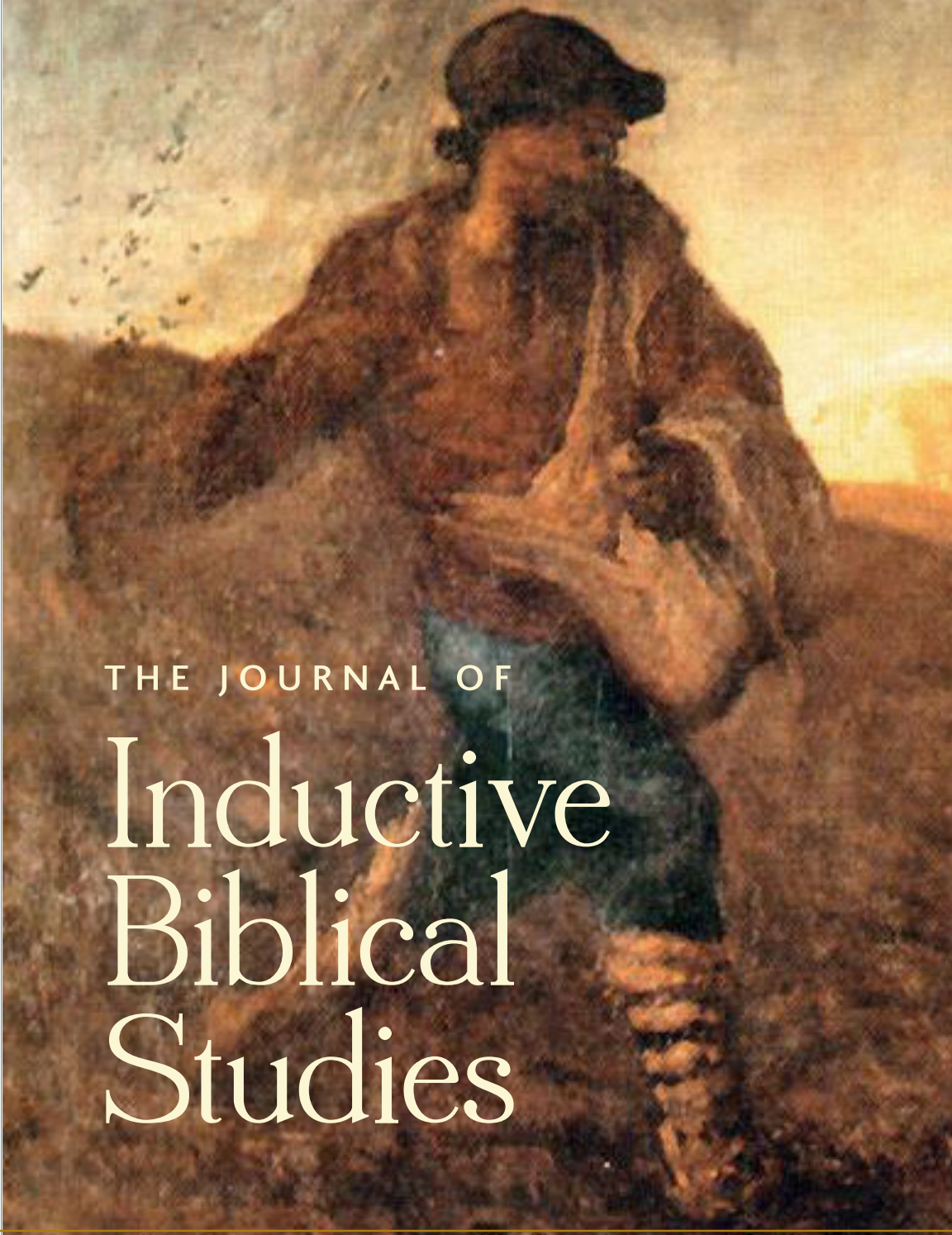

THE JOURNAL OF

Inductive Biblical Studies

Winter 2021 • Vol. 8/1
PUBLISHED BY FIRST FRUITS PRESS OF ASBURY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
asbury.to/jibs

THE JOURNAL OF

Inductive Biblical Studies

VOLUME VIII
Winter 2021

THE JOURNAL OF

Inductive Biblical Studies

TIMOTHY C. TENNENT
President and Publisher

DOUGLAS K. MATTHEWS
Provost

ISSN 2372-0727

Published in Winter and Summer

204 N. Lexington Avenue
Wilmore, Kentucky 40390

asburyseminary.edu
800.2ASBURY

The Journal of Inductive Biblical Studies intends to promote the hermeneutical approach to the study of the Scriptures generally known as Inductive Biblical Studies. By Inductive Biblical Study (IBS) we mean the hermeneutical movement initiated by William Rainey Harper and Wilbert Webster White that was embodied in the curriculum of The Biblical Seminary in New York founded in 1900. This approach had precursors in the history of interpretation and has since the beginning of the twentieth-century enjoyed widespread dissemination, being taught at such institutions as Princeton Theological Seminary, Columbia Theological Seminary, Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, Fuller Theological Seminary, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, Azusa Pacific University, and Asbury Theological Seminary, as well as hundreds of other institutions and organizations around the world.

For more information, contact
David R. Bauer or Fredrick J. Long
Asbury Theological Seminary
204 N. Lexington Ave.
Wilmore, KY 40390

http://place.asburyseminary.edu/jibs/

The Journal of Inductive Biblical Studies

VOLUME 8/1

Winter 2021

Table of Contents

From the Editors

David R. Bauer

We might affix the label "convergence" to this issue of the *Journal*, since the four articles that appear here have in common the forging of connections between inductive biblical study and related areas of biblical and ministerial scholarship.

First, Suzanne Nicholson, who has devoted her professional career to the teaching of Bible to undergraduate students, explores the relationship between inductive biblical study and narrative criticism. Her thesis is clear and compelling: Narrative criticism has much in common with the inductive study of the Scriptures and therefore should be embraced as a methodological partner with inductive Bible study. Of course, insofar as inductive Bible study seeks to be a holistic and synthetic approach that allows for the incorporation of every legitimate method, narrative criticism may naturally be included within the inductive study of the Bible. Yet Professor Nicholson's article not only argues that inductive Bible study should incorporate insights of narrative criticism but suggests also that narrative critics should take seriously into account elements typically associated with inductive biblical studies. In the process of arguing her case, Professor Nicholson offers both a helpful introductory description of narrative criticism, and also one of the most specific and detailed narrative-critical examinations of Acts 15 that one is likely to find anywhere.

This issue includes the final two chapters of the book, *The Resurrection Body*, by Wilbert W. White, the founder of The Biblical Seminary in New York and one of the pioneers of the inductive Bible study movement. (The earlier chapters appeared in previous issues of the *Journal*.) Even as Professor Nicholson relates inductive biblical study

to narrative criticism, so Dr. White employs an inductive study of the Bible, and particularly the New Testament, to address the historical-critical issue of the credibility of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Dr. White argues against Professor Adolf von Harnack's separation of the Easter message from the Easter faith. Many have followed Professor Harnack in insisting that while Christians must affirm the Easter faith that Jesus is alive, they cannot with intellectual honesty accept the Christian message that Jesus was actually raised from the dead and appeared in bodily form. Professor White demonstrates from a careful analysis of relevant texts that the earliest Church believed that Jesus was thus raised and that the structure of the New Testament witness requires that the Easter faith be based upon the Easter message and cannot exist without it. He insists that when we take seriously the testimonial evidence, we will find that it is more reasonable to accept this Easter message than to reject it. Thus, Professor White employs inductive study to understand the New Testament claims (interpretation) and to assess their validity and significance (evaluation and application).

Finally, Dorothy Jean Weaver, Emerita Professor of New Testament at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, contributes an article in the series, "From Inductive Study to Proclamation." This series recalls that the earliest Christian commentary on the Scriptures was for the most part preaching, or sermons, and thus demonstrates how the preaching task itself has a unique capacity to illumine the meaning of biblical passages as well as relate the message of these passages directly to the concerns and needs of congregations. Professor Weaver "pulls back the curtain" of her own analysis of and reflections upon Luke 10:38–42, in which she emphasizes that the interpretation of this passage is unlocked especially by considering its role within its broader-book context and demonstrates that attention to the proclamatory potential of this passage can actually illumines aspects of the meaning of this text. She presents the homiletic results of her work in a fresh and insightful sermon, which compellingly challenges the typical way this familiar passage that portrays the sisters Mary and Martha has been understood and applied.

The Two Spotlights of Inductive Bible Study and Narrative Criticism

Suzanne Nicholson
Asbury University
suzanne.nicholson@asbury.edu

Abstract
Narrative criticism and inductive Bible study share many key features, such as intensive investigation of textual details, recognition of the importance of viewing a book as a whole, and specific techniques for analyzing passages. Biblical narratives do not simply describe the events in the lives of Israelite kings, prophets, or Jesus and the early church. Rather, these highly crafted narratives lead the reader to theological conclusions through creative plot structures, characterizations, point of view, and other tools. Theological truth springs from literary art. When IBS intentionally includes narrative criticism as part of its analysis of biblical narrative, a deeper understanding of the text will emerge. This paper will focus on examples from the Gospels and Acts, with a more detailed look at Acts 15.

Keywords: Narrative Criticism, Gospels, Acts, Acts 15

Seeking meaning in a text can sometimes feel like wandering in a dark forest at midnight with nothing but a tiny flashlight. Greater clarity occurs, however, when the explorer brings multiple spotlights to bear

upon a text. By intentionally incorporating the hermeneutical approach of narrative criticism into the Inductive Bible Study (IBS) method, interpreters can more effectively uncover the nuances embedded in biblical narratives. IBS offers interpreters a deep understanding of Scripture through careful analysis of the details of the text while simultaneously paying attention to the structure of the book as a whole. Similarly, narrative criticism takes seriously the plot of the overarching narrative while simultaneously exploring the details that shape individual pericopes. When integrated, these two interpretive methods create a synergy that strengthens the interpretation of a given narrative text.

A comparison of the four Gospels demonstrates that biblical narratives never merely recite the events of Jesus's ministry. Despite the common subject matter, the differences in story order and detail suggest instead that these are highly crafted narratives.[1] The Gospel writers are storytellers who shape their tales to evoke specific responses from their readers. The details included—indeed, the details left out—are assiduously chosen. The setting, order of events, descriptions of characters, and other details are carefully crafted to convince the reader of the implied author's purpose. We should not be surprised that our Gospel writers each rearrange the order of the stories of Jesus's life, or that they differ in the details they use to describe events. But these differences should also lead us to ask: what are they directing us to see? How are these authors leading us to particular conclusions about Jesus and the kingdom of God?

Narrative criticism thus provides an important tool to answer these questions. The discipline "focuses on stories in biblical literature and attempts to read these stories with insights drawn from the secular field of modern literary criticism. The goal is to determine the effects that the stories are expected to have on their audience."[2] In many ways,

[1] This assessment contrasts with the assessment of early redaction critics, who thought of Gospel writers as merely editors of tradition rather than authors in their own right.

[2] Mark Allan Powell, "Narrative Criticism," in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 239.

this goal parallels emphases in the IBS method, which identifies common structures for communicating in order to understand the intended effect on the audience. Yet the major structural relationships identified via the IBS method are not limited to narrative; rather, they "are found in all cultures, all genres, all time periods, and all forms of art, not simply in literature."[3]

IBS and narrative criticism both appreciate the importance of recognizing the implied author and the implied reader. These are a construct of the text: what does the text imply about the author? For example, Acts implies that the author traveled with Paul at various points in the narrative.[4] Similarly, clues within the text help the interpreter to see who the implied reader might be. The implied reader is the one who "who actualizes the potential for meaning in a text, who responds to it in ways consistent with the expectations that we may ascribe to its implied author."[5] Like IBS,[6] narrative criticism focuses on the final form of the text. As a result, the discipline is less concerned with "getting behind the text" to make historical reconstructions of the actual author or actual recipients of the text. Whether Luke, the traveling companion of the apostle Paul, wrote Acts is less important than the evidence provided by the world of the text itself. Thus, IBS and

[3] David R. Bauer and Robert A. Traina, *Inductive Bible Study: A Comprehensive Guide to the Practice of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 94.

[4] The "we" passages in Acts occur in chs. 16, 20, 21, 27, and 28. The most obvious reading of these passages is that the author accompanied Paul on these voyages. Alternative explanations have been suggested as well (such as poor editing of a source from an eyewitness or the use of a first-person "sea voyage genre").

[5] Powell, "Narrative Criticism," 241.

[6] Bauer and Traina, for example, write, "The focus on the implied author is more constructive than a focus on the flesh-and-blood author because the aim of interpretation is to gain a sense *of the text*" (*Inductive Bible Study*, 45, emphasis original). For the full discussion of implied author and implied reader, see ch. 4, "Re-Creative Study" (42–49).

narrative criticism agree philosophically on the priority of textual evidence over against historical reconstructions.[7]

Narrative critics focus their energy on exploring plot, setting, characterization, empathy, and point of view. In the Gospels and Acts, all of these elements work together to present intricate and compelling portraits of Jesus. James Resseguie describes this literary approach to interpreting biblical narratives:

> Like a complex and intriguing puzzle, narrative analysis enlivens the imagination and offers new ways of looking at the familiar. Rhetoric and setting provide clues to a narrative's organization and structure, and the characters provide texture and depth to the narrative puzzle. The plot adds surprise and suspense. Point of view is the conceptual framework or theme of the puzzle. Just as a puzzle cannot be visualized until it is assembled, the point of a narrative is not realized until the parts are put together.[8]

Many of these elements overlap with the questions that practitioners of IBS ask of the text. Yet when one asks different questions of the text, one often finds different nuances in the answers. We will briefly explore the main foci of narrative criticism below and consider the ways in which these foci reinforce or enhance the principles of IBS.

Plot

Plot is the carefully designed sequence of events that leads to our understanding of the story's meaning.[9] Aristotle declared that a plot must

---

[7] This does not mean that the historical situation of the original author and reader are unimportant, since historical and socio-cultural contexts are necessary for understanding the text.

[8] James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 241.

[9] Ibid., 197.

have a beginning, middle, and end. But the plot is not the same as the story itself. Whereas a story tells us *what* happened, the plot tells us *why* events happened.[10] The interpreter must look carefully at the design of the plot, and the implicit or explicit causations, in order to understand the meaning of the narrative. When IBS interpreters investigate narratives as books-as-wholes and discover connections between major sections, they find important links in the plot of the story. Narrative critics, however, shine a spotlight on the development of plot in a variety of ways.

On a basic level, every plot has some kind of conflict that moves the story forward. These clashes of ideas, actions, or norms can occur within a character (for example, when the Samaritan woman at the well must decide whether the Jewish teacher standing before her is indeed the messiah the Samaritans are seeking), between characters (Jesus and the Pharisees), between a character and the natural world (Jesus and the stilling of the storm), between a character and the supernatural realm (Jesus and demons), and between a character and society (Jesus's decision to heal on the Sabbath). Often multiple conflicts exist within the same story.

For example, in the story of the Canaanite woman in Matt 15:21–28, several conflicts occur simultaneously. First, a supernatural conflict arises. The woman's daughter is possessed by a demon, and the woman asks Jesus to heal her. Another conflict occurs between the disciples and the woman; they are bothered by her incessant cries to Jesus, and they want her to go away.[11] This conflict includes a cultural component, as women were generally expected not to speak with unfamiliar men in public. Here she cries out loudly, interrupting them with her shouting. The chutzpah that this woman shows in chasing after Jesus

[10] Ibid., 199.

[11] The present and imperfect tenses used to describe the woman's actions indicate a continuous aspect: she was repeatedly bowing before Jesus and asking him to help her. In response, the disciples repeatedly asked Jesus to send her away. (Their request of Jesus is also in the imperfect tense.)

and the disciples would have been viewed as inappropriate.[12] The conflict between Jesus and the woman is clearly grounded in a cultural conflict between Jews and Gentiles. All of these conflicts work together to provide a chaotic, disturbing atmosphere to the story. If we identify only one of the conflicts, we miss the rich layering of the theological message.

When identifying conflicts within a story, it is important to ask whether the conflicts are resolved, and in what way. Sometimes conflicts are left unresolved so that the reader must linger over the question, "What would I do if I were this character?"[13] In the story we have just been looking at, several of the conflicts are resolved when Jesus applauds the Canaanite woman for her faith and the woman's daughter is healed. Jesus has challenged cultural norms and has conquered the spiritual realm. The resolution is rather unexpected because Matthew sets up the story to make the reader anticipate the woman's rejection: she is a woman and a foreigner, Jesus does not answer her the first time she calls to him, and his disciples are trying to shoo her away. Once the conversation begins, Jesus makes it clear that his mission is focused on the Jews. He even insults her by comparing Gentiles to dogs. The Jews are the true children who have a place at the master's table.

But for the reader of the whole Gospel, the context of the overall plot has prepared us for Jesus's willingness to provide healing for the woman's daughter. Even in the beginning of Matthew's gospel, we have seen hints that this Gospel is for all people. Jesus's family tree lists four women who are Gentiles.[14] At Jesus's birth, the wise men

[12] Frances Taylor Gench says that the woman's "concern for the well-being of her daughter leads her to break all the rules of conduct for decorous women, as she enters the public domain of men and intrudes upon their company speaking loudly" (*Back to the Well: Women's Encounters with Jesus in the Gospels* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004], 6).

[13] Powell, "Narrative Criticism," 245.

[14] Tamar was likely a Canaanite, since Judah had left his family and married a Canaanite himself. Rahab was a Canaanite (from Jericho). Ruth was a Moabite.

who came from the East were not Jews, but they were among the first to worship Jesus (2:11). And immediately before Jesus and his disciples encounter the Canaanite woman, Jesus reinterprets the Torah by declaring that it is not what goes into a person's mouth (i.e., food that does not meet kosher requirements) that makes a person unclean, but rather what comes out of a person's heart. This loosening of laws that served as boundary markers between Jews and Gentiles prepares the astute reader for the entrance of the Canaanite woman.

