The Book of Acts

Lesson 1

The Background of Acts

Manuscript

thirdmill
Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.

ABOUT THIRDMILL

Founded in 1997, Thirdmill is a non-profit Evangelical Christian ministry dedicated to providing:

Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.

Our goal is to offer free Christian education to pastors and Christian leaders around the world who lack sufficient training for ministry. We are meeting this goal by producing and globally distributing an unparalleled multimedia seminary curriculum in English, Arabic, Chinese, Russian, and Spanish. Our curriculum is also being translated into more than 20 other languages through our partner ministries. Consisting of graphic-driven videos, printed instruction, and internet resources, Thirdmill curriculum is designed to be used by schools, groups, and individuals, both online and in local learning communities. We also offer free, structured, certified biblical and theological training in multiple languages through our Thirdmill Institute.

Over the years, we have developed a highly cost-effective method of producing multimedia lessons of the finest content and quality. Our graphic designers, illustrators, and producers adhere to the highest production standards and use state-of-the-art equipment and techniques. Our writers and editors are theologically trained educators, our translators are theologically astute native speakers of their target languages, and our lessons contain the insights of hundreds of respected seminary professors and pastors from around the world.

In order to accomplish our distribution goals, Thirdmill has forged strategic partnerships with churches, seminaries, Bible schools, missionaries, Christian broadcasters, satellite television providers, and other organizations. These relationships have already resulted in the distribution of millions of video lessons to indigenous leaders, pastors, and seminary students. Our websites also serve as avenues of distribution and provide additional materials to supplement our lessons, including audio sermons, lectures, electronic books, and materials on how to start your own learning community.

Thirdmill is recognized by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) corporation. We depend on the generous, tax-deductible contributions of churches, foundations, businesses, and individuals. For more information about our ministry, and to learn how you can get involved, please visit www.thirdmill.org.

Contents

The Book of Acts

Lesson One

The Background of Acts

INTRODUCTION

The great German composer Ludwig von Beethoven is still remembered around the world for his beautiful and skillful compositions. But as wonderful as his musical scores are in themselves, his works are even more impressive when we remember that Beethoven suffered progressive hearing loss that began when he was a young man. In fact, it's astounding to realize that Beethoven wrote many of his greatest works when he was entirely deaf. Knowing the background of Beethoven's life makes his music all the more impressive.

In important ways, appreciating the Scriptures is similar to appreciating Beethoven. It isn't difficult to see the power and clarity with which the various books of the Bible proclaim God's revelation. But when we learn about the backgrounds of the writers of the Bible, their world, their lives and their purposes, our understanding and appreciation of the Scriptures become much deeper.

This is the first lesson in our series *The Book of Acts*. In this series we'll explore the New Testament book often called "The Acts of the Apostles" or simply "Acts." We've entitled this lesson "The Background of Acts," and we'll consider some basic issues that will help us understand and appreciate the teachings of this book more deeply.

Our lesson will touch on three critical aspects of the background of Acts. First, we'll examine the authorship of the book. Second, we'll look at its historical setting. And third, we'll explore its theological background. Let's begin by looking at the authorship of Acts.

AUTHORSHIP

Like all Scripture, the book of Acts was inspired by the Holy Spirit. But this divine inspiration shouldn't diminish our attention to its human author. The Holy Spirit kept the original writings of Scripture free from error, but he still employed the personalities, backgrounds and intentions of its human writers.

Acts has traditionally been attributed to Luke, the author of the third gospel. But neither the third gospel nor the book of Acts specifically mention the author's name. So, we should look at the reasons for affirming the traditional view of Luke's authorship.

We'll explore the authorship of Acts from three perspectives. First, we'll compare Acts with the gospel of Luke. Second, we'll examine early church history and its witness concerning Luke's authorship. And third, we'll look briefly at other aspects of the New Testament that indicate Luke wrote both books. Let's turn first to what we can learn about Acts' authorship from the gospel of Luke.

GOSPEL OF LUKE

When we compare Acts with Luke's gospel, we find both explicit evidence that strongly suggests one person wrote both books, and implicit evidence from the style and content of the books. Let's begin with the explicit evidence.

Explicit

In Acts 1:1, we read these words:

> In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach (Acts 1:1, NIV).

Here, in the prologue, the writer spoke of his "former book," meaning that Acts is the second of at least two volumes. He also indicated that he wrote this book to a person named "Theophilus." Now listen to the similar prologue in Luke 1:3-4:

> It seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught (Luke 1:3-4).

As in Acts, this passage refers to someone named Theophilus. But there is no reference to an earlier book.

Both Acts and the gospel of Luke are dedicated to Theophilus. And, as we've just seen, the book of Acts refers to a "former book." These facts provide strong evidence that the author of these books produced at least two volumes — the gospel of Luke being the first, and the book of Acts being the second. In fact, the connection between these two prologues reflects an ancient literary custom used when an author produced two-volume works. For instance, Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, wrote a two-volume work entitled *Against Apion* that has similar prefaces in both volumes.

Beyond these explicit connections, there are also implicit correlations between Acts and the gospel of Luke that point toward common authorship.

Implicit

> **We usually understand that the book of Luke and the book of Acts are by the same author for several reasons. On the one hand, we have a smooth transition between the end of Luke and the beginning of Acts. On the other hand, both books have a profuse use of medical language, which suggests an educated author and, in addition to that, in both books we see an interesting use of the level of detail about the**

> **things that are being narrated, and that tells us of the same style in the author's way of thinking.**
>
> — **Rev. Arthur Denyer (translation)**

A number of New Testament scholars have pointed out similarities that provide significant implicit evidence for common authorship. For instance, as we've just seen, Luke 1:3, 4 states that the author had investigated a variety of sources and made an orderly account dedicated to Theophilus. It shouldn't surprise us, then, that many scholars have noted how the accounts in Luke's gospel and the book of Acts are ordered and shaped in similar ways.

There are also several similarities in the compositional structure of the books. They both proceed in an episodic style, and both are roughly the same length, each filling a standard-sized scroll. Beyond this, there's a similar chronological length in each book. Both Luke and Acts cover roughly the same number of years.

In addition, they have parallel themes. As just one example, the gospel of Luke climaxes with Jesus' journey toward his arrest, trial, suffering, death and victory in Jerusalem, the capital of Judaism and the seat of Jewish monarchical power. Similarly, the book of Acts reaches its conclusion with the apostle Paul's journey toward his arrest, trial and suffering, and closes with his victorious proclamation of the gospel of Christ in Rome, the capital city of the world's imperial power.

These two books are also part of the same story, with expectations raised in Luke's gospel that are then fulfilled in the book of Acts. For example, in the beginning of Luke, faithful Simeon declared that Jesus would be a light to the Gentiles. In Luke 2:30-32, Simeon said:

> My eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel (Luke 2:30-32).

Jesus' ministry in Luke's gospel explains God's salvation and the promise given to Israel. But only in Acts do we see God's salvation serving as "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" in significant ways. These and other similarities point to a common redemptive-historical vision between the two works, and to a shared sense of purpose and belief. And these similarities suggest that the same author wrote both books.

