

# OpenTheo

## Reading Acts as Scripture (with Patrick Schreiner)

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Dr Patrick Schreiner, Associate Professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, joins me for a discussion of the book of Acts and its interpretation. He is the author of the new Acts commentary in the Christian Standard Commentary series (<https://amzn.to/3xf0Dvy>).

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## Transcript

Hello and welcome to another episode. I'm joined today by the author of a new commentary on the Book of Acts, Patrick Schreiner, who's Associate Professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Missouri. It's wonderful to have you with me.

It's great to be here with you, Alastair. So many people have written on the Book of Acts. And it seems that everything about the Book of Acts must have already been said.

What made you decide to write another commentary? And what do you think that your commentary can bring to the discussion? Yeah, good question. Someone asked me to write, Alastair. That's why I wrote it.

I had no previous interest in it. No, I'm just kidding. There is some truth to that.

But, you know, this new series, which is the old Knack series. I don't know if you recognize the relationship between it. But the new American commentary series is being kind of rebranded after the CSB Bible.

So this is the CSC, Christian Standard Commentary series. The old covers, people know books by their covers, right? Were kind of a red color. Now they're a blue color.

So it's very confusing. But they look much better now. But they were, they're redoing the series.

And that means they're reissuing some of the commentaries. And then they're redoing some of them. An author is updating them.

So for Acts, John Pohlhill did the one previously, which actually is an excellent commentary. It's very, very well done. I really enjoyed that one.

But he's older now. And he wasn't going to redo that one. So they asked me to do it.

I have been working a lot on Matthew, as you may know. And I hadn't done a ton of work on Acts besides my own teaching ministry. And then I had done a lot of spatial work, actually, in my kind of dissertation.

So I touched on Acts and actually Jesus' ascension a little bit, even in my dissertation PhD work. So they came to me and they asked, hey, we've got Acts open. Are you interested in doing that? We're looking for a very theological reading.

That's kind of how this series is going. And we know you love to do theological readings, which we'll talk about more. And I had to ponder it.

And then I thought, yeah, I really do want to do Acts. I'm very interested in the narrative portions of the New Testament, especially. And so I'm kind of a gospels-focused person.

So it makes sense that I would include Acts in that, because it's the narrative portion of the New Testament. And then I sat down, which is kind of another funny little story. I sat down and I actually googled how many verses are in Acts.

And then I looked at my due date. And I thought, I need to write every day on one verse to get this done in time. Because Acts is a large book.

So 28 chapters. I don't even remember how many verses total. But I obviously didn't do that.

But I ended up working on this for about six years on and off, for about six years. Really spent three years solid on it. And then spent another three years kind of editing, thinking, honing it.

And as you asked, when I looked at all the Acts commentaries, I did think, well, what do I have to offer here? But honestly, there is a sense in which I think the world of biblical interpretation has gone through somewhat of a shift. There is a lot of really good historical commentaries out there. There is a lot of good exegetical commentaries out there.

But in my own training, I was really helped by your friend Peter Lighthouse, by people like Richard Hayes, by really patristic interpreters of the scriptures and the Fathers. And the kind of the movement called theological interpretation of scripture. And so I looked at all the commentaries on Acts.

And while there's a few theological commentaries on Acts, there's not a lot. And so I was really trying to step into this stream of not having to make a full-fledged argument for every typological connection I made, because that would make the commentary way too long. And I just read the Fathers, and I see them doing it because they believe in a divine author.

They believe in the unity of the scriptures. And I thought, I think I can do the same thing. Now, I do provide some arguments, but you don't have time to get into everything.

And then at the same time, I did see a lot of people using dogmatics, really, to help interpret the Book of Acts. And so I very purposefully, actually, if you open the commentary, the first thing you get is the theology of Acts. I don't start with genre and date and author on purpose, because there's a lot of good ways to do commentaries.

But as you think about history and God and his relationship to history, God comes before history. Ontology comes before epistemology is another way to put that. God orders history.

God creates history. And so it kind of makes sense in another way to start with God and who he was and how he's portrayed in the Book of Acts. I don't claim to be trained in systematic theology, but I try to stay up on the conversation.

And so the other piece of the theology that I maybe mentioned in my book that's unique is when you come to Acts, often people just think of the Holy Spirit. And I noticed there is not an emphasis upon the Father's action in the Book of Acts. And so Alan Thompson has done great work on the work of Christ in the Book of Acts with the NSBT series, Carson's Little Gray series on biblical theology.

And then I saw a ton of great work on the Spirit in Acts, but I didn't see a lot of work on the Father in Acts. So I actually looked at it through a Trinitarian perspective and used kind of the classical relations of origin and the missions of the Son and the Spirit to really help me order the theology of Acts, which is, you know, it was so nice to have that kind of paradigm to just say, yeah, this is how everyone has kind of thought through the

relation of the Father, Son, and Spirit. And it really plays itself out perfectly in Acts.

I think the early church knew exactly what they were doing. And so beginning kind of with the Father's plan, aboula is kind of the term they use in Acts for the Father's administration of this whole plan. And then the Son, who's ruling and reigning, ascended to the heavens and directing this plan, and then the Spirit who is empowering.

And so we need to back up when we talk about the Spirit and say, remember the Spirit, is sent by the Father that we could get, and maybe by the Son, we could talk about. Well, I don't know. I don't have a lot to say about that.

