

# The Book of Acts

Christian Reflection

A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS



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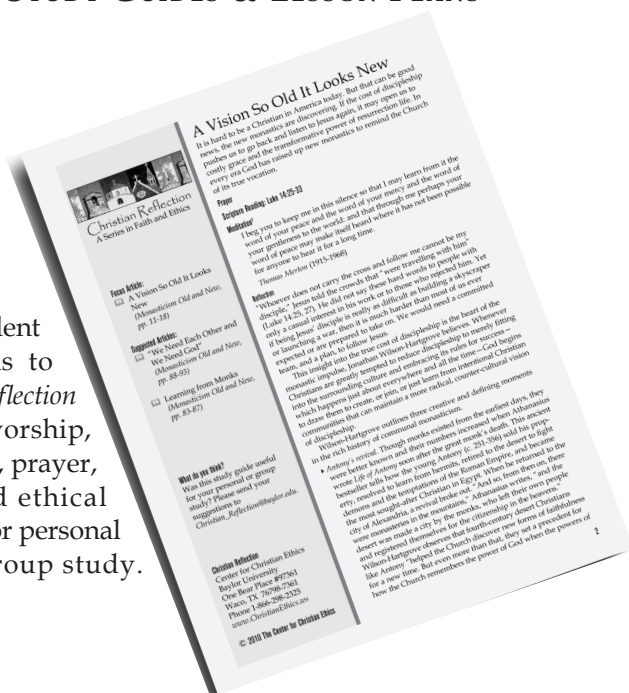
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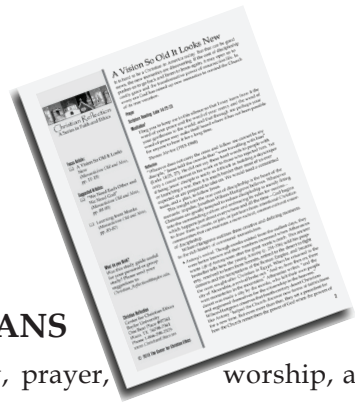


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The book of Acts is focused on God's mission, as God draws people into his orbit and brings them into his community, and so its spirituality is missional. God takes the initiative using a variety of creative means, and people respond in community to the awesome God who makes himself known in Jesus and by the Spirit.

### READING ACTS AS A SEQUEL TO THE FOURFOLD GOSPEL

The book of Acts was intended to be a sequel to a plurality of Gospels, which Luke refers to as "many." Thus, to read Acts for all it's worth, it is necessary to attend to the connections not only with Luke's Gospel, but also with those other narratives that recount the story of Jesus echoed in Acts.

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# Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

**The Acts of the Apostles is a hidden treasure in the New Testament. John Chrysostom found it “replete . . . with Christian wisdom and sound doctrine” to guide believers. Our contributors explore the book of Acts as a theological treasure that can engage and shape our discipleship today.**

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**T**he Acts of the Apostles is a hidden treasure in the New Testament, John Chrysostom famously proclaimed in the fourth century. He realized that many of his congregants were “not even aware that there is such a book in existence” which recounts how God, through the exalted Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, continued to guide in an intimate way the Apostles and the early churches. However, Chrysostom urged his people to study this short book, for it “may profit us no less than even the Gospels – so replete is it with Christian wisdom and sound doctrine.” Our contributors take up his challenge to explore the book of Acts as a theological treasure that can engage and shape our discipleship today.

The book of Acts is thoroughly “missional,” Steve Walton explains in *A Spirituality of Acts* (p. 11), for it “is focused on God’s mission, as God draws people into his orbit and brings them into his community.” Yet as God engages people through visions and dreams, Scripture interpreted in light of Jesus, the gospel message, and the name of Jesus, their response is often uneven. Walton observes, “Luke’s realistic portrayal of the slowness of religious people to change highlights that Acts presents no picture of unhindered progress of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, but rather believers’ mixed response to God, warts and all.” Chad Hartsock expands on the book’s missional character in *The Ever-Expanding Gospel* (p. 78).



“Acts re-calls us to a radically selfless gospel whose mission is to reach the ends of the earth,” he writes. “It reminds us that the ‘ends of the earth’ can be in a land far away, or among the socially marginalized neighbors who live in our shadows every moment.”

How is the book of Acts related to Luke’s Gospel? Mikeal Parsons notes in *Reading Acts as a Sequel to the Fourfold Gospel* (p. 19) that there is no evidence the two documents ever circulated together as two parts of a literary whole. For that and other reasons, he concludes, “The book of Acts was intended to be a sequel to a plurality of Gospels, which Luke refers to as ‘many.’ Thus, to read Acts for all it’s worth, it is necessary to attend to the connections not only with Luke’s Gospel, but also with those other narratives that recount the story of Jesus echoed in Acts.”

Several contributors draw attention to the intersection of Luke’s remarkable literary skills and theological vision of discipleship. In *Repetition for a Reason* (p. 73), Timothy Churchill explores how Luke presents three times, in slightly different and expanding ways, the story of Paul’s encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road. This allows Luke not only to emphasize Paul’s apostolic authority and present the gospel in kernel form, but also to commend a very high Christology in which “Jesus is presented in ways previously reserved for God alone.” Timothy Brookins admires the rhetorical artistry of the apostolic sermons as they are presented in Acts, especially Paul’s address to the Areopagus Council in Athens. This speech stands as “a paradigm for ‘cross-worldview’ evangelism,” Brookins writes in *Paul and the Philosophers* (p. 27), for “the Apostle restates the good news in terms that maintain common ground where a similarity of viewpoints is at hand, but retains the distinctiveness of his message on points that allow for no compromise.”

Andrew Arterbury’s *Warning to the Wise: Learning from Eutychus’s Mistake* (p. 57) explains how Luke’s earliest readers would spot a moral warning in this account of a young man’s untimely sleep, fall, death, and resuscitation. Luke, the narrative artist, weaves familiar themes of night worship in upper rooms, watchfulness, and spiritual laxity into his story. Arterbury writes, “Just as we are tempted to begin reading the story of the early Christians too triumphantly, we encounter a horrible mistake. As we begin wondering if they are now immune to spiritual slumber, we see Eutychus drift away and experience tragic consequences.” In *Philanthropy, Hospitality, and Friendship* (p. 65), Joshua Jipp interprets the adventure story of Paul’s sea voyage, shipwreck, and rescue to Malta before he finally arrives in Rome. This narrative, which at first glance looks like an unusually long sidebar, turns out to be a sophisticated instruction that is central to Luke’s theology: it “provides not only a glimpse of Paul as one who was open to fresh encounters with all peoples but also, surprisingly, a lasting impression of Gentiles as receptive, friendly, and hospitable.” We can learn much from this story about the roles that friendship, generosity, and welcome to the stranger must play in our own pilgrimage in the mission of God.

In the history of art, “the most thorough set of paintings from Acts” are Raphael’s cartoons for the design of ten tapestries in the Sistine Chapel, Heidi Hornik observes in *Spreading the Gospel “To the Ends of the Earth”* (p. 46). One of these, *Paul Preaching at Athens* (cover), depicts the famous Areopagus speech. Seven of the cartoons, or designs for large-scale tapestries, survive today, and Hornik explores the iconography of the five of these that relate to the book of Acts.

The worship service (p. 38) by Allison Buras reminds us of the role that Acts readings play during the weeks of Eastertide, when they point to the risen and exalted Christ’s continuing guidance to the Church. The liturgy features a new hymn by Terry York with music by David Bolin, “As Christ and Church and Congregation” (p. 35), that captures the missional spirituality of the book of Acts.

In *Studying the Book of Acts* (p. 88), Kathy Maxwell commends several section-by-section commentaries on the book of Acts: J. Bradley Chance’s *Acts* in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series, Beverly Gaventa’s *Acts* in the Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, Mikeal C. Parsons’s *Acts* in Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament, and Michael Mullins’s *The Acts of the Apostles*. While these four “well-researched, clearly written” volumes “adopt different approaches and formats,” she notes that “they share a common interest in theological application, carefully informed by the historical and literary context of Acts.”

In *A Story that Teaches: The Theology of Acts* (p. 82), Holly Beers begins by asking, “How do stories teach us?” She notes that “it is one thing to insist, as the Church often has, that the story narrated in the book of Acts teaches us; it is quite another to explain exactly how this teaching is done.” She finds the most accessible answers to her question in Darrell L. Bock’s *A Theology of Luke and Acts: God’s Promised Program, Realized for All Nations*, which toes an evangelical line, and Luke Timothy Johnson’s *Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church: The Challenge of Luke-Acts to Contemporary Christians*, which describes Acts as “utopian imagination” that nevertheless challenges the contemporary church on many levels. Beers admits that C. Kevin Rowe’s *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* is a more difficult read, but she thinks it is worth the effort. Rowe argues “Luke’s second volume is a highly charged and theologically sophisticated political document that aims at nothing less than the construction of an alternative total way of life – a comprehensive pattern of being – one that runs counter to the life-patterns of the Graeco-Roman world.” The book of Acts emphasizes that Christian discipleship is counter-cultural, but not illegal; it (in Beers words) “rejects violence as a way to ground peaceful community and instead witnesses to the Lord’s life of rejection and crucifixion by living it in public communities derisively called Christian.” Beers concludes, “The question for and the critique of the Church today is clear: is Christian embodiment proclaiming Jesus’ universal Lordship?” ❖

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# A Spirituality of Acts

BY STEVE WALTON

The book of Acts is focused on God's mission, as God draws people into his orbit and brings them into his community, and so its spirituality is missional. God takes the initiative using a variety of creative means, and people respond in community to the awesome God who makes himself known in Jesus and by the Spirit.

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**T**he word “spirituality” – now there’s a vague and imprecise term! Some use it as an opposite of “religion,” as in “I’m spiritual but not religious”; others use it as a way of speaking of their inner life – for instance, many people meditate on a regular basis and regard this as a “spiritual” practice. So to speak of spirituality in Acts requires some clarity over what we are seeking; otherwise it is a term which means nothing because it includes everything.

This dimension is vital to understanding earliest Christianity: it is all too easy to treat the Christian faith as either a set of intellectual beliefs or a series of ethical demands, and thus miss its crucial dimension of engagement with and experience of God as known in Jesus and by the Spirit.<sup>1</sup> The content of Christian belief is important, of course, and so is the lifestyle that goes with following Jesus, but both of these flow from and articulate the reality of Christian encounter with God – and the book of Acts is full of such encounters. So that is where we shall focus, on what Stephen Barton calls “the sense of the divine presence and living in the light of that presence.”<sup>2</sup>

To read Acts is to read a book whose focus is outward, not inward. We find little description or discussion of believers’ inner lives here – Acts is

concerned with God's mission in and to the world, to restore and renew creation, individuals, the nation of Israel, and the whole world. Mission theologians speak of *missio Dei*, "the mission of God," as the key way to think about mission. This means putting the accent on what *God* is doing: humans are to look for what God is doing and to join in, rather than to drive "mission" using their own ideas and wisdom. This approach is right in tune with Acts. Again and again, we read in Acts of God taking the initiative and moving to meet and engage with individuals and groups. Often these are not the kinds of people the earliest (Jewish) believers would naturally associate with, for God loves and reaches out to hated Samaritans (Acts 8:4-25), an Ethiopian (8:26-40), a "god-fearing" Roman centurion and his household (10:1-11:18), and even worshippers of pagan gods in Lystra (14:11-18).

The spirituality of Acts, then, is a *missional* spirituality. It is spirituality for those following God and engaging in the mission that God initiates and drives. It is spirituality for the journey, rather than for the settled life. So we shall study Acts first for the ways God moves towards humans, and then for the ways that we humans respond to God's initiatives.

### **HOW GOD MOVES FIRST**

God uses a variety of agents and means to engage with people in Acts, but always with the drive toward reaching out to others who are not yet part of the believing community.

God is God's own agent much of the time in Acts, specifically in the persons of the exalted Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Consider, first, Jesus himself. Some claim that Jesus disappears from the scene when he ascends to the Father (Acts 1:9-11), and that the Holy Spirit is his *alter ego* who acts in Jesus' place – something like Batman acting for Bruce Wayne.<sup>3</sup> This misunderstands both the present place of Jesus and the narrative of Acts. Jesus' present location is in heaven, in the seat of power in the universe, where he now reigns at God's right hand (2:33): in the ancient world, the right hand of a king is the place for his most trusted adviser and helper. Thus Peter identifies Jesus following his exaltation as "Lord," the Greek form of the name for the God of Israel in the Old Testament (2:36). "Lord" is not the same as "Messiah," Jesus' other title in 2:36. Jesus is Messiah by virtue of his resurrection, for this is how God has vindicated him from the mistaken human verdict of crucifixion (2:23-24); but Jesus is "Lord" by virtue of his exaltation to heaven (1:10-11), to the place of power and rule. He now pours out the Spirit (2:33), something that Yahweh, and Yahweh alone, does in previous times; in other words, Jesus functions and acts as Yahweh alone can.<sup>4</sup> To encounter Jesus is to encounter the God of Israel.

Because Jesus is exalted in this way, he directs and leads the mission of the believing community at key times. When the Spirit comes at Pentecost, it is striking that Peter's speech, after a short explanation of the day's remarkable events (Acts 2:14-21), focuses on Jesus (2:22-36), the one who

gives the Spirit. The first martyr, Stephen, has a vision of the exalted Jesus, and Stephen's announcing it to the examining council leads them to stone him to death (7:55-58). Jesus stands to welcome his faithful servant (7:55). When Saul of Tarsus's life is turned around on the Damascus road, it is the exalted Jesus who meets Saul (9:4-5). Saul quickly recognizes Jesus' authority, asks his identity, and then does as Jesus tells him (9:5-6). Jesus, "the Lord," prepares for Saul's integration into the believing community by appearing from heaven to call Ananias to help Saul by baptizing him and laying hands on him for healing (9:10-16). The exalted Jesus heals the bedridden Aeneas (9:34), and in other healing stories Jesus' *name* stands for his person and signals his activity (e.g., in 3:6, 16; 4:7, 17, 30). As Douglas Buckwalter explains, "What believers do in Jesus' name is in effect being done by Jesus himself."<sup>5</sup> The power of Jesus' name is also effective in throwing out evil spirits (16:18; cf., comically, 19:11-17). By Jesus' name alone are people "saved" (4:12) – here is the divine initiative to reach out and draw people into God's ways and purposes for planet Earth.

Consider now the Holy Spirit. Some regard Acts as a narrative of the Spirit's work, an "Acts of the Holy Spirit." This is not the whole story, for (as we have just seen) the exalted Jesus is deeply involved in the mission of God. However, the Spirit is highly significant as an agent of God reaching out. In Acts, the Holy Spirit acts as the organ of God's communication with humans, in five principal ways: revelatory visions and dreams (e.g., Acts 7:55; cf. 2:17); revelatory instruction or guidance (e.g., 8:29, 39; 10:19-20; 11:28); charismatic wisdom and discernment (e.g., 6:3, 5); charismatic praise (e.g., 2:4, 11b); and charismatic preaching and teaching (e.g., 2:14-36; 4:8-12, 29-31).<sup>6</sup> The Spirit drives and enables the divine outreach, and provides evidence that it really is God at work. Hence Peter defends his visit

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**God uses various agents and means to engage with people, but always with the drive toward reaching out to others who are not yet part of the believing community. God is God's own agent often, specifically in the exalted Jesus and the Holy Spirit.**

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to the Gentile centurion Cornelius by pointing to the Spirit's falling on this Gentile gathering, and this convinces his critics (11:15-18; cf. 15:8). The Spirit in Acts is primarily (but not exclusively) the *missionary* Spirit, empowering God's people to draw others into the circle of faith, and engaging with those outsiders directly (e.g., the Lystran man's faith may come from the Spirit, 14:9).

Consider finally *the appearances of divine messengers whom Luke calls "angels."* In similar ways to the Spirit, they act as God's mouthpieces, communicating God's purpose and will. An angel sends Philip into the desert to meet the Ethiopian eunuch and lead him to faith in Jesus (Acts 8:26). Cornelius sees an angel who tells him to send for Peter, who is instrumental in the household's conversion (10:3-6). Paul receives angelic reassurance that God will keep him safe amidst a great sea storm, in order to bear witness before Caesar (27:23-24). Through these messages God directs the *missio Dei*. Angels also *act* in space and time: Peter is freed from prison twice through angelic intervention (5:19; 12:7-11), and his freedom enables him to continue his mission work.

What, then, are *the means of God's engagement* with his people? Four are striking, and each resonates with Christian experience through the centuries, including today.

God engages with people through *visions and dreams*. Recall that Peter interprets Pentecost through the lens of Joel's prophecy which includes the Spirit causing "your young men [to] see visions and your old men [to] dream dreams" (Acts 2:17, quoting Joel 2:28). Luke portrays such events as ways God speaks. Ananias encounters "the Lord" (Jesus) in a vision, telling him to go to Saul, a very surprising event (9:10-12) — and Saul will become a key missionary. Cornelius's experience of the angel is "in a vision distinctly" (10:17) — and through responding, he comes to faith in Jesus. Paul has a vision of a man from Macedonia (16:9), which leads to the mission in Philippi. In this case, Luke writes that "a dream...*was seen* by Paul," and the passive verb suggests this is a "divine passive" signaling that God is the vision's source. Such visual experiences need interpretation: the group with Paul conclude from the Macedonian man's message that God calls them to go there (16:10; cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21).<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, *Scripture interpreted in light of Jesus* is a key means of encounter with God. "Scripture" here means the Old Testament, of course. Peter models such interpretation in his exposition of Joel 2:28-32 and Psalms 16:8-11; 132:11; and 110:1 in the Pentecost speech (Acts 2:14-36). Through Peter's exposition, the crowd hear God and realize they need to respond. Guided by Peter's answer to their question, "What must we do?" (2:37), they repent and are baptized into Jesus' name and join the renewed, Spirit-filled people of God (2:38-39). Similarly, believers interpret their experience through the lens of Scripture and Jesus as suffering Messiah. Their response to Peter and John being forbidden by the Jewish Council to speak in Jesus' name (4:18, 21) is to pray guided by Scripture, as they interpret recent events using Psalm 2:1-2 (4:25-28). God responds to their request for boldness and power in abundance (4:29-31); through Scripture interpreted in the light of Jesus, God meets his people and equips them for outreach.

Luke designates a third, linked, means, as "*the word of the Lord*" or "*the word of God.*" This phrase denotes the gospel message, which Luke portrays

as active in the world. The word regularly transforms lives (e.g., the summaries in Acts 6:7; 12:24; 13:49). The word is also the preaching of the eye- and ear-witnesses of Jesus, through which people encounter God seeking and finding them.

A fourth means of God encountering people is *the name of Jesus*: through it comes healing (Acts 3:6, 16; 4:10), signs and wonders (4:30; 8:12), forgiveness (10:43), deliverance from demonic power (16:18), and salvation (4:12). Water baptism is into Jesus' name (2:38; 8:12, 16; 10:48; 19:5; 22:16),<sup>8</sup> which suggests that baptizands called on Jesus, or the baptizer(s) invoked Jesus' name, as they were baptized – either way, baptized people met the living and exalted Jesus through the waters of baptism.

In sum, Acts portrays God – Father, Son, and Spirit – as actively engaged in the world, seeking humans to join in their mission. God is the initiator and driver of this mission, and its key end – for it is through the mission that people encounter God-in-Christ by the Spirit, and are being transformed into the people God calls them to be.

## HOW HUMANS RESPOND TO GOD

If this is how God engages with humans, what does human response to God in Acts look like? We focus primarily on “direct” engagement with God, rather than how people relate to others as a result of encountering God. Notice five major features of people's response.

First, *human response is frequently slow and partial.*

People do not always grasp what God is saying or what God desires. A key example is the development of the mission among people who are not Jewish. Luke portrays the progress of Gentile admission to the believing communities as very gradual, even though (with hindsight) it is driven by God.

Philip is an “early adopter” of the Gentile mission, but must accept that God is

sending him to a strange place (the desert road, Acts 8:26), and even then has to be prompted by the Spirit to approach the Ethiopian eunuch (8:29). It is only when Philip hears the eunuch reading Scripture (aloud, for all ancient reading was aloud) that Philip realizes this is a divine appointment and he must speak about Jesus to this high-ranking Ethiopian civil

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**How does God engage with his people? Four ways are striking, and each resonates with Christian experience. God engages them through visions and dreams, Scripture interpreted in light of Jesus, the gospel message, and the name of Jesus.**

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servant (8:30). It takes several means by which God takes the initiative before Philip responds appropriately.

