

Verse-By-Verse: The Book Of Acts

Introduction to the Book of Acts

We call it the Book of Acts or The Acts of the Apostles, but it didn't have a book title when it was written. That's because, the fifth Book of the New Testament was the second part of a historical work. The Gospel According to Luke was the first volume.

It wasn't until much later that Acts was separated from Luke.

In many ways, The book of Acts is a history book. It covers the story of the development of the early Christian Church as it was empowered and directed by the Holy Spirit.

It doesn't take long to realize just how prominent The Holy Spirit is in this book. He is mentioned in various forms some 109 times in 28 chapters. Because of this, Acts is sometimes called The Acts of the Spirit.

As we study this book, I want us to pay particular attention to the role of the Holy Spirit in this story. I'm confident we will come away from this study with a much greater appreciation for the role of the Holy Spirit in the Church's life!

With that in mind, let's look at the authorship and purposes of the Book of Acts:

The Book of Acts – The Historical Outline

Acts overlaps the end of Luke's Gospel and gives us the historical outline of the major events of the early Church. This includes:

- The birth of the Church in Jerusalem (chapters 1-5)

- The martyrdom of Stephen and the conversion of Paul (chapters 6-9).
- Peter's first foray into Gentile apostolic work (chapters 10-12)
- Paul's missionary travels (chapters 13-19)
- Paul's final journey to Jerusalem (chapters 20-21)
- Paul's arrest, imprisonment, and hearings in Jerusalem and Caesarea (chapters 21-26)
- Paul's voyage to Italy and confinement while awaiting trial before Caesar (chapters 27-28).

While the history is not completely linear, it does cover the expansion of the Church from Jerusalem to the outskirts of the Roman empire.

Acts covers nearly 30 years and includes valuable historical information about the Jewish-Christian Church in Palestine, largely led by Peter and James. At the same time, it reveals the remarkable progression of the Gospel to the Gentiles.

Paul, of course, is the primary focus of this progression. Luke details for his readers some of the great sermons of Paul. As some have noted, Paul's sermon on the Areopagus in Athens (chapters 17), may have been intended by Luke as a model for the preaching of the Gospel to the Gentile world.

The Book of Acts As A Theological Source

Some scholars have treated the Book of Acts as a history book but have discounted it as a source of theology. This is unfortunate because Acts shows us theology in practice. For example, in Acts, the Great Commission is not just good theology; it is carried out chapter by chapter in Luke's sequel to his Gospel.

Luke is not only a good historian, but he is also a good theologian. He takes great pains to outline both the theology of the Gospel and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit through Peter and then Paul. Luke ties together the Old Testament promises of the Holy Spirit's work with its New Testament realization.

Luke's Gospel and the Book of Acts

Both works have been attributed to Luke, a Gentile believer who evidently was also a medical doctor. Statistically, the Gospel According to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles comprise about 27% of the content of the entire New Testament.

Luke and Acts are, in effect, companion books. The evidence for this is very strong. In Luke 1:3 and Acts 1:1, Luke addresses both books to the same person (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1).

In the first century, it was common for historians to introduce a second volume by summarizing the first volume and indicating the contents in the second. Luke does this in Acts 1:1-4, writing,

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.

On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with[a] water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

At the end of Luke's gospel and the beginning of Acts, he ties the two volumes together. In his gospel, Luke details Christ's resurrection and

ascension. As we have seen, in the beginning of Acts, Luke picks up with Jesus' post-resurrection appearances and his commanding them to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father.

The Themes of the Luke's Gospel And The Book of Acts

The overall theme of Luke's gospel is how God unfolded his plan of salvation through Jesus. He takes pains to show Jesus as the Savior of all humans, regardless of their socio-economic background. Luke includes a lot of geography, as he shows the spread of the gospel from Galilee to Jerusalem.

The Theme of the Acts of the Apostles or The Holy Spirit is to show how the Gospel continued to spread – but this time from Jerusalem to the Roman Empire.

The Book of Acts reveals multiple sub-themes. Some feel Luke used it as an apologetic work - demonstrating to the Roman government that Christianity should be tolerated along with the other religions of its empire.

Luke shows how various Roman authorities regarded the Christian faith as harmless to the empire. This includes the city officers of Philippi, the town's clerk of Ephesus, Felix, Festus, and King Herod Agrippa II.

Another evidence of this purpose is the large sections of Acts detailing Paul's trials and defense of the Gospel. Nearly 25% of the Book of Acts is used for this purpose in chapters 22-28. In addition, there are several other defenses before Jewish authorities. See: Acts 4:1-23; 5:17-40; 6:9-7:60.

Possible Dates For The Writing Of The Book of Acts

Generally speaking, scholars suggest two sets of dates for the writing of the Book of Acts. One is around 63 AD, soon after the last event recorded in Luke's treatise. The second is 70 AD or later.

Some of the book's passages refer to the author as one of the "we" who travelled with Paul. This is evident in Acts 16:10-17, 20:5-21:18, 27:1-28:16. However, no references are made to Paul's execution or his letters.

That has led some scholars to believe Acts was written before Paul's death in or around 65 AD - and before the collection of his letters, early in the second century.

There are other considerations. First, Acts was written as Luke's second volume, so it has to date sometime after his gospel. It is also very likely that it was written after Mark's gospel.

