

THE BOOK OF ACTS

ORIENTING DATA FOR ACTS

- Content: part 2 of Luke's account of the good news about Jesus; how by the power of the Spirit the good news spread from Jerusalem to Rome
- Author: see the Gospel according to Luke
- Date: see Luke
- Recipients: see Luke
- Emphases: the good news of God's salvation through Jesus is for Jew and Gentile alike, thus fulfilling Old Testament expectations; the Holy Spirit guides the church in spreading the good news; the church has the good sense to side with God regarding his salvation and the inclusion of the Gentiles; salvation for all is God's thing and nothing can hinder it; the good news is accepted in joy by some and rejected in anger by others

OVERVIEW OF ACTS

In writing his larger account of the good news about Jesus, Luke has shaped the two parts to correspond in some significant ways. In Acts, for example, the geography is now reversed; it starts in Jerusalem and then branches out to other parts of Judea (chs. 1–12); its large central section is another travel narrative, as Paul takes the gospel from Antioch to Europe (chs. 13–20); the final third (chs. 21–28) portrays Paul's trials before the same three tribunals as Jesus (the Jewish Sanhedrin [Luke 22:66–71/Acts 22:30–23:10]; the Roman procurator [Luke 23:1–5, 13–25/Acts 24:1–27]; and one of the Herods [Luke 23:6–12/Acts 25:23–26:32])—which in Paul's case results in his getting the gospel to the heart of the empire (Rome).

The key to your reading of Acts is to recognize the “movement” of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, narrated in six parts (panels) and signaled by Luke's little summary statements in 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; and 19:20. In each case the narrative seems to pause for a moment before it takes off in a new direction—sometimes geographically, sometimes ethnically, and sometimes both. The good news that is being spread, of course, is God's salvation (the forgiveness of sins) offered to all people (Jew and Gentile alike) through the death and resurrection of Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Here at last the promise to Abraham (Gen 12:2–3; see Acts 3:25), expressed repeatedly by the prophets as part of their hope for the future—that Gentiles would join Israel as the people of God (e.g., Isa 2:1–5; Mic 4:1–5; Zech 14:16–18)—had found its fulfillment.

The first panel (1:1–6:7) tells the story of the spread of the good news about Jesus in Jerusalem by the apostles. The second (6:8–9:31) marks the first geographical expansion to neighboring Judea and Samaria (see 1:8), where Stephen and the Hellenists play the major role. The third (9:32–12:24) narrates the first expansion to the Gentiles (Cornelius) and the

conversion of the key figure (Paul) in what is to be its still greater expansion. With Paul now the central figure, the fourth panel (12:25–16:5) narrates the expansion to Gentiles in Asia, and how the early leaders dealt with the “problem” of Gentile inclusion “law-free.” The fifth (16:6–19:20) marks the jump of the gospel from Asia to Europe; the church is also now steadily more Gentile than Jewish. The sixth (19:21–28:31) tells how Paul (the apostle to the Gentiles) finally got to Rome (the capital of the Gentile world) with the good news—but he did so, Luke reminds us, by way of Jerusalem through a series of trials very much like those of Jesus.

SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING ACTS

The story in part 2 is still about Jesus, as the brief prologue (1:1–2) reminds us. The first part was about what “Jesus *began* to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven” (emphasis added). With some carefully chosen connections to part 1, Acts begins by picking up the prophecy from Luke 3:16 by John the Baptist about the coming Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5). The disciples are promised the “power” of the Holy Spirit (cf. Luke 24:49, “clothed with power from on high”) so as to bear witness to Jesus. Luke then narrates the ascension (cf. Luke 24:51) in the context of Jesus’ promised return; the clear implication is that through the Spirit they are to carry on the story until he comes (cf. the parable in Luke 19:11–27).

How Luke does this is the genius of Acts. First, note the large number of speeches that Luke records throughout the narrative (e.g., Peter in 2:14–39; 3:11–26; 10:27–43; Stephen in 7:1–53; Paul in 13:16–47; 17:22–31; 20:17–35). These tend to appear at key points and illustrate how the gospel is preached (or defended) in a variety of settings. In each case the speech either includes the essence of the story of Jesus or focuses on him at the end. Thus Jesus’ story continues in Acts as the early believers bear witness to him.

