Introduction

Both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts are addressed to Theophilus. He was presumably a Gentile of some social standing, but unfortunately we never hear of him again, not in Scripture nor anywhere else in ancient literature. In Luke 1:3 he is referred to as “most excellent Theophilus,” an appellation which Luke elsewhere reserves only for the Roman governors Felix (Acts 23:26; 24:3) and Festus (Acts 26:25). When Luke refers to his noble reader the second time, he is simply “Theophilus” (Acts 1:1). In his opening line in Acts, Luke reminds Theophilus that in his “former book” he wrote “about all that Jesus began to do and to teach” (Acts 1:1). From this evidence it is not difficult to conclude that the “former book” Luke has in mind is his Gospel. The current work is the sequel, or volume two, of the work that Luke has already written. Luke and Acts are therefore, respectively, volume 1 and volume 2 of a single work by the same author. Like the Old Testament books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, they are one story in two parts. Rather than being called Luke and Acts, they could have been more appropriately named “1 & 2 Luke” or even “1 & 2 Theophilus.” But whatever we call them, the most important consideration for the reader to keep in mind is that these two books make up a single work. This approach to Luke-Acts also reflects the majority view of current New Testament scholarship. This view was given its classic formulation by Henry Cadbury back in 1927:

In any study of Luke and Acts, their unity is a fundamental and illuminating axiom. Among all the problems of New Testament authorship no answer is so universally agreed upon as is the common authorship of these two volumes. Each is addressed in its opening words to the same Theophilus, the second volume
refers explicitly to the first, and in innumerable points of style
the Greek diction of each shows close identity with the other.¹

It is therefore appropriate that this article should begin with a complaint. It’s
a complaint that I have been making to my students over the last few years
of you have ever read Luke and Acts together as one story?” At this question
very few hands go up. I dare say that if I asked the same question of most
Christian groups the response would be the same. Very few people have ever
read Luke-Acts as one story. The reason for this unfortunate situation is not
far to seek. Everything conspires against such a reading of Luke and Acts:

(a) The New Testament canon itself is against it. In our Bibles Luke and
Acts have been separated by the Gospel of John. That’s a pity
because you then lose the continuity between Luke and Acts. That’s
been the case since about the second century when the church started
putting the New Testament books into an ordered collection.² So this
is not a complaint against the Holy Spirit. This has nothing to do with
inspiration. It has everything to do with the way in which the early

Macmillan Company in New York in 1927]), 8. More recently some scholars have questioned
the prevailing consensus, e.g. Mikeal C. Parsons and Richard I. Pervo, *Rethinking the Unity of
Press, 2009). Commenting particularly on the work by Parsons and Pervo, Michael F. Bird has
observed that “they have not convinced the majority of Lukan scholars and have not
434).

² Bird, “Unity of Luke-Acts,” 435, has noted: “With the exception of Irenaeus and the
Muratorian Fragment there is no evidence that Luke and Acts were read together, nor does it
appear that it was typical to do so in the period either before or after Irenaeus.” From its
reception history in the second century and onwards some scholars have drawn conclusions
Acts were not treated as Luke-Acts because they were not issued as one work in the first place;
separate publication and circulation amounted to separate treatment.” This, however, is to
out: “The fact that there is no evidence that Luke-Acts was received or read as a literary unity
in late-second century compositions does not answer the question of how the first readers
might have read and understood Luke’s writing.” For a detailed critique of Rowe’s views see
church arranged these inspired books. This arrangement was a very human effort, and even today not all Christian traditions arrange the New Testament books in the same order. So when it comes to Luke-Acts we have the canonical order against us.

(b) A second obstacle is the fact that very few commentators will comment on both of these books. How many commentators do you know that have written commentaries on both Luke and Acts? Or even more to the point, how many commentaries are there on Luke-Acts? In many a pastor’s library I am sure that there are commentaries on Luke and commentaries on Acts. But how many commentaries are there on Luke-Acts? Such commentaries do exist, but they are the exception rather than the rule.  


So at all levels we are discouraged from reading Luke and Acts as a single work. The canon, commentaries and courses all conspire against it. But Luke-Acts is one story in two parts, and the two are meant to be read as one. Therefore what God has joined together let not the canon or the commentaries or our courses ever separate! Reading Luke and Acts together

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4 This does raise the question as to why the two documents were separated in the first place. In a conjecture that seems to go back to Sir Frederic Kenyon, the long-time curator of the British Museum (1909-31), Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (2nd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 5-6, suggests that “the normal Greek literary roll seldom exceeded 35 feet in length. Ancient authors would therefore divide a long literary work into several ‘books’, each of which could be accommodated into one roll. The two longest books in the New Testament – the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts – would each have filled an ordinary papyrus roll of 31 or 32 feet in length. Doubtless this is one of the reasons why Luke-Acts was issued in two volumes instead of one.”
will have benefits that cannot be gained by reading these works individually.\(^5\) There will be a richness of understanding that allows each book to complement and interpret the other. Robert Tannehill has done well to explain the benefits of this approach:

> While it is possible to read Luke apart from Acts – an approach encouraged by the division of these works in the canon – we will read Luke differently if we read it as part of Luke-Acts, and our understanding of it will be enriched. Studying Luke-Acts as a narrative – and as a single narrative – helps us to appreciate some things that we might otherwise miss. Scripture and an inspired prophet have already indicated early in Luke the comprehensive saving purpose of God that stands behind the events of both Luke and Acts (Luke 3:30-32; 3:6). These passages explicitly indicate the purpose that stretches from the beginning of Luke to the end of Acts, holding the narrative together in spite of the departure of major characters. Recall of these passages puts the events of Acts in proper perspective. These events represent either the progressive realization of God’s purpose of salvation for both Jews and Gentiles or show human resistance to this purpose. In either case the individual events are meaningful parts of a single story because they relate to this overarching purpose behind the whole.\(^6\)

So in this article my aim is to demonstrate that Luke-Acts is indeed one story in two parts. That unity can be shown in three ways: (a) geographically, (b) thematically and (c) theologically.

