

Men's Group 22nd October 2013

A note on chronology.

The chronology of the early chapters of Acts is a bit vague.

If we accept Jesus as having been born in the reign of Herod (died in 4 BC) then Jesus would have died in around 30 AD. So Acts 1 would start in that year.

The next absolute fixed point is the death of Herod Agrippa I in 44 AD which dates chapter 12 to that year.

The famine mentioned in chapter 11 as occurring in the reign of Claudius would have to be between 41 (when Claudius became emperor) and 44.

The conversion of Paul would have to be considerably before this. Some people put it around 37 AD which sounds reasonable but really it's just a guess.

In any case it's worth remembering that these events that are telescoped together in the book actually were spaced over the course of a period of years.

Acts 9 – Conversion of Paul

As Wesley points out, Paul's conversion is one of the slower ones in Acts – it takes all of 3 days!

One striking feature of this conversion is that it is **initiated by God rather than by Paul**. This raises a lot of issues obviously about the matter of personal choice.

- Do we choose to become Christians or does God choose?
- Does this 'get us off the hook' as regards personal responsibility?

It's worth comparing Galatians 1. 11 - 24

This gives another account of this period in Paul's life, in Paul's own words. It's interesting how two descriptions of the same event by two different people can sound so different!—though I don't see any actual contradiction. In Galatians Paul spends three years in Damascus or thereabouts.

Both accounts end with Paul going to Jerusalem to meet the Apostles there, and then on to his home town of Tarsus in southern Turkey—Cilicia in Galatians, as it was then.

Acts 9. 32 – 43 Dorcas raised from the dead.

Those of us with medical training know that distinguishing dead from not dead is not as easy as it sounds! This is illustrated by the news story coming out of Iran last week of a convicted criminal executed by hanging and later found alive in the mortuary.

Personally I find it reasonable to suppose that when it says 'dead' it means 'dead according to the diagnostic criteria current in that society at that time'. Others may disagree . . .

Acts 10 – 11 Peter’s Dream, the ‘Jewish question’

This section is a bit drawn out. We have the episode itself in considerable detail (10. 1 – 47), and then we have Peter in chapter 11 repeating the entire episode almost word for word to the church in Jerusalem.(11. 4 – 18)

The reason for this is of course that at the time the issue was hugely contentious and obviously hugely important, and Luke wants to make absolutely sure we’ve ‘got it’.

It’s perhaps difficult for us today to put ourselves in the shoes of those early Jewish Christians who had been brought up in that xenophobic society where the idea that **“God is for the Jews, and the Jews only!”** had been drummed into them for a thousand years.

The two questions that arose early in the development of the church within Judaism were:

- Can gentiles become Christians?
- Do these Gentile Christians then have to adopt Jewish practices?

The first question was fairly easily resolved—hard to argue with what God is actually doing on the ground!

The second was much more difficult. We will see more of it later in the book. Suffice to say here, it was a major political issue in the early Church that festered on for decades, and in fact was never really totally resolved, except by history. Even in the early church ‘love you neighbour as yourself’ was easily lost sight of!

- What’s Luke’s position? What about Paul, Peter, James? What did they think?

Acts 10.38

There are many passages in Acts along these lines, which I find fascinating.

³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

In the early centuries of the Christian church discussion of the exact nature of the Christ and the relation to the Father were extensive and lively. Now sadly we are crushed under the iron hand of the Augustine’s doctrine of the Trinity—anyone who disagrees with Augustine is automatically labelled as a heretic. But if we look at passages like this at face value with an open mind what might we learn? What was the role of the Holy Spirit in Jesus’ life?

Acts 10. 44 – 48

We’ve talked a bit about receiving the Spirit, being filled with the Spirit etc. How, at that time, did you know whether someone had received the Spirit or not?