Scottish Journal of Theology (2025), 1–13
doi:10.1017/S0036930625000031

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

How to read ambiguity well: Reading ambiguity in Luke and Acts

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(Received 4 November 2024; revised 17 December 2024; accepted 19 December 2024)

Abstract

This article offers a hermeneutical account of ambiguity using Luke and Acts as an extended case study. After discussing the difficulties in identifying purposeful ambiguity in biblical texts, verbal ambiguity is distinguished from ambiguity beyond the sentence level, such as ambiguities of plot or character. Instead of approaching ambiguity primarily as a failure of language or a problem to be solved, this article offers a framework for thinking about ambiguity as an invitation to read a text from multiple angles. The discussion is illustrated throughout with a series of examples taken from Luke and Acts. I close with reflections on how this approach to ambiguity is helpful when reading scripture against different cultural contexts and in the study of New Testament Christology.

Keywords: Luke; Acts; ambiguity; Christology; hermeneutics

In Luke and Acts, it is often difficult to determine to whom the term 'Lord' refers. For example, in Luke 1:76 Zechariah says of John, his newborn son, 'And you, child, will be called a prophet of the most high since you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways'.[1] Who is the 'Lord' in this verse? It could be God, or it could be the Lord Jesus who has already been called 'Lord' by Elizabeth back in 1:43. It is difficult to tell. This does not stop interpreters from taking sides on the issue, when they even notice it, of course.[2] Yet it is frequently assumed that with just the right amount of critical thinking, linguistic skill, or historical knowledge, we can know who the referent of

[1]All translations of ancient texts are the author's own unless otherwise indicated.

[2]For a discussion of various positions, see C. Kavin Rowe, 'Luke and the Trinity: An Essay in Ecclesial Biblical Theology', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 56/1 (2003), pp. 17–8.

†An earlier version of this article was presented at the European Association of Biblical Studies Graduate Conference in Graz, Austria in February 2024. I would like to thank Veronika Burz-Tropper, Matthew Novenson, Christian Einertson, Arthur Rankin, and Joel Butcher for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this article.

'Lord' *really* is. However, this may not actually be the case. As Kavin Rowe once wrote in this journal:

> Luke 1:76 is fully ambiguous in itself as regards the identity of the κύριος. And this, it may be said, is precisely the point of the kyriotic overlap. The *either* YHWH *or* Jesus forced upon the text by many exegetes is a false dichotomy. . . . This either/or dichotomy is an historicist assumption carried over into exegesis that obscures the theological significance of the use of κύριος and prevents apprehension of the subject matter.[3]

Rowe helpfully alerts us to how the training of biblical scholars can lead them to miss what is right in front of them. This training, of course, is not purposeless. After all, many texts in scripture are obscure to us that were perfectly clear to the original readers or hearers. Nevertheless, sometimes texts can be ambiguous on purpose. To resolve such ambiguities is therefore not to clarify a text but to obscure it. It is indeed not hard to find scholars arguing for intentional ambiguities in various places in scripture,[4] but few have attempted a more general account of the interpretation of ambiguity in biblical texts. For example, how can interpreters decide when ambiguity is being used purposefully, that is, as a literary strategy? Furthermore, what might it mean to interpret such ambiguities productively, not merely as linguistic curiosities but as strategies by which biblical texts communicate theology?

In this article, I therefore offer a hermeneutical account of ambiguity, using Luke and Acts as an extended case study. After discussing how we should identify purposeful ambiguity, I distinguish verbal ambiguity – which has received the lion's share of scholarly attention – from ambiguity beyond the sentence level, such as ambiguities of plot or character. Furthermore, instead of approaching ambiguity primarily as a failure of language or a problem to be solved, I offer a framework for thinking about ambiguity as an invitation to read a text from multiple angles. I illustrate the discussion throughout with a series of examples taken from Luke and Acts, a corpus sometimes noted for its ambiguity.[5] Nevertheless, the analysis offered here should apply equally well to other biblical texts. I close with reflections on how this approach to ambiguity is helpful when reading scripture against different cultural contexts and in the study of New Testament Christology.

How do we identify purposeful ambiguity?

'Ambiguity' is unfortunately a rather ambiguous term itself. Literary theorists have defined 'ambiguity' in various ways. William Empson famously takes a particularly expansive approach to identifying ambiguity.[6] Others, like Shlomith Rimmon, identify

[3]Ibid.

[4]For example, Jeff Hayes, 'Intentional Ambiguity in Ruth 4.5: Implications for Interpretation of *Ruth*', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 41 (2016), pp. 159–82; Paul R. Raabe, 'Deliberate Ambiguity in the Psalter', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110 (1991), pp. 213–27.

[5]Henry J. Cadbury, 'Commentary on the Preface of Acts', in F. J. Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake (eds.), *The Beginnings of Christianity* (London: MacMillan, 1922), vol. 2, p. 504. See also Daniel Marguerat, 'Luc-Actes entres Jérusalem et Rome: Un procédé lucanien de double signification', *New Testament Studies* 45/1 (1999), pp. 73–9.