### A. Geographically

\(^5\) Thus Gregory, “Reception,” 467, “I believe that a close reading of Luke’s two volumes demonstrates that they are two parts of one continuous text, each written by the same author. I also believe that the pattern of correspondences between the two volumes and the distribution of at least some of their content strongly suggest that the author already intended to write the second volume as he wrote the first. Therefore, readers who read and interpret each volume in the light of the other volume will gain a fuller understanding of them both.”

Luke-Acts is a strongly Jerusalem-centred narrative. The twelve central chapters of the combined work sit right there in Jerusalem. Jesus arrives at Jerusalem with the triumphal entry in Luke 19 and the story doesn’t leave Jerusalem till after the stoning of Stephen in Acts 7. For twelve whole chapters the story is confined to Jerusalem and its immediate environs. Compare that to Mark where the disciples are commanded to meet the risen Jesus in Galilee (Mark 14:28; 16:7). At the end of Matthew the eleven disciples do indeed make the journey to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated (Matt 28:16), and it was from there that Jesus issued the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20). John’s Gospel presents a similar picture. After his resurrection Jesus appears to his disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee (John 21). So in the other Gospels there are resurrection appearances in Galilee. In Luke the risen Jesus ventures no further than Bethany (Luke 24:50) and Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35), both Judean villages in close proximity to Jerusalem. So in Luke the resurrection appearances all occur in and around Jerusalem. It’s a feature unique to Luke’s Gospel. But why? Why, for twelve chapters, does he confine his story to Jerusalem?

The answer to this question is actually rather straightforward. For Luke, Jerusalem is the city of destiny. He refers to it far more often than all the other writers of the New Testament combined. In fact, more than 70% (93/131) of the references to Jerusalem in the New Testament are found in Luke-Acts. For Luke, the major redemptive-historical events occurred in Jerusalem. It was there that Jesus was crucified and rose from the dead. It was near Jerusalem that he ascended. Pentecost also took place in Jerusalem. For Luke, Jerusalem is the focus, the pivot and the turning point of the whole story, and indeed of redemptive history as a whole. All the important events seem to occur in Jerusalem.

The wider story of Luke-Acts is like an hour glass. The sand of the story has to get through that narrow opening in the middle, which is
Jerusalem. The reason for the shape of the story is that the top half of the hour glass represents Israel and the lower half represents the Gentile world. The first nineteen chapters of Luke are all about Israel, while Acts 8-28 focus predominantly on the Gentile world. To get from Israel to the Gentile world, Luke’s story has to pass through Jerusalem.

When it comes to the Israel section of Luke’s Gospel, we find that Luke is again unique among the Synoptics. Just as he confines the centre of his two-volume narrative to Jerusalem, he confines the early part (Luke 1-19) exclusively to Israel. In Luke’s birth narratives there are no references to the flight into Egypt (cf. Matt 2:13-15). In Luke there is no mention of the Syrophoenician woman whose daughter Jesus heals in the area of Tyre and Sidon (cf. Matt 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30). In chapters 1-19 he never takes Jesus into Gentile territory. His focus is exclusively on Israel. In Luke we do have a record of Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Messiah (Luke 9:20), but nowhere is it said he say that this occurred in Caesarea Philippi (cf. Matt 16:13; Mark 8:27), most likely because Caesarea Philippi was well into Gentile territory. So far Luke has managed to keep Jesus out of Gentile territory. Once again we need to ask why.

Part of the answer may lie in the fact that when his story finally does move into Gentile territory it does so very impressively. From Acts 8

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7 The only possible exception is Jesus’ brief foray into the land of the Gadarenes on the other side of the Sea of Galilee where he cast out a legion of demons (Luke 8:26-39), but even this area could technically be regarded as Jewish territory. Although difficult to locate precisely, this area seems to have belonged to the Decapolis, a region that had been part of the Hasmonean kingdom in the first century B.C. In Old Testament times this territory had been incorporated into the kingdom of David (2 Sam 8:5-15).
onwards the story moves out from Jerusalem in ever widening circles:

In chapter 8 it moves out to Samaria, in chapter 9 to Damascus, in chapter 10 to Caesarea, and in chapter 11 to Antioch. Then Antioch serves as the sending church for Paul’s three missionary journeys into Asia Minor and Greece. Finally the hazardous sea voyage takes the story to Rome, the very heart of the pagan world empire of the day. So from Acts 8 onwards the Gentile world becomes hugely important. Even so, the story keeps coming back to Jerusalem. In chapter 7 Stephen had been stoned in Jerusalem. In chapter 9 Paul returns from Damascus to Jerusalem, and the Hellenistic Jews there attempted to put him to death (Acts 9:29). In chapter 12 the apostle James is put to death with the sword (Acts 12:2). In the same chapter Peter is imprisoned (Acts 12:4). Later when Paul returns to Jerusalem after the third missionary journey he is arrested and imprisoned and a plot is made on his life (Acts 21-23).

From these examples it can be seen that Luke portrays Jerusalem as the place of rejection. Not only had it rejected Jesus, but it also rejected Stephen, James, Peter and Paul. But there is another theme as well. The story also comes back to Jerusalem for another reason:

- When Peter has preached to the Gentiles in Caesarea in the house of Cornelius he has to face the music when he gets back to Jerusalem. Some of the circumcised believers point the accusing finger, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them” (Acts 11:3). But when Peter had given a good account of himself they praised God, “So then, God has even granted the Gentiles repentance unto life” (Acts 11:18).

- After Paul’s first missionary journey the same issue is raised even more dramatically at the Jerusalem Council in Acts. Some of the more conservative Jewish believers were insisting: “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses” (Acts 15:5). But the Council decision went against them. Gentile believers did not have to be circumcised. It was a great triumph for Paul and the Gentile mission.
So Jerusalem in Acts 8-28 is not only the city where the Gospel and its messengers are rejected. It is also the city where the mission to the Gentiles is acknowledged and reaffirmed. That is the paradox of Jerusalem in Luke-Acts. It is the centrepiece of the story. It is where all the important events seem to happen, but it is also the ultimate place of rejection of the Messiah and his messengers. Yet it is precisely from this place of rejection that the mission to the Gentiles is first launched (Acts 1), then acknowledged (Acts 11) and finally reaffirmed (Acts 15).

