

History of the Early Church

Author: The traditional author for Acts is Luke, the same author as the Gospel of Luke (Compare Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1-2). The book is also, in part, autobiographical, since a few sections speak from the first person (16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16). Luke is mentioned three times outside Acts as the companion of Paul: Colossians 4:14; Philemon 24; and 2 Timothy 4:11. The Muratorian Canon (AD 180), Irenaeus (AD 180), Clement of Alexandria (AD 200), and Eusebius (Eccl. Hist. 3.4, AD 320) All refer to Luke as Acts' author. Luke was by trade a physician (Col 4:14).

Date: The timeline of Acts covers about AD 30 to AD 62, just when Paul is about to go before Caesar (Nero) the first time. Realistically, the book could not have been finished until AD 62. Some place the finished book between 62 and 64, while others push the book to as late as the early second century, largely because they place Luke so late.

Audience: The audience for Acts and Luke is very specific, the individual known only as Theophilus. Theophilus is believed by most to have been someone who had some influence on Paul's legal situation, and this the gospel and this book was intended to be evidentiary support for Paul's case, in a sense, explaining why Christianity wasn't dangerous to anyone. However, Theophilus also means in the Greek, "God-lover" and so may have been a code word for all followers of Christ.

Purpose: As explained above, Acts may have been a legal document to help defend Paul, and as a whole, Christianity, at court. But Acts for us provides an historical outline for the letters of Paul and others. It gives us an idea of how the church grew from Jerusalem to the "uttermost parts of the earth."

Notes

Historicity: Luke is known for being historically accurate.

- His account of the sea voyage (Acts 27), for example, includes not only accurate terms for nautical items but speaks as one who was actually on the boat, rather than someone who heard about it.
- Paul's status as a Roman citizen was given proper treatment, according to what is now known about Roman Law (See Acts 18:12-16; 24:1-22; 25:1-12)

- “Luke invariably used the proper terminology for the different political officials encountered in each city of Paul’s travels.” (Fiensy, CPNIVC, NT Introduction, 159)

Luke also includes a number of speeches, given by Peter, Paul, and others:

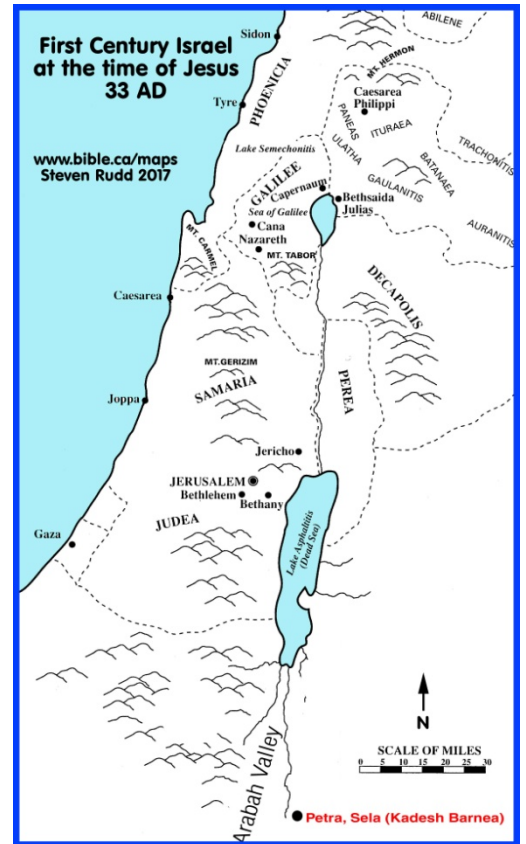
- Peter: 2:14-40; 3:12-26; 4:8-12; 5:29-32; 10:34-43; 11:4-17; 15:7-11
- Gamaliel: 5:35-39
- Stephen: 7:2-53
- Paul: 13:16-41; 17:22-31; 20:18-35; 22:1-21; 24:10-21; 26:2-23; 28:17-20
- James: 15:13-21
- Festus: 25:14-21

Outline (1:8)

- I. 1-7 The Church of Jerusalem
- II. 8-12 The Church expands into Samaria and the Gentile World
- III. 13-28 The Church expands into Asia Minor and Europe

