

Acts is a sequel to Luke, continuing the account of what Jesus did and taught, but this time through his followers as they take the message from Judea and Samaria throughout the Roman world.

This remarkably clear and concise study is informed by serious scholarship, but it aims to help a much wider set of readers—those who are interested, intrigued or inspired by Acts, and who want a brief, brisk overview of the main issues in it.



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Acts of God

The Message and Meaning
of the Book of Acts



John Proctor

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Preface

This booklet is not specialist academic writing. It is informed by serious study, but it aims to help a much wider set of readers. It is for people who are interested, intrigued or inspired by Acts, and who want a brief, brisk overview of the main issues in it. If you would like to read something fuller, there are many larger works on Acts, and some that helped me are listed in the Resources section of this booklet.

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1

Introduction

Acts is a sequel to Luke's gospel.

We know this, because the little preface at the start (Acts 1.1f) looks back to the first few verses of Luke. So Acts starts where the gospel ends, with Jesus ascending. As he leaves his friends, he tells them about the work ahead. 'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (1.8). This one verse sums up the story of the chapters, and the church, that follow.

From here on, the horizon expands. Little summaries in Luke's text highlight the growth and help us to track the outward movement:

- | | |
|-------|---|
| 6.7 | • 'increase' in Jerusalem. |
| 9.31 | • 'peace and growth' in Judea and Samaria. |
| 12.24 | • 'advance' to Antioch in Syria. |
| 16.5 | • 'strength and increase' as mission reaches west, towards Greece. |
| 19.20 | • the gospel 'presses on' around the Aegean Sea. |
| 28.31 | • 'bold and unhindered' preaching in Rome—surely a sounding board to send the message on. |

The impression is of widening circles, like a stone thrown into a pond. We hear of numerical growth among Jews (2.41; 4.4; 6.7; 21.20) and Gentiles (11.21; 16.5; 19.10, 20) and of an increasing cultural breadth in the church. Samaritans come to faith (8.4–25), then Gentiles on the fringe of Judaism (8.26–39; 10.1–48), Greeks (11.19–26; 17.34) and some in the service of Rome (13.6–12; 16.27–34).

But the story is selective rather than complete. Luke hints at the possibility of wide mission in his list of the crowds at Pentecost (2.8–11). Yet we hear almost nothing of the gospel going east, and not much about its journey south. Acts tells of a movement north and west into the Greek and Roman world, towards the lands we now call Europe. This was the region Luke and his readers knew.

So Acts has a double focus. Jerusalem, city of resurrection, is the place from which the gospel goes out, and it remains important as a point of reference and return. The gospel tells of a Jewish Messiah. Yet the message is international too, intended for the wider cultures of the Gentile world. As a Roman decree once took Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem (Lk 2.1), so the word of another king (Acts 17.7) makes the return journey, to be preached in the imperial city 'without hesitancy or hindrance' (28.31).

Around this axis, from Jerusalem to Rome, Acts splits roughly into half and each half into two quarters:

The Gospel in the Jewish World

Acts 1–7 The church in Jerusalem: Pentecost and persecution.

Acts 8–12 Judea, Samaria, Syria and the seeds of Gentile mission.

The Gospel in the Greco-Roman World

Acts 13–20 Paul's mission, as he spreads the gospel across Asia and Greece.

Acts 21–28 Paul's passion, as he suffers for the gospel and goes to defend it in Rome.

This outline will shape the pages ahead as we explore the text in greater detail. A word, however, of caution. The world was not as simple as the scheme above suggests. Jewish, Greek and Roman influences overlapped and interlocked, right across the eastern Mediterranean. The dispersed Jewish people, the Greek culture spread by Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC, and Roman imperial roads, trade and government, met in almost every place to which Luke takes us. Acts is set in a multi-cultural society. It might have much to teach us today.

The Gospel in the Jewish World

2

Promise and Power (Acts 1 and 2)

The opening verses recall the longer preface at the start of Luke's gospel. Theophilus (1.1) may well have been a Christian, or perhaps an interested enquirer, of high social status. Luke is writing history with a personal interest and concern, to show his friend that the Christian story is trustworthy and true (Lk 1.4).

The first scene of Acts, the hinge between gospel and church, is Jesus' ascension. This was a positive and hopeful parting, full of anticipation. A cloud took Jesus away, but the Spirit would come and the church would tell the world of its Lord (1.8). Meanwhile the disciples must wait in Jerusalem. So wait they did, a company of 120, including faithful women, a number of Jesus' relatives and eleven of his closest disciples. They prayed, and they took a decision to complete the twelve and replace Judas. The person chosen must be someone who had known Jesus well and could testify that he was truly risen (1.22). Then the full circle of twelve would be a sign in Israel that God was indeed 'restoring the kingdom' (1.6), carrying forward in the church's witness the promise Jesus had given (Lk 22.29f). They were ready for the wind to blow.

Pentecost (2.1–13) was a turning point. Later on, the church looked back to this as the beginning of its life (11.15). Jesus, the bearer of the Spirit (Lk 4.18), had become the bestower of the Spirit. The long journey into Jerusalem was complete (Lk 9.51ff), the waiting in the city was over (Lk 24.49; Acts 1.4, 12–14) and the word was released, to move outward to the nations.

Storm and fire (2.2f) breathe a hint of Sinai (Ex 19), of God renewing his covenant with Israel. Tongues, sounding clearly in the ears of people from many lands (2.4–13), seem to undo the confusion of Babel (Gen 11) and create new possibilities for human community. The crowd is Jewish by race (2.14, 22), but cosmopolitan by place, residence and belonging (2.8–11) with the potential to carry Israel's good news across the world.

Peter's speech (2.14–36) had one clear thread: 'What you see and hear is a sign that Jesus is risen, and ascended, and Lord.' To explain and support this, he drew on three OT texts: Joel 2, about God giving his Spirit 'in the last days' (2.15–21); and two psalms (Ps 16, in 2.25–31; and Ps 110, in 2.34f). The point of the psalm texts is that David's words look on to Jesus, God's great royal Messiah: he is the one delivered from death and enthroned with God.

So a church was born, in belief, baptism and the breaking of bread (2.37–42). A community came together, in cheerful generosity (2.43–45). Sharing of goods was practised by some other Jewish groups of the period. Yet here the coming of the Spirit seems to give the practice a peculiar momentum. The church had become an identifiable group, sharing in Israel's worship but with a life and loyalty of its own too (2.46–47). There would be troubles ahead.

Preaching and Persecution (Acts 3–5)

These chapters speak of rising levels of tension and suspicion between Jesus' followers and Israel's leaders. The first incident arises from a healing 'in the name of Jesus' (3.6). Peter uses the occasion to call people to faith (3.12–26), until he is interrupted by the authorities and locked up (4.1–5). A court hearing the next day ends only in impasse, and one fears there will be more confrontations ahead. But popular support gives the disciples some protection for the time being (4.18–21).

The prayer meeting that follows is a critical moment. The new fellowship might have been fragile. In the event we see solidarity and a strong sense of resolve (4.23–31). Still they shared, generously and gladly (4.32–37), testified to the risen Jesus (4.33) and enjoyed wide public respect (5.12–16). Yet when the authorities intervened again (5.17–26), positions had hardened and the mood was more threatening (5.28–33). In the event Gamaliel's careful words (5.34–39) brought a degree of calm and the apostles were able to carry on preaching (5.40–42). They had the people on their side (5.13, 26), and God too (4.31; 5.19f). But a harsher collision still would only be a matter of time.

