

INTRODUCTION

Sacred Encounters

The Power and Presence of Jesus Christ in Luke-Acts

Picture a young girl sitting on the edge of her seat hanging on to every word spoken, her heart pounding in her chest, yearning to hear more. That was how I felt every Sunday morning as I listened to the sermon at my home church. My love affair with the biblical text began in my pre-teen years and deepened as I grew older. I was fascinated with the characters, what happened to them along the way, and the outcomes of their stories. Eventually, this fascination led me to enroll at a theological college at age eighteen. Since then, I have devoted my life to studying (and teaching) the historical, socio-cultural, and religious world that shaped this ancient text, and the Bible remains my great love.

The Gospel According to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles were favorites in my early years, but it was while I was at seminary that I discovered the connection between these two books. Luke and Acts were written by the same author as two volumes of the same book and designated *Luke-Acts*. Written in the second half of the first century CE in southern Greece, Luke-Acts is unique in its composition. Luke is the only Gospel writer to continue the story post-resurrection and to include the Ascension of Jesus Christ. Acts is the sequel to the Gospel and its continuation. Read in sequence it becomes apparent that the Gospel anticipates Acts, and Acts reflects upon the Gospel.

The research and writing of H.J. Cadbury in the twentieth century paved the way to read Luke and Acts as one unified work. In support of this theory, Cadbury cites the similarities in language, structure, and theology of both books.¹

Luke and Acts are also linked by a common recipient named Theophilus. In the prologue to the Gospel, Luke addresses Theophilus as “most excellent” (Lk 1:3) and Theophilus is mentioned again by name in Acts 1:1–2a, “In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught, until the day when he was taken up to heaven.” The name Theophilus means “one who loves God,” and there has been speculation among church historians about whether Theophilus was a person or a symbolic reference to any reader who loved God. However, Luke indicates that Theophilus had already received Christian instruction and states that Luke’s purpose for writing the Gospel was for Theophilus to “know the truth concerning the things about which [he had] been instructed” (Lk 1:4). Knowing this makes it plausible that Theophilus was a human recipient of Luke-Acts.

Comprising almost twenty-five percent of the New Testament, Luke-Acts includes a cornucopia of

¹ H.J. Cadbury, *The Making of Luke-Acts* (New York: Macmillan, 1927).

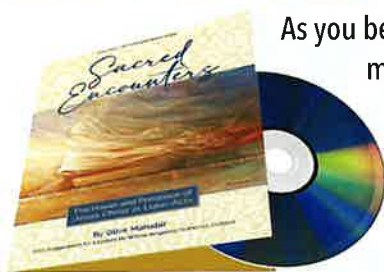
themes, stories, characters, geographic locations, and audiences. In recent years I have been drawn to the inclusive nature of Luke's writings.

In Luke-Acts the message of Jesus Christ includes all people regardless of their race, class, gender, or sexuality (as in the case of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8:26–40). For Luke, Jesus Christ was an inclusive leader and Christianity was an inclusive movement. Luke-Acts demonstrates the unfolding of God's redemptive purposes in human history and provides a distinctive perspective on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Luke presents a radical, inclusive, and hope-filled message to his community and highlights the universal scope of Jesus' message and

the inclusivity of God's love and salvation.

Throughout the Gospel, Luke shows Jesus caring for the poor and lowly, the outcast, the sinner, and the afflicted. In Acts, through the work of the Holy Spirit, the apostles continue this mission of mercy and compassion.

As we work through this study, I invite you to consider how the twenty-first century church can exhibit mercy and compassion within and beyond the traditional congregation. How can we go beyond a façade of caring to achieve true inclusion in our communities of faith? What are the potential implications for the church if we treat our interactions as sacred encounters that demonstrate the transformational love of Christ Jesus?



As you begin your study, know that leader (and reader!) helps are available in many places. Turn to the back cover to take a look—and visit presbyterianwomen.org/bible-study for even more.

Companion DVD

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