Acts 1:1-26

- Introduction (1-3)
 - Based on how Luke describes this work, how did he write this book?
 - How did Jesus prove He was resurrected?
- Ascension and Instruction (4-12)
 - Compare and contrast the “Commissions” of Jesus. What makes this Commission unique?
 - Matthew 28:18-20
 - Mark 16:15-18
 - Luke 24:44-49
 - John 20:19-23
 - Acts 1:9-12
- The Group Described (13-14)
 - How many believers at this time?
 - Who are the “brothers” of Jesus? (See John 7:3; Matt 13:55)
 - Who are the women? (See Luke 8:1-3; 24:10)
 - How do we account for Mary and the brothers of Jesus? (See 1 Cor 15:7)
 - How did we get from 500 (1 Cor 15:3-7) to 120?
- Replacing Judas (15-26)
 - Why didn’t Jesus choose a successor Himself?
 - What means did the church apply to determine Judas’ successor?



Acts 2:1-47

- The Spirit Descends as Promised (1-13)
 - How does the descent of the Holy Spirit fulfill John's (Luke 3:16; Acts 1:5) prophecy of Jesus' work of baptism? Do we still need to baptize with water?
 - What was the miracle of tongues? Should this be normal practice for Christians?
 - Who was the intended audience of the tongue-speaking? (See Isaiah 11:11-12)
 - How might this event be considered the "birthday of the Church"?
- Peter's Message Convicts (15-40)
 - How is Joel's prophecy applied and fulfilled? (Joel 2:28-32)
 - Whom did Peter blame for the crucifixion of Jesus? Why? Should we consider this antisemitic and how are we to consider the Jews today?
 - How is Jesus' resurrection a fulfillment of Psalm 16:8-11?
 - How is Peter a witness?
 - Who are the "enemies" of Psalm 110:1?
 - What does Acts 2:38 teach? Why do our Churches treat this as the Holy Grail of Bible verses?
 - How might this generation be called "corrupt"?
- The Church Organizes (41-47)
 - How might 3000 get baptized in a single day? What challenges did this present to the Church in its early days?
 - What activities do see this church doing? How are we doing these things today?



Acts 3:1-26

- A Sign of Healing (1-10)
 - Peter and John going up to the Temple has become a regular occurrence. How much time has passed between 2:47 and 3:1? Any similarity between this chapter and John 5:1-14?
 - Do you think the lame man know who he was talking to? Who do you think carried him there? Do you think other people would have been placed there too? What singled this man out for healing?
 - What does this “sign” prove? How much is “healing” like this part of the Church today?
- Power in the Name (11-26)
 - By whose power does Peter insist is the cause of the lame man’s healing?
 - How does Peter explain Jesus’ absence? As long as Jesus is in Heaven, what are men to do? What are the consequences for ignoring Jesus?

Acts 4:1-37

- A Two-fold response (1-4)
 - Who is offended at Peter's message? How do they respond?
 - Who is encouraged by Peter's message? How do they respond?
- The Apostles First Trial (5-22)
 - Who is asking the questions in this trial? How long had it been since Jesus stood in this very position?
 - How is Mark 13:11 fulfilled in 4:8? Has the Holy Spirit even prompted you to "give an answer" (1 Peter 3:15)? Note the use of Psalm 118:22 in their defense. Who wrote that Psalm, and prompted Peter to recite it here?
 - In what way is "Jesus!" always a good answer? Why is salvation found in no one else (John 14:6; 1 Tim 2:5; John 1:18)? Does this encourage you?
 - How did these priests and elders recognize Jesus in them? (See Luke 2:47; John 18:13, 18-24; Luke 22:66-71)
 - What threat did these elders and priests believe in that they were threatened by Jesus' teaching? (See John 11:47-48)
 - What is the sentence upon Peter and John? Why couldn't the Leaders do more than threaten Peter and John at this point?
- The Prayer for Boldness (23-31)
 - What does the Church borrow from Psalm 2:1,2 here?
 - On what basis does the Church here pray for boldness? How is the principle of unity expressed here? (See John 17:20, 21) See also how they apply Matthew 5:44.
 - How does God confirm His answer? Do you think God would give similar "boldness" to His church today if we prayed for it? What do you think "boldness" means?
- The Church Gives (32-37)
 - What chief activities seem to characterize the Church at this time?
 - This seems to be a time of great benevolence in the Church. Can you describe what circumstances might have made this necessary? In what ways does the Church still do this today? Does the Church need to do this today?
 - How is Barnabas introduced? Should Christian today be expected to do the same thing?