[6]As he writes, 'In a sufficiently extended sense any prose statement could be called ambiguous', William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 3rd edn (London: Chatto and Windus, 1953), p. 1.

ambiguity only as instances where two equally viable interpretations are 'mutually exclusive'.[7] Accordingly, other related phenomena such as 'the subjectivity of reading', 'ambivalence', 'vagueness', 'irony' or 'double meaning' are distinguished from what she considers to be *true* ambiguity.[8] Others take a more mediating position.[9]

For this study, let us say that ambiguity occurs when a reader cannot decide between more than one viable meaning of a text. Ambiguous language is therefore not merely language that is unclear but language that means too much. Scott Noegel puts the issue well: 'Ambiguous signs, words, and lines do not leave a text impenetrable to understanding, and thus *incapable of conveying* meaning. Rather, they pack the text with interpretive options, contingencies, and points of view—they *overload* their contexts with meanings'.[10]

There are many things that might cause a text to be unintentionally ambiguous.[11] Sometimes it is the author's fault. The author does not realise that what was written can be interpreted differently than how it was intended. Sometimes it is the readers' fault. They lack the necessary knowledge or perspective to be able to disambiguate a text. Of course, sometimes ambiguity is no one's fault since authors can also use ambiguity intentionally, that is, with purpose. Authors can have numerous purposes for being ambiguous,[12] whether to make a joke, to draw a connection between two things, to avoid saying something too openly, to keep one's rhetorical options open, to create a sense of mystery and so on.[13]

Scholars overwhelmingly, however, focus on verbal ambiguity, that is, ambiguity at the sentence level. Paul Raabe, for example, distinguishes three kinds of ambiguity, all of which occur at the sentence level: (1) lexical ambiguity, when an individual word can mean more than one thing; (2) phonetic ambiguity, when a word sounds like another word and both make sense in context and (3) grammatical ambiguity, when the morphology or syntax of a construction can be plausibly read in more than one way.[14] Most other discussions of ambiguity in biblical texts have followed along similar lines.

Of course, interpreters are regularly tempted to collapse ambiguity into a single clear meaning. This is not necessarily illegitimate. Most of the time apparent ambiguity can be resolved. Readers do this automatically whenever they read, such as when readers determine in which sense a word is being used in context.[15] Ambiguities can indeed be

[7]Shlomith Rimmon, *The Concept of Ambiguity: The Example of James* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. x.

[8]See the illuminating discussion in ibid., pp. 16–26.

[9]Abraham Kaplan and Ernst Kris, 'Esthetic Ambiguity', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 8/3 (1948), pp. 415–35.

[10]Scott B. Noegel, *'Wordplay' in Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2021), p. 302.

[11]See the helpful discussion in G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 102–8.

[12]See the survey of purposes in ancient near eastern literature in Noegel, *'Wordplay'*, pp. 47–154.

[13]This is not to say that such ambiguities are always literarily successful. One only has to imagine bad poetry (or bad academic writing) that confuses being unclear with being profound.

[14]Raabe, 'Deliberate Ambiguity', p. 213. See also the taxonomy of ambiguity in Hayes, 'Intentional Ambiguity', p. 168.

[15]For example, 'John sat near the *bank* and listened to the sound of the water rushing by' versus 'John sat near the *bank* while the robbers escaped with the money'.

resolved by appealing to other parts of the text,[16] the style of the author,[17] broader linguistic evidence[18] or historical context.[19] All of this works because context (of whatever kind) helps close off some avenues of interpretation while leaving others open. For example, in Acts 3:16, Peter says that the formerly disabled man who stands in front of the Jewish council was healed by faith in Jesus' name. It is not clear whose faith Peter refers to. It could be the formerly disabled man's faith (cf. Luke 8:48), or it could be Peter and John's faith (cf. Luke 5:20). However, before the man was healed, he exhibited no sign of faith other than asking for alms (Acts 3:3). Meanwhile, Acts makes it clear that when the apostles heal through Jesus' name, this requires an active connection of faith with Jesus himself, as the examples of Simon the Magician (8:18–23) and the sons of Sceva indicate (19:11–20). This resolves the ambiguity and indicates that the faith referred to in 3:16 is the apostles' faith rather than the man's.[20]

Thus, interpreters do well to try to resolve ambiguities when they arise. After all, it is a common exegetical mistake to assume that words bring all their potential meaning into every use, what is sometimes called 'illegitimate totality transfer'.[21] Readers of biblical texts are sometimes especially tempted to make these texts seem more profound and nuanced with subtle shades of ambiguous meaning. Thus, alleged ambiguity is sometimes a result of overactive verbal imaginations.[22] A good example of this problem can be seen in the recent exchange between Jeremy Barrier and Stephen Carlson regarding Barrier's proposal that κόσμος in Galatians 4:3 (τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου) means both 'world' and 'foreskin'.[23] Carlson's response demonstrates well how context closes off or activates meaning. Responsible interpreters do well to pay attention to how the context of a passage narrows possible meaning. Even so, interpreters should not prematurely foreclose the possibility of purposeful ambiguity in general since, as Carlson writes, 'irreducible ambiguity occurs when contextual cues strongly activate more than one distinct sense'.[24]

Thus, appeals to intentional ambiguity should only be made when (1) attempts to resolve alternative interpretations have been reasonably exhausted; and (2) multiple

[16]Hans Förster, 'Σὺ λέγεις: Philologische Untersuchungen zur semantischen Valenz der Verbindung eines Personalpronomens mit einem *verbum dicendi*', *New Testament Studies* 67/1 (2021), pp. 38–54.

