

The Book of Acts and the Early History of the Church

1. Authorship of Acts

Christian tradition (2nd century) attributes Luke and Acts to the same author. Note the 'we' passages in Acts (16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16) and the use of the first-person singular in the introduction to the Gospel and Acts. Is the author using a source in which the 'we' already occurred, or was he himself present on the occasions described? Luke is among Paul's companions mentioned in the letters but not in Acts (cf. Col. 4:14).

2. The Date of Acts

In favour of an early date (64-65 CE) Acts ends abruptly with Paul's arrival in Rome and no reference is made to the destruction of the Temple (70 CE).

A later date (around 85-90 CE) is suggested by the following: i) since the same author wrote the third Gospel, both probably post-date Mark (ca. 69-70 CE); ii) silence on Paul's death may be the result of presenting Christianity favourable to the Romans

3. Acts as a Record of Early Church History

A crucial source for the history of the Early Church, possibly written due to the delay of the parousia, despite the fact that it offers a selective account with some inconsistencies (cf. Luke 24:46-47 and Acts 1; 9:7 and 22:9).

3.1 Spreading the Message from Jerusalem to Rome Note the commission of the risen Jesus to his disciples to preach 'in Jerusalem, and in the whole of Judaea and Samaria, to the ends of the earth' (1:8). This is the threefold pattern in Acts: the disciples preaching in Jerusalem (2:1-8:3); missionary activity in Samaria (8:4-12:25); movement to 'the ends of the world', first to Diaspora Jews and then to Gentiles (13-28).

3.2 Figures and Events in Jerusalem During the stage when Peter, James and John (sons of Zebedee) were the 'pillars' (Gal. 2:9) in Jerusalem, their mission was to preach among Jews. Note the distinction between 'Hebrews' and 'Hellenists' in Acts 6; the tension between them led the Hellenists to appoint their own council of seven men to oversee the daily distribution of food to widows (6:1-6), although they were also probably the leaders of the Greek-speaking Jewish community. Hellenists had a more liberal attitude to the Torah and the Temple; Stephen was accused and finally executed for his critique of Judaism (7:51-53).

3.3 The Mission from Jerusalem After Stephen's death Philip preached in Samaria (Acts 8:4-25), whilst certain Hellenists preached to Greeks and Jews in Antioch, Syria (11:20). It was at Antioch that the church received a new name: Christians (11:26).

3.4 The Missionary Paul Paul first opposed the new sect (7:58; 8:1, 3; 22:4-5), but, as a result of his call-vision on the way to Damascus, he became a missionary to the Gentiles (9:1-19). He established communities through Asia Minor and Greece.

3.5 The Inclusion of Gentile Believers Torah-observant Jewish Christians maintained that Gentile converts should be circumcised and follow food laws (Acts 15:1, 5), debated during the Jerusalem council. During Paul's missionary travels in cities, he began in synagogues (among Jews and 'God-fearers'), but, following Jewish rejection, would then focus on Gentiles (cf. Acts 13:46).

3.6 Conflict in the Roman World Opposition from Gentiles (cf. 19:23-41: idol-makers in Ephesus), but official persecution by Nero in AD 64. According to tradition Nero had both Peter and Paul executed (cf. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.25.5).

4. Theological History in Luke-Acts

Emphasis (Hans Conzelmann and Ernst Haenchen) on the importance of *Heilsgeschichte* ("salvation history") in Luke-Acts; the author wrote his two-volume work according to three periods: the old Israel and the old covenant (reflected in the infancy narratives); the period of Jesus; the true or new Israel represented by the church.

4.1 A Spirit-Led Movement The spread of the message of salvation from Jerusalem to Rome, from Jews to Gentiles, is characterized by the work of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 1-2; 8:14-17; 10:44-48; 19:1-7).

4.2 Sermons as Theological Testimonies Jesus' disciples bear witness by preaching sermons at key narrative points: Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost (2:14-42); his sermon in the Temple (3:12-16); his sermon to Cornelius (10:34-43); Paul's sermon in the synagogue at Antioch Pisidia (13:16-41); his sermon to the Greeks in Athens (17:22-31). The focus is upon Jesus' resurrection and the need for repentance.

5. The Purpose of Luke-Acts: The Prologue

The prologue to the Gospel explains the author's purpose in composing both volumes: 'Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the

events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed' (1:1-4).

5.1 A Record to Promote Faith The author is interested in recording historical facts. Note the form of address employed, 'most excellent Theophilus' (*kratiste Theophile*), a term used to address Roman officials (Acts 23:26; 24:3; 26:25). Both volumes seek to persuade Theophilus to believe in Jesus.

5.2 Fulfilment of Prophecy The events described are the fulfilment of earlier promises (OT prophecies). For example, the events of Pentecost fulfil the prophecy of Joel (Acts 2:16-21; Joel 2:28-32). The Jews reject Paul and he turns to the Gentiles in fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah (Acts 28:25-27; Isaiah 6:9-10).

Bibliography

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