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THE EARLY CHURCH AND TODAY'S CHURCH: INSIGHTS FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS

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Introduction

There are several questions regarding interpretation of the book of Acts that continue to be asked. They are: (1) *What kind of book is the book of Acts?* Is it a history, a biography (or biographies), a romantic adventure involving a sea voyage and a shipwreck, a theology of the development of the early church, an apologetic for the early church, an explanation of how the church got centered on Rome? (2) *What is the relation of the book of Acts to other books in the New Testament?* Is it the second of two books, with Luke's Gospel the first, or is it the second of three, with the third unwritten? Or is the book of Acts best seen as an independent book? What is the relationship of the book of Acts to the letters of Paul and the letters of Peter and James, all three people who play a role in the book of Acts? (3) *Who was the author of Acts?* If the book is anonymous (as it is), does that affect how we read it? What about early historical traditions about the author being a companion of Paul, the physician Luke? (4) *Is the book of Acts normative for today?* If the book of Acts is Christian Scripture (and it is), what are we to make of it for Christian life today? Do we take all that it says as normative or none of what it says as normative? If we take some of it as normative, how do we decide which parts we take and which ones we do not take?

These are fundamental questions that arise out of the book of Acts itself in its biblical and early church context, but that have direct implications for the church today. The following essay offers some discussion in answer to these questions above by

considering three areas noteworthy for what they can offer the exegetical process: (1) The order and placement of Acts in the New Testament canon; (2) the literary type or shape of the book; and (3) the date of its composition. These are not new topics of discussion by any means, but their interpretive implications for understanding the book of Acts and the church today should be elucidated. My purpose here is not to offer any single interpretation of a given passage; it is to begin thinking about some different issues of interpretation, each with potentially far-reaching implications, which originate from within the book of Acts.

1. The Book of Acts in the Christian Canon

A. Order and Placement

The earliest extant complete copies of the book of Acts date to the fourth century, and are found in the two major codexes (a form of ancient book): Sinaiticus and Vaticanus. When Emperor Constantine commissioned the Bishop of Caesarea, Eusebius, in the fourth century (AD 331) to produce fifty deluxe editions of the Bible, the two codexes, Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, were quite possibly two of those fifty. Even if they were not part of that group of fifty, they certainly are deluxe and beautiful manuscripts, written on treated animal skins or parchment (first developed in the ancient city of Pergamum in now western Turkey). Sinaiticus is a nearly complete Bible of the Old and New Testaments and was found by the great textual scholar Constantine Tischendorf (1815–74).[1] Vaticanus, however, has been re-etched by a later scribe, indicating that perhaps Vaticanus failed to meet with approval as one of the fifty and had been rejected, only later to be picked up again and re-introduced as a usable Bible. In any case, there are notable distinctions between these two ancient books regarding the placement of the book of Acts within the ordering of the books in the New Testament.

1. For more on the life and work of Constanine Tischendorf, see Porter, *Constantine Tischendorf*.

In Vaticanus, the book of Acts appears after Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. However, Vaticanus then has the seven Catholic Epistles (James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, Jude), followed by the Pauline letters: Romans, etc. (with Hebrews after 2 Thessalonians and apparently before the Pastoral Epistles, assuming they were there, as Vaticanus breaks off in 2 Thessalonians, and was completed by addition of a later manuscript appended to it). In Sinaiticus, the order is the four Gospels, then the Pauline letters (with Hebrews after 2 Thessalonians and before the Pastoral Epistles) ending with Philemon, then Acts, and then the Catholic Epistles (James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, Jude) and Revelation (as well as Barnabas and Shepherd of Hermas).[2]

These are two very different orderings for the book of Acts, apart from Acts being followed by the Catholic Epistles in each. This difference in ordering is surprising, especially if these two deluxe codexes were prepared as two of the fifty that Constantine ordered. Why would such different ordering occur? Eusebius seems not to have exercised enough quality control so that they might at least follow the same order. Perhaps something more is going on here that merits attention. A survey of other canonical orderings of the early church (either lists or other manuscripts) shows that these two major codexes were not alone in their distinctive ordering.

The following canonical orders and their sources are to be found:[3]

(1) *Gospels, **Acts**, Catholic Epistles, Pauline Epistles*—Vaticanus, Council of Laodicea in AD 363, Cyril of Jerusalem (4th c.), John of Damascus (7–8th c.), and the Peshitta (Syriac, 5th c.); adding the book of Revelation at the end are: Codex Alexandrinus, Athanasius (4th c.), Cyril of Alexandria (4–5th c.), Leonitus (6th c.), Cassiodorus (6th c.), and Nicephorus (9th c.), among others.

2. See Porter, *How We Got the New Testament*, 129–36, for discussion of how Barnabas and Shepherd of Hermas are to be interpreted in light of their placement at the end of Sinaiticus.

3. Moffatt, *Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament*, 14.

(2) *Gospels, Pauline Epistles,* ***Acts****, Catholic Epistles, Revelation*—Sinaiticus, Jerome (4th c.), Epiphanius (4th c.), Codex Fuldensis (6th c. Latin ms.), and Eucherius (5th c.).

(3) *Gospels,* ***Acts****, Pauline Epistles, Catholic Epistles, Revelation*—Council of Carthage (AD 397), Amphilochius (4th c.), Philastrius (4th c.), Rufinus (4th c.), and Syriac Canon (5th c.).

(4) ***Acts****, Pauline Epistles, Gospels*—Apostolic Constitution (2.57) (late 4th c.?).

