

A

LEVEL

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES **1 Corinthians, Galatians & Ephesians**

FOR CCEA A LEVEL

2nd
EDITION



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Juliana Gilbride

Updated by Paula McCullough

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*In memory of
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1

The Context of Acts

Section 1:

The Background to the Acts of the Apostles

INTRODUCTION: THE CONTEXT OF ACTS

The book of ‘The Acts of the Apostles’ is an attempt to set out the early history of Christianity in an orderly way. It is regarded by most scholars as a sequel to Luke’s Gospel, which tells the story of the life and work of Jesus. Acts continues the story, describing how Christianity spread rapidly until it reached Rome, the centre of the ancient world. Packer (1966, p2) points out that the title, ‘The Acts of the Apostles’, is strange for a book that says nothing at all about the majority of the apostles. It focuses mainly on Peter and Paul, providing some insight into the contribution to the spread of Christianity of individuals like Stephen and Philip. Lake and Lake (1938, p67) comment that the value of Acts “is that it affords us a unique series of glimpses into the beginnings of Christianity. It is not a complete or a perfectly connected story, but our whole knowledge of the founding of the Greek-speaking church depends on it.”

Christianity began in Galilee in Palestine in the first century AD following the death and resurrection of Jesus. The first followers of Jesus, who were all Jews, began a movement or sect within Judaism with Christ as the central figure. The word ‘sect’, as we know it, implies separation. However, the Greek translation means ‘choice’, and before AD70 (the Fall of Jerusalem), there was a great variety of parties within Judaism, each laying stress on particular aspects of their religion (Guy, 1969, p6), which Jews could choose to follow. The only condition was an insistence on loyalty to the belief in one God (monotheism) and to the Jewish way of life.

The movement was called ‘the sect of the Nazarenes’ (Acts 24:5; 24:14; 28:22). While we would assume that the term ‘Nazarene’ derives from Nazareth, Jesus’ home town, most other Jews in the first century would have taken it to mean ‘observant people’ or people who observe a certain way of life (Bruce, 1958, p70), as the word is derived from a root that means ‘to observe’.

Almost immediately, one of the other Jewish parties, the Sadducees, were antagonistic towards the Nazarenes. The Sadducees strongly opposed belief in the resurrection, and unsuccessful attempts were made to suppress the movement in its early days. However, it was too popular and even priests and members of the Sanhedrin (Jewish Council) were drawn to it. Most members of the party of the Pharisees could find little fault with the Nazarenes and regarded them as pious Jews who observed the Law. While the belief that Jesus was the Messiah would have been looked upon as absurd, the fact that it was based on Jesus' resurrection would have been viewed as 'a sign of grace' (Bruce, 1958, p72).

The sect of the Nazarenes appealed mainly to the ordinary people because of its simple message of forgiveness. Acts tells us that from Galilee the movement reached Jerusalem and flourished. Many converts were made when the apostles preached that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah who was crucified, rose again and ascended into heaven. The movement spread through Judea and Samaria and, following the death of Stephen (Acts 6–8; 11:19), it extended to Syrian Antioch. Initially the movement consisted of Jews alone, but gradually Greek-speaking Jews and Gentiles were accepted.

As a result, the sect of the Nazarenes came to see itself as a new religion, separate from Judaism, although the term 'Christianity' was not used until after New Testament times.

Jerusalem evolved as the centre of the Jewish branch of the movement, while Antioch became the centre for Gentile Christians. From Antioch, Christianity spread through predominantly Gentile cities in Asia Minor and Greece until its eventual arrival in Rome.

Factors helping the spread of Christianity

When writing his letter to the Galatians, Paul stated that God chose exactly the right time to send his son: "But when the time had fully come, God sent his son" (Gal 4:4). Bruce argues that "politically and religiously the world was ready for the gospel at that time as it had not been before" (Bruce, 1958, p24). In the fifty years before 145 BC, the Romans had spread their empire over most of the known world. This led to relative peace and stability and also resulted in another benefit: good communications. The Romans had a reputation for building excellent roads, some of which survive today. Travel was safe and efficient, which helped the early Christians with their evangelising.

Greek culture and the widespread use of the Greek language was another factor that helped to provide the right conditions for the spread of the new religion. The official language of the Roman Empire was Latin, but most

people spoke Greek. Green (1993; 2002, p13) comments that “it is interesting to note that St Paul addresses high-ranking Roman officials in Greek, not Latin, and to notice the centurion’s surprise that Paul, an oriental Jew, should speak Greek, the cultured language of the world, not Latin (Acts 21:37ff).”

Against this background of peace and unity was a growing discontentment with the contemporary religions and philosophies. Bruce (1958, p24) notes that “the greater part of the civilised world was politically united, but the old classical religions were bankrupt.” According to Green, “it is not surprising to find a growing dissatisfaction in Greek thought with the worship of many Gods with human characteristics” (1993; 2002, p14). Some Gentiles, known as ‘God-fearers’, were attracted to the monotheism of Judaism, but religion was tied too closely to one nation to have widespread appeal. During this period, the mystery religions were growing in popularity. These cults tried to satisfy a craving for salvation and the hope for immortality; they are another factor that favoured the spread of Christianity.

