

Part Three

THE EARLY CHURCH AND PAUL

IN THIS PORTION of this work, the book of Acts (chap. 8) forms the basic framework for the discussion of Paul's life and ministry (chap. 9) and subsequent chapters treating Paul's letters in chronological sequence in their presumed order of writing (chaps. 10–15): Galatians; 1 & 2 Thessalonians; 1 & 2 Corinthians; Romans; the Prison Epistles (Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon); and the Pastoral Epistles (1 & 2 Timothy; Titus).

Organizing the material in this way enables the student to get a sense of the development of the early church and first-century Christianity throughout Paul's missionary career. Since Paul wrote 13 of the 27 books of the NT, and since his letters probe the major implications of Jesus' mission and saving cross-work for NT believers, Part Three forms the very heart of this Introduction to the NT. It is complemented and completed by the discussion of the General Epistles and the book of Revelation in Part Four (chaps. 16–20) and a concluding chapter on unity and diversity in the NT (chap. 21).

CHAPTER 8

THE BOOK OF ACTS

CORE KNOWLEDGE

Basic Knowledge: Students should know the key facts about the book of Acts. With regard to history, student should be able to identify the book's author, date, provenance, destination, and purpose. With regard to literature, they should be able to provide a basic outline of the book and identify core elements of the book's content found in the Unit-by-Unit discussion. With regard to theology, students should be able to identify the major theological themes in the book of Acts.

Intermediate Knowledge: In addition to mastery of the core content identified in Basic Knowledge above, students should be able to present the arguments for historical, literary, and theological conclusions. With regard to history, students should be able to discuss the evidence for Lukan authorship, date, provenance, destination, and purpose. With regard to literature, they should be able to provide a detailed outline of the book. With regard to theology, students should be able to discuss the major theological themes in the book of Acts and the ways in which they uniquely contribute to the NT canon.

Advanced Knowledge: In addition to mastery of the core content identified in Basic Knowledge and beyond the Intermediate Knowledge noted above, students should be able to evaluate critically and to assess the historical accuracy of the speeches, the Jerusalem Council, and the miracles recorded in Acts. They should also be able to evaluate accurately the sources that lie behind the composition of Acts.

KEY FACTS

AUTHOR:	Luke
DATE:	Early 60s
PROVENANCE:	Rome
DESTINATION:	Theophilus
PURPOSE:	A defense of the Christian faith showing the expansion of the early church from a Jewish sect to a worldwide movement
THEME:	Salvation history: the birth and mission of the early church
KEY VERSE:	1:8

INTRODUCTION

WHEN OSCAR WILDE was studying the classics at Oxford, he had to take an oral exam to test his knowledge of Greek. The examiners looked at him, sensed that he was “an effete and ‘difficult’ young man,” and assigned him the most difficult text to translate in the Greek NT: the account of Paul’s shipwreck in Acts 27 with its extensive use of nautical language. “That will be all, Mr. Wilde,” the examiners said, when Oscar, a brilliant Greek student, provided an effortless translation. “Oh, please,” exclaimed Wilde, “do let me go on—I am longing to know how the story finishes.”¹

This anecdote illustrates two facets of the book of Acts. To begin with, it is the account of a grand adventure, taking us from Palestine to the center of the Gentile world: Rome. Along the way, it includes the exciting story of encounters with hostile people and governments; sailing adventures and shipwrecks; and even courtroom dramas. No doubt about it, the book of Acts is an exciting adventure. But the anecdote not only underlines the exciting tale that is the book of Acts, it also leaves us (like Wilde) longing to know how the story finished after the end of the book since Paul remained under arrest in Rome awaiting trial.

¹ A. N. Wilson, *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 21–22. Ironically, of course, Wilde would *not* have found out how the story finishes even *if* he had read through the end of the book of Acts, since the story is open-ended.

HISTORY

Author

In a previous chapter, we identified Luke the beloved physician as the author of both the Gospel and the book of Acts. To recapitulate, Luke was a well-educated man, steeped in the OT (especially the LXX). He knew the geography of Palestine and the Mediterranean world. He was not an original disciple (see Luke 1:2), but was a traveling companion of Paul (thus the use of the first person plural pronoun in the “we” passages starting at Acts 16:8–17; see Table 8.1 below) and revealed great respect for Paul in his writings. Thus while Luke was not an eyewitness of the events recorded in his Gospel, he was an eyewitness of a significant portion of events narrated in the second half of the book of Acts. Luke’s close association with the apostle Paul ensured that the canonical criterion of apostolicity was met.

Table 8.1: The “We” Passages in Acts

Passage in Acts	Journeys and Locations	Event
16:8–17	Troas to Philippi	Ministry in Philippi
20:5–15	Philippi to Troas to Miletus	On way to Jerusalem
21:1–18	Miletus to Jerusalem via Caesarea	On way to Jerusalem
27:1–28:16	Caesarea to Rome	All the way to Rome

Date

Like its authorship, the date of the book of Acts was established in the chapter on the Gospel of Luke. The following brief discussion summarizes the major views on the subject. There are basically three positions set forth in the relevant literature: (1) a date prior to 70; (2) a date of 70–100; and (3) a date in the second century.

Virtually no one today dates Acts in the second century, although this has been proposed in the past.² The more popular date among less conservative commentators is a date some time after 75. This is usually based on these

² E.g., the Tübingen School posited a reconciling tendency in the book of Acts and assigned the book to the second century. A few have suggested a later date on other grounds: see F. C. Burkitt, *The Gospel History and Its Transmission*, 3d ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1911), 105–10; M. S. Enslin, “Once Again, Luke and Paul,” *ZNW* 61 (1970): 253, 271; and J. C. O’Neill, *The Theology of Acts in Its Historical Setting* (London: SPCK, 1961), 21, 26.

scholars' solution to the Synoptic Problem (typically in terms of Markan priority) and a dating of Mark in the mid- to late 60s.³ The abrupt ending of Acts is then explained in terms of Luke completing his purpose.⁴

An early date, however, remains the best option for the book of Acts. The aforementioned abrupt ending; the neutral, if not friendly, presentation of the Roman Empire;⁵ the lack of mention of the Pauline Letters; and the lack of mention of the Jewish war and its events all point to an early date for Acts.⁶ The ending of Acts is best explained as Luke having recorded everything that has happened up to this point in Paul's mission. Although not universally accepted, an early date is thus most plausible in light of the available evidence.

If, (1) if Paul was released from his first Roman imprisonment in which he found himself at the end of the book of Acts; (2) engaged in several years of further missionary travels and ministry as the Pastorals suggest; (3) if his martyrdom was preceded by a second, significantly harsher, Roman imprisonment as 2 Timothy seems to indicate; and (4) as tradition indicates, Paul was martyred in c. 65/66 during the persecution under Nero (54–68) subsequent to the great fire in Rome (64); this indicates that 60 is the most reasonable date for the conclusion of the book of Acts and a date of composition shortly thereafter.

Provenance

If the evidence for the date has been rightly evaluated, the only option for the provenance of the book is the city of Rome. If Luke had caught up in time with Paul so that the apostle was awaiting trial in Rome at the time of writing, and if the "we sections" are an indication of personal involvement, then Luke was with Paul when he wrote the book. This was the view of Irenaeus (c. 130–200), Eusebius (c. 260–340), and Jerome (c. 345–420).⁷ The Anti-Marcionite Prologue mentions Achaia as the place of publication. Jerome's belief that Luke wrote from Rome was self-admittedly adduced from

³ For this argument see J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 31 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1998), 54–55.

⁴ E.g., D. J. Williams, *Acts*, NIBC 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 13; and W. G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, rev. ed., trans. H. C. Kee (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975), 186. It must also be noted that this is not just a "liberal" vs. "conservative" option, for the generally conservative D. Wenham dates Acts rather late: D. Wenham and S. Walton, *Exploring the New Testament: A Guide to the Gospels and Acts*, vol. 1 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 297.

⁵ P. Parker ("The 'Former Treatise' and the Date of Acts," *JBL* 84 [1965]: 53) noted, "For any Christian to write, thereafter, with the easy optimism of Acts 28 would require almost subhuman obtuseness."

⁶ For a slightly different track to reach the same conclusion, see A. J. Matil, "The Date and Purpose of Luke-Acts: Rackham Reconsidered," *CBQ* 40 (1978): 335–50.

⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1; 3.14.1; Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* 2.22.6; and Jerome, *De Viris Illustribus* 7.

the ending of Acts.⁸ The other church fathers may well have come to the same conclusion. Ultimately, we are left with a few contradictory snippets in the tradition. This makes the provenance hard to pinpoint. Like Irenaeus, Jerome, and Eusebius, one may deduce from the ending that Luke was with Paul in Rome at the time of writing without staking any undue weight on this deduction. (Also, at a later point, Luke is said to be the only one left with Paul in Rome; 2 Tim 4:11.)

Destination

Theophilus, like Josephus's Epaphroditus, goes unnamed in the rest of the narrative. As discussed in chap. 6 on Luke's Gospel, little is known about him other than that he may have been a Roman official (see the designation "most excellent" in Luke 1:3; it also occurs in Acts 23:26; 24:3; 26:25 with reference to Felix and Festus) and that he had received previous information regarding the Christian faith (Luke 1:4). Most likely, he was Luke's literary patron, in which case he would not only have paid the price of publication, but may have housed Luke during the book's production and made the manuscript available for copying subsequent to its completion.

In addition, it is very likely Luke had a target audience beyond Theophilus. In determining the makeup of Luke's intended readers, it is instructive to look at the kind of information that Luke expected or did not expect his audience to know. On the one hand, he did not expect his readers to know the basic details of Judean topography, as in the statement that Mount Olivet was near Jerusalem (Acts 1:12). Nor did he expect them to know the local language: Aramaic terms are explained (see 1:12, 19; 4:36; 9:36; 13:8). At the same time, no explanation is given with regard to Jewish institutions such as Pentecost (2:1; 20:16), "a Sabbath day's journey" (1:12), "uncleaness" (10:14), and "Passover" (12:4), which suggests that Luke expected his audience to be familiar with this kind of information.⁹ Likewise, it may be assumed that since the OT quotes are from the LXX, this was the Bible of choice among Luke's readers.

Finally, the apologetic thrust of the book, setting forth the expansion of Christianity from a Jewish sect to a worldwide movement, may also indicate a particular target audience, namely, anyone interested in the astonishing rise of the Christian movement from humble beginnings in Jerusalem to the empire's capital, Rome. On the whole, then, Acts is a book that would resonate

⁸ Jerome, *De Viris Illustribus* 7.

⁹ C. J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 107.

well with non-Aramaic speakers familiar with the Greek OT. This would have included Gentile Christians, and it would not have ruled out Diaspora Jews or Jewish Christians living outside of Palestine. Beyond this, anyone interested in the nature and phenomenal rise of Christianity in the first few decades of the church would have found the book of Acts valuable and informative.

