

CHAPTER 5

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Acts is the only historical narrative book in the NT, and the only extant early Christian history until Eusebius of Caesarea about 300 years later. Written by Luke, the companion of Paul, Acts continues his narrative begun in his Gospel and brings it up to the arrival of Paul and his gospel in Rome.

Introduction to Acts

Author of Acts

Although not named in the book, the author clearly is the same as that of Luke's Gospel; so all the arguments for the authorship of Luke also apply to Acts. The style of the author is clearly the same as that of the Gospel; in addition, the author of the "we-sections" is the same as the author of the rest of Acts. This identity of authorship is universally recognized.

The author was a companion of Paul on at least three occasions. This is shown by the "we-sections" in Acts:

1. Acts 16:11-17 (during Paul's second missionary journey)
2. Acts 20:5 – 21:18 (during Paul's third missionary journey)
3. Acts 27-28 (during Paul's voyage to Rome and first Roman imprisonment)
4. Western text of Acts 11:28 ("when we were gathered together . . ."; during Paul's early ministry in Antioch; agrees with early tradition that Luke was from Antioch-Syria [F. F. Bruce, *Acts*, 243])

It is possible to compare these "we-sections" with Paul's epistles (particularly Colossians and Philemon, written during his first Roman imprisonment) and see which of his companions named there would fit with these sections of Acts. The result is one person: Luke. This conclusion agrees with the early church writings as well, which identify Luke as the author.

Date of Acts

There are three main theories about when the date of Acts. The first two are held by conservative scholars, while the third is a critical view that denies the book's genuineness.

Earliest date—about A.D. 58

There is an abrupt ending of the book of Acts at that point. Paul is awaiting his final trial in Rome, to appear before the emperor or one of his high officials. It seems strange that Luke would deliberately leave us in suspense concerning the outcome of that trial. It is assumed by conservatives that Paul was acquitted, and that result would make excellent evidence for Luke to use in the book to further his purpose. This view assumes that Luke's Gospel was written earlier, probably during Paul's imprisonment under Felix in Caesarea, and was not dependent on Mark's Gospel.

Later date—about A.D. 70

This view assumes that Luke's Gospel was written after Mark's (two-source or four-source hypothesis). If so, since Mark was written shortly before A.D. 70, Luke would be somewhat later than that, and Acts would come after Luke.

Critical date—in the A.D. 80s or later

This view assumes that someone else wrote Acts, and that many of the details of the book are not historical. It also assumes that the picture of Paul in Acts is different than the real Paul, the one revealed in his epistles (especially in Galatians).

Purpose of Acts

Luke, the only Gentile NT writer, had a particular interest in the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles. In particular, he traces how the gospel began as a primarily Jewish movement, was rejected by the Jewish establishment, and was taken to the Samaritans and to the Gentiles, many more of whom accepted it. The primary leader in this movement at the beginning was Peter and later was Paul. Luke follows the activities of Peter and Paul, especially the manner in which the Holy Spirit led them to carry the gospel into the Gentile world while still offering it to the Jews.

With this over-arching purpose, Acts provides a bridge between the Gospels and the Epistles, even providing historical background for the churches addressed in ten of Paul's Epistles.

A secondary purpose of the book is to demonstrate that Christianity should be approved by the Roman Empire. It shows that the opposition, first to Christ himself and then to the

church, arose not from the Roman officials, but from the Jewish leaders who opposed Christ. By relating the history and circumstances of the persecutions against the church, Luke demonstrates that the church was law-abiding and, in fact, beneficial to society.

