

INTRODUCTION TO 44TH BIBLEBOOK

THE BOOK OF ACTS (A.D. 63)

A. The writer and recipients of the Book of Acts	1
B. The date and place of writing the Book of Acts	1
C. The purpose of the Book of Acts	1
D. The history recorded in the Book of Acts	3
E. The theme and division of the Book of Acts	4
F. The characteristics of the Book of Acts	4
G. A summary of the beginning of Gentile Christianity	6
H. The main messages of the Book of Acts	8

A. THE WRITER AND RECIPIENTS OF THE BOOK OF ACTS.

The introduction of the book of Acts says, “In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up to heaven.” It is very clear that the author of the Gospel of Luke is also the author of the book of Acts. The author of the book of Acts was a travelling companion of Paul, as we can see from the sections in which he speaks of ‘we’ (16:10-17; 20:6-16; 21:27; chapter 28). He shows that he was together with Paul on his second missionary journey at Troas and Philippi. He was evidently left behind in Philippi, where he again joined Paul on his third missionary journey (16:17-19; 20:6). It seems probable that he was together with Paul throughout Paul’s imprisonment at Caesarea and he travelled with Paul to Rome just before Paul’s first Roman imprisonment. In his letters, Paul wrote about one very faithful companion, a beloved physician called Luke, who stayed with Paul during his first and his second imprisonment at Rome¹. The author was thus an eye-witness of much of the events he recorded in the latter half of the book of Acts. *The book of Acts has a distinct Pauline point of view, that is, it is especially interested to show God’s dealings with the Gentiles* (13:46)². The fact that the name of Luke is never mentioned in the book of Acts, strengthens the position that Luke is the author. Although the name of Titus is also not mentioned in the book of Acts, the introduction and medical language of both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts favour the conclusion that Luke was the author of the book of Acts. The early Christian tradition bears abundant testimony that Luke wrote the book of Acts.

The recipient was Theophilus, who was probably one of Luke’s highly respected friends. He was probably a Greek living in Rome and a person of high distinction. In Luke 1:3, he is addressed as “most excellent Theophilus”, which was the way in which the governors Felix and Festus were addressed (23:26; 24:3). Luke wrote the book of Acts to him and in general to all the Gentiles, that they may come to believe in Jesus Christ, or, when they already believed, that they may be strengthened in their faith.

B. THE DATE AND PLACE OF WRITING THE BOOK OF ACTS.

There is nothing in the Gospel of Luke or in the book of Acts that presupposes the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70. The Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts must have been written before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70, because this destruction is predicted in Luke 19:41-44 and 21:20.

There is also nothing in the book of Acts that shows that the Roman authorities were officially opposing the Christians. The book of Acts speaks positively of the Roman government everywhere. The turning point was when the Roman emperor, called Nero, began to persecute the Christians in Rome, following the great fire of Rome in A.D. 64. From that time onwards, Christians were burned publicly on stakes or thrown before wild beasts in the arena. Before that time, the Christian faith was probably suspect, but after that date it was definitely denounced as dangerous and put outside the law. Therefore the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts must have been written before A.D. 64.

Luke had accompanied Paul to Rome before his first imprisonment in Rome, which lasted from the beginning of A.D. 60 to the end of A.D. 61 (27:1-28:16)³. Thus, the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts must have been written after A.D. 61. Although Luke probably made a lot of research for his Gospel and Acts and wrote preliminary notes in Asia Minor, Achaia, Jerusalem and Caesarea, he most probably wrote the Gospel of Luke in about A.D. 62-63 in Rome and shortly after that the book of Acts in A.D. 63 also in Rome.

C. THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK OF ACTS.

1. Luke’s first purpose was to write about Jesus Christ.

In the Gospel of Luke, his purpose was to write about the things Jesus Christ *began* to do and to teach. In the book of Acts, his purpose was to write about the things Jesus Christ *continued* to do and teach by his Spirit in and through his followers and his Church. The main purpose of Luke in the book of Acts was to describe the work of Jesus Christ in the extension of the Church from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (1:8).

¹ Colossians 4:14; Philemon 24; 2 Timothy 4:11

² Ephesians 3:1

³ Colossians 4:14

While the Gospels tell of *the crucified and risen Saviour*, the book of Acts tells of *the ascended and exalted Lord* and Leader. While in the Gospels we hear of the teachings of Jesus Christ, in the book of Acts we see the effect of Christ's teachings on the acts of his apostles.

2. Luke's second purpose was to give an accurate and orderly account of the origins of Christianity.

It was the custom in Rome for a group of people to gather to listen to a new work being read aloud by its author or someone else. Theophilus may have been the most prominent member of such a group of educated people in Rome and he may already have accepted Jesus Christ as his Saviour. Luke's purpose was to provide such people with *a more accurate and orderly account of the rise and progress of Christianity* than they were likely to get anywhere else.

