

THE PEOPLE'S BIBLE COMMENTARY  
— A Bible commentary for every day —



# Acts

Loveday Alexander

BRF CENTENARY CLASSICS



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## INTRODUCTION

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*Bilbo often used to say that there was only one Road; that it was like a great river: its springs were at every doorstep, and every path was its tributary. 'It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out of your door,' he used to say. 'You step into the Road, and if you don't keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off to.'*

J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*.

### Welcome to the journey!

'This book will make a traveller of thee,' says John Bunyan at the beginning of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and the same could well be said of the Acts of the Apostles. The book of Acts is the story of a journey. It tells the story of the birth of the church, and its journey outwards and across the world from where it all began, in an upstairs room in Jerusalem. Woven into this story are the journeys of a whole host of individual travellers, apostles and others, moving back and forth across that Mediterranean world and spreading the word wherever they go. But it's also the story of the journey of faith, a journey to which every reader is invited: it's no accident that one of Luke's favourite metaphors for discipleship is 'the Way'.

As so often in the Bible, the journey starts with a vision, which empowers and controls the travellers and to which they constantly revert. The story begins on a mountaintop, the classic location for vision in the Bible, where the heavens open and angels and mortals speak face to face (ch. 1). Then comes the communal visionary experience of Pentecost, when the empowerment of God's Spirit becomes something visible even to the crowds in a Jerusalem street (ch. 2). Further into the narrative, the two controlling visions are Peter's rooftop trance (ch. 10) and Paul's encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus road (ch. 9); each is recounted over and over again, as the characters in the story are challenged to unravel the true significance of what God is saying to them (chs. 11; 15; 22; 26). And vision provides not only the starting point for mission but also its content: 'We cannot but speak of the things which we have seen and heard' (4:20; 26:19).

## **Journey into outer space**

Like any road movie, Acts contains a strong geographical element. It's the one book in the New Testament where you really need to keep an eye on the map. Most Bibles include a map of 'The journeys of St Paul', and there are excellent maps available in Bible atlases and other guides. (Tip: a modern physical map of the eastern Mediterranean will often give you a much better flavour of the terrain covered in the book.) More than any other book of the New Testament, Acts conveys a sense of the excitement and romance of travel. It's a cosmopolitan book, moving with ease from the narrow streets of Jerusalem to the classical elegance of Athens, from the high passes of the Turkish-Syrian border to the back streets of Rome. And on the way we meet a variety of deftly drawn characters, from the Ethiopian court treasurer (ch. 8) to the friendly Roman centurion Julius (ch. 27). Acts reminds us that there's a big wide world out there – a daunting prospect to the Galilean disciples on the Mount of Olives, as Jesus gives them their marching orders (1:8). But gradually, as we read, we come to share with them the unfolding excitement of finding that God is out there too, waiting to meet them and surprise them in this strange world that is also God's world.

## **Journey into inner space**

There's also a more hidden journey, a journey of discovery in which the familiar turns out to be more surprising than we thought. 'Who will show me the way?' asks the Ethiopian, sitting in his chariot on the Gaza Road and poring over an ancient scroll (8:31). It's not a road map he's asking for but a new way to read the age-old scriptures, and that's what Philip provides (8:35). Acts conducts its characters (and therefore its readers) into an inner journey of exploration under the guidance of God's Holy Spirit, working out how the 'this' of personal experience corresponds with the 'that' of God's revelation. This is not always an easy thing to do. Often it means facing up to the puzzlement and hostility of our closest compatriots. Even harder, it means confronting our own prejudices and facing up to our own persistent refusal to recognise God's Spirit at work. So there's a lot of conflict built into the story of Acts; and some of the shortest journeys in the book, geographically speaking, turn out to be some of the longest and most significant in terms of inner space.

## A guide for time travellers

This commentary is designed as a kind of interactive travel guide for readers of Acts, helping you to relate to Luke's story on three levels.

My first priority is to describe the journey itself from the point of view of the author and his first readers, taking pains to listen carefully to the story as he tells it, to pick up the clues he has laid for informed readers, and to try first of all to understand the story in its own terms. This is a basic courtesy we owe to any book, especially to a book written 2,000 years ago in a very different culture from our own. That means trying to experience the journey from the viewpoint of the characters in Luke's story, hearing the conversations and debates from inside, trying to understand both sides before jumping to conclusions about what's going on. It also means trying to hear Luke's story through the ears of his original readers, asking about the literary echoes or political resonances that would be picked up by a first-century audience.

