

INTRODUCTION

The genre “commentary” requires the discussion of certain matters of “introduction,” among which are issues of authorship, date, possible sources, and the like. In addition, specific biblical books require exploration of issues distinctive to that book. With respect to the Acts of the Apostles, three issues warrant attention: the textual history of Acts, the speeches of Acts, and the value of Acts as a reliable source for the history of early Christianity. These issues are interrelated, as the discussion below will make apparent. It is also helpful to readers for the introduction to discuss some prominent theological themes and issues that the Commentary will explore.

Title, Authorship, Date, and Sources¹

Title²

The title “Acts of Apostles” is represented among the best manuscripts of the New Testament, some of which date to the late second and early third centuries. One also finds among the manuscripts “The Acts of the Apostles,” the title often employed today. The original manuscript of the narrative is not available for examination, so one cannot know what title the original work bore. The Greek word *praxis* (acts) was employed in the larger culture to denote great deeds of either historical or mythological characters. The title attributed to the narrative at least shows that early Christian readers understood the narrative to describe the “acts” of the great ancestors of the church, specifically the apostles.

This is interesting for a number of reasons. First, Acts itself does not highlight Paul *as an apostle* (see [Paul and Barnabas as Apostles]), even though he is most certainly the main character of the second half of the book. Second, the narrative devotes attention to Stephen, Philip, and James, none of whom Acts considers to be apostles. Acts, with the exception of 14:4, 14, confines the title apostle to the Twelve (see [Twelve Apostles]), yet it does not focus attention exclusively on the Twelve and devotes considerable attention to those outside this circle. Such considerations allow the tentative conclusion that whatever “original” title the author might have placed on his narrative, it would not have been the Acts of the *Apostles*. Church tradition,

however, did view Paul as an apostle (as did Paul, of course!), as well as James, and many confused Philip the Evangelist with Philip the apostle (see [Philip]). Hence, the title is appropriate, given how the church understood the word *apostle*.

Authorship³

Discussion of authorship begins with the recognition that the author of Acts is the same as the author of the Gospel of Luke. The respective prologues of the two books (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-5) certainly link the two narratives. It is safe to say that the consensus of both critical scholarship and church tradition is that Luke and Acts were written by the same person. The separation of Luke from Acts by the Gospel of John requires the (obvious) conclusion that the church did not think it imperative to join the books in the canon. For about the last century, following the work of Henry Cadbury, scholars have more deliberately viewed Luke and Acts as a unity (Luke–Acts). Despite recent protests from some readers,⁴ the critical consensus is to see the two volumes as a narrative and theological unity, *at least nominally*. The fact that commentaries, as well as critical groups and seminars, still give focused attention to the separate volumes allows the conclusion that each is viewed as having its own literary integrity.

While there is consensus that Luke and Acts come from a single author, critical scholars are not unanimous regarding the identity of this author. The very title “The Gospel of Luke” speaks for itself with respect to the assessment of church tradition. The attribution of the Gospel—and, hence, Acts—to Luke, the companion of Paul, has an ancient history, going back to the last third of the second century. Some critical scholars are slow to accept this tradition. First, the theology of the narrative does not always comport with that of Paul.⁵ One would suspect that a companion and admirer of Paul would have understood better the theology of his hero. Second, a comparison of historical data that can be gleaned from Paul’s letters with historical claims made by Acts often do not easily—or, some think, even tortuously—harmonize.

On the other hand, in spite of these issues, one is left wondering why the church would have attributed these narratives to Luke, given that he was hardly a famous person in his own right in church tradition and history. The so-called We Passages certainly play a role in the debate (see [We Passages]). The passages imply that the person who penned the narrative accompanied Paul on occasion. It is quite possible that the church tradition of Lukan authorship emerged by the attempt to deduce who might have

been the anonymous voice behind the We Passages who, apparently, was in Paul's company on some of his journeys. One seeking to associate a name with the anonymous narrator would likely rule out persons specifically named in Acts as Paul's companions, persons such as Silas and Timothy, especially since the character hiding behind the *we* tends to distinguish himself from these and other "named" characters (cf., e.g., 16:1, 10 and 16, 19). A known companion of Paul not named in Acts is Luke (Phlm 24; cf. Col 4:14). This is the person whom church tradition has identified as the author.

It is hardly necessary to assume that an occasional companion of Paul fully understood all the nuances of Pauline theology or even felt compelled to agree with such. The author, whoever he was, has chosen to employ narrative as a means of presenting *his own* distinctive theology. But Paul, though admired, need hardly have been the author's only source of theological thinking. There are, admittedly, historical differences between Acts and data that can be gathered from the Pauline corpus, but such differences need not exclude an occasional companion from being the author. History is not an exact science today, much less two millennia ago. Further, the more serious conflicts between the chronological presentations of Acts and history that is constructed based on Paul's letters are found in the sections of Acts *before* the We Passages begin (especially Acts 9, 12, and 15), that is, before the author participated in some events of Paul's life.

One can suspect that Paul's part-time companion, despite claims to careful investigation (see Luke 1:1-4), did not spend all his time pressing Paul for the precise chronological details of his exploits that occurred fifteen or so years before the author met him. If Luke were the author, Paul knew him as one of his fellow workers (Phlm 24), not his chronicler. Luke may very well have viewed himself in a similar light. That is, there is no reason to claim with any certainty that while Luke was journeying with Paul he knew that one day he would write a history. It is *possible* that Luke was careful to take notes that he safely tucked away and pulled out many years later to consult for his history.⁶ But this is only *possible* and should not serve as an unquestioned foundation on which to build arguments about the author and his historical veracity.

Saint Luke Evangelist



El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos). *Saint Luke Evangelist*. Canvas, 98 x 72 cm. Cathedral, Toledo, Spain. (Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY)

The simplest way to understand the We Passages is to conclude that the author of the narrative spent some time with Paul. The Commentary, following tradition, will call this occasional companion and author “Luke.” And it is certainly possible, though by no means certain, that the Luke mentioned in the Pauline corpus was, in fact, this author. However, the authority and value of Acts does not lie in the identity of the author. It is the narrative that carries the theological freight, not the name of the person who penned it. To acknowledge this is to respect the deliberate anonymity of the author.

Date⁷

Dating the Acts of the Apostles is tenuous business, as such dating rests on other conclusions—or assumptions—that critics hold regarding significant dates of early Christian history, as well as dates assigned to other New Testament texts. Generally, historians date Paul’s arrival in Rome (Acts 28) to c. AD 61. Acts speaks of Paul’s preaching there for two years, bringing the last events narrated to c. AD 63. Such dates assume the general historical reliability of Acts, an assumption not taken for granted by many critical readers. But assuming the accuracy of such a rough chronology, the earliest date that one can propose for the composition of Acts would be c. AD 63. Justin Martyr, whose apologies date to around the mid-second century, appears to allude to the content of Luke–Acts (e.g., *1 Apol.* 50.12). If so, this would mean that the latest possible date of composition would be the mid-second century. Thus, a date range for the composition of Luke–Acts is rather wide: mid-60s to mid-second century.

The fact that Acts is connected with the Gospel of Luke must shape hypotheses about the date of composition. A commonsense reading of Acts 1:1 requires one to conclude that Acts was not composed until after the writing of the Gospel. Dating the Gospel has its own problems, however. Critical consensus—though it is hardly unanimous—affirms the Gospel of Mark to have been one of Luke’s sources for his Gospel. But dating Mark is also tenuous. Mark’s interest in the fall of Jerusalem, assuming this historical event to be the subject matter of Mark 13, leads many to date his Gospel to c. AD 70. If Luke used Mark as a source, the composition of the Gospel of Luke, as well as its companion volume of Acts, would have to date to after AD 70. This would seem to be confirmed by the Gospel’s apparent awareness of the siege and fall of Jerusalem in 70 (see, e.g., 19:41-44; 21:20-24).

Some critics argue for a later date of composition, suggesting the late first or early second centuries, perhaps even as late as 130. Such proposals have not persuaded the majority of critics. The consensus seems to fall within a range between c. 70 to the early 90s.⁸ Thus, some events of which Acts speaks pre-date its composition by as much as forty to sixty years, while the later events narrated in Acts would pre-date Acts' composition by around ten to thirty years. Such distance offers the author the hindsight necessary to construct a volume that narrates "the fulfillment of things accomplished among us" (cf. Luke 1:1). It also allows sufficient time for traditions to fade away or take on such embellishments that their historical value may be minimal.

