

The New Exodus Motif in Acts 12.1-23

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Abstract

The New Exodus motif has long been observed to be a central thread of Lukan theology.¹ Studies have noticed its centrality to Luke's Gospel and secondarily in Acts of the Apostles. The theme's presence in *Acts* shouldn't be surprising given that *Luke-Acts* is better read as one unifying narrative rather than two separate works.² Studies into this new exodus motif in *Acts* have largely centered around passages such as Acts. 1.8; 13.46-47; 28.25-28. As well as Luke's incorporations of Isaianic theology, and allusions to Ps. 118 (Ps. 117 LXX).³ Scarce attention has been given to the presence of this motif in Acts. 12.1-23. This essay argues that upon a close reading of this unit (Acts. 12.1-23), the new exodus motif is a discernible underlying theme to the scene and deserves greater attention

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- ¹ Otto Piper, "Unchanging Promises: Exodus in the New Testament," in *Interpretation* 11, no. 1 (January 1957): 3-22. M.L. Strauss, "The Davidic Messiah in Luke-Acts: The promise and its fulfillment in Lukan Christology," in *Journal for the Study of New Testament*, suppl. 110, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1995
- ² Henry Cadbury, *The Formation of Luke-Acts*, London: The Macmillan Company, 1927; Michael F. Bird, "The Unity of Luke-Acts in Recent Discussion," in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 29, no. 4 (June 2007): 425-48; Christopher Kavin Rowe, "History, Hermeneutics and the Unity of Luke-Acts," in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 28, no. 2 (December 2005): 131-57.
- ³ David W. Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament, 2. Reihe: 130. Mohr Siebeck, 2000; J. Kwon Hyuk "Psalm 118 (117 LXX) in Luke-Acts: Application of a 'New Exodus Motif,'" in *Verbum et Ecclesia* 30, no. 2 (September 1, 2009); Bryan D. Estelle. *Echoes of Exodus : Tracing a Biblical Motif*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2018.

in future explorations into the presence of the new exodus motif in *Acts*.

Introduction

The New Exodus motif has long been observed to be a central thread of Lukan theology. Studies have noticed its centrality to Luke's Gospel and secondarily in Acts of the Apostles. Given that *Luke-Acts* is better read as one unifying narrative rather than two separate works this isn't surprising. Studies into this new exodus motif in *Acts* have largely centered around passages such as Acts. 1.8; 13.46-47; 28.25-28; as well as Luke's incorporations of Isaianic theology and allusions to Ps. 118 (Ps. 117 LXX).⁴ Scarce attention has been given to the presence of the new exodus motif in Acts. 12.1-23 and how this passage contributes to the development of the theme in *Acts*. This essay argues that upon a close reading of the aforementioned literary unit (Acts. 12.1-23), the new exodus motif is a central theme to the scene and should be given greater attention in the future when discerning the presence of the new exodus motif in *Acts*.

Given the presence of the exodus motif in Luke's theology, it shouldn't be surprising that the theme would surface in several areas throughout *Acts*; however, more attention should be given to Luke's subtle ways of developing theology in Acts 12.1-23.⁵ The narrative structure of Acts 12.1-23 as well as its characterization point strongly to the presence of the new exodus motif in the scene.⁶ Less attention throughout this essay

⁴ J. Kwon Hyuk "Psalm 118 (117 LXX) in Luke-Acts: Application of a 'New Exodus Motif,'" in *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 2009; Bryan D. Estelle. *Echoes of Exodus : Tracing a Biblical Motif*, 2018; See comments on common authorship from D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, "Acts," in *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. Zondervan, 2005

⁵ Jindřich Manek, "The New Exodus in the Books of Luke," *Novum Testamentum* 2, no. 1 (January 1, 1957): 8-23; I. Howard Marshall, *Luke-- Historian and Theologian*. Paternoster P., 1970.

