

FADS AND COMMON SENSE: READING ACTS IN THE FIRST CENTURY AND READING ACTS TODAY

ECKHARD J. SCHNABEL*

As research and writing on the Book of Acts continue apace, a good number of scholars voice their discontent with traditional exegetical methods, implying or suggesting that newer methods promise more fruitful results of reading the NT in general and the Book of Acts in particular. I divide the discussion about method into six areas: (1) historical analysis; (2) literary, rhetorical, and narrative analysis; (3) sociological analysis; (4) feminist approaches; (5) post-colonial approaches; (6) canonical and theological interpretations; (7) synthetic interpretation: combination of methods.

These methodological approaches can be connected with collections of essays. The collection entitled *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* edited in 1991 by Jerome Neyrey¹ presents sociological and cultural anthropological approaches to the study of Acts. The historical analysis of Acts was the focus of the five volumes of the project *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting* edited by Bruce Winter between 1993 and 1996.² The collection entitled *History, Literature, and Society in the Book of Acts* edited by Ben Witherington in 1996³ presents essays which adopt an eclectic methodological approach to the study of Acts, although the editor's main concern is the historical dimension of Acts. The collection *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* edited by I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson in 1998⁴ focuses on the theology of Acts. The collection *Jesus and the Heritage of Israel: Luke's Narrative Claim upon Israel's Legacy* edited by David Moessner in 1999⁵ presents a narrative and intertextual reading of Acts with a strong theological interest. The collection entitled *The Unity of Luke-Acts*, edited by Jozef Verheyden also in 1999⁶ emphasizes narrative and theological readings of Luke-Acts which underline the unity of the two-volume work. The collection *Contextualizing*

* Eckhard Schnabel is professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2065 Half Day Road, Deerfield, IL 60015.

¹ Jerome H. Neyrey, ed., *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991).

² Bruce W. Winter, ed., *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting* (5 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993–96).

³ Ben Witherington, ed., *History, Literature, and Society in the Book of Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁴ I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson, eds., *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

⁵ David P. Moessner, ed., *Jesus and the Heritage of Israel: Luke's Narrative Claim upon Israel's Legacy* (Luke the Interpreter of Israel 1; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999).

⁶ Jozef Verheyden, ed., *The Unity of Luke-Acts* (BETL 142; Leuven: University Press, 1999).

Acts: Lukan Narrative and Greco-Roman Discourse edited by Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele in 2003 presents mostly rhetorical and socio-rhetorical approaches. The volume *A Feminist Companion to the Acts of the Apostles*, published in 2004 by Amy-Jill Levine⁷ collects previously written studies. The collection *Reading Luke: Interpretation, Reflection, Formation*, edited by Craig Bartholomew, Joel Green, and Anthony Thiselton in 2005⁸ focuses on theological readings of Acts. The most recent collection, entitled *Die Apostelgeschichte im Kontext antiker und frühchristlicher Historiographie*, edited by Jörg Frey, Clare Rothschild, and Jens Schröter in 2009⁹ emphasizes again the historical study of the Book of Acts.

I. HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

In his recent commentary on Acts, Scott Spencer describes the commentaries on Acts of C. K. Barrett and Joseph A. Fitzmyer as sharing “a common methodology that might broadly be labeled as historical-critical, following the dominant, traditional mode of ‘scientific’ biblical scholarship since the Enlightenment.”¹⁰ While acknowledging that their work contains “a treasure trove of exegetical insights,” he complains that “Barrett and Fitzmyer break little new ground in their approach to reading Acts.”

This verdict leaves readers of Acts wondering whether Spencer would be classified by Luke as belonging to “the Athenians and the foreigners living there” who “spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new” (Acts 17:21). And Spencer’s statement seems to imply that a commentary needs to break “new ground,” which begs the question what a commentary should and should not do—a form-critical question that we cannot explore here. Among what Spencer calls “innovative reading strategies”¹¹ are authors and studies that canvas “the first-century social-historical world of Acts in light of new discoveries and methodologies,” referring to Bruce Winter and the series *The Book of Acts in Its First-Century Setting*¹² and Jerome Neyrey’s *The Social World of Luke-Acts*.¹³

Now it surely can be argued that these and similar projects do not represent new or “innovative” reading strategies: they are as much “historical critical” as Barrett’s and Fitzmyer’s interests and commitments. This is true especially for *The Book of Acts in Its First-Century Setting* volumes, less so for Neyrey’s

⁷ Amy-Jill Levine, ed., *A Feminist Companion to the Acts of the Apostles* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2004).

⁸ Craig G. Bartholomew, Joel B. Green, and Anthony C. Thiselton, eds., *Reading Luke: Interpretation, Reflection, Formation* (Scripture and Hermeneutics 6; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

⁹ Jörg Frey, Clare K. Rothschild, and Jens Schröter, eds., *Die Apostelgeschichte im Kontext antiker und frühchristlicher Historiographie* (BZNW 162; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009).

¹⁰ F. Scott Spencer, *Journeying Through Acts: A Literary-Cultural Reading* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 21; the following quotation *ibid.*

¹¹ Spencer, *Journeying through Acts*, 21; the following comment *ibid.* 22.

¹² Winter, ed., *Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting* (5 vols.).

¹³ Jerome H. Neyrey, ed., *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (orig. 1991; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993); cf. Jerome H. Neyrey and Eric C. Stewart, eds., *The Social World of the New Testament: Insights and Models* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008).

compilation which, to quote François Bovon, “is less a description of Luke’s social-ethical teaching than the application of recent sociological theories to Luke-Acts.”¹⁴

Newer studies that focus on prominent cities deserve to be mentioned here as well. Especially Ephesus has been served well by the studies of Helmut Koester,¹⁵ Richard Strelan,¹⁶ Paul Trebilco,¹⁷ Stephan Witetschek,¹⁸ and Jerome Murphy-O’Connor.¹⁹ Philippi has been studied by Peter Pilhofer;²⁰ Thessalonica by Christoph vom Brocke;²¹ Pisidian Antioch by Stephen Mitchell and Marc Waelkens.²² It would be very helpful if we had similar studies of Athens, Corinth, and Rome.

I do not find it helpful to regard these studies as using “innovative” approaches. What is innovative is sometimes the terminology that scholars use, but not the questions that guide the reading of Acts. The problem with the “historical-critical method,” as Martin Hengel used to say, as practiced by Rudolf Bultmann, or, in the case of Acts, Hans Conzelmann or Ernst Haenchen, was the fact that it was neither sufficiently historical nor sufficiently critical. The “historical-critical method” as often practiced did not cast the net of historical analysis widely enough: the preoccupation with genre and forms, and sources and redaction, passed for “historical” while primary source material was neglected, whether it was the whole range of Greek and Roman literature, epigraphical material, or archaeological discoveries. This is what the studies of Martin Hengel, Bruce Winter, and others sought to rectify.

The approach to Acts 27 may serve as an example. The historical value of the episode has often been called into question, especially as Paul’s involvement is concerned. Ernst Haenchen writes,

Scholars like Zahn, Ramsay, and E. Meyer think they hear in this the eyewitness Luke’s own account of his experiences. They do not observe with what a constructive imagination the author achieves his goal . . . Paul was no noble traveller with special authority, but a prisoner accused of inciting to riot. He

¹⁴ François Bovon, *Luke the Theologian: Fifty-Five Years of Research (1950–2005)* (2d rev. ed.; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006) 548 n. 233.

¹⁵ Helmut Koester, ed., *Ephesos, Metropolis of Asia: An Interdisciplinary Approach to its Archaeology, Religion, and Culture* (HThS 41; Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995).

¹⁶ Richard E. Strelan, *Paul, Artemis and the Jews in Ephesus* (BZNW 80; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1996).

¹⁷ Paul R. Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius* (WUNT 166; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2004; republished by Eerdmans in 2007).

¹⁸ Stephan Witetschek, *Ephesische Enthüllungen I: Frühe Christen in einer antiken Großstadt* (Biblical Tools and Studies 6; Leuven: Peeters, 2008).

¹⁹ Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *St. Paul’s Ephesus: Texts and Archaeology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008).

²⁰ Peter Pilhofer, *Philippi* (2 vols.; WUNT 87.119; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1995–2000); cf. Peter Pilhofer, *Philippi. Band II: Katalog der Inschriften von Philippi* (2d rev. ed. WUNT 119; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2009).

²¹ Christoph vom Brocke, *Thessaloniki – Stadt der Kassander und Gemeinde des Paulus. Eine frühe christliche Gemeinde in ihrer heidnischen Umwelt* (WUNT 2/125; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2001).

²² Stephen Mitchell and Marc Waelkens, *Pisidian Antioch: The Site and its Monuments* (London: Duckworth, 1998).

therefore had no say in any of the decisions. Just those edifying supplements which extol Paul are additions by the author to a journal of reminiscences which could not report anything special about Paul, but only described the voyage, the danger and the rescue.²³

Some suggest that the author composed a “typical” account of a sea voyage,²⁴ on the basis of sources, perhaps the story of Jonah and Homer’s *Odyssey*,²⁵ into which he inserted the Pauline speeches.²⁶ Some critics concede that “the presence of such motifs does not mean that a particular shipwreck story is fictitious,” while continuing to be committed to skeptical readings, regarding details as suspect that are acknowledged to be historically plausible.²⁷ Comparisons with fictional literature of sea voyages and shipwrecks, which are common in the research on Acts 27, often leave differences unmentioned. Stories of storms based on Homer used rhetorically stylized descriptions of waves piling up like mountains, the battle of opposing winds, thunder and lightning, the panic of the ship’s passengers, and the resignation of the crew after various attempted maneuvers.²⁸ The narrative of Acts 27 lacks such features.²⁹ Luke’s account is prosaic, to the point, without dramatization. Nautical details and terms are mentioned in the narrative exactly where they belong.³⁰ Parallels are limited to elements such as the storm, darkness, waves, the ship, and the failure of various nautical maneuvers—elements which are hardly “literary motifs” since without these elements it is impossible to describe the actions of a ship’s crew in a severe storm or a shipwreck. Comparisons of Acts 27 with accounts of actual sea journeys are rarely carried out. Such comparisons are indeed revealing.³¹ Of particular interest is the account of a sea voyage of Dion who left with an armada of war ships in 357 BC from the Greek island of

²³ Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 709.

²⁴ Martin Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (ed. H. Greeven; New York: Scribner, 1956), 205–6; cf. Peter Seul, *Rettung für alle. Die Romreise des Paulus nach Apg 27,1–28,16* (BBB 146; Berlin: Philo, 2003), who regards the entire episode as a Lucan composition.

