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on Acts through Revelation

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CHAPTER 1

TYOLOGICAL GEOGRAPHY AND THE PROGRESS OF THE GOSPEL IN ACTS

Acts 1:8, 27:1–28:16; 28:30–31

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KEY POINTS

- Geographical references in Luke-Acts function not only historically, but also theologically, typologically representing the progress of the gospel.
- In Luke's birth narrative (Luke 1–2), the good news begins in Jerusalem, symbolizing the roots of Christianity in the covenant promises of the Old Testament and Judaism.
- Jesus' Journey to Jerusalem, or Travel Narrative (Luke 9–19), is both a historical and theological journey; Jerusalem ambivalently represents both God's glorious salvation and Israel's stubborn resistance to the gospel.
- In Acts the progress of the gospel from Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8) represents both the geographical and ethnic movements from Jerusalem to Rome and from Jews to gentiles.
- Paul's arrival in Rome, the center (not the "end") of the gentile world, confirms the continuing success of the gospel (Acts 28:30–31) and its unstoppable advance to all people everywhere (to the "ends of the earth"). The story is not yet over, though its conclusion has been written.

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Acts is without doubt the most geographically focused book in the New Testament. From beginning to end Acts is all about geography. It begins with an

announcement that the gospel is to progress geographically from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (1:8). It ends with a geographically rich sea voyage from Caesarea Maritima to Rome (27:1–28:16). In this

latter trip alone, Luke refers to more than two dozen geographical locations.

This article, however, is not about the geography of Acts per se, which would be a massive study well beyond our scope.¹ Nor is it about the historical accuracy of Luke's geographical references, though that would also be a profitable study.² It is about Luke's geographical theology. For Luke, the journeys in Luke and Acts have not only historical significance, but also symbolic and theological significance. This article examines how Luke uses geography typologically to symbolize the paradox of the cross and ethnic progress of the gospel from Jews to all people everywhere.

ACTS 1:8 AND THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PLAN OF ACTS

Acts 1:8 has rightly been called the theme verse of the Book of Acts. According to

Luke, following Jesus' resurrection and before ascending to heaven, he appeared to the disciples over a period of forty days, speaking about the central theme of his teaching in the gospel: *the kingdom of God*. Though Jesus had not established the kingdom in the political and nationalistic manner the disciples expected, they still wondered whether this was just a matter of timing. So they ask him, "Lord, are you restoring the kingdom to Israel at this time?" (Acts 1:6).³ While Jesus does not explicitly reject the idea of a physical kingdom on earth, he responds that the "times or seasons" (*χρόνους ἢ καιρούς, chronous ē kairous*) of the kingdom are not to be their concern.⁴ Instead, "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."

1. For detailed discussion of geographical locations in Acts, see the expanded edition of Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012). For Luke's conception of the world in his first century context, see J. M. Scott, "Luke's Geographical Horizon," in *The Book of Acts in Its Graeco-Roman Setting*, ed. D. W. J. Gill and C. Gempf, vol. 2 of *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting*, ed. Bruce W. Winter (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 484–583. For a specialized reading of Acts from the perspective of contemporary spatial theory of geography, see Matthew Sleeman, *Geography and the Ascension Narrative in Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Sleeman argues that spatial geography, particularly the relationship of heaven to earth following the ascension, is critically important in Luke-Acts, yet neglected by those who take a merely cartographical view of geography. For a summary and critique of Sleeman, see Douglas S. Huffman's review in *JETS* 54 (2011): 396–98.

2. For the accuracy of Luke's geographical references in Palestine, see Martin Hengel, "The Geography of Palestine in Acts," in *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, ed. Richard Bauckham, vol. 4 of *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting*, ed. Bruce W. Winter (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 27–78. For Luke's references throughout Acts see Colin J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, ed. Conrad Gempf (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989).

