

THE DAILY STUDY BIBLE SERIES

REVISED EDITION

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

THE ACTS OF THE
APOSTLES

REVISED EDITION

Translated
with an Introduction and Interpretation
by
WILLIAM BARCLAY

THE WESTMINSTER PRESS
PHILADELPHIA

Revised Edition
Copyright (c) 1976 William Barclay

First published by The Saint Andrew Press
Edinburgh, Scotland

First Edition, 1953; Second Edition, 1955

Published by The Westminster Press (R)
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

(ISBN 0-664-21306-5
ISBN 0-664-24106-9 pbk.

INTRODUCTION TO THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

A PRECIOUS BOOK

In one sense Acts is the most important book in the New Testament. It is the simple truth that if we did not possess Acts, we would have, apart from what we could deduce from the letters of Paul, no information whatever about the early Church.

There are two ways of writing history. There is the way which attempts to trace the course of events from week to week and from day to day; and there is the way which, as it were, opens a series of windows and gives us vivid glimpses of the great moments and personalities of any period. The second way is the way of Acts.

We usually speak of The Acts of the Apostles. But the book neither gives nor claims to give an exhaustive account of the acts of the apostles. Apart from Paul only three apostles are mentioned in it. In Ac.12:2 we are told in one brief sentence that James, the brother of John, was executed by Herod. John appears in the narrative, but never speaks. It is only about Peter that the book gives any real information, and very soon, as a leading character, he passes from the scene. In the Greek there is no The before Acts; the correct title is Acts of Apostolic Men; and what Acts aims to do is to give us a series of typical exploits of the heroic figures of the early Church.

THE WRITER OF THE BOOK

Although the book never says so, from the earliest times Luke has been held to be its writer. About Luke we really know very little; there are only three references to him in the New Testament--Col.4:14, Phm.24, 2Tim.4:11. From these we can say two things for sure. First, Luke was a doctor; second, he was one of Paul's most valued helpers and most loyal friends,

for he was a companion of his in his last imprisonment. We can deduce the fact that he was a Gentile. Col.4:11 concludes a list of mentions and greetings from those who are of the circumcision, that is, from Jews; Col.4:12 begins a new list and we naturally conclude that the new list is of Gentiles. So then we have the very interesting fact that Luke is the only Gentile author in the New Testament.

We could have guessed that Luke was a doctor because of his instinctive use of medical words. In Lk.4:35, in telling of the man who had the spirit of an unclean devil, he says "when the devil had thrown him down" and uses the correct medical word for convulsions. In Lk.9:38 when he draws the picture of the man who asked Jesus, "I beg you to look upon my son" he employs the conventional word for a doctor paying a visit to a patient. The most interesting example is in the saying about the camel and the needle's eye. All three synoptic writers give us that saying (Matt.19:24; Mk.10:25; Lk.18:25). For needle both Mark and Matthew use the Greek raphis (GSN4476), the ordinary word for a tailor's or a household needle. Luke alone uses belone, the technical word for a surgeon's needle. Luke was a doctor and a doctor's words came most naturally to his pen.

THE RECIPIENT OF THE BOOK

Luke wrote both his gospel and Acts to a man called Theophilus (Lk.1:3; Ac.1:1). We can only guess who Theophilus was. Lk.1:3 calls him "most excellent Theophilus." The phrase really means "your excellency," and indicates a man high up in the service of the Roman government. There are three possibilities.

(i) Just possibly Theophilus is not a real name at all. In those days it might well be dangerous to be a Christian. Theophilus comes from two Greek words, theos (GSN2316) which means

God and philein (GSN5368) which means to love. It may be that Luke wrote to a lover of God whose real name he did not mention for safety's sake.

(ii) If Theophilus was a real person, he must have been a high government official. Perhaps Luke wrote to show him that Christianity was a lovely thing and that Christians were good people. Maybe his writing was an attempt to persuade a government official not to persecute the Christians.

(iii) There is a more romantic theory than either of these based on the facts that Luke was a doctor and that doctors in the ancient days were often slaves. It has been conjectured that Luke was the doctor of Theophilus, that Theophilus had been gravely ill, that by Luke's skill and devotion he was brought back to health, and that in gratitude he gave Luke his freedom. Then, it may be, Luke wished to show how grateful he was for this gift; and since the most precious thing he had was the story of Jesus, he wrote it down and sent it to his benefactor.

LUKE'S AIM IN WRITING ACTS

When a man writes a book he does so for a reason, and maybe for more than one. Let us consider now why Luke wrote Acts.

(i) One of his reasons was to commend Christianity to the Roman government.

Again and again he goes out of his way to show how courteous Roman magistrates were to Paul. In Ac.13:12 Sergius Paulus, the governor of Cyprus, becomes a Christian. In Ac.18:12 Gallio is absolutely impartial in Corinth. In Ac.16:35ff. the magistrates at Philippi discover their mistake and apologize publicly to Paul. In Ac.19:31 the Asiarchs in Ephesus are shown to be concerned that no harm should

come to Paul. Luke was pointing out that in the years before he wrote Roman officials had often been well-disposed and always just to Christianity.

Further, Luke takes pains to show that the Christians were good and loyal citizens. and had always been regarded as such. In Ac.18:14 Gallio declares that there is no question of wickedness or villainy. In Ac.19:37 the secretary of Ephesus gives the Christians a good testimonial. In Ac.23:29 Claudius Lysias is careful to say that he has nothing against Paul. In Ac.25:25 Festus declares that Paul has done nothing worthy of death, and in the same chapter Festus and Agrippa agree that Paul might well have been released had he not appealed to Caesar.

Luke was writing in the days when Christians were disliked and persecuted; and he told his story in such a way as to show that the Roman magistrates had always been perfectly fair to Christianity and that they had never regarded the Christians as evil men. In fact, the very interesting suggestion has been made that Acts is nothing other than the brief prepared for Paul's defence when he stood his trial before the Roman Emperor.

(ii) One of Luke's aims was to show that Christianity was for all men of every country.

This was one of the things the Jews found it hard to grasp. They had the idea that they were God's chosen people and that God had no use for any other nation. Luke sets out to prove otherwise. He shows Philip preaching to the Samaritans; he shows Stephen making Christianity universal and being killed for it; he shows Peter accepting Cornelius into the Church; he shows the Christians preaching to the Gentiles at Antioch; he shows Paul travelling far and wide winning men of all kinds for Christ; and in Ac.15 he shows the Church

making the great decision to accept the Gentiles on equal terms with the Jews.

(iii) But these were merely secondary aims. Luke's chief purpose is set out in the words of the Risen Christ in Lk.1:8, "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judaea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." It was to show the expansion of Christianity, to show how that religion which began in a little corner of Palestine had in not much more than thirty years reached Rome.

C. H. Turner has pointed out that Acts falls into six panels, each ending with what might be called a progress report. The six panels are:

(a) Ac.1-5; Ac.6:1-7; this tells of the church at Jerusalem and the preaching of Peter; and it finishes with the summary, "The word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem; and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith."

(b) Ac.6:8-15; Ac.7-8; Ac.9:1-31 ; this describes the spread of Christianity through Palestine and the martyrdom of Stephen, followed by the preaching in Samaria. It ends with the summary, "So the Church throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up; and, walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it was multiplied."

(c) Ac.9:32-43; Ac.10-11; Ac.12:1-24; this includes the conversion of Paul, the extension of the Church to Antioch, and the reception of Cornelius, the Gentile, into the Church by Peter. Its summary is, "The word of God grew and multiplied."

(d) Ac.12:25; Ac.13-15; Ac.16:1-5; this tells of the extension of the Church through Asia Minor and the preaching tour of

Galatia. It ends, "So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily."

(e) Ac.16:6-40; Ac.17-18; Ac.19:1-20; this relates the extension of the Church to Europe and the work of Paul in great Gentile cities like Corinth and Ephesus. Its summary runs, "So the word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily."

(j) Ac.19:21-41; Ac.20-28; this tells of the arrival of Paul in Rome and his imprisonment there. It ends with the picture of Paul "preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered."

This plan of Acts answers its most puzzling question, why does it finish where it does? It finishes with Paul in prison awaiting judgment. We would so much have liked to know what happened to him and the end is wrapped in mystery. But Luke stopped there because his purpose was accomplished; he had shown how Christianity began in Jerusalem and swept across the world until it reached Rome. A great New Testament scholar has said that the title of Acts might be, "How they brought the Good News from Jerusalem to Rome."

LUKE'S SOURCES

Luke was an historian, and the sources from which an historian draws his information is all important. Where then did Luke get his facts? In this connection Acts falls into two parts.

(i) There are the first fifteen chapters, of whose events Luke had no personal knowledge. He very likely had access to two sources.

(a) There were the records of the local churches. They may never have been set down in writing but the churches had their stories. In this section we can distinguish three records. There is the record of the Jerusalem church which we find in

Ac.1-5 and in Ac.15-16. There is the record of the church at Caesarea which covers Ac.8:26-40, Ac.9:31-43 and Ac.10:1-48. There is the record of the church at Antioch which includes Ac.11:19-30, Ac.12:25, Ac.13 and Ac.14:1-28.

(b) Very likely there were cycles of stories which were the Acts of Peter, the Acts of John, the Acts of Philip and the Acts of Stephen. Beyond a doubt Luke's friendship with Paul would bring him into touch with all the great men of all the churches and all their stories would be at his disposal.

(ii) There is Ac.16-28. Of much of this section Luke had personal knowledge. When we read Acts carefully we notice a strange thing. Most of the time Luke's narrative is in the third person plural; but in certain passages it changes over to the first person plural and "they" becomes "we". The "we" passages are as follows--Ac.16:10-17; Ac.20:5-16; Ac.21:1-18; Ac.27; Ac.28:1-16. On all these occasions Luke must have been present. He must have kept a travel diary and in these passages we have eye-witness accounts. As for the times when he was not present, many were the hours he must have spent in prison with Paul and many were the stories Paul must have told him. There can have been no great figure Luke did not know and in every case he must have got his story from someone who was there.

When we read Acts we may be quite sure that no historian ever had better sources or used his sources more accurately.

Study Questions
The Acts of the Apostles
by William Barclay

The Acts of the Apostles

Intro

Introduction to the Acts of the Apostles (page 1)

up to but not including

The Power to Go On (page 9)

1. In the original Greek, what is the title of Acts?
2. Why is Acts the most important book of the New Testament.
3. What interesting details has Barclay gleaned from the New Testament concerning the author?
4. Barclay gives three possibilities of to whom Acts may have been written (pgs. 2a-2b.) Which appeals to you more and why?
5. The text gives multiple possibilities of why Acts may have been written. What do you think of the possibility that it may have been written as part of Paul's defense before the Emperor and that might be why it ends so abruptly?
6. How does Luke show that Christianity was not expressly for the Jews?
7. What was Luke's primary reason for writing Acts?
8. What has one New Testament scholar said the title of this book should be?