

Acts and the Eyewitnesses¹

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Abstract

This article engages with Richard Bauckham's work in *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* in relation to the book of Acts. It identifies and expounds the important place of eyewitness testimony in Acts. It also considers the role of eyewitnesses within Acts in relation to the stories of Jesus, arguing (with Bauckham) that this is significant for the preservation of these stories in our Gospels. It then identifies some example stories within Acts which imply use of eyewitness tradition, including the 'we' sections, and assesses how far eyewitness material can be trusted.

1. Introduction

My title is, of course, an echo of Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, a book which rightly caused a re-evaluation of the role of eyewitness testimony in the canonical Gospels.² As often, Bauckham upended many widespread assumptions in New Testament studies, notably here the form-critical assumption that the Gospels, especially the synoptics, are the product of a long chain of anonymous people who passed on individual Jesus stories in isolation and that the Evangelists were collectors of such traditions many years later, who shaped them into books. Bauckham argued, rather, that there is strong

1. The 2025 Tyndale New Testament Lecture. I am grateful to the Tyndale Fellowship committee for the invitation and to Prof. Richard Bauckham and the *Tyndale Bulletin* anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments, which have improved this paper. They should not, of course, be held responsible for any remaining deficiencies.

2. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Eerdmans, 2006); Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 2nd ed. (Eerdmans, 2017). See also the crisp summary in Richard Bauckham, *The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, Grove Biblical 48 (Grove, 2008).

evidence of an eyewitness stratum to all four Gospels. There has been much debate about Bauckham's work: my view is that he has shown convincingly that the assumptions of the form critics are not borne out by the evidence, and there is a much greater role for eyewitness testimony in the Gospels than has previously been allowed in mainstream scholarship. In what follows, I am building on his work.

Bauckham refers only briefly to the book of Acts in his book, and so I shall seek to extend his arguments by considering Acts in three ways. First, I shall consider the place of eyewitness testimony in Acts. Secondly, I shall ask what we can learn from Acts concerning the role of eyewitness testimony in relation to the stories of Jesus. Thirdly, I shall ask what we can learn from Acts concerning the role of eyewitness testimony in relation to the stories in the book of Acts itself.

As is well known, generations of scholars have sought sources within the book of Acts on the (appropriate) assumption that the author has drawn on material from others in composing the book.³ However, the lack of agreement among scholars as to the contents and nature of the sources speaks against the possibility of confidence in identifying these sources. Whatever material Luke draws on, he has woven it into his cloth in ways that means seams and breaks are almost impossible to identify, especially because the book of Acts is written throughout in Lukan diction and style.⁴ I shall argue that to consider eyewitness testimony as one of Luke's sources may help us with this question. What follows is a cumulative argument, drawing together a number of lines of evidence, rather than being dependent on one argument alone.

2. Eyewitness testimony in Acts

Several features indicate the importance of eyewitness testimony in Acts: the prominence of 'witness' language; the place of the eleven/twelve; the fact that

3. For examples, see C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 2 vols, ICC (T&T Clark, 1994, 1998), 1:49–56; 2:xxiv–xxx, and the magisterial discussion for his day of Jacques Dupont, *Les sources du livre des Actes: état de la question* (Desclée de Brouwer, 1960); ET: Jacques Dupont, *The Sources of Acts: The Present Position* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 1964).

4. James H. Moulton, Wilbert F. Howard and Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, 4 vols. (T&T Clark, 1906–76), 4:56–57; F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 3rd ed. (Apolllos, 1990), 44; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation and Commentary*, AB 31 (Doubleday, 1998), 80, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780300261660>, the latter citing the verdict of Dupont: '[Luke] rewrites the text by putting the imprint of his vocabulary and his style everywhere', Dupont, *Sources*, 166.

the eyewitnesses are named individuals, not anonymous communities; and Luke's own declaration of his method of compilation in Luke 1:1-4.⁵

The importance of testimony/witness is signalled early in Acts in Jesus's promise that the Spirit will empower his followers to be his witnesses (1:8). The genitive μου 'my' has, I suggest, a double sense: it indicates both that the witnesses belong to Jesus, and that their testimony is about Jesus (cf. a similar genitive in LXX Isa 43:12). The term μάρτυς 'witness', its cognate nouns μαρτυρία and μαρτύριον (both meaning 'testimony') and cognate verbs μαρτυρέω and μαρτύρομαι (both meaning 'testify, bear witness') are widespread in Acts, occurring twenty-nine times in total in the NA28 text.⁶ This language is forensic, used in courtroom scenes where the Jesus followers give testimony.⁷ It is also used metaphorically for the disciples' testimony given to persuade others to become Jesus followers.⁸ The widespread use is also suggestive of Luke's aim to provide a written form of apostolic testimony in Acts, as well as in his Gospel,⁹ for it is notable that Luke uses 'witness' language as a technical term for those who give testimony to their first-hand experience of Jesus. This means the twelve, of course, and Stephen (22:20) and Paul (13:30; 22:15; 26:16).¹⁰ It also includes a wider group: in Luke 24:36,44, 'they' includes 'the eleven and those with them' (v. 33) as well as the two who walked to Emmaus (v. 33).¹¹ The group addressed in Acts 1:6, 'those who had come together', may well be wider than the eleven, including those who prayed (1:14) and the one hundred and twenty (1:15).¹²

The task of witness has at least three dimensions. These are to testify to: (i) Jesus's ministry, death, resurrection, and exaltation (1:21-22; 2:22-24; 10:36-

5. While 'witness' and 'testimony' language is prominent in Acts, it is found in other NT documents; see Allison A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness*, SNTSMS 31 (Cambridge University Press, 1977).

6. For more detail, see Steve Walton, *Acts 1:1-9:42*, WBC 37a (Zondervan Academic, 2024), 126-127. ECM Acts agrees in these readings.

7. 4:25-27; 5:27-41; 6:12-7:60; 16:16-40; 17:6-9; 18:12-17; 21:27-26:32; on legal language and scenes in Acts, see Allison A. Trites, 'The Importance of Legal Scenes and Language in the Book of Acts', *NovT* 16 (1974): 278-284, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853674X00041>.

8. Discussion and examples: Trites, *Concept*, 128-153.

9. Trites, *Concept*, 140.

10. Peter Bolt, 'Mission and Witness' in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson (Eerdmans, 1998), 191-214, here esp. 196-210.

11. John Nolland, *Luke*, 3 vols, WBC 35A-C (Word, 1989-1993), 3:1220.

12. For these points and fuller critique of Bolt, see Peter Mallen, *The Reading and Transformation of Isaiah in Luke-Acts*, LNTS 367 (T&T Clark, 2008), 191-193.

42), as C. H. Dodd noticed long ago in his analysis of the apostolic preaching;¹³ (ii) Jesus's holy and righteous character which produced his healings and other powerful deeds (3:14; 10:38); and (iii) Jesus's present status as Lord following his exaltation, which calls people to repentance and trust in him (2:38; 3:22-23; 10:43; Luke 24:46-47). This testimony is in continuity with Jesus's testimony to the kingdom of God in the Third Gospel: notice the bookending of references to the kingdom of God in Acts 1:3 and 28:23.

2.1 The place of the eleven/twelve

Four Acts passages indicate the particular role of the eyewitness testimony of the eleven/twelve in the early Jesus communities.

