I agree with C. Kavin Rowe that the history of reception is important.\textsuperscript{1} Indeed, I am willing to argue that biblical scholars in the future will probably find the examination of the world that the New Testament creates more fruitful than the study of the world that created the New Testament. But in his attempt to use the evidence of the late second century (mainly Irenaeus and the Muratorian Canon) to warn against drawing historical conclusions from the reading of Luke-Acts as a literary unity, Rowe may fall into the same error against which he warns.

The fact that there is no evidence that Luke-Acts was received or read as a literary unity in late second-century compositions does not answer the question of how the first readers might have read and understood Luke’s writing.

In the first place, one could find little evidence that any New Testament writings were read in the late second century—or for much of the patristic period—as “literary compositions”. It is well known that patristic writers seldom advert to the distinctive literary characteristics of a Gospel or Epistle. That Luke-Acts was not read in the late second century as a literary unity is no more surprising than that no other New Testament writing was read that way.

In the second place, the second-century writers to whom Rowe refers were already approaching the New Testament compositions precisely as parts of a New Testament, that is, as a collection of writings that were to be read in the church, in distinction from other writings that were not to be read in church. They were, furthermore, making arguments or statements precisely about matters of inclusion and exclusion for a church considered as universal rather than simply local. In contrast, no original hearers of Paul’s letters or of the Gospels could possibly have heard them as part of a collection. And even if we assert a wider audience for the Gospels than a single community, we must admit that the first hearers of Luke-Acts (or, if one insists, of Luke and Acts) would have heard the

composition, not as part of a scriptural collection written in the past, but as a single, discrete, literary composition addressed to them—and possibly others—in the present.

In short, there is a gap between the authors cited by Rowe and the first readers of Luke-Acts, a gap not only of time, but also of circumstance and therefore of perspective. It is this gap that traditional historical-critical exegesis has tried to fill. Since we cannot supply the first readers of New Testament compositions, we try as best we can to imagine how they might have read. Literary criticism is very much like historical exegesis in this respect. Literary critics though, at least of the sort I try to be, think that historical critics pay too little attention to the rhetoric of the compositions and too much attention to the putative reconstruction of their historical situation—often at the expense of compositional integrity.

 Literary critics seek to redress that imbalance by focusing on the composition’s own rhetorical intentionality, but they do not thereby abandon historical imagination. To put it simply, the way the composition itself is put together suggests readers with certain characteristics and capabilities. Analysis of the composition’s rhetorical or narrative logic also reveals not only the writing’s argument but also something about the direction in which that argument wishes to turn its intended readers. A delicate sensibility is required in such reading. As I argued over 25 years ago, it is certainly wrong-headed to construct a ‘Lukan Community’ from the narrative of Luke-Acts. But this does not mean that some historical judgments cannot be made about the readers. Scholars can, for example, argue over, the ethnic identity of author and readers, for the composition allows distinct conclusions to be reached. The composition does not allow the conclusion, however, that the readers were not intended to be intensely and existentially interested in the destiny of Jews and Gentiles in the unfolding of God’s plan. To reach such a conclusion would mean to go against the composition’s internal logic and to indict the author as rhetorically incompetent.

The same desire for balance accounts for the way literary critics speak of “intended readers”, or “ideal readers”, or “imagined readers”. They do not want to make historical claims about actual readers. But they want to respect the nature of writing as communication, and point to the kinds of characteristics and competencies required to make full sense of the

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