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ASCENSION SCHOLARSHIP AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

Half a century ago, writing about the Lukan ascension accounts, P. A. van Stempvoort declared that 'discussion never ends'. He continued: 'The flood of publications goes on from year to year. Only new points of view give one boldness to add another.'[1] This study adds a new point of view to our understanding of Jesus' ascension by examining its impact on the narrative production of space within Acts.

Part I (Chapters 1 and 2) unpacks the theory underpinning this aim, and then Part II (Chapters 3–7) applies the theory in a 'spatialised' reading of Acts 1:1–11:18. As such, this study links three poles of scholarly inquiry, namely Christ's ascension, narrative-critical readings of Acts, and the role of geography in constructing and communicating that narrative's theological message. As the opening two chapters argue, previous scholarship has failed to integrate these three considerations and each has been impoverished as a result. Instead, the ascension requires a narrative positioning within Acts, and Acts as narrative requires a heavenward orientation. Both these claims require a proper understanding of the ways in which Jesus' ascension restructures earthly places and space within the narrative.

This opening chapter positions the direction for this study within existing scholarship concerning the ascension in Acts. This task is greatly helped by Arie Zwiep's monograph on the ascension in Luke and Acts.[2] His *Forschungsbericht* deliberately addressed the previous absence of an up-to-date review of ascension literature and, by also offering a sixteen-page bibliography of ascension literature from between 1900 and 1996, Zwiep has performed an admirable service to scholarship by rectifying this deficiency.[3] This acknowledged strength within his work[4] means that the present study can focus upon particular gaps within ascension scholarship.

[1] Van Stempvoort 1958/9: 30. [2] Zwiep 1997. [3] Zwiep 1997: 1–35, 200–15.
[4] McIver 1999 specifically highlights this element of Zwiep's work for commendation.

This chapter identifies three lacunae in existing scholarship examining Christ's ascension in Acts. First, the ascension account needs better narrative positioning within Acts as a whole; second, the problematic nature of post-ascension Christological presence and absence requires further elucidation; and, third, the ascension's submerged spatiality[5] needs to be uncovered. Although interrelated and together constituting the framework for the present study, each contention will be introduced in turn, the first two being appraised in this chapter. The third lacuna, concerning setting and spatiality, is anticipated in this chapter but explored more fully in Chapter 2.

1. A need for ascension scholarship to engage with narrative perspectives

Ascension scholarship and narrative readings

In the major examination of the Lukan ascension accounts preceding Zwiep, Mikeal Parsons's 1987 monograph distinguished traditional 'diachronic' analyses (text, source and form criticism) from more 'synchronic' (narrative literary) approaches to the text.[6] This distinction provides a taxonomy for positioning Zwiep's work and, indeed, all ascension scholarship. Assessed in its light, ascension scholarship reveals no sustained attempt, either before or after Parsons, to trace the impact of the ascension through the course of the ensuing Acts narrative.[7] John Maile came nearest to adumbrating such a project, anticipating that the ascension signals 'the same story continuing in a different mode'.[8] Yet despite his article's promise, Maile's overall thesis of the ascension as indicating Jesus' continuing ministry across Acts remained undeveloped.[9] Parsons stands as the key but lone precursor for the present study,[10] his synchronic approach to the ascension

[5] As Chapter 2 will elucidate, 'spatiality' is used as a summary term for 'the production of Space' (Soja 1996: 71). Throughout, *space* is 'at once result and cause, product and producer' of social life (Lefebvre 1991: 142).

[6] Parsons 1987: 18–24.

[7] Although pursuing other questions, Zwiep's *Forschungsbericht* confirms this observation.

[8] Maile 1986: 56.

[9] Maile (1986: 53 n. 68, 56 n. 77) makes reference to a thesis project which ultimately he failed to complete.