It is clear from the disciples' dismissive response to the woman, however, that they truly have not understood Jesus's teaching. Although the disciples see the woman as a nuisance interrupting Jesus's mission, a literary analysis of the story reveals that "the insistent and demanding 'Canaanite' is revealed as the protagonist, holding center stage.… [H]er quick-witted retort can even be seen as the scene's focal point."[15] Matthew does not reveal the disciples' response to Jesus's proclamation, however, and so the disciples' conflict is left unresolved. Have they begun to understand that the Gospel is for the Gentiles, too? The unresolved tension poses a challenge for us as well. Are we who are presently disciples willing to embrace the Other, to accept that anyone who reaches out to Jesus with tenacious faith will be welcomed?

Lest we, or the disciples, miss Jesus's expansion of his ministry to the Gentiles, Matthew orders his narrative in such a way that the second large feeding miracle follows on the heels of Jesus's encounter with the Canaanite woman. Previously Jesus fed more than 5,000 Jews. But now in Matt 15:29–39, Jesus healed many people who "praised the God of Israel," implying that the crowd is mostly Gentile.[16] He then

Bathsheba was initially married to a Hittite and thus likely was considered a foreigner herself.

[15] Judith E. McKinlay, "Reading Biblical Women Matters," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 405.

[16] Gench, *Back to the Well*, 12.

feeds this crowd of more than 4,000, and once again plenty of food is left over. God's abundant provision means there is more than enough for all of those who come to God in faith.

When analyzing plot, the order and duration of events often provide important insights. As Karl Allen Kuhn comments, "The sequencing is not random; the events described typically involve some sort of temporal, causal, or teleological relationship to one another. The plot revolves around problems to overcome or goals to accomplish by its leading characters. The sequencing is often artfully composed and rhetorically charged."[17] Sequencing can involve the use of foreshadowing and flashbacks to build tension and lead the reader's expectations in a particular direction.[18] The use of Old Testament prophecy early in the Gospels, for example, leads the reader to maintain certain assumptions about the identity of Jesus even before he enters the scene. We expect great things to happen since the prophets of old have pointed to this moment as a pivotal event in history.[19]

Creative sequencing of events can also help strengthen the emotional impact of a story. In Luke 7:36–50, for example, the story of the woman who anoints Jesus is not told in strict chronological order. Jesus is invited to a Pharisee's house for dinner, and when he enters, he takes his place at the table. Luke omits any mention of whether hospitality is offered to Jesus. Many readers at this point might assume Luke simply omits such information as unimportant to the story. When the

---

[17] Karl Allen Kuhn, *The Heart of Biblical Narrative: Rediscovering Biblical Appeal to the Emotions* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 33.

[18] An example of a flashback occurs in Mark 6:7–30, where the story of Herod beheading John is inserted into the narrative of Jesus sending out his disciples. The insertion may provide a sense of the passage of time (thus allowing the disciples to complete their mission and come back to report to Jesus a few verses later), or it may hint at themes of suffering that accompany discipleship. See Scott S. Elliott, "Time and Focalization in the Gospel According to Mark," pages 296–306 in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[19] Biblical interpreters should always consider how the larger story of Scripture informs the plot of any narrative. See, e.g., Richard Hays, *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).

sinful woman enters, however, Luke describes at length her actions in washing Jesus's feet with her tears and drying them with her hair. When Simon objects to her actions, Jesus confronts Simon. He begins with a parable about debts, but then he confronts Simon directly. It is only at that point in the story that Luke reveals that Simon has not performed the customary rites of hospitality. As James Resseguie points out, "Simon treats Jesus as a stranger while the woman treats him as a welcomed guest."[20] Thus, the resequencing of the plot flips the expected outcomes upside down.[21] Simon had seemed like an honorable man for inviting Jesus to dinner, and the sinful woman appeared to be acting shamefully (according to first-century standards) by interrupting the banquet and letting her hair down in public. But Jesus's sharp rebuke of his host not only shamed Simon but pointed to the "sinful" woman as the true moral exemplar. The unexpected twist forces the reader to consider the definition of honor from a new perspective.

When analyzing plot, the duration of events described also helps to indicate an event's importance. Twelve years can be covered in the span of a few verses (such as the leap in Luke 2:38–41 from Jesus's infancy to his fateful Passover trip to the Temple when he was 12), indicating the lack of importance of Jesus's childhood. On the other hand, all four gospels spend multiple chapters describing the last week of Jesus's life. Clearly, the authors consider the Passion narrative to be the most important of events.

The use of IBS alone may help the astute reader to discover key insights into plot. For example, the conflict inherent in any narrative would likely come to light as an Interrogation of the Problem-Solution type. Additional structural relationships, such as Climax or Cruciality, may appear as significant aspects of the plot, depending on whether

[20] Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism*, 35.

[21] Resseguie refers to this as "defamiliarization," a term popularized by the Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky in 1917. The formalists believed everyday habits made people numb to their surroundings. By suspending, twisting, or turning the familiar, audiences are forced to look at their surroundings in new ways (*Narrative Criticism*, 33–34).

the movement of the plot comes to fruition as expected or is surprisingly redirected.[22] The additional questions asked by narrative critics regarding the order, sequencing, and duration of events help to bring key details into sharper focus.

Setting

Both IBS interpreters and narrative critics recognize the importance of a story's setting, which can thoroughly color the meaning of a narrative. Although not every setting conveys significance—for example, sometimes Jesus simply "enters a village"—frequently the setting can "develop a character's mental, emotional, or spiritual landscape; it may be symbolic of choices to be made; it provides structure to the story and may develop the central conflict in a narrative."[23]

The most obvious aspect of setting is place. Where does the narrative take place, and how does this shape the direction of the story? In the New Testament, these locations often symbolize events from Israel's past or deep theological truths. When events take place at the Jordan River, for example, it recalls Israel's crossing into the promised land. Thus, when John baptizes people in the Jordan River, it symbolizes "a threshold experience in Israel's history. There Judeans and Jerusalemites come to John to 'turn around' in anticipation of the inbreaking rule of God."[24]

Setting is not just about place, however. Temporal settings can be equally important. In the Gospel of John, for example, scholars have

[22] For Climax, Cruciality, and Interrogation, see Bauer and Traina, *Inductive Bible Study*, 113–14, 99–100, 108–110, respectively. Narrative critics have appreciated the insights of the IBS method. Powell, for example, includes in his *What is Narrative Criticism?* a list of structural relationships from David Bauer, *The Structure of Matthew's Gospel: A Study in Literary Design*, JSNTSS 31/BALS 15 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1988), 13–20.

[23] Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism*, 88.

[24] David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 69.

long noted the importance of darkness and light in shaping the narrative. Characters who are "in the dark" spiritually often go about their business at night, while those who understand who Jesus is come to their revelation in the light of day. Nicodemus, for example, first comes to question Jesus in the dark of night (3:2), but by the end of the Gospel, he is burying Jesus in the light of day (19:38–42). In John, the dark implies fear, doubt, and disbelief, but the light brings revelation and the power of God.

Characters & Characterization

Narrative criticism excels in its analysis of biblical characters. According to Karl Allen Kuhn, "The casting of characters is among the most powerful rhetorical tools available to an author of narrative."[25] Yet, we should keep in mind that the writers of biblical narrative used a style quite different from modern novels. Today, one might read lengthy descriptions of characters, down to the spots on their clothes or the warts on their toes. Biblical narrative, on the other hand, might simply name a character with little to no introduction: "As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him" (Mark 1:16–18). In this passage, Mark gives us no lengthy explanation of the formation of the topography of Galilee, no colorful adjectives to describe the build, vernacular, or clothing of the fishermen, and no description of their boats. Simply put, biblical narratives are sparse in their details. But this should encourage, rather than discourage, biblical interpreters. It means that every detail

[25] Kuhn, *Heart of Biblical Narrative*, 49.

included in an otherwise sparse narrative is important.[26] Very little is extraneous. As a result, almost every piece of information in the text is important for interpretation.

Numerous methods exist to convey information about characters in the story. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon puts it simply: "Characters are known by what they say and what they do and by what others (the narrator and other characters) say and do to, about, or in relation to them."[27] Authors develop characters through showing and telling. Showing is indirect because the reader must infer the meaning from the character's actions. For example, when the rich young ruler hears from Jesus that he should sell everything he has and follow Jesus, "he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions" (Mark 10:22). The reader is left to figure out what this means. Did he grieve because he knew he loved money too much and would never inherit eternal life? Or did he grieve because he was about to sell his many possessions? But Mark gives us clues to his desired interpretation—the story is preceded by Jesus blessing the children and is followed by the disciples' proclamation that they have left everything to follow Jesus. As Joel F. Williams points out, "Unlike the children, the rich man wants to be judged based on what he has accomplished from his youth on; unlike the disciples, he refuses to leave behind his possessions in order to follow Jesus.… [N]othing in the wider characterization of the rich man lends support to a sympathetic view of the man as a sincere follower of the law."[28]

When the narrator *tells* a trait about a character rather than shows, this direct presentation leaves no room for inference: "What the

[26] Robert Alter notes, "There are virtually no 'free motifs' in biblical narrative.… Whatever is reported, then, can be assumed to be essential to the story" (*The Art of Biblical Narrative*, rev. ed. [Philadelphia: Basic Books, 2011], 101).

[27] Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *Mark's Jesus: Characterization as Narrative Christology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 14.

[28] Joel F. Williams, "Jesus' Love for the Rich Man (Mark 10.21): A Disputed Response Toward a Disputed Character," in *Between Author and Audience in Mark: Narration, Characterization, Interpretation*, NTM 23, ed. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 150.

narrator tells us influences how we read the narrative. We rely upon the narrator to express the norms and values of the narrative and how we should respond to individual characters. Those who voice the norms and values of the narrative receive approval while those who are opposed to these values are cast in a negative light."[29] In Mark's version of Jesus walking on water, for example, after Jesus climbs into the boat, the disciples "were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, and their hearts were hardened" (6:52). We are not left to wonder if their astonishment is a matter of joy at witnessing Jesus's miraculous power; rather, Mark tells us that it was a result of their lack of understanding and hard hearts. We are meant to have a negative view of the disciples at this point in the narrative.

In the case of some characters, we may not have a great deal of information. Characters can be flat or round—that is, either predictable, stylized around a singular character trait, or complex, comprised of multiple different character traits.[30] The Pharisees, for example, generally are flat characters. They are uniformly opposed to Jesus, and their trickery and aggressiveness stem from this opposition. The Canaanite woman is a minor character, but she is a round character. Her boldness, tenacity, and faith all help her to surprise the reader with her complex actions.

Closely related concepts are the ideas of static and dynamic characters. A static character does not develop through the narrative but maintains the same character traits throughout. A dynamic character, on the other hand, develops throughout the narrative by changing their outlook or behaving in new ways.[31] The apostle Peter, for example, develops in numerous ways throughout the gospels. Always

[29] Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism*, 127–28.

[30] Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism*, 123.

[31] Note that flat is not the same as static, nor is round the same as dynamic. A flat character could be dynamic—for example, the Pharisees' anger increases throughout the narrative until they are willing to forsake their own religion in order to crucify Jesus ("We have no king but Caesar!" in John 19:15).

impetuous, he is the first to speak and, as a result, often puts his foot in his mouth. He proclaims his fierce loyalty to Jesus, but he also denies knowing Jesus when persecution comes. Finally, however, Peter returns to Jesus. In the progression from Luke to Acts, we see Peter change from the frightened disciple to the bold proclaimer of the risen Christ.

Practitioners of IBS may discover patterns in the descriptions of characters such as contrasts with earlier behavior, a particularizing of an earlier description, or statements of purpose (instrumentation) that direct the reader to the purpose of a character's behavior. Narrative critics likewise carefully digest specific details of the text to develop a fuller picture of the characters within the story. Sustained attention to the development of the character throughout the larger narrative helps the narrative critic to see the unfolding of important themes underlying the narrative as a whole. Robert Brawley describes this process: "Readers construe characters by combining separate clues into holistic portraits, filling in gaps along the way. Readers build themes from the way clues reiterate, reinforce, redirect, or correct one another and construe characters from such thematization. Characterization develops sequentially, so that it, like all reading, progressively discovers what is true in the narrative world."[32] The additional analysis provided by narrative criticism thus helps to more sharply define the patterns that emerge from the text.

Empathy

When building characterizations, authors use various rhetorical means of creating empathy for a character, especially over against another character. This affect appeal is "the means by which narratives,

[32] Robert L. Brawley, "The God of Promises and the Jews in Luke-Acts," in *Literary Studies in Luke-Acts: Essays in Honor of Joseph B. Tyson*, ed. Richard P. Thompson and Thomas E. Phillips (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1998), 279–96.

including biblical narratives, compel us to enter their storied world and entertain the version of reality they present."[33] To be clear, when we explore how the narrator builds empathy, we are not talking about an analysis of what a character feels (although this can be one component of building empathy in the reader). Rather, we are looking at the tools the author uses to make the reader feel closer to some characters and more distant from others. Gary Yamasaki refers to these as different "camera angles" from which a speaker describes an event.[34] Some camera angles draw closer to a particular character, while others create distance. Sometimes this change in angle occurs simply through grammatical choices in a sentence: for example, the use of the passive voice ("Sally was greeted by Bob") can create distance from the second character listed (Sally is the nearer character on whom the narrative is focused; Bob is further away from the reader grammatically and emotionally).

Another tool involves lists: the first person named in a list usually has more status than the last person in the same list. (Judas, for example, is always listed last in the names of the disciples.) Named characters tend to have more status than unnamed characters, although Jesus often turns such expectations upside down. In the story of the sinful woman who anointed Jesus, for example, the woman has no name and no status. The Pharisee who hosts the banquet is named: Simon. Thus, the reader is set up to expect that Simon will be the more honorable character. Crucial plot information is withheld until the end when we discover that the "sinful" unnamed woman served as a better host than Simon, who did not offer the expected hospitality.

When narrative critics ask questions about how the author builds empathy within the story, they shine a spotlight on the construction of the narrative, which might otherwise remain hidden. The emotional

[33] Kuhn, *Heart of Biblical Narrative*, 56.

[34] Gary Yamasaki, *Watching a Biblical Narrative: Point of View in Biblical Exegesis* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 60–61.

impact the implied reader is expected to experience can thus be better understood.

Point of View

Narrative criticism, more than IBS as it is often practiced, analyzes the way in which an implied author utilizes different points of view (sometimes also referred to as focalization) to develop characters. "Point of view" refers to the perspective of the narrator as the narrator tells the story. Adele Berlin describes point of view in this way: "Biblical narrative, like most modern prose narrative, narrates like film. The narrator is the camera eye; we 'see' the story through what he presents…. He can survey the scene from a distance, or zoom in for a detailed look at a small part of it. He can follow one character throughout, or hop from the vantage point of one to another."[35]

These are not random choices. Rather, as Resseguie points out, "The influence of point of view is seen in the events a narrator selects for the story, what the characters say or do, what settings are elaborated, what comments and evaluations are made, and so forth. In apprehending narrative point of view, the reader discovers the norm, values, beliefs, and general worldview that the narrator wants the reader to adopt or to reject."[36] In general, the gospel writers are third-person omniscient narrators who rove between characters, revealing thoughts and emotions at various points in the narrative.[37]

In the last few decades, however, discussion of point of view has increasingly focused on the several different planes on which point of

[35] Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 15.

[36] Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism*, 167.

[37] There are some exceptions. The prologues in Luke and John involve first-person narration. (See, e.g., Luke 1:1–4 and John 1:14.) In Acts, the "we" sections become first-person narratives. Most of the book, however, provides third-person narration.

view functions: spatial, temporal, psychological, phraseological, and ideological.[38] The spatial plane considers the spatial location on which the narrator focuses his description of the unfolding events. Does the narrator move with a single character, seeing events through that character's eyes? Or does the narrator move through space, jumping from character to character, or providing a bird's-eye overview of the scene?[39] For example, in Mark's gospel, the narrator easily moves between Jesus's trial before the chief priests and Peter's "trial" in the courtyard below as he denies Jesus.[40] The movement in the spatial plane allows the reader to see more clearly the contrast between the faithful Christ and the unfaithful disciple.

The temporal plane considers whether the narrator is present as the events are happening (usually indicated by present tense) or if the narrator reports the events after the fact (indicated by past tense verbs). The sequencing of events also falls along this temporal plane. The Gospel writers narrate the events after the resurrection, and this significantly influences their point of view.

The psychological plane refers to what is commonly regarded as the "inside view" of characters—i.e., their thoughts, attitudes, and emotions. For example, when the sinful woman anoints Jesus, we hear Simon the Pharisee say to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." By providing these inner thoughts, the narrator allows us to see the reason for the deep discord between Simon and Jesus. Despite inviting Jesus to dinner, Simon has no respect

[38] Boris Uspensky originally articulated these five planes. See his *A Poetics of Composition: The Structure of the Artistic Text and Typology of a Compositional Form*, trans. V. Zavarin and S. Wittig (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

[39] Yamasaki credits Uspensky with broadening our understanding of point of view in this regard: "While the traditional understanding of point of view simply makes the distinction between the narrator's being inside or outside the story world, Uspensky's conceptualization of spatial point of view allows for specific types of spatial positioning on the part of the narrator" (*Watching a Biblical Narrative*, 30).

[40] Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism*, 171.

for Jesus. Simon does not think Jesus is a prophet, and he disdains Jesus for allowing a sinful woman to touch him. In an ironic twist, Jesus shows that he is, in fact, a prophet because he knows Simon's inner thoughts.

