

KNOW THE WORD SERIES

OVERVIEW OF ACTS

Session 1

(January 9, 2011)

PREFACE

The Acts of the Apostles is the name given to the second part of a two volume work (Luke-Acts) on the history of Christian beginnings. In Luke, we are introduced to Jesus and His ministry; in Acts we see how His ministry relates to significant events in the early church. Acts is the third longest book of the New Testament and together with the Gospel of Luke comprises almost 30% of the New Testament material. Acts is also a pivotal book coming between the Gospels and the Epistles. It records the beginnings of the Christian movement, telling us how the early Christians lived their lives. It describes the message, ministry and life of early Christians – including the triumphs and passion that drove it and the source of the power (Holy Spirit) that energized it.

Luke's meticulous work provides us with a historical record of the Christian faith. In providing clear chronological references for key events, it ties the story of Jesus, the Church and the disciples into world history. The main theme of Luke's gospel - Salvation For All, with special emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit and Prayer & Praise – is continued, paralleled and reflected in the book of Acts.

AUTHOR

The authorship of Acts is generally undisputed; all evidence points to Luke the much loved physician, Paul's friend and companion on his missionary journey (Col 4:14, Phlm 24:2, 2 Tim 4:11):-

- (a) Both Luke and Acts are addressed to an individual named Theophilus (Lk 1:3 and Ac 1:1)
- (b) Acts refer to an earlier work (Ac 1:1)
- (c) Certain stylistic and structural characteristics are common to both books and point to a single author
- (d) Both books have common theme and certain distinct emphasis not found elsewhere in the New Testament

Early Christian writers also agree in identifying Luke as the author of the two volume work (Luke and Acts). As early as A.D 135, Marcion acknowledged Luke as the writer of the third gospel

and Acts and this was further re-affirmed in the Muratorian Canon (A.D 180), Irenaeus (A.D 180) and other writers.

Who is Luke? He is not an apostle or “direct eyewitness” but a second generation Christian investigating the traditions of Jesus and very likely a Gentile. Tradition tells us that Luke came from Antioch in Syria or from Philippi in Greece. From his writings, Luke appears to be a cultured and educated man, with a wide vocabulary and a tidy mind. He enjoys compiling, editing and selecting material. He is an artist with words, writes in an entertaining and engaging manner and combines a formal journalist – reporting with a sensitive, sympathetic approach to personal stories. He is a careful investigator who takes pain to “write an orderly account” is also proven generally to be an accurate historian.

DATE OR WRITING

It is generally accepted that Acts was written when Paul had completed two years of imprisonment in Rome (Acts 28:30), i.e., AD 63-64. This view also helps to explain the ending of Acts which concludes rather abruptly with the two year house arrest of Paul in Rome. This is also consistent with the epistles to Colossae and Philemon which have traditionally been ascribed to Paul’s imprisonment in Rome, both of which mentions Luke as being present with Paul during that period.

AUDIENCE & PURPOSE

The specific audience mentioned in Acts 1:1-1 (“In my former book ... I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up to heaven”) is the same Theophilus whom Luke addressed in Lk 1: 1-4. It is not clear if Theophilus was a believer, but he had doubtless received some instructions on the faith. Luke’s stated purpose was to write an orderly account of the gospel so that Theophilus may know the “certainty of the things” that he has been taught. It is also likely that he was Luke’s patron or publisher (who would meet the publishing costs of written works) after the custom of that time.

The secondary purpose is to convey these truths to new Christians (mostly Gentile Christians community) to awaken and deepen their faith in Jesus as the Savior of all mankind (including all marginalized persons) and that salvation for all has come through the promised Messiah to all people, both Jews and Gentiles. Luke seems concerned with recording the early history of Christianity as a means of forwarding the Christian movement and perhaps with a mind to defend Christianity as a religion set in the Roman Empire.

Since the central theme of Luke-Acts is Salvation for All, with constant proclamation of the Good News, clearly evangelism is also another purpose that Luke had in mind while setting out to give an accurate account of Jesus and the early church.

STRUCTURE

There are many opinions as to how the book is structured. Some have structured Acts according to:-

- (i) the missionary journeys of Paul,
- (ii) the ministry of the two main apostles in Acts (Peter and Paul),
- (iii) growth and expansion of the early church from Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, and to Rome.