[10] Zwiep's *Forschungsbericht* passed over a branch of ascension literature, largely from the 1960s, which sought to come to terms with Bultmannian demythologising agendas (e.g. K. C. Thompson 1964, J. G. Davies 1969, Metzger 1969, Selman 1969). Importantly, these studies sought to engage with the *meaning* of the ascension, an

remaining undeveloped by subsequent scholarship. Therefore, the present study focuses on this aspect of the ascension.

Parsons intended his synchronic analysis to explore the ways in which the ascension narrative 'functions as a narrative beginning, anticipating major plot developments in the story of Acts'.[11] Adopting Marianna Torgovnick's literary theory concerning narrative closure for a reading of Acts 1, Parsons identified there a noticeably different narrative function from that evident in the Luke 24 account.[12] These differences, Parsons argued, are better explained in terms of their literary function than by recourse to interpolation or source theories.[13] His analysis of the Acts 1 account within its narrative cotext[14] identified elements of circularity, parallelism, 'empty center' narrative patterning (by which 'the characters variously respond to an absent, but curiously present Jesus'),[15] reverse linkage (whereby a sequel refers to its predecessor), and internal focalisation. Yet Parsons himself recognised the limited nature of his own inquiries at this juncture: 'Despite the number of ancillary plot strategies anticipated in Acts 1, this study is limited to the major one concerning the place of Israel in the gentile mission, reflected in the disciple's [*sic*] question and Jesus' response in Acts 1:6–8.'[16] Such an acknowledgement of the text's potential and Parsons's admission of the limited scope of his own study suggest room for further synchronic analysis of the ascension within Acts.

This present study builds on Parsons's synchronic approach, but in a new direction. It examines the ways in which Jesus' ascension structures the church[17] in Acts, and how it shapes the believers' 'spatiality', that is, the ways in which Jesus' ascension produces space and an understanding of space both within and beyond the church.[18]

Although Parsons pursued both diachronic and synchronic methods, Zwiep's subsequent analysis of the Lukan ascension maintained a

advance beyond simple hypothesising about the text's historical development. As such, at their best, they anticipated elements of later, more 'literary' readings of the ascension. K. C. Thompson 1964 provides the clearest example of these anticipations.

[11] Parsons 1987: 24. [12] Parsons 1987: 151–86.

[13] Parsons 1987: 189–99. Maile (1986: 34–5) draws similar 'theological' conclusions.

[14] This study uses 'cotext' to mean 'the string of linguistic data within which a text is set', preserving 'context' for 'the socio-historical [geographical] realities of the Lukan text' (Green 1997b: 13, 14).

[15] Parsons 1987: 169. [16] Parsons 1987: 159–60.

[17] 'Church' is here understood as shorthand for collective believers in Acts, eschewing any anachronistic rendering of the term (thereby heeding the warning of Lieu 2004: 91) but recognising it as one collective term among others for believers within Acts.

[18] While this study assumes Christian communities function as characters within the narrative, the understanding of space pursued here is more than simply keeping characters in their rightful (narrative) 'place' (cf. R. P. Thompson 2006).

more stridently diachronic approach to the text. Building on Gerhard Lohfink's earlier form-critical assessment of the Lukan ascension as a rapture story,[19] Zwiep compared the Lukan pericopae with other rapture stories circulating within first-century Judaism. More recent claims to reinstate Greco-Roman influences on the ascension accounts have contested Zwiep's analysis at this juncture,[20] but such debates remain firmly within the diachronic aspect of Parsons's taxonomy. For all his diachronic insights, and his acknowledgement of Parsons's synchronic advances, Zwiep did not advance the synchronic dimension to any degree.[21] Instead, his in-depth analysis of the wider Acts narrative was constrained to 'explicit' ascension texts, namely Acts 1:22; 3:19–21.[22] Reference to other parts of Acts were structured through Zwiep's concern with discrete issues arising from his thesis, such as the apologetic function of the forty days in Acts 1:3, and the ascension's relationship with parousia expectation and the outpouring of the Spirit.[23]

