

## The Meaning of ἔχοντες χάριν πρὸς in Acts 2.47: Resolving Some Recent Confusion

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This article addresses a debate over the proper interpretation of the phrase ἔχοντες χάριν πρὸς ὅλον τὸν λαόν in Acts 2.47. Several authors have been persuaded by T. David Andersen’s argument that this expression means that the Jerusalem community was ‘showing favour towards all the people’ rather than ‘having favour with all the people’, as it has usually been translated. Andersen’s evidence is much more ambiguous than he suggests, however, and I present three more precise parallels to the phrase in Acts 2.47 that strongly support the standard translation.

**Keywords:** Acts of the Apostles, χάρις, πρὸς, summary, syntax

In the first five chapters of Acts, Luke presents snapshots of the early Jerusalem believers’ way of life in three short summaries: Acts 2.42–7, 4.32–5 and 5.12–16. The last verse of the first summary, 2.47, depicts the joy and popularity that the community enjoyed, as they were ‘praising God and having the goodwill of all the people’ (ἔχοντες χάριν πρὸς ὅλον τὸν λαόν).<sup>1</sup> Most translations render ἔχοντες χάριν πρὸς ὅλον τὸν λαόν in a similar way, understanding the community to be the recipients of the people’s favour.<sup>2</sup> Over the past few decades, however, the arguments in T. David Andersen’s *NTS* article ‘The Meaning of EXONTEΣ XAPIN ΠΠΟΣ in Acts 2,47’ have led several authors to suggest that it is actually the people who are the recipients of the community’s favour and not the other way around.<sup>3</sup> While the context seems to support the standard translation, Andersen asserts that the linguistic evidence points

1 This and all subsequent biblical translations are from the NRSV.

2 The Jerusalem community is presented as the recipients of the people’s favour in the ESV, HCSB, KJV, NASB, NIV, NLT and RSV, as well as in German (Hoffnung für Alle, Elberfelder 1905, Luther Bibel 1984, Neue Genfer Übersetzung, Schlachter 2000) and French (La Bible du Semeur, Louis Segond, Nouvelle Edition de Genève, Segond 21) translations.

3 T. D. Andersen, ‘The Meaning of EXONTEΣ XAPIN ΠΠΟΣ in Acts 2,47’, *NTS* 34 (1988) 604–10.

towards the people-as-recipients interpretation, resulting in a tension between context and grammar.<sup>4</sup> In this short study, I argue that Andersen's data are weaker than they initially appear, and I present information overlooked by Andersen that strongly supports the community-as-recipients reading of this verse. There is, therefore, no tension between the contextual and the grammatical evidence, and the traditional translation may be confidently affirmed.

In his 1988 article, Andersen presents the community-as-recipients interpretation as the position of 'the vast majority of commentators'.<sup>5</sup> It has continued to enjoy considerable support, and, as Andersen himself notes, 'the strongest argument in favour of the traditional interpretation is that it fits the context'.<sup>6</sup> This is the case with respect to both the immediate and the broader context of Acts 2.47. Immediately, a statement that the community had 'the goodwill of all the people' in v. 47a paves the way for v. 47b, which asserts that 'day by day the Lord added to their number'. More broadly, a claim regarding the community's popularity with outsiders fits well with several similar comments in the early chapters of Acts (4.21; 5.13–16, 26).

Andersen's article takes up a position defended earlier by F. P. Cheetham and Giuseppe Gamba and expands it by considering parallel uses of the *χάρις πρὸς* construction in Philo and Josephus.<sup>7</sup> Cheetham and Andersen employ a similar set of arguments for the people-as-recipients reading:

- 4 Andersen, 'Meaning', 608 does not see such a tension, arguing that the context equally supports either reading, but others such as R. I. Pervo, *Acts* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009) 94 n. 57 acknowledge Andersen's 'strong linguistic argument' while also judging that the context supports the contrary interpretation.
- 5 Andersen, 'Meaning', 604.
- 6 Andersen, 'Meaning', 607. The community-as-recipients interpretation is upheld by F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book the Acts* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954) 133; E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) 193; G. Schneider, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, vol. II (HThKNT 5; Freiburg: Herder, 1980) 289; C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994) 1.171; J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles* (AB 31; New York: Doubleday, 1998) 272; D. L. Bock, *Acts* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007) 154; C. S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: Introduction and 1:1–2:47* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012) 1073; C. R. Holladay, *Acts* (NTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016) 108.
- 7 F. P. Cheetham, 'Acts ii. 47: ἔχοντες χάριν πρὸς ὅλον τὸν λαόν', *ExpTim* 74 (1963) 214–15; G. G. Gamba, 'Significato letterale e portata dottrinale dell'inciso participiale di Atti 2,47b: ἔχοντες χάριν πρὸς ὅλον τὸν λαόν', *Salesianum* 43 (1981) 45–70. Andersen, 'Meaning', 610 n. 1 cites Cheetham but does not mention Gamba's work. I will concentrate on the articles of Cheetham and Andersen, since they have been much more influential. Gamba does offer one additional major argument, that the Vulgate's translation of Acts 2.47 (*habentes gratiam ad omnem plebem*) supports the people-as-recipients reading. As Gamba himself documents, however, commentators on the Vulgate often interpreted the Latin phrase as meaning that the community found favour with the people ('Significato letterale', 60 n. 32). As for other ancient evidence, the only extant patristic commentary on this verse of which I

- (1) The context fits with both interpretations ‘equally well’.<sup>8</sup>
- (2) Evidence from the NT (Cheetham) and Philo and Josephus (Andersen) indicates that the object of πρὸς is typically the recipient of favour.<sup>9</sup>
- (3) Counter-examples cited by the LSJ do not involve the word χάρις and are too early to be relevant.<sup>10</sup>

Pointing to Cheetham’s and Andersen’s articles, Daniel Marguerat adopts the view that Acts 2.47 describes the Jerusalem believers showing favour towards the people, as do Mikeal Parsons and the authors of some recent essays and monographs on Acts.<sup>11</sup> The BDAG also indicates support for this reading, citing Cheetham in its entry for ‘πρὸς’ and Andersen under ‘χάρις’.<sup>12</sup> Other commentators, such as Richard Pervo, Rudolf Pesch and David Peterson, cite one or more of these articles while expressing uncertainty as to the correct interpretation, seeing a tension between the meanings favoured by grammar and context respectively.<sup>13</sup> At the present, therefore, commentaries on Acts express a range of opinions as to the correct reading of Acts 2.47, and the arguments of Cheetham and Andersen have played a significant role in effecting this disagreement.

All of these arguments overstate the evidence, however. Andersen is correct in stating that the context does not ‘rule out’ the people-as-recipients interpretation,

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am aware, that of John Chrysostom, reads Acts 2.47 as stating that the community was the recipient of the people’s favour (*Hom. Act. 7.3*).

- 8 Andersen, ‘Meaning’, 608. Cheetham, ‘Acts ii. 47’, 215 says that a community-as-recipients translation ‘would fit in perfectly well’ with the context.
- 9 Cheetham, ‘Acts ii. 47’, 214–15; Andersen, ‘Meaning’, 607.
- 10 Cheetham, ‘Acts ii. 47’, 214 observes that the LSJ ‘cite[s] two or three instances of this usage in classical Greek, but do[es] not refer to any *koine* or New Testament passage’, and Andersen, ‘Meaning’, 609 points out that ‘none of the examples cited actually uses the word χάρις’ and that ‘there is also a time difference, in that the examples cited by Liddell and Scott date from the fifth to the second centuries BC’.
- 11 D. Marguerat, *Les Actes des apôtres (1–12)* (CNT 5a; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2007) 108–9; M. C. Parsons, *Acts* (Paideia; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) 49. Others who cite Andersen and take up his interpretation include B. B. Blue, ‘The Influence of Jewish Worship on Luke’s Presentation of the Early Church’, *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (ed. I. H. Marshall and D. Peterson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 473–97, at 486 n. 43; R. P. Thompson, *Keeping the Church in its Place: The Church as Narrative Character in the Book of Acts* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006) 58 n. 127; A. Kuecker, *The Spirit and the ‘Other’: Social Identity, Ethnicity and Intergroup Reconciliation in Luke-Acts* (LNTS 444; London/New York: T&T Clark International, 2011) 133 n. 32; A. Chambers, *Exemplary Life: A Theology of Church Life in Acts* (Nashville: B & H, 2012) 80 n. 87.
- 12 BDAG, ‘πρὸς’, 874; ‘χάρις’, 1079.
- 13 R. Pesch, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (EKKNT 5; Zurich: Benzinger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1986) 132; Pervo, *Acts*, 94–5; D. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Nottingham: Apollon, 2009) 164.

