

Introduction

With the advent of narrative criticism into the field of biblical studies, the examination of literary “motifs” currently enjoys vigorous attention.¹ In the last two decades, students have produced over seventy dissertations that relate directly to this literary device and its application to biblical texts.² Yet among these works, many of the writers fail to provide an adequate definition of “motif,” sometimes providing a simple, generic definition or no definition at all. The result is the same in both cases: “motif” as a literary technique becomes diluted, easily replaced with such words as “theme,” “concept,” or “topic.”³

A generic understanding of the literary motif naturally leads to an abundant number of sightings in the biblical texts, attributing less significance to each case. Current usage of the term qualifies nearly anything as a motif. William Freedman criticizes the zeal of those readers who seem to “find a motif in every cupboard,”⁴ or in our case, every biblical text. Proliferation of the generic view of motif necessarily entails a loss of specificity, consequently diminishing the value of motif as an analytical tool. Without clarity of definition, motif is as helpful to the biblical scholar as bifocals are to a surgeon performing microscopic surgery.

1. “Motif” here refers to the broad inclusive sense. A more specialized meaning, as the term will function in this work, will be defined in the following pages.

2. Some of those that focus on a literary motif in Acts include Kim, “From Israel to the Nations”; Aubert, “Shepherd-Flock Motif”; Elledge, “Resurrection and the End of History”; and Frein, “Literary Significance of the Jesus-as-Prophet Motif.”

3. See Harvey, “The ‘With Christ’ Motif” as an example of this problem. His article begins: “Although Paul uses the ‘with Christ’ *motif* 36 times in his letters, few extended treatments of the *theme* have been attempted . . . When the ‘with Christ’ *concept* . . .” (329; italics added). Harvey could have just as easily substituted “phrase” for “motif” and actually does so later in the same paragraph.

4. Freedman, “Literary Motif,” 127.

PURPOSE AND DEFINITIONS

Utilizing Freedman's criteria for identifying and describing an efficacious motif reduces the blurred understanding of this literary tool, thereby preventing undesirable consequences for biblical scholarship. Freedman delineates five specific qualifications for an effective motif: (1) frequency, (2) avoidability, (3) occurrence in significant contexts, (4) coherency, and (5) symbolic appropriateness.⁵ The better the motif satisfies these criteria, the more effective and beneficial the analysis. Freedman also provides a necessarily lengthy definition in accordance with his criteria:

A motif, then, is a recurrent theme, character, or verbal pattern, but it may also be a family or associational cluster of literal or figurative references to a given class of concepts or objects, whether it be animals, machines, circles, music, or whatever. It is generally symbolic—that is, it can be seen to carry a meaning beyond the literal one immediately apparent; it represents on the verbal level something characteristic of the structure of the work, the events, the characters, the emotional effects or the moral or cognitive content. It is presented both as an object of description and, more often, as part of the narrator's imagery and descriptive vocabulary. And it indispensably requires a certain minimal frequency of recurrence and improbability of appearance in order both to make itself at least subconsciously felt and to indicate its purposiveness.⁶

This work then will seek to apply Freedman's specifications to the unified concept of death and resurrection in the book of Acts.

Although originally intended for the study of modern literature, Freedman's motif criteria prove equally insightful for evaluation of the Acts narrative. Both the contemporary novel and its ancient counterparts share many of the same traits, including the presence of strong themes, symbolism, characters, plots, contrasts, etc. For this reason, biblical scholars have spawned a plethora of works in which they apply modern narrative theory to ancient texts.⁷ The ancient author's awareness of narrative techniques in story may be indeterminable. We can, however, identify the

5. Ibid., 126–27.

6. Ibid., 127–28.

7. David Rhoads and Donald Michie in their work on the Gospel of Mark (*Mark as Story*) and R. Alan Culpepper's analysis of John (*Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*) became the major forerunners of many other studies that apply modern narrative theory to the biblical texts.

presence or absence of a particular technique (such as the use of a motif) within the text. This work will not seek to prove authorial intention but rather will identify the possible presence of a death-resurrection motif as defined according to modern criteria and, if present, determine its specific shape and function within the Acts narrative.⁸