> **There are all kinds of reasons, good reasons, for believing that the author of the third gospel, Luke, is also the author of the book of Acts. There are, for example, continuities in style between those two books, even grammatical similarities between the third gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. But probably the most compelling is the fact that at the beginning of the book of Acts, the author mentions his previous letter, or his previous work, his previous record about Jesus, and then he mentions directly the name Theophilus.**
>
> — **Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

Now that we've looked at some of the evidence for common authorship in Acts and the gospel of Luke, we're ready to consider the evidence provided by early church history.

EARLY CHURCH HISTORY

We'll briefly examine evidence from early church history in two ways. First, we'll look at early written manuscripts of and about the Bible. And second, we'll look at what early church leaders wrote about Luke's authorship. Let's begin with the evidence of some ancient manuscripts.

Manuscripts

From the second to the fourth century A.D., several manuscripts associated with the early church testified that Luke, Paul's traveling companion, was the author of both Acts and Luke. One very old manuscript, referred to as Papyrus[75], was discovered in 1952 in Egypt. Written on papyrus, it includes some of the earliest New Testament manuscript evidence. It was probably copied sometime between A.D. 175-225, and it includes large portions of the gospel of Luke and the gospel of John. Between the texts of the two gospels are written two descriptions of their content. After the conclusion of the gospel of Luke, the manuscript contains the words *euangelion kata Loukan* (εὐαγγέλιον κατά Λουκᾶν), or the gospel according to Luke. And immediately following these words is the expression *euangelion kata Ioannan* (εὐαγγέλιον κατά Ἰωάνναν), or the gospel according to John. These notices indicate that the material preceding the words "the gospel according to Luke" was identified as Luke's gospel. This manuscript evidence indicates that from very early on, it was believed that Luke wrote the third gospel. And by extension, it points to Luke as the author of Acts as well.

Second, the Muratorian Fragment, dated around A.D. 170-180, is the earliest known document listing the New Testament books that the early church considered to be canonical. After affirming Luke's authorship of the gospel of Luke, it explicitly points to him as the author of Acts as well. In lines 34-36 we read these words:

> **Moreover, the acts of all the apostles were written in one book… Luke compiled the individual events that took place in his presence.**

This statement indicates that in the second century, it was widely believed that Luke was the author of Acts and had witnessed at least some of the events described within it.

Third, the so-called *Anti-Marcionite Prologue*, an introduction to the third gospel written around A.D. 160-180, describes the authorship of Luke and Acts in this way:

> **Luke, moved by the Holy Spirit, composed the whole of this Gospel … And afterwards the same Luke wrote the Acts of the Apostles.**

> **So, sometime in the late second century, early third century — we're not quite sure — there were introductions, very short introductions to three of the four gospels. We call them Anti-Marcionite prologues. And, actually, one of the most popular ones was the short introduction to Luke's gospel, and it's the first one that mentions the name "The Acts of the Apostles" and that Luke was the author. If this dates to the end of the second century, then it's the earliest reference we have to Luke as the author and to the title "The Acts of the Apostles."**
>
> **— Dr. Gregory R. Perry**

Beyond this early manuscript evidence, we also have the testimony of early church leaders indicating that Luke was the author of the third gospel and the book of Acts.

Church Leaders

The church father Irenaeus, who lived from around A.D. 130-202, believed that Luke was the author of the third gospel. In his work *Against Heresies,* Book 3, Chapter 1, Section 1, he wrote:

> **Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the gospel preached by him.**

Here, Irenaeus referred to Acts as the book that "recorded … the gospel preached by Paul." His words are important because good historical evidence indicates that Irenaeus had access to firsthand knowledge regarding Luke's authorship of Acts.

Clement of Alexandria, who lived from around A.D. 150-215, also referred to Luke as the author of Acts. In Book 5, Chapter 12 of his *Stromata*, or "miscellaneous matters," he wrote these words:

> **Luke in the Acts of the Apostles relates that Paul said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious."**

And Tertullian, who lived from A.D. 155-230, wrote these words in his work *Against Marcion*, Book 4, Chapter 2:

> **Of the apostles, therefore, John and Matthew first instill faith into us … Luke and Mark renew it afterwards.**

Here, Tertullian specifically attributed the third gospel to Luke.

Finally, the great church historian Eusebius, writing around A.D. 325, referred to Luke as the author of Acts in Book 1, Chapter 5, Section 3 of his *Ecclesiastical History*.

There, he wrote:

> **Luke … has made mention [of the census] in the Acts.**

In addition to these kinds of affirmative statements, it is striking that there is not one indication in the literature of the early church that anyone other than Luke wrote the third gospel and Acts, even though he was never designated as an apostle. Because of clues like these, we have reason to believe that the early church did not invent the authorship of Luke, but merely passed on what it had received as the truth: that Luke wrote both these books.

So far, we've seen good evidence to affirm Luke's authorship of Acts by comparing it with the gospel of Luke. In addition, the early church testified that Luke was the author of both books. Now, we'll consider other portions of the New Testament that talk about Luke's authorship.

NEW TESTAMENT

To begin, we'll note some clues we gain from the New Testament about the anonymous author. Then, we'll compare these clues with information we have about Luke himself. Let's look first at clues about the author.

Clues

As we've already said, the author of Acts didn't identify himself by name. Apparently, he felt no need to name himself for the sake of his patron Theophilus. In Luke 1:3, he simply said, "It seemed good *to me* … to write." And in Acts 1:1 he said, "In *my* former book … *I* wrote." The author assumed that his patron knew who he was. And while this created no problem for Theophilus, it has created many questions for modern readers. At the same time, there are a number of things that the New Testament does tell us about our author.

First, he was not an apostle. In fact, he probably came to faith after Jesus ascended into heaven. Listen to these details from Luke 1:1-2:

> Many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us (Luke 1:1-2).

When the author said that the events of Jesus' life had been "delivered … to us," he indicated that he was not an eyewitness to the life of Jesus.

Second, the style of Greek in Acts and the gospel of Luke indicates that the author was well educated. Many of the books in the New Testament are written in a fairly common, even unsophisticated style of Greek. But the gospel of Luke and the book of

Acts show more sophistication in their use of the language.

Third, the second half of Acts indicates that the author was Paul's close traveling companion. In the early chapters of Acts, the narratives are consistently in the third person. But beginning in Acts 16, the narrative often takes on a first-person perspective, using words like "we" and "us." We find this type of language in Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; and 27:1–28:16. These passages indicate that the writer accompanied Paul during Paul's later missionary journeys and on Paul's trip from Caesarea to Rome.

Now that we have some clues from the New Testament about our author, how do these details correspond to Luke?

Luke

Let's look once more at the things we know about the author of Luke and Acts and compare them to what we know about Luke.

First, Luke was not an apostle. The apostles served in a foundational role for the church, exercising unique authority on Christ's behalf. They established the church and guarded it from error and trouble. And, according to Acts 1:21, 22, apostles had to be trained by Jesus himself. But Luke never met Jesus in person, and he never claimed the type of authority that belonged to the apostles. Rather, he was simply a faithful, supporting member of Paul's missionary endeavors, under Paul's apostolic authority. He was, as Paul described him in Philemon 24, a "fellow worker" of the apostle.

Second, it's likely that Luke was well educated. We can infer this from Colossians 4:14, where Paul identified Luke as a physician. While medicine was not as formal a discipline in the days of the New Testament as it is today, it still required a person with skill, aptitude, and knowledge.

Third, Luke was Paul's traveling companion. The apostle Paul mentioned that Luke traveled with him in Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11; and Philemon 24.

