

The Center of Biblical Theology in Acts: Deliverance and Damnation Display the Divine

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1. Reflecting on the Center of Biblical Theology in Acts

Acts 1:1 opens with a reference to what Jesus “began to do and teach”¹ recounted in the Gospel of Luke, indicating that this second volume will carry the narrative of Jesus’ actions and teachings forward. The risen Lord spends some forty days instructing his disciples (1:3–8) before he ascends his throne (1:9–10), where he takes his place at the right hand of God and pours out the Spirit upon his disciples (2:1–4, 33). Clothed in the Spirit with power from on high, these witnesses to the resurrection continue the teaching and healing ministry of Jesus. The signs and wonders done by Jesus continue to be done “through the apostles” (2:43; 4:16). Just as Jesus poured out the Spirit on the Apostles, the Spirit is given to the Samaritans “through the laying on of the Apostles’ hands” (8:18) and to the Gentiles through the preaching of Peter (10:34–48).² Barnabas and Paul relate that God did signs and wonders through them just as he did through Jesus (15:12; cf. 21:19). This pattern of Jesus continuing his ministry through these witnesses to his resurrection seems to inform the prominent theme of things being done or taught in the “name” of Jesus in Acts.³

We could list a number of themes that are emphasized in the book of Acts: the resurrection of Jesus; the human responsibility for his death; the availability of the forgiveness of sins; the healing ministry of the early church; the opposition to the new movement; and the praise afforded to God and Jesus, to name just a few. It might seem that these themes are isolated, or perhaps disconnected, but this essay argues that there is an organic connection between them. Moreover, there is a root from which these branches grow, a central theme that holds the others in orbit as planets around the sun. This central theme of Acts, in my judgment, is also the center of biblical theology.⁴

¹ Unless otherwise noted all translations are my own. A previous version of this essay was presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Valley Forge, PA, November 2005.

² Note the verbal correspondence between Acts 2:11 and 10:46:

2:11: ἀκούομεν λαλούντων αὐτῶν ταῖς ἡμετέραις γλώσσαις τὰ μεγαλεῖα τοῦ θεοῦ.

10:46: ἤκουον γὰρ αὐτῶν λαλούντων γλώσσαις καὶ μεγαλυνόντων τὸν θεόν.

³ See Acts 2:38; 3:6, 16 (2x); 4:7, 10, 12, 17, 18, 30; 5:28, 40, 41; 8:12, 16; 9:14, 15, 16, 21, 27, 28; 10:43, 48; 15:17; 16:18; 19:5, 13, 17; 21:13; 22:16. Cf. David Peterson, “The Worship of the New Community,” in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 381: “In simple terms it was the exalted Lord Jesus who healed the lame man” (referring to Acts 3:6).

⁴ For a discussion that seeks to account for the whole Bible, see James M. Hamilton Jr., *The Center of Biblical Theology: The Glory of God in Salvation Through Judgment* (Wheaton: Crossway, forthcoming).

Such an argument is warranted since several “centers” have been suggested for the theology of Acts. I. Howard Marshall writes, “The theological centre of Acts lies in God’s gift of salvation through Jesus Christ, the task of proclaiming it, and the nature of the new people of God empowered by the Holy Spirit.”⁵ This “centre” is somewhat diffuse, but in another place Marshall writes, “The main theme [of Acts] is that God has raised and exalted the crucified Jesus to be the Messiah and Lord through whom forgiveness and the Holy Spirit are offered to all who call on the Lord.”⁶ Marshall elsewhere states, “[T]he main storyline of Acts is concerned with the spread of the message.”⁷

Meanwhile, John Squires writes regarding the book of Acts that another “theme—the plan of God—functions as the foundational theological motif for the complete work.”⁸ This is not far from Frank Thielman’s description of “salvation history as Luke’s organizing theological principle.”⁹ More broadly, Darrell Bock writes that Jesus “is at the centre of God’s plan as the new era arrives.”¹⁰ Joel B. Green, however, claims “that salvation is the theme of Acts that unifies other textual elements within the narrative.”¹¹ Ben Witherington writes, “Christ’s death and resurrection are at the very heart of God’s saving plan for humankind.”¹² Brian Rosner asserts, “That Acts contains a series of summaries that report the progress of the gospel is unmistakable evidence that it is a central theme in the book.”¹³ David Peterson speaks of Jesus as “the eschatological centre of true worship” and “the focal point of God’s plans for Israel in the End time.”¹⁴

David Peterson’s summary essay in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* observes that contributors to this collection of essays propose a number of “centers.” Peterson notes (1) salvation and (2) the plan of God,¹⁵ but we may add (3) Jesus, (4) Jesus’ death and resurrection, and (5) the progress of the gospel. With at least five proposals on the table from just one volume of essays, is there hope for another proposal?

I am convinced that there is and that it will stand against the complaint that proposed centers of biblical theology are either too broad to communicate anything meaningful or too narrow to encompass all the evidence.¹⁶ Some may object that my proposed formulation captures the message of Acts but

⁵ I. Howard Marshall, “How Does One Write on the Theology of Acts?” in *Witness to the Gospel*, 3.

⁶ I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 180.

⁷ I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 26; quoted by Brian S. Rosner, “The Progress of the Word,” in *Witness to the Gospel*, 216.

⁸ John Squires, “The Plan of God in the Acts of the Apostles,” in *Witness to the Gospel*, 23.

⁹ Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 113–16.

