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Jubilee In Acts

Anthony J. Ricciuti

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The Third Sunday of Advent
December 15, 2002

To: Ryan Bowers, Michael Brown, Gloria and Ross Kinsler,
Lee Van Ham

Dear Friends and Colleagues of Word and World::

Each of you expressed interest in reading my thesis on jubilee justice in the Book of Acts. Thanks for your patient waiting while I re-entered a busy calendar (as each of you did as well, I'm sure) following the Tucson School. But here it is now.

My project this winter and spring is to revise certain sections and expand my conclusion as I prepare a manuscript for publication. I would like to engage your help by asking for your critical feedback after you have completed the reading. By all means do take as much time as you need for this task. When you are ready, I look forward to hearing from you. This will "reimburse" me in a far more meaningful way than a check to cover the costs of postage and handling.

Would you comment on both the substance and the style of my writing as briefly or as extensively as you are comfortable, giving me your overall impressions as well as comments on specific passages (refer to page numbers). Are my interpretations faithful, in your view? Or where have I missed the mark? Where do you find my arguments unconvincing? Are their supplementary works (books or articles) that you know which might help my understanding? How can I make this research more practical for, let's say, your own use where you work and minister for social justice?

Keep in mind that this study was originally a thesis for a particular audience. As such, the mechanics of academia are evident throughout. I recognize, as you will too, that my prose is quite dense in places, and the footnotes daunting. My goal is to simplify without diluting so that the final manuscript is more accessible and concrete. So I thank you, in advance for your assistance.

I also extend to you my deepest wishes for a joyous Christmas and a New Year of hope in the struggle.

Sincerely,

The Economics of the Way: Jubilee Practice Among the Early Christians According to the Acts of the Apostles

Anthony J. Ricciuti

Why do you call me "Lord, Lord,"
and do not practise what I tell you?
--Luke 6:46

There is a vision, seen
As on a Sabbath walk:
The possibility
Of human life whose terms
Are Heaven's and this earth's.
(Wendell Berry)

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Philosophical Foundations (M.Phil.F.)

The Institute for Christian Studies
Toronto
2001

Introduction: *How Shall We Read Our Story?*

This study is an exercise in retrieval. It aims to examine some little-explored territory in *The Acts of the Apostles* in search of a lost provision for economic justice which, centuries earlier, the framers of Israel's constitution had set forth in the Pentateuch and called *Jubilee*. The first Christians formed a movement to revive and re-enact jubilee principles in their own peculiar practice of the gospel. By such a way of living, they sought to embody the vocation of their Founder and extend throughout the eastern Mediterranean under Roman occupation his proclamation of good news to the poor and release to the captives. Luke wrote about this ambitious activity, filling the second of a two-volume work with stories to repudiate the flagrant social disparities in his world and command a realignment of the structures of wealth and power according to a design inspired by the Holy Spirit. For this evangelist, the divine intent is a very different regimen to safeguard, in concrete ways, the dignity, security and well-being of every member of the community. Luke's telling is itself an act of reconstruction. By following his plotline, I hope to trace the lineaments of a political economy that protests conditions of scarcity, exclusion, and enslavement as it projects onto the screen of our theological imagination a divinely ordained creation order built on natural abundance, care-filled distribution, and social solidarity. *Acts* is a theological account of the early church's first programmatic steps *"beyond poverty and affluence, toward an economy of care."*[1]

There are reasons aplenty, I believe, for retracing this journey in the present historical moment. For one, the growing attention of contemporary society to economic issues in the face of the pressures, threats, and opportunities of the new globalism has prompted among various faith communities a renewed interest in jubilee texts and their implicit critique of economies of consumption. Indeed, for the last two decades, the anticipation of the next millennium has occasioned a spate of research and reflection from biblical scholars, social historians, anthropologists, and activists, rapidly filling many gaps in our knowledge of the origin and development of these early prescriptions. But it has left much work still to be done. The present undertaking is a modest contribution to that *koinonia* of thought and action. The authors in my bibliography are only the most visible and immediate conversation partners among a host of communicants around the table. Their extensive comments on the pertinent legislation in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, for example, or on the sabbath traditions among Israel's priests and prophets, on the gospel writers' views of money and possessions; their illuminating analyses of the economic and social forces in the Greco-Roman world or in Paul's congregations, and their

