LUTHERAN BIBLE COMPANION

Volume 1: Introduction and Old Testament

A Practical Tool for Church Workers and Laypeople

Drawn from the consultant materials of 27 scholars for The Lutheran Study Bible project and from numerous faithful resources; supplemented in view of recent research, including articles by Horace D. Hummel, Paul L. Maier, Andrew E. Steinmann, and others.

GENERAL EDITOR
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FOREWORD BY GREGORY P. SELTZ

Whoever would know God and have eternal life should read [the Bible] with diligence and search for its testimony of Christ, God’s Son.
—Martin Luther (What Luther Says § 245)
Jesus says, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about Me” (Jn 5:39). The apostle John says at the end of his Gospel, “These [things] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name” (Jn 20:31). And the apostle Paul encourages all people to “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Col 3:16). The Bible is an incredible book of God’s promises and actions to redeem and restore the world to Himself. In the Scriptures there is life and salvation.

That’s why in my more than 25 years of ministry, as the Lutheran Hour Speaker, as the Director and Professor of the Cross-Cultural Ministry (Concordia University Irvine), and as a “church planting” pastor in the urban centers of the United States, my main goal was to introduce people to Jesus Christ and to deepen their knowledge of His Word, the Bible. If that is your desire, to know Christ Jesus with an ever deepening knowledge of the Old and New Testaments, then reading the Holy Scriptures with this wonderful resource, the Lutheran Bible Companion (LBC), will do just that.

Why This Book?

Well, first, let’s remember that not only is the Bible the most incredible book in all of human history, it is also a unique book. In fact, there is no other sacred book like it. It actually is a collection of books and letters, written over a span of 1,500 years, by over 40 authors from every walk of life—from peasants, to fishermen, to doctors, to priests, to kings. And these writings were written during times of peace, times of war, times of hopelessness, and times of great anticipation. In these writings are unique words, even now for times like this. For the Bible is a book of God's saving actions in history. Compared to all religious literature in the world, no other sacred book ties God's promises for all to specific people, places, times, and cultures like the Bible. To know the Word of God through the “words of God” is to study them in their context, to seek to know how they were understood, and to know with confidence that the God of the Bible can translate and deliver that message to you and me too.

So how does one go about studying a wonderfully unique book such as the Bible? Good question. Even those who have great desire to know the
Scriptures (among them many of my parishioners, my elders, my students, and even my “seeker” friends and family) have dived into the Word only to get lost, get off track, or to be diverted by some challenge for which they had no answer or no idea of where to look. That’s why the *Lutheran Bible Companion* is such a valuable resource. It is a cradle of scholarship—historical, archaeological, theological, and biblical—that allows the reader to start anywhere in the Bible and see the big picture even as one studies a specific book. This Bible Companion is a resource that helps the seeker and the serious Bible student to take the Scripture at its word, to see its major themes, to understand its desired impact, and to let it “dwell in you richly” so that you might see it as it is—God’s historically rooted Word of grace, life, and salvation for all those who believe.

**Basics First**

I love the fact that the Bible Companion begins with basic articles concerning the Bible as a whole. In this day and age, so many read the Bible from their point of view alone. That may be a good way to start, but the big question that remains is this: how does the Bible wish to be read? The opening articles give practical advice about how to read and study the Bible from the Bible’s own perspective. Before critiquing, criticizing, or even applying the Word of God, let the Bible have its say on its own terms. The opening articles then delineate how the Lord works through His Word with such different, yet powerful, themes as Law and Gospel. They orient the reader to the miraculous unity of the Scriptures, giving one confidence that the Scripture will be its own interpreter, and trust that the Holy Spirit will indeed work through the Word. The articles at the end of the Bible Companion concerning “Archaeology, Ancient Literature, the Church” and “the historically unique way that the Bible came to us,” provide even more valuable resources that give the committed Bible student a Word-driven orientation to the Scripture’s contents that will only enhance its clarity and purpose in one’s life.

The Bible Companion also deals with questions that modern readers might ask concerning the nature of the teachings of the Bible. Articles about miracles, science and the Bible, ancient customs and their application to today—all these are taken head-on, showing the serious student that the Bible is indeed a Word for all ages, for all people, for all times, because the God of the Scriptures, as the writer of the Hebrews says, “is the same yesterday and today and forever” (13:8).
HELPFUL DETAILS

My favorite part of the Lutheran Bible Companion is the detailed information that is brought to bear on every book in the Bible itself. Whether it’s information about Genesis, creation, and the promised Savior; or Moses, the Torah, and the exodus; or David, the covenant, and the temple; or even the historical and theological facts concerning the Gospels or the Epistles of St. Paul, the Lutheran Bible Companion lays valuable, necessary information at the Bible student’s fingertips. In preparing my five lectures, “Footsteps of Paul—Footprints of Grace,” for the “Footsteps of Paul” sojourn through Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy, this Bible Companion was an invaluable resource for me in my study of the Book of Acts and the Pauline Epistles. The summary sections for chapters, the Law and Gospel themes and doctrinal summaries for each book, the comments from prominent Lutheran theologians, the practical application section and the “Questions People Ask” about the individual book being read—these brought fresh ideas and depth to sections of the Bible that I’ve read many times before. And the wonderful pictures, illustrations, graphs, and maps provided a glimpse of what was to come on my trip. They will help the Bible “come alive” for you, the reader. And if all that is not enough, there is a “Further Study” section that will offer the average lay reader, Bible study leader, school teacher, professor, and pastor resources that will make the study of the Bible enjoyable and fruitful. In fact, with the Bible at the center and the Bible Companion at the ready, you can read the Bible for “all its worth.”

