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'Loosening the Pangs of Death' (Acts 2:24)

Dying and death, Preservation from Death and its Defeat in the Book of Acts

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Abstract

This article examines the many occurrences of dying and death in the Acts of the Apostles. While Acts often refers to the death and resurrection of Jesus, it also speaks of the resurrection of the dead in general, of death as a form of divine judgement, of the prospect of death, and the actual deaths of Christ-believers, and other forms and instances of natural and violent dying and death. While there are instances of death or references to it in so many chapters, the emphasis in Acts lies on different divine and human ways of being saved from death or its threat, and on the resurrection of the dead. Fully acknowledging the reality and tragedy of death, Acts proclaims a message of life and salvation.

KEY WORDS Death, Dying, Death of Jesus, Resurrection of the dead, Divine judgement, Martyrdom, Paul, innocence of, Being raised from the dead, Preservation from death

1. Introduction

In a book that begins with the appearances of the risen Jesus, which frequently refers to the resurrection of Jesus (e.g. Acts 3:15) and the general resurrection of the dead (e.g. 23:6; 24:16), and which proclaims Jesus as the author of life or leader into life (3:15),[1] it is surprising to see in how many chapters of Acts people die, are being threatened by death, or are preserved from death. It is surprising how many and how different people die under very different circumstances, and what different significance and interpretations are given to their deaths. However, a closer look indicates that the actual theme of Luke-Acts is the preservation from death, and its eventual overcoming of death and a message of life.

1 For the history of research, the origin and this translation see Müller, '**ἀρχηγός**', 392–394, and Keener, *Acts II*, 1097–1099 ('the author of life', 1097): 'Jesus is thus the heroic leader leading the way to the historic goal of achieving eternal life […], the life of the resurrection […], and as such fulfils the promises and inaugurates the opportunity for the eschatological era of blessing' (1098).

It must be taken into account that the Acts of the Apostles, as the second volume of what is commonly called Luke-Acts, presupposes Luke's Gospel—and in the case of our quest—the deaths mentioned on its pages and their interpretation. Two examples suffice: Jesus refers to the tragic and outrageous death of Galilean festival pilgrims in Jerusalem at the hands of Pilate's soldiers, and to the rather coincidental death of eighteen people, who perished when the tower in Siloam collapsed (they simply were in the wrong place at the wrong time), and interprets their deaths as a consequence of their sin and refusal to repent (Luke 13:1–5). The Lukan passion narrative portrays Jesus' dying and death in view of the Isaianic suffering Servant of God, as U. Mittmann-Richert has persuasively shown.[2] From these two instances, it is to be expected that at least some of the deaths mentioned and discussed on the pages of Acts are also pregnant with meaning. Detailed accounts of the death of Jesus, the removal of his corpse from the cross and of its burial, appear in Luke's Gospel to show that none other than Jesus of Nazareth died on the cross, was buried, and rose from the dead (Luke 23:23–55). There are witnesses to these events.

In this essay our focus is on the literary presentation of dying and death in Acts. We cannot analyse the historical reliability of these accounts,[3] nor their potential contribution to the reconstruction of the history of earliest Christianity.[4] Our aim is to survey and—as far as possible—to systematise the instances of dying and death in Acts, and to analyse, as far as evidence is available, the explicit and implicit interpretations of these deaths. This is followed by a summary, hermeneutical considerations, and reflections on the present significance of the instances of dying and death in Acts.

2. Dying and Death in the Book of Acts

2.1. The Death of Jesus and its Significance

A first focus is the many references to Jesus' death in Acts, usually in combination with his resurrection, in varying degrees of detail.[5] In much of the critical research on Luke-Acts of the past—often heavily influenced by Paul in the refraction of Lutheran theology, or, at least, a certain variety of Lutheran theology,[6]—the death of Jesus and especially its existing or lacking soteriological interpretation, and the nature of this interpretation, has played a prominent role. Does Luke know of or represent a soteriological interpretation of the death of Jesus that agrees with Paul or at least is clearly reminiscent of his understanding?[7] For many decades, Paul (in a

2 Mittmann-Richert, *Sühnetod*; see my review in RBL 05/2010 (http://www.bookreviews.org/BookDetail.asp?TitleId=7569). See also Doble, *Paradox*.

3 For the themes and the current debates see Backhaus and Häfner, *Historiographie*; Frey, Rothschild and Schröter, *Apostelgeschichte*; and Keener, Acts I, 51–220. In many instances the presentation of Acts cannot be compared to other extant ancient sources which renders the assessment of its reliability and historical value a difficult endeavour. However, this does not apply to the circumstances of the death of Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:18–23), since Josephus (*Ant* 19.345–347) also refers to this event, even though his emphasis is different; see the discussion in Keener, *Acts 3:1—14:28*, 1965–71; see also Acts 14:19 and 2 Cor. 11:25. For a controversial historical assessment of the deadly threat which some early Christ-believers faced, see also the discussion sparked by Moss, *Myth*; in Rebillard, *Narratives*, and Waldner, *Erfindung*.

4 See, for instance, the discussion of the deaths of Stephen and of James in Schnelle, *Jahre*, 111–155, and Koch, *Geschichte*, 169–178, 190–192.

5 On dying and death in the New Testament in general see the survey by Vollenweider, 'Death', 361–367, and Dietrich and Vollenweider, 'Tod', 582–600.

6 See Madsen, 'Cross', 1063–70.

7 For a survey of the Pauline interpretations of the death of Jesus see Stuhlmacher, *Theologie*, 293–304.

certain scholarly and confessional interpretation) was the 'standard' against which not only the Epistle of James but also Luke-Acts had to be assessed — often without much consideration of the different literary genres, to mention but one neglected factor. Some Pauline interpretations of the death of Jesus do not appear in Luke-Acts (at least, not at first sight), therefore, scholars have often criticised Luke. However, it was and is easily overlooked that for Luke, the entire life of Jesus is of importance. It is not without reason that Luke, in contrast to Paul, wrote an entire Gospel dedicated to the whole life of Jesus, from birth to ascension. This can also be observed in the missionary speeches in Acts, which for a long time were seen as the source *par excellence* for Lukan theology. Often it was assumed that these speeches, in particular, display Luke's concern and his theology, since Luke supposedly freely shaped these speeches, unbound by any sources.[8]

It should also be kept in mind that in view of the relatively detailed description of the passion of Jesus in Luke's Gospel, which the author of Acts presupposes as known to his readers, brief references to the fact of Jesus' death and its course suffice in the second volume. If one takes seriously the presentation and interpretation of the death of Jesus against the backdrop of the Isaianic suffering Servant of God, mentioned above, a lack of further explicit interpretation of this death in Acts is not surprising.

We briefly summarise the references to the death of Jesus and then turn to other occurrences of dying and death in Acts which have often been neglected in the scholarly focus on possible correspondences with the Pauline interpretations of the death of Jesus.