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[1] I have borrowed this apt description from the title of a book by two Dutch economists, Bob Goudzwaard and Harry de Lange. The original title, *Genoeg van te Veel, Genoeg van te Weinig,* literally means "enough of too much, enough of too little." The authors argue *contra* the mainstream view of their professional colleagues which holds that the distressing global crises of poverty, pollution and environmental degradation, and the ongoing losses in both the quantity and the quality of work can only be overcome by an increase in industrial production and a recovery of economic growth. Such claims, say Goudzwaard and de Lange, are not only false but paradoxical: they create the very problems which they set out to combat. And their substance is addictive. Accordingly, what is proposed is a bold, alternative "twelve-step program for economic recovery" based on an "economy of care" -- or "enough" -- for the earth and its people. (Bob Goudzwaard and Harry de Lange, *Beyond Poverty and Affluence: Toward an Economy of Care*, Mark R. Vander Vennen, trans., Grand Rapids, Michigan: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co./Geneva: WCC Publications, [1995])

probing investigations into the challenges besetting the sub-apostolic church to keep the jubilee movement alive -- all of this and more has been my daily bread for as long as I have worked on this project. I am profoundly grateful. Their perishable words convey an imperishable witness. But none has caused my heart to burn within me as Luke himself while he was telling me stories on the road. And so I yield to him a wide lane. Others, of course, have done likewise. Often, however, scholars focus mainly on the Gospel, Luke's first volume. *Acts* is reduced to a supporting role,[2] or less, to a passing reference.[3] My present objective is to give volume II its own place in the sun. Under a brighter light, companion texts connect more adroitly to the questions at hand, and so will be brought right into the discussion or else footnoted in detail where they seem to fit best. This format is not a linear progression of summaries but more a spiral of moves reaching back and then forward in an inclusive sweep. I wish to avoid treating the work of others as "background" to be acknowledged and then set aside before proceeding further. Hopefully, my arrangement will also lower the risk of supersession. In the final analysis, the work of the following pages is intended as a collegial offering to be shared amongst all whose labour in one vineyard or another stems from the same longing to work for and to welcome "the acceptable year of the Lord."

Notwithstanding, the value of this study, I hope, goes beyond the filling of a *lacuna* in our communal enterprise. As important as matters of detail in an age of information explosion are questions of method and hermeneutics in a postmodern ethos distrusting of texts. In 1988, Ward Gasque compared the status of Actsian studies to a freshly cultivated garden: some fruitful work was in progress, but most research was like newly planted seeds awaiting their season. His expectation of a bountiful yield was as high as any eager farmer's in the spring:

> Although it is not yet time for the full harvest, the "first fruits" that are already evident give us reason to hope for a bumper crop in the not too distant future.[4]

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[2] For example, Halvor Moxnes, in an otherwise very careful analysis, concludes -- wrongly, I think -- that "questions about money and economic and social relationships play different roles in the Gospel and in Acts respectively. In the Gospel, they are of structural significance, so that a study of 'money' takes us to the very center of the Gospel message. In Acts, it is more of a 'supporting' theme, not a key to the whole story." See *The Economy of the Kingdom: Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke's Gospel*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, (1988), p. 160.

[3] A more recent work, Sondra Ely Wheeler's *Wealth as Peril and Obligation: The New Testament on Possessions*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, (1995), contains a close reading of sample texts from every section of the New Testament except *Acts*. But in a "Table of Passages" (pp.118-19) deemed to be relevant to the issue of wealth and possessions, there are four references from *Acts* listed without comment: the well-known summaries of 2:44-45 and 4:32-37, the famous story of Ananias and Sapphira in 5:1-11, and Paul's final mission statement in 20:33-35.

[4] W. Ward Gasque, "A Fruitful Field: Recent Study of the Acts of the Apostles," *Interpretation*, xlii:2 (April, 1988), pp. 117-131. Citation, p. 117.

The germination period, apparently, has been ~~long~~. At mid-20th century the dominant view of *Luke-Acts* was Hans Conzelmann's. Luke's purpose, he asserted, was to address the problem of the delay of the *parousia*: what did the church do while "waiting for the promise" (Acts 1:4)?[5] Though no longer the coin of the realm, Conzelmann's eschatological notion of filling empty time conjures an image similar to Gasque's: an unruly or unproductive field awaiting the plow (cf. Matt. 13:39). The harvest metaphor is still in circulation. But it has an unfortunate referent in the modern west. It points to the practice of commercial exploitation in which the market's the thing. Market forces determine every aspect of cultivation including the choice of seeds for planting. Likewise, the routine of selective harvesting has come to symbolize the operative hermeneutics of biblical studies then and now. Consider the tools and the methods of reaping employed by labourers going onto the land these days. In addition to the time-honoured disciplines of theology, history and pastoral administration, there are upgrades to the equipment with the latest applications of sociology and cultural anthropology. And, as Gasque had predicted, these are garnering a bounty of studies on the social world of the first Christians.[6] But why has it taken so long for the "first fruits" to appear? Did the last generation of farmers find the soils too thin, possibly?

Beverly Gaventa suggests that certain features of *Acts* such as Luke's apparent celebration of the triumph of Christianity, or the record of Paul's harsh words to Jews who reject the Christian proclamation alongside his easy peace with Roman officialdom, "prove embarrassing to many contemporary Christians, making it comfortable to seek refuge elsewhere."[7] These issues will be examined in due course. For the moment, my point is that *Acts* may be a late bloomer because its peculiar character as testimony does not match recognized categories of modern research. Is Luke a theologian? He is indeed, but *Acts* is not a systematic theology. Is Luke an historian? He purports to be writing "an orderly account," but of course, his reporting doesn't conform to the canons of modern historiography. Is he, then, a simple storyteller? Well, yes -- and no. Narratology is still in vogue certainly, but before we put all our interpretive eggs into that one basket we need to understand the nature and function of Luke's recitals. Our methodological uncertainties have created ambivalence about this Lucan text and stalemate in research work. Justin Meggitt's recent study of the economic realities encountered by Paul and the response it provoked in his churches is only one example that illustrates my point.[8] Meggitt chooses as his "admissible evidence" the genuine letters of Paul, but rejects *Acts* from his investigation, judging that we should treat this text "with [a] degree of circumspection."