²⁵ For the view that Homer’s *Odyssey* influenced Acts 27 see Dennis R. MacDonald, “The Shipwrecks of Odysseus and Paul,” *NTS* 45 (1999) 88–107. The only real parallel is the appearance of a supernatural being which promises rescue (Homer, *Od.* 5.333–53; Acts 27:23–24); also note the phrase ἐπέκειλαν τὴν ναῦν in 27:41.

²⁶ Recently Richard I. Pervo, *Acts* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 2008) 647–48.

²⁷ Pervo, *Acts* 648, with the usual comment that ancient descriptions of shipwrecks were “stereotyped” (ibid. n. 40).

²⁸ Cf. Petronius, *Satyrical* 114.1–3; Achilleus Tatius 3.2.2, 3.2.8.

²⁹ Marius Reiser, “Von Caesarea nach Malta: Literarischer Charakter und historische Glaubwürdigkeit von Act 27,” in *Das Ende des Paulus: Historische, theologische und literaturgeschichtliche Aspekte* (ed. F. W. Horn; BZNW 106; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001) 49–74, 53.

³⁰ Cf. Reinhard G. Kratz, *Rettungswunder. Motiv-, traditions- und formkritische Aufarbeitung einer biblischen Gattung* (EHS 23.123; Frankfurt: Lang, 1979) 336–37, points out that the reason for the inclusion of so many nautical details is the fact that the journey took place in late fall when unusual nautical measures would be necessary. While insightful (Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998] 762, n. 44), one must not forget that any crossing of the Mediterranean from east to west had to contend with the prevailing northwesterly winds.

³¹ For the following see Reiser, “Von Caesarea nach Malta” 53–61. Such accounts are found in Lucian’s *Navigium* 7–9; Plutarch, *Dion*, 25.1–5; Aelius Aristides, *Hieroi Logoi* 2.65–68; 4.32–36; Flavius Arrianus, *Periplus Euxeinou pontou*, 4.1–5.2.

Zacynthos with the goal of reaching Sicily. The narrative of Dion's shipwreck, as related by Plutarch, is closer to Acts 27 than anything we find in fictional literature. The only possible literary motif borrowed from Homer in Acts 27 might be the reference to lightning and thunder, although these phenomena often indeed accompany storms. Plutarch's narrative is sparse, with few adjectives but several vivid details (e.g. punting-poles). Dion's expedition suffers the fate that the crew of Paul's ship is afraid of: their ship is driven into the "Heads of the Great Syrtis" (cf. Acts 27:17), which was feared as particularly dangerous on account of treacherous currents and shifting sand banks.³² A comparison of Acts 27 with ancient accounts of actual shipwrecks demonstrates three points:

(1) Luke's narrative lacks fictional elements as well as literary motifs of the "storm at sea" tradition.

(2) The description of the storm in 27:13–20 is rather prosaic even compared with the account of Plutarch and the authentic reports of Arrianus and Aelius Aristides. The "drama" that is often mentioned is simply the precise observation of events and actions.

(3) The route of the voyage in Acts 27 is realistic, as are the nautical details of the narrative.³³

The fact that Paul's brief speeches in Acts 27 reflect some of the main themes of Acts does not prove that they are literary insertions. Neither Paul's freedom of movement on the ship nor the fact that Paul gave advice to the crew is historically implausible. Paul traveled to Rome not as a convicted criminal but as a defendant who had appealed to the emperor and would thus not have been chained below deck. And since Paul had considerable experience as a traveler, including sea journeys and ship wrecks (in 2 Cor 11:25 Paul mentions three earlier experiences of shipwrecks), he may well have given advice in a dangerous situation (Acts 27:9–11; note that Paul's advice was not followed, despite the fact that he is the "hero" of Luke's story!).³⁴ There is no convincing reason why it should be impossible to accept the historical plausibility and authenticity of Luke's narrative while also accepting that Luke communicates "lessons" for his readers at the same time.³⁵ In this context, the "we" form of

³² Cf. Colin J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (ed. C. H. Gempf; orig. 1989; repr. WUNT 49; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 144, n. 122, for references; cf. Strabo, *Geogr.* 17.3.20; Pliny, *Nat. hist.* 5.4.26; Josephus, *B.J.* 2.381.

³³ Reiser, "Von Caesarea nach Malta" 61. For the following comments see *ibid.* 68–72.

³⁴ Hemer, *Acts* 138–39; Claus-Jürgen Thornton, *Der Zeuge des Zeugen. Lukas als Historiker der Paulusreisen* (WUNT; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1991) 326–27, 336; Reiser, "Von Caesarea nach Malta" 69–72. Cf. C. K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles* (2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994–98) 1179, who points out that "there is nothing improbable in the influence . . . of one man of unshakable faith and imperturbable courage."

³⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (SacPag 5; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992) 456–58, does not want to choose between "historical positivism" and "the other extreme" of reading the narrative in symbolic/allegorical terms, nor regard the episode "as fictional, providing Luke the opportunity (like the authors of Greek and Roman romances) to provide some edification while entertaining his readers; according to Johnson, the "best approach" is to take the narrative as historical with fictional elements, while recognizing that Luke, as all ancient historians, wanted to convey a moral message, "a set of *exempla* for instruction and imitation." In contrast, note Jacob Jervell, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (KEK 3; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998) 612–14, who

the narrative is most plausibly understood as the account of an eyewitness who was a companion of Paul during the journey from Caesarea to Rome.³⁶ Read in the context of Greek-Roman texts, the narrative constitutes an incontestable and irreplaceable source for the history of navigation in the first century.³⁷

Some scholars seem to find the discussion of such historical questions old-fashioned. A recent example is Joel Green. He argues that in “Luke’s narrative enterprise, the historiographical and theological tasks are indistinguishable” and that learning theological interpretation from Luke means “to set aside the hyper-concern with historical validation that has occupied so much of biblical scholarship, even biblical theology, in the modern era, in favor of renewed attention to signification.”³⁸ He does not want to give up the commitment to “validity in interpretation,” but he believes that “authorial intent and/or the meaning of a text at the time and place of its historical address are not the measures by which to determine a valid reading of Scripture.” Green deliberately situates himself *against* the view “that historical data provide the basis for theological interpretation,” a “presumption” that he regards as “out of place” in theological interpretation. His alternative

requires that readers enter cooperatively into the discursive dance with the text, while leaving open the possibility that the text is hospitable to multiple interpretation. Whether Luke’s *intended* readers or his *first, flesh-and-blood* readers in fact placed the role of the Model Reader is an altogether different question, and one that we can hardly begin to answer. And in any case, specifically theological interpretation of Scripture moves beyond a narrow interest in the voice of the human author(s) to accord privilege to the role of this text in divine self-disclosure.³⁹

Green seems to feel at least a bit uneasy when he adds,

use of the category of the Model Reader does not allow us to slide into apathy concerning historical questions . . . the text is present to us as a cultural product, which draw on, actualizes, propagates, and/or undermines the context within which it was generated. The Model Reader supported by this text protects the text from colonization or objectification by the Reader by allowing the text its own voice from within its own socio-cultural horizons.

With this caveat, Green seems to contradict himself. If historical data do *not* provide the basis for theological interpretation, the text is no longer treated as a “cultural product” (to use Green’s term) that is allowed to speak for

argues that the many specific details render the assumption impossible that Acts 27 is a literary creation or the adoption of a profane shipwreck account, that the Paul sections cannot be eliminated from Acts 27 (which makes no sense without the references to Paul), and that the “we sections” suggest Luke as an eyewitness.

³⁶ Cf. Thornton, *Zeuge* 313–41; James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem* (Christianity in the Making 2; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) 999–1000.

³⁷ This is the conclusion of the study of Chantal Reynier, *Paul de Tarse en Méditerranée: Recherches autour de la navigation dans l’Antiquité (Ac 27–28, 16)* (LD 206; Paris: Cerf, 2006) 171–92.

³⁸ Joel Green, “Learning Theological Interpretation and Luke,” in *Reading Luke: Interpretation, Reflection, Formation* (ed. C. G. Bartholomew, J. B. Green, and A. C. Thiselton; Scripture and Hermeneutics 6; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 55–78, here 57; the following quotations *ibid.* 57, 58.

³⁹ Green, “Learning Theological Interpretation and Luke” 57; the following quotations *ibid.* 60, 61.

itself. If the voice of the human author is regarded as representing a “narrow interest,” the door is open for the modern reader to introduce his or her own personal interests, or the interests of his or her social class, which indeed is tantamount to the colonization of the text. If historical validation is ridiculed as a “hyper-concern,” one should note that the history of interpretation has shown that the text and its author fall into a mine of ever-changing fads deep underground when historical questions are declared irrelevant. If the text of Scripture is regarded as open to multiple interpretations, valid readings of Scripture become hostage to the theological agenda as perceived by the modern interpreter, who exercises the only control in the hermeneutical enterprise.

Samuel Byrskog calls the disinterest in the historical reliability of Acts a uniquely American phenomenon, suggesting “a model of historical interpretation that avoids the scholarly antithesis between history and story.”⁴⁰

The interpretation of a text is by definition a historical enterprise, whether the text is twenty years old or 2,000 years old. The journal and website *Librarian* commented on Herta Müller’s winning of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2009 as follows:

Following her criticism of the Romanian Ceaucescu dictatorship in interviews, she was placed under a publication and travelling ban—culminating in death threats by the Secret Service. In 1987, she left Romania. Since then she has lived in Berlin, with her husband, the novelist Richard Wagner, as well as undertaking work as a guest professor at universities in England, the USA and Switzerland. The same central themes re-appear in both Herta Müller’s prose and her poetry: departing, emigrating, leaving, but without ever reaching a destination.⁴¹

Genre remains important. We can read the gigantic Chicago phone book as a poem celebrating shared humanity, as an ode to ethnic diversity, as a sonnet on the relevance of facts and figures, or as the meta-story of the hidden identities of the Chicago mafia. As interesting as such literary games might be, they would miss the point of the book. If we accept that the Book of Acts is a short historical monograph,⁴² or apologetic historiography,⁴³ or a “lively

⁴⁰ Samuel Byrskog, “History or Story in Acts—A Middle Way? The ‘We’ Passages, Historical Intertexture, and Oral History,” in *Contextualizing Acts: Lukan Narrative and Greco-Roman Discourse* (ed. T. C. Penner and C. Vander Stichele; SBLSymS 20; Leiden: Brill, 2003) 257–83, here 258, the following quotation *ibid.* 259.

