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UNDERSTANDING
THE BIG PICTURE
OF THE BIBLE

A GUIDE TO READING THE BIBLE WELL



Understanding the Big Picture of the Bible: A Guide to Reading the Bible Well

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The Theology of the New Testament

Thomas R. Schreiner

New Testament theology as a discipline is a branch of what scholars call “biblical theology.” Systematic theology and biblical theology overlap considerably, since both explore the theology found in the Bible. Biblical theology, however, concentrates on the historical story line of the Bible and explains the various steps in the progressive outworking of God’s plan in redemptive history. In this article some of the main themes of New Testament theology are presented.

Already but Not Yet

The message of the New Testament cannot be separated from that of the Old Testament. The Old Testament promised that God would save his people, beginning with the promise that the seed of the woman would triumph over the seed of the Serpent (Gen. 3:15). God’s saving promises were developed especially

in the covenants he made with his people: (1) the covenant with Abraham promised God's people land, seed, and universal blessing (Gen. 12:1–3); (2) the Mosaic covenant pledged blessing if Israel obeyed the Lord (Exodus 19–24); (3) the Davidic covenant promised a king in the Davidic line forever, and that through this king the promises originally made to Abraham would become a reality (2 Samuel 7; Psalms 89; 132); and (4) the new covenant promised that God would give his Spirit to his people and write his law on their hearts, so that they would obey his will (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 36:26–27).

As John the Baptist and Jesus arrived on the scene, it was obvious that God's saving promises had not yet been realized. The Romans ruled over Israel, and a Davidic king did not reign in the land. The universal blessing promised to Abraham was scarcely a reality, for even in Israel it was sin, not righteousness, that reigned. John the Baptist therefore summoned the people of Israel to repent and to receive baptism for the forgiveness of their sins, so that they would be prepared for a coming One who would pour out the Spirit and judge the wicked.

Jesus of Nazareth represents the fulfillment of what John the Baptist prophesied. Jesus, like John, announced the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God (Mark 1:15), which is another way of saying that the saving promises found in the Old Testament were about to be realized. The kingdom of God, however, came in a most unexpected way. The Jews had anticipated that when the kingdom arrived, the enemies of God would be immediately wiped out and a new creation would dawn (Isa. 65:17). Jesus taught, however, that the kingdom was present in his person and ministry (Luke 17:20–21)—and yet the foes of the kingdom were not instantly annihilated. The kingdom did not come with apocalyptic power but in a small and almost imperceptible form. It was as small as a mustard seed, and yet it would grow into a great tree that would tower over the entire earth. It was as undetectable as

leaven mixed into flour, but the leaven would eventually transform the entire batch of dough (Matt. 13:31–33). In other words, the kingdom was *already* present in Jesus and his ministry, but it was *not yet* present in its entirety. It was “already—but not yet.” It was inaugurated but not consummated. Jesus fulfilled the role of the servant of the Lord in Isaiah 53, taking upon himself the sins of his people and suffering death for the forgiveness of their sins. The day of judgment was still to come in the future, even though there would be an interval between God’s beginning to fulfill his promises in Jesus (the kingdom inaugurated) and the final realization of his promises (the kingdom consummated). Jesus, who has been reigning since he rose from the dead, will return and sit on his glorious throne and judge between the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31–46). Hence, believers pray both for the progressive growth and for the final consummation of the kingdom in the words “your kingdom come” (Matt. 6:10).

The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) focus on the promise of the kingdom, and John expresses a similar truth with the phrase “eternal life.” Eternal life is the life of the age to come, which will be realized when the new creation dawns. Remarkable in John’s Gospel is the claim that those who believe in the Son enjoy the life of the coming age *now*. Those who have put their faith in Jesus have *already* passed from death to life (John 5:24–25), for he is the resurrection and the life (John 11:25). Still, John also looks ahead to the day of the final resurrection, when every person will be judged for what he or she has done (John 5:28–29). While the focus in John is on the initial fulfillment of God’s saving promises now, the future and final fulfillment is in view as well.

