Contents

List of Figures ix
Foreword xi
Preface xiii
Acknowledgments xvi
Abbreviations xvii

Introduction 3

Acts 1 The Beginning of the Church 25
Acts 2 The Miracle and Meaning of Pentecost 36
Acts 3:1–4:31 The Healing of a Lame Man 52
Acts 4:32–5:42 Tensions Within and Without 72
Acts 6–7 Stephen and the Seven 81

Part 2. Acts 8–12 Beyond Jerusalem: Philip, Saul, Peter, and Others 109
Acts 8 Philip: A Man on a Mission 111
Acts 9:1–31 Saul and Ananias: Conversion and Call 125
Acts 9:32–11:18 Peter: His Words and Deeds 136
Acts 11:19–12:25 Barnabas, Peter, and Herod 164
Contents

   Acts 13–14 Paul’s Initial Missionary Campaign 183
   Acts 15:1–16:5 The Jerusalem Conference 207
   Acts 16:6–17:15 Paul in Macedonia 226
   Acts 17:16–18:17 Paul in Achaia 241
   Acts 18:18–19:41 Paul in Ephesus 259

      Acts 24–26 Paul before Felix, Festus, and Agrippa 323
      Acts 27–28 The Sea Voyage to Rome 351

Bibliography 371
Subject Index 395
Index of Modern Authors 405
Index of Scripture and Ancient Writings 409
Preface

Biblical commentaries belong to a genre distinctive to the study of scriptures, texts held to be sacred and authoritative for the faith and practice of religious communities. As such, they demand something from the interpreter that other genres of writing rarely require, namely, attention to each and every paragraph—if not to every word—of the text. Thus commentary writing, which attempts to follow the argument and logic of “another” and to present that argument as transparently as possible, demands a different kind of discipline than the academic monograph, whose writer attempts to present his or her own logic as lucidly and clearly as possible. Submitting myself to the discipline of this kind of analysis, that is, tracing the narrative logic of the ancient writer who produced the Acts of the Apostles, has been both rewarding and challenging. One is forced to comment on texts the meaning of which may not be readily apparent to the interpreter!

I have worked on Acts for more than twenty-five years, producing various articles and monographs, with a goal, eventually, of producing a full-length commentary. The actual writing of the commentary took place during the 2006–2007 academic year and was especially intense during the spring and summer of 2007, during which time I had a research leave. Taking up my post in a small cubicle in my university’s library, I spent eight or more hours each day engaging with and engaged by the narrative of Acts. My sustained experience with this portion of scripture has profoundly deepened my respect for the literary skills and theological vision of the author who produced it. That respect stands in contrast to the critical reception of Acts among those (perhaps many) who still view the Lukan corpus as the unwanted stepchild among the New Testament writings. That disregard was encapsulated for me in a throw-away comment by a colleague in the field, who, upon learning that I was writing a commentary on Acts, quipped: “You have the best story with
the worst theology in the New Testament!” I must now register my strong disagreement with the latter part of this assessment; Luke’s literary skills in communicating his story are matched if not exceeded by the theological vision that undergirds that story. If this commentary in some small way makes that theological vision a bit more transparent to the modern reader, then it will have achieved my aspirations for it.

One feature of the commentary is the attention paid to the ways in which the Christian scriptures, in this case Acts, shape the theological reflection and moral habits of its Christian readers; hence the title of the commentary series, *Paideia*. I am glad also to confess that over time this moral vision has captured my own theological imagination, and I humbly count myself in the “company of St. Luke,” that is, among those who continue to be “schooled” in matters of Luke’s vision of the Christian Way. The discipline required in commentary writing thus has produced another kind of discipline, this one a kind of spiritual discipline that frankly came upon me in unexpected but welcome ways.

The format of the commentary does not allow me to register in each passage the deep debt I owe to those who have sought to comment on the Acts of the Apostles from beginning to end. I have learned so much about Luke’s Acts from these writers, from Chrysostom and the Venerable Bede to—among others—Joseph Fitzmyer, Beverly Gaventa, Justo González, Ernst Haenchen, Luke Timothy Johnson, John Polhill, Gerhard Schneider, Scott Spencer, Ben Witherington, and my colleague, Charles Talbert, even—perhaps especially—when I found myself disagreeing with them.

I have also profited from the growing body of secondary literature, monographs, articles, and especially doctoral dissertations that have grappled with specific aspects of Acts. In particular, I should like to mention the community of doctoral students at Baylor University who over the years have produced significant contributions in seminar papers and dissertations (some published, some unpublished, and some still in progress) to my understanding of the Lukan corpus: Andrew Arterbury, Kenneth Bass, Martin Culy, Norfleece Day, Derek Dodson, Stan Harstine, Chad Hartsock, Derek Hogan, Dennis Horton, Ira Jolivet Jr., David Matson, Jim McConnell, Kathy Maxwell, Alicia Myers, Mark Proctor, Keith Reich, Jesse Robertson, William Shiell, Julien Smith, Josh Stigall, and Jason Whitlark. In addition to sharing their work with me, several of them also read and interacted with parts of the commentary. It has been an extraordinary blessing to live and work among such a talented and committed community of young scholars, who along with my colleagues in New Testament, Sharyn Dowd, Naymond Keathley, Charles Talbert, and now Lidija Novakovic, have contributed to an environment that is both nurturing and challenging. I especially wish to thank Jim McConnell, who worked with extraordinary patience and diligence in tracking down sources and putting the manuscript in proper format.
Preface

I have used the translation produced with Marty Culy for Acts: A Handbook on the Greek Text, published by Baylor University Press (2003). Translations are already acts of interpretation and, in those cases where readers want fuller explanation for the translation (as well as technical discussions of grammar and text-critical issues), they are encouraged to turn to the Handbook for more details. Appreciation is expressed to my coauthor, Marty Culy, and to Dr. Carey Newman, director of Baylor University Press, for permission to use the translation in the commentary.

I am grateful to Baylor University, and especially Provost Randall O’Brien and my departmental chair, Bill Bellinger, for their continued expressions of support, in particular for making possible the aforementioned research leave in spring 2007. James Ernest of Baker Academic first proposed the idea of the series in which this commentary appears and extended the invitation to me to serve not only as an author but also as series coeditor with Charles Talbert. From that initial conversation years ago at a regional SBL meeting has come an impressive collection of authors among whom I am proud to be counted. For James’s gentle spirit and firm editorial hand, I am most thankful, and I look forward to the time when the series is complete!

As always, my family has been my primary source of support and encouragement. For the undeserved joy that Heidi and my children bring to my life, I once again express my deep gratitude. Final revisions to the manuscript were made during the summer of 2007 while we were in Florence, Italy. Thanks especially to Heidi for helping each of us make Italy our home away from home!

Like Luke’s audience, I have been schooled by “masters” in matters of faith, and it is to four of those mentors that I dedicate this book: Cronje B. Earp—blessed be his memory—taught me, as an undergraduate, how to read classical and Hellenistic Greek. Dean M. Martin, first as my undergraduate adviser and later as a colleague, taught me how to read critically and think theologically. R. Alan Culpepper, first through his seminars and later as a colleague, and Charles H. Talbert, first through his writings and later as a colleague, taught me the art of “theological exegesis” in interpreting the Greek New Testament, and Luke/Acts in particular. It has been my distinct privilege to be “taught more accurately about the Way” by these Christian intellectuals, and for those opportunities I will be forever in their debt. I offer this commentary and a humble and grateful heart as a poor return for their investment of time and friendship over the years.

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Lent 2008
Introduction


This introduction aims at addressing topics necessary to orient the reader in using the commentary as a guide for interpreting Acts. Some of these issues are typically associated with critical introductions (authorship, date, place, etc.); others are not. The focus of the introduction, as with the commentary, is the text and its interpretation, and as such, the history of the interpretation of Acts (available elsewhere; see Gasque 1975) yields to a focus on the work itself (though a volume on the reception history of Acts is in the works: see Parsons and Hornik, forthcoming).

Since issues typically associated with a commentary introduction are scattered throughout this introduction, it may be useful to state succinctly the perspective taken on those issues in this work. The author of Acts, traditionally known as “Luke,” wrote what became known as the “Acts of the Apostles” as a sequel to a plurality of gospels then currently in use of which the Third Gospel (which “Luke” also wrote) stands as the “first among equals.” The Third Gospel was written in the ’80s (or ’90s), followed some years later by Acts (within the first two decades of the second century, ca. AD 110).
Introduction

Little can be known for certain regarding the identity of the author of Acts; what is clear is that the text presents the early Christian movement, known as “the Way,” within the context of first-century Judaism(s), and that first-century Judaism(s), as well as the spread of the Christian movement, must be understood within the larger first-century Greco-Roman context. In his composition of Acts, Luke demonstrated command of a number of rhetorical conventions and techniques, drew on various cultural and social scripts, and blended multiple genres of writing (including, but not limited to, elements of ancient biography, historiography, novel, and perhaps epic). Acts is a “charter” document of Christian self-identity and legitimation, written, not for a specific “Lukan community,” but rather for a general audience of early Christians living in the ancient Mediterranean world. Inaccessible—and fortunately for our purposes, irrelevant—is the provenance of Luke at the time of composition (although Ephesus seems to be of special interest to the author). It is difficult to distinguish when Luke’s writing reflects things as they were when they happened, or as they were in Luke’s day at the time of his writing, or as Luke hoped they would be. Luke’s primary purpose in writing is to “school” his intended audience in the moral and theological implications of the Christian vision by telling the story of the first followers of the movement’s founder. For contemporary Christians to adopt the point of view of the authorial audience (with the nuances necessary for a document set in circumstances nineteen hundred years ago) is to share in this Christian vision; it is to be theologically formed by the perspectives of this part of the Christian canon.

