

NIV Study Bible

Introduction to Acts

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; see notes on 16:10,17; 27:1). 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 (see Col 4:9–17 and notes; Phm 23–24). 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). 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 (see Col 4:14 and 28:6note).

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 (see 28:30 and note), 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 (see note there) 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).

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; see note there) 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 theme of the work is best summarized in 1:8 (see note there). 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" (1:8). This is, in effect, an outline of the book of Acts (see Plan and Outline below).

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 beginning and spread of the church as the result of the work of the risen Lord and the Holy Spirit through the apostles.
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 may have written 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 merely human work. It triumphed under the rule of the exalted Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

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 (see chart, p. 2230, and maps and archaeological notes scattered throughout the book).
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 Palestinian Aramaic of the first century 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 the Holy Land (chs. 1–12). When, however, Paul departs for Hellenistic lands beyond the territories where Aramaic-speaking people live, Aramaisms cease.
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 (see 5 below). 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 (see 6:1 and

note) but also the discord between Paul and Barnabas (see 15:39 and note). Divisions and differences are recognized (15:2; 21:20–21).

5. *Effective use of speeches.* One of the distinguishing features of the book of Acts is its speeches. They may be classified as follows: (1) evangelistic—two types: to Jews and God-fearers (2:14–40; 3:12–26; 4:8–12; 5:29–32; 10:34–43; 13:16–41), to pagans (17:22–31); (2) deliberative (1:16–17, 20–22; 15:7–11, 13–21); (3) apologetic (7:2–52; 22:1–21; 23:1–6; 24:10–21; 25:8, 10; 26:2–23; 28:17–20, 21–22, 25–28); (4) hortatory (20:18–35).

The speeches are obviously not verbatim reports; any of them can be read in a few minutes. We know, e.g., that Paul at times could be a long-winded preacher (see 20:7, 9; 28:23). However, studies of these speeches (speakers, audiences, circumstances, language and style of writing) give us reason to believe that they are accurate summaries of what was actually said.

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, p. 2268; cf. note on 1:8).

- Peter and the Beginnings of the Church in the Holy Land (chs. 1–12)
 - “Throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria” (1:1—9:31; see 9:31 and note)
 - Introduction (1:1–2)
 - Christ’s resurrection ministry (1:3–11)
 - The period of waiting for the Holy Spirit (1:12–26)
 - The filling with the Spirit (ch. 2)
 - The healing of the lame man and the resultant arrest of Peter and John (3:1—4:31)
 - The community of goods (4:32—5:11)
 - The arrest of the 12 apostles (5:12–42)
 - The choice of the Seven (6:1–7)
 - Stephen’s arrest and martyrdom (6:8—7:60)
 - The scattering of the Jerusalem believers (8:1–4)
 - Philip’s ministry (8:5–40)
 - In Samaria (8:5–25)
 - To the Ethiopian eunuch (8:26–40)
 - Saul’s conversion (9:1–31)
 - “As far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch” (9:32—12:25; see 11:19 and note)
 - Peter’s ministry on the Mediterranean coast (9:32—11:18)
 - To Aeneas and Dorcas (9:32–43)
 - To Cornelius (10:1—11:18)

- The new Gentile church in Antioch (11:19–30)
- Herod’s persecution of the church and his subsequent death (ch. 12)
- Paul and the Expansion of the Church from Antioch to Rome (chs. 13–28)
 - “Throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia” (13:1—15:35; see 16:6 and note)
 - Paul’s first missionary journey (chs. 13–14)
 - The Jerusalem conference (15:1–35)
 - “Over to Macedonia” (15:36—21:16; see 16:9 and note)
 - Paul’s second missionary journey (15:36—18:22)
 - Paul’s third missionary journey (18:23—21:16)
 - “To Rome” (21:17—28:31; see 28:14 and note)
 - Paul’s imprisonment in Jerusalem (21:17—23:35)
 - Arrest (21:17—22:29)
 - Trial before the Sanhedrin (22:30—23:11)
 - Transfer to Caesarea (23:12–35)
 - Paul’s imprisonment in Caesarea (chs. 24–26)
 - Trial before Felix (ch. 24)
 - Trial before Festus (25:1–12)
 - Hearing before Festus and Agrippa (25:13—26:32)
 - Voyage to Rome (27:1—28:15)
 - Two years under house arrest in Rome (28:16–31)

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