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# The motif of *way* in Luke and Acts (Part 2 of 2)

Jesus met most people on the road. All the Gospels portray Jesus on a continual road trip—God in action—urgently making a way to reach us. Along the way, Jesus encountered women broken by disease; a boy and a girl, whose young lives have been snatched away from their loved ones; women caught in questionable activities; hope-deprived people; and disease-riddled men. Even though the *way* symbolically portrays Jesus' journey to the Cross, which is *the* act of salvation, those people along the way really mattered to Jesus. So He stopped, listened, cared, and healed along the way that led to Calvary. Jesus demonstrated that the journey is as important as the destination. When Luke introduced Jesus to the world, he quoted the prophet Isaiah: " 'A voice of one calling in the desert, / "Prepare the way for the Lord, / make straight paths for him. / Every valley shall be filled in, / every mountain and hill made low. / The crooked roads shall become straight, / the rough ways smooth. / And all mankind will see God's salvation" ' " (Luke 3:4–6).[1] God worked a highway construction project through Jesus by making a road straight through the desert of our sin, failure, and death. In a previous article ("The Way of the Cross in Mark's Gospel," June 2011), I looked at the motif of *way* in Mark and suggested that Mark uses the term to point to the death of Jesus and what it means to be a disciple of Christ. In this article, I will look at Luke's creative use of the motif.

## Isaiah's new exodus in Luke and Acts

What immediately becomes clear from Luke 3:4–6 is that Luke has a longer version of the quotation from Isaiah than Mark. Luke adds the phrase "and all mankind will see God's salvation," not just to emphasize the universal nature of his Gospel, but also as an important theme that, indeed, pervades both his Gospel and Acts. This extension highlights the importance of the Gentile mission for Luke and also serves to unify God's writings. Furthermore, this extended quotation points to the fact that Luke's writings should not be read apart from the wider context of Isaiah 40–55.[2] To support this assertion, let us look at the beginning, middle, and closing of Luke and Acts. Luke 1:17, " 'to make ready a people prepared for the Lord,' " and Luke 1:76, " 'for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the *way* for Him' " contain allusions to Isaiah 40:3 (emphasis added).[3] Acts 1:8 is regarded by many commentators as the "ground plan" for Acts.[4] It reads, " 'But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my *witnesses* in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and *to the ends of the earth*' " (emphasis added).

First, the notion of witness, so dominant in the narrative of Acts (1:22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39; 13:31), is, in all likelihood, drawn in part from Isaiah 43:10 and 44:8. Yahweh had called His people to be His witnesses in the world. They had failed in this regard and Jesus, the Servant of Yahweh, had taken on this failure and succeeded in beautifully portraying the character of God, witnessing to His love and justice. Now Jesus had shared this witnessing ministry with His disciples.[5] Second, the phrase "to the ends of the earth" in Acts 1:8 alludes to Isaiah 8:9; 48:20; 49:6; and 62:11. The closest in context to Acts 1:8 is Isaiah 49:6, which reads, " 'I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, / that you may bring my salvation *to the ends of the earth*' " (emphasis added). Paul alluded to this text from Isaiah in Acts 13:47 and Acts 26:23, more or less in the middle and end of the narrative of Acts.[6] Luke begins and ends both his Gospel and his story of the church with allusions to Isaiah's new exodus.

## Luke's travel narrative: Jesus and the way

Luke 9:51–19:27 is generally acknowledged to be Luke's "travel narrative," or Jesus' journey to Jerusalem.[7] Luke prefaces this central section by referring to Jesus' departure or *exodus* in Luke 9:30, 31. This reads, "Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem." Clearly then, the travel narrative is depicted as the actual working out of Jesus' *exodus,* where He will die on the cross in Jerusalem.[8] Luke's portrayal of the exodus theme here in Luke 9:31 has far greater implications, just as Jesus is greater than Moses and Elijah, with whom He talks about His impending death. During the travel narrative, Luke uses the verb "to go" (*poreuomai*) (9:51–53; 10:38; 13:31, 33; 17:11; 19:28) and the noun *road* or *way* (*hodos*) (9:57; 10:4). Luke, like Mark, also has a theology of the *way* that leads to the Cross.