Sources⁹

While generalizations are always risky, critical scholars believe that Luke did use sources for Acts. However, there is little agreement regarding the specific content of such sources. The comparison of Luke's Gospel with those of Matthew and Mark gave rise to the Two-Source hypothesis of the Synoptic Gospels, namely that Matthew and Luke used two common sources in the composition of their Gospels, Mark and Q (a hypothetical source consisting primarily of sayings of Jesus). The Two-Source hypothesis gave critics confidence that Luke employed sources in the composition of his narratives, both the Gospel and Acts. With such confidence, the quest for sources behind Acts was on. A generation ago Dupont surveyed these quests for sources and offered an assessment that still holds true today: "Despite the most careful and detailed research, it has not been possible to define any of the sources used by the author of Acts in a way which will meet with widespread agreement among the critics."¹⁰ More recently, C. K. Barrett has offered sober counsel on this issue: "It is probably better at this stage to think of traditions, without specifying their form, that of written or even oral sources, if oral sources are understood as verbally fixed."¹¹

Still, many interpreters attempt to isolate such sources. For example, Luke may have employed a source emerging from the Jerusalem church, called a *Jerusalem* or *Palestinian* source. In addition, he may have employed a source from the church at Antioch, an *Antiochene* source. Mention has already been made of the We Passages, and these passages may represent a source employed by the author, assuming that these passages do not, in fact, represent the author's own presence at the events narrated therein. Some have argued that Luke had access to an itinerary of Paul's various stops

during his missionary journeys, which one could label the *Pauline* source. And then there will be the slippery “oral traditions,” stories that Luke simply heard. A source that Luke likely did not use was the Letters of Paul. Luke likely did not know of their existence. If he knew of their existence, he ignored them—an odd thing for him to do if he investigated things as carefully as he claimed (Luke 1:3). Either way, there is no evidence that Luke used these letters.

Discussion of sources hinges on one’s conclusions regarding other issues. For example, accepting that the We Passages denote the participation of the author in certain events allows for some tentative observations. Most obvious, of course, is that the author was an eyewitness to many events of which he speaks—he was his own “source.” Further, because Paul was Luke’s companion, Paul could have served as a “source” for events at which the author was not present. Recall, however, the caveat offered above: picturing Luke as pressing Paul for details and copiously taking notes is only a *possibility*.

Note also Acts 21:8: “We entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him.” Again, it would be a stretch to assert that Luke took advantage of his stay with Philip “to do research,” milking Philip for all the historical information he possibly could. Yet it is not far-fetched to suppose that during the stay Philip told some stories about his days in Jerusalem and his efforts to preach the gospel in the surrounding regions. The passing comment of 21:8, in other words, would allow the tentative conclusion that, with respect to events of Acts 6–8, Luke may very well have had as one of his “sources” Philip the Evangelist. This would certainly have a bearing on the value of Acts as a *historical* document, but, again, that is a matter that will be given more attention below.

The Text of Acts¹²

Textual criticism does not usually excite readers outside the specific field. However, it is a crucial feature of critical scholarship, and its labors affect *every* reader of the Bible today. Readers who pick up any modern version of the New Testament are reading a translation of Greek manuscripts. However, it is not the case that translators can consult the “original” edition of any New Testament (or Old Testament, for that matter) text and translate it. The “original manuscripts,” called *autographs*, are nonexistent. What scholars do possess are many copies and copies of copies.

Over the decades and centuries as these copies of copies evolved, there emerged certain characteristics among various “families” or textual traditions. Imagine a letter written by the matriarch of a family chronicling the family history. Both of her immediate heirs, say her two children, want a copy so that they can pass it on to their children. Of course, today one would simply go to a copy machine or scan the document and store it on a computer. But imagine attempts to preserve the letter at a time when handwritten copies were one’s only option for duplicating the letter.

Imagine something like this: As the two children make their own copies of the letter, each introduces some changes. The matriarch who wrote the letter, for example, might have made reference to “the farm.” The son, for the sake of clarity should one day his children read the letter, expands this simple reference to say “the family farm in Ohio.” This expanded version of the matriarch’s letter is then passed along to this particular copyist’s descendants. The daughter, as she makes a copy of the letter to pass along to her heirs, introduces some expansions of her own, again to offer clarity of the letter’s content for her descendants. Perhaps the matriarch’s original letter made reference to “my beloved husband.” The daughter modifies her copy to read “my beloved husband, Frank, to whom I was married for more than fifty years.” Now this emendation is part of the “textual tradition” that is passed along to the daughter’s immediate descendants. And, of course, each might have introduced into her or his respective copy inadvertent changes, such as accidentally omitting or repeating words and using alternate spellings of words.

“Two recensions” of the “original letter” now exist. The son’s copy would read “the family farm in Ohio” and “my beloved husband.” A textual critic might call this *Tradition S*, with *S* standing for “son.” There is another copy that reads simply “the farm” and “my beloved husband, Frank, to whom I was married for more than fifty years,” which a textual critic might call *Tradition D*. Add to this the unfortunate fact that the matriarch’s original letter

Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis Excerpt from Luke



(Credit: James R. Adair, “Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis,” [cited 20 September 2007].
Online: <http://alpha.reltch.org/cgi-bin/Ebind2html/BibleMSS/U5?seq=426>.)

was lost in a flood that swept away the lockbox where the original letter had been preserved for safekeeping.

All that now exist are copies. Imagine that a couple generations later someone gained access to *both* copies, on the basis of which she prepared her own handwritten copy. Confronted with two versions of the original letter, this later copyist might choose to conflate the two versions, creating a hybrid text that read “the family farm in Ohio” *and* “my beloved husband, Frank, to whom I was married for more than fifty years.” Now there exists yet *another* textual tradition, which a textual critic might label *Tradition SD*, recognizing it to be conflation of *Tradition S* and *Tradition D*.

Though the above example is highly simplified, this is precisely the kind of thing that happened as New Testament texts were copied and passed along: “textual traditions” emerged. Textual critics identify four major textual traditions, or families, of copies of the Greek New Testament: the *Alexandrian* tradition, the *Western* tradition, the *Caesarean* tradition, and the *Byzantine* tradition. The Caesarean tradition is actually something of a hybrid of the Alexandrian and Western traditions.¹³ The Byzantine tradition is the “latest” tradition and includes, overall, the most “additions” to the text. By far, most Greek manuscripts that exist today represent this tradition. Despite the large numbers, however, most textual critics consider this tradition to be the least reliable “witness” to the *autograph*. This was the textual tradition upon which the KJV of the New Testament was based, explaining why there are often many differences between the KJV and more modern translations. The Alexandrian and Western traditions are “earlier” and represent, overall, better witnesses to the oldest Greek copies of the New Testament. With respect to Acts, however, the Western tradition presents a most intriguing mystery for textual critics. The Western recension of Acts is actually about ten percent longer than the Alexandrian recension. Which recension or tradition best represents the original text of Acts?

Some have argued that Luke is responsible for *both* traditions. That is, Luke wrote two editions of Acts, a long version and a short version, with one giving rise to one “family” of texts and the other another family. But among such critics there is no agreement as to which version of Acts, the longer or the shorter, represents the version that Luke, finally, preferred as his “polished draft.” Most textual critics today do *not* ascribe the longer Western version to Luke. Rather, most argue that the Western recension emerged out of the originally shorter version.

This volume follows the consensus of textual critics that the Western tradition does *not* represent the “best” tradition as one

attempts to reconstruct the oldest, most original version of Acts. However, the Commentary will, on occasion, make reference to the Western tradition of Acts. Readers will note that one of the tendencies of this tradition was to clarify the shorter text of Acts by adding comments that filled gaps left by the shorter version or “updated” the shorter version to make it more “relevant” to later readers (see [Textual Criticism and the Apostolic Decree]). Further, the Western tradition also can show an “anti-Jewish” bias (see [The Western Addition of vv. 6b-8a]). In other words, the Western tradition actually represents something of a commentary on the Acts of the Apostles, with such commentary being embedded in the text itself, much like the son and daughter in the hypothetical example above embedded into their mother’s letter their own interpretive comments.