Second, note (1) the connection between Jesus Christ and the Spirit and (2) that the Spirit is ultimately responsible for every major turning point in the narrative. How Luke connects Jesus and the Spirit is especially important. You will remember from reading Luke that the Spirit is the key to Jesus’ earthly ministry (cf. Acts 10:38). Now “exalted to the right hand of God, he has *received* from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and *has poured out* what you now see and hear” (Acts 2:33, emphasis added). Christ, the great bearer of the Spirit, is also the great “baptizer” in the Spirit so that others will receive the Spirit and thus bear witness to Christ. It is therefore not surprising that at every turn, the Spirit is the driving force behind the forward movement of the gospel.

Third, because the gospel is God’s thing, initiated by him and expressing his faithfulness to Israel through Christ, and carried out by the power of the Spirit, Luke also regularly reminds us that nothing can hinder it—not the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem (chs. 3–5; “you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God,” 5:39); not unbelieving Jews, like Saul of Tarsus, bent on destruction (8:1–3); not the church in Jerusalem (11:1–18; “who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?” Peter asks, v. 17); not secular leaders, like Herod (12:1–24, “Herod ... was eaten by worms and died. But the word of God continued to increase and spread” [!], vv. 23–24); not Judaizers within the church (15:1–35; “why do you try to test God?” v. 10); not religious or secular opposition from Greeks (16:16–40; 19:23–41); not shipwrecks or snakes (chs. 27–28). With the coming of Jesus and the Spirit, the time of God’s favor has come. The gospel is God’s activity in history; salvation is for all people, Jew and

Gentile alike, and nothing can hinder it. And so the book concludes with Paul preaching in Rome with all boldness and without hindrance (28:31).

You will remember about Luke's Gospel that the universal nature of salvation was expressed in a *vertical* way to include the poor of every imaginable kind. In Acts Luke has concentrated *horizontally* on the Gentile mission—those ultimately marginalized by Israel. But throughout the narrative the restoration of Israel (Acts 1:6) is also always kept in view. The gospel begins as good news to Israel, “heirs of the prophets and of the covenant” (3:25), so that thousands turn to Christ from the start. As it moves outward, carried by Hellenistic Jews, it embraces fallen Jews (the Samaritans, 8:4–25) and a Jewish proselyte (8:26–40). The first Gentile convert is a “God-fearer” (10:2), and wherever Paul goes, he always begins in the synagogue, where some believe. And at the end, in Rome, he still pleads with Israel to believe in Jesus (28:17–28), but they refuse, so “God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!” (v. 28).

That leads us to remind you of the other side of Simeon’s prophecy (Luke 2:34–35)—that Jesus will be a “sign that will be spoken against.” You will want to note as the narrative progresses that the church becomes more and more composed of Gentiles, while Diaspora Jews and the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem lead the opposition. This obviously saddens Luke, but it also is part of the reminder to his implied (Gentile) readers that they belong to the Israel that God is reconstituting through Christ and the Spirit.

Finally, you will want to watch for the sudden insertion of “we” in the narrative at 16:10 (in Troas), which goes on until verse 17 (in Philippi), is picked up again at 20:5 (again in Troas), and continues through 21:19 (in Jerusalem) and again at 27:1 through 28:16 (from Caesarea to Rome). Two things are noteworthy about this phenomenon: (1) The author presents himself without fanfare as a sometime traveling companion of Paul, and (2) in these passages the details are far more abundant and vivid, suggesting that he may be using something like a diary.

A word about its placement in the canon. Luke understands his Gospel and Acts to be two parts of one story. It ended up in two books of about equal length (rather than one long book) because each would fit on one papyrus scroll. But in putting together the New Testament canon, the early church separated Luke from Acts (since both would have existed on separate scrolls, even when copied) through inspired insight. In the canon Luke now belongs to the fourfold Gospel, while Acts serves as a bridge between the Gospels and Paul. But in reading Acts, you need always to remember how it fits into Luke’s inspired plan.¹

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 296–299.