

An Introduction to The Acts of the Apostles

“In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.”

(Acts 1: 1-2)



Lectionary

Acts appears in our Sunday Readings mostly in Eastertide, so that we hear about the growth, teaching and development of the early Christian community (28 – 64 AD) in the light of the resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit. This occurs in all three of the years A, B and C in their cycle. It is expected to be read either in place of the Old Testament Reading or in place of the Epistle, if an OT Reading is preferred.

Acts and Luke’s Gospel

It is generally accepted that Acts and Luke’s Gospel were written by the same author. They share many points of common concern, have an evident theological dynamic between them and reveal a clear common purpose. The gospel shows God’s plan for the world’s salvation through the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ (Messiah – God’s Anointed One). Acts continues the story beginning with the Ascension, through the day of Pentecost and the growth of the early Christian community in Jerusalem and then gradually spreading beyond Judaea into Samaria and into the wider Gentile world largely through the missionary work of Paul. Luke’s Gospel is generally reckoned to have been composed in the 80s to 90s AD with

Acts following on a little after (i.e. some 30-40 years after the death of Paul). The author of Acts (let's call him Luke!) adopts the style of an ancient historian – he writes an “orderly account” and the word “gospel” is not mentioned – and thus composes speeches for Jesus and the Apostles, which constitute in ancient understanding giving a full report and revealing the essential meaning (and theological imperative) which he wishes to convey. The Gospel of Luke and Acts make up more than a quarter (27%) of the writings of the New Testament.

Luke's theological purpose in Acts

His purpose remains the same as it is in the Gospel: to write “a history of salvation” (*Heilgeschichte*). Luke's thinking is firmly rooted in Jewish tradition, although it is clear that he was not a native of the Holy Land as his vague geographical references show. By the time he is writing Jerusalem had already been razed to the ground by the Roman General Titus in 70AD and the Jewish community there dispersed or enslaved. He is writing in an attempt to answer a theological problem, namely how the Messiah of the Jews came to have an overwhelmingly non-Jewish Church. The answer seems to be that the message and good news of Jesus the Messiah was sent to the Gentiles because the Jews to a large extent rejected it.

But Luke is also writing this as an “apologia” – a defence – of the followers of Jesus, followers of The Way, addressed to Jews. The bulk of the speeches and sermons are addressed to Jewish audiences, with the Romans serving as external arbiters on disputes concerning Jewish customs and laws. Followers of Jesus – “Christians” – are still by and large seen at the time as a Jewish sect and so part of a “*religio licita*”, and thus enjoying the special status this allowed under Roman law. Clearly there was already conflict between Jews and Christians, with Christians often being ejected from synagogues, which had taken on a far more important role in Jewish life and culture since the destruction of Jerusalem. Yet it is not entirely clear (as perhaps Paul also was not) what God intends for the future of relations between Christians and Jews. Luke has gone out of his way to stress the authentic and genuine Jewishness of Jesus and his background and that of his early disciples and yet the rejection by the Jewish authorities of Jesus as the promised Messiah remains both a problem and a difficulty which Luke finds himself trying to explain.

Acts and historical accuracy

In offering the largest contribution from a single author in the New Testament Luke provides a framework for both the Church's liturgical calendar and an "historical outline" into which later generations have fitted their idea of the history of Jesus and the Early Church. Unlike comparable Annals of Great Men in the ancient world (eg : Suetonius : The Twelve Caesars) Acts is not really about the deeds and achievements of great men (sic!) but about what God was believed to be doing in creating a new people led by ordinary people chosen by Jesus or his Apostles who had received God's Holy Spirit, which had filled Jesus' own life. But is this what we would now call reliable history? Acts on the whole paints a picture of a harmonious and idealised church (eg Acts 2: 42-47; 4: 32-36; 6: 1-7), yet this is clearly at odds with what we learn of the life of the early church from Paul's writings (Corinthians and Galatians). Also there is an obvious discrepancy between how Luke records Paul's conversion (although he does mention it three times!) and Paul's own account (Galatians 1: 13 – 2: 10). Why does Luke not mention the martyrdom deaths of Peter and Paul (c 64 AD), when he goes at great lengths to describe Stephen's death?

The short answer is that Luke's theological story and programme override what we would see as historical accuracy. Luke is writing for a group of Greek-speaking followers of Jesus, mainly non-Jews but some Jewish elements as well, who would be meeting together for worship and the Lord's Supper, where his work would be read aloud. His intention was not to write a historical justification, an answer to "Did this really happen?", but to encourage faith: "This is what happened and what it all means". It has been described as a work of edification, to build up people's faith. It also describes what the relationship of the Church was with the Roman authorities (always a tricky question): God or Caesar...? Luke's portrayal shows that the Roman authorities never act against Jesus or his followers unless provoked by the Jews.

