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**ACTS**  
A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition

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# INTRODUCTION

The book of Acts, also known as the Acts of the Apostles, has had a variety of literary (and interpretive) “companions” since it first appeared. The book circulated before the creation of the NT canon, associated with the collection of General Epistles. Later, because it preceded the Pauline corpus, it often functioned as its historical introduction.

Because of a common addressee and other extensive similarities (vocabulary, style, characterization, themes, etc.) between the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, the use of the title “Luke-Acts” reflects a contemporary consensus about these two books: they were originally a single literary work of two separate volumes (see Cadbury 1927). This view has been assumed for nearly a century, despite their separation in the Bible and the lack of any extant MSS or canonical list that explicitly connects them.

External evidence of early usage indicates that the books were read separately (see, e.g., Gregory 2003; Rowe 2010, 43-65). The two texts deal with divergent materials: the Gospel of Luke depicts the life of Jesus and is placed with two other similar (Synoptic) Gospels; Acts depicts movements of the earliest believers, including Peter (chs 1—12) and Paul (chs 13—28). Its canonical position before communication among early Christian communities of faith corresponds with the general contexts depicted within Acts.

Yet the differences do not eclipse their literary links. Both books identify an addressee named Theophilus (→ “Addressee or Audience” in Introduction). Acts reminds Theophilus about the author’s “former book” about Jesus (1:1), likely the Lukan Gospel. Luke 24 and Acts 1 join the two books together in numerous ways: the promise of the Father (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4), the depiction of Jesus’ followers as “witnesses” and the mention of “power” that they would receive (Luke 24:48; Acts 1:8), the emphasis on Jesus’ ascension (Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9-11), etc. Characters in Acts (i.e., believers) often mirror characters in the Third Gospel (namely, Jesus). Most scholars consider the abundance of internal (literary) connections between the two books as sufficient reason for reading the two works together, despite the shortage of external evidence for doing so.

If readers approach Acts as the second part of the larger work “Luke-Acts” instead of a separate literary work, interpretive implications follow. First, intertextual connections are *primarily* between Luke’s Gospel and Acts rather than between Paul’s letters and Acts. Second, the Third Gospel and Acts are read differently, because (a) the former narrative does not end with the empty tomb (as do the other Synoptic Gospels) and ascension, and (b) the latter narrative presumes the *Lukan* story of Jesus. Third, these two texts *together* become the largest *single* contribution to the NT, comprising more than a fourth of the whole collection.

## A. Authorship

Like the Third Gospel (and the other NT Gospels), the book of Acts is anonymous. Most of what is known about the author comes from narrative hints. Although persons may try to identify the “real” or “flesh-and-blood” author with textual evidence, the text itself only suggests what is known as an “implied author,” constructed from textual cues about the author’s knowledge, background, point of view, etc. From Acts, one may deduce that the implied author had significant literary skill (compared to other NT writers) and was adept in dramatic storytelling. The extensive use of the LXX, particularly the Torah, both in allusions and in vocabulary, suggests good knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures. Although commonly assumed that the author was a Gentile, this familiarity with the Scriptures points either to a Hellenistic Jew or a Gentile with significant exposure to the LXX. If the author was the lat-

ter, he was likely connected to the synagogue either as a Godfearer (→ sidebar “The Godfearers” with 10:1-2) or as a convert to Judaism before hearing the Christian gospel.

Most of Acts is narrated from a third-person perspective. But in chapter 16, that perspective changes to first person without warning: “After Paul had seen the vision, *we* got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called *us* to preach the gospel to them” (v 10, emphasis added). This first-person narration continues through v 17 and then vanishes, only to reappear (and then disappear) again three more times (20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1—28:16). Some attribute this shift to Luke’s source for this section. But it would seem strange that an author with polished literary skills who apparently had little difficulties editing other sources was unable to recognize and adapt these materials. Another plausible solution is that this perspective was inserted strategically at this point in the narrative for rhetorical or literary reasons (→ “Literary Features” in Introduction).

Still others see this as evidence that the author was a participant in the narrated events. This traditional view has understood the “we” passages to indicate that the author of Acts (and the Gospel of Luke) was a coworker or ministry companion of Paul (see Neale 2011, 23-24). According to early church tradition, Luke wrote both the gospel now ascribed to him and the book of Acts. Irenaeus cited these “we” passages as evidence that the author was Paul’s associate (*Haer.* 3.14.1). But such information is corroborated by scarce NT references. Paul identifies Luke as one of two “fellow workers” (Phlm 24). Two other references refer to Luke as “the beloved physician” (Col 4:14 NRSV) who was still with Paul as he faced death (2 Tim 4:11). But these provide little support for Lukan authorship. These letters (whether or not from Paul’s pen) place Luke with Paul during some periods but do not necessarily place them together during the critical “we” passages.

Such sparse evidence suggests caution is needed when drawing conclusions. Two considerations should be taken seriously. First, attempts to defend Luke the physician as the author of Acts (and the Gospel of Luke) by arguing that the narrator’s style and perspective reveal someone from the medical profession often misinterpret both the specific textual details and the general work itself (see Cadbury 1920). Second, the different explanations for the “we” passages in Acts indicate that they may have an explanation unconnected to authorship. Other narrative issues such as differences between the portrait of Paul in Acts and Paul’s self-descriptions in his letters (→ sidebar “Different Writers, Different Pauls?” with 13:46-47) also need to be considered before concluding that the pronoun “we” points to the author of Acts. At the very least, the differences in portrayals of Paul—in Acts and Paul’s letters—raise questions about whether the author of Acts accompanied Paul or even knew

him. Nonetheless, for convenience most scholars (as does this commentator) still refer to the author of Luke-Acts as Luke, although the mystery about his identity remains unsolved. Fortunately, the interpretation of Acts does not depend on the resolution of authorship questions.

## B. Addressee or Audience

Both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are addressed to “Theophilus,” a name that means “friend / lover of God” or “beloved of God.” But who is Theophilus? The honor with which Luke addresses Theophilus (1:1; see esp. Luke 1:3) suggests an individual of considerable social standing. Perhaps Theophilus was a wealthy patron who funded Luke’s research. Because of the meaning of Theophilus’ name, perhaps the book is addressed to all believers or all those “beloved of God.” But the use of a name for such symbolic purposes was uncommon in ancient literary practice; thus, it is more likely that the original addressee was a specific person (see Alexander 1993, 132-33).

