

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF ACTS

THE LEGAL CHARACTER AND PURPOSES OF ACTS

The book of Acts is fascinating. It gives us important information about the earliest decades of the Apostles appointed by Jesus.

The book's connection with the Gospel of Luke is obvious, as it picks up where Luke leaves off. But what the purpose of Acts might be and why its stories were selected from among many possibilities that occurred during the three decades between the early 30s and the mid-60s AD is not so obvious.

Clearly, Acts is not what one would call a personal biography either of Peter or Paul, although they are the two main Church leaders featured in this book. But neither is it a history of all twelve of the Apostles, let alone of the Church as a whole, as it was spreading in many directions throughout the Roman Empire and even up into Ukraine and off into India. So, what might be the main purposes of the important and inspiring book of Acts?

While many themes arise in this thrilling book, one theme that is found throughout all twenty-eight of its chapters invites readers to see Acts as a collection of legal cases and official decisions that were influential in establishing rules regulating the conduct of early Christian Church officers and members.

More specifically than has been previously proposed, Acts can be seen as establishing precedents and rules in the following areas of Church policies and practices:

1. Authority and duties of the Apostles and Church officers
2. Official position on why and by whom Jesus was killed
3. Performance of baptism and the bestowing of the gift of the Holy Ghost, as well as the required covenantal conduct of Church members
4. Observance or supersession of practices carried over from the law of Moses

5. Handling of issues arising out of the use of supernatural powers
6. Conduct of Christians as plaintiffs or defendants before various judicial bodies
7. Holdings and favorable outcomes in various courts
8. Fulfillment of official duties given by Jesus to the Apostles

Although other approaches to Acts can well be taken—such as focusing on the geographical spread of the apostolic church or dwelling on the social or political interactions of early Christians with the surrounding Greek and Roman cultures—articulating the legal and administrative rules set by these actions and decisions of the Apostles allows readers to see this book from a practical administrative perspective.

It makes sense to read Acts this way. The author of Acts was Luke, a convert and companion of the Apostle Paul. Paul had been trained in Jerusalem by Gamaliel in Jewish law, and thus he knew the nuances and likely the objections Christians were up against. Luke was also well educated as a medical doctor, and thus he thought in terms of diagnosing medical cases. And he was obviously also conversant with technical legal terminology and assumed that his readers would find these episodes to be valuable case studies.

It is particularly easy to recognize the legal content of stories found in the second half of the book of Acts. There readers are told of Paul's several encounters before prominent Roman officials and judges. But when examined through a legal lens, the first half of the book is seen to be equally filled with legal content. No section of Acts lacks legal and church administrative implications.

Today, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has a lengthy handbook of instructions that guides all phases of Church activity and operation. Just as the handbook took many years to codify, so too did the book of Acts, which spans many years as it collects and presents its precedent-setting episodes and cases.

The following insights divide the book of Acts into fifty-three episodes or precedent-setting cases. In reading each case, one may ask, "What legal issues gave rise to this case?" or "What legal outcomes arose out of that encounter?" or "What legal significance might this event have had in the life of the Christian community?" Each of these precedents can be understood as contributing to the emerging administrative handbook of the Church used in regulating and directing the actions of the Church as a whole as well as the lives of its individual members and families.

The book's Greek title, *Praxeis Apostolōn*, signals something of the underlying legal nature of this book. While the word *praxeis* has been traditionally translated into Latin as *Acta* and into English as *Acts*, the word *praxeis* means more than just "actions, deeds, or doings." It conveys a strong undercurrent of legal meanings including lawsuits, legal cases, regulations, and practical rulings or precedents. The word "acts" is used here just as one speaks of an act of Congress, meaning the enactment of a law or administrative regulation. Indeed, most episodes in Acts address important operational needs faced by the early Church. And, of course, several episodes give detailed accounts of actual lawsuits or legal actions that exemplify ways in which the early Saints could successfully respond to legal challenges arising in Jewish, Greek, or Roman surroundings.

While Peter and Stephen are prominent in Acts 1–8 and 10–12, Paul is the main person in all the rest of Luke’s narrative. As a Roman citizen, Paul was no stranger to the iconic cultural centers of his day, including Jerusalem, Philippi, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome. Luke makes a special point of reporting legal events that took place in these cities, which were prominent seats of Roman government.

Recognizing the legal characteristics of this book helps modern readers understand many ways in which the book of Acts would likely have served early Christians. It functioned, of course, as a collection of inspiring stories of many of the most memorable and challenging events in the lives of the fledgling Christian Church. It also reported, for general awareness, official decisions of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Dealing with legal and official issues, the decisions and actions of the Apostles would naturally and intentionally have set authoritative precedents that came with the force and effect of divine law.

Because Acts explains and justifies why Christians believed and acted as they did, this book would also have told all readers—both within and beyond the Church—what Christianity was all about, how the followers of Christ were supposed to behave, and where they shared values with or parted ways from the surrounding Jewish, Greek, or Roman cultures. Its powerful accounts would have reassured Christians (many of whom found themselves victims of Roman persecution during the first and second centuries) that even though they were hauled before magistrates of the law, they might win or would eventually be vindicated and blessed by God.

Indeed, as far as the book of Acts goes, no hostile legal action brought against the Apostles ever succeeded. In this way, Acts explicitly fulfills the prophecies given by Jesus to the Apostles that they would be brought before synagogues, rulers, authorities, kings, and governors for His name’s sake but that this would be an opportunity to bear testimony. Jesus told the Apostles that when brought before these leaders, they should not worry about what they should answer, for the Holy Spirit will reveal “in that very hour” what they should say, which no adversary will be able to withstand or contradict (see Luke 12:11–12; 21:12–15).

Over and over, the accounts in Acts bear testimony of the faithful lives and sacrifices of the chosen Apostles and ordinary servants of the Lord Jesus Christ. With Peter’s seven speeches in the first half of Acts and Paul’s seven speeches in the second half, along with Stephen’s oration before the Sanhedrin—most of which were delivered in official legal contexts—abundant testimony is borne by to satisfy the traditional Jewish law that in the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word or issue be established.¹

Note

1 Deuteronomy 19:15; see also 2 Corinthians 13:1. Peter’s speeches are found in Acts 2:14–40; 3:12–26; 4:8–12; 5:29–32; 10:34–43; 11:5–17; 15:7–29, and Paul’s are found in 13:16–47; 17:22–31; 19:2–4; 20:18–35; 22:3–21; 26:2–29; 28:17–28. Stephen’s oration is recorded in 7:2–53.

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