From this we may safely conclude that the geography of Luke-Acts shows it is one story. The story begins in Israel, moves to Jerusalem as the heart of Israel, and from there it moves into the Gentile world. In the Gospel of Luke the story moves to Jerusalem. In Acts the story moves away from Jerusalem and on to Rome. The story moves out from Jerusalem in ever widening circles, but it always returns to Jerusalem either to confirm Jerusalem’s rejection of the Gospel or to confirm the mission to the Gentiles. Towards the end, however, it leaves Jerusalem and never returns. For his own safe-keeping the Romans escort Paul out of Jerusalem by night (Acts 23:23, 31). The city that Jesus had entered publicly, Paul now leaves by stealth. It had started so well for Jerusalem, but now the story abandons Jerusalem and leaves the city to its fate. What the story does geographically it also does thematically.

B. Thematically

If the theme of Luke-Acts had to be summarised in one word, it would simply be this – reversal. Luke-Acts is all about reversal. This theme works itself out in two opposite ways: (a) with respect to the Jews and (b) with respect to the Gentiles.

1. The Jews

Many scholars have pointed out that, apart from the prologue (1:1-4), Luke 1-2 is very Jewish. It has a very Semitic feel to it. The story begins in the temple in Jerusalem. Throughout these two chapters it appears that there are some very happy prospects for Israel and Jerusalem. These chapters are full of promise.
• The angel Gabriel comes to Zechariah and announces the birth of John the Baptist, and with that announcement comes a special promise, “Many of the people of *Israel* will he bring back to the Lord their God” (Luke 1:16).

• Gabriel’s next message is for the Virgin Mary. She will give birth to Jesus to whom “the Lord God will give the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of *Jacob* forever; his kingdom will never end” (Luke 1:32-33). Again this looks very promising for Jerusalem as the capital of David’s kingdom.

• Mary picks up this positive note in her song, the Magnificat, where she praises God: “He has helped his servant *Israel*, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers” (Luke 1:54, 55).

• In his prophecy Zechariah strikes a similar note: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of *Israel*, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us” (Luke 1:68-71).

• Simeon is in tune with both Mary and Zechariah:

  “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,  
  You now dismiss your servant in peace.  
  For my eyes have seen your salvation,  
  Which you have prepared in the sight of all people,  
  A light for revelation to the Gentiles  
  And for glory to your people *Israel.*” (Luke 2:29-32).

• Finally there was the prophetess Anna, an old woman of eighty-four, to whom it was also granted to see the infant Jesus. Of her we read that “she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of *Jerusalem*” (Luke 2:38).
When all of these promises and prophecies are taken together it creates the strong impression that Jerusalem is a city with great expectations. At the very least it could be said that God’s people have great expectations for the city of Jerusalem, and they also have great expectations for the nation of Israel. Many in Israel will return to the Lord their God. One of David’s descendants will reign on David’s throne forever. God has been merciful to his servant Israel. He has given them salvation from their enemies and from the hand of all who hate them. The salvation which God has prepared is for the glory of his people Israel, and that salvation includes the redemption of Jerusalem.

Try to put yourself in the shoes of those Jewish believers at the time Jesus was born. What were they looking forward to? What were their hopes and dreams and aspirations? What were they getting excited about? These messages and songs tell us. They were looking forward to a descendant of David on the throne, salvation from their enemies and the redemption of Jerusalem. That’s what it would have looked like to them – Jerusalem redeemed from its enemies and with a Davidic king on the throne. That’s the expectation of those first two, very Semitic and intensely Jewish chapters of Luke’s Gospel.

A little further into this Gospel, however, a very different picture begins to emerge. The Davidic King has come. He is on his way to Jerusalem. He comes to bring salvation. But the words he speaks about Jerusalem hardly echo the songs of Mary, Zechariah or Simeon, nor does he quote the words of the angel Gabriel. Instead, he breaks out into lament:

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often have I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’” (Luke 13:34-35).

What a touchingly tender picture this is. He had offered to give Jerusalem all the protection a mother hen gives her chicks, but Jerusalem would have none

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of it. There is nothing but the cold shoulder of refusal. We find the same words in Matthew’s Gospel (Matt 23:37-39), but there the context is different. Jesus had just denounced the scribes and Pharisees with seven woes (Matt 23:13-36) and he is about to deliver the Olivet Discourse (Matt 24-25). In Luke he is still on the journey. He is still somewhere in the domains of Herod Antipas, in Galilee or Perea (Luke 13:31). He is still far away from the city of Jerusalem. But even at such distance, he cries, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem!” What concern, what love, what pathos there is in these words. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem,” the city that kills the very prophets who bring it the promise of salvation.

But Jesus’ lament becomes even more intense as he comes to his journey’s end and the city comes in to view:

“As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city he wept over it and said, ‘If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognise the time of God’s coming to you” (Luke 19:41-44).

What a woeful lament this is. All four Gospels record the triumphal entry, but only Luke picks up a tragic contrast. There are jubilant disciples singing the praises of God, but as they rejoice and sing, Jesus laments and weeps. Luke is the only Gospel to record Jesus’ tears at this point. Here he is not just bursting into tears as he did at the grave of Lazarus (John 11:35). He is loudly wailing as he forecasts the destruction of Jerusalem in words reminiscent of Old Testament passages that foretold the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC (e.g. Isa 3:26; 29:3; Jer 6:6; Ezek 4:2). Now the enemies are back, the very enemies from which those early chapters of Luke had promised protection. But why are those enemies back? Why can they now dash Jerusalem to the ground and not leave one stone on another? Jesus tells the city why –

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9 The verb used here is κλαῖω, while in John 11:35 the verb is δακρύω. According to Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon Based on Semantic Domains* (2 vols.; 2nd ed.; New York: United Bible Societies, 1988-89), 1:304, the main difference between the two verbs lies in the “emphasis upon the noise accompanying the weeping” in the case of κλαῖω.
“because you did not recognise the time of God’s coming to you.” God had come to them but they had missed his coming. Their Messiah had come, their Davidic king had come, but they didn’t recognise him. They rejected him. That’s the tragic story of Jerusalem.

But Jesus isn’t finished yet. In Luke’s version of the Olivet Discourse, he prophesies the fall of Jerusalem in even greater detail:

“When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. For this is the time of punishment in fulfilment of all that has been written. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the time of the Gentiles is fulfilled.” (Luke 21:20-24).

