THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE.
LUKE AND THE LANGUAGE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT
AGAINST A GRAECO-ROMAN BACKGROUND

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ABSTRACT
This article investigates the meaning of the two words ἀγράμματοι...καὶ ἴδιοται used to describe the apostles in Acts 4:13 and which relate to the two themes of the social level and linguistic competence of the apostles. The use of these two words in the history of early Christianity is traced and related to apologetic concerns and the social context of Luke's writings.

1 INTRODUCTION
In his famed work on The influence of Greek Ideas and Usages upon the Christian Church, Hatch wrote in 1888: '(T)he love of speech had become to a large proportion of Greeks a second nature. They were a nation of talkers. They were almost the slaves of cultivated expression. Though the public life out of which orators had grown had passed away with political freedom, it had left behind it a habit which in the second century of our era was blossoming into a new spring' (Hatch 1907:27).

The Romans, often educated by Greek teachers, also focussed, as a first step in their study of literature, on the 'study of diction, the laying down of canons of correctness, the distinction between Hellenisms and Barbarisms' (Hatch 1907:29). 'Roman education was more “practical” than Greek. It both centred and culminated in rhetoric, taught and exemplified by the rhetores, who were both rhetoricians and orators' (Grant 1962:32).

The Romans reacted strongly against aberrant language. The exceptions, where some educated Romans would be tolerant of less gifted speakers, prove this general attitude. The second century Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, wrote: 'I owe to Alexander my habit of not finding fault, and of not using abusive language to those who utter a barbarous or awkward or unmusical phrase' (Hatch 1907:29).

New Testament texts were therefore written at a time when there was a sensitivity to a particular use of language and style (Norden 1918). Non-
Attic words and rhetorical devices were considered unacceptable in educated speech and writing. Authors who considered Attic Greek as the model for good Greek, became known as Atticists. Attic style and language became the norm of good writing and of an educated Greek, as is illustrated by the following: Xenophon is regarded by the Atticists as one of the greatest philosophers and historians. His works were considered to be worthy of imitation. There is, however, some criticism of him, as is clear from the remark of Dionysius of Halicarnassus when he says that it is unfitting that Xenophon puts philosophical speeches in the mouths of ἰδιώται καὶ βάρβαροι (De imit 3.2). The Greek notion of education became so influential that it was believed that only an educated person, a Greek speaker, could deliver a philosophical speech. Not only was non-Attic language avoided, but it was considered improper to have non-Greeks speak Attic language in a text!

The use of language became a social indicator, so that someone who used and wrote Greek well was considered a Greek and someone who did not, was seen as uncivilized. Non-Greeks were considered as devoid of even the most basic foundations of knowledge (cf Bauer [1971]:15) and unable to speak properly.

The Graeco-Roman 'romantic enthusiasm for the great classics of the former age in Attic Greek' (Deissmann 1911:54-62; Cadbury 1968:221) should be related to the important rôle of rhetorics and oratory in this time. A subtle change from earlier practices took place here, which is well-illustrated by developments in the writing of history. In contrast to previous descriptions of history, historiography in the first century aimed to persuade 'rather than to set forth the fundamental realities of the past, the great tidal forces which mastered the historical events and determined the fates of nations' (Grant 1962:34). In these times students were often more interested in the speeches of the historians than in the events they reported. History became important only in so far as the students could make use of it to enhance their oratorical skills and advance their careers. 'Lucian's essay, "How to write history", is a caustic criticism of the lesser breed of history-writers in his time, who "fail to realise that the dividing line between real history and laudatory panegyric is no narrow isthmus but a great wall — as musicians say, they are two diapasons apart!"' (Grant 1962:33).

2 THE LANGUAGE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT
When compared with classical Greek and its literary conventions and style, the language of the New Testament did not impress educated people in the Hellenistic world. The remark of Norden that these documents must have appeared to them 'als stilistische Monstra' (Norden 1918:517), is confirmed

2 A note of caution needs to be sounded here: The study of Rydbeck (cf Malherbe 1982:40-41) indicates that one should not too easily relate the language of the New Testament to the language of the vulgar papyri and, by implication, of uneducated people. Professional prose of the period of the New Testament reveals that the New Testament texts reflect the language of educated people who communicated in a nonliterary, nonclassical prose. But even though this may be true, the fact remains that the language of the
by the fact that gentiles criticised Christianity because of the language of the New Testament. They claimed that the language of the New Testament texts reflected the lack of education of their authors and they underlined the inferiority of these writings (Bauer 1971: 15 referring to Celsus in Origen, Contra Celsus 1.62, as well as Porphyrius in Pseudo-Hieronymus: Brev in psalt on Ps 81, and Hierocles in Eusebius, Contra Hierocles 2, PG22, 800B).

