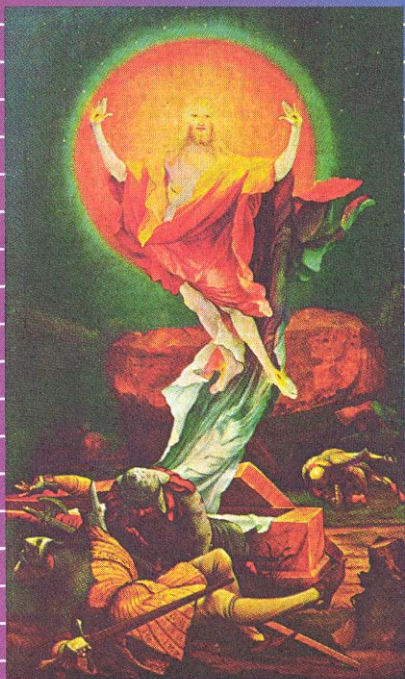




LUKE/ACTS



Barbara Hall

The most important thing about The Gospel of Luke and The Acts of the Apostles is this: these two "books" are two volumes of *one* work. A glance at the first few verses of each will make this clear. Together they tell the story of Jesus from his birth (with a number of pointers backward to the history of his people, the Jews) until the Gospel of Jesus, the Messiah (the Christ) reaches Rome, the center of Luke's world. Not surprisingly for those who know the story, the one work is divided at its climax: Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.

The original readers of these works lived at the end of the first century A.D. They were two or three generations away from the earthly ministry of Jesus, and none of them had ever known Peter, Paul, Stephen or other first generation apostles or disciples. Of course, they knew something about Jesus and the earliest church. They had Mark's gospel, and they had a written collection of other stories about Jesus' words and deeds. There were certainly other stories, parables and healing stories for example, which circulated orally, separate from any written

document. There were accounts about the earliest church and its prominent figures, perhaps all of these told by one person to another. This was a culture where the oral tradition had an authority unknown today.

Luke's original readers were Gentile. They were certainly aware that the origins of the church were Jewish. Jesus was a Jew, as were his earliest followers. They were also aware that at the beginning of the church's life there was sharp conflict among the Jewish Christians about whether Gentiles were to be admitted to the church, and on what terms. They may not have known a great deal about these conflicts, which persisted in some areas well into the second century, but they were comfortable as Gentile Christians in their own communities, probably with little contact with any Jewish or Jewish-Christian communities.

These Gentile Christians were also urban, economically secure for the most part and well-educated by the standards of the day. These circumstances put them at some distance from Jesus and the earliest Christian groups, just as we are today. We can understand and share the

need they had for an imaginative leap, necessary to make the story of Jesus and the earliest church their own.

Another important way in which Luke's community was somewhat distant from the earliest Christian experience was in their expectations for 'the coming of the Lord,' the hope that Jesus would return very soon as risen and ruling Son of God, to put things right on earth and inaugurate the Kingdom of God. Inevitably, the passage of a generation or two and the death of the first Christians, including the leading apostles, had changed the atmosphere of urgent hope. Christians began to settle down in the world, knowing that they might have to live for some time to come. The apparent promise of Mark 9:1 had not come to pass. It was to such a community (and also perhaps to those outside the church, see Lk 1:1-4) that our author addressed himself. He wrote anonymously, as did the writers of the other gospels. (The name, Luke, was assigned to the gospel much later.) He used as his sources the material known in his community, weaving the narrative together in such a way as to address the needs of his Christian church in its own

time and place. He was not changing what he and his readers already knew, nor was he trying to replace Mark or other earlier material. Rather, he was in conversation with his sources, in order to produce a new account which would meet the needs of his community.

The result is an astonishing accomplishment: the story of Jesus' earthly ministry, and of the earliest days of the church told in such a way as to give an example to the readers of how they ought to live their lives, of what God called them to be and do. It is a story, of course, which is first about God: what God has done and what that now means for us. Luke shows his readers the God of Israel intervening in human history in three drastic ways, to create the Christian church to be His witness in the world and to do His will.

The first intervention was the sending of Jesus. The birth of Jesus is accompanied in Luke by a genealogy (3:23-38) which traces Jesus' forebears back to Adam. The child's coming is a world event. But those who come to the manger are lowly, local shepherds (not foreign kings as in Mt). Jesus' parents do every-

thing according to the Law. They take him to the temple to be circumcised, and two very old and holy Jews, a man and a woman, witness to the identity of this baby as God's chosen one (2:21-40). Luke tells his readers that God's action is taken on the world's stage, but also squarely in the tradition and history of Israel, God's chosen people. Thus Luke links the Lord who is worshiped in his Gentile church to its beginnings in Judaism.