but claiming that the context fits both readings ‘equally well’ underestimates the support that the comparable claims of the people’s admiration for the believers elsewhere in Acts 1–5 offer for the traditional interpretation.<sup>14</sup> The fact that the third summary, Acts 5.12–16, contains one of these expressions (‘the people esteemed them’, 5.13) is even weightier evidence, given the high concentration of shared themes among the three summaries.<sup>15</sup>

Turning to linguistic arguments, the construction *χάρις πρὸς* + acc. does not occur elsewhere in the NT or LXX, and Cheetham and Andersen take different tacks in trying to establish the range of plausible meanings in Acts 2.47. Cheetham argues that the community-as-recipients reading would have to understand *πρὸς* + acc. in the ablative sense, as meaning ‘from’, and that *πρὸς* + acc. never signifies this in the NT.<sup>16</sup> Yet Luke twice marks the source of *χάρις* not with an ablative prepositional phrase (e.g. *παρὰ* + gen.) but rather with *παρὰ* + dat., a locative expression: ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God’ (εὐρες ... *χάριν παρὰ τῷ θεῷ*, Luke 1.30); ‘Jesus advanced [in] wisdom and age and favour before God and man’ (*προέκοπτεν [ἐν τῇ] ... χάριτι παρὰ θεῷ καὶ ἀνθρώποις*, Luke 2.52).<sup>17</sup> Further, in the NT *πρὸς* + acc. often has a locative, static meaning and can thus stand in for *παρὰ* + dat. in the sense of ‘with’ or ‘before’.<sup>18</sup> Interpreting *ἔχοντες χάριν πρὸς ὅλον τὸν λαόν* as ‘having favour with all the people’ is therefore consonant with the NT usage of *πρὸς* + acc.

Examining instances of the particular expression *χάρις πρὸς* + acc. would be more helpful, and this is the approach that Andersen takes, reviewing the nine uses of this construction in Philo and Josephus. Andersen reports that the results are unanimous: ‘in every case the object of *πρὸς* is the person towards whom *χάρις* is directed’.<sup>19</sup> This is the heart of Andersen’s argument, the evidence that ‘decisively supports the interpretation that *πρὸς* + accusative designates the recipient of *χάρις*’.<sup>20</sup> The data from Philo and Josephus are, however, much more ambiguous than Andersen asserts. First, two of the instances of *χάρις πρὸς* in Josephus describe situations of reciprocal favour: in *Ant.* 14, he records

14 Andersen, ‘Meaning’, 608–9.

15 For the repetitions in and relationship between the three summaries, see M. A. Co, ‘The Major Summaries in Acts: Acts 2,42–47; 4,32–35; 5,12–16: Linguistic and Literary Relationship’, *ETL* 68 (1992) 67–81.

16 Cheetham, ‘Acts ii. 47’, 214–15.

17 This is a standard construction with *χάρις*; cf. Exod 33.12 LXX; Plutarch, *Ag. Cleom.* 10.2; Herm. Mand. 33.5; 42.1.

18 In general, see BDF 239 (1); BDAG, ‘*πρὸς*’, 875; P. Bortone, *Greek Prepositions from Antiquity to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 183. For NT examples, see Mark 1.33; 9.19; Luke 9.41.

19 Andersen, ‘Meaning’, 607.

20 Andersen, ‘Meaning’, 609.

the Jewish envoys' request for a renewal of 'goodwill and friendship ... with the Romans' (πρὸς Ῥωμαίους χάριτας καὶ τὴν φιλίαν, 14.146 (trans. Marcus and Wikgren)) and the Romans' agreement to a relationship of 'goodwill and friendship with them' (φιλίαν καὶ χάριτας πρὸς αὐτούς, 14.148 (trans. Marcus and Wikgren)). This is clearly an establishment of reciprocal favour, and thus in these cases the object of πρὸς denotes the giver of χάρις no less than it does the recipient.

