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The Acts of the Apostles - the Acts of the Holy Spirit
A brief introduction to Acts - with an example
By Kai Kjar-Hansen

The book which is placed fifth in the New Testament canon is called The Acts of the Apostles. For the author of the book it is a matter of the utmost importance to show that through the Holy Spirit God sends the gospel to the ends of the earth, beginning in - and from - Jerusalem (1.8). People become involved in the acts of the Holy Spirit. And the important thing is: The Holy Spirit does his works in spite of the imperfection of the believers and in spite of their internal controversies.

A "golden age" with perfect believers is unknown to Luke!

There may be better names for the fifth book of the New Testament than The Acts of the Apostles. The Acts of the Holy Spirit has been suggested. For it is undeniably a book which testifies that the works of Jesus did not come to an end with his death and resurrection. Pentecost followed! The crucified and risen Jesus continues to work after his death, resurrection, and ascension. In glimpses The Acts of the Apostles shows that - and how - the absent Jesus is present through the Holy Spirit.

The author of the book reports how the Christian gospel was spread from Jerusalem to the Greek-Roman world. In saying this he is not just giving historical information, he is also preaching to his own age. As the apostles and others had been witnesses to the new era and the salvation which had come with Jesus, so shall the readers be confronted with it - although in a different way. In this way the account of the acts of the past becomes a challenge to the readers to mark their own present - and thereby also their future - for Jesus, and in Jesus' name.

If this is true, then we modern readers become involved, namely as writers that go on recording the acts of the Holy Spirit - and our own acts!

Holy Spirit and pious laziness are not on speaking terms. Certainly not, according to Luke. His book demonstrates that the acts of the Holy Spirit and the acts of human beings are not contrasts. Without Holy Spirit - no faith. Without human acts and words - and sacrifices - no progress.

But when the apostles make a report of the acts of the Holy Spirit and of their own acts, God is given all glory. This is far from always the case with us, but this is the way it should be!

The Acts of the Apostles: a book by Luke

The book which is called The Acts of the Apostles is the second volume of a compound work, the Gospel of Luke being the first. The two volumes written by the same author are both dedicated to the same person, namely Theophilus. So much can be said with certainty. But what comes now has been much debated. Fortunately, the significance of the book for present-day readers is not dependent on precise knowledge of all aspects of its composition.

The title, The Acts of the Apostles, does not appear in Luke's book; but the name is used, at least from the middle of the second century. The title is not quite adequate since it is not really about all the apostles; the author focuses on two principal characters: Peter and Paul. When some call it The Acts of the Holy Spirit, they are, however, making a good theological point: it is the Holy Spirit who steers the course of events. "Luke II" would be a more neutral title.

The author does not reveal his name. Sources from the end of the second century point out Luke, a Syrian from Antioch in Syria, who was a doctor. It is fairly safe to say that he was not a Jew. According to tradition, he is identified with the Luke who is mentioned in Col 4.14 and is one of Paul's co-workers. If the so-called "we-sections" (16.10-17; 20.5-15; 21.1-18; 27.1-28.16) are understood literally, which is a much debated issue, then he followed Paul on some of his journeys. If Luke is behind this "we", he also accompanied Paul on his journey to Rome.

The date of composition is a moot point. It is certain that it was written after the Gospel of Luke. Many scholars think that the Gospel was written after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, and therefore date The Acts of the Apostles to approximately 80 - some say a little before, others a little after this year. It is remarkable that Luke does not mention Paul's death since this happened in the sixties. This has caused some scholars to assume that Luke wrote before that happened, which again means that the book was written about 60 - and the Gospel of Luke a few years before that. Nothing can be known with certainty about this. Perhaps Luke even planned a third volume, "Luke III", which might explain the abrupt ending in chapter 28.

The place where the book was written depends on the date. Rome, Ephesus and Antioch have often been suggested.

The addressee is, first, Theophilus, but Luke obviously had a greater audience in mind. It is difficult to identify it precisely, but it makes sense to imagine that Luke was intending his work for a congregation of believers. It has often been said that it is a congregation of Gentile Christians but the problems which are treated are also relevant for Jesus-believing Jews; perhaps it is a mixed congregation. The level on which Luke operates makes it natural to assume that the addressees had a fairly good previous knowledge of the faith.