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[5] Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, trans., Geoffrey Buswell, London: Faber and Faber/New York: Harper and Row, (1961). See especially Part Two, "Luke's Eschatology," pp. 95-136.

[6] Ibid., p.131.

[7] Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "Toward a Theology of Acts: Reading and Rereading," *Interpretation*, 42/2, (April, 1988), pp. 146-157, esp. 146-147.

[8] Justin J. Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Survival*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, (1998).

> [W]e should distinguish between the historicity of the background 'world' of the work (the historical geography, the institutions, the cities, etc.) and that of its narrative . . . [between] the essential accuracy of much of the former . . . and the *Tendenz* of the latter, particularly in respect to its presentation of socio-economic details.[9]

That Luke is tendentious surely does not set him apart from Paul or from any other biblical writer whose purpose is to challenge the ethical distortions of prevailing worldviews or to present readers in a particular historical setting with an alternative to its destructive practices.[10] Does he, therefore, deserve any more circumspection than they? Regardless, Luke was no stranger to suspicion. He wrote *Acts* to convince a skeptical world that the principal *act*-ors in his recital had been empowered "to be witnesses" (1:8, Gk., *martyres*), that is, ***to tell their stories*** both in the juridical sense of telling a court the truth of what happened to them as well as in the evangelistic sense of demonstrating "all that Jesus did and taught" (1:1), even at the cost of their lives (literally, "martyrdom"). Narrative is the genre by which Luke recounts the *praxis* of "those who belonged to the Way" (9:2). For him, their stories are not fiction; they are, rather, "reliable words" (Luke 1:4) and lived truth. This peculiar "story view," in Robert Roth's term, should not, then, be inadmissible because

> reality is multifarious. . . . It includes many realms . . . some are empirical and some are not . . . some are historical and some are not. . . . Story is a fundamental category of reality. A story view . . . will talk about the action and passions of persons. . . . [T]he history of the church is the story of the activity of the Holy Spirit.[11]

The second volume of *Luke-Acts* gives an account of the early *Way*-farers' passion for, and re-en*act*ment of, the story of Jesus told in volume one, a story that has at its heart the jubilee vision of Sabbath economics. Central to Jesus' mission was his commitment to the full realization of that vision within history (Luke 4:16-20). Instigated by the Holy Spirit, his successors set to work building the house.

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[9] Ibid., pp. 8-9.

[10] Cf. Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell, "From System to Story: An Alternative Pattern for Rationality in Ethics," in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, eds., Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmanns Publishing Company, (1989), pp. 158-190, esp. 184-186. The authors argue that truthfulness in narrative is a matter of veracity *and* faithfulness. Furthermore, "any story which we adopt, or allow to adopt us, will have to display (1), power to release us from destructive alternatives; (2), ways of seeing through current distortions; (3), room to keep us from having to resort to violence; and (4), a sense of the tragic: how meaning transcends power" (p. 185).

[11] Robert Paul Roth, *The Theater of God: Story in Christian Doctrines*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, (1985), pp. ix, 117, 119-120. See especially chapter 2, "Narrative Hermeneutics" and chapter 3, "Narrative Ontology." Cf. also Gaventa on narrative in *Acts* in *Op. Cit.*, pp. 149-150, 157, and Ched Myers and Eric De Bode on the parables and certain efforts to "eclipse" them, in "Towering Trees and 'Talented' Slaves," *The Other Side*, (May & June, 1999), pp. 11-17.

How shall we approach this odd drama "of persons in conflict and community on a stage of props that are changing with the scenes . . . [of] relationships, encounters, developments, disintegrations, actions, and passions?"[12] A reading strategy for *Acts* must reckon with the last two features first, because they are the most obvious and the most fundamental: *Acts* is about actions, and passions which generate actions. "A story view," says Roth, "will talk about the actions and passions of persons." But who are these persons, or "actors" and "activists" mentioned by Roth? They are the protagonists in the story. Our conventional hermeneutical practice places the subjects *in* the text -- or *on* the stage, or *on* the canvas, *et cetera*. The rest of us live outside the story, at a distance from the action, as readers or spectators or critics. We remain in the audience. From here we "view" someone else's world displayed in front of us, and we "talk about" what is going on there. Of course, the characters in a story are three-dimensional, in that their passions spill over into the audience. And we, for our part, are drawn across the divide to extract meaning from the actions of others and apply it to our own story. Nevertheless, the crucial feature of theatre is the separation that exists between actors in performance and spectators in their seats, permitting only the story under the lights to be seen, while consigning the lifetexts of the audience to the shadows.

