
Reading Acts as a Sequel to the Fourfold Gospel

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Acts was intended to be a sequel to a plurality of Gospels, which Luke refers to as “many.” Thus, to read Acts for all it’s worth, it is necessary to attend to the connections not only with Luke’s Gospel, but also with those other narratives that recount the story of Jesus echoed in Acts.

The Acts of the Apostles holds a unique position in the New Testament canon. In the canonical traditions of the West, Acts stands as a bridge between the four Gospels and Paul’s epistles (in Eastern traditions, the Catholic Epistles precede Paul’s letters). Thus, by its placement in the New Testament canon, Acts is removed from its companion volume, the Gospel of Luke, widely assumed to have been written by the same author. Many lament that whatever is gained by Acts’ canonical location, more is lost in this separation from the Third Gospel. In fact, many consider the modern construal of the hyphenated “Luke-Acts” (usually attributed to the early-mid twentieth century Harvard don, Henry Cadbury) to be one of the great gains of historical-critical scholarship, correcting what the New Testament canonizers botched! And, as we shall see, there is much to be gained from reading Luke and Acts together.

But there is much to be gained also from taking seriously Acts’ location in the canon. In fact, its placement there may well reflect the intentions of the author, insofar as we are able to reconstruct them with regard to the relationship to the canonical Gospels. That is to say, the Acts of the Apostles

was *conceived and intended* to be read and heard as a sequel to a plurality of Gospels, which Luke referred to as “many” (Luke 1:1), and of which the Gospel of Luke was “first among equals.” The Third Gospel provided the primary story line in terms of characters and plot (conflicts and resolutions) to which Acts provided a sequel. Or to put it in a slightly different way, the “story” of Acts was heard, *from its earliest reception by the first audience*, also in the context of a plurality of Gospels, which, by the time of Acts’ publication, included Mark, Matthew, and possibly John (and may have included at one point or another, some now non-extant or partially preserved Gospels). By the time Acts was published, Luke knew that the Third Gospel was being read in early Christian gatherings along with other Gospels and, expecting Acts to be read in this kind of social context, wrote Acts primarily as a sequel to the Third Gospel, but with echoes and allusions (and corrections?) to these other Gospels.

From a plurality of Gospels would eventually emerge the notion of one Gospel in four versions, indirectly attested by the longer ending of Mark, which presumes a four-fold Gospel in the early second century. When collectors and later canonizers placed Acts after the four-fold gospel (whether in the “Eastern” or “Western” order), they were actually *fulfilling the intentio operis*, the “intention of the work,” that Acts be read as the sequel to the “Gospel” (albeit in ways Luke could not perhaps have fully anticipated) and not somehow distorting it. Thus, in the case of the Acts of the Apostles, there is fundamental coherence between authorial intent and reception history. And, once again, the “unmaking” of Luke-Acts may be required in order to understand more fully the complex relationship of Acts to Luke and other early Christian writings. Therefore, in order to read Acts for all it’s worth, it is necessary to attend to the literary and theological connections not only with Luke’s Gospel, but also with those other narratives that recount the story of Jesus echoed in Acts.

ACTS AS SEQUEL: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

It is striking that there is, to date, *not one shred of material evidence* that Luke and Acts circulated together. The usual explanation is that Luke wrote the two documents on separate scrolls because of length limitations. It has generally been assumed that scrolls in antiquity rarely exceeded thirty feet. Since Luke and Acts together would have exceeded sixty feet, it is assumed that the two works originated on separate scrolls, which would explain how the two volumes, intended to be two parts of one volume, were so easily separated.

Recent work, particularly on the papyri at the city of Oxyrhynchus in Upper Egypt, has called into question these assumptions. The data at Oxyrhynchus, along with sample texts from Herculaneum (the town preserved under lava flows from the eruption of Mount Vesuvius) and elsewhere, suggests that scrolls regularly reached an upper limit of fifty feet. Furthermore, scrolls in excess of seventy-five feet were rare, but not unprecedented.

Scribes used prefabricated blank rolls of twenty sheets (seven to eight inches each) and that were typically ten to thirteen inches high and thirteen to sixteen feet in length. Additional roles would be glued on in order to accommodate longer texts. Thus there was no “standard size” beyond which an author could not go, nor was the author under any pressure to “fill” the bookroll to the end, since the excess scroll could be trimmed and used at a later date. A bookroll of four of these prefabricated scrolls could have easily accommodated both Luke and Acts on a single bookroll. Thus, there is no reason that Luke could not have written Luke/Acts on a single scroll if he had wanted; and, conversely, there is no material evidence that he did.