[17]Thomas Farrar, 'Today in Paradise? Ambiguous Adverb Attachment and the Meaning of Luke 23:43', *Neotestamentica* 51/2 (2017), pp. 193–200.

[18]Mitchell Dahood, 'Some Ambiguous Texts in Isaias (30,15; 52,2; 33,2; 40,5; 45,1)', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 21/1 (1958), pp. 41–9.

[19]Adam G. White, 'The Rod as Excommunication: A Possible Meaning for an Ambiguous Metaphor in 1 Corinthians 4.21', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 39/4 (2017), pp. 388–411.

[20]So Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), p. 182; *contra* F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev. edn. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), p. 89.

[21]James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: OUP, 1961), p. 218. See also the discussion in Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics*, rev. edn. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), pp. 25–7.

[22]See Silva, *Biblical Words*, p. 150.

[23]Jeremy W. Barrier, 'τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου Again: Interpreting Cosmos in Gal 4,3 and 9 as Prespuce (or Foreskin)', *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 114/1 (2023), pp. 102–22; Stephen C. Carlson, 'No, Galatians 4:3 τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου Does Not Refer to a *Schmuck*', *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 115/1 (2024), pp. 114–24.

[24]Carlson, 'No, Galatians 4:3', p. 117.

ambiguous meanings make good sense in the larger context.[25] Other signs may also help indicate that one is or is not dealing with intentional ambiguity.[26] Consider, by way of negative example, Luke 23:2, where the Jewish council accuses Jesus before Pilate, saying that he calls himself χριστὸν βασιλέα. Virtually all translations read this as two nouns in apposition: 'Christ, a king' (e.g., KJV, NIV, Luther). It is, of course, entirely possible that χριστός is an adjective, thus: 'anointed king'.[27] It is difficult to come up with definitive reasons for why one reading should be preferred over the other. However, it is also hard to imagine why this ambiguity would be purposeful in the context of the Lukan narrative. The two potential readings are not sufficiently distinct for the ambiguity to have a clear literary effect. Thus, an irresolvable ambiguity is not necessarily a purposeful ambiguity.

Beyond verbal ambiguity

So far, we have focused on verbal ambiguity, that is, ambiguity at the sentence level. This includes ambiguities of word meaning, syntax, morphology and so on. Of course, sentences are not the only place where ambiguity can occur. While scholars tend to focus on the ambiguity of sentences, there is often even more ambiguity beyond the sentence level, what is sometimes called 'narrative ambiguity'.[28] Biblical scholars have examined the ambiguity of characterisation,[29] plot,[30] the meaning of metaphors[31] or even a writing's overall theological outlook.[32] While Rimmon offers a helpful theoretical discussion of the distinction between verbal and narrative ambiguity,[33] here we simply need to note how and why narrative ambiguity occurs. Readers must routinely make determinations about things like characters' motivations or the relationship between events in order to make sense of a story.[34] In literary theory, this is often referred to as

[25]On this latter point see Christian Blumenthal, 'Die Mehrdeutigkeit der Gottgleichheitsaussage in Phil 2,6 und ihr argumentationsstraegisches Potential', *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 113/2 (2022), pp. 180–201.

[26]See the criteria discussed in Naphtali S. Meshel, 'Too Much in the Sun: Intentional Ambiguity in the Samson Narrative', *Hebrew Studies* 62 (2021), pp. 61–3. See also June F. Dickie's work with reception among modern audiences, 'Using Performance (with Audience Participation) to Help Translators Discern Ambiguity in Texts: An Empirical Study Based on the Book of Ruth', *The Bible Translator* 71/2 (2020), pp. 192–208.

[27]See Michael Wolter, *The Gospel according to Luke*, trans. Wayne Coppins and Christoph Heilig (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), vol. 2, p. 503.

[28]While this discussion is focused on ambiguity in *narrative*, the same principles would apply equally well to non-narrative texts such as poetry, letters or law. To be precise, ambiguity beyond the sentence-level occurs whenever the ambiguity concerns not the meaning of words but the meaning of the things to which the words refer, such as people, events, things, places, ideas, metaphors and so on.

[29]Paul Danove, 'The Narrative Rhetoric of Mark's Ambiguous Characterization of the Disciples', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 70/1 (1998), pp. 21–38; Susan E. Hylen, *Imperfect Believers: Ambiguous Characters in the Gospel of John* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

[30]Chelcent Fuad, 'The Curious Case of the Blasphemer: Ambiguity as Literary Device in Leviticus 24:10–23', *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 41/1 (2019), pp. 51–70.