Some big issues come into view in these chapters.

- *Christology* is one—the way the church speaks about Jesus. Here he is called God's 'servant' (3.13, 26), 'the holy and righteous One' (3.14), the 'author of life' (3.15), and 'a prophet like Moses' (3.22f). These titles are not very widely used elsewhere in the NT; inevitably some terms did not travel well into Gentile cultures. So their occurrence here suggests that they do indeed come from the early period, rather than from Luke's era, a few decades later. They testify to his care as a historian.
- *Resurrection* is a major issue—'Israel's hope,' it is called later (24.15; 26.6–8). Acts portrays the gospel as firmly rooted in Judaism—a fulfilment of God's ancient promises to his people (3.18–26). And resurrection was the core of the church's faith: Jesus is Lord and his rising shows this (Acts 5.31; Rom 10.9). But Israel was divided on resurrection. Pharisees believed the faithful dead would be raised

to life, and Sadducees, who ran the Jerusalem temple, did not. So Christian talk about resurrection gets the Sadducees angry (4.2).¹ This belief would cause offence elsewhere too (17.32; 26.23f).

- *Scripture* is a recurring theme. The Psalms, which Peter used at Pentecost, appear again, although different psalms are used. Ps 118, which came up in Luke's gospel (19.38; 20.17), speaks of rejection and vindication (Acts 4.11). Ps 2 tells of a Messiah threatened by powers of earth, yet supreme in God's strength (Acts 4.25f). These texts, Acts suggests, come to life most meaningfully as words about Jesus.
- *Jesus' crucifixion* was a recent memory. This was Jerusalem's doing, says Peter (2.23; 3.14f; 5.30), even though it was the work of Roman hands. Yet it was also God's deliberate plan (2.23; 3.18; 4.28), brought into effect through human ignorance and misunderstanding (3.17; 13.27). So the church tells of this event, in Jerusalem and beyond (10.39f; 13.27f), as a known and necessary part of the gospel story. But there is no vindictive intent, as others may have feared (5.28), still less a long-term grudge against the Jewish people. Jerusalem is invited to repent—to acknowledge that the crucifixion was wrong (2.38; 3.19; 5.31). And audiences elsewhere will have their own repenting to do (10.43; 13.38; 17.30).
- Lastly, there is *money*. The sad episode of Ananias and Sapphira (5.1–11) contrasts with the cheerful liberality of others (4.32–37). Sharing goods was not always easy. Generosity cannot be enforced (5.4), but neither can it be counterfeited. God knows what we give and what we withhold. Money, according to Acts, caused trouble in other places too (8.18–24; 16.19; 19.24–26).

Witness to Death (Acts 6 and 7)

The first half of Acts 6 seems clear. Church growth requires organization to match. 'Hellenists' here are Greek-speaking Jews, with personal and cultural roots in the Dispersion. Language and custom would lead them, even after believing in Jesus, to mix more readily with one another than with Jews from the homeland. So to provide for the Hellenists' needs, pastoral overseers are appointed from their side of the Christian community (6.1–6).

A summary then draws together the first phase of Luke's story (6.7), before we hear of events that scattered the Jerusalem church. These centred on Stephen, a man of 'grace and power' (6.8), a forceful and articulate speaker. The charges against him concerned Israel's temple and law (6.13f).

Stephen's speech is the longest in Acts (7.2–53). It has two main themes. One is a story of rejected saviours. God's messengers have often been misunderstood or resented, at least to start with. This happened to Joseph (7.9–13) and to Moses (7.23–29, 39–43). Prophets have regularly been ill-treated; and Jesus was a prophet (7.52). The second theme is place. God is not tied to one spot. He was present to Abraham in Haran (7.2), to Joseph in Egypt (7.9f), to Moses in the desert (7.30) and to Israel on the Exodus (7.44) as surely as in the holy city and the temple. Where you worship matters less than how you worship.

Finally the two themes are drawn together. His accusers, says Stephen, have rejected 'the righteous One' and set too much store on a fixed place of praise (7.48–53). So this was not a conciliatory speech. It was defence by counter-attack. Attitudes in Jerusalem had hardened and the trial ended hastily and horribly. Stephen was stoned—the first Christian to die for his Lord. Indeed his martyrdom seems to echo the passion of Jesus: for 6.13f matches Mk 14.57f; 7.56 echoes Mk 14.62; 7.58 recalls Mk 15.20; and the prayer in 7.60 parallels Lk 23.34. The suffering church, Luke suggests, both recalls and repeats the death of Jesus. Perhaps Stephen gave Saul some disturbing memories too (7.58; 8.1), to carry with him to Damascus.

As he dies, Stephen has a vision of the 'Son of Man' (7.56). Jesus stands alongside God, in authority over the nations (Dan 7.13f). It might be no coincidence, then, that world mission starts here—in Samaria (Acts 8.5–25), to Ethiopia (8.26–39) and through the unexpected conversion of Saul, who took the gospel west (9.1–22). Out of death comes life; tread on the flame, and it spreads.

The Scattering of the Gospel (Acts 8–12)

There is no single storyline in Acts 8 to 12. The impression is more like a Catherine wheel, with light scattering from a single centre in all directions. The chapters start badly, with harsh persecution and Christians hurrying to get away (8.1–3).² Yet as they travel, they tell (8.4). There are five main phases of mission in these chapters and one further spell of persecution.

1 Samaria and the Samaritans (8.5–25)

Samaritans had some Jewish ancestry and heritage, but had been estranged from the community in Judea for several centuries. Luke's gospel shows contact between the two groups, but deep suspicion too (17.11–19; 9.52–54). Philip's preaching of Jesus is, then, a piece of bridge-building.³ His words and deeds convinced many (8.5–13) and Peter and John's visit served to bind the believers in Samaria to the church in Jerusalem (8.14–25). This was not a splinter movement, a stray offshoot; it was truly part of the family. A major racial and cultural divide had been crossed.

2 Gaza and an Ethiopian (8.26–40)

Philip headed next to the main road south, towards Egypt and beyond. The traveller was a God-fearing Gentile, who had worshipped in Jerusalem and was returning home with a scroll. Could Philip unravel it for him? Indeed he could; it was Isaiah 53, about the suffering of Jesus. Enquiry and explanation led to belief and baptism, and suddenly another barrier was broken. A Gentile believed and travelled joyfully home, perhaps to start a church there. This Ethiopian was surely one of the first black Christians. His ethnic origin and his physical malformation (unless 'eunuch' implies simply 'courtier') signal the inclusive nature of the gospel. Not only Isaiah 53, but Isaiah 56 too was coming to life.

3 Damascus and Saul (9.1–31)

'Meanwhile, Saul' (9.1f) was travelling north, to harass the believers in Damascus. Then God lit up his life and he was changed for ever (9.3–9). The memory of the Damascus vision never left him. Years later he described Christian experience as 'the glory of God, shining in our hearts in the face of Jesus' (2 Cor 4.6). Perhaps too Jesus' words—'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting' (9.5)—helped him to think of the church as 'the body of Christ' (1 Cor 12.27). But as so often with God, there was a human factor too. That Ananias called him 'Brother Saul' (9.17) must have seemed almost as great a revelation as the experience on the road.