¹⁰ Darrell L. Bock, “Scripture and the Realisation of God’s Promises,” in *Witness to the Gospel*, 48; cf. 42, 46–47.

¹¹ Joel B. Green, “Salvation to the End of the Earth’ (Acts 13:47): God as Saviour in the Acts of the Apostles,” in *Witness to the Gospel*, 83, cf. 85–86.

¹² Ben Witherington, “Salvation and Health in Christian Antiquity: The Soteriology of Luke-Acts in Its First Century Setting,” in *Witness to the Gospel*, 159.

¹³ Rosner, “The Progress of the Word,” 221; cf. 233.

¹⁴ Peterson, “The Worship of the New Community,” 374; cf. 377, 394.

¹⁵ Peterson, “Luke’s Theological Enterprise: Integration and Intent,” in *Witness to the Gospel*, 523, 525.

¹⁶ Discussing OT theology, Eugene H. Merrill (*Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006], 20) writes, “As critics of a ‘center centered’ approach have noted repeatedly, centers often fail to be narrow enough to avoid tautology (e.g., God is the center of theology) or broad enough to incorporate all the multitudinous variety of the biblical texts and teachings.”

does not use Luke's own language, but Marshall justifies such a formulation in his discussion on the theology of Acts:

[I]t would be possible, at least in theory, to draw up a systematic presentation of what is offered piecemeal as the beliefs of the early church, to draw out the theological significance of what its leaders and members did (or give the theological reasons why they did it) and to reconstruct the underlying set of theological assumptions which may be necessary to fill the gaps and give coherence to what is actually said.¹⁷

This essay seeks the central, ultimate, foundational theme out of which all the other themes flow and into which they feed. Each of the proposals listed above stops one step short of being ultimate in that none of them mentions the way that everything terminates in the glory ascribed to God. Moreover, there is a formulation that brings each of the elements enumerated above together into an organically connected statement that is both broad enough to account for everything and focused enough to be helpful.

The message of Acts is that Jesus has been raised from the dead, that his kingdom is inaugurated and soon to be consummated, and that the work of kingdom-building is continuing through the disciples.¹⁸ As N. T. Wright argues, "For a first-century Jew, most if not all the works of healing, which form the bulk of Jesus' mighty works, could be seen as the restoration to membership in Israel of those who, through sickness or whatever, had been excluded as ritually unclean."¹⁹ The upshot of this for Acts is that just as Jesus was portrayed as pushing back the curses as he brought in his kingdom in the gospels, so the disciples carry this program forward in the book of Acts. In Luke's narrative, the Apostles continue to do the mighty deeds of Jesus, and readers of Acts behold the triumph of the crucified one over the forces of sin and death. These firstfruits of the victory of the kingdom of God display the organic connection between the teachings of the Apostles, the signs and wonders God continues to do through them and their associates, and the center of biblical theology. I have argued that the glory of God in salvation through judgment is the center of biblical theology,²⁰ and this essay argues that this theme is also the center of the theology of the book of Acts.

We begin where the early Christian proclamation in Acts begins: the resurrection of Jesus. From there we take up the cross. This movement "backwards" from the resurrection to the cross follows the order of the presentation in Acts. The burden of the sermon presented in Acts 2 is the resurrection, and only later in Acts is the death of Jesus interpreted. The triumph of God in Christ through the cross and resurrection makes the healings recounted in Acts possible.²¹ As the ravages of sin are reversed in these healings, the opposition from those who fight against God (cf. 5:39) is repeatedly thwarted. God delivers through Jesus, and he damns those who gather together against him and his Messiah (cf. Ps 2:2; Acts 4:25–31). This essay contends that the intended result and natural outcome of the resurrection, the forgiveness of sins available through the cross, the healings, and the overcoming of opposition to the

¹⁷ Marshall, "How Does One Write on the Theology of Acts?" 5.

¹⁸ I use the present tense here because when the curtain falls on Luke's narrative in Acts 28, Paul and others are still proclaiming the kingdom. Luke's account ends, but the drama continues.

¹⁹ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God 2; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 191. Cf. John Nolland, "Salvation History and Eschatology," in *Witness to the Gospel*, 69.

²⁰ James M. Hamilton Jr., "The Center of Biblical Theology: The Glory of God in Salvation through Judgment?" *TynBul* 57 (2006): 57–84.

²¹ Cf. 3:16, where the lame man is healed by faith in Jesus.

church, is the ascription of glory to the God who has accomplished salvation through judgment (e.g., 2:47; 3:8–10).²² There are several direct notices that God receives glory:²³

1. 2:11: “we hear them speaking the magnificent deeds of God” (of those filled with the Spirit on the day of Pentecost)
2. 2:47: “praising God” (in a summary description of the early church)
3. 4:21: “all were glorifying God for what had happened, for the man was more than 40 years old” (healing of the lame man in 3:1–10)
4. 7:2: “the God of glory” (at the beginning of Stephen’s speech)
5. 7:55–56: “he saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God” (Stephen as he is martyred)
6. 10:46: “speaking in tongues and declaring the greatness of God” (of those filled with the Spirit at Cornelius’ home)
7. 11:18: “and they glorified God saying, so then also to the Gentiles God has granted repentance unto life” (Spirit poured out at Cornelius’ home)
8. 12:23: “And immediately the angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give the glory to God” (Herod’s death)
9. 13:48: “the Gentiles were rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord” (at Pisidian Antioch in response to the gospel coming to them)
10. 21:20: “they were glorifying God” (the brothers in Jerusalem hearing Paul’s report)