First there is the choice of a replacement for Judas (1:12-26). After Peter has interpreted two psalms as concerning Judas's betrayal of Jesus and death, and implying that God's intention is to replace Judas in the number of the twelve (note the 'divine δεῖ' ('it is necessary'), v. 21), he sets out a person specification for the role (vv. 21-22). This includes the requirement of being an eyewitness to Jesus's ministry 'beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us' (v. 22), that is, the period covered by Luke 3-24 and the beginning of Acts (1:1-11).¹⁴ This requirement means that the one chosen will become 'a witness of his resurrection with us' (v. 22).¹⁵ Their testimony, as Peter's Pentecost speech and his temple speech indicate, includes Jesus's life, ministry, death and, resurrection (2:22-36; 3:12-26), that is, the events indicated as qualifying them to serve in this role. Jesus's resurrection is crucial, of course, for if he had stayed dead, subsequent history would have taken no notice of him. The 'completion' of the number twelve is emblematic of the restoration of Israel, which is now in train following Jesus's resurrection and ascension.¹⁶ The connection with Jesus's words about the twelve sitting on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 22:28-30) is hard to miss, and is played out in Acts in

13. C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Development* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1936).

14. The fivefold use of visual vocabulary in Acts 1:9-11 is particularly striking, underlining that this is a this-worldly experience, not a vision or dream (language used for such experiences is different to the words used here): βλέπόντων 'as they watched', τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν 'eyes' (v. 9), ἀτενίζοντες 'staring intently' (v. 10), ἐμβλέποντες 'staring', ἐθεάσασθε 'you saw' (v. 11).

15. John J. Peters, *Luke among the Ancient Historians: Ancient Historiography and the Attempt to Remedy the Inadequate 'Many'* (Pickwick, 2022), 154-158 regards the naming of Matthias here with the eleven as indicating a key group of eyewitnesses upon whose testimony Luke draws. We might add the names in 1:13-14.

16. Walton, *Acts 1:1-9:42*, 155.

the role of the reconstituted twelve as witness primarily to Israel, forming the core of the renewed Israel, which will in due time embrace gentiles. Although only two names are proposed, it is probable that there are others, perhaps many others, beyond these thirteen who qualified for this role.¹⁷

Secondly, the first of the four markers of the life of the early community in Jerusalem is ‘the apostles’ teaching’ (2:42). Its location, as first in the list, suggests it has some priority over the other three features: the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers. Indeed, these three are dependent on the apostolic testimony to their importance. The role of the apostles depends on their experience of life with Jesus, as we saw in 1:21-22, and Jesus’s commissioning of them as witnesses (1:2,8,22b). In the first half of Acts, apostles have a particular role in recognising divine actions, notably in Samaria (8:14,18) and in Saul’s conversion (9:27).

Thirdly, when the question of equity of treatment between two different language-groups of widows occurs,¹⁸ the twelve call a community meeting to consider an appropriate response (6:1-2). Their proposal is that they should keep their focus on ‘serving the word’ (τῇ διακονίᾳ τοῦ λόγου, v. 4), rather than neglecting God’s word in order ‘to serve tables’ (διακονεῖν τραπέζαις, v. 2). The use of the cognate verb and noun for the two activities demonstrates that both activities are valued forms of service, rather than there being a hierarchy in which serving the word is superior.¹⁹ There is no suggestion that the seven serve *under* the twelve – both groups serve the gospel and the gospel community. The twelve are responsible for the word, because of their peculiar qualification to do so, and the seven take responsibility for overseeing provision for widows, again because they are recognised as qualified for this task.

Fourthly, when Peter speaks in Cornelius’s household, he identifies himself among the witnesses to what Jesus did (10:39,41) and gives a mini summary of Jesus’s ministry from John’s baptism to his resurrection (vv. 37-41). He describes Jesus’s ministry as ἀρχάμενος ἀπὸ τῆς Γαλιλαίας μετὰ τὸ βάπτισμα ὃ ἐκήρυξεν Ἰωάννης (‘beginning from Galilee following the baptism which John proclaimed’; v. 37), echoing ἀρχάμενος ἀπὸ τοῦ βαπτίσματος Ἰωάννου (‘beginning from the baptism of John’; 1:22). As Bauckham notes, this underlines

17. Bauckham, *Jesus*, 115.

18. The nature of the dispute is debated; see Walton, *Acts 1:1-9:42*, 410–412.

19. F. Scott Spencer, *The Portrait of Philip in Acts: A Study of Roles and Relations*, JSNTSup 67 (JSOT, 1992), 201–206; Nigel Biggar, ‘Showing the Gospel in Social Praxis’, *Anvil* 8 (1991): 7–18, here 14–15; contra F. Scott Spencer, ‘Neglected Widows in Acts 6:1-7’, *CBQ* 56 (1994): 715–733, here 729–730; Joel B. Green, *Practicing Theological Interpretation: Engaging Biblical Texts for Faith and Formation* (Baker Academic, 2011), 66–68.

Luke's concern that witnesses must have participated in the ministry of Jesus from its beginning with John through to Jesus's exaltation to God's right side.²⁰

The role of the twelve as eyewitnesses is thus prominent in Acts, especially in the first half of the book. The last appearance of the group, there called 'apostles', is at the Jerusalem meeting to resolve conditions for gentile participation in the Jesus communities (15:4,6,22,23; 16:4). There they are mentioned with 'the elders', whom we meet first in 11:30 as overseeing the Judaeon communities. The role of the twelve as eyewitnesses is thus foundational and not continuing – note that James is not replaced after his execution (12:2), by contrast with Judas (cf. Eph 2:20; 3:5; Rev 21:14).

2.2 Named individuals, not anonymous communities

It is notable that those referred to as 'witnesses' are individuals, even when said to be part of a group of witnesses (e.g. Peter in 10:37,39). This identification is important given that they must be able to testify to the full extent of Jesus's public ministry, death, resurrection, and exaltation, and it speaks against the form-critical model of Jesus stories and sayings being passed on anonymously for a long time before being written down. It is now widely recognised that the form critics' reconstruction is based on an erroneous understanding of genre, a mistaken view of human development based on ever-increasing 'progress', and a reconstruction of the situations and events where stories were told which lacks evidence.²¹

2.3 Luke's method

Luke tells his hearers about his method of research and writing in the prologue to his Gospel (Luke 1:1-4),²² uniquely among the four Evangelists, and we should pay careful attention to his self-testimony:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken the task of compiling an account of the matters which have come to fruition in our midst,
just as the original eyewitnesses and servants of the word handed on the tradition to us,²³

20. Bauckham, *Jesus*, 115–116.

21. Andrew Judd, *Modern Genre Theory: An Introduction for Biblical Studies* (Zondervan Academic, 2024), 3–17; Bauckham, *Jesus*, passim; and, less recently, Morna D. Hooker, 'On Using the Wrong Tool', *Theology* 75 (1972): 570–581, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X7207501103>.

22. I assume the shared authorship of Luke and Acts.

23. Treating παρέδοσαν 'passed on' as active, by contrast with many English versions which render it as if passive (e.g. NIV, NRSVue). See discussion: Peters, *Luke*, 147–149.