Saul soon caused a stir with his preaching (9.20–25). But it would take time for his Christian ministry to flower fully. The cautious reception in Jerusalem can hardly have encouraged him and, even after Barnabas had stepped in to help, Saul quickly left the stage (9.26–30). Tarsus would be a safer place, for a while at least. What he did there, we can only guess. A subsequent reference to churches in this area (15.41) might suggest he preached there too.

4 Caesarea and Cornelius (9.32–11.18)

Next come two incidents where Gentiles find their way to faith, at Caesarea and Antioch. Both places were major Roman centres, where the Jewish community met the wider world very directly. So both episodes were test-cases for the new movement: how easily could they assimilate converts from beyond Judaism?⁴

A centurion called Cornelius and his company received the gospel after a preaching tour by Peter in the west of Judea (9.32–43). Cornelius was already on the way to faith. He was a God-fearer, generous and prayerful and respected by Jewish neighbours (10.1–4, 22). Even so, Peter was wary about mixing with Gentiles (10.14, 28) and, by drawing attention to this, Luke stresses both God's hand in the event (10.3, 9–16, 19f) and its value as a learning experience for the church. Yet as soon as the Holy Spirit fell upon this group of Gentiles,

The Gospel in the Greco-Roman World

Peter realized that he had to baptize them. It was just like Pentecost all over again (10.44–48).

Cornelius was a changed man. So was Peter.⁵ His report of the episode convinced friends in Jerusalem that he had done the right thing. The new conversions were welcomed (11.1–18) and suddenly the Jesus movement had an international dimension. This was the shape of things to come.

5 Antioch and the Greeks (11.19–30)

The second test-case for the church's openness to Gentiles came in Antioch, in the north-east corner of the Mediterranean. Antioch was seen by some as part of the Jewish homeland. Yet it was also a cosmopolitan city, where races mixed. Some Jewish believers in Jesus, who fled Jerusalem after the death of Stephen, shared the faith with Greeks in Antioch (11.19–21). So Barnabas came, to care for this mixed and growing church, and Saul to teach the new believers (11.22–25).

'And at Antioch the disciples were first called "Christians"' (11.26). The word-ending '-ians' is Latin, and was often used to label followers of a political or civic leader, who formed a distinctive group in society. The name 'Christians' suggests the church had become a visible group, distinct from more traditional Judaism. Their fellowship in Jesus spanned an ethnic divide, and others noticed and named them accordingly.

6 Judea and Herod Agrippa (12.1–25)

In the early 40s, Herod Agrippa I ruled the whole Holy Land, as a client king under Rome. He was something of a chameleon, very respectful to Judaism when in Judea, but less observant of Jewish restraints when in Gentile company. Here he is in Judean mode (12.1–5), courting favour by harassing the church and although this persecution was short-lived, it marks a transition, both in Jerusalem and in the storyline of Acts. For Peter fades from view after this, appearing only once more, at 15.7–11. James, brother of Jesus, now leads the Jerusalem church (12.17; 15.13; 21.18). And Acts will soon start to follow Paul, into the Gentile world.

Herod Agrippa's death (12.20–23) shows a different side of the king and of the complex culture of the period. There was a growing trend in the Roman empire to accord worship to rulers, and civic life was increasingly shaped by this. In this incident (also mentioned by the Jewish historian Josephus) it appears that worship was both enthusiastically given and readily accepted. Luke makes a pointed contrast in 12.24; tyrants perish, and the gospel presses on. The word grows and goes out. The next chapters of Acts will take us far outside the Jewish homeland.

Sent West (Acts 13 and 14)

Antioch was open to the Gentile world in some ways that Jerusalem was not, and the church there now launched a mission of its own (13.1–3). Barnabas and Saul, who had arrived to support the church (11.22–25), became its envoys into new lands. Their journey took them to Cyprus and to the Roman province of Galatia.

As the missionaries travelled from place to place, they went first to Jewish synagogues (13.5, 14; 14.1), where the gospel of Israel's Messiah could be told against a scriptural background. Patriarchs, prophecy and psalms helped to shape and support the message (13.16–41) and there were some warm and wide responses (13.42–44, 48; 14.1). But many in the synagogues could not accept this messianic version of Judaism, and some sharp confrontations arose (13.45–47; 14.2–5; 14.19). One result, in a number of towns, was the separation of Christian mission from synagogue life, so that the gospel was shared directly with Gentiles, outside the social and liturgical frameworks of Judaism. On the street the range of background and belief was quite diffuse. There were different challenges to meet and new ways of evangelism to find.

So, for example, we see the church confronting magic in Cyprus (13.6–12) as it had done earlier in Samaria (8.9–24). Preaching to rural devotees of the Greco-Roman gods had to start, not from Scripture, but from the bounty of creation (14.14–17). And at Iconium 'signs and wonders' supported the preaching after the synagogue phase of mission had ended (14.1–3).

Miracles are a big factor in several places (13.6–12; 14.3, 8–11) as they were earlier at Samaria (8.5–8). There had been healings in Jerusalem too (3.1–10; 5.12–16; 6.8) but in that setting Scripture and the Jesus story gave a context for explaining these. In a Gentile environment, miracle seems to have a more direct effect, but also—without common reference points—greater scope for confusion too. So the blinding of Elymas convinces his employer (13.11f); signs at Iconium divide the town (14.4); and a healing at Lystra excites the crowds, but leads them to a very odd conclusion (14.8–13).

There were different challenges to meet and new ways of evangelism to find

Yet the eventual result is decisive, positive and full of potential. Young churches come into being which will have to sustain their own life, and can be trusted with their own leaders (14.23). Suffering is becoming a pattern for the new Christians and for Paul himself (13.50; 14.5, 19, 22); the kingdom is free, but not easy. And 'a door of faith for the Gentiles' has opened wide (14.27).

Check-point for Grace (Acts 15)

The door of faith was open. Acts 15 now asks what should be expected of Gentiles who come through it. How could they belong in fellowship with Jewish believers who kept the law and lived among Jewish neighbours? Accepting Gentiles into the church was one thing; finding patterns of co-existence would be another. A difference of opinion between the openness of Antioch and a more traditional group in Jerusalem had now to be teased out and tested.

The opposing views were clear. On one side, 'certain individuals from Judea' (15.1) reckoned that, since Jesus fulfils Jewish hope, Gentiles who believe in him should simply become Jews. Israel's law set the standard, circumcision was the entry rite and both should be expected of converts. Whereas Paul and Barnabas (15.2–6, 12) and Simon Peter too (15.7–11) had welcomed Gentiles to faith without these conditions. To impose them now would feel like a denial of God's grace (15.11).

This disagreement, and the effort made to resolve it, surely reflect a strong commitment to unity. These Christians might have believed different things, but they valued each other. Antioch had supported Jerusalem in a time of

famine (11.27–30). Now they wanted Jerusalem's support in their Gentile mission. For both sides, the church was one body.

