

THE EASY-TO-READ
DEVOTIONAL COMMENTARY



ACTS

The Holy Spirit At Work



UNDERSTANDING GOD'S WORD
VERSE-BY-VERSE

ACTS—THE HOLY SPIRIT AT WORK
by Practical Christianity Foundation

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INTRODUCTION



The Book of Acts recounts the history of the early church, starting with the ascension of Jesus to His Father in Heaven and ending with **Paul's**([view image](#)) ministry in Rome. Because it follows the activities of some of Jesus' apostles and extensively covers the ministries of **Peter** and Paul, this book has also been called "The Acts of the Apostles."

Two early church historians, **Eusebius** and **Jerome**, identify the author as **Luke**, a contemporary of Paul who travelled with Paul on many of his missionary endeavors. They affirm Luke's authorship of this history as well as the gospel that bears his name. They further reveal that he was a native of **Antioch**([view image](#)).² The earliest tradition of the church unanimously attributed this work to Luke.

Although the author never identifies himself in either of these narratives, both are addressed to the same recipient, Theophilus. Scholars wonder about the recipient of these works since the name means "lover of God." There is some speculation that they were written to those "who love God." Others believe that the address of "Your Excellency" demonstrates that this was a real person, possibly a well-known Roman dignitary, perhaps one of those who had turned to Christ in "Caesar's household" (***Philippians 4:22***).¹

What we know of the author comes from glimpses found mostly in the Book of Acts. Luke was not one of the twelve original apostles. In fact, we have no evidence to suggest that he ever met Jesus on a personal basis. In **Paul's**([view image](#)) writings, Luke was identified as the "beloved physician" (***Colossians 4:14***) and Paul's "fellow-worker" (***Philemon 24***).

In the gospel that bears his name and in this book of Acts, Luke provides a narrative of the life of Christ and a sequential narrative of the history of the early church. It tells of the beginnings of the primarily Jewish church in **Jerusalem** and expands to cover Paul's ministry to the Gentiles.

Like Mark's gospel, Luke wrote a history based on the testimony of eyewitnesses who accompanied Jesus during His earthly ministry (*Luke 1:1–4*). His association with early Jewish believers is confirmed by many references in the book of Acts, primarily working alongside the **Apostle Paul** (*Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16*). However, Luke himself was not a Jew. He was a Gentile (*Colossians 4:11, 14*). His love of history, his interest in the sciences, and his attention to detail make him a reliable contributor to an otherwise Jewish compilation of Biblical literature.

Because of Luke's careful recording of the history immediately surrounding the growing church, there is reasonable evidence to believe that both the Gospel of Luke and Acts were written about A.D. 61–62. Like the other Synoptic Gospels, **Matthew** and **Mark**, Luke records the **Olivet Discourse** in which Jesus predicts the destruction of Jerusalem. Since that destruction is not recorded in Acts, it is reasonable to conclude that it was written before A.D. 70. Acts also records nothing of the great Christian persecution by the Roman Emperor **Nero**([view image](#)) in A.D. 64. This provides a possible date of A.D. 63 for Acts and maybe a year or two earlier for the gospel narrative. Some scholars prefer a more general date of A.D. 50–60.³

Luke approaches the history of the early church with the same meticulous care that he used in his gospel, providing details that help us understand the historical context of events that followed Jesus' earthly sojourn. Just before Jesus' return to His Father (*Acts 1:9*) Jesus told His disciples: "You will be my witnesses to testify about me in Jerusalem, throughout **Judea**([view image](#)) and **Samaria**, and to the ends of the earth" (*Acts 1:8*). This statement provides a good outline for the study of the book of Acts. Under the authoritative direction of the Holy Spirit (*Acts 2:4*) the disciples testified to the good news of Christ's salvation first in the region of Jerusalem (*Acts 2:1–8:3*). Then, when threatened with persecution, the disciples began to leave Jerusalem and carried the Gospel to Samaria and Judea (*8:4–12:25*). During this period Saul of **Tarsus**([view image](#)), later known as Paul, was converted and under strong conviction carried the news of the resurrected Christ to the ends of the world (*Acts 13:1–28:31*).

Although Luke was a Gentile, he drew on the Old Testament Scriptures of the Jewish people. He affirmed Jesus as God's Messiah, the long awaited Promise to the Jews. Using that context as a springboard he also affirmed

that this Messiah was also the Savior of the Gentiles. In this way Luke provides the transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. He also shows the transition from Israel as God's chosen nation to the Church, including both Jews and Gentiles, as God's chosen witnesses to His salvation.

