Luke-Acts In A Nutshell

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When we come to read the Bible, we must understand what we are reading. Our faith commitment to the Bible as inspired Scripture leaves us with the firm belief that the Bible as a unified whole is the very Word of God to humanity. Yet even a casual glance at the first verses of, for example, any of Paul's letters, leaves us with the undeniable reality that the Bible is *first* a collection of separate, ancient documents, written by men, to men. In fact, if one picked up the Bible without the theological commitment that we typically bring to the text, the humanity of the book would probably be the first thing that stood out to an initial reader. They would immediately realize that they were reading an anthology of ancient human documents. We might have to work to explain to them that this collection of books has been bound together because it ultimately functions as a unified whole as the Word of God to all humanity. And this is by God's design.

If we want to take the Bible seriously, we must always and at every point give honor to this dual nature (both human and Divine) of Scripture. If God had so pleased, he could have dropped down the Bible from heaven in a single bound copy and told us to reproduce it (or he could have just dropped off numerous copies). He could have written the whole thing in the clouds, visible to all, for all time, with no connection to any particular historical contexts. (Or he could have simply emailed it to us and had a "click to agree to terms of use" button at the end!) But he instead chose to let each individual book arise *in history* as the response of a human writer who sought to address issues contemporary to their own time. In so doing, the Spirit intertwined the human and divine natures of Scripture in such a way that we now only uncover the *Divine* message when we can first see clearly the *human* message. That is, only when we know what the original human author of a book of Scripture intended to speak to his original readers can we know what God intends to speak to us. As Gordon Fee says so well, "The Bible can never mean to us what it could not have meant to its original readers." Speaking authoritatively about the Divine message of Scripture demands studying diligently its human element. Thus, wrestling with the original writers and readers of Scripture, and their historical contexts, is not some pointless academic exercise engaged in for the sake of studying ancient stuff, as though at the end of the day we only did it because we wanted to pretend to be Indiana Jones, or even his more boring dad. Rather, this study of the ancient text, in its ancient context, is part of the intense and passionate effort to hear the very personal Voice of the Spirit in our own lives. But it is to pursue this Voice in a way that gives honor to *how* God chose to give his Word.

We begin here a study of the Gospel of Luke and its sequel, the Book of Acts. We understand both to have been written by Luke to Theophilus. We will begin slowly to work our way through each book, text-by-text (I'm currently teaching through both in different settings). But to proceed with an understanding of what God intends to say through the text, we must know something about who wrote it, who they wrote it to, what they were trying to say, and *why*. These questions we will briefly wrestle with here, as prelude to our exegetical treatment of the books to come.

An Author And A Reader

Who is This Author Luke?

We get a glimpse of Luke in the Prison Epistles and in the Pastoral Epistles, as well as in Church history. Tradition has held that the author of Luke-Acts is the "Physician Luke" who was a traveling companion of the Apostle Paul. Colossians 4:14 explains that Luke and Mark (4:10) were in communication, thus we can make sense of Luke's access to Mark's Gospel and sources. It seems evident that Luke used Mark as a primary source when composing his history, as we'll note below, and as we'll point out at numerous points while proceeding through the text. Also, his distinction from "them of the circumcision" (4:11) makes it likely he was a Gentile. This would make him the only Gentile author in the NT (thus perhaps his great emphasis on Gentile inclusion and the Gentile Mission, which we will see as we move along). In fact, he's not only the the only Gentile NT author; he also wrote more of the NT than any other single author. While Paul wrote a greater number of letters, the content of Luke-Acts (whether counting verses or words) is greater than that of Paul's letters combined. (And this is true even if one mistakenly includes Hebrews as Pauline!)

Luke wrote more of the NT than any other single author - even more than Paul.

In Philemon 1:24, Luke is with Paul in his Roman imprisonment, further, Paul mentions him as a "fellow laborer" in the Gospel, so clearly Luke had come to devote his life to the Gospel's progress. The fact that by the time Paul writes his final "Prison Epistle," Philippians, only Timothy is with him (Phil 2:19-2), suggests that Luke had left by that time. II Tim. 4:11 places him with Paul during his final Roman imprisonment. As he "only" is with Paul, this (and the great linguistic similarities between Luke-Acts and the Pastoral Epistles, as well as the dissimilarities of the PE to Paul's other letters) might favor the idea that Luke was the "scribe" Paul used to write the PE. Further, this shows finally his acquaintance with all of Paul's career, and his close acquaintance with the opposition the Gospel will always face, yet its complete triumph over all obstacles. Luke was well aquatinted with the sources and in a position to write an accurate history of the early Christian movement. And Luke knew from firsthand experience that *the Gospel that is for all men (especially the least, the lost, and the marginalized), purchased by Jesus, and empowered by the Spirit, could be stopped by no force when the Church believed it, and preached it*, which is one of his main theological burdens.

