



Introduction to Dr. Tom Constable and His Bible Study (Expository) Notes

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NOTES ON

ACTS

2007 EDITION

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INTRODUCTION

TITLE

The title "Acts of the Apostles" is very ancient. The *Anti-Marcionite Prologue to the Gospel of Luke* (A.D. 150-180) contains the oldest reference to the book by this name. The title is a bit misleading, however, because the book contains only a few of the acts of some of the apostles, primarily Peter and Paul. The book is more a story of the extension of the church from Jerusalem to the ends of the ancient world than it is a complete history of the apostles' acts.

WRITER

Two lines of argument lead to the conclusion that Luke, the friend, fellow missionary, and physician of Paul wrote this book, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. First, there is the internal evidence, the passages written in the first person plural that can refer to Luke (16:10-40; 20:5—21:18; 27:1—28:16). Second, we have external evidence indicating that Luke wrote Acts. This evidence includes references by early church fathers,¹ comments in collections of New Testament books,² and editorial statements in early notes on certain New Testament books.³

DATE AND PLACE OF COMPOSITION

The date of composition was probably in the early sixties, A.D. 60-62. In view of his emphases, Luke probably would have mentioned several important events had they occurred by the time he wrote. These include the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the Neronian persecution of Christians that began in A.D. 64, and Paul's death in A.D. 68.

We do not know for sure where Luke was when he wrote Acts. Perhaps he composed it over a period of years, drawing on various sources, and then put it into its final form in Rome where Paul was in confinement for two years (28:30-31; A.D. 60-62).

“Fortunately the intelligibility and value of the book are largely independent of a knowledge of the precise situation in which it was written. While the finer points of the interpretation of Acts can still cause intense discussion among scholars, the essential themes of the book are basically clear and simple.”⁴

SCOPE

The events recorded in Acts cover a period of about 30 years beginning with the Lord's ascension in A.D. 33 to Paul's two-year Roman house arrest that ended about A.D. 62.⁵

PURPOSE

There seems to have been a three-fold purpose for the writing of Acts. As with the other books of the Bible that record history in narrative form, certainly the Holy Spirit had a historical purpose.⁶ He intended to provide an inspired record of selected events that show the spread of the gospel and the church. They branched out from Jerusalem, the center of Judaism where the church began, to Rome, the uttermost part of the Gentile earth in Luke's day.

“Streeter suggested that an alternative title for the book of Acts might be ‘The Road to Rome’, for this is indeed the significance of Luke's work. Whatever minor motifs Luke had in mind, such as the establishment of Christianity in men's minds as a constructive and not destructive element in the social order, his main concern was to show that, in God's plan for the renewal of the life of mankind, Jerusalem, the heart of old Israel, was the goal of Stage I [i.e., the Book of Luke], while Rome, the centre of the world, was the goal of Stage II [i.e., the Book of Acts].”⁷

However the fact that Luke included what he did and omitted much other historical data indicates a second, theological purpose. He showed how the plans and purposes of God were working out through history. In particular, he showed how Jesus Christ was faithfully and irresistibly building His church (Matt. 16:18).⁸ This involved clarifying how God's dealings with humankind had taken a different course because of the Jews' rejection of their Messiah.

Third, Luke evidently had an apologetic purpose in writing. He frequently pointed out the relationship of the church to the Roman state by referring to many Roman officials not one of whom opposed Christianity because of its doctrines or practices. This would have made Acts a powerful defensive tool for the early Christians in their struggle to survive in a hostile pagan environment.⁹

“. . . the Acts is to be seen in close literary association with the Gospel [of Luke]. They form two parts of one work, conceived in its final form as a unity, whether or not the original composition of the Gospel took place independently of the plan to produce the two-part work. Although there are other examples of literary compositions in two parts (Josephus, *Contra Apionem*, is one of the nearest parallels to Luke-Acts in time and cultural context), Luke's work appears to be unique among Christian writings and to have no close secular precedents in its combination of the stories of a religious leader and of his followers.”¹⁰

“. . . Luke in Acts is not merely concerned to draw a link between the time of Jesus and the time of the early church, as is commonly noticed, but also between the time of Israel and the time of Jesus and His church. Acts insists that the God who was at work in the history of his ancient people, Israel, bringing them salvation, is the same God who is at work in the church.”¹¹

UNIQUE FEATURES

Acts is the only New Testament book that continues the history begun in the Gospels.