Purpose

Numerous proposals have been made regarding the purpose of Acts. These include evangelism,¹⁰ an apology or defense of the Christian faith,¹¹ Paul's legal defense,¹² various theological concerns,¹³ the historical basis of the establishment and growth of the kingdom of God,¹⁴ and evangelism and edification.¹⁵

In considering the purpose of Acts, it must be remembered that the work is a sequel to Luke's Gospel. This does not necessarily mean that the purpose of Acts is identical to the purpose of Luke's Gospel; it means that the former should be related appropriately to the latter (see especially Acts 1:1). If the preface to Luke applies to Acts as well—and given the brevity of Acts' preface, this is most likely the case—then Luke set out to write an orderly account and to provide assurance and an apology or defense of the Christian faith. But what kind of defense did Luke provide?

The first and best indication is the literary structure of Acts, which revolves around showing the early expansion of the church from a local sect to a worldwide movement as empowered by God. Each expansion is brought about by the leading of the Holy Spirit rather than by the disciples' own initiative. In this theological emphasis, the book manifests the same focus on God's plan (including promise and fulfillment) that is prominent in Luke's

¹⁰ E.g., W. J. Larkin, *Acts*, IVPNTC (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995), 19–20; W. Neil, *Acts*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 28.

¹¹ R. H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 304; F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 20; D. A. deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods, and Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004), 354; L. T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, SacPag 5 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992).

¹² B. H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins* (London: St. Martins, 1953), 539. Kümmel (*Introduction*, 162) also lists Munck, Sahlin, and Koh.

¹³ E.g., the geographical movement of the gospel (T. Zahn, *Die Apostelgeschichte des Lukas* [Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1919–21], 14–15); the adjudication of church controversies (E. Trocmé, *Le 'Livre des Actes' et l'Histoire* [Paris: University of France Press, 1957]); or the explanation of the delay of the *parousia* or Second Coming (H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* [New York: Harper & Row, 1961]).

¹⁴ I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 17–22.

¹⁵ So D. A. Carson and D. J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 305; R. E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 272–73; and Kümmel, *Introduction*, 163.

Gospel. This also answers the question of why a sequel to Luke's Gospel was needed in the first place. The Gospel is "about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1), and Acts narrates the continuation of that which was begun in the Gospel. The story of Jesus is not complete until the gospel has moved from the Jewish capital to "the end of the earth"—all the way to Rome (Acts 1:8).

It is sometimes claimed that Luke's Gospel is continually journeying toward Jerusalem (especially the "Lukan Travel Narrative") and that the book of Acts is moving away from Jerusalem to the "ends of the earth." But this is an oversimplification. More precisely, the book of Acts spirals out from Jerusalem and Palestine. In the second half of the book Paul was continually returning to Jerusalem, only to set out deeper and deeper into the Gentile world. Three factors point to a sustained apologetic for Gentile inclusion on the basis of the Jewish rejection of the Messiah: the sustained apologetic for Gentile inclusion in the first part of the book that culminated in the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1–29), Paul's consistent pattern of preaching in the local synagogue in each city before moving on to the Gentiles, and his repeated return to Jerusalem.

This prominently surfaces in Acts 28:25–27, where Paul, upon reaching Rome, first speaks to the Jewish leaders there. Some of them believe, but to those who do not Paul cited Isa 6:9–10:

The Holy Spirit correctly spoke through the prophet Isaiah to your forefathers when he said, "Go to this people and say: 'You will listen and listen, yet never understand; and you will look and look, yet never perceive. For this people's heart has grown callous, their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; otherwise they might see with their eyes and hear with their ears, understand with their heart, and be converted—and I would heal them.'"

Having thus explained the rejection of the gospel by the Jews, Paul drew the following implication: "Therefore, let it be known to you that this saving work of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen!" (28:28). With this, the book of Acts closes.

The literary structure of the book thus points to a historical apologetic that explains God's plan extending the gospel to the Gentiles while including believing Jews as well. While it can be surmised that Luke's target audience included non-Aramaic speakers who were familiar with the OT, the apologetic presented is wide-ranging, including the evangelism of Diaspora Jews

as well as the edification of Gentile Christians who worship the Jewish Messiah whom the Jews had rejected. Luke's purpose was to write an accurate historical narrative designed to edify his Christian readers and to help them evangelize unbelievers.

Something to Think About: Christianity Takes the World by Storm

If the first generation of the Christian church proves anything, it is this: the power of God is infinitely greater than any human obstacles in its way. A humble Galilean craftsman, who suffered an untimely death and accumulated no earthly possessions, wrote no books, and left behind nothing but a small band of disheartened followers, spawned a movement so powerful that it took the Roman empire by storm.

How was this possible? There is only one satisfying answer: the same Jesus who was crucified on a hill outside of Jerusalem rose again from the dead three days later and was exalted to the right hand of God. As Peter proclaimed at Pentecost, "God has resurrected this Jesus. We are all witnesses of this. Therefore, since he has been exalted to the right hand of God and has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit, he has poured out what you both see and hear" (2:32–33).

The rest of the book of Acts records the amazing, astounding, breathtaking, irresistible progress of the Christian gospel in a world where the Jews fiercely oppose the early church's mission and where, ironically, the Romans protect Paul and the early Christians from certain death. Internal obstacles, whether dishonesty or potential disunity, are overcome, as are persecution and various external threats. Not clever strategy, but humble trust in God and faithful witness to him empower the early Christians, who prove victorious again and again.

Luke's account of the spiritual exploits of the early church can serve as a mighty inspiration to the church of all ages which is faced with the same challenge of bearing witness to the living, resurrected Christ in a world hostile to the gospel message. As we continue this godly legacy, we must make sure our trust, as that of the first Christians, is in the same God who raised Jesus from the dead and for whom no obstacle is too great if we only put our trust in him and his awesome power rather than in our own ability to overcome the obstacles we face.

LITERATURE

Genre

The question regarding the genre of Acts is more than merely a matter of curiosity. The answer to this question helps one to identify the expectations one should have when approaching the book. Certain genres of literature have no or little expectation of trustworthiness or historical veracity (e.g., a fairy tale or a novel). It matters, therefore, if the book of Acts was written as a collection of legends or as a serious historical narrative. For this reason identifying the genre of Acts is a significant aid in understanding Luke's purpose.

Similar to the Gospels, the literary genre of Acts is difficult to determine with certainty. There are few (if any) works of a similar nature prior to the publication of Acts. Also, again similar to the Gospels, a host of apocryphal "Acts" were written in imitation of the canonical book.¹⁶ This is not to say that the term "Acts" is original. In literary circles, "Acts" (praxeis) referred to the heroic deeds of mythical or historical figures, but this kind of writing was most likely not an established literary genre (even less was the term featured in titles) when Luke penned this volume.¹⁷

The Gospels have been identified by some as a specialized form of biography, with the words and deeds of Jesus at the center. If so, at first sight, Luke's second volume does not seem to fit this description, as it features the deeds of more than one person: Peter, Stephen, Philip, Paul, and so on. There are several significant human agents, but there is one, and only one, major divine agent underlying the entire plot of the book of Acts: the Holy Spirit. For this reason, rather than identifying the book as presenting the "Acts of the Apostles," it may be more accurate to say that at its heart are the "Acts of the Holy Spirit."¹⁸

In fact, this unity of what Jesus began to do during his earthly ministry and what he began to do in the power of the Holy Spirit subsequent to his ascension seems to be precisely what is implied by Luke himself in the opening verse of Acts: "I wrote the first narrative, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up, after he had given orders through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen" (Acts 1:1–2).

¹⁶ E.g., *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*; *The Acts of John*; *The Acts of Peter*; et al.

¹⁷ Fitzmyer, *Acts of the Apostles*, 47; and Carson and Moo, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 301.

¹⁸ So is Acts a sort of "biography" of the Holy Spirit, or perhaps a "biography" of the ascended Christ conducting his work through the Holy Spirit and the apostolic church? If so, this would need to be understood within the larger framework of God's salvation-historical purposes, on which see further below.

This may constitute the common ground between Luke's Gospel and Acts and mark both books as a literary unity.¹⁹

In recent times, the genre of Acts has been identified by some as related to the romance literature of its time, that is, as a kind of novel.²⁰ This is ultimately unproven and not very helpful.²¹ More likely, the genre of Acts is bound up with historiography. The early church fathers, who were familiar with the different literary genres, referred to the book as a "history."²² Although Luke did not use the term himself, there is good evidence that he set out to write a historical account. He wrote in a Septuagintal style resembling OT narratives.²³ It thus appears that Luke saw himself as writing sacred history.²⁴

Another good indication of this comes from the prefaces of Luke and Acts. D. Aune suggested that Luke's Gospel exhibits the following four of seven features of ancient historiography: (1) requests and dedications; (2) mention of predecessors; (3) use of appropriate methodology; and (4) reasons for writing.²⁵ If the preface to the Gospel covers both volumes, then Luke claimed

¹⁹ Against M. C. Parsons and R. I. Pervo (*Rethinking the Unity of Luke and Acts* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993], 20–44), who identified Acts as a "romance" and registered concerns about what they see as a shift in genre between Luke and Acts. Also, Luke mentioned other Gospels in Luke 1:1, but he did not mention any such predecessors in the case of the book of Acts (see B. Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 9).

²⁰ See R. I. Pervo, *Profit with Delight* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987). However, just because the work is entertaining does not mean that it must be in the novel genre. Pervo's genre identification is followed by the Westar Institute's "Acts Seminar." This seminar, of which Pervo is a fellow, is a sequel to the notorious "Jesus Seminar." D. E. Smith ("Was There a Jerusalem Church? Christian Origins According to Acts and Paul," *Forum* 3 [Spring 2000]: 57) said, "Today some scholars still propose that Acts can be defined under the genre of ancient history in some sense, but the burden of proof has now shifted to those who would claim historicity for Acts." In that same volume, D. R. MacDonald ("Luke's Emulation of Homer: Acts 12:1–17 and Illiad [sic] 24," *Forum* 3 [Fall 1999]: 197) stated that "the Acts of the Apostles is a self-conscious fiction.... The historical stratum, if any, is extremely thin and from my perspective quite uninteresting." Lucian, in the second-century work *How to Write History*, noted that the historian's task was not free from providing an entertainment value. He wrote, "The task of the historian is...to give a fine arrangement to events and illuminate them as vividly as possible" (51).

²¹ Marshall, *Fresh Look*, 19–21.

²² See Clement, *Stromateis* 5.12; Jerome, *Epistles* 53.8. Jerome called it "unadorned history"; Lat. *nuda historia*, which is lit. "naked history."

²³ Since Luke demonstrated an ability to write in other styles, this is most likely deliberate (so I. H. Marshall, *Acts*, TNTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], 18). J. Polhill (*Acts*, NAC 26 [Nashville: B&H, 1992], 43) noted, "Throughout Acts there is a verisimilitude in the narrative. Jews speak with a Jewish accent, Athenian philosophers speak in Atticism, and roman officials speak and write in the customary legal style. Luke showed not only a familiarity with such linguistic idiosyncrasies but also the ability to depict them through his style of writing."

²⁴ Whether or not Luke understood himself to be writing an inspired work is another question.