There are likewise several direct notices that Jesus is glorified, exalted, or magnified:²⁴

1. 2:33: “having been exalted to the right hand of God” (Peter speaking of Jesus in his Pentecost sermon)
2. 2:36: “God made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Peter speaking of Jesus in his Pentecost sermon)
3. 3:13: “the God of our fathers glorified his servant Jesus” (Peter preaching after the healing of the lame man)
4. 5:31: “God exalted him to his right hand as Champion and Savior” (Peter and the apostles before the Sanhedrin)
5. 5:41: “rejoicing . . . that they were counted worthy to be dishonored for the name” (the apostles after being beaten, their reaction clearly glorifies Jesus)
6. 8:8: “and it came about that there was much joy in that city” (joy over Philip’s proclamation of Christ [cf. 8:4–7])
7. 8:39: “he was going on his way rejoicing” (the Ethiopian Eunuch rejoicing in “the good news about Jesus” [8:35])

²² Though I do not discuss them in detail below, the same can be said for the themes of salvation history, the fulfillment of God’s plan, the progress of the gospel, and, in my view, any other theme in Acts.

²³ Indirect ascriptions of glory to God include the statements that people feared God (2:43; 5:5, 11; 9:31), God’s assertions that he will display wonders (4:30; 5:12; 14:3), and the many statements of Scriptural fulfillment, which show that God has kept his word.

²⁴ Indirect ascriptions include all the references to the “name of Jesus” (see note 3 above).

8. 19:17: “and the name of Jesus was magnified” (when people hear of the demonic response to the seven sons of Sceva)
9. 22:11: “I could not see from the glory of that light” (the glory of Jesus when he appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus)

One of Luke’s missionary companions once declared that since all things are from God, through God, and for God, glory should therefore be ascribed to him forever (Rom 11:36). Luke seems to have shared this perspective.²⁵

2. Tracing the Center of Biblical Theology in Acts

We proceed inductively, starting with the proclamation of the resurrection, then moving to the interpretation of the cross, the healings and mighty works the cross makes possible, and the way that the gospel advances in spite of opposition. As we proceed, we will attempt to trace the inner logic reflected in what Luke records.

2.1. The Resurrection: A False Verdict Overturned

People Killed Jesus, but God Raised Him

When the apostles reconstitute themselves as a complete twelve, they are portrayed as stating that “it is necessary” to have someone take the place of Judas as “a witness to the resurrection” (Acts 1:21–22). Jews did not expect the Messiah to be crucified by the Romans, so many concluded that the dead man could not be the Messiah.²⁶ Acts opens in the first weeks, months, and years after the crucifixion that Luke narrates in his first volume. He portrays the early church explaining that the crucifixion of Jesus was an act of wicked injustice. The witnesses to the resurrection hold their contemporaries, the Gentiles, and the leadership of the Jewish people responsible for the death of Jesus, and they proclaim again and again that after people killed Jesus, God raised him up. This proclamation of the resurrection has the appearance of an intentional, careful, direct response to the reproach of the crucifixion. These announcements “offer confirmation that Jesus is the Messiah.”²⁷ This explains, Ladd writes, why “the resurrection stands as the heart of the early Christian message.”²⁸

Luke portrays Peter and Paul as consistently articulating the responsibility borne by the inhabitants of Jerusalem for the death of Jesus. Implicit in this assertion is the claim that the death of Jesus is not evidence of divine displeasure, and this implicit assertion is supplemented by the asseverations that God planned the events to turn out this way (2:23; 4:28).²⁹ Further, God attested to Jesus by signs and wonders (2:22). The prayer in Acts 4:30 is that the signs and wonders by which God showed Jesus to be the Messiah would now continue through his name. These statements are accompanied by the declaration that God has raised Jesus from the dead. The crucifixion fails to prove that Jesus was not the

²⁵ Pursuing a “canonical” reading of Acts, Robert Wall writes, “If one of the roles that Acts performs within the NT is to introduce the letters of the NT, we presume that the narrative of Acts will yield clues to the deeper logic of the Pauline letters, beginning with Romans” (“Israel and the Gentile Mission in Acts and Paul: A Canonical Approach,” in *Witness to the Gospel*, 440).

²⁶ See the examples of Theudas and Judas the Galilean in Acts 5:37–38.

²⁷ Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 123.

²⁸ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 353.

²⁹ Cf. John B. Polhill, *Acts* (NAC 26; Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 63; Squires, “The Plan of God,” 26.

Messiah; the people are responsible for it. Thus, God was not the one who rendered the false verdict, but instead he has reversed it by raising Jesus from the dead.³⁰ These main elements—that people are responsible for the death of Jesus and that God has raised him from the dead—are asserted side by side five times in the Gospel of Luke and six times in Acts. Table 1 below set these statements of human responsibility for the death of Jesus next to the statements of God’s vindicating resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus speaks each of the statements in the Gospel of Luke, so when Peter (Acts 3:15; 4:10; 5:30; 10:39–40) and Paul (13:28–30) continue to proclaim virtually the same message, it is clear that they are continuing the ministry of Jesus. The repeated assertion of human responsibility for the death of Jesus in Acts establishes that God is justly calling men to account for the miscarriage of justice that resulted in the death of the righteous one. Those who crucified Jesus did what they wanted to do, and what they did was evil. God has not overlooked this, nor is the early church silent: “God made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus, whom you crucified” (2:36). Even as the word of condemnation comes to those responsible, however, full pardon is offered.

