DOUGLAS A. HUME

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A Narrative Analysis of Acts 2:41–47 and 4:32–35

Mohr Siebeck

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Preface

This monograph is a slightly revised version of my Ph.D. dissertation that was submitted and defended before the faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary in Spring 2009. As with most academic endeavors, a successful dissertation represents not only the achievement of an individual, but the efforts of a larger community. First and foremost, I would like to express a wealth of gratitude to my dissertation supervisor, Professor Beverly Roberts Gaventa. Without her patient and persistent guidance, this work would never have achieved its current form. As I too now engage in teaching, advising, and writing, I find myself practicing more and more the virtues of careful precision, critical caution, and respectful engagement that she models. I am also very grateful to the other members of my dissertation committee, Dr. Shane Berg and Dr. George Parsenios, especially for their efforts in the final stages of this project. Along the way, Professors Brian Blount, James Charlesworth, and the late Professor Donald Juel served on my committee, providing helpful feedback and inspiration as the work took shape. I am grateful to Professor Jörg Frey and the other editors for accepting this work into the WUNT II series. I am indebted to Professor Friedrich Avemarie for numerous editorial suggestions and corrections as I revised this work. Dr Henning Ziebritzki and his editorial staff also deserve a special thanks in assisting me with the formatting of this work. While there is some truth to the ancient maxim that friends share all things in common, it should go without saying that any mistakes or inaccuracies in this current work are entirely my own.

Beyond those directly engaged with reading drafts and providing feedback for this work, there were many people and several communities for whom the completion of this work means an achievement as well. First, of course, I am thankful to all the faculty, staff, and administration of Princeton Theological Seminary for providing opportunities too numerous to name during my time there as a masters and doctoral student. While many student colleagues offered support and provided community for me while I was at Princeton, I would be remiss not to mention Jacob Cherian, Joshua Cottrill, Matthias Gockel, James Logan, John Miller, Jason Ripley, Jeremy Schipper, and Meda Stamper.

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Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
Adul. Amic.	*Quomodo adulator ab amico internoscatur*
Amic.	*De amicitia*
Amic. Mult.	*De amicorum multitudine*
ANRW	*Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung.* Edited by H. Temporini and W. Haase. Berlin, 1972–
ANTC	Abingdon New Testament Commentaries
BDAG	Bauer, W., F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt and F.W. Gingrich. *Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature.* 3d. ed. Chicago, 1999.
BSac	*Bibliotheca Sacra*
BZ	*Biblische Zeitschrift*
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Commentary*
Conj. Praec.	*Conjugalia Praecepta*
CurBR	*Currents in Biblical Research*
Diatr.	Diatribae
Eth. eud.	*Ethica Eudemia*
Eth. nic.	*Ethica Nichomachea*
ETL	*Ephemerides Theologicae Lovaniensus*
EvT	*Evangelische Theologie*
ExpBC	Expositor's Bible Commentary
FM	*Faith and Mission*
GNT	Grundrisse zum Neuen Testament
Herm	Hermeneia–A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible
Hom. Act.	Homiliae in Acta apostolorum
HvTSt	*Hervormde teologiese studies*
Int	*Interpretation*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JSNT	*Journal for the Study of New Testament*
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
JTS	*Journal of Theological Studies*
Leg.	*Leges*
Mos.	*De vita Mosis*
NA^{27}	*Novum Testamentum Graece,* Nestle-Aland, 27th, ed.
NkTDH	*Neukirchener Theologische Dissertationen und Habilitationen*
NovT	Novum Testamentum
NovTSup	Supplements to Novum Testamentum
NTD	Das Neue Testament Deutsch
NTMon	New Testament Monographs
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
Off.	*De officiis*

Orest.	*Orestes*
Pol.	*Politicus*
RAC	*Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*
RQ	*Revue de Qumran*
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
SBLRBS	Society of Biblical Literature Resources for Biblical Study
SBLStBL	Society of Biblical Literature Studies in Biblical Literature
SBLTT	Society of Biblical Literature Texts and Translations
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Manuscript Series
SNTSU	Studien zum Neuen Testament und Seiner Umwelt
SP	Sacra Pagina
ST	*Studia Theologica*
StPersNT	Studies in Personalities of the New Testament
SUNT	Studien zur Umwelt des Neuen Testaments
Vit. Pyth.	*Vita Pythagorae*
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
ZNW	*Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der Älteren Kirche*
ZSNT	Zacchaeus Studies: New Testament

