

## *Narratives of Reading in Luke-Acts*

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**ABSTRACT:** The six narrations of reading in the Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles reflect an oral/aural culture in which texts and traditions were routinely experienced through verbal recitation and reading. These narratives of reading also participate in ancient moral discourses that highlight the importance of the reader's character in the event of reading. When read within their cultural and narrative contexts, Luke's accounts are seen to represent reading as a practice that shapes community by virtue of the reader. This insight is of special significance to the depiction of Jesus and the people of God in Luke-Acts. These conclusions raise a number of questions for theological librarians about present-day approaches to reading and research.

In a recent survey of biblical scholarship, Holly Haeron identifies six primary emphases in past studies of orality and literacy in the biblical world.<sup>1</sup> All of the scholarship surveyed is focused in one way or another on the oral transmission and performance of texts and traditions in antiquity.<sup>2</sup> Absent from Haeron's survey, however, are narrative-critical analyses of the literary representation of reading in the Bible. This *lacuna*, which accurately reflects scholarly inattention to the narration of the event of reading in the New Testament, is also reflected in Lukan scholarship, in which accounts of the oral practice of reading in Luke-Acts are focused on historical and cultural dynamics of oral transmission, and not the literary portrayal of oral reading in Luke-Acts.<sup>3</sup> This essay will address this *desideratum* in Lukan scholarship and analyze the narrations of reading in Luke-Acts,

<sup>1</sup> Holly Haeron, "The Implications of Orality for Studies of the Biblical Text," in *Performing the Gospel: Orality, Memory, and Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 3-20. The six emphases are 1) the evidence of oral recitation and reading of the biblical text in the structure of the texts; 2) the function or impact of the oral/aural texts in comparison to written texts; 3) the complex relationship between oral and written texts; 4) the nature and contexts of the oral performance of texts; 5) the transmission of oral texts, and 6) the power-relationships implicated in oral transmission of the text.

<sup>2</sup> A classic treatment of orality and the New Testament is that of Werner Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q*, Voices in Performance and Text (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997 [1983]). Kelber's analysis draws from the seminal work of Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, New Accents (New York: Methuen, 1982). See also, among others, Birger Gerhardsson, *Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity* (Lund: Gleerup, 1962); Paul J. Achtemeier, "Omne Verbum Sonat: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity," *JBL* 109 (1990): 3-27; Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History, History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History* (Leiden: Brill, 2000); Jonathan A. Draper, ed., *Orality, Literacy, and Colonialism in Antiquity*, Semeia Studies 47 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> There is not, to my knowledge, a prior study of the narrative representation of reading in Luke or Acts. A growing number of "reader-response" analyses of Luke-Acts address the oral habits of ancient reading, especially their shaping of Luke's implied or actual readers; see, for example, F. Gerald Downing, "Theophilus's First Reading of Luke-Acts," in *Luke's Literary Achievement: Collected Essays* (ed. C. M. Tuckett; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 91-109, especially the literature cited on page 92. Most promising is the title of William David Shiell's recent book, *Reading Acts: The Lector and the Early Christian Audience* (Boston: Brill, 2004). While Shiell's work helpfully highlights the orality of ancient reading practices, his historical reconstruction is entirely focused on the ancient lector's public reading of Acts in "the world in front of the text," not Luke's narrative representation of the lector's act of reading in "the world of the text." Shiell concludes that the ancient readers of Acts would have taken their cue from the gestures and other literary cues that are more or less explicitly narrated in Luke-Acts. These gestures, however, do not occur in scenes of public reading, but of public oration. A recent bibliography of scholarship on Luke's use of Scripture is available in Peter Mallen, *Reading and Transformation of Isaiah in Luke-Acts* (London: T & T Clark, 2008), 4-8. See also Luke Timothy Johnson, *Septuagintal Midrash in the Speeches of Acts* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2002), 58-59.

aiming to understand and explain Luke's characterization of the event of reading. How does reading occur, and what does it accomplish in Luke-Acts? This essay's answers to these questions are centered on the distinctively oral nature of reading in antiquity, but are also seen to elucidate contemporary practices of reading and research—a topic addressed in this essay's concluding postscript on theological librarianship.

As Roger Chartier and other historians have argued, studies of past reading practices should give special attention to modes of accessing the text that have disappeared in our contemporary world: "A history of reading must not limit itself to the genealogy of our own contemporary manner of reading, in silence and using only our eyes; it must also (and perhaps above all) take on the task of retracing forgotten gestures and habits that have not existed for some time."<sup>4</sup> The difference between ancient reading practices and our own is seen, for example, in the almost complete illiteracy among all but the social-cultural elite in the ancient Greco-Roman world—including Palestinian Judaism—in which only 5-15% of the population was literate.<sup>5</sup> The reality of ancient literacy was complex, of course, with relatively few people reading and composing full texts, but a greater percentage reading with lesser facility.<sup>6</sup> Such complexities notwithstanding, ancient reading was generally not a private or silent encounter with marks on a page, but was usually a public broadcast and aural encounter with the voice of the reader.<sup>7</sup> Correspondingly, our understanding of reading in the narrative of Luke-Acts must first remove the conceptual lenses through which we understand reading in the contemporary world, and "begin to read with our ears as well as our eyes."<sup>8</sup>

Six scenes in Luke-Acts explicitly identify an encounter with a text as an act of reading; in every instance the reading is from the Jewish scriptures.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the many other Lukan scenes in which scripture is cited by the narrator or a character in the narrative, these scenes explicitly connect the recitation of a text to an act of reading, either by depiction of the encounter with a text, or by use of a standard Greek term for reading: *anagi(g)nōskōl*

<sup>4</sup> Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 8-9.

<sup>5</sup> The fundamental study of ancient literacy is William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), esp. 267. For specific application of ancient literacy rates to New Testament studies, see Richard Rohrbaugh, "The Social Location of the Marcan Audience," *BTB* 23 (1993): 115; Pieter J. J. Botha, "Greco-Roman Literacy as Setting for New Testament Writings," *Neotestamentica* 26 (1992): 195-215. For analysis of ancient Jewish literacy, see Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001). On the complexities of defining and measuring ancient literacy, see Robert A. Derrenbacher, Jr. "Writing, Books, and Readers in the Ancient World," *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 52 (1998): 206-207.

<sup>6</sup> Lucretia B. Yaghjian, "Ancient Reading," in *The Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation* (ed. R. Rohrbaugh; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996), 208-209.

<sup>7</sup> The ancient Greeks were not incapable of silent reading: B. M. W. Knox, "Silent Reading in Antiquity," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 9 (1968): 421, 435. Cf. F. Gilliard, "More Silent Reading in Antiquity," *JBL* 112 (1993): 689-94.

