

Introduction and Ascension

Acts Chapter 1

Introduction

Luke, the author of the Book of Acts, was Paul's travelling companion and biographer (Acts 16 v 10 to 12; 2 Timothy 4 v 11; Philemon 1 v 23, 24). Paul called him "the beloved physician" (Colossians 4 v 14); since Luke was a doctor, he was a man of science and research, and this is reflected in both his history of the life of Jesus (Luke's Gospel), and his account of the birth and early life of the Church (Acts).

Acts, which spans the period between approx. 32 and 62 AD, is set against the following background: (i) the Roman Empire: the *Pax Romana* (good roads and shipping routes, no pirates, no passports) – geopolitical environment (see map overleaf); (ii) Greeks: universal culture, language and thought – intellectual environment; (iii) Palestine Jews: Sadducees, Pharisees, priests and devout Jews – religious environment; and (iv) Diaspora Jews: mercenaries, deportees – up to 1 million visitors gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost.

The title 'Acts of the Apostles' is a misnomer, as there are only two apostles that feature prominently – the first 12 chapters feature Peter, while Chapters 13 to 28 feature Paul. A better name might be the 'Acts of Jesus of Nazareth' (verse 1), or the 'Acts of the Holy Spirit'.

Acts is a fragmentary and incomplete book: for example, the churches in Galilee and Samaria are briefly mentioned (Acts 9 v 31), and the establishment of the church in Egypt during this time is not mentioned at all. However, the Book of Acts ushers in the Church, the 'ecclesia' ('called-out ones'), and the ministry of the Church is still continuing...

The promise of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1 v 1 to 5)

As in his Gospel (Luke 1 v 3), Luke addresses this book to a man named Theophilus, but it was also written with a wider audience in mind. By his title used in the Gospel ("most excellent"), we understand that Theophilus was probably a Roman government official, possibly the Governor of a province. Theophilus means 'lover of God', and this may have been his nickname. Luke has an agenda, and one speculation is that both Luke's Gospel and the Book of Acts may have been submitted as legal 'trial documents' in support of Paul's appeal to Rome, or even his 'defence brief' for his trial before Caesar.

- What did Jesus tell the apostles to do, and why?

"He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs" (v 3) – Jesus established the fact of his resurrection with 'infallible proofs' during the forty days after his resurrection but before his ascension. He left no possible doubt that he was resurrected, exactly as he had promised. In 1 Corinthians 15 v 6 Paul describes one of these proofs: Jesus "appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep."

"He ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father... 'you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit'" (v 4, 5) – this shows how the Trinity, One God in Three Persons, is woven into the fabric of the New Testament. Jesus told of the 'promise of the Father', which is the coming of the Holy Spirit. The idea of being 'baptized' is to be immersed or covered in something; as John baptized people in water, so these disciples would be immersed in the Holy Spirit. It may be more useful to describe the baptism of the Holy Spirit as a *condition*, rather than an *experience*. We should perhaps ask, 'Are you baptized in the Holy Spirit?' instead of, 'Have you been baptized with the Holy Spirit?'

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Jesus is taken up into Heaven (Acts 1 v 6 to 11)

- Will Jesus ever restore the kingdom to Israel (v 6)? See Romans 11 v 25, 26a.
- What did Jesus teach the apostles about their future work? What does it mean to “be my witnesses” (v 8)? Do you think it means door-knocking and asking strangers whether or not they are ‘saved’? Note Jerusalem and Judea – Acts 1 to 7; Samaria – Acts 8 to 12; ends of the earth – Acts 13 onwards...
- How will Jesus come back (v 11)? See Zechariah 14 v 4, 5.

““Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”” (v 6) – this was a question asked many times before, but it had a special relevance now. The apostles knew that Jesus had instituted the New Covenant (Luke 22 v 20). They also knew that the restoration of the kingdom to Israel was part of the New Covenant (Jeremiah 23 v 1 to 8; Ezekiel 36 v 22 to 30; Ezekiel 37 v 21 to 28), so it was reasonable for them to wonder when the rest of the New Covenant would be fulfilled. Jesus’ response (v 7, 8) indicates that he did not rebuke them: he simply told them that the answer was not for them to know.

““You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses...”” (v 8) – if the national kingdom the apostles wanted would be delayed, the power they needed would not. They would soon receive power with the coming of the Holy Spirit. The result of receiving this promised power would be that they would become Jesus’ witnesses, all over the world. This was not a command; it was a simple statement of fact: the words “will be” are in the indicative, not the imperative. Jesus did not command, or recommend, that they become witnesses; he said that they “will be my witnesses”. If we want to be witnesses, we need to be filled with the Holy Spirit. The best training program for evangelism is of little effectiveness without the filling of the Holy Spirit.

“He was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight” (v 9) – Jesus was taken up from them as he blessed them (Luke 24 v 50, 51). The cloud that received him is suggestive of the cloud of glory (called the Shekinah) that is associated with the presence of God in the Old and New Testaments. It was important for Jesus to leave his disciples in this manner. Jesus wanted his followers to know that he was ‘gone for good’, as opposed to the way he appeared and reappeared during the 40 days after his resurrection. Remember Jesus’ words to his disciples in John 16 v 7: ““It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.”” Now the disciples could know that that promise would be fulfilled. The Holy Spirit was coming because Jesus promised to send the Spirit when he left.

““Why do you stand looking into heaven?”” (v 11) – the two men (angels?) reminded the disciples that Jesus was coming back, and therefore they should obey Jesus’ command to return to Jerusalem, wait for the promise of the Holy Spirit, and preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth. ““This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”” These words remind us that “this Jesus”, who ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father, is the same Jesus of the Gospels; the same Jesus of love, grace, goodness, wisdom, and care...

Mattias chosen to replace Judas (Acts 1 v 12 to 26)

- After the ascension the apostles returned to Jerusalem. What did they do? Who joined them?

The death of Judas – Zechariah 11 v 12, 13 notes the betrayal for 30 pieces of silver, and that the money would end up in the hands of a potter. The field was called ‘Akeldama’ (Field of Blood) for two reasons: firstly because it was bought with blood money; and secondly because that is where Judas hung himself.

- In casting lots and choosing Matthias, do you think Peter and the apostles made a mistake? (Scholars disagree!) Who might have been the twelfth apostle that God had chosen and appointed? See Romans 11 v 13 and 1 Corinthians 15 v 7 to 9; see also Revelation 21 v 14.

Prayer – Lord, thank you for the Book of Acts. Help us to learn from the apostles, help us to pray and to be your witnesses in the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.



Extent of Pax Romana in the First Century A; Source: Lawrence, P (2006), *The Lion Atlas of Bible History*, Lion Hudson Plc