The Speeches of Acts¹⁴

Examination of the speeches of Acts spills over into discussion of the value of Acts as a source of history. Hence, many items pertaining to this discussion will lay a foundation for the next section of the introduction.

The speeches of Acts deserve focused examination for the simple reason that there are so many of them. Approximately one-third of Acts consists of speech material. Though scholars may disagree as to the exact number of speeches (depending on how one defines what constitutes a speech), most would agree that there are at least twenty-four speeches in Acts. Peter delivers eight speeches,¹⁵ and Paul delivers nine.¹⁶ In addition, other characters present speeches: Gamaliel (5:35b-39), Stephen (7:2-53), James (15:13b-21), Demetrius of Ephesus (19:25b-27), the anonymous town clerk of Ephesus (19:35b-40), Tertullus (24:2b-8), and Festus (25:14c-21, 24-27). Some count the words of the risen Christ as a speech (1:4-5, 7-8), as well as the brief words of the Twelve (6:2b-4) and Gallio (18:14b-15). Some of these “speeches” consist literally of only a couple verses, too short for some critics to consider a “speech.”

It is the critical consensus that the speeches in Acts *in their present form* are Lukan compositions. For example, even if one were to argue that the words attributed to Gallio in 18:14b-15 actually reflect the gist of what the proconsul said, it is hard to imagine that this is *all* he said. At best, the “speech” represents an incredibly brief précis that would relate to the reader the finding of the proconsul, as such was relevant to the story at hand. In fact, even the “longer” speeches of Acts are not all that long, as speeches go; Stephen’s speech, the longest in Acts, would take only a few

minutes to recite. If the speeches are *précis*, one must conclude that, *in their present form*, they are the compositions of the author. On that issue, there is no debate among critical readers.

Debate centers around whether the speeches are, in fact, *précis* of things actually said or artistic, rhetorical creations of the narrator. Here critics are divided. Much debate revolves around the statement of the historian Thucydides:

With reference to the speeches in this history, some were delivered before the war began, others while it was going on; some I heard myself, others I got from various quarters; it was in all cases difficult to carry them word for word in one's memory, so my habit has been to make the speakers say what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions, of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really said (*Histories*, 1.22.1).¹⁷

How is one to assess what this statement says about the nature of speeches in ancient historical writing? The first sentence is easy enough to understand: it is hard to recall accurately what was said on any given occasion, whether Thucydides or someone else heard the speech. The second sentence contains internal tension. In the first part of the sentence Thucydides states that his practice was *to make the speakers say what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions*. This statement gives Thucydides a lot of freedom. But the second half of the sentence qualifies the first part by saying *of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really said*.

Critical scholars are not in agreement as to how to assess speeches in ancient historiography in general or Luke's speeches in particular. Martin Dibelius represents one approach. He sums up succinctly the tension of Thucydides' statement: "The ambiguity of this remark presents a real problem. As a result, no agreement has yet been reached among the interpreters of Thucydides concerning the relationship of the subjective judgment and objective reproduction of the speeches."¹⁸ Dibelius, based on his survey of other speech material in ancient historiography, gives most weight to the first part of the ambiguous sentence, emphasizing the *freedom* of ancient historiographers in producing speeches. His statement is worth quoting in full.

This survey was merely intended to show concerning historical writing in ancient times that, where it contains speeches, *it follows certain conventions*. What seems to the author his most important obligation is not what seems to us the most important one, that of establishing what speech was actually made; to him, it is rather that

of introducing speeches into the structure in a way which will be relevant to his purpose. *Even if he can remember, discover or read somewhere the text of the speech which was made, the author will not feel obliged to make use of it.*¹⁹

Dibelius goes on to say that speeches in ancient historiography served primarily either to “enliven the whole” narrative or to “serve as an artistic device to help achieve the author’s aims.”²⁰

Dibelius studies some major speeches of Acts and concludes that such speeches serve primarily artistic aims and, in the context of the extended quotation above, are simply not interested in conveying actual words or even offering a précis of an actual speech; rather Luke fashions the speeches only to serve his own aims, and those aims are directed *at the reader*, not the “audience” of the speech in the story. In short, one is to assess the speeches not according to their word-for-word accuracy or even whether they represent generally what was actually spoken, to allude to Thucydides, but their literary and artistic function *within the narrative*. One simply misses the mark and is “looking for the wrong thing” to seek in the speeches a record, even a précis, of “what the speeches really said.”

Ben Witherington represents a critical assessment of the Lukan speeches that leads to different conclusions.²¹ To be sure, good Greek historiography was sensitive to rhetorical matters. Writing was to be artful.

It was not, however, a matter of the nonrhetorical historians versus the rhetorical ones. The debate was over whether distortion or free invention was allowable in a historical work in the service of higher rhetorical aims. No one was seriously arguing that composers of written history should eschew all literary considerations.²²

Witherington concedes there was “debate” in antiquity whether “distortion or free invention” was acceptable in historiography.

Witherington wants to put Luke in the camp of “good historians,” those who, while alert to rhetorical concerns, did not succumb to distortion or free invention. Representing the best of historiography were historians like Thucydides (c. 455–400 BC) and Polybius (c. 203–120 BC), who were both concerned to offer an accurate presentation of “what happened.” Polybius’s understanding of good history writing can be seen in his critical assessment of the historical writing of Timeaus. Note especially his comments as they pertain to speech material:

When we find one or two false statements in a book and they prove to be deliberate ones, it is evident that not a word written by such an author is any longer certain and reliable. But to convince those also who are disposed to champion [Timeaus] I must speak of the principle on which he composes public speeches, harangues to soldiers, the discourses of ambassadors, and, in a word, all utterances of the kind, which, as it were, sum up events and hold the whole history together. Can anyone who reads these help noticing that Timaeus had untruthfully reported them in his work, and has done so of set purpose? For he has not set down the words spoken nor the sense of what was really said, but having made up his mind as to what ought to have been said, he recounts all these speeches and all else that follows upon events like a man in a school of rhetoric attempting to speak on a given subject, and shows off his oratorical power, but gives no report of which was actually spoken. (*The Histories of Polybius*, 12.25a).²³

With respect to Thucydides, *immediately* following his statement quoted above concerning speeches, one finds the following:

And with reference to the narrative of events, far from permitting myself to derive it from the first source that came to hand, I did not even trust my own impressions, but it rests partly on what I saw myself, partly on what others saw for me, the accuracy of the report being always tried by the most severe and detailed tests possible. My conclusions have cost me some labour from the want of coincidence between accounts of the same occurrences by different eye-witnesses, arising sometimes from imperfect memory, sometimes from undue partiality for one side or the other. The absence of romance in my history will, I fear, detract somewhat from its interest; but if it be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the interpretation of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it, I shall be content. In fine, I have written my work, not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time (Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.22.3-4).²⁴

With respect, specifically, to speeches, all this is not to say that speeches, even in “good” historiography, were verbatim reports. Witherington summarizes J. Wilson’s assessment of the speeches of Thucydides: the speeches were offered in Thucydides’ own words; they represent a selection of speeches; they contain a selection of ideas that represent the “general sense” of what was said; they may be either abbreviated or expanded if such editing does not detract from the general sense; expansion in order to make the general sense clearer is quite acceptable.²⁵ In short, the speeches are

“Thucydidian compositions,” but one finds within them a fair presentation of “the general sense of what they really said.”

Witherington quotes with approval the summarizing statement of C. W. Fornara:

We are not entitled to proceed on the assumption that the historians considered themselves at liberty to write up speeches out of their own heads. That some or many or most actually did so is perhaps hypothetically conceivable. We must recognize, however, that such a procedure would have been contrary to convention and *not, as all too many seem to suppose, a convention in its own right.*²⁶

Witherington’s critical assessment yields different conclusions from that of Dibelius. Following Dibelius’s understanding of the *conventions* of historiography, one simply looks in vain in the Lukan speeches to find a “general sense of what they really said.” Despite Thucydides’ assertion, this was not what ancient historians were interested in offering. Luke was a literary artist and therein one finds the value of the speeches. Witherington’s assessment leads to the conclusion that while rhetorical, artistic concerns are not absent, and while the speeches in their present form are most certainly Lukan compositions, it was not a convention of ancient historiography for historians to compose speeches with little to no concern for what was actually said. Hence, one would find in Luke’s speeches, assuming that he followed the proper conventions of good historiography, words that give the reader a sense of what was actually said. The question boils down to whether Luke followed the proper conventions of good historiography, as Witherington understands such conventions.