People Can Repent and Receive Forgiveness of Sins

The forgiveness of sins proclaimed by the early church is a forgiveness that comes to people who realize that they stand condemned. The condemnation announced is intended to provoke them to repent and trust in the mercy of God. This forgiveness that follows repentance is first presented as what Jesus announced (Luke 24:46), and it is offered in Acts along with each mention of human responsibility for the death of Jesus and God’s response in raising him. Table 1 below highlights the note of forgiveness sounded in each of the passages. The only slight deviation is where Acts 4:12 speaks of “salvation” in place of “forgiveness of sins.”

Table 1 below shows that each time the Apostles call their contemporaries to account for the death of Jesus, they accompany the condemning word with an offer of forgiveness and salvation. The death and resurrection of Jesus results in the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins. Salvation comes through judgment. Those who are guilty are condemned, judged, and if their condemnation brings about repentance and faith, they are forgiven and saved.

Forgiven People Rejoice in God

The final element of what I am arguing (i.e., that salvation through judgment results in glory for God) occurs in each of the contexts under discussion: those who receive the good news respond by rejoicing in God. See the final column in the table 1 below.

³⁰ Luke portrays Stephen describing a similar pattern in the lives of Joseph and Moses (Acts 7:9, 35). Both were rejected by their kinsmen but affirmed by God, providing a typological pattern that would be fulfilled in Jesus. For my attempts to trace out typological readings of Scripture, see “The Virgin Will Conceive: Typological Fulfillment in Matthew 1:18–23,” in *Built upon the Rock: Studies in the Gospel of Matthew* (ed. John Nolland and Dan Gurtner; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 228–47; and my Julius Brown Gay Lecture presented at Southern Seminary on March 13, 2008, “The Typology of David’s Rise to Power: Messianic Patterns in the Book of Samuel,” available online at http://www.sbts.edu/pdf/JBGay/the_typology_of_davids_rise_to_power2008-03-101.pdf.

Table 1: God glorified in salvation through judgment in Luke-Acts

	1. People killed Jesus	2. God raised Jesus	3. People can repent and receive forgiveness of sins	4. Forgiven People Rejoice in God
1	The Messiah would suffer at the hands of men (Luke 9:22; 18:33; 24:7, 26, 46)	And rise from the dead on the third day (Luke 9:22; 18:33; 24:7, 26, 46)	Thus it has been written that the Messiah should suffer and rise from the dead . . . and for <i>repentance</i> unto <i>forgiveness of sins</i> to be proclaimed in his name to all the nations (Luke 24:46–47; this forgiveness is not announced in Luke until after the resurrection)	And having worshiped him they returned to Jerusalem with great joy (Luke 24:52)
2	You killed him (Acts 2:23)	God raised him (Acts 2:24)	And Peter said to them, “ <i>Repent!</i> ” He said, “And each one of you must be baptized in the name of Jesus the Messiah <i>for the forgiveness of your sins</i> and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38)	And daily they continued in the temple with one accord . . . praising God (Acts 2:46–47)
3	And you killed the Champion of life (Acts 3:15)	Whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses (Acts 3:15)	<i>Repent</i> , then, and turn so that <i>your sins might be wiped away</i> (Acts 3:19)	All were praising God for what had happened (Acts 4:21)
4	Jesus the Messiah of Nazareth, whom you crucified (Acts 4:10)	Whom God raised from the dead (Acts 4:10)	And there is no <i>salvation</i> in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men in which it is necessary for us <i>to be saved</i> (Acts 4:12)	they went to their own and reported . . . and having heard they raised their voice to God with one accord (Acts 4:23–24)
5	Whom you put to death (Acts 5:30)	The God of our Fathers raised Jesus (Acts 5:30)	God exalted this one as Champion and Savior to his right hand to grant <i>repentance</i> to Israel and <i>forgiveness of sins</i> (Acts 5:31)	rejoicing . . . that they were counted worthy to be dishonored for the name (Acts 5:41)
6	Whom also they killed, having hung him upon a tree (Acts 10:39)	This one God raised on the third day (Acts 10:40)	In this one all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives <i>forgiveness of sins</i> through his name (Acts 10:43)	speaking in tongues and declaring the greatness of God (Acts 10:46)
7	They asked Pilate for him to be put to death (Acts 13:28)	But God raised him from the dead (Acts 13:30)	Therefore let it be known to you, men, brothers, that through this one <i>forgiveness of sins</i> is proclaimed to you (Acts 13:38)	the Gentiles were rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord (Acts 13:48)

Conclusion

There is a clear pattern in these texts:

1. The apostles declare that wicked people are responsible for Jesus’ death.
2. God raised Jesus from the dead.
3. God offers forgiveness to the guilty if they repent and believe.

4. Those who repent and receive forgiveness glorify and praise God.³¹

From the pattern in these texts, we conclude that in Luke–Acts, God is glorified in salvation through judgment. Moreover, this message seems to be the main concern of the two-volume work.³² Put differently, the glory of God in the salvation through judgment accomplished by Jesus and offered to those who repent and believe is the center of the theology of Acts (and Luke and the whole Bible).