> **Luke is an eyewitness of Paul; of everything Paul was doing. When Paul was in prison, Paul says, "The doctor Luke is with me." So, when he says that, it's to make us understand, effectively, it's someone who was with Paul, someone who worked together with Paul, and who wrote with evidence of being there. A stranger, one who didn't know Paul, wouldn't write in this way. But Luke wrote it that way because he was with Paul. And he spoke not only in the third person but also in the first-person plural. He says "us," referring to Paul and himself. So, he is indeed a companion of Paul.**
>
> — **Rev. Sem Beasnael (translation)**

We can sum up the issue of authorship for Acts in this way: There is a great deal of historical evidence that points to Luke's authorship of Acts. Luke and Acts have a common author. The evidence of the early church consistently attributes authorship to Luke. And the biblical data is consistent with this idea. In light of these evidences, we have good reason to believe that Luke was the author of both the third gospel and Acts.

And we should always remember that Luke had excellent access and proximity to the subject matter he described.

Now that we've looked at Luke's authorship, we're ready to turn to the historical setting of Acts.

HISTORICAL SETTING

As we examine the historical setting of Acts, we'll look at three topics. First, we'll consider the date of composition. Second, we'll investigate the original audience of the book. And third, we'll explore the audience's social context. Let's begin with the date of the book's writing.

DATE

There have been many different opinions on when the book of Acts was written. But, in general terms, scholars have tended to date the book relative to one particular event. In A.D. 70, as part of the persecution of the Jews, the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. This tragedy struck at the heart of Jewish religious life and changed the way Jews lived and worshiped. The Roman persecution drove them from their homeland, and the temple's destruction left them without a way to worship as the Old Testament prescribed. These events marked a crucial turning point in Jewish history.

> **For the Jewish people, the destruction of the temple meant… It was just a huge event in their ongoing difficult relationship with the Roman Empire. It meant the destruction of their way of life as citizens of Jerusalem. In some ways it's the beginning of the diaspora, the scattering of the Jews throughout the Roman Empire, throughout Europe. And even today. They talk about the day, you know, the day of the week and then the date, and it's still fresh in their memories even though it's two thousand years old.**
>
> **— Dr. Timothy Yoder**

We'll look at the date of Acts first by considering the opinions of scholars who've argued that Luke wrote after the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70. And second, we'll deal with those who've argued that he wrote before A.D. 70. Let's begin with the possibility that Luke wrote after A.D. 70.

After A.D. 70

Scholars who believe that Acts was written after the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70 generally fall into one of two groups. The first group contends that the book was written between A.D. 105-130. This view relies primarily on the belief that some of the

material in Acts depends on *Antiquities*, written by Josephus around A.D. 93 or 94. Advocates of this position point to various connections between Acts and Josephus' work. But most scholars today believe that Luke and Josephus probably recounted well-known historical events separately or depended on common sources. This viewpoint is strengthened by the fact that Luke and Josephus described the same events in different ways, indicating that neither author simply copied the other.

Other scholars conclude that Luke wrote Acts between A.D. 80-95. They believe that Acts is too optimistic about the early church to have been written after the persecution of Christians in the mid-90s. In addition, the writer of Acts seems to have no knowledge of Paul's letters, which were widely circulated near the end of the first century. Had Acts been written later, it surely would show evidence of these letters. Of course, these arguments could also support the position of a pre-A.D. 70 date. So, advocates of a date between A.D. 80-95 also base this view on the argument that Acts was written after the gospel of Luke, which they date after A.D. 70. This date for Luke's gospel is based largely on passages such as Luke 19:43-44 and 21:20-24. These passages seem to allude to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. But they are far from clear descriptions of that event and might just as easily be prophecy, since they're spoken by Jesus, or they describe war in general.

While it's possible to date the book of Acts after the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, it seems more likely that it was written before A.D. 70. There are many evidences in favor of this earlier date, but for our purposes, we'll focus on the last scene in the book of Acts.

Before A.D. 70

In Acts 28:30-31, Luke wrote these words about Paul:

> [Paul] lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance (Acts 28:30-31).

The book of Acts closes with Paul under house arrest in Rome, which took place in A.D. 60-62. This ending offers important evidence for believing that Acts was written before A.D. 70.

First, Luke's description of Paul's ministry stops short of a crucial event that took place in A.D. 64. In A.D. 64, the emperor Nero blamed Christians for the devastating fire in Rome and began to persecute them. It would be strange for Luke not to mention such a major turn of events if he had been aware of it by the time he wrote Acts.

Second, Paul is generally thought to have been martyred during Nero's persecution of the church, probably in A.D. 65 or shortly thereafter. If Luke had known about this, he almost certainly would have mentioned Paul's martyrdom.

Third, when the Jewish temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70, it significantly impacted the relationships between Jews and Gentiles in the church. The book of Acts focuses on these relationships in many places. So, it seems quite unlikely

that Luke would have omitted the destruction of the temple had it occurred before he wrote Acts.

In light of facts like these, it seems best to conclude that Luke completed Acts sometime after Paul's imprisonment began in Rome in A.D. 60 and before the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70.

> **It is fairly safe to say that Acts was not only written in the first century but sometime between 60-70 A.D. There is no reference to the fall of Jerusalem, so that would indicate that the book of Acts was written before 70 A.D. Such a monumental occurrence would be… It would be virtually impossible that it wouldn't be mentioned if Acts was written after A.D. 70. At the same time, Paul's house arrest took place in the years 60 and 61, and we have pretty strong external evidence to identify that with a degree of certainty. So, that locates the book of Acts, because that house arrest is mentioned, that locates the book of Acts sometime after A.D. 61, and I would argue probably best to see it somewhere between 61-65 A.D.**
>
> — **Dr. David B. Garner**

With this understanding of the early date of Acts in mind, we should turn to a second feature of the historical setting of Acts: the original audience of Luke's work.

ORIGINAL AUDIENCE

We'll explore the original audience of Acts in two ways. First, we'll look at the book's explicit dedication to Theophilus. And second, we'll look at the possibility that the book was also intended for a broader audience. Let's begin with Theophilus as Luke's first reader.

Theophilus

> **Luke addresses the Gospel and the book of Acts to a person named Theophilus. Now, Theophilus has sometimes been speculated that it just means "someone who loves God," but Theophilus is best taken as a real person. And a most likely scenario is that Theophilus was something like a patron of Luke, perhaps someone who funded his work, someone who supported his work and so forth. So, when Luke writes to Theophilus, he is writing to a real person, but by extension, given the nature of Luke's writing, he writes for all of those who come to the text looking to understand who Jesus is and what he has done.**
>
> — **Dr. Brandon D. Crowe**

Luke's prologues imply that Theophilus was his patron, the one who commissioned his writing. As we've seen, in Luke 1:3 and Acts 1:1, Luke dedicated his works to "Theophilus." Beyond this, in Luke 1:3, Luke called Theophilus, "most excellent Theophilus." Luke used the term "most excellent" — or *kratistos* (κράτιστος) in Greek — as an expression of honor. This terminology has led many to believe that Theophilus was his wealthy patron. But the relationship between Luke and Theophilus was more complex than mere patronage. By reading the books of Luke and Acts, Theophilus became Luke's student. We can see this aspect of Theophilus' relationship to Luke in the prologue to Luke's gospel. Listen again to Luke 1:3-4:

> It seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught (Luke 1:3-4).

