

# THE BOOK OF ACTS

## Lesson 1, Introduction

Today we cross a bridge; the name of that bridge is the Book of Acts.

The dictionary definition of a bridge is: “A structure carrying a road or a path across an obstacle such as a river or a ravine.” The obstacle we are crossing over is the ravine (a gulf really) that has historically separated the Old and New Testaments. The needed structure that spans that gulf is the Book of Acts.

A reasonable question would be: “How can Acts be the bridge between the Old Testament and the New when the **first** book of the New Testament is the Gospel of Matthew, followed by three more Gospels”? And the answer is that the purpose of the Gospels is to reveal the nature, life and times of Yeshua the Messiah. But the Book of Acts delves into how the followers of a Jewish Messiah, whose messianic office is derived only from a Jewish/Israelite religion and a Jewish/Israelite holy book, somehow came to purposely include the gentile world.

A valued friend of mine who lives in Jerusalem, Messianic Rabbi Joseph Shulam, says this about the New Testament in general: ***“The New Testament is a Jewish document from the 1st century A.D., reflective of the lifestyle and theology of the Jewish community of the Second Temple period. Produced mainly by Jews interested in promoting a Jewish understanding of the messianic promises made by Israel’s prophets, the New Testament texts constitute an inalienable part of Second Temple Judaism and can only properly be understood in their original Jewish cultural and religious milieu.”***

There is no better NT book to help us understand 1st century, Second Temple Judaism than the Book of Acts. Yet the Book of Acts is still not sufficient in itself to help modern Western Christians truly understand the Jewish culture and religion of Yeshua's day, and so I will take us on a number of detours and spend the time necessary to construct the needed context. I will admit up front that if you have not studied the Torah and the Tanach with Seed of Abraham Torah Class, you will be at a disadvantage. The Old Testament will play a significant background role in our study of the Book of Acts. And this is because (as I have stated on numerous occasions) the Old Testament is the foundation for the New. Trying to study the New Testament without first knowing the Old Testament is like walking into the third act of a three act play after missing the first two acts. You may well get something out of it; but you will have missed the character development and the context for the plot. How the play got from here to there you don't know, so you fill in the blanks with your imagination and suppositions. In fact, when the play ends and the curtain drops, your conclusions about the play's meaning and purpose will be at best incomplete; at worst, it might be far off the mark.

The reason that I have decided to teach the New Testament Book of Acts is because Christianity, and in many cases Messianic Judaism, has indeed arrived to the play late and missed, or dismisses, the first two acts as not relevant to a modern Believer. The result has been some doctrinal conclusions that are substantially off the mark. Even worse, these dubious doctrines have fomented misunderstanding, if not hatred, between Jews and Christians, and also the alienation of Jews from their own Jewish Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. So, let's get started.

As is our custom we will have an introduction to the Book of Acts today as our first step onto the bridge that spans the gulf between the testaments. And the best place to start is with the author of the book. While it is not universally accepted, all but the most ardent skeptics from both the Liberal and Conservative sides of Christianity agree that the author is Luke; the same Luke who penned the Gospel of Luke. There are several reasons for this conclusion. The first is that both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts are addressed to the same person: Theophilus. The second is that the literary style of both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts are very similar. And third it is clear by the author's own words that the Book of Acts is essentially the sequel to the Gospel of Luke. Let's look at the opening paragraphs of both Luke and Acts.

**Luke 1:1-4 CJB *Dear Theophilos: Concerning the matters that have taken place among us, many people have undertaken to draw up accounts<sup>2</sup> based on what was handed down to us by those who from the start were eyewitnesses and proclaimers of the message.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, Your Excellency, since I have carefully investigated all these things from the beginning, it seemed good to me that I too should write you an accurate and ordered narrative,<sup>4</sup> so that you might know how well-founded are the things about which you have been taught.***

Let's compare that with the opening of the Book of Acts.

