sup> Apollos is an outstanding representative of early Christian Alexandria according to Birger A. Pearson, “Christians and Jews in First-Century Alexandria,” *HThR* 79 (1986): 206–16 (215): “It is a Christianity which breathes the spirit of the contemplative Philo, and, more importantly, moves in a trajectory leading to the typically Alexandrian theology of such great figures as Clement, Origen, and Athanasius.” See also Pearson, “Earliest Christianity in Egypt: Some Observations,” in *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity*, ed. idem and James E. Goehring, Studies in Antiquity and Christianity (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 132–59 (136, 149). Jürgen Wehnert, “Apollos,” in *Alexandria*, ed. Tobias Georges et al., COMES 1 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 403–12, plays with the thought that Apollos returned later to Alexandria with a great impact (“könnte seine christologische Schriftauslegung ... dort schulbildend geworden sein,” referring to the *Letter of Barnabas*). For a recent and cautious view of Christian origins in Alexandria, see Bernard Pouderon, “‘Jewish,’ ‘Christian’ and ‘Gnostic’ Groups in Alexandria during the 2nd Cent. Between Approval and Expulsion,” in Arcari, *Beyond Conflicts*, 155–75.

attempt to sketch an image of this unknown character, Apollos, as far as the evidence permits.

## 1. Apollos Attracts Modern Historians and Interpreters

Interest in Apollos as the first representative of Christian Alexandria has primarily arisen within the modern era. In early Christian literature, Apollos is a marginal figure. His ancient reception history is also quite meager.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, one early Christian source counted Apollos among the seventy disciples of Jesus, crediting with the number 32.<sup>4</sup> He became either bishop of Caesarea or, of course, bishop of Corinth and he died as martyr, burnt alive in Syrian Apamea.<sup>5</sup> He is called the “cupbearer of Christ’s disciples.”<sup>6</sup> And according to Luther he is the author of Hebrews.<sup>7</sup>

Within the modern era, interest in Apollos, his theological profile, his relationship with Paul, and his effect on early Christianity significantly increased. Of particular interest to modern scholars was his relationship with the apostle Paul and his Corinthian affairs. Academic *Apollophilo*i interested in this particular facet of Apollos inquiries contend that this early Christian teacher was a devotee of Philo and that he became the initiator of a sophisticated wisdom theology consisting of Alexandrian speculation. In Corinth, it is argued, Apollos with his wisdom theology became an opponent of Paul and his cross-centered apocalyptic theology. The most elaborate expression of this model

---

<sup>3</sup> Eckhard J. Schnabel, “Apollos,” *EBR* 2:411–14, does not offer any material.

<sup>4</sup> *Chronicon Paschale* (PG 92, 521C). See Pier F. Beatrice, “Apollos of Alexandria and the Origins of the Jewish-Christian Baptist Encratism,” *ANRW* 2.26.2 (1995): 1232–75 (1240n18). Beatrice considers traditions like these to be historical facts (see below n12).

<sup>5</sup> See Beatrice, “Apollos,” 1241n21.

<sup>6</sup> Nilus, *Ep.* 2.49 (PG 79, 220C: Ἀπολλῶς ὁ Ἀλεξανδρεὺς λόγιος ὁ ποτιστῆς τῶν Χριστοῦ μαθητῶν).

<sup>7</sup> Luther WA 45, 389: “Apollo ist ein hochverstendiger Man gewest, Die Epistel *Hebreorum* ist freilich sein;” cf. WA 44, 709. More recently, the same position is taken by Albert Vanhoye, “Hebräerbrief,” *TRE* 14: 494–505 (496): “bleibt jedoch eine unbeweisbare Hypothese.” A very detailed explanation for this hypothesis is offered by Ceslas Spicq, *L’Épître aux Hébreux*, vol. 1: *Introduction*, EtBib (Paris: Gabdala, 1952), 209–19. Knut Backhaus, “Der Hebräerbrief und die Paulus-Schule,” in idem, *Der sprechende Gott: Gesammelte Studien zum Hebräerbrief*, WUNT 240 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 21–48 (44), writes, “besitzt der Gedanke Luthers einen gewissen heuristischen Wert. Denn der Missionar Apollos, dessen Bild aus 1Kor 1; 3f und Apg 18,24–28 ungefähr zu rekonstruieren ist, dürfte ... den Typus darstellen, den auch der Hebräer-Autor repräsentiert: theologisch eigenständig, schriftkundig, “alexandrinisch” gebildet und rhetorisch gewandt, in freien (für Lk durchaus problematischen) Beziehungen zum Paulus-Kreis stehend.”

appears in the work of the late Gerhard Sellin.<sup>8</sup> Sellin notes a heavy rivalry between a Paul-group and an Apollos-group in Corinth – a tension rooted in a rivalry between Paul and Apollos themselves. The so-called Corinthian πνευματικοί are pupils of Apollos, the representative of an Alexandrian dualistic wisdom and pneuma theology. Sellin, among others, finds constitutive elements of this spiritual wisdom in parts of 1 Corinthians, namely in ch. 2 and, later, in the discourse about resurrection in ch. 15. According to Sellin, Paul's argument in these passages takes up central elements of Apollos's theology. Furthermore, Sellin argues that Corinth's enthusiasts have a soteriological understanding of the group leader as a "Heilsmittler." Accordingly, Apollos resembles the rank of Philo's "man of God," being the Logos of God. As such, Apollos – like every "wise" man – should be afforded with this status.

This is a fascinating hypothesis. However, it is not only highly constructive (and therefore held together by tenuous assumptions), it also mischaracterizes Philo himself, who never thought a human person, even an exceedingly wise person, might take over the function of God's Logos.<sup>9</sup> In a much less exaggerated form, however, such a reconstruction of Apollos's teaching and his central role in the Corinthian community is often advocated by scholars.<sup>10</sup> According to this view, Paul intentionally formulates his theology in 1 Corinthians as a refutation of and response to Apollos's theology. Putting aside interpretations that place an emphasis on Apollos's influences from Alexandrian wisdom theology, there are other modern strands of interpreta-

---

<sup>8</sup> Gerhard Sellin, "Das 'Geheimnis' der Weisheit und das Rätsel der 'Christuspartei' (zu 1Kor 1–4)," in *Studien zu Paulus und zum Epheserbrief*, FRLANT 229 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009 [1982]), 9–36. Among the predecessors of this kind of hypothesis is Birger A. Pearson, *The Pneumatikos-Psychikos Terminology in 1 Corinthians: A Study in the Theology of the Corinthian Opponents of Paul and Its Relation to Gnosticism*, SBLDS 12 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1973), 18.