For many today, the Bible remains a closed book. But it doesn’t have to be that way. The Lutheran Bible Companion is a resource that will help open the Scriptures for any reader of the Word. It can help anyone (as we Lutherans like to say) to truly read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the Bible, “God’s saving word for you.” This is a resource that needs to be on every person’s shelf, or even better, in their hands.

GREAT PLACES IN HISTORY

One of the great opportunities that I have as the Lutheran Hour Speaker is to lead people in tours of the Holy Land, the lands of St. Paul, and of course, Germany. I’ve been privileged to preach an Easter sermon right next to the actual empty tomb of Jesus, and a Reformation sermon from the pulpit where Luther himself preached. I’ve gotten to see these incredible places together with many of the faithful, the great places in history where the faith
took root, such as Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, and even Rome. There is nothing like seeing the “dirt level place” where the Gospel promises given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob began. But, if you can’t see them in person, see them in this wonderful resource, the *Lutheran Bible Companion*. With the Bible and the Companion together, I know that you, like me, will be blessed in your study of God’s Word, rooted and anchored in His gracious gifts, to live graced, abundant lives in Him.

To that end, may God richly bless you.
Rev. Gregory P. Seltz
Speaker, The Lutheran Hour
EDITOR’S PREFACE

Lutherans who study the Bible, preach, or teach in English have never had their own comprehensive handbook of the Bible. They have contented themselves with works of varying value by other Christians. From the respectable Halley’s Bible Handbook, which first appeared as a pamphlet in 1922, to volumes that promote theology of glory, confusion of Law and Gospel, and criticism of the Bible—the Lutheran reader has had to settle for less than helpful resources or search a variety of works to get at the insights needed for basic Bible study. For these reasons, a Lutheran Bible Companion was needed.

Earlier generations of Lutherans could look to Luther’s introductions to the biblical books if they were printed in their German Bibles. They might reach for Michael Walther’s Harmonia (1626), Johann Georg Benedikt Winer’s Biblische Realwörterbuch (1833), the Concordia Self-Study Commentary (1971), or other resources. Yet even these fine, earlier resources were not comprehensive. A better resource was needed, especially one that both church workers and laity could use and consult together. From the beginning of The Lutheran Study Bible project, we had this work for a Bible companion in mind since we could not possibly supply comprehensive tools within the Study Bible.

DEVELOPING THE BIBLE COMPANION

This companion is the last in a series of works that began in 2003 when we organized the Grow in His Word research project in the Adult Bible Study area at Concordia Publishing House. That research project focused on how people read the Bible and what questions came to mind for them as they read portions of the English Standard Version (ESV). The project led to our publication of The Lutheran Study Bible (TLSB; 2009) and The Apocrypha: The Lutheran Edition with Notes (ALEN; 2012).

To aid our writers for these projects, we consulted with 27 Lutheran Bible scholars. The Lutheran Bible Companion (LBC; 2014) reflects the directions provided by these scholars who guided our setting of dates, descrip-
An angel grips the sword by which Abraham would sacrifice his son Isaac. Behind Abraham appears a ram whom God sent as a substitute for the sacrifice. This dramatic Old Testament event foreshadowed the sacrifice of Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, illustrating the unity of the two testaments.
THE OLD TESTAMENT

THE VALUE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament has basic relevance in the life of every Christian because through it comes not only the revelation of the origin of the world in which we live but also the origin of sin, how it brought down God’s curse, and how God gave His loving promise to free mankind from the dreadful results of the curse of sin. No one can properly appreciate the Old Testament who does not discover the golden thread of prophecy that assures mankind of the coming of the Messiah, identified in the New Testament as Jesus Christ, the Savior of the World. Luther wrote,

Christ says in John 5[:39], “Search the Scriptures, for it is they that bear witness to me.” . . . The ground and proof of the New Testament is surely not to be despised, and therefore the Old Testament is to be highly regarded. And what is the New Testament but a public preaching and proclamation of Christ, set forth through the sayings of the Old Testament and fulfilled through Christ? (AE 35:235–36)

In reading the Old Testament, it is necessary to be aware that it reflects cultures, customs, and conditions quite different from those that current readers have experienced. It must be recognized that the writers employ various literary forms in order to communicate the truth of God’s revelation. This volume will help you with these goals.

Interpretation and Application

When Jesus Christ, having risen from the dead on Easter morning, walked with two men on the first Easter afternoon on their way to Emmaus and found them confused about His death and reports of His resurrection, Luke tells us that He opened unto them the Scriptures: “Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures
the things concerning Himself” (Lk 24:27). Later when Paul had been brought as a prisoner to Rome, he called the leaders of the Jews in Rome together and “From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets” (Ac 28:23).

These are the examples we will follow in the presentation of the books of the Old Testament. We believe this is key to a proper understanding and application of God’s Old Testament revelation, namely, the faith that these writings were inspired by God “to make [us] wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2Tm 3:15). Reading from this perspective, every book of the Old Testament carries a meaningful and faith-strengthening message for the reader and reduces the inclination to get lost in mere questions and problems of language and culture and authorship and chronology.
The Madaba Map is the oldest floor mosaic map including the Holy City of Jerusalem. On the left (north) appears the Damascus gate and plaza. Running down the center from left to right is the western cardo street, flanked by colonnades. At its center appears the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (upside down, red roof, three openings on its facade). The street ends on the right (south) at the Nea Church (also with red roof and two openings). On the top (east) runs the eastern cardo street with a short connecting street to the Lion’s Gate. At the bottom right (west side) appears the Jaffa Gate, with its street running up and angling right, toward the Nea Church. The temple Mount stood in the empty, upper right corner of the image (southeast).
“The word of God increased,” Three times in the Book of Acts Luke uses this sentence to sum up a period of the history of the Early Church (6:7; 12:24; 19:20). These words are a telling expression of the biblical conception of the divine Word. Our Lord Himself compared the Word with a seed that is sown and sprouts and grows: “The seed is the word of God” (Lk 8:11; cf Col 1:6; 1Pt 1:23). The Word of the Lord is powerful and active; it “prevails mightily,” as Luke puts it in Ac 19:20.