**Acts 1:1-3 CJB *Dear Theophilos: In the first book, I wrote about everything Yeshua set out to do and teach,<sup>2</sup> until the day when, after giving instructions through the Ruach HaKodesh to the emissaries whom he had chosen, he was taken up into heaven.<sup>3</sup> After his death he showed himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. During a period of forty days they saw him, and he spoke with them about the Kingdom of God.***

So according to Luke the first book (the Gospel of Luke) was written about everything Yeshua set out to do and to teach. But the second book (the Book of Acts) is about what happened after Christ's death and resurrection.

What has been forgotten, but was clearly known by the earliest Church Fathers, is that these two works (or books) written by Luke were essentially two volumes of a single original work called the "History of Christian Origins"; the contents of the Gospel of Luke was volume 1, and the contents of the Book of Acts was volume 2. And because it was originally one work (not two separate books as we commonly think of it), it began to circulate among both Jewish and gentile Believers as a single work under the single title of "History of Christian Origins". It was only later that it got separated into two works, with each volume given its own separate name and identity; that is, it was no longer used as one continuous book. So only after Luke's original work was divided into two was each volume given its own name: one became the Gospel of Luke, and the other became the Acts of the Apostles.

Most of the New Testament books as we call them today were at first in the form of letters or collections of letters, or lengthy monographs written for a specific purpose (the Gospels for instance). These letters and monographs were seen as

informative, accurate and helpful documents that circulated among the Believers. Some letters, especially Paul's, were taken as instructional. The important point is that they were not at all taken as Scripture or as inspired of God (at least not on the level of inspiration as the books of the Old Testament). The first "Christian" Bible, the one that Christ and all of His disciples used and that was used all throughout the first 150 years after Christ's death, was the Hebrew Bible also known to us as the Tanach or the Old Testament. Only around 200 A.D. would the call come from among some in the Church for the need for a unique Christian Bible, which would add to the Old Testament what we today call the New Testament. We'll talk about that more shortly.

The next usual question about the Book of Acts is when it was created. As you can imagine there is little agreement about this with the earliest suggested date being around 65 A.D., and the latest around 115 A.D. or even a bit later. Generally speaking that late date of 115 A.D. is accepted by very few, and mostly by those who don't hold much stock in the reliability of the Book of Acts. The majority of Bible scholars and Bible historians settle closer to sometime just before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. as an early date and 90 A.D. as the latest date. My opinion is that Luke completed his work sometime before 70 A.D. For one reason, all of the events and people depicted in the Book of Acts (such as the reigns of various governors, procurators, and Caesars) happened not later than 68 A.D. This is verified by extra-Biblical Roman and Jewish documents (and by the way, the term extra-Biblical simply means that the source is not the Bible, it is something else). And even though in the Book of Acts some of the central activity takes place in Jerusalem, there is no mention of its destruction by the Romans. Since that destruction in 70 A.D. was so monumental and catastrophic for the Jewish people and their way of life it is unimaginable that Luke would simply skip right over it since was such a game-changer. The only way to reconcile a much later date with that self-evident reality is that some say that Luke wrote his book 30 or more years after the destruction of Jerusalem and so its impact had softened by then and wasn't worth mentioning. That is a major stretch that seems highly unlikely.

Then there is the issue of what Bible scholars call the "we" sections of Acts, found in chapters 16, 20, 21, 27 and 28. Rather than explain it let me give you an example of what I mean.

**Acts 16:10-17 CJB <sup>10</sup> As soon as he had seen the vision, we lost no time getting ready to leave for Macedonia; for we concluded that God had called**

*us to proclaim the Good News to them. <sup>11</sup> Sailing from Troas, we made a straight run to Samothrace; the next day we went to Neapolis; <sup>12</sup> and from there, we went on to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that part of Macedonia. We spent a few days in this city; <sup>13</sup> then on Shabbat, we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we understood a minyan met. We sat down and began speaking to the women who had gathered there. <sup>14</sup> One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in fine purple cloth. She was already a "God-fearer," and the Lord opened up her heart to respond to what Sha'ul was saying. <sup>15</sup> After she and the members of her household had been immersed, she gave us this invitation: "If you consider me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay in my house." And she insisted till we went. <sup>16</sup> Once, when we were going to the place where the minyan gathered, we were met by a slave girl who had in her a snake-spirit that enabled her to predict the future. She earned a lot of money for her owners by telling fortunes. <sup>17</sup> This girl followed behind Sha'ul and the rest of us and kept screaming, "These men are servants of God Ha'Elyon! They're telling you how to be saved!"*