In the past, scholars have tended to downplay the role of Jesus's suffering and death in Luke-Acts, attributing greater importance to the resurrection event. When compared to Paul's writings, both C. H. Dodd and J. M. Creed found that the speeches in Acts present a theologically barren view of the cross. For this reason, they concluded that Luke's writings, in contrast to the Pauline interpretation of Jesus's death, lack a developed "theology of the cross"—*theologia crucis*.⁹ Instead, Luke was understood to attribute greatest value to the elements of Jesus's glory through his resurrection and ascension. Ernst Käsemann provided the apex of this school of thought in 1964 when he proclaimed that in Acts, "a *theologia gloriae* is now in process of replacing the *theologia crucis*."¹⁰ Though not stated as dramatically, I. Howard Marshall affirmed the position that in Acts, Jesus's resurrection supersedes the importance of his death.¹¹ Joseph Tyson, in his thorough study of Jesus's death in Luke-Acts, continues to accent a Lukan theology of glory especially in terms of soteriological significance. He concludes, "The benefits of forgiveness of sins and the Spirit are more closely connected with the resurrection [of Jesus] than the death."¹² Similarly, Joel B. Green attributes greater significance to Jesus's resurrection, judging it to be the "central affirmation of the Christian message in the Acts of the Apostles."¹³ As such, the resurrection of Jesus is the key event for Lukan Christology and soteriology, being both the "means and nature of salvation."¹⁴

An emphasis on the Lukan theology of glory persists through the present. One of the most comprehensive recent works is Kevin L. Anderson's treatise on Jesus's resurrection in Luke-Acts, *But God Raised*

8. The hyphenated term "death-resurrection" will serve to emphasize the unified nature of the motif.

9. Dodd, *Apostolic Preaching*, 25; Creed, *Gospel according to St. Luke*, lxxii.

10. Käsemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes*, 92.

11. Marshall, "Resurrection in the Acts," 92–107.

12. Tyson, *Death of Jesus in Luke-Acts*, 170.

13. Green, "Witnesses of His Resurrection," 227.

14. *Ibid.*, 237.

Him from the Dead." Anderson contends that the resurrection is the pivotal event in Luke's narrative in all respects: theologically, christologically, ecclesialogically, and eschatologically.¹⁵ All of these different aspects of resurrection relate to the Lukan message of salvation.¹⁶ Though Anderson acknowledges the importance of other events in Luke-Acts such as Jesus's ministry, death, and outpouring of the Spirit, he clearly locates the "focus" of soteriology within the resurrection event.¹⁷ Jesus's suffering and death do not convey forgiveness of sins; rather, only the resurrection, God's reversal of that death, "has a lasting salvific effect."¹⁸

Some biblical scholarship, however, has countered this perceived dominance of a Lukan theology of glory by positing a strong emphasis on Jesus's suffering and death in Luke-Acts. Georg Braumann in 1963 became one of the first dissenting voices, arguing that the theology of Luke is primarily a *theologia crucis*.¹⁹ More recently, David Moessner has revealed many of the shortcomings inherent with the triumphalistic approach to understanding Luke-Acts. Moreover, his appreciation for the effects of Jesus's rejection and death significantly expands the theological role of suffering in Luke's writings.²⁰ As a result, Moessner's well-argued thesis has attracted scholarly support and prompted further studies on the topic. Both Robert Tannehill and John Polhill, for example, reflect an indebtedness to Moessner's position.²¹ Paul R. House identifies suffering as the most essential element of Acts.²² Charles Estridge likewise emphasizes the importance of suffering by highlighting its centrality to

15. Anderson, "But God Raised Him", 13.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 31.

18. Ibid., 41. Anderson further clarifies: "Each of these events is crucial to salvation history, but the resurrection of Jesus stands as the focal point in the salvation message" (41).

19. Braumann, "Mittel der Zeit," 121. See also Schütz, who develops Braumann's thesis in the 1969 publication of his *Der leidende Christus*, explaining the theological significance of the close connection between Jesus's suffering and that of his followers.

