

Luke and Acts

The Narratives of St. Luke



Lindisfarne Gospels (Cotton MS Nero D. IV), c. A.D. 700.
London: British Library.

with
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Traditional Author: St. Luke
Traditional Date Written: A.D. 70-80
Period Covered: 6/5 B.C.-A.D. 62

St. Luke is not mentioned as the author of *The Gospel According to Luke* or *The Acts of the Apostles* in the text of either work. Nevertheless, the early Church unanimously ascribed both works to him. The oldest extant copy of the gospel, p⁷⁵, which is dated A.D. 175-225, is titled “Gospel according to Luke”; the Muratorian Canon, dated A.D. 170-180, attributes the gospel to Luke and also identifies him as a physician and Paul’s companion; Tertullian, writing in the first decade of the third century, notes Luke as the author of the gospels; and a steady stream of later tradition supports these earlier ascriptions.

St. Luke is mentioned on three occasions in scripture itself. In Philemon 24 he is included among Paul’s “fellow workers.” In Colossians 4:14, St. Paul refers to him as “our dear friend Luke, the doctor,” where he also includes him among his gentile helpers. And in 2 Timothy 4:11 he appears as Paul’s sole companion while Paul awaits death in Rome. In addition, the author of *Luke-Acts* includes his narrator among the travelers on Paul’s second missionary journey, joining them in Troas. As he tells his story, his pronouns shift from “they” to “we”:

*Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When **they** came to the border of Mysia, **they** tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow **them** to. So **they** passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” After Paul had seen the vision, **we** got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called **us** to preach the gospel to them.*

(Acts 16:6-10)

From this point on, the pronouns include our narrator who places himself with St. Paul for eighteen years, from the second missionary journey (A.D. 50-52) through St. Paul’s death in Rome (A.D. 68).

Notice in this brief discussion of authorship that I have drawn a distinction between the *author* of *Luke-Acts* and the *narrator*. Every story has at least four basic

perspectives: the author who fashions the story, the narrator who tells it, the characters who populate it, and the reader who experiences it. In *Luke-Acts*, our author does not identify himself, although I am content to view him as Luke, the “beloved physician” and traveling companion of Paul, as tradition holds. The *narrator*, however, is a distinct creation of our author.

In *The Gospel According to Luke*, our *author* tells us the purpose and method of his work, and he also tells us to whom it is addressed:

In as much as many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed good to me also, having carefully investigated everything from the beginning, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

(Luke 1:1-4, my translation)

Notice several things about this ‘prologue.’ First, our author knows that others have written works on the same subject, based upon “eyewitness” accounts and those provided by “servants of the word.” A careful, word-by-word comparison of *Luke* with *Matthew* and *Mark* suggests that our author used *The Gospel According to Mark* as one of his primary sources, and he also used *The Gospel According to Matthew*—or a source common to both—for additional material. Moreover, *Luke* includes considerable material not mentioned in either *Mark* or *Matthew*, suggesting that our author drew on other sources, perhaps both written and oral. Second, our author tells us that, using these sources, he “carefully investigated everything from the beginning” and that he wishes to arrange them in an “orderly account.” Third, we learn that he writes for a very specific audience, a man named “Theophilus,” who apparently is a recent believer. Finally, we learn that our author writes in order that Theophilus may know “the certainty of the things he has been taught,” suggesting that his work is a factually accurate one, designed to provide a solid foundation for Theophilus’s new faith.

We should note, too, the prose style of this preface: it is a single carefully structured sentence consisting of forty two words in Greek, arranged in a very symmetrical, balanced fashion, with a *protasis* (verses 1 & 2) and an *apodosis* (verses 3 & 4), each containing three parallel phrases, all written in the first person. Look at a schematic diagram of the sentence:

In as much as many
have undertaken
to *draw up an account* of the things that have been fulfilled among us,
just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were
eyewitnesses and servants of the word,
it seemed good to me also
having investigated everything from the beginning,
to *write an orderly account* for you, most excellent Theophilus,
so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Notice the formal contrast between “many” and “me also,” between “draw up an account” and “write an orderly account” and the secondary subordinate clauses in both the *protasis* and *apodosis*, “just as”/ “so that.” This is superb Greek—some of the best in the New Testament. It is certainly the work of a writer trained in classical Greek rhetoric, who chooses to introduce his story in a clearly defined, classical style.

Significantly, this is the last time we will encounter this first person, classical voice in *Luke-Acts*, for beginning with verse five, the narrative becomes colloquial, with Semitic idioms and strings of coordinate clauses taking the place of the balanced and highly structured opening sentence. In addition, once we leave the prologue, the narrative voice abruptly shifts from first person to third person. Shifting the narrative voice in such a fashion draws attention to what follows and it emphasizes the deliberate creation of a third person narrator, distinct from the voice in the opening lines. This is the mark of a *very* sophisticated author.¹

As the story continues, our author carefully develops distinct, identifiable voices for his narrator and his characters.² Like Mark Twain in *Huckleberry Finn* or William Faulkner in his Yoknapatawpha County stories, our *Luke-Acts* author creates voices for his narrator and characters that position them in time, distinguish them from one another and define who they are.

Let us consider our narrator first. After he is introduced in 1:5, we find that his voice throughout is best characterized as an *oral* voice, that is, the voice of one who is telling his story aloud, rather than writing it. Unlike the formal voice in the prologue, the narrator’s voice speaks words of few syllables in relatively short sentences consisting of clauses strung together by “and” and “but.” Of the roughly 1,260 particles in the narrator’s speech, 1,064 are one or the other.³ This is not acceptable practice in written

¹ Some critics have seen in this shift a gospel editor trained in classical rhetoric who was more interested in compiling sources than in crafting a narrative. See for example, W.L. Knox, *Some Hellenistic Elements in Primitive Christianity*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), Lecture 1. However, as Eduard Norden points out in *Die Antike Kinstprosa*, (Stuttgart: B.G. Teubner, 1958), 2: 483, the reader is very aware that the author could have told his story in a superb classical style *but did not*. From a literary perspective, the shift in style and person suggests the intentional introduction of a third-person narrator.

² James M. Dawsey provides an excellent and comprehensive analysis of the voices in *The Lukan Voice, Confusion and Irony in the Gospel of Luke* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1986).

³ Dawsey p. 21.

Greek, but it is very characteristic of oral Greek.⁴ Moreover, the narrator's voice is distinctly "Christian," that is, he uses formulaic constructions that hardly ever appear in the direct speech of the story's characters and are unusual outside of a Christian context, for example: 1) "and it happened" 2) "answering, he said" 3) "and behold," 4) "when," with an infinitive, 5) "praising God," and 7) "in that hour."⁵ Such formulaic constructions identify the narrator as part of a believing community, much as the use of current "Christian jargon" identifies one as a believer today. In writing his story our author seems to have constructed a recognizably "Christian" narrator, one who speaks in a colloquial, oral voice, one who observes the characters in the story, who moves them from place to place, and who comments upon their actions and attitudes from a believer's perspective.

When we turn to Jesus we find a very different voice from that of the narrator. Creating a distinctive voice for Jesus is a difficult task, for any author runs the risk of turning him into a caricature, as John nearly does in his gospel when he places such unnatural phrases in Jesus' mouth as "Verily, verily I say unto you." Rather than speaking in the unnatural or formulaic phrases of a believing community, Jesus speaks the language of ordinary people in *Luke*. James Dawsey numbers 212 instances of popular phrasing in Jesus' speech. Of those instances, forty-seven parallel *Mark* or *Matthew*, but the words themselves do not occur in either of those gospels, while eighty-seven instances are unique to *Luke*.⁶ Our author clearly has not taken the phrasing from his sources, but has deliberately used the phrasing to characterize Jesus' speech.

Although Jesus speaks the language of common people, the *style* of his speech is far from common. Notice how often in *Luke* Jesus' speech takes the form of a pronouncement or a question. Consider, for example, the story of the crippled woman Jesus heals on the Sabbath:

On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God.

⁴ Recall that the use of "and" (often followed by "immediately") characterizes Mark's gospel as well. In *Mark*, however, it is much more than an indication of oral speech: it is a distinct feature of the narrator's written prose style, as I have argued in my introduction to *The Gospel according to Mark*. Of the 11,022 words in *Mark*, 1,084 of them are "and"—10%; of the 19,165 words in *Luke*, 1,435 are "and"—7%. *Mark* uses "immediately" 41 times; *Luke* only once. *Mark's* use is clearly exaggerated—even for oral language—and thus suggests a deliberate construct.

