

Cambridge University Press  
 978-0-521-09383-5 - Acts of the Apostles  
 J. W. Packer  
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# ACTS

## OF THE APOSTLES

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### THE BOOK AND ITS AUTHOR

*'And so to Rome'* (Acts 28: 14)

'Acts of the Apostles' is a strange title for a book that says nothing at all about the majority of the apostles of Christ. Instead the scene is peopled with men and women from all over the Mediterranean world. 'There were at Antioch, in the congregation there, certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen, who had been at the court of Prince Herod, and Saul' (13: 1). It is almost a missionary council or an international conference. Barnabas came from Cyprus, Simeon perhaps from Central Africa, Lucius from North Africa, Manaen from Palestine and Saul from Tarsus in Cilicia. Throughout this dramatic chronicle of the early church the stage is thronged. While a brief scene takes place between Philip the evangelist and the high official of the Ethiopian queen (8: 26-40), one of the principal actors, Saul of Tarsus, was 'breathing murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord' (9: 1). Sometimes an actor's part is played out and he leaves the stage for good: 'Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed for Cyprus' (15: 39). Immediately afterwards the gap is filled by a newcomer: 'he found a disciple named Timothy, the son of a Jewish Christian mother and a Gentile father' (16: 1). The crowd is varied; the scene kaleidoscopic. Yet through the bustle of travellers and the noise of courts of law there stride the two principals, and so gigantic are they that there is scarcely room on the stage for them together. As soon as Peter escapes

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from prison and leaves the scene, apart from his witness at the Jerusalem Council, Paul sets out from Antioch to conquer Asia Minor for the church.

This is not a first history of the early church, but a dramatic presentation, full of seething activity, of its formative years. B. H. Streeter in his *The Four Gospels* suggested that 'the title of the Acts might well have been "The Road to Rome"' (p. 532). Early Christianity followed the Roman roads but paused repeatedly by the way to convict and to convince. Perhaps, to adapt the title of Browning's poem, Acts tells 'how they brought the Good News from Jerusalem to Rome'. Indeed the apostles fulfilled Christ's command 'you will bear witness for me in Jerusalem, and all over Judaea and Samaria, and away to the ends of the earth' (1: 8).

*'Greetings to you from our dear friend Luke, the doctor'*  
 (Col. 4: 14)

Luke's name is mentioned only three times in the New Testament. Paul sends Luke's greetings to the church at Colossae (Col. 4: 14). In writing to Timothy, Paul speaks of him as his companion: 'I have no one with me but Luke' (2 Tim. 4: 11), and writing to Philemon he refers to Luke with Mark, Aristarchus and Demas as one of his 'fellow-workers' (verse 24). That it was Luke who wrote Acts was the tradition of the church as early as the end of the second century A.D. Irenaeus, bishop of Lugdunum or Lyons in southern France, refers in c. 180-90 to the work as *The Acts of the Apostles* and its author as Luke. The Muratorian canon (a late second-century fragment discovered by Ludovico Antonio Muratori, archivist to the duke of Modena in Italy in the eighteenth century, and containing a list of New Testament books) calls the book *The Acts of All the Apostles* and assigns it to Luke. Similarly in a preface to the third Gospel, written at about the same time and known as 'the anti-Marcionite prologue', Luke is said to be the author of Acts

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as well as of the Gospel. This preface set out to discredit the teaching of Marcion (died c. 160) who had rejected the Old Testament and its influence in the New. It stated that Luke was a Syrian doctor from Antioch, a companion of Paul, who died unmarried at the age of 84 at Boeotia in central Greece.

The preface to Acts (1: 1–5) claims that the work is a continuation of the Gospel, and dedicated to Theophilus (see p. 21). The somewhat abrupt conclusion, leaving Paul in Rome for ‘two full years at his own expense’ (28: 30), may indicate that the author had projected a still further section covering the last phase of Paul’s life, and culminating in his final imprisonment and death. Those sections in the latter half of the book in which the narrative changes from the third person to the first (16: 10–17; 20: 5–15; 21: 1–18; 27: 1–28: 16) may well be extracts from the author’s travel-diary. As they start when Paul first leaves Asia for Europe and end in Rome, these ‘we-sections’ may imply that Luke first joined the party at Troas and then accompanied Paul on and off for the rest of his journeys (see below, p. 92, for reference to an earlier ‘we-section’ introduced in one manuscript at 11: 28). Sir William Ramsay’s attractive suggestion (W. M. Ramsay, *St Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen*, p. 203) that Luke was himself the Macedonian (16: 9) whom Paul saw in his vision at Troas has not met with much support in view of the earlier tradition that Luke came from Antioch. Nonetheless it seems quite conceivable that a doctor from Antioch in Syria should have set up practice in so important a Roman town as Philippi and have met Paul on a visit to nearby Troas.