The phraseological plane is the way in which individual characters are distinguished by their speech patterns. Once such a pattern is established, a subtle shift in wording can signal that the narrator has shifted from one character's point of view to another's. Gary Yamasaki points out the example of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38–42. Usually, the narrators of the Gospel refer to Jesus as "Jesus" and not "Lord"—rather, the characters in the stories who have some measure of faith use the term "Lord" of Jesus. Thus, we would expect Luke to describe Martha's sister sitting at the feet of "Jesus,"—but instead, he uses the term "Lord." This signals the shift from the narrator's perspective to that of Martha's perspective.[41] The reader is able to enter into Martha's experience more closely. We can see her respect for Jesus as "Lord," but the repeated language here also invites the reader to ask, who is really treating Jesus as Lord here? Although Martha calls him Lord, she finds other tasks more important than drawing near to hear her "Lord."

Finally, the ideological plane reveals the biases, attitudes, and worldview of the narrator and the characters. When the narrator comments on the story, for example, we are given insight into his worldview. In Mark 7:19, Jesus tells his disciples that it is not what enters a person's mouth that makes a person unclean, but it is what comes out of his mouth that defiles him. Then Mark inserts the comment, "Thus he declared all foods clean." Here we have Mark openly interpreting the speech of Jesus.

This focus on the various planes of point of view offers greater precision in understanding the narrative direction of the text. The

[41] Yamasaki, *Watching a Biblical Narrative*, 173. Although Yamasaki makes the observation that the shift in point of view has occurred, he stops short of identifying the significance of this shift. The observations that follow are my own.

characters within the story themselves point the way to understanding meaning within the text.

Reading a Gospel as a Single Story

One of the great strengths of narrative criticism, and its affinity with IBS, lies in its analysis of the story as a whole. Many churchgoers today have become so accustomed to Sunday morning sermons on just a few verses that they have lost sight of the larger story of the text. Yet, writers of narratives expect their readers to know the whole story. The interpreter, then, must be able to move between the individual stories and the larger narrative to discern meaning.[42]

The Gospel of Mark provides an excellent example of how the narrative dynamics form a coherent story from the parts. David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie's seminal work on narrative dynamics in Mark demonstrated the purposeful design found in the narrative: "Mark's complex artistry has been compared to an intricately composed 'fugue' or to an 'interwoven tapestry.'"[43] Although space limitations prevent an exhaustive look at their work, a few examples will help to demonstrate the importance of recognizing how the story as a whole shapes the individual stories in particular ways.

Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie identify a cosmic setting in Mark, where creation is awry. Illness, demonic possession, and Roman authorities all dominate the Judean people: "Yet the beginning of the story proclaims that the whole cosmic setting is changing. Into the midst of this bounded world gone awry, God opens the heavens and sends the spirit upon Jesus, who announces that 'the rule of God has arrived.'"[44]

[42] Jeannine K. Brown, *The Gospels as Stories: A Narrative Approach to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2020), 158.

[43] Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 3.

[44] Ibid., 65.

Mark's characterizations of the disciples focus on their fear, lack of understanding, and desire for power. Throughout the narrative they misunderstand Jesus, and at the end, they are unable to follow through with action. "Thus the disciples start out as reliable but end up being examples of how not to follow Jesus!"[45] Three key plotlines emphasize these themes as well. Three key groups of characters—nonhuman forces, the authorities, and the disciples—experience conflicts about power: how to use it, the limits of power, and the use of power to serve.[46] The disciples do not understand; they want to be faithful, but in the end, they are not prepared to lose their lives. Yet the possibility of restoration is there: "He's going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will behold him just as he told you."[47]

The narrative pacing of Mark shifts from the early rapid-fire sequence (demonstrated by Mark's repeated use of "immediately") to a day-by-day and then hour-by-hour description of the events of the crucifixion. "Because the whole narrative moves toward Jerusalem and toward death and resurrection, the slowing of the tempo intensifies the events of the crucifixion for the audience."[48]

In addition, Mark uses a variety of literary techniques to provide contrast at the end of the Gospel. Irony, for example, plays an important role in the ending of the narrative. "Throughout the story, Jesus commanded people to be quiet, but they talked anyway. At the end of the story, the young man commands the women to go and tell, but, in an ironic reversal, the women are silent. The irony perpetrated on the audience thus becomes a challenge, a challenge to proclaim the good news courageously in the face of persecution rather than be silent as the women were."[49]

[45] Ibid., 124–25.

[46] Ibid., 78.

[47] Ibid., 95–96.

[48] Ibid., 47.

[49] Ibid., 60.

The analysis offered by Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie demonstrates the effectiveness of narrative criticism in allowing the entire text of the story to shape the interpreter's understanding of the significance of the individual pericopes. In this way, narrative criticism brings to the forefront one of the important values of the IBS method: studying books-as-wholes.

In order to further demonstrate the strengths of intertwining IBS and narrative criticism, we will now turn to an in-depth analysis of the story of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, using a combination of techniques from IBS and narrative criticism.

Acts as a Whole: Part I

Scholars who focus on historical-critical questions have offered various theories regarding Luke's[50] purpose in writing Acts, ranging from an attempt to reconcile Jewish and Gentile forms of Christianity to an apologetic for Paul's ministry, to a defense in Paul's legal case before Rome.[51] Scholars who focus on narrative-critical questions, however, find different emphases in Acts. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, for example, has astutely observed that God is the key character in Acts; whereas other characters slide in and out of view in the book, God—depicted as the unstoppable director of history—appears as the one

[50] Here I am using "Luke" as shorthand for the author; although Luke's name nowhere appears in Acts, church leaders from the earliest years believed Luke, the traveling companion of Paul, was the author of this text. Since such authorship issues lie outside the scope of this paper, I will use "Luke" in reference to the author of Acts, whoever he may be.

[51] Mark Allan Powell reviews a number of these theories in *What Are They Saying About Acts?* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1991), 13–19: F. C. Baur argued that Acts attempted to address a breach caused by the different approaches of Peter and Paul. Charles Talbert argued for an anti-Gnostic polemic. B. S. Easton and Ernst Haenchen argued that Luke was trying to get Rome to approve Christianity as a licit religion. Robert Brawley argued that Acts attempted to show Jews that Paul was not an apostate. F. F. Bruce and J. C. O'Neill argued that Acts was an attempt to convert Gentiles.

consistent character throughout the narrative.[52] Certainly, Acts 15 exhibits this feature, as we will see below. Indeed, Acts 15 supports Luke's overarching theme of the fulfillment of God's plan, and specifically, the fulfillment of Christ's words in 1:8. Commentators have long noted the importance of 1:8 for setting the theme for the rest of the book: the Gospel will spread to the ends of the earth.[53] Acts 15 plays a key role in this narrative development, as the church must recognize how God has expanded the blessings of God beyond the boundaries of Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria to incorporate all the peoples of the earth. The characterizations and descriptions provide implicit warnings to those who disagree with God's direction and offer peace to those who recognize and align themselves with God's purposes.

Plot of Acts 15

Although on the surface Acts 15 may appear to be a simple report of the outcome of a large and important church meeting—certainly, very few descriptors are used—a closer look reveals that Luke is by no means objective in his storytelling. In this crucial meeting of the early church, Jewish believers debate whether Christian Gentiles must obey

[52] Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Acts*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 27. See also Mark Reasoner, "The Theme of Acts: Institutional History or Divine Necessity in History?" *JBL* 118 (1999): 635–59; Luke Timothy Johnson, *Acts of the Apostles*, SP 5 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 476.

[53] C. K. Barrett, for example, declares that 1:8 "expresses the content of Luke's second volume" (*The Acts of the Apostles*, ICC, 2 vols. [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998]), 1:79. See also Johnson, *Acts of the Apostles*, 26; F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, rev. ed. NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 36–37. Robert C. Tannehill, however, takes issue with the neatness of identifying the contents of Acts with the outline of 1:8. Rather, he suggests that the task is incomplete at the end of Acts, since there is no reason to equate Rome with the "ends of the earth." The mission is intended to continue beyond the events of Acts (*The Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 2 of *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990], 17–18).

all of Torah (and, in effect, become Jews) in order to be saved.[54] Luke describes the church leaders as deciding that Gentiles could become Christians as Gentiles—i.e., they did not have to become Jews, following the requirements of Torah. But lest we think Luke is providing a neutral historical report of the meeting, a closer look at this description reveals his theological bias. Rather, Luke intentionally sculpts the story to emphasize that the pro-circumcision party is hostile to God's purposes, whereas the pro-Gentile party is endorsed by God. Furthermore, despite the story's initial interest in Barnabas and Paul, Luke intends to focus on the Jerusalem church as a test of whether the fledgling leadership will recognize God's movement to include Gentiles within the people of God.

Order, Duration, and Frequency of Events

Luke configures the plot of this section chiastically to emphasize the contrast between the conflict brought by the pro-circumcision sect and the peace brought by the pro-Gentile group. The chiasm appears as follows:

A = Debate in Antioch (vv. 1–2): teaching and conflict
B = Travel caused by dispute (v. 3): report and rejoicing
C = Debate and resolution (vv. 4–29)
    1. General Report of Dispute (vv. 4–6; contrasting positions identified)
    2. Specifics of Jerusalem Debate (vv. 7–29)
B' = Travel caused by resolution (vv. 30–31): report and rejoicing
A' = Antioch (vv. 32–35): teaching and peace

[54] For a discussion of whether Jews believed Gentiles could be saved without full conversion to Judaism, see Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 3:2212–15.

Luke begins and ends his account of this dispute by describing teaching at Antioch. As the story begins, Judeans have come to Antioch and declared that believers must be circumcised according to the custom of Moses to be saved.[55] The debate in Antioch becomes so divisive that the church sends Paul and Barnabas to the leadership in Jerusalem to resolve the issue. By the end of the story—after Paul's position has been vindicated and affirmed—Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch and continue to proclaim "the Word of the Lord." (Notice that the teaching of the men from Judea had no such appellation attached to their instruction.) Both when Paul and Barnabas traveled to Jerusalem reporting the conversion of the Gentiles (15:3) and when they returned reporting the decision of the apostles and elders (15:31), the believers responded by rejoicing. Throughout Acts, Luke connects rejoicing with the proclamation of the Gospel.[56] This framing of the narrative thus serves to support Luke's contention that Paul's pro-Gentile stance reflects the will of God. By using this book-end contrast of dissension and rejoicing, Luke presents the pro-circumcision party as a threat to the church; the threat is ultimately defeated when church leaders heed the Holy Spirit's guidance.

The bulk of the narrative (15:4–29) describes how the dispute came to a resolution before the Jerusalem apostles and elders. Surprisingly, however, Luke gives very little attention to the Pharisees who opposed Paul. Other than 15:1 in Antioch and 15:15 in Jerusalem, we hear nothing of their position. Although Luke offers a general description of the debate in 15:4–6, when he delineates the specifics in the following verses, he only provides evidence that supports Paul's point of view, in spite of the fact that "much dissension" occurred among the apostles and elders (15:7). None of the leaders of the Pharisees is even named. Presumably, the discussion involved multiple passages in

[55] This is shorthand for saying that all of the Torah must be followed, as the Pharisees' argument in 15:5 clarifies.

[56] Gaventa, *Acts*, 214. In Acts, rejoicing occurs when the spirit is present and active (5:41; 8:8, 39; 11:23; 12:14; 13:48, 52; 15:3, 31). See also Keener, *Acts*, 3:2225.

the Torah, yet Luke cites only one passage from all of the Jewish Scriptures. Clearly, he is not concerned to accurately summarize all of the arguments for and against. Luke does not give his readers opportunity to be swayed by the believers from the Pharisees.

Furthermore, the irenic tone of the letter sent to the Gentile churches ("it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us[57] to impose on you no further burden than these essentials," 15:28) and the imposition of only basic requirements for Jews and Gentiles to have table fellowship both demonstrate a generosity of spirit that stands in contrast to the demands of the pro-circumcision group.[58]

Luke's sculpting of this plotline thus subtly and carefully elevates the pro-Gentile views of Paul and Barnabas, Peter, and James. Despite the description of the event as a significant debate, Luke's choices regarding the duration and sequence of events lead the reader to conclude that the church must affirm the work that God has already been doing among the Gentiles.

Conflict

On the surface, the key conflict within this section appears to be the dispute between the believing Pharisees and Paul and Barnabas regarding the means by which Gentiles come to be saved. The greater conflict, as Luke has presented throughout the book of Acts, lies in the question of whether the early church can recognize and conform to God's new revelation about the Gentiles. This affirmation of the Gentiles has already occurred in numerous ways in the early sections of Acts: Jesus proclaimed that the Gospel would spread to the ends of the earth (1:8); the Holy Spirit directed Philip to go to the Ethiopian

[57] Keener notes that ἔδοξεν in 15:22 is a standard idiom for passing a measure in an assembly (*Acts*, 3:2280); see also 15:25 and 28.

[58] The four stipulations of the letter itself have been the subject of much debate. For an overview of the various interpretations, see Keener (*Acts*, 3:2260–77).

eunuch (8:29);[59] an angel led Cornelius to send for Peter (10:3–6); the Holy Spirit fell upon Cornelius's entire household (10:44–48); and the Holy Spirit sent Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey (13:4), during which many Gentiles came to believe in Jesus. By the time the reader arrives at ch. 15, therefore, Luke has shown his readers the momentum initiated by the work of God. The questioning by the believing Pharisees thus serves as a threat to the narrative progress of Luke's story.

Setting of Acts 15

The story begins in Syrian Antioch, where evangelists from Cyprus and Cyrene had preached not only to Jews but also to Gentiles (11:20). The Jerusalem church had sent Barnabas to investigate, and he rejoiced at what God was doing (11:22–23). He then brought Paul to Antioch, where they taught for a year (11:25–26) before the church sent them on their first missionary journey (13:1–3). These details thus have prepared the reader, before Barnabas and Paul ever arrive at the Jerusalem Council, to look favorably upon the Antioch church and the ministry that is occurring there.

Nonetheless, the fact that the Jerusalem church sent Barnabas to Antioch, just as it had sent Peter and John to investigate the reports of believing Samaritans in ch. 8, also underscores the greater authority of the Jerusalem church. Not only is Jerusalem the home of the original community of those who believed in the risen Christ and the home of the apostles, but the Pharisees who question Paul "come down" from Judea to Antioch, while Paul and Barnabas are sent to "go up" to Jerusalem. Topographically, this is simple to explain: the elevation of Jerusalem is roughly 2,400 feet higher than that of Antioch. Nonetheless, the geographic reminder may also hint at a deeper symbolism: Israel's

[59] For a discussion of the status of the Ethiopian eunuch as a proselyte or God-fearer, see Gaventa, *Acts*, 142–43. She concludes he is a Gentile.

history is rife with revelations on mountains.[60] Those who wish to learn the truth of God go up for their revelation.[61]

Characters and Characterization in Acts 15

Luke's descriptions in Acts 15 provide only a sparse framework from which to develop insight into his characterizations. As a result, no detail should be considered extraneous; each point provides insight into the author's purposes.[62]

Negative Characterization of the Pro-circumcision Group

Luke's characterization of the circumcision party in Acts 15 provides far fewer details than his depiction of the other characters in the story.[63] We learn that they originated from Judea, they taught in

[60] Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie note this in their narrative analysis of Mark: "Mountains were places for epiphanies and revelations because mountains reach up into the lower heavens and bring people closer to God. God revealed the law to Moses on a mountain. On a mountain, God was made manifest to Moses and later to Elijah. From a mountain, Moses saw the promised land" (*Mark as Story*, 70). They note that Jesus retreated to a mountain several times in his ministry.

[61] Although Luke frequently uses the terms "went down" for characters leaving Jerusalem and "went up" for those who head to Jerusalem, this is not always the case. In 8:25, e.g., Peter and John "returned" to Jerusalem from Samaria without going up. Likewise, Saul intends to arrest Christians and bring them to Jerusalem, but Luke does not describe this as going up. Thus, geography does not demand the use of the terms "went up" or "went down"; therefore, when these terms are used, a symbolic meaning is also possible.

[62] Although Alter's principle of reticent narration describes the Hebrew Scriptures (*Art of Biblical Narrative*, 143), the concept also applies to the New Testament authors, who are clearly familiar with and influenced by the narrative style of the Hebrew Bible. Similarly, Mark Allan Powell notes that the Gospel authors prefer to show readers what the characters are like, often through dialogue, rather than to tell readers through the narrator's comments (*What is Narrative Criticism?* GBS [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990], 52).

[63] Although James does not receive any introduction and Luke does not give any explicit information regarding his leadership role in Jerusalem, his speech clearly

Antioch, and they believed that Gentiles needed to be circumcised in order to be saved. Those who spoke at the meeting in Jerusalem (it is unclear whether they are the same individuals who spoke in Antioch) were Pharisees who argued that the Gentiles must follow the Law of Moses.

Nonetheless, these simple descriptions are filled with negative nuances. For example, what is *not* said in this passage is just as important as what is said. As Robert Alter states, "The omissions of biblical narrative are as cunning as its repetitions."[64] In contrast to Paul and Barnabas, who arrived in Jerusalem reporting all that *God* had done, descriptions of the circumcision party make no mention of God at all.[65] Apparently, God has not done anything through these dissenters, and they certainly have not brought joy with them!

When Luke describes the dissenters in Jerusalem, he notes that they are "of the sect" of the Pharisees. Certainly, "sect" can have a neutral meaning and was often employed in Judaism to refer to particular groups or philosophical schools;[66] the use of the term here, however, implies division.[67] Other authors of the New Testament used the term to refer to sinful factions as well as false teaching.[68] While Luke may not go that far here—he does, after all, refer to these Pharisees as ones who had believed—he nonetheless points out that the Pharisees are a sect, a division, in order to underscore their divisiveness. Luke later uses the term in Acts 24:5 and 14. There the Jewish leaders who accuse Paul tell governor Felix that Paul is part of the "sect" called the

offers significant information about him. That the circumcision party receives almost no voice in this story is significant.

[64] Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 123.