As this passage indicates, Luke's book was designed in part so that Theophilus would "have certainty concerning the things [he had] been taught." To put it simply, Luke wrote to instruct Theophilus.

Having seen that Luke explicitly cited Theophilus as his first reader, it's also helpful to think of Luke's original audience in broader terms.

Broader Audience

From what we read elsewhere in the New Testament, it's not difficult to see that the broader church in the first century struggled with a number of issues. Luke addressed many of these in the book of Acts. The book mentions strife between Jewish and Gentile believers and divisions based on the leadership of different apostles and teachers. It touches on doctrinal errors introduced by false teachers. Acts also addresses strife between the church and civil governments. It focuses on issues faced by women and the poor. It records persecutions, sufferings and imprisonments. Acts touches on these kinds of doctrinal, moral and practical difficulties because the broader church struggled with these kinds of issues in its early decades.

Luke wrote the book of Acts to address a very broad set of issues, so it seems reasonable to assume that he intended his work to be read by many different believers. He was concerned to help both Theophilus and the early church at large to deal with the many challenges they faced.

Having considered the date and original audience of the book of Acts, we're ready to address a third concern: the general social context of Luke's work.

Social Context

We'll explore the social context of Acts by looking at two central features of life in the first century church: first, the rule and power of the Roman Empire; and second, the new relationship between the church and the Jews. Let's look first at the Roman Empire.

Roman Empire

By the time Luke wrote the book of Acts, the Roman Empire had conquered and controlled the entire Mediterranean world. Its reach extended as far as present-day Britain, North Africa and parts of Asia. In the days of the early church, the empire was still growing, adding more and more people and territories to its domain. As it did so, the Roman Empire deeply influenced all aspects of society with its distinctively Roman values, goals, and beliefs. Without a doubt, the greatest influences Rome had on conquered territories were political and economic. A chief political concern of the Roman Empire was to ensure peace and loyalty within the empire. It did this in a number of ways. One was by exerting forceful control over local governments and authorities.

Local Government. Conquered nations were allowed a measure of local autonomy, but their local governments were often reconfigured and were always in subjection to the Roman hierarchy. For example, the book of Acts mentions two Roman governors of Caesarea — Felix and Festus — who ruled the entire land of Judea from Caesarea. In addition to overseeing taxation, they were responsible for maintaining peace and order in their part of the Roman Empire.

Population. The empire also exercised cultural and political influence through the integration of Roman citizens into the population of conquered nations. Often, Rome offered retiring military forces land in newly conquered territories. This practice established enclaves of loyal Roman citizens all across the empire. It also promoted the values and commitments of Rome in both official and social settings. This is why the book of Acts occasionally mentions people from Rome. In Acts 2:10-11, we read that, as early as Pentecost, there were "visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes." Proselytes were Gentile converts to Judaism. And Cornelius, the God-fearing Roman centurion in Acts 10, plays an important role in the spread of the gospel in Acts.

Public Works. Beyond this, Rome's public works also influenced local cultures. The public works of Roman rule — including roads, elaborate buildings and public meeting places — explains how Paul and others traveled so freely and safely in their missionary efforts. The apostles also used these public venues to proclaim the gospel as they went from place to place.

Religion. Perhaps the most important feature of the Roman Empire for the early church was its influence on the religions of the people it conquered. At the time of Luke's writing, the Roman emperor was seen not only as the lord of his people and realm, but also as their *soter* or "savior." According to Roman propaganda, the reigning emperor, or Caesar, delivered his people from chaos and darkness. And the extension of the Roman Empire was presented as an extension of his salvation. He was freeing the people from the tyranny of their local kings and bringing everyone under Rome's benevolent rule. In most places, conquered people were allowed to continue many of their own religious practices as long as they confessed the superiority of the Caesar and the traditional Roman gods.

Now, in many respects, Jews and Christians in the first century were respectable subjects of Rome. But faithful Jews and Christians refused to acknowledge the supremacy of Roman religion. Still, the Roman Empire designated the Jewish faith as a *religio licita* or "legal religion." It also tolerated the Christian faith as much as possible — even though it repressed both groups. Through its control of government, population, public works and religion, Rome attempted to spread its influence everywhere it could.

> **The Romans were god worshipers and the emperor was their god, and that's who they focused on. And the Jews found that reprehensible. But the fact is, is that he's not a god and the people knew it because they could see the way that, Nero and others, they acted. And so, as a result that was really an issue that couldn't be reconciled. There's just no way that you can merge the emperor worship and the worship of the one true God, the Triune God. It just wasn't going to work.**
>
> **— Dr. Rodney Orr**

Now that we've looked at the social context of Acts in terms of the influences of the Roman Empire, we're ready to examine the relationship between unbelieving Jews and the early Christian church.

Jews

We'll consider the relationship between the Jews and the early church first by noting the deep connections between them, and second by exploring their fundamental differences. Let's begin with the connections between these two groups.

Deep Connections. The early church shared a common heritage with the Jewish people. In the modern world, we often have to remind ourselves that Jesus was Jewish. And not only was Jesus Jewish, but the apostles were all Jewish, and at first, the church itself consisted almost entirely of Jewish converts. So, it shouldn't be surprising that in the mind of the early church, loyalty to the promised Jewish Messiah implied a certain faithfulness to Judaism. According to the book of Acts, many people in the early church attended temple worship, met in synagogues to hear the Scriptures, and maintained appreciation for many Jewish customs. For example, listen to Paul's words in Acts 13:32-33:

> We bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus (Acts 13:32-33).

Paul and those traveling with him identified themselves with the Jews in the synagogue, speaking of the patriarchs as "the fathers" and of Christians as "us their children."

In addition, the early church and the Jewish community at large were both committed to the same Scriptures. In the book of Acts, Christians consistently appealed

to the Scriptures when they proclaimed the gospel in Jewish contexts. Acts 17:1-3 records how Paul turned to the Scriptures when proclaiming Christ to Jews. Listen to Luke's words there:

> They came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead (Acts 17:1-3).

Beyond this, the deep connection between Christianity and Judaism resulted in significant interactions between the Jewish authorities and the early church. According to the book of Acts, the early church's boldness in proclaiming the gospel of Christ often led to conflict with Jewish authorities. But as much as possible, the early Christians acknowledged Jewish leaders and resisted them only when they ordered them to disobey God's commands.

Despite the deep connections between the Jews and the early church, there were still fundamental differences.

Fundamental Differences. First and most fundamentally, Christians and unbelieving Jews disagreed over the person and work of Jesus. The church proclaimed that Jesus was the Messiah who had conquered death. They believed he was spreading the kingdom of God throughout the earth and restoring all creation, beginning with his own resurrection from the dead. But the unbelieving Jews denied what the church affirmed to be true. They believed that Jesus was unqualified to be the Messiah. They denied that his miracles and works were from God. And they refused to believe that he had risen from the dead. These differences created a rift between Christians and non-Christian Jews that continues even to our own day.

Second, while the early church and the Jewish leaders agreed on the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures, they disagreed vigorously over the correct interpretation of them. This was particularly true with regard to Jesus. The early church believed that the hopes of the Hebrew Scriptures for the coming Messiah were fulfilled in Jesus. But unbelieving Jews denied this understanding. And while there were a wide range of views within Judaism, most Jews found it impossible to accept that Jesus fulfilled the messianic hopes of the Old Testament.