I too decided, having followed everything carefully and thoroughly,
to write it all up for you in an orderly fashion, most excellent Theophilus,
so that you may have assured knowledge about the things in which you
have been instructed.²⁴

The sentence's structure is a protasis ('Inasmuch as ... servants of the word') and apodosis ('I also decided ... been instructed'). The key part for our discussion is Luke's reference to οἱ ἀπ' ἀρχῆς αὐτόπται καὶ ὑπηρέται ... τοῦ λόγου ('those from the beginning [who were] eyewitnesses and servants ... of the word'; v. 2), including himself among a later generation who received the eyewitness tradition (ἡμῖν, 'to us', v. 2). To translate αὐτόπται as 'eyewitnesses' in modern English may mislead us into thinking that it is purely forensic language.²⁵ Loveday Alexander, based on extensive research into usage, proposes that the term is better rendered 'those with personal/first-hand experience; those who know the facts at first hand'.²⁶ The phrase most probably represents one group rather than two – the ministers are the eyewitnesses.²⁷ As in Acts 1:22 and 10:37 we have the phrase ἀπ' ἀρχῆς 'from the beginning'. Among historians, Herodotus (*Hist.* 2.29.1; 8.79.4; 8.80.1), Polybius (*Hist.* 3.4.13), and Josephus (*Ag. Ap.* 1.10 §55) use αὐτόπτης concerning personal observation of events.²⁸ Heraclitus states that 'eyes are more reliable witnesses than ears' (ὀφθαλμοὶ τῶν ὠτῶν ἀκριβέστεροι μάρτυρες, D32.B101a, quoted by Polybius 12.27.1-2 (Laks & Most, LCL)). In Acts, Paul is described in similar terms as ὑπηρέτην καὶ μάρτυρα 'an assistant and witness' (26:16), and this suggests to Alexander that Luke 1:2 points also to the book of Acts, for Paul is the 'ultimate source' for the latter part of Acts.²⁹ In the same place, she also notes that Luke avoids

24. Based on the translation provided in Loveday Alexander, *The Preface to Luke's Gospel: Literary Convention and Social Context in Luke 1.1-4 and Acts 1.1*, SNTSMS 78 (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 107, 116, 125, 136, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511554827>. Her whole discussion is highly illuminating; see also Peters, *Luke*, 146–154.

25. Alexander, *Preface*, 121; Bauckham, *Jesus*, 117; 'αὐτόπτης', LSJ.

26. Alexander, *Preface*, 34–41, 120–122, quoting 120.

27. I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Paternoster, 1978), 42; more cautiously, Michael Wolter, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 2 vols, Baylor-Mohr Siebeck Studies in Early Christianity (Baylor University Press, 2016, 2017), 1:47–48.

28. Bauckham, *Testimony*, 118–119, although misciting Polybius as 3.4.3 in accordance with a typo at Alexander, *Preface*, 121 (the reference is correct on 38). See, further, Clare K. Rothschild, *Luke-Acts and the Rhetoric of History: An Investigation of Early Christian Historiography*, WUNT 2/175 (Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 22–25. For a fuller comparison with other ancient historians, see Peters, *Luke*.

29. Alexander, *Preface*, 124.

specifically Christian language, such as μάρτυς ‘witness’, in the preface: the language he uses is at home among ancient historians and technical writers.

Also noteworthy is the metaphorical use in v. 3 of παρηκολουθηκότι (‘having followed’) with the adverb ἄνωθεν (‘thoroughly’), giving the sense ‘having become thoroughly familiar with the whole affair’.³⁰ The verb does not itself denote research, although research would undoubtedly be involved in becoming thoroughly familiar.³¹ Luke thus claims to have accurately grasped the tradition which he is now passing on in writing. Luke is not implicitly criticising his predecessors in vv. 1-2,³² not least because, on the most widespread view of the synoptic Gospels, he incorporates much of Mark’s Gospel into his own work, for he regards Mark as also having authentic tradition about Jesus (v. 1). In his decision to write he places himself alongside his predecessors in ἔδοξεν καί μοι (‘I too decided’), rather than in contrast to them. Alexander proposes that ἀνατάξασθαι ‘to compile’ (v. 1) does not necessarily mean Luke’s predecessors produced *written* accounts,³³ but καί μοι ‘I too’ with γράψαι ‘to write’ suggests otherwise. Perhaps Luke’s predecessors produced some written texts (such as Mark’s Gospel) and some oral sources.

Thus Luke’s preface signals that he has ordered his gathered material with care and thoroughness, and that this material is rooted in eyewitness testimony to the events he narrates. ‘Luke can tell the story “from the beginning” because he is familiar with the traditions of those who were eyewitnesses “from the beginning.”’³⁴

2.4 Implications for the Gospels

What implications do these observations have for reading the Gospels, especially Luke’s Gospel? Acts, in combination with Luke’s Gospel, points strongly to the importance of eyewitness testimony to Jesus’s ministry and teaching, death, resurrection, and ascension. As Bauckham argues in detail, the Evangelists’ practice includes eyewitness testimony to events and teaching from Jesus’s ministry, signalled sometimes by named individuals. Since there is no other purpose for naming these people, the naming indicates the eyewitness source

30. Alexander, *Preface*, 128–130; see also Peters, *Luke*, 187–190.

31. So David P. Moessner, ‘The Appeal and Power of Poetics (Luke 1:1-4): Luke’s Superior Credentials (παρηκολουθηκότι), Narrative Sequence (καθεξῆς), and Firmness of Understanding (ἡ ἀσφάλεια) for the Reader’ in *Jesus and the Heritage of Israel: Luke’s Narrative Claim upon Israel’s Legacy*, ed. David P. Moessner (Trinity Press International, 1999), 84–123, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780567691569.ch-004>.

32. With Alexander, *Preface*, 115.

33. Alexander, *Preface*, 115.

34. Bauckham, *Jesus*, 124; see also Peters, *Luke*, 142–192.

of the story or teaching.³⁵ Bauckham's main examples are drawn from Mark's Gospel, some of which Luke reproduces,³⁶ but there are also names found in Luke alone: Zechariah and Elizabeth (Luke 1:5), Simeon (2:25), Anna (2:36), Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:40,43,44), Joanna and Susanna (8:3), Martha and Mary (10:38-42), Zaccheus (Luke 19:2,5,8), and Cleopas (24:18).³⁷ These make good sense as the ultimate eyewitness source of the stories where their names occur, especially if (as I think) the author was in Palestine for a couple of years during Paul's confinement in Caesarea Maritima, and there had opportunity to interview a number of these people, as well as Mary the mother of Jesus.

3. Using Bauckham's ideas in relation to stories in Acts

3.1 Named individuals as sources of stories

Bauckham's argument makes considerable play of the distribution of names in Palestine in the Gospels by comparison with Tal Ilan's database of Palestinian names.³⁸ This is clearly less relevant – and less achievable – in the book of Acts, since many of the characters, both Jewish and gentile, are from outside the Land and/or live outside the Land. Bauckham includes Acts in his statistics for Palestinian Jewish male names, but without differentiating names found in

35. Bauckham, *Jesus*, 47. More recently, see Kamil Gregor and Brian Blais, 'Is Name Popularity a Good Test of Historicity?: A Statistical Evaluation of Richard Bauckham's Onomastic Argument', *JSHJ* 21 (2023): 171–202, <https://doi.org/10.1163/17455197-bja10023>; Kamil Gregor and Brian Blais, 'Re-Examining Richard Bauckham's Argument from Name Popularity in Light of Apocryphal and Talmudic Evidence', *JSNT* 47 (2024): 271–296, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X241257350>, and the critique of Luuk Van de Weghe and Jason Wilson, 'Why Name Popularity is a Good Test of Historicity: A Goodness-of-Fit Test Analysis on Names in the Gospels and Acts', *JSHJ* 22 (2024): 184–214, <https://doi.org/10.1163/17455197-bja10035>.

