



ACTS

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ACTS

ACTS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

“The Acts of the Apostles” is the name given since the middle of the second century AD. to the second volume of a two-volume work composed by Luke and dedicated to a certain Theophilus. The first volume of this work is ordinarily known as “The Gospel according to Luke”.

Originally, the two volumes circulated together as two parts of one complete writing. But during the first or early second century, the first volume became associated with the Gospels identified with Matthew, Mark and John, thus forming the fourfold Gospel. Luke’s second volume was left to go its own way. It was at this time, it seems, that the second volume received its present title, “The Acts of the Apostles”. The word “Acts” apparently meant to suggest both movement in the advance of the gospel and the heroic exploits by the apostles. The reference to “the Apostles”, however, is a little misleading, because the work deals almost exclusively with Peter and Paul.

The book of Acts is one of the most important books in the Bible.

George O Wood writes:

“Without this book there would be a tremendous gap between the ministry of Jesus and the church as it emerged in the current of history. How did it happen that the followers of Jesus, who were unknown Galileans and Judeans, became so well-known? What transformed the shyness that moved these men to denial and flight at the crucifixion into a boldness that made them staunch defenders of the new faith? How did preachers who were ordinary men, who had not been formally trained as rabbis, make such an impact upon the world that they created an entirely new culture which reshaped the face of Western civilization? What was the origin of theological truths contained in the New Testament and preached by the early missionaries? How did it happen that a movement which began among Jews, was centered in a Jewish Messiah, and was founded on Jewish Scripture become a religion adopted largely by Gentiles? These questions and many others are answered by the book of Acts, which is the only existing link between the ministry of Jesus and the well-developed Christianity that appeared in the Epistles of Paul and other New Testament authors”. Wood 1980:7

The book of Acts connects the Gospels to the Epistles and Revelation. Without it there would be a lack of continuity in the New Testament. We would have no idea how the church came into being. We would not know how the gospel got from Jerusalem to Rome, or who the apostle Paul was.

LUKE'S PURPOSES IN WRITING LUKE AND ACTS

Little support is now given to B.H. Streeter's view that Luke wrote his two volumes to serve as a legal brief for Theophilus, charged with the task of defending Paul on trial for his life in Rome. The only advantage of this theory would seem to be that it solves the problem of why the book of Acts ends where it does, with Paul in prison waiting trial, without going on to tell us the outcome. There is so much in both the Gospel and Acts that would be quite irrelevant for any advocate preparing a speech for the Apostle's defence that this particular suggestion appears to be quite inadequate to cover the facts.

1. To give Theophilus an accurate and orderly account of the origins of Christianity.

Luke himself states that his purpose in writing his two-volume work was "so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught". Lu 1:4. The "most excellent Theophilus" (Lu 1:3 cf Acts 1:1) to whom Luke addressed his work seems to have been a man who, though receptive to the gospel and perhaps even convinced by its claims, had many questions about Christianity as he knew it.

F.F. Bruce writes:

"His first volume is in essence a record of the apostolic witness to Jesus' ministry of word, deed, suffering and triumph. His second volume takes up the tale after the resurrection of Jesus and carries it on for some thirty years; he traces the progress of Christianity from Judaea to Rome, and ends with the chief herald of the gospel proclaiming it at the heart of the empire with the full acquiescence of the imperial authorities". Bruce 1954:20

Luke states at the beginning of Acts that his first volume dealt with "all that Jesus began to do and teach", and so it seems that by implication the second volume deals with "all that Jesus continued to do and teach". In this way the two volumes cover the beginning of the gospel, the establishment of salvation in the ministry of Jesus and the proclamation of salvation by the early church.

Neil writes:

"What makes his two-volume work unique in the New Testament is that he does something that no other Evangelist or letter-writer, not even Paul, attempts to do. Mark in his Gospel tells of the redemption acts of God in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. His Gospel ends on a note of expectancy: the Lord will come again in glory, and the time will not be long. For Paul the story of redemption begins where Mark leaves off. He has little to say of the ministry of Jesus, for in his mind it was but the prelude to his death and Resurrection which ushered in the new age, where the risen and glorified Christ is present with the people through his Spirit.

Thus, as C.K. Barrett points out, Mark only hints at the future life of the Church, and Paul only hints at the historical Jesus. Neither of them deals with the relationship between the Jesus of history and the Church. But this is precisely what Luke does; in his two-volume work he builds a bridge between the two. It is thus not without significance that he tells the story of the Ascension twice: once at the end of his Gospel, and again at the beginning of Acts.

