

The Acts of the Apostles

The title of the fifth book of the New Testament aptly describes its contents. It contains the wonderful works of preaching and miracle which the first century apostles undertook during a span of approximately 30-35 years in order to establish Christ's ecclesia in the Roman Empire amongst the Jews first, and then among the Gentiles.

But the title, as a later superscription, is also something of a misnomer. Luke sets the agenda more precisely in his opening verse, in which he self-consciously makes the link back to Volume I:

"The former treatise (i.e. the Gospel of Luke) have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which he was taken up, after that he through the Holy Spirit had given commandments unto the apostles whom he had chosen." (Luke 1v1-2)

The things recorded in the gospel, then, were only the beginning of Jesus' work, up until the time of his ascension. But Jesus hadn't gone into retirement. From that very moment Jesus has continued to work, and has done so in the First Century through the apostles he has chosen. The gospel is only the beginning. In the book of Acts, Jesus now continues his work through his chosen apostles on the earth. Yes, the book describes the acts of the apostles. But in their acting they were working on behalf of their exalted Lord. True, the book describes the teaching of the apostles. But in their preaching they were speaking the words of the one who sent them. In a very real sense, this book describes

the continued Acts of Jesus.

The Work of the Spirit

Those first two verses also introduce the Holy Spirit. We noted previously that Luke's gospel was interested in the work of the Spirit, so it is no surprise to find the concern continued here. Now that the Lord had ascended from them, the disciples need its presence to support them in their preaching, to give them recollection of what their Lord had said, to guide them in their missions, and to perform miracles to cement the establishment of the early church. The practical outworking of the Spirit in Acts chimes appropriately with what the Lord had said about the Comforter back in John 14-16.

Already in the first chapter of Acts, Luke's interest in the work of the Spirit can be seen:

- Jesus gave commands to the apostles through the Holy Spirit (v2)
- After the ascension, the disciples were to await the baptism of the Holy Spirit, as promised by the Father (v5)
- The Holy Spirit would come upon them and empower them in their role as Christ's witnesses to the ends of the earth (v8)
- Luke quotes Peter, who stated that the Holy Spirit had spoken through David about the failure of Judas and the need to appoint a witness of the resurrection to succeed him (v16)

In a chapter 26 verses, such a four-fold reference is not insignificant.

And what comes next? The very next thing in the book of Acts is Pentecost. Here, a whole chapter (47 verses this time!) is given over to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples, Peter's explanation of it and its implications, and the consequences of the extraordinary event. Note especially v4,17,18,33,38,43. From this springboard we could continue throughout the book, following through the Spirit theme (an exercise well worth undertaking). We must, however, move on

Concentric Circles

The following structure presents a possible analysis of Acts.

Jerusalem 1v1 – 6v7

- Conclusion? “And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.” (6v7)

Palestine outside Jerusalem 6v8 – 9v31

- Conclusion? “Then had the churches rest throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, were multiplied.” (9v31)

Palestine to Syrian Antioch 9v32 – 12v24

- Conclusion? “But the word of God grew and multiplied.” (12v24)

South Galatia 12v25 – 16v5

- Conclusion? “And so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily.” (16v5)

Macedonia, Achaia, Asia 16v6 – 19v20

- Conclusion? “So mightily grew the word of God and prevailed.” (19v20)

Rome 19v21 – 28v31

- Conclusion? (notice especially the last clause) “And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, Preaching ... and teaching ... with all confidence, no man forbidding him.” 28v31

to another aspect of Acts.

From one Centre to Another

It is possible to read Acts as a self-contained book which tells its own full and satisfying story (as Christadelphians, this is what we usually do). It is possible, too, to read it as a part of the larger work Luke-Acts. There is merit in both approaches.

Looking at Acts standalone for a moment, we can observe that there are important links between the beginning and end of the book which provide important clues about the book’s overarching purpose and themes. Take a look at the following sets of pairs. In each pair, one reference is drawn from chapter 1, the corresponding one from chapter 28:

- In the days before his ascension, Jesus ‘spoke’ about ‘the things pertaining to the kingdom of God’ (1v3). The book ends with Paul ‘expounding and testifying the kingdom of God’ (28v23). The very last verse describes his two years in his own hired house ‘preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ.’ (28v31).
- In 1v8 Jesus states that his disciples will be ‘witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and in Samaria...’ At the end of the book, Paul is in Rome, where he ‘testifies the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus ... from morning till evening’ (28v23). The closing chapters of Acts have presented a number of instances of Paul appearing as a witness or defendant in courtroom scenes. At the end, he faces the most momentous trial of all, before Caesar himself.
- In his commission at the start of the book, Jesus speaks of the apostles’ duty to carry the gospel message to the ‘ends of the earth’. In Acts 28v28 Paul turns to the Jews for the last time and tells them that ‘the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and they will hear it’. As he says this he is sat in Rome, the capital of the world at that time. He is about to preach the gospel before the most important person in the world (Caesar himself). A momentous conclu-

sion!

