

Catholic Scripture Study International

The Acts of the Apostles

Introduction

THE FIRST HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

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Fishermen and travelers in the 1st century probably became nauseated while bobbing up and down on the seas of the Roman Empire. It's easy to imagine Luke sailing with Paul on one of the later missionary journeys, keeping notes and recording memories as he sat in the bow of a ship as it cut through the water. Writing with quills and parchment, Luke created two of the most important and well-written documents known to the modern world—details about the life of Jesus Christ and a history of the early Christian Church. These books of Scripture are known as the Gospel of Luke and The Acts of the Apostles, and they make up a large portion of the New Testament.

AUTHORSHIP, TITLE, AND PURPOSE

In his Letter to the Colossians, Paul implies that Luke is not “of the circumcision,” that is, Luke isn't Jewish (*Col 4:11-14*). This means that Luke is the only Gentile author in the Bible. Because of this, the Gospel of Luke and The Acts of the Apostles are unique. This is a significant detail in the study of the book of Acts, which focuses on the struggle between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians and the problem of how both can be assimilated into the early Church.

Luke's history of the early Church—mostly written from firsthand investigation, acquired tradition, and the author's own experiences with Paul—has come to be known as The Acts of the Apostles. It doesn't include acts of all of the apostles, however. It primarily deals with the two apostles Peter and Paul, and even those stories are sketchy and incomplete. In part, the work appears to have been written to validate the apostolic authority of Paul. Although the book of Acts is a true history of the early Church, it seems that Luke's primary motivation for writing is to teach and defend the faith. Thus, the book of Acts is a work of apologetics.

Alternate titles have been proposed for the writing—including Acts of the Holy Spirit and Acts of Peter and Paul—but the accepted title comes from the first centuries of the Church. The earliest Christians recognized The Acts of the Apostles as an inspired text, and the councils of the Church included it in the canon of Scripture. The book of Acts doesn't provide a complete history of the early Church but rather an outline of some crucial events and turning points experienced by the early Christian community. It weaves together theology, history, and eternal truth.

DATE OF COMPOSITION

In his Gospel Luke tells the story of Jesus' life, which covers the first 30 years of the 1st century. The book of Acts covers the next 30 years, and in it Luke tells the story of Jesus Christ in the life of his Church. Readers often get the mistaken idea that the events Luke is recording in the book of Acts all happened in a very short period of time. In reality, Acts covers only key vignettes that occurred in the Church over a period of about 30 years.

The Letter of James was written quite early, around 48-49 A.D., before the Council of Jerusalem in 49 A.D. Paul's Letters also are considered to have been written relatively early, prior to 67 A.D. when he was beheaded in Rome. Based on the events they describe, the Gospel of Luke and The Acts of the Apostles were written after 60 A.D. and prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. The original scrolls weren't titled "The Gospel According to Luke," and the Bible itself doesn't identify Luke as the author. There are only a few references to Luke in the Bible—in the Letter to the Colossians 4:14, Paul calls Luke "the beloved physician" and also implies Luke was a Gentile; in the Letter to Philemon 1:23, Luke is described as Paul's fellow worker; and lastly, in his Second Letter to Timothy 4:11, Paul, writing from prison in Rome around 67 A.D., discloses that "Luke alone is with me."

Although the Bible never says that Luke wrote the Gospel of Luke or the book of Acts, Catholic tradition regards Luke as the author of both. The biblical text also provides strong hints of this. In about the middle of the book of Acts, the author begins including himself in the story. It's known that Luke was with Paul during the time the "we" sections were written (*Acts* 16:10–17, *Acts* 20:5-15, *Acts* 21:1–18, and *Acts* 27:1—28:16). Irenaeus, writing in 180 A.D., verifies that Luke is the author of the Gospel and of the book of Acts, and he quotes Luke as an authentic witness. The Muratorian Canon, an amazing fragment of writing from about 150-200 A.D., is the oldest extant list of biblical books. It states that the third book of the Gospel is written according to Luke, the well-known physician. The same fragment also records that The Acts of the Apostles was written by Luke.

GENERAL OUTLINE

The opening words of the book of Acts indicate the existence of an earlier document: "In the first book, O Theophilus" (*Acts* 1:1). Here Luke is referring to his Gospel, which was written prior to the book of Acts. The recipient of both works, Theophilus, probably was a Roman dignitary interested in learning the full story of Christianity, which was at that time was a new and relatively unknown religion. Luke assumes that his initial audience for the book of Acts is familiar with the key events of Jesus' life from reading about them in the Gospel of Luke.