The already-not-yet theme dominates the entire New Testament and functions as a key to grasping the whole story (fig. 9.1). The resurrection of Jesus indicates that the age to come has arrived, that now is the day of salvation. In the same way the gift of the

Holy Spirit represents one of God's end-time promises. New Testament writers joyously proclaim that the promise of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit has been fulfilled (e.g., Acts 2:16–21; Rom. 8:9–16; Eph. 1:13–14). The last days have come through Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1–2), through whom we have received God's final and definitive word. Since the resurrection has penetrated history and the Spirit has been given, we might think that salvation history has been completed—but there is still the “not yet.” Jesus has been raised from the dead, but believers await the resurrection of their bodies and must battle against sin until the day of redemption (Rom. 8:10–13, 23; 1 Cor. 15:12–28; 1 Pet. 2:11). Jesus reigns on high at the right hand of God, but all things have not yet been subjected to him (Heb. 2:5–9).

Fulfillment through Jesus Christ, the Son of God

The New Testament highlights the fulfillment of God's saving promises, but it particularly stresses that those promises and covenants are realized through his Son, Jesus the Christ.

Who is Jesus? According to the New Testament, he is the new and better Moses, declaring God's word as the sovereign interpreter of the Mosaic law (Matt. 5:17–48; Heb. 3:1–6). Indeed, the Law and the Prophets point to him and find their fulfillment in him. Jesus is the new Joshua who gives final rest to his people (Heb. 3:7–4:13). He is the true wisdom of God, fulfilling and transcending wisdom themes from the Old Testament (Col. 2:1–3). In the Gospels, Jesus is often recognized as a prophet. Indeed, Jesus is the final prophet predicted by Moses (Deut. 18:15; Acts 3:22–23; 7:37). Jesus's miracles, healings, and authority over demons indicate that the promises of the kingdom are fulfilled in him (Matt. 12:28), but his miracles also indicate that he shares God's authority and is himself divine, for only the Creator-Lord can walk on water and calm the sea (Matt. 8:23–27; see Ps. 107:29). Jesus is the Messiah, who brings to realization the promise that

One would sit on David's throne forever. Recognizing Jesus as the Messiah is fundamental to all the Gospels and the missionary preaching of Acts, and is an accepted truth in the Epistles and Revelation.

The stature of Jesus shines out in the New Testament narrative, for he authoritatively calls on others to be his disciples, summoning them to follow him (Matt. 4:18–22; Luke 9:57–62). Indeed, a person's response to Jesus determines his or her final destiny (Matt. 10:32–33; see 1 Cor. 16:22). Jesus is the Son of Man who will receive the kingdom from the Ancient of Days (Dan. 7:13–14) and will reign forever. The Gospels emphasize, however, that his reign has been realized through suffering, for he is also the servant of the Lord who has atoned for the sins of his people (Isa. 52:13–53:12; Mark 14:24; Rom. 4:25; 1 Pet. 2:21–25).

This One who atones for sin is fully God and divine. He has the authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:7). Various New Testament occurrences of the word "name" indicate Jesus's divine status: people prophesy in his name (Matt. 7:22) and are to hope in his name (Matt. 12:21), and salvation comes in his name alone (Acts 4:12). But the Old Testament establishes that human beings are to prophesy only in God's name, hope only in the Lord, and find salvation only in him; thus, such use of Jesus's name indicates his divinity.

The Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) identifies Yahweh as "the Lord." In quoting or alluding to Old Testament texts that refer to Yahweh, the New Testament authors often apply the title "Lord" to Jesus and evidently use it in that strong Old Testament sense (e.g., Acts 2:21; Phil. 2:10–11; Heb. 1:10–12). The title is therefore another clear piece of evidence supporting Christ's divinity. Jesus is the image of God (Col. 1:15; see Heb. 1:3), is in the very form of God, and is equal to God, though he temporarily surrendered some of the privileges of deity by being clothed with humanity so that human beings

could be saved (Phil. 2:6–8). Jesus as the Son of God enjoys a unique and eternal relationship with God (see Matt. 28:18; John 20:31; Rom. 8:32), and he is worshiped just as the Father is (see Revelation 4–5). His majestic stature is memorialized by a meal celebrated in his memory (Mark 14:22–25) and by people being baptized in his name (Acts 2:38; 10:48). The Son of God is the eternal divine Word (Gk. *Logos*) who has become flesh and has been identified as the man who is God’s Son (John 1:1, 14). Finally, in a number of texts Jesus is specifically called “God” (e.g., John 1:1, 18; 20:28; Rom. 9:5; Titus 2:13; Heb. 1:8; 2 Pet. 1:1). Such texts involve no trace of the heresy of either modalism or tritheism. Rather, such statements contain the raw materials from which the doctrine of the Trinity was rightly formulated.