For *the earlier part of his narrative* Luke could depend on reliable first-hand witnesses, like the apostles at Jerusalem and Philip the evangelist. Luke was not the first to draw up an account of the life and work of Jesus and he himself could not claim to be an eye-witness of the earlier events recorded in his history of the church. But Luke did have access to the information that such eye-witnesses could supply. Moreover, his account is based on thorough and accurate research and it is arranged in a proper sequence.⁴

For *the latter part of his narrative* he could largely draw on his own experiences and his intensive contact with the apostle Paul. Luke's first volume, the Gospel of Luke, is in essence a record of the apostolic witness to the ministry of Jesus Christ through word, deed, suffering and triumph. Luke's second volume, the book of Acts, carries the apostolic witness on for at least another thirty years! He traces the progress of Christianity, beginning from Jerusalem, the capital of the Jews, and he ends with the chief herald of the gospel, Paul, proclaiming the gospel in Rome, the capital of the Gentile Roman Empire.

3. Luke's third purpose was to defend Christianity against the charges brought against it.

Luke's purpose may also have been to defend Christianity against the charges brought against it and to vindicate the innocence of Paul and the other Christians in relation to the Roman law before this educated public of Rome.

Christians showed respect towards the government.

Throughout the book of Acts, Luke shows the respectful attitude of Christians towards the Roman government. As the Christian faith began to spread in every direction in the world, and especially within the Roman Empire, opposition against it also began to mount. In the eyes of the Romans, who loved law and order, Christianity started off with a serious handicap. The Founder of Christianity, Jesus Christ, was condemned to death by a Roman governor on a charge of sedition. And the Christian movement, which he inaugurated, seemed to be accompanied by tumult and disorder wherever it spread. Luke tried to remove this view of Christianity by describing the history as it actually was.

Especially Jews caused disturbances.

The advance of Christianity was attended by so much strife and disorder, because it was *caused by the Jewish authorities* in the various centres where the gospel was proclaimed. It was the Jewish Sanhedrin that had condemned Jesus Christ and had falsely accused him before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. But Pontius Pilate pronounced Jesus not guilty of the charges. And king Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, agreed that there was no substance in the charges against him⁵. It was the same Jewish Sanhedrin that arrested and persecuted the apostles of Christ (4:1-5,15; 5:17-21). It was the same Jewish Sanhedrin that prosecuted the apostle Paul before the Roman proconsuls, Felix and Festus (21:27-29; 22:30; 23:12-15; 24:1-9,20; 25:1-8). And most of the disturbances that broke out when the gospel was proclaimed in the Roman provinces were fomented by the local Jewish communities. The Jews not only refused to accept the gospel themselves, but they also were annoyed when their Gentile neighbours believed it (13:44-52).

Gentiles seldom caused disturbances.

Only twice does Luke record disturbances caused by the Gentiles: At Philippi and at Ephesus the reason why the Gentiles persecuted Paul and his co-workers was the real or imagined threat to their vested property interests (16:16ff; 19:23ff).

Government officials were favourably impressed by Christians.

Luke makes it very clear that a variety of officials, both Gentile and Jewish, showed good will towards Paul and the other Christian missionaries, or at least admitted that there was no basis for the accusations brought against them by their opponents. In Cyprus, the distinguished proconsul was favourably impressed by Paul and Barnabas and their message (13:7). At Philippi, the magistrates of the colony apologised to Paul and Silas for their illegal beating and imprisonment (16:35-39). At Corinth, the proconsul of Achaia, Gallio, decided that the charges brought by the local Jews were related to internal matters of the Jewish religion and he pronounced them not guilty of any offence against the Roman law (18:12-17). At Ephesus, some leading citizens of the province of Asia, called Asiarchs, were Paul's friends and the chief executive officer of the city administration absolved Paul from the charge of public sacrilege (19:31,35-41). In Palestine, the two proconsuls, Felix and Festus, found him innocent of the serious crimes of which the Jewish Sanhedrin accused him (26:32; 28:17-19). Even the Jewish client king Herod Agrippa II and his sister Bernice agreed that he had done nothing to deserve death or imprisonment (26:30-32).

⁴ Luke 1:1-4

⁵ Luke 22:66-23:2; 23:13-15

The government allowed Paul to preach the gospel.

And after Paul had made his appeal to be tried by the emperor in Rome, he carried on his missionary activity for two years in Rome, while he was under constant surveillance of Roman guards and without anyone trying to hinder him (28:30-31).

The purpose of Luke is to show that if Christianity were such a lawless movement as was widely believed, the imperial guards would certainly not have allowed Paul to preach the gospel of the kingdom of God and to teach about the Lord Jesus Christ.

4. Luke's fourth purpose was to defend the Christian faith against Jews and Gentile pagans.

In three chapters, Luke appears to defend the Christian faith:

- In Acts chapter 7, by reporting Stephen's speech at Jerusalem, Luke defends *the Christian faith against the Jews and its Sanhedrin*. He demonstrated that *Christianity and not Judaism is the true fulfilment of the revelation given through Moses and the prophets in the Old Testament!*
- In Acts chapter 17, by reporting Paul's speech at Athens, he defends *the Christian faith against the pagan Greek philosophers*. He shows that the true knowledge of God is given in the gospel and not in the idolatry of paganism or the gods of other religions.
- In Acts chapter 26, by reporting Paul's testimony before king Agrippa at Caesarea, Luke defends *the Christian missionary work* of the apostle Paul.

