

# Reimagining Sacred Space in the *Acts of the Apostles*: A Socio-Rhetorical and Historical Study for Nigerian Religious Contexts

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## Abstract

This article investigates how the *Acts of the Apostles* redefines sacred space and mediates divine power through ordinary locations transformed by the Spirit's presence. Using Philip Esler's social scientific historical model alongside Vernon Robbins' socio-rhetorical criticism, the study analyses seventeen pericopes in Acts that portray the transformation of houses, public squares, and temples into ritual geographies of divine activity. It argues that Luke's theology of space is not static but dynamic. Holiness relocates from the Jerusalem temple to Spirit-filled communities across social and ethnic boundaries. The analysis demonstrates that sacred space in Acts is constructed through communal prayer, hospitality, and proclamation. This dynamic informs an African theology of space in which divine presence inhabits contextual realities. The article's unique contribution lies in integrating social scientific historical and socio-rhetorical exegesis with African phenomenology of sacred geography to formulate a contextual theology of sacred space relevant for Nigerian religious thought and national transformation.

**Keywords:** *Acts of the Apostles*; Esler; Robbins; Sacred Space; Social Scientific Historical, Socio-Rhetorical Criticism

## 1. Introduction

The concept of sacred space pervades biblical theology and the anthropology of religion. In the *Acts of the Apostles*, sacred geography shifts from the temple to the dispersed community of believers empowered by the Holy Spirit. Early Christian experiences occurred not in monumental temples but in domestic or contested public places. Pentecost, communal worship, healings, and house gatherings happened in socially diverse contexts. This study explores how Acts constructs sacred space as relational and mobile, revealing God's presence across cultural boundaries.

A persistent question drives this research: How does Acts redefine sacred space in relation to divine power, and what theological and contextual insights emerge for Nigerian understandings of sacred geography? Previous scholarship has examined temple imagery or Luke's pneumatology. Yet few have integrated Esler's social scientific historical model with Robbins' socio-rhetorical analysis to illuminate the social and rhetorical dynamics of space.

The research gap lies in the absence of a comprehensive study that combines these methodological approaches within an African theological framework. Most studies treat Luke's spatial theology in isolation

from contemporary African cosmologies. This creates a scholarly void in contextual biblical interpretation that this article addresses.

The objectives are threefold. First, to exegete selected pericopes in Acts that depict sacred space. Second, to interpret them using socio-historical, socio-cultural, and socio-rhetorical perspectives. Third, to develop an African contextual theology of sacred space.

The study is significant because Nigerian Traditional Religion regards land, shrines, and family compounds as loci of divine power (Okoronkwo, 2025; 2024a; 2024b). By juxtaposing Acts' theology of space with indigenous perceptions, the research contributes to dialogue between biblical theology and African cosmology. The theoretical framework combines Esler's socio-historical and socio-cultural models with Robbins' socio-rhetorical criticism. This integration enables a multidimensional reading of Acts that accounts for social dynamics, cultural codes, and rhetorical strategies.

The article proceeds through a literature review, methodological explanation, textual analysis, theological discussion, and an evaluation of impact and relevance. Each section builds toward a comprehensive understanding of sacred space in Acts and its implications for Nigerian Christianity.

## **2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Sacred Space in Biblical and Theological Scholarship**

Classical studies of sacred space emphasised the axis mundi that connects heaven and earth. Mircea Eliade's foundational work *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959) established this paradigm. In biblical theology, the Jerusalem temple functions as such an axis. However, Luke's narrative in Acts dissolves this spatial exclusivity. Wright (2012, 211) observes that Luke presents the Spirit as the new locus of divine presence. This theological shift fundamentally alters how early Christians understood divine geography.

Keener (2015, 628) argues that Acts redefines sacred space through the Spirit's mobility. The Spirit descends not only in Jerusalem but also in Samaria, Caesarea, and beyond. This geographical expansion challenges temple-centred theology. Gaventa (2016, 44) highlights how Acts relocates holiness into community life. The gathered believers become the new temple. Their corporate existence embodies divine presence more fully than physical structures.

Recent scholarship has explored Luke's spatial theology from various angles. Some focus on the temple's symbolic role in Luke-Acts. Others examine the house church as an alternative sacred space. Yet these

studies often treat spatial theology in isolation from social and rhetorical dynamics. A comprehensive analysis requires integrating multiple methodological perspectives.

In African scholarship, the spatial dimension of theology has received attention from scholars like Mbiti and Olupona. Mbiti (2015, 47) argues that African religion is geographically grounded in sacred sites. These sites connect communities to ancestors and divine powers. Olupona (2019, 93) describes sacred space as social memory. Places become holy through repeated ritual and communal narrative.

