

## 1. An Introduction

# Introduction to “Telling the Story”

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Acts of Apostles is essentially the acts of two apostles. In the first part of Acts (chapters 1 through 12), we see the beginnings of Christianity within the environment of the land of Israel and the key player is Simon Peter, whose evangelistic activity is supplemented by others of the Jerusalem community of believers. That activity of chapters 1-12 centered in Jerusalem and spread to Judea, Galilee, Samaria, and the coastal area of Israel.

Beginning with Acts 13:1, there is a broadening of evangelistic activity as the church of Antioch of Syria becomes the center of this messianic movement and it's spread into the Mediterranean world. Here the second of the two apostles becomes the major player, the Apostle Paul, with the colleagues who accompany him: Barnabas, Silas, Silvanus, Timothy, Titus, and Luke, the author this composition.

The destination of Paul and his companions is the Greek-speaking Jews living outside of Palestine called the Diaspora, in addition to the gentile godfearers and pagan gentiles of the Mediterranean world. As with chapters 1 through 12, the theme running through chapters 13 through 28, is that of evangelism – the heralding of the coming of the Messiah into the world. “Telling the story” (*the godspell*) is the consuming passion of Paul as may be seen is in Luke's final portrait of him when he arrived in Rome. In the last glimpse Luke gives us he is evangelizing the Jews of Rome,

*Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, 31 preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him (Acts 28:30-31).*

In both sections of this composition there is a presence of two forces significant to the evangelistic activity of the early church. The first is the presence of supernatural phenomena in the form of miracles, and the second is what Paul calls, "the power of God unto salvation" (Rom 1:16), the story of God's redemption that came to be called "the gospel."

In the first section (chapters 1 through 12), one sees the presence of supernatural power at work within the community of believers: the apostles are enabled to speak to a multi-lingual audience gathered in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost in languages they had never learned. There are also healings, angelic deliverances, as well as supernatural revelations of God to those entrusted with the message of God's redemption. In all the miraculous manifestations recorded in Acts of Apostles, the purpose was always to arouse the interest of the people in these messengers of God and to confirm the message as having come from God. However, the primary force that led to the conversion of the thousands was the message - the story revealing Jesus as the Messiah and the meaning of that for the race of Adam.

In the second section of Acts, Paul is the major player and here we see a similar scenario. These same two representations of the power of God are seen in the form of healings and exorcisms; the other power centered in the message sent from God, the story of God's redemption of the human race accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus. To see both powers at work is important in considering the evangelistic activity of the early church.

## Events of the Beginning

In the beginning of Acts we see the disciples of Jesus doing what others could not. They performed wonders and signs that confirmed their message as having been sent from God (cf. Mark 16:20). In Jerusalem, where the greater number of these miracles occurred, those who had been with Jesus were the only ones in possession of these powers, a fact difficult for the Jewish hierarchy to accept or explain, since they were supposedly the only ones who could speak on behalf of God. The followers of Jesus were receiving widespread notoriety throughout Judea, and they insisted

that Jesus of Nazareth, who had been crucified, resurrected, and ascended to God (the son of man in fulfillment of Daniel 7:13-14), was the source of their power.

## Peter, John, and the Twelve

The key players in chapters 1 through 12 of Acts are Peter, often associated with John, and seven Greek speaking Jews of the Hellenistic contingent of the community of believers; two of them, Stephen and Philip, played a significant role in the ongoing evangelistic activity of the church in Jerusalem. Stephen appears to have been going into the synagogues of the Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem, presenting powerful argumentation for the messianic identity of Jesus; he thus became Christianity's first martyr.

Philip, another of the Greek-speaking Jews, takes the gospel beyond Jerusalem to Samaria, converting many to Jesus. He then encounters a nobleman on his way to Ethiopia from Jerusalem and convinces him that Jesus of Nazareth was the fulfillment of the Isaiah 53, where a suffering servant of God was to die because of the sins of others. The nobleman asked to become a follower of Jesus and to be baptized. He then returns to Ethiopia with the story that the long awaited Messiah had come to Israel.