[65] Nonetheless, their view that "it is necessary" to be circumcised (v. 5) implies divine initiative. Walter Grundmann says that δεῖ in Acts 15:5 "expresses the will of God revealed in the Law" ("δεῖ," *TDNT* 2:22).

[66] Heinrich Schlier, "αἱρέομαι, αἵρεσις, κτλ," *TDNT* 1:181–82.

[67] *contra* Keener, *Acts*, 3:2227.

[68] Schlier, "αἱρέομαι, αἵρεσις, κτλ," 182–84. See, e.g., Gal 5:20; 1 Cor 11:19; and 2 Pet 2:1.

Way; they are clearly trying to paint Paul as an agitator. Paul responds by admitting he is part of the Way—which they call a "sect." In this context, the term plainly has negative connotations of divisiveness. Luke's use of the term in this manner in ch. 24 is thus instructive for our understanding of the connotations of the term in ch. 15. Luke further notes this discord in the letter to the Gentiles (15:24), in which the church clarifies that the Judeans were not sent by the church.

In addition, what little description Luke offers makes the circumcision party seem heavy-handed: they want to *command* the Gentiles to obey the Law of Moses (15:5). This is in striking contrast to the final letter sent to the Gentiles, in which the language is much softer: there is no explicit statement of the Jerusalem church's authority over Antioch and the other churches, no command, only the statement that "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us…" and the expressed desire not to burden the Gentile churches (15:28). Whereas Luke depicts the church leaders as flexible and considerate, he portrays the Pharisees as rigid and condescending.

What Luke does not include in this story is just as important as what he does include: the circumcision party has almost no voice. Although Luke includes their basic position in single-sentence statements in verses one and five, he does not name any individuals nor record any significant speeches, unlike with the pro-Gentile believers. Furthermore, despite the availability of Old Testament passages that appear to support the position of the circumcision party[69] and that surely must have been discussed during this heated debate, Luke includes none of it. His presentation of the debate is very one-sided.[70] Verse 1, for example, appears to simply present the argument of the circumcision party, yet Luke describes the event as the Judeans teaching "the

[69] E.g., Gen 17:10–14; Exod 12:48; Lev 12:3; and Ezek 44:7–9.

[70] Ben Witherington notes that Luke "gives no space to recording the arguments or rebuttals of the Judaizing party, only to speeches of the figures whom he portrays in a positive light" (*The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 456.

brethren" that they cannot be saved unless they are circumcised. Thus, in Luke's mind, the Gentiles in Antioch are already believers who are saved, in contrast to the teaching they are hearing.[71]

This continual, repeated teaching (note the imperfect tense of ἐδίδασκον) causes great dissension in Antioch, as indicated by Luke's use of the rhetorical device *litotes* to describe the debate (ζητήσεως).[72] Luke uses this same word for "debate" (ζητήσεως) to describe the Council's discussion in Jerusalem in 15:7. Furthermore, when Luke uses the terms dissension (στάσεως) and debate (ζητήσεως) elsewhere in Acts, he is describing riots and out-of-control mobs (19:40; 23:10) or very serious divisions (23:7; 24:5; 25:20).[73] Nowhere outside of Acts 15:2 and 7 does Luke use these terms to describe division *among believers*. The same holds true for the language used in the Council's letter to Antioch: the letter explains that certain ones from Jerusalem "troubled" those in Antioch with their words (15:24). The word here, ἐτάραξαν, is the same word that Luke uses in 17:8, 17:13 (ταράσσοντες), and 19:23 (the noun τάραχος) in reference to nonbelievers who stir up the crowds to riot.[74] Thus, Luke's word choice in Acts 15, despite the lack of further details of the arguments or emotions, makes it clear that the circumcision party has caused great offense in both Antioch and Jerusalem. For Luke, the members of the circumcision party are more like the *opponents* of the fledgling church than members of it!

Luke then records Peter's view that such a position is opposed to the plans of God. When Peter asks rhetorically why his audience[75] is

---

[71] Gaventa, *Acts*, 213.

[72] The use of *litotes* provides understatement for emphasis; the construction uses a negative statement to the contrary (Gaventa, *Acts*, 213). Thus, "no small dissension" indicates a great debate.

[73] Richard Pervo states that Luke's use of στάσις in v. 1 "characterizes them as dangerous outside agitators" (*Acts*, Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009], 371).

[74] Also, in 12:18, there was a disturbance (τάραχος) among the soldiers when they discovered Peter was no longer in jail.

[75] Peter uses the second person plural, and it is unclear whether the "you" he addresses are his opponents in the circumcision party or the entire church audience.

testing God (15:10) by placing a yoke on the Gentile believers,[76] he uses language reminiscent of his condemnation of Ananias and Sapphira. In fact, the only two places in Acts where the verb πειράζω is used in the sense of testing God are in 5:9 ("to test the spirit of the Lord") and 15:10 ("testing God").[77] In 5:9, Sapphira drops dead after Peter speaks these words to her. Thus, Luke's word choice in 15:10 calls to his reader's minds the frightening story of Ananias and Sapphira and provides an implicit warning against siding with the circumcision party.[78] Furthermore, Peter's admonition is one of many warnings in Acts against opposing God; Luke repeatedly develops this theme throughout the book, highlighting the terrible consequences of challenging God.[79] Luke's audience, therefore, will gain a sense of

---

Were the church leaders being convinced by the arguments of the Pharisees, which Luke does not record in any detail? That the crowd does not fall silent until Barnabas and Paul speak in v. 12 suggests a very heated debate up to this point. In either case, Peter's language offers a dire warning to those who would follow the circumcision party.

[76] Although some English versions (e.g., NIV) translate "by putting on the necks of *Gentiles*," it is important to recognize that the Greek literally states: "by placing a yoke on the neck of the *disciples*." Thus, Luke once again emphasizes that the Gentile believers are already brothers and sisters in Christ—any additional requirement is after the fact of their salvation and is thus inappropriate.

[77] The verb is used elsewhere in Acts in the sense of attempting to do something and does not have the negative connotations that occur in chs. 5 and 15.

[78] Gaventa argues that "the language Peter uses recalls important moments of Israel's rebellion against God (LXX Exod 15:22–27; 17:2, 7; Num 14:22; Deut 6:16; Isa 7:12; Wis 1:2; Luke 4:12; Acts 5:9)" (*Acts*, 216).

[79] Peter himself warns against opposing God in 3:23, where he cites Deut 18:19 and Moses's warning that God will destroy anyone who does not listen to his prophet. In 4:19, Peter asks the Sanhedrin rhetorically whether it is right to obey them or God, and in 5:4 and 5:9 he accuses Ananias and Sapphira, who die immediately thereafter. Other characters highlight this theme as well: Saul (9:5), Herod (12:1), and Elymas (13:10) all face physical judgments as a result of their opposition to God. Perhaps the most poignant warning comes from Gamaliel in 5:39; his counsel about fighting against God is demonstrated throughout the rest of the book—the Jews continue to oppose the Word (13:46) and ultimately this rejection closes out Acts (28:27). Gamaliel's premonition that the Sanhedrin will not be able to destroy these believers comes to fruition in 28:31: in the heart of the Roman Empire, Paul preaches without hindrance.

foreboding upon hearing Peter's speech. Terrible consequences await the church if it makes the wrong decision here.

Overall, Luke's descriptions of the circumcision party, scant though they may be, provide a consistently negative portrait of this perspective, and the ominous overtones demonstrate that Luke has no interest in sketching an objective report of the meeting. Rather, he saves all of his positive descriptions for the pro-Gentile party in an effort to demonstrate that God champions their position.

Positive Characterizations of the Pro-Gentile Group

In contrast to the circumcision party, where no individual characters are named, those who support full inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God are named and described in positive terms.

Peter

Luke's descriptions of Peter—clearly the dominant disciple in the first half of Acts—show an apostle emboldened by the Holy Spirit, facing confrontations without fear. Whereas in Luke's Gospel Peter denied his Lord when questioned (Luke 22:54–62), in Acts Peter cannot stop preaching the Gospel (4:20; 5:29). He is still the same fiery personality, however, and does not shy away from directly accusing his Jewish audiences of murdering Jesus (2:23; 3:13–15; 4:10; 5:30). It should not surprise the reader, then, that Peter is the character that Luke uses to create the emotional, ominous overtones in his response to the circumcision party. Although Luke does not use adjectives to describe Peter's emotions or character in ch. 15, Peter's speech and James's interpretation of that speech provide insight into his character.

Peter begins by referring to the apostles and elders as "brothers," thereby emphasizing their fellowship with one another. At the same time, he also establishes his authority, reminding the group that God chose him to preach to the Gentiles. The phrasing, "through my

mouth," styles Peter as a prophet of God. Elsewhere in Acts, Luke uses the language of "through [someone's] mouth" to refer to prophets, whether David (1:16; 4:25) or the prophets in general (3:18, 21). The prophets of the Old Testament were considered to be the mouthpiece of God,[80] and Peter is claiming that authority for himself here. God chose, Peter proclaimed, and the Gentiles responded. But Peter's claim of authority is not prideful; rather, he presents himself as a trustworthy witness of God's activity. Peter's first three statements show his humility—God is the actor, not Peter: God chose (15:7), God testified by giving the Holy Spirit (15:8), and God did not make a distinction when he cleansed the hearts of the Gentiles by faith (15:9).

Peter reminds the crowd that he is not making a new argument ("you know," 15:7)—rather, these Jewish believers had already discussed this issue when Cornelius and his household converted to Christianity (11:1–18) and concluded that God had chosen the Gentiles to receive salvation (11:18).[81] Peter further reminds his audience that God did not distinguish between Jews and Gentiles then, but both groups had received the Holy Spirit in the same manner (15:8–9). This latter statement, which declares that God had cleansed the hearts of the Gentiles, also presents an implicit warning. The cleansing language, used in Acts only here and in 10:15 and 11:9, calls to mind God's rebuke to Peter: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This is exactly the issue before the church now: if the elders listen to the Pharisees, they will be calling profane that which God has made clean. As Keener notes, "If, by pouring out his Spirit on Cornelius's

[80] Norman K. Gottwald comments: "The prophet is the mouthpiece or spokesman of God. The pith of Hebrew prophecy is not prediction or social reform but the declaration of divine will" (*A Light to the Nations: An Introduction to the Old Testament* [New York: Harper & Row, 1959], 277).

[81] Keener notes that even in this short speech the expected elements of ancient rhetoric appear. Peter begins his deliberative speech by establishing his credibility (*ethos*), then offers mixed narrative (*narratio*) and proofs (*probatio*) (*Acts*, 3:2231).

household…, God had already revealed his plan to embrace the Gentiles, the believers rebel against his will by hindering this purpose."[82]

Although Luke does not directly comment on Peter's emotions here, the fact that Peter makes a point of telling his audience that they have dealt with this issue previously suggests Peter's frustration. They are covering old ground, an issue that he thought had been resolved. We get a sense of this frustration in verse 10 when Peter accuses his audience of testing God, which (as noted above) is very strong language in light of the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira after they tested the Holy Spirit! Peter says they are testing God by placing on the necks of the "disciples" a yoke which the Jews were unable to bear. Peter does not call them "Gentiles" here but "disciples." In Peter's mind, they are already believers and already part of the people of God. This symbolism for the Torah was common: the rabbis declared that those who swore allegiance to God must follow God's commandments—that is, they must receive "the yoke of the commandments."[83] The imagery is not necessarily negative, although in this context, Peter intends a negative connotation.[84] The Hebrew Scriptures, especially the prophets, attest to a stiff-necked people who continually turn away from Yahweh. Peter cannot fathom how the Gentiles would fare any better under the yoke of the Law than the Jews.[85]

Peter finishes his speech by focusing on the salvation of Jews rather than the Gentiles. He switches from second-person language ("Why are you testing…") in 15:10 to first-person language ("we believe") in 15:11, and highlights that Jews are saved by the grace of Jesus, just as the Gentiles. Thus, Peter's speech addresses salvation from both directions. He argues for Gentile salvation based on the affirmation of God's spirit (15:8), but he also uses the logic of humility: Jews need the

---

[82] Keener, *Acts*, 3:2235.

[83] S. Dean McBride, Jr., "The Yoke of the Kingdom: An Exposition of Deuteronomy 6:4–5," *Int* 27 (1973): 273–306.

[84] Keener, *Acts*, 3:2236.

[85] Keener notes that rhetorically this kind of comparison can be used to place jurors on the same moral level as oneself or to search their hearts (*Acts*, 3:2238).

grace of Jesus just as much as the Gentiles. Three times in four verses, Peter compares Jews and Gentiles and declares they are in the same position before God: both received the Holy Spirit (15:8), both are treated the same by God (15:9), both are saved by the grace of Jesus Christ (15:11). Peter repeats his argument from different angles, and thus Luke shows Peter's impassioned tenacity. This inclusive language is remarkable from a man who just a few chapters earlier refused to have anything to do with the unclean (10:14).

Luke's description of Peter's speech focuses on the experiential side; this is somewhat surprising, given that Peter's previous speeches in Acts are filled with Scripture references.[86] Nonetheless, Peter is pointing back to the previous discussion of the issue after Cornelius's conversion, and in that conversation Peter quoted the authoritative words of Jesus, demonstrating their fulfillment in Cornelius's reception of the Holy Spirit (11:15–16).

Further characterization occurs when James summarizes Peter's speech. There he calls Peter "Simeon," which is a more accurate transliteration of the Semitic form of Peter's name than "Simon."[87] Thus, Luke emphasizes that, despite Peter's pro-Gentile view, he is thoroughly Jewish and his views should not be considered as those of an outsider.

Next, James affirms that Peter described how God "first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name." Here James is agreeing with Peter's words that God first chose Peter to preach to the Gentiles. The recurrent emphasis on Peter being first is quite odd since Luke records that the Ethiopian eunuch, who received the word from Philip, is actually the first non-Jew to believe

[86] 1:20; 2:16–21, 25–28, 31, 34–35, 22–24; 4:11; and 10:43.

[87] Jostein Ådna, "James' Position at the Summit Meeting of the Apostles and the Elders in Jerusalem (Acts 15)," in *The Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles*, ed. Jostein Ådna and Hans Kvalbein (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 145, n.64. See also Witherington, *Acts*, 458.

in Christ (8:26–40).[88] Although some commentators explain this discrepancy as James referring in general to God's choice of the Gentiles in the Old Testament,[89] Luke's language precludes such an interpretation. James's statement refers back to Peter's speech, and the emphasis there is on Peter's prophetic calling to speak God's will to the Gentiles. A better explanation arises when one recognizes that the Holy Spirit falls upon the Gentiles first through Peter's preaching.[90] In the case of the Ethiopian eunuch, he is baptized, but Luke ends the story abruptly with Philip being whisked away by the Spirit to Azotus; Luke does not record the eunuch receiving the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the first mass receipt of the Holy Spirit by Gentiles occurs with Peter's preaching to Cornelius' household. Luke records that the Holy Spirit fell upon "all who heard the word" (10:44). It is the corporate nature of this event that is so decisive for the Jewish community. One or two Gentiles coming to belief would not be much different than Rahab or Ruth joining the people of God, but when scores of Gentiles join the people of God *as Gentiles*, this is a wholly different matter. And Peter was the first to bring such a large group into the community of believers.[91] Yet Luke's description of Peter being the first also suggests that Peter is one of many—this was not a one-off appointment, but the beginning of a new direction for the church of God. Once again Luke is

[88] The Samaritans also received the Word prior to Cornelius (8:5–13); they were not Gentiles, but as Witherington notes, "most Galilean and Judean Jews viewed Samaritans as at best half-breeds and at worst foreigners" (280). Although some commentators argue that the Ethiopian was a Jew, this is unlikely since Old Testament passages excluded eunuchs from full inclusion in Israel (Gaventa, *Acts*, 142–43; Tannehill, *Acts of the Apostles*, 109).

[89] See, e.g., Ådna, "James' Position," 149 n.73 and Tannehill, *Acts of the Apostles*, 186.

[90] Note that in Samaria, Peter and John were sent to investigate the rumors about Samaritans believing in Christ after hearing Philip preach. The Samaritans did not, however, receive the Holy Spirit until Peter and John prayed for them to receive the Spirit (8:15–17).

[91] As a man of some status, Cornelius's household would have included not only his family, but slaves and other workers. Luke notes in 10:24 that Cornelius had also invited his relatives and close friends to hear Peter's message.

underscoring Peter's authority through James's affirmation of Peter's lead role in this transition of the people of God.

Furthermore, Peter's eyewitness testimony, along with the reports from Barnabas and Paul in 15:12, provide the multiple witnesses generally considered necessary for making legal decisions.[92] Although this meeting is not an official court setting, the apostles and elders are making a decision that will define the identity of the church, and thus the need for reliable witnesses is acute. Luke presents Peter as an authoritative prophet who witnessed firsthand God's will for the church. To ignore such testimony would be unwise.

Perhaps most important is James's statement that the prophets agree with Peter's testimony. The wording here is striking: one would expect James to say that Peter's account agrees with Scripture (comparing what is in doubt to what is already affirmed), but instead James says that Scripture agrees with the testimony.[93] Specifically, the testimony of the prophets agrees with Peter's statement. The prophets agree with the prophet, and so once again, Luke emphasizes Peter's authority.

Overall, the characterizations of Peter provided by Luke focus on his authority: the first and last statements about Peter in ch. 15 highlight his prophetic role in the community. Peter speaks for God.

Barnabas and Paul

Luke's characterization of Barnabas and Paul in ch. 15 begins with the description in verse two of the great dissension and debate between the circumcision party and Paul and Barnabas. These two refuse to back down from a fight. The reader would not be surprised at this

[92] See Num 35:30; Deut 17:6; and Deut 19:15. Although these passages deal with deciding guilt in criminal cases, they set a general legal precedent of presenting multiple witnesses to make a just decision.