An important variance emerges when one considers that Luke explicitly uses the term *way* in Acts (9:2; 16:17; 18:25, 26; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22) as an identity marker that points to the early Christians. The early Christians are to live out, in the context of Lukan theology, the teachings and experience of Jesus as outlined and identified along His *way* in Luke 9:51–19:27.[9] In this way, Luke ingeniously follows Mark; for where Mark identifies the twelve disciples as traveling the *way,* Luke has the early Christians in Acts journey on the *way* as well.

There are three distinct and one subtle reference to Jesus on the *way* to Jerusalem in the travel narrative. Luke 9:51 reads, "As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem." Here again Luke gives us a window into the heart of Jesus to fulfill the plan set out for Him by His Father. By alluding to Isaiah 50:7, " 'Because the Sovereign LORD helps me, / I will not be disgraced. / Therefore have I set my face like flint, / and I know I will not be put to shame,' " Luke once more keeps Isaiah's new exodus in the background as Isaiah 50:7 refers to the ministry of the Servant, Jesus.

A subtle reference to both Malachi and Isaiah is found in Luke 9:52, which reads, "And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him." Notice that the disciples are sent ahead of Jesus to prepare the way for Him. The words of Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 have been combined again and used creatively by Luke. Luke also makes reference to the *way* again in Luke 13:22 and 17:11. Jesus is engaged or attempts to engage in missionary activity in each of these references, specifically to the Samaritans. This is an indicator of the future ministry of the church, which commences its ministry in Jerusalem (Acts 1–7), then progresses to Samaria (Acts 8–11), and finally to the ends of the earth, as outlined in Acts 1:8. Luke also portrays the ministry of Jesus in Luke 4:17–19 in the context of Isaiah's new exodus, with allusions to Isaiah 61:1, 2. Jesus is a New Moses, who will lead His people out of slavery to sin, Satan, and death. This deliverance will exceed everything God has done in the past.

## Discipleship and the way

The disciples are little more than stage props prior to Luke 9:51; however, they appear more frequently once the journey begins (Luke 10:23; 11:1; 12:1; 16:1; 17:1, 5; 18:15).[10] Luke makes an interesting connection between those that traveled with Jesus and the theme of witness in Acts 13:31: "and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people." The journey on the *way* serves as an identity marker for the early church and authenticates the witness of the disciples. For Luke,



God's revelation is the revelation of a *way,* not just of the saving events of the Cross and the Resurrection, but also a revelation of Jesus' ministry that the disciples are called upon to embody and emulate. Thus, Christian witness was based on the testimony of those constituted as witnesses by (1) their presence during Jesus' Galilean ministry, (2) their following Jesus on the trip to Jerusalem, and (3) their witnessing the Resurrection.

We are also on the *way* with Jesus, just as the early church. The experience of Jesus on His *way* will be our experience as contemporary disciples of Jesus as well. Luke's *way* or travel narrative teaches a number of things about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. The first thing we can learn is that the journey in Luke outlines an itinerary of spiritual development; the journey reminds us that a resolute purpose remains as a fundamental characteristic of the spiritual life. The journey is marked for Jesus by prayer (Luke 11:1; 18:1). Portrayed as Someone who has a deep abiding relationship with God, He stubbornly carries out the practice of prayer. He is utterly dependent on His Father for sustenance, wisdom, and guidance. Contemporary disciples are called to be people of prayer. Our resources, contacts, and influence will amount to nothing if we are not a praying people. Importantly, the context of Luke 11:5–8 and 18:1–8 centers not on casual, routine prayer but deep, persevering prayer. Prayer shapes us spiritually.

As we walk with Jesus, dig into His Word, serve and fellowship with other Christians, and grow in our understanding of Jesus and His plan of salvation, His love will become crazier and crazier.

Along the way, Jesus also reminds the disciples that His Father is more than willing to "give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him" (Luke 11:13). The Holy Spirit plays a central role in Acts, as He empowers and motivates the disciples for service and mission. In fact, Christ begins His ministry full of the Spirit (Luke 4:1) and so do the disciples (Acts 2:1–4). Christ is continually filled with the Spirit (Luke 4:18) and so are the disciples (Acts 2:18). Christ is continually in prayer (Luke 5:16; 11:1) and so are the disciples (Acts 1:14; 4:24). John Stott suggests, therefore, that the "contrasting parallel [Luke] draws between his two volumes was not between Christ and his church, but between two stages of the ministry of the same Christ."[11]