(5) *Gospels, Pauline Epistles, Catholic Epistles,* ***Acts****, Revelation*—Augustine (4th c.), Innocent I (4–5th c.), and Isidore of Spain (7th c.).

More unique orderings are noted as well:

John Chrysostom (4th c.) had the order *Pauline Epistles, Gospels,* ***Acts****, Catholic Epistles*; Codex Bezae (5th c.) appears to have had *Gospels, Revelation, 1–3 John (possibly the Catholic epistles),* ***Acts***; the Apostolic Constitutions (late fourth c.?) (in another place) have the order of *Gospels, Paul's Epistles, Catholic Epistles* (though not standard order), *the two epistles of Clement, the eight books of the apostolic constitutions,* ***Acts of the Apostles***.

Two other manuscripts offer further evidence. These are two papyrus manuscripts.[4] The first is the papyrus manuscript P^{45} (papyrus 45, enumerated according to a standard list of papyrus manuscripts). P^{45} is a large papyrus manuscript that is often dated to the third century, or possibly even earlier, but it is not complete. It appears, however, to have originally contained the four Gospels and Acts, in that order. Although it did not apparently contain any more of the New Testament, the key here is that Acts occurs with the Gospels and at the end. The second manuscript is the papyrus manuscript P^{74}. P^{74} dates to the sixth or

4. Papyrus was an early form of paper made of treating the papyrus plant stalk. This plant grew in abundance in ancient Egypt, where the stalks were picked, slit into strips, laid out in sheets and pressed together so that the juices formed a glue to hold the sheets together. The earliest manuscripts of the New Testament were written on papyrus. For more on the study of ancient manuscripts and especially its related field known as paleography, see Parker, *Introduction to the New Testament Manuscripts*, 13–87.

probably seventh century, and contains Acts and all seven of the Catholic Epistles. In this case, Acts occurs with the Catholic Epistles, but occurs at the beginning.

The early Christians themselves apparently had different conceptions of how to think about the book of Acts—on the basis of where they put it in their various biblical canonical orderings and groupings. In most instances, Acts is placed after the Gospels, but before the Catholic Epistles and usually the Pauline Epistles. But sometimes Acts is placed after both the Gospels and the Pauline Epistles, and sometimes the Catholic Epistles as well. In one instance, Acts is at the front of the canon, and in other instances, at the end of the canon.

One of the important insights of canonical approaches to the New Testament (that is, approaches that attempt to interpret the New Testament in light of the entire canon taken as a whole and as an interpretive, regulative principle) is to foster the interpretation of the books of the New Testament on the basis of their placement within the canon. A canonical approach is often used as a regulator of the size of the canon, and usually begins from one of the well-established canons, such as the Protestant canon (that is, the books that Protestants consider fully authoritative). A canonical approach can help us to understand how the book of Acts was interpreted in the early church as a means of giving insight into various ways that we might think of and even interpret the book of Acts today.[5]

As indicative above, the book of Acts was viewed by early interpreters in different ways as evidenced in its placement in relation to the other books of the New Testament, and possibly even the Old. Some of these differing ways of viewing it include the following:

5. Brevard Childs, however, one of the founders of the canonical approach, does not think that placement of a book is significant for interpreting the book, because he wants to take the books synchronically as a whole**.** A helpful overview and description of Childs's canonical approach is chapter 3, "Canon and Criticism," in his *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 69–83. For the New Testament canon, see Childs, *New Testament as Canon*, 3–53.

a. Acts as a Bridge between Jesus and the Writing Apostles. Rob Wall, a New Testament canonical critic, calls it "Acts as canonical bridge," when Acts appears after the Gospels and before the Pauline and Catholic Epistles.[6] There are at least five ways in which Acts may act as a bridge between Jesus and the Writing Apostles (those books attributed to various apostles).

(1) *Chronological Bridge.* The events narrated in the Gospels involve the birth (at least in Matthew and Luke), ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The fourfold Gospel—which is never divided in these canonical lists (though sometimes they are varied in order)—is four separate though related canonical accounts of the ministry and teaching of Jesus Christ. The letters of Paul, Peter, John, and Jude are the letters of followers of Jesus after his ascension and therefore are subsequent chronologically. Acts, therefore, functions as a chronological bridge between this first (Gospels) and subsequent (Writing Apostles) generation of activity.

(2) *Explanatory Bridge.* The Gospels depict Jesus and his ministry, which is confined to the geographical regions of Judea and Galilee. The epistles of the subsequent generation are all written to those outside the confines of the immediate ministry of Jesus. Paul's letters are written to various churches throughout Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome. First Peter and James are written to those who are dispersed abroad. As an explanatory bridge, the book of Acts explains how it is that the ministry of Jesus, confined to Judea and Galilee, warranted letters written to as far away as Rome.

