

## THE DESIGN OF GOD IN LUKE-ACTS

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### Abstract

*The theme of God's design in Luke-Acts is developed on a variety of levels in the narrative. Its analysis requires a multi-faceted approach which leaves enough scope for a number of motifs to be recognized as aspects of the same central theme. The article discusses how various techniques are employed by the author of Luke-Acts to develop this theme and gives special attention to key phrases in the Greek text.*

Hardly any conspicuous topic in Luke-Acts can be mentioned without noticing that it carries some organic link with God's plan or design (cf Cadbury 1958:305). There are several ways in which the theme is revealed through the text. In the present study a thematic method is implemented that facilitates a close look at what is transmitted by means of the text.

God's design is given shape by constituent motifs. Karris (1985:10,11; cf also Krodel 1981:17) follows common Lucan scholarship in using theme and motif interchangeably, based on Freedman's motif analysis. For the present purposes Abrams' definition of motif is used: 'the frequent repetition of a significant phrase or set description in a single work' (1971:102). Theme, according to Abrams, is 'a thesis or doctrine which an imaginative work is designed to incorporate and make persuasive to the reader' (1971:102). The distinction between the two is informative in the case of Luke-Acts. God's design as portrayed in Luke-Acts is constructed by means of different motifs.

An attentive reader will most probably have no problem in recognizing that the text of Luke-Acts in some way or another has to do with God, God's design, or God's will (cf de Villiers 1977:48,51ff; 1983:20,67ff).

Richard (1983:9) provides an apt description of what God's design or plan in Luke-Acts amounts to: 'The divine plan is that salvation be offered to humanity; God is the agent and Jesus his instrument in achieving that grand scheme'. God's design is revealed in Luke-Acts by the actions ascribed to God, his words, his reported character, his relations to textual entities, prophecy, Old Testament allusions, promise and fulfilment, and especially in certain words and phrases.

A number of key concepts mirror aspects of God's design in Luke-Acts. Perhaps the most important one is *dei*. Some 'character of necessity or compulsion' in an event is generally expressed by *dei* (Grundmann 1964:21). The design of God in Acts receives its basis and much of its vitality from the manner in which God's plan has been explained in Luke. This is another reason for treating Luke-Acts as a unitary work. Paul's missionary activities in Acts are, for example, 'carried out according to a divine plan' (Wilckens 1966:76). That Luke-Acts cannot be properly understood without paying attention to *dei* is strongly supported by Grundmann (1964:23): 'The whole of God's will for Christ and for man is thus comprehended in this *dei* as Luke conceives it'.

Divine providence is the category in which Cosgrove (1984:189-90) deals with *dei* in Luke-Acts. Viewed from a literary perspective the application of *dei* in Luke-Acts introduces the reader to a number of profiles that together contribute to an understanding of God's design.

A major profile consists of how Jesus' death is presented. The much accepted idea that the death of Jesus in Luke-Acts presents him as a martyr rather than as Saviour may be challenged to some extent if it is viewed against the implications of God's design. To be sure, the reader is in some respects shown which 'avenues of suffering Christian life may take in imitation of Christ. Motivated by God's design, however, the exodus and death of Jesus is the medium par excellence through which the narrator sees God's plan taking effect (cf Richard 1983:6). During the same process the reader learns that the scheme which God had devised includes the calvary proceedings as an act of salvation. In retrospect Jesus is able to disclose to the two disciples underway to Emmaus that it was 'necessary (*edei*) that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory' (Lk 24:26).

The idea of purpose (*boule*) is another motif of Luke-Acts that promotes God's design (cf Conzelmann 1960:151). Neither of the other Gospel writers includes the word. As early as Luke 7:30 it becomes clear that in Luke-Acts the term is dominated by the thought of God's saving purpose. Ultimately the *boule* of God is at stake for the narrator: 'the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves' (7:30).