20. Moessner has written several pieces about this topic, but two of special interest include "Christ Must Suffer": New Light" and "Christ Must Suffer, the Church Must Suffer," abbreviated hereafter as "New Light" and "Church," respectively.

21. Tannehill, *Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, 2:114, 182, 348; Polhill, *Acts*, 70, 319.

22. House, "Suffering and the Purpose of Luke-Acts," 317–30. House states emphatically: "In short, Acts has no purpose, no plot, no structure, and no history without suffering" (321).

the speeches in Acts.²³ More recently, Scott Cunningham has expounded on the theology of persecution as a theme in Luke-Acts, highlighting its importance and functions.²⁴ Others, such as Martin Mittelstadt, have followed Cunningham's lead with special emphasis in Acts on suffering and its implications for the community of believers.²⁵

Even as a number of biblical scholars are embracing a *theologia crucis* as the most appropriate lens for envisioning Lukan soteriology and ecclesiology, the positive focus on redemptive suffering has its detractors. Many contextual theologians (feminists, womanists, and those representing racially oppressed groups) express strong reservations about attributing the greatest value to Jesus's passion, especially when his suffering is viewed in isolation from his life and the vindication of his death through resurrection.²⁶ They reason that a strong emphasis on crucifixion theology sanctions violence and fosters victimization.²⁷ Admittedly, contextual theologians often read against the grain of individual biblical texts, making many of their claims beyond the purview of the present study.²⁸ Nevertheless, a more balanced approach that values both Jesus's suffering and resurrection as a unified concept does serve to ameliorate some of the suspected problems associated with a disproportionate emphasis on crucifixion theology.

23. Estridge, "Suffering in Contexts."

24. Cunningham, "Through Many Tribulations." Cunningham's exhaustive treatment of Jesus's suffering and death serves as a fitting counterpoint to Anderson's comprehensive study on Jesus's resurrection. Their well-supported, but opposing emphases provide added impetus for serious consideration of a single motif inclusive of both Jesus's death and resurrection.

25. Mittelstadt, *Spirit and Suffering*, esp. 12–20.

26. Patterson, *Beyond the Passion*, 3–4. Patterson understands that nearly all of the biblical statements about Jesus's death were "calculated to resurrect the significance of Jesus' life for those who loved him, and would come to love him in the years ahead. They spoke of the movement he began as 'the way'—his way of life" (4).

27. See Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*; Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*; and Terrell, *Power in the Blood?* Though negative ramifications may be associated with a soteriology restricted to crucifixion theology, other scholars provide considered responses that retain the salvific value of the cross without sanctioning violence (cf. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide*; and Talbert's discussion of the topic in his Smyth & Helwys commentary on *Romans* (140–44).

28. The present study treats the text as primary for developing a biblical theology, whereas contextual theologians have various means of developing their theological tenets, often using the biblical texts as secondary support or to establish general principles that can be applied in different contexts.

Some scholars do support the concept that both the death and resurrection/ascension of Jesus receive equal emphasis in Luke-Acts. While C. K. Barrett acknowledges Luke's portrayal of an unhindered gospel, he also notes that the followers of Jesus who carry this gospel travel by the "way of the cross."²⁹ Nevertheless, Barrett does not perceive a fully developed theology of either stripe in the Lukan writings.

It would perhaps be wrong to describe him [Luke] as either a theologus gloriae or a theologus crucis: he is not sufficiently interested in theology (beyond basic Christian convictions) to be called a theologus of any colour. But he knows that to be a Christian is to take up a cross daily, and what this meant in the first century he has described in vivid narrative. This strictly practical theologia crucis is not contradicted by the fact that his pilgrims can "shout as they travel the wilderness through."³⁰

Beverly Roberts Gaventa, attributing greater theological depth to Luke-Acts, appropriately perceives a balanced *and vital* role for both theological perspectives: "Both of these threads, the triumph of God who will not allow the gospel to be overcome *and* the rejection of the gospel and the persecution of its apostles, belong to the narrative Luke develops. To eliminate either of them is to miss something essential to the Lukan story."³¹ Additionally, Morna Hooker finds soteriological value associated with both events in Luke's writings: "forgiveness of sins . . . is now available for all—through his death *and resurrection*."³²