Outline of Acts

Acts is by no means a complete history of the early church. The materials included in the book are often fragmentary; some examples:

- Little mention of Galilee (9:31)
- Sometimes one verse covers many miles and events (18:22)
- No details of trip through Asia Minor (19:1)
- No mention of most apostles; e.g., Thomas and the East

Many see in Acts 1:8 an outline for the book of Acts:

1. Jerusalem (ch. 1-7)
2. Judea and Samaria (ch. 8-12)
3. The world (ending in Rome; ch. 13-28)

Many see a basic outline in the ministries of Peter and Paul:

1. Peter and Jerusalem (ch. 1-12)
2. Paul and Antioch (ch. 13-28)

[Furthermore, Paul's ministry (ch. 13-28) can be divided into three phases, indicated by God's statement about him made to Ananias (Acts 9:15):]

- a. A witness to the Gentiles (ch. 13-20)
- b. A witness to kings (ch. 20-27)
- c. A witness to the children of Israel (ch. 28)

With the similar roles of Peter and Paul in the spread of the gospel to the Jews and the Gentiles, Luke offers several parallels between them:

Peter	Paul
Primarily to Jews	Primarily to Gentiles
Ministry to Jerusalem and Dispersion	Ministry to Antioch and Gentile world
Pentecost discourse (ch. 3)	Pisidian-Antioch discourse (ch. 13)
Heals lame man (ch. 3)	Heals lame man (ch. 14)
Judges Annanias and Saphira (ch. 5)	Judges Elymas (ch. 13)
Miraculously freed from prison (ch. 12)	Miraculously freed from prison (ch. 16)
Raises Tabitha (Dorcas) from the dead (ch. 9)	Raises Eutychus from the dead (ch. 20)

The Earliest Church in Acts

The first chapters of Acts (Acts 1-12) trace the history of the church from the resurrection of Christ to the beginning of Paul's missionary journeys. In these chapters the church is centered in Jerusalem, but is reaching out to other areas, finally taking the gospel all the way north to Antioch. These chapters are critical for both the historical and the theological development of the church. Peter is the pivotal figure in these chapters, taking the gospel first to the Jews in Jerusalem, then to the Samaritans, and finally to the Gentiles. These chapters also introduce Paul and prepare for the mission of Paul to the Gentiles in the later chapters of the book.

The gospel brought to Jerusalem (Acts 1-5)

Acts 1 – Preparation of the apostles for the new phase of God's work

- Final teachings and ascension of Jesus
- Promise of the Holy Spirit's special ministry
- Selection of Matthias to replace Judas Iscariot

Acts 2 – The church established in Jerusalem

- Holy Spirit given to 120 disciples in Jerusalem
- Spiritual gifts, including tongues

Tongue speaking was a sign of the reception of the person into the kingdom of God, and was common in the earliest church. It occurred five times in the NT; all these occurrences took place before or during Paul's missionary journeys; there is no indication this gift continued past that point:

1. Jewish church at Pentecost (Acts 2:4-11)
2. Samaritan believers (implied; Acts 8:15-17)
3. Gentile Cornelius and family and friends (Acts 10:44-46)
4. Gentile Christians in Ephesus (Acts 19:6)
5. Gentile Christians in Corinth (1 Cor 12-14)

- Peter's sermon to the Jews in the temple
- 3,000 added to the church
- Sharing of goods in the early church

Acts 3-5 – The church strengthened through persecutions

- Peter and John heal the man crippled from birth
- Peter's second sermon to the Jews in the temple (note offer of kingdom in Acts 3:19-21)

- Peter and John warned by the Sanhedrin
- Believers pray and continue sharing their goods
- Introduction of Barnabas
- Judgment on Ananias and Sapphira
- Apostolic miracles
- Peter and apostles' second Sanhedrin appearance (Gamaliel), flogged
- Continued preaching

The gospel delivered to Greek-speaking Jews (Acts 6-7)

The apostles, who were from Galilee, were comfortable speaking Greek as well as Aramaic. The Jews in Judea spoke mostly Aramaic. Most Jews of the Dispersion spoke Greek, as the lingua franca of the Roman world, in addition to the local languages in the places they lived (Acts 2:8-11). Many of these foreign Jews came to Jerusalem for the pilgrim festivals, as Passover and Pentecost. A few had already met Jesus (John 12:20-21). Apparently, after Pentecost many of these Greek-speaking Jews were converted through the preaching of Peter and the other disciples and continued to live in Jerusalem and be a part of the church there.

Before the gospel would spread to the other nations and peoples, it first had to penetrate the Jews in Jerusalem who did not speak Aramaic, and these converts needed to be incorporated into the church. These converts would be key players in taking the gospel to the Gentile world.

