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*Imagining Luke-Acts in Roman Britain:
Through the Eyes of the People of the Bloomberg Tablets,
the Vindolanda Tablets, and the Uley Tablets*

by Richard Cleaves

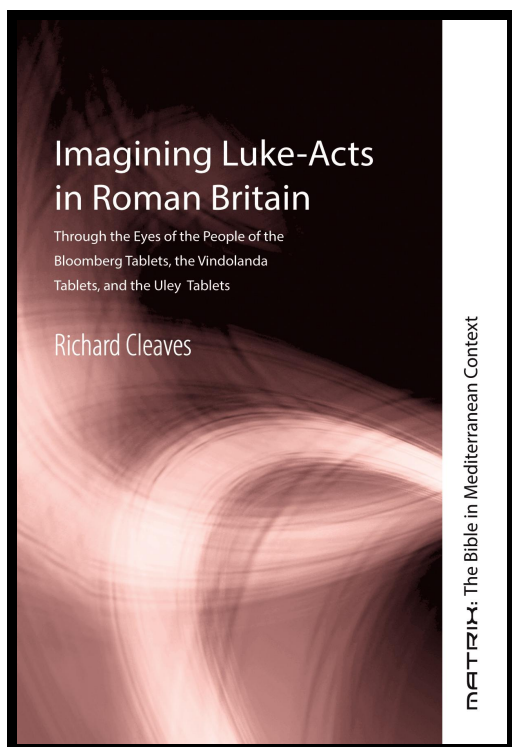
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New Title from Richard Cleaves

Imagining Luke-Acts in Roman Britain:

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The discovery of handwritten documents dating to New Testament times is a rare event. Three such exciting discoveries have recently been made in Britain. In the Bloomberg tablets (2016) we meet some of the Apostle Paul's contemporaries as they arranged loans and drew up contracts. In the professional and personal correspondence of the Vindolanda tablets (1983–2019) we get to know the women and men of a frontier fort. In the prayer requests of the Uley tablets (2024) we meet people from a rural community who turned to their local temple in times of trouble. Telling the story of the discovery of those three sets of tablets, this book introduces us to the kind of people who appear in Luke-Acts and who were its first readers. We are invited to imagine how people such as these—merchants and traders; centurions and women of standing; ordinary farmers—might have understood Luke-Acts had they become followers of the Way of Jesus. Serving as a guide to the world of the New Testament in Roman Britain, this book brings Luke-Acts to life in unexpected ways and throws new light on the way the first followers of Jesus negotiated the empire.

Dr. Richard Cleaves, a Minister of Congregational Federation churches latterly in Cheltenham, taught New Testament in the Congregational Institute for Practical Theology. Since Gloucester's 1997 celebration of its foundation as a *colonia*, he has researched the world of the New Testament in Roman Britain and caught the imagination of adults and children in his preaching and teaching. He hopes this book will inspire others to read the New Testament in the context of early Roman Britain. Discover more at www.lukeactsinromanbritain.co.uk

Interview with Richard Cleaves

What is special about your book?

This book is the first to use writings from early Roman Britain—most published in the last ten years—in a systematic study of any New Testament text. Understanding the social, cultural, and political world of the New Testament brings the New Testament to life in fresh and exciting ways. Part of that world was the world of the Roman Empire. The Roman conquest of Britain starts as the apostle Paul begins his travels and is complete by the time Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles come to be written. Documents from Roman Britain, therefore, open a near-contemporary window onto the world of the New Testament.

What does your book do?

After establishing the connection between the world of Roman Britain and the world of the New Testament, it focuses in turn on the people of an urban, a military and a rural community. Through their own hand-written documents we get to know the people responsible for the Bloomberg tablets, the Vindolanda tablets and the Uley tablets. We then imagine how they might have responded to texts from Luke and Acts had they become followers of the Way of Jesus, and how they might have negotiated empire.

Why does it matter?

How Christians read their sacred text, the Bible, matters in today's world. By seeing Luke-Acts through the eyes of contemporaries of the events it narrates and of its first readers, *Imagining Luke-Acts in Roman Britain* offers a reading of Luke-Acts grounded in the real world of its own time that relates to the real world of our time.

What made you interested in this topic?

In spite of a lifetime's study of the New Testament and interest in Roman Britain, I had not made any connection between the two until Gloucester's 1997 celebration of its designation as a *colonia* of the Roman Empire. I then began to research the connection and draw it into my preaching and my teaching of children and students. Young and old alike found the text coming alive in new and exciting ways. A study visit to the Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem confirmed the importance of reading New Testament texts in their historical context and prompted me to develop my research further.

What are your credentials for writing your book?

I studied Theology at Jesus College Oxford and went on to do a PhD with the University of Wales on the biblical exegesis of Martin Luther, John Calvin and Cardinal Cajetan. Throughout my pastoral ministry I taught New Testament at University level with the Congregational Institute of Practical Theology, latterly in partnership with York St John University. I have always had an interest in history, archaeology and Roman Britain; since 2015 my research has been guided by Professor Philip Esler who invited me in 2015 to read a paper to the Context Group seeing New Testament texts through the eyes of people responsible for British curse tablets, and in 2016 to contribute a chapter to his *The Early Christian World* taking the Vindolanda tablets and the newly published Bloomberg tablets into account. The paper and the chapter were well received, and he suggested I 'write the book' by doing a PhD with the University of Gloucestershire under his supervision. That is the basis of this book.

Who is your book for?