Characters in the text are not always sure what God's *boule* contains. One of those is Gamaliel, a Pharisee in the Jewish Council. The narrator quotes his address to the body with regard to Peter and John's message:

Keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this (*boule*) undertaking is from men, it will fail; but if it is from God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God! (Ac 5:38,39).

Variants of the verb *thelo* are abundantly scattered through Luke-Acts. The ultimate example, of course, are Jesus' words in Luke 22:42 to God: 'not my will (*thelema*), but thine, be done'. The devil promises Jesus material well-being and even reminds him of the angels of Psalm 91:11,12: 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone' (Lk 4:11). As the reader comes to the passion narrative, it is learned that clinging to God's *thelema*, Jesus suffers much

more than striking a foot against a stone. Ironically the loving (cf Lk 3:22) Father's will leads to the cross, while Satan's will is an avowed promise of prosperity.

A motif which not only relates to God's involvement in the narrative of Luke-Acts, but also provides a considerable degree of coherence, is *epaggelia* or promise (cf Richard 1978:331). Prior to his Ascension Jesus opens the minds of his disciples to an understanding of the scriptures, including the law of Moses, the prophets and the Psalms (Lk 24:44,45). Jesus also re-announces the promise (*epaggelia*) of the Father in the context of Old Testament passages like Joel 2:28,29; Isaiah 32:15; 44:3; and Ezekiel 39:29.

Acts 1:4 recalls Jesus' order that the disciples remain in Jerusalem (Lk 24:49) until they receive power when the Spirit has come upon them, in order that they may be witnesses of Christ from Jerusalem onwards (Ac 1:8). At Pentecost Peter delivers a speech explaining that Jesus, having received from the Father the promise (*epaggelian*) of the Holy Spirit, has poured the Spirit out on the people (Ac 2:33).

The next motif which advances God's design in Luke-Acts is *elpis*, hope (cf Ac 28:20). Together with fulfilment it constitutes the other side of promise. Acts 2:26 is a quotation from Scripture (Ps 15:9) that Peter utters at Pentecost. The context to which it is applied in Acts 2 is that there is hope for Israel because Jesus of Nazareth has been raised from the dead by God. Jesus in person has been seen as the promised salvation for people. When the narrator and characters in Acts speak of hope, the resurrection of Jesus is meant. In Acts 28:20 Paul means that Jesus being risen from death subsumes the messianic hope of Israel into the all-embracing salvation of God (cf de Plooy 1982:188).

The term *anastasis* is utilized to denote resurrection from the dead. The reader senses as early as Luke 2:34 that there is more to the word. Simeon prophesies about Jesus: 'This child is set for the fall and rising of many of Israel'. It is not said which, or how great a part will rise or fall. Because Jesus' resurrection signifies the salvation of God for the author of Luke-Acts, the case is strongly in favour of understanding the *anastasis* of Luke 2:34 as an allusion to eternal life (cf de Villiers 1976:138ff). Luke makes it clear that resurrection after death can mean heaven or hell (cf Lk 16:24,24; Ac 25:15).

The kingdom of God is a motif contributing much to the overall idea of God's design in Luke-Acts. What the author of Luke-Acts means by the expression has been the subject of extensive debate, with Conzelmann at the centre of activity. Fitzmyer (1981:231) classifies eschatology as 'the most difficult and most controverted aspect of Lucan theology today'. The dispute has mainly been whether *basileia* refers to a future or a present state of affairs. One of the best solutions so far is that of Sabourin (1982:75) who delineates the meaning which Jesus attaches to his death and exaltation, namely, that together the two sides 'constitute the decisive event in and through which God was to inaugurate his Reign'. It is argued here that the kingdom points not so much to the temporal aspect than to the God who rules the periods and places of people (cf Ac 17:26,27).

