CHAPTER 28

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES, NARRATIVE, AND HISTORY

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Acts begins with a prologue that establishes the narrative as a continuation of a previous account to Theophilus (1:1; cf. Luke 1:1–5). Whatever the precise relationship of the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts (for a summary of recent discussion, see Spencer 2007), the second volume to Theophilus presents itself as a continuation of the first volume, providing a narrative of the post-Easter Christian movement that begins in Jerusalem moments before Jesus's ascension and its spread throughout the Mediterranean through the activities of some of Jesus's followers.

Brief Outline of Acts

The emphases in the book of Acts on major characters and on the map help us to see the organization of the whole. Continuing the Gospel of Luke's focus on Jerusalem, Acts begins in that city with the activity of Jesus's apostles, but with a clear focus on Peter and John (1:1–8:3). Immediately following Jesus's ascension (also narrated in the final verses of Luke) and the replacement of Judas, we encounter a pivotal scene depicting the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the gathered apostles, which leads to a miraculous and public manifestation of the Spirit's power because the apostles can suddenly be understood in some of the many languages spoken throughout the Roman Empire. Once empowered by the Spirit, the apostles perform miracles and begin preaching publicly. Although they are well received by many, their activities meet with resistance from Jewish authorities and lead to arrests and trials, inaugurating a theme that recurs throughout the narrative. In Acts, as Richard Pervo (2009, 11) notes, "Luke uses persecution as the engine that drives his plot."

Acts then highlights the activity of the apostles and other missionaries beyond Jerusalem in a section (8:4–12:25) that functions as a transition away from Jerusalem and into activity around the Aegean in the second half of the narrative, and from a focus primarily on

Peter in the early chapters to one on Paul from Acts 13 to the end. Fulfilling Jesus's words in Acts 1:8, the message travels beyond the boundaries of Jerusalem through Philip's activity in Samaria and his encounter with an Ethiopian Eunuch; the newly converted Saul's preaching in Damascus; and Peter's visit to Lydda, Joppa, and eventually, Caesarea. Two episodes of this section are worth highlighting. The first is the gradual introduction of Paul: initially as Saul, an approving observer of the stoning of Stephen, then through a dramatic encounter with the risen Jesus while on his way to do violence to believers, and then as a witness who, like Peter, speaks boldly and meets with resistance and opposition. The second is the conversion of Cornelius, a lengthy episode that makes it clear that God engineers the inclusion of Gentiles in the movement, as both Peter and Cornelius receive divine messages. Acts' use of repetition to underscore important themes is also in evidence here: Peter's vision of unclean animals God has declared clean is experienced twice by the reader, once in a third-person narration and a second time in a first-person narration as Peter recounts the vision to Jerusalem's leaders.

After a brief return to Jerusalem, in episodes that highlight resistance, principally Jewish, to the gospel (Acts 12), Saul, who from this point on is referred to as Paul, takes center stage in Acts 13 and remains the focus of the narrative until its conclusion. Paul's Gentile mission in the Mediterranean world (13:1–20:38) has him traveling through Syria, Cilicia, Asia Minor, and Greece in a series of excursions based upon Antioch. In the final leg of Paul's travels, he visits major Aegean cities, including Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, and Corinth—all told with significantly more detail and local color than is the case in the first half of the narrative—before returning to Jerusalem.

The free movement of Paul in the previous sections is curtailed significantly when Paul is accused of inflammatory teaching and defiling the Temple by Jewish authorities and placed under arrest. This final section (21:1–28:31) follows Paul when he is in Roman custody as he works his way through and up the Roman judicial system. Paul's legal troubles provide opportunities for trials and defense speeches that both vindicate him and mirror the trials of Jesus in Luke. Paul then survives a dramatic shipwreck en route to an expected confrontation with the emperor. Paul's remarkable survival serves, like the successive trials in this section, to vindicate him. The anticipated audience with the emperor never occurs; instead, readers encounter a less than successful meeting with Jewish leaders in Rome and what to some has felt like an abrupt conclusion to the narrative with Paul, still under arrest and awaiting a hearing before the emperor but preaching the gospel "boldly and unhindered" (28:31).