Two other instances of χάρις πρὸς in Josephus and Philo may actually describe situations in which the object of πρὸς is not the recipient but rather the giver of favour. Andersen cites Thackeray's translation of *Ant.* 6.86, in which Samuel denies that he has 'done anything sinister and unjust through love of lucre or cupidity or out of favour to others' (ἢ κέρδους ἔνεκα ἢ πλεονεξίας ἢ χάριτος τῆς πρὸς ἄλλους). But this is not a contextually obvious translation; Samuel could easily be denying that he ever committed injustice in order to win favour *from* others. As it happens, this is the way in which Christopher Begg understands this passage in his recent translation: 'whether I have done anything bad or unjust or for the sake of gain or covetousness or [to win] favor with others'.<sup>21</sup> The direction of favour here is thus unclear; this text cannot serve as positive evidence for Andersen's interpretation. Another case cited by Andersen almost certainly depicts the object of πρὸς as the giver rather than the recipient of favour. In *Conf.* 116, Philo advises the wicked to keep their misdeeds hidden, 'whether to keep the goodwill of the more decent sort (χάριτος ἔνεκα τῆς πρὸς τοὺς ἐπιεικιστέρους), or to escape the punishments which wait on open sins' (trans. Colson and Whitaker). Here it is reasonably clear that the motivation for concealing one's wickedness is to preserve the favourable impression held by others.<sup>22</sup>

The linguistic evidence from the NT, Philo and Josephus, therefore, does not uniformly point towards a people-as-recipients interpretation of Acts 2.47. In addition, the last example from Philo supplies the first-century evidence for the use of χάρις πρὸς + acc. in the sense of '[to have] favour with' that Cheetham and Andersen found lacking in the LSJ. Nevertheless, none of the examples cited employ the verb ἔχειν; more exact parallels to the construction in Acts 2.47, ἔχειν χάριν πρὸς + acc., would certainly aid in establishing the correct translation of this verse. Neither Cheetham nor Andersen present such a parallel, but at least three are extant.

21 C. Begg, ed., *Judean Antiquities Books 5-7* (Flavius Josephus Translation and Commentary 4; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2005) 122.

22 Cf. the translation of C. D. Yonge, *The Works of Philo Judaeus*, vol. II (London: H. G. Bohn, 1854-5) 25: 'for the sake of gaining favour in the eyes of the moderate and virtuous'. Andersen cites Colson and Whitaker's translation without giving any explanation as to why he understands the direction of favour to be reversed.

The most relevant instance is found in Plutarch's *Demosthenes*. Recounting the orator's early frustrations, Plutarch remarks that Demosthenes 'had no favour with the people (χάριν οὐκ ἔχει πρὸς τὸν δῆμον), but debauchees, sailors, and illiterate fellows were listened to and held the bema, while he himself was ignored' (*Dem.* 7.2; trans. Perrin). This is the closest extant analogue to the Greek construction in Acts 2.47, and it comes from a contemporary of Luke.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, translators are unanimous in understanding the accusative object of πρὸς, 'the people', to be the ones (potentially) giving rather than receiving favour in *Dem.* 7.2.<sup>24</sup>

Two other instances of the ἔχειν χάριν πρὸς + acc. construction provide supplementary evidence for the same conclusion. Both occur in the Greek magical text known as the *Cyranides*, compiled somewhere between the first and the fourth century CE.<sup>25</sup> The first is in the description of the effects of wearing a stone engraved with images of Dionysus and a bird: 'You will not be drunk, and you will find favour with everyone (πρὸς πάντας χάριν ἔχων). And you

23 While Cheetham and Andersen fail to note this parallel, Gamba, 'Significato letterale', 58–9 n. 29 recognises its potential to serve as powerful counter-evidence to his argument and attempts to deal with this text in a long footnote. Admitting 'l'affinità di formulazione delle due espressioni', Gamba nevertheless argues that the sense of χάρις is different in the two texts, being objective in *Dem.* 7.2 and subjective in Acts 2.47. As such, he does not think that the passage from Plutarch aids in understanding the same construction in Acts. This dismissal is unsatisfactory for three reasons: (1) the identification of χάρις in *Dem.* 7.2 as objective is questionable and disagrees with the LSJ's analysis of this text; (2) even if χάρις is objective here, the direction of the potential favour is still relevant; (3) the two passages from the *Cyranides* that are discussed below are clearly subjective and therefore immune to Gamba's objection.