To orient the user of this commentary it is helpful to speak of the now familiar relationship between author, text, and audience. These rubrics were popularized during the emergence of literary studies of the biblical text (see especially Culpepper 1983; Rhoads and Michie 1982) and were based on communication models that assumed that meaning was conveyed through the interaction of these three elements (cf. Chatman 1978).

A communication model appropriate for biblical narrative is at the same time simpler and more complex than most previous models. It is simpler in the sense that ancient writers rarely if ever employed narrators whose voice was in conflict with the ideology of the implied or real author (contra Dawsey 1986) as is sometimes the case in a modern novel. The biblical model is more complex because the process of composing texts often involved a scribe whose participation in the process may have varied from that of being a kind of human “word processor,” who simply wrote down everything dictated by the author, to the role of coauthor of the document. The roles of the scribe have been rather fully explored in Pauline studies (Murphy-O’Connor 1995). It is assumed for purposes of this commentary that if Luke did use a scribe it would have been for the purposes of writing down his dictation.

The other end of the model likewise represents a complicated situation. It is widely recognized in NT studies that the early Christian literature would
Introduction

have been read to a congregation or gathering of Christians by one appointed to that task, usually referred to as the “reader” or “lector” (see Shiell 2004). The role of the reader was later institutionalized in the church in the form of the lector, a minor office in the church (see Tertullian, Praescr. 41; Hippolytus, Trad. ap. 1.12). We find references to “readers” and “public reading” in the various types of literature in the NT (Mark 13:14; 1 Tim 4:13; Rev 1:3; cf. Gamble 1995, 218–24). At the beginning of the Christian movement, then, those tapped for the task of public reading, whether of the Jewish scriptures or emerging Christian literature, would have been chosen on the basis of their gifts for public speaking. In addition to being literate, readers would need the gifts of a strong voice and most likely some training in rhetoric. Among the rhetoricians, a strong voice was a natural gift. The reader of early Christian texts presumably had the “gift” of public speaking. This idea that speaking is a natural gift was easily translated by Christians as evidence of a spiritual gift (Const. ap. 8.22).

In the Roman period, training in rhetoric began in elementary school and continued, for those interested in pursuing a career in politics, through several advanced levels. We may assume that the first lectors or readers of early Christian literature were among those most highly trained in the practice of rhetoric. One bit of evidence for this is found in Irenaeus, who claims that some heretics “do not know how to read Paul” and gives as an example the need to clarify the use of hyperbaton, the transposition of words, in 2 Thess 2:8 (Haer. 3.7.2). Irenaeus, at least, presumes that the “orthodox” reader will have enough rhetorical training to avoid some basic mistakes in delivery.

Relatively little attention is paid in this commentary to the actual “performance” of Acts by the reader or lector (though cf. the comments on the lector’s gestures at 13:16; 24:10; 26:1, and the sidebar at 21:40), but the user of the commentary is well advised always to keep this fact in mind: the author of Acts expected his audience to experience the text aurally and communally (see also Shiell 2004). For this reason, the commentary refers to “audience” or “authorial audience” rather than “reader” not only to respect the role reserved for the “reader” or “lector” who “performs” the text by reading (or reciting) it aloud, but also to underscore the aural and communal context within which Luke expected his work to be experienced, and within which, in practice, it was. One imagines, then, a social context of early Christian worship in which Acts, as one among several early Christian texts, was read aloud as part of a Christian meeting, perhaps after a meal (following the pattern of the Hellenistic symposium), both for edification and for entertainment. The use of Acts as the textual basis for Christian proclamation did not arise until much later (although the second-century writers Irenaeus and Tertullian most certainly knew Acts; Ephraem the Syrian in the fourth century and John Chrysostom in the fifth produced the earliest extant collections of commentaries or homilies on Acts).
Introduction

In its application to biblical studies, the communication model has often suffered from an overly optimistic view of the autonomy of the text, based on the (often unstated) assumption of what was then known as New Criticism, that a text could be understood best quite apart from its particular social and historical location and was independent of its “author’s intentions” (the so-called intentional fallacy; cf. Wimsatt and Beardsley 1954). The gains of this approach in NT studies, especially in terms of refocusing the interpreter’s attention on the final form of the text as we have it, rather than historical events, or literary or oral sources, or the evangelist’s mind, are well documented and thoughtfully critiqued (Moore 1989). The communication model, however, presumes a closer cultural and historical relationship between author, text, and audience, and if we rightfully demur from the notion of “authorial intention” as being too fraught with psychological overtones, we may nonetheless still speak of the “intention of the text” (intentio operis; cf. Eco 1992) as a way to emphasize the primacy of that first communication between Luke the author and his “intended audience,” the authorial audience.

The aim of this commentary, in keeping with the overall goals of the series in which it is published, is to read the final form of Acts within the early second-century historical, cultural, rhetorical, and theological contexts in which it was composed (as well as the mid-first-century contexts, which it purports to recount). The focus here is on the earliest reception of the final form of Acts. As such, the rubrics of author, text, and audience serve as helpful reminders of the importance of the first communication between author and audience in the form of a written text within its historical context. Exploring the author, in terms of issues of composition, and the audience, in terms of its reception and formation, allows the focus to remain on the text itself, not as an autonomous entity removed from its historical moorings but rather as a written communication between author and audience deeply embedded and implicated within its historical circumstances. The history of interpretation plays a role, in the sense that knowledge of it can give clues as to the important issues raised by the text as they have been understood over the history of the reception of Acts within the Christian community. Contextualizing the text in this way also allows theological issues of interest to contemporary Christian communities to arise naturally out of the exegetical treatment.

The Author and Issues of Composition

Most discussions of the authorship of Acts center on the author’s identity (see, e.g., Parsons 2001, 12–21, 54–55). Such debates typically assess the reliability of the traditions associating Acts with “Luke the Beloved Physician” and the problems of identifying the author’s ethnic identity (Gentile, Jew, or a God-fearing Jewish sympathizer). Luke’s ethnic identity is less important for
interpretation than acknowledging that he situates the Christian community within the larger Jewish debate about self-identity. Here, clearly, Luke understands the Way to be a movement within first-century Judaism (see below and especially Theological Issues on 9:32–11:18).

Luke as Historian and Theologian

Surveyors of the Lukan landscape typically categorize the scholarship on Acts in terms of interest in Luke the historian, Luke the theologian, and, more recently, Luke the litterateur. The move from form and source criticism (Di- belius 1956 et al.), which focused on Luke as historian, to redaction criticism (Conzelmann 1960 et al.), which focused on Luke as theologian, to the newer literary studies (Tannehill 1986–1990 et al.), which focused on Luke as creative writer, have been well documented in the surveys of Acts research (see esp. Powell 1991). The attention Acts has generated has not always been positive. As a historian, though he had his defenders (see Ramsay 1906, Gasque 1975, Hemer 1989, Marshall 1990), Luke was routinely criticized for his unreliable depictions of various characters (e.g., Vielhauer 1966, 33–50, on Paul) and events (e.g., Knox 1950 on the Jerusalem conference). As a theologian Luke was accused, among other things, of advocating a triumphalistic “theology of glory” that was inferior to Paul’s “theology of the cross” and of replacing the pristine eschatology of early Christianity with a three-stage salvation history—an “early Catholicism” shaped by the delay of the parousia that represented a degenerative step away from the primitive Christian kerygma, which proclaimed the imminent return of Jesus (so Käsemann 1982, 89–92). Even Luke’s abilities as a writer have been called into question from time to time (see Dawsey 1986).

While these issues are pursued in more detail at specific points in the commentary, suffice it to say here that Luke’s theological agenda is rich and nuanced and can hold its own in comparison with Pauline or Johannine theology, against which it is often measured and found lacking. Luke tells the story of the first followers of Jesus in such a way as to highlight that community’s heritage in the scriptures and experience of Israel and at the same time to chronicle the new thing God has done through the death and resurrection of Jesus, Israel’s Messiah, especially in terms of the inclusion of the Gentiles into the newly constituted people of God. Luke’s use of Jewish scriptures and covenantal, especially Abrahamic, language and concepts are addressed throughout the commentary (see especially Theological Issues on 3:1–4:31; 6–7). This community is called to bear faithful witness to the resurrected Lord, even as it suffers for that witness throughout the Roman Empire.

In terms of Luke as historian, Acts suggests an author deeply committed to historical verisimilitude, a commitment that rests in part on Luke’s determination to get the story straight. A modern reader, however, must recognize that getting the story straight in an ancient context does not imply that Luke
“got it right” historically in terms of every detail (though neither is Luke free simply to “make stuff up”). Rather, Luke’s commitment to verisimilitude is just as much a reflection of Luke’s training in rhetoric as it is a reflection of his knowledge of ancient historiography. Quintilian wrote, “It is possible to make sound use of anything that is naturally sound” (Inst. 2.10.3, trans. Brett Butler, 1921).