In conclusion, Green notes: “In the years between AD33 and 64 a new movement was born. In those thirty years it got sufficient growth and credibility to become the largest religion the world has ever seen and to change the lives of hundreds of millions of people” (1993; 2002, p7).

THE STRUCTURE OF ACTS

The book of Acts covers a vast amount of information giving us a chronological record of events in the church in the first century. However, it is fragmentary in places. For example, sometimes one verse will cover many miles (Ch 18:22) or sometimes no detail is given of a visit (Ch 19:1), while other events are described in great detail (Ch 15). It is difficult, therefore, to analyse the way the book has been structured by the author. Different theories have emerged, which, as you will see later, are linked to the purpose of the book.

Theories on the structure of Acts

1. The structure of Acts can be viewed in three parts, based on the pattern of Jesus’ command in Acts 1:8, which involved the gospel spreading to:
 - ... Jerusalem (Ch 1–7).
 - ... Judea and Samaria (Ch 8–12).
 - ... Rome, the centre of the world (Ch 13–28).
2. Another possible division of Acts is into two parts, explained by the parallel between the ministries of Peter and Paul:

... Peter (centred in Jerusalem) Ch 1–12.

... Paul (centred in Antioch) Ch 13–28.

Guy (1969, p9) explains that chapters 1–12 deal with the church in Palestine and Syria – how it spread from Jerusalem to Samaria, Joppa, Caesarea, Damascus and Antioch, with Peter as one of the main characters. Chapters 13–28 tell of the church in the Gentile world, with Paul as the leading character. Luke “relates the journeys to Cyprus and Asia Minor, to Macedonia and Greece, and how Paul was arrested in Jerusalem, held prisoner at Caesarea and eventually taken to Rome.” (Guy, 1969, p9). An outline of the parallels between the ministries of Peter and Paul is set out below:

Peter’s Ministry	Paul’s Ministry
Missionary to Jews	Missionary to Gentiles
Jerusalem	Antioch and Gentile world
Speech at Pentecost (Ch 2)	Speech at Pisidian Antioch (Ch 13)
Healing of Lame Man (Ch 3)	Healing of Lame man (Ch 14)
Judgement of Ananias and Sapphira (Ch 5)	Judgement of Elymas (Ch 13)
Escape from jail in Jerusalem (Ch 12)	Escape from jail in Phillipi (Ch 16)
Raising of Dorcas from the dead (Ch 9)	Raising of Eutychus from the dead (Ch 20)

This division of Acts acknowledges the importance of the work of bringing the gospel to the Jews (by Peter) and the Gentiles (by Paul). However, it does not take into account material in Acts that has nothing to do with Peter or Paul.

3. Parallels have also been made between the structure of Luke’s Gospel and Acts, which of course is based on the theory that Luke was the author of both. Smith (1988, np) points out that:

- both acknowledge the importance of Jerusalem.
- both are arranged in the form of journeys.
- both end with accounts of trials.
- in both there is the pattern of rejection of Jesus and his teaching by the religious authorities.

4. Short summaries that occur at intervals throughout the book are another feature of the book of Acts:

Summary Reference	Events
Ch 2:42–47	The lifestyle of the believers
Ch 4:32f	The use of possessions
Ch 5:12	Signs attributed to the apostles
Ch 9:31; 16:5	Progress up to that point
Ch 5:42; 15:35	Teaching and preaching
Ch 6:7, 12:24; 19:20	Expansion of the church as the Word of God

5. A special feature of Acts is the ‘we’ passages, which indicate that the author was present at the events. This has led some to regard the structure of Acts as influenced by Luke’s travel diary.

6. Finally, there are certain similar phrases used in Acts based around the term ‘The Word of God’, which may influence the structure of the book. These phrases comment on further expansion of the church:

Reference	Phrases	Expansion of church
Ch 6:7	The Word of God increased	After the appointment of ‘The Seven’ to support the apostles
Ch 12:24	The Word of God grew and multiplied	After Antioch has become an important centre for mission, and when the church at Jerusalem is experiencing problems
Ch 19:20	The Word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily	After the success of Paul’s missionary journeys

Outline of the book of Acts (for AS Level study)

