

# TYNDALE NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES

VOLUME 5

TNTC

ACTS

To  
FREDERICK FYVIE BRUCE  
on his seventieth birthday

# TYNDALE NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES

VOLUME 5

GENERAL EDITOR: LEON MORRIS

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## ACTS

AN INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY

I. HOWARD MARSHALL



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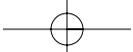
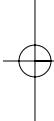
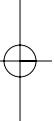
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## CONTENTS

General preface	7
Author's preface	9
Chief abbreviations	11
Bibliography	13
Map: The Near East in the first century AD	16
<b>Introduction</b>	17
The purpose of Acts	17
The theology of Acts	23
The historicity of Acts	35
The origins of Acts	46
The permanent value of Acts	52
<b>Analysis</b>	55
<b>Commentary</b>	59



## GENERAL PREFACE

The original Tyndale Commentaries aimed to provide help for the general reader in his study of the Bible. They concentrated on the meaning of the text without going into scholarly technicalities. They aimed at a mean between being too short to be useful and being too extensive for the present reader. Most who have used the books agree that there has been a fair measure of success in reaching that aim.

Times, however, change. The first Tyndale Commentaries appeared over twenty years ago and it is felt that some volumes do not meet the changed needs. New knowledge has come to light in some areas. The discussion of critical questions has moved on. Bible-reading habits have changed. In an earlier day most people read the Authorized Version and comments could be based on that. This situation no longer obtains and indeed the last commentary in the original series was based on the Revised Standard Version. In all the circumstances it is felt that the needs of students will best be served by replacing some of the original volumes. This is not meant as an expression of dissatisfaction with them. They served the needs well, but in these days some new needs will be better served by new books.

The original aims remain. The new commentaries are neither minuscule nor unduly long. They are exegetical rather than homiletic. They do not aim to solve all the critical questions, but none is written without an awareness of the critical questions that engage the attention of New Testament scholars. Serious consideration is

normally given to such questions in the Introduction and sometimes in Additional notes. But the main thrust of these commentaries is not critical. These books are written to help the non-technical reader to understand his Bible better. They do not presuppose a knowledge of Greek, and all Greek terms discussed are transliterated; but the authors have the Greek text before them and the commentaries are written in the light of the originals. The English text used is normally the Revised Standard Version, though it is borne in mind that these days readers use a variety of translations.

The original series owed an immense debt to Professor Tasker. He edited the whole, and wrote four of the commentaries himself. It is fitting to place on record this acknowledgment of our debt. I can therefore conclude in no better way than by echoing what Professor Tasker said of the original series. It is the hope of all concerned with these replacement volumes that God will graciously use them to help readers understand as fully and clearly as possible the meaning of the New Testament.

Leon Morris

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

At a time when there are almost innumerable commentaries on the books of the New Testament, anybody who dares to add to their number is under some obligation to justify producing yet another. In the present case it is not enough to claim that the demands of a series had to be fulfilled, since the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries already contained a volume on Acts by the distinguished Classical scholar, Professor E. M. Blaiklock. A number of factors, however, made a replacement of this work desirable.

In the first place, Professor Blaiklock deliberately set himself the limited task of writing 'an historical commentary', in the sense that he concentrated on illustrating and expounding the book of Acts against its historical background in the Graeco-Roman period. The course of study since his commentary was published has emphasized the *theological* importance of Acts, and it has become desirable that some account should be taken of this interest. It is significant that F. Bovon's excellent survey of recent scholarship on the works of Luke is entitled *Luc le théologien*.

The historical problems cannot be set aside in favour of a purely theological approach, however, and this leads to a second reason for attempting a fresh study. Shortly before the appearance of Professor Blaiklock's work there appeared another commentary in German from the pen of Professor E. Haenchen; with much learning and great attention to detail the author made Luke out to be something more like a writer of historical fiction than a serious historian. Haenchen's case needs to be taken seriously and evaluated.

If, therefore, the present work appears at times to be over-polemical and one-sided in its concentration on historical questions, this may be explained by the fact that so far commentators (with the notable exception of R. P. C. Hanson) have made little attempt to come to terms with Haenchen's approach. It should perhaps be emphasized that although this commentary is frequently critical of what I consider to be Haenchen's unjustified scepticism regarding the historicity of Acts, his work is an outstanding piece of scholarship which has done much to rekindle interest in the study of Acts.

In keeping with the expressed aim of the series, the commentary is primarily exegetical, although it is hoped that sufficient pointers have been given to the expository value of the text. While the commentary is intended to serve a wide range of readers, I have also tried to make it useful for the theological student, and to this end I have attempted to give some reference to the literature on Acts which has appeared subsequently to the publication of Haenchen's commentary and is not listed in his bibliographies.

I should like to express my warm thanks to Dr Leon Morris, the general editor of the series, and to Dr Colin J. Hemer for their helpful comments on the manuscript, and also to Miss T. Clark and Mrs P. Henderson for help with the typing.

The commentary has been written in the University of Aberdeen where Sir William Ramsay was a professor and Professor F. F. Bruce a student. It will be obvious how much I have been influenced by these distinguished writers on the book of Acts, and it gives me the greatest of pleasure to express something of my gratitude to the latter for his friendship and encouragement in many ways by dedicating this book to him.

