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COMMENTARY ON THE WHOLE BIBLE

Acts

by Matthew Henry

To the Students of the Words, Works and Ways of God:

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AN EXPOSITION, WITH PRACTICAL OBSERVATIONS, OF
THE

ACTS

OF THE APOSTLES

We have with an abundant satisfaction seen the foundation of our holy religion laid in the history of our blessed Saviour, its great author, which was related and left upon record by four several inspired writers, who all agree in this sacred truth, and the incontestable proofs of it, that *Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God*. Upon this rock the Christian church is built. How it began to be built upon this rock comes next to be related in this book which we have now before us, and of this we have the testimony only of *one witness*; for the matters of fact concerning Christ were much more necessary to be fully related and attested than those concerning the apostles. Had Infinite Wisdom seen fit, we might have had as many books of the Acts of the Apostles as we have gospels, nay, as we might have had gospels: but, for fear of over-burdening the world (~~John~~ John 21:25), we have sufficient to answer the end, if we will but make use of it. The history of this book (which was always received as a part of the sacred canon) may be considered.

I. As looking back to the preceding gospels, giving light to them, and greatly assisting our faith in them. The promises there made we here find made good, particularly the great promises of the descent of the Holy Ghost, and his wonderful operations, both *on* the apostles (whom here in a few days we find quite other men than what the gospels left them; no longer weak-headed and weak-hearted, but able to say that which then they were not able to bear (~~John~~ John 16:12) as bold as lions to face those hardships at the thought of which they then trembled as lambs), and also with the apostles, making the word mighty to the *pulling down of Satan's strong holds*, which had been before comparatively preached in vain. The commission there granted to the apostles we here find executed, and the powers there lodged in them we here find exerted in miracles wrought on the bodies of people — miracles of mercy, restoring sick bodies to health

and dead bodies to life — miracles of judgment, striking rebels blind or dead; and much greater miracles wrought on the minds of people, in conferring spiritual gifts upon them, both of understanding and utterance; and this in pursuance of Christ's purposes, and in performance of his promises, which we had in the gospels. The proofs of Christ's resurrection with which the gospels closed are here abundantly corroborated, not only by the constant and undaunted testimony of those that conversed with him after he arose (who had all deserted him, and one of them denied him, and would not otherwise have been rallied again but by his resurrection, but must have been irretrievably dispersed, and yet by that were enabled to own him more resolutely than ever, in defiance of bonds and deaths), but by the working of the Spirit with that testimony for the conversion of multitudes to the faith of Christ, according to the word of Christ, that his resurrection, the sign of the prophet Jonas, which was reserved to the last, should be the most convincing proof of his divine mission. Christ had told his disciples that they should be his witnesses, and this book brings them in witnessing for him, — that they should be *fishers of men*, and here we have them enclosing multitudes in the gospel-net, — that they should be the *lights of the world*, and here we have the world enlightened by them; but that day-spring from on high the first appearing of which we there discerned we here find shining more and more. The *corn of wheat*, which there fell to the ground, here springs up and bears much fruit; the *grain of mustard-seed* there is here a *great tree*; and *the kingdom of heaven*, which was then *at hand*, is here set up. Christ's predictions of the virulent persecutions which the preachers of the gospel should be afflicted with (though one could not have imagined that a doctrine so well worthy of all acceptance should meet with so much opposition) we here find abundantly fulfilled, and also the assurances he gave them of extraordinary supports and comforts under their sufferings. Thus, as the latter part of the history of the Old Testament verifies the promises made to the fathers of the former part (as appears by that famous and solemn acknowledgment of Solomon's, which runs like a receipt in full, ¹⁰⁸⁶1 Kings 8:56, *There has not failed one word of all his good promises which he promised by the hand of Moses his servant*), so this latter part of the history of the New Testament exactly answers to the world of Christ in the former part of it: and thus they mutually confirm and illustrate each other.

