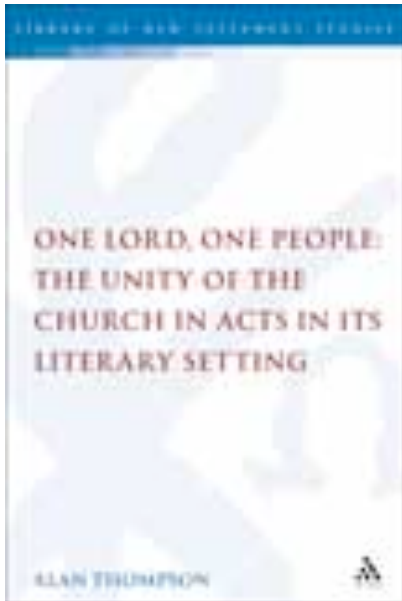


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Thompson, Alan

One Lord, One People: The Unity of the Church in Acts in Its Literary Setting

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Into the crowded field of monographs on Acts (or, more often, Luke-Acts), Alan J. Thompson, Lecturer, Sydney Missionary and Bible College, makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of unity and disunity in Acts. The title, *One Lord, One People: The Unity of the Church in Acts in Its Literary Setting*, could be slightly misleading if the reader focuses on the term “literary.” This is not a thoroughgoing literary approach that attempts to bracket out historical questions in order to focus simply on Luke’s narrative. Neither theology nor history is ever far from view. Rather, the approach is integrated, combining cultural, theological, and even historical concerns with close attention given to ancient noncanonical literature. Thompson does not treat Luke (by “Luke” he means “the sometime companion of Paul”) simply as a litterateur but also as a theologian and even historian. This monograph is a “substantially reduced” version of his doctoral thesis completed at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School under the supervision of David Pao. The monograph is part of the series Library of New Testament Studies, formerly Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series.

As one might expect, chapter 1 offers an introduction to the work, beginning with a brief survey of literature covering the unity of the church in Acts. Thompson concludes that too often the focus has been on either the historical reliability or unreliability of Luke’s

portrayal of unity without examining the larger narrative of Acts or other ancient literature for references to unity and disunity. Those studies that have taken up unity in ancient literature have neglected the theme of discord. In order to address this failure, Thompson investigates to what extent these themes of unity and disunity so prevalent in ancient literature are adopted and transformed in Acts (10). Despite having critiqued earlier work for focusing too much on historicity, the introduction reveals that Thompson himself will not be bracketing out such issues. He spends three pages explaining how an examination of the themes of unity and disunity in ancient literature and in the narrative of Acts itself may provide “indicators of factuality” (15). While the heading for this section is “Historical Plausibility,” he actually means the historical *reliability* of Luke’s portrayal. Thompson will use his study to contend that Luke is not “idealizing” his portrayal. Luke portrayed the church in this manner because it reflects the nature of the church (for more, see his “Unity in Acts: Idealization or Reality,” *JETS* 51 [2008]: 523–42).

Chapter 2, “Unity and the Rule of Law,” employs Greco-Roman sources, the Hebrew Scriptures (designated “Old Testament”), and noncanonical Jewish literature to demonstrate that the theme of unity (*ὁμόνοια*) was associated with kingship and law. The fact that these themes are frequently intertwined “provides a plausible context for a re-examination of the Lukan emphasis on the theme of unity” (19). The literature indicates that the greatness of a king in Greco-Roman culture was tied to his ability to unite all humanity as one community. The claims of Virgil and Ovid concerning Augustus’s ability to do just that offer intriguing possibilities for understanding Luke’s portrayal of the unity of the church under the lordship of Jesus. Furthermore, Thompson draws on a wide range of Greco-Roman and Jewish literature to demonstrate that the ideal form of government and its requisite laws would produce a unified state.

Chapter 3, “Unity and the Rule of the Lord,” builds on the previous chapter in order to offer a reexamination of the theme of unity in Acts. Thompson attempts to set the record straight by “showing the significance of the theme of kingship within the wider Lukan emphasis on the unity of God’s people” (58). Focusing on Acts 2, Thompson brilliantly brings together kingship Christology and the restoration/reunification of Israel. He concludes that Luke intended to offer a critique of contemporary Roman claims by highlighting the role of Jesus’ kingship and the unity of those under his lordship. Thompson also links the law in Acts to the theme of unity. He returns to Acts 2 in order to highlight the parallels between Pentecost and Sinai. The unity of the Christian community brought about by submission to the lordship of the risen Jesus provided evidence that it was the “best-governed community” and thus constituted the true people of God (92).

