

The Purpose of the Book of Acts

Introduction

The book of Acts forms a bridge between the Gospels and Paul's epistles. Almost every commentator on Acts maintains its purpose is to tell the story of the birth and growth of the church. While the birth of the church is found in Acts (though not in the way most think) Luke's purpose was far different. The goal of this study is to examine the text and its structure and reveal why Luke wrote Acts.

Acts: A Continuation

Acts continues the message begun by John the Baptist, Jesus, and His twelve apostles in the gospels. Luke, the physician, is its author—the same man who wrote the gospel by his name. Acts is, therefore, volume two of Luke's history.¹

The gospels announced the King of Israel, the Messiah, had arrived. For centuries, the Jewish prophets had proclaimed a Messiah-King would come to establish an earthly kingdom in which He would rule. For 400 years, since Malachi, God suspended the office of prophet and provided no prophecy to the nation. Increasingly over the centuries, the Jewish people yearned for a King to establish the kingdom in which they would no longer be under the heel of Gentile rule. In this kingdom, according to prophecy, Israel would be preeminent among the nations of the earth (Deuteronomy 28.1, 13) and a nation of priests (Exodus 19.5-6). The King would reign, not only over Israel, but over the whole earth (Zechariah 14.9) and the principal characteristics of the kingdom would be peace and righteousness (e.g., Isaiah 2.1-11, 11.1-10). With the birth of John the Baptist, God reestablished the prophetic office and prophecy began to be proclaimed again.

Luke's gospel disclosed the conversation between the angel and Mary, the soon to be mother of the Messiah. The angel revealed the long-awaited Messiah had come and that He would occupy the throne of David to serve as Israel's king. Luke wrote:

²⁶ Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And coming in, he said to her, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ But she was very perplexed at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this was. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; ³³ and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end." ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ The angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God. ³⁶ And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ And Mary said, "Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her (Luke 1.26-38).

Mary's response to the angel's pronouncement indicated that while puzzled about how she was going to become pregnant, she

understood the message about His rule (Luke 1.46-55). Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist, also had an encounter with an angel. His words indicated he too understood what was taking place (Luke 1.67-80). Mary and Zachariah were not unusual. Every Jew knew these prophecies. Other evidence that demonstrated that the prophetic activity had resumed were Simeon's experience in the Temple (Luke 2.25-35) and what happened to the prophetess, Anna (Luke 2.36-38).

John the Baptist's public ministry was a message of repentance and water baptism. This fit with God's intended purpose for Israel to become a kingdom of priests since the first thing the Levitical priests did to prepare for priestly service was wash (Exodus 29.4). John's message was to prepare the people for the kingdom proclaimed by the angels to Mary, Zechariah, Simeon, and Anna (Matthew 3.1-3). Jesus proclaimed the same message as He began His public ministry (Matthew 4.12-17, 9.35).

The Twelve in the Kingdom

Following Jesus' response to the rich young ruler and his stunning comment to the Twelve that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God, the disciples asked Him, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus responded, "With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." Peter, characteristically, pressed Jesus for additional information. Matthew wrote:

²⁷ Then Peter said to Him, "Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?" ²⁸ And Jesus said to them, "Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹ And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, will receive

many times as much, and will inherit eternal life. ³⁰ But many who are first will be last; and the last, first (Matthew 19.27-30).

Jesus' words were something they could latch onto. This was pay dirt. Do not think these men ever forgot His response. It penetrated deep into their souls. This is evident from their question to Him after His resurrection. Luke wrote:

⁶ So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority; ⁸ but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1.6-8).

Foremost in the apostle's minds after Jesus rose from the dead was the kingdom. And why not? John the Baptist, Jesus, and the Twelve had proclaimed it was "at hand" for three years. Had not the Lord promised they would reign as kings over the twelve tribes of Israel? Would you have forgotten such a promise? But to their dismay, the Lord deflected their question and would not reveal the timetable of the kingdom. Instead, the Lord told them they were to await the coming of the Holy Spirit and be His witnesses.² While the Lord refused to provide a clear answer their question, the disciples continued to operate on the basis that the kingdom was right around the corner. As such, their first order of business was to fill the vacancy of Judas' position. Since the kingdom required Twelve apostles to judge the twelve tribes the empty slot had to be filled immediately (Acts 1.15-26).

Peter's Sermons

Acts began in great hope. The nation had committed a terrible sin in crucifying their Messiah-King. But He had arisen! Hope remained alive. The Jewish nation could still repent and have the King and His kingdom. Peter understood this clearly. He addressed the Jewish people in Jerusalem on Pentecost (Acts 2.5, 14, 22, 29, 36) to offer them, once again, the King and the kingdom. Before examining Peter's sermon, we must note an important fact: Peter addressed Jews only, no Gentiles. His message was exclusive to Israel. He ended his message with these words:

Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2.36).

What was their response?

Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do” (Acts 2.37)?

Peter responded:

Peter said to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2.38).”