These Christians may have believed different things, but they valued each other

The decisive speech came from James, who seems to be the recognized leader of the meeting (15.13–21). His proposal may appear a compromise—some laws, but not all—but it had method and meaning in it. First James quoted Scripture (15.16f), from Amos 9.11f.⁶ This was a text of hope, looking forward to a time when God would renew his kingdom in Israel and draw in Gentiles too. In other words, Gentiles would join Israel's fellowship, but they would come in as Gentiles. So one would not expect them to keep the whole law—only those commands that always applied to Gentiles who lived among Jewish people. These, which appear in Leviticus 17 and 18, can be summed up in four prohibitions: the worship of other gods; the eating of blood; the eating of meat killed by a wild beast; and sexual licence. And this seems to be the reasoning behind the 'fourfold decree' (15.20, 29; 21.25).

So the law of Moses was respected, but not imposed as an entirety. Unity was sustained, and Gentiles were welcomed as Christians, not as potential Jews. In particular, male converts need not be circumcised. A tense stand-off was resolved, Gentile mission won a vote of confidence and the churches were stronger as a result (15.30–35).

Good News for the Greeks (Acts 16–20)

Chapters 16 to 20 describe a long spell of mission, by Paul and others, around the Aegean Sea. Midway through Paul visits Judea, but we hear almost nothing of what happens there (18.22). The main areas of interest, in this phase of Acts, are Greece and the west coast of Asia Minor.

Successes come in many towns, and opposition too: from synagogue Jews, disturbed by Paul's messianic preaching (17.5ff, 13; 18.12ff; 19.9; 20.3); from commercial interests, affected by the gospel (16.19ff; 19.23ff); from practitioners of magic and the occult (16.16ff; 19.11ff); and from the cultured snobbery of Athens (17.18ff, 32). There are six main phases to the mission.

1 Philippi (15.36–16.40)

A quarrel over John Mark broke the good working partnership between Paul and Barnabas (15.36–39). Then Paul and Silas' long land journey took them north-west across Asia Minor (15.40–16.10) and on by a short sea-voyage to Macedonia (now northern Greece) (16.11f). The role of the Holy Spirit is striking, not only prompting and directing the missionaries (as at 8.26f; 10.19f), but also restraining and preventing them along the way. Momentum may be a factor in the Spirit's work, a desire to push the gospel rapidly forward. Once the main settlements were evangelized, the word could spread to lands around.

The role of the Holy Spirit is striking: prompting and directing, restraining and preventing

Philippi was a smallish place, but it was designated a Roman colony, with strong links to the imperial capital. Although the town had no synagogue, prayerful women met by the river and there the gospel was received gladly (16.13–15). But the community had an ugly aspect to its life too and challenging this landed the missionaries in prison (16.16–24). Only after an earthquake (the third prison-break in Acts, after 5.19f and 12.6–11) were they freed to leave town, hastily but with heads high (16.25–40).

This first encounter with Roman justice in Acts sets a pattern for a number of incidents to come. We have seen Jewish rulers acting against the church, but Roman concerns were different. Public order, rather than any detail of the preaching, was their main anxiety. So it is regularly some sort of reaction to

their work, more than the message itself, that brings Christians into Roman courts (16.19ff; 17.6ff; 18.12ff; 19.23ff; 21.27ff; 23.26ff). There, time and again, they are cleared of any offence against Roman law and sent on their way. The events in Philippi run a little differently, because Paul uses his Roman citizenship to claim an apology from the magistrates (16.37). But the principle is clear: no offence has been proved; the mission goes on.

The converts at Philippi are interesting. Lydia was in some ways marginal; she was a merchant of substance, but as a foreigner, a God-fearer and a woman, she would not have been at the hub of local society (16.14).⁷ And the jailer found his way to faith almost by accident (16.27–34). Yet from them a brave and generous church emerged—to judge from Paul’s letter to Philippi a few years later.

2 Thessalonica and Beroea (17.1–15)

Thessalonica was much larger than Philippi. Mission started in the synagogue, and again ‘God-fearers’ were particularly receptive (17.1–4). Reaction began in the synagogue too, although the charges were cleverly shaped to arouse Roman concern: ‘turning the world upside-down, and proclaiming another king, Jesus.’ But as before, nothing could be proved (17.5–9).

Beroea by contrast had a more responsive Jewish community, and the gospel did well (17.11f; cf 18.19–21; 19.8), until a deputation from Thessalonica arrived, and Paul travelled on once more.

3 Athens (17.16–34)

Rarely in the NT do we see the gospel presented to educated pagans. The approach here is different from that used in synagogue evangelism. There is no quoting of Scripture. Paul begins in the local context (17.23), cites a couple of classical poets (17.28) and interacts quite carefully with ideas and beliefs of Greek philosophy. Only at the end do familiar themes appear. The resurrection of Jesus is a central issue (17.18, 31). There is a call to repentance too (17.30f), outlined against the prospect of future judgment (as in 24.25; 1 Th 1.9f) rather than against the background of the crucifixion, as it had been in Jerusalem. Yet many in Athens were coolly unimpressed—new ideas are one thing; repentance is another—and only a small church came into being (17.32–34).

4 Corinth (18.1–18)

Events at Corinth took a rather similar course to Thessalonica: starting in the synagogue, with patchy success; response from ‘God-fearers’; Jewish reaction; and an inconclusive Roman trial (18.5–17). Yet a few fresh features stand out. Paul works to support himself (18.3). Prisca and Aquila appear as trusted col-

leagues, both in the leather shop and in the gospel (18.2f; cf 18.26; Rom 16.3f). Some prominent members of the Jewish community believe in Jesus (18.8, 17). And again God speaks to Paul in a vision (18.9f), not this time moving him on, but encouraging him to stay. Then after a long ministry in Corinth (18.11, 18) comes an interlude, and a return to base (18.19–23).

5 Ephesus (18.19–19.41)

Paul preached for the first time in Ephesus on his way to Judea (18.19–21) and eventually he returned there for a longer spell (19.8–10). There was no very strong Jewish opposition. But occult interests were affected (19.11–20), as was the silver trade that served the goddess Artemis (19.23–27). Obviously religious life in the city had been quite substantially disturbed. And a pattern we have seen before followed: civil disorder; but no formal judicial verdict; and a hasty departure (19.28–20.1).

6 Moving On (20.1–38)

Luke’s account of Paul leaving the Aegean is quite protracted, for Paul works out his travel several stages ahead (19.21) and then changes his plan (20.3). When he finally sails, he stops a couple of times along the way (20.6, 17). So it is not until 21.17 that he gets to Jerusalem, and several years until he reaches Rome. All this contrasts with the terse account in Acts 18 of Paul’s earlier voyage to Judea. There are surely several reasons for this slowness.

Luke’s own involvement is one factor. Acts narrates this section in the first-person plural (20.5ff) as Luke remembers the voyage.⁸ Also, this journey has symbolic significance. It sums up much of Paul’s work among the Gentiles. He travels with friends from churches he has planted (20.4), to accompany a money gift for the Jewish church in Jerusalem (24.17; Rom 15.25ff). So his speech to the elders of Ephesus reads almost as a last testament of his active ministry (20.17–35). He has served his watch with vigilance and care and now hands on responsibility to others. Dark and daunting times are ahead of him (20.22f). This voyage has something in common with Jesus’ own journey to Jerusalem.