If, then, we are to hear the divine Word of the New Testament on its own terms (and that is the whole task and function of interpretation), we must study it historically. We must learn to see it as the growing and working divine Word, as God Himself active in history (Ac 2:11).

The Book of Acts is unique in the history of religions. Nowhere else do we find this sober and religious sense of history, this absolute conviction that God is the God of history, who clothes Himself in a garment of mighty deeds in order to reveal Himself to us. Here only do we find the conviction of faith that His Word is a force, is in fact the force in history. The Book of Acts is therefore uniquely valuable for our study of the whole New Testament. It is valuable because it provides us with the historical information
that is indispensable for reconstructing the historical background of many New Testament books, especially the letters of Paul; but not only for that reason. We appreciate and value the Book of Acts as students of history, of course, but we are never merely historians when we seek to interpret the New Testament. We are always first and foremost believers, for whom the historical is a means to a higher end, namely, that we hear the New Testament speak to us as the living voice of God now. And it is to the theologians and believers that the Book of Acts is really uniquely valuable. Since it is the history of the Early Church, conceived of and told not as the history of another religious society but as the history of the growth, the progress, and the triumph of the divine Word, the Book of Acts can determine not only the method of our study but also the basically religious attitude of our study.

Thus the first 12 chapters of the Book of Acts will provide us with the materials that enable us to reconstruct the historical setting and the original function of the Epistle of James, and will give us an insight into the genesis and the background of the mission to the Gentiles that gave rise to the letters of Paul. However, we shall do well to use these 12 chapters first as a means of getting a basic, theological insight into the character of the New Testament Word of God. This does not mean that we ignore the historical; it does mean that we see in history the revelation of God—our God. “When my love walks, she treads upon the ground,” a poet once said. We might say the same of our God: “When our God walks, He treads upon the ground.” He does not remain a remote and shadowy sort of philosopher’s God; He condescends to enter history and does His gracious work there, for us men and for our salvation. If we study historically the life of the Early Church and the nature of the apostolic proclamation that called that First Church into being, we shall be enabled to hear God speaking to us now.
Historical and Cultural Setting

What sort of life was this life of the Early Church, that life which was the historical framework of our New Testament, the seedbed in which it sprouted and grew? Its first and most obvious characteristic is that it is a life wholly dominated by the Lord Jesus Christ. Luke makes it very plain that the Book of Acts (which is the second book of a two-volume work, of which his Gospel is the first) is the direct continuation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: “In the first book, . . . I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Ac 1:1). The human figure of Peter may loom large on the stage of history in the first part (chs 1–12) and that of Paul in the second (chs 13–28); but they are both dwarfed by, and completely subordinated to, Him who is the real and sole Actor in this Book of Acts—this Jesus who continues to do and to teach. It is His Word that grows and speeds and triumphs here, not Peter’s or Paul’s, a fact that Peter and Paul are the first to assert.

Second, the Book of Acts has aptly been called the Gospel of the Holy Spirit. The book opens with the promise of the Spirit (1:5, 8), and the New Testament Church is born when the Spirit is given in the fullness and universality that neither the Old Testament people of God nor the disciples of Jesus had as yet experienced (2:1–42). The third major aspect of the history which is the seedbed of our New Testament is the fact that the Church is conscious of being the end times people of God, that is, the people of God in the world’s last days. The Spirit is the gift of God given “in the last days” (2:17). And the gift is given in order that we may bear witness to the fact which decisively ushers in the last days, the resurrection of Jesus from the
dead (2:32–36). That fact means that Jesus is enthroned as Christ and Lord (2:36), soon to return (3:20). The “day of the Lord” of which Joel had spoken is full in view (2:20), and it is for the new people of God “the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The kingdom of God is “at hand” more imminently and more urgently than when John the Baptist cried out in the wilderness (Mt 3:2) or even when Jesus proclaimed it in Galilee (Mt 4:17). The risen Lord is proclaiming it; the word of His messengers is establishing it (Ac 1:3, 6, 8). When the “good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” is being proclaimed (8:12), the Kingdom is there, the Christ is taking up His power and is beginning to reign; it is the beginning of the end. The last days have dawned.

The Book of Acts pictures the new people of God as living by the apostles’ word. The Church thus lives in faith and love under the Lordship of Jesus, animated by the Spirit, which He has poured out upon all believers, in joyous, active, and responsible expectancy of the return of the Lord in glory. The impress of this first history of God’s people is on the whole new New Testament, and the first apostolic preaching (often referred to by its Greek name kerygma, “herald’s news, proclaimed Gospel”) has given all the New Testament writings their characteristic color and contour.

The whole New Testament is the rich and various unfolding of “The word of God increased.” The Gospels expand it; the Epistles restate, point up, and apply it; the Book of Revelation unfolds its utmost eschatological reach. And nowhere, in any aspect of it, does this Word lose its character as history. It has a history, being the crown and fulfillment of God’s previous actions and promises; it is history—the recital of the mighty works of God that culminate in that epochal history when God dealt decisively with the sin of mankind in His Servant Jesus of Nazareth; and it makes history—it is the Word of the Lord, and the Spirit of the Lord moves creatively in it. It calls upon people to turn, and turns them, and thus catches them up into God’s last great movement in history toward God’s last goal.