Later, another Hellenistic Jew, Saul of Tarsus, was confronted by a luminous appearance of the risen Jesus. Saul immediately entered the synagogue of Damascus and informed that he had seen the risen Jesus and was convinced that he was the very Son of God.

Peter left Jerusalem for the Mediterranean Coast and in Caesarea converted a Roman centurion, a gentile who was apparently a godfearer. As this first part of Acts concludes, Peter flees Jerusalem at the attempt of Herod Agrippa to execute him and Saul of Tarsus becomes the thirteenth apostle and takes the stage as the principal player of this composition.

## Paul, the Thirteenth Apostle

Following Peter's exit from Jerusalem, Saul of Tarsus, who had returned to his home in Tarsus, is brought into the narrative. He is sought

out in Tarsus by Barnabas, one of the original converts to Christ, and is brought to Antioch of Syria where he and Saul spent a year teaching the believers who were now being called “Christians.” During this time Saul of Tarsus had become Paul the follower of Jesus. He and Barnabas were told by the Spirit of God to go to the Greek-speaking Jews of the Diaspora and also to the gentiles with the message of God’s redemption, not only of Israel but also the whole of the human race.

Barnabas and Paul developed an evangelistic agenda and went from Antioch into the Northeastern part of the Mediterranean basin. They went from city to city searching out the synagogues of Diaspora Jews. They would then join the services and when the opportunity presented itself, they, or more specifically Paul, would announce to the people that they had great news from the land of Israel, the long awaited Messiah had appeared in Israel. Paul was usually given access to the bema where he read from one of the messianic texts of the Scriptures and then declared to them that these Messianic prophecies had been fulfilled by Jesus of Nazareth, who was the Messiah God had sent for the redemption of Israel. Curiously, this is the same scenario used by Jesus in the synagogue of Nazareth (cf. Luke 4:14-30).

## Evangelism in the Early Church

If one looks at the NT portrait of the early church as seen in Acts of Apostles, he or she will see the core belief that led to the conversion of these early Christians and sustained them in the face of the opposition they experienced from the leaders the Jews. It all had to do with the identity of Jesus of Nazareth, who he was and how what they believed about him had so mesmerized them, taking complete control of their lives (Acts 17:6).

### *The Role of Miracles in Acts*

It is a common belief that the purpose of the miracles of Acts was to create belief that would result in the salvation of those who saw the miracles. At first look this would seem to be the case. The first of the miracles of Acts was that of the outpouring of the Spirit of God on the twelve, accompanied by rushing wind, fire and the miracle of speaking in

languages they did not know the story of God's redemption that centered in Jesus of Nazareth (2:6).

We are told that many miracles were performed by the apostles (2:43), signs and wonders were occurred by the hands of the apostles (5:12), and Peter was healing large numbers who came to him from the villages, towns, and cities (5:15-16). Stephen, one of the seven, wrought great wonders and signs among the Hellenistic Jews living in Jerusalem (6:8); and in Samaria, Philip, another of the seven, worked great miracles and signs (8:6-7, 13).

Paul and Barnabas were sent out from the church of Syrian Antioch to carry the story of Jesus to the Diaspora Jews and the gentiles of the Mediterranean world. Paul performed his first miracle in Cyprus by calling down blindness on a sorcerer (13:11-12). Paul later performed miracles in Iconium of Galatia, following his entrance into the synagogue and his proclamation of the arrival of the Messiah in Israel (14:3-4). Paul further performs miracles as he and Barnabas travel through other parts of Galatia (14:8-18). In Ephesus Paul worked many wonders of healing and exorcisms, so much so that many who practiced magic believed the message of Paul and burned their books of magic (19:11-12).

At first reading it would appear that these miracles were the primary cause underlying the conversions of so many in the early period of this messianic movement. But on a more thorough examination one is lead to the the conclusion that it was not the wonder of these miracles that was leading to the conversions of so many; rather, the wonder of the godstory (gospel) being told. It was this story that waspower leading to the salvation of man, argued Paul, was not miracles but was the power of the story Paul called "the gospel," or the godstory of redemption of the human race through the death and resurrection of Christ,the story that Paul, in his letter to the church in Rome, called "the power of God for unto salvation," (Rom 1:16).