⁴¹ <http://librarian.lishost.org/?p=2827>, posted Monday, October 12th, 2009 at 12:20 am (accessed September 14, 2010). The press release of the Swedish Academy stated: “The Nobel Prize in Literature for 2009 is awarded to the German author Herta Müller “who, with the concentration of poetry and the frankness of prose, depicts the landscape of the dispossessed” (The Nobel Prize in Literature 2009 - Press Release. Nobelprize.org. 14 Sep 2010 http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2009/press.html).

⁴² Cf. Eckhard Plümacher, “Die Apostelgeschichte als historische Monographie [1978],” in *Geschichte und Geschichten. Aufsätze zur Apostelgeschichte und zu den Johannesakten* (ed. J. Schröter and R. Brucker; WUNT 170; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2004) 1–13; Darryl W. Palmer, “Acts and the Ancient Historical Monograph,” in *The Book of Acts in Its Ancient Literary Setting* (ed. B. W. Winter and A. D. Clarke; The Book of Acts in Its First-Century Setting, Volume 1; Exeter: Paternoster, 1993) 1–29.

⁴³ Gregory E. Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition: Josephos, Luke-Acts, and Apologetic Historiography* (NTSup 64; Leiden: Brill, 1992).

political theology in its time,"⁴⁴ or a biography,⁴⁵ or a "biographical history of important developments in earliest Christianity,"⁴⁶ historical questions are an integral, indeed foundational part of Luke's concerns.⁴⁷ Scholars who do not want to engage historical reality of the first century should, perhaps, seek other objects of inquiry than the Acts of the Apostles.

Historical questions involve matters of historicity. While some interpreters are either tired or embarrassed of interacting with the historicity of Luke's narrative, the historical nature of the genre of Acts renders it impossible to find meaning in narrative structures or handpicked theological observations. A biography or a historical monograph whose author freely invents persons and events is not taken seriously, except postmodern readers who are willing to construct new meanings with or without factual basis. The community defining project or the moral lessons promoted by the author are seriously undermined if the information presented as factual cannot be trusted. If Peter and John and the Twelve were never imprisoned by the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, contrary to Luke's claims, Luke's concern to portray the apostles as fully committed to God's new revelation in Jesus Christ is seriously sabotaged: why would Luke need to invent such stories to much this point? If Ananias and Sapphira are essentially fictional characters, there may not be any lesson to be derived from Acts 5:1–11, as Richard Pervo seems to think. He writes, "The story is not an account of conflict; no principles or issues are contested, nor do parties with different views emerge . . . the narrative is consistent neither in itself or in its context."⁴⁸

A historical approach focuses not only on questions of authenticity and validation, however. As traditionally and properly understood, an historical approach asks *all* questions that are relevant for understanding the text: questions regarding the meaning of words and phrases in the context of Koine Greek; genre and forms; political realities and social and cultural norms and practices in the Greco-Roman world, including Palestinian and Diaspora Ju-

⁴⁴ C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 6.

⁴⁵ Charles H. Talbert, *Literary Patterns, Theological Themes and the Genre of Luke-Acts* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974) 125–40, who classifies Luke-Acts as "that type of biography which dealt with the lives of philosophers and their successors" (p. 134); also Bernhard Heininger, "Das Paulusbild der *Apostelgeschichte* und die antike Biographie," in *Griechische Biographie in hellenistischer Zeit* (ed. M. Erler and S. Schorn; Beiträge zur Altertumskunde 245; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007) 407–29, who compares Luke-Acts with Plutarch's double biographies, with Luke pairing a biography of Jesus with a biography of Jesus' most important disciples, viz. Peter and Paul. For a critical discussion cf. David L. Barr and Judith L. Wentling, "The Conventions of Classical Biography and the Genre of Luke-Acts," in *Luke-Acts: New Perspectives from the Society of Biblical Literature Seminar* (ed. C. H. Talbert; New York: Crossroad, 1984) 63–88; Hemer, *Acts*, 91–94; Loveday C. A. Alexander, *Acts in its Ancient Literary Context: A Classicist Looks at the Acts of the Apostles* (Library of New Testament Studies 298; New York: T & T Clark, 2005) 43–62.

⁴⁶ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), Introduction (forthcoming).

⁴⁷ On Acts as historiography see Frey, Rothschild, and Schröter, *Die Apostelgeschichte im Kontext antiker und frühchristlicher Historiographie*.

⁴⁸ Pervo, *Acts* 132, with reference to Haenchen, *Acts* 239–41 for the last statement; Pervo praises Haenchen for doing "his usual job of deconstructing the rationalizers while using their proposals to expose the holes in the narrative."

daism, both regionally and locally; geography and topography; archaeological and epigraphical material; readings of OT texts; Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions and motifs; literary conventions, for example regarding sermons in synagogues and defense speeches before Roman courts of law; theological convictions and commitments both of the persons portrayed in the narrative and of the author.

An example for the interplay of lexical semantics, epigraphical evidence, historical realities, and theological factors is the interpretation of the phrase ἔδοξεν ἡμῖν in Acts 15:25, which the RSV translates as “it has seemed good to us” (“it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul”; cf. 15:28: “For it has seemed good [ἔδοξεν] to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things”). The phrase translated as “we decided” (ἔδοξεν ἡμῖν) is frequently used in the introduction of official decrees. Greek inscriptions contain over 3,000 examples of the verbal form ἔδοξε/ἔδοξεν, mostly in formulas such as “Decision of the Council and the People” (ἔδοξεν τῆ βολῆ καὶ τῶι δήμῳ), indicating the official decision of the magistrates and the people of a city. The inscriptions from Miletus include the following decree honoring the wheat merchant Thyssos from Mylasa, beginning with the line,

Decision of the people, resolution of the Prytaneis (councillors) (*Ἐδοξε τῶι δήμῳ, γνώμη πρυτανέων), and continues (with some names missing): “the motion was introduced by [. . .] the son of [. . .]: Because Thyssos, the son of [. . .] imported from Mylasa more than 1,000 medimnae [a corn measure] of wheat, because he wished that the citizens could buy at lower prices, and because he accommodated the interests of the city, it shall be the decision of the people that he will be given citizenship rights as well as participation in the cultic rights and offices and everything else in which the Milesians have a part, both to him and to his descendants. The Prytaneis shall assign him by lot to one of the tribes (divisions). This decree shall be recorded on a stele which shall be placed into the sanctuary of Apollo.⁴⁹

What follows in verse 25 is not the personal opinion of some Christian leaders in Jerusalem but an official decree resulting from a decision made in the full assembly of the apostles and elders.⁵⁰ Thus, 15:25 should be translated, “we decided unanimously to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul” (cf. NRSV). The phrase is anything but “a remarkably casual introductory formula.”⁵¹ Rather, it is a reference to a formal

⁴⁹ Peter Herrmann, Wolfgang Günther, and Norbert Ehrhardt, *Milet VI. iii. Inschriften von Milet III: Inschriften n. 1020–1580* (Ergebnisse der Ausgrabungen und Untersuchungen seit dem Jahr 1899; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006) 4 (No. 1023). The *prytaneion* was the symbolic center of the *polis*, “housing its communal hearth (*koinē hestia*), eternal flame, and public dining-room where civic hospitality was offered; usually in or off the agora” (A. J. S. Spawforth, “Prytaneion,” *OCD*, 1268). The *prytaneis* were the councillors or presidents of the city; in Athens, the Council consisted of fifty men chosen by lot from each of the ten *phylai* (“tribes” or divisions); each group of fifty served as *prytaneis* for one-tenth of the year. Cf. D. M. MacDowell and S. Hornblower, “Prytaneis,” *OCD*, 1269.

⁵⁰ Note in 16:4 the term “decisions” or “decrees” (δόγματα) used to describe the demands of the Apostles’ Council.

⁵¹ Craig L. Blomberg, “The Christian and the Law of Moses,” in *Witness to the Gospel. The Theology of Acts* (ed. I. H. Marshall and D. Peterson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 397–416, 408.

decision of the assembly, sanctioned by the Holy Spirit. It was decided that the Gentile Christians shall adhere to certain regulations which are “essentials” (τὰ ἐπιβάναγκες; 15:28), that is, matters that they must adhere to because they are compulsory.⁵² The stipulations of the decree are thus more than “desirable customs.”⁵³ Lexical, epigraphical, and historical considerations regarding the phrase ἔδοξεν ἡμῖν show that James, Peter, and Paul do not believe that the Law has been abrogated in its entirety (note Paul’s protest against such a suggestion in Rom 3:31). Part of the Law continues to be binding, not only on Jewish believers but also on Gentile believers. As Paul states in Rom 7:12, “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.”

II. LITERARY, RHETORICAL, AND NARRATIVE APPROACHES

Some literary approaches take the historical character of Luke-Acts seriously, others ignore it. A few examples must suffice. I will discuss readings of Acts as epic and as fiction, rhetorical critical and socio-rhetorical readings, and narrative readings.

1. *Acts as epic.* Marianne Palmer Bonz reads Acts as an ancient epic which was written in deliberate imitation of, and contrast to, Vergil’s *Aeneid*, which she describes as “a paradigm and inspiration for Luke-Acts.”⁵⁴ Bonz assumes, first, that the author of Luke-Acts knew the *Aeneid* as Roman national epic and wrote his two volume work as an adaptation of the *Aeneid*.⁵⁵ Second, the genre of Luke-Acts is not historiography (nor fiction, nor biography), but a prose epic. Rather than writing “an informed history of Christian origins,” Luke “sought to convey what he perceived the underlying truth of Christian origins: its divine mandated mission, earthly trials, and divinely ordained destiny of continued growth within the largely pagan empire of Rome.”⁵⁶ Third, Luke’s theology of Christian origins is a critique of, and an alternative to, the theology of the origins of imperial Rome.⁵⁷

Bonz’s interpretation of Luke-Acts as epic has been justly criticized.⁵⁸ While it is not impossible that a Greek speaking author in the East could have

⁵² Cf. *LSJ* s.v. ἐπιβάναγκες, “it is compulsory, necessary.” Cf. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007) 513.

⁵³ Blomberg, “Law of Moses” 409.

⁵⁴ Marianne Palmer Bonz, *The Past as Legacy: Luke-Acts and Ancient Epic* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 56.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 25–29.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 188.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 189–93.