The *way* for Jesus ends at the Cross, while, for contemporary disciples, the *way* begins at the Cross. There would-be disciples are confronted with the claims of Christ and see firsthand the richness and meaning of His sacrificial death and begin to understand, what Francis Chan calls, His "crazy love."[12] This crazy love impacts and transforms us into disciples of Jesus. Our exodus from the tyranny and power of sin begins at the Cross. This crazy love also sustains and nurtures us as we begin to walk with Jesus on the *way*. As we walk with Jesus, dig into His Word, serve and fellowship with other Christians, and grow in our understanding of Jesus and His plan of salvation, His love will become crazier and crazier. The *way* in Acts is often used in relation to opposition and persecution. Jesus predicted in Luke that the disciples would be persecuted and opposed because of the gospel.[13] For example, the persecution of the disciples in Acts corresponds to the death of Jesus in Luke. Both Jesus and the disciples have the same opponents (Luke 22:4, 52; Acts 4:1; 5:21). Both Jesus and the disciples are questioned regarding the source of their authority (Luke 20:2; Acts 4:7). Jesus and the apostles are beaten (Luke 22:63; Acts 5:40). Both appear before the Sanhedrin (Luke 22:66; Acts 4:5, 7; 5:18–21).[14] The disciples are therefore in continuity with Jesus and His persecution and suffering. However, the persecution related to the motif of the *way* also provides opportunity for God's intervention and triumph. Nothing the authorities can do can stop the growth of the church. Even after the disciples are arrested, the number of believers climbs to 5,000.[15]

The motif of *way* is all-encompassing—prophetic, soteriological, Christological, and ecclesiological.

translate their faith. Above all, Jesus has walked the *way* before us and is the Source of our joy and encouragement.

| THE MOTIF OF WAY | |
|---|---|
| The Gospel of Mark | The death of Jesus / discipleship |
| The Gospel of Luke | The ministry and death of Jesus / discipleship |
| The book of Acts | The ministry and identity of the early church characterized by opposition and persecution |

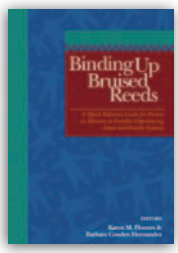
The time is ripe to recover the term *way* for Christianity and *disciples of the way* for Christians. The *way* designates a vibrant Spirit-filled community, consumed with passion for Jesus and living out its faith in a meaningful *way*. The adoption of the term also implies that disciples of the way will be opposed and persecuted for the radical *way* in which they

1 All scripture passages in this article are from the New International Version.
2 David W. Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus,* Biblical Studies Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 39, 40.
3 Craig A. Evans, *Luke,* New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 34.
4 Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles,* ed. Eldon Jay Epp, trans. James Limburg, A. Thomas Kraabel, and Donald H. Juel (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 7.
5 F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts,* The New International Commentary on the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 36.
6 Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary,* rev. trans. R. McL. Wilson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 143n9.
7 Darrell L. Bock, *Luke,* The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 282.
8 Robert H. Stein writes, "This is the city of Jesus' destiny (Luke 9:22). It is central to Luke's view of God's plan in that his Gospel also begins (1:9) and ends there (24:53). Furthermore, Acts also begins in Jerusalem (Acts 1:4), and it soon becomes the center of the church (8:1, 14; 15:1-2) with Paul returning to Jerusalem after every missionary journey." *Luke*, The New American Commentary, vol. 24 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 298.
9 J. A. Fitzmyer writes, "The travel account, therefore, becomes a special device used by Luke for the further training of these Galilean witnesses. . . . The travel account becomes, then, a collection of teachings for the young missionary church, in which instruction of disciples alternates with debates with opponents." *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX,* The Anchor Bible, vol. 28 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 826.
10 Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke,* New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 103.
11 John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts,* The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 32.
12 Francis Chan, *Crazy Love* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2008).
13 Scott Cunningham, *"Through Many Tribulations": The Theology of Persecution in Luke-Acts*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series, vol. 142 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 194. Cf. Luke 12:4 with Acts 4:19; 5:29; Luke 12:8 with Acts 4:10; Luke 12:11; 21:12 with Acts 5:30, 31; Luke 12:12; 21:15 with Acts 4:8.
14 Ibid., 196.
15 Ibid., 199.

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