**Reading the Bible Again…For the First Time**

**(Hermeneutics: The Science and Art of Biblical Interpretation)**

**Gary T. Meadors, Th.D.**

**Emeritus Professor of Greek and New Testament**

**Grand Rapids Theological Seminary**

[**www.gmeadors.com**](http://www.gmeadors.com)

[**gngmeadors@mac.com**](mailto:gngmeadors@mac.com)

**LESSON 2: BIBLICAL NARRATIVE**

**Part 2 The New Testament**

There are many similarities between the OT and NT in terms of narrative genre.

Narrative features are particularly present in the Gospels and Acts.

Epistles are letter genre but still contain narrative features (recent studies)

Revelation’s prophetic-apocalyptic genre finalizes the grand narrative of the Bible!

The NT often contains similar genre “markers” as the OT. On the surface, the Gospels seem to be a series of episodic stories, discourses, miracles, parables, etcetera. But when analyzed, chronological disjunction indicates that the Gospel writers have woven their theological-narratives to make their points about the life and teaching of Jesus.

**I. The metanarrative continues**

The NT (Matt/Luke Birth Narratives, John1), similar to Genesis, begins with a new start. Soon, the rejection of Jesus as God’s provision deepens. The work of redemption deepens as well. Then Revelation, like the OT Prophets, shifts to the future Apocalypse because the world has failed to respond to God’s grace.

**II. The Gospels and Acts are clearly themed to tell the story** of the redemptive mission of God as fulfilled in Jesus and continued by the Apostles. **The uniqueness of these writings is that they are history AND theology.**

**A. Narrative themes of the Gospels (vertical) and Acts:**

Matthew – The King Speaks (book wrapped around 5 discourses by Jesus)

Mark – The Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God (episodic)

Luke – The Gentile Mission (Luke-Acts is one narrative focused on the Gentile mission and with Acts, Luke-Acts validates Paul’s mission from God)

John – “Signs” Lead You to Believe in Jesus as the Christ/Messiah!

Acts—The founding and development of the Church by the Apostles and Paul as a continuation of the work Jesus began.

**B. Narrative conventions in the Gospels:**

**1. Narrative context**

a. We are still in an **oral / aural world**

Jesus’ call to “Let anyone with ears to hear, listen” highlights the oral/aural culture of the first century (cf. Mark 4:23; 7:16; Matt 11:15; 13:9, 34; 25:29; Luke 8:8; 13:9; 21:4). Consider, Jesus’ clever switch in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-27; v. 29 with 36-37). Would an “aural” culture have caught this while a reading culture constantly miss it?

b. The Gospels definitely reflect **the priority of text over event; theology over chronology**

1a. The Gospels are

**Vertical**…each Gospel has **its own** theme and stories

and

**Horizontal**…all the Gospels cover the **same Jesus and time-frame**

[Requires a *Harmony of the Gospels.* More on this later]

2a. In an horizontal study, MAJOR **chronological disjunction** surfaces

* Compare the index in a *Harmony of the Gospels* !! (for example, one illustration of Matthew’s flow = 4:18-22 / 8:14-17 / 4:23-25 / 8:2-4 / 9:1-8
* Look at the order of Jesus’ temptation in Matt 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13
* Consider how the “rejection of Jesus” is presented (Luke 4 versus Matt 12-13)

3a. Observing **the selectivity and arrangement of material** in the Gospels is crucial. It shows the authorial intention of each Gospel.

\* Cf. John 1-4, the “year of obscurity” is missing from the synoptic gospels, they jump forward nearly a year.

\* Note how differently Mark starts in reference to Matt and Luke. No Birth Narrative in Mark.

\* The Temptation Narrative as noted above.

\* Compare the Sermon on the Mount in Matt 5-7 and Luke 6:17-49.

\* Luke 9-18, the “Journey to Jerusalem”/Travel Narrative…unique to Luke

\* Luke 15-16 (note 15:1-2)

4a. The **rejection of Jesus is a sub-theme** in the portrayal of God’s purposes.

The placement of this theme varies in each Gospel, but it is ever present. For example:

\* Matthew’s unique use of the OT theme of rejection in the infancy narrative.

