Ad Fontes, Week Twelve: The Other Acts of the Apostles

Chapter 11: The Other Acts of the Apostles

Adult Sunday School · **Grace Free Lutheran Church** · Valley City, North Dakota

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Week Twelve

Until now we have weighed one verse or one passage at a time. This week we weigh a whole family of manuscripts. In the book of Acts, an ancient tradition called the Western text runs roughly 8 to 10 percent longer than the text in our Bibles. It is old, vivid, and full of extra detail. We will meet its star witness, Codex Bezae, walk through three of its longer readings, and see why the church reads Acts as Luke wrote it while still valuing this early witness to how the church read him.

How we will spend the next hour

Minutes	What we are doing
0 to 5	Opening and prayer
5 to 10	Report back: footnotes in Acts
10 to 20	Four families of manuscripts, and Codex Bezae
20 to 28	Acts 8:39: the Spirit and the angel
28 to 35	Acts 19:9: from the fifth hour to the tenth
35 to 52	Acts 15:20 and 29: the Apostolic Decree
52 to 60	Romans 16:25 to 27: the wandering doxology
60 to 65	The Western text as a whole
65 to 70	Assignment and closing

1. Report back: footnotes in Acts

Last week you found the footnote at Acts 19:9 (in an ESV, a NASB, or the NET; the BSB has no note there) and looked for others that say “some manuscripts add.”

- What did the note at Acts 19:9 add? What picture did it give you of Paul’s days in Ephesus?
- Did you find other “some manuscripts add” notes in Acts? Where?
- Did any of them change the meaning, or only add color?

Hold on to your answers. Most of what you found comes from one family of manuscripts, and today we meet it.

2. Four families of manuscripts

We met three families back in Week Five. Here is the full set you will see in study Bibles and commentaries.

Family	Home	Key witnesses	Character
Alexandrian	Egypt	P46, P66, P75, Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, the Coptic	Early, careful, conservative. The main basis of our modern text
Western	Strongest in the Latin West, but used in Egypt too, so “Western” is a historical label, not a map	Codex Bezae (Gospels and Acts), Codex Claromontanus (Paul), P38 and P48, the Old Latin, some Old Syriac, Irenaeus and the early Latin fathers	Ancient but free: paraphrases, explains, adds detail
Byzantine	Constantinople and the Greek East	Most medieval manuscripts; the base of the Textus Receptus	Later; smooths and harmonizes
Caesarean	Disputed	Families 1 and 13, Codex Koridethi	The least certain grouping; many scholars doubt it is a true family

The labels grew out of Griesbach’s three groups in the late 1700s and Westcott and Hort’s scheme of 1881; Lake and Streeter added the Caesarean group in the early 1900s. Today’s editors of the great critical editions, using the method called the CBGM, have set text-types aside and compare manuscripts one by one, though they still treat the Byzantine text as a distinct form. The book takes that up in Chapters 12 and 14. For us the labels remain a useful map.

Codex Bezae

The star witness of the Western text is Codex Bezae (D), copied around AD 400 and now at Cambridge University Library. Its pages face each other in two languages: Greek on the left, Latin on the right, line by line. It holds the Gospels (in the order Matthew, John, Luke, Mark) and Acts, with many leaves lost; a small Latin fragment of 3 John shows the volume once held more. Theodore Beza, Calvin’s successor at Geneva, gave it to Cambridge in 1581.

The Western text is not young. Two papyri of Acts (P38, about AD 250, and P48, late 200s) and Irenaeus (about 180) and the Latin fathers after him already show its readings.

One thing to keep straight: the King James is not the Western text. At all three Acts readings below, the Byzantine text behind the King James agrees with the Alexandrian text, not with the Western reading.

3. Acts 8:39: the Spirit and the angel

We pick up the Ethiopian's story right where last week ended.

Our Bibles	The Western reading
"When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, but went on his way rejoicing." (BSB)	"when they came up out of the water, the Holy Spirit fell upon the eunuch, and an angel of the Lord caught Philip away…"

Two changes: the Spirit now falls on the eunuch, and an angel, not the Spirit, carries Philip off.

The evidence. The shorter reading is in P74, Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, Alexandrinus (first hand), Ephraemi, Laudianus, the Byzantine majority, the Coptic, the Vulgate, and the Peshitta. The longer reading appears in a later correction to Alexandrinus, a group of later Greek minuscules led by 1739, the Old Latin manuscripts l, p, and w, a few Vulgate manuscripts, the margin of the Harklean Syriac, the Middle Egyptian Coptic of Codex Glazier, the Armenian and Georgian, and in Ephrem, Jerome, and Augustine. (Codex Bezae is missing its pages for this part of Acts, so it cannot testify here.) The UBS editors rate the shorter reading an A.

