

CHAPTER 2

THE BOOK OF ACTS

The book of Acts is our most detailed primary source for the missionary career of the Apostle Paul. The other primary source is the Pauline epistles. In order to appreciate the importance of Acts as a historical source, we must first confirm the fact that the book is the authentic work of an eyewitness, and that it was written to tell us what actually happened.

Authorship of Acts

While the author of the book of Acts does not give us his name, the tradition of the early church (external evidence), and the contents of the book itself (internal evidence), identify Luke the Physician as the author.

External evidence

“The tradition of Christian writers since the second century has been that the Third Gospel and the Acts were written by Luke the Physician who is mentioned by Paul in Colossians, Philemon, and 2 Timothy.”

—Henry J. Cadbury, “The Tradition,” *Beginnings of Christianity*, 2:209 (see the whole article, pp. 209-264; Cadbury himself denies that Luke wrote Acts)

The **Muratorian Canon** (ca. A.D. 170-190) says, “The third book of the Gospel [is that] according to Luke. Luke, ‘the’ physician, after the ascension of Christ, when Paul had taken him with him as a companion of his traveling, wrote in his own name. . . . The Acts of all the Apostles, however, were written in one volume. Luke described briefly ‘for’ most excellent Theophilus particular [things], which happened in his presence, as he also evidently relates indirectly the death of Peter (?) and also Paul’s departure from the city as he was proceeding to Spain.” (Daniel J. Theron, *Evidence of Tradition*, pp. 107, 109)

Irenaeus, disciple of Polycarp, disciple of John, attributed the book to Luke (*Against Heresies* 3:14:1; see Theron p. 77 and Cadbury pp. 213-21). Other early writers include **Clement of Alexandria** (*Stromata* 5:82:4, in Theron p. 79), **Eusebius** *Ecclesiastical History* 3:4:6, in Theron p. 69), and **Jerome** (*Illustrious Lives* 7, in Theron p. 71).

In addition to these church fathers, the earliest copies of the third gospel have the title KATA ΛΟΥΚΑΝ *Kata Loukan*, “According to Luke.” These titles can be shown go back to at least A.D. 130. Since it is universally recognized that whoever wrote Luke also wrote Acts, this evidence would favor Luke as the author of Acts.

Internal evidence

(1) The author of Acts is the same as the author of Luke; this fact is admitted by all. As well, within the book of Acts itself, the so-called “we-sections” were composed by the same person who composed the rest of the book; this fact is shown by comparing the contents and style of the we-sections with the other portions of Acts.

For detailed linguistic evidence, see John C. Hawkins, *Horae Synopticae*, pp. 182-89; esp. pp. 188 and 183 n. 4.

(2) The author had access to the eyewitnesses who participated in the events described. This is stated to be the case in the prolog to Luke.

(3) The author was a companion of Paul. The book of Acts shows this to be the case by containing the “we-sections.” In three different passages (in some manuscripts, four) the author includes himself among Paul’s party by using the first person plural. For example, after telling how Paul and Silas were led by the Holy Spirit to Troas, and how Paul had seen the vision of the man from Macedonia, the book continues, “After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them” (Acts 16:10).

These are the three “we-sections” of Acts:

- On the second missionary journey, in Troas and Macedonia (Acts 16:10-17)
- On the third missionary journey, from Macedonia back to Jerusalem (Acts 20:5 - 21:18)
- On the voyage and journey to Rome, from Caesarea to Rome (Acts 27:1 - 28:16)

There is a possible, but unlikely, fourth “we-section”:

- Acts 11:28 in the Western text—during Paul’s first ministry in Antioch of Syria. The Western manuscript D adds a few words to the beginning of this verse:

“And there was much joy; and when we had been gathered together, one of them named Agabus stood up and signified . . .”

This statement probably was not in the original text of Acts; the UBS has an {A} rating for omitting it. Yet most scholars believe that this textual variant is based

on a very ancient and probably true tradition, that Luke was originally from Antioch, and first met Paul there.

