

# *The ACTS of the APOSTLES*

## *INTRODUCTION*

**1. Title.** Since ancient times this book has been known as The Acts of the Apostles, but the title does not appear in the book itself.

In the earliest extant (but incomplete) copy of the book, known as Papyrus 45 (see Vol. V, p. 116), and in the Codex Sinaiticus the title is given simply as “Acts,” with no mention of the apostles. This is reasonable, for the book is not a full history of all these men. A few chapters describe the work of Peter and John, while the remainder of the book records the conversion and ministry of Paul until his first Roman imprisonment. Consequently the book does not completely cover the work of any one of the apostles, and, indeed, is silent about most of them. Of the Twelve, only Peter, James, and John play leading parts in the narrative, but much of the book is devoted to Paul, who, though an apostle, was not one of the original disciples. The title “Acts” would therefore seem sufficient.

From the 2d century onward there appeared a stream of tales purporting to give the lives and experiences of the apostles (see *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 8; cf. Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* iii. 25. 4–7). These writings were also called “Acts.” It was perhaps to distinguish the canonical Acts from these apocryphal imitations that the name of the Biblical book was variously elaborated as “Acting of the Apostles,” “Acts of All the Apostles,” or “Acts of the Apostles.”

**2. Authorship.** The introduction to the book of Acts (ch. 1:1–4) makes it clear that the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts were written by the same author. For a detailed discussion of the authorship of both Luke and Acts see Vol. V, pp. 175–179, 663–665.

The early church never seriously questioned the canonicity of the book, and it soon gained a secure place among New Testament writings.

**3. Historical Setting.** The Roman Empire was enjoying its heyday. Augustus had laid a firm administrative foundation on which the better of his successors were able to build, and which the lesser were unable to demolish. The benefits that Roman civilization brought to the empire’s inhabitants continued to be enjoyed by them even when the ruler himself was weak or tyrannical or both. Thus, during the period covered by the book of Acts, c. A.D. 31–63, the emperors were Tiberius (14–37), Caligula (37–41), Claudius (41–54), and Nero (54–68).

Of these, Tiberius and Claudius used their abilities for the good of their far-flung possessions, whereas Caligula and Nero did little but harm. Yet, in spite of this checkered leadership, the empire maintained conditions that were favorable to the spread of the gospel. A fairly stable government, a common administrative system, Roman justice, an expanding citizenship, peace preserved by disciplined legions, roads pressing into every corner of the then-known world, a language (Greek) that was almost universally understood—these were factors that favored the program undertaken by the apostles.

At first the new religion profited from its connections with Judaism. The chosen race had been dispersed to many corners of the empire, and its basic beliefs were eventually tolerated by the Romans. Christianity, as an offshoot of the older faith, shared in this toleration. But Judaism fell into disfavor. Its adherents were expelled from Rome during the reign of Claudius (Acts 18:2), and intense Jewish national aspirations led to rebellion in Palestine and to the disastrous wars of A.D. 66–70 that culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70. As the position of Judaism worsened, the situation of Christianity grew more perilous. It was a religion with no legal standing, and its members were without protection in the eyes of the law. When trouble arose, such as when Rome burned in A.D. 64, it was easy to make a scapegoat of the Christian community, and the subsequent persecution set a terrible precedent that was all too faithfully followed in succeeding years.

It is against this background that Luke prepared his history of the early church, and wrote the Acts of the Apostles. For a fuller discussion of the subject see Vol. V, pp. 46–73, 664, 665, and Vol. VI, pp. 22–33, 71–84, 89–95.

**4. Theme.** Luke declares (Acts 1:1) that his “former treatise” dealt with “all that Jesus began both to do and teach.” With clear historical insight he recognized that the work of Jesus on earth was but a beginning, which beginning he recorded in his Gospel. But he knew that his history would be incomplete without an account of what Jesus did through the infant church after His ascension. He therefore sets his hand to describe the continuation of Christ’s work through the ministry of His disciples. He does this in an orderly way by taking Acts 1:8 as the theme around which the acts of the apostles are developed. In obedience to their Master’s command, the disciples witnessed (1) in Jerusalem, (2) in all Judea, (3) in Samaria, and (4) in the uttermost parts of the earth. As Luke follows their movements, his record falls naturally into those divisions, and his book thus traces the geographical growth of the early church.

He also records another significant development. The church was Jewish in its origin, but it could never fulfill a worldwide mission if it remained within the limits of an exclusive religion like Judaism. It had to free itself from such exclusiveness. Luke outlines the steps that led to freedom. His narrative describes the growth of Christianity from a Jewish sect to an international religion, until the time when Paul could say that the gospel “was preached to every creature which is under heaven” (Col. 1:23). Luke records that thousands of Jews, including priests, early accepted the gospel (Acts 6:7); and that persecutions soon drove Philip to evangelize the Samaritans and the partly Judaized Ethiopian (ch. 8). He tells how Peter reached the Roman centurion Cornelius (ch. 10). He emphasizes how men of Cyrene and Cyprus preached to non-Jews for the

first time (ch. 11); how, the way having been opened, Paul and his associates evangelized the heathen in great numbers (chs. 13; 14); how they were actually able, with the help of Peter and James, to secure for Gentile converts freedom from subjection to Jewish ritual (ch. 15). His record closes with a vivid picture of the gospel's spread throughout the eastern Roman world (chs. 16 to 28). He sees Christianity becoming largely a Gentile religion.

Luke was peculiarly fitted to be the historian of such a movement. He is thought to have been a Gentile. He showed a deep interest in ministry to non-Jews (see Vol. V, pp. 663, 664). How appropriate, then, that he should be chosen to relate the story of the proclamation of the gospel to the Gentile world!

The author of Acts fully recognizes the position of the Holy Spirit in the growth of the infant church. From the day when Jesus "through the Holy Ghost had given commandments unto the apostles" (ch. 1:2), the Spirit appears as the counselor of the leaders and their associates. By the miracle of Pentecost "they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" (ch. 2:4). A little later the believers also were "filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness" (ch. 4:31). The seven men chosen as deacons were "full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom" (ch. 6:3), and one of the most prominent of their number, Stephen, was "full of faith and of the Holy Ghost" (v. 5). As the narrative progresses the Spirit continues to guide—in such situations as the ordination of Saul (ch. 9:17), in the acceptance of Gentiles into the church (ch. 10:44–47), in the separation of Barnabas and Saul for missionary work (ch. 13:2–4), in the Council of Jerusalem (ch. 15:28), and in Paul's missionary journeys (ch. 16:6, 7). The book of Acts may therefore be said to stand as a partial record of the Spirit's accomplishments through the apostles and their followers.