Third, the early church and the Jewish people of the first century differed over how they viewed Gentiles. For the most part, observant Jews didn't share company with Gentiles. But many uncircumcised Gentiles were so attracted to the beliefs and ethical teachings of Judaism that they attached themselves to local Jewish synagogues. They were known as "God-fearers." The God-fearers were respected above other Gentiles, but they were not full members of the Jewish community. Other Gentiles, known as proselytes, converted to Judaism, but this involved undergoing initiation rites, including a baptism and circumcision. They were also expected to observe traditions that Jewish teachers had added to the requirements of the Old Testament.

The early Jewish Christians began with this same understanding of Gentiles. But they gradually came to understand that Gentiles who followed Christ were to be granted full status in the Christian church without having to become Jewish proselytes. In light of

new revelation from the Holy Spirit, the early church determined that faith in Christ, expressed in confession and baptism, was sufficient for membership in the Christian church.

Accordingly, the apostles made it their practice to proclaim the gospel of Christ's universal Lordship to both Jews and Gentiles. And they accepted the spiritual gifts and the ministry of both peoples as the church grew. They also rightly understood that the inclusion of Gentile Christians was a primary means of spreading God's kingdom throughout the world. In fact, this is exactly what God had promised in the Old Testament. Not surprisingly, this led to many conflicts between unbelieving Jews and early Christians.

Knowing some of the details about the time when Luke wrote, the audience to whom he wrote, and the social context in which he wrote will help us greatly as we study the book of Acts. We will be better prepared to appreciate the problems Luke addressed, to understand his solutions, and to apply them to our own lives today.

Now that we've examined the authorship and historical setting of Acts, we're ready to explore our third main topic: the theological background of the book of Acts.

THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

As we study the book of Acts, many theological questions come to mind. Where did Luke learn his theological perspectives? How did he decide what to address in his book and what to omit? What overarching principles guided his writing? Well, the answers to these questions can be found in Luke's theological background.

Our discussion of the theological background of Acts will divide into three parts. First, we'll explore the foundations of Luke's theology in the Old Testament. Second, we'll consider how his theology was influenced by his beliefs about the messianic kingdom of God. And third, we'll see how Luke's gospel helps us understand the message of Acts. Let's begin with the Old Testament foundations to the book of Acts.

OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament influenced Luke's writing in at least two ways. In the first place, Luke was deeply influenced by the Old Testament's view of history in general. And in the second place, he was deeply impacted by its treatment of the history of Israel in particular. Let's look first at how the Old Testament's view of history in general informed Luke's theology.

History

The Old Testament's view of history has influenced countless writers throughout time. For instance, in his work *Pensées,* the 17th century Christian philosopher Blaise Pascal spoke of three great truths that human beings have recognized throughout history. First, he referred to the glory and beauty of creation, the wonder that permeates the

universe because God made all things good. Second, he spoke of the perplexing conflict between the creation's original glory and its present misery and corruption. And third, he spoke of redemption, the hope that there would be a solution to this conflict.

It's easy to see how Pascal's reflections parallel the Old Testament's division of world history into creation, the fall into sin, and redemption. And it's easy to see how Luke reflected this same threefold outlook on history in the book of Acts.

Consider first the period of creation. In Genesis 1, God prepared the world to be an extension of his heavenly kingdom. He ordered the universe, formed a paradise in Eden, and placed humanity, his royal image, within that paradise. He then commanded humanity to multiply and to rule over the earth, beginning in Eden, and stretching to the ends of the globe. In short, God set the stage for the full development of his kingdom on earth.

Luke's awareness of this important Old Testament idea is evident in many places in Acts. For instance, in 4:24-30, Peter and John spoke of creation as evidence of God's royal lordship over the earth. In 7:49, Stephen asserted that God had created the world to be his royal footstool. And in 14:15-17, Paul and Barnabas spoke of creation as the basis for God's rule over the nations. As Paul told the Athenians in Acts 17:24-27:

> The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth … made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth … that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us (Acts 17:24-27).

According to this passage, the backdrop to Paul's gospel ministry reached all the way to creation. God is the Lord who "made the world and everything in it." He ordered the world so that men would "seek God … feel their way toward him and find him." Paul's gospel ministry grew out of the purposes God established at creation.

By including these details in his book, Luke indicated that the theme of creation was important to his own understanding of the early church. In much the same way, Luke's awareness of humanity's fall into sin also comes to the foreground in the book of Acts.

As we know, Genesis 3 teaches that after God created humanity, Adam and Eve rebelled against him. The impact of this rebellion was tremendous. According to the Old Testament, humanity had such a central role in the world that their fall into sin brought the entire human race under the curse of death and corrupted the entire creation.

Luke wrote of the misery of sin in many places throughout Acts. We find references to the Fall in Peter's sermons in 2:38 and 3:19, in the apostles' defense before the Sanhedrin in 5:29-32, in Paul's words to the Ephesian elders in 20:18-35, and in Paul's speech before King Agrippa in 26:20. The book of Acts repeatedly illustrates that everything in creation — the physical world, our economic structures, our political systems, and even the church itself — suffers because of humanity's fall into sin.

In addition to Luke's awareness of creation and the Fall, his history in Acts indicates that he also embraced the Old Testament teaching on redemption. As horribly as sin had corrupted humanity and creation, Luke knew that God had not left the world without hope.

The Old Testament taught that God had been redeeming or saving people from the curse of sin since it first entered the world. But more than this, Old Testament prophets also predicted a time when sin and its curse would be entirely eliminated from the creation. At that time God's kingdom would come to earth as it is in heaven.

In Acts, Luke frequently displayed his belief that this redemption was coming to the world through the saving work of Christ. This theme appears throughout Acts. To name just a few places, we find the theme of redemption in Peter's sermon in 2:21, 40; the apostles' defense before the Sanhedrin in 5:29-32; the angel's words to Cornelius in 11:14; Paul's speech in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch in 13:23; Peter's argument in the Jerusalem counsel in 15:7-11, and Paul and Silas' words to the Philippian jailor in 16:30-31.

As we can see, Luke was deeply influenced by the Old Testament view that the history of the world is the history of God's kingdom expanding to fill the earth. This is why he so often recorded moments from the first century that reflected the broad scope of world history from creation, to the fall into sin, to redemption in Christ.

> **Luke is very careful to show that this Christian faith is perhaps a new expression but is actually the continuation, the completion of what was given by the prophets before, what God had moved upon them to write of and to look forward to, and the tying back to the old covenant, in Peter's preaching on Pentecost, and in the defense of the apostles Peter and John, as Peter speaks to the Sanhedrin when he and John were arrested, in how we see Paul argue for the fact that Jesus is indeed the prophesied Messiah. All of these arguments and proclamations include proofs from the Hebrew Scriptures. So, for Luke that's very important to do, and it ties Christianity to that which is ancient. It's not a new religion. It is what is the continuation of the original faith.**
>
> — **Dr. John Norwood**

Now that we've looked at the Old Testament's vision of history in general, we're ready to turn to its vision of the history of Israel in particular, and to the way Luke's record in Acts depended on this history.

Israel

Luke relied on the Old Testament history of Israel in countless ways as he wrote Acts. But we'll limit our discussion to three Old Testament characters that informed Luke's history: Abraham, Moses and David. In regard to Abraham, Genesis 12:1-3 records these words:

> The Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that

> you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:1-3).