(4) The author most naturally was Luke the Physician. This can be demonstrated by comparing the people mentioned in Paul's epistles with the people named in the book of Acts and with the location of the "we-sections" in Acts.

Assuming the author was with Paul during the first Roman imprisonment (the last we-section), we can find from the epistles that Paul wrote at that time (the Prison Epistles: Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians, Philippians) the names of his companions. The author of Acts probably will be found among them.

Luke is chosen by the process of eliminating the others from consideration. These companions are listed here:

Epaphras (Col 4:12; Phlm 23; cf. Col 2:1), came to Paul in Rome from Colossae, not on voyage from Caesarea

Onesimus (Col 4:9; Phlm 10-21), fled to Rome from Colossae, not on voyage from Caesarea

Ephaphroditus (Phil 2:25-30; 4:18), came to Paul in Rome from Philippi, not on Paul's voyage

Mark (Col 4:10; Phlm 24), with Paul during the first missionary journey, and other times outside of a we-section (e.g., Acts 13:5-13)

Timothy, Tychicus, Aristarchus (Col 1:1; 4:7, 10; Phlm 1, 24; Phil 1:1, 19-23), are distinguished from the author (Acts 20:4-6)

Jesus called Justus (Col 4:11), possible, but no external evidence for him

Demas (Col 4:14; Phlm 24), unlikely, since he later deserted Paul (2 Tim 4:10)

Luke (Col 4:14; Phlm 24), the only person left, the probable author. Note also that Paul does not mention Luke in those epistles which he wrote when the book of Acts is outside of a we-section (1 & 2 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Romans); this further confirms this choice.

(5) The medical language of Luke-Acts is consistent with its author being a physician. In 1882 W. K. Hobart published *The Medical Language of St. Luke*. He compared 400 "medical" words which occur in Luke-Acts with the vocabulary of four Greek physicians, including Hippocrates and Galen. His conclusion was that the author of Luke-Acts must be a physician, which supports the authorship by "Luke the beloved physician" (Col 4:14).

In 1906 Adolf von Harnack, in *Luke the Physician*, defended this argument, but reduced the number of examples, and made a stronger case for them.

In 1919 Henry J. Cadbury published *The Style and Literary Method of Luke*, in which he showed that 300 of Hobart's words also are found in the Greek OT and in Josephus, and other words in Plutarch and Lucian—all of them writers who were not doctors. Cadbury denied that the evidence showed the author to be a physician.

A good summary of the situation is included in A. T. Robertson, *Luke the Historian in the Light of Research*, ch. 7 (1920).

It does appear that the author is sympathetic to doctors; note the difference between Mark 5:26 and Luke 8:43.

The conclusion seems to be that the author was familiar with and used the medical vocabulary known by Greek writers of education and culture, not necessarily by doctors. He was not writing to doctors, and did not use specialized vocabulary known only by doctors. Therefore, while his vocabulary is consistent with his being a doctor, it does not prove that he was.

Luke the Physician

Luke probably was a native of Antioch in Syria, as the tradition behind the Western text of Acts suggests. Some scholars (such as William Ramsay) have suggested Philippi as his city of origin.

Luke was the only Gentile to write a book of the NT (Col 4:14; cf. v. 11). And, of course, he was a medical doctor (Col 4:14).

Luke was a companion with Paul during parts of his second and third missionary journeys, on his last trip to Jerusalem, and on his voyage and trip to Rome (Acts "we-sections"). He remained with Paul during that Roman imprisonment (Col 4:14; Phlm 24).

It may well be during Paul's time in prison in Caesarea that Luke wrote his Gospel, and during Paul's imprisonment in Rome that he wrote the book of Acts.

We do not know of Luke's activities during Paul's last travels, but we do know that he was with Paul when Paul was again in prison in Rome awaiting his execution. In fact, he was one of Paul's last faithful friends (2 Tim 4:11).