[31]David H. Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities: Metaphor, Semantics and Divine Imagery* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

[32]Suzanna R. Millar, 'Did Job Live "Happily Ever After"? Suspicion and Naivety in Job 42:7–17', *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 17/1 (2023): pp. 77–91.

[33]Rimmon, *Concept of Ambiguity*, pp. 26–58.

[34]See the insightful analysis in this regard in Kathy Reiko Maxwell, *Hearing Between the Lines: The Audience as Fellow-Worker in Luke–Acts and Its Literary Milieu* (London: T&T Clark, 2010).

'gaps' in the text.[35] While filling in these gaps can often be straightforward, this is not always the case. Consider Luke 9:18–22 where Jesus asks his disciples who the crowds say that he is. They tell him that some say he is Elijah, some that he is John the Baptist and some that he is one of the ancient prophets. Jesus asks them what *they* think. Peter, always the first to answer, says that Jesus is 'the Messiah of God' (9:20). Jesus then warns them to tell no one about this and tells them that he will suffer, be rejected by the religious leaders in Jerusalem, be killed and be raised.

There are numerous gaps in this story. Some are easy to fill. For example, it is not said whether Jesus approves of Peter's confession, but it is easy to conclude that he does since he tells the disciples not to tell anyone what Peter has said. The readers also know from earlier in the story that Jesus is indeed the Messiah (2:11; 2:26; 4:18). However, some gaps are not as easy to fill. For example, why does Jesus tell his disciples not to tell anyone that he is the Messiah? This question is harder to answer since the narrative does not give the readers the resources to answer this question with confidence. Nevertheless, many are quick to assume that Jesus swears the disciples to secrecy to prevent some kind of violent messianic panic.[36] Others assert that Jesus' rule as messiah is necessarily characterised by the inclusion of both Jews and Gentiles, which only becomes possible after Jesus' resurrection. Jesus thus forbids his disciples from proclaiming him as Messiah until this is possible.[37]

These are plausible options. However, one should note how these proposals fill in the gap by appealing to larger ideas about what kind of story Luke and Acts are telling in the first place. This should alert us to the danger of the illegitimate gap-filling that can result from overhasty reading and incorrect presuppositions. As Meir Sternberg warns, 'Illegitimate gap-filling is one launched and sustained by the reader's subjective concerns (or dictated by more general preconceptions) rather than by the text's own norms and directives'.[38] Such gap-filling often functions as a sort of Rorschach test. Thus, if one believes that Luke's purpose is to redefine Jewish messianism, then one will read accordingly. Likewise, if one believes that Luke's purpose is to show how the covenant with Israel is redefined to include Gentiles, then one will interpret accordingly. This is why interpreters frequently do not make arguments for such gap-filling: it proceeds from what they take to be obvious. Now, this is not at all to say that all gap-filling is illegitimate. On the contrary, readers *must* fill in gaps as they read. To read is to fill in gaps. The point here is that not all gap-filling strategies are equal; sometimes readers do well to leave certain gaps unfilled or entertain the possibility that the text may allow for multiple ways of filling a gap. Further reading may illuminate the question, or it may not. Attentive readers must be patient.

Nevertheless, while interpreters are sometimes willing to leave verbal ambiguity unresolved, they are often particularly resistant when it comes to ambiguity beyond the sentence level. While it is easy to explain verbal ambiguity as an example of authorial cleverness, ambiguity beyond the sentence level is often perceived by many as authorial sloppiness. Sternberg's comments on this point are particularly illuminating:

[35]See Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), pp. 38–40.

[36]For example, James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2015), p. 272.

[37]For example, Wolter, *Luke*, vol. 1, p. 219.

[38]Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 188.

> Multiple meanings at the verbal level are not always mutually exclusive. Even when such conflicts arise in a lyric poem, it is often possible to give them a realistic grounding in the lyric 'I' (e.g., 'the phrase is ambiguous and thereby expresses the speaker's "ambivalence" or "his sarcasm and his irony"' etc.). It is quite another matter when it comes to the reconstruction of events in a story: here we cannot 'really' have two opposite things taking place at one and the same time. It is the impossibility of devising a realistic motivation for the multiple, alternative systems of plot that has apparently deterred critics and theorists from legitimating them.[39]

Ambiguity beyond the sentence level threatens our ability to make sense of the plot, characters and so on. However, this destabilisation may be precisely the point. It may be a key part of the effect that a writing is supposed to have on its readers even if the ambiguity is resolved at a later point.

Unresolvable ambiguity as an opportunity for re-reading

What happens when ambiguity – of whatever kind – cannot be easily or honestly resolved and seems to be purposeful? How can interpreters approach such ambiguity? Sometimes the effect of ambiguity is to evoke a sense of wonder and mystery. Christopher Frilingos notes that sometimes texts are 'characterized . . . by ambiguity and suspenseful gaps, reminding readers of what human beings do not know. In the face of acts of divine power and expressions of divine knowledge, mortal understanding reaches its limits'.[40] This is particularly likely to be the case when supernatural characters are speaking or when human beings are giving a divine message. After all, if God is beyond understanding (Isa. 55:8), then it stands to reason that sometimes God's words may be hard to understand as well. The inscrutability of the writing on the wall in Daniel 5 is an excellent example of this phenomenon.

