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Acts of the Apostles: **Background and Commentary**



Written by Robert C. Jones
Acworth, Georgia

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Christian Theology and History Adult Sunday School Courses

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I've always been a strong believer in adult Sunday School classes and Bible studies in our churches. And many churches have quality, Biblically-based adult-focused programs. Unfortunately, just as many churches tend to downplay adult education, focusing on children's education (not a bad thing in itself), or focusing on the needs of the "unchurched", where topics such as church history and theology are often purposely ignored.

Yet there is a strong need for adult education focused on both the Bible and the basic tenets and history of the Faith. Among the reasons:

- Not all adults come from a strong childhood background in the church – adult Sunday School classes/Bible studies may be their first serious introduction to what Christianity is all about
- Christianity (and especially Evangelical Christianity) is under constant attack from the media and popular culture (movies, music, etc.). We need to give fellow Christians the tools to defend the Faith against attack (or to provide a "ready defense" as Peter says in 1 Peter 3:15)
- Even adult Christians that have a strong Biblical background often know little about the origins and history of their Faith

To better meet the needs of adult Christians (both those mature in their Faith, and those just starting out in the "School of Christ"), I've written a series of courses that focus on the history of the Christian Church (including the Jewish roots), as well as the development of doctrine in the Church. The topics represented in these courses are intended to both further the participant's walk in the Faith, as well as serve as a starting point for Christian apologetics.

While the primary purpose of these courses is for use in churches, they also may be useful for High School and College projects, especially the courses focused primarily on historical aspects.

One note: these courses are primarily written from an Evangelical Protestant viewpoint (I come from a Reformed Church background), but I hope I've given ample time to other points of view throughout the various courses.

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Introduction

Acts of the Apostles is the grand and exciting story of what is sometimes referred to as the “primitive church” – the church of the Apostles. Acts is the story of how the views of an obscure Jewish Messianic group spread throughout the Mediterranean and beyond in under two generations. Acts is the story of the two greatest evangelizing Apostles – Peter and Paul.

The *Acts of the Apostles*, along with the *Gospel of Luke*, form one of the great histories of the ancient world. And the author, Luke the Physician, must rate among the great historians of all time.

A note on the format of this course – while I generally follow the typical verse-by-verse format of a Bible commentary, in the discussions of Paul’s missionary journeys I move to a location-based commentary, rather than a verse-based one.

Authority

Unlike, say, Revelation or 2 John/3 John, there appears to have never been any controversy regarding the inclusion of Acts in the New Testament canon. Irenaeus in his c. 180 A.D. *Against Heresies* quoted from Acts 194 times. Acts appears in the mysterious Muratori Canon, a fragmentary list (85 lines) dating to c. 200 A.D., named (after its 18th century discoverer, Lodovico Muratori).

In Eusebius’ history of the church, written c. 325 A.D., he includes Acts as one of the “accepted” books of the New Testament canon:

THE DIVINE SCRIPTURES THAT ARE ACCEPTED AND THOSE THAT ARE NOT.

SINCE we are dealing with this subject it is proper to sum up the writings of the New Testament which have been already mentioned. First then must be put the holy quaternion of the Gospels; **following them the Acts of the Apostles**. (*Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius, Book 3, Chapter 25; emphasis added)

Saint Athanasius includes Acts in his 367 A.D. list of books of the New Testament. The below list is the oldest extant list of books that make up our modern day New Testament:

5. Again it is not tedious to speak of the [books] of the New Testament. These are, the four Gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Afterwards, **the Acts of the Apostles** and Epistles (called Catholic), seven, viz. of James, one; of Peter, two; of John, three; after these, one of Jude. In addition, there are fourteen Epistles of Paul, written in this order. The first, to the Romans; then two to the Corinthians; after these, to the Galatians; next, to the Ephesians; then to the Philippians; then to the Colossians; after these, two to the Thessalonians, and that to the Hebrews; and again, two to Timothy; one to Titus; and lastly, that to Philemon. And besides, the Revelation of John. (*From the thirty-ninth Letter of Holy Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, on the Paschal festival*, emphasis added)

Authorship and date

The author of Acts has always been viewed as Luke the Physician, a companion of Paul on his Missionary journeys (see Col 4:14, 2 Tim 4:11, Philemon 1:24). At least the second part of Acts is probably an eye-witness account. Acts appears to have been the second part of Luke’s great history of the church. Irenaeus, in his c. 180 A.D. *Against Heresies*, establishes Luke as the author of the Gospel carrying his name, and also establishes Luke as a companion of Paul:

"Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him. Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia." (*Against Heresies*, Irenaeus, Book 3, Chapter 1)

Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History* says this of Luke:

But Luke, who was of Antiochian parentage and a physician by profession, and who was especially intimate with Paul and well acquainted with the rest of the Apostles, has left us, in two inspired books, proofs of that spiritual healing art which he learned from them. One of these books is the Gospel, which he testifies that he wrote as those who were from the beginning eye witnesses and ministers of the word delivered unto him, all of whom, as he says, he followed accurately from the first. The other book is the Acts of the Apostles which he composed not from the accounts of others, but from what he had seen himself. And they say that Paul meant to refer to Luke's Gospel wherever, as if speaking of some gospel of his own, he used the words, "according to my Gospel." (Eusebius, Book 3, Chapter 4)

As to Luke's death, *Martyrs Mirror* states:

Respecting his end, some write that, while preaching in Greece, he was hanged by the ungodly to a green olive tree; others relate that he was in the eighty-fourth year of his age, at the time of his death.

Acts makes no mention of the Destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., so it was probably written before then. Since it doesn't refer to the death of Paul, it was probably written before 65/66 A.D., perhaps in the early 60s A.D.

Quiz

1. T/F There was great controversy in the early church over whether the Acts of the Apostles should be included in the new Testament canon
2. T/F Acts records the death of several of the Apostles
3. T/F The first great council of the Christian Church, the Jerusalem Council, is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles
4. T/F Paul of Tarsus was a follower of Jesus while Jesus was incarnate on earth
5. T/F The first apostle to propose a ministry to the Gentiles was Paul
6. T/F While Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea and Rome, he was sorely mistreated by his Roman captors
7. T/F While Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea, he tried to bribe the Roman governor to be released
8. T/F Paul's Road to Damascus experience is recounted once in Acts
9. T/F The Apostle who makes the final decision regarding the ministry to the Gentiles at the Jerusalem Council is Peter
10. T/F Paul went on all three of his missionary journeys with Barnabas

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of Acts describes the somewhat chaotic time for the Apostles immediately before and after the Ascension of Christ.

Verse 1: The basis for the assumption that the same author wrote both the *Gospel of Luke* and *Acts of the Apostles* can be seen by comparing the third verse of Luke with the first verse of Acts:

Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me 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 1:3-4, NIV; emphasis added)

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach... (Acts 1:1, NIV; emphasis added)

Note that both books are addressed to “Theophilus”, a figure who is not mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament (he was probably a gentile convert of Paul, but that is all we know about him). Also, note that in Acts 1:1, the author refers to “my former book”.

Verse 3: Background on the period following the resurrection, but before the ascension.

Verses 4-8: Jesus tells them to wait in Jerusalem, where they will be baptized by the Holy Spirit. The power they receive from this baptism will allow them to “be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” “To the ends of the earth” is significant, because it authorizes the spreading of the good news beyond the Jewish community to Gentiles.

Verse 9: A description of the Ascension.

Verses 10-11: Two “men dressed in white” (probably angels), promise the Apostles that Christ will return some day the same way he ascended. Compare with John 20: 10-13.