Yet Acts was not written only for an audience of one but for others who were also “beloved of God.” Like authorship, the identity of this broader Lukan “implied audience” may be constructed from textual indicators. Clearly the readers of Acts understood Greek; the implied author also assumes that they are familiar with the LXX. Such an audience was probably quite diverse and found in varied locales. Given the issues in Acts, they may have included both Jewish and Gentile believers, perhaps dealing with similar issues of diversity themselves (see Esler 1987, 30-45). The references to various groupings of persons—wealthy and poor, men and women, Jew and Gentile, citizen and slave, prominent and marginal—suggest the possibility of diverse social composition (see, e.g., Tannehill 1996, 24-26).

## C. Date of Composition

There are three viable options for the date of composition of Acts. The earliest date is shortly after the end of the book and Paul’s house arrest in Rome (in the early 60s). Jerome, for instance, contended that Acts (and the Third Gospel) was written in the brief span between Paul’s custody and his death a couple of years later.

This dating for the Lukan corpus still has a few adherents, for several reasons (see Hemer 1990, 365-410; Schnabel 2012, 27-28). First, the sudden ending of Acts tells nothing about Paul’s release or subsequent death. Second, Luke mentions nothing about two noteworthy events: the emperor Nero’s persecution (AD 64) and the destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70). Third, no place in Acts refers explicitly to any of the Pauline letters, which would have been collected several decades later.

The dominant view is that Luke-Acts was written as a two-volume work after the destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70), probably in the 80s. Such a view

accounts for passages in the Gospel of Luke where Jesus alludes to the fate of Jerusalem (13:35a; 19:43-44; 21:20-24; 23:28-31)—words that would have greater significance after the city’s destruction. But this position also explains the presence of passages in Acts that refer to the temple in Jerusalem closing its gates behind Paul after he was removed from the premises (21:30)—an act that would take on greater significance after the subsequent break between Judaism and the Christian movement. This date also precedes the likely time when the Pauline letters would have been collected and widely circulated, which explains the apparent lack of knowledge about them in Acts. Furthermore, this dating does not force historical explanations for an ending that may have better literary or rhetorical explanations.

A third hypothesis is that Acts was written during the first half of the second century. The classic formulation of this view came from Ferdinand Christian Baur in the nineteenth century, who contended that Acts played a pivotal role within early Christianity. Baur described the early church as having two competing sides. The Jewish Christians (first led by Peter) held to strict observance of the Jewish Torah. The Gentile Christians (first led by Paul) viewed the Torah as ineffective. Baur interpreted Acts as a document seeking conciliation and concessions between these two sides, whose conflict had extended into the second century (see 1876, 1:1-145). Few scholars today accept Baur’s view without significant modification.

More recent proposals for a second-century dating of Acts consider other features of the book. One view contends the vocabulary of Acts, its possible intertextual links (e.g., Josephus, whose last volume dates about ca. AD 93), and Luke’s depiction of “the other” (like the Jews) all point to an early second-century date, perhaps AD 110-120 (see Pervo 2006). Another proposal suggests that Acts may have been written as a response to the heretic Marcion (see Knox 1942). The suggestion is that the author of Acts edited and amended a pre-Marcionite version of the canonized Gospel of Luke to serve as a “prequel” to Acts, which was written to recover Paul from Marcionite teachings and distortions. This would date the composition no earlier than the 140s, which correlates with Irenaeus’ first references to both the Third Gospel and Acts (see Tyson 2006; Matthews 2010, 27-53; also Trobisch 2010, 119-27).

These later dates for the composition of Acts are able to account for possible allusions to Pauline and deutero-Pauline letters in the narrative of Acts. In addition, they help to offer rhetorical explanations for some differences between the Lukan portrayal of Paul in Acts and the self-portrayal of Paul in the Pauline letters.

## D. Genre of Acts

Different literary genres function differently, so the identification and assessment of the genre of Acts contribute to the interpretive task. Two issues complicate the matter. First, the possible association of Luke's Gospel and Acts as a two-volume work raises the question about whether the work's unity requires *generic* unity (see Parsons and Pervo 1993, 20-44). The differences in material make it likely that there are different genres for the two books, however interpreters determine the relationship between them. Second, ancient literary conventions often blurred genres. The study and imitation of different kinds of literature for learning composition were key aspects of Greco-Roman education. This results in literary features of different genres found in Acts.

Several proposals regarding the genre of Acts have been offered (see Phillips 2006, 365-96). Some who hold to the unity of Luke-Acts propose the genre of Acts as *biography*. Although this perspective typically focuses on parallels between NT Gospels and Hellenistic biographies (see, e.g., Burridge 1992), Luke-Acts has been compared to Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (third century AD), which offers biographies of founders of religious schools or movements (Talbert 1974). Talbert notes that Laertius' *Lives* also depicts stories about those founders' successors or disciples, which he considers noteworthy when studying the genre of Acts. Such an understanding offers a proposal for reading Luke-Acts holistically, but more have been convinced of biography as a generic category for Luke's Gospel than for Luke-Acts (or Acts).

More scholars see Acts as *history* or *historiography*. They see both the preface of Luke's Gospel (1:1-4) as well as the beginning of Acts (1:1) as either consistent with prefaces that appear in Greco-Roman historiography or at least containing vocabulary emphasizing key themes from that tradition. Thus, Luke's description of his investigatory work and consultation of various sources in composing his work corresponds with similar statements by the Greek historians Herodotus (*Hist.* 1.1) and Thucydides (*War* 1.20.3; 1.22.2). For instance, the representation of his work as "accurate" (*akribōs* [Luke 1:3]) mirrors statements by other historians: Thucydides (*War* 1.22.2), Polybius (*Hist.* 1.14.6; 16.20.8; 34.4.2), Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Ant. rom.* 1.1.2; 1.5.4; 1.6.3), Josephus (*J.W.* 1.2, 6, 9), and Lucian (*Hist.* 7, 24, 39-44).

Luke's characterization of his work as an "orderly account" (Luke 1:3) correlates with other historians who emphasize their role in arranging and unifying that work (see, e.g., Polybius, *Hist.* 1.3.4; 1.4.2-3). Luke links the stories about Jesus and the church both to the story of Israel and to the larger story of human history. He does this by alluding and referring to persons and events from the OT and from the Greco-Roman world.

This general understanding of the genre of Acts has several variations. Some consider it a popular form of *general history*, which focuses on the identity and emergence of a particular people (see Aune 1987, 77-157). Others classify it as *historical monograph*, a shorter work that focuses on narrated events in a more restricted period of time (see Plümacher 1979, 457-66; Palmer 1993, 1-30).