The purpose of the book can hardly be reduced to a single formula. Some have suggested that its primary purpose should be of an apologetical nature: either to prove to the Romans that the new faith was politically harmless, or to deliver proof of Paul's "orthodoxy" to his critics. It is, however, more natural to regard it as an edifying text which in a literary form gives consolation and encouragement by drawing the reader's attention to God's acts in salvation history.

Challenges abound - for the first as well as for modern readers. They are found in the main themes, e.g.

- * that in the past God gave promises which are fulfilled in Jesus

- * that the fulfilment of the promises to Israel implies good news for Gentiles in "the last days", the age of the Holy Spirit

- * that Jesus is the risen and exalted Lord who reigns at God's right hand

- * that the age of the Holy Spirit is the age of mission

- * that mission as God's concern involves human beings

- * that faith is created even under opposition

- * that all people are equal in God's sight and can receive the Holy Spirit and be saved through God's grace

- * that faith in Jesus does not turn a Jew into an ex-Jew

In short: Jew or Gentile - those who believe in Jesus are part of a big movement. The Church to which one belongs belongs to God!

Luke in a storm

Because of what he wrote in The Acts of the Apostles, Luke has found himself at the centre of a storm. There has been no shortage of criticism. In the last century a great many scholars thought that Luke tried to cover up the profound differences which they alleged

should exist between, on the one hand, the so-called Jewish Christianity, represented by Peter, and, on the other hand, Gentile Christianity, with Paul as its exponent.

Leading German scholars of this century have regarded Luke as an independent theologian, which means that his account first and foremost gives the reader an impression of his way of thinking rather than an insight into the thinking of his main characters. Often he is considered a mediocre historian.

A number of English scholars, in particular, have opposed this indiscriminating picture of Luke and his presentation in The Acts of the Apostles. It is true that he does not write like a twentieth-century historian - but what writer in antiquity did that? And it is true that there are many gaps in our understanding of church history from around 30 to 60 - the period which Luke covers. But we would have been in an infinitely worse situation if we had not had The Acts of the Apostles. Together with Paul's letters the book gives us a certain idea of the peculiarity and expansion of the Jesus movement, its external as well as internal struggles, and not least the problems connected with the conditions for the inclusion of Gentiles in the Jewish Jesus movement.

It was not Luke's intention to give an exhaustive description of the Church's history in the first three decades after Jesus' death and resurrection. As already mentioned, Luke concentrates on his two principal characters, Peter and Paul, and focuses on separate events. Perhaps he had both oral and written material at his disposal when he prepared his account, and perhaps he himself experienced some of the occurrences which he describes - dependent on whether or not the so-called "we-sections" originates from himself.

It is certain that he did not experience everything himself and therefore had to rely on the accounts of others. Some believe that descriptions of the Church's activity and mission were included in the early preaching and that Luke knew and used them. But he had to be very selective about what to include lest the scroll on which he wrote should expand and become unmanageable. When Luke leaves out things which modern historians would have included, and repeats important matters which modern historians would have relegated to a footnote, he is adopting the style of contemporary writers who in this way endeavoured to make the description vivid so that it might have the maximum effect on the readers. That everything has passed through Luke's pen is obvious.

The appraisal of Luke as historian varies. Scholars who have subjected Luke to a very critical examination have been struck by the accuracy which characterizes his description of political and geographical conditions which can be checked in other sources.

But Luke is more than an ordinary historian. When writing about the past he wants to preach to his own time. Luke's subject is, above everything else, salvation history. It is God's history that he writes, the last chapter in the history of the people of God, as it were. The pre-eminent source for him is the Scriptures. Through these the God of Israel gave promises which he has now fulfilled in Jesus. And God still steers the course of events - also in "the last days", the era of the Holy Spirit, the age of mission.

The Holy Spirit, resurrection and exaltation

In the era of the Holy Spirit, the risen and exalted Jesus continues his work through the apostles and the believers. Again and again Luke hammers home the fact that Jesus is not in his grave: no dead body, no possibility of a skeleton. God raised him from the dead. As exalted Lord he is now reigning at the right hand of God.

According to Luke, it is impossible to speak properly about Jesus unless it is as the risen Lord. Jesus lives! That is the fanfare ringing out from The Acts of the Apostles. And what is

important: as the living and exalted Lord Jesus pours out the Holy Spirit - as promised (2.33) - and lives in this way in the work of his Church.

The Church belongs to God, it is "bought" with Jesus' blood, and it is guided by the Holy Spirit (20.28).