Verses 12-14: An explicit list of the key members of the earliest Christian Church! Present were the Apostles, an unspecified number of his female followers, and his mother and brothers, assumedly including James the Just who would later be (according to Eusebius) the first bishop of Jerusalem:

Those present were Peter, John, James and Andrew; Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew; James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers. (Acts 1:12-14, NIV)

Verses 15-17: Even before Pentecost, Peter assumes a leadership position in the church. Note that the Christian Church, which numbers about 2 billion members today, had 120 members in c. 30 A.D.!

Verses 18-20: The fate of Judas is described (compare with Matthew 27:3-10). Peter discusses the necessity of replacing Judas as one of the Twelve.

Verses 21-22: Peter establishes the criteria for becoming one of the Twelve – the replacement must have been “with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us.” This criteria effectively made it impossible for later Apostles (Barnabas, Paul, Andronicus, Junias) to be considered in the “top tier” of the Apostles. This may have led to some of the later animosity between Paul and the Twelve.

Verses 23-26: Matthias is chosen as the replacement for Judas Iscariot, using a two-fold mechanism – the Apostles nominate two men (the first church nominating committee!), but leave the final choice to Divine intervention by choosing lots. Some Amish and Mennonites still use this two-fold mechanism today for choosing elders.

One could make the case that this procedure should not have happened prior to the baptism of the Holy Spirit, promised by Jesus. After all, Jesus had told the Apostles to go to Jerusalem and wait. Perhaps James the Just (the brother of Jesus) or Paul was meant to be the Twelfth Apostle. Matthias is never mentioned again in Acts or anywhere else in the New Testament.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 is one of the most important chapters in Acts. It starts out with a description of the Pentecost, and goes on to chronicle the first sermon in the history of the Christian church.

Verses 1-4: A glorious description of the Pentecost!



When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. (Acts 2:1-4, NIV)

As a result of this baptism of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles are able to speak in other languages. This allows the crowds to hear the Apostles in their own tongues.

Acts 2: 5-12: The Pentecost “just happened” to occur at a time when Jerusalem was filled with “God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven”. The gathered crowd heard the sound of the Pentecost, and then heard the Apostles speaking to them such that “each of us hears them in his own native language”. Most of the crowd views this as a miracle, and makes them willing to listen to what the Apostles have to say...

Acts 2:13: ...however, some in the crowd accused the Apostles of being drunk.

Acts 2: 14-40: Peter preaches the first sermon in the history of the Christian Church. He begins by tying the event that just happened to the Hebrew scriptures, book of Joel (“In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people”...) He then ties the death and resurrection of Jesus to the Old Testament prophesy of David:



¹ Library of Congress, LAMB, no. 1656 (B size) [P&P]

“Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will live in hope, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay.” (Psalm 16:9-10, NIV)

Peter then delivers the heart of Christian theology:

Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ [Messiah]. (Acts 2:36, NIV)

Peter then exhorts the crowd to be baptized, and assures them that “The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call” (a little predestination lingo, there).

Verse 41: In the first altar call in the history of the church, 3,000 people convert to what will later be called Christianity.

Verses 42-47: These verses describe how the early Christians worshipped and lived, including these points:

- They devoted themselves to teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer
- The Apostles performed many wonders and miraculous signs (as Jesus had promised that they’d be able to do)
- All believers held everything in common (similar to the Essenes), and sold their possessions to give to the poor
- They met in the Temple courts, and ate in each others’ homes
- They continued to increase in number

This aforementioned communal worship pattern existed only in the primitive Jerusalem church. There is no evidence that it ever appeared in the Gentile church, probably because the Gentile church realized that if they sold off all of their possessions and means for generating wealth, they wouldn’t have any money for the church to survive on in the future. (The early Jerusalem church believed that Christ’s return was imminent; thus, they probably weren’t focused on a long term “business plan” for the church!) However, this communal form of worship was a model followed by early monastics such as St. Antony and St. Benedict.

Chapter 3

In Chapter 3, Peter and John perform a miracle by healing a man that was crippled from birth. As the crowd forms to view the aftermath of this miracle, Peter turns it into a teaching moment.



“Saints Peter and John curing the sick”²

² Library of Congress LC-DIG-ppmsca-18665

Verses 12-16: After castigating the crowd for handing Jesus over to be killed, Peter identifies how the man was healed – not through some power of Peter or John, but through faith in Jesus Christ. Note how early this became a central tenet of Christianity.

Verses 17-26: Even though the crowd is guilty of the death of the messiah, there is still time to “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord”. In verse 21, Peter addresses what (at the time) was the tricky question of when Christ would return – “He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets”. The passages end with Peter linking Christ with the Old Testament prophecies of Moses and Samuel.

Chapter 4

In Chapter 4, Peter and John are arrested and questioned by the Sanhedrin for the first time. (The Sanhedrin had probably figured that they’d taken care of this Jesus thing when they set in motion the series of events that would lead to the crucifixion of Jesus; yet here were his followers stirring up “more trouble”!)

Verse 4: Although jailed by the Sanhedrin, the preaching of Peter and John continues to gain followers to the cause, with 5,000 Christians in existence at this time.

Verses 5-7: Peter and John are questioned by the same crew that had earlier questioned Jesus, including Annas and Caiaphas. They ask him, “By what power or what name did you do this?” [heal the crippled man].

Verses 8-11: Peter, “filled with the Holy Spirit”, tells the Sanhedrin that “It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.” Peter goes on to quote the famous verses from Psalm 118:22, “the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.” This, essentially, was an accusation of murder against the Sanhedrin.

Verse 12: The Christian concept of exclusivity of salvation through Christ was present in the earliest days of the church.

Verses 13-17: The Sanhedrin realizes that the miracle actually took place, and that Peter and John were “unschooled, ordinary men”. This latter point is one that helped give early Christianity validity in many people’s eyes – how else could a movement that started out with a group of Galilean fisherman spread so fast and become so prominent, unless by divine intervention?

Verses 18-22: The Sanhedrin admonish Peter and John against further preaching, but Peter replies that “we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

Verses 23-31: After Peter tells the other followers about the threats made to them by the Sanhedrin, the followers pray to God, and are filled (by the Holy Spirit) with an even greater dedication to spread the good news.

Verse 32-35: A further description of the communal nature of the early church, as well as their charitable efforts. (See commentary on Chapter 2:42-47).

Verse 36-37: Barnabas (described as an apostle in Acts 14:14) makes his first appearance to Acts. We learn that his given name is Joseph, he is a Levite from Cyprus, and that the name Barnabas means “Son of Encouragement”.

Barnabas would become an early mentor and sponsor of Paul, introducing him to the Apostles in Jerusalem after Paul’s conversion. Barnabas and Paul spent at least a year in Antioch (Syria), where the term “Christian” was first used. Later, Barnabas would accompany Paul on his first missionary journey, and seems to have been in charge during at least some parts of the journey. He must have been a large man, because in Lystra, the people mistook him for Zeus!

Barnabas and Paul were key participants in the Jerusalem Council described in Acts 15. They represented the view that the Gentiles did not have to be circumcised in order to be saved.

Later, Barnabas and Paul would part company in a dispute over John Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. John Mark had “deserted them in Pamphylia” according to Paul, and Paul did not want him to accompany them on his second missionary journey. It was a “sharp disagreement”, and Paul chose Silas instead of Barnabas to go with him on his second missionary journey.

