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A Bird's-Eye View
of Luke and Acts

Context, Story,
and Themes



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What's So Special About Luke–Acts?

WHY THE GOSPEL OF LUKE AND ACTS OF THE APOSTLES DESERVE YOUR TIME

Often when I'm thinking about a holiday destination, I must convince my family that we should journey to a particular place, especially if they are not familiar with it. After all, what is there to see in the Bunya Mountains, in northern Tasmania, in the mountains of Colorado, or the seaside of Cornwall? This volume is about a journey, a journey into the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles (i.e., Luke–Acts). Maybe you are already up for it, maybe you think it will be boring, maybe you think it will be just cute stories about Jesus and quaint tales about the apostles. Well, as your tour-guide-in-chief through Luke–Acts, I want you to know that there are several reasons why Luke–Acts is a great read, a terrific study, and sumptuous feast of history, theology, and biblical insights. I offer six reasons why you should make Luke–Acts one of your top destinations for biblical study:

First, Luke–Acts forms a distinct corpus within the New Testament. Both books are written by “Luke,” an evangelist and the church's first historian. Luke–Acts comprises a unified two-volume work with a distinctive approach to telling the story of Jesus, and it is one of our best sources about first-century Christianity.

Second, Luke–Acts makes up 28 percent of the New Testament. That is significant because Paul's epistles are only 24 percent of the New Testament, while John's Gospel, epistles, and apocalypse comprise 20 percent of the New Testament. Luke, then, is by far the biggest contributor to the New Testament.¹

Third, by marrying a biography of Jesus to the history of the early church, Luke has effectively written a New Testament in miniature. His two-volume work is the story of Jesus and the mission of the apostles. Luke–Acts is the New Testament in a nutshell.²

Fourth, Luke–Acts contains some unique materials and unforgettable stories. Luke provides famous passages such as Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), Zechariah's Benedictus (Luke 1:67-79), Jesus' Nazareth sermon (Luke 4:16-31), the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:1-32), the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37), the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35), the ascension (Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:1-11), the beginning of the church at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-47), the division between the Hebrews and Hellenists (Acts 6:1-6), Paul's conversion (Acts 9:1-30; 22:1-21; 26:2-23), and the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1-33). And that is just the tip of the iceberg.

Fifth, Luke–Acts emphasizes several key things:

- Jesus' concern for the poor and outcasts
- the rigorous nature of discipleship
- the importance of prayer and attitudes toward possessions
- the place of women among Jesus' disciples
- an emphasis on Israel's hopes fulfilled in Jesus
- the identity of Jesus as the messianic Lord

¹Some scholars think Luke *might* have written Hebrews and had a hand in compiling Paul's pastoral letters (1–2 Timothy and Titus). This is far from certain, but if true, it would mean that Luke wrote close to 50 percent of the New Testament.

²C. K. Barrett, "The First New Testament?," *NovT* 38 (1996): 94-104.

- the importance of the Holy Spirit in the mission of the church
- the apostolic preaching of Jesus
- the beginnings of the Christian mission to the nations
- the beginnings of Paul's apostolic ministry
- the church's contentious relationship with the Jews and the Roman Empire

Sixth, Luke–Acts is valuable for your devotional life and in a church's preaching cycle. For a start, the Gospel of Luke shows what it means to be a follower of Jesus. The Lukan travel narrative (Luke 9:51–19:44) contains most of Luke's teaching about discipleship and urges disciples to a manner of life that separates the followers from the fans (see esp. Luke 9:57–62 about three would-be disciples). The book of Acts tells us of the beginnings of the church and gives an ideal picture of the church as committed "to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42).

Why Read Luke?

"The most important reason to study Luke's Gospel is captured in the words of Cleopas and another, unnamed disciple. After an encounter with the resurrected Jesus, they say to each other, 'Did not our hearts burn within us . . . while he opened to us the Scriptures?' (Luke 24:32). Jesus had been teaching them that all of Scripture has always been centered on him as the fulfillment of God's plan of redemption (Luke 24:26–27). When we study Luke's Gospel, we see Jesus, the Redeemer. We hear the words of Jesus, the friend of sinners. We feel the heartbeat of Jesus, who seeks and saves the lost. When we study this book, will not our hearts burn within us with love for him? And will not this love overflow for the salvation of the world?"^a

^aC. D. "Jimmy" Agan III, "Why Study the Book of Luke?," Crossway, May 28, 2019, www.crossway.org/articles/why-study-the-book-of-luke/.

Why Read Acts?

