**Introduction to Acts of the Apostles**

**(a.k.a. Acts of the Holy Spirit)**

**Background Notes from www.enterthebible.org**

We do not know what sources went into the writing of this book, nor where, when, or exactly by whom it was written. The writer of Luke's Gospel also wrote Acts, and so both books are often referred to as Luke-Acts, reflecting their relationship as a two-volume literary piece. The common authorship of the two books suggests that Acts was written after Luke, probably between 75 and 95 C.E., during the time when Christians were beginning to distinguish themselves from their Jewish roots. Acts looks back, seeking to lay out how Jesus' first followers--that small group in the relatively small city of Jerusalem--spread and grew to the widespread and largely Gentile church that the author and his audience knew.

Acts itself establishes the time frame in which its events occur. The story extends from the forty days between the resurrection of Jesus and his ascension to the end of Paul's two years in Rome, a relatively short period of around thirty years. Acts offers few temporal reference points in the history it spans, such as the reference to Gallio's proconsulship (18:12-17). If the author knew of Paul's death or the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., he does not mention these things.

In terms of geography and culture, Acts locates readers firmly yet selectively in the world of the eastern and northern Mediterranean during the early Roman Empire. Major cities of that time and place, such as Ephesus, Damascus, Antioch, Corinth, Philippi, and Rome, are visited by Christian witnesses. Some aspects of life in those cities are described realistically, including descriptions of governing authorities, interest in magic, work, and common behaviors and attitudes.

Acts is "historical" within the ancient understanding of that term. History-writers of that era created speeches that could or should have been made; they did not have the ability to know or to record for posterity what really may have been said in a given situation. Like other accounts of ancient history, Acts is selective; it does not systematically lay out the spread of Christian communities. It provides, for instance, no information about the spread of Christians into Egypt or other important cities where Christians established themselves in the first century. Acts devotes half its length to Paul's travels and after chapter 15 pays almost no attention to other apostles, including Peter. While the selectivity can be frustrating for those who would like to know more, or potentially misleading if one insists that Acts tells *the* definitive story of early Christian activity and belief, Acts nevertheless remains our earliest overview of the beginning of the Christian movement, an invaluable book.

**SUMMARY**

The Acts of the Apostles portrays Jesus' followers from their days with the risen Jesus in Jerusalem to Paul's mission in Rome. Initial chapters focus on the life of the early community of believers in Jerusalem and the work of the Holy Spirit among them. Called, inspired, and even driven by the Holy Spirit, the apostles spread the gospel throughout northern Mediterranean lands. The story of Paul's call to spread the news of Jesus is the central emphasis of the second half of Acts. The final verse of Acts summarizes the book's themes: welcome of all, bold proclamation and teaching about the kingdom of God, and God's plan as unstoppable.

**HOW DO I READ IT?**

Read Acts as the history that its author chose and ordered for the sake of his first-century readers. One must read, therefore, knowing that this writer aimed to clarify how the beginnings in Jesus' day had yielded the increasingly Gentile church that had sprung from Jewish roots, but no longer adhered to Jewish law, yet claimed faithfulness to the God of the Jews. Acts also attempts to make clear that this group of religious women and men were not a danger to civic order, even though the God who sent Jesus for the salvation of all people was the God no other god or earthly ruler could challenge. Acts as history is shaped by these goals.

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**Introduction Questions:**

What kind of literature is the book of Acts?

Why did Luke write the book of Acts?

* What message(s) was he trying to convey?

Some ideas:

1. Acts was written to consolidate widespread faith communities.
2. Acts was written as a challenge against certain idolatries. (gentiles in the church)
3. Acts was written as an apologia for Christianity, explaining its roots and legitimacy.
4. Acts was written as a tool for evangelical mission to inspire further mission activity.
5. Acts was written to deepen the fragile faith of new believers
6. Acts was written in response to a theological crisis. (concern over the end times not coming quickly)

What are your favorite stories from Acts? Why?