

# The Acts of the Apostles

## *The Inauguration of the Kingdom of God*

### I. Introduction and Overview

The importance of the book of Acts (sometimes referred to as “The Acts of the Apostles”) to the canon of Scripture cannot be overestimated or overstated. Without it, the biblical record would be incomplete and God’s revelation inadequate, for Acts provides a crucial link in the record of the chain of salvation history found nowhere else in the biblical text.

- In the broadest sense, this book brings together salvation-historical promise and fulfillment, revealing the nature and substance of the connection between the former, preparatory age and the new, eschatological age that has come in Christ.
- More narrowly, the book of Acts provides the necessary link between the four Gospels as introducing and heralding the “in-breaking” of the new age of the kingdom of heaven and the Epistles as presuming its established existence. Whereas the Gospel accounts focus on the life, ministry, passion, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ as ushering in the promised new creation, the epistles are directed at Christ’s Church as it exists in the context of that renewal and an established Christian presence in the world.

Between these two historical contexts lies a monumental transitional work of God through which the salvation that is “*of the Jews*” is made manifest and effectual to the nations as well as to Israel so as to produce the composite household of faith promised in the Old Testament scriptures – a truly catholic “*ekklesia*” comprised of an elect remnant gathered out of every tribe, tongue, nation, and people. The book of Acts provides the record and necessary interpretation of this transition period in salvation history.

Thus, Von Harnack, in his work, *The Origin of the New Testament*, goes so far as to assert that the book of Acts gives the New Testament its “organic structure.” Likewise, Donald Guthrie observes that the epistles are not “*fully intelligible until they are read against the background of the book of Acts.*” Indeed, it is no overstatement to say that, apart from the book of Acts, it is impossible to fully grasp the radical transition that occurred in the first century:

- a transition that saw the passing of the Old Covenant with its fulfillment in Messiah and the advent of the New Covenant in His blood. This, in turn, brought with it an entirely new understanding of the kingdom of God – an understanding consistent with what was actually promised by the Law, Prophets, and Writings (cf. Acts 1-2, 13:16-43, 19:1-10 with Mark 1:14-15; Mathew 5:17-20; Luke 5:17-39 and 17:20-21);
- a transition from a natural, prototypical covenant people defined by temporally-redeemed national Israel to an authentic spiritual household of faith consisting of a body of spiritually-redeemed individuals drawn from all the families of the earth (cf. Acts 1:1-8 with Matthew 28:19-20; Romans 9-11; Galatians 3:1-4:5, 6:13-16; Ephesians 2:11-3:10; Philippians 3:2-3; Revelation 5:1-10; etc.);

- a transition from the defining ethic of the Law of Moses to the Law of Christ – the ethic of “faith working through love” empowered by the principle of renewal and transformation bound up in the New Covenant (cf. Acts 15 with 1 Corinthians 9:19-21; Romans 13:8-10; 2 Corinthians 3:1-18; cf. also Galatians 5:6 with 6:15-16);
- a transition into the full revelation of the Church as the mystery of God and the true Israel of God comprised of all who are the recipients, by grace through faith, of the blessings promised to Abraham (cf. Acts 3:1-26, 7:1ff with Romans 4:1-25; also Galatians 3:6-29, 4:21-31; Ephesians 2:11-3:10).

## **A. Authorship and Date**

1. As with most of the books of the Bible, the book of Acts is anonymous. Nevertheless, one thing is certain, and that is that both Luke and Acts were written by the same person (cf. Luke 1:1-4 with Acts 1:1-2). Beyond the writer’s introductory statement, this is further evident in several things, including the literary styles of the two books, their content and narrative relationship, as well as their immediate purpose (an apologetic to a man named Theophilus). Indeed, the book of Acts is the sequel to the Gospel of Luke, so that the combined text can be properly referred to as *Luke-Acts*.
  - Some believe that the prologue to Luke’s gospel account was intended to serve as the prologue to Acts as well. If this contention is true, it suggests that it was Luke’s original intention to write two volumes by which to give Theophilus “*the exact truth about the things you have been taught*” (Luke 1:1-4). The first volume (the Gospel of Luke), then, comprises the things that Jesus “*began to do and teach,*” while the second (Acts) records the continuance of Christ’s deeds and teaching through the working of His Spirit in the lives and witness of His apostolic ambassadors.
  - The sequential continuity between the two accounts is further emphasized in the fact that the book of Acts begins by rehearsing the content that ends the Gospel of Luke (cf. Luke 24:44-52 with Acts 1:1-12). Acts picks up the narrative storyline where Luke leaves off.
2. Given this relationship between the two books and the widely accepted historical attribution of the Gospel of Luke to Luke, the Gentile physician and missionary companion to Paul (cf. Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 24), it follows that the same Luke also penned Acts. The internal witness of Acts reinforces this conclusion, most especially in two related particulars:
  - a. First, the writer of Acts repeatedly indicated by his use of the first personal pronoun “we” that he was present with Paul during much of his missionary endeavors (ref. 16:9-17, 20:1-16, 21:1-17, 27:1-28:16).
  - b. Second, among Paul’s close traveling companions, only Luke and Titus aren’t mentioned in the third person within the Acts account.