Since Zwiep, subsequent ascension scholarship has not returned to Parsons's synchronic approach. This is in large part because the most recent ascension research has been undertaken by systematic theologians whose approach is, by its nature, even less likely to be sensitive to narrative position.[24] More detailed examination of these systematic studies later in this chapter acknowledges their significant contributions to scholarly understanding of the ascension, but they do not position the ascension *within Acts as a narrative whole*.[25] They exhibit the same limited sensitivity to narrative cotext that Parsons correctly identified in earlier ascension scholarship.[26] Consequently Robert O'Toole's diagnosis still holds true nearly three decades after it was first made: 'The methodology used by most researchers seems too limited. They spend a good deal of time discussing Luke's treatment of the ascension and exaltation, but they do not study these two

[19] Lohfink 1971. [20] E.g. Gilbert 2003: 242–7.

[21] Zwiep 2004, a monograph on Acts 1:15–26 described as a 'sequel' to his 1997 ascension monograph (p. vii), displays a sustained narrative turn (e.g. pp. 2, 136, 176–7) not evident in his ascension analysis.

[22] Zwiep 1997: 109–15. [23] Zwiep 1997: 171–85.

[24] Farrow 1999, Burgess 2004, Dawson 2004, A. Johnson 2004.

[25] The one exception is A. Johnson 2004, but his 'narrative perichoresis' primarily addresses Trinitarian issues rather than ecclesiological matters.

[26] See Parsons 1987: 14 regarding J. Davies 1958; Parsons 1987: 191 regarding van Stempvoort 1958/9; and Parsons 1987: 204 n. 27 regarding Lohfink 1971. Indirectly, Lohfink has recognised this weakness in his earlier work (1999: 319). Yet, despite – or, perhaps more accurately, *because of* – an autobiographical confession to that effect (Lohfink 1999: 311–22), Lohfink's recent ecclesiology fails to consider the ascension's effect upon the earthly church.

events in Luke-Acts as a whole.'[27] Indeed, that this criticism can be levelled at the vast majority of previous ascension scholarship indicates the fundamental nature of the methodological divide identified by Parsons. It therefore remains evident that the ascension still requires the supplementary insights of more synchronic approaches which recognise that any search for the theology of Acts 'must struggle to reclaim the character of Acts as a narrative'.[28]

Narrative criticism and narrative setting

The paucity of synchronic readings of the ascension highlights the need to obtain methodological purchase for such a study. This need is exacerbated by the conceptual growth within Anglo-American Acts scholarship[29] of what can be termed 'narrative criticism' from its origins in the early 1980s[30] into a catch-all term for many different text-based approaches.[31]

The advent of narrative criticism promised a transformation for geography within biblical studies after decades of its neglect and abuse. The early twentieth-century original 'quest' for the historical Jesus combed the gospels for their geographical references in an atomistic fashion, only to be followed by early redaction critics dismissing these geographical references as confused and incoherent. Narrative criticism's shift from historical to literary questions suggested new horizons for understanding settings, understandings in which 'Galilee and Jerusalem are no longer simply geographical references but settings for dramatic action … rich in connotational, or associative values, and these values contribute to the meaning of the narrative for the implied reader'.[32]

[27] O'Toole 1979: 111; cf. also p. 112. The present study views Acts as a sequel to Luke's Gospel, acknowledging its qualified unity with Luke's Gospel. This approach resists the excesses of 'parallelomania' by granting Acts a literary life of its own, while acknowledging that challenges to Luke-Acts unity have 'probably led to a stronger, better-defended, case for the unity of Luke-Acts' (Marshall 1999: 340).

[28] Gaventa 1988: 150.

[29] The limited engagement with German-speaking scholarship within this study reflects the relative absence of such 'literary' approaches within its writings on Acts. As recently as 2006 a *German* narrative-critical theory could be judged an exegetical gap (Eisen 2006: 43), although cf. Wasserberg 1998, who adopts a hybrid methodology, bridging historical-critical and narrative-critical approaches to the text (p. 34).