But certainly we need to have an order of relation there that he spirates from the Father just as the Son is eternally begotten from the Father. So I was using categories like that to kind of help me walk through the commentary and then using, as I said, kind of the patristic way of interpreting it, saying, you know, every word is in here for our instruction and every word is meaningful. So I think I quoted from maybe even a reformer at the beginning that said, all of this is here for our instruction.

And so things that you might think are boring or why is this in here, that's where he really wants you to dig in there and say, why is this included? I think even when that comment was made, it was on Acts 27 and the sea journey. And he was like, what are we to do with all these details that you might talk about later? But I found that really helpful as just a paradigm. So I hope as people pick up this commentary that they'll see different things that they haven't seen before in the book of Acts, because I am approaching it from a unique angle.

I read over a dozen commentaries on the book of Acts fairly in the last few years. And it really, I think that holds true that there are a number of things that you just don't see dealt with very well. The theological element, much of the literary element, I think, is neglected in many of these commentaries.

They're not thinking enough about the structural features and some of the illusions and other things like that. And then the typology more generally, there's a lot more work that can be done on that. And so, whereas I would recommend, I mean, if I'm going to recommend an exhaustive commentary on the book of Acts, it would be Craig Keener's, which is just a behemoth, but probably one of the biggest commentaries out there.

I read the whole thing. And it was, yeah, he sent it to me. He's the kindest man ever.

And he found out I was working on Acts and he sent me all four volumes. And I thought, wow, this is amazing. Why do I need to write anything? And he recommends your commentary on the cover as well.

That's right. That's right. He endorsed it.

He was kind to do so. But yes, if I were going to recommend a commentary for pastors and preachers and well-read lay people, this would be the commentary that yours would be the commentary that I'd recommend. It really covers the basis very well.

If you're thinking about some of these literary connections with the book of Luke, for instance, Tannehill's stuff is helpful on that. For a broader treatment, getting into the detail, but also covering these theological and literary and historical and other bases. I found your commentary incredibly helpful.

So thank you for your work on it. As you said, I really wrote it with pastors in mind, even though I am using the theology and dogmatics. I think most pastors are employing those as well.

And so one of my other frustrations with commentaries is I preach pretty consistently. Sometimes they're not that helpful for my preaching. And I think we need to maybe rethink the genre a little bit.

And I'll admit it maybe isn't the best idea on your first commentary to push the genre boundary. But I think we need to think first of preachers and not first of other scholars, people who stand up to deliver the word of God. I think that'll make us actually better interpreters in the long run rather than having all these.

So here's one example. I know I'm just going off. You're talking to me about Acts, though.

And so I have a lot to say. But there are thousands of pages on the use of we for Luke in Acts. And I put a very short footnote to it.

And I said, I'm not sure how this is going to affect your preaching a lot. He seems to be a companion of Paul, which is helpful in terms of putting this whole thing together. But there was actually, and I don't even remember all of it right now, but there was more literary things to say about that, like his inclusion in that narrative that I was interested in.

Personally, but I thought, man, all these commentaries have to do think they have to do pages and pages on the way. And every pastor is like, skip, skip, skip. Like, what am I going to say? Anyways, I found your approach to reading the text theologically suggest that the text has been written as a theological account of the history.

It's not just bare bones. This is what happened. There's some authorial intent to communicate theologically and interpretation of particular understanding of what is taking place.

Can you say more about, first of all, what it means to read acts theologically and also what it means to what theological history is? Yeah. So again, as we mentioned earlier,

many people approach acts and because of maybe Luke 1, 1 through 4, where Luke says, hey, I looked at all the sources, I examined everything. I'm giving you not an eyewitness account, but someone who studied the sources.

The first thing people think is, well, this is a very historical account. And I don't deny that it's a historical account. However, Luke is very clearly with his use of scripture, with the use of the LXX specifically, stepping into the Jewish tradition of telling what we call a scriptural story.

And so he's very much, and this is where I'm very influenced by my own gospel studies, but he's very much stepping into the storyline of the scriptures as a whole, beginning with Genesis and ending with Revelation. Even if some of these books haven't been written yet, that he's stepping into that tradition and saying, I'm going to tell this story in a way that is going to mimic other stories and in a way that is going to make you think of other stories while I tell them. And so I think often we think, well, what exactly happened here? And we don't ask, you mentioned the literary thing that I didn't even get into as much in my introduction, but I really focus on how did he tell these stories? So maybe, yeah, I'm speaking in the abstract, but maybe at the beginning, even when you step into Acts 1 and you have this narrative, you have this massive narrative of the ascension and the commission.

And then in chapter 2, you have this massive Pentecost story, but in between there's this choosing of Matthias, this 12th disciple, this 12th apostle that you're like, what is that doing? It's kind of a valley. People hear it as a valley in between those massive narratives. But I think Luke is being very intentional with saying, okay, Jesus has ascended and now they need to make the nation whole before they have the covenant ceremony.

So having the 12th apostle chosen is actually necessary to happen before the covenant ceremony, which is I think Pentecost, the new Sinai moment takes place. And often we come to that text and we ask very interesting questions of, oh, what's prescriptive and what's descriptive here with the lots? And, oh, those are fine discussions I have, but if you actually look at the narrative, you'll be interested in this because I think you're working on numbers, but the beginning and ending of the narrative talk about numbers. There's numbers all over it.