I. Howard Marshall

## CHIEF ABBREVIATIONS

AG	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> edited by W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich (Cambridge, 1957).
AHG	<i>Apostolic History and the Gospel</i> edited by W. W. Gasque and R. P. Martin (Exeter, 1970).
BC	<i>The Beginnings of Christianity</i> edited by F. J. Foakes-Jackson and K. Lake (London, 1920–33).
Bib.	<i>Biblica</i> .
BJRL	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester</i> .
CBQ	<i>The Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i> .
EQ	<i>The Evangelical Quarterly</i> .
ET	<i>The Expository Times</i> .
GNB	The Good News Bible (Today's English Version), Old Testament, 1976; New Testament, Fourth Edition, 1976.
HTR	<i>The Harvard Theological Review</i> .
JB	The Jerusalem Bible, 1966.
JBL	<i>The Journal of Biblical Literature</i> .
Jos.	Josephus ( <i>Ant.: Antiquities; Ap.: Against Apion; Bel.: War</i> ).
JSNT	<i>The Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i> .
JTS	<i>The Journal of Theological Studies</i> .
LS	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> compiled by H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, new edition revised by H. S. Jones and

- R. Mackenzie, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1940).
- LXX The Septuagint (pre-Christian Greek version of the Old Testament).
- MT Masoretic Text.
- NBD *The New Bible Dictionary* edited by J. D. Douglas et al. (London, 1962).
- NEB The New English Bible, Old Testament, 1970; New Testament, Second Edition, 1970.
- NIDNTT *The New International Dictionary of New Testament THEOLOGY* EDITED BY COLIN BROWN (EXETER, 1975–78).
- NIV The New International Version, Old Testament, 1979; New Testament, 1973.
- Nov.T *Novum Testamentum.*
- NTA *New Testament Abstracts.*
- NTS *New Testament Studies.*
- PLA *Perspectives on Luke-Acts* edited by C. H. Talbert (Danville and Edinburgh, 1978).
- RSV American Revised Standard Version, Old Testament, 1952; New Testament, Second Edition, 1971.
- SB *Kommentar zum neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* by Herman L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, 1956.
- SJT *The Scottish Journal of Theology.*
- SLA *Studies in Luke-Acts* edited by L. E. Keck and J. L. Martyn (Nashville, 1966).
- TDNT *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, a translation by Geoffrey W. Bromiley of *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum neuen Testament*, vols. 1–4 edited by G. Kittel, 5–10 edited by G. Friedrich (Grand Rapids, 1964–76).
- TNT The Translator's New Testament, 1973.
- Tyn. B. *Tyndale Bulletin.*
- TZ *Theologische Zeitschrift.*
- ZNW *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft.*
- ZTK *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche.*

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## INTRODUCTION

### 1. The purpose of Acts

What a reader gets out of a book and how he assesses its quality are determined to a considerable extent by the expectations with which he approaches it. These expectations may be based partly on the expressed purpose of the author and partly on the presuppositions with which the reader approaches it.

It is probable that the average reader approaches the Acts of the Apostles as *the history book of the early church*. He reads it in order to discover what happened in the first years of the church's existence. He will certainly find a story that answers such expectations. It begins with the ascension of Jesus, the event which marked the end of the earthly ministry of Jesus (Luke 24:50–53) and which also pointed forward to the ongoing work of Jesus through the church. After describing the equipping of Jesus' disciples for their work with the gift of the Spirit, the book goes on to tell the exciting story of the beginnings of the church in Jerusalem, its spread throughout the wider areas of Judea and Samaria, and then its rapid movement from

Antioch in Syria through Asia Minor and Macedonia and Greece, until eventually the arrival of Paul in Rome symbolizes the presence of the gospel in the central city of the ancient world. There is a wealth of detail in the telling of the story. Colourful, dramatic scenes alternate with straightforward reporting. Vigorous personalities stand at the centre of the action. The author has a talent for portraying the variety of life in the ancient world, as he takes us from backwater country towns like Lystra to the intellectual centre of Athens and brings us into touch with unforgettable characters, Jewish and Greek, nobles and slaves. His book is 'a story full of interest, told by a master story-teller'.<sup>1</sup>

Almost without realizing it, we have found ourselves moving from what Luke tells us to how he tells it, and have realized that this piece of history is told with conscious artistry. It is *a work of literature*, something that would have been very evident to the ancient reader from the moment he picked up the book with its introductory dedication to 'Theophilus' in the typical manner of an ancient work of letters. The language and style of Luke stand out in the New Testament and show that he was perhaps the most conscious of all its writers that he was writing literature for an educated audience and not merely pamphlets for use within a church that had no literary aspirations or interests.

But if Luke was writing what looks like history, and he was doing so with deliberate literary skill, the question inevitably arises as to what was his purpose in doing so. Why did he write the story of the early church? It was not, after all, the most obvious of things for a Christian writer to do, a fact demonstrated by the recollection that Acts is the only first-century example that we have of this particular kind of literature. Other Christians wrote Letters and Gospels, but only Luke wrote a history of the early church: what led him to do so? A whole variety of reasons have been suggested, and it is probable that we should seek for a compound rather than a simple answer to the question.