⁶ See the use of these narrative categories in Bar-Efrat Shimon, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, Bible, and Literature Series. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997; Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* :

will be given to a holistic analysis of the new-exodus motif throughout *Acts* but rather to careful exegesis of Acts 12.1-23 and its necessity in being a central passage to the unfolding motif in Lukan theology. Attention will be given to the linguistic, literary, historical, and theological analysis of the scene. The essay will conclude with some general applications of this passage for pastoral ministry and the life of the church.

Literary Analysis: Unity of the Narrative

Firstly, despite the existence of a couple of scenes in Acts 12.1-23, there is good reason for reading this section as one literary unit. Acts 12.24 does not neatly fit with the previous scene and serves as a clear break from the development of the plot following 11.29 much more naturally. The conjunction *de* is most naturally rendered here as “but,” rather than “and,” thus tying the following two narratives to the ‘sending the relief to the believers living in Judea’ (Acts. 11.29).⁷ Luke likely sandwiches 12.1-23 within the story of the famine during the reign of Claudius (11.28-29).⁸ Due to this compositional technique, it is best to read Acts. 12-1-23 as one unit.

Narrative Structure and Characterization

Several observations into the structure and characterization of the narrative in Acts 12.1-23 suggest the exodus motif is in view. One of the first clues to tip off the reader is the presence of the implied author in 12.3. The narrator interrupts the story

Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading, The Indiana Literary Biblical Series. Indiana University Press, 1985.

⁷Daniel B. Wallace, “The Role of Conjunctions,” in *The Basics of New Testament Syntax : An Intermediate Greek Grammar*. Zondervan, 2009; Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. University of Chicago Press, 2000.

⁸James W Barker, “Ancient Compositional Practices and the Gospels: A Reassessment,” in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 135, no. 1 (2016): 109–21; Müller Mogens and Jesper Tang Nielsen, *Luke’s Literary Creativity*, the Library of New Testament Studies/International Studies in Christian Origins (New York: T&T Clark), 2016.

with what he understands to be valuable information in introducing the scene. It is unlikely this serves merely chronological purposes given there are few instances in *Luke-Acts* where the narrator's presence is felt. This is especially telling because *Luke-Acts* is narrated in the third person rather than the first or second person. The narrator's presence should be read as preparation for discerning a unifying theme throughout.

The foil between Peter and the Jews aiding in his arrest is telling of the unit's thematic development. The Jews mentioned in this scene fail to recognize the fulfillment of the Passover in the messiah who was crucified and risen to lead them out of sin and death. The very essence of Peter's proclamation. These minor characters serve to highlight the fulfillment of the exodus through Israel's messiah, embodied or represented by Peter's character.⁹ A touch of irony can be observed here as well. The Jews were pleased by James' martyrdom and Peter's arrest, both of whom had been proclaiming the good news of God's redemption for his people. Rather than commemorating their exodus from bondage at the hand of God, they are "pleased," by the bondage of another.

Additionally, the foil between Peter and Herod serves to develop this theme.¹⁰ Peter's imprisonment and exodus are center stage, taking up the majority of the unit's narration time.¹¹ Following the disjuncture in 12.6 Peter is portrayed as obedient to the

⁹See characterization in Shimon, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 1997; and Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative : Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, 1985.

¹⁰See comments of use of King Herod, Carl R. Holladay, *Acts : A Commentary*, The New Testament Library, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016; as well as Stephen Mead, "Dressing up Divine Reversal: A Narrative-Critical Reading of the Death of Herod in Acts 12:19B-24," in *Restoration Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (2018): 227-34, further discussion on the characterization of Herod in Acts 12. 19b-24, as well as further discussion of Acts. 12.19b-24 and the unity of the rest of the pericope; Craig S. Keener, "Peter's Ministry Beyond Jerusalem," in *Acts: Exegetical Commentary* vol. 2 (Baker Academic, 2013).