36. See Table 5, Bauckham, *Jesus*, 65.

37. Bauckham, *Jesus*, 45–47 observes that many of these people were probably well-known members of the early Christian movement and that the stories concerning them thus circulated with their names included. That said, he is doubtful of the value of those named in Luke's infancy narratives (Luke 1–2) because of their age at the time of Luke's research and writing (Richard Bauckham, 'Eyewitnesses and Critical History: A Response to Jens Schröter and Craig Evans', *JSNT* 31 (2008): 221–235, here 222, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X08098283>). However, if Luke was in Palestine during Paul's Caesarean imprisonment, many of these individuals could still be alive, and, further, Luke may well have met Jesus's mother and learned of the testimony of Simeon and Anna through her.

38. Especially Tal Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity*, TSAJ 91, 126, 141, 148 (Mohr Siebeck, 2002, 2008, 2011, 2012), vol. 1; for an overview, see Bauckham, *Jesus*, 67–71.

Acts.³⁹ Nevertheless, there are at least four examples of named individuals who appear in particular stories and are the probable named source of the stories.

First is Philip the evangelist – the only individual named as an evangelist in the NT. Philip's ministry in Samaria (8:4-25) is groundbreaking in overcoming an historic antipathy between Jews and Samaritans, and it is unlikely that such a minor character's name would later be added to the tradition of the beginnings of the Samaritan Jesus community without an historical basis for his role.⁴⁰ A similar consideration applies to Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch (8:26-40), which is part of the gospel's journey 'to the end of the earth' (1:8). Interestingly, the eunuch is never named, although he is mentioned three times (vv. 27,34,38). Adolf von Harnack suggested that Philip and his daughters were one of Luke's sources, noticing the meeting with them of the 'we' character in 21:8-9. Acts 8:40 leaves Philip in Caesarea, and this is where the 'we' character meets him, now with four prophesying single daughters (21:8-9).⁴¹ I shall consider the so-called 'we' sections shortly, but suffice to note here that if the 'we' sections indicate the author's presence at events, Harnack's proposal becomes more likely. It is easy to envisage a scenario where Philip re-tells the stories in Acts 8, as he has done often, in the presence of the 'we' character (perhaps with some eye-rolling from his daughters!).

In support of this proposal, we may note that Eusebius reports Papias claiming Philip the presbyter as one of his sources (*Hist. eccl.* 3.39.4). Further, Papias, Eusebius states, κατὰ τοὺς αὐτοὺς ... γινόμενος 'being with them' (sc. Philip's daughters) gained information ὑπὸ τῶν τοῦ Φιλίππου θυγατέρων 'from the daughters of Philip' (*Hist. eccl.* 3.39.9). Eusebius also says, on the authority of Polycrates and Proclus, that Philip and his daughters later lived at Hierapolis in Phrygia (*Hist. eccl.* 3.31.3-5; 3.39.8-9), a region known to the author of Acts (Acts 16:6; 18:23). Indeed, Papias was himself bishop of Hierapolis, and thus he probably met Philip's daughters, so there is good reason to trust this testimony. Polycrates (or Eusebius) may have mistakenly (or deliberately) identified Philip

39. Bauckham, *Jesus*, 90–91.

40. Christopher R. Matthews, 'Philip and Simon, Luke and Peter: A Lukan Sequel and its Intertextual Success', *Society of Biblical Literature 1992 Seminar Papers*, SBLSP 31 (SBL, 1992), 133–146, here 145–146.

41. Adolf von Harnack, *The Date of the Acts and of the Synoptic Gospels*, Crown Theological Library 33 (Williams & Norgate, 1911), 156; Adolf von Harnack, *Luke the Physician: The Author of the Third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles*, Crown Theological Library 20 (Williams & Norgate, 1911), 39–40, 155–157. Harnack also considers a number of Gospel stories to derive from Philip and his daughters: Harnack, *Luke*, 153–157. Barrett, *Acts*, 1:51, 421 considers it 'not ... a wild guess' to suggest that the author drew some parts of the Cornelius story (set in Caesarea) from Christians in the city.

the apostle with the Philip of Acts 8 and 21,⁴² but that is no reason to reject other information which Eusebius reports.

Secondly, Rhoda the παιδίσκη ‘young girl’ offers another example (12:13). Her designation as παιδίσκη suggests she is a slave – other women in the NT so designated are probably or certainly slaves.⁴³ She is part of the household of Mary the mother of John Mark, and her responsibilities evidently include being the door-keeper (12:13). Luke’s account indicates that she recognises Peter’s voice (12:14), which is unsurprising if this large house⁴⁴ was a regular meeting place of the Jerusalem believers. She seems to be a believer herself, for she comes to (προσῆλθεν) the door (v. 13), which suggests she is present in the prayer gathering (v. 12), and she feels joy on hearing Peter’s voice (v. 14). Notice that she is the only person present who knows the whole story. In particular, she is the only one (apart from Peter) who encounters Peter knocking at the gate of the porch (v. 13) and runs in to tell the gathered praying group that he is at the door (v. 14), to be met with scepticism (v. 15). She is then present in the room as Peter tells the story of his escape (v. 17a), which Acts reports prior to his arrival at the house (vv. 6-11), and as Peter gives instructions to share the news (v. 17b). Acts is then vague about where Peter went next (v. 17c), which is compatible with Rhoda not knowing this – Peter presumably went underground, within Jerusalem or elsewhere, for his own safety.⁴⁵ There is no reason for naming Rhoda except that her name is attached to this tradition when Luke receives it; it is highly plausible that she is a named eyewitness who is the source of the story.⁴⁶

Thirdly, Jason of Thessalonica merits consideration. Jason’s name enters the story of Paul and Silas’s visit to the city without any introduction: Acts simply tells us that a mob attacked Jason’s house (17:5). Acts offers us little backstory for Jason prior to this point. He is named with τινὰς ἀδελφούς

42. See the brief discussion in Bauckham, *Jesus*, 440–442.

43. Matt 26:69; Mark 14:66, 69; Luke 12:45; 22:56; John 18:17; Gal 4:22, 30, 31; s.v. BDAG 750; with Turid Karlsen Seim, *The Double Message: Patterns of Gender in Luke-Acts*, SNTW (T&T Clark, 1994), 61.

44. Luke records that ἱκανοί (‘many’) were gathered there (v. 12), and τὴν θύραν τοῦ πυλῶνος (‘the door of the gate’; v. 13) implies this is a large free-standing house with an outer porch.

45. Scholars have speculated considerably about where Peter went; for discussion, see Barrett, *Acts*, 1:587.

46. See also Clare K. Rothschild, *Luke-Acts and the Rhetoric of History: An Investigation of Early Christian Historiography*, WUNT 2/175 (Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 228; William M. Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament*, 2nd ed., James Sprunt Lectures 1913 (Hodder & Stoughton, 1915), 209–221.