<sup>8</sup> Yaghjian, "Ancient Reading," 207.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 4:16, 10:26; Acts 8:28-32; 13:27; 15:21; 17:11. In each of these instances, a text is explicitly present in the narrative as the object of a reader's attention, or a conventional term for reading (*anagi(g)nōskō*) is employed. It is notable that one-third of the thirty-three explicit references to reading (*anagi(g)nōskō* and *anagnōsis*) in the New Testament occur in Luke-Acts. The challenge of identifying the verbs used for reading in the Greco-Roman world is discussed by Jesper Svenbro, *Phrasikleia: An Anthropology of Reading in Ancient Greece* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 2-5. The classic work on the topic of Greek verbs meaning "to read" is Pierre Chantraine, "Les verbes grecs significatifs 'lire,'" in *Mélanges Henri Grégoire*, Annuaire de l'Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire Orientales et Slaves 10 (Brussels: Secretariat des Éditions de l'Institut, 1950), 115-126. "The verb [*anagi(g)nōskō/skein*] was highly appropriate for signifying reading, that is, for recognizing characters and deciphering them" (Chantraine, *Les verbes*, 115). Cf. Jesper Svenbro, "Archaic and Classical Greece: The Invention of Silent Reading," in *A History of Reading in the West* (ed. G. Cavallo and R. Chartier; trans. L. Cochrane; Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999 [1995]), 42-43; D. J. Allan, "ΑΝΑΓΙΓΝΩΣΚΩ and Some Cognate Words," *The Classical Quarterly*, New Series, Vol. 30, No. 1 (1980): 244-251.

*skein*. The vocalized nature of these readings is evidence of their participation in a “rhetorical culture,” wherein the reading and writing of manuscripts occurred in societies still dominated by the oral transmission and performance of knowledge.<sup>10</sup> In these Lukan scenes, reading is a performance by a reader who is present as a character within a listening group or community. These three components to the reading situation—performance, character, and community—all contribute to our understanding of the narrative function of the events of reading in Luke-Acts.

First, reading in Luke-Acts is an oral performance of the text that embodies the text in the person of the reader. Unlike silent reading, public performance identifies the voice, gestures, and other expressions of the reader with those of the character(s) in the text. This identification of the text and reader in turn collapses the distance between the hearers of the reading and the text. The characters of the text—their words, behaviors, and values—are present to the audience in the person of the reader. As Werner Kelber has observed, “spoken words . . . produce the actuality of what they refer to in the midst of the people.”<sup>11</sup> As we shall see, the performance of reading in Luke-Acts has a twofold effect on the act of reading. First, it associates the reader’s identity with the characters of the text in a way that shapes the texts (their content and interpretation) according to the reader’s purposes. Second, the oral performance of the text creates an expectation in the reader and hearer that there is a character in the text to be recognized and identified with. Across the different contexts of oral reading—which vary significantly in Luke-Acts—the embodiment of the text in the reader’s performance enables this identification of the character(s) in the text.

Second, the character of the reader in Luke-Acts is on display. Unlike private access to the text in our contemporary culture (in which the reader’s moral qualities are hidden from view), the public performances in Luke-Acts display the reader’s moral and intellectual character. To varying degrees in Luke’s narrative, the disposition of the reader influences the way the text is read and interpreted. As we shall see, the relationship between characters in the text and the character of the reader/hearer is a central theme of the Lukan scenes, involving narrations of reading that participate in conventional moral discourses in the ancient world.

Third, reading signifies and shapes community in Luke-Acts. Whether involving only two people or within a large audience, ancient reading was primarily a social act that drew upon group identity through its evocation of shared knowledge and understandings. As William Shiell has observed, the ancient practice of reading “relied upon communal memory.”<sup>12</sup> This ability to understand a reading, recognize it, and remember it was as much a marker of group identity as physical participation in the reading assembly. The capacity of oral reading to enact these cultural markers of identity constituted part of its definitive role in the community. Oral reading not only signaled traditional understandings (e.g., of Messiah, Law, Israel), but also reshaped these through subtle (and not so subtle) reformulations and reapplications of sacred events, characters, and locations.

## LUKE 4:16-30

The most detailed and thematically important scene of reading in Luke-Acts is narrated in Luke 4 as the lection by Jesus in the Nazareth synagogue. Scholars have long recognized the narrative significance of this episode for the

<sup>10</sup>This understanding of “rhetorical culture” is indebted to Walter Ong, *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 214. See also Vernon Robbin’s definition of “rhetorical cultures” as “environments where oral and written speech interact closely with one another.” [“Writing as a Rhetorical Act in Plutarch and the Gospels,” in *Persuasive Artistry: Studies in New Testament Rhetoric in Honor of George A. Kennedy* (JSNTSup 50; ed. D. F. Watson; Sheffield: JSOT, 1991), 145.]

<sup>11</sup>Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel*, 19.

<sup>12</sup>Shiell, *Reading Acts*, 10.

development of the Lukan themes of Jesus the prophet, the gospel to the poor, and the inclusion of the Gentiles among God's people.<sup>13</sup> The passage also serves as the paradigmatic instance of reading in Luke-Acts. Jesus is characterized as a reader, who customarily performed the lection in the synagogue according to ancient Jewish practice (4:16). In his public performance of the text from the prophet Isaiah, Jesus is further characterized as the embodiment of the character described in the prophetic text. This enactment of the text is evidenced by the reaction of the synagogue (discussed below), and also in the reading's three uses of the first-person pronoun "me" (4:18), as well as the contemporizing interpretation announced by Jesus in 4:21: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."<sup>14</sup> In this way, the first-person reading identifies Jesus with the voice of Isaiah's text (e.g., "The spirit of the Lord is upon me . . ."), and presents the character depicted in the text in the voice of the reader. The result is the implicit identification of the text's character with the person of the reader. Jesus' identity is elided with that of the character in the text through an "associative identification" of the reader's voice and that of scripture; the audience is thereby led to recognition of the text's character through the reader's oral performance.<sup>15</sup>

From the standpoint of oral reading practices, Jesus' identification with the text demonstrates the control he exerts as the reader of the text. His oral identification with the character of the text accompanies a powerful recombination and reinterpretation of the text. First, the oral performance of the text identifies Jesus not only as the lector but also as the selector of the text. This is related to the observation by Michel de Certeau: "[The reader] invents in texts something different from what they intended . . . [The reader] combines their fragments and creates something un-known in the space organized by their capacity for allowing an indefinite plurality of meanings."<sup>16</sup> As de Certeau suggests, the reader's action can be intertwined with the authorial act in the selection of texts for presentation. Whether or not this selection was based on a Jewish lectionary cycle (which is doubtful), the narrative presents Jesus as the selector of the text in Isaiah, in which a creative recombination of the texts from Isaiah presents the reader's control over the "scroll of Isaiah" in the event of reading.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup>The programmatic importance of the Nazareth sermon to Luke and Acts is observed both in the commentary tradition and studies focused on the individual passage, e.g., J. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, Anchor Bible 28 (New York: Doubleday, 1981), 529; R. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation: Volume 1: The Gospel of Luke* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986), 63; Emerson B. Powery, *Jesus Reads Scripture: The Function of Jesus' Use of Scripture in the Synoptic Gospels* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003), 205.

<sup>14</sup>The reading of Isa 61:1 in Luke 4:18 presents Jesus as the "anointed" prophet of God, who proclaims the liberating actions of God on behalf of his audience.

<sup>15</sup>The designation "associative identification" is that of Joanna Dewey, "The Gospel of Mark as Oral/Aural Event: Implications for Interpretation," in *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament*, ed. Edgar V. McKnight and Elizabeth Struthers Malbon (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1994), 154-55.

<sup>16</sup>Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 169.