And to talk about lots is actually talk about Judas cast his lot with another, his lot is going to be in destruction in a deserted place, in a valley of blood. While this other lot is going to be basically the renewed promised land. And we see that as the spirit is poured out upon high.

And so there must be the reconstitution of Israel, the whole people of God coming together. And so when people debate, hey, was that the right choice? Because Matthias never appears again. Well, according to Acts, that's exactly what needed to happen.

And it actually fulfills all of the scriptures. He quotes from the Psalms there. And so it's pairing these narratives to say, okay, why do you have the ascension, the choosing of the 12, and then Pentecost, and then connecting it all and saying, actually, there's something going on here that mimics all of Moses's life, right? The ascension of a person, then on top of the mountain, he's directing his people, there's the new covenant ceremony.

And then they go out and they do what they do. It's basically the wilderness wanderings. And you have the apostles, they're going out and they're sharing the gospel in all these different regions.

That's very much like a wilderness wandering, almost living in tents. And actually, Paul himself is a tent maker. Again, everyone's like, oh, that's really interesting.

What does that actually mean? And I'm like, well, he's a tent maker. Do you think about the Old Testament here? Like, this is very James Jordan point there. Well, you know, I'm very influenced by James Jordan Lighthouse.

So, but yeah, he's building new tabernacles. And this is exactly how the New Testament speaks of it. So I think you have to double click on all of these words and all of these meanings and just put the narrative together.

So part of my purpose was to show you and other people, as you mentioned, Tannehill's done great literary work, and I was pulling from him a lot, but I was also seeing new things. I was just so shocked. And I'll just say this, I was just so shocked that I read a bunch of articles that said, you know, there's no connection between Sinai and Pentecost.

And I'm like, there's no connection? Like, I think I have 25 arguments for why there's a connection between the two. And they're like, well, there's only a connection in terms of the dates based on late rabbinic tradition. And I'm like, I don't have to go to late rabbinic tradition.

I'm just going to the imagery and the text itself. And the fact of where it's put and everything else. So well, 3000 people cut to the hearts.

That's right. 3000 people. That's right.

So I mean, I'm, I feel like obviously, as a Bible interpreter, I'm still learning so much. And I feel like I only saw half of the picture still. And as I continue to meditate on the scriptures, I'm going to see even more.

And so part of me never wants to open my commentary again, because the more I learn, the more I'm like, oh, there was more in there that I didn't put there. But I hope that this will be helpful, just even as a beginning way of saying, let's approach the scripture in this

way. This isn't just a historical narrative.

This is a Jewish literary masterpiece. Bible Project describes this Jewish meditation literature, that we are to meditate upon and begin connecting the dots between the whole of the canon. And so I did my best to do that.

And more work can be done. This was in for acts. This is actually a short commentary, believe it or not.

It is definitely. I haven't seen many of the others. And I think the way that you describe this significance of a meditation upon the text, that this is scriptural narrative, I think helps also to deal with some of the questions that we might have about the history.

Because when you begin to see what the writers of the Gospels or Luke as the writer of Acts is doing, it makes a bit more sense that you'd have different ways of telling the same story. Because the story is being told, not just to give you as clear a vision as possible of what actually happened. It's being told in a way that evokes certain connotations, resonances.

It's bringing certain stories into correspondence with each other. So in the case of the story of the death of Judas, James Bajoran has written on this. You've discussed this in your commentary.

And I've written on it in different ways, trying to say the way that it's told in Matthew and the way that it's told at the beginning of Acts by Luke is different, but it's different for good reasons. It's different not because there's some conflict in the underlying facts, but it's different because they're trying to draw your mind to different connotations and connections and into texts. And I think I even footnoted you on that because I was reading some of your work, which was maybe even a blog post, but how you pointed out there is a Joab, I don't remember all the details, but a Joab connection.

But certainly there's, I've studied Matthew and that narrative is so different and people struggle over all those differences, but they're just trying to do different things with them. One of the things that I noted about that story is that what is the story that you think of when you hear of someone's gut spilling out and bleeding out in a field of blood? It's a master who's assassinated by Joab. He's stabbed, his entrails come out, and he's described bleeding out and people passing by and looking at him.

And then the references to let his house be made desolate and let another take his office is what happens at the beginning of the book of First Kings. Joab is removed from his office and then Joab also, as he stabs him in the heart, he's introduced or he's greeting him with a kiss. It's a betrayal with a kiss.

And so Judas is the new Joab type character whose sin comes back upon his own head. And just as Joab is removed from office and replaced by Ben-Nah, the son of Jehoiada,



and he's buried in his desert property. And so we have something similar.

The Davidic king is leaving the scene. David is leaving the scene, a new regime being set up, and then the gift of wisdom, building the house of the Lord, et cetera. And so it seems that there are ways to read those texts alongside each other as a result.

But one of the things I wanted to ask you about in Acts chapter one, last time you joined me for a discussion of your work, it was a book on the Ascension. I've been curious, first of all, did you start the Ascension project at the same time or before or as something that sprang out of the work on Acts? And how do you see the story of the Ascension as maybe programmatic for the larger book? Yeah. Yeah.

