

# Study 1: Introduction to the book of Acts

Acts has a unique place in the New Testament writings. It provides an historical context for much of the rest of the New Testament, and enables us to put the epistles into context. We also learn much about how the New Testament church functioned in reaching out to the world with the gospel of Christ.

This study will help us with orientation of the book as we approach a series of studies not only of the book itself, but also of many issues raised along the way.

## ***Introduction***

**When was the book written and how do we know?**

**Who was the Author of the book, and how do we know?**

**Who was it written to?**

**The major themes of the book**

**The major players**

**What verse summarises the book?**

**Some useful reference sources**

## ***Homework and preparation for next week:***

Read Matthew chapter 28, Luke chapter 24 and Acts chapter 1

# Notes for study 1: Introduction to the book of Acts

## **Introduction**

I have long believed that we could unravel the chronology of the book of Acts, and during these studies I have made a serious attempt to do just that. There are some key events described in the book that place a “peg in the sand” where we know the specific times (or even the approximate times) of the events. These include:

- Pentecost,
- Aretas, King of Damascus,
- The death of Herod,
- The expulsion of the Jews from Rome,
- Gallio in Achaia,
- Festus the Governor of Judea.

Some specific durations mentioned in the book also help us piece things together, such as the time that Paul spent working with the churches in Antioch, and at Corinth. In addition, we can “work out” (or take an educated guess) at the length of time of some of the journeys, and how long Paul might have stayed in some of the cities. And of course, there is the information that we get from Paul’s letters that also help us fill in some of the details. We can piece all of this evidence together, and have a pretty good picture of the time line and chronology of the events.

In approaching a study of Acts, it is important to understand the bigger picture – what are the events described in the chapter about? If we can understand this, then it will help us to go to that information very quickly whenever we might need to call on it.

Therefore, in every chapter of the book, I ask three fundamental questions:

1. The Timing – when did the events occur, and how do we know?
2. The Cast – Who are the main characters in the chapter?
3. The Plot – What are the main events described in the chapter.

If we can understand these three things, then they will help with our fundamental understanding of not only the book of Acts, but also of the rest of the New Testament.

## ***When was the book written and how do we know?***

Before discussing the date of writing the letter, a more fundamental question is how the dates in New Testament times were reckoned. Most people would say that Christ was born in the year 0, however the evidence suggests that it was between 4 BC and 6 BC, based on the timing of known events around that time such as the census carried out by Augustus Caesar. We know that Jesus began his ministry when he was about 30 years old (Lk 3:23) – which could have meant between 28 and 32 years. We know that his ministry lasted for about 3 years. A thorough discussion of these factors is given in Reese<sup>1</sup>, who concludes that Jesus’ crucifixion occurred in AD 30. On the other hand, McGarvey<sup>2</sup> suggests that Jesus’ ministry began in AD 30 but lasted 4 years, and that He was crucified in AD 34.

The generally accepted date for Jesus’ life and ministry is from AD 30 to His crucifixion in AD 33, and it is from this time scale that I will count the dates during these studies.

The above discussion illustrates some of the difficulties in attempting to put a time line on the events of the book of Acts, and explains why there will be some diversity between any time scale that is chosen and those of other writings. Whilst I may make some comments about an event that occurred in (say) AD45, another commentary may state that it occurred in AD42, or even AD47.

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<sup>1</sup> Reese, pp x - xxi

<sup>2</sup> McGarvey (2), p xxx

On the basis of the book of Acts beginning in AD33, then the date of writing is generally placed around 63 or 64 AD or soon after, and covers the period from 33 AD in Jerusalem, until Paul's first imprisonment in Rome – around 63 AD.

Closure of the account at this time gives no details of the outcome of Paul's imprisonment, his trials, and his subsequent release. Further, the events associated with the destruction of Jerusalem began around AD 67 or 68 and took 3 years. With such an enormous imposition on the Christians in Jerusalem and the effect of the spread of Christianity, it would be most unlikely that the book was written after AD 70 and did not mention these events.

Importantly, the description of Paul's arrest in Jerusalem, trials and imprisonments take up the last quarter of the book, culminating in his house arrest in Rome. However, the book closes without any form of disclosure as to what happened to Paul – what was the outcome? This suggests that it was written at the time when Paul's imminent release had not yet taken place.

The book is not primarily a history book, although it is more of a history book than any of the other New Testament writings. The treatise closes when the mission statement of 1:8 has been completed, and the story of the gospel going into all the world has been described.

### ***Who was the Author of the book, and how do we know?***

Luke is almost universally regarded as the author of the book. Firstly and foremostly, it has almost a duplicate introduction with the third gospel. The author refers to his former treatise, addresses it to the same recipient, and refers the content of that treatise of "...*all that Jesus began both to do and to teach...*" (1:1). The two books together form two halves of a discussion about Jesus and the gospel. The first one (the third gospel) discusses what Jesus ***began*** to do and to teach, and ends with the crucifixion and ascension. The second treatise (the book of Acts) *begins* with the crucifixion and ascension and traces the spread of the gospel *into all the world*.

That Luke was the author is further supported by his use of "medical terms" in his dialogues. In Acts 28:6, he uses the term *pimpremi* "to swell up" - which is the usual medical term for such a condition. In his gospel, he refers to the man who has "dropsy" (Lk 14:2) with the medical term for this *hudropikos* the only time in the New Testament that this term is used. There are over 50 occasions where words that are common to both the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts occur, but are not used in any other book of the New Testament.