Sometimes it is as important to recognize what the Bible does *not* say as it is to note what it does say. Notice what Peter did *not* say. Peter did not tell these Jews that Christ had died for their sins and rose from the dead and if that they believed this they would be saved. On the contrary, he continued to preach the message of repentance proclaimed by John the Baptist and Jesus. The Greek text reads:

Πέτρος δὲ πρὸς αὐτούς, Μετανοήσατε, καὶ βαπτισθήτω ἕκαστος

ὕμῶν ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς ἄφεσιν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ὑμῶν, καὶ λήμψεσθε τὴν δωρεὰν τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος.

A better translation is,

“Peter said to them, ‘Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’”

Peter declared that to receive forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit required: 1) repentance and 2) water baptism. Both repentance and water baptism were required for salvation under the kingdom ministry begun by John the Baptist (cf. the words of Jesus, Mark 16.16; John 3.5 with Matthew 3.1-6). Another thing to note is that Peter appealed to both the individual Jew and the Jewish nation. Hence, while an individual Jew could be saved by repentance and baptism, for the King and the kingdom to come required national repentance. In other words, every single Jew (ἕκαστος ὑμῶν) had to obey his words.

The Structure of Acts

When God wants to emphasize something, He repeats it. Several repetitions in Acts provide us with keys to Luke’s purpose in writing. Acts contains the following sets of threes and may be outlined in the following manner:

Repetition	Passage	Result
Three Rejections of the King by the Jews Under the Twelve’s Ministry ³	Acts 4.5-31	Threat (Sanhedrin)
	Acts 5.12-42	Imprisonment (Sanhedrin)
	Acts 7.1-60	Execution (Sanhedrin)

Three Rejections of the King by the Jews Under Paul's Ministry	Acts 13.44-52	Rejection
	Acts 18.1-7	Rejection
	Acts 28.17-29	Rejection
Three Accounts of Paul's Salvation	Acts 9.1-16	Near Damascus
	Acts 22.1-21	In Jerusalem
	Acts 26.1-32	In Caesarea
Three Defenses of Paul Before Gentile Rulers	Acts 24.1-27	Felix
	Acts 25.1-12	Festus
	Acts 25.13-32	Agrippa and Bernice

The first part of Acts (Acts 1-8) is dominated by activities of the Twelve and those associated with the Jerusalem assembly. In this section, the gospel of the kingdom was preached to the Jewish nation alone. No Gentile evangelism occurred. While some Jews responded to the message of repentance, the majority did not. Rejection of the message and its messengers intensified. The Sanhedrin, at first warned, then imprisoned, and lastly executed Stephen, one of the deacons of the Jerusalem assembly. At Stephen's stoning Saul of Tarsus was introduced (Acts 7).

The next section (Acts 9-12) transitioned from a focus on the Twelve to Paul and his missionary ministry. During this period, Saul was converted (Acts 9) and commissioned as the apostle of the Gentiles (Romans 11.13). Following Paul's conversion, a transition began from purely Jewish evangelism (cf. Acts 11.19) to Gentile evangelism by Paul. In Acts 10-11, God instructed Peter to go to the Gentile, Cornelius, who was saved. Peter's evangelism of Cornelius was a one-time event. He had no Gentile ministry. In Acts 11, is the account of the church at Antioch which would become the first church with

Gentiles. In Acts 12, Peter was arrested and imprisoned, not by the Jews, but by Herod Agrippa I. His release from prison by the Lord was the last we see Peter except for his involvement at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 about 11 years later.

In the last section, Acts 13-28, Luke shifted the focus of his history from the activities of the Twelve and the Jerusalem Church to the missionary journeys and ministry of Paul. During this time is the record of Paul's going first to the Jews in the synagogues. After the Jews rejected Paul's message, he would turn to the Gentiles. This occurred three times, in Acts 13, Acts 18, and Acts 28. Also, during this time Luke recorded three accounts of Paul's conversion and his witness to three rulers: Felix, Festus, and Agrippa and Bernice.

The Three Rejections

The purpose of the book of Acts is governed by the Jews response to Peter and Paul. Luke recorded three rejections by the Jews to Peter and the apostles associated with him to the message of repentance and proclamation of the kingdom. In the latter portion of Acts, Luke recorded three rejections of the Jews to Paul's overtures of salvation.