(3) *Hermeneutical Bridge.* Jesus' ministry was first and foremost to the Jews and, however one interprets some Gospel statements and events, a Gentile ministry is not a prominent part of his ministry (although Luke 4:16–30, among other passages,

6. Wall, "Acts of the Apostles in Canonical Context," 113 (I am indebted to his account for many of the ideas that follow). See also Smith, *Canonical Function of Acts*, who argues for Acts not only having a unifying function for the NT canon, but also justifying the hermeneutical authority of the early catholic bishops up through the formation of the canon in the fourth century.

hints otherwise). The epistles clearly indicate a ministry that goes beyond geographical limitations and ethnic limitations to reach the dispersion and, even more obviously, the Gentiles. Acts depicts *how* this transition from Judaism to the Gentiles took place. It does so by depicting the *events*—Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–40), Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10), Paul's conversion (Acts 9:1–19), Paul ministering in synagogues, Paul going over to Europe (Acts 16 and following). Further, Acts depicts the *understanding* of how this transition takes place. An angel tells Philip literally to hit the road and join the Eunuch (Acts 8:26). Peter falls into a trance and sees a vision that explains to him about laws of purity (Acts 10:10). Paul is knocked off his feet and blinded (Acts 9:3–4), and a man from Macedonia appears to him in a vision at night and asks him to come to Europe (Acts 16:9). The meeting in Acts 15 comes to a conclusion regarding how God has given the Holy Spirit to all people.[7]

(4) *Theological bridge.* At the time when Jesus ascended (and the Gospels conclude their accounts), he had given some indications of the founding of a church, but little specific indication of what that church would be like, where it would be located, and how it would function. The letters of the apostles are written to various believing communities throughout the Mediterranean world, from Jewish communities of Asia Minor to clearly Gentile communities of faith spread throughout the Roman Empire, including as far away as Rome. The book of Acts shows not just the chronological, geographical, or even hermeneutical justification of such a transition. It provides *evidence* of how the early church grew to need the theology that is contained within the letters of the apostles. It shows the nature of the people involved, their particular problems and issues, their need for organization and structure, their struggles with theological issues, and their struggles with various ethical issues. The letters of the apostles make sense in the light of seeing the situations out of which they were called.

7. See Porter, "Leadership and the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1–21)."

(5) *Warrant for the Writing Apostles.* Jesus teaches in the Gospels, and these documents record the words and actions of Jesus of Nazareth. The epistles record authoritative teaching on the part of Jesus' followers, speaking on behalf of Jesus Christ to his churches, offering doctrine and practical advice. Acts justifies these subsequent authoritative writings coming from the followers of Jesus. In Acts, it is these closest followers of Jesus who are empowered at Pentecost and begin to preach fearlessly first in Jerusalem and then beyond, to the rest of the world. The book of Acts thereby offers a warrant for their positions as authoritative teachers through their letters by depiction of them as empowered authoritative teachers in their various missionary endeavors.

b. *Acts as Warrant for the Epistles of Peter, Jude, and James.* There are some canonical listings with Acts after the Pauline Epistles and before the Catholic Epistles, that is, between the two corpora of apostolic letters. Acts provides the warrant or basis for including the Catholic Epistles within the scope of canonical authority. In many instances where Acts precedes the Catholic Epistles, but follows the Pauline Epistles, the Pauline Epistles and the Gospels are placed one after the other. The placement of Acts may indicate that the early church accepted the teaching of the fourfold Gospel, and accepted the teaching of the Apostle Paul as the theological outworking of the ministry of Jesus. Jesus is arguably then seen as more clearly anticipating a ministry that would extend beyond the geographical confines of Judea and Galilee and the ethnic boundaries of Judaism to reach the wider world of the Mediterranean and the Gentiles.

The Catholic Epistles are in several instances addressed to those of the dispersion and are even concerned with what might appear to be more Jewish topics, such as the relation between law and works in Jas 2:16–21. The placement of Acts indicates an effort to provide a warrant for the Catholic Epistles as apostolic epistles that support the acts of these apostles. Paul's epistles are clearly already seen as authoritative (see 2 Pet 3:16), but Acts, by depicting the development of the early church and the function of such figures as Peter and James, warrants the

inclusion of their letters, as another dimension or facet of the development of the early church. These believers too are included within the people of God.

c. *Acts as Commentary on the Fourfold Gospel.* Acts often appears after the Gospels whereby Acts might provide a transition from the Gospels to the Epistles. Wall also sees Acts as providing a valuable commentary on the fourfold Gospel.[8] This would justify Acts occurring after the Gospels, but before the rest of the New Testament. Wall singles out several features of Acts that indicate this commentary function:

(1) Jesus' theological teaching is summarized and proclaimed in the book of Acts. Wall notes that Jesus' messianic deeds and his teachings are picked up by the book of Acts.[9] They are then referred to and even imitated by the apostles. Throughout Acts there are a number of speeches by various apostles who choose to reflect upon the words and teachings of Jesus. These include Peter in his speech in Acts 2 at Pentecost, Stephen in Acts 7 in his recapitulation of Israelite history, and numerous speeches of Paul, such as at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13) and Athens (Acts 16). The actions of the apostles in their healings and miracles (e.g., Acts 3 with Peter and John) are also a reflection of and commentary upon the continuing ministry of Jesus even after his departure.

(2) The ascension occurs at the end of the Gospels, and in particular, in the Gospel of Luke (24:44–53). Whereas much scholarship wishes to treat Luke and Acts together (hence the rubric, Luke–Acts, formulated by the New Testament scholar Henry Cadbury), I am trying to observe how Acts functions, when it is not attached to Luke, but stands on its own. Luke's Gospel (and Matthew's perhaps by implication) ends with the ascension, and the ascension is a final action that brings the Gospel to a close. In Acts, the ascension is the inaugurating event for future ministry.[10] In this sense, Acts provides a form of

8. Wall, "Acts of the Apostles," 115–20.
9. Wall, "Acts of the Apostles," 115–16.
10. See Porter, "Unity of Luke-Acts and the Ascension Narratives."

recapitulation of the ascension as a means of commenting upon the ministry of Jesus as not ended but continued in the work of his apostles. Acts then is the depiction of this continued ministry in the spirit and power of the ascended and reigning Jesus Christ.

