

PREFACE

The Book of Acts nears its climax with a sea voyage. I began writing this commentary on the open deck of a ship on my first voyage at sea, and through the feel of the ship, I felt a certain resonance with Paul and with the larger story of Acts. The main theme of the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts is the coming of the Realm of God—the confidence that God is seeking to restore the present old and broken world so that all things will fully manifest God’s purposes for all to live in love, peace, justice, and abundance. From Luke’s point of view, this restoration is already underway in nascent form through the ministry of Jesus, though Luke believed it would come fully only with Jesus’s return.

Beginning to write at sea affected my work. It called attention to differences between the world of Acts and the world of today. The ships on which Paul rode would have fit in the control room of my vessel. Yet we visited ports in which people struggle for survival, evidence the need for the manifestation of the Realm of God is as urgent today as then.

This commentary seeks to spark conversations with Acts that respect the otherness of the text—the differences in its world from the world of today—while exploring points at which this conversation continues to offer hope.¹ At times, Acts points a way forward for today’s community. At other times—when elements of a passage in Acts are theologically or ethically problematic—the conversation sets in motion theological reflection that can help us chart a course towards a world more like the Realm.

As a heterosexual male of European origin in the upper middle class, I enjoy the best the old age offers, often at the expense of women and people of other racial and ethnic communities. Yet, I hope this book can be a companion to preaching that sails on a journey of transformation toward a world ever more in the model of the Realm of God.

After a brief Introduction, this commentary moves passage by passage through Acts. Each discussion contains three elements. First, it interprets the passage in light of its historical, literary, and theological function in Acts. Second, because I see the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts as a giant chiasmus, I mention how the chiastic passage in the Gospel illumines our understanding of the passage in Acts. This chiastic structure is explained in Appendix 1. Third, each discussion offers suggestions for sermons. Since most of my exegetical observations are found in the standard commentaries, I cite other scholars only at points at which a distinct viewpoint has a direct effect on this work.²

I pause now over the titles “Old Testament” and “New Testament.” The names “Old” and “New” are theologically problematic: “old” can suggest outdated, in need of replacement, whereas “new” can refer to new and improved. These designations contribute to anti-Judaism, anti-Semitism, and supersessionism (the notion that Judaism is no longer valid and that Christianity has superseded or replaced Judaism). Preachers today increasingly use alternate terms such as Hebrew Bible or First and Second Testaments. These ways of speaking are not quite satisfactory because “First” and “Second” can imply first place and second place, and “Hebrew Bible” is not strictly accurate since parts of the “Hebrew Bible” are in Aramaic. In this commentary, I lean toward “Torah, Prophets, and Writings” for the first thirty-nine books and “Gospels and Letters” for the second twenty-seven books.³ This designation has the advantage of implying that the one Bible is composed of these different but theologically parallel parts.

I have previously ventured into the waters of Luke-Acts. *Preaching Luke-Acts* suggests that preachers develop sermons on themes that stretch across the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts.⁴ The theme is essentially the text of the sermon. Readers interested in a more detailed consideration of introductory matters can consult my chapters on the Gospel and Acts in *The Chalice Introduction to the New Testament*.⁵

I thank the Trustees of Christian Theological Seminary for the sabbatical that made this writing possible. I thank David Lott for encouragement, support, and good-humored emails. I thank the advisors of this series for judicious guidance: Luke Powery, Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, and David Lose. The Book of Acts played a seminal role in the emergence of the movement of which I have been a lifelong part, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Just as Paul often traveled with companions, so Linda McKiernan-Allen, minister of West Street Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Tipton,

Indiana, was not only a companion on my sea voyage but is a continuing partner on the great journey of life.

The Book of Acts envisions a church so full of the Holy Spirit its interior life embodies the Realm of God and its external witness is irrepressible. It envisions a church whose message and life are magnetic to people from every race, tribe, people, and tongue. It envisions a church with the courage to face the most savage powers of its time to invite repentance as the first step on the journey to restoration and to the Realm. I send this book forward with a prayer that the church of our time may be such a community.

Notes

1. On the text as other, see Ronald J. Allen, *Preaching and the Other: Studies in Postmodern Insights* (Saint Louis: Chalice, 2009).
2. A brief list of works for further reading, including many standard commentaries on the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, is found in Appendix 4.
3. See further Ronald J. Allen, "A New Name for the Old Book: Torah, Prophets, Writings, Gospels, Letters," *Encounter* 68 (2007), 53–62.
4. Ronald J. Allen, *Preaching Luke-Acts*, Preaching Classic Texts (Saint Louis: Chalice, 2000).
5. Ronald J. Allen, "The Story of Jesus According to 'Luke' and 'The Story of the Church According to 'Luke,'" in *The Chalice Introduction to the New Testament*, ed. Dennis Smith (Saint Louis: Chalice, 2004), 175–219.