It is the dominant New Testament belief that the exaltation of Jesus happens already at the resurrection (see e.g. Rom 1.3-4). Some contend that for Luke it does not happen till his ascension. A distinction like that seems alien to Luke. It is the already exalted Jesus who comes to his disciples before his ascension (1.3-8). The ascension is Jesus' definitive parting from his apostles - it is followed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. Jesus' ascension marks both that his life on earth is at an end and that his exaltation has taken place. At the same time it indicates that at some time in the future the exalted Jesus shall come again.

The new era and the Holy Spirit

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (ch.2) inaugurates a new era. But the new era and the time leading up to it are connected. This is the fulfilment of God's promises of an outpouring of the Spirit for everybody, not just for a few chosen ones. According to God's promise this is to take place in "the last days" (2.17). With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit the last days have come, the time of salvation for all people.

It is therefore a sign of primitive Gentile Christian thinking to imagine that the Holy Spirit should be invented on the Day of Pentecost. Already the second verse in Genesis speaks about the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God is God present and active in the world. In the Old Testament the Spirit of God falls, in a special way, on people whom God has chosen for a particular task. The Spirit of God is active when the prophets speak of the days of the Messiah, the last days - a point which is underscored in The Acts of the Apostles. And all things relating to Jesus, his birth, baptism and work, are encompassed by the Spirit of God.

In the new era, the era of the Holy Spirit, all that concerns the believers and the expansion of the Church, is related to the Holy Spirit.

Not the birthday of the Church

Some Gentile Christians call Pentecost the birthday of the Church. In this way they want to say that with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit something new in God's salvation history came into being - which is true. And yet the description is misleading. God also had an assembly before Pentecost - for example, in the desert (7.38). With Pentecost, it is God's Church for the last days which begins its ministry. It is the renewed Israel which steps forward, the people of the Messiah, with a message to Jews as well as Gentiles. Since Gentiles are now given a share in the blessing to Israel, the Church consists of both Jews and Gentiles.

The usual way to be incorporated into the Church is through repentance, faith and baptism, whereby one receives the gift of the Holy Spirit (2.38).

On the Day of Pentecost 3000 accept the gospel (2.41) in Jerusalem; their number soon increases to 5000 (4.4) - it is figures of this kind Luke operates with when he describes Jews accepting the gospel. When Paul's work among the Gentiles is appraised, it is often necessary to remove two or even three zeros!

And what a congregation of Jesus-believing Jews in Jerusalem! Now, let us see how Luke paints the picture of the Church at the beginning of the era of the Holy Spirit.

The first Church at the beginning of the era of the Holy Spirit
The Church is led by the twelve apostles - Matthias is the twelfth. He is chosen after carefully laid down criteria (1.21-22) - and in a sphere of prayer. The choice is made through the casting of lots - this is the last time in the New Testament we hear of such a solution of a difficult matter. Jesus himself had chosen the twelve, and the choice of Matthias is likewise left to the Lord. There is a comprehensive description of this (1.15-26). This is the only time Matthias is mentioned. This would seem to indicate that not the person Matthias but the number of twelve is in focus. Matthias is going to sit on one of the thrones together with the other eleven and judge the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 22.30). But when one of these twelve dies (12.1-2), there will not be a replacement. With Matthias the number of twelve is intact. These twelve represent Israel, the restored Israel, Messiah's people in the era of the Holy Spirit. When the new "Jerusalem covenant" came into effect on the Day of Pentecost, these twelve were enabled to preach the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit. How they do it - is a theme I cannot deal with now.

What, then, is this Church like? Luke gives some hints in the first chapters and not least in sections 2.37-47 and 4.23-37. Keywords from the first of these sections are:

The Church has

- * a common foundation for their faith and life: the apostles' teaching

- * a caring fellowship with each other

- * fellowship of the Lord's Supper

- * fellowship of prayer

This fellowship is exemplified:

- * they care for each other and the poor among them - lands and houses were sold to raise money for poor relief (4.32-37; 6.1-6)

- * they come to the Temple - and continue to pray Israel's prayers daily (see 3.1 and 4.23-30); they obviously had an opportunity to witness in Solomon's Colonnade, where they used to meet (3.11; 5.12)

- * they gather in private homes and celebrate the Lord's Supper together; this was celebrated in connection with an ordinary meal (20.7-12)

Luke even says: "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No-one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had" (4.32).