(‘certain brothers (and sisters)’) whom the mob drag before the authorities (v. 6), and we then learn that Jason has hosted Paul and Silas (v. 7). These features suggest that Jason is now a Jesus follower. He may be Jewish, for Jewish people did use the Graecised form Ἰάσων (‘Jason’) in place of the Hebrew form יֵשׁוּעַ (‘Yeshua’) known in Greek as Ἰησοῦς (‘Joshua/Jesus’).⁴⁷ If so, he was probably a convert during Paul’s synagogue ministry (vv. 1-4) and either then or earlier offered hospitality to Paul and Silas. The point to notice here is that the mob were unable to find Paul and Silas at Jason’s house (v. 6), most probably because they were not present there after hearing about the riot in progress (v. 5a). This means they could not be a first-hand source for the events of vv. 5-7. Further, the ‘we’ character is not present in Thessalonica, apparently left in Philippi (see below), so who could be the source for these events other than Jason himself?⁴⁸

Fourthly, Apollos’s encounter with Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus suggests an eyewitness source (18:24-28).⁴⁹ When these events happen, Paul has left Ephesus (v. 21), and the ‘we’ character is not present. Acts introduces him by his ethnicity (Jew) and his city of origin (Alexandria), as well as by his competence as a speaker who knows the Scriptures (v. 24). When he speaks in the synagogue, Priscilla and Aquila hear him and ‘take him aside’: προσελάβοντο implies they take him to a private place to speak. They explain the way of God ἀκριβέστερον (‘more accurately’; v. 26), by contrast with his earlier speaking ἀκριβῶς (‘accurately’) about Jesus (v. 25; cf. Luke’s desire to write ἀκριβῶς (‘accurately’), Luke 1:3). Only those three people are present for this discussion. Subsequently, the brothers and sisters in Ephesus support Apollos in travelling to Corinth and provide a letter of commendation for him (v. 27a). On arrival there, Apollos continues to speak and testify powerfully from Scripture that the Jewish Messiah is Jesus (vv. 27b-28).⁵⁰ Priscilla and Aquila could not give eyewitness testimony to Apollos’s time in Corinth, since they were still in Ephesus, although they might hear of it second hand. By the time Paul writes Romans some time later, Prisc(ill)a and Aquila are in Rome (Rom 16:3-4), having left Ephesus (their location when Paul writes 1 Corinthians; see 1 Cor 16:19). Assuming the writing of 1 Corinthians to be during Paul’s long

47. Gustav Adolf Deissmann, *Bible Studies*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1909), 315 n2; BDF §53.2.d.

48. Barrett, *Acts*, 2:807 concedes that ‘The name Jason suggests contact with local tradition.’

49. I owe the initial idea for this to Dr David Firth.

50. 1 Cor 1:12; 3:4-6,22; 4:6; 16:12 demonstrate the impact of Apollos’s ministry in Corinth.

Ephesian ministry (Acts 19), that is later than the Ephesian encounter in Acts 18:24-28. So it is certainly possible that the author of Acts, who is in Rome later with Paul (28:16), learns this story from Priscilla and Aquila in Rome, or perhaps from Apollos who appears to have had recent contact with Paul in Ephesus (1 Cor 16:12).

There are other passages to be explored for eyewitness testimony, such as Alexander at the riot in Ephesus (19:23-40), and I have not had time to think sufficiently about those yet – there is certainly a PhD to be written on this topic.

3.2 The ‘we’ character

What, then of the ‘we’ character in Acts? Several sections of Acts are in the first-person plural (16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16).⁵¹ In total, they cover a relatively short period, around six to seven months from the ten to twelve years of the period covered by Acts 16-28 (approximately AD 49-60). They begin and end rather abruptly: 16:17; 21:18; 28:16 shift into third person to narrate Paul’s activities, although the first two refer to ‘Paul and us’, τῷ Παύλῳ καὶ ἡμῖν, or ‘Paul with us’, ὁ Παῦλος σὺν ἡμῖν, before moving to Paul alone as subject (16:18; 21:19). These sections contain some of the most detailed stories in Acts, such as events in Philippi (16:11-18), which are reported much more fully than (for example) Paul’s eighteen months or more in Corinth (18:1-18), or his Ephesian residency of two years (or more) (19:1-40, although the riot is reported quite fully in vv. 23-40).⁵² Similarly, the sea journey from Caesarea Maritima towards Rome contains much detail (27:1-28:16).⁵³

The ‘we’ sections have proportionately about 2.5 times as many *hapax legomena* as Acts as a whole: 111 words are not found elsewhere in Luke or Acts, and 162 words are not found elsewhere in Acts.⁵⁴ That sounds like a rather distinctive vocabulary until we recognise that a large number of the Acts *hapax legomena* are nautical terms found in Acts 27; when we remove these, there are twenty-one lexemes in the ‘we’ passages found elsewhere in Acts, but not elsewhere in the NT, seventeen words or phrases found only in the ‘we’

51. I understand the first-person plural readings in D at 11:28; 16:8 as secondary. For a useful sketch of the contents of the ‘we’ passages, see Barrett, *Acts*, 2:xxv-xxvii.

52. For other examples of detail included, see Samuel Byrskog, ‘History or Story in Acts – A Middle Way? The “We” Passages, Historical Intertexture, and Oral History’ in *Contextualizing Acts: Lukan Narrative and Greco-Roman Discourse*, ed. Todd C. Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele, SBL – Symposium 20 (SBL, 2003), 257-283, here 263.

53. See discussion in Luuk van de Weghe, *Living Footnotes in the Gospel of Luke: Luke’s Reliance on Eyewitness Sources* (Pickwick, 2023), 59-75.

54. Harnack, *Luke*, 84-85.

sections and the Third Gospel, and twenty-eight other words or phrases found predominantly in the ‘we’ sections and found rarely in the rest of the NT.⁵⁵ These modified word statistics place the style of the ‘we’ sections within the range of the style of the rest of Luke and Acts, and thus suggest that, in their form in Acts, they come from the author’s hand.

Can we add the ‘we’ character to our list of eyewitnesses in Acts? I forebear to discuss the full spectrum of views on the ‘we’ sections in order to focus on this question.⁵⁶ I agree with Kingsley Barrett that the first-person plural would most naturally be seen as a claim to participation in the events reported.⁵⁷ Bart Ehrman agrees, but thinks Luke is lying.⁵⁸ Ernst Haenchen proposes that Acts draws on a (non-first-person) source but that Luke has put this source into the first person with the persuasive intent of presenting this material as eyewitness testimony.⁵⁹ Haenchen’s view assumes that first-person writing necessarily evinces eyewitness testimony, which was much valued in ancient historiography.⁶⁰ However, first-person narration within a book is not the only way, or even the commonest, of claiming eyewitness testimony: more frequently, authors begin their book by identifying themselves as witnesses of

55. Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Paternoster, 1998), 53, drawing on Sir John C. Hawkins, *Horae Synopticae: Contributions to the Study of the Synoptic Problem* (Oxford, 1899), 185–189.

56. For a fuller discussion, see *Excursus: The ‘We’ Sections at Acts 16:10* in the forthcoming second volume of the WBC on Acts.

57. C. K. Barrett, ‘Paul Shipwrecked’ in *Scripture: Meaning and Method. Essays Presented to Anthony Tyrrell Hanson for His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Barry P. Thompson (Hull University Press, 1987), 51–64, here 55. Daniel Jong-Sang Chae, *The Historical Paul in Acts*, Paternoster Biblical Monographs (Paternoster, 2019), 105–118 argues cogently that this is the natural way of understanding ‘we’ and draws numerous parallels with knowledge of Paul’s ministry in key cities which comport well with the earlier ‘we’ sections (he does not discuss 27:1–28:16).

58. Bart D. Ehrman, *Forgery and Counterforgery: The Use of Literary Deceit in Early Christian Polemics* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 269, 276–282.

