

MADNESS IN THE METHOD?  
THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES IN CURRENT STUDY\*

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ABSTRACT

Scholarship on the book of Acts frequently proceeds under the ‘no final conflict’ slogan when it comes to employing a diversity of methods. In this essay, however, some of the fundamental assumptions and approaches to Acts in recent scholarship are examined and challenged, raising questions related to the proliferation of method in New Testament and early Christian studies, the underlying methodological assumptions of particular interpretive approaches, and the sublimation of theology and ideology in scholarship. The past 15 years of Acts scholarship provides the context for this broad survey and interaction. The essential contours of the discussion are focused around matters related to genre, the nature of Acts as ‘text’, the book’s connections to its broader socio-cultural and historical worlds, and, finally, to matters related to post-critical interactions with Acts. No easy solutions are offered in this essay; rather, the broad discussion of method in current Acts scholarship pushes for a return to greater methodological awareness and reflection in the discipline.

1. *Disciplinary Matters*

The high degree of relativity in scholarly analysis is an oft-noted phenomenon, but it bears repeating in this present context, particularly in light

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of the common belief that academic inquiry proceeds from generally held principles and methodological rules with respect to particular disciplines. It is not clear, however, that this is always the case in practice. This phenomenon is probably all the more acute in a discipline such as Biblical Studies, which intentionally cultivates and nourishes methodologically diverse and eclectic practices, but at the same time has a history of strong ideological and theological debates that have become more sublimated in contemporary scholarly discourse. The situation with respect to Acts is intriguing not only for the proliferation of method that has been evident in the past 15 years of study, but also in part because of the implicit ideological commitments that Acts evokes in diverse interpreters. A strange academic dance seems to accompany the study of the book of Acts, as if this particular early Christian book is somehow important for reasons other than those explicitly articulated and evaluated by scholars.

It is interesting in this light that, despite the firm commitment by most scholars that there is a critical distance (albeit measured differently by various scholarly communities) between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith in the Gospel accounts, the narratives of Acts receive much less critical reflection in light of this framework—as if the theological evaluative distance between *Jesus* and *Christ* did not similarly affect the relationship of early *Christians* and *church* (see Downing 1968). While R. Bultmann could open his exploration of New Testament theology with the assertion ‘The *message of Jesus* is a presupposition for the theology of the New Testament rather than a part of that theology itself’ (1951: I, 3; Bultmann’s italics), one might now update that statement in light of modern scholarly trends and add that Jesus himself has become a presupposition for early Christian history, but is not a part of that history itself (although some scholars would clearly disagree [e.g. Wright 1996]). The Acts of the Apostles, by contrast, cannot be framed thus in both the discussion of New Testament theology or the analysis of early Christian history. Indeed, despite an apparent lack of acknowledgment, Acts seems to form a central, albeit often implicit, axis of modern scholarly discourse on early Christianity. Were it not for the Acts of the Apostles and its pivotal role in shaping the discursive practices of much current scholarship on the New Testament and early Christian texts and history, the current knowledge of the field would probably look significantly different than it now does. L. Alexander has aptly summarized the issue thus: ‘Acts...[is] the only hinge we have

Vander Stichele, who offered valuable feedback on earlier (and alternate) versions of this piece.

to link the Gospels and the Epistles' (Alexander 2000: 168). Indeed, almost our entire basis for the construction of the diverse facets of Christian origins hinges on Acts—we make sense of Paul through intercalation with Acts as well. The narrative of Acts thus functions as a touchstone that scholars either appeal to directly or that is embedded more implicitly in the premises of particular operative frameworks of scholarly investigation.

Recent study of the Acts of the Apostles may thus prove illustrative for larger hermeneutical and methodological issues in the field. Most significant in this regard is not that New Testament scholars employ a diversity of methods and operating assumptions in their study of this canonical biblical book, but that there is an increasing lack of reflection on and seeming awareness of the embedded values and assumptions—often of a conflicting nature—guiding the various methods frequently touted as complementary modes of analysis. Although opinions on the current state of both Acts studies and New Testament scholarship as a whole will vary, it may not be an exaggeration to refer here to an impending if not already realized crisis of/in interpretation. The tendency exists to compartmentalize various facets of study and thereby to keep even the most explicit contributions to methodological reflection somewhat marginalized in the process (see Räsänen 2000).

This current essay seeks to reflect on these and related issues in a broad and preliminary manner. At heart I argue that there is a methodological problem in the field of Acts studies, which itself is reflective of related, more general, trends in the discipline as a whole. We are often assured that methodological diversity implies no final conflict (Verheyden 1999b: 52; Powell 1991: 108). This confession of faith may in fact be misguided; a valiant attempt to assure the world of scholarship that our 'tried and true' methods are taking us in the same direction, eliciting relatively similar results. Conversely, one could argue that scholars are trained to demonstrate the unity of their discipline (and indeed to unify it!) rather than always to examine closely sometimes competing and contradictory methodological axioms, frameworks and values. Methods bring with them particular ways of seeing and reading texts, and they can be, and often are, mutually exclusive. As P. Fredriksen aptly notes, 'once method determines our perspective on our sources, *how* we see is really what we get' (Fredriksen 1999: 7).

In what follows I lay out some of the more pressing interests and concerns of current research on Acts, paying special attention to the methodological frameworks reflected in and questions generated by the scholarship of the past 15 years. Although the manifest purpose of this essay is to survey recent scholarship on Acts, there is no claim to comprehensiveness

and certain worthy studies will undoubtedly go unnoted, which is no reflection on their importance *per se*. Furthermore, the categories utilized for analysis in this essay are heuristic in nature, reflecting broad patterns of research trajectories, although I recognize that many works resist such simple categorization. Finally, while the purpose of this piece is to provide a brief and broad outline of current Acts scholarship, there are also both explicit and implicit programmatic directions for future scholarship articulated herein. There is thus a clear *Tendenz* throughout, which demarcates my own methodological and ideological presuppositions and agendas. Since the overarching framework of this essay is that of methodology, this format at least allows for the engagement of that issue explicitly by the reader. To this end, I have narrowed the following discussion to several major areas. After providing a broad survey of the field through a brief analysis of more general works, I focus on the following specific areas of discussion and debate: genre, textuality, historical and cultural world(s), and ideology of text and interpreter.

## *2. Proliferation of Method: Recent Acts Scholarship in Macro View*

In 1985 F.F. Bruce's essay 'The Acts of the Apostles: Historical Record or Theological Reconstruction?' appeared in the *ANRW* series. The piece intentionally evoked the 'storm-center' that W.C. van Unnik had identified twenty years earlier in his essay in the Paul Schubert Festschrift (1966). The debates and issues that Bruce engages are the traditional ones: the issue of sources, the question of historicity, the debate over the nature and reliability of the speeches, and, finally, the basic matters of authorship, dating and purpose of Luke's second volume. Yet by 1985 Acts studies seemed to be going in a different direction, at least as it was being developed in North America. Indeed, the *historical record* versus *theological reconstruction* framing of the discussion seemed strangely out of place on a scene that only two years later would see the publication of R.I. Pervo's seminal *Profit with Delight: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles* (1987), a book that represented a fundamental shift in terms of drawing attention to the relationship of Acts and the ancient novelistic genre. Scholars such as F.C. Baur, E. Haenchen, M. Dibelius, H.J. Cadbury and perhaps especially H. Conzelmann had paved the way for the shifts of the late 1970s and early 1980s, but the debates and issues had changed substantially since their work as well.

This methodological disjunction can be attested elsewhere. For instance, in 1989 C.J. Hemer's magisterial study of the historical background of Acts

was posthumously published (Hemer 1989). The work itself is staggering in terms of the sheer amount of data adduced to support the historicity of the Lukan narrative—a true *apologia* worthy of its intended defendant. Barely off the presses, W.W. Gasque declared that ‘this work meets a long felt need and one that few contemporary New Testament researchers are adequately equipped to write’ (Gasque 1989a: 156). Gasque’s own important 1975 contribution on the history of scholarship was also reissued in the same year. His *A History of the Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* belongs to the methodological framework of Hemer’s study, doing for the history of Acts interpretation what Hemer did for the historicity of Acts (Gasque 1989b). Yet, while both of these works represent notable contributions to the field, it is telling that they had only partial impact on Acts scholarship in the ensuing years. From the perspective of the current scene one would hardly recognize that the beginning of the 1990s was heralded by Hemer and Gasque. This situation is more broadly revealing of the present state of affairs: there seems to be *co-existence without engagement* of the fundamental issues and methods at stake. This shift can be seen most dramatically in the recent publication of a collection of earlier essays from the 1960s and 1970s by E. Grässer on the history of Acts research (2001), which reflects the scholarly world embodied in the work of Bruce and Haenchen but seems rather out of step with current research.

The commentary publications of the past 15 or so years evidence a similar situation. While the groundbreaking narrative commentary on Acts by R.C. Tannehill (1990) spawned numerous subsequent treatments of the Lukan literary art (Johnson 1992; Kurz 1993; Dunn 1996; Kee 1997; Spencer 1997; Talbert 1997; Gaventa 2003), at the same time we see a significant amount of research pulling in the opposite direction. C.K. Barrett’s massive and erudite two-volume commentary (1994–98), for instance, which, adopting the traditional mode of the *International Critical Commentary* series, places significant emphasis on source, historical and philological aspects for interpretation, and looks rather out of place alongside the narrative approaches concurrently in vogue. The same can be said also for the English translation of H. Conzelmann’s commentary (1987), which also seems to move against the grain of current scholarship on many issues, being closer, albeit more liberal in orientation, to the scholarly discourse reflected in Barrett’s tomes. A few recent studies combine approaches, following more conventional exegetical modes of analysis, including also some attention paid to the theological and historical character of the traditions in Acts (Pesch 1986, 1995; Zmijewski 1994; Fitzmyer 1998; Jervell 1998). The six-volume project of the *Ecole Biblique*, however, is more

difficult to situate within the current scene. It consists of a three-volume attempt to establish a tripartite redactional theory of Acts (Boismard and Lamouille 1990; see the summary in Taylor 1990), based on multiple sources, including Petrine, Travel and Johannine documents, complemented by a three-volume historical (= historicity) commentary by J. Taylor (1994–2000). Compared to this, the source and redactional commentary by G. Lüdemann (1989) looks rather tame, although upon closer inspection even his approach reveals huge gaps (and faith!) in the ability to recover the various threads of early Christian bedrock traditions buried under Lukan redactional interests. Finally, amidst all of this one should note B. Witherington's so-called 'socio-rhetorical' commentary on Acts (1998). While Witherington seeks to combine various threads in interpretation, in the end he leaves a rather flat impression of the literary, theological, historical, socio-cultural and rhetorical features of Luke's narrative. It might well be that this is the result, at least in part, of the unwitting employment of mutually exclusive methods of interpretation.

This situation of *co-existence without engagement* does not change much when one moves outward to more general studies on the place of Acts in early Christian history and theology. Examining, for example, the relative perspectives on Acts as a source for the history of early Christianity, one observes a rather free (and in some cases woefully uncritical) use of the text related to studies on Paul's chronology (Hengel and Schwemer 1997; Riesner 1998); the missionary expansion of early Christianity (Reinbold 2000); the compositional history of New Testament traditions and literature (Ellis 1999); early Christian rituals such as baptism (Ave Marie 2002); and to a lesser extent the theology of the earliest Christians (Schmithals 1997). Those scholars more skeptical about the accuracy of the material in Acts do not necessarily produce radically different results. J.D. Crossan pauses briefly to historicize Acts 2 and the passages on community sharing in the early Jerusalem church, while ignoring Acts in the rest of his analysis of Christian origins (1998). B.L. Mack simply dismisses Acts as 'blasé' in its conception of Christianity (1995: 238). While claiming to explore the communities reflected in divergent early Christian texts, Mack expends little effort to appreciate what Acts might yield with respect to the communities, social-locations, and values of early Christians. Moreover, neither Mack nor Crossan appear aware of the implicit function Acts plays in their own historical reconstructions.