Two important preliminary points must be made. The first is that one of the most striking literary features of the writings of Luke is

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1. Edwards, p. 9. Edwards' book is a most lively introduction to Acts.

that they are *written in the style of the Greek Old Testament*, the Septuagint (LXX). Since Luke can write in a different style (Luke 1:1–4), this is something deliberate. Probably he regarded himself as recording *sacred history*. He believed that the events which he was recording were the fulfilment of the prophecies contained in the Scriptures and that consequently they were the same kind of divinely wrought events as were already recorded in the Scriptures. Luke may not have claimed the description of ‘Scripture’ for what he himself was writing, but implicitly he was claiming that the story of the early church was part of the ongoing story of the work of God, and that the story itself was of similar character to the Old Testament Scriptures.

The second point is that the book of Acts is *the second part of a two-volume work* whose first part is the Gospel of Luke.<sup>2</sup> It is one of the unfortunate effects of the present ordering of the books in the New Testament that it leads us to think of Acts as a separate work on its own. But it was common in the ancient world for a writer to organize a work into several shorter sections (known as ‘books’) and to furnish each with its own brief introduction. Luke’s contemporary Josephus wrote an apology for the Jews divided into two books, the second of which begins thus: ‘In the first volume of this work, my most esteemed Epaphroditus, I demonstrated the antiquity of our race ... I also challenged the statements of Manetho, Chaeremon, and some others. I shall now proceed to refute the rest of the authors who have attacked us’ (Jos., *Ap.* 2:1). This extract is interesting for the way in which it parallels the details of Luke’s own introduction to his work (Acts 1:1f.), but our present point is that it underlines the fact that Acts and the Gospel form the two parts of one single work. It follows that to ask questions about the purpose of Acts in isolation from the broader question of the purpose of Luke-Acts is to set off from the wrong starting-point, a practice which generally leads to arrival at the wrong destination.

It emerges that we must ask about the purpose of Luke-Acts as a whole. If we nevertheless concentrate our attention here on Acts,

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2. With the vast majority of scholars I am assuming the common authorship of the Gospel and Acts.

the right way of posing the question will be to ask why Luke, in contradistinction to the other evangelists, chose to add a second volume to the Gospel instead of being content merely to write a Gospel.

One possible answer to this question is that Luke was attempting to write *the story of 'Christian beginnings'* in a broad sense. When Mark headed his Gospel 'The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God', he indicated that the ministry of Jesus, from his baptism to his resurrection, was the beginning and basis of the gospel. Luke, however, gathers together the story of Jesus *and* the story of the early church, and sees these as forming together the foundational narrative of the church. He was explaining how the good news had started, and how it had spread to cover the Mediterranean world from Jerusalem to Rome. He does in fact state at the beginning of Acts that his first volume dealt with 'all that Jesus began to do and teach', and it seems very probable that by implication the second volume deals with 'all that Jesus continued to do and teach'.<sup>3</sup> In this way the two volumes cover the beginning of the gospel, the establishment of salvation in the ministry of Jesus and the proclamation of salvation by the early church. This basic insight can be developed in various ways.

First, in an important article W. C. van Unnik argued that the book of Acts is the confirmation of the Gospel.<sup>4</sup> He suggested that in the Gospel Luke was presenting the saving activity of Jesus and showing its reality. Then in Acts Luke shows how the church proclaimed and confirmed this salvation. What Acts does in effect is to show how the salvation which was manifested by Jesus during his earthly life in a limited area of country and for a brief period became a reality for increasing numbers of people over a wide geographical area and during an extended period of time. As a result of this, Luke-Acts could be regarded as *an evangelistic work* which proclaims salvation to its readers. Similarly, J. C. O'Neill has insisted that the main purpose of Acts is evangelistic, and makes the specific suggestion that the

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3. Marshall, *Luke*, p. 87 n. 2.

4. Van Unnik, pp. 340–373; originally as 'The "Book of Acts" the Confirmation of the Gospel', *Nov.T.4*, 1960, pp. 26–59.

intended audience consisted of educated Romans.<sup>5</sup> This is an interesting possibility, but it does not seem to do justice to the considerable amount of material in Luke-Acts which appears to be directed to a wider audience.

Secondly, a key point in Acts is that it shows how the gospel was meant *for the Gentiles as well as for the Jews*. Part of the demonstration lies in Luke's claim that what took place in the early church was in accordance with prophecy. Luke's purpose was to show not only that the coming of Jesus fulfilled prophecy, but also that the rise of the church and the spread of salvation to the Gentiles fulfilled the prophecies in the Old Testament and the promises of Jesus (see Luke 24:47; Acts 1:4f., 20; 2:16–21; 3:24; 10:43; 13:40f., 47; 15:15–18; 28:25–28).<sup>6</sup>

Thirdly, while Luke's central concern is no doubt with salvation,<sup>7</sup> it is questionable whether we should regard his *main* audience as non-Christians. At this point we must take seriously what Luke himself tells us about his purpose in the prologue to his work.<sup>8</sup> He specifically addresses himself to 'Theophilus', who, according to the most plausible understanding of Luke 1:1–4, was already a Christian, and who can be regarded as typical of Luke's readers. Luke's explicit purpose was to confirm his faith by providing him with an orderly account of the things which he had learned in the course of his Christian instruction. A sceptic might have tried to persuade Theophilus that his faith was based on nothing more than 'cunningly devised myths'; Luke's reply was to present him with an account of the beginnings of Christianity based on what had been handed down 'by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word' (Luke 1:2). If the Gospel gave the facts about the ministry of Jesus, Acts demonstrated how the preaching of Jesus as the Christ corroborated and confirmed the facts recorded in the Gospel; when the good news was preached, the Spirit made the word effective and brought the hearers into the