The most important component of Luke's history begins with Jesus' declaration that the disciples should remain in Jerusalem until they received the Holy Spirit (*Acts 1:8*). On the day of **Pentecost** the Holy Spirit descended on the small gathering of believers and transformed their lives. From that day forward throughout Luke's account the Holy Spirit is shown to be the teacher, guide, and power behind the explosion of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus, we could say that this book is the history of the work of the Holy Spirit in and through Jesus' followers convicting people of their sin, Christ's righteousness, and the Father's judgment (*John 16:8*). Although this book is not doctrinal in nature, there is ample evidence of the way that God works through His Church, both in the days of the apostles and in our world today.

ANTIOCH — There were several cities in region that bore the name of Antioch. They were founded by Antiochus Epiphanes and the Seleucid dynasty following the death of Alexander the Great. In these passages, we are talking about Antioch in Syria. The city was located on the river Orontes, about 16 miles (26km) from the Mediterranean, and some 300 miles (483km) north of Jerusalem. It was the metropolis of Syria, and afterwards became the capital of the Roman province in Asia. It ranked third, after Rome and Alexandria, in point of importance, of the cities of the Roman Empire. It was called the "first city of the East." Christianity was early introduced into it (*Acts 11:19, 21, 24*), and the name "Christian" was first applied here to its professors (*Acts 11:26*). It is intimately connected with the early history of the gospel (*Acts 6:5; 11:19, 27, 28, 30; 12:25; 15:22–35; Galatians 2:11, 12*). It was the great central point whence missionaries to the Gentiles were sent forth. It was the birth-place of the famous Christian father Chrysostom, who died 407. It bears the modern name of Antakia, and is now a miserable, decaying Turkish town. Like Philippi, it was raised to the rank of a Roman colony. Such colonies were ruled by "praetors" (*Acts 16:20, 21*).¹

¹ M. G. Easton, *Easton's Bible Dictionary* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893).

APOSTLE — It is not hard to know what the word apostle means, because the apostles themselves made the definition very clear. ²¹*He must be one of the men who accompanied Jesus with us the entire time that the Lord Jesus was among us.* ²²*This person must have been with us from the time that John was baptizing people to the day that Jesus was taken from us” (Acts 1:21–22).* Thus, we may conclude that an apostle was one who had traveled with Jesus throughout His earthly ministry. As such, an apostle was one who had heard what Jesus taught, witnessed the miracles He performed, and experienced the miscarriage of justice that resulted in Jesus’ execution. An apostle would also be a witness to Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. Such a man could provide reliable eyewitness testimony to Jesus’ work, which provided salvation to those for whom He died.

One argument against the authenticity of Paul’s apostleship appears to have been the fact that he was neither numbered among the pillars of Jerusalem (*Galatians 2:9*) nor one of the original twelve apostles of our Lord (*Luke 6:13-16*). In Acts 2:12-26, one hundred and twenty disciples cast lots to replace Judas Iscariot. The lots were cast and Matthias replaced Judas, numbered with the Twelve. Nevertheless, Jesus Christ confronted Paul as he entered Damascus (*Acts 9:1-19*), completely transforming his heart and redirecting his perspective about Jesus. A three-year sojourn in the Arabian Peninsula followed this encounter. During this time, Paul received intensive training in the Truth of the Gospel (*Galatians 1:15-17*). Therefore, as an apostle “born out of due time” (*1 Corinthians 15:8-9*), Paul became the primary apostle appointed by God to proclaim the Gospel to those who were not Jews (*Acts 9:15-16*).

EUSEBIUS — Eusebius of Caesarea (*ca.* A.D. 260–340), bishop of Caesarea and prolific historian, biblical scholar, and Christian apologist. Educated in the Alexandrian tradition by the presbyter Pamphilus (hence his designation also as Eusebius Pamphili), his text-critical skills were employed as copyist for the emperor Constantine. His ten-volume *Historia ecclesiastica* (*Church History*) records the history of the Church from apostolic times until *ca.* 323; the many quotations and paraphrases preserve portions of ancient works which otherwise have not survived. Eusebius’ earlier *Chronicle* provides a comparative chronology of ancient Near Eastern, classical, and biblical history. Although he composed extensive commentaries using

literal and allegorical modes of exegesis, Eusebius' most important contributions to biblical studies were his *Onomasticon*, a topographical catalogue of biblical sites, and the *Eusebian Canons*, a system of tables indicating parallel passages in the Gospels.¹

ca. circa

ca. circa

¹Allen C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987) 358.

JEROME — (c.345–420), Eusebius Hieronymus, biblical scholar.