¹¹See 'narration time,' in *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 1997.

angel of the Lord who “leads him out,” from prison.¹² This stands in sharp contrast to the character of Herod in the following episode (12.20-23). This literary foil between Peter and Herod is one of the most telling literary features of an underlying new exodus motif. Peter is freed by an angel of the Lord, while Herod is *slain* by an angel of the Lord (cf. Ex. 12.12-13; Jub. 49. 1-6). Peter is humble, obedient, and gives glory to God (12.11). On the other hand, Herod is proud and does not give glory to God (12.22-23). The interaction of these two characters with the angel of the Lord in the narrative world of 12.1-23 parallels the interaction between the Egyptians, the Israelites, and the angel of the Lord in the exodus account.¹³

Contextual Tie to the Transfiguration Scene

It should be noted that *Acts* is better read as acts of Christ rather than acts of the apostles or acts of the Holy Spirit.¹⁴ It is Christ who is continuing his earthly ministry, post-ascension, through the hands of his apostles (cf. Acts. 1.1: *epoiesamen peri pavton, o theophile, on erxato o Iesous poiein te kai didaskein*). And through the work of the Holy Spirit in the church. It is through this lens that the new exodus motif in both *Luke* and *Acts* becomes far less vague. Especially in connection between the transfiguration and Peter’s escape from prison in Jerusalem (Acts 11.2ff). The scene of the transfiguration serves as perhaps the most explicit reference to the new-exodus motif in all of Lukan theology. Specifically, Lk. 9.31: *oi ophthentes en doxō elegon ten exodon autou en emellen pleroun en Ierousalem*

¹²See the structural elements of historical narrative in John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch As Narrative : A Biblical-Theological Commentary*, Library of Biblical Interpretation, Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Academic, 2017.

¹³For a further treatment on characterization in Luke-Acts see Frank Dicken and Julia A. Snyder, *Characters and Characterization in Luke-Acts* (Library of New Testament Studies: 548. T&T Clark, 2018).

¹⁴Alan J. Thompson, *The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus : Luke’s Account of God’s Unfolding Plan*, New Studies in Biblical Theology: Volume 27 (InterVarsity Press, 2013).

(“those appearing in glory were telling of his exodus, which he was about to fulfill in Jerusalem”).

A few things to note. Luke ties Christ’s *exodos* (“exodus”) to Jerusalem, as well as its *pleroō* (“fulfillment”) in Jerusalem.¹⁵ In *Luke-Acts* this ties Christ’s fulfillment of the exodus primarily to his death and resurrection but also to his ascension and sending of the Spirit at Pentecost in Jerusalem (Acts 1.4).¹⁶ It is within this framework, that Christ rescuing Peter in Jerusalem by an angel of the Lord can be read as a continuation of this theme. It is from Jerusalem that Christ brings his gospel message to all of Judea and Samaria and the ends of the earth. He faces similar opposition through his apostles that he faced in Jerusalem.

Feast of Unleavened Bread

It is because this detail is added at the introduction or prologue to the unit (12.1-5) and its theological implications would have been understood by a first-century Jewish audience, that it needs further elaboration. The feast of Passover and the feast of unleavened bread were synonymous in Second Temple Judaism, although the feast of Passover preceded the feast of unleavened bread (cf. *m. Pesahim*. 1.1-4).¹⁷ The week of Passover was observed through offerings, prayer, and the avoidance of any food with leaven.¹⁸ Within Second Temple

¹⁵See “πληρωω,” p. 784-792 in Moisés Silva ed. *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*. Second edition, ed. by Moisés Silva, Zondervan, 2014; Jindřich Manek, “The New Exodus in the Books of Luke,” *Novum Testamentum*, 8-23.

¹⁶Strauss, “The Davidic Messiah in Luke-Acts: The promise and its fulfillment in Lukan Christology,” 261-336.

¹⁷Daniel K. Falk, “Festivals and Holy Days,” in *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, ed. John J. Collins et. al. (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010) 636-45; B. D. Chilton “Festivals and Holy Days: Jewish,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. Craig. A. Evans et. al. (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2000) 371-78.