5. O'Neill, p. 176.

6. Dupont, pp. 393–419; Bovon, *Études*, pp. 343–345.

7. Marshall, *Luke*, pp. 88–94; Bovon, pp. 255–284.

8. The prologue to the Gospel is probably meant to cover the entire work; Marshall, *Commentary*, p. 39.

experience of salvation. On this view of things, the book of Acts was intended as an account of Christian beginnings in order to strengthen faith and give assurance that its foundation is firm. Obviously, a book written with this aim has an evangelistic purpose, but the scope of Luke-Acts stretches beyond material that is purely evangelistic.

If we adopt this view of Luke-Acts, it becomes highly unlikely that the *primary* purpose of Acts was to provide some kind of *political apologetic* for Christianity. It has sometimes been argued that the aim of Acts was to show that Christians were innocent of the political charges that were brought against them, and that in fact the Roman officials who examined such cases were agreed that the Christians had not in any way offended against the laws of the Roman Empire. It has even been suggested that Acts was written to supply the evidence needed for Paul's defence when he appeared before the Emperor Nero. This suggestion clearly goes too far. We are not denying that Luke had an apologetic motive in the composition of Luke-Acts, especially in the case of Acts. But it is a subordinate aim as compared with the main theme of the presentation of the historical basis for Christian faith.

It also becomes unlikely that the main purpose of Luke-Acts was *to refute Christian heresies* or *to promote some particular theological emphasis* of the author. It has been argued, for example, that Luke's aim was *to refute a Gnostic type of heresy*,<sup>9</sup> but it has been convincingly shown that Luke does not refer explicitly to any specific heresies of a Gnostic character and that there is no indication of any conscious polemic.<sup>10</sup> Another suggested aim is *the rehabilitation of Paul* over against his detractors in the church,<sup>11</sup> but this cannot be more than a subordinate purpose. A much more important aim of Luke is to show *how the church, composed of Jews and Gentiles, stands in continuity with Judaism*, and this can be regarded as a vital aspect of Luke's main theme. A

9. C. H. Talbert, *Luke and the Gnostics* (Nashville, 1966).

10. Van Unnik, pp. 402–409; originally as 'Die Apostelgeschichte und die Häresien', *ZNW* 58, 1967, pp. 240–246.

11. E. Trocmé, *Le 'Livre des Actes' et l'histoire*, (Paris, 1957); A. J. Matill, Jr, 'The Purpose of Acts: Schneckenburger Reconsidered', *AHG*, p. 108–122.

further, extremely important view is that Luke was attempting to come to terms with the problem caused for the church by the fact that the second coming or parousia of Jesus had not yet happened despite the church's expectation of it in the very near future; Luke, it is claimed, wrote *to produce a new theological outlook, in which the coming of the Spirit and the mission of the church filled the gap caused by the delay of the parousia*.<sup>12</sup> It is not clear whether the proponents of this view regard it as providing the conscious and deliberate motive of Luke for composing his work, or as the underlying and unconscious motivation which led him to frame his work in the way he did. In any case, it seems most unlikely that the delay of the parousia constituted a major conscious motive for Luke's work, and it is also unlikely that it was a decisive unconscious factor in the structuring of his work.<sup>13</sup> The view that Luke's theological outlook was determined largely by the delay of the parousia leads to a distorted understanding of Acts.

## 2. The theology of Acts

Although we have emphasized that Luke was writing a historical narrative about the beginnings of Christianity, and although we have rejected the view that he wrote to put over a particular theological point of view, we must nevertheless ask about the nature of the theological outlook which comes to expression in Acts. There is no doubt that Luke does see the story as having theological significance and that he has brought out its significance in the way in which he tells it. This is of course something different from saying that he has reinterpreted the history by presenting it in an alien theological framework.

### 1. *The continuation of God's purpose in history*

The story recorded in Acts is seen as *standing in continuity with the mighty acts of God recorded in the Old Testament and with the ministry of Jesus*. The phrase which has become current in theological jargon to express

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12. Conzelmann, *Theology*.

13. Marshall, *Luke*, pp. 77–79, 84–88.

this characteristic is 'salvation history'. In this context the phrase refers to an understanding of the various events in the life of Jesus and the early church as historical actions in which the activity of God himself is revealed. Christian faith is directed towards the God who has revealed himself as Saviour on the stage of history. This understanding of faith is sometimes compared with an 'existentialist' view, according to which faith is essentially independent of historical facts.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, it has been claimed that originally the Christian message had a basically 'existential' character; it was a proclamation of God's salvation with little or no backing from history and demanding faith and obedience from the hearers. Luke, it is claimed, transformed this 'message' into a historical report about Jesus, and thus made the story of Jesus into part of an ongoing set of acts of God in history; what had originally been 'the end of history' now became 'the middle of history'.<sup>15</sup> This is a misinterpretation of the evidence. There never was an 'existential' message independent of history, but rather the kind of presentation of salvation history offered by Luke was the original understanding of Christianity. To contrast the 'salvation-historical' and 'existentialist' approaches is to produce a false antithesis. The truth is rather that the historical facts, in which God was seen to be active, demand an existential response of commitment and obedience to this God. Apart from those historical facts there can be no basis for faith. This does not mean that Christian faith is faith *in* certain events, or that faith is possible only if certain events can be *proved* to have taken place and to have been acts of God. It does mean that if the reality of the events is denied, then there is no basis for faith: 'If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins' (1 Cor. 15:17).