Acts 5:1-42 Three Threats to God's Church

- Giving Gone Bad (1-11)
 - What is the Patronage system, and how did Ananias and Sapphira hope to use it?
 - How did they lie to the Holy Spirit? What made this such an awful offense?
 - Why doesn't God do this today? How is this a threat to God's Church?
- The Healing Church (12-16)
 - How do you reconcile vss 13 and 14?
 - Was the healing ministry becoming a problem? How might this be a threat to God's Church?
- The Apostles Second Trial (17-42)
 - Why were the Sadducees upset at all the Apostles?
 - Why did the angel wait until night to free them from jail? What were the Apostles instructed to say in the Temple?
 - From what we see in vss 21b-24, What was the angel able to do?
 - What charges do the Sanhedrin bring upon the Apostles?
 - The Apostles' defense stands on what truth?
 - What is Gamaliel's defense to the Sanhedrin? What is his warning?
 - What was the physical threat to the Church at this point? Why did this enthruse the Apostles?
 - Did this threat deter the Apostles from doing anything different?



Acts 6:1-15 The Church Expands

- Growing Pains (1-7)
 - What is at the heart of the issue in vs. 1?
 - According to vs. 2, how did the Apostles see their role in the Church? What made them uniquely qualified for this role? (See 1:21-22)
 - What does “wait on tables” involve and why did these people need to be so highly qualified? What were they responsible for?
 - How did the Apostles further qualify them? How might these individuals be considered “deacons” (ala 1 Tim 3:8ff)? How is this an important role in the church today?
 - What notable additions come into the Church after this?
- The Followers Lead (8-15)
 - What effect did the laying of hands have upon Stephen? By what authority did he speak and preach?
 - What accusations did Stephen’s opponents lay against him? (vs. 14 contra Matthew 26:59-61, and vs. 14 contra Acts 21:28) How was this attack fundamentally different from the charges against the Apostles on previous occasions? What does this tell you about Stephen’s preaching?
 - If his face was “like an angel”, what do you think it looked like?

Acts 7:1-60 Stephen's Defense

- (1) The Sanhedrin Questions Stephen
 - Who is in charge of questioning Stephen?
 - Based on the evidence presented, whose footsteps might Stephen be following?
- (2-16) The Defense from Genesis
 - What characters from Genesis are reviewed here?
 - What promise is made to Abraham? Why is this important? (Compare Galatians 3:14-18)
 - What role does Abraham play for his people? (Compare Galatians 3:6-9)
 - What covenant was Abraham expected to obey with all of his sons? Why is this significant? (Note Galatians 5:3; Romans 2:25 and the connections between this and the Law. How does this affect Stephen's point?)
 - What role does Joseph play for the rest of his family?
- (17-44) The Defense from Exodus
 - What characters from Exodus are reviewed here?
 - What role does Moses play for the rest of his people?
 - What reaction of the people to Moses does Stephen repeat (27-28; 35; 40; 43)? (Compare Romans 2:17-24; Hebrews 3:16-19)
 - Who follows Moses better, Stephen, or the people of Israel?
- (45-50) The Defense from Judges through 1 Kings
 - Speaking of the Tabernacle (44), how is God represented by the Temple? How is this a defense against their charge in 6:13-14?
 - Where is God's Temple today? (See 1 Cor 3:16-17)
- (51-53) Stephen's Charge
 - Stephen turns and charges the Sanhedrin with what crime? (See Mark 3:28-29; Ephesians 4:30)
 - Sounds like Stephen had been listening to what teaching of Jesus? (See Matthew 23:29-32)
- (54-60) Stephen's Martyrdom
 - How does Luke describe the crowd and the priests?
 - How does Luke describe Stephen's reactions to this violence?
 - What significant new character is introduced at this point? What themes have you seen above used in his writings?

