Acts
Scripture: Acts
Code: MSB44

Title

As the second book Luke addressed to Theophilus (see Luke 1:3), Acts may originally have had no title. The Greek manuscripts title it “Acts,” and many add “of the Apostles.” The Greek word translated “Acts” (*praxeis*) was often used to describe the achievements of great men. Acts does feature the notable figures in the early years of the church, especially Peter (chaps. 1–12) and Paul (chaps. 13–28). But the book could more properly be called “The Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles,” since His sovereign, superintending work was far more significant than that of any man. It was the Spirit’s directing, controlling, and empowering ministry that strengthened the church and caused it to grow in numbers, spiritual power, and influence.

Author and Date

Since Luke’s gospel was the first book addressed to Theophilus (Luke 1:3), it is logical to conclude that Luke is also the author of Acts, although he is not named in either book. The writings of the early church Fathers such as Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, Eusebius, and Jerome affirm Luke’s authorship, and so does the Muratorian Canon (ca. A.D. 170). Because he is a relatively obscure figure, mentioned only 3 times in the NT (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11, Philem. 24), it is unlikely that anyone would have forged a work to make it appear to be Luke’s. A forger surely would have attributed his work to a more prominent person.

Luke was Paul’s close friend, traveling companion, and personal physician (Col. 4:14). He was a careful researcher (Luke 1:1–4) and an accurate historian, displaying an intimate knowledge of Roman laws and customs, as well as the geography of Palestine, Asia Minor, and Italy. In writing Acts, Luke drew on written sources (15:23–29; 23:26–30), and also no doubt interviewed key figures, such as Peter, John, and others in the Jerusalem church. Paul’s two-year imprisonment at Caesarea (24:27) gave Luke ample opportunity to interview Philip and his daughters (who were considered important sources of information on the early days of the church). Finally, Luke’s frequent use of the first person plural pronouns “we” and “us”(16:10–17; 20:5–21:18; 27:1–28:16) reveals that he was an eyewitness to many of the events recorded in Acts.

Some believe Luke wrote Acts after the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70; his death was probably in the mid-eighties). It is more likely, however, that he wrote much earlier, before the end of Paul’s first Roman

imprisonment (ca. A.D. 60–62). That date is the most natural explanation for the abrupt ending of Acts—which leaves Paul awaiting trial before Caesar. Surely Luke, who devoted more than half of Acts to Paul's ministry, would have given the outcome of that trial, and described Paul's subsequent ministry, second imprisonment (cf. 2 Tim. 4:11), and death, if those events had happened before he wrote Acts. Luke's silence about such notable events as the martyrdom of James, head of the Jerusalem church (A.D. 62 according to the Jewish historian Josephus), the persecution under Nero (A.D. 64), and the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) also suggests he wrote Acts before those events transpired.

Background and Setting

As Luke makes clear in the prologue to his gospel, he wrote to give Theophilus (and the others who would read his work) a "narrative of those things" (Luke 1:1) which Jesus had accomplished during His earthly ministry. Accordingly, Luke wrote in his gospel "an orderly account" (Luke 1:3) of those momentous events. Acts continues that record, noting what Jesus accomplished through the early church. Beginning with Jesus' ascension, through the birth of the church on the Day of Pentecost, to Paul's preaching at Rome, Acts chronicles the spread of the gospel and the growth of the church (cf. 1:15; 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 13:49; 16:5; 19:20). It also records the mounting opposition to the gospel (cf. 2:13; 4:1–22; 5:17–42; 6:9–8:4; 12:1–5; 13:6–12, 45–50; 14:2–6, 19, 20; 16:19–24; 17:5–9; 19:23–41; 21:27–36; 23:12–21; 28:24).

Theophilus, whose name means "lover of God," is unknown to history apart from his mention in Luke and Acts. Whether he was a believer whom Luke was instructing, or a pagan whom Luke sought to convert is not known. Luke's address of him as "most excellent Theophilus" (Luke 1:3) suggests he was a Roman official of some importance (cf. 24:3; 26:25).

Historical and Theological Themes

As the first work of church history ever penned, Acts records the initial response to the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19, 20). It provides information on the first 3 decades of the church's existence—material found nowhere else in the NT. Though not primarily a doctrinal work, Acts nonetheless emphasizes that Jesus of Nazareth was Israel's long-awaited Messiah, shows that the gospel is offered to all men (not merely the Jewish people), and stresses the work of the Holy Spirit (mentioned more than 50 times). Acts also makes frequent use of the OT: e.g., 2:17–21 (Joel 2:28–32); 2:25–28 (Ps. 16:8–11); 2:35 (Ps. 110:1); 4:11 (Ps. 118:22); 4:25, 26 (Ps. 2:1, 2); 7:49, 50 (Is. 66:1, 2); 8:32, 33 (Is. 53:7, 8); 28:26, 27 (Is. 6:9, 10).

Acts abounds with transitions: from the ministry of Jesus to that of the apostles; from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant; from Israel as God's witness nation to the church (composed of both Jews and Gentiles) as God's witness people. The book of Hebrews sets forth the theology of the

transition from the Old Covenant to the New; Acts depicts the New Covenant's practical outworking in the life of the church.

Interpretive Challenges

Because Acts is primarily a historical narrative, not a theological treatise like Romans or Hebrews, it contains relatively few interpretive challenges. Those that exist mainly concern the book's transitional nature (see Historical and Theological Themes) and involve the role of signs and wonders. Those issues are addressed in the notes to the relevant passages (e.g., 2:1–47; 15:1–29).

Outline

Prologue (1:1–8)

I. The Witness to Jerusalem (1:9–8:3)

A. The Anticipation of the Church (1:9–26)

B. The Founding of the Church (2:1–47)

C. The Growth of the Church (3:1–8:3)

1. Apostles: Preaching, healing, and enduring persecution (3:1–5:42)

2. Deacons: Praying, teaching, and enduring persecution (6:1–8:3)

II. The Witness to Judea and Samaria (8:4–12:25)

A. The Gospel to the Samaritans (8:4–25)

B. The Conversion of a Gentile (8:26–40)

C. The Conversion of Saul (9:1–31)

D. The Gospel to Judea (9:32–43)

E. The Gospel to the Gentiles (10:1–11:30)

F. The Persecution by Herod (12:1–25)

III. The Witness to the Ends of the Earth (13:1–28:31)

A. Paul’s First Missionary Journey (13:1–14:28)

B. The Jerusalem Council (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 Jerusalem and Caesarean Trials (21:17–26:32)

F. Paul’s Journey to Rome (27:1–28:31)

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