New Testament theology, then, is Christ-centered and God-focused, for what Christ does on earth brings glory to God (John 17:1; Phil. 2:11). The New Testament particularly focuses on Jesus’s work on the cross, by which he redeemed and saved his people. The story line in each of the Gospels culminates in and focuses on Jesus’s death and resurrection. Indeed, the narrative of Jesus’s suffering and death consumes a significant amount of space in the Gospels, indicating that the cross and resurrection are the point of the story. In Acts we see the growth of the church and the expansion of the mission, as the apostles and others proclaim the crucified and resurrected Lord. The Epistles explain the significance of Jesus’s work on the cross and his resurrection, so that believers are enabled to grasp the height, depth, breadth, and width of the love of God (Rom. 8:39). The significance of the cross is explained in relation to themes such as new creation, adoption, forgiveness of sins, justification, reconciliation, redemption, sanctification, and propitiation. Woven together, these themes teach that salvation comes from the Lord, and that Jesus as the Christ has redeemed his people from the guilt and bondage of sin.

The Promise of the Holy Spirit

Bound up with the work of Christ is the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised to send the Spirit to those who are truly his disciples (John 14:16–17, 26; 15:26), and he poured out the Spirit on his people at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4, 33) after he had been exalted to the right hand of the Father. The Spirit was given to bring glory to Jesus Christ (John 16:14), so that Christ would be magnified as the great Savior and Redeemer. Luke and Acts in particular emphasize that the Spirit is given for ministry, so that the church is empowered to bear witness to Jesus Christ. At the same time, having the Spirit within is the mark of a person belonging to the people of God (Acts 10:44–48; 15:7–9; Rom. 8:9; Gal. 3:1–5). The Spirit also strengthens believers, so that they are enabled to live in a way that is pleasing to God. Transformation into Christlikeness is the Spirit's work (Rom. 8:2, 4, 13–14; 2 Cor. 3:18; Gal. 5:16, 18).

The Human Response

Because of sin, all humanity stands in need of the salvation that Christ brings. The power of sin is reflected in the biblical story line, for even Israel as the chosen people of the Lord lived under the dominion of sin, showing that the written law of God by its own power cannot deliver human beings from bondage to sin. Paul emphasizes that sin and death are twin powers that rule over all people, so that they stand in need of the redemption Christ brings (see Rom. 1:18–3:20; 5:1–7:25). Sin does not merely constitute failure to keep the law of God, but represents personal rebellion against God's lordship (1 John 3:4). The essence of sin is idolatry, in which people refuse to give thanks and praise to the one and only God, and worship the creature rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:18–25).

But sin is not the last word, since Jesus Christ came to save sinners, thereby highlighting the mercy and grace of God. The

fundamental response demanded by God is faith and repentance (see Acts 2:38). The call to faith and repentance is evident in the ministry of John the Baptist, in Jesus's announcement of the kingdom (Mark 1:15), in the speeches in Acts, in the Pauline letters, and throughout the New Testament. Those who desire to be part of Jesus's new community (the church) and part of the kingdom of God (God's rule in people's hearts and lives) must forsake false gods, renounce self-worship and evil, and turn to Jesus as Lord and Master. The call to repentance is nothing less than a summons to abandonment of sin and to personal faith, whereby people are called to trust in the saving work of the Lord on their behalf instead of thinking that they can save themselves. All people everywhere have violated God's will and must look outside of themselves to the saving work of Christ for deliverance from God's wrath. Indeed, the whole of the New Testament can be understood as a call to repentance and faith (see Hebrews 11). Even those who are already believers are to exert themselves in faith and repentance as long as life lasts, for this is the mark of Christ's true disciples. The New Testament writers constantly encourage their readers to persevere in faith until the end, and warn of the dangers of rejecting Jesus as Lord at any stage. True believers testify that salvation is of the Lord, and that Jesus Christ is the One who has delivered them from the coming wrath.

