

Review of Coleman A. Baker, *Peter, Paul, and Recategorization in the Book of Acts: Memory and Narrative in Early Christianity*. Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2011.

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In *Identity, Memory and Narrative in Early Christianity*, Coleman Baker argues that “the narrative of Acts attempts the recategorization of Judean and non-Judean Christ followers ... into a common ingroup by presenting Peter and Paul as prototypical of a common superordinate Christian identity in the midst of diversity and conflict within the Christ movement in the last decade of the first century CE” (p. xv). This recategorization is intended to establish the boundaries by which it can be seen who, from the Judean and Greco-Roman cultural groupings, is included in the Christian community and who is excluded from it. Drawing on narrative and reader-response approaches—especially Paul Ricoeur’s “three-fold process of narrative interaction” (p. 71)—Baker moves away from the quest for the “historical” Peter and Paul, past the “literary” Peter and Paul, and on to what Baker calls “an *identity-forming* Peter and Paul” (p. xvi). Baker proposes that such an approach builds on the vital but essentially incomplete social-scientific and literary approaches. The aim is to establish “a model for reading biblical texts as identity-forming documents within their historical and cultural context” (p xvii). In this work, Baker uses Acts as the test case for his theory.

In chapter one Baker argues for his methodology, which he names the narrative-identity model. This is a fusion of the Social Identity Approach and Narrative Theory. Baker argues that this is “a helpful model for understanding the identity-forming interaction between text and audience” (p. 1). The name is not new, having been used by Ricoeur in *Time and Narrative*. Ricoeur, however, uses it primarily in connection with the reader’s interaction with the text, whereas Baker argues for the inclusion of social identity and memory.

Much of this chapter is taken up with literature reviews of the Social Identity Approach and Narrative Theory. These are two large and diverse fields, and Baker does an admirable job of summing up the key works in each field, what he regards as deficient in each field, and how his fusion of the two resolves those deficiencies. Thus social identity and social memory are vital for understanding how prototypical figures are used by ingroup members to “re-interpret the past, present, and future of the group to make its identity more compatible with new situations and future directions” (p. 16). Narrative theory is needed, however, to understand how the interaction between text and reader creates identity formation, both personal and communal. Baker thus agrees with Ricoeur that “identity is formed in the interaction between text and audience” (p. 23).

Having established the importance of Social Identity and Narrative Theory, Baker introduces the Narrative Identity model, which he argues “is chiefly interested in the way that identity is shaped through the interaction between the narrative and the audience” (p. 30). By this Baker means Peter Rabinowitz’s “contextualized ‘implied reader’” (p. 39)¹ of the text, so chapter two proceeds to identify both the historical context and the narrative world of Luke and Acts. Baker argues that “Luke” was “a Judean Christ-follower ... from Western Asia Minor who had received a relatively high level of Hellenistic education” (p. 35), who did not personally know any of the main characters in his works (Jesus, Peter, Paul), but who, for community identity-forming purposes, writes as though he were present for at least some of the events he records. The authorial audience was a mix of Judean and non-Judean Christians in the very late first century CE, who had “varying opinions of Paul and

the inclusion of non-Judeans into the Christ movement without the requirement of circumcision and Torah observance” (p. 69). The narrative was written to provide a foundation from which his Christian community could “recategorize those of differing opinions about Paul and his mission to the non-Judeans into one superordinate group that transcends ethnicity” (p. 69), while allowing the varying groups each to retain some features of their unique identity.

Chapters three to six break Acts into four narrative blocks, each of which is centred around *kernels*, or essential plot advancement events. Baker argues that “(t)he plot of Acts centres upon the conflict created by the expansion of the gospel, an expansion that is both geographic and ethnic” (p. 73). Baker provides a table (on p. 74) that helpfully sets this out. After a brief outline of plot of the entire book of Acts, chapter three covers Acts 1:1-8:1a, built around the kernel of Acts 2:1-4. Baker proposes that Peter is to be seen as prototypical of the Christ group. Since the intended audience’s identity forming relies on their interaction with Peter, Baker sketches Peter’s narrative from Luke to Acts 1. In Luke, Peter is cast as the disciples’ spokesperson, which prepares him to be the departing Christ’s spokesperson in Acts. As such, Peter is able to establish the boundary markers for the Christ group: Jesus as the resurrected Messiah, baptism in Jesus’s name, and being filled with the Holy Spirit (along with the selling of possessions as a secondary boundary marker). However, Peter “as the metonymic representative of Jesus and, in his absence, the prototypical ingroup member” (p. 107) not only delineates between the in-group and the out-group, but also identifies, and begins to resolve, the tensions between the sub-groups that are shown to exist within the in-group, such as those identified in Acts 6 between the “Hellenists” and the “Hebrews.” This is key preparatory ground for the identification and resolution of tensions between the major sub-groups that appear as the narrative progresses: the Judean and the non-Judean Christ followers.