There are similar words in Matthew’s and Mark’s versions of the Olivet Discourse. In Matthew and Mark, however, the focus is on Judea (Matt 24:16; Mark 13:14), while in Luke it is far more specifically on Jerusalem. Again Luke is far more Jerusalem-oriented than the other two Synoptics. Notice too Jesus’ tender concern for the most vulnerable people – pregnant women and nursing mothers (Luke 21:23).

This perspective becomes particularly poignant in Jesus’ fourth and final lament over Jerusalem. On the way to the cross a large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. Jesus turned and said to them:

“Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, ‘Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’ Then ‘they will say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us!’ and to the hills, ‘Cover us!’’ For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?” (Luke 23:28-31).
Again these words of Jesus are unique to Luke. Only he records Jesus’ lament over the daughters of Jerusalem. Putting all of these laments and prophecies together we detect some unique features in Luke’s Gospel:

- Only in Luke does Jesus lament over Jerusalem from a distance.
- Only in Luke does he weep over the city when it comes into view.
- Only in Luke does the Olivet Discourse focus on the fate of Jerusalem.
- Only in Luke does Jesus lament over the daughters of Jerusalem.

A powerful picture is beginning to emerge. In the early chapters of Luke, Jerusalem is the city of promise. On the lips of Jesus it becomes the city doomed to destruction. A great reversal is taking place, because the city of Jerusalem did not know the day of its visitation. Instead of crowning the Messiah, it killed him. Instead of welcoming his messengers it mistreated and murdered them. Jesus was crucified. Stephen was stoned. James was put to the sword. Peter was imprisoned. Paul had to be rescued by the Romans. The rejection that Jesus suffered in the Gospel of Luke his servants suffered in the Book of Acts.

Acts takes the matter even further. Not only does Jerusalem reject the messengers, Israel does as well. Just as Jesus had been rejected in the synagogue at Nazareth, the apostles and missionaries were rejected by synagogues around the Graeco-Roman world. In Pisidian Antioch the Jews stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their region (Acts 13:50). When they came to Iconium they had to flee because of Jewish opposition (Acts 14:6). At Lystra the Jews instigated Paul’s stoning and left him for dead (Acts 14:19). At Thessalonica they formed a mob and started a riot in the city (Acts 17:5). At Corinth Paul was expelled from the synagogue (Acts 18:6). At Ephesus it looked more promising at first and Paul spoke boldly there for three months, but eventually some of the Jews became obstinate and publicly maligned what he had to say. So once again he was forced to leave the synagogue (Acts 19:8-9).
Finally, at the end of Acts, Paul reaches Rome. One of his first activities is to call together the leaders of the Jews. On a pre-arranged day, from morning till evening, he explained and declared the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets (Acts 28:23). But his audience was divided. Before they left, Paul closes the day with a quote from Isa 6:9-10:

“339Go to these people and say, ‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.’ For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn and I would heal them” (Acts 28:26-27).

This is a verbatim quote from Isa 6:9-10 as it appears in the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament. The only other time it is quoted as fully and precisely as this in Matt 13:14-15, where it stands between the Parable of the Sower and its interpretation. It appears in an abbreviated form in the same place in Mark 4, and in its most abbreviated form in Luke 8, again between the Parable of the Sower and its interpretation. It is as though Luke has deliberately left the full quote of this shattering passage from Isaiah to the end of his two-volume work. All four Gospels quote Isa 6:9-10 as the general Jewish response to Jesus’ ministry (Matt 13:14, 15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; John 12:40). Again the reference in the Gospel of Luke is the shortest, but he saves the full quote till the end of Acts. Again there is a parallel. In general (of course there were exceptions) the Jewish response to Jesus’ ministry in the Gospels is repeated in the Jewish response to the apostles’ ministry in Acts. The quote in Acts 28 is extremely powerful. Not only is it the last quote from the Old Testament in Acts, there has not been any Old Testament quote for five chapters (Acts 23:5) and none of any length for thirteen chapters (Acts 15:16-18). The last quote therefore forms a huge climax to Acts and a tragic end to the whole work. The people of Israel, the heirs of the promises, who have been so richly blessed, have definitively turned theirs back on the Messiah and his messengers.

So Luke-Acts, as a single work in two volumes, is a tragedy. There is no other way of putting it. Its entire theme is about reversal, and it is a reversal
of tragic proportions. The story begins with the highest hopes for the nation of Israel and the city of Jerusalem. The opening chapters are full of promise. They are loaded with great expectations. Yet by the time the story ends those hopes have been dashed and those expectations have been extinguished.¹⁰
The work could hardly end on a sadder note as far as Israel and the Jews are concerned. The city of Jerusalem can only await its doom, the doom that Jesus had said would surely come.

All of this raises an important question. Does this not make Luke anti-Semitic? As far as we know, Luke was the only Gentile to have contributed to the canon of Scripture. Neither in the Old Testament nor in the New, to the best of our knowledge, was there another Gentile who wrote a book of the Bible. That privilege was exclusively Luke’s. It belonged to Luke and to him alone. But does Luke perhaps abuse his privileged position by turning on the Jews? Could it be said that his writings are anti-Semitic in tone?

Think again of the words of Jesus that Luke has recorded and you soon realise that cannot be true:

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . how often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” (Luke 13:33)

“If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes.” (Luke 19:41)

“How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers!” (Luke 21:23)

“Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children.” (Luke 23:28)

¹⁰ Robert C. Tannehill, “Israel in Luke-Acts: A Tragic Story,” JBL 104 (1985): 78, argues that “the first two chapters of the Gospel, full of previews of the meaning of Jesus, proclaim that Jesus means salvation for Israel. The somber words of Simeon to Mary (Luke 2:34-35) seem only a slight shadow in the midst of all this brightness and joy. However, the end of Acts proclaims that Israel is a people blind and deaf to God’s word. There has been a turn in the plot, a reversal of fortunes. Expectations of happiness for Israel as a people, expressed at the beginning of the story, are not realized, for the plot turns in the opposite direction.”
The pathos, the tenderness and the compassion behind these words is simply overwhelming.\(^{11}\) Jesus is the Jewish Messiah lamenting and bewailing the fate that will befall his own people.\(^{12}\)

The same love for the Jewish people is evident in the apostle Paul. He is a Jew with a heart for his fellow-Jews. The Sabbath after the one where he first preached in their synagogue the Jews of Pisidian Antioch talked abusively against what Paul was saying. He answers them boldly, “We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles” (Acts 13:46). Then he goes on to Iconium and the very first place he visits is the Jewish synagogue (Acts 14:1). Later he visits synagogues in Thessalonica, Berea, Athens and Corinth. When he encounters opposition in the synagogue at Corinth he makes an announcement similar to the one he had made in Pisidian Antioch: “From now on I will go to the Gentiles” (Acts 18:6). In the next verse we see him moving to the house of Titius Justus, which was next door to the synagogue! Paul is not about to give up on his fellow-Jews. He lives by the principle, “To the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom 1:16), a principle to which he remains committed even at great personal cost.

