



Acts — Session 1

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What Kind of Book is This, and Why Did Luke Write It?

Luke-Acts is best understood as a **theological narrative**, or a history of Jesus and the early church that is designed to teach us something about God and his plan for the world.

Luke was likely influenced by two types of historical literature that were available to him: Hellenistic historiography and the Old Testament historical narratives.

1. The goal of a **Hellenistic historiography** was to inform people about what happened in a way that was engaging and entertaining (i.e. make it good reading) while also imparting some kind of moral lesson or perhaps a defense of an individual or group of people.
 2. The **Old Testament historical accounts** are divinely inspired histories that teach us about God (his character, his plan) and God's people (their motives, successes, failures).
- **Key Point:** We see the influence of both kinds of histories in Luke-Acts. It is highly informative, very engaging, imparts several important moral lessons, offers a defense of Paul and the church against the Roman charges of sedition, and it tells us a lot about God, his character and plan for the world, and the motivations and success of his chosen people.¹

¹ See *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stewart, chapter 6.

Luke States His Purpose in the Introduction to his Gospel:

“Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.”

- “Orderly account” speaks to the historical reliability and chronological accuracy of Luke-Acts
- “*So that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught*” demonstrates that Luke has skin in the game—he has a clear motive for writing this. He wants people to believe that what they have been taught about Jesus is true.

“What Acts seeks to do is to teach and persuade, even by the use of powerful examples, but to do so by showing, through the selective choice of events and summary, what originally took place on a grander scale. There is no doubt that Acts has a case to argue, as both the preface to the Gospel and Acts itself suggest. It seeks to give assurance, but this assurance is rooted, in part, in the essential character of the events Luke portrays.” Darrell Bock, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*.

Key Themes in Acts

1. The Rapid Spread of the Gospel, Despite the Opposition
2. Conversion and Salvation
3. Divine Intervention
4. Prayer
5. Community Life
6. How God Fulfilled His Promise to Abraham

1. The Rapid Spread of the Gospel Message, Despite Significant Opposition

- Geographically (from Jerusalem to Rome, see Acts 1:8)
- Demographically (Ethnic Jews, Jewish Converts, Samaritans, Gentiles)
- The Gospel spreads primarily through the personal witness of individual Christians.
- Opposition includes persecution from Jewish leaders, jail, natural disasters, infighting among the church, riots, etc.

“At the very end of Acts, Luke’s overriding conclusion is that nothing can hinder gospel proclamation (28:31).” -Scot McKnight, *The Story of God Bible Commentary*

“From chapter 1, where the Great Commission is recorded (1:8), right up to the end of the book, the great activity that dominates this book is evangelism.” -Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary*

“The key to understanding Acts seems to be in Luke’s interest in this movement of the gospel, orchestrated by the Holy Spirit, from its Jerusalem-based, Judaism oriented beginnings to its becoming a worldwide, Gentile predominant phenomenon. On the basis of structure and content alone, any statement of purpose that does not include the Gentile mission and the Holy Spirit’s role in that mission will surely have missed the point of the book.” Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*.

“Above all, Acts is about the expansion and triumph of the gospel as it penetrates the world from Jerusalem to Rome by means of God’s guidance and despite intense opposition.” Darrell Bock, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*

2. Conversion and Salvation

“If Luke-Acts has one central theme, it might be ‘salvation.’ Luke-Acts is the story of the ‘Saviour’, the story of ‘those who are being saved’, and traces how salvation extends from Israel to the ends of the earth. This salvation is multi-faceted. It includes deliverance from disaster, healing from physical afflictions, the removal of shame, status reversal, forgiveness of sins and justification, as well as receiving life, peace, mercy and grace. All this is accessed through faith and repentance, and is principally appropriated by allowing Jesus in ‘the way’... Luke [explains] how God’s purpose and plan for salvation works itself out from Israel through Jesus into the church and out to the world.” -N.T. Wright and Michael Bird, *The New Testament in its World*, p. 606-607

3. Divine Intervention by the Triune God

“God is the primary actor in the story of Acts... At every turn the spread of the good news about King Jesus is initiated by God and led by the Spirit.” -Scot McKnight, *The Story of God Bible Commentary*

“The key character in Acts is God, his activity, and his plan... At key junctures God enables, directs, protects, and orchestrates.” Darrell Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*

“Jesus’ statement of the Great Commission in Acts 1:8 is the key text in this book, highlighting the two main themes of Acts: the Holy Spirit and witness.” Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary*

A. The Nature of the Spirit:

- The Spirit is a **person** who can be lied to, tested, conspired against, and resisted (Acts 5:3, 9; 7:51)
- The Spirit has a **will** that can be known (Acts 15:28–“It seemed good to the Holy Spirit”)

B. The Giving of the Spirit:

- The Spirit is **given** to new believers (Acts 2:38; 8:15-17; 10:44-45, 47; 11:15; 15:8; 19:6)
- Disciples are **filled** with the Spirit (Acts 2:4; 4:8, 31; 6:3, 5; 7:55; 9:17; 11:24; 13:9, 52)
- The Spirit is **poured out** on the disciples (Acts 2:17, 18, 33; 10:45)

C. The Activity of the Spirit:

- The Spirit **actively intervenes** to direct the churches missionary efforts (Acts 8:29, 39; 10:19; 11:12; 13:2, 4; 16:6-7; 20:22)
- The Spirit gives **wisdom** (Acts 6:10)
- The Spirit **empowers** the church (Acts 1:8)
- The Spirit **encourages** believers (Acts 9:31)
- The Spirit **warns** disciples of future hardship (Acts 20:23)
- The Spirit **appoints leaders** to care for the church (Acts 20:28)
- Disciples **prophesy** through the Spirit (Acts 11:28; 21:11)
- Disciple **urge one another** through the Spirit (Acts 21:4)
- God **spoke** through the Holy Spirit (i.e. the Old Testament Scriptures, Acts 4:25; 28:25)