So the short Ascension book that I did with Lex and Press was birthed from me writing this commentary. Actually, if you look at any of my books in the last basically three years, they're all birthed from this book. You have so many thoughts going as you're writing a commentary that you can't put them all in one book.

And so I spun out all these little different projects based on this. So really, I started writing my theology as I was kind of going through the narrative. And I paused on the Ascension because I thought I've always wanted to write on it.

And I thought, wow, here's the time. And so I was able to do that. And, you know, yeah, as you mentioned, we don't give the Ascension a lot of playtime, but in Acts, the Ascension is actually the grounds from which he sends them out to the ends of the earth.

So there's a spatial reality and relationship between Jesus now being installed as the king in the highest heavens, which you see this at the end of Matthew 2, which then enables him to say, go into all nations because I've been made king over all the nations. So, you know, when people come to Acts, I think they rightly say geography is so huge. But I want to say why? Why is geography so huge? Because Christ has ascended to the heavens.

And so we have kind of this absentee Christology when we come to Acts, because you have the gospel. Yes, Jesus is there. And now he's installed to the heavens.

And we think, well, he's gone now. But what actually you see throughout Acts is he's directing this whole thing, him, the father and the son who's seated at his right hand, or as Stephen sees him standing at the right hand, right? They're directing this whole plan. You actually have in the Stephen narrative and in Paul's conversion, you get these visions of him still there being very active through this whole narrative.

And also, if you have a strong view of inseparable operations that as the spirit works, that so the son and the father works, then this through it's he's actually called it's Acts 16, right? The spirit of Christ or the spirit of the Lord. It's very clear that as the spirit is acting, it's actually Jesus Christ himself who is acting. So Alan Thompson, again, has

done great work on this, where it's not that Christ is absent from the narrative.

He's just present in a different way. And he's actually, if you follow the argument of Hebrews, he's present in a more real way. Yep.

Because the heavens are true reality, while earth is the shadow land. And so as Jesus is installed into the heavens, he's now in the control room of the universe. And also the book of Revelation is all about.

Yes, exactly. And he's directing this whole thing. And so he actually has the bird's eye view of what's happening.

And that helps us a lot, because I think you have to set up the book of Acts as and what it why was this written? Yeah, I think it was written for the encouragement of God's people to say, why are people being thrown into prison? Why is this plan kind of going well, and kind of not going well? It seems like there's ups and downs throughout acts, like you'd expect that they tell the great stories, like every new scene is a new Pentecost scene where 3000 people come know what you find out as they go into the temple, and the leaders are mad at them, you find out the end of acts that Paul's on trial for four whole chapters, and then he's in a shipwreck for another whole chapter, and then he's stuck in prison at the end. And you're like, what a way to end, I thought this is going to be this like glorious conversion story. No, Luke writes the book of Acts to say, hey, read, read the read the Bible more carefully, because this is exactly what was predicted that would happen, that this thing will start with kind of fits and stops.

And that Jesus said, it's going to be like a seed that's playing the ground, and it will grow slowly, but there will be growth, there will be growth, but it will grow slowly, and there will be opposition to the mission. And if you connect it to the book of Luke, just as Jesus was treated, so his disciples will be treated. So why why, of course, is Paul on trial for four chapters? Because Jesus is on trial with four different regimes, and he's going before all these different governors, and these Roman this Roman headquarters, and Pilate himself, and what's said about Jesus is said about Paul, just as they're like, what are you doing? What's your mission? And they all look at them, and they're like, well, we're not really sure what to do with this man.

He seems innocent, but we're also kind of concerned about a riot and a rebellion starting. But ultimately, they all declare him innocent. And so you see all these interrelationships, and all that's showing is that Jesus is really directing this whole thing from the heavens.

And so at the very beginning in Acts 2, Peter is very clear that Jesus has been installed as the Lord and the Messiah by his ascension to the right hand of the Father, and therefore that's why the church is actually birthed at that moment. And there's so much, so much of the theology seems to be in the conversation with the other texts that is

being, Luke wants us to see this is a text to be read alongside his gospel. It's a text to be read alongside other books like 1 Samuel or 1 Kings.

There are themes from Ezekiel in there. And as you take all these other texts into correspondence with it, like Exodus 20 or 32, or something like the story of Babel and the story of Pentecost, all of these things taken in correspondence with each other gives you a far richer portrait than if you're just reading the text in a flat way as if it were hermetically sealed from the rest of the scripture. It's setting up a conversation within the canon.

That's right. One thing I wanted to talk about here is the place of the book of Acts within the New Testament. This is one area where I find many traditional commentaries can be a bit weak on this question, the question of paratext, the ordering of books, the naming of books, and particularly the question of the ordering of books, the way that they're framed within the larger canon.

And Goswell in his book *Text and Paratext*, will let some press very helpful stuff on this, a recently published book that I'd recommend people get into. But one of the things that you discuss is the way that the book of Acts fits relative to other bodies of material within the New Testament. First of all, why is it divided from the book of Luke, which seems to be a companion volume within the actual canonical order that we have? And how can we think of the different relationships that it has with other texts as a way of giving us an angle of approach into it? That's right.

Yeah. So when most scholars come to Acts, all they want to talk about is the relationship between Luke and Acts, because they are the same author. I think that's very evident.

I think there's a ton of themes that connected. I even drew out like a whole outline that kind of connects the whole narratives. I don't want to deny any of that.