<sup>9</sup> See the analysis of Dieter Zeller, "Philonische Logos-Theologie im Hintergrund des Konflikts von 1Kor 1–4?" in idem, *Studien zu Philo und Paulus* (Bonn: University Press, 2011), 119–28. But see the defense of Sellin himself in "Einflüsse philonischer Logos-Theologie in Korinth: Weisheit und Apostelparteien (1Kor 1–4)," in *Philo und das Neue Testament: Wechselseitige Wahrnehmungen*, ed. Roland Deines and Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr, WUNT 172 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 165–72.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Gregory E. Sterling, "'Wisdom among the Perfect': Creation Traditions in Alexandrian Judaism and Corinthian Christianity," *NT* 37 (1995): 355–84 (383–84); Wehnert, "Apollos," 409–12; idem, "Apollos und Paulus in Ephesos," in *Ephesos: Die antike Metropole im Spannungsfeld von Religion und Bildung*, ed. Tobias Georges et al., COMES 2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 223–52 (230–31), who even plays with the thought ("mit einiger Phantasie") that the later Deutero-Pauline letters Col and Eph continue the preaching of Apollos, *ibid.*, 230n18. A moderate position is taken by Knut Backhaus, "Apollos," in *Personenlexikon zum Neuen Testament*, ed. Josef Hainz et al. (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 2004) 28–29.

tion that credit Apollos with the honor of being one of the founders of the famous Ephesian Christian community.<sup>11</sup> These are some of the more prominent theories surrounding the interpretation and significance of Apollos as an early Christian figure.<sup>12</sup>

In the following pages, I will investigate the textual basis on which such hypotheses have been built. All scholars agree on this point: There are a scant number of texts, some of which are the most complicated ones contained within New Testament. After we have analyzed the relevant texts, the study will conclude with a somewhat sober result. The two texts of main interest are in Acts and in 1 Corinthians.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> See Werner Thiesen, *Christen in Ephesus: Die historische und theologische Situation in vorpaulinischer und paulinischer Zeit und zur Zeit der Apostelgeschichte und der Pastoralbriefe*, TANZ 12 (Tübingen: Francke, 1995), 45, 53–60, 86; Matthias Günther, *Die Frühgeschichte des Christentums in Ephesus*, ARGU 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1995), 46, 67, 54–58, 205; Helmut Koester, “Ephesos in Early Christian Literature,” in *Ephesos: Metropolis of Asia: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Its Archaeology, Religion, and Culture*, ed. idem, HThS 41 (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1995), 119–140 (126, 133); Michael Fieger, *Im Schatten der Artemis: Glaube und Ungehorsam in Ephesus* (Bern: Lang, 1998), 73; a rather reserved position is taken by Rick Strelan, *Paul, Artemis and the Jews in Ephesus*, BZNW 80 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996), 214: “one original Christian movement in Ephesus was from Egypt and not from Palestine”; Stephan Witetschek, *Ephesische Enthüllungen 1: Frühe Christen in einer antiken Großstadt*, BTS 6 (Leuven: Peeters, 2008), 358; Wehnert, “Apollos,” 405 (considered as a possibility); very summarily formulated by Mikael Tellbe, *Christ-Believers in Ephesus: A Textual Analysis of Early Christian Identity Formation in a Local Perspective*, WUNT 242 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 22: “All studies agree that the beginning of the Christian movement in Ephesus cannot be found in the Pauline mission, but in the mission of the Alexandrian Christ-believer Apollos.” See also the report of Eckhard J. Schnabel, “Die ersten Christen in Ephesus: Neuerscheinungen zur frühchristlichen Missionsgeschichte,” NT 41 (1999): 349–82 (367–68).

<sup>12</sup> More recently Petr Pokorný claims that the so-called hymn in Phil 2:6–11 may have originated from Apollos and that he conveyed it to Paul in Ephesus: “Ephesos als Kreuzung frühchristlicher Traditionen,” in *Ephesos: Die antike Metropole*, 297–320 (309–13, referring to N. Walter). The most fantastic portrait paints Beatrice, “Apollos”: In Corinth, Apollos is not only Paul’s main opponent (in relation to the disputes in both Corinthian Epistles), but the representative of a radical encratism, stemming both from Alexandria and from the baptists (“another gospel: Apollos’s ‘encratite’ Theology,” *ibid.*, 1251). He laid the foundation for radical encratism in Egypt, Syria, and Asia Minor, which later gave rise to gnosticism. He was one of the seventy disciples sent out by Jesus (*ibid.*, 1260), so he knew the traditions of Jesus very well. Of course, he also represents a speculative wisdom theology and denies the resurrection of the dead (*ibid.*, 1257). He stands behind the Nicolaitans of Rev 2 (*ibid.*, 1261–63) and is the author of the apocryphal “Gospel of the Egyptians” (and perhaps also of the Odes of Solomon, *ibid.*, 1268–70). And finally, as an important Christian minister, he suffers martyrdom in Apamea (*ibid.*, 1270). In summary, Beatrice writes, *ibid.*, 1271: “the figure of Apollos occupies the crucial position between Jesus and Paul”!

<sup>13</sup> Apart from Acts 18 and 1 Corinthians, Apollos is also mentioned in Titus 3:13: “make every effort to send Apollos,” and 1 Clem 47:3: “a man certified” by the apostles. William O.

## 2. Two Lukan Episodes: Acts 18–19

Acts 18–19 recounts the beginning of Paul’s so-called third missionary journey. At the outset, the narrator tells the audience that although Paul arrived in Ephesus, he did not stay long but instead set sail for Caesarea shortly after his arrival (Acts 18:19–22). Though Paul sails away from Ephesus, the narrator lingers there to tell the audience about Apollos, Priscilla, and Aquila. This episode, which spans 18:24–19:1, provides us with the foundational text about Apollos. Following this episode is Paul’s return to Ephesus – while Apollos is in Corinth – and his encounter with twelve disciples who are connected with John the Baptist (19:1–7). The two stories (18:24–19:1a and 19:1b–7) are formulated similarly and share many parallels. We will come back to this point.

The few lines about Apollos we find in this passage offer important information:

1. Apollos is a “Jew.”<sup>14</sup>
2. He is a native of Alexandria.
3. He is λόγιος, i.e., “eloquent” and/or “learned,” “educated.”
4. He is competent in the interpretation of the “Scriptures.”

All these elements about Apollos’s personal background seem to be internally consistent and do not conflict with the claim that he comes from Alexandria. The following points, however, are more difficult to fit within a consistent framework:

5. He is “instructed in the way of the Lord.” This can be a mere biblical phrase that includes his lifestyle as well as a particular expression of ethics, or the phrase could be

---

Walker, “Apollos and Timothy as the unnamed ‘brothers’ in 2 Corinthians 8:18–24,” *CBQ* 73 (2011): 318–38, identifies Apollos with the “brother” in 2 Cor 8:18.

<sup>14</sup> The theophoric name Ἀπολλῶς itself, which is short for Ἀπολλώνιος and other names referring to Apollo (see BDAG 116), does not allow any conclusion about the degree of his family’s cultural adaptation to a pagan-Hellenistic environment, against Elisabetta Abate, “Spuren der religiösen Identität der ephesischen Juden (1. Jahrhundert v. Chr. – ca. 3. Jahrhundert n. Chr.),” in *Ephesos: Die antike Metropole*, 205–20 (213, referring to W. Eckey). See e.g. Stewart Moore, *Jewish Ethnic Identity and Relations in Hellenistic Egypt: With Walls of Iron?*, JSJS 171 (Brill: Leiden, 2015), 258–59. Furthermore, the name interacts in some manuscripts with Ἀπελλῆς, a very common name among Jews (cf. Rom 16:10 and BDAG 101). See George D. Kilpatrick, “Apollos – Apelles,” in *The Principles and Practice of New Testament Textual Criticism – Collected Essays*, ed. idem and J. Keith Elliott, BETL 96 (Leuven: University Press, 1970), 186, who assumes that the original reading in Acts is Ἀπελλῆς, but that it is the same person as in 1 Corinthians. On the name change, see Friedrich Blass et al., *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), §29.4: “interchange of ε and ο”; Theodor Zahn, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Leipzig: Deichert, 1906), 1:193.

interpreted as a link to the message of John the Baptist (Luke 3:4 par. 1:76). The significance of a connection with John the Baptist will become apparent later within our text.