Since Greco-Roman historiography was concerned about its didactic or rhetorical purposes, others classify Acts as *apologetic history* because of its concerns to defend the Christian movement and its leaders from charges or accusations against them (see Sterling 1992). It could also be described as *biblical history* since Luke draws parallels between narrated events and biblical traditions of the LXX (perhaps more specifically Deuteronomistic or prophetic; see Rosner 1993, 65-82; Schmidt 1985, 417-27; Brodie 1990, 78-85). Still others have noted similarities between Acts and *political histories* of the Greco-Roman era, which seek to connect founder, ancestors, and successors through a common story (see Balch 1990b, 5-19).

Some features of the narrative do not coincide with more technical or formal characteristics of that tradition (see Pervo 2009, 17-18). The prefaces of the Third Gospel (Luke 1:1-4) and Acts (1:1) contain some vocabulary consistent with Greco-Roman historiography, but their literary conventions and style do not conform to the standards of *formal* Greco-Roman historiography. Rather, these prefaces were written in more accessible types of writing suitable for those of the “professions” or trades of that era (Alexander 1993; 1999, 9-26; Robbins 1999, 63-67). Thus, although the Gospel of Luke and Acts exhibit greater literary style than most NT texts, they are also more comparable to other NT texts in such accessibility. This would locate Acts on the “fringes” of the historiographical genre rather than in its mainstream (Alexander 1999, 23). This suggests that, although Acts is history, it is also written in a more “popular” form.

The popular form of Acts increases the possibility that features from different genres may contribute to this work. Since ancient literary education included the imitation of classic and dramatic literature, Acts has been studied to consider the creative aspects of its composition. In particular, Luke may write for dramatic effect and even the entertainment of his audience (i.e., telling a good story; see Pervo 1987), since keeping the interest and attention of an audience is an important element of composition. Similarities between episodes in Acts and ancient epics also suggest that these Lukan stories were told in familiar ways to heighten their impact (see, e.g., MacDonald 1999, 88-107; 2003, 189-203). Features in these and other types of literature were typically imported into more popular forms of history like Acts, as the author sought to compose a work in effective ways (see Aune 1987).

## E. Sources and Intertextuality

Luke had sources in hand for writing Acts but states nothing about them (contrast Luke 1:1-4). The problem lies in determining what those sources may have been since Luke was skillful in shaping the final text with his own style and vocabulary (Dupont 1964). Some contend that the “we” passages in Acts reflect the authorial perspective of a source from which Luke draws in composing Acts, but other plausible explanations (→ “Authorship” in Introduction) make that argument less than compelling. A common view is that Luke had at least two sources—one from Jerusalem and another from Antioch of Syria—due to the shift in action from the holy city (chs 1—7) to the latter as the narrative focuses more on Paul’s ministry (chs 13—21).

Were Paul’s letters available to Luke as a source? Some contend that differences between those letters and Acts make their availability unlikely. Luke never mentions that Paul wrote a letter to one of the local churches that appear in the narrative. But such differences, which readers must take seriously, may have explanations other than Lukan unfamiliarity. In addition, some evidence in Acts 15 may suggest that Luke knew about and used Paul’s Galatian letter but reversed the roles and views of Peter and Paul (Walker 1998, 77-86). Other matters in Acts, such as the accusations against Paul in ch 21, may also allude more to what Paul states in his letter to the Galatians than to what Luke himself narrates about Paul in Acts. If Acts was written in the first half of the second century (→ “Date of Composition” in Introduction), it is much more likely the collection of Paul’s letters would have been available to the author.

One source that did influence Acts is the LXX (see Evans and Sanders 1993; Litwak 2005; also Neale 2011, 26-28). This intertextuality between the LXX and Acts is apparent in two distinct ways. First, Luke appropriates scriptural quotations at strategic points in Acts, such as Peter’s explanation of what happened at Pentecost (2:17-21) and numerous instances when Jesus was proclaimed as the Messiah/Christ (see 2:25-28; 3:22-23; 4:11). Second, scriptural echoes occur throughout Acts as Luke draws from the story of Israel to continue that story among the followers of Jesus. Luke uses these intertextual connections to tell a *continuing* story of God’s purposes of salvation as told in the Scriptures.

## F. Textual-Critical Issues

Most variations among Greek MSS of Acts are relatively minor and exist in apparently random passages. These differences are due either to copying texts by hand or to attempts to clarify textual ambiguity. However, significant differences exist between two major textual traditions, the Alexandrian and Western traditions. The Alexandrian tradition includes copies of the Third Gospel and Acts from as early as the fourth century, with the oldest papyrus

text of Luke's Gospel (P<sup>75</sup>) dating from AD 175-225. Texts of the Western tradition include parchment copies from as early as the sixth century as well as papyrus fragments and citations from early patristic writers (e.g., Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine) that go back to the third century.

Whereas the Western tradition *omits* materials from Luke 22—24 when compared to the Alexandrian tradition (Luke 22:19b-20; 24:3b, 6a, 12, 36b, 40, 51a, 52b), Western texts *expand* the narrative of Acts when compared to Alexandrian texts. These expansions amplify some stories, explain some textual ambiguities, emphasize the authority of the apostles, and accentuate Jewish rejection and the role of the Holy Spirit in a style that is different from the rest of Acts. This expanded version is about 10 percent longer than the Alexandrian one. Biblical translations of Acts are based on the Alexandrian tradition, since the Western tradition reflects consistent editorial revision through addition to the narrative of Acts (see Head 1993, 415-44). But because the Western text sometimes offers helpful clarification about textual ambiguity, readers should note such textual variations where they exist.

## G. Literary Features

Literary-critical approaches to biblical studies developed during the last third of the twentieth century (including narrative criticism) and changed the study of Acts. This approach is concerned not only with *what* the text says but also with *why* something is stated or described and *how* the text may have functioned as the original audience heard and understood it. Two areas dominate: (1) textual features and cues of what may be described as the “narrative world” as shaped and defined by Luke, and (2) the role of the interpreter in making appropriate connections and conclusions (see Thompson 2004, 66-73). In light of this, interpretation of Acts must consider matters such as plot, narrative placement and sequence, characterization, and the place of various themes and scenes. It must also consider the role of the interpreter in making the connections between different narrative elements and in evaluating characters, actions, and plot in terms of the narrative progression.