Second, we can take a step back and ask how Luke's story relates to other stories we know of from that time and place. This means filling in some of the historical information we need, to understand the significance of Luke's story: who was this emperor or that official? What else was going on at the time? How does Luke's version of events tie in with other evidence – Paul's letters, for example? I have tried to indicate what the main historical questions are and where you can find out more if you want to.

And third, we need to move back into the 21st century (which of course we never really left) and ask how Luke's story relates to our own stories. There are many different kinds of travel guides, but most of them fall into two categories: those that offer an armchair substitute for travel, and those that incite you to get out there and sample the real thing. My hope and prayer is that readers will find this guide provoking in many different ways, and that you will be able to use it to inform and inspire your own journeying on the Way, whether individually or as a group. So each reading ends with a question, a quotation or a prayer, suggesting ways to link up with some of the stories that belong to our lives today – things that are happening in the newspapers, in our churches or in our own spiritual lives. Use these any way you want, and treat them as a springboard to make your own connections between Luke's world and ours – or simply as a framework for your own prayers.



## Basic orientation

The rest of this introduction will deal with the basic information and equipment you need for the journey. You may like to read it all before starting, or you may prefer to save it up and refer back to it as the need arises.

### The author

Like most New Testament scholars, I use the name ‘Luke’ as shorthand for ‘the author of Acts – whoever that was’. This is the name that has been attached to the third gospel and Acts from earliest times, both in the manuscript tradition and in the early church writers who quote him. But it’s worth pausing at the outset to ask what we know about the person who put this crucial story together – and what kind of detective work has gone into piecing the story together.

First, we know from Acts 1:1 that the author has already written a book about Jesus – and it doesn’t take much detective ability to work out that this ‘former treatise’ is the third gospel, which is dedicated to the same person, Theophilus, and is written in very much the same style. So ‘Luke’ is actually the author of two books, which together make up almost a quarter of the whole New Testament. And our author tells us a bit more about himself in the preface to the gospel, at Luke 1:1–4. This preface doesn’t give the author’s name (although the masculine participle used in verse 3 does tell us that he was male). In some ways the preface tells us more about who Luke was not than who he was: he wasn’t the first to write down the story of Jesus (v. 1); he wasn’t an eyewitness (v. 2). But the whole way he writes tells us quite a bit about the sort of person he was: rational, business-like, reassuringly pragmatic, full of words like ‘carefully’, ‘accurately’, ‘thoroughly’, ‘in an orderly fashion’ (vv. 3–4). It’s as if Luke wants to reassure his readers that the extraordinary story they’re about to read is one that belongs in the real world, a world of people like Theophilus who like to check out the reliability of what they’re told (v. 4) – in other words, a world of people like you and me.

Nevertheless, this sober, rational author is not standing outside the story he tells, like an investigative journalist. He has a personal stake in it. The ‘we’ of the preface to Luke’s gospel aligns the writer with the whole Christian tradition, with all those who have received the testimony of the original eyewitnesses (v. 2). In fact, he’s part of the community in which the whole extraordinary business has come to

pass (v. 1). And towards the end of his second volume, the ‘we’ slips in again in a way that implies that the author is actually part of the story he narrates (Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16). It sounds as if our author was one of those who accompanied Paul on his travels, including the last, fateful trip to Rome. If so, all we need to do is to work out from Paul’s letters which of Paul’s many friends and co-workers is the most likely candidate for the job. It seems safe to assume that the author isn’t any of the people he mentions in the third person (Barnabas, Timothy, Gaius and so on – you can work it out for yourself if you want to). That still leaves quite a few options: Paul had a lot of friends! (Look at Romans 16, for example.) But as far back as we can see (as early as Irenaeus, writing around AD180), the favoured candidate is the attractive if shadowy figure of the beloved physician of Paul’s prison epistles, the co-worker who sends greetings to the house churches in Colossae, the faithful Luke who sticks with the apostle in prison: look up Philemon 24; Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11.

Not all scholars accept that this detective work has come up with the right answer. Some would argue that the ‘we-passages’ of Acts are just a literary device or that the author has incorporated some genuine diary entries from one of Paul’s companions. Many find it hard to believe that a close companion of Paul could have written Acts, on the grounds that the Paul whom Luke portrays is actually rather different from the Paul who comes across from his letters. That’s an issue we shall look at from time to time in the second half of Acts, but for my part (in common with a number of other recent commentators), I find that on balance the traditional authorship is the simplest way to account for all the data. Not that Luke’s viewpoint is identical with that of Paul’s letters in every respect. Luke hardly ever calls Paul an apostle, for example, and (as we shall see) he has certainly been selective in the story he tells. But then, which of our closest friends would portray any of us exactly as we would like to portray ourselves?