6. “He spoke being fervent in spirit”: The phrase itself is clear but how does it fit with Lukan pneumatology?

7. He “taught accurately the things concerning Jesus”: Linked with the interpretation of the Scriptures, this phrase might refer to a kind of christological hermeneutic of the Bible. Such an interpretation would fit well with the end of the passage, which claims that he showed “by the Scriptures that the Messiah is Jesus.” However, it must be taken into account that between these two descriptions of Apollos (Acts 18:25 and 18:28), he received special instruction from Priscilla and Aquila (18:26).

8. “He knew only the baptism of John”: With this detail, and those that follow in the subsequent section, the confusion concerning Apollos as a character begins. The text identifies a gap in Apollos’s knowledge, and narrates that Priscilla and Aquila fill this gap, providing Apollos with a “more accurate” teaching about “the way of the Lord.” Although this couple is closely linked with Paul and his mission, they were not converted to Christianity by the apostle himself (18:1–3).

9. Disputations with Jews (in Ephesus and, later, in Corinth).

10. Information about Apollos’s travel (Achaëa; the Corinth-connection is supported by 1 Corinthians).

Our passage, together with the following one, has produced a series of scholarly hypotheses without any convincing solution. Although it is not my intent to navigate through this jungle, I will focus on a few elements in service of our search for the historical Apollos.

### *2.1 Two Parallel Stories: Apollos and the Baptists*

The first task that must be accomplished is to illuminate the surrounding context of these parallel episodes. Prior the Apollos episode, and connected with it, the narrator provides a peculiar notice: Paul reaches Ephesus for the first time but departs shortly thereafter (Acts 18:18–23). Although there are some historical and exegetical questions regarding the veracity and the purpose of this travel information,<sup>15</sup> what appears to be clear is that Luke deems it important to mention Paul’s appearance in Ephesus before he continues the narrative. Luke must cope with and work around the fact that the apostle himself did not found the Christian community at Ephesus. Accordingly, in some way, this short notice with its link to Paul and the first mention of Ephesus offers the reader a substitute for a foundation narrative.

After the Apollos story Luke inserts another travel notice, this time narrating Paul’s return to Ephesus (19:1). What follows this travel notice (19:1–7) is in part a parallel to the previous story about Apollos (18:24–28). Paul encounters some “disciples” who were only baptized with “John’s baptism,” not having any experience or knowledge of the Holy Spirit. After being baptized

---

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. Michael Wolter, “Apollos und die Johannesjünger von Ephesus (Apg 18,24–19,7),” in idem, *Theologie und Ethos im frühen Christentum: Studien zu Jesus, Paulus und Lukas*, WUNT 236 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 402–26 (405–15).

by the apostle, they receive the Spirit and speak in tongues. The basic pattern between the two stories is similar, though there are some differences: (1) Once again, Luke presents the reader with individuals related to John's baptism. (2) These individuals are identified with the absolute *μαθηται*, initially giving readers the impression that they are Christians. (3) However, as the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that these disciples are in greater need of an "upgrade" to their doctrinal understanding than Apollos. (4) This time, Paul himself (instead of Priscilla and Aquila) offered the errant disciples a corrective.

The "disciples" episode can be read as a thematic resumption and variation of the Apollos narrative, but with marked intensity and exaggeration.<sup>16</sup> This becomes apparent when comparing the manner in which Apollos and the "disciples" are depicted. There is a significant gap between them: the "disciples" are still part of John the Baptist's movement while Apollos has, in part, already made the transition to Christianity; furthermore, the disciples have not been touched by the spirit, whereas Apollos was "fervent in spirit."<sup>17</sup> The contrastive portrayal of Apollos and the disciples creates a narrative that enhances the apostle's own work in Ephesus. Paul himself, and not only the couple allied with him, brings these disciples to conversion. As a result, the story is presented as a kind of "third Pentecost" (cf. 2:1–4; 10:44–46) and the disciples' number (twelve) corresponds to the apostles' circle at the outset of the Christian movement. Read in this light, it seems clear that Luke creates a new little narrative reverting to the previous one, intensifying all of its elements.

## 2.2 A Teaching Upgrade: The Intervention of Priscilla and Aquila

As we now turn to the Apollos story, one basic methodological question has to be clarified: How can one determine Luke's role in the construction of his

---

<sup>16</sup> The parallels between Acts 18:24–28 and 19:1–7 have often been noted, see esp. Ernst Käsemann, "Die Johannesjünger in Ephesus," in idem, *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen*, vol. 1, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970), 158–68 (167): "eine regelrechte communicatio idiomatum;" Scott Shauf, *Theology as History, History as Theology: Paul in Ephesus in Acts 19*, BZNW 133 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), 140: "There is a clear similarity in the plot between 18:24–28 and 19:1–7," see also *ibid.*, 159. Shauf underlines the observation that "the deficiency of Apollos is really not the main point of the episode" but "his participation in the expansion of the Christian movement, particularly in the refutation of Jewish opponents," *ibid.*, 143.

<sup>17</sup> See Charles K. Barrett, "Apollos and the Twelve Disciples of Ephesus," in *The New Testament Age: Essays in Honor of Bo Reicke*, ed. William C. Weinrich (Macon: Mercer, 1984), 29–39 (38), Luke works "by making Apollos more and the twelve disciples less Christian". The question is often asked whether "being fervent in spirit" relates to the divine or the human spirit. This is most probably a false alternative, which does not apply either in Acts 18:25 or in Rom 12:11. See also below n28.

narrative? Is he simply a transmitter of old traditions, a creator of new stories, or an author who shapes his material according to his purposes? If we accept the possibility that Luke had a more or less strong redactional hand within the creation of this narrative, then we must ask about his main intentions. As we begin answering some of these questions, we must be exceedingly cautious about claiming that Luke ingeniously and systematically created new material for his narrative. The first Christian historian is not so much interested in inventing pure fictions as he is in developing specific theological paradigms through the narrative retelling and shaping of his material. The author's purpose is to write a *διήγησις*, a narrative of Christian origins (Luke 1:1). Accordingly, the *auctor ad Theophilum*, being a great narrator as any historian of antiquity, converts some elements he finds in his traditions – like names, small pieces of local and personal notices – into miniature stories. That is why Luke has been imagined as a painter.

Even though it is quite difficult to get behind the redactional wall of Luke, there is hardly any doubt that he works with traditions about Apollos and about some disciples from the movement of John the Baptist. And from his presentation of these episodes, the modern reader might get the impression that Luke has some difficulties handling them properly and integrating them into his comprehensive grand narrative.<sup>18</sup>

In the two passages here in Acts 18–19 we face most notably Luke's authorial activity. It does not make sense to look for historical trajectories of Christian theology consisting of Jesus traditions without any knowledge and experience of the Holy Spirit and without a confession of Christ's resurrection. In other words, seen from a historical perspective, the theological profile Luke attributes to Apollos does not seem plausible. It does not seem likely that Apollos knew of Jesus traditions but had only experienced John's baptism and was, therefore, in need of an "upgrade" by the couple Priscilla and Aquila. The matter is further complicated when one notes the parallelism of Luke's formulations within this short story:

I. Apollos "had been instructed in the way of the Lord" and "he ... taught accurately the things concerning Jesus" (v. 25). These details are parallel with Luke's remarks about how Priscilla and Aquila "explained the way of God to him more accurately" (v. 26c).