⁵ Dawsey, pp. 25-31. This was first suggested by Matthew Black, "Second Thoughts IX: The Semitic Element in the New Testament," *Expository Times* 77(1965), pp. 20-23, and more recently by Fred Horton, "Reflections on the Semitisms of Luke-Acts," *Perspectives on Luke-Acts*, ed. Charles Talbert (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1978; reprint, Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1984).

⁶ Dawsey, pp. 36-37.

Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue ruler said to the people, "There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath."

The Lord answered him, "You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?"

When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing.

(Luke 13: 10-17)

After the narrator introduces the setting, characters and problem in the story, Jesus speaks, resolving the issue definitively with a pronouncement: "*Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.*" Placing his hands on her, she immediately stands up and praises God. The synagogue ruler then intrudes with a pronouncement of his own, directed not toward Jesus, but toward the woman, the weaker of the two: "*There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.*" Jesus instantly moves to the woman's rescue, defending her and his own actions, by countering with two questions, the first prefaced by a stinging rebuke: "*You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?*" Jesus' opponents are humiliated and silenced by his words, while the people are delighted.

Notice that Jesus' speaks his pronouncement in plain words and that those words have power over the "spirit"—later identified as "Satan"—that had crippled the woman for eighteen years. It is a pronouncement that establishes Jesus' authority, an authority so great that Satan himself bows to it. When the synagogue ruler responds, Jesus uses this authority to silence and humiliate his opponents. Notice, too, that "opponents" is *plural*. Apparently, Jesus targets the synagogue ruler *and* his supporters, that is, *all* those who wield influence in the synagogue, thus exercising his authority over them also. Consistent with his exercise of authority, Jesus' two questions are rhetorical: *they are not meant to be answered*, for the clear answer to each is "yes," and Jesus provides no time for a response. The questions are posed and phrased in such a way that they put the synagogue rulers in their place, which is clearly beneath that of Jesus. Our narrator confirms the fact by telling us "all his opponents were humiliated." At the same time he reinforces Jesus as a man of the people, for they were "delighted" with what he had done.

Of the eighty-some questions in Jesus' speech in *Luke*, nearly all are posed rhetorically. Their answers do not depend upon Jesus' ability to construct logical, rational or clever arguments; they rely solely upon his authority as the speaker. In this

sense, we might say that in *Luke* Jesus speaks prophetically, wielding the authority of God himself through his words.

To this point we have seen how our author uses a distinct first person classical style to introduce his story and then how he abruptly shifts that style to a third person colloquial one to distinguish himself from the narrator he creates. We have also seen how he develops a distinct voice for Jesus, distinguishing him from his narrator and defining who he is. Next, we should notice how our author moves his narrative forward. Recall in our study of *Mark* that the story depends upon the narrator to drive the action and to develop the characters. In a story of 11,022 words, the narrator speaks 5,826 of them—a full 53%, while Jesus speaks 36% and the rest of the characters 11%. In *Luke*, a longer story of 19,165 words, the narrator speaks only 7,690 words—40%, while Jesus speaks 47% and the rest of the characters 13%. In *Mark*, the *narrator* drives the story; in *Luke*, the *characters* drive the story, reflecting a fundamentally different narrative strategy. Compare, for example, how *Mark* and *Luke* present John the Baptist and his baptism of Jesus. I have marked the speakers in both narratives by leaving the narrator in plain text and printing the words spoken by the characters in bold italic.

The Gospel According to Mark, 1:1-13 (my translation)

Beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God, as it has been written in Isaiah the prophet:

Look! I send my messenger before your face who will prepare your way; a voice of one calling: “In the desert prepare the way of the Lord; make straight paths for him.”

John, the one baptizing in the desert, appeared proclaiming a baptism of repentance toward the forgiveness of sins, and the entire Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan river confessing their sins and John was clothed with camel’s hair and had a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey and he spoke out saying: ***“After me comes one who is mightier than I the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy of stooping down to loosen; I have baptized you in water, but he will baptize you in the Holy Spirit.”***

And it came to pass in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John, and immediately coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn apart and the Spirit like a dove descending into him, and there was a voice out of the heavens: ***“You are my Son, the Beloved; in you I am well-pleased.”*** And immediately the Spirit drives him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days being tempted by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels were ministering to him. After John had been arrested

Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God and saying: ***“The appointed time has been fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is fast approaching; repent and believe in the gospel.”***

The Gospel According to Luke, 3:1-22

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiapas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As is written in the book of the of Isaiah the prophet:

A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God’s salvation.’

John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, ***“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”***

What should we do then?” the crowd asked.

John answered, ***“The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.”***

Tax collectors also came to be baptized. ***“Teacher,”*** they asked, ***“what should we do?”*** ***“Don’t collect any more than you are required to,”*** he told them.

Then some soldiers asked him, ***“And what should we do?”*** He replied, ***“Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”***

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. John answered them all, ***“I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”*** And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.

But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.

When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ***“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”***

Recall how *Mark* begins with a dramatic proclamation in an *anarthrous* construction: *“Beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God, as it has been written in Isaiah the prophet . . .”* In a brief fourteen words in the Greek, Mark announces the start of the gospel with a proclamation that echoes Genesis 1:1, positioning the unfolding events at the beginning of creation itself. In sharp contrast, Luke carefully paves the way for his story in 73 Greek words by positioning events in recent history: *“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiapas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As is written in the book of Isaiah the prophet . . .”*

Our author tells us in his prologue that he “investigated everything from the beginning” and that he intends to “write an orderly account” so that Theophilus “may know the certainty of the things [he has] been taught,” and indeed he does. Like a good historian, he carefully provides context for his narrative, creating a strong sense of verisimilitude and authorial credibility. Like Mark, our author then links his story to Isaiah 40:3-5, identifying John's arrival as the fulfillment of a seven-hundred year old prophecy. Both authors then introduce John himself. In *Mark*, the narrator does so by describing in his own voice who John is, what he does, how his audience responds to him, and what he looks like: *“John, the one baptizing in the desert, appeared proclaiming a baptism of repentance toward the forgiveness of sins, and the entire Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan river confessing their sins and John was clothed with camel's hair and had a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey . . .”* In contrast, *Luke* allows John to speak for himself and to interact with the other characters in the story, while the narrator only briefly comments upon the action:

John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

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Do you see the difference in how the narrator presents his story? In *Mark* he *tells* us about his characters; in *Luke*, he *shows* us by allowing us to observe his characters in action. This is a consistent narrative strategy throughout *Luke-Acts*.

As we explore *The Gospel According to Luke*, observing how the author creates distinct voices for his characters and how he moves his story forward, we might also observe how he incorporates parables into his narrative. Obviously, each of the synoptic gospels includes scenes of Jesus teaching in parables, but *Luke* includes several the others do not. In *Luke*, parables are a main feature of the narrative landscape:

The Parables of Jesus

<u>Parable</u>	<u>Matthew</u>	<u>Mark</u>	<u>Luke</u>
1. Lamp under a bowl	5:14-15	4:21-22	8:16; 11:33
2. Wise and foolish builders	7:24-27		6:47-49
3. New cloth on an old coat	9:16	2:21	5:36
4. New wine in old wine skins	9:17	2:33	5:37-38
5. Sower and the soils	13:3-8, 18-23	4:3-8, 14-20	8:5-8, 11-15
6. Weeds	13:24-30, 36-43		
7. Mustard seed	13:31-32	4:30-32	13:18-19
8. Yeast	13:33		13:20-21
9. Hidden treasure	13:44		
10. Valuable pearl	13:45-46		
11. Net	13:47-50		
12. Owner of a house	13:52		
13. Lost sheep	18:12-14		15:4-7
14. Unmerciful servant	18:23-34		
15. Workers in a vineyard	20:1-16		
16. Two sons	21:28-32		
17. Tenants	21:33-34	12:1-11	20:9-18
18. Wedding banquet	22:2-14		
19. Fig tree	24:32-35	13:28-29	21:29-31
20. Faithful and wise servant	24:45-51		12:42-48
21. Ten virgins	25:1-13		
22. Talents	25:14-30		19:12-27
23. Sheep and goats	25:31-46		
24. Growing seed		4:26-29	
25. Watchful servants		13:35-37	12:35-40
26. Money lender			7:41-43
27. Good Samaritan			10:30-37
28. Friend in need			11:5-8
29. Rich fool			12:16-21
30. Unfruitful fig tree			13:6-9
31. Lowest seat at the feast			14:7-14
32. Great banquet			14:16-24
33. Cost of discipleship			14:28-33
34. Lost coin			15:8-10
35. Lost son			15:11-32
36. Shrewd manager			16:1-8; 19-31
37. Master and his servant			17:7-10
38. Persistent widow			18:2-8
39. Pharisee and tax collector			18:10-14
Total Parables	23	9	27