A number of important facets of this basic point must be noted. First, the events recorded in Acts are seen as being brought about

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14. See O. Cullmann, *Salvation in History* (London, 1967), for a comparison of the two approaches and a defence of a salvation-historical understanding of the New Testament as a whole.

15. Conzelmann, *Theology*, pp. 9–17. The thought is already present in R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, II, (London, 1955), pp. 116–118.

*by the will and purpose of God.* The story of the death and resurrection of Jesus is the most obvious example of an event which is traced to 'the definite plan and foreknowledge of God' (2:23), but the same is true of the events in the life of the church; thus it is implied, for example, that the opposition which the church experienced was of the same character as the divinely foretold opposition to Jesus (4:27–29).

It follows, secondly, that the life of the church was regarded as taking place *in fulfilment of Scripture*. The prophecies made in the Old Testament governed the course of church history – the outpouring of the Spirit and the proclamation of salvation (2:17–21), the mission to the Gentiles (13:47) and their incorporation in the church (15:16–18), and the refusal of the Jews as a whole to respond to the gospel (28:25–27).

Thirdly, the life of the church was *directed by God* at crucial stages. Sometimes the Spirit directed the church what to do (e.g. 13:2; 15:28; 16:6). At other times angels spoke to Christian missionaries (5:19f.; 8:26; 27:23), or messages were mediated by prophets (11:28; 20:11f.). On occasion the Lord himself appeared to his servants (18:9; 23:11).

Fourthly, the power of God was seen in *signs and wonders* which were performed by the name of Jesus (3:16; 14:3). As a result the work of the Christian mission can be said to be carried out by God (15:4).

## **2. The mission and the message**

Acts is a book about mission. It is not unfair to take 1:8 as a summary of its contents: 'You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.' The purpose of the Christian church was to bear witness to Jesus. This was in a special sense the task of the Twelve, who had been with Jesus during his earthly ministry and had seen him risen from the dead (1:21f.), and were therefore especially equipped to bear witness to Israel. But the task was by no means confined to the Twelve, and many other Christians took their share in evangelism.

The *message* which was proclaimed is expounded in a series of public addresses scattered throughout the book. Broadly speaking, it was concerned with the fact that Jesus, who had been raised from

the dead by God after being put to death by the Jews, had been declared to be the Jewish Messiah and the Lord, and hence the source of salvation. It was through him that forgiveness of sins was offered to men, and it was from him that the gift of the Spirit had come down to the church. The way in which Jesus functions as a Saviour is not made clear in Acts; there is no very close link made between his death and the possibility of salvation (except in 20:28), and the impression gained is rather that it was by virtue of being raised from the dead and exalted by the Father that Jesus received the authority to bestow salvation and to carry out his mighty acts in the church. It is thus the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus which stands at the centre of the preaching in Acts.<sup>16</sup>

The blessings associated with salvation are summed up as the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit. The latter was manifested in experiences of joy and spiritual power. Acts has little to say about the Pauline experience of union with Jesus, and one might be tempted to assume that Luke's religion is less mystical. It would be more correct to say that Luke describes the same basic Christian experience as Paul in different terminology. The place given to prayer and to visions in Acts, as well as to such charismatic experiences as speaking in tongues and prophesying, indicates that there is a real and profound element of communion with God in this book.

The main story-line in Acts is concerned with *the spread of this message*. It begins with the existence of a small group of followers of the earthly Jesus gathered in Jerusalem, and describes how under the impact of the gift of the Spirit they became witnesses to Jesus and gathered an increasing number of converts. The early chapters portray the growth and consolidation of the group in Jerusalem. From chapter 6 onwards we are conscious of widening horizons. Many priests are converted, and at the same time the Christian witness reaches various synagogues associated with the Jewish Dispersion in Jerusalem. As persecution led to the flight of many Christians from Jerusalem, so the message began to spread in the broader area of

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16. Luke does not ignore the atoning significance of the death of Jesus, but he does not go out of his way to stress it; Marshall, *Luke*, pp. 169–175.

Judea, and then took a decisive step forward with the conversion of some Samaritans and even a traveller from Ethiopia. By the middle of chapter 9 the author can speak of 'the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria'. But with the inclusion of Samaria the first important move had been made towards people who were not fully Jews, and soon afterwards various events convinced the church that it was called to take the good news to non-Jews. At first, the contacts were with Gentiles who already worshipped God in the synagogues, but it could not be long before other Gentiles too were attracted by the message. Once the church had become firmly established in Antioch, the Gentile mission became established policy, and from Antioch deliberate, organized mission took place. If Peter had been the leading figure in the early days of the church in Jerusalem, guiding it from its infancy to the point where it recognized that the gospel was for the Gentiles, so Paul plays the leading part in the development of the mission from Antioch; the second part of Acts is essentially the story of how Paul, in co-operation with other evangelists, proceeded to establish churches in Asia Minor and Greece, so that by chapter 20 the gospel has been effectively proclaimed throughout the Eastern Mediterranean world, and Paul can speak as though his work there is complete. But we are in fact only at chapter 20, and there is still something like a quarter of the book to come. What we have is an account of how Paul returned from his travels to Jerusalem and was arrested on a trumped-up charge; the story describes his various appearances before courts and governors in the course of which he defends himself over against both the Jews and the Romans, protesting his innocence and in effect having it confirmed by the Roman authorities. Finally, at considerable length we have the account of his journey to Rome. In the broad sense it can be said that the purpose of the account is to show how the gospel, in the person of Paul, came to Rome, but it is clear that the story in Acts, which starts off as a story of missionary expansion, has other aims also. We must ask whether other theological elements have a place in Acts.