The Scriptural Necessity of the Messiah's Death and Resurrection

These explanations of the crucifixion are necessary because of the astonishing nature of the events of the Messiah's life. Luke not only insists on the innocence of Jesus, he seeks to show that however surprised readers of the OT might be by a crucified Messiah, the OT necessitated just this.³³ Four texts in particular highlight this:³⁴

1. Luke 24:25–27: “And he said to them, ‘O fools and slow in heart to believe in all that the *prophets* spoke. *Were not these things necessary for the Messiah to suffer* and to enter into his glory?’ And beginning from *Moses* and from *all of the prophets* he interpreted for them in *all the Scriptures* the things concerning himself.”
2. Acts 3:18: “But God, the things he proclaimed *through the mouth of all the prophets for his Messiah to suffer*, he *fulfilled* in this way (cf. 3:21).
3. Acts 17:2–3: “And according to custom for Paul, he went to them and on three Sabbaths disputed with them from *the Scriptures*, opening and setting side by side that *it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer* and to rise from the dead, and that this is the Messiah, Jesus, whom I proclaim to you.”
4. Acts 26:22b–23: “I stand testifying to both small and great, saying nothing except what *both the prophets and Moses said would take place*, that **the Messiah would suffer**, that being first from the resurrection of the dead he would proclaim light both to the people and to the Gentiles.”

The *necessity* these texts point to results from what the OT indicated would take place. Since the OT predicted this, it had to happen. Luke puts the statement in Luke 24 on the lips of Jesus; the one in Acts 3 is ascribed to Peter; and the ones in Acts 17 and 26 describe Paul's activity. This further underscores the continuity between the message of Jesus, Peter, and Paul.

³¹ Cf. Joel B. Green, “Salvation to the End of the Earth,” 106: “All of this is to say . . . that the God of Israel is portrayed in Acts as the Great Benefactor, Jesus as Lord of all, and that the nature of this benefaction, of this lordship, embodies, enables, and inspires new ways of living in the world.”

³² Obviously, neither this claim regarding Luke nor the one that follows in parentheses in the next sentence above regarding the whole Bible can be demonstrated in this brief essay. For the argument for this thesis for both the gospel of Luke and the rest of the Bible, see my forthcoming study, *The Center of Biblical Theology* (note 4 above).

³³ Cf. Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 148: “[N]one of these developments was accidental. God had planned for his saving purpose to be accomplished in this way, and Luke tells his readers in many ways that these events correspond to the expectation expressed in Israel's Scriptures . . .”

³⁴ *Italics* indicate OT prediction and the resulting necessity. **Bold print** highlights the Messiah's suffering.

In Acts, salvation through judgment is primarily expressed in the death and resurrection of Jesus. As Schreiner states, “In Acts Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection are still central.”³⁵ The focus of the early Christian proclamation is on the judgment of God that reverses the evil verdict of those who crucified Jesus. God’s justice is manifested as he raises Jesus from the dead and also as he calls the perpetrators of that injustice to account through the preaching of the apostles. God’s salvation is put on display in the proclamation that Jesus was raised from the dead. Significantly, this is not a deliverance *from* the cross but *through* death on the cross. No death, no resurrection.

There are several ways that this salvation through judgment glorifies God:

1. God’s power is demonstrated in his victory over sin and death.
2. God’s holiness is honored in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus so that forgiveness can be offered to the guilty.
3. God’s love is shown in his willingness to send Jesus to redeem sinful men.
4. God’s wisdom is displayed in his elaborate and surprising plan that reveals his character and accomplishes salvation.
5. This salvation through judgment is worked out through the lives of people who are judged for the way they live, become convicted, and are saved through that experience of judgment. God is glorified as those who formerly scorned him show him due reverence.
6. The in-breaking kingdom also manifests deliverance through damnation as the outworkings of the curse—disease, disability, and demonic oppression—are overcome. Here again, the salvation comes through the judgment of the evil forces and the triumph over them accomplished by the victorious Christ.

In Schreiner’s words, “God works out his saving plan so that he would be magnified in Christ, so that his name would be honored.”³⁶

2.2. The Cross: The Display of God’s Justice

There is a prior salvation through judgment on which the salvation through judgment experienced by the repentant is based. This is the salvation accomplished by Jesus on the cross as he is judged by the holy God on behalf of his people. Jesus is judged, and he suffers the penalty due his people that they might be saved. He is damned, and they are delivered. Luke established this interpretation of the death of Jesus in his Gospel as he portrayed Jesus explaining his death to his disciples on the night he was betrayed:

And having taken bread, having given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them saying, “This is my body which is given for you; this do in remembrance of me.” And the cup likewise after the supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:19–20).³⁷

³⁵ Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 289.

³⁶ Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 14.

³⁷ Joseph A. Fitzmyer (*The Gospel According to Luke X–XXIV*, AB [Garden City: Doubleday, 1985], 1391) writes of “a vicarious dimension” and “a sacrificial nuance” with “a soteriological nuance” that “implies a soteriological value to Jesus’ own ‘suffering.’” See also Robert H. Stein, *Luke* (NAC 24; Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 543–44.

This presents the death of Jesus on the cross as him *being given on behalf of* (ὑπέρ) his disciples. The fact that it is the *new covenant* in the *blood of Jesus* matches the way that the *old covenant* was also entered into with *the blood of sacrificial animals* (Exod 24:5–8).

