



Acts 2:1-4

# ACTS

## Background File

The full title of this book is The Acts of the Apostles. The word *apostle* comes from a Greek word meaning “one who is sent out,” or a person sent to deliver a message. In *Acts*, *apostles* refers to the disciples Jesus chooses to carry on his teaching and ministry. *Acts* records the activities of certain apostles—including Peter, Paul, and Stephen—after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. It was likely written around 80–85 C.E.

The books of Luke and Acts were written by the same person. Acts continues the story started in Luke. We don’t know much about this writer, as there is no mention of the writer’s own background or life story. Because of the skillful writing and the number of speeches by Jewish followers of Jesus, scholars think the writer was a well-educated Jew who had come to faith in Jesus Christ.

Both Luke and Acts are addressed to “Theophilus” (1:1; Luke 1:3). This name means “friend of God.” Some scholars think this name is used to stand for all who follow Jesus. Others believe Theophilus was a wealthy person, perhaps a Roman official, who paid for the recording and copying of this work. Either way, the book is intended for a large audience. It is likely that the first readers of Acts were Gentiles and Jews living on the northern coast of the Mediterranean Sea (see Map 15, p. 2112).

## What’s the Story?

The Gospel of Luke ends with an account of Jesus ascended into heaven (see Luke 24:50–53). Acts begins with the same event (Acts 1:9–11). Acts tells the story of the early days of the Christian church. It traces the growth of the church from a small group of Jewish believers in Jerusalem to a worldwide movement that included both Jews and Gentiles.

In Acts, the writer continues to provide an “orderly account” (Luke 1:3) of the events surrounding the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This account in Acts tells about the ministry of the early Christians, forming a framework that helps readers understand the issues and conflicts addressed by the remaining books in the New Testament. The writer tells this story of the early church by focusing on the stories of key leaders, Peter and Paul in particular. It is quite possible that some of the first readers of Acts were Jews who were critical of the apostle Paul and the believers who were taught by him. By detailing many of Paul’s journeys and speeches, the writer positions Paul as a faithful Jew who believed in Jesus.

Speeches make up nearly one-third of the content in Acts. Most of the twenty-eight speeches are given by Jewish followers who believe Jesus is God’s Messiah. From these speeches, readers gain insight into how different groups wrestled with what it means to follow Jesus.

The book is sometimes called “The Acts of the Holy Spirit,” because of the writer’s strong emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit. Acts tells how the Spirit formed and guided the new church. Those who came to believe in Jesus did so because of the Spirit.

The outline of this book follows Jesus’ words in Acts 1:8: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

- Preparation for Christian witness (1:1–2:13)
- Witnessing in Jerusalem (2:14–8:3)
- Witnessing in Judea and Samaria (8:4–9:43)
- Witnessing to the Gentiles (10:1–15:35)
- Witnessing to the “ends of the earth” (15:36–28:31)

## What’s the Message?

The writer of Luke and Acts clearly desires to tell the story of God’s redeeming and saving love in Jesus Christ. Acts continues on from Luke, giving a systematic presentation of the growth of the Christian church from its beginnings in Jerusalem. This account is presented with many details about people and places.

The writer, trying to do more than tell the history of the early church, offers a defense of faith in Jesus Christ, including arguments that the faith is meant for both Jews and Gentiles. The writer also strives to show how and why the Christian church became a movement that included both Jews and Gentiles. The stories and speeches by key leaders demonstrate how quickly Christianity spread beyond Jerusalem. The writer also seeks to show the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the early believers as they face persecution and opposition to their witness.

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### The Promise of the Holy Spirit

**I**n the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning<sup>2</sup> until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.<sup>3</sup> After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.<sup>4</sup> While staying<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Or eating



#### 1:1 In the first book, Theophilus:

The writer refers to the Gospel of Luke and positions this book as a continuation of that story. He writes to Theophilus, a name that means “friend of God.” This may have been a person by that name or the writer’s name for all friends of God.



#### 1:2 instructions through the Holy Spirit:

In both Luke and Acts, the writer consistently emphasizes the Holy Spirit acting with and through the disciples (for example, 1:8; 2:4; 4:8, 31; 6:3, 5; 8:16; 10:44).