Readers are confronted with two opposing interpretations of exactly what the proper conventions were of ancient history writing. The statement of Fornara (cited above) that Witherington embraces provides something of a two-edged sword: “That some or many or most actually did [write up speeches out of their own heads] is perhaps hypothetically conceivable. We must recognize, however, that such a procedure would have been contrary to convention and not, as all too many seem to suppose, a convention in its own right.” On the one hand, Fornara insists that liberty in the composition of speeches was not the convention, in spite of the fact that many wrongly believe that to be the case. On the other hand, Fornara concedes that, at least hypothetically, it is possible that most ancient historians did freely construct speeches. Witherington states,

It must be acknowledged that such standards [of good historiography] were not observed a good deal of the time in antiquity. Thucydides and Polybius *were* in various regards exceptional, but it is also true that it was not impossible for a well-educated and apparently well-traveled person like Luke, who claims to have taken time and pains to investigate matters closely, to follow in the footsteps of other exceptional historians.²⁷

What constitutes *convention*? Is *convention* what a handful of “exceptional” historians of a bygone era (Thucydides and Polybius) claimed to practice or what “most” did?

Granting Witherington’s understanding of convention, it is possible that Luke followed the exceptional standards of historians who preceded him by centuries. Indeed, if Luke were a historian of the caliber of Thucydides and Polybius, he would have been quite exceptional. The second-century AD satirist Lucian offers his own opinion of the historians of his time in his treatise to Philo, *How to Write History*. He laments: “You cannot find a man but is writing history; nay, every one you meet is a Thucydides, a Herodotus, a Xenophon. The old saying must be true, and war be the father of all things, seeing what a litter of historians it has now teemed forth at a birth” (§ 2).²⁸ Lucian also held up Thucydides as one of the standard bearers of good historiography, whose high standards Lucian describes succinctly: “For history, I say again, has this and this only for its own; if a man will start upon it, he must sacrifice to no God but Truth; he must neglect all else” (§ 39).

Interestingly, despite Lucian’s praise for Thucydides’ commitment to the God of Truth, he offers no unambiguous allusion to or comment on what Thucydides has to say about *speeches*, though it appears likely that Lucian would have been familiar with the passage in question.²⁹ Furthermore, in offering his counsel to Philo, Lucian seems to give the historian some latitude when it comes to speeches: “When it comes in your way to introduce a speech, the first requirement is that it should suit the character both of the speaker and of the occasion; the second is (once more) lucidity; but in these cases you have the counsel’s right of showing your eloquence” (§ 58).³⁰ Speeches need to be appropriate to both the character offering the speech and to the occasion. They must be clear. But Philo is also given leave to show his “eloquence.” Nothing is said of accuracy. This hardly sounds like Polybius’s castigation of Timeaus: “He recounts all these speeches and all else that follows upon events like a man in a school of rhetoric attempting to speak on a given subject, and shows off his oratorical

power, but gives no report of which was actually spoken” (*Histories*, 12.25a).

If one understands *convention* to mean “what people actually did,” Dibelius seems to win the debate with Witherington. The Commentary will focus on the speeches as they help to convey to readers Lukan theology and purpose. Little attention will be given to offering a defense of their veracity to the “general sense of what they really said.” Readers who side with Witherington and other scholars who agree with him can choose to “hear” these speeches as Lukan compositions that reflect “the general sense of what they really said.” Such an assumption will not detract from the role the speeches play in communicating the aims of the narrative. Even if one grants Witherington’s position, a careful writer like Luke would not have ignored the plot and aims of his narrative as he compressed, expanded, and composed the speeches as they now stand.

The Value of Acts as a Source for Early Christian History³¹

The assessment of the value of Acts as a good historical source hinges, as so many other issues of introduction, on one’s assessment of other matters. For example, the We Passages clearly leave the impression that the author was an eyewitness to some events narrated in Acts. If one concludes that the insertion of a first-person narrator is, itself, simply a literary device—and something of a deceptive one, at that—one will not be reticent to assert that Acts would be of limited value, historically. An author willing to insert himself falsely into the story would be more inclined to insert other material as well. Readers assuming that the author was an eyewitness to some events (with access to others who witnessed other events) will be more inclined to view the narrative as having historical value.

One’s assessment of the genre of the narrative will affect one’s overall assessment of its historical value as well. Richard Pervo has argued that Acts is a historical novel; that is, it makes no pretense to offer history.³² Pervo has alerted critics to many popular features of narrative that the author has incorporated into his work. He has not won consensus that Acts is a deliberate novel. Most interpreters view Acts as belonging to the genre of history, though Charles Talbert has made a valiant effort to view Luke–Acts as a special type of biography—a succession biography.³³ Following the consensus of critics that Acts at least purports to be history, the question then focuses on how trustworthy a historian Luke was.

To be sure, in the prologue to the Gospel, which can serve both volumes, Luke claims to have investigated things carefully and consulted numerous eyewitnesses. Because such claims were quite conventional within the genre, they cannot always be taken at face value.³⁴ One suspects that Lucian, whose work on writing history was consulted above, would not have taken well to the attention given in Acts to the workings of God, the risen Christ, and the Holy Spirit. As Witherington notes, Polybius was not reticent to write a history that lays out the workings of Fortune—hence, such a type of history was not foreign to the world of antiquity, most certainly when one considers biblical and Jewish histories.³⁵ Notably, however, Polybius did not make Lucian’s list of commendable historians, for whatever reason.

Still, when one considers what Lucian notes as characteristics of good historical writing, Acts measures up rather well in many instances. Luke does not present a pretentious and wordy prologue (Lucian, *How to Write History*, § 23). Luke does not burden the reader with lengthy descriptions of geographical locations (§§ 19, 56–57). His narrative is not filled with major geographical errors (§ 24). Luke’s language offers a good balance, avoiding artificially highbrow language, while not bereft of “impressive and exalted tones” (§ 45). In the We Passages the author makes an implicit claim to being an eyewitness, which would satisfy Lucian’s exhortation to Philo not to make “exaggerated” claims to being such a witness (§§ 28–29). And while one suspects that Lucian would not have approved of the abundance of miracle stories in Acts, he does allow for such stories in histories: “It may occasionally happen that some extraordinary story has to be introduced; it should be simply narrated, without guarantee of its truth, thrown down for anyone to make what he can of it; the writer takes no risks and shows no preference” (§ 60). Certainly, the author of Acts believes the stories to be true, but he narrates them in a straightforward manner and offers no *apologia* for their content.

Candidly, critics differ widely on the historical value of Luke. Gerd Lüdemann represents one school of thought.³⁶ Essentially, Lüdemann believes the narrative of Acts to be a heavily redacted text. Buried within the Lukan compositions are snippets of inherited traditions. And buried within the snippets of traditions are snippets of *historical* tradition. Acts is valuable as a historical document *not as a whole* but in the fragments of historical tradition that the critic can excavate from the narrative.

While the Commentary will give focused attention to such issues where appropriate, one example will illustrate the fruits of

Lüdemann's method and labor.³⁷ Acts 18 tells of Paul's ministry in Corinth. Two pieces of accurate historical information are embedded in Luke's narrative: Claudius's expulsion of the Jews from Rome and Gallio's tenure as proconsul. Each of these historical events is linked with Paul's Corinthian ministry. However, Lüdemann dates the expulsion of the Jews from Rome to c. AD 41 and Gallio's tenure to about a decade later. Hence, there are in fact two visits of Paul that Acts has collapsed into one visit. As one can see, following this approach, Luke's value as a historical *writer* is minimal; it is not "good historiography" to collapse two visits to a city separated by ten years into one visit. But Luke does, even if unwittingly, preserve helpful historical information.