One can also see this in Luke 2:11 when an angel announces the birth of Jesus to a group of shepherds: 'In the city of David a savior has been born to you today who is Messiah Lord'. It is unclear how the two nouns, χριστὸς κύριος (Messiah Lord), are supposed to relate to each other. This is apparent from the way that some ancient readers have changed the text to read χριστὸς κυρίου ('the Lord's Messiah') instead (cf. Luke 2:26).[41] Some interpreters argue that κύριος simply explains χριστός for Hellenistic readers.[42] However, this is unlikely because κύριος is an odd explanation for χριστός and these titles are not treated as equivalent elsewhere in Luke and Acts (see Acts 2:36). The purpose is clearly to relate these titles to one another. However, it is not clear how.[43] Instead, it may be that the meaning of these terms and their relation to one another are intentionally introduced in an underdetermined way. Readers are invited to

[39]Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, p. 224, n34.

[40]Christopher A. Frilingos, 'Parents Just Don't Understand: Ambiguity in Stories about the Childhood of Jesus', *Harvard Theological Review* 109/1 (2016), p. 54.

[41]See the discussion in I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), p. 110.

[42]For example, Frederick W. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age, according to St. Luke: A Commentary on the Third Gospel* (St. Louis, MO: Clayton, 1972), p. 27.

[43]See the discussion in C. Kavin Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology: The Lord in the Gospel of Luke* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006), pp. 50–4.

wonder what it means that Jesus is Messiah-Lord, as the rest of Luke and Acts will go on to explore.

More often, however, ambiguity presents readers with distinct options that they must decide between. Suzanna Millar offers an excellent description of this phenomenon:

> At the level of textual details, one interpretation might foreground certain features. This constellation of features forms an overall picture in the reader's mind, functioning as an interpretive guide for the rest of the text. The reader uses it to infer the meaning of ambiguous expressions and to fill in textual gaps. Another interpretation, though, might shuffle these layers. An alternative textual constellation comes to the fore, and an alternative picture emerges.[44]

The key point here is that these alternative interpretations cannot exist together at the same time: 'These readings, which both have warrant in the textual details, seem mutually exclusive. It is not possible to affirm both simultaneously or to harmonize them together; we can see both options – but not at the same time. Our minds can only oscillate between them'.[45] To read is to make decisions about what we are reading, to read things in a particular way and not others. Thus, to appreciate this kind of ambiguity, we must become re-readers. We must read again but differently to observe how the narrative world thus constructed is different from our previous readings. Such a mode of reading is particularly reflective and is less concerned with finding right answers than it is with exploring the various possibilities inherent to the text.[46] Avinoam Sharon offers a fruitful example of this sort of reading in his discussion of the portrayal of David's height in 1 Samuel 16–17. He writes, 'The Bible gives the impression that David was both short and tall without expressly saying either. The descriptions are sufficiently ambiguous to allow us to imagine David either way'.[47]

To further explore the phenomenon of ambiguity, we will examine at greater length two instances of ambiguity that invite re-reading in Luke and Acts. The first is an instance of verbal ambiguity in the Gospel of Luke; the second is an instance of narrative ambiguity that arises from the beginning of Acts.

Reading ambiguity in Luke and Acts

When Jesus is twelve, his family travels to Jerusalem for Passover. After accidentally leaving him behind in Jerusalem, they find him in the temple, sitting with the teachers, listening and asking questions (Luke 2:41–47). Mary, apparently confused and offended, asks Jesus why he has treated them like this (2:48). Jesus responds, 'Why is it that you

[44]Millar, 'Suspicion and Naivety', p. 78.

[45]Ibid., p. 90. See also Rimmon, *Concept of Ambiguity*, p. x.

[46]At this point it is helpful to reiterate that the ambiguity in view here is distinct from what Rimmon calls 'the subjectivity of reading': '"Ambiguity" should first be distinguished from the multiplicity of subjective interpretations given to a work of fiction. . . . The essential difference between this phenomenon and ambiguity proper is that while the subjectivity of reading is conditioned mainly by the psyche of the reader, ambiguity is a fact in the text – a double system of mutually exclusive clues' (*Concept of Ambiguity*, p. 12). Of course, sometimes these two kinds of ambiguity are more difficult to separate in practice, see Amy Kalmanofsky, *The Power of Equivocation: Complex Readers and Readings of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2022).