**COMPOSITION**

**Author**

According to early tradition, borne out in the headings of early manuscripts, Luke the evangelist wrote the Book of Acts. Since the questions surrounding Lukian authorship are closely tied to questions regarding the Gospel of Luke, see pp 269–70 for further information.
Date of Composition

The content of Acts requires that it was composed after Paul reached Rome. Since Paul and Peter were later executed at Rome in AD 68 and Acts does not record these monumental events, the book was most likely written before their executions. For more on the date of composition, see pp 270–71.

Purpose/Recipients

It may be, as some scholars have supposed, that Acts has an apologetic purpose: to make plain to the Roman world that Christianity is no treasonable, subversive movement but is innocent of any politically dangerous intent. Its preachers may be turning “the world upside down” (Ac 17:6), but not in any sense that threatens the stability of the empire. It has often been pointed out that Luke repeatedly notes the fact that Roman officials find Christianity politically neutral (e.g., 18:14, 15; 23:29; 25:18, 19; 26:32). But the apologetic purpose is at most a secondary one for the book. The prime intent of the work is religious. It portrays the impact of the risen and exalted Christ upon the entire world. Christ confronts all people in the inspired word of the messengers whom He Himself has chosen. He confronts all sorts and conditions—Jews, Samaritans, Greeks, Romans, the high and the lowly, suave metropolitan philosophers and superstitious, excitable louts of the hinterland. Christ confronts them all with the gracious claim of His saving Lordship. Whether the response be the joyous and absolute submission of faith or the embittered resistance of unbelief or the polite mockery of skepticism, He looms divinely large as the Lord before whom the ways of men divide, since they must welcome or reject Him. He is the Christ who is gathering the new people of God from among all the nations of the earth.

Literary Features

Genre

The Book of Acts is to be thought of as the direct continuation of Luke’s Gospel, with the exalted Christ as its solely dominant figure (Ac 1:1). The book does not pretend to be a history of the Early Church or even a history of early missions; it would be woefully incomplete as either of the two. It is the continuation of the story of the Christ, and can therefore be as selective in recording the facts of history as the Gospel itself. Of all the ways that the Gospel went, Luke selects just one, the high road to Rome. And even that segment of the total history of missions is not fully portrayed but is leanly

Continued on p 368.
ACTS AND THE CRITICS

The historical accuracy of Acts has been seriously questioned by critical scholarship in modern times for the following reasons: (1) The ancient tradition concerning Lukan authorship is heavily discounted by critics. Only the “we” sections, at most, are attributed to an eyewitness and companion of Paul, probably, but not necessarily, Luke. This material, it is asserted, has been utilized by a writer of much later date. (2) The aim of the work, it is said, is obviously not primarily to convey historical information. Since its purpose is edification (or apologetics), one cannot expect historical accuracy. For example, it is argued that the parallelism between the accounts of Peter (Ac 1–12) and Paul (Ac 13–28) is too complete and too pat to be convincing as history. (3) The account of Acts concerning Paul cannot, it is alleged, be squared with what the letters of Paul tell us of his life. (4) Most important, it is argued that no one who had really known Paul could have portrayed him as he is portrayed in Acts; for example, it is thought to be inconceivable that the man who wrote the Letter to the Galatians would make it a point to preach first to the Jews wherever he went or would so completely and unabashedly associate himself with Judaism as he does in 21:23–26 or would call himself a Pharisee (23:6). The author of Acts has, so the argument runs, distorted the picture in order to give the impression that the development within the Early Church was more peaceful and harmonious than it in reality was. It is likewise maintained that Paul in 17:22–31 makes concessions to pagan thought that cannot be paralleled in his letters.

To these arguments the answer is: (1) It is a good principle in historical study that a tradition stands until valid reasons have been given for rejecting it. Can any really valid reason be advanced for skepticism regarding the tradition of the Lukan authorship of Acts in the Early Church?
(2) Acts is obviously written for the edification of the Church; its preface already indicates that. But the argument that a book designed for edification is for that very reason not trustworthy as a record of facts rests on a false conception of what constitutes “edification.” The New Testament itself is emphatic on the point that the apostles built and edified the Church, not with myths and dreams and fancies but with the facts of God’s wonderful works; the Gospels by their very title (Good News) assert that they want to be taken seriously as history. Paul stakes the whole case for his apostolate, the apostolic message, and the Church on the factuality of the Resurrection (1Co 15:1–19). As for Luke, it should be remembered that Lk 1:1–4, with its claim to historical accuracy based on careful research and recourse to primary sources, is the preface to the whole two-volume work, which the secondary preface of Ac 1:1 is designed to recall. A feature such as the parallelism between the lives of Peter and Paul does not, therefore, call into question the accuracy of the report concerning them. The parallelism was no doubt designed by the author and designed for edifying purposes. But the parallels do not prove that he falsified the facts in order to produce the report. (For example, without falsifying history, a man may point out that Handel and Bach, both musicians, were born in the same year, were both treated by the same eye doctor, and both went blind.) Moreover, the accuracy of Luke’s account in many details has been strikingly confirmed by historical and archaeological investigation. Luke, for instance, gets the titles of Roman officials right—and they varied not only from place to place, but also from time to time in the same place. And what is even more difficult for a noncontemporary, he accurately reproduces the atmosphere of the various places that are the scenes of events recorded by him—the fanatical Jewish nationalistic fervor at the time.
of a great festival in Jerusalem, the civic self-consciousness of the Philippian “colonists,” the intellectual curiosity and rationality of Athens. The details of the narrative of Paul’s voyage to Rome and his shipwreck on Malta in ch 27 have been checked by experts and not found wanting.