[30] Rhoads 1982.

[31] The term 'narrative criticism' is retained here because of its heuristic value as a collective label for the broad raft of narrative-based approaches to biblical texts.

[32] Malbon 1992: 24, 31.

Despite this promise, however, setting has remained a relatively undeveloped ancillary to plot and action, which have been viewed as primarily driven by sequence and time.[33] The neglect of setting within narrative readings of Acts is particularly surprising, given that Acts makes more use of spatially related terms than any other NT text.[34] Also, when viewed as a narrative event, the ascension relocates a particular character (Jesus) from one *setting* to another. Given that the account is told from the spatial vantage point of the disciples who remain on earth,[35] the *settings of other characters* are also repositioned by Jesus' ascension. Such interplay of settings adumbrates a wider understanding of narrative *space*.

Given narrative criticism's sustained neglect of these matters, Matthew Skinner's recent foregrounding of narrative setting provides a helpful springboard for the reading undertaken here.[36] As Skinner muses, while lamenting the comparative lack of scholarly interest in setting compared with the literature concerning characterisation, 'Perhaps analysis of setting is about to experience a period of similar fecundity within the study of biblical narratives.'[37]

Skinner helpfully highlights that analysing setting as an aspect of narrative does not require every text to deliver 'explicit descriptions of its settings or have them figure prominently in the causes and effects of narrated events'; instead, 'no narrative can totally bracket out the notion of setting; nor can any ever exhaust all the details of any single one'.[38] Setting can dynamically shift from an apparently background position to a more active role within the narrative wherein spaces become 'thematized', 'acting places' rather than simply the place of action.[39] In short, narratives inherently assume settings, but settings are not simply a flash of 'colour', or ready-formed background scenery

[33] Both Powell (1990: 69) and Marguerat and Bourquin (1999: 77) liken setting to adverbs. Although Resseguie (2005: 87–120) provides a longer introduction to setting, his discussion still lacks an integrative theory (a charge also applicable to Resseguie 2004) and is premised upon setting as 'background against which the narrative action takes place' (p. 87).

[34] According to Parsons 1998: 158 n. 14, utilising semantic domain lexicons.

[35] Parsons 1987: 175. Parsons's underlying understanding of point of view has stood up to scrutiny (Yamasaki 2007: 91–4). Cf. also Eisen 2006: 154–7.

[36] Skinner 2003: 34–55. [37] Skinner 2003: 4 n. 5. [38] Skinner 2003: 34–5.

[39] Bal 1995: 95. This is a more insightful theoretical observation than Bar-Efrat's distinction (1989: 195) between mentioning and describing sites, that is, backgrounding and foregrounding in relation to events. Bar-Efrat's categories neglect the more active and constitutive aspects of space and place.

'behind' the action.[40] Simply naming a place can evoke a host of descriptive associations which inform narrative action and, inevitably, 'Reading involves a process of spatial reconstruction or imagination.'[41]

Applying Skinner's insight to the ascension, that Acts lacks any *description* of heaven (οὐρανός) does not preclude it from functioning as a significant setting within the narrative, even though this has been an unspoken assumption of previous ascension scholarship.[42] Indeed, as the locale for the ascended Christ, the central character in Luke's first volume, its significance is worthy of further examination.

Thus the present study applies Skinner's theoretical insights in a new arena, locating them within a wider understanding of spatiality (Chapter 2) and using them to read the ascension within Acts (Chapters 3–7). Skinner has linked setting to the understanding of plot and characters within a narrative, recognising that settings 'can delimit the range of possibilities for action in a scene' and contribute to the symbolic and perceptive mood of a narrative, and that their repetition contributes towards the construction of 'archetypes and meaningful contrasts'.[43] Further, Skinner posits that settings reflexively relate with one another, and 'movement through various settings in a story can be a means of patterning events and anticipating or intensifying new horizons in the plot'.[44] Thus, Chapter 3 will argue that the fourfold repetition of οὐρανός at the outset of Acts (1:10–11) is highly important for constructing the narrative's spatiality.

