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Apostolic Commission Narratives in the Canonical and Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles

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Contents

PREFACE	v
INTRODUCTION	1
1. COMMISSION, CONVERSION, AND BIOGRAPHY	11
‘As God Counsell’d Socrates’: Stories of Divine Call	11
The Concept of Commission	14
The Narrative Context: Biography	20
Commission Narratives in the Apostolic Acts	23
2. COMMISSION IN ANCIENT LITERATURES	26
Egypt	26
Jewish Scriptures	33
Greco-Roman Literature	42
The Ancient Novel	50
Commission Stories in the Gospels	54
A Preliminary Typology of Commission Narratives	56
3. PAUL BEFORE DAMASCUS	58
<i>Acts</i> 9	59
<i>Acts</i> 22	69
<i>Acts</i> 26	77
Conclusions	86
Appendix: the <i>Acts of Paul</i>	88
4. THE ACTS OF JOHN	90
<i>Acts of John</i> 18	91
<i>Acts of John</i> 88–9	96
<i>Acts of John</i> 113	110
The Ascent of the Soul and Apophatism	114
Conclusions	116
Appendix: Date and Place of Composition of the <i>Acts of John</i>	116
5. THE ACTS OF THOMAS	119
Protest and Reassurance	120
Slavery and Craftsmanship	125
Conclusions	134

6. THE ACTS OF PHILIP	136
<i>Acts of Philip</i> 3	136
<i>Acts of Philip</i> 8	140
The <i>Acts of Philip</i> and the <i>Gospel of Mary</i>	145
Conclusions	148
Appendix: The Eagle in the <i>Acts of Philip</i> and the <i>Paraleipomena</i> <i>Jeremiou</i>	149
7. THE ACTS OF PETER AND THE TWELVE	155
Journey to the Nine Gates	156
The <i>Acts of Peter and the Twelve</i> and Pachomian Monasticism	158
Relation to the Other Apostolic Acts	167
Conclusions	170
8. THE COMMISSION OF JOHN MARK IN THE ACTS OF BARNABAS	172
The Story	173
Political Themes	177
The Commission of John Mark	182
Conclusions	191
9. THE ACTS OF TITUS	197
The <i>Acts of Titus</i> as Biography	199
<i>Tolle lege</i>	204
Conclusions	211
10. MORPHOLOGY	213
Villainy	218
Sortes: ‘Apostolic Lottery’ and Sacred Books	219
Epiphanies on the Road and on the Sea	224
Twofold, Threefold, and Double Vision	228
Sickness and Healing	234
Helper Figures	240
The Sujet of Commission	242
Conclusions	247
11. RETROSPECTS AND PROSPECTS	249
The Literary Models of Apostolic Commission	249
Apostolic Commission Stories as Biographical Models	260
General Conclusions	267
WORKS CITED	271
SAMENVATTING	293

Preface

When one finishes a dissertation, it is interesting to look back on the route and compare the final manuscript with one's earliest plans. Originally, I wanted to write a book about the conversion of Paul in the Lucan *Acts* with an appendix on the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles. On my arrival at Groningen, Professor G.P. Luttikhuis suggested I pay more attention to non-canonical texts. I gave in after some hesitation, and this was the beginning of an exciting tour of the field of apocryphal literature. My thanks are due to him for being a resolute but tactful advisor, who urged me to develop my own ideas on the subject rather than forcing his on to me. Professors J.N. Bremmer and A. Hilhorst, the co-advisors, have been especially important discussion partners on Greco-Roman literature and patristics. The three of them read my emerging chapters with unrelenting scrutiny, and many of the arguments and footnotes in the book are answers to their remarks.

The roots of this study reach back to earlier stages of my scholarly peregrinations in Hungary, the United States, Romania, Switzerland, and the Netherlands. It would be impossible to mention the names of all the teachers, friends, colleagues, and students, who contributed to the formation of this book. Let me here express my gratitude to Professors J. Bolyki and T. Fabiny (Budapest), D.P. Moessner (Atlanta, now in Dubuque), V.K. Robbins (Atlanta), H. Klein (Sibiu/Hermannstadt), U. Luz (Bern), and S. Vollenweider (Bern, now in Zürich).

The yearly conferences on the early Christian apocrypha, held in Groningen and Budapest since 1994, provided an invaluable impulse for my studies. This pertains not only to the actual sessions, but also to the memorable evenings that the group has spent in the homes of its various members over the years. The present work is also scheduled to be published in the series of that research project.

The Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen provided the material resources as well as a fascinating intellectual milieu. I thank Professor Martin Gosman and the Rudolf Agricola Research School for accepting the research project into their interdisciplinary programme on *Cultural Change*. Colleagues and friends gave advice on a number of particular questions or read chapters of the dissertation, especially Professor R.R. Nauta, G. Xeravits, L. Roig Lanzillotta, J.H.F. Dijkstra, and A. Diem.

My wife Gyöngyi and my daughter Éva have been faithful companions ‘from stage to stage’ (*Acts of Peter and the Twelve* 5.25). This book is dedicated to them.

Introduction

In this study, we will examine the narrative pattern of commission in the canonical and apocryphal apostolic Acts¹. These stories tell how God sent the apostles to various lands and people to spread the Christian message.

Former investigations of commission stories in early Christian literature were usually restricted to the four canonical Gospels and the Lucan *Acts of the Apostles*². These studies were inspired mainly by the results of form-critical work on the Jewish Scriptures and Near Eastern Literature³. With the help of previous scholarship, one can define ‘commission form’ in terms of its constant elements⁴:

1) *Introduction*. Remarks are made about the time and place of the commission, as well as the ancestry and titles of the commissioned person.

2) *Confrontation*. The sender appears and breaks in upon the hero’s everyday life. We read about visions, heavenly voices and creatures. The term ‘epiphany’ could also be used to designate this motif.

3) *Reaction*. The commissioned person reacts to the presence of the holy, often covering his face or falling on the ground with fear.

1. Throughout this study, ‘Acts of the Apostles’ and ‘apostolic Acts’ refer to the canonical *Acts of the Apostles* plus the non-canonical Acts of various apostles. Reference to a specific writing is always in italics (*Acts of Paul*, for example). *Acts of the Apostles* or *Acts* designates the canonical (Lucan) book.

2. Important works include Hubbard, *Matthean Redaction* and ‘Commissioning Stories’; Mullins, ‘Commission Forms’.

3. Habel, ‘Form and Significance’; Richter, *Berufungsberichte*, 136–79; Baltzer, *Biographie*.

4. The scheme is adapted from Czachesz, *Prophetic Biography*, 32–34 and ‘Socio-Rhetorical Analysis’, 19–20; cf. notes 2–3.

- 4) *Commission*. The hero is charged with a new duty.
- 5) *Protest*. The commissioned person claims that he is unable or unworthy to fulfil the task.
- 6) *Reassurance*. The sender encourages the hero, typically with the words ‘fear not’ and ‘I will be with you’.
- 7) *Description of the task*. The sender might talk about the hero’s sphere of authority, the details of his service or the specific situation in which he acts—as, for example, the critical situations in Israel’s history.
- 8) *Inauguration*. A ceremonial act may follow, such as anointing, the laying on of hands, or a sacramental meal.
- 9) *Conclusion*. The hero begins to carry out the task.

The occurrence of these elements will help us to recognise commission stories in different literary environments. If we take a look, for example, at the famous story of Paul on the Damascus road in *Acts* 9, it is not difficult to isolate most of the above-mentioned components there: introduction, epiphany, fear, reassurance, commission, description of the task, inauguration, and the beginning of Paul’s ministry⁵. Scholars agree that *Acts* 9 presents us with a commission narrative which shows remarkable similarities to the commission of the prophets in the Jewish Scriptures⁶. However, if we want to interpret this narrative as a whole, the idea of ‘commission form’, characterised by the above-mentioned elements, is of limited use. How does, for example, the role of Ananias fit into that ‘commission form’? What is the function of Paul’s blindness and healing? Why are there three visions—rather than only one—in the narrative?

Commission stories (and literary texts in general) provide us with complex models of personality, culture and society. A better understanding of commission narratives requires a shift of approaches. In this study, I will expand the scope of previous research in the follow-

5. Cf. Mullins, ‘Commission Forms’, 606; Hubbard, ‘Commissioning Stories’ 117–118; Czachesz, *Prophetic Biography*, 40–71.