(3) The most remarkable feature about the relationship between Acts and the Letters of Paul is the amount and kind of correspondence between the two. The notices of Paul and Luke frequently dovetail, and in such a manner as to exclude a calculated agreement on the part of Luke. It is only natural and, indeed, inevitable that there should remain unresolved tensions and unanswered questions in this area. The two men write from different points of view, and neither Paul nor Luke is writing a complete biography of Paul, so that we are often left ignorant of facts that might supply the connecting and unifying links between the Lukan and the Pauline notices.

(4) If Acts has drawn a false picture of Paul, one that cannot be harmonized with the self-portrait of the letters, that would constitute a most serious indictment of its historical trustworthiness. But one may fairly ask whether those who have found Acts wanting in this respect have made the whole self-portrait of Paul’s Letters the standard for comparison. Have they not forgotten the Paul who spoke of the Gospel as the power of God for salvation “to the Jew first” (Rm 1:16) when they question Luke’s veracity in portraying the Paul who preached first in the synagogue? If Paul avoided the synagogue, how are we to account for the fact that he in his apostolic ministry received the 39 lashes at the hands of the Jews no less than five times (2Co 11:24)? Paul writes, “To the Jews I became as a Jew” (1Co 9:20); was that a mere theory, or did he put it into practice? And if Paul once calls himself a Pharisee, the situation in which he does so must be borne in mind. He was not thereby saying, and his Pharisaic judges did not understand him to say, that he was returning to Judaism; he was saying with typically Pauline incisiveness that he shared with the Pharisees what he did not share with the Sadducees, the messianic hope and the hope of the resurrection (Ac 23:6). And as for Paul’s alleged concessions to paganism, does his speech on the Areopagus in Ac 17, rightly understood, really go beyond what he says in the first chapter of his Letter to the Romans (Rm 1:19)? And is there not a remarkable agreement between his speech on the Areopagus and the description that he himself gives of his missionary preaching in 1Th 1:9–10?

The historical accuracy of Acts cannot be checked and verified at all points; where it can be checked, the results have been generally favorable to Luke. In many points, no verification is possible; the miracles attributed to Peter and to Paul, for instance, lie quite outside the realm of historical veri-
fication. And what historical investigation can determine that which is for Luke the controlling fact of history, the fact of the presence and power of the Spirit? These realities can neither be proved nor disproved, and assent to the message that the facts spell out does not depend on the possibility of historical verification. Luke's appeals to faith; deep calls to deep and speaks a speech for which shallow rationality has no ear.

THE APOSTLES' MINISTRY
(Acts 1–12)

Acts records that Jesus ascended to heaven from the Mount of Olives (ch 1). On Pentecost in Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit filled the apostles, they proclaimed the Gospel in many languages, and 3,000 people were baptized (ch 2). Peter's healing of a lame beggar and preaching about Jesus in the temple (ch 3) resulted in 5,000 converts (4:4).

Philip proclaimed the Gospel in Sebaste, the rebuilt city of Samaria (8:1–8). Going from Jerusalem to Gaza, Philip taught and baptized the Ethiopian eunuch. Then he was taken by the Spirit to Azotus and preached on the way to Caesarea Maritima (8:26–40).

The ascended Jesus admonished and converted Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus. Ananias baptized Saul, who preached the Gospel in Damascus (9:1–22). He escaped mortal danger and went to Jerusalem. There, he preached boldly, but to save his life, he was sent to Tarsus via Caesarea Maritima (9:23–31).

Peter worked miracles in Lydda and Joppa (9:32–43). God sent him to proclaim the Gospel to the Gentile Cornelius in Caesarea Maritima (ch 10).

and monumentally sketched. There are, for instance, large gaps in the record of the career of Paul; both his two years’ ministry at Corinth and his three years’ ministry at Ephesus are merely illustrated by means of typical incidents rather than chronicled. Indeed, the whole work illustrates rather than chronicles the course of the Word that proclaims and presents Christ. Luke selects incidents and actions that illumine and bring out in clear outline the impact of that Word upon people, the tensions and conflicts that ensue when the Word of the Lord is heard, and the triumphant progress of that Word despite tensions and conflicts.

Characters

“Acts of the Apostles” can hardly be the title given to the second part of his work by Luke himself. Of the apostles, only Peter and Paul are really leading figures. John appears a few times in the early chapters and then disappears; James the son of Zebedee appears only as a martyr, with one short sentence devoted to his execution. On the other hand, men who are not apostles play a considerable role in the narrative: Stephen, Philip, Barnabas, Silas, Agabus. Furthermore, if the title were to be understood in the sense suggested by similar works current in antiquity, such as The Acts of Alexander by Callisthenes or The Acts of Hannibal by Sosylus, it could actually be misleading. It would suggest a narrative of human heroism and human achievement. Of course, the very term apostle, as defined by Jesus and as used by the apostles themselves, should have excluded that idea, for the apostle is by definition nothing of himself and everything by virtue of the commission given him by his Lord. But would Luke have selected a title that even suggested the idea of human greatness? His book tells the story of men, only because, and insofar as, men are instrumental in the growth and triumph of the Word of the Lord.
OUTLINE

The Book of Acts may be divided most easily between the work of Peter (chs 1–12) and the work of Paul (chs 13–28). Also, 1:8 provides a helpful outline for the progress of the 25 years of history presented in Acts (c AD 33–58):

From Jerusalem (1:1–6:7)
To Judea and Samaria (6:8–9:31)
To the ends of the earth (9:32–28:31)

The following detailed outline takes into account the main characters as well as the progress from Jerusalem out to the broader Roman Empire and its capital.