Skinner's insights, taken together and applied to the ascension, anticipate οὐρανός exercising a rich functionality in the ordering of space within Acts. This study will therefore position the ascension in Acts 1 as more significant for the wider Acts narrative than previous scholarship has indicated, with commensurate benefits for reading Acts. As section two of this chapter demonstrates, this also involves revisiting characterisation within Acts: at the ascension, Jesus, as a key character within Luke-Acts, undergoes cumulative development

[40] Darr's reduction of setting to providing 'clues' and 'convenient markers' (Darr 1998: 70) for reading character might reflect his primary focus upon characterisation, but it falsely flattens out the dynamic and reflexive reaffirmation, negation, revision and supplementing of *settings* across Acts.

[41] Skinner 2003: 36; see also p. 36 n. 23. Regarding 'imagined' geographies within contemporary human geography, see Valentine 1999, Gregory 2000a.

[42] Parsons 1987 is an exception, but then Parsons 1998 failed to connect his insights concerning the ascension with his later examination of the narrative space of Acts. Eisen 2006 is more suggestive in this regard.

[43] Skinner 2003: 48–53, quoting from pp. 49, 51. [44] Skinner 2003: 53.

rather than simply disappearing from the plot.[45] By sustaining Jesus as a placed character within the narrative, Acts encourages auditors[46] to appreciate his new location in heaven, by which Jesus' character becomes fused to some degree with the divine heavenly voice of Luke's Gospel.

This study anticipates that spatiality can be carried in small details within the narrative. Skinner helpfully inverts the conventional estimation that the typically limited explicit geographical description within biblical narrative makes assessment of geographical setting correspondingly harder: 'Although readers reared on modern novels may find the dearth of descriptive detail in biblical narratives unusual, it is not a unique phenomenon among the corpus of extant texts from antiquity … settings therefore could suggest rich associations among an audience without lengthy descriptions and play significant roles within the performance of the dramas.'[47] In short, limited elaboration or description of οὐρανός as Christ's new setting within Acts 1 does not preclude discernment of its significance for narrative spatiality.

While Skinner's theoretical insights helpfully inform new readings of narrative settings, Skinner notes that his work is suggestive rather than exhaustive.[48] Most importantly, full comprehension of a narrative's 'spatiality' cannot be reduced to setting, just as a narrative's understanding of *time* cannot be reduced to analysis of narrative pace. As Chapter 2 will establish, setting and space are related, even reflexive, but they are not coterminous. Skinner's failure to connect setting with space is partly exegetical, in that his analysis of Acts 21–8 does not examine the narrative's beginning, where the ascension exercises a comprehensive primacy effect over space in Acts.[49] Skinner's limited understanding of space is also theoretical, in that he interprets contemporary geographical theory too narrowly through the filter of setting. Skinner saw his own work as 'an early step toward a more comprehensive and much needed understanding

[45] By contrast, to cite an extreme example, the promising title of Fuller 1994 – 'The Life of Jesus, after the Ascension (Luke 24:50–53; Acts 1:9–11)' – leads to no consideration of Acts beyond 1:11!

[46] 'Auditor' is used throughout this study to refer to the intended recipient(s) of the narrative (without specifying a particular historical reconstruction), in recognition that most recipients would 'hear' rather than 'read' the text. For further discussion of orality within Acts, see Shiell 2004.

[47] Skinner 2003: 54–5 n. 92. [48] Skinner 2003: 53.

[49] Without particular reference to spatiality, Parsons 1987: 182–4 recognises that 1:9–11 exhibits a primacy effect over narrative expectations.

of the importance of settings in Luke's narrative'.[50] This present project extends his work, utilising spatiality as a larger theoretical concept. Chapter 2, therefore, will develop an overarching understanding of space, with setting located within it, as the theoretical basis for the exegesis undertaken in Part II.

As both symptom and cause of the difficulty of theorising space, setting in itself lacks the necessary integrative analytical framework for examining space. Typically, insights concerning space remain as disparate observations regarding toponymy, topographical features, architectural design, geopolitical dimensions, and cosmological (dis) order. Rather than conducting a unified examination of space, those biblical scholars who have investigated setting have tended towards more piecemeal consideration or, at best, exploration of particular aspect(s) of space. Coming to biblical studies as a geographer, I want to bring geographical insights to bear on such a richly spatial text as Acts.

Mieke Bal has voiced the theoretical need for an integrative theory of space: 'Few concepts deriving from the theory of narrative texts are as self-evident, and yet have remained so vague, as the concept of *space*. Only a few theoretical publications have been devoted to it.'[51] For Bal, 'The relations between space and event become clear if we think of well-known, stereotypical combinations: declaration of love by moonlight on a balcony, high-flown reveries on a mountain-top, a rendezvous in an inn, ghostly appearances among ruins; brawls in cafés.'[52] Such fixed combinations form structural *topoi* and, arguably, ascension accounts could well represent such a *topos*. Indeed, historical-critical readings of the ascension, via form criticism, are already mindful of this suggestion, as Zwiep's work illustrates. Yet a *narrative* reading of the ascension requires more flexibility, since also 'the expectation that a clearly marked space will function as the frame for a suitable event may also be disappointed'.[53] Thus, mapping narrative representations of space requires sequential, cumulative, and synchronic analysis of space as it is constructed rhetorically and holistically within specific texts (in this instance, Acts) – readings which are sensitive to structural expectations but not determined by such structures.[54]

[50] Skinner 2003: 4. [51] Bal 1995: 93.
[52] Bal 1995: 96. [53] Bal 1995: 97.
[54] For similar theorisation concerning characterisation, see Darr 1992: 37.

Conclusion

Using Parsons's taxonomy to position existing ascension scholarship, this section has highlighted the limited synchronic analysis of the ascension within Acts as a wider narrative. It has also examined recent developments in understanding narrative setting within Acts, appropriating their strengths while looking beyond them for an adequate and integrative theory of narrative space. The overall direction of this study has been introduced through the contention that Jesus' post-ascension setting in heaven shapes other (earthly) settings, and indeed the production of space, within Acts.

2. Christological presence *and* absence?

Existing ascension literature demonstrates an abiding scholarly tension between Christological presence and absence, and Jesus' corresponding activity or inactivity, engendered by the ascension.

Again, Parsons provides a starting point for discussion. His notion of an 'empty center'[55] to Acts, whereby Christ is a character who is 'absent but curiously present … around which both the major action and the various characters' thoughts revolve',[56] highlights the tension of post-ascension Christological presence and absence. Parsons is, however, far from being the first to raise this issue. It casts a longer shadow, within both biblical studies and systematic theology. A survey of this scholarship, even if necessarily selective, both positions this conundrum and anticipates moving beyond Parsons's formulation.

Presence and absence within biblical studies

First, the history of biblical studies reinforces the need for a *narrative* consideration of Christological presence and absence. A century ago, reflection on the ascension proclaimed an absent but active Christ, but without examining whether Acts *per se* would sustain such a conclusion.[57] Later on, mid-twentieth-century redaction criticism addressed more specifically the post-ascension Christology of Acts, but cast it in terms of a more passive absence. Under this reading, during the so-called 'epoch of the church', the Spirit substitutes for Christ, who remains in heaven until the parousia, which is now

[55] Parsons 1987: 160. [56] Kreiswirth 1984: 39–40, quoted in Parsons 1987: 161.
[57] E.g. Swete 1910, MacLean 1915.