

# *The Acts of the Apostles*

*Welcome to a sequel.* If the Acts of the Apostles were a contemporary film rather than an ancient document, they might call it “The Gospel of Luke: Part Two,” for this book of the New Testament is clearly a sequel to the Third Gospel. The easiest way to recognize that fact is to read the first four verses of Luke’s Gospel, where the author addresses one Theophilus (likely a new convert and possibly the sponsor of the publication—the one who paid the copyists) and then to flip forward to the opening phrase of Acts: “In the first book, Theophilus . . .” That should be enough to indicate that we are dealing with a two-volume work. Those who study and write about Luke’s work are so conscious that his contribution to the New Testament canon—that is, the collection of books accepted by the church as inspired by God—is a two-volume project, deserving to be treated as a single masterpiece, that they commonly refer to it simply as Luke-Acts, as we shall do in this commentary.

This obvious fact of the unity of Luke-Acts has long escaped most readers because the conventional ordering of printed editions of the New Testament separates Luke’s Gospel from its sequel by placing the Gospel of John between them. Those who chose that sequence had a perfectly good reason: the arrangement keeps the four canonical stories of Jesus together as a bundle. That way, Acts makes an appropriate bridge from the stories about Jesus to the letters of Paul. But this arrangement also has a downside: it has accidentally distracted readers from recognizing the continuity between the two parts of Luke’s work.

During the last third of the twentieth century, biblical scholars have focused less on the study of discrete segments of texts and more on the form and meaning of entire documents. That focus has produced a fresh appreciation of the integrity and artistry of the work now commonly called Luke-Acts.

*How does Luke himself understand his project?* Luke expresses his intentions regarding the whole of Luke-Acts in the four-verse introduction at the head of his Gospel.

<sup>1</sup>Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the events that have been fulfilled among us, <sup>2</sup>just as those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and ministers of the word have handed them down to us, <sup>3</sup>I too have decided, after investigating everything accurately anew, to write it down in an orderly sequence for you, most excellent Theophilus, <sup>4</sup>so that you may realize the certainty of the teachings you have received.

Notice that the subject of his work is “the events that have been fulfilled among us.” The phrase “events fulfilled” suggests that those events were not simply happenings but truly fulfillments of the Scriptures of Israel. The “us” in question is the Christian community of Luke’s own time, a group far enough removed in time (at least by forty or fifty years) from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that they needed the testimony of eyewitnesses and preachers of the word to learn about those events. And yet the “us” was in such continuity with that first generation of Christians (the eyewitnesses) that those events could be understood as fulfilled among *us*. In other words, Luke’s audience could still think of the past events as having been fulfilled among *them*. This also applies to subsequent readers, including us.

Did Luke think that such “fulfillment” events were still occurring in his own time? Yes. Other parts of Luke-Acts indicate this awareness quite clearly. Consider Jesus’ final words at the close of Luke’s Gospel: “Thus it is written that the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46-47, emphasis added). Notice that what is said to fulfill the Scriptures here is not only the death and resurrection of the Messiah but also the preaching of repentance in the name of Jesus to all the nations, which is precisely what Acts is all about. So “the events that have been fulfilled among us” include not only the story of Jesus (told in the Third Gospel) but also the story of the church (the subject of Acts) as it continues to unfold in Luke’s own generation. By the extension implied in his vision, our generation is included as well. This awareness of the end-time fulfillment occurring in the time of the church comes through strongly in an assertion in Peter’s speech in Acts 3:24: “Moreover, all the prophets who spoke, from Samuel and those afterwards, also announced these days.”

*Are there other clues to the unity of Luke-Acts?* There are many. Take, for example, the words that Gabriel speaks to Mary at the annunciation.

“He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever . . .” (Luke 1:32-33).

It is instructive to see what happens to those predictions throughout the remainder of Luke-Acts. In the world of first-century Judaism, the word about Jesus' inheriting David's throne meant becoming the Messiah, the end-time political and religious leader of a restored people of Israel. When does Luke show Jesus taking up that role? Certainly not in the Gospel. Nowhere in Luke's narrative of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection does Jesus become king in that conventional sense. Indeed, talk of kingship occurs only ironically—in the accusations of the Sanhedrin, in the mockery of the leaders and soldiers under the cross, and in the inscription on the cross: "This is the king of the Jews." But the implication of these ironic references is that Jesus has failed to inherit the throne of David in the conventional sense. His kingship turns out to be far grander than that.

The reader has to begin reading the second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, to learn Luke's understanding of how Jesus inherits David's throne. In Peter's speech at Pentecost, we hear Peter recite a psalm of David, Psalm 16, in which the speaker of the prayer expresses the hope that his flesh will not "see corruption." Peter then asserts that these words of David were not spoken about himself but about the Messiah. Psalm 16, Peter says, must be interpreted in the light of 2 Samuel 7:12 and Psalm 132:11 in a way that points only to Jesus. Jesus now reigns over end-time Israel, not from an earthly throne in Jerusalem but as risen Lord of the Christian community. That is just one example of the careful continuity between the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. This commentary will highlight many more such links between the first and second parts of Luke's two-volume work.

*Why did Luke's readers need a sequel?* These preliminary observations may begin to suggest some of the reasons why Luke added a sequel to his new edition of the story of Jesus.

