

The Book of Acts

The Early History of the Christian Church

Luke and Acts

- Luke: physician and companion of Paul (Irenaeus, Origen, Clement of Alexandria).
- 'We' passages describing sea voyages (16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16).
- Author may be using a source in which the 'we' was already included, *or* he was present on these occasions.
- Luke is named as a companion of Paul in Col. 4:14.
- The author writes polished Greek (influence of the Septuagint): a Greek-speaking Jew or a Gentile who frequented a Jewish synagogue.

Date of Acts

- Early date (ca. 64-65 CE):
 - book ends abruptly with Paul's arrival in Rome
 - no references to the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE.
- Later date (ca. 85-90 CE):
- if the same author wrote the Gospel, probably post-dates Mark (ca. 70 CE); emphasis on the delay of the Parousia;
- silence on the death of Paul is motivated by concern to present Christianity in a favorable light to the Romans.

Acts as a Record of Early Church History

- Luke did not expect an imminent *parousia*.
- Luke offers a selective account.
- Some inconsistencies and inaccuracies:
 - Jesus' command to preach to all the Gentile nations (24:46-47)
 - accounts of Paul's call-vision (cf. 9:7; 22:9).

Spreading the Message from Jerusalem to Rome

Preach 'in Jerusalem, and in the whole of Judaea and Samaria, to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8).

1. Disciples gather in Jerusalem after Jesus' death (2:1-8:3).
2. Movement from Jewish Christians of Jerusalem to Samaria (8:4-12:25).
3. Movement to the wider world, from Diaspora Jews to proselytes to Gentiles (Acts 13-28).

Message of salvation is sent to the Gentiles because it is rejected by the Jews. A Jewish Messiah is followed by Gentiles.

Figures and Events in Jerusalem

- Three disciples are prominent: Peter, James and John, sons of Zebedee. They all represent a Judaism faithful to Torah.
- James is executed under Herod Agrippa I (41-44 CE), and his place is taken by James the brother of Jesus.
- Acts 6:1: 'Hebrews' (Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians) and 'Hellenists' (Greek-speaking Jewish Christians). Tension between the two groups; Hellenists appoint their own council of seven to oversee the distribution of food (6:1-6).
- Hellenists may have included Stephen and Philip: more liberal attitude to the Torah and the Temple.
- Execution of Stephen (Acts 7:51-53). Watershed in Acts, followed by general persecution of Christians in Jerusalem; many Hellenists flee from the city (8:1).

The Mission from Jerusalem

- Hellenists were responsible for preaching among non-Jews (Gentile mission).
- Philip preaches in Samaria (8:4-25).
- Some Hellenists go to Antioch in Syria, preaching to Greeks and Jews (11:20).
- In Antioch the church received a new name, 'Christians' (11:26).

The Missionary Paul

Saul of Tarsus opposes the early Christians at first; he assists those who put Stephen to death (7:58; 8:1) and persecutes Jewish Christians (8:3; 22:4-5).

He receives a vision of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus (9:1-19) and, as a result, becomes a believer and begins preaching in Damascus, then Tarsus and Antioch.

He establishes new Christian communities in Asia Minor and Greece: he is the apostle to the Gentiles.

The Inclusion of Gentile Believers

- Conversion of the Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10-11) prompts Torah-observant Jewish Christians to maintain that Gentile Christians should be circumcised and must follow the Jewish food laws (Acts 15:1, 5). Paul's views are upheld by the Jerusalem council (cf. Gal. 2:1-10).
- Movement from Jewish to Gentile, rural to urban communities.
- Paul's strategy was to begin work in the local Jewish synagogue (contact with God-fearers); rejection forced him to work among Gentiles in private homes and small buildings.

'The word of God had to be spoken to you first. But since you rejected it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life we are turning to the Gentiles' (Acts 13:46).

Conflict in the Roman World

Gentile opposition to the early Christian movement: e.g., in Ephesus among idol makers (19:23-41).

Nero accused the Christians of setting Rome alight and had many of them crucified or burned (cf. Tacitus, *Annals* 15:44).

Nero was responsible for the execution of Peter and Paul (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.25.5).

‘Theological History’ in Luke-Acts

- Hans Conzelmann and Ernst Haenchen stress the importance of Heilsgeschichte (‘salvation history’) in Luke-Acts.
- Three key historical periods:
 1. Israel and the old covenant (Luke 1-2)
 2. Jesus (the rest of the Gospel)
 3. The new Israel, the Church (Book of Acts)

A Spirit-Led Movement

- Message of salvation is spread from Jerusalem to Rome, from Jews to Gentiles.
- The role of the Spirit is prominent:
 1. In the ministry of John the Baptist (Luke 1:15, 80)
 2. Zechariah (Luke 1:67)
 3. Descent on Jesus to anoint him for his ministry (Luke 2:40; 3:22; 4:1, 14)
 4. Disciples wait for the promised Spirit (Acts 1:1-5, 8)
 5. A fiery power and rushing wind (Acts 2)
 6. First Samaritan believers (Acts 8:14-17)
 7. First Gentile believers (Acts 10:44-48)
 8. Disciples who know John's baptism (Acts 19:1-7).

Sermons as Theological Testimonies

Sermons are preached at key points in the narrative:

Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost (2:14-42)

Peter's sermon in the Temple (3:12-16)

Peter's sermon to Cornelius (10:34-43)

Paul's sermon in the synagogue at Antioch Pisidia (13:16-41)

Paul's sermon to the Greeks in Athens (17:22-31)

The Purpose of Luke-Acts: The Prologue

‘Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed’ (Luke 1:1-4).

- A record to promote faith addressed to the ‘most excellent Theophilus’ (cf. Acts 23:26; 24:3; 26:25).
- Fulfillment of prophecy: day of Pentecost (Acts 2:16-21; cf. Joel 2:28-32); speech of Stephen (Acts 7:2-53); rejection of the Jews and turning to the Gentiles (Acts 28:25-27; cf. Isa. 6:9-10).