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The Acts – of God? What is the 'Acts of the Apostles' all about?

Steve Walton

Dr Steve Walton is Senior Lecturer in Greek and New Testament at London School of Theology.

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What is Acts about?¹ This question has been posed frequently in the history of critical scholarship, not least in the last 150 years. Answers have tended to focus on questions of the *purpose* of Acts, focusing on why Luke² wrote his book.³ More recently the impact of rhetorical criticism has encouraged scholars to ask what kind of effect(s) Acts is designed to produce in the beliefs and actions of its readers/hearers.⁴ In this paper we shall attempt to come at this issue from a different

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- 1 I am grateful to the members of the Acts seminar of the British New Testament Conference, the New Testament research seminar of Aberdeen University, and the London School of Theology New Testament research seminar, especially Dr Peter Mallen, for their helpful comments on this paper.
 - 2 Here we enter the usual caveat, that for the purpose of this paper we make no assumptions about who Luke is; see Loveday Alexander, *The Preface to Luke's Gospel: Literary Convention and Social Context in Luke 1.1-4 and Acts 1.1* (SNTSMS 78; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 2 n. 2.
 - 3 The search for a purpose for (Luke-)Acts is chronicled well in Robert Maddox, *The Purpose of Luke-Acts* (SNTW; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1982) and, more briefly, Todd Penner, 'Madness in the Method? The Acts of the Apostles in Current Study', *CurBR* 2 (2004), 223-93, esp. 258-60; Steve Walton, 'Acts: Many Questions, Many Answers', in Scot McKnight and Grant R. Osborne, eds, *The Face of New Testament Studies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic/Leicester: Apollos, 2004), 229-50; Joel B. Green, 'Acts of the Apostles', in Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids, eds, *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments* (Downers Grove, IL/Leicester: IVP, 1997), 7-24, esp. 16-23. cf. also W. W. Gasque, *A History of the Criticism of the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), *passim* and the standard scholarly bibliographies of Acts, Andrew J. Mattill, Jr and M. B. Mattill, *A Classified Bibliography of the Literature on the Acts* (NTTS 7; Leiden: Brill, 1966) and W. E. Mills, *A Bibliography of the Periodical Literature on the Acts of the Apostles, 1962-84* (NovTSup 58; Leiden: Brill, 1986). To ask the question about Acts strictly necessitates, of course, some engagement with Luke's Gospel too (for example, the theme of God's purpose/plan is prominent in Luke as well as Acts): posing the question focused on Acts enables us to pay particular attention to this book's themes, and avoids the danger of reading Acts only through Luke, highlighted by Mikeal C. Parsons and Richard I. Pervo, *Rethinking the Unity of Luke and Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), esp. 120.
 - 4 E.g. Ben Witherington, III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Carlisle: Paternoster/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 63-65, 68-76.

angle by asking what the 'topic' of Acts is, that is, we shall pay careful attention to what moves the narrative along and what Luke presents as the driving force of the story he tells.

In coming at Acts from this angle we are following a thread in recent scholarship, which is to see the New Testament, and the Bible more widely, as a collection of books about God.⁵ For many who read the scholarly literature on Acts this will come as something of a surprise, since Acts has frequently been read as a book about the church, about mission, about the apostles, about Peter and Paul, about Christian-Jewish relations, and so forth. Rarely has it been seen as focused on God.⁶ However, a careful reading of the book itself makes it clear that Luke presents us with the claim that God is at work in the stories (and overall story) which he tells, and that God is driving events in a particular direction. This article focuses on evidence for the claim that Acts is a book about God and what God is doing.⁷

Several factors together suggest that Acts is about God: the verb subjects of the book, key verbs which imply divine action, the focus of attention in the speeches, the development of the Gentile mission, and Luke's use of the language of 'the word of the Lord/God.'

Sentence and clause subjects

Richard Burridge pioneered the analysis of the subjects of sentences/clauses as

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- 5 E.g. Leon Morris, 'The Theme of Romans', in W. W. Gasque and Ralph P. Martin eds, *Apostolic History and the Gospel* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1970), 249-63 (arguing that God is the major topic of Romans); Antoinette Clark Wire, 'Pauline Theology as an Understanding of God: The Explicit and the Implicit' (unpublished PhD thesis, Claremont Graduate School, 1974); Nils Alstrup Dahl, 'The Neglected Factor in New Testament Theology', in Nils Alstrup Dahl and Donald H. Juel, eds, *Jesus the Christ: The Historical Origins of Christological Doctrine* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 153-63; W. Lee Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis: A Narrative Appraisal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001); Marianne Meye Thompson, "'God's Voice You Have Never Heard, God's Form You Have Never Seen': The Characterization of God in the Gospel of John", *Semeia* 63 (1993), 177-204.
- 6 There are, of course, exceptions, such as Robert L. Brawley, *Centering on God: Method and Message in Luke-Acts* (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), esp. 111-24; Jacob Jervell, *The Theology of the Acts of the Apostles* (NT Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), esp. 18-34; John T. Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts* (SNTSMS 76; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); and the fine recent commentary Beverly R. Gaventa, *Acts* (ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 2003).
- 7 A fuller study is required of the nature and actions of God in Acts – that is, how Luke characterises God in Acts – but that is beyond the scope of this article. Brawley, *Centering*, 111-24 and Daniel Marguerat, *The First Christian Historian: Writing the Acts of the Apostles* (SNTSMS 121; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 85-108 provide helpful brief studies; and now see Ling Cheng, 'The Characterisation of God in Acts: With Special Reference to the Interrelationships of Characters' (unpublished PhD thesis, London School of Theology/Brunel University, 2006).

a tool in studying the genre of ancient documents.⁸ He notes that in Graeco-Roman βίοι ('lives'), the person who is the focus of the book is also the subject of a substantial proportion of the main verbs.⁹ He goes on to demonstrate that in the canonical Gospels, Jesus is the subject of a major proportion of the sentences/clauses.¹⁰ This analysis becomes a significant plank in his overall argument that the canonical Gospels should be seen as Graeco-Roman βίοι.