<sup>17</sup>The selection of scripture in Luke 4 is often connected in the scholarly literature to readings selected as part of the ancient Jewish liturgy. Such claims must be qualified by the realization that Luke 4 is likely the oldest extant account of a synagogue service. As Harry Gamble has observed, analysis of first century reading practices must take into account the fact that most of the evidence about the synagogue lections comes from the second century and later: "It cannot be assumed that what is attested for the second and later centuries was already in effect in earlier times, for practice was increasingly regulated and standardized after the destruction of the Temple . . ." (*Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995], 208). Even if we accept latter accounts as indicative of reading practices in the New Testament era, the scholarly consensus is that the *haftarah* (the reading from the prophets) was not a fixed part of the lectionary in the first century C.E. Further mitigating the influence of the lectionary on the selection of scripture in Luke 4 is the fact that none of the fifth- and sixth-century sources mention Isa 61:1 as a *haftarah*. On this, among others, see C. A. Kimball, "Jesus' Exposition of Scripture in Luke 4:16-30 in Light of Jewish Hermeneutics," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 21 (1994): 185; D. Monshouwer, "The Reading of the Prophet in the

The full extent and importance of the reader's selection and recombination of text(s) is seen in Luke 4:18, where Jesus reads from Isaiah 61:1-2 and inserts a line from Isaiah 58:6 ("to let the oppressed go free").<sup>18</sup> This interpolation has long been studied by scholars; equally lengthy is the debate over its significance for interpretation of the passage.<sup>19</sup> As a window into the orality of reading in the ancient world, the creative recombination of sacred text in Luke 4 suggests that reading was a selective and creative act of the reader in which the lector's choices shaped the audience's awareness and understanding of the text.

The definitive importance of the reader to the act of reading is additionally seen in Jesus' interpretation of the reading, and its influence on the synagogue audience. The authority of Jesus as reader and interpreter of the prophetic text is first displayed in Luke 4:20-22:

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?"<sup>20</sup>

As scholars have observed, the words and actions of Jesus, as well as the audience's reaction, are evidence that Jesus is the authoritative interpreter of Scripture in Luke 4.<sup>21</sup> Additional insights are gained from attention to the dynamics of oral/aural reading in the passage, especially the references to hearing with "ears" (4:21) and reading with the "mouth" (4:22). Of central importance to the narrative depiction of the audience's reading is the somewhat abrupt appearance of the question about Jesus' identity in Luke 4:22: "Is not this Joseph's son?" The question externalizes the narrative's focus on the internal attention and attitude of the assembled worshippers and occurs as a final, climatic event following the reading from Isaiah. In light of Jesus' reading, the question reflects back, not only on the identity of Jesus, but also on Jesus' self-identification with the voice in the "scroll of Isaiah." In this way, the narrative plot of Luke 4:16-22 represents recognition of Jesus as a culminating act among the hearers.<sup>22</sup> In the second half of the Nazareth pericope (4:23-30), the interpretation of the reading is continued in Jesus' critique of the Nazareth audience. The identification of Jesus with the prophetic reading from Isaiah is continued in his self-designation as a "prophet" in 4:24, and in the repeated references to the missions of Hebrew prophets to Gentiles in the Elijah-Elisha narrative (4:25-27).

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Synagogue at Nazareth," *Biblica* 71 (1991): 90-99; A. Finkel, "Jesus' Preaching in the Synagogue on the Sabbath (Luke 4:16-28), *SIDJC* 17 (1984): 4-10; L. C. Crockett, "Luke 4.16-30 and the Jewish Lectionary Cycle," *JJS* 57 (1966): 13-45. A careful statement of the relationship of Luke 4 and the Jewish lectionary is that of Leon Morris, *The New Testament and the Jewish Lectionaries* (London: Tyndale Press, 1964), 23: ". . . These considerations make it exceedingly difficult to appeal to fixed prophetic lections as a basis for interpreting the New Testament."

<sup>18</sup>"Freedom/Release" (*aphesis*) is the catchword for linking Isa 61:1 and 58:6. Cf. Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 533.

<sup>19</sup>A good deal of work has been done on the intertextuality of this passage. For example, see J. A. Fitzmyer, "The Use of the Old Testament in Luke-Acts," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1992 Seminar Papers*, ed. E. Boring (Missoula Mont.: Scholars Press, 1992), 524-38; C. A. Kimball, "Jesus' Exposition of Scripture in Luke 4:16-30 in Light of Jewish Hermeneutics," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 21 (1994): 179-202; Craig A. Evans and Jack A. Sanders, *Luke and Scripture: The Function of Sacred Tradition in Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

<sup>20</sup>All biblical quotations are from the NRSV, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>21</sup>This point is underscored by Susan Noakes, "Gracious Words: Luke's Jesus and the Reading of Sacred Poetry at the Beginning of the Christian Era," in *The Ethnography of Reading* (ed. Jonathan Boyarin; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992): 52: "[Luke] summons converts to look to Jesus's authority as the key to the correct reading of Hebrew scripture."

<sup>22</sup>The prophetic critique by Jesus in the second half of the Nazareth pericope (4:23-30) results in a second climatic event: Jesus' escape from the angry mob (Luke 4:30). This scene parallels the first narrative climax, depicting the audience's (mis)recognition and (mis)identification of Jesus, this time facilitating Jesus' escape.

The reading by Jesus at first elicits a very positive response to this character. Jesus' self-involving reading is initially judged by his synagogue audience to be "gracious words." This designation of Jesus' reading characterizes it as a generous reading, which communicates gifts to the hearers. Luke's use of the term "grace" (*charis*) to designate the words of Jesus participates in a conventional Jewish discourse concerning the graciousness of divine wisdom and its exhibition by human teachers. The practice of reading and speaking "gracious words" is repeatedly extolled in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, as well as in the literature of Hellenistic Judaism, where "graciousness" is a quality of wise and righteous speech, in contrast to the language of the foolish and wicked, e.g., "The lips of the righteous know what is gracious (*charitas*), but the mouth of the wicked, what is perverse" (Prov 10:32).<sup>23</sup> Elsewhere in Luke-Acts, the revelation of God's salvation is described as a "gracious word" to be received by Jewish and Gentile audiences alike (Acts 14:3; Acts 20:32). Viewed along with other passages in the New Testament, where followers of Jesus are instructed to speak "graciously" in a way that instructs and strengthens their hearers (Col 3:16, 4:6; Eph 4:29), the "gracious words" of Jesus are understood to stem from a virtuous quality of character that was extolled in the ancient world for its magnanimity, charity, and conformity to the will of God. Reading is thus narrated in Luke 4 as an act that depends upon the character of the reader for its meaning and significance.