d. *Acts as Commentary on All the Epistles.* Rather than simply seeing Acts as a means of forming a bridge between the fourfold Gospel and the epistles, Acts is often found in relation to the epistles. Wall argues that Acts serves as a commentary on the two groups of epistles.[11] Acts can function as a means of bringing the Pauline Epistles and the non-Pauline epistles into dialogue with each other. Acts is a diverse book that depicts the growth and development of the church first on Palestinian soil, but then extending beyond Palestine to Samaria, and all the way to Rome. The epistles of Paul, James, Peter, and John are not confined to a single approach to the early church. The book of Acts invites these other apostolic writers into the events depicted in Acts and sees the diversity in Acts as a commentary on what is found in the various groups of epistles. This diversity can be welcomed as part of what it meant for the message of Jesus to be taken to the ends of the earth.

e. *Acts of the Apostles as Introduction or Conclusion to the Canon.* We usually think of Matthew's Gospel and the book of Revelation as the canon's opening and closing. In a couple of instances, the canonical ordering of Acts is either at the beginning of the New Testament or at its end. These two placements provide an interesting and perhaps even useful challenge for interpretation, especially as these orderings are so unusual.

(1) *Acts at the Beginning of the New Testament.* It is hard to see how Acts at the beginning of the New Testament canon can function. There are a couple of ideas, however, that may be worth considering. One is to see the book as encapsulating and providing the grand narrative for the whole of the New Testament. What began in Jerusalem (or thereabouts) spreads through the commission of Jesus and the faithful obedience of

11. Wall, "Acts of the Apostles," 120–23.

his first followers to encompass religious belief that spreads throughout the entire Roman Empire. In this sense, the book of Acts functions almost like a table of contents for the rest of the New Testament, as it anticipates the various chapters to follow.

Another way of thinking of the book of Acts at the top of the canonical ordering is that, if one joins the two testaments together—as they were by the time of Sinaiticus and Vaticanus—the book of Acts is perhaps to be seen as providing the turning point or the fulcrum for the change of the Testaments. The Old Testament is concerned with God's chosen people as they prepare to bring the Messiah into the world. The book of Acts takes this people and shows how their Messiah makes the transition from bringing a message to a single people to creating a message for all humanity, and how this message is spread across the face of the world, expanding from one people to all peoples as it sweeps all before it. Moreover, Acts can function as the next stage in a grand biblical narrative. The Bible begins with creation, the selection of a people, the development of that people through exodus and exile, and then the further narrative of their continued travel to the rest of the world, building a bigger and fuller and more inclusive people of God.

(2) *Acts at the Ending of the New Testament*. We are accustomed to finding Revelation at the end of our canonical groupings. I will bracket out the issue that the book of Revelation does not even appear or get mentioned in several canonical lists (as noted above), but instead address the issue of how we are to view Acts if it occurs at the end of the canon. Acts functions like the book of Revelation, but not in apocalyptic/prophetic terms. The book of Revelation, standing at the close of the New Testament, is often seen as pulling back the curtains to reveal a vivid picture of the world to come, including the New Heaven and the New Earth. However, what if the close of the New Testament (with or without Revelation in these canonical lists) is not with apocalyptic imagery but with the imagery of the spreading church? Acts depicts the world encountering the message of Jesus Christ as churches are founded and grow throughout the Roman Empire and even to the ends of the earth. Rather than forming a conclusion, like

Revelation, the book of Acts is seen as anticipating and even inaugurating a time of the church's future.

B. The Purpose of Acts in Its Traditional Canonical Placement.[12] The book of Acts is traditionally seen as being firmly placed after the Gospels and before the epistles, both Pauline and otherwise. The opening of the book of Acts begins with a programmatic statement for the book that encapsulates the major thrust of the Gospels and sets the agenda for the church. In Acts 2, Peter stands up and addresses the crowd about the disciples' behavior, and he explicitly cites Joel 2:28–32 (Septuagint 3:1–5) in Acts 2:17–21, Psalm 16:8–11 in Acts 2:25–28, and Psalm 110:1 in Acts 2:34–35.[13] These are the first sustained Old Testament quotations in Acts, and appear in what Mark Strauss calls the "first missionary proclamation of the apostles."[14] The book of Acts is thus a document that outlines the missionary purposes of Jesus through his followers, the church.

In the narrative of the book of Acts, Jesus is taken up into heaven, leaving the disciples with word that the power of the Holy Spirit will come upon them, so that they will be witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Then, on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit fills those gathered together. Because of the events of the festival, there are many Jews in Jerusalem, so when they hear the Spirit-filled apostles speaking in tongues, they at first suspect that they are drunk. In response, Peter addresses the crowd by saying that they are not drunk but that the prophet Joel speaks to the situation.

The quotation from Joel 2 includes a number of elements to it. These are: mention of pouring out of God's Spirit on all people, the appearance of various eschatological signs, and the extension of salvation to any who call on the name of the Lord. Peter then describes how the people of Israel treated Jesus of

12. This material summarizes Porter, "Scripture Justifies Mission," esp. 119–25.

13. There is also the allusive use of Old Testament language in Acts 2:30 and 31, the latter paraphrasing Psalm 16:10.

14. Strauss, *Davidic Messiah in Luke-Acts*, 131.

Nazareth, including his being handed over and put to death, but also being resurrected. He then cites the second passage, from Psalm 16:8–11. This passage depicts a figure who is not abandoned to the grave, as the speaker fears for himself, but one who is bodily resurrected. Peter then goes on to relate this notion to David speaking of the resurrection of Christ, and to God exalting him to his right hand. Then Peter cites Psalm 110:1, noting that David was not the one who ascended when he affirmed that the Lord said to his Lord to sit at his right hand, in other words, that God had made Jesus both Lord and Messiah.

