

The Acts of the Apostles (2009), an oratorio for baritone, chorus, congregation/audience, and chamber orchestra, was commissioned by The Memorial Church at Harvard University. It is dedicated to Edward Elwyn Jones and the Harvard University Choir.

The biblical books of Luke and Acts form a pair of documents from a single author and with a single audience (the likely-metaphorical “Theophilus”), yet they are unusual for being composed in such contrasting genres. Luke’s gospel, using Mark as a primary source throughout, features a comparable literary style to that of the other evangelists. Acts, by contrast, is a historical monograph that charts the birth of the Church with dramatic stories about—and speeches from—the apostles, painting a vivid, if not necessarily chronological, picture of their victories and struggles. As such, it is a book that provides excellent source material for a dramatic choral libretto of this scale.

Although much of Acts is focused on the ministry of Saul/Paul, this oratorio draws most of its material from the first third of the book, prior to and including the conversion of Saul. In the Prologue, Christ’s ascension is narrated and—following an orchestral Sinfonia—the chorus sings words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Plain in Luke’s gospel that foreshadow many of the trials the apostles go on to face. The astounding account of Pentecost follows: here, words from the book of Ruth, customarily read on the feast of Shavuot (Pentecost), are included, telling the story of a Moabite woman who converted to the Israelite faith—a parallel to the expansion of the Christian message to all nations by the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Prayer for Boldness, quoting Psalm 2, asks God for protection from the threats of persecution that the apostles will now face.

Stephen, regarded as the proto-martyr of the Christian Church, offers one of the most developed speeches in Acts, only a small portion of which is presented here. Full of scriptural references, including the quotation from Isaiah “Heaven is my throne...”, the end of the narrative is remarkable for two reasons: firstly, Stephen’s final words mirror those of Christ on the cross in Luke’s gospel—where Jesus forgives his executioners and prays “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46); secondly, Saul is specifically mentioned as one who approved of Stephen’s stoning, indicative of the redemptive possibilities of the Christian message.

The account of the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch here in the oratorio ends with the First Song of Isaiah—while not quoted in Acts, it seems a fitting conclusion to the scene as Philip and the eunuch were reading Isaiah together, and the canticle has often been associated by Christians with the rite of baptism. Similarly, the story of Saul’s Conversion is followed here by a Christological poem found in Paul’s letter to the Philippians, though it is likely a quotation from an earlier source. It is often regarded as the earliest extant Christian hymn.

The Acts of the Apostles concludes with Luke’s realistic assessment that in spite of Paul’s energetic evangelism many remained unconvinced by the Christian message. At the heart of both Luke’s gospel and Acts is the tension between the uniquely important role of the Jewish traditions that Jesus himself practiced and the expansion of the gospel to gentiles, of whom Luke himself is one. It is appropriate, therefore, to follow Paul’s message of salvation to the gentiles with the *Magnificat*: a canticle that emphasizes the promises of God to the people of Israel throughout history.

Three traditional hymn texts are found in the oratorio, each set congregationally to a pre-existing tune. The first, “Spirit of mercy, truth, and love” is an eighteenth century poem that extols the evangelistic implications of the Pentecost event. “O Jesus, I have promised” was written by the author for the Confirmation service of his children; its themes of Christian commitment are reflected in the ultimate sacrifice of Stephen’s martyrdom. The final hymn of the oratorio, “My soul, awake and render”—a translation of a German chorale—offers another perspective on discipleship: one of prayer, thanksgiving, and divine compassion.

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The Acts of the Apostles

Libretto adapted from the Bible by Matthew F. Burt

(All scriptural references are from the book of Acts, unless otherwise noted.)

