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### Introduction to "Acts of the Apostles"

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# Acts

The book of Acts functions as the introduction to the epistles. It provides us with the background story to the ministry of Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, and one of the principal authors of the epistles. Peter, also a main character in Acts, represents Jewish Christianity and introduces the General Epistles (see Gal. 2:6-9).

## AUTHOR

The book of Acts suggests that the author was a companion of Paul. The so-called “we passages,” where the author shifts from writing in the third person to first person (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1–28:16), imply the author was part of Paul’s missionary team and witnessed firsthand some of the accounts he records. Although the book does not explicitly state who wrote it, many early church fathers identified Luke as the author, and internal evidence from the New Testament suggests that he accompanied Paul in the “we passages.” Irenaeus connects Luke to the apostle Paul (*Against Heresies* 3.14.1), and this connection is also found in several New Testament passages (Philem. 24; 2 Tim. 4:11; Col. 4:14).

## DATE

Acts is the second volume of a two-part book (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-5). Therefore determining when Acts was written depends on the date assigned to the Gospel of Luke. Since Luke mentions he consulted other accounts of the life of Jesus for his own Gospel, some time had to have elapsed before his account could have been written. Since it is clear that Mark was one of his sources, Luke, and therefore Acts, must have been written sometime after Mark’s Gospel was composed in the late 50s or early 60s, which suggests a date for Luke and Acts in the late 60s or 70s. This calculation agrees with the testimony of the second-century church father, Irenaeus, who states that Luke wrote his Gospel after Peter and Paul were martyred.

Since Acts ends before the death of the apostle Paul, some have concluded it must have been written in the early 60s. While the reasoning may make sense, it is far from certain. Acts is not a biography of the lives of Peter and Paul. Its stated purpose is to tell the powerful way in which the good news of Jesus spread from Jerusalem to Rome (Acts 1:8). And that is the climax of the story—Paul proclaiming the gospel in Rome (28:28). If the story had continued, the focus of the book would have changed.



Date of writing  
ca. AD 62 or 63

## AUDIENCE

In both the prologues to Luke and Acts, the author writes to a certain Theophilus. Still, Luke probably meant the book for a broader audience, probably Gentile, in its majority (see the introduction to “Luke”).

## PURPOSE AND MAIN THEMES

Acts continues the purpose of the Gospel of Luke: “that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:4). In Acts, the author shows how God’s purposes and promises are being fulfilled in the church. The church continues Jesus’ ministry by proclaiming His work of salvation, and the story of Israel continues in the church. It is possible because salvation history has entered the new phase of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4). The coming of the Holy Spirit is the fulfillment of God’s promises found in the Old Testament (Acts 2:17-21; cf. Isa. 44:3; Zech. 12:10; Ezek. 36:22-28). He is now working through the church and empowering it to reach the world for God. The disciples begin preaching to the Jews and then continue towards the Gentile world. According to Acts, they are all a part of God’s plan (Acts 2:29-33; 10:38-43; 14:3, 27; 15:4).

## STRUCTURE

The literary structure of Acts follows the basic missiological strategy of the church found in Acts 1:8 (cf. 15:15-18). First, the gospel is taken to Jerusalem (chs. 1–7), then to Samaria and Judea (chs. 8–9), and finally, to the ends of the earth (chs. 10–28) as it reaches across the Mediterranean all the way to Rome itself.

The structure of Acts can also be seen as functioning around the role of the Holy Spirit in the growth of the infant church. From the day that Jesus “through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles” (1:2), the Spirit appears as the counselor of the leaders and their associates. By the miracle of Pentecost, “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance” (2:4). A little later, the believers also were “filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness” (4:31). The seven individuals chosen to serve the church in Jerusalem were “full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom” (6:3), and one of the most prominent of their number, Stephen, was “full of faith and the Holy Spirit” (v. 5). As the narrative progresses, the Spirit continues to guide—in such situations as the ordination of Saul (9:17), in the acceptance of Gentiles into the church (10:44-47), in the selection of Barnabas and Saul for missionary work (13:2-4), in the Council of Jerusalem (15:28), and in Paul’s missionary journeys (16:6, 7). It is the Spirit that compels Paul to journey to Jerusalem (20:22; 21:11), and that guides his ministry in Rome (28:24-28).

