

The Two Spotlights of Inductive Bible Study and Narrative Criticism

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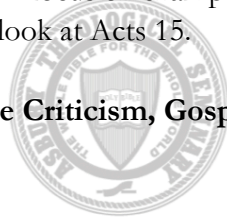
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Abstract

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



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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 in-breaking 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

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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. CAL SEMINARY

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.

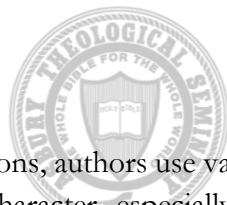
³¹ Note that flat is not the same as static, nor is round the same as dynamic. A flat character could be dynamic—for example, the Pharisees' anger increases throughout the narrative until they are willing to forsake their own religion in order to crucify Jesus ("We have no king but Caesar!" in John 19:15).

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,



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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

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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

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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

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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

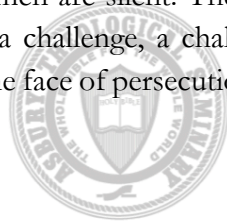
⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 124–25.

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's⁵⁰ 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

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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

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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 us⁵⁷ 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

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⁵⁷ Keener notes that *ἔδοξε* 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, “*αἰρέομαι, αἵρεσις, κτλ.*,” *TDNT* 1:181–82.

⁶⁷ *contra* Keener, *Acts*, 3:2227.

⁶⁸ Schlier, “*αἰρέομαι, 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 party⁶⁹ 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 audience⁷⁵ 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 Lys-tra 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

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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.

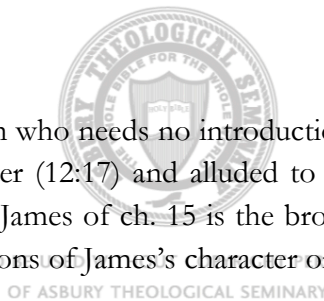
⁹⁷ Some commentators suggest that the silence indicates the audience was convinced by Peter's argument. See, e.g., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Acts of the Apostles*, AB 31 (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 548; Barrett, *Acts of the Apostles*, 2:721.

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 (ἐπιστηρίζω) the churches. Paul continues this work in 18:23, where he strengthens (ἐπιστηρίζω) 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 (*καρδιογνώστα*) 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.



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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

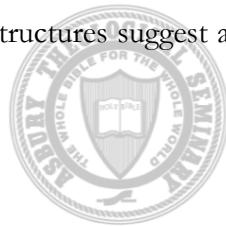
- What are the major conflicts in the story? Are they internal or external? Do they occur between characters, or between a character and society, the natural world, or the supernatural realm?
- Are the conflicts resolved? How?
- Which conflicts are left open-ended for the reader to interpret? How does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

Stories as Parts of Wholes

- 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?)



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