The early Christian writers were aware of these remarks. In some instances the Christians readily accepted this criticism and admitted that they had inherited a tradition in which the language failed to meet the standards of the educated Graeco-Roman authors and world.

The early second century apologist Justin Martyr (c 100-165), referred explicitly to the twelve disciples who were ἤτοι ἀληθείας and who were not powerful orators (ἀλείπτων μὴ δύναμενοί. Apol 1.39. Cf Dods 1867: 40). But this was not the only point of criticism. Closely linked to it were remarks about the social level of Christians. The second century pagan philosopher and critic of Christianity, Celsus, wrote that Jesus had disciples of notorious character, the very wickedest of tax-gatherers and sailors. He obviously referred to the social level of the apostles and considered them to be the very opposite of educated people. This point of criticism closely relates to the remarks about the language skills of the apostles and is in fact an indication of how language signalled social position.

The accusations of the gentile critics of Christianity were not left undefended. In his reply to Celsus, the church father Origen focussed on the language issue and admitted that Biblical writings were linguistically and stylistically inferior if measured against the literary conventions of Greek rhetorics and oratory.

According to Origen there was a definite reason for the manner in which the disciples proclaimed the Gospel. According to him, any 'intelligent analysis of the history' reveals the divine power with which the disciples preached and through which they succeeded in leading people to conversion. He contrasts this divine power with the 'power of speaking, or any orderly arrangement of their message, according to the arts of Grecian dialectics or rhetoric.' Their persuasion was not artificial through the manipulation and skilful arrangement of words (Origen Contra Celsus 1.62. Cf Crombie 1859).

In combining the lack of oratorical skills of the apostles with the divine power of their message, Origen's argument is similar to that of Justin who added to the remark about the apostles that 'by the power of God they proclaimed to every race of men that they were sent by Christ to teach to all the word of God.'

But the sensitivity to this matter continued long after these earlier authors. Two centuries later the fourth century father Basil wrote to his teacher Libanius: 'I must apologize for the style of this letter, the truth is, I have been in the company of Moses and Elias, and men of that kind, who tell us no doubt what is true, but in a barbarous dialect, so that your instruction have quite gone out of my head' (Hatch 1907: 29. Cf

New Testament is not the language of the literary group who imitated classical literary and rhetorical models.
also a similar, but more strongly worded argument by Chrysostom Ep 1 ad Cor 3 c 4). Here, once again, the problematic usage of language and style in Biblical texts is admitted.

3 LUKE AND THE LANGUAGE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT.

The above mentioned modern publications in which the remarks of the early church fathers on this matter are quoted, indicate that New Testament scholars have been aware of them for many decades, even though they may not have related them so closely to the historical development outlined by Grant. The origins of this debate about the language of the New Testament is already to be found in the New Testament itself.

One of the first indications of an awareness of the use of language and its social implications, can be found in the work of the evangelist Luke. In Acts 4 he relates how Peter and John were thrown into jail after they had proclaimed the message of the resurrection to the people (4:2). The next day Peter defends them before the Jewish leaders. After his speech, Luke remarks that the leaders were amazed because the apostles were so bold, although they were ἀγράμματοι καὶ ἔδωκατί (Acts 4:13).

From earliest times Luke has been known as the New Testament author who was well-versed in the Greek language. The fourth century Christian author, Jerome, already described him as a master of the Greek language (Letter 20.4, cf Cadbury 1968:213-238; Aune 1987:116). Luke consciously improved the style of his sources in order to present his material in more 'classic' style and language. But he also presented his work in such a way that it would appeal to literary groups. Dibelius (1956:146ff) considered the prologues of Luke's Gospel and Acts as indications that Luke intended his works to circulate not only in the wider Christian communities, but also among 'people of literary education, whether Christian or some other faith, who are accustomed to such prefaces in the books of their choice.' The contents of the Lucan writings illustrate a sensitivity to proper speech and form an important backdrop to understanding Acts 4:13. Luke is the one Biblical author who was sensitive to the role of language in communicating the Gospel to Gentiles.

There is reason to believe that this sensitivity of Luke reflects an important new phase in the history of early Christianity and that it represents a polemical situation in which the issue of proper speech was debated. An analysis of Acts 4:13 will indicate that the roots of this debate can be found in late New Testament texts such as Acts.

