



Ralph Woodrow Evangelistic Association

P.O. BOX 21, PALM SPRINGS, CA 92263-0021

THE BOOK OF AX?

It has been many years ago now. A woman who worked at a shop that did printing for us, mentioned something to me about the book of Acts. “It is the book of A.C.T.S,” she said, “not A.X.” I don’t know why she spelled this out. I have never been aware of anyone who supposed it is the book of AX!

But, in reflecting on that moment, maybe there is an application we can make: In the book of Acts those early believers, in the power of the Holy Spirit, as though with an AX, went after Satan and his works! A similar thought is expressed in Hebrews. It was not an ax, as such, but the word of God is mentioned as “sharper than any two-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12); and Jeremiah likened it to “a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces” (Jer. 23:29).

In this article, based on a recent sermon I preached, it will be our purpose to look at certain portions of the book of Acts, including some of the less-known truths within the book. I like to say the book of Acts is a book of *action!* Our starting place, quite logically, will be *verse one*:

“The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach...” (Acts 1:1, NKJV).

We will pause right there. Sometimes a “verse one” is read as though it were only introductory information; but I have learned that nuggets of truth may be found right in verse one.

It is from *verse one* we can determine that the writer of Acts was *Luke*, though he is not actually mentioned by name in the book. Acts is addressed to Theophilus, to whom the writer had issued a former account. That “former account” was about what Jesus *began* to do and teach. This, unmistakably, takes us back to the Gospel According to *Luke* (Lk. 1:1-3). And, accordingly, Acts is Luke’s account of what Jesus *continued* to do in the early church by the Holy Spirit.

Little is known about Theophilus, though the name means “Lover of God.” *Theo*, meaning God, may be seen in such terms as theocracy, theology, theological, theological seminary, etc. *Phil*, meaning love, may be seen in terms like Philadelphia (City of brotherly love), philanthropist (lover of people), Philip (Lover of horses), etc.

In Luke 1:3, Theophilus is addressed as “most excellent Theophilus” which seems to mean he was quite prominent, serving in a place of authority. The Greek term that is here translated “most excellent” appears three other places where it

is used of Felix, also Festus, both who were prominent as governors (Acts 23:26; 24:3; 26:25).

Something else we notice in *verse one*: Not surprisingly, JESUS is mentioned. Almost every book of the New Testament mentions Jesus in verse one. The *first* verse of the New Testament mentions Jesus Christ; the *last* verse of the New Testament mentions Jesus Christ. He is Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last (Rev. 22:13). Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, so in English it would be like saying he is the A and Z. And, he is *everything* in between! A gospel chorus phrases it this way:

*He is my everything,
He is my all; he is my everything,
both great and small.*

Over and over in Acts, people were healed, such as the lame man in Acts 3, in the name of Jesus Christ. Following that miracle, Peter and John declared: “There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” When the Jewish leaders saw such boldness, perceiving they were “uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that *they had been with Jesus*” (Acts 4:12,13).

“They had been with Jesus”! That’s what made the difference! Is that our desire? The words of a grand old hymn come to mind:

*More about Jesus would I know,
more of His grace to others show;
more of His saving fullness see,
more of his love who died for me.*

After his resurrection, Jesus told the apostles: **“John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”**

Then we read: “*Therefore...*” (Acts 1:5, 6). When we see the word “therefore,” it is good to ask: *What is it there for?* “*Therefore*”—because they were soon going to be baptized with the Holy Spirit—they asked a question:

“Lord, will you at this time restore [apokathistemi] the kingdom to Israel?”

The Greek word *apokathistemi* (here translated “restore”) signifies *to reinstate, to renew, to restore to a former state or master*. But, as Adam Clarke points out in his commentary, it can also have a different (somewhat opposite) meaning: *an ending, abolishing, blotting out, making an end of a thing*.