The evidence of early Gospel collections likewise fails to support this kind of “physical” unity. The oldest copy of the four-fold Gospel, P45 (c. 200), also contains Acts, but has the Gospels in the traditional order: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Codex Bezae preserves the so-called “Western” order of the two apostles (Matthew and John), followed by the two “apostolic companions” (Luke and Mark). Here Luke and Acts could easily have been placed together, but Mark stands between Luke and Acts. The Cheltenham Canon (c. 360) and Codex Claromontanus (seventh century) places Luke last among the Gospels, but Acts comes after the Pauline epistles in the former and at the end of the New Testament books in the latter. P74 (seventh century) puts Acts with the General epistles. The inescapable conclusion is that there is absolutely no manuscript evidence to support the view that Luke and Acts ever physically appeared side-by-side, ready for reading as one, continuous whole.

Another fundamental aspect of the relationship of Luke and Acts has to do with whether Luke and Acts first circulated together only to be separated in their subsequent reception or rather were circulated independently from the beginning. How one resolves this issue is also crucial for our understanding the material relationship between the Third Gospel and Acts.

It is well known that the textual transmission of Acts is distinct from that of Luke, indeed, from any other book in the New Testament. The text of Acts circulated in two very different forms, commonly called the “Alexandrian” and “Western” forms. The Western text is approximately eight percent longer than the Alexandrian tradition and contains, among other things, comments

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of local color and interpretive glosses. There is nothing like a “Western” textual tradition for Luke’s Gospel. The significance of Acts’ distinct transmission history, however, is largely neglected or undervalued in discussions of the publication of, and literary relationship between, Luke and Acts.

Regardless of how one accounts for the origins of these two textual traditions of Acts, their existence provides further support for the conclusion that Acts has its own distinctive transmission history and points to a circulation of the text of Acts, independent of the Third Gospel. The cumulative weight of the distinctive textual transmission of Acts, combined with the widely observed fact that Luke and Acts never occur side by side in any canonical list, argue in favor of those who conclude that Luke and Acts never circulated together in the material form of two parts of a literary whole, and were never intended to. The physical evidence and the transmission history as we have it are exactly what one would have expected to find if Luke and Acts were published at different times.

On the basis of Luke’s reference in his Gospel prologue to “many” other attempts to write accounts of Jesus’ life, it seems that a plurality of Gospels was already a reality by the time the Third Gospel was written (probably in the 80s or early 90s). The number and content of these other “Gospels” is unknown; the “many” (even if hyperbolic) may have included what would later be deemed heretical. Luke’s predecessors would almost certainly have included Mark’s Gospel.

Luke expected his version of the Jesus story would take its place alongside other versions. Thus, Luke writes Acts in the full knowledge that it would be read as a “sequel,” not just to the Third Gospel, but to a plurality of narratives about Jesus, which would later be dubbed simply “the Gospel” (of which there emerged four authoritative versions, but still of *one* Gospel). These Gospels (Luke and Mark and an indeterminate number of others) were already being read together in Christian worship by the time Acts was published. Like a diptych, Acts is one panel hinged to another panel of the other Gospel writers with St. Luke (considerably larger than the rest). For the purposes of rhetorical argument that is concise, clear, and compelling, Luke used the Third Gospel as the primary narrative for structuring Acts, thus accounting for the many parallels between Luke and Acts. In other words, with Acts, Luke follows up the basic plot of the Third Gospel, while presuming knowledge on the audience’s part of at least some of the “many” who undertook to write a narrative about Jesus (some of which are perhaps no longer extant; cf. the *agraphon* – or, a saying of Jesus not recorded in the canonical Gospels – in Acts 20:35). We should not be surprised then to find Acts following the basic plot and structure of the “primary” narrative, Luke, while echoing other “Jesus-stories,” only some of which are still accessible to the modern reader.

From the point of view of the authorial audience, Acts is read and heard as a follow up to the Jesus story. Acts is written *after* the public use of multiple

Gospels in early Christian gatherings but *before* this plurality of Jesus stories is textualized (reduced perhaps in number, collected, and published) in the *Tetraevangelium* (the Fourfold Gospel). In other words, the Fourfold Gospel is the culmination of an earlier practice of using multiple Gospels in the worship of local congregations.