²⁵ The full list includes requests and dedications, an apology for defective style, comments on the value and utility of history, mention of predecessors, assurance of impartiality, use of appropriate methodology,

to have written an account that is trustworthy, emphasizing the veracity of his research. Moreover, Luke produced a linear historical writing. He was careful to set events clearly at a point in history (called “synchronisms”) and, in line with Greek historiography, arranged his work geographically.²⁶

However, Acts does not seem to fit any one genre of historiography. Like Plutarch’s *Lives*, Acts features the lives and words of well-known people (Peter, Stephen, Paul, etc). At the same time, the book shifts from person to person. Stephen is only important in Acts 6 and 7, Philip in Acts 8. After Acts 15, Peter drops off the scene altogether; and then the main character is Paul, as the gospel moves through the known world. It seems that the personalities involved serve a purpose other than chronicling their lives.

The genre of Acts is also similar to OT historiography. Similar to the Gospels, the history is properly seen as ancient historiography, with a theological focus. Blomberg called it a “theological history,”²⁷ which seems to be a satisfying way of capturing the nature of the book. If so, the reader should expect the book to set forth a historical narrative that strives not only for accuracy in its portrayal of events but also seeks to be God-centered in its approach to history. In Acts, God is engendering salvation history. Thus the next question is: How accurate is this history?

THE HISTORICAL RELIABILITY OF ACTS

Introduction

Assessments of Luke’s accuracy in Acts range from complete affirmation to total denial.²⁸ Some, such as Pervo, complimented Luke’s literary ability while denigrating his accuracy in recording historical details. Pervo claimed

and reasons for writing (D. Aune, *New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, 89–90). L. Alexander (*The Preface to Luke’s Gospel: Literary Convention and Social Context in Luke 1:1–4 and Acts 1:1*, SNTSMS 78 [Cambridge: University Press, 1993]) disagreed and posited that the prefaces in Luke-Acts are more akin to scientific and technical treatises that were written for a less educated audience. She drew the conclusion that Luke was written for an audience with the same level of education. Of course, not every element had to appear for a work to be considered historiography. When the prefaces to Luke and Acts are compared to Josephus’s *Against Apion*, there is an amazing similarity. See Josephus’s preface in the second book against Apion: “In the former book, most honored Epaphroditus, I have demonstrated our antiquity, and confirmed the truth of what I have said, from the writings of the Phoenicians, and Chaldeans, and Egyptians” (Josephus, *Apion* 2.1).

²⁶ See especially the works of Ephorus (Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 34–35).

²⁷ C. L. Blomberg, *From Pentecost to Patmos: An Introduction to Acts through Revelation* (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 17.

²⁸ For the former see W. W. Gasque, *A History of the Criticism of the Acts of the Apostles*, BBGE 17 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1975); for the latter see E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary*, trans. B. Noble, G. Shinn, H. Anderson, and R. M. Wilson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 14–50.

that Luke was “bumbling and incompetent as an historian.”²⁹ Those advocating a radical denial of historicity include M. Dibelius, H. Conzelmann, O. Vielhauer, and E. Haenchen. On the other side of the spectrum, F. F. Bruce, C. Hemer, W. Gasque, and I. H. Marshall, among others, strongly defend Luke’s accuracy. In recent days many have sought to find middle ground. One of these scholars is J. Fitzmyer, who noted, “It is clear today that a middle ground has to be sought between the skeptical approach and a conservative reaction to it. One has to admit that at times Luke’s information is faulty and that he has confused some things in his narrative, but by and large he does present us with a reliable account of much of what he recounts.”³⁰ Bumbling and incompetent, historically accurate, or somewhere in between—which is it?

Luke’s general reliability in verifiable matters has been well attested. In matters of geography, he knew the topography of Jerusalem (e.g., Acts 1:12, 19; 3:2, 11). He was also familiar with the geography of Asia Minor. In 13:4–5, the natural crossing is correctly called “ports.” In 16:1, Paul passes through the “Cilician gates,” and Luke correctly chronicled Derbe as the first city on the route. Luke was also well acquainted with the Greek peninsula. In 16:12, Philippi is correctly described as a Roman colony. In 17:6, the board of magistrates in Thessalonica is properly identified as “politarchs.” More examples could be given. Suffice it to say that C. Hemer’s 51-page article “Specific Local Knowledge of Luke” has conclusively settled the matter of Luke’s geographical and provincial accuracy in the affirmative.³¹

Luke’s descriptions are also accurate in terms of specific people. The title of the emperor was “Augustus” (transliterated Augoustos in Luke 2:1), but on the lips of a Roman official it was formally and correctly rendered Sebastos (Acts 25:21, 25). Cyprus was governed by a proconsul at Paphos (13:7). Luke correctly stated that Ananias was the high priest (23:2). The Roman governor of Malta was known to be the “first man” (prōtos) of the island (28:7). Gallio was proconsul of Achaia (Greece) in Corinth starting in the year 44 (18:12).³²

Luke also correctly portrayed elements of ancient culture. He accurately noted that the people at Lystra spoke their own dialect (14:11). They were also particular worshippers of Hermes and Zeus (see the ascription of the

²⁹ Pervo, *Profit with Delight*, 3.

³⁰ Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 124.

³¹ Hemer, *Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, 108–58.

³² These and other examples can be found under the headings “Common Knowledge” and “Specialized Knowledge” in Hemer, *Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, 107–8.

titles “Hermes” and “Zeus” to Paul and Barnabas in 14:12). Also, Luke accurately detailed ancient navigation (chap. 26). Classicist A. N. Sherwin-White ably demonstrated that Luke presented an accurate description of Roman jurisprudence.³³ Because Luke narrated many encounters with the Roman courts (especially the last quarter of the book) in Acts, this covers a large portion of the narrative.

Further, Luke correctly narrated events that were recorded elsewhere in ancient historiography. These included a famine during the reign of Claudius (11:28), the death of Herod Agrippa I (12:19–23), the edict of Claudius (18:2), and the replacement of the proconsul Felix by Porcius Festus (24:27).

There are only a few points where Luke is severely criticized in verifiable matters outside of Scripture. The first is found in the short speech of Gamaliel when he mentioned a certain Theudas and Judas (5:34–37). Theudas, according to Gamaliel, claimed to be someone important, gathered 400 men, but was killed and his followers scattered. A Theudas whom we know from Josephus appeared 10 to 15 years prior to Gamaliel’s speech.³⁴ This is seen by many as an anachronism on Luke’s part. A possible key to unlocking this puzzle may be the mention of a certain Judas who is said to have come after Theudas. The Judas of Galilee we know comes from the time near Jesus’ birth (at the death of Herod the Great). It is possible that Gamaliel’s Theudas was not the same man as Josephus’s.³⁵ Since Theudas was a common name, and after the death of Herod numerous uprisings occurred, this otherwise unknown Theudas may be one of them.³⁶

The second specific charge against Luke’s accuracy is related to his use of numbers in the case of the number of the Egyptian’s band of 4,000 (21:38). The ancient historian Lysias also mentioned an Egyptian terrorist with 4,000

³³ A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Law and Roman Society in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1963).

³⁴ Josephus wrote, “During the period when Fadus was procurator of Judaea [c. AD 44], a certain impostor named Theudas persuaded the majority of the masses to take up their possessions and to follow him to the Jordan River” (*Ant.* 20.97). But Fadus would have none of it, and Theudas was captured and his head cut off.

³⁵ While Gamaliel’s summation is quite brief, there are some differences. For example, Gamaliel said that Theudas gathered an army of 400 men, while Josephus referred to “the majority of the masses.”

³⁶ K. F. Nögren (*Commentar über die Apostelgeschichte des Lukas* [Leipzig: Dörfling und Franke, 1882], 147) noted that Josephus related four Simons in a forty-year time span, and three men named Judas in a ten-year span, who each led a rebellion. Cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 17.269: “Now, at this time there were ten thousand other disorders in Judea, which were like tumults...” According to *Ant.* 17.285, this state lasted a long time.

men, but Josephus said he had 30,000 men.³⁷ But in this instance Luke should be preferred over Josephus since Josephus had a well-demonstrated tendency to inflate numbers.³⁸

Those striking the middle ground often concede the point of Luke's accuracy in historical matters, but do not necessarily extend it to the story he told.³⁹ These scholars take issue with Luke at three major points. Fitzmyer's threefold charge is representative: (1) the speeches in Acts are Lukan compositions; (2) there are tendentious story lines (Fitzmyer cites Acts 15 as a conflation of two councils); and (3) the recounting of miracles and heavenly interventions are judged problematic in terms of historicity.⁴⁰ It is therefore necessary to address these three issues next. As shown in each case, closer scrutiny vindicates Luke's accuracy.

The Speeches of Acts

The speeches in Acts take up about 25 to 30 percent of the book, depending on how one identifies a speech. Some have suggested that the speeches in Acts are wholly Luke's invention, so much so that some theologians do not even use Paul's speeches in Acts to develop a Pauline theology.

Although some claim that the pre-critical understanding of the speeches in Acts considered them verbatim reports, this is not the case. Many pre-Enlightenment exegetes considered them to be summaries rather than dictated notes.⁴¹ Indeed, verbatim reports are a virtual impossibility given the textual evidence. First, in some cases the receptor language is different than the original speech. Luke said that Paul's defense against the mob in the temple was in Aramaic (21:40), as was the heavenly voice at Paul's conversion (26:14). On other occasions the language used would most likely have been Greek, such as Paul's speech in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch (13:15) or the conversation between Paul and the commander of the guard (21:37). But in none of these cases is the conclusion warranted that these were verbatim reports.

Second, the text itself indicates at places that the speeches have been summarized. For example, Peter's sermon at the temple square lasted from 3 p.m.

³⁷ The account is found in Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.261–63; *Ant.* 20.169–72. See P. W. Barnett, "The Jewish Sign Prophets, A.D. 40–70—Their Intentions and Origin," *NTS* 27 (1981): 679–97.

³⁸ Polhill, *Acts*, 455, notes that it has been suggested that a scribal error accounts for Josephus's inflation. The uncial Δ (4 in Greek) was accidentally replaced by a Λ (30 in Greek).

³⁹ C. K. Barrett ("The Historicity of Acts," *JTS* 50 [1999]: 525) stated, "The accurate accounts of the working of Greek cities cannot prove that Luke's main plot is not wholly or in part fictitious."

⁴⁰ Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 127.

⁴¹ W. W. Gasque, *History of the Criticism of the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 20.

to evening (see 3:1; 4:3), but it only covers 17 verses. No one suggests that these 17 verses represent the totality of the original speech.

Finally, in matters of literary and linguistic style, Luke's diction is evident even in the speeches. But the rhetorical style (i.e., the shape of the speeches) is suitable to the context. For instance, Peter's Pentecost sermon reads like that of an OT prophet (2:14–36), but Stephen spoke like a Hellenistic Jew (chap. 7).⁴² Paul's speech at the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch resembles that of a rabbi (13:16–41), while he used the structure of a philosopher in Athens (17:22–31).⁴³ This suggests that while the speeches are not verbatim reports, neither are they "free compositions" by Luke.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, many object to this conclusion and challenge Luke's accuracy. Hemer summarized the arguments as follows: (1) ancient historians often invented speeches to suit their purposes; (2) the unity of style also suggests that the material was fabricated (or at least embellished) by Luke rather than accurately recording the actual original content of the speeches; and (3) the speeches display a continuity of content that spans from speech to speech and from speaker to speaker.⁴⁵ Fitzmyer, modifying Schweizer, identified a series of elements that commonly appear in the major speeches of Acts. He proposed that these elements allowed him to characterize them as "Lukan compositions."⁴⁶ But these objections can be met by the following rejoinders.