Introduction

The Question of Ethical Interpretation and the Depictions of the Early Community in Acts

I. The Problem

The Acts of the Apostles opens with a compelling story about God, who realizes the birth and growth of the church by overcoming complex challenges in an often inhospitable world. Two especially striking passages in this story depict the church living together in harmony and communion (Acts 2:41–47; 4:32–35). As they worship and pray together with one mind (2:46–47), share meals together in joy (2:42; 2:46), perform signs and wonders (2:43), teach and witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus (2:42; 4:33), the believers are portrayed as selling their possessions to distribute them among the needy (2:45; 4:34). These early Christians "share all things in common" (Acts 2:44; 4:32) and possess "one heart and soul" (Acts 4:32). The undeniable friendship of these believers resides in their trust in God, who empowers them with the Holy Spirit (2:1–4), adds to their numbers daily (2:41, 47), and whose story they tell by testifying to the resurrection of Christ (4:33).

Interpretations of these depictions have, at times, provided moral direction for the church. In the fourth and fifth centuries, John Chrysostom and John Cassian endorsed the model of spiritual and material accord found in these passages as exemplary for their Christian communities.[1] Martin

[1] In a homily on the passage, John Chrysostom deems the Jerusalem community an "angelic commonwealth" for sharing all things in common ["Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles," in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (ed. Philip Schaff; 14 vols.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1956), 11:47]. In a later homily, he dreams of the Christians of Constantinople selling their property and placing the proceeds into a common fund. He not only believes that so much gold bullion would be collected that it would amply supply the poor, but asking "Nay, should we not make it a heaven upon earth?" Chrysostom claims that the grace of God would inexhaustibly reward such efforts (11:74). Likewise, John Cassian links the formation of the coenobitic movement to the community portrayed in these passages of Acts. As model and guide, these portrayals provide the impulse for monastic Christianity. See "The Twelve Books of John Cassian on the Institutes of the Coenobia," and "The Conferences of John Cassian," in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series* (ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace; 14 vols.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1952–

Luther later rejected this impulse to emulate the Jerusalem community. Disputing with his predecessors, Luther argued that the believers' communal life was ephemeral and had little exemplary value. Luther instead presented a theological interpretation of the entire book of Acts, faulting earlier interpreters for isolating these portrayals from their wider context.[2] Like Luther, many later interpreters continued looking to the wider context of Luke-Acts to distill some guiding theological principle or pattern for interpreting these depictions.[3] Other later interpreters isolated these passages from the surrounding narrative context in order to identify historical sources and evidence of redaction.[4] With such a variety of approaches and diversity of interpretations, little consensus now exists regarding the ethical function of these passages[5] – or even regarding Luke's stance on wealth and property.[6] These passages once led John Chrysostom to declare

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1957), 11:206–7; 11:480–481. See also footnotes 2 and 3 in Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Literary Function of Possessions in Luke-Acts* (SBLDS 39; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977), 1.

[2] For example, in his "Preface to the Acts of the Apostles [1546 (1533)]," Martin Luther disputes with "St. Augustine and many others" regarding these passages. While they view "the fact that the apostles had all things in common with Christians [Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–37] as the best example which the book contains," Luther notes that "this practice did not last long and in time had to stop." Instead, Luther claims that the central teaching of the book is "*Sola Fides justificat, 'faith alone justifies' "* and that "all the examples and incidents contained in this book are sure and comforting testimonies to this doctrine" [in *Luther's Works* (eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann; 55 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955–1986), 35:362–63]. Luther also decries the misreading of these passages among his contemporaries, aiming his most pointed critiques at monks and peasants. He accuses the monks of feigning poverty but living in splendor, all the while glorifying themselves for following the examples of the earliest believers. See "Lectures on Deuteronomy (1525)," in *Luther's Works*, 9:147; and "The Judgement of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows (1521)," in *Luther's Works,* 44:357. Likewise, he attacks peasants who institute communal property rules through violent acquisition and uprisings. See "Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants," in *Luther's Works,* 46:51. Luther does not always oppose reading these passages as exemplary for Christian life. Luther openly supports a congregation in Leisnig in their efforts at "setting up a common fund after the example of the apostles [Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–35]," hoping that they "may become a public example to be followed by many of the congregations." See "Ordinance of a Common Chest," in *Luther's Works,* 45:169. See also footnote 1 in Johnson, *Literary Function,* 2.

[3] The review of twentieth-century approaches below (20) will focus specifically on the theological contribution of Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (trans. Geoffrey Buswell; New York: Harper, 1961).

