

Text: The Book of Acts, Acts 1:1-11

Title: Introduction to Acts

Date/Location: Sunday Evening November 13, 2011 and April 19 & 26, May 3, 2023 at FBC

Introduction

- A. What shall we call this book? 2nd Luke? Acts of the Apostles? Acts of the Holy Spirit? History of the Early Church?
- B. Theophilus was the original recipient of the letter. We can surmise a few things about this man, but much of our effort could amount to speculation. We simply do not know who he was. Some even suggest Theophilus was an alias instead of a real individual. I am strongly inclined that he *was* a real person known to Luke, either one Luke was trying to evangelize, or one who was an immature believer who needed more information, or someone who could benefit from a defense of the nature of the faith as not a threat to the Roman government. Theophilus was apparently quite highly placed in society because Luke calls him “most excellent Theophilus” in Luke 1:3-4.
- C. Luke is a careful historian. He includes references to a lot of people and locations that help place the book into its historical context. For example:
 - 1. Jesus, of course
 - 2. The apostles: Peter, James, John, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, Judas son of James (and Judas Iscariot)
 - 3. Mary the mother of Jesus

4. The brothers of Jesus (unnamed, but who we know from Mark 6:3 to be James, Joses, Judas, and Simon)
5. Matthias, selected to take Judas's place, and Joseph Justus (Barsabas)
6. Gamaliel, 5:33
7. Stephen, and the less famous first deacons Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, Nicolas
8. Simon the Sorcerer
9. Ethiopian official
10. Paul (Saul), and Ananias, Barnabas, Silas
11. Aeneas, Dorcas (Tabitha)
12. Cornelius, 10:1
13. Rhoda, Acts 12:13
14. Blastus, official under Herod Agrippa I, 12:1-24
15. Timothy, Acts 16
16. Gallio, 18:12
17. Felix and Porcius Festus, 23:26, 24:22, 24:27
18. Ananias the high priest, 24:1
19. Claudius and the Jews expelled from Rome, 18:2.
20. The assassins, 21:38
21. Herod Agrippa II, 25:13
22. Sergius Paulus, proconsul of the island of Paphos, 13:7.
23. Jason, Acts 17:5

24. Dionysius the Areopagite and Damaris, converts in Athens, 17:33.
25. Crispus and Sosthenes, synagogue leaders, Acts 18:8, 17
26. Priscilla and Aquila, 18:18
27. Apollos, 18:24
28. Demetrius, a silversmith 19:24
29. Four virgin daughters, prophets, 21:9
30. Agabus, another prophet from Judea, 21:10
31. A centurion who bought his Roman citizenship, 22:28
32. Paul's sister and son, unnamed, 23:16
33. Roman army commander Claudius Lysias, 23:26
34. Caesar, 25:11
35. Publius, an official on the island of Malta and his father, 27:7
36. Sopater of Berea, Aristarchus, Secundus, Gaius, Tychicus, and Trophimus of Asia, 20:4

This is at least 64 named individuals, as well as several others unnamed and a group or two. Numerous cities and regions are named, and all are actual places, not mythical ones. That is because Luke's work is *history*, not fiction.

D. These and other references help us place the writings of various NT books into a historical chronology.

1. For example, the book of Romans was written in AD 56 while Paul was in Corinth at Acts 20:2b. Paul's

connection to Erastus (Acts 19:22, Rom. 16:23, and 2 Tim. 4:20) helps us in this regard. Erastus was the city's treasurer. An inscription mentioning an Erastus was found in 1929 in Corinth.

2. As another example, Paul wrote 1 & 2 Thessalonians in AD 50-51 while in Corinth around Acts 18.
3. He wrote 1 Corinthians in AD 55 from Ephesus around Acts 19.

E. An Aside: The Historical Nature of the Bible. I recently ran across a severe critic of the Christian faith who trashed our belief in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. He gave several examples of other religions that believe in virgin births. For example:

Romulus and Remus; the Buddha, Zoroaster, the Muslim poet Kabir in 1440 supposedly was birthed by a Hindu virgin, sent down a river in a basket and adopted by a Muslim family, the Aztec Quetzalcoatl, and the wizard Merlin. Even Melchizedek was supposedly born of a virgin according to Second Book of Enoch.