D. THE HISTORY RECORDED IN THE BOOK OF THE BOOK OF ACTS.

1. Acts chapters 1-7 describe the extension of the church in and around Jerusalem.

The events recorded in Acts 1-7 took place between A.D. 30-33/34. The sudden transformation of the early disciples of Jesus Christ from a group of thoroughly dejected individuals to a company of witnesses filled with joy and unshakeable conviction can only be explained by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. That fact changed everything. Their main message everywhere became "the Lord Jesus Christ died as the atonement for sins, he arose from the dead and he ascended to heaven and is sitting at the right hand of God". The resurrection and ascension clarified the meaning of the cross. Moreover, through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost in May A.D. 30, Jesus Christ himself came to live in the hearts and lives of his disciples in order to give them courage, strength, joy and spiritual insight.

The preaching of the gospel resulted in the conversion of many and the first local church was established in Jerusalem. The Christians were characterised by their devotion to the teachings of the apostles, by their fellowship of love and sharing, by their prayers and their witnessing. Every day the Lord added more converts to their number. Their rapid growth led to the persecution by the Jewish authorities. Although the apostles were threatened and flogged, Acts 5:42 says, "day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ." When the Greek speaking Jews in Jerusalem stoned Stephen to death, a great persecution arose especially against Greek speaking Jews who had become Christians!

2. Acts chapters 8-12 describe the extension of the church southward to Ethiopia and northward to Syria.

The events recorded in Acts 8-12 took place between A.D. 33/34-46. Thus, while the apostles remained in Jerusalem, the persecuted Greek speaking Jews were scattered and founded new churches everywhere they went. Philip the evangelist spread the gospel to Samaria and to an Ethiopian. About A.D. 34 Paul was converted and began preaching in Damascus in Syria. The apostle Peter spread the gospel to the cities on the Coastal Plain. God had to use extraordinary means to show Peter that the gospel was meant not only for Jews, but also for Gentiles and thus Cornelius and his family and friends were converted. When the apostles heard that Gentiles were also converted in Antioch in Syria, they sent Barnabas to Antioch. In about A.D. 44/45 Barnabas brought Paul into the ministry at Antioch. And in A.D. 46 they brought Mark into the ministry at Antioch.

3. Acts chapters 13-20 describe the extension of the church to Asia Minor and Europe.

The events recorded in Acts 13-20 took place between A.D. 47-57. Paul made three missionary journeys.

Paul's first missionary journey was from A.D. 47-48 together with Barnabas and Mark. They went to Cyprus, Pamphilia, South Galatia and Cilicia in Asia Minor, which is modern Turkey. In about A.D. 49/50, certain Jewish Christians came from Jerusalem to Antioch, saying that unless Gentile Christians were circumcised, they could not be saved. As a result, a conference or consultation was held in Jerusalem to speak about the relationship between the Jewish and the Gentile Christians. This conference is described in Acts 15 and Galatians 2. At this meeting of two local churches, the Jewish Christians received a severe blow. They became known as '*the Judaist party*', a *Christian sect which tried to turn Gentile Christians into Jews*. They believed that all Christians should keep the Old Testament ceremonial law, especially circumcision, Sabbath days and food rules. They immediately plotted revenge. Their plan seemed to have been to follow the missionaries everywhere and oppose "the gospel of justification by faith alone". They came to Antioch, but Paul vigorously opposed them. They came to the South Galatian churches in Asia Minor and succeeded to pull many new Christians into their legalism. Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians especially to counter the false teaching of the Judaist party.

Paul's second missionary journey was from A.D. 50-52 together with Silas and Timothy. They went to Syria, Cilicia and South Galatia in Asia Minor and then crossed over to Europe and established churches in Macedonia and Greece. They spent one and a half years in Corinth.

Paul's third missionary journey was from A.D. 52-57 together with Timothy. They worked for three years in Ephesus and they also worked in Greece and Macedonia.

4. Acts chapters 21-28 describe the extension of the church to Rome.

The events recorded in Acts 21-28 took place between A.D. 57-61. Paul spent almost all this time in prison. From A.D. 57-59 he was imprisoned in Caesarea and from A.D. 60-61 he was imprisoned in Rome.

E. THE THEME AND DIVISION OF THE BOOK OF ACTS.

Theme. "The acts of the apostles, especially of Peter and Paul, and the beginning of Gentile Christianity."

The book of Acts may be divided into *two* parts.

1. The extension of the church in and from Jerusalem.

This is written in Acts chapters 1-12. This part may again be divided into two sections:

- Acts 1:1 – 8:3. The extension of the church in Jerusalem.

These events took place between the years A.D. 30-33/4. The events include the ascension of Christ, the choice of Matthias to replace Judas as an apostle (1), the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the beginning of the first local church in history (2). It also includes the rapid growth of the church at Jerusalem (3-4), which resulted in persecution, the arrest and imprisonment of the twelve apostles (5:18), and the testimony and martyrdom of Stephen, which was witnessed by Paul (6-7).

- Acts 8:4 – 12:25. The extension of the church from Jerusalem into all Judea and Samaria.

