
§1 *Jesus Taken Up into Heaven (Acts 1:1-11)*

Acts and the Third Gospel clearly come from the same hand. Not only their common dedication, but their common interests and their unity of language and style leave this beyond doubt. Moreover, the way in which they are introduced—the Gospel with its relatively detailed preface, Acts with its shorter introduction echoing the other's language—points us to the fact that these are not simply two books by the same author, but two volumes of one book. This arrangement of a work into a number of "books" having a common preface, with the later books having their own brief introduction, was a not-uncommon feature of ancient writing (cf., e.g., Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.1-7; see *BC*, vol. 2, p. 491). Unlike the Gospel, there is no clear line of demarcation in Acts between the introduction and the narrative, for what begins as a reference back to the earlier preface becomes a brief résumé of the whole of the first book—a narrative that leads into the new material of the following section. The famous Greek satirist Lucian (b. ca. A.D. 120) gives it as a dictum that the transition from the preface of a book to its narrative should be gradual and smooth (*On Writing History* 55). Luke conforms to Lucian's requirements.

1:1 / The book is dedicated to **Theophilus**, a man of some standing, to judge by the address in the Gospel, "Your Excellency" (Luke 1:3, GNB). Luke explains that in his **former book**—clearly he means the Gospel—he had set out to give an account of "all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven." This reveals Luke's understanding of the scope of his first volume. It was concerned only with the beginning of Jesus' work, the implication being that that work went on beyond "the day he was taken up." Luke's thesis is this: Jesus remains active, though the manner of his working has changed. Now, no longer in the flesh, he continues "to do and to teach" through his "body," the church (see disc. on 9:5). This is the story of Acts.

1:2 / Before Luke takes up that story, he briefly recalls the events that brought the first book to a close. Prior to the ascension, Jesus had given **instructions . . . to the apostles he had chosen**. In the Gospel, the title "apostles" is limited to the Twelve (Luke 9:10; 17:5; 22:14; 24:10; cf. Matt. 10:2ff.; Mark 6:30), and it is said by Luke to have been conferred upon them by Jesus himself (Luke 6:13). In Acts also, the primary reference is to the Twelve, though verses 21 and 22 suggest that others may have been included and certainly that others shared the apostles' experience (see further the notes on v. 26). The title was later given a wider application (see 14:4, 14). As we see from verse 5, Jesus' instructions were concerned in part with the gift of the Spirit. But already the Holy Spirit was involved in what he was doing. For it was **through the Holy Spirit** that he was now teaching them. Some commentators prefer to attach this phrase to Jesus' choice of the Twelve, but the most natural reading of the Greek is to take it with the statement "he gave instructions" and to understand it to mean that, in his teaching, Jesus was invested with divine power and authority. At all events, we are here given notice that in the story that is about to unfold the Spirit plays a key role. The Spirit is mentioned four times in this chapter alone (vv. 2, 5, 8, 16).

1:3 / For **forty days** after his death, Jesus showed himself to his disciples. The Greek is literally, "through forty days," which appears to mean, not that he was with them continuously, but that he appeared from time to time during that period. **Forty** was often used as a round number, but in this instance it seems to refer to the actual number of days, the period being something less than the fifty days between Passover and Pentecost (see disc. on 2:1). The most comprehensive list that we have of Jesus' appearances begins in 1 Corinthians 15:5, though even this, as the Gospels show, is far from complete. The "many times" of GNB (not represented in the Greek) may be a fair assumption. And, of course, the more times they saw him, the less chance there was that they were mistaken. Notice how Luke underlines the reality of the experience by means of repetition: "he showed himself to them," "he was seen by them." Nor was this all, for he also talked with them and, as we learn from elsewhere, ate and drank with them, as he had done in earlier days (see 10:41; Luke 24:30, 42f.; cf. Luke 22:17-20). The outcome of all this was that

they were left with an unshakable conviction that Jesus was alive and had been with them. It was “proven beyond doubt”—as strong an expression as Luke could have used. Had they not had these **convincing proofs**, the events described in this book would never have taken place.