Already on the day of Pentecost, Peter directly addresses the public and generally known death of Jesus in Jerusalem: 'This Jesus, delivered up according to the definitive plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hand of lawless men' (Acts 2:23; there is a further reference to the crucifixion in 2:36).[9] Mentioning the death of Jesus is the prerequisite for the more important proclamation of his resurrection: 'God raised him up, loosening the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by death' (2:24).[10] Only in the resurrection of Jesus was David's confident confession fulfilled: 'For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption' (2:27).[11] Since the patriarch David certainly died ('He died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day', 2:29), he could not have spoken of himself.[12] David's permanent death, undisputed and demonstrable by the presence of his tomb in Jerusalem, proves that these promises could not have been fulfilled yet and were fulfilled only now, in Jesus. Thus David, who is said not to have spoken of himself but of his descendant, becomes an important witness to the relationship of the 'saint' (Jesus) to God, which continued beyond physical death. David spoke of the resurrection of the Christ: 'He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see decay' (2:31).

8 For the significance and an assessment of the speeches of Acts see Keener, *Acts I*, 258–319.

9 Throughout the article, quotations are from the ESV. The references to the death of Jesus appear in a series of assertions which contrast divine and human action; see Stuhlmacher, *Theologie*, 190–194. Dietrich and Vollenweider, 'Tod', 593.19–23 write: 'The early Christian confession of resurrection drastically highlights the contrast between the killing of Jesus and the turning point brought about by God: God "loosed the pangs of death, because it was impossible that he should be held by death" (Acts 2:23–24, with reference to Ps. 17:6 LXX [also Ps. 114:3 LXX, 2 Sam. 22:6]; see also Acts 4:10; 10:39–40)'. All translations from German by the author.

10 On the origin and meaning of the expression 'pangs of death' see Haacker, *Apostelgeschichte*, 62: 'Luke adopts this expression from the Bible of his audience, but Peter's speech here presupposes the Hebrew text, because "to hold fast" only fits with "ropes" and not with "labour"'; similarly Keener, *Acts I*, 943–944. Even if death already had Jesus fully under his control after Jesus' death, had already bound Jesus with his 'pangs' (LXX), it could not permanently hold on to Jesus. Before the process of decay set in, God intervened and delivered Jesus from this bondage.

11 In this manner Peter emphasises that Jesus had definitely died, but that his body had not yet been affected by the process of decay, see Keener, *Acts I*, 954: 'the incorruptible one is not David'.

12 For the tomb of David in Jerusalem see Keener, *Acts I*, 951–952.

Acts 3 also speaks of Jesus' death and its circumstances: 'and you killed the author of life' (Acts 3:15). Also, in this speech, the resurrection of Jesus, the overcoming of his death, appears immediately after mentioning his death.[13] The apostles act 'by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead' (4:10). In this way, the stone that was rejected by the builders has become the cornerstone (4:11). Therefore, there is salvation in no one else, 'nor is there any other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved' (4:12). Jesus' death is also alluded to in Acts 4:26–28: 'The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed'.

Also, outside of Jerusalem, the death of Jesus is a crucial element of the missionary proclamation: Jesus was 'put to death by hanging him on a tree' (Acts 10:39). Compared to the references in Jerusalem (some of them blame and directly accuse the religious leaders and the population of the death of Jesus), it is noteworthy that the antagonists of Jesus and those responsible for his death are not specified: 'They put him to death by hanging him on a tree' (10:39).[14] The inhabitants of Jerusalem, 'though they found in Jesus no guilt worthy of death, [they] asked Pilate to have him executed. And when they had carried out all that was written of him [in this sinful action they fulfilled the will and plan of God, of which the death of Jesus was an integral part] [they] took him from the tree and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead' (13:28–29). God raised Jesus from the dead, therefore, he did not experience decay as a result of death (13:33–37): Jesus would 'no more return to corruption [...] You will not let your Holy One see corruption [...] David was laid with his fathers and saw corruption, but he, whom God raised up did not see corruption'. Arguing from Scripture, Paul explains and proves in Thessalonica 'that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus [...] [despite or even because his death on the cross], is the Christ"' (17:3).

Also, in Athens, the death of Jesus must have played a role in Paul's initial missionary proclamation. When Paul is said to have spoken of Jesus and his resurrection or the resurrection in general, this presupposes the death of Jesus (Acts 17:18).[15] Only at the end of his speech before the Areopagus Council does Paul return to his initial evangelistic proclamation in the *agora* without specifically mentioning the preceding death of Jesus: 'God raised Jesus from the dead' (17:31). The proclamation of the resurrection of the dead (17:32)—initially probably the resurrection of Jesus, but closely connected with it or derived from it, the resurrection of the dead in general—leads to the interruption and end of Paul's speech.[16]

Only Acts 20:28 offers a direct interpretation of the death of Jesus: the significance and great dignity of the entire flock, that is, the church, derives from the fact that God 'obtained it with his own blood'. This can only refer to the blood *of his own Son*, Jesus. Without explaining this link in detail (which is not to be expected in a farewell speech of Paul to Christian leaders), the existence of the church is connected with the death of Jesus, especially with his shed blood, his surrendered life. For the readers of Luke-Acts, the account of the last Passover meal in Jerusalem comes to mind (Luke 22:19–20) and Jesus' own statement that in the impending passion events, the words of the prophet Isaiah 'must be fulfilled in me: "And he was numbered with the transgressors"' (22:37–38)—and was treated accordingly.

13 The ministry of the apostles is summarised as 'they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead' (Acts 4:2). The healing of the lame man in Acts 3:1–10 has been interpreted by some scholars as an allusion to the resurrection of Jesus; see, for instance, Hamm, 'Healing', 305–319.

14 Only the immediately preceding reference to 'the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem' gives a clue of who was involved.

15 See Keener, *Acts III*, 2598–99.

16 See Smith, *Rhetoric*.

On later occasions, the death of Jesus, likewise, appears as an integral part of the Christian proclamation. Before King Herod Agrippa II, the Roman *praefectus* Festus summarises Paul's controversial preaching in this way: 'and about a certain Jesus, who was dead, but whom Paul asserted to be alive' (Acts 25:19). Later, in his defence speech before Festus, Paul emphasises 'that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead [thus not only suffer but actually die], he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles' (26:23).

