

Luke wrote to Rome – a Suggestion

Luke addresses his Gospel and Acts of the Apostles to one and the same person, Theophilus⁽¹⁾. Many arguments support the opinion that the two Lucan works are intended to be read as one story⁽²⁾ by Theophilus, the first part or volume dealing with the life of Jesus, the second with the witnessing to and from him.

In broad strokes we can say that the two works are a reflection on historical matter, organized structurally according to time and place, i.e. chronology and geography. As he will often notice, the reader moves ever onward, from the time of Jesus in Nazareth through Jerusalem, ultimately to a time defined by Paul's imprisonment in Rome, about 61-63AD⁽³⁾. The time span of the Lucan presentation is some ninety years (with the actual writing of Luke pegged at about 85AD) and the span of geography reaches from Israel to Rome.

1. *Our Problem: the end of Acts*

As one reflects on the Lucan decision to end his storytelling in Rome and about 61AD, one wonders why he did not bring his history through to his own time and place, i.e. the time and place of his writing. Specifically, why the gap between 61AD when the history stops, and 85AD when the writing takes place? And why did the geography of Luke's story finish with Rome and not to 'the end of the earth'? (Or perhaps with the place from which Luke writes?)

This double question — why stop the story at 61AD and why stop the story in Rome — has traditionally been answered by saying that, once Luke

⁽¹⁾ By Theophilus is meant, not an idealized Christian, 'beloved of God', but a real person. By that name we understand, too, that the Lucan work was directed not just to one person, but to a community of Christians. Moreover, the individual Theophilus lives in Rome, perhaps is a Roman official of some sort, and is interested in Luke's work, not because he needs Christianity to be justified to him, but because he is a Christian believer who, in Luke's words, values 'certitude' or 'reliability' regarding the things he has been taught. We certainly hold that he is not a Jewish priest and Sadducee, not the High Priest to succeed Caiaphas. Most of these points have been discussed in Richard H. ANDERSON, "Theophilus: A Proposal", *Evangelical Quarterly*, 69:3 (1997) 195-215; W.G. KUMMEL, *Introduction to the New Testament* (London 1965) 102-105. For the purposes of this essay, it does not matter whether or not Theophilus and his community are Jewish or Gentile Christians (or a mix of the two), though the immense references, implicit and explicit, to the Old Testament presume more likely Jews who know their religious books well.

⁽²⁾ Cf. E. HAENCHEN, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Göttingen 1959) 105: "Die Apg beginnt als zweites Buch eines grossen Geschichtswerkes..."; J. FITZMYER, *The Acts of the Apostles* (AB 31; New York 1998) 55: "Barrett has rightly seen that the Third Gospel was composed as a preface to Acts...Acts, then, is the continuation of the Lucan Gospel..."; further "Luke's stated purpose is found in the prologue to his Gospel, which, despite the protestations of Haenchen, is usually regarded today as the preface to his two-volume work", 59. "The Gospel of Luke is the first volume of a single two volume writing", T. JOHNSON, *Luke* (SP 3; Collegeville 1991) 1; contra, H. SCHÜRMANN, *Das Lukasevangelium* (Freiburg 1969) 17: "...ergibt noch nicht eine literarische Einheit".

⁽³⁾ Henceforth, this date will be reduced to 61AD for convenience sake.

has his reader reach Rome — and that historically with Paul’s arrival there in 61AD — he has fulfilled his literary promise (Acts 1,8) that ‘the witness to Jesus will reach to the end of the earth’, for from Rome, the center and apex of the known world, the word of the Lord can be easily imagined to reach all other peoples.

While this traditional answer to our double question regarding the end of Acts is reasonable and has been widely used in commentaries, it remains a hypothetical answer. In short, there is room for another hypothesis.

2. *An Hypothesis*

What alternatively would make good sense is this: the book of Acts ends when and where it does because Luke had in mind that his story reach only to the time and place in which Theophilus’ community was founded. What considerations might support this hypothesis?

