

The Acts of the Apostles

Background

The Acts of the Apostles is the second volume of Luke's comprehensive presentation of the Gospel. For Luke the account of God's saving work in Jesus Christ cannot be separated from the life and ministry of the Christian community that is animated by the Holy Spirit. For Luke there is an intimate connection between the Gospel and the response of discipleship and witness. This is apparent in the large section of material unique to Luke's Gospel account, the so-called travel narrative (see 9:51—19:44), in which Jesus often gives instructions and exhortations to his disciples and warns them of the challenges ahead. The story of Acts continues the proclamation of God's saving work by focusing on the life of the Church as it bears witness to Jesus by responding to his exhortations and squarely facing the hostility of the world. Amid these challenges Acts places special emphasis on the power of the Holy Spirit that directs and protects the Christian community. With the Ascension of Jesus in Luke 24:50—53, a story unique to Luke's Gospel, the stage is set for this story of salvation to take a turn. From this point forward, the decisive importance of Jesus' Resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit will be manifested by the witness of the Christian community in imitation of Christ.

The Structure and Flow of the Acts of the Apostles

Generally speaking, the narrative in Acts is divided into two sections: an initial section that focuses on the growth of the Church in and around Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and a second part that focuses on the growth of the Church among the Gentile populations. As the narrative transitions between these two focal points, several key figures and events emerge. Within the first part of the narrative, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit forms the basis of the missionary activity of the early Church among Jews of every nation, and this takes place in Jerusalem. From Jerusalem we begin moving outward "to the ends of the earth" (1:8). This expansion pivots on the story of Stephen's martyrdom in Acts 7:1–60. Following his death, which is preceded by a lengthy speech on the connections between the Christian Gospel and the stories of Old Testament figures, the Gospel is received by those outside Israel: first by the Samaritans (see 8:4–25) and then the Ethiopian eunuch (see 8:26–40). These two stories provide a transition to the focal point in the second part of Acts—the growth of the Church among the Gentiles.

Luke emphasizes the importance of Paul in the second part of Acts, but the transition to his story is signaled long before he becomes the focus of the narrative. We see him initially at Stephen's stoning (see 7:58—8:3), and we hear of his persecution of the Christian community. These persecutions are interrupted by the stories of the expansion of the Church outside of Judea, but then we rejoin the story of Saul, who is stopped by the power of Christ (see 9:3–9) and called by the Risen Christ to become a missionary to the Gentiles (9:15–16), even though the conditions for the Gentile mission had not yet been established. These conditions, namely, that Gentiles were exempted from adopting strict Jewish practices, are established with the story of Peter and Cornelius (see 10:1–48) and are confirmed in the meeting at Jerusalem (see 11:1–18). Yet the full opening of the Gentile mission will await the Council of Jerusalem in which it is affirmed that Gentiles have no obligation with regard to Jewish practice (including circumcision), only the obligation of the so-called Noahide prohibition against eating blood (see 15:1–29, cf. the story of Noah in Genesis 9:3–5) and eating meat sacrificed to idols (they are also instructed to avoid *porneia*, a Greek word, the meaning of which is somewhat indeterminate in this context but has something to do with sexual impropriety or illicit marriage). Meanwhile the missionary exploits of Paul



begin to replace the stories of Peter, so that after Barnabas and Paul are commissioned as missionaries by the church in Antioch (see 13:1–3), there follows a consistent narrative of Paul's missionary exploits.

From Acts, chapter 13, to the close of Acts, the focus remains almost exclusively on Paul as he brings the Gospel to the far corners of the earth. In fact, the closing chapters of Acts that narrate Paul's arrest in Jerusalem, his appeal to the emperor, and his journey to Rome (see 21:27—28:30) provide the platform for the fulfillment of Jesus' command to bring the Gospel from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. Paul's appeal to the emperor, a right he enjoyed as a Roman citizen according to Roman law, nicely parallels the opening of Luke's Gospel. In both scenes Roman law and the emperor play an unwitting role in God's plan of salvation—by calling for a census and directing Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem in Luke, chapter 1, and by bringing Paul to Rome and beyond to preach the Gospel “to the ends of the earth” (1:8). The ending of Acts, then, is not as strange as some may think (some may ask why there is no narrative of Paul's death if this was written two to three decades after his death). The end of Acts brings the narrative around and forms what is often called an *inclusio* (an intentional repetition) with the words of Jesus at the Ascension in Acts 1:8: “But you will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Rome and Spain represented the furthest reaches of the known world and effectively signal “the ends of the earth.”

