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## **Acts of the Apostles Introduction and Overview**

### ***Introduction***

As we approach the fast of the apostles, it is good for us to have an introduction to and overview of the Acts of the Apostles. The Acts of the Apostles, also known as *Praxis*, talks about the spread of Christianity after the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the life of the early church. As Orthodox Christians, we do not look at the early church as something far removed from us, but we are, in fact, the continuation of the early church. For this reason, the Book of Acts is the only book of the New Testament that does not end with the word ‘amen,’ since the life of the church continues until this day. Also, the Coptic Church reads the Acts of the Apostles at every Divine Liturgy, followed by the *Synaxarion*, which contains the stories of the lives of the saints who came in the years after the apostles until today. Likewise, whenever a bishop is ordained, the laying of hands takes place after the reading of the Book of Acts, since the bishop is a successor to the apostles.

### ***The Author: Saint Luke the Evangelist***

Saint Luke is the author of the Acts of the Apostles. Like the gospel that bears his name, he writes the book of acts to Theophilus. Theophilus was most likely a Roman political figure, as the title “most excellent” is used (see Acts 23:26, 24:3, 26:25). Theophilus had most likely been trained in the Christian faith and had received basic instructions in the church. The Gospel according to Saint Luke and the Acts of the Apostles were not likely to sit in Theophilus’ private library but would be proclaimed publicly in worship. Likewise, in Luke chapter one, as well as throughout the Book of Acts, we see God’s people assembled for worship.

Saint Luke was an Antiochian and a physician by profession. He had a great knowledge of natural philosophy, and as is evidenced by his gospel, was very familiar with the Law of Moses and Jewish customs. He most likely adopted the Jewish religion before his conversion to Christ. He lived in Jerusalem during the ministry of our Lord and was called as one of the seventy apostles. He was worthy to meet the Lord after His resurrection as he journeyed with Cleopas to the village of Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). After the Lord ascended and Saint Paul believed, Saint Luke became a close companion, follower, and fellow traveler with Saint Paul. We know that he was a very loyal companion, in that he stayed with Saint Paul until his death (2 Timothy 4:11).

Also, according to tradition Saint Luke was the first to paint the image of the *Theotokos* holding in her arms the infant Jesus Christ. He also painted two other icons of Saint Mary and presented them to her for her approval. On seeing the icons, she said, “May the grace of Him Who was born of me and my mercy be with these icons.” He also wrote images of the Apostles Saints Peter and Paul, and was therefore the initiator of iconography.

### ***The Acts of the Apostles: Overview***

The Acts of the Apostles was written in Rome around 63 A.D., at the time that Saint Paul was first imprisoned in Rome. Rome burned down in 64 A.D. under Nero and Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 A.D., and neither of these incidents is mentioned in the Acts.

As a fellow-traveler of Saint Paul, knowledgeable in the Greek language, and a good historian, Saint Luke gives many detailed descriptions of life in the early church and the work of the Apostles. As a physician, for instance, describing the healing of the lame man at the temple in Acts 3, he seems to use medical expressions like, "...and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength" (Acts 3:7). Also, in Acts 27, he describes in great detail the voyage of ship in the Mediterranean, which became shipwrecked. He convinces us that these stories are not fables and fantasy, but real historical events. He also describes less favorable events such as the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, as well as the disagreement between Saints Paul and Barnabas, which further prove the authenticity of this work.

As we said, the Acts of the Apostles focuses on God's work in His people, the spread of Christianity, and the continuity of Christ's work with His Holy Spirit in His disciples. The Book of Acts primarily focuses on the work of Saint Peter and Saint Paul in the first 12 chapters and the last 16 chapters respectively.

There are also many 'firsts' in the Book of Acts:

- ❖ The first time the Holy Spirit descended upon the Believers (Acts 2)
- ❖ The first prayer assembly for meeting (Acts 1:14)
- ❖ The first sermon (Acts 2)
- ❖ The first persecution against the Church (Acts 4)
- ❖ The first Christian martyr (Acts 7:54)
- ❖ The first apostle martyred, Saint James the son of Zebedee (Acts 12:2)
- ❖ The first time the disciples were called 'Christian' in Antioch (Acts 11:26)

We also find many sermons and words of preaching in the Book of Acts. Saint Peter delivered seven sermons, Saint Stephen delivered a very long historical and theological discourse, and Saint Paul delivered nine sermons.