The People of God

The saving promises of God, then, have begun to be fulfilled in a new community, the church of Jesus Christ. The church is composed of believers in Jesus Christ, both Jews and Gentiles, for the laws in the Old Testament that separated Jews from Gentiles (e.g., circumcision, purity laws, and special festivals and holidays) are no longer in force. The church is God's new temple, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and is called to live out the beauty of the

Fig. 9.1 The Already and Not Yet of the Last Days

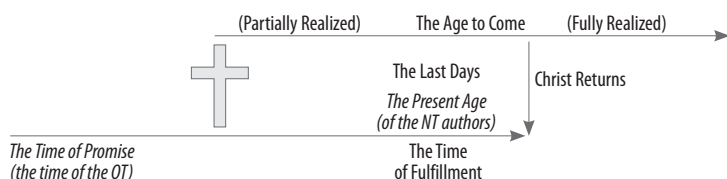
The Old Testament prophets, writing from the vantage point of their present age (the time of promise), spoke of “the last days” as being the time of fulfillment in the distant future (e.g., Jer. 23:20; 49:39; Ezek. 38:16; Hos. 3:5; Mic. 4:1).

The Structure of the OT Expectation of the Last Days



The New Testament (the time of fulfillment), however, locates “the last days” in the present age. The “last days” *already* began with the death and resurrection of Jesus and the outpouring of the Spirit, but they are *not yet* fully realized, which will happen only after Christ returns.

The NT Restructuring of the OT Expectation of the Last Days



gospel by showing the supreme mark of Christ’s disciples: love for one another (John 13:34–35).

The church recognizes, however, that she exists in an interim state. She eagerly awaits the return of Jesus Christ, and the consummation of all of God’s purposes. In the interim, the church is to live out her life in holiness and godliness as the radiant bride of Christ, and to herald the good news of salvation to the ends of the earth, so that others who live in the darkness of sin may be transferred from Satan’s kingdom to the kingdom of the Lord. The church longs for the day when she will behold God face-to-face and worship Jesus Christ forever. The new creation will be a full reality, all things will be new, and the Lord will be praised forever for his love and mercy and grace—for New Testament theology is ultimately about glorifying and praising God.

10

Reading the Gospels and Acts

Darrell Bock

The Gospels and Acts were designed to be read as full accounts, each in their own right, even as they seek to tell about Jesus and his followers. The main obstacle in the Gospels continues into Acts: many in Israel have rejected a message and promise originally intended for them. A key to understanding these accounts is to trace the negative reaction and what it teaches about how people respond to God, and how God still moves to draw people to himself.

Genre

The Gospels have a genre parallel in the ancient world that was called the *bios*. This was ancient biography. Rather than focusing on physical description and tracing psychological thinking and personal development like modern biographies, a *bios* highlighted the key events that surrounded a person and his teaching. That

is very much what the Gospels do. The key characters are Jesus and God, as Jesus carries out the plan of the Father.

Acts belongs to a different kind of genre. It is a *legitimization* document: its goal is to explain and legitimate the early church and its roots. This was necessary because in the ancient world what counted in religion was its age and time-tested quality. Since Christianity was new, it needed to explain how it could be new and still be of merit. The answer was that, although the *form* of Christianity was new, the *faith itself* was old, rooted in promises and commitments made to Israel. In fact, the new movement did not seek to make itself into a new entity but was moved in a new direction only when official Judaism rejected it and expelled it from the synagogue, with the result that (in accord with God's plan, as Acts clarifies) the gospel was taken to the Gentiles also. Acts tells this story as it presents how the promise of God expanded as far as Rome.

Though the Gospels are historical writings, they are not always presented in a strict chronology, since some of their scenes are organized topically. For example, Mark 2:1–3:6 reports five controversies in a row that Matthew spreads out over chapters 8–12.