The word “parable” is a compound of two Greek words, *para*, meaning “along side” (as in *paramedic* or *paralegal*) and *bole*, from the Greek verb “to throw.” A parable is something “thrown along side” to illuminate or bring into sharp focus a common truth in a new or memorable way. In a technical sense, “a parable is something like a metaphor expanded into a story.”⁷ Typically, a parable draws from everyday experience and introduces a surprising or extravagant twist that catches the hearer’s attention and brings into focus the comparison he is making. Frequently a parable includes terms that have special or symbolic meaning to the world and culture of Jesus’ day or it gains meaning from the events or words that precede it. Consider *Luke* 13:1-9, for example:

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them, do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’ ‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”

As Jesus is teaching, someone in the crowd mentions a particularly heinous act committed by Pilate—the killing of a group of Galileans as they were offering sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem.⁸ Jesus uses the comment to ask a question and to make a pronouncement: “*Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.*” Following Jesus’ typical pattern, the question is rhetorical: he gives no time for an answer, nor does he expect one. Instead, he answers the question himself: “*I tell you, no!*” He then follows his answer with an authoritative pronouncement: “*But unless you repent, you too will all perish.*” On the surface, comparing a group of Galileans deliberately and gruesomely murdered with the members of Jesus’ audience seems odd. Even more oddly, Jesus quickly follows this comparison with another in the same rhetorical question/ pronouncement pattern: *Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them, do you think they were more guilty than*

⁷ John Nolland, “Excursus: Modern Parables Research,” in *Luke 1-9:20* (Dallas: Word Books Publishers, 1989), p. xliii.

⁸ Although this event is not mentioned anywhere else in Scripture or in ancient literature, it is easy to understand it as a current event in Jesus’ day. Since sacrifices could only be made at the temple in Jerusalem, the killings must have occurred there, and as Josephus shows in his *Jewish Antiquities*, it is certainly consistent with the behavior of Roman troops at that time.

all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”⁹ In both instances, Jesus stresses the tenuous nature of human life. Obviously, the murdered Galileans were not greater sinners than others present at the temple that day, nor were the eighteen who died when a tower fell on them any more guilty than others in Jerusalem. In both cases, ordinary people were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. The lesson Jesus drives home is this: Death can strike anyone at any time, so you’d better repent while you still can.

Jesus then reinforces this lesson by introducing a parable, an extended metaphor “thrown along side” the two previous examples to illustrate and extend them in a memorable fashion. Notice the elements of the parable: 1) a man, 2) a fig tree, 3) a vineyard, 4) fruit, and 5) the man who takes care of the vineyard. The elements recall Micah 7:1—“What misery is mine! I am like one who gathers summer fruit at the gleaning of his vineyard; there is no cluster of grapes to eat, none of the early figs that I crave.” Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures Israel is compared to a vineyard planted by God in which each vine and fig tree is to yield good fruit. In Jesus’ parable, then, the man is God, the vineyard is Israel, the fig tree is the individual Israelite, the fruit is the good works of the individual, and the man who takes care of the vineyard is Jesus. All of this would be clear to Jesus’ audience, as it draws upon commonplace metaphors in Scripture.

The parable achieves its full meaning, though, by pairing it with the two illustrations that precede it. In the parable the fig tree has born no fruit for three years. It is barren and worthless, so the owner of the vineyard tells the man who tends it to cut it down. Instead, the man asks for one more year, during which time he will “dig around it and fertilize it.” If it does not bear fruit after that, he will cut it down. Jesus has already made the point in the previous questions/ pronouncements that life is tenuous and that death can strike at any time, so one had better repent while he can. In the parable, Jesus offers his listeners a final chance. As the one who tends the vineyard, he is “digging around and fertilizing it” by his teaching. If his listeners do not repent and produce fruit after that, they will be cut down posthaste. In the previous examples, neither group is guilty of a greater sin than anyone else; in the parable, though, one who does not produce fruit after being “fertilized” by Jesus’ teaching *is* guilty of “a greater sin,” for he has *chosen* to do nothing after having been warned.

Parables have been the subject of an enormous amount of research and analysis. Throughout the centuries the Church has read Jesus’ parables primarily as allegories and has applied them to the lives of individual believers as such.¹⁰ Adolph Jülicher initiated a new period of parable study in 1910 when he demonstrated the inadequacy of the allegorical method in understanding the parables and suggested the necessity of

⁹ The tower was part of the old, first wall of ancient Jerusalem which turned from the east southward “above the fountain of Siloam,” according to Josephus (*Jewish War* 5.4.2, paragraph 145). No ancient literature outside of this story mentions its collapse. Again, though, it seems to be a current event that Jesus’ audience clearly knew.

¹⁰ A. M. Hunter provides a good survey of the allegorical approach in “The Interpreter and the Parables,” *Interpretation*, 14(1960), 77-81.

developing other approaches.¹¹ Following Jülicher's thinking, a group of German scholars began investigating the Jewish background of Jesus' parables.¹² Then in 1935, C. H. Dodd launched a massive reappraisal of the parables.¹³ In his work, Dodd points out that no one would have crucified an itinerant preacher who went about encouraging people with entertaining and memorable stories that encouraged them to embrace higher moral and ethical principles. Clearly, said Dodd, there is more to the parables than that, and he set out to discover the original setting of the parables in Jesus' ministry. For Dodd, his research led him to believe that the parables contained a revolutionary message regarding the coming eschatological "Kingdom of Heaven," and it was being realized through Jesus' preaching. For Dodd, the parables contained a radical and revolutionary message.

Paying tribute to Dodd, Joachim Jeremias moved parable research forward again when he launched a deep investigation into their Palestinian background, probing cultural and rabbinical sources, as well as literature contemporary with Jesus, such as the Dead Sea scrolls.¹⁴ At the same time G. V. Jones began investigating the parables as art forms, loosening them from their historical and cultural roots and viewing them as distinct works of art, focusing on their structural elements.¹⁵ Today, parable research tends to focus more and more on such cultural and literary issues.¹⁶

I include this brief survey of parable research to suggest that *Luke-Acts*—like any other world-class literature—offers an inexhaustible opportunity for study and research. Anyone who limits his or her approach to Scripture—whether form-critical, historical, cultural, literary, or anything else—greatly limits his or her response to the richness of the text. *Every* approach to Scripture bears some fruit, and one can fully appreciate the text only when he or she acquires all of the critical reading skills and interpretive tools available and applies them in a wise and discerning fashion to the text at hand.

¹¹ *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1910).

¹² Chief among them are C. A. Bugge, *Die Haupt-Parabein Jesu* (Giessen: J. Ricker, 1903) and Paul Fiebig, *Altjüdische Gleichnisse und die Gleichnisse Jesu* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1904).

¹³ *The Parables of the Kingdom*, 3rd ed. (New York: Scribners, 1961).

¹⁴ *The Parables of Jesus*, 3rd ed., trans. by S. H. Hooke, *et al.* (London: SCM, 1972).

¹⁵ *The Art and Truth of the Parables* (London: SPCK, 1964).

¹⁶ Useful sources for the cultural issues include: E. F. F. Bishop, *Apostles of Palestine* (London: Lutterworth, 1958) and N. Levinson, *The Parables: Their Background and Local Setting* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1926). For literary issues begin with: Geraint Vaughan Jones, *The Parables: A Study in Their Literary Form and Modern Interpretation* (London: SPCK, 1964) and Dan Otto Via, *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967).

When we turn our attention to *The Acts of the Apostles*, we confirm our previous statement that *Luke-Acts* is a single work, designed in two parts. *Acts* opens as our author once again steps into the story with his first-person voice saying: “*In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven . . .*” (Acts 1:1). If *Luke* tells what Jesus “*began to do and to teach,*” then *Acts* continues the story. In *Luke*, Jesus begins his ministry on earth; in *Acts*, the Holy Spirit continues it.

After a brief summary of Jesus’ earthly ministry, our narrator reintroduces Jesus:

On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.”

