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The Acts of the Apostles in Its Greco-Roman Setting

AST 6V90.001
August 1998–May 1999

**Anglican School of Theology
University of Dallas
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Course Description

An examination of the Acts of the Apostles, with special attention to its social context within the Greco-Roman-Jewish world of the first two centuries. Class work will involve a study of current socio-historical and literary methodologies, and an exploration of how these have been used to illuminate the probable complex of meanings that Acts had in its original historical context, as well as the meanings that later generations of interpreters discovered within it.

Texts

The Bible. Since the Bible contains not only the Acts of the Apostles and its companion volume, the Gospel of Luke, but also the Pauline epistles, the student's familiarity with these texts cannot be overstated. Students who are able should examine the Greek texts of the relevant passages prior to each class meeting. Others should consult at least two of the more recent English translations such as The New Revised Standard Version, The Revised English

Johnson, Luke Timothy. *The Acts of the Apostles.* Collegeville, Mn: The Liturgical Press, 1992. While not the most comprehensive commentary of Acts, Johnson's treatment nevertheless provides a detailed, verse-by-verse analysis of the text. Moreover, it deals evenhandedly with the various critical issues surrounding the interpretation of Acts, not infrequently lending insight to the understanding of difficult passages. ***Students should read the "Interpretation" sections of the commentary corresponding to that month's reading from Acts.***

Bauckham, Richard, ed. *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995. Various essays from this recent volume will be assigned during the first portion of the course, when the focus is on the Palestinian setting of the narrative in Acts.

Gill, David W. J. and Conrad Gempf, eds. *The Book of Acts in Its Graeco-Roman Setting.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994. As with the previous volume, the essays in this book will form the bulk of the reading assignments during the latter part of the course, when the narrative focus of Acts shifts to the diaspora.

Course Requirements

I. Class Attendance and Participation (10% of Final Grade)

Since there is only one class meeting per month, regular attendance at class sessions is essential. While lectures will be the focus of these sessions, class time will also be devoted to an analysis and discussion of the materials associated with the day's topic. Consequently, students are expected to "read, mark and inwardly digest" the required readings assigned for the dates specified below in preparation for class discussions.

II. Computer Discussion Board or Journal Entries (20% of Final Grade)

Beginning with the second month of the course, each student will be required to make monthly contributions to a discussion board located on the instructor's Web site. All posts to the discussion board will be anonymous to everyone except the instructor, and must be entered by 5 pm on Fridays prior to the Saturdays when class meets. Entries should address the material arising from that month's readings; they may also be made in response to a post made by another student (within the bounds of civility, of course). Some starter questions will be included in the class outline below, not to induce a rigid set

of Q & A responses, but simply to stimulate thought. Entries should be one or two paragraphs long; they will be judged on the depth of their reflections and *not* on whether the student agrees with the interpretations of the instructor. See the discussion board handout for additional technical information on posting your entries. If a student does not have Internet access, he or she may submit journal entries to the instructor on the day of class in lieu of contributions to the discussion board.

III. Mid-Term Exam (30% of Final Grade)

There will be a mid-term examination held during class time on **November 21**. The exam will last about two hours and will consist of identification, definition, and essay questions on the topics covered in the first portion of the course. Prior to the examination, the instructor will supply study sheets that the students may find helpful in exam preparation.

IV. Final Paper (40% of Final Grade)

Each student is required to write a research paper of about 15 *double-spaced* pages on a topic related to the subject of the course. For example, the paper might be a deeper consideration of an issue considered within one of the class sessions. Alternatively, the paper might consider a pertinent topic which we were not able to address within class. A short paper proposal with attached bibliography is due in class on **January 16. *Papers are due at the beginning of the last day of class, May 22.***

Outline of Class Meetings

August 22 *Introduction*

- Overview of the Course: Good Housekeeping and Dates to Remember
- Acts of the Apostles: An Orderly Account, Part II
- Questions of Author, Date and Purpose
- A Matter of Interpretation

September 19 *Judaism and Roman Rule in Palestine*

- Jewish Groups: From Essenes to Zealots
- The Role of the Temple and the Synagogues
- Roman Virtues and Vices

Reading Assignment: Johnson, Introduction; Acts 1–4:22; Bauckham, chapters 2, 3, 5 and 6.

Discussion Board ([September](#)): Within the narrative of Acts, how are Jewish life and faith related to Christian life and faith?

October 24 *The Churches in Palestine*

- Everything Held in Common: An Essene Connection?
- A Question of Language
- Matters of Wealth and Poverty

Reading Assignment: Acts 4:23–7; Bauckham, chapters 7, 9, 10 and 11.

Discussion Board ([October](#)): In what ways do Essene and early Jewish Christian practices as portrayed in Acts appear to converge and diverge?

November 21 *Midterm Exam*

Assignment: Prepare for Exam

Discussion Board ([November](#)): Since there are no assigned readings this month, begin to reflect on possible topics for your final paper.

December 19 *Movement into Samaria and Syria*

- **The Samaritans: A Bridge to the Gentiles?**
- **Light on the Road to Damascus**
- **Clean or Unclean?**

Reading Assignment: Acts 8–12; Gill, chapter 7.

Discussion Board ([December](#)): What literary function does the mission to the Samaritans appear to play in Acts? What seems to be the continuing role of the Holy Spirit?

January 16 *The First Missionary Journey and Its Fall-out*

- **Time for a Road Trip**
- **Quarreling Rabbis**
- **A Successful Council?**

Discussion Board ([January](#)): Based on a comparative reading of the accounts of the Jerusalem council in Acts and Galatians, how does the question of circumcision appear to have been addressed by different parties within the churches?

February 20 *Movement into Europe*

- **Philippi: Is this Any Way to Treat a Roman Citizen?**
- **Acceptance and Rejection in the Synagogues: Deja Vu all Over Again**
- **Clashes in Corinth**

Reading Assignment: Acts 15:36–18:17; 1 Thessalonians 1–3; 1 Corinthians 16; Romans 16:1–2, 21–23; Gill, chapters 11 and 12.

Discussion Board ([February](#)): In what ways might the Christian message have been attractive to the "God-Fearer"?

March 20 *Settling Down in Asia*

- **Life in the Big City**
- **Remembering Diana**
- **A Farewell Address**

Reading Assignment: Acts 18:18–20:38; Gill, chapter 9 and Appendix 1 ("The Asiarchs")

Discussion Board ([March](#)): What were the benefits and dangers of missionary work within a big city such as Ephesus?

April 17 *Trials in Caesarea*

- **A Gift Not Well Received?**
- **Rhetoric of the Courtroom**
- **Benefits of Citizenship: A Free Trip to Rome**

Reading Assignment: Acts 21–26

Discussion Board ([April](#)): In what ways does this segment of Acts serve as an apology of Christianity before the governing Roman authorities?

May 22 *Journey to Rome*

- **Danger on the High Seas**
- **God's Providence**
- **Journey's End**

Reading Assignment: Acts 27–28; Romans 14:1–16:20; Gill, chapters 4, 13 and Excursus

Discussion Board ([May](#)): Reflecting on the course as a whole, in what ways has your understanding of early Christianity been enhanced? How might these be relevant to the Church's continuing life today?

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