

The Acts of the Holy Spirit

Editorial

The articles in this issue of *Mishkan* all deal with topics related to the book traditionally known as the Acts of the Apostles.

There may, indeed, be better names for the fifth book of the New Testament than the Acts of the Apostles. “The Acts of the Holy Spirit” has been suggested.¹ It is undeniably a book which testifies that Jesus’ works did not end with his death and resurrection. Pentecost followed! The crucified and risen Jesus continues to work after his death, resurrection, and ascension. In glimpses, the Acts of the Apostles shows how the absent Jesus is present through the Holy Spirit. We modern readers also become involved, namely as “writers” who record the continuing acts of the Holy Spirit — and our own acts!

The book of Acts demonstrates that the acts of the Holy Spirit and the acts of human beings do not stand in opposition. Without the Holy Spirit there is no faith; without human acts and words and sacrifices there is no progress.

The purpose of the book can hardly be reduced to a single formula. Some have suggested that its primary purpose is apologetic: either to prove to the Romans that the new faith was politically harmless,² or to prove Paul’s “orthodoxy” before his critics.³ It is more natural, however, to regard it as an edifying text which, in a literary form, brings consolation and encouragement by drawing the reader’s attention to God’s acts in salvation history.

Luke in a Storm

Because of what he wrote in the Acts of the Apostles, Luke has found himself at the center of a storm. His books have received no shortage of criticism. In the last century, a great many scholars thought that Luke tried to cover up the profound differences allegedly found between so-called Jewish Christianity, represented by Peter, and gentile Christianity, with Paul as its exponent.⁴

Leading German scholars of this century have regarded Luke as an independent theologian, meaning that his account first and foremost gives the reader an impression of his way of thinking rather than an insight into the thinking of his main characters. He has often been considered a

¹The expression was first used by J. Bengel in 1742; cf. F.F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, revised edition, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 31.

² See I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentary (Leicester/Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press/Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 21-22.

³ See J. Jervell, *Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1979), 185-207.

⁴ On F.C. Baur and the so-called Tübingen school of criticism — and a critique of these — see W. Ward Gasque, *A History of the Criticism of the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), 21-95. Cf. also J. Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (London: SMC Press, 1959), 69-86.

mediocre historian.⁵

A number of English scholars have opposed this critical picture of Luke and his presentation in Acts.⁶ It is true that Luke does not write like a twentieth-century historian — but what writer in antiquity did? It is also true that our understanding of church history between 30 and 60 AD — the period which Luke covers — contains many gaps. But we would have been in an infinitely worse situation without the book. Together with Paul's letters, the book gives us a certain idea of the peculiarity and expansion of the Jesus movement, its external as well as internal struggles, and not least the problems connected with the conditions for including the gentiles in that Jewish movement.

Luke did not intend to give an exhaustive description of the church's history in the first three decades after Jesus' death and resurrection. Rather, he concentrates on his two principal characters, Peter and Paul, and focuses on separate events. Perhaps he had both oral and written material at his disposal; perhaps he himself experienced some of the occurrences which he describes, depending on whether or not the so-called "we-sections" (Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16) originate with Luke himself.

It is certain that Luke did not experience everything himself and therefore had to rely on the accounts of others. Some believe that descriptions of the church's activity and mission were included in the early preaching and that Luke knew and used these.⁷

When Luke leaves out things which modern historians would have included and repeats important matters which modern historians would have relegated to a footnote, he is adopting the style of contemporary writers who endeavored in this way to make the description vivid, creating the maximum effect on his readers. It is obvious that everything has passed through Luke's pen.

But Luke is more than an ordinary historian. When writing about the past he preaches to his own time. Luke's subject is, above everything else, salvation history.⁸ He is writing the last chapter in the history of God's people, as it were. His pre-eminent source is the scriptures. Through these the God of Israel gave promises which he has now fulfilled in Jesus. And God still steers the course of events in "the last days", the era of the Holy Spirit, the age of mission.

Not the Birthday of the Church

Some gentile Christians call Pentecost the birthday of the church. They want to say by this that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit created something new in God's salvation history. Although this is

⁵ M. Dibelius is one of the leading German exponents of this critical view; his articles are listed in Gasque, 201-250; among others are H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St Luke* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960) and E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971). Among German scholars who have defended Luke is M. Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1979). Hengel maintains that Luke "is no less trustworthy than other historians of antiquity" (p. 60).

⁶ At the turn of the century, not least through Sir William Ramsay's writings and later through F.F. Bruce's; cf. I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, 34-35. Also worth mentioning is A.N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963). See also note 9 below.