\* Jesus’ rejection in Luke 4 (Sec 45) is early and Matthew 12 (Sec 97) is placed much later. “I must needs go to Jerusalem”

\* John’s picture of Jesus within his clearly selected purpose (John 20:30-31). “mine hour has not yet come”

5a. The Gospels are **High context**

Luke 10 The Good Samaritan; Luke 15-16 The Rich Man and Lazarus

**2. Narrative markers (like in the OT)**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| NARRATIVE MARKER | ILLUSTRATION |
| Narrative editor | Matt 12:1-2/Mark 2:23-24/Luke 6:1-2 (Sec 60, cf. 61) |
| Repetitious expression | \*“on the Sabbath”; “teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath”;  \*“publicans/tax gatherers and sinners” cf. Matt 21:31;  \*linking of religious groups e.g. Pharisees and scribes or Sadducees or etc. Pharisees usually lead since they were the guardians and teachers of the Law.  \* “it came to pass” (Luke uses 40 times)  \* “behold” (Luke uses 50 times)  \* “immediately” (Mark)  \* “my hour has not yet come” (John)  \* “…teaching and preaching”  \* “…must go to Jerusalem” (Luke) |
| Travel / Journey Narrative | Luke 9-18, the journey to Jerusalem…unique to Luke |
|  |  |
| The **conflict motif** is a **MAJOR** narrative marker | The best illustration of narrative marker in the Gospels is the conflict between Jesus and the religious establishment. The occasion for conflict was usually related to Pharisaic views of “cleanliness” and “Sabbath observance.”  Sections 60, 61 in Harmony |

* **Intertextual echoes** that suggest similar themes

Cf. Hannah (1 Samuel 2) and Mary’s statements (Luke 1) within their respective narratives pull the reader into an OT narrative that provides an analogy for Jesus’ life.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1Sam. 2:1 And Hannah prayed, and said: My heart exulteth in Jehovah; My horn is exalted in Jehovah; My mouth is enlarged over mine enemies; Because I rejoice in thy salvation. 2 There is none holy as Jehovah; For there is none besides thee, neither is there any rock like our God. 3 Talk no more so exceeding proudly; Let not arrogancy come out of your mouth; For Jehovah is a God of knowledge, And by him actions are weighed. 4 The bows of the mighty men are broken; And they that stumbled are girded with strength. 5 They that were full have hired out themselves for bread; And they that were hungry have ceased to hunger: Yea, the barren hath borne seven; And she that hath many children languisheth. 6 Jehovah killeth, and maketh alive: He bringeth down to Sheol, and bringeth up. 7 Jehovah maketh poor, and maketh rich: He bringeth low, he also lifteth up. 8 He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, He lifteth up the needy from the dunghill, To make them sit with princes, And inherit the throne of glory: For the pillars of the earth are Jehovah’s, And he hath set the world upon them. 9 He will keep the feet of his holy ones; But the wicked shall be put to silence in darkness; For by strength shall no man prevail. 10 They that strive with Jehovah shall be broken to pieces; Against them will he thunder in heaven: Jehovah will judge the ends of the earth; And he will give strength unto his king, And exalt the horn of his anointed. 11 And Elkanah went to Ramah to his house. And the child did minister unto Jehovah before Eli the priest. | Lk 1: 46 And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, 47 And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. 48 For he hath looked upon the low estate of his handmaid: For behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. 49 For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; And holy is his name. 50 And his mercy is unto generations and generations On them that fear him. 51 He hath showed strength with his arm; He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their heart. 52 He hath put down princes from their thrones, And hath exalted them of low degree. 53 The hungry he hath filled with good things; And the rich he hath sent empty away. 54 He hath given help to Israel his servant, That he might remember mercy 55 As he spake unto our fathers Toward Abraham and his seed for ever. 56 And Mary abode with her about three months, and returned unto her house.  How intertextuality works in Epistles see:  Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (Yale, 1989). |

* **Framing** is particularly noted in the composition of Luke-Acts, individually and as a two volume work.

Cf. the use of Isaiah to present Jesus and then Paul as the “Servant of the Lord” (cf. E. Fudge, “Paul’s Apostolic Self-Consciousness at Athens.” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 14 [1971]:193-198) framed within the theme of taking salvation to the Gentiles and the Servant of the Lord motif.