One church tradition places Luke's later ministry in Byzantium and Thrace:

"Byzantium, and all the country of Thrace, and of the parts about it as far as the great river, the boundary which separates from the barbarians, received the apostles' ordination to the priesthood from Luke the apostle, who himself built a church there, and ministered there in his office of Ruler and Guide which he held there."

—*The Teaching of the Apostles* (an ancient Syriac document), *ANF* 8:671

Early church tradition is divided about Luke's death. According to the Anti-Marcionite Prologue of Luke, Luke died at the age of 84 in Boeotia, just north of the Corinthian isthmus in Achaia. But according to the Monarchian Prologue of Luke, he died in Bithynia at the age of 74 (Theron p. 61).

Critical objections

Nearly all conservative Bible scholars accept Luke as the author of Luke-Acts. Critical scholars are divided on the question. Their main objections are that they believe that there are inaccuracies of fact in the book, and that there are theological contradictions between Acts and Paul's epistles. They say that it is unlikely that a close companion of Paul would make such mistakes or contradict his teachings.

Historical objections

As to the objection about inaccuracies of fact, the book of Acts has shown itself to be very accurate in even obscure details. The work of the archaeologist William Ramsay and others has demonstrated that the author of Acts knew intimately the Mediterranean world about which he wrote—its geography, sociology, and politics. In their books many negative critics fail to interact with these discoveries.

For further study in this area, see the books of W. Ward Gasque, *Sir William M. Ramsay, Archaeologist and New Testament Scholar* (1966; esp. pp. 24-27), and *A History of the Criticism of the Acts of the Apostles* (1975; esp. pp. 239, n. 106; 249, n. 134; 250).

Theological objections

A more serious objection is that there is a difference between the Paul of his epistles and the Paul of the book of Acts. It is claimed that in his epistles Paul strongly stands for Gentile Christianity, and opposes any concession to the Jewish law, whereas in Acts he is willing to compromise these strong principles and cooperate with the Jewish Christian leaders. However, a closer study of his epistles will show that Paul indeed did seek to cooperate with Jewish Christians, and urged his followers to compromise in areas of indifference to keep the unity of the church.

Redaction critical objection

The most celebrated problem is the relation of the book of Galatians and the conference mentioned in chapter 2, with the Apostolic Council described in Acts 15. According to some critics there is a real contradiction here. It is held that Luke-Acts was written to support a later form of “early catholic” Christianity, a compromise between the earlier theologies of Jewish and Gentile Christianity, epitomized by Peter and Paul.

Yet conservative scholars have shown that there are actually two ways of solving this difficulty. These will be discussed later in the course.

All in all, if the Christian is willing to accept the miraculous origin of the NT church, and the ministry of the apostles, there is no sufficient reason for denying that Luke was the author of Acts.

Date of Acts

Suggested date: A.D. 59

This is the earliest date suggested for Acts. The narrative in Acts ends, rather suddenly, after Paul was in prison in Rome two years, in A.D. 59 (Acts 28:30). There is no statement from the early church which dates the book. The most important result is the relation of the date of Luke with the other Gospels. This earliest date can be defended by the following arguments (from F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on Acts*, pp. 11-13):

1) Acts shows little acquaintance with Paul’s epistles, which would not have been the case had Acts been written later.

2) The ending of Acts is abrupt. How did Paul’s appeal fare? What happened to him? If the book had been written later, these questions probably would have been answered. Some have suggested that Luke intended a third volume; but then a better breaking-off place would have been probable (cf. the break between Luke and Acts).

3) There is no hint in the book of Paul’s death, not even in Acts 20:25. This seems unnatural if it was written ca. A.D. 70 or later.

4) Acts reveals a positive attitude toward Roman power. This fits with its being written before Nero’s persecution in A.D. 64. The ending of Acts seems optimistic about the church’s relation with the Roman government.

5) There is no hint in Acts of the Jewish war with Rome of A.D. 66-70, nor of the fall of Jerusalem.

