

A LOOK AT A BOOK: The Acts of the Apostles

February 12, 2012

Introduction

Acts begins with the ascension of Jesus, the event which marked the end of the earthly ministry of Jesus (Luke 24:50-53) and which also pointed forward to the ongoing work of Jesus through the church. After describing the equipping of Jesus' disciples for their work with the gift of the Spirit, the book goes on to tell the exciting story of the beginnings of the church in Jerusalem, its spread throughout the wider areas of Judea and Samaria, and then its rapid movement from Antioch in Syria through Asia Minor and Macedonia and Greece, until eventually the arrival of Paul in Rome symbolizes the presence of the gospel in the central city of the ancient world. There is a wealth of detail in the telling of the story. Colorful, dramatic scenes alternate with straightforward reporting. Vigorous personalities stand at the center of the action. The author has a talent for portraying the variety of life in the ancient world, as he takes us from backwater country towns like Lystra to the intellectual center of Athens and brings us into touch with unforgettable characters, Jewish and Greek, nobles and slaves. His book is a story full of interest, told by a master story-teller.

Purpose

Why did he write the story of the early church? It was not, after all, the most obvious of things for a Christian writer to do, a fact demonstrated by the recollection that Acts is the only first-century example that we have of this particular kind of literature. Other Christians wrote Letters and Gospels, but only Luke wrote a history of the early church: what led him to do so?

The book of Acts is the second part of a two-volume work whose first part is the Gospel of Luke. It is one of the unfortunate effects of the present ordering of the books in the New Testament that it leads us to think of Acts as a separate work on its own. Luke gathers together the story of Jesus and the story of the early church, and sees these as forming together the foundational narrative of the church.

A key point in Acts is that it shows how the gospel was meant for the Gentiles as well as for the Jews. Luke's purpose was to show not only that the coming of Jesus fulfilled prophecy, but also that the rise of the church and the spread of salvation to the Gentiles fulfilled the prophecies in the Old Testament and the promises of Jesus.

The Theology of Acts

The continuation of God's purpose in history. The story recorded in Acts is seen as standing in continuity with the mighty acts of God recorded in the Old Testament and with the ministry of Jesus. First, the events recorded in Acts are seen as being brought about by the will and purpose of God. The story of the death and resurrection of Jesus is the most obvious example of an event which is traced to "the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (2:23). Secondly, the life of the church was regarded as taking place in fulfillment of Scripture. The prophecies made in the Old Testament governed the course of church history – the outpouring of the Spirit and the proclamation of salvation (2:17-21), the mission to the Gentiles (13:47) and their incorporation in the church (15:16-18), and the refusal of the Jews as a whole to respond to the gospel (28:25-27). Thirdly, the life of the church was directed by God at crucial stages. Sometimes the Spirit directed the church what to do (13:2; 15:28; 16:6). At other times angels spoke to Christian missionaries (5:19f.; 8:26; 27:23), or messages were mediated by prophets (11:28, 21:11f.). On occasion the Lord himself appeared to his servants (18:9; 23:11). Fourthly, the power of God was seen in signs and wonders which were performed by the name of Jesus (3:16; 14:3). As a result the work of the Christian mission can be said to be carried out by God (15:4).

The mission and the message. Acts is a book about mission. It is not unfair to take 1:8 as a summary of its contents: "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea (ch. 1-7) and Samaria (ch. 8-12) and to the end of the earth (ch 13-28)." Another way to outline the book is the acts of Peter (ch. 1-12) and the acts of Paul (ch. 13-28). The purpose of the Christian church was to bear witness to Jesus. The message which was proclaimed is expounded in a series of public addresses scattered throughout the book. Broadly speaking, it was concerned with the fact that Jesus, who had been raised from the dead by God after being put to death by the Jews, had been declared to be the Jewish Messiah and the Lord, and hence the source of salvation. It was through Him that forgiveness of sins was offered to men, and it was from Him that the gift of the Spirit had come down to the church. The way in which Jesus functions as a Savior is not made clear in Acts; there is not a close link made between his death and the possibility of salvation (except in 20:28), and the impression gained is rather that it was by virtue of being raised from the dead and exalted by the Father that Jesus received the authority to bestow salvation and to carry out his mighty acts in the church. It is thus the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus which stands at the center of the preaching in Acts. The main story line in Acts is concerned with the spread of this message. It begins with the existence of a small group of followers of the earthly

Jesus gathered in Jerusalem, and describes how under the impact of the gift of the Spirit they become witnesses to Jesus and gathered an increasing number of converts. Finally, we have the account of Paul's journey to Rome. In the broad sense it can be said that the purpose of the account is to show how the gospel, in the person of Paul, came to Rome. (Abrupt ending: Paul is in prison, but what happens next? Did he appear before Caesar? Was he condemned? Martyred? Or released?)