4 ἀγράμματοι


Because the remark in Acts 4:13 is uttered by Jewish scribes, elders and the priestly family in Jerusalem, the customary explanation of this description is that the disciples were perceived as untrained in the Jewish law (cf Marshall 1980:101). In their lexicon, Louw and Nida take up this established position when they write (1988:329): 'Evidently, ἀγράμματος in Ac 4.13 refers to a lack of formal rabbinic training.'

The second word used to describe the disciples (ἔδωκατί) in Acts 4:13 is furthermore understood as a synonym for the first word. Holtzmann (1901:44) interprets both ἀγράμματοι καὶ ἔδωκατί as referring to a lack of
rabbinical training and refers to John 7:15 and 1 Corinthians 14:16 and 23 respectively as evidence (cf. also Wendt 1913:114; Bruce 1986:102 and the discussion below).

We have become sensitive to the fact that one should avoid reading an anachronistic category such as 'rabbinic' into New Testament material. But that Luke did not have the lack of training in Jewish law in mind when he used the Greek word διγράμματος, is clear from his description of the apostles in the first section of Acts where Christian leaders such as Peter and Stephen are portrayed as competent and convincing teachers of Scripture.

Why did Luke use this expression if it did not indicate the training of the disciples?

This word could refer to illiteracy in the most basic sense of not being able to read or write, or it could be used in a broader meaning of being uneducated (cf. Liddel and Scott 1961:14) or, even more specifically, being untrained in the sciences. In the Memorabilia (4.2.20) of Xenophon there is a discussion between Socrates and Euthydemus on the doctrines of the 'just' and the 'letters' (τῶν γραμμάτων). The trend of this section in the Memorabilia is to illustrate that Euthydemus's claim that he can benefit nothing from discussions with wise men, is untenable (4.2.1–2). Discussing the question whether the person who intentionally blunders in his writing and reading is more literate (γραμματικοτέρου) than he who blunders unintentionally, Socrates asks: 'May we not say, then, that the intentional blunderer is literate and the unintentional is illiterate (διγράμματος)?... You say, then, as I understand, that he who knows letters (τῶν ἔπισταμένων τὰ γραμμάτα) is more literate than he who is ignorant of them?' (Marchant 1938:283). The 'understanding of letters' refers to someone who can read and write. Xenophon (through Socrates) then proceeds to question the assumption that people can not be considered just simply because they are literate or trained for a trade or profession. In the next section (4.2.22) he calls those who possess knowledge of trades 'slavish' (ἄνδραποδώδεις).

In this text a general conception of two societal groups is present: On the one hand there are ignorant people who lack education and knowledge of writing and on the other hand those who are literate and educated. Within the philosophical discussion of Xenophon, the concept of knowledge is therefore more specifically qualified by the ideal of the beautiful, the good and the just.

In Plato's Apology (26D) ignorance is again linked to the use of διγράμματος. The books of Anaxagoras are mentioned and Meletus is asked whether he considers some men to be so 'unversed in letters' (ἄνευρον γραμμάτων εἶναι) that they are unaware of the contents of the books of Anaxagoras. Here it is implied that a literate person would know writings and their contents.

The description in Acts 4:13 is sometimes related to the Latin phrase in Lucilius 649. Here both descriptions of the apostles are used, this time in their Latin equivalents: 'Why not? Besides, you again would say I was unlettered and a common fellow' (Quid ni et tu idem illiteratum me atque idiotam diceres, cf. Schneider 1980:349). Illiteratus in Latin may mean unlettered, illiterate, uneducated or unlearned (Lewis 1960:886). Cicero, in De Oratore 2.6.25 uses the word in combination with the category of a
good man: *quem cognovimus virum bonum et non illitteratum.* In the immediate context of this passage there is a strong contrast between erudite (*doctus*) and ignorant people. This would be in line with the meaning of *ἀγράμματος* in Acts 4:13 and the Greek passages quoted above.

The meaning of *ἀγράμματος* can be determined more precisely by investigating the way in which related motifs or words are used in the book of Acts as a whole. In Acts 22, Paul addresses the people in Jerusalem, mentioning his own education under Gamaliel. He describes himself as an educated person, using the Greek word *παίδευω* (cf Van Unnik 1962 for a penetrating study on this word). In this verse Paul explicitly mentions his education in the law of the fathers.