These events took place between the years A.D. 33/34-46. The great persecution of the church at Jerusalem caused the Christians in Jerusalem to be scattered all over Judea and Samaria, where they continued to preach the gospel. The events include the missionary work of Philip, which spread to Samaria and Ethiopia (8); the conversion of Paul and his missionary work in Damascus and Jerusalem (9) and the missionary work of Peter in the coastal areas and his calling to go to the first Gentiles in Caesarea (10). Finally it includes the missionary work of Christians that reached Antioch in Syria and Paul's involvement in the work at Antioch (11). The first part of the book of Acts closes with the martyrdom of the apostle James and the imprisonment of the apostle Peter (12).

2. The extension of the church from Antioch, mainly through the missionary work of Paul.

This is written in Acts chapters 13-28. This part may be divided into five sections:

- Acts 13-15. Paul's first missionary journey and the Jerusalem conference.

Paul's first missionary journey took place in A.D. 47-48 (13-14) and the Jerusalem conference in A.D. 49/50 (15).

- Acts 16-18. Paul's second missionary journey.

This took place in A.D. 50-52.

- Acts 19-20. Paul's third missionary journey.

This took place in A.D. 52-57.

- Acts 21-26. Paul's arrest in Jerusalem and imprisonment in Caesarea.

This took place in A.D. 57-59.

- Acts 27-28. Paul's voyage to Rome and his first imprisonment in Rome.

This took place in A.D. 59-61.

F. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BOOK OF ACTS.

1. The book of Acts is the second volume of Luke's two volume work.

The first collection of Christian documents consisted of the letters of Paul.

Soon after the death of the apostle Paul, the first collection of Christian documents took place, namely a collection of 'the letters of Paul'. It is quite possible that Timothy collected all the letters of Paul, promoted the making of copies of this collection of the letters of Paul and spread it to the various churches⁶. According to 2 Peter 3:16, it seems probable that a collection of the letters of Paul existed by A.D. 64, when Peter was martyred under Nero's persecution.

The second collection of Christian documents consisted of the Gospels.

Originally the two volume work of Luke, produced in A.D. 62-63 circulated together as one complete and independent work. However, after the publication of the Gospel of John between A.D. 70-98, towards the end of the first century or beginning of the second century the four Gospels were gathered together into one collection and began to circulate as 'the Fourfold Gospel'. This meant that the first volume of the two volume work of Luke (the Gospel of Luke) was detached from the second volume (the Book of Acts) and this second volume began to pursue a career of its own.

2. The book of Acts proofs that Paul was as much an apostle as Peter and the rest of the apostles.

⁶ 2 Timothy 2:2

In Acts 20:29-31, Paul was aware that ‘savage wolves’ were following him everywhere he went to destroy his missionary work. These people belonged to ‘the Judaist party’⁷ (Jews trying to induce Gentiles to convert to Judaism).

Jesus Christ had first sent his disciples to the lost sheep of Israel⁸, but before his ascension he sent them to make disciples of all the nations⁹. In the beginning of the history of Christianity, after Pentecost, the Christians consisted only of Jewish Christians, but after the missionary journeys of Paul, very many Gentiles became Christians too. This led to a clash between the Jewish and Gentile Christians, first in Antioch and later in the southern Galatian cities of Asia Minor.

Like the other apostles, Paul began his preaching to the Jews in the synagogue meetings on the Sabbath. He did not make this accommodation out of principle, but on purpose in order to win the Jews for Christ¹⁰. Certain Jewish Christians held on to ‘the shadows’ of the Old Testament law¹¹. They believed that they should still keep the many regulations of the Jewish ceremonial law, especially circumcision, the Sabbath, the other Jewish festivals and the Jewish food laws. They even made circumcision a requirement for salvation (15:1). *While the apostle Paul wanted to convert the Jews to become Christians, the Judaist party wanted to convert the Gentile Christians to become Jews!* The Jerusalem Conference in Acts 15, decided that ‘the yoke’ of the Jewish ceremonial law may not be put onto the Gentiles believers (15:10,28)! But the Gentile Christians should be considerate to the Jewish Christians by abstaining from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood (15:20-21)¹². All those Jewish Christians who refused to accept this united decision of the Holy Spirit, all the apostles and the Christians present at this Jerusalem conference, continued their propaganda campaign against Paul and his preaching of the gospel. They became known as ‘the Judaist party’. Paul opposed their false teachings especially in his letters to the Galatians¹³, Corinthians¹⁴, Ephesians¹⁵, Philippians¹⁶ and Colossians¹⁷.

The opposition of this Judaist party in Asia Minor was dealt a severe blow when, on the one hand, the book of Acts started to circulate in the churches in Asia Minor and brought about a revival of interest in the apostle Paul, and on the other hand, when Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed in A.D. 70. The Judaist party gradually developed into sects called the Nazarenes and the Ebionites, which continued to exist for several centuries. Thus, the book of Acts proved to the whole Christian Church that Paul as the apostle to the Gentiles, was as much an apostle as Peter and the other apostles, who mainly concentrated on the Jews.

3. The book of Acts provides the historical proof that not only Paul, but all the other apostles, were true apostles of Jesus Christ.