But as you mentioned, most people stop there because that's the historical read. Well, it's the same author, so we can connect these texts together. But if you look at all the canon lists, and there's lots of debate about how we read canonically, but if you look at all the canon lists, Luke is never right next to Acts.

They're never placed side by side, which I think the early church is telling us there's also other ways of reading this. It's not like they didn't know that Luke wrote both of them. People think people in the early church didn't realize all this history.

I'm like, no, they knew who wrote both of these narratives. It's very evident. But they didn't place them right next to each other.

Why? Well, because they wanted to put the four gospels together. And there's different orderings of the gospels, but many of them do have John as the last one, because there is kind of a leading up to the theology of John, where John explains some of the theology

of the other synoptic writers. It's contained within the synoptic gospels, but he seems to clarify them.

And so they want to put the gospels all together, and Luke just comes in that package. And Acts uniquely functions as a bridge book canonically, that both links to the gospels and connects us to the epistles, because it introduces us even more to the kind of birth of this church and then Paul's missions as he goes out to the ends of the earth. And so as I sat down, I wish I, I mean, I almost wanted to do a whole book on this, but I only had a few pages of time for this.

But as I sat down, I thought, well, let's look at Acts compared to Luke, or I mean, Acts compared to John, because John is so closely connected in many of our canon lists. And what you find at the end of John is that there's all of, and there's so much more we could say, but especially in Jesus's final discourses, he talks a lot about the counselor, the Holy Spirit, the comforter who's going to come, and he will teach you all things. When the counselor comes, it says in John 15, 26, the one I will send you from the Father, that sounds very much like the beginning of Acts, the spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, he will testify about me.

Isn't that interesting? It's the spirit who testifies about Christ. And so at the end of John, Jesus just continually speaks about this comforter or this counselor, this parakletos, which actually could be understood as almost a law court term, and you're going to see them on trial a lot at the beginning of Acts. You can see that there's this canonical connection between Jesus saying the spirit is going to come, and then Acts actually fulfilling that, that the spirit does come at Pentecost.

And so you want to make those connections between not only Luke and Acts, but John and Acts. I would argue that's true for all of the Gospels. I didn't do that as much.

I mean, we just talked about Matthew 28, and there seems to be kind of a punting forward to the ascension and to the mission to the ends of the earth in the Great Commission. The other interesting thing to say about Acts' kind of placement is that it introduces us to the epistles, and it does so in two ways. You know, most of our canon lists that we know, the English ones, it begins with the Pauline literature, and that's nice because it usually begins with Romans, and we end with Paul in Rome.

He's stuck in Rome, and then you begin with Romans, and so it goes through kind of all of the Pauline literature, but you also have other canon lists, and if you look at the Tyndale Greek New Testament, they actually put the Catholic epistles or the general epistles before the Pauline epistles, and what's interesting is you can see actually there's a link there. The early church seemed to be seen that, you know, the focus on the beginning is very much on Peter and John. Peter and John are going around throughout the temple and preaching Jesus Christ.

It's the second half that actually, Acts 13, as everyone recognizes, begins to focus on Paul's mission. Canonically, I always point this out to my students, is as you begin to look at the scriptures in different ways and to see there's different ways of putting this together, you can see that it actually raises different questions. So, we often ask the question, you know, how can James agree with Paul, but if you actually read James first, you actually ask the question how Paul can agree with James, and so there's just different ways of asking these questions, and I think it's interesting to look at Acts and see how it's connected kind of to that whole storyline and actually canonically how it fits into it, and so I just want to push people to say don't just constrain your interpretation to the themes between Luke and Acts.

Actually open up your horizon to see that Acts is functioning as this bridge book that has a connection both to the kind of tetraeoangelion, right, the fourfold gospel, and all of the letters that are coming after it, and so we can kind of read it. I would argue read all of the books of the Bible like this, but we can read it in this expansive way. We can also think of the connection with Romans, not just the location, but the theological themes that as you go through the book of Acts, the question of will the kingdom be restored to Israel is a very key one, and then it ends on this note that seems to be very discouraging on that front, and then Paul's taking up that theological question very much in the book of Romans, and so there are thematic connections beyond just the location in Rome.

That's right. The other thing I'd also mention, I know I'm talking a lot here, but you had me on, so this is what I'm supposed to do, is that Acts helps us give a narrative of Paul's life, and I know people teach it this way, but it struck me anew just to certain things like in Corinth, you know, he denies worldly wisdom and speaking with great oratorical ability, so you could take that and say Paul was just kind of a monotone. I'm going to read whatever text I have in front of me and sit down because I don't want to wow you, but then you go to Acts 17, and you're like, okay, this guy has amazing rhetorical abilities, and he employs them on behalf of the gospel, so we have to nuance our discussion of what he says in Corinth a little bit, or in Galatians when Paul's so hard on accepting circumcision, but then, you know, he goes and he circumcises Timothy in the narrative, and so it was just a check on my own biblical interpretation to say you can get so into one narrative that you forget this comes in kind of a whole life of Paul, and we do get some of that life of Paul in Acts that maybe makes us nuance our conversations about these other texts a little more.

One thing I've always found the Book of Acts helpful for when coming to read Paul is the sense that Paul is doing things, and the letters are doing something as part of a larger mission. They're not just ideas that hang in the abstract. The letters are means, I mean, he sends them out with people who go from church to church.