⁵⁸ Cf. Alfred Breitenbach, “Epos,” in *Neues Testament und Antike Kultur* (4 vols.; ed. K. Erlemann et al.; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2004–5) 1:99–102, 100–101; Clare K. Rothschild, *Luke-Acts and the Rhetoric of History: An Investigation of Early Christian Historiography* (WUNT 2/175; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004) 8; Loveday C. A. Alexander, “New Testament Narrative and Ancient Epic,” in *Acts in its Ancient Literary Context: A Classicist Looks at the Acts of the Apostles* (LNTS 298; New York: T & T Clark, 2005) 165–82; Stefan Krauter, “Vergils Evangelium und das lukianische Epos? Überlegungen zu Gattung und Theologie des lukianischen Doppelwerkes,” in *Die Apostelgeschichte im Kontext antiker und frühchristlicher Historiographie* (ed. J. Frey, C. K. Rothschild, and J. Schröter; BZNW 162; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009) 214–43.

known the *Aeneid* of Vergil, who died in 19 BC, understanding the complex literary architecture of the work and the ability to engage in literary interaction with it was restricted to an educated elite, specifically a very limited number of members of literary circles.⁵⁹

A second problem is Bonz's understanding of epic. Ancient epics were written in hexameters,⁶⁰ Luke-Acts is not.⁶¹ While ancient philology defined genres, imitation of an author was even more important: thus Vergil "wrote like" Homer; Luke does not "write like" Homer, but imitates Israel's Scriptures in their Greek version, which is not the same.

In distinction from Vergil's *Aeneid*, which is a mythological epic like Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Luke-Acts does not relate events in the distant past but events which happened "among us" (Luke 1:1); if we insist on using the term "epic," Luke-Acts would have to be classified as a historical epic (as Ennius's *Annales* or Lucan's *Bellum civile*).

Bonz's insistence that Luke's interest in the truth behind events, seen in topological-symbolical references, marks his work as epic, plays down the fact that such an interest of the truth behind events, and typological meanings, can be found in historiographical works as well. Tacitus's depiction of the principates of the Julian emperors in terms of a gradual revelation of their perverse character⁶² is an example. Occasions of divine guidance are not unique for the genre "epic" but occur in historical works as well.

Loveday Alexander points out that "reading the biblical narratives alongside the Greek and Roman epics (like reading them alongside the myths of Hollywood) is a valuable imaginative exercise" which can be exciting and illuminating; she insists, however, that such readings "are essentially a-historical: they tell us nothing of deliberate imitation or conscious evocation."⁶³

2. *Acts as fiction.* It was in particular Richard Pervo who suggested that Acts should be read as fiction.⁶⁴ Referring to Ernst Haenchen's view regarding the historical reliability of Acts, Pervo asserts that Luke "was bumbling and incompetent as a historian, yet brilliant and creative as an author."⁶⁵

In this hermeneutical context, Acts 27 is read against the background of popular novels of the Hellenistic period, particularly romances in which a

⁵⁹ Krauter, "Vergils Evangelium" 220, who criticizes the view of Dennis Ronald MacDonald, *Does the New Testament Imitate Homer? Four Cases from the Acts of the Apostles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003) 2, who had argued that "ancient readers could detect allusions invisible to all but the best-trained classicists," as an exaggeration (*ibid.* 220, n. 31).

⁶⁰ Cf. Diomedes, *Ars Grammatica* 3: "carmine hexametro divinarum rerum et heroicarum humanarumque comprehensio;" see also Quintilian, *Inst.* 10.1.51–57; Aristotle, *Poet.* 23–24 (1459a17, b31).

⁶¹ For this and the following points see Krauter, "Vergils Evangelium" 225–31.

⁶² Tacitus, *Ann.* 6.51.2.

⁶³ Alexander, "New Testament Narrative and Ancient Epic" 169.

⁶⁴ Richard I. Pervo, *Profit with Delight: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987). See already Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament* (2d ed.; New York: De Gruyter, 1995–2000) 322: "epic story."

⁶⁵ Pervo, *Profit with Delight* 11.

sea-voyage with storm and shipwreck are a regular feature.⁶⁶ It is argued that Luke gives his readers his version of such a story, defined by the conventions of the genre. Luke includes Acts 27 because he wants to entertain his audience with a traditional story of a sea journey.

It is telling that in his commentary, Pervo is much more careful when he comments on the genre of Acts.⁶⁷ The fact that he discusses the historicity of individual pericopes suggests that he is not really convinced that the category of “fiction” fully explains the genre of Acts. Since he does not believe in the possibility of divine intervention through miracles or dreams, he holds that “too many episodes are, from the perspective of historiography, fictions concocted in conformity with the values of the narrator and framed in accordance with popular taste.”⁶⁸

If Pervo means “contemporary secular historiography,” he may have a point. Compared with ancient historians, in particular Jewish historians, there is little in Acts that is problematic. Pervo’s reading of Acts as fiction seems to owe more to his skepticism regarding the historical references in Acts than to factual similarities with ancient novels in content and presentation.⁶⁹

3. Rhetorical critical and socio-rhetorical readings. Several interpreters have adopted a rhetorical-critical or socio-rhetorical approach to Acts. This is true for Ben Witherington’s commentary on Acts⁷⁰ who continues to be interested in questions of historical reliability, and it is true for authors such as Todd Penner who is “no longer interested primarily (or even at all) in the historicity of the material in Acts but rather in examining the only thing Acts can really yield in the end: a window to Luke’s sociocultural world.”⁷¹ While Penner continues to call his approach “historical-critical,” Joseph Tyson calls it “socio-rhetorical.”⁷² Scott Spencer describes his commentary as a “literary-cultural reading,”⁷³ which he explains as follows:

I embark on the reading of Acts as an exploratory journey, which seems to be an especially apt reading strategy for a book comprised of a series of missionary travel narratives. Literarily, I chart this reading trek step by step as it unfolds, remaining alert to the ‘building of characters’ (cf. Darr), the mounting and ebbing of conflict and suspense, the shifting of narrative viewpoints, and the

⁶⁶ Cf. the works of Chariton of Aphrodisias, Longus, Petronius, Achilleus Tattius, Heliodorus, Xenophon of Ephesus.

⁶⁷ Pervo, *Acts* 14–18.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 18.

⁶⁹ Thus Jörg Frey, “Fragen um Lukas als ‘Historiker’ und den historiographischen Charakter der Apostelgeschichte,” in *Die Apostelgeschichte im Kontext antiker und frühchristlicher Historiographie* (ed. J. Frey, C. K. Rothschild, and J. Schröter; BZNV 162; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009) 1–26, here 16.

⁷⁰ Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

⁷¹ Todd Penner, “Civilizing Discourse: Acts, Declamation, and the Rhetoric of the *Polis*,” in *Contextualizing Acts: Lukan Narrative and Greco-Roman Discourse* (ed. T. C. Penner and C. Vander Stichele; SBL Symposium Series 20; Leiden: Brill, 2003) 65–104, 84.

⁷² Joseph B. Tyson, “From History the Rhetoric and Back: Assessing New Trends in Acts Studies,” in *Contextualizing Acts: Lukan Narrative and Greco-Roman Discourse* (ed. T. C. Penner and C. Vander Stichele; SBL Symposium Series 20; Leiden: Brill, 2003) 23–42, 32.

⁷³ Spencer, *Journeying through Acts*; the following quotation *ibid.* 27.

fulfilling and frustrating of expectations along the way. I maximize the element of discovery, approximating a first reading of the text and resisting the urge to peek ahead and foreclose the story's dramatic tension.

His journey follows a "trifocal cartography" with a focus on the temporal, spatial, and social dimensions of each segment of the Acts journey, a reading strategy characteristic of both narrative criticism and social-science analysis.

In the collection of essays entitled *Contextualizing Acts: Lukan Narrative and Greco-Roman Discourse*, Mikeal Parsons argues that Luke's rhetorical conventions and strategies were shaped by the *progymnasmata* and the Greco-Roman rhetorical traditions.⁷⁴ And Todd Penner uses the exercise of rhetorical declamation to argue that Luke's rhetoric exploits the Greco-Roman value system to create identity, demonstrating that Christianity "can reasonably respond to the social, political, and moral decay and disarray of the empire."⁷⁵

The new *Paideia* commentary series focuses on the narrative or rhetorical flow of the text and on theological issues raised by the text.⁷⁶ Mikeal Parsons's commentary on Acts provides detailed comments on the Hellenistic rhetorical conventions as they are employed by Acts, and comments on the theological function of the individual pericopes. Such rhetorical investigations have contributed much to the understanding of Acts, although it needs to be noted that Parsons largely leaves unexplored the question which Jewish literary and rhetorical conventions shaped Acts, although the reader is pointed to intertextual connections with the OT and Second Temple Judaism in terms of traditions and theological themes.

4. Narrative readings. Scott Spencer, who provides in his Acts commentary a "literary-cultural reading," reads Acts 27:1–28:15 as describing "changes in Paul's status as a prisoner . . . Paul re-establishes his role as a *dynamic prophet and servant* in the mold of Jesus. With this voyage to Rome, it is almost as if he embarks on another missionary expedition."⁷⁷

The qualifier "almost" indicates the problem: while Paul is portrayed as receiving God's promise of a positive outcome of the ship's voyage in the violent storm, and while he is portrayed as urging the crew and passengers of the ship to stay on the ship, as saving the prisoners whom the guards want to kill, and as healing people on Malta, Luke does not describe him explicitly as a prophet, nor does he relate that Paul preached the gospel either on the ship or on Malta, nor does Paul still the storm (like Jesus did), nor does Paul's status as a prisoner change. The view that Acts 27 narrates a "dynamic transformation in Paul's status—from political prisoner back to dynamic missionary"⁷⁸—is

⁷⁴ Mikeal C. Parsons, "Luke and the *Progymnasmata*: A Preliminary Investigation into the Preliminary Exercises," in *Contextualizing Acts: Lukan Narrative and Greco-Roman Discourse* (ed. T. C. Penner and C. Vander Stichele; SBLSymS 20; Leiden: Brill, 2003) 43–63.

⁷⁵ Penner, "Civilizing Discourse: Acts, Declamation, and the Rhetoric of the *Polis*" 102.

⁷⁶ Thus the editors of *Paideia*, Mikeal C. Parsons and Charles H. Talbert; Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts* (*Paideia*; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008) xi–xii.

⁷⁷ Spencer, *Journeying through Acts* 240.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 241.

not borne out by the details of the text. Paul remains a political prisoner, and he is not portrayed as a missionary as he was in Acts 13–26.

