God or Jesus? Textual Ambiguity and Textual Variants in Acts of the Apostles

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One of the most interesting features of the Acts of the Apostles is what looks like an intentional correlation of references to God and Jesus in a number of expressions. To be sure, Acts also distinguishes God and Jesus. So, e.g., some 160 times the God of biblical tradition is referred to as ὁ θεός, and is consistently the referent of this construction in Acts, whereas Jesus is unambiguously referred to almost 70 times by name, (ὁ) Ἰησοῦς. But at various points the author also seems to have intended to correlate God and Jesus, conspicuously linking them in discourse and references to religious practices. For example, in Acts we have several textually secure references to the grace of God (11:23; 13:43; 14:26; 20:24), but 15:11 refers to “the grace of the Lord Jesus” (cf. also 14:3; 15:40), which seems to have created some differences among ancient readers about whose grace is referred to in 20:32, as reflected in the variants there (to which I return later in this essay).

It is interesting that this sense of ambiguity in the text at certain points is not ours alone, but, as we shall see, is reflected in the manuscript tradition. That is, it seems that at a number of places in Acts we have textual artefacts of the efforts of ancient readers to clarify for themselves the referents in some statements, and so to disambiguate them.


2 I use approximate numbers because at a number of places there are textual variants, and approximate numbers will serve to make my points. Anarthrous forms of ὁ θεός with the biblical deity as referent appear in 5:29, 39; 7:55. In 12:22, I take the anarthrous form in the crowd’s acclamation as “the voice of a god.”

3 I have been persuaded that we should view most intentional changes to the text as more likely made by readers, not copyists (“scribes”). See esp. M.W. Holmes, “Codex Bezae as a Recension of the Gospels,” in Codex Bezae: Studies From the Lune Colloquium, June 1994 (ed. D.C. Parker and C.-B. Amphoux; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 123–160; and U. Schmid, “Scribes and
Certainly, one of the factors contributing to this referential ambiguity in a number of places in Acts is the pattern of the author’s use of ὁ κύριος and κύριος. In majority of their 70 (or so) uses in Acts, the arthrous-singular forms of κύριος are applied unambiguously to Jesus, either along with his name (e.g., 1:21; 4:33; 8:16; 11:17, 20; 15:11, 26; 16:31; 19:5, 13, 17; 20:21, 24, 31; 21:13), or an arthrous form on its own but the referent clear contextually (e.g., 9:11, 15, 17, 27, 28; 11:16; 13:12; 14:33; 18:8; 22:10; 23:11). In a few other instances, however, God is rather obviously the referent of the arthrous-singular of κύριος (e.g., 3:20; 4:26; 7:33; 13:47). On the other hand, the typical referent of the anarthrous-singular forms of κύριος is God (e.g., 2:25; 2:39; 3:22; 7:31; 7:49; 15:17; 17:24, similarly to the frequent use of anarthrous singular forms of κύριος in the LXX as the translation-equivalent for הוהי), although in a few other instances in Acts the referent is equally clearly Jesus (e.g., 2:36; 10:36!).


5 I have listed only those places where the text is secure and where the referent is unambiguously clear. There are a number of other instances where Jesus is in my view likely the referent as well (e.g., 9:31, 35, 42; 11:21; but cf. Dunn, “ΚΥΡΙΟΣ in Acts,” 369–372), but to argue the cases would distract unnecessarily us from the focus of this essay.

6 In 7:33 Bezae has καὶ ἐγένετο φωνή, and in v. 31 instead of this phrase has ὁ κύριος εἶπεν. I find unpersuasive Read-Heimerdinger’s claim that the speeches of characters such as Stephen and the apostles do not reflect the theology of the author of Acts, and so I must dissent from her further claim that the author did not use arthrous forms of κύριος with reference to God. Cf. J. Read-Heimerdinger, The Bezan Text of Acts: A Contribution of Discourse Analysis to Textual Criticism (JSNTSup 236; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), e.g., 280–281. Cf. also her view of the referent of ὁ κύριος in 13:47 (ibid., 284–285).

7 I omit from this discussion uses of the vocative form, κύριε, given that this address can have a range of connotations. Note that in 10:36 the christological claim is that Jesus is “Lord of all” (πάντων κύριος), which may not, thus, be a real instance of the simple anarthrous form of κύριος applied to Jesus. Also, in 2:36 and 10:36 the anarthrous forms are predicates in copula constructions, which distinguish them from the constructions in which God is the referent. Cf. the discussion of anarthrous κύριος in Bezae by Read-Heimerdinger, Bezan Text of Acts,