Burridge performs his analysis on the Graeco-Roman literature mainly by using a computer analysis which identifies both the nouns found in the document under consideration, and in particular, occurrences of nouns in the nominative case (which are likely to be subjects of verbs).¹¹ This is clearly not a nuanced analysis (as Burridge himself notes¹²); for nominative nouns can occur in other grammatical constructions (for example, as the complement of equative verbs, e.g. εἰμί, γίνουσι), and for numerous verbs no subject is explicitly stated. A full analysis would require examining each of the clauses of Acts by hand, as Burridge does for the canonical Gospels. Hence the results below should be regarded as preliminary, pending further detailed examination of Acts.

When we turn to Acts, the analysis is interesting. The table in Appendix A sets out the main proper nouns which are found in the book, both in any case and specifically in the nominative.¹³ Unsurprisingly, Saul/Paul is found frequently,

8 Richard A. Burridge, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (SNTSMS 70; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 113-17.

9 *Ibid.*, 134-38, 162-67, and see the pie charts in the appendix, 261-70.

10 *Ibid.*, 195-99, 223-25, and see the pie charts in the appendix, 271-74. Burridge estimates that Jesus is the subject of 24.4% of Mark's verbs, 17.2% of Matthew's, 17.9% of Luke's, and 20.2% of John's. He further notes that the teaching of Jesus occupies a further substantial proportion of the verbs: Mark 20.2%, Matthew 42.5%, Luke 36.8%, and John 34%.

11 *Ibid.*, 114-16.

12 *Ibid.*, 115.

13 Statistics cited are based on the NA27/UBS4 text, and were prepared with the assistance of Accordance. There is, of course, a significant issue over *which* text of Acts we work with for this analysis – the Alexandrian or the Western, and I have sided with the majority in scholarship in regarding the Western text as secondary. For discussion, see, e.g. (taking the Alexandrian view) Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (2nd ed.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft/United Bible Societies, 1994), 222-36; C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (ICC; 2 vols; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), 1:1-29; Peter Head, 'Acts and the Problem of its Texts', in Bruce W. Winter and Andrew D. Clarke, eds, *The Book of Acts in its Ancient Literary Setting* (A1CS 1; Cambridge/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 415-44; and (supporting the Western text as more original) M.-É. Boismard, OP, *Le texte occidental des Actes des Apôtres* (EBib n.s. 40; 2nd ed.; Paris: Gabalda, 2000); Jenny Read-Heimerdinger, *The Bezan Text of Acts: A Contribution of Discourse Analysis to Textual Criticism* (JSNTSup 236; London: Sheffield Academic, 2002); Josep Rius-Camps and Jenny Read-Heimerdinger, *The Message of Acts in Codex Bezae: A Comparison with the Alexandrian Tradition* (LNTS; projected 4 vols; London: T. & T. Clark International, 2004-).

but θεός 'God' occurs more times, both in general and in the nominative case in particular. These two proper names dominate the landscape of Acts – only κύριος 'Lord' and πνεῦμα 'S/spirit' are even remotely near them in frequency, and in the nominative case the gap is especially wide ('Saul/Paul' and 'God' are found about 7% each and 'Lord' and 'Spirit' about 2% each).¹⁴

The case for seeing God as more important than Paul for the *whole* book of Acts is supported by noticing the spread of usage within Acts. Saul/Paul does not occur until 7:58, only occurs twice in chapter 8 (vv 1, 3), is absent between 9:24 and 11:25, and occurs once in chapter 12 (v 25). Thus for most of the first half of the book, Saul/Paul is absent – or peripheral at most. By contrast, God is spread throughout the book.¹⁵

When we look more widely in the NT, the sharpness of focus on God in Acts becomes clearer: in the NT generally 'God' is the commonest proper noun, forming 4.55% of NT occurrences of nouns, and 4.03% of NT nominative noun occurrences. In Acts the figure for occurrences of 'God' is similar to the NT in general (4.02%), but the proportion of nominatives (and therefore, likely, of verb subjects) is significantly higher (6.74%).

Appendix B provides statistics on the usage of θεός in the various NT books. This analysis highlights that, while the Pauline corpus undoubtedly uses 'God' proportionately markedly more than other parts of the NT,¹⁶ we can say three things about usage in Acts. First, by comparison with other NT narrative books (i.e. the Gospels), 'God' occurs significantly more frequently, both in absolute number terms and in occurrences per thousand words of the book in question. Second, when we consider nominative uses specifically, usage in Acts (per thousand words) is at least three times as much as any other NT narrative book (John is the nearest¹⁷) – and, indeed, the actual number of occurrences (65) is more than the four Gospels added together (55). Third, when we measure nominative uses as a percentage of NT nominative uses, Acts emerges as having 20.70%; if we compare this figure with the total length of Acts as a percentage of the NT

14 Jervell, *Theology*, 19, 21, 30-31 notes that in Acts Jesus' role and status is defined in relation to God – thus in Acts, God is never 'The God who raised Jesus from the dead' (Gal 1:1; Col 2:12), but rather Jesus is the one whom 'the God of our ancestors' raised (Acts 5:30; cf. 2:24, 32; 3:15, 26; 4:10; 10:40; 13:30, 37). One might develop this point by observing (with Brawley, *Centering*, 121-22) that God in Acts is known by his actions, notably by raising Jesus from the dead and by sending the Spirit, and not only by the preaching of the apostles.

