The "We Passages" of Acts

A feature of Acts that might lead one to assume that its author had personal familiarity with Paul is a set of five sections known as the “we passages” of Acts. Each of these stands in the context of reporting Paul’s journeys, and in each the author seems to cast himself as one of Paul’s companions on the trip. The first of these is Acts 16.10-17, which reports Paul and his companions traveling to Macedonia in response to a vision, beginning with their stay in Philippi, where Paul and Silas were jailed. The peculiarity of these “we passages” can be illustrated from this case, where the switch to a first person narrative at its onset is sudden and jarring: “6They [Paul and his traveling companions] went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. 7When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; 8so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. 9During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” 10When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them. 11We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, 12and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days.”

While the initial verses report the activities of Paul and his companions as things they did, suddenly in v. 10 the narrator includes himself in this group that responded to Paul’s vision, even to the point of seeing the mission of proclaiming the good news being as much his as any of the others accompanying Paul. This first person narrative continues through a report that they were followed by a clairvoyant who kept announcing that they represented the Most High God. But when Paul is arrested for exorcising the clairvoyant, and thus depriving her masters of income, Silas is the only companion jailed with Paul, and the narrator again speaks of what happens to them. That narrative perspective persists through the story of imprisonment and release, the outcome of which is reported at chapter’s end: “After leaving the prison they went to Lydia’s home; and having seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed.” Then chapter 17 opens with the report, “After Paul and Silas had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica,” with the narrator reporting the continuation of the journey without including himself in Paul’s company.

The next “we” passage is 20.5-15. The chapter opens with Paul fleeing Ephesus after a confrontation: “1After the uproar had ceased, Paul sent for the disciples; and after encouraging them and saying farewell, he left for Macedonia. 2When he had gone through those regions and had given the believers much encouragement,
he came to Greece, where he stayed for three months. He was about to set sail for Syria when a plot was made against him by the Jews, and so he decided to return through Macedonia. He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Beroea, by Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, by Gaius from Derbe, and by Timothy, as well as by Tychicus and Trophimus from Asia. They went ahead and were waiting for us in Troas; but we sailed from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread, and in five days we joined them in Troas, where we stayed for seven days.”

The whole of Paul’s work in Ephesus (since 19.1) has been narrated as a report about Paul alone, as it is again in vv. 1-4 of chapter 20. But suddenly, in v. 5, the narrator insinuates himself again as a traveling companion of Paul. The “we” narration continues through Paul’s stay in Troas, at the end of which the narrator reports: “We went ahead to the ship and set sail for Assos, intending to take Paul on board there; for he had made this arrangement, intending to go by land himself. When he met us in Assos, we took him on board and went to Mitylene. We sailed from there, and on the following day we arrived opposite Chios. The next day we touched at Samos, and the day after that we came to Miletus.”

In the remainder of the chapter the narrator reports Paul summoning the Ephesian elders to Miletus and delivering a farewell address to them. While nothing in the context prevents this from continuing to be the report of the eyewitness who spoke earlier in the chapter, the narrator speaks of Paul’s actions, without mentioning himself or any other individual.

The third “we” passage then appears at the conclusion of that speech, in 21.1-18, which narrate Paul’s journey from Miletus to Jerusalem, with the narrator again portraying himself as part of Paul’s entourage.

After the arrival at Jerusalem, the narrator tells of the plot against Paul, the attack on him in the temple, his arrest, his transfer from Jerusalem to Antipatris, and his several hearings before Roman magistrates there – all without implying that he accompanied Paul in any of these events. And then again, suddenly, we find the “we” voice at the start of the narrative of chapter 27: “When it was decided that we were to sail for Italy, they transferred Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan Cohort, named Julius. Embarking on a ship of Adramyttium that was about to set sail to the ports along the coast of Asia, we put to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica.”

This manner of narration continues through the first stages of the journey and into a report about a storm that threatened to destroy the ship, concluding with the report, “Fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come.” — Again the narrator implies his presence by associating himself with the sailors: “fearing that we might run on the rocks.” But shortly after, he just as strikingly absents himself from the course of the story:
“33 Just before daybreak, Paul urged all of them to take some food, saying, “Today is the fourteenth day that you have been in suspense and remaining without food, having eaten nothing. Therefore I urge you to take some food, for it will help you survive; for none of you will lose a hair from your heads.”

Similarly, his report of the outcome of the shipwreck is, “And so it was that all (not “we” or “we all”) were brought safely to land.” And then suddenly, at the beginning of chapter 28, the narrator associates himself with the action once again: “1 After we had reached safety, we then learned that the island was called Malta.”

After reporting that Paul performed wonders on the island, including the healing of many of its inhabitants, the narrator associates himself with Paul, reporting that, as a consequence of Paul’s healings, “They bestowed many honors on us, and when we were about to sail, they put on board all the provisions we needed.”

The “we” narration continues through the report of their arrival in Rome, after which, in the final 15 verses of the book the narrator describes Paul’s activities in Rome, without insinuating himself into the scenes.