The critic dismissed the Christian account of the virgin Mary by reason that it is just another in a long list of similar religious myths.

Although the critique sounds devastating, two faults are evident with this approach. First, just because there are many false stories that share a component (a virgin birth), this does not mean that all of them are false. There are many flood legends in the world, and we believe that is because they derive from the one real global deluge that happened during Noah's lifetime. It is simply a logical fallacy to say "many

stories are false, so this other similar one must be false too.” It is the fallacy of overgeneralization.

The second fault is this: the religious tales that are cited as similar examples are dissimilar in one very important regard: they are a-historical. They are clearly legend. By contrast, the information recorded in Matthew and Luke bears all the marks of actual history. For example, there are real, named people. The two primary people, Joseph and Mary, are described in detail. Their genealogies are given back many generations. They are not made-up characters, but rather real people with a long pedigree tying them to the human race. There are a multiplicity of eye witnesses including writers, one of whom we are studying here (Luke) who is obviously a very thorough historian.

I. The Major Subject of Acts, v. 1

- A. In the prologue, Luke is making it clear that he is composing the book of Acts as a continuation of his gospel of Luke. In the earlier book, he covered what Jesus “began” to do and teach until His ascension into heaven. The implication is that Luke will now be writing about the next phase of Jesus’s work in the world. Things were taking a new turn or starting a new era. This work was done through the Holy Spirit working in the apostles and other believers. This view is consistent with what Jesus told the apostles before He ascended into heaven: they were to continue a very important work.
- B. There is another ingredient to all of this that we cannot miss. Jesus said in John 14:16-18 that He would not leave

them as orphans but that He would send the Helper, the Holy Spirit, to be with them and guide them (John 16:13). This truth would be the truth that Jesus would give to the Spirit to convey to the apostles, and, by extension, to the church. So, the Holy Spirit is the so-called replacement of Jesus in the life of the early church. The “Holy Spirit” is mentioned in 41 verses in the book’s 28 chapters. Another dozen or so times the “Spirit” is mentioned without the adjective *holy*.

- C. Jesus is continuing to work in the world, but not directly by his presence. Instead, He is working through the Spirit of God. We might call the book the Continuing Work of the Lord in the Early Church or The Work of the Holy Spirit in the Early Church because the Holy Spirit did continue Jesus’s work in the world.

II. Transitional Nature of Acts

- A. There is always a transitional period between dispensations when things are a bit “up in the air.” The transition between the dispensation of conscience to that of what we call “human government” was the tempestuous time during the 1-year judgment of the Noahic flood and the immediate aftermath when the world needed to be repopulated. The transition between the present dispensation of the church and the millennial kingdom is occupied with the Tribulation, a 7-year period of judgment.
- B. The book of Acts records the transition from the dispensation of the Mosaic Law and the dispensation of the church. As such, some things were “up in the air” and not fully settled, at least in the minds of everyone involved. This is evident in the following ways:

1. The express command of Jesus to be witnesses not only in Jerusalem, but also in Judea, Samaria, and the end of the earth. This was a change from earlier instruction (like Matthew 10:5-6).
2. The movement of the gospel to Samaritans and to an Ethiopian official in Acts 8 after an initial period of focus on Jerusalem in Acts 2-7. Persecution was one of the tools that God used to accomplish this movement.
3. The special revelation to Peter in Acts 10 that expressly lifted the ban on certain foods and the Jewish view of Gentiles as unclean because of the food they ate. This was followed by Peter's explanation in Acts 11 to his fellow Jews.
4. The church council in Acts 15 met to discuss the question of the applicability of the Law of Moses to Gentile Christians. There was some struggle between factions as to how this was to look.
5. The spread of the gospel through the ministry of Paul in Acts 13-14 and 16-28.
6. The confusion about the status of "disciples" like those who had John's baptism in Acts 19:1-7.