I. Prologue (1:1–2) (Links Acts to Luke and Shows That Christ’s Work Continues as the Spirit Works In and Through the Church)

II. Peter and the Church’s Foundation: The Gospel Spreads from Judea to Galilee and Samaria (1:3–14:28)

A. The Church Is Born (1:3–2:47)
   1. Jesus teaches about the kingdom of God, promises the Holy Spirit, and ascends into heaven (1:3–11)
   2. Matthias chosen to replace Judas: the foundation of the 12 apostles is restored (1:12–26)
   3. Pentecost: the descending Spirit gives birth to the Church (ch 2)

B. Peter and John Carry on the Work of Christ in Jerusalem (chs 3–5)
   1. Peter and John’s first trial and its effects (3:1–5:11)
   2. Peter and John’s second trial and its effects (5:12–42)

C. The Martyrdom of Stephen and Initial Spread of the Gospel (chs 6–8)
   1. Stephen and his martyrdom (6:1–8:1a)
2. The persecution of the Church leads to the Gospel’s spread
   (8:1b–40)

D. The Conversion of Paul and the Vision of Peter Pave the Way
   for Outreach to the Gentiles (chs 9–14)
   1. Saul’s conversion on the road to Damascus (9:1–31)
   2. Peter’s vision and the extension of the Gospel (9:32–11:18)
   3. The Church in Antioch (11:19–30)
   4. Peter’s escape; Herod’s death (ch 12)
   5. Paul’s first missionary journey (chs 13–14)

III. The Jerusalem Council: Paul’s Work Endorsed by Peter and
     James (15:1–35)
     A. Paul’s Missionary Work Sparks Controversy (15:1–5)
     B. Paul’s Missionary Work Evaluated (15:6–21)
     C. The Council Sends a Letter to the Churches (15:22–35)

IV. Paul Carries the Gospel to the Ends of the Earth (15:36–28:31)
     A. Paul’s Second Missionary Journey (15:36–18:22)
     B. Paul’s Third Missionary Journey (18:23–21:16)
           b. Trial before the Council (22:30–23:11)
           c. Transfer to Caesarea (23:12–35)
        2. Paul’s imprisonment in Caesarea (chs 24–26)
           a. Trial before Felix (ch 24)
           b. Trial before Festus (25:1–12)
           c. Hearing before Festus and Agrippa (25:13–26:32)

Paul is pictured as a loyal friend of the Jews, devoting some time on his
second and third journeys to raise money for Christian Jews in Jerusalem.
Perhaps Luke hoped that these emphases in his book would serve to heal
the growing breach between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Peter was as
important as Paul, Luke seems to be saying. God used Peter in the same way
He used Paul. Both Peter and Paul performed acts of healing; both raised people from the dead; both overcame sorcerers; both were offered divine worship by superstitious admirers; both were agents of divine judgment on impenitent sinners.

**Narrative Development or Plot**

Acts opens with (1) the believers in Jerusalem waiting for the gift of the Spirit and (2) Luke presenting the history of their work in that city. The history presents the journey of faith and of mission that led the early Christians from Jerusalem to the heart of the Roman Empire. In the early chapters, Peter emerges as a key character. Persecution and the death of the deacon, Stephen, moves the story from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, where a second key character is introduced: Saul/Paul, whom God calls to preach Christ.

For a few chapters, the story turns back to Peter, through whom God performs miracles, and begins ministry to the Gentiles (chs 9–12). The story then describes the mission to the Gentiles through Paul, with ch 15 recording how the Christians in Jerusalem settled doctrinal and practical disputes that arose due to the Gentile mission. The rest of the book records two missionary journeys of Paul and his companions until Paul reaches Rome, fulfilling an important aspect of Jesus’ stated goal in Ac 1:8.

Many have found the ending of Acts puzzling and inadequate: why is the outcome of Paul’s trial not told? Either his release or his martyrdom would seem to constitute a more fitting conclusion to the work than the one Luke has seen fit to give it. Some scholars have suggested that Luke perhaps intended to add a third volume to his work, one that would round out and conclude the story by recounting Paul’s release, his voyage to Spain, and his martyr’s death. But there is no real indication that Luke intended such a continuation of his book; neither is the suggestion very plausible that Luke did not record the outcome of Paul’s trial because that outcome was martyrdom and he did not wish to conclude his account of the victorious Gospel on a sad and negative note. To judge from Luke’s account of the martyrdom of Stephen (Ac 7:54–60) and from Paul’s own attitude toward martyrdom as recorded by Luke (Ac 20:24; 21:13), neither Luke nor Paul looked on martyrdom as something negative and depressing.

The fact is that the present ending makes sense, both as the conclusion of Acts and as the conclusion of the two-part work. The goal noted in Ac 1:8 has been reached: the Gospel is being proclaimed in Rome, the capital of the western world; it has stepped through the door that opens into all the world.
Text and Translations

The so-called “Western” text of Acts is about 12 percent longer than the early manuscripts associated with Alexandria and includes numerous interesting readings that reach back to at least the second century AD. It was named “Western” because some of its major witnesses were likely scribed in the western Mediterranean (e.g., Codex Bezae, uncial D, likely comes from Italy or France), though the so-called Western readings may likewise occur in manuscripts of Syria. Antioch, the Roman capital of Syria and one of the largest cities of western Asia, may have been the connecting point between these western and eastern manuscripts.