The second intervention was the raising of Jesus from the dead. In Luke's account, the climactic events following Jesus' death all take place in Jerusalem, the heart and center of the Jewish people, not in Galilee as in Matthew and Mark. Of course, Luke's readers know about the resurrection not just from Mark's Gospel but from the preaching and teaching of the church. Without the resurrection there would have been no church. In Luke's telling, however, the joyous events connected to Jesus' rising are tightly tied to Jewish Scripture (24:25-27 and 44-48) and to Jerusalem (Lk 24:33, 47, 49). With the resurrection, the reach of God is broadened to all nations and the disciples called

to be the ones who will spread the good news (vs. 47-48). But not quite yet. There is one more event, one more act of God to be awaited. And here the Gospel of Luke ends, with Jesus' Ascension and the disciples "continually in the temple blessing God."

The third intervention of God is the sending of the Holy Spirit. The third great intervention of God is recounted in Acts ch. 2. The Spirit is given and Peter, the chief spokesman for the apostles, addresses a long sermon to the crowd in which the event is closely tied to Israel's history, with the terms for belonging to this new reality set forth. Peter's is the first of several long speeches in Acts in which Luke's program becomes apparent. God sent Jesus to the Jews and eventually to all people, but the Jews are the first called and the first to be offered the gospel. Acts ends with Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles, a prisoner in Rome, where he makes a last unsuccessful attempt to reach the Jews with the message of Jesus (Acts 28:16-27). Much of the material in Acts concerns the attempts to preach to the Jews and the positive response, not of

Jews, but of Gentiles. Now the message is to be addressed to Gentiles, who "will listen." The message goes out to the Gentiles: Luke's readers are included in the story. Now they become the messengers, the ones who continue to call all people to Jesus, the Christ of God.

The Gospel of Luke

Luke's original readers/hearers first heard Luke's gospel in some ways as we still do: a passage was read aloud and became the basis for a sermon or a discussion. The readers/hearers already know the basic story. They listen for how Luke will tell it, what new and different elements and emphases there will be, what they will learn and what they will have to think about and ponder. (They did not have, as we do, four gospels, normally not sharply distinguished from each other by us. Rather, they had Mark and some stories about Jesus' life and ministry.) In Luke, they now have a new connected account and they can expect that its impact on them will be new.

Luke's gospel begins with the birth stories that were known in the commu-

nity, but not as part of a gospel. As was noted, Jesus' birth is tightly tied to his Jewish heritage. They would have noticed that from the beginning of his adult ministry (Lk 4:16-21), as well as throughout the birth narratives, the Hebrew Scriptures testify to Jesus.

Readers surely heard Luke's emphasis on Jesus' compassion. In a way, this replaces Mark's urgency. Jesus is not so much the one resolutely heading toward Jerusalem and the cross, as in Mark. He is more the one who has time for healing and concern for the poor, warnings to the rich. (See Lk 6:20-26, and compare Mt 5:1-12, Lk 12:15-21 and Lk 16; 19-31 found only in Lk.)

Outsiders are of particular concern in Luke's gospel. The parable of the Good Samaritan is found only in Lk 10:30-36. In the healing of the ten lepers (17:11-19), the only one who returns to thank Jesus is a hated Samaritan. Luke's gospel is our only source for the story of the Pharisee and the publican (18:9-14), and the only one to speak of Jesus' healing the slave with his ear cut off (Lk 22:49-51, compare Mk 14:47; Mt 26:51-54). Only Luke has Jesus on the cross promising to include the

repentant thief (23:39-43) in Paradise. Luke's readers not only know that they as Gentile outsiders are included, but they also hear Luke calling them to include outsiders.

Among other emphases Luke's first readers would have noted is his treatment of the early church's expectation of the end, of Jesus' triumphant return. For example, compare Lk 9:27 with Mk 9:1: Luke omits the words "come to power." He is suggesting perhaps that the Kingdom of God is not exclusively the future glory expected by the early Christians, but something which can be experienced now. For other, similar changes, see Lk 4:14 and following, compared to Mk 1:14 and following; Lk 21:9 and Mk 13:7; Lk 22:69 and Mk 14:62. Luke's changes are small and subtle, suggesting that the second and third generation church must find alternatives to the specific hopes of the first. In Luke's time, Mark's gospel was not Holy Scripture, so for Luke to change his source was not a very important matter. But it is worth noting that he was not erasing the earlier witness—it was there, no one could erase it. Rather, he was in conversation with earlier tradition and

with his readers, suggesting that it might help Christians in his day to see things differently. Since the church decided to include Luke in its Holy Scripture, it is clear that others agreed with him and, fortunately, Luke's gospel survived for our use.