So when they met together, they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

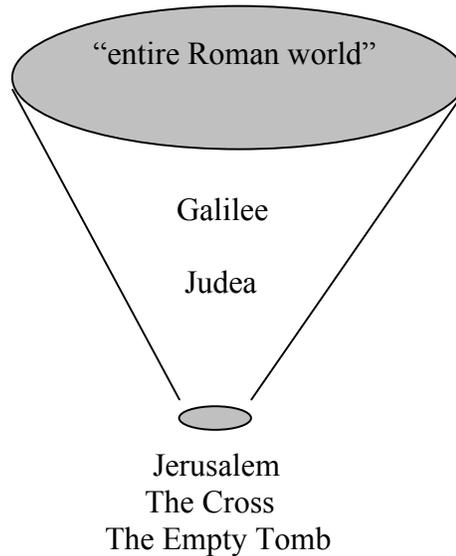
(Acts 1:4-8)

Jesus’ words set the structure for *Acts*, and they also suggest an overall structure for *Luke-Acts* combined. In *Luke*, our narrator places Jesus’ birth in the context of history and geography: “In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world . . .” (Luke 2:1), and he then positions Jesus’ ministry “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas . . .” (Luke 3:1-2).

Notice how the story begins with the “entire Roman world,” and then narrows that world down to Judea, Galilee, Iturea, Traconitis and Abilene, finally focusing on Annas and Caiaphas, the high priests in Jerusalem. In like motion, Jesus moves from heaven itself as the “Son of God” (*Luke* 1:35) to Galilee and Judea, finally ending his public ministry in Jerusalem at the cross and the empty tomb. The *shape* of the narrative looks something like this:

Luke

Narrative movement

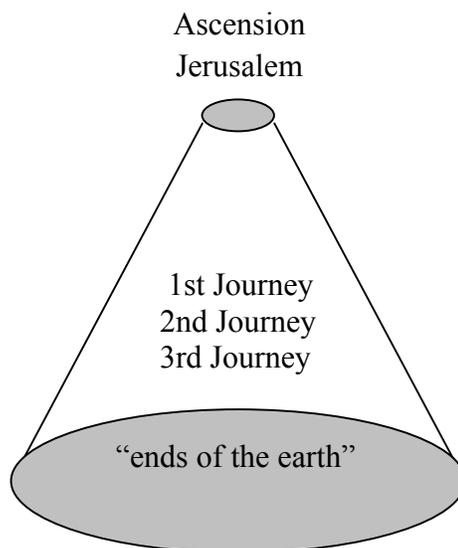


**Jesus'
Ministry**

Forty days after Jesus' resurrection, he leaves Jerusalem and ascends back *into* heaven, leaving his Apostles with the command to be his witnesses "in Jerusalem, and Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). And that is precisely what happens. Ten days after Jesus' ascension, the Holy Spirit descends *from* heaven and the Church begins moving out into the world, starting with Peter's sermon on Pentecost at the temple mount in Jerusalem and moving with Paul through his first, second and third missionary journeys, each progressing farther and farther into the Roman world, ending with Paul in Rome awaiting trial before Caesar. The shape of *Acts* looks something like this:

Acts

Narrative movement



**Holy Spirit's
Ministry**

Structurally, *Luke* and *Acts* make up one unified work, each the mirror image of the other.

As Jesus is the driving force in *Luke*, the Holy Spirit is the driving force in *Acts*. The narrative begins with Jesus telling the Apostles to stay in Jerusalem and “wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about” (Acts 1:4). Ten days later, on the Jewish feast of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit arrives in Jerusalem and the job of being Jesus’ “witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” begins in earnest. As the Apostles wait for the Holy Spirit, the believers number “about a hundred and twenty” (1:15). After Peter’s sermon on the temple mount at Pentecost, “three thousand were added to their number” (2:41). By the time Peter and John appear before the Sanhedrin, “the number of men grew to about five thousand” (4:4), and as the Apostles continue teaching at the temple mount, “more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number” (5:14). As the narrative takes us from Jerusalem to “Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth,” the numbers steadily increase.

Although *Acts* highlights the work of Peter and Paul in the Church’s growth, the Holy Spirit is the engine driving events. As you read through the narrative, notice the pervasive presence of the Holy Spirit. At Pentecost all of the Apostles “were filled with the Holy Spirit” (2:4); Peter tells his listeners on the temple mount to “repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (2:38); when Peter addresses the Sanhedrin, he is “filled with the Holy Spirit” (4:8); Peter tells Ananias that he has not lied to him, but “to the Holy Spirit” (5:3); on his second appearance before the Sanhedrin, Peter affirms that “we are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit” (5:32); and the seven deacons chosen to assist the community are “known to be full of the Spirit” (6:3). The list grows throughout the narrative. In a very real sense, *The Acts of the Apostles* could be more aptly titled *The Acts of the Holy Spirit*.

In this introduction I have given a brief analysis of several literary features of *Luke-Acts*. I have only scratched the surface. *Luke-Acts* is certainly the best story in the New Testament, and it is among the best stories in all of Scripture. As a literary work it stands shoulder-to-shoulder with the greatest works of world literature.

Luke-Acts Outline

Luke

Prologue: (1:1-4)

I. Infancy Narrative (1:5-2:52)

- A. Gabriel speaks with Zachariah (1:5-25)
 - a. The offer (1:5-17)
 - b. Zachariah's question (1:18)
 - c. Gabriel's response (1:19-20)
 - d. The result (1:21-25)

- B. Gabriel speaks with Mary (1:26-38)
 - a. The offer (1:26-33)
 - b. Mary's question (1:34)
 - c. Gabriel's response (1:35-37)
 - d. The result (1:38)

- C. Mary visits Elizabeth (1:39-80)
 - a. Mary's stay (1:39-56)
 - 1. Mary's song (*Magnificat*) (1:46-55)
 - b. Birth of John the Baptist (1:57-80)
 - 1. Zechariah's song (*Benedictus*) (1:67-79)

- D. Jesus' Birth and Youth (2:1-52)
 - a. Jesus born (2:1-7)
 - b. Shepherds visit (2:8-20)
 - c. Jesus presented in the temple (2: 21-40)
 - 1. Jesus' circumcision (2:21)
 - a. Simeon's song (*Nunc Dimittis*) (2:29-32)
 - 2. Mary's purification (2:22-38)
 - d. Return to Nazareth (2:39-40)
 - e. Jesus at the temple at twelve years old (2:41-51)

II. Jesus' Public Ministry (3:1-23:56)

- A. Prelude: John the Baptist prepares the way (3:1-22)**
 - a. Jesus baptized (3:21-22)

- B. Phase 1: The Beginnings (3:23-9:50)**
 - a. Jesus' genealogy (3:23-37)
 - b. Jesus tempted (4:1-13)
 - c. Jesus rejected at Nazareth (4:14-30)
 - d. Jesus relocates to Capernaum (4:31-9:50)

1. Jesus preaches at synagogue and drives out an unclean spirit (4:31-37)
2. Jesus heals many people (4:38-44)
3. Jesus calls Simon (Peter), Andrew, James and John as disciples (5:1-11)
4. Jesus heals a man with leprosy (5:12-16)
5. Jesus heals a paralytic (5:17-26)
6. Jesus calls Levi (Matthew) as a disciple (5:27-32)
7. “Why do your disciples not fast?” (5:33-39)
8. “Why do your disciples work on the Sabbath? (6:1-11)
9. Jesus calls Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, Judas son of James and Judas Iscariot as disciples, completing the twelve (6:12-16)
10. Jesus preaches the “Sermon of the Plain” (6:17-49)
11. Jesus complements a Centurion’s faith (7:1-10)
12. Jesus raises the son of the widow of Nain (7:11-17)
13. John the Baptist’s disciples question Jesus (7:18-35)
14. Jesus dines with Simon the Pharisee (7:36-50)
15. Jesus travels about Galilee, “proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God” (8:1-9:50)
 - a) Parable of the sower (8:1-15)
 - b) Parable of the lamp (8:16-18)
 - c) Jesus’ mother and brothers visit (8:19-21)
 - d) Jesus calms the storm (8:22-25)
 - e) Jesus heals a demon-possessed man at Gadara (8:26-40)
 - f) Jesus heals the woman bleeding for twelve years and raises Jairus’ twelve-year old daughter (8:40-56)
 - g) Jesus sends out his twelve disciples (9:1-9)
 - h) Jesus feeds the 5,000 (9:10-17)
16. Confessions of faith (9:18-50)
 - a) Peter’s confession: “The Messiah of God” (9:18-27)
 - b) Jesus transfigured; God’s “confession”: “This is my Son” (9:28-36)
 - 1) Response #1: Jesus heals a very difficult case (9:37-45)
 - 2) Response #2: Disciples argue over “which of them will be the greatest” (9:46-50)