Perhaps the current state of affairs is best illustrated by a brief comparison of the major essay collections on Luke–Acts that appeared in the 1990s (for further assessment of these see Penner 2003b). Beginning with

the 1991 publication of J.H. Neyrey's *The Social World of Luke–Acts: Models for Interpretation*, scholarship on Luke–Acts took a significant turn, preceded in part by the earlier sociological study by P. Esler (1987). This collection highlighted the approaches of various scholars associated with the *Context Group*. Self-consciously moving towards a more holistic model of interpretation for ancient texts, they utilized anthropological, social-science and social-world analysis, with a focus on the world of the implied author (see esp. Robbins 1991b). This collection set a new standard in exploring the socio-cultural contexts of ancient writings, and is probably to be viewed as a watershed collection, separating the older discussions of Bruce and Conzelmann from what was to follow in the 1990s.

Two years later the volumes from the series *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting* began to appear (five of the six planned volumes have been published so far). This major research endeavor represents the re-envisioning and reformulation of the classic five-volume *The Beginnings of Christianity: The Acts of the Apostles* (Foakes Jackson and Lake 1920–33). A major feature of the newer series is to explore the historical and social contexts of Acts. The express methodological direction aligns itself most evidently with traditional historical-critical inquiry, insofar as the broader world of exploration is largely limited to historical, geographical and socio-historical background issues, and, presumably aside from the forthcoming sixth volume on theology, does not engage Lukan ideological and rhetorical agendas in-depth. It is curious but also telling that despite the inclusion of contributors from a fairly broad and eclectic background and varied historical commitment, there is also an undeniable tendency in this work as a whole to create assurance of the truth of the story of Acts. This feature is evidenced, for instance, in that historiography is the sole genre considered in the volume dealing with the ancient literary setting of Acts (Winter and Clarke 1993). Any treatment of Acts as a novel or epic is for the most part left to the side, although there is some attention given to the biographical genre by L. Alexander (1993a). The implicit assumption seems to be that the genre *history* signals something about the trustworthiness or reliability of the early Christian text. Moreover, the absence of socio-cultural *topoi*/themes from the discussion and the manifest emphasis on historical, socio-historical and political backgrounds of Acts (including studies devoted to the *historical* character of the God-fearers in Acts [Levin-skaya 1996] and the trials of Paul [Rapske 1994]) suggests an underlying agenda to ground the narrative of Acts in palpable, actual first-century history.

Tensions also exist within this series. The fourth volume (Bauckham 1995a), for example, which examines the Palestinian setting of Acts, reveals methodological fissures when the studies collected in the volume are compared with one another. On the one hand, there are attempts to reconstruct the plausible first-century context for Christian worship in Jerusalem, the community of goods, the presence of synagogues in Jerusalem, the presence of diverse social groups in Jerusalem, as well as some emphasis on the historical and political contexts. The studies on Paul (prior to his conversion), Peter, and James all elicit a striking confidence in the use of the narrative of Acts for reconstructing these *real* individuals in history. On the other hand, one also finds S. Mason's essay on the religious leadership in Jerusalem, comparing Luke and Josephus in terms of their respective characterization of the diverse groups. Although Mason concedes that the move to history might be made, he himself resists making it. And therein lies the tension: amidst rather assured movements from narrative to history, there is a counter-voice suggesting the more tenuous nature of this enterprise.

Similar tensions can be observed in B. Witherington's edited collection, *History, Literature, and Society in the Book of Acts* (1996c). There are narrative-theological studies, such as D.P. Moessner's contribution (1996b), which plots the manner in which Israel's Scripture (the *tradition*) is utilized as a narrative structuring device, attesting to Lukan literary artistry. L. Alexander (1996) focuses on the technical question of the preface to Acts and seeks to demonstrate how it does not match the generic expectations for a work of Hellenistic historiography (see also Alexander 1993b), and C.H. Talbert (1996) returns to his argument (of the 1970s) that Acts represents the literary form of *bios* (see now the collection in Talbert 2003). Alongside J.H. Neyrey's (1996) analysis of Paul's social status in the narrative and B.T. Arnold's (1996) study of Luke's creative use of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament citations to characterize the main apostles, these essays as a whole demonstrate a fairly eclectic approach to Lukan narrative and theology. Yet there is also a strong tendency to attempt to establish the *historical* dimension of the Lukan narrative, with a significant stress on *historicity*, which clearly moves against the grain of some of the studies delineated above. The contribution by Witherington applies the 'lessons' from Lukan redaction of Mark to the use of alleged sources/traditions in the book of Acts, arguing for presumption of Lukan reliability in the account of Acts (see also 1996b). Witherington goes as far as to provide an addendum to W.J. McCoy's essay (McCoy 1996) dealing with historiography and Thucydides; an essay that departs from Witherington's

own more positivistic assessment of Thucydidean *historia*. In sharp disjunction from this larger context created for the volume stands C.C. Hill's contribution, which, summarizing the major insights of his earlier study (1992), stresses the high degree of Lukan creativity in the story of Stephen and the Hellenists. Despite a certain intercalation that results from a collected whole, it may well be argued again that many of these methods of analysis assume conflicting and sometimes competing models for interpretation, not to mention differing definitions for and uses of the common vocabulary of interpretation (e.g. *tradition* and *history*).

A different approach is found in I.H. Marshall's and D. Peterson's *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, which appeared in 1998. Originally intended as the anticipated sixth volume of *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting*, it brings together an array of studies that range over the full territory (including broader thematic and more minute textual studies) of Lukan theology in Acts. It is evident throughout that here too there is diversity of perspectives and approaches to the historical dimension of Acts. Some studies clearly appreciate Lukan theology at the level of literary dynamics (Noland, Green, Stenschke, Clark), while others more easily move *behind* the text to the theology of the early church (Neudorfer, Peterson, Blue). Thus, there are multiple methodological assumptions present without necessarily a shared engagement of the extent and nature of the intersections of and interactions between Luke's theology, his argumentative and rhetorical strategies, and early (pre-Lukan) Christian theology embedded in the present narrative. Also worth noting is that the volume conceptualizes Lukan theological praxis almost entirely against a Jewish and Hebrew Bible/Old Testament framework, with few studies moving outwards into the Hellenistic and Roman worlds. The notable exception is J.T. Squires's essay, in which he revisits the theme of the 'plan of God' in comparison with Hellenistic historiography (see 1993; 1998). The volume edited by J. Verheyden, *The Unity of Luke-Acts* (1999a), follows a similar paradigm. The essays in this collection, while diverse in one sense, also manifest a tendency to focus their narrative and theological readings through the prism of Jewish tradition (with only a few notable exceptions, e.g. Denaux). The purported focus of the collection is to explore the interconnections of the Gospel and Acts, and for the most part the unifying features that draw the two together are articulated in non-Greco-Roman categories. The volume thus offers a predominantly theologized (Christian?) understanding and assessment of Lukan discourse, which appears removed from the socio-cultural *topoi* that infuse the *theological* themes with meaning.

In the same year that Verheyden's volume appeared, D.P. Moessner's *Jesus and the Heritage of Israel* was also published (1999b). In the conclusion this collection of essays is heralded as 'a sea change of interpretation' in which 'the quest for the theology of Luke–Acts becomes again a vital narrative, rhetorical, hermeneutical, and historical enterprise' (Moessner and Tiede 1999: 368; also 358, 360). One primary focus is the analysis of the Lukan utilization of Jewish Scripture with a view to how Scripture serves the ends of persuasion, stressing the function of literary and rhetorical strategy inherent within the genre of historiography (i.e., history demands a story; see also Byrskog 2000). Numerous essays thus analyze how narrative *qua* narrative is grounded in the theory and practice of composing ancient historiography. Several studies also compare Acts with themes and narrative strategies in the works of Hellenistic Jewish historians. Notable in this respect is G.E. Sterling's essay, which goes further than his earlier study (1992) in demonstrating how Christian identity is shaped by the recasting of biblical narrative.

Although there are some significant points of advancement, clarification and nuance in Moessner's volume, the question remains whether it truly represents the 'sea change' that is claimed for it. True, the wedding of narrative to ancient conventions of historical composition is made more explicit and given greater prominence in this collection than previously, but the emphasis on both was already present in earlier literature. Moreover, the volume does not engage fully some of the quintessential issues that are necessary in order for a 'sea change' to occur. There are, for instance, some significant ramifications for how we understand ancient historiography—what we can do with it—if this narrative model is adopted (see Penner 2000). There is also a strong tendency to conceptualize the genre and content question as separate spheres of inquiry. While the generic discussion is contextualized almost completely within Greco-Roman categories, the discussion of Lukan theology is confined much more narrowly to Jewish traditions and Scriptures. One cannot help but query the methodological, theological and cultural 'clearing-house' that Judaism seems to become in the process. Despite the claim that there is a profound influence of Hellenistic *tropes* and *topoi* (Moessner and Tiede 1999: 365), these tend to be limited to features connected explicitly and implicitly to the genre of historiography.

There are other collections that have appeared in the past 15 years (Ameowo, Arowele and Buetubela Balembo 1990; Richard 1990; O'Collins and Marconi 1991; Luomanen 1991; Tuckett 1995; Thompson and Phillips 1998; Penner and Vander Stichele 2003), but this selection suffices to

elucidate the present panorama of approaches to the study of Acts. While there is clear continuity with past scholarship, dramatic changes have also taken place. The current study of Acts has witnessed not only an increasing proliferation of method, but also expanding hybridity. The result is a growing threat of inconsistency in interpretation, stemming from an apparent lack of methodological reflection and awareness of the schools of past research and the presence of ever widening gaps and fissures in the methods themselves. These are of course general patterns that I am highlighting, and any given scholar may or may not fit the larger paradigm. Indeed, the last 15 years of scholarship have witnessed some notable exceptions (e.g., Marguerat 1999; 2002). Yet, as one examines the broader trends of recent research, there emerges a tendency to focus on the genre of historiography (by far the favored choice), on the historical and political dimensions of the Roman empire as the setting for Lukan narrative in Acts, and on the Jewish background as the resource for Lukan narrative theology. Little context or motivation is created for methodological interaction or meta-reflection, so not infrequently studies offer relatively little engagement of alternative viewpoints or positions, which results in a lack of consideration of the conditionedness and limitedness of any one particular model in the analysis of Acts. Further, the ideologically embedded values and commitments of various scholars and scholarly communities have received less attention as well. No doubt the staggering amount of studies that have appeared in the past 15 years have made such reflection all the more impractical. Nevertheless, the growing compartmentalization remains a problematic development, as everyone seems to be doing his or her own thing with the material. Whether this is a postmodern outgrowth (as truth claims are no longer made or encouraged), the development of an 'anything goes' attitude under the guise of pluralism, or the polemics of past scholarship being averted or subverted by a different generation of scholars, there is in the end a surprising lack of critical contesting of the issues.

### 3. *Genre Bending Acts*

Even those readers only remotely familiar with contemporary Acts scholarship are probably aware that one of the principal areas of current debate and research centers on literary genre. Recent scholarship has in this sense stood squarely on the shoulders of the decades older scholarship of M. Dibelius and H.J. Cadbury (and to a lesser extent E. Plümacher), attempting to move the discussion of the literary character of Acts as

ancient historiography to greater clarification and precision. Cadbury set the basic methodological tone over 70 years ago:

Prior to the question of its truth we have set the question of its genesis... It is desirable to approach historical records in this sequence and with this distinction. We should inquire what the author thought took place before we ask what took place. We should ask why the author narrates it as he does before we ask whether it is true as he narrates it. The study of the making of a book is a prerequisite to its evaluation (Cadbury 1927: 362).