“The book of Acts offers something unique in the Christian canon. It has no rival in terms of a book spanning so many different lands. Its references to the Spirit far outpace any other work. It functions as a hinge canonically, bridging the Gospels and Epistles. It recounts the birth of the church age, and its content has no parallel in the New Testament. Acts is also unparalleled in that it recounts a new stage in Christian history: post-Jesus life. Everything (canonically) before this has been either pre-Jesus or with Jesus. No longer are readers and characters looking forward to a Messiah, or following him on the dusty roads of Galilee. Now, readers get a glimpse of Jesus’s followers as they seek to be faithful to Jesus after he has departed.”^a

^aPatrick Schreiner, *The Mission of the Triune God: A Theology of Acts* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 19-20.

All this is to say, going deeper into Luke–Acts is a great way to be reminded of authentic discipleship and a terrific refresher on the church’s mission.

WRESTLING WITH LUKE

Reading Luke–Acts brings up some thorny questions and knotty challenges for us to consider in our thinking about the contents of this two-volume work and how to apply it. What follows is a list of what I intend to cover in each chapter of this volume with an explanation of why it matters for understanding Luke–Acts.

First, origins story. This includes exactly who was Luke, why he wrote his two-volume work, the details about date, genre, outline, and all that scholarly preamble. I know it is not exactly riveting theater, but we cannot afford to skip this part because we do need to place Luke in his social and historical context. We must have a working hypothesis about Luke’s sources, we should try to figure

out what is motivating him, and we need to at least consider how Luke-Acts holds together as a story.

Second, granted that Luke and Acts can both stand alone, if we read them together, can we discern a particular purpose that Luke has in mind? What makes someone write a biography of Jesus and the history of the church? Is the Lukan Gospel for the social justice-loving churches of the region of Achaia in Greece? Was Acts composed as kind of friend-of-the-court brief to help Paul during his trial in Rome? Assuming that Luke is not writing his two-volume story purely for the curiosity of posterity, it is incumbent on us to ask what impact he wanted his writings to have, both immediately and in the long haul.

Third, should we think of Luke as mainly a historian or a theologian? Scholars crank out huge tomes on these questions. It is a dense topic but a necessary one. That is because there are a few places where one wonders whether Luke has the details quite right (e.g., the census under Quirinius in Luke 2:1-5), but there are other places where Luke seems to be a historian of the first rank (e.g., the man really knows his ancient nautical travel itineraries in Acts 21-28). History aside, if Luke is principally a theologian, then what is driving his theological agenda? Is Luke trying to compensate for the failure of Jesus to return as quickly as everyone thought by telling the church to get comfy and hang in for the long haul in the “times of the Gentiles” (Luke 21:24)? Or is Luke simply a Jesus-freak and Paul fanboy who wants everyone to know the “way of salvation” (Acts 16:17)?

Fourth, who is Jesus, according to Luke? Luke has some unique material about Jesus that gives us Luke’s own perspective about who Jesus is. Spoiler alert: in Luke’s testimony Jesus is the messianic herald of salvation, Lord of the church, the anointed Spirit bearer, the exalted Spirit dispenser, and the only name in whom

salvation can be found. While Luke's portrayal of Jesus operates differently in the Gospel (through the story of Jesus' life) versus in Acts (through Jesus heralded as the exalted Lord), Luke has a consistent and well-rounded view of Jesus as the Messiah of God in whom the nations find their hope.

Fifth, Luke is very big on the theme of salvation (Greek σωτηρία), with people attaining wholeness or deliverance from sinful deeds, dispossession, dishonor, disease, disability, demons, death, and despotic powers. Jesus is the prophesied "horn of salvation" from David's house (Luke 1:69 NIV), and "There is salvation in no one else" other than Jesus, "for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). We must unpack the theme of salvation with its holistic and wide-ranging scope of meaning.

Sixth, Luke is a biblical theologian concerned with the how Israel's sacred Scriptures find their fulfillment in Jesus and the early church (see esp. Acts 13:32-34). Luke kicks off his Gospel by stating that his purpose is to provide "an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us" (Luke 1:1). At the end of his Gospel, the risen Jesus gives the two travelers to Emmaus a lesson in christological readings of the Old Testament: "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:27 NIV). We'll see how Luke considers his Jesus-church story as built with the scaffolding of Israel's Scriptures.

Seventh, Luke has a lot to say about Jesus' disciples and what it means to be his disciple. The travel narrative (Luke 9:51-19:44) is filled with many episodes, encounters, parables, and sayings that demonstrate how nothing less than total commitment to Jesus and his kingdom is required for true disciples. The strenuous nature of discipleship is illustrated in Jesus' encounter with would-be

disciples who are challenged as to whether they are really devoted to God's kingdom and Israel's sacred traditions or are only committed to the point of convenience. Acts provides a lot of details about how the early church cultivated its own pattern of devotion to Jesus and the God of Israel. The challenge is for us, too, to forsake possessions, luxury, family expectations, and career and to follow the risen and exalted Jesus.

