

The Acts of The Apostles: Fact or Fiction?

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Abstract

Acts of the Apostles is unique in the Bible. It serves as the transition between the Gospel and the Epistles. For Christians, Acts of the Apostles is a historical book that presents the fact of how Christianity is then widespread. Within the historical issues in the studies of Acts, one creative approach is to classify Acts as a Greco-Roman novel that is highly fictional, a popular treatise for entertainment purposes. The aim of this paper is to examine the historicity of the Acts. The issues of the historicity of the text, the reliability of sources used by Luke, chronology, and data accuracy will be examined. Here, I will argue that Luke's theological-historical perspective to explain the passage is still better than the novel perspective. I will also demonstrate that the theological principles derived from the novel perspective are strongly disputed compared to those of the theological-historical perspective. Only several theological principles of the text from both historical novel and theological-historical perspective will be presented.

Keywords: *Acts, Historical, Greco-Roman, Theological-Historical, Fiction*

Introduction

Within the historical issues in the studies of Acts, one creative approach is to classify Acts as a Greco-Roman novel, that is highly fictional, a popular treatise for entertainment purposes.¹ In his book, *Profit with Delight*, Richard Pervo clearly states, "My thesis is that the canonical Acts are best explained as an example of one type of historical novel."² Such a claim is made after comparing the text of Acts itself with novels, particularly the incarceration and the adventures, the journeys. On the one hand, Pervo seems to let the text speak for itself,³ but on the other hand, he compares it with novels and claims the similarity between Acts and novels, particularly what he calls the prison-escape scene. He stated explicitly that:

"The prison-escape scene in Acts 5 participates, along with related incidents recorded in chapter 12 and 16, in one of the most widespread stock incidents of Aretalogical literature. More than thirty such tales can be studied, in Acts and

¹ Richard I. Pervo, *Profit with Delight: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), 11.

² Pervo, *Profit with Delight*, 122. The term historical refers to the Apocrypha of Acts which are a sort of the Greco-Roman novels.

³ Pervo, *Profit with Delight*, 10.

Apoc. Acts, Dionysiac literature, Jewish narrative, historical and romantic novel, and novellas.”⁴

Here one can see the contradiction between the attempt to let the text of Acts speak for itself and the comparison of Acts with novels. Following the same approach, Saundra Schwartz also presented the similarity of a more specific theme, the trial scenes, between Acts and Greek novels.⁵

One of the implications of classifying Acts as a novel is the denial of the historicity of Acts. Also the theological principles derived from such a classification are questionable whether they represent the intention of Luke, the author.⁶ In his most recent commentary on Acts, Pervo, as a result of denying the historicity of Acts, has to assume the existence of the person Stephen when he stated that “The historical Stephen-presuming that the person existed-may in fact, have engaged in patient labor for a year or more until one fine day, as it were, he was killed”⁷ Although, while Schwartz seems convincing in her side by side presentation on the trial scenes between Acts and Greek novels, she is not able to provide any theological principle for the reader other than just a few common variables. In the end of her conclusion she states:

However, regardless the specific ideology, in both the Greek novels and in Acts the readers are expected to gaze with pity, wonder, astonishment, and delight on the events displayed in the narrative- and to trust that in the end, to paraphrase Photius, the villains will pay the penalty and the heroes will be vindicated, if not in the temporal courtroom then certainly on the high plane of poetic justice.⁸

Does her conclusion of the trial on Acts and novels represent fully the intention of Luke in writing the trial particularly of Stephen?

Although many similarities may be found in both Acts and in novels, thus offering a creative way of understanding Acts, the crucial question here is whether we can really examine merely the text and set aside the theological perspectives of the author of Acts. Those who argue from the theological-historical point of view also provide strong arguments in

⁴ Pervo, *Profit with Delight*, 21. Further at the end of his conclusion he portrayed Luke “As a historian he (*Luke*) leaves much to be desired. What he (*Luke*) did have were vision and the means (*novels*) to express it.” in Pervo, *Profit with Delight*, 138; Italics mine.

⁵ Saundra Schwartz, “The Trial Scene in Greek Novels and in Acts.” in *Contextualizing Acts: Lukan Narrative and Greco-Roman Discourse*, ed. Todd Penner and Caroline V. Stichele (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2003), 105-137.

⁶ Pervo does insist the importance of speeches in Acts in Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, US: Fortress Press, 2009), 22-25, but he failed to provide broad theological principles in his commentary on the longest speech in Acts. For instance is the speech of Stephen in Acts 7:2-53, he stated that “It justifies the separation of the two bodies in the light of subsequent intra-Christian debate” in Pervo, *Acts*, 193; See also n.8 for another disputed theological principle derived from the trial scene in Acts.

⁷ Pervo, *Acts*, 164.

⁸ Schwartz, *The Trial Scene in Greek Novels and in Acts*, 133. Although Schwartz does not claim this as the intention of Luke, but her conclusion does not fit with the purpose of Luke in presenting the story of Stephen.

understanding Acts 6:8-8:3 as a reliable historical record.⁹ Although the historical novel perspectives may offer a creative understanding of Acts, the theological-historical perspective of the author should not be set aside in understanding Acts, particularly Acts 6:8-8:3, since the text is not only related to but influenced by the author's perspective.