According to these verses, God called Abraham — who was called "Abram" at the time — to go to the Promised Land for two main purposes. On the one hand, Abraham would father "a great nation," become famous, and receive many spiritual and material blessings. God's blessings to Abraham and his descendants after him were to be symbolic demonstrations that there is hope in God's salvation, even in this fallen world. But on the other hand, God's call went far beyond what Abraham and his descendants would receive. Through Abraham, "all the families of the earth [would] be blessed."

This twofold focus of God's choice of Abraham underlies much of Luke's thinking in Acts. On the one hand, Luke frequently reported how the blessing of salvation in Christ came to the Jews, the descendants of Abraham, fulfilling God's promises to the great patriarch. But on the other hand, Luke also focused on how Jewish Christians brought the gospel of Christ to the Gentiles. Time and again in Acts, Luke reported that Jews like Phillip, Peter, Paul and Barnabas took the gospel of salvation to the Gentile world. This too fulfilled God's promises to Abraham.

In the second place, Luke's outlook in Acts also showed his understanding of the relationship between Moses and the Christian church. As God's deliverer, Moses led Israel from slavery in Egypt, presented God's Law to the nation, and held the Israelites accountable to the Law. And in that same Law, Moses prophesied that God would one day send another prophet like himself to redeem his people from their slavery to sin. As Luke pointed out in Acts, this prophet like Moses turned out to be Jesus. In Acts 7:37-39, Luke recorded these words of Stephen:

> Moses ... said to the Israelites, "God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers." This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us. Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt (Acts 7:37-39).

According to Stephen, Jesus was the prophet Moses had foretold in Deuteronomy 18:15. So, to reject Jesus was also to reject Moses and the Law, just as the ancient Israelites had done. To be truly committed to Moses and the Law, one must embrace Christ. And consider how Luke summarized Paul's words to the Jewish leaders in Acts 28:23:

> From morning till evening [Paul] expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets (Acts 28:23).

For Paul and the rest of the early church, acceptance of Moses and the Law was foundational to faith in Christ. And this belief influenced what Luke wrote in Acts.

In the third place, Luke was influenced by the Old Testament record of David's

dynasty. It would be difficult to imagine any Old Testament theme that was more important to Luke than the establishment of David's house. As Israel grew into an empire in the Old Testament, God chose the family of David as the permanent dynasty to lead his people. But the Old Testament also anticipated the day when the house of David would extend the reign of God from Israel to the ends of the earth. As we read in Psalm 72:8, 17:

> May [David's son] have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth! … May people be blessed in him, all nations call him blessed (Psalm 72:8, 17).

As these verses reveal, it was through his descendant David that Abraham would become a blessing to the world. But David would not accomplish this himself. Rather, one of his descendants would be the king to extend his benevolent, peaceful and righteous rule throughout the entire world.

In the book of Acts, Luke drew deeply from this hope in David's house. He knew that Israel had fallen under the judgment of God for hundreds of years. Yet, he understood that Jesus was the perfectly righteous son of David. He was the royal ruler of God's kingdom who was expanding his reign from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, especially through the work of the Holy Spirit in the church. For example, listen to James' words at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:14-18:

> God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, "After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old" (Acts 15:14-18).

Here James referred to Amos 9:11-12. Amos predicted that after Israel suffered under God's judgment, God would restore David's dynasty and extend his reign over the Gentile nations. As James indicated here, the success of the gospel among the Gentiles was the fulfillment of these Old Testament hopes.

> **In the Old Testament the kingdom of God was in Jewish literature, in Old Testament literature, really, really related to the kingdom of David. One of the very repeated phrases of Jesus is what it means to enter into the kingdom, to really be in the kingdom and what the kingdom is. Matthew develops this a little bit more than maybe the other gospels. However, the idea is those who follow Jesus now enter the kingdom. They are in the kingdom, and now the kingdom becomes, in terms of people, it becomes the church.**
>
> — **Dr. Daniel Steffen**

Luke wanted his readers to understand that Jesus was the heir to Abraham's promises, the prophet like Moses, and the final Davidic king. Jesus had ascended to David's throne and was conquering the world through the proclamation of the gospel and the growth of the church. And he was extending his kingdom of salvation from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, just as the Old Testament had foretold.

Having looked at Luke's dependence on the Old Testament, we're ready to see how the messianic kingdom of God contributed to the theological background of Acts.

KINGDOM OF GOD

Our discussion of the kingdom of God will divide into three parts. First, we'll consider Jewish theology of the kingdom. Second, we'll focus on the theology of John the Baptist. And third, we'll briefly compare these views with Christian theology. Let's begin with Jewish theology.

Jewish Theology

After the last books of the Old Testament were written in the fifth century B.C., Israel entered a period of spiritual darkness. For hundreds of years, the vast majority of Israelites lived outside the Promised Land. And those who remained in the Land suffered under the tyranny of Gentile rulers. At first it was the Babylonians, then the Medes and Persians, then the Greeks, and finally the Romans. Throughout this prolonged history of suffering, the faithful in Israel never lost hope that the Messiah would come and establish God's kingdom over the whole earth.

This hope for the future kingdom took a variety of forms. For example, the Zealots believed that God wanted Israel to usher in the day of the Messiah by mounting insurrection against the Roman authorities. Various apocalyptic groups believed that God would supernaturally intervene to destroy his enemies and to establish his kingdom. There were also Nomists, such as the powerful Pharisees and Sadducees, who believed that God would intervene only when Israel had sufficiently obeyed the Law of Moses. These various points of view contributed to the theological backdrop of Acts.

Although the Jewish theology of God's kingdom was prevalent in Luke's day, Luke recognized that the ministry of John the Baptist brought a new way of understanding the coming of God's kingdom.

John the Baptist

Both the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts indicate that John the Baptist called for true repentance. He also proclaimed the good news that the Messiah was about to bring the kingdom of God to earth. And more than this, John rightly identified Jesus as that Messiah. Listen to John the Baptist's words in Luke 3:16-17:

> John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to

> untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Luke 3:16-17).

Here John rightly declared that the Messiah would bring the promised blessing and purification of the Holy Spirit, including judgment. But he was under the mistaken impression that the Messiah would do this work all at once.

As we mentioned, the majority of Jews at this time were living in exile or suffering under Roman oppression. And like John, they expected an immediate restoration of the earthly kingdom of Israel, including an immediate and complete judgment against the wicked. They did not foresee that the Messiah would bring salvation and judgment to the world in stages. Later, John would become so perplexed by the fact that Jesus had not yet done everything the Messiah was expected to do that he sent messengers to ask Jesus if he really was the Messiah. Listen to the way Luke described their question and Jesus' response in Luke 7:20-23:

> When the men had come to [Jesus], they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?'" … And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me" (Luke 7:20-23).

In his reply to John the Baptist, Jesus alluded to a number of messianic prophecies in the book of Isaiah. He did this to assure John that he was in the process of fulfilling the expectations of Old Testament messianic prophecy, even though he hadn't finished them all. Jesus also encouraged John not to be offended because of the manner in which he was bringing God's kingdom.

With this understanding of Jewish messianic theology and the outlooks of John the Baptist in mind, we're ready to turn to the early Christian theology of the Messiah and the kingdom of God.