1. The story of Gospel-Acts is directed to one person, or group of Christians, called Theophilus. The story is very precise in terms of its destination. To tell a story so thoroughly directed to one ‘person’ strongly suggests that the book’s end would be tied in very tightly to that person, to the needs of that person.

2. The underlying structure⁽⁴⁾ of the two volumes is movement, from the Jerusalem temple to Rome. Such a vital structure must be a key to the interpretation of the Lucan work — and it is, for many specialists describe Luke’s work as principally the manifestation of God’s will to save all peoples⁽⁵⁾. The attentive reader can follow the triumph of the divine will as God offers to various peoples and generations, in a sequence of places which begins in Jerusalem and gradually reaches Rome, the assurance of salvation through belief in Jesus⁽⁶⁾. This conscious structure of continued geographical and temporal movement most logically brings Theophilus to find his place in

⁽⁴⁾ Throughout this essay we hold that Luke-Acts is the equivalent of two volumes of one work; the structure, noted materially as geographic and temporal movement and theologically as the continued offer of salvation even to Rome, is the basis of our assertion. “...there is so much that unites the two works in theological conception, in overall structure, in the repetition of motifs, and in the literary foreshadowings in the Gospel, of matters which only come into their own in Acts, that it is only reasonable to agree...that he [Luke] is [with Acts] writing a sequel to a Gospel”; however the author notes, “To say that we have part one and part two of a single work would, however, be an exaggeration”, J. NOLLAND, *Luke 1–9,20* (WBC 35A; Dallas 1989) xxxiii.

⁽⁵⁾ “These passages [Luke 2:20-32; 3,6] explicitly indicate the purpose that stretches from the beginning of Luke to the end of Acts...the progressive realization of God’s purpose of salvation or the human resistance to this purpose”, R. TANNEHILL, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis 1990) II, 7. “Le parole di Simeone [Lc 2, 32] sintetizzano bene la prospettiva dell’evangelista espressa nell’intera sua opera: Gesù è al centro della storia della salvezza...una salvezza destinata ad estendersi a tutte le nazioni...”, G. ROSSÉ, *Il Vangelo di Luca* (Roma 1992) 100. We note that G. Schneider has dedicated an entire book to discussing, as his title indicates, *Lukas. Theologe der Heilsgeschichte: Aufsätze zum lukanischen Doppelwerk* (Bonn 1985).

⁽⁶⁾ The picture of Jesus in Luke-Acts is drawn to serve the overall intention of Luke to make clear to Theophilus the offer of salvation ‘to the ends of the earth’; “Il Dieu...poursuit di toute éternité son dessein de salut...L’œuvre de Jésus est la tentative ultime et définitive du Dieu miséricordieux de s’attacher Israël e d’atteindre les païens”, F. BOVON, *L’Évangile selon Luc* (CNT 3a; Genève 1991) I, 29.

the divine plan to enter into the entire Mediterranean world⁽⁷⁾. It is reasonable to assume that Luke intended all along to offer to Theophilus an explanation of how the saving word of God reached him⁽⁸⁾.

3. In his first sentence Luke writes “in order that you, Theophilus, may comprehend how reliable are the things you have been taught”⁽⁹⁾. Can we identify “these things”⁽¹⁰⁾? Certainly not with precision. Yet, with the Pauline Corpus, Mark’s Gospel and Q as parameters, we can estimate with confidence. The Pauline Corpus strongly indicates the struggle to understand Gentile Christians to be the equal of Jewish Christians: “There is neither Jew nor Greek” (Gal 3, 18). One can assume that part of the teachings given to Theophilus is the demonstration of God’s saving intention (and plan) to reach Theophilus and his type. Acts clearly gives grounds for the teaching that Theophilus is fully a member of the Christian community of believers. Certainly, by the end of Acts, Theophilus can better understand himself and the religion he has embraced and his place in it⁽¹¹⁾. It seems right to say that Luke-Acts means to explain to Theophilus⁽¹²⁾ how God wanted to reach him and his generation.