Robert Tannehill's narrative reading of Acts 27 leads him to a symbolic understanding of the references to being saved from the storm and the sea (27:20, 31, 34, 43, 44; 28:1):

the insistence that all the ship's company must be saved echoes the promise that 'all flesh will see the salvation of God' in Luke 3:6. Thus the fulfillment of God's promise to Paul that all those in the ship will survive the storm becomes a sign in miniature of God's promise of salvation for all flesh, which has not yet been fulfilled. . . . This unconverted audience is promised salvation from the sea. Paul makes no reference to faith in Jesus Christ as a precondition. God graciously grants salvation to all on the ship, not because of their works or their faith, but simply because it fits God's purpose. In fact, the whole narrative of the voyage to Rome is remarkable for the absence of any indication that Paul proclaimed Jesus either to his companions on the ship or to the people of Malta. The benefits that God brings through Paul do not depend on acceptance of this message . . . the voyage narrative presents a more comprehensive vision of God's saving work, which is not limited to those who hear and accept the gospel.⁷⁹

Tannehill knows that the statement in Acts 13:48 ("as many as had been destined for eternal life became believers") suggests that not all people are ordained to eternal life. He should have pointed also to Acts 4:12 ("There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved"). Instead, he argues,

However, if salvation in Paul's voyage to Rome does have a second level of meaning, this section of Acts represents a new boldness of hope that anticipates the salvation (in some sense) for every individual of a pluralistic community and views persons such as Paul as mediators of this promise. We cannot assume that the implied author reached theological clarity on this issue and held one view consistently.

The repeated references to the significance of Jesus, to faith in Jesus, to God's judgment, to the need of repentance of sinners, in Acts rules out the possibility that Luke allows for a universalism that includes Jews, Christians, and pagans in God's ultimate salvation. Words that have two or more meanings do not automatically assume a second, or third, level of meaning when the "first" meaning of the word is present. During the *banking* crisis of 2009, the *banks* of the Chicago River did not reek of valueless bonds turning into compost. There is no preaching in Acts 27:1–28:15, thus the word σώζειν does not refer to salvation from God's judgment but to rescue from drowning in the sea. The phrase "salvation (in some sense)" demonstrates the problem of Tannehill's interpretation: people on a ship battling hurricane force winds and high seas are not interested in being rescued "in some sense": they want to get to dry land and reach safety. In Luke's as well as in Paul's view, sinners need not salvation "in some sense" but in the very specific sense of forgiveness of sins

⁷⁹ Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation. Vol. II: The Acts of the Apostles* (orig. 1990; repr., Philadelphia: Fortress, 1994) 337; the following quotation *ibid.* 337–38.

and deliverance from God's eternal judgment, possible only through faith in Jesus. Tannehill does not allegorize the sea and the storm, nor the ship, but his interpretation opens the door for a full allegorical reading of the text.

The example of Tannehill's interpretation of Acts 27 can be taken as indicative of the problem posed by a purely narrative interpretation of a biblical text, which might suggest that Luke, at the end of his book, broadens the scope of salvation to all humankind. If we read Acts and its author, as well as the main characters of Acts, in the historical and theological context of the missionaries and theologians in the first century, a universalist interpretation becomes quickly untenable.

Luke Timothy Johnson surmises that Luke wants to provide his readers with "narrative space" so that they have "time to assimilate what has happened to Paul and what will happen to him," in other words a "time of freedom" which allows the readers "to the finality of Paul's condition and the inexorability of his future."⁸⁰ Whether the drama of the sea voyage, the storm, and the shipwreck provides such "space to assimilate" is debatable. Most of Luke's readers, or rather listeners, presumably, would have been so caught up in the details of the narrative that they would not have had time to reflect on Paul's arrest in Jerusalem and on his trial in Caesarea while hearing Acts 27. These and similar answers fail to satisfy. There were many opportunities earlier in the book to include entertaining stories of dangers at sea and on the road. Coming right after the extended accounts of Paul's arrest and imprisonment, Luke's readers are not looking for literary breathing space or comic relief so much as for an exposition on Paul's fate.

While narrative readings often help us to see connections with texts that do not belong to the immediate context of a pericope, there are several inherent problems in narrative criticism that we must not ignore. Using terminology such as "story," "plot," and "scene" or "character development" constitutes a problem, at least outside of fiction. If Acts belongs to the genre of historical literature, then approaches developed from studying fiction may or may not be relevant. Authors who write history do not "create narrative worlds."⁸¹ Peter Wilson certainly tells a "story" in his history of Europe's Thirty Years War,⁸² but he does not create a plot nor is he interested in character development. Martin Gilbert's biography of Winston Churchill also tells a "story." But "plot" or "scene" are rather inappropriate terms when reading Gilbert. It might be of academic interest how Martin Gilbert depicts Churchill in his eight-volume biography⁸³ or in his one-volume condensed version⁸⁴ in comparison with Henry Pelling's biography.⁸⁵ While both authors are selective, neither

⁸⁰ Johnson, *Acts* 458; the following quotation *ibid.*

⁸¹ Mark L. Strauss, *Four Portraits, One Jesus: An Introduction to Jesus and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007) 79.

⁸² Peter H. Wilson, *The Thirty Years War: Europe's Tragedy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

⁸³ Randolph S. Churchill and Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill* (8 vols.; London: Heinemann, 1966–88), with over 20,000 pages; in addition there are 23 companion volumes.

⁸⁴ Martin Gilbert, *Churchill* (New York: Holt, 1991), with 1066 pages.

⁸⁵ Henry Pelling, *Winston Churchill* (London: Macmillan, 1974).

creates a narrative world or a plot. Reviewers in the *Times Literary Supplement* or in the *New York Review of Books* do not speak of narrative worlds or plots when discussing works of history or biography. If indeed genre is important, and if Acts is historiography—certainly written with literary skill and with theological concerns—then this must inform how we read this book.

III. SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Sociological analysis can be broadly grouped into two main approaches. On the one hand are scholars such as Edwin Judge,⁸⁶ Gerd Theißen,⁸⁷ and others who investigate the social contexts and the social references of NT texts, and more generally the origins and development of early Christianity, without positing a particular sociological theory. On the other hand are scholars such as Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey who apply modern sociological methods and theories to NT texts in order to explain patterns of behavior which are characteristic for specific groups of people who live in a particular time and in a particular place.⁸⁸ The first approach works “from the bottom up” while the second approach works “from the top down.”

The first approach is most plausibly regarded as belonging to historical analysis, if “history” is understood to be more than a series of events. Questions informed by sociological concerns are often illuminating, although often we do not have the data to answer many of the questions that are being raised. Howard Clark Kee, for example, asks the following questions: To which groups to the people mentioned in the text belong? What was the social dynamic of these groups? What goals did these groups pursue? How did they attempt to reach these goals? What power structures existed within these groups? Did these groups include or exclude women? What are the limits of acceptable behavior?⁸⁹ While it would be helpful to know the answer to these questions, for example, for the Pharisees of the first century, there is very little evidence that allows us to write a social “profile” of the Pharisees along the lines suggested by these questions.

A non-ideological, historical approach to questions of group dynamics and group structure can also be seen in Gerd Theißen’s discussion of Acts 12:1–4.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ See the collection of essays of E. A. Judge in Edwin A. Judge, *Social Distinctives of the Christians in the First Century: Pivotal Essays* (ed. D. M. Scholer; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007); and Edwin A. Judge, *The First Christians in the Roman World: Augustan and New Testament Essays* (ed. J. R. Harrison; WUNT 229; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008).

⁸⁷ See the collection of essays of Gerd Theißen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978); Gerd Theißen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (orig. 1982; repr., Philadelphia: Fortress, 2004).

⁸⁸ Cf. Jerome H. Neyrey, ed., *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (orig. 1991; repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993).

⁸⁹ Howard Clark Kee, *Knowing the Truth: A Sociological Approach to New Testament Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 65–67.

⁹⁰ Gerd Theißen, “Die Verfolgung unter Agrippa I. und die Autoritätsstruktur der Jerusalemer Gemeinde. Eine Untersuchung zu Act 12,1–4 und Mk 10,35–45,” in *Das Urchristentum in seiner literarischen Gestalt* (FS Jürgen Becker; ed. U. Mell and U. B. Müller; BZNW 100; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999) 263–89.

He suggests that the change in the structure of the Jerusalem church has to be understood in the context of the persecution under Agrippa I which was triggered by the religious policies of the emperor Claudius and by Agrippa's efforts to becalm Judea after the Caligula crisis and to direct the tension in the region to a minority in Jewish society. The persecution of a small circle of leading apostles in Jerusalem promotes the replacement of charismatic authorities who had been Jesus' leading disciples by a functional legitimization of authority. A crisis prompted the early Christians "to favor 'proven' authorities who had been proven and tested in their service for the community over against 'chosen' authorities, without losing the charismatic character of authority."⁹¹

The second approach is exemplified by the essays published in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, a volume edited by Jerome Neyrey.⁹² Neyrey defines the approach of "social scientific criticism," in deliberate contrast to historical criticism, as follows:

History is about the story line and the sequence of events of the past as relevant to the historian's contemporaries. History is ". . . the study of human societies, with the emphasis on the differences between them and on the changes which have taken place in each over time."⁹³ The social sciences, in contrast, look to typical, repeated patterns of social interaction characteristic of a given group of human beings in a specific time and place. . . . Historical criticism usually examines discrete data, specific actions, times, places, and events. Social scientific criticism looks to the broader, more encompassing social system and the coherence and interrelation of its component parts. This more inclusive perspective, focused on common patterns of perception, organization, and behavior, requires a more comprehensive and therefore higher level of generalization. It necessitates greater abstraction.⁹⁴

While this approach has led to illuminating and interesting readings, it is sometimes difficult to determine whether a particular reading owes more to the generalizations of sociological and cultural anthropological theories derived from an analysis of modern societies than to a serious analysis of Greek, Roman, or Jewish societies. Thus, Carolyn Osiek warns that social analysis "used rigidly and exclusively . . . can isolate us from the text rather than join us to it, by stressing differences and destroying links. But used in conjunction with historical, literary, and liberation methods, it promises to yield good fruit for the harvest of biblical interpretation."⁹⁵

⁹¹ Theißen, "Verfolgung unter Agrippa I" 288.

⁹² Jerome H. Neyrey, *Social World*.