Christian Theology

In Luke's writings, as in the rest of the New Testament, Christian messianic theology is closely connected to the Christian gospel or "good news" of God's kingdom. We can summarize the New Testament gospel message as:

> **The announcement that God's kingdom comes to earth through the person and work of Jesus, the Messiah, and that it expands toward its great consummation as God grants salvation to those who receive and trust in Jesus as the Messiah.**

All New Testament authors agreed that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah. In Jesus' first coming, he inaugurated, or began, the final expansion of God's kingdom on earth. Since that time, God's kingdom has continued to expand as the gospel brings believers into salvation in Christ. Ultimately, this expansion will conclude at the consummation of history when Jesus returns.

In the book of Acts, Luke drew attention to these dimensions of the gospel many times. On the one hand, he emphasized the realities of God's great work of salvation in Christ. He recorded the church's proclamation that Jesus had died for the sins of his people, that he had been raised from the dead, that he reigns at the right hand of God the Father, and that he will return in glory. For example, in Peter's sermon at Pentecost recorded in Acts 2:22-24, Peter said:

> Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs … you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death (Acts 2:22-24).

Peter's gospel proclamation includes the objective facts of the Messiah's life, death and resurrection.

But on the other hand, Luke also stressed the importance of people personally embracing the truth of Christ so that it transformed their lives. For instance, Luke's record of Peter's Pentecost speech also includes this exchange in Acts 2:37-38:

> When they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said … "Brothers, what shall we do?" And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:37-38).

The Christian gospel cuts to the heart of those who hear it. It's not just a bare acknowledgement of facts, but a heartfelt, life-transforming embrace of the Savior.

As we've said, first-century Jewish theology believed that the Messiah would establish a political kingdom all at once. But Jesus and his apostles taught that the Messiah's kingdom grows gradually through the expansion of the church and the personal transformation of people. This is one reason that Luke focused so much attention on the conversion of unbelievers through the proclamation of the gospel. He knew that this was the means through which the messianic kingdom of God would expand throughout the world.

> **The book of Acts opens with Jesus teaching his disciples in a period of about forty days about the kingdom of God. And then in verse 6, they ask him this question: "Is now the time that you're going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" It's interestingly a loaded question because behind that was this common expectation that when the Messiah comes, God is going to break into history and bring his kingdom all at once — the day of the Lord will come; the day of the judgment will come. The Romans and whoever is oppressing God's people will be defeated, they'll be thrown out, and God will reestablish his king in**

Jerusalem and his kingdom on the earth. But a surprising thing happens with Jesus in the gospels, and that is that he begins to explain how the kingdom has come with him, but the kingdom is also not yet fully here, that there's going to be this spread of the kingdom, that the day of the Lord is going to be stretched out in a time of mission, and he's going to use his people, the Messiah's people, the messianic community, to spread the news of the coming of God's kingdom — "You will be my witnesses." So, Jesus answers the question that way. He says, "It's not for you to know the times or the seasons that the Father has entrusted to me, but you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and to the ends of the earth." And then the narrative of Acts bears out Jesus' answer to the question consistent with how he had spoken about the coming of the kingdom in the parables in the Gospels. It is going to be like a seed; it's going to grow.

— Dr. Gregory R. Perry

We've seen the theological background of Acts in the Old Testament and in the coming kingdom of God. Now, we should consider how Luke's gospel served as a foundation for Acts.

LUKE'S GOSPEL

The book of Luke starts with the life of Jesus and the acts of Jesus, and it continues through the church. The work of Jesus continues through the church in the book of Acts. When you read the two books, it appears as if it is one good story being told from the time of the birth of Jesus to the time where Paul was in prison in Rome. It comes out to be a very beautiful story that has the same connections.

— Rev. Joseph Kamau Kabui

As we read the book of Acts, we must always remember that it is the second of two volumes that Luke wrote to Theophilus. Luke always intended these books to be read together. His gospel is the first part of the story, and the book of Acts is the second part of the story. So, to read the book of Acts rightly, we need to understand how it continues the story that began in Luke's gospel.

There are many ways Luke's gospel prepares us to understand the message of Acts. But for our purposes, we'll focus on the theme of the kingdom of God that spans both volumes. In Luke's gospel, Jesus established the pattern and goal for the kingdom of God and prepared his apostles to continue his work after his ascension. In the book of Acts, Jesus ascended into heaven and left his apostles, aided by the Holy Spirit, in charge of expanding his kingdom through the gospel.

We'll consider two ways the gospel of Luke prepared the way for the apostles' kingdom-building work in the book of Acts. First, we'll look to Jesus as the one who

brought the kingdom. And second, we'll explore the role of the apostles in continuing to bring the kingdom after Jesus' ascension into heaven. Let's begin with Jesus.

Jesus

Throughout his gospel, Luke characterized Jesus as both the prophet who proclaimed the coming of the kingdom of God, and as the king who was bringing the kingdom into power by ascending to its throne. Jesus himself spoke of both of these ideas in many places but we'll consider just two times he mentioned these ideas in his public ministry. First, in Luke 4:43, Jesus spoke about being a prophet. He said:

> I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God ... for I was sent for this purpose (Luke 4:43).

Here, Jesus explicitly said that he came to earth to "preach the good news of the kingdom of God."

Second, at the end of his public ministry, just before his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus referred to his kingship in the parable of the ten minas. Listen to the way it begins in Luke 19:11-12:

> [Jesus] proceeded to tell a parable, because he was near to Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately. He said therefore, "A nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and then return" (Luke 19:11-12).

As we saw earlier, most Jews in Jesus' day believed that the kingdom of God would come immediately in all its fullness. In the parable of the minas, Jesus taught that he was bringing the kingdom slowly and in stages. When he told this parable, he was about to enter Jerusalem where he would be heralded as king. But he didn't want the people to assume that he would install himself as an earthly ruler at this time. Instead, he taught that having begun the kingdom, he was now going away for a long time to be crowned king. And he would return to rule his earthly kingdom in the future.

In line with this teaching, Jesus was arrested and crucified in Jerusalem. Then he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, at which point he received his kingship from the Father. And he has yet to return to consummate his kingdom.

With this understanding of the way the gospel of Luke established Jesus as the one who brings the kingdom, we should turn to the role of the apostles in furthering the kingdom.

Apostles

According to the gospel of Luke, on the night before Jesus was crucified, he instructed his apostles to carry on his work of bringing in the kingdom. Listen to what he

said to them in Luke 22:29-30:

> I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 22:29-30).

Jesus appointed his apostles as leaders and judges in his kingdom. Their job — in dependence upon the Holy Spirit — was to continue where he left off, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and expanding the kingdom to fill the world.

As we can see, Luke's gospel establishes that Jesus' primary task was inaugurating the kingdom. And he commissioned the apostles to carry on this work after his ascension into heaven. The book of Acts begins with Luke reminding his audience of this commission. And it explains that after Jesus rose from the dead, and before he ascended into heaven, he spent 40 days teaching the apostles about the kingdom of God. Listen to Luke's account in Acts 1:3-8:

> [Jesus] presented himself alive … appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father … [saying,] "[Y]ou will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." … [T]hey asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. 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 1:3-8).

Once again, Jesus encouraged his followers not to look for the immediate completion of the kingdom. Instead, he confirmed that the apostles would be responsible to carry on his work by proclaiming the gospel throughout the world. And this is just what they did.