With regard to the presentation and interpretation of the death of Jesus in Acts, Craig S. Keener writes:

> Luke's theology does not neglect the cross even if he emphasizes (especially in the theologically pregnant speeches) the resurrection. Despite the reservations of many as to whether Luke has much of a theology about Jesus' death, scholars have explored Luke's theology of the cross. One scholar [P. Doble] argues that Luke alludes to imagery from Wisdom of Solomon to help explain Jesus' death as the righteous sufferer. This view might not appear as developed as the views of some other early Christian writers, but it would indicate, at the least, a coherent theology of the cross.
>
> Although Luke does not articulate an explicit doctrine of propitiatory atonement as it appears in some other writers (e.g., Rom 5:6–10; 1 John 2:2; 4:10), it is not correct to say that he neglects any soteriological significance to Jesus's death. Jesus's blood inaugurates a new covenant (Luke 22:20); Luke also draws on Isaiah's Servant 'Songs' in relation to Jesus' passion (Luke 22:37; Acts 8:32–33). To suggest that Luke would reject the theology drawn from Isaiah's servant by his Christian contemporaries simply because he does not cite the particular lines stressing atonement (cf. Mark 10:45; 14:22–24; Luke 22:27) seems more an argument from silence than would the presumption that he accepted the widely held early Christian view regarding the context he cites. He does not react against this view, and so silence cannot be construed as rejection.
>
> Luke's emphasis, however, lies elsewhere, especially on the resurrection, which gives the cross its divinely informed meaning. Because he writes a narrative and not an argumentative treatise, Luke often focuses on Christ's death as part of God's salvific plan. God's sovereignty in Jesus's death (joined with the resurrection that followed it in Acts 2:24) would encourage those who followed his model according to God's plan (e.g., 7:59–60; 14:22; 20:24).[17]

God's intervention through the resurrection of Jesus, in which he uniquely affirmed the Messiah who was rejected, fits well with the emphasis that it is this 'God himself who gives to all humanity life and breath and everything' (Acts 17:25).

For Luke, a particularly soteriological interpretation of the death of Jesus was apparently less important than the emphasis that the unexpected and unimaginable *death* of the Messiah was part and parcel of the plan of God.[18] As such, it was explained by the risen Lord from the Scriptures to the disciples on the road to Emmaus and, later on, in Jerusalem (Luke 24:25–27,45–47). The disturbing fact of the death of Jesus is offset by the equally strong and stronger emphasis on Jesus' *resurrection*. By raising Jesus from the dead, God fully vindicated him. Now he is the Author of life or the Leader to life.[19] In addition, for Luke, the death of Jesus is part of his entire life, and

17 Keener, *Acts I*, 938–39; for detailed treatments, see Kimbell, *Atonement*, and Jantsch, *Jesus*; for the close linking of death and resurrection, see Horton, *Death*.

18 See Squires, *Plan*.

19 See Dietrich and Vollenweider, 'Tod', 590.45–51; on the Lukan emphasis on the resurrection of Jesus, see Thompson, *Acts*, 71–88, 93–95.

therefore, relevant to salvation.[20] The references to his death appear in the wider context of his biography, which is not reduced to his death. Therefore, the theology of Acts is not deficient simply because it does not interpret the death of Jesus in detail, or does not interpret it in the sense or with the emphasis found elsewhere in the New Testament.

As indicated previously, although we set out with the death of Jesus, our focus is on the *other* occurrences of dying and death in Acts, and upon its significance and in what contexts Luke refers to it. In closing, we will place the references to the death of Jesus in the wider context of Luke's many other references to dying and death in Acts.

2.2. The General Resurrection from the Dead

In addition to the *resurrection of Jesus* mentioned in the context of the accounts of his death and its circumstances, and closely related to it, the *resurrection of all the dead* appears time and again. Based on the specific instance of Jesus' resurrection, the apostles proclaim the resurrection from the dead (Acts 4:2). Jesus is the divinely appointed judge of the living and the dead (10:42), whose resurrection is a prerequisite for this eschatological judgement. 'Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some [among Paul's audience at the Areopagus] began to mock, but others said [...]' (17:32). Paul confesses his hope in the resurrection of the dead: 'It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial' (23:6). In this context, it becomes clear that this conviction is not limited to Christ-believers. Rather, in the Lukan portrayal, it is a widespread early Jewish hope. The Pharisees also reckon with a resurrection.[21] Paul has 'a hope in God, which these men [his accusers before Felix] themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust' (24:15). Therefore, he affirms, 'So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and men' (24:16).[22] Paul claims that he is accused by his Jewish opponents for the sake of the resurrection from the dead (24:21; it is not clear whether this refers primarily to the resurrection of Jesus or to the general resurrection of the dead mentioned earlier[23]). This 'hope' is further defined regarding its content in Acts 26:8: 'Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?'[24]

This resurrection will 'loosen the pangs of death' (Acts 2:24) for all people; death will be overcome. It is a source of hope and motivation for Christ-believers, but also shows the future responsibility and destiny of all people before God. For no person, death, suffered under whatever circumstances, is the end. Therefore, in view of the resurrection of Jesus, which is the anticipation, guarantee, and model of the eschatological general resurrection of the dead,[25] it is mandatory to live accordingly in the present (2:38–40; 24:16). All people everywhere are called to repent.

20 See Stenschke, 'Biography', 267–294, and with different emphases Stenschke, 'Presentation'.

21 See Avery-Peck and Neusner, *Judaism*, and Nickelsburg, *Resurrection*.

22 Nickelsburg, 'Resurrection', 1144, emphasises that for the NT, 'the final judgment is based not simply on faith in Christ or the lack of it [...] but on one's good or evil deeds, and this even in the Pauline epistles that celebrate "justification by faith"'.

23 See Keener, *Acts IV*, 3401–3407.

24 See Haacker, 'Bekenntnis', 135–150.

25 See Dietrich and Vollenweider, 'Tod', 590.52–591.4. Acts draws on several early Jewish understandings of resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus appears as an individual, *post mortem* bodily resurrection within time (Luke 24:36–43). The general resurrection of the just and the unjust is expected to take place at the end of time. Their *post mortem* fate does not appear in Acts, see the enigmatic parable in Luke 16:19–31. For early Judaism, Nickelsburg, 'Resurrection', 1142, concludes, 'In addition to a resurrection of the body, biblical and Jewish texts also speak of the ascent of the spirit or one's immortal soul to heaven and exaltation among the angelic host'.

