

The Acts of the Apostles

01. Introduction and Acts 1:1-11



Luke (San Marco, Venice)

Christian Belief

Christian Living

Church

Creation

Education

Fundamentalism

God

Islam

Jesus

Liturgy

Mission

MSC

New Testament

Old Testament

Pope Francis

Prayer

Priesthood

Religious Life

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A u d i o C D ' s H o m i l i e s A r t i c l e s

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There are sections in the Acts where Luke introduces the word ‘we’, and since as early as the second century this has been understood as an indication that Luke himself was with Paul and witnessed the events which he chronicles (Irenaeus AH 3.14.1).

49AD Paul’s first journey into Europe

‘We’ in Acts 16:11 (from Troas to Philippi).



54AD During Paul's Stay in Ephesus.

Paul sends greetings from Luke who is named as among his
'fellow workers' (Philemon 1:24).

He sends greetings from 'Luke, the beloved
physician.' (Colossians 4:14)

57AD

Paul's journey to Jerusalem

After Paul's Letter to the Romans
composed in Corinth

Acts 20:6 (from Philippi to Troas)



Acts 21:1-15 (from Miletus to Jerusalem)



59-60 AD Acts 27:1-2; 28:16

‘When it was decided that **we** were to sail for Italy, they transferred Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan Cohort, named Julius. Embarking on a ship of Adramyttium that was about to set sail to the ports along the coast of Asia, **we** put to sea ... **we** came to Rome.’



Writing from Rome (67AD): 'Only Luke is with me' (2 Timothy 4:11).

The Muratorian Canon (c.180AD)

Irenaeus (c.180AD)

Clement of Alexandria (c.200AD)

Prologue to the Gospel (c.200AD)

Tertullian (c.200AD)

Eusebius (c. 340AD)

Jerome (492AD)

A Syrian, companion of Paul, historian, author of Gospel and Acts,
Celibate, Martyr.

The Muratorian Canon (c.180AD)

‘Luke was a physician. After the ascension of Christ, when Paul had taken him along with him as one devoted to letters, he wrote the Gospel under his own name from hearsay. For he himself had not seen the Lord in person.’

Irenaeus (c.180AD)

‘Luke, the companion of Paul, set forth in a book the gospel as preached by Paul.’ (Interpretive commentary)

Clement of Alexandria, writing c.200AD, speaks of Luke as the author of the Gospel and of Acts (Stromata 1.12 & 5.12).

Prologue to the Gospel, c.200AD

‘Luke was a Syrian of Antioch, by profession a physician, the disciple of the apostles, and later a follower of Paul, until his martyrdom. He served the Lord without distraction, without a wife and without children. He died at the age of eighty-four in Boeotia, full of the Holy Spirit.

Though gospels were already in existence, the Gospel according to Matthew composed in Judea, and the Gospel according to Mark in Italy, Luke was prompted by the Holy Spirit and composed this gospel entirely in the regions about Achaia [Greece] ... Later the same Luke wrote the Acts of the Apostles.’



After 200AD, the attribution of the Gospel and Acts to Luke is common. Three examples should suffice.

Tertullian, writing in the first decade of the third century, states that it was Paul who inspired Luke to write. He even speaks of Luke's Gospel as 'the Gospel of his teacher, Paul' (Against Marcion 4.5.3).

Eusebius in his *History of the Church* (3.4), composed c.340AD attributes the Gospel and Acts to Luke.

Jerome: *The Lives of Illustrious Men*, 7 (492AD)

‘Luke, a physician of Antioch, as his writings indicate, was not unskilled in the Greek language. An adherent of the apostle Paul, and companion of all his journeying, he wrote a Gospel ... He also wrote another excellent volume to which he prefixed the title Acts of the Apostles, a history which extends to the second year of Paul’s sojourn at Rome, that is to the fourth year of Nero, from which we learn that the book was composed in that same city.’

Luke the historian

‘The Book of Acts in the setting of Hellenistic History’
by Colin Hemer [Eisenbrauns, 1990].

Luke explicitly states that he is interested precisely in history. In introducing his two-part work, Luke writes (Luke 1:1-4):

‘Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the **events** that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were **eyewitnesses** and servants of the word, I too decided, after **investigating everything carefully** from the very first (or ‘from above’), to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.’