Chapter 4, “Unity and Disunity: The Difference between Survival and Destruction,” analyzes victories and defeats in ancient literature and the role unity or the lack thereof played. Whether Herodotus commenting on the Athenian victory over the Persians (*Hist.* 6.109–110) or Thucydides displaying the ruinous effects of *στάσις* in explaining the defeat of the Athenians in the Peloponnesian War (3.81–83), the evidence is clear that unity (*ὁμόνοια*) was essential for the survival of a city or nation and was the greatest blessing of the gods. Josephus likewise asserts that the discord (*στάσις*) of a minority of Jews caused Israel’s tragic history.

Chapter 5, “Concord and the Conquest of the Word,” builds on the analysis of the previous chapter and concludes that the victory of the word of God over every obstacle in Acts demonstrates that the Christian community is the true people of God over against competing claims. Thompson highlights the victory of the word in various cities throughout the empire (Iconium, Thessalonica, Berea, Corinth, and Jerusalem) despite Jewish opposition. Thompson’s analysis of the power of the word in the midst of turmoil at Ephesus is particularly intriguing. By depicting this significant city of the empire as confused, disordered, and finally conquered by the word, Luke asserts something of the status of the Christian community within the political structures of the empire. Ultimately, the conquest of the word provides reassurance that Jesus is the sovereign king, his kingdom is the true empire, and the community of the conquering word is the true people of God.

Thompson successfully takes up isolated themes that have been the subject of extensive research in Acts (Jesus’ kingship, the role of the Spirit, the law, and the gospel overcoming all barriers) and treats them in association with unity as a way to understand the narrative as a whole. In the process, significant implications emerge. Christologically, the validation of Jesus’ kingship by virtue of the unity of the Christian community draws a sharp contrast with Caesar’s claims in light of the disunity and confusion of Roman cities where the word was preached. A great deal of attention has been given to the significance of the Roman imperial cult for understanding Paul (Peter Oakes, Richard Horsley, N.T. Wright, Justin Hardin); much more needs to be done in Acts. While C. Kavin Rowe has correctly noted the dangers of relating Luke-Acts to the imperial cult (“Luke-Acts and the Imperial Cult: A Way through the Conundrum?” *JSNT* 27 [2005]: 279–300), Thompson has successfully demonstrated that Acts is fundamentally and consistently disruptive and subversive to any competing claims of authority, Caesar heading the list. The declaration of Acts 2:36, that Jesus is both *κύριον* ... *καὶ χριστόν*, affirms Jesus’ kingship in contrast to all competing claims. Thompson’s work may provide a way forward. Thompson is also to be commended for bringing new insight to the work of the Spirit in Acts. While attention has been given to the Spirit as the divine empowerment for mission/witness, as offering divine guidance, and as authentication of genuine faith, Thompson’s emphasis

on the work of the Spirit in uniting the true people of God is a breath of fresh air. Finally, the book has implications for the church's self-identity. Ultimately, the people of God now consist of Jew and Gentile, unified under the lordship of Jesus and constituted under a law that abrogates those aspects that hinder or prevent unity (Acts 8; 10–11; 15).

Despite my appreciation for Thompson's work, several issues require mentioning. Thompson makes much of the "cotext" and "context" of a given passage, the former being a literary term and the latter referring to social milieu. I could not discern, however, how this distinguished his work from the work of other scholars who attempt to read the biblical text and comparative literature contextually. It seems he uses the terms as an apologetic against a "history of religions" model that might call into question the narrative's historical reliability (17). This points to a larger issue that emerged early and bubbled beneath the surface throughout the work.

Thompson bemoans in the introduction that "much of the debate surrounding the subject of the unity of the church in Acts has been preoccupied with the historicity of Acts" (3). In reality, what troubles Thompson is a preoccupation not with historicity but with the historical unreliability of Acts. While his approach is "literary," and the focus is on the text of Acts as a "literary unit" (17), Thompson seems ever poised to use his findings to assert that Luke "got it right." I do think a literary analysis generally, and this study specifically, can and does point to the historical plausibility of Acts, but Thompson reaches for "factuality" and historical "reliability." In so doing, he goes further than the results of this study can take him. This concern should not obscure the value of his work theologically and as a model for employing ancient literature as a means of reevaluating Acts within its narrative framework.