Luke 3:4-6 Isaiah 40:3-5

Luke 4:18-19 Isaiah 61:1-2

Luke 8:10 **Isaiah 6:9-10**

Luke 19:46 Isaiah 56:7

Luke 22:37 Isaiah 53:12

Acts 7:49-50 Isaiah 66:1-2

Acts 8:32-33 Isaiah 53:7-8

Acts 13:34 Isaiah 55:3

Acts 13:47 Isaiah 49:6

Acts 28:26-27 **Isaiah 6:9-10**

**Cf. also Luke 4 with Acts 28:28 and how it frames Luke-Acts.**

**C. Narrative Abuse in the Gospels:**

As Fee and Stuart note, **biblical narratives are *not about you* but about the original individuals and situations**. **To merely read off words in a moralizing manner is to abuse the Bible.** The product of such reading may generally be biblically true, but using the wrong text to make a point is nothing but a pretext, i.e. either out of ignorance or a ploy to manipulate others to an opinion. Two quick examples…

* You should not use the Gospels and Acts to teach socialism or missions strategy *per se*. Most texts are descriptive not prescriptive. Jesus’ “call” to discipleship and Acts 20:20 fit THEIR context and are not one-to-one for our context. Furthermore, the Epistles do not follow up on the distinctive items in the Gospels and Acts. The Epistles present a theological and moral model for the long haul.
* You should not use the Gospels and Acts as a “normative” model for ministry today (even the NT didn’t use them as a model in the Epistles!). The Gospels are particularly bound by certain contextual issues…the Kingdom (and the King is here!); “Disciple” motif (absent in Epistles); texts like “The Unpardonable Sin”; etc.).
* You should not “cherry pick” texts to build your own view of things.

**IV. The Conventions of Narrative are Observed in Acts (hinted at above and expanded here)**

**A. THE COMPOSITION OF LUKE-ACTS**

1. Review Luke 1:1-4 with Acts 1:1-2 (cf. Witherington, “Introduction,” in *Acts* for an expansion of observations in this section)

The preface of Acts depends upon a first volume. Luke’s gospel preface is for both books and may have been written after both were composed (cf. “among us” in Luke 1:1). Therefore, they are one narrative.

1. Did Luke anticipate a sequel when he wrote his gospel?

Luke seems to have planted some seed thoughts that would be expanded upon later. Only a few examples include,

* A promise of light for the Gentiles (Luke 2:32; 3:6)
* The need to fulfill the Gentile paradigm of Luke 4:24-27; 24:47
* The Servant of the Lord motif (Isaiah in Luke-Acts; Paul’s testimonial)
* Peter’s imprisonment (Luke 22:33 [not in Matt. or Mark] with Acts 4, 5, 12).
* Banquet parable forecast (Luke 14:15-24…unique to Luke)
* Witness theme (Luke 21:12-13; 24:48 with Acts 1:8 etc.)
* Luke 21:12-13 with Acts 4:3; 5:18-25; 8:3; 12:1, 3-6; 16:23

1. There is also a fascinating “balance” between Luke and Acts, a fact that may reflect a symmetry issue in ancient historiography.

* Both volumes cover a similar historical period. Luke covers about 6 B.C.E. to C.E. 30 and Acts C.E. 30-60/62.
* 23% of Luke covers Jesus’ trial/death/res/asc (19:28-24:53) and 24% of Acts covers the arrest/trials/Rome situation of Paul (21:27-28:31). Is this a further aspect of the “Servant of the Lord” theme (that is, Paul as the new Servant of the Lord after Jesus departs)? Think about how this links Paul to Jesus and thereby enhances his ministry.

4. Acts provides a partial historical/narrative grid for the epistles. It is interesting how this is a fact yet the literature is so different…different purposes:

Acts = historical progress

Epistles = models for sustaining the Church as Church

**B. THE BOOK OF ACTS IS HISTORICAL-THEOLOGICAL NARRATIVE.**

1. Acts uses narrative devices

1a. The use of **narrative summaries** (= repetitious expressions)

Chapters 1-5 use three major summaries (usually a narrative crisis before sum):

2:42-47

4:32-35

5:12-16

Other summaries are used as narrative transitions (5:42; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 19:20).

2a. The use of **“speeches” as narrative filter** (Talbert suggests that the first and last speech provide a frame). Out of about 1,000 verses in Acts, 300 are speeches. For example,

1:4-8, 16-22

2:14-40

3:12-26

4:8-12, 24-30

5:35-39

7:2-53

11:15-17

15:7-11; 15:13-21

17:22-31

20:18-35

3a. The use of a **“journey motif”** was common in Hellenistic narratives (cf. Homer’s *Odyssey*).

Cf. Luke 9:51-19:11 The “Travel Narrative” in Luke is unique to Luke.

Acts 13:4-14:28 Paul’s First Missionary Journey

15:36-18:1 Paul’s Second Missionary Journey (to 18:32?)

18:18-19:1 Paul’s Third Missionary Journey (18:23-19:14?)

20:1-21:16 Paul’s journey to Jerusalem

27:1-28:16 Paul’s Journey to Rome

Note the possible parallel…Jesus had to Journey to Jerusalem; Paul had to go to Jerusalem before Rome. Servant of Lord motif?