All are useful for helping us to better understand and appreciate the events and spread of the gospel in Acts. For the purposes of our study, we have structured the outline of Acts in accordance with (i) and (iii) (see Outline)

Luke-Acts, being a two volume work, is most easily tied to the geography of their accounts.

(a) From Judea to Samaria to Jerusalem

The Gospel of Luke begins with a global perspective, dating the birth of Christ to the reign of the Roman emperors in Luke 2:1 and 3:1 and also significantly tracing Jesus' genealogy back to Adam "the son Of God". From there we see Jesus' ministry in Galilee, an area that had a large Jewish populations, but which was primarily a Gentile region (4:14-9:50).

Beginning in 9:51, we see Jesus focus shift towards Jerusalem. Jesus travels from Galilee to Jerusalem, passing through Samaria (9:52-53), traveling through other villages in Judea (10:38, 13:22, 17:11), up to Jericho (19:1), Bethany (19:29) and finally into Jerusalem (19:37-45).

Once in Jerusalem, Jesus presents himself as the Jewish Messiah (19:28-21:38), and then offers himself up the savior of the world (22:1-24:53). After the resurrection, Luke does not mention Jesus' appearances in Galilee, keeping the action in Jerusalem. This is done to tie in the geographic outline of Acts.

(b) From Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria and the "ends of the earth"

The book of Acts follows just the opposite motion, taking the scene from Jerusalem (chapters 1-5), to Judea and Samaria (chapters 6-9), then traveling towards Rome (chapters 9-28). This chiasmic structure emphasizes the centrality of the resurrection and ascension to Luke's message, while emphasizing the universal nature of the gospel.

This geographic structure is foreshadowed in Acts 1:8, where Jesus says you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem (chapters 1-5), and in all Judea and Samaria (chapters 6-9), and even to the remotest part of the earth (chapters 10-28). The first two sections (chapters 1-9) represent the witness of the apostles to the Jews, while the last section (chapters 10-28) represents the witness of the apostles to the Gentiles.

GOSPEL OF LUKE

1:1	4:13	4:14	9:50	9:51	19:27	19:28	21:38	22:1	24:53
Introduction to the Son of Man		Ministry of the Son of Man		Teaching of the Son of Man		Presentation of the Son of Man		Passion of the Son of Man	
Introduction		Galilee		Traveling to Jerusalem		Jerusalem			

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

1:1	6:7	6:8	9:31	9:32	12:24	12:25	16:5	16:6	19:20	19:21	28:30
Jerusalem		Judea & Samaria			Syria		Asia Minor		Europe		Rome
					Remotest Parts of the Earth						
Witness to the Jews					Witness to the Gentiles						
Ministry of Peter						Ministry of Paul					

PARALLELS

As Luke had intended Acts to be the second part of a two volume work, he sets up numerous parallels in the portrayal of events in the two volumes and repeatedly stresses features in the second volume that fulfill the anticipations expressed in the first. The following are some examples:-

- (a) The geographical movement of Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem is paralleled by the advance of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome
- (b) The importance of the Holy Spirit in the birth narratives and baptism of Christ is paralleled in the birth of the church and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit
- (c) The work of the Holy Spirit constantly undergirding the ministry of Jesus is paralleled in the centrality of the Holy Spirit in the ministry of the church
- (d) The ministry of Jesus (preaching, healing, raising the dead, freeing those in bondage) and his suffering are mirrored in the ministry of the Apostles (especially in Peter and Paul)
- (e) The preaching of the good news and the impact on people and society
- (f) The importance of prayer in the ministry of Jesus and the Apostles

Acts is however more than just a parallel of the Gospel of Luke. The author did not simply intend to show the connection and continuation of God's salvation plan (from Luke to Acts) , but also a new beginning. The ministry of the Apostles in Acts is presented as the necessary extension of the redemption effected by Christ. What God had started in Christ will now be continued by His disciples. The accomplishment of Salvation and the spread of the Good News are inseparable units in the climatic activity of God's redemption plan for mankind.