6. Munck, *Paul*, 24–35; Baltzer, *Biographie der Propheten*, 189–191; Johnson, *Acts*, 166–69 (cf. idem, *Luke*, 16–17, on ‘the apostles as prophets’); Czachesz, ‘Socio-Rhetorical Criticism’, 19–21; Storm, *Paulusberufung*, 19–22 and passim (concentrating on ch. 22); Hollander, ‘Bekering van Paulus’, 32–3.

ing directions: (1) The investigation also covers the non-canonical apostolic Acts. (2) In addition to Near Eastern and Jewish passages, the range of textual parallels will include different areas of Greco-Roman literature and various early Christian texts. (3) Different modes of literary analysis will be used to examine various aspects of commission stories as rhetoric, narration, plot, social texture and cognitive structures. (4) Finally, I will interpret commission as a key episode of biographical narratives.

The broader horizon of literary investigation raises the question of how relevant are the parallels mentioned under (2) for the understanding of early Christian texts. It seems reasonable to assume that Near Eastern biographies influenced the Jewish literary tradition, while both Greco-Roman and Jewish biographical models influenced early Christian literature. Suggestions to direct or indirect dependencies will be made in this book, especially in the last chapter. However, phenomenological similarities are not necessarily due to the dependence of texts and traditions upon one another. This problem requires some further consideration.

As a starting point, I will differentiate between three contexts of interpreting literary texts: the anthropological, cultural, and social-historical. The *anthropological* context has remained more or less unchanged in historical times. In its history, humankind has lived basically in the same sort of natural environment and with very similar biological and psychological capacities. On the *cultural* level we find major differences in time, space, language, technological skills, religion, social structures and other characteristics. There are no generally accepted criteria to differentiate between cultures. Culture is a rather flexible concept, which allows identifications such as 'Jewish culture' or 'Greco-Roman culture' together with generalisations like 'Hellenistic culture' and even 'Mediterranean culture'. The most particular level is the *social-historical* one. We can talk about the history and society of countries, regions, and even particular settlements.

Comparative studies can yield generalisations on all three levels, resulting in overarching anthropological, cultural, sociological, and historical models. I will use a concept of intertextuality that embraces these three levels. Although I will attempt to explain literary parallels, when this is plausible, by suggesting a direct influence of one text on the other (in the form of quoting, imitation, etc.), I will also reckon

with social, cultural, and anthropological levels of intertextuality. Similarities (especially structural ones) are often due to the shared background of two texts in one of these levels⁷. I will suggest historical references as well as more general sociological and cultural orientation also when interpreting the social world of the commission narratives. A combination of cultural and anthropological aspects characterises most literary analyses, and the literary-critical efforts of this study are to be understood in the same context.

The biographical framework of commission narratives is a key factor. The protagonists of these narratives receive life-long tasks that demand full dedication of their time and resources. In my earlier investigations of the Lucan *Acts*, I approached commission in the frame of the ‘prophetic biography’ as elaborated by K. Baltzer⁸. This is a scheme of five topoi: the commission story (*Einsetzungsbericht*), the securing of peace, the leading of the holy war, the restoration of social justice, and the purification of the cult. The prophetic biography concentrates on the public activity of the hero and relies on fixed topoi. Although Baltzer suggested the application of his scheme to the New Testament, his categories do not quite fit there. I therefore applied the concept of ‘reconfiguration’, a category of intertextuality, in order to understand how the topoi of the prophetic biography have been transformed in the usage of the New Testament authors. I argued that ‘Luke in the Book of Acts systematically reconfigures the Old Testament prophetic narrative. When “imitating” and “surpassing” the prophetic biography, he presents the early Church as a reconfigured prophetic community. The calling and competence of the apostles as well as the situation and tasks of the congregation are understood in the light of the Old Testament prophetic biographical tradition’⁹.

The application of fixed topoi is known also from the Greco-Roman biographical tradition. Friederich Leo (1851–1914) associated

7. According to Robbins, *Tapestry*, 97–120, ‘intertexture concerns the relation of data in the text to various kinds of phenomena outside the text’. He differentiates between four types of intertexture: oral-scribal (this includes different modes of citation and imitation), historical intertexture, social intertexture, and cultural intertexture.