Peter is another of the first Jewish believers to connect with Gentiles, as he goes to meet the Roman centurion Cornelius and his household. Again there is a divine appointment, for an angel appears to the Roman (Acts 10:3-6), and Peter has a baffling vision (10:9-17a) which he only “gets” after the Spirit prompts him to welcome Cornelius’s slaves and soldier (10:19-20) – such a prompt persuades Peter the Jew to allow Gentiles (presumed unclean) to eat with him.

The issue rumbles on as (Jewish) believers in Jerusalem criticize Peter for eating with Gentiles (Acts 11:3). Peter’s telling of God’s initiative in sending him to Cornelius (in 11:4-17 telling the story from Peter’s perspective), and particularly in pouring the Spirit on Gentiles, convinces the Jerusalem believers. Even so, the surprise in their voices is evident: “*even to the Gentiles*” (11:18, my italics).

The Cornelius story does not close the debate, for Paul and Barnabas later debate with Jewish, Pharisaic believers who regard circumcision and keeping the Jewish torah as necessary for salvation (Acts 15:1-2, 5). Luke reports the Jerusalem gathering which resolves the issue by setting out conditions for fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers, conditions which exclude circumcision (15:19-20, 28-29).

Even then, when Paul visits Jerusalem, false rumors about his stance on circumcision abound, and Paul agrees to participate in a Jewish ceremony to demonstrate that he is not abandoning his Jewishness (Acts 21:20-26). Paul’s going the extra mile leads to a riot (21:27-36), which initiates the chain of events that finally takes him to Rome.

Luke’s realistic portrayal of the slowness of religious people to change – realistic to those of us involved in congregations today! – highlights that Acts presents no picture of unhindered progress of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, but rather believers’ mixed response to God, warts and all.

Secondly, believers’ response to God is *corporate and community-centered*. Acts 2:42-47 is rightly seen as “programmatic” for the community’s life, for it lists features of the church’s life that recur in later sections about believers’ meetings. All these activities flow from the Spirit’s pentecostal coming, and are expressed using plural verbs: the apostles’ teaching (2:42, concerning Jesus and rooted, presumably, in Scripture); fellowship (shared life which involved sharing goods, 2:44-45); the prayers (2:42, including the temple prayers, 2:46; 3:1, and praise of God, 2:47); and breaking bread (2:42, notably in shared meals in the temple and in homes, 2:46, and including sharing the Lord’s supper, cf. Luke 22:19; 24:30-31, 35). Acts 2:38 must be read with 2:39, for the commitment to community that 2:39 expresses – involving “you and your children” as well as “all who are far away” – is a crucial part of responding to God, for God engages with his people *together*.

Thirdly, encountering God leads to a response of *prayer*. Indeed, one key means by which believers meet God is in prayer – most often in a corporate



setting. The community members pray as they wait in response to Jesus' instruction (Acts 1:14, cf. 1:4-5). They pray for guidance over Judas' replacement (1:24). They pray when commissioning those God calls to particular tasks – the Spirit's call to Barnabas and Saul both comes in the setting of prayer (13:2) and issues in prayer for them (13:3; cf. 6:6; 14:23).

Individual prayer is less common, but clearly present. Peter is praying on the rooftop when he sees the sheet full of animals that opens his mind to visiting Cornelius (Acts 10:4) – and so is Cornelius (10:2). Saul is praying when God sends Ananias to pray for his healing and to baptize him (9:11). Joel Green observes that as believers pray, they “get in sync with and participate in what God is doing.”<sup>9</sup>

Fourthly, believers encounter God in *suffering*. They do not see persecution as showing that they are getting things wrong, but as a call to seek God's power and boldness. As we noted, they pray when Peter and John are forbidden to speak in Jesus' name: they do not pray for deliverance *from* persecution, but for God's strength and grace *in* persecution (Acts 4:29-30). Acts encourages suffering believers to pray similarly by noting God's positive answer (4:31).

Luke does not suggest that James dies because believers do not pray (Acts 12:2), but he does present God's deliverance of Peter as an answer to prayer. Luke presents this humorously, as the praying group are amazed when Peter shows up (12:12-16); the resemblance to Christians' surprise today when God answers our prayers is considerable!

Finally, the believers' response to God is characterized by *fear*, a response seen in four key places. The early community is marked by fear (“awe,” Acts 2:43) – not abject terror, but right recognition that God is great and powerful, and not to be trifled with. The community is “seized” by fear after the Ananias and Sapphira incident (5:5, 11). Luke summarizes the growth of the

churches as “walking in the fear of the Lord” (9:31), echoing the Old Testament phrase “the fear of the Lord.”<sup>10</sup> The people of Ephesus are fearful (“awe-struck,” 19:17) following the comical episode of the Jewish sons of Sceva seeking to throw out a demon by third-hand use of Jesus' name (19:13-16). The praise of Jesus' name which follows implies that “fear” entails respect for Jesus' power when rightly invoked.

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**Luke's realistic portrayal of the slowness of religious people to change highlights that Acts presents no picture of unhindered progress of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, but rather believers' mixed response to God, warts and all.**

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## CONCLUSION

We have found patterns both of God's actions to draw people to himself, and of appropriate human response. Both sides are important: the Christian life in Acts is about responding to God's initiative, rather than humans driving events and setting the agenda, *and* the Christian life is about human response—it is not about God alone. Christians are to walk with God in company with others.

Christians today must beware setting their minds on the things of this world, and the ways they like and prefer. Rather, they must maintain openness to God, to encountering God in surprising and fresh ways through these amazing stories, in the Spirit, and in response to the risen and exalted Jesus.

## NOTES

1 See Luke Timothy Johnson, *Religious Experience in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1998).

2 Stephen C. Barton, *The Spirituality of the Gospels* (London, UK: SPCK, 1992), 1. The whole book is an excellent discussion of the Gospels' contribution to Christian spirituality.

3 Notably Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (London, UK: Faber & Faber, 1960), e.g. 204.

4 Hence at the ascension, the disciples *worship* him (Luke 24:52), and Stephen prays to Jesus (Acts 7:59).

5 Douglas Buckwalter, *The Character and Purpose of Luke's Christology*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 89 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 184.

6 See Max Turner, "The 'Spirit of Prophecy' as the Power of Israel's Restoration and Witness" in I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson, eds., *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 327-348, especially 334.

7 See John B. F. Miller, *Convinced That God Had Called Us: Dreams, Visions, and the Perception of God's Will in Luke-Acts*, Biblical Interpretation Series 85 (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2007).

8 Three Greek prepositions for "in" are used (*en*, *eis*, and *epi*), with no discernible difference in meaning.

9 Joel B. Green, "Persevering Together in Prayer: The Significance of Prayer in the Acts of the Apostles" in Richard N. Longenecker, ed., *Into God's Presence: Prayer in the New Testament*, McMaster New Testament Studies (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 183-202, here citing 194.

10 See, for example, Psalms 34:11 and 111:10; Proverbs 1:7, 29; 2:5. The one anointed by the Spirit in Isaiah 11:2-3 displays the fear of the Lord.

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# Reading Acts as a Sequel to the Fourfold Gospel

BY MIKEAL C. PARSONS

**Acts was intended to be a sequel to a plurality of Gospels, which Luke refers to as “many.” Thus, to read Acts for all it’s worth, it is necessary to attend to the connections not only with Luke’s Gospel, but also with those other narratives that recount the story of Jesus echoed in Acts.**

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**T**he Acts of the Apostles holds a unique position in the New Testament canon. In the canonical traditions of the West, Acts stands as a bridge between the four Gospels and Paul’s epistles (in Eastern traditions, the Catholic Epistles precede Paul’s letters). Thus, by its placement in the New Testament canon, Acts is removed from its companion volume, the Gospel of Luke, widely assumed to have been written by the same author. Many lament that whatever is gained by Acts’ canonical location, more is lost in this separation from the Third Gospel. In fact, many consider the modern construal of the hyphenated “Luke-Acts” (usually attributed to the early-mid twentieth century Harvard don, Henry Cadbury) to be one of the great gains of historical-critical scholarship, correcting what the New Testament canonizers botched! And, as we shall see, there is much to be gained from reading Luke and Acts together.

But there is much to be gained also from taking seriously Acts’ location in the canon. In fact, its placement there may well reflect the intentions of the author, insofar as we are able to reconstruct them with regard to the relationship to the canonical Gospels. That is to say, the Acts of the Apostles

was *conceived and intended* to be read and heard as a sequel to a plurality of Gospels, which Luke referred to as “many” (Luke 1:1), and of which the Gospel of Luke was “first among equals.” The Third Gospel provided the primary story line in terms of characters and plot (conflicts and resolutions) to which Acts provided a sequel. Or to put it in a slightly different way, the “story” of Acts was heard, *from its earliest reception by the first audience*, also in the context of a plurality of Gospels, which, by the time of Acts’ publication, included Mark, Matthew, and possibly John (and may have included at one point or another, some now non-extant or partially preserved Gospels). By the time Acts was published, Luke knew that the Third Gospel was being read in early Christian gatherings along with other Gospels and, expecting Acts to be read in this kind of social context, wrote Acts primarily as a sequel to the Third Gospel, but with echoes and allusions (and corrections?) to these other Gospels.

From a plurality of Gospels would eventually emerge the notion of one Gospel in four versions, indirectly attested by the longer ending of Mark, which presumes a four-fold Gospel in the early second century. When collectors and later canonizers placed Acts after the four-fold gospel (whether in the “Eastern” or “Western” order), they were actually *fulfilling the intentio operis*, the “intention of the work,” that Acts be read as the sequel to the “Gospel” (albeit in ways Luke could not perhaps have fully anticipated) and not somehow distorting it. Thus, in the case of the Acts of the Apostles, there is fundamental coherence between authorial intent and reception history. And, once again, the “unmaking” of Luke-Acts may be required in order to understand more fully the complex relationship of Acts to Luke and other early Christian writings. Therefore, in order to read Acts for all it’s worth, it is necessary to attend to the literary and theological connections not only with Luke’s Gospel, but also with those other narratives that recount the story of Jesus echoed in Acts.

### **ACTS AS SEQUEL: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

It is striking that there is, to date, *not one shred of material evidence* that Luke and Acts circulated together. The usual explanation is that Luke wrote the two documents on separate scrolls because of length limitations. It has generally been assumed that scrolls in antiquity rarely exceeded thirty feet. Since Luke and Acts together would have exceeded sixty feet, it is assumed that the two works originated on separate scrolls, which would explain how the two volumes, intended to be two parts of one volume, were so easily separated.

Recent work, particularly on the papyri at the city of Oxyrhynchus in Upper Egypt, has called into question these assumptions. The data at Oxyrhynchus, along with sample texts from Herculaneum (the town preserved under lava flows from the eruption of Mount Vesuvius) and elsewhere, suggests that scrolls regularly reached an upper limit of fifty feet. Furthermore, scrolls in excess of seventy-five feet were rare, but not unprecedented.

Scribes used prefabricated blank rolls of twenty sheets (seven to eight inches each) and that were typically ten to thirteen inches high and thirteen to sixteen feet in length. Additional roles would be glued on in order to accommodate longer texts. Thus there was no “standard size” beyond which an author could not go, nor was the author under any pressure to “fill” the bookroll to the end, since the excess scroll could be trimmed and used at a later date. A bookroll of four of these prefabricated scrolls could have easily accommodated both Luke and Acts on a single bookroll. Thus, there is no reason that Luke could not have written Luke/Acts on a single scroll if he had wanted; and, conversely, there is no material evidence that he did.

The evidence of early Gospel collections likewise fails to support this kind of “physical” unity. The oldest copy of the four-fold Gospel, P45 (c. 200), also contains Acts, but has the Gospels in the traditional order: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Codex Bezae preserves the so-called “Western” order of the two apostles (Matthew and John), followed by the two “apostolic companions” (Luke and Mark). Here Luke and Acts could easily have been placed together, but Mark stands between Luke and Acts. The Cheltenham Canon (c. 360) and Codex Claromontanus (seventh century) places Luke last among the Gospels, but Acts comes after the Pauline epistles in the former and at the end of the New Testament books in the latter. P74 (seventh century) puts Acts with the General epistles. The inescapable conclusion is that there is absolutely no manuscript evidence to support the view that Luke and Acts ever physically appeared side-by-side, ready for reading as one, continuous whole.

Another fundamental aspect of the relationship of Luke and Acts has to do with whether Luke and Acts first circulated together only to be separated in their subsequent reception or rather were circulated independently from the beginning. How one resolves this issue is also crucial for our understanding the material relationship between the Third Gospel and Acts.

It is well known that the textual transmission of Acts is distinct from that of Luke, indeed, from any other book in the New Testament. The text of Acts circulated in two very different forms, commonly called the “Alexandrian” and “Western” forms. The Western text is approximately eight percent longer than the Alexandrian tradition and contains, among other things, comments

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**From a plurality of Gospels emerged the idea of one Gospel in four versions. When later canonizers placed Acts after the four-fold Gospel, they fulfilled the intention that it be read as the sequel to the “Gospel” (albeit in ways Luke could not have fully anticipated).**

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of local color and interpretive glosses. There is nothing like a “Western” textual tradition for Luke’s Gospel. The significance of Acts’ distinct transmission history, however, is largely neglected or undervalued in discussions of the publication of, and literary relationship between, Luke and Acts.

Regardless of how one accounts for the origins of these two textual traditions of Acts, their existence provides further support for the conclusion that Acts has its own distinctive transmission history and points to a circulation of the text of Acts, independent of the Third Gospel. The cumulative weight of the distinctive textual transmission of Acts, combined with the widely observed fact that Luke and Acts never occur side by side in any canonical list, argue in favor of those who conclude that Luke and Acts never circulated together in the material form of two parts of a literary whole, and were never intended to. The physical evidence and the transmission history as we have it are exactly what one would have expected to find if Luke and Acts were published at different times.

On the basis of Luke’s reference in his Gospel prologue to “many” other attempts to write accounts of Jesus’ life, it seems that a plurality of Gospels was already a reality by the time the Third Gospel was written (probably in the 80s or early 90s). The number and content of these other “Gospels” is unknown; the “many” (even if hyperbolic) may have included what would later be deemed heretical. Luke’s predecessors would almost certainly have included Mark’s Gospel.

Luke expected his version of the Jesus story would take its place alongside other versions. Thus, Luke writes Acts in the full knowledge that it would be read as a “sequel,” not just to the Third Gospel, but to a plurality of narratives about Jesus, which would later be dubbed simply “the Gospel” (of which there emerged four authoritative versions, but still of *one* Gospel). These Gospels (Luke and Mark and an indeterminate number of others) were already being read together in Christian worship by the time Acts was published. Like a diptych, Acts is one panel hinged to another panel of the other Gospel writers with St. Luke (considerably larger than the rest). For the purposes of rhetorical argument that is concise, clear, and compelling, Luke used the Third Gospel as the primary narrative for structuring Acts, thus accounting for the many parallels between Luke and Acts. In other words, with Acts, Luke follows up the basic plot of the Third Gospel, while presuming knowledge on the audience’s part of at least some of the “many” who undertook to write a narrative about Jesus (some of which are perhaps no longer extant; cf. the *agraphon* – or, a saying of Jesus not recorded in the canonical Gospels – in Acts 20:35). We should not be surprised then to find Acts following the basic plot and structure of the “primary” narrative, Luke, while echoing other “Jesus-stories,” only some of which are still accessible to the modern reader.

From the point of view of the authorial audience, Acts is read and heard as a follow up to the Jesus story. Acts is written *after* the public use of multiple

Gospels in early Christian gatherings but *before* this plurality of Jesus stories is textualized (reduced perhaps in number, collected, and published) in the *Tetraevangelium* (the Fourfold Gospel). In other words, the Fourfold Gospel is the culmination of an earlier practice of using multiple Gospels in the worship of local congregations.

### **READING ACTS AS A SEQUEL: IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERPRETATION**

What would it mean to hear Acts as a sequel to a plural-form Gospel, of which Luke is “first among equals”? In other words, what is the hermeneutical “paydirt”? For one thing, instead of reading Acts exclusively in light of the Third Gospel, we would explore echoes and allusions to the other gospels as well. What follows are a few brief examples that demonstrate what reading Acts as a sequel to a multi-form Gospel collection that included the other Synoptics, Mark and Matthew, might entail.

I have tried to include material in Acts that has verbal links and/or conceptual connections to material in Matthew and/or Mark (but not in the Third Gospel). These non-Lukan links serve to parallel (Acts 9:40; 14:21; 20:10), clarify (Acts 19:7), or extend (Acts 10:13-16, 28; 12:2) the argument of the material in Matthew and/or Mark.

*Acts 1:5 / Mark 1:8*

One need not read very far in Acts before encountering one of the first allusions to a non-Lukan Synoptic tradition. In Acts 1:5, Jesus tells his disciples: “John baptized

with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

This verse alludes to a tradition found in all three Synoptics (Mark 1:8/ Matthew 3:11/Luke 3:16).

The authorial audience recognizes that the command not to depart from Jerusalem but to wait for what the Father had promised (Acts 1:4) echoes Luke 24:49, but Jesus’ note that John baptized with water,

but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit (1:5) more closely resembles the Markan form (Mark 1:8) of that saying than either Matthew 3:11 or Luke 3:16 (both of which add “and fire” to “Holy Spirit”). Here the focus is on Jesus’ explanation that John the Baptist’s prediction of a coming Spirit baptism was about to be fulfilled “not many days from now” (at Pentecost). Mark’s version, lacking the additional reference to “baptism by fire,” keeps

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**The distinctive textual transmission of Acts, combined with the fact that Luke and Acts never occur side by side in any canonical list, suggest Luke and Acts never circulated together as two parts of a literary whole, and were never intended to.**

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the focus on the Spirit in a way that the Third Gospel does not. This echo (sans the “fire” element) also subtly suggests that the authorial audience should understand the reference to the Spirit’s distribution on the disciples “as tongues of fire” as a simile and not literally (subsequent artistic depictions notwithstanding).

*Acts 9:40 / Mark 5:41*

In the account of Peter’s resuscitation of Tabitha, Peter arrives in Joppa and is escorted to the upper room where Tabitha’s corpse is. Perhaps moved by the widows’ weeping and mute display of Tabitha’s benefaction, Peter orders everyone outside, kneels, prays, and commands, “Tabitha, get up!” (Acts 9:40). For auditors familiar with Mark, the command is reminiscent of Jesus’ words in Mark 5:41 (but missing from Luke), “Talitha [now Tabitha] cumi.” The parallel between Jesus’ action and Peter’s own act is thereby strengthened. Yet there is an important difference: Peter’s miracle is not a result of his own power, a point indicated by the fact he prayed to the deity. Peter then presents Tabitha alive to the saints and widows (9:41).

*Acts 10:13-16, 28 / Mark 7:14-23*

In his vision recorded in Acts 10, three times Peter is shown a sheet with all kinds of animals on it and is commanded to eat. Three times Peter refuses, claiming, “Certainly not, Lord! For I have never eaten anything that is impure and contaminated!” (10:14, my translation). The authorial audience, familiar with Mark, will also hear echoes of Jesus’ teaching regarding clean and unclean foods (Mark 7:14-23, missing in Luke’s Gospel) – a message (“Thus he declared all foods clean,” Mark 7:19) that Peter evidently failed to understand the first time around. In the larger argument of Acts 9:32-11:18 (and 15:7-11), Peter is presented as undergoing a conversion no less radical than Cornelius’s. He is led to confess, “I truly come to understand that God does not show favoritism. Rather, in every nation, the one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34-35, my translation), and later, at the Apostolic Council, he proclaims that God “made no distinction between them [the Gentiles] and us regarding our faith, but cleansed their hearts (as well as ours)” (Acts 15:9, my translation). The allusion to Mark 7, which implies that Peter has not understood (or heeded?) Jesus’ proclamation that all foods are clean, deepens and enriches Acts’ presentation of Peter’s “conversion” to a more inclusive attitude regarding first food than people.

