

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

It takes a little detective work to prove it was Luke who wrote The Acts. There is a key verse in chapter 16:10. The Apostle Paul has just arrived at Troas. At this point, the writer changes his account from the third to the first person as he describes the next part of the journey. This means he must have joined Paul's company at this point. He is left behind at Philippi, for the account resumed the third person at this point. But the writer is back with Paul in the last chapter of Acts, because he uses 'we' to describe the events belonging to Paul's time in prison in Rome. From the greetings Paul sends in one of his letters from prison (Colossians 4:10-17), we can conclude that it must have been Luke who was with him!

In his preface, Luke refers his friend Theophilus to his gospel, the 'first book':

"In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen". (Acts 1:1,2)

In this new work he continues from where he left off. He briefly recapitulates in chapter one the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to the Apostles. Then comes the momentous morning when Jesus led the Apostles to the Mount of Olives and ascended into heaven, leaving them the promise of his Return. Now, as their master had instructed them, they must begin their life's work of calling disciples from all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. Luke captures the nervous atmosphere of those early weeks, as the Apostles awaited the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. They met in fear of the authorities, who were displeased with public rumours that Jesus of Nazareth had come back to life. But once they are anointed with the Spirit on the **Day of Pentecost** (one of the great Feasts of the Law of Moses), it is a very different band of

men who face them. Peter stands confidently in the Temple courts, and persuades three thousand Jews that the death of Jesus was no accident, but an essential part of God's plan, predicted long ago in the prophets. The Messiah had to die. Only when a sinless man was put in the grave could God through him break the power of sin to keep us all in the dust. Jesus was alive, and they, his followers, had seen him with their own eyes. By believing in the Saviour, the people of Jerusalem could be freed from their guilt in slaying him. It was a glorious beginning to their calling as fishers of men.

Again, Luke picks up the contrast between the joy and unity and fellowship of the early believers, and the cold hatred of their opponents, determined to crush this new movement, but unable to face down these humble men with their ability to work miracles and expound the scriptures. **Saul of Tarsus**, a fervent young Jewish lawyer, was empowered by the High Priest to head the opposition. It grew into a campaign of violence, imprisonment and death - the classic response of an intellectually defeated establishment.

The persecution of the original group of believers in Jerusalem, painful though it was, had the effect of scattering them across the countryside. The gospel began to spread. Luke notes the key developments. There was the campaign of Philip the Evangelist amongst the hated Samaritans, who sincerely believed "the good news about the Kingdom of God and the Name of Jesus Christ" and were baptised. A minister in the service of the Queen of Ethiopia on a once-in-a-lifetime visit to Jerusalem, becomes the first man from another race to be baptised. Then, amazingly, Saul himself is converted, convinced by a personal appearance to him of the risen Christ. His deep remorse is to drive him to devote the rest of his life to the

service of the Master he had so misunderstood.

Thus far the Apostles had confined their work to Jews who observed the Law of Moses. It was time to open the door to the Gentiles. Peter was entrusted with this task. Persuaded through a vision to preach to a devout Roman centurion and his family, he became convinced that God wanted Gentiles to share in the good news about Jesus. When they too received the gift of the Holy Spirit, there could be no doubt.

Now it was the turn of a group of believers who lived in Antioch in Syria. They had moved north to escape Saul's persecution. These men began to preach to Greeks, that is, people who had no background in the Law of Moses. With God's blessing, great numbers joined their ranks. Luke notes (see Acts 11.26) that it was at Antioch that the believers were first called '**Christians**' (followers of Christ). The gospel net was reaching out into the world.

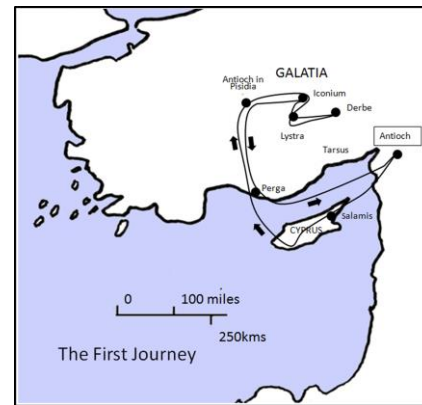
The twelfth chapter swings back to Jerusalem. There had been an interlude of peace after Saul became a Christian. But now **King Herod** (a relative of the Herod who tried to kill the infant Jesus) turns on the Christians. He executes James, brother of John – first of the Apostles to die for his faith. Peter is next in his sights, but an angel delivers him by night from Death Row, and Herod dies from a stroke. God is in control, and the Church can breathe again.