3. All translations are from the NIV unless otherwise stated.

4. For the presence of both present and future eschatology in Luke-Acts, see Darrell L. Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), ch. 20; Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 1:682–88. As Keener points out, "Contrary to the later Gentile church's de-Judaized way of reading Scriptures, Jesus does not deny that Israel's restoration will come. Rather he merely warns the disciples it is not their place to know the *times* (1:7), the sort of detailed chronological map offered in some apocalyptic documents; instead, they must focus on their mission" (1:687; emphasis original).



Key themes of Acts emerge here: (1) the disciples as Jesus' representatives, fulfilling and completing his role in the world; (2) the eschatological Spirit of God as the guiding and empowering agent behind all they say and do; (3) the expansion of the gospel from its roots in Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

AN OUTLINE OF ACTS?

Acts 1:8 is sometimes seen not only as a thematic introduction to Acts, but also the book's outline and structure:

1. The gospel to Jerusalem (chs. 1-7)
2. The gospel to Judea and Samaria (chs. 8-12)
3. The gospel to the ends of the earth (chs. 13-28)

This simple outline has a number of strengths: (1) All the events in chapters 1-7 occur in *Jerusalem*. (2) Acts 8:1, a key transitional statement following the martyrdom of Stephen, specifically refers to *Judea*

and *Samaria* as the places to which the church was scattered. Most of the events in this middle section indeed take place in Judea or Samaria: Philip in Samaria (8:5-25); the Ethiopian eunuch—Judean road to Gaza (8:26-40); Peter's miracles at Lydda and Joppa (9:32-43); the conversion of Cornelius' family at Caesarea Maritima (10:1-11:18). (3) The missionary journeys of Paul that begin in chapter 13 climax with his arrival in Rome—the center of the gentile world and hence symbolic of the gospel's ultimate expansion to the *end of the earth*. In short, the ethnic movement of Acts—from Jews to Samaritans to gentiles—parallels the geographical movement, from Jerusalem/Judea, to Samaria, to the gentile world.

Yet there are also problems with this simple outline. The middle section does not quite work, since it includes not only the expansion of the gospel to Judea and Samaria, but also the establishment of the important church in Antioch, Syria (11:19-30), as well as Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus (9:1-19a), his time

in Damascus (9:19b–25) and his return to Jerusalem (9:26–30). Luke’s narrative in this middle section also returns to *Jerusalem* to recount the execution of James and Peter’s miraculous release from jail (12:1–23). Finally, this simple geographical outline does not do justice to the length of the third section (chs. 13–28), which comprises more than half the book.

There are many other proposals concerning Luke’s structure and design.⁵ Many scholars note the summaries of the gospel’s advance in 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:31, which can yield the following outline:⁶

1. The church in Jerusalem (1:1–6:7)
2. The church in Judea and Samaria (6:8–9:31)
3. The gospel to the gentiles (ethnic, nongeographical) (9:32–12:24)
4. The gospel to Asia (12:25–16:5)
5. The gospel to Europe (but with a return to Ephesus) (16:6–19:20)
6. The gospel to Rome (19:21–28:31)

While this outline nicely combines geographical references and summary statements, it, too, has its problems and inconsistencies. First, there are a number of summary statements in Acts that it does not take into account (2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 11:21; 13:48; 19:10). If Luke were structuring his volume around summaries, one would expect more consistency. Furthermore, there are some important

sections in Acts that are not demarcated with summary statements. The Council of Jerusalem (15:1–35), for example, is often identified as both the structural and theological center point of Acts.⁷ Yet here it is treated as a mere subsection of “the gospel to Asia.” Similarly, it could be argued that Paul’s break with Barnabas and the beginning of the second missionary journey (15:36–41) is a more important transition than the summary statement in 16:5. Furthermore, the designation “the gospel to Asia” used for 12:25–16:5 is much more apropos for Paul’s ministry in Ephesus during his third missionary journey (19:1–41), rather than his outreach into Cyprus and Galatia on his first journey. During Paul’s time in Ephesus, “all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (19:10).

