

James E. Smith, New Testament Books Made Simple
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LUKE'S SECOND VOLUME

Acts of the Apostles

Acts functions in the New Testament like the twelve historical books function in the Old Testament library. Acts relates the history of about the first three decades of the church. Many of the epistles that follow in the New Testament fit into the historical framework provided by Acts.

44th Book of the Bible

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Proclamation of the Gospel

The fifth book of the New Testament was known in the ancient church by the name *Acts of the Apostles* or simply *Acts*. The name in some respects is a misnomer. Acts only relates the details of the ministry of two of the Apostles, Peter and Paul. Because of Luke's strong emphasis on the ministry of the Holy Spirit, some have suggested that this book should really be called the *Acts of the Holy Spirit*.

The opening verses of Acts make the point that this book is the second book in a two-volume set. Both Luke and Acts are addressed to Theophilus. He was a wealthy Christian patron who probably financed the production of this monumental set. Luke identifies the occasions when he was personally present by using the plural "we" or "us."

The Book of Acts contains twenty-eight chapters, 1,007 verses, and 24,250 words.

Situation

Acts concludes by relating how Paul was in custody in Rome for two years. A date of about AD 63 for the writing can be assigned.

During his travels with Paul Luke met many of the Christian leaders. He was in a position to gather the facts about the earliest days of the church. On some of Paul's missionary trips, Luke personally was present. Because he was interested in preserving the history of the church, and because he as much as any other was in a position to know the facts about Christianity, Luke penned the Book of Acts.

Plan

The Book of Acts consists largely of lively narrative punctuated here and there with prayers and sermons. The theme of the book is *witnessing for Christ*.

Structural plan. Acts unfolds geographically as outlined in Acts 1:8. Thus an outline of the book looks like this:

- **Introduction** (ch 1)
- **Jerusalem campaign** (2:1-8:3)
- **Judea-Samaria campaign** (8:4-12:25)
- **World-wide campaign** (chs 13-28)

The writer of Acts was a missionary himself. He personally participated in much of the history that he narrates in this book. His account, therefore, is not the detached analysis of an historian reviewing the past. Luke writes with passion about missions, for missions were his life. This in no way, however, detracts from the authority of this primary historical document. Luke can properly be designated the first church historian.

Geographical plan. Acts needs to be studied with a Bible atlas in hand. There are about eighty geographical references in Acts. Four major **regions** are mentioned. First, **Judea** is the region around Jerusalem. In the first century this region was administered by a Roman governor who was headquartered in the sea-coast city of Caesarea. Second, the region of **Samaria** was north of Judea. During his ministry Jesus had sowed the seed in that region. Philip the preaching deacon was the first Christian to carry the gospel into Samaria. Third, **Asia Minor** was the ancient name for the country we now call Turkey. In New Testament times that region was carved up into fourteen Roman provinces, all of which are mentioned in Acts. The fourth major area of activity in Acts is **Greece**. In this period the northern half of Greece was called Macedonia, the southern half Achaia. Paul spent a great deal of time in the region of Greece.

In addition to the four major areas, five major **cities** are the centers for the activity in Acts: Jerusalem, Antioch, Corinth, Ephesus and Rome. The church was founded in **Jerusalem**. There the Christians remained for four or five years until forced to scatter by persecution. Jerusalem

remained a strong center of the faith until the Romans destroyed in the city in AD 70.

Persecution caused the Christians to carry the message as far as **Antioch**, three hundred miles north of Jerusalem. Barnabas teamed up with Saul (later called Paul) to teach the new Gentile believers in that city. Antioch was the hub of missionary endeavor for many years.

Paul founded the church in **Corinth** on his second missionary journey. Paul wrote two letters to the church in Corinth. Several of the greatest New Testament preachers spent time ministering in Corinth.

Paul used **Ephesus** on the western coast of modern Turkey as a hub for evangelizing the Roman province called Asia. After the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 Ephesus seems to have become the main center of Christianity. The Apostle John spent his last years there.

Rome was the center of the Roman world. We do not know how the church came to be founded there. It already existed when Paul wrote his letter to the Romans. Paul was in custody in Rome on two occasions. He along with Peter was martyred there about the year AD 68.

Biographical structure. In the three evangelistic campaigns referenced in the outline above, **Peter and John** are the leaders in the first, **Peter and Philip** in the second, and **Paul** in the third. Luke mentions over one hundred people by name in Acts. Aside from the campaign leaders, the key figures in this book are **Stephen**, a preaching deacon; three notable converts **Simon the Sorcerer**, the Roman centurion **Cornelius** (*kor-nee'-lee-us*), and **Lydia**, the first European convert to Christianity; four great missionaries: **Barnabas** (*bahr'-nuh- buhs*), **Silas** (*si'-luhs*), **Timothy**, and **Luke**; and **James**, the half brother of Jesus who became a leader in the Jerusalem church.