The influence of Jesus' reading upon his Nazareth audience is evident in their multiple reactions to the reading and its interpretation in Luke 4:22-30. We have already observed the positive response of amazement in 4:22. More challenging is the negative response to Jesus' prophetic critique in the second half of the pericope, which raises the question: why does the synagogue respond with rage and an attempt on Jesus' life in 4:28-29? The importance of this question to the nature of Jesus' reading is twofold: 1) the reading from Isaiah is directly related to Jesus' critical statements in the second half of the Nazareth sermon, and 2) this association of Isaiah 61 and Jesus' critique in Luke 4 reshapes the audience's identity. Jesus' series of statements about his hometown, a prophet's rejection in his hometown, and the missions of Elijah and Elisha (4:23-27), are all centered upon the identity of Israel's prophets—their divine mission and their reception among God's people. At this thematic level, the characterizations of prophecy in the second half of the passage develop both the reading from "the prophet Isaiah" (4:17) and the narrative characterization of Jesus as the anointed prophet of God, who is "sent" to proclaim liberation to his people (4:18).<sup>24</sup> Viewed in this light, Jesus' self-identification as a prophet who is "not accepted" in Nazareth and his references to prophetic missions to Gentiles are both polemical statements that mitigate the synagogue's relationship to the "gracious" gifts previously recognized in the Sabbath lection. The reading and its exposition thus redefine the hearers as outsiders to the text.<sup>25</sup> In addition to foreshadowing the inclusion of the Gentiles later in the book of Acts, the references to Elijah and Elisha evoke characterizations of prophetic figures in the Jewish scriptures who routinely called for Israel's repentance.<sup>26</sup> In this way, despite the audience's opposition, Jesus' reading and interpretation reverse the audience's recognition of itself and of Jesus in the text, re-forming their understanding of themselves as insiders to the prophetic text and Jesus' "gracious words."

<sup>23</sup>For example: Eccl 10:12; Ps 45:2; 44:3; Prov 10:21; Wis 8:21; Sir 20:13; 21:16.

<sup>24</sup>On the traditional association of Isaiah 61 with God's promises to Israel, see James A. Sanders, "From Isaiah 61 to Luke 4," in *Luke and Scripture: The Function of Sacred Tradition in Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 46-69.

<sup>25</sup>As is observed by James A. Sanders, "Just after Jesus' reading from Isaiah 61, the people would have interpreted the passage as favorable to themselves; but when Jesus used the hermeneutic of prophetic critique the people were deeply offended." ("From Isaiah 61 to Luke 4," 67).

<sup>26</sup>B. J. Koet, "Today This Scripture Has Been Fulfilled In Your Ears," *Bijdragen* 47 (1986): 368-394.

## LUKE 10:25-37

The other instance of reading in the Gospel of Luke occurs at 10:27, where the Lukan term for reading (*anagi(g)nōskō*) appears in a narrative situation that is significantly different from the Nazareth synagogue in Luke 4. Jesus' inquiry regarding a lawyer's "reading" of the scriptures results in a recitation in which the text is not obviously present during the "reading." The audience, furthermore, appears limited to the lawyer and Jesus.

Similar to Luke 4, the oral quality of the reading/recollection of scripture empowers the reader's reorganization of the biblical text; Deuteronomy 6:5 is combined in a single reading with Leviticus 19:18—"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>27</sup> The spoken recitation also enables the interpretive identification of the reader with the text. This is seen in the lawyer's question regarding the reading: "Who is my neighbor?" (10:29).

Similar to Luke 4, the interpretation of scripture by Jesus is of paramount importance to the significance of the reading. Luke emphasizes Jesus' control of every aspect of the lawyer's reading, from the initial prompting to read, to the lawyer's inquiry about the meaning of the text, to Jesus' concluding instruction to the lawyer: "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37). Prompted by Jesus, the lawyer's reading and interpretation of the texts accurately identifies the requirements of the Law. Jesus' reinterpretation of the lawyer's reading and question then leads to the lawyer's proper recognition of the neighbor in Leviticus 19, as well as identification with this neighbor. In Luke 10, therefore, the scene of reading and interpretation highlights Jesus' interpretive authority and reorients the lawyer to the text, correcting his reading and identifying the lawyer with the neighbor who truly serves.

The character of the reader also impacts the act of reading in Luke 10. In contrast to the gracious reading by Jesus in Nazareth, the lawyer's reading of scripture in Luke 10 is the product of a selfish character: "Wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" (Luke 10:29). The lawyer's question and characterization indicate his desire to read himself out of the text by demonstrating his past fulfillment of its requirements, and, perhaps, to disqualify Jesus' interpretive authority.<sup>28</sup> At the level of narrative plot, the negative characterization of the lawyer brings an abrupt end to his reading and interpretation; the narrative suddenly transitions to Jesus' parable. As we observed, Jesus' parable reverses the lawyer's identification with the text, with the result that the lawyer truly recognizes himself in the text, not as the character in the text who sought to qualify for God's mercy ("What shall I do to inherit eternal life," 10:25) but rather as the character who loves and shows mercy to others as a neighbor. The narrative thus demonstrates the flawed character of a reading of scripture that would "test" Jesus and focus on self-righteousness. Conversely, a reading that acknowledges the authority of Jesus' interpretation results in true understanding and virtuous action.

The redirection of the lawyer's flawed reading leads to a narrative characterization of the recipients of God's salvation that includes the outsider (*viz.*, the Samaritan); as Fitzmyer observes, "It suggests that even a Samaritan has found the way to eternal life."<sup>29</sup> By contrasting the lawyer's selfish reading with the gracious mercy of the Samaritan, Jesus corrects the lawyer's reading of the Law and redefines the boundaries of who can fulfill the Law. The ethnic overtones of this reinterpretation of Leviticus 19:18 are apparent in the parable's contrast of the Samaritan with the priest and Levite (10:32-33). In Luke 10, therefore, the lawyer's selfish reading results in Jesus' reinterpretation and redefinition of the boundaries of God's salvation to include the Samaritan.

<sup>27</sup>The association is traditional, seen in references to the greatest or "royal" commands in the New Testament (Mk 12:30-31; Mt 23:37-39; Rom 13:8; Gal 5:14; James 2:8). As in these passages, the lawyer associates love of God with love of neighbor. Unlike all other instances of Leviticus 19:18 in the New Testament, however, the quotation of the command to love the neighbor is seamlessly connected to the imperative to love God (Deuteronomy 6:5).

<sup>28</sup>Similarly, in other New Testament writings, a "self-justifying" disposition characterizes individuals who understand the Jewish law without adequate regard for the "justice" of Christ (Rom 10:1-5; Phil 3:9; cf. Acts 13:38, 1 Clement 32:4).

<sup>29</sup>Fitzmyer, *Luke*, 884.

## ACTS 8:28-39

The next explicit reference to the act of reading in Luke-Acts occurs in Acts 8:28-39, where the Ethiopian eunuch is three times described as reading the text of Isaiah 53 (8:28, 30, 32). Here again the audience of the oral performance of reading is limited to one other person, the evangelist Philip, who overhears the eunuch's oral reading of the scripture (Acts 8:30). The eunuch's performance of the reading is best understood as a signifying act that marks him as the object of the Holy Spirit's instruction to Philip. Here the oral reading initiates Philip's instruction, not identifying the reader as the embodiment of the character of the text (as in Luke 4) but rather as the special object of the message of the text being read. This associative identification of the eunuch with the reading from Isaiah prompts Philip's probing question: "Do you understand what you are reading?" (8:30). The ensuing dialogue, including the eunuch's invitation to shared reading (8:31), and his inquiry into the reference of the reading leads to Philip's proclamation of the "good news of Jesus." Philip's proclamation results in the abruptly stated and self-involving question by the eunuch: "See here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?" (8:36). As in other instances of reading in Luke-Acts, the oral performance of the text leads both to recognition of the character described in the text and to self-identification with the text, as is evidenced by the eunuch's abrupt request to be baptized.