Martin Hengel represents another approach.³⁸ While he reads Acts critically, he believes that Acts does present an overall good and competent historical narrative: "Luke is no less trustworthy than other historians of antiquity. People have done him a great injustice in comparing him too closely with the edifying, largely fictitious, romance-like writings in the style of the later acts of apostles, which freely invent facts as they like and when they need them."³⁹

This is not to say that Hengel is a naïve and credulous reader. He is a critical reader, but, as such, is not averse to a reasonable conflation of source material. For example, he cautions readers not to "play off II Cor. 11.32f. and Acts 9.23ff. in this connection."⁴⁰ If Hengel can find a credible way to synthesize the sources, in this instance, Acts and Paul's own writings, he will do so. He does not, however, strain credulity. For example, Hengel simply acknowledges that Paul could not have made the journey from Antioch with Barnabas to deliver famine relief to Jerusalem, as Acts 11:29-30 records.⁴¹

Readers should keep in mind that commentaries serve different purposes. This Commentary is not focused on the historical reconstruction of early Christianity. Rather, its focus is to offer Commentary and Connections on the theological significance of the narrative. Hence, while the Commentary will give attention to historical issues, that will not be the focus, with such attention generally confined to the sidebars. Joel Green gives voice to the approach of this Commentary:

To learn theological interpretation from Luke, then, is to set aside the hyper-concern with historical validation that has occupied so much biblical scholarship, even biblical theology, in the modern era, in favor of renewed attention to signification. That is, rather than concerning ourselves primarily with whether things happened in this

way, we attend to what significance these have when construed within this narrative. That is because we recognize that *theological interpretation* takes as its starting point the theological claim that the church has received as canon these particular narrative representations of those events that appear in Scripture (rather than the church's having declared canonical a particular set of historical facts).⁴²

In this volume, Luke's theological insights are not contingent on *first* offering an apology for the historical accuracy either of words attributed to characters or events depicted. Such lack of focus does not mean that the volume takes a hypercritical stance toward history as presented in the narrative, though historical problems will not be avoided or minimized. [A [Chronology of Early Christianity](#)]

Theological Themes of Acts

As stated above, the primary purpose of this Commentary is to explore theological features of the narrative, not to employ the narrative as a source for historical reconstruction. A number of themes come forth in the Commentary and Connections sections of the volume.⁴³

Christianity's Connection with Judaism

Christianity is not a new religion; rather, it is the fulfillment of the hopes of Judaism as such hopes are given expression in Israel's Scriptures. Many of the speeches of Acts devote attention to the explication of Scripture in order to demonstrate the continuity between Judaism and the movement initiated by Jesus, which Acts designates not as "Christianity" but as "the Way" (see [\[The Way\]](#)).

Another way that Luke shows continuity is through his attention given to the city of Jerusalem and the temple, in both the Gospel and Acts. The Gospel begins in Jerusalem and the temple, and much of the birth narrative takes place within these environs. The central panel of the Gospel speaks of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. Jerusalem and the temple are the locations of Jesus' passion *and* resurrection. The early chapters of Acts take place in Jerusalem, with much action happening at the temple. Even as the message of the gospel moves outward to "the ends of the earth" (cf. Acts 1:8), primarily through Paul, the reader (and Paul) is regularly brought back to Jerusalem to remind the reader of the Way's roots in this city. Like Jesus, Paul makes a final trip to Jerusalem where he faces a trial before numerous authorities (see [\[Jesus and Paul\]](#)).

The narrative's concern to show continuity with Judaism spills over to another area: continuity between the early Jerusalem church and the expansion of the Way beyond the boundaries of Jerusalem and Judea. The Jerusalem church, through its representatives (usually Peter, though not exclusively), offers its approval of the expanding mission of the Way. Peter and John, for example, visit the newly established Samaritan churches in Acts 8. Barnabas visits the church of Antioch in Acts 11. As noted above, as Acts focuses on Paul as the primary instrument of Christ to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth, Paul's connection with Jerusalem is highlighted (Acts 9, 11, 15, 18, and 21).

Another way that Acts demonstrates continuity between the Jerusalem church and the geographically expanding church is to narrate the story in a manner that highlights similarities between Peter, a chief representative of the Jerusalem church, and Paul, the chief representative of the geographically expanding church.

Both offer about the same number of speeches. The respective initial speeches of each highlight the fulfillment of Jewish Scripture in Christ (Acts 2 and 3 for Peter, Acts 13 for Paul). Both are arrested and interrogated by various Jerusalem authorities (Peter: Acts 4, 5, 12; Paul: Acts 21–24). Furthermore, the “trials” of each are regularly narrated in a way that highlights similarities with the trial of Jesus before various Jerusalem authorities (see Commentary, ch. 10 on Acts 12 and [\[Jesus and Paul\]](#)). Both heal a lame man (Peter: Acts 3; Paul: Acts 14). Both heal indirectly (Peter's shadow, Acts 5:15; Paul's cloths, Acts 19:12). Both confront magic (Peter: Acts 8:18-24; Paul: Acts 13:6-11; 19:11-20). Both raise someone from the dead (Peter: Acts 9:36-41; Paul: Acts 20:9-12). Both miraculously escape from prison (Peter: Acts 12:6-11; Paul: Acts 16:25-41). [\[Apostles Peter and Paul\]](#)

Such “parallels” serve to demonstrate the continuity between the missions of each major representative of “the Way” in the first and second halves of the book and in the geographical regions in and around Jerusalem (Peter) and beyond (Paul). Such narrative links offer the reader a sense that “the Way” emerges smoothly out of its Jewish roots. Jesus' deep connections with the historic faith of Israel, Peter's connections with Jesus and this same Jewish faith, and Paul's connections with both Jesus (demonstrated through *literary* parallels) and Peter (also demonstrated through *literary* parallels),⁴⁴ mixed with Paul's own credentials as one once steeped in a blindly zealous commitment to his Jewish heritage (cf. Acts 22:3-5), all combine to affirm that the narrative of the Gospel and Acts presents not the story of the establishment of a “new religion,” but the fulfillment of a very old and true religion.

A Chronology of Early Christianity



The following table offers a rough chronological sketch of some key events of the first generation of church history.

It assumes the *overall* historical reliability of Acts, supplemented *and corrected* by data from the Pauline corpus.

Those who assume Acts to be essentially unreliable will not agree to such a constructed chronology. Those who assume Acts to be an infallible source of historical data will disagree with some features, as well.

| Date Ranges (all dates are AD) | Event | Explanation |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|
| 28/29 | Jesus' public ministry begins | Luke 3:1 states that Jesus began his ministry in the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius (AD 14–37). |
| 30 | Death of Jesus | The Synoptic Gospels offer no specific indication of the length of Jesus' ministry. John's Gospel indicates a ministry of two, possibly three, years, if one can accept as historically reliable this Gospel's record of Jesus' frequent trips to Jerusalem during various Jewish festivals. |
| 30–33 | Acts 1–8. Early period of the Jerusalem church. Martyrdom of Stephen. | If one can follow Acts, which places the events of Acts 1–8 before the call of Paul, one would date these events prior to the time of Paul's call. |
| 33 | Acts 9. Call of Paul | To a great extent, dating Paul's call requires that one work backward from dates that one can ascertain with more assurance, such as Paul's work in Corinth (see below) and information provided by Paul's letters, especially Galatians 1–2. |
| 36 | Acts 9. Paul visits Jerusalem | Acts 9:23-26 is very imprecise regarding the time span between Paul's call and his first trip to Jerusalem. Paul says in Gal 1:18 that he did not visit Jerusalem until three years after his call, a trip to Arabia, and his return to Damascus (Acts makes no mention of these last two events; see [Acts and Galatians]). |
| 33–46/47 or 49/50 | Acts 10–14. Expansion of Christianity into Judea, northern Syria, and Asia Minor. The conversion of Cornelius fits into this period (prior to 44, Herod's death). Paul and Barnabas bring famine relief to Jerusalem (mid-40s). Martyrdom of James, brother of John (c. AD 44). | Events of Acts 10–14 would be placed between the call of Paul (33) and Paul's trip to Jerusalem for the so-called Jerusalem Council (see below). Luke is likely in error to state that Paul made the famine relief trip (see [Chronological Issues]). The execution of James is recorded in Acts 12:2. Acts 12:20-23 records the death of Herod Agrippa I (AD 44), shortly after the narration of the death of James, implying a date of c. 44 for James's death. |
| 46/47 or 49/50 | Acts 15. Paul visits Jerusalem a third time, according to Acts. The Jerusalem church issues the so-called apostolic decree, not requiring Gentiles to be circumcised. | Paul says in Gal 2:1 that he returned to Jerusalem "after fourteen years." But does he mean fourteen years after the first visit (36) or after his call experience (33)? Scholars are not sure. Assuming the latter would render a date of c. 49 or 50. The former would render a date of c. 46 or 47. Most scholars equate the visit of Gal 2:1 with the meeting described in Acts 15. |

