



3a. Introduction to the Book of Acts

“The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, Until the day in which he was taken up, after that he through the Holy Ghost had given commandments unto the apostles whom he had chosen: To whom also he shewed himself alive after his passion by many infallible proofs . . .” (Acts 1:1–3a)

Authorship, Internal Evidence (from the text itself)

Historical Question: Who Wrote This Book?

- Little **direct evidence** (**anonymous**, super or subscriptions in earliest manuscripts are end of 2nd century A.D.)
 - The author **seems to have been party to some of the later events of Acts: the so-called “We Passages”** (Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:6)
 - *This could, however, be due to the author’s source or Classical rhetorical conventions (particularly in sea-voyage narratives)*
- **Indirect evidence**
 - **Acts and the Third Gospel (Luke) share the same author**
 - Both dedicated to “Theophilus”
 - Acts 1:1–2 summarizes the Gospel of Luke
 - Uniform literary style
 - Common themes of **God working in history** (e.g., through Christ and the Church) and the **work of the Holy Spirit**
 - Author was **not an eyewitness** for most of the material but depended on others for his information (Luke 1:2–3)
 - Judging from quality of the Greek, the author had **a thorough, Hellenistic education**
 - **Sympathy with and attention to Gentiles** and outsiders suggests that the author was not a Palestinian, or even Diaspora, Jew
 - Nevertheless, he is very familiar with the Septuagint (Greek OT) and very interest in Jewish history and customs—perhaps **a God-fearer** before a Christian?

Authorship, External Evidence (outside the text)

Historical Question: Who Wrote This Book?

- **The “we-sections” and Paul**
 - If the author **was a companion of Paul, who might he have been?**
 - Philemon 1:24, 2 Tim 4:11, and Col 4:14 list **Luke among Paul’s “fellow workers”**
- **Patristic (early Church father) evidence attributes the gospel and Acts to “Luke”**
 - The Muratorian Canon (c. A.D. 170) states, “Luke, the physician...wrote in his own name what he had been told (*ex opinione*), though he himself had not seen the Lord in the flesh.”
 - Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 150-215) attributes the Book of Acts to Luke: “As Luke in the Acts of the Apostles relates that Paul said...” (*Strom.* 5.12)
 - Eusebius (c. A.D. 325) cites numerous source claiming Lucan authorship (*Hist Eccl* 3.4)

2/3/2009

3a. Introduction to Acts

3

Date and Place

Historical Questions: When and Where Was This Book Written?

- **Date of Composition**
 - **Broad span**
 - Earliest possible date (*terminus post quem*): A.D. 59
 - Must have been after appointment of Festus as procurator in Judea
 - Last event recorded, Paul’s arrival at Rome, presumed to be c. A.D. 63
 - Latest possible date (*terminus ante quem*): mid second century A.D.
 - Quotations from and allusions to Acts in early Christian writings
 - **Details of Paul’s two-year imprisonment and outcome of his trial in Rome not recorded**
 - This would suggest a date before c. AD 64 or 68
 - **However, Paul’s trial, or even fate, was not the theme of the book. Rather his arrival in Rome fulfilled the theme of taking the gospel to “uttermost part of the earth”**
 - Gospel of Luke *may* have been written after A.D. 70
 - Working date: A.D. 80
- **Place of Composition**
 - **Indeterminable**

2/3/2009

3a. Introduction to Acts

4

Title and Audience

Historical Questions: What Was It Called? For Whom Was It Written?

- **Earliest manuscripts lack a title**
 - Later Christian writers dubbed it “Acts” in the Hellenistic sense of great deeds
 - Cf. *Res Gestae* or “Deeds” of Augustus
- **“Acts of the Apostles” is imprecise**
 - ***Some of the acts of some of the apostles!***
 - Perhaps “Acts of Peter and Paul,” but also Stephen and Philip . . .
 - “The Book of Acts in the Bible has been called the ‘Book of the Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles.’” (*Preach My Gospel*, 100)
- **“Theophilus” either a real person who was the work’s patron or a type**
 - the name means “lover of God!” Whether real or a type, ***“Theophilus” probably represents the larger Christian community***
- **Probably directed to early Christian community**
 - Gives a sense of **continuity** with earlier Israelite history and the ministry of Christ
 - Provides a **defense** (*apologia*) in the face of both Jewish and Gentile opponents
 - Serves as a **guide**—basic principles applied to specific situations
 - Overall, ***the superintending power of the Holy Spirit***

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3a. Introduction to Acts

5

Genre: Type of writing as a whole

Literary Questions: What Kind of Book Is This?