Acts 6-7 – The Greek-speaking Jewish Christians

- Greek-speaking Jewish Christians overlooked in food distribution
- Appointment of the seven first “deacons” (note Greek names, Acts 6:5)
- Ministry and arrest of Stephen
- Stephen’s speech to the Sanhedrin
- Stephen’s execution by stoning (the first Christian martyr)
- Introduction of Saul of Tarsus

The gospel reaches beyond Jerusalem (Acts 8-9)

Following the pattern set by Jesus in Acts 1:9, the gospel now progresses to areas beyond Jerusalem, especially in the surrounding region of Judea and into Samaria. Some of this expansion is driven by increasing persecution in Jerusalem, led by Saul of Tarsus (Acts 8:1; 9:31). Also, during this stage Saul is converted, preparing for the second major part of Acts.

Acts 8 – New witnesses to Samaria and Ethiopia

- Saul’s persecution sends Christians from Jerusalem (except apostles)
- Philip brings gospel to Samaria

- Peter and John confirm church in Samaria
- Judgment on Simon the Sorcerer
- Peter and John Preaching throughout Samaria
- Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch (Isa 53:7-8; the nations to believe and “be sprinkled” in Isa 52:15)
- Philip preaching in western Judea up to Caesarea

Acts 9 – Saul’s conversion and Peter’s ministry

- Saul’s conversion on Damascus road (retold in Acts 22 and Acts 26)
- Saul’s ministry in Damascus
- Saul’s escape to Jerusalem and reception by the disciples
- Saul’s move to Tarsus
- Rest and strengthening for the church
- Peter’s ministry in Lydda and Joppa
- Peter’s raising of Tabitha (= Dorcas)

The gospel goes to the Gentiles (Acts 10-12)

While a few Gentiles have been converted to Christ by this time (the deacon Nicolas from Antioch, who was already a Gentile covert to Judaism, in Acts 6:5; and the Ethiopian eunuch, who already was a God-worshiper loyal to the Jewish religion, in Acts 8:36-39), these few converts were already loyal to Judaism. So far in Acts, there is no record of a pagan converting directly to Christ. This situation changes in this section of Acts. God prepares Peter to lead the way in the bringing in of Gentiles into the church, without going through Judaism first. This section also shows how Antioch became the new center of Christian activity, even as Jerusalem faded.

Acts 10 – Conversion of Cornelius

- Angel speaks to Cornelius in Caesarea
- Peter’s vision on the housetop in Joppa
- Delegation to fetch Peter
- Peter’s preaching to Cornelius (same outline as Mark’s Gospel)
- Conversion of Cornelius and his household
- Gift of the Holy Spirit and baptism

Acts 11 – Gentiles accepted by Jerusalem church and reached in Antioch

- Peter explains his actions to Jewish Christians in Jerusalem
- Jerusalem believers recognize inclusion of Gentiles (Acts 11:18)

- Jerusalem Christians who fled preach to Jews as far as Antioch (Acts 11:19)
- Some Jerusalem Christians, with roots in Dispersion, preach to pagan Gentiles in Antioch (Acts 11:20)
- Barnabas sent to Antioch
- Barnabas brings Saul to Antioch
- Disciples first called Christians in Antioch (“people of the Christ, the Messiah”)
- Prophecy of Agabus, offering sent to Jerusalem
- Barnabas and Saul sent with offering to Jerusalem (the “famine visit”)

Acts 12 – The move from Jerusalem

- King Herod Agrippa I has apostle James executed, Peter imprisoned
- Peter’s miraculous escape from prison
- Peter meets with Christians, leaves Jerusalem (Acts 12:17)
- Herod Agrippa’s pride, disease, death
- Barnabas and Saul return to Antioch, taking John Mark with them

The Ministry of Paul in Acts

With the beginning of chapter 13, Acts enters the second main phase: the ministry of Paul and the bringing of the gospel from Antioch all the way to Rome. This part of the NT history will be covered in the following chapters of notes dealing with the life and the epistles of Paul.