



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

- 📖 Reading Acts as a Sequel to the Fourfold Gospel
(*The Book of Acts*, pp. 19-26)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 A Story that Teaches: The Theology of Acts
(*The Book of Acts*, pp. 82-87)
- 📖 Studying The Book of Acts
(*The Book of Acts*, pp. 88-93)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to
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Christian Reflection

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Reading Acts as a Sequel to the Fourfold Gospel

The Acts of the Apostles was intended to be a sequel to a plurality of Gospels, which Luke refers to as “many” (Luke 1:1). Thus, to read Acts for all it’s worth, it is necessary to attend to the connections not only with Luke’s Gospel, but also with those other narratives that recount the story of Jesus echoed in Acts.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Acts 9:36-10:33

Reflection

Contemporary scholars often talk about “Luke-Acts,” but curiously in the New Testament canon or order of books, Acts is not paired with its companion volume, the Gospel of Luke. Instead, it occupies a unique position as a hinge between the four Gospels and all the other writings. (In the West, Paul’s letters follow Acts; in Eastern traditions, the Catholic Epistles come after Acts.)

How seriously should we take Acts’ location in the canon after the Gospels? “Its placement there may well reflect the intentions of the author,” Mikeal Parsons suggests. “That is to say, the Acts of the Apostles was conceived and intended to be read and heard as a sequel to a plurality of Gospels...which, by the time of Acts’ publication, included Mark, Matthew, and possibly John (and may have included at one point or another, some now non-extant or partially preserved Gospels).” He compares this relationship to an artist’s diptych, or two images on a hinged tablet: on one panel is the book of Acts, and on the other are the Gospel writers, with Luke depicted larger than the rest, as “the first among equals.” The image on each panel helps us interpret the other: the Gospels shed light on the stories in Acts, which in turn serve to parallel, clarify, or extend the arguments of the Gospels.

To illustrate the value of reading Acts in light of the fourfold Gospel, Parsons traces some “verbal links and/or conceptual connections to material in Matthew and/or Mark (but not in the Third Gospel).” For example, in the stories in Acts 9:36-10:33 Parsons identifies the following connections.

- ▶ *The resuscitation of Tabitha echoes Jesus’ healing miracle.* The parallels with Jesus’ resuscitation of Jairus’s daughter (Mark 5:22-24, 35-43 // Luke 8:41-42, 49-56) are striking. When Peter commands “Tabitha, get up” (Acts 9:40), listeners familiar with Mark’s Gospel will remember Jesus’ words in Mark 5:41 (but missing from Luke), “Talitha [now Tabitha] cumi.” Yet, as Parson observes, “there is an important difference: Peter’s miracle is not a result of his own power, a point indicated by the fact he prayed to the deity.”
- ▶ *Peter’s vision echoes Jesus’ teaching about clean and unclean foods.* When Peter sees a sheet with all kinds of animals on it and is commanded to eat them, he refuses because some are “unclean.” Listeners will recall Jesus’ teaching in Mark 7:14-23 (cf. Matthew 15:15-20, but not in Luke). There, Jesus explains his parable – “there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile” – to his disciples, and specifically Peter



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(Matthew 15:15). “Peter evidently failed to understand the first time around,” Parson notes. “Peter is presented as undergoing a conversion no less radical than Cornelius’s. He is led to confess, ‘I truly come to understand that God does not show favoritism. Rather, in every nation, the one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him’ (Acts 10:34-35), and later, at the Apostolic Council, he proclaims that God ‘made no distinction between them [the Gentiles] and us regarding our faith, but cleansed their hearts (as well as ours)’ (Acts 15:9). The allusion to Mark 7, which implies that Peter has not understood (or heeded?) Jesus’ proclamation that all foods are clean, deepens and enriches Acts’ presentation of Peter’s ‘conversion’ to a more inclusive attitude regarding first food then people.”

Parsons concludes from such examples that Luke wrote Acts not only as a sequel to Luke, which provided his literary plot and theological themes, but also “as a sequel to the multiform Gospel in which he occasionally picked up on a literary thread or theological theme missing in the Third Gospel, either because at that point it did not serve his purposes or because at that time he was unacquainted with the writing that contained it.”

Study Questions

1. What do the stories in Acts 9:36-10:33 teach us about Peter’s discipleship? About our own? How are these teachings developed by the links between Acts and Mark’s Gospel?
2. How do other non-Lucan links in Acts serve to parallel (Acts 14:21; 20:10), clarify (Acts 19:7), or extend (Acts 12:2) the argument of the material in Matthew and/or Mark?
3. Briefly summarize Mikeal Parsons’s evidence that from the beginning Luke and Acts circulated independently. How does this bear on his view that Acts “*was conceived and intended to be read and heard as a sequel to a plurality of Gospels.*”

Departing Hymn: “All Hail the Power of Jesus Name”

All hail the power of Jesus’ name!
Let angels prostrate fall;
bring forth the royal diadem,
and crown him Lord of all.

Ye chosen seed of Israel’s race,
ye ransomed from the fall,
hail him who saves you by his grace,
and crown him Lord of all.

Let every kindred, every tribe
on this terrestrial ball,
to him all majesty ascribe,
and crown him Lord of all.

O that with yonder sacred throng
we at his feet may fall!
we’ll join the everlasting song,
and crown him Lord of all.