Chapter four covers Acts 8:1b-12:25, and is built around 8:1b-4. This block “focuses on the movement of the gospel in two spheres, geographically and ethnically” (p. 135). The previous block has briefly introduced Saul/Paul as an enemy of the gospel: this block records his move from the out-group to the in-group by crossing the boundary markers the prototypical in-group member Peter has identified and promulgated in the first block. This is a key part of the recategorization process, since Saul/Paul has been shown to be a fierce opponent of the Christ group. The crossing of the boundary markers transforms him into one of the Christ group’s strongest proponents. At the same time, Peter is faced with new tensions, as first Samaritans and then “uncircumcised non-Judean god-fearers” (p. 136) are put forward as possible entrants into the Christ group. Peter, as the metonymic representative of Jesus and prototypical Christ follower, faces down fierce opposition from the Judean in-group, who require additional boundary markers from the Torah—notably circumcision—to be added to the requirements that the Acts narrative has proposed define the in-group of Christ followers. As Baker notes (p. 127), these issues are not yet fully worked through: this occurs in the next narrative block. The chapter concludes by noting Peter’s effective departure from the narrative.

Chapter five covers the third block, Acts 13:1-19:20, and is built around the kernel 13:1-3. As Baker notes, “the gospel spreads further into the Roman world and away from Jerusalem” (p. 138). This block is notable for the almost complete absence of Peter. Saul/Paul is identified as the person who will take over the leadership of the Christ group from Peter as the recategorization process continues. Baker demonstrates how Paul takes on the roles that the gospel of Luke ascribes to Jesus, and that the Acts narrative has to date ascribed to Peter: “This ... is the beginning of other parallels between Paul, Peter, and Jesus and therefore initiates the process by which Paul is viewed by the authorial audience as prototypical of Christ group identity” (p. 141). The remainder of the chapter fleshes out this move, along with Paul’s own battles to ensure that Torah-based boundary markers are not put upon the non-Judean initiates to the Christian community. This is especially true of the circumcision debate in Acts 15:1-35, where, Baker asserts, “the recategorization process reaches its climax as the superordinate identity is confirmed, boundary crossing rituals are firmly

established, and subgroup identities affirmed that allow for social interaction between Judean and non-Judean followers” (p. 154). Baker notes, however, that Paul does not hesitate to permit Judean Christians to continue Judean customs, such as the circumcision of Timothy in Acts 16.1-3 (pp. 157-9).

Chapter six covers Acts 19:21-28:31, and is built around the kernel 19:21-22. In this chapter, Baker argues that the author has moved from recategorizing the Judean and non-Judean groups in the narrative to a recategorization of the authorial audience. Luke, Baker contends, is seeking to assure his Judean Christ-follower audience that as a prototypical Christ-follower, Paul does not require a decategorization of all believers—particularly the Judean followers—“into one superordinate group” (p. 173), but allows the distinct sub-groups to maintain their identities. Thus Baker argues that throughout the block Paul remains committed to his Judean heritage, always seeking first to win Judean converts to Christ and allowing them to retain their Judean customs, while equally not requiring non-Judeans to take on Torah-related boundary crossing rituals.

Chapter seven, the conclusion, serves as a summary for the two essential arguments of Baker’s work: that the authorial audience of Acts was a group of Judean Christians in the very late first century CE who were concerned that they were being required to surrender their cultural differences from non-Judean Christians, and that a narrative-identity reading of Acts provides a cogent close reading of the text that reveals first Peter and then Paul as prototypical Christ-followers, whose arguments and actions help resolve major disputes within the superordinate Christian group. The core boundary-crossing markers into the superordinate Christ group are established, but a process of recategorization leaves room for both Judeans and non-Judeans to retain their unique cultural differences.