| | | |
|----------------------|--|--|
| 46/47 or 49/50–50/52 | Acts 16–17. Paul’s missionary travels, including Philippi, Thessalonica, and Athens. | If Paul arrived in Corinth no later than AD 51 (Acts 18; see next panel), all events spoken of in Acts 16–17 must occur in the narrow time frame between the meeting of Acts 15 and Paul’s arrival in Corinth. Assuming an earlier date for the Jerusalem meeting of Acts 15 allows more time for events of Acts 16–17 to transpire. |
| 50/51–51/52 | Paul in Corinth | Acts 18:12 indicates that Paul was in Corinth when Gallio was proconsul. Inscriptional evidence allows historians to date the likely beginning of Gallio’s tenure to the summer of 51, possibly the summer of 52. He began his tenure after Paul had spent as much as eighteen months in Corinth. This provides a touchstone date around which to date other events. |
| 50/52–58 | Paul’s missionary travels of Acts 19–21 | Paul spent two, possibly three, years in Ephesus (Acts 19), visited various churches he had established earlier (Acts 20), then went to Jerusalem, making a number of stops along the way (Acts 20–21). |
| Spring 58 | Paul returns to Jerusalem where he is arrested and imprisoned (Acts 21–26) | If one can consider as reliable the reports in Acts regarding Paul’s imprisonment under Felix (52–60) and Festus (60–62), one may conclude that Paul arrived in Jerusalem c. 58, in the spring (cf. Acts 20:16). Acts 24:27 indicates that Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea during the last two years of Felix’s reign (58–60). Paul’s letters confirm that he was planning a trip to Jerusalem (e.g., Rom 15:25) to deliver relief for the church there (see [The Collection]). Acts minimizes the significance of the collection. |
| Fall 60 | Paul leaves for Rome | Acts 26 indicates that it was not long after Festus assumed leadership that Paul left for Rome. Acts 27:9, with the reference to the Fast (the Day of Atonement), indicates that the voyage began in the fall, approximately two-and-a-half years after Paul arrived in Jerusalem. |
| Early 61 | Paul arrives in Rome | Again, one must rely on Acts. Acts 27:1–28:14 states that the voyage to Rome took place over the winter season. The voyage was interrupted by a shipwreck that required the crew and prisoners to holdover on Malta for the winter, after which Paul continued and finished his trip to Rome. |
| 61–63 | Paul’s stay in Rome | Acts ends with reference to Paul’s preaching in Rome for two years, offering no word on the outcome of Paul’s hearing. Later church traditions asserted that Paul was released and continued his missionary work. He was then martyred during Emperor Nero’s persecution of Christians. |

The above table is a revision of the chronological table prepared by the author and found in J. Bradley Chance and Milton P. Horne, *Rereading the Bible: An Introduction to the Biblical Story* (Upper Saddle River NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2001), 272–73.

Apostles Peter and Paul



Peter and Paul are “the apostles” upon whom the Acts of the Apostles focuses. The painting by El Greco may show awareness that, historically (though certainly not in Acts), there was tension between the two (cf. Gal 2). Though not touching, the near touch of the hands shows reconciliation. However, it would appear that Peter is reaching out to Paul more than Paul to Peter. Note how Peter looks in Paul’s direction, while Paul looks away from Peter’s direction. Though barely discernable, one can see in the shadows that Peter holds “the keys to the kingdom” in his lowered left hand. While the keys, symbolic of the power of Peter and the church (based on Matt 16:18-19), are hidden in the shadows, the book to which Paul points, representing a Bible, is given prominence. Though both the church (Peter and the keys) and the Bible are present in the picture, it is the Word that shines more prominently. This interpretation shows my deep, free-church roots and makes no claims to represent El Greco’s intention. Though the Acts of the Apostles focuses on Peter and Paul, in the narrative it is Paul, as perhaps in this painting, who is the more dominant figure.



El Greco. *Apostles Peter and Paul*. 1592. Oil on canvas. The Hermitage, St. Petersburg. Web Gallery of Art.

To be sure, Acts urges readers through its narrative to reread and to interpret in fresh ways just what lies at the heart and mission of this very old religion, that is, to paraphrase Paul, to come to grips with the “scandal of the gospel” as Luke interprets it. The gospel requires Israel to revisit and rethink its own story and heritage, recognizing the far-reaching and universal implications of its own story. Therein lies the rub and cause of much conflict in the narrative between the followers of the Way and those of Israel for whom the old wine tastes good (cf. Luke 5:39), who cannot let go of the “old” way of being Israel. This leads to the next theme.

The Universal Gospel

As stated above, while the Way is the fulfillment of Israel’s own Scriptures and hopes, such fulfillment requires Israel *to be Israel* in a new “way.” The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is not the God of only the physical descendants of these ancestors; God is the God of all. It is precisely this “way” of understanding Israel and Israel’s mission to which the Lukan narrative gives emphasis. And it is precisely this way of being Israel that creates the greatest conflict within the narrative.

Luke has radically rewritten Mark’s terse story of Jesus at Nazareth in Luke 4:16-30. When one notes the Lukan expansions to the skeleton of Mark 6:1-6 four themes emerge: Jesus as the fulfillment of Scripture (Luke 4:16-21), the initial openness of Israel to the message of fulfillment (Luke 4:22), the implications of Jesus’

mission for those beyond the boundaries of Israel (Luke 4:23-27), and Israel's violent rejection of these implications (Luke 4:28-30). Within this programmatic pericope lies the Lukan pattern. The good news of Israel's God fulfills Israel's hopes, as expressed in Scripture. But it is not only for Israel's glory, but is also a light for revelation to non-Jews (cf. Luke 2:32). It is this second feature of Israel's mission that most of Israel resists, according to Luke (e.g., Acts 13:44-47; 14:1-6, 19; 17:4-5, 13; 18:4-6; 22:17-23).

Luke's universal gospel revolves around the God of Israel and God's Messiah, to be sure. Israel, who already worships the true and living God, is not called upon to repent in order to worship this God. But Israel is called upon to repent—to turn—and recognize Jesus as God's Messiah. Such recognition is not simply a matter of doctrinal consent, but recognition that, in Christ, God has visited God's people to show them the way to be Israel, including the universal implications of being God's people. Gentiles are also to repent, turning from the empty worship of idols to the true and living God of Israel—and of all.

The Connections section of the volume explores for the contemporary faith community the universal implications of being the people of God. The Connections are not interested merely in describing how “the Jews back then” resisted the universal gospel. As the portion of Scripture called Acts engages and challenges contemporary readers, such readers need to reflect on their “way” of being the people of God. The church has done its fair share of erecting barriers that close off the liberating word of God from those whom the church insists remain outside the gates. The inclusiveness of the gospel message finds resistance in the Lukan narrative quite often from those who were “the people of God,” Israel. Those who claim to belong to the people of God today in the context of the church can still exclude people, though the criteria of exclusion may be very different from the criteria that faced the author of Acts through the protests of “the Jews.” The topic of inclusion is potentially no less controversial today than it was “back then.”

The Community of Faith

Acts offers numerous portraits of the church, the community of faith. The Commentary and Connections do not advocate a mere imitation of the patterns discerned in Acts. There are no calls for contemporary Christians to sell their possessions and lay the proceeds at the feet of the apostles, attempting to discern who the equivalent of “the apostles” would be today before whom

contemporary Christians are to lay their goods and money. Yet Luke's descriptions of the faith community offer numerous opportunities for reflection and "connections."

Prayer was a crucial dimension of community life. In Acts, prayer makes things happen. Numerous Connections and sidebars will offer some reflections about this significant dimension of community life. *Fellowship*, the breaking of bread, is also an important dimension of community life. Breaking of bread requires presence, not only the presence of the living Lord, but also the presence of flesh-and-blood believers sharing the same space. Fellowship in Acts is not an abstract concept; it assumes and requires face-to-face interaction among the people of faith.

