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CHAPTER III

The Journey Motif in Luke-Acts

Floyd V. Filson

I

[p.68]

The journey narrative so strikingly used in Luke-Acts is one of the dominant literary patterns of the Biblical story. This pattern is prominent in the Book of Genesis, which tells of the nomadic wanderings of the patriarchs from Ur to Haran and then southward to the land of Canaan and even down to Egypt. These journeys are followed by the Exodus and the forty years in the wilderness before Joshua leads Israel into the promised land.¹ The period of the Judges still saw no fixed centre of worship and government. The prophet Samuel carried on a rather itinerant ministry in which Mizpah, Bethel, Gilgal, and Ramah were centres of limited role (1 Sam. 7).

Not until David captured "the stronghold of Zion" (2 Sam. 5:7) did the ark, the portable journeying focus of the worship of Israel, find a stable resting place. Plans were developed by David for a temple as the fixed centre of the religious life of God's people. But the building of the temple by Solomon did not provide a satisfying and spiritually worthy focus of worship; the apparently stable religious life of Israel was in fact often linked with polytheistic and syncretistic practices, particularly forms of Baal worship; and the Biblical writers consider the exile, first of the northern kingdom and then of the Jerusalem leaders, to be the well-deserved result of the largely unworthy royal, priestly, and popular life of Israel. The return from exile sounded again the journey motif of a people restlessly seeking the satisfaction of their spiritual hunger in a homeland and way of life truly loyal to their God (Isa. 40:3).

Likewise in the New Testament we find a detachment from the more stable institutions of the day. The Qumran sect had dramatized this withdrawal from existing religions. This sect withdrew from the Jerusalem-centred Jewish worship and in the wilderness awaited a true priesthood and worship which could command its loyalty. John the Baptist, though of priestly descent, withdraws to the wilderness and preaches there to those who come to hear him. Jesus responds to the wilderness preaching of John and soon returns to Galilee to carry on an itinerant ministry, which probably was interrupted more than once by a brief visit to Jerusalem and

[p.69]

¹ See the use of this motif in Ernst Käsemann, *Das wandernde Gottesvolk*² (Göttingen, 1957). Cf. the journey as a quest for heavenly rest in the letter to the Hebrews.

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finally was followed by a climactic journey to Jerusalem, a journey noted in all four Gospels (least clearly in the Gospel of John) and accented especially in Luke, and undertaken by Jesus to give a final challenge to his people and especially to its leaders, challenging them to respond to his last appeal for repentance and obedience to God. After his death and resurrection his followers carried on a witnessing ministry outwardly centred in Jerusalem and its temple but essentially outside of the formal structure of the religious life of his people and without any clearly planned programme to shape the expansion of the developing Christian church. (Acts 1:8 is not a systematic programme for the Christian mission.) But characteristic of the informally developing pattern of Christian mission was the continual travel which began at Jerusalem and spread out over a large portion of the eastern Mediterranean area. (No journey to Mesopotamia or to Egypt is mentioned but note a possible hint in Acts 2:9, 10 and the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-40.) Both the ministry of Jesus and the preaching of the Apostles and other Christian leaders were marked by itineration and continual journeying rather than by stable authoritative resident leadership. James the brother of Jesus was essentially of the latter kind (but see 1 Cor. 9:5). The future of the church, however, was not with him, as we shall see.

In both the Old and the New Testament Jerusalem most nearly provides a stable and organizing centre of the worship and life of God's people. But it rarely if ever proved the fully worthy centre for which dedicated men looked. Most of the kings were unworthy; they "did what was evil in the sight of the Lord." (In 1 and 2 Ki. this familiar formula occurs over thirty times.) This condemnation is applied especially to the kings of Israel but also to many of the kings of Judah. The priesthood was often corrupt. The lay leaders of Jerusalem were repeatedly unjust and greedy. In the New Testament the Roman overlords and the Jewish priests and social leaders were no better. Jerusalem was a promise never really fulfilled. The sensitive and loyal among God's people had to sit loose to the standards, the rulers, the priests, and the economic and social leaders of Jerusalem. As a result many of the devout men of Israel, such as the Qumran sect and John the Baptist, had to make the reverse journey, not to the promised land and its central city, but away into the wilderness from which Israel had entered the promised land. Jerusalem and its institutions were not really built upon the solid and durable foundations for which the faithful people of God looked. Life continued to be a restless journey, a constant quest for the divine gift which Israel's existing life failed to give them. This is why the itinerant ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus evoked so great a response; it promised the blessings and the rest which the Journeying people of God had so long been seeking.