When Acts is assessed from a narrative perspective, four features stand out. One is *the use of speeches in Acts* (including at least twenty-seven speeches and seven “partial speeches”; Soards 1994, 1), which accounts for over 35 percent of the entire work. Some speeches are similar in form and content and, because they call for repentance, are often described as sermons (see Acts 2:14-36; 3:11-26; 5:29-32; 10:34-43; 13:16-41). Because these speeches appear on the lips of different reliable characters, the similarities imply that Luke as narrator was responsible for their final form and content, not unlike the Greek historian Thucydides' comment about speeches in his own work (*War* 1.22.1). Some speeches (or sermons) are related to the narrative events

where they are situated; others focus more directly on the respective event, thereby making them more analogous to speeches in ancient works of history (see Cadbury 1933d, 402-27; Dibelius 1956, 138-85).

In either case, speeches appear at strategic points in Acts. They function as commentary rather than verbatim record. Each speech offers a theological explanation for what happened, for what will happen, or both. The narrator thereby provides readers with needed information or insight to interpret scenes and characters appropriately, without addressing them directly. Thus, the speeches are particularly significant because of what they reveal about Luke's theological agenda. Since they are scattered throughout Acts, they also bring coherence to the narrative (see Soards 1994, 162-208).

A second feature is *the use of geography and travel motifs in the general structure of Acts*. Acts begins where the Gospel of Luke ends—in Jerusalem. The fulfillment of God's promises to Israel occurs there in the first seven chapters (see Acts 2:1-41). However, consistent with Jesus' commission to his apostles (1:8), this was only the beginning of their witness, which would extend beyond the city ("all Judea and Samaria") to "the ends of the earth." The narrative action returns to Jerusalem at strategic points: the introduction of the transformed Saul to the church leaders (9:26-30), questions about salvation and Gentiles (11:1-18; 15:1-35; 21:18-26), and legal proceedings against Paul (21:27—23:30). This grounds the story of the church (including the inclusion of Gentiles) within the story of God as seen in Israel. But Acts ends not in Jerusalem but in Rome, which suggests a shift in Jerusalem's narrative and theological role (see Parsons 1998, 155-71).

This use of geography is related to travel or journey motifs in Acts. Jesus' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51—19:27) is prominent in the Gospel; in Acts, Luke uses the journey motif to depict the spread of the gospel and the progress of the church's mission. Believers are on "the Way" (9:2; 18:26; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22), traveling first from Jerusalem to surrounding regions and then to the Mediterranean world. Particular attention is given to the journeys of Philip (8:4-40), Peter (9:32—10:48), and Paul (13:4—14:28; 15:36—18:22; 18:23—21:16; 27:1—28:16). In each instance, the journey was associated with Jerusalem or divine activity, thereby linking the Christian movement with the purposes of God.

A third literary feature is *characterization*. All authors depict their characters in particular ways that are appropriate for the broader narrative world that the author creates and the purposes for that world (see Neale 2011, 36-37). Thus, characterization must be interpreted within the narrative. In Acts, Luke paints his leading believers (e.g., Peter, Paul) in ways that are reminiscent of others. The episodes of Peter and John (3:1-10) and of Paul (14:8-10) healing a crippled man resemble a similar scene in Jesus' ministry (Luke 5:17-26),

thereby connecting the story of the church with the story of Jesus. Luke also depicts characters in specific ways so that they stand in comparison or contrast to one another. Thus, readers must not only recognize the general nature of characterization but also its function in specific contexts.

A fourth distinctive feature is *the use of first-person narration in portions of Acts*. These sections after Acts 15 have provoked different explanations (→ “Authorship” in Introduction; see Praeder 1987, 193-218; Wedderburn 2002, 78-98). As a literary device, they may simply heighten the dramatic. Or they may indicate that Paul, the author, and the audience all shared a common perspective.

First-person narration also seems to make the claim of personal presence, despite improbabilities (due to details in Acts) that the author was a companion of Paul (see Wedderburn 2002, 78). The impression of personal presence is complicated by inconsistencies in shifts between first- and third-person accounts, which often obscure who was with Paul from scene to scene (see Kurz 1993, 111-24). Since this perspective reflects “the style of personal integrity and trustworthiness” consistent with prominent ancient historians (Campbell 2007, 89), it could encourage readers to view the narrative with confidence at these pivotal points in Acts. Despite the difficulties (see Pervo 2009, 392-96), the advantage of such literary interpretations is that attention centers on how these “we”-passages function in Acts.

## H. Theology and Acts

Most interpreters consider Acts to be on some level a work of history. But that does not preclude Luke from shaping the work in theological ways. By writing a narrative, Luke went about the theological task very differently from Paul’s letter to the Romans. Luke offers a “theological history” in Acts, so that readers of Acts may consider the theological orientation of this work or the theology that this book has to contribute alongside other biblical works. Yet “Luke’s theology is intricately and irreversibly bound up with the story he tells and cannot be separated from it. An attempt to do justice to the theology of Acts must struggle to reclaim the character of Acts as a narrative” (Gaventa 1988, 150). Thus, interpreters must consider how narrative and literary features function *within* the work (→ “Literary Features” in Introduction), rather than simply interpreting or extracting theological images or ideas *apart from* that work.

Several theological themes resonate throughout the narrative. *First, God functions as the primary mover behind events and persons*. Throughout Acts (and the Gospel of Luke), the will and purposes of the God of Israel orient the scenes and their arrangement. Luke deliberately connects the story of the earliest Christians to the story of Jesus, both of which he connects to the story of God’s people in the OT. From the beginning of Acts to its ending, Luke depicts the God of Israel as fulfilling God’s promises and purposes for Israel as the people

of God (see, e.g., 2:17-21; 26:12-23). This same God is the one who guides and initiates (often through the Holy Spirit) the mission of the church beyond its initial Jewish boundaries (see, e.g., 8:26-40; 10:1-48; 13:1-4; 16:6-10).

*Second, Jesus is affirmed as God's Messiah/Christ on the basis of his resurrection and ascension.* Luke's Christology has little to say about Jesus' death as sacrifice or atonement for sin (→ 20:28). Rather, Luke underscores the significance of Jesus' suffering and death in two ways: (1) as occurring due to the rejection and disobedience of the Jewish people, and (2) as the occasion by which God *resurrected* Jesus, thereby vindicating the faithfulness of Jesus' own life and ministry (2:22-24). Thus, God's actions of resurrecting and exalting Jesus confirm the latter's identity as "both Lord and Messiah" (2:36). With such affirmation comes the declaration that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (2:21; see 4:12).