Defences and Delays (Acts 21–26)

Through Acts 21 to 26, Paul suffers and defends himself in Judea. There are parallels—although they are neither exact nor emphasized—with the passion of Jesus, and Luke may have intended the similarity. For example, the sufferings are foreseen and predicted (Acts 20.22f; 21.11; as in Lk 9.22, 44) yet Paul resists well-meaning friends who want to warn and restrain him (21.12–14; cf Lk 13.31–35). There are four trial hearings—one priestly, two before the governor alone and one with Herod

There are parallels with the passion of Jesus

Agrippa (Acts 23.1; 24.2; 25.6, 23; rather as in Lk 22.66; 23.1, 6f, 13). There is a hostile crowd (Acts 21.36; Lk 23.18). Yet the sequences also differ. Events in Holy Week moved at great speed, as they did for Paul in Jerusalem, whereas Paul's trials in Caesarea proceeded much more slowly. And most obviously, Paul's situation remains unresolved at the end of Acts; he lives, and tells the gospel story. In the paragraphs ahead we follow the events of the trial, then look at what Paul says in his defence.

1 Jerusalem: Confusion and Custody (21.17–22.30)

Yet again, Paul was arrested after a riot. He had come to town with Gentiles in tow, a living witness to the sort of Christian communities he had brought into being. Then to show law-observant Christians in Jerusalem that he was a loyal Jew, he helped in a ceremony in the temple (21.20–26). But this well-meant gesture misfired, when people put two and two together and accused Paul of bringing Gentiles onto holy ground (21.27–29). Then Paul, who was a figure of some notoriety, rather inflamed the ensuing commotion (21.30–40) when he was allowed to address the crowd (22.1–22).

So Paul was led off by soldiers and for a second time in Acts he called on his rank as a Roman citizen. A citizen could not be punished without a trial (22.23–30). So to find out what basis there might be for a legal process, the Roman tribune decided to set Paul before the Jewish high council (22.30). This would be the first of a very long series of trials and defences.

2 To Caesarea: Slow Process (23.1–26.32)

After a tumult in the Jewish Sanhedrin (23.1–10), Paul had to be sent down to Caesarea for the governor to deal with (23.23–33). The first hearing there was formal and structured, but no verdict followed (24.1–22). Felix, who appears both in Acts and in Roman sources as a wretchedly corrupt official, simply left Paul in jail for the next governor to inherit (24.26f).

Festus, though keen to clear the case, could make nothing of it himself and Paul would not return to a Jewish court. His citizenship entitled him to Roman justice, and he would seek this in Rome if need be (23.11). So Festus granted Paul's appeal (25.1–12) but he had to know more if he were to pass a file on to Rome. He asked advice from Herod Agrippa (25.13–27).⁹

Agrippa was a well-informed Jew (26.2f, 27) and Paul's final defence speech (26.2–23) was more religious in tone than his speeches to the governors had been (24.10–21; 25.8–11). He told his own story, talked of Jesus' resurrection and Festus thought him crazy (26.24). But insanity does not make a man guilty: 'He could have been set free, if he had not appealed to the emperor' (26.32).

3 Paul's Speeches: Theology in Defence

Paul's speeches in these chapters, in both Jewish and Roman settings, give a

good deal of insight into his sense of call and mission. He talks throughout of his strong national loyalties. He is a deeply committed Jew (22.2f; 23.1; 24.16; 25.8; 26.5) and Israel is 'my nation' (24.17).

His gospel too is Jewish, with solid roots in Scripture (24.14; 26.22). The message is that 'Israel's hope' for the dead to be raised (23.6; 24.15; 26.6–8), is already being realized. The Messiah has come, and has himself been raised from death, as 'a light to the people and the Gentiles' (26.23). And the risen Jesus himself has called Paul, to carry this word to the world (22.14f, 21; 26.15–18).¹⁰

So with a Jewish gospel of a risen Messiah Paul has good news for the nations. Now he must travel to the centre of the empire, to bear witness there (23.11).

'And On to Rome' (Acts 27 and 28)

The bulk of the last portion of Acts is a long travelogue of Paul's journey from Caesarea to Rome, involving three ships, a wreck and a rescue. The centrepiece of the account is a terrible driving storm that blew the ship, in the course of a fortnight, many hundreds of miles from Crete to Malta (27.14–44). Even in the tempest, Paul kept a cool head. Even there, God spoke to him and sustained him so that there is a prophetic character to his words and presence (27.9–11, 21–26, 30–38). He was the man who saved the ship's company, in a curious inversion of the Jonah story.¹¹

Finally the travellers reached Rome, where local Christians welcomed them (28.15). Paul was still under arrest but free to receive visitors. So he started by explaining himself to leaders of the local Jewish community (28.17–28). Again he claimed that the gospel is rooted in the OT (28.23) and that the 'hope of Israel' is what had driven and directed him (28.20). His hearers divided over what he said (28.24f) and Paul spoke in frustration about seeking a wider audience (28.28).

So, as the story stops, Paul preaches on. We expect him to come before the emperor (28.19) for his appeal but we never see this. Acts ends with the word sounding steady and clear in a place where it can surely be taken further on, towards 'the ends of the earth.'

There is a prophetic character to Paul's words and presence

4

Themes and Issues in Acts

We mentioned in passing many important themes in Acts. This section addresses a few issues more directly.

Acts and God

Acts tells throughout of an active church led by an active God.¹² All three persons of the Trinity (though Luke does not put it this way) are involved in the story. Yet it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between Father and Son for the word 'Lord' can refer to either. For example, in 2.36 and 4.33 the Lord is Jesus, whereas in 2.39 and 4.24 the Lord is Israel's God. Indeed Acts 2.34, quoted from Ps 110, might lead us to expect some ambiguity on this point. But the ambiguity arises from conviction rather than confusion. Jesus is spoken of in ways that belong properly to God and this is neither blasphemy nor carelessness, but an expression of the church's faith.

Throughout its mission, the church is not alone. God is there, to be heeded and obeyed (4.19; 5.29), praised and prayed to (4.21, 24ff; 12.5). God adds to the church, extends its membership and gives the Holy Spirit (11.18; 13.48; 15.7-9). God does miracles (19.11), grants visions (10.3ff, 9ff) and brings assurance in the midst of a crisis (27.23f).

The ascended Jesus, too, is an active participant in Acts. He pours out the Holy Spirit, which he has received from the Father (2.33). In his name Christians are baptized and the Spirit comes to them (2.38; 10.48; 19.5f). By his

power damaged and distorted lives are made whole and clean (3.6, 16; 4.10, 30; 9.34; 16.18).

He appears to Stephen as a figure of majesty and authority (7.55), to Saul as the voice of

The ascended Jesus is an active participant in Acts

the persecuted church (9.3-6) and to Ananias with a task that would change many lives (9.10-17). He is the object of faith (13.38; 16.31) and for his sake the church serves and suffers (9.16; 15.26).

