

# ACTS



© 1989 Biblical Archaeology Society

Simon Peter's house, Capernaum

This lesson's subject is the Book of Acts. Let us begin by noting that the Book of Acts is not an independent work. It is the second half of a two-volume work. Originally the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts were one work. The writer introduces the second half of his work in Acts 1:1-5 just as he did in the Gospel. In this introduction, the writer gives a short summary of the Gospel of Luke and anticipates the contents of the Book of Acts.

Read Acts 1:1-5, and answer the following questions.

- To whom does the writer address these verses?
- What does the writer say was the subject of the first book?

c. For how many days did Jesus appear to his disciples?

d. What promise did Jesus make to his disciples?

## ACTS 1

The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles originally circulated as a single work. In the fourth century, the Council of Toledo permanently divided Luke and Acts into two separate works. It placed the Gospel of Luke with the other Synoptic Gospels. The Council placed the Book of Acts after John.

The present placement of Acts serves two purposes. On the one hand, Acts shows how the work of Jesus continued in the life

of the church. Thus it is a good follow-up of the Gospel material. On the other hand as a history of the early church it describes the growth and spread of Christianity. Thus it provides a context within which we can read and understand the remaining New Testament documents, that is, the Letters.

Acts 1:8—a saying of Jesus—provides a clue to the general outline of the Book of Acts. Read Acts 1:8.

Acts describes how the early church receives power. The church then witnesses to the faith, first in Jerusalem, then in Judea and Samaria, and finally to the end of the earth.

Chapter 1 narrates two events. First, the writer reports the ascension of Jesus after forty days of appearances following his resurrection. The account of the Ascension concludes with a promise in verse 11: "This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

The second event concerns the election of a successor to Judas. The requirements for the successor are spelled out in verses 21 and 22. Read Acts 1:21-22.

The believers propose two candidates. They select by lot so God can determine the outcome. The lot falls with Matthias.

Read Acts 1:6-11 to learn more about the ascension of Jesus. Answer these questions.

a. The disciples wished to know when Jesus would "restore the kingdom to Israel." Why did he not give them a set time?

b. Why was the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit important?

c. Luke included the Ascension in his account not only to record the past but also to look to the future. Based on this account

what do you think the return of Christ will be like?

d. In your own words tell what the Ascension signaled to the disciples who witnessed it.

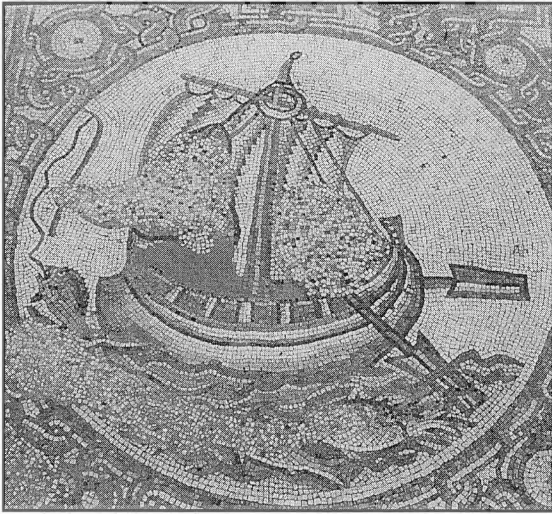
## **ACTS 2-4**

Chapter 2 records the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Pentecost is the Greek name for the Jewish Feast of Weeks. The name means "fifty." The festival is so named because it falls on the fiftieth day after the celebration of the barley sheaf during Passover. In the Jewish faith it celebrates the giving of the law at Mount Sinai.

When the Holy Spirit descends upon the early disciples, they speak in tongues. The writer understands this speaking in tongues as the disciples' sudden ability to address the pilgrims in the city in languages that the disciples could not speak previously. Some of those who witnessed the disciples' behavior believe they are drunk.

Peter, after assuring the people that the disciples are not drunk since it is only nine in the morning, explains their behavior. The disciples' possession of the Spirit is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promise in the prophetic Book of Joel. In the last days God's Spirit will be poured out upon all flesh.