Eighth, women are far more prominent in Luke-Acts than in any other part of the New Testament. Women have key voices and roles from the infancy narrative (Luke 1-2) all the way through to the churches of the eastern Mediterranean with those such as Lydia (Acts 16:14-15). However, if you are expecting Luke to be a fourth-wave feminist, then you are going to be disappointed. Luke is writing from within the Greco-Roman world, where female roles were still socially limited. At no point does Luke demand that we burn the patriarchal barn to the ground. Accordingly, feminist interpreters dispute whether Luke is truly pro-women or merely reiterates patriarchal power and privilege with slight modifications. For example, in Luke 10:38-42, does Luke commend Mary for sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to his teaching (unlike her sister Martha, who is irate that she has to do all the housework herself)? Or does Luke have Jesus commend Mary because she sits down and shuts up rather than actively serves?

Ninth, some parts of Luke-Acts sound a bit like socialism. Luke records John the Baptist telling someone, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise" (Luke 3:11), while the early church's members "would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:45). To cut to the chase, Luke is not calling for state control of the means of production and for the abolishment of private property by a politburo on behalf of some

industrial urbanized proletariat. However, Luke does have a lot—I mean a *lot*—to say about possessions and wealth, which is challenging as it is jarring. If your thing is based on your things, then you are going to find the Lukan Jesus' teachings about wealth quite disturbing. Luke may not be a political Marxist, but he's not exactly thrilled, either, at the prospect of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. In Luke's view, the first will be last and the last will be first (Luke 13:30). This is unsettling stuff for those of us who live in a consumerist and affluent society.

Tenth, Luke was the first “Pentecostal” theologian, with his emphasis on the Holy Spirit. Jesus is both the bearer of the Spirit (Luke 3:22) and the dispenser of the Spirit (Luke 3:16). The Spirit is the “promise of the Father” (Acts 1:4) and “power from on high” (Luke 24:49). But don't get the wrong impression—the Spirit is not some kind of divine fog or a performance-enhancing drug for preachers. The Spirit really does not like being lied to (Acts 5:3, 9), and he directs the apostles toward missionary ventures (Acts 13:2). While not every church today is Pentecostal in the denominational sense, if it were not for Pentecost, there would not be any churches (see Acts 2).

Eleventh, Luke in many ways is trying to hold together the church's Jewish heritage while simultaneously affirming that the full inclusion of Gentiles in the church is a very Jewish thing to do. Luke gives us a Jewish Jesus who operates as the living Lord of a largely Gentile church. Luke tells a complicated story on that front, full of surprising twists, debates, setbacks, and controversy. At the same time, Luke knew that Jesus and Paul had some big religious showdowns with the Jews of Judea and the Diaspora, and some scholars wonder whether Luke had an anti-Jewish inclination born of sectarian debates between Jews and Christians. So there are lots of things to discuss here on Luke, Jesus, Jews, and Gentiles.

Twelfth, what did Luke think of the Roman Empire? Did Luke think the empire was inherently evil, useful but dangerous, or a good thing that facilitated the spread of Christianity? Luke appears so eager to blame the Jews for Jesus' death and for anti-Christian riots that he can sometimes make Roman officials look good in comparison. Other times, however, Luke portrays Roman officials as greedy, corrupt, indifferent to injustice, idolatrous, murderous, or even plain incompetent. It will be useful to see what Luke really thinks about Rome and its supporters out in the provinces of the empire.

Thirteenth and finally, we need to look at Luke's conception of hope. An older line of scholarship argued that Luke was trying to compensate for the failure of Jesus to return as soon as the first generation thought he would. Luke, so the argument goes, is trying to explain what happened and what the church was going to do in this long, long interim period. Even beyond that dry discussion, there is the matter of what Luke thinks will happen on earth when the Son of Man comes (Luke 18:8) and what it means that to believe that "it is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). In Luke's telling, Paul declares that he is on trial for "my hope in the promise made by God to our ancestors" (Acts 26:6). This hope is based on Jesus as God's expression of his faithfulness to Israel and his invitation for everyone to "eat in the kingdom of God" (Luke 13:29; see Luke 14:12).

These are the questions, or perhaps the challenges, that Luke sets before us, and we will carefully address them in the following chapters. At the end I hope that readers will know Luke's two-volume work better and will be more equipped to follow Jesus as the prince of life.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What percentage of the New Testament is Luke–Acts?
2. To whom did Luke address his Gospel and Acts?
3. Luke 9:51–19:44 is known as what section of the Gospel of Luke?
4. How does Luke challenge the affluence and consumerism of our society?
5. What do you think Luke means by “salvation”?

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