III. The Post-Resurrection / Pre-Ascension Ministry of Jesus, v. 2-8

Jesus's post-resurrection ministry consisted of seven things:

1. Giving various commands to the apostles.

These are not listed, but a few are mentioned in the succeeding verses—do not depart from Jerusalem

(yet), wait for the promised Holy Spirit, and be witnesses to Jesus throughout the world.

2. His physical presence for 40 days. Remember it was 3 days for the crucifixion and resurrection, and a total of 50 until Pentecost.

Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
					XG	G
GRM	M	M	M	M	M	M7
M	M	M	M	M	M	M14
M	M	M	M	M	M	M21
M	M	M	M	M	M	M28
M	M	M	M	M	M	M35
M	M	M	M	MAW	W	W42
W	W	W	W	W	W	W49
P50						

A = Ascension
Ministry

G = Grave

M = Jesus'

P = Pentecost

R = Resurrection

S = Sabbath

W = Waiting X = Crucifixion

Leviticus 23:15-16 instructed the Israelites to count 50 days after the Passover Sabbath (marked with just a G in the chart above) to have the feast of Pentecost (the feast of weeks).

The point about him being seen for these 40 days is that the apostles were eyewitnesses of his resurrection. They did not have a one-off dream or hallucination that He was alive. Part of the proof of the resurrection is that he appeared repeatedly, day after day, for nearly 6 weeks.

3. Providing many proofs of His resurrection. During that time, He presented himself after his suffering as alive, and did so with “infallible proofs.” These are convincing and decisive proofs that made known with certainty that Jesus was alive. They are things that are unmistakable. What are these proofs? There were *many* of them, some of which were:

1. Thomas saw the Lord and examined his body for the marks of the nails and spear.
2. Seen by all the apostles, and the women.
3. Seen by 500 hundred brothers at once, according to 1 Cor. 15:4-8
4. Had flesh and bones (Luke 24:39), ate food, was touched.
5. He ate with the disciples at the Sea of Galilee (John 21).
6. Can you think of others that are recorded?

4. Teaching concerning the Kingdom of God

I believe this was somewhat like the “big picture” teaching on the kingdom. The disciples expected the kingdom to come right away (see the following), but it was going to be postponed and a time of sowing and reaping would ensue, calling out people from the Gentiles to be saved be citizens of the future kingdom.

5. Instruction to wait for the Holy Spirit

A special ministry of the Spirit was promised by Jesus in John 7:37-39, 14:16-17, 14:26, 15:26, 16:13. He had to leave first, then He would send the promise of the Spirit.

The main new ministry of the Spirit was Spirit baptism and a special empowerment for service in the new church era. In addition, from the texts above, it appears that there are other, related ministries of the Spirit like illumination for the disciples to write the NT gospels and epistles, and a species of indwelling of the Spirit with significant new revelation and assurance that was only partially present in the OT period.

6. Answering a Question about the Kingdom

The issue of their question was one of timing (will You at *this time* restore the kingdom?). They assumed the kingdom was coming, but wanted to know specifically when it would happen.

I take the answer to their question was in effect, no, not right now. The larger point was that they were not to know about things that God had not revealed, particularly having to do with times and seasons. He said they could not know the timing because God the Father was the exclusive holder of that information and had not chosen to reveal it to others.

7. Issuing the Great Commission

This was partly in reply to their question about the kingdom. They were not to concern themselves with things that were outside of their control and knowledge. Rather, they were to concern themselves with that which they were commanded to do.

The command was what we call the Great Commission. Evangelize the nations, start local churches to baptize and gather those new disciples together, and propagate the gospel-sowing ministry to the next

generation. The basis of this was their eyewitness experience of Jesus' resurrection. They were simply to tell that to others.

Example: Acts 4:19-20, Acts 22:15

They were to tell others of Jesus's resurrection, and I think it is obvious, they were to tell of His death, and the meaning of that death, and his coming again to be judge, etc.

All of this was done up to the point of his departure. Luke wrote about this in his gospel, 24:50-53. He is reviewing the last paragraphs of his gospel and expanding upon it somewhat up through verse 11. At the end of Luke, they returned to Jerusalem, and in Acts 1:12 Luke picks up just where he left off, with the disciples in Jerusalem.

