



## Introduction to the Book of Acts

### Introduction

Once we have read the OT, especially the messianic prophecies, and the four Gospel accounts, we have all the evidence about Jesus of Nazareth to know that he is the Son of God, the Son of David, the Messiah or Christ, and the Son of Man. In essence, in him we have the Capstone or Rock of our faith. In the Book of Acts, we now move on to an account of how the foundation of his church was laid and built upon that Rock.

The grain of wheat that died and fell to the ground has sprouted to produce a magnificent crop; a mustard seed that has produced the great tree that is the Kingdom of God.

The book has been called the Acts of the Apostles but we will simply refer to it as Acts. Church tradition and other historical documents show that the eleven original apostles all continued the work they had been trained to do, although the author of Acts focuses primarily on Peter and, in part, John. These men had gone from the insecure, timid apostles, who frequently failed to grasp what was being taught to them, and who had debated who among them would be the greatest, to becoming bold evangelists, true fishers of men, and a light to the world, just as Jesus commanded them to be.

The author resumes the account in Jerusalem, with Jesus giving some final instructions before his ascension into heaven. This was followed almost immediately by the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The Word is preached in Jerusalem and the early church starts to blossom and spread, as the apostles and new disciples become the witnesses Jesus had trained and nurtured them to be. It seems likely that some of these new disciples, especially those that were drawn from the early church of 120 believers in Acts 1:15, were from the group of 72 disciples sent out on mission by Jesus in Luke Chapter 10.

The early church is established and there is great unity among all those who were joining this fast growing church despite the persecutions and even martyrdom of Stephen and James.

We are introduced to Saul of Tarsus, who will have an encounter with the risen Christ, which would change his life forever, as he becomes the apostle Paul and travels far and wide to spread the Gospel of Christ, suffering much as he does so.

We also see the emergence of Jesus' half-brother James as a senior figure in the church in Jerusalem. One of his letters is included in the canon of scripture and he is seen to have apostolic authority.

As commanded by Jesus, the Gospel is preached in Jerusalem, Judæa, Samaria and then to the centre of the Roman Empire, where this part of the story concludes.

---

## Author

As we noted before, the third Gospel does not name its author. This is also true of this book, which is the author's second work. This does not mean, however, that the original readers did not know who wrote these two books.

The Lukan authorship of Luke-Acts is affirmed by both external evidence, i.e. church tradition, and internal evidence. Church tradition supporting Luke as the author is both early, from the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> Century AD, and unanimous. In fact, it was never doubted until the 19<sup>th</sup> century when so-called Christian scholars seemed to challenge every aspect of scriptural integrity; most of which has since been overruled.

The 'we' sections in Acts 16:10-17, Acts 20:5 to Acts 21:18 and Acts 27:1 to Acts 28:16 indicate that the author was a companion of Paul and participated in the events described in those sections. Thus the author of Acts was clearly one of Paul's closest companions, as listed in his letters written during those periods. Luke is mentioned in Colossians 4:14, 2 Timothy 4:11 and Philemon 24, and is not one of those referred to in the third person in the 'we' sections, i.e. Acts 20:4-5.

It is known that the author was from the second generation of the early church, was not an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry according to Luke 1:2, and was a Gentile. Eusebius, in Ecclesiastical History 3.4.6, says that Luke was 'by race an Antiochian and a physician by profession', which is confirmed in Colossians 4:14, which says: <<*Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send greetings*>>. The testimonies of early church fathers Origen (early 3<sup>rd</sup> Century), and Epiphanius (late 4<sup>th</sup> Century), both claim that Luke was Jewish and one of the 72 sent out by Jesus. If this were the case it would negate Luke's own claim as not being an eyewitness. Jerome, from the same period as Epiphanius, claims that Luke was never married and that he suffered martyrdom at the age of 84. There is no historical evidence to support the location or to hold this as a fact.

However, despite some anomalies and hypotheses, all of this confirms the tradition that Luke was the author of the third Gospel.

Because Luke travelled with Paul, his Gospel was received as having apostolic endorsement and authority from Paul. Therefore, it is considered a trustworthy record of the Gospel that Paul preached. Eusebius reports that Paul quoted from Luke by saying: 'According to my Gospel' (Ecclesiastical History 3.4.7). Likewise, the Book of Acts is seen as a true and historic record, written very close to the time it occurred and Luke was an eye-witness of many of the aspects recorded in the second part of the book.