II. Apollos is "well-versed in the Scriptures" (v. 24) and taught "boldly in the synagogue" (v. 26a). Luke offers this description prior to Apollos's upgrade and a parallel one about

---

<sup>18</sup> See e.g. Knut Backhaus, "Lukas der Maler: Die Apostelgeschichte als intentionale Geschichte der christlichen Erstepoche," in *Historiographie und fiktionales Erzählen: Zur Konstruktivität in Geschichtstheorie und Exegese*, ed. Knut Backhaus and Gerd Häfner, BThSt 86 (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 2007), 30–66 (64): "Die diffuse Situation von Apollos (Apg 18, 24–28] und den Johannesjüngern zu Ephesus (Apg 19, 1–7) sprengt das vereinheitlichende Geschichtsbild und dürfte die mannigfachen Grauzonen christlicher Identitätsbildung wirklichkeitsgerecht widerspiegeln."

his work in Achaëa after he received instruction from Priscilla and Aquila: He “refuted powerfully the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Messiah is Jesus” (v. 28).

The nature of the instructional upgrade carried out by the couple is unclear since it is linked neither with the transmission of the Holy Spirit nor does it end with baptism. Was their intervention to integrate Apollos (an “early Christian privateer”<sup>19</sup>) into the Christian and especially the Pauline communities? Whatever form this upgrade might have had, the author’s intention behind the couple’s intervention seems to be aimed at embedding Apollos in the overall historical setting Luke establishes in his work: Apollos has to be linked with the universal mission run in this phase especially by Paul and his team. Such a “heilsgeschichtliches” embedding of missionary activities of famous early Christian missionaries can also be observed in the case of Philip in Acts 8:9–25.<sup>20</sup>

Why is it not Paul himself who “optimizes” Apollos’s teaching and his ecclesiastical standing but “only” his allies, Priscilla and Aquila? We know that Apollos and Paul were in direct contact in Ephesus (1 Cor 16:12). Many scholars suspect that Luke knew about some rivalry between these two and tried therefore to keep them at a distance here in Ephesus.<sup>21</sup> But there is a rather simple explanation that does not rely on historical background knowledge, if the story about the Baptist’s disciples in Acts 19:1–7 is understood as a *narrative variation and adaptation of the former story*, which enhances and intensifies its elements at several points: Now not only does the couple act, but also the master himself, Paul. And at the same time Luke is able to hint at Apollos’s independence of Paul and, by means of Paul’s temporary absence, to hint at the non-Pauline early developments in the Christian community of Ephesus.

### 2.3 Luke’s Apollos: Alexandrian or Levantine Background?

Some details of Apollos’s portrait deserve special attention. Apollos is presented not as a Christian but as a Jew<sup>22</sup> with great rhetorical and hermeneuti-

<sup>19</sup> This is the wording of Käsemann, “Johannesjünger,” 165–66, “urchristliche Freibeuter.”

<sup>20</sup> Friedrich Avemarie, *Die Taufenzählungen der Apostelgeschichte: Theologie und Geschichte*, WUNT 139 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 441–55, tries to maintain the historical reliability of as much material as possible connected to the narratives of Philip and of the Baptist’s disciples; he refers to an archaic rite of baptism without any link to the Holy Spirit.

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., Wolter, “Apollos,” 412, 415, 419–20.

<sup>22</sup> Here the phrase Ἰουδαῖος δέ τις refers to a Jew rather than specifically to a Jewish Christian. See Walter Gutbrod, “Ἰσραήλ κτλ. (C./D.),” *ThWNT* 3:382, cf. *TDNT* 3:380: “When members of the community are called Jews, this is usually in explanation of the special circumstances or to denote that they are members by birth. ... At [Acts] 18:2 Aquila is called a Ἰουδαῖος to explain why he was in Corinth. He had to leave Rome whether or not he had become a Christian.” Also Acts 21:20 and Gal 2:13 (cf. 2:15) are particular cases determined by their specific context.

cal competence (Acts 18:24). He is a native of Alexandria (Ἀλεξανδρεὺς τῷ γένει). Immediately following these details is the information that he was an “educated man” (ἀνήρ λόγιος). The semantic spectrum of λόγιος ranges from “eloquent” to “learned, cultured.” It is probably best not to treat these two meanings as alternatives. There is, nevertheless, some reason to put the emphasis on “learned, educated,” because Apollos is described as an outstanding biblical expert in the following part of the sentence.<sup>23</sup> At first glance, Apollos’s origin and his education fit together well and correspond to Luke’s general intention of embedding his message within a context of ancient education, of *paideia*. In early Christian literature, the *auctor ad Theophilum* is an outstanding representative of a program of “Bildung.”<sup>24</sup> If Luke hadn’t found this information about Apollos’s education in his tradition, he would have invented it! An educated Alexandrian Jew would look exactly like Luke’s Apollos – Alexandria was the famous city of Hellenistic *paideia*, of books, and of hermeneutics and, from a Jewish perspective, was important due to its connection with the legendary origins of the Septuagint.<sup>25</sup>

The Alexandrian color, however, is only a part of the picture. If we continue reading, another setting begins to prevail: the connection between Apollos and the baptist movement. In what follows, I will argue that the much more extensive and significant part of the description of Apollos and his activities is determined by the reference to the movement of John the Baptist.

1. Central is the phrase “he had been instructed in the way of the Lord” (v. 25a), which is an expression often used throughout the biblical texts.<sup>26</sup> Alt-

<sup>23</sup> See Gerhard Kittel, “λόγιος,” *ThWNT* 4:140, cf. *TDNT* 4:137: “the accompanying clause: *δυνατὸς ὄν ἐν ταῖς γραφαῖς*, corresponds so closely to the use attested in Joseph[us] that the sense of ‘learned’ is at least very probable.” See furthermore Ceslas Spicq, *Lexique théologique du Nouveau Testament* (Fribourg: Cerf, 1991), 924–26 (cf. ET, idem, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, ed. and trans. James D. Ernest [Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994], 2:403–6), with arguments for both meanings, together with a third, namely for “un titre d’honneur.”

<sup>24</sup> See the hints in my article, Samuel Vollenweider “Bildungsfreunde oder Bildungsverächter? Überlegungen zum Stellenwert der Bildung im frühen Christentum,” in *Bildung und Religion: Was ist Bildung in der Vormoderne?* ed. Peter Gemeinhardt, SERAPHIM 4 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 283–304; repr.: idem, *Antike und Urchristentum: Studien zur neutestamentlichen Theologie in ihren Kontexten und Rezeptionen*, WUNT 436 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), 375–94; Matthias Becker, *Lukas und Dion von Prusa: Das lukianische Doppelwerk im Kontext paganer Bildungsdiskurse*, Studies in Cultural Contexts of the Bible 3 (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2020).

<sup>25</sup> On the significance of such ethnic stereotypes, see Matthijs Den Dulk, “Aquila and Apollos: Acts 18 in Light of Ancient Ethnic Stereotypes,” *JBL* 139 (2020): 177–89. Den Dulk emphasizes the unexpected scenario of an uneducated Pontic manual laborer, instructing a learned Alexandrian. This story ties in with Luke’s general “reversal theme.”