Map of Key Places in Acts

Themes

Key Text:

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”. (Acts 1:8)

(a) Salvation for All

Priority of evangelism: From the beginning of the book to the end, the great activity that dominates Acts is missions and evangelism. Two major methods that were prevalent were the winning of attention through:

- (i) Miracles (Signs and Wonders)
- (ii) Apologetics (Speeches/Sermons)

Signs and wonders accompanied the early Church as it preached the gospel (see examples 3:1-10, 4:32-45, 12:3-19, 5:12-16) as did Jesus when he preached the good news – a clear indication that the work started by Jesus was to be carried on by his disciples through the Spirit. The speeches and sermons recorded in Acts (likely summaries rather than verbatim accounts) had apologetic content (see examples 2:1-47, 3:1-26, 8:26-39, 10:1-48, 13:14-52, 14:6-20,

17:16-34). It sought to answer the questions that the people were asking (is this a new religion? How does Jesus relate to the Law? What has it to do with life? What is the good news?). Acts presented a church that sought to persuade and convince people of the truth of the gospel. The evangelists not only performed healings and miracles but were also capable of preachers highly reasoned apologetics messages. Both methods were inspired and empowered by the Spirit.

Missions: The gospel spread from Jerusalem (where the early church was established) to (a) Judea and Samaria, (b) to the Gentiles where the church at Antioch was established (c) and then to Asia Minor (Paul's first missionary journey), Macedonia (Paul's second missionary journey) and (d) eventually to Rome.

Inclusiveness: Acts is also a story of how the early Jewish Christians were led by God to a vision of a more inclusive people of God, a church that transcended all barriers of human discrimination and prejudice – including social, racial and economic differences. Acts 9-15 is the story of the inclusion of the Gentiles – and it took a major conference of the leaders in Jerusalem (see Acts 15) to settle the issue once and for all – that Gentiles were to be accepted into God's people on the basis of the response to the gospel and not the requirements of the Torah. The inclusiveness extends to "all peoples" regardless of class or social status – hence, in Acts, the gospel was preached to a lame beggar, prison guards, foreigners, governors, kings and perhaps even to an emperor.

(b) Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is clearly prominent in Acts (as he was in the Gospel of Luke) and some have suggested that this book should be titled "The Acts of the Holy Spirit". The church was born of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2) and is a constant companion throughout the life of the young Church. Acts records in detail the outpouring of the Spirit, first to the disciples and then to the believers, the new stages of the mission of the church are marked by the activity of the Spirit – especially in evangelism and outreach – a clear reflection of how the work started by Jesus is to be continued and carried on by his disciples.

From the first to the last, the Holy Spirit directs the mission of the church. Every major breakthrough in mission activities of the church in Acts occurs through the guidance of the Spirit. Sometimes this guidance is explicitly stated as when Spirit called the church at Antioch to set aside Paul and Barnabas (13:2-3) and when the Spirit prevented Paul from working in Bithynia and literally forced him to the first mission on European soil at Philippi (16:6). The Spirit's presence is strongly felt in the narrative of Acts even when it is not explicitly stated.

The Spirit was also present in the "legitimization" of new groups in the Christian outreach – Samaritans (8:17-25), Cornelius and his fellow Gentiles (10:44-48) and the disciples of John the

Baptist at Ephesus (19:6). The Spirit was present at each event that marked a new breakthrough, a new level of outreach in Christian mission.

(c) Prayer

As in the Gospel of Luke, prayer features prominently in Acts. The disciples were joined in prayer as they wait for the promised Holy Spirit (1:13-14) and the early church (leaders and followers alike) were very much engaged in prayer. The first fifteen chapters of Acts (with the exception of chapter 5) and many later chapters mention prayer. Prayer was involved at every major event in the life of the early church – the appointment of leaders, the sending of missionaries, in times of crisis, in fellowship, in caring for the new believers.

(d) Community

Acts also presents the early church as a vibrant community. They cared for each other, took care of the new believers, worshiped and prayed together. They were passionate about missions and evangelism but also attended to each other's material needs (such as the example of Barnabas in 4:36-37), shared their possessions and there were 'no needy persons amongst them' (4:34). However, Luke did not shirk from describing the problems that the community faced such as the deception of Ananias and Saphirra (5:1-11) and distribution of food to the widows (6:1-6) and the need for the appointment of suitably qualified persons to take care of administration. The early church was therefore not presented as one that is devoid of problems but one that is kept together by the Spirit in spite of them.

