

## **The Acts of the Apostles, or simply, Acts**

### **I. Title: Acts of the Apostles**

The title, “Acts of the Apostles,” distorts the thrust of the book. Only two apostles are the focus of the book, Peter, then Paul. John is mentioned, as is James, but the others are not mentioned. Paul dominates the last half of the book. But the real actor in the book is not the apostles, but the Holy Spirit. The narrative describes how God the Holy Spirit empowers the early church, specifically, through Peter, then Paul, to take the message of the risen Messiah from the Upper Room in Acts 1, to Paul’s private, house prison room, in Acts 28.

The earliest known evidence for the name, “Acts,” is found in an anti-Marcionite Prologue to Luke’s gospel, dated between A.D. 150—180. No evidence exists for the reason for this title.

### **II. Author: Luke, cf., Luke 1:1–4, Acts 1:1**

The author of Acts is never mentioned, however, the clues that are given within the book have led to the tradition that the author was Luke. Irenaeus (A.D. 130–200) was the first to recognize the use of the first person plural (‘we’ and ‘us’) indicated that the writer was at times the traveling companion of the Apostle Paul (Ac 16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–29; 28:1–16). The opening verse of the book indicates the author is also that of the third gospel (cf., Luke 1:1–4 w/Acts 1:1). When evaluated, only Luke could fit these conditions. We know little of Luke. We believe he was a Gentile based on his name and his education as indicated through the elevated style of his writing and being a physician (Col 4:14).

Paul first met Luke in Troas (Acts 16:8–11), though there has been speculation that Luke may have known Paul earlier, since there was a medical school in Tarsus. Paul mentions Luke in 2 Tim. 4:1 and Philemon 24 as a faithful friend and traveling companion. Luke led the church in Philippi for about six years before rejoining Paul. It is likely that he used the two years that Paul was in jail in Caesarea to research the material and interview eyewitnesses for both the Gospel and Acts. The final draft would have been completed when Paul was in Rome, but before he was released for his next journey.

### **III. Date**

Considering the circumstances surrounding Luke’s presence with Paul it seems that the book would have been completed during Paul’s first period of house arrest in Rome. Since neither the burning of Rome (A.D. 64), nor the destruction of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) are mentioned, the book was likely not written later. Thus it was most likely written before these events and before the death of Paul (A.D. 66) which he surely would have recorded. The most likely date is in the early 60s, probably the late fall of 61 or winter of 62.

Critical (liberal) scholarship places the time of writing in the early second century, A.D. 125–30; others have dated it to A.D. 80–90.

#### **IV. Place in the Bible**

This book plays a unique role in the revelation of God and the outworking of His plan in human history. Acts describes the propagation, progress, and process by which the Gospel moved from being a local Judaic phenomenon to a global phenomenon.

The structure of the book is foreshadowed by Jesus' implicit mandate to the eleven disciples in Acts 1:8, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." The narrative begins with the twelve disciples receiving their final instructions from the resurrected Jesus just before he ascends to heaven. They are to wait in Jerusalem for the promised arrival of the Holy Spirit. When this event occurs on the Day of Pentecost, the disciples become transformed into the apostles, commissioned and sent by Christ to take the gospel to all the world. Acts describes the dynamic expansion of the infant church from the one hundred twenty souls of Acts 1, through the rapid increase of converts in Acts 2–3, the progress of the gospel through Judea and Samaria, then to Antioch, and Asia Minor and on to Greece and Rome, the capital of the known world.

This narrative plays an important role by describing the birth and expansion of the infant church, from the resurrection of Jesus to the imprisonment of Paul in Rome. We see Christianity transformed from a primarily Jewish sect to one that is primarily Gentile. The book is thus important for seven reasons:

1. It records the beginning of the church on the Day of Pentecost (Shuvu'ot), A.D. 33 with the miraculous outpouring of God the Holy Spirit upon the disciples.
2. The book describes how the infant church expands from Jerusalem to the halls of power in Rome. We see the opposition, persecution, tension, and spiritual maturation of the early church.
3. The book enables us to understand the transition from the Age of Israel to the Age of the Church, from the Law to Grace, from Jerusalem to Rome, and from a Jewish sect to an international multitude. This provides an important understanding of the separation of Christianity from Judaism.
4. As the church develops, we understand how God the HS provided for its leadership, administration, and organization.
5. Acts lays the foundation for the Church Age concept of missions, the outworking of the Great Commission given by Jesus to His disciples,
6. Without the historical structure provided by Acts, we would not understand the context for the Pauline epistles, or even understand who the Apostle Paul was or the significance of his letters.

7. Acts provides the only historical sequel to the events of the Gospels.

Luke wrote a legal defense [*apologeō*] to Theophilus to demonstrate that Christianity is a unique work of God, and not merely some human contrivance. As the human writer, he organized the book around Jesus' mission statement to the disciples in Acts 1:8. Luke also draws upon specific events that demonstrate the supernatural birth and miraculous expansion of the early church. The disciples' credentials are validated through the miraculous healings and signs and wonders which accompanied them. Luke makes it clear that the church is a multi-ethnic organism where nationality, ethnicity, gender, or economic or social status are irrelevant to the grace and power of God.