It sounds strange, in a way—that a word can have *opposite* meanings—but it is true. The word “cleave” provides an example. It can mean *cling together*, as when Jesus said a man was to leave father and mother and cleave to his wife (Matt. 19:5). Or, it can mean *split apart* (Psalms 141:7; Zech. 14:4); a butcher splits meat apart with a cleaver, etc. In the context before us, does *apokathistemi* mean *restore* or *make an end*?

The nation of Israel, with Jerusalem as its capital, had long been under Roman rule. The Jewish hope was that they could again be an independent, sovereign kingdom as in the days of David and Solomon, bringing about a long-lasting time of peace and prosperity. Was this what the disciples were asking about? Did they suppose the coming of the Holy Spirit “within a few days” would bring about a *long-lasting* sovereign kingdom for Israel? It is difficult to see how this would fit. Jesus had already explained to them that Israel, including its capital city Jerusalem, was going to be *destroyed* within that generation (Luke 21:20-23; Matt. 24:1,2, 34). Living on this side of the fulfillment, we know that destruction happened in AD 70.

The ministry of the apostles—which would be to all nations—was to begin at *Jerusalem*; they were commanded by Jesus to wait *there* until they were endowed with power from on high (Luke 24:47-49). Yet, while they knew Jerusalem was going to be destroyed—within that generation—the exact time had not been revealed. It is certainly possible that a genuine concern about the timing of this event prompted the disciples’ question. No need for dogmatism, of course. It is not our purpose to push this view, but simply to make the reader aware of a less-known, alternate position.

Notice the response of Jesus:

“It is *not* for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in his own authority” (Acts 1:7).

Ironically, over the centuries there have been those who think *they* can figure out the times and seasons, supposing they can set a year for the rapture, the end of the world, the coming of the Lord, or the beginning of a millennium of peace on earth. Sometimes those who follow such dates are few in number; but in other cases, large numbers of people have been taken in. Here are some of the years that have been promoted in the past 200 years or so:

1801, 1805, 1814, 1820, 1832, 1836, 1843, 1844, 1845, 1846, 1847, 1849, 1851, 1856, 1862, 1863, 1867, 1868, 1869, 1870, 1872, 1874, 1878, 1880, 1881, 1873, 1890, 1895, 1896, 1899, 1900, 1901, 1908, 1910, 1911, 1914, 1919, 1925, 1928, 1934, 1935, 1936, 1943, 1945, 1947, 1950, 1952, 1953, 1954, 1957, 1959, 1962, 1966, 1967, 1969, 1973, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1985, 1988, 1990, 1994, 1996, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2016.

The emphasis of Jesus was not for his people to try to figure out dates, but rather *to preach the gospel!* He went right on to say (Acts 1:8):

“But you shall receive POWER when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

The Greek word that is here translated “power” is *dunamis* (sometimes spelled *dynamis*). Our word “dynamite” comes from

this word. There is obviously something very explosive (in a good sense) about the power of the Holy Spirit! The gospel message spread like a prairie fire. It encircled the mountains and crossed the oceans. It made kings to tremble and tyrants to fear. So mighty was the impact that unbelievers exclaimed: “These have *turned the world upside down*”! (Acts 17:6).

Some years ago I met a pastor in Missouri who had a unique experience with dynamite. The church had plans to expand their building, but first a portion of a rocky hill needed to be removed. The pastor obtained dynamite and along with some of the men of the church—all inexperienced!—dug a hole into which the dynamite would be dropped. But right in the middle of things, word came that one of the members had been taken to the hospital, and the pastor needed to leave. The men went ahead and put dynamite into the hole and left.

When the pastor got back, not knowing they had placed the dynamite—and anxious to get the job done—put *more* dynamite in the hole and set it off. It not only blew up the rocky hill, but the sound rattled buildings and nerves far and wide! Fortunately not much damage was done to the existing church building and no one was hurt!

Acts 1:8, about the power (*dunamis*) of the Holy Spirit, is often considered a key verse to the book of Acts. Notice the very next verse: “Now when he had spoken *these things*, while they watched, he was taken up...” (Acts 1:9)

Following the Ascension of Christ, we are told that the disciples returned “to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet” (Acts 1:12). This has caused some to assume that Jesus ascended from this mount—perhaps from the *top* of it. But why the top? Since he had a long distance to go, did he need the summit as a launching pad?