The articulated goal of Cadbury's method, however, has not always accompanied the subsequent scholarly use of the literary historical model he espoused. G. Strecker aptly reveals what is often implied in the categorization of Acts as ancient historiography: 'Luke's primary objective is the presentation of history, rather than an invented, but historically possible, story (as in the historical romances)' (Strecker 1997: 188). In ascribing a particular ancient method (including purpose) to a specific generic designation, the suggestion is that the genre of ancient *historia* is concerned with the presentation of *real* and *actual* rather than *invented* history. This connection necessarily leads to a major underlying question of not only Acts studies, but of the larger fields of classics and biblical studies as well: what does genre tell us about a text?

Although there is a diversity of perspectives on the question of what genre reveals, the matter of genre itself has often been linked closely (as evidenced in the quote from Cadbury above) with the *authorial intention* of a given text. It is not readily apparent, however, what the intention behind any particular genre in the ancient world is and it cannot be assumed that a particular reconstructed intention in fact coheres innately with a specific genre itself. While classicists such as G.B. Conte are quite right to argue that genres are not recipes but contain inherent strategies of reading that evoke/provoke responses in a reader (1994: 112), it is more difficult in practice to discern what those strategies are and how they operate. Moreover, since specific authors not only invest intention in their own works, but also model them on and purposely imitate predecessors in form and content, from the beginning the notion of intention is a fluctuating reference point. This observation leads to an even more complex issue with respect to the genre of Acts: whose genre are we referring to—the author's or the reader's? Scholars have expended formidable effort in deciphering the *codes* embedded in the prologues of Luke and Acts that would indicate to the reader that what they were reading (or hearing) was a piece of ancient historiography. Aside from the obvious problem that a writer such as Lucian would have excluded Acts as a historical composition because it

contained miracles and was focused on dramatic episodes (which raises yet another interesting question: who gets to decide if Acts would be historiography or not: Luke or Lucian?; New Testament scholars or classicists? [the latter of whom tend to take the Lucianic view of early Christian literature; see Bowersock 1994]), we must also raise the issues of whether the vast majority of ancient hearers were themselves looking for these codes, that they knew how to recognize them, and that ancient literature itself was fairly static in its reception history.

Perhaps the place to start is to query what current scholars think genre tells us. There is naturally no unified position on this either. The linking of Acts to ancient historiography, for instance, has always had at least an undercurrent of promoting the historical (and at times revealed) character of early Christian texts. This stance cannot be denied, although not all scholars who consider Acts *historia* assert that it reflects a historical account as traditionally understood (Schmidt 1999). Still, the emphasis on Acts as a piece of ancient historiography has received consistent focus in the last 15 years, and the prologues to both Luke and Acts have often been studied as evidence of that affiliation (Moessner 1996a; 1999a; 1999c; Balch 1999; Schmidt 1999; Yamada 1999). Moreover, there are scholars who define the genre of ancient historiography so as to necessitate a degree of historical reliability. Much is made of the comments of specific ancient writers such as Thucydides, Polybius and Lucian with respect to the importance of fact or data in the composition of ancient *historia*, but New Testament scholars have made relatively few attempts to correlate what is *said* by such writers to what is both *meant* and *done* in practice. Classical scholars have begun to raise these issues (Woodman 1988; 1998; Wiseman 1993; 1994; 1998), and this discussion is gradually reshaping the study of ancient literature and narrative, especially in the past decade of scholarship. There is thus a perceptible shift towards more socio-cultural and literary readings of historical texts, focusing on identity issues related to authors and communities (Hartog 1988; Eckstein 1995; Swain 1996; Duff 1999; Rood 1999; Clarke 1999; Gruen 1998; 2002; Chaplin 2000). The correlation between the historiographic generic identification/association by an author in antiquity and its relative historical worth is probably also to be re-appraised in light of this larger paradigm shift.

Of course, scholars for some time have realized that the association between historiography and accuracy is not the same for all ancient writers. Thus, classical and New Testament scholars have already tended to bifurcate the ancient historiographical genre, basing such distinctions on the rhetorical language of demarcation used by major historians such as Poly-

bius and Lucian (Marincola 1997). As a result, distinctions have thus been made between rhetorical and non-rhetorical historiography (on the rhetorical context, see Hall 1996, 1997). Scholars of classical antiquity may well have a vested methodological interest in making such a differentiation, often ignoring the inherent rhetoricity of ancient writing processes and products in doing so (Robbins 1991c; 1993; for a major assessment of the rhetorical nature of historiography in Acts, see Rothschild 2004). Witherington has made the most of this distinction in current debate (1996a; 1996b), arguing that Luke must be viewed as a historian not of the Josephean or Livyian paradigm (because they are perceived to be more rhetorical and therefore more unreliable; but see Thornton 1991, who argues that Luke should be considered a *tragic* historian because his *faith* shaped his presentation of the *facts* [also Plümacher 1998]), but of the Thucydidean and Polybian variety (as their claims to be true and honest allegedly hold more sway). This approach, however, creates a false dichotomy in ancient literature, failing to recognize that Josephus consciously models his *historia* on Thucydides (Mader 2000). Moreover, it raises complications in terms of conceptualizing at what point an ancient author has been Thucydidean and what precise method one would use to determine this.

By contrast, those scholars who stress the utility of generic identification for interpreting the narrative of Acts as a literary strategy come closer to Cadbury's appreciation of the purpose of generic association noted earlier: one understands the purposes and meanings of the writer better by comprehending the particular literary constraints, possibilities, structures and/or conventions of a genre. The current shift in this respect, and very much in line with Cadbury's emphases, is that this approach entails correlating the narrative of Acts with an understanding of its rhetorical and literary force in argumentation (to provide *assurance* for Theophilus). Here scholars such as Moessner (1996a, 1999a, 1999c, 2002) have made significant advances in pushing forward Cadbury's earlier project, demonstrating that there is a functional relationship between the explicit intention of the ancient author set forth in the prologue and the unfolding of the subsequent narrative presentation (Balch 1999; Schmidt 1999).

Even when it is admitted that the genre of historiography reveals something about Lukan narrative patterns and conventions, further analysis is still necessary in order to determine more fully the nature of the content. In principle the content does not change based on generic specifications; yet the specific framework for interpreting the narrative determines to a high degree the perception of Lukan objectives in the shaping of that

material. Subgeneric designations have therefore been considered helpful for framing Luke's political, social and/or theological agendas in writing. Following from this emphasis, a wide diversity of views on the historiographic subgenres have been proffered in recent scholarship: historical monograph (Palmer 1993; Plümacher 1999a), political historiography (Balch 1989), universal/general history (Aune 1987), apologetic history (Sterling 1992), institutional history (Cancik 1997; see the critique by C. Heil 2000), kerygmatic history (Fearghail 1991), biblical history (Rosner 1993), typological history (Denova 1997), and historical *hagiographa* (Evans 1993). In each case, the specific subgeneric identification is intended to clarify the particular framing of the historical aspects of the narrative. The helpfulness of such identification is aptly demonstrated by Sterling's oft-cited study on Luke–Acts, which defines the two-volume work as apologetic historiography, in which the aim is understood to be the presentation of 'the story of a subgroup of people in an extended prose narrative written by a member of the group who follows the group's own traditions but Hellenizes them in an effort to establish the identity of the group within the setting of the larger world' (Sterling 1992: 17). By defining the subgenre of historiography in this manner, Sterling has set the parameters for assessing Luke's re-writing of the traditions of Israel (and of early Christianity) within the framework of shaping and maintaining group identity in the Greco-Roman world. This framework aids the interpreter not only in understanding the motivations behind the shape of the Lukan material, but also in deciphering particular patterns of composition peculiar to the subgenre (in this case, the Hellenizing of former, native traditions).

There is much to be said for this preoccupation with historiography in current scholarship, but it also has its limitations. For this reason, scholars have moved to other genres for exploring Acts. C.H. Talbert, for instance, has emphasized the category of biography, claiming strong affinities between Luke's two-volume work and Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of the Philosophers* (Talbert 1996; 2003; Talbert and Stepp 1998; Parsons 1992; Chance 1992; Moessner 1992). Talbert argues that Luke–Acts displays the same A/B pattern reflected in Laertius's sources—the life of a founder (A) followed by a succession list of or narrative about his followers (B). Talbert takes the matter of genre one step further, contending that such a generic definition not only helps one to comprehend the particular Lukan shaping of the tradition, but also implies certain, albeit general, social situations. The predominant function of these social contexts, according to Talbert, seems to be to ward off attacks by outsiders and to inculcate values for insiders through highlighting the essence of valued individuals and tradi-

tions in the group. Alexander's earlier contribution to the question (1993b) perhaps goes the furthest in this respect. In her attempt to distance Luke–Acts from the historiographical genre and to push it in the direction of the scientific manuals in the ancient world, she not only focuses on comparative conventions in prologue form and function, but also argues for the presence of a strong social dynamic embedded in the production of Luke–Acts: the writer is part of a school tradition, which brings with it an implicit social context. This connection between social dimension and generic association moves one much closer to a socio-cultural localization of the author of Acts, and remains one of Alexander's most important contributions from her earlier work (see Perdue 1990).

Further generic identifications have also been forthcoming. Baffled by certain unique features of Lukan discourse, some scholars have suggested it is a *sui generis* composition in antiquity (Wedderburn 1996; Marshall 1993); others have attempted to account for some of these features in other ways. One of the more recent generic designations is ancient epic (Palmer Bonz 2000), with a particular stress on epic themes, mythic functions, and concomitant social-identity processes of/in Lukan narrative (Cameron 1994; Moreland 1999; 2003). Palmer Bonz's argument focuses on the dramatic unity of epic composition (over and against, in her view, historiography), postulating that Vergil's *Aeneid* formed the basis for Luke's narrative conception, wherein divine fulfillment and prophecy structure the heroic thread of Luke's historical epic. Most recently D.R. MacDonald (2003a; 2003b; see also 1999) argues that Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20 is consciously modeled on Hector's similarly patterned speech in the *Iliad*. In another not unrelated move, Pervo has made the most extensive argument for viewing Acts as a form of ancient novelistic composition (1987; see also Wills 1991; S. Schwartz 2003), postulating that Acts presents a fictionalization of core historical events and persons, centering on the presentation of dramatic episodes and the exhibition of the legendary quality of its characters, all for the purpose of entertainment and edification. One of the important contributions of Pervo's discussion is his attempt to separate the generic identification of Acts from the Gospel (Parsons and Pervo 1993; Pervo 1989; 1999). Generally scholars have assumed that the two volumes must belong to the same genre, not in small part because the premise is that two parts of a larger whole in an author's mind must naturally have proceeded along the same compositional formulae. Parsons and Pervo not only offer an observation that challenges some of our modern assumptions about genre, they also move the discussion beyond a more facile focus on genre as an end in and of itself for the

literary interpretation of a text. We may in fact have much more invested in generic identifications and structures than ancient writers did, and unity of conception and argument, including narrative arrangement and ordering, may actually have much less to do with genre, and much more to do with general cultural literary patterns and cross-generic conventions in the ancient world.

The epic and novel generic positions on Acts are not without weaknesses, however, and the most significant in this respect is their conscious reaction to traditional understandings of ancient historiography. Palmer Bonz, for instance, argues that Vergil's epic differed from contemporary forms of historiography primarily in the fact that the 'selection and arrangement of its content... was governed not by the historian's criteria of sources and traditions but by the artist's concern for cosmic universality as it is revealed in human particularity' (2000: 58). This argument represents a misunderstanding of the narrative dynamics of ancient *historia*, and results in a dichotomization between history and epic based largely on modern distinctions between poetry and history. One also receives the distinct impression in Pervo's work that he seeks to avoid viewing Acts as somehow grounded in real historical events. Yet every point he makes by way of comparison with the novels also applies equally to ancient historiography (Penner 2000). More systematic reflection on what actually separates history and novel/epic in antiquity is therefore required.