Paul's Appeal	Jewish Response	Text
⁴⁴ The next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of the Lord. ⁴⁵ But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and <i>began</i> contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming.	⁴⁶ Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles.	Acts 13.44-52

<p>⁵ But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul was devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ.</p>	<p>⁶ But when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his garments and said to them, "Your blood <i>be</i> on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles."</p>	<p>Acts 18.1-7</p>
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<p>²⁰ For this reason, therefore, I requested to see you and to speak with you, for I am wearing this chain for the sake of the hope of Israel.” ²¹ They said to him, “We have neither received letters from Judea concerning you, nor have any of the brethren come here and reported or spoken anything bad about you.</p> <p>²² But we desire to hear from you what your views are; for concerning this sect, it is known to us that it is spoken against everywhere.” ²³ When they had set a day for Paul, they came to him at his lodging in large numbers; and he was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the kingdom of God and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus, from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets, from morning until evening.</p>	<p>²⁴ Some were being persuaded by the things spoken, but others would not believe. ²⁵ And when they did not agree with one another, they <i>began</i> leaving after Paul had spoken one <i>parting</i> word, “The Holy Spirit rightly spoke through Isaiah the prophet to your fathers,</p> <p>²⁶ saying, ‘Go to this people and say, “You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; And you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive; ²⁷ For the heart of this people has become dull, and with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes; Otherwise they might see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and return, and I would heal them.”’</p> <p>²⁸ Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen.”²⁹ [When he had spoken these words, the Jews departed, having a great dispute among themselves.]</p>	<p>Acts 28.17-29</p>
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Conclusion

Acts began in great hope. The Jews had crucified their Messiah but He had risen from the dead. Hope remained alive that God would establish His long-awaited kingdom and fulfill the covenantal promises to Israel. Peter continued the message of repentance required of the nation which had begun with John the Baptist. Luke recorded that most of the nation would have none of it. They refused to repent and listen to Peter. In the next section of Acts, Paul, commissioned as the apostle of the Gentiles (Romans 11.13), first preached to Jews (Romans 1.16-17). Paul desperately wanted the Jews to recognize that Jesus was the promised Messiah (Romans 9.1-3). He thought the nation could be saved since he had been saved: no one had been more zealously opposed to Jesus of Nazareth than he.

But it was not to be. Luke recorded three distinct rejections by the Jews to Paul's reasoning with them that Jesus was the Christ. As Acts began in great hope for Israel, it ended in abject failure. The book ends with the words, "this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; and they will listen." At this point, Paul recognized that no hope of repentance remained for the Jews. That would await a future day.

The primary purpose of the book of Acts is *not* to record the birth of the Church, the body of Christ. Luke's primary purpose was to record the *downfall of Israel*. Why did the kingdom not come? The answer is it could not come until the nation repented and believed Jesus was the Messiah. Since the nation refused to repent, God set it aside and began to form His Church, the body of Christ, by commissioning Paul, the apostle of the Gentiles. When the Body of Christ is complete God will resume His work with national Israel. In that day, Israel will repent and God will establish His kingdom on the earth. While the Jews of Jesus' generation failed, the Jews of the Tribulation will not. They will repent and God will establish His kingdom and fulfill His covenantal promises. Paul revealed this in Romans 11.25-27:

²⁵ *For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in;* ²⁶ *and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, “The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob.”* ²⁷ *“This is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins.”*

Acts is a bridge between the gospels and Paul's epistles. How strange the New Testament would read without it! Imagine going from the gospels to Romans. In the gospels, everything focuses upon the nation of Israel, repentance, and the earthly kingdom. Paul's audience, however, was primarily Gentiles, not Jews. He only mentions repentance once for unbelievers in his letters (Romans 2.4). Repentance, in Paul's letters, was reserved for believers, not unbelievers. He had no thought of an earthly kingdom. He taught the Church's destiny was heaven, not earth. Thus, without Acts, one would wonder what in the world had happened. Luke provides the answer.

¹ Some argue Luke was a Gentile. The evidence for this is paper-thin. One argument is his name: Luke. Jews frequently had Graeco-Roman names. Paul was one. Apollos was another. The whole region became Hellenized after Alexander the Great. Another argument is that Luke's theology is Gentile. One can only wonder what led to this idea. How anyone who has read Luke can reach this conclusion is beyond me. Luke was far too familiar with Jewish law, tradition, and the Scriptures, and employed too many Semitisms, Jewish idioms, to be a Gentile (see H.F.D. Sparks, "The Semitisms of St. Luke's Gospel," *The Journal of Theological Studies*, vol-XLIV n175-176 (1943): 129-138). The only argument with substance is that Paul's phrase "of the circumcision" (Colossians 4.10-11) referred to Jews saved under the gospel of the kingdom (cf. τοὺς ἐκ

περιτομῆς, Galatians 2.12-13). If Luke was a Gentile he would be the only non-Jew to write Scripture. This would not fit well with Paul's statement in Romans 3.1-2. Luke was a Jew.

² Jesus did not rebuke His disciples for their question. Nor did He tell them they misunderstood His meaning. On the contrary, they had it exactly right. What He refused to reveal was the timing of when the kingdom would be established.

³ After these three rejections or persecutions by the Jews is the persecution found in Acts 12. This rejection was not initiated or conducted by the Jews but by Herod Agrippa I, a grandson of Herod the Great. Herod killed James to please the Jews and imprisoned Peter. Luke recorded the circumstances of this ruler's death (Acts 12.20-23).

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