For these reasons, the particular passage as mentioned earlier, Acts 6:8-8:3, will be examined.¹⁰ First, this passage is identified by Pervo as the climatic incarceration in Acts 1-7,¹¹ and yet it reveals the highly stylized skill of Luke in narrating it.¹² Second, scholars, including Pervo, have identified the historical problem of the sources that are used.¹³ Third, the person Stephen is identified by Pervo as created by Luke, thus making him an imaginary being.¹⁴ However, Pervo still attempts to provide theological principles from the passage.¹⁵ Based on my thesis, first, I will define the terminology of the theological-historical perspective that Luke has in composing Acts. This first argument will include the definition of historical, the central theme of Luke's theology in Acts,¹⁶ and the preface of Acts. Second, the text Acts 6:8-8:3 will be divided into three sections, Acts 6:8-15, Acts 7:1-53 and Acts 7:54-8:3. The issues of the historicity of the text, the reliability of sources used by Luke, chronology, and data accuracy will be examined. Here, I will argue that Luke's theological-historical perspective to explain the passage is still better than the novel perspective. Third, I will demonstrate that the theological principles derived from the novel perspective are strongly disputed compared to those of the theological-historical perspective. Only several theological principles of the text from both historical novel and theological-historical perspective will be presented.

Definition of Theological-Historical

Historical and History

At the very outset, we need to examine the term history as the term historical is distinct from history. The term history refers to an event that has happened in the past. Within such a definition, there are two variables that can be found, the event and the time. The complexity

⁹ Two of them are: Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998); Howard I. Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1970).

¹⁰ The Alexandrian text will be chosen. The discussion of the Alexandrian and Western text can be seen in Bruce M. Metzger, *Textual Commentary of the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart, Germany: German Bible Society, 1994), 222-36, 296-311. This particular passage is chosen for it can stand as a representative example for the purpose of examination. See Todd Penner, *In Praise of Christian Origins: Stephen and the Hellenist in Lukan Apologetic Historiography* (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2004), 75-79.

¹¹ See Pervo, *Profit with Delight*, 19-23: Acts, 152; and Schwartz, *The Trial Scene*, 121.

¹² See Todd Penner, *In Praise of Christian Origins*, 7-8.

¹³ Several of them are: Pervo, *Acts*, 164-201; Howard I. Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007), 128-52; Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 251-78; M. Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Heinrich Greeven (London, United Kingdom: SCM Press, 1956), 207-8; C. K. Barret, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 2 vols. ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994, 1998), 319-22; E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary*, trans. by R. Mcl. Wilson et al. (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1971), 273-4; Penner provides briefly the problematic issues in Penner, *In Praise of Christian Origin*, 79-85.

¹⁴ Pervo, *Acts*, 193.

¹⁵ Pervo, *Acts*, 164-201.

¹⁶ Although there are many theological themes found in Acts, but the attempt here is to seek out a single theme that is considered as the most representative of all themes.

of the event is influenced by the number of persons involved and the setting of the event. The most complex is when there occur many remarkable things that are beyond the law of nature as we understand it, such as the presence of angels, miracles, divine vision, or even the presence of the most divine being.¹⁷

Since the history itself is already in the past, sources (so-called "facts") are then a necessity for writing the history.¹⁸ The term historical is defined as the sharing on considering the nature of the history that consists of both the real event and the time. To say that Acts is a historical book means that the book in the past consists of the real event that happened also in the past, and not merely the book that exists in the past. The selection of sources that are influenced by the perspective of the writer is inevitable. Expecting an objective account that covers everything in detail without any influence by the perspective of the writer is impossible.

An analogy to the concept of historical is like a reporter who wishes to write a book about an event of World-War II where he was partly an eyewitness. Suppose the period of the event is ten years long, and the reporter was only an eyewitness for the last five years. After a certain time in the future, the reporter wishes to write a book on this event. Although the reporter was partly an eyewitness, it is inevitable to use and select other sources and sources as an eyewitness. The perspective of this reporter, whether political, social, cultural, military, economic, or environmental, is another important factor that influences the content of the book. Therefore, one should not judge the result of a certain perspective as an unhistorical account just because of the distinct intention of the one who makes the judgment. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the perspective of the writer in writing the book to avoid misunderstanding and misleading conclusion.

The above analogy is similar to Acts. The Acts of the Apostle covers a very complex set of events and also a period of more than thirty years. The complexity of the events is apparent in the number of persons involved, such as Apostles, Jewish leaders, people of the synagogue, common people, God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, and Luke was just partly an eyewitness,¹⁹ In short, Luke, the author of Acts²⁰ who is partly an eyewitness, has the element of historical in his mind in composing Acts. To reject Luke as the author of Acts and regard it anonymous and link the intention to "the focus was on the protection of established communities from external and internal threats,"²¹ might risk misunderstanding Acts since Luke's intention focuses on God which will be demonstrated in the following topic.

¹⁷ The disagreement of whether or not to include the involvement of the "supernatural" in the historical text is an evidence of the complexity. For a more detailed discussion, see Marshall, *Luke*, 28-32.

¹⁸ For a more comprehensive discussion on the nature of history, see Marshall, *Luke*, 21-25.