24 A sample of translations: 'bei dem Volke' (B. Büchschütz, *Plutarch's Demosthenes und Cicero* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1857) 20); 'he could not yet find any acceptance with the people' (A. H. Clough, *Plutarch's Lives of Illustrious Men* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1876) 202); 'il ne trouvait pas grâce devant le peuple' (R. Flacelière and E. Chambry, *Vies: Démosthène, Cicéron* (Collection des Universités de France; Paris: Belles Lettres, 1976) 22); 'he is not in favour with the people' (H. A. Holden, *Plutarch's Life of Demosthenes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1893) 61); 'he was unpopular with the assembly' (A. W. Lintott, *Plutarch: Demosthenes and Cicero* (Clarendon Ancient History; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 26); 'he had not found favour with the people' (R. Waterfield, *Hellenistic Lives* (Oxford World Classics; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) 86).

25 C. A. Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 121 dates the *Cyranides* to the first century CE, and it is placed in the first or second century by M. Waegeman, *Amulet and Alphabet: Magical Amulets in the First Book of Cyranides* (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1987) 7 and J. Scarborough, in the *OCD's* entry 'Cyranides', 405. On the other hand, D. Bain, "'Treading Birds": An Unnoticed Use of πρᾶξω (*Cyranides* 1.10.27, 1.19.9)', *Owls to Athens: Essays on Classical Subjects Presented to Sir Kenneth Dover* (ed. E. M. Craik; Oxford: Clarendon, 1990) 295–304, at 296 endorses the fourth-century CE dating by K. Alpers, 'Untersuchungen zum griechischen Physiologus und den Kyraniden', *Vestigia Bibliae* 6 (1984) 13–84.

will be free from danger and unbeatable in court' (1.8.27-8).<sup>26</sup> Tying a vulture's heart bound in wolfskin to one's arm also produces positive results: 'Every demon will flee the one who bears it, as will bandits and wild beasts. He will find favour with all men and with all women (ἔξει δὲ χάριν πρὸς πάντας ἀνθρώπους καὶ πᾶσας γυναῖκας), and he will live in ease' (3.9.14-16).<sup>27</sup> In both cases, the desired effect clearly is finding favour in the eyes of others rather than showing favour to others.

These three passages from Plutarch and the *Cyranides* are the closest parallels to the Greek construction found in Acts 2.47, showing the same ἔχειν χάριν πρὸς + acc. construction. In all three cases, the object of πρὸς is the person or persons *giving* rather than *receiving* favour. The standard meaning for the expression ἔχειν χάριν πρὸς + acc. thus seems to be 'to find favour with'. This finding resolves the tension that some have seen between the interpretations of Acts 2.47 suggested by context and syntax respectively. Both the context and the syntax of Acts 2.47 indicate that ἔχοντες χάριν πρὸς ὅλον τὸν λαόν should be understood as stating that the Jerusalem believers found favour with the people. Previous arguments against this interpretation have misrepresented the evidence from Philo and Josephus and have failed to take the most relevant comparative material into account.

<sup>26</sup> The translations of both passages from the *Cyranides* are my own.

<sup>27</sup> I am aware of one other instance of the ἔχειν χάριν πρὸς + acc. construction. In his *Politics*, Aristotle uses the analogy of a nose that 'is still beautiful and agreeable to look at' (ἔτι καλὴ καὶ χάριν ἔχουσα πρὸς τὴν ὄψιν, 1309b25-6 (trans. Hett)). This is a more removed parallel than those presented in the main text, since the object of πρὸς is not a person or persons, but the general meaning is in agreement with that in the other three examples: the subject that has χάριν is viewed favourably by others.