[93] Gaventa argues that the unusual wording suggests that James "makes the bold move of looking for scriptural language with which to express the church's experience of God's action" (*Acts*, 218).

description, having become familiar with Paul's zealous personality from before his conversion (8:1; 9:1–2), as well as his tenacity at preaching the gospel (chs. 13–14). Paul and Barnabas have been described as prophets and teachers (13:1), chosen by the Holy Spirit (13:2), and filled with the Holy Spirit (13:9). Paul has already had a successful confrontation with a magician, in which Paul temporarily blinded his opponent (13:10–11). He also performed a miracle in Lystra when he healed a lame man (14:8–10). Yet despite successful preaching, Paul and Barnabas have also been chased out of cities in which they preached (13:50; 14:5–6), and Paul was even stoned and left for dead (14:19).

Luke has not given as much attention to Barnabas, although we learned of his generous nature and encouraging personality in 4:36–37. His good behavior served as a foil for the Ananias and Sapphira story of ch. 5. Barnabas had also served as an envoy from the Jerusalem church to Antioch. He rejoiced when he saw God's grace, and he exhorted the believers there to remain steadfast in their devotion (11:23). Luke offers the judgment that Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith (11:24).[94]

Thus, when the readers of Acts approach the story in ch. 15, they would expect that Paul and Barnabas present the theologically correct position in the debate (since these two were chosen by the Holy Spirit—13:2), but readers would not be sure of the potential outcome of the confrontation. Sometimes Paul and Barnabas are well received, and sometimes they are rejected. Luke underscores his affirmation of these characters by noting that as they are on their way to Jerusalem, their reports bring great joy to the believers. Nonetheless, readers will have to await the outcome of this meeting for reassurance; when

[94] For the narrative critic, these direct assessment of character from the narrator provide the most reliable testimony (Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 146).

Barnabas and Paul first arrive (15:4), their report is met with an objection rather than with rejoicing (15:5).[95]

Luke's additional descriptions are brief but informative. In 15:12 he summarizes their speech as a report of "the signs and wonders that God did through them."[96] Once again, God is the primary actor, but these two serve as God's designated agents. It is striking that the crowd falls silent to listen to this report. This small detail suggests that up to this point—and even during Peter's authoritative speech—the gathered leaders were actively debating with one another. But something changes when Barnabas and Paul speak.[97] Perhaps it is the description of signs and wonders that has caught their attention; such evidence suggests that Barnabas and Paul were affirmed by God in the same way as the apostles after Pentecost (who performed "wonders and signs," 2:43). It is intriguing that Luke most often lists Paul first when mentioning the duo, but here in Jerusalem Luke more frequently lists Barnabas's name first (15:12, 25). This probably reflects Barnabas's senior status—he was a disciple long before Paul, and he was the one responsible for initially bringing Paul into the circle of leaders in both Jerusalem (9:27) and Antioch (12:25–26).[98]

The most intriguing aspect of this council meeting is that Paul and Barnabas play very little role in it. The beginning of this story leads the reader to believe that the two will make quite an impact in Jerusalem,

---

[95] As noted by Keener, "In both 15:4 and 15:12 Luke emphasizes that they report about *God's* confirming works, which can cast the objection of 15:5 as missing the point" (*Acts*, 3:2225).

[96] Here Luke is interpreting his own writing. In chs. 13 and 14 Luke reported the first missionary journey, which included preaching, interpreting Scripture, and discipling, in addition to miracles. For Luke's narrative purposes in ch. 15, however, the signs and wonders provide the key emphasis: they demonstrate God's affirmation of the Gentiles. Luke does not need to reiterate Paul's preaching about Jesus, because the believers in Jerusalem already agree regarding the identity of Jesus.

[97] Some commentators suggest that the silence indicates the audience was convinced by Peter's argument. See, e.g., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Acts of the Apostles*, AB 31 (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 548; Barrett, *Acts of the Apostles*, 2:721.

[98] Keener suggests that Barnabas strategically took the lead role in Jerusalem, since he was more well known and better respected there than Paul (*Acts*, 3:2240).

but once they arrive, Luke gives them only one verse of summarized speech.[99] Surprisingly, the Pharisees have more voice in this pericope than Paul and Barnabas! Given Luke's buildup of expectations for Barnabas and Paul to play a key role, their lack of prominence is jarring. This suggests, however, that Luke's focus lies elsewhere. He uses Barnabas and Paul to bring this issue to Jerusalem, but Luke's primary concern in this chapter is whether the fledgling church will be able to adapt to the new ways in which God is working. Paul and Barnabas are not the key characters here—God is. Repeatedly Luke writes so as to indicate that God is the subject of the sentence, not the apostles; God is the actor who has made all these events come to pass. As the geographical spread predicted by Jesus in 1:8 takes place and Luke affirms the fulfillment of these words, the question arises as to whether the church will understand and embrace this new direction. In 1:6 the disciples had asked the wrong question of Jesus, and he redirected their focus in 1:7–8. Now, halfway through Acts, Luke raises the questions of whether the disciples have understood Jesus's promise and whether they will follow this path or oppose God and face the dire consequences that other opponents have experienced. This is a crucial moment for the church. By giving positive characterizations to Barnabas and Paul, Luke guides his audience to the necessary outcome of the debate: this new ministry must be affirmed because God has already affirmed the bearers of this good news.

James

For Luke, James is a man who needs no introduction. Luke has mentioned him once via Peter (12:17) and alluded to his presence once (1:14, assuming that the James of ch. 15 is the brother of Jesus), but offers no direct descriptions of James's character or personality. Luke

[99] Fitzmyer notes that Paul "is depicted as simply acquiescing to a decision, after having played an important preliminary part leading up to the Jerusalem meeting" (*Acts of the Apostles*, 552).

assumes his readers are familiar with James already. For modern readers, his speech is our primary source of information in Acts about the leader of the Jerusalem church.

Like Peter, James notes his fellowship with the other believers by addressing the crowd as "brothers." James begins by affirming Peter's words; in v. 14, he states that God took from the Gentiles a people (λαός) for his name. James's word choice is striking here since λαός is usually preserved for the Jewish people.[100] James makes it clear that the Gentiles are already part of the people of God; nothing more needs to be added. Next, James announces that Peter and the prophets agree, and he cites Amos 9:11–12 to support Peter's position. For James, any decision must be based on Scripture. Despite the wide variety of passages likely debated, Luke cites only those verses that align with his narrative purposes. The version of Amos used here agrees more closely with the LXX than the MT; however, some commentators have suggested that the use of the LXX seems unlikely for a Jew speaking to other Jews in Jerusalem.[101] Jostein Ådna argues for the possibility that another Hebrew version existed which, when translated into Greek, would explain both the similarities to and differences from the LXX version.[102] He also notes that if Greek-speaking Antiocheans were present at the discussion in Jerusalem, "any demonstration of an agreement in pertinent scriptural statements between Hebrew and Greek manuscripts will have been very important."[103] The discrepancy between versions is significant, though, since the version found in the MT emphasizes the defeat of the nations and runs counter to James's argument.[104] The Hebrew states that the purpose of rebuilding the

[100] For this reason, Hans Conzelmann calls "a people out of the gentiles" a "consciously paradoxical formation" (*Acts of the Apostles*, Hermeneia [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987], 117).

[101] See, e.g., Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 469.

[102] Ådna, "James' Position," 138.

[103] Ibid., 143.

[104] Gaventa, *Acts*, 219.

fallen tent of David is "so they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by my name," whereas the LXX says the purpose is "so that the remnant of men may seek (me) and all the nations who call upon my name." Thus, James chooses the version of Amos which best suits his purpose of demonstrating that the prophets "have already provided for Gentiles becoming part of a reconstituted 'people of God,' for an incorporation of them into Israel."[105] Given the discrepancies between versions, it is striking that Luke does not record any conversation between James and the pro-circumcision party regarding the wording of this text. Surely the Pharisees would have suggested an alternate interpretation, based on the Hebrew text, that emphasized the priority of the Jews over the nations![106] Perhaps such a discussion occurred among the apostles and elders prior to James offering what he considered to be the definitive version of the text. Nonetheless, Luke chooses this passage to represent the discussion that took place and to provide scriptural justification for the full inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God as Gentiles.[107]

Once James offers his scriptural proof, he proclaims to the audience in an emphatic Greek construction, "I judge…" (ἐγὼ κρίνω). The statement may indicate that this is James's personal decision and not the decision of the church leaders as a whole, or it could be an attempt

[105] Fitzmyer, *Acts of the Apostles*, 555. He notes that some interpreters see the restoration of the tent of David as fulfilled in the story of Jesus's resurrection, which will then cause the Gentiles to seek God.

[106] Keener sees less of a discrepancy in interpretations: "Even though possessing them (as the Hebrew puts it) entails conquest, their being called by God's name also would suggest conversion for first-century readers" (*Acts*, 3:2254). In the context of Acts 15, however, the idea of conquest aligns more closely with the Pharisaic belief that Gentiles must submit to Torah. James's use of the LXX shifts the focus from submission to welcome.

[107] Although narrative criticism is less concerned with the historical circumstances that lie behind the text, Luke's choice to include this passage is likely motivated in part by the recent destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. For those first-century readers who were traumatized by the destruction of their national symbol and religious center, Luke provides a more universal outlook. God is reconstructing a new and better temple that draws all people to himself.

to state his ultimate authority as leader of the entire church.[108] More likely is Barrett's suggestion that James is "acting as a chairman and expressing what he takes to be (and wishes to be) the sense of the meeting."[109] Luke's irenic description of James in this section suggests that James does not presume authoritarian power; rather, he is concerned that the church reaches a consensus before communicating its decision to those who have asked for an interpretation of this issue.

James's final statement, in which he looks to Torah for guidance, underscores his deep-seated respect for the Law of God, despite these radical new changes in the church. James uses the fact that the Law of Moses is read regularly in synagogues to justify the four requirements for the Gentiles. This suggests that most of the Gentile believers were God-fearers who were at least somewhat familiar with basic teachings of the Torah. Thus, these four stipulations, which are based on the regulations in Leviticus 17 for aliens living among Jews, should not surprise the new Gentile believers.[110] As much as the believing Jews have learned to respect Gentile believers, the Gentiles also must learn to respect basic Jewish expectations for interacting with Gentiles. Fitzmyer describes James's attitude of compromise well when he calls James a "broadminded leader" who "seeks to preserve the unity and peace of the church."[111] Acknowledging the need to respect the Jewish background of the first Christians, "Luke presents James as a church official who seeks a reasonable compromise in the interest of the church at large."[112]

Thus, Luke's characterization of James accomplishes his goal of demonstrating that the Jerusalem church has come to understand and

---

[108] Keener takes the latter view (*Acts*, 3:2559, esp. n.519).

[109] C. K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Shorter Commentary* (London: T&T Clark, 2002), 232.

[110] See Richard Bauckham, "James and the Jerusalem Church," in *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, vol. 4 of *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 415–80.

[111] Fitzmyer, *Acts of the Apostles*, 553.

[112] Ibid., 554.

support God's work among the Gentiles; the church is beginning to understand Jesus's promise of 1:8 and its implications.

Judas and Silas

Judas and Silas play only a minor role in Acts 15 and receive very little introduction from Luke. Their function, nonetheless, is an important one since they serve as chosen leaders who confirm the ruling before the Antioch church, in contrast to the ones from Judea in verse 1 who had no authority from the Jerusalem church.[113] Judas, called Barsabbas, and Silas have risked their lives for Jesus (15:26), although the specifics are not delineated. In 15:32 Luke describes them as prophets who comforted and strengthened (ἐπεστήριξαν) the church in Antioch with their message. This presents a contrast to the pro-circumcision group, which "troubled" the spirits of those in Antioch (15:24). Furthermore, the language unites Judas and Silas to Paul and Barnabas. In 14:22, just prior to the Jerusalem Council, Luke states that Paul and Barnabas "strengthened the spirits" (ἐπιστηρίζοντες τὰς ψυχὰς) of those in Iconium and (Pisidian) Antioch. When Paul and Silas set out on their next missionary journey in 15:41, together they strengthen (ἐπιστηρίζων) the churches. Paul continues this work in 18:23, where he strengthens (ἐπιστηρίζων) the disciples in Galatia and Phrygia.[114] In Luke's narrative, only those who take the pro-Gentile view are able to strengthen the spirits of the believers.

When Judas and Silas eventually return to Jerusalem,[115] they are sent from the Antioch church "with peace." These positive descriptions suggest that the Holy Spirit has affirmed the church's ruling and

[113] Keener, *Acts*, 3:2280 and 3:2285.

[114] "Paul is thus depicted playing the role that Peter was to play for his fellow Christians according to Jesus' prayer in Luke 22:32" (Fitzmyer, *Acts of the Apostles*, 534).

[115] The Western Text adds the phrase "But it seemed good to Silas to remain there," probably to explain how it was that in 15:40 Paul was able to leave Antioch with Silas in tow.

the ministry of these prophets; Luke uses similar wording in 9:31 to describe peace in the church and the comfort of the Holy Spirit.

Although the reader will not hear of Judas again, Silas continues to appear in Acts as the traveling companion of Paul, although admittedly the descriptions of Silas are quite limited.[116] Luke's characterization of Silas and Judas as leaders and prophets in ch. 15 underscores both their authority and reliability: They, too, speak for God, and they, too, recognize that the full inclusion of the Gentiles is part of God's plan.

God

Luke makes it clear that despite the variety of actors in this story, God is the ultimate director of these events.[117] Luke's description of God in this story emphasizes God's wise choice and direction of his people. Peter describes God as one "who knows the human heart" (καρδιογνώστης, 15:8), a term which Luke also used in 1:24 (καρδιογνῶστα) when the church prayed to God for wisdom regarding which apostle to choose to replace Judas. In Acts 15, God is the one who cleanses human hearts, works wonders, testifies regarding his decisions by means of the Holy Spirit, and ultimately decides who constitutes the people of God. Peter's warnings about testing God also imply God's role as the judge who metes out justice. These descriptions all underscore God's power and his role as director of history.

Overall, each of the characters that Luke uses to promote acceptance of God's work among the Gentiles has a different personality—Peter is the fiery prophet who warns of impending judgment, Paul and Barnabas are the wonder-working evangelists, and James is the

[116] See 15:40; 16:19, 25, 29; 17:4, 10, 14–15, and 18:5.

[117] Since these statements have been discussed above, only a brief summary will be offered here.

wise but compassionate interpreter.[118] Yet Luke skillfully brings these characters together to present a picture of God at work among his people. Luke wants to make it clear that the church is not simply having a committee meeting, offering discussion, and making a compromise to suit all parties. Rather, God has been moving in a startling new direction, and the choice that the Jerusalem church ultimately must make is whether to recognize and embrace God's will and thus flourish, or to resist this new direction and face frightening consequences.

Empathy in Acts 15

Luke creates emotional distance from the Pharisee party in Acts 15 through various techniques, beginning with his description of their behavior: they cause dissension (v. 2) and trouble the hearts of the Gentiles (15:24). Luke uses more subtle techniques as well. He begins by using the passive voice in 15:1. When Luke reports the teaching of those who came to Antioch from Judea, he could have concluded their statement with "God will not save you," but instead he chooses the more understated "you will not be saved." This use of the passive voice creates distance. Luke is downplaying the circumcision party's view that God has supported their position. Luke also refuses to name any of these teachers or those believing Pharisees in Jerusalem who declare that Gentiles must keep the law of Moses. This diminishes the status of these characters.

On the other hand, Luke names all of those who speak in favor of the Gentiles. Yet in their reports, God is the key actor. In this story, whenever Luke's language places God as the subject, as the actor, it is in the context of supporting the full inclusion of the Gentiles. As noted

[118] Space limitations preclude a discussion of neutral characters: the church (which greets Paul and Barnabas and consents to sending Judas and Silas to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas) and the "apostles and elders" (who consider the debate and send Judas and Silas). These are flat characters; the story focuses instead on Peter and James.

in the characterization section above, Luke's language for the pro-Gentile party is nothing but positive: they speak with prophetic authority, perform signs and wonders, preach Scripture, and bring rejoicing wherever they go.

Point of View in Acts 15

The overarching narrative of Acts to this point has led readers to side with the pro-Gentile party. As Gary Yamasaki states, "The narrator's manipulation of point of view to this point in the narrative succeeds in making it abundantly clear to the audience that it is to adopt the ideological point of view of those insisting that Gentiles coming to faith not be required to undergo circumcision."[119]

Two additional planes figure prominently in this narrative: the spatial and temporal. The spatial plane of the narrator moves with Barnabas and Paul. The action of the story begins in Antioch, moves to Jerusalem as the duo goes up to present the matter to the leaders there, and the action descends with the pair as they report the decision back in Antioch. The believers from the Pharisee party, however, disappear from view as soon as they report their argument in 15:5 (although, their dissension is mentioned in the letter in 15:24).

The many aorist verbs in this section indicate that the narrator's temporal plane is one of reporting the events after they have happened. Nonetheless, Luke creates tension in Peter's speech when Peter uses the present tense in 15:10 for the accusation that "you are putting God to the test" by placing the burden of the law on the Gentiles. This may imply that Peter is worried that the pro-circumcision party has been debating well enough to convince the elders to require Torah obedience of the Gentiles. He then reminds the elders—again, in the present tense—that "we believe" the Jews are saved by grace, just as the

[119] Yamasaki, *Watching a Biblical Narrative*, 208.

Gentiles are. Peter presents a pivotal moment in their deliberations, and his emphasis on a unified means of salvation causes the elders to fall silent.