<sup>26</sup> For the “way of the Lord,” see Gen 18:19; Deut 8:6; Josh 2:5; Judg 2:22; 2 Sam 22:31; Ps 24:10 LXX; Isa 26:8; Jer 6:16 LXX; Ezek 18:25; Jub 20:2; Sap 5:7. As regards the term “instructed” see Becker, *Lukas und Dion von Prusa*, 59–61 on *κατηχεῖσθαι* in Luke.

though the expression is at home in the biblical vernacular, it is more likely a specific reference to the performance and the message of John the Baptist with which the readers have been familiar since the beginning of the Gospel (Luke 3:4; cf. 1:76; 7:27; furthermore Acts 13:24–25; 19:4).<sup>27</sup>

2. Verse 25d refers explicitly to John's baptism: Apollos "knew only the baptism of John." Framing the description of Apollos in this way also suggests that the middle part of this sentence about his spiritual possessions and teaching (v. 25b–c) are loosely related to the "baptist section."

3. Apollos's "burning enthusiasm" is typical for any charismatic preacher (like Stephen).<sup>28</sup> In addition, the phrase "boiling in spirit" (ζέων τῷ πνεύματι) is perhaps also a loose allusion to John's announcement about the one who will baptize with spirit and fire (Luke 3:16; cf. Acts 1:5; 11:16; 13:24–25). However, it is an otherwise known expression (see Rom 12:11).<sup>29</sup>

4. Apollos's teaching about "the things concerning Jesus" (v. 25c) refers most simply to the type of proclamation that was characteristic of John who had to prepare the way for Jesus. In some sense, Apollos shares the position of John being in between the age of promise and the age of fulfilment (cf. Luke 16:16; 7:28). The adverb "accurately" fits well with John's announcement of the coming of Jesus: It is precise, especially because of the exact references to the Scriptures (Luke 3:3–6; cf. Acts 13:24–25; 19:4). Nevertheless, Apollos's teaching remains in a blurred state, like the one of John the Baptist: The latter clearly looks ahead to Jesus, and yet he does not yet know him as a real person (cf. Luke 7:19). Only thanks to the intervention of Priscilla and Aquila does the preaching of Apollos mutate into the full proclamation of Jesus Christ (ἐπίδεικνύς διὰ τῶν γραφῶν εἶναι τὸν χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν, v. 28). For Luke, the proclamation of Apollos undergoes an increase in accuracy and precision (ἀκριβέστερον, v. 26).

5. The statement that Apollos courageously spoke in the synagogue (v. 26a) also belongs in this section, as it attests to the continuation and localization of his teaching (v. 25). Seen in this light, the later remark about his

---

<sup>27</sup> See Ulrich Busse, "Apollos: ein Geistlicher im Lernprozess (Apg 18,24–28)," in *Mysterium regni ministerium verbi* (Mc 4,11; At 6,4): *Scritti in onore di mons – Vittorio Fusco*, ed. Ettore Franco (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 2000), 517–27 (520–21).

<sup>28</sup> See Acts 7:55; cf. 6:3, 5; 11:24; 13:52. Wehnert, "Apollos und Paulus," 229, refers also to the "anderen begnadeten ägyptischen Juden" in Stephen's speech: Joseph (Acts 7:9–10) and Moses (Acts 7:21–22, 36, 38). Cf. also Wolf-Henning Ollrog, *Paulus und seine Mitarbeiter: Untersuchungen zu Theorie und Praxis der paulinischen Mission*, WMANT 50 (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1979), 40: "Die Wendung beschreibt Apollos ... als überragenden Pneumatiker."

<sup>29</sup> See Albrecht Oepke, "ζέω," *ThWNT* 2:877–78; cf. *TDNT* 2:876: "The combination τῷ πνεύματι ζέειν seems to be peculiar to the NT and was perhaps coined by Paul." See also above n17.

preaching among the Jews (v. 28), although it is already in Corinth, refers to v. 25f. and therefore also belongs in this series of statements.

6. The initial remark about Apollos's exegetical skills ("well-versed in the scriptures," v. 24d) is, at first glance, part of the "Alexandrian" section. However, the words can also be assessed differently. With the previous phrase "he came to Ephesus" we have already left Alexandria, so to speak. The following remark about the biblical competence of Apollos points in advance to the next statement: His expertise is filled in terms of content by the phrase of the "way of the Lord," which we have previously assigned to the "baptist section."

7. Above all, the central significance of the baptist background is reinforced by the following story about the twelve disciples (19:1–7), which is in many ways parallel to the previous one. We tried to understand this story as a variegated resumption of the previous narrative, which works with marked intensification and heightening. John's baptism, his announcement, and his movement are like an overarching clasp that holds together the first two Ephesian narratives.

"Alexandrian section"	Transition	"Baptist section"
<p><sup>24a</sup>Ἰουδαῖος δέ τις Ἀπολλῶς ὀνόματι, Ἀλεξανδρεὺς τῷ γένει, <sup>b</sup>ἄνῆρ λόγιος,</p>	<p><sup>24c</sup>κατήντησεν εἰς Ἔφεσον, <sup>d</sup>δυνατὸς ὦν ἐν ταῖς γραφαῖς.</p>	<p><sup>25a</sup>οὗτος ἦν κατηχημένος τὴν ὁδὸν τοῦ κυρίου <sup>b</sup>καὶ ζέων τῷ πνεύματι ἐλάλει <sup>c</sup>καὶ ἐδίδασκεν ἀκριβῶς τὰ περὶ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ, <sup>d</sup>ἐπιστάμενος μόνον τὸ βάπτισμα Ἰωάννου· ... <sup>28</sup>εὐτόνως γὰρ τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις διακατηλέγετο δημοσίᾳ ἐπιδεικνὺς διὰ τῶν γραφῶν εἶναι τὸν χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν. 19:1–7 the Baptist's disci- ples</p>

Based on this understanding of the material in Acts 18, therefore, the narrator very quickly leaves the Alexandrian origin of Apollos. The initial remark functioned only to provide the audience with Apollos's native origin (γένος).<sup>30</sup> The "Alexandrian" profile is surprisingly kept tight: Apart from the mention of his homeland, the only information about Apollos that can be

<sup>30</sup> In Paul's case, Luke explicitly differentiates between his home town and his place of studies (Acts 22:3: γεγεννημένος – ἀνατεθραμμένος ... πεπαιδευμένος, cf. 26:4).

assigned to his time in Alexandria is the adjective “eloquent/educated.”<sup>31</sup> It is no surprise that later at least one reader felt this marginal role of Alexandria and tried to amplify it.<sup>32</sup>

### 3. Various Roles in the Corinthian Community: 1 Cor 1–4

In our assessment of the biblical portrayal of Apollos, we must briefly address the material found in 1 Corinthians. As already stated in section 1, there are many exegetical hypotheses that relate Apollos’s Alexandrian background with a type of “wisdom” theology in Corinth and postulate a more or less severe tension between Paul and Apollos.<sup>33</sup> On this point we have to be content with a few observations. If we put the Alexandrian educational background of Apollos in question, then there is no compelling reason to link the Corinthian’s yearning for wisdom with him. Corinthian *sophiophilia* and *pneumatomania* have to be explained without reference to an Apollos-construction built on the basis of Acts 18. There is also some reason to seek an explanation for the Corinthian’s enthusiasm for wisdom in Paul’s own group – or even in the Christ group, if there has been one. Also Paul’s criticism of pure rhetoric in 2:1–5 does not necessarily address Apollos’s elo-

---

<sup>31</sup> The vagueness and rarity of the statement is rightly observed by Johannes Munck, “Die Gemeinde ohne Parteien: Studien über 1. Kor. 1–4,” in idem, *Paulus und die Heilsgeschichte* (Kopenhagen: Munksgaard, 1954), 127–61 (136): “Man kann sehr wohl aus Alexandria stammen und Jude sein, ohne von der allegorischen Schriftauslegung und der hellenistisch-jüdischen Philosophie, die in dieser Stadt blühten, beeinflusst zu sein.” See especially Adolf Schlatter, *Paulus: Der Bote Jesu – Eine Deutung seiner Briefe an die Korinther* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1934), 20: “Aus der Herkunft des Apollos aus Alexandria lassen sich keine Schlüsse über die Haltung seines Glaubens und seiner Predigt ziehen. In der grossen Judenschaft Alexandrias war alles vorhanden, was es an Formen jüdischer Frömmigkeit gab.... Vermutlich war ein von der Taufbewegung erfasster Mann von allen griechisch gefärbten Theologien weit entfernt, ... dies war etwas ganz anderes als mit Platonismus begründete Mystik.”