In light of these difficulties, it is probably best not to expect from Luke the kind of precisely delineated outline sought by Western commentators. What is clear throughout Acts is that Luke is focused on *the unrelenting advance of the gospel*, and that this progress has critically important *ethnic* as well as *geographical* dimensions. In the discussion that follows we will trace the geographical and theological significance of the four place names mentioned in Acts 1:8—Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the end of the earth.

THE GOSPEL TO JERUSALEM

The importance of Jerusalem and the temple in Luke-Acts is well document-

5. See Keener, *Acts*, 1:575–81, for various proposals.

6. Adapted from Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1998), 74.

7. I. H. Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 256.



ed.⁸ The Gospel contains thirty-one references to Jerusalem, compared to only thirteen in Matthew and eleven in Mark. The book of Acts has an additional sixty references. The Gospel begins and ends in the temple in Jerusalem. The opening scene has Zechariah offering incense in the temple, where he receives the angelic announcement of the birth of John the Baptist (1:5–25). The closing scene has the disciples returning to Jerusalem after the resurrection “with great joy” and staying “continually at the temple praising God” (24:53).

THE AMBIVALENT SIGNIFICANCE OF JERUSALEM IN LUKE-ACTS

While clearly important for Luke’s theology, Jerusalem plays an ambivalent role in Luke-Acts. On the one hand, Jerusalem is God’s holy city, the place where his salvation will be achieved. The first announcement of salvation comes to Zechariah in the Jerusalem temple (1:11–17; compare Mal 4:5–6). His song of praise at John’s birth celebrates that God is raising up “a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David ... salvation from our enemies” (1:69–71). This salvation is

8. J. K. Elliot, “Jerusalem in Acts and the Gospels,” *NTS* 23 (1976–77), 462–69; M. Bachmann, *Jerusalem und der Tempel: Die geographisch-theologischen Elemente in der lukanischen Sicht des jüdischen Kultzentriums* (Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1980); J. Bradley Chance, *Jerusalem, the Temple, and New Age in Luke Acts* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988); Ron C. Fay, “The Narrative Function of the Temple in Luke-Acts,” *Trinity Journal* 27 (2006): 255–70; Mikeal C. Parsons, “The Place of Jerusalem on the Lukan Landscape: An Exercise in Symbolic Cartography,” in *Literary Studies in Luke-Acts: Essays in Honor of Joseph B. Tyson*, ed. Richard P. Thompson and Thomas E. Phillips (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 155–71; Steve Walton, “A Tale of Two Perspectives? The Place of the Temple in Acts,” in *Heaven on Earth: The Temple in Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Simon Gathercole (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004), 135–49.

subsequently identified by the elderly Simeon, a righteous and devout man of Jerusalem, as the “consolation of Israel,” the coming of the “Lord’s anointed,” and “your salvation ... a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel” (2:25–32). The prophet Anna then identifies this same salvation as the “redemption of Jerusalem” (2:38). It is clear that, for Luke, Jerusalem is both the place where salvation will be achieved and the object and recipient of that salvation.

Yet beside this positive presentation lies a negative one. Jerusalem represents the rejection of God’s messengers, the prophets, and the rejection of the gospel. In his prophetic role, Jesus must press on toward Jerusalem, “for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!” (Luke 13:33). He then pronounces a judgment oracle against the city:

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’” (Luke 13:34–35)

Jerusalem’s unwillingness to be “gathered” (*ἐπισυνάγω*, *episynagō*; 13:34) into the eschatological community of faith by answering Jesus’ call will result in the city’s desolation.

Similarly, as Jesus approaches Jerusalem for the last time he weeps over the

city (Luke 19:41) and again predicts its destruction:

“If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.” (Luke 19:42–44)

Jerusalem’s destruction will result from the city’s unwillingness to recognize God’s “visitation” (*ἐπισκοπή*, *episkopē*; 19:44)⁹ in the person of Jesus the Messiah.