6) Acts gives prominence to matters which were subjects of interest before A.D. 70. These matters concerned Gentile admittance into the church, Jewish-Gentile relations in the

church, and the conflicts regarding the food requirements. These issues quickly became less important after Jerusalem was destroyed and the church became predominantly Gentile.

7) The theology of Acts reflects primitive Christianity. Fully developed Pauline theology would be expected in a later book. For example, “Christ” is still used as a title, not a name. Other primitive titles are used for him: “Servant of God,” “Son of man,” “His own” (20:28). Christians are called “disciples,” a term not used in the Pauline epistles. “The people” means “the Jews.” And Sunday is referred to as “the first day of the week,” instead of the later Christian term “the Lord’s day.”

Alternate date: ca. A.D. 70

Many scholars favor this date for Acts, in spite of the arguments listed above. The primary reason for this date is as follows: if Mark was the first Gospel to be written, and if it was written close to A.D. 70, then Luke must have been written after that. Since Acts was written after Luke (Acts 1:1), Acts could be no earlier than ca. A.D. 70. Of course, this argument assumes that Mark was the first Gospel. This assumption, however, is not proved. The question is still debated. While the arguments are discussed in another course, it can be stated here that a good case can be made for both Matthew and Luke being written before Mark. Another possibility is that Luke used Mark’s notes when he was in Rome, before Mark wrote the final form of his own Gospel (E. F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 240).

Another major argument for this position is the detailed manner in which Jesus predicts the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (Luke 19:43-44; 21:20, 24; note the difference between Mark 13:14 and Luke 21:20). Most critics say that such a prediction could not have been written before the event took place. However, if Jesus really was the Son of God, he could predict the future, and that prophecy could have been written earlier. Actually, even non-inspired writers have made such predictions (cf. F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on Acts*, p. 13, n. 1).

Asked whether the abrupt ending of Acts fits with a later date of composition, some (such as Theodore Zahn) have suggested that Luke intended to tell of Paul’s fate in a third volume, but was not able to produce it. Many others have suggested that, since Luke’s purpose was to show how the gospel of Jesus was brought to Rome with the preaching of Paul, and since Acts ends with that being accomplished, that it was not necessary for Luke to continue the account beyond that point.

So while it is possible to hold to this date for Acts, it still seems that the weight of evidence favors the earlier date.

Critical date: ca. A.D. 90-100

Many critics who do not believe that Acts is accurate or historical place the book at the end of the century. The author, they say, must not have been an eyewitness, and the audience

could not have been Paul's contemporaries. They also assume that Acts used the history of Josephus, produced ca. A.D. 93.

This view, based on a negative and destructive criticism, is unacceptable to the Christian who trusts in the inerrancy of Scripture, and is not required by historical evidence; nor is it supported by early testimony. As a matter of fact, it overlooks much data which confirms the accuracy of the book.

Contents of Acts

Although the book of Acts has a lot of information, it still is fragmentary. For example, there is little mention of Galilee (cf. 9:31); sometimes one verse will cover many miles (e.g., 18:22); there often are no details on trips (e.g., 19:1); there is no mention of Thomas and the East; in fact, most of the apostles are not discussed at all. It is clear that Luke had a particular purpose in mind when he wrote Acts.

In the book of Acts, Luke continues telling Theophilus how he can be sure of the truth of the Christian instruction he has heard. It provides a link between the Gospels and the epistles. It shows how the message of Christ spread from the early Jewish believers to all the Gentiles and into the heart of the Roman empire.

Many have seen Acts as built on the pattern of Jesus' command in Acts 1:8.