We find, then, that the book begins in Jerusalem, and works its way to Rome. It charts a course from the religious centre of the world, if you will, to its economic and political centre. It marks a path from Jew to Gentile, from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

Putting the Acts into Luke-Acts

Once we set the book of Acts into its wider context of Luke-Acts the foregoing stands in even sharper hue. In our earlier consideration of Luke (XREF?), we discovered that the narrative began in Jerusalem and ended there. The gospel contained a long travel narrative which charted Jesus' journey to Jerusalem to sacrifice himself. The text was constantly focussing our attention upon Jerusalem and what the Lord would accomplish there.

In Acts the movement goes the other way. Instead of homing in on Jerusalem (the geographic frame getting ever narrower and more concentrated), the action begins in Jerusalem and spreads out from there in ever widening circles. Like ripples spreading on a pond where a stone has struck, Acts begins with Jesus' staggering commission and describes how the wonderful news of what happened at Jerusalem is carried through the Roman Empire to the capital itself. In the panel there is a list of passages which mark these concentric circles of the gospel's reach. They stand like waymarks along the exciting journey the gospel message takes. They also provide a possible scheme for analysing the book.

If we look at the combined entity of Luke-Acts, we find more ties which bind them at beginning and end. It was prophesied at the beginning of Luke that Jesus would be a light to the Gentiles, and the fulfilment of this is found in Acts 28. Furthermore, according to Simeon's prophesy, Jesus was set 'for the falling and rising of many in Israel', (Luke2v34). In Acts 28v24-28 Paul divides the Jews into believers (those who would rise), and unbelievers (those who would fall). The Jews were thereby similarly divided into two camps; there would be no middle ground.

It is interesting to compare Luke 2v29-35 with Acts 28v24-28.

The Speeches

In addition to charting the rapid and vigorous geographic and ethnic spread of early Christianity, Acts serves another vitally important purpose. It records the actual content of the apostles' teaching, and in many different settings. The speeches of the

book of Acts are a defining feature (I have enumerated them in a panel).

There is a lot to be learned from examining the speeches. Sometimes there is a hook – a powerful lead-in which the apostle takes as a spring-board for revealing the gospel's power and relevance to men and women. Almost always there is swift reference back to the Old Testament Scriptures to show the consistency and design of God's unfolding purpose. The speeches are direct and to the point; they are often short in length, but never short on vigour or conviction.

Nor are they short on content. If one takes a typical speech and simply lists how much doctrinal ground is covered in a short compass, the result is often staggering. All one has to do is to itemise the first principle doctrines that are either explicit or implicit in what is said. Most of the speeches contain most of the key doctrines that Christadelphians would profess today. Put them together as a collection, and practically every base is covered. The speeches in Acts provide a wonderful and convincing summary of what the first century apostles believed, that which Christadelphians still believe today. They are powerful models for the modern-day preacher in content, design, and execution.

The Characters

Let's now attempt a brief summary of the main characters in

The Speeches

Peter at Pentecost 2v14-36, 38-40
 Peter after the healing of the cripple 3v12-26
 Peter before the Sanhedrin 4v8-12
 Peter before the rulers after release from prison 5v29-32
 Stephen 7v2-53
 Peter before Cornelius 10v31-43
 Paul at the synagogue in Antioch in Pisidia 13v16-41
 Paul and Barnabus at Lystra 14v15-17
 [Peter and James to the Jerusalem counsel 15v7-11, 13-21]
 Paul on Mars Hill 17v22-31
 [Paul's farewell at Ephesus 20v18-35]
 Paul to the people in Jerusalem 22v1-21
 Paul to the Jewish council 23v1-6
 Paul before Felix 24v10-21
 Paul before Agrippa 26v2-29
 Paul to the Jews in Rome 28v17-20, 25-28

Acts. Here is a rough-and-ready survey:

Chapter	Main Apostolic Character or Speaker
1-5	Peter
6-7	Steven
8	Philip (Peter also)
9	Paul and Peter
10-12	Peter
13-14	Paul
15	Paul (and Peter and James)
16-28	Paul

Broadly speaking, in the first twelve chapters the dominant character is Peter. From chapter 13 onwards, the narrative is largely concerned with Paul. Certain other characters make their appearances (notably Steven, Philip and James), but Peter and Paul predominate, Peter in the first half, Paul in the second.