A church increasingly composed of non-Jews (Gentiles) needed help in understanding how Gentiles could claim the heritage of Israel. Luke tells the story of the church to demonstrate that their experience is the fruition of "the light to the nations" (Isa 49:6) that the People of God was always meant to be.

People living after the generation of the original eyewitnesses needed a way of understanding how the life of Jesus still had relevance in their own lives. Luke shows how the life of Christians, individually and communally, is always some kind of replay of the life of Jesus. Thus Stephen's death parallels Jesus' death, and the travels and trials of Paul mirror the travels and trials of Jesus.

As a community spreading throughout the Roman Empire, the church needed an account of itself that demonstrated honorable roots (origins in the ancient people of Israel) and posed no political threat to Roman law and order. And so Luke stresses biblical fulfillment and underscores the innocence of Jesus and his followers in the courts of Roman officials.

A growing church needed models for interacting with the worlds it was encountering. And so Luke told its early history not simply as reminiscences of "the way we were" but in the form of episodes that could model "the way we are." Indeed, that is why the Acts of the Apostles has been of permanent value to the church. While we can never succeed in simply replicating the early days of the church, we can always find reminders of what has been permanently important to the life of the church in Luke's portrayal of those early days.

*What are we to make of all those short speeches?* A good third of the content of the Acts of the Apostles consists of brief speeches. Often readers have taken these to be something like "tapes" of the apostolic preaching. Intense study of the Greek-writing historians of the first century has, however, led scholars to another conclusion. One of the tools of history writing in the Mediterranean world of those days was the composition of speeches put on the lips of key figures to interpret the meaning of the events narrated. In other words, even when Hellenistic (Greek) historians had verbatim records of what an important person said on a particular occasion, they would consider it part of good history writing to use the benefit of hindsight, along with the sources at their disposal, and compose a speech that captured the essential truth of what was happening. Most Lukan scholars judge that the speeches in Acts represent that kind of history writing, that is, Luke, drawing upon the tradition handed down from the apostles, composes speeches and puts them on the lips of Peter, Paul, and Stephen to explain to his readers the meaning of the history he is telling.

To those of us who thought we were hearing in those speeches the very words of Peter and Paul, this way of understanding the speeches was, at first, disappointing. But in the end, taking Luke to be writing speeches in the manner of his peer historians makes better sense of the material. For each of those speeches makes more sense as addressed to Luke's readers rather than as addressed to the audience within the plot line of the narrative. Indeed, the speeches build on one another and presume an audience that has read the Third Gospel and the rest of the Acts of the Apostles.

What we have in those cameo speeches, then, is not a set of tapes that we have to sort out for ourselves (like editors working with Richard

Nixon's White House tapes); rather, what we have are Luke's authoritative interpretations of the early history of the church. Because of their content, they also give us examples of the early church's use of Scripture in proclaiming the good news. At the end of the day, this is a more satisfying and instructive way of reading those speeches. This commentary aims to make that apparent.

*Outline.* Many commentators have observed that Jesus' words to the disciples before his ascension contain a kind of outline of Acts: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). That observation is illustrated in the following outline:

- I. The Risen Christ and the Restoration of Israel in Jerusalem (1:1–8:3).
- II. The Mission in Judea and Samaria (8:4–9:43).
- III. The Inauguration of the Gentile Mission (10:1–15:35).
- IV. The Mission of Paul to the Ends of the Earth (15:36–28:31).

This way of outlining the major movements of Luke's history also reflects one of the main texts from the Scriptures that he uses to interpret what is going on in the early history of the church:

For now the LORD has spoken  
who formed me as his servant from the womb,  
That Jacob may be brought back to him  
and Israel gathered to him;  
And I am made glorious in the sight of the LORD,  
and my God is now my strength!  
It is too little, he says, for you to be my servant,  
to raise up the tribes of Jacob,  
and restore the survivors of Israel;  
I will make you a light to the nations,  
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the  
earth. (Isa 49:5-6)

Notice that this prophecy about Servant/Israel entails two stages: first, the restoration of Israel (the twelve tribes of Jacob); second, becoming a "light to the nations." In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke shows how this prophecy is fulfilled.

Isaiah's first stage, the end-time restoration of Israel, unfolds in the first two movements in Acts—first in the formation of the Jerusalem community out of Jews from all nations (1:1–8:3), then in their outreach to Jews in the surrounding area and to Samaritans (8:4–9:43).

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Isaiah's second stage, becoming a "light to the nations," unfolds in two further movements—first in the inauguration of the mission to the Gentiles (10:1–15:35), then in Paul's mission to "the ends of the earth" (15:36–28:31).

This commentary will highlight the two continuities sketched in this introduction: (1) the continuity between the story of Jesus and the story of the church, and (2) the continuity between the Christian story as a whole and the longer story of Israel's life with God, as told in the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures. The importance of this approach was underscored by the recent document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible" (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002; available at <http://www.libreriaeditricevaticana.com>).

Although the format of this commentary does not allow for footnotes, the author's dependence on prior commentators will be obvious to those familiar with Lukan scholarship. Readers who wish to pursue their study of Luke-Acts more deeply should consult the following: Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992); James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press, 1996); Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *The Acts of the Apostles*, Anchor Bible 31 (New York: Doubleday, 1998); and Ben Witherington, III, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1998).

Now let us begin to read Luke's sequel.