C. Phase 2: On the Road to Jerusalem (9:51-19:27)

- a. Samaritan opposition (9:51-56)
- b. Cost of discipleship (9:57-62)
- c. Jesus sends out seventy-two disciples (10:1-24)
- d. Parable of the Good Samaritan (10:25-37)
- e. Jesus dines with Mary and Martha (10:38-42)
- f. Jesus teaches on prayer (11:1-13)
- g. Jesus and Beelzebub (11:14-28)
- h. The sign of Jonah (11:29-36)
 1. “Your eye is the lamp of your body” (11:33-36)
- i. Jesus dines with another Pharisee (11:37-12:12)
- j. Parable of the rich fool (12:13-21)

- k. Jesus teaches about worry (12:22-34)
- l. Jesus encourages watchfulness (12:35-48)
- m. Jesus brings division, not peace (12:49-53)
- n. Signs of the times (12:54-59)
- o. Repent or perish (13:1-9)
- p. Jesus heals the woman bent double (13:10-17)
- q. Parable of the mustard seed (13:18-19)
- r. Parable of the yeast (13:20-21)
- s. "Who will be saved?" (13:22-30)
- t. Herod hunts for Jesus (13:31-33)
- u. Jesus laments over Jerusalem (13:34-35)
- v. Jesus dines with yet another Pharisee (14:1-24)
 - 1. Parable of the great banquet (14:15-24)
- w. Cost of discipleship (14:25-35)
- x. Parable of the lost sheep (15:1-7)
- y. Parable of the lost coin (15:8-10)
- z. Parable of the lost son (15:11-32)
- aa. Parable of the shrewd manager (16:1-15)
- bb. The law stands (16:16-17)
- cc. Divorce (16:18)
- dd. The rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31)
- ee. Sin, faith and duty (17:1-10)
- ff. Jesus heals ten lepers (17:11-19)
- gg. Jesus teaches on the kingdom of God (17:20-18:30)
 - 1. "When will it come?" "You don't know." (17:20-37)
 - 2. "What should we do in the meantime?" "Pray." (18:1-8)
 - 3. "What about our righteousness?" "Don't count on it." (18:9-14)
 - 4. "Who will be in the kingdom?" "Those like little children." (18:15-17)
 - 5. "What must we do to enter the kingdom?" "Eliminate what stands in the way." (18:18-30)
- hh. Approaching Jerusalem, Jesus predicts his death (18:31-34)
- ii. Up from Jericho (18:35-19:27)
 - 1. Jesus heals the blind beggar in Jericho (18:35-43)
 - 2. Jesus meets with Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector (19:1-10)
 - 3. Parable of the ten minas (19:11-27)

D. Phase 3: Jerusalem (19:28-23:56)

- a. Jesus arrives in Jerusalem (19:28-44)
- b. Jesus enters the temple area and drives out the merchants (19:45-46)
- c. Jesus teaches at the temple (19:47-21:38)
 - 1. Jesus' authority questioned (20:1-8)
 - 2. Parable of the Tenants (20:9-19)
 - 3. "Should we pay taxes to Caesar?" (20:20-26)
 - 4. "Is there a resurrection?" (20:27-40)
 - 5. "Whose son is the Christ?" (20:41-47)
 - 6. The widow's offering (21:1-4)

- 7. Signs of the end of the age (21:5-38)
- d. Judas agrees to betray Jesus (22:1-6)
- e. The Last Supper (22:7-38)
- f. The Garden of Gethsemane (22:39-53)
 - 1. Jesus arrested (22:47-53)
- g. Trail at the home of the high priest (22:54-71)
 - 1. Peter disowns Jesus (22:54-62)
 - 2. Guards abuse Jesus (22:63-65)
 - 3. Jesus found guilty (22:66-71)
- h. Trial before Pilate (23:1-23:25)
- i. Jesus crucified (23:23:26-49)
- j. Jesus buried (23:50-56)

III. Jesus Resurrected (24:1-Acts 1:11)

- A. The empty tomb (24:1-12)
- B. Jesus speaks with Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus (24:13-35)
- C. Jesus appears to his disciples in the upper room (24:36-49)
- D. *Transitional conclusion* (24:50-53)**

Acts

Prologue: (1:1-11)

- E. *Transitional introduction* (1: 3-8)**
- F. Jesus ascends into heaven (1:9-11)



IV. Phase #1: The Church in Jerusalem (1:12-8:40)

- A. Prelude: the disciples wait (1:12-26)**
 - b. Disciples return from Mt. of Olives to Jerusalem (1:12-13)
 - c. Disciples replace Judas with Matthias (1:15-26)
- B. The Holy Spirit arrives (2:1-13)**
- C. Peter's Ministry (2:14-8:40)**
 - a. Peter's 1st sermon (2:14-40)
 - b. The community grows (2:41-47)
 - c. Peter heals a crippled beggar (3:1-10)
 - d. Peter's 2nd sermon (3:11-26)
 - e. Peter and John arrested (4:1-31)
 - f. The community continues to grow (4:32-4:35)
 - g. Barnabas sells a field and gives the money to Peter (4:36-37)
 - h. Ananias and Sapphira sell property, too (5:1-11)
 - i. The Apostles heal many (5:12-16)

- j. All of the Apostles arrested (5:17-42)
- k. Division of labor: seven deacons chosen (6:1-7:60)
 - 1. Steven (6:8-7:60)
 - a) Steven's teaching (6:8-10)
 - b) Steven arrested (6:11-15)
 - c) Steven's defense (7:1-53)
 - d) Steven stoned to death (7:54-60)
 - 2. Great persecution begins, led by Saul of Tarsus (8:1-3)
 - 3. Philip (8:4-40)
 - a) Leaves for Samaria (8:4-25)
 - 1) Simon the Sorcerer (8:9-25)
 - b) Encounters the Ethiopian eunuch (8:26-39)
 - c) Leaves for Caesarea (8:40)

Interlude: Saul of Tarsus Converted on the Road to Damascus (9:1-31)

- l. Peter visits Lydda and Joppa (9:32-43)
- m. Peter converts Cornelius, the first gentile in the Church (10:1-11:18)
 - 1. Peter explains himself to the other Apostles in Jerusalem (11:1-18)
- n. The Church spreads as far as Antioch (11:19-30)
 - 1. Barnabas and Saul relocate to Antioch (11:25-26)
- o. Peter arrested by Herod Agrippa (12:1-24)
 - 1. Peter breaks jail (12:6-11)
 - 2. Peter meets the other believers at the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark, and then leaves Jerusalem (12:12-19a)
 - 3. Herod Agrippa dies in the theater at Caesarea (12:19b-24)
- p. John Mark joins Saul and Barnabas at Antioch (12:25)

V. Phase #2: The Church Expands “to the Ends of the Earth” (13:1-28:31)

A. Prelude: Saul and Barnabas Teach at Antioch (13:1)

B. Paul's Ministry (13:2-3)

- a. The Holy Spirit calls Saul and Barnabas as missionaries (13:2)
- b. The Church at Antioch commissions Saul and Barnabas (13:3)
- c. **1st Missionary Journey (13:4-14:28)**
 - 1. Saul, Barnabas and John Mark teach in Cyprus (13:4-12)
 - 2. Saul, Barnabas and John Mark go to Pisidian Antioch, where they teach (13:13-52)
 - a) John Mark leaves them in Perge and returns to Jerusalem (13:13)
 - b) Paul preaches his first recorded sermon (13:16-47)
 - 3. Saul (now called Paul) and Barnabas travel to Iconium (14:1-7)
 - 4. Paul and Barnabas visit Lystra and Derbe (14:8-20)
 - 5. Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch (14:21-28)

Interlude: The Council at Jerusalem (15:1-35)

d. 2nd Missionary Journey (15:36-18:22)

1. Paul and Barnabas have a falling out over John Mark (15:36-41)
2. Paul and Silas arrive in Derby and then Lystra (16:1-5)
 - a) Timothy joins Paul and Silas (16:1-3)
3. Paul, Silas and Timothy travel through Phrygia and Galatia, Mysia and Troas (16:6-10)
 - a) “Luke” joins the group in Troas (*the pronouns switch to “we”*) (16:10)
4. The group travels to Philippi (16:11-40)
 - a) Paul meets Lydia and her friends (13-15)
 - b) Paul and Silas land in jail, where they convert the jailer (16:23-34)
5. From Philippi they move west to Thessalonica (17:1-9)
6. Paul and company continue on to Berea (17:10-15)
7. Paul travels alone to Athens (17:16-34)
 - a) Paul preaches at the Areopagus, the “faculty club” of Athens (17:22-31)
8. Paul relocates to Corinth (18:1-17)
 - a) He meets Priscilla and Aquila (18:2)
 - b) Silas and Timothy rejoin Paul (18:5)
9. Paul sets sail from Cenchrea to Caesarea and he makes his way back to Antioch (18:18-22)

e. 3rd Missionary Journey (18:23-21:16)