Chapter 5

Verses 1-10: The story of Ananias and Sapphira is one of the more difficult ones in the New Testament. While it is sometimes explained that Ananias and Sapphira died because they didn’t give everything they owned to the church, Peter gives us two clues that this isn’t the real reason. In the case of Ananias, Peter says that Ananias has “lied to the Holy Spirit”; in the case of Sapphira, Peter asks her how she could “agree to test the Spirit of the Lord”. The issue here is probably blasphemy of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:31-32, Mark 3:29, Luke 12:10), not how much Ananias and Sapphira decided to put in the collection plate that morning.



The death of Ananias³

Verses 11-16: The deaths of Ananias and Sapphira inspired fear and awe in the people. More and more people joined the church, and more and more people came to the Apostles (especially Peter) for healing.

Verses 17-26: Because of the success of their preaching, the Apostles are arrested and jailed by the Sanhedrin (this would be the second arrest of Peter and John in a short time). The Apostles are rescued from prison by divine intervention – “an angel of the Lord”, and return to preaching.

³ Library of Congress LC-DIG-ppmsca-18649

Verses 27-32: Once again the Apostles are brought before the Sanhedrin and questioned and berated. Once again, Peter takes a leadership role, replying, “We must obey God rather than men!”

Verse 30 has an interesting parallel in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Verse 30 makes reference to Jesus “whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.” In a seeming messianic reference in the Dead Sea Scroll 4Q541, it states “do not afflict the weak by wasting or hanging...[Let] not the nail approach him.”

4Q541 “He will atone for all the children of his generation, and he will be sent to all the children of his [pe]ople. His word is like a word of heaven, and his teaching is in accordance with the will of God. His eternal sun will shine, and his light will be kindled in all the corners of the earth, and it will shine in the darkness. Then the darkness will pass away [fr]om the earth, and thick darkness from the dry land...

They will speak many words against him, and they will invent many [lie]s and fictions against him and speak shameful things about him. Evil will overthrow his generation...His situation will be one of lying and violence [and] the people will go astray in his days, and be confounded...

...and do not afflict the weak by wasting or hanging...[Let] not the nail approach him...” (Translation from *The Suffering Servant at Qumran*, John J. Collins, Bible Review, Dec. 1993; emphasis added)

Verses 33-39: We sometimes assume that all Pharisees were against Jesus and his followers, but this is not entirely true. At one point in Luke, the Pharisees warn Jesus that Herod wants to kill him. A prominent Pharisee on the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus, is a follower of Jesus. Acts 15 records that there were Pharisees among the early Christian Church. And, of course, Paul announces on several occasions with some pride that he was trained as a Pharisee. In the reference here, the Apostles are released from prison by the intervention of the Pharisee Gamaliel, under whom Paul studied. Gamaliel, along with Rabbi Hillel, is often considered to be the founder of Rabbinical Judaism.

Chapter 6

In this chapter, the first deacons in the church are appointed.

Verse 1: Verse 1 shows that divisions were already creeping into the nascent church (and Acts makes no attempt to whitewash these divisions). In this case, the divisions are between the Grecian Jews (Hellenized Jews) and the Hebraic Jews, over the distribution of alms to widows.

Verses 2-4: The Apostles decide to appoint a committee of believers to look after the distribution of alms. The criteria for this new position (later to be called “deacon”) is to be “known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom”.

Verse 5: The first deacons in the church are appointed: “Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip [probably not Philip the apostle], Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism”.

Verse 6: The tradition of ordaining by the laying on of hands starts here.

Verse 7: Christianity continues to spread, in this case to Jewish priests.

Verses 8-15: False charges are brought against Stephen (assumedly the same Stephen that was just appointed deacon) by some Grecian Jews. Like Jesus, he is seized and brought before the Sanhedrin; like

Jesus, false witnesses are brought against him; and like Jesus, he is accused of blasphemy because “we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place [the Temple] and change the customs Moses handed down to us.” This would be the third time in a short (unspecified) period that an official of the nascent Christian church would be brought before the Sanhedrin for questioning. The Sanhedrin must have been disconcerted by Stephen, because “they saw that his face was like the face of an angel”. These pesky Christians just weren’t going to go away quietly!

Chapter 7

Verses 1-53: Stephen responds to his questioning by the Sanhedrin by lecturing them on Jewish history, starting with Abraham, and progressing through David and Solomon. He points out two instances where the people and their elders reject holy men favored by God – Joseph and Moses. He ends his dissertation by accusing the Sanhedrin of doing the same thing:

⁵¹“You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! ⁵²Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—⁵³you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it.” (Acts 7:51-53, NIV)

Verses 54-60: Stephen has a heavenly vision where he sees “the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God”. Stephen is then dragged out of the city and illegally stoned (only the Romans had the legal right to order a man put to death). Stephen’s final words, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” and “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” are similar to the words of Jesus on the cross.



Stoning of Stephen, from *Martyrs Mirror*

In verse 58, the first reference in Acts to Saul/Paul is made - “Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.” We discover in Chapter 8 that Saul (at least) approves of the stoning, and possibly instigated it.

Stephen is considered the first martyr in the history of the church. According the *Martyr’s Mirror*, the stoning occurred 4 years after the ascension of Christ:

Such was the end of this upright man Stephen, to whom the honor of Jesus Christ was dearer than his own life. It is stated to have taken place in the year thirty-four after the birth of Christ, in the nineteenth year of the reign of Tiberius, which was the thirty-eighth year of his age. It happened in the seventh year after the baptism of Christ.

Chapter 8

Verses 1-3: Here we are introduced to the idea of one Saul as a persecutor of the church. Also, we find out that many of the Jerusalem Christians have been geographically scattered as part of the persecution. However, like seeds on the wind, the scattering results in Christianity being spread to new areas.

Verses 4-8: Philip (probably the apostle) preaches in Samaria, and attracts people to the Word through healings and exorcisms.

Verses 9-24: Simon the Magician (or Sorcerer) is an interesting case. According to the text, Simon was already a noted magician in Samaria where Philip was preaching. At least at the beginning, his interest in Christianity seems authentic (verse 13). However, in verses 18/19, Simon does the unthinkable – he offers money to Peter and John to “Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” At this point, Peter essentially throws him out of the movement.

The early church fathers record that Simon Magus went on to found Gnosticism, the 1st and 2nd century A. D. Christian heresy. Eusebius records the tradition that Peter later fought against the heresy of Simon Magus in Rome:

For immediately, during the reign of Claudius, the all-good and gracious Providence, which watches over all things, led Peter, that strongest and greatest of the Apostles, and the one who on account of his virtue was the speaker for all the others, to Rome against this great corrupter of life [Simon Magus]. He like a noble commander of God, clad in divine armor, carried the costly merchandise of the light of the understanding from the East to those who dwelt in the West, proclaiming the light itself, and the word which brings salvation to souls, and preaching the kingdom of heaven. (Eusebius, Book 2, Chapter 14)

The *Acts Of The Holy Apostles Peter And Paul* describes the battle in Rome between Paul (and Peter) and Simon the Magician. The battle eventually plays out in front of Nero, and all three (Peter, Paul, Simon) end up dying.

In verses 14-17, we discover that 1) it is possible to receive baptism by water without receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit and 2) baptism of the Holy Spirit could be done by the Apostles (Peter and John in this case) by the laying on of hands.

Verse 25: Chapter 8 is when full-scale conversions of non-Jews start, with heavyweights Peter, Paul and Philip all preaching in Samaria.