Then Peter proceeds to preach about Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament expectation. Here we have an account of the first Christian sermon. In this sermon Peter makes the following points. First, Jesus' mighty works, wonders, and signs are the way God attested to Jesus' ministry. Second, Jesus was crucified in accordance with the plan and foreknowledge of God—although at the hands of lawless men. Third, God raised Jesus from the dead and exalted him to God's right hand. To support



Ship mosaic in early Christian church

his proclamation Peter quotes Old Testament passages from the books of Psalms, Isaiah, and Joel. Finally, Peter asks his hearers to repent and be baptized.

According to Acts 2:41 about 3,000 persons convert to the new faith on the Day of Pentecost. Thus Acts views the Day of Pentecost as the day of the church's birth. The writer then describes the general activity of the followers of Jesus. Read Acts 2:43-47.

In Chapters 3 through 7 the Book of Acts tells how the church establishes itself in Jerusalem and describes some of the problems encountered by the new faith. In Chapter 3 Peter and John heal a lame man on their way to worship in the Temple. The people's response to the healing gives Peter an opportunity to preach. He denounces the audience for their lack of faith and calls on them to repent and accept Jesus as the foretold Messiah. The preaching of the disciples leads to their arrest. In Chapter 4 the rulers, elders, and scribes give them a hearing. They then threaten and release them.

Acts 2:37-47 records the result of the first sermon given by Peter. Read these verses, and answer the following questions.

a. When the people were cut to the heart, Peter gave them two commands and a promise. List these three things here.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

b. To what four activities did the first converts devote themselves?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

c. The early Christians practiced "togetherness." Indicate three ways in which they shared.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

### **ACTS 5:1-9:30**

The writer of Acts carefully reports that the early churches share all things in common. Read Acts 4:34-35, which talks about this practice.

Chapter 5 reports how Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, lie about their property sales and withhold money from the community. Scripture tells us that both die when confronted with the seriousness of their deed. The rest of the chapter tells of further trouble with the Jewish authorities, the arrest of the apostles, their hearing and beating by the Sanhedrin, and their release. But the Christians persist in their ways as the closing verse of Chapter 5 tells us: “Every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah.”

In Chapter 6 we encounter one of the earliest internal problems in the church. The Greek-speaking Christians, or Hellenists, felt they were being neglected in the distribution of the common goods. To meet the needs of this group the disciples select seven members who were to be responsible for the welfare of the Hellenists.

One of those selected is Stephen. Chapter 7 gives his speech before the Sanhedrin. His attack on the Council for their hardness of heart and their unwillingness to see Jesus as the Messiah enrages the leaders. They cast Stephen out of the city and stone him. Thus Stephen becomes the first Christian martyr. One of those present and consenting to his death is Saul—later known as Paul.

As a result of the persecution that arose against the church, the early Christians scattered. In Chapters 8 and following, the writer shows how this persecution and scattering leads to the spread of Christianity. Chapter 8 tells how Philip preaches the gospel in Samaria. The first part of Chapter 9 reports Saul’s conversion on the road to Damascus, on his travels to persecute the church.

In Chapter 8 we read of the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Samaria. Read Acts 8:1-8, and answer these questions.

a. Why did the church begin to move out from Jerusalem? (verse 1)

b. What did those who were scattered do? (verse 4)

c. The Samaritans paid heed to Philip for two reasons. List those reasons below. (verse 6)

1.

2.

d. How did the people respond to Philip’s words and works? (verse 8)

### **ACTS 9:31-21:16**

Before discussing the further work of Peter, the writer summarizes in Acts 9:31: “Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.”

Peter’s work in Lydia, Joppa, and Caesarea is the subject of Acts 9:32–11:18. In these chapters the church develops practices that differ from Judaism. In a vision God tells Peter that food God has cleansed is acceptable for eating. Also, the church admits noncircumcised Gentiles into the fellowship. Both of these decisions distinguish Christianity from Judaism.