Approaching Acts as a Narrative

The book of Acts has long played a significant role in shaping the way the history of early Christianity is reconstructed, both in the early years, by such Christian leaders as Eusebius (Cameron 1994), and in recent scholarship (Penner 2004b). The increased attention given to the literary and narrative features of Luke and Acts in the last few decades has shown that Acts is, in many ways, much more and much less than a straightforward history, if we measure history by modern standards. Indeed, Acts is a highly selective and very carefully constructed narrative of the early spread of the Jesus movement. Despite the traditional title by which the work comes to be known, *praxeis apostolōn*, or "the Acts of the Apostles," the narrative

focus is on particular witnesses—primarily Peter in the first half (chaps. 1–12) and Paul, who in Acts is not actually granted the title of apostle, in the second (chaps. 13–28). But even this is an oversimplification, for as significant as these named figures are, Acts makes it clear that they act at the direction of and under the guidance of God and the Spirit, who emerge in the narrative as characters with speaking parts. If, in its focus on key figures, the narrative fails to correspond to its traditional title, it is also selective in its geographical scope. Despite Jesus's clear charge to the apostles to be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and, eventually, at the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8), the narrative's actual geographical focus drives ever westward, from Jerusalem to the coast and into Syria, Asia Minor, and Rome, creating a narrative arc from Jerusalem to Rome. Any narrative, including one that purports to be historical, makes choices about what events to highlight and in what order (Marguerat 2002, 5–6). What, then, does one make of Acts? How do we understand the choices made, the places covered, and the particular ways in which the spread of the movement is described?

Sustained narrative-critical or narratological approaches to Acts began in earnest in the 1970s but did not come out of nowhere. Attention to the literary features of Acts can be seen in the work of historical critics, perhaps especially in that of Henry Cadbury (1920, 1927), who argued for reading Luke and Acts as a two-volume work on the strength of their similar language, themes, and style. Martin Dibelius's (1956) important essay on the style criticism of Acts highlighted its narrative differences from the Luke narrative, which then require different approaches and methods for understanding what the second volume to Theophilus does. Literary features are also central in the work of redaction critics, such as Hans Conzelmann (1961) and Ernst Haenchen (1966). But in the end, the literary features of particular gospels facilitated the search for the communities behind the texts. Attention then shifted to tracing themes, motifs, and patterns in Luke and Acts (Goulder 1964; Minear 1976; Talbert 1974). Drawing on emerging literary theory, readings of Acts soon began to bracket historical concerns (and questions of historicity explicitly) emphasizing the value of focusing on the narrative itself and on the text. As Norman Petersen (1978, 20) put it, "[T]he text itself must be comprehended in its own terms before we can ask of what it is evidence whether in relation to the time of writing or in relation to the events referred to in it." Petersen went on to focus on the repetition of the pattern of Paul's preaching to Gentiles after being rejected by Jewish audiences, identifying it as a plot device inextricable from the narrative world created by Luke.

The next two decades saw a number of works drawing on narrative-critical approaches that typically emphasized the ways in which the theology and the purpose of Acts are carried through the narrative features of both Luke and Acts (Parsons 1987; Tannehill 1990; Brawley 1990; Kurz 1993). While some of the early narrative-critical studies focused almost exclusively on the text itself, a number of scholars began to turn to contextualization and comparison to understand the ways in which the narrative of Acts would have been read or heard in a Greco-Roman context. David Gowler (1991), for example, examines the characterization of the Pharisees in Acts using modern narratological tools but also gives attention to the scripts and narrative conventions available at the time by situating Acts among a broad set of contemporary narratives. Other studies of characterization in Acts also rely heavily on comparison to understand the kinds of meaning or meanings the narrative would have evoked in its Mediterranean setting (Darr 1990; Roth 1997; Penner and Vander Stichele 2003; Marguerat 2002; Alexander 2005). A number of scholars expanded the scope of comparison beyond textual and literary materials to include the social world (Danker 1982; Esler 1987; Neyrey 1991).