2.3. Death as a Consequence of Divine Judgement

In his first speech in Acts, Peter describes the tragic fate of Judas in a drastic manner: 'falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. And it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their own language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood' (Acts 1:19–20).[26] Later, Peter adds that Judas 'turned aside from this ministry and apostleship to go to his own place' (1:25). Judas, the man who betrayed Jesus, did not simply trip and end up with a troublesome torn ligament or a fractured ankle. As it stands, Peter's reference is hardly comprehensible: a person falling over headlong usually gets some scratches and breaks some bones at the worst, but does not burst open in a way that the bowels protrude. This description indicates that this death, described so drastically, is more than an unfortunate mishap: it is the dramatic end of an enemy of God, as it appears in the Old Testament (Lev. 10:1–2, for example; see also Num. 16:20–35) and in some early Jewish writings. Keener writes:

> [D]isembowelment or bowel pains were considered a particularly painful and appropriate way for a wicked person to die. But they also provide a graphic image for a terrible death that is not limited to the wicked (e.g., 2 Sam 2:23; 3:27; 20:10, 12). Historians were not above reporting the later suffering of an evil character in the account as just deserts for evil behaviour. The gruesome reports of Judas's death here and in Matt 27:5 help conform his death to that of other notoriously evil men, such as Herod the Great or Nadan in the story of Ahikar. Judas' death, like that of Herod (Acts 12:23) and Ananias (5:5), warns Luke's audience of the dangers of opposing the kingdom.[27]

The account of the circumstances of the death of Judas in Acts 1 is in tension with the account in Matthew 27:3–5, where Judas is overwhelmed by remorse and commits suicide even before the death of Jesus: 'Then, when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind [...] "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood" [...] and he went and hanged himself'. In contrast, the version in Acts 1 places a different emphasis: it was not Judas who actively laid hands on himself, but God's judicial action led to Judas' drastic end.[28] In Luke 22:3, Judas' endeavours are associated with Satan.[29]

Divine judgement also appears in the quotation from Deuteronomy 18:19 at the end of Peter's second major speech to a Jewish audience. Whoever among the people of God 'does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people' (Acts 3:23). The refusal to listen to Jesus, who is identified with this prophet, and to act accordingly, will lead to the loss of membership in the people of God.[30] Whether this implies death and what kind of death is not clear. Because they

26 On the three instances of death as a curse in Acts (1:18–19; 5:1–11; 12:18–25) see Guttenberger, 'Tod', 279–294.

27 Keener, *Acts I*, 760; see also Guttenberger, 'Tod', 282–287, similarly in Zwiep, 'Judas', 940: 'one that is strikingly different: not a self-inflicted execution, but an unfortunate and tragic fall, an outright act of divine revenge, with no sign of remorse. [...] According to Acts, Judas dies the death of a traitor as a result of an act of divine retribution'; see also Zwiep's monograph *Judas* and the survey of the OT and early Jewish background by Yinger, 'Judgement', 853–855.

28 For the differences and similarities between both versions see the discussion in Keener, *Acts I*, 761–765.

29 Guttenberger, 'Tod', 287 notes: 'With the judgement of Judas, God again proves to be the sole Lord over the events in the nascent church. Luke 22:3 had told of how Satan entered Judas and thus initiated the Passion events. Now Satan loses his agent. What follows is a time when Satan has no power. The first period of the early church — which begins with the Pentecost event — is an epoch free from satanic influences, a "golden age". In this it resembles the period of Jesus' public ministry, which, after Jesus had resisted Satan (Luke 4:13), is also portrayed as devoid of evil intervention until the beginning of the passion'.

30 See Stenschke, 'Jesus', 69–96.

allowed Satan to fill their hearts and lied not only to people but also to the Holy Spirit or God, Ananias and Sapphira die and are buried (5:1–11).[31]

The dramatic death of King Herod Agrippa I is also presented as divine judgement.[32] Because he tolerates the bestowal of divine honours on himself, and does not reject this acclamation and reverence (as Peter did before him, Acts 10:25–26, and Barnabas and Paul will do in Lystra afterwards, 14:13–18), 'the angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give glory to God, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last' (12:23).[33] Reminiscent of Judas, this enemy of God does not simply die, but expires in a particularly revolting way.

The interpretation of an (imminent) death as divine judgement occurs once on the lips of non-Jews. After a fatal snakebite on the island of Malta, Paul is, at first, taken to be a murderer whose immediate death as a divine judgement is to be expected (Acts 28:4).[34] However, against all the expectations of the 'barbarians', Paul does not drop dead (28:6).

Drawing on Genesis 15:16,18–21, Paul mentions in his speech in Pisidian Antioch that God destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan and gave their land to the Israelites as an inheritance (Acts 13:19; see 'for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete', Gen. 15:16).

Besides these, more or less dramatic deaths as expressions of direct divine judgement, there are also some 'milder cases' of (human) judgement in Acts.[35] The sorcerer Elymas who sought to keep Sergius Paulus away from believing (Acts 13:8) receives Paul's verdict: 'And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time' (13:11). In view of the severe preceding designations ('You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord', 13:9), the mild judgement is surprising.[36]

It is striking that Saul of Tarsus—impressively described in Acts 9:1 as 'still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord', see also Acts 8:3)—was indeed 'confronted' by the exalted and glorified Jesus as he travelled to Damascus. However, Saul was not judged and did not die an appropriate draconic death. Just the opposite is the case: Paul is spared from the traditional and appropriate end of the enemies of God.[37] He is pardoned and called to ministry (9:3–19; cf. Rom. 1:5).

Also, on other occasions, the divine judgement that might be expected from the passages just mentioned is absent: neither the Jewish nor the non-Jewish antagonists of the earliest Christian mission are judged by God: the angel of the Lord does not strike the Jews who turn the Lystran crowd against Paul and, in this way, cause his being stoned (Acts 14:19), nor the silversmith Demetrius and his colleagues, nor the Jews in Jerusalem who conspire to kill Paul. In the latter

31 See Guttenberger, 'Tod', 287–291 and the reports of funerals in Luke 7:12 and 23:50–56.

32 See Allen, *Death*, and Haacker, 'Schicksalsjahr', 62–72.

33 See Leven, 'Würmer', 925–926.

34 See Stenschke, *Portrait*, 94–97, and Ritzmann, 'Schlange', 777–778.

35 For the Hellenistic-Roman context see Helm and Leven, 'Strafwunder', 833–834.

36 See Liggins, *Proofs*. In view of this comprehensive picture of death as divine judgement and divine judgement more generally, it is questionable to propose a pattern of the punitive miracles in Acts 1:18–19; 5:1–11 and 12:18–25 which builds on the observation that OT narrative patterns often combine punitive miracles with miracles of salvation. Allen, *Death*, 93–108 has built on this and suggested (summarised by Guttenberger, 'Tod', 281): 'Following the "Exodus pattern" (Israel's rescue of Israel from Egypt and the death of Pharaoh), the death of Jesus is followed by retribution against Judas, the death of Stephen by the conversion of Paul, which bears traits of punishment, and the death of James as well as the imprisonment of Peter by the punishment of Herod Agrippa I. In each case, the death of the persecutor initiates a new phase for the Church'.

37 For instance, Paul is spared the kind of divine chastisement that Heliodor suffered in the temple in Jerusalem (2 Macc. 3); see Gera, 'Heliodorus', 746–751.

cases, Paul is delivered in an entirely immanent way. The relatively mild punitive miracle against Elymas is the only miracle of this kind performed by Paul.

