



The Acts of the Apostles

Introduction

The Book of Acts is the second volume of a two-volume work. The first volume is the Gospel According to Luke and the second volume is the Acts of the Apostles. The arrangement of our Bibles confuses the close relationship between these two works by separating them with the Gospel of John. Almost certainly the first readers of Acts would have read our book or heard it as the immediate sequel to Luke's Gospel.

Traditionally both volumes have been attributed to Luke and Luke has been identified as a physician and as Paul's travel companion (see Philemon 24, Colossians 4:14 and 2 Timothy 4:11). The identification of Luke as the author of the Gospel and of Acts is later than the earliest versions of the writings themselves, but in these studies, we will refer to the author as "Luke" without trying to make a judgment about whether he was the Luke who is mentioned both in Acts and in the New Testament epistles.

What we can tell about our author is that he is self-consciously a historian. Each of our four biblical gospels is written for particular purposes, but it is Luke who most clearly states the purpose of his two volume work in the prefaces he writes – Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1-5.

In the prologue to Acts, Luke states clearly that this is the second volume of his work. Both prefaces are addressed to Theophilus. Theophilus may have been Luke's patron – the one who invited him to write the two volumes. Or he may have been simply a friend and acquaintance with whom Luke wanted to share his convictions. The name "Theophilus" means "Friend of God", and it is also possible that Luke uses the name as a kind of code for a whole group of seekers who have accepted the monotheism of the synagogue but have yet to be persuaded that Jesus is the great prophet predicted by Moses and indeed is God's own son.

In Acts there are a few references to a group called "The God-Fearers." These were apparently Gentiles who took part in some of the activities of the synagogue but had not become converts to the faith of the Jewish people. Perhaps they resisted the requirements regarding circumcision and diet, but for whatever reason, they were philosophically interested in the Jewish faith but not yet persuaded to convert. It is possible that in addressing "Theophilus" Luke is addressing the group of god-fearers who have not yet converted to the Jewish faith and who may in fact be excellent candidates to follow the apostles on "The Way" of Jesus.

As a historian, Luke makes clear in the preface to his first volume that he has not invented his material but that he uses literary sources – like any good historian – to provide the material for

his work. We are quite sure that among the sources for Luke are the Gospel of Mark and a collection of sayings that Matthew also had. That collection has never been found, but is called “Q” because “Q” is the first letter of the German word Quelle or “source.” Luke also has material in his gospel that is his alone, including some of his best loved material—the stories around Jesus’ birth and the great parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son.

We are less clear what sources Luke may have used in writing Acts, though again it seems likely that he had some written material at hand. Toward the end of Acts, there are some chapters where the author moves into the first-person plural and talks about what “we” did, suggesting that either the author or his source had first-hand reminiscences of some of these events. We will look at this issue a bit more in our individual sessions.

Of course, Luke is not just a historian, he is a historian of the church. More than any of the other Gospel writers and more than Paul in his epistles, Luke is clear that the church has had a history and will continue to have a history. Because Luke and Acts are the two volumes of that history we can see that for Luke, his Gospel is in part intended as the first volume of a history of the church. It is not just the story of Jesus – it is the story of Jesus as the founder of a movement which continues and grows after his death, resurrection and ascension.

In the two volumes, Luke-Acts, this history of the church is traced both temporally and geographically.

In the mid twentieth century the German New Testament Hans Conzelmann wrote a book whose title in English was *The Theology of Luke*. However, a more literal translation from Conzelmann’s German title is “*The Middle of Time*.” Conzelmann argues that for Luke the historian, the story of Jesus is the story of the middle of time, the middle of history. Not only is Jesus’ story chronologically in the center of history, it is theologically the center, the climactic act of God’s dealing with humankind.

Though some of the details of Conzelmann’s readings of Luke-Acts have been questioned, it seems to us that he persuasively argues that Luke sees history as divided into three great eras – the era of prophecy, up to and probably including John the Baptist; the era of Jesus; and the era of the church.

Because of Luke’s great stress on the movement of the Spirit in the life of the church, it is possible to see in the movement of his work a kind of hint of what would later be Trinitarian theology. Luke and Acts move from the era of the Father to the era of the Son to the era of the Spirit. Acts, our book for this study, is above all the history of the Spirit at work in the church.

Geographically Luke and Acts tell the story of God’s activity as it spreads from Jerusalem to Rome. Both Luke and Acts begin with Jerusalem, and the two-volume work ends in Rome. In part this is how Luke tells of the spread of the Christian movement from somewhat provincial beginnings to the very center of the Roman empire. In part this is also how Luke indicates that the Jesus story spreads from its Jewish beginnings to include Gentiles and indeed all the company of creation.

As we shall see, this movement is also signaled in Acts from the early concentration on Peter, who was known as apostle to the Jews, to Paul, who was known as the apostle to the Gentiles.

(Though in Acts both Peter and Paul are drawn by the Holy Spirit to a generous view of God's dealing with Gentiles as well as Jews.) And of course, if Theophilus is a representative of Gentiles seeking faith, it is good news for him to watch the Gospel spread to include sympathetic Gentiles like himself.

Unfortunately, none of the New Testament writers give us clear indication of the date of their writing. Most scholars are convinced that Luke wrote after Mark, because he apparently used much of Mark's material in his gospel. There are also clear hints especially in the last chapters of Acts that the generation of the original apostles has now died and that the church is in the hands of a new generation (exemplified by the Ephesian elders). Our guess, along with many other students of Luke, is that both Luke and Acts were written sometime in the 80s or 90s of our era.

Again we have no clear indication of the audience for which Luke and Acts were originally written, but we are intrigued by the suggestion of Professor Peter Lampe of the University of Heidelberg that the elders of Acts 20 represented a kind of surrogate for Luke's original readers and that the books were written originally as a guide for churches and church leaders in Ephesus.

Our guesses about dates and first audience are of course speculative. What is not speculative is that Luke and Acts alike try to provide theological insight and practical guidance for churches in the first generation after the Apostles. What is not speculative is the claim that unlike Mark and Matthew or even Paul, Luke writes history for a church that has a future to look forward to as well as a history to remember. Of course, Jesus will return, but in the meantime there is a gospel to be preached and churches to be organized.