Main Events	Detail	Reference
The beginning of the church	Prologue Jesus' initiation of the church's mission The Pentecost event The first preaching of the gospel (Pentecost speech) First summary of the life of the Early Church	Ch 1:1–2 Ch 1:3–11 Ch 2:1–13 Ch 2:14–42 Ch 2:43–47
The church and the Jewish Authorities	The healing of the lame man and Peter's explanation The arrest of Peter and John Prayer for boldness Second summary of the life of the Early Church Ananias and Sapphira Growth of the church Second arrest of apostles	Ch 3:1–26 Ch 4:1–22 Ch 4:23–31 Ch 4:32–37 Ch 5:1–11 Ch 5:12–16 Ch 5:17–42
The church starts to grow	The Appointment of the Seven Stephen's speech and martyrdom The evangelising activity of Philip Paul's conversion Paul begins to preach	Ch 6:1–7 Ch 6:8–8:1 Ch 8:4–25 & Ch 8:26–40 Ch 9:1–19a Ch 9:19b–31
The start of the Gentile mission	Peter's miracles The conversion of Cornelius The church at Antioch The imprisonment and escape of Peter	Ch 9:32–43 Ch 10:1–11:18 Ch 11:19–30 Ch 12:1–25
The First Missionary Journey	Cyprus, Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra	Ch 13:1–14:28
The Second Missionary Journey	Derbe, Lystra, Macedonia, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth	Ch 15:36–18:22
The Third Missionary Journey	Caesarea, Antioch, Ephesus, Miletus	Ch 18:23–21:17

WHO WROTE THE BOOK OF ACTS?

It is generally accepted that Luke's Gospel and Acts were written by the same man, but neither the Gospel nor Acts actually claims this to be Luke. Tradition names the author as Luke, "the beloved physician" (Col 4:14) and a co-worker of Paul (Philemon 1:24 and 2 Tim 4:11), although his name is

in fact only mentioned three times in the New Testament. Barclay feels that it is obvious that Luke was a doctor because he instinctively uses medical words (1955, pxiv). However, Banks highlights the view of Cadbury that the language used does not require a medical author since it is found also in the language of non-medical authors (2006, p14).

We can also work out from Colossians 4:11 that Luke was a Gentile. The verse concludes with a list of greetings from Jews and a new list begins in verse 12. The natural conclusion is that this is a list of Gentiles. Luke is mentioned in this list, and if we accept that he is the author of Acts, then the fact remains that he is the only Gentile author in the New Testament. Banks (2006, p12) also points to Acts 1:19, in which the author refers to “their language” when speaking of the Aramaic spoken by the residents of Jerusalem. The quality of the author’s Greek, the general lack of Semitic (Jewish) words and the universalism found in Luke–Acts also imply that he is a Gentile (Banks, p12).

There are two types of evidence to support the argument that Luke is the author of both pieces of work. The first type of evidence we will look at is ‘external’ evidence, meaning that it is found ‘apart from’ or outside Luke’s Gospel and Acts. The second type of evidence is ‘internal’ evidence, so called because we look inside the Gospel and Acts for clues to the authorship.

External evidence

1. Packer (1966, p2) points out that as early as the end of the second century AD the tradition of the church held that Luke wrote Acts. Irenaeus was an early Christian writer who lived in the second century. He held that Acts was written by Luke and he was supported by other early Christian writers, for example Clement of Alexandria (AD150–215) and Tertullian (AD160–225).
2. In the early days of Christianity the New Testament did not exist in the form that we have it today. Rather it developed over a long period of time, with some books being rejected from the final ‘Canon of Scripture’, which closed in the fourth century. However, some earlier evidence of a compilation of New Testament books exists. Around AD170, a list of New Testament books was collected known as ‘the Muratorian Fragment’. The ‘Acts of all of the Apostles’ is one of the books included on this list, naming Luke as the author.
3. Another piece of evidence is found in a preface to the third Gospel, written at about the same time, called ‘the anti-Marcionite prologue’. In it Luke is named as the author of Acts as well as of the Gospel.

Internal evidence

1. Luke's Gospel and Acts can be looked upon as a two-volume work. Acts continues the story at the point at which the Gospel finishes. Freed (2005, p4) points to Acts 1:1, which indicates that Luke intended the second volume to complement the first. This argument is further supported by Guy, who comments that "the end of the Gospel overlaps with the beginning of Acts" (1969, p6) and Barrett, who adds that "the end of the story of Jesus is the church; and the story of Jesus is the beginning of the church" (1961, p57ff). Furthermore, both Luke's Gospel and Acts were addressed to the same man, Theophilus.
2. Acts is written using mainly the third person pronoun (He did this; they went to), a style that suggests the author was not present at the events he is recording. However, there are four passages in Acts (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28) where the pronoun changes from the third person to the first person (I did this; We went to). These are referred to as the 'we' passages because it is obvious that the author was present at these events. These passages can be described as eye-witness accounts and were written like a travel diary record. "In these passages we find more exact notes of place and times than in other parts of the book. The natural conclusion is that the writer was himself present at these points" (Guy, 1969, p14).
3. Freed also points out that "common vocabulary, similarities in literary style, and some of the same religious beliefs also support the views of common authorship" (2005, p14). Longenecker agrees, adding that "stylistically and structurally, the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are so closely related that they have to be assigned to the same author" (1995, p238).



TASK

Rather than trying to work out who the author was, work backwards and use the method of elimination. In other words, who could the author NOT have been? For example, if you were writing a diary account of a day spent with friends it might read as follows:

"Tom, Kate, Amy and I drove down to the beach yesterday. It was a really hot day and we ran into Jon and Sam at the café so we all went for coffee and had a right laugh."