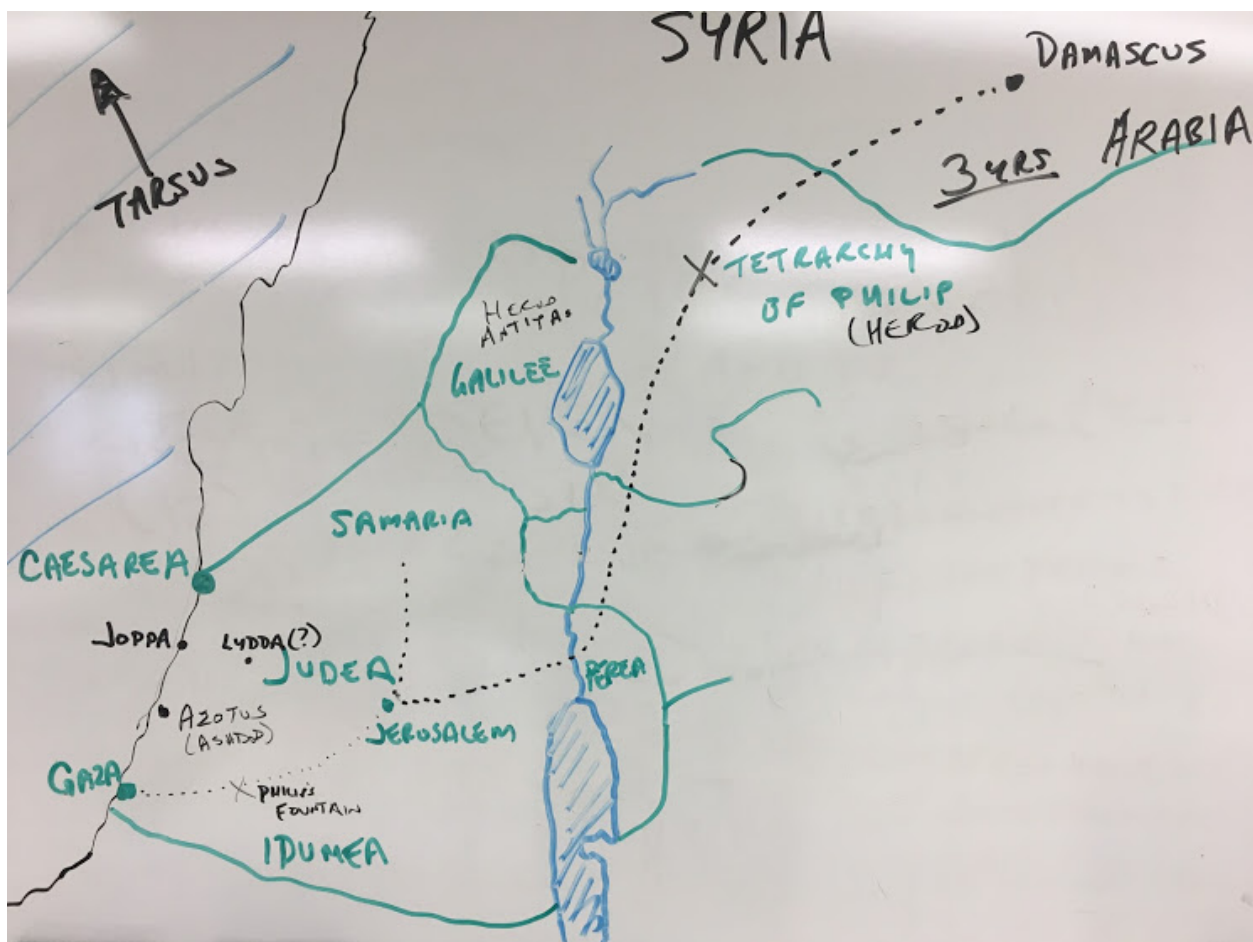
Acts 8:1-40 Persecutions and Conversions