In Luke's mind the Ascension of Christ has two aspects: in the Gospel it is the end of the story of Jesus, in Acts it is the beginning of the story of the Church, which will go on until Christ comes again. Thus for Luke, as Barrett says, 'the end of the story of Jesus is the Church, and the story of Jesus is the beginning of the Church'. For Mark and Paul Jesus is the End – God's last word. With this Luke agrees, but for him Jesus is also the beginning of something else. In one way or another the whole of the New Testament sees the time after the Resurrection as the last chapter in history; for Luke, however, the last chapter is a new chapter and Christ is not the close of all history, but the starting point of a new kind of history, 'Church History'. Luke is thus entitled, Barrett concludes, to be called 'the father of Church History', since no one before his day had realized that there was such a thing, and no one else in the New Testament had the same vision of something that had just begun but whose end was on the far horizon". Neil 1973: 26,27

Luke was an excellent historian. The N.I.V. Study Bible states:

"Every page of Acts abounds with sharp, precise details, to the delight of the historian. The account covers a period of about 30 years and reaches across the lands from Jerusalem to Rome. Luke's description of these times and places is filled with all kinds of people and cultures, a variety of governmental administrations, court scenes in Caesarea, and dramatic events involving such centers as Antioch, Ephesus, Athens, Corinth and Rome. Barbarian country districts and Jewish centers are included as well. Yet in each instance archaeological findings reveal that Luke uses the proper terms for the time and place being described. Hostile criticism has not succeeded in disproving the detailed accuracy of Luke's political and geographical designations". (p. 1642).

2. To defend Christianity against the charges which were brought against it in the second half of the first century.

Acts was written to serve as a defence for Christianity by commending it as a non-seditious faith to the Roman government. Christianity at this time was being popularly charged with sedition, of inciting rebellion against the authority of the state. Luke is concerned to defend Christianity against these charges and to establish the law-abiding character of Christianity.

In the Roman Empire Christianity started off with a serious handicap. Its founder had been crucified as a messianic pretender in Jerusalem. At Philippi the charge brought against Paul and Silas is given as disturbing the peace "by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice". (Acts 16:20-21). At Thessalonica the charge is one of "defying Caesar's decree," saying that there is another king, one called Jesus. (Acts 17:7). And at Corinth it is that of "persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law". (Acts 18:13). Also, at Paul's later trials the Jews charged him with stirring up riots within the Jewish communities and therefore deserved to be tried under Roman law. (Acts 24:5-9).

Luke sets himself to reduce this handicap. Bruce writes:

"The crucifixion of Christ is presented as a gross miscarriage of justice. True, He was accused of sedition before Pontius Pilate, but Pilate pronounced Him not guilty of the charges, and Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee, agreed that there was no substance in them (Luke 23:13ff). It was the influence of the chief

priests of Jerusalem, and the clamour of the city mob incited by them, that compelled Pilate against his own judgment to pass the death-sentence which they demanded.

Similarly in Acts a variety of officials, Gentile and Jewish, show good will towards Paul and other Christian missionaries, or at least admit that there is no basis for the accusations brought against them by their opponents. In Cyprus the distinguished proconsul of the island is favourably impressed by the Apostles and their message (Ch 13:7,12). At Philippi the chief collegiate magistrates of the colony apologize to Paul and Silas for their illegal beating and imprisonment (Ch 16:37ff). At Ephesus the Asiarchs, leading citizens of the province of Asia, are Paul's friends, and the chief executive officer of the city administration absolves him of the charge of public sacrilege (Ch 19:31, 35 ff). In Palestine the procurators Felix and Festus successively find him innocent of the serious crimes of which the Sanhedrin accuse him, and the Jewish client king Herod Agrippa II and his sister Bernice agree that he has done nothing deserving death or even imprisonment (Ch 24:1-26:32). And when he appeals, as a Roman citizen, to have his case heard by the emperor in Rome, he carries on his missionary activity for two years in that city, under constant surveillance, without anyone trying to hinder him (Ch 28:30 f). If Christianity were such a lawless movement as was widely believed, Paul would certainly not have been allowed to propagate it by the imperial guards in whose charge he was!

How then, it might be asked, was the advance of Christianity attended by so much strife and disorder? Luke arraigns the Jewish authorities as responsible for this. It was the Jerusalem Sanhedrin who prosecuted Jesus before Pilate and Paul before Felix and Festus; and most of the disturbances which broke out when the gospel was proclaimed in the Roman provinces were fomented by the local Jewish communities, who refused to accept the gospel themselves and were annoyed when their Gentile neighbours believed it. Bruce 1954:20,21.

