# KIRBY LAING CENTRE ONLINE SEMINAR

# Reading Acts

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## Why Acts?

### My interest in Acts

The first small commentary I ever bought, as a sixth former, was Ralph P. Martin’s little commentary on Acts published by Scripture Union. It was therefore of interest when Ralph, then the Word Biblical Commentary series editor, asked me if I’d be interested in writing on Acts for the series.

I’d first become academically interested in Acts through an essay which Professor Charlie Moule set me during my first term at theological college, on the theological distinctives of Luke. In working on that, I came across the debate about how accurate the portrait of Paul in Acts is when compared to the portrait in the Pauline letters. This led to an undergraduate dissertation, and ultimately to my doctoral thesis on Paul’s speech at Miletus to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:17-38), published as *Leadership and Lifestyle* (SNTS monograph series 108; Cambridge University Press, 2000).

So when Ralph Martin approached me about writing this commentary, I was interested. I’d only a year earlier finished my PhD and was working on publishing it. Sadly, Ralph did not live to see the first volume of my Acts commentary: I hope he would have been pleased with it.

### Why everyone should be interested in Acts

1. *Acts is a key bridge in the NT between the Gospels and the rest of the NT,* the letters and the book of Revelation. Interestingly, the Tyndale House Greek NT uses the book order of many early manuscripts, putting the four Gospels up front, followed by Acts, and then followed by the Catholic Epistles, before the Pauline Epistles, and the book of Revelation. Our more usual book order also places Acts as the ‘hinge’ from the Gospels to the rest of the NT with Paul coming first. Acts shows how the story develops after Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension, preparing us to read letters about the life of the early Christian communities.
2. *Acts shows us that Jesus didn’t stop acting when he ascended to heaven.* Notice Acts 1:1, which describes Luke’s Gospel as ‘the things which Jesus *began* to do and teach’—Acts is thus what Jesus *continues* to do and teach. We see this in Jesus being the one who pours out the Spirit at Pentecost (2:33), in healing Aeneas as Peter says, ‘Aeneas, Jesus the Messiah heals you’ (9:43), and (of course) in appearing to Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus road (9:4-6), and orchestrating Saul’s meeting with Ananias by appearing to Ananias in a vision (9:10-17). This feature invites Christians today to look for ways in which Jesus is *now* at work, rather than thinking of him merely as a figure of the past.
3. *Acts shows us a focus on mission.* Jesus’ words in 1:8 are key here, promising that the Spirit’s coming will enable the disciples to be Jesus’ witnesses ‘in Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth’. The end of the earth (and notice it is ‘end’—the Greek is singular in spite of many translations as plural!), echoing Isa 49:6 (and other passages) to give the sense ‘everywhere’. The disciples are going out in the power of the Spirit to announce Jesus as Lord. They aren’t going to win territory, as an army might, but to *announce* the good news of Jesus’ reign.
4. *Acts places our attention on God rather than people.* This book is not a story of brilliant human strategy leading to successful church growth, but of a God-directed project which sometimes moves in surprising directions, such as to hated Samaritans, an Ethiopian eunuch on a road in the middle of nowhere, or the Roman centurion Cornelius’ household. It even includes the surprising event of changing Paul’s team’s direction to cross over the Aegean Sea into Macedonia (16:6-10). I hope you will find a strong focus on divine action in my commentary as a result.

## On writing a commentary on Acts

A key feature of working on the commentary has been a sense of privilege. When I sit down to work on it I find myself feeling honoured to engage in depth with this part of Scripture in order to help others understand it and engage better with it themselves, in colleges and universities, and in churches and other Christian groups.

The format of the Word Biblical Commentary has been an interesting partner in writing. Discussion of each passage falls into six parts, and I have thought of different audiences for each of these parts.

First comes a *Bibliography* of key works: articles, monographs, essays in edited volumes, etc. (other commentaries don’t come here—they go in the general bibliography near the start of the book). This is for postgraduate students and other scholars who want to identify key works to consult.

Secondly, there is a fresh *Translation* which (the guidance from the editors says) is to reflect the end result of the exegetical work on the portion. This sometimes meant that I changed a detail or two in the translation as I did fuller work on a passage. Thirdly, immediately following the *Translation* come *Notes*, keyed to the translation, primarily to explain tricky bits of the Greek, and to discuss textual variants among the manuscripts and versions. I wrote the *Translation* and *Notes* with my second-year Greek students in mind, thinking what would need explaining for a student who had completed an introductory course which taught them the basics of Greek grammar.

Fourthly, there is a section called *Form/Structure/Setting*. I suspect this heading owes a lot to the origins of the WBC in the 1970s, when form and redaction criticism were still the dominant methods in New Testament studies. Here I’ve written about the *Delimitation* of the portion, explaining why I’ve divided the text the way I have, and discussed the *Form* as relevant (sometimes sections include sub-sections which are a particular form, such as the prayer in 4:23-31). I’ve then considered *Sources and Historicity* (the two are usually closely connected). In the case of historicity, sometimes comment on this is limited by worldview considerations—for example, a scholar’s view of a passage will at times be shaped by their belief (or non-belief) in a supernatural God who intervenes in humans’ lives. Then follows discussion of the passage’s *Structure*, how it is organised, and any possible parallel structures which might inform reading of this passage. *Setting* is then about the location of the passage within its immediate context in Acts, and in the wider context of major sections of Acts, and the whole book. Much of this section of the commentary is addressing students and fellow scholars, although I hope the discussions of delimitation and setting will also be useful to those who preach on Acts.

Fifthly comes the heart of each section, detailed *Comment*, sentence by sentence, though the passage. In accordance with the editors’ guidance, Greek is always translated here, to aid those whose Greek is rusty or absent. Each paragraph begins with a phrase from the text, and there then follows detailed explanation of the meanings of words and the content of the text in the light of its literary and social/cultural contexts in interaction with scholarship. ‘Interaction with scholarship’ does not mean that this is the kind of commentary which is a telephone directory of scholars’ opinions, and particularly I am aiming, adapting Dick France’s words, to write a commentary on *Acts*, not a commentary on the *commentaries* on Acts. The introduction of footnotes in recent WBC volumes is a big plus, in my view, because references and longer lists of parallel texts go into the footnotes, rather than standing in brackets in the main text. The *Comment* is written with my second- and third-year Greek text classes in mind, although I hope pastors and preachers will consult it after reading the final section, *Explanation.*

Sixthly, *Explanation* aims to draw the threads of the discussion together to offer an overall interpretation of the passage. It’s therefore much briefer than the *Comment*, since it’s working with conclusions drawn there to allow readers to step back and see the big picture of the passage. I wrote these sections with my wife, Ali, in mind, since she is a Church of England minister who preaches regularly, and the *Explanation* is the place where I recommend most readers to start reading on a passage. Here you will find my summary of the passage’s key points and emphases in the micro-context of the immediately surrounding passages, and the macro-context of the major sections of Acts, and the whole book.