One of the big questions is why Luke is silent about what happened at the close of Paul's two-year imprisonment in Rome, the Great Fire of Rome, 64 AD, the martyrdom of Peter and Paul, sometime around 67 AD, and Jerusalem's destruction in 70 AD.

Are there any answers for why Luke would have left these events out of Acts? Those who hold to a later date for Acts suggest that Luke did not detail these events because it did not fit his purpose for this second volume.

In other words, Luke's primary purpose for writing Acts was to show how the gospel had expanded in the first century in ever-widening circles; Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. The finale was Paul's defense at Rome - the world's political and cultural center.

If this is the case, the martyrdom of Paul and the later destruction of Jerusalem were not necessary to Luke's narrative.

Who Was Theophilus?

One of the unanswered questions of the Book of Acts is, "Who was Theophilus?" The fact is, we really don't know.

The name "Theophilus" literally means "loved by God," but it carries the connotation of "friend of God." Some scholars have surmised that Luke used the name "Theophilus" as a generic title for all Christians.

It seems more likely that Luke was writing to a specific individual – even though his message has value for Christians in every century. Who, then, is Luke's recipient? Let's look at four possibilities.

One clue is the fact that Luke addresses Theophilus as "most excellent". This was often used as a title of someone of honor or rank in the Roman empire. Paul used this term for Felix (Acts 23:26; Acts 24:2) and Festus (Acts 26:25). This leads some to believe Theophilus was a high-ranking officer or official in the Roman government.

A second possibility is that Theophilus was a wealthy and influential man in the city of Antioch. There are second-century references to a man with this name who was "a great lord" and a leader in the city of Antioch during Luke's era.

If Luke's benefactor was his intended recipient, it would make sense to send him a detailed account of his and Paul's missionary journeys.

A third theory is that Theophilus was a Jewish high priest named Theophilus ben Ananus. This man was Israel's high priest from 37-41 A.D. He was the son of Annas and the brother-in-law of Caiaphas. Another option is Mattathias ben Theophilus, who served in Jerusalem from 65-66 A.D.

Lastly, some scholars suggest Theophilus was the Roman lawyer who defended Paul during his trial in Rome. They believe Luke's purpose in writing his gospel and Acts was a defense of Christianity – similar to a legal brief.

This theory suggests Luke's writings were designed to defend Paul in court against charges of insurrection, while defending Christianity against the charge that it was an illegal, anti-Roman religion.

Characteristics Of The Book Of Acts

There are many things that scholars note about the Book of Acts. Let's cover just a couple categories. We start with:

- Luke's Historical Accuracy

Luke does, indeed, write as a historian. In chapter after chapter, Luke includes precise details. This is remarkable, considering Luke covers over 30 years of history, spanning from Jerusalem to Asia Minor, and eventually, Rome.

Luke's includes details about many different people. In addition, he notes various cultures. Luke describes political administrations, he details court sessions in Caesarea, and chronicles events in city centers at Antioch, Ephesus, Athens, Corinth, and Rome.

Modern Bible archeologists are gaining greater appreciation for Luke's accuracy in describing geographic areas, including his use of then-current terms for the times and places he writes about.

- Luke's Literary Style

Luke's vocabulary is greater than many of the other New Testament writers. No doubt, his education contributed to this. Throughout Acts, his literary style fits his narrative of cultural settings and events.

As some have noted, Luke uses a variety of writing styles to enhance his message. Sometimes he uses classical Greek while other times he uses first-century Palestinian Aramaic in his expressions. Many of the latter appear when Luke describes events and people in the Holy Land in Acts 1-12.

Yet, when Luke chronicles Paul's apostolic journeys among the Greek territories, he transitions from the Aramaisms to Hellenistic descriptions and cultural markers.

- A Dramatic Narrative

Of all the New Testament books, Luke's has the most remarkable sense of dramatic story telling.

In the Book of Acts we find more apologetic speeches than in any other narrative. From Peter's Pentecost sermon to Paul's many defenses before Roman authorities, the drama of the events is well written.

In addition to these, Luke has great skills in making the major events in Acts come to life for the reader. For example, Luke's description of the events surrounding the Malta shipwreck are second-to-none in first century accounts.

Scholars note Luke's accuracy in describing nautical details is balanced against his narrative of Paul's angelic visitation before the shipwreck (Acts 27). Luke relates both the theology and the factual details of the story.

As one scholar put it, "Much like the Gospel of Mark, the book is vivid and fast-moving throughout."

- A Balanced Narrative

The last thing I want to point out is that Luke's narrative does not favor anyone or any particular perspectives. As far as he is able, Luke presents a balanced history of the Early Church.

Luke's arrangement of the historical material displays objectivity as well. He doesn't hold back from recording both the successes and the failures of the gospel's expansion. He tells us both the good and the bad parts of this story.

For example, Luke describes the dissension between the Hebrew and Greek widows in the early days of the Church (Acts 6). Later, he will describe the falling out between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15). Finally,

Luke does not hide the dissonance between the Jewish and Gentile believers (Acts chapters 15 and 21).

Let me summarize what we have seen:

The Book of Acts is significant as a historical account of Christianity's first century expansion. It chronicles the founding of the Church, the spread of the gospel, the early organization of congregations, and the pattern of apostolic missionary work.

The Book of Acts shows how the Great Commission transitioned from a theological premise to an actual movement. It shows the power of the Holy Spirit as he directed and empowered the Church to carry out Jesus' command to "go into all the earth and make disciples."