**Luke and Rhetoric**

To understand Luke either as theologian or historian, we must first understand his skills as a writer. And while modern literary criticism has been successful in raising the question of Luke as litterateur, it has not yet been able to circumscribe it fully. In part this is due to reliance on categories and concepts based on the modern novel and not categories and concepts derived from antiquity. To understand the historical verisimilitude and theological message of Acts, one must first understand the rhetorical strategies and conventions employed by the author. Thus issues of composition are of singular significance in this commentary and mark its distinctive, and perhaps most important, contribution to the interpretation of Acts.

This conclusion is based firmly on the assumption that the historical and theological content of Acts—the “what” of Luke’s message—is irreducibly shaped by and inextricably interwoven with the “how” of Luke’s message,
that is, the ways in which Luke has shaped Acts into a well-formed narrative, drawing upon all the figures of speech and literary conventions at his disposal through his training in ancient rhetoric.

Studies of the speeches in Acts show that Luke was more than competent in the handbook tradition, and it is possible to analyze the speeches in Acts in terms of their rhetorical species (cf. Kennedy 1984, 114–40; Neyrey 1984, 210–23; Black 1988, 1–8; Morgenthaler 1993; Satterthwaite 1993, 337–79; Soards 1994). Scholars, for the most part (though cf. Taylor 1946), have been reluctant to apply these insights to the narrative portions of Acts. One reason for hesitation has been the recognition that the rhetorical handbook tradition represented by Cicero, Quintilian, and others is aimed at training orators for declamation; that is, their focus is on delivering oral speeches, not on writing narratives. This reading of the handbooks, of course, fails to appreciate that Quintilian, Cicero, and the others generously quote examples from various Greek and Latin epics, histories, poetry, and other works. Still, the reluctance is understandable.

Based on the speeches, it is fair to conclude also that Luke would have cut his rhetorical teeth, as it were, on the *progymnasmata* tradition. The *progymnasmata* were “handbooks that outlined ‘preliminary exercises’ designed to introduce students who had completed basic grammar and literary studies to the fundamentals of rhetoric that they would then put to use in composing speeches and prose” (Braun 1995, 146). As such, these graded series of exercises were probably intended to facilitate the transition from grammar school to the more advanced study of rhetoric. Four of these *progymnasmata* from the first to fifth centuries AD have survived: Theon (first century?), Hermogenes (second century), Aphthonius (fourth), and Nicolaus (fifth) (collected and translated in Kennedy 2003).

What is important about these writings is that some of the exercises in the *progymnasmata* are clearly intended to embrace both written and oral forms of communication. For example, in his chapter “On the Education of Young Students,” Aelius Theon remarks:

> So then, I have presented these things, not thinking that they are all suitable for all beginners, but in order that we might know that training in the exercises is absolutely necessary, not only for those who are going to be orators, but also if anyone wishes to practice the art of poets or prose-writers, or any other writers. These things are, in effect, the foundation of every form of discourse. (*Prog.* 70.24–30, trans. Kennedy 2003, 13)

Thus though the rhetorical handbooks and the *progymnasmata* often address the same topics, the *progymnasmata*, aimed as they are in equipping young students with the building blocks of communication, both written and oral, serve as a kind of filter for the handbooks to sift out what comments might be more appropriate for written communication.
Introduction

Furthermore, George Kennedy observes:

The curriculum described in these works, featuring a series of set exercises of increasing difficulty, was the source of facility in written and oral expression for many persons and training for speech in public life. . . . Not only the secular literature of the Greeks and Romans, but the writings of early Christians beginning with the gospels and continuing through the patristic age, and of some Jewish writers as well, were molded by the habits of thinking and writing learned in schools. (emphasis added; Kennedy 2003, ix)

If the last part of Kennedy’s comment is true and if Luke at least, among the gospel writers, was familiar with the rhetorical exercises similar to those discussed by Theon and others, then a thoroughgoing investigation into the rhetorical conventions of Luke is warranted. Throughout the commentary (often in sidebars), the rhetorical strategies, conventions, and figures of speech

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Identifying Figures of Speech

Cataloging the rhetorical figures of speech helps contemporary readers understand how the rhetoric functions in Acts. Luke’s audience would not necessarily have been able to identify these figures by their technical names. But they were used to listening to speeches and hearing texts read aloud and would have responded appropriately to these figures.

Consider the “I Have a Dream” speech delivered August 28, 1963, by Martin Luther King Jr. from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. The speech is replete with rhetorical figures and devices. In addition to allusion, metaphor, alliteration, hendiadys, and so on, the speech makes especially effective use of epanaphora (cf. Rhet. Her. 4.13.19), the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of a sentence. In addition to the repetition of the title phrase, “I have a dream,” the speech repeats the phrase “let freedom ring” eight times. Furthermore, the speech ends with an effective use of transplacement, the reintroduction of a word or phrase “so as to render the style more elegant” (Rhet. Her. 4.14.20): “Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, we are free at last.” Few modern hearers could name the rhetorical figures at work in King’s speech, but the power of its rhetoric is undeniable, and looking at the rhetorical figures helps explain that power.

The analysis of rhetorical figures and devices in the commentary is aimed at helping the modern reader recover some sense of the rhetorical effect on the ancient audience. We may apply to rhetorical figures in general the words of an ancient rhetorical treatise regarding figures involving repetition: “There inheres in the repetition an elegance which the ear can distinguish more easily than words can explain” (Rhet. Her. 4.14.21, trans. Caplan 1954, 281).
and thought reflected in Luke’s composition of Acts are explored. The analysis is by no means exhaustive, but rather limited to those instances in which knowledge of the relevant rhetorical device sheds additional exegetical light on the passage’s meaning. This leads to a discussion of the text and issues of intertextual relationships.

The Text of Acts and Issues of Intertextuality

Narrowly speaking, discussions of the “text” of Acts as a matter of critical introduction usually refer to issues related to the manuscript evidence for the writing and issues of textual criticism. While the term is used here more broadly to speak of issues related to the work itself (rather than the author or audience), it is wise to begin with this more narrow understanding.

The Textual Traditions of Acts

To speak of the “final form” of the text of Acts is to engage in the issue of the distinctive textual traditions of Acts, most commonly referred to as the “Alexandrian” and “Western” texts. The so-called Western text is most commonly identified with, but not exclusively limited to, Codex Bezae (D in Acts). It is approximately 8 percent longer than the Alexandrian tradition. We can illustrate the character of many of the Western readings by considering the four verses in Acts that are now omitted in most critical Greek editions and English translations:

And Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he replied, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God” (8:37; a Western addition found in E, many minuscules, itgig vgms syrh with copG67 arm; Codex D is not extant for 8:29–10:14).

But it seemed good to Silas that they remain, and Judas journeyed alone (15:34; Codex D; cf. the Majority Text, which reads: “But it seemed good to Silas to remain there”).

And we would have judged him according to our law. But the chief captain Lysias came and with great violence took him out of our hands, commanding his accusers to come before you (24:6b–8a; a Western addition found in E, 1739, itgig vg, etc.; Codex D is not extant from 22:29 to the end).

And when he had said these words, the Jews departed, holding much dispute among themselves (28:29; a Western addition found in 383 614 itgig vgms syrh with; Codex D is not extant from 22:29 to the end).
Introduction

In each case, these additions attempt to expand upon or clarify the immediate context. In all four verses the Western tradition was taken up into the Byzantine or Majority Text, which was the basis for the earliest English translations with versification, including the Authorized or “King James” Version. This association with the Majority Text (and not necessarily their connection to the Western tradition) accounts for the inclusion of the verses in early Greek editions and English translations of Acts. Once it was determined that the variants in question were not part of the “original” text, the editors and translators of the various Greek editions and English translations, rather than renumbering the verses from that point forward, opted rather to omit the verses altogether (as they did in other places in the NT). Thus these variants are chosen to illustrate the differences in the Western tradition of Acts, not because they are the most important, exegetically speaking, nor the most controversial, but simply because these are the first places at which a contemporary reader of Acts in translation is most likely to encounter the issue of textual traditions.

Despite arguments that the Western tradition holds priority over, or at least equal footing with, the Alexandrian text (Clark 1933; Boismard and Lamouille 1984; Strange 1992), this commentary, for the most part, accepts the critical consensus regarding the generally secondary and derivative nature of the Western text of Acts, and follows the critical edition of NA²⁷/UBS⁴, which itself is based primarily on the Alexandrian tradition (cf. the history and evaluation of the textual traditions of Acts by Head 1993, 415–45). Occasionally the commentary will treat textual variants as they might shed light on the meaning of a particular passage (for more detailed treatment, see Culy and Parsons 2003).


This excursion into textual criticism raises questions regarding the relationship between Acts and Luke (interest in the question of unity has reemerged since Parsons and Pervo 1993; see Rowe 2005, 2007; Johnson 2005; Bockmuehl 2005; Bird 2007; Spencer 2007). Perhaps it is best to begin with what textual criticism can not tell us about that relationship. Contra Kirsopp Lake (1933) and the various versions of this argument by Amos Wilder (1943), Hans Conzelmann (1960), and Philippe Menoud (1962), there is no manuscript evidence to support the contention that the ascension narrative in Luke 24 was added after the two works were separated (Menoud actually argued that both ascension accounts were interpolations after Luke and Acts were divided upon acceptance into the canon).