1. Paul travels throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, finally arriving in Ephesus (18:23-19:41)
 - a) Apollos teaches in Ephesus, where he is corrected by Priscilla and Aquila (18:24-28)
 - b) In Ephesus, Paul has “discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus” for 2 ½ years (19:9-10)
 - c) Because of Paul’s teaching a riot breaks out in Ephesus (19:23-41)
2. Paul leaves for Macedonia, stays for three months, and returns to Troas (20:1-12)
 - a) In Troas, Paul raises Eutychus (20:7-12)
3. Paul bids farewell to the elders at Ephesus (20:13-38)
4. Paul continues on to Jerusalem (21:1-16)

f. On to Rome (21:17-28:31)

1. Paul arrives in Jerusalem (21:17-23:22)
 - a) A problem (21:17-26)
 - b) Paul arrested (21:27-23:22)
 - 1) Paul addresses the crowd (21:37-22:29)
 - 2) Paul addresses the Sanhedrin (22:30-23:11)
 - 3) The plot to kill Paul (23:12-22)
2. Paul transferred to Caesarea (23:23-26:32)
 - a) Paul transported under armed guard (23:23-35)

- b) Paul on trial before Felix (24:1-27)
- c) Paul on trial before Festus (25:1-12)
- d) Paul on trial before King Agrippa (25:13-26:32)
- 3. Paul sails for Rome (27:1-28:10)
 - a) From Caesarea to Crete (27:1-12)
 - b) The storm (27:13-28:10)
 - 1) Caught in the “northeaster” (27:13-26)
 - 2) The shipwreck (27:27-44)
 - c) Ashore on Malta (28:1-10)
- 4. Paul arrives in Rome (28:11-31)

The Acts of the Apostles

Syllabus

Week 1 (July 20, 21)

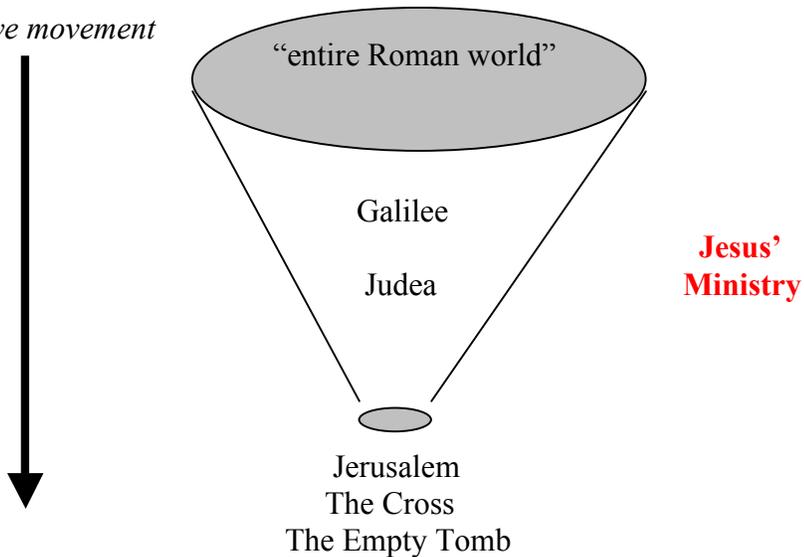
Lesson #1: *Prologue*

“Stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” (Acts 1: 1-26).

The *Gospel according to Luke* and the *Acts of the Apostles* comprise two parts of a single, unified literary work:

Luke

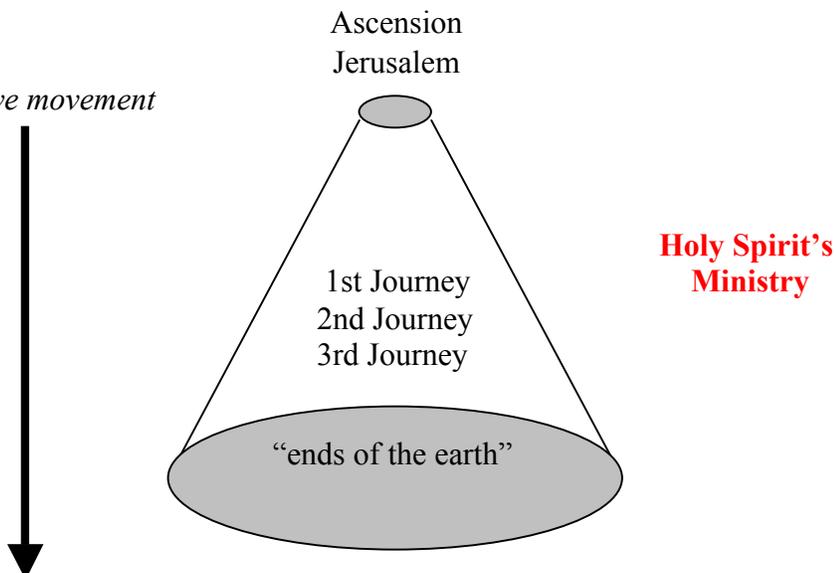
Narrative movement



TRANSITIONAL BRIDGE (Acts 1: 1-26)

Acts

Narrative movement



At the end of Luke's gospel, Jesus' spends forty days with his disciples, teaching them what they need to know to take the gospel message to the world on his behalf, and he commissions them as "Apostles" for that specific job.

At the beginning of Acts, Jesus gives his Apostles their final instructions, telling them to wait in Jerusalem "*for the promise of the Father about which you have heard me speak*" (Acts 1: 4). He then ascends into heaven from the Mount of Olives.

The wait lasts ten days.

Lesson #2: The Birth of the Church (2: 1-47)

On the Jewish feast of Pentecost, A.D. 32—fifty days after Passover—the Holy Spirit arrives in Jerusalem—like a freight train, very publically! We read that "*suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which [the Apostles] were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each of them. And they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them*" (Acts 2: 2-4). At the roaring sound, a large crowd gathers at the Temple area, wondering what just happened!

Although Acts highlights the work of Peter and Paul in the early Church's growth, the Holy Spirit is the engine driving events. As you read through the narrative, notice the pervasive presence of the Holy Spirit. At Pentecost all of the Apostles "*were filled with the Holy Spirit*" (2: 4); Peter tells his listeners on the temple mount to "*repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*" (2: 38); when Peter addresses the Sanhedrin, he is "*filled with the Holy Spirit*" (4: 8); Peter tells Ananias that he has not lied to him, but "*to the Holy Spirit*" (5: 3); on his second appearance before the Sanhedrin, Peter affirms that "*we are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit*" (5: 32); and the seven deacons chosen to assist the community are "*known to be full of the Spirit*" (6: 3). The list grows throughout the narrative. In a very real sense, *The Acts of the Apostles* could be more aptly titled *The Acts of the Holy Spirit*.

Assignment

Read: Acts 1: 1 - 2: 47.

Enrichment Material

Luke Timothy Johnson, "Luke-Acts," *The Writings of the New Testament*, pp. 187-225.

Donald Senior and PHEME PERKINS, "Acts," *The Catholic Study Bible*, pp. 423-438.

“The Acts of the Apostles, Introduction,” *The Catholic Study Bible*, pp. 1526-1527.

Week 2 (July 27, 28)

Lesson #3: St. Peter Arrested! (Acts 3: 1 – 4: 31)

The Church grows quickly, from 120 in the upper room after Jesus’ Ascension (1: 15), to 3,000 after St. Peter’s sermon at Pentecost (2: 41), to 5,000 only weeks later (4: 4). Such rapid growth raises eyebrows and quickly produces conflict. After Peter heals a crippled beggar at the Temple, the Sanhedrin dispatches guards to arrest him and John. Brought before the high priest and the Jewish leaders—the same men who condemned Jesus to death—Peter offers a fiery defense:

“Leaders of the people and elders: If we are being examined today about a good deed done to a cripple, namely, by what means he was saved, then all of you and all the people of Israel should know that it was in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead; in his name this man stands before you healed.”

