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New Testament Bible Survey | The Acts of the Apostles

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Last Week Review

- The Gospel of John presents stories about Jesus that are independent of the Synoptics but complementary to them.
- John presents Jesus as God's *shaliach*, his divinely-appointed ambassador to represent the Father to the world.
- In John, Jesus follows a pendulum effect of humility (taking on flesh) and exaltation (the crucifixion and ascension), revealing his divine purpose.

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What is Your Legacy?

What has the Christian faith passed down to you?



Hospitals



Orphanages



Antisemitic "Juden-sow" from Wittenberg

Part of being obedient to Christ is ensuring we don't pass down our own ideas of what legacy is!

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Summary of Acts of the Apostles

- Key Verse: Acts 1:8

  "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

- Summary:

  Acts is the second of Luke's two-volume series describing the mission of the church as it expanded both geographically from Jerusalem to Rome and ethnically from an intra-Jewish movement to an extra-Jewish faith. Luke further explains how Jesus' message of the Kingdom of God appeals to the Gentile world despite the difficulties faced by the early apostles, modeling how the early church grew in the face of the struggles.

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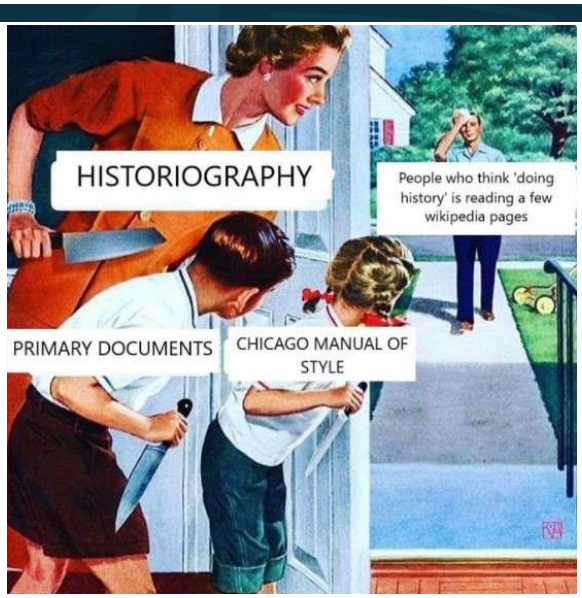
Purpose of Acts



Remember our process of interpretation:

1. What does the text say?
2. What is the CONTEXT (the ORIGINAL audience)?
3. What does it mean to us?

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Purpose of Acts

- The book of Acts is a unique type of literature written to describe the beginning of the New Testament church.
- Acts can be called a "general history" in terms of ancient genre
- *Caution:* doing history in the ancient world =/= to doing history today
- Acts has characteristics in common with multiple types of Hellenistic and Jewish literature genres of the 1st century:
  - *Historiography*
  - *Praxeis*
  - *Biography*
  - *Novel*
  - *Genealogy*
  - *Travel descriptions*
  - *Local history*
  - *Chronography*

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Purpose of Acts

- Like in the Gospel of Luke, Luke is following the genre of the day:

  "Those who wish to write histories are motivated, I observe, not by one and the same aim, but by widely different motives. Some, eager to display their literary skill and to win the fame therefrom expected, rush into this department of letter; others, to gratify the persons to whom the record happens to relate, have undertaken the requisite labor even though beyond their power; others again have been constrained by the mere stress of events in which they themselves took part to set these out in a comprehensive narrative; while many have been induced by prevailing ignorance of important affairs of general utility to publish a history of them for the public benefit. Of the previous motives the last two apply to myself." **Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities, 1.1.3***

- Luke calls his work a *diegesis* – the same word used by other historians of the day for work that is faithful to the events

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Luke: Historian or Theologian?

- A major issue of discussion for 250 years has been this tension between being an historian and a theologian
- Two extreme poles:

Creative theologian who writes for his audience ⟷ *In Tension* ⟷ Modern, newspaper reporter/historian

Everything theological — Everything factual

- This is a false dichotomy!
- We believe that the Holy Spirit was active in the creative process of writing Luke-Acts



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Overall Structure of Acts

- Acts follows three primary movements:
  - The establishment of the church in JERUSALEM
  - Second, the scattering of the church outside of Jerusalem into the neighboring regions of JUDEA and SAMARIA
  - Third, the movement of the church out into the ENDS OF THE EARTH
- This structure can be seen in Christ's commission to the first group of believers in Acts 1:8
  - *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*
- Acts lives out the promise of the establishment of the Kingdom of God that Luke declared to all the nations in his Gospel

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Themes of Acts: The Work of the Holy Spirit

Group Activity:

Take the following passages and examine how the Holy Spirit is driving the ministry of the church forward:

- Acts 2:1 – 14
- Acts 4:1 - 22
- Acts 10:9 – 48
- Acts 19:1 – 7

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Themes of Acts: The Work of the Holy Spirit

- The expansion of the church forms the narrative basis for Acts, but the work of the Holy Spirit is the engine
- This continues the same theme from the Gospel of Luke
- The presence of the Holy Spirit is evident throughout the book:
  - Inaugurates the new ministry of the church
  - Empowers the preaching and directs the mission activity
  - Demonstrates its presence through miracles
  - Legitimates the ministry to the Gentiles
- The characters seem to always be "catching up" to what the Spirit is doing!



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The Church in Jerusalem

- The post-Christ mission kicks off at PENTECOST in Acts 2. This supernatural moment demonstrated God's desire for the church to reach the NATIONS rather than simply a particular ethnic people:

*"Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from **every nation** under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians—we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God." Acts 2:5-11*

- Pentecost is the inverse of the TOWER OF BABEL as God brings the nations back to himself through the gospel.