59. Ernst Haenchen, “‘We’ in Acts and the Itinerary”, *JTC* 1 (1965): 65–100; ET of Ernst Haenchen, ‘Das “Wir” in der Apostelgeschichte und das Itinerar’, *ZTK* 58 (1961): 329–366. Cf. Eckhard Plümacher, ‘Wirklichkeitserfahrung und Geschichtsschreibung bei Lukas: Erwägungen zu den Wir-Stücken der Apostelgeschichte’, *ZNW* 68 (1977): 2–22, here 16–22, <https://doi.org/10.1515/zntw.1977.68.1-2.2>, who sees the ‘we’ sections as the author signalling that he travelled widely and had personal acquaintance with his subject matter, i.e. that he claims to fulfil the requirements to be a competent Hellenistic historian. However, he concedes that there are no known ancient parallels to Luke’s use of first-person plural for this purpose, which rather undermines his claim.

60. E.g. Polybius 12.25d.1; 12.25e.7; 12.25h.3, critiquing Timaeus for relying solely on written sources; discussion: Byrskog, ‘History or Story’, 274–275.

the events they narrate, and then tell the remainder of their narrative in the third person.⁶¹

A biblical analogue with the ‘we’ sections in Acts is the first person sections of Ezra–Nehemiah (which form one book in the Hebrew canon), which are often identified as extracts from memoirs written by those people.⁶² It is not impossible that the author is composing Acts in this way in the ‘we’ sections, but it is hard to distinguish this from the author drawing on his own recollections, whether in writing or from memory or some combination of the two.⁶³ The events of these sections of Acts are generally highly memorable.

After an exhaustive review of first-person usage in antiquity, C.-J. Thornton concludes:

The ‘we’ narrative of the Acts of the Apostles contains nothing that ancient readers would not have considered completely realistic. They could only see it as an account of the author’s real experiences. If the author had not taken part in the journeys described in the ‘we’ form, his accounts of them would have been lies – even according to ancient understanding.⁶⁴

61. Alexander, *Preface*, 32–41 discusses examples among Greek historians, notably Thucydides, whose consideration of his sources in his preface was highly influential on later historians.

62. See discussion in Steve Walton, ‘Whose Acts? And Does it Matter?’ in *Does it Matter Who Wrote the Bible? The Pastoral Implications of Pseudepigraphy and Anonymity in the New Testament*, ed. David B. Capes (Wipf & Stock, 2025), 303–325, here esp. 309–311; Hugh G. M. Williamson, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, WBC 16 (Word, 1985), xxiv–xxxii. Of course, these books are dated considerably longer after the events they portray than Acts, on any dating of Acts, so Williamson, *Ezra–Nehemiah*, xxxv–xxxvi, who estimates the interval between events and writing as 130 years. The first to draw this analogy in modern scholarship appears to be Adolf von Hilgenfeld, *Historisch-kritische Einleitung in das Neue Testament* (Leipzig, 1875), 607; so also Eduard Norden, *Agnostos Theos: Untersuchungen zur Formengeschichte religiöser Rede* (Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1912), 330–331; Henry J. Cadbury, ‘“We” and “I” Passages in Luke–Acts’, *NTS* 3 (1957): 128–132, here 128–129, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688500023614>. Eve-Marie Becker, *The Birth of Christian History: Memory and Time from Mark to Luke–Acts*, AYBRL (Yale University Press, 2017), 95, <https://doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300165098.001.0001>, makes the intriguing suggestion that Luke may have modelled his use of first-person plural verbs on Paul’s use in his letters.

63. For a discussion which engages with the use of first person in Thucydides, Polybius, and Josephus at a literary level, see William S. Campbell, ‘The Narrator as “He,” “Me,” and “We”: Grammatical Person in Ancient Histories and in the Acts of the Apostles’, *JBL* 129 (2010): 385–407, <https://doi.org/10.2307/27821025>.

64. Claus-Jürgen Thornton, *Der Zeuge des Zeugen: Lukas als Historiker der Paulusreisen*, WUNT 56 (Mohr Siebeck, 1991), 141 (my translation; original: ‘Die Wir-Erzählungen der Apostelgeschichte enthalten nichts, was antike Leser nicht für völlig realistisch gehalten hätten. Sie konnten darin nur einen Bericht über die wirklichen Erlebnisse

There are difficulties in this view, but none that are insurmountable. Paul may have initially been a person of little standing on the voyage to Rome,⁶⁵ but the advice of a person who stays calm amidst a fierce storm may well be heard. Further, Julius the centurion guarding Paul (27:1) almost certainly knows that Paul is considered innocent by Festus and Agrippa (26:32; note 27:3), and thus the centurion may well take Paul's advice seriously (27:31). If at least some of the 'we' material were written, could papyri survive the shipwreck on Malta (Acts 27)? Brian Rapske notes that preserving documents in the sea is possible, citing Suetonius's account of Caesar holding key documents out of the water while swimming for two hundred paces after falling overboard (*Caesar* 64), and observes that Acts indicates that the shipwreck was planned for by weighing anchors and waiting for dawn (27:29) and aiming for the bay (29:39-40).⁶⁶ Further, it is probable that our author would have left copies of his most important notes in Caesarea for safe keeping.⁶⁷

The 'we' character links to the first-person singular introduction of both Luke and Acts: ἐποίησάμην ('I wrote'; Acts 1:1), ἔδοξε καί μοι ('I decided'; Luke 1:3), in similar manner to the Ezra and Nehemiah memoirs. It has been common to claim that the four Gospels are anonymous, but in the case of Luke it is incredible that Theophilus (taking him as a real person) would not know who was dedicating two books to him.⁶⁸ The switch from third-person narrative into first-person plural narrative in the 'we' sections is akin to C. H. Turner's shift

des Autors erblicken. Hätte der Autor die in Wir-Form geschilderten Reisen gar nicht mitgemacht, so wären seine Erzählungen darüber – auch nach antikem Verständnis – Lügen!)

65. So Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Blackwell, 1971), 709.

66. Brian M. Rapske, 'Acts, Travel and Shipwreck' in *The Book of Acts in its Graeco-Roman Setting*, ed. David W. J. Gill and Conrad H. Gempf, BAFCS 2 (Paternoster, 1994), 1–47, here 34 n151, contra Haenchen, *Acts*, 87. Stanley E. Porter, *The Paul of Acts: Essays in Literary Criticism, Rhetoric and Theology*, WUNT 115 (Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 38–39 n95 is rather sceptical about this possibility.

67. Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, 4 vols (Baker Academic, 2012–2015), 4:3660, e.g. mention of copies of letters in Cicero, *Ep. Brut.* 3.1; *Fam.* 235.3; 236.1; 368.6; *Att.* 53.4; cf. a resolution copied to Jerusalem, Josephus, *Life* 46 §237; and Galen's plan to have copies of his works moved to Campania, which was frustrated by a fire (*Grief*, 21–23; full translation: Clare K. Rothschild and Trevor W. Thompson, 'Galen: "On the Avoidance of Grief"', *EC* 2 (2011): 110–129, <https://doi.org/10.1628/186870311795386971>).

68. Simon J. Gathercole, 'The Alleged Anonymity of the Canonical Gospels', *JTS* 69 (2018): 447–476, here 452–453, 475–476, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/fly113>.

from plural subjects to a focus on Jesus in Mark's Gospel, which Bauckham uses as an argument for eyewitness testimony in Mark.⁶⁹

In sum, I think the 'we' sections can be added to our list of eyewitnesses of some events in the book of Acts.

