

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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Acts

The book of Acts has a central role in the New Testament: It connects Jesus with the emerging Christian community, and the Gospels with the rest of the New Testament. It frames the proclamation of the Christian message in both Jewish and Gentile settings and underscores the key roles of Peter and Paul in the spread of the Good News throughout the Mediterranean. It is the story of a dynamic message with an outreach to all.

Setting

Luke wrote at a time when the Good News about Jesus Christ was spreading from Jerusalem throughout the Mediterranean world. Luke was probably a Gentile (non-Jew), and his material on Christian origins keeps the needs and outlook of the wider world in mind.

Luke began his presentation of the message of Christ with an account of Jesus' life (the Gospel of Luke). In the book of Acts, Luke describes how the Christian faith was carried across the Mediterranean world.

It was important for Luke to show that God's love and mercy reaches out to all people—"God shows no favoritism," as Peter told Cornelius ([10:34](#)). Christ is the only Savior ([4:12](#)), and all can believe in him for salvation and new life (see [16:30–31](#)). Despite the tendency of Jewish Christians to keep God's grace to themselves, the church came to the united conclusion that Gentiles are fully included in God's promises (see [15:1–31](#)). The message of the forgiveness of sins and new life through Christ is for all nations.

Summary

The apostles and other followers of Christ were filled with the Spirit and empowered to carry out the great commission ([Matt 28:18–20](#)). Acts specifically highlights the ministries of Peter ([Acts 1:1–12:25](#)) and Paul ([13:1–28:31](#)).

Acts follows a geographical outline based on [1:8](#). The Christian message and community of believers spread in Jerusalem ([1:1–8:3](#)), in Palestine and Syria ([8:4–12:25](#)), and in the Gentile world throughout the Roman empire ([13:1–28:31](#)). The closing word in the Greek text of Acts (akōlutōs, “unhindered,” [28:31](#)) recalls the unhindered spread of the gospel to Jews ([3:1–5:42](#)), Samaritans ([6:1–8:40](#)), “God-fearers” ([8:26–40; 9:32–11:18](#)), and Gentiles ([11:19–30; 13:1–28:31](#)).

Purposes of Acts

History. Acts describes people, places, and events involved in the early spread of the Good News.

Geography. Acts shows how the message was taken from Jerusalem to Rome ([1:8; 9:15](#)).

Biography. Acts highlights the ministries of Peter and Paul, who, along with James, were the principal figures leading the early Christian movement. Other influential early Christians—including Stephen, Philip, and Barnabas—also play a significant role.

Evangelism. Acts gives clear examples of how Christian leaders proclaimed the Good News to different audiences (note the speeches of chs [2-5](#), [7](#), [10](#), [13](#), [22](#), [26](#)). Acts shows that the gospel is open to all—not only to Jews but also to Gentiles ([2:8-11](#); [8:26-40](#); [10:1-11:18](#)), and not only to men but also to women ([5:14](#); [8:12](#); [16:13-15](#); [17:4](#), [12, 34](#); [18:26](#); [21:9](#)).

Politics. Acts presents a strong defense of the Christian faith to Jews ([4:8-12](#); [7:2-53](#)) and to Gentiles ([24:10-21](#); [26:1-23](#)). Luke argued that Christianity was entitled to the same protection Judaism enjoyed as a religio licita ("permitted religion") and that it presented no danger to the Roman state ([18:14-16](#); [19:37](#); [23:29](#); [25:25](#); [26:32](#)).

Authorship

Luke was Paul's traveling companion (see [16:10](#) and footnote there) and was with Paul during his later years ([2 Tim 4:11](#)). Several passages in Acts appear in the first person ("we"; [16:10-18](#); [20:5-15](#); [21:1-18](#); [27:1-28:16](#)), which suggests that Luke was with Paul for those parts of his journeys. In Colossians, Luke is referred to as the "beloved doctor," listed as one of several non-Jews who were working with Paul ([Col 4:11-14](#); see also [Phlm 1:24](#)). Paul was grateful for Luke's love and support as a faithful coworker and friend.

Luke was also apparently the author of the Gospel that bears his name. The theological viewpoint is consistent throughout both works. Each book highlights the historical reality of God's action in redemption, the role of the Holy Spirit, the central place of prayer, the importance of angels, and the fulfillment of Old Testament promises in the life of Jesus and in the Christian community. Luke saw God as governing the course of history for the outworking of the divine purpose.