Finally he reaches Rome. He seeks out the Jewish leaders and now he solemnly makes his declaration for the third time. What he had said at Antioch and at Corinth he now declares in the capital of the empire. Paul leaves the Jewish leaders with these words ringing in their ears: “Therefore I want you to know that God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!” (Acts 28:28).\(^{13}\)

\(^{11}\) As Tannehill, “Israel in Luke-Acts,” 75, has pointed out, “The destruction of Jerusalem is regarded as divine punishment for the rejection of Jesus, but the tone is pathetic, not vindictive.”

\(^{12}\) Against the view that Luke-Acts is anti-Semitic, Tannehill, “Israel in Luke-Acts,” 81, presents a telling counter-argument: “This view conflicts with my thesis that the author presents the story of Israel as a tragic story. The emotions of anguish, pity and sorrow aroused by tragedy are not the same as the hatred of anti-Semitism, nor does the negative stereotyping of anti-Semitism fit the emphasis on the great hopes and honors of the Jews, which is essential to Luke’s tragic story.”

\(^{13}\) Paul Borgman, The Way according to Luke: Hearing the Whole Story of Luke-Acts (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 322-23, has some apposite comments on these last words of Paul to the Jews: “Israel, as Simeon foresaw, is split: those who were rising have risen; those who were falling have fallen [Luke 2:34]. It is the Gentiles’ turn now. Servant Israel — faithful
2. The Gentiles

Paul’s declaration about the Gentiles in Acts 28:28 represents the second great reversal in Luke-Acts. The Jews who were so highly privileged have rejected the word of God, but the Gentiles, those outsiders, those strangers to the covenants of promise (Eph 2:12), “they will listen!”

This is a thought that is worth tracing all the way back to the Gospel of Luke. Again the image of the hour glass should be kept in mind. The top half of the hour glass refers to Israel. In Luke the ministry of Jesus is confined to Israel, but already there are hints of the later developments in Acts. The Gospel of Luke is preparing the ground for the explosion of the gospel into the Gentile world. Carefully, sometimes subtly, Luke is laying the groundwork for all that will unfold in Acts. Even in those very Semitic early chapters there are hints of the later Gentile mission. More than the other Gospel writers Luke has a pronounced interest in the Gentile world.

Only in Luke do we read that just before the birth of Jesus “Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world” (Luke 2:1) and that “this was the first census that took place when Quirinius was governor of Syria” (Luke 2:2). In the next chapter the word of God came to John the Baptist in the desert “in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar – when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea” (Luke 3:1). Only in Luke do we have the events of redemptive history intersecting with the history of the Graeco-Roman world. Already at this early stage we can see that Luke has broader interests than just Jewish parochial concerns. He has an eye for the wider secular world.

Luke’s interest in the Gentile world, however, does not just come by way of mere hints. In those early chapters of Luke we meet Simeon. He is not introduced as a priest or as a prophet but simply as a man. Yet he is a man with impeccable qualifications. He “was righteous and devout” and “the Holy Israel, delivered Israel – will serve the non-Jews, even ‘to the ends of the earth’ [Luke 1:54; Acts 3:25; 28:28] . . . The ending of Luke’s story is as powerfully bittersweet as anything in world literature. It is thoroughly sweet because of the thousands rising within faithful Israel and because the mission of redeemed and covenantally fulfilled Israel is under way, but it is thoroughly bitter because of the falling ones within Israel who are lost.”
Spirit was upon him” (Luke 2:25). He was also waiting for the consolation of Israel. When he speaks it is under the direction of the Holy Spirit. But not only does he have a word for Israel, but also for the Gentiles. As he takes the infant Jesus into his arms, he calls him “a light for revelation to the Gentiles” (Luke 2:32).

In the next chapter John the Baptist makes an equally compelling prophecy. As in the other Gospels he describes his own ministry as the “voice of one calling in the desert” (Luke 3:4), quoting from Isa 40. But in Luke the quote is taken further than in any other Gospel in that it includes the line, “And all mankind will see God’s salvation” (Luke 3:6).

These are two rock-solid prophecies that God’s salvation is for all the world and not just for the Jews. Again it’s a theme that will be developed in strong and subtle ways in Luke’s Gospel. In Jesus’ genealogy at the end of chapter 3 the ancestors are not traced back only as far as Abraham, as was the case in Matthew, but all the way back to Adam. Jesus is therefore not just the ideal representative of the Jews but of all humanity. Placing the genealogy where he does (Luke 3:23-37), Luke indicates that both Jesus’ baptism (Luke 3:21-22) and his temptations (Luke 4:1-12) have global significance.

When Jesus delivers his maiden speech in the synagogue at Nazareth he reminds the congregation that Elijah was not sent to any of the widows of Israel but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. Likewise there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha, but none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian (Luke 4:25-27). All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this and wanted to throw Jesus down a cliff. It was the first indication of the rejection that Jesus would experience from his own people. Significantly for Luke it begins in Jesus’ own hometown. It is another early indication of the Gentile mission in Acts. No other Gospel records this incident.

In chapter 7 we meet a centurion who loved the nation of Israel and built the local synagogue. He was clearly a God-fearer, like the many God-fearers that we will meet in Acts, such as Cornelius the centurion in Caesarea in Acts 10. This man does something very unusual. He amazes Jesus and Jesus declares to the crowd, “I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel” (Luke 7:9). This is another indication of things to come.
In chapter 10 Jesus compares the towns of Galilee unfavourably to the Gentile cities of Tyre and Sidon: "Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths" (Luke 10:13-15).