What happened. Elsewhere in Acts, Luke often mentions the Spirit coming on new believers (2:38, 8:17, 10:44). A copyist missed that note here and supplied it. That is the easier reading. The harder one says nothing about the eunuch receiving the Spirit, and Luke often tells of Baptisms without mentioning the Spirit at all (Lydia in 16:15, the jailer in 16:33).

What we keep. The eunuch was baptized, and he went on his way rejoicing. The Spirit's gift is in that Baptism and in that joy, whether or not Luke named it in so many words.

4. Acts 19:9: from the fifth hour to the tenth

In Ephesus, Paul leaves the synagogue and holds "daily discussions in the lecture hall of Tyrannus" (BSB) for two years. The Western text adds four Greek words: "from the fifth hour to the tenth," roughly 11 in the morning to 4 in the afternoon. Those were the hot midday hours when the hall stood empty and much of the city rested.

The evidence. The added hours are in Codex Bezae, the Old Latin (including the giant medieval Codex Gigas), part of the Sahidic Coptic, and a few late Greek minuscules. Every other major witness lacks them: P74, Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, Alexandrinus, Ephraemi, Laudianus, the Byzantine majority, most of the Coptic, the Vulgate, and the Peshitta.

What happened. This addition changes no teaching. It adds a vivid, believable detail. It may preserve a real memory handed down in the churches, or it may be a copyist imagining how Paul

arranged his day. We cannot tell. Either way, Luke's own summaries give places and people, not timetables, and the weight of evidence says these words were added.

What we keep. The scope of the work is all in Luke's own words: "daily," "two years," and "everyone who lived in the province of Asia, Jews and Greeks alike, heard the word of the Lord" (19:10). The hours are a charming footnote to that.

5. Acts 15:20 and 29: the Apostolic Decree

This is the Western reading that matters most. At the Jerusalem Council the apostles decided that Gentile believers need not be circumcised or keep the whole law of Moses. They asked only that Gentiles abstain from a few things, so Jewish and Gentile Christians could share a table.

Our Bibles (and the King James)	The Western text
"You must abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality." (15:29 BSB)	Abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, and from sexual immorality, and do not do to others what you would not want done to you

The Western form drops "strangled" and adds the Golden Rule in its negative form. A food-law list for shared tables becomes a moral list.

The evidence. The four-part decree is in essentially every witness outside the Western family: P33, P74, Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, Alexandrinus, Ephraemi, Laudianus, the Byzantine majority, the Coptic, the Vulgate, and the Syriac. The Western form is in Codex Bezae, some Old Latin, and the Latin fathers Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Cyprian, who show that by the late 100s this was the decree as much of the Latin church knew it. The UBS editors rate the four-part form a B.

Why the four-part form is original.

- **It matches Leviticus.** Leviticus 17 to 18 gives the rules binding on the foreigner living among Israel: no idol sacrifices, no blood, no meat with the blood still in it (which strangled meat is), and no sexual immorality. The four-part decree follows that pattern closely. It is a rule for Jews and Gentiles sharing meals.
- **The change is easy to explain in one direction.** Once churches were mostly Gentile, a rule about strangled meat seemed beside the point, while a moral rule seemed fitting. No copyist would delete the Golden Rule and put back a food law.

What our Confession says about the Decree

The Augsburg Confession speaks to this very passage. In Article XXVIII it notes that the apostles commanded abstaining from blood and what was strangled, and asks who keeps that now. Those who do not are not sinning, it says, because the apostles did not mean to bind consciences forever. They gave the rule for a time, to avoid giving offense. (Article XV makes the same point about church rites in general: they may be kept for good order, but not as if they were necessary for salvation.)

The four-part decree, with its roots in Leviticus, shows exactly that: a wise, loving rule for one situation, Jewish and Gentile believers eating together in the first century. The Western rewording, by turning it into a general moral list, blurs that historical setting. The older text supports our Confession's reading.

6. Romans 16:25 to 27: the wandering doxology

Here the question is not whether but where. Romans closes with a great doxology: "Now to Him who is able to strengthen you by my gospel and by the proclamation of Jesus Christ… to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen" (BSB). The manuscripts put it in five different places.