With the many references to the death of Jesus and the several occurrences of death as a result of divine judgment, it is striking that Jesus' death is not presented in Acts as a vicarious suffering of divine judgement on the sins of Jews and non-Jews alike. Only the words of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane in Luke 22:39–44 can be understood in this way: Jesus is ready to drink the cup of divine judgement/wrath (according to OT idiom, cf. Ps. 11:6; 75:9; Jer. 25:17; 49:12; Hab. 2:15–16; Obad. 16; Lam. 4:12) vicariously for Israel and the nations.[38]

Luke is rightly regarded as the evangelist of God's salvation.[39] At the same time, however, the interpretation of death as an act of divine judgement is also an essential ingredient of the biblical image of God.[40]

2.4. Intentions to Kill Christ-Believers and the Accounts of Individual Martyrdoms

Time and again, the Book of Acts reports violent conflicts between the apostles or other Christ-believers (such as the so-called Hellenists and, later, also Paul and his various travelling companions) and other Jews.[41] Repeatedly, the actions of the opponents threaten the lives of the Christ-believers.[42] At the end of a series of conflicts, the religious leaders in Jerusalem are determined to kill the apostles (Acts 5:33). Only the moderating advice of Gamaliel causes them to reconsider their intentions and saves the apostles' lives. Stephen is stoned to death by his opponents (7:58). He dies while praying for his murderers (7:60). At this point, Saul is introduced into the narrative with the telling note that he approved of Stephen's execution (8:1a). However, Saul does not content himself with approving and safeguarding the garments of the executioners: later he breathes threats and murders against the disciples of the Lord (9:1). Looking back on this time in his life, Paul later confesses, while himself on trial, 'but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them' (26:10).

After his conversion/calling, Paul himself becomes the target of such intentions in Damascus: 'When many days had passed, the Jews plotted to kill him [...] they were watching the gates day and night in order to kill him' (Acts 9:23–24). Only his nocturnal escape in a basket over the city wall spares his life (9:25). Later on, some Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem want to kill Paul (9:29: 'but they were seeking to kill him'). When these intentions become known, Paul is sent away by the Christ-believers. Herod Agrippa I 'laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword' (12:1). When he realises that this pleases the

38 Knust, 'Cup', 1162–1164.

39 See Jantsch, *Jesus* (Jantsch also offers a survey of different conceptions of Lukan soteriology, pp.18–24), and of the older studies, Marshall, *Luke*, 77–215; see also Suk Fong Jim, *Saviour*.

40 See Blischke, 'Judge', 983, and Stenschke, 'Judge', 987–990.

41 On the conflicts between the apostles and the religious leaders in Jerusalem and the conflicts between the Hellenistic Jewish Christ-believers and other Jews from the Diaspora in Jerusalem, see Stenschke, 'Conflicts I', 15–31, and 'Conflicts II', 114–134; for the conflicts between the earliest Christian mission and Jews in the Diaspora, see Stenschke, 'Encounters', 135–179.

42 See the survey in Guttenberger, 'Tod', 294–300.

Jewish opponents, he also has Peter imprisoned.[43] The show trial and the possible execution do not take place[44] because Peter is liberated by an angel of the Lord and able to leave Jerusalem (12:3–17).[45]

The threat to Paul's life in Damascus and Jerusalem continues in other places. In Iconium, non-Jews, and Jews, and their rulers attempt to mistreat and stone the missionaries (Acts 14:6). In Lystra, Jews from Antioch and Iconium succeed in persuading the crowds. They stone Paul, drag him out of the city, and suppose that he has died.[46] 'But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city' (14:19–20).

On the return trip from the third missionary phase, Paul affirms his willingness not only to be taken captive in Jerusalem, but also to die for the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 21:13). In Jerusalem, Paul is seized by force and dragged out to the temple. In addition, 'they were seeking to kill him' (21:31; 26:21). A short while later, because of his Roman citizenship, Paul can aviod scourging with possibly deadly consequences (22:24–29).[47]

In Jerusalem, a group of fanatical Jews joins together with the firm intention of killing Paul (Acts 23:12–15,21, 'kill' appears four times): 'till they had killed Paul' (12), 'till we have killed Paul' (14), 'And we are ready to kill him before he comes near' (15), and 'till they have killed him' (21). Claudius Lysias reports accordingly, 'This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them' (23:27), noting that Paul 'was charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment' (23:29; see 2.5 below). The intentions to kill Paul are so intense that they are still present even after Paul's two-year long detention in Caesarea: 'because they were planning an ambush to kill him on the way' (25:3).

After and besides the action against Jesus in Luke's Gospel (the intention to kill Jesus is repeatedly mentioned and his crucifixion eventually carried out), this violence has a 'pre-history' as it is narrated in Stephen's speech. Already in the past, the people of God were massively endangered: The Egyptians 'dealt shrewdly with our people and forced our fathers to expose their infants, so that they would not be kept alive' (Acts 7:19).[48] Later in the speech, the story of threat and killing continues among the people of God themselves: The fathers persecuted and killed the prophets (7:52): 'And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous

43 Acts 12:19. It is not clear whether the soldiers who were unable to safeguard Peter were executed themselves, see Keener, *Acts II*, 1953–57; 'The likelier sense here is thus simply that they were being led to execution […] While the blame for the action rests with Agrippa rather than with Peter or the angel, it is noteworthy that the normal course of human events follows here; there is no divine intervention for the guards. Luke does not invite his hearers to celebrate the guards' demise; elsewhere, one of his reliable characters intervenes to preserve a guard's life, where this was possible (16:28)' (1956–1957). In this case, death would not only appear as a consequence of divine judgement but also as the consequence of a human verdict, as is the case with Jesus, Stephen, and James. This is all the more tragic as the guards were not guilty of negligence and could not be blamed for Peter's supernatural liberation.

44 For the intentions of Herod see Keener, *Acts II*, 1874: 'planning to have him executed after the Passover festival'; see also p.1877.

45 In the accounts of other miraculous liberations on Acts (5:19–21 in Jerusalem; 16:25–26 in Philippi) there is no indication that the apostles or Paul and Silas are saved from an immediately impending execution, see Acts 16:35 and Stenschke, 'Domains', 129–163, see also Hintermaier, *Befreiungswunder*.

46 For the details see Keener, *Acts II*, 2172–2177.

47 See Keener, *Acts III*, 3247: 'the present form of torture was far more dangerous—indeed, potentially deadly. Although meant for interrogation, this torture, which could rip the flesh of the subject's back, could produce 'crippling or death' before it was finished (Dig. 48.19.8.3; Mart. *Pol.* 2.1). Although deliberate killing was not the intention of an interrogatory flogging, scourging could also be used as a means of execution. Paul thus has reason to speak up more openly than before (Acts 22:25)'.