Outline

PART 1 – THE BIRTH OF THE CHURCH IN JERUSALEM (1:1-2:47)

- Preparation for Pentecost
- Outpouring of the Holy Spirit
- The new community
- Peter's proclamation and crowd's response

PART 2 – THE EXPANSION OF THE CHURCH IN JERUSALEM (3:1–6:7)

- Healing by Peter and its consequences
- The arrest of Peter and John
- Radical Community (sharing, generosity, discipline)
- Apostles before the Sanhedrin
- The appointment of the Seven: Community Administration

PART 3 – THE EXTENSION OF THE CHURCH TO JUDEA AND SAMARIA (6:8-9:31)

- Stephen martyrdom (Arrest, defence and death)
- The church in Jerusalem persecuted
- Philip ministry (Samaria)
- Saul's conversion (Road to Damascus)

PART 4 – THE EXTENSION OF THE CHURCH TO ANTIOCH (9:32-12:24)

- Preparation of Peter for the Gentile Mission
- Preparation of the Jerusalem Church for the Gentile Mission
- Birth of the Church in Antioch
- Preparation of the Antioch Church for the Gentile Mission
- Herod's persecution of the Church in Jerusalem (martyrdom of James and Peter's arrest)

PART 5 – THE EXTENSION OF THE CHURCH TO ASIA MINOR (12:25-16:5)

- **Paul's First Missionary Journey (13:4 – 14:28)**
Mission of Paul and Barnabas to Asia Minor
(Cyprus, Pisidian Antioch, South Galatia, returns to Antioch)
- The Council in Jerusalem concerning the Gentile Mission
- The confirmation of the Churches in Asia Minor
- **Paul's Second Missionary Journey (15:36 – 18:22)**
(Syria, South Galatia, Troas, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, Caesarea, returns to Antioch)
- Barnabas and Mark departs for Cyprus
- Paul and Barnabas departs for Tarsus

PART 6 – THE EXTENSION OF THE CHURCH TO THE AEGEAN AREA (16:6-19:20)

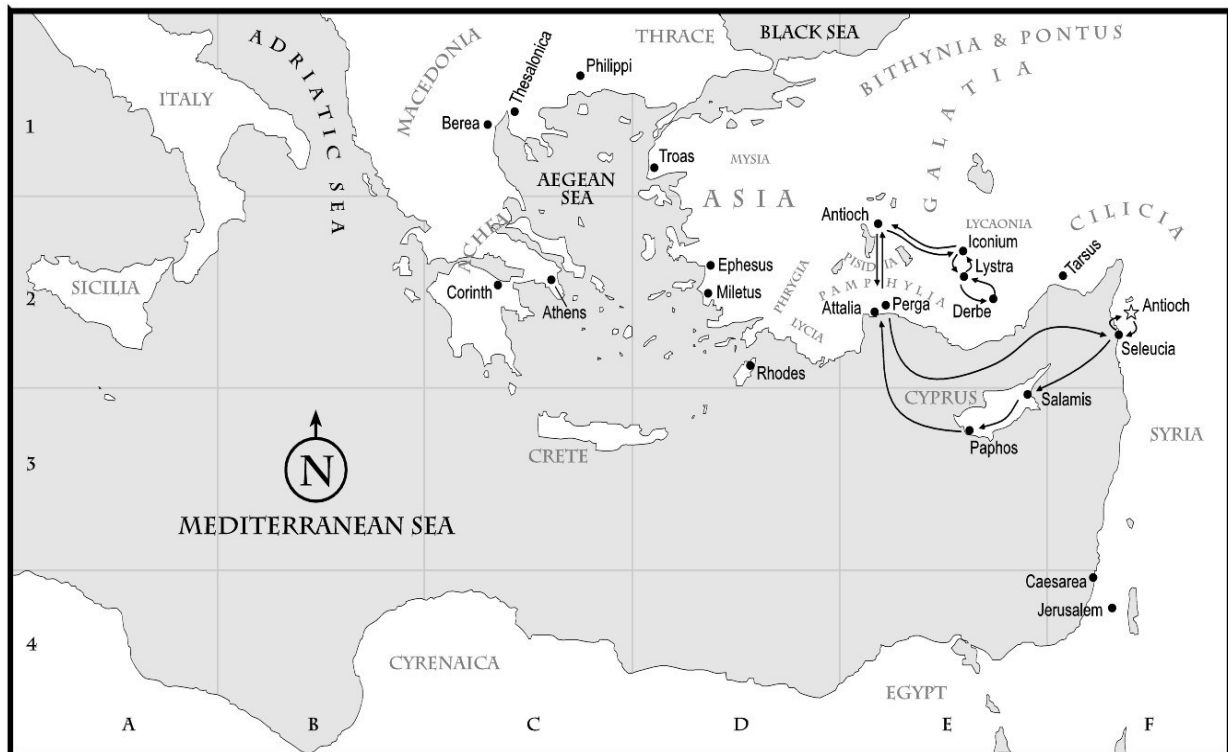
- Paul's vision: Come to Macedonia
- Paul and Silas arrested in Philippi
- Ephesus
- **Paul's Third Missionary Journey (18:23 – 21:16)**
(Galatian-Phrygian region, Ephesus, Macedonia, Achaia, Syria, Troas, Miletus and returns to Jerusalem)