These two passages, together with the parable of the tenant farmers (20:9–18), provide the backdrop for Jesus’ discourse on the Mount of Olives. In response to the disciples’ admiration of the beauty of the temple, Jesus predicts its destruction (21:5–6). Jerusalem will be besieged and destroyed (21:20–24) because of the city’s rejection of God’s visitation in the person of Jesus the Messiah (13:34; 19:44).

It is clear from these references that for Luke “Jerusalem” symbolically represents the obduracy of Israel’s leaders, who are unfaithful guardians over the God’s vineyard and who will reject and murder the owner of the vineyard’s son (20:9–18). The result will be their destruction and the passing of the vineyard’s guardianship to others (20:16).

9. This term is commonly used with reference to both judgment and redemption (Hebrew: *דָּקַף*, *pqd*); judgment: Exod 20:5; 34:7; Num 14:18; Deut 5:9; Job 35:15; redemption/deliverance: Gen 50:24, 25; Exod 3:16; Ruth 1:6; 1 Sam 2:21; Ps 65:9.



Model of Herod's Temple

JERUSALEM AS DESTINATION IN THE
GOSPEL: LUKE'S TRAVEL NARRATIVE

All three of the Synoptic Gospels have the same basic geographical outline. Jesus' public ministry begins in Galilee, with occasional forays into gentile territory. Jesus then heads to Jerusalem for Passover, where he challenges the religious leadership, is arrested, tried, and crucified, and then rises from the dead. In all three, the confession of Peter and Jesus' first passion prediction mark a key turning point, as Jesus begins to define his suffering role (Mark 8:27-33; Matt 16:13-23; Luke 9:18-22). In Mark's Gospel, the section that follows could be entitled "the revelation of the Messiah's suffering" (Mark 8:31-10:52) since Jesus three times predicts his death and then teaches his disciples about cross-bearing discipleship. Yet, surprisingly, the first mention of Jesus' Jerusalem destination does not come until Mark 10:32 ("They were on their way up to Jerusalem"),

just before Jesus' third passion prediction. Jesus then arrives in Jerusalem a few paragraphs later (Mark 11:1-11). In other words, Jerusalem is not explicitly linked to Jesus' suffering fate until Mark 10:32. Matthew "corrects" this by mentioning Jesus' Jerusalem destination in Jesus' first passion prediction (Matt 16:21). Yet Jerusalem is not mentioned again in Matthew until the third passion prediction, where it appears in Mark (Matt 20:17).

Luke's Gospel stands in stark contrast to these other Synoptics, with a much greater emphasis on Jerusalem as Jesus' theological and geographical destination. At the transfiguration, Luke alone relates that the topic of conversation between Jesus, Moses, and Elijah was "his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem" (9:31). Shortly after that, Luke notes the key turning point as Jesus sets out for Jerusalem: "As the time approached for him to be taken

up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem" (9:51). This marks the beginning of Luke's so-called Travel Narrative or Journey to Jerusalem (9:51–19:27). Although Jesus does not head straight for Jerusalem, wandering from place to place, Luke repeatedly reminds us that he is traveling (9:57; 10:1, 38; 18:35; 19:1) and that his destination is Jerusalem (9:51–56; 13:22, 33; 17:11; 18:31; 19:11, 28, 41, 45). What in Mark takes a few paragraphs becomes in Luke an entire phase of Jesus' ministry (ten chapters!). Many of the stories and parables recounted during this journey concern God's love for the outsider: the poor, sinners, tax collectors, women, Samaritans, and gentiles.¹⁰ Also prominent is the theme of reversal. The humble and contrite outsiders receive blessings, while the powerful and prideful insiders suffer loss.

For Luke, then, the journey to Jerusalem symbolically represents his messianic mission, a period of heightened resolve on Jesus' part to reach his Jerusalem goal and so fulfill the suffering role of the Messiah. Here again we see Luke's typological and theological geography in action. Jerusalem ambivalently represents both the place of Jesus' rejection and the place of God's glorious salvation.

