Blending Rhetorolects in the Healings of Acts 3 and 14

Acts 3:1-4:4 and 14:8-18 begin with the healing of a lame man, which signals the presence of the miracle rhetorolect. These stories differ, however, in the rhetorolects that they blend with miracle. In explaining their agency and the source of the healing, Peter and Paul draw on images and argumentation that come from prophetic and wisdom belief systems. Acts 3 primarily uses the prophetic rhetorolect with its story-line of the rejected prophet and the support it draws from the biblical prophetic books. In Acts 14, Paul draws on the wisdom rhetorolect with a focus on the good gifts of God on the earth, in contrast to the priestly reasoning exhibited by the priest of Zeus and the Lycaonians. Before I examine these two rhetorolects, I will discuss the miracle rhetorolect that sets the stage for blending.

Miracle Rhetorolect in Acts 3 and 14

The first-space of the lame man’s body dominates the opening of both Acts 3:1-4:4 and 14:8-18. In both texts the man is “lame from his mother’s womb,” emphasizing the congenital nature of his defect and the great length of time his body has been disabled. Acts 14:8 states that the man “could not use his feet and had never walked.” Acts 3 emphasizes the man’s physical dependence upon others: people would carry him to the gate of the temple and lay him there so that he could ask for money.

A physical transaction takes place between the bodies of the healer and the man healed. In Acts 3 and 14, the healer “looks intently” at the lame man. In Acts 3, Peter requests that the man look at him, which he does. In both stories, a verbal transaction accompanies the visual exchange: the healer says, “Stand up and walk” or “Stand up on your feet” (3:6; 14:10). In Acts 3, a third physical transaction takes place: Peter touches the man by taking his hand and lifting him up.

The result of this miracle transaction in the first-space of bodies results in bodily movement. In both stories the man jumps up and walks. Acts 3 is more expansive and repetitive in its description of the man’s ability to move. Repetition of “walk,” “leap,” and “praising God” reinforce the physical change of the man. Furthermore, Acts 3 adds: “His feet and ankles were made strong” (3:7). He goes
into the temple, a space he previously was not able to enter. The response of the crowds in Acts 3 and 14 are physical in different ways. In Acts 3, the people’s seeing the man and Peter turns to amazement, indicating their cognitive limitations to understanding the healing. In Acts 14, the crowd’s seeing the healing turns to an assured shout, or a raising up of their voices.

The issue with both of these responses is that the audience does not correctly attribute God’s transforming power. In Acts 3, the healed man praises God, indicating that he knows the source of his healing and that Peter is the human agent through which God transformed his body. The people, on the other hand, do not praise God for the miracle but rather wonder and stare. Peter asks them: “Why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk?” (3:12). They misunderstand Peter’s role as healing agent. The Lycaonians, on the other hand, determine from the miracle that Paul and Barnabas are gods. Again, they misunderstand Paul’s role as the healing agent of God. The misunderstanding in each of these stories calls for the blending of a second rhetorolect that will allow the speaker to explain and the audience to understand the God who heals. For Acts 3, the blended rhetorolect is prophetic, which at points verges on apocalyptic. For Acts 14, the blended rhetorolect is wisdom, which corrects the priestly rhetorolect of the priest of Zeus and the crowds.

**Prophetic Rhetorolect in Acts 3**

The first-space of prophetic rhetorolect is the earthly kingdom. This first-space is blended with the second-space, or conceptual space, of imagining God as ruling a heavenly kingdom. Blending these two spaces together results in the reasoning that creates God’s kingdom made up of God’s people on earth. When God’s people do not live up the honor of being a heavenly kingdom, God sends a prophet to confront them and urge them to change. God’s prophet is often rejected and persecuted. Early Christian discourse draws the language and story-line of the prophetic rhetorolect from the stories of prophets in the Hebrew Bible, including Abraham, Moses, and all of the prophets starting with Samuel.
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Early Christian writers used the story-lines of these prophets to make sense of the narratives of Jesus’ life and death and the activities of his followers.

In his speech in Acts 3, Peter invokes the prophetic story-line. He calls God “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers” (3:13). This identification of God uses two rhetorical resources for the prophetic story-line (Robbins, 222). First, Peter identifies God as the God of the first prophet, Abraham. Second, he draws on the story-line of the prophet Moses by reciting the name God uses to identify God’s self to Moses when God first calls him (Exod 3:6). Peter continues the prophetic story-line: Jesus, God’s servant, was rejected, killed, and raised up. Peter implicates his audience, “Men, Israelites,” in the rejection and killing of Jesus. The prophetic rhetorolect includes a strong element of confrontation and a judicial tone that leads to an appeal to change directions and repent (Robbins, 221-222). Peter confronts the audience, “the people,” therefore, with a story of a prophet. The mention of the resurrection in 3:15 does two things: first, it moves toward the apocalyptic rhetorolect, which sees resurrection as the process by which faithful people enter a new realm of eternal life (Robbins, 341-344); second, it brings the healed man into the prophetic-apocalyptic story-line. Peter “raised up” the man (3:7), and God “raised up” Jesus from the dead (3:15).