*Acts 12:2 / Mark 10:39 / Matthew 20:23*

Herod had James, the brother of John, executed by the sword (Acts 12:2). Compared to the narrative recording of the martyrdom of Stephen, this notice of James’s martyrdom is quite brief; however, it still serves its purpose of heightening the dramatic quality of the following story of Peter. No less importantly, it underscores the fact that not all of Christ’s followers



are divinely rescued; in this case, it is James, brother of John, one of the first of Jesus' followers to be called (Luke 5:10), one of the Twelve (Luke 6:14; Acts 1:13), and one of Jesus' "inner circle" (Luke 8:51; 9:28, 54) who meets his death. The Church suffers along with its suffering Messiah. The authorial audience will hear echoes of Jesus' prediction of the martyrdom of James (and John) in the Synoptic tradition: "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized" (Mark 10:39; cf. Matthew 20:23; but missing in Luke).

*Acts 14:21 / Matthew 28:19*

Acts 14:21–28 begins with a reference to Paul preaching the good news in "that city" (Derbe) (14:21a), thus connecting to the previous story, which ends with Paul and Barnabas in Derbe (14:20). Not only do Paul and Barnabas preach the gospel in Derbe, they are also involved in making a substantial number of disciples (14:21b). The word translated "making...disciples" (*mathēteuō*) occurs elsewhere in the New Testament only in Matthew, most notably Matthew 28:19 (cf. also Matthew 13:52; 27:57). The authorial audience, familiar with Matthew, hears here echoes of the Great Commission in which Jesus instructs his followers to "make disciples of all the nations." Making disciples for Luke as well as Matthew involved more than evangelism and baptism. For the Matthean Jesus, "discipling" involved "teaching them whatsoever I have commanded you"; for the Lukan Paul, it involved "strengthening the souls of the disciples" (Acts 14:22a).

*Acts 19:7 / Mark 5:7*

In the story of Paul and the sons of Sceva (Acts 19:11-20) the echo to Mark and/or Matthew serves to clarify Luke's point regarding the connection between exorcism and magic. The language used by the Jewish exorcists ("I adjure/order you by Jesus whom Paul preaches to come out" [Acts 19:13, my translation]) would be heard by the authorial audience in terms of the magical practices of antiquity. The term "adjure" is not used by Jesus or his disciples in any exorcism story in any Gospel, though the term does occur in Mark. In Mark 5:7 the words of the Gerasene demoniac to Jesus ("I adjure you by God") are an attempt to manipulate and control both Jesus and God. This term is also frequently used in magical incantations in a double command: "I adjure X by [the authority of] Y." The adjuration is an attempt to manipulate both the object of adjuration and the deity whose authority is invoked. Thus by understanding this passage in its larger cultural context and by hearing an allusion to Mark 5:7, the authorial audience understands that these Jewish exorcists/magicians are trying to use Jesus' name in a way typical of magical technique. Luke, however, makes it clear that Jesus' name is not some magical talisman vulnerable to manipulation (cf. Acts 19:15-16).

*Acts 20:10 / Mark 5:39*

Paul's "Don't worry!" (Acts 20:10) before raising the "sleeping" Eutychus echoes a similar scene in Mark's Gospel in which Jesus asks the crowd, "Why are you worrying?" before raising the "sleeping" daughter of Jairus (Mark 5:39). The term "worry" (*thorybeō*) is missing from the Lukan parallel in Luke 8:52. This passage is another instance of the rich intertextual connections between Acts and the Synoptic tradition and once again prompts the authorial audience to expect Paul to resuscitate Eutychus as Jesus did Jairus's daughter.

Hopefully, these few examples serve to illustrate the potential for exploring Acts as a sequel both to Luke and to a multiform Gospel and to find parallels between Acts and the Third Gospel where possible and between Acts and other Gospels where appropriate.

**CONCLUSION**

By the time Luke composed Acts, the Third Gospel was being read and heard in early Christian gatherings in conjunction with the "many," an unspecified number of other Gospel accounts. Luke penned Acts as a sequel to Luke with the understanding that the Third Gospel provided the baseline for his continuing development of literary plot and theological themes as part of a series of two rhetorically well-formed – but not systematic – narratives, *and* as a sequel to the multiform Gospel in which he occasionally picked up on a literary thread or theological theme missing in the Third Gospel, either because at that point it did not serve his purposes or because at that time he was unacquainted with the writing that contained it. Further, Luke also knew that Acts was self-sufficient and was intelligible on its own. Thus, from the point of view of its authorial intention, Acts may be read and heard on its own terms or as part of a "literary diptych," that is as a sequel to Luke, *and*, simultaneously, as a sequel to a multiform Gospel (of which the Third Gospel is the primary witness).<sup>†</sup>

**NOTE**

† Sections of this article are borrowed, in somewhat altered form, from my paper "Hearing Acts as a Sequel to the Multiform Gospel: Historical and Hermeneutical Reflections on Acts, Luke and the *Polloi*" in Andrew F. Gregory and C. Kavin Rowe, eds., *Rethinking the Unity and Reception of Luke and Acts* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2010), 128-152. I thank the Press for permission to use this material.

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# Paul and the Philosophers

BY TIMOTHY A. BROOKINS

**Paul's speech to the Areopagus Council is a paradigm for "cross-worldview" evangelism. The Apostle restates the good news in terms that maintain common ground where a similarity of viewpoints is at hand, but retains the distinctiveness of his message on points that allow for no compromise.**

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**I**n many ways, the religious context North American Christians inhabit today shares less in common with the Bible Belt culture of the mid twentieth century than it does the pluralistic pagan environment in which the apostle Paul struck out to establish the world's first congregations. Until recently, North American pastors could expect their pews to be lined with men and women intimately acquainted with the Bible's stories and ideas. Evangelists stood before audiences of men and women who believed in both the existence of God and the Bible's authority as a sacred text. But in the "post-Christian" age of the present, Christians now stand, like Paul, on their own "Areopagus" and address audiences of "Athenians."<sup>1</sup>

In these times, we have much to learn from the preaching of the earliest Christians. In Acts 17:16-34, we find Paul in Athens, laying the gospel before this city for the first time. He begins by conversing "in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons," but quickly attracts the attention of "some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers" and is summoned to present his message before the city's governing body, the Areopagus Council. Among his audience, which includes not only the Council but also a crowd of inquisitive bystanders (as 17:20-21 implies), some may be Jews who are drawn from the synagogue

in the commotion; and probably many are ordinary Greeks who are believers in the traditional “folk” gods or pious keepers of the local “civil” cults; but the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers are the only group mentioned by name. Not one of these people yet believed in Christ.

Paul’s address in 17:22-31 is often considered a paradigm for “cross-worldview” evangelism, for it depicts the Apostle ‘translating’ his gospel message into the vernacular of his audience. In other words, he restates the good news in terms that maintain common ground where a similarity of viewpoints is at hand, but retains the distinctiveness of his message on points that allow for no compromise.



If this is Paul’s strategy, then there is no sarcasm in his introduction: “I see how *extremely religious* (*deisidaimonesterous*) you are in every way” (17:22). Complimenting the audience at the opening of an address was conventional in the ancient world; Paul simply follows suit.<sup>2</sup> True, from one point of view, the basis of his audience’s religiosity is its rampant *idolatry* (cf. 17:16). It is not, however, their idolatry that the Apostle commends, but their scrupulousness to honor even a God whose name they do not know; he reports to them, “as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god’” (17:23). Clearly Paul is capitalizing not on what he thinks is worst in their practices, but on what he thinks is best.

This claim becomes the pivot-point of the address: it is this God – the one of whom the Athenians are ignorant – that Paul aims to make known to them. Paul identifies the “Unknown God” whom these pagans worship with the very same God whom he preaches. They may not know this deity as the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” or “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” but they acknowledge him as a “god” just the same. For the moment Paul highlights what they have in common and pushes their differences into the background.

The strategy of seeking common ground with his audience continues in Paul’s description of God. Each one of the affirmations that he makes about God in 17:24-30 is approximated in ancient pagan writings. God made all things, and is Lord over all (17:24); God does not dwell in temples made with hands (17:24); God needs nothing from anyone, but has given to all creatures “life and breath and all things” (17:25); God made all nations, and appointed times and boundaries for them (17:26); God made them to seek him, and he is not far from anyone (17:27); in God “we live and move and have our being,” and all are one race, from him (17:28); since people are a race *from God*, clearly God cannot be represented by merely material things (17:29); and while God has overlooked humanity’s previous ignorance, now

all need to repent (17:30). Only at this point does Paul say something that an average Greek listener might have found unusual: this God has appointed a day of judgment, to be executed by the (unnamed) man whom he has designated, and whom he has raised from the dead as proof (17:31).



Paul's speech does not include a single direct quotation from Scripture. And throughout it, even where Jewish figures are alluded to, Paul abstains from naming them explicitly (notice that humanity is said to have happened simply "from one" in 17:26, and humanity is judged "by the man whom God has appointed" in 17:31).

Rather than quoting from Scripture – which would not have been convincing, or even comprehensible, to his pagan audience – Paul selects a number of popular philosophical commonplaces for use. The material looks remarkably similar to things said by the Stoics, who were profoundly influential on popular thinking of the time. Much less would this material have appealed to the Epicureans among his audience. (This, indeed, highlights a common difficulty found in addressing diverse audiences: particular arguments have less appeal to some members than to others.<sup>3</sup>) For instance, the Epicureans could, with Paul and the Stoics, affirm that God does not dwell in things made with human hands, and that he needs nothing from humans. But no Epicurean would agree that God created all things (for on their view, the random swerve of "atoms" produced the current world), or that God has given people gifts and set boundaries of places and times (for the gods, if they exist, are remote and uninvolved in human affairs), or that God is near. On the Epicurean view, therefore, whoever seeks God, seeks him in vain.

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**Despite the surface similarity of Paul's arguments to Stoic ideas, he departs in critical ways from their philosophy. The genius of his rhetoric is that it maximizes the impression of agreement with his audience without compromising his worldview.**

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Despite the surface similarity of Paul's arguments to Stoic ideas, his discourse departs in critical ways from their philosophy. Indeed, the genius of Paul's rhetoric is that it maximizes the impression of agreement with his audience without compromising the deep structure of the Jewish and Christian worldview from which his discourse truly originates. For this reason, Copan and Litwak

suggest that Paul gives us an example of how to “shape, not compromise” our presentation of the gospel.<sup>4</sup> How does he do this? Paul employs language and ideas accepted in the dominant culture and suited for establishing common agreement, but “baptizes” them by placing them within a broader Jewish and Christian storyline.

Language receives specifiable meaning only in light of the narrative substructure that undergirds it. These underlying narratives, or what philosophers call “metanarratives,” are the stories that shape people’s lives; they are structured wholes that provide a kind of interpretive key to the individual parts or experiences taken separately. They form the deeper meaning of the words people use.

Here is an everyday example. At the university where I teach, we have a marketing slogan: “Houston Baptist University: A ‘higher’ education.” Now to a group of theological sophisticates, this slogan might naturally suggest education in “things above” – that is, in theological matters. But one can easily imagine some other individuals inclined to take the slogan to mean that Houston Baptist is the kind of place where students habitually partake of hallucinogens. Now, one of these interpretations is certainly a more responsible one than the other (and it is not second), but both are possible interpretations. What is the difference? How we use language and how we understand others’ use of language depends in part on the context, or *narrative world*, in which we are living.

Here is another example. Pastoral theologian James Thompson worries that church people today develop their metanarratives less from the Bible than they do from television series and other sources of popular culture.<sup>5</sup> As a result, he thinks Christians have come to critique biblical faith in the light of their secular metanarratives, when they ought to be critiquing secular metanarratives in the light of biblical faith.

When it comes to interpreting Paul’s Areopagus speech, then, it makes a great deal of difference whether we think Paul assumes the underlying narrative of Stoicism, or whether he is using Stoic discourse to provide, as it were, merely its garb. Modern rhetorical theory tells us that a common discourse, or common “lingo,” is a necessary precondition to attempts at persuasion.<sup>6</sup> But the common discourse is only a starting point, a first foothold where both parties can stand facing each other on a common plane. As dialogue progresses, it often becomes evident that the two parties are actually standing on two completely different kinds of terrain.



Despite heavy reliance on popular discourse, Paul’s speech in Acts 17 is unmistakably biblical. While he never reproduces exactly the words of any biblical passage, each of his points resounds with biblical allusions.<sup>7</sup> Moreover,

the framework or narrative that supplies the intended context for his meaning comes not from popular culture, but from the Bible. Deep-structure differences from Stoicism are evident at every turn.

For instance, Paul declares that “from one...[God] made all nations to inhabit the whole earth” (v. 26) and that “we are God’s offspring” (v. 29). Taken apart from their biblical framework, these statements are sufficiently vague to win the assent of any Stoic-minded listener (and let us remember how far-reaching Stoic influence was in the first century). But some critical differences emerge upon elaboration. For Paul, the unity of the human race arises out of their common descent from the one *man*, Adam, who received from the Creator the “image of God” (Genesis 1:27-28) that is the quality of *reflecting* (rather than replicating) the Creator, and who passed this image on subsequently to his descendants (see Genesis 5:3). Now for the Stoics, the unity of the human race owes to their common origin from God as well. But the Stoics explain these origins quite differently: common origin is grounded not in common descent from one man, but common descent from the *stars*, the divine heavenly bodies, collectively comprising God (or Zeus or whatever divine name you like), of which the soul of each person constitutes a fragment. For the Stoics, then, all are indeed “sprung from the same stock”: God is both the father of all and is by nature *in* all, being *intrinsic* to human nature.

This difference in human origins naturally introduces further points of divergence. When Paul says that God is “not far from each one of us” (v. 27), and that in God “we live and move and have our being” (v. 28), can he conceivably mean, with the Stoics, that each person contains a fragment of God within, that indeed people live and move by that divine power that is *intrinsic* to their very constitution as

human beings? In a word, no. Paul, like any faithful Jew (or Christian) of his day, knows there is a fundamental distinction in being between the created order and the Creator himself. God is “not far” from people, then, not because they have “a piece of God,” but because he cares for them (Psalm 145:18) and has made himself known to them (Jeremiah 23:23);

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**Paul’s speech is unmistakably biblical. While he never reproduces exactly the words of any biblical passage, each point resounds with biblical allusions. Moreover, the framework or narrative that supplies the intended context for his meaning comes from the Bible.**

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people “live and move in him,” not because they “contain” God, but because God supplies to them the breath of life (Isaiah 42:5) and all that they need (Psalm 23).

The Stoic-minded person also might have agreed that God, as Paul says, permitted humanity “the times of human ignorance” (v. 30). But here Paul’s meaning is in a completely different key. According to Seneca, a Stoic contemporary of Paul, human beings were born with the “seeds of reason,” but without the possession of reason itself. Thus, children, like animals, are unreasoning, and not capable of either virtue or vice (for these traits require reason and intentionality); children live in a temporary stage of ignorance.<sup>8</sup> While there may be a place in Paul’s thought for something in this vein, his claim here goes in a completely different direction. His meaning rather concerns the Jewish understanding of the *movement of history* under God’s divine providence.

In fact, it is precisely at this point in the speech that Paul begins to change course. Having enjoyed an easy agreement until now, he begins veering away from his audience in verse 30, and by verse 31 he is rowing against the current. Paul introduces a thoroughly Jewish understanding of time as linear: it has a beginning and will have an end. Somewhere in the middle, at the appointed moment, God has started the clock on the final stretch: the end has begun, judgment is at hand, and history is coming to its final, unrepeatable goal. The Greek view of time, by contrast, is cyclical. In its Stoic inflection, the universe has neither beginning nor end, but continues eternally and uniformly through its natural cycles. When the cycle completes itself, the universe will find itself exactly where it was when the cycle began.

Certainly this different understanding of time puts Paul’s claim that God “allotted the times of their existence” (NRSV) or “determined their appointed seasons [or cycles?]” (ASV) into a new perspective (17:26). But more importantly, it introduces into the narrative a whole stage in “history” that had no place in the Greek sequence of thought, and right at the climactic moment in Paul’s speech. Popular Greek thinking left room, at most, for a final judgment according to works.<sup>9</sup> But Paul has much more than this in view: there will be an *appointed* day of judgment (cf. Isaiah 2:12; Amos 5:18) for all of creation at once, and a divinely-appointed *agent* of judgment (Daniel 7:13-14) who was *resurrected* from the dead. The Greeks believed in none of these things, least of all resurrection. The tragedian Aeschylus (c. 525-436 BC) is representative: “Once a man dies and the earth drinks up his blood, *there is no resurrection.*”<sup>10</sup> Among the Romans, many believed in total annihilation, as is indicated by the epitaph, “I was not, I was, I am not, I care not,” which was used so widely that it could be indicated



simply by its Latin abbreviation, n.f.f.n.s.n.c.<sup>11</sup> Even the Stoics, who in Paul's day acknowledged the immortality of the soul, seem to have believed that the individual "lost perception" at death, when the soul "returned to the stars, whence it came."



F. F. Bruce once observed that Paul's Areopagus speech "begins with God the creator of all and ends with God the judge of all."<sup>12</sup> For this reason, the Epicureans among the audience would have objected from the beginning, but most of the audience not until the end. Yet, why would the Apostle strike such a controversial chord in the closing remarks, after stringing the audience along with such abundant signs of agreement up until this point? James Dunn suggests: "It is almost as though [Paul] wanted to set in the sharpest possible contrast the fundamental claim of Christianity and the mocking rejection of the Athenian sophisticates."<sup>13</sup>

There are many lessons in this. For one, it demonstrates that while Paul was happy to use the words and ideas of the surrounding culture as a point of departure, he was also unwilling to keep essential points of contrast concealed, despite knowing full well the potential consequences of revealing them. The audience response to his approach was mixed at best — "some scoffed; but others said 'We will hear you again about this'" while "some joined him and became believers" (17:32, 34). To the extent that this response constitutes a "failure,"<sup>14</sup> it presents us with a kind of failure that we could afford to emulate more often.

Despite its ever-changing garb, underneath, Christianity presents an uncompromising counter-narrative, a benchmark against which all other

narratives might be measured and critiqued. Paul was a master of adaptation — in his own words, he became "all things to all people" (1 Corinthians 9:22) — but he was hardly one to roll over for antithetical viewpoints. As the Church faces its own "Athenians" today, Paul continues to offer himself as an example of one who knows when to make use of culture, and when to speak against it.

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**Paul was happy to use the words and ideas of the surrounding culture as a point of departure, but he was unwilling to keep essential points of contrast with the Christian gospel concealed, despite knowing full well the potential consequences of revealing them.**

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**NOTES**

1 Paul Copan, and Kenneth D. Litwak, *The Gospel in the Marketplace of Ideas: Paul's Mars Hill Experience for our Pluralistic World* (Downers, Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 11, 14-15.

2 For commendation of this practice by ancient orators, see Cicero, *De Oratore* (On the Orator) 1.119-122, and Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* (Institutes of Oratory), 4.1.8. Examples are Virgil, *Eclogues* (Poems) 6.3 f.; Propertius 3.3; Horace, *Carmina* (Odes) 4.15.1 ff.; and Dio Chrysostom, *Orationes* (Orations) 12.10, 15; 32.1-2.

3 Chaïm Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, translated by John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 477.

4 Copan and Litwak, *The Gospel in the Marketplace of Ideas*, 16.

5 "The metanarrative of *Seinfeld*," Thompson suggests, "which will live for many years in syndicated form, will continue to communicate a generation's commitment to the satisfaction of the self." In James W. Thompson, *Preaching like Paul: Homiletical Wisdom for Today* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 10.

6 Again, see Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*.

7 For examples, see James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Narrative Commentaries Series (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 230-237.

8 See Seneca, *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium* (Moral Letters to Lucilius) 118.14; 121.15; and 124.9-12.

9 See, for example, the *The Downward Journey* or *The Tyrant*, by Lucian of Samosata (c. 120-190).

10 Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 6.478-479.

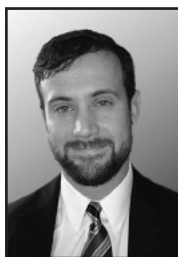
11 For the phrase *Non fui, fui, non sum, non curo*.

12 F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, revised edition, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988), 335.

13 James Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 237.

14 James Thompson (*Preaching like Paul*, 48) points out that Acts tells us a lot about Paul's preaching failures.

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**TIMOTHY A. BROOKINS**

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# As Christ and Church and Congregation

BY TERRY W. YORK

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As Christ and Church and congregation,  
Jesus, God the Son, walks free.  
His footprints' fresh and firm impressions  
map the worlds we would not see.