That education need not refer exclusively to knowledge of the law, is clear from the case of Moses in Acts 7:22. According to this verse he was educated in the wisdom of the Egyptians. Such a description of the erudition of a Jew would make a deep impression on the reader of the text. During the trial of Paul, described in Acts 26:24, Festus tells Paul that τά πολλά...γράμματα is driving him crazy. On the final level of the text, the reference to the wisdom of Paul in Acts 26 therefore need not be restricted to knowledge of the law only. Luke wanted his readers to think of Paul as a wise person, one who is versed in literature.

Luke portrays Paul as an educated man, not only well-trained, but also able to speak eloquently before kings and officials (note how convincingly he speaks in Acts 26:28). This is, however, not the only example in Acts. In Acts 18:24 Luke also describes Apollos as an ἀνήρ λόγιος. Ἀνήρ λόγιος could mean both eloquent or educated (cf the commentaries *ad loc*).

In the Graeco-Roman world children from the upper classes received an advanced training during which they, amongst others, studied literature, grammar, philosophy, and especially rhetorics. For this advanced education the children would go to an *ephebeia*, which would enable them to be fully integrated into the privileged social life of the cities (Ferguson 1987:84). Luke’s understanding of education should be related to this context. He is, for example, quite informed about philosophy (Acts 17:18). He was aware of the importance of education, which included the development of rhetorical skills (ἀνήρ λόγιος).

By means of the word *ἀγράμματος* the disciples are contrasted directly with leaders such as Paul and Apollos. In Acts 4:13 Luke refers to those who have not had an advanced training and access to literature. The disciples are described as lacking the wisdom of the world or of the Jews.

Scholars who comment on these verses often refer to John 7:15 which describes the wisdom of Jesus with the same word: ὃς οὗτος γράμματα οἶδεν μὴ μεμαθηκὼς; It seems as if the Johannine tradition shared the sensivity of the Lucan works to the literary skills and knowledge of the Christians.

Several explanations have been given for the second description of the apostles in Acts 4:13. Drawing on Liddel & Scott (1961:819), scholars interpret ἰδωταί to mean someone without professional knowledge, a layperson. According to Schneider (1980:349) the word in Acts 4:13 refers to the orator who has not been trained (cf also Schlier 1938:217).

There is, however, another possible explanation; Plutarch in his *De ge-
In this section, Pheidolaius refers to the ignorant masses who rely on works of divination. The meaning of the word becomes even more clear in Plutarch's *Quaestiones Convivales* 613E where guests involved in philosophical discussions at parties are described. Over against the learned men (*philologous*) there may be a few *idiota* at a party who are like 'mute consonants among sonant vowels.' In 665A the *οί πολλοί καὶ ιδιώται*, as ordinary people, are again contrasted with philosophers. Elsewhere Plutarch uses the word in the sense of the average man, opposed to the person of distinction or authority (cf Pel 20.2.4; Oth 6.3.3).

The Latin equivalent is once again useful. Quintilianus 8.3.22 refers to *idiota* in the sense of the common throng, the fickle mass (Lewis & Short 1980:878). In the passage quoted from Cicero (De Or 2.6.25) the ignorant are even likened to 'rusticos', which means simple, boorish (lit: from the countryside). A similar combination is to be found in Quintilianus 2.21.16, who uses the phrase *rusticus illitteratus*.

With this description Luke would therefore imply that the disciples were from the rank and file. They had no fame, lacked leadership positions and were not celebrities. They were from a very different group than those in power.

Once again contrasting motifs in the narrative of Acts support this reading: In Acts 25:5, Festus invites the most important (*οί δικαστοί*) Jews to travel with him for the trial of Paul. And in Acts 25:23 the distinguished company of king Agrippa and his wife Bernice are listed: the generals and important citizens of the city accompany them. The apostles would be in stark contrast to these distinguished people. They come from the common people and masses.

The immediate context of Acts 4 supports this reading: the authorities in Jerusalem are pictured as they conspire against the apostles. They are jealous (Acts 5:17) because of the following among the people (Acts 4:21) and because their leadership positions are threatened by ordinary, uneasured people.

The observer of the events reported in Acts 4 would be under the impression that the apostles were looked down upon as part of the crowds. Luke often refers to these crowds in his works. They are easily influenced and misled by leaders. He normally uses the word *δρακός* for these groups of people (Ac 14:19; 17:8,13; 19:26).