There is a network being formed through these letters. There are ongoing relationships. There are ways in which these letters sending greetings from church to church or

addressing the preparation, for instance, that the Book of Romans provides for a visit or the concern to gather for the saints in Jerusalem.

That connection with the actual narrative of Acts helps us to recognize that even as someone who is writing and thinking these deep theological thoughts, Paul was an actor and a missionary, and those things cannot be divided from each other. That's right. Yeah.

So one thing towards the end of our discussion I was hoping we could do is just think through some of the key passages within the book, or some of the passages that I found really helpful reading through the commentary, and giving a sense of some of the insights that arise from this sort of approach that you're taking, and also maybe give a sense of the shape of the book. So we've already discussed chapters one and two, the Ascension and Pentecost, and the appointing of a replacement for Judas. I thought it'd be interesting to look at something like Acts 12 as an example of how this intertextual approach to reading scripture can be very illuminating and help us to pick up on things that we might not otherwise.

Yeah. So Acts 12, it's one of those narratives again where you come to it, and right before this you have the church in Antioch. Right after it you have kind of the launch of Paul's mission.

The interesting thing is you have this mission of Saul and Barnabas coming to Jerusalem, and they're in Jerusalem. Then you have a whole chapter when they're absent. They're not actually actors within it.

That's right. But the narrative of Acts 12 is about King Herod violently attacking the church in Jerusalem. He executes James, so we have kind of the first martyr after Stephen, second martyr after Stephen.

Then they arrest Peter, and there's this foreboding like scene where what's going to happen. I think the narrative is setting up like Peter's about to die, but it's during the festival of unleavened bread. So Herod's a little scared of rebellion or riot, and so he's kind of saying, okay, let's wait a little bit.

Let's bring him out after the Passover so that we don't cause a big problem. But what's interesting here is that there's all these references to the Passover and to the feast of unleavened bread. So this kind of new Exodus imagery starts to come up in your mind.

So Peter is kept in this prison, this dark place. I think if you're reading through the Gospels and you already see the Herod figures as a type of pharaoh based on Matthew 2, this is in the same tradition. This is in the same line of the same Herod's.

So you have King Herod who's acting like a new pharaoh who is actually persecuting God's people and killing God's people just like Pharaoh did in the Old Testament. So

Peter himself, he's put into prison. He's put into a very dark place just like they're in slavery in Egypt, and they have guards guarding him.

And what happens is late at night when Peter is bound with chains, who shows up? It's the angel of the Lord. And if you read back in Exodus, it's the angel of the Lord who actually rescues Israel. It's this angel of the Lord that is continuing this main actor.

And it's interesting because the angel of the Lord is tied to this pillar of fire and this pillar of cloud. And so this bright light comes and he's actually leading Peter on this kind of new exodus. And what's interesting is in Acts 12, 8, I was reading it and I was kind of thinking these things, but in Acts 12, 8, it says, the angel says to Peter, get dressed, put on your sandals, wrap your cloak around you and follow me.

And it's this weird kind of like all these details in the narrative of like, why do you need to tell us what the angel said to Peter? Like, of course, get dressed and let's go. But if you look at some of that language, that's get ready to go on the new exodus. That's mirroring the language of get dressed, get your sandals on, you're about to walk through the sea.

And so even that, those little details there should make you think, okay, there's a new exodus that's happening. So he goes out, he follows the angel and he thinks he's seeing a vision and they end up going to a house and he knocks on the door. And what's really interesting here at the end of this narrative is the people are very confused by Peter's presence.

A servant girl named Rhoda, she comes to answer. And I found this very interesting as well, because most people take Rhoda as this kind of figure that you laugh at like, oh, ha ha, she saw Peter or she heard him and she ran from the door in her excitement. She never opened the door and everyone's laughing at her.

But I actually think Rhoda becomes a positive example of the type of disciple, like the women at the end of the gospels, who in their excitement over a resurrection type scene, because I skipped over this, but the angel, I think, tells Peter to arise. It's kind of this resurrection type imagery, and that would fit with new exodus imagery. This lowly servant girl in the house of Mary comes and she recognizes before the people in the house who laugh at her that God has done a miracle.

And I actually think that actually fits really well with Luke's emphasis on lifting up the downtrodden. That's the servant girl Rhoda, who actually can perceive and see what God is doing, because she believes their prayer is actually effectual. And this prayer, again, connects to the ascension.

Who are they praying to? They're praying through Jesus Christ to the Father who is actually listening. And so this whole narrative becomes this kind of a question mark of

when you think everything is going wrong, remember your God is the God of the new exodus, and remember that he is going to perform miracles and be the type of person like Rhoda who will believe. At the end of the narrative, you have the demise of Herod, who actually lifts himself up to be like a god, just like Pharaoh does.

And he is destroyed, and there's all these intertexts with Ezekiel, where those who exalt themselves, or also Nebuchadnezzar texts, those who exalt themselves will ultimately be humbled. And so the narrative begins with Peter being the one who's going to die, but ultimately God reverses it, and it's the king who dies because he exalts himself above God himself. And as you note, even the literary detail of the fact that Peter is struck by an angel, and to raise him up, and Herod is struck by an angel to strike him down, it's suggesting we need to read these figures alongside each other and recognize the contrast.