His talking with them had been of **the kingdom of God**. This had been Jesus’ theme from the beginning, as it would be theirs (see 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31), though they would preach it from a different perspective. For the kingdom had “come with power” only in the saving events of Jesus’ death and its sequel (Mark 9:1). Even so, what they preached was not their own construction on those events, but was given to them now in Jesus’ teaching about his death (see Luke 24:25f., 45ff.) and in the years to come by the Spirit of Jesus (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 2:10). In the phrase **after his suffering**, Luke uses a word that, more than most, reminds us of the cost at which our salvation was won (cf. 17:3; 26:23).

1:4 / Besides this, one other matter in particular found a place in Jesus’ instructions: the apostles were not to leave Jerusalem, but were to wait there for **the gift** that he had told them about, that is, the gift of the Holy Spirit which the **Father** had **promised** (cf. Isa. 32:15; Joel 2:28–32; Acts 2:33, 39; Gal. 3:14; Eph. 1:13, and for Jesus’ teaching, Matt. 10:20; John 14:16f., 25; 15:26; 16:7f., 13–15). In NIV, verses 4 and 5 appear to refer to something Jesus said on a specific occasion, as well they might. Perhaps we have in these verses a recollection of their last meeting with him (cf. vv. 6–8; Luke 24:48f.). But in the Greek, the use of the present participle suggests that the reference is, rather, to a number of occasions on which they came together and these instructions were given (cf. John 20:22). Clearly it was a matter of great importance to Jesus that his disciples should be ready for the gift that the Father had promised. The fact that they were ready and had expressed their readiness in expectant prayer may have been a condition of their receiving the gift. The location seems also to have been important. Their own inclination had been to go back to Galilee (see John 21), but Jesus stressed that they should remain in Jerusalem—**he gave them this command**; in the Greek the verb is one that Luke often uses for particular emphasis. But why Jerusalem, we cannot say, except that Isaiah had spoken of a new teaching issuing from the city and a new obedience that

would follow (Isa. 2:3), and what had been spoken had to come true. In any case, there was something appropriate in the Father's gift being given in the very place where, not long before, a disobedient and rebellious people had put Jesus to death (cf. 7:51; Neh. 9:26). And here, of course, the greatest number of people would be found to receive the apostles' initial witness to Christ.

1:5 / Jesus promised that the power to witness would soon be theirs, when they were **baptized with the Holy Spirit** (cf. v. 8). This expression, used also by John the Baptist (see Matt. 3:11, etc.), is derived from baptism with water. As a metaphor of the gift of the Spirit it does not convey all that the gift entails, but it does give the required sense of an overwhelming experience. The promise was fulfilled within a **few days** (see disc. on 2:4; cf. 2:17; 11:15).

1:6 / So important did Luke regard the teaching of these few days before the ascension that he has left us three accounts of it: one in the Gospel (Luke 24:44-49), another in the preface of Acts, and a third in verses 6 to 8 of this section. Though the material may be based on the recollection of one particular occasion, perhaps Jesus' last meeting with the disciples, it may be regarded as typical of the instruction he gave throughout the post-resurrection period. The remaining verses of this section (9-11) give an account of the event that brought this period to a close. They are the fullest and perhaps the only account of the ascension in the New Testament, since the texts of Mark 16:19 and Luke 24:51 are probably not original. Because the passage stands alone, its historical value has been questioned and Luke accused of translating a purely spiritual event into an event in the material world. But even if the ascension is not actually described elsewhere, it is certainly implied in the frequent references to Christ at the right hand of God (e.g., 2:33f.; 3:21; John 6:62; Eph. 4:8-10; 1 Thess. 1:10; Heb. 4:14; 9:24; Rev. 5:6) and is twice clearly attested, once by Peter (1 Pet. 3:21f.), once by Paul (1 Tim. 3:16), the latter citing perhaps an earlier Christian hymn. It is difficult to imagine how Luke could have gotten away with such a story while the apostles or even their successors were alive if the event had not been much as he describes it. Certainly no other explanation is offered by the New Testament for the sudden end to Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. And yet, because Luke is describing in terms of this

world an event that transcends it, a completely literal interpretation may not be possible. Nevertheless, we must not lose sight of the fact that something must have happened—something that convinced the apostles that Jesus had “ascended” and something (we may suppose) that could more nearly be described in these terms than in any other.