Regarding the first objection, B. Witherington III noted that in the matters of ancient historians and source materials, "there was no convention that ancient historians were free to create speeches."⁴⁷ Ancient historians were highly influenced by rhetorical conventions, but not to the detriment of accuracy, so they had two concerns: "fidelity to the truth and perfection of style."⁴⁸ Ancient historians fell into a continuum between those who elevated

⁴² J. J. Scott, Jr. ("Stephen's Defense and the World Mission of the People of God," *JETS* 21 [1978]: 172) noted regarding Stephen, "His speech employs literary forms, ideas and emphases that suggest the influence of a culture other than that of OT Judaism." Cf. B. Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation* (Uppsala: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1955), 27.

⁴³ See Witherington, *Acts*, 518.

⁴⁴ J. W. Bowker, "Speeches in Acts: A Study in Proem and Yelammedenu Form," *NTS* 14 (1967–68): 96–111.

⁴⁵ Hemer, *Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, 420.

⁴⁶ Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 107. The list is limited to "Missionary and Evangelizing Speeches" (excluding apologies) and includes items such as "Direct Address" and "Appeal for Attention" that ostensibly any impromptu speech would have, as well as items such as "Christological-theological Kerygma."

⁴⁷ Witherington, *Acts*, 40.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 41, citing H. F. North, "Rhetoric and Historiography," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 42 (1956): 242.

oratorical style and those who were less so inclined.⁴⁹ Those on the latter end of the continuum were less likely to manipulate speeches for oratorical flavor. Studies in Luke's style show that he is no Atticizer, writing in rhetorical flourishes, but more in line with writers of serious Hellenistic history (especially Polybius).⁵⁰ He therefore falls on the latter end of the continuum as one less inclined to create oratorical compositions with his speeches.

Witherington also noted that the speeches in Acts show some disjunction with Hellenistic historical works such as those by Thucydides. To begin with, the speeches in Acts are considerably shorter, which diminishes the possibility that Luke used a speech to impress his readers with his own oratorical skill. Also, the speeches in Acts are grounded more strongly in their historical setting than the speeches in Thucydides' works. Finally, the speeches in Acts do not comment on the events; they are the events—proclamations of the word of God.⁵¹

Regarding the second objection, the unity of style is conceded by all. But this can also be seen in Luke's Gospel when Luke cited his source. The fact that Luke stamped his sources with his own style in no way undermines the view that the speeches are summaries of what was actually said.

The third objection is based on a continuity of content across the speeches, something Hemer shows "is clearly not the case."⁵² To be sure, Psalm 16 is cited twice by different people as a messianic proof text, but Peter was less refined than Paul in his usage. The speeches also show a remarkable suitability to their own context. For example, Paul cited a Stoic philosopher (Epimenides) when dealing with the Stoics (Acts 17:28).

One should also include certain verbal affinities that point away from Lukan free compositions. Peter's speeches have certain vocabulary words that occur in 1 Peter. One example is the use of "tree" (Gk. *xylon*) for the cross (see Acts 5:30; 10:39; 1 Pet 2:24). It should also be noted that Peter's outline

⁴⁹ Witherington, *Acts*, 41.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 43. Polybius stated that the "whole genus of orations... may be regarded as summaries of events and as the unifying element in historical writing" (*Hist.* 12.25a-b; see 36.1).

⁵¹ Witherington, *Acts*, 46. Thucydides is often cited at this point by both sides of the argument. He stated, "As to the speeches that were made by different men..., it has been difficult to recall with strict accuracy the words actually spoken, both for me as regard that which I myself hear, and for those who from various other sources have brought me reports. Therefore the speeches are given in the language which, as it seemed to me, the several speakers would express on the subjects under consideration, the sentiments most befitting the occasion, though at the same time I have adhered as closely as possible to the general sense of what was actually said" (*War* 1.22). The troublesome issue comes when Thucydides is interpreted as saying that he gave what his subjects *ought* to have said. Witherington observed that he should be interpreted as noting what it seems likely that they said (*ibid.*, 47).

⁵² Hemer, *Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, 424.

of the ministry of Jesus is remarkably similar to that found in the Gospel of Mark (Acts 10:36–41; ostensibly based on Peter’s preaching).⁵³ Finally, Paul’s “Miletus speech is widely conceded to contain Pauline characteristics” (Acts 20:18–35).⁵⁴

Therefore, no real reason to doubt the accuracy of Luke’s speeches exists if these are understood as reliable summaries of real speeches. Whatever redaction Luke performed does not seem to have robbed the speeches of their situation in history or of the substance of what was said. If, then, the speeches most likely are not free compositions of Luke, it is also less probable that the storyline is invented.

The Jerusalem Council

Another important matter pertaining to Luke’s accuracy is the reporting of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. Not only is the event central to the theological message of the book, how one interprets it also bears heavily on how Luke has composed his book. As Witherington observed, “It raises all the key questions of what Luke’s relationship to Paul was, what the relationship is between Acts 15 and Galatians 2, and therefore what sort of history Luke is writing.”⁵⁵

A number of scholars see problems in Acts 15. They allege that the problem of Gentile inclusion apparently was not solved after the council (as seen in Galatians). They also contend that Paul never mentioned the decree later on in the book, and they object that he would not have liked it. Their solution is to propose a conflation of meetings from an Antiochene source. At first, Paul was present and in agreement with the conclusion to continue the Gentile mission. At a later meeting, a new law was imposed on the Gentiles, something to which Paul would have never agreed.⁵⁶ Thus, conceiving of the speeches as free compositions is an integral part of “solving” an apparent ingruity.

But each of these objections is based on debatable antecedent judgments. The theory that the speeches were free compositions has already been critiqued. The assumption that Galatians 2 chronicles (at least in part) Acts 15 is debated and unlikely as well. It is more probable that Galatians 2 refers to the famine relief visit of Acts 11:30.⁵⁷ Thus Paul did not mention the results of the decree in Galatians because the Jerusalem Council had not yet taken

⁵³ W. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 10–11.

⁵⁴ Hemer, *Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, 425.

⁵⁵ Witherington, *Acts*, 439.

⁵⁶ Barrett, “Historicity,” 530.

⁵⁷ See the discussion of the date of Galatians in chap. 10 below.

place. As for the theory that the decree imposed a new law on Gentile believers, Blomberg noted, “When the council writes its letter to believers in Antioch and nearby regions explaining their decision (vv. 22–29), it concludes simply by stating, ‘you will do well to avoid these things’ (v. 29), hardly a way to refer to mandatory legislation.”⁵⁸ Thus a hypothetical conflation theory is not necessary to explain the phenomenon of the Jerusalem Council.

Miracles in Acts

There is no doubt that the most problematic area for some regarding the veracity of Acts is the miraculous elements in the book. Indeed, the book features some astonishing miracles, such as healings of men lame from birth (3:1–10; 14:8–10); Peter’s repeated angelic deliverances from prison (5:19–20; 12:6–11; cf. the violent earthquake in 16:26); Philip being carried away by the Spirit of the Lord from the Ethiopian’s presence (8:39–40); Paul’s vision of the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus (9:3–9); Peter healing a paralyzed man named Aeneas (9:33–34); Peter raising Dorcas from the dead (9:36–41); visions by Cornelius and Peter (10:3–16); Paul striking Elymas the sorcerer with blindness (13:9–11); God speaking directly to Paul in his Macedonian vision, in Corinth, and in Jerusalem (16:9–10; 18:9–10; 23:11); and Paul raising young Eutychus from the dead (20:8–12). Perhaps among the more astonishing feats recorded is the following: “God was performing extraordinary miracles by Paul’s hands, so that even facecloths or work aprons that had touched his skin were brought to the sick, and the diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them” (19:11–12; see also 5:12–16).

Are these accounts of astonishing miracles performed by the apostles and other supernatural manifestations credible, or should these be regarded as reflections of an outmoded, superstitious frame of mind? To some, the existence of these references as part of a historical narrative is unacceptable. But the heart of the issue is not historical; it is a matter of philosophical and theological presuppositions.⁵⁹ Those who reject divine intervention reject the veracity of the miracles; those who accept divine intervention have no problems with these events. The more moderate commentators leave them in the category of “unprovable.” It should be affirmed, however, that in light of Luke’s proven credibility elsewhere, there seems to be no good reason to doubt his reliability with regard to the supernatural events mentioned above,

⁵⁸ Blomberg, *From Pentecost to Patmos*, 53.

⁵⁹ See the discussion of Philosophical Foundations of Modern Gospels Study in chap. 3 above (including bibliographic references). Cf. “Chapter 3: Miracles” in C. L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 2d ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007).

especially since post-Enlightenment skepticism regarding the possibility of miracles and God's supernatural intervention in human affairs has itself been shown to be of doubtful merit.

Conclusion

Ultimately, there is no substantial reason to doubt Luke's accuracy on empirical grounds. Where sources are available, Luke's information is shown to be reliable. Unlike in his Gospel where Luke relied on the account of eyewitnesses (Luke 1:3), Luke himself was an eyewitness to a substantial part of Paul's missionary travels in the book of Acts. This assumes that the "we passages" indicate Luke's participation in these portions of the narrative. In light of Luke's proven reliability where this is borne out by the available sources, it seems reasonable to hold him innocent until proven guilty where his information cannot be currently corroborated by extant extrabiblical material. As W. Ramsay stated, "You may press the words of Luke in a degree beyond any other historian's, and they stand the keenest scrutiny and the hardest treatment, provided always that the critic knows the subject and does not go beyond the limits of science and justice."⁶⁰

THE SOURCES OF ACTS

Arising from the scholarly quests for the historical Jesus, where everything must have a written source of some kind, Luke's sources for writing Acts have been a field of inquiry as well.⁶¹ This kind of procedure is the next logical step once one rejects the notion that the writer was a follower of Paul. Hypothetical sources include a "Jerusalem A and B source,"⁶² "an Antiochene Source,"⁶³ and a "travel diary/itinerary."⁶⁴ Haenchen left open the possibility that Luke traveled to the great Pauline centers gathering information from

⁶⁰ W. Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1915), 89.

⁶¹ E.g., F. Schleiermacher, *Einleitung ins Neue Testament*, in *Friedrich Schleiermacher's Sämtliche Werke*, ed. G. Wolde, div. 1, vol. 8 (Berlin: Reimer, 1834–1864), 360. According to Meyer, Schleiermacher held that Luke simply strung together other written documents. See H. A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Acts of the Apostles*, 2d ed., trans. P. J. Gloag (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1889), 9.

⁶² Harnack, *Acts of the Apostles*, 162. Harnack based this on apparent doublets in the narrative in Acts 1–15, that is, two Petrine sermons, two arrests, two defenses before the Sanhedrin, two estimates of converts, and two accounts of the community sharing all things. But Bruce showed that this is unnecessary (*Acts*, 23).