*‘These men are servants of the Supreme God, and are declaring to you a way of salvation’* (Acts 16: 17)

The shout of the slave-girl in Philippi is a summary of what Luke in Acts is trying to proclaim. This ‘way’ is what Theophilus wants to know. ‘In the first part’ of his work Luke ‘wrote of all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning

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until the day when, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen, he was taken up to heaven' (1: 1-2). In the gospel the Holy Spirit had worked in Christ to establish the 'way of salvation'. In Acts the same Spirit declares through the 'servants of the Supreme God' how that 'way of salvation' should be pursued. This was 'the new way' (9: 2) whose followers Saul of Tarsus arrested and brought to Jerusalem. This was 'the way of the Lord' (18: 25) in which the Alexandrian Jew, Apollos, had been instructed. Christianity for Luke is 'the way of the Lord' and the Christians who journey along it are under the guidance of the Holy Spirit through the apostles. Every traveller is wise if he seeks and obtains help from those who have followed the way before. So Priscilla and Aquila took Apollos 'in hand and expounded the new way to him in greater detail' (18: 26).

On occasion the traveller will have to dissociate himself from others who fail to see clearly where the true path is leading. 'It was necessary' said Paul and Barnabas to the Jews of Pisidian Antioch, 'that the word of God should be declared to you first. But since you reject it and thus condemn yourselves as unworthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles' (13: 46). The same thing happened in Corinth. 'Your blood be on your own heads!' said Paul to the Jews, 'My conscience is clear; now I shall go to the Gentiles' (18: 6). Sometimes it is necessary to make special provisions for new companions on the journey: men and women for whom the old rules are not applicable. Thus when Paul and Barnabas, Judas and Silas 'travelled down to Antioch... and delivered the letter' (15: 30) from the apostles and elders at Jerusalem releasing Gentiles from strict conformity to the Jewish Law, 'they all rejoiced at the encouragement it brought' (15: 31).

Friendly relations with others on the way are essential if progress is to be made and most of all, wherever possible, with those in authority. Whether in Philippi, Corinth, Ephesus or Caesarea, Paul found the Roman authorities friendly, especially when his citizenship was known. The very

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varied contacts made on the journey established the church in places as diverse as Pisidian Antioch, Philippi, Corinth, Athens and Ephesus, and its membership stretched from Africa to Rome. As its size and variety increased, so it became necessary for it to be more organized. Just as the Holy Spirit directed the way along which the Gospel should go (16: 6–10), so the seven assistants to the Twelve were selected as ‘men of good reputation . . . full of the Spirit and of wisdom’ (6: 3). In all these ways the Holy Spirit is seen at work impressing upon those who are following the way that the living Christ is truly one of their company.

*‘On the Sabbath they went to synagogue and took their seats’*  
 (Acts 13: 14)

This was in Pisidian Antioch, not Palestine. One of the most useful aids to the spread of the Way in the first century was the presence of a Jewish community in most towns of the Roman Empire. The larger communities possessed their synagogues, where, as at Corinth, Paul ‘held discussions . . . Sabbath by Sabbath’ (18: 4). The smaller used ‘a place of prayer’, which was normally ‘outside the city gate by the river-side’ for the convenience of ritual washing, as at Philippi (16: 13). Generally the apostles received a friendly welcome on their arrival. ‘The officials of the synagogue’ at Pisidian Antioch ‘sent this message to them: “Friends, if you have anything to say to the people by way of exhortation, let us hear it”’ (13: 15). But later ‘when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealous resentment, and contradicted what Paul said, with violent abuse’ (13: 45). The same thing happened at Thessalonica. For three Sabbaths Paul argued with the Jews in their synagogue until ‘in their jealousy’ they ‘recruited some low fellows from the dregs of the populace, roused the rabble, and had the city in an uproar’ (17: 5). At Beroea the Jews ‘were more civil than those at Thessalonica’ (17: 11). When Paul and Silas spoke in their synagogue ‘they received the

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message with great eagerness' (17: 11) until the Thessalonian Jews arrived to stir up trouble. Perhaps the Jewish community in Athens was not so influential as those in other towns. Luke says little of Paul's arguments in the synagogue there and more of his discussions 'in the city square every day with casual passers-by' (17: 17).