Jesus' death on the cross is the place where God's justice is satisfied so that those who are represented by Jesus can be forgiven. This understanding of the cross is also articulated in Acts 8 when Philip explains Isa 53 to the Ethiopian Eunuch (8:30–35).³⁸ Several features of the context in Acts 8 indicate that the Eunuch is reading more than the isolated verses of Isaiah that Luke cites. While Luke only quotes Isa 53:7b–8a, the whole passage—and probably the whole section and book of Isaiah—is in view.³⁹ The Eunuch seems to be reading the Greek translation of Isaiah.⁴⁰ Right before Philip arrived at his chariot to hear him reading Isa 53:7b–8a, the Eunuch would have been reading these words: “to whom it has not been proclaimed concerning him, they will see, and those who have not heard, they will understand” (Isa 52:15b).⁴¹ He would then have read,

He bore our sins and was pained for us And he was wounded on account of our sins, and he was made weak on account of our sins; the punishment of our peace was upon him; by his stripes we are healed. We all like sheep have gone astray, a man has wandered in his own way; and the Lord gave him over for our sins (53:4a, 5–6).

John Walton has recently proposed a stimulating ancient Near-Eastern background for this text,⁴² and this background fits very well with the interpretation of the text Luke shows Philip giving to the Ethiopian Eunuch. Just as the substitute king ritual of the ancient Near-East satisfied the wrath of the

³⁸ For Luke's use of the OT in Acts, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1998), 90–95; and I. Howard Marshall, “Acts,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 513–606, which surveys scholarship and interpretive issues (513–27) and discusses Acts 8:26–40 (573–75). See also Darrell L. Bock, *Proclamation from Prophecy and Pattern: Lucan Old Testament Christology* (JSNTSup; Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), 225–30; C. K. Barrett, “Luke/Acts,” in *It Is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture* (ed. D. A. Carson and H. G. M. Williamson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 231–44. Unfortunately there are only scattered references to and not a discrete discussion of Isa 53 in Acts 8:30–35 in David W. Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), but this volume should be consulted for the wider issue of Luke's use of Isaiah and for a survey of Luke's use of Scripture (see 5–17).

³⁹ (1) Luke describes Philip coming upon the Eunuch “reading Isaiah the prophet” (ἀνεγίνωσκεν τὸν προφήτην Ἡσαΐαν [8:28]; αὐτοῦ ἀναγίνωσκοντος Ἡσαΐαν τὸν προφήτην [8:30]). In verse 28, the verb “reading” is an imperfect tense-form, and in verse 30 it is a participle, both of which communicate ongoing action. (2) If the Eunuch is reading before Philip arrives and hears the words quoted by Luke, he has presumably read all of Isaiah to that point and has probably just read the whole passage beginning from at least Isa 52:13. (3) The Eunuch's question regarding of whom the prophet speaks (Acts 8:34) appears to be informed by the use of the word “servant” in Isaiah 40–66, where at points the servant appears to be the nation, at points an individual, and at points Isaiah himself. The Eunuch's question naturally arises in the mind of an attentive reader of these chapters of Isaiah. (4) Before quoting Isa 53:7a–8b, Luke states, “Now the *passage* of Scripture which he was reading was this” (Acts 8:32). The term translated “passage,” περιοχὴ, refers to a “section of a book” (LSJ, 1381; cf. BDAG, 803).

⁴⁰ The wording of Acts 8:32–33 in the NA²⁷, except for the bracketed pronoun (which is in some witnesses to the Greek translation of Isaiah; for the evidence see Ziegler's apparatus), corresponds exactly to the wording of both the Rahlfs text and the text of the critical edition of Isa 53:7b–8a. See *Septuaginta* (ed. Alfred Rahlfs; Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1979; and Joseph Ziegler, *Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum Graecum Auctoritate Societatis Litterarum Göttingensis editum XIV: Isaias* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1983).

⁴¹ Here I have translated the Greek of Isaiah presented in the Rahlfs text. The only differences in the text of the critical edition are the lack of the final ν on the verbs ἀκηκόασιν συνήσουσιν, and the apparatus presents no major variants (see Ziegler, *Septuaginta*). My translations can now be compared with those of the *New English Translation of the Septuagint* (NETS), which is available online at <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition/>.

⁴² John H. Walton, “The Imagery of the Substitute King Ritual in Isaiah's Fourth Servant Song,” *JBL* 122 (2003): 734–43.

god(s) against the king and the people he represented, so Isa 53 seems to be interpreted by the early Christians as an indication that Israel's King-Messiah suffered for his people.⁴³ The view that early Christians interpreted the death of Jesus through the lens of Isa 53 is communicated as Luke recounts that "having begun from that Scripture, Philip proclaimed the gospel of Jesus to him" (Acts 8:35).

There are other points of contact between Acts and Isa 53,⁴⁴ and as Luke Timothy Johnson has written, "It is reasonable to suppose . . . that Luke expected his readers to have a reading competence sufficient to catch these allusions and echoes."⁴⁵ Places where the influence of Isa 53 can be felt in Acts include Acts 3:13,⁴⁶ where Luke recounts Peter claiming that "The God of our fathers glorified (ἐδόξασεν) his servant (τὸν παῖδα αὐτοῦ) Jesus, whom you handed over (παρεδώκατε) . . ." This matches Isa 52:13: "Behold my servant (ὁ παῖς μου) will be wise and exalted and exceedingly glorified (δοξασθήσεται)." Isa 53:6 and 12 use the verb "handed over" (παρέδωκεν [v.6], παρεδόθη [v.12, 2x]) with reference to the servant being delivered up for the sins of his people.⁴⁷ Later in the speech, Luke has Peter saying, "Having raised up his servant (τὸν παῖδα αὐτοῦ), God sent him to you first, blessing you when each one of you turns from your sins" (3:26). The verbal connection to Isaiah through the use of the term παῖς is here accompanied by the thematic link to the references to what the servant would accomplish by his death in Isa 53:10c–12.⁴⁸

And the Lord was pleased to take from the pain of his soul, to show to him light and to form for understanding, for the Righteous one (δικαίον) to justify (δικαιῶσαι), serving well for the many, and he himself will bear their sins. On account of this, he will inherit many, and the plunder of the strong he will divide because his soul was given over to death, and he was reckoned among the lawless; and he bore the sins of many, and on account of their sins he was handed over.