---

## Date

The earliest possible date for Luke-Acts is immediately after the events that Luke recorded in Acts Chapter 28, i.e. around AD62. In fact, Luke was probably written slightly earlier than this and Acts could have been completed around that time. This seems likely as most scholars hold that Paul was released from imprisonment in AD62 or 63 and undertook another missionary journey, before being re-arrested and executed.

The specific date centres on two questions:

- Would Luke have added to his Gospel later?
- Did he make use of the Gospel of Mark in writing his own Gospel?

If Luke wrote Luke-Acts after the martyrdom of Paul in the mid-60s AD, then it is suggested that the omission of the details of Paul's trial and death seems strange. In addition, Luke makes no mention of the terrible persecution of Christians under Nero in AD65 but gives a very positive picture of Paul preaching the Gospel in Rome for two years. This is seen with

the closing words of Acts, which says: <<*with all boldness and without hindrance*>> (Acts 28:31). So we conclude that he must have written both books sometime before AD65.

Those who hold to a later date for Luke reply that ending with Paul preaching in Rome is natural because it shows that the preaching <<*to the end of the earth*>> in Acts 1:8 has been fulfilled. Since a primary purpose of Luke-Acts is to tell the story of how the Gospel spread to the Gentile capital of Rome, when that purpose is accomplished the story could come to a natural end, regardless of what happened to Paul.

Concerning the relationship of Luke to Mark, the great majority of scholars believe that Luke made use of Mark in writing his Gospel. There is no real difficulty in dating Mark in the mid to late 50's AD, which would allow for a date of Luke in the early 60's. Other scholars dispute this and claim that the predictions of the fall of Jerusalem in Luke 21:20-24 are so vivid that they could have been written only after the fact. This would mean that Luke and Acts were written after AD70. These scholars would then date Mark somewhat before Luke in the late 60's, i.e. shortly after the deaths of Paul and Peter. However, many evangelical scholars, who consider Luke 21:20-24 to be a predictive prophecy by Jesus, would hold to a date for Luke in the early 60's.

---

### Theme

In Acts, believers are empowered by the Holy Spirit to bear witness to the good news of Jesus Christ among both Jews and Gentiles, and in doing this they establish the church. In addition to this, Acts explains how Christianity, although it is new, is in reality the one true faith, rooted in God's promises from the beginning of time - his providential plan. In the ancient world, it was important that a faith or religion should be shown to have stood the test of time. Thus Luke presents the church as the fulfilment and extension of God's promises.

---

### Purpose of the Book of Acts

Luke's stated purpose for both of his books is provided at the beginning of the first (Luke 1:1-4). He had an historian's interest in providing 'an orderly account' - 'of the things that have been fulfilled among us'. One would assume the latter statement applied both to the ministry of Jesus (Luke's Gospel) and to that of the early church (Acts). Dedicating the work to Theophilus, he wanted him to have 'certainty' for and confidence in what he had been taught. The exact nature of Luke's purpose depends on how one identifies Theophilus. He evidently had already been instructed in the Christian way and may have been a new convert or a seeker on the verge of commitment. Since Theophilus means 'lover of God', it is also possible that Luke is challenging the devotion of his readers rather than addressing his book to just one of them, although most hold Theophilus to be a real person.

Luke probably had a number of purposes for writing Acts. These are best determined through the emphases and themes found throughout the book.

---

### Summary of Salvation History

After his ascension, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit as he had promised, which empowered his apostles and disciples to spread the Gospel message as witnesses of what had they had seen and heard. It was particularly intended that the message should be taken beyond the borders of Palestine and to all peoples of every nation throughout the world.

---

## Writing Style

Luke's literary excellences and his eye for detail bring his accounts to life in the imagination of his readers, allowing them to become 'witnesses' just as if they had been there themselves.

This is a fast paced adventure, with real drama revealing unlikely heroes, and providing some remarkable dialogue - there are 32 speeches in Acts. This is a real life story that takes us around many parts of the region and describes how different people lived their lives from Jerusalem to pagan villages, the philosophers of Athens, idolaters in Ephesus and finally into the power-base of the empire in Rome. Yet it never loses sight that this is a key part of God's story and that he wanted Luke to record it so that we would have an understanding of the cost of discipleship, see how the church should be, learn more from the mistakes made by those who misunderstood the purpose of God, and which leaves us motivated and energised for the work that he has determined for us, both as a church and as individuals.