A minority of scholars have argued that the Western text is more original than the more polished Alexandrian texts; much of this discussion centers around the passages in Acts. In some passages, the Western text is shorter, leading to speculation about whether the Alexandrian texts included additions at those points. The majority of scholars conclude that the Western text is a looser and inclusive tradition of copying New Testament manuscripts rather than an earlier, more original form of the manuscripts. On the style of Luke’s Greek, see p 274.

**Doctrinal Content**

*Summary Commentary*

**Ch 1** The resurrected Christ advances the kingdom here and now. He will return in full sight of all in the Father’s good time. In view of this, the disciples and others seek the Lord’s will concerning the candidate of His choice to replace Judas as a leader of the Church, the new Israel.

**Ch 2** The Holy Spirit descends as a gift, sounding forth one message in many languages, showing that Israel will soon burst its ethnic bounds. In faith, Peter shows from the Scriptures that Jesus is Israel’s Lord as well as...
Savior of the nations. The early Christians lived only for their Lord and for the other members of His Body, the Church.

3:1–4:31 In this highest form of almsgiving, Peter and John dispense God’s own gift: mercy. Present through the Spirit in His holy name, the exalted Jesus makes the crippled man stand, that he may leap for joy. Peter then shows the crowd at the temple that all the prophets have pointed to Jesus as the Christ. The religious authorities close their eyes and cover their ears to silence the Word. But the crippled man still stands, the name of Jesus displays its power, and salvation resides in Him alone. Mounting pressure drives the apostles to prayer. They recite God’s sure Word and ask Him for boldness and a demonstration of His presence.

4:32–5:42 As the early Christians loved their Lord, they loved His Bride, the Church, giving of themselves freely. Ananias and Sapphira paid a high price for their hypocrisy, taking grace for granted and forgetting that Christ will return in judgment. God heals many people through the apostles. This massive outpouring of God’s love and power comes with His serious appeals for repentance. God’s patience with Israel (Rm 2:4) is running out. Yet the leaders are dangerously close to judgment. Under fire, the Church holds firm, confesses the truth, and accepts the suffering that follows.

Chs 6–8 The apostles deal with complaints about the relief of the Church’s poor, instituting the office of deacon. Yet one of the deacons, Stephen, is the new target of persecution. Synagogue leaders twist his words, accusing him of treason against Judaism. Stephen’s reply recounts how God’s chosen people, by rejecting Moses, rejected God. Israel’s refusal to follow God ended in their dismissal of God’s Son. Stephen displays the heart of one touched and changed by Jesus’ love. His death and Saul’s persecution of Christ’s followers illustrate the fulfillment of the prophecy that the world would hate the Gospel and kill those who believed it (Mt 24:9–10). Yet the omnipotent God makes the world’s fanatical hatred serve His purpose in proclaiming the Gospel throughout the entire world. The power of the Gospel, which reaches even the most unlikely people, is illustrated in the lives of the Samaritans. Then God leads Philip to bear witness to and baptize an important official from Ethiopia, ensuring that Jews in Africa and also Ethiopians would likewise receive the Gospel.

9:1–31 Jesus confronts Saul and converts him through the Gospel and Baptism. Though Saul was convinced of his righteous mission of persecution, he learned that true righteousness comes only through Christ. The Holy Spirit opened Saul’s eyes and heart to forgiveness through Christ so he boldly confessed His name to his fellow Jews. Due to Saul’s past, Christians
before King Agrippa and Bernice so they may formulate charges to send with Paul to Rome. Festus fails to set Paul free, even though he knows Paul is innocent. When Paul makes his defense before King Agrippa, he describes his zealous opposition to Jesus and the Gospel message. Then he recounts how the Lord converted him from an ardent persecutor of the faith to an avid apostle.

**Chs 27–28** Grave difficulties beset Paul’s journey to Rome, yet the Lord assures Paul that he will reach his journey’s goal. After a harrowing storm, the ship carrying Paul wrecks on the island of Malta. However, all the passengers are saved. Paul amazes the native people by surviving a snakebite, and they believe he is a god. As he heals many sick people, they will learn that his power comes from the one true God, not from Paul himself. Paul eventually reaches Rome safely and peacefully. Although not all of Paul’s fellow Jews believe the Gospel, Paul proclaims it without hindrance to the Gentiles, thus fulfilling Christ’s promise that the Gospel would be proclaimed to all nations.

**Specific Law Themes**

Describing the Christian life, Acts refers to Christianity as “the way” of God, which included rejection of idols, devotion to the Law and the Prophets, and the call to repentance. Acts emphasizes repeatedly, through commission and examples, that Christians must bear witness to the crucified and resurrected Christ as well as offer hospitality to those who travel for that purpose. As the apostles urge people to turn to God, they likewise condemn the sins of the nations. Those who resist the Spirit and persecute God’s people are subject to His special judgment.

**Specific Gospel Themes**

“Kingdom of God” and “way of God” are also used in Acts to describe the way of salvation and the gracious reign of heaven, which breaks forth in a unique way as God fulfills His promises in Jesus and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit fills the disciples, who boldly proclaim salvation in Jesus’ name through baptizing and teaching the Gospel. The story continually shows God’s direct involvement in the life of His Church.

**Specific Doctrines**

The Book of Acts has special interest for every Christian. It tells how Christ’s Church developed and matured in the crucial years between AD 30 and AD 60 as it preached the Gospel in the world, and it tells the story of the apostle
Paul, the missionary theologian whom God used to shape and mold the Church during this period. Acts serves to remind Christians that the Holy Spirit is active and powerful in the Church and that He gives them power to be witnesses to Jesus to “the end of the earth,” including both Jews and Gentiles. The following pages will explore how Acts teaches these great themes.

