

Acts

INTRODUCTION

God's Grace in Acts†

In Acts, Luke's second volume, the OT and the apostolic testimony through the convincing power of the Holy Spirit bear witness to God's grace in Jesus Christ, the resurrected Lord of the church. The apostle Peter declares: "All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (10:43).

Acts relates the spreading of the gospel of God's grace both: (1) geographically, from Jerusalem through the eastern Mediterranean lands to the capital of the Roman Empire, and (2) theologically, from a small Jewish-Christian community to an extended church in which Gentile Christians equaled, if not surpassed, in number the believers among the Jews. Acts also includes various problems and their solutions, which such a tremendous transition entailed—all under the guidance of God's grace through his Holy Spirit.

Luther on Acts†

"Therefore he [Luke] emphasizes so powerfully not only the preaching of the apostles about faith in Christ, how both Gentiles and Jews must thereby be justified without any merits or works, but also the examples and the instances of this teaching, how the Gentiles as well as Jews were justified through the gospel alone, without the law" (*LW* 35:363).

Author

Although the author does not name himself, evidence outside the Scriptures and inferences from the book itself lead to the conclusion that the author was Luke.

The earliest of the external testimonies appears in the Muratorian Canon (c. A.D. 170), where the explicit statement is made that Luke was the author of both the third Gospel and the "Acts of All the Apostles." Eusebius (c. 325) lists information from numerous sources to identify the author of these books as Luke (*Ecclesiastical History*, 3.4).

Within the writing itself are some clues as to who the author was:

1. *Luke, the companion of Paul.* In the description of the happenings in Acts, certain passages make use of the pronoun "we." At these points the author includes himself as a companion of Paul in his travels (16:10–17; 20:5–21:18; 27:1–28:16). A historian as careful with details as this author proves to be would have good reason for choosing to use "we" in some places and "they" elsewhere. The author was therefore probably present with Paul at the particular events described in the "we" sections.

These "we" passages include the period of Paul's two-year imprisonment at Rome (ch. 28). During this time Paul wrote, among other letters, Philemon and Colossians. In them he sends greetings from his companions, and Luke is included among them (Phm 23–24; Col 4:10–17). In fact, after eliminating those who, for one reason or another,

would not fit the requirements for the author of Acts, Luke is left as the most likely candidate.

2. *Luke, the physician.* Although it cannot be proved that the author of Acts was a physician simply from his vocabulary, the words he uses and the traits and education reflected in his writings fit well his role as a physician (see, e.g., note on 28:6). It is true that the doctor of the first century did not have as specialized a vocabulary as that of doctors today, but there are some usages in Luke-Acts that seem to suggest that a medical man was the author of these books. And it should be remembered that Paul uses the term “doctor” in describing Luke (Col 4:14). – In Colossians 4:14 Paul calls Luke “the doctor.” A famous medical school was located in Antioch. As a native, Luke could have easily secured his literacy and medical education there. Assuming he lived in Antioch, it is reasonable to believe that Luke’s conversion to Christianity is described in Acts 11:19-21. Antioch is the first city in which the scattered believers made a deliberate effort to speak to pagan Greeks about Christ. Luke became one of Paul’s assistants in Troas in the year 52 or 53. Luke stayed with Paul until his first imprisonment ended in 62. He alone (2 Timothy 4:11) stayed with Paul during his second imprisonment and was with Paul at his execution in 66.

Date

Two dates are possible for the writing of this book: (1) c. A.D. 63, soon after the last event recorded in the book, and (2) c. 70 or even later.

The earlier date is supported by:

1. *Silence about later events.* While arguments from silence are not conclusive, it is perhaps significant that the book contains no allusion to events that happened after the close of Paul’s two-year imprisonment in Rome: e.g., the burning of Rome and the persecution of the Christians there (A.D. 64), the martyrdom of Peter and Paul (possibly 67) and the destruction of Jerusalem (70).

2. *No outcome of Paul’s trial.* If Luke knew the outcome of the trial Paul was waiting for (28:30), why did he not record it at the close of Acts? Perhaps it was because he had brought the history up to date.

Those who prefer the later date hold that 1:8 reveals one of the purposes Luke had in writing his history, and that this purpose influenced the way the book ended. Luke wanted to show how the church penetrated the world of his day in ever-widening circles (Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, the ends of the earth) until it reached Rome, the world’s political and cultural center. On this understanding, mention of the martyrdom of Paul (c. A.D. 67) and of the destruction of Jerusalem (70) was not pertinent. This would allow for the writing of Acts c. 70 or even later.

