

The Book of Acts

Lesson 1

The Background of Acts

Lesson Guide



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HOW TO USE THIS LESSON GUIDE

This lesson guide is designed for use in conjunction with the associated video. If you do not have access to the video, the lesson guide will also work with the audio and/or manuscript versions of the lesson. Additionally, the video and lesson 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** — The Notes section of the lesson guide has been divided into segments 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. IIIM 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 lesson guide contains a basic outline of the lesson, including the time codes for the beginning of each segment 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 (0:18)

II. Authorship (1:45)

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 (2:47)

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

1. Explicit (3:13)

- Introduction refers to a “former book” and to Theophilus (Acts 1:1; Luke 1:3, 4).
- Similar prefaces reflect ancient literary customs.

2. Implicit (5:10)

Multiple similarities between the third gospel and Acts:

- Orderly account
- Compositional structure (episodic style)
- Chronological length
- Parallel themes
- Same story

Similarities point to a common redemptive-historical vision, purpose and belief suggesting the same author wrote both books (Luke 2:30-32).

B. Early Church History (9:19)

1. Manuscripts (9:32)

Papyrus⁷⁵ (ca. A.D. 175-225) 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 (ca. A.D. 160-180) describes Luke as author of the gospel and Acts.

2. Early Church Leaders (13:09)

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

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

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

Eusebius (ca. A.D. 325): “Luke...has made mention ... in the Acts” (*Ecclesiastical History*).

C. New Testament (15:50)

1. Clues (16:11)

- Not an apostle (1:1-2)
- Well educated
- Paul’s traveling companion (16:10-17, 20:5-15, 21:1-18, 27:1–28:16)

2. Luke (19:04)

- Not an apostle – Luke never met Jesus in person.
- Well educated – Paul identified Luke as a physician (Colossians 4:14)
- Paul’s traveling companion – Paul stated that Luke travelled with him (Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 24).

III. Historical Setting (22:11)

A. Date (22:20)

Scholars have tended to date the book relative to the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70.

1. After A.D. 70 (24:02)

Some scholars base this view on the belief that some material in Acts relied on *Antiquities*, a book written by Josephus around A.D. 93-94.

Luke and Josephus described the same events in different ways, indicating that neither author simply copied the other.

Some argue Acts was written between A.D. 80-95:

- too optimistic about the early church given the persecution of Christians in the mid-90s
- makes no reference to Paul's letters
- written *after* Luke's gospel account which arguably references the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (Luke 19:43-44, 21:20-24)

2. Before A.D. 70 (26:38)

Acts closes with Paul under house arrest in Rome and does not mention crucial events that took place:

- fire in Rome (A.D. 64)
- martyrdom of Paul (ca. A.D. 65)
- destruction of temple (A.D. 70)

B. Original Audience (29:46)**1. Theophilus (29:59)**

Luke's prologues imply that Theophilus was his patron, the one who commissioned his writing (Acts 1:1; Luke 1:3).

By reading the books of Luke and Acts, Theophilus became Luke's student (Luke 1:3-4).

2. Broader Audience (32:25)

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 (33:50)

1. Roman Empire (34:03)

When Acts was written, the Roman Empire had conquered and controlled the entire Mediterranean world.

Rome exercised great influence on their conquered territories:

- local government – conquered nations were subject to Roman leaders

- population – Rome offered retiring military forces land in newly conquered territories (Acts 2:10-11; Acts 10)
- public works – Roman roads, buildings and public meeting places enabled Paul and others to travel and preach on their missionary journeys
- religion – the Roman emperor was seen not only as the lord of his people and realm, but also as their *soter* or “savior.”

Rome permitted the Jewish faith as a *religio licita* or “legal religion” and tolerated Christianity though it repressed both.

2. Jews (39:40)

a. Deep Connections (40:00)

- Heritage – The early church remained loyal to Judaism (13:32-33)
- Scriptures – Paul appealed to the Scriptures since both Jews and Christians were committed to them (17:1-3)

- Authorities – Despite conflict, early Christians acknowledged the authority of Jewish leaders and only resisted when necessary

b. Fundamental Differences (42:46)

- Jesus – The church proclaimed that Jesus as Messiah, but unbelieving Jews denied what the church affirmed to be true.
- Interpretation – Unbelieving Jews found it impossible to accept that Jesus fulfilled the messianic hopes of the Old Testament.
- Gentiles – Observant Jews didn't share company with Gentiles.

Early Jewish Christians learned that believing Gentiles had full status in the church.

Faith in Christ, expressed in confession and baptism, was sufficient for membership in the Christian church.

IV. Theological Background (46:39)

A. Old Testament (47:15)

1. History (47:46)

The Old Testament's view of history has influenced countless writers (e.g., Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*).

- Creation (Genesis 1) – God prepared the world to be an extension of his heavenly kingdom and commanded man to rule over the earth.

Luke demonstrated his awareness of this Old Testament idea in Acts:

- 4:24-30 – Peter and John spoke of creation as evidence of God's royal lordship over the earth.
- 7:49 – Stephen asserted that God had created the world to be his royal footstool.
- 14:15-17 – Paul and Barnabas spoke of creation as the basis for God's rule over the nations.

The theme of creation was important to Luke's understanding of the early church.