In the next chapter Jesus again makes some unfavourable comparisons. This time he compares the current generation of Jewish people to some notable Gentiles from the Old Testament: “The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn them; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here” (Luke 11:31-32).

Time after time Jesus warns his fellow-Jews about the terrible reversal that is taking place and of the ultimate fate of those who reject him. One more example will suffice, this time from chapter 13: "There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last" (Luke 13:28-30).

This last quote epitomises the great reversal: “The last will be first and the first will be last.” Jesus makes the same point in the parable of the great banquet. The honoured guests turned down the invitation, so the master tells his servant, “Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house may be full” (Luke 14:23). It is a picture of the Gentile mission.

It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that the Gentiles are romanticised in Luke’s Gospel. In his third passion prediction Jesus declares that he will be handed over to the Gentiles. “They will mock him, insult him, spit on him,
flog him and kill him” (Luke 18:32). In his prophecy over Jerusalem he also warns that “Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles until the time of the Gentiles is fulfilled” (Luke 21:24). So the Gentiles are not always portrayed in a positive light either in Luke or later in Acts. It’s not as though Luke portrays the Jews as the villains and the Gentiles as the heroes. God is the hero of the story and it is when his message for the world is rejected by the Jews that he turns to the Gentiles.

This perspective becomes clear in Luke’s version of the Great Commission. This version may not be as well known as Matthew’s version (Matt 28:18-20) or as Luke’s second version in Acts 1:8, but it is just as important. It comes almost at the very end of the Gospel and it ties together all the Gentile strands that have been considered so far. Jesus tells his disciples: "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:46-49).

In Acts we find that the apostles are slow to catch on when it comes to the extent of their mission. For the first seven chapters the story sits in Jerusalem and it is only through persecution (the stoning of Stephen) that the Great Commission is taken to the next phase. In Acts 8 Philip takes the gospel to the Samaritans, those despised half-Jews, who turn out to be a stepping stone into the Gentile world. In chapter 10 the word of God reaches the Gentile world when Peter preaches in the house of Cornelius in Caesarea. This development is hardly the result of a decision by the mission board of the Jerusalem church. The Holy Spirit had to orchestrate visions and dreams to finally get Peter out of his comfort zone. The whole episode in Acts 10 is a masterpiece of divine choreography. The Lord goes to great lengths to get Peter and Cornelius together. When Peter finally sets foot in Cornelius’ house it is “a small step for a man, but a giant leap for mankind.” The Gentile dyke has been breached and from now on the gospel will go flooding into the Gentile world.

The next development is in Antioch where some of the believers from Cyprus and Cyrene began to tell not just Jews but also Greeks the good news about
the Lord Jesus (Acts 11:20). Their work was very effective. Luke explains that “the Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord” (Acts 11:21). The church in Jerusalem hears about this development and sends Barnabas to Antioch. True to form, Barnabas lives up to the meaning of his nickname, “son of encouragement” (Acts 4:36), and “encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts” (Acts 11:23). He then goes to Tarsus to look for Saul.

When Barnabas found Saul he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught great numbers of people (Acts 11:26). This is a detail tucked away at the end of Acts 11 that a reader might easily miss, but it is highly significant. The church at Antioch was a strategic bridgehead into the Gentile world. Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire (after Rome and Alexandria). Sitting a little inland from the north-east corner of the Mediterranean it was an influential urban centre that dominated major trade routes between East and West. It was also a very wealthy city. It had two-and-a-half miles of streets colonnaded and paved with marble. It also had a complete system of night lighting. This was no backwater but a sophisticated commercial centre. It was an ideal location for the spread of the gospel into the Gentile world. So it is no accident that in God’s providence Antioch was the first church to reach out to Gentiles in a major way. It became the launching pad for the gospel into the Roman world. Antioch was the sending church for Paul’s three missionary journeys – the first to Cyprus and Galatia, the second to Macedonia and Greece, and the third to Asia Minor. Gentile evangelism had become an unstoppable force that would ultimately reach the heart of the Empire in Rome itself. Far from being just another Jewish sect, Christianity had become a worldwide, Gentile-predominant phenomenon. A great reversal had taken place.

14 John McRay, Paul – His Life and Teaching (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), underscores the strategic importance of Antioch for the evangelization of the Gentile world: “Antioch of Syria was bustling with activity and excitement during a time of rebuilding when Paul first arrived about A.D. 43, the year when the city established its Olympic Games. It was a huge, cosmopolitan city, the third largest behind Rome and Alexandria, with a population in the first century A.D. of about 300,000. Paul subsequently headquartered his work here in Antioch, a city where barriers of religion, race and nationality were easily crossed, a perfect base of operations for a new understanding of the religion of ancient Israel, which had been internationalized by Jesus of Nazareth.”
So in Luke-Acts reversal is the major theme. As the story progresses from the temple in Jerusalem in Luke 1 to the heart of the pagan empire in Rome in Acts 28, two major reversals take place. The first is tragic. The Jews for whom the message was originally intended have by and large rejected the word of God. The other reversal is the opposite of tragic. It is surprising and glorious. The Gentiles, who seemed to be completely outside of the orbit of the covenants and the promises, have received the message in great numbers. The salvation ($\sigma\omega\tau\iota\rho\iota\omicron\nu$) that the devout Simeon had seen (Luke 2:30) has now been seen by all mankind (Luke 3:6).\(^{15}\) It has been sent to the Gentiles because they will listen (Acts 28:28). A great reversal has taken place and it is at the same time both tragic and glorious. This is Luke’s meta-narrative. It is the big picture of Luke-Acts. In many ways what Luke is doing in these two books is what Paul is doing in Romans 9-11.\(^{16}\) In narrative form he is showing how the Gentiles as wild olive branches have been grafted into the cultivated olive tree that is Israel, while some of the natural branches have been cut away. The theology that Paul conveys in his epistle Luke conveys through his narrative, and he does it in two books that are intended to be read as one.