The date of Jerome's birth at Strido, near Aquileia, has been the subject of dispute: Prosper of Aquitaine says that he was 90 when he died, implying that he was born in 330; though a chronology based on Prosper's statement has recently found some support, most scholars argue for a later date. Jerome studied at Rome, where he was baptized, and then travelled in Gaul before devoting himself to an ascetic life with friends at Aquileia. About 374 he set out for Palestine. He delayed in Antioch, where he heard the lectures of Apollinarius of Laodicea until self-accused in a dream of preferring pagan literature to religious. He then settled as a hermit at Chalcis in the Syrian desert for four or five years, and while there learned Hebrew. On his return to Antioch he was ordained priest by Paulinus, next spent some time in Constantinople, and from 382 to 385 was back in Rome, where he acted as secretary to Pope Damasus and successfully preached asceticism. After Damasus' death he visited Antioch, Egypt, and Palestine, and in 386 finally settled at Bethlehem, where he ruled a newly founded men's monastery and devoted the rest of his life to study.

Jerome's writings issued from a scholarship unsurpassed in the early Church. His greatest achievement was his translation of most of the Bible into Latin from the original tongues, to which he had been originally prompted by Damasus (see VULGATE). He also wrote many biblical commentaries, in which he brought a wide range of linguistic and topographical material to bear on the interpretation of the sacred text. Further, he anticipated the Reformers in advocating the acceptance by the Church of the Hebrew Canon of Scripture, thereby excluding those Books which came to be called the Apocrypha. In addition to his biblical work, he translated and continued Eusebius' 'Chronicle'; compiled a 'De Viris Illustribus', a bibliography of ecclesiastical writers; and translated into

Latin works by Origen and Didymus. His correspondence is of great interest and historical importance. His passionate nature also led him to throw himself into many controversies and to attack Arianism, Pelagianism, and Origenism (the last of which had led to a bitter quarrel with his friend Rufinus of Aquileia who had remained faithful to Origen). In some of his letters to friends and in his tracts against Helvidius and Jovinian, he advocated extreme asceticism.

Since the 13th century he has often been depicted in art with a red hat, on the supposition that Damasus created him a cardinal. He is also often represented with a lion at his feet. His feast day is 30 Sept.¹

¹ F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. rev. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). 872.

JERUSALEM — Jerusalem is one of the world's famous cities. Under that name, it dates from at least the 3rd millennium BC; and today is considered sacred by the adherents of the three great monotheistic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The city is set high in the hills of Judah, about 50 km from the Mediterranean, and over 30 km W of the N end of the Dead Sea. It rests on a none-too-level plateau, which slopes noticeably towards the SE. To the E lies the ridge of Olivet. Access to the city on all sides except the N is hampered by three deep ravines, which join in the Siloam Valley, near the well Bir Eyyub, SE of the city. The E valley is Kidron; the W is now called the Wadi al-Rababi, and is probably to be equated with the Valley of Hinnom; and the third cuts the city in half before it runs S, and slightly E, to meet the other two. This latter ravine is not mentioned or named in Scripture (although Maktesh, Zp. 1:11, may well have been the name of part of it), so it is usually referred to as the Tyropoeon Valley, *i.e.*, the Valley of the Cheese-makers, after Josephus.¹

W West, western

N North, northern

E East, eastern; Elohist

N North, northern

E East, eastern; Elohist

W West, western

¹D. F. Payne, “Jerusalem”, *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. R. W. Wood, I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer and D. J. Wiseman, 3rd ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1996). 557.

JUDEA — Place-name meaning “Jewish.” In Ezra 5:8 the Aramaic designation of a province that varied in size with changing political circumstances, but always included the city of Jerusalem and the territory immediately surrounding it. The area, formerly called Judah, was first given the name Judea following the Babylonian exile. During the Persian period, Judea occupied a very small area. Under the Maccabees, however, the territory was expanded in size and enjoyed a period of political independence. Herod the Great, appointed over roughly the same territory by Rome, had the title king of Judea. Judea, Samaria, and Galilee were generally considered, in Roman times, to be the three main geographical divisions of Palestine.¹

¹ “Judea”, *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, Archie England, Steve Bond, E. Ray Clendenen and Trent C. Butler (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003). 960-61.

LUKE — Author of the Third Gospel and the book of Acts in the NT, as well as a close friend and traveling companion of Paul. The apostle called him “loved” (Colossians 4:14). Luke referred to his journeys with Paul and his company in Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16. Many scholars believe Luke wrote his Gospel and the book of Acts while in Rome with Paul during the apostle’s first Roman imprisonment. Apparently Luke remained nearby or with Paul also during the apostle’s second Roman imprisonment. Shortly before his martyrdom, Paul wrote that “only Luke is with me” (2 Timothy 4:11).

Early church fathers Jerome (ca. A.D. 400) and Eusebius (ca. A.D. 300) identified Luke as being from Antioch. His interest in Antioch is clearly seen in his many references to that city (Acts 11:19–27; 13:1–3; 14:26; 15:22, 35; 18:22). Luke adopted Philippi as his home, remaining behind there to superintend the young church while Paul went on to Corinth during the second missionary journey (Acts 16:40).