It seems that Luke wrote Acts as an apology with Theophilus primarily in mind, but he meant it also for other Gentiles, perhaps both Christian and non-Christian.

3. To show how the gospel was meant for the Gentiles as well as for the Jews.

Another purpose in writing Acts was to show that the rise of the church and the spread of salvation to the Gentiles fulfilled the prophecies in the Old Testament and the promises of Jesus. (Lu 24:47; Acts 1:4f, 20; 2:16-21; 3:24; 10:43; 13:40f, 47; 15:15-18; 28:25-28).

AUTHOR OF THE BOOK

The author of Luke-Acts never names himself. His presence in the historical narrative is indicated on four different occasions by the plural pronoun "we". (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16). These references indicate that the author of Acts joined Paul during the early part of the second missionary journey at Troas. He accompanied him across the Aegean Sea to Philippi, remaining behind in Philippi until the end of Paul's third missionary journey. He then returned with Paul and other co-workers to Jerusalem in order to take an offering to the poor saints from the Gentile churches established by Paul. Then from Caesarea he sailed with Paul on the trip to Rome, remaining with him during his Roman imprisonment. During this time Paul wrote, among other letters, Philemon and Colossians. In them he sends greetings from his companions, and Luke is included among them. (Phile 23-26; Col 4:10-17).

Wood lists the following statements that leads us to the conclusion that Luke was the author:

1. The author of Luke-Acts was a companion of Paul in the Roman imprisonment (Acts 28).
2. It is highly probable that the author would be named in Paul's prison Epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon) written during the imprisonment described in Acts 28, but not named in the "we" sections of Acts.
3. The only names which meet the conditions above are: Mark, Jesus Justus, Demas, Luke, Epaphroditus.
4. Luke is mentioned in Colossians 4:10-14 and Philemon 24.
5. Historical tradition strongly attests to Luke's authorship.
6. The Scriptures themselves present no evidence contrary to the tradition.
7. In addition to his close association with Paul, the author has depended heavily upon interviewing eyewitnesses and reading other documents for his two-volume history. Wood 1980:19

Luke is the only Gentile writer of the Scriptures. (See Colossians 4:10-14) for evidence that Luke is not of the "circumcision"). Probably he researched Christian Palestinian origins during Paul's two-year imprisonment at Caesarea.

DATE OF THE BOOK

In deciding a date for the authorship of Acts, there are two other dates that need to be considered:

AD64 The fire of Rome which Nero blamed on the Christians and used as a pretext to persecute them. The book of Acts closes with no hint of these events. Surely if this has happened before Luke wrote Acts, he would have mentioned such an important event in the early history of the church.

AD70 The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Romans.

This indicates that Acts was written before AD64.

Wood writes:

"The dating of Acts holds important implications for New Testament study. A device of liberal scholarship has been to project later dates for New Testament writings. This had been done in order to support the view that the historical reliability of major sections of the New Testament may be discounted because they were written long after the events described. Acts is central to the discussion, for it can be established that the Gospel of Luke is prior to Acts.

Moreover, it can be strongly argued that Mark is prior to Luke. If, for example, Acts was written before A.D. 64, then Mark and Luke necessarily must come in the late 50's or early 60's of the first century. Liberal scholarship would rather project an additional 20-30 year delay in order to strengthen their position that the

gospel is more the church's theology of Jesus than the actual history of Jesus. However, a pre-A.D. 64 date for Mark and Luke-Acts means that the account of Jesus and the birth of the church was written during the lifetime of the generation which witnessed the ministry of Jesus! Had Mark and Luke been writing fiction rather than history, you can be sure they would have been corrected by a multitude of eye witnesses (I Corinthians 15:6). Wood 1980:21

THE STRUCTURE OF ACTS

1. Luke and Acts are structurally similar.

Richard N. Longenecker writes:

"The Acts of the Apostles was originally written as the second part of a two-volume work, and its inseparable relation to Luke's Gospel must be kept in mind if we are to understand the work. As Cadbury insisted over fifty years ago: "Their unity is a fundamental and illuminating axiom. They are not merely two independent writings from the same pen; they are a single continuous work. Acts is neither an appendix nor an afterthought. It is probably an integral part of the author's original plan and purpose". The Prologue to the two-volume work (Luke 1:1-4) suggests, in fact, that the author's intention was to write "an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us" - things that stretched from the birth of John the Baptist to the entrance of the Good News into Rome. And his use of the emphatic verb "began" (erxato) as he commences his second volume (Acts 1:1) sets up the parallel between "all that Jesus began to do and to teach" as recorded in his Gospel and what he continued to do and to teach through his church as is shown in Acts.