The Church sprouts green in ev'ry culture,  
pushing up through dust and clay;  
the gospel then takes root, transforming  
life and death and work and play.

In clear embrace and separation  
Church and culture dodge and dance.  
In each new language, song, and symbol,  
see the gospel's sure advance.

Then let the Church be ever Christ-like:  
live his teachings, live his grace,  
like Christ arise, each day, extending  
unconditional embrace.

# As Christ and Church and Congregation

TERRY W. YORK

C. DAVID BOLIN

As Christ and Church and con - gre - ga - tion,  
The Church sprouts green in ev' - ry cul - ture,  
In clear em - brace and sep - a - ra - tion  
Then let the Church be ev - er Christ - like;

Je - sus, God the Son, walks free.  
push - ing, up cul - the dust, and and clay;  
Church and his teach - ure ings, live and his dance,  
live his teach - ure ings, live and his grace,

His foot - prints' - fresh and firm im - press - ions  
the gos - pel - then takes root, trans - form - ing  
In each new lan - guage, song, and sym - bol  
like Christ a - rise, each day, ex - tend - ing

map the worlds we would not see.  
 life and death and work and play.  
 see the gos - pel's sure ad - vance.  
 un - con - di - tion - al em - brace.

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*Tune: HARDING  
 9.7.9.7.*

# Worship Service

BY ALLISON BURAS

---

## *Call to Worship*

Christ is Risen!

**He is Risen indeed!**

Let us worship the Lord our God.

**Let us come before him with praise and thanksgiving.**

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.

**His steadfast love endures forever.**

## *Chiming of the Hour and Introit*

### *Hymn of Praise*

“’Tis so Sweet to Trust in Jesus”

’Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus,  
just to take him at his word;  
just to rest upon his promise,  
just to know, “Thus saith the Lord.”

*Jesus, Jesus how I trust him!  
How I’ve proved him o’er and o’er!  
Jesus, Jesus, precious Jesus!  
O for grace to trust him more!*

O how sweet to trust in Jesus,  
just to trust his cleansing blood;  
just in simple faith to plunge me  
’neath the healing, cleansing flood.

### *Refrain*

Yes, ’tis sweet to trust in Jesus,  
just from sin and self to cease;  
just from Jesus simply taking  
life and rest, and joy and peace.

### *Refrain*

I'm so glad I learned to trust him,  
 precious Jesus, Savior, Friend;  
 and I know that he is with me,  
 will be with me to the end.

*Refrain*

*Louisa M. R. Stead (1882), alt.*

*Tune: TRUST IN JESUS*

### *Silent Meditation*

Healing the lame [as in Acts 3] may lie far beyond our abilities. But is Peter and John's courageous speech to the authorities any less miraculous for us?

The church's speech in our pluralistic setting is increasingly muted and indistinct.

...Have we become fearful of speaking the name of Jesus? ...Have we lost the capacity to speak at all because we have become so respectful of public orthodoxy, so intent on maintaining our respectability? The voices of our cultured despisers ring loudly, "*On what authority do you say these things?*" We shrink back and speak only within the privacy of our homes and houses of worship.

...The Easter church is a speaking church, a community entrusted with words that no one else can speak and that have the power to heal the world: Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. O Church, speak!

*Doug Lee* †

### *Psalter Reading (responsively): Psalm 23*

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

**He makes me lie down in green pastures;**

He leads me beside still waters;

**He restores my soul.**

He leads me in right paths  
 for his name's sake.

**Even though I walk through the darkest valley,  
 I fear no evil;**

for you are with me;  
 your rod and your staff—  
 they comfort me.

**You prepare a table before me  
 in the presence of my enemies;**

You anoint my head with oil;  
**my cup overflows.**

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,

**And I shall dwell in the house of the LORD  
my whole life long.**

*Hymn of Petition*

“Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us”

Savior, like a shepherd lead us,  
much we need thy tender care;  
in thy pleasant pastures feed us,  
for our use thy folds prepare;  
blessèd Jesus, blessèd Jesus,  
thou has bought us, thine we are;  
blessèd Jesus, blessèd Jesus,  
thou hast bought us, thine we are.

We are thine, do thou befriend us,  
be the guardian of our way;  
keep thy flock, from sin defend us,  
seek us when we go astray;  
blessèd Jesus, blessèd Jesus,  
hear, O hear us when we pray;  
blessèd Jesus, blessèd Jesus,  
hear, O hear us when we pray.

Thou hast promised to receive us,  
poor and sinful though we be;  
thou hast mercy to relieve us,  
grace to cleanse and power to free;  
blessèd Jesus, blessèd Jesus,  
early let us turn to thee;  
blessèd Jesus, blessèd Jesus,  
early let us turn to thee.

Early let us seek thy favor;  
early let us do thy will;  
blessèd Lord and only Savior,  
with thy love our beings fill;  
blessèd Jesus, blessèd Jesus,  
thou hast loved us, love us still;  
blessèd Jesus, blessèd Jesus,  
thou hast loved us, love us still.

*Dorothy A. Thrupp* (1836)

Tune: BRADBURY



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*First Reading:* 1 John 3:16-24

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

*Pastoral Prayer*

Lord you have laid down your life for us,  
and call us to lay down our lives for one another.

Grant us eyes to see the needs of those around us.

Grant us discipline to restrain our own greed for time or possessions  
so that we can share with our neighbors.

Grant us compassion for those who have hurt others and hurt themselves.

Grant us joy in serving alongside one another as your Church.

Prosper the work of our hands Lord,  
and let your kingdom come.

Amen

*Hymn of Response*

“As Christ and Church and Congregation”

As Christ and Church and congregation,  
Jesus, God the Son, walks free.  
His footprints’ fresh and firm impressions  
map the worlds we would not see.

The Church sprouts green in ev’ry culture,  
pushing up through dust and clay;  
the gospel then takes root, transforming  
life and death and work and play.

In clear embrace and separation  
Church and culture dodge and dance.  
In each new language, song, and symbol,  
see the gospel's sure advance.

Then let the Church be ever Christ-like:  
live his teachings, live his grace,  
like Christ arise, each day, extending  
unconditional embrace.

*Terry W. York, ASCAP (2014)*

*Tune: HARDING, C. David Bolin (2014)*

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(pp. 35-37 of this volume)

### *Second Reading: Acts 4:1-12*

While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. So they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. But many of those who heard the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand.

The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is

'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders;  
it has become the cornerstone.'

There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

## *Hymn of Adoration*

“All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name”

All hail the power of Jesus’ name!  
Let angels prostrate fall;  
bring forth the royal diadem,  
and crown him Lord of all;  
bring forth the royal diadem,  
and crown him Lord of all.

Ye chosen seed of Israel’s race,  
ye ransomed from the fall,  
hail him who saves you by his grace,  
and crown him Lord of all;  
hail him who saves you by his grace,  
and crown him Lord of all.

Let every kindred, every tribe  
on this terrestrial ball,  
to him all majesty ascribe,  
and crown him Lord of all;  
to him all majesty ascribe,  
and crown him Lord of all.

O that with yonder sacred throng  
we at his feet may fall!  
We’ll join the everlasting song,  
and crown him Lord of all;  
we’ll join the everlasting song,  
and crown him Lord of all.

Vv. 1-3, *Edward Perronet* (1780), alt.; v. 4, *John Rippon* (1787)  
*Tune: CORONATION*

## *Prayer of Confession*

We want to make every thought captive to you, O Lord,  
but too often we bow down before idols of our own making.  
We are ruled by our fears or our passions,  
and our minds are not fixed on the things above.

**Lord have mercy.**

We want to proclaim with our lips, “Christ is Risen!”  
but too often we wait to utter those words in the safe haven of your church,  
and fail to bear witness to you in the world.

**Christ have mercy.**

We want to be a people who are known as Christians by our love,  
but too often we fail to love our neighbors as ourselves.

**Christ have mercy.**

Lord, we confess our unfaithfulness to you  
in thought, word, and deed,  
confident that you are faithful and just to forgive our sin  
and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

**Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. Amen.**

### *Declaration of Forgiveness*

Christ revealed his love to us in this,  
that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.  
Hear, then Christ's word of grace to us:  
our sins are forgiven.

### *Gospel Reading: John 10:11-18*

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away – the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

The Word of the Lord for God's people.

**Thanks be to God.**

### *Song of Preparation*

"Take Thou Our Minds, Dear Lord" (v. 1)

Take thou our minds, dear Lord, we humbly pray,  
give us the mind of Christ each passing day;  
teach us to know the truth that sets us free;  
grant us in all our thoughts to honor thee.

*William H. Foulkes (1918)*

*Suggested Tunes: BREAD OF LIFE or EVENTIDE*

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*Sermon*

*Offering*

*Passing of the Peace*

*Sung Benediction*

“Gloria Patri”

Glory be to the Father,  
and to the Son  
and to the Holy Ghost;  
as it was in the beginning,  
is now, and ever shall be,  
world without end.  
Amen, amen.

*Lesser Doxology* (third-fourth century)

*Tune: MEINEKE*

## NOTES

† Doug Lee, “The Patron Saint of the Tongue-Tied,” *Ekklesia Project* (April 24, 2012), [www.ekklesiaproject.org/blog/2012/04/the-patron-saint-of-the-tongue-tied/](http://www.ekklesiaproject.org/blog/2012/04/the-patron-saint-of-the-tongue-tied/) (accessed December 3, 2014). Used by permission.

During Eastertide a reading from Acts is often substituted for the lesson from the Old Testament. This service is based on the readings for the Fourth Sunday of Easter in the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B.

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version of *Christian Reflection*.

**Few visitors today realize that the Sistine Chapel  
decoration is incomplete without the Raphael tapestries  
depicting stories from the book of Acts.**

*Figure 1: Raphael (1483-1520), THE HEALING OF THE LAME MAN (1515-1516). Watercolor on paper mounted onto canvas (tapestry cartoon). 3.4 x 5.4 m. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Great Britain. Photo: V&A Images, London / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.*

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# Spreading the Gospel “To the Ends of the Earth”

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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The High Renaissance painter Raphael Sanzio was chosen by Giovanni de' Medici, newly elected as Pope Leo X (1513-1521), to design tapestries for the walls of his private chapel, the Sistine.<sup>1</sup> The ten tapestries, woven in Brussels from cartoons made by Raphael, were to hang beneath the frescoes commissioned by Pope Sixtus IV della Rovere (1471-1484) in the early 1480s. Five of these cartoons are illustrated here and depict scenes from the Acts of the Apostles.

Very few visitors today realize that the Sistine Chapel decoration is incomplete without the tapestries. The iconographic importance of the tapestries to the Sistine Chapel program rivaled in fame and beauty during the sixteenth century Michelangelo's ceiling (1508-1512), which was commissioned by Pope Julius II (1503-1513). The narrative scenes of the original tapestry program were tailored to continue the iconography of the *Capella papalis*. The proper titles for the Sistine are *Capella palatina* and *Capella magna* (or *maior*) in the Vatican. Together with the Basilica of St. Peter's, the chapel was the primary location for the liturgical feasts of the pope and his court. St. Peter's was the premier church of Christendom, and the chapel represented Christ's vicar on earth, the pope. The manifestation of the *Maiestas Papalis* occurred not only in the magnificence of these structures and the money spent on the gold and silver threads used to weave the tapestries but also in the narratives painted on the walls under Sixtus, the ceiling under Julius, and the tapestries under Leo.

The theme of papal authority continues through the placement of the life of Peter tapestries beneath the scenes from the life of Christ frescoes on the north wall. The narratives of Paul's life woven into tapestries are located beneath the painted life of Moses on the opposite wall. Sharon Fermor explains the selection of these tapestry narratives: "Peter and Paul are portrayed as the twin founders of the Christian church, with special missions to convert the Jews and Gentiles respectively. They are also presented as the joint sources of the Pope's own authority and the tapestries were certainly intended to have a personal and political dimension for Leo in his role as Pope."<sup>2</sup> Each tapestry series parallels the 1480s frescoes: Peter and Christ, Paul and Moses. The tapestries were not permanently on display but were put up on special occasions.

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Figure 2

Raphael (1483-1520), *THE DEATH OF ANANIAS* (1515-1516). Watercolor on paper mounted onto canvas (tapestry cartoon). 3.4 x 5.3 m. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Great Britain. Photo: V&A Images / The Royal Collection, on loan from HM The Queen. Used by permission.

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As one faces the altar, the Peter scenes are placed below the Christ frescoes and begin on the right side of the altar and move clockwise onto the side wall in the following order: *Miraculous Draught of Fishes* (Luke 5:3-10), *Christ's Charge to Peter* (Matthew 16:18-19; John 21:15-17), *Healing of the Lame Man* (Acts 3:1-10), and *Death of Ananias* (Acts 5:1-6). The scene on the left side of the altar is the *Stoning of Stephen* (Acts 7:54-60). Continuing on the sidewall, in a counter-clockwise direction are the Paul scenes, hung below the Moses frescoes. The Paul compositions are: *Conversion of Saul* (Acts 9:1-9), *Conversion of the Proconsul and the Blinding of Elymas* (Acts 13:6-12), *Sacrifice at Lystra* (Acts 14:8-18), *Paul in Prison* (Acts 16:23-26), and *Paul Preaching at Athens* (Acts 17:15-34).<sup>3</sup> Altogether the tapestries would cover approximately twelve hundred square feet.

I will briefly discuss the cartoons produced by Raphael and his assistants that depict two Peter scenes and three Paul scenes from the book of Acts. The cartoons, each approximately 11' x 18', were painted in a glue-based watercolor over charcoal drawings by Raphael. Often the drawings are visible through the applied color. His pupils probably did the painting. Raphael set the average height of a standing figure in the foreground of the



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Figure 3

Raphael (1483-1520), *THE CONVERSION OF THE PROCONSUL* (1515-1516). Watercolor on paper mounted onto canvas (tapestry cartoon). 3.4 x 4.4 m. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Great Britain. Photo: V&A Images, London / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

painting at 8'. He utilized architecture that is cut off by the frame to keep it in proportion with the large figures. The cartoons and tapestries were far more expensive than frescoes and oil paintings. The total cost was 16,000 ducats, which is more than five times the amount paid to Michelangelo for painting the Sistine Chapel ceiling.<sup>4</sup>

*The Healing of the Lame Man* (Figure 1) depicts the first miracle performed by the apostles after Christ's death. The biblical narrative describes the man as both a lame and a beggar, which factors into the story when Peter says, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk" (Acts 3:6). Biblical scholar Loveday Alexander explains, "Peter's lack of silver and gold (perhaps due to the community's policy on property [cf. Acts 2:44]) highlights both the unexpected character of the miracle (the beggar is looking for money not healing) and the apostles' own dependence: only 'in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth' can healing take place."<sup>5</sup>

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Figure 4

Raphael (1483-1520), *THE SACRIFICE AT LYSTRA* (1515-1516). Watercolor on paper mounted onto canvas (tapestry cartoon). 3.4 x 5.6 m. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Great Britain. Photo: V&A Images, London / Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

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The crowd has gathered at the Beautiful Gate, the *Porta speciosa*, between the second and third of the peripheral courts around the temple of Jerusalem. Peter stands in the center with John looking towards the lame man. Peter is healing the man through a blessing gesture. In the cartoon Peter raises his left hand, but the tapestry will be woven in reverse. This act is symbolic of Peter's spiritual healing and the conversion of the Jews.<sup>6</sup>

*The Death of Ananias* (Figure 2) is presented in a very straightforward manner. Peter and the other apostles have persuaded wealthy individuals to sell off land and property and distribute the proceeds to the poor. One of them, Ananias, kept back some money, and Peter rebukes him. Ananias falls down dead in the front right foreground of the composition before the entire crowd. The shock is seen in the faces of a group of men delivering sacks on the right. Two figures, a man and a woman, on the left also react in horror to the sudden death before them but the alms distribution by the other apostles on the far left continues without anyone seeing what has happened.

While the main event occurs in the center of the composition, two later stories are referred to on the left and right sides of the cartoon. The depiction of the distribution of alms is not only a way to call attention to the apostles'

actions as good examples, but also refers to the distribution of the common goods of the Church, for which purpose the office of deacon was instituted. Stephen was one of those deacons appointed after the death of Ananias.<sup>7</sup> *The Stoning of Stephen* is the next tapestry in the series. The right side shows Sapphira, the wife of Ananias, counting her coins as she, too, keeps back some of the wealth. She will be struck dead within three hours because of her greed and deceit.

Peter pronounces divine judgment on these members of the Christian community for their disobedience. His action has also been interpreted as punishment because of the embezzlement of church funds. This is somewhat ironic as Pope Leo X himself was accused of diverting funds for the payment of the tapestries.<sup>8</sup> Sources for Raphael's composition are not from other artistic depictions of the death of Ananias, but instead are from classical sculptures such as the *Oratio Augusti* from the *Arch of Constantine* and the *Dying Gaul*. Michelangelo's *Death of Haman* from the Sistine ceiling may also be a source for the pose of the woman with upraised hands looking back at the dying Ananias.<sup>9</sup>

*The Conversion of the Proconsul* (Figure 3) is a centralized, characteristically High Renaissance composition. The proconsul, the governor of a senatorial province, sits enthroned in the center of the painting. The throne is inset before an architectural niche. His attention is on the man to his left, the magician Elymas, who has just now been struck blind by Paul. Paul is on the left of the painting in green gown and rose-colored mantle with his right hand extended towards Elymas. Elymas staggers forward with eyes closed and hands and arms extended to feel his way as he walks towards Paul.

The proconsul Sergius Paulus had called Paul and Barnabas because he wanted to hear the word of God.<sup>10</sup> Elymas opposed what they had to say. Loveday Alexander notes that, "Educated Romans had a particular interest in divination, and it was not uncommon for a wealthy senator such as Sergius Paulus to keep a soothsayer as part of his household."<sup>11</sup> Paul sees this magician as evil. Luke describes their encounter:

Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him [Elymas] and said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? And, now listen—the hand of the Lord is against you, and you will be blind for a while, unable to see the sun." Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he went about groping for someone to lead him by the hand.

*Acts 13:10-11*

Witnessing Paul's act of punishing this evil man caused the proconsul to convert and become a follower of the Lord. Raphael recorded this conversion in an inscription on the throne (as translated by John Shearman), "Through

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Figure 5

Raphael (1483-1520), *PAUL PREACHING AT ATHENS* (1515-1516). Watercolor on paper mounted onto canvas (tapestry cartoon). 3.4 x 4.4 m. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Great Britain. Photo: V&A Images / The Royal Collection, on loan from HM The Queen. Used by permission.

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the preaching of Saul, Sergius Paulus, Proconsul of Asia, embraces the Christian Faith."<sup>12</sup>

*The Sacrifice of Lystra* (Figure 4) illustrates the biblical text of Acts 14:11-18 in precise detail. Lystra was a small town in southern Asia Minor whose residents spoke Lycaonian. Paul has just commanded a man whose feet have been crippled from his birth to "Stand upright on your feet." This healing occurred after Paul "looking at [the man] intently saw that he had faith to be healed" (Acts 14:9). Upon seeing the man rise up and walk, the frenzied crowd on the right, along with the priest of Zeus who brought oxen to the gates, want to offer sacrifice to Paul and Barnabas. The crowd refers to the two missionaries as Hermes and Zeus, respectively (because Paul/Hermes was the chief speaker).

Paul responds to them by offering his first sermon that tries to explain the gospel to pagans:

“Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing good – giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy.”

*Acts 14:15-17*

Raphael depicts the moment when Paul attempts to stop the crowd but fails, and they make the sacrifices. Later, some Jews come from Antioch and Iconium and convince the crowd that Paul and Barnabas are not related to their pagan gods. They stone Paul, drag him out of the city, and leave him for dead.

While the Jews are not accepting of Paul’s gospel in Lystra, Paul has a very different experience in Athens. Some scholars have suggested the message is received differently by country dwellers (Lystra) than city residents (Athens).<sup>13</sup> *Paul Preaching in Athens* (Figure 5) is the most widely copied of the Raphael cartoons in the history of art. Paul had become deeply concerned about the presence of idols as he walked around the city of Athens. Paul wears the same vestments as in other scenes and stands on a stepped platform in front of the Areopagus as he raises his hands in gesture. He addresses the crowd, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god’” (Acts 17:22b-23a). The statue of Mars can be seen to the right of the composition. Paul goes on to speak of God as creator and as the one who raised “the man whom he appointed,” Jesus, from the dead. The mention of the Resurrection causes some in the crowd to scoff, but others believe.