Verses 26-40: This movement to convert non-Jews (Gentiles) continues when Philip baptizes an “Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians.” However, note that the eunuch was already a seeker – he was reading the book of Isaiah when Philip came upon him. Even the Apostles could only convert those that the Holy Spirit had already prepared for conversion.

After the baptism of the eunuch, the chapter ends with a seeming miracle: the “Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away”. Whether this is meant to be some sort of teleportation, or Philip simply left the area at the direction of the Spirit is unclear. Later apocryphal writings on the Apostles certainly interpreted this as the former, as the teleportation device appears in several apocryphal “Acts of the Apostles”.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 contains two vitally important instances in the early church – the conversion of Saul (Paul), and Peter raising Tabitha from the dead.⁴

The journey of Paul from being a great persecutor of Christians to being their most staunch evangelist and supporter happened one day on the road to Damascus, Syria, where Paul had been sent by the Jerusalem high priests to persecute the nascent Christian congregation there. The story of Paul's conversion is considered so important that it is repeated no less than three times in Acts! (Acts 9, 22, 26)

Verses 1-2: Paul continues his assault on the early church. We find an early name for the nascent Christian movement in verse 2 – “the Way”.

Verses 3-8: The first of three descriptions of Saul's “road to Damascus” conversion. Note these points:

- Saul actually talks to Jesus (although he doesn't see him)
- The people with Saul hear the sound, but also don't actually see anything
- Saul is blinded by the experience for three days (photo to right: The Conversion of Paul⁵)



Verses 10-16: Jesus appears to a Christian in Damascus named Ananias. Christ orders Ananias to go to Paul, and restore his sight by the laying on of hands. Ananias is hesitant, knowing Paul's reputation as a persecutor of the church. Christ replies with his plan for Paul, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

Verses 17-22: Ananias lays his hands on Paul, and heals his blindness. Assumedly he also baptizes Paul by the Holy Spirit. Paul then receives (assumedly) the water baptism. Saul then immediately begins “to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.”

Verses 23-24: Some Jews conspire to kill Saul, but he is eventually saved by his followers.

Verses 26-30: Saul goes to Jerusalem, but the disciples are afraid of him. Barnabas (introduced in Chapter 4) becomes his spokesman and mentor. Saul begins to preach to the Grecian Jews, but once again, there is a plot to murder him. He escapes to Tarsus (his home town).

Verses 32-43: The chapter now turns its attention to Peter, who is called to Joppa after a believer named Tabitha (Aramaic) or Dorcas (Greek, meaning “gazelle”) has died. Peter raises her from the dead after praying by her bedside. As a result, Peter is able to make many converts in Joppa.

⁴ My vote for the 3 most important events in the pre-Nicene church (in chronological order): 1) Pentecost 2) Saul's conversion 3) the conversion of Constantine

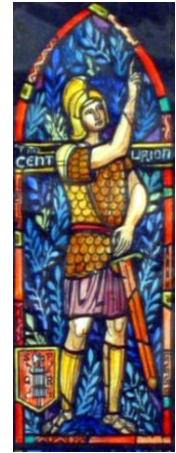
⁵ LOC LAMB, no. 1520 (B size) [P&P]

Chapter 10

While the Word had spread to non-Jews before this chapter (the Ethiopian eunuch; the Samaritans), it is in this chapter that the apostle Peter enthusiastically accepts the inclusion of Gentiles into the ranks of the early church, after receiving a vision from God.

Verses 1-8: A Roman Centurion (about as Gentile as you could get in 1st Century A.D.) named Cornelius and his family are “God-fearing”, which is a label typically applied to Gentiles who believe in the God of the Jews. Cornelius has a vision from an angel of the Lord, and he is told to send for a man named Simon Peter in Joppa.

Verses 9-16: Peter, too, has a vision from God, in which he sees “all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air.” Peter is instructed to “kill and eat” in the vision, but Peter initially resists, seemingly falling back on Jewish food laws – “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean”. The voice in the vision replies, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” This last phrase is the key one. It seemingly rejects the old covenant (Jewish Levitical Law), and is later interpreted by Peter to mean that it is OK to spread the Word to Gentiles. (Photo⁶)



Verses 17-26: While Peter is still pondering the meaning of the vision, he is told by the Spirit to greet the three men sent by Cornelius. The next day they journey to the house of Cornelius. Cornelius falls at his feet in reverence, but Peter replies, “Stand up, I am only a man myself.” Paul will later run into similar situations where he is worshipped as if he was God himself.

Verses 27-29: Peter tells them that under Jewish law, a Jew should not associate with a Gentile. However, in this case it is OK because “God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean.” Here we discover how Peter interpreted the vision that he had the day before.

Verses 34-43: Peter gives rousing support to the desirability of preaching the Word to everyone – not just to Jews. Verse 39 – another reference to Jesus being hung on a tree. See commentary on Chapter 5.

Verses 44-48: After hearing Peter speak, the Holy Spirit came upon everyone in the room, proving once and for all that the Word is for all people, not just Jews. Proof of their receiving the Spirit was their ability to speak in tongues, and their praising of God. Peter seals the deal on preaching to the Gentiles by saying, “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” The chapter ends with Cornelius and his family receiving the water baptism.

Chapter 11

Verses 1-18: Peter returns to Jerusalem, and is criticized by some of the believers for eating in the house of a Gentile. Peter tells the story we have already seen in Chapter 10, but adds:

¹⁵“As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. ¹⁶Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?” (Acts 11:15-17, NIV)

⁶ Library of Congress LAMB, no. 1332 (AA size) [P&P]

The believers in Jerusalem accept his explanation, and agree that it is acceptable to spread the Word to the Gentiles.

Verses 19-21: Believers from Cyprus and Cyrene go to Antioch, and preach to the Greeks (Gentiles) there.

Verses 22-24: The elders in Jerusalem send Barnabas to Antioch to assist with the conversion efforts there.

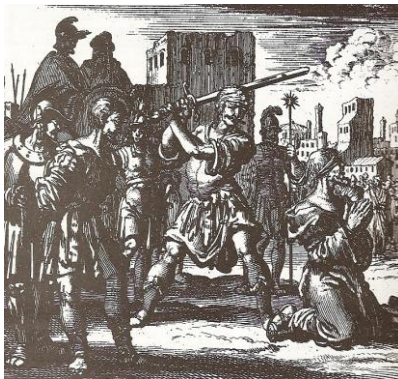
Verses 25-26: Barnabas brings Paul to Antioch, and the two of them preach in Antioch for a year. Note the important passage that says that followers of the Word were first called “Christians” in Antioch. Two thousand years later, “Christians” remains the primary nomenclature for the faith.

Verses 27-30: A prophet named Agabus comes to Antioch and predicts through the Spirit that there will be a severe famine throughout the Roman world. Alms are taken up by the disciples in Antioch, and sent through Barnabas and Saul to Judea.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 contains the only recorded death of one of the Apostles (except for Judas Iscariot) in the New Testament.

Verses 1-2: James, son of Zebedee, and one of the “inner circle” of the Apostles, is put to death by sword by Herod Agrippa, the grandson of Herod the Great.



The death of James, son of Zebedee (*Martyr's Mirror*)

Verses 3-5: As part of a general anti-Christian movement, Peter is arrested (for at least the third time), and imprisoned.

Verses 6-11: Peter is rescued by “an angel of the Lord”, who leads him past the guards and outside the prison. Peter doesn’t realize that it actually happened until it is over (thinking it was a vision or dream).