- Luke and Acts are “treatises”
 - Luke 1:1 and Acts 1:1 calls them *diēgesis* or “narratives”
- **Theological Narrative**: Luke-Acts has elements of **Hellenistic history**, **biography**, and **Jewish Apology**
 - **History**—prologue of the gospel looks like that of a Hellenistic history, places Christian traditions in the context of world history, interested in causality
 - **Biography**—focus on the lives of Christ, Peter, Paul, and others
 - **Apology** or “defense”—gospel vindicates Christ, concentration on Paul in the second half of Acts is a defense of Paul and his teachings
 - Paul not a renegade but a true teacher in Israel, views are consonant with many Pharisees
- **“Apologetic historiography” also works!**
 - Reads like history, was influenced by Classical models
 - “Defends” the faith and Church
 - Christians were righteous by Jewish standards
 - Christians were not rebels against Rome (like the Jews were A.D. 66–73)

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3a. Introduction to Acts

6

Genre: Type of writing in various sections of Acts

Literary Questions: What Kind of Book Is This?

- **Narrative** (Luke telling or recounting events)
 - **Historical narrative**
 - **Summaries** (esp. at the ends of sections)
 - **Miracle stories** (cf. healing and other miracle stories in the gospels)
 - **Call stories** (e.g, the call of Saul)
- **Discourse** (quoting the speech of others)
 - **Sermons, speeches**
- Combined, particularly in **dramatic episodes**

2/3/2009

3a. Introduction to Acts

7

Style and Characteristics

Literary Questions

- **Accurate historic detail**
 - Archaeology and history reveal that Luke generally uses proper terms for the places, events, and places described
- **Literary excellence**—particularly in using styles that fit the cultural setting of the events described
 - **Septuagint Greek and even signs of Palestinian Aramaic show through in Acts 1-2**
 - Otherwise uses **a polished form of literary Koine Greek**
 - The Greek of Luke-Acts better than any in the NT except perhaps Hebrews
- **Parallelism with Luke**
 - Mary overshadowed by the Holy Ghost (Luke 1:34-35); **Church by the Spirit** (Acts 1:13-14; 2:1-4)
 - **Peter and Paul performing similar miracles, which in turn are parallel to those of Christ**

2/3/2009

3a. Introduction to Acts

8

Style and Characteristics (continued)

Literary Questions

- **Summaries:** Narrative interrupted and spaced by 3 major and several smaller summaries (Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–35; and 5:12–16)
 - *Provide the reader with a sense of passing time and a glimpse into the life of the Christian community*
- Dramatic descriptions
 - Punishment of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11)
 - Details of the shipwreck (Acts 27)
- **Speeches**—fully one half of the narrative
 - *Luke uses them as Hellenistic historian would: what ought to be said in a particular occasion*, but still based on what the character probably or reportedly had said
 - *However, because he was writing scripture, we cannot discount the possibility that Luke could be inspired or that the Spirit “brought things to his remembrance” (see John 14:26)*

2/3/2009

3a. Introduction to Acts

9

Structure: 7 Sections in 3 Geographic Circles

Literary Questions: How is this book structured? (see packet, section 7)

- Acts: Chronicles the **geographic and ethnic expansion of the gospel**
 - Thematic/structural statement: “But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in **Jerusalem**, and in all **Judaea**, and in **Samaria**, and unto **the uttermost part of the earth**.” (Acts 1:8)
- **Jerusalem**
 - Preparing the Disciples (1:1–26)
 - Mission in Jerusalem (Acts 2:1–8:1a)
- **Missions in Samaria and Judea**
 - Preparing for the “Turn to the Gentiles” (Acts 8:1b–12:25)
- **“Unto the uttermost part of the earth”**
 - Missions of Barnabas and Saul (Acts 13:1–14:28)
 - The Jerusalem Council on Gentile Christians (Acts 15:1–35)
 - Missions of Paul to Asia Minor and Greece (Acts 15:36–21:14)
 - Paul’s Arrest in Jerusalem, Trial in Caesarea, and Journey to Rome (Acts 21:15–28:31)

2/3/2009

3a. Introduction to Acts

10

Themes

Theological Questions: What is this book about? What is it teaching?

- How God interacts with mankind in “**Theological History**” (*Heilsgeschichte*)
 - God working in Israel (Luke 1-2 fulfilled in **Acts 1-2**)
 - God working in the person of Jesus (body of Luke; **Acts 1:1-3**)
 - God continuing to work through the Church (Luke 24; **body of Acts**)
- Promise of the Eventual Return of Jesus
 - In the meantime he sits at the right hand of God in heaven . . .
- Luke-Acts: Work of the Holy Spirit in empowering and effecting God’s purposes
 - “anoints” Christ at baptism (Luke 3:22) and plays a large role in his ministry (e.g., Luke 4:1)
 - **Empowers the Church at Pentecost** (Acts 1:1-13) and guides its witness (Acts 15:28; 16:6-7)
- Spread of the Apostolic Witness
- Documents the basic principles and ordinances of the gospel