Where the doxology stands	Witnesses
After 16:23 (where our Bibles have it)	P61, Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, Ephraemi, Claromontanus, the Vulgate, the Coptic
After 14:23	The Byzantine majority, Ψ, the Harklean Syriac
After 15:33	P46 (about AD 200), our oldest copy of Paul
After both 14:23 and 16:23	Alexandrinus and a few others
Nowhere	Codices Augiensis and Boernerianus (Boernerianus leaves a blank space after 14:23)

The BSB prints the doxology at 16:25 to 27 and notes the other places: "Some manuscripts place the text of verses 25–27 after Romans 14:23 or after Romans 15:33."

Why it wanders. The best explanation is that Romans circulated early in more than one form. The second-century heretic Marcion used a copy that ended at 14:23, and shortened forms of the letter seem to have been in use. Wherever a copy ended, the doxology tended to follow. Most of the early witnesses put it at the end of chapter 16, though our oldest copy, P46, has it after 15:33. The end of chapter 16 is the best-supported place, and that is where our Bibles print it.

What we keep. The doxology is there in every form of the letter that has it, and the King James prints it in the same place we do, even though the Byzantine majority has it after 14:23. Its wandering is not a sign of an unstable text. It is the trace of a letter so loved it was read, copied, and shared in more than one form.

7. The Western text as a whole

Reading	What the Western text does	Why
Acts 8:39	Adds the Spirit falling on the eunuch	To complete a pattern the copyist expected

Reading	What the Western text does	Why
Acts 19:9	Adds Paul's teaching hours	Vivid detail, maybe memory, maybe imagination
Acts 15:20, 29	Rewrites the Decree as a moral list	To fit a later, mostly Gentile church

The Western text is ancient, and it is a real witness to how the second-century church read Acts. But at each place, the older, harder, shorter reading explains the Western one, and not the other way around. It is part of the history of the Word's reception. It is not the apostolic text.

Hear the other side

In 1895 Friedrich Blass proposed that Luke wrote two editions of Acts, a longer one (the Western text) and a shorter, polished one for Theophilus (the text in our Bibles). In 1984 the French scholars Boismard and Lamouille argued that the Western text preserves genuine Lukan material at many points. These are serious scholars, not cranks, and the Western text is richer than a quick dismissal allows. But most scholars remain unpersuaded, because at place after place the oldest and most widespread witnesses, and the Byzantine text too, stand against the Western readings.

For discussion

1. The Western text is very old, yet we do not follow it. Why is age alone not enough?
2. Acts 19:9's added hours may preserve a true memory. How should we treat a detail that may be true but is not part of Scripture?
3. How does the Apostolic Decree help us think about church rules today that are wise for a time but not binding forever?
4. What does the wandering doxology tell you about how the early church used Paul's letters?

Working vocabulary, new this week

Add these to your vocabulary page.

Western text. An ancient grouping of witnesses (scholars now prefer "textual cluster" to "family"), represented by Codex Bezae, the Old Latin, and some Old Syriac witnesses, known for fuller and freer readings, especially in Acts.

Codex Bezae (D). A Greek and Latin manuscript of the Gospels and Acts from about AD 400, the chief witness to the Western text. Now at Cambridge.

Codex Claromontanus. A Greek and Latin manuscript of Paul's letters from the 500s. It uses the letter D too, which can cause confusion.

Caesarean text. A proposed grouping of Gospel witnesses linked to Caesarea, to Families 1 and 13, and to Codex Koridethi; many scholars now doubt it is a coherent group.

Apostolic Decree. The four requests the Jerusalem Council sent to Gentile believers (Acts 15:20, 29).

Recension. A deliberate reworking of a text by an editor, as opposed to scattered copying slips.

Before next Sunday

Read. Chapter 12, “The Latin Bible, the Syriac Bible, and the Coptic Bible, and What the Fathers Quoted.”

Do this one thing. Open a long textual note in the NET Bible (the free one at netbible.org), for example at Mark 1:1 or Acts 8:39. Notice how many witnesses are not Greek at all: Latin (“it” and “vg”), Syriac (“syr”), Coptic (“cop”), and the church fathers. Write down three you want explained.

Bring. Your Bible, your list, and your vocabulary pages.

Think about. The Latin church loved Acts enough to fill in its gaps. Where might our love for Scripture tempt us to add to it, instead of listening?

A closing word

Thanks be to God for the book of Acts as Luke wrote it: the Spirit poured out, the Word going from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, and the church learning to eat at one table. Thanks be to God for the early Christians who copied it with such love that they could not help adding what they remembered or hoped. And thanks be to God for the freedom of the Gospel, which lets the church keep wise rules for a season without binding consciences forever.

“So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.” Acts 16:5 (BSB)

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Scripture quotations are from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB), with the KJV and other translations quoted where the lesson compares them. Confessional citations follow the Kolb-Wengert edition of the Book of Concord.