

The Book of Acts

Study Guide

LESSON
ONE

THE BACKGROUND OF ACTS



THIRD MILLENNIUM
MINISTRIES

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HOW TO USE THIS LESSON AND STUDY GUIDE

This study guide is designed for use in conjunction with the associated video lesson. If you do not have access to the video, the study guide will also work with the audio and/or text versions of the lesson. Additionally, the lesson and study guide are intended to be used in a learning community, but they also can be used for individual study if necessary.

- **Before you watch the lesson**
 - **Prepare** — Complete any recommended readings.
 - **Schedule viewing** — In the Notes section of the study guide, the lesson has been divided into sections that correspond to the video. Using the time codes found in parentheses beside each major division, determine where to begin and end your viewing session. IIM lessons are densely packed with information, so you may also want to schedule breaks. Breaks should be scheduled at major divisions.
- **While you are watching the lesson**
 - **Take notes** — The Notes section of the study guide contains a basic outline of the lesson, including the time codes for the beginning of each section and key notes to guide you through the information. Many of the main ideas are already summarized, but make sure to supplement these with your own notes. You should also add supporting details that will help you to remember, describe, and defend the main ideas.
 - **Record comments and questions** — As you watch the video, you may have comments and/or questions on what you are learning. Use the margins to record your comments and questions so that you can share these with the group following the viewing session.
 - **Pause/replay portions of the lesson** — You may find it helpful to pause or replay the video at certain points in order to write additional notes, review difficult concepts, or discuss points of interest.
- **After you watch the lesson**
 - **Complete Review Questions** — Review Questions are based on the basic content of the lesson. You should answer Review Questions in the space provided. These questions should be completed individually rather than in a group.
 - **Answer/discuss Application Questions** — Application Questions are questions relating the content of the lesson to Christian living, theology, and ministry. Application questions are appropriate for written assignments or as topics for group discussions. For written assignments, it is recommended that answers not exceed one page in length.

Preparation

- Read the book of Acts

Notes

I. Introduction (0:26)

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.

II. Authorship (1:58)

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.

Neither the third Gospel nor the book of Acts specifically mentions the name of the author.

A. Gospel of Luke (3:04)

Two types of evidence suggest one person wrote Acts and Luke.

1. Explicit (3:38)

- Acts and the third gospel are dedicated to Theophilus.
- Acts refers to a “former book.”
- Similar prefaces reflect ancient literary custom.

2. Implicit (6:13)

Multiple similarities between the third gospel and Acts:

- Orderly account
- Compositional structure
- Chronological length
- Themes
- Same story

Similarities point to a common redemptive-historical vision, purpose and belief, and author.

B. Early Church (9:38)

1. Manuscripts (9:53)

Papyrus⁷⁵ (ca. A.D. 175-200) indicates that Luke wrote the third gospel and Acts.

The Muratorian fragment (ca. A.D. 170-180) affirms Luke as the author of the third gospel and Acts.

The Anti-Marcionite Prologue (an introduction to the third gospel, ca. A.D. 160-180) describes Luke as author of the gospel and Acts.

2. **Early Church Leaders (13:04)**

Irenaeus (ca. A.D. 130-202): “Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the gospel preached by him.”

Clement of Alexandria (ca. A.D. 150-215): “Luke in the Acts of the Apostles relates...”

Tertullian (ca. A.D. 155-230): “Of the apostles, therefore, John and Matthew first instill faith into us... Luke and Mark renew it afterwards.”

Eusebius (ca. A.D. 323): “Luke...has made mention ... in the Acts.”

There is not one indication in the literature of the early church that anyone other than Luke wrote the third gospel and Acts.

C. New Testament (15:50)

1. Clues (16:11)

- Not an apostle or eyewitness to the life of Jesus.
- The style of Greek indicates that the author was well educated.
- Paul's traveling companion.

2. Luke (19:19)

- Not an apostle.
- Well educated: physician.
- Paul's traveling companion.

III. Historical Setting (22:02)

A. Date (22:17)

1. After A.D. 70 (23:00)

Optimism:

- Acts is too positive about the early church to have been written early.
- But Acts deals with all kinds of problems inside and outside the church.

Josephus:

- Josephus' writings were composed no earlier than A.D. 79, and not available before A.D. 85.
- Theudas (Acts 5:36) may be the Jewish revolutionary mentioned in Josephus' *Antiquities* (20.97).
- Judas the Galilean (Acts 5:37) appears in Josephus' *Jewish Wars* (2.117-118) and *Antiquities* (18.1-8).
- The Egyptian (Acts 21:38) may appear in Josephus' *Jewish Wars* (2.261-263) and *Antiquities* (20.171).
- The description of Herod's death (Acts 12:19-23) resembles Josephus' *Antiquities* (19.343-352).

It seems likely that Acts and Josephus:

- Recounted well-known historical events separately or
- Depended on common sources

2. Before A.D. 70 (27:34)

Acts closes with Paul under house arrest in Rome, stopping short of crucial events:

- Fire in Rome (A.D. 64)
- Martyrdom of Paul (ca. A.D. 65)
- Destruction of temple (A.D. 70)

B. Original Audience (30:07)

1. Theophilus (30:30)

- Luke's patron
- Luke's student

2. **Broader Audience (32:30)**

The church in the first century struggled with a number of issues that Luke addressed in the book of Acts:

- Strife between Jewish and Gentile believers
- Divisions based on leadership
- Doctrinal errors and false teachers
- Strife between church and civil governments
- Issues of women and the poor
- Persecutions, sufferings, imprisonments

Luke intended his work to be read by many different believers.