3. Because Luke and Acts were written as a sequential record by the same individual, the dating of the latter depends upon the dating of the former. Guthrie (*New Testament Introduction*) notes that three date timeframes have commonly been associated with Acts:

- a. The first has the book being written prior to A.D. 64 (the year of Rome's great fire). Arguments favoring this date include several important historical considerations. First of all, there is a complete absence of material associated with the historical period leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70. Given his meticulous attention to detail and the promise-fulfillment emphasis of his account, it seems impossible that Luke would have made no mention of the event that tangibly marked the end of Old Covenant Judaism.

Also absent from the book of Acts is any reference to Nero's horrific persecution of Christians beginning in A.D. 64. Because Acts addresses the Church's early history, it's hard to believe that Luke would have omitted this from his account. As well, Luke makes no mention of the martyrdom of James, Jesus' half-brother, in A.D. 62-63, though he played a prominent role in his record (ref. Acts 15).

Perhaps most compelling is the fact that Luke makes no mention of Paul's death circa A.D. 67, ending his account with Paul's first imprisonment at Rome (A.D. 61-63). Once again, it seems very unlikely that Luke would have been silent about Paul's death when he was such a close companion and his ministry is the focal point of the latter half of Acts. Indeed, Paul's imprisonment is Luke's closing topic; what could be better suited to noting his death if it had already occurred?

Other arguments for an early date include the primitive nature of the subject-matter and theology in Acts, the generally indifferent attitude of the civil authorities toward the Church (which changed under Nero), and the lack of reference to any of the epistles written by Paul, though the earliest of them probably was written before A.D. 50.

- b. A second proposed timeframe for the writing of Acts is A.D. 70-85, after the fall of Jerusalem. The most important reason for this dating is the conviction that Luke's gospel was composed subsequent to the Gospel of Mark and the destruction of the temple. Many scholars believe Mark to be the oldest of the four Gospels, dating it circa A.D. 55-65. More importantly to this view, the Jewish temple was destroyed by the Roman general Titus in A.D. 70, so the assumption of a post-temple writing of Acts necessarily places it after that date.
- c. The final proposed option is that the book of Acts was written in the early second century. This view was popularized in the late nineteenth century but has generally been rejected. One of the most well-known arguments for it is the claim that Luke drew some of his material from the Jewish historian Josephus.

In the end, Luke's authorship of Acts and the book's internal evidence strongly point to a date of composition no later than A.D. 63.

## B. Purpose

Despite some claims to the contrary, the book of Acts is composed as an historically accurate record. Given Luke's preamble in his gospel account (which he called his "first account"), there is no doubt that Luke fully intended to present an accurate, well-researched accounting of the events he recorded. Because the book of Acts constitutes the second half of that account, Luke would have brought to it the same investigative and documentary approach, thereby providing to Theophilus the balance of his accurate recounting "*of the things accomplished among us.*"

The book of Acts is constructed as historical narrative, yet it is preeminently theological and christological in that its central concern is salvation-historical: *The purpose for Luke's historical record is to substantiate his previous contention that all of salvation history bears witness to and finds its fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth and His redemptive work.*

1. Luke brought his first account to a close by emphasizing that all the Scriptures have realized their fulfillment in the person and work of Christ (Luke 24:13-32, 44-45).
  - a. The Old Testament scriptures are the record of God's promise of creational renewal/restoration and the elaboration and reinforcement of that promise through His work in salvation-history in preparation for the time of fulfillment.
  - b. Luke recognized that all of the Scripture promised and portrayed the new creational *kingdom of heaven* to be inaugurated through the Lord's messianic Servant, and knowing Jesus to be that Messiah, he took great pains to demonstrate it from numerous vantage points and thereby establish the fact and import of the in-breaking of the long-awaited kingdom (ref. Luke 1:5-17, 26-33, 39-55, 67-79, 2:1-11, 25-32, 36-38, 3:1-6, 15-17, 4:14-21; etc.).
2. Luke's gospel is his account of "*all that Jesus **began** to do and teach,*" and the book of Acts records the continuation of Christ's teaching and works, but now as they were being accomplished in His disciples through the leading and empowerment of His Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the leading figure in the book of Acts, not merely because He is Jesus' presence in the present form of the kingdom, but also because He is central to the promise of the kingdom; He is the One through whom creational renewal is effected.

Jesus would continue to speak and act subsequent to His ascension to the Father, but He would do so through those individuals being transformed into His likeness through His indwelling Spirit. Moreover, in accordance with the ancient Abrahamic promise of global blessing, Jesus' self-witness – now being manifested through Abraham's true offspring (Galatians 3:6-9, 29) – was to go into all the world (ref. Luke 24:44-49; Acts 1:8; cf. Matthew 28:18-20; John 15:26-27). Acts is the record of the beginning of that fulfillment.

Thus Luke's purpose in Acts perpetuates and presupposes his purpose in his gospel: In his "first account," Luke sought to show that the Scriptures have been fulfilled by the coming of the Redeemer-King. In Acts he carried that witness further, demonstrating that what was transpiring in the world following Christ's ascension is precisely what the Scriptures and Jesus promised.