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concerning the things about which you have been instructed.

“Theophilus means ‘lover of God’ or ‘loved by God.’

All lovers of God may therefore believe that this was written to them, because Luke the Physician wrote so that they might find health for the soul here.” (Bede).

Today we have strict expectations of the style and method which we judge appropriate for historians. While we expect historians to be imaginative in the way they arrange their material, they should present the ‘facts’ without adornment.

But propaganda, prejudice, unsuspected assumptions!

The Greek historian **Polybius** (died c.122BC) in *The Histories* (12.4c)

- personal witness is best
- ‘inquire of as many people as possible, to believe those worthy of belief, and to be an adequate critic of the reports that reach him.’

Careful historians judged it easier to assess critically an oral statement face to face than to assess a written document. Hence Luke’s insistence on ‘eyewitnesses’.

Polybius is critical of a contemporary historian, Timaeus, who 'diligently pursued the reading of books, but was very remiss in his interrogation of living witnesses ... Personal inquiry is the most important part of history'(12.27). He is not impressed by those who 'after spending a long time in libraries and becoming deeply learned in memoirs and records, persuade themselves that they are adequately qualified for the task' (12.25e).

Flavius Josephus, writing in the first century AD, for all his tendency to exaggeration, insists that it is the duty of an historian to have an accurate knowledge of the facts 'either through having been in close touch with the events or by inquiry from those who knew them' (*Against Apion* 1.10.53).

The focus is on immediate contact with the facts rather than on critical study of written material. Historians then, as now, were quite aware of the propensity of people to put on record only what they wanted people to read and to select with this in mind. Careful historians judged it easier to assess critically an oral statement face to face than to assess a written document. Hence Luke's insistence on 'eyewitnesses'.

- Over 50% of Acts is speeches

Lucian of Samosata (died 180AD). In his *How to write History*,

‘If someone has to be brought in to give a speech, above all let the language suit the person and the subject ... It is then that you can exercise your rhetoric and show your eloquence’ (n.58).

- Everyone agrees that the speeches as presented are composed by Luke.
- He was expected to base his composition of speeches on careful investigation of what was actually said on the occasion.

Thucydides (died c.400BC) allows historians to compose speeches, but only after careful investigation and only with the aim of giving ‘the general sense of what was actually said’(*Histories* 1.22.1).

Polybius (died 122BC) (*The Histories* 12.25i):

‘If writers, after indicating to us the situation and the motives and inclinations of the people involved, report in the next place what was actually said, and then make clear to us the reasons why the speaker either succeeded or failed, we shall arrive at some true notions of the actual facts.’

In *Acts* Luke has Paul declare to the elders of Ephesus: ‘I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God’ (Acts 20:27), Luke is speaking for himself as well. The fact that his Gospel was treasured by the Christian community gives us confidence that Luke’s fellow Christians judged that he did express valid insights into the action of the Spirit in Jesus.

Luke is writing to record the facts. He is also a believer. The focus which he puts on events, the way he arranges his material, and especially the way in which he composes the speeches given in his narrative, are all intended to encourage faith in the reader.

However, it is important to repeat that Luke is a historian. He is interested in what really happened, and his rhetorical and dramatic account has only one object in mind: to indicate the significance of what the Risen Jesus was doing through his Spirit, active in the early church.

In keeping with biblical tradition, Luke looks at history at two levels.

There is the level of human cause and effect, which Luke does his best to record as accurately as his sources and investigation allowed.

There is also the mysterious level of divine will, and, as a historian seeking to discover and communicate the significance of events, it is this divine level which he seeks to underline.

Alone among the authors of the New Testament he speaks of ‘**God’s purpose**’(see Luke 7:30; Acts 2:23; 4:28; 13:36; 20:27).

God's purpose - What God is doing

- Jesus is the full revelation of this purpose
- Jesus' Spirit is active in history,
especially in inspiring the church.
- The Spirit is 'poured out even on the Gentiles' (Acts 10:45)
Mission 'to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8).
'All people will see God's salvation' (Luke 3:6).
- The apostolic church is carrying out the mission given to Israel:
Abraham is 'the father of many nations' (Genesis 17:14).