However, the application of socio-rhetorical and socio-historical models to Acts within an African theological frame remains underdeveloped. Although a few scholars have begun exploring such intersections—such as Etukumana's (2024) socio-political reading of Luke—Acts within African Pentecostal cosmologies and Dube's (2000, 2012) postcolonial feminist engagements with Luke's missionary narratives—these efforts remain limited in scope. Earlier methodological contributions by African biblical scholars, including Ukpong's (1995, 2002) inculturation hermeneutics and Adamo's (2001, 2015) African cultural hermeneutics, provide important foundations but do not yet offer sustained socio-rhetorical analyses of Acts. Likewise, broader theological reflections by Bediako (1992, 2004) and Pobee (1979) highlight resonances between early Christian and African cosmologies but stop short of detailed textual engagement with Luke's narrative strategies. Consequently, few studies have attempted to bridge Luke's first-century context with contemporary African cosmologies in a way that integrates socio-historical reconstruction with African worldviews. This gap presents an opportunity for methodological innovation and contextual interpretation.

## **2.2 Esler's Socio-Historical and Socio-Cultural Models**

Philip Esler's socio-historical approach situates biblical texts within the social world of their production. The method focuses on group identity, conflict, and cultural codes (Esler 1994, 9). Esler employs social-scientific categories to interpret early Christian behaviour. These categories include honour, kinship, purity, and patronage. They provide analytical tools for understanding ancient Mediterranean society.

Esler's socio-cultural model examines how these categories shape textual meaning. In Acts, spatial practices express boundary negotiation between Jews and Gentiles. Temple attendance signals Jewish identity and covenant faithfulness. Household meetings represent inclusive fellowship that transcends ethnic boundaries. The temple becomes a contested site of authority. Households become symbols of radical inclusion (Esler 2015, 188).

Esler's framework illuminates Luke's narrative strategy. Luke portrays the early church navigating complex social boundaries. Jewish Christians maintain temple worship while embracing Gentile believers. This tension creates narrative conflict that drives the Acts storyline. Sacred space becomes a focal point for identity negotiation. Where and how communities gather reveals theological commitments.

The socio-cultural model also highlights honour dynamics in ancient society. Public miracles at temple precincts challenge priestly authority. Household hospitality confers patron status on converts like Lydia and Cornelius. These social dynamics shape how sacred space functions rhetorically and theologically. Esler's approach thus provides essential context for interpreting Luke's spatial theology.

### **2.3 Robbins' Socio-Rhetorical Model**

Vernon Robbins developed socio-rhetorical criticism to explore how texts create meaning through interacting textures. These textures include inner-textual (rhetorical argument), inter-textual (allusions), social-cultural, ideological, and sacred dimensions (Robbins 1996, 95). Each texture contributes to the text's persuasive power and theological vision.

The inner texture examines repetitive patterns, narrative structure, and argumentative logic. In Acts, repeated phrases like "with one accord" create rhetorical cohesion. They emphasise communal unity as essential to sacred space. The inter-textual dimension reveals how Luke echoes Old Testament temple theology while subverting it. References to Solomon's temple and Moses' tabernacle connect Acts to Israel's story. Yet Luke reinterprets these symbols through Christ and the Spirit.

The social-cultural texture explores how texts reflect and shape social relationships. Luke's portrayal of household churches reflects urban patronage systems. The ideological texture uncovers the text's value commitments. Luke privileges Spirit-led inclusion over ritual purity. He values mission over religious boundary maintenance.

The sacred texture exposes theological claims about divine presence and power. Robbins' model reveals how Luke persuades readers to envision sacred geography beyond physical structures. God's presence is not confined to temples. The Spirit sanctifies any space where believers gather in Jesus' name. This theological vision challenges both Jewish and Greco-Roman assumptions about sacred space.

Applying this model to Acts reveals Luke's rhetorical strategy. He constructs a narrative world in which ordinary places become extraordinary through divine encounter. Houses, streets, and marketplaces host

miraculous events. These spatial transformations communicate theological truths about God's accessibility and the gospel's universal scope.

## **2.4 Research Gap and Theoretical Integration**

Although many studies examine Luke's temple theology, few integrate Esler's socio-historical insights with Robbins' rhetorical analysis to interpret sacred space. Some scholars employ one method or the other. But combining both approaches yields richer exegetical results. Esler illuminates the social forces shaping sacred geography. Robbins explains how Luke constructs persuasive rhetoric about space.

This article bridges that methodological gap by analysing how Acts constructs sacred geography both rhetorically and socially. The integration reveals multiple dimensions of Luke's spatial theology. Social-scientific analysis shows how early Christians navigated cultural boundaries through spatial practices. Rhetorical analysis demonstrates how Luke persuades readers to embrace a new theology of place.

The study further extends the discussion into African theology. Luke's fluid sacred space resonates with African Traditional Religion's understanding of spiritual presence embedded in land and ritual. Yet Acts universalises sacred space through Christ and the Spirit. This universalising move creates opportunities for dialogue between biblical theology and African cosmologies. Both traditions affirm divine presence in ordinary contexts. Both value communal gathering as sacred activity.