Recipient†

The recipient of the book, Theophilus, is the same person addressed in the first volume, the Gospel of Luke (see Introduction to Luke: Recipient and Purpose, and Date and Place of Writing). – All we can gather about Theophilus is from Luke 1:3-4. “Most excellent Theophilus” indicates that Luke’s friend was either a knight, held an official position of some sort, or was a person of great wealth and prominence. More importantly, it is evident that Theophilus was interested in Christianity. (LL) Theophilus means “one who loves God.” Luke does not use the title here. Since Christians did not address one

another with formal titles, this may mean that Theophilus became a Christian after reading Luke's Gospel. (PBC)

Importance

The book of Acts provides a bridge for the writings of the NT. As a second volume to Luke's Gospel, it joins what Jesus "began to do and to teach" (1:1) as told in the Gospels with what he continued to do and teach through the apostles' preaching and the establishment of the church. Besides linking the Gospel narratives on the one hand and the apostolic letters on the other, it supplies an account of the life of Paul from which we can learn the setting for his letters. Geographically its story spans the lands between Jerusalem, where the church began, and Rome, the political center of the empire. Historically it recounts the first 30 years of the church. It is also a bridge that ties the church in its beginning with each succeeding age. This book may be studied to gain an understanding of the principles that ought to govern the church of any age.

Theme and Purpose†

The geographical theme of the work is best summarized in 1:8. It was ordinary procedure for a historian at this time to begin a second volume by summarizing the first volume and indicating the contents anticipated in his second volume. Luke summarized his first volume in 1:1–3; the theme of his second volume is presented in the words of Jesus: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." This is, in effect, an outline of the book of Acts (see Plan and Outline).

The theological theme of Acts is the development from a small Jewish-Christian community at Jerusalem to a predominantly Gentile Christian church which is extended over the eastern Mediterranean to the capital of the Roman Empire. Repetition is Luke's means of emphasizing two events basic to this development: the conversion of Cornelius, probably the first Gentile (chs. 10 and 11) and the conversion of Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles (chs. 9, 22, 26). A central chapter (15) narrates the chief points in the Jewish-Gentile controversy, settled by the apostolic council at Jerusalem.

The main purposes of the book appear to be:

1. *To present a history.* The significance of Acts as a historical account of Christian origins cannot be overestimated. It tells of the founding of the church, the spread of the gospel, the beginnings of congregations, and evangelistic efforts in the apostolic pattern. One of the unique aspects of Christianity is its firm historical foundation. The life and teachings of Jesus Christ are established in the four Gospel narratives, and the book of Acts provides a coordinated account of the beginnings of the church.

2. *To give a defense.* One finds embedded in Acts a record of Christian defenses made to both Jews (e.g., 4:8–12) and Gentiles (e.g., 25:8–11), with the underlying purpose of conversion. It shows how the early church coped with pagan and Jewish thought, the Roman government and Hellenistic society.

Luke probably wrote this work as Paul awaited trial in Rome. If his case came to court, what better court brief could Paul have had than a life of Jesus, a history of the beginnings of the church (including the activity of Paul) and an early collection of Paul's letters?

3. *To provide a guide.* Luke had no way of knowing how long the church would continue on this earth, but as long as it pursues its course, the book of Acts will be one of

its major guides. In Acts we see basic principles being applied to specific situations in the context of problems and persecutions. These same principles continue to be applicable until Christ returns.

4. *To depict the triumph of Christianity in the face of bitter persecution.* The success of the church in carrying the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome and in planting local churches across the Roman empire demonstrated that Christianity was not a mere work of man. God was in it (see 5:35–39).

Characteristics

1. *Accurate historical detail.* Every page of Acts abounds with sharp, precise details, to the delight of the historian. The account covers a period of about 30 years and reaches across the lands from Jerusalem to Rome. Luke's description of these times and places is filled with all kinds of people and cultures, a variety of governmental administrations, court scenes in Caesarea, and dramatic events involving such centers as Antioch, Ephesus, Athens, Corinth and Rome. Barbarian country districts and Jewish centers are included as well. Yet in each instance archaeological findings reveal that Luke uses the proper terms for the time and place being described. Hostile criticism has not succeeded in disproving the detailed accuracy of Luke's political and geographical designations.