But they are unequal halves. Paul has considerably more space devoted to him, and the space is given almost without interruption once chapter 13 is reached (chapter 15 is the only exception, with Peter and James making key contributions along with Paul). In the Peter part of Acts, there are major sections in which Peter is not present at all (large parts of chapters 6-8).

When we think of the way in which Acts is concerned with the spread of the gospel message, particularly through Gentile territory, this should perhaps come as no surprise. Paul was the Lord's prime mover in the mission to the Gentiles, whereas Peter's ministry in Acts is to the Jews and the area in closer proximity to Jerusalem. Indeed, some of the key passages in which Peter does appear are concerned with the transmission of the gospel to the Gentiles (especially the Cornelius event). As Paul's travelling companion, it is also no surprise that he devotes more space to Paul.

Yet Acts is not biography. Luke is not interested in unpacking the personality of Peter or Paul, for instance. He is concerned with them only as ministers of the Lord Jesus, key figures only

because of their part in the unfolding drama of the spreading gospel message. To read Acts as biography is to mis-read it.

The interface between the Peter and Paul parts of Acts (1-12 and 13-28) is important. After the introductory of chapter 1 (much of which builds bridges back to the gospel and the ministry of Jesus), chapter 2 opens with an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Following this ‘baptism’ for which Jesus had commanded them to wait, Peter presses forward with the preaching work. His long speech in chapter 2 inaugurates this public work; the mission of Peter is launched. The second main part of Acts, the Paul section, is similarly marked with a manifestation of the Holy Spirit:

“Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabus ... and Saul, As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, Separate me Barnabus and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. So they, being sent forth by the Holy Spirit, departed...” (Acts 13v1-4a)

And so the famous missionary journeys begin! Paul’s mission, too, is launched not by his own planning, but by the Holy Spirit.

But the two parts of Acts are not separate. Luke carefully integrates them. Peter will reappear in chapter 15 to show that Paul has not somehow replaced him. And Paul first appears, not in chapter 13, but in chapters 7 and 9. The conversion of Paul is described in chapter 9, but he does not begin his mission proper until chapter 13. In between come three crucial chapters which are all about Peter. These chapters are the bridge. It is with Peter, the apostle to the Jews, that the active mission to the Gentiles begins, and to whom the vision of the sheet with unclean animals is revealed. It is upon Peter’s lips that the words “Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized?” are found (10v47). As the Jews later respond: “Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life!” (11v18). Paul will take up this work and thrust it forward more than any other figure since, but Luke is careful to show that the work is one and

that Peter and Paul are fully in step in their direction and purpose. Thus we have an interlocking pattern:

Main Peter section (1-8) Paul (9) Remaining Peter (10-12) Main Paul section (13-28)

It is fascinating that Peter's vision about the sheet takes place at midday, involves a voice from heaven, and he sees a vision which is repeated three times. The story of Paul's conversion is told three times in the book of Acts (chapters 9, 22 and 26), and also takes place at midday and involves a voice from heaven. Both accounts form part of the catapult-machinery that the Lord uses to launch the mission to the Gentiles.

The End

One of the puzzles of Acts is its ending. The apostle Paul dwelling in his own hired house for two years in Rome waiting for his hearing by Caesar hardly seems like the most wonderful climax to the book. Paul's 'sitting around' in Rome, waiting for something to happen, is quite uncharacteristic of everything else which happens in Luke and Acts, for they are so packed with action. It is a strange place to end – every reader would want to know the outcome of Paul's appeal, and yet is denied that knowledge (although it is true that to some extent it can be reconstructed from the later epistles, this somewhat misses the point). Here are some possibilities:

Although first impressions might be otherwise, Paul's impending testimony of the gospel before Caesar is in fact a climax, for it is an incredible preaching opportunity. If God were more concerned with the great men of this world, this explanation might be more convincing!

The ending is abrupt because Luke also wrote a third volume which takes the story further. God has not seen fit to preserve this volume for us. – Of course, this is pure conjecture.

The ending is 'incomplete' because the reader has to take up his own part in completing the story. The book ends with Paul seemingly without opportunity (under house arrest), yet still able to preach, no man forbidding him. The point is this: the

word of God is not bound, and what becomes of it now (in terms of people's response and in terms of the preaching work) depends upon the reader. The baton is passed on.