As a responsible Hellenistic historian, Luke used good historical methods and described his procedures in detail, showing concern to write an accurate and orderly account of the truth of Christian origins ([Luke 1:1-4](#)). Where other sources can verify Luke's writings, he proves to have been careful and accurate in handling historical details. Luke was also a literary artist, a gifted storyteller who perceived and clearly portrayed the hand of God in the development of the Christian mission and community. He is one of the most important historical writers between Polybius, "the last of the great Greek historians" (100s BC), and Eusebius, the first major church historian (AD 275–339).

Place and Date of Writing

The precise location from which Acts was written is unknown, but Rome is likely.

Acts is generally dated between the early 60s AD and the end of the expected life span of Paul's coworkers and traveling companions (mid-80s AD). Many scholars have opted for a date after AD 70, arguing that Luke used Mark as one of his sources (presuming that Mark was written in the late 60s). However, Acts makes no mention of the outcome of Paul's trial (around AD 62); the death of James, the Lord's brother (early 60s AD); the persecution of Christians carried out by Nero following the fire of Rome in AD 64; the deaths of Peter and Paul (around AD 64–65) and Nero (AD 68); the Jewish revolt (AD 66); or the destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70). Acts ends with Paul under house arrest (AD 60–62). Thus, a valid case can be made that Luke wrote Acts before AD 64. Those who date Acts after AD 70 would answer that Luke omits these events because they were not pertinent to his purpose (see [Acts 1:8](#); [9:15](#); [28:31](#)).

Recipients

The book of Acts is the second volume of a two-part work (see [Luke 1:1-4](#); [Acts 1:1-2](#)). The prime recipient of Luke's Gospel and the book of Acts was Theophilus ([Luke 1:3](#); [Acts 1:1](#)), whose name means "one who loves God." Theophilus is described by the title, "most honorable" ([Luke 1:3](#)), which is used elsewhere for Roman governors such as Felix and Festus ([23:26](#); [24:2-3](#); [26:25](#)). Theophilus may have been Luke's patron and benefactor. He was a Gentile who had received Christian instruction ([Luke 1:4](#)). Luke wanted him and others to have an accurate understanding of the Christian faith and of its spread into the Mediterranean world so they could be "certain of the truth" concerning Christianity ([Luke 1:4](#)).

Literary Characteristics

The material of Acts is presented carefully and precisely (e.g., [11:28](#); [18:2](#)), and the accuracy of the information has often been affirmed by archaeology, geography, and related studies. Luke has combined historical accuracy and detail with a gift for vivid and dramatic descriptions (e.g., [5:17-32](#); [12:1-17](#); [14:8-20](#); [16:11-40](#); [27:1-44](#)).

Acts is punctuated by the powerful speeches of Peter, Stephen, James, and Paul ([2:14-40](#); [7:2-53](#); [15:13-21](#); [22:3-21](#)). The varied literary styles in Acts fit the cultural settings in a remarkable way. Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost has a strongly Jewish character ([2:14-40](#)), while Paul's preaching before the cultured Greek philosophers in Athens uses the forms of Greek oratory ([17:22-31](#)). These characteristics all support the historical authenticity of the book, as well as the literary skill of its writer.

Meaning and Message

Acts shows that the Christian faith truly fulfills God's promises in the Hebrew Scriptures ([2:16-36](#); [4:11-12](#); [10:42-43](#); [13:16-41](#); [17:30-31](#); see [Luke 24:25-27](#), [44-47](#)). It also demonstrates that Christ brought salvation ([8:35](#); [10:36](#); [16:17](#), [30-31](#)), prayer advances God's Kingdom ([1:12-15](#); [2:1-4](#); [4:24-31](#); [12:5](#)), and the Holy Spirit energizes and equips God's people to carry out their mission ([1:8](#); [4:8](#), [31](#); [6:3](#), [5](#), [10](#); [7:55](#); [11:24](#); [13:9](#), [52](#)).

Acts shows the importance of the individuals that God chose to carry his message and testify about Christ. At the beginning the apostles—especially Peter—testified about the life and ministry of Jesus ([1:22](#); [10:39-41](#); see [Luke 1:2](#)) and explained Jesus' significance in God's plan to redeem humanity ([2:40](#); [3:15](#); [4:33](#); [10:42](#)). Later, other Christian leaders shared in the task of testifying for their Lord; Stephen and Philip are two outstanding examples of bold witnesses for the faith ([7:2-53](#); [8:4-40](#)). Other Christians simply shared their faith as they had opportunity (e.g., [8:1-4](#); [11:19-21](#)). Later, God called Paul to participate in this enterprise as his “chosen instrument to take [his] message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel” ([9:15](#); [22:1-21](#); [26:2-23](#)). Paul, like Peter, occupies a central role in Acts as a major witness for Christ.