Chronological structure. The Book of Acts reports the history of the earliest Christians from the *enthronement* of Jesus (AD 30) to the Roman *imprisonment* of Paul (AD 63). Therefore, Acts covers roughly thirty-four years.

Eternal Purpose

The immediate purpose of the Book of Acts is to continue the record of what Jesus began to do and to teach (1:1). The ultimate purpose of this book is to document that the power of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit were present in the formative days of the Christian church.

Acts is valuable for showing how the early Christians evangelized—how they presented the gospel plan of salvation. Luke has selected a number of conversion cases to illustrate how one by one the barriers to the spread of the gospel were smashed. A large crowd on the Jewish feast day of Pentecost contained at least some who had been responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. Peter's message convicted them of this terrible sin and drove them to ask how they might obtain God's forgiveness. The response *repent and be baptized* (Acts 2:38) is the first presentation of the gospel plan during the reign of Christ.

One of the great benefits of Acts is the way it illustrates how the Christians responded to Christ's Great Commission to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth (Mt 28:19f). It took the Christians about ten years to catch up to the spirit of Christ's commission. A persecution got the Christians out of Jerusalem. Philip the preaching deacon took that occasion to break through the Samaritan barrier. A few years later a housetop vision convinced Peter to preach the gospel to Gentiles for the first time. Even after this breakthrough many Jewish Christians resisted the full inclusion of Gentiles in the life of the church. Ultimately the view of Paul prevailed. The gospel was carried to the far corners of the Roman Empire.

In Acts Luke traces the history of that crucial generation when the make-up of the church shifted from predominately Jewish membership to predominately Gentile membership. Luke intends to demonstrate that the church is not one of many branches of Judaism. In Acts he presents the church as the new and true Israel of God—as the ultimate fulfillment of Old Testament aspiration and anticipation. In the church the true sons of Abraham are manifested, the destiny of ancient Israel is fulfilled.

Another valuable contribution of Acts is the background material it furnishes for the interpretation of the Epistles of Paul. Without Acts many of the allusions in Paul's letters would be difficult if not impossible to understand.

Acclaim

In Acts Jesus is portrayed as the *Enthroned King*. New Testament preachers cited Old Testament prophecy to prove that the resurrection/ascension of Christ was anticipated and thus required. The Apostles throughout the book bear testimony to having seen Christ alive after his crucifixion. They had forty days to establish the reality of his astonishing conquest of death.

In Acts 1 eleven apostles saw Christ ascend into heaven (Acts 1:9). Peter offered tangible proof that Jesus was enthroned in heaven by pointing to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit with accompanying signs that transpired on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:32-35). Just before his martyr's death Stephen claimed to have seen the heavens opened. He saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7:56). On the Damascus road Saul of Tarsus saw a blinding light from heaven and heard the voice of Jesus (Acts 9:3-6). This same event is told in the words of Paul himself in 22:6-10 and 26:13-18. Clearly the Christians made the heavenly enthronement of Jesus one of the key points in their message (Acts 17:7).

Keys

The key chapter in the Book of Acts is chapter 10. This chapter records the conversion of the first Gentile.

The key verse in the book is this: *you [apostles] shall receive power, after that the Holy Spirit is come upon you: and you shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth* (Acts 1:8). As noted above, this verse virtually outlines the contents of the book.

The key phrases in the book are *and it came to pass* (13 KJV) and *passed through* (8).

Key words include *believe/believed/faith* (55) and *baptized/baptism* (27).

Special Features

Here are some interesting facts about Acts that set this book apart in the books of Scripture:

- The earliest name for believers in Christ was *followers of the Way*. The term *Christian* did not surface until about a decade after Christ.
- The two books of Luke and Acts make up twenty-eight percent of the New Testament.
- Acts contains the last recorded words of Jesus (Acts 1:8).
- Acts is the historical link between the Gospels and the Epistles. It provides historical background for ten of Paul's letters.
- Luke's precision in citing locations and titles (e.g., consul, tetrarch) has been verified by archaeological evidence.
- Acts devotes a large amount of space to speeches and sermons. There are no less than twenty-four messages in the twenty-eight chapters of the book.

HEAR

God speaks his will for the church in the Book of Acts. The church needs to hear what the Lord says. Here are some of the outstanding chapters in Acts that can serve as start for your detailed study of the book:

- Final days of Jesus (Acts 1)

- Birthday of the church (Acts 2)
- Conversion of Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9)
- Conversion of the first Gentile (Acts 10)
- Paul's 1st missionary journey (Acts 13-14)
- The Jerusalem council (Acts 15)
- Paul's 2nd missionary journey (Acts 16-18)
- Paul's voyage to Rome (Acts 21)

Here are some favorite lines from Acts:

- *Whoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved (2:21).*
- *Repent and be baptized every one of you (2:38).*
- *We must obey God rather than men (5:29).*
- *God is no respecter of persons (10:34).*
- *Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved (16:31).*
- *It is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35).*
- *Why do you tarry? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins (22:16).*
- *Almost you persuade me to be a Christian (26:28).*