[4] See below for a discussion of such approaches in the twentieth century.

[5] See below for a survey of ethical interpretations of these passages.

[6] For surveys on Luke's understanding of possessions, see John R. Donahue, "Two Decades of Research on the Rich and the Poor in Luke-Acts," in *Justice and the Holy: Essays in Honor of Walter Harrelson* (ed. D.A. Knight and P.J. Paris; Atlanta: Scholars

the Jerusalem community an "angelic commonwealth," a community worthy of emulation and wonder. What has become of this clarion call to moral excellence?

Hans Frei's study of the development of modernist interpretation provides a broad context for answering this question. In Frei's view, modernist biblical interpretation began to drive a wedge between the reader and the biblical story by appraising empirical evidence outside of the text to test its historical veracity. Starting in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, biblical narrative came to be viewed as a bearer of history, instead of a realistic account continuous with the narrative experience of readers.[7] The widening gulf between the modernist interpreter and the biblical story necessitated building hermeneutical bridges to explain and make meaning of an increasingly distant text.[8] For modernist interpreters, the clarion call of the portrayals of the earlier Jerusalem community became muted by historical skepticism and muffled in hermeneutical reasoning.

Is there a way for interpretation to describe the power of biblical narrative to shape the theological and ethical experience of contemporary readers? How did pre-modern readers experience the biblical narrative? Frei outlines three guiding assumptions for pre-modern biblical interpretation. The first is the belief that the biblical story "automatically referred to and described actual historical occurrences."[9] The second is that the numerous and sometimes divergent biblical stories made sense and fit together to assemble a meaningful and realistic "cumulative story" – even if interpreters needed to engage in figurative or typological readings to coax mismatched pieces together. The third element is that this grand narrative or cumulative story also embraced the experiences of pre-modern readers and their world. In pre-modern interpretation, the reader's life and ethos were continuous with a "world detailed and made accessible by the biblical story – not the reverse." The pre-modern reader "was to see his disposition, his actions and passions, the shape of his own life as well as that of his era's events as figures of that storied world."[10]

John Calvin's comments on Acts 2:41–47 and 4:32–35 exemplify some of the virtues of pre-modern interpretation. For Calvin, the continuity between his and his readers' experiences and those of the storied biblical world is an important presupposition. Calvin views the narrative depiction of the Jerusalem community possessing "all things in common" (Acts 2:44;

Press, 1989), 129–44; Thomas E. Phillips, "Reading Recent Readings of Issues of Wealth and Poverty in Luke and Acts," *CurBR* 1 (2003): 231–69.

[7] Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1975), 3–5.

[8] Ibid., 5.

[9] Ibid., 2.

[10] Ibid., 3.

4:32) and being of "one heart and soul" (Acts 4:32) as "a striking example of love…that we may learn that we must relieve the poverty of our brethren out of our abundance."[11] For Calvin, this narrative depiction indicates a moral imperative for his community because the story of Acts depicts a real account of God's providential activity towards the church, one that is continuing even into his day.[12] For Calvin there is an immediacy of the moral claim of the story upon him and his community because his interpretation occurs within the "forward motion" of an ongoing narrative experience of God's providence, "not the product of the wedding of that forward motion with a separate backward perspective upon it, i.e. of history and interpretation joined as two logically independent factors."[13] Calvin's stance as a pre-modern interpreter of the narrative is within the "flowing stream" of the story of God's ongoing activity in the world.[14] In Calvin's own words, "just as God long ago marvelously saved His Church when it was afflicted and crushed in so many ways, so He will also come to our help today."[15]

II. A Proposal

In my interpretation of Acts 2:41–47 and 4:32–35, I am seeking to retrieve a sensitivity to the moral and theological immediacy of the experience of biblical narrative. A central presupposition of my interpretation is that narrative form and meaning remain inseparable. In Frei's words, "especially in narrative…there is neither need for nor use in looking for meaning in a more profound stratum underneath the structure (a separable 'subject matter') or in a separable author's 'intention,' or in a combination of such behind-the-scenes projections."[16] Meaning is a performative act[17] that is

[11] John Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles 1 – 13* (CNTC 6; eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance; trans. John W. Fraser and W.J.G. McDonald; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1965), 130.

[12] Ibid., 19.

[13] Frei, Eclipse of Biblical Narrative, 36.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Calvin, *Acts 1–13*, 19.