I. PROLOGUE

Luke In my first book, Theophilus, I accounted for all that Jesus did and taught until the day that he was taken up. On that day he said to the apostles he had chosen, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses even to the ends of the earth.” And after he said this, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight. *[1:1–2, 8–9]*

[Orchestral Sinfonia]

Chorus Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,
bless those who curse you, pray for those who spite you.
Judge not, and you will not be judged,
Forgive and you will be forgiven,
for what you give to others will be given back to you. *[Luke 6:28, 37–38]*

II. PENTECOST

Luke The day of Pentecost had come, and the apostles were all together in one place. *[2:1]*

Reader Do not urge me to leave you. Where you go, I shall go, and where you stay, I shall stay. Your people will be my people, and your God my God. *[Ruth 1:16]*

Chorus Suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty wind. And there appeared to them flames like tongues of fire, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak in other tongues. *[2:2–4]*

Luke At this sound a crowd gathered, and they were bewildered, for they heard the apostles speaking their several languages. Peter stood up, and in a loud voice addressed the crowd. *[2:5–6]*

Peter Now Jesus has been raised up by God, and of this we all are witnesses. Exalted at God’s right hand he received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit, and all that you now see and hear flows from him. Repent and be baptized, and all your sins will be forgiven. For the promise is to you and to your children and to everyone whom the Lord may call. *[2:32–33, 38–39]*

Hymn Spirit of mercy, truth and love,
O shed thine influence from above,
and still from age to age convey
the wonders of this sacred day.

In every clime, by every tongue,
be God's amazing glory sung;
let all the listening earth be taught
the deeds our great Redeemer wrought.

Unfailing Comfort, heavenly Guide,
still o'er thy holy Church preside;
O shed thine influence from above,
Spirit of mercy, truth, and love. [*Psalms, Hymns, and Anthems* (1774)]

III. PRAYER FOR BOLDNESS

Disciple Sovereign Lord, Maker of earth and sea and of everything in them, you said by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of David your servant: [4:24–25]

Chorus Why did the Gentiles rage
and plan their worthless schemes?
The kings of the earth stood firm
and the rulers gathered together
against the Lord and his Messiah. [4:25–26]

Disciple Now, O Lord, look upon their threats, and permit those who serve you to speak your word with boldness. [4:29]

Chorus Stretch out your hand to heal—while signs and wonders are performed in the name of Jesus. [4:30]

Luke And when they had finished praying, the place they were gathered shook, and all were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke God's word with boldness. [4:31]

IV. STEPHEN

Luke The disciples grew in number, and chose Stephen, a man of faith, and presented him to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on him. [6:1, 5–6]

Chorus Full of grace and power, he did great wonders and signs among the people. [6:8]

Luke But some disputed with him, and stirred up the elders, and seized him, and brought him before the Council in the Temple. They set up false witnesses against him, who said: [6:9, 12–13]

Chorus This man spoke continually against this holy place and the law. For we heard him say Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and the customs Moses gave us. [6:13–14]

Luke The high priest asked Stephen whether the testimony was true, and Stephen said: [7:1]

Stephen My brothers, fathers of this nation, listen to me. Our forefathers had the tent of witness in the desert, as God commanded Moses. In the next generation, our fathers under Joshua brought it with them as they dispossessed the nations. David asked God to provide a dwelling–place for the God of Jacob; but it was Solomon who built him a house. However, the Most High does not live in houses built by men, as the prophet says: [7:1, 44–48]

Chorus Heaven is my throne,
and earth my footstool.
Did my hand not make all these things? [7:49–50]

Stephen How stubborn you are—you always resist the Holy Spirit! They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and you have betrayed and murdered him. You received the law but did not keep it. [7:51–53]

Chorus And Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, saw the glory of God. And the Council gave a great shout, and stopped their ears, and took him out of the city. And they stoned him! [7:55, 57–59]

Stephen Lord Jesus, receive my Spirit... Do not hold this sin against them. [7:59–60]

Luke And Saul was among those who praised his death. [8:1]

Chorus Then I heard a voice from heaven saying: “Write these words: Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth. That they may rest from their labor, and their works will follow them.” [Revelation 14:13]

Hymn O Jesus, I have promised
to serve thee to the end:
be thou ever near me,
my Master and my friend;
I shall not fear the battle
if thou art by my side,
nor wander from the pathway
if thou wilt be my guide.

O let me hear thee speaking
in accents clear and still,
above the storms of passion,
the murmurs of self-will;
O speak to reassure me,
to hasten or control;
O speak, and make me listen,
thou guardian of my soul.