[p.70]

II

Both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of The Acts share this general Biblical pattern of the journey. The wilderness sojourn and later the preaching of John the Baptist (Lk. 1:80; 3:1-20), the journey of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem and Jerusalem at the time of Jesus' birth (Lk. 2:4, 22), their journey to Jerusalem with him when he was twelve years old (Lk. 2:42), his itinerant preaching travels culminating in the decisive journey to Jerusalem to challenge the religious leaders there (Lk. 4:14; 9:51), and the continual journeys in Acts, chapters 8-28, mark the journey motif as consistently characteristic of the New Testament period and

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movement. It is not surprising, though it is significant, that Luke, whom I take to be the author of Luke-Acts, gives great prominence to this common Biblical journey motif.

Our concern, however, is with the fact that Luke makes his own distinctive use of this recurring journey motif. He does this not merely or mainly by including the journeys of Luke 1 and 2 and by extending the story of "the things of which" Theophilus had "been informed" (Lk. 1:1-4) to include not only the itinerant ministry of Jesus but also the developments of the Apostolic Age. All of these "things" are important. He does it even more strikingly by including two great travel sections, one in the middle of the Gospel of Luke (9:51-19:44) and one forming the last third of the Book of The Acts (19:21-28:31). In each case the *extended* journey narrative indicates that special meaning attaches to the journey reported.

We must first note the characteristics of each of these two substantial blocks of material. We then must consider what meaning Luke wished to convey by so arranging his material as to throw such emphasis on the journey pattern. Each of these two travel sections has its own peculiar features and can tell us something of the thinking that lay behind Luke's literary use of the journey motif.

III

The great travel section of the Gospel of Luke (9:51-19:44) tells of the decisive journey of Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, a section which takes up nearly 40 per cent of this Gospel. It fills ten of the twenty-four chapters of the Gospel of Luke. For comparison, note that in Matthew this journey occupies only two chapters (19 and 20) and in Mark but one (ch. 10). The place where this section begins in Luke is clear; it is plainly marked by the explicit statement of 9:51: "When the days drew near for him to be received up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." The Galilean ministry is ended; Jesus sets out for Jerusalem. There is some difference of opinion as

[p.71]

to where the travel narrative ends. This may be due, in part at least, to a tendency of some scholars to end the travel section where Luke resumes parallelism with Mark (Lk. 18:15). The logical end of the travel section, however, is where Jesus arrives at Jerusalem. This means that the special Lucan travel section begins with 9:51 and ends with 19:44.

The effect of making this middle section of the Gospel of Luke into a long travel narrative is, first of all, to eliminate one journey found in Matthew and Mark, the journey into the district of Tyre and Sidon (Matt. 15:21-28; Mk. 7:24-30; for Luke the gospel is to go from Galilee to Jerusalem and from Jerusalem out into the world). The effect in the second place is to reduce the role which Galilee plays in this gospel. Whereas in Matthew the Galilean ministry occupies the space from 4:12 to 18:35 (fourteen and one-half chapters), and in Mark from 1:14 to 9:50 (eight and two-thirds chapters), in Luke it is compressed into the much shorter section beginning at 4:14 and ending at 9:50 (about five and one-half chapters). This is only partly explained by Luke's lack of any parallel to Mark 6:45-8:26. In his concern to make the significance of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem stand out, Luke deliberately shortens the Galilean

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ministry and builds up the travel section, in part with material which in Matthew and Mark is located during the Galilean ministry. Luke knows that it was at Jerusalem that the final decision concerning Jesus' ministry and appeal had to be made. He therefore so structures his gospel as to build attention and suspense directed towards that final crisis and decision at Jerusalem.

An intriguing feature of Luke's literary procedure is his cautious introduction of references to Samaria and Samaritans. The Gospel of Matthew in its one mention of the Samaritans (10:5) limits itself to saying that the disciples should "enter no town of the Samaritans". The Gospel of Mark simply ignores Samaria and the Samaritans. The Gospel of John in 4:1-42 reports Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman and his brief ministry in her city. Luke proceeds in his own way. Luke 9:52 and 17:11 locate the travelling Jesus on the border between Galilee and Samaria, and at least one of the ten lepers whom Jesus heals in 17:11-16 was a (grateful) Samaritan. Moreover, it is the humane Samaritan who is the praiseworthy figure in the famous parable in Luke 10:25-37. So Luke has an interest in Samaria and Samaritans. Luke's interest in Samaria is further shown by his attention to the early spread of the gospel to Samaria in Acts 1:8; 8:5-25; 9:31. But it must be noted that Luke does not know and makes no specific claim to know of any actual ministry by Jesus in the region of Samaria. He merely pictures Jesus travelling on the border between Galilee and Samaria. The incidents he reports in his extended travel section have as a whole the atmosphere of Jewish life. This conclusion that Luke really knows of no Samaritan ministry by Jesus is supported by the use in his travel section of Jewish oriented material from "Q" and "L". It seems to have its setting in Jesus' ministry not to the Samaritans but to the Jews.