- The Scattering of the Church (1-4)
 - How do you understand “Saul agreed with putting him to death”?
 - How do you think the church structure changed and where did they go?
 - How did the church respond to the death of Stephen?
 - How would you describe Saul’s efforts here? (Gal 1:13-14)
- The Second of the Seven Steps Up: Philip (5-13)
 - Why would the Samaritans be interested in Philip’s message? (See John 4)
 - What signs accompanied Philip’s preaching? (See Mark 16:17, 18)
 - What kind of work does Simon do? Where did his power come from?
 - How might Simon’s conversion be a great victory for the Kingdom?
- The Apostles bring the Holy Spirit (14-25)
 - Why do you think the Apostles waited to go to Samaria? (See Acts 1:8)
 - How did the Samaritans get baptized and not receive the Holy Spirit (contra Acts 2:38)? How did the Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit? Who else received this ritual? (See 2 Timothy 1:6)
 - What did Simon ask for? Why are Peter and John so harsh with Simon? Is what he asks for even possible? (Note: This is the origin of the practice of Simony, paying for ecclesial power.)
 - The Apostles seem satisfied with Philip’s work, but what else did they need to do before they left Samaria?
- The Gospel goes to Ethiopia (26-40)
 - An Angel of the Lord returns to counsel the church (As in 5:19), but this time to do what? Do Angels still do this today? Do you wish they did?
 - Whom did this Ethiopian Eunuch worship? How might Isaiah have been an encouragement to him (See Isaiah 56:3-5)? What does it say that this man has a copy of Isaiah in his possession? What language was he reading?
 - The spiritual cast changes, and now who is it that commands Philip? What does this say about Philip’s relationship to the Spirit?
 - Do you ever need a Philip?
 - Who is Isaiah 53:7-8 talking about? Is it talking about Isaiah or someone else? How does Philip handle the question? How do we know that baptism was part of Philip’s gospel presentation?
 - Do we need verse 37?
 - What did the people of Samaria receive that the Ethiopian Eunuch did not? Why didn’t the Eunuch need it?
 - How does the Bible explain Philip’s sudden disappearance? Where does Philip reappear? How does this connect to Acts 21:8-9? What can we assume Philip was doing during this time?

Acts 9:1-43

- Saul's Persecution (1-2)
 - Combined with 8:3, how would you describe Saul's mission? Why were women also included?
 - What term is applied to describe the Christian movement? (See John 14:6)
 - Why would Saul need letters from the High Priest?
- Saul's Conversion (3-19a) (Acts 22:6-16; 26:13-18)
 - Where (vs. 3) and when (22:6; 26:13) was Paul when he saw the light? Was this light from the Sun or the Son?
 - In all three passages, Saul falls to the ground. How does the Voice describe Saul's persecutions? How would persecuting Christians be an affront to the Holy One? (Revelation 6:9-11)
 - Give Saul some credit. How does he address this mysterious Voice?
 - What does Jesus tell Saul to do? Why do you think Jesus hands off the responsibility of the gospel message to someone else? (Note: How does the verse addition in vs. 5 help us understand this text?)
 - Why do you think Saul is given blindness here?
 - Was Paul's mission to Damascus a secret? (See also 9:21) Why do you think Ananias stayed in Damascus if everyone knew that Paul was coming to arrest believers?
 - What special mission did Jesus have in mind for Saul? How do you read vs. 16?
 - How does Saul receive the Holy Spirit? His apostleship? (See Gal 1:11-12, 15, 16; 1 Cor 9:1-2)
- Saul's Proclamation (19b-25)
 - How long were the "some days" of vs. 19 and the "many days" of vs. 23? (See Galatians 1:18)
 - What is the essence of Paul's declaration? How was Paul evangelizing?
 - What do you think was the Jews' plan? Who else was interested in Paul's whereabouts? (See 2 Corinthians 11:32-33) What does this say about Paul's activities? How does lowering Paul in a "basket" help him?
- Saul's Return (26-31)
 - Three years had passed (Gal 1:18); was the church any less afraid of him? What might they think he was trying to do?
 - Would the apostles have listened to Saul without Barnabas? How was Barnabas familiar with Saul's testimony?
 - Who did Saul see while in Jerusalem? (See Galatians 1:18-19) Why was it important that he only saw Cephas?
 - How is Saul's audience similar to Stephen's? (compare vs. 29 with 6:6) How did Saul avoid Stephen's fate?
 - What encouragement did the church receive from Saul? (Galatians 1:21-24)

- Peter's Miracles and Ministry in Judea (32-42)
 - How would you describe Peter's activity in vs. 32? From what we saw in 31, what territory are these apostles responsible for now? More than just Jerusalem?
 - What act in Lydda turns the people's hearts to the Lord? Can we assume that Peter also preached to the people in Lydda?
 - Knowing that very few women are mentioned in this time, why is Tabitha (Dorcas, "female gazelle") important? Is she the original "Sleeping Beauty"?
 - What did the disciples from Joppa want Peter to do? (See Mark 5:40-41) Why should they expect him to do this? Why do you think Peter agreed to it?
 - What effect does Peter's act have upon the people in Joppa?