Acts as a Whole: Part II

Throughout the book of Acts the church has faced regular threats, both external and internal.[120] Luke's continual interchange of stories of persecution and stories of growth emphasizes a deep irony: the very persecution that was intended to destroy the church instead caused greater growth. In the first half of Acts, much of the persecution came from the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. Despite imprisonments and martyrdom, and often because of these events, the church continued to grow.[121] As the Holy Spirit continued to lead the church through these crises and empowered the spread of the Gospel beyond Judea, the theological crisis regarding the Gentiles came to a head at the Council of Jerusalem. The Council's ruling provided a turning point which many scholars consider to be "the center of the book of Acts; the rest of the book carries forward the Gentile mission that the council approved."[122]

Paul's further missionary journeys in Acts follow the same pattern as before the Jerusalem Council: he travels to a city, preaches in the synagogue, receives a positive response mostly from Gentiles, and eventually faces persecution from non-believing Jews before he heads

[120] Internal threats include the lies of Ananias and Sapphira (5:1–10), the dispute about the Hellenistic widows (6:1–7), and the question of the inclusion of the Gentiles (11:1–18; 15:1–35).

[121] For example, the death of Stephen (7:60) and the continuing persecution (8:1) caused the disciples to flee to Judea and Samaria. They continued to preach, however, and the very next pericope describes the spread of the Gospel in Samaria. Thus, the persecution meant to stamp out the church actually expanded it.

[122] Keener, *Acts*, 3:2297. *Contra* Gaventa, who identifies the turning point of the first half of Acts as the conversion of Cornelius (*Acts*, 211). For Gaventa, Acts 15 provides a narrative denouement rather than a climax (*Acts*, 212).

to the next city. One wonders how this evangelistic pattern would have changed if the Council had come to a different conclusion about the Gentiles. But that is Luke's point. The spread of the Gospel to the ends of the earth continues, just as Jesus had promised (1:8).

Surprisingly, other than the brief interaction with James in Jerusalem, the mother church falls out of view.[123] This interaction in ch. 21 is nonetheless significant: Luke reassures the reader that the agreement from ch. 15 is still in effect (21:25), and thus the church is still on the right path. Instead, the current threat to the progress of the church comes from the non-Christian Jews who attempt to impede Paul's progress at every turn. From Thessalonica to Berea to Corinth and finally in Jerusalem, these Jews have tried to stop the spread of the Gospel. Yet despite their plot to end Paul's life (23:12), their plans do not come to fruition. Luke's foreshadowing in 23:11 ("just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also in Rome") reassures the reader that the Jews will not be successful in their plans, despite the harrowing experiences that lie ahead. By the end of the book, Paul is preaching in Rome, and despite his chains, the book ends with Paul proclaiming the Gospel "with all boldness and without hindrance" (28:31). The mission to the Gentiles continues, and even those Jews who turn to the Gospel will be healed.[124] Acts has demonstrated that God is the unstoppable director of history, and neither internal nor external conflicts can prevent the fulfillment of God's promises.

[123] Luke also implies a brief visit to Jerusalem in 18:22 (Paul "went up" to greet the church) but gives no further description.

[124] See Brawley, who interprets the Isaiah quotation regarding the Jews as "should they turn, I will also heal them" ("God of Promises," 294). He concludes, "As with Luke, so also Acts begins and ends with the God of promises" (296).

Appendix: Questions to Ask When Analyzing a Narrative

Plot: Conflict

- What are the major conflicts in the story? Are they internal or external? Do they occur between characters, or between a character and society, the natural world, or the supernatural realm?
- Are the conflicts resolved? How?
- Which conflicts are left open-ended for the reader to interpret? How does the rest of the narrative point the reader toward a possible resolution?

Plot: Order, Duration & Frequency of Events

- Is the story told in order? If flashbacks or predictions are used, how do these develop or alter the plot?
- Which events does the author spend the most time describing? Which events receive the least attention? What does this suggest about the relative importance of these events?
- What other structures are used to shape the narrative? What do these structures suggest about the author's narrative purpose?

Setting

- Where is the story located? When? In what culture?
- How does the setting affect the story's development?

Characters & Characterization

- Which characters are flat or stereotypical?
- Which characters are round? How do these multiple character traits give us insight into the character's motivations?
- Which are dynamic and develop throughout the story? How does this development help us understand the narrative direction of the story?
- What do the words, actions, thoughts, and other details tell us about the characters?
- Does the narrator make direct statements interpreting the motives or actions of a character? How does this give us insight into the narrator's presuppositions?

Empathy

- How does the author develop empathy between the reader and the characters? What cues are used?
- Where is distance created between the reader and certain characters? How is this achieved?
- What do these observations reveal about the direction the narrator would like the readers to go?

Point of View

- Which character's perspective does the narrative follow most closely? Whose perspective is left out?
- How do the spatial, temporal, psychological, phraseological, and ideological planes affect the way we view the story?

- How does the individual story shape the larger narrative?
- How does the larger narrative inform the meaning of the individual story? (When interpreting Bible stories, this should include a consideration of the overarching story of Scripture. For example, how do God's promises to Israel inform our understanding of the identity of Jesus?)

Although at first sight, the idea that we are immersed in a medium almost infinitely denser than lead might seem inconceivable, it is not so if we remember that in all probability matter is composed mainly of holes. We may in fact regard matter as possessing a bird-cage kind of structure, in which the volume of ether disturbed by the wires when the structure is moved is infinitesimal in comparison with the volume enclosed by them. If we do this there is no difficulty from the great density of the ether; all that we have to do is to increase the distance between the wires in proportion as we increase the density of the ether.

Prof. J. J. Thomson.

Chapter IV: Why Is the Resurrection Judged Credible?

We return to ask a second time the question put to King Agrippa by Paul: "Why is it judged incredible with you, if God should raise the dead?" The absence of good reason for unbelief is here clearly intimated. The grounds for acceptance of the resurrection of Jesus as a fact and appropriate action in the light of the fact are suggested by Paul to be most substantial.

Almost without realizing it we are face to face with one of the most outstanding and compelling reasons for belief in the Easter message. It is this, that Paul the Apostle believed it. On it he rested his Easter faith. Can there be any doubt about his conception of the relation of the Easter message and the Easter faith to each other? Verify, if you will, by restudy of the four great letters of his concerning which

the boldest criticism has not even suggested doubt; viz.: The letters to the Corinthians, and the Epistles to the Galatians and the Romans. Remember as you do this that these letters all were written less than thirty years after the death of Jesus to companies of Christians living in the three distinct and distinctive regions bordering on the north of the Great Sea, Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy. Remember also that they were written by a man who formerly had most bitterly opposed both the message and the faith of Easter.

It will be helpful to clarity of thought and consequent fairness of judgement to be keeping in mind Professor Harnack's position as we proceed. This position represents the most up-to-date, the only and final, stand which can be taken by those who reject the Pauline teaching concerning the resurrection. Professor Harnack's belief, we repeat, is that the Easter message, which consists of the empty grave and the appearances of Jesus in His resurrection body, must be distinguished from the Easter faith. The message, he affirms, we can no longer hold. Without it, however, he maintains that we must hold the faith, which is that Jesus is alive. In the words of another, Professor Harnack's position is adopted thus: "I don't believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus.—Jesus alive? Yes. But I just can't believe in the bodily resurrection."

It is thus clearly seen that the Modernist boldly rejects the documentary evidence. We frankly accept it, not blindly, but with fairly complete knowledge of the situation. Instead of accepting the statement of the Modernist to the effect that "every scholar knows" his (the Modernist's) position to be true, we are able to go only so far as to affirm that "some scholars think" the Modernist position true. It should not be forgotten for a moment that the rejection of the evidence is made critical and not on judicial grounds. The documents already referred to (the letters to the Corinthians, the Romans and the Galatians), as well as the remainder of the New Testament are received in courts of civilization as reliable and trustworthy testimony. The

judges of the earth have not considered themselves justified in proceeding as far as the critics of the Church.

We fain would pause to ask in all candor which "on the face of it" is the more reasonable, the Biblical position, or that of Professor Harnack. The Biblical records proceed upon the basis that the Easter message and the Easter faith belong together. The every-day, common, and usually safe judgement of mankind, we believe, will continue to think that the Easter faith cannot exist without the Easter message, any more than a house can stand without a support of some kind under it, or that a tree can bear fruit without roots. How can a tree be a tree at all, without its underground counterpart?

The organizing centre of our answer to the question, Why accept the Easter message? is the fact that the first generation of Christians believed it. This fact of belief on the part of the Apostolic group and the first century Christians we are confident can be adequately accounted for only on the basis of the resurrection as a fact.

Leading up to this answer in somewhat fuller form, let us closely examine selected representative portions of the Biblical record that we may grasp clearly its own way of conveying the Easter message.

The Empty Tomb in the Gospel by John

The empty tomb is in evidence in each of the four Gospels. The account, most challenging, and offering opportunity for direct, intensive, first-hand, psychological testing by any reader, is found in the first ten verses of the twentieth chapter of St. John. That this record can be a fabrication is to me unthinkable. Please follow in the study of it and judge for yourself.

The account reads as follows (see John 20:1-10):

"Now on the first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, while it was yet dark, unto the tomb, and seeth the stone

> taken away from the tomb. She runneth therefore, and cometh to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and saith unto them, They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we know not where they have laid him. Peter therefore went forth, and the other disciple, and they went toward the tomb. And they ran both together: and the other disciple outran Peter, and came first to the tomb; and stooping and looking in, he seeth the linen cloths lying; yet entered he not in. Simon Peter therefore also cometh, following him, and entered into the tomb; and he beheld the linen cloths lying, and the napkin that was upon his head, not lying with the linen cloths, but rolled up in a place by itself. Then entered in therefore the other disciple also, who came first to the tomb, and he saw, and believed. For as yet they knew not the scripture, that he must rise again from the dead. So the disciples went away again unto their own home."

Observe carefully as we proceed and use your historical imagination freely in order to picture the scene accurately in all its details.

1. The tomb is the centre of attention in the account. Note, "unto the tomb," "from the tomb," "out of the tomb," "toward the tomb," "to the tomb," "into the tomb," "to the tomb."

In this new tomb the body of Jesus had been placed. A great stone had been rolled against the door. Upon the stone had been put the seal of the Roman Empire. Watchers had been on guard to keep the tomb from being disturbed.

2. This tomb is approached by three different people, Mary Magdalene, Peter, and "the other disciple who Jesus loved." Mary came to it (presumably walking). From it she went *running*. The other two *came* running. For awhile after they started they ran together. One of them, the younger, running faster than the other, reached the tomb first.

3. The reason why Mary ran from the tomb to which she came walking, was because she saw something which led her to jump to an

exciting conclusion. What she saw was that the tomb was open. The stone which had been rolled against the door of the tomb had been taken away. "She saw the stone taken away." The inference was that somebody had taken away the body of Jesus. In this she was mistaken, but fast as her feet could carry her, she went to the disciples and told them what she believed, namely, that the body of Jesus had been removed from the tomb. Imagine the excitement with which she informed these men, and the promptness with which they must have started toward the tomb. The account gives me the impression that they became more eager as they proceeded, and if possible ran faster and faster. One was younger than the other and consequently could run faster. He reached the tomb first, but was not the first to enter. There is psychology here which fits perfectly the collection of records concerning the events and persons involved.

4. "The other disciple" is the second one in the account who is said to have seen something. Mary was the first. She saw *from without* the tomb the stone rolled away, and inferred what was not true from what she saw. "The other disciple" saw *from without* the tomb also, but from near the tomb—he was near enough to look inside. He saw the linen cloths lying. These were the cerements or grave wrappings which had been about the body of Jesus. In verses at the end of the nineteenth chapter of this Gospel by John we are told that the body of Jesus was bound in linen cloths wrapped with about a hundred pounds of spices brought by Joseph of Arimathæa and Nicodemus, the two men who buried Jesus. Note that the record so far mentions these linen cloths only. These cloths "the other disciple" in a stooping position saw as he looked into the tomb from without. Nothing is said about the effect which this sight had upon him. We are not told how long he stooped looking in. So far, as respects the tomb, we note (1) that it is open, (2) that the linen cloths are there with the spices a hundred pound weight. These would occupy space enough to suggest the size of a man. The cloths with spices distributed in between the layers

would constitute bulk enough to attract and hold the gaze of a looker-in. In what form were they? Let us observe as we proceed.

5. Peter, the disciple of onset, entered the tomb, passing by the one (the disciple of insight) who stood stooping and looking in from without. What did he see? A different word for see is introduced here. Note it carefully. Our Revised translation is "beholdeth." It has the meaning sometimes of to gaze upon inquiringly—to look with eyes wide with intent and great desire to understand. Wonder and amazement may easily be read into it here. What did Peter gaze upon? The linen cloths *and the napkin that was upon His head not lying with the linen cloths but rolled up in a place by itself.*

The prominence of this napkin is striking—One-tenth of the whole story is given to it at first mention. It must have some special significance. What can it be? Wait until we know what next occurred. "The other disciple" went into the tomb "and saw and believed." What did he see? Evidently what Peter was gazing upon—*the linen cloths and the napkin that was upon His head not lying with the linen cloths but rolled up in a place by itself.* What did he believe? What do you think he believed? If you are not clear about how to answer, pause a minute to note that we have now a third Greek word used for see. It is *perceive.* Mary saw (v. 1) the stone and made a wrong inference. "The other disciple" from the outside saw (v. 5) the linen cloths. The same word (βλέπει) is used there as in v. 1. Peter beheld (θεωρεῖ) the linen cloths and the napkin that was upon His head not lying with the linen cloths but rolled up in a place by itself. "The other disciple," looking upon the same objects upon which Peter was gazing wonderingly and with eager desire to understand the meaning of, *perceived, saw through, understood* (εἶδεν). A third Greek word for see is here employed.

What now do you think he believed? Was it not that Jesus was alive? Is not this clearly the intent of the author of this story? Surely, "according to the scriptures" the body of Jesus came out of those grave wrappings in a supernatural manner.

The first seer (Mary) made a wrong inference from what she saw. The last seer, the disciple of insight, made a correct inference from what he saw, as was proved by subsequent experiences.

This conclusion is confirmed by the quietness of mind which the closing verse of this matchless paragraph indicates in contrast to the nervous excitement with which it begins.

Pause a moment to review the scene with special reference to the location in the tomb of the grave cloths and particularly the position and form of the napkin that was about the head. The body had been placed either on the left side or on the right side of the entrance and lengthwise. The head had therefore four possible positions, two near the door, one on one side, the other opposite; and two at the far end of the tomb, one on each side. What would be the result of stooping and looking in from the outside? Would it not be likely that only the cloths (the bulky part) which had enveloped the body would be observed? If the head had been toward the door, no matter on which side, the rolled-up head wrapping would not likely be seen from without. It would be hidden by the side wall. If the head had been furthermost from the door, no matter on which side, the same effect would result. From without, one would be likely to observe only the linen cloths. This would be likely because of both the position and size of the napkin that was about the head. From within, one would see both the linen cloths and the napkin that was about the head. One is profoundly impressed by the detailed accuracy of this account.

Some reader may wish to know that the original word, describing the shape of the "napkin that was about his head," indicates that it was "rolled up." The word is ἐντετυλιγμένον, meaning wrapped or twirled. One who has seen an East Indian man's headgear will have an idea of the shape in mind. Only, instead of the wrapping being about the crown of the head, it would be about the entire head. It would have much the shape of a hollow ball with an opening at one side having the diameter of the neck. Many have the mistaken idea that this

"napkin" was folded up by Jesus Himself after He rose from the dead and laid on the shelf where His body had been, very much as a table napkin is folded and laid beside one's plate. This is sometimes cited as evidence of composure of the part of the risen Saviour, and a proof of leisurely departure from the tomb! Such thought is certainly far from the meaning conveyed to the women and the disciples as they looked upon the place where the Lord lay.

The Empty Tomb in the Gospel by Matthew

"His own new tomb, which he had hewn out in a rock," are the words used (Matthew 27:60) to describe the resting place of the body of Jesus, which Joseph of Arimathaea had provided. Having wrapped the body "in a clean linen cloth," he laid it in place. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and departed. There is enough difference here to indicate independence of the account in the Gospel by John, but no difference which is so great as to constitute departure from accuracy in either.

Two of several women who observed this burial were Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary." Other accounts (see Mark and Luke) make it obvious there were several women with them (see also Matthew 27:55). These were those who had ministered to Jesus when in Galilee, and had followed Him to Jerusalem. It is altogether natural for us to suppose that together they planned to visit the tomb as early as possible after the Sabbath. What would have been more likely? Let us follow them carefully.

By the authority of Pilate, on request of the chief priests and Pharisees, the tomb had been sealed and a guard had been furnished to prevent robbery. These enemies remembered the statement that Jesus had made about rising from the dead after three days. Strange that the disciples had forgotten? Yes and no. There is the profoundest psychology here. Real life presents the most unexpected contraries. Work it

out sometime for yourself. How can we believe this story to be a fabrication? Who would weave out of imagination such a combination of ideas?

The account is as follows (Matthew 28:1–8):

> "Now late on the Sabbath day, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, came Mary Magdalene and the other Mary to see the sepulchre. And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from Heaven, and came and rolled away the stone, and sat upon it. His appearance was as lightening, and his raiment white as snow; and for fear of him the watchers did quake, and became as dead men. And the angel answered and said unto the women, Fear not ye; for I know that ye seek Jesus, who hath been crucified. He is not here; for he is risen, even as he said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly, and tell his disciples, He is risen from the dead; and lo, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him; lo, I have told you. And they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to bring his disciples word."

Keep in mind the presence of the guards as we proceed. It is daybreak on Easter morning. The group of women who had watched the burial approached the tomb. It is sealed. As they draw near, there is an earthquake. All are greatly frightened. Their fear is increased by the sudden opening of the tomb. An angel rolls the stone off to the side and sits upon it. His appearance is like lightening and his raiment as white as snow.

The guards fall to the ground as dead men. In great excitement Mary Magdalene, her attention being concentrated upon the open door of the tomb, suddenly turns and runs to bring the disciples word. She reported to Peter and John in the words: "They have taken away the

Lord out of the tomb, and we know not where they have laid him" (John 20:2).

The other women of the group hear the angel say: Do not be afraid. I know that you seek Jesus. He is not here. He is risen. Come, see the place where the Lord lay.