Luke alone of the evangelists seems to have viewed the history of the advance of the gospel as of comparable importance to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus - understanding, it seems, Jesus' accomplishment of redemption and the extension of that redemption through the activity of the church as being part and parcel of the same climactic movement in the drama of salvation. On the one hand, therefore, Luke has taken pains to construct the second volume with an eye to the first; he sets up numerous parallels in the portrayal of events in the two volumes and repeatedly stresses features in the second that fulfil anticipation expressed in the first.

A. The geographical movement of Jesus in the Gospel from Galilee to Jerusalem, for example, is paralleled in Acts by the geographical advance of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome.

Also Luke sees a parallel between Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, which is prominent in his first volume, and Paul's journey to Jerusalem, which he describes in the second. Stott writes:

"Of course the resemblance is far from being exact, and the mission of Jesus was unique; yet the correspondence between the two journeys seems too close to be a coincidence.

- (a) Like Jesus, Paul travelled to Jerusalem with a group of his disciples (20:4ff). Cf Lk 10:38.

- (b) Like Jesus he was opposed by hostile Jews who plotted against his life (20:3,19). Cf Lk 6:7,11; 11:53-54; 22:1-2.
- (c) Like Jesus he made or received three successive predictions of his 'passion' or sufferings (20:22-23; 21:4,11). Cf Lk 9:22,44; 18:31-32, including his being handed over to the Gentiles (21:11). Cf Lk18:32.
- (d) Like Jesus he declared his readiness to lay down his life (20:24; 21:13). Cf Lk 12:50; 22:19; 23:46.
- (e) Like Jesus he was determined to complete his ministry and not be deflected from it (20:24; 21:13). Cf Lk 9:5;.
- (f) Like Jesus he expressed his abandonment to the will of God (21:14). Cf Lk 22:42.

Even if some of these details are not to be pressed, Luke surely intends his readers to envisage Paul as following in his Master's footsteps when he 'steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem'. Cf Lk 9:51 AV. Stott 1990:315

B. The importance of the Holy Spirit in the birth narratives, in the Spirit's descent of Jesus at his baptism, and in the Spirit constantly undergirding his ministry (cf Jesus' declaration of this fact found only in Luke 4:18-19) is paralleled in Acts by the Spirit's coming upon the disciples at Pentecost and the repeated emphasis upon the Spirit as the source of the church's power and progress." Longenecker 1981:230

Comparison of the Structure of Luke and Acts

LUKE	ACTS
1. Holy Spirit's work of preparing Jesus for his ministry (conception, Luke 1:35; baptism, Luke 3:21-22; temptations, Luke 4:1)	1. Holy Spirit's work of preparing the Church for its ministry. (promise Acts 1:4,8; Pentecost, Acts 2:1-4)
This was followed by his anointed ministry. Luke 4:14, 18-19.	This was followed by anointed ministry. (Acts 4:8,31.)
2. The geographical movement of Jesus from Galilee (Luke 4:14-19:28, 41,45) to Jerusalem (Luke 19:29-24:53) Samaria	2. The geographical movement of the church from Jerusalem (Acts 1:12) to Judea, Samaria and eventually Rome. (Acts 8:1, 5, 26; 11:19,20: 28:14).

2. Acts can be divided into two sections, revolving around the ministries of Peter and Paul.

In his presentation, Luke deliberately sets up a number of parallels between the ministry of Peter in the first half of Acts and that of Paul in the second half.

Paul's apostleship is affirmed by the same signs as Peter's. Similarities in the supernatural events in the ministries of Peter and Paul are compared below:

Peter	Paul	
3:2-8	14:8-10	Man lame from birth healed
5:15	19:12	Extraordinary supernatural power
5:16	16:18	Demons cast out
8:18-24	13:6-11	Victorious encounter with sorcerers
9:36-41	20:9-12	Raisings from the dead.

3. Acts is divided into six “panels” of forward movements emphasising the work of the Holy Spirit as he urges the church to break through all barriers (culturally, geographically etc) as it continually moves out into the world with the gospel message.

