

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)

“Jehovah, Lord of Heaven and Earth”

Hymn no. 269



1. Jehovah, Lord of heav'n and earth,
Thy word of truth proclaim!
Oh, may it spread from pole to pole,
Till all shall know thy name;
Oh, may it spread from pole to pole,
Till all shall know thy name.

2. We long to see thy Church increase,
Thine own new kingdom grow,
That all the earth may live in peace,
And heav'n be seen below;
That all the earth may live in peace,
And heav'n be seen below.

3. Roll on thy work in all its pow'r!
The distant nations bring!
In thy new kingdom may they stand,
And own thee God and King;
In thy new kingdom may they stand,
And own thee God and King.

4. One general chorus then shall rise
From men of ev'ry tongue,
And songs of joy salute the skies,
By ev'ry nation sung;
And songs of joy salute the skies,
By ev'ry nation sung.

Historical Questions about Acts

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 WHO WROTE IT, WHERE AND WHEN WAS IT WRITTEN,
 AND TO WHOM WAS IT ORIGINALLY INTENDED?

Internal Evidence about Authorship

What does the text itself say about who wrote Acts?

• Direct Evidence

- **Formally anonymous**, never directly names author
- Even the current title is not original
 - *Superscriptions and subscriptions do not begin appearing in manuscripts till the end of the 2nd century*
- **So-called “we passages”**
 - *Author seems to have been part of some later events (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 Luke share the same author**
 - *“Theophilus dedication,” summary of Luke in Acts 1:1-2, uniform literary style, same theme of God working in history*
- **not an eyewitness** for most of the material but depended on others for his information (Luke 1:2-3)
- Quality of Greek suggests the author had a **thorough Hellenistic education**
- Sympathy with and attention to Gentiles suggests that author was not himself Jewish or from Palestine
 - *Perhaps a “God-fearer?”*

External Evidence about Authorship

What do other ancient sources say about who wrote Acts?

- **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 a **Luke** among Paul’s “fellow workers”
- **Patristic evidence (early church fathers) 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)

Date and Place

When and Where Was This Book Written?

- **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
 - Gospel of Luke *may* have been written after A.D. 70
- **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”*
- **Working date: A.D. 80**
- **Place of Composition: Indeterminable**

Audience

To whom was Acts originally written?

- **Narrowly to “Theophilus”**
 - Perhaps **a real person** who was the work’s patron
 - Probably **a type**
 - the name means “lover of God!”
 - Whether real or a type, *“Theophilus” probably represents the larger Christian community*
- **Broadly directed to the 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*

Literary Questions about Acts

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 WHAT IS IT ABOUT, WHAT KIND OF WRITING IS IT, WHAT STYLE
 DOES IT EMPLOY, HOW IS IT STRUCTURED?

Title

What was it called? What should it be called?

- **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
- **Nevertheless “Acts of the Apostles” is imprecise**
 - *Some of the acts of some of the apostles!*
- **Perhaps “Acts of Peter and especially Paul” would be better, but it also includes some of Stephen and Philip and others . . .**
- **“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)**

What are Genre Questions?

See “What Kind of Writing Is This Passage” (packet, 329)

- Generic questions deal with both **the type of writing a work is (genre)** and **how that type of writing effects the way one reads it (generic expectations)**
- Fundamental division between **poetry** and **prose**
- Broad generic categories
 - **Narrative**: telling a story, usually in the third person
 - **Discourse**: quoting someone’s speech, usually in the first or second person
 - Includes speeches, dialogues, other “quoted” material
 - **Dramatic writing**: often combines narrative and discourse for effect
- Numerous specific categories (see lecture 2 slide 19 and packet)

Genre of Acts as a Whole

What is the overarching classification of the book?

- 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**—the story of the Christian movement after Jesus
 - 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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Genres of Its Parts

Different sections of Acts are comprised of different genres

- **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**
 - Other speeches, such as courtroom defenses
 - Dialogues
- Combined, particularly in **dramatic episodes** (“dramatic narrative” for convenience of description)

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Style and Characteristics

- **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) and the Holy Ghost at Christ's baptism = **Church filled with the Spirit** (Acts 1:13-14; 2:1-4)
 - Christ performing miracles = **Peter and Paul performing similar miracles**

Style and Characteristics Continued

- **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)*

Structure of Acts

How is the book organized?

- Acts chronicles **the geographic and ethnic expansion of the gospel**
 - **Thematic/structural statement:** “But ye shall receive power, after the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and you shall be witnesses unto me both **in Jerusalem**, and **in all Judaea**, and **in Samaria**, and **unto the uttermost parts 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)

Theological Questions in Acts

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HOW DO THE THEMES OF ACTS TEACH DOCTRINAL TRUTHS, BOTH THEN AND NOW?

Major Themes in Acts

- **Theological History** (*Heilsgeschichte*): how God interacts with mankind
 - God working **in Israel** (Luke 1–2, fulfilled in Acts 1–2)
 - God working **in the person of Jesus** (most of Luke, Acts 1:1–3)
 - God continuing to work **through the body of the church** (Luke 24:49–53, most 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 witnesses** (Acts 15:28; 16:6–7)
- **Spread of the Apostolic Witness**

Basic Teachings and Practices

“Principles and Ordinances” found in Acts

- **Christology** (person and work of Jesus)
- **Apostles**, qualifications and calls of
- **Role of the Holy Ghost** (baptism of fire, direction of, gifts signs of)
- **God is no respecter of persons**
- **Faith in Christ leads to repentance and baptism**
- **Men and women as the offspring of God**
- **The power of given to God’s servants** (priesthood authority)
- **Signs follow them that believe**