Verses 12-15: Peter goes to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark (author of the Gospel of Mark). A group of believers are there praying for Peter’s freedom. The servant girl tells them that Peter is at the door. They don’t believe her, and reply “It must be his angel.” This passage is sometimes used as proof of the concept of a “guardian angel” for each of us.

Verses 16-17: Peter is finally greeted by the believers in Mary's house and he tells them the story of the rescue. "Tell James and the brothers about this", Peter says, indicating the prominence of James the Just (brother of Jesus) in the Jerusalem church (it can't be referring to James, son of Zebedee, because he is already dead at this point.)

Verses 18-23: Herod Agrippa orders the guards of Peter to be executed. Later, he is struck down and killed by an angel of the Lord:

"...because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died."

Verse 24: Against all adversity, the Christian movement continues to grow.

Verse 25: Barnabas and Saul complete their mission to Jerusalem and depart, with John Mark accompanying them. John Mark will also accompany them at the beginning of Paul's first missionary journey.

Chapters 13-14

Chapters 13-14 record Paul's first missionary journey, and sets the basic pattern for the subsequent journeys. The three missionary journeys of Paul (which combined, were over 6,000 miles in length!) effectively spread the Word of Christianity throughout the Greco-Roman world.

Paul followed a general pattern when he'd go into a new town. First, he'd preach at the local Jewish synagogue – often to attract Gentile "God-fearers", who believed in the God of Abraham, but hadn't accepted the rigors of Mosaic Law. Next, he would often try to create small churches in the homes of new followers (Lydia and her household, for example, are baptized in Lydia's home). Then in some instances, he would preach in more public arenas (Mars Hill in Athens, for example).



Missionary journeys of Paul (Classic Maps, Ages Software)

On this 1st missionary journey, Barnabas seems to be in the elder statesman role, while Saul is the new-kid-on-the-block, over-eager assistant. Note Paul's heavy use of the Hebrew Scriptures when he is preaching to a primarily Jewish audience.

| 1st Missionary Journey c. 46-48 A.D. (with Barnabas) | | |
|--|--|-----------------|
| Reference | Notes | Verse(s) |
| Antioch (Syria), Selucia to Salamis (Cyprus) | Led by the Holy Sprit | Acts 13:1-3 |
| On Cyprus to Paphos | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sorcerer Bar-Jesus blinded by Paul • 13:9 – Saul becomes Paul | Acts 13:6-12 |
| Perga in Pamphilia | John Mark leaves. This will later cause a rift between Barnabas and Paul | Acts 13:13 |
| Antioch in Pisidia | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ In modern-day Turkey ▪ Paul defends his ministry to the Gentiles in verses 46-48, which angers some local Jews ▪ Paul & Barnabas expelled from the region. They leave after they “shook the dust from their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium.” | Acts 13:14-50 |
| Iconium | Plot to stone Paul & Barnabas | Acts 13:51-14:5 |
| Lystra | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Paul heals a crippled man (his first recorded healing) ▪ Barnabas is mistaken for Zeus (probably because of his size) and Paul is mistaken for Hermes (Hermes was a “messenger of the gods”). Paul replies “We too are only men, human like you.” ▪ Paul is stoned and left for dead | Acts 14:6-20 |
| Derbe | Paul & Barnabas “won a large number of disciples” here | Acts 14:20-21 |

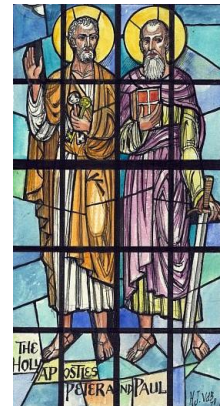
| 1 st Missionary Journey c. 46-48 A.D. (with Barnabas) | | |
|--|--|---------------|
| Reference | Notes | Verse(s) |
| Lystra, Iconium, Antioch | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elders are appointed in the local churches. This pattern would continue through the rest of Paul's ministry. In time, many of those elders became bishops in the early church. | Acts 14:21-23 |
| Pisidia, Pamphylia, then Perga | | Acts 14:24-25 |
| Attalia | | Acts 14:25-26 |
| Antioch (Syria) | | Acts 14:26-28 |

Chapter 15

The first half of this key chapter describes the first Council in the history of the Christian Church. The second half describes the start of Paul's 2nd missionary journey.

Verses 1-5: Some Jewish believers disagree with Paul and Barnabas' ministry to the gentiles, preaching that you had to be circumcised to be saved (probably shorthand for following Mosaic Law). A council in Jerusalem is called. Today, we often refer to this council as the "Jerusalem Council".

Verses 6-11: Peter, an apostle who had sometimes preached to Gentiles himself, strongly defends Paul and Barnabas to the Council. He uses the argument that since Gentiles can receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit, they should be considered no different than Jewish converts to Christianity. He concludes with what would later become a central tenet in Protestantism, "We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are" (as opposed to salvation through works). (Photo: "The Holy Apostles Peter and Paul"⁷)



Verse 12: Paul and Barnabas describe their ministry to the Gentiles.

Verses 13-21: James the Just, the brother of Jesus, makes the final ruling at the Council. This would seem to indicate that James was the leader of the Jerusalem church, agreeing with Eusebius that James was the "first Bishop of Jerusalem". James rules in favor of Paul and Barnabas (and Peter), and states "we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God". While he includes a sop to the Jews that protested against Paul and Barnabas in the first place ("telling them [Gentiles] to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood"), his ruling essentially ensures the future growth of the church through the Gentiles, who are freed from following Mosaic Law. This is a key moment in the life of the early church. It is one of the reasons that there are 2,000,000,000 Christians in the world in 2009.

⁷ Library of Congress LC-DIG-ppmsca-17027

Verses 22-29: The Council decides to send two men, Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, back to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas to confirm what the Council has decided. They are given a letter written by James the Just that contains the Council's ruling. In the letter, James refers to Barnabas and Paul as "men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ".

Verses 36-41: Paul suggests to Barnabas that they retrace the route of their earlier missionary journey, to see how the churches were faring. Barnabas wants to take John Mark with them again, but Paul disagrees, saying that John Mark had "deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work." The disagreement leads to a (final) split between Paul and Barnabas. Barnabas leaves for Cyprus with John Mark, and Paul embarks on his 2nd missionary journey, taking Silas as his associate.

From this point on, Acts is the story of Paul.

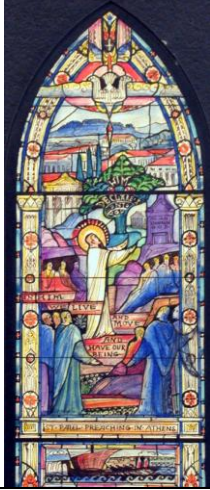

Chapter 16-18

Chapters 16-18 describe Paul's 2nd missionary journey.

