

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES - NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP STUDY -
PART ONE - INTRODUCTION AND CHAPTER ONE

WHO WAS THE WRITER?

Nowhere does the writer identify himself by name but he gives us some clues which are fascinating to follow.

- Clue 1 Compare Acts 1:1 and Luke 1:3. Both books were written by the same person. Unfortunately the title of Luke's gospel is traditional, not part of the text, so that does not give us the answer. Nowhere does the gospel identify its writer.

- Clue 2 Three passages in Acts - chapters 16, 20-21 and 27-28, use the first person, 'we' and 'us', not 'they' and 'them' indicating that the writer was there on these 3 occasions only.

- Clue 3 Chapter 28 ends with Paul in prison in Rome. Colossians 4 written from prison mentions 8 people who were with Paul. One is Luke. All but one of the rest can be eliminated because they are mentioned elsewhere in Acts or the gospels. Tychicus and Aristarchus are in Acts 20:4; Mark is in Acts 12:25 and later. Onesimus, according to the letter to Philemon, was converted in Rome, much too late to have shared Paul's journeys. Epaphras was a Colossian and the first missionary to his people, (Col.1:7) presumably from Paul's Bible school in Acts 19:9,10. These 5 were all in the wrong place at the wrong time. Demas later deserted Paul and the gospel. (II Tim.4:10) Jesus Justus is mentioned nowhere else making him unlikely. Luke, in II Tim.4:11, is described as the only one who stuck with Paul in his imprisonment.

- Clue 4 Luke was a physician according to Col.4:14. The writer of the gospel and Acts took special care with the medical details of those who were sick and healed by Jesus. As a doctor he would have been specially trained to record history with great care. He records the first Christian history with great accuracy. No detail has ever been shown wrong by subsequent discoveries.

While the writer was probably Luke, the author was certainly God.

The three passages written in the first person give us some clues to Luke's life and Christian experience. Acts 16 would seem to be his first meeting with Paul at Troas and therefore probably his conversion. They travelled together to Philippi where Paul left him for 4 years in which he was presumably the pastor of the new church. Philippi had a famous medical school. It is possible that Luke was either involved there or practised medicine to support himself in Philippi while giving people the very best medicine, the gospel of Jesus Christ. He had a further period of learning from Paul while they travelled together to Jerusalem in Acts 20 and 21. During the two years Paul was imprisoned, Luke had opportunity to research for himself the story of Jesus, as he describes in Lk.1:1-4. He would also be gathering material for Acts 1-12. When he and Paul travelled together again, this time to Rome, they would by now be learning from each other. During Paul's imprisonment in Rome he had opportunity to put the results of his research down in two letters - the Gospel and Acts.

THEOPHILUS(1:1) received both letters. There are two clues to his identity. 'Most excellent' was the title in those days for the governor of a Roman province. (Acts 24:3) Luke as a careful historian would not use such a title carelessly. 'Theophilus' means 'lover of God'. It may well have been a nickname used to hide the real identity of a provincial governor, who had become a Christian, so as not to get him into unnecessary trouble.

THE DATE OF WRITING was likely to have been 63AD. Paul arrived in Rome around 60AD. Acts 28:30 describes him being there for two years. Several key events happened shortly after this time which are not mentioned by Luke. In 64AD a fire destroyed much of Rome and was blamed on the Christians. 66-70AD was period of the Jewish revolt against the Romans. Between 64 and 68AD is the likely time for the death of Paul and Peter.

THE PURPOSE OF WRITING is stated in Luke 1:4 that Theophilus might know the exact truth because as a prominent Christian he would be risking his life. We too need to be certain of the facts concerning Jesus Christ and the work of His Spirit in us.

THE MESSAGE OF THE BOOK is implied in the opening verse.(1:1) Luke refers back to the gospel as the record of 'all that Jesus began to do and to teach'. Acts is therefore the record of all that He continued to do and to teach, not now in one body but living in all the bodies of His disciples. Acts does not finish with any great climax or conclusion. It is unfinished because its story is unfinished. God wants to write another chapter every day in our lives. The story is not a model for us to copy but a series of examples of the possibilities if we let the same Holy Spirit live in us.

THERE ARE SIX DIVISIONS OF THE BOOK each ending with a verse that confirms how the gospel continued to be spread and people went on finding Christ. The first section to 6:7 describes how the gospel filled Jerusalem. The second to 9:31 tells how the gospel reached one of the ends of the earth, and the preparation of one man who would do much of this, Saul of Tarsus. The third part to 12:24 takes the gospel to the Gentiles, and explains the preparation of a missionary church which God would use, the church of Antioch. The fourth section to 16:5 takes the gospel to Asia. The fifth part to 19:20 describes the gospel reaching Europe and the final part to Rome itself, the capital of the Western world of those days.

1:1 Q.1 How would Luke's background and training have prepared him to write Acts? How has God used your background to prepare you to teach others? What effect would Luke's stated purpose in writing have on how he prepared, and on the style he used? What can we learn from this about how God equips and prepares us to minister to others?

1:2-5 Q.2 What two aspects of Jesus' ministry during His resurrection appearances are mentioned? What 2 aspects of the ministry of Jesus' disciples does the book describe? What 2 parts are there meant to be to our ministry today?

1:4,5 Q.3 What did Jesus mean when He promised His disciples that they would be baptised with the Holy Spirit?(I Cor.12:13; Rom.6:1-11; Col.2:12-14; I Pet.3:21,22) How does water baptism illustrate the meaning of Spirit baptism? What do we have to do to be baptised with the Spirit?

1:6-11 Q.4 Having promised the disciples that the Spirit would make them part of the His body, and that the Spirit would come into their lives to represent Him, Jesus gave them a commission and 2 warnings. What were they? What four steps in being witnesses were they to take? How do we take the same four steps in our task as missionaries today? What is the role of a witness in court? How do the same two warnings they received apply also to us today? How can we avoid these dangers?

1:12-14 Q.5 From where did Jesus ascend to heaven? What had already happened in the same place?(Lk.22:39) What had been promised about this place? (Zech.14:4) What do we know already about the team whom God was going now to use to continue the work of Jesus? How do you suppose they got on as a group of people? What lesson is there in God's choice so far as we are concerned?

1:15-26 Q.6 How did the disciples fill in the time from the Ascension to Pentecost? How long was it? What reasons did Peter give for urging the others to choose a replacement for Judas? Did Peter make a mistake in his choice? (Rom.1:1; I Cor.1.1; Gal.1.1; Rev.21:14) If so, how can we learn from it?