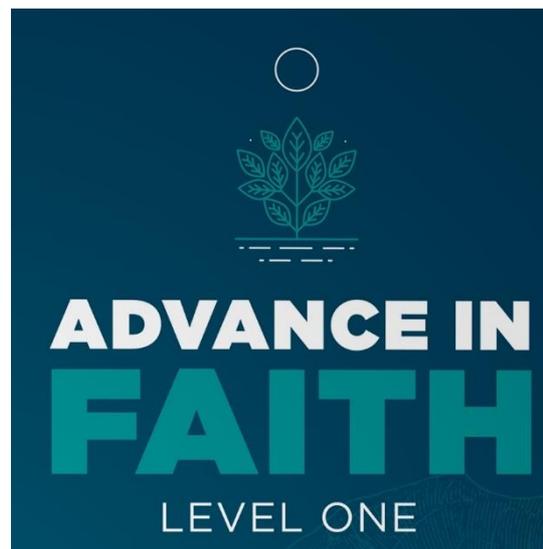


Setting the Scene

Book of Acts – Week 1



1. Introduction:

This is Luke’s second book within the New Testament. His first, his Gospel, dealt with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Now he deals with Jesus’ Ascension and how, by the power of the Spirit, the good news spread from Jerusalem to Rome.

The key to your reading of Acts is to recognize the “movement” of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, narrated in six parts (panels) and signaled by Luke’s little summary statements in 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; and 19:20. In each case the narrative seems to pause for a moment before it takes off in a new direction—sometimes geographically, sometimes ethnically, and sometimes both.¹

2. The Structure of Acts:

- 1:1 to 6:7 The Good News begins in Jerusalem
- 6:8 to 9:31 The Good News spreads to Judea and Samaria
- 9:32 to 12:24 The Good News spreads to the Gentiles
- 12:25 to 16:5 The Good News spreads to Asia
- 16:6 to 19:20 The Good News spreads to Europe
- 19:21 to 28:30 The Good News reaches Rome with Paul

3. Luke as the Author:

As the writer of both the Gospel and the Acts, Luke used his storytelling license to connect the two books in a number of ways.

Look over the following passages in both Luke and Acts and comment on the similarities of the two books.

Gospel of Luke	Acts	Connection
Chapter 2, 9:51	Chapters 1, 2	(hint) geography
10:38; 13:22; 17:11; 18:31	Chapters 13-20	
22:66–71/ 23:1–5, 13–25/ 23:6–12	22:30–23:10/ 24:1–27/ 25:23–26:32	

¹ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book : A Guided Tour* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2002), 296-97.

In the following passage from Luke’s gospel there are a number of themes which will show themselves throughout the Book of Acts. Read the passage and jot down what themes you find there;

Luke 4:16-30

Themes:

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What connection do you see between the following Old Testament verses and Acts?

Gen 12:2–3; Isa 2:1–5; Micah 4:1–5; Zech 2:11

Acts 10:28

4. Setting the Scene:

No matter what scripture we study it is always important and vital to establish the circumstances into which the book was written.

Remember that;

Scripture was written for us but not to us!

This means that we need to ask about the context into which this book is written.

a. Historical Setting

Both the Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles, were written somewhere between 64 and 79 A.D. during the time of the final rebellion of the Jews against their Roman rulers and near the time of the destruction of Jerusalem.

The world of Acts is a world dominated by the Roman Empire sitting on top of a very Greek thinking business world.

The Roman roads provided an infrastructure that knit the empire together. As a result, the army could be anywhere in the realm within two weeks. Communications from the emperor traveled with a speed unheard of in previous empires. In God's providence, the early church also utilized this communications network to spread the Gospel.²

b. The Religious Setting

The Book of Acts begins in a very Jewish world and ends in a very Gentile world. It is unique in that it bridges the gap between a small sectarian Jewish movement and what was to become the greatest religious movement the world had ever seen.

The Gospel of Luke finishes with Jesus instructing the disciples to remain in Jerusalem until Holy Spirit comes and fills them with power. Acts opens with the same scene though with more description this time, and then moves to the fulfilment of Jesus' instruction.

The followers of Jesus are still considered rebellious Jews and the Jewish authorities are seeking to stop the small movement in its tracks.