This has not always been the case, and its evolution is a story in itself. Brazilian dramatist Augusto Boal identifies the gap between stage and audience as political space which functions as a barrier to maintain social control.[13] He traces the roots of theatre to a time long before the professionalization of acting, when "theatre" was the people singing freely in public, when "performance" was created by and for anyone who wished to participate. Then came an aristocracy whose reigning ideologies required a division: some will go to the stage to act; the rest -- the masses, the people -- will remain seated, receptive, passive. Classical Greek theatre widened the division further by setting apart some actors as protagonists from the rest as "the chorus," the latter being surrogates for the people. Thus, the people have no voice, and *de facto*, no story of their own, though they have a relationship with the *dramatis personae*. The spectators' only way of being is a coerced choice to live in and through the acting of others.

> From the moment the performance begins, a relationship is established between the character, especially the protagonist, and the spectator. . . . Since the character resembles us, we live vicariously all his stage experiences. Without acting, we feel that we are acting. We love and hate when the character loves and hates.[14]

This kind of transference, in classical poetics, was called "empathy."[15] It's power, as Aristotle understood it, was so great as to be capable of fusing the horizons of the character and

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[12] Ibid., p. 42.
[13] Augusto Boal, *Theater of the Oppressed*, trans., Charles A. and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride, London: Pluto Press, (1979).

[14] Ibid., p. 34.
[15] Ibid.

the spectator, absorbing the agency of the latter into the *ethos* of the former.[16] The audience is thereby rendered completely passive; the people lose their power to act. Boal tags such empathy "a very efficient and terrible weapon,"[17] because it makes persons surrender their decision-making capability to an image.[18] The cumulative effect reinforces the status quo of entrenched power, especially of the economic power of patronage,[19] precluding the possibility of social change. Boal calls for "a materialist poetics"[20] adequate to the task of restoring the spectator's ability to act, in order that "the people reassume their protagonistic function in the theater and in society."[21] The obligation of every actor re-placed on stage "is not only that of interpreting the world, but also of transforming it and making this earth finally habitable."[22]

Boal's socio-political analysis of dramatic texts is very suggestive for a reading of *Acts*. It sets a framework for understanding Luke's narrative strategy. Clearly this evangelist is putting the poor back on stage to tell their story, which will have the paradoxical effect of illuminating further, and not suppressing, the dominant story of the Empire. Within an economy of participation that is open to the actions and passions of *all* the people as protagonists, the restoration of the unstoried will re-present the world *as capable of transformation*. The question before us now concerns how we, as stewards of this text, can participate in Luke's drama, that is, how the story of *our* economy plays out on the stage of his inclusive poetics where it will be accountable to others and subject to revisions whenever its activity threatens to delete the text of the poor from history. Our answer will depend on a hermeneutical approach that can overcome "circumspection" which, I am hypothesizing, has been responsible more than anything else for keeping the story of *Acts* in silent darkness. In other words, I believe our deep (subconscious, perhaps) suspicion of Luke's political agenda has been a barrier to our full acceptance of his account of history, and a hindrance to our engagement with his program. There is much in *Acts*, as we shall see, to suggest that Luke's *Tendenz* is a strategy which *intends*, in contrast to prevailing views, not to create a new institution supported by wealth and power, but to disestablish existing ones. Among the examples to be considered in the following chapters are Acts 10-11, on Peter's vision of a net filled with foodstuffs deemed by long religious and legal tradition to be profane, now repudiated; or Acts 19, on the riot in Ephesus against a threat to overthrow the economy of an entire city-state; and, of course, the memorable accusation against Paul and Silas (17:6), "These people [are] turning the world upside down!" My surmise is that the "circumspection" accorded *Acts* by many readers inside *and* outside the academy stems from a

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[16] Ibid., Part 1, "Aristotle's Coercive System of Tragedy," pp. *xiii*-50, esp. pp. 36-47.
[17] Ibid., p. *ix*.
[18] Ibid., p. 113

[19] Ibid., p. 47: "It is designed to bridle the individual, to adjust him to what pre-exists." Also p. 53: "Knowledge is revealed according to the perspective of the artist or of the social sector in which he is rooted, or which sponsors him, pays him, or consumes his work -- especially that sector of society which holds the economic power. . . . This sector is evidently interested in the transmission of that knowledge which helps it to maintain its power."

[20] Ibid., p. 103.
[21] Ibid., p. 119.
[22] Ibid., p. 103

fear of Luke's radical agenda. Such anxiety, however, may be so concealed under centuries of our domestication of the text as to require the tornado-like force of Pentecost to unmask it. So far, it has confined our attention mainly to "background checks" on the veracity of the story. These produce interesting and helpful studies, perhaps, but are hardly transformative. Nor do they alter our status as spectators.

