

**ACTS OF THE APOSTLES, WITH
NOTES, CRITICAL,
EXPLANATORY, AND
PRACTICAL, DESIGNED FOR BOTH
PASTORS AND PEOPLE**

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Acts of the Apostles, with notes, critical, explanatory, and practical, designed for both pastors and people by Henry Cowles

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CRITICAL, EXPLANATORY, AND PRACTICAL,

DESIGNED FOR BOTH PASTORS AND PEOPLE.

BY

REV. HENRY COWLES, D.D.

"The words that I speak unto you—they are spirit and they are life."

JOHN 6 : 63.

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ACTS OF THE APOSTLES.

INTRODUCTION.

THIS book holds a middle place between the Gospel History and the Epistles, being an historic continuation of the former and a natural introduction of the latter.—To introduce the book to the diligent reader, I propose to treat of the following points:

- I. Authorship:
- II. Date of its composition:
- III. Its authenticity as history:
- IV. The objects of the book:
- V. Its points of special value:
- VI. The chronology of its important events.

I. *Authorship.*

In his first words the author identifies himself with the author of the Gospel History by Luke, addressing the same Theophilus here as there, and proposing to take up the history here at the point where he laid it down there. Hence if that Gospel History was written by Luke, so is this "Acts of the Apostles." The former writes out the personal history of Jesus in the points mainly of his miracles and of his preaching—"all that Jesus began both to do and to teach"—down to his ascension. This latter takes up the thread of the history dropped there and continues it to the close of Paul's first imprisonment at Rome.

Further, this identity of authorship is amply established by its similarity of style compared with that of the Gospel. This argument can not be presented in its full strength to the merely English reader, these peculiarities of style pertaining mainly to the original Greek. In that language they are very manifest and convincing. Luke approaches more nearly to the style of classic Greek than any other

New Testament writer, indicating that this was probably his vernacular, and that he had enjoyed fair advantages for culture.

Finally, the testimony of the early Christian Fathers to Luke as the author is unanimous and decisive. Irenæus (A. D. 178)—himself intimate with some associates of the Apostles—knew the book well, and regarded it as undeniably the work of Luke. Clemens of Alexandria (flourished A. D. 190) regarded Luke as the author; as do also Tertullian (A. D. 200); Eusebius (A. D. 325) from whom has come down this statement: "Luke, a native of Antioch, by profession a physician, was mostly Paul's companion, though he associated not a little with the other apostles. He has left us examples of the art of healing souls, which he acquired from the apostles, in two divinely inspired books; first in the Gospel, which he testifies to have written according to what eye-witnesses and ministers of the word delivered to him from the beginning, all which also he says that he investigated from the first; and secondly, in the Acts of the Apostles, which he composed not from report, as in the other case, but according to his own personal observation."

II. *Date of its Composition.*

The most rational assumption is that the author continued his history fully up to the time when he wrote, so that the last recorded event may be assumed to give, proximately at least, the time of his writing. On this assumption, we shall date the book two years after Paul's first imprisonment at Rome commenced (Acts 28: 30)—which may be assumed to be the date of his release. This line of argument fixes the date about A. D. 63.

III. *Its Authenticity as History.*

This admits of being expanded at great length; but it must suffice to refer to three specific sources of testimony.

1. Its allusions to well known cities, to historic characters, and to the customs and events of his time, are everywhere found on the most searching examination to be made with surprising accuracy. Ephesus, Corinth, Athens, Antioch, Rome, are well known cities. Luke's allusions to them always testify to his accurate knowledge of what they were. So the death of Herod Agrippa (Acts 12); the administrations of Felix and of Festus, are fixed dates with

which Luke's narrative corresponds. He knew that Philippi was a Roman colony (Acts 16 : 12).

2. The words and deeds which he attributes to his principal, best known characters (*e. g.*, Peter and Paul) are entirely in harmony with all else that is known of these men. This is the same Peter who appears in the gospel history and in his own Epistles; the same Paul whose character stands out so clearly in his Epistles. The strong characteristics of Paul as seen in his Epistles are thoroughly foreshadowed in this book. Thus every thing wears the stamp of historic authenticity.

3. The coincidences between the incidental notices in the Acts, and the corresponding notices in the Epistles, will bear the closest examination. That they are manifestly and certainly *undesigned*, and therefore are not the result of plan—are not wrought up for fiction, but are the straightforward, honest showing of truth,—has been admirably brought out in Paley's "Horse Pauline"—a presentation of this line of argument which can not well be surpassed, and which as an argument for the authenticity of the book, has never been refuted.

