

The Acts of the Apostles - History & Background

Preface

This is the **second** of a two volume set of Luke's writings, it's companion volume being the **Gospel of Luke**. At the end of the Gospel of Luke Jesus says "*that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.*" In this sequel, we see the fulfillment of Christ's words as **the apostles** carry the **gospel to the world**.

1. Introduction

1. **Luke** has the distinction of being the only Gospel writer to produce **a sequel** to his book on the life and ministry of Jesus.
2. It appears that Luke set out to show in **two volumes** how redemption came to mankind.
 - In Volume I (**his Gospel**), Luke relates the coming of a Redeemer who died for our sins, rose in triumph, and looked to the time when all men would share in salvation. Luke 24:46-47.
 - In Volume II (**the Book of Acts**), Luke takes up the narrative at the point just after Jesus' Ascension and shows how the gospel went from Jerusalem to Rome in approximately 30 years.
 - The Gospel he wrote tells about the things "Jesus *began* both to do and to teach. " Acts 1:1.
 - Acts tells what he brought about through the Holy Spirit's continuation of his work. Acts 1:8; cf. John 16:13.
3. Luke wrote well **over one-fourth** of the entire New Testament.
4. The Acts of the Apostles is a **crucial** part of Holy Scripture.
 - It tells of the establishment of the church.
 - It describes the growth (amid frequent perils) of the church and records the gospel's amazing spread **through the Roman Empire**.
 - It gives inspiring accounts of great persons who loved not their lives unto death.

2. Background to the Acts of the Apostles

1. The author, **Luke**:
 - He was **not** one of the Twelve. He was **not** an eyewitness to the life of Christ (Luke 1:14), but he was a participant in many of the events of Acts (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-7; 21:18-19; 27:1-12).
 - He was with Paul at Rome during **the imprisonment** with which Acts closes. Acts 28:30-31; cf. Col.4: 14; Phile. 24.

2. The date it was written:

- Acts closes abruptly with Paul under house arrest at Rome, awaiting the outcome of his appeal to Caesar.
- The most reasonable explanation for the book's leaving us in the dark as to the outcome of the appeal is that the case had not yet been decided when Luke wrote.
- Paul and his company arrived at Rome in the spring of **A.D. 60** and stayed there "two whole years" before going to trial. Acts 28:30.
- Thus Acts must have been written **sometime in A.D. 62**, just before Paul's trial and release.

3. Additional Background to the Acts of the Apostles

1. Luke was a **physician** (Col. 4:14), and his medical background and interests seem to appear at times.
 - He uses medical terms ("convulses" and "examine" ["look upon": Latin: "**respice**"] in Luke 9:38)
 - Saul did not merely have his sight restored, but "there fell from his eyes as it were scales" Acts 9:18-19.
 - Publius' father "lay sick of **fever** and **dysentery**." Acts 28:8.
2. Why did Luke write?
 - He saw the need to commit to writing an **accurate account** of the beginning and spread of Christianity. Cf. Luke 1:14.
 - It chronicles the **triumph of the gospel** over the hearts of **men in a hostile world**. Acts 2:47; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30-31.

4. The Message of the Book of Acts

1. Acts is designed to trace the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Antioch to Rome.
2. A **simple outline** of the book can be formulated on the basis of Jesus' statement at Acts 1:8.
 - In **Jerusalem**. Acts 1:8.
 - In **Judea** and **Samaria**. Acts 8:4, 11:18.
 - In the **uttermost parts** of the world. Acts 11:19, 28:31.
3. As he was moved by the Holy Spirit, Luke showed how **the purpose of God to save mankind** was being worked out in human history.
4. Its spread throughout the larger Roman Empire mainly through the efforts of Paul.
 - Paul always began his preaching in each city **among its Jewish population**. Acts 13:5,14; 14:1; 16:13; 18:4; 19:8; 28:17.
 - Rejection by the Jews led to preaching to the Gentiles. Acts 13:46.