FROM JERUSALEM OUTWARD

This strong emphasis on Jerusalem as the theological as well as geographical destination in the Gospel provides insight into

Luke's presentation in Acts, where the gospel moves outward from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. The whole of Luke-Acts can be viewed as a symbolic journey having Jerusalem as its center point. In the Gospel, Jesus journeys toward Jerusalem, which represents the promise of salvation found in the old covenant. At the climax and center point, salvation is achieved through Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension. The message of salvation now goes forth from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (24:47; Acts 1:8). Luke's Gospel represents *salvation achieved*; the book of Acts, *salvation announced*.

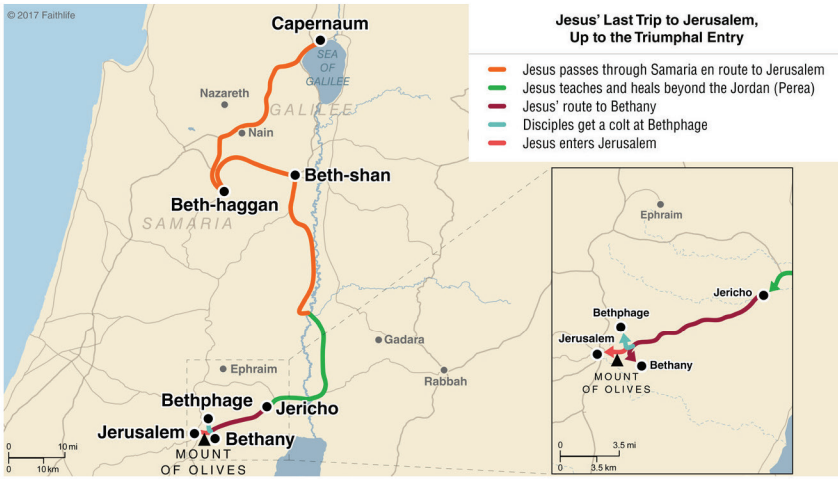
The idea of Jerusalem as the geographical and theological center of the earth has precedent in Judaism.¹¹ Philo says that Jerusalem is "situated in the center of the world."¹² The Book of Jubilees (second century BC), a retelling of the book of Genesis, similarly identifies Jerusalem as the "navel" of the world. In a passage on the table of nations from Genesis 10, the world is portrayed as circular and divided among the three sons of Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, after the flood. The text says, "And he [Noah] knew that the garden of Eden was the holy of holies, and the dwelling of the LORD. And Mount Sinai (was) in the midst of the desert, and Mount Zion (was) in the midst of the navel of the earth. The three of these were created as holy places, one facing the other" (Jubilees 8:19).¹³ This passage, which has

10. Well known parables include the good Samaritan (10:29–37), the rich fool (12:13–21), the great banquet (14:16–24), things lost (sheep, coin, and son; 15:1–32), the rich man and Lazarus (16:19–31), the persistent widow (18:1–8), and the Pharisee and the tax collector (18:9–14).

11. Philip S. Alexander, "Jerusalem as the Omphalos of the World: On the History of a Geographical Concept," *Judaism* 46 (1997): 147–58.

12. Philo, *Legatio ad Gaium* §294 (LCL). Cf. Josephus, *JW*. 3.3.5 §§51–52, who identifies Jerusalem as the center of the country.

13. Translation from Orval S. Wintermute, "Jubilees," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 2:73.



strong political implications, likely arose during the Hasmoneans period and was meant as polemic to defend Jewish territorial claims.¹⁴

Luke, too, presents Jerusalem as the center of the world and the focal point of God’s redemptive activity, but for a different reason. The salvation promised and achieved in Judaism (symbolized by Jerusalem) was all along intended for the whole world. Luke’s geographical typology therefore presents the gospel moving outward from its center both geographically and ethnically.