[47]Avinoam Sharon, 'Height Theology: The Theological Use of Lexical Ambiguity in the David and Goliath Story', *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 45/4 (2017), pp. 243–52.

were looking for me? Did you not know that it is necessary for me to be ἐν τοῖς τοῦ πατροῦ μου?' (2:49). This final phrase is a long-standing *crux interpretum*. The various proposals essentially boil down to two readings.[48] The first reading takes τοῖς to be a neuter article, giving the meaning 'involved in the things of my father'.[49] The second takes the whole phrase as an idiom referring to the temple, that is, 'in my father's house'.[50] While many scholars tend to opt decisively for one reading or another,[51] some say the phrase may be intentionally ambiguous.[52]

These scholars are likely right to see here an example of intentional ambiguity. First of all, neither reading can be discounted on philological grounds,[53] as confirmed by the divergent readings in the ancient versions.[54] Furthermore, either reading makes good sense as an answer to Mary's question. Jesus is in his father's house since he is in the temple. He is also engaged in his father's things since he is discussing the things of God with Israel's teachers, foreshadowing Jesus' later discussions with Israel's leaders when he returns to the temple (Luke 20). While the reading of 'house' makes particularly good sense in the *immediate* narrative context, de Jonge is right to point out that if this is Luke's intention, 'he expressed himself in an unnatural and even extraordinary manner'.[55] Elsewhere Luke does not hesitate to use οἶκος (house) to refer to the temple (Luke 6:4; 11:51; 19:46; Acts 7:47). This, as well as Mary and Joseph's reaction, 'And they did not understand the word which he spoke to them' (2:50), suggest that there is more going on here.[56]

Even so, it is one thing to say that a phrase is intentionally ambiguous; it is quite another to say what the effect of the ambiguity is. This point is sometimes lost on hermeneuticists such as Silva when he writes, 'If we can establish that an author has used ambiguity for literary purposes, then our problem is resolved'.[57] *Identifying* a literary device is not the same thing as *interpreting* it. This can be more difficult than it seems. Consider how interpreters assume that intentional ambiguity is simply a way to evoke two meanings at once. For example, Dennis Sylva offers a crude reading of this ambiguity, arguing that it simply evokes the meaning of 'in my father's house' and

[48]Some distinguish a third reading where τοῖς is read as a masculine article referring to people. However, this has found few proponents with the exception of Julius Döderlein, 'Das Lernen des Jesusknaben', in Ludwig Lemme (ed.), *Neue Jahrbücher für Deutsche Theologie* (Bonn: Weber, 1892), vol. 1, pp. 609–19. René Laurentin has the most complete survey of views on this verse, *Jésus au temple: Mystère de paques et foi de Marie en Luc 2, 48–50* (Paris: Gabalda, 1966), pp. 38–70.

[49]For similar phrases see 1 Cor. 7:32–34; 1 Tim. 4:15. Advocates include David Lyle Jeffrey, *Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2012), p. 50; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), p. 61.

[50]For similar phrases, see LXX Gen. 41:51; Esth. 7:9; Job 18:19. Advocates include Laurentin, *Jésus au temple*, p. 56; Marshall, *Luke*, p. 129.

[51]See the assessment of Henk J. de Jonge, 'Sonship, Wisdom, Infancy: Luke II. 41–51a', *New Testament Studies* 24 (1978), p. 331.

[52]For example, ibid.; Dennis D. Sylva, 'The Cryptic Clause *en tois tou patros mou dei einai me* in Lk 2:49b', *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 78 (1987), pp. 132–40; Mark Coleridge, *The Birth of the Lukan Narrative: Narrative as Christology in Luke 1–2* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), pp. 202–3.

[53]See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1981), vol. 1, pp. 443–4.

[54]See Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, 2nd edn (New York: Doubleday, 1993), p. 476.

[55]De Jonge, 'Sonship, Wisdom, Infancy', p. 332.

[56]Ibid., p. 334. Of course, Laurentin points out that it is not necessarily the ambiguity of the word τοῖς that confuses Mary and Joseph (*Jésus au temple*, pp. 77–81). This is another gap in the narrative.

[57]Silva, *Biblical Words*, p. 151.

'involved in my father's things' at the same time.[58] Better are those who focus on the effect on the readers. Mark Coleridge connects the readers' experience with that of Mary and Joseph, 'The effect of this ambiguity is to leave the readers sharing the parents' perplexity and asking what it might mean to be "in the things of my father"?'[59] This is a question that will only come up later on in in the Gospel narrative as characters wonder about the nature of Jesus' work (7:18–23) and his relationship to the temple (20:1–8). Thus, Jesus' cryptic response offers the readers a chance to reflect on how Jesus will engage in God's work, not only as he teaches but also when he returns to Jerusalem to suffer and be raised as was necessary according to the scriptures (24:26).[60] Yet, it also invites readers to think about the central role that the temple itself will play in the Lukan narrative.[61] Notably, the Gospel both begins (1:9) and ends in the temple (24:53). Acts also frequently centres around the temple (Acts 3–4; 5:17–42; 21:27–36). The temple is not something Jesus' followers leave behind as the message of Jesus spreads.[62] Thus, both readings of Luke 2:49 make good sense in the larger narrative context and invite readers to reflect on how these themes develop and intersect throughout the narrative.