Luke tells us specifically where the ascension took place: it was *at Bethany!* “And he led them out as far as to BETHANY, and he *lifted up his hands*, and blessed them. And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven” (Lk. 24:50,51). This does not conflict with the statement that they returned to Jerusalem “from the mount called Olivet,” for Bethany was located on the southeastern portion of this hill area, but not up on top.

The distance back to Jerusalem was “a Sabbath day’s journey” (Acts 1:12). This was figured at seven-and-a-half furlongs (about one mile). But in John 11:18, we are told that from Bethany to Jerusalem was about fifteen furlongs (about two miles), which would have been more than a Sabbath day’s journey. *Clarke’s Commentary*, quoting Lightfoot, explains:

“Our Savior led out his disciples, when he was about to ascend, to the very first region or tract of mount Olivet, which was called Bethany, and was distant from the city a Sabbath day’s journey. And so far from the city itself did that tract extend itself which was called Bethphage [cf. Mark 11:1]; and when he was come to that place where the bound of *Bethphage and Bethany met* and touched one another, he then ascended.”

Apparently when Jesus led his disciples out “to Bethany,” he did not lead them *into* Bethany—not into the town itself—but rather to the town limit. Though the ascension was clearly visible, that it did not take place right in the middle of town

seems evident, for after his resurrection he did not appear “to all the people, but unto witnesses chosen before of God” (Acts 10:41).

Many of these things were going through my mind in 1978 when I spent some time, alone, walking over portions of the Mount of Olives. At one point, passing near a little house, a boy about 10 years old who evidently lived there—probably realizing I was an American “tourist”—greeted me in English with a friendly “Hello!”

Lifting hands in prayer and worship is mentioned in a number of verses (1 Tim. 2:8; Psalms 134:2); but just before the Ascension, Jesus raised his hands as a form of blessing.

In those days between the Ascension and Pentecost, at a gathering of 120 believers, a replacement was chosen for Judas Iscariot. Two men, witnesses of the resurrection, were chosen: one was Barsabbas, whose name means “Son of [the] Sabbath,” and the other was Matthias. After prayer for God’s guidance in the matter, “they cast their lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. And he was numbered with the eleven apostles” (Acts 1:22-26).

Occasionally I have heard it said, “Matthias was ‘numbered’ with the eleven apostles, he was not *God’s* choice. The true twelfth apostle was *Paul*.” I am not sure what that statement is supposed to prove. Paul himself did not believe he was one of the twelve! When he listed those who saw Jesus after his resurrection, he wrote that he was “seen of *the twelve*. After that...*he was seen by me also*” (1 Cor. 15:5-8). Paul was without doubt an apostle; but, he was not one of the twelve.

Probably the reason some have thought Paul was the *twelfth* apostle is because of a perception that there were *only* twelve apostles. The fact is, others are mentioned as apostles in the New Testament, among them: Barnabas, Apollos, Timothy, Silas, Epaphroditus, etc. who were not part of the twelve.

It was said of the believers at Ephesus, “you have tested those who *say* they are apostles *and are not*, and have found them *liars*” (Rev. 2:2). If there were *only* twelve apostles, those believers at Ephesus would not have needed to test these false apostles. They would have only needed a list of the twelve (as in Acts 1:13). Everyone not on the list would be out!

Unfortunately, the word “apostle” has today acquired the status of an exalted, high-sounding, flattering title in English. The original word simply meant “one sent forth on a mission,” which actually aligns better with our word *missionary*, a more humble term.

On the day of Pentecost, “suddenly there came a SOUND from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind” (Acts 2:2). I see no need to complicate a message by citing Greek words—*unless* there is a good reason. In this case, the word translated “sound” is of interest. It is *echos*, from which we get our word “echo.” And later, when we read that Peter “lifted up his VOICE...” (2:14), the Greek word so translated is *phone*! This, as is self-evident, provides the basis for words we use in English: *phone*, *microphone*, and *phonograph*!