The character of the reader again determines the outcome of the reading in Luke 8. The eunuch exhibits the ancient virtue of hospitality, which results in Philip accompanying and guiding him to a Christological reading of Isaiah 53: "He invited Philip to get in and sit beside him" (8:31). Luke's use of the term "invited" (*parakaleō*) to describe the eunuch's reception of Philip is a conventional marker of the ancient practice of hospitality, in which a host received the stranger or traveler for room and/or board in conformity with ancient codes for honorable behavior.<sup>30</sup> Hospitality was often associated with the reception of new knowledge and insight in the ancient world, and, elsewhere in Luke-Acts, the disposition for hospitality is determinative of insight into the wisdom and plan of God.<sup>31</sup> As a characteristic of reading, the eunuch's hospitality invites new insight into the meaning and significance of the text, enabling his reception of the gospel and leading to his obedient response in baptism.

Viewed within its narrative context, the Ethiopian's reading of scripture contributes to a redefinition of the Christian community in Luke-Acts. The description of the eunuch's reading occurs immediately after the expansion of the gospel to the "villages of the Samaritans" in Acts 8:25 and contributes to the thematic spread of the gospel beyond the environs of Jerusalem (8:1) to Samaria (8:5) and beyond to Caesarea (8:40), which is the furthest extent of the gospel's expansion before the explicit inclusion of the Gentiles among God's people in Acts 10-11.<sup>32</sup> Viewed within this literary context, the Ethiopian's reading and reception of the gospel contributes to the extension of the gospel beyond Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria "to the uttermost parts of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The vocalized reading of Isaiah is the catalyst for the Ethiopian's interaction with Philip (who overhears the reading), and is also the basis for the Ethiopian's acceptance of the gospel (by virtue of his hospitality and Philip's interpretation). The performance of the reading of Isaiah 53, the Spirit's direction of Philip, and the hospitable character of the eunuch extend Christian belief and identity to the Ethiopian in a way that extends the borders of God's people to include the

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<sup>30</sup>Luke 8:41, 15:28; Acts 9:38, 16:15, 27:33, 28:14, 20. For other examples outside of Luke-Acts, see Andrew Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in its Mediterranean Setting* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005), 188.

<sup>31</sup>Scenes of hospitality are not only about commensality and social status in Luke-Acts; rather, hospitality and its rituals of friendship serve in Luke-Acts to create and shape new knowledge and understanding among hosts and guests, occasioning interpretation and insight through the social interaction and cultural exchange of shared space and food, e.g., Luke 1:40; Luke 10:7, 38; 7:36-50; 24:35, 41-42; Acts 10-11; 16:15.

<sup>32</sup>On the significance of Caesarea to Luke's portrayal of Christianity's expansion, see my *Plots of Epiphany: Prison Escape in Acts of the Apostles*, BZNV 131 (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 216-217.



Jewish Diaspora in Ethiopia (which is not mentioned among the nations represented at Pentecost in Acts 2:9-11). The baptism of the Ethiopian is therefore a geographical extension of the boundaries of the Christian community, whether or not we understand the eunuch to be a Gentile, as is often debated, and likely indeterminable.<sup>33</sup> The oral performance of reading and interpretation demonstrates the capacity of the Ethiopian to share in the meanings and messages of Scripture in a way that establishes his identity as a believer in Christ, thereby redrawing the boundaries of God's community in Luke-Acts.

### ACTS 13:26-27

Presented as part of Paul's proclamation to the synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia (13:14), the second explicit reference to the act of reading in Acts occurs in Paul's depiction of the encounter with the scriptures by the Jerusalem Jews and their leadership:

My brothers, you descendants of Abraham's family, and others who fear God, to us the message of this salvation has been sent. Because the residents of Jerusalem and their leaders did not recognize (*agnoēsantes*) him or the voices of the prophets that are read (*anaginōskomenas*) every Sabbath, they fulfilled those words by condemning him (Acts 13:26-27).

Like the account of Jesus in Luke 4, the practice of reading is here associated with the ritualized Sabbath lection. Unlike previous narrations of reading, however, Paul's reference to the reading of scripture does not narrate the performance of reading, only its results, including its implications for the identity of God's people.

In addition to the narrative setting in the synagogue, the account in Acts 13 evidences the oral nature of the reading by reference to the "voices (*phōnai*) of the prophets." Paul's description of this reading in Acts 13 is reminiscent of the performance of oral reading narrated in earlier passages. First, the reading of scripture should lead to recognition of the characters in scripture. Negatively in Acts 13:27, the Jerusalem Jews and their leaders' failure to understand the voices of the prophets is related to their failure to acknowledge Jesus in their reading of scripture. This representation of reading underscores the function of reading as a practice of recognizing the characters of the texts, especially in Jesus.

Second, the reader of scripture, here portrayed as a corporate body of Jews in Jerusalem, is identified with the characters depicted in Jewish scripture. In previous narrations of reading in Luke-Acts, this associative identification of the reader(s) with the character(s) in the text being read was a function of the embodiment of the text in the oral performance of the reading. Although this performance is not narrated in Acts 13, the association of the text with the audience is nevertheless evidenced in Luke's account of the "fulfillment" of the text in the Jews' reading.<sup>34</sup> Here the Jews' failure to recognize Jesus in the prophetic texts results, ironically, in their identification with these same texts. Although the exact nature of this association remains undefined (to what prophecies is Paul referring?), Paul states that the Jews' rejection of Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of scriptures: "They fulfilled [these words]" (Acts 13:27). Luke's narration of this reading thus inverts the conventional expectations for the reading in the ancient world. By failing to recognize Jesus in the Hebrew scriptures, the Jews' (mis)reading is recognized in Acts.

Finally, the practice of reading reshapes the identity of community in Acts 13. As we have observed, the scene of reading in Acts 13:27 occurs in the middle of Paul's retelling of the history of God's "people" (13:15, 17, 24, 31)

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<sup>33</sup>Lukan scholarship is divided regarding the ethnic identity of the eunuch. For an overview of the debate, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Anchor Bible 31 (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 410. I view the Ethiopian's ambiguous identity as a purposeful narrative characterization that signifies the liminal status of the Christian group and its ethnic identity in Acts 8-11.

<sup>34</sup>Similarly, in Luke 4:21, the "fulfillment" of the prophetic text in Jesus identifies him with the "anointed" messenger of God in Isaiah 61.

and their reactions to God's words and actions. Like the Deuteronomistic history, Paul provides a theodicy to his hearers, recounting historical cycles of divine overture and tragic human rejection.<sup>35</sup> Most important to the present analysis is the central role of the scene of reading in Acts 13:27, which is the primary example of a divine "word of salvation" sent to Abraham's "family" (13:26), and its rejection by the people of God. This offer of salvation to the inhabitants of Jerusalem during the lifetime of Jesus is explicitly continued in Paul's proclamation to the Jewish people in Antioch of Pisidia, where the rejection of God's word by some Jews results in the expansion of Paul's proclamation to the Gentiles: "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46). Among the multiple proleptic indicators of this final reversal in Acts 13, the scene of failed reading in Jerusalem functions as the prototypical instance of Jewish rejection of the message about Jesus—a rejection that Paul identifies as a catalyst for the expansion of God's salvation to the Gentiles. In this way the account of reading in Jerusalem and its characterization of the readers results in a narrative redefinition of the boundaries of God's people to include the Gentiles.