3.3 Evidence from the letters

A number of passages from the Pauline corpus reinforce the likelihood that stories about the Jesus communities were passed on to other communities.⁷⁰ The idea that the communities in each city were isolated from each other, which has also generated mistaken ideas about particular 'communities' for each of the four Evangelists to address, is now increasingly recognised as mistaken.⁷¹ Let us consider some examples.

Paul, Silas, and Timothy speak of the example which the Thessalonian believers are *πᾶσιν τοῖς πιστεύουσιν ἐν τῇ Μακεδονίᾳ καὶ ἐν τῇ Ἀχαΐᾳ* ('to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia') and that *ἐν παντὶ τόπῳ ἡ πίστις ὑμῶν ἢ πρὸς τὸν θεὸν ἐξελέλυθεν* ('in every place your faith towards God has gone out [i.e. become known]'; 1 Thess 1:7-8). Indeed, they write that 'it is *from you* (*ἅφ' ὑμῶν*, fronted for emphasis) that the word of the Lord has sounded out' (v. 8). The summary of the welcome the three missionaries had in Thessalonica, and the gospel message they received in 1:9-10 is evidently at least part of the content of the message Paul and his co-workers have spoken elsewhere. Later in the letter, they speak of the Thessalonian believers becoming imitators (*μιμηταί*) of the Judaeen community who were persecuted by their compatriots (2:14-15), which implies that the Thessalonian believers knew of the Judaeen Christians' experience. In 2 Thessalonians 1:4 the same trio 'we ourselves (doubly emphatic, *αὐτοὺς ἡμᾶς*) boast about you among the assemblies of God concerning your endurance and faithfulness in the midst of all your

69. Bauckham, *Jesus*, 156-164; C. H. Turner, 'Marcan Usage: Notes, Critical and Exegetical, on the Second Gospel V', *JTS* 26 (1925): 225-140, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/os-XXVI.103.225>.

70. Jacob Jervell, *Luke and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), 19-31; W. Ward Gasque, 'Did Luke Have Access to Traditions about the Apostles and the Early Church?', *JETS* 17 (1974): 45-48; David A. Smith, *The Epistles for All Christians: Epistolary Literature, Circulation, and the Gospels for All Christians*, *BibInt* 186 (Brill, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004440449>.

71. Michael B. Thompson, 'The Holy Internet: Communication between Churches in the First Christian Generation' in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 49-70; Richard Bauckham, 'For Whom Were the Gospels Written?' in *The Gospels for All Christians*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 9-48.

persecutions and sufferings which you are enduring'.⁷² Again, stories about one Jesus community are being shared with others for the others' encouragement.

As Paul and Timothy defend their ministry in Corinth, they reject the idea that they need letters of recommendation from the Corinthians, letters which were widespread in the first century.⁷³ Rather, the Corinthians themselves are Paul and Timothy's letter of recommendation (2 Cor 3:1-3). This implies that other churches know of the Corinthian communities and their faith. Indeed, the address of the letter itself 'to the assembly of God which is in Corinth *together with all the holy ones who are in the whole of Achaia*' (2 Cor 1:1, my italics) shows that the missionary duo expect communication between the Jesus communities in the region. Paul himself (first-person singular, 7:7-9,12) expresses his own encouragement at hearing news from Titus about the Corinthians (2 Cor 7:4-13). Paul's appeal for contributions from the Corinthians for the collection leverages the example of the abundant generosity of the Macedonian assemblies which flows from their devotion to the Lord (2 Cor 8:1-6).

Similarly, Paul, writing to a community in Rome he has never visited, assures them that 'your faith(fulness) is proclaimed *in the whole world*' (ἡ πίστις ὑμῶν καταγγέλλεται ἐν ὅλῳ τῷ κόσμῳ, Rom 1:8), at least implying that Paul himself knows of their life together. That is unsurprising when we read the long list of calls for greeting in Romans 16, showing that Paul knows a number of the believers in that city, some of whom have been his co-workers (vv. 3,9 and probably 12,13).⁷⁴

Finally, in Colossians 1:4-5 Paul has heard about the Colossians' faith and love, which is part of the gospel bearing fruit both in the whole world and specifically in Colossae (1:6). Paul has learned this from Epaphras (Ἐπαφρᾶ τοῦ ἀγαπητοῦ συνδούλου ἡμῶν, ὅς ... ὁ καὶ δηλώσας ἡμῖν τὴν ὑμῶν ἀγάπην ἐν πνεύματι 'Epaphras our beloved co-worker, who ... also made known to us your love in the Spirit', 1:7-8), and is now sending news about himself and the situation from which he writes with Tychichus, who is probably the letter-carrier, and Onesimus (4:7-9).⁷⁵

72. It matters not for our argument if 2 Thessalonians is pseudepigraphic, since the point here is of stories about Jesus communities being passed on to other Jesus communities. On the authorship, see Paul Foster, 'Who Wrote 2 Thessalonians? A Fresh Look at an Old Problem', *JSNT* 35 (2012): 150-175, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X12462654>.

73. For examples, see David I. Yoon, 'Ancient Letters of Recommendation and 2 Corinthians 3.1-3: A Literary Analysis', *JGRChJ* 12 (2016): 45-72, here esp. 53-68.

74. See Susan Mathew, *Women in the Greetings of Romans 16.1-16: A Study of Mutuality and Women's Ministry in the Letter to the Romans*, LNTS 471 (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), esp. 89-90, 108, 112, 161, 162.

75. Again, my point does not depend on the authorship of the letter (see n72).

Tychicus the beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow-slave in the Lord, whom I am sending to you for this very reason, *in order that you might know the things about us and that he might encourage your hearts ... with Onesimus ... they will make known to you the things here.* (My italics)

It was common for letter-carriers to bring news other than the content of the letter.⁷⁶

Ward Gasque summarises well: 'In the Pauline churches, there was preaching about the missionary experiences of the apostles and about the establishment of churches; and the spiritual triumphs of the various churches were used for paracletic and parenetic purposes.'⁷⁷

3.4 Can we trust eyewitness testimony?

This is the \$64,000 question, of course: anyone can claim eyewitness access to events they narrate, but writers can and do tell events with great verisimilitude combined with inaccuracies or errors.⁷⁸ Rainer Riesner draws on Ruth Finnegan's work on the transmission of oral poetry in non-literary societies. She argues that a careful, verbatim preservation of material is likely if three factors are present: the teacher is considered to be divinely inspired; the oral text is in a fixed form, such as poetry; and that there is a group trained to pass on the material.⁷⁹ Riesner offers six reasons for the probability that a process like this went on with the teaching of Jesus recorded in the Gospels.⁸⁰

76. Peter M. Head, 'Letter Carriers in the Ancient Jewish Epistolary Material' in *Jewish and Christian Scripture as Artifact and Canon*, ed. Craig A. Evans and H. Daniel Zacharias, SSEJC 13/LSTS 70 (T&T Clark, 2009), 203–219, here esp. 205, 213, 218, 219. In the NT, e.g. Eph 6:21; Col 4:7,9.

77. Gasque, 'Did Luke', 48.

78. E.g. Rothschild, *Luke-Acts*, esp. 213–290 considers Luke's extensive claims to eyewitness testimony (which she documents well) as 'exaggeration' (289). For a similar sceptical view, see Dale C. Allison, Jr, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Baker Academic, 2013) and the cogent critique of Richard Bauckham, 'The General and the Particular in Memory: The General and the Particular in Memory: A Critique of Dale Allison's Approach to the Historical Jesus', *JSHJ* 14 (2016): 28–51, <https://doi.org/10.1163/17455197-01401004>.

