

## **Expounding Narrative: Acts 10:1-11:18**

### **How does Acts fit into the wider canon of Holy Scripture?**

Although both Luke and Acts were written anonymously, we have good grounds for concluding that they were written by the same author. Both books are written in good literary Greek suggesting that the author was well educated. It is commonly thought that Luke (cf. Colossians 4:14) wrote Acts as a second part to the gospel commonly attributed to him. Luke-Acts forms between one-quarter and one-third of the New Testament and, therefore, more of the canon of New Testament scripture came from Luke's pen than from either Paul or John.

Last time we worked particularly hard on the structure and plan of Acts and how it relates to Luke's gospel. It is particularly important that this groundwork is done so that we do not totally divide the two parts of the two part work. In the book of Acts we have a picture of the New Testament church in action (sometimes called the 'Early Church' – but the designation 'Early Church' is too vague for our purposes) and an account of the ministry of the apostles. Through Acts we gain some information on what it means to be a Christian (a person who responds in faith to the grace of God) as, through the narrative, themes of personal evangelism, Bible study and engaging with the local culture are considered.

Although we can fairly say that Acts is a 'story' that does not mean that it was made up. We are reasonably familiar with the idea that Luke's gospel is firmly rooted in history (Luke 1:5; Luke 2:1-2; Luke 3:1-2; Luke 23:1-25) but the same can also be said of Acts which records that the gospel was proclaimed and spread through the Roman world in the reign of Claudius (Acts 11:28; 18:2), when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia (Acts 18:12-17), when Felix and Festus ruled in Judea and Ananias was the high priest in Jerusalem (Acts 24-25), and between the times of two Jewish kings, Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:1-23) and Herod Agrippa II (Acts 25:13-26:32).

### **What is the overall structure of the book of Acts**

Acts opens with an explanation that the gospel must spread through Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Luke's portrayal of Jesus in the Gospel is of one who is the 'Saviour of the World', rather than simply Jewish Messiah. In his record of the spread of the gospel, Luke does not include everything; instead, he selects and presents events and speeches in a particular way, showing that as God acted in Christ he now acts through the apostolic ministry of the body of Christ. Acts explores the meaning and implications of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ and explains the significance of the coming of the Holy Spirit in power at Pentecost. The ministry of the apostles (particularly Peter and Paul and their relationship with each other, including the difficulties they faced) is described and explained. The message of salvation and of the Kingdom of God that was proclaimed by Jesus is now proclaimed by the church. The nature of kingship continues to be an important idea (Acts 17:7) and the legality of Christian worship is considered (Acts 16:20-21, Acts 18:13).

The ministry of the apostles begins with the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and Peter preaching at Jerusalem (Acts 2:4; Acts 2:11ff.). Luke orders the rest of his material into six sections, each concluding with statements or 'progress reports'. Luke's account of Christian mission to Jewish world starts with the beginning of the Christian mission (1:1-2:41) and the

proclamation of the gospel to the Jewish world (2:42-12:24). This latter part is made up of three short sections, the first concerning the earliest days of the church at Jerusalem (2:42-6:7), the second concerning critical events in the lives of three important figures (6:8-9:31) and the third concerning the advances of the gospel in Palestine-Syria (9:32-12:24). The second half of Acts continues with an account of Christian mission to the Gentile world (12:25-28:31) and, like the first half, is divided into three accounts, the first concerning the first missionary journey and the Jerusalem Council (12:25-16:5), the second concerning the widening Christian outreach through two missionary journeys (16:6-19:20) and the third concerning the advance of the Gospel to Jerusalem and from Jerusalem to Rome (19:21-28:31).

*The beginning of the Christian mission (1:1-2:41)*

*The proclamation of the gospel to the Jewish world (2:42-12:24)*

- (1) The earliest days of the church at Jerusalem (2:42-6:7)
- (2) Critical events in the lives of three important figures (6:8-9:31)
- (3) The advances of the gospel in Palestine-Syria (9:32-12:24)

*The proclamation of the gospel to the Gentile world (12:25-28:31)*

- (1) The first missionary journey and the Jerusalem Council (12:25-16:5)
- (2) The widening Christian outreach, two missionary journeys (16:6-19:20)
- (3) From Jerusalem to Rome (19:21-28:31)

Unlike modern historians, Luke does not cite authorities, consider other viewpoints or future implications. Instead, he proclaims the continuing activity of the ascended Christ in the world through his Spirit in the church. That said, we still need to consider whether and how we should derive normal teaching from Biblical historical narrative and how we discriminate between what Luke determined as normative and what he did not (Larkin, 2000) taking care that our interpretation of a passage is drawn from faithful study of that passage and then is in harmony with the rest of scripture.