The unique contribution of this study lies in demonstrating how socio-rhetorical and socio-historical exegesis can inform contextual theology. By reading Acts through African phenomenology of space, the study generates insights relevant for Nigerian Christianity. It shows how biblical texts speak to contemporary questions about sacred geography, religious identity, and communal worship.

## **3. Methodology and Hermeneutical Approach**

The study employs a qualitative, exegetical, and comparative design. This methodological framework integrates textual analysis with social-scientific interpretation and contextual application. The approach is interdisciplinary, drawing on biblical studies, sociology, and African theology.

### **3.1 Primary Data and Text Selection**

The primary data consist of seventeen pericopes from Acts. These passages were selected based on explicit references to sacred space or spatial transformation. The *pericopes* include Acts 1:4–14; 2:1–13;

2:42–47; 3:1–10; 4:1–4; 5:12–16; 6:8–15; 7:44–53; 9:1–19; 10:1–48; 16:13–15; 17:22–34; 18:1–8; 19:8–10; 21:26–30; 22:17–21; 28:23–31.

These texts span the entire Acts narrative. They represent diverse geographical settings: Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, Asia Minor, Macedonia, Greece, and Rome. The selection captures Luke's progressive redefinition of sacred space as the gospel spreads. Each pericope contributes to understanding Luke's spatial theology.

### **3.2 Exegetical Steps**

The analysis follows five steps. First, textual identification and historical context. Each pericope is situated within Luke's narrative sequence and first-century Mediterranean culture. Historical background illuminates social dynamics shaping the text.

Second, lexical and semantic analysis of spatial terms. Key Greek words include *topos* (place), *oikos* (house), *hieron* (temple), and *hagios* (holy). Semantic ranges are examined to understand how Luke employs spatial vocabulary. Word studies reveal theological connotations and narrative patterns.

Third, narrative and rhetorical structure analysis using Robbins' inner texture. This step identifies repetitive patterns, narrative progression, and argumentative logic. Rhetorical devices like chiasm, inclusio, and parallelism are noted. The analysis uncovers how Luke structures spatial narratives to communicate theological meaning.

Fourth, interpretation through Esler's socio-historical categories. This step applies social-scientific models to understand group identity, honour dynamics, kinship patterns, and purity concerns. The analysis explores how spatial practices reflect and shape early Christian identity.

Fifth, contextual theological synthesis. Exegetical findings are integrated with African theology to generate contextual insights. The synthesis compares Luke's spatial theology with Nigerian Traditional Religion's understanding of sacred geography. Theological implications for contemporary Nigerian Christianity are drawn.

### **3.3 Justification of Method**

Esler's model illuminates the communal and cultural forces shaping sacred geography. His socio-historical approach explains why certain spaces became significant for early Christians. Social-scientific categories

reveal how spatial practices negotiated identity boundaries. This dimension is essential for understanding Acts as a historical document.

Robbins' rhetorical approach interprets how Luke constructs persuasion and theological meaning. His model shows how narrative strategies communicate theological vision. This dimension is essential for understanding Acts as persuasive literature.

Together they provide a multi-dimensional hermeneutic suitable for bridging historical and contemporary contexts. The combination yields exegetical precision and contextual relevance. Historical analysis grounds interpretation in first-century realities. Rhetorical analysis reveals timeless theological truths. Contextual application speaks to contemporary African Christianity.

### **3.4 Data Sources**

Primary texts are analysed alongside secondary literature. Key commentaries include Keener (2015), who provides exhaustive historical and cultural background. Esler (2015) offers social-scientific interpretation of Luke-Acts. Robbins (1996) supplies the socio-rhetorical framework. African theologians such as Orobator (2018) and Mbiti (2015) contribute contextual perspectives.

Ethnographic insights from Nigerian traditional worship practices complement the textual data. These insights are drawn from published ethnographies and theological reflections. They enhance contextual relevance by connecting biblical exegesis to contemporary religious experience. The integration of textual and ethnographic data strengthens the study's contribution to African theology.

## **4. Results and Findings**

### **4.1 Sacred Space in the Early Jerusalem Community (Acts 1–5)**

In Acts 1:4–14, the disciples gather in an upper room following Jesus' ascension. This domestic setting becomes sacred space through prayer and expectation. The upper room is not inherently holy. Its sacredness derives from the gathered community's devotion. Luke employs the phrase "with one accord" to emphasise communal unity (Acts 1:14). Robbins' inner texture reveals how this repetitive pattern creates rhetorical cohesion. Unity prepares for Pentecost.

Esler's socio-historical lens shows a marginalised group redefining sacred geography outside institutional temple authority. The disciples cannot access the Holy of Holies. They lack priestly status. Yet their

gathered presence becomes a new locus of divine encounter. This spatial redefinition challenges temple monopoly on holiness.

At Pentecost (Acts 2:1–13), the Spirit descends in a house. Luke emphasises that "they were all together in one place" (Acts 2:1). The Spirit comes not to the temple but to the gathered community. This signifies divine presence among believers regardless of institutional location. Luke's rhetoric contrasts interior domesticity with public noise that draws the crowd. The sound like rushing wind attracts Jerusalem's multinational population.