Perspectives

Even though the Gospels each offer varying accounts, they all share the view that Jesus is the promised Messiah, uniquely related to God to bring his promise and salvation. Three of the Gospels (called the Synoptics because they overlap at many places) tell the story of Jesus “from the earth up,” gradually depicting how one can see his unique relationship to the Father. Mark starts with John the Baptist, while Matthew and Luke start with Jesus's unique birth. John, however, tells the story very much “from heaven down.” He starts with the preincarnate Word becoming flesh. His presentation of Jesus as Son of God is more direct and

explicit. The Synoptics allow the reader to gradually see this idea, much in the manner people come to realize gradually who Jesus is. This difference in how the story unfolds does not represent a conflicting account of Jesus, but simply a distinct perspective on how to highlight who he is and what he has done.

Acts chronicles the expansion of Jesus's newly formed community from Jerusalem to Rome. Here God and Jesus are the key figures, directing the action through the Spirit, with the key human figures being Peter, Stephen, Philip, and Paul. Acts is not a defense of Paul, as many argue, but is a defense of what Paul's ministry to the Gentiles represents: the realization of God's promise to reconcile all people groups to himself and to one another through Jesus.

Distinctives of Matthew

Matthew's major concerns include Jesus's relationship to Israel and explaining Israel's rejection of him. Those who were Christians did not seek a break with Judaism but had separated from Judaism because the nation rejected the completion of the divine and scriptural promise Jesus brought and offered. However, that rejection did not stop the arrival of the promise; it raised the stakes of discipleship and led to the creation of a new entity, the church. The message was not limited to Israel but included the whole world. Five discourse units consisting of six discourses (long sections of teaching by Jesus) are the backbone of the book (chs. 5–7; 10; 13; 18; 24–25 [eschatological discourse followed by a parables section]). As with all the Gospels, there is an interaction and interchange between Jesus's word and deeds. Jesus's actions support what he preaches. Jesus's death was an act of the divine plan that led to his vindication and mission. Disciples are those who come to Jesus in personal relationship and trust, seeking forgiveness and the righteousness that God so graciously offers.

A brief listing of major Matthean themes shows the variety of his interests. (Italics identify the key themes, which in some cases overlap with other Gospels and in other cases are unique.) Matthew's Christology presents a *royal, messianic understanding of Jesus*, who as *Son of God* comes to be seen as the revealer of God's will and the bearer of divine authority. As the promised King of the Jews, Jesus heals, teaches *the real meaning of the Old Testament in all its dimensions*, calls for a *practical righteousness*, inaugurates the kingdom, and teaches about the *mystery* elements of God's promise. Matthew associates all of this with a program he calls the *kingdom of heaven*. This kingdom is both present and yet to come (12:28; 13:1–52; 24:1–25:46). Jesus proclaims its hope throughout the nation to the lost sheep of *Israel*. He *calls on them to repent, challenges their current practices, expresses his authority over sin and the Sabbath*, and *calls them to read the law with mercy*. Most of Israel rejects the message, but the mystery is that the promise comes despite that rejection. One day that kingdom will encompass the entire world (see the parables of ch. 13). At the consummation, the authority of Jesus in that kingdom will be evident to all in a *judgment* rendered on the entire creation (chs. 24–25). Thus, for Matthew the kingdom program, eschatology, and salvation history are all bound together.

Distinctives of Mark

Mark is generally regarded today as the first Gospel to have been written, although a minority of scholars regard Matthew as first. Thus, Mark's outline of Jesus's ministry has become the basic structure through which his life has been traced, even though sections of it are probably given in topical rather than chronological arrangement (e.g., the conflicts of chs. 2–3). The first major section of this Gospel (1:16–8:26) cycles through a consistent structure in each of its three parts. There is a story about disciples at the start (1:16–20; 3:13–19; 6:7–13) and a note

about rejection or a summary at the end (3:7–12; 6:1–6; 8:22–26). The turning point of the Gospel is the confession in 8:27–31 that Jesus is the Christ. Half of the Gospel treats the movement toward the final week of Jesus’s ministry, while a full quarter of it is on the last week alone. For Mark, the events of the final week are central to the story.

The key themes are also evident in how the account proceeds. It begins with a note that what is being told is *the gospel*. Though to a lesser degree than Matthew or Luke, Mark also traces the *kingdom of God* as a theme. For Mark, it has elements that indicate its initial presence, while the bulk of the emphasis is that it will come in fullness one day in the future. The *mystery of the kingdom* is that it starts out small but will accomplish all that God has called it to be. It will grow into a full harvest.