⁷ See Jervell, 19-39, who argues that the apostles' activities and the establishment of congregations were events which formed part of the missionary proclamation of the church; cf. Marshall, 38.

⁸ For a discussion of the concept of "salvation-history", see I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1970), 53-115.

true, the description is misleading. God also had an assembly before Pentecost, in the desert, for example (7:38). With Pentecost, God's church for the last days begins its ministry. It is the renewed Israel which steps forward, the people of the Messiah, with a message to Jews as well as gentiles. Since gentiles are now given a share in the blessing to Israel, the church consists of both Jews and gentiles.

Consistently in Acts, the way to be incorporated into the church is through repentance, faith, and baptism, whereby one receives the gift of the Holy Spirit (2:38).

On the Day of Pentecost, 3000 people accepted the gospel in Jerusalem (2:41); the number soon increased to 5000 (4:4). These are the kind of figures with which Luke deals when he describes Jews accepting the gospel.⁹ When Luke records Paul's work among the gentiles he speaks of figures less two or even three zeros!

An Idealized Picture?

Some expositors think that Luke has idealized the picture of the church in Jerusalem. Not all was pure idyll, it is argued. Doubtless this is true, and Luke was well aware of it. He uses bold strokes of the brush, but as soon as he has done so, he is not afraid to record problems and disagreements in the young movement.

When Luke says that the believers had "everything" in common (2:44), he makes it clear (5:4) that "everything" does not mean "everything without exception": a believer was allowed to have private property. A study of Luke's usage of "everything/everybody" reveals that it usually means "very much/very many".

One should not therefore too quickly assume that Luke presents a idealized picture of the church. A careful reading of the texts shows that Luke does relate quite a lot about problems and difficulties in the first church. It was not a golden age without human weakness and sin.

The account of Ananias and Sapphira (5:1-11) is a horrifying example of this. The neglect of the Greek-speaking Jewish widows in the daily distribution of food (6:1-6) is another example. Church growth gives rise to problems, and since the apostles were responsible for the relief of the poor they also shared the responsibility for the problems. In other words, the apostles are not depicted as perfect but as troubleshooters worth following.

The church in Jerusalem cannot agree whether or not to welcome Paul as a Jesus-believer; they are afraid of him, and it is only through Barnabas' intervention that he is welcomed (9:26-27).

Disagreement over the conditions for the inclusion of gentiles in the church — whether gentiles had to become Jews in order to be genuine Jesus-believers — is a fourth example of crisis. Chapter 15 is evidence of this. They found the solution, but only after much discussion (cf. 15:7).

⁹ For these large numbers compared to the size of Jerusalem in the first century AD, see Wolfgang Reinhardt, "The Population Size of Jerusalem and the Numerical Growth of the Jerusalem Church", in Richard Bauckham (ed.), *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting (The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting IV)*, (Grand Rapids/Carlisle: Eerdmans Publishing Co./The Paternoster Press, 1995), 237-265.

When Disagreement becomes Theology **— the Example of Paul and Barnabas**

Luke's account in 15:36-41 of the bitter controversy between Paul and Barnabas is perhaps the strongest evidence that a golden age never existed among the first Jesus-believers.

The way Luke presents the account makes the dispute seem to center around differences of opinions over a person: Was John Mark suited or not suited to take part in the second missionary journey, considering that he had left them on the first journey? Luke does not mention the reason why he had left them (13:13). Nor does he theologize the problem. He does not even commit himself directly on this point. Luke's account does not acquit Paul of his share in the unhappy conflict; who was at fault remains an open question. Nevertheless, Paul's relationship to the church in Antioch is not influenced by it. And Luke shows that there is more to be said about the believers in the first church than that they were "one in heart and mind" (4:32).

Some expositors are not content with Luke's explanation, however. They insist on seeing a more profound theological disagreement which Luke should have hidden from his readers. They assert that Mark and Barnabas had a theological disagreement with Paul over the question of the gentile Christians' position regarding the Law.¹⁰ But this does not harmonize with what is said in 15:22, 32.

If there is anything positive at all in this dispute, it is that the gospel is spread in spite of people's disagreement and that it is proclaimed in more places because there are now two teams operating independently.

We must admit that it can often be said about us that we theologize — or spiritualize — problems which have little to do with theology — or spirit — because in this way we can feel superior to our opponents.

Concluding it can be said that the acts of the Holy Spirit are greater than the acts of men, even the acts of the apostles, so that the gospel is spread in spite of the disagreements of believers. If people were to wait to spread the gospel until they were perfect, no one would ever have heard it.

The call is: Be of one mind! However, Luke has shown that even if believers are not of one mind the gospel must still be proclaimed.

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¹⁰ For example, Haenchen, 475-77.