[16] Frei, Eclipse of Biblical Narrative, 281.

[17] Frei himself does not use the language of "performatives" to speak about what is constituted through the reading of the text. In his use of Gilbert Ryle to disavow any weight one might want to place on authorial intention, one can clearly see how the concept of performatives and speech acts aptly suit his conception of reading: "An intention is an implicit action, an action an explicit intention; in the words of Gilbert Ryle, 'to perform intelligently is to do one thing and not two things.' And this is as much to be remembered in the reading of texts as in understanding any other intelligent activity" (ibid.).

"*constituted* through the mutual, specific determination of agents, speech, social context, and circumstances that form the indispensable narrative web."[18] As these performatives are being "constituted," potential meanings and ethical applications emerge from reading the "narrative structure or sequence itself." [19] The interpreter seeking clarity about the ethical function of a story needs to focus on the "narrative web" of storytellers and hearers, characters and circumstances in and through which the story is emerging. The moral, ethical or theological "meaning" of the narrative lies in the performative potential of the story itself. As I interpret the portrayals of the church in Acts 2:41–47 and 4:32–35, to consider their moral relevance will be to describe the performative potential that may unfold in readers' and interpreters' encounters with the text.

With the aim of considering their moral relevance and describing their performative potential, this study offers an interpretation of Acts 2:41–47 and 4:32–35 informed by *narrative ethics*.[20] Narrative ethics is a method of literary analysis that takes into account the performative function of stories with regard to the ethical lives of readers.[21] A written narrative can be pictured as a performative act by imagining a reader's (or readers') experience similar to an audience's encounter with a compelling theater performance. The story itself is what is occurring on stage. In the story, characters – as they engage or are engaged by other characters – manifest a wide moral spectrum of behaviors, actions, and attitudes. What occurs on stage also has the power to shape the imaginations, enliven the emotions, and instruct the morals of the audience. As audience members reflect upon the story over time and encounter differing interpretations and fresh performances of it, the story has the potential to shape their virtues and lives. Audience members may also respond in diverse ways, either by attending

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[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., 280.

[20] The basic conception for narrative ethics will be borrowed from Adam Zachary Newton, *Narrative Ethics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995). For further discussion of his proposal in relation to literary criticism, see the section on narrative ethics below (36).

[21] For a description of narrative ethics that accounts for the "performative" potential of stories, see Carol A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 35–36. In twentieth-century philosophy of language, one can trace the idea of the performative potential of language to the later thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Speech act theory took his idea of language games and expanded and explained the performative function of language. See J.L. Austin, "Performative-Constative," in *The Philosophy of Language* (ed. J.R. Searle; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 13–22; idem, *How to Do Things With Words* (2d ed.; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975); J.R. Searle, "What is a Speech Act?," in *The Philosophy of Language* (ed. J.R. Searle; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 39–53.

to or ignoring various details of the story, accurately shaping or misconstruing the story in their imaginations, or by retelling and reinterpreting it to others. Narrative ethics supposes that similar processes occur through the reading of stories. As a method, it seeks to provide the interpreter the tools to describe the story in such a way that the performative potential is taken into account.[22]

This book presents a narrative ethical interpretation of Acts 2:41–47 and 4:32–35. In the next chapter, the study begins with a brief review of approaches that various scholars have taken to these passages over the past century. This review demonstrates the need for the kind of interpretive approach called for in this introduction, an approach that takes into account the potential of the text itself to summon readers to imaginative, passionate, and moral engagement. For an academic study such as this, describing potential is not an easy task. Such description is perhaps better suited to the literary form of parable, where images of mustard seeds and yeast prevail. The description of the narrative ethical method, and its exegetical application in the chapters that follow, therefore cannot in itself provide that sense of theological or moral immediacy that may result from actual performances of the text in congregational or other settings. What this study provides are avenues that scholars may pursue to assess the potential of biblical passages to shape readers' moral imaginations and subsequent actions.

[22] As such, narrative ethics is primarily a literary method that may also inform Christian ethics, a separate discipline with its own focus and method. Christian ethics can be defined as the critical reflection about the practices through which Christian convictions transform individuals and their societies in the contexts of creative, sustaining, and faithful communities in a living relationship to the one true God. Inherently practical, Christian ethics provides inspiration and instruction for concrete actions, considering also what such actions may imply for the lives of Christian communities. For the basis of this definition, its implication as an inherently practical enterprise, its consonance with God's ongoing story with Israel and the church, as well as its relationship to theology, see Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 16.