IV. The Pivotal Event: The Ascension, v. 9-11

- A. I say this is the pivotal event because it marks the shift from the preceding phase of Jesus' work to the new phase of it through the Spirit and apostles. It is sort of like a graduation or moving out on your own. (Caution: I am *not* making a comparison to the obviously more pivotal event of the death and resurrection of Christ!)
- B. A miraculous departure. The text describes a visible departure, not an ethereal or "spiritual" departure. He went out of their sight. And except for a couple of appearances recorded later in Scripture—to Paul on the way to Damascus in Acts 9, and Acts 23:11, and to John in Revelation 1 and the following chapters—the Lord is out of sight until He comes back. Blessed are those who believe despite not seeing Him (John 20:29).

This event stands against naturalistic uniformitarianism. There are some things we just do not understand or that very few people truly understand: a magnet will raise something off the ground. Even with understanding of the natural mechanism that is at work, the existence of that mechanism defies naturalistic explanation. But the ascension of Christ is outside of the realm of even that!

C. As with other major events in the life of Jesus, angels attended the event and relayed a message from God. Think of the other events where angels ministered in the life of Jesus:

1. His birth (Matt. 1:20), the announcement to the shepherds (Luke 2:10), flight to Egypt (Matthew 2:13), and return (2:19). Before that, an angel announced the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:13).
2. His temptation in the wilderness (Matt. 4:11).
3. Gethsemane (Luke 22:43).
4. The resurrection (Matt. 28:2, 5).
5. The ascension (here in Acts).
6. The second coming and final harvest (Matt. 13:41, 49, 16:27, 25:31).

D. The angelic message of the second coming. The angels made clear that this Jesus that they observed going up will come back down the same way—associated with the clouds. Clouds are often associated in Scripture with Jesus's return. He will be coming from "up" where the clouds are. Consider these portions:

1. Matt 17:5 a cloud overshadowed the mount of Transfiguration and obscured the appearance and voice of God as He spoke.

2. Matt 24:40 the Son of Man will come on the clouds of heaven. This ties in with Daniel 7:13. "Clouds of heaven" is a phrase that refers to the atmospheric heaven. Beyond that there are the starry heavens and the heaven which is the dwelling place of God.
 3. Matt 26:64 – same. Mark 13:26, 14:62 – same. Luke 21:27 – same.
 4. 1 Thess 4:17 – at the rapture of the church, we will be caught up together with those Christians who have predeceased us and be together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord
 5. Revelation 1:7 – he is coming with the clouds.
 6. Revelation 14:14-16 – the Son of man sitting on a cloud and drawing together His elect.
- D. The second coming is a clear, direct, essential teaching of the Christian faith. Jesus's coming was bodily and visible, and His leaving was the same, and His coming again will be the same. None of this is pretend stuff to make us feel good or triumphant or comforted or whatever. It was and will be *real*. Because of this, we must take heed.
- E. Also, the unknown timing of this event yields a critical implication: we have to be ready at any time.
1. 1 John 2:28 Christ's return urges us to live holy lives so that we will not be ashamed when He returns
 2. James 5:9 The judge stands at the door
 3. Luke 12:42-48, also Matthew 24:51, sudden judgment.
 4. Mark 13:32-37 only the Father knows the time, so we have to watch and be ready.

5. Luke 12:39-40 The thief comes at an unannounced time. See also Matthew 24:36, 43.

6. Matt 25:13 You do not know the day or hour.

F. This teaching is a big part of the basis of the doctrine of the *imminent* return of Christ. At any time He could come back. At any time we can be held accountable to Him. At any time, our life's work may be over. Our enjoyment of life's blessings could be over at any moment. *Watch* and *be ready* are critical ideas.

Conclusion

This is the kind of church we ought to be: following Jesus' commandments, telling others that He is alive, understanding the program of God's kingdom for the world, walking in the Spirit, not worrying about timing and other things we cannot know, carrying out the Great Commission, expecting His second coming.

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