

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Introduction

The Book of Acts draws us into the world of the first century, as it vividly tells the story of the explosive spread of Christianity in the first three decades after Christ's resurrection.

Acts focuses on the ministry of two men, Peter in Jerusalem and Judea (chs. 1-12) and Paul in the wider world of the Gentiles (ch. 13-28). This narrative history gives a background against which we can better understand the New Testament Epistles, and provides vital insights in the dynamic qualities of first-century evangelism.

(above material taken from The Revell Bible Dictionary)

Luke's division of Acts has probably always been recognized. Chapter one is introductory. Chapters two to twelve describe the progress of the gospel among the Jews with Peter being the dominant personage. This first half of Acts can be divided into two sections: 1) the progress in Jerusalem (chs.2-7); 2) the progress in Palestine in general (chs. 8-12). The second half of Acts depicts the progress of the gospel among the Gentiles with Paul as the dominant personage. And again we have two subsections: 1) the progress while Paul was at liberty (13:1-21:16); 2) the progress while Paul was in captivity (21:17-28:31). The whole depicts the progress of the gospel from Judaism into the great Gentile world or, more tersely stated, from Jerusalem to Rome.

(above material taken from The Interpretation of The Acts of the Apostles by R.C.H. Lenski)

When a man writes a book he does so for a reason, and maybe for more than one. Let us consider now why Luke wrote Acts.

(i) One of his reasons was to commend Christianity to the Roman government.

Again and again he goes out of his way to show how courteous Roman magistrates were to Paul. In Acts 13:12 Sergius Paulus, the governor of Cyprus, becomes a Christian. In 18:12 Gallio is absolutely impartial in Corinth. In 16:35ff, the magistrates at Philippi discover their mistake and apologize publicly to Paul. In 19:31 the Asiarchs in Ephesus are shown to be concerned that no harm should come to Paul. Luke was pointing out that in the years before he wrote Roman officials had often been well-disposed and always just to Christianity.

Further, Luke takes pains to show that the Christians were good and loyal citizens and had always been regarded as such. In Acts 18:14 Gallio declares that no question of wickedness or villainy. In 19:37 the secretary of Ephesus gives the Christians a good testimonial. In 23:29 Claudius Lysias is careful to say that he has nothing against Paul. In 25:25 Festus declares that Paul has done nothing worthy of death, and in the same chapter Festus and Agrippa agree that Paul might well have been released had he not appealed to Caesar.

Luke was writing in the days when Christians were disliked and persecuted; and he told his story in such a way as to show that the Roman magistrates had always been perfectly fair to Christianity and that they had never regarded the Christians as evil men. In fact, the very interesting suggestion has been made that Acts is nothing other than the brief prepared for Paul's defence when he stood his trial before the Roman Emperor.

(ii) One of Luke's aims was to show that Christianity was for all men of every country.

This was one of the things the Jews found it hard to grasp. They had no idea that they were God's chosen people and that God had no use for any other nation. Luke sets out to prove otherwise. He shows Philip preaching to the Samaritans; he shows Stephen making Christianity universal and being killed for it; he shows Peter accepting Cornelius into the Church; he shows the Christians preaching to the Gentiles at Antioch; he shows Paul travelling far and wide winning men of all kinds for Christ; and in Acts 15 he shows the Church making the great decision to accept the Gentiles on equal terms with the Jews.

(iii) But these were merely secondary aims.

Luke's chief purpose is set out in the words of the Risen Christ in 1:8, "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judaea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." It was to show the expansion of Christianity, to show how that religion which began in a little corner of Palestine had in not much more than thirty years reached Rome.