⁹³ Peter Burke, *Sociology and History* (Controversies in Sociology; London: Allen & Unwin, 1980) 13.

⁹⁴ Jerome H. Neyrey, "Preface," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (ed. J. H. Neyrey; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991) xvii, xiii.

⁹⁵ Carolyn Osiek, "The New Handmaid: The Bible and the Social Sciences," *Theological Studies* 50 (1989) 260–78, here 278. See also the critique of Marianne Sawicki, *Crossing Galilee: Architectures of Contact in the Occupied Land of Jesus* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000) 5–6, 37, 65–67; Morten Hørning Jensen, *Herod Antipas in Galilee: The Literary and Archaeological Sources on the Reign of Herod Antipas and its Socio-Economic Impact on Galilee* (2d ed.; orig. 2006; repr. WUNT 2/215; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010) 30–34.

Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey, in an essay on personality in the first century, working with the concept of “social psychology built upon a circum-Mediterranean *modal personality* that includes the idiosyncrasies of the culture and distinctiveness of social structure in that given time and place.”⁹⁶ They argue, “We submit that what characterized first-century Mediterranean people was not individualistic, but ‘dyadic’ or group-oriented personality. For people of that time and place, the basic, most elementary unit of social analysis is not the individual person but the dyad, a person in relation with and connected to at least one other social unit, in particular, the family.”⁹⁷

A “dyadic personality,” a modern anthropological category, is described as “one that needs another person constantly to know who he or she is.”⁹⁸ When applied to the NT, the following sweeping inference is made: “To understand the persons who populate the pages of the New Testament, then, it is important *not* to consider them as individualistic. They did not seek a personal, individualistic savior or anything else of a personal, individualistic sort. . . . Group-oriented persons internalize and make their own what others say, do, and think about them because they believe it is necessary, if they are to be human beings, to live out the expectations of others.”⁹⁹

The emphasis on the difference between modern, North American individualism and patterns of values and modes of behavior in the first century is certainly important. However, there are several problems with this approach. First, Malina’s and Neyrey’s use of the concept of dyadic personality ignores contemporary social psychological models which use the concept to describe the behavior of individuals and groups in Western societies.¹⁰⁰ The assumed difference between modern Western individualism and (ancient) Mediterranean “group orientation” is exaggerated. Second, the larger methodological problem is the premise of a single “Mediterranean culture” which overlooks local and regional variations.¹⁰¹ Third, the concept of dyadic personality cannot explain the behavior of John the Baptist or Jesus, or the witness of Peter at Pentecost and before the Sanhedrin, or the missionary work of Paul—unless we describe them as “deviants.” Fourth, if the concept of dyadic personality includes the tendency “to presume that human character

⁹⁶ Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, “First-Century Personality: Dyadic, Not Individualistic,” in *The Social World of Luke-Acts. Models for Interpretation* (ed. J. H. Neyrey; orig. 1991; repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993) 67–96, 68.

⁹⁷ Malina and Neyrey, “First-Century Personality” 72–73.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* 73; the authors refer to George M. Foster, “The Dyadic Contract: A Model for the Social Structure of a Mexican Peasant Village,” *American Anthropologist* 63 (1961) 1173–92; Henry A. Selby, *Zapotec Deviance: The Convergence of Folk and Modern Sociology* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1974).

⁹⁹ Malina and Neyrey, “First-Century Personality” 72, 73.

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, Dale Griffin and Richard Gonzalez, “Models of Dyadic Social Interaction,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society London Biological Sciences* 358 (2003) 573–81; Margarete E. Vollrath, Franz J. Neyer, Eivind Ystrom, Markus A. Landolt, “Dyadic Personality Effects on Family Functioning in Parents of Newly Hospitalized Children,” *Personal Relationships* 17 (2010) 27–40.

¹⁰¹ Thus the critique of David G. Horrell, “Social-Scientific Interpretation of the New Testament,” in *Social-Scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation: Retrospect and Prospect* (ed. D. G. Horrell, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999) 3–28, 15.

is fixed and unchanging,”¹⁰² it seems difficult if not impossible to explain the connection that Luke establishes between the Holy Spirit and the changed behavior of converts to faith in Jesus.¹⁰³ Fifth, some people described in Acts certainly “seek a personal, individualistic savior:” when about 3,000 people were immersed in one of the immersion pools near the Temple Mount (Acts 2:41), they did so individually, following Peter’s challenge to “repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38), acting in conscious departure from the “group think” of both the Jewish leadership and the Jewish population of Jerusalem who, as Peter had reminded them in his speech, had “crucified and killed” Jesus with the help of those outside the law (Acts 2:23). And “group orientation” can explain neither the conversion of Paul nor that of Sergius Paulus.

In a recent study, Darin Land describes the apostles in Acts as “manager-leaders” who were “focused on maintaining group-status, controlling internal group structure, and defending group honor” acting according to the culturally expected norms for group leaders in the first century.¹⁰⁴ The reconstruction of “norms for group leaders” on the basis of sociological models, while instructive in some respects, misses the unique status of the twelve (!) apostles as symbolizing the identity of the church as the messianic people of God, functioning as the symbolic representatives of Israel and of God’s kingdom which is now being restored.¹⁰⁵ Anthony Blasi is correct when he comments,

In light of these dilemmas, one should be cautious about overly simple and formulaic approaches to the use of the modern social sciences in inquiry into ancient Christianity. Contemporary social scientific concepts and models are not “cookie cutters” that can stamp out preestablished shapes in an otherwise formless dough of ancient information. The social scientific concepts and models are not “answers” to be substituted for missing evidence but questions. Science in general is not a shortcut; it is an art that requires practice.¹⁰⁶

IV. FEMINIST APPROACHES

When I speak here of “feminist approaches” to the study of Acts, the term “feminist” can be understood in the narrow sense of ideological feminism, and in the broader sense of reading strategies informed by women’s concerns.

¹⁰² Malina and Neyrey, “First-Century Personality” 75.

¹⁰³ See, for example, Matthias Wenk, *Community-Forming Power: The Socio-Ethical Role of the Spirit in Luke-Acts* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

¹⁰⁴ Darin H. Land, *The Diffusion of Ecclesiastical Authority: Sociological Dimensions of Leadership in the Book of Acts* (Princeton Theological Monograph; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2008), 139–52 quotation p. 151.

¹⁰⁵ See Andrew C. Clark, “The Role of the Apostles,” in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (ed. I. H. Marshall and D. Peterson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 167–90, 173–81; Peter Bolt, “Mission and Witness,” in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (ed. I. H. Marshall and D. Peterson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 191–214, 196–202.

¹⁰⁶ Anthony J. Blasi, “General Methodological Perspective,” in *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Science Approaches* (ed. A. J. Blasi, J. Duhaime, and P.-A. Turcotte; Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002) 61–79, here 78.

Amy-Jill Levine, in the introduction to the collection of essays entitled *Feminist Companion to the Acts of the Apostles*, asserts that “Acts can be read as promoting women’s discipleship . . . , leadership roles in the nascent church, prophetic voice, and public spirit.”¹⁰⁷ She recognizes that “[w]hile it is evident that Acts has been used to promote harmful agendas, be they sexist or anti-Jewish or colonialist, readers will continue to debate whether the cues for such conclusions are embedded in the text or spring from the minds and experiences of interpreters.”

The essays in this volume range from explicitly feminist approaches to studies that more generally offer observations relevant for feminist analysis. Janice Capel Anderson belongs to the first category, seen in the fact that she begins by emphasizing her social location defined according to ethnicity/race, age, class, sexual orientation, religion/denomination, gender, and profession.¹⁰⁸ She emphasizes that all forms of social inequality, which typically have gender as a component, involve the reader’s inevitable subjectivity, and that readers, when have learned to recognize narrative strategies, can consciously choose to accept or to deny the values that the author promotes.

Levine perceptively comments in her introduction that for some readers today, the feminist hermeneutical program as outlined by Anderson has several potential problems. First, the autobiographical emphasis on personal identification can easily serve to preclude critique. Second, if feminist readers assert that all readings are the result of social location, one may conclude that therefore all readings are correct, an approach that risks devolving into solipsism. Third, the use of labels such as “male-stream” or “patriarchal” can easily reinforce for readers the view that “feminist” means hatred or at least distrust of men and risks ignoring or minimizing the experience of non-powerful men.¹⁰⁹

Ideological feminist readings for which patriarchal repression is a central hermeneutical category are offered by Luise Schottroff. She interprets Paul’s and his companions’ hesitancy to accept Lydia’s invitation to stay in her house as “refusals of Christian men to grant to women, whose baptism they have just authorized or performed, those baptismal rights that concern their role as women. Lydia argued, implicitly or explicitly, on the basis of the Christian baptismal confession, which we know from Gal. 3:28; the Paul of the Acts of the Apostles behaved similarly to the Paul of the *Acts of Thecla*: because you are a woman, you are seducible and a seductress and therefore dangerous as a hostess or a leader of the Christian community.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Amy-Jill Levine, “Introduction,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Acts of the Apostles* (ed. A.-J. Levine; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2004) 1–21, 1; the following quotation *ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Janice Capel Anderson, “Reading Tabitha: A Feminist Reception History [1994],” in *A Feminist Companion to the Acts of the Apostles* (ed. A.-J. Levine; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2004) 22–48; first published in Janice Capel Anderson, “Reading Tabitha: A Feminist Reception History,” in *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament* (ed. E. S. Malbon and E. V. McKnight; JSNTSup 109; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 108–44.

¹⁰⁹ Amy-Jill Levine, “Introduction” 3.

¹¹⁰ Luise Schottroff, *Lydia’s Impatient Sisters: A Feminist Social History of Early Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 110; the following quotations *ibid.* This study was origi-

Schottruff goes on to assert that Lydia addresses the contradiction present in Paul's refusal as she fights both for political resistance (the offer of hospitality is an offer of political protection) and for Christian acceptance, something that "Paul does not grasp." Schottruff asserts, "It is clear that only the critique of women's role, made possible by Christian baptism, permits women to engage in political resistance; it is also clear that men, who do not participate in that critique, undermine women's existence. The only thing that helps is women's and men's critique of patriarchy (in an all-embracing sense of that term). Resistance to economic and political oppression that shies away from including gender roles will not lead to real liberation."

Schottruff's interpretation is guided not so much by historical factors and possibilities nor by an even-handed evaluation of the theology of Luke and of Paul, but by modern concerns concerning political resistance and gender roles.

