Chapter Ten

The Acts of the Apostles

Introduction

The Acts of the Apostles, or book of Acts, is one of the Bible’s most cohesive narratives – there is a dynamic set of characters who follow a plot rife with dramatic tension and geographic expansion, an explicitly defined beginning, middle, and end that ultimately continues the story of Jesus’ disciples generally, and introduces us to the apostle Paul specifically.

It was written as a companion piece to the Gospel of Luke and is thus thought to share its author and composition date, around 85-95 CE. We can see this connection in the opening verse of Acts: “In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen” (1:1-2).

The book functions in the New Testament as the link between the gospels and the Christian church that developed out of the Jesus movement. Capturing what is known as The Apostolic Age, the era that runs from about 33 CE to 100 CE, Acts documents the spread of Jesus’s message beyond Jerusalem.

Characters

We find a familiar cast of characters in the text as the remaining 11 disciples appear to take up their evangelizing mission. In fact, we even witness a recasting moment as there needs to be a restoration of the apostles to equal 12 – replacing Judas and maintaining the parallel with the 12 tribes of Israel: “And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles” (1:26). This account is startlingly reminiscent of the utilitarian treatment of Judas: roll the dice and take your chances with fate. Matthias is surely in for a better time than his predecessor.

The spotlight falls on Jesus and the Holy Spirit at the beginning and then takes turns following the disciples Peter, Barnabas, Saul/Paul, Philip, and John Mark (traditionally thought to be Mark the Evangelist, though the text itself does not clearly identify its author) as they spread the word of Jesus. How do they do this? By performing acts of “magic” – healing the sick and the lame, casting out demons, making clean the unclean.
Such power is invested in them through a commissioning of the Holy Spirit, conferred by Jesus before his ascent to heaven: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (1:8). Luke, the writer, takes care to note that the original apostles actually stay in Jerusalem. See, for example, in Acts 8:1, where he writes: “and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside.”

We then meet key conversion figures such as Stephen, a Greek and commonly considered the first Christian martyr; an unnamed Ethiopian man; Cornelius, a Gentile and an officer in the Roman army; and Lydia, a woman who welcomes Paul and Silas to Philippi.

As most of the second half of Acts is focused on the work of Saul/Paul, it is easy to, and certainly conventional, to think of him as the main character. However, scholar Kyle Keefer suggests that it is actually the Holy Spirit that functions as the main protagonist of the book, writing, “The only character that pervades the book from start to finish is, in fact, the Holy Spirit. Although something of an impersonal force, the Holy Spirit displays all the literary accoutrements (sic) that a reader expects from a protagonist” (Keefer 42).

The “covenant community” and Jerusalem church are additionally important to the book of Acts, both as supporting features that maintain the narrative action and also as a reminder of the writer Luke's audience. The Jerusalem church refers to those original members of the Jesus movement, eventually known as Jewish Christians, who were fundamental in creating the new religion and who remained in Jerusalem.

The “covenant community” refers to the radical expansion of religious practice added to the discourse by the Jerusalem church to the established practices (and promises) of Judaism: “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. . . . And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved,” (2:44,47b).

We see further evidence for this community as the text continues, “You are the descendants of the prophets and of the covenant that God gave to your ancestors, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed’” (3:25), providing initial guidelines for living under this new promise, “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common” (4:32).
Christopher R. Matthews explains it this way in his introduction to The Acts of the Apostles in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, NRSV*:

Acts portrays influential Romans expressing interest in Christianity with (13.12; 19:31), or at least concluding that it posed no threat to the state (18.15; 19.37; 23.29; 25.25; 26.32). In this way Luke demonstrates the nonsubversive nature of the church, possibly in an effort to convince citizen elites of his own day that their membership in the Christian community was not incompatible with their status as Roman citizens. Luke’s argument is designed for internal consumption; it was neither intended to persuade non-Christians nor would it have been likely to do so. (Matthews 1921)

**Themes**

There is one thematic directive underlying all of Acts, and it is not so different from that of the gospels: to be a witness. Based on the performative signs of the apostles, a cycle forms: proclamation or witness, arrest, trial, punishment. This cycle forms a literary basis to the book of Acts, condensed for the apostles in the first half and expanded for Paul in the second. You can see the beginning of this cycle, the proclamation to the arresting Sadducees, in this example with Peter and John: “But Peter and John answered them, ‘Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard’” (4:19-20).