It as also worth highlighting the studies focused on the question of the genre of Acts. While Acts does not fit neatly into any genre category, it evokes historiographical expectations (Phillips 2006; Penner 2004a; Witherington 1996), or, in the preface at least, the expectations one finds in technical writing (Alexander 1993), novels (Pervo 1987), and epics (Bonz 2000; MacDonald 2003). Some of these studies might not necessarily be classified as "narrative critical"; however, they were significant in providing models for how Acts might or might not have been read or heard in the early Roman Empire.

Careful attention to the world constructed by the book of Acts, the particular discourses—linguistic and cultural codes—invoked, and the ways in which the particulars of the narrative would have been understood in an early Roman context are now, for the most part, the norm in Acts studies. The reading of Acts that I develop in what follows pays particular attention to the ways in which the narrative draws on conventions and patterns that readers would have expected to encounter in the telling of the story of the expansion of the Christian movement.

Reading Acts in an Ancient Mediterranean Setting

The prologue addressed to Theophilus (Luke 1:1–4), which the secondary preface in Acts recalls (Acts 1:1–2), provides a kind of reading contract for the reader that can help us to see the aims of the work (Marguerat 2002, 23). Two aspects are worth highlighting here. The first is that the narrator, in the repeated use of "us" (*hēmeis*; Acts 1, 2), inscribes himself into the community for which the ensuing narrative is relevant, suggesting that Acts' ideal reader is imagined as a part of a community of believers. The second is what I take to be the narrator's statement of purpose for the work: to provide his readers with "surety" or "certainty" (*asphaleia*; 1:4). The author goes about providing this surety through a narrative (*diēgesis*; 1:1) that in the second volume takes up the events that occur after Jesus's ascension. One of the striking features of Acts is the use of several narrative voices: the preface in Luke (1:1–4) has an extradiegetic narrator; a third-person omniscient narrator appears throughout the book of Acts; and a first-person plural narrator—also omniscient—appears intermittently in the second half of the narrative (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16). Long seen as evidence for the author's written sources, these multiple narrative voices are probably best seen as attempts to construct a reliable identity for the narrator that draws on the credibility of both an authoritative observer and an eyewitness (Eisen 2010, 227–228). Although a clear genre identification has proven elusive, this story of beginnings can be fairly understood as a foundational narrative, whose "truth lies in the interpretation it gives to the past and the possibility it offers to a community to understand itself in the present" (Marguerat 2002, 8). Acts provided readers in the late first century, or, more likely, the early second century (Pervo 2006; Tyson 2006) with a means of constructing a Christian identity and providing the movement with legitimacy (Marguerat 2002, 30–34; Esler 1987, 16–23).

The particular discourses, or linguistic and cultural codes, on which Acts draws suggest a world view steeped in an understanding of the Hebrew Bible (likely the Septuagint version) and "presumes that history is the unfolding of a divine plan for the salvation of God's

chosen people and that great men, of humble origins, are called by God to be instruments in the execution of that plan" (Matthews 2013, 8–9). Divine intervention often appears at key moments—empowering the apostles (Acts 2), converting the first clearly identified Gentile (Acts 10–11), and commissioning Paul at the start of his travels (Acts 13), for example.

In addition, Acts draws on the larger literary, narrative, and cultural patterns available in the Greco-Roman world. In so doing, the author of Acts reflects compositional practices of his time that are sometimes difficult to appreciate from our modern vantage point. Whereas we privilege originality and innovation, in the early Roman Empire imitation of classical models was highly valued and reinforced in the Greek educational system, which emphasized the imitation of Greek classical models. Through repeated imitation at each stage of their education, students would develop a familiarity with a core group of classical texts—Homer, Euripides, and Plato, among others—and develop a compositional ethos that was highly allusive as well as indebted to a relatively small set of literary models (Dupertuis 2007). Perhaps the most significant implication for the study of the literature of the period, including Christian literature, is that we should expect to find writings conforming to the principles of composition instilled throughout the various stages of education, including attention to the classical models that were the typical targets of imitation. The use of models, as well as the *topoi* and type-scenes that develop from them over time, would have also been expected by an audience of the early era. Attention to the ways in which Acts drew on these models and type-scenes from the available cultural repertoire in a narrative aimed at providing surety or certainty to Christian readers is central for understanding Acts in its context.