### ACTS 15:19-21

The explicit identification of the Gentiles as part of God's people and consideration of its ethical implications are the context for the next narration of reading in Acts 15:21: "For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud (*anaginōskomenos*) every Sabbath in the synagogues." Spoken as part of James' judgment regarding the required lifestyle of Gentile Christians, this reference to reading is similar to Acts 13:27 in its third-person account of the oral reading and proclamation of the Jewish scriptures in the synagogue.

The meaning and significance of this passage is "notoriously obscure" due to uncertainty about what the verse's introductory "for" (*gar*) is meant to explain.<sup>36</sup> Multiple interpretations of the relationship of this verse to the preceding narrative have been advanced, all of which seek to explain how James' reference to the Sabbath readings follows from his preceding judgment that the Jerusalem council should stop "troubling" the Gentiles (15:19), and that the Gentiles should avoid idolatry, sexual immorality, and eating food that contains blood (15:20).<sup>37</sup> James' statement regarding the reading of Moses in the synagogues follows immediately after these prohibitions as the reason for the contents of the decree. The progression of the narrative is thus best understood to present the Gentile's access to the reading of Moses in the synagogue as a rationale for the limited requirements placed on Gentile Christians (circumcision is not required). When these limited requirements are recognized as part of the so-called "Noachian precepts" spelled out in Leviticus 17-18 for "proselytes and sojourners," James' appeal to reading in the synagogues at 15:21 is understood as an appeal to the knowledge of these prohibitions that the Gentiles would have learned through their association with the synagogue.<sup>38</sup> James thus argues that his requirements are acceptable and not "troubling" because they were already known to the Gentiles through encounter with the reading of the

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<sup>35</sup>On the similarities between the literary strategies of Luke and the Deuteronomists, see Thomas Römer and Jean-Daniel Macchi, "Luke, Disciple of the Deuteronomistic School," in *Luke's Literary Achievement: Collected Essays* (ed. C. M. Tuckett; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 178-187.

<sup>36</sup>S. G. Wilson, *Luke and the Law* (SNTSMS 50; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 83.

<sup>37</sup>A history of interpretation of this passage is provided by Daniel R. Schwartz, "The Futility of Preaching Moses (Acts 15,21)," *Biblica* 67 (1986): 276-281.

<sup>38</sup>This is the most widely accepted explanation of the *crux interpretum*; see, for example, L. T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina 5 (Collegeville, Minn.: 1992), 267; Beverly Gaventa, *Acts* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 223; J. Bradley Chance, *Acts* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2007), 259.

Mosaic Law in the synagogues. Viewed from the standpoint of ancient reading practices, it is noteworthy that the logic of James' argument depends on the spoken broadcast of Jewish scripture in the synagogues of the ancient Mediterranean world. In addition to signaling the personification of Moses in the reading of the Law, ("[Moses] has been read aloud"), James' description of the reading appears to presume that the Gentiles will recognize themselves in the Law, viz., their status and obligations as non-Jews. As we have seen, the goal of recognizing and identifying with the characters in the text is thematic to Luke-Acts and serves as the basis for the narration of reading in Acts 15. The power of the practice of reading to reform and re-inscribe the ethnic boundaries of God's people is on full display in Acts 15. The reading of Jewish scriptures and its availability to the Gentile Christians in the synagogues warrants new requirements for the Gentiles' inclusion within the Christian community. James' claim is that the Gentiles' hearing of reading in the synagogue is a basis for the Christian community's acceptance of the Gentiles without the requirement of circumcision. In this way the act of reading reforms the Christian community by articulating a set of shared meanings (the Law of Moses) and also privileging a subset of these meanings (Leviticus 17-18) in order to reshape of the identity of the reading community.

### ACTS 17:11-12

The final narrative of reading in Luke-Acts occurs in the account of Paul's reading of scripture in Thessalonica and Berea in Acts 17. This passage is unique in Acts due to the author's explicit contrast of the reactions of Paul's audience in two different geographical locations: Thessalonica and Berea. In the first verses of Acts 17, Luke narrates the Thessalonian responses to Paul's "argument from the scriptures," and to his proof that "it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the dead." The reading and subsequent proclamation that Jesus is "the Messiah" (17:3) result in the persuasion of "some" of Paul's synagogue audience, in addition to many devout Greeks and leading women. The reading and proclamation also results in the depiction of Jewish hostility and instigation of ruffians and the crowd in Thessalonica (17:5-9).

By contrast, Acts 17:11-12 presents a synagogue readership in Berea that is much more amenable to Paul's message:

These Jews were nobler (*eugenesteroi*) than those in Thessalonica, for they welcomed the message very eagerly and examined (*anakrinontes*) the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, including not a few Greek women and men of high standing (Acts 17:11-12).

The Bereans are here characterized as hospitable and enthusiastic in their listening to Paul, persistent in their reading of Scripture, and focused on the correspondence of Paul's proclamation to the content of their reading. All of these qualities occur in a clause that modifies Luke's initial designation of the Bereans as "more noble" (*eugenesteroi*), the comparative form of *eugenēs*, "well-born." As we shall see, the meaning of this Greek word and its use in ancient Greco-Roman and Jewish discourse is integral to understanding Luke's narrative representation of reading in Acts 17.

The Greek word *eugenēs* is variously translated in the standard English versions, most often as "noble" or "noble-minded." The Greek term literally means "well-born" or "of a good *genos*"—of a good race, class, family, or kind. The meaning and significance of the term was, however, contested throughout antiquity. The central debate was whether the term should only designate noble birth in the genealogical sense of descent from an extraordinary or

privileged ancestry<sup>39</sup> or whether the term should describe people who exhibit the extraordinary moral qualities associated with those who are genuinely well-born.<sup>40</sup>

When indicative of a person's disposition and not genealogical descent, the attribute of *eugeneia* (the noun form meaning "nobility of birth") was often described in terms of moral and intellectual virtues. This association of the well-born with virtue is pithily expressed in the traditional Stoic maxim: "The virtuous person alone is well-born (*eugenēs*)."<sup>41</sup> For example, the virtue of energetic and courageous pursuit of truth was commonly attributed to *eugeneia*.<sup>42</sup> Philo in particular extols the one "well-born" who pursues and acknowledges truth despite obstacles.<sup>43</sup> In his treatise *On Noble Birth*, Philo depicts the Jewish patriarch Abraham as the epitome of the morally "well-born" who comes to faith in God on the basis of personal virtue and not familial association.<sup>44</sup> Abraham's *eugeneia* is specifically evidenced by his enthusiastic and persistent investigation of the scriptures, his comprehension of their message, and his belief in God.<sup>45</sup> As Philo repeatedly observes, Abraham's example demonstrates that good birth (*eugeneia*) and kinship (*suggeneia*) with God are not solely predicated upon Jewish birth but are inclusive of non-Jews on the basis of their virtue, especially in their disposition toward the "oracles of God."<sup>46</sup> Philo concludes that Abraham shows that the proselyte to Judaism is as "well-born" as the Jew by virtue of his or her attitude and action toward God: "[Abraham] is the standard of nobility (*eugeneia*) for all proselytes, who abandoning the ignobility of strange laws and monstrous customs . . . have come to settle in a better land, in a commonwealth full of true life and vitality, with truth as its leader."<sup>47</sup> For Philo, therefore, God's people are identified on the basis of faith and virtue, not family genealogy or ethnic group.