15 Apart from no or one occurrence being found in Acts 1, 9 and 25 – a curious phenomenon which invites further investigation. Broadly similar results in terms of the spread of usage are seen when nominative occurrences alone are isolated: then Saul/Paul is not found until 8:1 and is absent similarly to the pattern for all cases, and God is absent from Acts 1, 6, 8-9, 12, 18, 20, 24-25, 28.

16 Especially in Romans: see discussion in Morris, 'Theme', esp. 250-52.

17 And note Thompson's important observation, that God is not directly characterised in John – in the Fourth Gospel, God is only known through Jesus (e.g. John 1:18); see Thompson, 'Voice', 188-94, esp. 188-89.

(13.08%), we can see that the nominative use of 'God' is proportionately higher than any other NT narrative book.

This statistical analysis suggests that there is a *prima facie* case for regarding 'God' as at least a highly significant subject in Acts. Further, a brief consideration of the passive indicative verbs of Acts¹⁸ suggests that significant uses have God as the implied actor who performs the action of the verb. Examples include 'he was lifted up' (ἐπὶ ῥῆθη, 1:9), 'there were added' (προσετέθησαν, 2:41), 'the place in which they were gathered *was shaken* (ἐσαλεύθη) and they all *were filled* (ἐπλήσθησαν) with the Holy Spirit' (4:31), and 'your prayer *has been heard* (εἰσηκούσθη) and your alms *have been remembered* (ἐμνήσθησαν) before God (10:31).¹⁹

If we further ask what other proper nouns occur most frequently, the picture expands to include κύριος 'Lord', πνεῦμα 'Spirit', πατήρ 'Father', and Ἰησοῦς 'Jesus', all key to understanding the Christian God in Acts, as well as λόγος 'word' (which is frequently accompanied by 'of God' or 'of the Lord',²⁰ and thus closely associated with God), υἱός 'son' (a key christological word) and ἄγγελος 'angel' (a key divine agent). Thus persons or objects closely associated with God (to put it no stronger) take up a high proportion of the key proper nouns in Acts.

Terms assuming or implying divine action

A further piece of evidence needs to be added to our study at this stage, and that is Luke's understanding of divine action.²¹ Notable is the use of δεῖ 'it is necessary',²² a verb found significantly more frequently in Luke-Acts than elsewhere in the NT.²³ Luke frequently uses this word to signify that God has so organised

18 235 in total excluding the 20 uses of the deponent aorist passives of ἀποκρίνομαι and δύναμαι.

19 My initial survey identifies some 37 which *prima facie* denote divine action.

20 Acts 4:31; 6:2, 7; 8:14, 25; 11:1; 12:24; 13:5, 7, 44, 46, 48; 15:35, 36; 16:32; 17:13; 18:11; 19:10; 20:35.

21 See the valuable discussions in Squires, *Plan, passim*: 1-3 outline the key terms used which highlight God's ordering of events; see also John T. Squires, 'The Plan of God in the Acts of the Apostles', in I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson, eds, *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 19-39; Marguerat, *Historian*, 96-103; David Peterson, 'The Motif of Fulfilment and the Purpose of Luke-Acts', in Bruce W. Winter and Andrew D. Clarke, eds, *The Book of Acts in its Ancient Literary Setting* (A1CS 1; Carlisle: Paternoster/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 83-104.

22 A fuller study would need to take account of other key terms which highlight divine action as well as the major theme of fulfilment of Scripture. Key terms include βουλή and θέλημα ('plan' or 'will'), μέλλω ('I am about to'), πληρῶω, τελέω and πίμπλημι (all having a sense of 'I fulfill' – plus, of course, their compounds); see discussion in Peterson, 'Motif'; Squires, *Plan*; Squires, 'Plan'; Charles H. Cosgrove, 'The Divine ΔΕΙ in Luke-Acts: Investigations into the Lukan Understanding of God's Providence', *NovT* 26 (1984), 168-90, here 184-85.

23 40 of 101 NT uses are in Luke-Acts, of which 22 are in Acts; see the careful discussion in Cosgrove, 'Divine', esp. 172-84.

events that they must happen this way:²⁴ for example, Scripture had to be fulfilled by the death of Judas (1:16); the name of Jesus is the only one given among people by which it is necessary for us to be saved (4:12, combining $\delta\epsilon\hat{\iota}$ with the infinitive $\sigma\omega\theta\eta\eta\upsilon\alpha\iota$ 'to be saved', whose passive voice is also suggestive of divine action); Ananias is told that the Lord will show Saul how much it is necessary for him to suffer for the Lord's name (9:16); and Paul is assured by the Lord that it is necessary for him to bear witness in Rome (23:11). This Lukan favourite term exposes his belief that God has a purpose which is being carried out through the stories which Luke tells in Acts. Cosgrove summarises well in three affirmations: the 'divine $\delta\epsilon\hat{\iota}$ ' (i) emphasises that the events of the Gospel and Acts are rooted in God's plan; (ii) functions as a call to obedience and submission to this plan; (iii) guarantees God's carrying out of his plan.²⁵

Wider than this, Luke strongly emphasises the fulfilment of Scripture in what is now taking place²⁶ – an emphasis we shall see in considering the speeches. To provide just one example, Paul's speech in Antioch (13:16-41) uses 'fulfilment' language prominently: the Jerusalemite Jews and their leaders fulfilled (v 27) the words of the prophets by killing Jesus; the same people carried out (v 29) everything written about Jesus; and God is now fulfilling Scripture 'for us' in the resurrection of Jesus (v 33).²⁷ The speech itself is organised as a re-telling of the story of God's dealings with Israel (vv 17-22) to show that the sacred history leads to its climax when God brought Jesus, the Saviour of Israel (v 23). The fourfold citation of Scripture which follows underlines this point, as Paul is presented as quoting Ps. 2:7 (v 33), Isa. 55:2 (LXX 55:3; v 34), Ps. 16:10 (LXX 15:10; v 35) and Hab. 1:5 (v 41).