<sup>32</sup> In v. 25, Codex Bezae offers a slightly modified version that situates clearly Apollos’s education in his home town of Alexandria (ὅς ἦν κατηχημένος ἐν τῇ πατρίδι τὸν λόγον τοῦ κυρίου). This note has no historical value since it testifies to the tendency of the following centuries, “aus der heraus eine ganze Reihe von frühchristlichen Theologen mit Alexandria in Verbindung gebracht worden ist,” Alfons Fürst, *Christentum als Intellektuellen-Religion: Die Anfänge des Christentums in Alexandria*, SBS 213 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2007), 72; differently Pearson, “Christians,” 210; also Schnabel, “Apollos,” 411: “This comment is often interpreted to imply that the early Christian mission had reached Egypt some time before 50 CE, which is a distinct possibility.”

<sup>33</sup> See also Niels Hyldahl, “Paul and Apollos: Exegetical Observations to 1 Cor. 3,1–23,” in *Apocryphon Severini, Presented to Søren Giversen*, ed. Per Bilde et al. (Aarhus: University Press, 1993), 68–82 (81): “Apollos is the person mainly responsible for the division,” and, even more, “Apollos’ philosophy, as distinct from Paul’s ‘wisdom of God’, can ... be called gnostic.”

quence.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, there are no clear signs of any underlying rivalry between Paul and Apollos in ch. 1–4.<sup>35</sup> The problem in Corinth was factionalism (1:11–12). If one does not read the passages where Paul explicitly refers to Apollos through a “hermeneutic of suspicion,” one will only find rivalry and quarrelling between some factions in Corinth but not among their leaders.<sup>36</sup> Finally, it is also not advisable to read the polemically interpreted passages in 1 Cor 1–4 as a prelude to the much more violent debates in 2 Corinthians.<sup>37</sup>

The central passage in this discussion concerning rivalry between Paul and Apollos is 1 Cor 4:6: “I have applied all this to Apollos and myself for your benefit” (NRSV; ταῦτα δὲ ... μετασημάτισα εἰς ἑμαυτὸν καὶ Ἀπολλῶν δι’ ὑμᾶς). Here, the term μετασηματίζειν seems to have the meaning *application* or *exemplification*, a kind of indirect speech in order to spare somebody.<sup>38</sup> As the phrase “for your sake” shows, this is about sparing the Corin-

---

<sup>34</sup> This is a hypothesis shared by many researchers, e.g., Joop F. M. Smit, “What is Apollos? What is Paul?: In Search for the Coherence of First Corinthians 1:10–4:21,” *NT 44* (2002): 231–51 (248–49); Duane Litfin, *Paul’s Theology of Preaching: The Apostle’s Challenge to the Art of Persuasion in Ancient Corinth*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2015), 323–26.

<sup>35</sup> At this point in accordance with Corin Mihaila, *The Paul-Apollos Relationship and Paul’s Stance toward Greco-Roman Rhetoric: An Exegetical and Socio-historical Study of 1 Corinthians 1–4*, LNTS 402 (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 211–12, 214; Devin L. White, *Teacher of the Nations: Ancient Educational Traditions and Paul’s Argument in 1 Corinthians 1–4*, BZNT 227 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017), 161–70 (164): “Paul presents himself and Apollos as ... cooperative teachers.”

<sup>36</sup> See Donald P. Ker, “Paul and Apollos – Colleagues or Rivals?,” *JSNT 77* (2000): 75–97 (83): “while we may not be able to determine Apollos’s original teaching or intentions we are in a stronger position to gauge the Corinthian response to them.” Recently Timothy A. Brookins denies that the quarrels in Corinth have anything to do with leaders: “Reconsidering the Coherence of 1 Corinthians 1:10–4:21,” *NT 62* (2020): 139–56.

<sup>37</sup> So Gerhard Sellin, *Der Streit um die Auferstehung der Toten: Eine religionsgeschichtliche und exegetische Untersuchung von 1 Korinther 15*, FRLANT 138 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), 67–71; Manuel Vogel, “‘Seine Briefe sind gewichtig und gewaltig’ (2 Kor 10,10): Polemik im 2. Korintherbrief,” in *Polemik in der frühchristlichen Literatur*, ed. Oda Wischmeyer and Lorenzo Scornaienchi, BZNT 170 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 183–208 (188–192).

<sup>38</sup> See the options in BDAG 642. The most illuminating example for this type of rhetorical method (not noted by BDAG) is Alexander Numenius, *De figuris* 20 (3,24 Spengel). Alexander deals with the rhetorical figure of *apostrophe*, i.e., *aversio* (“turning away”), understood in such a way that one blames person A, but actually person B is intended. He explains it in a Homeric speech by Odysseus before Troy (Homer, *Il.* 2.284–86): To avoid direct criticism of the Achaeans, the speaker “applies the word to Agamemnon (μετασημάτισε τὸν λόγον πρὸς αὐτὸν τὸν Ἀγαμέμνονα).” I have compared the passage of Spengel to the one in the electronic edition of: Jaewon Ahn, “Alexandri de figuris sententiarum et verborum,” (PhD diss., University of Göttingen, 2004), 31 (<https://ediss.uni-goettingen.de>). The passage of Alexander is already noted by Johan S. Vos, “Der METAΣΧΗΜΑΤΙΣΜΟΣ in 1Kor 4,6,” *ZNW 86* (1995):

thians. Unfortunately, the following words are, once more in our subject, a *crux interpretum*. It is likely that the phrase “Nothing beyond what is written” (v. 6b) is a kind of proverb.<sup>39</sup> But the central intention of this μετασχηματισμός is very clear: “so that none of you will be puffed up in favor of one against another.” This relates again to the fatal effect of factionalism. If we ask to what “all this” (ταῦτα, v. 6a) refers, it seems best to relate it to the whole passage that comes before it (3:5–4:5). There are two different consequences for understanding ταῦτα in this way: First, Paul relativizes the position of the servants of God, be they apostles or teachers, “planters” or “waterers” (3:5–15). Second, God’s servants, no matter their role, should not be played off against each other (4:1–5) – an effect of factionalism. Both of these points are held together by their reference to the last judgment.<sup>40</sup> So God’s judgment gives no room either to self-aggrandizing nor to the criticism of others. Paul’s attack on Corinthian factionalism levels everything which seems to have power and position in this world: 3:21–23 offers a strong theological statement that fuses together Stoic praises of the wise man and the Christian “word of the cross.”