Among the miracles that occurred on the day of Pentecost, disciples of Jesus “began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:4). Devout Jewish people—

born in other countries with distinctive and different languages—who were in Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost, in amazement exclaimed: “We hear them speaking in our *own* tongues the wonderful works of God” (verse 11).

Luke records the various people and foreign countries represented: Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, JUDEA, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs (verses 8-11).

But one place mentioned on this list stands out as an oddity: *Judea*. One commentator says this has “exceedingly puzzled commentators and critics.” Why? Here are the reasons:

In a list of foreign countries, Judea seems out of place. Judea was not a foreign country; that is where they were—in Jerusalem, the capital of Judea!

Judea does not fit geographically. As the text stands, Judea is placed on the list between the very distant lands of Mesopotamia and Cappadocia. It would seem unlikely after mentioning Mesopotamia, to suddenly jump back to “Judea,” and then back to Cappadocia.

But more importantly, the miracle involved people from countries with a different language being able to hear the wonderful things of God in their own language! This would not be required, nor would it fit, for those in Judea. They would have understood the normal, everyday language that was common to them.

For these reasons, we don’t rule out that *Armenia* could be the correct reading. Tertullian (c.155—c. 240 AD), using an older manuscript than any available today, instead of *Judea* read *Loudia*, i.e. Armenia. Later, Augustine (354—430 AD) held the same view. It is a technical point which may be of interest to a few, but certainly not an essential of the faith!

When Peter wrote to Jewish believers living in Pontus, Cappadocia, and Asia (1 Peter 1:1)—three of the places mentioned on the list—this may have included some of the 3,000 converted under his ministry on the day of Pentecost.

Coming to Acts 3, we read about the miraculous healing of a man, over forty years old, who had never walked. He had to be carried. There were people who daily carried him to what was called the Beautiful Gate, an entrance into the temple courtyard, where he could beg. Peter and John did not have silver or gold to give, but gave him something much greater: he was healed in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth!

It is quite common to picture the lame man as *sitting* at the Beautiful Gate when he was healed. But at the time he encountered Peter and John, he was being *carried* to this location. Various translations make this point, including the KJV, but it is more clear in other translations: “Now a man crippled from birth *was being carried* to the temple gate called Beautiful” (NIV), etc.

The important thing is that the man was healed—now whether he was “sitting” at the Beautiful Gate or being “carried” there—but I mention this to illustrate that we should read the scriptures *carefully*, otherwise there are things that escape our notice.

After the lame man was healed, he entered into the temple courts with Peter and John, “walking, and JUMPING, and praising God” (Acts 3:8 NIV).

Growing up I did not excel in sports like football, basketball, or baseball. But being tall and slim, I did excel at high jump. In the ninth grade I could jump higher than anyone in the entire school. Somewhere I still have a ribbon I won. But that was back in the '50s—I am not going out for high jump now!

I have sometimes heard older Christian people say they would like to *kneel* to pray, but if they did, they might have difficulty *getting back up!* *Kneeling* in prayer is certainly scriptural (Lk. 22:41; etc.). Other verses speak of *standing* to pray (Mk. 11:25, etc.). But effective prayer is not based on any one position of the body.

Jesus would often *sit* while he taught (Matt. 5:1; 13:2; Mk. 9:35; Lk. 4:20; 5:3; John 8:2). But on some occasions, probably for emphasis, he would *stand* and make a statement (John 7:37; 20:19; cf. Rev. 3:20). Jesus is commonly mentioned as *sitting* at the right hand of God (Mk. 16:19; Acts 2:33, 34; Heb. 1:3; 12:2). But just before Stephen was stoned to death, he saw Jesus *standing* on the right hand of God (Acts 7:55,56).

Some congregations feel it is more worshipful to *stand* while singing—for the entire song service, a half hour or more. Those who *sit* down may not be considered “as spiritual” as those who stand. But the physical makeup of some, simply does not permit standing a long time.