### **Speeches in Acts**

Speeches form a significant part of Acts but the historical narrative provides the context for the speech, so that it is necessary for the expositor not simply to divorce the speech from the rest of the text. It is important to note the identity of the preacher, the place, the audience and the main content of the speech, bearing in mind that this is a brief summary of the pertinent points. Speeches in acts often follow a basic structure, an explanation of what is going on (*apologia*), a proclamation of the basic apostolic message (*kerygma*) which, for our purposes, can be summarised in six points,

*Jesus was the promised Messiah (or Saviour)*

*The death of Jesus was part of God's plan*

*God raised Jesus from death as prophesied*

*The resurrection of Jesus was witnessed and proved*

*Christ is glorified now and in the future*

and, finally, there is a call to repentance and the promise of blessing

*All must repent and believe.*

## **Acts 10:1-11:18**

### ***The role of Luke's writings in the wider canon of Holy Scripture***

As we approach this passage, we must bear in mind that it is part of Luke-Acts and remember the role of Luke's writings in the wider canon of Holy Scripture. In this passage we would expect to have a picture of the New Testament church in action and be able to observe the apostles. We might expect to learn something about the proclamation of Jesus 'Saviour of the World' and what it means to be a Christian. Themes of personal evangelism, Bible study and the relationship of Christians to each other and the Christian community to the local culture might also be important. Luke might also give us some historical details (names of places and well-known historical figures) to show that the story is firmly rooted in history.

### ***The place of the passage in the overall structure of Acts***

After a preliminary examination of the passage we are studying, we might then take time to consider where the passage falls in the overall structure of the book of Acts. In general it is about the spread of the gospel through Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). More specifically, we must review how this passage shows God acting through the apostolic ministry and if it reveals anything about the meaning and implications of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus and the significance of the coming of the Holy Spirit. We might expect to see in this passage something about challenges and difficulties the apostles faced and the nature of their relationship with each other. We might also see something about the church's proclamation of salvation and the Kingdom of God and possibly a note about Christian worship.

### ***The specific section in which the passage falls (the summarising verse)***

From the work we have done on the overall structure of Acts, we know that Luke has ordered this part of his writing into six sections, each with a concluding statement. These chapters form part of the first half of Acts, *The proclamation of the gospel to the Jewish world (2:42-12:24)*, and in particular the third section, which records the advances of the gospel in Palestine-Syria (9:32-12:24). Luke states clearly what this section is about in his summarising verse 'but the word of God continued to increase and spread' (Acts 12:24). Consequently, we might expect this passage to consider the proclamation of the gospel to the Jewish world showing how the word of God continued to increase and spread. As it is near the end of the section, we might consider whether it in any way prepares the reader for the next section, which is the second half of Acts and therefore considers the proclamation of the gospel to the Gentile world. If there is a speech in the passage (and there is in this one), we must consider the relationship of the speech to the narrative context.

### ***Is this narrative normative?***

An important consideration must always be whether the narrative account that we have in Acts is normative for the church and Christian practice today. Our interpretation must begin with faithful study of the passage in hand but must be in harmony with the rest of scripture, in particular if any element of the narrative is of special importance, a fair assumption would be that such a narrative element would often appear in the scriptures. It is important, therefore, to have a broad view of scripture and not to conclude that something must always happen today because it happened in particular episodes of the history of the New Testament Church.

***Important questions to bear in mind when dealing with the passage***

With the best will in the world, it is easy to lose our focus on the issues that we have raised and so I have sharpened these up into a series of questions that should help us in preparing a presentation on any passage from Acts. We must not forget to place Acts in the total canon of scriptural teaching but remember the particular emphases of Luke's writings. From all that we have considered above, I devised a list of 17 questions and in order to make our exercise conform to the more familiar '20 Questions' format added three supplementary questions to help us review our exegesis (the actual study of the text) and move this on into exposition (exploring the meaning and application for today).