Mark and Luke provide New Testament accounts of Jesus' Ascension into heaven (*Mk* 16:19, *Lk* 24:51 and *Acts* 1:2–11). Luke outlines not only the deeds and actions of Peter and Paul but also God's plan for geographical expansion of Christianity beginning in the 1st century and continuing in the present-day Church. Before disappearing into the clouds, Jesus tells his disciples: "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (*Acts* 1:8). This is exactly what happened, and this passage accurately prophesies the geographical spread of Christianity described in the book of Acts.

Luke sets the scene for Pentecost by describing 120 disciples huddled in an upper room in Jerusalem, waiting for the power of God to descend—or for armed soldiers to break down the doors (*Acts* 1:12-13). On the day of Pentecost, tongues of fire settled on each disciple's head, and the gift of tongues was given. The power of the Holy Spirit leads Peter to preach the first full-fledged Gospel sermon, which concludes with the words: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (*Acts* 2:38). Notice here the fulfillment of Jesus' words to Nicodemus about new birth through water and the Spirit (*Jn* 3:5). Peter doesn't reduce the Gospel to "faith alone." He instructs those who desire salvation to do something—to strive for holiness and to participate in the sacraments in obedience to the risen Jesus Christ.

CHRISTIANITY'S EXCLUSIVELY JEWISH BEGINNINGS

The book of Acts explains that the 3,000 believers who were baptized on the day of Pentecost were Jews from many nations visiting Jerusalem for the ancient Hebrew feast of Pentecost celebrated by the Jews. Despite the language differences, there were no Gentiles in the crowd who responded to Peter's inspired preaching. The amazing truth is that for about the first decade after Jesus' Ascension, the Church was exclusively Jewish. In this way, Jesus' apostles fulfill the initial phase of his final instructions to them to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, the holy city that was the central location for the religion of Judaism.

The second step in the expansion of the Church required the apostles to bear witness to Jesus Christ beyond the confines of Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria. The book of Acts describes how this is accomplished through bitter persecution of the first Christians. This includes the vicious actions of Saul, who later becomes known by his Roman name of Paul. Stephen's lengthy sermon at his own martyrdom sets the stage for broader inclusiveness of the Gospel message. Philip the deacon spreads the Gospel to Samaria, where he gathers a great harvest of new believers, whom the apostles are called to confirm (*Acts* 8:14-17).

With the dramatic conversion of Saul (*Acts* 9:1-19), the expansion of the Church moves into the third stage, and the apostles begin witnessing to the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ by spreading the Gospel to the end of earth. Peter, Paul, and the other apostles fan out to preach and establish the Church. The thirteenth chapter of Acts describes the beginning of the exciting expansion of the Church beyond Judea and Samaria, zooming in on the life and apostolate of Paul. In the book of Acts, Luke gives very little information about the other apostles. Most of the information Christians know about them comes from snippets recorded elsewhere in the New Testament and from other historical records and tradition.

PETER AND PAUL

The book of Acts can be roughly divided into two broad sections: the ministry of Peter described in the first 12 chapters and the ministry of Paul described in the last 16 chapters. Peter makes an important reappearance in the fifteenth chapter, which can be viewed as the pinnacle of the entire historical account and should be held precious by all Gentile Christians. It was there that Peter stood and exercised the authority over the Church to proclaim that the Gentiles could be included in the full life of Jesus Christ and the Church without first being

circumcised. The Gentiles now could partake of the fullness of God and the blessings of Abraham. Even though the first Gentile converts, Cornelius and his household, had been filled with the Holy Spirit and baptized at the hands of Peter (*Acts* 10:46-48), this new development needed to be explained and defined by the Church. The first general council of the Church in Jerusalem, presided over by Peter, the apostles, and the elders, resulted in an authoritative decree of the Church that was binding upon all the churches. Precedent was set for future ecumenical councils.

THE NEW COVENANT REFLECTS THE OLD

The depth of Luke's thought and the profound interrelationship of the New Testament with the Old can be graphically demonstrated in the book of Acts. Luke is the only Gentile writer in the whole Bible, yet he demonstrates a penetrating understanding of the Old Testament and God's covenants. With the brilliance and perception of a prophet, he demonstrates a direct parallel between the Old Covenant and the New. At the new Passover, Jesus is the innocent Lamb whose blood is shed on the cross, providing a way through water (the sacrament of Baptism) to leave behind the bondage of sin and to journey to the Promised Land of eternal life. Fifty days (which is what *Pentecost* means) after the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb, wind was heard and fire settled on Mount Sinai where God originally wrote the Law with his finger on tablets of stone. At the new Pentecost, God once again descends in fire 50 days after Jesus, the Passover Lamb, is sacrificed. This time the writing isn't on tablets of stone but on human hearts—as Paul describes in his Second Letter to the Corinthians: “You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on your hearts, to be known and read by all men; and you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (*2 Cor* 3:2-3).