Notice how the narrative in this section speaks about "we" and "us". We know that one-half of the "we" is Paul because it says so. Who is the other half? The plain reading of it along with the context makes it clear that the other party of "we" is the writer Luke himself. In fact in some of Paul's letters he refers to a man named Luke who accompanied him at times, and it is difficult to find cause not to conclude that this is the same Luke who is the writer of Acts. Here is but one example of finding Luke in Paul's Epistles:

**Colossians 4:12-14 CJB <sup>12</sup> Epaphras sends greetings; he is one of you, a slave of the Messiah Yeshua who always agonizes in his prayer on your behalf, praying that you may stand firm, mature and fully confident, as you devote yourselves completely to God's will. <sup>13</sup> For I can testify to him that he works hard for you and for those in Laodicea and Hierapolis. <sup>14</sup> Our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and Demas send you greetings.**

Luke is also mentioned by Paul in 2Timothy 4 and in Philemon 24. The point is that while most of Acts is Luke writing about things he had been told in his investigations, and taken from interviews with eyewitnesses, and information extracted from other documents he deemed as reliable, some of what he wrote about was first hand knowledge as he actually personally knew Paul and participated with him on some of his mission trips. Why is that fact so important?

It is because we first learn of Paul in the Book of Acts, not in his several Epistles. And it is in Acts that we see the new Believer Paul in his Jewish context, and learn how it is that he came to be a follower and an Apostle of Christ. Let me say this another way; Acts gives us the foundational background for understanding who Paul is, and without Acts we don't quite see Paul as the committed Jew that he is. It is Luke who knows Paul intimately, and so Luke can speak knowledgeably about Paul's devotion to his Jewishness and Torah observance that never waned as a result of his newly found belief that Yeshua was the Messiah Israel had been waiting for.

I want to explore this fact about Paul as depicted in the Book of Acts because, frankly, it had much to do with me coming to understand the Hebrew Roots of my Christian faith many years ago. Without doubt the Apostle Paul can be an enigma if not downright frustrating. In fact his fellow Apostle, Peter, found Paul very difficult to understand some times.

**2Peter 3:15-16 CJB <sup>15</sup> *And think of our Lord's patience as deliverance, just as our dear brother Sha'ul also wrote you, following the wisdom God gave him. <sup>16</sup> Indeed, he speaks about these things in all his letters. They contain some things that are hard to understand, things which the uninstructed and unstable distort, to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.***

I readily stipulate that Paul says many things in his Epistles that in one letter seems to say one thing, and in another letter seems to say nearly the opposite. Since Paul was an excellent speaker, well educated and quite articulate by all accounts, Peter can only be referring to the same issue that many laymen, Pastors, Bible Scholars and Bible Teachers encounter with Paul: he seems to be contradictory on some subjects. Nevertheless, it is unequivocally so that the modern Church's doctrinal differences hinge on the teachings of Paul. In fact for at least a couple of centuries, now, many intellectually honest Bible scholars freely admit that we are far more the Church of Paul than we are the Church of Christ. That is, it is the doctrines extracted from Paul's teachings that form the bulk of Church doctrine; and the fact that Paul can be (as Peter said) "hard to understand" is perhaps the primary reason that the Body of Christ has broken into about 3000 denominations because the tendency is to pick and choose which statements of Paul suit the denominational authority the best. But another of the main culprits for this fracturing of Christianity also has to do with an institutional unwillingness to take the Book of Acts at its word as concerns Paul. Yet another is a reluctance to research what the early Church Fathers had to say

as concerns Paul and the Book of Acts (we'll get into that later).