As was observed above, Luke's description of the Bereans' energetic reception of Paul's message and reading of the scriptures is introduced by their designation as "noble/well-born." Viewed in light of the conventional understanding of this term in the ancient world, the narration of the Bereans is seen to participate in a conventional portrayal of the noble human who is energetic in the pursuit of truth. As in other passages in Luke-Acts, the act of reading indicates the character of the reader.

The importance of this characterization in Acts 17 is also seen in its traditional claims about the superiority of social groups. As we have seen, Philo's account of *eugeneia* is partly focused on the legitimacy of non-Jewish claims to inclusion among the family of God. This use of *eugeneia* is comparable to its use by other ancient authors to make claims about the cultural legitimacy or superiority of ethnic groups. Ancient authors extolled one *genos* at

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<sup>39</sup>The ambiguous meaning and significance of *eugeneia* is evident in Aristotle's now fragmentary treatise *On Good Birth* = Aristotle, *Eug. Frag.* 4 (= Stob 4.29 C 52). For his part, Aristotle is supportive of the traditional view of *eugeneia*, arriving at the following conclusion: "Good birth is excellence of stock" (*estin ē eugeneia aretē genous*). Cf. Luke 18:12.

<sup>40</sup>For example, Dio Chrysostom, *Dis.* 15.29-32: "Those who originally applied these names (*gennaios* paired with its synonym *eugenēs*) applied them to persons who were well-born with respect to virtue, not bothering to inquire who their parents were. Then afterwards the descendants of families of ancient wealth and high repute were called 'well-born' by a certain class." Cf. Plato, *Resp.* 2.375; Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1390b16; Philo, *Abr.* 1:210; *Virt.* 227.

<sup>41</sup>Seneca, *Ben.* 2.28.1; *Ep.* 44. Stobaeus *Fl.* 86. Philo, *Abr.* 1:219.

<sup>42</sup>Plato, *Rep.* 2.375, 376c; Aristophanes, *Fr.* 726-29; Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1390b16; Philo, *Prob.* 1:109; *Legat.* 1:215; *Mos* 1.10, 22; *Virt.* 219; Josephus, *A. J.* 12.225; 15.236; *Sir* 45:23; 2 Macc 6:28; 7:21; 4 Macc 6:5; 13:11; 16:16.

<sup>43</sup>Philo, *Spec Leg.* 1.51; *Legat.* 1.195.

<sup>44</sup>Philo, *Virt.* 226.

<sup>45</sup>Philo, *Virt.* 215-216.

<sup>46</sup>The encomiastic treatment of Abraham includes a polemic against those who rely upon ethnic identity rather than virtuous character for their relationship to each other and to God, e.g., Philo condemns Jews who "give a truce to those of their own nation, allowing them to despise sound and stable virtue" (*Virt.* 226, cf. 227).

<sup>47</sup>Philo, *Virt.* 219. Cf. Philo's account (*Praem.* 152) of a legend about Tamar, which presents her as a female proselyte who exhibited nobility in her own conversion to monotheistic belief.

the expense of another by employing the discourse of *eugeneia* to legitimate the social standing of one group over another.<sup>48</sup> For example, Josephus describes writings of ancient historians in which claims about a group's *eugeneia* functioned rhetorically to flatter or debase cultural claims to superiority: "Some historians have endeavored to disgrace the nobility (*eugeneia*) of certain nations."<sup>49</sup>

In light of this ancient discourse of "nobility," Luke's account of the "well-born" readers in Acts 17 is understandable as a narration of the legitimating virtue of the disciples in Berea. In contrast to the jealously dismissive Jews of Thessalonica, whom Luke associates with ruffians and mob violence (Acts 17:5), the noble Jews and Gentiles of Berea represent an honorable response to the gospel.<sup>50</sup> Luke's characterization of the Bereans, like Philo's account of Abraham, presents a portrait of proselytes that validates their non-Jewish ethnicity due to the virtue and "nobility" evidenced in their reading of scripture. This redefinition of God's community of believers is demonstrated by virtue of reading, and not by common descent from an ancestor. In this way, Luke redefines the identity of God's people in Acts 17 through the character of their reading.

## CONCLUSIONS

Unlike the enduring outcomes of many writing practices, the action of reading is an evanescent encounter that is defined by a singular and unique set of circumstances. Readings do not last for a thousand years to be unearthed in the Egyptian desert. Even the event of reading "captured" by modern recording technology is substantially changed in playback. This is attributable to the transient qualities of reading that are both internal and external to the reader—those temporal/temporary properties of mind and culture that are each time uniquely interrelated in the personal and cultural expressions of a human reader and audience.

The preceding analysis has highlighted the situational and cultural-bound nature of practices of reading in Luke-Acts; they are represented within different narrative settings and scenarios that reshape the content, form, and purpose of reading according to their exigencies. This diversity of reading is itself an interpretive insight into Luke's narrative that should not be flattened or homogenized in the interest of summary conclusions. We have observed intriguing differences, for example, between the readings in Luke (where Jesus is present as reader/interpreter) and Acts (where Jesus is the read/interpreted). Differences exist between readings of "prophetic" texts (e.g., Luke 4, Acts 10) and readings of "Law" (Luke 8, Acts 15). The author's hope is, therefore, that this essay will prompt further exploration of the diverse depictions of reading in Luke-Acts, as well as fuller consideration of the spectrum of the types of textual encounter that are represented in the Lukan narrative.<sup>51</sup>

Among the explicit references to reading in Luke-Acts we have repeatedly observed that the oral nature of reading, with its embodiment of the text in the voice and gestures of the reader, is of fundamental importance to the narrative representation of reading. In sum, the performance of the reader is seen to form the reading. Reading does not occur as a passive recitation in which the author's text passes directly and unaltered through the conduit

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<sup>48</sup>Josephus, *B. J.* 2.365; 2.387; 4.181.

<sup>49</sup>Josephus, *C. Ap.* 1:220.

<sup>50</sup>Similarly in Philo, the "noble" or "well-born" is contrasted with the *hoi polloi* and rustics of ancient society (*Abr.* 1.219; *Flac.* 1.64).

<sup>51</sup>For example, future analysis might examine Jesus' "opening" of the scriptures in Luke 24 or Paul's recitation of Greek poetry in Acts 17. These passages were excluded from consideration because they fail either 1) to explicitly narrate the reading/recitation of a text or 2) to include a lexical indication of reading.

of a reading event; rather, the text is refracted through the presence and purposes of the reader.<sup>52</sup> We have observed this at greatest length in the readers' configurations and interpretations of the text, which are included, often quite seamlessly, in the oral performances of the text. These performances are varied in Luke-Acts, but with remarkable consistency the performances result in a presentation of Jesus in the Jewish scriptures. From the reading by Jesus in Luke 4, to the interpretation by Jesus in Luke 10, to the multiple recognitions of Jesus through events of reading in Acts, the performance of reading forms the text for recognition of Jesus. This "presencing" of Jesus in the reading is a result of its oral performance, in which the reader's vocalization either occasions (e.g., Luke 10 and Acts 8) or accomplishes (e.g., Luke 4 and Acts 17) the identification of Jesus in the text. As we have seen, this often occurs through combination of reading and interpretation in the reading event. Because these readings lead to recognition of the authority or identity of Jesus, we may conclude that *Luke represents reading as having a "Christological" function through its recognition of Jesus in the words of the text.* Even in those instances where readers fail to recognize Jesus (Acts 13) or are focused on non-prophetic texts (Acts 15), the narrative characterizes reading as recognition of God's will for the messianic community.