Each document has its own distinct reception history (see Gregory 2003, 300–301), a point that speaks against a precanonical “narrative” unity of the two documents. For example, the evidence of early gospel collections fails to support an original unity (Parsons and Pervo 1993). The oldest copy of the
fourfold Gospel, P45 (ca. AD 200), also contains Acts, but has the gospels in the
traditional order: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Codex Bezae preserves the
so-called Western order of the two apostles (Matthew and John), followed by
the two “apostolic companions” (Luke and Mark). Here Luke and Acts could
easily have been placed together, but Mark stands between Luke and Acts. Thus
a great opportunity was missed to place Luke last in the order and alongside
The Cheltenham Canon (c. 360) and the stichometry of Codex Claromontanus
(seventh century) place Luke last among the gospels, but Acts comes after the
Pauline epistles in the former and at the end of the NT books in the latter. P74
(seventh century) puts Acts with the General Epistles (see Parsons and Pervo
1993, 22). The inescapable conclusion is that there is simply no manuscript
evidence in which Luke and Acts appear side by side, ready for reading as a
continuous whole. Some have countered that the reception history does not
necessarily reflect authorial intention, and in the case of Luke/Acts most cer-
tainly does not (Johnson 2005). But is this necessarily the case?
The fact that the textual history of Acts is distinct from Luke’s other vol-
ume, the Third Gospel, is not always fully appreciated in discussions of the
relationship between Luke and Acts from the point of view of intentio operis.
circulated in the early church in two quite distinct forms, commonly called the
Alexandrian and the Western” (Metzger 1994, 222). The same has not, and
indeed cannot be said about Luke’s gospel. Furthermore, while the Western
tradition of Acts shares with Luke (as well as the other gospels and Pauline
corpus) “minor variants that seek to clarify and explain the text and make it
smooth . . . there are variants of another kind, peculiar to the Western text
of Acts” (Metzger 1994, 233). These variants

include many additions, long and short, of a substantive nature that reveal the
hand of a reviser . . . The reviser, who was obviously a meticulous and well-
formed scholar, eliminated seams and gaps and added historical, biographical,
and geographical details. Apparently, the reviser did his work at an early date,
before the text of Acts had come to be generally regarded as a sacred text that
must be preserved inviolate. (Metzger 1994, 233)

Regardless of how one accounts for the origins of these two textual traditions
of Acts (Metzger 1994, 225–32), their existence provides further support for
the conclusion that Acts has its own distinctive transmission history and points
to a circulation of the text of Acts, independent of the Third Gospel.
The little evidence that we do have, then, does not suggest that these two
documents, Luke and Acts, were “published” together by Luke as one volume
or even published at the same time, only later to be separated from one another
with the emergence of the fourfold Gospel. Rather, the manuscript traditions
suggest two distinct transmission histories, one for the Gospel and one for Acts. This implies at least that the two were published and disseminated separately, and quite probably at different times.

The prologue to the Third Gospel (1:1–4) suggests that Luke writes, in part, because he thinks that previous attempts at gospels have proven unsuccessful in producing a rhetorically persuasive narrative (see Parsons 2007). On the basis of Luke’s reference to “many” other attempts to write accounts of Jesus’ life, it seems that a plurality of gospels was already a reality by the time the Third Gospel was written (probably in the ’80s or early ’90s). The number and content of these other “gospels” is unknown; the “many” (even if hyperbolic) may have included “heretics” who “used traditional material in the interest of their own perverse propaganda” (Danker 1988, 24). In this sense, Luke may have been partially successful in replacing some of these previous “attempts,” of which he is critical (and thus contributed to the loss of some early accounts that are no longer extant). Nevertheless, Luke probably did not think his version of the Jesus story would replace all other versions. And even if he did, he knew better by the time he published Acts. His account of “the things accomplished” had taken its place alongside other versions. Thus Luke writes Acts in the full knowledge that it would be read as a “sequel,” not just to the Third Gospel, but to a plurality of narratives about Jesus, what would later be dubbed simply “the gospel” (of which there emerged four authoritative versions, but still of one gospel). These gospels (Luke and Mark and an indeterminate number of others) were already being read together in Christian worship by the time Acts was published.

We should not dismiss those other “attempts” at writing a gospel as possible sources for Acts (cf., e.g., Mark 14:57–58/Acts 6:13–14 et passim), but Luke used the Third Gospel as the primary narrative for structuring Acts, thus accounting for the many parallels between Luke and Acts (cf. Talbert 1974). In other words, with Acts, Luke follows up the basic plot of the Third Gospel, while presuming knowledge on the audience’s part of at least some of the “many” who undertook to write a narrative about Jesus (some of which are perhaps no longer extant; cf. the agraphon in Acts 20:35). We should not be surprised, then, to find Acts following the basic plot and structure of the “primary” narrative, Luke, while echoing other “Jesus-stories,” only some of which are still accessible to the modern reader.

From a plurality of gospels would eventually emerge the notion of one gospel in four versions, indirectly attested by the longer ending of Mark, which presumes a fourfold Gospel in the early second century (see Kelhoffer 2000). When canonizers/collectors placed Acts after the fourfold Gospel (whether in the “Eastern” or “Western” order), they were actually fulfilling the intentio operis that Acts be read as the sequel to the “Gospel” (albeit in ways Luke could not perhaps have fully anticipated) and not somehow distorting it.
Thus, from the point of view of the authorial audience (see below), Acts is read and heard as a follow-up to the Jesus story. 

Acts is written before this plurality of Jesus stories is textualized (possibly reduced in number, then collected and published) in the fourfold Gospel, but after the public use of multiple gospels in liturgical settings. In other words, the fourfold Gospel is the culmination of an earlier liturgical practice and theological reality of multiple gospel usage in local congregations. In sum, the question of Luke’s intent and the audience’s reception are perhaps much closer than usually allowed; at least we would do well to resist a facile conclusion that the canonizers “botched” the job. As a result, it is a minor (some twenty non-Lukan gospel parallels or echoes are noted), but distinctive, aspect of this commentary to note, at least in passing, the non-Lukan materials in Acts that are parallel to the extant gospels (and an occasional conjecture regarding a now “lost echo”) and their effect on the reading of Acts.

**Acts and Genre**

Another debated issue of text and intertextuality is the question of the genre of Acts (for a helpful survey, see Phillips 2006). The Acts of the Apostles has been variously compared to the genre of ancient biography (Talbert 1974, 1977, 1992), the ancient novel (Pervo 1987), ancient epic, whether Roman (Bonz 2000) or Greek (MacDonald 2003), or most frequently with some type of historiography (e.g., general history, Aune 1987; political history, Balch 1985, 1987, 1990; Deuteronomistic history, Brodie 1990; or apologetic history, Sterling 1992). No one of these arguments has emerged as the critical opinio communis; rather the emerging consensus seems to be that Acts represents a blending of genres (Phillips 2006, 384–85), a consensus that even includes some of those who had earlier advocated a specific generic designation (see Talbert and Stepp 1998, 178–79; Pervo 1999, 135; Balch 2003, 141). Understanding Acts as a foundational or charter document for the Christian community—that is, as a document that seeks to establish the identity of its constituency as legitimate and true heirs of Moses within the larger panoply of ancient Greco-Roman religions and philosophies—requires it to be read in conversation. That conversation must include not just one other genre of literature but rather all those documents that share or contest its field of vision, regardless of generic designation.

**Acts and the Pauline Letters**

What more may we say of the relationship of Luke to Paul? Long ago Philipp Vielhauer raised the historical issue regarding whether Acts gives evidence that Luke knew and was influenced by Paul. Over against the still dominant conclusion that there is little connection between the Paul of Acts and the Paul of the Epistles (Vielhauer 1966) a number of protests have been lodged (inter
Introduction

alia, Walker 1985, 1998; Porter 1999). Whether or not the “historical” Luke knew and traveled with the “historical” Paul (cf. Fitzmyer 1989, 1–26), the literary issue of the relationship of the book of Acts to Paul’s letters remains. This is a related, but nonetheless slightly different issue than the one posed by Vielhauer. Richard Pervo has recently offered compelling evidence that Luke was familiar with Paul’s life and thought through a collection of some of his extant letters (see Pervo 2006).

How then would an audience familiar with Paul through his letters hear Luke’s story of Paul in Acts? This question is addressed intermittently throughout the second half of the commentary. To anticipate the conclusion, the overall picture of Paul in Acts is not exactly identical to the Paul of the letters (who, we do well to remember, is itself a projected rhetorical persona), but there are nonetheless similarities between the two portraits (cf. Parsons 2007, 123–37).

Dating Acts

These comments also touch upon the issue of the date of Acts. As we suggested, the separate transmission histories of Luke and Acts, as well as the separation of the two works in all known collections and lists, make it more likely that the two documents were published and disseminated at different times than that an original single work (for which we have no external evidence) was subsequently divided. Knowledge of a collection of Paul’s letters would push the terminus a quo for the dating of Acts to the beginning of the second century (see Pervo 2006; also Tyson 2006). If we grant the critical consensus that the Third Gospel was written in the last quarter of the first century (in the ’80s or ’90s), and accept Luke’s knowledge of Paul’s letters (see above and throughout the commentary), then we arrive at a terminus a quo for Acts of no earlier than the beginning of the second century (Pervo 2006). Thus twenty to thirty years lapsed between the publication of the two documents. What can be said about a terminus ad quem for Acts?