That's right. So this narrative, I think as people look at it, you should just not be thinking, no, this is a redemption story, but this is a redemption story like we've seen before, and like was predicted in the prophets. So that's very helpful for thinking about some of the ways in which the stories are told to evoke the story of Christ, in part, the resurrection themes, to evoke stories of the Old Testament, and to give a sense of the larger movements that are occurring in terms of divine providence that is playing tradition, that familiar themes that they would have been aware of from the Passover and other stories that they'd grown up with.

I'd be curious to hear more about some points that you make in relationship to Paul's speech in Acts 17. You use the expression, Hellenizing the biblical traditions and Biblicizing the Hellenistic traditions. I thought this was particularly interesting because when people talk about textuality and these sorts of things, often it is merely within the biblical text, but you're suggesting something beyond the biblical text here, a relationship between Paul's telling of the biblical story and the work of Christ and stories that they would be familiar with from their Greek tradition.

Can you say more about that? Yeah, so Paul comes into Athens, which is the city of philosophers. Socrates taught there. He was known there.

And so, this is the place where, really, philosophy is reigning supreme. Now, Athens wasn't at its prime at the time, but when Paul steps in there, philosophy and religion, as we call it, were not. They were both asking the questions of what does it mean to live a good life? We think of philosophy like you come to a professor and the professor says, is this table really here? How can I trust my senses? How do we figure these things out? But philosophy about that time was more about the good life and how do we live an ethical life.

And so, as Paul comes into Athens, there's this huge debate in scholarship of is he using these Hellenistic traditions, this Greco-Roman philosophy, or is he using more of the



biblical tradition? And as I went through the narrative and I read all these articles, I'm not an expert in Greco-Roman philosophy, but it seems to me that he's continually doing both and that he's actually taking these two traditions and making an argument. Kind of my big point of Act 17 is he's arguing that Christianity is the true philosophy. It's the one, it's the philosophy that makes sense of all your philosophies.

So, while at the same time he comes to them and connects with them, it's also a confrontation. So, we read Act 17 often as this, oh, Paul's meeting them where they're at. Okay, there's some truth to that.

He's speaking the language that they know, but ultimately he's speaking about the resurrection of the dead, which they scoff at and they're like, how can this be true? And so, Paul is able, Paul is such an amazing figure. He's able to interact with the highest ideals of the philosophy of their day and do so. And I mean, we just have a summary of this and do so in such a way that he integrates Greco-Roman philosophy with the biblical story and says, actually, the Christian story is a philosophy and that's okay to say.

And actually, it speaks of the same sort of things, like what is the good life and what does it mean to worship and what does it mean to be human and what does it mean to live and move and have our being in the divine idea or a divine being. And so, he's not afraid to use those traditions and actually integrate them with the biblical texts, but Christianize them at the same time. I view it as a sort of plundering the Egyptians.

And I think Christians are so hesitant to look at the wisdom of the world and just say, no, that's bad because it's not scriptural. But Paul is just so integrative in how he thinks. And I think it's because he truly believes that as God has made humanity in his image, they're going to, I think he uses language of they're grasping for him.

They're leaning towards him, even though they can't ultimately reach him. And they won't be able to reach him without the message being preached to them. That's not what I'm saying.

Romans is very clear. They have to have the message of Jesus preach them. But there is a sense in which, even as they begin to think about the universe and how it's created, that there's a sense in which they're tapping into things that are true, but it's always corrupted at the same time.

So, Paul's using, yeah, I don't know if I'm getting into the details that you're wanting to, but it's more of the philosophical stance. He's using that tradition, but also integrating the Christian tradition and saying both of these things can be true at the same time. But ultimately, you have to recognize where the Christian philosophy is the superior way of thinking and the superior way of being.

And so I think there's all this double speak in there. What the famous one is, I'm looking

at verses I'm trying to find exactly. He was, what's the verse that he was disturbed when he saw them that they were very, oh no, they were very religious, right? That's the language.

He was deeply distressed because he saw that they were very religious. But there's another way to translate that, that they were very superstitious. So, I tend to think there's two different things going on.

They're very religious, but he's also kind of critiquing them saying you're kind of superstitious on this. And I think the language throughout, there's all these echoes actually to Socrates and his death in Paul's own trial that's happening. And he's becoming the true Socratic philosopher who's going to, Socrates, he accepted death because he thought this is how a philosopher died was either an affirmation of their philosophy of life or denial.

And I think Paul is willing, he's willing to die on behalf of his philosophy because that's what Jesus taught him to do. Take up your cross and follow me. That's actually where you have life.

And so, he's speaking about the resurrection of the dead because he's saying Socrates died for his philosophy, but so did Jesus Christ, the true philosopher, which confirmed all of his teachings about death will lead to life. And I think Paul is willing to step into that, Tristan. And taking up the cross and following Christ is very much what we see at the end of the book of Acts.

Paul has four trials and shipwreck that recalls the events of the end of the book of Luke. Paul is walking in the footsteps of his master. And it seems to me, again, this is an example of the deeply theological telling of the story.

So it's very concerned that you see that parallel. And that parallel is part of the means by which you will read and understand what's taking place and the significance of it. And as we move towards an end of our discussion, I'll be curious to hear the role that you see the concluding chapters of the book of Acts playing within the message of the book as a whole.