Consideration of the evidence utilizing motif analysis confirms equal importance of these two connected events in the Acts narrative. Through the combination of speeches (inclusive of the narrator's comments) and actions of the characters, Luke forges the elements of death and resurrection into a solitary motif. Cunningham acknowledges the equal value of both elements, but he mistakenly separates the two.³³ The present study

29. Barrett, "Theologia Crucis—in Acts?," 79.

30. Ibid., 84.

31. Gaventa, "Towards a Theology of Acts," 157.

32. Hooker, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel*, 91.

33. Cunningham, "Through Many Tribulations", 324. Cunningham states, "In fact, the theology of glory and the theology of the cross are both equally affirmed by the narrative." His study, however, focuses exclusively on the suffering/persecution perspective. As a result, he fails to integrate the two elements as they are within the Luke-Acts narrative. Nevertheless, his work does provide a thorough explication of Luke's theology of the

proposes a double-edged yet single literary motif formed by diegetic references to Jesus's death and resurrection. Many of the characters in Acts reinforce this motif through their own experiences as portrayed through several different mimetic scenes. Finally, the juxtaposition of the contrasting death-and-decay motif heightens the effects of the primary motif.

The following definitions will help clarify some of the narrative terminology necessary for accomplishing the goals of this study. "Diegesis," as Robert W. Funk defines, is the classical term that refers to the "recounting" or "telling" of events in the "unfocused or mediated narrative segment."³⁴ Many of the summary statements, for example, fall into this category and may be termed "hyperdiegetic" statements because the narrator stands "at the first level above the primary narrative."³⁵ Because the speeches in Acts are embedded within the first level of the narrative, the speaker becomes the narrator within the story. Events recounted on this deeper level will therefore be termed "intradiegetic."³⁶

"Mimesis," then, refers to the "enacting" or "showing" of events in the focused scene; that is, a scene in which "the narrator transports the listener or reader, by means of words, to a specific time and place, with participants present and allows her or him to look on and listen in."³⁷ In contrast to the unfocused segment, the mimetic scene utilizes specific language appealing to the senses, particularly to sight and hearing. As such, mimesis functions well to describe the experiences of the characters in Acts.

Freedman, as explained above, furnishes valuable clarification for a comprehensive understanding of motif as a literary technique. He emphasizes that a motif "may appear as something described" in the narrative, but "perhaps even more often forms part of the description. It slips, as it were, into the author's vocabulary, into the dialogue, and into his [*sic*] imagery . . ."³⁸ In a related article, Freedman offers a concrete example of this phenomenon: the motif of circularity in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister*

cross in Acts and its implications those who become followers of Jesus.

34. Funk, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 134.

35. *Ibid.*, 154.

36. *Ibid.*, 31–33, 154. Though the meanings of such terms may be nuanced slightly by different authors, Funk's particular definitions are well-suited for the present task and comport well with contemporary opinion of the guild.

37. *Ibid.*, 134–35.

38. Freedman, "Literary Motif," 124–25.

Carrie. Not only does the narrator recount instances of circularity, the movement of the main character “is a repetitive, futile, in effect circular quest for happiness.”³⁹ Because the narrator of Acts, as in *Sister Carrie*, both “tells” (diegesis) and “shows” (mimesis) the message, the application of Funk’s distinctions between these two types of narration in conjunction with Freedman’s criteria adeptly identifies and gauges the effectiveness of the death-resurrection motif in Acts.

BACKGROUND

I first became intrigued with the topic of this study while reading Richard Pervo’s *Luke’s Story of Paul*. By analyzing the imagery used to describe Peter’s final imprisonment (Acts 12) and Paul’s shipwreck (Acts 27), Pervo suggests that Luke’s depictions of these events create a symbolic death-resurrection experience for each character.⁴⁰ As part of my graduate course work, I explored the theological implications of symbolic death and resurrection in Acts among the major and minor characters. Further consideration of this phenomenon within a literary motif, as well as discussions with Baylor colleagues, raised the prospect about Luke’s use of this double-sided narrative device as a central role in the Acts narrative. I then presented some preliminary findings in a paper at a regional meeting for the Society of Biblical Literature.

