

Acts of the Apostles

A Study of the Early Church

Introduction

The Name: The book is commonly called "The Acts of the Apostles" although it is quite probable that in its original form it had no title at all. Over the centuries it has been called simply "Acts," or "The Acts" (Eusebius). This title "The Acts of the Apostles" is somewhat misleading since only a few of the apostles of Jesus Christ are mentioned, with special emphasis given to the "acts" of Peter and Paul. Therefore, it covers a timespan of approximately 34 years – from the ascension of Jesus Christ (ca. AD 30) to Paul's imprisonment in Rome (ca. AD 64). Some have suggested a more appropriate title would be "The Acts of the Holy Spirit" since the presence and work of the Holy Spirit is central to the book beginning on Pentecost (Acts 2).

The Author: Although the author does not identify himself by name, scholars have ascribed the authorship of Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts to Luke, the companion of Paul. One reason for concluding both books came from the same author is that both were addressed to the same individual, Theophilus, a distinguished Gentile.

Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed. (Luke 1:1-4)

The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen, to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. (Acts 1:1-3)

Furthermore, the literary style, vocabulary, and theological contents of Acts and the Gospel of Luke are quite similar. The numerous references to "we" (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5–21:18; 27:1–28:16) indicate Luke had joined Paul as a fellow traveling companion and reliable historian. Since he was present and personally familiar with many of the events surrounding Paul's latter missionary journeys, Luke was able to write with greater clarity and vividness in the latter half of Acts. He was an eyewitness to many of these events. Luke also mentioned 95 different persons from 32 countries, 54 cities, and 9 Mediterranean islands in Acts. It has been suggested that he may have gathered information for the first part of Acts (chapters 1–12), and for the gospel bearing his

name, from many these sources. In Acts, however, Luke writes a very selective history, focusing only on the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome.

The Date: It is difficult to determine the actual date of the writing of Acts. The only thing that can be said with any certainty is that it was written after the Gospel of Luke, and before the final events in the life of the apostle Paul is played out. Many scholars date Acts as early as AD 62 and as late as AD 68 or a little later since it concludes with the account of Paul's imprisonment and his earliest ministry in Rome.

The Theme: The book Acts has been described like a drama with two main characters, Peter, and Paul. The theme deals with the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem (the city where Jesus was crucified) to Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire, and provides valuable information concerning the development of the early church following the ascension of Jesus. Standing between the Gospels and the Epistles, the book of Acts is a bridge between the life of Jesus and the ministry of the apostle Paul.

Since the book of Acts is the continuation of the gospel account of all Jesus "began to do and teach," it catalogs what Jesus continued to do and teach through the Holy Spirit sent down from heaven. In fact, the principal theme of Acts is outlined by Jesus Himself:

"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

Essentially, the theme of Acts focuses on the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, and eventually the world of that day – or from a gospel given to the "Jews first" (chapters 2–9) and then to "the Gentiles" (chapters 10–26). But in providing a historical record of the establishment of the church and the spread of the gospel, Luke also defended "the Way" (Acts 9:2) from the suspicion of it being a secret, subversive cult (Acts 26:26). Perhaps this is why so many public speeches are recorded in Acts – so that no one could claim the message of the apostles was secretive and given to only a select few. Furthermore, Luke showed that the apostles were not leading sedition against Rome. Time after time Luke recorded that the Roman authorities acquitted the apostles of the charges brought against them (Acts 16:38-39; 17:5-9; 18:12-17; 19:35-41; 23:23-30; 25:23-27; 26:28-31). This may be the reason for Luke devoting nearly one third of Acts (chapters 21–28) to Paul's imprisonment – to not only show the gospel reached its destination despite numerous obstacles, but also to show that Paul and his message were not politically subversive.

Theological Contribution: The book of Acts could just as easily be titled; "The Acts of the Holy Spirit," for the Spirit is mentioned nearly 60 times in the book. In His parting words, Jesus reminded His disciples of the promise of the Father – that "you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" and be empowered to proclaim the message of the gospel by the divine inspiration of the Spirit. Ten days later the power of the Spirit descended on the apostles at Pentecost (2:1-4). Persons "from every nation under heaven" (2:5) saw the miraculous demonstrations of the Holy Spirit's

power – "the wonderful works of God" (2:11) – and heard the divinely inspired message proving beyond any doubt that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God. Thus, the Lord's church was born with the baptism of three thousand souls on that same day.

Beginning with the conversion of three thousand on Pentecost, the book of Acts contains a total of seven specific examples of conversions (Acts 2:14-47; 8:5-13; 26-39; 9:1-18; 10:34-48; 16:14-15; 25-34) in which the gospel was proclaimed and those who were receptive to the message were all baptized into Christ. From these seven examples we have the complete picture of all the steps leading to salvation by grace through faith.