The conclusion of Luke the physician (as Paul refers to him in Col 4:14) as the author of the book is almost without doubt. Sir William Ramsay set out to undertake some archaeological work in the Middle East, and initially regarded Luke's writings with some degree of scepticism. However, he subsequently came to regard him as an historian of the first order.

There is significant external evidence from writers as early as two generations removed from the apostles, that confirm Luke as the author of the book. Among these are Irenaeus (180 AD), Clement of Alexandria (190 AD), and Tertullian (200 AD).

### ***Who was it written to?***

Theophilus is ascribed as the recipient of both the third gospel and the book of Acts. In the gospel he is referred to as "...*most excellent Theophilus...*" (Lk 1:3) which suggests that he must have been a man of some prominence and reputation – perhaps a Roman official. It is likely that he was the patron of the works, and provided the financial backing to enable the work to be published. (In the first century, all of this would be done by hand copying by scribes).

Luke's gospel was primarily written for Gentiles, and whilst the book of Acts is written in the same style and to the same recipient, it is the only writing that covers the area of the spread of the gospel and the growth of the church.

## **The major themes of the book**

The major theme of the book is the spread of the gospel throughout the “then-known” world. But equally, the book is also a history of the establishment and growth of the church. Jesus said in Mt 16 that “...I will build my church...” (future tense). In Acts chapter 2, we see the fulfilment of what Jesus said come to fruition, and the church being established throughout the world as the gospel is spread. We see problems in the church develop and being dealt with, governance for the church put into place, and the church at work in the various communities where it was founded.

Acts is often referred to as a “book of conversions”. Throughout the book, conversion after conversion occurs, and we can discern what God wants us to do in response to the gospel.

Some other themes that run through the book are the presence and use of the spiritual gifts, the establishment of God’s kingdom, and the place of Gentiles within God’s family.

## **The major players**

The Apostle Peter features for most of the first half of the book (through chapter 12). The second half deals with the work of the Apostle Paul (chapters 13 through 28). There are many other players, but the book can be divided as dealing with these two people as the lead.

## **What verse summarises the book?**

Chapter 1:8 “You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth.”

- The first few chapters deal with the work in Jerusalem.
- The stoning of Stephen (chapter 7) sets a turning point in the book, and the gospel goes to Samaria (chapter 8).
- From chapter 13 onwards, we see the ministry to the rest of the world.
- Chapter 11:19 is a key verse in the book, as it marks a turning point as the gospel is spread to the Gentiles, and we will refer back to it on several occasions during our studies.

## **Some useful reference sources**

Perhaps the most obvious reference source is the Jewish historian *Flavius Josephus*. He tells us much about the events of the Jews in the context of the Roman rule at the time, and wrote soon after the period of the apostles.

The *Mishnah* is a Jewish writing that takes the oral traditions (Oral Law) that goes with the written law (Old Testament). It was written down for the first time in the mid second century before the traditions were lost after the dispersment of the Jewish leaders from the destruction of Jerusalem. Because of the timing of the writing, it provides us with a very useful comment on some of the events that are recorded for us in our study of the book of Acts.

Some more modern studies that we will find useful are:

Coneybeare and Howson: *The Life and Epistle of St Paul*,

Gareth Reese: *Acts – New Testament History*.

This is a particularly useful work as it has around 20 “special studies” that deal in detail with many significant aspects of the book that we might not otherwise observe.

JW McGarvey: *Original Commentary on the book of Acts*.

In my opinion, this is the definitive work on the book, and it makes detailed reference to Coneybeare & Howson, Josephus, and the *Mishnah*, and is referred to by Reese.

A good map will also help us follow the adventures of the characters of the book on their travels, and understand some of the things that they experienced along the way.

Over the next year as we undertake this study of the book of Acts, we will travel with them, observe their faith in action, see their trials, and feel the emotions of their joys and sorrows as we see the gospel taken from its very beginnings, and to Kings and Rulers and “into all the world”.

## ***Bibliography***

The following references will be used and quoted from during the studies. The full reference of the books are quoted here, and only their abbreviated title and page number will be quoted in the studies.

### **McGarvey (1)**

McGarvey, JW: A Commentary of Acts of Apostles, with a Revised Version of the text  
Gospel Advocate Co, Nashville Tenn. (generally referred to as the Original Commentary on Acts)

### **McGarvey (2)**

McGarvey, JW: New Commentary on Acts of Apostles,  
Gospel Light Publishing Company, Delight, Arkansas; ISBN 0-89916-000-X

### **Reese**

Reese, Gareth: New Testament History – A critical and exegetical commentary of the book of Acts,  
College Press, Joplin Missouri; ISBN 0-89900-055-X

### **Coneybeare and Howson**

Coneybeare WJ, and Howson JS: The Life and Epistle of St Paul,  
Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids Michigan; ISBN 0-8028-8086-X

### **Foster**

Foster RC: Studies in the Life of Christ,  
College Press, Joplin Missouri; ISBN 0-89900-644-2

### **Ramsay**

Ramsay, WM: St Paul the Traveller and Roman Citizen,  
Hodder and Straughton, Third Edition

### **Bruce (1)**

Bruce, FF: Paul: Apostle of the heart set free,  
Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids Michigan; ISBN 0-8028-3501-5

### **Bruce (2)**

Bruce, FF: The Book of Acts – The New International Commentary on the New Testament  
Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids Michigan; ISBN 0-8028-2505-2

### **Bruce (3)**

Bruce, FF: In the Steps of the Apostle Paul  
Candle Books: ISBN 1-8598-5043-X

### **Josephus**

The Works of Josephus translated by William Whiston  
Hendrickson Publishers, Lynn, Massachusetts;