Reading Christian Expansion

The book of Acts is a spatially oriented narrative perhaps best read with the aid of a map.

The centrality of geography and of movement in the narrative is signaled in Jesus's charge to the disciples in Acts 1:8, which is often read as a programmatic statement for the narrative. It is also evident in the fact that the narrator's preferred term for the movement is "the Way" (9:2; 18:25; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22), as well as the significant travel of the movement's emissaries and the numerous references to place names. The scope of Acts is both "universalizing" and "translocal" (Burrus 2007, 133). As Robert Maddox (1982, 11) puts it, "[T]he story of Jesus and of the Church is a story full of purposeful movement."

Actual travel in Acts follows a typical there-and-back structure: Peter ventures into Samaria, then returns to Jerusalem (8:14–25); Paul repeatedly returns to Jerusalem throughout Acts; and his missionary travel (Acts 13–19) is structured as a series of trips, with Antioch as a base. That said, the overall progression of the narrative is clearly from Jerusalem, the focal point at the beginning, toward the Aegean, and eventually, to Rome. In this movement, Acts can be read as a narrative of expansion and, though the imagery is not necessarily military, perhaps even as a narrative of conquest of the Roman world.

In the light of the steady westward expansion of the movement throughout the narrative, it is worth noting the repeated use of patterns, codes, type-scenes, and language associated with the founding of a city, institution, or colony. The pivotal events of the outpouring of the Spirit on the disciples and the subsequent language miracle in Acts 2 evoke language that is typical of the foundation of an institution or city (Balch 2003; Penner 2003; Weaver 2004). Similar language appears in the account of the conversion of Cornelius, which sets the stage

for Paul's Gentile mission (Wilson 2001). Paul's visit to Philippi (Acts 16:11–40), which I will look at in more detail later, also draws on imagery of the foundation of a movement, as does Paul's arrival in Rome (Acts 28:16–31), the center of imperial power (Marguerat 2002, 249). These "foundation" narratives mark key moments in the advance of a mission that in Acts is presented geographically, with the clear movement of Christianity's center from Jerusalem to Rome. Luke Timothy Johnson (1992) notes that the author's skill is such that the degree to which an investment in a Gentile mission drives the geographic sense and movement of Acts is often overlooked. He goes on to state, "[The author] has wonderfully joined a spatial progression to a demographic phenomenon (conversion of Gentiles more than Jews), and has joined this to a cultural transformation (ever-increasing sense of the 'Greek World' as the story progresses)" (11). I might go a bit further and suggest the geographical movement described in Acts has a double function. On the one hand, it quite fairly and plausibly represents historical facts—there was a demographic shift in early Christianity, and at one point the Christian movement expanded westward. On the other hand, geography in Acts also functions symbolically. Through the use of civic and cult foundation imagery as the gospel moves into new territories, Acts also serves to legitimate the presence of Christianity in the Roman world.

We can now take a more detailed look at one of the stories of the expansion of the movement into new territory. The story of Paul's missionary activity in the Aegean (16–19) begins in Philippi (16:11–40). After being prevented by the Spirit from carrying out their planned itinerary, Paul and Silas receive a vision in which a Macedonian man asks them for help (16:6–10). With divine sanction for the new destination clearly established, the narrator (now using the first-person plural for the first of the four "we-passages" in Acts) reports brief stops at Troas, Samothrace, and Neapolis before finally arriving in Philippi, which is identified as a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. The usual visit to the local synagogue is replaced here by an encounter with women at a place of prayer (*proseuchē*) outside the city. There Lydia, identified as dealer in purple cloth, accepts the message given by Paul, is baptized along with her household, and offers the missionaries hospitality. On the way to the place of prayer, the missionaries encounter a slave girl with a prophetic spirit, an ability the girl's owners benefit from financially. The girl publicly identifies Paul and his associates as servants of the Most High God, proclaiming the way of salvation. After many days of this activity, Paul becomes annoyed and demands that the spirit leave her. This upsets the girl's owners, who bring charges against the missionaries with the local authorities. The men are beaten and thrown in jail without a trial. But the walls of the prison do not hold them long, as an earthquake tears at the foundations and springs the doors open. The distraught jailer is prevented from committing suicide by Paul and Silas, who do not take the opportunity to escape. The jailer is subsequently converted, along with his household. Ordered released, Paul reveals that he and Silas are Roman citizens and have been unjustly treated given their status. They receive an apology, and after visiting Lydia, they depart.