Let's continue to follow this line of thought a little further because it highlights the reason that the Book of Acts is critical to our faith, and thus why we're going to take close to a year to study it. So the issue of how to interpret Paul and where to place him in a hierarchy of Scriptural authority goes all the way back to around 48 A.D. with Peter (who was one of Yeshua's 12 original disciples who heard Messiah's teachings directly from the Lord's own lips; teachings on the very subjects that Paul later expounded upon). One can only imagine how hard it must have been to hear Paul say words that Peter at times couldn't exactly square with what He heard Yeshua say. But about 100 years later, the issue of Paul's difficult sayings became even more problematic when a fellow by the name of Marcion decided that it was time to have a Christian Bible, containing teachings only from Christ Believers. He also decided that the only reliable Apostle was Paul.

Marcion of Sinope was a devotee to Paul's writings; nevertheless this gentile shipping magnate had a very unbalanced view of Christianity and Paul. In 144 A.D. in Rome (one of the several growing centers of Christianity), he proposed to the Bishop of Rome a new Bible based upon his belief that the world had entered a new age because of Christ. Marcion felt that Jesus was the founder of an entirely new religion that had no connection to anything previous to it. For him Yeshua was Jewish only due to an accident of birth, and that the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) and its prophecies about a Messiah had no bearing on who Jesus was. Thus, as is the true case in many Christian denominations today, for Marcion the Old Testament had no place in a Christian Bible or in the Christian faith. And by the way; let me clear by what I just said. I've been a member of the Body of Christ for a long time, carefully studied several of the modern Christian commentators Liberal and Conservative, and served in enough Churches at various levels to know that while the Old Testament may remain in a particular denomination's authorized Bible, it is considered somewhere between unimportant and irrelevant and would be removed in a heartbeat if congregation members would stand for it. But it is too sensitive of an issue to tackle quite that boldly, so it is not touched. Rather the Old Testament is simply ignored. Or in some cases congregations are warned that it is dangerous and to stay out of it as studying it might lead them to question or even abandon their faith in Christ.

Now Marcion, who indeed saw Christ as God, also saw Him as the **new** God while God the Father was the **old** God. And since God the Father had never

appeared on earth before and directly ministered to people, then Christ was the superior God. Thus we have God the Father as the God of Israel, and we have superior Jesus Christ as the God of Christianity, thus making Christianity superior to the religion of the Israelites. And according to Marcion it was Paul who faithfully taught this supposed truth. It was Paul alone of all the Apostolic writers who kept the true witness of Christ; the rest were too Jewish and therefore heretics. Thus Marcion proposed a new Bible consisting of two parts: the first part was to be called The Gospel and the second part was to be called The Apostle. The Gospel was to be only Luke's Gospel; one that had been suitably edited by Marcion. The Apostle would consist of nine letters (Epistles) written by Paul. They too had been edited. And that's it.

Marcion published his new Christian Bible canon and it of course immediately caused a tremendous uproar. One has to ask a question at this point: if only *one* of the four Gospels in circulation that Marcion found suitable was Luke's, why did he find Luke's Book of Acts unfit for his new Christian Bible? First we have to recall something I told you a few minutes ago; Luke's Gospel and the Book of Acts were originally one unified work produced by Luke, but it did consist of two volumes. At first it circulated as a book called History of Christian Origins. But some years later it was divided and made into two separate books: the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. By now the Gospel of Luke had gained wide acceptance but the Book of Acts was not viewed with the same favor in some corners of Christianity, and certainly not in Marcion's eyes. And those corners that had disdain for the Book of Acts were generally those who wanted Christianity to be a gentiles-only religion.