### ***3. Progress despite opposition***

Acts is much concerned with *the opposition which surrounds the spread of the gospel*. 'Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God' (14:22). Luke recognizes that, just as the way of Jesus took him

through opposition culminating in judicial murder, so too the path of the Word of God is beset by opposition. It begins with the mockery of the apostles on the day of Pentecost and continues with the attempts of the Sanhedrin to force them to remain silent about Jesus. It comes to a swift climax in the death of the first martyr, Stephen, and the wave of persecution that followed his death. A Jewish king attempted to curry favour with the people by putting James to death, and only a miracle saved Peter from the same fate. When the missionaries moved out into the Roman world, they were dogged by opposition. Usually it began with the Jews who viewed the evangelism of the Gentiles with disfavour; but in many cases the Jews were able to gain support from pagan sympathizers in acts of violence against the missionaries. This led on occasion to the missionaries being brought before the magistrates. The attitude of the latter was ambivalent. On occasion they were quite prepared to administer summary justice against people who appeared to be responsible for breaches of the peace. At other times, however, they appear not so much as defenders of the missionaries but rather as unbiased and disinterested upholders of the law who recognize that the activities of the missionaries are in no way contrary to Roman law and custom.

The paradigm case is that of Paul, and it is Luke's interest in this theme which has led to the remarkable amount of space devoted to his period of captivity. Here Luke makes it quite plain that Paul had not offended against the laws of Rome and that, in a sense, only a legal technicality prevented his being set free by the Roman governor. At the same time, however, the story suggests that Roman governors were not free from blame in their handling of the affair. So long as governors were prepared to buy favour from the Jews and to seek bribes from defendants, Christians must expect to receive less than justice. Luke thus shows an awareness of the hard realities of life; no matter how innocent Christians might be, they could still expect to be victims of injustice.

So far as the Jews were concerned, the charges against Paul were that he tried to profane the temple, and more generally that he was promoting a Jewish heresy wherever he went. The first of these charges (which was little more than a pretext for his arrest) is simply denied; on the contrary, Paul is presented as a law-abiding Jewish

worshipper. The second charge is refuted by the argument that Paul was simply worshipping and serving God in the way that had been laid down in the Old Testament, and that he was and remained a Pharisee in his convictions. In other words, *Christianity is true Judaism*. This basic point is made at length, but it is clear that it cut no ice with the Jews, although some of the Pharisees were sympathetic to it. Here again Luke can only present the hard reality that many Jews refused to accept the Christian claim that Christianity is the fulfilment of Judaism. At the same time, Luke is using the motif to indicate that from a Roman point of view Christianity should be regarded as a legitimate development of Judaism, and should therefore receive the same privileged position as a tolerated religion within the Empire; the quarrels between Jews and Christians are theological in nature, and do not come within the cognizance of Roman law.

In face of this opposition two important facts emerge. The first is that Christians are called *to stand firm and to be faithful* despite the tribulations which they must endure. When they are commanded to stop preaching, their answer is a defiant refusal to do so. True, they find it necessary to retreat from towns where they are forbidden to continue preaching, but they simply carry on evangelism wherever they find opportunity to do so; the gospel command did not require them to continue to battle on in situations where they were unwelcome, but having faithfully borne their witness they were required to move on elsewhere (Luke 9:5). In the trial of Paul a different feature emerges. Paul uses the courtroom as a place to bear witness; his concern is not so much to defend himself as to proclaim the gospel (Luke 21:12–15). Opposition becomes an occasion for evangelism. This, of course, was also true of Peter and Stephen when they appeared in court scenes.

The other fact is that despite the opposition *the Word of God continues its triumphal progress*. The hand of God is upon the missionaries even in the midst of persecution. It does not remove them from danger and suffering, but on occasion they find divine protection from their enemies. Here again Luke's realism comes out; James dies, but Peter survives to fight another day. Paul is brought safely from Jerusalem to Rome despite every kind of obstacle and danger. God's declared purpose will be fulfilled, no matter what the opposition.

Acts is the story of the triumphant progress of the Word of God.

#### ***4. The inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God***

Acts reflects the tremendous tensions which existed in the early church over *the basis of the Gentile mission*. Although the Gospels record the commission given by Jesus that his disciples should take the gospel to all nations, at first the church was composed of Jews and carried out its evangelism among Jews. Contrary to a widespread popular belief, Luke makes no mention of Gentiles being present on the day of Pentecost other than Jewish proselytes (2:10). But within a few years the church found itself preaching the gospel to Samaritans, uncircumcised God-fearers and finally to pagan Gentiles. This progression is seen by Luke as divinely willed and prophesied; it was a turn of events that came about apart from any conscious planning by the church. The church had to come to terms with this fact.