48 For the details see Keener, *Acts II*, 1376–1381.

One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered'.

How are these references to the threat of death and actual martyrdom with their high degree of violence to be evaluated?[49] Leaving aside the important but notoriously difficult question of historical reliability, we ask how these statements function in the narrative of Acts and how they contribute to its purpose. Several possibilities should be considered:

- The references to Saul's activities as a persecutor, including the death of the Christ-believers, serve to emphasise the zeal and radicalism of the pre-Christian Saul (Acts 8:1a; 26:10). Against this background, his pardon and calling, appearing three times in Acts, become all the more astonishing. They can only be understood as a sovereign act of the exalted Lord, who took the initiative and clearly affirms Paul's disputed ministry.
- These references show the extent of the measures that at least some individual opponents of the Christ-believers and their mission are prepared to take. This indicates how controversial the proclamation of Jesus of Nazareth as God's Christ was among his Jewish contemporaries and the extent of the division within the people of God.[50]
- In the face of this massive threat, the determination and courage of the Christ-believers becomes all the more apparent: Saul faithfully adheres to his commissioning by the risen Christ, even though this meant suffering and the repeated threats to his life (from a rhetorical perspective, an 'argument by sacrifice'). His suffering is not only announced to Ananias (Acts 9:16: 'For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name'), but also reported on several occasions in the later narrative. This suffering was part of the race Paul had to complete and of the ministry that he had to carry out fearlessly, 'that I have received from the Lord Jesus, to testify of the gospel of the grace of God' (20:24).
- At the end of Acts, the references to the zealous intentions to kill Paul serve to explain why he had to make use of his Roman citizenship and appeal to the imperial court even before a Roman court in Judea. Paul took this crucial step (with all the consequences that it meant for him personally, but possibly also for his Jewish opponents!) only when it was foreseeable that—in view of Porcius Festus' desire to 'do the Jews a favour'[51] (Acts 25:9) and the determination of the conspirators—he had to reckon with the fact that in the case of a further trial in Jerusalem, he would most likely not even arrive there alive (25:9–11).
- The references to the martyrdom of Stephen and James and to the plans to execute Peter serve to explain why the Hellenistic Christ-believers of Jewish origin had to and did leave Jerusalem, and, at a later date, also the apostles. They did not abandon their people because they no longer cared or were disappointed, but only left when they faced death if they were to continue to stay.[52] Following the commission of Jesus, they proclaimed the salvation given to Israel in the Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, as long as possible in Jerusalem (Acts 1:8). In this way, they embodied and through their ministry continued the gathering and restoration of Israel that began with Jesus himself and the calling of the circle of Twelve by him. It was their opponents who silenced their witness in Jerusalem, through murder and expulsion.

49 On the significance of violence in studying religious conflicts see Mayer, 'Conflict', 1–19.

50 See Jervell, 'People', 41–74.

51 See Yoder, *Representatives*, 303–332.

52 This also applies to Paul who was ushered off by the Christ-believers of Jerusalem; see Stenschke, 'Emissary'.

2.5. 'Not Worthy of Death': Protestations of Paul's Innocence

The final chapters of Acts contain a number of statements of Paul in which he asserts his own innocence and/or in which protagonists from the social elite conclude, after examining the facts and accusations levelled against him, that Paul has done nothing that would warrant a death penalty.[53] Before Festus, Paul insists that he has not committed anything for which he deserves to die (Acts 25:11). If this were so, he would not refuse to die. This estimate is confirmed by Festus to King Herod Agrippa II: 'But I have found that he had done nothing deserving death' (25:25). After the hearing of Paul before Festus and the king, the latter confirms, 'This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment' (26:31). Also, in his last speech in Acts (Acts 28:18), Paul affirms that the Roman officials wanted to release him 'when they had examined me [i.e. seriously investigated his case], because there was no reason for the death penalty in my case'.[54] This recurring motif is part of Luke's strategy, appearing several times in Acts, of drawing parallels between Paul and Jesus,[55] of whom Paul also affirms, 'and though they found in Jesus no guilt worthy of death, they asked Pilate to have him executed' (13:28).

Because of a snake bite, the Maltese islanders think that Paul must be guilty: 'No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live' (Acts 28:4). However, the course of events proves them to be mistaken: 'They were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god' (28:6; cf. the testimony of the Roman centurion in Luke 23:47). The 'barbarians', who are in no way prejudiced, become key witnesses to Paul's innocence (cf. the testimony of Pilate's wife in Matt. 27:19). Also, in this way it becomes clear that Paul is not guilty of death. This was clear even to these 'barbarians'.

Given the significance of the threats to Paul's life in Acts, the space that is allotted to them in the narrative and the repeated insistence that he did nothing worthy of death,[56] it is surprising that Acts does not tell of his death.[57] It emphasises Paul's willingness to suffer what was predicted by the prophecy of Agabus: 'For I am ready not only to be imprisoned, but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus' (Acts 21:13). While Acts tells of the death of Jesus, the stoning of Stephen, the execution of James, and the stoning of Paul in Lystra (thus, there is no intention of concealing martyrdoms in any way), the further fate of Paul at the end of the two years of light imprisonment in Rome remains open. A possible and likely explanation is that the author actually did not know more beyond the situation at the end of the narrative than he reports and that, therefore, Acts would have to be assigned an early date.[58]

53 For the details, see Omerzu, Prozess, 464–97.

54 Haacker, 'Prolog', 227 observes: 'According to v. 17, Paul took the initiative immediately after his arrival in Rome to inform the Jewish communities in Rome about the current proceedings against him. Why? It was to be expected that representatives of the prosecution (without whom a trial was impossible) would arrive from Jerusalem. In the case of an acquittal for Paul, a drastic punishment of the accusers was to be expected. That is why Paul, as a precautionary measure, declines any responsibility for this risk'. In the case of Jesus' trial, the inhabitants of Jerusalem who were present are said to have taken the risk of a misjudgement upon themselves ('His blood be on us and on our children', Matt 27:25). In this way they declare that they are ready to bear the consequences if this should be the case. Keener, *Acts III*, 2776 notes that it was 'a great embarrassment [...] to charge someone and then discover the defendant's innocence in court (Suet. Claud. 16.3)'. Josephus (BJ 7, 443–50) reports of a false witness (among other issues, false testimony against himself) who was sentenced to death, see also Wells, Law.

55 For this aspect, see Stenschke, 'Continuity', 98–117.

56 For a possible historical background see Haacker, 'Prolog'.

57 See the detailed discussion in Guttenberger, 'Tod', 300–305, who examines the end of Paul in view of the notions of death and dying in Acts.