Vv. 1-3, *Edward Perronet* (1780), alt.; v. 4, *John Rippon* (1787)

Suggested Tunes: ST. ANNE (Croft) or MCKEE

Reading Acts as a Sequel to the Fourfold Gospel

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To see how Luke links stories in the book of Acts to narratives about Jesus in non-Lucan gospels, especially Matthew and Mark.
2. To focus on the central character of Peter in the book of Acts.
3. To consider how the book of Acts is related to the Gospel of Luke and to other early narratives about Jesus.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Book of Acts (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “All Hail the Power of Jesus Name” locate one of the familiar tunes ST. ANNE or MCKEE in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Question

“How do stories teach us?” Holly Beers asks. “It is one thing to insist, as the Church often has, that the story narrated in the book of Acts teaches us; it is quite another to explain exactly how this teaching is done.”

Academics used to draw a hard distinction between the descriptive and prescriptive, or narrative and instructional parts of the New Testament, and then they prioritized the latter. More recent literary-theological investigations (like the one by Mikeal Parsons in this study) show why this is “unhelpful,” Beers continues. “Also by the wayside is the modernist ideal of ‘neutral’ texts; all texts have agendas. The central question, therefore, is: in the book of Acts, what is Luke’s agenda, theological and otherwise? How is he shaping that agenda through the story he tells? How is he teaching the Church, from Theophilus to today?” (*The Book of Acts*, p. 82)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by praying that God will reveal new perspectives on his grace and salvation through Jesus Christ as you study the book of Acts.

Scripture Reading

Ask two group member to read Acts 9:36-10:33 from a modern translation with the first reading the Joppa-centered events and the second reading the Caesarea-centered events in this alternating way: the first reads 9:36-43, the second reads 10:1-8, the first reads 10:9-23, and the second reads 10:24-33.

Reflection

Learning about *how* biblical stories are told is important not only to appreciate their literary artistry, but also to understand their teachings about God and our discipleship. In this study, Mikeal Parsons examines how some stories that Luke tells in Acts draw upon and extend other stories about Jesus (not only from the four Gospels, but also from narratives that are unknown today; cf. the *agraphon*—or, a saying of Jesus not recorded in the

canonical Gospels—in Acts 20:35). This echoing of one story in another can enrich our understanding of the teaching in each story and lead us more carefully to encounter Jesus. This study of literary links between Acts and the Gospels sets the stage for two other studies in this series—“Warning to the Wise: Learning from Eutychus’s Mistake” which explores Acts 20:7-12 more fully, and “Philanthropy, Hospitality, and Friendship” which uncovers the rich teachings in Acts 27:1-28:10.

For further study in the literary artistry of the book of Acts, encourage members to examine the section-by-section commentaries that Kathy Maxwell commends in *Studying the Book of Acts*. In *A Story that Teaches: The Theology of Acts*, Holly Beers reviews three recent works that summarize and explore Luke’s theological agenda in the book of Acts.

Study Questions

1. Peter is depicted as both very like Jesus in his concern for the suffering (in Acts 9:36-43) and struggling to understand and appropriate Jesus’ teachings about what is clean and unclean (in Acts 10:1-33). Encourage members to reflect on their own uneven understanding and halting embrace of Jesus’ way. Where do they really “get it,” and where do they lag behind in their understanding of Jesus’ teachings or draw back in their commitment to them?

Mikeal Parsons suggests the first story (of Peter resuscitating Tabitha) “parallels” the Gospel narratives, and the second story (of Peter’s vision) “extends” them. Thus, in the first story, the link emphasizes how closely Peter imitates Jesus (even in the detail of his command to the dead girl). In the second story, the link shows how Peter misunderstands or resists Jesus’ direct teaching. (Notice, in the Matthew 15:15-20 parallel, Peter is the one who seeks and receives the explanation of Jesus’ parable about the clean and unclean things.) Since Luke’s Gospel does not record this parable, the verbal link to Mark and Matthew is required to highlight the significance of Peter’s mistake.

2. Form four small groups to study the links between the following passages in Acts and the non-Lucan Gospels: *Acts 12:2* linked with Mark 10:39 // Matthew 20:23; *Acts 14:21* linked with Matthew 28:19; *Acts 19:7* linked with Mark 5:7; and *Acts 20:10* linked with Mark 5:39.

Ask the groups to highlight how the link they studied either develops a parallel with, clarifies, or extends the main point of the story in Matthew and/or Mark. How does the link help them better understand the teaching of the Acts passage?

Parsons suggests the first passage (Acts 12:2) “underscores the fact that not all of Christ’s followers are divinely rescued” as, here, one of Jesus’ inner circle is martyred, as Jesus predicted. This underscores: “The Church suffers along with its suffering Messiah.” The second passage (Acts 14:21) shows that making disciples goes beyond evangelism and baptism: the Lucan “strengthening the souls of the disciples” involves teaching them Jesus’ commandments. The third passage (Acts 19:7) clarifies that Jesus’ powerful name cannot be used in a magical way. The fourth passage (Acts 20:10) suggests that Paul’s action (like Peter’s in Acts 9:36-43) is an imitation of Jesus’ resuscitation of Jairus’s daughter. This is interesting because Paul did not know Jesus in the way that Peter did.

3. Recent studies of how ancient papyri could be lengthened have shown “there is no reason that Luke could not have written Luke/Acts on a single scroll if he had wanted.” Parsons goes on to make two points. First, in the oldest manuscripts of the New Testament (from the third to seventh centuries), Luke and Acts do not appear side-by-side. Second, the book of Acts has a very distinctive textual tradition: Acts circulated in two versions—“Alexandrian” and “Western”—unlike Luke (and the other New Testament writings).

All of the evidence is consistent with and the second line of evidence suggests that Acts circulated among churches independently of Luke’s Gospel. Surely it was clear to listeners that Acts bore a special relation in plot and theme to the Gospel of Luke (see Acts 1:1), but they might interpret the allusions in Acts to the other canonical Gospels and narratives of Jesus as Luke’s endorsement and development of those non-Lucan stories.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.