In his Letter to the Philippians, Polycarp refers to Jesus “whom God raised, loosening the birth pangs” of Hades (1.2). The phrase occurs verbatim at Acts 2:24, in which Peter refers to Jesus “whom God raised, loosening the birth pangs” of Death (or Hades, so D and some Latin, Syriac, and Coptic MSS). What is striking is that the distinctive phrase “loosening the birth pangs” is found nowhere else in the LXX (though it alludes to Ps 18:4–6) or any other extant Jewish or early Christian literature. As Andrew Gregory has observed: “It is certainly unlikely that Luke and Polycarp would each have adopted the form independently” (Gregory 2003, 314). Rather than appeal to an earlier and hypothetical testimony book (so Barrett 1994, 36), the simplest solution is to conclude that Polycarp knew Acts (see Zahn 1909, 2:186; Berding 2002, 39–40; Hartog 2002, 185). Other possible allusions then fall into place with this conclusion (cf. Pol. Phil. 2.1 / Acts 10:42; Phil. 2.3 / Acts 20:35; Phil. 3.2
The disputed composition history of Polycarp’s letter, however, further complicates the situation. Those who follow P. N. Harrison’s multiple letter theory (Harrison 1936) would date Polycarp, *Philippians* 1–12, to about AD 135; in this scenario Acts could be dated as late as AD 120–130. William Schoedel (1967), however, has argued cogently for the unity of the letter. The letter was written shortly after the martyrdom of Ignatius, which, following Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 3.36.1), is traditionally dated toward the end of Trajan’s reign (ca. AD 110–117, and possibly connected with Trajan’s eastern trip in 114). The date for Polycarp’s letter would then be about AD 115 (see Hartog 2002, 60, 169). The date of Ignatius’s martyrdom, however, is by no means certain since the accuracy of Eusebius’s report, given his apologetic interests in securing as early a date as possible for Ignatius, cannot simply be assumed (on the difficulties of dating the martyrdom, cf. Foster 2006). Others prefer a date of about 125 for Ignatius’s martyrdom, during Hadrian’s reign (AD 117–138; cf. Pervo 2006, 17–20). Michael Holmes prudently concludes: “Perhaps the most that can be said with any degree of confidence is that Ignatius probably died sometime during the first third of the second century” (Holmes 2006, 62). Thus I would place the date of the publication of Acts at about AD 110, though a release anytime within the first two decades of the second century (ca. AD 100–120) would have provided sufficient time for Polycarp’s knowledge of the book.

In this scenario Acts is published several decades after the publication of the Third Gospel. In the intervening period, the liturgical use of a plural-form Gospel would be securely in place and a collection of (an indeterminate number of) Paul’s letters would be widely known. It is within this historical framework that I place the first reception of the final form of Acts.

**The Overall Structure of Acts**

In its final form, Acts divides into halves, 1–12 and 13–28. The first half of the book deals with the people and places of the Jerusalem church; the second half focuses on the missionary activities of Paul. Additionally, each half is subdivided into two sections: 1–12 consists of 1:1–8:3 and 8:4–12:25; 13–28 is composed of 13:1–19:41 and 20:1–28:31. Luke has used the rhetorical device called chain-link interlock to connect these four units of Acts (Lucian, *How to Write History* 55; Quintilian *Inst.* 9.4.129; cf. Longenecker 2005). Part 1 (Acts 1–7) is linked to part 2 (Acts 8–12) by 8:1–3. Part 2 (Acts 8–12) is linked to part 3 (Acts 13–19) via 11:27–12:25; and part 3 (Acts 13–19) is linked to part 4 (Acts 20–28) by 19:21–41. Furthermore, each of these major units may be segmented into smaller units. The two halves are symmetrical (but not perfectly so). Acts 1–12 is constructed of nine text segments or episodes (five in the first section and four in the second) and comprises 43.6 percent
Figure 1. Map of the Setting of Acts in the Roman World
of the Greek text; Acts 13–28 has nine segments (five in the third section and four in the fourth), constituting 56.4 percent of the text. The accompanying outline shows the structure of Acts; throughout the commentary more detailed outlines will show this structure in closer detail.

**The Audience of Acts and Issues of Reception and Formation**

Interest in the “reader(s)” or “audience” of biblical texts has soared in recent decades (see Fowler 1991; Powell 1990). Understanding the terminology of reader-oriented interpretations, however, is not always easy. This commentary attempts to consider two kinds of readers or audiences: the constructed “authorial audience” and real, flesh-and-blood contemporary Christian communities, although the focus in the commentary proper is clearly on the former.

**The Authorial Audience of Acts**

This commentary is written from the perspective of the authorial audience, that is, the reception of the text by the audience that the author had in mind when he wrote his Gospel (cf. Rabinowitz 1987; Carter 1996; Talbert 1998, 2003; Parsons 2007). It is important to tease out the implications of this fact for understanding the impact of Luke’s writings upon his authorial audience, which presumably also knew how to respond appropriately (if unconsciously) to the effects of persuasive rhetoric, with an eye toward how they might illuminate our understanding of how Luke told his story of Jesus’ first followers; that is, the rhetorical strategies and literary conventions he employed and the ways they might have been understood by his audience.

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Thus the commentary attempts to understand the ways in which the final form of the Acts of the Apostles was received by the authorial audience. The authorial audience is not a real flesh-and-blood audience; it is nonetheless historically circumscribed. The effort, then, is both historical and hermeneutical, and it is important to outline the parameters of that historical task. First, Luke’s authorial audience is not to be mistaken for a specific second-century community; in other words, there was no “Lukan community” per se whose interests and needs we can tease from between the lines of Luke’s Gospel (Johnson 1979). Rather, Acts (and Luke) were addressed to a general Christian audience, living in the Roman Empire at the turn of the second century (Bauckham 1998, 9–48). Thus Acts is read in its historical context, but as Richard Bauckham says, “That context is not the evangelist’s community. It is the early Christian movement in the late first century” or, as we presume, early second century (Bauckham 1998, 46). For this reason, attempts to locate the provenance of either the author or the audience have failed to create a critical consensus, and more telling, have proven mostly irrelevant for interpreting the text.

For purposes of the commentary I assume that both Luke and the authorial audience of Acts were familiar with the cultural scripts and rhetorical conventions of the larger Greco-Roman world, scripts and conventions that were extant in specific documents that they may or may not have known. The audience is also familiar with the basic themes of the Jewish scriptures (especially regarding the inclusion of the “righteous Gentile”), other Second Temple Jewish literature (or at least the prominent themes that those documents preserve and reflect), and other early Christian literature, including an early collection of Paul’s letters, some gospels (certainly Mark, possibly Matthew), and perhaps some other writings.

The commentary focuses on how the authorial audience heard Acts within the web of other texts and contexts familiar to that audience. We ask, “What would be the rhetorical impact of such ‘intertextuality’ on the authorial audience?” The issue is the way in which these cultural scripts and rhetorical conventions are echoed and reconfigured in this new text. This kind of intertextual exploration takes into account the rhetorical conventions, social scripts, and theological concepts reflected in those texts and with which the audience would likely have been familiar.

Luke also understood his task as having hermeneutical implications. Education, or *paideia*, in the ancient world (not unlike today in many quarters) “was based on the transmission of an established body of knowledge, about which there was wide consensus” (Cribiore 2001, 8). The transmission of traditional values included also the formation of the moral character of the students (or audience) (Penner 2003, 425–39). Theon of Alexandria, author of the earliest of the extant *progymnasmata*, confirms this point several times: “Surely the exercise . . . not only creates a certain faculty of speech but also
good character [\textit{ethos}], while we are being exercised in the moral sayings of the wise” (Theon, \textit{Prog.} 60.18, trans. Kennedy 2003, 4; see also 71.6; 78.9). Beyond acquiring facility in grammar and rhetoric, a fortunate by-product of the rhetorical exercises from the teacher’s point of view was the shaping of moral habits that reflected the prevailing cultural values of the day.

At the same time that Luke acquired the ability to read and write through his rhetorical education, he also learned \textit{ethos} argumentation, that is, how to shape the moral character of his audience and thus how to inculcate those values in the student/audience’s moral vision. The moral vision propagated by the progymnasmatists was elitist, racist, and sexist. The ideal was the free, male Roman citizen; all others were deemed inferior (Gleason 1995). While Luke invokes the methods and categories of rhetorical argument, he often does so only to subvert or overturn them, a rhetorical move of \textit{ethos} argumentation that he no doubt learned from the very teachers of grammar and rhetoric whose moral vision he so severely challenges (Parsons 2007). In its place, Luke offers a vision of God’s family that is inclusive of Jew and Gentile, rich and disenfranchised, male and female, slave and free, the physically whole and the physically disabled. Luke’s use of rhetoric is aimed at forming the moral character and theological vision of the Christian community so that the followers may more faithfully imitate the founder, Jesus the Christ (for a similar argument, see Bockmuehl 2006).

\textit{The Contemporary Christian Audience(s) of Acts}

The contemporary Christian community is invited to participate in this vision, to adopt the point of view of the authorial audience Luke had in mind. Of course, such imitation of the authorial audience by a real contemporary Christian community, removed by space and time, can only be approximate at best, and may entail, from time to time, acknowledging contextual differences. For example, the contemporary Christian reader, living in a post-Holocaust context, must acknowledge the difficulty and difference in hearing Luke’s story of the conflict between the first followers of Jesus and other Jewish groups, as Luke intended it, as an intra-Jewish debate (see Theological Issues on Acts 9:32–11:18).