The contrast symbolises a shift from private to universal sacred space. What begins in domestic intimacy becomes public proclamation. The Spirit democratises holiness, erasing spatial boundaries. Keener (2015, 1369) notes that the Spirit's coming on all believers challenges priestly exclusivity. Every believer becomes a conduit of divine power.

In Acts 2:42–47, believers meet in homes for teaching and breaking bread. These practices sacralise ordinary domestic life. The community gathers in the temple courts but breaks bread "in their homes" (Acts 2:46). This dual spatial practice maintains Jewish identity while creating new sacred spaces. Esler's socio-cultural model interprets this as fictive kinship formation. Shared meals replace temple sacrifices (Esler 2015, 193).

Luke presents communal life as the new temple ritual. Believers devote themselves to teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42). These activities constitute sacred practices that sanctify domestic space. The household becomes a micro-temple where divine presence dwells.

At the Beautiful Gate (Acts 3:1–10), Peter heals a lame man within temple precincts. The miracle occurs at the threshold between sacred and profane space. The Beautiful Gate marks the boundary between outer courts and inner sanctuary. Peter's healing symbolises divine intervention that transcends physical sanctity. God's power operates at spatial margins.

The act reclaims temple space rhetorically for the risen Christ. Peter declares, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk" (Acts 3:6). Jesus' name mediates divine power independently of temple structures. The subsequent arrest (Acts 4:1–4) reveals ideological conflict over spatial control. Temple authorities view the apostles' teaching as territorial encroachment. The apostles represent a new locus of divine authority challenging temple establishment.

#### **4.2 Contested Temple and Emerging Sacredness (Acts 5–7)**

At Solomon's Portico (Acts 5:12–16), public miracles extend sacred geography across temple courtyards. The apostles perform "many signs and wonders among the people" (Acts 5:12). These miracles attract crowds. People bring the sick into streets, hoping Peter's shadow might heal them (Acts 5:15). This extraordinary detail emphasises divine power pervading public space.

Robbins' social texture identifies tension between public witness and institutional hostility. The high priest arrests the apostles, accusing them of filling Jerusalem with their teaching (Acts 5:28). Spatial language reveals territorial anxiety. The gospel threatens priestly control over religious space. Yet divine power continues manifesting beyond official sanction.

Stephen's accusation and speech (Acts 6:8–7:53) articulate the theological climax regarding sacred space. Accused of speaking against the temple, Stephen delivers a historical survey of Israel's relationship with God. He concludes that "the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands" (Acts 7:48). This declaration, quoting Isaiah 66:1–2, undermines the temple's monopoly on holiness.

Stephen's rhetoric employs Israel's historical narrative to challenge spatial exclusivity. He recounts God's appearances to Abraham in Mesopotamia, Moses at Sinai, and Solomon's temple construction. Throughout Israel's history, God reveals himself beyond fixed locations. The tabernacle, mobile by design, symbolises divine presence accompanying God's people. Stephen argues that temple fixation misunderstands divine transcendence.

Esler's socio-historical reading interprets this as boundary-breaking declaration. Divine presence transcends ethnicity and geography (Esler 2015, 198). Stephen's speech threatens social boundaries maintained through spatial practices. By denying the temple exclusive sanctity, Stephen relativises Jewish religious identity markers. This theological position enables Gentile inclusion without requiring temple participation.

#### **4.3 Household and Gentile Sacred Spaces (Acts 9–10; 16; 18)**

Saul's conversion (Acts 9:1–19) reveals divine encounter in transit and in Ananias' house. Jesus appears to Saul on the Damascus road, far from Jerusalem's sacred centre. The encounter demonstrates God's geographic freedom. Divine revelation occurs wherever God chooses. Subsequently, Ananias receives a

vision directing him to Saul. The healing and baptism occur in Judas' house on Straight Street (Acts 9:11). This private home becomes a site of revelation and healing.

The pattern establishes domestic sanctity as normative for Christian experience. Households become places where God speaks, heals, and commissions. This spatial theology democratises access to divine presence. One need not journey to Jerusalem or access temple precincts. God meets believers in their ordinary contexts.

Peter's visit to Cornelius (Acts 10:1–48) marks a watershed in Acts' spatial theology. The Spirit descends on Gentiles in a Roman household. This event parallels Pentecost, confirming that Gentiles receive the same Spirit without requiring temple participation. Peter declares, "God shows no partiality" (Acts 10:34). This theological principle has spatial implications. Divine impartiality extends to geographical impartiality.

Robbins' ideological texture exposes Luke's rhetorical goal: to legitimate Gentile inclusion by depicting God's impartial sanctification of alien spaces. The Spirit falls on Gentiles "even as on us at the beginning" (Acts 11:15). This parallel validates Cornelius' household as sacred space equivalent to the Jerusalem upper room. Geographic and ethnic boundaries dissolve before the Spirit's presence.