C. Theologically

The theology of Acts is driven by three primary concerns: (a) the baptism of the Holy Spirit, (b) the Great Commission, and (c) the resurrection. These three primary concerns lay the groundwork for the entire account and are mentioned upfront in the first eight verses of the book. They are also very

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\(^{15}\) Cf. Tannehill, “Israel in Luke-Acts,” 71: “Already in Simeon’s response to the baby Jesus (Luke 2:29-32) we are told that Jesus has special meaning for both Israel and the Gentiles. When he sees the baby Jesus, Simeon sees God’s salvation ($\sigma\omega\tau\iota\rho\iota\omicron\nu$), which will be ‘light’ for Gentiles and ‘glory’ for Israel. This theme of the universal revelation of God’s $\sigma\omega\tau\iota\rho\iota\omicron\nu$ is repeated in the quotation of Isa 40:3-5 in Luke 3:4-6. The only other occurrence of the term $\sigma\omega\tau\iota\rho\iota\omicron\nu$ in Luke-Acts is in Paul’s final statement to the Roman Jews at the end of Acts (Acts 28:28). This seems to be a deliberate inclusion, with the end of the work pointing back to the beginning. But this reference back also emphasizes the difference between the beginning and the end, for in the final scene in Acts Paul declares that the Roman Jews, like the Jews elsewhere, are blind and deaf, while the Gentiles will hear and receive ‘this salvation of God.’”

\(^{16}\) The theme of reversal is also present in these chapters, a point which I have sought to demonstrate in some detail elsewhere. See Stephen Voorwinde, “Rethinking Israel: An Exposition of Romans 11:25-27,” Vox Reformata 68 (2003): 4-48.
closely inter-related. The apostles will need to be baptized by the Holy Spirit if they are to carry out the Great Commission, and the central feature of the Great Commission is their witness to the resurrection of Jesus. It is in turn the risen Jesus who issues the Great Commission and who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. This is the dynamic that keeps the story moving. This is what propels it from Jerusalem to Rome. The apostles are baptized by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. They begin to carry out the Great Commission as they bear witness to the resurrection in Jerusalem, all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

But while these three concerns are foundational to Acts, they do not have their origin in Acts. The baptism of the Holy Spirit, the Great Commission and the resurrection all have their beginnings not in the Book of Acts but in the Gospel of Luke. To understand the primary theological concerns of Acts we need to go back to Luke. The ministry of the apostles in Acts cannot be understood apart from the ministry of Jesus in the Gospel. There are some notable parallels.

1. **The Baptism of the Holy Spirit**

In Acts 1:5 Jesus tells his disciples “. . . in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” Jesus is about to ascend and the baptism of the Spirit will occur at Pentecost. But this is not Luke’s first reference to the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Back in Luke 3:16 he had quoted the words of John the Baptist to the crowds at the Jordan: “I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you will the Holy Spirit and with fire.” The one more powerful who is coming is of course Jesus.

Subsequent events, however, didn’t quite pan out the way John had expected. From prison he sends a delegation to Jesus. They come with an urgent question, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Luke 7:20) Why was John asking this question? Why is he overcome by doubts? Wasn’t Jesus performing some spectacular miracles? Wasn’t Jesus a stellar performer who could pull a crowd and keep them spellbound
for hours with his pointed parables and soul-searching sermons? Why doubt him? Why now?

The answer is really quite simple. In spite of his magnetic pull on the masses, in spite of his brilliant sermons and his spectacular miracles, there were some things that Jesus was not doing. He was precisely not doing the very things that John the Baptist had predicted of him. He was not baptizing with the Holy Spirit and he was most certainly not baptizing with fire! This must have concerned and disappointed John. These were the very activities that he had predicted of Jesus and he seemed to be doing anything but. Why was this the case? Jesus did not baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire because he himself had not yet been baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire. When John sent his delegation Jesus had indeed been baptized by the Holy Spirit. That had happened at the Jordan almost at the same moment that he had been water-baptized by John. But he had not yet been baptized by fire. This baptism by fire was still to come and it would come at the cross. Only when he had experienced his own baptism by the Holy Spirit and by fire would he be able to baptize others with the Holy Spirit and fire. This would happen at Pentecost when those present were filled with the Holy Spirit and when tongues of fire came to rest upon each of them (Acts 2:3-4).

Herein lies a remarkable parallel between Luke and Acts. Early in Luke Jesus was baptized with the Holy Spirit to confirm his messianic identity. Early in Acts the church is baptized with the Holy Spirit to constitute it as the messianic community. The baptism of the Holy Spirit launches the earthly ministry of Jesus. The baptism of the Holy Spirit also launches the early ministry of the church. Therefore what the Jordan was for Jesus, Pentecost was for the church. The parallel is unmistakable. The ministry of Jesus cannot be understood without his baptism by the Holy Spirit, and neither can the ministry of the church be understood without the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The ministry of Jesus and ministry of the church are therefore beautifully symmetrical. Both depend on the empowering of the Holy Spirit. Jesus and the church were also baptized by fire. For Jesus it happened on the cross. For the church it happened at Pentecost in the tongues of fire (Acts 2:3). The church’s baptism by fire was completely gracious because Jesus had already taken the heat out of it when he died on the cross.
2. **The Great Commission**

The baptism of the Holy Spirit empowered the apostles to carry out the Great Commission: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Jesus made a similar point when he issued the Great Commission at the end of Luke: “Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in my name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:47-49).

In both versions the emphasis is on empowerment. They can do nothing until they have been empowered by the Holy Spirit. But there is more to be seen here. There is another parallel with the ministry of Jesus. Jesus had his own “Great Commission” to carry out. It is commonly known as the “Nazareth Manifesto.” He states it very soon after he has been baptized with the Holy Spirit. In his landmark sermon at Nazareth, Jesus claims to be fulfilling the messianic prophecy of Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
Because he has anointed me  
To preach good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
And recovery of sight for the blind,  
To release the oppressed,  
To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour” (Luke 4:18, 19).^{17}

It takes little imagination to see that there is significant overlap between the Nazareth Manifesto and the Great Commission. The apostles’ ministry was a continuation of Jesus’ ministry. What Jesus began in Luke the apostles continued in Acts.