Accordingly, I now propose that we set aside the hermeneutics of circumspection with its exclusive, disciplinary strategies, in favour of what James H. Olthuis calls "a hermeneutics of connection."[23] This alternative disposition is not bridled by caution, doubt, or suspicion (the setup for an economy of violence). On the contrary, and cognizant of its own vulnerability, our strategy will welcome and interact with the *Tendenz* of the text -- because it is there, inextricably; and also because it recognizes and takes into account the fact that interpreters have an ax of their own to grind. It strives to encounter the full repertoire of a writer's ideology, partisanship, and social location, mindful of their correspondences in the reader.

> For it is as the persons we are -- gendered, located, timed -- that we see (that is, read or interpret) the persons, texts, or artworks in the way we do, in certain ways *as* such and such. Interpreting, thus, begins an interactive journey -- frequently an adventure -- with the hope of coming into genuine contact with an other for mutual enrichment. Hermeneutics, in this reading, is the art of interpretation which arose to help facilitate, promote, and ease the whole process of illuminating differences, sharpening insights, and deepening connections.[24]

The Olthuisian model of interpretation "honors the scandal of uniqueness"[25] as it "meets with difference" and with "the other" who "claims, asks to be heard, evokes encounter, and invites response."[26] "We have had . . . a philosophy of power with its legitimization of oppression and violence, a philosophy of injustice."[27] We need an alternative to dominant "mastery" modes intent on "penetration" and "control" of meaning.

> I begin with an intersubjective economy of non-oppositional difference -- an economy of love (*eros*) -- and its yearning for healthy connection, shared power, mutuality, and right relation -- in face of and in spite of the risk of violence. *Eros* is the cosmological urge to connection, the full-bodied, multidimensional desire to reach out, meet, and be in contact with others, the beyond, and God. In living out, pursuing,

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[23] James H. Olthuis, "Otherwise than Violence: Toward a Hermeneutics of Connection," in *The Arts, Community and Cultural Democracy*, eds., Lambert Zuidervaart and Henry Luttikhuizen, London: MacMillan Press/New York: St. Martin's Press, (2000), pp. 137-164.

[24] Ibid., p. 137.
[25] Ibid., p. 144.
[26] Ibid., p. 137.
[27] Ibid., p. 139.

> shaping, nourishing, and sustaining such connections, persons, texts and artworks are not objects to be mastered and exploited, but invitations to mutuality, opportunities for growth, enrichment, and mutual transformation. Other persons [and texts] are neighbors to be journeyed with rather than threats to be investigated or objects to be dominated.[28]

The art of interpretation in Olthuis's stylistics is an expressive four-step "dance" sweeping across the spaces between the self and others which this philosopher/theologian/psychotherapist calls "the wild spaces of love -- wild because they are uncharted, as open and free for love as they are for violence."[29] Here the desire of hermeneutics is not for "a mastery of facts" or "the right explanation of a text," but for "a meeting with the other in creative mutuality . . . not to seize the bounty you can come away with, but . . . for relational attunement to justice and healing."[30] For this purpose, the dance-floor, unlike a fallow field awaiting cultivation, (unlike also the theatre in Aristotle's coercive system of tragedy), is not "a neutral empty space or a silent abyss over which we transfer and countertransfer our projections about the other; the field between is a hermeneutical with-space."[31] Thus, the four movements of Olthuis's "spiral of connection with the other" require *first*, a hermeneutics of "receptivity and trust," an "attending to" involving "generosity" and "openness to the gift of the other."[32] This is not "feigned neutrality," a suppression or denial of the interpreter's own horizons with their biases, or, in a Gadamerian phrase, the "tyranny of hidden prejudices" that make us deaf to the voice of the stranger.[33] Attending to the other involves simultaneously a consciousness of who we are. The more acute our sense of self, of our own historicity, social context and cultural perspective, "the more likely we will be able to relate to another person in his/her own right rather than in terms of our own needs, and the less likely we will be able to overdo (gullibility) or underdo (paranoia) in our openness to the text."[34] *Second*, there is a "journeying-with, struggle, and courage."[35] Rather than "taking possession" of its meaning, understanding a text calls us to "linger with it," "taste it, try it on,"[36] even in the face of "skirmishes of control" which threaten to violate "the spirit of hospitality." Journeying-with a text rather than dismantling it is more likely to yield "truth and honesty" as well as "deepened insight" and "expanded horizons -- even if it ends in total disagreement" because its pace follows the rhythms of trust and respect.[37] The *third* movement Olthuis calls "a hermeneutic of birthing, releasing-with-the-other."[38] This engagement with "the different" is not "forceful appropriation" of a text's intent, for "what is disclosed may act to dislocate or relocate our identity and worldview."[39] But if we "engage in the dance without

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[28] Ibid., p. 138.
[29] Ibid., p. 142
[30] Ibid., p. 145.
[31] Ibid., p. 146.
[32] Ibid., pp. 148-151.
[33] Ibid., p. 148.
[34] Ibid., p. 149.
[35] Ibid., pp. 151-155.
[36] Ibid., p. 151.
[37] Ibid., p. 153.
[38] Ibid., pp. 156-157.
[39] Ibid., p. 157.