The book of Acts is the proof that the teachings of Marcion were false. In about A.D. 144 this false teacher preached a false view that Jesus Christ revealed a completely new religion that had no relationship to the Old Testament or any other Jewish influence. He *took out* of the Gospel of Luke and ten of the letters of Paul all materials related to the Jews, and called it respectively “the Gospel” and “the Apostle”. Marcion thus limited the “canon” or “list of inspired books of the New Testament” to only these eleven documents. Marcion rejected the whole Old Testament, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and John and the letters of Paul to Timothy and Titus, and he rejected all the other apostles of Jesus and their writings as being false.

The false teaching of Marcion challenged and stimulated the true Christian Church to oppose Marcion and compelled them to more accurately define the Christian “canon” or “list of the inspired New Testament books”, which were already accepted by the Christian churches everywhere.

For the true Christian Church, the New Testament did not supersede the Old Testament, but stood alongside it and the Old and New Testament together formed the inspired revelation of God to man. The Old and New Testaments together are called “the Bible”. For the true Christian Church, the Bible consisted of the 39 books of the Old Testament and the 27 books of the New Testament. For the true Christian Church the Gospel did not comprise of one document like Marcion’s list, but consisted of the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. And for the true Christian Church the Apostle did not comprise only of ten of Paul’s letters like Marcion’s list, but consisted of all thirteen letters of Paul and the letters of the other apostles like Peter and John. For the true Christian Church the book of Acts provided the historical proof that not only Paul, but also all the other apostles were true apostles of Jesus Christ. From that time onwards the book of Acts was known as ‘the Acts of the apostles’. (This title is found in the Anti-Marcionite Prologue to the Third Gospel, dated between A.D. 150-180).

⁷ Matthew 23:15

⁸ Matthew 10: 5-6

⁹ Matthew 28:19

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 9:20

¹¹ Hebrews 10:1

¹² 1 Corinthians chapters 8,10

¹³ Galatians 4:8-11; 5:2-3; 6:10

¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 11:4

¹⁵ Ephesians 2:11-22; 3:2-6

¹⁶ Philippians 3:2-3

¹⁷ Colossians 2:16-17

4. The book of Acts especially draws a comparison between the apostles Peter and Paul.

- Peter was especially the apostle to the Jews and Paul was especially the apostle to the Gentiles¹⁸. Peter was the champion of the early Church in Jerusalem, while Paul was the founder of the Gentile churches.
- There is a summary of the preaching of Peter in Acts 2, and of Paul in Acts 13.
- Both preached justification by faith: Peter in Acts 10:43 and Paul in Acts 13:38-39¹⁹.
- Both healed a lame man: Peter in Acts 3 and Paul in Acts 14.
- God brought swift judgement through Peter to Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, and through Paul to Elymas in Acts 13.
- Both were freed from imprisonment by divine intervention: Peter in Acts 12, and Paul in Acts 16.
- Both stressed the work of the Holy Spirit: Peter in Acts 2 and Paul in Acts 19.
- Both summarised the gospel by preaching the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ: Peter in Acts 2 and Paul in Acts 13.

G. A SUMMARY OF THE BEGINNING OF GENTILE CHRISTIANITY.

1. The first Jewish churches (A.D. 30-44).

The events in Acts 1-7 took place in the period A.D. 30-33. The Jerusalem church was the very first local church in the Christian era. The events in Acts 8-12 took place in the period A.D. 33/34-44. Jewish Christian congregations were founded in Judea, Galilee and Samaria (9:31).

2. The first Gentile churches (A.D. 34-50).

Besides the occasional Gentile convert in the period of the ministry of Jesus and Philip, the earliest Gentile ministries were that of the apostles Paul and Peter.

3. The Gentile ministry of Paul: Syria and Cilicia (A.D. 34-50).

Saul/Paul the persecutor of Hellenists. The high priest as president of the Jewish Sanhedrin in Jerusalem was head of the Jewish State as far as internal affairs were concerned. His decrees were even binding to Jews outside Palestine, e.g. Damascus. Damascus is a very ancient city and besides many Syrians living there, there was a large Jewish community with many synagogues, a Nabatean Arab community and a Jewish Christian refugee community who had fled from persecution in Palestine to Damascus.

Paul grew up in Tarsus (modern Turkey), a city thousands of years old. It is a free city since the time of Antiochus IV (171 B.C.) and the centre of schools devoted to philosophy, rhetoric and law. It is the chief city of the province Cilicia. Paul grew up in Tarsus, but also lived in Jerusalem (26:4-5). He was educated in Jewish theology, Hellenistic culture and possessed the coveted Roman citizenship.

Hellenists were Greek speaking Jews and later Greek speaking Gentiles that became Jews. They were attracted by the monotheism of the Jews and had become God-fearing²⁰ or worshippers of God and even converts/proselytes to Judaism (2:5,11.)²¹. They spoke Greek and were the main target of persecution by the Hebrew speaking Jews in Jerusalem. One of the seven deacons in Jerusalem, Stephen, had been a leader among the Hellenists (chapter 6). Due to persecution, they were compelled to leave Jerusalem. From then on the Jerusalem church consisted almost entirely of 'Hebrews' (Hebrew speaking Jews). The apostles remained witnessing in Jerusalem (1:8).

Saul (Paul)²² was "still breathing murderous threats" against the people of 'the Way' (Christians) and asked the high priest for letters to the synagogues in Damascus so that he could arrest and haul renegade Jews who had become Christians back (9:1-2).