Second, Luke's multiple narrations of the relationship between the reading and the reader result in multiple accounts of the characteristics of readers. Luke repeatedly narrates the reader's disposition in the act of reading. From the "gracious words" of Jesus, to the hospitality of the Ethiopian eunuch, to the "nobility" of the Bereans, the character of the readers affects the character of the reading, whether this involves the reading's impact on the hearers (as in Luke 4) or on the reader him/herself (Acts 8 and 17). A similar understanding is plausibly understood to underlie James' confidence in the reading of Torah (Acts 15:21) and its understanding by the Gentiles, who are identified as possessors of the Holy Spirit, "cleansed in heart by faith," and "turning to God" (15:8, 19). As we have observed, the negative dispositions of the lawyer in Luke 10 and the Jerusalem Jews in Acts 13 display the same association of character and reading. *In each of these scenes, therefore, reading functions to demonstrate the character of the reader.* As we noted in the treatment of Acts 17, these characterizations of the reader in Luke-Acts serve an apologetic function, flattering and empowering the belief and the obedience formed in virtuous readers, while attributing failed readings of the scriptures to a failure of the reader's character.

Third, the setting of the synagogue is central to many of the narrations of reading in Luke-Acts, with *the event of reading functioning as a model for community in Luke-Acts.* The practice of reading indicates not only the present character of God's people but also represents what God wills them to be. As we have seen, from Luke 4 to Acts 17, the recognition of the divine will through reading can take different forms—e.g., prophetic critique, parabolic example, didactic instruction, and hermeneutical inquiry—but this recognition always impacts the ethnic identity of God's people and the expansion of this identity according to the insight given by God's prophets (including Jesus) and the direction given by God's Spirit. In this way, *Luke's narrations of reading function to reform and transform God's community, especially the community's self-definition.*

The community of readers is also represented in less formal settings in narrations of the reading shared by two persons in dialogue (Luke 10 and Acts 8). Both of these scenes share the characteristics observed in the synagogue (viz., focus on a reading that is orally performed and interpreted by a reader in a responsive encounter). These less formal scenes differ from the synagogue narratives not only in the number of reading participants but also in

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<sup>52</sup>Studies of the orality in early Christian traditions tend to oscillate between emphases on 1) the reliability of these traditions, especially their sameness through time, and 2) the creativity of these traditions, e.g., their malleability according to the limitations of human consciousness and the values of cultural context. This debate is outside the ambit of the present essay; suffice it to say here that both qualities are evidenced in Luke's narrations of reading.

the way these readings provide a model for the ethnic identity of God's people. Unlike the synagogue scenes, the symbolic significance of these readings to ethnic identity is not explicitly related to a community of God's people. The transformative function of these scenes does not occur through proclamation in worshiping community but by the readers of Luke-Acts and their discernment of the place and meaning of these events in Luke's story. These are stories of reading that require reading in order to be recognized.

## SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR THEOLOGICAL LIBRARIANS

I offer here two brief reflections on the implications of this study for theological librarians. The topic of reading is, of course, central to the profession of theological librarianship, and the preceding investigation will, I hope, generate ideas and practices beyond my brief observations, which are organized around two analytical foci of the article: oral performance of reading and the character of the reader.

### 1. INFORMATION ORALITY

What are the implications of ancient oral culture for contemporary theological reading and research? Literary critics and media theorists increasingly observe a convergence between oral communication and digital technologies. Most famously, Walter Ong has argued that "electronic technology has brought us into the age of 'secondary orality,'" which is "a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print."<sup>53</sup> Building on Ong's work, theorists have argued that hypermedia display many of the characteristics of oral culture, e.g., evanescence, non-linear association, participatory effort, and networked social structures.<sup>54</sup> The similarities lead one biblical scholar to conclude that oral performance is eminently relevant to contemporary life: "Orality isn't just a quaint antiquarian area of study anymore—it is an apt description of the reality into which we're all hurtling ever deeper every day."<sup>55</sup>

If digital technologies are moving human communication towards increased orality, then what insights might the narrations of oral reading in Luke-Acts offer to theological librarians? One possibility centers on the audience's repeated participation in the reading and recognition of the text in the reader in Luke-Acts. In a world where scholarly information is embedded in hypertexts that must be "resolved," and embodied in performances on iTunes®, researchers increasingly participate in the formation of knowledge and are asked to recognize what is knowledgeable in the speaker's presentation. As "attendants" to the word (Luke 4:20), librarians are in a position to provide guidance in accessing these oral and hyper-textual performances.<sup>56</sup> For example, what might researchers gain from being taught the art of the reference interview, which serves as one model for recognizing identity and knowledge during oral communication?

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<sup>53</sup>Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 136.

<sup>54</sup>Jay David Bolter, *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext and the History of Writing* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1991); George P. Landow, *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Richard A. Lanham, *The Electronic Word: Democracy, Technology, and the Arts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

<sup>55</sup>Robert Fowler, "How the Secondary Orality of the Electronic Age Can Awaken Us to the Primary Orality of Antiquity, or What Hypertext Can Teach Us About the Bible with Reflections on the Ethical and Political Issues of the Electronic Frontier," n.p. [cited 22 March 2008]. Online: <http://homepages.bw.edu/~rfowler/pubs/secondoral/index.html>

<sup>56</sup>For one approach to engaging learners in a "relational" approach to electronic resources, see the relevant portions of my essay "Search Engines, Databases, and the Contexts of Information Literacy Instruction," *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 60 (2006): 234-240.

## 2. *VIRTUOUS READING*

What constitutes an excellent reader or researcher? The proliferation of scholarly and non-scholarly information sources on the web and the rise of social forms of computing have made it increasingly difficult (and passé) to provide all-encompassing rules for effective evaluation of information resources. Is Wikipedia in or out? If a group of professors author a blog, is it a peer-reviewed source? Reasoned answers are forthcoming, but the questions highlight the increasingly complex nature of today's infosphere. One complementary approach to rule-based techniques is an "aretalogical" ethic of reading that cultivates virtuous research practices. In addition to teaching rule-based techniques for reading and research, how might librarians cultivate research practices that are rooted in virtues, like those observed in Luke-Acts: generosity (as an impetus to citing sources and avoiding plagiarism), hospitality (as honorable reception of the unfamiliar book), and nobility (as eager and persistent effort to evaluate a website and to judge "whether these things are so" [Acts 17:11])? This is character development that theological librarians are well positioned to cultivate in the seedbeds of theological bibliography and research.<sup>57</sup>



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<sup>57</sup>For one approach to cultivating virtues through library instruction, see my essay "Special Collections and the Seeds of Knowledge and Virtue," *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 60 (2006): 207-213.