The contemporary Christian readers of Acts are also implicated in their own web of texts and cultural scripts. In addition to, and perhaps more important than, the history of Acts scholarship, with which the contemporary reader may (or may not) be familiar, is the liturgical and aesthetic contexts within which many modern Christians experience Acts, if only indirectly. Furthermore, within those Christian communities that adhere explicitly to some form of Christian confession or creed, it is interesting to note that in the Pelikan and Hotchkiss collection of nearly three hundred creeds and statements of faith from a wide variety of confessional communities there are nearly twelve hundred references to Acts (Pelikan and Hotchkiss 2003). Such
theological issues are raised explicitly in the commentary only on occasion (see, e.g., the discussion of the Triune God in Theological Issues on 20:1–21:16), but it is helpful to recall constantly how Acts “has been prayed and sung in [the church’s] liturgy, confessed in its creeds and confessions of faith, [and] defended by its seven ecumenical councils” (Pelikan 2005, 26), since these are the liturgical and confessional contexts within which we most often encounter the Acts of the Apostles.

The liturgical and credal use of Acts may seem foreign to those contemporary Christians who come from a “low church” background. This unfamiliarity with the explicit liturgical use of Acts should not, however, be mistaken for the absence of Acts from their own distinctive forms of worship. The worship and theology of Pentecostals, for example, are profoundly shaped by a particular appropriation of the book of Acts. Furthermore, the hymnody of “free church” traditions draws deeply from the rich resources of Acts (cf. for example, the nearly thirty references to Acts in the scripture index of The Baptist Hymnal, 1991). Rarely if ever does this contemporary context take the forefront in the exegetical section of the commentary, but it forms a useful background against which to read and use the commentary.

The Theological Issues sections of the commentary draw on interpretive issues of interest to the contemporary Christian community, whose “preunderstanding” of Acts is shaped to varying degrees by these diverse liturgical and theological influences. Luke’s own commitment to this formation of Christian character functions as the springboard for these reflections. Sometimes the “theological issues” involve the context of the larger Christian canon. At other times, the history of the interpretation of the text is brought to bear. As the meaning(s) of the text for the authorial audience comes into focus, the implications for the contemporary faith community become more transparent. This is not to suggest that the Theological Issues sections exhaust the possible topics for consideration; rather, they should be viewed as “conversation starters,” and as attempts to extend Luke’s spiritual formation of his audience into faithful disciples who can know more fully the truth of the matters in which they have been instructed.
The first part, Acts 1–7, centers primarily on the activities of Jesus’ followers in and around Jerusalem. It traces events involving key persons in the early Christian movement: Peter and the apostles, the selection of the Seven, and the martyrdom of Stephen. It is clear from the opening pages that the movement known as “the Way” was one of several expressions of first-century Judaism(s).
Acts 1

The Beginning of the Church

Introductory Matters

The opening chapter of Acts serves not only to set the stage for the emergence and spread of the earliest Christian community; it constantly refers back to the previous story of the founder of that community, Jesus of Nazareth. Acts 1:1–14 functions as the introduction to the book. The remainder of the first chapter (1:15–26) is devoted to the accounts of the defection of Judas from the circle of the Twelve and the selection of his successor.

Tracing the Narrative Flow

Introduction (1:1–14)

The surface structure of 1:1–14 falls into three parts: Acts 1:1–5 represents the literary preface—the introduction proper—and includes several formal features common to prefaces of antiquity. Acts 1:6–11 describes the departure of Jesus and the response of his disciples and borrows elements from Greco-Roman and Jewish assumption scenes. Acts 1:12–14 forms a summary statement at the end of the episode and

Acts 1 in the Narrative Flow

The people and places of the Jerusalem church (1–12)

The sense of a beginning (1–7)

The beginning of the church (1)

Introduction (1:1–14)

Preface to Acts (1:1–5)

Departure of Jesus and response of the disciples (1:6–11)

Narrative summary (1:12–14)

Death of Judas and election of Matthias (1:15–26)
as such represents a common literary convention employed by Luke to provide transition from one episode to the next.

1:1–5. The presence in 1:1–5 of a “secondary” preface (which refers to an earlier work) does not, in and of itself, demonstrate narrative unity. Sequential books in antiquity employed any one of three types of prologues (see Palmer 1987, 427–38): (1) Some writers presented a summary of the preceding book and an outline of what was covered in the present volume (see Polybius, Hist. 2.1.4–8; 3.1.5–3.3; see also his explanatory note in the fragments of book 11; Diodorus Siculus, Hist. 1.4.6–5.1; Philo, Mos. 2.1). (2) Others give a retrospective summary of the preceding book and move directly into the contents of the present work (see Xenophon, Anab.; Josephus, Ant.; Herodian, Hist.). (3) Still others give a prospective summary, but do not mention the previous volume (see Appian, Hist. Rom. 1.13–15; Diodorus Siculus, Hist. 2.1; Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 7.praef.). Luke apparently followed the first pattern of a retrospective summary and an outline of what was to follow. Acts contains a brief, retrospective summary, which describes the contents of the Third Gospel as what Jesus began to do and teach until the very day he was taken up (1:2). A prospective outline of the contents of Acts is given in 1:8. This prefatory summary was, as we have seen, a typical literary convention of antiquity (Lucian, Hist. conscr. 23).

Thus the narrator has chosen to present a retrospective summary and a prospective outline of the contents of Acts, similar to, but not in exact correspondence with, the first option. By crediting Jesus with the outline and by shaping it into the form of a promise, the narrator creates audience expectations that the witness to the gospel will be fulfilled “to the end of the earth.” Are these expectations fulfilled?

In addition, Acts 1:1–5 exhibits several literary conventions typical not just of sequels but generally characteristic of narrative beginnings in late antiquity. The first is the presence of a first-person narrator in the preface (see Philo, Mos. 1.1; Diodorus Siculus, Hist. 1.3.1). Such narration is used in both Luke and Acts to provide a frame for the story (see Luke 1:1–4; 5:14; Acts 23:22; for a similar rhetorical device, see also Josephus, BJ 1.76; Ant. 1.100; Arrian, Anab. 5.11.4; John 3:15–16). First-person narration facilitates the move of the audience from a point of view external to the story to an internal point of view—the audience moves from the position of arm-chair spectator to full participant in the story.

A second convention is the naming of Theophilus (1:1) as addressee. Historically, these names in antiquity are believed, in many cases, to represent a benefactor/client relationship between the named person and the author (see Aelius Aristides, Hier. log. 51.63; Horace, Carm. 1; Sat. 2; Josephus, C. Ap. 1.1; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 1 Amm. 1.2; Hermogenes, Invent. 3.1). Regardless of the historical background, from a literary perspective Theophilus functions to circumscribe the reception of Acts. To imitate the authorial audience...
of Acts, the real reader must assume the posture of Theophilus, a “lover of God.” Theophilus, then, functions as a hermeneutical bridge between the narrative world of the text and the “real world” of the audience. The naming of Theophilus here in Acts 1, of course, also recalls the mention of Theophilus in Luke 1. Evoking Theophilus at the beginning of the narrative is a literary strategy that reminds the audience of the previous volume, Luke, and provides the authorial audience with entry to the narrative world of Acts.

The authorial audience recognizes that the command not to depart from Jerusalem but to wait for what the Father had promised (1:4) echoes Luke 24:49, but Jesus’ note that John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit (1:5) more closely resembles the Markan form (Mark 1:8) of that saying than either Matt 3:11 or Luke 3:16 (both of which add “and fire” to “Holy Spirit”).


In addition to these formal similarities, the ascension account in Acts 1 has several striking parallels with the assumption of Elijah. Especially noteworthy is the use of *analambanō* to describe the assumption of Elijah (2 Kgs 2:9–11; 1 Macc 2:58; Sir 48:9) and the ascension of Jesus (Acts 1:2, 11, 22).

Whether Jewish or Greco-Roman, these assumption stories accentuate the elevated status of their subjects. Likewise, the ascension of Jesus functions to underline the exaltation of Jesus. It is the fitting conclusion to the ministry of Jesus (so Luke 24:50–53); more important here, it is the foundation of the church, which makes the life of the church both possible and intelligible.
Ironically the departure of Jesus inaugurates the beginning of the church—the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the beginning of the worldwide mission.

In addition to the significance of the ascension for Luke’s story and theology, these opening verses focus as much on the response of the disciples to Jesus as they do on his words and deeds. This second section contains two parts, and each concludes with a reproof of and a promise to the disciples. In Acts 1:7–8, Jesus responds with a reproof: *It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has established by his own authority* (1:7; cf. Matt 24:36); and a promise: *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses* (1:8a; see Talbert 1984, 6–7). The promise of the Holy Spirit for empowering the witness of the disciples is found also in John 15:26–27. This empowerment will enable the disciples to engage in a worldwide mission, *beginning in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth* (1:8b; cf. Matt 28:19–20).

Likewise, at the conclusion of 1:9–11 we read the angelic response in two parts: a reproof, *Galileans, why are you standing (there) staring at the sky?* (1:11a), and a promise, *This Jesus, who was taken up from you into the sky, will come (back) in the very same manner that you saw him go into the sky* (1:11b; cf. Luke 21:27).