¹⁹ The issue in the debate is whether or not the "we" section suggests Luke as eyewitness; for a more detailed discussion of this "we" section see Jacques Dupont, *The Sources of Acts: The Present Position*, trans. Kathleen Pond (London, United Kingdom: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1964), 75-165.

²⁰ There is a dispute on the author of Acts, but most scholars accept that Luke is the author. those who accept Luke as the author are: F.F. Bruce, *The Book of The Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), 19; Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. James Limburg et al., ed. Eldon Jay Epp et al. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), xl-xlii; While Pervo is one of few scholars who disagrees that Luke is the author of Acts in Pervo, *Acts*, 15.

²¹ Pervo, *Acts*, 5.

Theological Theme

Although his profession was that of physician,²² Luke's books, the Gospel and the Acts are profoundly characterized by theological understanding. Thus, the importance of the theological theme in Acts should not be neglected. As there may be many theological themes in Acts,²³ to prevent any imposing of our own themes, we can start with searching for the statistic of the words such as "God", "Lord", "Holy Spirit", "Paul" or "Peter" in the text.

The word that is related to the divine being, such as God (θεος),²⁴ Lord (kurioj),²⁵ Spirit (πνευμα) or Holy Spirit (ἅγιος πνευμα),²⁶ occurs most often.²⁷ Based on the statistical data, we come to an early conclusion that God, Lord and Holy Spirit, three very divine beings, are the most important figure in Acts. But this statistic alone will not be enough to draw out the theological theme in Acts without further examination of the role of each divine being.

The Role of God

Throughout Acts, God is identified as the one who has given his promise for the purpose of salvation,²⁸ who has raised Jesus from the dead,²⁹ who has given his Spirit;³⁰ all these are intended for the salvation of the Jews, as well as the Gentiles.³¹ The fulfillment of God's promise of salvation is in Jesus who died, but God raised him from the dead and lifted him up as Lord,³² and the sign of those who believe, whether Jew or Gentile is that of receiving or

²² For a more detail discussion on the identity of Luke such as name, a Christian (whether or not a Jewish ethnic), a companion to Paul and a physician, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Garden City, AL: Doubleday, 1981-1985), 35-53.

²³ For several important themes in Acts such as plan of God, Eschatology, Salvation, Christology, Ecclesiology and the Holy Spirit; See Francois Bovon, *Luke the Theologian: Fifty-five Years of Research (1950-2005)*, 2nd ed. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006).

²⁴ Total occurrence of the word "God" is 171 with 167 times refer to God. The Nominative case that stands mainly as subject of a verb occurs 67 times, 57 times for Genitive, 30 times for Accusative and 13 times for the Dative. The number of occurrences will be even higher if the personal pronoun is included. The same is with the word "Lord" and "Spirit or Holy Spirit" in the two following notes.

²⁵ The word "Lord" occurs 106 times in total, with 104 times refer to Lord Jesus or God. 24 times for Nominative, 44 times for Genitive, 12 times for Accusative, 9 times for Dative and 15 times for Vocative.

²⁶ The total occurrence of the word "Spirit" is 69 times. 58 times refer to the Holy Spirit or God's Spirit. 27 times for Nominative, 23 times for Genitive, and 8 times for Dative case.

²⁷ Logos bible software with Nestle-Aland 27th edition Greek text is used to search out the statistic. All these three divine beings are classified as one since in many places they seem to be interchangeable. For instance, in Acts 2:17 and 2:33 God's spirit is understood as or interchangeable with the Holy Spirit. Also Spirit of the Lord is interchangeable with the Holy Spirit in Acts 5:3 and 5:9; 16:6 and 7. Lord is understood as God in Acts 4:24; 9:4. The sum of the occurrence of all three divine being, God, Lord and Spirit or Holy Spirit, in Acts is 328 times. This number of occurrences is the highest in Acts. While Paul 63 times (Nominative), and Peter 37 (Nominative) times. See also the appendix A and B in Steve Walton, "The Acts -- of God? What is the 'Acts of the apostles' all about?" *Evangelical Quarterly* 80, no. 4 (October 2008): 305-306.

²⁸ Acts 2:17, 22; 7:17, 7:25; 26:6; See also Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 29.

²⁹ Acts 2:24; 3:15; 4:10; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30, 13:33; 26:8; See also Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 29.

³⁰ Acts 1:17; 2:33; 5:32; 14:8; Also, Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 29.

³¹ Acts 10:34; 11:18; 14:27; See Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 30.

³² Acts 2:32, 36; Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 29-30.

possessing the Holy Spirit following their faith.³³ God has revealed his salvation, particularly since the history of Israel in the Old Testament until the climax in Jesus Christ, and even more recently in the time of the Apostles.³⁴ This very word of God,³⁵ the salvation of God through believing in Jesus and receiving the Holy Spirit, is the gospel that is to be spread to the end of the world.³⁶

The Role of Lord

The word "Lord" in Acts is associated with both Jesus Christ and God.³⁷ When this title is associated with Jesus Christ, it identifies him as the one who died and was raised by God, fulfilling God's promise of salvation.³⁸ The Lord Jesus is the object of faith for the purpose of salvation. The center of the proclamation of the word of God is Jesus who died, was raised by God, and lifted as Lord.³⁹ The association of Lord to Jesus may seem to subordinate the status of the Lord under God, but this is unlikely because of the association of Lord to God. To sum up, Jesus, the means of God's salvation and also the object of faith is God as well.