Throughout the Roman Empire these pockets of Judaism provided Paul, the Jew and Roman citizen, with obvious bases from which to begin his mission. When, as at Corinth, opposition arose to his teaching 'that the Messiah was Jesus' (18: 5), then he left the synagogue and turned to the Gentiles, but the base had served its purpose and given him an initial hearing in the city. Judaism was an established religion in the Empire and vital to the spread of the Way. This Dispersion of the Israelites, known as the Diaspora, had begun long ago with the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. to the Assyrians and the fall of the southern kingdom of Judah in 597 B.C. to the Babylonians. The deportations that followed these defeats and other, voluntary, migrations like that to Egypt in Jeremiah 42-4 led later to the spread of Jewish communities throughout the Greek and Roman Empires. The Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 B.C. to c. A.D. 50), tells us that in his day there were not less than a million Jews in Alexandria. These communities, despite the influence of Hellenistic culture, still paid the Temple taxes and kept the Law of Moses. They were outposts of Judaism in the Empire, to whose meetings in the synagogue Paul, 'following his usual practice', went first (17: 2). Only when the Jews had rejected his message and condemned themselves 'as unworthy of eternal life', did he say 'we now turn to the Gentiles' (13: 46).

The zeal of Jewish Christians for the Law could be a stumbling-block to the Way. When Paul made his final visit to Jerusalem and reported to James and the elders, he 'described in detail all that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. When they heard this, they gave praise to God' (21: 19-20). They were not so happy about the

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rumours that had reached them that Paul had taught 'all the Jews in the gentile world to turn their backs on Moses, telling them to give up circumcising their children and following our way of life' (21: 21). There were many thousands of Jewish converts in the city who were 'staunch upholders of the Law' (21: 20). These would have to be convinced that the rumours were false and that Paul was 'a practising Jew' and kept the Law himself (21: 24). To do this, James and the elders advised him to 'go through the ritual of purification' with four men who were under a vow and pay the expenses of their sacrifices. Such an act would prove Paul to be a practising Jew. At Cenchreae he was himself under a vow and 'had his hair cut off' (18: 18) as a sign that as a Jew he accepted the Law. The circumcision of Timothy (16: 3) is a further indication that Paul believed the Law to be binding on a Jew. Timothy was technically a Jew, as he had a Jewish mother, therefore 'out of consideration for the Jews who lived in those parts' Paul circumcised him.

The Way was a gentile mission as well as Jewish. It had been revealed to Peter at Joppa and Caesarea that 'God has no favourites' (10: 34). 'The believers who had come with Peter, men of Jewish birth, were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit should have been poured out even on Gentiles' (10: 45). When the church in Jerusalem heard what had happened they challenged Peter. "'You have been visiting men who are uncircumcised,'" they said, "and sitting at table with them!"' (11: 3). But when Peter related what had happened to him at Joppa and Caesarea, 'their doubts were silenced. They gave praise to God and said, "This means that God has granted life-giving repentance to the Gentiles also"' (11: 18). The position of the Gentiles was still not clear. Peter, Barnabas and other Jewish Christians later withdrew from meals with gentile believers at Antioch (Gal. 2: 11-13) and merited Paul's rebuke. Similarly, Jewish Christians came down from Judaea to Antioch and taught that circumcision 'in accordance with Mosaic practice' was essential to salvation (15: 1). The

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matter had obviously to be argued out in council. Paul, Barnabas and others from Antioch went up to Jerusalem to see the elders and apostles. The extreme Jewish view was expressed by 'some of the Pharisaic party who had become believers'. They said the Gentiles 'must be circumcised and told to keep the Law of Moses' (15: 5). After the debate James summed up. 'My judgement therefore is that we should impose no irksome restrictions on those of the Gentiles who are turning to God, but instruct them by letter to abstain from things polluted by contact with idols, from fornication, from anything that has been strangled, and from blood' (15: 19-20). These decisions were embodied in a letter to the gentile churches and handed on by Paul and his fellow-missionaries 'as they made their way from town to town' (16: 4). Although Jewish Christians were required to fulfil the Mosaic Law, there was no doubt that gentile converts were exempt. When Paul was asked to prove to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem that he was a practising Jew, the elders repeated the decisions of the council regarding Gentiles (21: 25). The Way was consistently preached first to the Jews for whom there was no relaxation of the Mosaic Law. After that, the appeal was made to the Gentiles who, though exempt from keeping the Jewish Law, must accept the Jerusalem decrees. As time went on this distinction between Jewish and non-Jewish Christians gradually disappeared except among some Jewish Christians who tended to want to preserve it. The church soon became so independent of Judaism that the problem no longer existed.