The rest of Luke's story is devoted to the titanic missionary work of Saul of Tarsus, henceforth to be known by his more familiar Latin name of **Paul**.

Somewhat surprisingly, since Herod's death is known to have taken place in AD44, we find that 15 years have gone by from the death of Jesus, and 11 years since Paul himself was baptised. Only now does Jesus, through the Holy Spirit (see Acts 13:2), send out Paul on the first major effort to convert Gentiles (non-Jews). He and his good friend

Barnabas were selected by name for this work.

Where should they begin? Barnabas came from the island of **Cyprus** in the

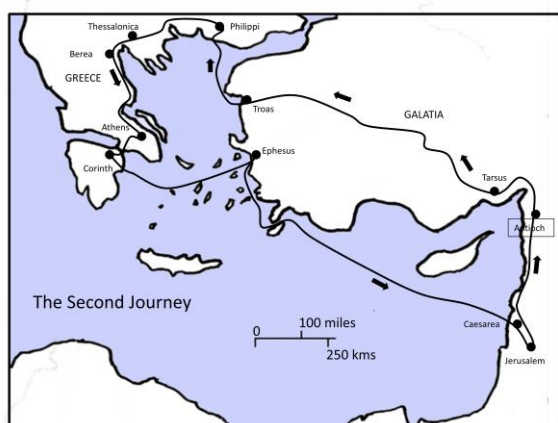


Mediterranean Sea, so this was a good place to practice, as they set off on the First Missionary Journey. They took a ship across to Salamis, the capital, and worked their way through the island. Luke notes a major triumph – the conversion of the Roman Governor, **Sergius Paulus**. Then the two preachers crossed to the mainland and trudged up into the mountains of Galatia. It is possible Paul became ill at this time, because when writing later to the Galatian Christians he reminds them "*it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first*". (Galatians 4:13) In any event, he still managed to give a stirring speech in the Synagogue at **Antioch of Pisidia**, rather like Peter's on the Day of Pentecost, where he picked out key Old Testament prophecies that said the Messiah must die and rise again in order to bring salvation from sins. This was unpalatable to his Jewish listeners. They could not stomach the idea that God's promised King would die like a criminal. But many Gentiles in the audience were impressed, and a week later a huge crowd gathered to hear Paul teach. Many of them became believers. The results of the first campaign were beginning to flow in.

The Jewish leaders at Antioch reacted by stirring up trouble for Paul amongst the rulers of Antioch. He was forced to move on further east to **Iconium** and **Lystra**. At

Lystra he came within an inch of his life. He had just started to preach there, when the Jews from Antioch came after him, and had him publically stoned, leaving him close to death. Thankfully he revived, and resumed his journeys, moving on to **Derbe**, where he was unmolested, before bravely returning to the cities where he had been persecuted to strengthen the new disciples of Jesus. He made friends on this first trip to Galatia who stayed loyal for the rest of his life, including young **Timothy**, who was to become his right-hand man.

There were consequences from Paul's success. The Christians in Jerusalem, many of whom were still keeping the Law of Moses, were having cold feet about this preaching to Gentiles. They wanted Gentiles to be circumcised and keep the commandments. Some of these teachers came to Galatia, and Paul had to write a strongly worded letter to the Galatians to warn them not to listen to these men. Eventually it was decided to hold a conference in Jerusalem to decide what should be done. This is described in Acts chapter 15. When the audience heard Paul's report of the amazing response he had had, and Peter and James, trusted leaders of the Church, added their approval to Paul's work, it was agreed to write an official letter to the Gentile believers. This said they need not keep the Law of Moses, but it would be helpful if they could avoid actions which would particularly upset Jews, like eating meat which came from sacrifices to heathen gods, or blood products. Paul could breathe again. If the decision had gone against him, Christianity would have remained a branch of Judaism. Now he could press on into the