The Jews as a whole rejected Jesus, however. Like the Israelites of old who rejected God to worship the golden calf and then all died within 40 years without entering the Promised Land of Canaan, this new generation is destroyed by Roman troops who level Jerusalem and the Temple there 40 years after Peter's Pentecost preaching to the Jews: “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” (*Acts* 2:40). Peter connects the 1st-century Jews with the generation of Israelites who followed Moses out of Egypt but were destroyed in the wilderness due to their unbelief. Peter isn't primarily referring to salvation of souls, he's issuing a prophetic warning that destruction is coming on this new generation of unbelieving Jews—just as their ancestors had been destroyed in the wilderness. The new is a mirror image of the old, and Luke uses great precision to paint a portrait that reflects this understanding. As St. Augustine phrased it, the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New.

The book of Acts has a very unsatisfactory ending in the sense that there is no real ending. Luke stops his story in mid-stream, and readers are left wondering what happens to Peter and Paul. Luke's inconclusive conclusion points out that the story of the Church is never-ending. The Holy Spirit still is at work in and through the Church. The story won't end until Jesus Christ returns in the clouds just as he left—a promise made at the beginning of the book of Acts: “And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’” (*Acts* 1:10-11).

OUTLINE OF THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

1. **Prologue (1:1-5)**
2. **Ascension to Pentecost (1:6—2:13)**
 - A. Ascension of Jesus (1:6-14)
 - B. Replacement of Judas (1:15-26)
 - C. Pentecost (2:1-13)
3. **The Gospel in Jerusalem (2:14—8:3)**
 - A. The Descent of the Holy Spirit (2:14-47)
 - B. Peter's Ministry and First Imprisonment (3:1—4:31)
 - C. Donations and Discipline (4:32—5:11)
 - D. Peter's Ministry and Second Imprisonment (5:12-42)
 - E. Selection of the First Deacons (6:1-7)
 - F. Stephen's Ministry and Martyrdom (6:8—7:60)
 - G. The First Persecution of the Church (8:1-3)
4. **The Gospel in Judea and Samaria (8:4—12:25)**
 - A. Philip's Ministry in Samaria and Judea (8:4-40)
 - B. The Conversion of Saul (9:1-31)
 - C. Peter's Ministry in Lydda, Joppa, and Caesarea (9:32—11:18)
 - D. Conversions of Gentiles in Antioch (11:19-30)
 - E. Persecution of the Church, and the Death of Herod Agrippa (12:1-25)
5. **The Gospel to the End of the Earth (13:1—28:31)**
 - A. Paul's First Missionary Journey: Cyprus and Asia Minor (13:1—14:28)
 - B. The Council of Jerusalem (15:1-35)
 - C. Paul's Second Missionary Journey: Asia Minor, Greece, Ephesus (15:36—18:22)
 - D. Paul's Third Missionary Journey: Asia Minor, Ephesus, Greece (18:23—21:14)
 - E. Paul's Arrest in Jerusalem and Imprisonment in Caesarea (21:15—26:32)
 - F. Paul's Journey to Rome (27:1—28:16)
 - G. Paul's Ministry in Rome (28:17-31)

VOICES OF THE SAINTS

What is the Word of Christ? It is the Word by which all things are made. The Lord commanded, and heaven was made. The Lord commanded, and the earth was made. The Lord commanded, and the seas were made. The Lord commanded, and every creature was produced. You see, then, how effective is the Word of Christ. The Word of the Lord Jesus is so powerful that it can create something out of nothing.

**—St. Ambrose of Milan
known as the honey-tongued Doctor of the Church**

CATECHISM CONNECTIONS

- To learn the three criteria the Church teaches for interpreting Scripture in accordance with the Holy Spirit, see paragraphs 112-114 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*.
- CCC 642 explains how Peter and the Twelve are the primary witnesses to Jesus' Resurrection—but not the only ones.
- To learn about how the Church was foreshadowed from the beginning of the world, see CCC 760.
- It was Jesus' task to accomplish the Father's plan of salvation in the fullness of time. For more information about how the Church is the kingdom of heaven on earth, see CCC 763.

ROME TO HOME

Pope John Paul II called the Bible the “path to happiness” because through the words of Scripture God reveals fundamental morality.

In the Bible, God not only reveals himself but also the path to happiness. This is a theme that regards not only believers but, in a certain sense, every person of good will. Through the Bible, God speaks and reveals himself and indicates the solid basis and certain orientation for human behavior. The fundamental behaviors of biblical morality are: knowing God, the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ; recognizing his infinite goodness; knowing with a grateful and sincere soul that ‘all good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights’; discovering in the gifts that God has given us the duties that he has entrusted to us; and acting in full awareness of our responsibilities in this regard. The Bible presents to us the inexhaustible riches of this Revelation of God and of his love for humanity.

—speaking to the 2004 assembly
of the Pontifical Biblical Commission

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