2. The Book of Acts and Its Literary Type and Date of Composition

What kind of a book is Acts, and when was it written? The type of literature that it is and when it was written raise questions regarding the limits and types of interpretation of the book itself. There are three major options as to the type of literary work that Acts is. They are as follows:[15]

A. Acts as Romance

One of the most popular recent viewpoints is that the book of Acts is an ancient romance, akin to an ancient novel.[16] The author of Acts probably knew Luke's Gospel and attempted to fashion a work that is in some ways compatible with this previous work; he knew of a literary genre that included heroic escapades often including imprisonments, shipwrecks, and travel narratives, and he wished to allegorize the development of the early church in such a fashion. He did this so well that this type of writing caught on and was further developed in other apocryphal Acts literature of the early church.

15. Here I follow Porter, "Genre of Acts and the Ethics of Discourse." For a helpful overview of various genres of Acts and their leading proponents, see Phillips, "Genre of Acts."

16. See esp. Pervo, *Profit with Delight*, and many who have followed him.

The genre of romance itself does not imply that any of the events narrated necessarily occurred, although it was meant to have a semblance of historical veracity. Thus, there was an agenda at work in Acts that governed the development of the genre. The readers would have been expected to differentiate fact from fiction, or rather to have accepted fiction as "fact" and to understand the narrative and, even more significantly, its theological significance.

Who is the author in such a scenario? The author is seen to be both highly literarily accomplished (the creator of complex allegory and a teller of tales) but historically incapable.[17] Certainly, the author could not have been both historically reliable *and* entertaining (or so the theory goes). The link to the Gospels is dependent upon conclusions regarding their primarily theological rather than historical orientation.[18]

The link to the historical romances is therefore suspect, since romances do not for the most part purport to be historical but simply fictive narratives.[19] The prefaces to Luke and Acts must be disregarded or reinterpreted in ways that minimize both their connections and any relation to historical method. The failure to create a plausible authorial scenario, the generic problems including failure to define a number of literary conventions, and especially the problem of how to read a unique work in relation to its companion work all indicate that the ancient romance hypothesis is not correct, even if there are elements of a tale well told in the book of Acts.

17. Pervo (*Profit with Delight*, 3–8) thinks that simply noting historical problems renders a work unhistorical, when he fails to realize that there are alternatives, such as Luke being a bad historian (see Alexander, "Fact, Fiction and the Genre of Acts"; Porter, *Paul of Acts*, 16–17).

18. This is the position that has been maintained ever since the rise of form criticism. For discussion, see Burridge, *What are the Gospels*, 3–24.

19. See Porter, *Paul of Acts*, 15. Pervo is ambivalent regarding the historicality of Acts. See Porter, *Paul of Acts*, 14–15.

B. Acts as Historical Monograph

Another viewpoint is that the book of Acts is a form of historiography.[20] That is, it is a form of historical or apologetic monograph (or a combination of both),[21] written to depict the rise of Christianity in the light of the departure of Jesus. According to such a scenario, the author who wrote Acts—most would argue that Luke was a follower of Paul—was an educated and experienced researcher (a physician, cf. Col. 4:14), who continued the kind of work that had already been done on the Gospel and extended the discussion to the events of the early church.[22] Perhaps this person had first-hand acquaintance with the events surrounding the spread of Christianity,[23] or perhaps this person simply continued the kind of information and fact-gathering from sources that was acknowledged in the preface to the Gospel of Luke. In any case, once some of the artificial props of the romance hypothesis are removed, it appears most likely that a reader would have recognized historical elements in Acts. This does not mean that they would have thought of it as an historical monograph, however, since historical writing was diverse in the ancient world.

20. Proponents are many, following Ramsay: Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen*, esp. 383–90; Bruce, *Acts of the Apostles*, 15–18; Hemer, *Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*; and Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition*, esp. 1–19.

21. John Stott contends that Acts is both an historical monograph and a political apologetic because the author (Luke) demonstrates in Acts that he is "deeply concerned about the attitude of the Roman authorities towards Christianity" (26). Acts shows Christianity to be harmless, innocent, and lawful in the eyes of the Roman government. In this regard, the author functions as diplomat and peacemaker in the church by depicting Christianity as an essentially unifying movement and not a divisive one, especially for both Jewish-Christian relations and Jewish-Gentile relations. See Stott, *Message of Acts*, 25–29.

22. Stott also identifies in the preface to Acts (1:1–4) five successive stages that Luke delineates for the development of historical reliability of Acts: (1) historical events, (2) eyewitnesses, (3) Luke's personal research, (4) the act of writing, and (5) readers of the document. Stott, *Message of Acts*, 21–24.

23. On various issues regarding eyewitnesses, see Porter, *Paul of Acts*, 27–42; Wedderburn, "The 'We'-Passages in Acts"; Byrskog, "History or Story in Acts."