### *The Power of Salvation is in the Story*

The gospel (*euangelia*), as understood by Paul, was a message containing enormous power for change in the person who believed it to be

true. It was a story of a redeemer come into the world to reclaim what God had created in his own image. It was a story of a God who was more characterized by love than wrath. So much was his compassion for man that he entered into man's own existence and lived under the very powers of sin and death that had enslaved man to the end that he might destroy both powers through his own confrontation of them and his conquest of both through his submission to death and his resurrection from it into a new existence free from the power of both. The Jews longed for a Messiah, an anointed or chosen one, who would lead them in conquest over the world, the Messiah who came would lead mankind in conquest over the forces underlying the powers the Jews wished to destroy. To the pagan world who knew nothing of a Messiah, Jesus was presented as an otherworldly redeemer sent by the Creator of the universe, who had raised the redeemer from death, drew him back into heavens and gave him the title, "Lord" (*Kurios/Adonai*) as well as Messiah/Christ (Acts 2:36-39).

What had happened in the first century Mediterranean world that caused lives to be so transformed had more to do with the identity of the person Jesus of Nazareth than anything else. In fact, this was the major theme of every sermon in the book of Acts (with exception of Paul's speech in Athens), and was considered to be "the power" that led to the conversion and transformation of the early Christians. "Who is he?" was the question during Jesus' earthly ministry, now the question was, "Who was he?"

Twenty-four miracles are reported in Acts, seventeen of them public miracles, eight occurring in the land of Israel in the early period, and four by Paul, performed in public. However, the record of the teaching, preaching, discoursing, and reasoning of Paul concerning the identity of Jesus of Nazareth, is found in seventy-five occurrences in Acts. This would suggest that it was the influence of the message more than the miracles that was the force underlying the conversions we read about in Acts. This fact is readily established by the following texts of Acts.

In Acts 2:14-41, following the sermon on Pentecost, Peter concludes his sermon with the claim that God had made Jesus to be the Lord and Messiah/Christ, and three thousand came to faith. In 2:42, those who believed continued in the teaching of the apostles, that teaching had to do

with the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. In 4:31, the apostles preached the word boldly and bore witness of the resurrection of Jesus. In 5:21, they were found in the Temple in Jerusalem teaching and preaching in the name of Jesus. In 5:42, Luke summarizes the continuing activity of the apostles as, "never ceasing to teach and preach the good news that Jesus was the Messiah/Christ." In Acts 6:8-10, a conflict arose within the Hellenistic synagogues in Jerusalem when the Hellenistic Jews found that they could not withstand the wisdom by which Stephen spoke concerning the messiahship of Jesus. Later in 7:1-53 the sermon of Stephen to the Sanhedrin, he declared that God had foretold that the Jews would betray and murder the Righteous One who would be sent to them. In Acts 8:4-5, we read of Philip, another of the seven on whom the apostles had laid hands proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah to the people of Samaria, and in 8:28-35, he convinces the treasurer of the Queen of Ethiopia, that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Suffering Servant prophecy of Isaiah 52:13-53:12.

After the risen Jesus appeared to Saul of Tarsus, Saul immediately went to the synagogue in Damascus telling them that he had seen Jesus of Nazareth alive, that this Crucified Messiah had become a Risen Lord (Acts 9:3-6, 20; 22:6-9). In Acts 13:4-5, the story of this Savior sent from God began to make its way into the Mediterranean world, to the Jews of the Diaspora and "the nations or gentiles (*ethnoi*). Paul and Barnabas went from city to city, going to the synagogues throughout the eastern region of Asia Minor with the message of that the Messiah had come. In every synagogue that Paul entered he proclaimed Jesus to be the Messiah and used the Jewish Scriptures as proof of his claims. In the synagogue of Antioch of Pisidia, he proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah (13:14-40); the people of the synagogue invite Paul and Barnabas to speak again the next Sabbath (13:42). In 13:44, we are told that on the next Sabbath the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. In Acts 14:1-4, Paul and Barnabas entered the synagogue in Iconium in the southern region of Galatia, announcing the good news of the coming of the Messiah and a great number of Jews and God-fearing Gentiles believe. In 14:21-22, we are told that Paul and Barnabas proclaimed the good news all around the cities of Galatia.