Are people more receptive to the Holy Spirit while standing? We should not forget that when the Spirit was outpoured at Pentecost, those original believers were “*sitting*” (Acts 2:2). I am convinced the position of the *body* is not nearly as important as the attitude of the *heart*.

On the day of Pentecost, about 3,000 received Christ and were baptized. In Acts 2:47 we read: “And the Lord ADDED to the church daily those who were being saved.” By the time of Acts 6:7, “the number of the disciples MULTIPLIED greatly in Jerusalem.” Notice the neat contrast between “added” and then “multiplied”!

What this verse goes on to say is truly amazing! “...and a *great many* of the priests were obedient to the faith.” We should not quickly read over these words. Not just a few, but a *great many* of the Jewish priests received Christ as Lord. Possibly in this number were even some who Jesus described as “whitewashed tombs,” which looked beautiful outwardly but inside were “full of dead men’s bones” (Matt. 23:27), who had now been transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit!

In Acts 16, Paul and Silas (also called by the less-familiar name *Silvanus* four places in scripture) were thrown into prison after being seized and dragged into the marketplace at Philippi. There they were publically humiliated, being *stripped of their clothes* and beaten (Acts 16:22).

In the ancient world, it was not uncommon for people accused of crimes to be stripped of clothing when they were beaten, stoned, or crucified. There is little doubt that part of the “shame” of Jesus’ crucifixion was such (Heb. 12:2; cf. Rev. 3:18). J. Vernon McGee says Jesus suffered the humiliation of

being crucified naked, that we might be spiritually clothed with the righteousness of Christ.

Stripping war captives of their clothing was so common, one of the Old Testament words translated “captive” means *to make naked* (Strong’s, H1540; 2 Kings 15:29; 17:6; etc.) An example would be the 200,000 victims that were stripped of clothing, including their shoes (2 Chron. 28:8, 15; cf. Isa. 20:4).

In Acts 23:16, we learn that Paul had a sister. While this is no great truth in itself, it is an example of little details that are commonly overlooked. Paul’s sister’s son was instrumental in saving Paul’s life, being within God’s plan, at the right place at the right time.

Toward the end of the book of Acts, we read of Paul being taken by ship as a prisoner to Rome. There were 276 men on the ship (Acts 27:37)—a number sometimes overlooked. Winter was setting in (Acts 27:9), making the waters treacherous. Some reasoned that by the time they got to Phoenix (Acts 27:12, NKJ, NIV, etc.), a harbor would provide protection—but that was not to be. They became shipwrecked at the island of Malta (formerly known as Melita) which is about 50 miles south of Italy.

The lives of all on the ship were saved, but they were wet and cold. The island people showed them great kindness and built a fire. As Paul placed a bundle of sticks he had gathered on the fire, a viper came out of the heat and fastened on his hand. But when he did not suddenly die, as expected by the native people, they thought he was a god! (cf. Mark 16:18).

In that area was the estate of the leading citizen of the island, Publius, whose father was sick of a fever and dysentery. This type of fever, called Malta fever, was common in Mediterranean islands. The microorganism has since been traced to the milk of the Maltese goats. This fever could last four months, and sometimes as long as two or three years. “Paul went in to him and prayed, and he laid his hands on him and healed him.” The word spread and soon “*the rest of those on the island who had diseases* also came and were *healed*”! (Acts 28:1-10).

There is so much more that can be gleaned from this book of ACTION that we call the book of Acts. But we are out of space for now. I can relate to the writer of The Faith Chapter who said: “What more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of....” (Heb. 11:32).

It has been said there is no “Amen” at the close of the book of Acts; it is still be lived in the lives of men and women who serve God in the power of the Holy Spirit! —RW

RALPH and ARLENE WOODROW

P.O. Box 21

Palm Springs, CA 92263-0021

Phone order line: (760) 323-9882

Email: ralphwoodrow@earthlink.net

Website: www.ralphwoodrow.org