C. Acts as Ancient Biography

One of the major issues in discussion of literary type is the relation between modern categories and ancient categories.[24] As a result, moderns tend to differentiate history and biography as genres—while admitting that there may well be some overlap between them, especially regarding historical elements and details. The ancient Greeks, and the Romans who followed them, however, thought of historical writing in different terms. By the fifth century BCE, the ancients thought of historical writing in terms of five major categories: genealogy, ethnography, history (accounts of men's [and it usually was men's] deeds or acts), horography (local history), and chronography. There is no single category that was used to lump all of these five forms of historical writing together under one catch-all category, called "history." In that sense, there was no "history" genre in the ancient world, even if there were types of historical writing, called by various names. The closest that any of these comes to the notion of historical monograph would be history as an account of men's deeds or acts.

What we would call biography is not included within this set of five literary genres—even though at least one of the literary genres was concerned with the deeds or acts of men. This category appears to have been a very specific type of historical writing, to be distinguished from the others, and not to be equated with biography. Biography emerged in the fifth century BCE, that is, about the same time as historical writing, but did not flourish until the Hellenistic period.[25] The origins of biography are much earlier, however, quite possibly in the collecting of accounts and stories about people.[26] Arnaldo Momigliano, the ancient historian, defines a biography simply as

24. My research into this literary category was prompted by the work reflected in Porter, "Use of Authoritative Citations in Mark's Gospel." See also the work in Adams, *Genre of Acts and Collected Biography*, esp. 26–67.

25. Momigliano, *Development of Greek Biography*, 12. Momigliano notes that biography was not considered to be history writing by the ancients.

26. Potter, *Literary Texts and the Roman Historian*, 67, who attributes this to Momigliano.

"An account of the life of a man from birth to death . . . "[27] However, he also notes that biography was not concerned with the description of an individual life simply for its own value as distinct from other individuals. Ancient biographers, he notes, were often concerned to write about men of the same "type."[28] The origins of biography are thus seen in what Charles Fornara calls their "ethical preoccupations."[29] The deeds of a person were not considered of interest in themselves but as these deeds enlightened understanding of that individual, especially that person's character. The result is that items not considered appropriate for historical writing, such that they might exemplify certain characteristics of the person, would be included in biography. The analysis of character thus explains the choice of events in a biography. In Roman times, therefore, the discussion of the character of the ruler, the Caesar, was considered entirely apt, since it helped to explain the events of the most important person in the world of the time. Thus, biography was entirely appropriate for discussion of emperors and the like.

There are interpretive implications of such a biographical approach. Acts, therefore, focuses upon the lives of several significant individuals who were involved in the development of the early church. It explores both their words and their deeds,[30] but it does so as studies also in character as type. For example, the book of Acts depicts Peter as a person of strong character who is willing to stand before his peers and others to note their previous shortcomings and to proclaim the message of the resurrected Jesus (e.g., Acts 2:14–36), and he resists the temptation to conform to the standards of the world, by his refusal to stop preaching in the temple precincts (Acts 4:8–20).

Paul enters the scene as the person whose character is radically transformed by God (Acts 9:1–9 and parallels). A person who at one time stood and watched the stoning of

27. Momigliano, *Development of Greek Biography*, 11.

28. Momigliano, *Development of Greek Biography*, 12–13.

29. Fornara, *Nature of History in Ancient Greece*, 185.

30. On the importance of both words and deeds, see Burridge, *What are the Gospels*, 212.

Stephen is confronted by the risen Lord and becomes his impassioned advocate. Utilizing the advantages of his Roman citizenship, Paul confronts the beliefs of the ancient world while not wishing to overthrow its institutions (Acts 22:25–28). The resultant study in character is of one who, despite repeated adversity, is seen to be preaching in various synagogues, rented rooms, and even prison accommodations up to the end of the book itself (Acts 13:14; 14:1; 17:10; 18:4, 7, 26; 19:8; 16:22–40; 28:30–31).

Acts, continuing not only the literary tradition (alluded to in the preface), but also the literary techniques and methods of biography, depicts those select and significant followers who successively promulgate the message of the risen Jesus, serving as mission-oriented types. Peter proclaims the theme of the book with his Pentecost speech regarding the crucified and resurrected Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit to provide the abiding presence of the risen Jesus. Peter's speech contains not only a message to the Jews but a proclamation to those of all nations. The spread of the gospel is thus a task undertaken by Peter and others, and reaches its culmination in the missionary ventures of Paul. Paul takes the gospel message to the ends of the earth. He ends his days in Rome proclaiming the gospel, despite his imprisonment, in the very capital of the empire.

3. Date of Composition of Acts

To continue the trajectory that the book of Acts is a form of biography, when would it make sense that this biography was written, and what are the interpretive implications of such a conclusion? There are three major proposals regarding the date of the composition of Acts, and these dates often follow along with the decision regarding literary type noted above.

A. Late Date

Those who argue that Acts is a form of romance often argue for the late date, sometime in the second century, anywhere from

around AD 100–130. Richard Pervo[31] contends, first, that the author of Acts used a number of sources. Some of the most important were the Septuagint and the Gospel of Mark. He contends that Luke consciously creates episodes that are simply rewritings of Septuagintal stories. Pervo also begins with the supposition that Mark was written no earlier than AD 75, and that Markan language is found in both Luke's Gospel and Acts. Secondly, Pervo asks whether Luke knew the letters of Paul. How is it that Acts does not depict Paul as a letter writer, but only as a speech giver? Pervo turns this on its head and says that he can find plenty of evidence that Luke used Paul's letters. He contends that there are verbal, thematic, setting, and content indicators of the use of the following Pauline letters: Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, as well as indicators of Paul's itinerary. Thirdly, Luke depended upon Josephus, whose works were not published until the end of the first century, and so push composition of Acts to the second century. Pervo cites examples such as reference to Judas the Galilean and the rebel Theudas in Acts 5:34–39, who according to Josephus lived from AD 44–46 (not around AD 30 as depicted in Acts), and "the Egyptian." These are the same three rebels Josephus cites, which indicate that he is following Josephus. Pervo lists thirteen places in Acts (and eighteen in Luke and Acts) where he thinks the author used Josephus. Fourthly, various social and ecclesial institutions, structures, and leaders reflect the second century. These include social organizations, the categories of leadership in the church, and the like. Pervo contends that even the vocabulary of Acts is reflective of language used in the second century.