2. *Literary excellence.* Not only does Luke have a large vocabulary compared with other NT writers, but he also uses these words in literary styles that fit the cultural settings of the events he is recording. At times he employs good, classical Greek; at other times the Aramaic of first-century Palestine shows through his expressions. This is an indication of Luke's careful practice of using language appropriate to the time and place being described. Aramaisms are used when Luke is describing happenings that took place in Palestine (chs. 1–12). When, however, Paul departs for Hellenistic lands beyond the territories where Aramaic-speaking people live, Aramaisms cease. – Some go so far as to call it the most beautiful book ever written, and its author, Luke, as the greatest of all historians, ancient or modern. Much of this praise comes from many of those who spent years searching for errors in the great amount of geographical and historical data and the 110 names of persons contained in the book – and kept coming up empty-handed. (LL)

3. *Dramatic description.* Luke's skillful use of speeches contributes to the drama of his narrative. Not only are they carefully spaced and well balanced between Peter and Paul, but the speeches of a number of other individuals add variety and vividness to the account. Luke's use of details brings the action to life. Nowhere in ancient literature is there an account of a shipwreck superior to Luke's with its nautical details (ch. 27). The book is vivid and fast-moving throughout.

4. *Objective account.* Luke's careful arrangement of material need not detract from the accuracy of his record. He demonstrates the objectivity of his account by recording the failures as well as the successes, the bad as well as the good, in the early church. Not only is the discontent between the Grecian Jews and the Hebraic Jews recorded (6:1) but also the discord between Paul and Barnabas (15:39). Divisions and differences are recognized (15:2; 21:20–21).

LUKE/ACTS:

Already in the Gospel, Luke had taken over from Mark the use of narrative summaries. In Acts, they are even more important, enabling him to provide a sense of fullness to a narrative otherwise low in specific factual content. (Sacra)

In the Gospel, Luke moves the narrative toward Jerusalem. In Acts, the geographical movement is away from Jerusalem. Each movement of the Gospel away from Jerusalem also circles back to it (see 8:14; 11:1-18, 29-30; 12:25; 15:2; 18:22; 19:21; 20:16; 21:13; 25:1). Luke is concerned to show that the expression of Christianity into the wider world and among the Gentiles took place in continuity and communication with the original community in Jerusalem. (Sacra)

The purpose of Luke's Gospel was to create and nourish Christians. (LL) Acts constructs a continuation of the biblical story for Gentile believers in order to help them come to grips with the profound puzzle generated by their own recent experience. (Sacra)

Plan and Outline†

Luke weaves together different interests and emphases as he relates the beginnings and expansion of the church. The design of his book revolves around (1) key persons: Peter and Paul; (2) important topics and events: the role of the Holy Spirit, pioneer missionary outreach to new fields, conversions, the growth of the church, and life in the Christian community; (3) significant problems: conflict between Jews and Gentiles, persecution of the church by some Jewish elements, trials before Jews and Romans, confrontations with Gentiles, and other hardships in the ministry; (4) geographical advances: five significant stages (see the quotations in the outline; see also map of "The Spread of the Gospel").

In addition to a threefold outline (as implied in 1:18: chs. 1-7; 8-9; 10-28) or a twofold arrangement (as below), a sixfold division is logical according to the six summarizing statements in Acts (6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:31)—each section covering approximately five years, and the first five statements alternating between summaries concerning the word and the church.

- I. Peter and the Beginnings of the Church in Palestine (chs. 1-12)
- A. "Throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria" (1:1-9:31; see 9:31)
 1. Introduction (1:1-2)
 2. Christ's postresurrection ministry (1:3-11)
 3. The period of waiting for the Holy Spirit (1:12-26)
 4. The filling with the Spirit (ch. 2)
 5. The healing of the lame man and the resultant arrest of Peter and John (3:1-4:31)
 6. The community of goods (4:32-5:11)
 7. The arrest of the 12 apostles (5:12-42)
 8. The choice of the Seven (6:1-7)
 9. Stephen's arrest and martyrdom (6:8-7:60)
 10. The scattering of the Jerusalem believers (8:1-4)
 11. Philip's ministry (8:5-40)
 - a. In Samaria (8:5-25)
 - b. To the Ethiopian eunuch (8:26-40)