O Jesus, thou hast promised
to all who follow thee,
that where thou art in glory
there shall thy servant be;
and, Jesus, I have promised
to serve thee to the end;
O give me grace to follow,
my Master and my friend.

O let me see thy footmarks,
and in them plant mine own;
My hope to follow duly
is in thy strength alone.
O guide me, call me, draw me,
uphold me to the end;
and then in heaven receive me,
my Savior and my Friend. [*John Ernest Bode, 1868*]

V. PHILIP AND THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH

Luke The disciples went through the country proclaiming the Messiah. And Philip was traveling South on a desert road. While on his way, he caught sight of an Ethiopian eunuch, a senior official of the queen, in charge of all her treasure. The eunuch was reading from the prophet Isaiah: [8:4-5, 26-28]

Chorus He was led like a sheep to the slaughter; like a lamb before his shearer he does not open his mouth. He is cut off from the land of the living. [8:32-33]

Luke And the Ethiopian said: [8:34]

Ethiopian Please tell me whom is it that the prophet speaks of here—himself or someone else? [8:34]

Luke Then Philip told him the good news of Jesus. [8:35]

Chorus Repent and be baptized, then your sins will be forgiven. For the promise is to you and your children and to everyone the Lord our God may call. [2: 38–39]

Luke And as they came to some water, the man said: [8:35–36]

Ethiopian Here is some water—what is to prevent my being baptized? [8:36]

Luke And they went down to the water, and Philip baptized him. [8:36]

Chorus Surely, it is God who saves me;
I will trust in him and not be afraid.
For the Lord is my refuge and defense, and he will be my Savior.
With joy you shall draw water from the springs of salvation.
And on that day you will say,
“Give thanks to the Lord and call on his Name;
make his deeds known among the peoples;
sing praises to the Lord, for he has done great things.” [Isaiah 12:2–5]

VI. CONVERSION OF SAUL

Luke Saul, breathing threats against the disciples, set out to Damascus, seeking to arrest any followers of the Way. But as he approached the city, suddenly a light flashed from the sky. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying: [9:1–4]

Chorus Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? Get up and go into the city, and you will be told what to do. [9:4–6]

Luke Saul arose, but when he opened his eyes he could not see. His companions led him by the hand to Damascus, where he was blind for three whole days and took no food or drink. Then a man named Ananias came to him, laid his hands upon him, and said: [9:8–9]

Ananias My brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who has appeared to you, has sent me so that you might recover your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. [9:17]

Luke And Saul regained his sight, and he got up and was baptized. Without delay, he proclaimed Jesus publicly, declaring him to be the Son of God. [9:18, 20]

Chorus Though in the form of God, Christ claimed no equality with God,
but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant.
Bearing human likeness, he shared the human lot,
he was humble and obedient, even dying on a cross.
Therefore God has exalted him,
giving him the name above all names:

that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow,
and every tongue proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord
to the glory of God the Father. [*Philippians 2:5–11*]

Amen.

VII. EPILOGUE

Luke From dawn to dusk, Paul—as Saul was now known—put his case to the people. He spoke urgently of the kingdom of God and sought to convince them about Jesus by appealing to the law of Moses and the prophets. Some were won over by his arguments; others were unconvinced. Then Paul said to them: [*28:23–25*]

Paul Therefore know that God’s salvation has been sent also to the Gentiles. [*28:28*]

Chorus My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior;
He has mercy on those who fear him in every generation.
He has shown the strength of his arm,
and scattered the proud and all their schemes.
He has come to the help of his servant Israel,
for he has remembered his promise of mercy
to Abraham and his heirs for ever. [*Luke 1:46–47, 50–51, 54–55*]

Hymn My soul, awake and render
to God, thy great defender,
the God of all the living,
thy prayer and thy thanksgiving.

Be thou my only treasure,
fulfill in me thy pleasure,
thy word my spirit feeding,
thy light still onward leading.

Thy love, which once did find me,
to thee shall ever bind me;
my life to thee be tending,
beginning, middle, ending. [*Paul Gerhardt, 1647; trans. John Christian Jacobi, 1720., alt.*]