5. Some special features of Acts

1. The geography of the book involves three key cities.
 - **Jerusalem** is the base for the church's evangelistic activity among the Jews for the first 12 chapters.
 - **Antioch** is the center of activity among the Gentiles covering Chapters 13-21.
 - **Rome** is the city of Paul's evangelistic enterprise as the book comes to a close. Acts 27:1 thru Acts 28:31.
2. In terms of central personalities, **Peter** and **Paul** dominate respective halves of the book.
 - **Peter**, apostle to the Jews, is the central figure of the first 12 chapters; **Paul**, apostle to the Gentiles, is the principle of the remainder.
3. The activity of the Holy Spirit is emphasized in Acts.
 - **The outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost** is in many ways the **central event** of the book. Acts 1:45; 2:1-13. The signs performed in its confirmation are all attributed to the power of the Holy Spirit.

6. The early expansion of the church

1. In the earliest days of the church, the church was confined to Jerusalem.
2. The persecution of Christians following Stephen's martyrdom led to evangelization in the areas of **Judea** and **Samaria**. Acts 8:1.
 - Philip preached in **Samaria**. Acts 8:4-25.
 - He converted an Ethiopian. Acts 8:26-40.
 - He preached in the **Gentile city of Caesarea**. Acts 8:40.
3. The first recorded instance of Gentile conversion is Peter's experience with **Cornelius**. Acts 10.
 - This met with objections. Acts 11:13 I:
 - As a result, however, the right of Gentiles to hear the gospel was affirmed. Acts 11:18.
4. Near the time of Cornelius' conversion (ca **A.D. 40**), the gospel came to Antioch.
 - Preaching was first to **the Jews**. Acts 11:19.
 - An **outreach** was begun among the Gentiles. Acts 11:20-21.
5. **Antioch** in Syria now becomes the center of activity in the book.

7. The missionary tours of Paul

1. The church at Antioch was **founded by fugitives** from Saul's persecution at Jerusalem. Acts 11:19.
 - Many Gentiles were converted in this city. Acts 11:20-21.
 - The brethren at Jerusalem sent Barnabas to look into this unusual situation. Acts 11:22-24.

2. **Barnabas** decided to seek the help of Saul in building up the church at Antioch. Acts 11:25-26.
 - He had shown confidence in Saul earlier, shortly after his conversion. Acts 9:26-27.
 - Now he would bring Paul into a situation where **the Lord's providence** was to provide an opportunity for the greatest missionary efforts in all history.
3. Three great missionary tours **by Paul** were sponsored from Antioch.
 - The **first tour** covered the years **A.D. 46-47** (Acts 13:4-14) and was followed by a conference at Jerusalem which debated the matter of Gentile obligations to the law (Acts 15:1-35).
 - The **second tour** began in **A.D. 48** and extended into late **A.D. 51** or early **A.D. 52** (Acts 15:36 thru 18:22); the gospel was carried to Europe (Macedonia) and Greece.
 - The **third tour** began in **A.D. 52** and ended with Paul's arrest at Jerusalem in **A.D. 58** (Acts 18:23 thru 19:14); Paul's extended work at Ephesus for about three years was done in connection with this tour.
 - Of course these dates are merely the **best estimates** available.
4. The remainder of Paul's career in Acts is spent as a prisoner at Jerusalem, Caesarea, and Rome.

8. The conversions in Acts

1. Acts has accounts of both **conversions** and **non-conversions** in its pages.
2. General reactions to the preaching of the gospel in Acts may be summarized with Acts 17:32-34.
 - Some **mocked**. Acts 26:24.
 - Some **listened** out of politeness or curiosity. Acts 17:21; 24:24.
 - Some **believed**. Acts 18:8
3. Paul's further comments on human reaction to the gospel are recorded in 1 Cor. 1:18.
4. **A timeless axiom**: The faithful preaching of the truth (the Word of God) produces the same reactions today.

9. Conclusion

1. Luke has given us a wonderfully **compact history** of the first 30 years of the church covering (**ca A.D. 30 to A.D. 60**).
2. The work of God going on in the world today is **the continuation of this book**.