The spread of the church into Gentile lands becomes the topic of Acts in 11:19 and dominates the rest of the book. The disciples establish a church in Antioch, and here for the first time the members call themselves Christians. In Chapter 12 we

learn that the persecution of the church in Jerusalem—this time under Herod Agrippa, the grandson of Herod the Great—leads to further spread of the faith.

Paul's first missionary journey to Cyprus and southern Galatia—in today's Turkey—is the topic of Chapters 13 and 14. The growing number of Gentiles in the church leads to the Jerusalem conference of leaders in Chapter 15. This conference decides to place only limited requirements on Gentiles. The conference members advise the Gentiles to "abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication."

The discussion of Paul's second missionary journey, in lands around the Aegean, is reported in Acts 15:36–18:22. Paul's third missionary trip is the subject of Chapters 19, 20, and the first half of 21.

Paul's first missionary journey to Cyprus and southern Galatia is the subject of Acts 13 and 14. Read each of the verses listed here, write the name of each place Paul visited, and trace Paul's journey on the map on page 141. (See completed map on page 184.)

a. (13:1)

b. (13:5)

c. (13:6)

d. (13:14)

e. (13:51)

f. (14:6)

g. (14:25)

h. (14:26)

### **ACTS 21:17-28:31**

The remainder of the book tells how Paul eventually comes to Rome. In Jerusalem some Jews from Asia seize him, causing a riot. The tribune arrests Paul for his own safety. Paul defends his faith before the Sanhedrin, then before Felix the governor of Judea. After being imprisoned for over two years Paul appeals his case to Caesar, a right he has as a Roman citizen. After enduring storm and shipwreck at sea and snakebite on land, Paul arrives in Rome. The book closes with Paul in Rome awaiting his trial before Caesar, but preaching the gospel unhindered.

### **SUMMARY**

The Book of Acts gives us stories of the early heroes of the faith. It shows how their witnessing to the faith and the persecution of the faithful led to the growth of the church and to the development of a worldwide mission.

Five major events found in the Book of Acts are listed below.

- (1) The ascension of Jesus into heaven (Acts 1)
- (2) The appointment of another disciple to take the place of Judas (Acts 1)
- (3) The Day of Pentecost and Peter's sermon (Acts 2)
- (4) Paul's conversion while on the road to Damascus (Acts 9)
- (5) Paul's three missionary journeys (Acts 13–21)

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. The Book of Acts shows how the early church began in Jerusalem and then moved into all parts of the world. The following are key verses that indicate the geographical progression of the early church: 8:5 (Samaria), 8:40 (the seacoast), 9:10 (Damascus), 11:19 (Antioch and Cyprus),

13:13 (Perga and Pamphylia), 16:11 (Samothrace and Neapolis), and 28:16 (Rome). Think about the contents of the Book of Acts. How does this book reflect the development described above?

2. Peter and Paul are two major figures in the apostolic church. In Chapters 1–12, Peter witnesses to Jewish audiences, saying, “Repent.” (For example, see Acts 2:26–38.) Later we see Paul witnessing to Gentiles saying, “Believe.” (For example, see Acts 16:30–31.) Discuss the difference between their points of view. Which approach to witnessing for Christ is better for today? Do you see yourself as a witness for Christ? Why or why not?

3. Acts 2:40 and 2:47 seem to be somewhat contradictory. Compare these two verses and discuss how we should understand them. What does the word *salvation* mean to you?

4. In Acts 5:41 it is written that as the apostles left the presence of the council, “they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name.” Read also Acts 4:13–31. Discuss how the early Christians faced persecution with faith. Note parts of the world in which Christians are suffering persecution even now. Can we rejoice today when we suffer for Christ? What is the relationship between your suffering and your faith?

---

### **DAILY READINGS FOR ROMANS**

- Day 1: Romans 1:1–17
- Day 2: Romans 2:17–29
- Day 3: Romans 4:1–12
- Day 4: Romans 7:7–20
- Day 5: Romans 9:1–13
- Day 6: Romans 12:9–21
- Day 7: Romans 16:17–27