When reading Acts, try to trace the actions of the Holy Spirit, who is very prominent in His role in equipping the church for its mission.

## OUTLINE:

- I. Introduction (1:1-11)
  - A. Luke's "Former Treatise," the Gospel (1:1)
  - B. The Gospel Commission (1:2-8).
  - C. Christ's Ascension (1:9-11)
- II. Growth of the Church in Jerusalem (1:12-7:60)
  - A. Waiting for the Power of the Spirit (1:12-26)
  - B. Power of the Spirit (2:1-47)
  - C. Healing of the Lame Man (3:1-4:31)
  - D. Early Christian Community (4:32-6:7)
  - E. Arrest and Death of Stephen (6:8-8:1a)
- III. Expansion in Palestine and Syria (8:1b-12:23)
  - A. Persecution Leads to Expansion (8:1b-4)
  - B. The Ministry of Philip (8:5-40)
  - C. A Gentile Accepts the Gospel (10:1-11:18)
  - D. The Gospel Takes Root in Antioch (11:19-30)
  - E. Herod Agrippa I Persecutes the Church (12:1-24)
- IV. Paul's First Missionary Journey (12:24-14:28)
  - A. Barnabas and Paul in Antioch (12:25-13:3)
  - B. The Gospel Goes to Cyprus (13:4-12)
  - C. The Gospel in Pisidian Antioch (13:13-52)
  - D. The Gospel in Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (14:1-28)
- V. Council of Jerusalem (15:1-35)
- VI. Paul's Second Missionary Journey (15:36-18:22)
  - A. Paul in Syria, Cilicia, Galatia and Troas (15:36-16:10)
  - B. Paul in Philippi (16:11-40)
  - C. Paul in Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens (17:1-34)
  - D. Paul in Corinth (18:1-22)
- VII. Paul's Third Missionary Journey (18:23-21:17)
  - A. Paul in Ephesus (18:23-19:41)
  - B. Paul in Macedonia and Greece (20:1-6)
  - C. Paul in Troas (20:7-16)
  - D. Paul in Miletus (20:17-38)
  - E. Paul's Journey to Jerusalem (21:1-17)
- VIII. Paul's Arrest and Trials (21:18-26:32)
  - A. Paul Witnesses before Jews (21:18-23:35)

- B. Paul Witnesses before Gentiles and a Jewish King (24:1–26:32)
- IX. Journey to Rome and Imprisonment (27:1–28:31)
  - A. Paul's Journey to Rome (27:1–28:16)
  - B. Paul's Witness in Rome (28:17–31)

### ARCHAEOLOGY

Historical and archaeological data from the first century AD have contributed towards the credibility of Acts. An excellent example of this is the titles mentioned in the book of Acts. For example, in Acts 17:6-9, Luke calls the authorities of Thessalonica *politarchoi*. This title is not used anywhere in classical literature, which lead scholars to question the account of Acts. However, inscriptions have been discovered in several Macedonian towns, including Thessalonica, confirming the title. One such inscription, dated to the first century, states: "in the time of the Politarchs..." Another example is the title of proconsul for Gallio in Acts 18:12 since historians believed procurators governed Achaia.

The Delphi inscription, dated to 52 AD, refers to Gallio as proconsul. This evidence confirmed the reference in Acts and provided historians with a vital marker to establish the chronology of the life of Paul. Other titles that have been verified by archaeology are the proconsul of Cyprus (13:7), the magistrates in Philippi (16:20–39), all the titles in 19:31, 35, and 38, the title "lord" for Festus (25:26), and the chief official of Malta (28:7). The familiarity and accuracy with which the author of Acts uses different titles for the various officials throughout the book is evidence of a firsthand account and the book's historical reliability. Such evidence strengthens the purpose of giving the reader certainty about the story of Jesus and the church (cf. Luke 1:4).