| 2nd Missionary Journey c. 49-52 (with Silas) | | |
|--|--|---------------|
| Reference | Notes | Verse(s) |
| Syria and Cilicia | | Acts 15:41 |
| Derbe and Lystra | Timothy, "whose mother was a Jewess and a believer, but whose father was a Greek", joins Paul | Acts 16:1-5 |
| Phrygia and Galatia | | Acts 16:6 |
| Near Mysia, Bithynia | Prevented from entering by the Spirit of Jesus | Acts 16:7 |
| Troas, Samothrace, Neapolis | Paul has a dream in Troas that leads him to Macedonia | Acts 16:8-11 |
| Philippi | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lydia, "a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira" and her household baptized by Paul Paul exorcises a demon from a slave girl who could predict the future Paul and Silas imprisoned on the instigation of the angry owners of the slave girl; an earthquake shakes the foundations of the jail – Paul and Silas stay, and convert (and baptize) the jailer Paul plays the "I'm a Roman citizen" card, and the local magistrates come to release Paul | Acts 16:12-40 |

| 2nd Missionary Journey c. 49-52 (with Silas) | | |
|--|--|---------------|
| Reference | Notes | Verse(s) |
| | <p>and Silas personally</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paul and Silas meet with the believers at Lydia's house before leaving the city | |
| Through Amphipolis and Apollonia to Thessalonica | Paul's preaching converts "a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women", but incites mob violence from jealous Jews | Acts 17:1-9 |
| Berea | In Berea, Paul's preaching in the local synagogue is more successful, and "Many of the Jews believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men" | Acts 17:10-13 |
| Athens | <p>Paul debates with Stoics and Epicureans at the Areopagus (Mars Hill), telling them that he knows who the God is that has the altar with the inscription TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.</p> <p>This is a good example of Paul's market strategy, which was "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews... To those not having the law I became like one not having the law...so as to win those not having the law."</p> <p>Paul had some success in his debate on Mars Hill - "A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others."</p> | Acts 17:14-34 |
| Corinth | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paul links up with Priscilla and Aquila, a married couple mentioned 6 times in the New Testament (with Priscilla mentioned first 4 of those times) | Acts 18:1-17 |

| 2nd Missionary Journey c. 49-52 (with Silas) | | |
|--|--|---------------|
| Reference | Notes | Verse(s) |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paul is finally fed up with how he is treated by the Jews – “Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.” Paul works as a tent-maker, and stays for 1.5 years Paul receives encouraging words from Christ in a vision | |
| Cenchrea | Paul the Nazorite? Cutting his hair because of a vow that he made may be an indication that he had reached the end of a two-year commitment to being a Nazorite (during the “term” of being a Nazorite, one couldn’t cut ones hair or drink fermented drinks). | Acts 18:18 |
| Ephesus | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paul leaves Priscilla and Aquila, who accompanied him from Corinth We’re introduced to “a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, [who] came to Ephesus”. Paul refers to him in 1 Corinthians 3:6 – “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.” | Acts 18:19-21 |
| Caesarea, Jerusalem, & Antioch (Syria) | | Acts 18:22 |

| | |
|---|--|
|  |  |
| Paul preaching on Mars Hill ⁸ | Modern photo of the steps to Mars Hill (photo by Debra Kasson-Jones) |

Chapters 19-21

Chapters 19-21 describe Paul's 3rd missionary journey.

| 3rd Missionary Journey c. 53-57 A.D. | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|--------------|
| Reference | Notes | Verse(s) |
| Galatia and Phrygia | | Acts 18:23 |
| Ephesus | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paul meets 12 disciples that have received John's Baptism, but not the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Paul (presumably) administers the water baptism, and then baptizes them in the Holy Spirit by laying hands on them – "and they spoke in tongues and prophesied". 2 year stay Paul heals the sick, and performs "extraordinary miracles" Many sorcerers publicly burn their scrolls, since they were in fear of God | Acts 19:1-41 |
| Macedonia | Paul stays in Greece for 3 months | Acts 20:1-2 |
| Greece, Macedo- | Paul has many traveling | Acts 20:3-6 |

⁸ Library of Congress LAMB, no. 1239 (AA size) [P&P]

| 3rd Missionary Journey c. 53-57 A.D. | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|---------------|
| Reference | Notes | Verse(s) |
| nia, Philippi | companions, including Timothy | |
| Troas | Paul raises Eutychus from the dead, after Paul “talked on and on” into the night (the poor boy fell asleep, and fell from a three-story window!) This act puts Paul in very rare company, including Christ and Peter. After this, no one could question Paul’s <i>bonafides</i> as a follower of Jesus. | Acts 20:6-12 |
| Assos | In verse 13, notice the use of the word “we” – presumably referring to Luke and his associates | Acts 20:13-14 |
| Mitylene, Kios, Samos, Miletus | Paul calls the Ephesian elders to Miletus and says his farewells. Paul notes that in every city, the “Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me”. In verse 34, Paul mentions that he earned his own living among the Ephesians. | Acts 20:14-38 |
| Cos, Rhodes, Patara | | Acts 21:1-2 |
| Tyre | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paul lands at Tyre, and is warned by the disciples there (through the Holy Spirit) not to go to Jerusalem. Verse 5 mentions that many of the disciples were married. | Acts 21:3-6 |
| Ptolemais | | Acts 21:7 |
| Caesarea | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paul stays with Philip the evangelist (is this the apostle or the deacon? Or yet another Philip?) Philip had four daughters who prophesied, showing that 1) there was still prophecy at this period of the church and 2) women could be prophets. Paul is warned by Agabus (through the Holy | Acts 21:9-15 |

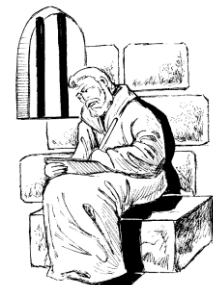
| 3rd Missionary Journey c. 53-57 A.D. | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|---------------|
| Reference | Notes | Verse(s) |
| | Spirit) not to go to Jerusalem. Paul decides to go anyway, noting "The Lord's will be done". | |
| Jerusalem | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paul arrives in Jerusalem and reports - "James, and all the elders were present" The old controversy of Paul's ministry to the Gentiles is opened once again; Paul takes part in a purification ritual to show that his is still, indeed, a Jew. Some Jews from Ephesus stir up the crowd against Paul. The crowd tries to kill him, but Paul is saved by Roman troops (some irony there!) As Paul is about to go into the barracks of the soldiers, he is asked if he is an Egyptian terrorist. Paul replies, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city." Paul then addresses the crowd. | Acts 21:16-25 |

The arrest and trials of Paul

The rest of Acts is about the arrest and various trials/interrogations that Paul would go through for the next 4 years of his life. Before I do a chapter/verse commentary, the overview below is provided for context.

After the completion of Paul's three missionary journeys, the next four years of Paul's life would be spent primarily in jail. First, Paul spent two years in jail in Caesarea under the control of Roman procurators Felix and Festus. Later, he would spend two years in a Roman jail, and write some of his most famous letters, including Colossians and Ephesians.

Paul was arrested in Jerusalem, where he was accused by "some Jews from the province of Asia" of defiling the temple by bringing Greeks (Gentiles) into it. While he briefly appeared before the Sanhedrin (where he skillfully separated the Pharisees and Sadducees by bringing up the doctrine of resurrection of the dead), Paul used his Roman citizenship to claim Roman protection. He was tried before Felix, and seemed to successfully refute the



charge of defiling the Temple. However, he would remain in a Roman jail in Caesarea for two years, assumedly as a sop from Felix to the Sanhedrin.

The new procurator, Festus, was ready to try the case again, but Paul balked when Festus wanted him to return to Jerusalem for the trial. Paul invoked his right as a Roman citizen to have his case heard by the emperor in Rome. During the long voyage to Rome, Paul would suffer a shipwreck off the coast of Crete.

When Paul arrived in Rome (c. 61 A.D.), according to Acts he interacted with a group of Jews who apparently had heard of Christians, but were not Christians themselves:

“But we want to hear what your [Paul’s] views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect.” (NIV, Acts 28:18)

Thus, one could theorize that it was Paul, not Peter, who was the first apostle to reach Rome, and establish the subsequent church.