Paul's calling and commission as apostle among Gentiles (A.D. 34). Paul was converted on the road to Damascus in A.D. 34, where Jesus personally called and commissioned him in this informal way to preach the gospel among the Gentiles (26:17-18)²³. Paul "did not consult any man nor did he go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before him, but went immediately into Nabatean Arabia (close to Damascus) and later returned to Damascus"²⁴.

Paul's ministry in Damascus (A.D. 34-36). "At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. He baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ (the expected Messiah). After many days (about 3 years) had gone by, the Jews conspired to kill him. Saul learned about their plan and his followers²⁵ lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall" (9:19-25).

¹⁸ Galatians 2:8

¹⁹ Isaiah 53:11

²⁰ God-fearing Jews (Ιουδαιοι, ανδρες ευλαβεις)

²¹ God-fearing Gentiles (σεβομενου)(Acts 13:50; 16:14; 17:4,17; 18:7) + Proselytes to Judaism (προσηλυτου)(Acts 2:11; cf.:13 43; Matthew 23:15)

²² His Jewish and his Roman names

²³ Galatians 1:16

²⁴ Galatians 1:16-17

²⁵ His ministry was fruitful

Paul's ministry in Jerusalem (A.D. 37). After his escape, Paul returned to Jerusalem in A.D. 37. This was Paul's first visit to Jerusalem after his conversion. He tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him and did not believe that he really was a disciple. He wanted to get acquainted with the apostle Peter. So Barnabas brought him to 'the apostles' (a generalizing plural) and told them that Paul preached fearlessly and spoke boldly in the name of Jesus (9:26-29). He stayed 15 days with Peter and also saw James, the Lord's brother (whom Paul probably regarded as an apostle)²⁶. For these two weeks he took up the work which Stephen had laid down when he was stoned to death. He engaged in debates with the Greek speaking Jews (Hellenists) in Judea, i.e. Jerusalem.

But Jesus appeared to him when he was praying in the temple and told him to leave Jerusalem (22:8,21). These Jews tried to kill him and therefore the brothers took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus in Cilicia (A.D. 40). In Galatians Paul says the same: "he went to *Syria* and Cilicia" (9:31)²⁷. Syria and Cilicia formed one imperial province of Rome at that time. However, Paul was personally unknown to the churches of Judea, i.e. "to the rest of Judea" (besides Jerusalem). They only heard the report that the man who formerly persecuted the church is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy²⁸. The persecution that followed Stephen's death died out with the conversion and departure of the chief persecutor.

Paul's ministry in Tarsus (A.D. 37-44/45). Paul ministered about 8 years in Cilicia. Paul's method was to begin his ministry in Jewish synagogues where there were many Hellenists (Greek speaking Jews) and Greek speaking non-Jews that had become Jews (worshippers of God and proselytes to Judaism)²⁹. Many of them became Christians.

Paul's ministry in Antioch (A.D. 44/45-46). Barnabas went to Tarsus and brought Paul to help him in Antioch and together they ministered a year long. It was in Antioch that it had been most clearly discerned that the followers of Jesus Christ (*those who belonged to the Way*)(9:2) were not just another Jewish sect, but had a faith that was completely unique among all the religions in the Roman Empire. It was at Antioch that the followers of Jesus Christ were first called *Christians* (11:25-26).

There was a severe famine which spread over the entire Roman world during the reign of Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus (A.D. 41-54). The church of Antioch sent support to the elders (in Jerusalem) by Barnabas and Saul (11:27-30). King Herod Agrippa³⁰ was king of Judea from A.D. 41-44 and died in A.D. 44. Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch thereafter, probably in A.D. 46. This was Paul's second visit to Jerusalem after his conversion³¹. They took Mark, the cousin of Barnabas along with them.

Paul's ministry with Barnabas in Galatia (A.D. 47-48). This was Paul's first missionary journey; together with Barnabas and Mark. They went to Cyprus (13:4-12) and Pamphilia (in modern Turkey): to the cities Pisidian Antioch (13:13-50), Iconium (13:51), Lycaonian Lystra and Derbe and the surrounding country (14:6). In Antioch Paul said to the Jews, "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life we now turn to the Gentiles (13:45-48).

Recognizing Paul's Gentile ministry (A.D. 50 before the Jerusalem consultation). Paul went up to Jerusalem "14 years later" (2:1), in A.D. 50. This was Paul's third visit to Jerusalem after his conversion. He was accompanied by his co-worker, Barnabas and they took Titus, a Greek (Gentile) along with them. Privately he set before the leaders of the Church ("those reputed to be pillars") the gospel he preached among the Gentiles. They did not compel Titus to be circumcised! Peter, John and James, saw that Paul had been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been to the Jews. So they gave Barnabas and Paul the right hand of fellowship. God worked in the ministry of Paul as 'an apostle to the Gentiles' just as He worked in the ministry of Peter as 'an apostle of the Jews'. Therefore they decided that Paul and Barnabas should go to the Gentiles and Peter and John to the Jews (2:7-10).