This is often considered Paul’s most dramatic speech and defines him as a preacher. The tapestry was, from an iconographic perspective, appropriately placed below Cosimo Rosselli’s fresco from the Moses cycle depicting the *Adoration of the Golden Calf*. Pope Leo X had just issued a doctrine of preaching reform in the tenth session of the Lateran Council on December 15, 1515.<sup>14</sup> In this document, the Pope gave Paul the title Prince of Preachers. The tapestries were truly a legacy of Pope Leo X, but unfortunately when he died in 1521 the papacy was bankrupt and the tapestries had to be sold to help pay for the gathering of the cardinals to elect his successor.<sup>15</sup>

The Raphael tapestries are rich visual depictions of stories about Peter and Paul. Eight out of ten of them refer to events recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. As the most thorough set of paintings from Acts, they allow us to visualize the major events in the spreading of the gospel “unto the ends of the earth” (Acts 13:47).

## NOTES

1 This article is developed from research for Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons, *The Acts of the Apostles Through the Centuries*, Wiley-Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, forthcoming).

2 Sharon Fermor, *The Raphael Tapestry Cartoons: Narrative, Decoration, Design* (London, UK: Scala, 1996), 10.

3 The cartoons are lost for the *Conversion of Saul*, *Paul in Prison*, and *Stoning of Stephen*.

4 Frederick Hartt and David G. Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, seventh edition, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2011), 528.

5 Loveday Alexander, "The Acts of the Apostles," in John Barton and John Muddiman, eds., *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1033.

6 Mark Evans and Clare Browne, eds., *Raphael: Cartoons and Tapestries for the Sistine Chapel* (London, UK: V & A Publishing, 2010), 83.

7 John K. G. Shearman, *Raphael's Cartoons in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen and the Tapestries for the Sistine Chapel* (London, UK: Phaidon, 1972), 57.

8 Evans and Browne, *Raphael*, 89.

9 Ibid.

10 Alexander, "The Acts of the Apostles," 1044. A man named Sergius Paulus held office in Rome under Claudius at about the right time to be Luke's proconsul.

11 Alexander, "The Acts of the Apostles," 1044.

12 Shearman, *Raphael's Cartoons*, 58.

13 Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts*, Paideia Commentaries in the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 199-200.

14 Shearman, *Raphael's Cartoons*, 71.

15 Hartt and Wilkins, *History of Italian Renaissance Art*, 530.

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## ❖ Other Voices ❖

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To many persons this book [of Acts] is so little known, both it and its author, that they are not even aware that there is such a book in existence. For this reason especially I have taken this narrative for my subject, that I may draw to it such as do not know it, and not let such a treasure as this remain hidden out of sight. For indeed it may profit us no less than even the Gospels; so replete is it with Christian wisdom and sound doctrine, especially in what is said concerning the Holy Ghost.

**JOHN CHRYSOSTOM ( C . 3 4 7 - 4 0 7 ) , *Homily I on Acts 1:1-2***

A canon which comprised only the four Gospels and the Pauline Epistles would have been at best an edifice of two wings without the central structure [of the book of Acts], and therefore incomplete and uninhabitable.

**ADOLF VON HARNACK ( 1 8 5 1 - 1 9 3 0 ) , *History of Dogma* ( 1 8 9 6 )**

Where, within eighty pages, will be found such a varied series of exciting events – trials, persecutions, escapes, martyrdoms, voyages, shipwrecks, rescues – set in that amazing panorama of the ancient world – Jerusalem, Antioch, Philippi, Corinth, Athens, Ephesus, Rome? And with such scenery and settings – temples, courts, prisons, deserts, ships, barracks, theaters? Has any opera such variety? A bewildering range of scenes and actions (and of speeches) passes before the eye of the historian. And in all of them he sees the providential hand that has made and guided this great movement for the salvation of mankind.

**E. J. GOODSPEED ( 1 8 7 1 - 1 9 6 2 ) , *An Introduction to the New Testament* ( 1 9 3 7 )**

Acts is not mere history written to report like a newspaper the events of those early days of the church. Nor is Acts but an interesting story to divert our attentions from the mundane. Nor is Acts merely a list of theological assertions designed to appeal only to our intellect and volition. Nor is Acts only a prequel to the heights of Paul's writing. Nor is Acts only a sequel to Luke's ministry. Acts is history, literature, and theology, to be sure. Yet Acts is also a call to us, to today's followers of Jesus Christ.

Acts calls us to enter God's family and to join the work of God in the world. Acts declares that the presence of Jesus and the empowering of the Holy Spirit continue unabated wherever and whenever the disciples of Christ gather. Acts recounts how God gathered a people from the many peoples of the world. Acts narrates how the earliest church dealt with the

many diversities of the ancient world. In other words, Acts speaks to many of our contemporary questions through the victories and travails of the earliest church. Yet in the end, God is the character which shines most brightly in Acts. God has acted. God is acting. God will continue to act. That is truly good news, fit to be proclaimed.

**ERIC BARRETO, "PREACHING ACTS," *WorkingPreacher.org*  
(APRIL 5, 2011)**

The Acts, written by Luke as an epilogue to his gospel to show what Jesus 'continued to do and to teach through the Holy Spirit,' is the greatest text-book on missions in existence. Here we see the widening circles by which Christianity spread out from Jerusalem to Rome, the enlarging conceptions wrought in the minds of Christian believers regarding the scope of the gospel, the strategy of occupation devised by master missionaries, and the eternal conflict with evil which the gospel meets in establishing its worldwide sway. Here we find the substance of the missionary message that has power to win the world, — Jesus Christ, Crucified and Risen from the Dead.

**HELEN BARRETT MONTGOMERY, *The Bible and Missions* (1920)**

Luke shows the church in Acts continuing the prophetic witness of Jesus in the Gospel....The part of the prophetic message that distinguishes the church from Jesus is the proclamation of Jesus as the prophet whom God has raised from the dead and exalted to his right hand. ...The resurrection of Jesus is the source of the gift of the Holy Spirit that empowers his followers and inaugurates a new age. The reality of the resurrection runs through all the speeches of Acts, from Peter's first sermon at Pentecost to Paul's last defense before Agrippa.

**LUKE TIMOTHY JOHNSON, *Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church: The Challenge of Luke-Acts to Contemporary Christians* (2011)**

Repeatedly, Luke demonstrates that human beings do not on their own arrive at a right understanding of Jesus' identity. Instead, they learn it through Scripture, the reading and interpretation of which play a significant role in the church's witness (see esp. Acts 13:15; 15:16-17; 17:2). They learn through instruction within the community, both from apostles and from others (Acts 2:42; 18:24-26; 28:31). That is to say, humans are instructed about the identity of Jesus by God, by the risen Jesus, and by the Spirit. As Jesus himself rejoices, God has hidden insight from those who presume to be wise and understanding and has revealed it to the children (Luke 10:21-22).

**BEVERLY ROBERTS GAVENTA, "LEARNING AND RELEARNING THE IDENTITY OF JESUS FROM LUKE - ACTS," *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage* (2008)**



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# Warning to the Wise: Learning from Eutychus's Mistake

BY ANDREW E. ARTERBURY

**The downfall of Eutychus is certainly, to modern ears, a strange story, but it would have offered moral guidance to ancient readers. It exhorts them to learn from Eutychus's youthful mistakes and to avoid spiritual laxity at all costs.**

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**I**n Acts 20:7-12 we encounter a fascinating story about Paul raising a young man from the dead. By this point in the book of Acts, Paul has already concluded his final work in Greece and is in the midst of saying farewell to the Christians in Asia Minor. In particular, he has already spent six and a half days in Troas, and he is down to his final night there. As a result, Paul spends his final hours in the region preaching, worshipping God, and breaking bread in an upper room amid a house-church gathering. In fact, we are told that midnight has already arrived and Paul shows no sign of stopping (20:7).

At that point, we meet Eutychus, an adolescent worshipper in the Troas congregation whose name literally means lucky or fortunate one. Unfortunately, the young man falls asleep, falls out of the window in which he sits, falls three stories to the ground, and dies. Astoundingly though, Paul goes downstairs, raises Eutychus from the dead, and then resumes his role as the leader of the all-night worship service in the upper room. Finally, we are told that Paul continues preaching until the sun comes up and that the church receives great comfort from the revitalization of Eutychus.

While interesting on many levels, this story presents us with a variety of challenging questions. For example, if we assume that the author purposefully included the story about Eutychus's resuscitation in the book of Acts, we must ask, "What might that purpose be?" Interpreters have generally concluded that the author (likely Luke) hoped Acts would shape his readers' thoughts, imaginations, and behavior. So we must ask, "How

would Luke's earliest readers have understood this particular story, and what lessons did Luke hope his readers would draw from this text?"

To answer these types of questions, biblical scholars commonly exhort conscientious readers of biblical narratives to consider two things: the cultural norms assumed by the readers of ancient narratives and the overarching storylines of the various biblical books. By reading individual narrative units within their cultural context and within their broader literary context, we often find significant clues that point us toward reliable interpretations of narrative texts.

### **PATTERNS OF INTERPRETATION**

Some modern interpreters have read Acts 20:7-12 through a humorous lens, pointing out what happens when preachers preach too long; other interpreters have treated Eutychus's fall as a no-fault happenstance.<sup>1</sup> Of course, these interpreters arrive at their conclusions for good reason. Paul's theological reflections last all night. In essence, modern readers frequently feel empathy for the youthful Eutychus, reasoning that Eutychus can be excused for falling asleep during Paul's lengthy sermon. They are more likely to criticize the long-winded preacher than the youthful listener who dozes off. The difficulty, however, with these readings is that they do not readily explain why Luke included this story in the book of Acts.

Conversely, the first readers of Acts would likely have interpreted Eutychus's actions as a tragic mistake that could have and should have been prevented. Given an ancient Mediterranean milieu and a broad view of both Luke and Acts, Eutychus's fall seems to be depicted more as a downfall rather than an excusable accident. "Bad luck" is not responsible for this deadly event; Eutychus is. Eutychus, whose name means "Lucky," is fortunate only because Paul is present and able to reverse the natural repercussions of Eutychus's careless actions. Below I will describe why I think this latter interpretation of Acts 20:7-12 is likely the way Luke's first readers interpreted the text. In particular, I will show that this type of reading provides a spiritual warning for Luke's readers. Readers are encouraged to avoid Eutychus's actions and to cultivate spiritual vigilance.

### **ANCIENT UNDERSTANDINGS OF SLEEP**

Would ancient Mediterranean peoples have thought about sleep in ways that are different from contemporary interpreters? The answer is yes in some instances. Based upon ancient Mediterranean texts, we can break down ancient conversations and thought patterns about sleep into four main categories.<sup>2</sup>

First, without a doubt and without need for further explanation, many ancient writers referred to literal, physiological sleep in their writings (e.g., Luke 8:22-25). Second, ancient writers often referred to physical death as sleep. For example, Paul speaks of "those who have fallen asleep" when he refers to those who have physically died (1 Thessalonians 4:13, cf. Acts

13:36). Third, ancient writers at times referred to the Greek god, *Hypnos* or "Sleep." Sleep overpowers unsuspecting gods and humans with physical sleep and, together with his twin brother Death, ushers the dead to the underworld (e.g., Homer, *Iliad* 14.153-360; 16.451-454, 666-682). Finally, ancient authors routinely depicted irresponsible human behavior metaphorically as sleep. For example, Jesus tells the parable of the ten bridesmaids in Matthew 25:1-13. The five wise bridesmaids take along additional oil for their lamps so they will be prepared for the bridegroom, who is delayed but arrives at midnight. However, the five foolish bridesmaids fall asleep and run out of oil; they are unprepared for the bridegroom's arrival and miss out on the wedding banquet. When Jesus reflects on the parable, he instructs his disciples saying, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

In Acts 20:7-12 the references to Eutychus's sleep most certainly refer to physical rest (category one). At the same time, however, Luke appears to build upon common metaphorical notions of sleep as well (category four). In particular, Eutychus's physical sleep provides a visible characterization of his spiritual laxity and irresponsible Christian behavior.

#### LITERARY THEMES IN LUKE AND ACTS

The overarching narratives of Luke and Acts also provide many clues and natural comparisons that help us interpret the short story found in Acts 20:7-12 as Luke's earliest

readers would have. A variety of thematic elements, verbal repetitions, and narrative clues in other Lukan passages support a negative portrait of Eutychus's fall and a positive portrait of Paul's actions in the story. I will summarize four of the most relevant Lukan literary themes below.

The first is the theme of *resuscitations*. Miraculous acts of raising a person from the dead are rare in the Bible, yet there are three

resuscitations in Luke's writings. Jesus raises a widow's son from the dead in Luke 7:11-17; Peter raises Tabitha in Acts 9:36-42; and Paul raises Eutychus from the dead in Acts 20:7-12. A good reader will not miss the parallels. As a result, the author of Acts is in no way depicting Paul in a negative light given that, apart from Jesus, Paul is one of only two people

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**Modern readers often feel empathy for the youthful Eutychus. They are more likely to criticize Paul's long-winded preaching than the youthful listener who dozes off. But this reading does not explain why the story is in the book of Acts.**

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in the entire New Testament (and one of only four people in the Bible, cf. 1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:18-37) to perform a miracle of resuscitation. In essence, by including the miraculous resuscitations performed by Peter and Paul in Acts, Luke appears to be showing that they are in faithful continuity with Jesus. They are carrying on the work of Jesus after his death, and Jesus' spirit is at work in them. Paul's actions in Acts 20, therefore, drive home the readers' awareness that the Spirit of God is at work in and through Paul.

In both Luke and Acts, *upper rooms* provide an intimate setting for Jesus' followers. For example, in Luke 22:7-38 Jesus communes and dines with his disciples in an upper room on the night of his arrest. Later in Acts 1:13-14, Jesus' disciples have again gathered in an upper room prior to the arrival of God's Spirit. Likewise, Peter resuscitates Tabitha from the dead, whose body had been laid in an upper room in Acts 9:36-42. Finally, in Acts 20:7-12, the Christians in Troas worship God in an upper room. In all of these units, the setting connotes a context of intimacy and sincere discipleship. Yet, as we see with Judas in Luke 22:3-6, 47-48 and Eutychus in Acts 20:9, when a disciple leaves the context of an upper room, an ominous tone is introduced.

*Worship* is the third important literary theme. The Christians in Troas show themselves to be a faithful gathering of Jesus' followers by means of their faithful worship of God. They are breaking bread, worshipping God, and existing in unity much like we see in Acts 2. For example, the believers in Acts 2 "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles" (Acts 2:42-43). Notably, all of those elements (teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, and a miracle performed by an apostle) except prayer explicitly appear again in Acts 20:7-12.

Even the imagery is significant. The lamps allow them to continue in light throughout the night while darkness has fallen outside of the upper room. The Christians in Troas prepared ahead of time for an entire night of worship and communion when they brought their lamps with them.<sup>3</sup>

The fourth theme we should notice is Luke's metaphorical use of *sleep, night, and darkness*. As with most ancient narratives that retell historical events, readers can assume that the author chose not to include many ordinary events. Rather, the author elected to include noteworthy events that contribute to the overall message of the book. For example, it is logical to assume that Jesus ate and slept on most days of his life, but Luke does not narrate those events for every twenty-four hour period. Rather, Luke highlights important or pivotal moments for his readers. Within this line of reasoning, it is interesting to note that whenever Luke does mention sleep, he primarily associates it with negative metaphorical connotations. We should not be surprised then to see Luke utilize other

terms like awake, alert, day, light, night, and darkness in conjunction with metaphorical references to sleep. As a result, for the most part, Luke's references to sleep, night, and darkness are negative themes in his writings. For example, Jesus associates the arresting mob in Luke 22:53 with "the power of darkness" and Satan's influence.<sup>4</sup>

One might then be tempted to assume that only daytime is associated with the work of God and nighttime is exclusively associated with the opposite, but that is not quite right. The work of God takes place both during the day and the night in Luke and Acts, but the key for humans pertains to whether they are awake or asleep during the decisive moments of salvation history. On occasion, God's will is fully realized during the nighttime hours, but only those who are awake and alert recognize and/or participate in God's will.

For example, an angel of the Lord speaks to the shepherds during the night while they are keeping watch over their sheep (Luke 2:8-20). The shepherds then immediately go to Bethlehem where they find Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus in the manger. God's servants accomplish God's will during the middle of the night, but the angel speaks to those who are alert and awake. Similarly, the prophet Anna is praised for worshipping, fasting, and praying continuously in the temple – both night and day (Luke 2:37). Notably, Jesus also spends the entire night in prayer prior to selecting his apostles (Luke 6:12). Along

these lines, exegetes have routinely noted that Jesus prays before major decisions in Luke. Yet, it is equally important to realize that Jesus provides a model for how one handles the night. Furthermore, Jesus exhorts his disciples to remain alert or awake and pray so that their hearts will not be weighed down with indulgence, drunkenness, and the worries of this life (Luke 21:34-36).

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**One might assume that only daytime is associated with God's work and nighttime with the opposite, but that is not quite right. On occasion God's will is fully realized in the nighttime hours, but only those who are awake participate in it.**

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The opposite of remaining alert and awake during the night, of course, is falling asleep. Only Luke tells us that Peter, James, and John fell asleep during the transfiguration (Luke 9:28-36). Presumably during the evening hours, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John onto a mountain in order to pray. While Jesus prays, his appearance transfigures and he speaks of his departure. The disciples, however, are weighed down with sleep (9:32). (In fact,

the same terminology found in Luke 9:32 appears again when sleep weighs down upon Eutychus in Acts 20:9.) Thankfully, though, the three disciples are able to witness Jesus' transfigured appearance once they awake (9:32). Of course, the most obvious example in the Gospel of Luke of the disciples' propensity to fall asleep during the night at a moment when they should pray and remain alert is found in Luke 22:39-46. On the Mount of Olives, Jesus prays that the Father might remove the cup of suffering. At the same time, Jesus twice instructs his disciples to pray that they might not come into the time of trial (22:39, 46). Yet, the disciples fail miserably by falling asleep at an important moment rather than praying. They fall asleep on a night when they should remain vigilant.

As a result, we see a pattern developing in Luke's Gospel. Luke shows us two profound examples of wide-awake vigilance at the beginning of his Gospel: the shepherds and Anna remain alert to the work of God even during the night hours. Thereafter, we also repeatedly see Jesus praying and communing with God during the night hours. On the other hand, Jesus' disciples repeatedly fail miserably throughout the Gospel. In particular, Luke frequently associates the disciples' failures with the behavior of falling sleep. The disciples sleep at pivotal moments in salvation history. They drift away into unconsciousness during the decisive moments of God's work in the world. In the Gospel, therefore, sleep often functions metaphorically to illustrate the disciples' spiritual laxity and failure.

Luke establishes a significantly different pattern regarding disciples and sleep in the book of Acts. The events narrated in Acts take place after Jesus' Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension to the right hand of the Father in heaven (Acts 1:9-11; 7:55-56). In addition, the Holy Spirit has already come upon Jesus' followers in a miraculous manner that empowers them to carry on Jesus' ministry. These pivotal events transform Jesus' disciples. For instance, Peter denies that he even knows Jesus at the end of the Gospel (Luke 22:54-62), but forty days later Peter provides the authoritative interpretation of the Pentecost events (Acts 2:14-40). Unfaithfulness has been transformed into faithfulness, and in general sleep has been transformed into vigilance.

For instance, in Acts 12:1-17, while guarded by four squadrons of soldiers during the night, Peter sleeps in a prison cell. Yet an angel of the Lord appears in the prison, wakes Peter, frees him, and guides him out of prison. In the process, Peter is easily roused and fully compliant with the angel's instructions. In the meantime, we learn that that the church in Jerusalem is simultaneously praying for Peter during this entire nighttime event (12:5, 12). In essence, Peter and the church in Jerusalem are depicted as being in tune with the will and work of God. Unlike Gethsemane, sleep does not prohibit Peter's obedience or the church's prayers. They are awake and vigilant.