Esler's socio-cultural perspective frames this as social boundary crossing that reconfigures sacred geography. The move from Jewish exclusivity to universal accessibility fundamentally alters Christian identity. Gentile households become legitimate sacred spaces. This theological innovation enables Christianity's transformation from Jewish sect to universal movement.

Lydia's house in Philippi (Acts 16:13–15) illustrates household churches as normative spatial form. Paul meets women praying by a river, outside Philippi's city gate. This marginal location becomes a site of gospel proclamation. Lydia responds, and her household is baptised. She insists, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my house" (Acts 16:15).

Lydia's hospitality converts domestic space into ritual centre. Her house becomes the gathering place for Philippian believers (Acts 16:40). A woman patron establishes sacred space through hospitality. Oropeza (2020, 77) notes how women and patrons convert domestic areas into ritual centres. Power and piety intersect spatially. Social status enables spatial transformation.

The house of Titius Justus in Corinth (Acts 18:1–8) further illustrates this pattern. When Paul leaves the synagogue, he goes next door to Titius Justus' house (Acts 18:7). This household becomes the base for

Corinthian mission. The spatial proximity to the synagogue is rhetorical. Paul's move next door symbolises continuity and rupture. The gospel remains connected to Israel's story but creates new sacred spaces.

#### **4.4 Public and Secular Sacred Spaces (Acts 17; 19; 21–22; 28)**

Paul's sermon at the Areopagus (Acts 17:22–34) represents theological reconceptualisation of sacred space. Athens' civic centre becomes a platform for gospel proclamation. Paul declares that "God does not dwell in temples made with hands" (Acts 17:24). This statement echoes Stephen's speech and challenges Greco-Roman temple theology.

Paul relocates divine presence to creation itself. God "gives to all men life and breath and everything" (Acts 17:25). Divine proximity is universal, not temple-confined. Robbins' sacred texture reveals cosmic rhetoric aligning with Greco-Roman philosophical categories. Paul employs Stoic concepts to persuade an Athenian audience. The strategy demonstrates theological adaptability while maintaining spatial theology's core claim: God transcends human-made sacred spaces.

In Ephesus (Acts 19:8–10), Paul teaches in the Hall of Tyrannus. This secular lecture venue transforms into sacred pedagogical space. After three months in the synagogue, Paul withdraws with disciples to Tyrannus' hall (Acts 19:9). For two years, "all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:10). This remarkable claim attributes missional success to teaching in a rented hall.

Esler's socio-cultural reading emphasises adaptation to urban public culture. Tyrannus' hall represents Greco-Roman educational institutions. By appropriating this space, Paul demonstrates that sacred geography expands wherever God's word is proclaimed. The location sanctifies activity, not vice versa. Teaching and proclamation create sacred space regardless of architectural context.

Paul's temple vision (Acts 22:17–21) and arrest (Acts 21:26–30) expose ongoing conflict over sacred boundaries. Paul reports that while praying in the temple, he fell into a trance and received a vision (Acts 22:17). Even within contested temple space, divine revelation occurs. This demonstrates that God's presence persists amid territorial conflict. The temple remains symbolically significant but no longer exclusively sacred.

Paul's arrest in the temple (Acts 21:26–30) climaxes spatial tension. Jewish pilgrims accuse Paul of defiling the temple by bringing Greeks into it (Acts 21:28). This accusation reveals anxieties about spatial boundaries. The temple's holiness depends on maintaining ethnic and ritual purity. Paul's inclusive mission

threatens these boundaries. The subsequent riot demonstrates how sacred space becomes contested ground.

Finally, during Paul's house arrest in Rome (Acts 28:23–31), his rented dwelling becomes a centre of unhindered preaching. Luke concludes Acts with Paul "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (Acts 28:31). This geographical and spatial endpoint completes Luke's narrative arc. The gospel reaches "the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8) in a domestic setting.

The final scene reaffirms household sacred space as Christianity's normative form. Paul's rented house in imperial Rome becomes a site of unhindered proclamation. No temple, no synagogue, no public forum—just a house where God's word goes forth. This ending underscores Luke's spatial theology. Divine presence sanctifies ordinary places where believers gather in Jesus' name.

## 5. Discussion and Interpretation

### 5.1 Theological Meaning of Sacred Space in Acts

Acts constructs a theology of sacred space as relational rather than architectural. Holiness derives from divine presence mediated through the Spirit, not from physical structures. The temple remains symbolically important but is superseded by Spirit-filled community. Luke's narrative portrays movement from *topos hieros* (holy place) to *laos hagios* (holy people).

This theological shift has profound implications. First, it democratises access to divine presence. No priestly mediation or temple pilgrimage is required. Second, it universalises sacred geography. Any place where believers gather becomes potentially sacred. Third, it emphasises communal and ethical dimensions. Sacred space emerges through prayer, hospitality, and justice, not through ritual purity.