It seems more reasonable to say that, given the Lucan desire to instruct Theophilus about his self-identity, the story which offers this instruction end at the place where Theophilus resides. In other words, Luke will be satisfied to demonstrate the movement of God’s salvation by bringing that movement to its logical goal, which most reasonably is where his reader, the object of all his intentions, resides.

⁽⁷⁾ The many teachings we can confidently ascribe to Theophilus’ Christian formation are important, but the overarching teaching, which necessitates not only the words, deeds, and life events of Jesus, but also the development from Jesus to the time of the Christian Theophilus, must be the description of the saving plan of God. While the preface to the Gospel serves as a general statement of intent to justify two volumes, one does not miss the fact that Acts carries through its role in the Lucan plan by virtue of ‘testimony’ to and from Jesus.

⁽⁸⁾ To say this is to reaffirm our belief that Theophilus and his community are Christian, and thus the Lucan document is aimed at support of Christians; not all agree, cf. the discussion of NOLLAND, *Luke*, xxxii-xxxiii.

⁽⁹⁾ Cf. C. TALBERT, *Reading Luke* (London 1982) 11: “It is worth testing...in one’s reading of Luke-Acts whether the narrative was written so someone might know the truth about Christian origins. Truth could, of course, be understood either in the sense of accurate information or in the sense of certainty about Christianity”. It seems better to think that Luke means to teach reliability, not about the accuracy of what he narrates, but the meaning of the saving plan of God for a Gentile who has accepted Jesus as his Savior; c.f. FITZMYER, *Acts*, 59: “τὴν ἀσφάλειαν...cannot be limited to “assurance” or historicity; it is also a doctrinal assurance, or better a pastoral assurance...”.

⁽¹⁰⁾ The emphasis we give to the unifying concept of Luke-Acts, which is universal salvation, does not deny the sense of the plural in “teachings” given to Theophilus. But the singular importance of the teaching about the salvation that God offers to Jew and Gentile is most important in that other elements to be taught, e.g. the meaning of Jesus, are determined by the concept of salvation for all people, “first the Jew, then the Gentile”.

⁽¹¹⁾ It should be clear that we do not agree with HAENCHEN, *Apostelgeschichte*, 105, n. 3, that “Dieses Proömium gilt nur dem 3. Ev (gegen Cadbury, *Beg.* II, 489-510)”.

⁽¹²⁾ Contra the implication of HAENCHEN, *Apostelgeschichte*, 105, n. 3, that “Ein antikes Buch ist nicht speziell für den Mann verfasst, dem es gewidmet ist”. We cannot simply dismiss the thought that Luke addresses his work to Theophilus (as well as others), on the basis of general practices in preface-writing — particularly when Theophilus is singled out by the second person singular, κατηχήθης.

4. The disparity between the time of Paul's arrival in Rome (and thus the end of the Lucan work) and Luke's writing his story to Theophilus — generally agreed to be at least a 20 year period — is notable. Why did Luke end his work with 62AD, in Rome? Luke admittedly was interested in witness; witness is a primary structural element of Acts (cf. Acts 1, 8). It seems best to conclude, however, that witness, so notable in the martyrdom of Paul, is not of sufficient interest that it should be included in Acts. Thus, witness is subject to something more important, and this 'something more important' is most reasonably explained as Luke's desire to bring his story about God's saving plan to an end with the account of the beginnings of the community of which Theophilus is a later member. With the book ending in this way, Theophilus can understand the reliability of the things he has been taught — how the message of God reached the shores on which would be built his church. He can follow, through the deft accounting of Luke, the causes which ultimately led to the origin of his community.