In the end, then, this questions remains: does the genre of Acts matter? The answer, I would suggest, is both yes *and* no. If we think that the generic association as such says something intrinsic about the *historicity* of Luke's narrative (as does Thornton 1991), then we are pursuing generic classification for the wrong reasons. The burning issue used to be centered on the speeches in ancient historiography: were they real, actual speeches given some shape and form by the historian or were they creations *in toto* by the authors of historical works? That question, despite some detractors (Porter 1990; slightly more nuanced in Porter 1999), has for the most part been settled in both Classical and New Testament Studies: the historians were largely responsible for composing the speech-in-character (for Acts, see Hilgert 1993; Soards 1994; Johnson 2002); but what remains to be accomplished is a more systematic examination of the generative relationship of the speech to its narrative setting (Tannehill 1991; Penner 1996; 2003a). The we-passages are still a matter of significant debate, however (Praeder 1987; Wehnert 1989; Koch 1999; Porter 1999; Mount 2002; Wedderburn 2002), and continue to be the major point where scholars find a link to the historical traditions and/or sources of earlier Christianity. As

an assured datum of historical tradition, the we-passages may well disappear in future scholarship. If retained, however, scholars will need to consider more seriously the processes of orality and narrativization of such accounts even if they are based on so-called 'eye-witnesses' (Laird 1999; Thomas 2003; esp. Byrskog 2003). At the very least, the use of Acts for reconstructing the history of the early church has to be subjected to extensive theoretical reflection on the complex methodological issues involved.

Perhaps the greatest weakness of generic designations for the purposes of literary comparison is that one essentially defines—often arbitrarily—the limits of comparison; a process which frequently and artificially excludes literature that might well illuminate the text. Alexander's recent work on the genre of Acts is important in this respect, raising in a variety of essays precisely this point (Alexander 1993a; 1993b; 1995a; 1995b; 1996; 1998a; 1998b; 1999a; 1999b; 1999c). Her significant insight, established over the course of her work of the 1990s, is that genre is a rather open-ended phenomenon in the ancient world, and, depending on how one analyzes Acts, it can look like a scientific treatise, a historical or biographical composition, a novel, and/or an apologetic text. There may well have been a diversity of perceptions of Acts in its ancient context, and it is a legitimate question which particular viewpoint ought to calibrate the modern scholarly interpretive lens. We probably short-change both Luke and his audience(s) if we choose just one.

In the final analysis, while generic identification is a reasonable starting point for interpretation, we cannot limit comparison to genre, but must rather look at the broader literary patterns and conventions that were appropriated in all forms of ancient literature. Themes such as retribution and providence, for example, are as prevalent in history (Trompf 2000; Squires 1993; Plümacher 1999b) as they are in epic (Alvis 1995; Palmer Bonz 2000; for the novel see Chance 1998). In this respect, D. Marguerat's work on Acts is exemplary, as he demonstrates quite forcefully the potential of cross-generic comparison, especially in his study of the sea voyage in comparative Greco-Roman perspective, drawing on the range of this phenomenon across literary genres (Marguerat 2002; see also Wordelman 1994; 2003, for a similar result in her study of Acts 14). W.T. Wilson's study of the foundation legend in Acts 10.1–11.18 also considers a *topos* across a range of genres, working with a broader conception of cultural discourse than one limited to a specific genre (2001). Finally, the recent study by I. Czachesz on the commission narratives in the canonical and apocryphal Acts further demonstrates the cross-generic presence of a variety of com-

missioning forms (2002). Most importantly, Czachesz implicitly raises a crucial question for the scholar of the canonical Acts: should hard and fast lines be drawn between the Acts of the canon and the apocryphal literature related to the apostles? Traditionally the canonical Acts is considered historiography, while the apocryphal are viewed as novelistic compositions. This separation has provided some degree of protection for the canonical Acts as a result of the implication that as historiography Acts is more historically reliable. Precisely this assumption prevents us from exploring more fully the diversity and complexity of early Christian literature, as, for instance, Marguerat is able to do by analyzing the canonical Acts in comparison with the Acts of Paul, focusing on the socio-cultural factors that shape their respective images of the apostle (1997). The work of V.K. Robbins in socio-rhetorical criticism has also been useful in this connection, as he shifts the focus from genres to discourses and their respective cultural *topoi*, enabling the interpreter to move beyond the tyranny of generic classification in terms of analysis (Robbins 1996a; 1996b; also Bloomquist 2002). Thus, while the discussion of genre may appear, at least to some, to have been exhausted, it may turn out to have been just the prolegomenon to much richer and deeper ruminations on the substance of Acts.

#### 4. *What Is (In) a Text?*

On occasion I like to tease a friend of mine, who has been the managing editor of the Q project for the past ten years, by bringing to his attention that a good part of his academic career has been committed to a document that does not have an independent existence, but is in fact a hypothetical text. His response is generally the same cautious reminder: 'all early Christian texts are hypothetical'. This is actually a rather astute observation: all New Testament and early Christian texts are in principle hypothetical documents. In the case of Acts we are dealing with a particularly acute form of this phenomenon, as we have significantly different versions of the text. Any original text we thus proffer *is* hypothetical in nature. K. Haines-Eitzen's recent portrait of Christian scribal activity as a battleground for the formation of identity in a tumultuous theological/ideological environment, in which texts functioned as mediators of that identity (Haines-Eitzen 2000; also Parker 1992; Ehrman 1993), suggests that we may well be looking at a more socio-culturally complicated situation in terms of textual transmission at the earliest stages of the Christian movement than has generally been envisioned (this observation has led some

scholars to begin studying the textual traditions of Acts as actual reflections of these larger socio-cultural and ideological processes; see Nicklas and Tilly 2003). Moreover, insofar as Hellenistic-Roman education would also have lent itself to the reproduction of originals as a legitimate exercise in creative reconfiguration, the textual state is all the more tangled.

The current situation with respect to the text of Acts demonstrates this complexity, as the older preference for the Alexandrian text over the Western tradition is no longer an assured position of scholarship (Delobel 1997; 1999), and the (in)famous Codex Bezae is also being re-evaluated as a result (Parker 1992; Parker and Amphoux 1996; Tavardon 1997; 1999; Read-Heimerdinger 1998; 2003; Boismard 2000). The complex source theory of Boismard and Lamouille (1990) is heuristically helpful in terms of reassessing the equation, as they argue that the Western text should be dated to the second half of the first century. Thus, from the beginning there is complexity, rather than simply later corruption of a pristine text. Similarly, W.A. Strange has taken up the difficult issues related to the Western and non-Western versions of Acts, offering as a solution that Acts was published after the death of its first-century author. In this view, two different editors in the second century took up the original draft and both of their textual traditions reflect Lukan and non-Lukan readings (1992). Strange's most important contribution, however, may well be his rearticulation of an older argument that the book of Acts was not utilized in the same way as the Gospel of Luke in the early second century. This conclusion seems to suggest that the two books were not circulated together and that Acts took on importance (as a counter argument) only after Marcion's claim on the Christian tradition. A curious feature of the reception history of Acts that lends credence to the above suggestion is that its first unambiguous citation is by Irenaeus (but see the recent discussion by Gregory 2003). Some of these issues, such as the dating of the composition of Acts (and the Gospel for that matter; on the latter, see Shellard 2002), require further exploration. Traditionally Luke–Acts has been dated to the first century, but in principle, as with the dating of many early Christian documents, a significant amount of guesswork is involved, and certainly the recent movement to reconsider a second-century origin for Acts is apropos (Tyson 2003). For this reason V.K. Robbins has called for a more open-ended dialogue on the date and location of Acts, an 'open poetics' rather than a 'closed poetics' that simply limits the date to the first century (1992). Wherever scholarship goes on this issue, one would be remiss not to mention that with respect to the dating of these texts, we are solidly and

assuredly operating from a wide array of ideological, theological and historical preconceptions and biases.

C. Mount's recent work on the image of Paul in Acts is significant in this context, as he explores essential matters related to Acts in the second century, arguing that whenever Luke–Acts was written, the ideological battles of the second century, and Irenaeus's use of Acts in this context in particular, were determinative for the way in which Acts was subsequently viewed and utilized in the reconstruction of early Christian origins. The canon in this context distorts—by harmonizing and unifying—the earlier history of Christianity (2002; see also D.E. Smith 2002). In the end, we may not want to speak of *a* text of Acts *per se*, but begin looking more broadly at canonical Acts traditions, and then push that even further by exploring the articulation/reception of particular apostolic characters in non-canonical literature (e.g. C.R. Matthews 2002 on Phillip). We may also begin to explore more systematically the rhetorical power of canon in shaping our view of early Christian history (Aichele 2001); especially since 'canon' is, for all intents and purposes, an anachronistic construction for the first two hundred years of Christian history, the formation of which is a much more gradual process than we have generally recognized (Hahnenman 1992; but see Balla 2002). The textual and literary history of Acts may well be instructive for these conversations, realizing that perhaps the idea of an *original* and *intentional* text or point of origin is in essence a modern construction.

Related to this broader discussion is the growing lack of clarity in terms of defining the relationship between sources, redaction, and the actual narrative substance of Acts. A serious engagement of these issues is made no easier by the fact that we are, if nothing else, dealing with one of the more sophisticated and literate writers of the early Christian literary corpus (on the stylistic associations with Hellenistic historians, see Mealand 1991; 1996); someone adept at varying style and wording (Mussies 1991; 1995); practiced in the skill and art of ancient rhetoric (Morgenthaler 1993; Satterthwaite 1993; Parsons 2003); and steeped in the ability to imitate and reconfigure the Septuagint (Johnson 2002), as well as Greco-Roman traditions (Palmer Bonz 2000; MacDonald 2003b). The situation is further complicated if we take seriously the notion that the textual traditions of Acts were rather free-floating, being recalibrated and edited over a longer period of time, possibly by more than one writer and/or scribe. Moreover, because most of our scholarly energies have been focused on the canonical Acts, we have not had the benefit of assessing how things would look if one were to apply these same methods more systematically to the apocryphal

counterparts, entertaining how that analysis might illuminate further the study of the canonical Acts.

Source and redaction theories are intricately tied into these issues. Of the two, source theory has certainly received much less overall attention in the past 15 years, as Lukan theological interests (and hence redaction) have formed a critical component of the current research agenda. By *source* is meant particularly the notion that Luke used specific pre-written sources or traditions in the composition of Acts in the same way that he did for his Gospel. It is difficult, of course, to move from the valid assumptions about the Gospel to Acts, not in small measure because we do not have any extant sources with which to compare the canonical Acts. Moreover, we possess limited models for assessing the textual character of Acts, especially with respect to evaluating the possible, plausible, actual and rhetorical natures of the account. Methodological re-engagement at this point may prove necessary and valuable, taking into account the full range of literary and rhetorical options available to ancient writers, including the possibility of literary cross-fertilization and syncretism. That source theory has been on the decline (or a hiatus?) may suggest that scholars recognize implicitly some of the more problematic issues involved. One such issue is whether Acts provides full, partial, or any access to the history of earlier Christianity, and whether or not we can or should be using Acts as a means to retrieve it. C.C. Hill's attempt to correlate a reading of Acts with Paul's letters represents an important contribution in this vein (Hill 1992), but does not necessarily eradicate the problem of the direction of influence, let alone the fundamental problem pointed out by Mount: our use of Paul as a source for *the* history of earliest Christianity is determined in large part (explicitly and implicitly) by the influence of Acts itself.

Having just stated this, however, I would be remiss not to point out that scholars have had some ongoing interest in the source material behind Acts (Dickerson 1997; Béchard 2003), or, more generally, the traditions upon which the author could draw (Moessner 1989; Wedderburn 1994). No matter what one may think about the final narrative form of Luke's account, there is a desire on the part of the modern interpreter towards knowing something more than Luke's world, theology, culture and literary techniques. We really want to learn about the processes of the early Christian communities, the real men and women who shaped and formed the church (we know from Acts). Thus, the quest for traditional elements in the Lukan narrative is hardly a mere arcane curiosity, but reflects how systematically and dramatically Luke's powerful account of Christian

origins impresses upon a reader the names, places, and formative events and circumstances surrounding the early church.