Much more could be said on this point,²⁸ but enough has been said to show that Luke uses both specific vocabulary and the broader theme of the fulfilment of Scripture, to show that what is now happening is *God's* action for which he has prepared the way.

The focus of attention in the speeches

We shall concentrate our discussion of this point on an examination of the speeches of Acts 3-4, but the same point could be made from almost any of the speeches in Acts. To illustrate briefly, Acts 1:16-26, spoken to a Christian audi-

24 See further Steve Walton, 'Where Does the Beginning of Acts End?', in J. Verheyden, ed., *The Unity of Luke-Acts* (BETL 142; Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 448-67, here 454 and literature cited there.

25 Cosgrove, 'Divine', 183, 189.

26 See the very helpful discussion in Peterson, 'Motif', esp. (on Acts), 94-104.

27 See the helpful brief discussion in Luke T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (SP 5; Collegeville: Liturgical, 1992), *ad. loc.*

28 E.g. in considering the use of 'promise' language – $\epsilon\pi\alpha\gamma\gamma\epsilon\lambda\acute{\iota}\alpha$ 'promise' occurs 8 times in Acts (1:4; 2:33, 39; 7:17; 13:23, 32; 23:21; 26:6), always in the setting of fulfilment of God's purposes, especially in Scripture – and other key words and ideas identified by Squires, *Plan*, 1-3.

ence, focuses on the fulfilment of God's purpose in Scripture (vv 16, 20) and highlights that this was foretold by the Holy Spirit (v 16), and the decision about who will take Judas' place is made in prayer (vv 24-6).

Similarly, Acts 2:14-36, a speech to Jewish non-yet-believers, focuses on what God is now doing as the fulfilment of the Joel prophecy (vv 16-21, citing Joel 2:28-32), God's attestation of Jesus in his ministry (v 22), death and resurrection (vv 23-24), again citing Scripture in support (vv 25-8, 31, 34-5, citing respectively Pss. 15:8-11a LXX [MT 16:8-11a]; 15:10 LXX [MT 16:10]; 109:1 LXX [MT 110:1]), and concluding with the emphatic statement, 'God has made him both Lord and Messiah' (v 36).

Likewise, Acts 10:34-43, a speech to godfearing Gentile not-yet-believers, begins with Peter's reflection that God shows no bias (v 34), identifies Jesus' preaching as a message from God (v 35), clarifies that the power of Jesus' ministry was a divine anointing (v 38), asserts that God acted in raising Jesus from the dead (v 40), states that God chose the apostles as witnesses (v 41), and closes by identifying Jesus as the one appointed by God as judge (v 42), and again highlights the testimony of divine witnesses – the prophets – to the centrality of Jesus (v 43).

Again, Acts 17:22-31, a speech to outright pagans, centres on the question, 'Who is God?' This issue is raised in the narrative framework, where Paul is considered to be proclaiming a new deity, Jesus (v 18).²⁹ The speech itself expounds a Judaeo-Christian view of God in engagement with the views of Stoic and Epicureans:³⁰ God is knowable and has revealed himself (v 23); God is the creator and sustainer of the world and its inhabitants (vv 24-25); God allotted places to every nation (v 26); God wants people to seek and find him (vv 27-28); idolatry is a misguided attempt to identify the creator with elements of his creation (v 29); God calls people to turn from their former way of life and thinking since they will face judgement at the hands of Jesus, whom God raised from the dead (vv 30-31).

Finally in this brief survey, Acts 26:2-23, Paul's defence speech before Agrippa, centres on who rightly understands God. Paul introduces his background as a strict Pharisee, and thus a highly orthodox Jew (vv 4-5), and argues that his trial results from his pharisaic hope in the resurrection of the dead promised by God in Scripture (vv 6-8). He narrates his life before the Damascus Road experience to demonstrate further his fidelity to ancestral Jewish faith (vv 9-11), before telling the story of that experience in which 'the Lord' was identified as Jesus (v 15)

29 Or perhaps two deities, Jesus and Anastasis. This view seems to have originated with John Chrysostom: 'they supposed *Anastasis* (the Resurrection) to be some deity, being accustomed to worship female divinities also' (*Hom. Act.* 38); so also Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation and Commentary* (AB 31; New York: Doubleday, 1998), 605; Johnson, *Acts*, 314; *contra* Barrett, *Acts*, 2:831; Jacob Jervell, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (KEK; 17th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 444.

30 See the valuable brief discussion in Conrad H. Gempf, 'Athens, Paul at', in Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, eds, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove/Leicester: IVP, 1993), 51-54.

– again, the key question is who God is and how God may now be known. Thus the ministry to which the exalted Jesus appoints him is to turn people to *God* (v 18), and the vision in which this comes is stressed as being ‘heavenly’ (v 19, that is, sent from the realm of God³¹) – thus Paul’s whole mission derives from God.³² So when Paul summarises his preaching, it centres on calling Jews and Gentiles to turn to *God* (v 20), and God has helped him in this (v 22). Moreover, all that he proclaims is supported by the testimony of Scripture, God’s book (vv 22-23).

There is thus a consistent pattern that God is the focus of the speeches, whether to believers, Jews, godfearers, outright pagans or in a forensic setting. Admittedly, this examination of the speeches is not exhaustive. Nevertheless, the evidence presented points very strongly to a focus on *God* rather than specifically on *Jesus*.