Internally, this episode reflects a pattern of mission, arrest, trial (or at least a trial-like situation), and vindication through release (Acts 2–5; 16–19; Pervo 1987, 12–57; Tannehill 1990, 201–203). It also parallels two earlier miraculous jailbreak scenes featuring Peter (Acts 5, 12). But as is often the case in Acts, and in keeping with the expectations of an ancient audience, Acts modifies the type-scene to mark the significance of the arrival of the movement on Greek soil. To do so, Acts invokes cult foundation narratives, specifically the arrival of the worship of Dionysus on Greek soil as told in Euripides's *Bacchae*.

In Acts 16, as in the *Bacchae*, an emissary of a new god arrives on the Greek mainland for the first time. In both, the god is primarily accepted by women associated with Lydia, a region in Asia Minor. The *Bacchae* suggests that Lydia is the birthplace of Dionysus; whereas the use of the name Lydia in Acts, as well as linking her to Thyatira, a city in Lydia, appears to evoke Dionysian traditions. Whereas Dionysus drives the women of Thebes mad, Paul rids a slave girl of a spirit of divination. Both actions lead to accusations by city officials, who feel threatened by the new god's power, and result in the incarceration of the god's emissary. In both the *Bacchae* and Acts, the imprisonments are short-lived, because earthquakes destroy the prisons and the captors rush in with swords drawn. Whether the result of direct dependence (MacDonald 2004) or the use of a topos or type-scene (Matthews 2001, 72–78; Pervo 2009, 409–411), it is clear that Acts draws on and evokes narrative patterns associated with the founding of a cult to mark the arrival of the gospel in Greece.

It is worth noting that the sense that the gospel is expanding into new territory is heightened by the fact that the "mental map" assumed in Acts up to this point is centered around Jerusalem, leaving places like Philippi and other Greek cities off the field of view entirely. To the Jerusalem-centered world of Acts 2, with its well-known list of nations (2:9–11), the Aegean is "unknown territory, and its penetration by the emissaries of the gospel is a geographical achievement worthy of celebration" (Alexander 2005, 79–80).

But the story in Acts marks more than simply the arrival of the gospel into a new territory. Philippi was, indeed, an important city, having been the capital of Alexander the Great. While Paul's arrival in Philippi is like Dionysus's arrival in Thebes—both represent entry onto the Greek mainland—Acts emphasizes the Roman identity of Philippi by calling it the "first city of the district of Macedonia, and a Roman colony" (Acts 16:12). The Christian movement's presence in Philippi is thus not merely an advance into Greek territory, although it is that; it is also an incursion into the sphere of Roman imperial authority. This impression is also supported by the fact that Philippi is the only place in Acts where the resistance or opposition Christian emissaries encounter does not include a representative of Judaism (Skinner 2010, 123). The opposition comes from the Philippian owners of a slave girl and the Philippian authorities.

The brief encounter with the prophesying slave girl (16:16–18) adds a defeat of pagan religion to the geographical expansion of the movement into Greek (and Roman) territory. The slave girl, who follows Paul and Silas for days proclaiming them servants of the Most High God thanks to a "spirit of divination" (*pneuma pythona*), is linked to the god Apollo, who defeated the Python at Delphi to acquire divinatory powers. Despite the fact that what the slave girl says is right, the narrator disapproves of the source of her powers, and, accordingly, Paul exorcises the spirit. The slave girl, who might otherwise be a victim, functions in the narrative as the "bad-girl" in contrast to Lydia's "good-girl" (Staley 1999, 126–128) and serves as a vehicle to showcase the defeat of pagan religious practices. That she disappears from the narrative suggests that she has served her purpose (Gaventa 2003, 238).