¹⁸J. B. Seegal, *The Hebrew Passover : From the Earliest Times to A.D. 70*, London Oriental Series: V. 12. (Oxford University Press, 1963).

Judaism, several other practices developed that marked this time including reciting prayers and cantations within familial contexts (cf. 11Q5 27:7-8; Jub. 49.1-23; Mk. 14.26; Ps. 113-118; Wis. 18.7-9; *Phil. Spec. Leg.* 2.148, and Ex. 15.1-21).¹⁹ Of special interest are recurring prayers throughout the week that Jews, including Peter, would've been praying or recalling this time of year.²⁰

One such collection of prayers specifically for Passover and the beginning of unleavened bread are preserved in fragments such as 4Q503-505. These prayers include benedictions to the God of Israel as well as requests for redemption and suggest petitions for protection from various plagues.

Blessed be the God of Israel...Today he renewed...in the fourteenth of the gates of light...for use to rule...teen companies of...}...the heat of the sun...when it crosses{...with the strength of his powerful hand...peace be upon you, Israel.

*Blessed be the God of Israel who hides...before him in each unit of his glory. And that night...eternal and to give him thanks. And our deliverance at the beginning of...the rotations of the luminaries. 4Q503 frags. 1-3.*²¹

It is mere speculation to propose any specific prayers Peter and others may have been reciting during his arrest and imprisonment (cf. Acts 12.5, 12). However, these types of prayers give us a window into the conscious-theological milieu of devout second-temple Jews in first-century Jerusalem during Passover. Including Jewish Christians as well. For Jewish Christians, this would've likely assumed a distinctly messianic

¹⁹Daniel K. Falk, "Festivals and Holy Days," in *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, 636-45.

²⁰Falk, 636-45.

²¹Martinez Garcia Florentino, and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition* (Brill, 2000).

flavor. That is, hope in future rescue grounded in Christ's passion and resurrection not merely rescue from Egypt. Christ has fulfilled the Passover for his people and as a result, can continually redeem his people.

For a Jewish-Christian reader of Acts. 12.1-23, this would've undoubtedly been the historical-religious milieu leaping off the page. Especially due to the commemoration of these events amidst Peter's imprisonment and deliverance. The text's reference to the festival of unleavened bread and the occurrence of these events during Passover (cf. 12.6; "the very night *before* Herod was going to bring him out,") no doubt would've had theological significance for Luke and his audience (cf. Acts 12.11-12; 17). Christ has redeemed his people from sin and death in Jerusalem and will continue to redeem his people to advance his message.

Lexical Analysis—Luke's Use of *exaireo*

In the NT *exaireo* occurs only 8x (Matt. 5.29; 18.9; Acts 7.10; 7.34; 12.11; 23.27; 26.17; Gal. 1.4), and BDAG renders its range of usage as either "to take out," or "to rescue."²² Despite its only eight occurrences in the NT, it occurs 140x in the LXX. Within these eight occurrences in the NT 5x are found in Acts. It may reflect Luke's tendency toward a distinctly Septuagint style of Greek or the use of mimesis.²³ The word occurs frequently in secular Greek literature explaining its entrance in the LXX. In secular literature, it occurs 1043x with its most common rendering being, "to take out."²⁴ But can also mean, "to set free or deliver,"²⁵ which is how it is commonly rendered

²²Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2000.

²³Darrell L. Bock, "Introduction to Acts," in *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Baker Academic, 2007); W. K. L. Clark, "The Use of the Septuagint in Acts," in *The Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 2, ed. F. J. Foakes-Jackson, et. al. (London: Macmillan, 1922).

²⁴H.G. Liddell, R. Scott, and H.S. Jones, *A Greek English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940).

