THE BOOK OF ACTS AS A NARRATIVE COMMENTARY ON THE LETTERS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

A Programmatic Essay

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This essay assesses the value of Acts as a historical source. Following the most important reading instructions presented in the text through the narrator's (Luke's) voice, the main characters (Jerusalem authorities and Paul), and the central conflict (Paul's apostleship) I shall explore the narrative within the literary context of the wider New Testament. My thesis is that the main function of Acts is to fill in the gaps in the story as it is told through the two New Testament letter collections: the Letters of Paul and the Catholic Epistles. This narrative-critical approach suggests that Acts is an excellent source to describe the inner world of second-century readers and their theological convictions. The value of Acts to reconstruct first-century events is, however, unreliable without corroboration from sources outside the New Testament.

NARRATOR'S VOICE

To tell a story one must present the audience with a setting in time and space, with characters, and with a conflict that has to be resolved. "In my first book, dear Theophilus, I wrote about everything that Jesus did and taught from the beginning to the day when he was taken up into heaven" (Acts 1:12a). In the very first sentence the readers of Acts are introduced to the narrator, whose voice will guide them through the turbulent events unfolding before their eyes. He introduces himself as the author of a previous book. Because there is only one other book in the New Testament collection addressed to Theophilus, and because that book is about "what Jesus did and taught" from "the beginning" (Jesus' birth) until "the day when he was taken up into heaven," it is clear to anyone who reads Acts in its canonical context that the author of the Acts of the Apostles is the

author of the Third Gospel, whose name was given in the canonical title of that book: Luke.

As readers allow themselves to be drawn into the narrative of Acts, they discover passages written in the first person plural and learn that Luke, the narrator, was an eyewitness to some of the events he is writing about. The last of these we-passages transports the readers to Rome, where the narrator, after assuring his readers that Paul is still alive and well, falls silent. Luke concludes his second book with the words: "He lived there for two whole years in his own quarters, welcoming everyone who visited, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ boldly and freely" (Acts 28:30–31). This last sentence provides the setting in time and space for the end of the narrative. Luke finished telling his story in Rome while Paul was still alive, thus referring the readers back to the beginning of the book, where the resurrected Jesus outlines the journey on which the readers are about to embark: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem [Acts 1–7], in all Judea [Acts 9–12] and Samaria [Acts 8], and to the ends of the earth [Acts 13–28]" (Acts 1:8). In Rome the apostles and readers alike have reached "the ends of the earth" as promised.

CHARACTERS

The first half of Acts is dominated by characters who have authority for the early Christian community in Jerusalem: Jesus' disciples and Jesus' family. They are introduced to readers immediately after the ascension story. The eleven disciples: "Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James"; and the family of Jesus: "Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers" (Acts 1:13–14). In the second half of the book the main character is indisputably the apostle Paul. The overall design of Acts is thus quite clear. Jerusalem dominates the first part of the story, Paul dominates the second part of the story, and in the middle (Acts 15) both parties shake hands.[1]

LITERARY CONTEXT

The manuscript tradition of the New Testament presents the collection as one work published in four volumes. Acts precedes the Catholic Epistles in the manuscripts in the volume entitled *Praxapostolos.* The other three volumes are the Four-Gospel-Book *(Tetraeuangelion),* the Fourteen Letters of Paul *(Epistolai Paulou ΙΔ),* and Revelation of John *(Apokalypsis Iōannou).* All four volumes are connected to each other through an elaborate system of cross-references communicated to the readers through the editorial titles and arrangement of the books.[2]

The expression "I wrote about everything *that Jesus did*" (Acts 1:1) literally picks up the definition of a gospel-*book* as presented in the last sentence of John

(John 21:25): "But there are also many other things *that Jesus did;* if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain *the books* that would be written" (John 21:25). By referring to the last sentence of John, the volume containing Acts and the Catholic Epistles *(Praxapostolos)* is linked not only to John but to the last sentence of the Four-Gospel-Book as well.

The first sentence of the Letters of Paul refers to the royal lineage of Jesus and to Jesus' resurrection (Son of David according to the flesh; Son of God through his resurrection [Rom. 1:3–4]). This sentence may be read as addressing a discrepancy between Mark, which includes neither an explanation of the royal origins of Jesus nor a resurrection appearance of Jesus, and Luke. At the same time Rom. 1:3–4 may be taken to reaffirm the reader's sentiment that Luke's Gospel is Paul's gospel for it insists on the royal origin of Jesus and gives an account of Jesus' resurrection.