58 See for instance Carson and Moo, *Introduction*, 296–300, and Bernier, *Rethinking*, 35–84.

2.6. Death as a 'Prerequisite' for Miracles / Raising the Dead

The death of Tabitha in Joppa is one of the few natural deaths in Acts: 'In those days she became ill and died' (Acts 9:37). Her death brings her cherished ministry to an end: her many good works and abundant alms (9:36) abruptly cease. Tabitha will no longer be able to make skirts and dresses (9:39). The factuality of her death is emphasised: the corpse is washed and laid out in the upper room. All the widows mourn her death (9:37–39). A short time later, Peter raises her from the dead. 'And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter, she sat up' (9:40). There are witnesses to this miracle: 'Then calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. This became known throughout all Joppa, and many came to believe in the Lord' (9:41–42).

At Troas, Eutychus plunges down from the third floor and dies ('and was taken up dead', Acts 20:9), although Paul is sure, 'Do not be alarmed, for life is in him [...] And they took the youth away alive, and were not a little comforted' (20:12).[59]

The overcoming of death becomes evident not only in the resurrection of Jesus and the general resurrection, but also in the raisings of the dead by Peter and Paul.[60] Thus, as part of the strategy of parallelisation in Acts, the divine affirmation for Jesus is not only demonstrated in his raising people from the dead (Luke 7:11–17) and his own resurrection, but also in the affirmation of Peter and Paul through these exceptional resurrection miracles. In this way, Luke emphasises that Paul is no less gifted and divinely affirmed than Peter. In their ministries, both men continue the ministry of Jesus.[61]

2.7. Other Occurrences of Dying and Death

In addition to the instances of dying and death that fall into the above categories, there are a number of other occurrences that also belong to the Lukan portrayal and understanding of dying and death. In his speech, Gamaliel refers to Theudas, who 'was killed and those who followed him [about 400 men] were dispersed and came to nothing' (Acts 5:36).[62] As a revenge for mistreating a fellow Israelite, the young Moses struck down an Egyptian (7:24). His fellow Israelites then asked Moses if he would also kill them, as he had killed the Egyptian (7:24–28). The Egyptians enforced the exposure of the infants of the Israelites with the stated purpose 'so that they would not be kept alive' (7:19). Through their spirited intervention, Paul and Silas manage to prevent the suicide of the prison director in Philippi ('he drew his sword and was about to kill himself', 16:27).[63] In this way, the threat of death can also be overcome. Paul predicts that continuing the sea journey into the autumn storms poses a massive threat to the cargo, the ship, and the lives of the travellers (27:10). Nevertheless, the travellers set out and are shipwrecked, but miraculously no one dies (27:44). In view of the imminent shipwreck and their personal responsibility for the prisoners, the soldiers in charge of them (cf. 12:19) plan to kill the prisoners, so that none of them could swim

59 On the question of whether Eutychus had actually died in this accident, see Keener, *Acts III*, 2975–2979. While the narrator's voice clearly states this ('and was taken up dead'), Paul ('for life is in him') also has a credible voice in the narrative. Feigned deaths or mock deaths play an important role in ancient novels (usually the readers are privy to them).

60 See Guttenberger, 'Tod', 278–279; on the narratives of the raising people from the dead of the Jesus tradition, see Dietrich and Vollenweider, 'Tod', 592.23–31.

61 See Stenschke, 'Continuity'.

62 In contrast to Theudas, Jesus was also killed, but was raised from the dead. His followers were dispersed, but because of Jesus' resurrection, other intentions, and his concrete behaviour, they were not destroyed, but re-gathered and were commissioned by the risen Jesus.

63 For ancient occurrences and estimations of suicide, see Keener, *Acts III*, 2498–2507.

away and escape in this way (27:40). Paul manages to prevent the execution of this plan.

For the sake of completeness, it should be mentioned that the violent death of animals also appears on the pages of Acts.[64] In a vision, Peter is told to slaughter and consume unclean animals (Acts 10:13; 11:7; at least he is instructed to do so).[65] The enthusiastic inhabitants of Lystra prepare lavish sacrifices to the gods who had appeared in human form: 'And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gate and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds' (14:13). Among the sacrifices financed by Paul, in order to redeem the Nazarite vows, are animals (21:23–24). When the proposal of James (15:20,29; 21:25) speaks of blood and of 'what has been strangled', this presupposes the slaughter of animals according to the requirements of the Mosaic Law and, thus, their deaths. Paul shakes off the serpent that had taken hold of his hand into the fire (28:5), presumably causing its death.

Our survey of dying and death in Acts indicates that a narrow and one-sided focus on the death of Jesus and its interpretation fails to do justice to the multi-layered evidence of Acts.

3. Summary, Analysis, and Implications

While no one on the pages of the Book of Acts dies a thousand deaths,[66] Acts contains instances of the entire range of ancient dying and death: from death due to a particularly unfortunate fall, death by execution on the cross or by beheading, death caused by the exposure of infants and manslaughter, death by lynching or through being struck by the angel of God (including being eaten by worms), a planned suicide, and death by plunging down from a third-floor window. In addition, there are different threats of death, such as being persecuted by enemies, experiencing a shipwreck, or being bitten by a poisonous snake.

Given the many occurrences of dying and death in Acts, it is striking that only few people on its pages die naturally.[67] Only rarely does the most common form of death appear—dying simply because of illness and old age. The patriarch David died and was buried (Acts 2:29). Jacob went down to Egypt 'and he died, he and our fathers' (7:15). Tabitha became ill and died (9:37). Furthermore, a case of death by accident is reported for Eutychus (20:9–12).[68] However, it must be asked what reason the author would have had for mentioning or even emphasising natural deaths.

Thus, while the Acts of the Apostles reports a wide variety of deaths and death experiences, its emphasis is on the undoing of death through the resurrection of Jesus, preservation from death, the overcoming of death under special circumstances, or the final overcoming of death in the

64 For various perspectives and methodological issues, see Roscher, Krebber, and Mizelle, *Handbook*.

65 Peter receives this vision on the roof of the house of Simon, a tanner in Joppa where Peter spends a long time (Acts 9:43). In such a location, contact with parts of animal corpses is part of everyday life.

66 To play on the title of Jack London's first published short story of the year 1899.

67 For a survey see Guttenberger, 'Tod', 276–279. See the instances of death through the collapse of the tower of Siloam in Luke 13:4. For the omnipresence of death in the age of the New Testament see Dietrich and Vollenweider, 'Tod', 583.13–22; for the general state of health of ancient people see Leven, *Antike Medizin*; (in particular, Hooff, 'Lebenserwartung') and the instructive paleopathological analyses of the skeletons discovered in Herculaneum by Capasso, 'Flüchtlinge', 45–55.