Ultimately, I don’t believe that the name of the author is what really matters. Much more important is to work out why the author has shaped his story in the particular way he has. For that, it is highly significant that the author (let’s stick with calling him Luke) has chosen to align himself with the first-hand experience of Paul’s travelling companions. And that, I believe, provides a vital clue to the distinctive viewpoint that gives his story its shape.

## The shape of Luke's story

It's helpful to think of Luke's story as a drama in four acts. The first three correspond roughly to the threefold geographical plan outlined in Jesus' commission in 1:8: Jerusalem (Act I: chapters 1–7); Judea and Samaria (Act II: chapters 8–12); 'to the ends of the earth' (Act III: chapters 13–19). Act IV (chapters 20–28) brings Paul back to Jerusalem, and tells how he eventually ended up travelling to Rome as a prisoner.

Looking forward, in other words, the story proceeds like a series of chain reactions (Pentecost; persecution; mission), each one triggering the next. As we watch each explosion, it's impossible to predict where the debris will end up: the potential is global (2:9–11), and Luke doesn't attempt to tell all the stories that his narrative opens up. (What happened to all the other apostles, or the other deacons?) But unrolling the story backwards, it's quite easy to see how each step links back to the one before. Starting out from the Mount of the Ascension, there's no way you could predict Paul's imprisonment in Rome, but if you begin at the end you can trace the causal links all the way back. And the wonderful thing that Luke wants to impress above all on his readers is how each step – even the apparent disasters – is under the guidance of God's Holy Spirit. Like Joseph, Paul could have said, 'It was God who brought me here to preach the life-giving gospel of salvation' (compare Genesis 45:5).

So in many respects the easiest way to understand the shape of the drama is to begin at the end. 'And *that's* how we got to Rome!' says Luke triumphantly, after all the excitement of the shipwreck (28:14) – as if the whole point of his story is to explain how Paul comes to be arriving in Rome, accompanied by a Roman centurion, charged with disrupting the peace and generally causing mayhem back in Jerusalem. In fact, I believe that is precisely Luke's point. The whole last quarter of the book tells the long and complicated story of the riot in the temple that triggered it all off and the series of trials in which Paul has to defend himself before the Jewish and Roman authorities. But of course we want to know how he came to be in the temple in the first place, and why he got people so wound up: so that takes us back into Act III, which tells the extraordinary story of Paul's mission, and how he kept trying to give his message to Jewish audiences around the Mediterranean world and then finding that he was being pushed into giving it to the Gentiles too. But Paul wasn't acting just under his own steam: Act II takes us further back, to the heavenly revelation that stopped Paul in his tracks and

made him a follower of Jesus instead of a persecutor of Jesus' disciples, and shows how Paul's story ties in with the stories of other people following this Way that people call 'the sect of the Nazarenes' (24:5, 14). And that takes us, finally, to Act I (chapters 1–7), which tells the story of how the sect originated and its links with the hidden substratum of Acts, the good news that God has sent salvation for the whole world in Jesus, the Christ (compare Luke 1:68–79; 24:44–47).

### **Journey's end**

The final scene of Acts also provides a vital clue to Luke's original audience and situation. Luke tells us a lot about Paul the missionary, preaching to the Gentile world (in Act III), and Paul the prisoner, making his defence before the Roman empire (in Act IV). In the final scene of the book, however, Paul is neither of these. His final words are addressed to the leaders of the Jewish community in Rome, who ask him (in surprisingly neutral tones), 'Tell us about this sect.' In essence, I believe that Luke's whole story is the answer to that question – although my hunch is (along with most scholars) that Luke is actually writing after Paul's death and after the destructive and futile rebellion against Rome that left the temple in ruins.

The final scene of Acts is a kind of freeze-frame that encapsulates a key moment in the long, fraught history of Jewish–Christian relations. Acts records three decades of dialogue, debate and division – sometimes violent – over 'the Way' within the Jewish community. Much of this dialogue takes place on the margins, in the border zones where different groups within the Jewish family are jostling for position, each at times trying to edge the others out. So there are times when Luke speaks of 'the Jews' as outsiders, and times (much more often) when Paul and Peter address their fellow Jews as insiders in impassioned, prophetic appeal. That's the time warp Acts is caught up in, a freeze-frame that's hard to recapture from where we stand today. But I believe it is essential that we give full weight to all the voices in that dialogue, within and outside the church, refusing to foreclose the debate – which in many ways foreshadows the debates going on in the church today between continuity and innovation, 'traditional' and 'emerging' patterns of church life. In our ready identification with one side or the other, with the prodigal or the elder brother, it's all too easy to shut out the voice of the Father who says to both brothers, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours' (Luke 15:31).