The Role of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is also depicted as the one who fills, leads and empowers the apostles for the purpose of proclaiming and explaining the prophecy of the Holy Scriptures regarding Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of God's promise of salvation.⁴⁰ It is the Holy Spirit who initiates the presence of the new community of believers as is manifested in their daily lives and in turn as they are called to be Christians.⁴¹

The summary of this theological theme is this: God has promised his salvation from the beginning, particularly from the time of Abraham. The Lord is Jesus Christ who in order to fulfill God's salvation, died and was raised by God. Those who believe in him will be saved. The Holy Spirit, who is the sign of believers, will fill, lead, and empower the Apostles to proclaim the word of God, the Gospel, to the end of the world. All figures, even such as Peter or Paul, are solely the ministers of the word in witnessing this very word of God.⁴² This statistic implies that the central theme of the Acts is about the action of God, thus it is plausible to conclude that Luke wrote the Acts of the Apostles with theological perspective. In other words, the Acts of the Apostles is a theological book with Theological-Historical Perspectives

³³ Acts 5:32; 15:8.

³⁴ See for examples the speeches of Peter in Acts 2: and the speech of Stephen in Acts 7:1-53; Also Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 31.

³⁵ The word of God is more than just word, but it is power of God behind it. The implication of the power of God in his word is expressed in phrases that indicate the irresistibility of the word of God to increase or grow as in Acts 5:7; 12:24; 28:31.

³⁶ Gaventa pointed out rightly that "God's comprehensive role means that it should come as no surprise that two small phrases pepper the story: the Word of God and Plan of God" in Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 31; See also John T. Squires, "The Plan of God" in *Witness to The Gospel: The Theology of Acts* ed. Howard I. Marshall and David Peterson (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 19-27.

³⁷ The more is the association to Jesus in such as in Acts 1:21; 9:10-11, 9:15, 9:17; 10:36; 15:17; 18:9; 23:11; The association to God are found in Acts 1:47; 7:33, 7:49; 17:24.

³⁸ Acts 10:36; 17:3; 22:8; see also n.35.

³⁹ The only response after the proclamation of the word of God is to believe Jesus as in Acts 2:38; 4:4; 11:1, 17; 14:27.

⁴⁰ Acts 1:16; 2:4; 8:29; 11:12; 20:23; Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 35-36.

⁴¹ Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37; 11:26.

⁴² See Luke 1:1-4, where Luke calls even the eyewitnesses as the ministers of the word.

(as demonstrated afterwards) and not a novel (a crafted story not based on facts) which inclines to focus on a hero.

Theological-Historical Perspectives

The Theological-Historical perspective is a term to depict a perspective that consists of the elements of theological and historical. The historical element is that Christianity is a fact in history and Luke attempts to report it. The theological element is that Luke writes the history influenced by his theology that centered on God who is actively working in history. These two elements, the theology and history are indispensable. God, the center of Luke's theology in Acts, is revealed through Jesus Christ in the reality of the history as presented in Luke's first book, the Gospel according to Luke.⁴³ Although the theology might influence the writing of the history, this does not mean that the historical record of Christianity is unreliable, for Luke is trustworthy, as expressed in the preface.⁴⁴

Through the preface of Acts,⁴⁵ Luke has revealed the methodology and the reliability of sources in composing Acts as the history of Christianity.⁴⁶ The integrity, intelligence even the balances of the theological and historical element are revealed in this preface.⁴⁷ Ignoring the importance of the preface could lead to failing to comprehend the trustworthiness of Luke. Witherington rightly pointed out the importance of the preface that:

Luke does not suggest in either Luke 1:1-4 or Acts 1:1-2 that he sees it essential task to give pleasure, to entertain, to edify, or even in the main to encourage certain virtues, but rather he will recount important things that are of great relevance both to himself and to Theophilus, for they involve the fulfillment of divine promises.⁴⁸

The conclusion quoted above has several implications: First, Acts is a serious matter that is understood between Luke as the author and Theophilus, the reader. Second, this matter is serious since the divine promises are involved in the reality, and not made up by creativity. Third, it is clear that the purpose is not as that of novels, but to strengthen their faith regarding the fulfillment of divine promises that is in Jesus Christ. We can conclude that Luke has both the theological and historical elements in composing Acts.

⁴³ Marshal, *Luke*, 21-52; Also F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, 1952), 15-18.

⁴⁴ The preface of his Gospel, Luke 1:1-4 stands as a representation of his trustworthiness. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 17-18. And Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 8-14; Also, Marshall, *Luke*, 37-41.

⁴⁵ For a comprehensive discussion of the preface of Acts see the dissertation of Loveday C.A. Alexander, *Acts in Its Ancient Literary Context* (London, United Kingdom: T&T Clark, 2005).

⁴⁶ See Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 8-24; also, Marshall, *Acts*, 55; And Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 17-18. See also the discussion in previous section, "Historical and History" in p.4-6.

⁴⁷ Here the unity of Luke's Gospel and Acts is upheld, consequently there is a very close correlation between the Preface of Luke and Acts. For a more comprehensive discussion on the unity of Luke and Acts see J. Verheyden, "The Unity of Luke-Acts: What Are We Up To?" in *The Unity of the Luke-Acts* ed. J. Verheyden (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press), 3-57.