Several quick responses to Pervo's suggestions are in order. The first one concerns the sources he cites. When one actually examines the parallels that he musters, these really do not amount to much at all. He finds a few words that two accounts contain to justify Septuagintal parallels. So what if there are Septuagintal parallels? These indicate nothing at all regarding the date of Acts, as the Septuagint—or at least the parts the

31. Pervo, *Dating Acts*, esp. 51–199, for what follows.

author of Acts wishes to cite—had already been translated at the time of the composition of Acts, regardless of whether the date was early or late. Pervo uses inappropriate Markan parallels (sometimes made on the basis of English translation rather than the Greek text), and is dependent on a late date for Markan composition. What if Mark's Gospel were written earlier? (I believe that it was). This would undermine this argument.

The second response involves Pervo's argument regarding Paul's letters. Pervo finds parallels in most of the letters except for the Pastoral Epistles, to which I will return. However, his theory of dependence and hence a late date is based upon the gathering of Paul's letters not taking place until around AD 100, and on a number of these letters not being authentically Pauline. What if Paul's letters were not gathered together in AD 100 but had actually been gathered by Paul himself? Further, what if all of the letters attributed to Paul (I exclude the Pastoral Epistles for the moment) were written by Paul? David Trobisch argues that Paul was the first one to promote collection of his letters. Paul, so Trobisch argues, followed the letter-writing practice of his day and made and retained copies of his letters. Trobisch argues that the first four books of the Pauline letter corpus follow a pattern of decreasing length. He believes that this indicates that Paul began his letter collection by keeping the first four—authentic—letters. Then later pseudepigraphers added the other letters to the collection.[32] Trobisch has neglected a number of features of the letter collection, however. On the basis of examination of ancient calculations of letter length, I believe that the Pauline letter corpus is divided into two parts, one set of church letters in roughly descending length from Romans to 2 Thessalonians, and a second set of personal letters, in descending order from 1 Timothy to Philemon.[33] Trobisch finds the group of four as a support for the traditional F. C. Baur hypothesis regarding the four authentic Pauline letters (the so-called *Hauptbriefe* or Pillar Epistles). However, the Pauline corpus is

32. Trobisch, *Die Entstehung der Paulusbriefsammlung*; Trobisch, *Paul's Letter Collection*; and Trobisch, *First Edition of the New Testament*.

33. See Porter, "Paul and the Process of Canonization."

organized consistently over the entire corpus, and pseudepigrapha were not acceptable in the early church, so it is entirely plausible that Paul himself was the gatherer of his own corpus of all thirteen letters.[34] We can thus accept the hypothesis that the author of Acts used the Pauline letters, but that assumption would not necessarily mean that Acts was written in the second century.

Third, concerning use of Josephus, Pervo's argument relies upon a small number of cases. There have been a number of counter-arguments made to each of the proposals that Pervo marshals. Pervo claims that Josephus is the only other written source attesting to certain people and events, and that Acts thus is wrong. However, this cuts both ways. Josephus may have used the source that is wrong. In fact, Josephus is a source that must be used with caution. Moreover, there are many sources that we no longer have—Josephus also cites sources no longer extant—and so it is difficult to say that Josephus had it right every time.

Fourth, concerning themes and ideas, Pervo relies on comparisons of such books as the Petrine Epistles and the Pastoral Epistles. He assumes that these books are later pseudepigrapha, and parallels with them indicate that Acts must be late. But what if these letters are not late? What if Peter wrote his letters while imprisoned in Rome, and Paul wrote the Pastorals either during his ministry or during his final travels and last imprisonment in AD 64–65? Further, Pervo's evidence in relation to the church fathers is also questionable. Most of the lexical evidence he marshals indicates the use of the words that he claims are late within the first century, but with increased use in the second century by church fathers. I would contend it makes more sense to argue that the church fathers expanded usage found in Acts than that Acts copied the church fathers.

34. For more on the early church's rejection of pseudepigrapha, especially on the grounds of literary property and apostolic continuity, see Wilder, *Pseudonymity*, esp. 35–73, 165–216.

B. Early Date

As an alternative, most scholars argue for an earlier date for the composition of Acts. The intermediate date is somewhere around AD 80. This date is not so much argued for as tacitly accepted, because scholars do not want to accept the late date or an early date. However, there is far more substance to arguing for an early date for Acts. Colin Hemer lists a good number of them:[35] (1) no mention of the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70; (2) no indication of knowledge of the Jewish war that began in AD 66; (3) no indication of the persecution associated with the Neronian persecution of Christians; (4) no indication of the death of James in c. AD 62, or of the imprisonment or death of Peter or John; (5) Christians and Jews still being seen as closely related, as indicated by Gallio's decision in Acts 18:14–17; (6) the place of the Sadducees in Acts reflecting their position before the fall of Jerusalem; (7) the sympathetic role of the Pharisees; (8) God-fearers in the synagogues probably being more reflective of a time before the fall of Jerusalem; (9) statements in Acts, such as Acts 20:25, appearing to be modified later in the book, which must have been written earlier than the events; (10) Christian terminology that is primitive in its formulation, such as Christological titles ("Jesus," "the Lord"; but "the Christ" is always indicating "the Messiah," not a name) (this was Adolf Harnack's major argument); (11) the optimistic orientation of Acts; and (12) a number of incidental details that indicate an early date, such as Stephen's speech in relation to a standing temple, the meaningfulness of Roman citizenship, contemporary provincial terminology, and the like. More could be said about each of these arguments, but their weight is significant.