*Third (and related to the previous theme), the universality of salvation is affirmed as an essential characteristic of the people of God.* The affirmation of Jesus as God's Messiah/Christ carries with it a redefinition of the people of God to include both believing Jews and Gentiles. Acts (along with the Third Gospel) emphasizes the inclusion of Gentiles, but through the use of the LXX, this is always shown to be in continuity with Israel as the people of God. For example, Peter's Pentecost speech contains a quotation from the OT prophet Joel, which interprets the Pentecost phenomenon as God's fulfillment of God's promise to Israel (2:17-20). Also, Luke appropriates the term *ekklēsia* (usually translated "church" in the NT), which the LXX uses for the assembly of Israel as God's people. Thus, at the center of this theme of continuity is the activity of the God of Israel, who calls for and prompts repentance among the Jewish people (see Jervell 1972; 1996).

But this same God also steers believers to Gentiles: first to the God-fearing Cornelius (10:1-48) and Antiochenes of Syria (11:19-30), then to the eastern part of the Mediterranean world (16:6-10). Whereas the first quarter of the narrative focuses exclusively on salvation in Jewish contexts, the central half depicts the spread of the gospel in diverse situations. Proclamation typically begins in the Jewish synagogue, but the audience includes both Jews and worshipping Gentiles. And even there, Jewish opposition (likely over this inclusive understanding of the gospel) leads to ministry in increasingly diverse settings (see 18:7-11; 19:9-20).

*Fourth, the call for repentance places the status of the Jewish people as the people of God in question.* After World War II and the Holocaust, interpreters have wrestled with the difficulties posed by Luke's portrayal of the Jewish people (see, e.g., Tyson 1988b; Sanders 1987; Jervell 1996). Some interpret Luke's characterization of the Jewish people to be negative or even anti-Semitic. But others understand his portrayal of the Jews as having a rhetorical

function to legitimize the church and her mission in light of the OT story of the people of God and the rejection of that mission by institutional Judaism. When viewed in the latter sense, the Jewish leaders at the beginning (chs 1—7) and end (chs 23—28) of Acts as well as other Jews in general during Paul’s ministry (chs 9, 13—22) oppose the Christian gospel—a message about what the God of Israel had done in continuity with what God had *always* done on behalf of Israel. So as Luke depicts the Jewish people, they are disobedient and in need of repentance, with their ongoing resistance consistent with how their ancestors responded to the prophets (see 7:35, 39, 51-52; 28:26-27). There is also repentance early on in Jerusalem (2:38-41; 4:4; 5:12-16; 6:7), as well as most places where Luke describes the Christian mission at work (9:19b-25; 11:19-30; 13:16-52; 14:1-7; 16:11-15; 17:1-9, 10-15; 18:1-18; 19:1-20). Yet the universality of salvation and mission may be too much for the institutions of Judaism to accept, as this is a question of their identity as a people. Thus, the response and images of Judaism may be more tragic than negative in tone (see Tannehill 1985, 69-85).

## I. Engaging Acts in a New Day

Across the centuries, Acts has had an awkward place within the theological discourse of the church. For some, Acts is a common source for basic information about the earliest Christians. Yet for others, it is often not appreciated for its theological contribution alongside Paul’s letters and Jesus’ teachings (within the Gospels).

The ambiguity about Acts’ role is also apparent within Wesleyan and Wesleyan-holiness circles, from which many readers of this commentary come. John Wesley quoted Acts relatively little in his sermons in comparison to his favorite letter, 1 John (twice as much despite its comparative size). Conversely, many who worship in Wesleyan-related churches around the world today are drawn to Acts because of its dramatic descriptions of Spirit-empowered life within the early church.

To such diverse impressions and responses to Acts, this biblical book offers a needed scriptural resource that complements, nurtures, and challenges the spirit of the broader Wesleyan tradition . . . and of Christianity itself. But how may it be read or engaged in a new day?

### I. Read Imaginatively

As with all biblical texts, it is not enough simply to “understand” the printed words on the page or even to imitate the actions of faithful persons in biblical stories. Rather, the task of interpretation demands “an integrative act of the imagination” analogous to a jazz musician making music through the improvisation of a composed musical score (Hays 1996, 6). Imagination engages creatively about what Acts may say to contemporary settings (see Adam 2006, 28-34;

Wall 2004a, 108-15). And this coincides with John Wesley's understanding of the inspiration of prayerful readers (or the church; see Thompson 2004, 57-79). Thus, engaging Acts in a new day does not mean replicating ancient images but imagining possibilities provoked by that reading. The question becomes how the church may live out or perform the narrative in a very different time (see Thompson 2013, 121-30). Plausible, faithful readings may result in responses that are surprisingly different but still embody the mission and purposes of the church as the people of God depicted throughout its narrative.

## 2. Read Soteriologically

The correlation between theological emphases throughout Acts (→ “Theology and Acts” in Introduction) and Wesleyan theological themes suggests this to be a natural resource for the Wesleyan tradition. Since Wesleyans read Scripture with a soteriological aim (see Green 2004, 130-32; Wall 2004b, 51-52), they see in Acts a focus on God and God's activity in offering salvation to all. The fulfillment of God's promises to Israel and the offer of salvation to the Gentiles, despite numerous obstacles, resonates with and contributes to Wesleyan understandings of God's grace.

Because such matters permeate all of Acts, Wesleyan readers are encouraged to view Acts holistically as a narrative. Thus, such readers have theological as well as narrative reasons to interpret *all* narrative elements—regardless of how powerful or wonderful those images or ideas may be—as having meaning *first* within the broader story of which they are a part.

## 3. Read Holistically

For contemporary Wesleyans, Acts should be read holistically as the story of God's salvific activity and work of grace. Sometimes, descriptions of the early church are lifted from Acts and interpreted *separately* from the broader story. But these should first be interpreted *within* that story so that readers may begin to imagine how the whole story may relate to the present day. For instance, several passages depict extraordinary growth in numbers among the believers (2:41, 47; 4:4; 6:7; 12:24). But one should interpret such descriptions along with many other descriptions and images of believers in Acts. Within that broader context, such references give evidence of God's presence and blessing because of the church's worship of God. As a result, contemporary engagement of such passages may have little to do with church growth strategies. Instead, a Wesleyan reading may look for different ways to recognize God's presence and grace at work in the midst of genuine worship offered to God by God's people.

For many Wesleyan contemporary readers, engaging Acts in a new day involves what Acts describes as persons “filled with the Holy Spirit” (e.g., 2:4; 4:8) or doing “signs and wonders” (5:12; 14:3; 15:12; see 2:43; 6:8). Such per-

sons often interpret Acts through the lens of “personal Christian experience” or teachings about normative behavior for Christian discipleship. But when read holistically, Acts offers Wesleyans something at once greater and more significant in the mission of God. The power associated with the Spirit in Acts was given for the church’s mission and witness, not for personal spiritual matters (1:8). The occurrences of “signs and wonders” were not mere accomplishments of extraordinary deeds by the faithful. These were *signs* of divine blessing upon those who set out to fulfill the divine mission as God called them. Such descriptions were reminiscent of Jesus (2:22). But these also echo OT descriptions of God’s actions on behalf of Israel in Egypt (e.g., Deut 6:22; 7:19; 26:8; 34:11; Ps 135:9; Jer 32:20-21). So these images of extraordinary activities serve as literary and theological links between (a) the mission of the church in Acts, (b) the story of Jesus, and (c) God’s broader mission and story.