(above material taken from *The Daily Study Bible: The Acts of the Apostles* by William Barclay)

Strictly speaking, Luke did not write a *history* of the early church. This is not to suggest that his narration is unhistorical or inaccurate. However, the task of a "historian" is to give a comprehensive narrative of all the important facts. This, obviously, Luke did not attempt. He tells us nothing about the churches in Galilee (Acts. 9:31) or about the evangelization of Egypt or Rome. His story is not *The Acts of the Apostles*, for only three of the original twelve appear in his narrative—Peter, James, John; and the latter two are only mentioned. The book of Acts is the Acts of Peter and Paul. Furthermore, Peter is practically dropped from the story after the conversion of Cornelius, and we are left wondering what became of him. Again, Luke gives no explanation of the rise of elders in the church (11:30), of how James came to a place of leadership in the Jerusalem church (15:13), of what Paul did in Tarsus after his conversion (9:30; see 11:25), and of many other important historical matters. Furthermore, he passes over some events with a few words (18:19-23) but relates other events in great detail (21:7-26:32). In other words, Luke is telling a story, not writing a "history." His story is that of the main outlines of the extension of the church from Jerusalem to Rome via Samaria, Antioch, Asia, and Europe; and in this story, only Peter and Paul played outstanding roles. The ministry of the other apostles elsewhere in the eastern world was not important to Luke.

Two themes underlie the story of this expansion: the rejection of the Gospel by the Jews and its reception by the Gentiles; and the treatment of the early church by local and Roman officials. Luke's main purpose, therefore, in his two-volume work (Luke-Acts) is to explain to Theophilus how it came about that the Gospel which began with the promise of the

restoration of the kingdom to Israel (Lk 1:32, 33) ended with the Gentile church in Rome, distinct from Judaism.

Furthermore, Judaism was a religion recognized by Rome. The new religious fellowship that arose within Judaism and yet was not simply a sect in the order religion received the same recognition from Rome as did Judaism. Thus the Christian church became established in the Roman world as a legitimate religion distinct from Judaism.

Outline

The Establishment and Growth of the Church

1. Beginnings of the church. 1:1-2:47
 - a) Preparation: The post-resurrection ministry and ascension of Jesus. 1:1-14
 - b) Choice of Matthias. 1:15-26
 - c) Coming of the Holy Spirit. 2:1-41
 - d) Life of the primitive church. 2:42-47
2. The church in Jerusalem. 3:1-5:42
 - a) A typical miracle and sermon. 3:1-26
 - b) First opposition from Jewish leaders. 4:1-37
 - c) Death of Ananias and Sapphira. 5:1-16
 - d) Second opposition from Jewish leaders. 7:17-42
3. Extension of the church in Palestine through dispersion. 6:1-12:25
 - a) Choice of the seven. 6:1-7
 - b) Occasion of the dispersion: Ministry and martyrdom of Stephen
 - c) The Gospel in Samaria. 8:4-25
 - d) Conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. 8:26-40
 - e) Conversion of Saul. 9:1-31
 - f) Peter's ministry in Palestine and the first Gentile converts. 9:32-11:18
 - g) Establishment of a Gentile church at Antioch. 11:19-30
 - h) Persecution by Herod Agrippa 1. 12:1-25
4. Extension of the church in Asian Minor and Europe. 13:1-21:17
 - a) First mission, Galatia. 13:1-14:28
 - b) Problem of the Gentile church, and council in Jerusalem. 15:1-35.
 - c) Second mission, Asia Minor and Europe. 15:36-18:22
 - d) Third mission, Asia Minor and Europe. 18:23-21:17
5. Extension of the church to Rome. 21:18-28:31
 - a) Rejection of the Gospel by Jerusalem. 21:18-26:32
 - b) Reception of the Gospel in Rome. 27:1-28:31

(above material taken from The Wycliffe Bible Commentary, Moody Press)

It may, or may not, be a good thing that over so much of the world today Christianity is looked upon as a European religion. But how does it come about that a faith which arose in Asia should have come to be so integrally associated with European rather than with Asian civilization? The answer surely is that, in the providence of God, its leading herald and missionary in the three decades following its inception was a Roman citizen, who saw how the strategic centres and communication of the Roman Empire could be turned to the service of Christ's kingdom, and planted the Christian faith in those centres and along those lines of communication. "In little more than ten years St. Paul established the Church in four provinces of the Empire, Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia and Asia. Before AD 47 there were not Churches in these provinces; in AD 57 Paul could speak as if his work there was done, and could plan extensive tours in to the far West without anxiety lest the Churches which he had founded might perish in his absence for want of his guidance and support" (Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* [London, 1927], p. 3).