How did Christianity emerge from its Jewish roots? How did a Jewish Messiah, preaching a Jewish theme, the kingdom of God, to a Jewish following become the Savior of people everywhere?³

The Book of Acts gives this answer.

c. Luke's Audience

Both Acts and the Gospel are addressed to Theophilus, probably a wealthy student of Luke's, who also became Luke's patron.

However the book of Acts addresses a number of issues that began to emerge in the early church. These included;

- Strife between Jewish and Gentile believers
- Divisions based on the leadership of different apostles and teachers
- Doctrinal errors introduced by false teachers

² James P. Eckman, *Exploring Church History* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 9.

³ Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, Updated 2nd ed. (Dallas, Tex.: Word Pub., 1995), 14.

- Trouble between the Church and the civil government
- Issues faced by women and the poor
- Persecution, suffering and imprisonment

It would seem that Luke wished his writing to help the early church deal with the many challenges that it faced.

d. The Focus of the Book of Acts

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHtJ94951Jg&list=PL8DD1D3B812DC343A>

Look at the following verses. What are the two themes that come from these verses regarding the Book of Acts?

Acts 1:1, 2

Acts 28:30, 31

How is the Kingdom of God described in the Gospels?

- Matt 4:23 to 5:12
- Mark 1:14, 15
- Mark 12:28-34
- Luke 8:1
- John 18:36

The end of the story is important to the theme or focus of the story. How does the story end, in what circumstance?

Paul is left preaching and teaching about Jesus and the Kingdom. Wright makes the following observation of this:

But the unusual nature of the book is that we are supposed (so Luke is telling us) to read it on at least two levels. At one level, it is of course the story of the early church—told very selectively, of course, like all history (if you wrote down every single thing that happened in a single day you would already fill a library), and told with an eye, as we shall see, to particular concerns and interests. But Luke wants us to read it, all the way through, as a book about Jesus, a book indeed with Jesus as the principal actor, rather like some of the plays by another great playwright of recent years, Samuel Becket, where the action on stage sometimes crucially depends on a person whom the audience never actually sees.

If this is so, one of the results is that there is a third level as well on which Luke wants us to read his work. *This is a play in which we are invited to become actors ourselves.*

The stage opens up and we discover we're in the middle of the action. That is part of the point of the 'ending' which isn't really an ending: the story continues, and we are part of it! What we are reading, from this moment on, is the opening scene, or set of scenes, in a play whose action we ourselves are called to continue.⁴

Acts 1:1-5

Notice that Luke is keen to introduce up-front two ideas;

Firstly all of what is about to be described is because of the physical resurrection of Jesus. Without this event nothing else happens.

Secondly, the events that follow are driven by the power of the Holy Spirit. He is intimately involved in all that takes place.

What might this be saying to us today?

Acts 1:6-8

"Are we there yet?" is the question the disciples ask.

What do you think their idea of 'restore your kingdom' was?

What do you think was Jesus' view of the kingdom?

Jesus tells the disciples that they will be his witnesses. The disciples would have immediately understood this in empire terms. When a new Roman emperor came to power, he sent witnesses throughout the empire to make the announcement. It is from here that the term 'good news' comes.

Jesus speaks of authority and power. How are these two words used differently?

For the moment we notice one thing in particular, which will help us as we read into the rest of the book. Jesus gives the apostles an agenda: Jerusalem first, then Judaea (the surrounding countryside), then Samaria (the hated

⁴ Tom Wright, *Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008), 2-3.

semi-foreigners living right next door) and to the ends of the earth.⁵

Acts 1:9-14

What is this event all about?

Neither Luke nor the other early Christians thought Jesus had suddenly become a primitive spaceman, heading off into orbit or beyond, so that if you searched throughout the far reaches of what we call 'space' you would eventually find him. They believed that 'heaven' and 'earth' are the two interlocking spheres of God's reality, and that the risen body of Jesus is the first (and so far the only) object which is fully at home in both and hence in either, anticipating the time when everything will be renewed and joined together.⁶

Within the OT the picture of 'cloud' is often associated with God's presence;

Ex. 13:21

1 Kings 8:10

2 Chron. 5:13

Ezekiel 10:3, 4

Rev. 14:15

One of the ways in which the Roman emperors sought to establish their divinity was to have someone, during the emperor's funeral pier, see the 'spirit' of the dead emperor ascending to heaven.

Luke's picture suggests something like this but much more powerful. It is the resurrected Jesus, in his new physicality, that is now alive and ruling.

Luke may also have been drawing his readers' attention to the coming of the 'son of man' figure to the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7.