This description of unity and care for one another in material things (v. 32) suggests the double commandment to love (Luke 10.27; cf. Deut 5.5; Lev 19.18). This is seen fulfilled in the Church as are Jeremiah's words: "I will give them singleness of heart and action" (Jer 32.39). But perhaps Israel's so-called creed, *Shema Israel*, is also in the background.

The sages interpreted the commandment to love the Lord with all one's "heart": to love God with an undivided love; the commandment to love the Lord with all one's "soul": to love God even if he takes one's soul (i.e. life); the commandment to love the Lord with all one's "strength": to love God with all one's resources, riches, mammon.

Against this background the believers are characterized by three things:

- * they were one heart - they had an undivided love to God; they loved God with all their heart

- * they were one soul - they were willing to lay down their lives for Jesus' name's sake; they loved God with all their soul

- * they did not consider their possessions their own - with their mammon they practised mutual love; they loved God with all their strength.

An idealised picture?

Some expositors think that Luke idealised the picture of the Church in Jerusalem. Not all was pure idyll, it is argued. There is some truth in that. My point is that Luke was well aware of that. He uses bold strokes of the brush, but as soon as he has done so, he shows that it was not all idyll.

A few keywords:

When Luke says that the believers had "everything" in common (2.44), he makes it clear (in 5.4) that "everything" does not mean "everything without exception": a believer was allowed to have private property. A study of Luke's usage of "everything/everybody" reveals that it usually means "very much/very many".

So one should not be too hasty in passing judgment on Luke's alleged idealised picture of the Church. A careful reading of the texts shows that Luke does relate quite a lot about problems and difficulties in the first Church. It was not a golden age without human weakness and sin.

The account of Ananias and Sapphira (5.1-11) is a horrifying example of this.

The neglect of the Greek-speaking Jewish widows in the daily distribution of food (6.1-6) is another example. Church growth gives problems, and since the apostles were responsible for the poor relief, they also shared the responsibility for the problems. In other words: the apostles are not depicted as perfect, but they are portrayed as troubleshooters worth following.

The Church in Jerusalem cannot agree whether or not to welcome Paul as a Jesus-believer; they are afraid of him, and it is only through Barnabas' intervention that he is welcomed (9.26-27).

Disagreement over the conditions for the inclusion of Gentiles in the Church - if Gentiles had to become Jews in order to be genuine Jesus-believers - is a fourth example of crisis. Chapter 15 is evidence of this. They found the solution - but only after much discussion (cf. 15.7).

The Holy Spirit and us ...

When they were to choose a new apostle, they cast lots (1.26). Now they can say: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (15.28). It sounds bold. The way the decree is presented, it might be named The Holy Spirit and Apostle Decree.

A recurring pattern in The Acts of the Apostles is the Holy Spirit or God steering the course of events. Now it is for all to see in black and white that the Holy Spirit is behind the decisions of the apostle decree. The message is: one does not argue with the Holy Spirit!

But not all is said with this. For there was a discussion before they could say: It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. Yet, the various contributions in the discussion made it plain that God was behind what happened to the Gentiles. The Holy Spirit was given to the Gentiles. The Holy Spirit decided that Gentiles could receive the gift of salvation without circumcision.

But all through the process the decision-makers cannot avoid the responsibility of interpreting the acts of the Holy Spirit; they are not passive robots operated by remote control or manipulated by a superior power.

The example of Paul and Barnabas (15.36-41)

Perhaps the strongest evidence that there never was a golden age among the first Jesus-believers is Luke's account of the bitter controversy between Paul and Barnabas.

Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." Barnabas wanted to

take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

A sharp disagreement

The council in Jerusalem (15.1-35) is over. The Jewish Christians have reached an agreement about the conditions for the admission of Gentile Christians in the Church - theoretically at least. Immediately before the second missionary journey there is another instance of disagreement.

Some time after the apostolic council Barnabas and Paul agree to visit the churches which they founded on the first missionary journey. But they have a violent dispute - not over some theological question, nor over the route to follow or mission strategy, but over a person.

Barnabas wants to take his cousin John Mark - he was with them on their first journey. Paul does not want to take him along - he had left them in Perga in Pamphylia and returned to Jerusalem.

Their dispute is not solved with an "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (cf. 15.28). They part company.