Peter attributes the people’s rejection of Jesus to “ignorance” and argues that such ignorance has a prophetic purpose. Their ignorance and rejection allowed the writings of the prophets to be fulfilled—that the anointed one would suffer. The conclusion (“therefore”) that Peter draws from the fulfillment of the prophets is a command for his audience to “Repent and turn to God” (3:19). The result of repentance (“so that,” 3:20) moves to the apocalyptic rhetorolect, which differs from the prophetic in that it moves focus from earth and present time to heaven and future time (Robbins, 227). Peter urges his audience to repent “so that times of refreshing may come” (3:20). The phrase “times of refreshing” (kairois anapsykseôs) is unusual and used only here in the NT. Pervo suggests the equivalence of “times of refreshing” and “the time of universal restoration” and that these terms indicate an
eschatological outlook (Pervo, 107). The location of the Messiah in heaven until a certain future time suggests an apocalyptic mode of reasoning.

This apocalyptic reasoning is still closely connected with the prophetic belief system. The apocalyptic “times of refreshing” was announced by the prophets (3:21). Peter cites Moses, from Deut 18:15-20 and Lev 23:29. The topoi of God, prophet, the people, and raising up converge in the recitation of these scriptures. Peter interprets the prophetic story-line of Jesus to indicate that Jesus is the “prophet like Moses.” Peter argues that all of the other prophets since Samuel have also predicted Jesus. Peter then tells his audience their place in the prophetic story-line. They are descendents of the prophets and of Abraham. Therefore, they are the descendents through which “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (3:25; Gen 22:18; 26:4). Peter reinforces the idea of blessing in 3:26. Blessing is the positive side of the judicial rhetoric of the prophetic rhetorolect (Robbins, 222). Peter’s prophetic command to repentance and blessing are successful, as shown by 5000 believing (4:4). His apocalyptic reasoning, however, creates problems with the Jewish leadership, as they are not happy that he is preaching resurrection (4:2).

**Wisdom Rhetorolect in Acts 14**

In Acts 14, Paul is the human agent through which God transforms a human body. The Lycaonian crowds, however, do not understand this. Their experience of religion causes them to identify healers with the gods. Humans are not conduits for the transforming power of God; instead, humans can be priests, such as the priest of Zeus, who mediate human and divine needs through the beneficial exchange of sacrifice. The Lycaonians operate from a form of priestly reasoning. The conclusion they draw from the ability to heal is that a god is in their midst. If a god is in their midst, they must sacrifice.

Paul tries to correct this priestly logic with wisdom logic. The agency of the healer comes from the Living God, who does not require sacrifices but rather establishes a parental relationship with creation and humanity and expects the production of goodness and life from both. The first-space for
wisdom rhetorolect is twofold—the household in which fathers and mothers pass on wisdom to children and the natural world which God created and humans observe and work. Paul, therefore, draws on the natural world to describe God, “the living God who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them” (14:15). Creation is God’s “witness in doing good” (14:17). Rains from heaven, fruitful seasons, food to eat, and human joy witness to God just as Paul brings good news of God. Paul acknowledges the particularity of the religious systems of different peoples: different nations followed their own ways. However, the focus on creation in the wisdom rhetorolect allows the God Paul proclaims to become universal. The action Paul requests of the Lycaonians based on the evidence of creation is for them to “turn from worthless things to the living God” (14:15). Paul requests them to modify their behavior and turn from the ways of the nations to the way of God, a common wisdom topos (e.g. Prov 4:14–27).

Within Paul’s argumentation is the basic characteristic of early Christian wisdom of turning scriptural discourse into proverbial discourse (Robbins, 122). The phrase “who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and all that is in them” (14:15) is significant not only because it uses the created world as evidence for God but also because it is a recitation of Exod 20:11 and Ps 146:6. Paul gives no indication, however, that this phrase is written, unlike Peter does when he recites scripture in Acts 3. Instead, this phrase is woven into the speech and becomes a proverbial and universal statement rather than a scriptural and specific statement. The scripturally informed Christian reader or hearer of Acts may hear the echo of Exod 20:11 or Ps 146:6, understand the multiple layers of meaning in the statement, and see how scriptural logic about God translates to other peoples.

In Acts 14, the blending of wisdom discourse, with a focus on the goodness of creation, and of miracle discourse, with a focus on the restoration of a human body, allows the healing be read as an act of renewing the creation of God. In his discussion of wisdom rhetorolect, Robbins interprets the creation narrative of Genesis as producing both images and argumentative patterns for wisdom discourse (Robbins, 134-150). In describing God’s beginning actions, Robbins writes: “The process of
creation begins, then, with a speaking agent who is able to see, because the primary thing speech creates is light. The seeing described in the story is the kind of seeing that knows what it sees. The seeing is not simply a matter of glancing at something or observing it” (Robbins, 135). Robbins also emphasizes that the creation story brings humans into the actions of God by being “like” God, and wisdom discourse suggests that humans should continue to produce goodness as God does in creation (137). A wisdom understanding of the healing may help us interpret the various verbs of speaking and seeing in the opening and the precise transaction that occurs between Paul and the man. This interpretation may further help us understand the differences between the healing in Acts 3 and 14. As I suggested above, the discourse in Acts 3 draws the man into the prophetic-apocalyptic story-line since he is “raised up.” By contrast, the discourse in Acts 14 suggests that God’s creative power manifests itself not only in the natural order but also in the seemingly supernatural actions of God’s human agents.

Works Cited:
