

PARALLEL GUIDE 19 The Acts of the Apostles, Part I

Summary

The next two chapters are a two-part survey of the second half of Luke's work, the Acts of the Apostles. This chapter outlines the Book of Acts and treats the first 12 chapters. These include the birth of the church, the church in Jerusalem, Peter's ministry, Stephen's martyrdom, and the call of Paul.

Learning Objectives

- Read the **first twelve chapters of the Acts of the Apostles**
- Explore the texts concerning the Ascension and Pentecost
- Identify how decisions were made concerning succession in the early church
- Learn the rabbinic method of *gezerah shawah*

Assignment to Deepen Your Understanding

1. The Ascension of Jesus is related only by Luke in Luke 24:50-51 and in the Acts of the Apostles 1:9-11. What does the Ascension mean to us today?
2. What is the significance of Pentecost in the time of the apostles and today?

Preparing for Your Seminar

Pentecost was a major turning point. Today we often think of the Pentecostals and a faith that has a strong emotional basis. What is the role of emotional fervor in faith and worship? What are the benefits and the perils? How should we interpret this turning point?

Additional Sources

See Chapter Twenty for a bibliography.

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Chapter 19 THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES, PART I

In his second volume Luke continues the story of how the church came to be. (For introductory comments on the two-volume work Luke-Acts, see Chapter Eleven.)

In effect, Acts 1 is an expansion of the last part of Luke 24. The events the church comes to know liturgically as "Ascension" and "Pentecost" appear only in Luke, part of the overall schema he draws of the beginnings of Christianity. As Frederick Danker pointed out, Jesus is the Servant-Benefactor in Luke. That role belongs to the church in the Book of Acts.

The Book of Acts falls into two parts. With a certain amount of overlap, the first is about Peter and the

second is about Paul. Scholars outline the book variously in three, five, six, or nine sections. While Acts tells a story in a straight line, a schematic presentation may be useful:

Outline of the Book of Acts

1:1-2:42: Birth of the church
1:1-11: Recapitulation; Ascension
1:12-26: Waiting
2:1-42: Pentecost and its aftermath
2:43-8:1a: The church in Jerusalem
2:43-47: Life together
3:1-5:42: Peter's ministry
6:1-8:1a: Stephen's ministry and martyrdom
8:1b-40: Philip's ministry; the church in Samaria
8:1b-25: Coming of the gospel to Samaria
8:26-40: Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch
9:1-28:31: The church among the Gentiles
9:1-31: Calling of Saul
9:32-12:25: First Gentile converts
13:1-14:28: Paul's ministry: first phase
15:1-35: Apostolic council in Jerusalem
15:36-21:14: Paul's ministry: second phase
21:15-26:32: Paul's arrest and trials
27:1-28:31: Paul in Rome

Birth of the Church 1:1-2:42

Luke briefly summarizes the previous book (1:1-5) and gives a program for the second (1:6-11). Only here in scripture do we find the forty days between Easter and Ascension that have become part of the church's liturgical tradition (1:3); "forty days" obviously recalls Noah's Flood and Jesus' temptation, as well as the forty years of Israel's wilderness wandering. The baptism in the Spirit is carefully linked with the words of John the Baptizer at the beginning (1:5; cf. Luke 3:16).

Ascension 1:1-11

In view of Luke's obvious concern about Jerusalem we should not underestimate the importance of the question, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (1:6) This question is answered with a comment on the limitations of human understanding and a promise of power for what is needed: witness

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in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, "and to the ends of the earth" (1:8). Luke recounts Jesus' exaltation and promises Jesus' return (1:11). Meanwhile there is work to do here and now, so the witnesses to the Ascension need not stand "looking up toward heaven" (1:11).

Waiting 1:12-26

The exaltation and the promise of return are associated by Luke with Olivet, which according to scripture will be the scene for God to fight Israel's last battle (*Zech. 14:4*). Presumably the women Luke has mentioned are those gathered with the eleven (Luke 8:2; 23:49, 55; 24:10).

The replacement of Judas (1:15-26) illustrates the importance of the number twelve as constituting the “apostolic college.” Twelve is the full complement of the tribes of Israel. From the beginning Peter exercises leadership in relating what is happening to their group and the growing understanding of scripture they are learning (1:15). The section also illustrates the nature of apostleship. What is required to be included in the Twelve is to have been part of the company of Jesus’ disciples from the beginning; such a person must (Luke’s frequently repeated word in his Gospel) become, with the eleven, a witness to the Resurrection (1:22-23). They cast lots, but only after prayer that God might show them whom God has chosen. “Ministry and apostleship” (1:25) point to two aspects of the apostolic task: to be servant to the church and a commissioned representative of Christ.

Pentecost and Its Aftermath 2:1-42

The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is the pivotal event of the opening part of the Book of Acts. The baptism in Spirit and fire prophesied by John and the power promised by Jesus are now given (2:2-3). Despite most Christian iconography, Luke probably intended “all together” (2:1) to refer to the entire company, including the women, rather than just the Twelve (cf. 1:14).

The feast of Pentecost (also known as Shavuot, or “Weeks,” Lev. 23:15-21) is connected in rabbinic tradition with the giving of the Torah at Sinai. Legends that at Sinai the Torah had been miraculously translated into every language undoubtedly influenced Luke’s description of what followed (2:5-13). To some it all sounds like the effects of new wine (2:13), but then Peter speaks. He makes clear that the miraculous gift of tongues is not an end in itself. The gift of tongues is a sign that the new age has begun, as witnessed to by prophecy, particularly by Joel (2:28-32; LXX 3:1-5), quoted in Acts 2:17-21. The passage speaks of a new era in which all God’s people prophesy (2:17-18), and all can call on God’s name and be saved (2:21). This promised time, says Peter, has now arrived (2:16).

The passage also speaks of cosmic wonders—the moon turned into blood, and so on—and Peter goes on (2:22-24) to say that Jesus has done the wonders and signs God promised. The darkness and failure of the sun are probably the eclipse that Luke records at the time of Christ’s death (Luke 23:44), and the fire is the coming of the Holy Spirit. Luke’s use of the Joel passage in this way shows that the early church was perfectly capable of understanding such language figuratively. Now God has raised up Jesus (2:24).

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An extended quotation from Psalm 16:8-11a, with the noticeable omission of the last line about David’s hope, follows (16:11b). In the manner of most first-century exegesis, the psalm is assumed to be an oracle about the future, written by David (“since he was a prophet,” 2:30). Who is the “holy one” who, according to David, will not see corruption? Clearly it is not David himself, for David has died (2:29). Obviously, then, it is the coming King-Messiah. Jesus is the one whom God has raised, “and of that all of us are witnesses” (2:32). At this crucial point the passage does not appeal to scripture but to the apostolic witness! Faithful testimony is to be accepted wherever it occurs, even in the mouth of someone living, so that proper accreditation in witnesses is vital.

Jesus has been exalted “at the right hand” of God (2:33), and now the quotation from Psalm 16 is in effect completed. The reference to Jesus’ exaltation is the functional equivalent of quoting “in your right hand are pleasures for evermore” (Ps. 16:11b). Scripture is alive for these people, not a dead body of quotable text but the word of God being renewed in the life of the community, most especially in Jesus.

The rabbinic method of biblical interpretation known as *gezerah shawah* interprets a phrase in one passage in the light of the same phrase used in another. Peter’s allusion to Psalm 16 now allows him to refer to another “right hand” psalm, 110:1. In this passage God says to one who is called “Lord” that he is to be at God’s “right hand.” This passage also was traditionally understood to speak of the Messiah (see, e.g., Mark 12:35-

37). Peter's meaning is clear: Jesus, who has been exalted to God's right hand, this crucified Jesus, is both Lord and Christ (Messiah) (2:36).

The Jews Peter addresses ask what they should do, and he replies, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (2:38). This baptism is like that of John the Baptizer, but now it is also given in the name of Jesus as Messiah (2:38). Those who are baptized will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit promised to "everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him" (2:39). The allusion (not at all clear in the NRSV) is to Joel 2:32 (LXX Joel 3:5b), part of a longer passage that Luke has been quoting just above (Acts 2:17-21).

The "primitive" (i.e., early) nature of this speech has long been noted. It is primitive in style. The Greek contains many Aramaisms that are quite foreign to Luke and, apart from those passages where Luke naturally makes use of the LXX to quote scripture, appears to be a translation from originally Aramaic material. The speech is also primitive in content. It is written from a thoroughly Jewish perspective. It does not offer a new religion. The outpouring of the Spirit simply signifies the arrival of the new age promised by the prophets. What this has to do with the Gentiles is not yet clear ("far away" at verse 2:39 could refer to Gentiles or to the Jews of the Diaspora).

We need not assume that the speech is a precise record of everything that Peter said on the day of Pentecost. Apart from any other objection, as a sermon it is rather short (see Acts 2:4). But it does seem likely that Luke is here making use of an

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early source that represents the kind of preaching and teaching that was given by the church from the very beginning—and that we certainly are in touch with the general pattern of teaching offered by Peter and other early preachers of Jewish Christianity. Ancient historians commonly composed the kind of speech thought suitable for each particular occasion. While Luke has certainly done a great deal of editing and some composing, nevertheless the basic pattern of preaching seems to be preserved, as C. H. Dodd showed long ago in outlining the primitive kerygma (see Chapter Seven).

2:43-8:1a—The Church in Jerusalem

Life Together 2:43-47

The mission succeeds beyond all expectation. Luke's opening picture of the church is almost idyllic. Fellowship in the gospel leads naturally to a fellowship of possessions (2:44-45). As faithful Jews the believers continue worshiping daily in the Temple; as faithful followers of Jesus they continue daily in the fellowship of the eucharistic table (2:46). God is praised, the disciples have "the goodwill of all the people" (2:47), and their numbers continue to increase.

Peter's Ministry 3:1-5:42

The mission in Jerusalem under the leadership of Peter (and, to some extent, of John; see 3:1, 11; 4:13, 19) continues to be a great success. Luke's account of it is quite unrestrained. There are miraculous cures (3:1-10), inspired preaching (3:11-26), and utter fearlessness before the authorities (4:1-22). It is all celebrated with triumphant prayer and further manifestations of the Holy Spirit (4:23-31). Those who try to cheat are punished (4:32-5:11). There are continuing healings (5:12-16), miraculous escapes (5:17-25), and enormous popularity (5:26). With the warning given by Rabbi Gamaliel himself that the Christian movement may be of God (5:33-39), the movement continues to go forward (5:40-42). Little is known of R. Gamaliel I in rabbinic tradition. According to the Book of Acts he was Paul's teacher (22:3). Theudas was a rebel against Rome who was killed under the procuratorship of Fadus (44-46 CE), i.e., several years later (Josephus, Ant. 20.5.1).

Unless there was another rebel Theudas of whom we have no other record, Luke has inserted something that is chronologically impossible. This need not mean that he has misrepresented Gamaliel's general attitude, or that Gamaliel was never known to have defended the Christians.

Stephen's Ministry and Martyrdom 6:1-8:1a

Chapter 6 marks a transition in the story. The first joy is marred; the church now experiences growing pains. Tension arises between the "Hebrews" and the "Hellenists"—that is, between Aramaic-speaking and Greek-speaking Jews. The exact nature of the dispute, which is only vaguely described by Luke, is unclear. It probably reflects divisions of which we are uninformed in the fabric of first-century Jewish society in Jerusalem. **Significantly, the seven appointed in response to the problem all have Greek names.** Later in the Book of Acts, when persecution leads to the scattering of the church, apparently it is only the Hellenists who are scattered (8:1b). Peter and the others are still in Jerusalem at the beginning of chapter 12. This may well have been the first instance of an ethnic rift in the church; it would certainly not be the last.

The episode described in verses 6:1-6 is often referred to as "the appointment of the seven deacons." The work to which the Seven are appointed—the distribution

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of relief—bears some relationship to the work of deacons in later times. But the word "deacon" is used nowhere in the passage, and the relationship of the Seven to the diaconate is actually very uncertain. When one of them is given a title later in the Book of Acts, the word used is "evangelist," not "deacon" (Acts 21:8). Since in some ways the Seven have the same relationship to the apostles as the seventy elders to Moses (Num. 11:10-25), they might well be regarded as the forerunners of later Christian presbyters (elders) rather than deacons. Reading later church organization or doctrine or practice back into the New Testament is often tempting but always misleading, not because later church life is "a departure from the New Testament" but because it is a response to needs that only become evident later.

The passage in verses 6:1-6 implies some fairly clear principles about appointment to office in the church (6:3). In this passage what the church traditionally calls "external vocation" (i.e., calling by the church) is emphasized almost to the total exclusion of "internal vocation" (i.e., a personal sense of call to a ministry). In other words, what the candidates believe about themselves is of comparatively little importance; what the church believes is of first importance. **On what basis does the church discern a true calling?** Those chosen are to be "of good standing [literally "testified about"], full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (6:3). The entire congregation—not the apostles, or certainly not the apostles alone—makes the decision. The people of God as a whole make the choice; the apostles appoint (6:6).

Luke follows with a further summary of the church's triumphant progress (6:7). The note about believers among "the priests" is interesting for its hint of progress among the establishment leadership.

Stephen is abruptly introduced. Although one of the seven appointed to serve at tables, he is actually engaged in preaching to Diaspora Jews (6:9). In the ensuing controversy he is charged not with preaching the Resurrection (in contrast to Peter and John) but with blasphemy against the Temple and the Torah (6:11-14). (We cannot miss the similarity to the charges against Jesus.) These charges are the occasion for Stephen's speech.

The speech is not without problems. At first reading it is not obvious what it has to do with the charges against Stephen. In fact, Stephen's speech is a review of Jewish formative history. In form and content this speech invites comparison with other reviews of the same history, such as Joshua 24 (designed to persuade the people to turn away from foreign gods), Psalm 78 (the history of Israel from the Judean perspective, designed as a warning against national disobedience), Ezra 9 (describing the disobedience of Israel's past and

calling for the restoration of purity), and Daniel 9:4-19 (describing Israel's past as disobedience and looking for the restoration of Jerusalem). These biblical reviews of history, like the biblical genealogies, are never composed merely to give information; they have a theological purpose, as does Stephen's speech.

Stephen asserts that Israel has frequently rejected its saviors, including Joseph and Moses (7:35), and that it has constantly been drawn to idolatry—over the calf (7:41)

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and, by implication, over its attitude toward the Temple: “Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands” (7:48). The same pattern, the speech continues, is to be seen in the Sadducees' rejection of Jesus (7:52-53). They have rejected the prophets, they reject Jesus, and they reject the Torah.

The martyrdom of Stephen abruptly follows. In form the account has clear resemblances to Luke's account of the death of Jesus (cf. 7:56, 60). At the conclusion—a link with what is to come—the young man Saul is mentioned as a complicit witness of Stephen's death: “And Saul approved of their killing him” (8:1a; see Luke 11:48, where the same word is used by Jesus to characterize the scribes' attitude toward the martyrdom of Israel's prophets).

Philip's Ministry: The Church in Samaria 8:1b-40

The persecution of the church by Saul and others (8:1b-3) has an effect exactly opposite to that intended by the persecutors: the church grows. Nothing can stop the gospel, and the word is preached in Samaria. Philip preaches with power (8:7) and with considerable success (8:6). This extension of the mission is accepted by the Jerusalem apostles. The laying on of hands signifies identification of his work with theirs and confirmation that the same Spirit is at work in all of them (8:14-17).

Coming of the Gospel to Samaria 8:1b-25

In Luke's view the gift of the Spirit is the normal accompaniment of all baptisms (cf. 2:38). One sense in which we might understand that the Spirit “had not come upon any” of the Samaritan converts is that none of them had yet manifested the “Pentecostal” signs of speaking in tongues and prophesying. These manifestations, according to the narrative, were what impressed Simon the magician when the Spirit did come (8:18-19), but he is scarcely to be regarded as spiritually perceptive. (His attempt to buy what could only be given freely by God is the source of the word “*simony*” as a term to describe the purchase of church offices.) Still, the account in verses 8:14-17 describes the “Samaritan Pentecost” as verse 10:44 will describe the “Gentile Pentecost.” Peter and John come to Samaria from the Temple at Jerusalem, pray for the converts, and give them the laying on of hands, the ancient sign of approval, blessing, and incorporation. Then the same Spirit that was received by the disciples at Pentecost is given to the Samaritans, who are now united with the Jews, their former adversaries, in the fellowship of the church.

Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch 8:26-40

In verses 8:26-40 Luke emphasizes that the one who proclaims the gospel is under divine guidance (8:26), and that there are no outcasts in God's kingdom. The importance of the passage is not that the man baptized was an Ethiopian, but that he was a eunuch. Eunuchs could not be full members of the Israelite community (cf. Deut. 23:1). The Ethiopian eunuch was presumably a member of the class known as “God-fearers,” Gentiles drawn to Judaism who for one reason or another would not or could not become full converts. The good news, which has just been received by a group previously regarded with suspicion by the people of the covenant, now comes to one formally outcast from their fellowship. We have come to the limits of those who can in any sense be regarded as linked with Judaism.

9:1-28:31—The Church Among the Gentiles

This story of call is obviously very important to Luke, who repeats it twice more,

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with variations (22:3-21; 26:4-23). It is a story on which we reflect in more detail when we discuss Paul's ministry and correspondence. For the moment we notice three characteristics of Luke's account.

Calling of Saul 9:1-31

First, it is a story of grace. The Jesus who deals graciously with Saul the persecutor is evidently the same Jesus who earlier prayed for his persecutors at the Crucifixion (9:4-6, 15; cf. Luke 23:34). Second, it emphasizes the solidarity of Christians with Christ. The bond between Christ and the church is such that the church has an apostolic or representative character. Saul has been persecuting Jesus' followers, but to do so is to persecute Jesus himself (cf. Luke 10:16). Third, it emphasizes Jesus' explicit command that Saul shall carry his name to the Gentiles (9:15).

Despite this third element in his call, Saul begins by talking to his fellow Jews and does not have great success. A group plots to kill him (9:20-24). Even Christians, who are suspicious of him, do not receive him well. Only the persuasion of **Barnabas** prevails (9:26-30). Meanwhile the church "in the comfort of the Holy Spirit" continues to grow in Judea, Galilee, and also in Samaria (9:31). Saul is incorporated into the community in the same way everyone else is, vision or no vision. He is taught the faith by one already in the church. He has hands laid on him and he is baptized.

First Gentile Converts 9:32-12:25

Despite the command to Saul, the Gentile mission actually begins with Peter, who is convinced by a vision and driven rather against his will to a centurion named Cornelius (10:1-33). In response to Peter's proclamation (10:36-43), the Spirit falls on the Gentiles (10:44-46). This is the "Gentile Pentecost." As at the first Pentecost, the gift is unmediated (no baptism or laying on of hands) and is marked by the gift of "tongues." This does not mean that baptism is unnecessary, but rather that those whom God has called must at once be received by baptism into the Christian fellowship (10:47-48). The church needed some time to sort out the sequence in which initiatory acts are performed and the criteria by which alleged manifestations of the Spirit are judged. The Book of Acts is the best record we have of the earliest stages of that development.

The whole experience is ratified after discussion by the Jewish-Christian church in Jerusalem (11:1-18). Peter does not operate on his own but within the community's overall commission. He must seek the community's approval for new ventures of this importance. At this point we learn of a successful mission by Hellenistic Jewish Christians to "Greeks" (11:19-21, i.e., here clearly meaning "pagans"). This venture, too, is ratified by the Jerusalem church (11:19-26). In a passage with the flavor of the end-time, Gentiles send their gifts to Jerusalem (11:27-30). The giving of the gifts is itself under the guidance of the Spirit, and Luke is careful to point out that the prophecy now given by Agabus was later fulfilled (11:28-29).

This activity naturally raises hostility, and in verses 12:1-25 we read of the martyrdom of James (son of Zebedee) and the arrest of Peter by Herod (Agrippa), grandson of Herod ("the Great"), who was reigning when Luke's first scroll opened (Luke 1:5). Peter is miraculously delivered from prison and sends word to James (brother of Jesus) and the rest of the believers. Herod has the guards killed. Shortly afterward

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Herod is hailed as a god by the people of Tyre and Sidon, then immediately falls ill and dies (12:20-23; cf. Josephus, Ant. 19.8.2).

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End of chapter

Bibliography - here as a public service^{back}

Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic Books, 1971) is an attempt to read the Old Testament with the eyes of a literary critic. Alter's aim throughout is, in his words, "to illuminate the distinctive principles of the Bible's narrative art." The study is accessible to the lay reader as well as the scholar.

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Greek names^{back}

Did Jews who only spoke Greek typically have Greek names? Worth investigating.

A true calling^{back}

This has been a subject of debate and schism ever since.

Barnabas^{back}

Good for Barnabas! A reasonable, conciliatory person. I think our community could make more of him.