There is also a brief appendix, in which Baker sets out his arguments for Acts having been written “in the mid 90s to early 100s CE” (p. 206) during the reigns of Domitian, Nerva, or Trajan. The importance of setting the date of composition has already been argued for in chapter two. As such, it is appropriate for Baker to spend some time defending his dating of the text. Baker argues that the author does not appear to know the Pauline letters but is aware of (and may well have made use of) Josephus’ *Antiquities*. That said, the issue is much more complex than Baker’s arguments suppose, and the appendix has a decidedly rushed and unfinished feel.

Identity, Memory, and Narrative in Early Christianity is a revised version of Baker’s doctoral thesis (p. ix). Chapter two establishes his methodology, and chapters three to six follow the Acts narrative to demonstrate how the narrative-forming identity process of the Lukan Christian community has been completed. Chapter three leads with a summary of the methodology we have just had explained. Chapters four to six each open with a brief synopsis of the recategorization process to date. All this makes Baker’s study feel less like a book for publication and more like a dissertation. The openings could have been reworked to smooth this process out without losing the value of the book’s argument as a whole. The space saved could have been used to comment in more depth on, for example, the role of the Judean Christians James and Apollos—who are otherwise reduced to a page each—in the recategorization of the superordinate Christ group.

As Baker notes, the division in the narrative of the early Christian community into two basic sub-groups does not necessarily correspond with historical reality. Echoes of a number of sub-groups within the early Christian community exist both within the canon (notably the Johannine community) and outside it (for example, the letters of Ignatius). Baker has argued cogently, however, for the position that Luke/Acts is dealing with one sub-group of a later generation’s view of one recent conflict within the Christian community. I found Baker’s arguments around Peter and Paul as prototypical representatives of the Christian community well argued. The Narrative Identity model he proposes is a helpful paradigm for viewing the narrative audience. I found very cogent, for example, the suggestion (p. 142; drawn from Pervo 2009, 198), that Luke’s postponement of the

revelation that Saul is Paul is due to Luke's desire to have the authorial audience build up sympathy for the character Paul prior to his true identity being revealed, thereby ensuring that his status as a prototypical in-group leader is not lost. It is certainly a richer literary idea than the bland explanation usually given, that the change is merely due to the Gentile setting in which Paul is now working. Equally, Baker gives a convincing basis for Luke's decision to demonstrate Paul's Judean heritage, so often a stumbling block to scholars: Luke is seeking to maintain Paul's status as a prototypical member of the Christ group, in the line of Peter and Jesus himself (p. 155).

That said, I do take issue with Baker over some aspects of his close reading of Acts. For example, Baker agrees with Pervo (2009, 269), that Peter's threefold refusal to eat unclean food in Acts 10 is a repetition of his three-fold denial of Jesus in Luke 22, and that the narrative audience will have seen this. He then goes on to argue that the narrative audience, having made this link, will see this as a reinforcement of Peter's authority and prototypicality. I wonder if Baker is reading too much into what may be merely a literary device intended to link the works.

Another point I find puzzling is Baker's statement that "(t)he Narrative-Identity model assumes the presence of three worlds that are involved in the interpretive process: the world of the interpreter, the world behind the text, and the narrative world of the text" (p. 29). Yet the only interpreter's world we engage with is that of the authorial audience. There is very little reader-response here. As its name suggests, Baker's Narrative Identity model operates primarily within the narrative hermeneutic. Baker's concluding hope is that the model may assist with "a theological reconsideration of the superordinate Christian identity ... that makes no distinction on the basis of traditional cultural boundaries" (p. 202). I found little within his study, however, to prepare the reader for such a response.

In conclusion, Baker has proposed a useful narrative-based methodology that he himself recognizes requires further work, especially as new work on narrative theory and social memory is done. In this regard it is an informative and engaging study. Whether the Narrative-Identity model is able to make the leap into wider theological reflection that Baker hopes for it is far less certain.

There are a small number of proofing errors, which occasionally mar the flow of the work: for example Herod's reign is incorrectly listed (p. 35); the word "to" is missing on line 11, para. 2, page 152; and "fourth" on line 1, para. 2, p. 160 should be "third."

ENDNOTES

¹ Cf. Rabinowitz (1989, 85).

REFERENCES

- Pervo, R.I. 2009. *Acts: A Commentary*. Ed. by H. W. Attridge. Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009.
- Rabinowitz, P. 1989. Whirl without end. In *Contemporary Literary Theory*, ed. by G. Douglas Atkins and Laura Morrow. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.



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