⁴⁸ Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 11; Also, Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 6-7.

For Pervo, the preface is highly conventional,⁴⁹ since it also appears in the novels in which consistency with the content is doubted. So, the argument from the preface is not convincing for Pervo.⁵⁰ This conclusion is, of course, highly questionable. The reason to dispute such conclusion is that the historicity of the event in the novel is unverifiable, while the events in Acts are verifiable by eyewitnesses. Also, the purpose of both novels and Acts, is so different. The purpose of novels is to entertain but not with Acts. The preface of Acts is of course incomparable with that of novels. So, the preface of Acts can indeed represent the trustworthiness of Luke.

The Text, Acts 6:8-8:3

The arrangement of Stephen's story, which is the lengthiest story in Acts,⁵¹ reflects apparently the high skill of Luke in narrating the trial of Stephen. Pervo points it right that "The story of Stephen encases the sturdy meat of his address within two very thin slices of bread."⁵² This passage is part of the larger passage from 6:1-8:3 that covers the story of Stephen. The previous passage of 6:1-7 will be discussed only when it is relevant to the discussion.

Acts 6:8-15

There are two problematic issues of this section. First, the immediate shift from the miraculous work of Stephen in v.8 to the opposition from synagogues in v.9 is difficult to interpret how many synagogues are involved.⁵³ Such a narration is identified as a source used by Luke.⁵⁴ The text itself states several names of groups of synagogue such as Freedman, Cyrene, Alexandria and Province of Cilicia and Asia. There are distinctions on how many synagogues are involved. For Pervo, one of the problems is that "Luke is likely to have made this addition (*Cilicia*)."⁵⁵ By adding the name of Cilicia, Luke intends to introduce Paul, his hero, for "Through this addition, the narrator introduces a hint of Paul's presence into the story and identifies the enemies of Stephen with those of his hero."⁵⁶

This is unlikely the situation, since Luke must refer to a reliable source rather than freely shape it to introduce Paul, his hero. If Luke intends to introduce Paul, his hero, he could do this in two ways which are more convincing. First, Luke could spare a certain passage that shows Paul's competency in all aspects, whether as the disciple of Gamaliel,⁵⁷ or that he is

⁴⁹ Convention is the formal features or devices that are used in the Greco-Roman period in writing treatises or letters. Several devices are such as letter opening, greetings, thanksgiving, benediction, preface. The claim of highly conventional is made by Pervo, see Pervo, *Profit with Delight*, 5.

⁵⁰ Pervo, *Profit with Delight*, 5.

⁵¹ The whole story of Stephen from Acts 6:1-8:3 covers seventy-two verses to make it the lengthiest story throughout Acts, and a few verses more than the story of Cornelius in Acts 10:1-11:18 with sixty-six verses.

⁵² See Pervo, *Acts*, 165.

⁵³ Marshall, *Acts*, 129; Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 156; Also, Pervo, *Acts*, 165.

⁵⁴ Marshall, *Acts*, 128; Also, Pervo, *Acts*, 165; Pervo believed that in verse 9 Luke takes over a source as it is, since it fits in Luke's thesis, but the rest of this section is the shape of Luke in using Mark's Gospel.

⁵⁵ Pervo, *Acts*, 167. Italics mine. For Pervo, "Luke is not aware that Cilicia was not reconstituted as a separate province until 72 CE." See Pervo, *Acts*, 167, n.20.

⁵⁶ Pervo, *Acts*, 167.

⁵⁷ Acts 22:3.

beyond many of his age,⁵⁸ as Paul himself claimed. This is, of course, not difficult for Luke to insert additional section. Also Luke is Paul's companion, so it will not be difficult to collect these two important identities of Paul to be introduced in the very outset in Acts.⁵⁹ Second, Luke's record of the end of Paul's life in Acts 28:31 is unlikely a logical way to describe Luke's hero. If Paul is indeed Luke's hero, the text about Paul must be more than just Acts 28:31. The fact that Luke does not present the end of Paul's life is very strong evidence that the Paul is not Luke's hero. In Acts, the Apostle Paul is only a minister of the word. God does choose him to proclaim the powerful word of God. Rather than tell us about how Paul ends his life explicitly, Luke chooses to write that the kingdom of God and the word about the Lord Jesus Christ is proclaimed with boldness and without hindrance (Acts 28:31). Therefore, instead of assuming that the addition of Cilicia and Asia is to promote Paul, the argument that Luke refers to a reliable source that a real event is more likely convincing. Thus, Luke has demonstrated his commitment as has been claimed in the preface.