We are therefore not simply content to analyze, for instance, the narrative function of the episode of the first Christian martyr (Bachmann 1999), but we really want to know who Stephen and the Hellenists were and what they said and did (Larsson 1987; 1993; Dschulnigg 1988; Walter 1989; Légasse 1992; Brehm 1992; Berger 1995; Neudorfer 1998; Bovon 2003; Taylor 2003 and even Räisänen 1992, despite his skepticism regarding the presence of any real historical core in the Hellenist account). The Hellenist Philip receives separate attention as well, as narrative assessments of the Lukan portrayal (Spencer 1992) readily give way to source analyses (Kollmann 2000; C.R. Matthews 2002, who is interested in both). The easily overlooked role of Barnabas has likewise received a recent, detailed analysis (Öhler 2003). The Jerusalem church is also not excluded from such interests, and scholars have entertained, for example, how realistic (or not) the communal sharing of goods portrayal in fact is (Bartchy 1991; Capper 1995; Theissen 1995; Lindemann 1998; Taylor 2001). Moreover, we can hardly conceptualize early Christian origins without the central role of Antioch attested in Acts (Rau 1994; Taylor 1994; Berger 1995; Hengel and Schwemer 1997; Bunine 2002; Zetterholm 2003). When T. Seland produced his informative study of vigilante or 'establishment violence' against those early Christians not conforming to Torah legislation (Stephen and Paul), it is telling, again, that he rather easily makes the move to the source material underlying Luke's narrative, trying to recover the actual experience of the earliest Christian martyrs, despite the fact that his study would have worked just as well (if not better) at the level of the Lukan narrative (1995; 1998). The same could be said for the studies of P.F. Esler, whose assessment of the sociological function of the larger Lukan narrative is much more convincing and effective than his attempts to detect the sociology of earlier Christian groups reflected *behind* the narrative (1987; 1992; see also Theissen 1996). In like fashion, F. Heintz has sought to peel away the Lukan rhetorical layers in the characterization of Simon Magus (particularly with reference to the widespread accusation of being a magician in antiquity) in order to reveal something of the historical core detailing the confrontation between the miracle worker Simon and Peter (and John) in Samaria (Heintz 1997). The women of Acts have recently received renewed attention as well, particularly in terms of recovering some of the more prominent ones *behind* the Lukan use (Richter Reimer 1995) or suppression (Price 1997) of them in the narrative. And we should not neglect the God-fearers and the quest that has ensued to prove Luke's

portrayal as historically accurate as well as A.T. Kraabel's assessment that they are a Lukan fiction wrong (Overman and MacLennan 1992; Levin-skaya 1996; Gilbert 1997). James (the brother of the Lord) is also a figure who has received increasing attention, given his prominent role in Acts (Chilton and Evans 1999). For such reconstructions Acts 15 has been particularly important (Bauckham 1995b; 1996; McKnight 1999; Ådna 2000). Indeed, the historical core of Acts 15 has been a long-standing fascination of scholarship, not in small part because of its significance for the Gentile mission in early Christianity and its chief canonical proponent, Paul. To this end scholars such as A.J.M. Wedderburn have been engaged in separating the tradition behind the so-called apostolic decree from Lukan interpretive interests (1993; see also Klinghardt 1988; Wehnert 1997; to a lesser degree also Callan 1993; but contrast Jervell 1995; Tyson 2001).

It may in the end not be surprising that we are drawn to specific characters and incidents in Acts, as the literary artistry of Luke in fact pulls our attention in this direction. Luke adeptly draws his readers to the central figures, incidents and places in his story, and his dynamic and engaging narration fixes our gaze and interest on these focal points of his literary canvas. Yet how much of this phenomenon is our own desire (need?) to recover the *real history* of earliest Christianity? How much of this is made readily and evidently available in Luke's narrative? And, most importantly, how much of this quest is in fact created by the literary and rhetorical force of Luke's presentation? If it is true that Luke has engendered in the reader a belief (or *pistis*) in the historical accuracy of his work, then our continual attempts at retrieval may in fact confirm his rhetorical superiority.

It is curious in light of this trend that alongside the comparison of Paul's speeches in Acts with his letters (Aejmelaeus 1987; Pichler 1997; Walton 2000), Acts scholars for the greater part have been interested not so much in the historical Paul *behind* the text, but in Luke's narrative, rhetorical and cultural portrait of him (Tajra 1989; MacDonald 1990; D.R. Schwartz 1990; Lentz 1993; Franklin 1994; Rosenblatt 1987; 1995; Malina and Neyrey 1996; Mendels 1996; Neyrey 1996; Spencer 1999; Hummel 2000; Burfeind 2000; Given 2001; Mount 2002; but see Strelan 1996; Breytenbach 1996; Jewett 2000; Campbell 2000; Bunine 2002; and esp. Porter 1999 [also see Horn 2001, which contains a mixture of both approaches]). It probably goes without saying that the particular way in which Paul is approached, as distinct, for instance, from Stephen and James, relates to the fact that there exists other information about Paul, and thus there is less need to seek him behind the Lukan text. In this connection it is also intriguing that scholars generally postulate a fairly different view of Paul

in the Lukan portrayal than in the Pauline letters (but not Porter 1999), an insight into Lukan method, which is, however, not applied to other characters in the narrative (as if they would be immune from a similar fate). An interesting thought experiment would be to query what our image of Paul would look like if we only had Acts with which to work. Would we find/recognize the Paul of the letters? There would definitely be some broad patterns of agreement (Paul was a missionary to the Gentiles; Paul had a connection to Antioch), but it is not evident that we would have the same fundamental (especially theological) conception of Paul that we now do. Further, if Luke has in fact used (some of) Paul's letters as sources for composition of both narrative and speech, a position that seems to be gaining popularity in recent scholarship (Aejmelaeus 1987; Schenk 1988; Brodie 1995; 2001; Walker 1998; Walton 2000; Leppä 2002), then this will dramatically alter the way we think about Paul in Acts (and may also change the way we think about his letters, particularly if we think of Luke as the first reader/interpreter of Paul or his traditions [Hyldahl 2002]). As it now stands it is impossible to read Acts and think about early Christian origins without the Pauline extratexts prompting one to fill in the gaps, as well as to correlate and harmonize the stories in both directions.

In the final analysis, engagement of traditional and redactional elements in Lukan composition appears to be an endless enterprise of speculation and hypothesis, which, like the quest for the historical Jesus, may reveal much more about modern scholarly agendas and values than the early church. Still, not much consideration has been given to the complex methodological issues involved in this procedure, let alone serious reflection on whether or not Acts as literary text allows for this kind of access to the world *behind* the text. It is also not clear in fact what *behind* really means in this case. In almost all the studies that operate from tradition- and redaction-critical methods what is meant or implied by *behind* is simply taken for granted. And this assumption is all the more surprising given what we generally do accept: early Christians were energetic practitioners of midrashic storytelling, infusing their narratives with their own agendas, and—as post-canonical literature attests in all its glorious fictions—manipulating, creating, and at times wildly reconfiguring earlier heroic characters and situations. That this observation has yet to sink in with respect to the Lukan literary art is indeed a curious matter, especially given the creative literary environment out of which Christianity arose; itself heir to a Jewish legacy of poetic imagination and inspiration that may well have rivaled any in the ancient world (Gruen 1998).

It is not surprising in light of this creative impulse in early Christian literature that the last 15 years has also witnessed equally creative trajectories of analysis by scholars. First and foremost, there has been a dramatic turn to the literary study of Acts. Tannehill's 1990 volume on Acts inaugurated a period that would see a myriad of studies follow suit, all seeking to understand Lukan compositional and narrative dynamics (Darr 1993; Spencer 1993). Illustrative is M. Parsons's comparative study of the ascension narratives in the Gospel and Acts, in which he focuses on the divergences in the Lukan accounts (1987; see also 2004). Parsons examined the two narratives, arguing that for literary and theological reasons Luke deliberately varied the portrayal with an implicit and explicit account. Thus, rather than falling back *behind* the text, proffering two variant traditions or versions, Parsons cogently argues for intentional variation (see Marguerat 2002 on the multiplication of Paul's conversion accounts [also Hamm 1990]; and Kurz 1997a on the variant narrators in Acts 10–11). Problems that were often assessed on a traditional or historical basis have thus tended to receive instead literary explanations in more recent scholarship. The open ending of Acts is another excellent example of this, as scholars are inclined to reflect on the literary/rhetorical and theological reasons motivating the phenomenon (Marguerat 2002; Kurz 1997b). Other studies have focused almost exclusively on literary theory, analyzing for instance the literary characterization of the Holy Spirit in Luke–Acts (Shepherd 1994). Overall, however, most studies have sought to combine literary, theologically and culturally sensitive strategies in their readings of discrete narrative units. J.B. Tyson's later work, for example, has made some significant shifts in this direction with respect to examining the implied reader's understanding of the text (1995). Tyson concludes that such an implied reader is likely to be a God-fearer, thus making sense of Luke's extended explanation for the largely negative or at least ambivalent role of Judaism in the early Christian movement (see Sanders 1987; Tyson 1988; 1992; 1999; Siker 1991; Kilgallen 1997; Räisänen 1997). John Darr's work on the Pharisees in Luke–Acts also represents a significant achievement in this respect, demonstrating the complexity of their evolving literary characterization as obdurate figures, which ultimately leads to understanding even their tacit approval of Christianity as Lukan irony (Darr 1992; also 1998b). Literary studies of Luke–Acts have thus provided substantial interpretive payoff as a result of the overt methodological aim to analyze the narrative closely, looking at the function of language within a micro and macro literary context and in the process yielding notable insights into the unifying features of the Gospel and Acts (Moessner 1989;

Bergholz 1995; Wiens 1995). In this light, the recent extension of literary approaches to include linguistic analysis seems to be potentially profitable (Martin-Asensio 2000).

Of course, literary studies are frequently utilized in service of other goals, often related to uncovering the authorial intention, artistry or conceptual framework or idea behind a particular narrative unit, theme or literary pattern. This observation may seem like an obvious point to make, but it bears emphasis all the same, especially because literary analysis of Lukan narrative has increasingly taken up the task of older redaction-critical aims. D.P. Moessner's earlier study on the Lukan travel narrative and its thematic structuring of both Luke and Acts provides a good example: Moessner is interested in the connection between literary design/structure and the thematic content (in this case the influence of Deuteronomy), including examination of the import of this interrelationship for Lukan theological conceptualization (1989). This conjunction of features has become a major preoccupation of recent research, with particular appeal being made to repetitive Lukan themes. The benefit of this approach is attested in a wide array of studies, such as J.P. Heil's recent treatment of the meal type-scenes in Luke–Acts (1999) (resulting in the thesis that these scenes function [especially in Acts] to anticipate the coming eschatological banquet in the Kingdom of God, thus bearing a eucharistic accent); R. Ascough's analysis of the crowd scenes and their narrative function (1996); O.W. Allen's study of the death of Herod (1997); J.H. Neyrey's fascinating assessment of the stereotypical pairing of Stoics/Pharisees and Epicureans/Saducees related to the matter of theodicy in Acts 17 (1990); C.W. Stenschke's examination of the Lukan anthropological portrait of the Gentiles in Acts (1999; see also Hagene 2003); E. Reinmuth's comparison of the narrative techniques and themes of Pseudo-Philo and Luke–Acts (1994); and R.L. Brawley's application of various literary theories to highlight the theocentric appropriation of Jewish Scripture in Acts (1995).