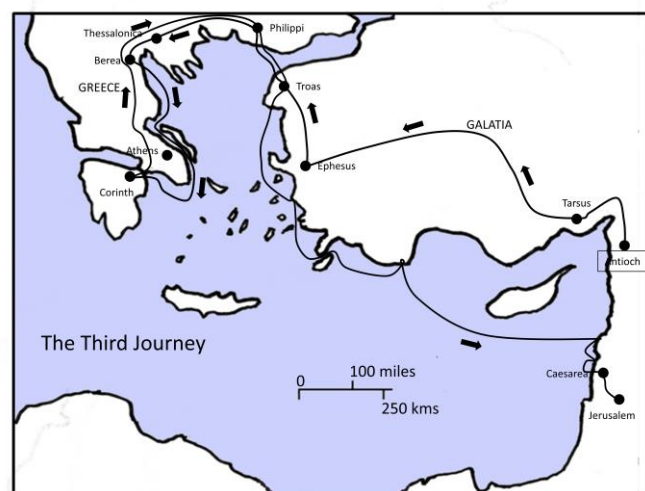


Roman world.

The Second Missionary journey began with a return to Galatia, after which the Apostle was guided by the Holy Spirit to move across into Europe, via **Philippi**, a major city in the north of Greece, then turning south through the Roman province of Macedonia to **Athens**, the capital of Greece. His formula was to stay in a city as long as he could, but to move on when persecution became intolerable. We have to admire the sheer courage of this great man, who endured prison, beatings, robbers, shipwrecks and thousands of miles of foot-slogging along dusty roads to bring the good news to yet more eager ears. He made it a practice not to accept money from his listeners. This meant he had to pay his way by manual work as a tent maker, a craft which he had learned as a young man. Paul's preaching was done in his spare time. And all the time he was looking over his shoulder, avoiding his enemies.

The philosophers of Athens were unimpressed by Paul's attempts to persuade them that Jesus had come back from the dead, but he found a ready audience further south in the bustling port of **Corinth**. Here he stayed for eighteen months, before returning to his base at Antioch in Syria.

The Third Journey took Paul back to Galatia, and then on to **Ephesus**, a vast city near the west coast of modern Turkey. Here he spent a total of three years. As was his custom, he began by visiting the synagogue – the Jews must be given the first chance to



hear the gospel. Only when their leaders became hostile did he move on to address the Gentile population. So many Ephesians became believers that he caused a noticeable drop in the numbers of pilgrims buying souvenirs from the **Temple of Artemis** (Diana). That hurt the pockets of the silversmiths, and they banded together to make a public protest (see Acts 19:23 onwards). They dragged Paul's companions into the theatre – a huge public space, the ruins of which can still be visited today. Here they were rescued by the Town Clerk, who tactfully dismissed the rioting crowd.

Paul was forced to move on to Greece. Here he had previously arranged to take a gift of money from the believers there to help the poorer Christians in Jerusalem, as a token of their love, their solidarity and their practical support. This plan went forward, interrupted (as we have come to expect) by an attempt by the Jews to assassinate Paul on board ship, which forced him to travel overland instead up through Macedonia to Philippi. On his way back to Jerusalem he said goodbye to his friends in Turkey, because he now intended to move on further west to Italy and Spain. But life is unpredictable, and his great scheme fell apart.

When the Apostle came to Jerusalem and handed over the money he had gathered together, he visited the Temple several

times. By an unfortunate coincidence he was recognised there by some of his enemies, Jews from the province of Asia who were also visiting the city. They stirred up a riot, in which he was badly beaten, and rescued only by the intervention of the Roman tribune in charge of the Temple area.

This was the beginning of a long, frustrating period in Paul's life. He spent the next three years in jail, waiting for a proper trial. At the end of this time he was forced to use his right of appeal as a Roman citizen (his father was a citizen and he inherited this privilege) to have his case heard by the Emperor in Rome. The dramatic story of his voyage there as a prisoner, in the company of faithful Luke, occupies the 27th chapter of Acts. Their ship was wrecked on the island of **Malta**, but he survived, and the following spring came to Rome, to be detained for two more weary years in the long queue for Roman justice.

Luke ends his account at this point. However, we can work out from the letters he wrote that Paul was eventually freed (there was no sound case against him). For a few more years was able to resume his travels, until the **Emperor Nero** turned against the Christians, and he was brought back to Rome to be sentenced to death.

Those years of confinement, miserable though they were to a man who had spent much of his life on the open road, were highly productive. Even in prison, Paul was not the man to sit in a corner and sulk. Unable to visit his friends, he wrote long and detailed letters to them, some of which have been preserved in our New Testament, and through which the principles and doctrines of the First Century Church have been indelibly recorded.