When read holistically, Acts confronts Wesleyan readers with extraordinary descriptions within the story of that day as signs of God’s grace at work. Thus, when thinking imaginatively about how such matters in Acts relate to the present day, Acts provokes Wesleyans to look for faithful ways to extend God’s grace to those around them, rather than merely to seek the imitation of the extraordinary that accentuates the individual. As the church focuses on living out the gospel, her God-given mission, God’s active grace continues to bring transformation in unexpected and extraordinary ways.

#### 4. Read Experientially and Ecclesially

The primacy of Scripture has characterized the Wesleyan tradition from its beginning, as John Wesley described himself as “a man of one book” (1984, 105). Central to such claims is the belief that Scripture is sufficient for teachings necessary for salvation (see Jones 1995, 37-41). Yet Wesley and his theological forbears appropriated other “sources” in addition to Scripture, namely reason and tradition. Wesley and his successors also included experience. Although the precise relationship of these four sources (later described as the Wesleyan quadrilateral) continues to be debated, the primacy of Scripture among these sources affirms its authoritative role in shaping doctrine and practice within the church.

Wesley gave explicit attention to the complementary role of experience in doctrine and practice. Such experience, which assumes a church context, does not supersede Scripture. But it tests alternative interpretations or may even challenge assumed ones (see Maddox 1994, 44-46).

Many in Wesleyan circles are influenced significantly by theological traditions that focus on divine sovereignty, human depravity, and biblical inerrancy. Too often these emphases lead to a static and unchanging meaning attached to the Bible (i.e., “What the text meant is what it always means”). But the church’s experience suggests otherwise. Acts *itself* challenges the church

to look at and listen again to Scripture, because within Acts are numerous examples where believers' experiences clashed with their assumed/inherited understanding of Scripture (see, e.g., Acts 10:1—11:18; 15:1-35). So Acts not only challenges the church today but also offers a glimpse of how to wrestle, as the faithful people of God, with such issues.

## 5. Read Inclusively

Acts challenges all readers, Wesleyans and others, to see God's salvific work and grace that extends to all people. The struggles that faced the earliest Christians are defined by time, place, and customs. Jewish understandings of what it meant to be the people of God determined who was and was not considered an "insider." But numerous other boundaries or obstacles appear within Luke's narrative world: gender, socioeconomic, ethnic, political, geographical, spiritual, and others. Yet Acts offers a perspective that suggests that all such boundaries may be overcome by the good news of God's grace. It also challenges longstanding customs and traditions that kept "insiders" in and "outsiders" out.

Perhaps the book of Acts has not been adequately engaged by the Wesleyan tradition or the broader church because it still confronts and challenges her today about boundaries and obstacles that she directly or indirectly affirms in keeping individuals and groups apart from her. Acts offers a perspective that dares Wesleyans, if they really affirm God's grace at work in many different ways (even prevenient grace!), to begin expecting and looking for God at work . . . even within those persons or groups that the church had left behind or outside. And that perspective also encourages the church to read Scripture with such inclusion in mind. Unless the church is willing to read such biblical texts so that they question and challenge her, these texts will never truly become sacred Scripture through which God can speak to her (see Fowl and Jones 1991, 41-44).

Every commentary both comes from and assumes a particular kind of reading. As the volume title states, this work comes out of the Wesleyan tradition. Such influence will sometimes be more explicit and overt; more often it will be implicit and indirect. The assumption is that most readers will also find themselves in churches variously shaped by Wesleyan theology and practices. The hope is that such readings of Acts will result in faithful practices that extend God's love and grace to all.

# COMMENTARY

## I. PREFACE: CONTINUITY, COMMISSION, AND PROMISE: ACTS 1:1-11

ACTS

1:1-11

### BEHIND THE TEXT

Like the Gospel of Luke, the book of Acts begins with a preface that follows the advice and practice among historians of that day. Both the mention of the “former book” and the overlap in content from the end of that gospel (esp. Luke 24:36-53) subtly induce the recipient to read the ensuing narrative in light of the Lukan narrative about Jesus (→ also Introduction). Such expectations for the reader are not surprising, since Theophilus is the addressee for both works (→ “Addressee or Audience” in Introduction). The preface to Acts, however, lacks the distinct transition to the first narrative materials that accompanies the preface to Luke’s Gospel. Thus, scholars disagree over where the preface ends and where the story of Acts begins. The general structure, literary connections, and shared content suggest that these first eleven verses form a literary unit that offers both a retrospective glance to the ending of the Lukan Gospel and a prospective glimpse of what will unfold in the narrative of Acts.

The narrator does not explicitly identify the exact location for what these verses mention. However, inferences here as well as information from Luke 24 suggest that Jesus and his apostles were in Jerusalem and in neighboring areas. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus appeared to the gathered followers in Jerusalem (24:33-49) and then ascended to heaven from Bethany (24:49-51), a village probably located about two miles east of Jerusalem. However, later in Acts 1:12, the stated location is the Mount of Olives, an area known for its abundance of olive trees between Jerusalem and Bethany. This location was known as a hideout for underground, Jewish revolutionary groups that opposed the religious establishment and the Roman occupation of Israel.

## IN THE TEXT

■ **1-5** The narrator's first statement connects Acts with the Third Gospel, described as his **former book** (lit., *first word*). Here **Theophilus** is also addressed but, as in that gospel, no other information reveals his identity. Luke reminds him about that prior narrative of Jesus. The verb **began** (*ērxato*) in Luke 3:23 similarly indicates the inception of Jesus' ministry, which will then continue in Acts through the apostles and others.

The narrator or a character in the Third Gospel often describes Jesus as teaching (see Luke 4:15, 31; 5:3, 17; 6:6; 11:1; 13:10, 22; 19:47; 20:1; 21:37; 23:5). He frequently associates the believers as doing the same thing after the ascension (see Acts 2:42; 4:2, 18; 5:21, 25, 28, 42; 11:26; 13:12; 15:35; 17:19; 18:11, 25; 20:20; 28:31). Here Jesus is teaching the apostles. The phrase **through the Holy Spirit** appears ambiguously in Greek, between the mention of Jesus' instruction and his selection of apostles. Thus, it is unclear to which the phrase applies. The ambiguity suggests that the phrase describes *both* aspects regarding the apostles as dependent on the Spirit's activity.