Next, we see Paul's spiritual vigilance depicted by being alert to the work of God at night on two separate occasions in Acts 16. For example in Acts 16:9-10 Paul has a vision during the night of a Macedonian man asking him to help the Macedonian people. Paul interprets this vision as a call from God. Similarly, Paul and Silas are beaten, thrown in prison, and guarded by a jailer in Philippi (16:11-24). Yet at midnight, Paul and Silas are not sleeping, as one would expect. Instead, they are "praying and singing hymns to God" (16:25). While being spiritually attuned to God, a miraculous earthquake frees Paul and Silas from prison while leading the jailer to believe in the Lord Jesus. Thereafter, the jailer cleans their wounds and extends hospitality to Paul and Silas in the middle of the night (16:33-34).

### **THE WARNING TO THE WISE**

In Acts 20:7-12 we see behaviors that fall well within the established patterns in Luke and Acts. Characterized by the marks of faithful Christian worship, we see both Paul and the Christians in Troas wide-awake, worshipping God, and breaking bread at midnight. They are in an upper room that is illuminated by lamps while darkness surrounds them on the outside. Eutychus is the only Christian who behaves otherwise. He falls asleep, which prevents his participation in the acts of worship. Moreover, his slumber has tragic consequences. Unlike Peter, Paul, Silas, and the church in Jerusalem, Eutychus is not alert to the work of God. Instead, when he falls asleep, he also falls away from the worshipping community, into the darkness, and down three flights to the ground resulting in death.

Even though most of Jesus' disciples fall asleep at inopportune times in Luke's Gospel, in Acts most of Jesus' followers are depicted as being awake and alert at pivotal moments when God is at work during the night. Yet, the youthful Eutychus is a counterexample. Just as we are tempted

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**As we are tempted to begin reading the story of the early Christians too triumphantly, we encounter a horrible mistake. As we begin wondering if they are now immune to spiritual slumber, we see Eutychus drift away and experience tragic consequences.**

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to begin reading the story of the early Christians in Acts too triumphantly, we encounter a horrible mistake. Just as we begin wondering whether early Christians are now immune to spiritual slumber, we see Eutychus drift away and experience tragic consequences. Just as we begin to contemplate whether a person in an upper room can ever fail as badly as Judas again, we see the foolish Eutychus make a life-threatening mistake.

In sum, the downfall of Eutychus is certainly, to modern ears, a strange story, but it would have offered moral guidance to ancient readers. It would have offered a warning to the wise, a sobering reminder to all the readers of Acts. To the followers of Jesus it says, “Beware of diverging from the authentic worshipping community.” It exhorts readers to learn from Eutychus’s youthful and immature mistakes. It reminds the wise followers of Jesus that spiritual laxity must be avoided at all costs.

## NOTES

1 See, for example, Martin Dibelius, *The Book of Acts: Form, Style, and Theology*, edited by K. C. Hanson (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004 [1956]), 43-44; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Anchor Bible Commentary 31 (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 667, 669; and Richard I. Pervo, *Acts*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 510.

2 Andrew E. Arterbury, “The Downfall of Eutychus: How Ancient Understandings of Sleep Illuminate Acts 20:7-12,” in *Contemporary Studies in Acts*, edited by Thomas E. Phillips (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009), 201-221.

3 Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, second edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 388.

4 Andrew E. Arterbury, “The Battle on the Mount of Olives: Reading Luke 22:39-46 in Its Literary Context,” in Todd D. Still, ed., *Texts and Contexts: Gospels and Pauline Studies and Sermons in Honor of David E. Garland* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, forthcoming).

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# Philanthropy, Hospitality, and Friendship

BY JOSHUA W. JIPP

The narrative of Paul's sea-voyage to Rome—with a violent storm, shipwreck, and adventures on Malta—provides not only a glimpse of Paul as one who was open to fresh encounters with all peoples but also, surprisingly, a lasting impression of Gentiles as receptive, friendly, and hospitable.

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The subject matter of the book of Acts is the living God as revealed. This simple fact means that while Acts provides the reader with a historical explanation for the expansion of the Church and its transformation into a multiethnic institution, the text also makes theological, existential, and epistemological demands upon the reader regarding the identity and activity of the living God.<sup>1</sup> Luke's description of the Church engaged in worldwide mission, devoted to prayer, sharing possessions, challenging idolatry, and discerning divine activity in human lives and events not only tells us what happened once upon a time but also makes claims upon us about who the living God is, how God is known, and the kinds of people the Church of the living God ought to be. If we are reading certain portions of Acts—e.g., Luke's summaries of the Church (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35; 5:12-16), then perhaps recognizing these claims will not seem to be too intractable a problem. As the Church once devoted itself to prayer, apostolic teaching, fellowship, and sharing possessions so the Church today must consider how to respond to the living God.

But what are we to think of Acts 27:1-28:10? This *lengthy* stretch of text narrates how Paul the prisoner was transported by ship from Caesarea to Rome, experienced shipwreck, and landed on Malta before finally arriving

in Rome. The text makes for enjoyable reading: Paul surprisingly experiences the kindness of a Roman centurion; he provides prophetic insight from God that proves instrumental in saving the lives of all on board the ship when they experience shipwreck; Paul also provides a Eucharist-like meal that encourages everyone on board; after the shipwreck Paul experiences more kindness from the barbarians on Malta; he is bit by a snake but is unharmed; and Paul and the Maltese share gifts with each other. This is an interesting story with some exotic encounters between Paul and strangers, undoubtedly, but does this text actually reveal something about God and the identity or character of the Church to us? Does it really make a theological and existential claim upon our lives and provide meaning for how the Church of God is to live today? Answering these questions requires that we explore first the literary and cultural context of Paul's sea-voyage in a bit more detail and then, secondly, Paul's relationships and interactions with those who do not belong to the Christian movement.

We will see that Luke provides his readers with a final and memorable depiction of Paul's positive interaction with Gentiles. The relationship between Paul and the Gentiles is characterized by mutual displays of philanthropy, hospitality, and friendship. This shared hospitality between strangers continues the ministry of Jesus as described in the Gospel of Luke, provides a fitting narrative representation of Paul's final words regarding the receptivity of the Gentiles to God's salvation (Acts 28:28), and calls the contemporary Church to place itself in the position of guest and host with outsiders today.

### **THE LITERARY AND CULTURAL CONTEXT OF PAUL'S SEA-VOYAGE**

Three literary and cultural observations about Paul's sea-voyage will aid our interpretation of the text. Perhaps the most striking element of Luke's narration of Paul's sea-voyage is its length—sixty verses in our Bibles devoted to showing how Paul was transferred from Caesarea to Rome (Acts 27:1–28:16). Travel and journeying are spoken of repeatedly throughout the book of Acts, but Luke usually avoids lengthy and technical descriptions about how the early Christian missionaries moved about from place to place.<sup>2</sup> Further, at this point in the narrative the reader is not expecting such a lengthy sea-voyage; rather, the reader has been anticipating Paul's trial in Rome before Caesar at least since Acts 19:21 ("after I have been there [Jerusalem] it is necessary for me to see Rome").<sup>3</sup> Thus, the length of the scene and its delaying effect suggest that the episode bears some special importance for Luke that goes beyond *merely* providing historical information about how Paul arrived in Rome.

At this point in the narrative, when Paul the prisoner undergoes his voyage to Rome, he has had no missionary interactions with Gentiles since his strengthening of the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:17–35. The Apostle to

the Gentiles has, rather, been occupied (from Acts 21:18 until 26:32) in giving forensic speeches and defending his orthodoxy with respect to Jewish customs, beliefs, and scriptures (a theme that will find some closure in the ending of Acts). Paul has made no Gentile converts during the period of his imprisonment, and this is a marked shift in Luke's characterization of Paul. The reader knows that one of Luke's concerns is to narrate how God's salvation goes forth to the Gentiles, and Paul plays the premier role in demonstrating how this takes place. Thus, in Acts 27:1–28:10 Paul re-enters a Gentile setting (i.e., the Mediterranean Sea) and encounters Gentile characters.<sup>4</sup> It will not be surprising if one of Luke's agendas is to tell us something of lasting significance about Paul's relationship with Gentile peoples.

Finally, we should be aware that sea-voyages, storms, shipwrecks, and subsequent encounters with exotic peoples were standard fare for Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman authors. Homer's *Odyssey*, Vergil's *Aeneid*, and numerous Greek novels employ sea-voyages not only for the dramatic entertainment they provide but also as a means of providing a lasting impression of the hero's character and identity. Sea-voyages and shipwrecks provide the author with an opportunity to demonstrate the hero's strength, character, and destiny and to leave a memorable portrait of the hero's identity.<sup>5</sup>

These three literary and contextual features of Paul's sea-voyage position the reader to expect that Luke will provide significant information regarding Paul's identity and his encounter with non-Jewish peoples. When we hear Paul's final words in Acts—"God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, they also will listen" (28:28b)—Luke may intend us to agree with Paul's declaration based, in part, on his encounters with Gentiles in Acts 27:1–28:10. But when we turn to Paul's sea-voyage, what do we find?

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**When we hear Paul's final words in Acts—"God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, they also will listen" (28:28b)—Luke may intend us to agree with Paul's declaration based, in part, on his encounters with Gentiles during the dramatic sea-voyage.**

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## **HOSPITALITY, PHILANTHROPY, AND FRIENDSHIP BETWEEN PAUL AND THE GENTILES**

Three distinct interactions between Paul and Gentiles provide a window into the lasting impression of Paul that Luke wishes to leave his readers.<sup>6</sup>

The first named character Paul encounters when he is taken on board the ship is “Julius a Roman centurion of the Augustan Cohort” (27:1). Mention of a Roman military figure entrusted with transporting prisoners *may have* activated the stereotypes of the brave soldier and faithful citizen, but nearer at hand may have been the stereotypes of the Roman soldier as violent, brutish, and willing to use force to keep the prisoners in order – as the soldiers are, for example, more than ready to suggest the use of violence in order to prevent the prisoners from escaping when the ship wrecks (27:43; cf. Luke 23:11).<sup>7</sup> But Luke’s characterization of the centurion is glowingly positive, rather than violent. To be sure, Luke says, “Julius demonstrated philanthropy to Paul by allowing him to be cared for by his friends” (27:3). Not violent, brutish, or greedy, the military man demonstrates the prized virtue of *philanthropia*. Philanthropy – often translated as kindness, love for humanity, or generosity – was considered to be one of the premier Hellenistic virtues and was often associated with the making and maintenance of friendships through acts of mercy, kindness, hospitality, and clemency. To show philanthropy was the mark of the educated, virtuous, and civilized person such that the term was often applied to rulers who showed philanthropy through the provision of benefactions to their subjects.<sup>8</sup> Later the centurion shows more kindness to Paul when he saves Paul’s life by disrupting the plan of the soldiers who want to kill all the prisoners when the ship wrecks on Malta (27:43). The motivation for the centurion’s kindness to Paul is left unexplained, and yet this display of a military man’s philanthropy toward Paul the vulnerable prisoner “unsettle[s] the authorial audience’s expectations” as it casts this Gentile man as favorable to Paul and as performing acts of mercy toward the vulnerable.<sup>9</sup>

But Paul not only *receives* the philanthropic kindness from Julius, Paul is also a prophetic and divine agent who secures the salvation of all of his shipmates. On three occasions, Luke portrays Paul as offering prophecies, exhortations, and encouragements that provide safety to those on board the ship. He frequently warns the leaders of the ship to refrain from immediate continuation of the journey due to the dangerous sailing conditions (27:9-11), and his prophecy comes to fruition when the typhoon threatens to destroy the ship (27:18-20). Later, after “all hope that we should be saved was taken away” (27:20), Paul receives a message from God’s angel that God will see to it that Paul makes it safely to Rome and that God “will freely give to [Paul] all those sailing with you” (27:24b). Paul is God’s prophetic instrument for the salvation of his shipmates, and as God’s prophet Paul encourages everyone on board with the angel’s message (27:25-26). When some of the ship’s crew tries to escape due to fear that the ship would break apart against the rocks, Paul is able to advise the centurion to keep the soldiers on board: “unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved” (27:31). As Richard Pervo notes, “Paul is the cause of their deliverance and thus their savior.”<sup>10</sup> On six occasions Luke uses forms of “to save” in order to refer to the salvation or

safety of the shipmates and Paul (27:20, 31, 34, 43, 44; 28:1),<sup>11</sup> and given that one of Luke's primary themes is God's salvation for all people, it may be that Luke intends the reader to view God's rescue of the crew through Paul as a metaphor for the salvation of the Gentiles.<sup>12</sup>

Paul's mediation of salvation for his shipmates is portrayed in a striking manner when Paul initiates a meal with his shipmates and takes the lead as host (27:33-38). Twice Paul exhorts everyone to "share in the nourishment" of the meal together (27:33, 34). Paul's actions whereby "he took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of everyone, he broke it and began to eat" (27:35) clearly mimics Jesus' sharing of meals with all people in the Gospel of Luke (e.g., Luke 9:11-17; 22:14-23; 24:28-35). Just as Jesus' meals were marked by their inclusive character, so is the meal between Paul and his shipmates characterized by the involvement of "everyone" on board the ship (see 27:33, 35, 36, and 37). Luke is clear about the purpose of this meal: "it exists for your salvation" (27:34b). The meal literally does provide salvation in that it provides the hungry crew with the needed strength to endure the impending loss of their ship, but Luke may intend his readers to view the meal as mediating divine salvation whereby the prisoners are saved by sharing in divine hospitality. The echoes of Jesus' table-fellowship with sinners in the Gospel of Luke, the reference to "all 276 souls on the ship" (27:37) — which reminds the reader of earlier scenes in Acts where Luke had recounted the number of "souls" saved (2:41; 4:4) — and the repeated references to salvation throughout the sea-voyage suggest that "Paul allows the Gentiles to taste God's salvation through his extension of hospitality, and thereby Luke symbolically portrays the Gentiles as being incorporated into God's people."<sup>13</sup>

Paul's interaction with non-Jewish peoples continues in Acts 28:1-10 where he receives another remarkable display of philanthropy and hospitality from the Maltese islanders. Paul's prophecy is fulfilled as the ship breaks apart and the crew lands on Malta (27:26; 27:44-28:1). Paul, of course, is a total stranger to the Maltese, and so this is a potentially dangerous situation. Luke refers to the Maltese as "barbarians" (28:2, 4) and thereby activates widespread cultural connotations that associated barbarians with *inhospitality* toward shipwrecked strangers. Odysseus, for example, when encountering a new land and people in his voyages often spoke the phrase: "Alas, to the land of what mortals have I now come? Are they insolent, wild, and unjust? Or are they hospitable to strangers and fear the gods in their thoughts?" (Homer, *Odyssey*, 6.119-121).<sup>14</sup> Luke activates an impending *inhospitality* scenario, however, only to overturn it: "the barbarians showed us no small philanthropy" through their provision of a fire to keep the prisoners warm (28:2). Further, their kindness to the prisoners is, according to prominent Hellenistic moralists, the height of virtue since shipwrecked strangers have no means to reciprocate for hospitality received. Once again, the philanthropy of the barbarians toward the needy and vulnerable demonstrates that the

Maltese belong to the same Lukan exemplars of hospitality such as Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), Cornelius (Acts 10:1-11:18), and Lydia (Acts 16:11-15).<sup>15</sup>

After Paul's triumphal incident with the viper reveals that he is no ordinary prisoner but rather bears the powerful presence of God (28:3-6), Publius (the first man of Malta) wisely shows hospitality to Paul and his companions: "he welcomed us and for three days extended friendly hospitality to us" (28:7b).

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**As congregations seek to hear and be shaped by God's Word in Acts 27-28, they would do well to reflect upon whether they are intentionally seeking opportunities to bestow divine hospitality and create friendship relationships with so-called outsiders.**

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This display of hospitality and friendship to Paul elicits Paul's Jesus-like healing of Publius' father (28:8) and the healing of all the sick on the island (28:9). Luke's narration of these healings recalls Jesus' healing of Peter's mother-in-law (Luke 4:38-39) and his initial healing ministry in Capernaum (Luke 4:40-41) and suggests that Jesus' ministry is continuing to spread to the ends of the earth.

The episode concludes with the Maltese cementing their relationship with Paul: "they bestowed many honors upon us, and when we were about to sail, they put on board all the provisions that we needed" (28:10). The Maltese "barbarians" are anything but uncivilized or ignorant of the ways of hospitality towards strangers, for they reflect the attributes of ideal hosts by providing a safe conveyance for the next stage of their guest's journey. Luke may, in fact, intend for his readers to view the Maltese as eliciting a formalized guest-friendship with Paul through their hospitality. When two distinct ethnic parties engage in a mutual back-and-forth sharing of hospitality, gifts, and friendship, it was often seen as creating a permanent, binding relationship which is on par with friendship or even non-biological kinship.<sup>16</sup> The Maltese barbarians, then, through their *continued* enactments of hospitality appear to have initiated a binding kinship-like relationship with Paul.

#### **LESSONS FOR THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH**

When Paul claims that God's salvation has gone forth to the Gentiles who will provide a listening and receptive audience (28:28), the examples of Julius the Roman centurion, the shared meal between Paul and his shipmates, and the hospitable Maltese barbarians provide good reason for readers to expect that the legacy and mission of Paul will continue even after his imprisonment and death. Philanthropy, shared hospitality, and friendship have been on abundant display between these Gentile characters

and Paul throughout his journey to Rome. The sea-voyage, then, provides both a memorable glimpse of Paul's character and identity as one who was open to fresh encounters with all peoples and, surprisingly, a lasting impression of Gentiles as receptive, friendly, and hospitable.

Today when we read Acts 27:1–28:10 as Christian Scripture, we are challenged to bestow (as hospitable hosts) and receive (as receptive guests) the kind of hospitality and kindness that would result in the creation of friendship and kinship relations.<sup>17</sup> In this text, the gifts of God – table-fellowship, the salvation/safety of the shipmates, and healing – are not hoarded or held back as the exclusive property of Paul but are shared liberally and freely with those not belonging to Paul's own kinship network. They are, furthermore, shared without requiring or asking for a response.

Congregations who would continue to embody the same message and values should reflect upon where and how their gifts and resources may be put to use in service of the larger world. Paul demonstrates no hesitation in receiving kindness from a Roman military man, happily and freely shares a meal with prisoners, and shows no fear to stay in Publius's home and receive his hospitality. Thus, Luke leaves his readers with a portrait of Paul as entering into host and guest relationships with outsiders as a means of extending God's salvation to all people. Luke seems, in fact, to make a point of invoking cultural stereotypes (of Roman centurions, prisoners, and barbarians) only to overturn them – namely, to show that these are the people to whom God's salvation has and will extend and that they are not only worthy of receiving but are supremely capable of practicing and initiating friendship, hospitality, and philanthropy. As we seek to hear and be shaped by God's Word in Acts 27–28, we would do well to reflect upon whether we are intentionally seeking opportunities to bestow divine hospitality and create friendship relationships with so-called outsiders. Perhaps we would do well to reflect upon whether soldiers, prisoners, and the ethnically 'other' *still* represent some of the same cultural stereotypes needing to be overturned. Congregations that would take seriously the message of Acts 27–28 would, however, not *only* reflect upon how and to whom they should dispense hospitality, but would also seek ways in which they might receive, learn, and experience the gifts from others who are not part of their friendship-kinship network.

## NOTES

1 I have argued this point more fully in Joshua W. Jipp, "The Beginnings of a Theology of Luke-Acts: Divine Activity and Human Response," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 8:1 (2014), 23–44. See also C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 156–176.

2 On the importance of travel as a theme in Acts, see Loveday C. A. Alexander, *Acts in Its Literary Context: A Classicist Looks at the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007), chapters 4 and 5.

3 Scripture quotations are my translations.

4 See further Daniel Marguerat, *The First Christian Historian: Writing the 'Acts of the Apostles,'* translated by Ken McKinney, George J. Lauhery, and Richard Bauckham, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 121, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 217.

5 Especially helpful here is Vernon K. Robbins, "By Land by Sea: The We-Passages and Ancient Sea-Voyages," in *Sea Voyages and Beyond: Emerging Strategies in Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation*, Emory Studies in Early Christianity 14 (Blandford Forum, UK: Deo Publishing, 2010), 47-81; Cf. Marguerat, *The First Christian Historian*, 231-256.