## 1

**Acts 1:1–5**

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**Act One: Jerusalem**

*When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then they said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them.' The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad.*

PSALM 126:1–3 (RSV)

The opening chapters of Acts capture something of the dream-like quality of the psalmist's vision of the restoration of Zion. Restoration, and the fulfilment of the age-old promises, is very much what the first quarter of the book is about. But restoration is also about repentance, and that is what is on offer for the people of Jerusalem and their rulers.

**The story so far**

Like the preface to Luke's gospel (Luke 1:1–4), the opening verse of Acts is essentially a kind of label stuck on to the front of the book, in which the author momentarily speaks in his own voice and addresses the reader direct. The practical reason for putting the label here is that each of Luke's two volumes is about the right length for a scroll, so this point marks the break. Because a scroll has no spine or dust jacket, ancient authors normally used the first sentence to supply the essential information that readers needed to identify what they were reading. The effect is rather like changing reels halfway through the film in an old-fashioned cinema. For a few moments we slip out of the narrative world and back into the real world of authors and readers.

**Volume two**

The first thing we learn as we open the book is that it's the second volume of a diptych, the second half of a book that describes 'all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning' (v. 1). And it's not just a loosely connected sequel. It's easy to see from the first verse that Luke expects his readers to know what has happened in the gospel. He makes very few concessions to new readers: there are no footnotes or helpful glosses to tell them who John or the apostles were. Everything in the

second volume, Acts, presupposes the story of the first (that is, the story of Jesus) and there are all sorts of links and connections that observant readers can pick up between the two.

## **Captain and crew**

The preface also lays the groundwork in important ways for the second half of Luke's story. It introduces the key characters of Acts, beginning with Jesus himself. Luke's story of Jesus is shaped in a particular way, focused on the actions and teachings of a holy man (v. 1), just as many Greek biographies described the actions and teachings of a philosopher. That story is directed towards the ascension (v. 2), which creates the centrepoint for the whole two-volume work. For Luke, the ascension of Jesus is not an afterthought, tacked on to tidy up the end of the narrative: the passion, resurrection and ascension are a unit, beginning as far back as Luke 9:51. But the story doesn't end with Jesus' departure to heaven: the opening scene of Acts creates a double overlay with the last chapter of the gospel (Luke 24), both describing in different ways the captain's final instructions to his crew. In a sense, everything in Acts stems from this moment. In the chapters that ensue, we shall follow the apostles' attempts to carry out the mission Jesus has entrusted to them.

## **The apostles and the Spirit**

The apostles (v. 2) are therefore the next most important characters. We shall hear much more about them as the story progresses, but this brief introduction already tells us that they were chosen by Jesus and instructed by Jesus – companions who shared table-fellowship with him (the meaning of 'staying with them' in v. 4, NRSV). The essence of their commission lies precisely in being entrusted with the unique experience of seeing Jesus alive after his passion (v. 3), witnessing the 'many convincing proofs' of his resurrection life. Transmitting this experience to an unbelieving world, offering living proof of Jesus' continued (but hidden) resurrection life, is what they are about. They are not alone: Jesus' instruction is 'in the Holy Spirit' who has been with him since the beginning of the gospel story (Luke 1:35; 3:22; 4:14). And more is on its way: the promise of the Father (compare Luke 24:49) is about to be realised not many days from now (vv. 4–5). There's a sense of expectancy here which takes us right back to the beginning of the gospel.

## **Prayer**

*Lord Jesus, as we read the story of the apostles, help us to catch a glimpse of what it means to be your disciples, and to take our place in your mission in the world.*



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Acts is the story of the birth of the church and the beginnings of its journey around the world. The author, Luke, traces this journey from an upstairs room in Jerusalem through the travels of individual disciples across the Mediterranean world, spreading the gospel wherever they go. It is also the story of the journey of faith – ‘the Way’, as Luke describes it. As we read, we share the excitement of those first Christians in finding that God is ‘out there’, waiting to meet us on our journeys.

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