Apollos seems, however, to have made a lasting impression on some Corinthians that led to the emergence of an Apollos group within the community. But if we have to abandon the wisdom-hypothesis, it becomes more difficult to explain the rise of such a faction. Did Apollos’s attraction stem mainly from his hermeneutical competence? Or was his acquaintance with Syrian-Palestinian baptist circles – if this can be said with any historical certainty – and therefore his indirect association with the Jesus movement, something the Corinthians found attractive? Somewhat later, at any rate, certain teachers among the “Hebrews” seem to have impressed the Corinthians (2 Cor 11:22–23), probably not least because of their close ties to the early Jerusalem congregation. For the Corinthians, they were probably particularly interesting as representatives of a kind of “barbaric wisdom.”<sup>41</sup> Perhaps something similar was also an allure of Apollos.

---

154–71 (165). A slightly different rhetorical interpretation is given by Carl J. Classen, *Rhetorical Criticism of the New Testament*, WUNT 128 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 34–36 (36): “Not only does Paul show himself familiar here with the terminology of rhetoric, it is with the help of such a knowledge of the technical vocabulary of rhetoric alone that one can fully and adequately understand and appreciate Paul’s phrasing.”

<sup>39</sup> See the discussion in White, *Teacher*, 80–84, who interprets the phrase “as a maxim or *praescriptio* referring to the earliest stages of literate education.”

<sup>40</sup> See the analysis of Christian Stettler, *Das Endgericht bei Paulus: Framesemantische und exegetische Studien zur paulinischen Eschatologie und Soteriologie*, WUNT 371 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 207–34.

<sup>41</sup> See my article, Samuel Vollenweider, “Kreuzfeuer: Paulus und seine Konflikte mit Rivalen, Feinden und Gegnern,” in *Receptions of Paul in Early Christianity: The Person of Paul and his Writings through the Eyes of his Early Interpreters*, ed. Jens Schröter et al.,

Finally, there is no hidden agenda behind the remark about Apollos's travel projects in 1 Cor 16:12.<sup>42</sup> The note instead points to a good and relaxed relationship between the two teachers. They were two independent, itinerant preachers who cooperated locally and maintained good relations. And the note is a small highlight on the intensive communication processes that existed between early Christian travelers and local inhabitants.

#### 4. In Search of the Historical Apollos

Turning back to Acts 18, my intent will be to provide a better picture of Apollos as a historical figure. Luke's depiction of Apollos seems to be oriented more on his association with the baptist movement than with a refined Alexandrian educational context. From the information Luke provides, it is difficult to assess the nature of the information he has received about Apollos. Concerning the detail about Alexandria, he may have had only a brief note about his origin from there. Luke obviously correlates his Alexandrian origin with his education and, probably, with his competency in the interpretation of Scripture (Acts 18:24b–d). These correlations provide readers with a miniature portrait of an excellent Alexandrian teacher. However, everything that follows immediately in the Lukan account (v. 25) is textually related to the baptist environment: his doctrine about the “way of the Lord,” his spiritual fulfillment, some knowledge of Jesus, and finally the baptism of John. This baptist complex may also include the competence to interpret Scripture (v. 24d; 26a; 28). It is not easy to assume that all these attributions were originally made by Luke. The well-known difficulties of this story – and the next one dealing with the “disciples” (19:1–7) – show that the evangelist attempts to incorporate little older pieces of tradition into his tales about Ephesus, but the pieces remain bulky and protrude awkwardly from his finished edifice. Therefore, scholars have good reason to argue that Luke knew of traditions about Apollos that put him in connection with some groups who claim to originate from John.<sup>43</sup> Of course, there is no need to make Apollos a disciple

---

BZNW 234 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018), 647–74 (669); repr.: idem, *Antike und Urchristentum*, 201–26 (221).

<sup>42</sup> See esp. Matthias Konradt, “Die korinthische Weisheit und das Wort vom Kreuz,” *ZNW* 94 (2003): 181–14 (193): “16,12 wäre ... schwer verständlich, wenn Apollos in Korinth als Paulus' Rivale und mit einer mit Paulus inkompatiblen Verkündigung aufgetreten wäre.” Konradt distinguishes between the wisdom hypertrophy among the Apollos-group and Apollos himself who did not introduce necessarily a kind of wisdom theology in Corinth (ibid., 214).

<sup>43</sup> This historical linkage, esp. the phrase in Acts 18:25c: “though he knew only the baptism of John,” is often completely denied, for example by Käsemann, “Johannesjünger,” 164: “lukanische Fiktion”; Witetschek, *Enthüllungen*, 352, 357; Wehnert, “Apollos,” 405.

of John the Baptist himself.<sup>44</sup> In any case, Luke's embedding of Apollos in a baptist environment is of some historical significance. There is more substance behind it than in the very general note about Apollos's Alexandrian provenance. It is, furthermore, noticeable that Luke locates the activities of Apollos above all in a Jewish synagogue milieu (v. 26a; cf. v. 28). His focus on a Jewish audience at the fringes of a local synagogue community fits both with his provenance from Hellenistic Jewish Alexandria as well as with his connections to baptist circles.

It also makes sense to suggest that Luke's story about the Ephesian "disciples" in Acts 19:1–7 has a historical core.<sup>45</sup> Surrounding this nucleus are a number of strong narrative traits Luke appends to the episode: In addition to the eye-catching number twelve, the gift of the Spirit accompanied by glossolalia and prophecy is outstanding. This third Pentecost event stands beside the two decisive watersheds in the historical outline of Acts, that is the Pentecost event in Jerusalem (2:3–4) and the one in Caesarea (10:44–46). Despite the strong redactional hand of Luke, the scene is not a mere fiction. Instead, it is an indication of the historical possibility that followers of John the Baptist played a certain role in Ephesus up to his time.<sup>46</sup> The Christian congregation

---

<sup>44</sup> In this regard, Avemarie is most likely right, idem, *Täuferzählungen*: There is no need Apollos "als einen ehemaligen Täuferjünger vorzustellen ..., den bereits Jahrzehnte vor seiner ephesinischen Wirksamkeit ein seltsames Schicksal zu Johannes an den Jordan geführt hätte" (ibid., 439). A moderate position is taken by Paul Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius*, WUNT 166 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 123: "We have no reason to think that Apollos had any strong connections with John the Baptist." Knut Backhaus, *Die 'Jüngerkreise' des Täufers Johannes: Eine Studie zu den religionsgeschichtlichen Ursprüngen des Christentums*, PaThSt 19 (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1991), 226, is a little more confident: "Der Jude Apollos hat die Johannestaufe empfangen, einen dauerhaften Anschluss an die Jüngerschaft des Täufers aber nicht gewonnen. Auch zur Jesus-Bewegung hat er keine festen sozialen Beziehungen aufgenommen." Cf. also ibid., 369; similarly Heinz Giesen, "Von Täufer- und Jesusanhängern zum Glauben an Christus: Apollos und die zwölf Jünger in Ephesus (Apg 18,24–19,7)," in *Lukas – Paulus – Pastoralbriefe: Festschrift für Alfons Weiser*, ed. Rudolf Hoppe and Michael Reichardt, SBS 230 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2014), 129–43 (135–36; cf. also 142).

<sup>45</sup> For some indications of historical evidence, see Trebilco, *The Early Christians*, 130–34; Dietrich-Alex Koch, *Geschichte des Urchristentums* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 316–20.