[p.72]

His travel section in his gospel (Lk. 9:51-19:44) prepares for but does not begin the ministry to the Samaritans.

IV

The other great travel section of Luke-Acts is the final third of the Book of The Acts (19:21-28 :31). At 19:21 Luke clearly begins a new section. He has told of the crucial beginnings of the church at Jerusalem (1:1-6:7); he then has reported the ministry of the Seven, the martyrdom of Stephen, the outreach to Samaria, and Saul's conversion (6:8-9:31); the next section tells of Peter's ministry on the Palestinian coastal plain, the extension of the church northward to Antioch in Syria, and Peter's imprisonment, release, and departure from Jerusalem (9:32-12:24); the fourth section tells of the missionary preaching of Barnabas and Paul in Cyprus and south-central Asia Minor, and the agreement that Gentiles may become Christians without prior conversion to Judaism (12:25-16:5); and then the fifth section reports Paul's independent mission to Macedonia, Achaia, and Asia (16:6-19:20). Up to this point the story of The Acts has dealt with the basic beginnings of the church and its missionary outreach, especially through Paul, and each of the five sections has closed with a summary which attests that Luke has a definite outline in mind as he writes.²

² On this question, see my *Three Crucial Decades* (Richmond, Va., 1963), chapter one.

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The rest of The Acts has its own clear objective. It is announced in 19:21 "Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, 'After I have been there, I must also see Rome.'" The days of Paul's independent mission in the eastern half of the Mediterranean world have ended. His thoughts and plans now look westward. He is at Ephesus. He will not forget the churches he has founded. He must first visit and strengthen those churches in Macedonia and Achaia. But that done, he will go to Jerusalem (to take the collection his churches have been raising for the Jewish Christians at Jerusalem, although Luke only hints at that errand in Acts 24:17). Then from Jerusalem he intends to go to Rome, a visit he has long desired to make and one which he has conceived as a step on the way to Spain for new missionary work (we learn of his purpose in Rom. 1:10-15; 15:23-29). Luke, however, does not mention the plan to go on to Spain. It is the journey to Rome that holds all his attention. He tells the story in great detail. In Luke's view there obviously was special importance in the going of Paul to Rome to preach.

The fact that Acts 19:21-28:31 Constitutes a unit and is the longest section of the book of Acts is often overlooked. This neglect seems due mainly to a mistaken emphasis on the so-called three missionary journeys

[p.73]

of Paul, the first to Cyprus and southern Galatia (Acts, chs. 13-14), the second to southern Galatia, Troas, Macedonia, and Achaia (15:40-18:22), and the third to southern Galatia, Ephesus, Macedonia, and Achaia, ending with a journey to Jerusalem (18:23-21:17). This thinking in terms of three missionary journeys gives no real place to Paul's decision to go to Rome; the Roman destination in this view becomes vital only as the result of Paul's appeal to Caesar (25:11); this view gives no place to the clear statement of Acts 19:21 that while at Ephesus Paul determined to revisit his churches and Jerusalem and then go to Rome, so that Paul's determination to go to Rome dominates the last third of Acts.

For Luke the journey to Rome is planned at Ephesus. That journey is prepared for by a circuit of the Aegean Sea to revisit the churches Paul had founded on his independent mission in Macedonia and Achaia. The journey to Rome for Paul would be possible only after he had again visited Jerusalem, doubtless to take the collection which his Gentile churches are to send to Jerusalem to show their oneness with the Jewish Christians there (24:17 — this is what seems to be in mind). It is wrong to ignore the clear indication of 19:21 that the entire section of The Acts from 19:21 to 28:31 is a unit. Paul's plan to visit Rome is so important that Luke feels justified in giving the final and climactic section of The Acts, one-third of his entire account of the Apostolic Church, to the story of how Paul determined to go to Rome and finally did so.

Professor F. F. Bruce gives to the section 19:21-28:31 the heading: "Paul plans to visit Rome via Jerusalem and achieves his aim in an unexpected way."³ He says of 19:21: "This verse summarizes the remainder of Acts." This view of Bruce is a faithful reflection of the data of The Acts.

³ *The Acts of the Apostles* (London, and ed., 1952), p. 360.

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V

What observations can we make which will throw light on the question: Why did Luke think Paul's journey to Rome so important that he devoted to it one full third, the climactic final third, of the Book of The Acts?