The account of Paul’s travel to Rome ends rather abruptly in Acts (in fact, some scholars believe that Acts was written as Paul’s defense before the emperor):

“For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.” (NIV, Acts 28:30-31)

Chapter 22



“Ancient Jerusalem, previous to its destruction by Titus”⁹

Verse 2: Paul speaks in Aramaic, perhaps to reassure the crowd that he is really Jewish.

Verses 3-5: Paul tells the crowd that he studied under Gamaliel himself, and once persecuted Christians for the Sanhedrin.

Verses 6-21: Paul gives a first-person account of his Road to Damascus experience (the second time the event is described in Acts). During the conversion, when Paul expresses misgivings about joining the Way because of his history as a persecutor of Christians, Jesus replies, “Go; I will send you far away to

⁹ Library of Congress LC-DIG-ppmsca-09325

the Gentiles.” This is a good example of how Paul tailored what he said for the crowd to which he was speaking. In this case, he was probably trying to justify to the crowd his ministry to the Gentiles.

Verses 22-30: The crowd wants to kill Paul, and he is taken into the barracks by the Roman soldiers. The Roman commander then “directed that he be flogged and questioned in order to find out why the people were shouting at him like this.” (Perhaps the commander could have asked the crowd, rather than persecuting the victim!) Paul played the “I’m a Roman citizen” card to the commander, who stopped the flogging. In an amusing note, the commander mentioned that he had to “pay a big price for my citizenship”, whereas Paul was born a Roman Citizen.

The next day, Paul, following in the footsteps of Jesus, Peter and John, is questioned by the Sanhedrin.

Chapter 23

Verses 1-5: Paul is struck in the face by order of the high priest Ananias. Paul points out that it is a violation of the (Jewish) law to strike him. He is then told that Ananias is the high priest, and Paul backs down.

Verses 6-10: In one of the greatest courtroom moves of all time, Paul tells the Sanhedrin that he is a Pharisee, and the son of a Pharisee. He then says “I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead” – a doctrine that the Pharisees believe in, but the Sadducees do not. In the ensuing argument, the Pharisees and Sadducees argue with each other, as opposed to questioning Paul.

The incident tells us much about the divisions in Judaism at the time of Christ. The Pharisee’s beliefs in resurrection of the dead, angels and spirits all correlate with doctrines that became popular during the period between the Testaments, and can be found in the Apocrypha and the Dead Sea Scrolls (another Jewish religious group, the Essenes, had similar beliefs.) The Sadducees seemed more steeped in Old Testament theology (which only mentions the concept of resurrection of the dead three or four times). The Sadducees were probably Levitical descendants of Zadok, the first high priest of the temple under Solomon (“Sadducee”, indeed, may actually mean “sons of Zadok”).

Paul is once again removed to the barracks of the Roman soldiers.

Verses 11: Christ tells Paul, “As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome”.

Verses 12-24: A conspiracy to kill Paul arises among 40 Jews. In a fascinating turn of events, we discover that Paul 1) has a sister and 2) is an uncle – it is the son of Paul’s sister that hears of the plot, and reports it to Paul. Paul sends his nephew to the Roman commander to report the plot.

The commander takes immediate and significant action – “Get ready a detachment of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at nine tonight. Provide mounts for Paul so that he may be taken safely to Governor Felix.” On the one hand, such a large force will protect the prisoner. On the other hand, the commander seems eager to get the “Paul problem” off his hands, and into the hands of the Procurator Felix.

Verses 25-35: In a letter from the commander to Procurator Felix, we discover why the commander is taking such pains with his prisoner – “for I had learned that he is a Roman citizen.” Paul is taken to Caesarea, meets briefly with Felix, and then is imprisoned in Herod’s palace.

Chapter 24

Verses 1-9: Ananias and his cronies arrive in Caesarea to plead their case before Felix. Various false charges are brought against Paul (he “even tried to desecrate the temple”). Verse 5 is interesting, because it shows how the early Christians were referred to by their enemies – the “Nazarene sect”.



Modern day photo of the ruins of the ancient harbor at Caesarea (photo by Barbara Brim)

Verses 10-16: Paul begins his defense, and claims his innocence. He refers to the believers as “the Way”, but points out that he, Paul, also believes everything the Jews that are charging him believe about the Law and the prophets. He specifies “that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked”, a doctrine which is expanded in Revelation 20:12-15.

Verses 17-21: Paul completes his defense, pleading his innocence, and once again wonders if he is being persecuted because of his belief in the resurrection of the dead.

Verses 22-27: Felix adjourns the proceedings, ostensibly until the commander Lysias that had arrested Paul in Jerusalem shows up. Paul would remain under loose guard for the next two years, as Felix (and Drusilla, the wife of Felix) talk to Paul on various occasions. It appears that Paul could have won his release at any time if he had offered a bribe to Felix, but he does not do so. After two years, Felix is replaced by Festus, and the new Roman Procurator inherits the “what to do about Paul of Tarsus” problem.

So why did Paul not bribe Felix to get out of jail? Remember that Christ himself had told Paul, “As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome”. Paul had more important fish to fry in Rome.

Chapter 25

Verses 1-5: Festus goes to Jerusalem three days after he assumes office, and is asked by Jewish officials to have Paul transferred to Jerusalem, where there is a plot to kill him. Festus refuses, suggesting that the leaders make their case against Paul in Caesarea.

Verses 6-10: Paul is once again put on trial in front of the (new) Roman Procurator, and the Jewish leaders from Jerusalem once again make spurious charges against him. Paul rejects a suggestion from Festus that Paul return to Jerusalem for trial, and stands on his right as a Roman citizen for a trial by Caesar (probably Nero at the time!). Paul says “I appeal to Caesar!”, and Festus replies “You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!”

Verses 11-21: King [Herod] Agrippa and Bernice arrive and discuss the Paul situation with Festus. The most interesting part is when Festus tries to sum up the religious dispute between Paul and the Sanhedrin - "...they [the Jewish leaders] had some points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive." The latter phrase is a crude, but effective summation of Christian belief, coming from a Roman governor.

Verses 22-27: The trial starts up again the next day, at the request of Agrippa. Festus complains that he doesn't really have any legitimate charges against Paul to warrant sending him to Nero.

Chapter 26

Verses 1-8: At the invitation of Agrippa, Paul is invited to speak. Paul once again proclaims that he is a Jew, and claims that his only "crime" is the belief in resurrection of the dead.

Verses 9-11: Paul here admits that he was involved in the putting of Christians to death - "when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them". This is implied in the incident of Stephen the martyr, but Paul is explicit here.

Verses 12-18: Paul gives a first-person account of his Road to Damascus experience (the third time that an account of this incident appears in Acts.) He is explicit about his role as revealed by Christ in the incident - "to open their [Gentiles definitely; it may also include Jews] eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."

The use of the phrase "turn them from darkness to light" is interesting. John the Apostle is sometimes accused of being either a Gnostic or an overly Hellenized Jew because of his use of the light versus dark imagery in John 1:1-18. However, this verse in Acts proves that John was not the only follower of Jesus to use that imagery. Also, the Essenes had used that imagery long before Paul and John were born. An example follows:

[God] "created man to have dominion over the world and made for him two spirits, that he might walk by them until the appointed time of his visitation; they are the spirits of truth and of error. In the abode of light are the origins of truth, and from the source of darkness are the origins of error. In the hand of the prince of lights is dominion over all sons of righteousness; in the way of light they walk. And in the hand of the angel of darkness is all dominion over the sons of error; and in the ways of darkness they walk. And by the angel of darkness is the straying of all the sons of righteousness...but the God of Israel and his angel of truth have helped all the sons of light." (*Manual of Discipline*, Millar Burrows translation, p. 374)

Verses 19-23: Paul gives his belief that Jesus fulfills the Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament:

I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that the Christ [the Messiah] would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles. (Acts 26:22b-23, NIV)

Verses 24-32: Perhaps with a certain amount of wryness, Agrippa asks Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" Paul replies, "I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am." Paul never gives up an opportunity to preach or to try to make converts to Christ.