Another idea, which has not met with wide acceptance, but is thought provoking, is that Luke and Acts were written in connection with the Paul's trial before Caesar in Rome. It seems that Luke's accounts were written at this very time as Paul awaited his trial, so there was no more that Luke could write, for history had not yet revealed what would happen next. The sug-

Some Parallels between Peter and Paul in Luke-Acts

- Both have two names, a 'before' and 'after'
- Both heal a lame man and get into trouble for it (chs 3, 14)
- Both arrested in the Temple and brought before Sanhedrin (chs 4,5,21,23)
- Fear falls upon all (5v5,11; 19v17)
- Peter's shadow, Paul's skin (5v15-16; 19v11-12)
- Compare Gamaliel's words to Gallio's; a beating follows (chs 5,18)
- Peter denounces Simon Magus, Paul Barjesus
- Compare the healings of Aeneas with Publius' father; Dorcas with Eutychus
- Both are offered worship (10v25; 14v13)
- Peter is arrested by Agrippa I, Paul defends himself before Agrippa II
- All sorts of details in chp 12 are echoed in Paul's experience

gestion is that Theophilus was to be the counsel for defence in Paul's trial before Caesar, and that for this he needed a briefing document – a detailed historical account, ordered and sure, which he would use for basis of his defence. This would include not only an account of the life and work of Paul (which Acts supplies), but the much wider net of the whole movement of Christianity from the birth of its founder Jesus Christ himself, and his predecessor John the Baptist.

It was not just Paul on trial; it was Christianity appearing before Caesar. The focus upon the Jew-Gentile issue, so prominent in Acts, makes sense in this light. There is much in the gospels to suggest that they have a wider use than this. But it remains an interesting suggestion for the work's original purpose.

Shadows of their Lord

In conclusion, let's return to the connections between the two halves of the book and to Peter and Paul. We have already seen some close connections, but these are but a taster from a whole set of links between the lives of the two apostles. So many of the things that happen to Peter happen to Paul as well. The life of the apostle to the Jews finds its counterpart in the apostle to the Gentiles. The panel presents a larger selection of these links, but it is still only a selection drawn from a much larger list.

What is the purpose of this symmetry? At one level it illustrates a kind of harmony or patterning in the experiences of the apostles and the early church. The opposition and persecution Peter met, Paul met too; the joy of those they converted was equally revolutionary; the force of their respective missions and the power demonstrated by the Holy Spirit mighty in each case.

But perhaps the real reason lies not in the similarities between Peter and Paul. Perhaps the point is rather that both Peter and Paul have experiences which echo the experiences of one greater: their Lord and ours, the Lord Jesus Christ. They are both arrested, tried and persecuted by the religious rulers of the Jews – but the point of this is surely that this is what happened to Jesus. They re-enact – in some lesser way, to be sure, but in a significant one nevertheless – the passion of the Lord. Their whole lives – in their fervour, in their miraculous works, in their journeyings, and in their sufferings – are modelled upon his. They are willing to suffer and to die with him as they spread his marvellous message, even as they are willing to share in his amazing victory.

Footnote text - requires locating in the body

The pouring out of the Spirit so close to the start of Acts may be compared with the Spirit/dove's alighting on the Lord Jesus towards the beginning of Luke.

Interestingly, Paul's own path at the end of the book follows this pattern. He goes to Jerusalem (21v15, cf v12-14), and from there to Rome. He draws this point out explicitly in 28v17-19).

The evidence for this comes from the famous 'we' passages in Acts which let us know when Luke quietly joins or leaves Paul's party. The 'we' passages are 16v10-17; 20v5 onwards. Luke's presence can also be felt in his concern with historical placement and terminological accuracy, as in the gospel.

The distribution of content would also fit with the hypothesis, set out later, that Luke-Acts is a briefing document in Paul's trial.

More debatably, the vision-event is narrated three times: 10v9-16, 28; 11v5-10.

This was put forward in a book called Paul on Trial by J. Ironside-Still.

A full survey is provided in R.B. Rackham, *The Acts of the Apostles* (London: Methuen, 1909), p.xlviii.

The 'progress report' passages quoted in the table have been recognised by many writers (there are others too, though of differing form, eg 2v41,46,47; 4v4; 5v14. The particular presentation here is taken from W.F. Barling, *The Letters to Corinth* (London, 1958), p30. 28v31 doesn't fit the pattern as it doesn't contain a word such as 'multiplied / increased / grew'. Nevertheless, the idea of God's word not being bound is a powerful and related conclusion.