We can understand this phenomenon further by noticing a key contrast in the speeches in Acts 3-4. When Peter speaks to the people following the healing of the man with a congenital disability (3:1-10), he highlights that the healing is the action of the ancestral Jewish God (3:13), who has exalted Jesus (3:13, 15) – and the man himself and the crowd respond to the healing by praising *God* (3:8, 9). Certainly there is an emphasis on the power of the name of Jesus to heal (3:16), but it is by faith ‘through him’ (3:16) that the healing takes place: Jesus is the one who is the means of God healing – almost the conduit through which the healing takes place.³³

Hence Peter’s call to the people is to turn to God (v 19), who has foretold what is now happening in Scripture (v 18) and who will send both times of refreshing now and his Messiah in the future (v 20).³⁴ The Pentateuch and the rest of Scripture³⁵ speak of these things (vv 22-24) and the people are the inheritors of these divine promises and covenant (v 25) – indeed, God’s purpose in raising Jesus was to bless the people of God (v 26).

When Peter responds to the charges of the gathering the following day (4:8-12), there is a greater attention given to Jesus – he is again the one through whose name the healing has taken place. However, Jesus’ significance is that *God* has

31 BDAG 737 οὐράνιος.

32 Jervell, *Apostelgeschichte*, 595 comments: ‘Paul’s entire effectiveness, because of which he is now arrested, can be explained by this heavenly vision. Because of it Paul has now accomplished a worldwide mission’ (my translation).

33 Jervell, *Apostelgeschichte*, 166 observes that this phrase suggests that the faith is either given or produced by Christ; he also observes (164) that in 3:13 ‘The Messiah Jesus plays only a passive role here’ and ‘The miracle which happened is portrayed in verses 11-16 as God’s action through Christ’ (my translations throughout this note).

34 Here there appears to be a parallel between the two elements in each of vv 20-21: the ‘times of refreshing’ (v 20a) take place while Jesus remains in heaven (v 20b); when he comes from heaven (v 20b) that will be the time of universal restoration (v 21b).

35 I take the reference to ‘the prophets... from Samuel’ to be a reference not to the person of Samuel but to the book that bears his name, which is the first book in the section of the Hebrew canon known as ‘the prophets’ (with Jervell, *Apostelgeschichte*, 170).

raised him from the dead (v 10) and thus Scripture is fulfilled in what God has now done following the mistaken verdict of the Jewish court (v 11).

The striking contrast emerges when we consider the response of the Sanhedrin, for when they discuss what to do (4:15-17), they do not mention God at all! The theocentric focus of the believers contrasts sharply with the political machinations of the Jewish leaders – and the contrast is heightened further by Peter and John's response to their warning not to speak further in the name of Jesus, for they refocus the discussion on God: it is to *God* that both believers and Jewish leaders must answer (vv 19-20).

The narrative flow continues into the return of Peter and John to the believing community, and their reaction is to pray – and their prayer is centred on who God is and what God can do: God is *δεσπότης* (v 24), the sovereign who is in control;³⁶ God is creator (v 24); God spoke in Scripture (vv 25-26); and God controls history (v 28). Thus they pray with confidence that God will act now (vv 29-30) – and Luke records that this is exactly what happens (v 31).

Thus our examination of the speeches suggests that God is the central subject in speech after speech – people are called to respond to God, and they are told of what God has done and said, in Scripture, in Jesus and in God's present actions to restore and heal.

Mission in Acts

There can be no doubt that the expansion of the gospel is an important theme in Acts. It is signalled by a number of key summary verses (6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30-31) which have been seen by some as structuring the whole book.³⁷ For our purpose, we note how dependent the expansion is upon divine initiative throughout the book. At key moments in the story it is God who steps in and moves events on, not least in the events of Pentecost which launch the mission, for there God pours out the Spirit (2:4, 16-17, citing Joel 2:28) and thus enables the believers to proclaim God's praise in many languages (2:4-11). Peter's speech, which explains how God is acting in the event, leads to three thousand people being added to the believing community (2:41).

The healing of the man at the Beautiful Gate of the Jerusalem temple (3:1-10) is another case in point. As Luke portrays this event, it is clear that subsequent events flow from the action of God in healing this man. Peter's speech happens 'while he clung onto Peter and John' (3:11), and the healing provides the starting

36 '[O]ne who has legal control and authority over persons, such as subjects or slaves', BDAG 220 s.v..

37 Notably Richard N. Longenecker, 'The Acts of the Apostles', in Frank E. Gaebelien, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 207-573, here 233-34 [= Richard N. Longenecker, *Acts* (Expositor's Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 29-30], building on the work of C. H. Turner, 'Chronology of the New Testament', in James Hastings, ed., *A Dictionary of the Bible* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1898), 1:403-25, here 421.

point for his words (3:12) – indeed, Luke chooses the verb ἀποκρίνομαι ‘answer’ to introduce what Peter says (3:12), thus suggesting that his speech arises from the implicit questions raised by the healing.³⁸ Peter’s words lead to many believing, with the number rising to five thousand (4:4), and that reaction is contrasted by Luke with the negative response of the Sanhedrin who wish the believers to stop speaking in the name of Jesus (4:18). As the story moves on further, the believers’ prayer leads to renewed power from God for witness (4:29–31).

The development of gospel ministry in Samaria is also greatly dependent on the power of God: Luke highlights that Philip’s evangelistic effectiveness (8:6) hinged on deliverance ministry and healing (8:7) – the clause ‘when they heard and saw the signs which he did’ (v 6) gives the reason for the statement of v 6a,³⁹ and the two verses are linked by an explanatory γάρ ‘for’ (v 7).⁴⁰ Further, the coming of the Spirit through Peter and John laying hands on the Samaritan converts is ‘God’s gift’ (8:20). Again, the action of God is critical to the growth of the gospel.