And Luke is the historian of this enterprise—one of the most far-reaching in world history. He shows plainly how it was done. "Generally speaking, Paul's activity was based on certain centres, from which he undertook his longer and shorter journeys, and which in the course of years were transferred from one province to another" (M. Dibelius, *Paul* [Eng. Tr., London, 1953], p. 69). The first of these centres was Damascus, from which Paul penetrated Nabataean Arabia. He would have made his next centre Jerusalem, had he not been warned in a vision not to settle there (Acts. 22:17-21). He went back therefore to his native Tarsus, and from that centre he preached the gospel in Cilicia and Syria for the best part of ten unchronicled years. Then, for shorter or longer periods, his successive centres were Antioch, Corinth, Ephesus, Rome. Something of his achievements as he worked in one after another of these centres, and preached the gospel as he journeyed on the roads from one to the other, may be gathered from allusions in his epistles. But is Luke that we have to thank for the coherent record of Paul's apostolic activity. Without it, we should be incalculably poorer. Even with it, there is much in Paul's letters that we have difficulty in understanding; how much more there would be if we had no book of Acts!

"O God, who, through the preaching of the blessed apostle Saint Paul, has caused the light of the Gospel to shine throughout the world; Grant, we beseech thee, that we, having his wonderful conversion in remembrance, may shew forth out thankfulness unto thee for the same, by following the holy doctrine which he taught; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen"

"Almighty God, who calledst Luke the Physician, whose praise is in the Gospel, to be an Evangelist and Physician of the soul; May it please thee, that, by the wholesome medicines of the doctrines delivered by him, all the diseases of our souls may be healed; through the merits of thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen"

(above material taken from *The Book of Acts* by F.F. Bruce)

Theological Contribution

As narrative, Acts does not teach, but rather tells a story. For this reason it's unwise to try to develop doctrine from the book of Acts. Nevertheless Acts is a rich source of insight into the dynamics of early Christianity. In particular, Acts gives us unique insights into: early

evangelistic preaching, church life and leadership, the role of the Holy Spirit, and the growing rift between Christianity and Judaism.

1. *Early evangelistic preaching.* Nearly one-fifth of Acts consists of speeches. Among them are lengthy summaries of how the Gospel was preached by both Peter and Paul (2:14-36; 3:12-26; 4:8-20; 13:16-41; and 17:16-34). In each sermon, an introduction establishes a point of contact with the listeners, and then each focuses clearly on the following points:

- Jesus was God's man
- Jesus died and was raised again
- Jesus will come again to judge the world

This preaching of Jesus culminated in a call to listeners to respond to the Gospel message.

2. *Church life and leadership.* The repeated use of the Greek word *homothymadon*, "of one accord" (1:14, 2:1, 46; 4:24; 5:12; 15:25) in descriptions of the Jerusalem church emphasizes its unity and harmony. These descriptions portray shared life—meeting together, studying together, even giving gladly to provide for each other's material needs (2:42; 4:31; 12:5; 13:3).

Initially leadership was exercised by the apostles. Deacons were soon added to deal with practical matters such as the distribution of food to widows (6:1-6). As the church expanded beyond Judea, elders were appointed to provide local spiritual leadership (11:30; 14:23; 15:2; 21:18). Local prophets are also mentioned (11:27-30; 13:1). And throughout the early church era, itinerant teachers such as Apollos (18:24-28) and trouble-shooters such as Timothy and Titus traveled frequently among the churches. Thus local congregations and their leaders had access to a whole network of leaders who could help them with special needs.

Acts thus shows that the church, in both its local and international expressions, existed more as a warm community of caring persons than as a formal institution.