What is the response of the witnesses to this event?

⁵ Tom Wright, *Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008), 10.

⁶ Tom Wright, *Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008), 13.

Acts 2:1-47

Here is the consummation of the new Israel, the new group to whom has been given the role that the nation of Israel held in the Old Testament.

Pentecost is part of the year festival cycle of Israel. This is the festival of the Feast of Weeks, an agricultural festival. But its roots lie in the story of the Exodus.

The Israelite nation was to offer, 50 days after Passover, bread made from the first grain harvested. This festival was inaugurated while the nation was camped at Sinai. This festival was also a festival of covenant renewal. It is about God showing his people how they were to live. (Lev. 23:10)

Luke makes the point that the noise of the wind came from heaven. Jesus now completes the connection between God's space, heaven, and man's space, earth. The dream of Jacob is fulfilled. (Gen. 28:10-16)

The Reversal of Babel

The promise that the world would be blessed through Abraham's descendent comes hard on the heels of the story of the tower of Babel. Now the Holy Spirit gifts the apostles with the means to reverse the problem of different languages, so that the 'new Israel', the new people of God, can take the gospel to the world's nations.

The First Sermon

This is the first of 7 sermons which Luke gives his readers throughout Acts; 3 from Peter, 1 from Stephen and 3 from Paul.

The Last Days

Peter's quoting of Joel's prophecy marks the end of the Israel journey and the beginning of a new journey, one in which young and old, male and female, servants and masters will all be spokespeople for God, that is, they will be prophets!

The Resurrection

The reason the 'last days' are here is because of the **resurrection** of Jesus, nothing more nor less.⁷

⁷ Tom Wright, *Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008), 36.

Peter makes the point strongly that the only reason Joel’s prophecy and the Holy Spirit’s gift was happening was because of the resurrection of Jesus. Peter spends a significant time arguing for the necessity of the resurrection in God’s plan of salvation.

Lord and Messiah

Peter finishes his message with an extraordinary truth, especially for a Jew. Jesus, the one whom you crucified and whom God raised, is both ‘Lord’ and ‘Messiah’. What were the implications of these titles to Peter’s Jewish audience?

Lord

This became the term used by Jews for Yahweh. Remember that they did not say or use the term Yahweh so they used terms that were often translated ‘Lord’.

The title ‘Lord,’ while not connoting divinity in the metaphysical sense, means that at his exaltation Jesus entered upon a new function as the representative of God’s Lordship in the world and over the church (Phil. 2:11).⁸

Messiah

The Messiah, of course, is the one promised by Yahweh to bring the kingdom back to Israel.

The early Christians, following Jesus himself (see Luke 20:41–44), went back to Psalm 110 again and again to make this point. They saw it tying together Jesus’ Davidic ancestry with God’s fresh action in raising and exalting him, and thus declaring him to be the true Messiah.⁹

The Four Marks of the Church (2:42)

What 4 activities were originally constituted for the new believers, now called the Church?

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⁸ Paul J. Achtemeier, Publishers Harper & Row and Society of Biblical Literature, *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 573.

⁹ Tom Wright, *Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008), 38.

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What do you think verse 47 might say about evangelism?

Acts 3:12 – 26 Peter’s 2nd Sermon

What was the reason for Peter’s 2nd sermon?

Peter uses a phrase that immediately linked his Jewish audience into another supernatural event – the Exodus. Once again God has done something supernatural and Peter’s audience can be the recipients of God’s promise.

Peter associates Jesus with three different pictures;

1. A servant – images of Isa. 53
2. The Holy One
3. The prince of life

Note the emphasis on having faith in the ‘name’ of Jesus.

In verses 17-26 to whom does Peter appeal concerning the role of the Messiah and what might each of these people mean to the Jewish audience to whom Peter is speaking?

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Acts 4:2

What was it that had the religious rulers so upset and why do you think it affected them this way?

Homework:

Read the book of Acts through.

Read Ps. 118. How do you think this relates to the message that Peter gave both to the audience at Pentecost and with the Jewish rulers later?

Read the sermon sections of Acts and make note of who spoke, to whom did they speak and any similarities or differences that may be there between them;

Verses	Who Spoke	Audience	Similarities	Differences
2:14 – 39				

3:12 – 26				
3:8 – 12				
7:2 – 53				
13:15 – 41				
17:22 – 31				
26:2 - 29				