In the book of Acts, the apostles built up the church as the primary manifestation of God's earthly kingdom. They also brought the gospel of the kingdom to new lands and people, expanding the kingdom from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. And by the end of the book, the apostle Paul was proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom in Rome. Listen to the way Luke concluded Acts in 28:30-31:

> [Paul] lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance (Acts 28:30-31).

Here, rather than simply saying that Paul preached the gospel, Luke said that Paul preached "the kingdom of God."

We know, from places like 1 Corinthians 15:25, that Paul's proclamation of the kingdom also included Jesus' role as the Anointed One, the Messiah and King who "must

reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet." And Paul taught this "with all boldness and without hindrance" in Rome, the capital city of the evil empire that opposed Jesus in the first century. So, the book of Acts ends just as it begins, emphasizing the apostles' role as those who expanded God's kingdom on earth through their proclamation.

As we approach the book of Acts, we must be careful not to reduce it to a history of the personal experiences of individuals and groups in the first century. Rather, Luke wrote from his understanding of God's kingdom promises in the Old Testament and from his first-century Christian beliefs about the kingdom of God. We must also remember that Acts follows the gospel of Luke. It explains how the expansion of God's kingdom, that began with the ministry of Christ, continued after he ascended into heaven through the work of the Holy Spirit in the apostles and prophets. And we can expect Jesus to further his kingdom until its consummation when he comes again in glory.

The book of Acts speaks to our hopes and our responsibilities as servants of Christ. And it warns, encourages and guides every generation of followers of Christ as we continue to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom throughout the world.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we've examined the authorship of the book of Acts, we've described its historical setting, and we've explored its theological background. Keeping these details in mind as we study the book of Acts will help us to discover its original meaning, and to apply it properly to our own lives.

As we continue in this series, we will see how the background to Acts opens many windows into this wonderful book. We will discover how Luke's inspired record of the early church led Theophilus and the early church into faithful service to Christ. And we will see that the book of Acts offers crucial guidance for the church today as we continue to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom to our own world.

CONTRIBUTORS

Dr. Hans Bayer (Host) is Professor Emeritus of New Testament at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri where he also served as Chair of the New Testament Department Dr. Bayer received his M.A. and M.Div. from Ashland Theological Seminary, and his Ph.D. from University of Aberdeen in Scotland. Born and raised in Germany, Dr. Bayer taught for ten years at the German Theological Seminary at Giessen, where he also planted and co-pastored a church. He lectures and preaches regularly throughout the U.S. and Europe and has published numerous English and German monographs, essays, dictionary articles, and commentaries, primarily on the Gospels and the Book of Acts. He is also the author of *A Theology of Mark: The Dynamic Between Christology* and *Authentic Discipleship* (P&R, 2012).

Rev. Sem Beasnael is a missionary with Global Outreach International in French-speaking Central Africa, Dean of the Theological Seminary in Moundou, and Director of APT Ministries in Chad.

Dr. Brandon D. Crowe is Assistant Professor of New Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary.

Rev. Arthur Denyer serves with Vineyard churches in Costa Rica and is Executive Director of SOLIDpastors, a coaching ministry for church leaders in Latin America.

Dr. David B Garner is Academic Dean, Vice President of Global Ministries, and Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary.

Rev. Joseph Kamau Kabui is Principal at Kenya Baptist Theological College and lead Pastor of Tigoni Baptist Church in Kenya.

Dr. John Norwood is Senior Pastor of the Ujima Village Christian Church in Ewing, New Jersey, and is the founder and director of the Christian Mission School of Theology.

Dr. Rodney Orr is Dean and Professor of Missiology and Intercultural Ministries at Dallas Theological Seminary, Washington D.C.

Dr. Gregory R. Perry is Vice President for Strategic Projects at Third Millennium Ministries and President of Thirdmill Seminary.

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr. is Co-Founder and President of Third Millennium Ministries.

Dr. Daniel Steffen is Professor of New Testament Studies and Interdepartmental Professor *en Español* at Dallas Theological Seminary.

Dr. Timothy Yoder is Associate Professor of Theological Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary.

GLOSSARY

Abraham – Old Testament patriarch, son of Terah, father of the nation of Israel with whom God made a covenant in Genesis 15 and 17 promising innumerable descendants and a special land

Anti-Marcionite Prologues – Ancient prologues to the Gospels (ca. A.D. 160-180) that assign authorship and give biographical details for the gospel writers

apocalypticists – Name given to first-century Jewish sects that expected God to intervene quickly and catastrophically to destroy their enemies and establish the age to come

Clement of Alexandria – (ca. A.D. 150-215) Early church father and writer from Alexandria

David – Second Old Testament king of Israel who received the promise that his descendant would sit on the throne and reign forever

euangelion kata Ioannan – Greek phrase (transliteration) meaning "the gospel according to John"

euangelion kata Loukan – Greek phrase (transliteration) meaning "the gospel according to Luke"

Eusebius – (A.D. 263-340) Early Christian historian who wrote *Ecclesiastical History*

gospel – Literally, "good news"; announcement that God's kingdom came to earth through the person and work of Jesus and that it expands toward its great consummation as God grants salvation to those who receive and trust in Jesus as the Messiah

Irenaeus – (ca. A.D. 130-202) Second-century bishop and early Christian writer who wrote *Against Heresies* in which he refuted Gnosticism and affirmed the validity of the four gospels

Jerusalem Council – Meeting in Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15 where the apostles and church leaders addressed concerns in the early church; in particular, whether or not Gentiles were required to follow the Mosaic law to be saved

John the Baptist – New Testament prophet who called for true repentance and proclaimed that the arrival of God's kingdom was near; identified Jesus as the Messiah and prepared the way for Jesus' public ministry

Josephus – (A.D. 37-ca. 100) Jewish historian from the 1st century A.D. who wrote *Antiquities*

kratistos – (vocative case "*kratiste*") Greek word (transliteration) meaning "most excellent," a person of highest honor, sometimes used for Roman governors; used by Luke in his gospel and the book of Acts when referring to Theophilus

Luke – Author of the third gospel and the book of Acts; a Gentile convert to Christianity and one of Paul's co-workers; believed to have been a physician

Moses – Old Testament prophet and deliverer who led the Israelites out of Egypt; man with whom God made a national "covenant of law" and who administered the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant to the Israelites; also appeared with Elijah at Jesus' transfiguration

Muratorian Fragment – Earliest known document listing the New Testament books that the church considered canonical, dated A.D. 170-180

Nero – Roman emperor from A.D. 54-68 who persecuted Christians; blamed the Christians for a fire in Rome in A.D. 64; executed Paul (according to tradition)

Papyrus 75 – Early manuscript containing portions of the gospels of Luke and John, probably copied between A.D. 175 and A.D. 200

Pharisees – Jewish religious sect from the first century known for their strict observance of the Law; believed in the future resurrection, but also believed that God would not intervene until Israel became obedient to the Law

Rome – Capital city of the world's largest imperial power in New Testament times; city where Paul was imprisoned for two years and preached the gospel boldly and without hindrance

Tertullian – (ca. A.D. 155-230) Early Christian writer and church father from Carthage who wrote *Against Marcion* and popularized the Latin terminology used to discuss the Trinity

Theophilus – Person to whom Luke addressed both his gospel and the book of Acts

Zealots – First-century Jewish sect that believed God would usher in the age to come only when the Jews rose up militarily against the Roman rulers