68 Guttenberger, 'Tod', 278–279 neglects the selective character of the presentation in Acts when she suggests, 'The two instances of natural deaths, narrated from the period after Jesus' death are reversed by miracles. According to the portrayal of Acts, there is no natural death in the time of the church. […] Although Luke does not portray his own time in this way, the time of the apostles was as an epoch in which the power of death was limited by the miraculous power of the apostles'. Why should the author have noted the natural deaths of other believers?

general resurrection (Acts 4:2; 23:6,8; 24:15,21; 26:8). This applies first to Jesus and the believers in Christ,[69] but with the multiple mention of the resurrection of the just and the unjust, also to all people. Being preserved from death or its overcoming occurs in different ways. In the general resurrection of the dead, life is restored to all who have died. God has already anticipated this eschatological resurrection in the midst of space and time in the resurrection of Jesus, thereby affirming him in a unique way as his emissary. The resurrection of Jesus also constitutes the model and guarantee of the general resurrection of the dead. The (at least temporary) overcoming or delaying of death can be seen in the raising/resuscitation of Tabitha (9:36–42) and of Eutychus (20:7–12).

On several occasions, miraculous preservation saves from death. In a number of cases, the Christian protagonists, as well as other people, are thus saved from death. Peter is delivered by an angel from prison in Jerusalem and his impending execution (Acts 12:3–11). In Philippi, Paul and Silas, but also the other prisoners, are saved from death in a collapsing building: 'a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds unfastened' (16:26). Paul and all his fellow travellers are saved from death at sea or after the actual shipwreck, as well as Paul from the effects of the bite of a poisonous snake. In this context, one should also remember the many healing miracles reported either in detail or in summary fashion, insofar as they concern serious illnesses.

At the same time, the preservation from death also happens on a human level without any miraculous elements being explicitly mentioned.[70] Gamaliel's advice to wait for time to tell prevents the apostles from being killed by their enraged opponents (Acts 5:35–39). Time and again, the plans of the opponents become known so that their implementation can be prevented by various means: 'but their plots became known to Saul' (9:24); 'to mistreat them and to stone the missionaries, they learned it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia' (14:5–6) or 'Now the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, so he went and entered the barracks and told Paul' (23:16).

Repeatedly, people help those threatened by death: 'but his disciples took Paul by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket' (Acts 9:25); 'And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus' (9:30; cf. also 17:10,14); 'But the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan', that is, killing the prisoners entrusted to them (27:43, the Roman officer allows those who could swim to jump into the sea and save themselves and make for the land, and the others on planks or on pieces of the ship, 27:43–44). In this last instance, sympathy, a correct assessment of the situation and of the means available, and organisational skills lead to preservation from death. The appeal and reassurance of Paul and Silas persuade the prison director in Philippi not to commit suicide as he was just about to perform it (16:27–28). Paul is saved from death through the conspirators in Jerusalem by appealing to his Roman citizenship and the imperial court in Rome (25:10–11).[71] Following the advice of the experienced sea-traveller Paul[72] and the resulting wintering in the unsuitable Καλοὺς Λιμένας (Acts 27:8–10) would have prevented the danger to life in the following disastrous winter storm at sea. Due to the circumstances of the shipwreck (Paul's intervention,

69 A number of the challenges listed below (such as hostility from opponents) also occur in the narrative without becoming a threat to the lives of the protagonists. With our focus on dying and death, we only consider the particularly serious cases. However, this narrow focus distorts the overall picture.

70 In this way we separate what was probably inextricably linked for the author of Acts.

71 For the details see Omerzu, *Prozess*, 474–97.

72 According to Schnabel, *Paul*, 122, Paul, as far as we know, travelled some 14,000 km at sea.

a bay suitable for running ashore, the ship breaking up only within reach of the shore, people unable to swim coming ashore on planks and other wreckage), Paul and his fellow passengers are all spared and saved (Acts 27:40–44).

This emphasis on preservation from death or on overcoming death follows suit with the Christology of Acts, which proclaims Jesus as the author of life: 'and you killed the author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses' (Acts 3:15). Both statements are under the wider anticipation of the expected coming 'times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord' by the returning Lord, 'whom heaven must receive until the time of restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago' (3:21).

Yet the tension remains that the preservation from death does not apply universally. Some Christ-believers die without being saved by divine intervention or otherwise: Stephen and James die as martyrs; Paul is (from his assailants' point of view) stoned to death in Lystra. The narrative does not offer a direct explanation or resolution of this tension (perhaps, there is a hint in Acts 9:16: 'For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name'[73]). However, it is clear that the certainty of the eschatological resurrection of the just (and the unjust) also gives hope to those who—for whatever reason—are not preserved from death here and now.

Once we look beyond the references to the death of Jesus and the understanding of its significance, a perspective which has dominated past research, the Book of Acts offers a surprisingly broad spectrum of dying and death. It does not conceal the factuality and the tragedy of death, and its varying circumstances. In some places, it presents death as divine punishment; in only one passage does it present and interpret, somewhat enigmatically, the death of Jesus (the blood shed at this occasion) as the means by which God 'redeemed' the flock, that is, the church. All dying and all deaths in Acts are under the prospect and certainty of the resurrection from the dead, whether for the consummation of salvation or final judgement.

The many references to dying and death in Acts provide a new perspective on the death of Jesus. No doubt, he died as a righteous person (Luke 23:47), as the suffering servant of God (see above). While certainly more than simply a further instance of the many deaths died on the pages of Acts, Luke does not emphasise the particular nature and significance of Jesus' death. His death, even his death on the cross, was according to the Scriptures and does not negate Jesus being the Christ (Luke 24:25–27,44–47). What Luke emphasises is that God raised Jesus from the dead and, in this way, uniquely affirmed him and his claims in word and deed. Having overcome death, Jesus is now the author of life and leader into life for all who would follow him. Of this, the readers can be sure (Luke 1:4).

With its focus on the resurrection of Jesus, the preservation from death, and both the temporal and final conquest of death in the resurrection of all the dead, Acts offers important impulses for an eschatologically oriented, distinctly *theological* coming to terms with the limits of human existence for Christians, but also beyond their confines. This applies first of all to the many Christians who are persecuted today because of their confession of faith in Jesus, and whose lives are threatened.[74] Furthermore, the preservation from death and its final overcoming is a Christian hope of great importance in times of threat from pandemics and wars. In order to rediscover and actualise the full potential of this spiritual 'asset', many Christians will have to reflect on and engage the extensive, variegated post-Enlightenment uneasiness with the resurrection in theology

73 See Keener, *Acts II*, 1657–1660, and Cunningham, *Theology*.

74 See, for instance, the annual index compiled by Open Doors ministries, https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/world-watch-list, accessed 24/06/2023.

and churches beyond the formulaic confession of the resurrection of the dead in the *Apostolic Creed* ('the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting'). The expected resurrection of even the unjust to the final judgement is a reminder and a consolation that, one day, God will call all people to account and enforce his justice and rule, also over those who, for now, seem to get away with despicable and atrocious behaviour and all sorts of crimes.

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