- Luke's perspective
- Welcomed as inspired
- Source of understanding of Paul
- Focus is action of the Spirit of risen Jesus continuing Jesus' mission of revealing God as a God of love who is constantly drawing people together, whatever their racial identity, into a community of love.

For Luke, as for Paul his mentor, there is a mysterious consistency in God's loving design. A careful reading of Acts shows that far from Israel being rejected, or being no longer relevant, it is the Christian community which carries on the mission entrusted to Israel by God. In the Christian community Jews and Gentiles are to live in different ways but in mutual respect and in loving harmony. It is not accidental that all the great missionaries featured in Acts are Jews who have seen God's design and whose fidelity to Judaism impelled them to become disciples of Jesus and to carry out his mission of love, so that Abraham would indeed be 'the father of many nations' (Genesis 17:4).

When Paul is not accepted in the synagogue, far from rejecting the Jews, he takes upon himself the mission which they are loathe to shoulder. He does so for them and on their behalf, impelled by the same Holy Spirit who inspired the prophets and whose promised salvation was fulfilled in Jesus and is now being fulfilled in the Church to which all Jews and all peoples are welcome, for, as Isaiah states: 'All flesh will see the salvation of God' (Isaiah 40:5, quoted Luke 3:6). Paul's letters are in complete agreement with Luke in this regard.

Date of composition

Many scholars date the Gospel after the destruction of Jerusalem (70AD) and opt for a date for the publication of Luke-Acts somewhere between 80-85AD. However, granted that Luke is interested in the relationship of the Christian community to both Judaism and the Roman empire, it is surprising that he makes no reference either to the Roman persecution under Nero (64AD) or the Roman-Jewish war and the destruction of Jerusalem (66-70AD). Furthermore, as a historian, he makes no attempt to reflect on the significance of these important events for the themes which he is developing.

It is possible that he simply wished to conclude his work with the gospel being proclaimed from the heart of the Roman Empire.

However, it is also possible that he composed his work before the deaths of Peter and Paul.

By 62AD, Luke's careful investigations have been going on for over four years. By then he was also in a position to have met Mark and to see Mark's Gospel as providing an excellent structure into which to introduce his own findings.

Acts of the Apostles is about God's self-revelation, and about God's purpose unfolding in history through the power of the Holy Spirit in the ministry of Jesus which continues in the lives of Jesus' disciples.

Luke features the apostles only in so far as they witness to Jesus. Through what the apostles do and say, Luke wants us to see that Jesus is alive and is continuing his liberating and saving mission in the world.

We are being invited to share in his life through welcoming the Holy Spirit who is Jesus' gift to us.

Throughout Acts Luke wants his readers to recognise that the church is apostolic, in that the witness of the apostles is foundational. What we believe must be consistent with their teaching. It is they who explain the significance of Pentecost (see Acts 2:14-36). It is they who appoint the seven (see Acts 6:6). It is they who recognise the authenticity of the experience of the Samaritans (see Acts 8:14-17). It is Peter and then the Jerusalem community who acknowledge the entrance of the first Gentiles (see Acts 11:18), and who acknowledge Paul and his mission (see Acts 15:19).

Like Stephen and following on from him, Luke sees Paul as a witness who continues the witness of the apostles, and with their blessing goes to the Gentiles. Because of this, though Paul is not one of the twelve who were with Jesus from the beginning (see Acts 1:22), he is recognised as an apostle (see Acts 14:6,14 and 22:21) who takes the word first to the Jews, but also to the Gentiles (see Acts 9:15; 22:14-15; 26:16).

Throughout Acts it is the Holy Spirit who is inspiring and empowering Jesus' disciples, demonstrating that Jesus is alive and is continuing his ministry through them. At times the action of the Spirit is demonstrated in spectacular manifestations (see Acts 2:4; 10:44-46; 13:2; 19:5-6; 21:7-11). We will watch the disciples doing the 'signs and wonders' that we saw Jesus doing in the Gospel. We will watch them speaking as Jesus spoke and suffering as Jesus suffered.

The Spirit of love who is the very being of God will enable them to share Jesus' own prayer-communion with his Father, and from within this communion Jesus will continue his mission in their actions and words. Jesus is absent physically, for he died and has been 'taken up into heaven' (Acts 1:1). He is present, however, through the Holy Spirit and through the word that is proclaimed by the apostles.