²⁵H.G. Liddell, *A Greek English Lexicon*, 1940.

in the LXX especially when it is paired with the preposition *ek* (cf. Bar. 4.18, 21; Ezek. 34.27; Dan. 3.17; 88; etc...).

For the purposes of this essay, it most interestingly is used in Ex. 3.8 and 4x in Ex. 18 LXX, which in every one of these occurrences, recalls the exodus from Egypt. In Ex. 18 it refers exclusively to Israel’s redemption from the hands of the Egyptians and Pharaoh:

<p>ἐξελέσθαι αὐτοὺς ἐκ χειρὸς Αἰγυπτίων (Ex. 3.8)</p>	<p>ἐξείλατο αὐτοὺς κύριος ἐκ χειρὸς Φαραω καὶ ἐκ χειρὸς τῶν Αἰγυπτίων (Ex. 18.8)</p>	<p>ὅτι ἐξείλατο τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ ἐκ χειρὸς Αἰγυπτίων καὶ ἐκ χειρὸς Φαραω (Ex. 18.10).</p>
<p>ὅτι ἐξείλατο αὐτοὺς ἐκ χειρὸς Αἰγυπτίων καὶ ἐκ χειρὸς Φαραω (Ex. 18.9)</p>	<p>καὶ ἐξείλατό με ἐκ χειρὸς Φαραω (Ex. 18.4)</p>	<p>καὶ ἐξείλατό με ἐκ χειρὸς Ἡρώδου (Acts. 12.11; cf. Ex. 18.4)</p>

Figure 1

Notice the phraseology employed above by Luke in Acts. 12.11, which not only matches usage in *Exodus* but also verbatim matches Ex. 18.4 LXX—which is similarly, *another character summary, by Eliezer of, God’s deliverance*²⁶□ This undoubtedly qualifies as an allusion especially when recalling the rare usage of *exaireo* in *Luke-Acts* as well as the rest of the NT. Moreover, this exact phraseology is also employed by Luke during Stephen’s retelling of the exodus in Acts. 7.10, 34 even furthering this likelihood. In sum, the usage of *exaireo* in Acts. 12.1-23 when referring to the “hands of Herod,” exactly parallels usage in *Exodus* when referring to the “hands of

²⁶καὶ τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ δευτέρου Ελιεζερ λέγων Ὁ γὰρ θεὸς τοῦ πατρὸς μου βοηθός μου καὶ ἐξείλατό με ἐκ χειρὸς Φαραω (Ex. 18.4 LXX).

Pharaoh,” and so is likely an allusion to the exodus whether conscious or unconscious by Luke.

Theological Analysis—A New Exodus Missiology

The presence of the new exodus theme in Acts. 12.1-23 more interestingly contributes to a richer understanding of Luke’s missiology. However, no doubt the new exodus theme most famously contributes to an understanding and portrayal of salvation rooted in Old Testament imagery. In the case of Acts 12.1-23, the new exodus motif is mapped onto the unfolding advancement of the church’s mission to bring the message of Christ to all of Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth (cf. Acts 1.8). This is perhaps the most intriguing logical development that can contribute to a richer theology of *Acts* and *Luke-Acts* more broadly.

The mission of the church carried forward successfully by Christ’s universal lordship is a dominant thread in *Acts*.²⁷ However, it is the means by which this advancement is accomplished as well as the various obstacles the church faces which add depth and complexity to the narrative.²⁸ It may be tempting for the biblical theologian to read any presence of the new-exodus motif as only relevant for an unfolding soteriology or Christology in *Luke-Acts*. Rather, Acts. 12.1-23 contributes to a biblical theology that Christ the new exodus, can and will sufficiently overcome these obstacles as the risen, ascended, and victorious Lord. Christ leads the church out of such otherwise deterrents which oppose the gospel’s advancement. Insofar as we might add, the church is functioning within its mission presented by *Acts* (cf. Acts 1.8; 13.47).