## Key Themes

1. That God is one and he is the sole focus of our faith and lives.
2. The Holy Spirit is the driving force and power behind the witness and ministry.
3. The truth of the resurrection and the power that was behind it, is central to the Gospel message and clearly identifies Jesus as the Christ.
4. The OT Scriptures point to the death and resurrection of Christ, and the prophecies about Christ and of his followers had to be fulfilled, which they were.
5. The proclamation of the Gospel always requires a response. That is, the repentance of our sins and the acceptance of Jesus as Lord over our lives.
6. The faith is for all people: Jews and Gentiles, men and women, black and white, rich and poor, kings and working people, and those with disabilities.
7. Being a disciple will mean suffering, hardship and sacrifice.
8. Effective witness demands the unity of the church, both local and global.
9. Disciples must always maintain their integrity in the world.
10. Miracles are all around us but they are primarily there to support the message, which is the key aspect of the witness.
11. Acceptance of the message depends both on the human attitude and the divine intentions of the Holy Spirit.
12. Christian witness must be faithful and true to the Gospel as proclaimed by Jesus.
13. Faithful witness will always bring amazing results, although we may not always see the fruit for ourselves.

## The Setting of Acts

The Book of Acts starts where the Gospel of Luke concluded, on the Mount of Olives, just outside of Jerusalem. Jesus gave his apostles and disciples one final command: <<*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judæa and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*>> (Acts 1:8).

This is precisely what happened. Starting in Jerusalem, then throughout Judæa and Samaria, in Asia Minor, the eastern Mediterranean islands, Macedonia, Greece and then the story finally concludes at the capital of the known world - Rome, where Luke writes of Paul that: <<*He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ - with all boldness and without hindrance!*>> (Acts 28:31).

The story of this success is told with the word being preached in Jerusalem (Chapters 1-7), in Judæa and Samaria (Chapters 8-12), and finally it went to Rome (Chapters 13-28).

## Outline

- 
- I. Preparation for Witness (1:1-2:13)

---

    - a. Jesus taken up to heaven (1:1-11)
    - b. Matthias chosen to replace Judas (1:12-26)
    - c. The Holy Spirit comes at Pentecost (2:1-13)
  
  - II. The Witness in Jerusalem (2:14-5:42)

---

    - a. Peter addresses the crowd (2:14-41)
    - b. The fellowship of the believers (2:42-47)
    - c. Peter heals a lame beggar (3:1-10)
    - d. Peter speaks to onlookers (3:11-26)
    - e. Peter and John before the Sanhedrin (4:1-22)
    - f. The believers pray (4:23-31)
    - g. The believers share their possessions (4:32-37)
    - h. Ananias and Sapphira (5:1-11)
    - i. The apostles heal many (5:12-16)
    - j. The apostles persecuted (5:17-42)
  
  - III. The Witness beyond Jerusalem (6:1-11:30)

---

    - a. The choosing of the seven (6:1-7)
    - b. Stephen bears the ultimate witness (6:8-8:1a)

---

      - i. Stephen seized (6:8-15)
      - ii. Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin (7:1-53)
      - iii. The stoning of Stephen (7:54-8:1a)
    - c. The church persecuted and scattered (8:1b-3)
    - d. Philip witnesses beyond Jerusalem (8:4-40)

---

      - i. Philip in Samaria (8:4-8)
      - ii. Simon the sorcerer (8:9-25)
      - iii. Philip and the Ethiopian (8:26-40)
  
    - e. The conversion of Saul (9:1-31)

---

      - i. Saul's conversion (9:1-19a)
      - ii. Saul in Damascus and Jerusalem (9:19b-31)
  
    - f. Peter preaches in the coastal towns (9:32-11:18)

---

      - i. Aeneas and Dorcas (9:32-43)
      - ii. Cornelius calls for Peter (10:1-8)
      - iii. Peter's vision (10:9-23a)
      - iv. Peter at Cornelius' house (10:23b-48)
      - v. Peter explains his actions (11:1-18)
  
    - g. The church in Antioch (11:19-30)