II. As looking forward to the following epistles, which are an explication of the gospels, which open the mysteries of Christ's death and resurrection,

the history of which we had in the gospels. This book introduces them and is a key to them, as the history of David is to David's psalms. We are members of the Christian church, that *tabernacle of God among men*, and it is our honour and privilege that we are so. Now this book gives us an account of the framing and rearing of that tabernacle. The four gospels showed us how the foundation of that house was laid; this shows us how the superstructure began to be raised,

1. Among the Jews and Samaritans, which we have an account of in the former part of this book.
2. Among the Gentiles, which we have an account of in the latter part: from thence, and downward to our own day, we find the Christian church subsisting in a visible profession of faith in Christ, as the Son of God and Saviour of the world, made by his baptized disciples, incorporated into religious societies, stately meeting in religious assemblies, attending on the apostles' doctrine, and joining in prayers and the breaking of bread, under the guidance and presidency of men that gave themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word, and in a spiritual communion with all in every place that do likewise. Such a body as this thee is now in the world, which we belong to: and, to our great satisfaction and honour, in this book we find the rise and origin of it, vastly different from the Jewish church, and erected upon its ruins; but undeniably appearing to be of God, and not of man. With what confidence and comfort may we proceed in, and adhere to, our Christian profession, as far as we find it agrees with this *pattern in the mount*, to which we ought religiously to conform and confine ourselves!

Two things more are to be observed concerning this book: —

(1.) The penman of it. It was written by Luke, who wrote the third of the four gospels, which bears his name; and who (as the learned Dr. Whitby shows) was, very probably, one of the seventy disciples, whose commission (^{<00>}Luke 10:1, etc.) was little inferior to that of the twelve apostles. This Luke was very much a companion of Paul in his services and sufferings. *Only Luke is with me*, ^{<00>}2 Timothy 4:11. We may know by his style in the latter part of this book when and where he was with him, for then he writes, We did so and so, as ^{<00>}Acts 16:10; 20:6; and thenceforward to the end of the book. He was with Paul in his dangerous voyage to Rome, when he was carried thither a prisoner, was with him when from his prison there he wrote his epistles to the Colossians and

Philemon, in both which he is named. And it should seem that St. Luke wrote this history when he was with St. Paul at Rome, during his imprisonment there, and was assistant to him; for the history concludes with St. Paul's preaching there in his *own hired house*.

(2.) The title of it: The Acts of the Apostles; of the holy Apostles, so the Greek copies generally read it, and so they are called, ~~REV~~ Revelation 18:20, Rejoice over her you holy apostles. One copy inscribes it, The Acts of the Apostles by Luke the Evangelist.

[1.] It is the history of the apostles; yet there is in it the history of Stephen, Barnabas, and some other apostolical men, who, though not of the twelve, were endued with the same Spirit, and employed in the same work; and, of those that were apostles, it is the history of Peter and Paul only that is here recorded (and Paul was now of the twelve), Peter the apostle of the circumcision, and Paul the apostles of the Gentiles, ~~REV~~ Galatians 2:7. But this suffices as a specimen of what the rest did in other places, pursuant to their commission, for there were none of them idle; and as we are to think what is related in the gospels concerning Christ sufficient, because Infinite Wisdom thought so, the same we are to think here concerning what is related of the apostles and their labours; for what more is told us from tradition of the labours and sufferings of the apostles, and the churches they planted, is altogether doubtful and uncertain, and what I think we cannot build upon with any satisfaction at all. This is gold, silver, and precious stones, built upon the foundation: that is wood, hay, and stubble.

[2.] It is called their acts, or doings; *Gesta apostolorum*; so some. *Praxeis* — their practices of the lessons their Master had taught them. The apostles were active men; and though the wonders they did were by the word, yet they are fitly called their acts; they spoke, or rather the Spirit by them spoke, and it was done. The history is filled with their sermons and their sufferings; yet so much did they labour in their preaching, and so voluntarily did they expose themselves to sufferings, and such were their achievements by both, that they may very well be called their acts.