^{17} Cf. Tannehill, “Israel in Luke-Acts,” 70: “This is a commission statement, and it is widely recognized that it is programmatic, that is, intended to interpret the subsequent events in Jesus’ ministry.”
3. **The Resurrection**

The core focus of the Great Commission was the apostles’ witness to the resurrection. When Jesus said, “You are my witnesses,” what he had in mind was the fact that they had been eye-witnesses to his resurrection appearances. While the apostles may have been slow to catch on the *extent* of their witness, they had no doubt as to what the *content* of their witness was to be. They were primarily witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection. When it came to carrying out this aspect of their commission they were very faithful. The apostolic speeches in Acts (about fifteen in all) can be divided them into four categories – evangelistic, apologetic, deliberative and hortatory. The great majority are evangelistic and apologetic. On most occasions you find the apostles (especially Peter and Paul) either preaching the gospel to the crowds or defending the gospel before the authorities. When they do so, the main point or climax of their message is nearly always the resurrection. Here are some of the more prominent examples:

(a) When Peter preached at Pentecost he declared: “God has *raised* this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses to the fact” (Acts 2:32).

(b) When he preached his first sermon to a Gentile audience at the house of Cornelius, Peter said, “God *raised* him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was seen not by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen – by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead” (Acts 10:40-41).

(c) Paul at Athens preached the same message when he brought his sermon to a dramatic conclusion: “God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by *raising* him from the dead” (Acts 17:31).

Time and time again that was their message. That’s what the apostles preached – the resurrection of the dead. That’s why they were brought to trial. They were accused for holding that the hope of Israel had been fulfilled in Jesus (Acts 23:6; 24:15, 21; 26:6-8). That’s why Peter and John appeared before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4-5). That’s why Paul was later brought to trial.
before Felix and Festus (Acts 24-26). Ironically, paradoxically, tragically, they were on trial because they held to the hope of Israel (Acts 23:6; 24:15; 28:20). In Jesus they were proclaiming the resurrection of the dead (Acts 4:2). That’s what all the fuss was about. They preached the hope of Israel and their message was repeatedly rejected by the leaders of Israel. That’s the great tragedy of the book of Acts.

The apostolic message of the resurrection in Acts is again firmly anchored in the Gospel of Luke. He devotes his last chapter entirely to the resurrection of Jesus. In Luke 24 Jesus is raised from the dead, walks with the two to Emmaus and appears to his disciples in Jerusalem. In a brief paragraph at the very end of the chapter there is a passing reference to the ascension (Luke 24:51). Because of the way that Luke has composed this chapter the reader could be excused for thinking that the ascension happened on Easter Sunday. Only in the first chapter of Acts does it become clear that the ascension occurred forty days after the resurrection. Luke 24 majors on the resurrection with just a fleeting mention of the ascension. Acts 1 briefly recapitulates Jesus’ resurrection and then gives a more detailed account of his ascension. Jesus’ resurrection and ascension therefore function as a hinge between the two volumes.

When it comes to the three primary theological concerns of Acts, each has its starting point in the Gospel:

(a) The apostles were baptized with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and Jesus was baptized with the Holy Spirit at the Jordan;
(b) The apostles carried out the Great Commission in the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus likewise carried out his commission in the power of the Spirit.
(c) The apostles’ central message was the resurrection of Jesus, which was the climactic event of the Gospel.
Conclusion

Preaching from Luke-Acts often means preaching narrative. It is important to know that each narrative is part of the larger meta-narrative of Luke-Acts.\textsuperscript{18} This is one story in two parts. We can see this in three ways:


(b) The overall story has a clear theme – the rejection of God’s purposes by the Jews and a growing acceptance of those same purposes by the Gentiles.

(c) The major theological concerns of Acts are the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the Great Commission and the resurrection. None of these primary concerns can be properly understood apart from their background in the Gospel of Luke.

So what is Luke-Acts more like – 1 & 2 Samuel or 1 & 2 Corinthians? Clearly it is more like 1 & 2 Samuel. If we had to rename the entire work it would be “1 & 2 Luke” rather than “1 & 2 Theophilus.” It is one narrative by the same author, not two messages from the same author.

What does all of this mean for preaching? It means that in the back of our minds we always have Luke’s “big idea” for the entire narrative. From beginning to end that big idea is reversal. The story that begins in Jerusalem ends up in Rome. God’s purposes that were originally intended for the Jews are now being fulfilled in the Gentiles. That is the great reversal in Luke-

Acts. It’s not as though it’s all over for the Jews as far as God’s salvation is concerned, but this great reversal will stay in effect “until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (Luke 21:24). Then there may well be another great reversal, as Paul argues in Romans 11, but that’s not Luke’s main concern. He is mainly concerned with the hour glass – the movement of the gospel from the Jews to the Gentiles, the general rejection of God’s purposes by the Jews and its growing acceptance by the Gentiles.

So that’s Luke’s overall theme. “The first shall be last and the last shall be first.” That’s his theme at the macro-level and we should look for this theme at the micro-level as well:

In Luke 9 Jesus resolutely set his face to go to Jerusalem. The journey from Galilee has begun. The first incident in this part of the Gospel is the rejection of the pilgrims by a Samaritan village. John is one of the disciples who ask Jesus, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?” (Luke 9:54). In Acts 8 the Samaritans are the first to accept the word of God when it leaves Jerusalem, and John is one of the apostles who prayed for the Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:15). A double reversal taken place – one for John and the other for the Samaritans. Further Samaritan examples include the Parable of the Good Samaritan where the Samaritan is the hero of the parable, not the priest and the Levite (Luke 10:25-37). In a real-life situation it is the Samaritan leper who comes to thank Jesus, not the other nine (Luke 17:16-19).

The great banquet is enjoyed not by the invited guests but by the crippled, the blind and the lame (Luke 14:21). As Mary said at the beginning, “God has filled the hungry with good things, but he has sent the rich away empty”(Luke 1:53); or as Jesus said in the Sermon on the Plain, “Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now for you will mourn and weep.” (Luke 6:25).

So when you read Luke-Acts, when you preach Luke-Acts, look for that grand theme of reversal. For those who have eyes to see, it’s everywhere. It’s the big idea of the whole work. To account for the great reversal was Luke’s purpose from beginning to end. And this is the reversal of which we Gentiles are the beneficiaries.