The Spirit redefines holiness through presence and mission. Where the Spirit moves, sacred space emerges. This pneumatological understanding challenges static concepts of holiness. Sacred geography becomes dynamic and missional. It follows the Spirit's movement across ethnic, social, and geographical boundaries.

### 5.2 Socio-Rhetorical and Socio-Historical Integration

By merging Robbins' and Esler's frameworks, we observe that Luke's rhetoric reflects socio-historical realities of displacement and diaspora. The early believers, marginalised within Judaism and the Roman

Empire, sacralised spaces accessible to them. Homes, streets, and lecture halls became sites of divine encounter. This spatial strategy enabled community formation despite social marginalisation.

Esler's concept of group identity formation through spatial differentiation illuminates this process (Esler 2015, 205). Early Christians defined themselves partly through distinctive spatial practices. They gathered in homes rather than temples. They welcomed Gentiles into sacred spaces previously restricted to Jews. These practices communicated theological convictions about inclusion and grace.

Robbins' sacred texture explains how narrative rhetoric persuades readers to embrace this new spatial theology. Luke constructs a narrative world in which ordinary places become extraordinary through divine presence. Repeated patterns of household gatherings, public miracles, and cross-cultural encounters normalise Luke's spatial vision. Readers learn to recognise sacred space wherever the Spirit moves.

The integration also reveals Luke's apologetic strategy. By showing divine presence in diverse locations, Luke argues for Christianity's legitimacy and universality. The gospel is not geographically bound to Jerusalem. It spreads across the empire, sanctifying spaces wherever it goes. This geographical expansion validates Christianity's claim to universal truth.

### **5.3 Comparison with African Traditional Religion**

African cosmology conceives land and community as imbued with sacred power. Shrines, groves, and ancestral compounds symbolise divine proximity (Olupona 2019, 104). Sacred spaces connect communities to spiritual realms. They embody collective memory and identity. Ritual practices at these sites maintain cosmic order and communal wellbeing.

Acts portrays divine presence permeating domestic and social settings similarly. Houses, streets, and public squares become sacred through Spirit's presence. Both traditions affirm that divine power inhabits ordinary contexts. Both value communal gathering as essential to sacred experience. The convergence suggests Acts resonates with African holistic spirituality.

However, important differences exist. African Traditional Religion often ties holiness to territorial continuity. Sacred sites derive power from ancestral connections and historical usage. Specific locations hold unique spiritual significance. By contrast, Acts universalises sacred space through Christ and the Spirit. No location holds intrinsic sanctity. Divine presence follows believers wherever they go.

This theological shift invites African theology to interpret church, home, and public life as spaces of divine encounter beyond ritual centres. It affirms African intuitions about divine presence in communal life while challenging territorial restrictions. The Spirit's freedom to sanctify any space liberates African Christianity from dependence on imported sacred geographies. Indigenous contexts become legitimate sites of divine revelation.

The dialogue between Acts and African Traditional Religion generates constructive theological insights. It suggests that African churches need not replicate Western architectural models. Indigenous spatial forms—compounds, communal gathering spaces, natural settings—can function as sacred space. What matters is the community's faithfulness and the Spirit's presence, not architectural style.

#### **5.4 Ethical and Ecclesial Implications**

The theology of sacred space in Acts challenges contemporary Nigerian Christianity to reconsider its attachment to monumental architecture. Many churches invest heavily in elaborate buildings, viewing physical structures as markers of success. Yet Acts suggests authentic sacredness emerges from communal faith, justice, and mission rather than architecture.

The church should prioritise relational holiness manifested in reconciliation, inclusivity, and hospitality. These practices embody divine presence more faithfully than impressive buildings. Sacred power expresses itself through transformed relationships, ethical witness, and communal solidarity. Where believers gather in Jesus' name with justice and love, there God's presence dwells.

This perspective has practical implications for Nigerian ecclesiology. It challenges prosperity theology's emphasis on material success. It questions denominational competition expressed through architectural rivalry. It redirects attention from building projects to community formation. Resources invested in massive structures might better serve mission, education, and social justice.

Acts also models spatial inclusivity that challenges religious territorialism. In Nigeria, religious tensions often revolve around sacred sites and worship spaces. Muslims and Christians compete for space and influence. Indigenous practitioners face marginalisation. Acts' theology suggests sacred space need not be exclusive. Divine presence is generous, sanctifying diverse locations and communities.

This vision promotes peaceful coexistence. Recognising God's presence beyond exclusive locations encourages interfaith respect. It reduces conflict over land and worship centres. Each community can

experience sacred space without denying others' access to divine presence. This theological foundation supports religious tolerance and civic harmony.

## **6. Contribution, Impact, and Policy Relevance**

### **6.1 Academic Contribution**

This study contributes a contextual theology of sacred geography that integrates socio-rhetorical exegesis with African phenomenology of space. Its originality lies in demonstrating that Luke's reconfiguration of sacred space parallels African communal spirituality. This parallel offers biblical foundation for contextual theology of place.