My research in the area has revealed a need for explication of the proposed motif. On the diegetic level, as noted earlier, scholars have preferred to tip the hermeneutical scales in one direction (glory) or the other (suffering) rather than exploring the ramifications of an equally balanced double-sided motif. Richard Rackham, M. D. Goulder, Walter Radl, Richard Pervo, and Susan Garrett have conducted preliminary research on the mimetic concept of symbolic death and resurrection, but this research either lacks substantiation or neglects the role of the minor characters.⁴¹ Scholarly research has assessed the actions of certain minor characters within Acts, but no research has related these characters with the unifying motif of death and resurrection.⁴²

39. Freedman, “A Look at Dreiser,” 386.

40. Pervo, *Luke’s Story of Paul*, 44, 92–93.

41. Rackham, *Acts* (1904); Goulder, *Type and History in Acts* (1964); Radl, *Paulus und Jesus* (1975); Pervo, *Luke’s Story of Paul* (1990); and Garrett, “Exodus from Bondage” (1990).

42. M. Dennis Hamm explores both the symbolic implications of the healing of the

METHODOLOGY

To determine the shape and function of the death-resurrection motif, I will apply Freedman's criteria to the Acts narrative using a threefold procedure: (1) examine the diegetic references to death and resurrection; (2) isolate mimetic examples of the death-resurrection pattern among the experiences of major and minor characters; and (3) demonstrate how the motif becomes intensified through contrast with a secondary motif of death and decay. Each section will include explanations about its relevance to the identification and efficacy of the primary motif.

Chapter 1 will consider the diegetic statements in Acts about death and resurrection. This section will examine how these references emphasize Jesus's passion and resurrection as an inseparable climactic event, frequently recounted in the teaching and preaching of the early church. Particular attention will be given to the placement of these references, possible interpretations, and significance for the development of the motif.

Because the message is both told and shown, the second and third chapters examine the death-resurrection experiences of the major and minor characters. Parallelism and symbolism with insights from reader response criticism provide the primary means of validation for such occurrences. The parallels consist of pertinent similarities in vocabulary, phrases, activity, and sequence found within Acts, and between Acts and the Third Gospel.⁴³ The symbols for death and resurrected life encompass ancestral and cultural symbols as well as those created by the implied

temple beggar ("Acts 3:12–26," 199–217) and the healing of Paul ("Paul's Blindness," 63–72), Robert O'Toole discusses some of the symbolic overtones of ἀνίστημι ("Some Observations on *Anistēmi*," 85–92), and Bernard Trémel offers a symbolic interpretation of the Eutychus episode ("À propos d'Actes 20,7–12," 359–69).

43. The study of parallelism in Luke and Acts has produced a rich history, including works by F. C. Baur, Hans Conzelmann, Charles H. Talbert, and more recently Robert F. O'Toole and David P. Moessner. Although these studies focus primarily on theological or pastoral concerns and have neglected the minor characters, many of their insights prove informative for the present study.

author.⁴⁴ The final criterion utilizes reader expectations and retrospection to help clarify the meaning of the texts.⁴⁵

In addition to these three means of control, other complementary measures will verify the distinctiveness of the death-resurrection scenes. The immediate context will, in some cases, provide interpretive clues for confirmation of the pattern.⁴⁶ Obviously not all healings, imprisonments, or shipwrecks in ancient Mediterranean literature indicate the presence of a death-resurrection experience.⁴⁷ The accompanying explanations within these chapters will therefore focus attention on those factors that validate the presence of substantive allusions to the messianic pattern.

The fourth chapter will set forth a contrasting death-and-decay motif. The same procedure of examining diegetic segments and mimetic scenes will document the extent of the motif in juxtaposition with the death-resurrection motif. Descriptions of the secondary motif will highlight its effects on and relation to the primary motif.