Acts also contains portraits of many Christians of the early church and the outstanding characteristics of each. For example, Barnabas exemplified generosity (4:36-37), Stephen modeled forgiveness (7:60), Philip demonstrated dedication to others (6:1-5; 8:26); Paul typified humble obedience (26:19); and Cornelius exhibited deep devotion to God (10:2); all the apostles demonstrated great boldness (2:29; 4:13, 29, 31; 28:31). In fact, ordinary people were empowered to perform extraordinary feats: a cowardly apostle was empowered to address multitudes (2:14) and made a defense before the betrayers and murders of Jesus (4:8); a servant defended his faith to the point of death (7:58); the despised Samaritans turned to Christ (8:4-8); so did a Gentile Centurion (10); a staunch persecutor of the gospel was converted (9:1-19), and through him the gospel reached the capital of the world!

Finally, the book of Acts shows that nothing can stop the spread of the gospel, whether it be persecutions (8:3-4; 11:19), famines (11:27-30), opposition (13:45), or violent storms (27). Through it all, the Holy Spirit ensures that "all things work together for good" (Romans 8:28) to further the cause of Christ.

Historical Notes: Archeological research has greatly strengthened the historical credibility of Acts. Sir William M. Ramsay (d. 1935) recognized as the leading archeologist to research the New Testament, initially questioned the historical accuracy of the Bible. In his quest to point out inconsistencies in the Bible through archaeology, Ramsay discovered archaeological evidence to support the Bible as historically accurate.

His studies in Asia Minor caused him to study the book of Acts, which he accepted as a document of the second half of the second century, but later changed his belief based on the irrefutable evidence from the book of Acts itself. In his book, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament*, Ramsay explained that the purpose of his book, *St. Paul the Traveler and the Roman Citizen*, was to show:

"...that Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy; he is possessed of the true historical sense; he fixes his mind on the idea and plan that rules in the evolution of history, and proportions the scale of his treatment to the importance of each incident. He seizes the important and critical events and shows their true nature at greater length, while he touches

lightly or omits entirely as much that was valueless for his purpose. In short, this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians." (222)

Numerous excavations and explorations have now been conducted at places mentioned in the book of Acts, offering further proof to the historical accuracy of the book. Luke also detailed various common modes of travel in Acts. Whether on land, by foot or horse (23:24, 32), or chariot (8:27-38), or by sea (21:1-3; 27:1-5), Luke's account concerning these modes of travel was consistent with historical evidence. In fact, it has been said that the story of the wreck of Paul's ship is the most exciting and dramatic narrative of a sea adventure in ancient literature (Acts 27-28).

In addition to being historically accurate, Luke gives us insight into the many cultures of the day, such as the philosophical inquisitiveness of the Athenians (Acts 17:17-18) and the commercial monopoly of the silversmiths at the temple of Artemis in Ephesus (19:24-34).

Outline:

Although the book of Acts can be divided into two main sections – the work of Peter and the twelve (Acts 1–12), and the work of Paul (Acts 12–28) – the book is more commonly arranged according to the outline given in Acts 1:8:

I. The Gospel Preached in Jerusalem (Acts 1:1–8:4)

- A. The Power of the Church (1:1–2:47)
- B. The Progress of the Church (3:1–8:4)

II. The Gospel Preached in Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:5–12:25)

- A. The Preaching of Philip (8:5–40)
- B. The Conversion of Saul (9:1–31)
- C. The Witness of Peter (9:32–11:18)
- D. The Example of the Early Church (11:19–12:25)

III. The Gospel Preached to the End of the Earth (Acts 12:26–28:31)

- A. Paul's First Missionary Journey (13:1–14:28)
- B. The Jerusalem Council (15:1–35)
- C. Paul's Second Missionary Journey (15:36–18:22)
- D. Paul's Third Missionary Journey (18:23–21:16)
- E. The Journey to Rome (21:17–28:33)

Links to Online Bible Study Tools:

These websites contain numerous Bible versions and translations, concordances, dictionaries, lexicons, and many other useful tools: <https://biblehub.com/> and <https://www.biblestudytools.com/>.

Memorization:

In addition to every student being required to answer review questions based on the text of the book of Acts, each student will also be required to memorize the follow:

1. Key passages in Acts
2. Key events in each chapter of Acts
3. Paul's three missionary journeys and the key cities in each

The Exposition:

I. Introduction

A. The Name

1. What does the name "The Acts of the Apostles" imply and why is this perhaps not the best title for the book?

2. Think of some other names or titles you could give to the book of Acts and explain why you would choose those names.

B. Author

1. List the reasons for Luke being credited as the author of the book of Acts.

2. Of the reasons mentioned above, in your opinion which are the strongest for concluding Luke is the author of Acts.

C. Date

1. Some scholars previously thought the book of Acts was written sometime during the second century AD. What evidence would you offer to discredit that belief?

D. Theme

1. Why is the book of Acts considered as a "bridge" between the gospels and the epistles?

2. List some of the ways Luke defended the integrity of gospel message and the Lord's church.

E. Theological Contribution

1. List the four "theological contributions" of Acts mentioned in this outline and briefly explain each.
 - a.

 - b.

 - c.

 - d.

2. Which of these do you consider to be the most useful and most significant? Explain your answer.

E. Historical Notes

1. In what ways is the book of Acts historically significant?