It is no real answer to this question to say that this journey narrative shows, as do other parts of the Biblical narrative, that God's purpose may be realized in ways that man has not planned or expected. This final third of The Acts does illustrate that point. Paul had planned to go to Rome as a free traveller, but he went as a prisoner; and he had thought to preach in Rome as a free Roman citizen, but he had to preach while chained to a Roman guard. It does not sound to modern ears like a success story; Paul was maligned, plotted against, imprisoned, and shipwrecked, but he reached Rome and preached there, even if he did not do so as he had

[p.74]

intended. We modern Christians tend to see mainly frustration in what Paul had to endure, but Paul himself and Luke saw in it the providence of God.

This point is instructive, but it is no reason why Luke should give the entire final third of The Acts to the travel narrative of Paul's journey to Rome. The point could have been made by a much briefer narrative. There must be a more adequate and distinctive reason why Luke devoted a full third, the final climactic third, of his story of the Apostolic Age to the journey which brought Paul to Rome.

It comes nearer to the truth to say that in this final narrative of The Acts Jerusalem and its spiritual leaders lose their opportunity to be the focus and centre of the Christian movement. To put it in other words, these closing chapters of The Acts attest both the potential continuing importance and the actual dispensability of Jerusalem and its temple for the Christian church. Up to this point in The Acts, Jerusalem has been the central city of the story. It has been mentioned far more often than any other city, and it has remained thus far the dominant city of the church. Antioch in Syria, Corinth, and Ephesus have been prominent, Antioch especially as a missionary centre founded by Hellenistic Jewish disciples but soon reaching out in a Gentile mission; but none of them has thus far rivalled Jerusalem in importance. Even Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, has recognized the importance of Jerusalem. He had lived there for a time; he has visited it more than once (9:26; 11:30; 15:2-4; 18:22). That he should feel bound to go to Jerusalem again before going to Rome is a witness to the importance Jerusalem had for him. To be sure, he has a special reason to take this final trip thither; he goes with 'alms' (24:17), collected for the poor Christians of Jerusalem by the Gentile Christians in other cities,⁴ but this specific errand does not exhaust the significance of his going to Jerusalem at the risk of his life before he sets out for Rome. As was true in the ministry of Jesus, Jerusalem cannot be ignored; the gospel must be preached there; if it is ready to accept its opportunity and responsibility, it will continue to be the centre and focus of

⁴ In Acts the fact that this collection was for the poor Christians of Jerusalem is not clearly stated; Luke does not mean to deny this, but he sees the gift as in a real sense a gift Paul was bringing to his people.

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the Christian church; the gospel will continue to go out from there; it will lose its primacy only by its own decision, and particularly the decision of its leaders, not to accept the gospel.

Yet if Jerusalem fails to meet its opportunity, that will not be the end of the church. As in the Old Testament, the purposes of God can go forward even if the city does not accept its divinely given role and opportunity. Just as in the Old Testament the fall of Jerusalem was not the end of God's purpose nor the substantial defeat of his will, so also in this new situation the divine purpose can go forward in spite of the rejection of the gospel

[p.75]

and in spite of the aggressive hostility to Paul on the part of the Jewish leaders of the temple and the city.

It is the repeated emphasis of the closing chapters (and indeed of the earlier chapters) of The Acts that the gospel is the fulfilment of God's promises to Israel as found in the Old Testament; the church is the divinely given continuation of the life of Israel and so the church is the true Israel. Jerusalem could have continued to be the focal geographical and spiritual centre of that new and true Israel. But it failed to avail itself of its privilege. With the mob attack on Paul in the temple and the active attempt of the Jewish leaders to put Paul out of the way, Luke sees the failure of Jerusalem to accept and fulfil its role; and so Luke in this final third of The Acts is presenting the lost opportunity which Jerusalem had and the essential transfer of the centre of the church from Jerusalem to Rome.

The fact is that Luke sees theological meaning in the geography of his story. He thinks in terms of centres of the life of God's people. He saw no possibility that Galilee could serve as the dominant centre of the church. As we have seen, he reduces greatly the proportion of his gospel which deals with Jesus' Galilean ministry. His outline of the gospel gives much more attention to the journey from Galilee to Jerusalem than it does to the entire ministry in Galilee. And when Jesus leaves Galilee for Jerusalem, he takes final leave of the Galilean scene. He never comes back. The disciples stay in Jerusalem after the crucifixion, and in the Gospel of Luke none of the resurrection appearances is located in Galilee. In the entire Book of The Acts there is no word of preaching in Galilee (it is even omitted in 1:8). Only the one bare brief mention of the church in Galilee in 9:31 breaks this curious silence about Galilee. Luke's attention focuses on other regions.