A very different sort of ambiguity arises in Peter's sermon at Pentecost when he says, 'Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you all crucified' (Acts 2:36). To be sure, there is nothing here that is ambiguous at the sentence level. The ambiguity only arises when readers try to make sense of this verse in relation to other verses which talk about Jesus being Lord and Messiah since at least his birth (e.g., Luke 2:11). Particularly notable is Jesus' claim to have been previously anointed in Luke 4:18. Even Acts will talk about Jesus having been anointed by God at his baptism (10:38). Accordingly, Acts 2:36 gives rise to an ambiguity when readers ask how it is that Jesus can be said to be *made* Lord and Messiah at his resurrection when the narrative previously calls him Lord and Messiah well before his resurrection.[63]

One of the more common solutions in modern biblical scholarship is to say that Luke is a conservative redactor who, whether intentionally or not, is simply preserving a source which speaks of Jesus in a way that does not match the rest of the narrative.[64] It is impossible to disprove this conjecture. However, Rowe has helpfully argued that such readings (regardless of whether they are correct) engage in a contextual sleight-of-hand whereby 'a non-Lukan context is substituted for the Lukan one. . . . Even to get off the ground with an analysis of the meaning of Acts 2:36 for Luke's christology, we will have to work with the Lukan context, that is, Luke-Acts'.[65]

[58]Sylva, 'The Cryptic Clause', p. 134.

[59]Coleridge, *Birth of the Lukan Narrative*, pp. 202–3.

[60]In this respect see J. K. Elliott, 'Does Luke 2:41–52 Anticipate the Resurrection?', *Expository Times* 83/3 (1971): pp. 87–9.

[61]See Gregory R. Lanier, 'Luke's Distinctive Use of the Temple: Portraying the Divine Visitation', *Journal of Theology Studies*, n.s., 65/2 (2014), pp. 433–62.

[62]See also Isaac W. Oliver, *Luke's Jewish Eschatology: The National Restoration of Israel in Luke–Acts* (Oxford: OUP, 2021).

[63]Note that this passage was particularly significant for the Arian controversy, see, for example Athanasius, *Against the Arians* II.15; Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius* V.2–3. See also the discussion in C. Kavin Rowe, 'Acts 2.36 and the Continuity of Lukan Christology', *New Testament Studies* 53/1 (2007), pp. 38–41.

[64]For example, C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (London: T&T Clark, 1994), vol.1, p. 151.

[65]Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology*, p. 191.

When we do this, we see that there are in fact numerous other passages which also talk about Jesus undergoing a change. When Jesus tells the religious leaders the parable of the wicked tenants, he closes by quoting Psalm 118: 'The stone which the builders rejected, this has *become* the cornerstone' (Luke 20:17). Earlier, in the parable of the minas, the nobleman must leave for a far country in order to *receive* his kingship (19:12). Even in Peter's Pentecost sermon, he says that when Jesus was exalted to the right hand of God, he received 'the promise of the spirit' which he then poured out on his disciples (Acts 2:33).

There are thus two ways of talking about the time that Jesus receives his authority as Lord and Messiah. In one way of speaking, Jesus has possessed this authority from the beginning. In another way of speaking, Jesus receives this authority at his exaltation. There are a number of proposed ways of reading this broad narrative ambiguity in Luke and Acts. Nevertheless, many tend to collapse the ambiguity either by saying that Jesus is only said to be Lord or Messiah before the exaltation in an improper or proleptic way,[66] or by saying that Acts 2:36 merely means that Jesus is publicly revealed to be what he was all along at his exaltation.[67] Sternberg's comments regarding scholarly failures to appreciate ambiguity are again helpful:

> The endless critical warfare . . . misses (as well as, unwittingly, establishes) the poetic point. And so do the attempts to resolve the quarrel by blaming the work itself: the incoherencies that derive from its history of transmission – the staple of biblical source criticism – or from its sloppy execution or even from its disregard for clarity. It is not that any of these explanations of incoherence may be ruled out a priori, but that their abuse obscures the scope and working of ambiguity as a constructive force.[68]

Thus, better approaches to the narrative ambiguity that arises at Acts 2:36 will avoid prematurely resolving these two different ways of talking about Jesus' authority. Instead, the readers are invited to see how both ways of speaking are true. Jesus is born son of David and son of God (Luke 1:32). He is publicly recognised to be son of God by evil spirits (4:3, 41) and God himself (3:22; 9:35). He is rightly proclaimed Messiah by Peter (9:20) and those who execute him (23:35, 39). And yet there is a reason that the kingdom does not come right away (19:11; Acts 1:6). The builders must first reject the cornerstone (Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11) as the scriptures testify (Luke 24:26, 46; Acts 3:18), and Jesus must go to his father to receive his kingship (Luke 19:12) before he returns to serve as judge of all people, Jews and Gentiles, the living and the dead (Acts 10:42; 17:31). Both ways of speaking are essential to understanding the message of Luke and Acts.

Conclusion

This article has discussed how interpreters of scripture should think about ambiguity in biblical texts. Ambiguity occurs when readers cannot decide between more than one viable reading of a text. Most ambiguities can be resolved through further reading as readers try out the different readings in question. Yet sometimes the alternative readings

[66]For example, Arie W. Zwiep, *Christ, the Spirit, and the Community of God: Essays on the Acts of the Apostles* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), pp. 139–56.

[67]For example, Rowe, 'Acts 2.36', pp. 37–56.