Just as Jesus manifested the reality of His physical bodily resurrection through many convincing proofs, so Luke authenticates the divine source of the new church. He demonstrates its verification through various objective, historical events. God does nothing in secret without validating it in public. Once established, these proofs were historically recorded and there is no need to repeat them in subsequent generations. By the end of Acts the Church has transitioned from spiritual infancy to an early maturity, grounded on the foundation of the prophets and apostles.

## V. The Role of the Holy Spirit in Acts

The major distinction from the Day of Pentecost forward is the presence and activity of God the Holy Spirit. This is one of the primary distinguishing characteristics of a new period in God's administration and oversight of human history—the dispensation of the Church, or the dispensation of Grace. In this dispensation the Holy Spirit makes the body of each believer a temple for the indwelling of Christ. To highlight this change, the early years of the Church were marked by significant manifestations of the Holy Spirit which distinguished the new age.

### The Holy Spirit in Acts

Ch 1	4x	Ch 10	5x	Ch 20	2x
Ch 2	6x	Ch 11	5x	Ch 21	2x
Ch 3	0	Ch 12	0	Ch 22–27	0
Ch 4	2x(M) 3x(Cr)	Ch 13	4x	Ch 28	1x
Ch 5	3x	Ch 14	0		
Ch 6	3x	Ch 15	2x		
Ch 7	2x	Ch 16	2x		
Ch 8	6x	Ch 17	0		
Ch 9	2x	Ch 18	0		
		Ch 19	4x		

Ch 1–7 in Jerusalem 20x (21x Cr)

Ch 8–9 in Judea and Samaria 8x

Ch 10–28 in the uttermost part 27x

The major events in which the HS ministry is displayed occur around certain events.

Ch 1 The HS's coming is prophesied and Scripture revelation is attributed to Him.

Ch 2–4 Events at Pentecost and immediately after are described as the outpouring of the HS.

Ch 5–6 Description of growth of the Church and service to one another

Ch 6–7 Events around Stephen's stoning

Ch 8 Paul's salvation and commissioning

Ch 10–11 Conversion of Cornelius, inclusion of Gentiles

Ch 12–13 Maturation of the church

Acts 19 Conversion of John's disciples, Old Testament saints

Acts 20 Paul's warning to the Ephesian elders

Acts 21 Paul's side trip to Jerusalem on the way to Rome.

## VI. Place in History

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (1 Peter 1:20–21) we have the divine interpretation of the early history of the church. In Acts, God gives us His emphases and describes what He believes is important for the coming centuries. As such we come to understand a new work in history, the Church, a living, growing, dynamic organism, empowered by God the Holy Spirit and destined to be the bride of Christ. In these chapters God stresses the expansion of the Church through the witness of the good news that Jesus Christ has paid for the sins of the world completely. This brings into focus a second chapter of the intrusion of God into the world, the first being the call of Abraham in Gen 12. Just as God had previously called out the descendants of Abraham to be a counter culture in the world that then was, a culture that was to be the light to the nations, to teach them about the nature, character, love, and grace of God. In the new age, the Church would be sent out to declare this message to all the world.

## VI. Major Characteristics of the book

The most significant feature of Acts is that it is transitional and historical. Transitional means that the norm of God's work in history is changing from the Old Testament pattern of ongoing revelation and working exclusively through Israel, to a cessation of special revelation and working primarily through the Church. Historical means that the writer describes what transpired and is not indicating that what happened is what should always happen or what will always characterize the new dispensation. Acts is descriptive not prescriptive.

Other than the Holy Spirit the following doctrines are emphasized

The resurrection of Christ

Prayer

Preaching

Witnessing, numerous conversions

Missionary expansion

Organization and administration of the local church

Caveat: Acts is not a pattern for the New Testament believer. This is the error of forgetting it is a transitional book covering a period of time which the New Testament canon of Scripture was incomplete. At the beginning of Acts there are thousands of Old Testament saints throughout Judea and the Roman world. In the progress of revelation and the establishment of the church they must be brought in to the church (Jew, Greek, Samaritan, Old Testament saints, Gentiles) in such a way that the unity of the new baby is preserved and old rivalries and distinctions are no more (Eph. 2:11ff).

## VII. Key Doctrines

Ecclesiology: the Church

The Holy Spirit's ministries

Apologetics: one of the, if not the primary purpose of the book is to establish the credentials of Christianity and present a logical, rational defense of its veracity.

Missions

Prayer

Demonism: demon possession, demon influence, and casting out demons

Evangelism: much can be learned from the various sermons recorded in Acts

The Kingdom of God

Dispensation