The question raised by the apostles in this verse could have been asked at any time during the forty days that Jesus was with them, since he spoke to them often about the kingdom of God (cf. v. 3). Indeed, the imperfect tense suggests that it was asked more than once. But if it was asked at their last meeting with Jesus, there is a certain poignancy in their failure right to the end to understand that the kingdom was not of this world (cf. John 18:36) but of the Spirit, to be entered only by repentance and faith. It would be unjust to suggest that the apostles had learned nothing from Jesus. In some respects they had come a long way (see disc. on v. 2; cf. Luke 24:45). But clearly they were wedded still to the popular notion of the kingdom of God as something political—that its coming would see the gathering of the tribes (see disc. on 3:21 and notes and the disc. on 26:7), the restoration of Israel’s independence, and the triumph of Israel over its enemies. In this respect they had not progressed very far from their earlier hope of occupying the seats of power in such a kingdom (Mark 10:35ff.; Luke 22:24ff.). But given these hopes and against the background of Jesus’ resurrection and his statements concerning the Spirit, their question, though mistaken, was a perfectly natural one. In Jewish thought, resurrection and the Spirit belonged to the new age. Indeed, the prophecy of Joel, to which Jesus had very likely referred them, may have given rise to the question they were now asking, for the prophet had spoken both of the pouring out of God’s Spirit (Joel 2:28ff.) and of his restoring the kingdom to Israel (Joel 2:18ff.; 3:1ff.). Their sense of anticipation is expressed in the present tense of the Greek: not “will you?” but “Lord are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

1:7-8 / This was not the first time they had asked Jesus about what was to come, and as before, he gave them no answer. Instead, he drew their minds to their present duty (cf. John 21:21f.). The future was in God’s hands, and it was not for them to know what it held, at least not in detail (cf. Mark 13:32). Their task was to be his **witnesses** (v. 8). This commission obviously

had a special reference to the apostles, who would uniquely authenticate the gospel data—the life, the death, the resurrection, and the ascension of Jesus. In this sense they would be the foundation and pillars of the church (cf. Matt. 16:18; Gal. 2:9). But the church to be built upon that foundation would itself become “the pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). Herein lies the secondary reference of Jesus’ words. Not all are apostles, but all are commissioned to witness to the truth that they established. To all, therefore, the promise is given: **you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you** (v. 8). The statements of this verse should be understood as cause and effect. Effective witness can only be borne where the Spirit is, and where the Spirit is, effective witness will always follow, in word, in deed (miracle), and in the quality of the lives of those who bear it (see disc. on 2:4).

The command had a universal scope. From Jerusalem they were to go out **to the ends of the earth** (v. 8). This supplies the corrective to the particularism of the apostles’ question in verse 6, though it may be doubted whether at the time they understood it as such. At most, they probably took Jesus to mean that they should witness to the Jews of the Diaspora (see notes on 2:9ff.) and only in this sense preach “the forgiveness of sins . . . to all nations” (Luke 24:47; see disc. on Acts 10:10ff.). The thought of including the Gentiles would never have crossed their minds and was accepted later only with great difficulty. The Jewish nationalism of the early church died hard. But by the time Luke was writing that was largely a thing of the past, and the phrase **the ends of the earth** had taken on a wider meaning. It now embraced the Roman Empire, epitomized by Rome itself, and on that basis Luke adopted the program of this verse as a framework for his narrative.

1:9 / When these forty days of instruction were over, Jesus **was taken up**. They had taken the familiar path across the Kidron to the Mount of Olives (cf. v. 12), and somewhere in this vicinity the summit of Jesus’ life was attained. Because the Jews thought of heaven as “above” and earth as “below,” the movement of Jesus from the visible to the invisible world is expressed in terms of his going “up.” The idiom may not seem appropriate to us, but it was to them and is found elsewhere in the New Testament, coupled with the thought of Jesus’ exaltation (cf., e.g., Eph. 1:20;

Phil. 2:9; Heb. 1:3; 2:9). That thought is expressed here in the words **a cloud hid him from their sight**, for in biblical language the cloud was often a symbol of divine glory (cf., e.g., Exod. 16:10; Ps. 104:3). The language is pictorial and must be treated as such, and yet Luke is certain that something objective took place. Notice his emphasis on their seeing it: Jesus was taken up **before their very eyes**; “they were looking intently up into the sky as he was going” (v. 10). This was important, for they were to be witnesses of his ascension no less than of his life, death, and resurrection.