The essence of the problem was whether the rise of the church had produced a new society that was different from Judaism. Since the first Christians were Jews, it was natural for them to live as Jews – to circumcise their children and to live according to the law of Moses, although admittedly there could be variations in the interpretation of the law, and Jesus himself had displayed considerable freedom with regard to certain aspects of it. The same way of life could be expected of Jewish proselytes who were converted to Christianity. Christianity could then be seen as the true and proper fulfilment of Judaism; the promised Messiah had come and brought renewal to his people.

Two factors disturbed this easy assumption. On the one hand, it became increasingly obvious that the Jewish leaders and many of the people were not prepared to accept Jesus as the Messiah, and an easy evolution from first-century Judaism to Christianity simply by incorporating the Christian message of Jesus as the Messiah was ruled out. In fact the Judaism of the early church's contemporaries had turned aside from the truth. It was Stephen who voiced criticism of the Jews of his time, alleging that they had failed to follow truly the law of Moses and that their worship of God in the temple was displeasing to him. Not surprisingly this attack provoked strong opposition from the Jewish leaders, and we may suspect that Stephen's outlook was

not immediately shared by all members of the church. Nevertheless, it was bound to become increasingly obvious that official Judaism was opposed to the church and regarded its views as heretical.

On the other hand, there was the problem of the entry of the Gentiles into the church. This not only intensified the opposition against the church from Judaism. It also raised acute questions within the church regarding its character and its way of life. There has been much discussion regarding the way in which Luke envisaged the nature of the church. One view is that he saw it as essentially a Jewish institution, the people of God, consisting of Jews, and from which Jews who refused to repent cut themselves off, and to which believing Gentiles can be joined.<sup>17</sup> The other view is that Luke saw God's purpose as the gathering of a new Israel, composed of both Jews and Gentiles, and that he describes the progressive separation of the church from Judaism.<sup>18</sup> The truth probably lies somewhere between these extremes; in our view Luke stresses the Jewish origins of the church and its roots in Old Testament prophecy, but shows that it is a people of God, composed of believing Jews and Gentiles, in which Jews may find the fulfilment of Judaism and Gentiles are not required to become Jews.

But how was this possible on a practical level? The problem was twofold. First, could Jewish Christians have fellowship with Gentiles without becoming 'unclean' through contact with people who did not observe the law of Moses? Secondly, could Gentiles come into a true relationship with God and his people merely by accepting Jesus as the Messiah? Were they not required to accept the Jewish law, including circumcision? Luke was quite certain that Gentiles did not need to be circumcised. But this solution led to searching struggles of conscience for Jewish Christians, and for many years a group of strictly law-abiding Jewish Christians continued to exist in Palestine in isolation from the rest of the church.

Luke depicts how the problem was solved in the early days. When God poured out the Spirit on the Gentiles, Peter was prepared to accept them as members of God's people, and to eat with them. The

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17. Jervell, pp. 41–74.

18. O'Neill. See the discussion in Wilson; also Bovon, pp. 342–361.

vision which he received from God showed him that there was no longer to be a distinction between clean and unclean foods. But it is doubtful how quickly other Jewish Christians came to share Peter's viewpoint (and even he found it difficult to maintain it consistently). When the Jerusalem church met with representatives from Antioch to consider the matter, the fundamental point that was accepted was that the Gentiles did not need to be circumcised. At the same time, however, they were asked to avoid alienating their Jewish colleagues by abstaining from food sacrificed to idols and from meat not slaughtered in the Jewish manner, and by observing Jewish standards of sexual behaviour. These requirements bear some relationship to the rules already accepted by God-fearers who worshipped in the synagogues. The only really difficult point was the rule about meat, and this may have applied only to common meals with Jews. In this way it was possible for strictly law-abiding Jews to recognize the validity of the Gentile mission. How long the regulations continued in force is not known. They were probably taken seriously in Jerusalem, especially under mounting Zealot pressure in favour of the preservation of Jewish national and cultural identity. Paul himself lived as a law-abiding Jew among Jews, although he strongly protested his freedom of conscience. It is unlikely that the Jerusalem regulations had a long or wide currency, however, and they probably fell into disuse. When they are echoed in Revelation 2:14, 20, the ruling about meat appears to have been quietly dropped.

Alongside the acceptance of the Gentiles Luke chronicles the increasing refusal of the Jews to accept the gospel. Paul's regular practice was to begin his mission in the local synagogue, and we almost gain the impression that only when the Jews refused the gospel did he turn to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46). It may be better to say that the Gentile mission took place once the Jews had had an opportunity to hear the gospel first.<sup>19</sup> Paul recognized that the gospel was for 'the Jew first ... and also the Greek' (Rom. 1:16). When the Jews rejected the gospel, they were rejected by God from

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19. Jervell, pp. 60f., does his best to play down the force of 13:46. He is at least correct, however, in insisting that the Gentile mission is not motivated solely by the refusal of the Jews to accept the gospel.

his people, a fact symbolized when the missionaries shook off the dust from their feet against them and turned to the Gentiles.<sup>20</sup> The point which is made in Acts 13:46 is repeated with tremendous emphasis at the climax of the book in 28:25–28. Yet one factor strangely absent from Acts is any reference to the divine judgment upon Jerusalem which figures so prominently in the Gospel (Luke 13:34f.; 19:41–44; 21:20–24; 23:28–31). Jerusalem, which figures in the Gospel as the place of the Lord's rejection, becomes the place where he rises from the dead, where the Spirit is poured out, and where the church begins its work. In Acts it is official Judaism rather than Jerusalem which stands under condemnation for refusing the gospel.

