

Why the Bible Matters
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Sadly, Ascension Day is not much celebrated in Protestant churches. On this day, we remember when, as the followers of Jesus watched, Jesus was taken out of their sight, and into heaven (Luke 24:50-51). The response of the community was significant:

They worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem overwhelmed with joy. And they were continuously in the temple praising God. (Luke 24:52-53)

Too often, we draw a line between worship and service, or evangelism and liturgy, or Bible study and social action. Clearly, for the earliest church, formed by the experience of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension, these were unthinkable distinctions. If it was to be the community of proclamation and service, it needed also to be the community of Scripture, prayer,

and praise—as do we.

The lectionary readings for Ascension Day (Luke 24:44-53 and Acts 1:1-11) bridge two books in our New Testament: Luke and Acts. Although separated by the Gospel of John in our Bibles, Luke and Acts belong together, as two parts of a single work. The two books have a similar literary style and share common themes, particularly a concern for women and the poor. But as these readings demonstrate, they are particularly joined by their emphasis upon the risen, victorious, ascended Christ, and his promise of the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4-5; 2:1-4).

The structure of Luke moves inexorably toward Jerusalem. After a prologue describing Jesus' birth and childhood (Luke 1:1—2:52), the gospel is arranged geographically, starting in Galilee (3:1—9:50), then moving to the way to Jerusalem (9:51—19:44, often called Luke's "special section" as it contains a wealth of material unique to this Gospel), and finally reaching its climax in Jerusalem itself (19:45—24:53). This pattern is reversed in Acts, where Jerusalem becomes the center out from which the gospel is carried to the entire world; as Jesus tells his followers, "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem throughout Luke's Gospel. When he at last arrives at Jerusalem, we expect great things—but he is betrayed, captured, tried, condemned and crucified! That, however, is by no means the end. Jesus is raised from the dead. Faithful women see his empty tomb, but the eleven reject their report as nonsense (Luke 24:1-12).

Even when Jesus at last appears to The Eleven in Jerusalem (Luke 24:36-43), they have trouble accepting and understanding what has happened. Jesus shows them the wounds of crucifixion, still visible (Luke 24:38-40), and even eats some broiled fish with them to prove that he is really, physically *there* (Luke 24:41-43).

In the Gospel reading for Ascension Day, Jesus then teaches his followers what his resurrection means:

“These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the Law from Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. (Luke 24:44-45)

This description, emphasizing the *whole* of Scripture, calls to mind the division of the Jewish Bible into *Torah* (the Law, or the books of Moses), *Nebi'im* (the Prophets), and *Kethubim* (the Writings, including the Psalms). The Jewish canon—that is, the collection of books deemed sacred by the community—was fixed by the end of the first century, but long before that official closure this threefold division of the canon was in place.

In his prologue to the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach, a book of the Apocrypha dating to the early second century B.C. sometimes called Ecclesiasticus, ben Sirach’s grandson tells us of his grandfather’s work:

*Numerous and wonderful things have been given to us through **the Law, the Prophets, and the other writings that followed them**. For this reason, it is necessary to praise Israel for education and wisdom. It is also necessary not only for those who read them to gain understanding but also for those who love learning to be of service to strangers when they speak and write. Because of this, my grandfather, Jesus, who had devoted himself more and more to the reading of **the Law, the Prophets, and the other ancestral scrolls**, and had gained enough experience with them, was himself led to compose a work dealing with education and wisdom. His goal was that lovers of learning who were committed to education and wisdom should gain much more by living according to the Law.*

Throughout his own two-volume work, Luke uses Scripture in a very distinctive way. Unlike Matthew, who quotes and cites biblical passages (for example, Matt. 2:17-18), Luke *alludes* to texts, writing in the style of the Greek translation of Jewish Scripture, the Septuagint. For example, the famous Song of Mary, often called the Magnificat after its opening word in Latin (Luke 1:46-55; the new Presbyterian hymnal has a lovely and vigorous setting of this passage) draws freely in style and imagery on the Song of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1-10). According to New Testament scholar I. Howard Marshall, Luke’s “use of a [Septuagint] style must raise the question whether he thought of himself as writing a work of the same kind and thus continuing the ‘salvation history’ which he found in it” (I. Howard Marshall, “An Assessment of Recent Developments,” in *It Is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture* [ed. D. A. Carson and H. G. M. Williamson; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1988], 9).



The degree to which Luke values Scripture is shown, not only in his Septuagintal style, but also in the content of his Gospel. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, found only in Luke, the rich man’s plea that Lazarus be sent back from the dead to warn his brothers is answered by Abraham, “They have Moses and the Prophets. They must listen to them” (Luke 16:29). When the rich man says that if someone came back from the dead, his brothers would be sure to listen, Abraham says, “If they don’t listen to Moses and

the Prophets, then neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16:31). This proves an effective foreshadowing of Luke 24, where Jesus’ resurrection continually prompts doubt and disbelief (with the sterling exception of the women at the tomb!), until he dispels doubt by turning to the Scriptures (Luke 24:27, 44-45). Of course, reading the Scriptures alone is not enough. Only when Jesus himself has “interpreted for them the things written about himself in all the scriptures, starting with Moses and going through all the Prophets” (Luke 24:27) and “opened their minds to understand the scriptures” (Luke 24:45) does their meaning become powerful and apparent. As the two friends in Emmaus say after their encounter with Jesus, “Weren’t our hearts on fire when he spoke to us along the road and when he explained the scriptures for us?” (Luke 24:32).

It is difficult to know precisely what Luke has in mind when he writes,

This is what is written: *the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and a change of heart and life for the forgiveness of sins must be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.* (Luke 24:46-47)

It seems unlikely that he is thinking of a specific text for each claim Jesus makes here about himself. Rather it seems that the *whole* of Scripture extends into, and finds its fulfillment in, the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. This is the point of Luke’s Gospel, and the reason he writes as he does, in the style of the Septuagint, echoing its language and themes. Luke believes that he is writing Scripture, and that Scripture bears witness to God in Christ Jesus.

When I was teaching at Randolph-Macon College in Virginia, I met a Korean-born Christian named Peter Chang. Peter, like me, had done his Ph.D. in Hebrew Bible at Union/PSCE in Richmond, and for a time he worked as an adjunct in our college’s Religious Studies department. We talked often—about common friends at Union, about our discipline of biblical studies, about teaching, but also about faith.

Peter told me how he had become a Christian in South Korea. He was a university student, he said. At this time, he knew no Christians: his family was not Christian; he had no Christian friends. Together with a group of other students, *none* of whom was Christian, Peter began a study of the Gospel of Mark. In the course of that study, they became convinced of the truth of what they were reading. Unguided by missionaries or tracts, unproselytized by Protestants or Catholics, without an evangelist or an altar rail in sight, they gave their lives to the Jesus they met in the pages of Scripture.

I found Peter’s story amazing, but not surprising. In my years of teaching Bible to undergraduates, many of whom had never opened a Bible before, I had many times seen similar evidence of the power of Scripture to change lives. Many times, students have written a note on the last page of their final exams telling me that they have started going to church, or that they have started listening to their pastor’s sermons. One student wrote, “I think I know now what I need to do to be saved.” Scripture has this power, not because the Bible is a magic book, but because in its pages God comes to meet us. Through the words of Scripture, we encounter the Word made flesh, our living Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. That is why the Bible matters.