1:10–11 / In the long term, the apostles’ appreciation of the ascension must have come from a combination of sight and (inspired) insight, the latter resting on Jesus’ earlier teaching. But initially, there must have been enough given to their physical senses to convince them that this was their final parting with Jesus as they had known him. Luke expresses their experience in dramatic terms. He speaks of **two men dressed in white appearing beside them** (v. 10; cf. 10:30; 12:7; Luke 2:9; 24:4). They are introduced with the exclamation, “Look”—not apparent in NIV, but intended to convey a sense of surprise at the providential (cf. esp. 7:56; 8:27, 36; 10:30; 16:1), for Luke wants us to understand that the two “men” were angels (cf. Matt. 28:2f.; John 20:12). What he meant by an “angel” is not so clear. Perhaps all he wanted to say was that there was an overwhelming sense of the divine in what happened (see disc. on 5:19f.; 12:6ff.; cf. 7:30; 8:26; 10:3; 12:23; 27:23) such that the apostles were convinced that Jesus would come back as he had gone—visibly and manifesting the glory of God (this, of course, had been Jesus’ teaching, cf., e.g., Mark 13:26; 14:62). But some time would elapse before his return. Hence the question, **why do you stand here looking into the sky?** (v. 11). Meanwhile, they had their instructions. For the present they were to remain in Jerusalem (v. 4), then they were to go out as his witnesses (v. 8). The emphasis here, as in the New Testament generally, is on the present duty of Christians rather than on speculation about Christ’s return. However, in the knowledge that he would return, the apostles set about their present task “with great joy” (Luke 24:52f.). This passage is one of the few references in Acts to the Parousia (cf. 3:20f.; 10:42; 17:31; 23:6; 24:25; see also notes on 2:17ff. and disc. on 7:55f.).

Additional Notes §1

1:1 / Theophilus: The name means “friend of God” and has been taken to mean any friend of God, i.e., the Christian reader in general. Others have seen it as a pseudonym for someone who could not be named. But the name was not an uncommon one, and there is no good reason to think that Theophilus was not a real person of that name. The use of the title “Most Excellent” bears this out (Luke 1:3) and suggests, moreover, that he was a man of some importance. The title was appropriate to a man of the Roman equestrian order (an upper middle class social group) and is applied elsewhere in Acts to the procurators of Judea, since most procurators were of equestrian rank (see 23:26; 24:3; 26:25). Theophilus appears to have been a Christian.

Began: Some scholars regard this word as meaningless, the redundant auxiliary of Aramaic idiom. But in this context the sense I have suggested here seems the more likely. That Acts was simply the continuing story of Jesus tells against the theory proposed by H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, that Luke divided history into three periods, of which the history of Jesus was “the middle time” and the events related in Acts the “period of the church.” In reality, the whole two-volume work covers the one history of Jesus, which, to Luke’s mind, belonged to the “last days.”

1:3 / The kingdom of God: For a proper understanding of this term, it should be noted that both the Greek and the Hebrew or Aramaic words thus translated signify kingship rather than kingdom, rule rather than realm. Essentially, therefore, the kingdom of God “is not a community of Christians nor an inner life of the soul, nor yet an earthly paradise which mankind is bringing into being and which is in process of development” (G. Lundstrom, *The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus* [Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1963], p. 232), though it might embrace all these notions, but is, rather, God acting in his kingly power, exercising sovereignty and, in particular, asserting his rule for the overthrow of Satan and the restoration of humanity to a relationship with himself. But this was conceived of in various ways: sometimes in terms of God’s eternal sovereignty and sometimes in terms of our present experience of him, but chiefly in terms of the kingdom’s future manifestation, its onset marked by the “Day of the Lord,” when God and/or his Messiah would appear, the dead would be raised, and the new age ushered in (see notes on 2:17ff.). Then all would know God, from the least to the greatest, and he would forgive them (Jer. 31:34) and pour out his Spirit upon them (Joel 2:28).