(4: 8-10)

This is from a man who less than three months earlier was afraid of a servant girl in the courtyard of the high priest! Peter is on fire with the Holy Spirit.

Lesson #4: Life in the Spiritual Fast Lane (Acts 4: 32 – 6: 7)

What was life like in those early days of the Church?

Lesson #4 transports us back into those days, a time when “*the community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common*” (4: 32); a time when “*there was no needy person among them*” (4: 34); a time when Barnabas, a Levite from Cypress, “*sold a piece of property that he owned, then brought the money and put it at the feet of the apostles*” to contribute to the common good (4: 36-37); a time when “*many signs and wonders were done among the people at the hands of the apostles*” (5: 12); a time when “*they even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and mats so that when Peter came by, at least his shadow might fall on one or another of them . . . and they were all cured*” (5: 15-16).

And yet, even within this Utopian vision, conflict and turmoil threatened the Church’s very existence: Ananias and Sapphira cheated God, and they died for their offence; the Apostles were arrested . . . again; and the Church was growing so quickly that jealousies emerged, bitterness between the Hellenists and Hebrews poisoned the community, and the Apostles were overwhelmed, exhausted with work.

Those in the early Church were living life in the spiritual fast lane . . . and it was a dangerous place to be.

Assignment

Read: Acts 3: 1 – 6: 7.

Week 3 (August 3, 4)

Lesson #5: Mounting Opposition (Acts 6: 8 – 8: 31)

With the Church speeding ahead (wheels wobbling and its fenders rattling, nothing quite bolted tightly yet), increasing friction and unexpected bumps in the road threaten to spin it off track and hurdle it end-over-end, flaming, into a retaining wall. We read that “*certain members of the so-called Synagogue of the Freedmen, Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and people from Cilicia and Asia, came forward and debated with Stephen . . . instigating some men to say, ‘We have heard him speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God’*” (6: 9-12). Stephen is promptly arrested and hauled before the Sanhedrin. His defense—such as it is—enrages the religious leaders: “*They cried out in a loud voice, covered their ears, and rushed upon him together. They threw him out of the city, and began to stone him*” (7: 57-58). Recall that the Jewish leaders were not permitted under Roman law to execute someone; that’s why they took Jesus to Pilate for a death sentence. No. The Sanhedrin did not execute Stephen; they lynched him.

And with that lynching, persecution against the Church explodes, led by a brilliant, ambitious and extremely zealous young man named Saul.

Lesson #6: Moving Out from Jerusalem (Acts 8: 4-40)

With the fierce persecution led by Saul, the believers in Jerusalem “*were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria*” (8: 1). All those who had been in Jerusalem for Pentecost and remained there after the birth of the Church—Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya near Cyrene, as well as travelers from Rome, both Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans and Arabs (2: 9-11)—fled home, taking the gospel message with them.

Philip heads north to Samaria, where he speaks of Jesus. There he confronts Simon the “magician” who offers to pay Philip for the ability to drive out unclean spirits and heal people, as he sees Philip do (that’s the origin of “simony,” the buying of ecclesiastical privileges, a practice that later became endemic in the Church. In the *Divine Comedy (Inferno, Canto 19)*, Dante places those church officials who

practiced simony in the 8th circle of Hell, upside down, legs kicking, in pockets filled with human excrement and filth: Pope Nicholas III (Pope, 1277-1280) is one of them, and he mistakes Dante's voice for that of Pope Boniface VIII (Pope, 1294-1303), who will be arriving shortly!).

Moving on from Samaria, Philip heads south for Gaza, where he meets the Ethiopian Eunuch, who will take the gospel message south into Africa.

Assignment

Read: Acts 6: 8 – 8: 40.

Week 4 (August 10, 11)

Lesson #7: The Road to Damascus (Acts 9: 1-31)

No one ever hated Christ more than Saul of Tarsus.

We first met Saul at the stoning of Stephen, where he supervised Steven's murder. And on that same day, Saul began *“trying to destroy the church; entering house after house and dragging out men and women, he handed them over for imprisonment”* (8: 3). As we enter Acts 9 we learn that *“Saul, still breathing out murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, that, if he should find any men or women who belonged to the Way, he might bring them back to Jerusalem in chains”* (9: 1-2).

Saul's dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus is the stuff of legend, transforming Saul from the greatest of sinners (1 Timothy 1: 15) to the greatest of saints.

Lesson #8: Excursus: A Portrait of St. Paul

In Lesson #8 we explore Saul of Tarsus, later known as St. Paul. Who was he? Where did he come from? What was his background? Why was he in Jerusalem? What were his motives for hating Christ?

And did Paul really “invent” Christianity, as many have claimed?

Assignment

Read: Acts 9: 1-31.

Week 5 (August 17, 18)

Lesson #9: St. Peter and Cornelius (Acts 9: 32 – 11: 18)

In Lesson #9 we rejoin St. Peter as he travels along the coast to Lydda and Joppa, where he heals Aeneas, who had been bedridden for eight years, and where he raises Tabitha from the dead. Meanwhile at Caesarea Maritima, an angel has visited Cornelius, a Roman centurion, who tells him to send messengers to Joppa to bring Peter to Caesarea. St. Peter was staying at the home of Simon the tanner, and around noontime Peter had a vision of a sheet being lowered from heaven, containing a collection of both clean and unclean animals. What could all this mean?

When Peter arrives at Caesarea, Cornelius greets him, tells him about the angel visiting him, and Peter proclaims the gospel to Cornelius and his family. They become believers as a result, and they receive the Holy Spirit.

No one in the Church ever imagined that the gospel had anything whatsoever to do with the Gentiles; it was purely a Jewish movement! With the conversion of Cornelius and his family, *everything* changes. No longer is the Church limited to being a minor reform movement within Judaism; with Gentiles becoming believers, the Church gains the potential to become a global enterprise, embracing *all* of humanity.

Lesson #10: St. Peter Arrested . . . again! (Acts 11: 19 – 12: 25)

As Lesson #10 opens, the Church in Jerusalem sends Barnabas to Syrian Antioch, where the gospel was being preached primarily to Gentiles. It was one thing for Cornelius and his family to become believers, but the vast majority of the Church still held that the gospel was primarily meant for the Jews. On arriving in Antioch, Barnabas investigates the situation, and he approves Antioch's "open door" policy for the Gentiles, encouraging them to "keep up the good work." Since Antioch is less than 100 miles from Tarsus (both are in eastern Turkey of today), Barnabas decides to visit Saul, and when he does, they both return to the church at Antioch, where they stay and become teachers.

Meanwhile in Jerusalem, Herod Antipas has arrested the Apostle James, the brother of the John, and Herod has beheaded him. Herod then arrests Peter, planning to execute him, as well, but in the middle of the night, Peter is broken out of jail by an angel, much to the chagrin on the sixteen soldiers who are guarding him (they pay for their dereliction of duty with their lives). Later, at a public assembly in the theater at Caesarea, Herod is stricken with intense pain, collapses, and is "eaten by worms" and dies! (How cool is that!)

Assignment

Read: Acts 9: 32 – 12: 25.

Week 6 (August 24, 25)

Lesson #11: 1st Missionary Journey (Acts 13: 1 – 14: 28)

Paul and Barnabas taught for several years at the church in Syrian Antioch, but we read that in the mid-40s the Holy Spirit said to the church, “*Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them*” (13: 2). The church at Antioch thus commissions Paul and Barnabas to take the gospel message to the interior of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey).

In A.D. 46 that is precisely what they do, traveling first to the island of Cypress, then to Antalya, Perge, Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derby, returning in A.D. 48 to Syrian Antioch by the same route, retracing their steps. Along the way Paul and Barnabas establish churches in each of those cities, small groups of believers who meet in one another’s homes.

Lesson #12: The Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15: 1-35)

On the 1st Missionary Journey, Paul and Barnabas established their “evangelization strategy”: they would enter a town or city and speak at the local synagogue; short time or long, they would be asked to leave the synagogue (sometimes politely; other times not); they would preach to both Jew and Gentile in the marketplace; they would form a small church community; they would oftentimes be beaten up or arrested; and then they would move on to the next city or town, where they would do the same thing again. It was mostly Gentiles who responded to their message, not Jews. When Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, they reported in, telling the church about their experiences.