Just as the servant will see "light," Jesus was raised up (Isa 53:11; Acts 3:26). Just as the servant would serve the many, Jesus blesses those who repent at Peter's word (Isa 53:11; Acts 3:26). The servant is referred to as "the Righteous one" in Isa 53:11, and Luke refers to Jesus as "the Righteous one" in Acts 3:14 and 22:14.

⁴³ For similar analyses, see Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 296–97; Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 120.

⁴⁴ For the best discussion of criteria for discerning the presence of intertextual echoes, see Richard B. Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel's Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 34–45.

⁴⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Septuagintal Midrash in the Speeches of Acts*, The Père Marquette Lecture in Theology 2002 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2002), 47. While I am not sure about the use of the term "midrashic," what Johnson goes on to say is instructive: "It has become clear as well that the full force of Luke's exposition is rarely obvious within a single speech. Rather, through the entire set of speeches in Acts, a sort of midrashic argument is constructed. The argument is properly called messianic . . ."

⁴⁶ Similarly Polhill, *Acts*, 131.

⁴⁷ In Isa 53:6, the Lord "handed over" the servant, while in Acts 3:13, Luke shows Peter charging the people who gather to hear what he has to say with "handing over" Jesus. This tension is also present in Acts 2:23, where the killing of Jesus by the people is stated to be "by the ordained plan and foreknowledge of God." God ordained the crucifixion, but the people are nevertheless responsible for it. That Isa 53:6 attributes the handing over to God is reflected in Rom 3:25, where Paul states that God put Jesus forward as a sacrifice of propitiation.

⁴⁸ Παῖς is also used of Jesus in Acts 4:27, 30.

The statement in Isa 53:11 that the Lord was pleased “for the Righteous one to justify, serving well the many,”⁴⁹ also corresponds to the words Luke shows Paul proclaiming in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch:

Let it be known to you, men who are brothers, that on account of this one forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and from all which you were not able to be justified (δικαιωθῆναι) in the law of Moses, in this one everyone who believes is justified (δικαιοῦται) (Acts 13:38–39).

The forgiveness of sins proclaimed by the early church in Acts (2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18) is available because of the death of Jesus. God’s justice is demonstrated as the due penalty for sin is paid and the sins of those who believe in Jesus are borne by him on the cross. The salvation proclaimed by the early church is available because of the judgment of sin at the cross. Salvation comes through judgment for the glory of God as his righteousness is upheld and his mercy is freely offered.

2.3. Healings and Mighty Works: Deliverance and Damnation

In biblical theology, the activity of unclean spirits, the corruption, decay, and death of the human body, and the ravages of the forces of nature are all outworkings of the alienation introduced by the rebellion of creatures against the Creator. Gen 3:15 recounts the words of God’s judgment against the serpent. In this judgment, however, we also receive intonations of a promise of life that would overcome death.⁵⁰ Though God had promised that the man would die in the day he ate of the tree, in the announcement that the woman’s seed would crush the head of the serpent, Adam hears a promise of life, and so he names Eve the mother of all living (Gen 3:20). There appears to have been some hope for a reversal of the other curses as well, as evidenced by Lamech’s words at the birth of Noah. Echoing the language of the curse in Gen 3:17, Lamech is presented as saying, “This one will give us rest from our work and from the pain of our hands from the ground that Yahweh cursed” (Gen 5:29).

As Jesus comes driving out unclean spirits, healing, and even overcoming death in the Gospel of Luke, it seems that the hope for the one who would open the way to Eden has been realized.⁵¹ He is

⁴⁹ It seems to me that my translation is more satisfying grammatically and better fits the context of the passage than the *NETS* translation of this phrase: “to justify a righteous one who is well subject to many” (Isa 53:11). My translation takes δίκαιον as the accusative subject of the infinitive (rather than as the object of the infinitive, as *NETS* has it), and in my translation the participle δουλεύοντα is taken adverbially and in an active sense (rather than substantively and in a passive sense as *NETS* has it). I have not done an exhaustive analysis of translation technique in the Greek Isaiah, which may inform the *NETS* rendering, but my rendering is as natural a reading of the Greek (if not superior) as that found in *NETS*.

⁵⁰ See further James M. Hamilton Jr., “The Skull Crushing Seed of the Woman: Inner-Biblical Interpretation of Genesis 3:15,” *SBJT* 10:2 (2006): 30–54, and James M. Hamilton Jr., “The Seed of the Woman and the Blessing of Abraham,” *TynBul* 58 (2007): 253–73.