PART 7 – THE EXTENSION OF THE CHURCH TO ROME (19:21-28:31)

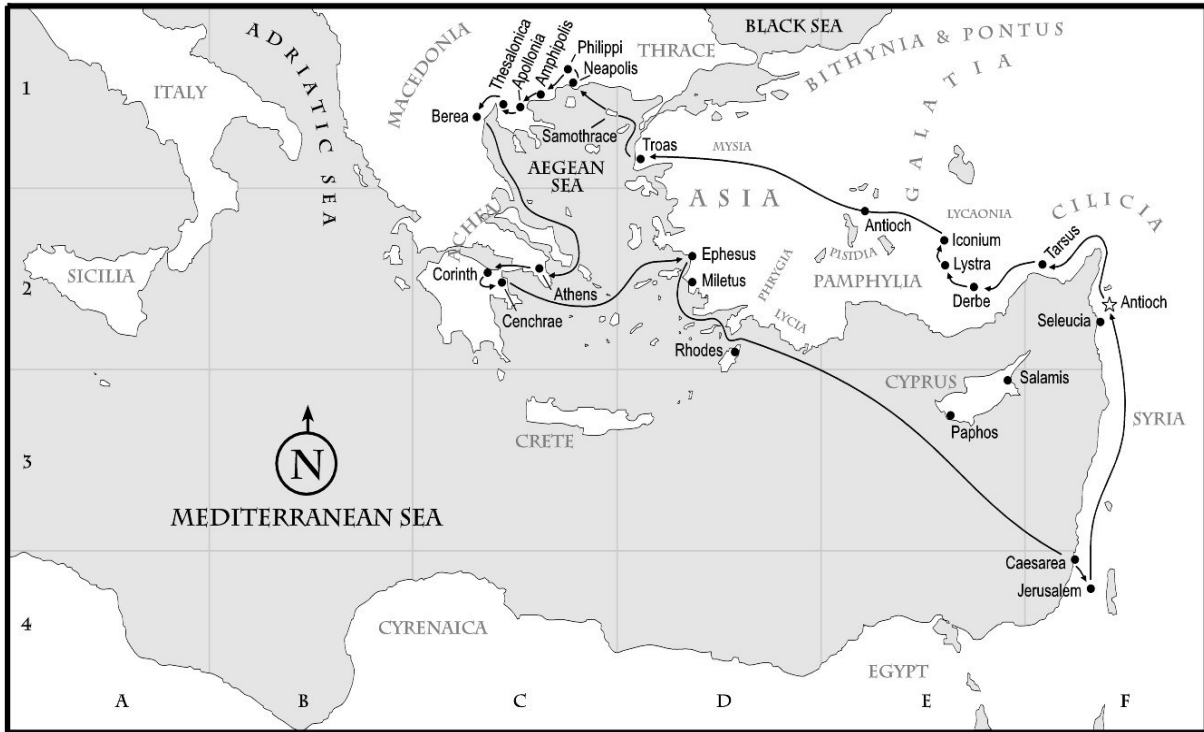
- The Riot at Ephesus
- The journey to Jerusalem
- Paul in Jerusalem
- Paul in Caesarea
- The voyage to Rome
- Paul in Rome

References:

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3. Acts: Introduction, Outline and Argument: Daniel Wallace, Dallas Theological Seminary.
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5. The New Lion's Handbook of the Bible
6. Maps from www.bible-history.com
7. W.E Vine, Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words
8. Acts: The Adventure Begins (Heartbeat Ministry, SJSM)



Paul's First Missionary Journey (Acts 13:4 – 14:28)



Paul's Second Missionary Journey (Acts 15:39 – 18:22)



Paul's third missionary journey (Acts 18:23 – 21:17)



Pauls' journey to Rome (Acts 27-28)

THE FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEYS

Missionary Journeys - Philip the Evangelist



Missionary Journeys - the Apostle Peter

