

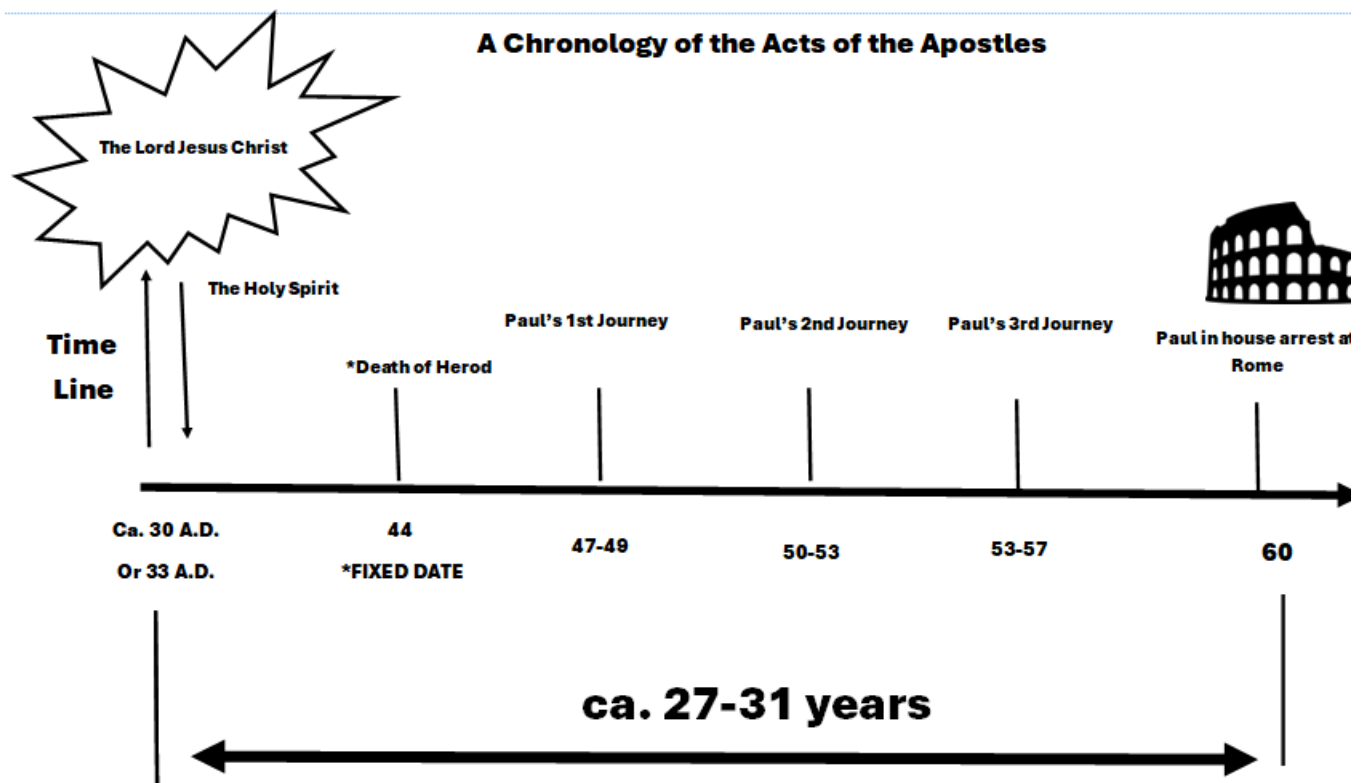
## THE CHRONOLOGY AND STRUCTURE OF THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

From a dispensational point of view, there is not a great deal of literature on the Acts of the Apostles. And even where literature does exist, the writers say little or nothing about its chronology and structure.

Structure is VERY IMPORTANT to our understanding of any book of the Bible. After all, structure indicates where and how the author (and in the Bible the Co-author is the Holy Spirit) is taking us. The structure of the early part of the Acts of the Apostles (Chapters 1-12) is not immediately apparent and the chronology is even more obscure. This part of our study is our effort to clear up some of these obscurities and clarify the movement of the text both in its chronology and logic.

### THE HISTORICAL STRUCTURE BY CHRONOLOGY

Historically, the Acts of the Apostles covers a period of over 30 years (from ca. A.D. 30-60) as pictured below:



Of the nine references in the Acts of the Apostles to secular rulers, we have fixed dates for two: 1. \_\_\_\_\_, the death of Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:20-23), and 2. \_\_\_\_\_, the first year of the two-year Proconsulship of Gallio in Achia (Acts 18:12). Working backward from A.D. 51 and utilizing statements made in the Acts of the Apostles and the Pauline Epistles (esp. Galatians 1 and 2), we can establish with relative certainty the date of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), that of Paul's First Missionary Journey (Acts 13 and 14), and even Paul's conversion to Christianity (Acts 9), which at the earliest occurred most likely in A.D. 35. Working forward, Paul must have reached Rome in A.D. 59 where he was under house arrest until A.D. 61. Luke ends his account before Paul's release.