6 For a detailed discussion of what follows, see Joshua W. Jipp, *Divine Visitations and Hospitality to Strangers: An Interpretation of the Malta Episode in Acts 28:1-10*, *Novum Testamentum Supplements* 153 (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2013).

7 On stereotypes of soldiers and their relevance for understanding Luke's positive depictions of the Roman centurions, see Laurie Brink, *Soldiers in Luke-Acts: Engaging, Contradicting, and Transcending the Stereotypes*, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 2, 362 (Tübingen, DE: Mohr-Siebeck, 2014).

8 See further, Ceslas Spicq, "La philanthropie hellénistique, vertu divine et royale (à propos de Tit 3:4)," *Studia Theologica* 12 (1958), 169-191; Mikael C. Parsons, *Acts*, *Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Press, 2008), 367-370.

9 Brink, *Soldiers in Luke-Acts*, 124.

10 Richard I. Pervo, *Acts*, *Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 662.

11 See the fine article by Susan M. Praeder, "Acts 27:1 – 28:16: Sea Voyages in Ancient Literature and the Theology of Luke-Acts," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 46 (1984), 683-706.

12 On the theme of salvation in Luke-Acts, see Luke 1:47, 69, 71; 2:11, 30; 3:4-6; 6:9; 7:50; 8:12, 36, 48, 50; Acts 2:21, 40, 47; 4:9, 12; 11:14; 13:47; 14:9; 15:1, 11; 16:30, 31; 28:28.

13 Jipp, *Divine Visitations and Hospitality to Strangers*, 256.

14 For further examples, see Jipp, *Divine Visitations and Hospitality to Strangers*, 39-44, 257-259.

15 For a wealth of information on hospitality in Luke-Acts and the broader ancient Mediterranean world, see Andrew Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in its Mediterranean Setting*, *New Testament Monographs* 8 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005).

16 On the relevance of the custom of ritualized friendship (guest-friendship) for understanding the book of Acts, particularly the Peter-Cornelius episode, see Walter T. Wilson, "Urban Legends: Acts 10:1-11:18 and the Strategies of Greco-Roman Foundation Narratives," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 20 (2001), 77-99.

17 Thankfully, there is now a wealth of literature devoted to recovering the Christian tradition of hospitality to strangers. The most helpful and accessible work is Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1990).



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# Repetition for a Reason

BY TIMOTHY CHURCHILL

In the book of Acts, Luke emphasizes Paul's unexpected encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road by repeating the story three times. Jesus' message to Paul in that story deserves our full attention, for it contains the entire gospel in kernel form.

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Paul's unexpected encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road was a pivotal moment in the history of the early church. In the book of Acts, Luke emphasizes the story by repeating it three times, first in narrative form (9:1-9), and later in two speeches (22:3-11; 26:4-20). While it is not the only story that Luke tells three times, it is, according to Craig Keener, "the longest substory within Acts' longer plot."<sup>1</sup> For years, scholars have struggled to understand why Luke tells this story as he does. Even today, this remains a "*crux interpretum* [crucial and difficult point of interpretation] in Acts research."<sup>2</sup>

In this article I will take a fresh look at how the Damascus road encounter is presented in the book of Acts.<sup>3</sup> I will begin by noting where Luke positions the three accounts within the larger work. Then I will explore how Luke varies his descriptions as he repeats the story, paying close attention to how Paul's pre-encounter persecutions, the heavenly light that appears, and Jesus' message to Paul are developed as the story is retold. I will conclude with some reflections on what we can learn from the way Luke has communicated the story of Jesus' appearance to Paul on the Damascus road.

Before we take a look at how Luke tells the story, we should first notice where each account is placed within the book of Acts. Using chapter markers as a rough guide, we see that Acts 9 is found at about the one-third

mark, Acts 22 just past the three-quarter mark, and Acts 26 at about the ninety percent mark. It's even more striking to view things from the end of Acts rather than from the beginning. Acts 26 occurs just two chapters from the end; Acts 22 occurs six chapters from the end, or three times further in; and Acts 9, nineteen chapters from the end, or three times further from the end than Acts 22. Simply put, the frequency intensifies with near mathematical precision as we approach the end of Acts. It seems that Luke wants his readers to remember the Damascus road story as they finish reading Acts! But what exactly does he want them to remember? This will become clear as we look at Luke's use of repetition in telling the story.

### **LUKE'S USE OF REPETITION**

Luke repeats the story of Paul's encounter with Jesus three times. Yet the story is not told in exactly the same way each time. Let's examine some of the variations to see if we can learn what Luke is trying to communicate through his use of repetition. I will focus on three key areas: Paul's pre-encounter persecutions of the early church, the heavenly light, and Jesus' message to Paul.

Regarding *Paul's pre-encounter persecutions*, in Acts 9:1 we find Paul breathing murderous threats. In Acts 22:4 we learn that Paul persecuted early Christians to the point of death and imprisonment. In Acts 26:9-11 Paul speaks of performing many hostile acts, imprisoning many holy ones in prisons, voting to condemn them to death, punishing them in the synagogues frequently, attempting to force them to blaspheme, and even pursuing them to foreign cities. From this we can see that Luke becomes increasingly intense in recounting Paul's pre-encounter persecution.

Luke's depiction of *the heavenly light* also develops through the three accounts. The light's brightness grows from "a light" (9:3), to "a great light" (22:6), to "a light brighter than the sun" at midday (26:13). The light's scope increases from "flashed around [Paul]" (9:3), to "shone about [Paul]" (22:6), to "shining around [Paul] and [his] companions" (26:13). The human response to the light also increases as Paul seemingly falls alone in the first two accounts (9:4; 22:7), but his companions fall with him in the third telling (26:14).<sup>4</sup> In other words, Luke increases the brightness and scope of the light, and the response to the light, with each retelling.

We now come to the heart of the Damascus road experience: *Jesus' message to Paul*.<sup>5</sup> Let's examine the three accounts to see what Luke is trying to communicate through his use of repetition in the message.

In Acts 9, Jesus' message consists of the cryptic statement, "you will be told what you are to do" (9:6). The Greek phrase translated "what" is used here to introduce the answer to an indirect question.<sup>6</sup> From the context it is clear that Paul's question must have been "What must I do?" But note that Jesus is responding to a question that has not been asked. To add to the

intrigue, Jesus does not really seem to answer Paul's implied question. So the message section of Acts 9 is rather strange, consisting of an implied question without a proper answer.

In Acts 22, Paul gives voice to the question we were expecting in Acts 9: "What am I to do, Lord?" (22:10). Jesus' response once again defers the full answer: "Get up and go to Damascus; there you will be told everything that has been assigned to you to do." So in Acts 22 we get to hear Paul's question, but we still don't know exactly what message Jesus had for him.

In Acts 26, Paul's question is completely missing, but we finally hear the answer we have been waiting for:

But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.

*Acts 26:16-18*

It appears, then, that Luke has constructed the entire sequence to arouse curiosity in the mind of his reader. The burning question is this: why did Jesus appear to Paul? Beginning with the hint of a question in Acts 9, and continuing with Jesus' apparent reluctance to answer Paul's question in Acts 22, Luke finally reveals that Paul did indeed receive his divine appointment from Jesus on the Damascus road in Acts 26. To put it more plainly, the three accounts have been crafted to climax with the revelation that Paul received his call as apostle to the Gentiles from Jesus on the Damascus road.

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**The story of Paul's encounter with Jesus is not told in the same way each time. What can learn from this? I will focus on three key areas: Paul's pre-encounter persecutions of the early church, the heavenly light, and Jesus' message to Paul.**

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### **WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM LUKE'S PRESENTATION**

Through the use of repetition, Luke has made every effort to draw the reader's attention to the Damascus road encounter between Jesus and Paul. As one nears the end of the book, the story should be ringing in one's ears

as it is repeated with increasing frequency and with more intense depictions of Paul's persecution of the early church, the heavenly light that appears, and the reaction of Paul and his companions. Luke uses this heightened awareness of the story to drive home the key point of the entire sequence: that Jesus appeared to Paul on the Damascus road in order to call him to be Apostle to the Gentiles.

Given the significance of the Damascus road encounter within the book of Acts, Jesus' message to Paul deserves our full attention. What more can we learn from the message (26:16-18)? First of all, we see that Paul's apostolic authority came straight from Jesus: "I have appeared to you...to appoint you." We also learn that Paul's mission to the Gentiles came directly from Jesus: "I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles – to whom I am sending you." Paul's apostolic authority has major implications for us today, especially when we consider that Paul wrote nearly half the books in the New Testament! Second, we see the gospel in kernel form: Jesus calls Paul "to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me." Themes such as forgiveness, sanctification, and faith in Jesus deserve more attention than this article permits, unfortunately. Third, the message reflects a very high Christology. In the Old Testament, God is the one who rescues; yet here, Jesus is the one who rescues. In the Old Testament, God is the one who appoints his messengers; yet here, Jesus is the one who appoints Paul. In other words, Jesus is presented here in ways previously reserved for God alone.

Finally, Luke's use of repetition in the three accounts of the Damascus road encounter should remind us of how carefully the book of Acts has been constructed. Luke was intentional in presenting the story of Paul's encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road in such a way that the reader is drawn to the message. Luke's use of repetition should also inspire us to study the book of Acts in detail. May we dig deeply into the message that Jesus had for Paul on the Damascus road, and indeed into the entire book of Acts, to see what more we can find!

#### NOTES

1 Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: 3:1-14:28*, volume 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 1598.

2 Daniel Marguerat, "Saul's Conversion (Acts 9, 22, 26) and the Multiplication of Narrative in Acts," in Christopher M. Tuckett, ed., *Luke's Literary Achievement: Collected Essays*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 127-155, here citing 128.

3 A more detailed discussion may be found in Timothy W. R. Churchill, *Divine Initiative and the Christology of the Damascus Road Encounter* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 191-249.

4 For a good summary of the debate over apparent contradictions in the descriptions of Paul's travel companions, see C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts*

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*of the Apostles*, 2 volumes, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh, UK: T & T Clark, 1994, 1998), 2:1038-1039.

5 Lohfink points to the increase in the three accounts with respect to Paul's call to mission: from call (Christ to Ananias) and call to mission (Ananias to Saul) in Acts 9, to announcement of the mission (Christ to Saul in Jerusalem) in Acts 9, to immediate mission (Christ to Saul from Damascus) in Acts 26. See Gerhard Lohfink, "Meinen Namen Zu Tragen... (Apg 9, 15)," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 10:1 (1996), 108-115, here citing 114.

6 See Friedrich Blass, Albert Debrunner, and Robert Walker Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1961), §300(1).

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# The Ever-Expanding Gospel

B Y C H A D H A R T S O C K

**The book of Acts re-calls us to a radically selfless gospel whose mission is to reach the ends of the earth. It reminds us that the “ends of the earth” can be in a land far away, or among the socially marginalized neighbors who live in our shadows every moment.**

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**T**he book of Acts is significant because it explores core, identity-shaping questions about how the Church came to be what it is. It asserts the centrality of the Holy Spirit in shaping the identity of the Church. It also highlights the controversies involved in the shaping of the Church—both dangers emerging from the surrounding environment (like Jewish religious leaders or the threatening Saul on the prowl) and internal controversies that the Church must resolve, the greatest of which is the question of what to do about the Gentiles. Acts does not paint a picture of a pristine and idyllic Church, but of one being forged in the fires of conflict.

With the Gospel of Luke, Acts shares a gospel that targets the outsider, a gospel that is the necessary plan of God, rooted in antiquity and Scripture, and a gospel that disarms and defeats the spiritual forces of evil. Yet for Acts, no theme is more important than this one: the ever-expanding mission of the gospel. The kingdom of God is on the march, both geographically and sociologically, to the very ends of the earth, and its divinely-guided progress will not be halted.

The theme of an ever-expanding gospel appears immediately in Acts. Christ’s final instructions to the apostles before his ascension—“you will

receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (1:8) – serves as a kind of geographical thesis statement for the book. Christ's death and resurrection has Jerusalem as its epicenter, but its effects will radiate in all directions, ultimately to the very edges of the map. For the first audience of this book, Jerusalem was in the center of their maps in much the same way that Americans have North America in the center of theirs, or instinctively turn their globes to the western hemisphere. Christ sets the tone for the book (and for the story of the faith) by telling the Apostles that the gospel cannot be stagnant, is not to be locked down in the holy city, and is not to be selfishly hoarded for themselves. Indeed, this is a gospel intended for everyone everywhere, and the job of all the disciples is to keep it moving. In fact, as Acts unfolds, the reader can watch this geographical thesis fulfilled step by step.

The gospel does not leave Jerusalem immediately. The apostles return to Jerusalem (1:12), sequester themselves in the upper room, and await the Spirit. Among the many things that happen when the Spirit arrives is that the "devout Jews from every nation under heaven" (2:5) hear the gospel proclaimed in their own language; this is a sort of promissory note of the gospel's ability to communicate anywhere. Yet this Pentecost audience is a melting pot of people living in Jerusalem, and they may or may not have taken that message to distant homelands. The apostles certainly remain in Jerusalem, seeking to proclaim Christ as fulfillment of the Jewish covenants and scriptures in Jerusalem and the Temple. As they proclaim the same message as Jesus did and do many of the same signs and wonders that Jesus performed, they meet opposition from the same opponents as their Lord did.

It is not until the Stephen incident that the gospel is effectively spread beyond Jerusalem by a considerable number of Christ's followers. Stephen, one of the seven deacons chosen in 6:1-6, is arrested, tried, and executed for the same trumped-up crimes as Jesus – blasphemy against the Temple and the Law (6:11-14). What is notable about these events is what happens in their aftermath: "That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of *Judea and Samaria*" (8:1b, emphasis mine). The geography mentioned here, which recalls the words of Jesus in 1:8, shows the gospel is now leaving town. Although the believers are fleeing the streets of Jerusalem, they are not retreating underground into bunkers; they are running to other synagogues in every town and village: "Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word" (8:4). The

Jewish religious leaders intended through Stephen's execution to stomp out the fires of this aberrant movement, but all they managed to do was pour kerosene on the flames. The movement that so recently had been contained in the upper room of a house or a single porch in the Temple now took to the highways and byways; what was once a semi-contained campfire now threatened to ignite the whole forest. "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem" – done. "In Judea and Samaria" – done. "And to the ends of the earth."

Philip, a Hellenist who like Stephen had been appointed to "wait tables" (6:2), soon joins the apostles' work of expanding the gospel. He is called by the Spirit to meet a certain Ethiopian eunuch who is leaving Jerusalem. Those two adjectives say a lot about the man: as a eunuch, he is an outcast in any culture and probably not welcome in the very temple where he came to worship; as an Ethiopian, he hails from the very edge of the map. (On maps of the day, the southernmost reaches to the south of Egypt were called "Ethiopia.") Here we find a character who is not only an outsider socially, he is also from one end of the earth. The story of Philip "starting with this scripture [viz., Isaiah 53:7-8]" and proclaiming to this man "the good news about Jesus" (8:35) is another down payment on a gospel that is ever-expanding.

The focus turns next to Saul/Paul in chapter 9. Saul is dispatched to find those expansionists who are spreading this gospel and drag them back to Jerusalem. Saul seeks to corral and tame the gospel, but he can no more harness it than one can un-ripple a pond. Indeed, Saul who is sent to stop the gospel becomes its greatest missionary, doing more to carry it to the ends of the earth than anyone who ever lives. Even the enemy of the gospel is not beyond its reach.

The end of the book of Acts is curious as well. Acts concludes with Paul in Rome under house arrest. We do not see his day in court, and are not told how his life ultimately ends. In a very significant sense, however, those things do not matter to this story. Paul himself is not the point; the ever-expanding gospel is. It does not matter what happens to this main character; the expansion of the gospel is fully in motion now, whether Paul lives or dies. Thus Acts ends with an odd line: Paul is "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (28:31). The final word in Greek is an adverb that means, literally, "unhinderedly." It is an unusual grammatical construction to end a book, yet it fits this one perfectly. Acts is about the ever-expanding gospel, and it most appropriately ends with a description of that mission being fulfilled. It is open ended, leaving the reader to



find his or her own place in the story of this gospel as it spreads to the very ends of the earth.

The book of Acts' call to the reader is clear: carry the gospel to everyone in every place. Yet the frustration of the contemporary church is that more often our gospel builds bigger cathedrals, hunkers down in our own selfishness, prays for the expansion of our own territory (whether this be names on the church roll or acreage owned), and acts as if some people simply do not belong in this kingdom. Acts reminds us that such a gospel is wrongheaded, misguided, and antithetical to the one Christ envisions. Acts re-calls us to a radically selfless gospel whose mission is to reach the ends of the earth at any and all personal cost. It reminds us that the "ends of the earth" can be in a land far away, or among the socially marginalized neighbors who live in our shadows every moment. May our gospel be ever-expanding.

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# A Story that Teaches: The Theology of Acts

BY HOLLY BEERS

**What is Luke’s agenda, theological and otherwise, in the book of Acts? How is he shaping that agenda through the story he tells? How is he teaching the Church, from Theophilus to today? In the books reviewed here, three leading Acts scholars attempt an answer to these questions.**

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**H**ow do stories teach us? It is one thing to insist, as the Church often has, that the story narrated in the book of Acts teaches us; it is quite another to explain exactly how this teaching is done.

There is a growing consensus among Acts scholars that the old academic bifurcation between what is descriptive versus prescriptive in the New Testament (a dichotomy that prioritizes the scriptural epistles over the narrative books like Acts) is unhelpful. Also by the wayside is the modernist ideal of “neutral” texts; all texts have agendas. The central question, therefore, is: in the book of Acts, what is Luke’s agenda, theological and otherwise? How is he shaping that agenda through the story he tells? How is he teaching the Church, from Theophilus to today? In the books reviewed here, three leading Acts scholars attempt an answer to these questions.

In *A Theology of Luke and Acts: God’s Promised Program, Realized for All Nations*, Biblical Theology of the New Testament Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012, 495 pp., \$39.99), Darrell L. Bock offers, in line with the goal of the series (in which three of the eight volumes are completed), a volume that seeks to demonstrate “how Biblical Theology ought to be conducted” within an evangelical context (p. 19). The evangelical ethos is framed through assent to the authority of Scripture and a view of the New Testament as theologically unified, and not contradictory (though the language of “diversity” is also employed). More to the point, Bock’s offering,

while summarizing some recent and not-so-recent scholarly activity on Luke and Acts, ends up in predictable evangelical territory in his arguments for Lukan authorship (pp. 32-37), an early date of composition—in the late 60s (p. 41), and Luke's competence as an historian (pp. 43-44).

Bock's three-page section entitled "On Philosophy of History and Acts" (pp. 48-51) is particularly impressive, for this is where he engages some of the current (post)modern claims that, for example, "history itself (is) a construct" (p. 48) as opposed to a series of documentary events. This discussion would profit from being expanded, as it is a space where a self-defined evangelical approach to biblical theology can, and must, make a robust contribution.

The arrangement of the work is thematic, including such topics as "The Plan, Activity, and Character of God" and "Israel in Luke-Acts." This leads to an ease of use, though a possible weakness is the implied compartmentalization—separating what Luke presents as a whole story. However, Bock does often outline a brief "narrative order" before synthesizing material.

Bock's sweet spot is his ability to integrate relevant language (e.g., Greek) and historical issue (e.g., second temple Judaism) in a way that is accessible and yet nuanced. He appropriately places the language of Jesus sitting at God's right hand within the second temple Jewish and rabbinic textual milieu, illustrating the power of such a New Testament claim for Jesus (p. 181). He also rightly traces Acts' fondness for "the Way" terminology and image to its Old Testament provenance in Isaiah and Malachi, where it is tied to God's restoration (pp. 304-306).

This lengthy work carries the stamp of Bock's interest in the nation of Israel. For example, he is careful to present the kingdom of God as present, future, political, and spiritual (pp. 141 ff.), a move that serves his larger concern to deny any "rejection of Israel" motif (e.g., pp. 143, 375-381, and chapter 12). The "political" aspect of the kingdom is thus future for Bock, and it applies only to Israel (as opposed to the Church).

In line with much Lukan scholarship, Bock highlights Luke's stylistic preference for including (and often naming) women. Interestingly, his discussion of women is reminiscent of some modern feminist scholarship, where the women are emphasized only to be domesticated once again. In other words, it appears that from Bock's perspective, Luke mentions them only to put them firmly in their place: a restricted, gendered space. On this point, Bock does not exhibit real engagement with some of the more provocative arguments of scholars like Richard Bauckham (whose *Gospel Women* is listed in the bibliography).