Luke followed Mark's outline of the story of Jesus in a general way. After being tempted in the wilderness and baptized by John, Jesus begins his public ministry. There follow various incidents, teachings, encounters, healings, etc., known to Luke's readers from their shared sources, but woven into one whole connected narrative by Luke. Luke's version is different in some ways from what we know of other traditions. It would pay modern Christians to read Luke's version of the Passion, beginning at Ch. 22. There are, for example, two trials, instead of only one in the other gospels. One is before the Jews, the other before Pilate. The rejection of Jesus by the Jews is heightened in Luke's account, compared to Mark's. This is in line with Luke's intent to show how the Jewish Messiah/Christ came to be Lord of the Gentiles also.

From the cross Jesus not only forgives

and includes the repentant thief, but also expresses his confidence in God at the end: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Compare Jesus' cry of agony in Mark 15:34, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In Luke, Jesus goes to his death in perfect obedience and confidence that he and God are one in this suffering. Mark has a somewhat different idea of the meaning of the Cross. Here and elsewhere, the author's own contributions to the gospel would have been especially noted by his first readers because they would have been new things, not familiar to the community. At our distance, we cannot be sure of every addition Luke made, but we can appreciate the impact of the whole. Luke's church and ours has been enriched by more than one view of Jesus and of his death.

The Acts of The Apostles

Acts can be described as the movement of the church from Jerusalem, to the center of Luke's known world, Rome. It is the story of the earliest church under the direction and guidance of the Holy Spirit and the Lord Jesus (used, it seems,

interchangeably by Luke). It can be called the movement of the church from inside Judaism to primarily Gentiles. It can be called the record (or, better, a record) of the work of the two great apostles, Peter and Paul. All of these are correct. Yet it is very important to state that Luke is at great pains to show the overlapping of the two sides of the story.

The first part of Acts, in Jerusalem, includes the scene of Stephen's speech and his death (Ch. 7). Paul's conversion is first told in Ch. 9, followed in Ch. 10 by Peter's vision, convincing him that all things—including people—are clean (the Gentiles are to be included). In Ch. 15, following account of the work of Paul and Barnabas in Antioch among Gentiles, there is the narrative of the Jerusalem Council, where the question of the Gentiles is "settled." The 'overlapping' continues in the last half of Acts where Paul, in his various journeys, goes first in each place to the Jews, and only when he is rejected, goes to the Gentiles. Acts ends in Rome.

This is hardly a historically accurate account of the earliest years of the church. The story is in conflict at various important points with Paul's first hand account

of his history in Galatians. But Acts is a brilliant interpretation by one looking back and trying to understand what happened. Jesus Christ and the church which know God in him was a new and very surprising event for both Jewish and Gentile Christians. How to understand it? Various authors in the New Testament offer differing explanations of what God was doing in Jesus and the earliest church. Acts is Luke's offering. His genius was to do it in a way that both connects the Christian phenomenon to its Jewish parent, and explains how the two are separated. The reality, no doubt, was not nearly so neat as Luke paints it. Yet he has given the church a sense of the movement from communities separate and distinct at the end of the first century A.D. It is hardly Luke's fault that later Christians have, regrettably, used his work in anti-Semitic ways.

One of the many fascinating things about Acts is the interaction of the Spirit/the Lord and the community. Sometimes the Spirit (or the Lord) instructs that something be done; sometimes the apostles seemingly act on their own. The

relationship is so close that it does not seem to matter whether a command is given or not. When something needs to be decided and there is no direct command, they get together and talk it over and the Spirit directs the decision.

Would that we all had such a clear picture of what God wants us to do. We are reminded of Luke's first volume, in which Jesus' disciples do what he does: they preach, they heal (first in Lk 9:1-6), the mission of the twelve, and then in Lk 10:1-11, the mission of the seventy. In volume two, Acts, Luke promises the church that the Spirit and the Risen Lord are present, just as Jesus was to his first disciples.

This, indeed, is good news.

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About 1510-15

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