The Spirit too is at work throughout the story—filling the earliest believers at particular times of joy or need (4.8, 31; 7.55; 13.52) and as an ongoing gift and habit of life (6.3, 5); comforting the church (9.31); guiding its mission (16.6f); and warning it of trouble ahead (20.23; 21.4, 11). This is God's Spirit (2.17), but

also the 'the Spirit of Jesus' (16.7). A lot of activity that the Spirit undertakes in the OT continues in Acts: inspiring Scripture and the church's speech (4.8, 25); enabling leadership (6.3-10); weighing human integrity (5.9); and breathing life and hope into the world (2.1ff). Yet this is also a Spirit of innovation and missionary advance. Where the gospel comes to a new place or people, Luke often draws attention to the Spirit's role—in chapters 2, 8, 10-11 and 16. Grace, promised by God in the past and powered by the resurrection of Jesus, reaches the world through the leading of the Spirit.

So all through Acts, in Jewish and Gentile territory alike, miracles and mission go together. There are some very personal accounts of individual healings (3.1-10; 4.22; 9.32-43; 14.8-18; 28.1-6) and summaries too of signs too numerous to list (2.43; 5.12; 6.8; 8.6; 14.3; 15.12; 19.11f). On four occasions powers clash—God's holy grace and occult involvements (8.9ff; 13.6ff; 16.16ff; 19.12ff); consistently grace comes out on top. All this is God's contribution to the mission—endorsing the work (14.3), pointing to the risen power of Jesus (5.32), and accompanying words of salvation with deeds of mercy (3.1-4.12). The church in Acts is a people gifted with power and escorted by love.

Acts and Mission

So Acts tells of a missionary God and a church committed to God's mission. Christians are mobile, busy and energetic, crossing land, sea and cultural boundaries with the gospel. They are imaginative in their methods, and prepared to take knocks for the cause. They talk of their faith in temple and synagogue, on a riverbank and a ship, in homes high and low, on town streets and a country road, in an Athenian debating chamber, an Ephesian school-room and a Philippian jail and on countless occasions before the Jewish high council and Roman courts.

Christians are mobile, busy and energetic, imaginative and prepared to take knocks

In the course of this mission, Christians run into opposition almost everywhere. They are mocked, mobbed, bound and beaten; they are arrested, arraigned, tried and threatened; they are insulted, imprisoned, struck, stripped and stoned; and (on more occasions than we are shown: 26.10) Christians are put to death for their faith. Acts does not hide the fear and alarm that persecutions cause. But it does show Christians who rise above their fears and represent their Lord with courage and joy (4.23-31; 5.40-42; 14.19-21; 16.25). The word of God grew, advanced and prevailed, because men and women were willing to bear the humiliation and hurt that came from trusting and telling it.

The church's message, too, shows both persistence and flexibility. In Jewish settings it was natural to start from Scripture and to talk of repentance, forgiveness and the Holy Spirit, to people whose pattern of belief had a place for these ideas. The gospel, for a Jewish audience, did not present a new world of thought, but the flowering of ancient hopes through the risen Lord Jesus. So, in both the sermons of early Acts and the defence speeches of the last chapters, the resurrection is central. The church proclaims not itself but Christ. It tells what God has done and what God can give.

In the Gentile world expectations were different, but the accent was still on divine goodness. So rural Lystra heard about God's generosity in creation, and Athens learned of God's sovereign direction of human life. Yet both places were urged to 'turn, repent' (14.15; 17.30) and at Athens the resurrection both prompted and concluded Paul's message (17.18, 31). Wherever the gospel is preached, it is not merely or primarily demand. Demand follows grace. People respond to what God has done.

So mission is a combination of steadfastness and flexibility—resolve and persistence in the face of opposition, and cultural sensitivity in dealing with people. Through it all the church depends on, delights in, and disseminates its faith in a generous, active and living God.

Acts and History

In both Luke and Acts, God works within history. So history matters, and Luke has tried to write it responsibly. He may not always mean to be precise; for example, there are small variations in his accounts of Paul's Damascus experience in Acts 9, 22, 26. Yet on the larger canvas of Acts, several points have impressed me, as indications of his general accuracy and care.

The gospel preface (Lk 1.1–4) is a careful and deliberate statement of historical method. There was much discussion in the ancient world about the writing of history. People knew the value of checking facts, finding careful witnesses, travelling to get information and telling the truth. Luke's preface allies him with the best practice of the day.

When Luke uses material from Mark in his gospel, he uses it in substantial blocks and generally respects Mark's text. This suggests that his attitude to sources might normally be respectful rather than cavalier.

At a number of places, especially in the latter half of Acts, incidental details match information in other ancient sources—for example, titles of public officials in various towns. And scholars of Roman law have been impressed by the details of Paul's trial—appeal, citizenship and so on. Luke has the process right. (There are, admittedly, fewer details of this kind in the first half of Acts.)

In four portions of Acts the narrative switches from third-person to first-person plural. These 'we-passages' are 16.10–17; 20.5–15; 21.1–18; 27.1–28.16, and the possibility that the author was present seems by far the most natural explanation. Their linguistic style is rather similar to the rest of Acts, so it is not very likely that Luke simply adopted someone else's diary.¹³ It is better to suppose that he was involved as an eyewitness in these parts of the story.

In two areas, however, Luke's historical work has been strongly challenged: the speeches; and his portrait of Paul. We look at the speeches first. It is sometimes said that these owe much to Luke's imagination. How could he have known what was said on all these occasions?

It is true that speeches in Acts are written in Luke's own style and surely they were often longer than the version he gives (as 20.7 suggests). But they might not be mere imagination. For they vary greatly in content and by no means all of them fully match the general tenor of Luke's writing. Stephen, for example, is more critical of the temple than Luke would be. The christological titles in Peter's speech in Acts 3 are quite distinctive.¹⁴ Paul's speech at Athens appears to be more intricately connected with the local context than Luke has been able to show. Theological points in Paul's defence speeches match the prologue of Romans, which he wrote at more or less the same time.

So, while there is no proving of Luke's accuracy in the speeches, it seems likely that he had some worthwhile information to go on and that he used this, with literary skill but also with due respect.

Acts and Paul

A second challenge is over Luke's portrayal of Paul. It is sometimes said that his portrait of Paul does not match very well the Paul we know first-hand, from his letters. There is some truth in this. The Paul of Acts is mainly an evangelist, talking to people outside the church. Whereas in the letters Paul is a pastor, and he only occasionally refers back to his initial preaching of the gospel. So one would not expect the portraits to correspond exactly. Even so, some differences have been identified:

- We do not see in Acts the angry Christian controversialist of Galatians or 2 Corinthians.
- In Acts Paul says little about the law, except to stress how carefully he has kept it, whereas in the letters he sometimes contrasts law and gospel quite strongly.
- Paul's worked-out theology of the cross, which figures so largely in the epistles, appears only fragmentarily in Acts.

But these differences are surely nuance rather than contradiction.

- The Judaizers of Acts 15 carry the same message as Paul's opponents in Galatia, and Luke knows very well that Paul took a strong stand against them (15.2).
- The Paul of the letters could be very flexible, for the sake of the gospel (1 Cor 9.20f). Similarly in Acts, Paul mixes with Gentiles (16.15, 34) and worships with Jews (21.24–26).
- The theology of the cross appears in Paul's one pastoral speech in Acts (at 20.28), and this seems, although compact, very Pauline in tone.