Spread the gospel to . . .	Jerusalem	ch. 1-7
	Judea and Samaria	ch. 8-12
	The world (Rome)	ch. 13-28

Others have noted the parallel in the book of Acts between the ministry of Peter and that of Paul:

Peter, centered in Jerusalem	ch. 1-12
Paul, centered in Antioch	ch. 13-28

The parallel between these men in Acts is quite remarkable:

<u>Peter</u>	<u>Paul</u>
To Jews	To Gentiles
Jerusalem & dispersion	Antioch & Gentile world

Pentecost sermon (ch. 2)	Antioch-Pisidia sermon (ch. 13)
Heals lame man (ch. 3)	Heals lame man (ch. 14)
Judges Ananias and Sapphira (ch. 5)	Judges Elymas (ch. 13)
Freed from Jerusalem prison (ch. 6, 12)	Freed from Philippi prison (ch. 16)
Raises Dorcas from dead (ch. 9)	Raises Eutychus from dead (ch. 20)

While Paul is shown to have a ministry equal to Peter's, the emphasis of the book seems to fall more heavily on Paul. This is natural since Luke himself was a companion of Paul, and a Gentile. When Peter is discussed, his role is emphasized as the apostle who opened the church up for the Samaritans and for the Gentiles. Paul's ministry in Acts can be broken down into stages, as indicated in God's promise concerning him in Acts 9:15:

Preach to . . .	Gentiles	ch. 13-20
	Kings	ch. 21-27
	Children of Israel	ch. 28

Following is a brief chapter summary of the book of Acts:

Peter emphasized

- ch. 1 Ascension, Matthias
- ch. 2 Pentecost, Peter's sermon
- ch. 3 Peter's second sermon
- ch. 4 Peter and John before the Sanhedrin
- ch. 5 Ananias and Sapphira, second Sanhedrin appearance
- ch. 6 Deacons chosen
- ch. 7 Stephen's speech and martyrdom, Saul mentioned
- ch. 8 Philip's ministry, Samaritans saved
- ch. 9 Paul's conversion, Damascus, first Jerusalem visit
- ch. 10 Peter and Cornelius
- ch. 11 Peter's explanation, Paul's famine visit to Jerusalem
- ch. 12 Peter in prison under Herod Agrippa I, escapes

Paul emphasized

- ch. 13 First missionary journey: sermon in Antioch-Pisidia
- ch. 14 In Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, return to Antioch-Syria
- ch. 15 Jerusalem Council, Paul-Barnabas division

- ch. 16 Second missionary journey: Galatia, Macedonia, Philippi, in jail
- ch. 17 In Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Areopagus sermon
- ch. 18 In Corinth, Jerusalem, return to Antioch, Apollos in Ephesus and Corinth
- ch. 19 Third missionary journey: Ephesus, riot
- ch. 20 In Macedonia, Corinth, return, Troas, Ephesian elder sermon
- ch. 21 Arrival in Jerusalem, arrest in temple
- ch. 22 Speech to Jews from castle stairs
- ch. 23 Appearance before Sanhedrin, moved to Caesarea
- ch. 24 Trial before Felix
- ch. 25 Trial before Festus
- ch. 26 Speech to Herod Agrippa II
- ch. 27 Voyage for Rome, shipwreck
- ch. 28 On Malta, arrival in Rome, first Roman imprisonment

Purpose of Acts

Much has been written about the purpose of Acts. The question is closely linked to its authorship and date. Assuming that Luke was the actual author, it is apparent that he particularly desired to show to the reader that the gospel preached in Rome by Paul was the same gospel that began with Jesus Christ himself in Galilee and Judea. If Theophilus was his financial sponsor for the project, then the two-volume work of Luke-Acts would have been used for evangelism as well as doctrinal confirmation of the largely Gentile church in Rome and throughout the Empire.

Secondary purposes are clear from the book's contents as well. Luke's emphasis on Roman rulers' time and again approving of Paul's ministry and message probably was directed to Roman officials, encouraging them to approve the spread of Christianity and not to persecute the new movement. Of course, a large part of the work is dedicated to showing that the Gentile Christians were equal in status to Jewish believers in the church, and supporting that fact by the united testimony of the apostles as well as by various ministries of the Holy Spirit. The book was also designed to prepare Christians to live for Christ and to be willing to suffer for him.