Theological Themes

As in his Gospel, Luke again offers an orderly account of the story of the Church, and one aspect of this orderliness is Luke's use of periodization. For Luke the history of God's saving work unfolds through distinct yet related periods of time. The orderly flow of periods from Luke's Gospel account to Acts sheds light on Luke's understanding of how God works through history to save humanity—each event has its proper place in history and leads to or prepares for the next event. For example, the story of John the Baptist anticipates the advent of Jesus, who does not begin his ministry until the arrest of John (Luke 3:1–38 recounts John the Baptist's career and has him arrested even before the narrative of Jesus' Baptism in Luke 3:18–22; the genealogy of Jesus then follows in Luke 3:23–38 rather than in conjunction with the story of Jesus' birth as might be expected). Jesus' proclamation is first delivered to Israel—including Galilee and Samaria. After his Death and the Resurrection appearances, Jesus departs and ascends into Heaven (a story unique to Luke). The departure of Jesus allows the sending of the Spirit, and it is the Spirit that will animate the activity of the Church. Acts, therefore, is not disconnected theologically from Luke's Gospel; rather, it is Luke's presentation of the next temporal period or era in God's saving work.

Many of the themes present in Luke's Gospel are also found in Acts, particularly an emphasis on the continuity of God's saving activity in both the story of Israel and the story of the Christian church. (Note that the word *church* [*ekkle̓sia* in Greek] refers to the community of faith called together by God; whenever this word is used in Matthew, Acts, and throughout the New Testament, the reader should be cautious about associating it too closely with modern notions of a structured institution of an independent and distinct religion.) We see that the speeches given in Acts often explicitly make this point, especially in Peter's speech at Pentecost (see 2:14–36) and Stephen's speech before the council (see 7:1–53). But the parallelism in Acts goes beyond thematic elements in the many speeches one finds there. In Acts there is a concerted attempt to portray the struggles of the churches as an imitation of Jesus' own trials—something Jesus foretells in Luke 21:9–19. We see the disciples hauled before various councils, both Jewish and Gentile; yet the disciples are given the courage to proclaim the Gospel even under these trying circumstances. Many of the disciples are beaten and humiliated, and others even undergo execution for the sake of the Gospel (Stephen and James). Their suffering and deaths are patterned after



the Death of Jesus. One example of this is found in Luke 22:67–69 and Acts 7:55–57, where mention of the Son of Man seated at the right hand of God brings the witnesses into a rage against Jesus and Stephen. Through the witness of the earliest disciples, the work of Christ, which includes suffering and rejection, is carried on in the world.

Luke's orderly account provides Christians with a narrative that is not so much historical as it is theological. Like the Gospel accounts themselves, the Acts of the Apostles cannot be regarded as simple history— a disinterested account of what happened in the past. Rather, Luke has a specific plan for proclaiming the Gospel, and it encompasses both the story of Jesus and that of the early Church. That is, the Christology (doctrine of Christ) of the Gospel narratives, and its emphasis on the divinity of Jesus, is paralleled by the ecclesiology (doctrine of the Church) found in Acts, and its emphasis on the divine origin of the Church. Luke paints over historical tensions and the factionalism that, at least in part, defined the early Christian community (e.g., the tension between Peter and Paul in Galatians, chapter 2, and the factionalism and libertinism addressed in First Corinthians). Though not everything narrated in Acts is a cold factual account of the history of the early Church, Acts nonetheless is rooted in history and remains an important source for our understanding of the early Church. One must recall, however, that Luke's goal in Acts, as in his Gospel, is to summon people to faith. For Luke this proclamation is inseparable from the life and spirit of the believing community.

(This article is adapted from the article "The Acts of the Apostles," by Christopher McMahon, PhD, in *The Saint Mary's Press® College Study Bible* [Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2006], pages 1624–1626.)