Paul's actions enrage the girl's owners, who drag him and Silas before the local magistrates. The reader is privy to the real motivation for the charges—the loss of income (16:19)—whereas in the public charges, Paul and Silas are accused of disturbing the city and advocating customs that were illegal for Romans (16:21). The trial devolves into a mob scene, showing the first part of the charge to be false. That the magistrates are the ones carrying out the beating on Paul and Silas is a challenge to credibility, but it makes a point: Paul and Silas are certainly not the agitators in this scene. The second part of the charge will become ironic

by the end of the episode, as the categories of "insider" and "outsider" become increasingly blurry.

The third of the miraculous prison-break scenes in Acts (16:25–31) differs from the previous two in a number of ways, but most prominent among them is that it does not feature an escape at all. Robert Tannehill (1990, 198–199) notes that "in Philippi Paul is twice presented with opportunities for freedom (vv. 26, 35–36) and twice refuses them. These developments focus attention not on the fact of miraculous release, but on Paul's reasons for rejecting these opportunities, which involve the jailer on the one hand and the city officials, on the other." The actions of Paul and Silas certainly lead to the jailer's conversion and the confrontation with city authorities, but Acts adds an additional layer of meaning by narrating the non-escape in language and imagery that evoke philosophers generally, and Socrates in particular. According to tradition, Socrates, who had by the early Roman Empire become the model of philosophic virtue, composed a hymn while in prison and refused to take advantage of an opportunity to escape (Pervo 2009, 410–412). While the earthquake vindicates Paul and Silas in language and imagery that are strikingly Dionysian, their behavior and its aftermath take a turn to the Socratic, revealing them to be genuine philosophers.

The tendency in this section to highlight the Roman aspects of Philippi's identity comes into play in the final confrontation with the Philippian officials. Why the magistrates order Paul and Silas released (Acts 16:35) is unclear. The omission of motive—a narrative "blank" because it is deemed not essential by the narrator (Tannehill 1990, 199)—serves to highlight what the narrator does deem important, and in this scene it appears to be a confrontation with the magistrates over the issue of identity. Paul's stunning revelation that both he and Silas are Roman citizens, and the magistrates' desire to make their blunder disappear, is a trope used here to create the space to restore Paul's honor. Indeed, Paul's refusal to let the shameful (and from the narrator's standpoint) illegal public beating be handled quietly and privately would have been heard in terms of the ancient competition for honor (Johnson 1992, 303). Paul's citizenship provides a surprising twist on the earlier accusation of behavior that is not Roman. "The question of who in fact reflects the ideal of Roman citizenship here receives an ironic answer" (Gaventa 2003, 241). The arrival of Christianity in Philippi through Paul is both a conquest, celebrated and justified in the language and imagery of the arrival of a foreign cult, and a return home, since the movement is, like Paul, legitimately and legally at home in the Roman world.

Conclusion

While the journey is central in both Luke and Acts, the theme is developed differently in the two volumes addressed to Theophilus. In Luke, the extended journey from Galilee to Jerusalem becomes a frame on which to hang Jesus's teaching. In Acts, however, the journey takes the form of a series of adventures in which the reader follows the expansion of the movement. In Acts, the characters and their carefully plotted and represented geographical movements become means of relating the passing of the message from the provincial outskirts to the center of the Greco-Roman world. In earlier scholarship this was often read as an apology for empire, but empire is a given in the world in which Acts was first heard. Acts provides its Christian readers in need of surety a narrative of the past that allows them to see

a legitimate space for themselves in a world dominated by Rome. The narrative does this, in part, through a telling of past events that stresses the divine initiative and sanction of the Gentile mission. It also relies on cultural codes that would have been familiar to first readers. It is a testament to the skill of the author of Acts that it is difficult to see the constructed nature of the narrative. Attention to how Acts would have been read in its own time allows us to see the ways in which Acts draws on and challenges expectations in the story of first days of the church.

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