

Bible Book of the Month: Introduction to the Book of Acts

Based on the Lutheran Study Bible

Background:

The full title of this book is The Acts of the Apostles. The Greek word Apostle means *'one who is sent out'* to deliver a message. The word apostle in Acts refers to the disciples Jesus chose to carry out his ministry. The book records the activities of the apostles specifically Peter, Paul, and Stephen – after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. It is believed to be written between 80 -85 C.E.

Both Luke and Acts were written by the same person. Acts continues where Luke ended. The writer is unknown, but the skillful writing and the recording of the number of speeches by Jewish followers of Jesus make scholars believe that the writer was a well-educated Jew who had come to faith in Jesus Christ.

Both Luke and Acts are addressed to Theophilus, meaning 'friend of God' (Acts1:1, Luke1:3). Some scholars believe that the name stands for all who follow Jesus, while others believe that Theophilus was a wealthy Roman official who paid for the recording and copying of this work. The book is intended for large audiences. Most likely, the first readers of Acts were living on the northern coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

The Story of Acts:

Luke ends and Acts begins with the same event (Acts 1:9-11) of Jesus ascended into heaven. Acts tells the story of the early days of the Christian church. It traces the growth of the church from a small group of Jewish believers in Jerusalem to a worldwide movement that included both Jews and Gentiles.

The writer of Acts continues to provide an 'orderly account' (Luke 1:3) of the events surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The account of the ministry of the early Christians forms a framework that helps readers to understand the issues and conflicts coming to light in the remaining books of the New Testament. In telling the story of the early church, Acts focuses on stories of key leaders, Peter and Paul in particular. There is some indication that the early readers of Acts were Jews who were critical of Paul and the believers who were taught by him. But by detailing many of Paul's journeys and speeches, the writer presents Paul as a faithful Jew who believed in Jesus. Twenty-eight speeches by Jewish followers who believed that Jesus is God's Messiah, make up nearly one third of the content of acts. These speeches provide insight into how different groups wrestled with what it means to follow Jesus. Sometimes the book is also called 'The Book of the Holy Spirit' due to its strong emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit in forming and guiding the church and enabling believers to believe in Jesus the Christ.

The Outline of the Book follows the words of Jesus in Acts 1:8 “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.”

Preparation for Christian witness (1:1 – 2:13)

Witnessing in Jerusalem (2:14 – 8:3)

Witnessing in Judea and Samaria (8:4 – 9:43)

Witnessing to the Gentiles (10:1 – 15:35)

Witnessing to ‘the ends of the earth’ (15:36 – 28:31)

The Message of Acts:

The writer of Luke and Acts clearly desires to tell the story of God’s redeeming and saving love in Jesus Christ. Acts continues on from Luke, giving a systematic presentation of the growth of the Christian church from its beginning in Jerusalem with many details about people and places. The writer is also doing more than to tell the story of the history of the early church. He offers a defence of faith in Jesus Christ, including arguments that the faith is meant for Jews and Gentiles. The stories and speeches by key leaders demonstrate how quickly Christianity spread beyond Jerusalem. He also seeks to highlight the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the early believers as they face persecution and opposition to their witness.