THE GOSPEL TO JUDEA

The second geographical reference in Acts 1:8 is Judea. Luke refers to Judea eleven times in his Gospel and twelve times in Acts, together more than half the references in the New Testament (forty-five times). Curiously, Luke uses the term in two different ways. Sometimes he uses it of Judea proper, the southern

district of Palestine distinct from Galilee and Samaria. For example, Luke carefully differentiates Pilate’s governorship over Judea from Herod Antipas’ reign in Galilee (Luke 3:1). Similarly Joseph heads south “from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David” (Luke 2:4). Other times Judea for Luke apparently encompasses all of Palestine. After describing Jesus’ ministry in Nazareth and Capernaum, Luke says that, “he kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea” (4:44). At his trial, Jesus’ accusers claim that, “He stirs up the people all over Judea by his teaching, starting in Galilee and all the way here.” (23:5). The same thing happens in Acts. Luke clearly distinguishes Judea from Galilee and Samaria in Acts 9:31, but then treats Judea as encompassing Galilee in 10:37, where John preaches “throughout Judea ... beginning in Galilee.”

Some commentators attribute this to Luke’s inadequate knowledge of

14. Alexander, “Jerusalem as the Omphalos of the World,” 151.

Palestinian geography. This, however, would be surprising in light of Luke's historical and geographical accuracy elsewhere. Dean P. Bécharard notes that Josephus—who hardly has a deficient knowledge of Palestinian geography—uses the term Judea with a similar range of meanings, and that “the apparent ambiguity in Josephus’s use of Judea results from the fact that he employs this term to express not only topographical concept but also a political and theological concept.”¹⁵ Sometimes the term refers strictly to Judea as distinct from Galilee, Samaria, and Perea. Other times it refers to the shifting jurisdictions over which the Romans placed their vassals or governors. For example, Pilate can be called governor of Judea, even though he rules both Judea and Samaria (but not Galilee, the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas). Still other times Josephus uses Judea in a theological sense for what he elsewhere calls “the land of the Jews.” In these contexts, “Judaea often signifies what Josephus and his fellow Jews believe to be the homeland God has apportioned to his chosen people as a lasting inheritance.”¹⁶ Significantly, when Josephus uses the term in this latter sense of the Jewish homeland, he includes Judea, Galilee, and Perea, but not Samaria.¹⁷

Josephus’ use of the term provides insight into Luke’s, and more specifically the outline set forth in Acts 1:8. While Luke is well aware of the distinct prov-

ince of Judea in the south, he is also cognizant that Judea can mean “the Jewish homeland,” so that “Judea” in Acts 1:8 represents not primarily a geo-political region, but the ethnic and religious progress of the gospel. The gospel that began in Jerusalem expands to “Judea,” that is, the wider community of Jews, then to the Samaritans (an intermediary people—see below), and finally to the gentiles, represented by “the ends of the earth.”

THE GOSPEL TO SAMARIA

The third geographical reference in 1:8 is Samaria. The term can refer to the city that was the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel during the monarchy (ninth and tenth centuries BC) but here no doubt refers to the geographical and political region between Judea and Galilee, west of the Jordan River.

BACKGROUND OF THE SAMARITANS

The origin of the Samaritans is controversial.¹⁸ The Samaritans viewed themselves as pure Israelites, the authentic heirs of the religion of Abraham and the patriarchs. Despite conquest and upheaval, they had maintained their ancestral connection to the land. First-century Jews, by contrast, considered the Samaritans to be a half-breed race, descendants of foreign colonists who had intermarried with the Israelites of the northern kingdom after the Assyrian conquest. They considered Samaritan religion to be a syncretism

15. Dean Philip Bécharard, “The Theological Significance of Judaea in Luke-Acts,” in *The Unity of Luke-Acts*, ed. Joseph Verheyden (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1999) 675–91, esp. 677–79.

16. Bécharard, “Theological Significance,” 679–80.

17. Bécharard, “Theological Significance,” 680–81.

18. See Alan D. Crown, ed., *The Samaritans* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989); H. G. M. Williamson and M. Kartveit, “Samaritans,” *DJG* 832–36.