⁶³ R. E. Brown (*An Introduction to the New Testament* [New York: Doubleday, 1997], 317) contended that today this source is probably the most widely held.

⁶⁴ Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, 126. Dibelius's work largely ended the quest for solely written sources for Acts, preferring to describe Luke as a creative author (Neil, *Acts*, 24).

local sources.⁶⁵ Fitzmyer is representative of much of mainstream scholarship on the issue. He posited a Palestinian source (generally chronicling Peter's activities); an Antiochene source (Stephen, Gentile inclusion issues, the Dispersion, and the Jerusalem Council); a "we" sections source; and a Pauline source (encompassing Paul's conversion and activities).⁶⁶ Much of this is conjecture based on the research of someone—not a follower of Paul—who wrote a generation after the death of Paul, a theory critiqued above.

So what kind of sources can be postulated for Acts? Acts 16–28 is dominated by the "we" passages and this is best explained as discussed above under the authorship of the Gospel of Luke. This section reflects either (1) the reminiscences of the author; or (2) a diary, of sorts, of the author. The greater details in the latter part of the book point to recent events and more than likely to the first option.⁶⁷ For the events outside of the "we" passages in the second half of Acts, one needs to look no further than Luke's personal acquaintance with Paul himself.⁶⁸

The question remains concerning Luke's sources for Acts 1–15, when he was not present at the events. Hemer, in a rather extensive look at how Luke treated his sources, concluded regarding Acts that "Luke obtained parts of his material by interviewing participants, and that he sometimes edited older traditions by re-interviewing such surviving participants as may have been accessible to him, and that this process accounts for some of the significant 'L-nuances' in the Third Gospel."⁶⁹

Hemer further suggested that a close connection to Peter (such as a personal interview) can be sustained, so that Luke was not necessarily dependent on second-hand sources.⁷⁰ This, then, would coincide with Luke's declaration of his sources in the preface to Luke (Luke 1:1–4); some written sources (see Acts 15:23–29; 23:25–37); eyewitness testimony; and personal investigation. Luke's extensive travels would have allowed for sufficient opportunities to make contact with individuals who could supply him with information regarding events in which he was not personally involved.

⁶⁵ Haenchen, *Acts*, 86.

⁶⁶ Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 85–88.

⁶⁷ See the discussion of the authorship of Luke's Gospel in chap. 6 above.

⁶⁸ Since he was strongly connected to the Sanhedrin, Paul could even have been the source for speeches and events at which it was impossible for Luke or the early Christians to be present, such as the speech of Gamaliel given to the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:35–39) or Stephen's speech and stoning (Acts 7).

⁶⁹ Hemer, *Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, 351. Cf. S. J. Kistemaker's treatment that shows that Peter and Paul spoke in terms familiar to the Peter and Paul known outside of Acts but not available to Luke at the time of writing (*An Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002], 9–12).

⁷⁰ Hemer, *Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, 356–62.

SIDEBAR 8.1: TEXTUAL ISSUES IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

Textual critics distinguish four basic text types of the NT that were handed down to us: Alexandrian, Caesarean, Byzantine, and Western. The so-called Western text is generally regarded as secondary and unremarkable until one arrives at the book of Acts, where it is about 8.5 percent longer than the established text. A comparison of a typical Alexandrian edition with a Western edition results in a difference of 1,582 words. A similar comparison between the Robinson-Pierpont Byzantine and Eclectic text indicates that only 222 words are different, an approximate 2 percent difference in length (i.e., about twice as many words as in the present paragraph).¹

The Western text of Acts tends to smooth out grammatical “difficulties,” clarifies ambiguous points, expands references to Christ, and adds notes of historical details at unprecedented levels.² Some examples will suffice to show the flavor of these readings. At Acts 11:28, Luke is identified as a native of Antioch (employing a first-person plural, constituting this as a “we” passage). At Acts 19:9, Paul rented the school of Tyrannus of Ephesus “from the fifth hour to the tenth” (i.e., 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.). At Acts 15:20, 29, the Western text omits “things that are strangled” and adds “and not to do to others what they would not like to be done to themselves” at the end of the apostolic decree. Many other similar changes occur throughout Acts.

That the Western text adds historical details is the most interesting, and ultimately the most valuable, phenomenon. While not Scripture, these notes may preserve ancient understandings. Where did these additions come from? Some say from Luke himself;³ others name an early reviser (before 150);⁴ yet others propose a later revision.⁵ Ultimately, very little of these readings can be considered original. In the ultimate analysis, these additions may give more insight into a single scribe’s practice than they add any significant historical information.⁶

¹ The figures for a comparison between the Alexandrian and Western are from F. G. Kenyon, *The Western Text in the Gospels and Acts*, Proceedings of the British Academy 24 (London: H. Milford, 1938), 26, cited in B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2d ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 223.

² Metzger’s textual commentary on Acts comprises nearly a third of the book, due mainly to discussions of the Western text type. For a nice but rather brief discussion, see Haenchen, *Acts*, 50–60.

³ This is the opinion of F. Blass, *Acta Apostolorum sive Lucae ad Theophilum liber alter edition philologica* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1895). He viewed the Western text as an earlier draft of the book, as did T. Zahn, *Die Urausgabe der Apostelgeschichte des Lucas* (Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1916). Although criticized early, the theory has had some new breath breathed into it by M. E. Boismard and A. Lamouille, *Texte Occidentale des Actes des Apôtres: Reconstitution et Réhabilitation*, 2 vols. (Synthèse 17; Paris: Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1984). Their view that the Western recension of Acts shows Lukan style traits has been adequately critiqued by T. C. Geer, Jr., “The presence and significance of Lucanisms in the ‘Western’ text of Acts,” *JSNT* 39 (1990): 59–76.

⁴ See J. H. Ropes, *The Beginnings of Christianity: Part I the Acts of the Apostles*, eds. F. J. Foakes Jackson and K. Lake, Vol. III: *The Text of Acts* (London: Macmillan, 1926), ccxlii–ccxlii.

⁵ B. Aland, “Entstehung, Charakter und Herkunft des sog. Westlichen Textes untersucht an der Apostelgeschichte,” *ETL* 62 (1986): 5–65.

⁶ For recent discussions of the Western text of Acts see T. Nicklas and M. Tilly, eds., *The Book of Acts as Church History*, BZNW 120 (New York: W. de Gruyter, 2003); and P. M. Head, “Acts and the Problem of Its Texts,” in *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting*, vol. 1: *Ancient Literary Setting*, eds. B. W. Winter and A. D. Clarke (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 415–44.

LITERARY PLAN

As stated above, and as widely agreed upon, the basic blueprint of Acts is given at Acts 1:8: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The rest of the book shows the fulfillment of Jesus’ command and the unfolding of God’s plan from the church in Jerusalem and Judea (1:1–6:7) to Samaria (6:8–9:31) and to the ends of the earth (9:3–28:31).⁷¹ Luke took pains to show that the expansion of Christianity was at God’s direction, including the Gentiles, while at the same time continuing salvation “to the Jews first.”

At the heart of the book is the Jerusalem Council (chap. 15) where the church regulated the inclusion of the Gentiles in the rapidly growing Christian movement. Paul’s ministry is presented through three missionary journeys (one before and two after the Jerusalem Council). Similar to Luke’s Gospel, where the extended “Lukan Travel Narrative” shows Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, the action slows down during the last quarter of the book of Acts as Paul made his way to trial in Rome. Unlike Luke’s Gospel—where Jesus is arrested, tried, and crucified, and on the third day rises from the dead—Acts ends on an inconclusive note, with Paul still awaiting trial in Rome.⁷²

Table 8.2: Alternate Structural Proposals for Acts

F. F. Bruce	D. L. Bock
I. Birth of the Church (1:1–5:42)	I. Ascension and Commission (1:1–11)
II. Persecution & Expansion (6:1–9:31)	II. Early Church in Jerusalem (1:12–6:7)
III. Beginnings of Gentile Christianity (9:32–12:24)	III. Judea and Samaria (6:8–9:31)
IV. Extension from Antioch (12:25–15:35)	IV. Gospel to the Gentiles (9:32–12:25)
V. Movement to the Aegean World (15:36–19:20)	V. From Antioch to Gentiles (13:1–15:35)
VI. Paul Travels to Rome (19:21–28:31)	VI. Expansion to Greece (15:36–18:23)
VII. Arrest & Trip to Rome (21:17–28:31)	

⁷¹ Commentators outline the book in slightly different ways. Table 8.2 reproduces in simplified form the outlines by Bruce, *Acts*, vii–xiv; and D. L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), vii–viii. For other outlines see Marshall, *Acts*, 51–54; J. R. W. Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), 3–4; and Larkin, *Acts*, 34–36.

⁷² A few of the headings in the outline below are borrowed from the useful book by H. A. Kent, Jr., *Jerusalem to Rome: Studies in Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 7.

OUTLINE

- I. FOUNDATIONS FOR THE CHURCH AND ITS MISSION (1:1–2:47)
 - A. Preface (1:1–5)
 - B. Jerusalem: Waiting for the Spirit (1:6–26)
 1. The Ascension of Jesus (1:6–14)
 2. The Choice of a Twelfth Apostle (1:15–26)
 - C. Pentecost: The Church is Born (2:1–47)
 1. The Event: The Exalted Jesus Sends the Spirit (2:1–4)
 2. The Evidence of the Spirit's Coming: Foreign Languages (2:5–13)
 3. The Explanation: Peter's Message (2:14–40)
 4. The Expansion: The Growth of the Early Church (2:41–47)
- II. THE CHURCH IN JERUSALEM (3:1–6:7)
 - A. A Miracle and its Aftermath (3:1–4:31)
 1. The Miracle (3:1–10)
 2. The Aftermath: Peter and John's Arrest and Bold Witness (4:5–31)
 - B. Trouble Within and Without (4:32–6:7)
 1. The Sharing of Property in the Early Church: Good Example (4:32–37)
 2. The Sharing of Property in the Early Church: Bad Example (5:1–11)
 3. Further Growth in Numbers and Geographical Extension (5:12–17)
 4. Another Arrest (5:18–42)
 5. Serving the Hellenists' Widows: Potential Conflict Avoided (6:1–7)
- III. WIDER HORIZONS FOR THE CHURCH: STEPHEN, SAMARIA, AND SAUL (6:8–9:31)
 - A. Suffering: One of the Servants Arrested and Martyred (6:8–7:60)
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 - A. First Missionary Journey (12:25–14:28)

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 4. James' Response on behalf of Jerusalem Church (15:13–21)
 5. The Council's Decree (15:22–29)
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 - C. Second Missionary Journey Begins (15:36–16:5)
 1. Paul and Barnabas Separate (15:36–41)
 2. Paul and Silas Deliver Decisions of Jerusalem Council, Take Timothy (16:1–5)
- VI. FURTHER PENETRATION INTO THE GENTILE WORLD (16:6–19:20)
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- VII. ON TO ROME (19:21–28:31)
- A. From Ephesus to Jerusalem (19:21–21:16)
 1. Ephesus: Opposition by Demetrius (19:21–41)
 2. Paul's Journey to Macedonia and Greece, Seven Days in Troas (20:1–13)
 3. From Troas to Miletus (20:14–16)
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 5. Paul's Journey to Jerusalem (21:1–16)
 - B. Paul's Final Visit to Jerusalem and His Removal to Caesarea (21:17–23:35)
 1. Paul's Visit with James and the Elders (21:17–26)
 2. Paul Arrested at the Temple (21:27–40)
 3. Paul's Defense (22:1–29)
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- C. Paul's Defenses before Felix, Festus, and Agrippa (24:1–26:32)
 1. The Jews' Charges against Paul (24:1–9)
 2. Paul's Defense before Felix (24:10–27)
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- D. Paul's Trip to Rome (27:1–28:31)
 1. Sea Voyage and Shipwreck on Malta (27:1–28:14)
 2. Paul Preaches the Gospel Openly in Rome (28:15–31)

UNIT-BY-UNIT DISCUSSION

I. Foundations for the Church and Its Mission (1:1–2:41)

A. Preface (1:1–5)

The book of Acts opens by referring to the “first narrative,” Luke’s Gospel, which narrated that which Jesus began to do and teach. By implication, Acts, the sequel, sets forth the continuation of God’s plan by recording what Jesus continued to do and teach through the Holy Spirit and the apostolic church. The resurrected Jesus reminded the disciples of the promised Holy Spirit and commanded them to wait for his imminent coming in Jerusalem.