Because Marcion's view was seen as so radical the Bishop of Rome and other Church Bishops took up the challenge and officially looked at the issue of just how authoritative certain of the circulating Epistles and Gospels were to be considered. They were not deciding on a new Biblical canon, but rather they were responding to Marcion's outrageous views. The result was that they gave equal weight to four particular Gospels chosen from among the several more that were in circulation around the Church at that time (some Gnostic Gospels were also part of that mix). And the chosen four were the ones we're familiar with: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. They also declared that 10 letters (not 9) written by Paul were authoritative (not inspired Scripture, just authoritative for instructing the Church), as well as some of Peter's writings. And to Marcion's greatest disdain, the Book of Acts was included as authoritative. In fact, the Church renamed this work of Luke to "The Book of the Acts of the Apostles" (Apostles,



plural), so that it was understood that the Church Bishops considered more writers than only Paul as both authoritative and as Apostles. Due to the Book of Acts being re-validated, Yeshua's Jewishness was returned to Him and Paul was given back the context of his own Hebrew heritage and his continued dedication to the Jewish religion.

Now let's talk about the early Church Fathers for a moment because their view of Paul is a bit different than the modern Church view of Paul (a modern view that is actually closer to Marcion's). While many modern Bible scholars, and language experts, and Bible historians honestly believe that they have a better idea of who the various New Testament Bible characters were, and how they lived, and what they meant by what they said 2000 years ago, they must necessarily also question and at times shun some of the writings of the early Church Fathers; some who were but a generation or two removed from Paul and in some cases knew people who had known Paul personally. I believe their premise is upside down. Rather I contend that those people who are closest in time to any particular historical event, and especially those who lived within the social and cultural context of that same cultural event, have the better perspective on how to interpret and understand the meaning and intent of that event. So I'm quite at odds with many post-modern Bible scholars on that account. But it also explains why modern historians feel so confident in their opinions as to easily and often rewrite history to conform to their viewpoint.

So what did the Early Church Fathers have to say about Paul and the Book of Acts? Well, fragments of various works from about 40 different authors who commented on the Book of Acts from about 100 A.D. to as late as 800 A.D. have been found. However there are only 3 ancient works that are complete commentaries (or very nearly complete) on the Book of Acts that have survived over the centuries. The oldest is by John Chrysostom from 407 A.D. The next oldest was written by Arator about 550 A.D. And after that the one written by Venerable Bede in 735 A.D. Any commentaries written after that time are considered too late to be categorized as "**ancient** Christian commentary".

One fragment that was found written by the early Church Father Tertullian is especially insightful because he is responding to Marcion's heresy, which 50 years later in 200 A.D. was still unsettling many Bishops (I think the reason for this is that the Bishops were at that time beginning to seriously address the possibility of creating a New Testament, and if so what documents might it contain). In Tertullian's work appropriately titled "Against Marcion", he says this

(and I quote him): ***“You must show us first of all who Paul was. What was he before he became an Apostle? How did he become an Apostle?”*** In other words, since Luke’s Acts of the Apostles was where this information about Paul was contained, Tertullian was an advocate for this book’s validity and its importance for understanding Paul (remember that a key issue with Marcion concerned Paul and Marcion’s characterization of him).

Who Paul is and what he believes and teaches in his religious Jewish context is found primarily in the Book of Acts. Remove the Book of Acts from the scene (as Marcion insisted upon) and the Paul of the Epistles becomes a different Paul who will necessarily be understood differently. That is the magnitude of what we are dealing with when we decide to undertake a study of the Book of Acts.

Every Bible character, and every human for that matter, has a foundational context for knowing them and understanding them (and when it comes to the Bible, for interpreting them). When we lift anyone out of their foundational context, we get it wrong. This issue of using the Book of Acts to provide the foundational context for understanding Paul compares favorably with what I’ve taught you about the importance of establishing the foundational context for understanding the person and purpose of Yeshua HaMashiach. When we discard this well known, pivotal statement by Jesus explaining His identify and His purpose in His own words, then we lose the foundational context for understanding who Yeshua is.

