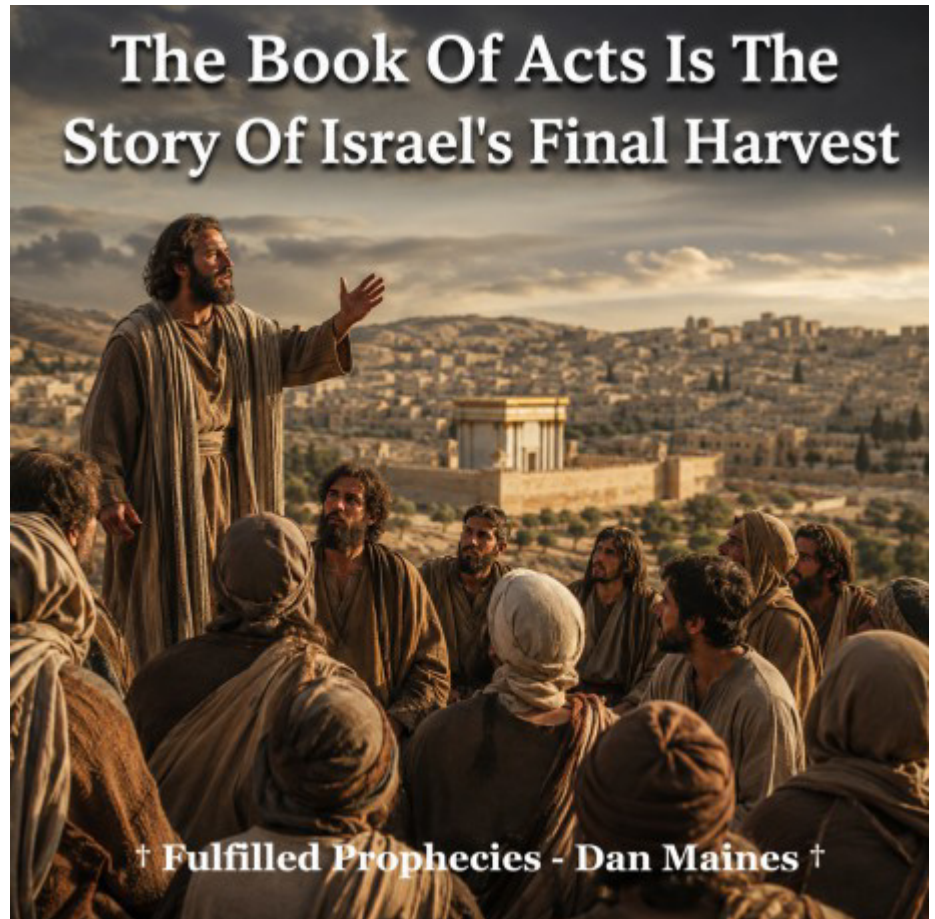


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The Book Of Acts Is The Story Of Israel's Final Harvest



By Dan Maines

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Introduction

† The book of Acts isn't merely the history of how the church began. It's the inspired record of a harvest that Jesus had already announced.

† Jesus placed the harvest at the end of the age, then Acts records the gospel spreading through Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and outward to the nations as that age approached its conclusion.

† Pentecost wasn't an accidental starting point. Pentecost was

a harvest feast, and on that very day thousands were gathered into Christ.

† James called first-century believers firstfruits. Jesus spoke about gathering His elect. Paul preached that the gospel had gone throughout the world. James said the Judge was standing right at the door. Revelation pictured the earth being harvested.

† Put those passages together and an amazing picture appears. Acts records the great covenant harvest between the ministry of Jesus and the approaching judgment upon the old covenant world.

† This doesn't mean the gospel stopped in AD 70. It means the prophetic harvest connected with the end of that age reached its appointed fulfillment, while the everlasting kingdom and gospel continue without end (Isaiah 9:7; Ephesians 3:21).

Matthew 13:39-40

and the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels. So just as the weeds are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age.

† Jesus directly connected the harvest with the end of the age. The Greek word translated world here is *aion*, referring to an age. Jesus wasn't predicting the destruction of the physical planet.

† The disciples were living near the conclusion of the old covenant age. Jesus described a harvest in which the righteous and wicked would be separated as that age reached its appointed end (Matthew 13:41-43).

† This gives us the prophetic framework for Acts. Acts isn't happening in a theological vacuum. The gospel mission recorded there unfolds during the very generation Jesus identified with the approaching end (Matthew 24:34).

† The harvest had already begun during Jesus' ministry. He told His disciples that the fields were already white for harvest, showing that the gathering wasn't thousands of years away (John 4:35-38).

Matthew 9:36-38

Seeing the crowds, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and downcast, like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore, plead with the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest."

† Notice the setting. Jesus was looking at people standing in front of Him when He spoke about the harvest. He wasn't describing a harvest that wouldn't begin for thousands of years.

† Israel was scattered like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus came as Israel's promised Shepherd, and His disciples became laborers sent into that harvest (Ezekiel 34:11-16; Matthew 10:5-7).