4a. The use of **“parallelism”** (See James Dunn, *Acts*)

Peter and Paul work similar wonders

Acts 3:1-10 with 14:8-11

Acts 10:36-40 with 20:7-12

And these miracles resemble Jesus (Luke 5:17-26; 8:40-56)

Peter and Paul face similar threats (8:9-13 with 19:13-19)

and enjoy similar miraculous escapes (12:6-17 with 16:25-34)

5a. The **use of geography** in Luke and Acts

Luke moves TO Jerusalem and Acts moves OUT FROM Jerusalem.

Acts 1:8 breaks out in chapters 1-7; 8-12; 13-28.

But, as Acts moves out, it never looses sight of its “Mother.” Luke and Paul show this consciousness by keeping Jerusalem prominent throughout the narrative (8:14; 11:1-18, 29-30; 12:25; 15:2; 18:22; 19:21; 20:16; 21:13; 25:1).

6a. Luke’s **use of prophecy and fulfillment** (Luke 1:1-4; 24:44; 1:8 with 3:22;

11:27; 13:46-47; 19:21; 20:25; 21:11; 27:22; 28:28)

2. Other themes that emerge in the Acts narrative.

1a. To the Jews first…while reaching Gentiles too (Acts 1:8; 1:1-12:24 focus on Jews and 12:24-28:31 on Gentiles). But the effort to bring Jew and Gentile together in Christ is not working (cf. 2:30-32; 3:6). Luke-Acts reflects this tension but never resolves it. Cf. how programmatic Luke 4 is.

2a. Conflict with the Jews (compare terminal points: 4:1-4ff.; ch. 10; 28:23-28)

3a. The Gentile mission (cf. Lk 4:24-30 w/Acts 28:28; Luke-Acts as an apology for the Gentile mission)

4a. Structural indicators of the church growing (different linguistics but thematically the same statements: 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:31).

4a. Jesus and Paul as “Servant of the Lord” (see E. Fudge, “Paul’s Apostolic Self-Consciousness at Athens.” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 14 [1971], 193-98).

Paul as the new "servant of the Lord" (Paul's testimonium in ch. 26, cf. even 28:31! Cf. Col. 1:24). *Luke and Acts should be viewed together. Luke’s two books comprise an apology for the Gentile mission from the perspective of Jesus and the early church*.

2. Acts is also like the Gospels in that it could be called **"theological history."** Literary form is used for the package.

1a. "...a narrative of interrelated events from a given place and time, chosen to communicate theological truths..." (KBH, 344).

**What is Luke's “theological tendenz” in Acts?? (means “authorial intention”)**

2a. "Theological history" is the result of the historiography genre of Luke's time.

Greek history writing of Luke's time "was written **both** to encourage or entertain (i.e., to be good reading) **and** to inform, moralize or offer an apologetic" (F/S, 96).

Therefore, reading Acts is not only to gain historical information about "what happened", but also to discern Luke's purpose in selection and shaping of material. Luke's theological intentions in Acts are tied to the package of Luke-Acts. While people are prominent within these books, it is the events which are center stage…an account of the birthing of the Church as a new vehicle for proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom. Jesus is born in Luke; His Church is born in Acts.

**C. THE QUESTION OF THE NORMATIVE VS. DESCRIPTIVE PATTERNS IN THE BOOK OF ACTS (See Fee, Chapter 6)**

This question relates to how biblical writings are abused under the umbrella of interpretation and application. Fee/Stuart especially raise this question. They point out that views on the normative nature of Acts vary. This problem is aggravated by diverse groups "proving" different views from the same texts, for example: "Such diverse practices as the baptism of infants or of believers only, congregational and episcopalian church polity, the necessity of taking the Lord's Supper every Sunday, the choice of deacons by congregational vote, the selling of possessions and having all things in common, and even ritual snake handling (!) have been supported in whole or in part on the basis of Acts" (*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth,* 95).

The Charismatic movement insists on total continuity between Acts and the Church of today. They claim that miracles are for ministry (claiming it as a model from Acts) rather than evidential of Jesus and the Apostles roles.

Fee notes that the **Church has abused Acts** by imposing a **“restoration mentality”** (p. 113) to reading Acts. That is, some claim that the current Church should recreate the First Century. This is/was not the purpose of the book of Acts. Acts is first of all a record of redemptive history during the apostolic period. In that sense it is **descriptive.** The burden-of-proof rest on any person or view that claims it or any text within it to be prescriptive. There are certainly some normative statements, perhaps many, but they need to be validated.