guarantees about the outcome" then "in this process which is bigger than ourselves, something bigger than we are may, in grace, take place, a newness may take shape."[40] This, *finally*, becomes a "re-stor(y)ing, transformational dynamic,"[41] where the outcome is an integration of new meanings into our stories. "We are moved to purposive action"[42] "toward justice and human flourishing."[43] A "giving-for(th)" yields a "for-giving of self and others in a bond of mutual respect, peace, and reconciliation."[44] A hermeneutics of "just connection" restores balance by "the enactment of reciprocity" and a commitment to "an equitable sharing of power."[45] Such are the fruits of an economy of love which alone, Olthuis asserts, can provide an escape from the violence inherent in an economy of exchange:

> My basic conviction is that if the God who is present with us both creatively and redemptively is the God of connections and love rather than of separations and evil, then human hermeneutic efforts likewise have the calling and possibility to counter violence and to strengthen and remake connections that enhance life.[46]

Accordingly, I choose this method of interpretation as my reading strategy for Luke's story of the church's beginnings. It imposes a moratorium on the circumspection that has marginalized *Acts* in scholarly circles, and alternatively, it beckons the reader into a risky dance with the account, providing both partners with permission and courage (which is not the same as naiveté) to stumble along inelegantly perhaps, painfully sometimes, but unavoidably until they find their own feet, and new places to set them. Both outcomes are possible only in the *wit(h)ness* of the other. Such an approach strikes me as a promising sabbatical from the wary strategies of competing models which require great care to avoid "stepping on toes" and to negotiate around perceived pitfalls on each other's terrain, and which, at the end of the day, may not put us much closer to Luke's passion, or our own, than when we began.

More significantly for *this* text, dancing is an image of embodiment, of participation, and co-operation. We define dancing, fundamentally, as the peculiar movement of bodies (while not ignoring, of course, its unobtrusive mental discipline). *Acts* is about the actions of bodies -- specifically, of political bodies within the body politic of an imperial world,[47] and of co-operative

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40 Ibid.
41 Ibid., pp. 158-160.
42 Ibid., p. 158.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., p. 159.
45 Ibid., p.160.
46 Ibid., 138.

47 I am here borrowing the terms "political body" and "body politic" from Ched Myers in *Who Will Role Away the Stone? Discipleship Queries for First World Christians,* Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, (1994), pp. 84-87, *passim*. Myers extrapolated these expressions from cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas's essay "The Two Bodies," in *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology,* New York: Vintage Books, (1973), pp. 93-131. "Body politic" designates "the imperatives, symbols and hierarchies of the dominant socio-political order." Our "political bodies" signify "our socialized self including the consciousness, physical body, personal habits, and socio-political practices of the individual" (Myers, p. 85.)

communities (*corp*-orations?) within an alienating economy. "Dancers" form partnerships through which they create movements of mutuality in "the wild spaces" of their hearts and counter-movements of solidarity in the daunting wilderness of their history. *Acts* is the story of an odd dance troupe performing subversive steps to the music of a mighty wind, and to the cadence of a crackling fire, at private parties in upper rooms, and in dangerous public places across a whole empire: in marketplaces, synagogues, courthouses, and jails. The dancers' every move is a Spirited political act. And because it is so political, the dance is rescued from sentimentality. (Thinking clearly and acting with integrity are hermeneutical movements of struggle.) Sidney Carter's hymn of resistance in the 1960s, set to an American Shaker melody, confirms the sanguine character of this company:

> I danced on a Friday when the sky turned black;
> It's hard to dance with the devil on your back.
> They buried my body and they thought I'd gone:
> But I am the dance and I still go on.[48]

The dance of political action is a hermeneutics of connection[49] Its movement would be aborted if my reading of *Acts* were limited to a random selection of passages plucked from their storied context. Like the view from an instant replay camera trained on only one foot at a time, such isolated expositions, common in a thematic approach to Scripture, may offer some interesting, if obsessive, details. But they cannot appreciate the narrative strategy, or *Tendenz,* which gives the dance cohesion and momentum. "They suggest *what* to look for in the text, but not *how* to read it."[50] As a consequence, its radical polemic, quarantined already by the canons of established, specialized, professional disciplines, can be buried forever under a mountain of trivia in the manner of contemporary journalism, smothering its political power. It is then that the

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[49] Ched Myers, in his ground-breaking study of Mark, describes his political hermeneutics in a different metaphor: "The reading strategy I propose skirts between the twin errors of contemporary biblical criticism. To port lies the Scylla of historical criticism's dismantling of narrative texts; to starboard the Charybdis of the new literary criticism, which divorces narrative signification from the historical world. . . . I insist upon both the literary *and* the socio-historical integrity of the whole text. . . . I call my approach 'socio-literary' in order to distinguish it from three current schools of criticism, each of which I draw from in part but none of which I fully endorse: sociological exegesis, narratology, and materialist criticism." (*Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, [1988], p. xxviii.). Myers' approach begins with a deep suspicion, not of texts *per se*, but of the co-optation of the academy in the modern west by the powers of empire in a way that often stonewalls a political reading of those texts (cf. p. 10). He rejects First-World methods of abstraction which render from flesh-and-blood historical struggles only ethical or political principles (p. 460). From this point of view I agree that the critical voice of a text has often been stifled in many privileged interpretive settings, achieving a huge disconnection between vision and practice. A hermeneutics of connection is not naive about the injustice wrought by such pervasive, if unwitting, disempowerment. Indeed, in response to totalizing alliances and their suppression of minority voices within communities and texts, the dance of interpretation proposed here is committed to the irreducible otherness of the text -- voiced sometimes in destabalizing accents and tones -- not as a theoretical construct, but as a political program.