B. Jerusalem: Waiting for the Spirit (1:6–2:6)

The disciples asked when Jesus would establish his kingdom, but Jesus just told them that they would be his Spirit-empowered witnesses. A period of waiting and praying followed as the early believers prepared for the coming of the Spirit (1:6–14).

Acts 1:15–26 shows the replacement of Judas by the Eleven. After setting the ground rules, Matthias was selected by lot. It is a matter of debate whether or not Matthias’ selection was approved by God.⁷³ However, on balance, since Luke includes this narrative without any negative comment, the action was most likely appropriate.

⁷³The following concerns can be raised: (1) Jesus’ command was for the apostles to wait until the giving of the Spirit; Peter’s initiative to replace Judas appears to violate that command; (2) casting lots is an OT mode of decision-making, hardly normative for NT times; (3) Matthias is not heard of again in the narrative of Acts subsequent to his selection; (4) instead, Luke narrated Christ’s selection of Paul in Acts 9, apparently as the twelfth apostle and replacement of Judas (though this point is not explicitly made); (5) Peter and the other apostles did not possess the Holy Spirit at this point prior to the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost; (6) Peter’s quotation of two OT passages in Acts 2:20 is somewhat doubtful proof of the disciples’ need to choose a replacement for Judas.

C. Pentecost: The Church Is Born (2:1–47)

When the day of Pentecost arrived, the gathered disciples experienced the coming of the Holy Spirit (2:1–13), which took place in fulfillment of Jesus' promise (see 1:8). Because devout Jews from every nation were present, all Israel was represented. These worshipers heard the word of God in their own languages and witnessed the power of the Spirit, a sign of the end times. In this way, the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost highlights the worldwide implications of the gospel, reversing the confusion of languages that ensued at the tower of Babel incident (Gen 11:1–9).

Peter explained the significance of the events that had transpired (2:14–40). In essence, the logic of Peter's address is as follows: (1) the Spirit had now been poured out; (2) Jesus predicted that this would occur once he had been exalted with God subsequent to his ascension (Luke 24:49; see Acts 1:8–9); (3) hence the coming of the Spirit proved that Jesus had now been exalted: "Therefore, since he has been exalted to the right hand of God and has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit, he has poured out what you both see and hear" (2:33).

Peter quoted the prophecy of Joel 2:28–32 to explain that this was the promised coming of the Holy Spirit (2:14–21). The last line of Joel's prophecy, "then whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved," transitions into Peter's evangelistic appeal (2:22–36). He concluded with a call to repentance (2:37–40), with the result that 3,000 were converted. The citation of Joel 2:28–32 can be compared to the citation of Isa 61:1–2 in Luke 4:18–19 in that it sets the stage for the rest of the book by narrating the coming of the Spirit to all those who called on the name of the Lord.

Luke concluded his account of these preliminary events with the first of several summaries that mark the transitions (2:41–47). The church devoted itself to the apostles' teaching (the standard of doctrinal orthodoxy prior to the formation of the NT), to fellowship, to the breaking of bread (i.e. celebrating the Lord's Supper), and to prayers (note the plural in the original Greek, which may suggest set prayers). Many miraculous signs and wonders were performed by the apostles. The believers shared everything in common, worshiped God in gladness, and continually grew in numbers.

II. The Church in Jerusalem (3:1–6:7)

Subsequent to the foundational narrative of the ascension of Jesus and the coming of the Spirit in the first two chapters, this unit presents the establishment of the church in Jerusalem, stage one of the three-part expansion of the gospel predicted by the risen Jesus at the beginning of the book of Acts (1:8).

At this early juncture, the church is wholly Jewish and expanding rapidly, which is further underscored by the reference to a number of priests coming to the faith, which concludes this section (6:7). Jesus' promise that his followers would be witnesses in Jerusalem was powerfully fulfilled.

A. A Miracle and Its Aftermath (3:1–4:31)

God performed a remarkable miracle through Peter who was on his way to the hour of prayer in the temple (3:1–10). When approached for money by a man born lame, Peter healed the man, whose great rejoicing drew a large crowd. Peter's ensuing speech at the temple (3:13–26) charged the people with putting Jesus to death but acknowledged that they had done so out of ignorance. Peter told the crowd that they would experience "times of refreshing" if they repented and followed Jesus.

At this, Peter and John were seized by the Jewish leaders (4:1–4). This gave Peter the opportunity to extend a similar message to the Sanhedrin, albeit without an appeal to repent. Subsequently, Peter and John were released with orders to stop talking about Jesus (4:5–22). Upon their return to the community of believers, the place was shaken, and the believers were all filled with the Holy Spirit to "speak God's message with boldness" (4:31).

B. Trouble Within and Without (4:32–6:7)

This section of Acts shows the nature of the new community and the lengths to which God was prepared to go to protect her purity. Barnabas, first mentioned here, sold a piece of property and donated the proceeds to the church (4:32–37). This spurred a couple in the church, Ananias and Sapphira, to do the same but to keep back a portion for themselves. By itself, this was unobjectionable, but lying about it in order to increase one's stature was an affront to God. The couple was severely judged: first Ananias and then his wife were struck dead on the spot (5:1–11). As a result, great fear came upon the church.

Undaunted, the apostles preached continually in the temple, boldly healing in Jesus' name (5:12–16). Once more, the apostles were arrested but freed by an angel who told them to go on so they could "tell the people all about this life" (5:20). When arrested again and forbidden to preach about Jesus, the apostles retorted, "We must obey God rather than people" (5:29). Gamaliel's advice to his fellow Sanhedrin members was to wait and see. If this movement was not from God, it would fail, as other movements had done in the past. After receiving a flogging, the apostles returned joyfully to preaching

the word, in direct disobedience to the Sanhedrin (5:40) but in obedience to God.

The section is rounded out by a return to the community life of the young church. A potential crisis was averted by the church's selection of seven qualified, Spirit-filled men to meet the needs of a group of Hellenistic widows (6:1–7). Stephen, the main character of chap. 7, is introduced as a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. Luke summarized the state of the church by highlighting the effective witness borne in Jerusalem. In particular, Luke noted that even a large number of priests came to the faith (6:7).

III. Wider Horizons for the Church: Stephen, Samaria, and Saul (6:8–9:31)

A. Suffering: One of the Servants Arrested and Martyred (Acts 6:8–7:60)

Stephen, introduced in the previous section, was falsely accused of speaking against “Moses and God” before the Sanhedrin by those of the “Synagogue of the Freedmen” (6:8–15). Stephen's defense (chap. 7) shows how throughout Israel's history, the nation opposed God's plan: Joseph was sold into slavery, Moses' leadership was rejected, and the people worshipped idols. In a sense, this unit serves as the completion of the last section in its emphasis on Jewish responsibility. Stephen's martyrdom and vision led to the events that are narrated in the following chapters.

B. Palestine and Syria: Philip, Saul, and Peter (8:1–9:31)

Stephen's death sparked a period of great persecution for the church. Saul, who had played a major role in Stephen's stoning, was ravaging the church (8:1–3). The believers, except for the apostles, were scattered throughout the surrounding regions, which resulted in the extension of the gospel beyond Judea to Samaria, in fulfillment of Jesus' mandate (see 1:8).

Philip, one of the seven (6:5), performed signs in Samaria and preached Christ to the Samaritans (8:4–8). However, the Samaritans did not receive the Spirit upon salvation until Peter and John, representing the apostles, came and laid hands on the Samaritan believers. This served to authenticate God's work among them. In the process, Simon the sorcerer, who sought to purchase the power of the Holy Spirit from Peter for money, was rebuked (8:9–25).

Subsequently, Philip, again at the direction of the Holy Spirit, encountered a court official for Candace, the queen of Ethiopia, and led him to Christ (8:26–38). Although Gentile by birth, he was probably a proselyte

(God-fearer?). The Holy Spirit miraculously transported Philip to Azotus, where he evangelized the coastal regions all the way to Caesarea (8:39–40). The gospel then moved throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria.

The final chapter in this section records the conversion of Saul in preparation for the Gentile mission (9:1–31). While on the road to Damascus to persecute Christians, Saul encountered the risen Christ and was converted. This marks a momentous occasion in the mission of the early church. The major opponent of Christianity became the greatest protagonist of the church's mission, and he would take the gospel to the "ends of the earth."

To Ananias, a disciple charged with ministering to Saul, Jesus described Saul as his "chosen instrument to carry my name before Gentiles, kings, and the sons of Israel" (9:15). Although first met with skepticism, Saul preached the gospel powerfully in Damascus. Later, the Jerusalem church received him at the intercession of Barnabas. Saul preached boldly in the name of Jesus until an assassination attempt forced the brothers to take him to Tarsus via Caesarea.

Luke concluded this section with a summary that includes a reference to the church enjoying a period of peace and increase in numbers. Thus Luke chronicled the plan of God as expressed in 1:8, taking the gospel through Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria. His next step was to provide a clear demonstration that Gentiles can be saved without converting to Judaism first, and this is the subject of the next two major sections.

IV. Peter and the First Gentile Convert (9:32–12:24)

A. The Proof of Gentile Conversion (9:32–11:18)

Peter apparently had an itinerant ministry in Palestine. The healing of Aeneas the paralytic in Lydda led to raising Dorcas in Joppa (9:32–43). It also set up the account of the encounter with the Roman centurion Cornelius (chap. 10). While in Joppa, Peter received a vision which impressed on him that he should not consider anyone "unclean" (10:9–29). Meanwhile, Cornelius received a vision to call for Peter in Joppa. When Cornelius believed, Peter was convinced that God had accepted a Gentile into the church (10:24–48). Peter, in turn, convinced skeptics among the Jewish Christian that Cornelius' conversion was genuine (11:1–18).