While it is an original contribution to New Testament scholarship, it is in general for anyone who has an interest in the New Testament and in particular for Pastors, Preachers and Teachers as they help their congregations and their classes to engage more deeply with the text. It will also be of interest to anyone fascinated by Roman Britain as it introduces three sets of recently discovered writings and the people responsible for them in their very own handwriting. It serves as a guide to—and gazetteer of—the New Testament world in Roman Britain for those who live in Britain and for those who are visiting.

What do you hope for your book?

That it opens up the world of Roman Britain to New Testament scholarship and encourages people to imagine how contemporaries of the events of the New Testament and its first readers might have read other New Testament texts. That it enables readers to get to know the people responsible for the earliest writings to be discovered in Britain. That it models for teachers of children and adults, and for preachers, a way of bringing New Testament texts to life in the context of Roman Britain.

**An Excerpt from *Imagining Luke-Acts in Roman Britain:
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the Vindolanda Tablets, and the Uley Tablets***

Those who visit Britain and those who live in Britain are never far from Roman remains be they evident in place names, roads, town plans, archaeological sites, or museum displays. In the mind's eye it is possible not only to recreate a lost world but to reanimate the people who left their mark long ago. In recent decades a treasure trove of business transactions, personal letters, and even pleas to the local god, have been discovered, transcribed, translated and published. In fragments of writing, little larger than a post card, it is possible to get to know people by name and glimpse something of their social, cultural, political and ritual life. With our inward ear it is as if we can hear their voices as they communicate to each other.

In exploring Roman Britain, very few people have made the connection between the world of Roman Britain and the world of the New Testament. If only one has the eye to see, there are so many connections to be made, as a glance at Table 2 will show. As the events described in the New Testament were unfolding, the Romans invaded Britain (43 CE). By the time that invasion was complete (c. 83 CE), the earliest books of the New Testament had been written and were in circulation.

The recent publication of three sets of writings from early Roman Britain has the potential to throw light on the way Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles were received by their first audiences. The traders, merchants and financiers of the Bloomberg tablets (published 2016), the women as well as men of the military community of the Vindolanda tablets (published 1983–2019 and ongoing), and the members of a rural community who in times of crisis turned to the nearby temple dedicated to Mercury (published in part 1993–2022, and in full 2024) were not only the kind of people we meet in Luke-Acts, but also the contemporaries of its first readers.

Drawing on the insights of archival ethnography, it is possible to develop an understanding of these people through their very own hand-written documents. Just as an ethnographer undertakes a “scientific description of peoples and cultures with reference to their particular customs and characteristics,” (Concise Oxford Dictionary) so an archival ethnographer uses the commonplace, every day detail in that written record to develop an understanding of people from long ago. With such an understanding of people from an urban, a military and a rural community in Roman Britain we can imagine how they themselves, or people such as these, might have read texts from Luke-Acts had they become followers of the Way of Jesus.

In many ways the peoples, cultures, and societies of the Mediterranean world and of the island of Britain were as different in the time of the New Testament as they are today. And yet, for all the differences between east and west, there are many points of contact in a shared history. Establishing the connection between the eastern and western provinces of the Roman Empire demonstrates the way a study of Roman Britain opens a window on to the world of the New Testament.

As Paul's travels began, Claudius invaded Britain in 43 CE, initiating a conquest that would be completed by the Flavians forty years later. The triumph of Claudius was commemorated in places visited by Paul. In Pisidian Antioch, a statue had been dedicated to Claudius “for his safety and victory in Britannia”. In Corinth there is evidence of “the direct worship of the personified goddess Victoria Britannica.”

***Praise for *Imagining Luke-Acts in Roman Britain:*
Through the Eyes of the People of the Bloomberg Tablets,
the Vindolanda Tablets, and the Uley Tablets***

“This book offers a stimulating and original way to explore the Roman world of Luke-Acts by way of recent archaeological finds in Roman Britain. Here the military community of Vindolanda, the traders and financiers of Roman London, and the rural community which produced the curse tablets of Uley—all brought to life by a disciplined archaeological imagination—provide windows into the lives and loves of Luke’s characters and original readers.”

—Loveday Alexander, Emeritus Professor of Biblical Studies, University of Sheffield

“In this remarkable book, Richard Cleaves shows—more clearly than anyone has before—the broad interconnections and parallels between the literacies of Roman Britain and those of the contemporaneous eastern Mediterranean. More than this, he maps the shared concerns, interests, anxieties, and habits that allow us to imagine the common ground across which religious communication and mutual understanding must have taken place in the first centuries AD.”

**—Greg Woolf, Leon Levy Director of the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World,
New York University**

“Cleaves brings realism to an understanding of Luke-Acts by presenting first-hand, near-contemporary evidence of types of people, practices, and ideas seen in the biblical texts. The astonishingly preserved real people of Roman Britain bring new and illuminating depth to a reading of Luke-Acts.”

—Peter Oakes, Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis, University of Manchester

“It only rarely happens that an interpreter conceives of a totally new and highly significant approach to a biblical text. Yet this is what Richard Cleaves has done with *Imagining Luke-Acts in Roman Britain*. In an academic setting where research into the beginnings of Christianity in the first century CE has been focused solely on the Mediterranean world, Cleaves has had the daring insight to ask, and to go a long way towards answering, how Britain might have featured in the process. . . . The result is not just a scholarly triumph, but a major contribution to bringing the British people into startling and unexpected conjunction with the dawn of Christianity.”

—Philip F. Esler, Portland Chair in New Testament Studies, The University of Gloucestershire