Luke includes six summary statements or “progress reports” (6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20 and 28:31), each of which seems to conclude its own “panel” of material.

Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart write:

"As you read, notice the brief summary statement in 6:7, 9:31, 12:24, 16:5, and 19:20. In each case the narrative seems to pause for a moment before it takes off in a new direction of some kind. On the basis of this clue, Acts can be seen to be composed of six sections, or panels, which give the narrative a continually forward movement from its Jewish setting based in Jerusalem with Peter as its leading figure toward a predominantly Gentile church, with Paul as the leading figure, and with Rome, the capital of the Gentile world, as the goal. Once Paul reaches Rome, where he once again turns to the Gentiles because they will listen (28:28), the narrative comes to an end. You should notice, then, as you read how each section contributes to this “movement”. In your own words, try to describe each panel, both as to its content and its contribution to the forward movement. What seems to be the key to each new forward thrust? Here is our own attempt to do this:

2:42-6:7. A description of the primitive church in Jerusalem, its early preaching, its common life, its spread and its initial opposition. Notice how Jewish every thing is, including the sermons, the opposition, and the fact that the early believers continue associations with the temple and the synagogues. The panel concludes with a narrative indicating that a division had begun between Greek-speaking and Aramaic-speaking believers.

6:8-9:31. A description of the first geographical expansion, carried out by the “Hellenists” (Greek-speaking Jewish Christians) to diaspora Jews or “nearly Jews” (Samaritans and a proselyte). Luke also includes the conversion of Paul, who was (1) a Hellenist, (2) a Jewish opponent, and (3) the one who was to lead the specifically Gentile expansion. Stephen’s martyrdom is the key to this initial expansion.

9:32-12:24. A description of the first expansion to the Gentiles. The key is the conversion of Cornelius, whose story is told twice. The significance of Cornelius is that his conversion was a direct act from God, who did not now use the Hellenists, in which case it would have been suspect, but Peter, the acknowledged leader of the Jewish-Christian mission. Also included is the story of the church in Antioch, where Gentile conversion is now carried out by the Hellenists in a purposeful way.

12:25-16:5. A description of the first geographical expansion into the Gentile world, with Paul in the leadership. Jews now regularly reject the Gospel because it includes Gentiles. The church meets in council and does not reject its Gentile brothers and sisters, nor does it lay Jewish religious requirements on them. The latter serves as the key to full expansion into the Gentile world.

16:6-19:20. A description of the further, ever westward expansion into the Gentile world, now into Europe. Repeatedly the Jews reject and the Gentiles welcome the Gospel.

19:21-28:30. A description of the events that move Paul and the Gospel on to Rome, with a great deal of interest in Paul's trials, in which three times he is declared innocent of any wrongdoing. Try reading Acts with this outline, this sense of "movement", in view to see for yourself whether this seems to capture what is going on. As you read you will notice that our description of the content omits one crucial factor - indeed the crucial factor - namely, the role of the Holy Spirit in all of this. You will notice as you read that at every key juncture, in every key person, the Holy Spirit plays the absolutely leading role. According to Luke, all of this forward movement did not happen by man's design; it happened because God willed it and the Holy Spirit carried it out....

The key to understanding Acts seems to be in Luke's interest in this movement, orchestrated by the Holy Spirit, of the Gospel from its Jerusalem-based, Judaism-oriented beginnings to its becoming a worldwide, Gentile-predominant phenomenon. On the basis of structure and content alone, any statement of purpose that does not include the Gentile mission and the Holy Spirit's role in that mission will surely have missed the point of the book." Fee and Stuart 1982:90-92

Taking all these literary and structural features into account, Longenecker concludes that Luke developed his material in Acts along the following lines:

"Introduction: The Constitutive Events of the Christian Mission (1:1-2:41)

Part I: The Christian Mission to the Jewish World (2:42-12:24)

Part II: The Christian Mission to the Gentile World (12:25-28:31).

Panel 1 - The Earliest Days of the Church at Jerusalem (2:42-6:7) Summary Statement: "So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith". (6:7).

Panel 2 - Critical Events in the Lives of Three Pivotal Figures (6:8-9:31) Summary Statement: "Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord" (9:31).

Panel 3 - Advances of the Gospel in Palestine-Syria (9:32-12:24) Summary Statement: "But the word of God continued to increase and spread" (12:24).

Panel 4 - The First Missionary Journey and the Jerusalem Council (12:25-16:5) Summary Statement: "So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers" (16:5).