

Introduction to Acts

Where is it in the Bible?

Acts is the fifth book in the New Testament. Its full title in Greek is “The Acts of the Apostles”, but it is usually shortened. It is the only historical book in the New Testament and is found between John and Romans.

Who wrote it?

The author of Acts is not named anywhere in the book itself; however, comparing Acts 1:1 and Luke 1:1-4 leads to the conclusion that the two books were written by the same person. This is supported by similarities of language, style, and theological themes. In fact, this is “one of the few virtually unchallenged conclusions of NT scholarship,”¹ and scholars often refer to “Luke-Acts” as if it were a single book. This means that this author is responsible for roughly 25% of the New Testament.

In spite of this, we still do not know exactly who the author was. Based on the *we* passages which begin in Acts 16:6-10, he seems to have been an occasional companion of Paul. Although there are other possibilities, the early and unanimous tradition was that the author was the person referred to in Colossians 4:14 as “Luke, the beloved physician.” This tradition was widespread in the Church, and most scholars feel there is no strong reason to challenge it.

From his works, it is clear that Luke was well-educated. He uses the richest vocabulary of any Biblical author and is familiar with both classical literature and the Hebrew Scriptures. Most feel that he was a Gentile Christian who had studied the Bible extensively, although he could also have been a Hellenistic Jew who had a classical education.

When was it written?

Most scholars think that Acts was probably written after Luke in the mid-80s. The problem with this date is that the book ends its account of the early Church in the mid-60’s. It does not say anything about the persecutions under Nero, the deaths of Peter and Paul, or the destruction of Jerusalem. Because of this, some have suggested a date in the 60’s. This would mean that Luke would also have to be dated either and so would Mark, since it is a source for Luke. Therefore, most scholars still think Acts was written roughly 20 years after the events that are described and that the author ended the book because he had accomplished his goal of showing the spread of Christianity from Jerusalem to Rome.

What is it about?

Acts is a bridge between the gospels and the epistles that shows us how the Christian message moved from the rural world of Palestine in Jesus’ day to the urban world of the cities in the Roman Empire.

¹ Loveday Alexander, “Acts,” in *The Oxford Bible Commentary* ed. John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1028.

How is it structured?

- I. In Jerusalem (1:1-8:3)
 - a. The Church is Born (1:1-2:41)
 - b. The Church in Jerusalem (2:42-5:42)
 - c. The First Martyr (6:1-8:3)
- II. Outside of Jerusalem (8:4-12:25)
 - a. To Samaria and Beyond (8:4-40)
 - b. Paul's Conversion (9:1-31)
 - c. Peter's Preaching in Coastal Towns (9:32-11:18)
 - d. Thriving Despite Persecution (11:19-12:25)
- III. To the "ends of the earth" (13:1-28:31)
 - a. Paul's First Missionary Journey (13:1-14:28)
 - b. The Council in Jerusalem (15:1-35)
 - c. Paul's Second Missionary Journey (15:36-18:22)
 - d. Paul's Third Missionary Journey (18:23-21:16)
 - e. Paul's Arrest and Trials in Jerusalem (21:17-23:31)
 - f. Paul's Trials in Caesarea and on to Rome (23:12-26:32)

What are some things to look for?

- **God Controls History:** Acts makes it clear that God has control over history. God determines events and when, where and how they occur. Everything happens according to the plan of God, who guides those who follow it.
- **Speeches:** Beginning with Peter's sermon on Pentecost, speeches make up roughly one third of Acts. These speeches follow a general pattern of showing how Jesus is the Messiah who fulfills the prophecies of the Old Testament and offers forgiveness and salvation to those who repent.
- **Themes Continued from Luke:** Acts continues many of the themes found in Luke.
 - **The Holy Spirit** is mentioned more often in this book than anywhere else in the Bible and plays a significant role in the spread of Christianity. In fact, some have said that it might be appropriate if the title of the book was "The Acts of the Holy Spirit." The beginning of the Church is marked by the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost. All believers receive the Spirit who empowers them for mission and guides the spread of the Church.
 - **Women** are prominent in both Luke and Acts. This may be an indication of their importance as members and leaders in early Christian communities.
 - **Meals and community** are important in Acts as well as Luke. The early Christians are described as breaking bread in their homes (2:42). This probably refers both to sharing the Lord's Supper and a fellowship meal together.
- **Universality of the Church:** Acts clearly shows that everyone is welcome in the Church. This was true from the beginning, when both Jews and Gentiles heard the message on Pentecost. This led to tension between those who thought Gentiles had to become Jews before they could become Christians and those who thought that was unnecessary. The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) resolved this issue.