- 
- IV. The Jerusalem church is persecuted (12:1-13:3)
- 
- a. Peter's miraculous escape from prison (12:1-19a)
    - i. The death of James Zebedee (12:1-2)
    - ii. Peter put in prison (12:3-6)
    - iii. Peter released by an angel (12:7-10)
    - iv. Peter visits the church (12:11-17)
    - v. Herod's reaction to Peter's escape (12:18-19a)
  - b. Herod's death (12:19b-24)
  - c. Barnabas and Saul sent off (12:25-13:3)
- 
- V. The Witness in Cyprus and Southern Galatia (13:4-14:28)
- 
- a. On Cyprus (13:4-12)
  - b. In Pisidian Antioch (13:13-52)
  - c. In Iconium (14:1-7)
  - d. In Lystra and Derbe (14:8-20)
  - e. The return to Antioch in Syria (14:21-28)
- 
- VI. The Jerusalem Council (15:1-35)
- 
- a. The council at Jerusalem (15:1-21)
    - i. The circumcision party criticises the Gentile mission (15:1-5)
    - ii. Peter defends Paul (15:6-11)
    - iii. James proposes a solution (15:12-21)
  - b. The council's letter to Gentile believers (15:22-35)
- 
- VII. The Witness in Greece (15:36-18:22)
- 
- a. Disagreement between Paul and Barnabas (15:36-41)
  - b. Timothy joins Paul and Silas (16:1-5)
  - c. Paul's vision of the man of Macedonia (16:6-10)
  - d. Paul witnesses in Philippi (16:11-40)
    - i. Lydia's conversion in Philippi (16:11-15)
    - ii. Paul and Silas in prison (16:16-40)
      - 1. Imprisonment of Paul and Silas (16:16-24)
      - 2. Conversion of the jailer (16:25-34)
      - 3. Release of Paul and Silas (16:35-40)
  - e. In Thessalonica (17:1-9)
  - f. In Berea (17:10-15)
  - g. In Athens (17:16-34)
    - i. Witness in the marketplace (17:16-21)
    - ii. Witness before the Areopagus (17:22-34)
  - h. In Corinth (18:1-17)
  - i. Paul travels from Corinth to Syrian Antioch (18:18-22)
-

---

## VIII. The Witness in Ephesus (18:23-21:16)

---

- a. Priscilla and Aquila instruct Apollos (18:18-28)
  - b. Paul in Ephesus (19:1-22)
    - i. Paul encounters disciples of John (19:1-10)
    - ii. Paul encounters false religion at Ephesus (19:11-22)
  - c. The riot in Ephesus (19:23-41)
  - d. Through Macedonia and Greece (20:1-6)
  - e. Eutychus raised from the dead at Troas (20:7-12)
  - f. Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders (20:13-38)
  - g. On to Jerusalem (21:1-16)
- 

## IX. The Arrest in Jerusalem (21:17-23:35)

---

- a. Paul's arrival at Jerusalem (21:17-26)
  - b. Paul arrested (21:27-36)
  - c. Paul speaks to the crowd (21:37-22:21)
    - i. Paul's first defence (22:3-21)
  - d. Paul the Roman citizen (22:22-29)
  - e. Paul before the Sanhedrin (22:30-23:11)
    - i. Paul's second defence (23:1-11)
  - f. The plot to kill Paul (23:12-22)
  - g. Paul transferred to Cæsarea (23:23-35)
- 

## X. The Witness in Cæsarea (24:1-26:32)

---

- a. Paul's trial before Felix (24:1-27)
    - i. Paul's third defence (24:10-21)
    - ii. Paul remains in custody (24:22-27)
  - b. Paul's trial before Festus (fourth defence) (25:1-12)
  - c. Paul before Agrippa (25:13-26:32)
    - i. Festus presents the case to King Agrippa II (25:13-22)
    - ii. Paul witnesses to King Agrippa II (25:23-26:32)
      - 1. Paul's fifth defence (26:1-29)
- 

## XI. The Witness in Rome (27:1-28:31)

---

- a. Paul journeys to Rome by sea (27:1-44)
    - i. Paul sails for Rome (27:1-12)
    - ii. The storm (27:13-26)
    - iii. The shipwreck (27:27-44)
  - b. Paul ashore on Malta (28:1-10)
  - c. Paul's arrival at Rome (28:11-16)
  - d. Paul preaches at Rome under guard (28:17-31)
-