**Matthew 5:17-19 CJB <sup>17</sup> "Don't think that I have come to abolish the Torah or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete. <sup>18</sup> Yes indeed! I tell you that until heaven and earth pass away, not so much as a yud or a stroke will pass from the Torah- not until everything that must happen has happened. <sup>19</sup> So whoever disobeys the least of these mitzvot and teaches others to do so will be called the least in the Kingdom of Heaven. But whoever obeys them and so teaches will be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven.**

When we read this, we hear our Messiah insist that He did NOT do the very thing that the gentile Christian Church insists that He did: abolish the Law and the Prophets. And of course, as most of you are well aware, there is an equal insistence within Christianity that it is Paul who says Christ DID abolish the Torah and the Prophets. Truth be told, the position that Christ DID abolish the Law and the Prophets is precisely what led Marcion to his heresy, and the early Church

Bishops and Church Fathers renounced Marcion for it. And it is also true that if you read sections of some of Paul's Epistles it is hard NOT to take it that way. But, just as there is a pivotal foundational context for understanding Christ in Matthew chapter 5, so there is a pivotal foundational context for understanding Paul that we will dissect in depth in the Book of Acts.

We've spent a great deal of time talking about Paul, so now I'd like change gears and discuss this central issue: what is the Book of Acts about, and who is the central character? The answer to this is not easy because Acts covers a lot of territory. We meet a number of people in Acts such as Barnabas, Peter, James, Stephen and of course Paul. However I believe I can say with confidence that you will soon see that the central character in Acts is God; and especially in His attribute as the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit takes central stage in Luke's sequel. In fact when we count up the number of times in the entire New Testament that the Holy Spirit is mentioned by name, we find this interesting spread: Matthew 5 times, Mark 4, Luke 13, John 3, all of Paul's Epistles in total 16, Hebrews 5, and Peter 2. The Holy Spirit is not mentioned at all in Revelation. But in the Book of Acts we find the Holy Spirit mentioned 40 times. When we add together both books written by Luke that means that out of a total of 88 times the Holy Spirit is spoken of in the New Testament Luke speaks of Him 53 of those times. Obviously the Holy Spirit was at the forefront of Luke's mind as he contemplated the work of God especially after Christ ascended. We will also find that Luke equates the terms Holy Spirit and the Spirit of Yeshua (we'll cover that more when we encounter it in Acts 16).

Further our writer Luke makes it abundantly clear that for him the God of the Church is the God of Israel (quite the opposite of Marcion). And that everything that Christ did and who He was is confirmed and it fulfilled the Old Testament Prophets. As we progress through the Book of Acts you will notice that Israel's history is made central to redemption history in speeches by the martyr Stephen and by Paul.

Therefore in summation I think I can say that while each of the Epistles of the New Testament was written to address some specific issues taking place at specific congregations of Believers, the Book of Acts was written to accomplish the dual tasks of defining and reconciling the relationship between Jewish and gentile Believers in the 1st century Body of Believers; and also to put Peter's ministry and Paul's ministry in their proper perspectives and on somewhat equal footing. As Rabbi Joseph Shulam so aptly points out, as we read about Peter and

Paul in Acts, Luke advises us that, 1) the first healing of both men were of cripples; 2) Peter healed by merely casting his shadow while Paul healed from someone touching a cloth he had touched; 3) they both encountered and dealt with witchcraft; 4) they were both supernaturally released from being imprisoned; and 5) through all their trials and troubles still they both were able to spread the Word of God and the truth of the Good News.

Let's finish up today with this thought. One of the themes that is woven throughout the Book of Acts is that what happens on earth either is being established on another level in Heaven or has already been established in Heaven and is only now happening on earth. And that many earthly events have a real tangible meaning, consequence, and outcome as they happen (such as the death of Christ); but these same events can also simultaneously have a mysterious quality to them that somehow advances God's plan and purpose in ways that we can't see or measure.

Gregory the Great, the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church from 590 – 604 A.D. said this: ***“Holy Scripture, in its way of speaking, transcends all other sciences because in one and the same statement while it narrates a real event, it also sets forth the mystery”***. I have tried to characterize and illustrate this impossible to explain divine phenomena by using the term the Reality of Duality.

Next week we shall open our Bibles to Acts chapter one.