8. Baltzer, *Biographie der Propheten*, 193–194.

9. Czachesz, *Prophetic Biography*, 105. For ‘reconfiguration’ see Robbins, *Tapestry*, 107–8.

this model with the Alexandrian type of biography¹⁰. Alexandrian philologists divided their material into categories and attached biographical sketches to their textual editions. They organised the history of philosophy into schools and completed it with the available biographical material of philosophers. In their biographical sketches, they applied neither an elaborated style nor a narrative form. They reported the youth and death of the hero and a series of notes about the hero's friends, pupils, works, and achievements. Alexandrian biography reached its climax in Suetonius, who applied the approach of a grammarian to his literary work. He did not want to create an artistic portrait, but rather a transparent collection of his biographical material. Leo also identified the peripatetic type of biography¹¹, which preferred the artistic presentation of great individuals and concentrated on the hero's ethos. In its full-fledged form it was represented by Plutarch¹². Among the apostolic Acts we find examples of both models.

Instead of relying on formal categories, Albrecht Dihle proceeded from the function of biography. Starting his discussion with Plato's *Apology*, he argued that the most important impulse to the development of Greek biography was the conflict of the individual with the community¹³. The lives of the heroes served as (ethical) models for imitation¹⁴. According to Baltzer, the public activity of the hero is the scope also of the prophetic biographies of the Jewish Scriptures. Near Eastern texts bear evidence to the same tendency¹⁵. It is difficult to decide how far biographies in Near Eastern and Jewish literatures could serve as examples to be imitated; in Hellenistic times, the heroes of Jewish history are explicitly mentioned as moral examples¹⁶. Biographies often served as literary models for the writing of later

10. Leo, *Biographie*, 118–45, 318–20.

11. Leo, *Biographie*, 85–117, 316–8, 320.

12. For the reception of Leo, see Momigliano, *Greek Biography*, 19–20, who prefers to talk about 'political' and 'antiquarian' approaches to biography.

13. Dihle, *Biographie*, 19, 35, 36, for example.

14. Dihle, *Biographie*, 20.

15. Baltzer, *Biographie der Propheten*, 20, 29. Cf. Chapter 2 below.

16. *Sirach* 44–50; *1–4 Maccabees* (cf. *1 Maccabees* 2.25; *2 Maccabees* 6.31). Kurz, 'Narrative Models', 179–84, points out similar intention in *Tobit*, Philo and Josephus.

ones¹⁷. An extreme form of literary imitation appears when the records of a Pharaoh's 'deeds', including the names of his enemies, are copied verbatim unto the walls of his temple from a monument two centuries older¹⁸.

In which sense shall we use the term 'biography' in this book? Shall we mean by it the use of certain topoi (Baltzer; Alexandrian type), an artistic portrait with a moral focus (peripatetic type), or the presentation of ethical models (Dihle)? Arnaldo Momigliano, in an attempt to avoid the discussion of 'how biography should be written', proposed a practical definition of biography as 'an account of the life of a man from birth to death'¹⁹. However minimalist this definition seems to be, it would exclude most of the biographical texts we are going to deal with in this study, since they usually miss the birth and sometimes the death of the hero. They also largely miss historical curiosity or an interest in personal details, attributes that are typically associated with ancient biographies²⁰. The literature with which we are concerned is interested in general types rather than personal details. To capture the biographical traits of our texts, we propose the following working definition: biography is the presentation of someone's public career as a narrative model for life and literature. The questions of form, chronological order, the application of fixed categories, the way the texts deal with the birth and death of the hero will be secondary. These aspects are helpful in the analysis of our texts, but do not decide whether a given piece of literature qualifies as biog-

17. For literary imitation in Greco-Roman and Jewish literatures, see Brodie, 'Greco-Roman Imitation', 22–6 and idem, *Luke*, 33–70, respectively. Cf. p. 33, note 31 below.

18. Frankfort, *Egyptian Religion*, 48, on Pepi II and Sahure; cf. pp. 29ff below.

19. Momigliano, *Greek Biography*, 11.

20. Momigliano, *Greek Biography*, 102, places biography 'among the [...] products of the new historical curiosity of the fifth century BC'. Hellenistic biography, he suggests, is characterised by 'its distinctive features of erudition, scholarly zeal, realism of details, and gossip' (103). Swain, 'Biography and Biographic', 1–2, proposes that 'Biographical texts are texts which furnish detailed accounts of individuals' lives. [...] It is the aim of every biographical text to gather detailed information about the individual'.

raphy. We will understand as biographical narratives even parts of larger works, such as the portrait of Paul in the Lucan *Acts*²¹.

