



Acts

The Acts of the Apostles tells the story of Jesus' disciples from their time in Jerusalem, just after Jesus' ascension, to Paul's eventual arrival in Rome. Roughly the first half of the book concentrates on what happened to Jesus' first disciples and how, inspired by the Holy Spirit, they began to share the good news, first in Jerusalem and then further afield. The second half of the book picks up the story of the apostle Paul (whom we meet first at his conversion on the road to Damascus in chapter 9) who spreads the good news to the Gentiles in Asia Minor (what we now call Turkey), then Greece and finally Italy.



How long will it take?

Reading time: 2¼ hours
Short of time? Just read 1.1-2.47; 5.1-8.3; 9.1-31; 27.1-28.31



Genre

History



Anything tricky?

There are a few gory bits (the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira in chapter 5 and King Herod Agrippa in chapter 12). Otherwise there is not much that is tricky, probably the hardest thing is keeping a track of the places Paul and the other disciples visited. It can help to read Acts with a map of the Roman world in the first century to hand so you can plot where the different places are.



Inspiring quotes

"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."

(Acts 1.8)

¹⁹ "Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, ²⁰ so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord."

(Acts 3.19-20a)

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

(Acts 10.34-35)



About the Author

The opening few verses of Acts (1.1-2) indicate that this book is the second book to an earlier one. Since Theophilus is also mentioned in Luke, it is probable that the same author wrote Acts as wrote the Gospel of Luke.

It is worth noting that these two books were probably always separate as they both contain an account of Jesus' ascension into heaven (the question is which one was written first – Luke or Acts?).

What do we know about him?

Traditionally it was widely believed that Luke, the author of the third Gospel and the Acts of the

Apostles, was a physician and a companion of Paul (mentioned in Philemon 1.24, Colossians 4.14 and 2 Timothy 4.11). Tradition identifies his birthplace as Antioch but the place where he lived, when not travelling with Paul, as Troas.

There is much discussion about whether Luke was a Gentile or not. He certainly knew, and was able to quote from, the Jewish scriptures. This might suggest that he was a God-fearer.

From his writings we can tell that he was a keen historian and laid out both the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles in a style reminiscent of historical accounts of his day.



About the times

Many scholars would date Acts to a similar time to Luke's Gospel so around the ad 80s.

What were people feeling?

Just as in Luke, there is very little in Acts to indicate how the first recipients might have been feeling at the time.



What kind of Book is it?

Like a lot of the Old Testament history books, this is a history book which falls into the category of what you might call theological history – history with a purpose. It is not telling the events solely so that you can know what happened but so that you can understand why they happened. Many of the historical books of the Bible are like this.



How is it structured?

- 1.1-8.40 The early community gathered in Jerusalem and the start of the spread of the good news (to Samaria).
- 9.1-15.35 The good new starts to spread and the Christian community gathers in Jerusalem to discuss whether Gentiles should be asked to become Jews.
- 15.36-20.37 Paul travels further afield into Asia Minor and Greece.
- 21.1-28.31 Despite the danger, Paul returns to Jerusalem, is arrested and sent to Rome.



Look out for...

One of the interesting strands that runs through Acts is the intersection of baptism and the Holy Spirit. Sometimes the Holy Spirit falls on people first, and then they are baptized (chapter 10); sometimes people are baptized in the name of Jesus and then receive the Holy Spirit (chapter 19). Keep an eye open for these twin themes (of baptism and the Holy Spirit) and see what you think about how they are connected.

Another huge theme is the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. Again reflect as you read about what you think about the disagreement between Paul, Peter and James.

Acts is known for the long speeches given by various people along the way, read these carefully and ask yourself why you think Luke uses so many of them. What do they add to the story?



What could this mean for me?

One of the key features of Acts is the strength of community among the early Christians, eating together, sharing every (or most!) things together, reflect on how this compares to your local Christian community and ask whether we should even aim for this level of community today.



Discussion group questions

- Were there any parts of the book that you particularly liked or which inspired you?
- Were there any parts of the book that you disliked or which troubled you?
- What did *you* think the book was about?
- Discuss the theme of community in Acts (see What could this mean for me? above), what do you think – is it possible or desirable to aim for the closeness of community that we see in Acts?
- Acts is only a few chapters in before conflict breaks out among the Christian community. Discuss conflict in the church then and now, is there anything we can learn from how they dealt with conflict.
- Acts ends rather abruptly. Talk about it – why do you think it ends like this? Did you think it was effective or disappointing?
- Did you read anything in the book that touched you, expanded your faith or made you think more deeply about your life and how you live it?



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