VI

It would capture the essential geographical outlook of Luke to entitle the Gospel of Luke "From Galilee to Jerusalem", and the Book of The Acts "From Jerusalem to Rome". Jerusalem was the goal of the ministry of Jesus; it could have been the focus and centre of the ongoing church; because it rejected its privilege and opportunity, the centre moves to Rome; Paul executes and symbolizes that transfer. It may be objected that there were already Christians at Rome — indeed, there was a widely known and noteworthy church there — before Paul arrived (Acts 28:14-15; Rom. 1:8 f.). This is true. But for Luke the coming of Paul to Rome signals and symbolizes the entrance of Rome into the role of focal centre of the

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church and missionary home base of its gospel outreach. The centre of the church is no longer Jerusalem; it now moves to Rome.

Another way to see the significance of Acts 19:21-28:31 is to think back

[p.76]

to Acts 1:8. In that programmatic verse at the beginning of The Acts the disciples are charged to take the gospel to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and "to the end of the earth". The narrative of The Acts tells how that charge was carried out. But how can Paul's going to Rome and his preaching there fulfil Acts 1:8, which commands the disciples to take the gospel to "the end of the earth"? We can understand this only if we think, as Luke and Paul both did, from the Roman point of view. To a Roman the city of Rome was the centre of the world; from the golden milestone in the Forum at Rome roads went out in all directions to all parts of the Empire. So when The Acts ends with Paul in Rome preaching the gospel, Luke must mean that now from the centre of the world the gospel is beginning to go out in all directions to all parts of the Empire. For Luke, Paul's preaching in Rome is not just a local evangelistic programme; it is or at least symbolizes and sets in motion the broad Empire-wide fulfilment of Acts 1:8. The gospel centre has come from Jerusalem to Rome and is beginning to spread out from there in all directions.

It is noteworthy that Luke centres attention on Paul's *preaching* in Rome. This is the emphasis of the closing words of The Acts in 28:30-31. The personal fortunes of Paul are not Luke's focus of interest. The focus is rather on the gospel, and the preaching of the gospel by the one who is representing his Lord in the capital city of the Empire. It is curious that through the centuries Christians have discussed the later traditions about the coming of Peter to Rome and his preaching and leadership there, but in all this discussion have tended to ignore almost entirely the fact that in The Acts Peter is not the founder of the Roman church or the apostolic guarantor of the gospel preached there. The Acts gives no hint that Peter ever visited Rome. For Luke, Paul is the Apostle who came to Rome and became the sponsor and guarantor of that church's message. There is no hint in The Acts (or in anything Paul wrote) that Peter brought the gospel to Rome or was the founder or sponsor of the church there.⁵ This distinction as apostolic sponsor Luke gives to Paul.

VII

For Luke Paul is the outstanding figure of the Apostolic Church. He receives far more space and attention than Peter. And he is the one apostolic sponsor of the church at Rome and is the apostolic guarantor of its gospel.

The later one dates The Acts, the more remarkable this ignoring of Peter at Rome becomes and the more striking is the basic role given Paul there. There was a church at Rome before Paul arrived there, but Peter did not found it or lead it before Paul's arrival; that Peter came there a little later,

⁵ For a careful study of the career of Peter and his death in Rome see Oscar Cullmann, *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr*,² trans. by F. V. Filson (Philadelphia, 1962).

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[p.77]

near the end of his career, is probably true, but this does not change the *fact* that for Luke Peter had no role at Rome, and instead Paul was the apostolic sponsor and guarantor of the gospel at the centre of the Roman Empire.

The fact that Paul is the apostolic guarantor of the gospel at Rome and the representative of the church's outgoing mission there helps us to see why The Acts ends as it does. Christians usually end their reading of The Acts with questions about the personal fortunes of Paul. Was he tried and condemned? Was he executed? Was he released after a trial? Was he released by default after two years of waiting in vain for a hearing or trial? Did he do further preaching in Spain and/or in eastern Roman provinces where he had previously preached the gospel? A rather good case can be made out that he *was* released and did further travel and preaching. But the point is that The Acts says nothing on these matters. Luke was not writing a biography of Paul.

The term "the Way" (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:22), which is used in Acts five times as a designation for the Christian faith and group, is another indication that Luke and the apostolic church found journey language congenial.

That Paul reached Rome, that he was the apostolic sponsor of the gospel there and so of the Roman church, that he preached there and represented the world outreach of the gospel at the centre of the Roman Empire — this is what Luke has to say. This is the goal of the journey which is reported in the climactic final third of the Book of The Acts.

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