Yet lingering questions remain. First, as R.I. Denova's treatment of the narrative function of prophetic traditions in Acts suggests (1997), Luke has wedded both Scripture and historical detail to his narrative argumentation in such an intricate fashion that it becomes difficult now to disentangle the narrative web. Denova, in contrast to Witherington's argument regarding the use of Mark in Luke as a parallel for Acts, points out that one can intuit from what Luke does with Jewish Scripture how he most likely worked with other details he had at his disposal (i.e., he was highly creative in his reconfiguration). It is not only the comparative aspect that is interesting here, as it also raises the issue of how one ought to configure

the relationship between the contemporary literary study of Acts and source (and to a certain extent also older redaction) analyses. In other words, does the conceptual framework of what a text is within a literary model not in some sense conflict with how these other models conceptualize a text? In the latter, there are narrative seams, fissures and discrepancies, all of which point to sources or traditions lying *behind* the text, from which one can detach Lukan contributions/theology. These models operate with a fairly limited sense of the complexity of the ancient writing process and possess relatively meager criteria for deciphering the material contributing to the Lukan agenda. Even more critical here is the shift in conceptual frameworks as to what a text is, what it gives access to, and how it functions. These are questions that are not given enough attention in New Testament studies, but which are critical at the moment, in part because much of current research is operating under a variety of different conceptions of the nature of a text, and these repeatedly come into conflict, even if this disjunction is not always realized.

The second question I want to raise here relates to Lukan theology, which literary readings often serve to highlight. It is important to state at the outset that one of the rather unique features of the past 15 years of scholarship, heralded in many respects by Moessner's study on the theological function of the Lukan travel narrative (1989), is that Lukan theology is increasingly read as a product of Lukan narrative strategy rather than as simply the product of Lukan redactional additions to the pre-Lukan material incorporated into Acts. This insight represents an important and fundamental shift from earlier scholarship, which placed much more emphasis on deciphering the Lukan agenda by separating the explicit Lukan material from the allegedly non-Lukan traditions. Current scholarship has implicitly pointed out the flaw in this earlier approach, noting that in fact the entire narrative of Acts, whether resulting from pre-Lukan *Grundschriften* or Lukan invention, is in the end now a product of the Lukan literary and ideological imagination. In other words, despite there being relatively little methodological reflection on this point *per se*, scholars have moved towards explicating the Lukan theological script using a literary approach to the text. This emphasis is evidenced in an array of recent studies, focusing on Luke's portrayal of the eschatological role of Jerusalem and the temple in God's plan of salvation (Chance 1988; see also the more extensive treatment by Ganser-Kerperin 2000); the themes of restoration in Luke–Acts (Ravens 1995); the Lukan theology of persecution (Cunningham 1997); the utilization of LXX characterization such as

'poor' and 'lame' as types that develop a particular Lukan image of Christ (Roth 1997; see also Spencer 1994 on the Lukan themes of 'widows' and 'orphans'); Lukan depiction of church growth (Reinhardt 1995); and the summaries in Acts understood against Hebrew Bible/Old Testament conceptions (Wendel 1998). The question remains, however, to what degree Lukan theology can in fact be derived from such measures? (See esp. Rothschild 2004.) How consistent is an ancient writer? To what degree and in what way can specific units, narratives and themes be utilized to construct broader patterns of meaning for the author (compare recent studies on Roman historiography, which are more nuanced in this respect: Miles 1995; Sinclair 1995; Jaeger 1997; Feldherr 1998; Ash 1999)? For example, if Luke is following the rhetorical exercise of writing *speech-in-character*, to what extent is he committed personally or communitarily to the content of the speech? Speeches function in multiple ways in ancient texts, as do other literary facets of the presentation. More often than not we tend to establish rules for the language game that reflect our own modern (and scholarly) predilections, but the ancient context is literally a world apart from our own. While all of these issues serve to make the analysis of the Lukan text of Acts all the more difficult, ultimately it is also a much more intellectually engaging and rewarding endeavor as a result.

### 5. *Mapping the Wor(l)ds of/in Acts*

Having explored issues related to the text of Acts in the previous section, the intersection of the text and its context still remain to be examined more closely. It is clear from the discussion in the previous sections that the *historical* character of Acts is at the center of contemporary study in numerous ways, even if it is not always clear how the term/concept is functioning in academic discourse. Scholars of early Christian literature are, like their classical counterparts, trained to discover, trace out, and finally analyze discrete lines of connection between the text and its world. This point may seem clear enough, but postmodern criticism has encouraged reassessment of the nature of authorship, text and readership in the ancient (and modern) world, raising questions such as: What does a text like Acts really tell us about early Christianity, the expansion of which occupies the main narrative thread of the book? Is there a linear correspondence between the text and its extratextual world? Does the text perhaps reveal more about the author of Acts than earlier Christian history? What about ancient readers—does their social location matter in terms of how Acts is understood? How do we begin to think about meaning given the

wide and diverse expanse of thought and life available and practiced in the so-called 'Mediterranean world'? These questions are critical if we are to move scholarship on Acts forward, but they have received less attention in current scholarly analysis, which sometimes seems to proceed as if the world and words of Acts are/were self-evident.

One entry point into these larger matters is to address the modern conceptualization of the *historical* with respect to Acts. Already at the outset, however, a critical element of debate surfaces: what does it precisely mean for something to be historical and how does that relate to historicity? The assessment of this relationship will obviously vary for different scholars (Harding 1993). In terms of the discussion here, the *historical* world or dimension of the text refers to general correspondence with (patterns of) real or conceptually imagined events in the ancient world. It is different from *historicity* in that the latter denotes that a specific event in Acts has actually taken place, although admittedly there is often a close association drawn between the two, especially when narrative verisimilitude makes differentiation between the *actual* and *probable* difficult (Breytenbach 1996). The historical dimension of the text as just described has been explored most thoroughly in recent scholarship with respect to the trial scenes in Acts, with emphasis being placed on the legal proceedings of Paul. Several monograph length studies have been devoted to investigating the relationship between the legal proceedings as described in the narrative and the broader patterns of legal procedures in Roman society. That the trial scenes should receive such extended focus is not surprising, since these represent the most extended and repetitive features of Acts that can be clearly associated with the Roman historical and political contexts of the text. A.N. Sherwin-White's formative study (1963) has thus been substantively reinforced in recent scholarship (Tajra 1989; Rapske 1994; Omerzu 2002; and also Seland 1995, who focuses on the Jewish legal context for the 'mob justice' in Acts 7, 21 and 23). There is a clear emphasis in these studies on the judicial proceedings and legal character of Paul's trials that are understood to correspond most directly with a *historical* Roman and Greek context. The tendency to move from *historical* to *historicity* is often implicit, the general premise being that Paul's trial narratives are more than mere fictions. To the contrary, their correspondence to real-world Roman realities rather suggests that they are in fact accurate recordings of actual events.

By contrast, Lentz's study on Paul (1993; see also Rosenblatt 1987; Neagoe 2002; Skinner 2003), which also addresses the legal aspects of Paul's trials, focuses on features of social status that are raised in Luke's

conscious portrait of Paul in the trials, resulting in a significantly different analysis than those studies noted above. The stress is no less on the *historical* as a result, but the connection to *historicity* is manifestly not the point of Lentz's approach. It is also interesting to mention in this context the work of S. Schwartz on the trial scenes in the Greek novel (1998; 2000–2001) and her recent comparative study drawing in Acts (2003; also Hogan 2002). In principle, the shift to the novels as the comparative genre does not take one away from the historical world of Roman legal proceedings, but the move towards an assumed (more) fictional genre nonetheless results in a different approach to the trials. Rather than seeking to prove their correspondence to real Roman judicial proceedings, Schwartz focuses on the issues of narrative purpose/function and the features of *paideia* and Greek identity that are elucidated through the use of such trial scenes. This approach represents a marked alternative to the perspective in the work of Tajra, Rapske and Omerzu, and, although Schwartz has not in fact shifted her analysis from the *historical* world as such, there is a departure from the implicit *historicity* that often overshadows and indeed at times clouds the investigation of the *historical*. The fact that such differences are apparent suggests that the way the *world* of the text is envisioned and understood is deeply indebted to modern scholarly constructs and imaging.

Notions of the *historical* take on even more complexity the further one pushes the conceptual boundaries. For instance, not only does Acts imbibe deeply the world of antiquity, it also reconfigures it constantly in and through its words and wording. This phenomenon is something that makes the task of the interpreter all the more difficult. Take, for instance, an element as seemingly basic as *geographical* representation. The progressive geographical texture of Acts has long been noted and is one of the assured points of departure for scholarly inquiry. On the one hand, Acts refers to real places and cities in the ancient world (Hengel 1995; 2000). On the other, Luke clearly has a rhetorical/persuasive end that directs his use of geography: it is both textually and rhetorically progressive, as well as symbolic in its general aim (Parsons 1998b; Spencer 1999). J.M. Scott (1994; 2000; 2002) has argued for Luke's linking of the Genesis Table of Nations traditions with Jewish eschatological expectation in his use of geographical representation. D.P. Bécharad explores similar issues, associating Luke's geographical patterns of the Lystran and Athenian episodes with broader ethnographic conceptions in the ancient world (2000; 2001). G. Gilbert extends this further in his study of the list of nations in Acts 2, analyzing the list against similar examples in Roman imperial propaganda

(2002; 2003). Here Luke's literary creativity comes to the fore, as early Christian persuasive strategies are employed to counteract the claims of imperial Rome. In this context, geography has moved from merely reference to particular places to more broadly conceived ideological and socio-culturally projections of Christian identity and space, a practice that has ample attestation in the ancient world (Nicolet 1991; Clarke 1999; with respect to Acts, see McKeever 1999). In other words, *historical* in this context is not just the use of real geography and its reconfiguration within Christian ideological and rhetorical textual practices, but also the projection and in some sense reimag(in)ing of the external, real world through the words of the text. This feature is no less *historical*, of course, since it in fact represents real individual scribal and corporate identity orientation and practices in the ancient world, often in dialogue/competition with other, real voices.

The situation becomes even more intricate when one pushes the contextual nature of *historical* yet further. The Christology of Acts, for instance, is frequently explored in light of various paradigms or constructs available to Luke in the first century, some of them rooted in tradition, others more broadly associated with cultural modes of conceiving the divine. Scholars have articulated in this way the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament context for Lukan christological expression (Bock 1987; Strauss 1995), or related Lukan conceptions to Jewish angelic, exalted, and/or mediator figures (Crump 1992; Fletcher-Louis 1997; Zwiep 1997; 2001), which highlights the eschatological nature of Lukan Christology (Bayer 1994; Nielsen 2000). Others have investigated the Lukan construction by combining a distinctive Jewish scriptural and Christian articulation of divine status in light of both the portrayal of Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and Pauline servanthood notions (Buckwalter 1996). In this connection, it is striking that such analysis of Lukan christological expressions and formulations has been limited almost entirely to Jewish tradition. Compared to the discussion of Paul's trial narratives, in which lines are drawn explicitly to a *Roman* historical context, in the treatment of Christology the lines are clearly and tightly drawn to both Jewish Scripture and Second Temple traditions. Undoubtedly such connections exist—Luke, after all, was steeped in Jewish biblical concepts and themes. But how likely is it that such clear and, dare we say, sanitized lines can be drawn between Acts and Judaism? Fewer scholars in recent scholarship have ventured to explore Lukan christological themes against the backdrop of the Roman imperial cult and propaganda, although such study proves to be equally profitable for an appreciation of Luke's unique configuration of Jesus as

the Christ (Brent 1997; 1999; Gilbert 2002; 2003; Janzen 2002). The assumed importance of the ruler cult for early Christian identity and rhetoric, especially for the book of Revelation, and the widespread influence of the images of the divine emperor in Asia Minor (Friesen 1993; 2001), would suggest that more attention should be focused in this direction. It is undeniable that the method of separating Lukan Christology into Jewish, Greek and Roman backgrounds/categories reflects, in part at least, theological concerns: certain spheres are considered, albeit implicitly, safer than others. Moreover, scholars tend to conceptualize the study of themes in Acts in a fairly linear manner, while models offering more convoluted multilinear associations are less frequently employed. Furthermore, while it is necessary to construct and utilize models that are able to provide more flexibility in terms of the lines that are drawn and the ways in which those lines are fixed, more complex constructions of the categories 'Jewish'/'Judaism', 'Roman', and 'Greek'/'Hellenistic' also need to be established. These categories are heuristic modes of analysis, but do not represent pure historical or cultural expressions/manifestations in the ancient world. Rather, these *backgrounds* are actually intermixed and intertwined in different ways and to varying degrees depending on a diversity of factors, including social-location in the empire. Darr's recent volume examining the philosopher-tyrant confrontation in Jewish and Greek tradition as the model for responses to Herod in Luke–Acts (1998a) is just one example of a study that begins to move in the direction articulated here. Combining narrative and socio-cultural thematic analysis, Darr focuses on the 'extratextual repertoire' that would have given shape and meaning to the presentation and reception of the stories in Luke–Acts. Much more needs to be done, however, that pushes the complexity of these extratextual connections, so that the reservoir of Lukan expression (and reception) is perceived more as a complex web of meaning and signification than simply an easily identifiable and often overly simplified linear association with a particular pattern, theme or context.