What is going on in this very elaborate account of the shipwreck? And why does it end in the strange situation that it does with Paul in house arrest? Yeah. Yeah. The shipwreck scene has always troubled people, but it's kind of like a movie car chase scene.

That's what I compare it to that, you know, you cut in that world, you would know that type of narrative. So if you've ever been in a shipwreck, it's a very scary thing. I've never been a shipwreck, but I can imagine it's a very scary thing.

So I think people would have been on the edge of their seat during this reading. Well, we're kind of like, why are they telling us all these details? But even more than that, in

the biblical tradition, you know, going through the sea or plunging to the depths of the sea, what is, was a sort of death. And there's a lot of Jonah echoes in this narrative where Paul becomes kind of an anti-Jonah figure.

As Jonah ran away from the Lord and encountered a shipwreck and God brought him back to Nineveh, the people far away from the Lord. Now Paul is actually obeying the Lord. He encounters a shipwreck, but he's saved through the storm.

And in the midst of being saved through the storm, he becomes kind of this prophetic figure on the boat. And if you're, what's really interesting is if you're tracing the narrative from the beginning to the end, it begins in Jerusalem. And it's not the last people that he shares with, but some of the last people he shares with at the end, at the beginning of Acts 20 are barbarians.

And you think about even Colossians, like to the Greeks and to the barbarians, he kind of used barbarians as like the last people to go to. So it's interesting that he ends up on the island of Malta and he's this prophetic figure, both on the island of Malta and on the boat where he's with all these Roman soldiers. And so you kind of trace the narrative, go back, he begins in Jerusalem with these Jewish figures, and then it goes to Hellenistic Jews.

And then it goes, I mean, I know I'm skipping probably some, but it goes to God-fearers like Cornelius, and then it goes to the nations. But now it's going to even new people groups like kings and the trials and governors. And then it's going to Roman soldiers and then to barbarians.

So I think there's actually a narrative pattern and it's kind of matching. You're going to the, matching Jonah, where you're going to the furthest reaches of the ends of the earth as Acts 1.8 predicted. And so the other thing to say with the sea is the sea is known as obviously this place of chaos.

It's the Greek place, the land was where Jews wanted to be, but the sea was this place of danger. But God actually provides a way through the sea. He actually saves his prophet through the sea.

Again, there's new Exodus imagery through there. And in the midst of that, Paul actually seems to have almost a Eucharistic type meal on the boat. And then they're saved.

It actually, the word that's used throughout Acts 27, that's usually translated as they are safe, is it sozo, that they're saved through the storm. And so I think Luke is doing something with that narrative to kind of portray this as a type of salvation for those people on the boat. What's interesting is you've come to that narrative is Paul hasn't really had a mission.

He's just been on trial. He's been sharing with individuals. And then suddenly he's still in

prison, but in another sense, he's with all these other people again.

And so this is his new mission. He's like, wherever I am, whether it's on a boat or not, this is my mission. And so it seems that he's sharing the gospel of this new prophet.

He ends up in Rome. I'd love to say more about Malta. I think Malta, the barbarians are usually looked at negatively.

I take them very positively. Their hospitality towards Paul is almost unheard of throughout the rest of Acts. So I think you've got to tie it back to a text like Matthew chapter 10, where it says, as you receive a disciple, so you receive me.

Let your peace come upon this house. And so it seems that the barbarians in one sense have a better idea of who Paul is than many of the narratives we've seen throughout Acts. And so it's again that theme of the least expected, the uncultured barbarians are the ones who recognize that Paul is an agent of God.

And he's actually the very presence of God to them themselves. So the presence of God has come to this island where they don't speak Greek. But at the very end, Paul goes to Rome.

He enters in chains, which makes sense. You'd expect based on Acts 1-8 that he'd enter Rome with all this fanfare. And it's actually described somewhat as a triumphal entry, but it's triumphal entry in chains.

And I think Paul is using that imagery in 2nd Corinthians where he spreads the aroma of death, but through the aroma of death, there's life. And so he comes as a very weak man. He's actually imprisoned.

And he's imprisoned, but in the midst of his imprisonment, he's able to continue to share the gospel to both Jews and in Greek. So the end almost seems like he rejects the Jewish nation, but at the end, it also says he welcomes all to him. He continued to welcome all people to him.

And the message of the kingdom of God, he continued to preach with all boldness. And at the very end of the book, there's actually this very Trinitarian kind of statement. I'm forgetting off the top of my head, but Acts 28, it says, he proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

So you have the kingdom of God, the Father teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness. And that boldness term is tied throughout Acts to the Holy Spirit. And so you begin kind of with this Trinitarian frame and you end with this Trinitarian frame.

But what you expect, as many people have noted, you expect like what happens to Paul. But the whole point of Acts is it's not about Paul. It's not about these apostles.

It's about God and his word going forth. So who's the main actor of Acts? It's not Paul. It's God, the Father, God, the Son, and God, the Holy Spirit, who's continuing to spread the message through this imprisoned man in Rome.

This has been a fantastic discussion. Thank you so much for joining me. Thanks, Alistair.

It's been fun talking to you. I'll have the link to the book in the show notes. I very highly recommend it if you want to get into the book of Acts.

And until next time, thank you very much for listening.