Jesus answers polemically when he is asked when the kingdom will come. People are not to ask about its time or place of arrival (cf Ac 1:7). Rather the kingdom of God is *entos humon* (Lk 17:21; cf Martens 1981:249). Conzelmann too conveniently discounted the implications of this *entos* as 'not as important as is often supposed' (1960:124). Whether the phrase means 'within your grasp' or 'in the midst of you' (cf Fitzmyer 1985:1159) is not the most important point about it. What should be understood is that the kingdom affects present reality.

A narrative analysis of Luke-Acts discloses that the references to God's kingdom are there to tell the reader how God has been dealing with humankind all along (cf Maddox 1982:132), and what his *modus operandi* will be like in future times. God's design is not confined to temporality because it is a dynamic concept (cf Jeremias 1971:98). The kingdom of God also cannot be separated from the person and work of Christ in Luke-Acts (cf also Wilcock 1979:172; Robinson 1962:112; Ernst 1978:56; Merk 1975:219).

A final motif to be mentioned connoting the design of God is the 'way' (*hodos*). There are at least seven ways in which the author implements the term, though they may be outlined in a hierarchy of three categories.

Firstly, *hodos* is used in the 'ordinary' sense of a (physical) road or voyage (cf Lk 2:44; 8:5; 14:23; 24:35; Ac 1:1; 8:26; 9:17; 26:13). Secondly there is the *hodos* of Luke 1:76-77 where Zechariah prophesies about the relations between his son John and the Lord Jesus: 'You will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins'. This path is called the way of peace (1:79), the way of God (20:21; Ac 18:26), the way(s) of the Lord (Lk 1:76; Ac 13:10; 18:25), and ways of life (Ac 2:28). In Acts 14:16 God is said to have allowed the Gentiles to walk in their own ways, as opposed to that of God. Thirdly, a number of texts in Acts, certainly not unrelated to the previous category, display an almost technical reference to 'the Way'. In his own defense Paul says that 'according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers' (24:14). In this case *hodos* stands for the Christian movement and everything it implies. Robinson is correct in contending that 'this way is understood by Luke theologically as an actualization of God's purpose' (1962:65).

The motifs produced thus far have conveyed some understanding of the aspects that God's design as theme in Luke-Acts has. A cursory look will further be taken at how God's plan is revealed in the text by the actions ascribed to God, his words, reported character, and relations to characters. Only certain examples are cited.

God's actions as reported in Luke-Acts are connoted in the very first verse (Lk 1:1): 'the things which have been accomplished among us' (*peplerophoremnon...pragmaton*). The point to recognize is that the word is in the passive voice, with the implication of an agent performing an action. The implied subject of the verb can only be God (cf Cadbury 1958:303). He has accomplished 'the subject-matter of the "narrative"' (Fitzmyer 1981:289), which includes all of God's dealings with people in past and present, as told in Luke-Acts. Luke-Acts is thoroughly interspersed with the thought that God has sent Jesus on a mission, and that especially in raising and exalting Jesus he gives expression to the divine plan (cf Dömer 1978:43).

The words ascribed to God secure an element of verisimilitude in the narrative which it otherwise would have lacked. Divine oration or reference to it originates from more than one source in Luke-Acts, e g angels (Lk 1:13,30,31ff; Ac 8:26; 27:24-26), prophets (cf Lk 24:44; Ac 2:16-21,30; 3:18, 21,24; 11:49), and Jesus or God himself (Ac 9:4; cf. 22:7; 26:14; 18:9,10). In summary, God is said to be speaking through various means in the narrative; his design is construed from more than one verbal source. The 'message' of God's words corresponds to raising Jesus (the good news promised to the fathers) who is addressed as follows: 'Thou art my Son' (cf Ac 13:32,33).

If the words attributed to God contribute to an understanding of his design, so do the characteristics or identity of God as expressed in the narrative, e g the 'Almighty'.

It has been established here that studying the theme of God's design in Luke-Acts requires a multi-faceted approach which leaves enough scope for a number of motifs to be aspects of the theme. Subtly the ideological point of view of the author glimmers through words, expressions and structures related to the tapestry of God's design.

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