Since Herod Agrippa I's death in A.D. 44 was recorded in Acts 12, obviously the events of the Acts of the Apostles happened within a space of 14 years (A.D. ca. 30-44). But anyone reading these chapters collectively can hardly envision any movement of time. In fact, one could read chapters 1-7 and easily perceive the events as happening within the space of 5 or 6 months! Not so: 14 years transpired between the ascension of our Lord (Acts 1) and the death of Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12)... 12 years if one dates the death and resurrection and ascension of our Lord as 33 A.D.

### GEOGRAPHICAL SURVEY

It goes without saying that Luke was a historian of great skill, and we know that historians think chronologically. But historians are not merely chroniclers. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Luke was not writing the day-to-day or even month-by-month account of the primitive Church. He had a much larger goal in mind. What was he doing?

A close examination of the Acts of the Apostles makes it clear that Luke under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit arranged his selected materials with an outline which is both chronological and geographical. The Lord Jesus Christ had already enunciated that His disciples would witness for Him and His Gospel beginning in Jerusalem and in ever widening circles to Judea and Samaria and even to the furthest reaches of the earth (Acts 1:8). And if we look at it closely the book of the Acts of the Apostles is arranged geographically in just such a manner. It traces the movement of the newborn Church from Jerusalem to Judea-Samaria, to Antioch of Syria, to Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), to Greece, and to the Imperial city of Rome at the heart of the vast Roman Empire.

Luke's very detailed accounts of the spread of the Gospel were highly selective (the day of Pentecost, the healing of the lame man, the addressing of the Sanhedrin, the death of Stephen, the conversion of Paul and then Cornelius, etc.) Nevertheless, he continually moved the historical narrative out and away from Jerusalem where the Church began.

We can detect at least 6 distinct stages or milestones in this movement:

- **Milestone One**-Witnessing about Christ in \_\_\_\_\_, Acts 1:1-6:7, ca. 30-35 A.D.

Summary/Transition, "Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith." (Acts 6:7, NKJV)

- **Milestone Two**-Witnessing about Christ in the \_\_\_\_\_, Acts 6:8-9:31, ca. 35-40 A.D.

Summary/Transition, "Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied." (Acts 9:31, NKJV)

- **Milestone Three**-Witnessing about Christ in \_\_\_\_\_, Acts 9:32-12:24, ca. 41-45 A.D.

Summary/Transition, "But the word of God grew and multiplied." (Acts 12:24, NKJV)

- **Milestone Four**-Witnessing about Christ in \_\_\_\_\_, Acts 12:25-16:5, ca. 46-50 A.D.

Summary/Transition, "So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily." (Acts 16:5, NKJV)

- **Milestone Five**-Witnessing about Christ in \_\_\_\_\_, Acts 16:6 -19:20, ca. 50-55 A.D.

Summary/Transition, "So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed." (Acts 19:20, NKJV)

- **Milestone Six**-Witnessing about Christ in \_\_\_\_\_, Acts 19:21-28:31, ca. 56:61 A.D.

Summary, “Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him.” (Acts 28:30–31, NKJV)

You will note that each “milestone” stage in this geographical spread of the Gospel is approximately 5 years in length. Obviously, not every event that occurred in each designation that is here displayed. For example, milestone 2 includes the arrest of Stephen (6:8-15), his address to the Council and subsequent death (7), the persecution led by Saul (8), and his conversion to Christianity (9). The point is that Stephen’s death led to Saul’s persecution, which in turn sent the believers into all Judea and Samaria, including Philip, preaching the Good News with Saul in hot pursuit only to be converted and then witnessing himself in Damascus. Clearly the geographical movement of the Gospel beyond Jerusalem to Judea-Samaria-the uttermost parts of the earth subtly undergirds the entire narrative.

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The Acts of the Apostles records historical segments from the first 3 decades of the apostolic witness to Christ. Luke’s narrative is a chronological and geographical structure that is not immediately apparent but is most instructive and necessary to understanding Luke’s methodology with the spread of the Gospel in Apostolic times.

As we seriously examine the structure and chronology of the Acts of the Apostles, we will gain a much greater appreciation for this very important transitional book.