The last sentences of the Letters of Paul pick up this theme again. For readers who encounter the Pauline corpus and the fourfold gospel as constitutent parts of the New Testament, Paul's reference to Mark and Luke together may be significant. The fact that Paul mentions Luke and Mark together in the same sentence (Philemon 24), albeit with Aristarchus and Demas as well, may remind readers who are sensitive to such cues that Luke knew Mark and that, on a literary level, Luke's Gospel is to be seen as an improved edition of Mark (cf. Luke's reference to previous badly organized books on Jesus [Luke 1:1–3]).

The links between Acts and the Four-Gospel-Book are apparent. In addition Acts explains to the readers of the New Testament who the authors of the two letter collections are. In its first part it introduces James, Peter, and John—the authors of six of the seven Catholic Epistles—as important characters in the story. In its second part it talks about Paul, the author of the other letters contained in the New Testament. The obvious suggestion by the editors of the New Testament is that Acts provides the narrative context to these letters. This simple insight deserves more consideration as it is quite different from most approaches to Acts. If the New Testament is taken as a literary unit, Acts functions as a narrative commentary on the letters.[3]

Acts does not quote from any letter of Paul or from any of the Catholic Epistles in the New Testament. But because Paul, James, John, and Peter are the protagonists of the plot, to the readers of the New Testament the reference to their letters might be considered just as clear as the reference to Luke's Gospel in the first sentence of Acts. By not citing expressly from the letters, Acts suggests to the readers that it provides an independent account of the same events. And by ending in Rome while Paul is still alive, Acts dates itself as contemporary to those letters that Paul and Peter wrote from Rome, specifically 2 Timothy and 2 Peter, both of which imply a situation where the authors expect their impending deaths in Rome (cf. 2 Tim. 1:17; 4:6.11; 1 Pet. 5:13; 2 Pet. 1:14, 3:1). In other words there

is good reason to believe that the editors of the first edition of the New Testament wanted their readers to read Acts in the context of the Letters of Paul and the Catholic Epistles. Acts explains the letters, and the letters explain Acts.

A NARRATIVE CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

Acts needs to be read not only with attention to its canonical context but also with attention to the narrative that its author has constructed. It should not be controversial: there is no real narrative power without conflict. Conflict moves the plot, it explains why characters behave differently in comparable situations, and it captures and holds the attention of the readers. What is the central conflict of Acts?

In my view the central conflict of Acts is the tension between Paul and the Jerusalem leadership as it is documented in the Letters of Paul and the Catholic Epistles. 1 Corinthians refers to a group associated with Paul and a group associated with Peter (1 Cor. 1:12). Peter, the other apostles, and the brothers of the Lord are expressly mentioned as opponents of Paul and Barnabas (1 Cor. 9:5–6) when it comes to the question of how to finance their ministry. The Jerusalem group follows Jesus' commission to accept food and lodging from the people they visit (Matt. 10:9–11 = Mark 6:8–11 = Luke 9:3–4), whereas Paul and Barnabas earn their living with their own hands when they travel: "This is my defense to those who would examine me. Do we not have the right to our food and drink? Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living?" (1 Cor. 9:3–6). Paul is clearly aware of Jesus' instruction: "The Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:14). In the eyes of Peter and the other disciples of Jesus, and in the eyes of Jesus' brothers, Paul and Barnabas break Jesus' command.

The Letter to the Galatians, which follows the Corinthian correspondence in most manuscripts of the New Testament, narrates the biographical events in the life of Paul that lead up to the escalation of his conflict with Peter during an encounter in Antioch: "But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned" (Gal. 2:11). What is written in Galatians after this point serves to explain Paul's action during the incident in Antioch and illustrates his discussion of the Mosaic law in his letter to Romans.

There is much in the Catholic Epistles that can be read as overt criticism of Paul. James seems to attack directly Paul's concept of justification by faith and not works (cf. Rom. 3:27–28; 4:5; 9:32): "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (James 2:24). And Peter's assurance that he is in agreement with Paul makes good sense if readers are aware of a serious disagreement: "So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom

given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures" (2 Pet. 3:15–16).

The background story of 3 John is that Diotrephes, a leader of the congregation of Gaius to which the letter is addressed, refused to feed and house itinerant preachers. For readers of the New Testament this behavior may document the discrepancy between the Pauline concept of self-support [self sufficiency?] even while traveling as an apostle and the concept of the Jerusalem leadership—in this case represented by John—to accept support from the groups they visit: "He [Diotrephes] refuses to welcome the friends, and even prevents those who want to do so and expels them from the church" (3 John 10).