Who is This Reader Theophilus?

We can infer the following about Theophilus from what little we have in Luke-Acts; His title, "Most Excellent" (Luke 1:3) suggest that he was of some high social standing, and quite possibly of unique value to the spread of the Gospel. The inclusive pronouns of Luke 1:1-4 favor the idea that he was a Christian, though probably a recent convert. Thus, the 2-part work, including the Gospel, is not so much evangelistic, as it is an *encouragement to evangelize*. The purpose statement of Luke 1:1-4 makes it clear that the predominant "problem" of Theophilus that Luke writes to correct was some kind of failure to be fully convinced of the truthfulness of the Gospel itself (Vol. 1), and of the ability of that Gospel to overcome the mounting opposition that it was facing (Vol. 2). The content, and predominant "imperative" if we could say there is one, is *to boldly preach the Gospel*. As a purpose usually stands behind a main imperative, it seems likely that Theophilus was at some level wrestling with this bold proclamation of the Gospel. Historically, he lived in a period where opposition to the Gospel was climaxing. His "reticence" would seem only natural as he watched the opposition that the Gospel faced. People who came to Jesus (and especially those that told others about the Jesus they had found) came to persecution and martyrdom.

What is the Gospel of Luke Teaching Us?

Examining the theology and content of Luke in detail would take us far beyond a single blog post. (In fact, it will occupy many upcoming posts!) For those who like visual presentations, a simple and helpful overview of basic content is found here (Luke 1-9), here (Luke 10-24), here (Acts 1-12), and here (Acts 13-28). For those who prefer to read and appreciate the original academic thought, a helpful introduction is found here for Luke and Acts. For my nerdy friends who want to know, or who want commentary recommendations, I've found Marshall helpful for Luke and Acts, Bock helpful in both Luke and Acts, Green helpful in Luke and Keener in Acts (and no - I've not read the whole thing!). But mostly I've found Witherington and especially Peterson indispensable for Acts study. What we will attempt here is simply a brief overview, a basic main idea, and some brief thoughts about application.

To understand this work and its message for us today, we need to note the geographical structure that Luke has given to his first volume (what we know as the Gospel of Luke). He has presented the story of Christ, but has arranged his account around primarily geographical contours, with the goal being the Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension, in Jerusalem. Thus, after an introduction that reveals a prologue (1:1-4), the birth of Jesus (1:5-2:52), and His preparation for ministry as one fully submitted to and empowered by the Spirit (3:1-4:15), the first major section of Luke's Gospel is taken up with Jesus' ministering in Galilee (4:16-9:50). At the end of this period, Jesus determines to go to Jerusalem (9:51), and the second major section of the Gospel is the ministry of Jesus that takes place on his way to Jerusalem (9:51-19:27). Having arrived in Jerusalem (19:28-29), Jesus engages in His ministry in Jerusalem (19:28-21:38), which, due to its proximity to the Temple and the Jewish leadership, leads ultimately to His Passion (22:1-23:56), and climaxes at his Resurrection (24:1-49). Luke ends his account with a brief summary of the Ascension (24:50-53), together with Jesus' command (24:46-49) that the disciples wait in Jerusalem until they receive the power of the Spirit from on high to be witnesses of this Gospel story that they have seen develop before their very eyes.

Luke (Volume I) in Brief - A Journey to Jerusalem's Cross

- Introduction (1:1-4:15)
  - Ministry in Galilee (4:16-9:50)
  - Ministry on the way to Jerusalem (9:51-19:27; see notes that keep the reader on track at 9:51; 13:22; 17:11)
  - Ministry in Jerusalem (19:28-21:38)
- Passion, Ascension and Commission (22:1-24:53)

The Structure of Luke's Gospel				
Introduction (1:1-4:15)	Ministry in Galilee (4:16-9:50)	Ministry on the way to Jerusalem (9:51-19:27 see notes at 9:51; 13:22; 17:11)	Ministry in Jerusalem (19:28-21:38)	Passion, Ascension and Commission (22:1-24:53)

But we can learn even more about what Luke intends to communicate to Theophilus by looking at his express purpose statement and his introductory prologue.

"Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught."
(Luke 1:1–4 ESV)

At least two things stand out about what the Gospel of Luke is and does in this simple introduction. First, Luke used sources. He points out expressly that a number of narratives had been compiled of the events of the life of Jesus, and makes clear that he is familiar with them. Luke has engaged in his own long-standing historical inquiry into the events, and wants to add his work to those that have gone before. He understands that he is not a first-generation eye-witness of the events, but has access to the accounts of such eyewitness. We concur with the majority of Gospels scholarship in holding that one of the primary sources that Luke relied upon was the Gospel of Mark. But regardless of what the sources he had available, Luke has selected, arranged, and adapted his material to accomplish his own purpose. Thus, he has written up this orderly account for Theophilus.