<sup>46</sup> There is, nevertheless, no need to link the twelve "disciples" of Acts 19:1–7 too closely with John the Baptist himself. Nevertheless, they seem to be part of a movement derived from him and with reference to him. See Backhaus, *Die Jüngerkreise*, 211, 368–69: the "palästinische Täuferbewegung ... repräsentiert eine relativ breite Strömung im spätantiken Judentum und begegnet der Gestalt des Jordanpropheten mit tiefer, mitunter quasi-messianischer Verehrung."

in this metropolis was multi-faceted and must have consisted of diverse, distinct groups, some of which with Jewish-Christian origins.<sup>47</sup>

In our quest for a historical reconstruction of Apollos, the question of his theological education and formation once again comes to the fore. His teaching and his abilities in interpreting the Bible are historically plausible even within a baptist context. After all, it is generally inadvisable to underestimate Jewish movements like the ones related with John the Baptist; they were not all rural and uneducated people. As subsequent centuries demonstrate, baptist groups were theologically productive. Such is the case with the Mandaeans as well as with the Elkesaites.<sup>48</sup> For the 1<sup>st</sup> century, however, scholars are at a loss, having absolutely no material from which to work. At least one can assume that, within the Johannine circle, some among the baptist movement played an important part in an early phase of its Christian history. In fact, one finds later in the Fourth Gospel all the characteristics we encounter in Luke's portrait of Apollos, such as hermeneutical competence, spirituality, and even some forms of rhetoric. This is not at all to make the claim that Apollos could have been the author of the Fourth Gospel, as it has been proposed in 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>49</sup> But it is clear that, in later times, Ephesus played a remarkable role

---

<sup>47</sup> See the outlines offered by Trebilco, *The Early Christians*, 712–17; Koch, *Geschichte des Urchristentums*, 287–322; Markus Tiwald, “Frühchristliche Pluralität in Ephesus,” in *Das frühe Christentum und die Stadt*, ed. Reinhard von Bendemann and Markus Tiwald, BWANT 198 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2012), 128–45; Jörg Frey, “Von Paulus zu Johannes: Die Diversität ‘christlicher’ Gemeindekreise und die ‘Trennungsprozesse’ zwischen der Synagoge und den Gemeinden der Jesusnachfolger in Ephesus im ersten Jahrhundert,” in *The Rise and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries of the Common Era*, ed. Clare K. Rothschild and Jens Schröter, WUNT 301 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 235–78; Benjamin Schliesser, “Vom Jordan an den Tiber: Wie die Jesusbewegung in den Städten des Römischen Reiches ankam,” *ZThK* 116 (2019): 1–45 (38–40) about the “melting pot” Ephesus. For the city as a whole throughout its history, see the volume of essays edited by Georges, *Ephesos*; furthermore *Religion in Ephesos Reconsidered: Archaeology of Spaces, Structures, and Objects*, ed. Daniel Schowalter et al., NT.S 177 (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

<sup>48</sup> On the latter, see the proposal on the differentiation of Gerard P. Luttikhuijzen, *The Revelation of Elchasai*, TSAJ 8 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1985), 222–27; furthermore Tobias Nicklas, “Jenseits der Kategorien – Elchasai und die Elchasaiten,” in *Shadowy Characters and Fragmentary Evidence: The Search for Early Christian Groups and Movements*, ed. Joseph Verheyden et al., WUNT 388 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 177–99. See also the theological disputes that Mani began in his early years among the baptists according to the Cologne Mani Codex (esp. p. 72–106 Koenen / Römer); an English translation is offered in *Manichaean Texts from the Roman Empire*, ed. Iain Gardner and Samuel N. C. Lieu (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 58–66; cf. esp. Luttikhuijzen, *Revelation of Elchasai*, 153–64.

<sup>49</sup> See the report by Rudolf Schumacher, *Der Alexandriner Apollos* (Kempten: Kösel, 1916), 45–49.

in the history of the Johannine group.<sup>50</sup> Accordingly, it is possible that this metropolis provided a suitable place for interactions between members of the baptist movement and the Johannine circle.

Despite these considerations, there are definitely no signs that a group tracing itself back to Apollos would have formed among the Baptist's followers.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the fact that Luke reports nothing about Apollos's missionary successes in Ephesus – he apparently travels to Corinth immediately after the intervention of Priscilla and Aquila – does not once indicate that any stable Apollos group, similar to that in Corinth (1 Cor 1:12), was ever formed in this city.<sup>52</sup>

Be that as it may, the doors are open for all kinds of imagination. Did Apollos, a Jew, become a follower of the Jesus movement in Ephesus first thanks to Priscilla and Aquila?<sup>53</sup> Or was it just Luke who linked Apollos with this couple?<sup>54</sup> And what of these two communities? Were the boundaries between being a Jew, shaped by the baptist movement, and being a member of the Jesus movement in the second third of the 1<sup>st</sup> century much more permeable than later as seen by some representatives of Christian orthodoxy?

In sum, Apollos remains an almost unknown wandering missionary and teacher of early Christianity, independent of Paul's team and yet connected with him in a collegial manner, whose traces are lost after his stay in Corinth and his return to Ephesus. His ties to Alexandria are tenuous. He is certainly not a representative of an early Christian community there. And the connection between his education and Alexandria is at best a charming assumption.

---

<sup>50</sup> It seems, therefore, reasonable to see a connection between the baptist disciples of Acts 19 with the baptist circles who apparently played a notable role in the history of the Johannine group within Ephesus. See Hermann Lichtenberger, "Täufergemeinden und frühchristliche Täuferpolemik im letzten Drittel des 1. Jahrhunderts," *ZThK* 84 (1987): 36–57 (47–53); Ulrich B. Müller, "Die Heimat des Johannesevangeliums," *ZNW* 97 (2006): 44–63 (46–50); Koch, *Geschichte des Urchristentums*, 319.

<sup>51</sup> The fact that Luke does not directly associate the baptist disciples with Apollos himself speaks against this: Despite all similarities, 18:24–28 and 19:1–7 are two different narratives, which were presumably first linked by Luke. See Trebilco, *The Early Christians*, 122–23: "Luke has given the two stories one after the other in his narrative. But beyond this, there seems to be no historical connection between the two."

<sup>52</sup> Jörg Frey, "Toward Reconfiguring Our Views on the 'Parting of the Ways': Ephesus as a Test Case," in *John and Judaism: A Contested Relationship in Context*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and Paul N. Anderson (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 221–39 (225, 229), interprets the matter differently, assuming that during Luke's time there was still a group of Christians on the fringes of the synagogue that traced itself back to Apollos.

<sup>53</sup> This is suggested by Eduard Schweizer, "Die Bekehrung des Apollos, Apg 18, 24–26," in idem, *Beiträge zur Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1970), 71–79 (76–78). Differently Trebilco, *The Early Christians*, 122: "Apollos was almost certainly a Christian before he met Priscilla and Aquila."

<sup>54</sup> Such was the position of Käsemann, "Johannesjünger," 167.

Luke himself is more concerned with embedding him within the baptist movement than in an Alexandrian setting. And this connection with the baptist movement seems to be based on some reliable historical data.

Apollos, therefore, turns out to be not a great thunderbolt highlighting early Alexandrian Christianity but rather a shooting star, a “Sternschnuppe,” that can be seen but does little to illuminate its surroundings. In fact, the depiction of Apollos in the New Testament leaves us with more questions than it does provide answers about who he was, his relationship to early Christianity, and to the great metropolis of Alexandria.