Read canonically Acts functions as a narrative commentary to these and other passages. It resolves an obvious conflict. This argument also makes good sense of the overall structure of Acts, which allows roughly the same amount of text for the Jerusalem leadership as it does for Paul and his ministry. In the middle of the book they meet in Jerusalem and sign a common written statement in direct response to the incident in Antioch related to the readers in Paul's Letter to the Galatians.[4] "Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among their members and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers, with the following letter" (Acts 15:22–23). This tendency of Acts to construct a perfect balance between the Jerusalem leadership and Paul is also expressed in the selection of miracle stories. Everything that Peter does is repeated by Paul.

Just as Peter and John heal a lame man outside of the Jerusalem temple (Acts 3:1–10), Paul heals a lame man in Lystra (Acts 14:8–10). Peter's shadow heals the sick in Jerusalem (Acts 5:15); in Ephesus the sick are cured by touching Paul's handkerchiefs and aprons (Acts 19:12). In Jerusalem Peter casts out unclean spirits (Acts 5:16); in Ephesus Paul casts out a spirit of divination (Acts 16:18). The story of Peter healing everyone who is brought to him in Jerusalem (Acts 5:16) is paralleled by the story of Paul curing everyone who is brought to him on Malta (Acts 28:9). In Joppa Peter raises Tabitha from the dead (Acts 9:36–41), and Paul brings young Eutychus back to life in Troas (Acts 20:9–12). In Lydda Peter heals Aeneas, who was paralyzed and had been bedridden for eight years (Acts 9:33–34), while in Malta Paul cures the father of Publius, who suffered from fever and dysentery (Acts 28:8).

However, Paul never mentions his ability to heal in his letters. Worse yet, he is sick himself: "No one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I

appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness'" (2 Cor. 12:6–9). The word translated "weakness," *astheneia,* may also be translated as "illness." Historically speaking Paul probably did not heal and this would explain much of why his apostleship was so openly and so easily questioned. Acts, however, feels the need to counter the Pauline reading of weakness. In Acts, God's power is not "made perfect in illness."

In Samaria the power of Peter and John is stronger than the power of the magician Simon (Acts 8:18–25). In Paphos on Cyprus Paul reproaches the magician Elymas (Acts 13:6–12). When Cornelius falls down at the feet of Peter and worships him (Acts 10:25) or Paul and Barnabas are worshipped as gods in Lystra (Acts 14:11–18; cf. 28:6), Peter, Paul, and Barnabas reply with almost the same words: "I am only a mortal" (Acts 10:26) and "We are mortals just like you" (Acts 14:15). In Samaria Peter and John lay their hands on people and they receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14–17; cf. 10:44). In Ephesus Paul lays his hands on the twelve disciples of John the Baptist, and the Holy Spirit comes on them (Acts 19:1–7).

In Galatians Paul insists that he was not trained by men but received the gospel of Jesus Christ through a visionary experience: "For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1:11–12). Acts is eager not to let Peter be outdone by Paul when it comes to revelations. A vision causes Peter to accept Gentiles into the Christian community in Joppa (Acts 10; cf. 11:5–10), just as Paul receives his commission to serve the Gentiles through a vision on his way to Damascus (Acts 9:1–22; 22:6–11; 26:12–18).

To make up for his apparent lack of apostolic healing powers, Paul insists that he has suffered more than others: "Are they ministers of Christ? I am talking like a madman—I am a better one: with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death" (2 Cor. 11:23). Acts balances Paul's claim with the lives of the Jerusalem leadership: the Jerusalem leaders suffer just as much as Paul does. In Jerusalem the apostles are physically punished in front of the council (Acts 5:40); in Philippi the magistrates tear the garments off Paul and his companions and give orders to beat them with rods (Acts 16:22–23). In Jerusalem Stephen, who had been appointed by Peter and the apostles, is stoned (Acts 7:54–60); in Lystra Paul is stoned and his body is dragged out of the city, where he is left for dead (Acts 14:19–20). When the apostles are arrested in Jerusalem, an angel opens the prison doors at night (Acts 5:17–20; 12:6–11); in Philippi a great earthquake miraculously opens the prison doors and unfastens everyone's fetters, and Paul and Barnabas are set free (Acts 16:24–34). The message of Acts is clear: what Paul suffers, the Jerusalem apostles suffer as well.