4. The Gentile ministry of Peter: Caesarea (A.D. 40).

Peter's ministry in Joppa (before A.D. 40). After Peter returned from Samaria (chapter 8) he travelled about the country, visited the saints, healed the paralytic Aeneas, raised Tabitha (Dorcas, meaning: Gazelle) from the dead and stayed in the house of the tanner Simon in Joppa (Jaffa).

Peter's ministry in Caesarea (about A.D. 40). God gave a Roman centurion, Cornelius, a vision and he sent for the apostle Peter. Through a revelation to the apostle Peter, Peter went to Caesarea, entered the house of this God-fearing Gentile and preached the gospel to him, his family and friends.

Peter clearly proclaimed the impartiality of God with respect to race (10:1-48). Acts 10:43, 11:17 and 15:7 mention faith. The Holy Spirit fell on the hearers (the Pentecost of the Gentiles) just as on the disciples in the beginning (the Pentecost of the Jews). The baptism with water is the visible sign and seal of the baptism with the Spirit (11:44-48; 15:5-11).

²⁶ Galatians 1:18-20

²⁷ Galatians 2:18-23

²⁸ Galatians 1:17-23

²⁹ Romans 1:16

³⁰ Also called Herod 2 or Agrippa 1

³¹ Agrippa died in A.D. 44

Recognizing Peter's Gentile ministry (A.D. 50 at the Jerusalem consultation). At the Jerusalem Conference in A.D. 50 Peter said, "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe" (15:7).

5. The Gentile ministries of Philip and Barnabas (before A.D. 40 - 46).

Philip's ministry to a city in Samaria (before A.D. 40). Philip, one of the seven deacons in Jerusalem, was also one of the Hellenistic leaders. As one of those scattered by the persecution in Jerusalem, he preached the gospel in a Samaritan city, performed exorcisms and healings. Samaritans (half-Jews) believed the gospel, were baptised with water (8:1-11). Because the door had not been opened by apostles³², these Samaritans had to wait for the apostles Peter and John to lay hands on them and pray for them for their baptism with the Spirit (8:14-17) (the Pentecost of the Samaritans/half-Jews).

Philip's ministry on the road to Gaza (before A.D. 40). An angel guided Philip to the desert road between Jerusalem and Gaza where he came across an Ethiopian eunuch, a treasurer of the Ethiopian court. This man had been worshipping in Jerusalem during one of the great pilgrimage-festivals. and was on his way home to Kush or Upper Nubia. At that time it lay between south Egypt (second cataract of the Nile) and later Ethiopia and was called Ethiopia by the ancient Greeks. *This chamberlain was probably a God-fearing Gentile (2:5)³³, because it is questionable whether a eunuch could have been admitted to the commonwealth of Israel as a full proselyte (Deuteronomy 23:1; Isaiah 56:3).* He was reading/studying Isaiah 53:7-8. Philip used this passage to explain the good news about Jesus to him. He believed and when they passed 'some water', he asked to be baptised. They both went down (the road) into the water. Philip baptised him while they both stood³⁴ in the water. The chamberlain must have received the Spirit, because he went on his way rejoicing (5:22)³⁵. Philip preached the gospel in all the cities through which he passed until he reached Caesarea, where he probably settled (21:8).

Barnabas' ministry in Antioch (about A.D. 40 – 46).

While the apostles remained in Jerusalem, the Greek speaking Jews, who had become believers in Jesus Christ, were scattered because of the great persecution by Hebrew speaking Jews against them. They first proclaimed the gospel only to Jews, but men from Cyprus and Cyrene went to Antioch in Syria and began to tell the good news to Gentiles. A great number of people turned and believed (11:19-21). The church at Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. By the year A.D. 44 they had founded the congregation in Antioch of Syria. In A.D. 44/45 Barnabas went to Tarsus and brought Paul to help him in Antioch and together they ministered a year long.

There was a severe famine which spread over the entire Roman world during the reign of Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus (A.D. 41-54). The church of Antioch sent support to the elders (in Jerusalem) by Barnabas and Saul (11:27-30). King Herod Agrippa³⁶ was king of Judea from A.D. 41-44 and died in A.D. 44. Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch thereafter, probably in A.D. 46.

H. THE MAIN MESSAGES OF THE BOOK OF ACTS.

1. Acts shows which gospel message Christians should preach.

- According to Acts 4:12, Christians must proclaim that salvation is found in no one else, because the only name given by God to men by which they *must* be saved is Jesus Christ.
- According to Acts 17:3 and 18, Christians must proclaim that Jesus Christ had to die on the cross and that he was resurrected from the dead.
- According to Acts 20:21, Christians must proclaim to all people that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.
- According to Acts 10:43 and 13:38-39, Christians must proclaim that everyone who believes in Christ is justified, that is, his sins are forgiven and he is saved.
- According to Acts 26:20, Christians must proclaim to people that they must prove their repentance by their deeds.

2. The book of Acts teaches how local churches came into existence.

The local churches are the historical result of the sovereign intervention of God and the obedience of Christians to the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19, "Go and make disciples of all nations". For example:

- In Acts chapter 2, God poured his Holy Spirit out and the apostle Peter preached the gospel. As a result, the first local church among the Jews was planted in Jerusalem.
- In Acts chapter 8, God allowed a great persecution of Christians in Jerusalem that scattered them and they preached the gospel wherever they went. As a result, churches were planted throughout Judea, Samaria and Galilee (9:31).

