

“Acting on Acts”

‘Breakfast and the Bible’/‘Supper with the Scriptures’

Overview of Acts and 1:1-5

The Acts of the Apostles is unique in the Bible. It’s an account of the exciting events which followed the resurrection of Jesus and the genesis of the first communities of his followers.

Acts starts with the return of Jesus to heaven (the Ascension), continues with the coming of God’s Holy Spirit (Pentecost) upon the first believers, and goes on to describe how those first followers of Jesus were equipped to continue his work on earth and to take that message far away from Jerusalem and into Europe.

The author of Acts is widely thought to be St. Luke, who also wrote the Gospel that bears his name. Although he probably never met Jesus face-to-face, Luke gathered together the eyewitness accounts of those who did and has faithfully passed them on to us. But he did witness the miraculous growth and work of the first Christians and this too we can read, thanks to his hard work.

Who was Luke?

Luke was a doctor – we know this from Colossians 4:14. From this passage we also find that he was a good friend to St. Paul. As a doctor, Luke was an educated man. He applied his academic training to the discipline of being an historian too, and there are numerous details in his writing which show that he was careful to be accurate in what he recorded. For example, he uses the correct titles for the Roman political and military leaders he mentions. His descriptions on board a ship in the Mediterranean are also accurate and can be verified from contemporary accounts. In other words, he seems to be a man in whom we can place our trust.

At the beginning of his gospel he writes, “Since I myself have *carefully* investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an *orderly* account for you...” (Luke 1: 3) (*my italics*). This was based on eye-witness accounts (Luke 1:2).

The first part of Acts also relied upon these eyewitness accounts and Luke refers to the disciples in the third person plural – ie. ‘they’ and ‘them’. But in Chapter 16 this suddenly changes. The first nine verses are still about ‘they’ and ‘them’, but in verse 10 Luke starts to talk about ‘we’ and ‘us’. So it seems that Luke joined them at this point, as they left Troas to begin a new mission into Greece – the entry of the gospel into modern-day Europe. Later in Acts, we find that Luke spent some time with the Apostle Philip before accompanying Paul on his journey to Rome. He is referred to as a ‘fellow-worker’ in Paul’s letter to Philemon (Philemon 24). In one of Paul’s last letters before his martyrdom, he refers to Luke as being the only person with him (2 Timothy 4:11). Over the years, there would have been plenty of opportunities for Luke to learn about Jesus.

Most commentators believe that Luke was a Gentile – ie a non-Jew. We do not know how he came to faith. Luke’s Gospel certainly has several passages which emphasize the universality of Jesus’ mission, and make it clear that it is not only the Jews who are part of God’s new kingdom; see for example Lk. 2:32. Luke probably wrote his gospel in the 60s AD. Whilst Matthew, Mark and John finished their gospel accounts with the resurrection of Jesus, Luke concludes his with Jesus’ Ascension; and then writes a sequel to take us on from the Ascension into the life of the early Church. The reason for this is to be found in the ‘Prologue’ to the book of the Acts of the Apostles, Acts 1:1-5.