[50] Ibid., p. 469.

dance dies; reading is left an orphaned exercise. By contrast, the whole choreography of "relationships, encounters, developments, *and* disintegrations" (this is not, after all, an endless victory parade); the ensemble of historical *Toi-Toi, barrel leaps* and *cabrioles*, is greater than the sum of its parts. Dancing with it from beginning to end is breathgiving. The actions and passions of the text connect by contagion with the heart and feet of the reader, shifting the *locus* of the dance to the reader's own historical situation. Unimpeded, the energy and exacting rhythms of this distinctive partnership will *re-place* the text in the backyard of the interpreter's own political economy without coercion, without, as Walter Brueggemann might say, "overwrought efforts to connect to contemporaneity."[51] A text so dynamic, when fully, faithfully attended to will, unavoidably, draw responses to its claims in each new social location (cf. Acts 26:19). Thus, the dance goes on.

The following pages will offer a reading of *Acts* which situates each *praxis* of its socio-economic paradigm within the ongoing movement of the story in its entirety. This is not, however, a word-by-word commentary; I do not attempt even to cover every chapter. In fact, this is not a commentary at all. But it is, I hope, more than an extended study of one theme -- more, still, than a "study" at all, if that word smacks of personal detachment in the guise of academic objectivity. This venture is an odyssey, my attempt to learn a new dance, to discover a new Way, to test a new call as I attend to the text's crucial movements. I have chosen to read *Acts* (or is it truer to say that the text has, somehow, chosen to read me?), and to dance with Luke for many reasons perhaps, but principally because we live, he and I, in very similar worlds. My *oikumene* at the opening of a new millennium is a huge juggernaut riding roughshod around the globe.[52] It has an insatiable appetite fueled by an addictive techno-military economy of consumption. It devours everything in its path, leaving behind a widening valley of debt, disillusionment, and alienation. The eastern Roman Empire of Luke's world likewise ran on a permanent war economy that lived by conquest, occupation, and extraction of wealth from its margin, to feed an unappeasable centre, co-opting the infrastructures of synagogues and local governments with deadly efficiency. Poverty in each sphere differs only by degree, if it differs at all. In my world we can speak of poverty with a variety of possible meanings, as Meggitt notes, "and many of these are not strictly 'economic' at all."[53] But *material* poverty, understood as a

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[51] From his Stone Lecture, "(I)chabod Departed," reprinted in *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, xxii:2, New Series, (2001), pp.115-133. See p. 129.

[52] Anthony Giddens uses the juggernaut as an image of what it feels like to live in the world of modernity. The term comes from the Hindi *Jagannath*, "lord of the world," and is a title of Krishna; an idol of this deity was taken each year through the streets on a huge car, which followers are said to have thrown themselves under, to be crushed beneath the wheels. "The juggernaut -- a runaway engine of enormous power which, collectively as human beings, we can drive to some extent but which also threatens to rush out of control and which could render itself asunder. The juggernaut crushes those who resist it, and while it sometimes seems to have a steady path, there are times when it veers away erratically in directions we cannot foresee. The ride is by no means wholly unpleasant or unrewarding; it can often be exhilarating and charged with hopeful anticipation. But so long as the institutions of modernity endure . . . we shall never be able to feel entirely secure, because the terrain across which it runs is fraught with risks of high consequence." (*The Consequences of Modernity*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, [1990], p. 139.)

[53] *Op. Cit.,* p. 4.

lack of basic essentials necessary for supporting human life, is found in the globalized contemporary world just as it was in the first-century context. The poor in the Roman Mediterranean were, according to Meggitt who quotes Peter Garnsey,

> those living at or near subsistence level, whose prime concern [was] to obtain the minimum food, shelter and clothing necessary to sustain life, whose lives [were] dominated by the struggle for physical survival.[54]