The Ethiopian eunuch encounters Philip because of what we might call a ‘divine appointment’,⁴¹ although this time God’s agent in arranging the meeting is an angel (8:26). But this does not mean we should see this as any less the work of God. When the Spirit prompts Philip to go to the man’s chariot (8:29), we should also see this as divine prompting. After the eunuch’s baptism, Philip is removed by the Spirit to another sphere of operations (8:39),⁴² in similar manner to Ezekiel being transported by the Spirit (e.g. Ezek 3:12, 14; 11:1; 37:1; 43:5).

One of the most crucial shifts in the growth of the gospel is Peter’s visit to Cornelius and its consequences (10:11–11:18; 15:7–9). Here, Luke stresses the divine initiative: not only does God speak to Cornelius by an angel and give him specific information about who to find and where to find him (10:3–6, 31–32; 11:13–14), but God also gives Peter a threefold vision (10:9–16) and speaks to him by the Spirit (10:19–20; 11:12). More, for Peter has hardly started his speech (‘as I began to speak’, 11:15) when God sends the Spirit upon the Gentile audience,

38 BDAG 113 ἀποκρίνομαι §1.

39 For this use see James Hope Moulton, Wilbert Francis Howard and Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1906–76), 3:145–46; Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (Biblical Languages: Greek 2; 2nd ed.; Sheffield: JSOT, 1994), 200 (although neither cite this verse as an example). This use of ἐν with articular infinitive could also be considered to be temporal (see Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 595), but the context seems also to require a causal element – the events are not merely coincident in timing.

40 With Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), 302 on both points.

41 See the valuable discussion in F. Scott Spencer, *The Portrait of Philip in Acts: A Study of Roles and Relations* (JSNTSup 67; Sheffield: JSOT, 1992), 154–58.

42 Rudolf Pesch, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (EKKNT; Zürich: Benzinger-Verlag, 1986), 1:294 sees the snatching of Philip away by the Spirit as showing that Philip did the correct thing in reaching out to a Gentile and baptising him.

evidenced by tongues-speech reminiscent of Pentecost (10:44-47; 11:15). It is this divine action which persuades 'those of the circumcision' (11:2) that *God* has acted (11:18b) – with the result that they give God praise (11:18a).

Saul's Damascus Road experience, told three times by Luke (9:1-19; 22:3-21; 26:2-23), is presented as an experience of the intervention of God-in-Jesus. That it has a divine component (and is not simply focused on Jesus) can be seen by similarities with OT and Jewish theophanies,⁴³ as well as by noticing how Luke subsequently speaks of the experience. Ananias tells Paul that in this experience, 'the God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will' (22:14). Paul himself says that the experience was a 'heavenly vision' (26:19), and the message he proclaims is to call people to turn to *God* (26:20), fulfilling the promises given by God to his ancestors (26:6).

When Barnabas and Saul begin their travelling ministry it is a further intervention of God which moves them out of Antioch (13:1-3). God speaks by the Holy Spirit (v 2), most probably through a Christian prophet in the gathering who were worshipping and fasting – for other occasions when Luke uses language like 'the Holy Spirit said' (v 2) have a prophet speaking in view (esp. Acts 21:11, but also Luke 1:67; Acts 4:25).

The rare language of God calling highlights another occasion of divine intervention in the mission. In 16:6-10 Paul and his colleagues are actively prevented by God, through the agency of the Spirit, from preaching in Asia (v 6) or entering Bithynia (v 7). The night vision of the Macedonian man (v 9) is interpreted by Luke as 'having concluded that God had *called* [προσκέκληται] us to evangelise them' (v 10). There are only four places in the NT where the *καλέω* 'call' word group is used in the sense of God calling people to a specific task or role (here; Acts 13:2, considered above; Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 1:1), so it is of interest that Luke highlights that they understood this vision as God calling them to a new task.⁴⁴ It may be significant that the journey to Macedonia marked the transition of the gospel into a new area of the world – Europe, in our terms – and this new step is presented as initiated by God, even to the extent of preventing the missionaries going in the wrong direction, further into Asia Minor.

The church lagging behind the divine initiative

With these examples of God acting to initiate new phases of the mission, we may contrast the cautious, conservative nature of the believing community at times, which further highlights the divine push to take the mission onward.

Thus, in the Cornelius story, the reaction of the circumcised believers is to criticise Peter for eating with Gentiles (11:2), and it takes the very full explanation of how God has managed events to persuade them otherwise.

43 I owe this observation to my student Tim Churchill, whose PhD thesis argues this point in full.

44 See my discussion in Steve Walton, *A Call to Live: Vocation for Everyone* (London: Triangle Books, 1994), ch. 6.

The argument rumbles on, for the claim that circumcision and Torah observance are required for salvation is still being made vociferously (15:2-3, 5). At the resultant Jerusalem meeting Luke's characters respond by repeatedly stressing what *God* has done.⁴⁵

Peter's speech focuses strongly on God who had taken the initiative (15:7-11): note 'God chose' (v 7); 'God who knows the heart testified' (v 8); '[God] made no distinction between us and them' (v 9); 'why are you testing God?' (v 10).

The meeting then hears Barnabas and Paul telling of 'all the signs and wonders which God had done among the Gentiles' (v 12).

James, in summarising, highlights that God took the initiative in the Gentile mission (v 14, 'God *first* concerned himself about'⁴⁶ taking from the Gentiles a people for his name'), and cites Scripture in support (vv 15-18, quoting Amos 9:11-12). Furthermore, these Gentiles James regards as turning to *God* (v 19). Thus the community is dragged forward, somewhat reluctantly, by the realisation that God is at work and they must not resist God.