So Luke's insight may not be complete. But his missionary Paul is of a piece with the pastor Paul we know from the letters.¹⁵

Curiously Paul and Peter are almost symmetrically balanced in Acts. Both heal a lame man (3.1ff; 14.8ff), confront a magician (8.9ff; 13.6ff), have a visionary call to Gentile mission (9.1ff; 10.1ff), emerge providentially from prison (12.6ff; 16.24ff)—and so on. Why? One explanation that makes sense to me is that Luke wanted to show how closely Paul carried forward the mission of the Jerusalem church. He was not a maverick. His mission, and his concern to bind Jew and Gentile together in Christ, were matched from within the original apostolic circle. Antioch and Jerusalem, Damascus and Caesarea, Philippi and Pentecost, Paul and Peter, were part of the same connected movement.

So when Paul comes to Rome at the end of the book and prepares to stand trial, this is a destination to which the Spirit has led the church as a body. He is in some ways a man alone and far from home, yet he represents 'another king, Jesus' (17.7) at the imperial court. Paul had heard at his conversion, that witness and suffering would be woven together (9.15f) and now he was fulfilling both of these callings, as a prisoner and a speaker for Christ. Vulnerable his situation might be, but he served and spoke in the providence and protection of God. Acts does not simply stop. It concludes: the gospel has come from Jerusalem to Rome. And the work goes on.

Acts and Judaism

Yet the progress to Rome should not obscure the fact that Acts presents a gospel with deep roots and origins in Israel's heritage, Scripture and life. A Jewish church emerges very rapidly in the opening chapters (2.41; 4.4; 6.7) and it continues to the end, strong in numbers and firmly committed to the law (21.20). There is a wide spread of the gospel in the course of Acts and some

tensions between the mother-church and the mission churches. But there is no lasting weakening of the centre.

The temple in Jerusalem was a national place of prayer and pilgrimage and Jewish Christians used it for as long and as fully as they could (2.46; 3.1; 5.12, 20, 42; 21.26). And in the towns of the dispersion, missionaries regularly went to synagogues first, and spoke of Jesus in a context of Jewish Scripture and praise. They only peeled away when it was clear that they were not welcome.

So the church's message pursues the 'hope of Israel' all the way through Acts. 'Restoring the kingdom' might not follow a pre-set timetable (1.6), yet it is guaranteed by the resurrection, it goes forward through the church's witness to Jews and Gentiles (15.16f) and it sustains the narrative right to the end (28.20). The church looks forward to resurrection because it has a resurrection to preach.

Israel's Scripture helps to shape the message. Psalms tell of a royal messiah, at God's right hand (2.25–35; 4.11f, 25f; 13.33, 35) and Isaiah of a servant, suffering for many (8.32f). Words from the prophets give meaning to the expanding mission. Joel talks of the pouring out of God's Spirit, and Amos of the raising up of God's royal house. 'All flesh' shall receive (2.17); Gentiles will be drawn in (15.17).

There are more painful prophetic texts too, from Habakkuk (13.41), Isaiah 49 (13.46f) and Isaiah 6 (28.26–28). Indeed these come in two of the three towns where Paul talks of turning from Jew to Gentile (the other is at 18.6) and some see a pattern here, a 'parting of the ways,' a persistent movement away from Judaism by the church. By that reckoning, Acts would be a book of transition, explaining why a Jewish gospel has produced a predominantly Gentile church. But I think that a misreading. Acts does not portray a tilt from one ethnic group to another, so much as a gospel that beckons and divides wherever it goes.

For Isaiah 6 was used by Jesus, when he talked about the gospel dividing Israel. This text interprets the parable of the sower (Mk 4.10–12). And we see the same text and the same picture at the end of Acts (28.24–28): opinion divides. As Simeon said, 'this child is set for the fall and rise of many in Israel' (Lk 2.34). Jesus polarizes people, in Israel and in the Gentile world too. Witness and suffering is the pattern, conversion and reaction, among Jews and Gentiles alike.

Acts and the Church

There are many theories about why Acts was written. One that makes sense to me is that Luke simply wanted his audience (Theophilus and perhaps others) to understand how the faith came to be, so that they would grasp it confidently and live it consistently. To quote Ben Witherington, Luke writes:

...to inform about the history of the Christian movement, to enable Theophilus to take some pride in its course and leading figures, and to prepare him for the sort of difficulties he would face as a person of some station in an environment not very congenial to the Christian faith.¹⁶

So this was pastoral writing—realism and encouragement, arm in arm. Luke showed how the church came from a Jewish base to become an international fellowship. It moved from Jerusalem to Rome. Still the church honoured its Jewish roots, but there were serious tensions between the gospel and the central structures of Judaism. In the Roman world, too, Christianity was not illegal, but nor would it easily find a place of popularity. What it did have was God—and Scripture, good news, faith, courage and fellowship.

Fellowship mattered deeply for Luke. Christians belong together. Much of the best mission was done by rugged individuals, but regularly they either worked with colleagues or depended on churches that sent them and waited to receive them back. Over and again, we see attempts to connect one strand of the gospel's work with another (8.14ff; 11.1ff; 11.19ff; 15.1ff; 18.24ff; 19.1ff; 21.17ff). Christians need one another's support and blessing. Hospitality was a ministry in many centres (9.43; 12.12; 16.15; 18.1–3; 20.6; 21.4, 8, 16; 27.3; 28.14f). A fragile international movement requires a network of practical support and homely love. The church, according to Acts, is neither perfect nor problem-free. But Christians may yet be purposeful, joyful and supportive of one another.

So Luke wrote to foster not only faith, but to encourage Christian fellowship too. Sharing goods was a tradition from the start. Supporting missionaries was vital. Sustaining one another would bolster the church and its faith in difficult times. For Christians belong to a generous God, who has bought the church with his blood and builds it up with his word (20.28, 32). Luke wanted his readers to trust and not fear, so that through their gifts of service, support, sharing and suffering for the gospel, the goodness and grace of God would bless them richly and reach through them 'to the ends of the earth.'

Acts and the Church Today

Surely many patterns and practices in Acts should inform and inspire the church in every age: missionary energy; cultural sensitivity in sharing the gospel; commitment to Christian unity and relationships; courage; prayer; the importance of Jesus' resurrection. One could extend the list and some commentaries make numerous connections between the church's life then and its task now.¹⁷

However, Christians are more divided over some of the most intense features of the Acts story: the strange drama of Pentecost, for example; the emphasis on miracle, visions and angels; or the close and committed character of Chris-

tian giving and sharing. Some churches think God means to replicate all this in every age and place; as Pentecost was repeated in Samaria, Caesarea and Ephesus (8.14–25; 10.44–48; 11.15; 19.1–7), so we should expect it to recur in our own lives and churches. Other Christian traditions are more wary, inclining to talk of depth rather than drama in the Holy Spirit's work.

I wonder if the situation is more complex than either of these views allows. For Pentecost was a change of phase in God's dealings with the world, the start of a new era in salvation. And just as a river runs more swiftly over a weir, we might ask whether there was a quickening of some currents of grace as God's purposes moved onto a new level. Perhaps the intensity of the first Whitsun has something to do with the uniqueness of that occasion. Yet Acts gives, it seems to me, three continuing invitations to explore and express the life of the Spirit.