- 1 Do I learn anything about the New Testament church in action?
- 2 What is the role of the apostles in this passage?
- 3 Does it mention evangelism, Bible study, or Christians living in a particular local culture?
- 4 Are there historical details (e.g. place names, well-known people)?
- 5 Where does the passage fall in the overall structure of Acts (mission to Jews or Gentiles)?
- 6 Does this passage show God acting through the apostolic ministry?
- 7 Does it reveal anything about the meaning and implications of Jesus' death and resurrection?
- 8 Does it reveal anything about the significance of the coming of the Holy Spirit?
- 9 Do we learn anything about challenges and difficulties the apostles faced?
- 10 Do we learn anything about the nature of the apostles' relationship with each other?
- 11 Is there anything here about the church's proclamation of salvation and the Kingdom of God?
- 12 Is there anything to note about Christian worship?
- 13 In what specific section does the passage fall?
- 14 What is the summarising verse for that section?
- 15 How does this passage relate to what comes before and what comes after it?
- 16 Is this narrative normative?
- 17 Is there a speech and if so what is its context and main points?
- 18 What are the main points of this passage and is there a logical progression between them?
- 19 Can I present these in a listener-friendly, lively and relevant way?
- 20 What is my overall interpretation and is it in harmony with the rest of scripture?

- 1 Do I learn anything about the New Testament church in action?

It seems to me that from this passage we see the importance of obedience, the centrality of the preaching of the word of God and the role of the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

- 2 What is the role of the apostles in this passage?

The apostles are church leaders. They are also responsible for (one might also add 'responsible to') right doctrine and the proper exercise of Christian ministry.

- 3 Does it mention evangelism, Bible study, or Christians living in a particular local culture?

It mentions a God-fearing Gentile and the relationship of the Christians with people engaged in occupations formerly considered unclean (tanning) and with Gentiles.

- 4 Are there historical details (e.g. place names, well-known people)?

Joppa, Caesarea, Jerusalem, Cornelius (a person of note), the Italian Regiment, Simon the Tanner

- 5 Where does the passage fall in the overall structure of Acts (mission to Jews or Gentiles)?

It is at the end of the section concerning the mission to the Jews

6 Does this passage show God acting through the apostolic ministry?

By this special vision God shows Peter that the gospel must be preached to the Gentiles.

7 Does it reveal anything about the meaning and implications of Jesus' death and resurrection?

It reminds the reader that Jesus was seen by witnesses God had chosen, who ate with him and drank with him after his resurrection. It says that Jesus is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead and that he is the one of whom the prophets spoke that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

8 Does it reveal anything about the significance of the coming of the Holy Spirit?

Just as the Holy Spirit had moved among the Jews of the Diaspora in Jerusalem at Pentecost, so the Holy Spirit now comes upon on all who heard the message, including Gentiles.

9 Do we learn anything about challenges and difficulties the apostles faced?

The barrier between Jews and Gentiles must have seemed insurmountable – but by the preaching of his Word and the power of his Spirit, God has transcended it.

10 Do we learn anything about the nature of the apostles' relationship with each other?

There were sometimes difficulties between them but they were prepared to listen to each other.

11 Is there anything here about the church's proclamation of salvation and the Kingdom of God?

The question of the relationship between Judaism and the infant church is an important one. The gospel must now be preached to the Gentiles for 'God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life'.

12 Is there anything to note about Christian worship?

Christian worship is devoted exclusively to the divine (i.e. Jesus) and never to men.

13 In what specific section does the passage fall?

The specific section concerns the advances of the gospel in Palestine-Syria (9:32-12:24).

14 What is the summarising verse for that section?

'But the word of God continued to increase and spread' (Acts 12:24).

15 How does this passage relate to what comes before and what comes after it?

It is near the end of the section and seems to be preparing for the second half of Acts and the proclamation of the gospel to the Gentile world.