[68]Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, p. 227.

work equally well.[69] In these cases, readers should resist the urge to collapse the ambiguity and instead observe how each reading contributes in its own way to the overall literary and theological effect of the work.[70] Two brief examples will help illustrate the value of this approach for biblical studies and biblical theology.

First, scholars of the New Testament are often at odds over to what degree the various writings in the New Testament are best read against the background of Graeco-Roman culture and literature on the one hand and Jewish culture and literature on the other.[71] While many scholars have grown to appreciate how much these cultural backgrounds overlapped in the ancient world, there is still significant disagreement over which backgrounds readers should presuppose as primary and listen for more intently.[72] However, a productive alternative model has been proposed by Daniel Marguerat with regard to Luke and Acts. Marguerat argues that Luke and Acts often engage in what he calls 'double signification', that is, many elements in the narrative make good sense against *both* Jewish and Graeco-Roman backgrounds.[73] Consider the centurion's pronouncement upon Jesus' death that this man is δίκαιος. This can be read as a pronouncement of Jesus' legal *innocence* in the manner of a Hellenistic innocent martyr or as a pronouncement of Jesus' *righteousness* in the manner of the righteous sufferer from the Psalms.[74] Likewise the story of Paul's shipwreck in Acts 27 can be productively read against the story of either Jonah or Odysseus.[75] Marguerat goes on to argue that this dynamic questions the polarising readings which insist on reading Luke and Acts either for Jewish or Graeco-Roman readers. Instead, there is no need to decide between the two. The ambiguity of Luke and Acts allows for productive reading against either background. In other words, different readers from different cultural backgrounds may be invited to see different (but complementary) things in the same text. There is no reason to think that this dynamic may not hold for other New Testament writings as well.

Second, this perspective on ambiguity has also been lacking from discussions of New Testament Christology. In the past several decades there has been a resurgence of interest in what is sometimes called, 'early high Christology', which proposes, among other things, that the Christian belief in Jesus' divinity is not a relatively late development but was present as early as the first generation of Jesus' disciples.[76] One drawback, however, has been a failure to recognise that Jesus' divine identity is often revealed mysteriously. Later statements of Jesus' identity and mission value precision and clarity, such as the Nicene or Athanasian Creeds or to a lesser extent the Gospel of John. However, other writings, such as the Synoptic Gospels, seem to value maintaining a sense of holy wonder at the revelation of the identity of Jesus. In other words, I do not

[69]Even when they do not, many resolutions of difficult cases of ambiguity are best understood as issues of probability and are therefore provisional. Even when one reading is judged to be more probable than another, interpreters do well to be honest about the relative probability of the readings they analyse. For example, see Farrar, 'Today in Paradise?', p. 200.

[70]Again, see Millar's excellent article, 'Suspicion and Naivety'.

[71]See, for example, Jan Willem van Henten and Joseph Verheyden (eds.), *Early Christian Ethics in Interaction with Jewish and Greco-Roman Contexts* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

[72]See, for example, Oliver, *Luke's Jewish Eschatology*, pp. 134–5.

[73]See Marguerat, 'Luc-Actes entres Jérusalem et Rome', pp. 73–9.

[74]Ibid., pp. 74–5.

[75]Ibid., pp. 76–8.

[76]See the literature review in Brandon D. Smith, 'What Christ Does, God Does: Surveying Recent Scholarship on Christological Monotheism', *Currents in Biblical Research* 17 (2019), pp. 184–208.

dispute the arguments that many have made regarding the Synoptics' indirect divine Christology.[77] My point is that too many have not reckoned with the fact that this indirectness, this imprecision, is no accident; it is part and parcel of the christological presentation. One scholar who understands this well is Richard Hays, who writes regarding the Gospel of Mark:

> The man Jesus is somehow – in a way that defies understanding – the God of Israel, present among us as the One whom wind and sea obey, and yet at last nailed to a cross. The community of those to whom this apocalyptic secret is given may dare to speak of this awful mystery only in hints, whispers, and scriptural allusions. . . . They are the possessors of a secret whose full revelation lies in the future. Mark's hermeneutical strategy, therefore, is to provide cryptic scriptural pointers that draw the discerning reader into the heart of the eschatological mystery.[78]

Scholars are right to unpack the mysteries contained in scripture. They do well, though, to remember that they are still dealing with mysteries. Being a good reader means recognising that one cannot and should not solve every problem. It means recognising that if readers of scripture are recipients of divine mysteries, then perhaps the best reaction is to follow Mary who 'stored up all these words, pondering them in her heart' (Luke 2:19).

[77]For example, Joshua E. Leim, *Matthew's Theological Grammar: The Father and the Son* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015).

[78]Richard B. Hays, *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), p. 96. See also Camille Focant, 'Une christologie de type "mystique" (Marc 1.1–16.8)', *New Testament Studies* 55 (2009): p. 20.

Cite this article: Kendall A. Davis, "How to read ambiguity well: Reading ambiguity in Luke and Acts," *Scottish Journal of Theology* (2025), 1–13. doi:10.1017/S0036930625000031