- 1 Acts consistently traces the leading edge of Christian mission, the frontiers of church life, as the gospel reaches new people and places. It might be that the Spirit stirs more visibly in the church's evangelism, than in settled and contained phases of church life. It might be too that God supports the church more overtly in times of persecution than during more peaceful spells. If we are committed to mission, or if we face serious opposition for Christ, we should surely expect God to give the help we need, in ways that may surprise us.
- 2 Christian sharing of goods after Pentecost probably reflects the wider Jewish practice of alms-giving. It might not have continued in quite the same way where Christians did not meet daily for meal-fellowship.¹⁸ Yet Acts speaks often about generosity as a habit of Christian life (9.36; 10.2; 11.27–30; 16.15; 24.17; 28.14). We give readily and regularly because God has given to us (20.28–35). Details change; the duty and delight of giving remain as an expression of the Spirit's life.
- 3 All through Acts, we encounter people who have a peculiar sensitivity to God, who are closely tuned in (8.26, 39; 9.10; 13.2; 16.6f; 21.11). We can talk of this as 'charismatic,' if we mean that this quality is a gift. Yet it seems to surface in many church traditions. If we want to do God's work, then personal spirituality matters. This is part of the way God sustains mission and strengthens the church.

So there is a threefold challenge here: to nurturing our own spiritual life; to generosity to neighbour for Christ's sake; and to the mission of God and the gospel in the world. If we take these seriously, I suspect we shall hear in our day all the echoes of Acts that we need. The river of grace will flow through and around us and we shall rejoice and praise God.

Resources on Acts

Acts takes a lot of background information for granted and good resources will help anyone who teaches and preaches from it. Here are some.

Commentaries

Big Commentaries

C K Barrett, *International Critical Commentary* (London: T & T Clark, 1994 and 1999). A weighty commentary from a senior Methodist professor. Somewhat sceptical about historicity. An abridged version (2002) is also available.

J A Fitzmyer, *Anchor Bible Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1999). By a senior Roman Catholic professor; critical. Good on use of OT and comparison of Paul and Acts.

L T Johnson, *Sacra Pagina* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992). A Catholic series that seeks to make the fruits of academic learning available to the church.

R N Longenecker, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, revised edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006). Moderate evangelical; bound with a commentary on John. Careful and informed, but not overwhelming.

B Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998). Very lengthy and very clear. Many 'closer look' sections—short essays and explanations of particular questions and themes.

Smaller Commentaries

L C A Alexander, *People's Bible Commentary* (Oxford: BRF, 2006). Light but with plenty of depth, from a real specialist on Acts. Divided for daily reading.

J D G Dunn, *Epworth Preacher's Commentary* (Peterborough: Epworth, 1996). A series that aims to help Methodist lay preachers.

I H Marshall, *Tyndale NT Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1980. TNTC). Evangelical and very clear.

J R W Stott, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1990). Fine exposition from an evangelical preacher who has done his homework.

N T Wright, *Acts for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2 vols, 2008). Lively and lucid, from the Anglican Bishop of Durham. Divided for daily reading.

Books about Acts

J Jervell, *The Theology of the Acts of the Apostles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Stresses the Jewish background of Acts in a series suited for second-level university work.

I H Marshall and D Peterson (ed), *Witness to the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998). Essays on the theology of Acts. Written with the heart as well as the head, but not for beginners.

A B Robinson and R W Wall, *Called to be Church: the Book of Acts for a New Day* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006). Reflections on how we use the insights of Acts in church life today. Quite accessible.

Web Resources

The Grove web site (www.grovebooks.co.uk) has a longer annotated list of 'Comments on Commentaries'; go to *Biblical Studies Bulletin*.

Other sites that regularly deliver goodies:

www.ntgateway.com an academic site, which opens out to plenty of material for others too.

www.lectionary.org exegesis of the lectionary texts.

www.textweek.com a wide variety of material for use in worship.

Notes

- 1 Later in Acts Paul exposes quite dramatically the fault-line between Pharisees and Sadducees (23.6–10). In this earlier part of Acts, while Sadducees are offended, it is a Pharisee who takes a more moderate line (5.33–39).
- 2 'Except the apostles' (8.1) might not mean that the twelve remained alone, but that they continued to lead whatever Christian presence either continued in Jerusalem or returned there. A further persecution, in Acts 12, caused a change of leadership. (So R Bauckham in Bauckham (ed), *The Book of Acts in its Palestinian Setting* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995) pp 428f).
- 3 This is surely the Philip of Acts 6.5, rather than the Philip listed in 1.13. Acts 21.8 bears this out.
- 4 The Ethiopian of Acts 8 appears to be the first Gentile Christian. But he was

not a test-case for the Jerusalem church, as Cornelius and Antioch would be, because he was out of sight.

- 5 I am loath to call this 'Peter's conversion.' It was indeed an important step forward in his Christian life, and in some ways it paralleled Saul's Damascus vision. But Saul's encounter, and indeed Cornelius' experience in Acts 10, brought them into the Christian life from outside. Surely the word 'conversion' most usefully refers to this first turning to Christ, rather than to any subsequent advance in insight.
- 6 Acts gives the Septuagint wording. This Greek version of the OT was widely used in NT times. Sometimes, as here, the Septuagint version of a text invites a particular line of interpretation.
- 7 That Lydia dealt in a luxury commodity and could receive guests in her house suggests she was quite well-off.
- 8 For more on the 'we-passages,' see below, p 21.
- 9 This man was son of Agrippa I (who appears in Acts 12), and was a client king of Rome in the northern part of the Holy Land.
- 10 All this is similar to the little summary at the start of Romans, which was probably the last letter Paul wrote before sailing to Judea. The gospel has roots in Scripture (1.2). It is a message for the world, rather than for Israel alone, because Christ is risen (1.3f). And through Jesus, Paul is an apostle to the Gentiles (1.5f). In Romans as in Acts, resurrection is at the heart of Israel's Scripture (4.17, 19) and of Christian belief (4.24; 10.9). The Paul of the Acts expresses the same basic theology as he does in Romans.
- 11 So L C A Alexander, *Acts in its Ancient Literary Context*, p 85.
- 12 I am grateful to Dr Steve Walton, who is writing the Word Biblical Commentary on Acts, for underlining this point to me in conversation. A forthcoming article by Walton in *The Evangelical Quarterly* will explore this issue more fully.
- 13 All commentaries discuss this issue. I found B Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: a Socio-rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998) pp 52–54 and 480–486, particularly helpful.
- 14 This point is discussed above, on page 6.
- 15 Witherington's commentary, pp 165–173 and 430–438, deals carefully and imaginatively with this issue.
- 16 Witherington's commentary, p 379.
- 17 For example, A Fernando, *NIV Application Commentary: Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998); R L Gallagher and P Hertig (eds), *Mission in Acts* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004); J L Gonzalez, *Acts: the Gospel of the Spirit* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001); A B Robinson and R W Wall, *Called to be Church: the Book of Acts for a New Day* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).
- 18 B Capper, 'Reciprocity and the Ethic of Acts,' in Marshall and Peterson (eds), *Witness to the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998) pp 499–518.

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