16 Is this narrative normative?

Cornelius had an extraordinary vision and at the same time Peter fell into a trance (because of associations with occultism the Greek word *ekstasis* is perhaps better translated 'ecstasy', though even that word is not without its problems) and had a vision. This vision opened the way for preaching to and fellowship with Gentiles. When Peter preached the Holy Spirit was poured out on them all, even the Gentiles, and they began to speak in tongues. They were baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. Should we expect Christians to have extraordinary visions today (determining the strategic mission of the Christian Church)? Should we expect Christian congregations to speak in tongues? Should we baptise in the name of Jesus Christ? (At point 20 I suggest that it is vitally important to compare the passage with other scriptures before making a particular element of a narrative episode normative.)

17 Is there a speech and if so what is its context and main points?

In Acts 10: 34-43, the preacher is Peter, the place is Caesarea Philippi, the audience is Gentiles and the occasion is after the visions of Cornelius and Peter. The main question is 'does God accept Gentiles?' Caesarea (named after the emperor Augustus Caesar) was the Roman capital of the province of Judea, and important port city. Peter has already broken new ground by staying in the home of Simon the tanner who, because of his work with dead animals, was

regarded by the Jews as ceremonially unclean. Cornelius, a centurion, is of worthy character but he is, nonetheless, a Gentile and therefore not a person with whom a devout Jew would have any kind of relationship. The stage is set for Peter's response to a Gentile. Luke regards this as a matter of great importance by the space he devotes to it. The structure of Peter's sermon is much the same as his two earlier recorded sermons (Acts 2:14-41; Acts 3:12-26) though, not surprisingly considering the congregation, it includes more information about Jesus' earthly ministry. The essence of the message is that God does not show racial favouritism. He treats people without partiality for in every nation whoever fears God does what is right is acceptable to him. The issue is that nationality makes no difference to God (Amos 9:7; Micah 6:8) but Cornelius, however devout, still needs to hear the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. Though Peter's audience consisted of Gentiles he still took the trouble to point out that *Jesus was the promised Messiah* to Israel and also 'Lord of all' (i.e. of Jews and Gentiles). Kings of Israel and Judah were anointed with oil but Jesus the Messiah King was anointed with the Holy Spirit and power. His ministry was characterised by power and the presence of God. Peter does not stress the fact here that *Christ is glorified now and in the future* but does make reference to his authority over the devil. His next point is completely clear – *the death of Jesus was part of God's plan*, even down to his death on the wooden cross. Peter continues that *God raised him from death as prophesied*, but Peter does not produce scriptural references for Gentiles as he had done for Jews in Acts 2. The resurrection was literal, actual, physical, witnessed and attested. The great commission of the apostles was based on their eyewitness testimony. *The resurrection of Jesus was witnessed and proved*. Eating and drinking is recorded as convincing proof of Jesus' physical presence (as in Luke 24: 41-43). In Jewish thought apparitions were unable to eat and drink, being without digestive tracts. Peter reminds them that Jesus, the Lord of all, is given authority as judge and shows that *Christ is glorified now and in the future*. The apostles are not the first to bear witness to the Saviour, for the prophets had done that. The call is the same – *all must repent and believe*. By his nature and his works, Jesus is able to offer salvation to all. The gospel transcends barriers of race and nationality. 'Everyone who believes in him' breaks through the barrier between Jews and Gentiles. The bestowal of the Holy Spirit on Gentiles as well as Jews confirms the message that Peter preaches. Baptism in the Holy Spirit is the spiritual reality to which water baptism testifies. Gentile Christians were by no means second-class Christians. There was to be a new spirit of fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers alike. God in his grace brings Gentiles directly into the kingdom of Jesus Christ, without any prior relationship with Judaism.

18 What are the main points of this passage and is there a logical progression between them?

God does not show favouritism, the gospel is for the Gentiles, who can also be saved. God "accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" does not mean that such people are saved because of this attitude but they are ready to receive forgiveness of sins if they respond by believing in Jesus, who has been appointed judge of the living and the dead.

19 Can I present these in a listener-friendly, lively and relevant way?

God's grace: prevenient (unseen but there – like gravity), Acts 10:35-36

God's grace: proclaimed, Acts 10: 34-43

God's grace poured out, Acts 10:44-47

20 What is my overall interpretation and is it in harmony with the rest of scripture?

See Ephesians 2:12-16 – is the main point or points of my presentation a reason why Luke included this information in his account of the spread of the gospel and the New Testament Church.

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