B. Gentile Conversion in Antioch and the Return of Paul (11:19–26)

Those scattered because of the persecution of Stephen reached Syrian Antioch, preaching only to Jews. But men from Cyprus and Cyrene preached to

the Gentiles (the term “Hellenists” means “speakers of Greek,” which refers to Gentiles). The Lord was with them, and a large number was converted. Barnabas was sent to investigate, observed the genuineness of the conversion, and sought out Saul in Tarsus, teaching daily for the period of a year. Also, believers were first called “Christians” in Antioch.

C. Events in Jerusalem (11:27–12:24)

The events in Jerusalem are sandwiched between references to Saul and Barnabas’ relief mission in response to a famine (11:27–30; 12:25), indicating not only the solidarity the new Gentile believers had with the Jerusalem church, but also that God was still moving among the Jews.

Peter’s miraculous release apparently so infuriated Herod Agrippa I that when he could not find Peter, he executed the guards and left town.⁷⁴ Having given an oration, and received the adoration of men as a god, Herod was “infected with worms and died” (12:1–23).

Another Lukan summary statement concludes the section, noting that the word of God continued to spread. Barnabas and Saul returned to Antioch from their mission to Jerusalem, accompanied by John Mark, who would later go with them on the first part of their first missionary journey and, later still, write the Second Gospel.

V. Paul Turns to the Gentiles (13:1–16:5)

Luke has described the progress of the gospel geographically through Palestine and parts of Syria, and racially or religiously from Jews to proselytes, God-fearers, and Gentiles. His agenda here was to describe the Lord’s work of sending the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth. At each stage, progress was achieved through the work of God and not human efforts.

A. First Missionary Journey (13:1–14:28)

The gospel’s penetration into the Gentile world began with a specific call by the Holy Spirit through the prophets at Antioch to separate Barnabas and Saul for the missionary enterprise. Ironically, what Saul, prior to his conversion, sought to prevent by persecuting Christians in Damascus (also in Syria), he now actively brings about: the spread of the gospel to Syria and beyond. Once commissioned, they began their journey at Barnabas’s home on the island of Cyprus (13:4; see 4:26). Paul blinded Elymas the sorcerer because he “opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul away from the faith” (13:8). But the proconsul Sergius Paulus was converted.

⁷⁴This is implied by the force of the word “and” (*kai*) in v. 19.

Paul and Barnabas then traveled through Pisidian Antioch, and 13:16–41 details Paul’s sermon in the local synagogue. The Jews and proselytes begged Paul to preach again the next Sabbath, and the ensuing crowds sparked jealousy and derision from the members of the synagogue. Paul then turned to the Gentiles, and the gospel spread throughout the area. But the Jews instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, expelling them from the region. This, then, forms the pattern throughout the first journey: synagogue, reception, rejection, persecution.

The results in Iconium were very similar to Pisidian Antioch (14:1–7). Paul preached in the synagogue and then suffered persecution. At Lystra, Barnabas and Paul were met with a warm reception that almost turned to idolatry after the healing of a man who had been lame from birth. But the Jews from Iconium and Antioch swayed the crowds to stone Paul, and they left him for dead. Paul then evangelized Derbe (14:8–20) and made a return trip through Derbe, Iconium, and Lystra, establishing elders in every church, on his way to Antioch in Syria (14:21–28).

B. Jerusalem Council (15:1–35)

The Jerusalem Council is a pivotal event for the Gentile mission. The question of Gentile converts is settled by this special meeting of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. The issue was whether Gentiles had to become Jewish proselytes before they could become Christians (see 15:1, 5). The issue was settled by the testimonies of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas, and ultimately James adjudicated the matter by citing Amos 9:11. At the conclusion of the meeting, a letter was sent (see 15:23–29) that encouraged the Gentiles to abstain from things particularly repulsive to Jews (15:20, 29).

C. Second Missionary Journey Begins (15:36–16:5)

Traditionally, 15:36 has been seen as marking the beginning of Paul’s second missionary journey. This journey is presented in terms of encouraging the church in Syrian Antioch and the young churches planted during the first journey. The letter mentioned in the previous section was taken to the churches of South Galatia. Silas replaced Barnabas after Barnabas and Paul disagreed on whether to take John Mark with them. Paul said no because of Mark’s desertion early in the first missionary journey. But Barnabas wanted to give his nephew another chance, so they parted company. While in Lystra, Timothy was highly recommended by the churches and joined Paul and Silas. The section concludes with a summary that notes the growth and encouragement of the churches.

VI. Further Penetration into the Gentile World (16:6–19:20)

A. *Second Missionary Journey (16:6–18:22)*

Like every genuine new movement of the gospel into new lands or people groups, God is the one who instigated the irresistible spread of the gospel in the mission of the early church. Paul's plan was to continue through Asia Minor, but the Spirit prevented him from doing so. When he had a dream about a Macedonian calling him for help, he proceeded to go there, "concluding that God had called us to evangelize them" (16:10).

Paul's first stop after crossing the Hellespont was Philippi, where the first "we section" occurs (starting in 16:10). Paul's pattern, consistent with God's salvation-historical plan, was to begin with the Jewish residents of a given city or region and then turn to the Gentiles. The first convert to the Christian gospel in Europe was Lydia, a merchant selling an expensive purple cloth.

The confrontation with a demon-possessed young woman led to a painful but fruitful encounter with the magistrates of the city. Paul and his companions were jailed but found this incident to be a platform for the gospel. The jailer was converted, and the magistrates offered to release Paul. But Paul, appealing to his Roman citizenship, would not let the magistrates beat him and his associates in public and then release them secretly. Paul demanded, and received, a public apology, but he and his coworkers were urged to leave town.

In Thessalonica, Paul stayed consistent in following the pattern "to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile" (see 17:2: "as usual"). Preaching in the synagogue for at least three Sabbaths, Paul showed people from the Scriptures "that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead" and that that Messiah was Jesus (17:3). When Gentiles came to Christ in large numbers, the Jews became jealous and hired scoundrels to persecute the believers. When this was brought to the attention of the magistrates, they fined Paul's host while Paul and the missionary team departed for Berea. After early success, the Jews from Thessalonica followed them to Berea and stirred up more violence until Paul was forced to go to Athens.

Athens, a major intellectual center, provided Paul with a great challenge in his missionary preaching. He found the city full of idols and reasoned with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, who considered the apostle a "pseudo-intellectual" (literally, a "seed picker," that is, one who picks up scraps; 17:18). Some thought Paul spoke of "foreign deities" because he proclaimed Jesus and the resurrection (17:18). Paul began his address by referring to an altar he had observed that bore the inscription "To an unknown God" (17:23). From

this Paul declared the good news of Jesus and his resurrection from the dead. Some ridiculed Paul, but a few believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris (17:34). On the whole, Paul met with less positive response than at other occasions in his missionary preaching.

The next stop was Corinth, where Paul met with Aquila and Priscilla, Jewish Christians recently expelled from Rome. Again, Paul reasoned in the synagogues. When the people there steadfastly resisted, Paul turned to the Gentiles. Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, was converted along with many Corinthians. Paul stayed in Corinth for 18 months. Ultimately, the conflict with the Jews ended up with Paul standing before the Roman proconsul Gallio, who decided he had no jurisdiction in Jewish religious matters. Paul then left for Syria via Ephesus.

B. Third Missionary Journey (18:23–19:20)

Although from here on Paul traveled to Jerusalem and on to Antioch, the focus is on Ephesus. When Paul left Corinth, he briefly went to Ephesus. After preaching in the synagogue, Paul was asked to stay longer but declined saying, “I’ll come back to you again, if God wills” (18:21). His return occurred two verses later. In the meantime, he traveled to Caesarea, Jerusalem, Antioch, and back, visiting some of the churches of the first journey, and then arrived back in Ephesus. In Ephesus, Paul encountered a residual John the Baptist movement (18:24–19:7), engaged in some initial missionary work (19:8–10), and performed extraordinary acts of ministry (19:11–20).

VII. On to Rome (19:21–28:31)

A. From Ephesus to Jerusalem (19:21–21:16)

Paul planned to go to Rome after visiting Macedonia, Achaia, and Jerusalem, and this itinerary dominates the concluding section of the book. Paul’s later vision (see 23:11) reinforces this plan, and Rome is the target on the horizon throughout this last section of the book. Before Paul departed from Ephesus, however, there was a strong pagan uprising. Once again, the Christians brought before the crowd were shown to be innocent of the charges brought against them. Paul traveled through Macedonia and Greece, and set sail for Miletus. There he met with the Ephesian elders and gave them farewell instructions. The final unit of this section (21:1–16) marks the beginning of Paul’s last journey before his arrest, and at every stop he was warned about difficulties awaiting him in Jerusalem.

B. Arrival, Unrest, and Arrest in Jerusalem (21:17–23:35)

Upon arriving in Jerusalem, Paul was invited to pay for a Jewish vow to alleviate suspicion among the Jewish believers. But a charge from Jews of Asia Minor that Paul brought a Gentile into the temple created a riot. Paul was seized by the Roman soldiers garrisoned at the fortress of Antonia. (Ironically, the false charge that Paul brought a Gentile into the temple caused Gentiles to enter the temple to rescue Paul.)

C. Paul's Defenses before Felix, Festus, and Agrippa (24:1–26:32)

After being allowed to give his defense before the crowd, Paul, over a period of at least two years, was brought before Felix (24:1–26:32), Porcius Festus (24:1–12), and Agrippa (25:13–27). Paul's appeal to Caesar necessitated the trip to Rome even though Paul was declared innocent of the charges at each interrogation (26:1–32).

D. Paul's Trip to Rome (27:1–28:31)

The actual seafaring journey comprises almost two thirds of the final two chapters of the book. Just as God had been the major impetus behind the church's missionary expansion, he was also the driving force on the journey to Rome. While Paul was not in control of his movements, neither were the Romans. God's providence is clearly accentuated through this final section of the book. It ultimately brought Paul to Rome and proved God powerful throughout the journey.

When Paul arrived in Rome, he followed the pattern set throughout his ministry and met with the Jews first, with moderate success. Regarding those who rejected the message, Paul cited Isa 6:9–10 in order to show that the rejection of the Jews was not unexpected. After this, the Gentiles were invited to trust in Christ. Thus Luke concluded the book with Paul under house arrest in Rome yet preaching unhindered to all who would hear, Jews and Gentiles alike.