Narrative criticism works best with carefully crafted narratives. Unfortunately Acts does not display a distinct love for details, plot construction, and character development. For example, the ascension of Jesus is narrated at the end of Luke's Gospel on the Mount of Olives and on Easter, but according to Acts it happened several miles away in Bethany and forty days after Jesus' resurrection. Three times the story of Paul's revelation outside of Damascus is told. The first time Paul and his companions hear God's voice (Acts 9:4–7), but in the second version only Paul hears the voice (Acts 22:7–9). The first time his companions do not see the light (Acts 9:7), but when the story is told for the third time they see it (Acts 26:13). This could have easily been corrected by a skilled editor. Another blunt example is the name change from Saul to Paul. No explanation is provided. The text simply declares "Saul, also known as Paul" (Acts 13:9) and continues to refer to the character exclusively as Paul. Linking the name change to Paul's revelation before Damascus (Acts 9) would have greatly improved the plot construction, but the author of Acts does not seem to care.

Because of the poor literary quality of Acts, it does not seem appropriate to base an argument on details but instead to concentrate on the major lines of the overall concept. I think that the structure of the book and the constructed balance between Jerusalem and Paul's ministry expresses the central redactional intention. It is the conflict between Peter and Paul that is addressed and resolved in the narrative.

HISTORICAL VALUE

Does a narrative critical assessment of Acts provide historical insights? I think it does. Acts conveys the inner world of an early Christian storyteller and his or her audience at the time of publication. Whether the book has any historical merit when it comes to describing the actual events narrated is, however, an entirely different question. The implied author of Luke knows the events he is writing about from books and from interviewing eyewitnesses and "servants of the word" (Luke 1:1–4). He is not an eyewitness. And when it comes to writing Acts the implied author's firsthand experience is limited to occasional encounters with Paul (Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18) and to accompanying Paul on his trip to Rome (Acts 27:1–28:16). The events, however, are narrated in a way that is meaningful to the readers at the time of publication.

A literary critical approach, like the narrative critical assessment of Acts presented here, is a historical critical approach. It insists that by reading the text at face value the interpreter can reconstruct the inner world of the storyteller and readers at the time of publication. Storytelling works with plausibility and therefore the characters, places, and events introduced without explanation are especially important to the interpreter. But their historical value is only for the time

of publication. And more often than not literary narratives are written at great distance to the events narrated. This may be the case for Acts as well.

It is generally agreed that Acts is not referred to as a book before Irenaeus uses it extensively in his refutation of Marcion toward the end of the second century.[5] Although a lack of attestation cannot be certain proof, it does invite the possibility that Acts was not written and published in its present form until the middle of the second century. Could Acts be the last book that was included in the New Testament? The close links to the Four-Gospel-Book and to the two New Testament letter collections support such a view. In this case Acts' historical value is to document thought processes and concepts of the evolving Catholic Church in the second century. The advocated harmony between Peter and Paul reflects the all inclusive "catholic" position and may reflect the well-attested struggle between the Paul-centered Marcionite church and more Jesus-centered faith groups.

Whether Acts carries any original historical value beyond what can be corroborated in the Letters of Paul, the Catholic Epistles, and the scarce witness of contemporary historians such as Josephus should be seriously questioned rather than simply assumed. Stories often present historical fact next to poetic construction, and the implied author of Acts is not obliged to inform the audience where history ends and poetic construction begins.

Why do storytellers not simply state the events as they happened? Why do they embellish and fill in gaps by using imagination? Why do painters paint objects differently from what we ourselves see? Why do poets and musicians try to capture their experience by writing poems and songs? There is no simple answer. But when their attempts are successful we call them art, and those who capture and transform our trivial experiences of the moment into something meaningful and lasting, we call artists.

NOTES

1. David Trobisch, "The Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 and Paul's Letter to the Galatians," in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs* (ed. Christopher Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 331–38.

2. David Trobisch, *The First Edition of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 26–28.

3. Robert W. Wall, "The Acts of the Apostles," 10:3–370, in *The New Interpreter's Bible,* 12 vols., edited by Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002); and Robert W. Wall, "A Canonical Approach to the Unity of Acts and Luke's Gospel," in this volume, 172–191.

4. Trobisch, "The Council of Jerusalem," 331–38.

5. See Andrew F. Gregory, "The Reception of Luke and Acts and the Unity of Luke-Acts," in this volume, 82–93 (first published in *JSNT* 29 [2007]: 459–72); Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (ed. and trans. R. McL. Wilson; Oxford: Basil Black-

well, 1971), 9; Howard Clark Kee, *To Every Nation Under Heaven: The Acts of the Apostles* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press, 1997), 1–2; C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles,* vol. 1 (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 15; C. Kavin Rowe, "Literary Unity and Reception History: Reading Luke-Acts as Luke and Acts," in this volume, 74–81 (first published in *JSNT* 29 [2007], 449–57).