We also learn about the different ways God worked in the lives of individuals and through the apostles to attract them to salvation. For instance, the Ethiopian Eunuch discovered Christ in the Holy Scriptures; Saint Paul received a dramatic and wonderful revelation from our Lord, Himself; God opened Lydia's heart as she heard the preaching of Saint Paul; and the Jailer at Philippi started the path to salvation out of fear.

Lastly and most important, we see the work of the Holy Spirit and the roles of the Holy Spirit as a teacher, a guide, a source of remembrance, a source of power, a comforter, a sanctifier, an advocate and intercessor, one who convicts, and one who rebukes.

As we journey through the Book of Acts, we can take many lessons we can practice today.

The Acts of the Apostles begins with ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ and the command to the disciples to preach everywhere: from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). We learn here to constantly fix our eyes on the heavenly, and to preach first to hearts, then to our families, our neighbors and community, and then, if God calls us, to the ends of the earth, both in our words and our deeds. The disciples then spend ten days between the ascension and the Feast of Pentecost praying in unity and submitting to God's will as they chose Saint Matthias to replace Judas as the twelfth apostle.

Chapter two details the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, and the sermon of Saint Peter that led to the baptism of 3,000 souls in one day. Here we learn the power of God working in His children. Before the Day of Pentecost, the Apostles were afraid, but now they go out and preach boldly. The Holy Spirit, likewise, gives us strength.

Chapters three and four tell us about Saint Peter and Saint John in the Temple. Saint Peter heals the lame man and they witnessed before the council of the Jews, the Sanhedrin. We also see the powerful work of prayer in the early church, as well as how they shared all things in common and then distributed to those who were in need. What a great spirit of unity and charity we see in the early church!

Chapter five tells us about the tragic story of Ananias and Sapphira who were punished with death for lying to the Holy Spirit, a lesson to us about how seriously God takes sin in the church. We also read how the apostles continue to preach with boldness, how they were put on trial again, and were even found rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for Christ's name (Acts 5:41).

In chapters six, seven, and eight, we see the work of the deacons in the early church. Seven men had been appointed to serve the Greek speaking Jews. Saint Stephen became the first martyr, and after his martyrdom, the apostles scattered to different areas outside of Jerusalem because of a great persecution that arose against the church, teaching us that there is a time for fleeing from evil. In chapter eight, Christ is preached in Samaria. The Gospel of Saint Luke tells us how a village of the Samaritans rejected Christ, and Saint James and Saint John wished to send fire down on this village to destroy it (Luke 9:51-56). Now, the Samaritans accept Christ, and they receive the fire of the Holy Spirit, as the apostles laid hands on these newly baptized Christians. We also read about the baptism and conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch.

In chapters nine through twelve, the disciples begin their witness to the ends of the earth. In chapter nine, we read about the dramatic conversion of Saul, who had formerly persecuted the church, and became the great preacher, Saint Paul. In chapters ten and eleven, we see the conversion of the Gentiles, the first being Cornelius. These chapters confirm that Christianity is a *Katholik* (universal) religion that is not limited by race or language. In chapter twelve also, we see the power of prayer in the church in that it freed Saint Peter from prison.

Chapters thirteen to twenty-one primarily detail the journeys of Saint Paul. We also read in Acts chapter fifteen about the first council in Jerusalem to decide how Gentiles were to be admitted to the church. Chapters twenty-two to twenty-eight show the judgment/trials of Saint Paul before the congregation, before the Sanhedrin, before Felix and Festus, before King Agrippa, and finally his journey to Rome where he would go before Caesar.

***Conclusion***

The Acts of the Apostles is a wonderful book in the Holy Scriptures. We ought to read it with great joy as it inspires us also to go forth and preach, to endure tribulation joyfully, to find joy in giving, and to find joy in worship. The Acts of the Apostles is truly a book of joy in the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and a powerful witness to the Truth of Christianity.

**Glory is due to God forever. Amen.**