
ACT ONE: JERUSALEM

*When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then they said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them.'
The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad. (Psalm 126:1–3, RSV)*

The opening chapters of Acts capture something of the dream-like quality of the psalmist's vision of the restoration of Zion. Restoration, and the fulfilment of the age-old promises, is very much what the first quarter of the book is about. But restoration is also about repentance, and that is what is on offer for the people of Jerusalem and their rulers.

The story so far

Like the preface to Luke's Gospel (Luke 1:1–4), the opening verse of Acts is essentially a kind of label stuck on to the front of the book, in which the author momentarily speaks in his own voice and addresses the reader direct. The practical reason for putting the label here is that each of Luke's two volumes is about the right length for a scroll, so this point marks the break. Because a scroll has no spine or dust jacket, ancient authors normally used the first sentence to supply the essential information that readers needed to identify what they were reading. The effect is rather like changing reels halfway through the film in an old-fashioned cinema. For a few moments we slip out of the narrative world and back into the real world of authors and readers.

Volume Two

The first thing we learn as we open the book is that it's the second volume of a diptych, the second half of a book that describes 'all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning' (v. 1). And it's not just a loosely connected sequel. It's easy to see from the first verse that Luke expects his readers to know what has happened in the Gospel. He makes very few concessions to new readers: there are no footnotes or helpful glosses to tell them who John or the apostles were. Everything in the second volume, Acts, presupposes the story of the first (that is, the story of Jesus) and there are all sorts of links and connections that observant readers can pick up between the two.

Captain and crew

The preface also lays the groundwork in important ways for the second half of Luke's story. It introduces the key characters of Acts, beginning with Jesus himself. Luke's story of Jesus is shaped in a particular way, focused on the actions and teachings of a holy man (v. 1), just as many Greek biographies described the actions and teachings of a philosopher. That story is directed towards the ascension (v. 2), which creates the centrepoint for the whole two-volume work. For Luke, the ascension of Jesus is not an afterthought, tacked on to tidy up the end of the narrative: the passion, resurrection and ascension are a unit, beginning as far back as Luke 9:51. But the story doesn't end with Jesus' departure to heaven: the opening scene of Acts creates a double overlay with the last chapter of the Gospel (Luke 24), both describing in different ways the captain's final instructions to his crew. In a sense, everything in Acts stems from this moment. In the chapters that ensue, we shall follow the apostles' attempts to carry out the mission Jesus has entrusted to them.

The apostles and the Spirit

The apostles (v. 2) are therefore the next most important characters. We shall hear much more about them as the story progresses, but this brief introduction already tells us that they were chosen by Jesus and instructed by Jesus—companions who shared table-fellowship with him (the meaning of 'staying with them' in v. 4, NRSV). The essence of their commission lies precisely in being entrusted with the unique experience of seeing Jesus alive after his passion (v. 3), witnessing the 'many convincing proofs' of his resurrection life. Transmitting this experience to an unbelieving world, offering living proof of Jesus' continued (but hidden) resurrection life, is what they are about. They are not alone: Jesus' instruction is 'in the Holy Spirit' who has been with him since the beginning of the Gospel story (Luke 1:35; 3:22; 4:14). And more is on its way: the promise of the Father (compare Luke 24:49) is about to be realized not many days from now (vv. 4–5). There's a sense of expectancy here which takes us right back to the beginning of the Gospel.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, as we read the story of the apostles, help us to catch a glimpse of what it means to be your disciples, and to take our place in your mission in the world.