In *The Beginnings of Christianity: An Introduction to the New Testament*, Howard Clark Kee identifies Acts’s main theme as the ever-expanding spread of Christianity:

The overall aim of Acts is evident in the account of the divinely supported movement of the good news from the center of the Jewish heritage from which Jesus came – Jerusalem – to the political and cultural center of the Gentile world – Rome. But equally as important for the author as this geographical spread is the cultural outreach as evident in the concepts and modes of communication that are incorporated in the Acts account of this divinely supported move. The modes include speeches, stories, and the overall literary method of the book. (Kee 216)

**Setting**

Because the book of Acts is essentially a travelogue that documents the spread of the Christian message, it can be useful as you read to consult a map. The one below (Fig. 18)
demarcates each of Paul’s journeys away from Jerusalem by color, and it provides a clear sense of scale for just how far the apostolic mission spread through the Roman Empire during Paul’s lifetime.

Fig. 18: Paul’s Travels. [Link](http://i.imgur.com/K6sGzXx.jpg)

**The Story of Stephen is the Story of Paul**

Despite the suggestion that we consider the Holy Spirit the main protagonist of the book of Acts, we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge the significance of Paul. Scholar Howard Kee points to the structural support for such focus: “[T]he Acts of the Apostles portrays the conversion and mission of Paul and reports his message and activities in twenty-one of its twenty-eight chapters. His central role in the spread of Christianity is reflected in this material” (Kee 213). Indeed, when we first meet Paul, he is Saul of Tarsus, a Jewish man playing a part in the story of Stephen, the martyr.

Stephen, understood to be the first Greek Christian convert, mimics the plot line of Jesus’ story in chapters 6-8. Under fire for his evangelizing, he is brought to the high priests for trial, where he pleads, “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are
forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do” (7:51). Readers will recognize this literary technique of using the language of Exodus to connect with the language of Jesus. The outcome of Stephen’s story provides another parallel: “But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God,” Stephen rushes into the streets and is stoned to death (7:55). Saul is a witness to the event: “And Saul approved of their killing him” (8:1a).

What follows is a period of persecution of the Jerusalem church, described in the pivotal Chapter 8, during which its members take to the countryside and begin their evangelizing in earnest outside of Jerusalem.

One member, Philip, travels to Samaria, and it is eventually from this outreach that we encounter Saul once more, on his own trip from Caesarea to Damascus, “…still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord…” (9:1a). He intends to report on members of “the Way” to Jewish leadership (see 9:2). But something happens! A theophany: “Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’” (9:3-4).

Saul acknowledges the voice as divine, as Jesus, and is converts. He is blinded for three days, unable to eat or drink, before becoming baptized by a disciple named Ananias, who is directed by God: “But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name’” (9:15-16). Now known as Paul, the former Saul goes to Jerusalem to join with the church there, where he is received with understandable suspicion.

It is an apostle named Barnabas who takes charge, as it were, of Paul, and who leads him around Jerusalem so that he could “speak[s] boldly in the name of the Lord” (9:28). Paul's role and authority grows along with the movement and it is through his written voice that much of Christian doctrine forms. Indeed, after the creation and delivery of the apostolic letter in Chapter 15, only Paul carries the narrative.

There are two details on which to focus from this remarkable story - that Paul is a Gentile convert and that suffering is integral to his call. The fact that anyone can become part of the new covenant community is a part of the separation between burgeoning Christianity and the existing genealogical ties with Judaism; the pledge of suffering calls attention to the distance between “the kingdom of God” the gospels promise and earthly existence.
**Structure**

Beyond the story of Paul, here is a guide to the design of Acts.