The issues raised here with respect to the *world* and *word* of Acts can be explored further by examining Lukan rhetorical practice. The use of rhetoric is often considered a skill/art that can be readily compared with similar practices of other ancient rhetoricians (Morgenthaler 1993). Sometimes formal analysis, usually confined to the speeches (Zweck 1989; Watson 1990; Winter 1991; 1993), gives way to more systematic exploration of the affects on Lukan narrative, as A.C. Clark accomplishes quite well in his study of the rhetorical practice of *synkrisis* (comparison) in Acts (2001; see also A. Smith 1999; Duff 1999). Yet much less is being done to move

towards more heterogeneous formulations of the way in which Lukan discourse as a whole is immersed and deeply embedded in both the social processes and products that ancient rhetorical display and art manifests at its core. Such assessments push beyond formalistic analysis to the study of the networks of meanings created by a text such as Acts. In this light, the role of primary and secondary Greco-Roman education in the literary and rhetorical development of Christian texts is still relatively unexplored. Significant work has been done recently by scholars examining the various rhetorical aspects of Hellenistic-Roman education (Morgan 1998; Criboire 2001; Hock 2001; Webb 2001), with a special focus on the *progymnasmata*, the elementary exercises for primary education (on Acts, see Parsons 2003; Penner 2003a). If the *progymnastic* exercises are any indication, ancient readers were actually encouraged from the earliest ages to mix genres and discourses, imitating patterns and conventions from a wide range of ancient narrative, from Thucydides to Homer (for an excellent study of imitation in Acts, see Kurz 1990), with relatively little distinction being made between different types of literature. This compositional mode of thinking was based on intermixing, reformulating and recontextualizing. Not only is it apparent, then, that one is thus dealing with fairly flexible notions of genre and classification with respect to Acts, but one must also now ask how the study of Acts itself might be reconfigured and reformulated in this framework, particularly with respect to the way in which the text of Acts in all its facets is both a constituent participant in and product of the process (see further, Penner 2003c).

Lukan use of Scripture is also illustrative in this connection. Recent studies have highlighted the content, form and function of scriptural citation (Koet 1989; Evans and Sanders 1993; Brawley 1995; Parsons 1998a; Pao 2000; Jeska 2001; Johnson 2002; Rusam 2003). Moreover, particular Lukan themes such as the restoration of the people of God have been analyzed against their scriptural background (Ravens 1995; Bauckham 2001). There is nothing particularly unusual about this in and of itself, because such connections do in fact exist. This becomes an issue, however, when very particular connections are drawn in ways that tend, intentionally or not, to disassociate the text of Acts from the broader worlds of which it is a part. Rhetorical technique or scriptural use only take on meaning within the webs of signification created by the world at large. There is in this sense, for instance, no explicitly Jewish context for Acts, or even a Greek or Roman one for that matter. Rather, Jewish, Greek and Roman worlds are intertwined in very specific and unique ways, so Acts, like many ancient

texts, takes part in the creation of new cultural modes of expression through the reconfiguration of its material resources. Thus, it is a misguided premise that simply because Luke utilizes and reconfigures Jewish Scripture the context for Acts must therefore be primarily Jewish: Vergil's reconfiguration of Homer, for instance, does not thereby imply a Greek context for Roman epic. This is precisely why broader applications in the field are necessary. The studies of Lukan use of Scripture are often conducted as if Scripture were a separate *world* onto itself, abstracting the use and function of Scripture from the broader cultural context. Rusam moves beyond this more limited model in part by comparing the use of authoritative citations in other ancient historiographic works with the use of Scripture in Acts (2003), but much more clearly needs to be done.

The recent work of D. Balch on Acts has been particularly helpful in pushing the boundaries of this discussion (1989; 1995a; 1995b; 1998; 2003a; 2003b), as he has expended significant effort to demonstrate the way in which Luke utilizes political and/or social themes predominant in Hellenistic historians such as Dionysius of Halicarnassus, but with an eye to how they are reconfigured through Lukan social concerns and issues. Balch has focused almost exclusively on historiographic materials, but his approach is worth highlighting precisely as a model of interpretation. One of the seminal studies in this vein, and probably one of the more important monographs written on Acts in the past 15 years, is the work of D.R. Edwards (1996; also 1994), who analyzes broad themes in Acts, comparing them with Josephus (Jewish) and Chariton (Greek). It is significant that Edwards mixes different genres (historiographic and novelistic) in his analysis and that he pursues the function and use of religious themes and motifs in particular writers of the same relative time period, but of distinct places in the empire. Edwards also creates a more expansive context for his study based on historical and socio-cultural analysis, and then seeks to establish discrete 'webs of power' that provide the context in which the shaping of religious themes and cultic practices by the various writers in the Greek East takes on meaning and power of its own. Not only innovative in its approach, this work is also groundbreaking in terms of conceptualizing the broader Lukan world in ever more complex ways.

Following this line of reasoning further leads one to a larger matter with respect to the definition and use of a rather favored topic of scholarship: *Lukan theology*. When one looks, for instance, at recent surveys of Lukan theological expression and ideas (Jervell 1996; Pokorný 1998) or the many studies on specific Lukan themes such as ecclesiology (Wendel 1998) or eschatology (Wolter 1997; Nielsen 2000), it is readily apparent that the

discussion is almost solely focused on specific theologized concepts that have taken on, albeit implicitly, a dogmatic meaning in contemporary scholarship. So even when someone like C. Stenschke (1999) examines the theological anthropology of Luke's concept of salvation, it is done almost entirely in terms that seem to be rather abstracted from the social and cultural currents of the so-called ancient Mediterranean world. Indeed, if one takes seriously the incarnational dynamics of early Christian discourse, it is apparent that there is often a profound disjunction between the modern formulation of Lukan theological expression that focuses on the clearly biblical (if not already implicitly Christian) meta-language and the socio-cultural linguistic grounding of the ultimate ideological *topoi* that come to expression in Acts. Moreover, there is no one-to-one correspondence between a particular Lukan theological theme and either Jewish Scripture or the historical and cultural worlds of the text. There are, rather, a multitude of intersecting points or vectors between theological expressions of/in texts and their contexts. This multiplicity may be intended by the writer, but it may also not, as ancient readers would have created their own receptive intersections, which would have varied depending on where, when, by whom, and how Acts was read. This is where historical-criticism as traditionally conceived and practiced continues to oversimplify the situation: while authorial intention is not to be abandoned (although in principle even *intention* as such has various and sometimes contradictory conscious and unconscious elements that come into play), the idea that an ancient text can be limited to just that is conceptually problematic. Finally, the creation of a distinctively Christian culture—the construction of new webs of signification and/or reconfigurations that result in something fresh in the ancient world—also should be something that scholars are invested in pursuing. Yet descriptions of such ought to be enmeshed fully in the material resources that gave birth to this phenomenon in the first place, otherwise the *new* will simply seem *alien* to the world out of which it came. Scholars such as Theissen (1999; also Räisänen 2000) have attempted to do just this, although Theissen's failure to consider the Greek and Roman contexts as formative for the early Christian symbolic world limits the utility of his results (compare the opposite problem in Klauck 2000b, who fails to engage the Jewish elements in the religious context of the earliest Christians).

These observations lead, finally, to a reconsideration of the purpose of Acts. In much the same way as other facets outlined above, scholars tend to define rather narrowly the authorial purpose of the narrative; a topic which, nonetheless, continues to occupy the contemporary research agenda. Moessner's collection, mentioned earlier, concentrates on demonstrating

both the nature and end of Lukan argumentation in terms of the recasting of Jewish Scripture (1999b). Sterling's work equally stresses the critical importance of *apologetic* discourse in terms of Luke's goal of presentation of the Christian movement to both insiders and outsiders (1992; 1994; 1999; also Stoops 1989; Mitchell 1992). S. Walton, on the other hand, accents Luke's presentation of the empire to Christians, offering strategies for Christians to deal with imperial Rome (2002; also Robbins 1991a). L.T. Johnson has further explored the nature of *apologetic* as insider rhetoric, which creates and sustains group identity (1992; also Neagoe 2002). G. Gilbert (2002; 2003) has focused on Lukan propaganda, which creates Christian identity in light of Roman imperial themes and values, while L. Alexander (1999a) has examined the easy slippage from defense into propaganda, as the narrative would seem to have been most convincing to Christian readers rather than to an imperial Roman audience. My own stress on the epideictic features of Lukan rhetoric also highlights this premise: Acts is much more about insider group dynamics than outsider persuasion (Penner 2000). Most recently, M. Moreland has stressed the sociological function of mythmaking (also Cameron 1994) as a strategy of creating and maintaining group identity (2003). This emphasis fits well with the concomitant theme of many current classical studies that feature the formation of Greek identity in the East in the second sophistic period (Anderson 1993; Swain 1996; Goldhill 2001; Whitmarsh 2001).

Given the larger argument made in this section, however, it will also be important to move beyond the delineation of a *single* and *sole* function or purpose for Lukan narrative argumentation and/or Scriptural reconfiguration (compare Cassidy 1987, who tends to articulate purpose in rather narrow terms). Purposes can be simultaneously explicit (and multiple), implicit (and unconscious), intentionally ambiguous (Given 2001), and even contradictory. While it is telling that scholars have shied away from Esler's (1987) earlier attempt to assess legitimization on both the level of the Lukan narrative-community and the tradition of the early Christian community reflected in/behind the narrative, the various scholarly configurations of Lukan purpose as a whole have been fairly streamlined. This tendency probably needs to be challenged by taking into consideration broader trends in Jewish, Greek and Roman literature, as well as working with models that allow for a variety of cross-fertilizing purposes, which may also stand in tension at times. Moreover, we must deal with the strong possibility that Luke also includes material for reasons that may be situated in rhetorical and narrative artistry, and may thus not necessarily serve

his own particular ideological, political and/or social agendas, at least not in obvious ways. Politics and aesthetics are interwoven throughout.

In summary, then, texts are probably never linear in their original orientation; as they stand to a *reader*, all texts—both ancient and modern—are definitely not linear. Thus, limiting the scope to only one particular background, source or purpose ultimately undermines the meaning in/of the text. We probably also need to think more expansively about the extent and nature of the *historical* world of Acts and its socio-cultural moorings. Finally, the area that deserves further exploration is what the narrative of Acts reveals—in general terms—about the world coterminous with the author of the text. I am not thinking here of studies that seek to localize the text in a particular city (such as Ephesus; Berger 1995; Koester 1995), time period (first or second century) or in specific kinds of social and historical circumstances (Stegemann 1991; also Stegemann and Stegemann 1999), but rather an approach that is interested in discovering and articulating the worlds of the text (the values, the socio-cultural associations) in comprehensive terms (see Robbins 1991a). This approach to assembling and deciphering the worlds of the text/author in a multilinear mode works against the tendency of those biblical scholars who narrow and focus academic discourse, but the varied representations of Acts that will emerge undoubtedly will reflect a much more realistic and holistic context for the appreciation of this early Christian text. Furthermore, as a result we may learn something more substantial about the general patterns reflected in the world of the author (see Strange 2000 for an interesting example of this with respect to the use of Jesus tradition in Acts). Indeed, the shifting of attention to the Lukan world of the text may prove to be one of the formidable areas of new research concern in the coming years, especially if we work with alternative and competing contextual models so as to assess and delineate the larger worlds as broadly as possible.