“The book which we call the Acts of the Apostles may be said to complete the Pentateuch of New Testament history. Four of these books present the Person of our Lord; while the fifth gives the first page of the history of the Church . . .”¹²

Acts is also an indispensable historical record for understanding the Apostle Paul's epistles; without it we could not understand some of the things he wrote. It is the only Bible book that records the historical transition from Judaism to Christianity. It provides basic information about and insight into the early church. And it challenges every modern Christian.¹³

STRUCTURE

Longenecker identified five phenomena about the structure of Acts that the reader needs to recognize to appreciate what Luke sought to communicate.

1. It begins, like the [Third] Gospel, with an introductory section of distinctly Lukan cast dealing with the constitutive events of the Christian mission (1:1—2:41)

before it sets forth the advances of the gospel ‘in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth’ (1:7).

- “2. This introductory section is followed by what appears to be a thematic statement (2:42-47). This material, while often viewed as a summary of what precedes, most probably serves as the thesis paragraph for what follows.
- “3. In his presentation of the advance of the Christian mission, Luke follows an essentially geographical outline that moves from Jerusalem (2:42—6:7), through Judea and Samaria (6:8—9:31), on into Palestine-Syria (9:32—12:24), then to the Gentiles in the eastern part of the Roman Empire (12:25—19:20), and finally culminates in Paul’s defenses and the entrance of the gospel into Rome (19:21—28:31).
- “4. In his presentation, Luke deliberately sets up a number of parallels between the ministry of Peter in the first half of Acts and that of Paul in the last half.¹⁴
- “5. Luke includes six summary statements or ‘progress reports’ (6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; and 28:31), each of which seems to conclude its own ‘panel’ of material.¹⁵

“Taking all these literary and structural features into account, we may conclude that Luke developed his material in Acts along the following lines:

“Introduction: The Constitutive Events of the Christian Mission (1:1—2:41)

Part I: The Christian Mission to the Jewish World (2:42—12:24)

Panel 1—The Earliest Days of the Church at Jerusalem (2:42—6:7)

Summary Statement: ‘So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith’ (6:7).

Panel 2—Critical Events in the Lives of Three Pivotal Figures (6:8—9:31)

Summary Statement: ‘Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord’ (9:31).

Panel 3—Advances of the Gospel in Palestine-Syria (9:32—12:24)

Summary Statement: ‘But the word of God continued to increase and spread’ (12:24).

Part II: The Christian Mission to the Gentile World (12:25—28:31)

Panel 4—The First Missionary Journey and the Jerusalem Council (12:25—16:5)

Summary Statement: ‘So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers’ (16:5).

Panel 5—Wide Outreach Through Two Missionary Journeys (16:6—19:20)

Summary Statement: ‘In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power’ (19:20).

Panel 6—To Jerusalem and Thence to Rome (19:21—28:31)

Summary Statement: ‘Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ’ (28:31).¹⁶

OUTLINE

- I. The witness in Jerusalem 1:1—6:7
 - A. The founding of the church 1:1—2:47
 1. The resumptive preface to the book 1:1-5
 2. The command to witness 1:6-8
 3. The ascension of Jesus 1:9-11
 4. Jesus’ appointment of a twelfth apostle 1:12-26
 5. The birth of the church 2:1-41
 6. The early state of the church 2:42-47
 - B. The expansion of the church in Jerusalem 3:1—6:7
 1. External opposition 3:1—4:31
 2. Internal compromise 4:32—5:11
 3. Intensified external opposition 5:12-42
 4. Internal conflict 6:1-7
- II. The witness in Judea and Samaria 6:8—9:31
 - A. The martyrdom of Stephen 6:8—8:1a
 1. Stephen’s arrest 6:8—7:1
 2. Stephen’s address 7:2-53
 3. Stephen’s death 7:54—8:1a
 - B. The ministry of Philip 8:1b-40
 1. The evangelization of Samaria 8:1b-25
 2. Philip’s ministry to the Ethiopian eunuch 8:26-40
 - C. The mission of Saul 9:1-31
 1. Saul’s conversion and calling 9:1-19a
 2. Saul’s initial conflicts 9:19b-30
 3. The church at peace 9:31
- III. The witness to the uttermost part of the earth 9:32—28:31
 - A. The extension of the church to Syrian Antioch 9:32—12:24
 1. Peter’s ministry in Lydda and Joppa 9:32-43
 2. The conversion of Cornelius 10:1—11:18
 3. The initiatives of the Antioch church 11:19-30
 4. The persecution of the Jerusalem church 12:1-24