IV. *The Objects of this Book.*

To take up and continue the gospel history; to show how the great work of preaching Christ and his gospel was prosecuted by the apostles after the ascension of their Lord; under what circumstances; by the agency of what leading actors, and against what chief obstacles. It seems to have been one very special object to show the fulfillment of the great promise of the Holy Ghost; to present striking manifestations of his presence and power, and, not least, to bear witness that the success of this great enterprise was due to his power, so that this history might fitly have been called—not "The Acts of the Apostles," but "*The Achievements of the Holy Ghost.*" For those were glorious manifestations of his power.—In pursuance of this special object the scenes of the great Pentecost give supreme prominence to the work of the Holy Ghost; the new boldness, wisdom and magnetic force manifested in the apostles come remarkably into the foreground of the history: the wonderful spirit and power of Stephen are attributed to his being full of the Holy Ghost; the conversion of Saul comes in the same line of testimony; the guidance and success vouchsafed to Philip the evangelist, to Peter also, and to Paul all along in his

great gospel labors, serve to reveal the matchless wisdom and efficiency imparted to man by the Spirit of God.

As to the historic aims of the book, it does not attempt a complete history of the labors of all the apostles. The first twelve chapters keep Peter mostly in the foreground. The rest of the book traces the history of Paul. In the first great division, John is sometimes seen by the side of Peter; Stephen and Philip from the first seven deacons and evangelists (Acts 6) come into the narrative; while in the latter portion we have notices of Paul's fellow-laborers—Barnabas, Silas and Timothy.

Moreover, this book throws valuable light upon the missionary policy of the apostles in the point of special endeavors to plant the gospel in great radiating centers of power. The book is chiefly occupied with the endeavors to plant strong churches in Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Philippi, Corinth, and Rome. To take and to hold for Christ these great strategic points was a first and controlling measure of their policy. This history is chiefly occupied with the planting of churches in these strong centers of population and of influence.

Finally, the history was manifestly shaped to bear upon the question (then of vital importance)—of the exclusive claims of the Jews, and the rights of Gentiles to gospel blessings. The precise point of this question was whether the Gentile must of necessity come into this new kingdom *through Judaism*; or whether the middle wall of partition should be broken down, and his access be free as that of the Jew himself. The history in this book shows accordingly how Peter's mind was disabused of his life-long national prejudices on this point; and also how the repugnance of the Jew to his gospel preaching drove Paul forth from them to the Gentiles. The great council (Acts 15) over the main points in this controversy was a step of immense and glorious progress toward Gospel emancipation from Jewish bondage.

V. The *value* of this book has been already suggested. It is the first great chapter of church history and the best. Taking up the thread of missionary history where it was temporarily dropped by the death of Christ, it shows how the work was prosecuted by the original apostles and especially by the extraordinary accession of a new convert in the person of Saul the persecutor.

High above all its other points of value is the light it

throws upon the agencies and powers of the Holy Ghost. It was of great consequence that Jesus, shortly before his death, spake so freely and fully of the work of the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth (then mostly prospective). This history fills out those revelations of the Spirit's agency by describing minutely the manifestations of his power in the souls of men "full of the Holy Ghost."—Hence this book records the grandest illustrations of Christian heroism. Here all along are men endued with the Holy Ghost and with his great power from on high. We have the record of their zeal, their devotion, their self-consecration, and of their glorious success in the saving of men. These are the best lessons of this book of history—the best lessons, indeed, next to the words of Jesus, which any book could give.

VI. *The Chronology of its Principal Events.*

It may be convenient to the reader to have here a group of some of these most useful dates.

1. *The year of Saul's conversion.*—The evidence is only probable. Paul speaks (Gal. 1: 17, 18) of going into Arabia soon after his conversion; and then returning again to Damascus; and moreover, of "going up to Jerusalem three years after" [some important event], and this is assumed to be that of his conversion.—Yet further; his first peril from persecution is referred to (2 Cor. 11: 32) as occurring at Damascus under "Aretas the king." Supposedly this "Aretas" was king of a district in Great Arabia, of which Petra was the capital city. He is known to have been in hostile relations to Herod, and therefore to Rome. His occupancy of Damascus must have been brief. On grounds connected with the power of the Roman emperors over Damascus, it is supposed to have ended about A. D. 39. Hence Paul's conversion may be with much probability assigned to A. D. 36.

2. The death of Herod Agrippa (Acts 12: 2, 3) is fixed beyond doubt by the testimony of Josephus, in the year A. D. 44, after a reign of three years. This event being well established carries with it the other important events of this chapter 12; the martyrdom of James; the deliverance of Peter; and the first great missionary tour of Paul.

3. The administration of Felix and also of Festus. Combining the historic dates of the Roman historians and of Josephus, the point referred to (Acts 24: 27) where Felix