The *interpretation of Scripture* also plays a crucial role in the life of the community. As the Commentary and Connections will note, the interpretation of Scripture was very much rooted in the experiences of the community of faith. In fact, as much as it pinches the methods of critical scholarship, Acts does not portray the community as very interested in the "original meaning" of a text as it goes about the task of interpreting Scripture. While responsible interpretation today cannot ignore the fruits of critical scholarship, the *critical interpretation* of Acts makes clear that the "original meaning" of a text did *not* dictate what Luke–Acts understood the only or perhaps even primary "meaning" of Scripture to be. To interpret Scripture as the early community of faith interpreted Scripture requires that we not confine our interest to its "original meaning," but that we allow Scripture to address our own contexts, issues, and questions.

The community plays a crucial role in the interpretation and application of Scripture and, with that, the discernment of the will of God. Though Acts is not reticent to speak of visions offered directly to key individuals to guide these persons in discerning the divine will, the community consistently plays an important role in legitimating and sanctioning such visions and personal experiences. An obvious example would be the role played by the Jerusalem church in offering legitimacy and sanction to the mission to those who were not Jewish (cf. Acts 11, 15). It is not an exaggeration to say that the Spirit finds its voice in the voice of the community (cf. Acts 15:28).

The community also devotes itself to the teaching of the apostles (cf. Acts 2:42). The devotion to the apostles is also demonstrated symbolically through laying one's goods at the feet of these apostles (cf. Acts 4:34–37). Application to the contemporary community of faith is varied. Churches that embrace an episcopal structure (e.g.,

Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Lutheran) carry such deference to the apostolic teaching over into the structure of church governance, giving heed to the counsel and guidance of bishops (*episkopoi*). For all Christians, including those who follow bishops, the apostolic voice of guidance is certainly found in the New Testament. Christians aware of the realities of the process of canonization, itself slow, methodical, and not without controversy, and the history of biblical interpretation within the church know, however, that the apostolic voice contained in the New Testament does not exist in a vacuum apart from the larger faith community, both past and present.

It was, after all, the larger community of faith that “canonized” certain texts as Scripture. And it was the community of faith, over the centuries, that wrestled with the meaning of such texts, offering itself guidelines as to how one should read these texts. Responsible interpretation of *Scripture as Scripture* does not exist apart from the community of faith, both past and present. While Acts, as noted above, gives due weight to the *experiences* of individual believers in discerning the will of God and the meaning of Scripture, it seeks to balance such experience with the counsel of the community. For Acts, that Christian community and its leadership reach across a couple of generations. For the contemporary church, the community and its leadership reach across a couple of millennia. Acknowledgment of *the community of saints*, both past and present, is part of responsible scriptural interpretation and discernment of the will of God. Finding the wisdom to delicately negotiate passage between Scylla and Charybdis, between personal experience and community tradition, is necessary for responsible discernment of Scripture and God’s will. Readers will encounter numerous Connections and sidebars that provide humble attempts to offer such wisdom.

The Providence of God and Human Participation in the Divine Drama

These two theological themes go together. There is no question but that God is “behind” the action in Acts. Visions and miracles are numerous, denoting the direct action of God to guide the church in its mission. The volume does not minimize the importance of this kind of divine acting. The story of Acts is “going somewhere,” and where it is going is in accordance with the “plan,” “will,” or “purpose of God” (see, e.g., [The Whole Purpose of God]).

Yet exclusive focus on “God’s action” through vision and miracle can leave many modern Christian readers feeling a bit out of the loop. Most do not experience God like this. To be sure, some still

do, but many do not, especially modern, Western Christians who are the implied readers—the envisioned audience—of this volume. The volume does not browbeat readers to pretend to have the worldview of first-century Jews and Christians. The fact is, much of the providential care of God manifests itself in Acts in the ebb and flow of human choices and action, including human beings who are not at all interested in discerning and acting on the will of God. God very much works in partnership with people, most especially God’s people, to accomplish God’s purposes, aims, and goals.

Readers will detect sympathy in the Commentary and Connections with ways of thinking and talking about God that highlight this *relational partnership*. As such, readers will find some exploration of ways of talking and thinking about God that one finds today in so-called “open theism” and “process theology.” This is not to say that the Commentary or Connections will argue that Luke was an open or process theist. This would be as grossly anachronistic as arguing that Luke was Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, Calvinist, or whatever label one can put on various expressions of Christianity that have emerged over the centuries. All are later theological constructions. None, whatever advocates might claim, is a mere replication of Lukan, Pauline, or biblical theology. Still, readers especially bent on certain expressions of Calvinism had best be prepared to gird up their loins in order to engage in some fairly serious resistant reading.

A Personal Word

Readers will find numerous places where I talk about “gaps” in the Lukan narrative. In fact, it would not be far-fetched to say that the *commentary* genre is all about filling in gaps that one finds in the text. If the text had no gaps, commentary, frankly, would not be required. There are many ways that commentators fill the gaps. Those informed by historical criticism appeal to issues of historical or social background to “fill the gap.” For example, Acts 2 talks about Pentecost, but leaves a gap as to exactly *what* Pentecost is. The commentator fills the gap by offering some background on the nature of the Jewish festival, including its biblical roots and the evolution of its meaning over Jewish religious history.

Or one may fill a gap by reconstructing the history behind the story that one finds in the narrative. For example, Acts 9:23 says that “after many days” Paul left Damascus and went to Jerusalem. That’s a very indeterminate time frame, leaving quite a gap. Galatians 2:18 states that Paul made his first trip to Jerusalem *three years* after becoming a follower of Jesus, possibly filling in this

Lukan gap. The above examples offer readers a taste of how historical criticism can fill in narrative gaps. One must be cautious, however, as the Commentary will show from time to time, that interpretive comments not stray from offering comment on the *Lukan narrative* to offering comment on the *reconstructed history* that might lie behind the narrative.

Commentators also can fill gaps by alluding to other texts within the Lukan narrative. For example, Acts 1:3 says that the risen Lord spoke to the disciples about the kingdom of God, but the text itself offers no comment on what this “kingdom of God” is. One can appeal not only to “historical criticism” to fill this gap, but also to Luke’s Gospel, which devoted much attention to talking about and illustrating the kingdom of God.

A very candid admission that every commentator should make to readers, and I offer this now, is that all interpretations, all expositions, all “gap filling” that one encounters in a commentary *are the readings and interpretations of the commentator*. That could go without saying, but I choose to come right out and say it. It would be annoying and rhetorically ineffective for every comment to begin with “I understand this to say,” or “I think this text means,” or “I read the text this way,” or some such comment. Commentators do not tend to do that. In reality, commentators—and I have followed their example—tend to hide their voices behind other voices.

I might hide my voice behind the voice of the author or narrator of Acts, saying things like, “the author wants to make clear” or “the narrator implies such and such here.” Readers will find that I tend to “hide my voice” more often behind “the narrator,” who is “present” to the reader, than “the author,” the person I’m calling Luke, who held the pen, lest readers think that, somehow, I can discern what this human author was thinking or intending as he wrote this or that text.

I might hide my voice behind the narrative itself, saying things like, “the narrative implies” or “the narrative demonstrates irony in this passage.” Or I might hide my voice behind “readers.” Sometimes I’ll hide behind “real readers,” quoting other readers of Acts, other commentators. Occasionally, I’ll even endorse their “readings,” saying something like, “as so-and-so rightly observes.” What I’m really saying is that I think so-and-so is right. Or I might hide my voice behind hypothetical readers, urging such readers to understand the text in question a certain way. “Readers should recall that . . .” or “alert readers will detect the irony here.” I am hopeful that my readings are informed and thoughtful. I am hopeful that my readings do not leave too many gaps for *my* readers

to have to fill. But keep in mind that the readings are *my* readings of the Lukan text.

Given all of this, rhetorically, I will employ a third-person voice in the Commentary sections, using expressions such as those offered above. The Connections sections strive to “connect” the biblical passage to *our* own issues and questions. Hence, in this section I will regularly employ a first-person plural voice, attempting to pull the reader (you), author (me), and text (Acts) into a more explicit kind of interpretive *relationship*.

Also, the Connections will offer a more explicitly *canonical* approach to the reading and application of Acts, drawing on the whole of Christian Scripture to “connect” to our time and place various issues that *I* see expressed in Acts. In addition, the Connections will draw on other thinkers whose counsel, I believe, can help us make connections between the narrative of Acts and our own time (Justin, Augustine, Irenaeus, John Wesley, Walter Rauschenbusch, Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, Martin Luther King Jr., Henry Nouwen, Sallie McFague, John Sanders, Clark Pinnock, Molly Marshall, Marjorie Suchocki, and the list could go on). Canonical reading, combined with insights from the “communion of saints,” past and present, allows us to bring out the richness of the text in question.