The second thing that stands out is a little bit about what this purpose is. Luke expressly says that he is writing "that [Theophilus] may have certainty" about the Gospel message that he has already learned. That is, Luke isn't writing for the purpose of giving Theophilus a first exposure to the Christian message; he is writing because Theophilus doesn't believe that message as firmly as he should. Luke intends through his telling of the story and its attention to careful history to move his reader past the doubting questions and into the trusting faith. He intends to not only show that the Gospel really happened, but also that it truly has the power to spread across the world in an unstoppable fashion. And who could waver hesitantly and remain less than fully committed to such a Gospel of power in the midst of suffering? How could Theophilus be silent about a message that once proclaimed can't be contained?

Thus, Luke shows that the Gospel story took place on its way to, and in, Jerusalem, and in part two (Acts) he takes up how that story, which began so small in an upper room in Jerusalem, when the Spirit descended, spread from those small beginnings to change the world. In some ways, all of the Gospel of Luke is prelude to the Book of Acts. The Gospel has been cast as the story of Jesus, proclaiming the Kingdom that is now for all, bringing salvation to all who repent and believe, fulfilling OT expectations, empowered by the Spirit, and most importantly, on his way to Jerusalem and to the cross that awaits him there. Everything builds towards the bloody cross, the empty tomb, and the Commission to witness to the story of what happened there and what it means for the whole world. It's a little harder I suspect to find a single "idea" in Luke, apart from these various themes. But I suspect one could say that the basic idea of the Gospel of Luke is to show that *The Gospel must go empowered by the Spirit to all, because Jesus is Lord of all, and has purchased a salvation that is for all.*

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What is the Book of Acts Teaching Us?

To answer this question we need to note the structure of Luke's second volume (Acts) as a whole. Luke arranges his second volume into six "panels" about the spread of the Gospel, concluding each section with a "summary statement" about how the Gospel is spreading. Two other organizing principles are occasionally set forth that should be noted. First is that which sees the book in two parts aligning to its two most prevalent human characters; Peter and Paul. Second is that which takes Acts 1:8 as a sort of "outline" for the book, dividing it into three parts, "Jerusalem," "Judea and Samaria," and, "The Ends of the Earth." All of these outlining structures have value, and overlap a little, and each probably is in some ways intentional on the part of Luke.

Possible Structures for Acts						
Major Figures as Outline	Peter is the Primary Figure in Chapters 1-12			Paul is the Primary Figure in Chapters 13-28		
Acts 1:8 as Outline	Jerusalem - Chap. 1-7	Judea and Samaria - Chapters 8-12		The Ends of the Earth - Chapters 13-28 (cf. 13:47)		
Progress Reports as Outline	The Word Begins in Jerusalem 1:1-6:7 (Summary in 6:7)	The Word Spreads to Judea-Samaria 6:8-9:31 (Summary in 9:31)	The Word Spreads to the Gentiles 9:32-12:24 (Summary in 12:24)	The Word Spreads to Asia 12:25-16:5 (Summary in 16:5)	The Word Spreads to Europe 16:6-19:20 (Summary in 19:20)	The Word Reaches to Rome 19:21-28:30 (Summary in 28:30-31)

However, it seems clear that his most important organizing principle is that which is seen in his use of the summary statements to conclude each panel of the progress of the Word. The phrase "The Word" in Luke's vocabulary isn't a reference to the canon of Scripture. It is a reference to the message of the Gospel. And for Luke, Peter and Paul are not the main stars of the book of Acts. *The Gospel is*. Each of six panels deals with unique opposition that the Gospel faces, and shows how the opposition is overcome to the glory of God.. This seems to clearly be one of the most abundant themes in terms of what the story actually recounts. Peterson shows how this develops in the narrative (and essentially handles his exposition along the lines of this conflict). "Each of the key editorial markers climaxes a section of the narrative recording the resolution of some conflict or the cessation of opposition and persecution. The Gospel is shown to progress in spite of, and even because of, suffering. By implication, 'nothing can stop the Gospel but its spread still causes grief and loss'..." (Peterson; *PNTC*, pg. 33-36). Gordon Fee notes, "Because the Gospel is God's thing...Luke also regularly reminds us that nothing can hinder it – not the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem (chs. 3-5; "But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God," 5:39); not unbelieving Jews, like Saul of Tarsus, bent on destruction (8:1-3); not the church in Jerusalem (11:1-8; "what was I, that I could withstand God?" Peter ask in vs. 17); not secular leaders, like Herod (12:1-24, "Herod... was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost. But the word of God grew and multiplied."[!] vv. 23-24); not Judaizers within the Church (15:1-35; "Now therefore why tempt ye God?" vs. 10); not religious or secular opposition from Greeks (16:16-40; 19:23-41); not shipwrecks or snakes (chs. 27-28). With the coming of Jesus and the Spirit, the time of God's favor has come. The Gospel is God's activity in history; salvation is for all people, Jew and Gentile alike, and nothing can hinder it. And so the book concludes with Paul preaching in Rome with all boldness and without hindrance." (Gordon Fee, *How To Read The Bible Book By Book*)