For Jesus’ contemporaries, as for all generations before them, the kingdom conceived of in these terms was no more than a distant hope. With what astonishment, therefore, must they have heard Jesus’ announcement that it had become a present reality (see, e.g., Mark 1:22,

27). “The right time has come,” he said (i.e., the anticipated time of its manifestation), “and the kingdom of God has arrived” (Mark 1:15; cf., e.g., Luke 17:21). But, if Jesus was right (and the evidence of his life, his miracles, his resurrection, and the Pentecostal outpouring assure us that he was), then the kingdom clearly had not come in the manner expected. For the time being, it remained a personal and partial experience (though certainly a real one) for those who submitted to God’s rule in Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 13:12). Only when Jesus returns will the kingdom be fully established and God’s rule become all in all (see disc. on 3:19–21; 14:22; cf. 1 Cor. 15:24f.). Thus the Day of the Lord, which, in a sense, could be said to have come with the coming of Jesus, has been drawn out these many years until his coming again. Much of the language of the Old Testament describing the Day of the Lord is applied by the New Testament to “the day of Christ,” i.e., to the day of his return.

1:4 / While he was eating with them: The word thus translated (*synalizein*) is an unusual one, found in the New Testament only here and once (disputed) in the Old Testament (LXX Ps. 140:5). It is derived either from a word meaning “to meet” (GNB) or from a word meaning “salt,” and from that, “to eat together.” The latter is to be preferred, on the grounds that the author is recapitulating the events of Luke 24:42ff.

1:7 / The times or dates: The two Greek words represented by this translation have sometimes been regarded as synonymous. Certainly it is difficult always to maintain a clear distinction between them. But here **the times** (Gk. *chronous*) may be taken to mean space of time as such—the eras of the history of the world—and **dates** (Gk. *kairous*) the critical moments within those extended periods.

1:8 / When the Holy Spirit comes on you: Two different renderings of the Greek are possible here. The genitive case of **the Holy Spirit** could be governed by **power**, giving the sense “you will receive the power of the Holy Spirit who will come upon you” (cf. Luke 4:14; Rom. 15:13, 19), or it could be a genitive absolute with a temporal sense. The latter, adopted by NIV, is to be preferred.

You will be my witnesses: Here the genitive case of the personal pronoun presents us with two possibilities (some texts read the dative case, which gives us similar options). Either it is the objective genitive, expressing the thought that he is the one *about whom* they would testify, or the possessive genitive, indicating their personal relationship with him—they are *his* witnesses. Both of course are true, and the ambiguity may be quite intentional.

In Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth: The fact that in the outworking of the history of the church the full import of Jesus’ words was only slowly grasped and even then, for many of his followers, was like grasping a nettle, need not lead us to suppose that he never gave this instruction and that it came from a later hand. The history of Israel, as indeed of the church itself, is full of instances in which people did not attain the best ideals of their leaders.

The form of the saying shows a close acquaintance with the political and social context of that day. For a broader definition of **Judea**, see disc. on 10:37, but here **Judea** refers to that part of Palestine inhabited by Jews, apart from Samaria and Galilee (cf. 9:31; 11:29; 15:1; 26:20; 28:21) and sometimes even excluding Caesarea (cf. 12:19; see disc. on 10:1 and 21:10). But politically, under the procurators, this region and Samaria were governed from Caesarea as one province, as Luke's Greek clearly intimates, whereas Jerusalem was always regarded by the rabbis as separate from the rest of the province, as Luke also intimates, not only here but elsewhere in his writing (cf. 8:1; 10:39; Luke 5:17; 6:17; see notes on 2:9ff.).

The precise phrase, **to the ends of the earth** occurs in LXX Isa. 8:9; 48:20; 49:6 (cf. Acts 13:47, where Paul refers Isa. 49:6 to Barnabas and himself); 62:11; 1 Macc. 3:9, and if it seems somewhat strained to suggest that Luke saw Paul's preaching in Rome as its fulfillment, it is noteworthy that in the Psalms of Solomon 8:16; Pompey, a Roman, is said to have come from "the ends of the earth."

1:11 / Men of Galilee: It appears that most of the Twelve were Galileans, Judas Iscariot being perhaps the only exception.