Finally, I need to make explicit what should certainly have been at least implicit in my above introductory comments. Ultimately, I interpret Acts *as Scripture*. I do not attach to the word Scripture what some do; most especially I do not attach to Scripture the heavy freight of inerrancy, *however one might choose to define that term*. By Scripture I mean a text recognized by the church, the body of our spiritual ancestors, to speak the word of God. But, as I hope comments just above have made clear, *interpretation* is a crucial dimension of *hearing* the word of God. Thoughtful interpretation is to give rise to serious *reflection* on the implications of God’s word for the faith community. And, finally, such reflection is to lead to the *transformation* of readers, both as individuals and in community. These three dimensions of reading Scripture are discussed in the excellent volume of essays *Reading Luke: Interpretation, Reflection, and Transformation*, which I highly recommend.⁴⁵ These three interconnected steps together allow the *reading* of Scripture to serve the *purpose* of Scripture, as *stated by* Scripture: to be “useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17).

NOTES

¹ For a good overview of introductory issues see Luke Timothy Johnson, "Luke–Acts, Book of," *ABD* 4.403–20, and Raymond B. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 279–332.

² Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles* (AB 31; New York: Doubleday, 1998), 47–49.

³ Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 49–51; Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 51–60.

⁴ E.g., Mikeal C. Parsons and Richard Pervo, *Rethinking the Unity of Luke and Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

⁵ See, e.g., Philipp Vielhauer, "On the 'Paulinism' of Acts," in *Studies in Luke–Acts*, ed. Leander Keck and J. Louis Martyn (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 33–51. See also J. Bradley Chance, "The Seed of Abraham and the People of God: A Study of Two Pauls," *1993 SBLSP*: 384–411.

⁶ Some scholars claim as much. See Jacob Jervell, "The Future of the Past: Luke's Vision of Salvation History and Its Bearing on His Writing of History," in *History, Literature, and Society in the Book of Acts*, ed. Ben Witherington III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 104–26, esp. 117.

⁷ Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 51–55; Witherington, *Acts*, 60–63.

⁸ John B. Polhill, *Acts* (NAC 26; Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 27–31, proposes the early 70s; C. K. Barrett, *Acts*, 2 vols. (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994/1998), 2.xlii, proposes the late 80s to early 90s. Witherington, *Acts*, 62 proposes the late 70s to early 80s; Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 54, the 80s. All acknowledge that such suggestions are tentative.

⁹ Jacques Dupont, *The Sources of Acts* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964); Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 80–89; Barrett, *Acts*, ICC 2.xxiv–xxx.

¹⁰ Dupont, *Sources*, 166.

¹¹ Barrett, *Acts*, ICC 1.53.

¹² F. J. Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake, *The Beginnings of Christianity: The Acts of the Apostles*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 1979), vol. 3: "The Text of Acts," esp. ccxxi–ccxlv; Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 66–79.

¹³ Eldon Jay Epp, "Textual Criticism: New Testament," *ABD* 6.412–35, though he employs different terminology (Alexandrian = B text group; Western = D text group; Caesarean = C text group; Byzantine = A text group). Bart D. Ehrman, "Text of the New Testament," *EDB* 1292–95, identifies three major traditions, Alexandrian, Western, and Byzantine. Recall that the Caesarean is a hybrid of Alexandrian and Western traditions.

¹⁴ Henry J. Cadbury, "The Speeches of Acts," in *Beginnings of Christianity*, 5.402–427; Eduard Schweizer, "Concerning the Speeches of Acts," in *Studies in Luke–Acts*, 208–16; Marion L. Soards, *The Speeches in Acts: Their Content, Context, and Concerns* (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1994); Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 103–108, 111–13.

¹⁵ 1:16-22; 2:14-36, 38-39; 3:12-26; 4:8-12, 19, 20; 5:29-32; 10:34-23; 11:5-17; 15:7-11.

¹⁶ 13:16-41; 14:15-17; 17:22-31; 20:18-35; 22:1-21; 24:10-21; 26:2-23, 25-27; 27:21-26; 28:17-20.

¹⁷ *"The History of the Peloponnesian War," By Thucydides, Written 431 B.C.E. , Translated by Richard Crawley*, <http://classics.mit.edu/Thucydides/pelopwar.1.first.html> (14 July 2006).

¹⁸ Martin Dibelius, "The Speeches in Acts and Ancient Historiography," in *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Heinrich Greeven (Mifflintown PA: Sigler Press, 1999), 138–85, quotation p. 141.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 144. Emphases added.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Witherington, *Acts*, 24–49.

²² *Ibid.*, 41.

²³ *The Histories of Polybius Published in the Loeb Classical Library, 1922–1927* [public domain], http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Polybius/12*.html (14 July 2006).

²⁴ *"The History of the Peloponnesian War"*; see n. 17 for complete bibliographical information.

²⁵ Witherington, *Acts*, 47.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 48; emphasis added by Witherington.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁸ All translations of Lucian's *How to Write History* and references are from *Internet Sacred Text Archive, Lucian, How to Write History*, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/luc/wl2/wl210.htm> (14 July 2006).

²⁹ Lucian offers a clear paraphrase of Thucydides, *History* 1.22.4. Thucydides states: "I have written my work, not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time." Lucian's paraphrase: "our work is to be a possession for ever, not a bid for present reputation" (42). The paraphrased statement from Thucydides occurs just a few lines after Thucydides' statement on speeches. It would seem that if Lucian knew the lines he paraphrases, he would have been familiar with the lines immediately preceding them.

³⁰ Lucian's advice that the speech suit the speaker and occasion *could* allude to Thucydides' comment that speeches "make the speakers say what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions." If so, and this is by no means certain, it is significant that Lucian makes no allusion to Thucydides' comment that his speeches reflected the general sense of what was actually spoken.

³¹ Witherington, *Acts*, 24–51; Barrett, *Acts*, ICC 2.xxxii–lxii; Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 124–28; Ernst Haenchen, "The Book of Acts as Source Material for the History of Early Christianity," in *Studies in Luke–Acts*, 258–78.

³² Richard I. Pervo, *Profit with Delight: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

³³ Charles Talbert, *What Is a Gospel? The Genre of the Canonical Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); see also J. Bradley Chance, "Talbert's New Perspectives on Luke–Acts: The ABCs of Ancient Lives," in *Cadbury, Knox, and Talbert: American Contributions to the Study of Acts*, ed. Mikeal C. Parsons and Joseph Tyson (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 181–201.

³⁴ Charles Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 8–11.

³⁵ Witherington, *Acts*, 32–33.

³⁶ Gerd Lüdemann, *Early Christianity according to the Traditions in Acts: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 195–204.

³⁸ Martin Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 85. See [Acts and Galatians].

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 111. See [Chronological Issues].

⁴² Joel B. Green, "Learning Theological Interpretation from Luke," in *Reading Luke: Interpretation, Reflection, Formation*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew, Joel B. Green, Anthony Thiselton (Scripture and Hermeneutics Series 6; Carlisle UK: Paternoster/Zondervan, 2005), 55–78 (quotation, 57; emphasis original).

⁴³ One can offer an overview of theological themes by discussing a list of various "ologies": Lukan *eschatology, pneumatology, Christology, ecclesiology, missionology*, etc. The themes discussed here emerged out of a review of the Commentary and Connections upon their completion. The kinds of issues here may not always fit traditional *theological* categories, but are theologically relevant and reflect the actual themes and issues that readers will encounter in the pages that follow. Further, since the issues discussed in this section emerged from a synthesis of numerous discussions throughout the Commentary, rather than a review of critical writers for the specific purpose of writing this section of the introduction, this section does not present bibliography that surveys the topic under discussion. Relevant bibliography is presented in appropriate places in the Commentary and Connections sections.

⁴⁴ Though Peter and Paul share the stage on occasion (cf. Acts 9:27; 15:4, 12), they *do not directly interact* in the narrative. "Connections" between Peter and Paul are constructed by the way the narrator tells stories about each.

⁴⁵ Green, *Reading Luke: Interpretation, Reflection, Formation*, n 42.