The second problem deals with verse 10-15. The story tells us that Stephen's opponents could not stand up against him. Then, they begin to charge him with blaspheming against Moses, the Holy Temple, Law and God. The story clearly presents the involvement of the Sanhedrin to charge on the blasphemy. The problem raised by Pervo is the setting of Stephen is so similar to the setting of Jesus. Pervo even provides a table in demonstrating how similar such the setting is.⁶⁰ The conclusion then is that the author made up this similarity by making use mainly of Mark's Gospel.⁶¹

Instead of making the story up, Luke must have a reference to a source⁶² (or sources) that is consistent to his commitment in the preface. Two considerations to support the use of a source (or sources) will be presented, the context and the logical argument. There are three contexts that can demonstrate the similar situation between Stephen and Jesus, without the need to set them as the same. First, the space of time between the charge of Stephen and that of Jesus is only a couple of years. Second, the fact that Stephen is identified as full of grace, power and Spirit,⁶³ and Stephen's opponents were not able to resist him, could serve as a solid answer that naturally, the setting of Stephen is similar to Jesus. Third, the opponents and the reasons of the charge are generally the same. The opponents are the Jews, the issue is blaspheming both Moses, God, the Law, and the Holy Temple.

Luke might have recognized that these settings were found in other treatises such as Mark's Gospel. By writing the story as it is now, Luke, of course, knows the consequence of being judged as inconsistent in himself by Theophilus. Logically, he must change the whole story of Stephen, but the text does not tell so. Therefore, the setting could be that Luke, after investigating carefully a source (or sources), knows that the story of Stephen is real and similar

⁵⁸ Gal. 1:14.

⁵⁹ Col. 4:4; 2 Tim 4:11; Phil. 1:24.

⁶⁰ Pervo, *Acts*, 168. Listing similarities between Stephen and Jesus in Mark, Luke and Acts, Pervo follows earlier scholars such as Michael D. Goulder, *Type and History in Acts* (London, United Kingdom: SPCK, 1964) and Earl Richard, *Acts 6:1-8:4: The Author's Method of Composition* (Missoula, MT: Scholarly Press, 1978).

⁶¹ Pervo argued that the setting of Stephen is fully Luke's responsibility, that Luke has shaped the story from the material of Mark's Gospel to present the similarity between Stephen and Jesus. See Pervo, *Acts*, 167-170.

⁶² Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 261; Also, Marshall, *Acts*, 135.

⁶³ Acts 6:3, 6:8.

to Jesus. But because it is true, he then chooses to write it down as it is, with the risk of the judgment as inconsistent.

Between these two options, either he makes up the story of Stephen to fit to Jesus⁶⁴ or he writes it as it is, because it is true as it is, with all the possibility he might bear, the second option will be more convincing and is likely the case. With the second option, Luke then has demonstrated his consistency in providing a reliable history⁶⁵ and all at once maintains both theological and historical elements that influence his writing.

Consequently, the third issues that deals with the existence of Stephen, is then answered by the two issues discussed above. In other words, the existence of Stephen does not need to be presumed as did Pervo,⁶⁶ since the presumption of the existence of Stephen lies in the assumption that the story of Stephen is unreal but created. Also, the previous passage Acts 6:1-7, clearly indicates that there were many eyewitnesses, not only from the congregation, but also the Apostles who laid their hands on him as one of the deacons.⁶⁷

Acts 7:1-53

This specific passage is the speech of Stephen responding to the accusation of the Jewish leaders. The main problem here is to account for the origin of the speech, whether this belongs to Stephen or is created by the author of Acts to fit with his thesis.⁶⁸ For Pervo, this speech is created by the author of Acts, and not derived from a source (or sources), because "Ancient writers were expected to compose their own speeches, and the author of Acts is no exception."⁶⁹ Providing five theories in interpreting this speech, he rejects the idea that maintains the speech of Stephen as a report. The impossibility of the speech as a report is because "a Greek speech based on LXX with this content is wholly unsuitable for the context, a blasphemy trial before the high court of Jewish people."⁷⁰

Pervo clearly equates the author of Acts with the ancient writers, as if they all must strictly follow a certain pattern and content. Two crucial issues here are: First, the judgment of Acts by using the ancient writers as the basis. Second, the claim of that the speech is unsuitable to the context of the charge. These two issues are problematic if we understand that the speech is not made up but refers to a reliable source truly as it is.

The equalization of the author of Acts with the ancient writers in all aspects tends to be a speculative generalization. The style of the writing may have been the same as the result of convention, but the content that correlates to the reliability or historicity is not. The content is influenced by the perspective and intention of the author rather than the style of writing. Penner is right when he asks, "who gets to decide if Acts would be a historiography or not:

⁶⁴ As being been argued by Witherington that presenting such similarities is as a compelling evidence to set Stephen to Jesus, see Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 253.

⁶⁵ Marshall, *Acts*, 135.

⁶⁶ As in Pervo, *Acts*, 164.

⁶⁷ Acts 6:5; This specific verse explicitly stated that the congregation choose Stephen; in Acts 6:6, it is clearly written that the Apostles lay their hand for the chosen deacons where Stephen is one of the deacons. While in Acts 8:1-2, Paul was mentioned as giving his approval in the death of Stephen, in Acts 8:2 it is explicitly mentioned that some devoted men buried and mourned deeply for Stephen.

⁶⁸ Pervo, *Acts*, 175-176; Pervo presented five existing theories in solving this issue of origin, but the main category falls in to these two options. Pervo as the one who maintain that Acts is historical novel, believed that Luke created this speech to fit his thesis

⁶⁹ Pervo, *Acts*, 14.

⁷⁰ Pervo, *Acts*, 175; For the contrary of this conclusion see Marshall, *Acts*, 135.