After the proceedings end for the day, Agrippa and Festus agree that there are no legitimate charges against Paul. Agrippa comments, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar". But Paul must go to Rome.

Chapter 27

Verses 1-8: Paul begins his epic journey by sea from Caesarea to Rome. The Roman centurion Julius extends courtesies to Paul along the way.

Verses 9-20: Off the Southern coast of Crete, Paul warns the centurion that "our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also". However, the centurion, the captain, and the pilot of the ship decide to journey onwards.

Near the island of Cauda, the ship runs into a hurricane, which engulfs the ship for "many days".

Verses 21-26: Still engulfed in the hurricane, Paul offers solace to the crew, stating, "Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me and said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.'"

Verses 27-32: After two weeks (!) of the storm, some of the sailors lower a lifeboat to try to save themselves. Paul warns the centurions and the soldiers that the ship can't be saved if the sailors leave (this seems to be a quite practical observation).

Verses 33-38: Paul encourages the men to eat, and reiterates that they will all be saved. We are told that there are 276 people on board.

Verses 39-44: The ship is finally grounded on a sand bar, and everyone makes it to land safely (just as Paul had predicted). The soldiers were planning to kill all the prisoners to prevent them from escaping, but the centurion stopped them to save Paul's life.

Chapter 28

Verses 1-6: The island that they landed near was Malta, which means that the ship had been blown clear across the Adriatic Sea during the storm. Paul is bitten by a viper, and when he suffers no ill effects, the people believe he is a god.

Verses 7-10: Paul heals the ailing father of Publius, the chief official of the island. He performs many more healings on the island, "When this had happened, the rest of the sick on the island came and were cured."

Verses 11-16: After a three-month stay on Malta (assumedly, through the winter), Paul's epic journey to Rome continues on another ship. After landing in Puteoli, Paul continues toward Rome on foot. He is greeted by some brothers from Rome - "The brothers there had heard that we were coming, and they traveled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us". Paul finally arrives in Rome, and is placed under house arrest.

The "brothers" referred to in the above verses create an interesting question. Did the term "brothers" refer to fellow Christians, or were they Jews (as Paul always started his missionary journeys to new cities

at the local synagogue). On the one hand, the appellation “brothers” seems to be Christian code for fellow believers. But wait, there is more information to come.

Verses 17-22: Paul calls a meeting of local Jewish leaders (his house arrest didn’t appear to be too severe!) He tells them why he is in Rome under arrest. The Jews say that they hadn’t heard of Paul specifically, but they are eager to hear about the Christians:

We have not received any letters from Judea concerning you, **and none of the brothers** who have come from there has reported or said anything bad about you. But we want to hear what your views are, for we know that people everywhere are talking against this sect. (Acts 28:21-22, NIV)

Note that 1) the Jewish leaders refer to other Jews as “brothers”, and 2) they appear not to have met any Christians in Rome. One could make a case that Paul is the first Christian (or at least, the first Christian leader) to reach Rome. Thus, it is possible that it was Paul, not Peter, who founded the church in Rome! This theory is further buttressed by the fact that 1) Paul ended up in Rome at the direction of Jesus himself and 2) nowhere in the New Testament does it say that Peter was ever in Rome.

Regarding the 2nd point above, I’m not suggesting that Peter never preached in Rome – there seems to be ample church tradition to place Peter there. However, in the divine, revealed Word of God, only Paul is explicitly placed in Rome.

Verses 23-27: Paul draws large crowds (assumedly from the local Jewish population), and preaches the Word. Some Jews believed, but others didn’t. Paul admonished those that didn’t believe by quoting the Old Testament – “Go to this people and say, “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.”

Verse 28: Paul ends his preaching by stressing the importance of taking the Word to the Gentiles – “Therefore I want you to know that God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!”

The account of Paul’s travel to Rome ends rather abruptly in Acts (in fact, some scholars believe that Acts was written as Paul’s defense before the emperor):

For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ. (NIV, Acts 28:30-31)



Arch of Titus, Nero's Temple, Coliseum & Arch of Constantine¹⁰

So, was Paul tried before Nero and acquitted? Or is this when he met his death? We can only surmise, based on brief references in some of Paul’s letters (see, for example, Philemon 1:22), and later church tradition. Most scholars believed that Paul was released from house arrest in Rome in c. 62 A.D., and

¹⁰ Library of Congress PAN FOR GEOG - Italy no. 8 (F size) [P&P]

that he may have made a fourth missionary journey, which may have gone as far as Spain (Rom 15:24, 28). Church tradition says that Nero executed Paul in Rome c. 67 A.D.:

Eusebius also records that Paul was put to death under Nero in Rome:

It is, therefore, recorded that Paul was beheaded in Rome itself, and that Peter likewise was crucified under Nero. This account of Peter and Paul is substantiated by the fact that their names are preserved in the cemeteries of that place even to the present day. It is confirmed likewise by Caius, a member of the Church, who arose under Zephyrinus, bishop of Rome. He, in a published disputation with Proclus, the leader of the Phrygian heresy, speaks as follows concerning the places where the sacred corpses of the aforesaid Apostles are laid: "But I can show the trophies of the Apostles. For if you will go to the Vatican or to the Ostian way, you will find the trophies of those who laid the foundations of this church." And that they both suffered martyrdom at the same time is stated by Dionysius, bishop of Corinth, in his epistle to the Romans, in the following words: "You have thus by such an admonition bound together the planting of Peter and of Paul at Rome and Corinth. For both of them planted and likewise taught us in our Corinth. And they taught together in like manner in Italy, and suffered martyrdom at the same time." I have quoted these things in order that the truth of the history might be still more confirmed. (Eusebius, Book 2, Chapter 25)

However, the New Testament is silent on the death of this great apostle.

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Thanks to Debra Kasson-Jones and Susan Baker for proof-reading this course.

Notes

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Robert C. Jones grew up in the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania area. He made his living as a hotel lounge band leader/musician from 1974-1981. In 1981, he moved to the Atlanta, Georgia area, where he received a B.S. in Computer Science at DeVry Institute of Technology. From 1984-2009, Robert worked for Hewlett-Packard as a computer consultant.



Robert is an ordained elder in the Presbyterian Church. He has written and taught numerous adult Sunday School courses (see front inside cover). He has also been active in choir ministries over the years, and has taught the *Disciples* Bible Study six times.

Robert is also President of the Kennesaw Historical Society, for whom he has written several books, including "The Law Heard 'Round the World - An Examination of the Kennesaw Gun Law and Its Effects on the Community", "Re-tracing the Route of the General - Following in the Footsteps of the Andrews Raid", and "Kennesaw (Big Shanty) in the 19th Century". A new book, "Images of America: Kennesaw", was published by Arcadia in 2006.

Robert has also written several books on ghost towns in the Southwest, including in Death Valley, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, and Mojave National Preserve.

In 2005, Robert co-authored a business-oriented book entitled "Working Virtually: The Challenges of Virtual Teams". His co-authors were Lise Pace and Rob Oyung.

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