Word got back to Jerusalem that the church in Antioch, through Paul and Barnabas, focused its outreach primarily on Gentiles, and that raised red flags! The mother church in Jerusalem consisted almost entirely of Jews, and the leadership believed that was as it should be: Jesus was a Jew; Mary was a Jew; all of the Apostles were Jews; and most of the church in Jerusalem consisted of Jews: Jesus was, after all, the *Jewish* Messiah. Peter’s experience with Cornelius and his family showed that Gentiles may well become believers, but if they did, obviously they should observe the Mosaic Law, including circumcision and the dietary restrictions. After all, how could one follow the Jewish Messiah and not observe the Mosaic Law, given to the Jews by God, himself?

Paul and Barnabas disagreed.

The Church leadership called a council at Jerusalem to address the issue, and the Council's decision charted a course that fundamentally altered the Church forever.

Assignment

Read: Acts 13: 1 – 15: 35

Week 7 (August 31, September 1)

Lesson #13: 2nd Missionary Journey, Derby to Athens (15: 36 – 17: 34)

After the Council at Jerusalem, St. Paul has free reign to evangelize the entire Gentile world, without requiring Gentile converts to observe the Mosaic Law: that opened the floodgates to the church, and the Gentiles poured in; by the end of the 1st century, the vast majority of the church would be Gentile, not Jewish.

In A.D. 50 Paul and Silas leave Antioch and set out to retrace the 1st Missionary Journey, in reverse order (Paul and Barnabas had a serious falling out in Antioch, and they parted company, never to meet again). On the way, Timothy joins the group in Lystra and they continue on to Pisidian Antioch. From there, they had planned to head south to Perge, but the Holy Spirit sent them north through Galatia and west to Troas, where Luke joins them. From Troas, Paul and company sail north to Neopolis, setting foot on the continent of Europe for the first time, and from Neopolis they travel to Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea and Athens.

Lesson #14: 2nd Missionary Journey, Corinth (Acts 18: 1-28)

St. Paul arrives in Corinth, and there he stays for 18 months, heading back home toward the end of A.D. 52. Corinth was a double-seaport town on the isthmus that links mainland Greece to the Peloponnesian Peninsula, with the Gulf of Corinth feeding into the Ionian Sea on the west and the Saronic Gulf feeding into the Aegean Sea on the east. Corinth had been destroyed by war in 146 B.C. In St. Paul's day, however, it was a modern, prosperous city, newly constructed by Julius Caesar in 44 B.C., a little over 100 years earlier. A sophisticated, wealthy pagan city, Corinth was St. Paul's most difficult and troublesome church, both in its founding and in its ongoing operation.

While in Corinth, Paul writes 1 & 2 Thessalonians and Galatians (his first epistles).

Assignment

Read: Acts 15: 36 – 18: 28.

Week 8 (September 7, 8)

Lesson #15: 3rd Missionary Journey (Acts 19: 1 - 40)

On the way home from Corinth toward the end of A.D. 52, St. Paul stopped in Ephesus, the major deep-water port on the west coast of Asia Minor; one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire; one of only three cities in the Empire with street lighting at night; and the home of the Temple of Diana, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was a fabulous city, in every way! It was also the “hub” for the Roman Empire’s maritime trade routes, with much traffic from all parts of the Roman world entering and exiting its harbor. Paul immediately saw its potential.

Until now, Paul’s “evangelization strategy” focused on traveling from town-to-town, city-to-city, founding churches. His strategy was effective, but it was not efficient. On his 3rd Missionary Journey, A.D. 54-57, Paul travels to Ephesus . . . and he stays there, letting the people to come to him. Ephesus was St. Paul’s most effective missionary journey, for at its end Luke writes that “*all the inhabitants of the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord, Jews and Greeks alike*” (19: 10).

St. Paul writes 1 & 2 Corinthians from Ephesus in A.D. 54 and Romans in A.D. 57, perhaps his most important epistle.

Lesson #16: St. Paul’s Journey to Jerusalem (Acts 20: 1 – 21: 14)

After three years in Ephesus, St. Paul leaves for Macedonia and travels leisurely to Greece, where he stays for three months. Preparing to leave for home, probably from the port at Cencreae, he learns of an assassination plot and instead travels by land through Macedonia, where he stays in Philippi (with Lydia?) for Passover, and then he goes on to Troas. During the journey Paul develops a deep and dreadful foreboding that he must get to Jerusalem by Pentecost, and that when he does, he will be killed. His companions sail from Troas to Assos, while Paul walks, pondering his options.

His decision made, St. Paul sails from Assos with his companions, past Ephesus to Miletus, where he meets with the leaders of the church at Ephesus and says goodbye to them, encouraging them and saying that he will not be seeing them again. He then sails on to Tyre (in Lebanon of today) and south to Caesarea Maritima, where he prepares to walk the final leg of his journey to Jerusalem . . . and to his fate.

Assignment

Read: Acts 19: 1 – 21: 14.

Week 9 (September 14, 15)

Lesson #17: St. Paul's Arrest in Jerusalem (Acts 21: 15 – 23: 35)

Sure enough, when St. Paul arrives in Jerusalem trouble greets him: word is out among the Jerusalem believers that Paul has been “*teaching all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to abandon Moses and . . . not to circumcise their children or to observe their customary practices*” (21: 21). Never mind that the Jerusalem Council settled these issues eight years earlier. When the Jewish believers spot St. Paul near the Temple, a riot erupts and Paul is nearly torn to pieces, saved only by the quick intervention of the Roman authorities.

Wanting to get to the bottom of the issue, the next day the Roman commander has Paul brought before the Sanhedrin to listen to their charges and to give Paul an opportunity to defend himself. It doesn't go well. Again, a near riot erupts and Paul is escorted to the Roman barracks, where—as a Roman citizen—he is placed under protective custody.

Meanwhile, Paul's nephew learns of an assassination plot forming against Paul. He reports it to the commander, who then transfers Paul from Jerusalem to Caesarea Maritima, with a protective guard of 200 soldiers, 70 cavalry and 200 auxiliaries.

Roman citizenship has its privileges!

Lesson #18: St. Paul at Caesarea (Acts 24: 1 – 26: 32)

St. Paul is *not* in prison at Caesarea; rather, as a Roman citizen Paul is held under protective custody until his case can be adjudicated. Governor Felix (procurator of Judea from A.D. 52-60) orders that Paul should “*have some liberty, and that [the guards] should not prevent any of his friends from caring for his needs*” (24: 23); indeed, Governor Felix “*sent for him very often and conversed with him*” (24: 26).

Two years passed, however (A.D. 58-60), and Festus (procurator of Judea from A.D. 60-62) succeeded Governor Felix. Learning of Paul's plight, Governor Festus orders the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem to Caesarea, where they are to present their case against Paul. Weary of the entire ordeal, St. Paul exercises his right to appeal his case directly to Rome. Festus confers with his attorneys, and he orders that Paul be transferred immediately: “*You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go*” (25: 12).

Again, Roman citizenship has its privileges!

Assignment

Read: Acts 21: 15 – 26: 32.

Week 10 (September 21, 22)

Lesson #19: *The Voyage to Rome (Acts 27: 1 – 28: 31)*

St. Paul sets sail for Rome, accompanied by “*a centurion named Julius of the Cohort Augusta*” (27: 1), who is escorting a group of prisoners, as well. At each stop on the way, Paul is free to go ashore and visit friends. After sailing from Myra in Lycia aboard an Alexandrine ship, Paul and company encounter strong winds, and then are slammed by a “Northeaster,” a hurricane-force winter storm that blows them far off course, into the deep blue of the Mediterranean. Lost at sea, the storm hammers them for fourteen days, seriously damaging the ship and sickening everyone on board. Finally, they spot land and make a dash for it, only to be caught in the surf zone on a sandbar, and the ship is battered to pieces. Two hundred seventy-six men desperately scramble ashore on the island of Malta, their teeth chattering with the cold—and St. Paul is promptly bitten by a poisonous snake!

The people of Malta treat their unexpected guests graciously, however, caring for them through the winter. Three months after their shipwreck on Malta, the survivors board another Alexandrine ship and set sail for Rome.

Once in Rome, St. Paul spends two years (A.D. 60) in his own rented house and he “*received all who came to him, and with complete assurance and without hindrance he proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ*” (28” 30-31).

In Rome St. Paul writes Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon.

Lesson #20: *Epilogue*

Luke ends the *Acts of the Apostles* with St. Paul in Rome, A.D. 60-62, awaiting his hearing before Caesar. What happens afterwards is rather vague, but in Lesson #20 we explore some possibilities, as well as explore St. Paul’s influence on the Church throughout her history.

Assignment

Read: Acts 27: 1 – 28: 31.

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