The motif of the crowds as the ignorant and fickle masses is well-known in early Christianity. It appears, interestingly enough, also in the Johannine tradition. In John 7:47-49 the Pharisees reproach those who were so impressed by the preaching of Jesus that they ignored instructions to arrest him. The Pharisees ask whether these soldiers have also been misled by Jesus, adding the significant remark that not one of the leaders or the Pharisees believed in him. They then add: *όλλὰ ὁ δρακός οὗτος ὁ μὴ γινώσκων τὸν νόμον ἐπάρατος γείσιν.*

Luke stresses the fact that even though the disciples were not learned or distinguished people, they impressed their audiences. The Jews were 'astonished' that the disciples displayed so much power, despite who they were. This remark emphasises the fact that they were not convincing people because of their rhetorical skills. The Spirit is at work in their proclamation (cf the speeches of Tertullus and Paul in Ac 24. Conzelmann
1987:33). The proclamation has divine origins. In this sense Luke is later followed by Justin and Origen who openly accept the humble beginnings of Christianity, but then use it to confirm the uniqueness of the Gospel.

6 CONCLUSION
It is true, as Malherbe (1983:33) correctly states, that one should not attempt to determine the social context of a text exclusively on the basis of its language. There are nevertheless some interesting social conclusions to be drawn from the way in which the apostles are described in Acts 4:13.

Is Luke translating a gospel of the poor so that it becomes a gospel of the wealthy privileged group, educated in the classical Greek way of life? This may be quite an ironical conclusion, especially in the light of the many attempts to single out Luke as the Evangelist of the poor. It is of course true that with Luke the Gospel is moving into the corridors of power. The evangelist is a key figure in the movement from Jesus to Constantine. But one should not underestimate his incisive criticism of the privileged and rich (Lk 16:19ff; 18:18ff; and especially Lk 12:13ff), his focus on the powerless as the beloved of God and his scathing attacks on those who want to exclude these powerless ones from the Gospel (Acts 10:1). Luke understood Jesus well. He understood him so well that he was able to contextualise his message in a remarkably apt manner.

Although I have indicated some relationship between Luke’s writing and Graeco-Roman texts, one may be too easily tempted to forget to what extent Luke appropriates the style of the Septuagint, especially when he reports speeches. A D Nock has made us aware of how this language reflects an in-group mentality (cf Malherbe 1983:37) and reflects on the Christians as a minority group. This remark is important because it indicates that Luke

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3 We have seen that the language of the New Testament, according to someone like Rydebeck, should be seen as the nonliterary language of the educated people. Does Luke stand somewhere between these educated, nonliterary groups and the literary groups? Malherbe (1983:41n28) remarks that Rydebeck to a large extent depends on the writings of Luke, which are hardly representative of the New Testament, for his thesis. It therefore seems to be particularly valid in the case of the writings of Luke.

4 His attitude towards the rich may in fact reflect an apologetic concern worthy of further research.

5 Malherbe (1983:41-59) discusses the work of Judge, who related early Christianity to the philosophers of the time and argued that Christianity became better known than other religious movements because of its academic character. He concludes that one should not assume too easily that rhetoric was an academic enterprise only, or move too hastily from the rhetoric of Paul to presume rhetorical sophistication of his churches. He finds that the evidence rather proves that there were educated people in some of the Pauline churches and that one should therefore not accept the judgement of Deissmann about the social level of early Christianity. There seems to be wide agreement that Luke provides another example of Christianity in an educated context.
wrote to readers who had to be assisted in warding off the attacks of pagans against their faith.

Luke's interest in persons of higher standing (Conzelmann 1987:201) and his picture of the disciples as uneducated and unesteemed, combined with the picture of them as dynamic people driven by the Spirit of God, reveal his apologetic aim of defending the Gospel against those who remark cynically on its form of presentation. Luke knows that in his time people were very conscious of the fact that the medium was the message. This would relate to his attempt to show how prominent leaders such as Sergius Paulus and Festus were impressed by the Gospel and the learnedness of someone like Paul. This is also reiterated by the later remarks of Justin and Origen, who were both defending the Christian faith against the attacks of pagan philosophers.

Luke is writing to people who have received a literary education and who are accustomed to reading books with prologues similar to the Lucan ones (Dibelius 1956:145ff). The important conclusion which Dibelius reaches during this discussion of the defence of Paul at the end of the Book of Acts, is noteworthy: 'Indeed, arguments are given here which speak not for or against Paul, but for or against Christianity, and they did so especially in the author's own day. The intention is to edify the reader by these arguments, not only as he observes their 'effectiveness in this one particular trial, but in order that he himself may be so strengthened by them that he too will be able to withstand such accusations' (Dibelius 1956:149).

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