The growth of 'the word'

We noted above the summary verses which track the growth of the mission. For Luke a key category in understanding the mission is that it is a mission of the word of the Lord or the word of God. Luke uses the terms 'the word of God' and 'the word of the Lord' frequently – his Gospel contains 5 uses and Acts 20 uses, from an NT total of 54 uses.⁴⁷ The genitive is likely to be plenary (i.e. to have elements of both subjective and objective genitive⁴⁸), in that the message is both *from* God/the Lord and *about* God/the Lord.

The message which the community speaks is the word of God (4:31). Growth of the mission is growth of the word of God (12:24; 13:49), so that when new groups respond to the gospel message they are said to 'accept' the word of God (8:14 Samaria; 11:1 Gentiles – Cornelius and his household).⁴⁹

The twelve's ministry is to be focused on the word of God, so that they must not neglect it in order to serve tables (6:2), but rather must dedicate themselves to the service of 'the word' (6:4).⁵⁰ Indeed, it is following this act of delegation by the community that 'the word of God went on growing and multiplying' (6:7, using imperfect tense verbs to indicate a continuing process).

45 Cf. Jervell, *Theology*, 22-23; also Gaventa, *Acts*, 215-27 – her whole discussion focuses strongly on the issue that 'it is God who decides' (215).

46 Ἐπισκέπτομαι with infinitive has this sense (BDAG 378 ἐπισκέπτομαι §3).

47 The other significant groupings are undisputed Paulines (9), disputed Paulines (6), Revelation (7). The combination is found in the NT with 'of God' 41 times and with 'of the Lord' 13 times – Luke-Acts uses it with 'of God' 16 times and with 'of the Lord' 9 times (see listing in n. 20 above).

48 Wallace, *Greek*, 119-21.

49 Cf. Brawley, *Centering*, 119.

50 Note τῇ διακονίᾳ τοῦ λόγου 'the service of the word', which echoes and contrasts with the use of the cognate verb in v 2, διακονεῖν τραπέζαις 'to serve tables': the apostles are servants who handle the word, not tables.

That this focus of the twelve's (and the wider apostolic group's) ministry continued can be seen from further references to the word of God/the Lord: Peter and John speak the word of the Lord in Samaria (8:25); Barnabas and Saul speak the word of God in the Cypriot synagogues (13:5) and to Sergius Paulus, the proconsul (13:7); in Antioch the city gathers to hear the word of the Lord (13:44), and Paul and Barnabas summarise their message as 'the word of God' (13:47); on their return to Antioch they continue to teach and proclaim the word of the Lord (15:35); they summarise their previous work as proclaiming the word of the Lord (15:36); in Philippi Paul and Silas speak the word of the Lord to the jailer and his family (16:32); the message preached in Beroea is identified by Luke as 'the word of God' (17:13); Paul's ministry in Corinth (18:11) and Ephesus (19:10) is centred on the word of God/the Lord.

This theme within Acts highlights a characteristic of God: the God of Acts is a communicator and a missionary – God reaches out to speak to people in his word, the gospel message, in order to introduce them to Jesus and lead them to salvation. But here we are stepping beyond the boundaries of our present study, and straying into asking about the character of God in Acts.

Some implications

It seems beyond dispute that God is the key actor in Acts. To see Acts this way contrasts significantly with much of the scholarly literature until recently,⁵¹ and is markedly different from much popular reading and preaching of Acts, which mistakenly treats the human agents in the story as most significant for the plot's development. This recognition is suggestive for at least two reasons in relation to Acts' ancient setting, which we can sketch only briefly.

First, Acts provides a focused and clear answer to the question, 'Who is God?' This question was much asked in the ancient world,⁵² and the Jews were considered unusual because of their monotheism. Thus Luke could not simply announce 'God' without clarifying the nature of the god he proclaimed. Hence the stress on who God is and what God is now doing would be highly relevant to a Graeco-Roman audience. Luke's focus on God would contribute significantly to his aim to persuade his audience that the God of Israel, who had now made himself known in and through both the life, ministry, death and (supremely) resurrection of Jesus, and the work of the Spirit experienced in the believing community, was the one true God.

That said, it must be acknowledged that such readers would not find much of Luke's presentation congenial, notably his focus on the fulfilment of Scripture and his emphasis on the claim that the God who acted in Israel's history had

51 See n. 6.

52 Cf. the analysis found in Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* (*De natura deorum*), which identifies three major positions in the Graeco-Roman world: the Stoics, the Epicureans and the Academicians (Cicero identifies his own view with the sceptical view of the latter group).

acted in Jesus and was now acting in the life of the believing community. There are few places where the nature of God is tackled head on as a topic (the two speeches to pagans, in Lystra and Athens, are perhaps the clearest examples, Acts 14:15-17; 17:22-31).⁵⁴ This rather suggests that at least a significant part of Luke's target audience knew the Scriptures of Israel.⁵⁴

Thus, second, to write in this way would facilitate apologetic and proclamation among Jews and godfearers, who were those who knew these Scriptures. They would need no persuasion of Luke's monotheism, but they would need to be convinced that the locus of God's activity was now the community which saw Jesus as Israel's Messiah, not least because this community was now including Gentiles in their midst without requiring circumcision. Such people would be well placed to grasp Luke's highlighting of the fulfilment of Scripture in Jesus and the community of his followers – and, of course, Christian hearers of Acts would find the book helpful in equipping them to engage in evangelism and apologetics among such people, as Moule judiciously comments:

Here, then, in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts, each with its own peculiar emphasis, may be found the deposit of early Christian explanation: here are the voices of Christians explaining what led to their existence – how they themselves came to be: telling the story to themselves, that they may tell it to others, or even telling it directly to those others.⁵⁵

In combination, this dual audience provides an audience for Acts which is wide-ranging across the Mediterranean community. Luke has written a book which communicates a 'zeal for God' both to those who have a Jewish heritage, whether as ethnic Jews or godfearers, and to those who are standing on the outside of Judaism looking in from paganism or emperor worship or the worship of any (or all!) of the gods of the Graeco-Roman world. Acts therefore fits with Bauckham's proposal that the Gospels, too, were aimed at such a wide audience.⁵⁶

Abstract

This article argues that the true focus of the 'Acts of the Apostles' is God and the work and purposes God is now carrying out in the world. Four lines of evidence point this way: an analysis of clause and sentence subjects (following Richard Burridge's work on the Gospels as Graeco-Roman 'lives'); terms assuming or implying divine action; a consideration of the focus of the speeches (within and outside the believing community, and in a variety of circumstances); and the

53 I owe this observation to my student Dr Peter Mallen.

54 So, among others, John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20* (WBC 35A; Dallas: Word, 1989), xxxii-iii; Witherington, *Acts*, 63-65; Jervell, *Apostelgeschichte*, 89-90.