Barnabas and John Mark sail for Cyprus, Barnabas' native island, where they probably evangelize although this is not said explicitly. Paul and Silas go through Syria to Cilicia, Paul's native soil - perhaps with a visit to Tarsus, his native town (22.3). Who knows?

Luke does not take sides in the controversy - if he does, he does not give himself away. He continues to concentrate on Paul.

A sharp disagreement prior to evangelization

It is like coming from one world to another: in the previous section we read about deep theological discussions over Gentiles' attitude to the Law; the outcome was epoch-making and is still relevant for non-Jews living on the threshold of the twenty-first century.

And now, even before an evangelistic outreach, they are discussing - a person, John Mark, which leads to bitter disagreement between Barnabas and Paul. Disagreement among enemies or people who are indifferent to each other is one thing, another thing is disagreement among close friends, not to mention disagreement among friends who share the same faith and fight the same fight. This was the situation with Paul and Barnabas.

- * Barnabas defended Paul when the disciples in Jerusalem doubted the authenticity of his conversion (9.26-27)

- * Barnabas went to Tarsus and brought Paul to Antioch, where they worked together for a whole year (11.25-26)

- * Barnabas and Paul carried out a task together in Jerusalem (11.30; 12.25)

- * Barnabas and Paul had, together, been set apart for missionary work by the Holy Spirit (13.2)

- * Barnabas and Paul had worked together for the gospel on the first missionary journey (13.4-14.28)

- * Barnabas and Paul had been charged, by the Church in Jerusalem, with the responsibility of making known the apostle decree (15.22).

Neither of the two hotspurs deserves praise. The only person who deserves praise is Luke, because he did not hide this controversy. We might even have wished to have had more details, for how did they manage to live with this disagreement?

- * What did Barnabas say in Cyprus to the believers now that

Paul did not accompany him on *his* journey?

* What did Paul say to the believers in southern Asia Minor now that Barnabas did not accompany him on *his* journey?

* How did this sharp disagreement influence their boldness when they preached the gospel?

* How could they speak to others about peace and toleration when there was a bitter conflict between them which had *not* been solved?

And so on and so forth.

But it is noteworthy that the controversy did *not* prevent either Barnabas or Paul from being active for Jesus. They deserve no praise for their dispute, but in a roundabout way there is nevertheless some sort of "oblique edification" in their strife. For it smashes all beliefs

* that there should be such a thing as a golden age in the apostolic epoch, a golden age without problems, sin, and conflicts due to strong personalities

* that the gospel can only be proclaimed by perfect men and women who have all things under control - also the things that relate to those who are nearest and dearest to them.

When disagreement becomes theology ...

The way the account in 15.36-41 is presented to us, it is a matter of different opinions of a person. Was John Mark suited or not suited to take part in the second missionary journey, considering that he had left them on the first journey? Luke does not mention the reason why he had left them (13.13).

Luke does not theologize the problem. He does not even commit himself directly on this point. Luke's account does not acquit Paul of his share in the unhappy conflict - at least it is an open question, but Paul's relationship to the Church in Antioch is not influenced by it. And Luke shows that there is more to be said about the believers in the first Church than that they were "one in heart and mind" (4.32).

But there are expositors who are not content with Luke's explanation. They insist on seeing a more profound theological disagreement which Luke should have hidden for his readers. They assert that Mark and Barnabas had a theological disagreement with Paul over the question of Gentile Christians' position to the Law. But this does not harmonize with what is said in 15.22,32.

But we must admit that it can often be said about us that we theologize - or spiritualize - problems which have little to do with theology - or spirit - because we in this way feel that we are in a stronger position against our opponents.

If there is anything positive at all in this dispute, it is that the gospel is spread in spite of people's disagreement and that the gospel gets further out because there are now two teams which operate in different places.

Therefore I conclude by saying that - praise the Lord! - the Acts of the Holy Spirit are greater than the Acts of men, even The Acts of the Apostles, so that the gospel is spread in spite of the disagreement of believers. If people were to wait to spread the gospel until they were perfect, no one would ever have heard it.

The call is: Be of one mind! However, Luke has shown that even if believers are not of one mind, the gospel must nevertheless be proclaimed.

Were the conflicting parties ever reconciled? This is worth reflecting on in the light of what Paul later writes about Barnabas in Gal 2.13 and 1 Cor 9.6, and about Mark in Col 4.10; Philemon 24 and 2 Tim 4.11.