In her book *Women and Worship at Philippi: Diana/Artemis and Other Cults in the Early Christian Era*, Valerie Abrahamsen argues that in view of the prevalence of the female in Greco-Roman religion, particularly in Philippi, this element was suppressed or altered in early Christianity.¹¹¹ The feminist agenda can be seen in her assertion that early Christians knew same-sex missionary couples.¹¹² This assumption is based on funerary inscriptions which indicate that early Christians buried two or more women together.¹¹³ Since deaconesses, who are mentioned in some of these inscriptions, had to have had children, Abrahamsen's interpretation is unconvincing.¹¹⁴

Ivoni Richter Reimer argues in *Women in the Acts of the Apostles: A Feminist Liberation Perspective*, that despite Luke's androcentric narrative which focuses on the male personalities of Peter and Paul, Luke's female characters work independently of males, sometimes appearing as head of house churches (Mary in Jerusalem, Lydia in Philippi) and as involved "in the mission, in philosophy, and in prophecy."¹¹⁵ She concludes, "The Acts of the Apostles reflects no particular tendency to keep women at home and subject them to men, i.e. to their husbands. Even though it is silent about important women like Mary Magdalene, it is still far from what was written, at about the same time as its composition, in the Pastoral letters and similar works . . . regarding the subordination of women and slaves."¹¹⁶

nally published as Luise Schottruff, *Lydias ungeduldige Schwestern. Feministische Sozialgeschichte des frühen Christentums* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994).

¹¹¹ Valerie A. Abrahamsen, *Women and Worship at Philippi: Diana/Artemis and Other Cults in the Early Christian Era* (Portland: Astarte Shell, 1995).

¹¹² Abrahamsen, *Women and Worship at Philippi* 155, 158.

¹¹³ Denis Feissel, *Recueil des inscriptions chrétiennes de Macédonie au III^e au VI^e siècle* (BCHSup 8; Paris: Boccard, 1983) 39–40 (No. 20, dating to the 5th/6th century), 42 (no. 23, dating to the 5th/6th century), 204–5 (No. 241, dating to the 4th/5th century).

¹¹⁴ Thus even Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 351–52.

¹¹⁵ Ivoni Richter Reimer, *Women in the Acts of the Apostles: A Feminist Liberation Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 260. This work is the translation of Ivoni Richter Reimer, *Frauen in der Apostelgeschichte des Lukas. Eine feministisch-theologische Exegese* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1992), a dissertation written under Luise Schottruff.

¹¹⁶ Richter Reimer, *Women in the Acts of the Apostles* 267.

Richter Reimer sees Sapphira in Acts 5 as an example of how women should *not* function: she is punished precisely because she consents to the conspiracy of her husband.

Gail O'Day has written the commentary on Acts in *The Women's Bible Commentary*.¹¹⁷ In the introduction, she writes under the heading "Acts and Women,"

Women have a limited role in the accomplishment of Luke's purposes in Acts. Luke frames Acts around the ministries of Peter and especially Paul, because they embody for him the movement of the gospel from Jews to Gentiles. The ministries of all other teachers and leaders, male and female, are diminished as a result of this emphasis. It is important therefore to remember that Acts does not contain a representative picture of church leadership. In addition, Luke's desire to present a picture of Christianity that would win favor in the Roman Empire led to a further diminishment of women's roles in Acts. Women were second-class citizens in the Roman Empire; public leadership roles were all held by men. . . . Luke shapes his treatment of women in Acts to conform to this Roman model.

While much of this description is plausible, Luke's treatment of women such as Lydia and Priscilla calls into question the claim that Luke was hostage to Roman views of women and that he consequently diminished the role of women in early Christianity. More plausible than the assumption that Luke changed early Christian realities is the view that gender roles in the Jewish and Greco-Roman world largely determined what women could and could not do.

A thoroughly informative, historically sensitive, and exegetically driven discussion of women in the early church has been presented recently by Lynn Cohick.¹¹⁸

V. POSTCOLONIAL APPROACHES

The commentary on Luke-Acts, written by Virginia Burrus, in the *Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*,¹¹⁹ situates Luke's position, which is labeled "ideological," in the context of contemporary, that is, recent, theories of empire and resistance. Focusing on the relationship between Luke's narrative and the political and economic Roman-Judean setting, Burrus finds a mixed message: there is an ominous celebration of empire, and at the same time an ambivalent political subversion. Commenting on continuities and discontinuities from the Gospel of Luke to the Book of Acts, she finds a shift from the time of the Gospel, which is located in the distant past, "into

¹¹⁷ Gail R. O'Day, "Acts," in *The Women's Bible Commentary* (exp. ed.; ed. C. A. Newsom and S. H. Ringe; Louisville: Westminster/Knox, 1998) 394–402; the following quotation *ibid.* 395.

¹¹⁸ Lynn H. Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009).

¹¹⁹ Virginia Burrus, "Luke-Acts," in *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings* (ed. F. F. Segovia and R. S. Sugirtharajah; *The Bible and Postcolonialism* 13; London: T & T Clark, 2007) 133–55.

dialogue with an ambiguously open-ended present.”¹²⁰ Burrus concludes her commentary by affirming the political possibilities of reading Luke’s work as an ambiguous novelistic text which is unstable and hybrid.

In his epilogue to the *Postcolonial Commentary*, Rasiah Sugirtharajah argues that texts which were excluded from the Bible by the process of canonization ought to be included, and that postcolonial exegesis should not affirm monotheism but embrace the polytheistic context from which the biblical texts emerged.¹²¹ These concerns and demands illustrate on the one hand a model for a politically engaged reading of the Bible, while they demonstrate at the same time the pitfalls of ideological commitments when the latter control not only the application of biblical readings but the exegesis itself.

VI. CANONICAL AND THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Robert Wall presents a canonical reading of Acts in his commentary in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*.¹²² This approach does not affect his investigation into and explanation of historical or literary matters, but it affects his explanation of Luke’s theological emphases. While narrative approaches also focus on the final form of the text, the “logic” of a canonical interpretation elevates in importance “the intracanonical relationships between Acts and the four Gospels and between Acts and the two collections of letters (especially Pauline) that follow it. . . . No longer does the biblical theologian consider the thematic interests of Acts only in terms of the congruence with those found in Luke’s Gospel. Rather, the theological contribution Acts makes to *biblical* theology is now measured as an indispensable part of an integral whole.”¹²³

Wall carries out this program with uneven consistency. To point to just one example, he does not note the parallels between the Areopagus speech in Acts 17:22–31 and Paul’s letters, which include the following.¹²⁴ (1) Some of the statements about God (vv. 23–25) are similar to Rom 1:4, 19–20, 23; 2:5, 16. (2) The reference to God’s revelation in creation (v. 27) has parallels in Rom 1:19. (3) The accusation that Gentiles have abandoned the worship of the true God by venerating images (v. 29) is found in the NT only here and in Rom 1:23. (4) The reference to repentance and to God’s forbearance on account of the Gentiles’ ignorance (v. 30) is found in 1 Cor 15:15, 34; 1 Thess 1:9; and Rom 3:25–26. (5) The reference to a future day of judgment, for which God has appointed a man on account of the fact that he rose from the dead (v. 31) has a parallel in Rom 1:4, 2:5, 16.

¹²⁰ Burrus, “Luke-Acts” 146.

¹²¹ Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah, “Postcolonial and Biblical Interpretation: The Next Phase,” in *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings* (ed. F. F. Segovia and R. S. Sugirtharajah; *The Bible and Postcolonialism* 13; London: T & T Clark, 2007) 455–66.

¹²² Robert W. Wall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (*The New Interpreter’s Bible* Vol. 10; ed. L. E. Keck; Nashville: Abingdon, 2002) 1–368.

¹²³ Wall, *Acts* 26, 27.

¹²⁴ Cf. Armin D. Baum, “Paulinismen in den Missionsreden des lukanischen Paulus,” *ETHL* 82 (2006) 405–36, 424–33.

We return to Joel Green and his version of theological interpretation.¹²⁵ In Green's opinion, theological interpretation "is less method, and more an intrinsically self-involving theological vision of God, church, Scripture, and world, bound together within the economy of salvation, with the people of God cast as pilgrims on a journey whose destination is known and achieved only by embracing, indwelling, and embodying the divine story."¹²⁶

This summary reflects Green's conviction that "the plot of Luke's narrative is thus theologically (not christologically) determined." In Green's view, Acts is an exercise in "world-shaping" in which the primary obstacle that needs to be overcome is ignorance. He argues, "The human situation in Lukan thought was one characterized by ignorance needing correcting rather than sin needing forgiveness," where ignorance is "less as the state of 'lacking information,' but more in terms of 'possessing a faulty imagination. Thus, ignorance for Luke is actually misunderstanding—a failure at the most profound level to grasp adequately the purpose of God."¹²⁷

Green either rejects or is unaware of Christoph Stenschke's answer to Jens-Wilhelm Taeger. While Luke's portrait of the Gentiles prior to coming to faith indeed includes the notion of ignorance, we also find active rejection of God's purpose and revelation in history, idolatry, materialism, moral-ethical sins, bondage to the power of Satan, coming under God's judgment. In Luke's narrative, Gentiles do not simply "recognize" their plight: they need God's saving intervention:

Against Taeger, Luke's comprehensive portrait of Gentiles prior to faith attests their need of salvation. . . . Correction does not replace but rather accompany and follow [*sic*] salvation. The majority of Luke's references to systematic instruction concern Gentile Christians, people already on an essentially different road. . . . Gentiles do not recognize and alter their state themselves. The initiative comes *ab extra*. Even their response and conversion are often attributed to divine activity. . . . Taeger overestimates the human capacity and contribution in the appropriation of salvation because the limits of correction are not regarded sufficiently. . . . At the same time Taeger underestimates the work of God in the Gentiles' salvation.¹²⁸

Theological readings are sometimes symbolical readings which read theological concerns into the text. Symbolical readings which read Acts 27 as parallel to Luke 23–24, that is, as an "account of death and resurrection"¹²⁹ are un-

¹²⁵ Note Markus N. A. Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (Studies in Theological Interpretation; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006) 158, who asserts that "the bandwagon of 'theological interpretation' and 'ecclesial reading' is in danger of becoming overpopulated with a variety of very diverse, not to say irreconcilable, approaches." For a survey and critique see John C. Poirier, "'Theological Interpretation' and its Contradistinctions," *TynBul* 61 (2010) 105–18.

¹²⁶ Green, "Learning Theological Interpretation and Luke" 66; the following quotation *ibid*.