C. A Date Coinciding with the Death of Paul

One last feature worth mentioning is the death of Paul, or rather the lack of mention of the death of Paul, in the book of Acts. Acts ends with Paul in prison at the end of two years still awaiting his trial before Caesar. There has been much discussion of this for several reasons. One is that it provides a somewhat

35. Hemer, *Book of Acts*, 376–82.

anticlimactic ending to the book after all that has happened, and another is that it begs for an explanation. There have been plenty of explanations of what happened.[36] Some of these are the following (including a response of my own to each one):

(1) Luke had done what he set out to do—show how the gospel came to Rome—and so he was finished. However, the ending is about how Paul brought the gospel to Rome, and now Acts simply leaves him languishing; (2) the ancients thought this was a fine ending and not anticlimactic at all—but this is not the way ancient works usually end; they are usually full of action right up to the end; (3) the readers of Acts already knew what happened to Paul—then why all the other details that they would presumably have known as well?; (4) the author of Acts did not want to involve the Romans in Paul's death for politically sensitive reasons—although it obviously was the Romans who put him into this position; (5) Acts is an apologetics book regarding Paul's activities only—but we still do not know the resolution of his activities; (6) the author intended to write a third volume—there is no evidence that this was intended or done, and would all that happened to Paul afterward have filled a volume equivalent to Luke's Gospel or Acts?; and (7) Acts was in some way prevented from being finished—but the author certainly got pretty far in the story to suddenly have such a disaster with only a few lines to go.

There is of course a much simpler conclusion than those offered above. The conclusion is that Luke wrote up to the knowledge that he had, and then he stopped. In other words, after writing this account as a companion of Paul, and including the two years that Paul was in prison (perhaps during which he finished the two volumes?), Luke finally drew it to a close because that was simply the extent of his knowledge. The implications of this solution are several, especially when combined with what I have said above. First, Luke as the author of Acts wrote up to the extent of his knowledge and finished these two volumes before Paul's death. Acts does not say whether Paul was released and died in prison a few years later,

36. Hemer, *Book of Acts*, 383–87.

or whether he died in prison during this imprisonment. In either case, the book of Acts was finished somewhere around AD 62–65, with the Gospel finished beforehand. Second, if one holds to Pauline authorship of the letters, we also have the Pauline letters written and then in the process of collection by Paul and his closest followers. This means that when Paul writes in 2 Tim 5:13 to bring the books and parchments, he may be referring to his own letters. Third, if we are to accept that Luke used Mark as a source for writing his Gospel, and Luke's Gospel was written before Acts, then we have Luke's Gospel written before the Jewish war and Mark's Gospel finished even earlier than that.[37] Acts is a source written as a contemporary account of the events that it purports to represent—not far removed from the events it represents, not as some later theological tractate to justify a particular theological position, and not as a political document attempting to bring factions together. Do we want to know what happened in the early church? Then the source we need to examine is the book of Acts, because it was written by someone who was on the scene as these events unfolded. More than that, the author was a traveling companion of at least one of the most significant figures in the development of the early church, Paul himself, as he took the gospel to the ends of the earth and proclaimed it before people of all walks of life—Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, powerful and weak. Lastly, the author was not just an observer, but he was a participant in these crucial early events. He did not just sit and record, but he traveled and participated. He accompanied those who took the gospel to new places and to new people.

This scenario that I have presented accounts for the rugged vibrancy of Acts. This is a book that rips back the curtain and displays the events of the early church with all of their vividness. There was conflict to be sure, as the Gentiles were brought into the fold. There were strange reactions, as some tried to worship Paul and Barnabas as Hermes and Zeus (Acts 14:8–18). There

37. However, I realize that this is merely one of several theories regarding Synoptic origins. For four of the major theories presented, responded to, and put in context, see Porter and Dyer, eds., *Synoptic Problem*.

was widespread acceptance as thousands came to salvation, but there was also disappointing rejection, and even violence, in such places as Iconium and Ephesus. Nevertheless, the gospel sometimes plodded, at other times sailed, and finally made progress forward.

Conclusion

The book of Acts continues to provide intriguing interpretive possibilities. In this essay, I have examined three different dimensions of the book of Acts as an attempt to understand it more fully. These include its canonical placement, its literary type, and its date of composition. There is of course much more to study regarding the book of Acts. However, our possible understandings of these three possible areas of interpretation provide numerous potential opportunities for reconsidering and expanding our understanding of Acts. An examination of its placement within various canonical lists and manuscripts indicates that early interpreters had differing views on the function of Acts, especially in relation to the other sub-corpora of the New Testament. Its type of literature is better understood as a type of ancient biography regarding the acts and deeds of significant people within the early church. Its early date accounts for the vibrant nature of the account itself. The book of Acts, as it did in the early church, continues to captivate our interpretive imaginations and provide insights into the life of early Christianity.

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