Progress despite opposition. Acts is much concerned with the opposition which surrounds the spread of the gospel. "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God (14:22). It begins with the mockery of the apostles on the day of Pentecost and continues with the attempts of the Sanhedrin to force them to remain silent about Jesus. It comes to a swift climax in the death of the first martyr, Stephen, and the wave of persecution that followed his death. A Jewish king attempted to curry favor with the people by putting James to death, and only a miracle saved Peter from the same fate. When the missionaries moved out into the Roman world, they were dogged by opposition. Usually it began with the Jews who viewed the evangelism of the Gentiles with disfavor, but in many cases the Jews were able to gain support from pagan sympathizers in acts of violence against the missionaries. This led on occasion to the missionaries being brought before the magistrates. Opposition becomes an occasion for evangelism.

The inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God. Acts reflects the tremendous tensions which existed in the early church over the basis of the Gentile mission. Although the Gospels record the commission given by Jesus that his disciples should take the gospel to all nations, at first the church was composed of Jews and carried out its evangelism among Jews. But within a few years the church found itself preaching the gospel to Samaritans, uncircumcised God-fearers and finally to pagan Gentiles. This progression is seen by Luke as divinely willed and prophesied; it was a turn of events that came about apart from any conscious planning by the church. The church had to come to terms with this fact. The essence of the problem was whether the rise of the church had produced a new society that was different from Judaism.

The life and organization of the church. Luke is concerned to offer a picture of the life and worship of the church no doubt as a pattern to provide guidance for the church in his own time. From the brief summaries in the early chapters of Acts (2:42-47; 4:32-37) we gain a picture of small groups meeting together for teaching, fellowship, prayer and the breaking of bread. Entrance to the church is by baptism with water. Luke particularly stresses the importance of the Spirit in

the life of the church. The Spirit is the common possession of every Christian, the source of joy and power, and Christian leaders are people who are especially filled with the Spirit to perform their various functions. The Spirit guides the church in its choice of leaders and in its evangelistic activity to such an extent that Acts has sometimes been described as the book of “The Acts of the Holy Spirit.” We also learn something about the work of missionaries. The principle of team work was established from the start, and for the most part the missionaries travelled in groups of two or more. Luke records several sermons as examples of the way in which the gospel was preached, and one example of Paul speaking to Christian leaders about their responsibilities (20:17-35). Luke’s story is very much structured on the careers of the two Christian leaders, Peter and Paul.

Christianity deserves freedom. A subsidiary purpose in Acts is to show that Christianity deserves continued freedom because it is derived from Judaism, which had legal standing, and because it is not politically disloyal to Rome. Therefore Luke repeatedly cites favorable judgments concerning Christianity and its proponents by various kinds of local and provincial governmental officials. This apologetic was needed because Christianity started with the handicap that its founder had died as a condemned criminal under a Roman governor. And wherever Christianity spread, disturbance resulted.

The Origins of Acts

Authorship. Throughout the preceding discussion we have been content to refer to the author of Acts by his traditional name of “Luke.” But was the author in fact the person known in the New Testament by his name, the physician, friend and colleague of Paul (Colossians 4:14; Philemon 24; II Timothy 4:11)? Two lines of argument favor this identification. First, there is the internal evidence of Acts. Certain passages are written in the first person plural, and the most plausible interpretation of them is that they come from the pen of a companion of Paul, and that they were incorporated in Acts without change of style because the author of this source was himself the author of the book. When we ask who this companion of Paul was, we can eliminate various persons who are mentioned by name in Acts, such as Timothy and Aristarchus. Secondly, there is the external evidence from early church writers. The clearest evidence is that of Irenaeus (c. AD 180) who names Luke as the author of the third Gospel and Acts. From this point onwards the tradition is firmly attested. Both Luke and Acts are dedicated to Theophilus. Both also have similar language and style, containing some of the most cultured Greek of the New Testament.

Date of composition. People generally date Acts around A.D. 62 or in the 80's or 90's. The date is based upon the abrupt ending. Paul is left in Rome in prison, preaching unhindered. The significant events that occur after A.D. 62, which are omitted in the historical narrative, convince me that the early 60's is the proper date. For example:

1. The death of James, the brother of Jesus, in A.D. 62. According to Josephus he was clubbed to death by young Jewish men outside the temple area. It seems that Luke, who recorded the death of James, the brother of John, would have also recorded this death if it had already occurred.
2. The death of Peter is not mentioned, which occurred around A.D. 65.
3. The death of Paul is not mentioned, which also occurred around A.D. 65. In Acts, he is left in prison with an outstanding appeal to Caesar.

Peter's Sermons as Earliest Record of Apostles' Theology

The good news can be summarized in many ways, reflecting various emphases. Cambridge New Testament scholar C.H. Dodd (1964) has summarized the Christian good news as taught by the apostle Peter in the Book of Acts (see Kerygma; Acts 2:14-41; Acts 3:11-4:4; Acts 10:34-43):

1. The Age of Fulfillment has dawned, the "latter days" foretold by the prophets (Acts 3:18-26)
2. This has taken place through the birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:22-31)
3. By virtue of the resurrection, Jesus has been exalted at the right hand of God as Messianic head of the new Israel (Acts 2:32-36)
4. The Holy Spirit in the church is the sign of Christ's present power and glory (Acts 10:44-48)
5. The Messianic Age will reach its consummation in the return of Christ (Acts 3:20-21)
6. An appeal is made for repentance with the offer of forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, and salvation (Acts 2:37-41)