† Acts shows those laborers doing exactly what Jesus commissioned them to do. They preached first in Jerusalem, then Judea and Samaria, and finally carried the gospel throughout the Roman world (Acts 1:8).

† What Jesus called a plentiful harvest in the Gospels becomes a visible gathering of thousands in Acts.

Acts 2:5, 41

Now there were Jews residing in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls.

† Pentecost was one of Israel's appointed feast days, associated with the firstfruits of the harvest (Leviticus 23:15-21). Acts 2 deliberately places this enormous spiritual gathering on Pentecost.

† Jews from every nation under heaven were gathered in Jerusalem, heard the gospel, and approximately three thousand received the message.

† This is harvest imagery becoming historical reality. Jesus had announced the harvest, and now thousands were being gathered into His kingdom.

† There's also a remarkable covenant contrast with Sinai. After Israel's sin with the golden calf, about three thousand died. At

Pentecost, about three thousand received the gospel and were added to the people of God (Exodus 32:28).

† The ministry of the Spirit was producing life where the old covenant exposed sin and condemnation (2 Corinthians 3:6-11).

Acts 4:4

But many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.

† The harvest continued immediately after Pentecost.

Thousands more believed as the apostles preached Christ in Jerusalem.

† Acts repeatedly gives numerical growth reports because Luke is showing the rapid expansion of the gospel during this crucial covenant generation.

† The gathering wasn't moving slowly toward some event thousands of years away. The field was being harvested in their lifetime.

† Soon Acts would say that the word of God increased and that the number of disciples multiplied exceedingly in Jerusalem, including many priests who became obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7).

James 1:18

In the exercise of His will He gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.

† James actually calls these believers firstfruits. That's harvest language, and it fits perfectly with what was happening throughout Acts.

† Firstfruits belong to the beginning of a harvest. These first-century Jewish believers were being gathered into Christ as the promised kingdom came to its covenant fullness.

† This is especially significant because James addressed the twelve tribes scattered abroad (James 1:1). His language is rooted directly in Israel's covenant and harvest imagery.

† The firstfruits weren't waiting thousands of years for the harvest to begin. They were evidence that the harvest was

already underway.

Acts 13:46-48

Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first. Since you repudiate it and consider yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, 'I have appointed You as a light to the Gentiles, That You may bring salvation to the end of the earth.'" When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and all who had been appointed to eternal life believed.

† The harvest expands dramatically here. The message went to Israel first, but it wasn't going to remain confined to ethnic Israel.

† The inclusion of the Gentiles wasn't a second plan after Israel failed. It was part of God's prophetic purpose that salvation would extend to the nations through Israel's Messiah (Isaiah 49:6).

† Acts records this movement again and again, from synagogue to synagogue and city to city, until the gospel was being proclaimed throughout the Roman world.

† Paul could eventually say that the gospel had been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, demonstrating the astonishing reach of that first-century mission (Colossians 1:23).

Matthew 24:31

And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet blast, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.

† Jesus promised a gathering of His elect, and the New Testament shows that gathering taking place through the proclamation of the gospel.

† The trumpet is familiar prophetic language for announcing God's intervention and gathering His people (Isaiah 27:13).

† Jesus placed this gathering within the same prophecy in

which He declared that all these things would happen within that generation (Matthew 24:34).

† Acts shows believers being gathered from Jerusalem outward until Jews and Gentiles were becoming one body in Christ (Ephesians 2:14-18).

† The gathering of God's people wasn't about transporting Christians away from planet Earth. It was about gathering God's covenant people into Christ and His kingdom.

James 5:7-9

Therefore be patient, brothers and sisters, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Do not complain, brothers and sisters, against one another, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door.

† James brings harvest language and imminence together in one passage. The farmer was waiting for the precious fruit of the earth, and James immediately told his readers that the coming of the Lord was near.

† He didn't tell them that the harvest was thousands of years away. He told those believers to be patient because the coming of the Lord was at hand.

† He made the timing even stronger by saying the Judge was standing right at the door. That's immediate first-century expectation, not a prediction directed primarily toward the twenty-first century.

† Acts records the gathering, while James tells those same first-century believers that the harvest was approaching its covenant climax (Hebrews 10:25, 37).

Revelation 14:14-16

Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and sitting on the cloud was one like a son of man, with a golden crown on His head and a sharp sickle in His hand. And another angel came out of the temple, calling out with a loud voice to Him who sat

on the cloud, "Put in Your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come, because the harvest of the earth is ripe." Then He who sat on the cloud swung His sickle over the earth, and the earth was reaped.

† Revelation brings the harvest imagery to its dramatic conclusion. The harvest that Jesus announced is pictured as ripe and ready to be reaped.

† Notice the language, the hour to reap is come. Revelation doesn't describe the harvest as something indefinitely postponed.

† Revelation begins by saying that the things revealed must shortly come to pass and that the time was near, and it closes with the same urgency (Revelation 1:1-3; 22:6, 10).

† Revelation 14 also moves from harvest to judgment. This fits Jesus' teaching in Matthew 13, where the end-of-the-age harvest involved both gathering and separation.

† The gospel gathered God's people into Christ, while covenant judgment removed the old order that had rejected its Messiah.