- Fall (Genesis 3) – Adam and Eve rebelled against God; their sin brought humanity under the curse of death and corrupted all of creation.

Luke wrote of the misery of sin:

- 2:38, 3:19 – Peter's sermons
- 5:29-32 – apostles' defense before the Sanhedrin
- 20:18-35 – Paul's words to the Ephesian elders
- 26:20 – Paul's speech before King Agrippa

Acts repeatedly illustrates that everything in creation suffers because of humanity's fall into sin.

- Redemption – God was redeeming people from the curse of sin since the fall; Old Testament prophets predicted a time when sin's curse would be entirely eliminated from the creation.

Luke believed this redemption was coming to the world through the saving work of Christ:

- 2:21, 40 – Peter's sermon
- 5:29-32 – the apostles' defense before the Sanhedrin

- 11:14 – the angel's words to Cornelius
- 13:23 – Paul's speech in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch
- 15:7-11 – Peter's argument in the Jerusalem counsel
- 16:30-31 – Paul and Silas' words to the Philippian jailor

2. Israel (55:54)

Luke relied on the history of Israel when he wrote Acts:

- Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3) – God called Abraham to go to the Promised Land:
 - to father a great nation
 - all peoples on earth would be blessed

Luke reported:

- The blessing of salvation in Christ came to the Jews.
- Jewish Christians (Phillip, Peter, Paul and Barnabas) brought the gospel of Christ to the Gentiles.

- Moses – God's chosen deliverer who led Israel from slavery in Egypt and prophesied that God would send another prophet like himself to redeem his people from their slavery to sin.

Luke pointed out that:

- 7:37-39 – Jesus was the prophet Moses had foretold (Deuteronomy 18:15) and to reject Jesus was to reject Moses and the Law.
- 28:23 – For Paul and the early church, acceptance of Moses and the Law was foundational to faith in Christ.
- David – God chose David's family as the permanent dynasty to lead his people, eventually extending the reign of God from Israel to the ends of the earth (Psalm 72:8, 17).

Luke understood that Jesus was the perfectly righteous son of David, expanding his reign from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

- 15:14-18 – James referred to Amos prediction that after God's judgment, he would restore David's dynasty and extend his reign over the Gentile nations (Amos 9:11, 12).

Luke wanted his readers to understand that Jesus was the heir to Abraham's promises, the prophet like Moses, and the final Davidic king.

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B. Kingdom of God (1:04:24)

1. Jewish Theology (1:04:35)

After the the Old Testament was written, Israel entered a period of spiritual darkness, suffering under the tyranny of Gentile rulers.

The faithful in Israel never lost hope that the Messiah would come and establish God's kingdom over the whole earth:

- Zealots believed that God wanted Israel to mount an insurrection against Roman authorities.
- Apocalyptic groups believed that God would supernaturally intervene to destroy his enemies and to establish his kingdom.
- Nomists (including Pharisees, Sadducees) believed that God would intervene only when Israel had sufficiently obeyed the Law of Moses.

2. John the Baptist (1:06:21)

John the Baptist called for repentance, proclaimed the good news that the Messiah, Jesus, was about to bring the kingdom of God to earth.

John declared that the Messiah would bring the promised blessing and purification of the Holy Spirit, including judgment (Luke 3:16-17).

John, like the majority of Jews in his day, 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 (Luke 7:20-23).

3. Christian Theology (1:09:28)

Christian messianic theology is closely connected to the Christian gospel.

God's kingdom on earth was inaugurated at Jesus' first coming, continues to expand as the gospel spreads, and will conclude at the consummation when he returns.

Luke emphasized God's great work of salvation in Christ (2:22-24).

He stressed the importance of people personally embracing the truth of Christ so that it transformed their lives (2:37-38).

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

C. Luke's Gospel (1:15:02)

The book of Acts is the second volume of stories that Luke wrote to Theophilus.

Luke's gospel prepares us to understand the message of the theme of the kingdom in Acts:

- Luke: Jesus established the pattern and goal for the kingdom of God and prepared his apostles to continue his work after his ascension.
- Acts: Jesus ascended into heaven and left his apostles, aided by the Holy Spirit, in charge of expanding his kingdom through the gospel.

1. Jesus (1:17:00)

Luke characterized Jesus as the prophet who proclaimed the coming of God's kingdom, and as the king who was bringing the kingdom.

- Luke 4:43 – Jesus came to earth to “preach the good news of the kingdom of God.”
- Luke 19:11-12 – Jesus referred to his kingship in the parable of the ten minas.

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

2. Apostles (1:19:46)

Jesus instructed his apostles to carry on his work of bringing in the kingdom (Luke 22:29-30).

After Jesus rose from the dead and before he ascended to heaven, he spent time teaching the apostles about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3-8).

The apostles built up the church as primary manifestation of the kingdom of God and brought the gospel of the kingdom to new lands and people (Acts 28:30-31).

Paul's proclamation of the kingdom included Jesus' role as the Messiah and King who "must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet" (1 Corinthians 15:25).

V. Conclusion (1:25:11)

Review Questions

1. Discuss the explicit and implicit evidence from the gospel of Luke that strongly suggests that one person wrote both the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.
 2. Discuss the historical evidence from the early church that supports the view that the same person wrote the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

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.

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

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