79. Rainer Riesner, 'Jesus as Preacher and Teacher' in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition*, ed. Henry Wansbrough, JSNTSup 64 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991), 185–210, here 207–208, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780567691545.0010>, citing Ruth H. Finnegan, *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance, and Social Context* (Cambridge University Press, 1977), 52–87.

80. Rainer Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer: Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung der Evangelien-Überlieferung*, 3rd ed., WUNT 2/7 (Mohr Siebeck, 1988); helpful English summary: Riesner, 'Jesus as Preacher'.

First, Jesus spoke ‘the word of the Lord’ with authority after the manner of the scriptural (OT) prophets, and there would thus be the same concern to preserve his teaching. Secondly, Jesus’s self-presentation as Messiah entailed the expectation that the Messiah would be a teacher of wisdom, leading his followers to preserve his words. Thirdly, the Gospels portray Jesus as a teacher of wisdom – even Mark regularly observes that Jesus taught, although he does not give the same volume of teaching as the others. Riesner estimates that, when retroverted into Aramaic from Greek, over 80 per cent of Jesus’s teaching is in memorable forms.⁸¹ Fourthly, there is widespread evidence in the Gospels that Jesus told the twelve to ‘learn’ certain things and transmit them to others, even during Jesus’s earthly ministry (e.g. Mark 6:7-13; 9:9-10; 13:28; Luke 10:1-7; 11:1). Further, Paul’s letters use classic terminology of tradition to signal careful, accurate passing on of tradition, such as Jesus’s eucharistic words (1 Cor 11:23-26), and the core gospel events and their witnesses (1 Cor 15:1-7).⁸² The parables of the kingdom are Riesner’s parade example.⁸³ Fifthly, memorisation of texts was commonplace among first-century Jews, and poetic forms were used to aid memorisation – exactly the forms which Riesner finds in the teaching of Jesus. Finally, teachers in both the Jewish and Graeco-Roman worlds gathered students (disciples) to perpetuate their teaching. Jesus, in this way, resembled the rabbis (even if he differed in other ways). These points reinforce what we have found about the eyewitness role of the twelve bearing testimony to the life, ministry, teaching, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus.

Can we apply similar thinking to events in Acts? Here, Bauckham’s discussion is helpful. He notes that we generally regard eyewitness testimony with receptivity rather than scepticism, unless there is good reason about that testimony to be sceptical: ‘trusting testimony is indispensable to historiography’.⁸⁴ He draws on studies of recollective memory by psychologists

81. Riesner, ‘Jesus as Preacher’, 202.

82. See further R. T. France, ‘The Authenticity of the Sayings of Jesus’ in *History, Criticism and Faith*, ed. Colin Brown (Inter-Varsity Press, 1976), 101–143, here 123; in more detail, see Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*, ASNU XXII (Gleerup, 1961), 288–301.

83. Riesner, ‘Jesus as Preacher’, 205.

84. Bauckham, *Jesus*, 475–479, 490. He observes cogently that historical use of testimony is not subject to the level of confidence required in a courtroom, and thus that in NT studies it is inappropriate to expect ‘unrealistically high levels of proof’ (Richard Bauckham, ‘The Psychology of Memory and the Study of the Gospels,’ *JSHJ* 16 (2018): 136–155, here 149, <https://doi.org/10.1163/17455197-01602002>).

to identify a series of nine factors which make it likely that a memory is reliable.⁸⁵ Eight of these are particularly relevant to Acts. First, events which are unique or unusual or unexpected are likely to be well remembered. Many of the events in Acts fit this category. Secondly, the salience, or importance for the rememberer, supports the likelihood of reliable memory. The events of (e.g.) Pentecost (2:1-4), Peter's prison escape (12:6-11), and numerous others in Acts fit the bill well. Thirdly, events where the rememberer has an emotional involvement, especially where there is a strong visual stimulus, are likely to be well remembered. Peter's prison escape is again a clear example in Acts, for instance. Fourthly, the presence of vivid imagery in the story is a marker of accurate recollection. While this is relatively rare in the Acts stories, there are examples of vivid details, such as poor Peter having to keep knocking on the door of Mary's house to be let in (12:13,16) and the praying group's initial scepticism that it might be Peter (12:15), or the imagery of the Spirit at Pentecost (2:2-4). Fifthly, irrelevant details suggest accurate memory. These are also relatively rare in Acts, although some of the details of events in the Thessalonica might fit this category, such as taking bail from Jason (17:8). The late Colin Hemer provided us with a mass of such information in his wonderful final book, of course.⁸⁶ Bauckham observes that the absence of irrelevant details is not an argument against accurate memory, since it probably indicates that the stories have been shaped by retelling to eliminate such things.⁸⁷ Sixthly, when a story is told from a participant's point of view, rather than an observer's point of view, it probably represents better recollection. Bauckham reports that this distinction is more likely in the case of recent memories, and says there is evidence that people reporting a memory can change the point of view from participant to observer (and vice versa). He notes that point of view changes within the Gospels, and the same is true in Acts. In Philippi, for example, the 'we' character is the storyteller through whose eyes we see the story in 16:10b-18, but not after Paul delivers the divining slave girl. It seems probable that the 'we' character was not present for the events of the slave-owners' seizing Paul and Silas, and those two being beaten and thrown into prison by the magistrates, as well as their non-escape following the earthquake, and their confrontation of the magistrates over their improper beating and imprisonment (16:19-

85. Bauckham, *Jesus*, 330-335, 341-346; see further Bauckham's response to discussion of the psychology of memory: Bauckham, 'Psychology', notably his criteria for accurate recall, 142-145.

86. Colin J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, WUNT 49 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989).

87. Bauckham, *Jesus*, 343.

39). Seventhly, the absence of specific dating information is not an argument against accuracy of memory. Its presence is likely only for specific reasons: Bauckham suggests the links of events in John to Jewish festivals may be such an example.⁸⁸ Recollection of time of day may well be accurately remembered information – think of Peter and John meeting the man with a congenital disability at the Beautiful Gate of the temple at 3 p.m. (3:1) or Cornelius praying at the same hour (10:3) or Peter praying on the roof in Joppa about noon (10:9). Finally, frequent re-telling of a memory is likely to both hold the memory and hold it accurately. As we have seen, the particular role of the twelve in Acts in re-telling the stories of Jesus is an example. The evidence we have found in the letters of telling the stories of some Jesus communities to others suggests that such telling was often re-telling.

4. Conclusion

We have seen that eyewitness testimony is an important feature of the portrait of the earliest Christians in Acts, and that it is significant in studying both the memories of Jesus recorded in the Gospels and the memories of the stories of the early Jesus followers in Acts. In particular, I have argued that certain named individuals – Philip, Rhoda, Jason, and Priscilla and Aquila (or perhaps Apollos) – are probably the sources of stories where they are participants, as well as the ‘we’ character. Specifically, Rhoda and Jason appear from nowhere and disappear to the same place; there is no other reason to name them in the story.

We have also seen that the likelihood of eyewitness material can be further evidenced from the letters. I have argued, using work on memory and recollection by Riesner and Bauckham, which draws on ethnographic and psychological studies of memory, that there is strong reason to trust the accounts Acts gives us through the eyewitnesses upon whom it draws.

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88. Bauckham, *Jesus*, 344.

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