The conclusion will synthesize the findings of the study, clarifying the shape and function of the motif within the narrative. This section will also suggest ways in which the message of the motif relates to other emphases in Acts and to other areas of biblical research and ancient Greco-Roman study.

44. Mark Allan Powell provides clarification: “*Symbols of ancestral vitality* derive their meaning from earlier sources. . . . *Symbols of cultural range* derive their meaning from the social and historical context of the real author and his or her community. . . . *Symbols created by the implied author* can be understood only with the context of the particular narrative” (*What Is Narrative Criticism?* 29).

45. Of particular importance are the works by Robert Alter, Janice Capel Anderson, Fred Burnett, and Robert Tannehill on type-scenes and redundancy.

46. E.g., the healing of the lame beggar at the temple receives many interpretive clues from the surrounding and interwoven materials (Acts 2–4).

47. Within Acts, for instance, the healing of the spirit-possessed slave at Philippi does not reflect a movement from a state of death to one of life. In other contemporary literature, Apollonius of Tyana heals the blind and the lame but fails to initiate a death-resurrection pattern (Philostratus *Life of Apollonius*, 1:317). Xenophon of Ephesus narrates the story of two young lovers who undergo numerous imprisonments and shipwrecks, yet he conveys the theme of constant suffering in these scenes, not suffering and renewed life (Xenophon *Ephesian Tale*).

LIMITATIONS

In order to thoroughly analyze the specific shape and function of the motif within the Acts narrative, this study will necessarily focus its attention on the book of Acts. Nevertheless, this limitation does not imply the absence of the death-resurrection motif in the Third Gospel. Incipient forms of the motif do seem to be present in Luke's Gospel, and some of the experiences involving actual death and resuscitation/resurrection prove informative for the interpretation of similar events in Acts.⁴⁸ Particular attention will be given to the Third Gospel's treatment of Jesus's passion and resurrection to identify any parallels with the major and minor characters in Acts.

Despite a definite interrelationship between Luke and Acts, a complete narrative unity remains elusive and should not be assumed. Mikeal C. Parsons and Richard I. Pervo, for example, have challenged this assumption and recommend a thorough reexamination of the issue.⁴⁹ A full analysis of the motif within the Third Gospel deserves a separate study, perhaps as a sequel to the present work. Rather than forcing the two narratives into a single story, this study presents them as independent but related stories, allowing the Gospel to provide interpretive clues, not mandates, for understanding the Acts narrative.

The relationship of the motif to the entire plot of Acts, though certainly a potentially fruitful topic, also lies beyond the parameters of the present study. Preliminary evidence does reveal that the motif becomes especially prominent at climactic points of the narrative, indicating the significance of the death-resurrection message for the story. Nevertheless, to perform a thorough analysis of the plot would require in itself a detailed explanation of theory and thereby distract from the primary concern: the shape and function of the motif. Examination of plot will be limited to elementary comments relating to Freedman's third criterion for a motif, that of its occurrence in significant contexts.

48. E.g., the widow's son (Luke 7:11–17), Jairus's daughter (Luke 8:41–56), and Jesus himself (Luke 22:1–24:53).

49. Parsons and Pervo, *Rethinking the Unity of Luke and Acts*, 45–83.

POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Such a study proves valuable in at least three substantive ways. First, this study provides an instructive example of a literary motif within a biblical text, clarifying how a motif can saturate the narrative and become intensified through contrast with a subordinate motif. Subsequently, a practical guide and comprehensive example exists for future research on biblical motifs.

Second, this study supplies a needed balance between the extremes of past and present scholarship by considering the combination of suffering and renewed life within a single motif. Moreover, interaction with those who accent one theological perspective over the other (*theologia gloria* or *theologia crucis*) creates an instructive dialogue, enriching the academic conversation about Lukan theology.

Third, clarification of the death-resurrection motif yields practical implications for the contemporary church. Demonstration of both suffering and renewed life as integral parts of Lukan discipleship provides a better balance for understanding the Lukan view of the Christian life. Inclusion of suffering as a common element of Christian living counters the lopsided message of those who distort the meaning of abundant life to be composed only of health, wealth, and prosperity for the faithful followers of Christ.