What is here involved of interest on the question of the resurrection body? Two things especially. First, that the resurrection body left the tomb *before* the stone was rolled away! It was not necessary that the door be opened before the Lord of Life could come forth from the grave. It was impossible to imprison His body of glory. Bindings of head, hand and foot, walls, the seals, guards, a great stone at the door—these were nothings to Him who had been raised in power. The stone was rolled away not to let the Saviour out, but rather to let the women and the disciples in! Why enter? For evidence therein of the fact of resurrection. The angel bade them enter, calling especial attention to the place where the Lord lay. What was on that stone shelf to observe? The grave wrappings were there, in such form, as we have learned, as to indicate the departure of the body therefrom without disturbing them. They lay there mutely but conclusively testifying to the fact that the body had not been violently removed, but rather of its own volition had leaped through and out of the cerements and through the walls into the fresh air of the new Easter morning. This is the only appropriate manner of action for the Prince of Life in the initial instant of entrance into victory over death.

This interpretation is consistent with and important consideration respecting the guards in relation to the approaching testing time about the preaching of the resurrection. There is thus no period of time, not even the shortest, after the tomb is opened, when witnesses representing both enemies and friends are not present to verify the facts. The guards on the one hand and the women on the other, both witness the opening of the grave. No room is left for controversy about what happened or concerning the contents of the tomb. The body was there

when the tomb was sealed. It was not there when the seal was broken. The linen cloths were there and spoke their own message, confirming the word of the angel.

Certainly there was continuous provision during those stirring, exciting hours against misrepresentation of the truth. It is gratifying to discover that it was this company of devoted ministering women from Galilee who were the first to hear the angel say: "He is risen," and to receive the invitation to verify his statement by inspection of the tomb. Favored Galilee of the Gentiles! To thee in darkness came the light of life. Honored handmaids of the Lord of Glory! We hail you among the blessed, and follow the story of that first Easter with eager interest.

The Empty Tomb in the Gospels by Mark and Luke

Eager desire is present to indicate points of harmony in these two accounts which go a long way toward assurance that the records are not only reliable, but also accurate when each is regarded from its own angle of vision, and its particular objective in narration. But limited space requires the greatest brevity. One point only therefore is noted. Both of these accounts refer to the inside of the tomb and particularly to the place where the body had been laid. In Mark the angel specifically directs attention to "the place where they laid him." In the Luke account, we read: "They entered in and found not the body…. But Peter arose, and ran unto the tomb, and stooping and looking in, he seeth the linen cloths by themselves." The women were "perplexed" and Peter "wondered" at what was seen. Thus all four evangelists recognize the significance of the evidence of resurrection presented *within the tomb.*

Suggestion: Study carefully this company of women from Galilee, who are present on the evening of the crucifixion and on the morning

of the resurrection. It is confidently believed that as they approached the tomb they saw it opened; as they entered the tomb they witnessed evidence which the grave cloths afforded, that the body had not been violently removed. On the contrary, they were face to face with proof that the body had supernaturally left the winding sheets intact. Even the head roll remained in its original shape. It had only fallen back in a place by itself when released by the body of Jesus at the instant of its change from a dead body to the resurrection body. Then on their way from the tomb, Jesus himself met them and said, All hail! Again we are constrained to exclaim: Blessed among women, O early rising company from Galilee! Your eyes have seen in succession what no other human eyes have beheld—the new tomb, the closed tomb, the sealed tomb, the tomb opened, the open tomb, within the open tomb. Your testimony concerning it brings comfort to many even in this time remote from your day.

The Appearances: A Condensed Survey

No particulars are recorded concerning the appearance of our Lord to James and Peter individually. Paul names them both (in I Corinthians, fifteenth) as having been favored as individuals. Paul's own experience is related in the book of the Acts. The first chapter of Paul's Epistle to the Galatians is suggestive here. We wonder what he, Peter and James talked about during those two weeks spent together at Jerusalem. We may be reasonably sure that they visited the tomb together and that Paul eagerly questioned them both concerning their personal experience with the risen Lord.

Easter Morning

Our Lord appeared to Mary in the garden. Read the account in John, twentieth chapter. It is not necessary to believe, as some assert,

that Jesus was dressed in the garb of a gardener. This may have been the case, for in His new mode of existence He was capable not only of appearing and disappearing, but also of appearing in different forms. Mary was weeping. Her tears may have partially blinded her eyes. Moreover, she was not expecting to see the Lord and she was painfully preoccupied. We often have seen intimate friends whom in fact we have not seen. Our eyes have been holden by thought. Mary's recognition of her Lord was met by a word of Jesus which is usually given a strained and unnatural interpretation. Why not make the statement, "Take not hold on me, for I have not yet ascended unto the Father," fit into what follows, and understand it to mean merely this: Do not try to detain Me here, Mary, in the fear that you will never see Me again. I am not immediately ascending to My Father. You will see Me again. Do not remain here longer now, but go unto My brethren, and say to them, I ascend unto My Father and your Father, and My God and your God. This is in perfect harmony with other directions given to the disciples to meet the Lord in Galilee.

Towards Easter Evening

The story of the two on the way to Emmaus may be allowed here to furnish only two of many most interesting observations. These men, slow of heart to believe the Easter message, although on their own testimony they had heard that He was alive, became men of the burning heart as Jesus Himself opened to them the Scriptures concerning Himself. The body of the resurrection according to this account, was capable of appearing in such a fashion as to escape identification for the time being; to make itself recognizable at will, and at will to vanish out of sight!

The Evening of Easter

The appearance to the ten (John 20:19-23) is significant for our present purpose in one respect especially. The record indicates that the doors were securely fastened. The original language is significantly strong here. The disciples feared the Jews, and with special care had made fast the door. This fact adds interest to the statement that Jesus "came and stood in the midst and said: Peace be unto you." He proved to them that the body of the resurrection was the same body in a real sense by showing them His hands and His side. He proved to them that it was different in a real sense by coming into the room in a supernatural manner.

A Week Later

The doors were bolted a second time. Thomas was present with the ten. Again Jesus comes into the room in His resurrection body. It is consequently different from His body before His death. Yet it is identifiable as the same, for the wounds are there both in His hands and feet and also in His side.

The wounds of our Lord in His new body, which remain forever to tell the story of redemption procured by the sacrifice of life, suggest the appropriateness here of the following striking, challenging statement of the social significance of the body.

> "The Christian doctrine of the resurrection gives the most important emphasis to the social significance of the body. We need to look more closely at the structural meaning of the saint's glorified body. It is, on the one hand, a spiritual repetition of the body of his temporal probation. Thus comes the accentuation of the distinct person himself. Never is he to lose connection with his own past. Not only by memory, but by his very objective life itself,

he is to be reminded that he is the same man who lived that life on earth. Most seriously I urge you to work out the wholesomeness of this thought, that the line of identity is everlastingly sacred, that no man, in all the solemn eternities can begin all over again.

"Not only so, but this repetition of the earthly body is a perpetual objective insistence upon the fact that every redeemed man once belonged to that old Adamic race which was broken up by death and because of sin. Thus, the entire social life of the new race will ever suggest the sad history of the old race. No saint can ever make a gesture, or look into the face of another saint, without projecting large hints of the story of a costly redemption. Indeed, the whole objective life of the saints in glory is so planned that it has memorial force, like a great Sacrament." (Curtis, *The Christian Faith.*)

"Driving a Stake"

Our thesis is that the Easter faith and the Easter message are inseparable. They stand together or they fall together. We believe there is good reason for accepting the Easter message as true, and in consequence exercising the Easter faith.

Let the nature of the message be clearly apprehended. We have had it defined by Professor Harnack who rejects it. It is the empty tomb together with the appearances of Jesus in the body of the resurrection according to the Scriptures.

A certain very successful Bible class teacher became well known and popular because of his method of "driving a stake" in each lesson. By this is meant that he seized upon a great fact or truth each time and held to it, driving it home in the minds of the members of the class, and relating up to it every other part of the lesson.

Let us follow his example and "drive a stake" in our study of the resurrection. The fact to begin with, to stay with, to go from, to return

to, to be always in sight of, and in the light of which to decide, is the fact that the first Christian community was convinced that Jesus Christ was alive from the dead in His resurrection body. The fact of belief in the resurrection by the first generation of Christians (and by resurrection according to the Scriptures is always meant the reunited spirit and body, the body being both the same and different, not a resuscitated body but a resurrected body)—the fact of belief in the resurrection of Jesus by the early Christians is almost the most obtrusive feature of the New Testament. Certainly it is regarded as the most important fact there recorded. It is the cardinal doctrine there found. The four Gospels reach their climax in the announcement of it and the citation of the evidence of it. The book of the Acts teems with testimony to the same effect. The Epistles are full of resurrection assurances, and the Apocalypse everywhere records the conviction that He who was dead is alive forevermore.

The problem of the rejectors of the message is to account adequately for this fact of belief on the part of the first generation of Christians—those living, say, from 30 to 70 A.D. Charles Reade remarks that "to accept an inadequate explanation of an undeniable fact is credulity in one of its worst forms." We agree with this principle.

This fact of the belief in the resurrection of Jesus by the first Christian community is the more remarkable because of certain accompanying facts. It is the chief fact of a heap of facts. Consider that the resurrection, as this first group believed it, was not anticipated. Jesus died on the cross, and His disciples had given up hope. Nor was the resurrection believed when first reported. The story appeared to them as an idle tale. "Some doubted" even after they saw Him. The records give us the impression that the people of those times were quite cautious about accepting as true reports of great happenings, especially of this particular event in question. There were bitter opponents. Those who believed suffered for their belief. Some of them went to death on account of it. All were enthusiastic about it and

sought successfully to persuade others to believe it. The company rapidly increased in size. Many believed. Among them were unlikely ones. Priests, the most difficult to persuade, are mentioned as having become members of the Church in large numbers. Then there is Paul. He was not expecting the resurrection. He rejected it. He became convinced of it. He was revolutionized by it. He preached it. He suffered for it and died a martyr to it. His life demonstrated the power of it. He insisted that he and his fellow Apostles were first-class liars or the resurrection was true. Paul was a first generation Christian. He must have had a sufficient basis for his belief. Will the theory of fancy, or the theory of fraud, or the phantom theory, explain it?

Keep Driving the Stake

This pivotal fact of belief that Jesus rose from the dead, on the part of the first generation of Christians is undisputed.

Strauss says: "Only this much need we acknowledge, that the Apostles firmly believed that Jesus had risen." He also says: "Without the faith of the Apostles in the resurrection of Jesus, the Church would never have been born."

Schenkel, a most scholarly rationalist, says: "It is an indisputable fact that on the early morning of the first day of the week following the crucifixion, the grave of Jesus was found empty. It is a second fact that the disciples and other members of the Apostolic Communion were convinced that Jesus was seen after the crucifixion—we will admit this; it is all we have to admit."

Dr. Schmiedel agrees with Strauss and Schenkel. He starts with the one fact of which he is sure, that the followers of Jesus believed that they had seen Him. He even believes that some of the disciples believed they saw and felt in reality the wounds which Jesus received on the cross.

The testing sentence of Charles Reade is certainly in place here. "To accept an inadequate explanation of an undeniable fact is credulity in one of its worst forms." We repeat:

What is undeniable fact? It is that the first Christian community—the believers from 30 A.D. to 70 A.D. were convinced that Jesus WAS ALIVE FROM THE DEAD.

Dr. Fairbairn truly says: "We reach the conclusion that on the terms fixed and defined by Modern Criticism, there is, on the supposition that Christ did not rise, no sufficient explanation of the origin of our belief. It is impossible to account for it and save the honesty and rationality of the men."

Dr. James Orr agrees also by saying: "The fulcrum is still wanting by which this fundamental conviction of the earliest Christian community can be lifted from it place."

Professor T. R. Glover, of St. John's College, Cambridge, in an article in the Constructive Quarterly, on *Immortality and the Person of Christ*, uses the figures of a tunnel to describe a certain gap in our knowledge of the Church's history. He calls our attention to the fact that the group of men we meet in the Epistles and the Acts are the same we meet in the Gospels, but they are greatly changed. The train passed through a tunnel. We saw it before it entered and after it left. The same people were in it before and after; but something happened in the tunnel. We must, if we are to remain honest, admit that something very exceptional and very signal happened, for it has changed the history of the world.

Bases of Rejection

We maintain that those who deny the fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ as reported in the Scriptures, as well as those who in the present time do so, are without justifiable grounds for such denial.

One of the best short discussions of the grounds for accepting the resurrection as a fact is found in the eighteenth chapter of Dr. A. M. Fairbairn's *Studies in the Life of Christ.* He mentions four explanations which have been offered of belief in the resurrection of Jesus on the part of the first Christian community. To aid the memory they may be called:

The Theory of Fancy,
The Theory of Fraud,
The Theory of Phantom,
The Theory of Fact.

The Theory of Fancy, more commonly known as the Swoon Theory, is that actual death did not occur; that Jesus by some unexplained means appeared to His disciples after He was supposed to have died, and that from this arose the report that He was risen from the dead. This theory was made prominent by the adherence of Schleiermacher. Paulus also was an exponent of it. Strauss, the noted rationalist, to the satisfaction of most people, demolished the theory by his well-known passage from which I quote the following:

"A half-dead man, crawling about, sickly, in need of a physician and a nurse, could never have made upon the disciples the impression of his being the Lord of life, nor changed their mourning into exultation."

It is very interesting to observe how the Gospel narratives emphasize the fact of the real death of Jesus. It would almost seem that the attempt to account for the belief by the Swoon theory was anticipated by the guiding Spirit of God when the records were made.

The Theory of Fraud, which is to the effect that the disciples stole away the body by night and gave out the report of the resurrection, has been abandoned as absurd. It is mentioned in the twenty-eighth chapter of the Gospel by Matthew. Variations on this, affording illustrations

of the strange extremes to which credulity will go for the purpose of explaining away facts which do not fit theory, are seen in Oscar Holtzman's suggestion that Joseph on reflection removed the body to another tomb, and Kirsopp Lake's idea that the women went to the wrong tomb and a young man who happened to be near said to them: "Over there, not here!" In this connection, we recall that sentence of Carlyle: "O man, great is thy infidel faith!" We recall also the words of Sir Robertson Nicoll: "It is easier to believe in the supernatural than in the impossible."

There remain the two theories—the Phantom Theory and that of Fact. The Phantom Theory in one or another of its forms is the favorite and last resort of rejectors of the fact.

The theory of Keim, who invented the expression "Telegram from heaven" is a variation of the Phantom Theory. It is to the effect that when the disciples believed that they had seen Jesus, they did not really see Him, but only a visionary image. "The visionary image," says one in reviewing Keim's theory, "was produced in their souls immediately by God, in order that they might be assured that Jesus was risen." Holders of this theory of course believe that the body of Jesus remained in the tomb.

Dr. Schmiedel in his article on the Resurrection and Ascension in the *Encyclopedia Biblia* says: "Any attempted explanation presupposes an insight into the subjective experiences that can perhaps never be completely attained; it demands, therefore, the greatest caution. It cannot, however, be left unattempted.… For all that has been said in the foregoing paragraphs, the most that can be claimed is that it proves the possibility—the probability if you will—of an explanation from subjective visions."

The difficulties manifestly attending such an explanation are great. The explanation presents greater difficulties than it removes. They have led the rejectors of the fact of the resurrection to attempt

generally no explanation at all, but to take refuge in the general assumption of the impossibility of the supernatural.

On our present view, the energy of the constitution of the ether is incredibly and portentously great, every cubic millimeter of space possessing what, if it were matter, would be a mass of a thousand tons and an energy equivalent to the output of a million horsepower station for forty million years.

Sir Oliver Lodge.

The fifth part of an American five-cent piece, if we could entirely disassociate it in one second, would give an energy equal to six milliards, eight hundred million horsepower, the energy of a moving body being equal to half the product of its mass by the square of its velocity.

Gustav Le Bon.

Chapter V: The Resurrection and the Power of God

The resurrection of Jesus is the New Testament unit of power. Back of the New Testament are the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament), with their tremendous emphasis on the power of God. He is the Almighty Creator. He never grows weary. For Him nothing is impossible. In the very initial stage of the history of the chosen people, the father of the race was asked, "Is anything too hard for Jehovah?" Interesting enough, the occasion was one when life from the dead was in question.

The mighty hand of God was revealed in the overthrow of Pharaoh, and the deliverance of Israel from the land of Egypt. In song the Redeemer from bondage was praised thus:

> "Who is like unto thee, O Jehovah, among the gods?
> Who is like unto thee, glorious holiness,
> Fearful in praises, doing wonders?"

In the realm of experience, it may be said that the Exodus was the Old Testament unit of God's power, or perhaps better, the measure of God's power. It is frequently referred to as an indication of what He could do.

Perhaps the book of Job magnifies God's power as much as any other part of the Old Testament. Here, as in other portions, observation of the forces of nature led to recognition of the omnipotence of the Creator and Preserver of the universe. A typical expression of this is found in Job, twenty-sixth chapter, where after a graphic description of the power of God as displayed in nature, the writer says:

> "Lo, these are but the outskirts of his ways:
> And how small a whisper do we hear of him!
> But the thunder of his mighty power who can understand?"

The Psalms are full of instruction about the person and nature of God. DeWitt, in the Introduction to *A new Translation of the Psalms,* asserts that they are fuller of instruction about God than even the New Testament, and that the New Testament assumes this previous revelation as not needing to be repeated. Here is one selection,

> "God hath spoken once,
> Twice have I heard this,
> That power belongeth unto God." (Psalm 62:11)

The prophets are unsurpassed in the consideration which they give to the power of God. For example, the great fortieth chapter of Isaiah, having comfort as its objective, dwells on the wisdom, tenderness and power of God. It says, in part: "Jehovah will come as a mighty one. Who hath meted out heaven with the span? … and weighed the mountains in scales? Behold the nations are as a drop of a bucket … behold he taketh up the isles as a very little thing." Referring to the stars of heaven, he says, "Lift up your eyes on high, and see who created these, that bringeth out their host by number; he calleth them all by name; by the greatness of his might, and for that he is strong in power, not one is lacking."