5. Was it a reasonable decision to omit the rest of the Roman-community-story that ranges from 62AD to the writing of Acts? If the goal of Luke is to show Theophilus how the word of God reached to the beginnings of Theophilus' community, it was a reasonable decision. With this limited goal in mind, we can understand why Luke omitted a number of possible stories, including the development of Christianity through such a person as the Ethiopian eunuch and the spread of Christianity to Spain or northern Europe or the lands east of Palestine. Though clearly Luke thinks it valid to understand that God wants His word to reach "to the end of the earth"⁽¹³⁾, he does not feel obliged to detail that complete journey of the word. It is enough if he can show Theophilus how Christianity came to his church and what Christianity means for this Gentile Christian.

6. We have considered the hypothesis that Luke intended to bring the story of God's salvation to the origins of the Roman church, in which Theophilus is a later participant. The alternative hypothesis, very popular, is that Luke was satisfied to end his story in Rome 61-63AD because from Rome, the center of the Mediterranean world, one can imagine that the word of God radiated outward, in all directions and with some ease, to reach all nations. The justification for this view consists solely in concluding that Paul's speaking freely in Rome means to imply that the witness which will reach "to the end of the earth" will, once Rome is reached, surely reach that goal. The arrival in Rome in 61AD is, essentially and substantially, the arrival of the word to the ends of the earth. But there is little justification for claiming that this was the implied intention of the author; we have here rather a "prudent guess" that he intended that we think that from Rome will proceed the word of God to the ends of the earth. Certainly this claim about Luke's

⁽¹³⁾ "...some commentators (Baljon, *Handelingen*, 5; Loisy, *Actes*, 159; Foakes-Jackson, *Acts*, 4; Conzelman, *Acts*, 7) maintain that Luke is alluding to Rome with this phrase [ἕως ἑσχάτου τῆς γῆς]. If so, this would explain why Acts ends where it does, with the story of Paul's testimony in the capital of the Roman empire", FITZMYER, *Acts*, 206-207. We would support Fitzmyer, except that we prefer to say that Luke ends in Rome because that is where one finds the beginnings of the church to which Theophilus, the object of Luke's writing, belongs.

intention was created precisely to “bring to completion” the expectations of Jesus that what was foreseen by Jesus in Acts 1, 8 will come to pass — as the world history has shown. But it is we who construct this relationship between Rome and ‘the end of the earth’, as we try to explain why Luke ends his story in Rome and not ‘at the end of the earth’.

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We have considered the two opinions that are the basis of this essay – 1) that the reason Luke stopped his writing at Rome, 61-63AD, was that his two-volume narrative for Theophilus and his community has clarified and made solidly convincing (in a way better, in Luke’s mind, than others did), how it came to be that Theophilus received the saving word of God and was made equal to Jewish Christians in the blessings of faith in Jesus, and 2) that Luke was satisfied to stop his writing once he reached Rome, 61AD, for from there one can imagine (and such was Luke’s intention) the future witness about Jesus reaching “to the end of the earth”. The data for justifying either theory is admittedly slim [of ‘hard’ data there is none], but the bases of argument are, we think, in favor of the first opinion above. In short, Luke is interested in supporting the faith of Theophilus through supporting the teachings he has received; Luke is not concerned with the offer of the word of salvation ‘to the end of the earth’. Given his unique interest in writing his second volume, one can suppose that, should he have wanted to bring the saving word of God to the end of the earth, he would have done more than merely suggest it as a goal.

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SUMMARY

Luke wrote, concerned to help Theophilus comprehend the reliability of the things he had been taught. One of the teachings to Theophilus in this tumultuous century is, it seems most likely, an explanation as to how it is that he, a pagan, has become a full member of an exclusionary religion that began as thoroughly Jewish. This attention to Theophilus, it is suggested, makes necessary a story that geographically and chronologically arrives and finishes at the place where Theophilus and his community are; it is to *them* the story is written (Luke 1, 4). Luke’s work does not stop till Rome, 61 AD, but stops there and then. This strongly suggests Luke’s satisfaction that he has told a story which finally arrives where Theophilus is. That Luke stops his work at Rome, 61 AD, indicates Theophilus and his church are there. By Luke’s story, Theophilus understands the truth many teachings, particularly about his place in God’s plan of salvation.