Luke or Lucian?"⁷¹ In short, the intention and perspective of each author is different although the style may seem the same. The perspective and intention of Luke focuses on God who actively works in history, that is, the theology that has its ground in history as well. This intention will never be the same with the ancient writers who did not have such a faith as Luke.

The argument that there is an unsuitability between the speech and the charge is unconvincing. The main charge of Stephen's opponents, who are the elders, scribes, and the Sanhedrin, is the blasphemy against Moses and God,⁷² also the Holy Temple and the Law.⁷³ So there are two elements, the Jews and the charge. If we follow the speech of Stephen, we will find that instead of unsuitable to the context, the speech points accurately to the heart of the charge.

The issues in the trial, Moses, God, Holy Temple and the Law, originated in God's calling to Abraham and are pertinent to his opponent. So, the speech that begins with Abraham, is a strong evidence that it is not out of context. By telling the history of Israel from the very outset, the Jews must easily recognize whether or not Stephen blasphemes. Their dreadful reaction to Stephen's speech confirms the relevancy between the speech and the trial. It is strange if the answer is unsuitable to the charge, but still the Jews lynch Stephen. If it is unsuitable, Stephen may then be considered as illogical by the Jews, and they will not have any reason to overreact and lynch him.

The option is whether Luke made up this speech or it is originated from a source (or sources) and Luke used it. The most likely is that the author cited a source (or sources), since we consider that Luke is consistent to his claim in the preface. To argue that Luke has created it,⁷⁴ would be less convincing since it is Stephen instead of Luke, who is more likely to understand the real situation he faced as written in the source that was quoted then by Luke. Maintaining that Luke used a source (or sources) will keep the harmony between the preface and the content, also the theological-historical perspective.

Acts 7:54-8:3

The same question of the similarity of Stephen and Jesus is recalled by Pervo, but here it is more obvious because "The martyrdom of Stephen has been shaped to conform the passion of Jesus"⁷⁵ Pervo claimed that the material of Mark is utilized by the author of Acts. Presenting six parallels, he argued that it is Luke who made up this section rather than using a source.⁷⁶ As has been argued earlier, the short space of time, the opponents who are generally the same, and the fact that Stephen is a person who is full of Spirit and grace, and also the logical response of Luke, has proved to be more convincing to claim that the story referred to a source than it is made up. Also, the situation is described as emotionally uncontrolled,⁷⁷ so the absence of the formal process is highly probable.

⁷¹ Todd Penner, "Madness in the Method? The Acts of the Apostles in Current Study." *Currents in Biblical Research* 2, no. 2 (April 2004): 234-235.

⁷² Acts 6:11-12, 6:15.

⁷³ Acts 6:13.

⁷⁴ See Pervo, *Acts*, 178.

⁷⁵ Pervo, *Acts*, 195.

⁷⁶ Pervo, *Acts*, 195. All the six parallels are: 1. The absence of formal sentence; 2. a climatic Son of Man saying; 3. a reference to garment; 4. the final words in a loud voice and a prayer; 5. the prayer of forgiveness of enemies; 6. burial by "devout" person(s).

⁷⁷ Acts 7:54, 7:57.

Another problem deals with Act 8:1-3, that mentions the burial, deep weeping of the devout men, and the spread of the Gospel. For Pervo, all the scenes such as the tension and increasing crescendo of violence are the result of careful crafting by the narrator who "has cast the seed of future Diaspora and gentile missions."⁷⁸ Although Pervo does not deny the presence of source, but for him, the story is crafted. In short, Pervo claims that this story is crafted to cast the mission to the gentiles. However, it is likely that Luke intended to introduce Saul as the eyewitness of this violence who is then his source in writing the Acts of the apostle and be beneficial to Theophilus. Thus, claiming this episode as crafted in the sense of telling things which is not based on the fact is not valid.

The issue of crafting will not be reargued in this section. The attention is given to the issue of the author who wish to "cast the seed of gentile mission". This phrase might be true, but if the story is crafted as if it can be unreal, one may also easily claim that the gentile mission as crafted and thus the truthfulness of the gentile mission is at stake, whether or not it is real. This will not be the issue if the use of a reliable source (or sources) is maintained, because, the mission to the Gentiles is the will of God from the very outset,⁷⁹ and the persecution is only the precipitating factor to the spread of the mission. Luke is attempting to provide this report in term of the mission to the Gentiles and even to the end of the world. So again, Luke's theological-historical perspective is more convincing to provide answers to the issue.

The Theological Principles

The theological principles of each section in Acts 6:8-8:3, derived from both theological-historical and Historical Novel approach will be examined to determine which is consistent with the intention of the author. Only the theology that contrasts to one another will be highlighted since there may be similarities between them. The attempt here is to demonstrate that the theological-historical perspective is more consistent thus should never be disregard even if one may disagree with it.

The Theological Principles of Acts 6:8-15

Two theological principles of the first section Acts 6:8-15 will be presented from the theological-historical perspective. First, the miraculous work of Stephen is not exclusively his, but it is the Holy Spirit who fills him and the Grace and power of God that makes him as such.⁸⁰ Second, that Stephen who is full of wisdom and power and Spirit, has boldness in facing persecution. So, the principle is that the power and grace of God and the Holy Spirit work in the context of Stephen and is applicable to our contemporary situation, specifically in the times of persecution. God will not leave us, for our fellowship with him is no longer in a place but in us to encourage us.