Paul identified Luke as a physician (Colossians 4:14) and distinguished Luke from those “of the circumcision” (Colossians 4:11). Early sources indicate that Luke was a Gentile. Tradition holds that he was Greek. The circumstances of Luke’s conversion are not revealed. An early source

supplied a fitting epitaph: “He served the Lord without distraction, having neither wife nor children, and at the age of 84 he fell asleep in Boeatia, full of the Holy Spirit.”¹

¹ T. R. McNeal, “Luke”, *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, Archie England, Steve Bond, E. Ray Clendenen and Trent C. Butler (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003). 1056-57.

MARK (JOHN) — Author of the Second Gospel and an early missionary leader. John Mark, as Luke calls him in Acts, was the son of Mary, in whose house the church was meeting when Peter was miraculously freed from prison in Acts 12. Commonly called by his Greek name, Mark, in the NT, John was probably his Jewish name. Mark was a Jew, Barnabas’ cousin (*Colossians 4:10*), and a companion of Barnabas and Paul on their first missionary journey. On the first missionary journey Mark ministered with the group on Cyprus, the home territory of Barnabas, and also a place with family connections for Mark. However, when they left for Pamphylia, Mark returned to Jerusalem.

Mark was the cause of the split between Paul and Barnabas when Mark’s participation in the second missionary journey was debated (*Acts 15:39*). Barnabas sided with his cousin, while Paul refused to take Mark since he had left them on the first journey. Later, however, Paul indicated that Mark was with him (in Rome likely) as Paul sent letters to the Colossians (*Col. 4:10*) and Philemon (*Philem. 24*). Mark was also summoned to be with Paul in 2 Tim. 4:11. Whatever rift existed earlier was healed sometime and their friendship renewed.

Mark is closely related to Peter. In 1 Pet. 5:13 Peter refers to Mark, his “son,” as being with him in Rome (Babylon). Early church tradition supports the strong association between Peter and Mark. In the early second century, Papias mentioned that Mark was Peter’s interpreter. Other early church figures associate Mark with Peter and note that the Gospel of Mark was based upon Peter’s preaching.¹

¹ Warren, Bill. “Mark, John.” Ed. Chad Brand et al. *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* 2003 : 1082. Print.

MATTHEW—Personal name meaning “the gift of Yahweh.” A tax collector Jesus called to be an apostle (Matt. 9:9; 10:3). Matthew’s office was located on the main highway that ran from Damascus, down the Jordan Valley to

Capernaum then westward to Acre to join the coastal road to Egypt or southward to Jerusalem. His duty was to collect “toll” or “transport” taxes from both local merchants and farmers carrying their goods to market as well as distant caravans passing through Galilee. He was an employee of Herod Antipas. Matthew knew the value of goods of all description: wool, flax, linen, pottery, brass, silver, gold, barley, olives, figs, wheat. He knew the value of local and foreign monetary systems. He spoke the local Aramaic language as well as Greek. Because Matthew had leased his “toll” collecting privileges by paying the annual fee in advance, he was subjected to the criticism of collecting more than enough, growing wealthy on his “profit.” Thus he was hated by his fellow Jews.

Matthew is the same person as Levi, a tax collector (Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27), and thus the son of Alphaeus. James the son of Alphaeus is also listed among the apostles (Mark 3:18; Matt. 10:3; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). This indicates that both Matthew and his (half) brother were in close association with Jesus. Mary, the mother of James, keeps the vigil at the foot of the cross with Mary, the mother of Jesus (Matt. 27:55–56; Mark 15:40). If the James mentioned here is the same as the son of Alphaeus, then we have a larger family closely associated with the family of Jesus.

Later legendary accounts tell of Matthew’s travel to Ethiopia where he became associated with Candace, identified with the eunuch of Acts 8:27. The legends tell us of Matthew’s martyrdom in that country.

Matthew had the gifts to be trained as a disciple, could keep meticulous records, and was a potential recorder/author of the Gospel. From earliest times Christians affirmed that Matthew wrote the Gospel that bears his name.¹

¹ Oscar S. Brooks, “Matthew,” ed. Chad Brand et al., *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1090–1091.

NERO — Emperor of Rome A.D. 54-69; successor to Claudius.

The transition of power from Claudius to Nero went smoothly, under the direction of the Praetorian Guard. The early years of Nero’s reign were remarkably stable and free of the excesses characteristic of his later years. Tutored by the Stoic philosopher Seneca and ably assisted by the Praetorian prefect Burrus, the young Nero gained favor with both the Senate and Rome, despite the meddling of his dominating mother, Agrippina.

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