Such matters continue until Jesus ascends to heaven, which only the Lukan corpus describes. The same verb, *analambanō*, describes Elijah being taken up to heaven (2 Kgs 2:11 LXX). This suggests that the author links these two incidents. He offers no other details here, content to summarize matters the Third Gospel developed more fully.

The remainder of that first statement (Acts 1:3-5) retains the reader's attention on Jesus and his apostles. The Lukan Gospel account seems to limit Jesus' appearances to one day (see Luke 24). Here, however, the author states that these extended over a period of **forty days**. The significance of this longer period may be found on at least two levels.

First, the extended time provides sufficient evidence for Jesus' resurrection. The noun translated **convincing proofs** (*tekmērios*) appears only here in the NT. In Greek rhetoric, it describes compelling evidence that results in defensible or irrefutable conclusions.

Second, the number **forty** probably links the beginning of Acts with OT stories of preparation and God's dealings with the people of Israel (see Exod 24:12-18; 34:28; Deut 8:2; 1 Kgs 19:8). Luke 4:1-13 describes Jesus' temptation as over forty days. Thus, as Moses prepared to receive God's commandments for the people, Jesus prepares his apostles and gives them his commandments (Spencer 2004a, 34-35).

This narrative includes little of Jesus' teaching. What little Acts mentions appears elsewhere. Several aspects of the teaching here are noteworthy.

First, the teaching is about **the kingdom of God**, a common but undefined expression for Jesus' message in Luke's Gospel (e.g., 4:43; 6:20; 7:28; 9:2; 10:9; 17:20-21; 18:16-17; 22:16, 18). This same expression also describes the message of the Christian preaching in Acts (e.g., 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 28:23, 31). In Jesus' day, people hoped for the kingdom of God in the distant future. However, in both the Third Gospel and Acts (as in other NT texts), it expresses how God had *presently* entered into human experience through Jesus. The mention of this both here at the beginning of Acts and then later at its end (28:31) brackets the entire work with this theme as a literary *inclusio*. It lets the reader know without question "that the triumph of God's reign is the subtext of the narrative sandwiched between" (Wall 2002, 41). The term as used in both the Third Gospel and Acts also contrasts against its common reference to the Romans and the empire's imperial power.

Second, Jesus instructs the apostles to **not leave Jerusalem**, which reiterates the Gospel account (Luke 24:49). Luke offers no reason for these instructions. But he later describes the Pentecost scene in Jerusalem as the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. Thus, at this stage Jerusalem is the geographical and theological center of the Acts narrative.

Importantly, the author places this instruction in the context of a meal, a common feature of the Third Gospel (see Luke 5:27-32; 7:36-50; 11:37-54; 14:1-24; 19:1-10; 22:7-38; 24:13-35). The participle *synalizomenos*, translated **while he was eating**, literally connotes the sharing of salt among persons. The social implications of shared meals point to what Jesus and the apostles hold in common. Their shared beliefs, values, practices, and traditions define the boundaries and rules that govern their meal and solidify their places within that group (see Thompson 2007, 77-78).

Third, Jesus tells his apostles to **wait for** or **expect**, as the verb *perimenō* often connotes, **the promise of the Father** (see Luke 24:49). He subsequently clarified this as being **baptized with the Holy Spirit**. There is no mention of Jesus saying anything resembling this in the Gospel of Luke. But the saying may reiterate the unfulfilled prophecy of John the Baptist (Luke 3:16). The Spirit is important here, because the promised Spirit baptism would establish

continuity between Jesus and these apostles as well as enable them to serve as prophetic witnesses, as readers will soon see.

■ **6-7** Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God probably precipitates the question about the restoration of **the kingdom to Israel** here. The dual conjunctions *men oun* typically link two events, with the latter event being dependent upon the first (Levinsohn 1987, 141). Thus, the participle *hoi synelthontes*—translated **those who came together**—probably refers to the eleven apostles, although a larger group of followers is not out of the question (Johnson 1992, 26). The imperfect tense of *ērōtōn* suggests that their questioning persists. That tense was typical in questions, since any inquiry was incomplete until it was answered (Barrett 1994, 75).

Jesus' reference to the Holy Spirit probably stimulates their questions, since Jewish tradition associated the Spirit's coming with the last days (see 2:17) and Israel's restoration (see Isa 32:14-30). No doubt, the apostles are speaking about the fulfillment of the messianic mission. They expect this would include both the reestablishment of a politically independent Israel apart from Roman rule and an accompanying conversion of Gentile nations to Israel's God (e.g., Isa 2:2-4; Mic 4:1-8). The indicative **restore** (*apokathistaneis*) in their question has a similar meaning in the LXX (Mal 4:6; Sir 48:10). There, it referred to Elijah and the restoration of all things associated with his return (Johnson 1992, 26).

Jesus' response in v 7 contrasts the *apostles'* misunderstanding with the *divine* understanding. This redirects the apostles' attention from *when* things would happen to *who* controls them. The apostles ask Jesus about the consummation of the kingdom with regard to **time** (*chronō*) in terms of chronology or dates on a calendar. Jesus' negative response refers both to such **times** (*chronous*) as well as to **seasons** (*kairous*) or specific times when God would act as falling under the **authority that uniquely belongs to the Father** alone.

■ **8** The conjunction **but** (*alla*) contrasts Jesus' refusal to grant the apostles' request with this ensuing promise. Jesus' followers did not receive the knowledge they sought. But he offers them other details. His promise of their reception of **power** (see Luke 24:49) correlates both with the Spirit's future coming and with their impending mission to be Jesus' **witnesses**. It is *not* concerned with matters of personal benefit or help.

To serve as Jesus' witnesses meant that the apostles would speak about Jesus from personal experience and conviction. That would be possible only as the promised Spirit enabled them. This power refers to a divine gift essential for them to be effective witnesses to these gospel events. It is not to make them and future believers "strong" in the faith.

This statement about their mission functions loosely as an outline of the Acts narrative. It would begin in Jerusalem (through 8:3), continue to the

regions of Judea and Samaria (8:4-40 and perhaps ch 9), and then move on to other parts of the Mediterranean world.

One should not miss the radical overtones of this brief list. It includes places and persons most Jews considered outside the bounds of God's saving work. The phrase *heōs eschatou tēs gēs*, **to the end of the earth**, occurs four times in the LXX (Isa 8:9; 48:20; 49:6; 62:11; see *Pss. Sol.* 1:4). In Isa 49:6 (quoted in Acts 13:47), the phrase describes Israel's call to be "a light to the Gentiles," so they may share in God's salvation.