55 C. F. D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament* (BNTC; 3rd ed.; London: A. & C. Black, 1981), 133.

56 Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), esp. 9-48.

development and growth of the mission in Acts. Acts thus facilitates and feeds apologetic and evangelistic proclamation, especially in the Gentile world.

Appendix A: Nouns in Acts

	All nouns				Nominative nouns			
	NT	NT %	Acts	Acts %	NT	NT %	Acts	Acts %
<i>Different words</i>	2509		859		1229		311	
<i>Total occurrences</i>	28976	100.0	4156	100.0	7787	100.0	965	100.0
θεός 'God'	1317	4.6	167	4.0	314	4.0	65	6.7
Παῦλος, Σαούλ, Σαῦλος 'Paul, Saul'	182	0.6	152	3.7	87	1.1	63	6.5
κύριος 'Lord'	717	2.5	107	2.6	183	2.4	24	2.5
πνεῦμα 'spirit'	379	1.3	70	1.7	102	1.3	22	2.3
πατήρ 'father'	413	1.4	35	0.8	134	1.7	11	1.1
Ἰησοῦς 'Jesus'	917	3.2	69	1.7	462	5.9	10	1.0
λόγος 'word'	330	1.1	65	1.6	78	1.0	10	1.0
Ἰωάννης 'John'	135	0.5	24	0.6	54	0.7	10	1.0
Βαρναβᾶς 'Barnabas'	28	0.1	23	0.6	10	0.1	8	0.8
<i>Other nouns</i>	24558	84.8	3444	82.9	6363	81.7	742	76.9
άνηρ 'man'	216	0.8	100	2.4	114	1.5	58	6.0
Πέτρος 'Peter'	156	0.5	56	1.4	100	1.3	37	3.8
ἀδελφός 'brother'	343	1.2	57	1.4	188	2.4	26	2.7
ἄνθρωπος 'person'	550	1.9	46	1.1	150	1.9	14	1.5
ἄγγελος 'angel'	175	0.6	21	0.5	70	0.9	11	1.1
υἱός 'son'	377	1.3	21	0.5	194	2.5	10	1.0
ὄχλος 'crowd'	175	0.6	22	0.5	74	1.0	6	0.6
γυνή 'woman'	215	0.7	19	0.5	88	1.1	4	0.4
Χριστός 'Messiah'	472	1.6	14	0.3	76	1.0	3	0.3

Appendix B: Uses of θεός 'God' in the New Testament

<i>NT book</i>	Uses in any case					Nominative uses		
	<i>Total words in book</i>	<i>Times</i>	<i>Times per 1000 words in book</i>	<i>NT % of uses</i>	<i>Book as NT %</i>	<i>Times</i>	<i>Times per 1000 words in book</i>	<i>NT % of uses</i>
Matt.	21259	51	2.40	3.87	13.34	9	0.42	2.87
Mark	13090	49	3.74	3.72	8.21	12	0.92	3.82
Luke	22433	122	5.44	9.26	14.07	15	0.67	4.78
John	18207	83	4.56	6.30	11.42	19	1.04	6.05
Acts	20845	167	8.01	12.68	13.08	65	3.12	20.70
Rom.	8278	153	18.48	11.62	5.19	32	3.87	10.19
1 Cor.	8127	106	13.04	8.05	5.10	33	4.06	10.51
2 Cor.	5193	79	15.21	6.00	3.26	20	3.85	6.37
Gal.	2655	31	11.68	2.35	1.67	8	3.01	2.55
Eph.	2788	31	11.12	2.35	1.75	6	2.15	1.91
Phil.	1914	23	12.02	1.75	1.20	8	4.18	2.55
Col.	1833	21	11.46	1.59	1.15	2	1.09	0.64
1 Thess.	1715	36	20.99	2.73	1.08	7	4.08	2.23
2 Thess.	944	18	19.07	1.37	0.59	5	5.3	1.59
1 Tim.	1862	22	11.82	1.67	1.17	2	1.07	0.64
2 Tim.	1445	13	9.00	0.99	0.91	2	1.38	0.64
Titus	775	13	16.77	0.99	0.49	1	1.29	0.32
Phlm.	386	2	5.18	0.15	0.24	0	0	0.00
Heb.	5691	68	11.95	5.16	3.57	24	4.22	7.64
Jas.	2077	16	7.70	1.21	1.30	4	1.93	1.27
1 Pet.	1953	39	19.97	2.96	1.23	5	2.56	1.59
2 Pet.	1243	7	5.63	0.53	0.78	1	0.8	0.32
1 John	2494	62	24.86	4.71	1.56	13	5.21	4.14
2 John	278	2	7.19	0.15	0.17	0	0	0.00
3 John	254	3	11.81	0.23	0.16	0	0	0.00
Jude	535	4	7.48	0.30	0.34	0	0	0.00
Rev.	11117	96	8.64	7.29	6.97	21	1.89	6.69
Total	159391	1317				314		