The historical novel provides several principles such as, first, this section, by stating the synagogue name of Cilicia and Asia, is understood to introduce his ultimate figure, Paul.⁸¹ This may be true, but if we examine this idea more carefully, the main intention is unlikely as argued earlier. Also, "This dimension of the "theology of the Seven" is indirectly represented

⁷⁸ Pervo, *Acts*, 201.

⁷⁹ See for instance the genealogy of Jesus in Luke 3: 23-38, that traces back to Adam instead of Abraham, as the very ancestor of Jesus. Also Acts 1:8, that the Apostles will be the witnesses of Jesus to the end of the world.

⁸⁰ Marshall, *Acts*, 129; And Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostle*, 257.

⁸¹ Pervo, *Acts*, 195.

in both the theology of Luke"⁸² It is mentioned that this dimension will serve as helpful link for the reader to Jesus.⁸³ It is not clear what the reference of "Theology of the Seven" is and its dimension. If it refers to persons with the great spiritual power to performed miracles such as Stephen then, it is highly probable to be irrelevant and inapplicable to our contemporary context, since the great spiritual power and miracles might not always correlate to one another.

Theological Principles of Acts 7:1-53

The speech of Stephen, functions as an important part in Acts as a basis for spreading the gospel in to the ends of the world.⁸⁴ The theological principles of the theological-historical perspective are: First, it is God who began the work of salvation by revealing himself to Abraham, the forefather of Israel and the one promised the land, which was then fulfilled in the time of Joshua when Israel possessed the land ever since.⁸⁵ In short, the "promised and fulfilled" scheme in the history of Israel is God's gracious works of salvation. Also, God's salvation was then fulfilled in its fullness in Jesus.⁸⁶ It was Israel who was unfaithful, causing God to turn from them until the time of Stephen's speech.

For the historical novel approach, the speech of Stephen in Acts 7:2-53, "it justifies the separation of the two bodies in the light of subsequent intra-Christian debate"⁸⁷ Such a negative understanding does not fit to the text itself. By leaving the conclusion unexplained, nothing can be learnt and applied in our current context. To state that the speech of Stephen serves as a justification for the separation will of course overlook the main theme that focuses on God and look at the negative aspect rather than the value that can be learnt.

The effort to keep questioning the source and to demonstrate that Luke has created this speech to fit his thesis has in turn caused the historical novel approach to fail at seeing the richness of the theology that can be derived from this speech to the beyond except a negative view on martyrs of which Stephen is included.⁸⁸ Here we see that the theological principles derived from the theological-historical perspective fit better to the text.

Theological Principles of Acts 7:54 – 8:3

The main theological principle in this section, for those who represent the theological-historical perspective is the eschatology. Stephen, by seeing Jesus at the right hand of God, has revealed certain truth regarding the end of times.⁸⁹ This great vision of Stephen will then

⁸² Pervo, *Acts*, 165.

⁸³ Pervo, *Acts*, 165.

⁸⁴ See Neudorfer, "The Speech of Stephen." in *Witness to The Gospel: The Theology of Acts* ed. Howard I. Marshall and David Peterson (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 279.

⁸⁵ Neudorfer, *The Speech of Stephen*, 283; And Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 266-275; also, Marshall, *Acts*, 134-135.

⁸⁶ Neudorfer, *The Speech of Stephen*, 286-287; and Marshall, *Acts*, 142-143, 147.

⁸⁷ Pervo, *Acts*, 193.

⁸⁸ Rather than attempt to present the theology which is rich, Pervo goes too far bay saying that "Martyrs-when given free rein in literature- are more likely to defend what they represent than weave a detailed legal fabric; they prefer death to dishonor, as the saying goes, and freely boast of their beliefs." in Pervo, *Acts*, 175; Such a conclusion is sadly can be figured out and of course it is unlikely the intention of Luke in presenting Stephen.

⁸⁹ Marshall, *Acts*, 150-151.

strengthen the faith of the readers, also confirm the truth of Jesus words. This theological principle also encourages the believers of our times now.

In this last section, the historical novel approach understands that "Within the narrative it helps to till the ground for the conversion of Saul"⁹⁰ Also this section is to explain how the mission to the gentiles is set out by Jesus disciples.⁹¹ With this understanding, it is evident that the historical novel approach has disregarded the theological-historical perspective. The attempt to keep on demonstrating the inconsistency of the author who is claimed as crafted the story, has led to the resistance to look for the theological principles from the text. It is unlikely that this conclusion can be applied to the contemporary context. Therefore, again the theological-historical perspective has proved to be more faithful to the text.

Conclusion

Finally, the conclusion that we would like to state is that the theological-historical perspective is embedded in the mind of Luke, the author of Acts. Resisting to adopt this perspective in understanding Acts will result in a distinctive interpretation that misunderstand the author of Acts and created many unnecessary and complicated implication to both the claim itself and the theological principles. The historical novel approach that seems to disregard this theological-historical perspective has been examined to be less convincing and more speculative. Therefore, to understand Acts properly, the theological and historical element should not be ignored as this is Luke's notion in composing Acts.

⁹⁰ Pervo, *Acts*, 199.

⁹¹ Pervo, *Acts*, 201.

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