In light of common evangelical insistence upon the Bible's relevance for the Church, the minimal "application" of Acts' theology is somewhat surprising. It is true, however, that application is not part of the stated intention of the series (p. 19) and, encouraged by Bock's occasional comments, a discerning reader may sense how Acts can apply today (for example, at

the end of the “wealth and possessions” section on p. 330, and in his discussion of the question of normativity on pp. 444-445). Still, it appears that the opportunity to give a decades-long specialist in Luke-Acts the space to shape evangelical embodiment of the theology of Luke-Acts has been missed.



Luke Timothy Johnson, in contrast to Bock, spends much of his energy in *Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church: The Challenge of Luke-Acts to Contemporary Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011, 198 pp., \$23.00) on the question of relevance for the Church, as his subtitle demonstrates. While he devotes most of each chapter to surveying the scholarly landscape on critical issues and arguing for prophetic readings of Luke-Acts, he includes substantial sections (filled with energetic language) entitled “Challenge to the Contemporary Church” at the conclusions of chapters four through eight.

Johnson’s methodological parameters are broader than Bock’s, as evidenced by his use of language such as “utopian imagination” (p. 5) to describe Luke-Acts, and his insistence that “Luke’s depiction of the church may or may not be based on facts from the past” (p. 6). For many readers of Acts, however, the question of whether or not this happened, or whether or not these early believers actually lived this way, cannot and will not be so easily cast aside.

Johnson’s first chapter concerns the literary shape of Luke-Acts, and he quickly navigates through terrain that includes source criticism and genre in a way that is accessible. The book gains momentum through chapters two and three – “The Prophetic Shape of Luke-Acts” and “The Character of the Prophet” – as he argues for prophecy not only as prediction, but “as-a-way-of-being-in-the-world” (p. 29). His argument that prophets *embody* God’s word – that is, they not only speak it verbally, but express it through their actions – rightly focuses not only on the text of Luke-Acts but on the Hebrew scriptures as the main source for prophetic precedent.

It is common in analyses of Luke-Acts to focus on the Spirit upon Jesus and the disciples, and Johnson follows suit in chapter four, “The Prophetic Spirit.” He is fairly sympathetic to the charismatic and pentecostal movements today that insist upon the Spirit’s continuing presence and active work (pp. 66-69). He insists that Luke-Acts challenges the Church today in its willingness to respond to what he calls “the movements of the spirit” (p. 70), adding that local, smaller communities will be most nimble.

Chapter five, “The Prophetic Word,” extends Johnson’s emphasis on prophecy as embodiment (though this is one of several places in the book where there is some redundancy), and here his critiques of the contemporary church find a sharp edge. In contrast to Bock, he emphasizes the present “political” dimensions of the kingdom of God as seen in “a people shaped

by shared convictions and practices" (p. 90) such as forgiveness of sins, both received from God and extended to others (pp. 93-94).

The heart of the book is found in chapters six and seven – "Prophetic Embodiment" and "Prophetic Enactment" – for it is here that Johnson argues for "Jesus' prophetic challenge [as] embodied in four interlocking dimensions of his ministry" (p. 96) that are continued by the disciples: poverty and the sharing of possessions, itinerancy, prayer, and servant leadership. An academic accent common to Johnson's scholarship occurs here, as he utilizes the "symbol of table service as the marker of genuine leadership" (p. 106).

Again, his most powerful commentary occurs in his challenge to the contemporary church, where he critiques both his own Catholic tradition, referencing reading the beatitudes "from gilded pulpits," as well as "suburban megachurches that stand as witness to the spirit of entrepreneurship more than to the spirit of evangelical poverty" (p. 126). In reference to itinerancy, he contends: "If the corollary of itinerancy is responsiveness to the movement of the Holy Spirit, the corollary of stability is concern for institutional preservation" (p. 127).

Chapter seven is Johnson's call for the contemporary church to enact the prophetic vision of healing, exorcism, and the embrace of the marginal in continuity with Jesus and the disciples. His argument for modern-day exorcism as the naming and resisting of evil systems and addictions is thoughtful (pp. 162-163), though believers with experience in what may be called "personal" demonic interactions may find him giving too much ground here to "rational" explanations.

In his final chapter, Johnson unsurprisingly cultivates a picture of witness as embodiment (as opposed to simple proclamation exclusively, though that is included) and stresses the resistance that faithful witness brings in Luke (for Jesus) and Acts (for his followers). How can the Church expect anything less?



C. Kavin Rowe's book, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 300 pp., \$24.95), is the only book reviewed here that focuses specifically on Acts as opposed to Luke-Acts. Its title does not begin to hint at the depths plumbed in this relatively short text. Rowe's thesis, that "Luke's second volume is a highly charged and theologically sophisticated political document that aims at nothing less than the construction of an alternative total way of life – a comprehensive pattern of being – one that runs counter to the life-patterns of the Graeco-Roman world," (p. 4), is supported by arguments from a range of scholarly perspectives (including political theory and constructive theology), making his book a truly interdisciplinary

work. His justification for this kind of project is based in the historical particularity of our own lives: “because we live interdisciplinary lives, we think in interdisciplinary terms” (p. 8).

The impetus for his study is found in what he calls “the dominant trend” in Acts studies for the past three hundred years: the view that Acts “argues for the political possibility of harmonious existence between Rome and the early Christian movement” (p. 3). His book disputes that claim, but not in a black-and-white manner. Incidentally, Rowe often makes comments about scholarly discussions of issues in Acts, especially as they are connected to the history of scholarship. This not only shows Rowe’s awareness of the historical shape of Acts studies, but gives the reader a sense of the depth of various questions or topics.

This book requires a good deal of effort to read well, and it assumes a fairly high level of pre-understanding. Greek, Latin, and German vocabulary is sprinkled liberally throughout his five chapters, and English translations are given only sometimes. However, the patient and sensitive reader will most likely find this reading experience worth the effort.

In chapter two, “Collision: Explicating Divine Identity,” Rowe argues that the life patterns of the Jesus community provoke “cultural destabilization” (p. 5). By this he means that conversion from pagan (that is, non-Jewish and non-Christian) culture and religion entail not simply a slight adjustment of routine, but entrance into a new culture as embodied in the practices of the Christian community. The transfer, in other words, is total, and it subverts existing ways of living in the world. Acts 16, the episode with Paul and Silas exorcising the mantic girl in Philippi, is one of his textual warrants, as he claims that “the vanquishing of the pythonic spirit is a tear in the basic fabric of pagan popular religion.... Inasmuch as such religious life was woven together with material gain, such a tear means the unraveling of mantic-based economics as well (v. 19)” (p. 26).

Back to the three-hundred-year trend in scholarly interpretation of Acts: if Christian culture collides with pagan culture, how can Rome and Christianity exist on friendly terms? In chapter three, “*Dikaios*: Rejecting Statecraft,” Rowe admits to the tension, stressing that outsiders could “construe Christianity as sedition or treason,” and that “Luke explicitly raises these and related charges and repeatedly narrates the course of events so that the Christians—here in the mold of Jesus himself—are found ‘innocent’ of seditious criminal activity” (p. 5). He says here what he repeats elsewhere: “New culture, yes—coup, no” (p. 5). The disruption is real, but it is not illegal. His textual proof includes episodes with Gallio, Claudius Lysias, Felix, Festus, and Herod Agrippa II, arguing that these leaders lack the hermeneutical paradigm or cultural story to understand truly the debate surrounding followers of Jesus (e.g., p. 84). Such ignorance, however, is not forgiven, as “the state” is idolatrous and kills Jesus even after declaring him innocent (with the narrative expectation for a similar fate for Paul) (p. 88).

In chapter four, “World Upside Down: Practicing Theological Knowledge,” Rowe asks how we might think through the tension of: “New culture, yes – coup, no” (p. 91). His answer includes a focus on the kind of tension produced: it “is a *lived* tension” (p. 102). Because it is lived, a focus on life patterns is appropriate, and here he emphasizes “three mutually interdependent ecclesial practices...: the confession of Jesus as *Lord* of all, the *universal* mission of light, and the formation of Christian *communities* as the tangible presence of a people set apart” (p. 92, emphasis mine). They are interdependent because the *Lordship* of Jesus is *universal*, thus calling all to embody this reality in cultural (and thus *communal*) ways.

Rowe ends his book with a chapter that scholars with a different methodological paradigm might call “application,” though he rejects a “from-then-to-now linear movement” (p. 9). He sees this piece not as an extra, but as part-and-parcel of his book that has delineated Luke’s view of the universal Lordship of Jesus. He admits that “in a crucial way, the vision of Acts is profoundly intolerant” (p. 170), which means that much of our culture will be inhospitable to its claims. However, in a chapter filled with philosophical language and discussion across disciplines, his conclusion is that the truth claim about Jesus’s Lordship in Acts does not lead to a narrative blueprint for the need to coerce others for their own good, but to a mission that rejects violence as a way to ground peaceful community and instead witnesses to the Lord’s life of rejection and crucifixion by living it in public communities derisively called Christian. The claim to universal truth is not thin but thick, or enfleshed – shown to be what it is in the living out of the person’s life about whom the claim is made. According to Acts, therefore, to be the community that claims to know the Lord of all is to be in the world the way the Lord himself was. Theologically said, ecclesiology is public Christology (p. 173). The question for and the critique of the Church today is clear: is Christian embodiment proclaiming Jesus’ universal Lordship?

In short, between these three texts there is something for everyone. From the introductory and accessible to the philosophically nuanced and interdisciplinary, the scope of Luke’s distinctive contributions is trumpeted. Read on; read well.



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# Studying the Book of Acts

BY KATHY MAXWELL

The four commentaries reviewed here are well-researched, clearly written treatments of the book of Acts for the educated lay person or pastor and for the seminarian. They share a common interest in theological application that is carefully informed by the historical and literary context of Acts.

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The student of Acts will find there is no shortage of commentaries. They often use different methodologies to achieve their varied purposes. Acts stands alone in the New Testament as a narrative account of the early years of those following The Way, a distinction that offers particular challenges. Scholars have debated the book's historical reliability, its rhetorical and literary nature, and its sociological and theological implications. The four commentaries reviewed here adopt different approaches and formats, but they share a common interest in theological application, carefully informed by the historical and literary context of Acts. For each volume I will identify the audience, purpose, and methodology of the series and commentary, introduce the author's hermeneutic, and briefly note the supplementary material provided. I will mention how the author treats some particular text in order to provide a sample of the author's approach.

Beverly Gaventa's volume *Acts* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003, 296 pp., \$31.99) appears in the Abingdon New Testament Commentaries series, which aims to produce "compact, critical commentaries" (p. 15) for upper level university students, theological students, pastors, and church leaders. The series focuses on the "literary, socio-historical, theological, and ethical dimensions of the biblical texts" (p. 15). The volumes follow a common format that reflects this concern: each passage is subjected to literary, exegetical, and finally theological and ethical analysis. Gaventa



chooses to focus particularly on the theological perspectives communicated in Acts. She writes, “The question that drives this volume concerns the order Luke posits on the chaotic and colorful realm of the world, an order he refers to as ‘the events that have been fulfilled among us’ (Luke 1:1)” (p. 59). Thus, it is not surprising that Gaventa spends relatively little time discussing traditional background issues such as authorship, audience, date, and genre. The conclusions she does draw regarding these questions tend to be based on narrative evidence from the text of Acts. Gaventa’s proposed structure of Acts also revolves around narrative development. Acts builds up to and then comes down from two climactic events: Cornelius’s conversion (Acts 10:1-11:18) and Paul’s final defense before Festus and King Agrippa (Acts 26), which highlight, respectively, the preaching to the Gentiles and the inclusion of Jew and Gentile in the people of God.

Gaventa’s commentary is less concerned with historical reconstruction, though she does engage such discussions when appropriate. For example, when treating the sea voyage of Paul (Acts 27), Gaventa avoids the debate of whether the account of the voyage is historically reliable, discussion regarding the geography that contributes to a “northeaster,” and lengthy explanation of how the crew members might “undergird the ship” (Acts 27:17). She focuses instead on the theological and narrative developments within the pericope, observing the well-seasoned nature of Paul’s travel advice and his place as “an agent of God who brings about the rescue of the ship” (p. 352). She notes the emotion of the “we” narrator as well, who seems to be just as hopeless as the rest of the passengers. Paul alone remains confident that God will preserve the travelers.

Gaventa’s fairly extensive table of contents doubles as a helpful outline of the text, making it easy to see a quick overview of Acts. The end matter includes a selected bibliography that provides plenty of sources pointing readers to further study. The commentary includes a subject index, but not a scripture index. The annotated entries for major commentaries are a nice addition, particularly for those wishing to build their theological library.



J. Bradley Chance’s volume *Acts* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007, 640 pp., \$60.00) is part of the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series. This series’ goal is to make “serious, credible biblical scholarship” available in “an accessible and less intimidating” multimedia format (p. xvii). The treatment of each passage is divided into two main sections, Commentary and Comments, which are supplemented by “sidebars” that provide the multimedia: in-depth topical discussion, word studies, maps, text critical information, and reflections on related fine art, among other materials.

Chance targets engaged, active Christian readers who are “seeking a word from the Lord for the church” (p. xviii). In fact, engaged readers are key to Chance’s hermeneutic. He defines biblical interpretation as a dynamic process that takes place at the intersection of the reader and the text. As readers change over time, their interpretations may change as well. Chance begins with the assumption that hearing Scripture necessarily involves interpretation, which leads to reflection, and finally results in the transformation of individuals and communities.

Chance’s introduction to the biblical text unfolds in a straightforward way. He deals with four main topics: introductory historical questions, the textual history of Acts, the historical reliability of Acts, and theological themes in Acts. Compared to the other commentaries reviewed in this essay, this one includes a more extended discussion of the history of scholarship, particularly in the areas of textual criticism and the speeches in Acts.

Four theological themes identified in the introduction – Christianity’s Connection with Judaism, the Community of Faith, the Providence of God, and Human Participation in the Divine Drama – play a continuous role in the exposition of the text. Chance summarizes the last two themes as the “relational partnership” in the unfolding of God’s will and purpose (p. 26). Chance’s hermeneutic is also woven throughout the book; it is often mentioned in the commentary proper (see, for example, the Connections section on Acts 15) and it also makes appearances in the sidebars (as in the one titled “Experience and the Believer” on p. 379). Chance finds support for his hermeneutic in Acts, pointing to James’s conclusions at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) as an example “from the Bible itself, that Scripture is not interpreted in a vacuum, free of the context – and experience – of the interpreter” (p. 255).

The supplemental material in an included CDROM sets Chance’s volume apart from the others: it contains a searchable PDF of the commentary and a “freebies” folder. The “front matter” of the PDF version of the commentary explains how most effectively to use the resource within copyright restrictions. The “freebies” folder is less useful than it was when the commentary was published (as it includes outdated Smyth & Helwys catalogs), but it does contain links to some teaching and study resources available at the publisher’s website.

The formatting of the printed volume includes wide margins, allowing ample room for the author’s sidebars and the reader’s notes. The table of contents separates the chapter and verses in Acts from the section headings, making it a bit easier to locate a particular passage quickly. In addition to the usual indices, readers will appreciate the Index of Sidebars and Illustrations that gathers the sidebar topics into one convenient place of reference.



Mikeal C. Parsons writes his commentary *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008, 464 pp., \$30.00) as part of the Paideia series, which is intended for students “who have theological interest in the biblical text” (p. xi), upper-level and graduate students, and seminarians. The series title—from the ancient Greek term for rearing and educating citizens of the polis—points to the impact that Greek educational practices had on the New Testament and continue to have on the series’ own pedagogical goals. The series focuses on a literary approach, informed by what the editors call the “extratext” that colored the world of ancient composers and audiences (pp. xi-xii). Based on his study of Luke-Acts, Parsons concludes that “Luke’s literary skills in communicating his story are matched if not exceeded by the theological vision that undergirds that story” (p. xii). Luke’s theological vision and the means by which he communicates it serve as the foci of Parsons’s volume. Thus, after Parsons treats introductory material for each rhetorical unit, he moves to the study of the unit as it unfolds and then addresses theological issues in the text for a contemporary audience (p. xii).

Parsons’s work in ancient rhetoric no doubt contributes to the number of Greek and Latin rhetorical terms that are cogently explained in light of their function in Acts. The discussion of Acts’ rhetorical context contributes to a particular strength of this commentary: Parsons’s focus on *how* Luke communicates his narrative and theology. Close readings of the text and “extratext” reveal Luke’s considerable gift of the art of persuasion. For instance, after observing that the compositional question of the “we passages” in Acts “has proven intractable and unsolvable,” Parson turns instead to the passages’ rhetorical function, for which there are also several

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options. He concludes that the addition of first-person plural language added a third buttress to Luke’s persuasiveness: to the evidence of oral tradition and written witnesses, Luke now adds eyewitness testimony (pp. 238-239). Considering the ancient reception of Acts, Parsons notes that as early as Irenaeus the added first-person detail was persuasive. Irenaeus assumes that Luke joined Paul on his travels. Parsons points out, however, that the

narrative focus does not rest on the narrator's presence with the group but remains on the work of God's spirit (pp. 239-240).

The Paideia series makes good use of sidebars filled with context/outline reminders, explanation of rhetorical devices (usually employing the Greek or Latin vocabulary), minor language issues, cultural issues (especially regarding rhetoric and the audience), comparative and other extra-biblical literature, related theological content, and visual illustrations. The commentary's extensive bibliography provides a wide range of sources for readers of various levels. The indices also serve as helpful resources, particularly the Index of Scripture and Ancient Writings that offers information on the large number of ancient sources to which the commentary refers.



Michael Mullins's *The Acts of the Apostles* (Dublin, IE: Columba Press, 2014, 286 pp., \$47.00) is a sequel to his commentary on Luke. It is the only commentary reviewed here that is not part of a series. Mullins's goal is to compile academic-level scholarship and make it accessible to a broader audience of serious readers – preachers, students of theology, and others who wish to study the biblical text. He uses some technical terminology when necessary, but these words are contextually defined and explained. The impetus behind this volume is the increase in serious Roman Catholic readers of the biblical text as a result of the Second Vatican Council (p. 13).

Mullins succeeds in delivering scholarship on Acts in an accessible manner, as evidenced by examining the rather short Index of Modern and Ancient Authors at the back of the volume. Instead of making frequent reference to other scholars, Mullins provides a concise survey of scholarship for the reader. Throughout the commentary, Mullins exhibits a healthy appreciation of Luke as an author in his own right, not merely a compiler of traditions. For example, when Mullins treats the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), he ends the section by addressing the question of historical reconstruction in light of Galatians 2. He asks the pertinent questions, raising problems and possibilities for his readers. Mullins briefly offers solutions that consider the social and theological situation, and then concludes that Luke's account is likely a fusion of events. He takes into account the purpose of both Luke and Paul, pointing out that "Luke has the advantage of writing many years later than Paul and seeing the once heated issues in a cooler, more overall perspective made clearer with the passage of time" (p. 164).

As was the case in Gaventa's book, the table of contents here is quite extensive, serving as a helpful outline and overview of the text of Acts. The opening map is the only illustration in the volume, but marked on it are the key locations that appear in the book of Acts. Mullins uses footnotes sparingly, in keeping with his purpose, and the General Index is shorter than some, but helpful nonetheless.



The four commentaries reviewed here offer well-researched, clearly written treatments of the book of Acts. They are designed for the educated lay person or pastor and for the seminarian. Bridging the gap between academic scholarship and the interests of these readers is tricky at best, given that some will have theological training, or teaching and preaching experience, or a general curiosity that leads them to a more in-depth study Scripture. All four of the commentaries use transliterations and definitions of select Greek words. The commentaries by Chance and Parsons guide readers to different levels of information by using sidebars that do not interrupt the text of the commentary proper. This approach is largely successful, allowing readers to pick and choose the supplemental information they wish to engage. The volumes by Gaventa and Mullins do not use a distinctive format for additional information, but instead rely upon in-text definitions and descriptions to ensure that readers of all levels have access to pertinent information. Depending on personal interest and intended use, serious students from various contexts will find one or more of these commentaries to be reliable, effective resources for understanding and applying the book of Acts.



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