²⁷Craig S. Keener, “The Spirit and the Mission of the Church in Acts 1-2,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 62, no. 1 (March 2019): 25–45; Alan J. Thompson, *The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus: Luke’s Account of God’s Unfolding Plan*, New Studies in Biblical Theology: Volume 27 (InterVarsity Press, 2013).

²⁸Frank Dicken and Julia A. Snyder, *Characters and Characterization in Luke-Acts*, 2018.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated the question of whether or not the new-exodus motif is an underlying theme of Acts 12.1-23. Upon careful analysis, the new exodus motif as the thematic thread of Acts 12.1-23 is very likely. Firstly, observations from the narrative structure of the pericope and its characterization suggest parallels to the Exodus narrative. Moreover, contextual ties between Acts 12.1-23 and other passages in *Luke-Acts* such as the transfiguration scene (Lk. 9.28-36). Secondly, observations from the religio-historical context of Acts 12.1-23 are suggestive of this new-exodus theme's presence in the text as well. Most notably, the mention of these events during Passover (12.3). It is argued that the theological milieu of the events surrounding the Passover in Second Temple Judaism points toward the theological significance of Peter's exodus from prison Herod's death for the primitive church and Luke's inclusion of the unit. Thirdly, language and phraseology from Peter's summarization of his rescue from prison strongly alludes to recounts of the exodus, especially Eliezer's in Ex. 18.4. And finally, how the pericope fits within Lukan theology across *Acts*. Therefore, Acts 12.1-23 should be incorporated into further investigation of the new exodus motif in *Acts* as well as Luke's understanding of the church's mission and Christological advancement.

Significance and Application

It may be tempting in a spiritual formation context to see the relevance of this pericope as solely applicable to evangelism and missions. However, to see the relevance of Acts 12.1-23 for the process of spiritual formation, it would be helpful to broaden our definitions of evangelism and missions to include more of the biblical data (cf. Matt. 28. 19-20). There are two sides to missions, or the great commission as defined in the New Testament. The church's mission undoubtedly includes discipleship. Nor is this theme absent in *Acts* (cf. Acts 9.26-27; 11.22-26; 15.23-29). It is through our discipleship and

relationships that we can be confident in the fact that Christ will eventually overcome any obstacles that stand in our way.

However, throughout various periods of desolation and consolation in the life of the believer, it can be tempting to doubt if we are truly in Christ and that Christ is in us. The notion that Christ is victorious and will eventually lead us out of anything that hinders spiritual growth and discipleship may sound all well and good until we doubt our union with Christ because of patterns of sin in our lives. This can lead to what has been called the “sanctification gap,” and eventually to a type of “moral formation,” devoid of Christ.²⁹ At this juncture, it might be helpful to point out that the very Peter who is led out of prison is the very Peter who denied Christ three times (Lk. 22. 54-62).

What we see modeled in Peter also happens to be the process by which we are transformed. When we fail Christ repeatedly, perhaps three times in the span of one conversation, do we return to him? The primary way in which we know that we know Christ and Christ knows us is whether or not we turn to him when we feel guilt and shame (cf. Lk. 15.11-32). This is the means by which we depend on the Spirit and are formed by Christ rather than ourselves. Take the most “spiritually mature,” pastor and then take the person struggling with addiction and doesn’t see a way out. Maybe both struggle with several habitual sins. When guilt and shame are overpowering do we run to the cross as a remedy? However, for many of us who have been doing this, it may often feel like nothing is happening. Nothing seems to work. However, Christ who has overcome the world can and will overcome any barrier to our

²⁹John H. Coe, “Spiritual Theology: A Theological-Experiential Methodology for Bridging the Sanctification Gap,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 2, no. 1 (Spr 2009): 4–43; John H. Coe, “Resisting the Temptation of Moral Formation: Opening to Spiritual Formation in the Cross of the Spirit,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 1, no. 1 (Spr 2008): 54–78.

transformation in so far as we trust him to do so by returning to him again and again.

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