*'They also appointed elders for them in each congregation'*  
 (Acts 14: 23)

By the time Paul had reached the capital, the power of the Holy Spirit promised by Jesus (1: 8) had driven the church along the Roman roads throughout the Empire from Jerusalem to Rome. After the consolidation in Jerusalem following



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the drama of Pentecost, the number of converts increased rapidly. At the appointment of Matthias there were 'about one hundred and twenty in all' of the assembled brotherhood (1: 15). After Peter's first address 'some three thousand were added to their number' (2: 41) 'and day by day the Lord added to their number those whom he was saving' (2: 47). The total increased to 'about five thousand' men (4: 4), when Peter had addressed the crowds after the healing of the cripple at the Beautiful Gate. It was no wonder that before long the apostles would need the assistance of the Seven (6: 1-6).

The martyrdom of Stephen 'was the beginning of a time of violent persecution for the church in Jerusalem; and all except the apostles were scattered over the country districts of Judaea and Samaria' (8: 1). The next stage in the spread of Christianity had begun. Philip was at work, first in Samaria and then in the south towards Gaza. After his conversion Saul 'silenced the Jews of Damascus with his cogent proofs that Jesus was the Messiah' (9: 22). Peter's 'general tour' (9: 32) led him through Lydda to Joppa and then to Cornelius at Caesarea. 'Meanwhile those who had been scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen made their way to Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch' (11: 19). This was at first a mission to Jews only, but 'natives of Cyprus and Cyrene' among the missionaries 'began to speak to Gentiles as well' (11: 20). When Barnabas was sent from Jerusalem to inquire into this new movement, he rejoiced at what was happening. 'And large numbers were won over to the Lord' (11: 24). 'It was about this time' (12: 1) that Herod launched his fruitless attack on the church by killing the apostle James and imprisoning Peter. Herod died but 'the word of God continued to grow and spread' (12: 24).

The nerve-centre of the church was now at Syrian Antioch and from there the Holy Spirit sent out Barnabas and Saul, with Mark as their assistant, for work in Cyprus (13: 1-5). The subsequent journey on the mainland from Pisidian Antioch to Derbe and back is breath-taking for its speed and,

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despite the persecution aroused, its success. The converts now needed some form of organization. The apostles could only visit occasionally. Hardships would arise. The infant churches would need the strength of a common cause. Thus Paul and Barnabas 'appointed elders for them in each congregation, and with prayer and fasting committed them to the Lord in whom they had put their faith' (14: 23). This organization resembles that of the synagogue. The Jerusalem church was probably organized in the same way (notice the elders in 11: 30 and 15: 6). At this stage the elders or presbyters would be the senior members of the local church and formed its governing body, responsible for its worship, charity and discipline. This became the pattern for the future and its success was apparent; for when Paul and Silas revisited the towns of the Phrygian and Galatian region they found that 'day by day, the congregations grew stronger in faith and increased in numbers' (16: 5).

The meeting-place for these young churches was doubtless at first in the houses of members. Just as the church at Jerusalem met in 'the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark' (12: 12), so at Philippi it began in Lydia's house (16: 40). In Thessalonica the church may well have used Jason's house (17: 5) and in Corinth the home of Aquila and Priscilla (18: 2) or the house of Titius Justus 'next door to the synagogue' (18: 7). Paul's repeated journeys over the same territory brought 'new strength to all the converts' (18: 23) of these new and growing churches.

Contacts between local churches were established. Priscilla and Aquila, now in Ephesus, gave hospitality to Apollos and then, 'finding that he wished to go across to Achaia, the brotherhood gave him their support, and wrote to the congregation there to make him welcome' (18: 27). Discussions not only took place in synagogues but also in pagan lecture-halls like that of Tyrannus in Ephesus (19: 9), or before the Court of Areopagus, probably in the colonnade surrounding the market-place in Athens (17: 19-23). On his last journey