THEOLOGY

Theological Themes

Salvation History

Luke's organizing principle is best described as "salvation history." His intent throughout Luke-Acts was to narrate the unfolding of God's salvation

plan.⁷⁵ This, of course, was impacted by the identification of the genre of Acts as historiography and the nature of Acts as being a sequel to Luke. In describing this approach, one must avoid importing all the negative conclusions reached by proponents of Heilsgeschichte (German for “salvation history”) to the interpretation of Luke-Acts. For Luke, focusing on salvation history was not a necessary correction to an embarrassing delay in the apocalyptic expectation within the lifetime of the early disciples.⁷⁶ Rather, Luke presented God’s plan throughout history as one that brings about individual redemption through Jesus Christ. This redemption, in the fullness of time, was announced and offered through the proclamation of this historical event, that is, the gospel.⁷⁷ As Köstenberger and O’Brien observed, “Luke’s Gospel tells the story of Jesus and his salvation, while the book of Acts traces the movement of that salvation to the Gentiles.”⁷⁸

One of the more prominent themes throughout the book of Acts is the sovereignty of God in moving the gospel out of Palestine and “to the ends of the earth” (1:8). This can be seen in a variety of ways. To begin with, Luke was clearly interested in the fulfillment of Scripture. The vast majority of the OT quotations occur in the evangelistic speeches in Jewish contexts (see especially Peter’s appeals in 2:14–36 and 3:12–26; Stephen’s speech in 7:2–53; and Paul’s address in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch in 13:16–41).⁷⁹ In Gentile contexts (e.g., 17:22–31), this was a less effective appeal, but among those who hold to the inspiration of the Torah it was quite successful. The fulfillment of the OT was essential to the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch (8:30–35). Beyond these specific instances, there are also unspecified appeals in Acts to the fulfillment of the OT that point to God’s activity in sending Christ (e.g., Peter speaks of what “all the prophets testify,” 3:18, 24; 10:43; cf. the summaries of Paul’s preaching in 17:3; 24:14; 26:22; and of Apollos’s preaching in 18:28). Thus, the message to Israel is “Your Messiah has come, according to the Scriptures.”

This fulfillment of God’s desire is seen in the continued emphasis on God’s plan. The “divine must” (dei) is a continued phenomenon from Luke’s Gos-

⁷⁵ See the essays in “Part I: The Salvation of God” in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, eds. I. H. Marshall and D. Peterson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). D. Peterson (*ibid.*, 523) speaks of the “centrality of salvation theology” in Luke-Acts.

⁷⁶ As proposed by H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961), 137–69.

⁷⁷ See F. Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 113–14.

⁷⁸ A. J. Köstenberger and P. T. O’Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth*, NSBT 11 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 157.

⁷⁹ All but two of the citations are in chaps. 1–15. The last two instances are in 23:5 and 28:26–27.

pel (see 1:16, 21). At many places in the narrative it is used to show the plans of God (see 3:21; 4:12; 9:6; 14:22; 17:3; 19:21; 23:11; 27:24; 27:26).

From a structural and literary standpoint, Luke showed that the expansion of the gospel to the ends of the earth was a movement of God. Above all else, it was in obedience to and in fulfillment of the explicit command of Jesus (1:8). The rest of the book unfolds as Jesus foretold (i.e., “Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”). But more than that, each step was a movement of God. The evangelization of Jerusalem came after the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. In 8:4, the door was opened to Judea and Samaria. The persecution at the stoning of Stephen and the subsequent dispersion proved to be providential. Philip evangelized some Samaritans and then a Gentile God-fearer (the Ethiopian) at the command of an angel.

The door was further opened to Gentiles with the salvation of Cornelius, who received a vision to talk to a man named Peter (10:1–5). Meanwhile, Peter, in Joppa, received a vision not to exclude anyone (10:9–16). At about that time, the invitation from Cornelius arrived.

The outline of Acts is centered geographically, proceeding as follows: Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, Asia Minor, Macedonia and Greece, and Rome. At the entrance of the gospel to each of these regions, Luke was careful to note that the gospel penetrated these areas at the direction of God. In 13:2, Paul and Barnabas were selected by the Holy Spirit to take the gospel to Asia Minor. On the return trip, a Macedonian vision was interpreted as a message from God to go there (16:9). Paul was determined to go to Rome, but this happened in such a way that could only be considered providential (19:21). The purposes of God were clearly announced to Paul on his final trip to Jerusalem. In the end, he was arrested, appealed to Caesar, and was sent to Rome at state expense, all of which was articulated to Paul as the decree of God (e.g., 21:10–14; 23:11; 27:23–24).

The Universal Scope of the Gospel

The second, unmistakable theme related to salvation history is that the gospel is for all nations. Luke stressed in Acts 1:8 that Jesus commanded the apostles to go to the ends of the earth. Yet he also documented that the steps to the inclusion of the Gentiles were slow and hesitating. Moreover, these steps were certainly not the result of human planning. For example, Peter had to be convinced by miraculous, divine means that Gentiles could receive the gospel apart from Judaism (10:1–48).

Although the inclusion of the Gentiles is widely accepted, it is often forgotten (and sometimes denied)⁸⁰ that salvation includes the restoration of Israel through Jesus (see especially the question at 1:6 and Peter's invitation at 2:36). Jesus' reply to the question at 1:6 ("Lord, is it at this time that you are restoring the kingdom to Israel?") was not that the kingdom would not be restored, but that this will take place in the Father's timing. F. Thielman is certainly correct when he stated, "This implies that such a restoration is coming, although Christians should not calculate the timing of its arrival."⁸¹ Throughout the book of Acts, the pattern—as Paul announced it in Rom 1:16—is "to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile." Thus Luke demonstrated that the gospel was initially proclaimed "to the Jews first."

The Holy Spirit

Related to the emphasis on the sovereignty of God in moving the gospel forward is an emphasis on the Holy Spirit as the agent of the church's life and growth. Luke described his Gospel as recording "all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1), implying that the book of Acts is about the continuing activity of Christ. This activity was accomplished through the Holy Spirit.⁸² Hence, the disciples were commanded to wait for the promise of the Spirit (1:4, 8). His coming at Pentecost signaled the beginning of the church's advance (2:1–4, 33).

Since God promised to give the Spirit at salvation (2:38; 9:17), his reception is proof of salvation. Speaking in tongues is the evidence that three key people groups have been saved: Jews (2:4), Gentiles (10:46), and some disciples of John the Baptist (19:6). Since it is evident that the Samaritans had received salvation as well (8:16), it is possible that they spoke in tongues at salvation too—though this is not stated explicitly in the text. It is a mistake, however, to assume that salvation is always accompanied by speaking in tongues. The account of Paul's conversion, for example, makes no mention of tongues. Tongues in Acts are an indisputable sign that salvation has taken place with regard to specific people groups. The phenomenon strongly underscores the inclusiveness of the gospel.

The Holy Spirit was the one who sovereignly directed the Christian mission. Jesus gave orders through the Holy Spirit (1:2). Philip was ordered by the Holy Spirit (8:29, 39). Peter was instructed by the Holy Spirit to receive

⁸⁰ See J. T. Sanders, *The Jews in Luke-Acts* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

⁸¹ Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 133.

⁸² A few times in Acts the Lord Jesus himself appears and communicates (1:4–8; 7:56; 9:1–18; and 23:11), although these occasions can hardly be separated from the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Gentiles (10:19–20). The Holy Spirit set apart Barnabas and Saul and directed them to depart (13:2, 4). The Holy Spirit initiated Paul's departure to the Greek peninsula (16:6–10; cf. 20:22–23, 28; 21:4).

The Holy Spirit not only directed the mission, he empowered it. This was in keeping with the promise of Jesus (1:8), which was affirmed repeatedly in the narrative (4:8, 31; 6:10; 7:55; 9:31; 11:28–29; 13:9–10; 21:11). Peter's citation of Joel 2:28 (2:16–21), where the Lord promised an eschatological outpouring of the Spirit that would inaugurate salvation on a universal scope, is programmatic for the entire book. Thus it is hard to overstate the Spirit's post-Easter role in salvation history.⁸³

The Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus

The key point in salvation history is the death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus. In the proclamation of the gospel, this cluster of significant events is the pivot point of history and the culmination of God's plan from long ago. This plan was commanded by God (4:23), predicted by the prophets (26:22), accomplished in Christ (13:28–39), and proclaimed by faithful witnesses (4:33).⁸⁴

Luke's teaching on the resurrection of Christ entails not merely a restoration from the dead but an unprecedented exaltation. Even though others, such as Enoch or Elijah, had ascended to heaven, Jesus was elevated to the right hand of God. The importance of the ascension in Luke's theology is seen by strategic references to it in Luke-Acts at the end of the Gospel and at the beginning of Acts. Paul likewise, in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, connected the resurrection of Jesus to his sonship (13:33–34). Thus Jesus reigns as God's Messiah from the heavenly throne, not only as the Son of David, but also as the Son of God.

The resurrection of Jesus is the proof of Jesus' claims (see 3:15; 5:20; 25:19). It is also the guarantee of a personal resurrection for chosen humanity (see 24:15; 26:23). Finally, as noted above, it is also the starting point for the restoration of Israel. This is the first question asked of the resurrected Jesus in the book of Acts (1:6), and it is the "hope of Israel" (28:20). This restoration begins with the reception of the Messiah and his purging of sin, a message

⁸³ Although Luke clearly understood that the Spirit was involved in the writing of the OT (e.g., some OT passages are identified as having come through the Holy Spirit: 1:16; 4:25–26; 28:25), the reception of the Spirit is clearly something eschatological.

⁸⁴ This is a far cry from Conzelmann's understanding that Jesus was the "middle of time." Luke's presentation of the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus is not an eschatological correction of inaccurate prophecy but an integral part of God's plan.

powerfully proclaimed by Peter at Pentecost and marked especially by the pouring out of the Spirit as an inaugural sign of the last days (2:38).

The restoration includes a powerful “reconstituting” of the people of God to include the poor and oppressed in Israel and ultimately the inclusion of “all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call” (2:39).⁸⁵ Peter’s words thus provide a fitting summary: “Let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene—whom you crucified and whom God raised from the dead.... This Jesus is the stone despised by you builders, who has become the cornerstone. There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to people by which we must be saved” (4:10–12).

CONTRIBUTION TO THE CANON

- Volume 2 of Luke-Acts: what Jesus continued to do through the Holy Spirit (1:1)
- Account of the spread of Christianity from Jerusalem to Rome (1:8) and of the life and practices of the early church (see 2:42)
- Giving of the Spirit at Pentecost and birth of the NT church (chap. 2)
- Ministry of Peter, John, James (Jesus’ half-brother), and others (chaps. 1–12)
- Inclusion of the Gentiles by decree of the Jerusalem Council (chap. 15)
- Ministry of Paul “to the Jew first and also to the Gentiles” in locations to which Paul addressed letters included in the canon (chaps. 13–28; see especially 28:23–28)

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Who wrote Acts? Was the author an apostle? What ensures that the criterion of apostolicity was met?
2. When was Acts most likely written, and what is the major reason usually given for this date?
3. Who was Theophilus, how do we know who he was, and what was his likely role with regard to Luke/Acts?
4. Where was Acts most likely finished?

⁸⁵ See the fine treatment in Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 123–24.

5. What are the major proposals regarding the purpose of Acts? According to the authors, what is the most likely purpose?
6. Why is the question regarding genre important for studying Acts?
7. Why is Acts considered historically reliable?
8. What are the sources that lay behind the composition of Acts?
9. What is the basic “blueprint” for Acts, and why?
10. What is the logic underlying Peter’s Pentecost sermon?
11. What was the major issue discussed at the Jerusalem Council?
12. What role does the Holy Spirit play in Acts?

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