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The Church in Jerusalem

- The rest of the Jerusalem section of the book of Acts deal with the CHARACTER of the church and the PERSECUTION of the church.
- Luke describes the GENEROSITY of the church in Acts 4, and presents two opposing examples of character of the church. Barnabas is presented as the archetype of a faithful member of the church. Note that he only sold a single field and gave the money to the apostles.
- ANANIAS and SAPPHIRA likewise sold property, but held back some of the proceeds for themselves. Their sin was lying to the Holy Spirit and their death demonstrated the seriousness of the UNITY and INTEGRITY of the church.



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The Church in Jerusalem

- Each section of the three phases of mission also details the persecution the church encountered
- Acts 7:54-60 describes the death of STEPHEN, the first MARTYR of the church, who was killed for proclaiming Christ as divine to the Jewish leadership. This would spark the scattering of the church out of Jerusalem.
- Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin reflects common elements found in the other speeches in Acts – very important part of writing historiography in the 1st century
  - Appeal to hear message of salvation
  - Placing gospel message in larger context of situation
  - Interruption of sermon by character or narrator
  - The Holy Spirit

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Regional Expansion

- After the outbreak of persecution in Jerusalem, Acts describes an expansion both geographically and ethnically:
- Acts 8: Philip ministers in SAMARIA (not Jewish) and ministers to an Ethiopian eunuch on the road between Jerusalem and Gaza
- Acts 9: The former persecutor, Saul, converts to Christianity on the road to Antioch, where Christians have established new congregations.
  - It is important to note that Saul never changed his name to Paul - the two names were interchangeable - Saul was a HEBREW name; Paul was a ROMAN name.

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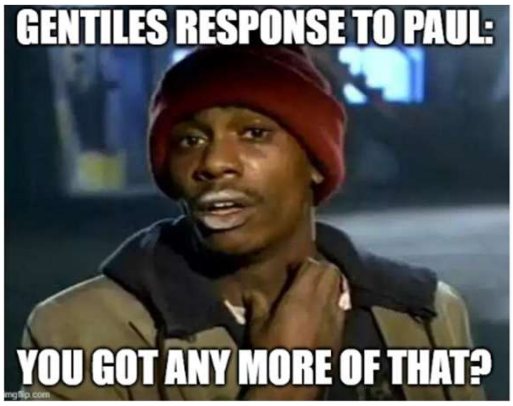
Regional Expansion

- Act 10: Peter travels to Joppa (on the coast of Palestine) and, after a divine dream, leads the gentile Cornelius and his household to Christ
- Acts 11: People travel to Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch and begin speaking to Greeks
- Acts 12: Church met again by persecution – James, son of Zebedee, killed and Peter imprisoned



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To the Ends of the Earth

- In Acts 13, Paul and Barnabas are commissioned to travel across the Roman Empire to evangelize
- The rest of the book describes their three missionary journeys as the gospel reaches "the ends of the earth" – Rome
- This represents a shift in the character focus of Acts – from Peter, James, and John to Paul
- There are other missionaries doing the same activities, hinted at in Acts and other NT books – "my fellow worker"

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To the Ends of the Earth

- This also represents a shift in the focus of efforts to evangelize, as the issue of Gentile converts becomes a source of tension, leading to the Jerusalem Council meeting in Acts 15
- This issue of whether Christianity is "inclusive" (anyone can join) or "exclusive" (one must be Jewish to be a Christian) reflects the cultural debate of the 1st century
- Like in the previous two sections, the believers face persecution in this phase as well



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To the Ends of the Earth

- Paul finds himself at odds with various factions of the church – "Judaizers," "men from James," "Peter," the "Christian Pharisees"
- Different parties constantly follow Paul and attempt to undermine his authority and work in his established churches
- Paul even has to publicly re-establish his Jewish commitments to Torah observance (at the request of James) by attending Temple rites in Acts 22
- This episode leads to Paul's arrest and eventual death.



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To the Ends of the Earth

- The issue of Gentile conversion is solved at the Great Jerusalem Council in Acts 15
- James suggests a compromise position between Paul and the Christian Pharisees to abstain from:
  - Food sacrificed to idols
  - Blood and strangled animals
  - Fornication
- This didn't stop the conflict between the "conservative" Jewish Christians and the "liberal" Pauline faction



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To the Ends of the Earth



Three missionary journeys, followed by a fourth journey to Rome for his trial

- 1st Journey – limited in scope
- 2nd Journey – includes large cities: Ephesus, Athens, Corinth, Jerusalem; gathers offering for Jerusalem church
- 3rd Journey – covers much of the same territory; terminates in Jerusalem with Paul's arrest

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To the Ends of the Earth

- Paul is saved from a mob in the Temple by the Roman soldiers
- Paul escapes the plot to kill him by appealing to the Roman governor, Felix, and then to the Emperor in Rome
- Paul's imprisonment in Rome led to one of his most productive literary periods:
  - Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon (the "Prison Epistles")
- Acts ends with Paul still imprisoned in Rome, before his beheading in the early to mid-60s under Emperor Nero

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What is Your Legacy?

What will we pass on to our kids?





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Today's Takeaways

- Acts of the Apostles recounts the stories of the early church from its founding in Jerusalem and spread to the whole world through the power of the Spirit
- Like his gospel, Luke is writing with a variety of sources in the common mode of the time (don't apply modern categories to ancient history)
- Acts fulfills the command of Jesus to take the gospel to the "ends of the earth" (Rome)

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Preparation for Next Week

- Reading:
  - Galatians, Colossians, and Ephesians
  - Burge / Green – Chapters 14, 19
- Writing:
  - Theological ditty topic: “What does Paul’s reaction to the Judaizers in Galatians reveal about his personality and approach to ministry?”



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