3. *The role of the Holy Spirit.* The Holy Spirit is mentioned over 50 times in Acts, a fact which has led many to think of this book as "The Acts of the Holy Spirit." The visible signs associated with the coming of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost (2:1-13; *compare* 8:17, 18; 10:44-46; 19:6) have raised many questions about what modern Christians should expect to experience. There is no doubt that the Holy Spirit is presented here as the source of the early church's power (4:29-31), and that both Peter and Paul were enabled by the Spirit to perform miracles (Peter: 3:1-10; 5:15, 16; 8:9-24; 9:36-41. Paul: 13:6-11; 14:8-16; 19:11, 12; 20:9-12). Acts also portrays the Holy Spirit as actively directing missionary operations (8:29; 10:19; 13:2, 4; 16:6, 7).

4. *The growing rift between Christianity and Judaism.* Christianity began as a movement within Judaism and was known as "the Way" (9:2; 18:25, 26; 22:4; 24:14, 22). This was an advantage, as Judaism was a *licit* (officially recognized) religion in the Roman Empire and the early Christian missionaries were thus protected by law as they traveled and preached.

Acts suggests that, despite some persecution (ch. 8), as long as the church was predominantly Jewish, it coexisted with traditional Judaism in Palestine. But as the number of Gentile Christians grew, some within the church felt Gentile believers must adopt the Mosaic Law and a Jewish lifestyle (15:1). This view was rejected by a council meeting in Jerusalem about AD 49. Paul continued to go first to Jewish synagogues when traveling, but Acts portrays a growing resistance on the part of the non-believing Jewish community to Paul's message (17:5-8, 13-15; 18:12-17; 22:21-22).

Master Keys

The repeated references to the Holy Spirit is important. Underline each and note specifically what the Holy Spirit does in and/or through believers.

Compare the evangelistic sermons in Acts (2:14-36; 3:12-26; 4:8-12; 13:16-41; 17:22-31) by listing themes in parallel columns. What do recurring themes tell you about personal or public evangelism?

Special Features

While Peter and Paul are the dominant figures in Acts, this book contains vivid portraits of several other persons. Among the most attractive are Barnabas and Stephen, as well as Priscilla and her husband Aquila.

(above material taken from The Revel Bible Dictionary)

The Church Era—Acts 1-12

There are four major subjects in the Church Era:

1. Creation: Birth of the Church—Acts 1-5. The birthplace of the Church is Jerusalem. After His death, burial, and resurrection, Jesus instructs His disciples to wait in Jerusalem until they receive the power of the Holy Spirit and then to be witnesses to Him in Jerusalem (their city), Judea and Samaria (the surrounding provinces), and the remotest part of the earth (the rest of the world). Then Jesus ascends into heaven right before their eyes. Shortly after that, on the Jewish feast day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit comes upon Jesus' disciples. While they are gathered in a house, a sound like a violent rushing wind fills the place and flames of fire rest on each disciple, and they are filled with the Holy Spirit. They begin speaking in different foreign languages, with the result that many of the Jews from different parts of the world hear them speak in their own language. This and other notable miracles associated with the birth of the Church take place in the early days as the number of converts to Christianity increases rapidly in Jerusalem.

2. Growth: Organization of the Church—Acts 6. As the number of converts increases, some measures are taken for the organization of the Church, giving structure to their activities and responsibilities