C. **Social Context (33:58)**

1. **Roman Empire (34:25)**

- Conquered and controlled the entire Mediterranean world as far as present-day Britain, North Africa and parts of Asia.
- Empire was still growing.

- Political and economic influence:
 - Government: Exerting forceful control over local authorities.

 - Population: Integrated Roman citizens into the population of conquered nations.

 - Public Works: Built roads, elaborate buildings and public meeting places.

- Religious influence:
 - Caesar was seen as lord and savior of his people.

 - Conquered people were allowed to continue their own religious practices.

 - People were required to confess the superiority of the Caesar.

2. Jews (39:38)**a. Deep Connections**

- Heritage
- Scriptures
- Authorities

b. Fundamental Differences

- Jesus
- Interpretation
- Gentiles

IV. Theological Background (47:02)**A. Old Testament (47:42)****1. History (48:17)**

Luke wrote about the early church in ways that reflected Pascal's threefold outlook on history.

- Creation
 - In General

 - In Acts

- Fall
 - In General

 - In Acts

- Redemption
 - In General

 - In Acts

2. Israel (55:48)

Luke's record in Acts depended on the history of Israel.

- Abraham

God called Abraham to go to the Promised Land for two main purposes:

- Abraham would father a great nation.
- Through Abraham all peoples on earth would be blessed.

Luke reported:

- The blessing of salvation in Christ came to the Jews, fulfilling God's promises to Abraham.
- Jewish Christians brought the gospel of Christ to the Gentiles, fulfilling the rest of God's promises to Abraham.

- Exodus under Moses

Moses prophesied that God would send another prophet to redeem his people from sin.

Luke pointed out:

- This prophet turned out to be Jesus.
- To reject Jesus was to reject Moses and the Law.

- David's dynasty

God chose the family of David to:

- Lead his people as their permanent dynasty.
- Extend the reign of God from Israel to the ends of the earth.

Luke understood that Jesus was:

- The son of David.
- Royal ruler of God's kingdom.
- Expanding his reign by means of the church.

Luke wanted his readers to understand that Jesus was:

- Heir to Abraham's promises.
- Prophet like Moses.
- Final Davidic king.

B. Kingdom of God (1:04:37)

1. Jewish Theology (1:04:50)

God would send a messianic liberator to Israel.

- Zealots: God wanted Israel to mount insurrection against Roman authorities.
- Apocalypticists: God would supernaturally intervene to destroy his enemies and establish his people as victors.
- Nomists (such as Pharisees and Sadducees): God would not intervene until Israel became obedient to the Law.

2. John the Baptist (1:06:57)

- Called for true repentance.
- Proclaimed the good news that the Messiah was about to bring the kingdom of God to earth.
- Rightly identified Jesus as the Messiah.
- Declared the Messiah would bring the great blessing and purification of the Holy Spirit, including judgment.

John did not foresee that the Messiah would bring salvation and judgment to the world in stages.

Jesus assured John that he was in the process of fulfilling expectations of Old Testament messianic prophecy.

3. **Christian Theology (1:10:28)**

Christian messianic theology is closely connected to the Christian gospel:

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

Luke emphasized:

- The realities of God's great work of salvation in Christ.

- The importance of people personally embracing the truth of Christ so that it transformed their lives.

The Messiah's kingdom grows gradually, through the expansion of the church and the personal transformation of people.

C. Gospel of Luke (1:15:04)

Acts is the second part of the story begun in Luke.

1. Jesus (1:16:28)

- Prophet who proclaimed the coming of the kingdom of God.
- King who was bringing the kingdom into power by ascending to its throne.

Jesus taught that he was bringing in the kingdom slowly and in stages.

2. Apostles (1:19:43)

Jesus instructed his apostles to carry on his work of bringing in the kingdom.

After Jesus rose from the dead and before he ascended to heaven he spent time teaching the apostles.

The apostles:

- Built up the church as the current form of the kingdom of God

- Brought the gospel of the kingdom to new lands and people

V. Conclusion (1:24:15)

3. Which clues can we gain from the New Testament about the author of Acts? How do these clues support the idea that Luke wrote the book of Acts?

4. What evidence suggests that the book of Acts was written after A.D. 70? What evidence suggests it was written before A.D. 70?

5. Describe the original audiences of the book of Acts.

6. Describe the social context of Acts in terms that include a discussion of (1) the Roman Empire and (2) the relationship between the church and the Jews.

7. Demonstrate that Luke's theological perspectives were grounded in the Old Testament's view of history in general and its view of Israel's history in particular.

8. Compare and contrast the Christian view of the messianic kingdom of God with the views of contemporary Jewish theology and with the view of John the Baptist.

9. How does the theology of the kingdom of God in Luke's gospel prepare us to understand the message of Acts? In your answer, give particular attention to the roles of Jesus and of the apostles.

Application Questions

1. How does the authorship of Luke help us better understand and apply the book of Acts?
2. How are our lives and theology influenced by our own governments and cultures?
3. What are some similarities and differences between unbelieving Jews and Christians today? How can understanding the similarities and differences help us evangelize modern Jews?
4. Why have Christians of both Jewish and Gentile heritage been granted full status in the church? Why is it important to recognize that Christians of both Jewish and Gentile heritage have equal standing?
5. How should the Old Testament's view of world history inform our own thinking as Christians in the modern world?
6. In what ways do we currently participate in God's kingdom? What is our role in the process of kingdom building?
7. How should we change our thinking and priorities in light of the fact that God's kingdom expands as people receive and trust in Jesus as the Messiah?
8. What is the most significant insight you have learned from this study?

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

apocalyptic/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*

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

kratiste/kratistos – 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

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