The apostles proclaimed that the death and resurrection of Jesus was God's plan in fulfillment of Scripture ([2:22-36](#); [3:15](#); [4:27-28](#), [33](#); [7:52](#); [8:32-35](#); [10:38-43](#); [13:26-39](#)). Jesus was the one appointed to redeem humankind, so the apostles' message was, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved” ([16:31](#)). God offers his grace and forgiveness to all, and “there is peace with God through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all” ([10:36](#)).

Finally, the book of Acts demonstrates that no opposition can prevent the Good News of Jesus Christ from spreading. The messengers of this good news faced imprisonment, physical harm, and even death. Nonetheless, the message spread from a small group gathered in a room in Jerusalem ([1:12-14](#)) to Jews and Gentiles spread across the Roman world. In fact, the book closes with Paul sharing the message freely at the epicenter of the known world ([28:30-31](#)).

Chronology of the Apostolic Age

Events in the apostolic age are difficult to date because few precise statements are made about time. Many events, however, can be correlated with known dates in the Roman world.

Events from AD 30 to 50. We know from Roman sources that Herod Agrippa I died in AD 44 ([Acts 12:23](#)), so his execution of the apostle James and imprisonment of Peter ([12:2-17](#)) must have happened before that date.

The famine prophesied by Agabus befell Judea during the reign of Emperor Claudius ([11:28-29](#)). When the church in Antioch sent famine relief to the church in Jerusalem, Barnabas and Paul were appointed to carry the money ([11:29-30](#)). It was Paul's second trip to Jerusalem after his conversion. The Jewish historian Josephus dates the famine between AD 46 and 48.

While Paul was in Corinth on his second missionary journey, Gallio was governor of Achaia ([18:12](#)). An inscription discovered at nearby Delphi indicates that Gallio's term was AD 51-52. The incident in [18:12-17](#) probably occurred at the beginning of Gallio's term. Paul then left Corinth not long afterward, probably in the summer or autumn of AD 52. Paul had spent eighteen months in Corinth ([18:11](#)), so he probably arrived in early AD 50. That arrival date is confirmed by [18:2](#). When Paul came to Corinth, Aquila and Priscilla had recently been exiled from Rome. Claudius expelled Jews from Rome in AD 49.

Events from AD 50 to 70. Festus replaced Felix as governor of Judea during Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea ([24:27](#)), probably in the summer of AD 59. This event helps us date events in the rest of the book of Acts. Paul's arrest ([21:33](#)) was about two years beforehand (AD 57). Earlier that spring, Paul had celebrated Passover in Philippi ([20:6](#); April AD 57). Paul had just spent three months in Greece ([20:3](#)), probably the winter of AD 56-57 (see [1 Cor 16:6](#)). Previously Paul had spent three years in Ephesus ([Acts 20:31](#); AD 53-56).

After Festus arrived in the summer of AD 59, Paul quickly stood trial and appealed to Caesar ([25:1-12](#)). The voyage to Rome most likely began in the fall of AD 59 ([27:2](#)) and ended early in AD 60 ([28:11-16](#)). Paul stayed in Rome "for the next two years" ([28:30](#)). The New Testament does not report the outcome of Paul's trial, but he was probably released and then recaptured and

martyred in Rome along with Peter and many others during Nero's persecution (around AD 64-65).

In Jerusalem, James the brother of Jesus was stoned to death by the Jewish authorities in AD 62 (Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.9.1). Not long afterward, the church in Jerusalem left that doomed city and settled in Pella, one of the cities of the Decapolis east of the Jordan. Thus, when war broke out between the Jews and the Romans in AD 66, the Christians largely escaped its fury. The war ended in AD 70, when Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed.

Events from AD 70 to 100. The New Testament writers and other early Christians left few records of the period following the destruction of Jerusalem. It is possible that both Matthew and Luke wrote after AD 70, but they did not write about the developments that occurred after AD 70. Similarly, the apostle John probably wrote his Gospel and three letters close to AD 90, but we learn few specifics about the late first-century church from those writings. If Revelation was written in the early 90s AD, then it gives us a glimpse of what the churches in Asia Minor were facing during that time (see Revelation Book Introduction, "Date of Writing").

As the apostolic age came to a close, the church around the Mediterranean grew and developed, as it would continue to do after the last of the apostles had died and the leadership of the church had passed on to the following generations.