#### ***5. The life and organization of the church***

Luke is concerned to offer a picture of *the life and worship of the church* no doubt as a pattern to provide guidance for the church in his own time. From the brief summaries in the early chapters of Acts (2:42–47; 4:32–37) we gain a picture of small groups meeting together for teaching, fellowship, prayer and the breaking of bread. Entrance to the church is by baptism with water.

Luke particularly stresses the importance of the Spirit in the life of the church. The Spirit is the common possession of every Christian, the source of joy and power, and Christian leaders are people who are especially filled with the Spirit to perform their various functions. The Spirit guides the church in its choice of leaders and in its evangelistic activity to such an extent that Acts has sometimes been described as the book of 'The Acts of the Holy Spirit'.<sup>21</sup>

Initially the leadership of the church was in the hands of the apostles in Jerusalem together with the elders, and the church in Jerusalem occupied an important place in relation to the other churches which grew up subsequently. There were elders in the local churches, and special significance is attached to prophets and teachers, some of

20. Perhaps the motive indicated in Rom. 11:13f. is implied.

21. J. H. E. Hull, *The Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles* (London, 1968); F. F. Bruce, 'The Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles', *Interpretation* 27, 1973, pp. 166–183.

whom appear to have been resident while others were more itinerant. Luke says so little about how such people were appointed and what they did that we can only conclude that he did not regard this as important. Yet we are told how an apostle was appointed to replace Judas, and how seven men to assist the apostles were chosen. We hear briefly how missionaries were sent out by the church at Antioch and how Paul appointed elders in the churches which he founded. This is sufficient evidence to show that for Luke the significant factors were the spiritual qualities of the persons chosen and the guidance of the Spirit in the meetings that appointed them.

We also learn something about the work of missionaries. The principle of team work was established from the start, and for the most part the missionaries travelled in groups of two or more; Peter and Philip (chapters 8 – 10) were exceptions to the rule. Luke's manner of presentation has suggested to many readers that we should think of Paul and his colleagues as carrying on 'missionary journeys', but a closer study of the narrative shows that in fact Paul stayed in important centres of population for considerable periods of time. Whether Luke fully recognized Paul's principles of working is not clear, but he certainly gives us the evidence that Paul's journeys were far from being whistle-stop tours.

Luke records several sermons as examples of the way in which the gospel was preached, and one example of Paul speaking to Christian leaders about their responsibilities (20:17–35). The variety in these missionary sermons and the speeches of Christians on trial before Jewish and Roman bodies is no doubt meant to illustrate the different ways in which the gospel was presented to different groups of people, Jews and Greeks, cultured and uncultured, and it is hard to resist the impression that the sermons are presented as models for Luke's readers to use in their own evangelism. It is material of this kind which has led to the characterization of Acts as 'edifying'. Although the term, as used by Haenchen (pp. 103–110), seems at least mildly derogatory, it is a proper and respectable word to describe this book, intended as it is to show the Christians of Luke's day what it means to be the church and how they should continue to live according to the pattern established in the early days.

Luke's story is very much structured on the careers of the two Christian leaders, Peter and Paul. There are interesting parallels

between the two men, and one can also trace some parallelism between the careers of Jesus and Paul. Some scholars have shown great ingenuity in discerning this parallelism in detail and have probably exaggerated its presence.<sup>22</sup> In broad terms, however, the claim is persuasive, and shows that Luke saw a pattern for the life of the church and its missionaries in the life of its earthly Master.

### 3. The historicity of Acts

In the preceding section we have seen some of the theological interests which are apparent in the composition of Acts. Their presence has led an increasing number of scholars to question the historical value of Acts.<sup>23</sup> In the nineteenth century the so-called Tübingen school of criticism regarded Acts as a late attempt to varnish over the conflict between Peter and Paul which (it was alleged) had dominated the early years of the church; Acts presented a picture of smooth compromise and glossed over the harsh realities of the conflict.<sup>24</sup> Towards the end of the century the researches of Sir William Ramsay in particular did much to discredit this interpretation of Acts and to reaffirm the high historical quality of Luke's work.<sup>25</sup> Ramsay no doubt put the point much more strongly than many of his contemporaries would have been prepared to accept, and he was capable of making assertions about Luke's historical accuracy which went beyond what could be shown by the available evidence. Essentially the same point of view was presented more moderately in the major work of Anglo-American scholarship on Acts in the early twentieth century, *The Beginnings of Christianity*. The

22. M. D. Goulder, *Type and History in Acts* (London, 1964); W. Radl, *Paulus und Jesus im lukanischen Doppelwerk* (Bern and Frankfurt, 1975).

23. For a history of criticism with special reference to this question see Gasque.

24. H. Harris, *The Tübingen School* (Oxford, 1975).

25. W. M. Ramsay, *St Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (London, 1895, 1920<sup>56</sup>); *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (London, 1914).