The research advances Luke-Acts studies by combining Esler's socio-historical and Robbins' socio-rhetorical models in a single interpretive frame. Previous studies typically employ one approach or the other. Combining both yields multidimensional readings that account for social dynamics and rhetorical strategies simultaneously. This methodological integration models how interdisciplinary approaches enrich biblical interpretation.

The study also contributes to African biblical hermeneutics. It demonstrates how African cosmologies can function as hermeneutical lenses for biblical interpretation. Rather than imposing Western theological frameworks, the study engages Acts through African phenomenology of space. This approach generates contextual insights while maintaining exegetical rigour.

For socio-rhetorical criticism, the study shows how Robbins' model applies to spatial theology. Previous applications focused on social identity or christological claims. This study demonstrates socio-rhetorical criticism's utility for analysing sacred geography. The method illuminates how Luke constructs spatial theology through narrative rhetoric.

### **6.2 National and Ecclesial Impact**

Within Nigeria, religious tensions often revolve around territorial claims and sacred sites. Muslim-Christian conflicts sometimes concern worship spaces or land use. Indigenous practitioners face marginalisation from both religions. This study's insights promote dialogue and peaceful coexistence.

Recognising God's presence beyond exclusive locations encourages interfaith respect. If divine presence is not territorially confined, then religious communities need not compete for sacred space. Each tradition can

honour its sacred sites without claiming exclusive access to divine presence. This theological perspective reduces conflict over land and worship centres.

For Nigerian churches, the study challenges architectural triumphalism. Many denominations compete to build the largest or most impressive structures. This competition diverts resources from mission and social service. Acts' theology suggests that sacred power manifests through transformed communities, not impressive buildings. Churches can redirect resources toward education, healthcare, and poverty alleviation.

The emphasis on household sacred space supports small group ministry and cell church models. Nigerian mega-churches often struggle to foster intimate community. Acts' household gatherings model how domestic spaces can function as primary loci of spiritual formation. This approach promotes relational discipleship and mutual care.

The study also affirms African cosmologies while offering Christological reinterpretation. It respects African intuitions about sacred space while showing how Christ universalises divine presence. This balanced approach supports theological indigenisation without syncretism. African Christianity can develop distinctive spatial theologies rooted in both biblical tradition and African cosmology.

### **6.3 Policy and Educational Relevance**

For theological education, the findings support curriculum reform integrating contextual hermeneutics and African cosmology into biblical studies. Nigerian seminaries often use Western textbooks and methods exclusively. This study models how African contexts can function as hermeneutical resources, not just application fields.

Seminaries can employ this framework to teach space theology as a lens for public theology and nation-building. Students learn to interpret biblical texts through African lenses while maintaining academic rigour. They develop contextual theologies relevant for Nigerian ministry. This approach produces church leaders equipped for African contexts rather than trained primarily in Western paradigms.

Church organisations can adopt this framework to design community-oriented worship spaces embodying inclusivity and social transformation. Rather than replicating Western cathedral models, churches can create indigenous sacred spaces. Outdoor gathering areas, multipurpose community centres, and adapted

traditional structures can function as worship spaces. The key is fostering community and Spirit-filled worship, not architectural grandeur.

For government and educational policymakers, this research contributes to national integration and religious harmony. This study addresses national challenges including religious conflict that threatens Nigerian unity. It offers theological resources for promoting peaceful coexistence. It shows how reinterpreting sacred space can reduce territorial conflicts.

The Nigerian Interreligious Council and similar bodies can utilise these insights for dialogue initiatives. Understanding how different traditions conceptualise sacred space facilitates mutual respect. Comparative studies of Christian, Muslim, and indigenous sacred geographies can build bridges across religious divides. This theological work supports peace-building and social cohesion.

Universities can integrate this research into religious studies and peace studies curricula. Students learn how theological concepts influence social conflict and cooperation. They develop analytical tools for addressing religion's role in Nigerian public life. This interdisciplinary approach connects biblical studies to sociology, anthropology, and political science.

#### **6.4 Alignment with National and Institutional Research Objectives**

In line with national and institutional priorities that emphasise research as a driver of development, this study contributes to cultural integration, moral renewal, and the intellectual indigenisation of theology. These objectives reflect the broader commitment of research funding and academic institutions in Nigeria to address developmental challenges through contextually relevant scholarship. Issues such as religious conflict, cultural alienation, and dependence on imported theologies continue to hinder national progress, underscoring the need for locally grounded theological reflection.

This research addresses these challenges directly. By linking biblical hermeneutics with socio-cultural realities, it demonstrates how theological scholarship can inform policy on religious harmony and civic ethics. The study models indigenous scholarship that engages global academic conversations while addressing local concerns.

Cultural integration occurs when diverse traditions find common ground. This study facilitates dialogue between Christianity and African Traditional Religion. It shows how biblical theology resonates with African

cosmologies without requiring cultural abandonment. This approach supports cultural continuity amid religious transformation.