Acts 10:1-48

- Cornelius' Vision and Response (1-8)
 - How does Cornelius answer the question: What does God do about all those who don't know Jesus?
 - How did Cornelius "qualify" for this special treatment?
 - How did Cornelius respond to the vision?
- Peter's Vision and Response (9-23)
 - Why is it important Peter was hungry? Could Peter have actually gotten his dinner this way?
 - What kinds of animals would you think twice about killing and eating?
 - Who was speaking to Peter? What happened three times? (Note: John 21:17)
 - What was the message of Peter's Vision of the sheet and the animals? (1 Tim 4:3-5) When did he know? Did it take a while to sink in? (See Galatians 2:12-13)
 - Did Peter go to Caesarea alone?
- Peter Visits Cornelius (24-33)
 - What do you think prompted Cornelius to worship Peter? (As an example, see Daniel 2:46, and then Revelation 19:10)
 - How does verse 28 illustrate that Peter understood the vision?
 - Why did Cornelius send for Peter? Why was this the "right thing"? (See Philippians 4:14 2 Peter 1:19; 3 John 6)
 - Did Cornelius expect his summons to be obeyed?
- Peter extends the Gospel to Cornelius (34-48)
 - What would it be like if God showed favoritism? Who then is acceptable to God? What does Peter mean here? (Ephesians 2:13-18)
 - How does verse 35 help us understand God's relationship with those who never hear the Gospel?
 - From verse 37, are we to understand that Cornelius already knew about Jesus?
 - Why do you think Jesus didn't appear to everyone? (Verse 41)
 - Verse 43 proclaims what essential truth about the purpose of Jesus' mission? (Matthew 1:21) Why do you think this was the moment the Holy Spirit chose to descend?
 - When the Holy Spirit fell, upon whom did it fall? Did it also fall on those with Peter? Why the similarity with Acts 2:4? For the same reasons?
 - Why did Peter insist that these also be baptized, if they already had the Holy Spirit?

Acts 11:1-30

- A Matter of Dissension (1-18)
 - Why are some Jews less than pleased with the acts of Peter?
 - In what way does Peter defend his actions? What points of his speech offer defense to these who prefer the company of the circumcised?
 - What words of Jesus does Peter employ as authority? (See Acts 1:4-5)
 - What did God do that validated the inclusion of the Gentiles? (17) How does Peter refer to Jesus?
 - How are we to understand the “Baptism of the Holy Spirit”? (Especially in light of “baptisms” in Hebrews 6:2)
 - How do you gauge the silence of vs. 18? What does their statement say about the Gentiles? What does it tell you that they believed before God moved in this way to include Gentiles? How could Gentiles become Christians before Acts 10?
- Founding of the Antioch Church (19-26)
 - Antioch was a port city designed to Hellenize (make Greek) people living in Syria, complete with an oracle of Apollo just outside the city. Many Jews also lived there. Why were believers in Antioch?
 - Who began to share the gospel with the Greeks? Were these apostles? What effect did it have? Who does Luke say helped with the work? Was this before or after Cornelius?
 - Who is sent from the Church of Jerusalem to investigate this new work? Why?
 - What does this messenger find? What does his message to these believers tell you about what he found? What was the result of his message?
 - What has Saul been doing during this time? (See Galatians 1:21-23; 2 Corinthians 11:23-27) Who did Barnabas believe could help him in Antioch? What was unique about Paul’s calling that made him a good fit for Antioch?
 - The name Christian comes from “Christ” which is Greek for “Messiah” and a Latin ending meaning “devotion to a particular leader”. The words “were called” are better understood as “took the name”, meaning that these believers designated themselves as “Christians”, rather than such being an insult. Why do you think they didn’t call themselves “Jesusians” or “Messiahians”?
- The Famine (27-30)
 - By what authority did Agabus make this prediction? What kind of prophet is Agabus? (note: Claudius reigned AD 41-54, this same Claudius ejected the followers of Chrestos from Rome)
 - How does the famine demonstrate a relationship between Jerusalem and the other churches?
 - Who is it that receives the relief at Jerusalem? Where are the Apostles? (4:37)