Acts is the story of Jesus' continued presence, enlightening, healing, liberating, saving, and drawing everyone into communion with him and with each other in sharing the very life of God, the life of the Holy Spirit.

The Exalted Jesus and the Gift of the Holy Spirit Acts 1:1 - 2:13

Acts 1:1-2

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving **instructions** through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

‘instructions’ (see Luke 24:47-49]

1. ‘Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.’
2. ‘You are witnesses of these things.’
3. ‘I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.’

Acts 1:3

After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

‘Many convincing proofs.’

Not at the tomb. Luke 24:1-12 Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and the other women with them saw ‘two men in dazzling clothes’ at the tomb, but ‘they did not find his body there’ (Luke 24:23). Some of the disciples went to the tomb but ‘did not see Jesus’ (Luke 24:24).

1. ‘On that same day’ two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-29).
‘They recognised him in the breaking of the bread’ (Luke 24:30-35).
2. ‘The Lord has risen. He has appeared to Simon’ (Luke 24:34).

3. Luke 24:36-49 At a meal with ‘the eleven and their companions.’

When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.
While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering,
he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?”
They gave him a piece of broiled fish,
and he took it and ate in their presence.



Luke 24:40-43

Peter in Acts 10:40-41

‘God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear,
not to all the people but to us who were chosen as witnesses,
and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.’

Luke wants to insist that they did not experience Jesus as some kind of ghost. They experienced the Jesus of Nazareth whom they knew so well, transformed and enjoying the fullness of life in God for which we all long.

4. Luke 24:50-51 At Bethany where he was ‘carried up to heaven.’

Acts 1:3

Appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

The 'forty days' mentioned here by Luke reminds us of the forty days during which Moses was in communion with God on Mount Sinai (see Exodus 24:18; 34:28), as well as the forty days of Elijah's journey to the mountain of God (1Kings 19:8).

'Jesus signified that by his hidden presence he would fulfil what he had promised – Behold, I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world' (Bede).

The focus of Jesus' teaching during his public ministry is the 'kingdom of God': the reign of God's love made possible through the gift of the Spirit (see Luke 4:43; 8:1; 9:11). He instructs his apostles to have the same focus (see Luke 9:2, 60; 10:9, 11).

Acts 1:4-5

While sharing a meal with the apostles [Luke 24:36-49], Jesus ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. ‘This,’ he said, ‘is what you have heard from me, for John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.’

God promised to pour out his Spirit on everyone (Acts 2:17). It is this Spirit who is poured out upon the apostles (Acts 2:33), the disciples (Acts 4:31), the Samaritans (Acts 8:17), Cornelius (Acts 10:44-47), and the disciples in Ephesus (Acts 19:6). The seven are chosen from among those who are full of the Spirit’ (Acts 6:3). Stephen is a man ‘full of the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 6:5; see 6:10; 7:55), as are Barnabas (Acts 11:2) and Paul (Acts 13:9). The Holy Spirit inspires Peter (Acts 4:8), the Antioch community (Acts 13:2), and the prophet Agabus (Acts 11:28; 21:11). He guides Paul (Acts 13:4; 16:6-7; 20:22-23).

Acts 1:6-8

So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’

He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority [see Mark 13:32].

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Paul in Acts 13:47

‘The Lord has commanded us, saying, ‘I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’”



Acts 1:9-11

When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. (see Acts 2:33)

[Elijah 2 Kings 2:1-14, concerning succession]

While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them [see Luke 24:4]. They said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’

Luke 24:50-53

‘Then Jesus led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.’

There was an expectation, reinforced by the resurrection of Jesus, that a new creation was being born, in which God's will would be done, in which God would reign in the world, and in which people would see Jesus as God's answer to the promises given to Israel.

We will see Jesus, but it will be 'in the same way'; that is to say, in a 'cloud'. Wherever we witness the mysterious activity of God acting in our lives, there we are seeing Jesus. Jesus continues to walk the earth, no longer as he did prior to his death , but now in a hidden way, as the 'Son of Man', continuing to take the side of the oppressed, continuing to heal, to love, and to combat evil through the life and ministry of his disciples. *Acts* is the story of the activity of the glorified Jesus in the world through the gift of his Holy Spirit , living in and acting through Jesus' disciples.