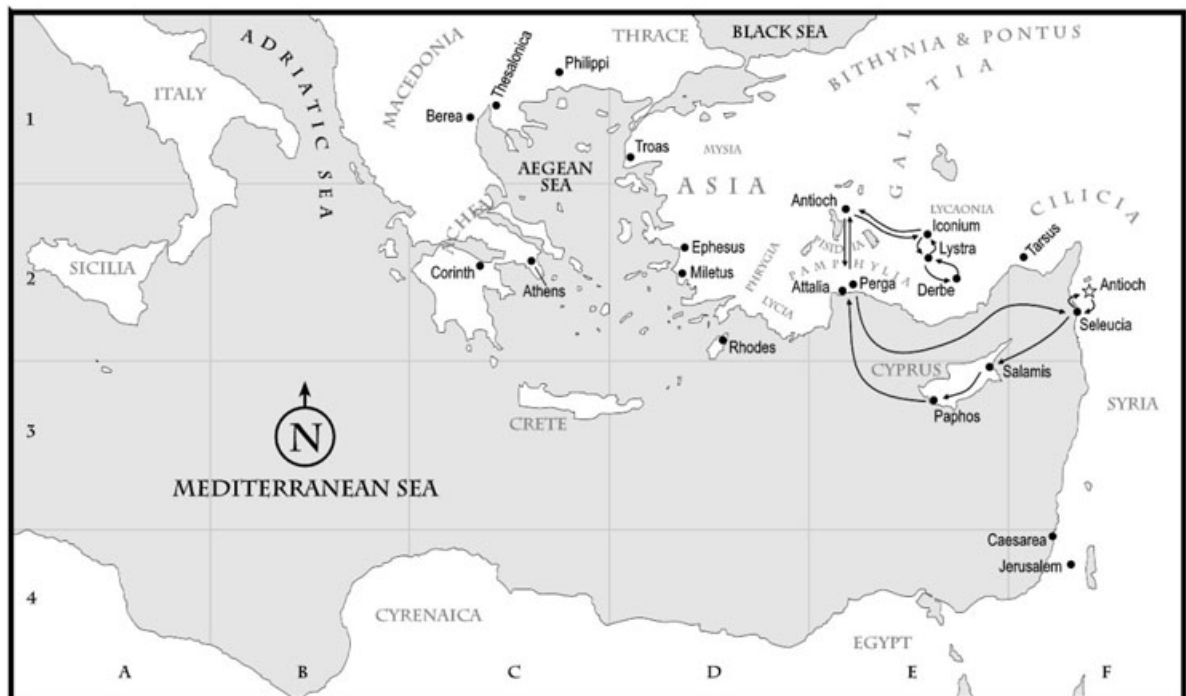
3. Persecution: The first Christian Martyr—Acts 7. Stephen, one of the early preachers, is arrested by the Jewish leaders for preaching about Jesus. When he does not recant his message but presses it further, the Jews stone him to death on the spot, making Stephen the first Christian martyr.

4. Transition: A missionary to the Gentiles—Acts 8-12. A zealous Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus, looks after the cloaks of those who stone Stephen. Shortly afterward, he is journeying to Damascus to find and persecute other Christians when Jesus appears to him from heaven, and Saul is converted to Christianity: Jesus changes Saul's name to Paul, and he becomes known as the apostle Paul. Jesus expressly tells Paul that he will become a missionary to the Gentiles.

The Missions Era—Acts 13-28

The four major subjects in the Missions Era are:

1. First Missionary Journey: Galatia for two years—Acts 13-14. In Paul's first missionary journey, he and Barnabas are selected by the Holy Spirit to travel to Galatia and take the gospel to Gentiles living there. They depart from Antioch, the point of departure for all three missionary journeys, and are in Galatia for two years, experiencing encouraging results.



(taken from www.archtoronto.org/stpaul/scripture.htm)

2. Second Missionary Journey: Greece for three years—Acts 15-17. Paul leaves from Antioch to visit the believers from his first journey. However, he receives a vision of a man in Macedonia (Greece) and changes his plans, going to Greece with the gospel message for the Gentiles there. He travels in Greece for three years.

4. Trials and Imprisonment: Roman prison for two years—Acts 22-28. Jewish leaders in Jerusalem have Paul arrested on false charges. Since his life is threatened there, even under guard, he is moved to Caesarea, the Roman capital in the area. There, he is tried under three men: Felix, Festus, and Agrippa. In order to thwart a miscarriage of justice in the process Paul exercises his right as a Roman citizen to take his case before Caesar in Rome. He is taken to Rome, but his case never comes to trial. After being in a Roman prison for two years, it is said he was beheaded (the established means of execution for a Roman citizen).

(above material taken from 30 Days to Understanding the Bible by Max Anders)