The literary corpus to be investigated is that of the apostolic Acts. The group of texts designated by this term includes the Lucan *Acts*, and a number of apocryphal Acts relating the deeds of various apostles. Among the apocryphal Acts, it is usual to differentiate between five ‘major Acts’ and other ‘later’ or ‘minor’ ones²². This study will concentrate on Greek and Coptic writings up to the fifth century²³. In the frame of this book, I will not deal with commission in the broader context of religious studies. Visions and call stories are known from different religious traditions and the records of anthropologists. In such a comprehensive study, one should discuss stories about Buddha, Muhammad, well-known Christian figures, leaders of revival movements and sects, shamans and leaders of tribal religions. Although a study that complex would substantially enhance the understanding of commission on the anthropological level, we have to put aside this task for the moment. Thus, we will limit ourselves to the ancient Greco-Roman and Near-Eastern texts that by and large constituted the precedents and the closer environment of early Christian literature.

To sum up, I will pursue a close reading of apostolic commission stories with special attention to their function as biographical models. During my study, I attempt to answer the following questions: What is the narrative concept of divine call that emerges from those texts? How do apostolic commission narratives establish the character of their protagonists? In which typical ways do characters interact in commission stories? What is the function of such narratives in the broader literary frame of the texts? What is the connection between the narrative world of the commission narratives and their social-historical contexts? How did the apostolic Acts utilise existing literary patterns? What is the mutual relation of the commission narratives

21. For Luke-Acts in the context of Greco-Roman biography, see Talbert, *Literary Patterns*, 125–140; idem, ‘Biographies’, 1647–50; idem, ‘Acts’; Barr and Wentling, ‘Classical Biography’.

22. Cf. Schneemelcher, ‘Second and Third Century Acts’, 76; Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 229–30; van Kampen, *Apostelverhalen*, 14; Bremmer, ‘Apocryphal Acts’, 150–1.

23. For a survey of the relevant texts, see pp. 23ff below.

found in the different apostolic Acts? In which ways could ancient readers (communities and individuals) use apostolic commission narratives as models for their own lives?

My *hypothesis* is that apostolic commission stories provided biographical models of self-definition in changing social and ecclesiastical environments. In these narratives, groups and individuals modelled their relations to society and Early Christianity. For this purpose, they utilised a large scale of intertextual resources. Commission in the apostolic Acts is an important vehicle of the social and cultural structures of Early Christianity, and as a cognitive scheme, it exerted a lasting influence on European culture.

A few words have to be said in advance about the methodological aspects of this study. As a starting point, I use the form-critical observations of previous scholarship about commission stories. In Chapter 1, I will complete the form-critical description of commission with a number of elements that concern the narrative structure and function of commission narratives. Whereas the form-critical approach asks which are the standard parts of commission stories, my focus is how commission narratives work. The threefold typology suggested in Chapter 2 helps us to understand the social texture of commission. Synchronic-narrative analysis remains the major interest of the main chapters where I examine commission narratives in the individual apostolic Acts, although important historical links will also be considered at several points. In Chapter 10, I organise the motifs observed through the analysis of individual texts into a systematic presentation of commission narratives. As the title of that chapter, ‘Morphology’, suggests, I draw to some extent on the theories of V.J. Propp and A.-J. Greimas. It is, however, not my intention to replace the form-critical model with a rigid structuralist scheme. Rather, actantial analysis serves as a general framework to discuss the most common dramatic relations and developments in commission stories. The notions of Propp and Greimas appear already at earlier points of the study when I speak of ‘sender’, ‘hero’ and ‘helper’ in the texts.

The study has the following design: Chapters 1 and 2 form a tandem and elaborate on the literary context in which the commission stories of the apostolic Acts will be examined. In Chapter 1, I will compare the commission narratives in Plato’s *Apology* and the Lucan *Acts*. These texts and some theoretical passages by Epictetus will pro-

vide new insights into the form and function of commission narratives. This will be followed by an initial overview of commission stories in the apostolic Acts. In Chapter 2, I will survey the motif of divine commission in the literary environment of Early Christianity. In the same chapter, a preliminary typology of commission will be suggested. Chapters 3 through 9 are dedicated to the study of individual commission narratives. Chapters 10 and 11 form another tandem, intended to systematise the close reading of commission passages. In Chapter 10, I will examine the typical motifs of the apostolic commission narratives, and establish a narrative sujet of commission. Finally, in Chapter 11, I will summarise the results of the study with special attention given to the question of literary influence and the role of the apostolic commission stories as biographical models.