- B. The extension of the church to Cyprus and Asia Minor 12:25—16:5
1. The divine appointment of Barnabas and Saul 12:25—13:3
 2. The mission to Cyprus 13:4-12
 3. The mission to Asia Minor 13:13—14:21a
 4. Paul and Barnabas' return to Antioch of Syria 14:21b-28
 5. The Jerusalem Council 15:1-35
 6. The strengthening of the Gentile churches 15:36—16:5
- C. The extension of the church to the Aegean shores 16:6—19:20
1. The call to Macedonia 16:6-10
 2. The ministry in Macedonia 16:11—17:15
 3. The ministry in Achaia 17:16—18:17
 4. The beginning of ministry in Asia 18:18-22
 5. The results of ministry in Asia 18:23—19:20
- D. The extension of the church to Rome 19:21—28:31
1. Ministry on the way to Jerusalem 19:21—21:16
 2. Ministry in Jerusalem 21:17—23:32
 3. Ministry in Caesarea 23:33—26:32
 4. Ministry on the way to Rome 27:1—28:15
 5. Ministry in Rome 28:16-31

- 10 Idem, "Acts and the 'Former Treatise,'" in *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting; Vol. 1: The Book of Acts in Its Ancient Literary Setting*, p. 182.
- 11 Brian S. Rosner, "Acts and Biblical History," in *ibid.*, p. 82. Cf. George E. Ladd, "The Acts of the Apostles," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, pp. 1123-24.
- 12 G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 9.
- 13 Stanley D. Toussaint, "Acts," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, p. 349.
- 14 W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Acts of the Apostles: Outline Studies in Primitive Christianity*, pp. 25-26, offered some helpful comparisons between Peter's ministry and Paul's in Acts. For two lists of 16 parallels between Acts 1—12 and 13—28, see Charles H. Talbert, *Literary Patterns, Theological Themes, and the Genre of Luke-Acts*, pp. 23-24. This book contains many tables of interesting parallels within Acts, within Luke, and between Luke and Acts.
- 15 Cf. Dictionary of the Bible, ed. by James Hastings, s.v. "The Chronology of the New Testament," by C. H. Turner, 1:421. Turner's first panel included 1:1—2:41.
- 16 Longenecker, pp. 233-34. For those interested in further study of background issues such as the history, authorship, unity, text, composition, theology, church, and ministry of the Book of Acts, I heartily recommend the Introduction in Richard B. Rackham, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. xiii-cxv.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 E.g., *Irenaeus*, c. 180 A.D.
- 2 E.g., the *Muratorian Canon*, second century A.D. See *Documents of the Christian Church*, pp. 28-29, for an English translation of the text.
- 3 E.g., the *Anti-Marcionite Prologue* to the Gospel of Luke, second century A.D. See T. W. Manson, *Studies in the Gospels and Epistles*, p. 49, for an English translation.
- 4 I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 49.
- 5 See Appendix 1 at the end of these notes for a table of Paul's activities.
- 6 William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. xvii, is one commentator who believed Luke's purpose was primarily historical.
- 7 William Neil, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 27.
- 8 Richard N. Longenecker, "Acts," in *John-Acts*, vol. 9 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, pp. 212-14, has shown that Luke's method of writing history was in line with current historiography of his day.
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 216-21, identified Luke's purposes as kerygmatic, apologetic, conciliatory, and catachetical. For a very good discussion of the major theological emphases in Acts, see Marshall, pp. 23-34.