⁵¹ Much could be said about this in Luke, but a few brief comments must suffice: Luke’s genealogy is structured such that it ends with Adam, who is referred to as “the son of God” (Luke 3:38), and this is immediately followed by the temptation narrative (4:1–13), in which Jesus is referred to as “the son of God” (4:3). Thus, the mention of the son of God, Adam, who failed when tempted, is juxtaposed to the mention of the son of God, Jesus, who overcame when tempted. See esp. E. Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 93–95. Ellis writes, “Elsewhere Adam is viewed as a type of Messiah, the one who restores the Paradise that Adam lost” (93, citing his comments on 23:43, and referring to Rom 5:12; 1 Cor 15:45; Heb 2:6). Jesus is presented as saying to the thief on the cross, “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43), and παράδεισος can refer to the Garden of Eden (BDAG, s.v.). Ellis writes, “Paradise, i.e. park or garden, refers in the Old Testament to the Garden of Eden, which then becomes a type of the future kingdom of God (cf. Isa. 51:3)” (*Luke*, 268). Beale writes that Jesus’ statement in Luke 23:43 “suggests further that Jesus’ death was in fact a pathway leading to a new creational Eden, apparently beginning to fulfil the intention of the primeval garden sanctuary” (G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s*

crucified, but death has no power to hold him (Acts 2:24). He ascends his throne and continues the work of inaugurating his kingdom through his witnesses. Thus, the apostles and their associates drive out unclean spirits (e.g. Philip, 8:6; Paul, 18:12), heal the lame (Peter, 9:34; Paul, 14:8–10), and raise the dead (Peter, 9:40; Paul, 20:9–10). These mighty works point to the salvation that has come through the judgment of the forces of evil and death. Jesus the risen Lord has triumphed over them, and the exercise of his authority over the forces he has judged results in praise for God from those who are redeemed from the futility of the fallen order.⁵²

2.4. Fighting Against God: Vain Opposition to the Messiah's Kingdom

Yet another way in which God triumphs in judgment in Acts has to do with those who, in the words of Gamaliel, find themselves “fighting against God” (Acts 5:39). The opposition to and martyrdom of Stephen illustrates this motif of people fighting against God by opposing the church (6:9–8:1). The opposition scatters the church, and leading the charge against the Messiah and his people is Saul (8:3; 9:1–2, 4–5). Herod joins the campaign by killing James and imprisoning Peter (12:1–3). The Jews also oppose the new movement when Paul begins to proclaim Jesus as Messiah (13:45; 14:19, etc.).

The opposition to the early church meets the outcome of all attempts to fight against God. The church relentlessly grows because God is the one adding to its numbers (see 1:15; 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1, 7). Frank Thielman rightly refers to “the certain triumph of God’s saving purpose” as “one of Luke’s settled theological convictions.”⁵³ The scattering of believers from Jerusalem results in the Samaritans (8:12) and the Ethiopian Eunuch (8:27–38) coming to faith.⁵⁴ Saul’s opposition to the church results in his conversion (9:1–22).⁵⁵ Herod’s attempt to take glory that belongs to God results in his death (12:23). Tellingly, Luke follows the notice of Herod’s death with the statement that the Word of God continued to triumph (12:24). Fighting against God results in conversion in Saul’s case and death in Herod’s. The war on God has no chance of success. As Thielman writes, “Luke wants his readers to know that God’s saving purposes will be accomplished despite all efforts to stop them, whether invisible or visible.”⁵⁶ And yet, as Brian Rosner notes, “It is not progress in the triumphalistic sense that Acts portrays . . . , for opposition and persecution are pervasive and enduring.”⁵⁷ The non-triumphalistic progress by God’s power through every affliction is unstoppable: the Jews try with no avail to stop the advance of the gospel by opposing Paul. The Romans lock him up, but the Word continues to roam freely as jailers get converted (16:25–34) and people come to where Paul is held to hear the good news of the kingdom (28:30–31).

Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God [New Studies in Biblical Theology 17; Downers Grove: IVP, 2004], 190, cf. 190n40).

⁵² See §1 and the table in §2.1 for texts.

⁵³ Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 125, cf. 125–35.

⁵⁴ See also 10:44–48; 11:21, 24; 12:24; 13:43, 48–49; 14:1, 21; 16:5; 18:10; 19:20. Marshall notes, “[T]he triumph of God, or rather of his Word, and the suffering of his messengers of the Word go hand in hand in the pattern of the book” (“How Does One Write on the Theology of Acts?” in *Witness to the Gospel*, 13).

⁵⁵ Cf. Brian Rapske, “Opposition to the Plan of God and Persecution,” in *Witness to the Gospel*, 255.

⁵⁶ Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 134.

⁵⁷ Rosner, “The Progress of the Word,” 233; similarly Polhill, *Acts*, 71–72.

3. Conclusion: The Glory of God in Salvation Through Judgment

God's justice is seen in his righteous reversal of the unjust condemnation of Jesus, in his just calling to account of those who perpetrated that crime, and in the proclamation that forgiveness of sins is available through Jesus. Forgiveness is available through Jesus because Jesus has satisfied God's justice in his death on the cross.

Thus, the justice of God is of a piece with the salvation of God. God demonstrates his mercy by making a way for sins to be forgiven through the death of Jesus. Upholding his justice through the death of Jesus, God can extend mercy to guilty people who deserve only justice. This mercy is offered to those who crucified the Messiah, and the redemptive mercy of God is put on display through the healings and teachings that the witnesses to the resurrection do in Acts.

God's justice and his mercy balance one another. The justice keeps the mercy from becoming insipid sentimentality, while the mercy keeps the justice from crushing all with just punishment.⁵⁸ Justice and mercy serve a higher aim, as well, for both display God and evoke the glory that God rightly deserves. Deliverance and damnation display the Divine. Or, we might say, the center of the theology of Acts is the glory of God in salvation through judgment.



⁵⁸ See R. W. L. Moberly, "How May We Speak of God? A Reconsideration of the Nature of Biblical Theology," *TynBul* 53 (2002): 177–202.