In his second missionary journey Paul took the gospel into Greece. Going to the synagogue in Berea he reasoned with them from the Scriptures

(17:2). In 17:10-13, he is found in a synagogue in Berea, where he left the people searching the Scriptures daily concerning whether Jesus' was the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies were truly, "according to the Scriptures." In Acts 18:4, we see Paul reasoning in the synagogue at Corinth persuading Jews and Greeks; the response to the traditionalist Jews was so strong they he denounced them and went to the house of Titus Justice (18:7) where, according to 18:11, he stayed for a year and a half teaching them the word of God. In Acts 18:19, Paul appears in a synagogue in Ephesus in route to Antioch of Syria when he ended his second missionary journey (18:22),

In 19:8 Paul returns to the synagogue in Ephesus and spent three months reasoning from the Scriptures with those of the synagogues of Ephesus reasoning with them concerning the kingdom (*basileia* - reign/rule) of God (the reign of Christ). In 19:9-10, we are told that Paul stayed two years in Ephesus discoursing in the lecture of Tyrannus; the content of his teaching was without doubt the good news that Jesus of Nazareth was God's Messiah and he had raised him from death in affirmation of his identity as the Messiah, the Savior, the Lord, and the Son of God. In 20:18-35, Paul, in his farewell speech to the elders of the church of at Ephesus he reminds them that while he was among them he had taught them publicly and from house to house concerning the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. All of Paul's teaching, preaching, reasoning, and debating centered in his claims that Jesus of Nazareth was God's Messiah, whom God had rased from death in declaration of his identity.

## The Miracles and the Message

What does all his tell us about what was responsible for the growth of this messianic movement that became Christianity? From what we see in Acts of Apostles it appears that the primary cause leading to the convesions of the early Christians was not the miracles performed, but rather what was being proclaimed concerning the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. In the synagogues throughout the Mediterranean world Paul is repeatedly seen reasoning with the people from the Scriptures concerning the identity of the Messiah as prophecied in the Scriptures, and then identified Jesus of Nazareth as the fulfillment of these prophecies.

The miracles we see in Acts were clearly manifestations of the power of God, but they were not the power of God unto salvation. Paul tells us that it was the gospel (the redemption story) that was the power of God unto salvation (Rom 1:16). What is important to see here is that even though the age of miracles is past, it doesn't matter. The major cause of the spread of Christianity was not people seeing miracles, it was what they heard and believed concerning the identity of Jesus of Nazareth who had been here in our midst, and their passion for telling everyone they knew about who it was that had been here, what he had done while here, and the significance of it all for the human race.

## Christological Faith and the Early Christians

What the earliest Christians believed is of great significance, if one is looking for the cause of the success of the growth of this community of faith called "the Way," in Acts of Apostles. These were people whose belief in Jesus of Nazareth had so transformed them that his identity had become the paradigm for their own identity; they were who they were because of who they believed him to be. As beings created in the image of God, they saw Jesus as the exemplar of what it meant to be a being created in the image of God. They believed that in him God's presence had broken into this world in a way it never had before. Jesus was not only the Holy One of God, in him the holiness of God had become personified and walked in our midst. Jesus of Nazareth was "one of us," but he was also, in an mysterious and inexplicable way, "God with us."

Everyone who has heard of Jesus of Nazareth, whether believer or nonbeliever, has some understanding of who Jesus was, but that understanding is very often not informed by those who followed him while he walked the earth and saw him alive have he had risen from death. Jesus of Nazareth was an overwhelming presence in the NT. In today's culture, however, he is too often a peripheral figure who gives churches some form of legitimacy, who is interpreted to suit the theological, evangelistic, or media profile need to accomplish some hidden agenda.

We don't seem to have the sense of wonder the early Christians had concerning the identity of Jesus. Many modern Christians talk about believing in him, but they can't say they are mesmerized by him. Would it not be wonderful to see the kind of faith that captivated the people of the first century reclaimed by the Christians of our age? For that to happen we will have to immerse ourselves in his story and become one with him in his story, the story called "the gospel," the power of God unto salvation.

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