- **Chapters 1-7**: The ascent of Jesus and the growth of the Jerusalem church
  
  - *Divine charge of the apostles*: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (1:8); this occurs before the ascension of Jesus, found only in the books of Luke and Acts. This charge continues as a literary device: “One of the main devices Luke employs to propel his narrative is recounting public speeches. Often before the speech, he will describe the character as touched by the Holy Spirit” (Keefer 42). Here’s an example, “Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them...” (4:8a).

  - *Pentecostal message*: Chapter 2 finds the apostles speaking in languages of “every nation under heaven” (2:5); this builds the Jesus message, an act of witnessing: “And he [Peter] testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, ‘Save yourselves from this corrupt generation’” (2:40).

  - *Gamaliel speaks out for the apostles*: “So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them – in that case you may even be found fighting against God!” (5:38-39a)

- **Chapters 10-15**: The missionary work of Paul, Barnabas, and Peter

  - *Peter is important to the developing church*: “In Caesarea, the Roman center of authority in Palestine, Peter is the messenger through whom a Roman military officer is converted – reported to and approved by the church in Jerusalem (11:1-18). The geographical outreach continues in Syria at Antioch, the city founded by the Hellenistic ruler Seleucus I and named in honor of his father, who consolidated the Seleucid empire. The city is important geographically and symbolically as evidence of the new community’s
reaching out to the wider Graeco-Roman world. It builds on the foundation set by Diaspora Judaism, but exceeds it in inclusiveness and mission initiative.” (Kee 217)

- A message for their time: When the crowds in Lystra refer to Paul and Barnabas as “gods in human form,” they respond by stripping off their clothes and, in such presentation to the crowds, crying, “‘Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing good – giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy.’” (14:15-17)

- **Chapters 15-28:** Paul’s missionary travels, arrest, and imprisonment
  - First missionary journey: chapters 13-14
  - Second missionary journey: chapters 15-18
  - Third missionary journey: chapters 18-21
  - Paul’s journey to Rome: chapters 27-28

In each of these missionary journeys, Paul establishes churches and reaps the political consequences of such action: imprisonment. It is during his various incarcerations that he writes the letters that form the next section of the New Testament. We leave him serving a two-year sentence in a Roman prison.

**Select Dramatic Events**

The Acts of the Apostles is filled with excitement and drama. Two key examples of this drama might include the following important scenes:

- Divine prison breaks: in 5:17-21, the apostles are arrested and then sprung by angels (5:17-21); in 16:19-34, Paul and Silas are freed from the Philippian jail by a divine earthquake.
• **Punishment for denying the Holy Spirit:** in 5:5, Ananias drops dead in punishment for deceiving the Holy Spirit; in 12:23, Herod Agrippa dies, “And immediately, because he had not given the glory to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.”

**Conclusion**

The Acts of the Apostles ultimately testifies to the eschatological urgency of the time: “While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising himself from the dead” (15:30-31).

This sense of urgency impels the spread of the Jesus message, the gospel or good news. The message directs followers to piety, to acceptance and forgiveness, to foregoing earthly material concerns. It was as radical then as it is now.

**Questions for Further Exploration and Discussion**

1. Reflect on “witness.” What does it mean to be a witness? What is required, gained, and lost?

2. Use your skills as a literary critic to draw a character map of key figures in Acts. How do they relate to each other? What are their representative moments?

3. Draw your own map of Paul’s missionary journeys. What do you learn about the scale of their apostolic work in doing so?

4. Consider this observation in chapter 15:18: “Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him.” Explore the reference and discuss what the historical context adds to our understanding of Acts.

5. How and why does Christianity move from being a small Jewish sect/movement to a big Gentile religion, according to the Book of Acts?

6. Paul did not even know Jesus when he was alive on Earth. How did he become Jesus’s most important interpreter? Explain using evidence from Acts.

8. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles? Does it seem different from what is recorded in the Synoptic Gospels?

9. What are the big controversies portrayed in this book? Or problems? How do the early Christians deal with them?

10. Why do you think the Jesus movement was local, but the Paul/Christian movement so global?

**Works Cited and Further Reading**