The Structure of Acts

Two structural principles underlie Acts:

1. A gradual geographical movement away from Jerusalem, the centre of Jewish religious and political life, towards Rome, the centre of the Gentile world (cf Luke 9: 51 and Acts 19: 21)

2. The roles of Peter and Paul. The first representing the Jewish/Christian church, the second the mission to the Gentiles.

Let's see how this works out:

Transition passage

1: 1-26: The Introduction (see top of page 1), the Ascension, centred in Jerusalem awaiting the Holy Spirit, Matthias chosen to make up the Twelve.

Petrine Christianity

2: 1 – 12: 25

2: 1 – 8: 1: The beginnings in Jerusalem, the early community, Stephen's ministry.

8: 2-40: Persecution leads to expansion to Samaria and beyond.

9: 1-31: Paul's conversion whilst on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus

9: 32 – 12: 25: Peter's experience with the conversion of Cornelius the god-fearing Gentile: a transitional moment. The formation of a Christian community at Antioch.

Pauline Christianity

13: 1 – 28: 31

13: 1 – 14: 28: Gentile mission promoted from Antioch.

15: 1-35: Gentile mission confirmed in Jerusalem.

15: 36 – 28: 31: Gentile mission in Asia Minor, Greece, and Paul's eventual arrival in Rome where he teaches for two years.

Further and more elaborate analysis of Luke/Acts

In the discussion of Luke's gospel (page 3 and see below) I pointed out the parallel structures between the Gospel and Acts: what Jesus taught and did and was done to him can be paralleled in Acts in the stories of Stephen, Peter and Paul etc.

Parallel structure in Luke/Acts

Presentation in Temple at Jerusalem/Apostles gathered in Jerusalem

Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness/40 days after Resurrection before Ascension

Jesus empowered by Holy Spirit at Baptism/ Apostles receive Holy Spirit at Pentecost

Jesus preaches with power of HS/ Apostles preach with power of HS

Jesus has ministry in Samaria/ Philip has ministry in Samaria

Jesus has ministry in Decapolis/ Apostles (esp. Paul) has Ministry in Asia Minor

Jesus heals the sick/ Apostles heal the sick

Passion and death of Jesus/ Passion and death of Stephen

Apostles sent to all nations/ Paul preaches in Rome

Some scholars have taken this analysis much further and see a nine fold scheme within both the Gospel and Acts: Michael Goulder's "*Type and History in Acts*" (see separate sheet). Just how far one can push this typological approach is a matter of dispute among scholars. It can look very neat and balanced but can also lead to looking for parallels where they may not exist or need to be forced into the typological mould. There was within Jewish interpretation of the Torah and other scriptures a tradition of discerning a prefiguring or of allegorising what God intends for his people and this influenced much early Christian understanding of Messianic prophecy (eg Psalm 110, Isaiah 7: 14 etc), seeing it as referring to Jesus. Luke would have been well aware of this tradition and indeed this has clearly influenced how he wrote about the life and ministry of Jesus and that of the early church. It was certainly his intention that the latter should clearly reflect the former. And above all that the Spirit of God which filled the life of Jesus from the moment

of his conception (Luke 1: 35) should be seen to be at work in the life of those communities that he describes in Acts.

Easter Season Readings (Year C)

Easter Day: Acts 10. 34-43 – A key moment in the growth of understanding of that early Christian community as Peter brings the Good News to god-fearing Gentiles.

Easter 2: Acts 5. 27-32 – Peter with the apostles are brought before the Jewish Council in Jerusalem where they witness to the risen life of Jesus.

Easter 3: Acts 9. 1-6 – The risen Christ appears to Paul who experiences a dramatic conversion.

Easter 4: Acts 9. 36-43 – Peter restores life to Dorcas (Tabitha).

Easter 5: Acts 11. 1-18 – Peter explains to the Jewish Christian church in Jerusalem what occurred with the Gentiles at Caesarea (*see Easter Day*)

Easter 6: Acts 16. 9-15 – A key moment for Paul as he crosses over from Asia Minor (Turkey) to Macedonia (N. Greece) to evangelise there.

Ascension Day: Acts 1:1-11 – The moment of transition and handover from the earthly risen Christ to the Apostles, who are about to receive that Spirit that filled his life.

Easter 7: Acts 16. 16-34 – In Philippi Paul and Silas are imprisoned but are miraculously delivered from bondage through an earthquake and manage to convert their jailer and his household.

Pentecost: Acts 2. 1-21 – The Holy Spirit fills the Apostles commissioning them symbolically to proclaim the Good News to all the world.