Despite the reproaches, both dialogues end with promises to the disciples, thus inviting a favorable judgment of the disciples by the audience. In fact, from this group Peter emerges as the protagonist for much of the first half of the narrative. The identification of the audience with the disciples has already been strengthened in what precedes the ascension narrative. At 1:2 we learn that Jesus chose the apostles through the Holy Spirit. In Acts 1:3, we find that Jesus appeared to them for forty days. The specific reference to “forty days” may be explained by recognizing: (1) the number forty has a rich Jewish heritage (see Exod 24:12–18; 2 Bar. 76.1–4); and (2) the dating of the Pentecost requires that the hiatus between Easter and Pentecost be filled—Luke fills the gap with the forty days of instruction and the (implied) ten days in which the disciples pray and choose a successor for Judas. Jesus’ response does not indicate that the restoration of Israel is impossible, but it does challenge the norms of the disciples and the audience. The burning issue is not “When will the kingdom be restored to Israel?” Rather, it is “Who is commissioned to spread the good news on worldwide missions?”

Through being taught by the risen Lord, praying together with one accord, and performing the delicate and crucial task of selecting Judas’s replacement without incident, the formal features of the opening scene depict the disciples as informed, spiritually mature, and administratively equipped—all signs that they are prepared to undertake the task of worldwide mission that lies before them (cf. Matt 28:19–20).
Jesus’ ascent into heaven is described in “earth-bound” terms, not as a heavenly journey in which the narrator accompanies the hero (as is the case in many heavenly journeys in late antiquity). Luke employs the rhetorical figure of *conversio* (*antistrophē*), that is, the repetition of the same word or group of words at the end of successive clauses, sentences, or lines (*Rhet. Her.* 4.13.19). The phrase “into the sky” (or “heaven”) occurs four times in rapid succession, emphasizing that Jesus is taken from the eyes of the disciples and thus from the audience’s “visual” field.

Another literary device employed by Luke is the rhetorical question (Quintilian, *Inst.* 9.2.7). In Acts 1:11 the two messengers ask: *Galileans, why are you standing (there) staring at the sky?* Again, just as the disciples’ question to Jesus in 1:6 seemed reasonable, so also their actions seem most natural. What else should one do when Jesus ascends except stand and look into heaven after him? But idly gazing into heaven is an inappropriate response to Jesus’ ascension. The messengers assure the disciples (and audience) that Jesus will return in just the same way he left.

**1:12-14.** The Mount of Olives is the locale of Jesus’ departure (1:12-14; contra Bethany in Luke 24:50). The fact that Bethany was located on the Mount of Olives, while easing historical concerns, serves only to heighten the literary significance of the variation. Though both narratives tell of the disciples’ return to Jerusalem, they differ in regard to their specific destination and the activity that occupies them. In Luke the disciples return with joy to the temple and are incessantly blessing God. In Acts, on the other hand, the disciples return to the upper room where they *devoted themselves together to prayer* (1:14). The reference in Luke to Bethany is appropriate because it closely links the closing scene with the triumphal entry scene at 19:28-40. The closing scene of the Gospel, set as it is in Bethany, becomes Jesus’ triumphal exit. In the same way that the triumphal entry closes the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem, so the triumphal exit brings an end to Jesus’ exodus.

The reference to the Mount of Olives as the site of the ascension in Acts (1:12) not only recalls the triumphal entry scene (19:29, 37), but also Luke 21:37 and 22:39.

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**Contentio**

In Acts 1:11, Luke uses the rhetorical figure of *contentio* (antithesis) to make his point regarding Christ’s return. *Contentio* is the juxtaposition of contrasting words or ideas. The author of *Rhetorica ad Herennium* cites several examples, including: “In a situation requiring all your coolness, you are on fire; in one requiring all your ardour, you are cool” (4.15.21, trans. Caplan 1954, 283). He concludes: “Embellishing our style by means of this figure we shall be able to give it impressiveness and distinction.”

Such distinction (and impressiveness) is evident in Luke’s use of the figure in 1:11: “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into the sky, will come (back) in the very same manner that you saw him go into the sky.”
The reference at 21:37 is to Jesus teaching in the temple during the day and lodging at the Mount of Olives at night. Luke alone of the evangelists records that the place to which Jesus returned was the Mount of Olives (Luke 22:39). Important here is the narrator’s effort to inform the audience that the Mount of Olives was a familiar place to Jesus. The specific reference to “the place” (Luke 22:40) indicates he has prayed here before.

The next (and last) reference to the Mount of Olives in the Lukan writings is in this passage. By means of redundancy the narrator has brought to mind the prayer scene on the mountain. Jesus has again taken his disciples to a favorite place—here is an element of repetition. This time, however, when they return from Jerusalem they do what they were unable to accomplish prior to the arrest—they pray. Again the authorial audience is assured of the disciples’ readiness and competence to be witnesses of the gospel.

The disciples return to the upstairs room (1:13a). This word is not the same used to describe the room where Jesus ate the Passover meal with his disciples (Luke 22:12), yet the identification of the two seems most natural, and the reference here serves to strengthen the connection made above between the prayer scene on the Mount of Olives and the ascension in Acts.

Luke provides a “laundry list” of the disciples who have gathered together in the upper room (cf. Luke 6:13–16). The names of the disciples in Acts 1 are the same as those in Luke 6, though the order is slightly different: Luke’s list—“Simon, whom he named Peter, and Andrew his brother, and James and John”—is shuffled in Acts to read Peter, John, James, Andrew (1:13b). The shift may be the result of a kind of “pecking order”—an observation supported by the fact that only the first three named in Acts receive any attention beyond this list (on Peter and John, see Acts 3–4; the only further mention of James, brother of Zebedee, is the brief notice regarding his death in 12:2). A similar phenomenon occurs in the list of the seven Hellenists in Acts 6 where only the first two mentioned, Stephen and Philip, receive any attention in the narrative. The omission of Judas’s name from the list, of course, prepares the audience for the legend of Judas’s death and the choice of his replacement.

To list the successors or followers of a leader was a common device in ancient literature (see, e.g., Diogenes Laertius, Vit. phil.; Aristippus, 2.85–86; Plato 3.46–47; Zeno 7.36–38; Pythagoras 8.45–46; Epicurus 10.22–28). The list of followers is extended in Acts to include women and the family of Jesus, inviting the audience perhaps to revise the definition of disciple and the understanding of who was present at the ascension. To mention women is unusual for a succession list. Mary, the mother of Jesus (1:14) stands as a bridge figure between the women who followed Jesus (see Luke 8:2; 23:49, 55; 24:10) and the family of Jesus, which (except for James) receives no further mention in the text.

Luke concludes this section with the first of a series of summary statements (see comments on 2:41–47). Following the ascension, Acts 1:12–14 depicts the disciples as fully instructed and appropriately pious—they pray. To be sure,
the disciples are not perfect, but the result is that when Jesus exits from the scene, the authorial audience is still left with a group of characters who have been chosen by Jesus through the Holy Spirit, who have been witnesses of his postresurrection appearances and ascension, who have been deputized as ambassadors with a divine mandate, and who, in a short while, will receive what Jesus promised—the gift of the Holy Spirit. In these early chapters, the narrator uses the disciples to shape the audience’s view toward a particular understanding of discipleship. The summary here serves both as an expanded conclusion to the ascension story and as a prefatory note that sets the stage for the selection of a replacement for Judas.

**Death of Judas and Election of Matthias (1:15–26)**

Before Luke can narrate the fulfillment at Pentecost of Jesus’ promise that the disciples will be empowered by the Holy Spirit, he must address what for him is a problem of the first magnitude. The circle of the Twelve has been broken and must be restored (Johnson 1977, 175). Acts 1:15–26 divides into three parts: (1) introduction (1:15); (2) Peter’s speech (1:16–22); and (3) Election of Matthias (1:23–26).

1:15. Peter stands in the midst of the believers to address this problem of the fall of Judas from the circle of the Twelve (1:15). The situational irony of this first apostolic speech within the post-Easter community should not be lost, an irony created by the similarities in the pre-Easter actions of Judas and Peter. Judas betrayed Jesus (Luke 22:47), thus fulfilling Jesus’ prophecy (Luke 22:21–22). Peter denied knowing Jesus three times before three different persons in the courtyard of the high priest (Luke 22:54–62), thus fulfilling Jesus’ prophecy (Luke 22:34). The actions of both Judas and Peter are associated with the work of Satan (Luke 22:3; 22:31). And so in Acts 1:15, we have the ironical predicament of the one who denied Jesus retelling the story of the one who had betrayed him.

Though the actions of both are somehow related to Satan, there is a sharp distinction. “Satan entered Judas” (Luke 22:3) indicates that Judas’s actions were under the jurisdiction of the “power of darkness” (Luke 22:53). His act of betrayal and subsequent demise fulfill Jesus’ pronouncement of curse: “woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!” (Luke 22:22). In the case of Peter, Jesus’ warning, “Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat,” is followed by an exhortation, “when once you
have turned back, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:31–32). The difference between the two is in the revelation of Jesus to Peter: “but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail” (Luke 22:32). The appearance of Jesus to Peter (Luke 24:34; [24:12?]) provides Peter the opportunity to “turn again.” The situation of having the “rehabilitated” denier of Jesus speak of the divine necessity for the one who betrayed Jesus to go to his “own place” is certainly justified from the perspective of the narrator. If Judas fulfills the woe of Jesus when he bursts asunder in the field that he has purchased, then Peter fulfills the exhortation of Jesus to “strengthen your brethren” when he stands in their midst and expounds upon the divine imperative of the scripture regarding the fate of Judas and the election of his replacement.