We could outline this structure as follows;

Acts (Volume 2) in Brief - Six Panels of the Spreading Word

- 1:1-6:7 – The Word begins in Jerusalem (summary of its spread in 6:7)
- 6:8-9:31 – The Word spreads to Judea and Samaria (summary of its spread in 9:31)
- 9:32-12:24 – The Word spreads to the Gentiles (summary of its spread in 12:24)
- 12:25-16:5 – The Word spreads to Asia (summary of its spread in 16:5)
- 16:6-19:20 – The Word spreads to Europe (summary of its spread in 19:20)
- 19:21-28:30 – The Word reaches Rome (summary of its spread in 28:30-31)

Almost 1/3 of the content of the Book of Acts is made up of Sermons that showcase the preaching of the Gospel in the Power of the Spirit.

A final feature of Luke's second volume must be taken account of. While Luke is perfectly capable of summarizing a sermon in a few words (e.g., Acts 9:20), he regularly gives great space to extended report of sermons preached. These are still shortened summaries of course. After all, Paul's sermons could last long into the night, (Acts 20:7-12) and none of them in Acts is recounted in that detail! But we nonetheless get a more detailed recounting of sermons in Acts than would seem necessary. Luke shares some eight speeches by Peter (Acts 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 11, 13), two by James (Acts 15, 21), one by Stephen (Acts 7), nine by Paul (Acts 13, 14, 17, 20, 22, 23, 24, 26, 28), and occasionally even some by unbelieving Jews who unwittingly still speak the principle that this new Jesus Way (because it actually *is* of God) can't be stopped (Acts 5:33-39)! Why is this? What is Luke doing? Why does he write this way? The answer is a simple one; Luke is intending to strengthen Theophilus' faith in the truth of the Gospel, not so that he can keep it to himself, but so that he can share it with Spirit-empowerd boldness. This is why the Great Commission both concludes his first volume (Luke 24:44-49), and is repeated at the opening of the second (Acts 1:1-11). The repetition is wholly unnecessary for one who just read it, except to reveal the primary point. Luke regularly points out that this boldness comes only from the Spirit (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8; 2:4, 4:8, 29, 33; 6:8+10+7:2, 55; 10:1-4+34-43-48+11:15; 11:21-24; 20:23; etc.). And he doesn't want to just say to Theophilus, "You should proclaim the Word," as though this could be down in his own power. He rather *shows* him, repeatedly, what it actually looks like to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus in the power of the Spirit. In fact, in terms of content, *sermons make up almost 1/3 of the Book of Acts.* They move the narrative along and are often its key points of action. (We have spelled out the basic message preached in early Creed here, and will in a later blog flesh out how this same message makes up the basic content of the sermons in Acts, in diverse settings). The Gospel of Jesus is a supernaturally powerful force that can be stopped by no opposition, outside or inside the church - *if the church will proclaim it boldly in the power of the Spirit.* Only the silence of its adherents could slow the Gospel's progress, for once proclaimed, the Spirit-energized-Gospel is an unstoppable force.

To draw these threads together and summarize the whole message of the book of Acts then, we might say the following;

When the Church believes in the Gospel with deep-seated conviction,
and preaches its Jesus with Spirit-empowerd boldness,
no opposing force can stop this Message
from changing the whole world.

So the question is, What about you? Will *you* believe in the powerful message of a crucified and risen King? Or will you resist in disbelief, unwilling to be swayed? Will you hear the call of a Risen Jesus whispering your name in the silence of the night? If you have heard it already, and believe his message now, will you let the Spirit breath that belief deeper and deeper into core of your heart? Will you let him make it the very heartbeat of your life? It surely is his.

And what now will you do with this message? Will you proclaim it with boldness? Through both your life *and* your lips, will you give courageous testimony to the eternally important truth that Jesus lives? Will you profess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, but always under your breath, just in case someone close to you might hear the message that could change their eternity? Will you cower in fear of reprisal, because the cost seems too great, the danger too real, the mockery too painful, and your understanding of God too small?

Or will you join the chorus of those from the first 30 years of the Church, whom Luke lets us catch a glimpse of in his work,
who were so overwhelmed by the reality of this Message that they could not be silent about it;
who bravely faced with abandon every obstacle and opposing force imaginable,
because they were consumed with the conviction that this Jesus is alive,
and the World must know it?

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