The Prologue to Acts: 1:1-5

- In the prologue to his gospel (Luke 1:1-4), Luke tells us why he has written the Gospel of Luke. His explanation equally applies to the Acts of the Apostles.
- He addresses both books to 'Theophilus' – see also Luke 1:3. We do not know who 'Theophilus' was. The name means 'lover of God' or 'dear to God' so it could have been a real person or an invitation to anyone who loves God to read on. I like to think that it probably was a real person, and someone who already had a lively and enquiring faith and whom Luke held in high regard.
- The reason that Luke is writing to 'Theophilus' is "so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:4).
- In the prologue to Acts, Luke refers to his 'former book' as being "about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven" (Acts 1:1b-2a). Perhaps the word 'began' is significant? Luke saw the life, death and rising of Jesus as the start of a new work which would continue unbroken in the life of the Church that was now the 'body of Christ'. Acts can be seen as the outworking of Jesus' promises that they would be his witnesses who would be given his Spirit (Luke 24:48-49) and would be persecuted in the same manner as he had been (Luke 21:12-19).
- Note that the Prologue to Luke's gospel, four verses, is one long verse. In the world that Luke knew, this was a literary device to signal to the readers that he was saying something serious, solid and trustworthy. In other words – 'pin your ears back'! Rightly too – Acts is no 'fly-by-night' piece of shallow journalism or 'fake news' but a well-researched account, based on interviews with many eye-witnesses and those who were recognised guardians of community history through the ancient and honourable art-form of story-telling – oral history. Whilst we have largely lost that art in the West, it still lives on in many cultures around the Mediterranean.
- These opening verses give a helpful summary, for the reader, of the last Chapter of his Gospel (Luke 24), so that we are ready to journey with Luke into what happens next.
- Luke refers to the Ascension of Jesus to heaven three times in his writings: in Luke 24:51, Acts 1:2 and Acts 1:6-11. He obviously wants us to know how significant this event is in the life of Jesus.
- The followers of Jesus and eye-witnesses of his death and resurrection are here referred to as 'apostles' (2) – ie those sent. Originally only 'The Twelve' were referred to as 'apostles' but now other eye-witnesses are accorded that important title, as will be Barnabas and Paul. Luke makes it clear that the apostles minister only under instruction from the Holy Spirit of Jesus. A significant theme of Acts is the role of the Holy Spirit, for example: as the gift from God to new believers (2:38), as giving Peter and Stephen the words to say when on trial (4:8 and 6:10) and all the believers to speak boldly (4:31), of directing Philip to approach an Ethiopian eunuch (8:29) and guiding him to faith in Jesus and baptism, of prompting Agabus to prophesy a famine (11:28), and so it goes on.
- Luke's prologue concludes with another couple of references to the Spirit. In (4) he refers to the 'promise of the Father', which is surely reminding his readers that Jesus explained about the coming of the Holy Spirit on his people once he had gone back to be with his Father; see e.g. John 14:26, 15:26 and 16:13-15. The reference in (5) to being 'baptised in the Holy Spirit' will have resonated for them with the beginning of Jesus' ministry when he was baptised; both Matthew and John record that Jesus will baptize his followers with the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11 and John 1:33).
- That baptism is due "not many days from now" says Jesus (5), so implicit in his message is an entreaty to be patient and ready for that very special day to come.

Onwards into Acts

Luke will go on to describe in exciting detail the coming of the Spirit of Jesus on the Jewish believers at Pentecost (Acts 2). Not only that, but he will also share the account of the Spirit's anointing of Gentile believers (Acts 10). His second book will then start to move us away from Jerusalem and out into the then known world as Paul, following his dramatic conversion (Acts 9), journeys deep into Gentile territory on his three missionary journeys. Acts concludes as Paul reaches Rome, the centre of the greatest empire of his day.

Some have suggested that the 'Acts of the Apostles' should really be the 'Acts of the Holy Spirit' – and it is true that it was the Holy Spirit who enabled Peter and Paul and the other apostles to speak so powerfully and heal dramatically, drive out evil spirits and even raise dead people back to life. But the point of this book's title is that God chose to wield his awesome power through ordinary men and women who, prior to the coming of the Holy Spirit, had let Jesus down and were fearful of the future.

In Acts, therefore, we learn:

of the impact of the speech on Pentecost of an ordinary fisherman when over 3000 people (just imagine it!) came to faith;
of the first meetings of those early Christian communities;
of signs and wonders carried out by the apostles;
of non-Jews coming to faith;
of the start of persecution and the first Christian martyr – Stephen;
of the fulfilment of Jesus' command to take the gospel beyond the lands of the Jews;
of the dramatic conversion of Saul the persecutor of the followers of Jesus into Paul the powerful minister of Christ;
and of Paul's missionary journeys to modern-day Turkey and Greece and his eventual imprisonment in Rome.

Acts concludes where the rest of Church history begins – and this includes the missions to our own land too! It is inspiring reading!

Questions

- ***We may not be 'apostles' the strict sense of the word, but as God's baptised people we are still sent out in his name. What 'acts' has God done in and through our lives? They may not be dramatic and 'on show' to others, but God will have used us in what we may feel are small ways to further his Kingdom.***
- ***Where have we seen God acting in the lives of other Christians that has blessed us personally?***
- ***How do we seek to be immersed in the Holy Spirit – ie so that we don't dry out?!***
- ***How have we quenched the work of the Spirit in our lives?***
- ***Given the serious intent of Luke in writing his two books for us, what should we be doing to show serious intent to learn from them?***