D. The Activity of Jesus / Angels / God

- Directs the disciples to stay and wait for the Spirit (Acts 1:5)
- Gives the disciples the roadmap for their missionary work (Acts 1:8)
- The Lord grants missionary success to the church (Acts 2:47; 11:21; 16:14)
- Jesus appears to Saul and calls him to repentance (Acts 9:5, plus the parallels when Paul retells his conversion story)
- Jesus (The Lord) appears to Ananias and tells him to meet Saul (Acts 9:11)
- The Lord appears to Peter and tells him to eat freely (Acts 10:4)
- The Lord appears to Paul to tell him to keep preaching (Acts 18:9; 23:11)
- An angel frees the apostles from jail (Acts 5:19)
- An angel frees Peter from jail (Acts 12:7-11)
- An angel killed King Herod for not giving glory to God (Acts 12:23)
- An angel directs Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26)
- An angel speaks to Cornelius (Acts 10:3, 4, 7, 22) and tells him to find Peter
- An angel appeared to Paul and told him not to be afraid of standing trial (Acts 27:23)

4 Prayer

“Fourteen of the first fifteen chapters of Acts (ch. 5 excepted) and many of the later chapters mention prayer; in Acts, as in Luke’s Gospel, prayer is a key theme.” Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary*

A. The Centrality of Prayer

- Constant prayer (Acts 1:14)
- About major decisions / during major transitions (Acts 1:24; 10:9; 11:5)
- Praying with the church family (Acts 2:42; 12:12; 13:3; 21:36; 21:5)
- The Apostles stayed focused on prayer and the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4)

B. What They Prayed About

- For boldness in preaching (Acts 4:29-31)
- Response to persecution (Acts 7:59; 16:25)
- For new believers (Acts 8:15)
- For God’s mercy on sinners (Acts 8:24)
- For miraculous healings (Acts 9:40; 28:8)
- For God to rescue / protection Christians (Acts 12:5; 27:29)
- Committing local leaders to the Lord (Acts 14:23)

C. Where Did They Pray?

- **Short answer: Everywhere!**
- Homes (Acts 1:12-14; 12:12; 9:40; 10:9; 28:8)
- The Temple (Acts 3:1; 22:17)
- In the Sanhedrin (Jewish court of elders, Acts 6:15 and 7:59)
- During their worship assembly (Acts 13:3)
- Outside the city, by a river (Acts 16:13)
- In prison (Acts 16:25)
- On the beach (Acts 21:5)
- On a ship (Acts 27:29)

5. Community Life

“Acts presents a vibrant community that was passionate about mission, with the members caring for each other, pursuing holiness, and dealing with matters that affected its unity. In the description of community we also see Luke’s characteristic concern for the poor.” -Ajith Fernando, *The NIV Application Commentary*

- **Summary statements of the church’s community life and success of the Gospel:**
 - Acts 2:42-47 Acts 4:32-37; 5:12-16; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20

6. How God Fulfills his Promise to Abraham From Genesis

“And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” -Genesis 12:3

- Luke Timothy Johnson believes that one of Luke’s primary reasons for writing Acts is to show that God has been faithful to his promise to Abraham.
- The thought process:
 - God made frequent and specific promises that the Israelites would be his people on earth.
 - In Acts, the Gospel seems to have been much more successful among Gentile audiences than Jewish ones.
 - If God has left Israel behind, so to speak, does that mean he reneged on his promised to them? If you read Acts after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, you might seriously question whether or not God was faithful to his Old Testament promises.
 - In response to this question about God’s character and faithfulness, Luke demonstrates that the Jewish people are the ones who broke up with God, rather than God breaking up with them. He continually emphasizes Paul’s efforts to preach the Gospel among the Jews, only to be rejected by them.
 - **The church—composed of Jews and Gentiles—is portrayed as the fulfillment of God’s promises and the continuation of God’s relationship with Israel.**
 - Acts 2 (the multinational day of Pentecost) is seen as the restoration of Israel and the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham.
- **The Key Point:** Gentile Christians who are coming to faith in Jesus can be confident in God’s promises to them because Luke is demonstrating that God was in fact faithful to his promises to Abraham.

A Few Reflections on Acts 1

- In Luke 1-2, the Holy Spirit is active in bringing about the birth of Christ; In Acts 1-2, the Holy Spirit is active in bringing about the birth of the church.
- In Luke, the Holy Spirit propels Jesus into his public ministry; in Acts, the Holy Spirit propels the disciples into their mission.

Jesus tells the disciples to “**wait for the gift**” (1:4) (Holy Spirit). The only thing more important than starting the mission was being properly equipped for it.

The disciples understood that Jesus was “**Lord**” (1:6), the Old Testament word for God.

Acts 1:8 is a preview of what will take place in Acts.

- The spread of the Gospel
- The Spirit empowering the church

“Why do you stand here?”

- Praxis — Action, activity, undertaking.

Constant Prayer — (1:14)

- Apostles plus the male and female disciples, around 120 total.
- Prayer of discernment regarding big decisions (1:23-26)

The Providence of God (1:16)

- Peter quotes the OT to say that Judas’ betrayal was a fulfillment of the Scriptures. *Everything* happens according to God’s plan, even the things that seem to directly oppose him.