Referring to the resurrection, our Lord said to the Sadducees, "Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God." Certainly they did not know their Scriptures about God's power or they would not have questioned His ability to raise the dead. They evidently also had little personal experience of God's power, else they would have been more receptive of His Son and His message. Who but Sadducees will raise a question about the God of the Bible being equal to the problem of Easter?

The Apostle Paul uses four different words in one verse to indicate the activity and accomplishment of God Almighty, and all of them with respect to Easter. The verse is the nineteenth of the first chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians. Three expressions are found in the prayer of which this verse is a part. They are: "His calling," "his inheritance," "his power." This great Christian and leader of men wishes for his friends and all Christian believers that they may have the eyes of their heart opened to know "what is the exceeding greatness of his *power* [dynamite] to us-ward who believe, according to that *working** [energy] of the *strength* of his *might* which he wrought [exercised] in Christ when he raised him from the dead and set him at his own right

* Thayer says that this word is in the New Testament used only of superhuman power.

hand." No portion of the Bible of equal length has such a heaping together of words for power. Let us never forget it. God is able. He giveth it a body.

The reader is earnestly advised to pursue the study of the verses in Ephesians following the one quoted above. Ignore the division of chapters, and note how the power of God manifested in the resurrection of Christ is followed by an exhibition of that same power in the case of believers who are referred to in the second chapter. The parallel is striking. Christ was raised and exalted to the right hand of God in the heavenly places (Ephesians 1:20). Believers are made alive together with Christ and raised up with Him and made to sit with Him in the heavenly places (Ephesians 2:5, 6). Resurrection and ascension are both there for both Christ and believers. They rise from the dead and go with Him to the heavenlies. The entire programme of redemption, as here, is continually in Paul's mind. He looks forward to the ages to come (2:7) and lives in the presence of the revelation of the exceeding riches to come, of God's grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

The words of Dr. David Cairns, quoted in the foreword, may fittingly be used again as we bring this brief study to a close. "In belief in the resurrection is the spring of that new life of faith of which to-day the Church stands in so much need." Shall we not seek this spring whose refreshment not only we ourselves personally so sorely need, but also the multitudes who spend their earnings for that which satisfies not?

"Ho, everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come buy wine and milk without money and without price." Our Saviour's Spirit beforehand moved the prophet to call thus like an auctioneer. Were ever such valuable holdings thus offered? In the fullness of time in a house of mourning He Himself said: "I am the resurrection of the life: he that believeth on me, though he die, yet shall he live."

Christmas, Good Friday, Easter. The Incarnation, The Atonement, The Resurrection. The last of these is greatest in the sense that once the message of Easter obtains, the others follow. And more, for Easter is not the last of this series. Resurrection is followed by Ascension, Intercession, Procession (the gift of the Holy Spirit), Revelation, Manifestation, Restoration of all things.

Nor is Christmas the first in this indissoluble order. Jesus Christ had a past. God promised to Good News afore through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, concerning His Son, who was born of the seed of David, according to the flesh, who was demonstrated to be the Son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead (Romans, first chapter).

We must go even further back, for this Son, who was promised by prophets, is He in whom were created all things in the heavens and upon the earth. He was in the beginning with God, and being the whole beaming image of God's glory, and the very expression of God's substance, He was God. He is the Alpha and the Omega with all the letters between. He is the first and the last, only begotten Son of God, and Ultimate Man.

The Resurrection Chapter of the Bible is First Corinthians, fifteenth. From the beginning, middle and end of it the words below are selected as fittingly concluding this Easter message.

"For I delivered unto you first of all that which also I received: that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried; and that he hath been raised on the third day according to the scriptures…. But now hath Christ been raised from the dead…. For he must reign till he hath put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be abolished is death…. Wherefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord."

THE END

On Serving and Sitting: A Curious, Upside-Down Story about Discipleship (Luke 10:38–42)

Dorothy Jean Weaver
Eastern Mennonite Seminary
weaverdj@emu.edu

Abstract
This sermon presents the biblical text of Luke 10:38–42 and offers a "traditional" interpretation of this text. This "traditional" interpretation hinges (1) on Jesus' rebuke of Martha (10:41) and (2) on Jesus' commendation of Mary (10:42). Such an interpretation, however, leaves the almost unavoidable impression that Jesus is ungrateful for Martha's efforts in doing the "women's work" and cooking a meal for a large crowd of people. The sermon then deconstructs this "traditional" interpretation as it re-examines the text of Luke 10:38–42, paying special attention to the broader Lukan usage of the key vocabulary here, namely "serve" (*diakoneō*: 10:40a/b) with regard to Martha and "listen/hear" (*akouō*: 10:39) with regard to Mary. This re-examination leads to the paired conclusions that (1) Mary the contemplative will be called to active response to her "listening/hearing" (cf. Luke 6:46–49; 8:19–21; 11:27–28), while (2) Martha the activist—whose "service" reflects nothing less than the "service" of Jesus himself (22:25–27; cf. 12:37)—is even now called to "listening/hearing" as the foundation for her life of activism (cf. Luke 10:42).

Introduction: Hermeneutical Moves

I open this sermon with the observation that "Jesus never fails to surprise" with his healing and his teaching, offering the example of Luke 10:38–42 as a case in point and presenting the listeners with the biblical text, largely NRSV with a few personal retranslations. I suggest that this is a "hot button" text for both first and twenty-first century listeners. And I offer a "traditional" interpretation of the text to support my suggestion. This interpretation, to first appearances, leaves Martha both in the lurch and in the kitchen, doing "women's work," while Jesus commends Mary for sitting, motionless and silent, "at Jesus' feet."

But I do not take "first appearances" as the final "answer" for this text. Instead, I ask what Jesus meant with his words to Martha and why Luke, alone of all the Gospel Writers, chooses to tell this story. Here I make my major hermeneutical "move" with the sermon. I go back to Luke's text once again and read it against the broader Lukan context, so far as key vocabulary is concerned: "serve" (*diakoneō*: 10:40a/b) with regard to Martha and "listen/hear" (*akouō*: 10:39) with regard to Mary. This "move" turns the significance of the story on its head. Now Mary discovers that she will be called away from her "contemplation" into active response to Jesus' words, since "hearing" always leads to "doing" within Luke's larger story (cf. Luke 6:46–49; 8:19–21; 11:27–28). And Martha—whose "service" reflects nothing less than the "service" of Jesus himself (22:25–27; cf. 12:37)—discovers that she is even now called to the same "contemplation" as Mary, that one "needful" thing which will provide the foundation for her life of "activism" (cf. Luke 10:42).

In concluding my sermon, I return to the place where I started: "Jesus once again surprises." And I call my listeners to "hear the words of Jesus and the story of Luke and discern them rightly."

Sermon

Jesus never fails to surprise. Everyone. Everywhere. All the time. His disciples. The crowds. His hometown acquaintances. His opponents. Everywhere he goes Jesus amazes people with his healing ministry. And every time he speaks Jesus astonishes people with his stories, his teachings, his proclamations about the kingdom of God. I can't give you all the "chapter and verse" here this morning. That would be a sermon on all four of the Gospels. But check it out for yourself. Jesus is a man who leaves everybody either praising God in joyous amazement, scratching their heads in confused disbelief, or ready to throw Jesus off a cliff.

Our story for today is a very tiny story, just five verses long, Luke 10:38–42. But, if we look at it carefully, this tiny little story packs a powerful—and an equally surprising—punch. Let's listen to the story, as Luke tells it to us:[1]

> Now as they went on their way,
> [Jesus] entered a certain village,
> where a woman named Martha
> welcomed him into her home.
> [Now Martha] had a sister named Mary,
> who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what
> he was saying.
> But Martha
> was distracted by [the big job of serving a
> meal].
> So she came to [Jesus] and said,
> Lord, do you not care that my sister
> has left to me to [serve the meal] by
> myself?

[1] The text cited below reflects the NRSV except where bracketed. The bracketed texts are my own translations.

Tell her then
to help me.
But the Lord answered her,
Martha, Martha,
you are worried and distracted by many things.
There is need of only one thing.
Mary has chosen the better part,
which will not be taken away from her.

This is a challenging story that Luke tells us here. This story seems to hit all kinds of hot buttons, whether in the first century or in the twenty-first, at least for women … or for those men who likewise spend lots of time in the kitchen cooking. Martha is, after all, making dinner for Jesus and his disciples. She has "welcomed" them into her home. They do need to eat. And this is a large crowd of folks. There is lots to be done. And I shouldn't have to remind you that Martha doesn't have a twenty-first century kitchen full of useful and time-saving appliances to assist her in making this meal.

So there she is, in the midst of this major first century effort to put food on the table for Jesus and his disciples, cooking up a storm, as it appears. And Mary is just sitting there with the disciples, listening to Jesus, while Martha works her "buns" off in the kitchen (no pun intended). On the "fairness" spectrum, this situation appears to be off the end of the scale on the "unfair" side.

And then Jesus appears to make a bad situation even worse. First he gets on Martha's case for being "distracted by many things" (who wouldn't be in her situation?). Then he praises Mary for "choosing [the one needful thing], the better part" and promises her that this "will not be taken away from her." At first glance we might wish to say, "Thanks a lot, Jesus!" Here he just seems to send Martha back to the kitchen to do her "women's work" and praises Mary for sitting motionless and

not at all "helpful" at his feet and listening to his words. But is this in fact the story that we are left with?

What is the meaning of this account? And why does Luke, alone of all the Gospel Writers, tell us this story? What could Jesus possibly mean by his words to Martha? And what could Luke possibly intend by inserting this little story into his account of the ministry of Jesus? Is Jesus simply ungrateful for the meal he is about to receive? Is Luke simply a man of his day and his culture who believes that "women's place is in the kitchen" and that Martha shouldn't complain about her work?

Well, those might be questions that we can never fully answer. But the text does give us some significant clues in response to our outraged questions (if we are in fact outraged by this story). Let's go back and examine the text a bit further and see what we can observe.

Observation #1. Martha is the active woman in this story. First she "welcomes" Jesus into her home. And then she does what any good, self-respecting Middle Eastern woman will do when she has guests in her home. She "serves" her guests. In Luke's Greek text he tells his readers that Martha is focused (well, distracted, if you will) by her "great service." I took the liberty to retranslate this phrase as "the big job of serving a meal."

Hospitality to guests is the heartbeat of Middle Eastern women, whether back in the first century or still today in the twenty-first. Back in 1995 I visited Peter and Karen [not their real names] for a week when they lived in Damascus. And one evening when I was with them, they were surprised at home by the sudden and unanticipated appearance of a Syrian Orthodox priest (or was it a couple of clergy?), who showed up at their door. I still remember vividly Karen's sudden and urgent scurry to provide appropriate "hospitality," tea and who knows what all else, for this guest or guests who showed up at the door. Well, multiply that Syrian Orthodox priest by thirteen and you have the situation of Martha. She is indeed engaged in "serving" her guests.

And "serving" is not the bad word in this story. It could never be the bad word in Luke's Gospel. "Serving" is, to be sure, what women do in that society. When Jesus heals Simon [Peter's] mother-in-law (4:38–39a), Luke tells us that "immediately she got up and began to serve them" (4:39b). As Jesus and his disciples are on the road in their ministry (8:1), they are joined by an entire little crew of women who "[serve and keep on serving]" Jesus and his disciples out of the women's own personal "resources" (8:2–3). Jesus tells a parable about a slave who comes in from a hard day's work in the field and still, according to first century custom, is expected to "serve" his master a meal before he himself "may eat and drink" (17:7–9).

But "serving" is not only for women and for slaves. The astonishing thing here is that "serving" is also for masters, as Jesus tells his disciples. "Blessed are those slaves," Jesus says, "whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, *and he will come and serve them*" (12:37, emphasis mine). And if there is any question about his meaning here, Jesus makes that meaning very clear and very personal with his words at the Last Supper:

> The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, *and the leader like one who serves*. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? *But I am among you as one who serves.* (22:25–27, emphasis mine).

No. "Serving" is not the bad word in this story. Jesus is neither an ungrateful nor an unthinking recipient of Martha's hospitality, her "service." "Service" is always a good word, as Jesus uses it in Luke's Gospel. "Service" is what Jesus himself is ultimately about. "I am among you as one who serves." How much greater commendation could there

ultimately be for Martha's energetic activity on his behalf? Martha has already learned what Jesus' disciples have yet to discover, namely that "greatness" ultimately and ironically resides in "the one who serves."

"Service" is first and foremost Martha's gift to Jesus. This is a beautiful gift. And Jesus does not rebuke Martha for this gift. If we read this story in conjunction with lots more stories in Luke's Gospel, we see that Jesus surely enjoys good meals. And this is yet one more good meal. The bad word or words here in this story, if there are bad words here, are the words that have to do with "distraction" and "worry." These are the things that Jesus is concerned about, as he speaks to Martha. "Worry" is a prominent theme in Jesus' proclamation. He warns his disciples "not to worry" about how to "defend [them]selves" or "what to say" when they are put on trial for their faith (12:11). He warns them "not to worry" about the details of their everyday "life," that is, their "food" and their "clothing" (12:22; cf. 12:25). He warns them "not to worry" about "[all] the rest" of those things that ordinary folks worry about from day to day (12:26).

And here Jesus seems to say to Martha, if I dare paraphrase the words of Jesus, "Don't worry about this meal, Martha! It's going to be just fine. And your worry won't make it taste any better. God is in charge of the universe. And God will help you with your cooking, since Mary is just now sitting at my feet and listening. Relax, Martha! Take a deep breath! And don't worry! Your gift of 'service' is a beautiful one just the way it is and even without Mary's help."

Well, that's Martha, perhaps, if we have read this story carefully in the context of Luke's Gospel. And that's ***Observation #1.*** But then there's Mary … and ***Observation #2.*** Mary is not the active person in this story. Instead, she clearly appears to be motionless, seated as she is "at the feet of Jesus" (10:39a). And she is just as silent as she is motionless. Mary says not one word from the start of this story to its conclusion. Mary's only actions here are "sitting" and "listening." This is her profile, a very different profile from that of her sister Martha.

Martha is without any question the "activist" in this account, while Mary is obviously the "contemplative." And within her 1st-century, Middle Eastern, patriarchal context, Mary is also a genuine anomaly. She is in fact a "rabbinical student"—just like the Apostle Paul, who notes that he has "sat at the feet of Gamaliel" (Acts 22:3). And this in a world where only men get such a privilege. Mary is an astonishing figure in this story, even if she is motionless and silent.

And Jesus in fact commends Mary for her "contemplation" and, by the same token, astonishingly enough, for her status as a female "rabbinical student" in an unmistakably patriarchal world. "Mary," Jesus says, "has chosen the better part, [that is, the one thing that is needed], and [this] will not be taken away from her" (10:42). This is a huge commendation, a verbalized commendation, for Mary. Jesus seems to suggest that Mary has gotten it all right. And she has, thus far, it surely appears.

And if we stop too soon as we look at this story, we might well conclude that Jesus has greater appreciation for Mary the contemplative than he does for Martha the activist. And those of us in this room today who are the "contemplatives" might well be ready to pat ourselves on the back and to congratulate ourselves on "having chosen the better part." But is that ultimately Jesus' message? Let's take a look at Mary's "listening" within Luke's wider story, just as we did with Martha's "serving." And when we do so, we may just find that Jesus has surprised us yet once again.

In fact, Jesus has a lot to say in his public ministry about "listening," or, if you wish, "hearing," since those two words reflect the same Greek verb. And what Jesus has to say about "listening/hearing" might in fact be a surprise both to Mary and to Martha. Listen to the words of Jesus in Luke's Gospel:

> Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you? I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my

> words, and acts on them. That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house. (6:46–49).
>
> Then his mother and his brothers came to [Jesus], but they could not reach him because of the crowd. And he was told, "Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you." But [Jesus] said to them, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it. (8:19–21)
>
> While [Jesus] was saying this, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!" But [Jesus] said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it." (11:27–28)

For Jesus, "listening/hearing" is never complete without an "active/doing" response. So, Mary's motionless and silent stance in front of Jesus evidently won't last all that long. Instead, Mary will be compelled by her very "contemplation"—that is, her contemplative "listening/hearing" stance in front of Jesus—out into the world. Mary's motionless "listening/hearing will compel her out into the active world of construction, to build houses with strong rock foundations. Her "listening/hearing" will compel her out into the active world to "do the word of God" in physical response to what she has heard. Her "listening/hearing" will compel her out into the active world to "obey the word of God" in a life of faithful living. That will be the surprise for Mary. Her "contemplative" instincts will in fact drive her out into

a big, wide world of active response to the word and the words of Jesus.

And the surprise for Martha? Well, Martha is the activist who hears Jesus' words of commendation for Mary, the contemplative. But she would hardly be mistaken, if she were to hear in Jesus' words, or perhaps in the silences around them, an unstated, nonverbalized, but very real call to her, Martha, the activist, to become a contemplative herself, a "rabbinical student" who "sits at Jesus' feet" and "listens to what [Jesus] is saying." As Jesus puts it, "There is need of only one thing." And Martha "needs" that just as much as Mary does. Especially if she is to continue her "activist" life of hospitality to those whom she "welcomes into her home."

So, there we have it. Jesus once again surprises. Mary, the contemplative, discovers that she is in fact called out into the world of active and faithful response to the words of Jesus and the word of God. And Martha, our faithful activist, hears in the words of Jesus a call to join her sister Mary "at Jesus' feet" and to gain sturdy foundations for all those "houses" that she is building in her life of activism. And here, in turn, is Luke's curious, upside-down story about discipleship.

Let those who have ears hear the words of Jesus and the story of Luke and discern them rightly. Amen.