### 6. *Discursive Acts*

The final section of this essay deals with a relatively recent—if not final—frontier of contemporary scholarship. Postmodern studies in the discipline (see esp. Aichele *et al.* 1997) have encouraged scholars to make engagement of cultural, ethical and reader-responsive interpretations of biblical texts an explicit part of their agenda. These new vistas have opened up tremendous potential for future Acts scholarship, which has already been moving beyond more traditional feminist and reader-response interactions with the narrative of Acts to gender and post-colonial ap-

proaches, including deconstructionist studies as well (Seeley 1994). These models of interpretation offer fundamental—and often much-needed—challenges to traditional modes of inquiry, but the two spheres ought by no means to be placed over and against each other. While they stand somewhat in tension, current scholarship will flourish if the two spheres are allowed to interact and cross-fertilize with one another. M. Given's study on Acts 17, mixing Derridean theory and traditional historical-critical methods, is exemplary in this respect, and may signal the beginning of even more innovative approaches to Acts (2001).

Perhaps the place to begin is with the role of women in Acts. More traditional feminist modes of analysis have here continued to hold significant sway in the discussion, but new developments have also been appearing along the way (see the discussion of some recent feminist treatments of Luke–Acts in Koperski 2002). Most noteworthy in terms of more traditional approaches is I. Richter Reimer's attempt to recover the women of Acts from behind the Lukan narrative (1995). Very much in line with scholars such as E. Schüssler Fiorenza, Richter Reimer's study represents a major effort to move behind the androcentric focus of Luke's narrative (but see the counter-argument by Arlandson 1997) to the *real* life experiences of early Christian women. S. Matthews's more recent study continues partially in this vein, but also demonstrates a more nuanced assessment and appreciation of the historical sources (2001). Focusing on the rhetorical import of having wealthy female patrons associated with a new religious movement, but also moving beyond the rhetorical and literary portrait to postulate some broader historical connections with the power and place of real women in early Christianity (and Judaism), Matthews's sensitive historical analysis has yielded important insights into the social dimensions of (some) early Christian circles: women did play important roles, even if some of those are now lost behind or mitigated by the Lukan literary portrayal. Seim's seminal study should also be considered in this context, as she argues that Luke offers a 'double message' with respect to women: Luke both retains narratives that seem to suggest a strong role for women, but at the same time clearly promotes a preference for masculine discourse and patterns (1994; see Corley 1993 for assessment of the traditional nature of the Lukan portrait of women in the symposium scenes in the Gospel). C.J. Martin's work on Acts moves beyond these readings to incorporate womanist hermeneutics, but essentially belongs to the same framework, attempting to recover those female figures who will empower and provide emancipatory models for all women (1989; 1994).

Most recently M.R. D'Angelo has expanded her earlier assessments of the Lukan role of women (1990), picking up on the gender-pairs also noted by Seim (1994), and has pushed scholarship forward significantly in terms of proffering a gender-critical analysis of Lukan narratives of women that interacts with both the imperial context for Lukan discourse and ancient conceptions of masculinity. Her most recent contribution to this discussion is one of the more sophisticated treatments to date of the literary and rhetorical use of women in Acts as a means for displaying early Christian imperial masculinity (D'Angelo 2002; 2003), and represents a significant turn in the current study of Acts. The perceptible shift that is herein taking place represents a move away from a more narrowly defined feminist perspective, towards a study of gender in the ancient world, which comprehends female identity in light of masculine imaging. In ignoring such gender- and sex-related issues, scholars have up until recently generally failed to take account of a full(er) historical context for assessing early Christian writings. The critical role of power in the negotiation of early Christian identity has for the most part been absent in recent study as well. In Classical Studies there has already been a dramatic increase in attending to the intersection of gender, rhetoric, power and education in the ancient world (Gleason 1995; Richlin 1997; Keith 2000; Gunderson 2000; Whitmarsh 2001; Fredrick 2002; Connolly 1998; 2003; Haynes 2003) and this emphasis has also been making its way into scholarship on ancient Christianity (Burrus 2000; Kuefler 2001; Moore 2001). Undoubtedly future scholarship will produce more nuanced but also richer studies of the gendered nature of Lukan discourse, including advancement in terms of the still relatively taboo topic of Lukan/authorial displays of power and control in and through the narrative of Acts (Penner and Vander Stichele 2004).

It is worthwhile examining in this light the well-studied topic of miracle and magic in Luke–Acts. Since Kee's (1986) earlier engagement of the issues, in which he assured the reader that Luke–Acts was well separated from the pagan world of magic, scholars have more or less followed that line of argument, viewing miracle and magic as distinct categories of interpretation, the former clearly safer than the latter (Wildhaber 1987; Garrett 1989; McCord Adams 1993; Weiss 1995; Kollmann 1996; Schreiber 1996; Heintz 1997; Klauck 2000a; Reimer 2002). Following the lines developed earlier in the section on genre, it is often argued that only the apocryphal Acts capitulate fully to a magical worldview (Koskenniemi 1994: 228-29), while the canonical Acts manages to maintain more distance from its environment in this respect. Aside from the various obser-

vations that could be made on the relativity of the *magic-miracle* language game in the ancient world (it is a feature of the discursive structure of magical/supernatural claims to authority, power and control in antiquity; see Stratton 2002; Penner 2004), the way in which this particular subject is treated by Acts scholars gives one pause. This feature is important to highlight here because of what it reveals about the ideology of many modern biblical interpreters: there is evident investment in viewing Acts as detached (to a degree) from its larger cultural world. This separation is not evident in all matters related to Acts and its world, but in particular in those ones that would too closely associate Acts with unsavory or evidently pagan practices or images. This observation was already made earlier with respect to the parallels between Christology in Acts and the emperor cult, but it is worth stressing again in this section because it signals the power of ideology to shape, create and sustain discursive structures for and in modern interpretation.

This last point moves us quite forcefully in the direction of ideology in texts and interpreters, especially the idea that all texts, all contexts, and all readers have a politic(s) that guides their readings, uses and appropriations of texts. Attempts to subvert the language of politics by suggesting that Christian texts and interpreters are driven by ideal values or theological scripts (e.g., Minear 2002) should rather be avoided, since the sublimation of politics makes it all the more dangerous. Examples of the multiple, intersecting, and also intertwined layers of ideologies in Acts and its interpreters are readily available (on Acts 9 see Czachesz 1995). For instance, one could examine in a post-colonial mode the Lukan and early Christian use of black and ethnic identity in antiquity (Byron 2002), but equally observe how modern scholarship has its roots in just as problematic construals of the ancient world (Wordelman 2003). Indeed, as some scholars are seeking to remind us, many of our heuristic models for Christian origins have racial if not also racist ideologies undergirding them (Heschel 1998; Tyson 1999; Kelley 2002). Current scholarship is particularly at risk at this juncture, as we have inherited ideological tools for analysis, and, while no longer explicitly affirming the original ideological commitments, we nonetheless can perpetuate unknowingly and unwillingly the failings of past interpretation and interpreters.

Another similar sphere of engagement is the scrutiny of the scholarly commitments and predilections that seem to gain predominance in Acts scholarship. It would be naïve, for instance, not to consider that the choice of genre—with the preference being by far for historiography—does not also involve ideological commitments of a variety of kinds (including a

gendered element in the selection process itself; see Vander Stichele 2003). And this is just the tip of the iceberg. Indeed, ideological analysis is critical to the vibrancy of the discipline of Biblical Studies; our reticence to engage these and related issues has been one significant factor in the current methodological state of Acts studies. Moreover, since ideological assessments apply across the board, from traditional to feminist methods, the sometimes oversimplistic categorizations of texts and interpreters as *androcentric* or *malestream* can be re-engaged at another level of power analysis, demonstrating that recognition of a male bias in a text like Acts is but the beginning of textual, self, and societal analyses. Finally, establishing engagement of Lukan politics, and the creation of textual and real individual and community identities in the ancient world (Habinek 1998), will reopen longstanding issues of debate in the study of Acts. That Christian identity is, for example, achieved at the loss of identity for the *others* in the Lukan narrative, not least the Jewish characters (Wills 1991), means that we need to re-engage these features from a decidedly ethical stance (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999), acknowledging the violence embedded in and executed by the text. The height of Christian cultural achievement in the ancient world comes at a significant cost to others—Greek, Roman and Jewish—and latent appropriations of imperial discourses in a text like Acts not only have had real-world consequences in the past, but these discourses cannot help but continue to shape communities and societies that commit to define themselves in light of these texts today.

### 7. *'Too Much Learning Is Driving You Mad!'*

Felix's reply to Paul in light of his study may well be relevant in/to our own time also. Is there, in the end, madness in our method(s)? Is the current state of Acts study in crisis? Has our learning driven us over the edge into inconsistency and denial? The answer to these questions will of course depend largely on where the individual reader situates herself or himself with respect to the trends highlighted herein. I have argued that quite the opposite of the traditional formulation of the aphorism—there is method in the madness—is actually the case in contemporary study of Acts. Our seemingly orderly categorization of methodology, our eclecticism in textual and historical analysis, and our firm belief that various heuristic models are complementary may belie the rather chaotic and unstructured nature of current method in the field. At least part of the problem, I would suggest, is that not enough energy has been invested in reflecting on method in the discipline of Biblical Studies; rather, individual scholars following

particular scholarly trajectories/traditions of interpretation have been working within their own respective models, often with little dialogue or conversation going on between competing modes of analysis. Diverse combinations of literary, source and redactional frameworks, for instance, have been undertaken at various stages, forming distinct disciplinary commitments and communities. Current analyses therefore consistently perpetuate the problems that should have long ago been assessed and addressed but were not. Indeed, so much time has elapsed and scholarly output has increased to such an extent that trying to sort through all the issues embedded within the discipline might at this point prove overwhelming. Yet outside of a coming methodological Messiah or a reloading of the matrices that are currently operative, we may have no choice but to start at square one and move out from there. I have suggested some possible ways forward throughout this study, stressing the need for more complex heuristic models of analysis for the complicated texts and worlds with which we are dealing, including more emphasis on assessing the fundamental role of ideology in both the text and interpreter on multiple levels. These are, however, only general suggestions; there is a pressing need for sustained engagement of these and related matters.

Finally, it is imperative to draw attention to what is probably the most serious challenge: the sublimated theological and ideological commitments of scholars from a variety of diverse communities and interpretive frameworks. As noted at the outset of this study, Acts performs an evident function for contemporary scholars, which, while not uniform in practice, nonetheless has received less serious attention in scholarship. In light of this, it would be a simplistic overture to suggest that somehow the situation will change in the coming years. It is, in the end, questionable whether engaged scholarly dialogue across a variety of models, approaches and historical commitments can in fact take place. Can, for instance, a *humanist* scholar, someone who is deeply committed to examining a text like Acts *solely* for what it reveals about human processes and products, good and evil, really have dialogue with (or be a good conversation partner for) a scholar driven by *theological* agendas, who seeks to raise issues *beyond* the merely human, in order to catch a glimpse of the revealed nature of the divine in the text? Does ideology, in the final analysis, simply become the point of numerous divisions, wherein discussion inevitably ends up in disappointment (and sometimes even despair)? If we are realistic, we must admit the possibility of this being the case. We may in the end do better, go further, and learn more by engaging the meta-narratives and meta-frameworks that are operative for individual scholars. In any case, perhaps

there is one thing that disparate scholars and their communities can agree on: whether fictional or actual or somewhere in-between, whether reflective of theological value or fully embedded civic virtues in the ancient world, whether it represents a power-play pure and simple or a true and virtuous attempt to form/describe unity in the early church, whether it is finally a product of the Lukan epic imagination or real events that were fulfilled among the earliest Christians, scholars and their communities must now contend with the place and function of the book of Acts among us.

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