³² Matthew 16:18-19

³³ εὐλαβητής = God fearer.

³⁴ See Acts 22:16 and the ancient pictures of baptisms in the catacombs of Rome.

³⁵ Ephesians 1:13

³⁶ Also called Herod 2 or Agrippa 1

- In Acts chapter 10, God gave visions to a Gentile military officer, called Cornelius, and to the apostle Peter on a rooftop, before Peter went to the Gentiles and preached the gospel to them. As a result the first local church among the Gentiles was planted in Caesarea.
- In Acts chapter 11, God's hand was with those who had been scattered by the great persecution. They began to preach the gospel to Gentiles in Antioch of Syria. As a result a large local church was planted in a foreign country.
- In Acts chapter 13, God called, set apart and sent Paul and Barnabas on missionary journeys and they made disciples in every city they came. As a result local churches were planted in other Asian countries.
- In Acts chapters 16-20, God, through the Holy Spirit guided the missionary team to where they should go and where they should not go. As a result they went and preached the gospel to new places and local churches were even planted in European countries.
- In Acts chapter 18, God even directly commanded and encouraged Paul to stay in a particular place and teach God's word for a longer period of time.

3. The book of Acts teaches how these local churches functioned.

According to Acts 2:42-44 and 5:15-16,42, the basic activities of the local church in the beginning were *to gather* and *to scatter*.

- The Christians gathered regularly together for worship and prayer, teaching and preaching, baptism and the Lord's Supper, and for fellowship and service.
- But they also scattered into their neighbourhood, into the streets and houses, and even to the neighbouring towns to preach, teach and to heal.

4. The book of Acts teaches how these local churches were led.

According to Acts 14:21-23 and 20:17,28, each local church was led by "*a body of elders*". The qualifications, tasks and limited authority of elders are clearly recorded in the Bible.

- Although the local church should have leaders, these leaders may not lead the church as they wish. 1 Timothy 3:14-15 teaches that leaders must fulfil certain requirements (20:17,28)³⁷. No leader in the church has the authority to change these instructions.
- Moreover, the Lord Jesus in Matthew 20:25-28 and the apostle Peter in 1 Peter 5:1-4 teach that no church leader may lord it over the Christians that are entrusted into their care.

5. The book of Acts teaches where these local churches conducted their meetings.

The book of Acts shows that the local churches, which are described in the New Testament, conducted most of their meetings in the houses of Christians. The churches were *house churches* or *house fellowships*!

- The local churches met in houses for the regular worship service³⁸.
- The local churches met in houses for teaching and preaching (5:42).
- The local churches met in houses for praying (12:5-12).
- The local churches met in houses for evangelism (10:24-27).
- The local churches met in houses for training of their workers (18:24-28).

Even today, in many places of the world, local churches still meet in houses.

6. The book of Acts is a guidebook for church missions.

- The motive to do missionary work is to bring people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ (chapter 2 and 13).
- As seen above, the missionaries presented the gospel message in a way that people could understand it. They preached that Jesus Christ was the only way to God and salvation, that Jesus Christ died to atone for sins and was resurrected as a proof that God accepted his atoning sacrifice; that people should repent and believe; that everyone who believes is justified and that those who believe should prove their genuine faith by the way they live.
- The written word of God (the Bible) was their only weapon (10:43 and 26:22-23).
- The Christians depended entirely on the power of God working through the Holy Spirit (4:23-30).
- The missionaries had a definite missionary plan. They first preached the gospel in the great population centres of the world at that time, like Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth and Rome. From there, the gospel spread to the surrounding cities, towns and villages.

7. The book of Acts shows how persecution results in the growth of the church.

According to Acts chapters 7:1-8:4, the Christians who witnessed or preached the gospel were soon opposed and even persecuted. Stephen was a layman. In the book of Acts is recorded how courageously he witnessed for Jesus Christ. Especially the last day of his life is described in chapter 7. He spoke to the government of the Jews, which was called the Sanhedrin. He said that while the Jews in the Old Testament killed *the prophets* who predicted the coming of the Messiah, the Jews in the New Testament betrayed and murdered *the Messiah*. He challenged them to stop hardening their hearts against the Holy Spirit. The members of the Sanhedrin dragged Stephen outside Jerusalem and stoned him to death.

³⁷ 1 Timothy 3:1-13; 5:17-22; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-7

³⁸ Philemon 1:1-2

It is not the length of time we live on earth that counts, but how we live! Stephen was the first martyr of the Christian Church. His testimony and death had a great effect on Paul, who was still unconverted at that time. His death also was the beginning of a great persecution of the Christians in Jerusalem. The majority of the more than five thousand Christians living in Jerusalem fled and scattered all over Judea and Samaria. Wherever they went, they preached the gospel and local churches were founded.

Throughout the book of Acts, we read how *persecution only led to the spreading of the gospel to all places and to the growth of the church in numbers and in quality of life*. No person and no persecution can thwart God's purpose and plan. The gospel will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations and then the end will come³⁹.

³⁹ Matthew 24:14