Mark is more a Gospel of *action* than of teaching. Things happen *immediately*, one of Mark’s favorite expressions. Mark has only two discourses, the parables of the kingdom (4:1–33) and the eschatological discourse (13:1–37). Miracles abound. Mark has twenty *miracle accounts*. Combined with healing summaries, these units comprise a third of the Gospel and are nearly one-half of the first ten chapters. These pictures of Jesus’s authority are important to Mark, as he presents Jesus as one who teaches with authority. The authority underscores that Jesus is *the Christ, the Son of God* (1:1; 8:29; 15:39). Mark’s Christology presents Jesus as this promised figure. His claims of authority over sin, human relationships, and practices tied to purity, Sabbath, and temple get him into trouble with the Jewish leaders, who early on determine they must stop him. This *conflict raised by Jesus’s claims* is also a central feature of the Gospel.

However, Jesus’s authority is not one of raw power. In terms of proportion, Mark highlights Jesus as *the suffering Son of Man and suffering servant* more than the other Gospels. His mission is to come and give his life *as a ransom for many* (10:45). The

importance of understanding the suffering role probably explains the *commands for silence* given to those, including demons, who recognize Jesus as Messiah (1:44; 3:11; 5:43; 9:9). Without an appreciation of his suffering, Jesus's messianic calling is not understood. It is here that the pastoral *demands of discipleship* appear as well (10:35–45; see 8:31–38; 9:33–37). Mark is like Matthew here. After the suffering come glory and vindication. The same Son of Man will return one day to render judgment, as the eschatological discourse reveals (Mark 13). The need for discipleship and really listening to Jesus is clear as Mark notes without hesitation *the failures of the disciples*. Their instincts will not take them in the right direction. Instead, they must trust in God and his ways. In addition, Mark notes *the emotions of Jesus and the disciples* more than any of the other Gospels.

Distinctives of Luke

The third Gospel is the longest. It has a mix of teaching, miracles, and parables. Luke gives more parables than any other Gospel. Whereas Matthew presents teaching in discourse blocks, Luke scatters his teaching throughout his Gospel, usually in smaller units. Many key discourses happen in meal scenes (7:36–50; 11:37–52; 14:1–24; 22:1–38; 24:36–49), which recall Greek symposia where “wisdom” is presented.

Key themes center on *God's plan*. Things “*must be*” (Gk. *dei*) in Luke (2:49; 4:43; 9:22; 24:7, 26, 44–47). God has designed a plan to reach and deliver *the poor, the oppressed, and those caught in Satan's oppressive grip* (4:16–18; 11:14–23). The plan reflects a *promise and fulfillment* structure, where key figures express scriptural realization of the plan (7:28; 16:16). The opening infancy section does this through the use of hymns decorated in scriptural language, underscoring the note of *joy* that works through the Gospel. Things also happen with an immediacy, as many texts speak of what is happening “*today*” (2:11; 4:21;

5:26; 19:9; 22:34; 23:43). The gospel marches forward, as is indicated by *the geographic progression* in the story from Galilee to Jerusalem (9:52–19:44).

Jesus appears as the *Messiah-Servant-Lord*. The basic category is messianic (1:31–35; 3:21–22; 4:16–30; 9:18–20), but as the story proceeds it is clear that this role is one of great authority that can be summarized by the image of *the judging Son of Man* or by the concept of *Lord* (5:24; 20:41–44; 21:27; 22:69). All of these connections reflect what Scripture has said about the plan. Jesus also functions as a *prophet* like Moses, a leader-deliverer-prophet who is to be heard (4:20–30; 9:35). Jesus’s miracles provide evidence for the inaugurated presence of the *kingdom*. Ultimately the kingdom brings with its deliverance the *defeat of Satan* (11:14–23; 17:20–21). Yet there also is a future to that kingdom, which will see Jesus return to reign over both Israel and the nations, visibly expressing the sovereignty he now claims (ch. 21). Thus Jesus’s deliverance looks to the realization of covenantal promises made to Abraham, David, and the nation (1:45–54).