The singular *eschatou*, **end** (ends in most translations), may not refer to perceived geographical boundaries of the planet or the known world of that era. Commentators often conclude that the phrase refers to Rome. This corresponds with its role as the westernmost locale in Acts' list of locations from where Jewish pilgrims had come to Jerusalem (2:9-11). But Rome was typically regarded as the *center* of the world, not its *end*. Here, the phrase may not have a *geographical* reference as much as a *theological* one. God's purposes seek to bring salvation to *all* (Luke 1:46-55; 2:28-32), as represented by the capital of the Roman Empire.

■ **9-11** The ascension of Jesus is not a separate scene but immediately follows his commissioning of the apostles. Jesus' departure to heaven is reminiscent of the departure of significant prophetic figures in Jewish tradition, including Enoch and Elijah (see 2 Kgs 2:1-12; Philo, QG 1.86) as well as Moses (see Philo, *Moses* 2.291; Josephus, *Ant.* 4.326).

In the OT, a **cloud** typically symbolized God's activity and presence (see Exod 16:10; 19:9; 24:15-18; 40:34; 1 Kgs 8:10-11). The imagery may also remind the reader of the cloud that blanketed the transfiguration scene (see Luke 9:28-36). Thus, some argue that the **two men** who appeared with the apostles after Jesus' ascension were Moses and Elijah (Johnson 1992, 27; Wall 2002, 43-44). However, most scholars point to the similarities between these two men and the angelic messengers at the empty tomb (Luke 24:4, 23). What may be more significant than the identity of the messengers is their message. It helps the apostles grasp what takes place and how that relates to their commissioned role as witnesses.

Explanation of the significance of Jesus' ascension is left for later (→ 2:32-36). For now, the narrator highlights three matters.

First, Jesus is taken **into heaven**. The phrase appears four times in Acts 1:10-11. This redundancy probably explains why some MSS omit one of those phrases. However, the repeated mention of **heaven** clarifies the inferences of the cloud imagery. This and the passive voice of the two verbs translated **taken up** (vv 9, 11) indicate that God's presence captures Jesus and carries him heavenward.

Second, the five references to what the apostles *themselves* saw emphasize their commissioned role as witnesses. The first two references (v 9) reaf-

firm that the apostles could vouch for Jesus' departure because they were eyewitnesses.

The verb *atenizō*, translated **looking intently**, is a common Lukan term (see Luke 4:20; 22:56; Acts 3:4, 12; 6:15; 7:55; 10:4; 11:6; 13:9; 14:9; 23:1). It underscores that the apostles saw *everything* as Jesus departed. The two textual variants of the verb **looking** (*blepontes* or *emblepontes*) both fit the context. The first variant repeats the participle in Acts 1:9 and correlates with the verb **you have seen** later in v 11: the apostles saw Jesus' ascension as first-person witnesses, which was not the case with the resurrection. The second variant intensifies the verbal root, so that it conveys a gaze of intense consideration (BDAG 2000, 321-22).

Third, the messengers redirect the apostles' attention from Jesus' departure to his return. The expression **will come back in the same way** probably employs the imagery of Dan 7:13. It describes "one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven." The question and assurance given to the apostles provoke them to embrace their mission as witnesses. Not only would they be Jesus' representatives, but their proclamation about him would declare God's primary role in the story of Jesus. This is the point of the statement "you will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8). Thus, the message serves as a call to action for the apostles prior to Jesus' second return (Tannehill 1990, 18-19).

## FROM THE TEXT

Like most texts, the opening of Acts offers an agenda for the rest of the narrative. It includes hints regarding what readers should bring to the table and expect as they engage this story. The author does not state such matters directly. But the literary imagery and connections in this introduction coax readers into making appropriate judgments about what this story is about and what (or who) is the driving force behind it.

This prefatory passage affirms that the unfolding story of Acts is a story of continuity on two interrelated levels.

*First*, the story of Jesus in both the Third Gospel and Acts is a continuation of the OT story of God. Both the OT literary allusions and the ascension scene in Acts point to God's presence and activity. Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God and his twice-repeated promise of the Holy Spirit indicate that what happened in the forty days was consistent with what the Lukan Gospel presents: God was at work to fulfill God's promises to Israel. Readers must keep this important message and emphasis in mind as the narrative moves toward the Pentecost events of ch 2. There Peter's explanation will unpack these themes more fully (2:14-36). Ultimately, the ascension is about God's presence and fulfillment of divine promises.

*Second*, the story of Acts continues the story of Jesus as presented in the Third Gospel. There is an inherent theological and christological emphasis in Acts. The activities of the apostles and other believers are linked to the purposes and activities of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah (Christ), as presented in the Gospel of Luke. All else that happens in Acts begins with God's purposes as seen in Jesus as depicted in the Lukan Gospel.

Thus, when Jesus commissions his apostles to witness "to the ends of the earth" (1:8), no hint appears about the replacement of Israel as God's people with the church or about the creation of the church as a spiritual Israel. Rather, the cues about taking the gospel message about Jesus to the Gentiles come from the OT understanding of Israel as God's people. The story of Acts is a continuation of the story of God and the people of God. It is ultimately a part of God's plan of salvation from the beginning. The story begins with God and points back to God.

The continuity of these related stories emphasizes the apostles' role as witness *and* the Spirit's role as the power for witness. On the one hand, the apostles not only were called to be witnesses but also were prepared for their task. The extended time of preparation indicates that the experience of the extraordinary or divine occurrences was not sufficient. These verses imply the exercise of theological reflection: Jesus and the Eleven wrestled together with the implications of all Jesus embodied *as* the gospel. This reflection provided the context for them to discover the connections between their experience and God's purposes. At the beginning of Acts, Luke nudges us to be reflective in our reading and in our testimony regarding God's grace on our lives.

On the other hand, the words of Jesus in Acts 1 define the role of the Spirit in terms of witness rather than in terms of believers and their lives in obedience to God. Unlike Paul in Rom 8, Luke offers *nothing* here about the role of the Spirit in salvation, one's personal life, strength for living faithfully, or one's relationship with God. Rather, Acts describes the role of the Spirit in terms of empowerment for ministry as witnesses. The promise of the Spirit is to enable the church to fulfill God's purposes for God's people. It is not for the fulfillment of personal goals or aspirations for the Christian life. Luke redirects our attention again and again to God *alone*, rather than to what God can do for us.