READING ACTS AS A SEQUEL: IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERPRETATION

What would it mean to hear Acts as a sequel to a plural-form Gospel, of which Luke is “first among equals”? In other words, what is the hermeneutical “paydirt”? For one thing, instead of reading Acts exclusively in light of the Third Gospel, we would explore echoes and allusions to the other gospels as well. What follows are a few brief examples that demonstrate what reading Acts as a sequel to a multi-form Gospel collection that included the other Synoptics, Mark and Matthew, might entail.

I have tried to include material in Acts that has verbal links and/or conceptual connections to material in Matthew and/or Mark (but not in the Third Gospel). These non-Lukan links serve to parallel (Acts 9:40; 14:21; 20:10), clarify (Acts 19:7), or extend (Acts 10:13-16, 28; 12:2) the argument of the material in Matthew and/or Mark.

Acts 1:5 / Mark 1:8

One need not read very far in Acts before encountering one of the first allusions to a non-Lukan Synoptic tradition. In Acts 1:5, Jesus tells his disciples: “John baptized

with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

This verse alludes to a tradition found in all three Synoptics (Mark 1:8/ Matthew 3:11/ Luke 3:16).

The authorial audience recognizes that the command not to depart from Jerusalem but to wait for what the Father had promised (Acts 1:4) echoes Luke 24:49, but Jesus’ note that John baptized with water,

but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit (1:5) more closely resembles the Markan form (Mark 1:8) of that saying than either Matthew 3:11 or Luke 3:16 (both of which add “and fire” to “Holy Spirit”). Here the focus is on Jesus’ explanation that John the Baptist’s prediction of a coming Spirit baptism was about to be fulfilled “not many days from now” (at Pentecost). Mark’s version, lacking the additional reference to “baptism by fire,” keeps

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the focus on the Spirit in a way that the Third Gospel does not. This echo (sans the “fire” element) also subtly suggests that the authorial audience should understand the reference to the Spirit’s distribution on the disciples “as tongues of fire” as a simile and not literally (subsequent artistic depictions notwithstanding).

Acts 9:40 / Mark 5:41

In the account of Peter’s resuscitation of Tabitha, Peter arrives in Joppa and is escorted to the upper room where Tabitha’s corpse is. Perhaps moved by the widows’ weeping and mute display of Tabitha’s benefaction, Peter orders everyone outside, kneels, prays, and commands, “Tabitha, get up!” (Acts 9:40). For auditors familiar with Mark, the command is reminiscent of Jesus’ words in Mark 5:41 (but missing from Luke), “Talitha [now Tabitha] cumi.” The parallel between Jesus’ action and Peter’s own act is thereby strengthened. Yet there is an important difference: Peter’s miracle is not a result of his own power, a point indicated by the fact he prayed to the deity. Peter then presents Tabitha alive to the saints and widows (9:41).

Acts 10:13-16, 28 / Mark 7:14-23

In his vision recorded in Acts 10, three times Peter is shown a sheet with all kinds of animals on it and is commanded to eat. Three times Peter refuses, claiming, “Certainly not, Lord! For I have never eaten anything that is impure and contaminated!” (10:14, my translation). The authorial audience, familiar with Mark, will also hear echoes of Jesus’ teaching regarding clean and unclean foods (Mark 7:14-23, missing in Luke’s Gospel) – a message (“Thus he declared all foods clean,” Mark 7:19) that Peter evidently failed to understand the first time around. In the larger argument of Acts 9:32-11:18 (and 15:7-11), Peter is presented as undergoing a conversion no less radical than Cornelius’s. He is led to confess, “I truly come to understand that God does not show favoritism. Rather, in every nation, the one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34-35, my translation), and later, at the Apostolic Council, he proclaims that God “made no distinction between them [the Gentiles] and us regarding our faith, but cleansed their hearts (as well as ours)” (Acts 15:9, my translation). The allusion to Mark 7, which implies that Peter has not understood (or heeded?) Jesus’ proclamation that all foods are clean, deepens and enriches Acts’ presentation of Peter’s “conversion” to a more inclusive attitude regarding first food than people.

Acts 12:2 / Mark 10:39 / Matthew 20:23

Herod had James, the brother of John, executed by the sword (Acts 12:2). Compared to the narrative recording of the martyrdom of Stephen, this notice of James’s martyrdom is quite brief; however, it still serves its purpose of heightening the dramatic quality of the following story of Peter. No less importantly, it underscores the fact that not all of Christ’s followers

are divinely rescued; in this case, it is James, brother of John, one of the first of Jesus' followers to be called (Luke 5:10), one of the Twelve (Luke 6:14; Acts 1:13), and one of Jesus' "inner circle" (Luke 8:51; 9:28, 54) who meets his death. The Church suffers along with its suffering Messiah. The authorial audience will hear echoes of Jesus' prediction of the martyrdom of James (and John) in the Synoptic tradition: "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized" (Mark 10:39; cf. Matthew 20:23; but missing in Luke).