**The New People of God under the Lordship of Jesus Christ**

His Word grows; His will is done. For He is the exalted Lord of invincible majesty, the Lord who has been “taken up” into heaven, to the world of God (Ac 1:2, 9, 11), “exalted at the right hand of God” (2:33) as “Leader and Savior” (5:31), the “Lord of all” (10:36). The dying Stephen prayed to this Lord, just as Jesus Himself had on the cross prayed to His Father (7:59, 60; cf Lk 23:34, 46).

He is the exalted Lord by virtue of His resurrection from the dead: “This Jesus God raised up. . . . Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, . . . God has made Him both Lord and Christ” (2:32, 33, 36). It is the God who has raised Him from the dead who has exalted Jesus as Leader and Savior at His right hand (5:30, 31). “God raised Him on the third day and made Him to appear” (10:40). The exalted Lord is the Lord risen from the dead; that ties Him firmly and forever to the Lord who was made man for us men and for our salvation, to the Lord Jesus who went in and out among His disciples, whom John the Baptist heralded and proclaimed (1:21, 22), the man Jesus of Nazareth whom God attested to Israel with mighty works done in the midst of the men of Israel (2:22), the Jesus of Nazareth whom God anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil (10:38).

He is Lord because He went that way of gracious ministry to the utmost. He is the chief stone of the new temple of God because He was the stone rejected by the builders (4:10, 11), because He was betrayed by His own disciple, arrested by His own people (1:16), and killed and crucified (2:23; 3:13–15; 4:10; 7:52).

The new people of God know and proclaim their Lord as the Servant of God. The term Servant is used more frequently of Him in these early chapters of Acts than anywhere else in the New Testament (3:13, 26; 4:27, 30; cf 8:32, 33). No other single term could, perhaps, so fully denote His peculiar and all-encompassing Lordship as this one. For with this term, Jesus was proclaimed as the fulfillment of those prophecies of Isaiah that fixed the hope of God’s people on the Servant of the Lord, that servant whom the
Lord endowed with His Spirit for a mission of merciful ministry to all nations in order that He might be “a covenant for the people” (Is 42:6) Israel (that is, that He might bring about fully and forever the intent of God’s covenant-mercy and covenant-fidelity for God’s chosen people), and in order that He might be “a light for the nations” (42:6)—that in Him the dawn of God’s great day of salvation might break on all people everywhere (42:1–9). The Servant is described by the prophet Isaiah as going down into the depths of humiliation and rejection in His ministry (49:4, 7; 50:6), a ministry whose goal is the restoration of Israel and the salvation of all nations, that the Lord’s “salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (49:6). The Servant is pictured by the prophet as going through ministry and humiliation to a triumphant exaltation (52:13, 15).

But the triumph is not His until He has gone the downward way of ministry to the full, not only “despised and rejected by men” (Is 53:3), but bruised and put to grief by the Lord.
Himself (53:10), who numbers Him with the transgressors (53:12) and lays upon Him and punishes in Him the iniquity of all (53:5, 6). Only when the Servant has gone down into a vicarious, penal, atoning death for a sinful people, only when He has borne the sins of many, led like a lamb to the slaughter for their guilt, only then does He rise to new life and triumph (53:10–12). With the term Servant the apostles and the new people of God after them could sum up the whole glory of their Lord. The glory of the ministering Messiah, the crucified Messiah, the risen Messiah, the exalted Messiah was all comprehended in that term; and the dark mystery of His cross was illumined by it.

The Servant-Messiah of the new people of God is anything but a mere memory for them; He is for them no departed hero, no commemorated martyr. He is their present, living, and actively working Lord. Peter told the people, “God, having raised up His servant, sent Him to you first, to bless you” (Ac 3:26). We can see this actively blessing character of the Church's
Questions People Ask about Acts

Theudas

In Acts 5:36 we find a statement of Luke’s that certain critics see as an error on his part. It is the reference to a revolutionary by the name of Theudas, who before the days of the census of AD 6 fomented trouble and perished with his followers. Those who here accuse Luke of making a misstatement quote Josephus (Ant 20:97–98), according to whose account a certain Theudas arose in revolt during the procuratorship of Fadus (AD 44–46). Luke, it is alleged, in reporting the speech of Gamaliel, fell into an anachronism, dating the career of Theudas too early by about 40 years. One at once inquires why Josephus should be thought to be more reliable than Luke, when the latter has now, especially by the research of Sir William Ramsay, been shown to be a historian of the first order. On the other hand, the famous German scholar Theodore Zahn has shown that the work of Josephus at times lacks accuracy.

There are a number of other considerations, however, that entirely remove the suspicion that Luke here has committed a blunder. To begin with, the mere fact that Josephus does not mention this particular Theudas is no proof that Luke in Ac 5:36 is not speaking of a historical person. Again, the years before AD 6 and this year itself saw many disturbances in Israel, as the narrative of Josephus bears out. Theudas may have been one of the unnamed insurrectionists alluded to by this historian. The name Theudas was a fairly common one; there is no reason why there should not have been another man thus named around AD 6, as well as in AD 45. Or it may be that Theudas was the second name of a disturber whose misdeeds Josephus has mentioned under a different name. Our attention is especially attracted by a slave called Simon, who at the time of the death of Herod the Great (4 BC) attempted to seize control of Israel (Ant 17:273–77; War 2:57–59), but instead of attaining his objective, came to a miserable end. It is quite possible that he originally bore the name Theudas and changed it to the popular name Simon when he came forward with his claims. Those who are particularly interested in this question can consult the passages in Josephus that relate to this period, and various possibilities accounting for Gamaliel’s reference to Theudas as given in Ac 5:36 will easily suggest themselves.