The narrator uses an aside (see Sheeley 1992) to address the audience directly about the size of the assembly gathered with Peter: the crowd of people together numbered one hundred and twenty people (1:15). The number is significant since one hundred and twenty is not only a multiplication of the Twelve but also since one hundred and twenty men are necessary to constitute a local sanhedrin (Sanh. 1.6). Even if Luke is not making the point that the early church is also a “properly constituted” community (see Conzelmann 1987, 10), it is still clear from the narrative that in this newly formed community, women count (see 1:14; also Luke 8:1–3; 23:49).

1:16–22. Because Peter recommends an action in the very near future, namely the replacement of Judas in the circle of the Twelve, his speech (1:16–22) falls into the rhetorical species of deliberative discourse (see “Species of Ancient Rhetoric,” p. 8). The speech turns upon the OT quotation cited in 1:20. The first half of the quotation, taken from Ps 69:25, deals with the demise of Judas; the second half, which is a citation of Ps 109:8, addresses the election of Judas’s successor. The double use of the dei of divine necessity is the textual clue to this division. The shift in tense from imperfect to present also supports the view that the first half of the quotation is addressed by Peter’s story of Judas and the second quotation anticipates fulfillment in the election narrative (see Dupont 1961, 41–51).
Peter’s story of Judas’s demise summarizes the bare essentials of Judas’s betrayal found in the Third Gospel and then adds new information presumably not known to Luke’s authorial audience. The contrasts between Matthew’s version of Judas’s demise (Matt 27:1–10) and Luke’s account helpfully instruct regarding the distinct perspective of the Lukan Peter. Matthew’s account includes: (1) Judas repented and returned the money (27:3–4). (2) The priests are responsible for buying the field for burial (27:7). (3) The name of the field is the result of the use made of the money. (4) Matthew cites scripture (Zech 11:12–13; Jer 32:8–9) to explain the price of the land, not to speak of Judas’s fate.

Peter depicts the defection of Judas and his subsequent judgment with the use of money. In the Third Gospel (contra Matthew), Judas does not repent and return the money, but rather, according to Acts 1:18, purchased a field (chōrion) with the betrayal money. Such a self-serving purchase not only stands in sharp contrast to the way the believers sold their fields and laid the proceeds at the apostles’ feet (see 4:32–35) but also is juxtaposed to the narrator of this story, Peter, who along with James and John “left everything” to follow Jesus (see Luke 5:11). Judas has traded his inheritance (klēron) in the apostolic ministry (1:17) for a farm, a symbol of his apostasy from the circle of the Twelve.

Ironically, Judas dies on this same property, according to Acts: this man purchased a field using the money earned from his unjust deed and after becoming prostrate he burst open in the middle and all his insides poured out (1:18). The phrase “becoming prostrate” or “falling headlong” (prēnēs genomenos) recalls conceptually the prophecy of Simeon that Jesus would be “set for the fall and rising of many in Israel” (2:34). There is no hint of suicide here (contra Matt 27); the death is the result of divine judgment and fits into the theme of “the death of the opponent of God” (Conzelmann 1987, 11), and like the account of Herod (cf. Acts 12:20–23) is conveyed in vivid, “ekphrastic” language, meant as much for the eye as for the ear (see Acts 2:1–5). Because Judas meets his death on this property, it is called the Field of Blood (1:19). And just as the purchasing of a field symbolized Judas’s defection, so also the fact that his property is doomed to perpetual desertion (1:20) is a sign of his judgment.

**Apposito**

The rhetorical figure of *apposito*, the addition of an adjacent, coordinate, explanatory or descriptive element (Quintilian, *Inst*. 8.6.40–43), has occurred twice now (1:15 and 1:18–19). In the case of Acts 1:18–19, the name “Field of Blood” is explained by Judas’s actions. Furthermore, the use of foreign language (here the Aramaic term “Akeldama” or “Field of Blood”), from a rhetorical point of view, is considered a barbarism (barbarismus; Quintilian, *Inst*. 1.5.5–33), but nonetheless necessary for Luke. The effect for the audience is to supplement or correct Matthew’s explanation of the name.
1:23–26. The account in 1:23–26 presupposes that the authorial audience of Acts is familiar with the practice of casting lots (see Num 26:55; Prov 16:33; 1QS 5.3; Livy, Hist. 23.3.7). The crucial feature of this scene is that the number of the Twelve is full again. Joseph and Matthias (1:23) are put forward, and the assembly prays for divine guidance in the selection process. The result of the prayer is that Matthias is chosen as the replacement.

Note the play on words throughout this scene: Judas has forfeited his share (klēron) in the apostolic ministry and goes to his own place (topos). In contrast, the lot (klēron) now falls to Matthias, and he takes his place (topos) alongside the Eleven in the apostolic ministry (on the rhetorical device of using words with multiple meanings, see the sidebar on Acts 4:22). The scriptures are fulfilled, the circle of the Twelve is reconstituted, the stage is set for Pentecost.

Theological Issues

Only Luke and Acts in the NT narrate the departure/ascension of Jesus. By repeating the departure of Jesus in Acts, the narrator has identified the story of Jesus with the story of the church. These two accounts share several common elements. The characters are the same—Jesus and the disciples. In both accounts, this scene is the last appearance of Jesus to his followers. Both stories report Jesus’ commission to his disciples to preach “to all the nations” or to “the end of the earth.” The command to wait in the city for the promise of the Father is also found in both accounts.

Nevertheless, the variations between the two accounts are striking. The narrative contexts in which these two stories are placed explain several of the variations. The ascension story in Luke functions in its narrative context to bring closure to the Gospel, while the ascension narrative in Acts serves in its context as a narrative beginning (see Parsons 1986b). The role of each account in its respective narrative context largely accounts for the differences in detail.

The most obvious discrepancy is the chronological difference between Luke and Acts. The Gospel appears to date the final departure of Jesus on Easter Sunday; Acts allows a period of forty days during which Jesus appeared to the disciples. From a historical point of view, the difference of the forty days between Luke and Acts is intolerable. The temporal tension, however, is readily explained on literary grounds. To end the Gospel with a reference to forty days of appearances by the risen Lord would destroy the rhetorical effect of the ending of Luke. The end of Luke’s gospel is a “close-up” ending with no temporal gap between the body of the narrative and its conclusion. The departure of Jesus occurs on the same day as his resurrection. No epilogue describing the time after the resurrection rounds off the story (as in John). In the narrative context of Acts, however, forty days of appearances are entirely appropriate. Establishing the disciples as reliable and legitimate successors of
Jesus is a major task of the narrative beginning of Acts. The period of forty
days is needed to assure the audience that the disciples are “fully instructed”
(see Acts 20:20, 27, 31). During this period of time, then, Jesus was “telling
them things about the kingdom of God” (1:3).

There is no dialogue in the Gospel account; one sees but cannot hear the ac-
tion. The scene at the end of Luke is a silent scene. The significance of this silence
is that it creates distance between the audience and the characters and facilitates
closure. The audience can “see” Jesus and the disciples but is unable to hear
them. This framing device creates the literary illusion of space between audience
and story and effectively assists the audience in leaving the story world.

In Acts, however, more than half of the account is dialogue. Two speeches by
Jesus anticipate the unfolding of the rest of the narrative. First, Jesus promises
the disciples that “you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit, not many days
from now” (Acts 1:5). This word finds fulfillment in the Pentecost narrative
(see Acts 2). Second, in response to the disciples’ question about the kingdom,
Jesus gives his commission, which effectively serves to outline the rest of the
narrative. The unfolding of Acts is in accordance with Jesus’ promise that the
disciples would be “witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria,
and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

The “raising of hands” and the repeated references to “blessing” in Luke
are missing from Acts. The “raising of the hands” and the blessing at the end
of the Gospel draw a full circle around the story. In the first episode of
the Gospel, Zechariah is incapable of discharging his duties as priest; he is
unable to bless the people who patiently await his service. He returns home,
able to speak, task unfinished (1:23). At the end of the Gospel, Jesus raises
his hands in Levitical fashion (see Lev 9:22; Sir 50:20–22) and blesses his dis-
ciples who are also waiting. In effect, Jesus completes what Zechariah could
not do; he blesses the people of God. These elements are strong closural
devices appropriate to the context of Luke 24:50–53 as a narrative ending,
but they are missing in Acts 1:1–11. The variation again occurs because what
is appropriate or necessary for a narrative ending is not always appropriate
or necessary for a narrative beginning. The benediction at the end of Luke
becomes an invitation at the beginning of Acts. The narrator of Luke and
Acts has employed the ascension narrative to bring closure to one narrative
and provide entrance into its sequel.

There is no need, however, to speak of an “absentee Christology” in Acts.
The influence of Jesus throughout the rest of the narrative is profound even
though he is absent as a character from the narrative of Acts after chapter 1
(except for appearances in visions). His name occurs no less than sixty-nine
times in Acts. He is at the center of the church’s controversy with the Jews.
He guides the church in its missionary efforts. He empowers the disciples to
perform miracles. The ascended and exalted Christ, though absent as a char-
acter, is nonetheless present throughout the narrative.