Acts 14:21 / Matthew 28:19

Acts 14:21–28 begins with a reference to Paul preaching the good news in "that city" (Derbe) (14:21a), thus connecting to the previous story, which ends with Paul and Barnabas in Derbe (14:20). Not only do Paul and Barnabas preach the gospel in Derbe, they are also involved in making a substantial number of disciples (14:21b). The word translated "making...disciples" (*mathēteuō*) occurs elsewhere in the New Testament only in Matthew, most notably Matthew 28:19 (cf. also Matthew 13:52; 27:57). The authorial audience, familiar with Matthew, hears here echoes of the Great Commission in which Jesus instructs his followers to "make disciples of all the nations." Making disciples for Luke as well as Matthew involved more than evangelism and baptism. For the Matthean Jesus, "discipling" involved "teaching them whatsoever I have commanded you"; for the Lukan Paul, it involved "strengthening the souls of the disciples" (Acts 14:22a).

Acts 19:7 / Mark 5:7

In the story of Paul and the sons of Sceva (Acts 19:11-20) the echo to Mark and/or Matthew serves to clarify Luke's point regarding the connection between exorcism and magic. The language used by the Jewish exorcists ("I adjure/order you by Jesus whom Paul preaches to come out" [Acts 19:13, my translation]) would be heard by the authorial audience in terms of the magical practices of antiquity. The term "adjure" is not used by Jesus or his disciples in any exorcism story in any Gospel, though the term does occur in Mark. In Mark 5:7 the words of the Gerasene demoniac to Jesus ("I adjure you by God") are an attempt to manipulate and control both Jesus and God. This term is also frequently used in magical incantations in a double command: "I adjure X by [the authority of] Y." The adjuration is an attempt to manipulate both the object of adjuration and the deity whose authority is invoked. Thus by understanding this passage in its larger cultural context and by hearing an allusion to Mark 5:7, the authorial audience understands that these Jewish exorcists/magicians are trying to use Jesus' name in a way typical of magical technique. Luke, however, makes it clear that Jesus' name is not some magical talisman vulnerable to manipulation (cf. Acts 19:15-16).

Acts 20:10 / Mark 5:39

Paul's "Don't worry!" (Acts 20:10) before raising the "sleeping" Eutychus echoes a similar scene in Mark's Gospel in which Jesus asks the crowd, "Why are you worrying?" before raising the "sleeping" daughter of Jairus (Mark 5:39). The term "worry" (*thorybeō*) is missing from the Lukan parallel in Luke 8:52. This passage is another instance of the rich intertextual connections between Acts and the Synoptic tradition and once again prompts the authorial audience to expect Paul to resuscitate Eutychus as Jesus did Jairus's daughter.

Hopefully, these few examples serve to illustrate the potential for exploring Acts as a sequel both to Luke and to a multiform Gospel and to find parallels between Acts and the Third Gospel where possible and between Acts and other Gospels where appropriate.

CONCLUSION

By the time Luke composed Acts, the Third Gospel was being read and heard in early Christian gatherings in conjunction with the "many," an unspecified number of other Gospel accounts. Luke penned Acts as a sequel to Luke with the understanding that the Third Gospel provided the baseline for his continuing development of literary plot and theological themes as part of a series of two rhetorically well-formed – but not systematic – narratives, *and* as a sequel to the multiform Gospel in which he occasionally picked up on a literary thread or theological theme missing in the Third Gospel, either because at that point it did not serve his purposes or because at that time he was unacquainted with the writing that contained it. Further, Luke also knew that Acts was self-sufficient and was intelligible on its own. Thus, from the point of view of its authorial intention, Acts may be read and heard on its own terms or as part of a "literary diptych," that is as a sequel to Luke, *and*, simultaneously, as a sequel to a multiform Gospel (of which the Third Gospel is the primary witness).[†]

NOTE

[†] Sections of this article are borrowed, in somewhat altered form, from my paper "Hearing Acts as a Sequel to the Multiform Gospel: Historical and Hermeneutical Reflections on Acts, Luke and the *Polloi*" in Andrew F. Gregory and C. Kavin Rowe, eds., *Rethinking the Unity and Reception of Luke and Acts* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2010), 128-152. I thank the Press for permission to use this material.

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