We have them living with us still. Luke, astonishingly, describes an economy devoid of poverty (Acts 4:34). That is the essence of his good news and the ultimate goal of his program. It is significant, I believe, that he chooses to tell the story (in two thick volumes!) to someone decidedly *not* poor. His testimony is *about* the subjugated and destitute, but not spoken (directly) *to* them. Luke addresses his work instead to a man named Theophilus (Acts 1:1). We know very little about him. But the clues appearing in the text suggest that he was a figure of considerable status, educated, possibly even holding a position of wealth and influence. He was certainly a protege of the imperial economy, if not one of its managers (Below, 1,i). It may not be far-fetched to speculate that Luke saw him as one having power to effect social change. I put myself in the shoes of Theophilus who quite likely enjoyed a level of comfort and privilege corresponding to the affluence of the modern west. Our "reading sites"[55] for the text of *Acts*, then, are similar: the prosperous strata of a first-world society.[56] If my assumptions are correct, then perhaps I can also imagine the possibility that Theophilus was as deeply disturbed by the excesses of his empire's economy, and its inherent injustice, as I am of mine. We might both find ourselves at the same crucial junction in our respective worlds, jaded by the hollowness of their seductive claims, appalled by the heavy toll on human and nonhuman life, questioning now the sustainability of the course we have followed. Such disaffection is a necessary catalyst for change to occur from the top. Otherwise, in social structures of disparate and hardened power blocs with their disproportion of suffering, meaningful transformation is more likely to start from the bottom. In

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[54] Ibid., p. 5, and Peter Garnsey and Greg Woolf, "Patronage of the rural poor in the Roman world," in *Patronage in Ancient Society,* ed. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, London: Routledge (1990), p. 153.

[55] Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, op. cit., p. 3.

[56] A stream of scholarly tradition dating from Irenaeus situates the writing of *Acts* in Rome. But no broad consensus on this exists. If the claim is true, however, then the placement of Luke in the centre of the Empire gives him a strategic location from which to correspond with Theophilus, bringing his world and our world into close, critical scrutiny. My hunch would be strengthened by this point, but does not depend upon it. Other locations could evoke a similar suggestion. Justo Gonzales, for example, follows the view of several scholars that Antioch, the capitol of the province of Syria, may have been where both *Luke* and *Acts* were written (*Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, [2001], p. 5.). Warren Carter, quoting Josephus (*Jewish Wars*, 3.29) says of Antioch: [F]or extent and wealth, [it] unquestionably ranks third among the cities of the Roman world,' presumably behind Rome and Alexandria" (in *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations*, Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, [2001], p. 38). For the full range of possible places and dates of composition, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* The Anchor Bible, New York: Doubleday , (1998), pp. 51-55.

any case, Luke's intent is to bear witness to a liberating alternative to power-over social arrangements. He is actually achieving a dual purpose: in presenting his best account of the economy of the gospel, he is simultaneously putting our imperial stories under a harsh light. Through a hermeneutics of connection, a triangular interpretive field opens to the reader: the social world of the first century, the globalized economy of late twentieth-century neoliberalism, and the *oikonomia* of the Reign of God. The aim of this thesis is to outline the third horizon, indicating where it conflicts with the first, and how by inference it challenges the second.

This tale of three economies is the braided story of the church. What we are is what we were: a movement of resistance to institutionalized inequity, and alternatively when we have forgotten, or denied perhaps, this peculiar history in our gradual osmosis to a false patrimony, an institution of hierarchies resistant to movement. Luke is telling us *our own story* in the "intertextuality" of discipleship practice and imperial mismanagement. From these sometimes tangled connections will emerge a new imperative for Christians of the First-World just as there had for Theophilus and his kin. As we do-sa-do with our partners, however, we will come to realize that what we are stepping to is, in fact, a dance more ancient. Luke will call from a platform in the heart of our empire, inviting us to swing our bodies to the originary sounds of the *yobel*, to the tune and text of *Jubilee*, with its unmistakable beat of justice and jubilation.

A final introductory note is in order concerning a definition of economics. I am herein following Meggitt by saying that economics "is understood as *that which has to do with the satisfaction of material wants*."[57] This generic sense of the word accords with the reality of pre-industrial economies. There is, he asserts, an "otherness" in the economic life of antiquity. It corresponds to the otherness of our hermeneutic claims.

> In the first century economics was culturally embedded in the societal whole and consequently was controlled by assumptions drawn from the entire gamut of human interaction. Specific economic reality, as we would recognize it, was only just in the process of conscious differentiation. One need only look at the etymology of the word "economics" itself, a word which was forged in a context not far removed in time from that under analysis, in order to see this alienness. The term combines the two words *oikos* (household) and *nemein* (to regulate, administer, organize), and hence reflects the traditional significance of the household in structuring Hellenistic material relationships. Such an idea is in distinct contrast to the contemporary, asocial, concept of the market, in which, theoretically economic decisions are determined solely by the economic criterion of the price mechanism.[58]

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[57] *Op. Cit.*, p. 2.

[58] Ibid., pp. 3-4.

The activity of household management at the root of "economics" is key. It will serve as the dominant metaphor in our discussion of a Lucan *oikonomia*, giving concreteness to the subject which we will be attending to in *Acts*. The economics of the Way has a place ("it fills the entire house"); it has a face ("Parthians, Medes, Elamites . . . a beggar blind from birth, Rhoda, Lydia, Paul"); it is an orderly administration ("to each as any has need") governed by a Divine Homemaker. There is no place-less, disembodied, random "unseen hand" in Luke's economics. Consequently, we shall begin our reading where he does -- in an upper room -- and with a question that introduces the dance: "Lord, is this the time for *restor(y)ing* the Economy of God?"