**An initial analysis of “what is normative” may be delineated by evaluating the principles of “prescription” and “description.” There is a “problem of [determining what is] biblical precedent.” (p. 113).**

* Definition of a model to determine what teaching is “normative.”
  + A teaching that is **normative** = a teaching that is always prescribed as binding regardless of time and culture. One paradigm for teasing out this category is to apply the principles of prescriptive and descriptive:
  + **“Prescriptive”** = a teaching that is prescribe to be obeyed
    - The Ten Commandments would fit forever prescriptive, therefore normative (albeit the Sabbath definition is debated, having presence before Moses and some claim after Jesus).
    - The OT ritual law, e.g. food laws, were prescriptive but became descriptive. The food laws were “codes of holiness” not codes for hygiene.
  + **“Descriptive”** = a teaching that shares “what was,” a purely historical account. Descriptive teaching does not set precedent expectation. In Acts 20:20, the Church spread the truth by going house to house. Therefore, your church must have a “house to house” visitation program! No. You certainly can (except in Hong Kong where it is illegal), but such a method is not prescribed. [Furthermore, note how this text is pulled out of context and the cultural issues are ignored.] Another item, how often should you observe the Lord’s Supper? Should you practice a commune approach to living? The violation of many items in Acts and the Bible are because the reader ignores the original context and transfers phrases into a “normative” mood.

If one can demonstrate that a text is intended to be always normative, then it is prescriptive. That is, it is prescribing what should always be done in any time period.

If one observes that the text is merely telling us “how it happened then,” it is descriptive.

Descriptive texts should not be turned into prescriptive texts.

For example, “prayer” is something believers should always do. HOW we prayer, however, may vary.

e.g. the “food laws” of Acts 10 illustrate prescription (OT) and description (Church).

e.g. the practices of how/when the Church meets and its practice of the ordinances is more descriptive than prescriptive.

Apply to questions of:

Evangelistic, missionary and church growth methods

Communal sharing

Decision-making

Time and place of worship services

Church government

Sacramental patterns

Miracles

Is Acts a record of a transition? If so, in what sense?

How do you account for continuity and discontinuity between

Acts, the OT, the Apostolic Age, and the future.

Readers of Acts need to exercise an interpretive consciousness in regard to how they use texts to argue a view of these issues.

But a thorough system requires a more advanced paradigm to analyze “normative” (cf. Gary T. Meadors, editor. *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*. Zondervan, 2009).

# Selected Bibliography

Dunn, James D. G. *The Acts of the Apostles.* Narrative Commentaries. Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996.

Hemer, Colin J. *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990.

Johnson, Luke Timothy. *The Gospel of Luke* and *The Acts of the Apostles*. Sacra Pagina volumes 3 and 5. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992.

Keener, Craig S. *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary.* 4 Volumes. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015.

Tannehill, Robert C. *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation.* 2 Volumes. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990.

Winter, Bruce W. and Clarke, Andrew D., editors. *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting.* 6 Volumes (cf. Vol. 1 “Ancient Literary Setting”). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993.

Witherington, Ben. *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.

**V. THE CONVENTIONS OF NARRATIVE SOMETIMES APPEAR IN EPISTLES**

“Paul’s epistolary discourse is like a membrane that is tightly stretched over a narrative framework, revealing many narrative contours from beneath. His letters do not simply offer independent snippets of ‘truth’ or isolated gems of logic, but are discursive exercises that explicate a narrative about God’s saving involvement in the world. Academic and ecclesiastical interpreters, it is suggested, have all too often failed to see the narrative forest of Paul’s theology for the discursive wood of his letters.”

(Longenecker, *Narrative Dynamics in Paul*, 3-4.)

The details of Paul’s writings are driven by his “narrative world” (the product of which influences all of his thinking and formulations like a worldview). Paul’s “big story world” is the whole Bible. One might capture Paul’s focus of the metanarrative as “God’s redemptive work in the world in Christ.”

The use of “faith, love and hope” gives narrative glue to Paul’s instructional work.

Faith = Theology

Love = Ethics

Hope = Eschatology

Resources:

Davis, Ellen F. and Hays, Richard B., editors. *The Art of Reading Scripture*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

Hays, Richard B. *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. *The Faith of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11*. Chico: Scholars Press, 1983.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to the New Testament Ethics*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996.

Longenecker, Bruce W. *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.

Resseguie, James L. *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005.

Witherington, Ben III. *Paul’s Narrative Thought World: The Tapestry of Tragedy and Triumph*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994.