¹²⁷ Green, "Learning Theological Interpretation and Luke" 71, following Jens-Wilhelm Taeger, *Der Mensch und sein Heil. Studien zum Bild des Menschen und zur Sicht der Bekehrung bei Lukas* (StNT 14; Gütersloh: Mohn, 1982), particularly p. 37: "Der Mensch ist kein salvandus, sondern ein corrigendus."

¹²⁸ Christoph W. Stenschke, *Luke's Portrait of Gentiles prior to their Coming to Faith* (WUNT 2/108; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999) 386, 387.

¹²⁹ Pervo, *Acts* 652–53.

convincing, despite the presence of some common themes: Paul neither dies nor is raised from the dead.

An innovative contribution to both a narrative and a theological reading of Acts is the work of Matthew Sleeman.¹³⁰ Seeking to address the notion of Jesus' presence *and* absence in the narrative of Acts, he distinguishes between firstspace (external, material, or physical space, the realm of conventional geography), secondspace (mental or theoretical representations of space, articulated, for example, in written text or architectural plans), and thirdspace (imaginative or creative space, a form of spatial awareness that denies dualism by examining spaces as simultaneously real, imagined, and more).¹³¹ Sleeman finds

a foundational coherence for spatiality within Acts. Crucially, then, Christ is not omnipresent in Acts: his firstspace location is *in heaven*. Immediately Sojan categories begin to assist with the problematic of presence and absence: firstspace is not the totality of spatial consideration but, nonetheless, Christ's firstspace specificity in heaven avoids the annihilation of space by ubiquity and evokes an ascension geography to be embodied among the earthly believers. . . . Christ's ascension is . . . not a discrete narrative feature concluded by 1:11 or only later alluded to in isolated verses such as 3:21. Instead, it exercises an unceasing influence over the whole narrative and its theology. . . . As a result of the present reading, any reading for the spatiality of Acts cannot ignore the heavenly dimension of the narrative. Earthbound readings are no longer legitimate, given the rendering of space identified in this study. References to οὐρανός ("heaven") are one conduit for this thirdspace impulse within the narrative. . . . The trailing off of οὐρανός reference within Acts after 11:18 coincides with the climactic labelling of believers as "Christians" in 11:26. This ascription reflects a distinctive community formation reflecting heavenly thirdspace, which combines Jews, gentile and "more." The "and more" coheres within the label's acknowledgement of the Christ now in heaven who determines this hybrid identity within embodied earthly expressive organisations and emotional communities.¹³²

While Sleeman's exegesis is suggestive, the jargon is at times exasperatingly obtuse, a fact that he acknowledges: "Reading for spatiality requires different conceptualisations, new vocabulary and redefined terms. . . . Soja can be difficult to understand, sometimes conceptually obtuse. The persistent challenge has been to use Soja's analytical categories of firstspace, secondspace and thirdspace with maximal clarity and accuracy, so that they illuminate the spatiality of Acts rather than confuse it by introducing neologisms or questionable value."¹³³ One wonders whether Sleeman could have investigated the manner in which Jesus' ascension and heavenly location influences Luke's subsequent narrative without Sojan spatial jargon and arrived at the same results.

¹³⁰ Matthew Sleeman, *Geography and the Ascension Narrative in Acts* (SNTSMS 146; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹³¹ Sleeman, *Geography* 44–45, with reference to Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996) 11. Sleeman adopts Soja's concept of thirdspace.

¹³² Sleeman, *Geography* 51, 257.

¹³³ *Ibid.* 256.

Commentaries on Acts that describe themselves as consciously “theological” have not really been successful so far. Matthew Skinner offers a brief summary of major themes,¹³⁴ and Jaroslav Pelikan’s commentary, which is not very convincingly based on the Western text, re-labeled *textus a patribus receptus* (text accepted by the church fathers), presents the theological content of Acts not through a careful interpretation of the text but through comments on eighty-four individual theological issues or *loci communes*.¹³⁵ This approach means for Paul’s Areopagus speech in Acts 17 that we are treated to comments on 17:23 under the heading “apophatic theology: negation as the affirmation of metaphysical transcendence,” and on 17:24–29 under the heading “one God the Father, All-Powerful Maker” with comments on the first article of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, on the Book of Genesis, and brief references to Thomas Aquinas, Augustine, Basil, and Gregory of Nyssa. Neither the various theological emphases of Paul’s speech nor the use that the church fathers and later theologians made of the speech come into view.

VII. SYNTHETIC INTERPRETATION: COMBINATION OF METHODS

Scholars who want to do justice to the historical dimension of Acts while utilizing more recent methodological approaches find it difficult to describe what they are doing. Osvaldo Padilla’s *The Speeches of Outsiders in Acts* may serve as an example for the challenge that the proliferation of diverse methodological approaches to Acts presents.¹³⁶ The subtitle *Poetics, Theology and Historiography* signals that he is interested in rhetorical, historical, and theological questions. He describes his methodological approach as being somewhere on the trajectory “between composition criticism and narrative criticism,”¹³⁷ while protesting against the tendency of some narrative critics to bracket out “historical queries,” insisting on not severing the “implied author” from the “real author,” utilizing categories of rhetorical criticism and of various literary techniques such as dramatic irony, combined with the hope of learning something about how Luke’s work helps form and reinforce a Christian community’s identity. As far as the analysis of speeches is concerned, Padilla asserts that the orientation of his work is “within the trajectory” begun by Dibelius and continued by Soards and Gaventa, that is, the focus is not on possible sources behind the speeches, nor on the historicity of the speeches, but on the function of the speeches which is a “direction” that is “closer to narrational ends.”¹³⁸ At the same time, he asserts that he wants to shed light

¹³⁴ Matthew L. Skinner, “Acts,” in *Theological Bible Commentary* (ed. Gail R. O’Day and David L. Petersen; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009) 359–71.

¹³⁵ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Acts* (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible; Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005); for an explanation of the “loci communes” method see *ibid.* 29–30, for a defense of using the Western Text *ibid.* 33–34.

¹³⁶ Osvaldo Padilla, *The Speeches of Outsiders in Acts: Poetics, Theology and Historiography* (SNTSMS 144; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹³⁷ Padilla, *Speeches* 8; for the following comments see *ibid.* 11, 12–13, 13–14, 1–4.

¹³⁸ Padilla, *Speeches* 40, the following quotation *ibid.*

on “historiographic questions” since Acts “shares substantial generic affinities with Second Temple historical works.” The repeated references to methodological trajectories and the insistence of being “between” various positions taken are, perhaps, symptomatic of a general methodological uncertainty that is characteristic of some recent research. Why not state that all relevant approaches will be used and any analytical question will be asked which helps elucidate the meaning of these seven speeches as fully as possible?

The authors of technical studies on Acts are certainly justified in employing one particular, narrowly defined, method in studying a particular text or theme, either with the purpose of rehearsing a new method, for example narrative criticism, or with the aim of focusing on a specific question, for example a political reading of Acts in the light of the emperor cult or modern border studies.¹³⁹ However, when writing for a wider readership, particularly for the church, the most helpful studies and the most useful commentaries are those that combine all relevant methods, “method” understood as a set of questions the answers to which illuminate the text.

Steve Walton’s *Leadership and Lifestyle: The Portrait of Paul in the Miletus Speech and 1 Thessalonians* is a good example of such a “unified” approach.¹⁴⁰ He studies the narrative context, the literary genre, rhetorical structure, the content, and the (theological) themes of Acts 20. Since his main interest is a comparison with Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonian Christians, the exegesis of Acts 20 is not as comprehensive as it could be, but his study shows that what is often labeled “traditional” methods can be combined with newer approaches to great benefit. Commentators who take the historical, literary, and theological character of Acts seriously and combine older and newer methods have written the most useful commentaries. Among English commentaries on Acts, Luke Johnson,¹⁴¹ Joseph Fitzmyer,¹⁴² and Darrell Bock¹⁴³ are good examples, as regards German commentaries, Rudolf Pesch,¹⁴⁴ Josef Zmijewski,¹⁴⁵ and Jacob Jervell¹⁴⁶ deserve to be mentioned, and the French commentary of Daniel Marguerat¹⁴⁷ is exemplary in many respects.

Acts presents part of the history of the early church, and thus must be interpreted with the full range of historical methods, taking into account Jewish and Greco-Roman social, cultural, and political history. Acts is a literary work and thus must be interpreted with literary methods. Acts consists of a narrative and must be read with narrative concerns in mind. The author

¹³⁹ Brian M. Rapske, “Crossing Divides: Reading Acts in Light of Contemporary Border Studies” (Evangelical Theological Society Luke-Acts Consultation; Atlanta, 2010).

¹⁴⁰ Steve Walton, *Leadership and Lifestyle: The Portrait of Paul in the Miletus Speech and 1 Thessalonians* (SNTSMS 108; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹⁴¹ Johnson, *Acts*.

¹⁴² Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles* (AB 31; New York: Doubleday, 1998).

¹⁴³ Bock, *Acts*.

¹⁴⁴ Rudolf Pesch, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (2 vols.; EKK 5; Zürich / Neukirchen-Vluyn: Benziger / Neukirchener, 1986).

¹⁴⁵ Josef Zmijewski, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (RNT; Regensburg: Pustet, 1994).

¹⁴⁶ Jervell, *Apostelgeschichte*.

¹⁴⁷ Daniel Marguerat, *Les Actes des Apôtres (1–12)* (Commentaire du Nouveau Testament 5a; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2007).

of Acts wants to convince readers, just as the characters of his narrative seek to convince various audiences through speeches, thus his work deserves to be analyzed with rhetorical methods. The author of Acts presents theological convictions, thus his work needs to be interpreted in the context of early Christian theology. While following fads sounds innovative and creative, at least during the time that a particular fad is current, common sense suggests that the meaning and the significance of biblical texts is analyzed and established with the help of the full arsenal of historical, literary, narrative, rhetorical, and theological questions. Historical readings of Acts, if they are detached from the literary and narrative features of the text and from the theological aims of the author, are mere fads, as are literary readings if they are disconnected from the historical realities and the theological purposes of the text. In a similar vein, new theological readings of Acts will remain fads if and when they ignore the literary, rhetorical, and narrative dimensions of the text and disregard the historical realities of the missionary work of Peter and Paul. Common sense demands that interpreters read the Book of Acts with the full *Instrumentarium* of methods which account for and thus explain the literary shape, the rhetorical strategies, the narrative flow, the social-political location, the historical dimension, and the theological emphases of the text.