The national leadership is steadfast in its rejection of the message. Nevertheless, the plan proceeds. *Israel* will experience judgment for her unfaithfulness (19:41–44; 21:20–24). Her city will be destroyed as a picture of what final judgment is like and as an assurance that God’s program is taking place. Efforts to call Israel to faithfulness continue despite her refusal to embrace God’s care and Promised One.

In the meantime, Jesus forms a *new community* (called “the Way” in the book of Acts). This community is made up of those who *turn* to embrace Jesus’s message and follow in *faith*. Acts is really the second half of Luke’s story, telling how God led the gospel into the heart of the Roman Empire, despite stiff opposition, through the boldness of exemplary witnesses drawing on God’s Spirit.

Distinctives of John

The fourth Gospel's account emphasizes Jesus as the Sent One from God, who acts in unity with the Father. John highlights Jesus's uniqueness from the declaration of the incarnation, through a narration of seven signs, to the use of multiple discourse-dialogues. This Gospel's explicit portrayal of Jesus gives it its literary power.

John's themes focus on *Christology*. Unlike the Synoptics, he speaks little of the kingdom. Rather, it is *eternal life* that is the key theme to express what the Synoptics call the kingdom promise. The emphasis in the term "eternal life" is not only the duration of the life (eternal) but also its quality (i.e., *real, unending life*). Thus, to know the Father and Jesus Christ whom the Father sent is eternal life (17:3). This life is available now (5:24–26). Along with the opportunity is also the prospect of judgment for those who refuse it (3:16–21, 36).

The promise is brought by the *Word/Logos* sent from God in the form of human flesh. The "*I Am*" sayings convey various ways in which Jesus represents the way of God. Each image (light of the world, the resurrection and the life, the good shepherd, the bread of life, the vine) specifies some central role that belongs to Jesus. As *Son*, Jesus only does that which the *Father* shows him. It is the *unity with the Father* in mission that John highlights. Jesus is the hoped-for *Messiah*, as well as the *Son of Man* who ascends and descends between earth and heaven. In this role, he will judge (5:27), be lifted up (3:14), and serve in mediating salvation (3:13; 6:27). Even when Jesus is seen as a *prophet*, it is as a *leader-prophet* like Moses (6:14; 7:40).

Seven *signs* dominate the first two-thirds of the Gospel. The response to them covers the range from rejection (12:37–39) to openness (9:25). Interestingly, unlike the Synoptics, there is no casting out of demons in John. He focuses on acts of healing, restoration, and provision. What these signs especially

highlight is *Jesus's superiority to Jewish institutions* (1:17; 2:19–21; 7:37–39; 9:38; 10:1–18). Most of the miracles take place in a setting of Jewish celebrations and underscore how Jesus provides what the feasts celebrate. At the end of the Gospel, blessing comes to those who have faith without the need for such signs (20:29).

Jesus is seen as the *revelator* of God. He makes the Father and his way known, functioning as light (1:14–18). Jesus's death shows the love of the Father for his own people and is an example to disciples of how they should love (13:1, 11–17). Jesus's death also serves to gather God's people together (10:1–18) and is a means by which the Son and Father are glorified as life is made available through him (3:14–16).

Also of great importance to John is *the Spirit*, also called the Helper (Gk. *paraklētos*; see John 14:16–18, 26; 15:26; 16:7–14; 20:22), the one Jesus sends after his death, a point Acts also highlights. This encourager-enabler leads the disciples into the truth, empowers them for ministry and mission, and convicts the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 14:25–31; 16:8–11). He is the one who sustains life (4:8–10; 7:37–39).

Distinctives of Acts

Acts teaches that the new community is rooted in old promises. It does this by telling how God directed the inclusion of Gentiles and took the message from Jerusalem to Rome. The central figures in the book are Peter (chs. 1–5; 10–12); evangelists from the Hellenistic believing community, such as Stephen and Philip (chs. 6–8); and Paul (chs. 9; 13–28). Discourses are important to the book, whether they be *missionary speeches* to call people to belief or *defense speeches* where the Christian mission is explained. In the end, the book makes it clear how an originally

Jewish movement came to include Gentiles. The gospel can go to all the world because (1) Jesus is Lord and (2) God directed that the gospel go into all the world. The book ends on a note of triumph as the gospel comes to Rome, even though believers suffered in terms of injustice and physical persecution in an effort to get the gospel there.

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