The Book Of Acts And The Harvest

† Read Acts through the harvest language of Jesus and its structure becomes much clearer.

† Jesus announces that the fields are ready. He sends laborers into the field. Pentecost produces thousands of converts. The word multiplies. Samaritans receive the gospel. Gentiles are brought in. Paul travels throughout the empire. Churches appear across the Roman world.

† What begins in Jerusalem reaches outward exactly as Jesus said it would (Acts 1:8).

† Paul later writes that Israel's fall brought salvation to the Gentiles and that Gentile inclusion was provoking Israel to jealousy (Romans 11:11-14).

† Acts is therefore much more than a collection of missionary adventures. It's the historical record of the gospel advancing through the final generation of the old covenant age.

† The destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 didn't end Christianity. It ended the covenant age that had centered on the earthly

temple, priesthood, sacrifices, and Jerusalem.

† Christ's kingdom continued, the gospel continued, and the nations continued entering the New Jerusalem after the old covenant age had passed away (Hebrews 12:22-24; Revelation 21:24-26).

Historical References

† Josephus described the enormous crowds gathered in Jerusalem during the Jewish festivals shortly before the city's destruction. His account shows how deeply the national life of Israel still revolved around Jerusalem and the temple during the very generation in which Acts and the New Testament letters were written (Josephus, Wars 6.9.3).

† Josephus also described the catastrophic Roman siege, famine, slaughter, and destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. His history provides an important non-Christian witness to the national judgment that brought the temple-centered Jewish order to its devastating conclusion (Josephus, Wars 5-6).

† Tacitus recorded the Roman campaign against Jerusalem and described the city and temple during the conflict. His account independently confirms the historical setting surrounding Jerusalem's destruction under Titus (Tacitus, Histories 5.10-13).

† Eusebius later recorded the Christian tradition that believers in Jerusalem departed the city before the war and went to Pella. Whether every detail of the later tradition can be independently verified, it shows that early Christians connected Jesus' warnings with the first-century catastrophe that overtook Jerusalem (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 3.5).

How It Applies To Us Today

† We aren't waiting for Israel's final harvest to begin. We live in the kingdom that the first-century believers were entering while the old covenant age was approaching its end.

† We don't need to move Jesus' harvest warnings thousands of years away from the people to whom He originally gave them.

† Understanding the harvest helps us read Acts as part of one continuous story, promise, firstfruits, gathering, harvest,

judgment, and kingdom fulfillment.

† The gospel didn't expire when that harvest reached its prophetic climax. Christ's kingdom has no end, and the invitation of the gospel continues to go into the nations (Luke 1:32-33; Revelation 22:17).

† We now proclaim a completed redemption, an established kingdom, an open New Jerusalem, and a reigning King.

† Acts shows us how faithfully God gathered His people before the old covenant age disappeared. That should give us confidence that God keeps His promises exactly as He gives them.

Q & A Appendix

Q: Was the harvest in Matthew 13 the end of the physical world?

A: No. Jesus connected the harvest with the end of the age, and He placed the fulfillment of His end-of-the-age prophecy within that generation (Matthew 13:39-43; Matthew 24:34).

Q: Why is Pentecost important to the harvest theme?

A: Pentecost was connected with Israel's harvest and firstfruits, and Acts records approximately three thousand people receiving the gospel on that very feast day (Leviticus 23:15-21; Acts 2:41).

Q: Were only Jews included in the harvest?

A: No. The gospel went to Israel first and then expanded to the Gentiles, fulfilling God's promise that salvation would reach the nations (Acts 13:46-48; Isaiah 49:6).

Q: Did the gospel stop after AD 70?

A: No. The prophetic end-of-the-age harvest reached its covenant fulfillment, but Christ's kingdom and gospel continue. His kingdom has no end, and the nations continue being invited into the life of the New Jerusalem (Luke 1:32-33; Revelation 21:24-26; Revelation 22:17).

Q: Why does James matter to this interpretation?

A: James called his first-century readers firstfruits and later told them that the coming of the Lord was near and that the Judge was standing right at the door. His language connects the

harvest directly with their first-century expectation (James 1:18; James 5:7-9).

Q: What does Revelation 14 add to the picture?

A: Revelation shows the Son of Man with a sickle and declares that the hour to reap had come. That agrees with Revelation's repeated statements that its fulfillment was near (Revelation 14:14-16; Revelation 1:1-3; Revelation 22:6, 10).

Q: So what is the book of Acts really showing us?

A: Acts shows the gospel harvest moving from Jerusalem outward during Israel's final covenant generation, gathering God's people into Christ before the old covenant age reached its end (Acts 1:8; Matthew 24:14, 34).

† This is the fulfilled perspective we proclaim at Fulfilled Prophecies †

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Source Index

† Matthew 13:39-40; Matthew 9:36-38; Acts 2:5, 41; Acts 4:4; James 1:18; Acts 13:46-48; Matthew 24:31; James 5:7-9; Revelation 14:14-16

† Josephus, Wars 5-6; 6.9.3; Tacitus, Histories 5.10-13; Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 3.5

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