Moral renewal requires theological foundations. Nigerian society faces ethical crises in governance, economics, and social relations. This study's emphasis on relational holiness and communal ethics provides theological resources for moral discourse. Sacred space manifested through justice, reconciliation, and hospitality offers vision for societal transformation.

Intellectual indigenisation ensures that Nigerian scholarship contributes to global knowledge production. This study demonstrates that African contexts generate valuable theological insights. It positions Nigerian biblical scholarship as contributing to international conversations, not merely consuming Western scholarship. This intellectual self-sufficiency supports national development.

## 7. Conclusion

Acts of the Apostles redefines sacred space as dynamic, inclusive, and mission-oriented. Through the Holy Spirit, divine presence migrates from the Jerusalem temple to communities gathered in houses, public halls, and even prisons. Luke's narrative constructs a theology in which sacred geography follows the Spirit's movement across social and ethnic boundaries.

Using Esler's socio-historical and socio-cultural perspectives, sacred geography emerges as a social construct shaped by identity, power, and boundary negotiation. Early Christians sacralised accessible spaces—homes and streets—precisely because they lacked access to traditional religious centres. These spatial practices expressed theological convictions about inclusion, grace, and divine impartiality.

Robbins' socio-rhetorical model reveals Luke's persuasive strategy inviting readers to internalise this new theology of place. Through repeated patterns of household gatherings, cross-cultural encounters, and public miracles, Luke normalises the vision of sacred space as relational rather than architectural. The narrative rhetoric persuades readers that God's presence sanctifies any context where believers gather in faith.

The integration of these methodological approaches yields rich exegetical results. It demonstrates how first-century social dynamics shaped Luke's spatial theology. It shows how Luke's rhetoric constructs theological meaning through narrative patterns. It illuminates the text's enduring relevance for contemporary questions about sacred geography.

For Nigerian theology, this reinterpretation affirms that divine presence sanctifies human contexts—villages, cities, and homes—where justice, prayer, and fellowship flourish. African cosmologies intuitively grasp this truth. Sacred power inhabits communal life, not just ritual centres. Acts provides biblical warrant for developing contextual theologies of place rooted in African experience.

The church's task is to embody sacred power through ethical witness and communal solidarity. Rather than investing in monumental architecture, churches should prioritise relational holiness. Sacred space manifests where believers practice reconciliation, hospitality, and justice. These practices make every Spirit-filled community a living temple of God.

The study's practical implications extend to multiple spheres. Ecclesiastically, it challenges architectural triumphalism and supports community-centred ministry. Socially, it promotes interfaith dialogue and reduces religious territorialism. Educationally, it models contextual hermeneutics and indigenous theological scholarship. Politically, it contributes to peace-building and national integration.

Future research may explore comparative studies between Acts and African sacred narratives to deepen the theology of place within global Christianity. Examining how different African cultures conceptualise sacred space could generate additional contextual insights. Comparative analysis of Christian, Muslim, and indigenous sacred geographies might yield resources for interfaith dialogue.

Further studies could also investigate how Luke's spatial theology relates to contemporary urban planning and architecture. How might cities design public spaces that honour diverse sacred geographies? What architectural forms best express Acts' inclusive vision of sacred space? These questions connect biblical theology to practical concerns about built environments.

Additionally, empirical research examining how Nigerian Christians actually experience sacred space would complement this textual study. Ethnographic studies of worship practices, spatial arrangements, and architectural choices could test this article's theological proposals. Such research would assess how biblical spatial theology translates into lived practice.

Ultimately, sacred space in Acts—and in Nigeria—points beyond geography to transformed relationships. Physical locations matter insofar as they host Spirit-filled communities practising faith, hope, and love. The theological vision is profoundly relational. God dwells not in buildings but among people gathered in Jesus' name.

This vision liberates African Christianity from dependence on imported architectural models. It affirms indigenous spatial forms as legitimate expressions of Christian worship. It redirects attention from physical structures to communal practices. Most importantly, it assures believers that divine presence accompanies them wherever they gather in faith.

The article's unique contribution lies in demonstrating how socio-rhetorical and socio-historical exegesis can inform African contextual theology. By integrating these methodologies with African phenomenology of sacred space, the study generates insights relevant for both global biblical scholarship and Nigerian Christianity. It models how African scholars can contribute to international theological conversations while addressing local contexts. As Nigerian Christianity matures, it requires contextual theologies that honour both biblical tradition and African cosmology. This study contributes to that ongoing project. It shows how careful biblical exegesis, informed by social-scientific and rhetorical methods, yields theological insights applicable to contemporary contexts. It demonstrates that rigorous scholarship and pastoral relevance need not conflict.

In conclusion, Acts invites believers to recognise sacred space wherever the Spirit creates community, empowers mission, and embodies justice. Every Spirit-filled gathering becomes a living temple. Every act of hospitality sanctifies domestic space. Every proclamation of the gospel transforms public squares into sacred geography. This vision, rooted in Luke's first-century narrative, speaks powerfully to twenty-first-century Nigeria, calling churches to embody sacred power through transformed relationships and faithful witness.

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