

# The Acts of the Apostles: The ABCs

## Authorship, Background, and Contents

### *Authorship*

The first thing to note about the book of Acts is that it is actually “Volume 2” of a two-volume work. From the formal prologue it is clear that the same writer is continuing the story begun in what we call the Gospel of Luke. Therefore, what is said about one of these in introduction also applies to the other. Luke-Acts comprises about 30 percent of the New Testament, so these works’ importance can hardly be overestimated, especially since Acts fills in portions of early Christian history of which we would otherwise be ignorant.

The Gospel of Luke begins thus:

**Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses to the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4)**

Compare this to the beginning of Acts:

**In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. (1:1-2)**

Both books begin with a formal declaration of purpose in keeping with high-level literary works of the period. It was not unusual also to dedicate the work to an important person. The name Theophilus means “friend of God,” and was a name in use at the time, though it may have been a pseudonym. Likely, Theophilus was the patron of the work, meaning he financially supported the author during its writing and financed the reproduction of the first copies. Keeping in mind that every copy had to be hand-written, this could be expensive, so financial support would have been invaluable. The writer uses the honorific address “most excellent,” which marks him as at least mid-level nobility (compare the use of the term for the governor Felix in Acts 24:3). Other possible implications of the dedication to Theophilus will be discussed in Background.

From the earliest Christian records, Luke has been unanimously identified as the author of these books, including the lists of the second century. The use of “we” and “us” in the book marks the writer as an eyewitness and participant in many of the events described. For examples, see Acts 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; and 27:1-28:16.

Luke is mentioned as Paul’s companion in Colossians 4:14, Philemon 24, and 2 Timothy 4:11. In Colossians 4:14, he is called “our dear friend Luke, the doctor,” the source of our knowledge that Luke was a physician. Also, in that passage he is separated from the list of Jewish companions, leading to the traditional view that Luke was a Gentile.

The date of writing is a matter of conjecture, obviously depending on one's view of the dating of Luke. One marker is where the book ends: Paul active during his first Roman imprisonment, dated usually around A.D. 60-62. It might be assumed that Luke wrote Acts shortly afterward, with Paul's fate not yet determined. Traditionally, it is assumed that Paul was released and enjoyed a few years of freedom, after which he was rearrested and executed somewhere around A.D. 65-66. It has been suggested by some that Luke actually planned a "Luke-Acts Part 3," but there is no historical evidence for this. Liberal scholars sometimes claim that Luke-Acts was written in the 80s or later, but this is mainly due to their assumption that predictive prophecy is impossible, and that therefore Jesus could not have prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem before the fact. For believers in the reality of God, this is not an issue.

Therefore, the best estimate of the writing of Acts is by Luke around A.D. 63-64.

## ***Background***

As Luke writes in the beginning of his gospel, he wants Theophilus to be able "to know the certainty of what he had been taught." No doubt, Luke also clearly intended to speak beyond this individual to many more Gentiles, hoping to win them to Christ. Whether or not Theophilus was the person's real name or a pseudonym, he was evidently a high-born noble Roman. He was likely already a Christian, or at least an interested "God-fearer" (Gentile believer in the God of Israel). Either way, there were questions anyone steeped in Roman culture would ask, and for which Luke provides answers.

- ***How the Christian church related to Judaism.*** To understand some of the dynamics encountered by the first century church, it is important to know that in the Roman Empire religions could be legal or illegal. Religiously, the Romans respected antiquity and traditions. For that reason, even though they considered the Jews bizarre and obstinate, they respected them for their fanatical allegiance to their ancestral traditions. Judaism was therefore a legal religion in the Empire. Roman people were deeply suspicious of any "new" religions, which they labeled "superstitions." The Christian movement was increasingly identified as one of these.

Politically, the Romans desired tranquility and taxes. Therefore, any religious sects that were both "new" and practiced anything in "secret" drew their immediate concern as possible seedbeds of sedition. The Christians were open to both of these charges, and were therefore potential targets as Rome became increasingly aware of them.

Luke, therefore, wanted to show that Christianity was not a "new" superstition only recently invented, but was in fact the culmination and crown of Judaism, the goal toward which the ancient traditions pointed. Acts takes special pains to show this relationship, and that it was only the obstinate refusal of Jewish leaders in power who forced the separation.

- ***The innocence of Jesus.*** The Christian movement suffered from the start in penetrating Roman society due to the fact that its Founder and King had been executed under a Roman governor as a state criminal. In his gospel, Luke takes special pains to emphasize that Jesus' death was undeserved, and records numerous individuals declaring Jesus' innocence: Pontius Pilate repeatedly pronounced Jesus

not guilty (Lk. 23:4, 14, 22), as did King Herod (Lk. 23:11, 15), one of the other criminals executed with him (Lk. 23:40-42), the centurion carrying out the crucifixion (Lk. 23:47), and one of the leading members of the Jewish council, Joseph of Arimathea (Lk. 23:50-51). The conclusion couldn't be clearer: Though Jesus was executed under a Roman magistrate, he was completely innocent of wrongdoing.

- ***The innocence of the Christian movement.*** In Acts Luke continues this theme of Jesus' innocence, and it is mentioned often in the preaching of the apostles; e.g., see 2:22-23; 3:13-15.

The same problem arose with the new Christian movement in general, and particularly with the Roman imprisonment of Paul, so Luke carefully explains the circumstances, proving that Paul was innocent of criminal activity towards Rome.

When Paul was beaten and imprisoned by the authorities in Philippi, he was eventually released by them with a public admission of his innocence (16:35-39). Later, when Paul was arrested in Jerusalem, the commander did not know what to indicate as the reason (23:25-30), and "kicked the problem upstairs." After Paul was forced to appeal to Caesar to prevent being a victim of a miscarriage of justice, the king and governor admitted that there was no real reason for his imprisonment (26:30-32).

When he finally arrived in Rome, Paul was granted the loosest form of Roman imprisonment, which allowed him a great deal of freedom "for two whole years" (28:30-31), evidence that he was not considered dangerous. It is assumed by most scholars that Paul was eventually released to enjoy a few years of further ministry because no accusers showed up and there was no case against him.

- ***The unity of the developing church.*** The church was born following Jesus' death and resurrection, officially inaugurated on the day of Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit (ch. 2). Though there was clear understanding from the start about the foundational truths about Christ, the early Christians needed time to work their understanding out to its full conclusions.

It took time for the original believers to realize that Samaritans could come into the church as full members (8:4-17). Even more difficult was their acceptance of the Gentiles as fellow members of the body of Christ without the condition of accepting the Mosaic Law. Even Peter had to go through a difficult change of mind to make this shift (chapters 10 & 11). Later, a full council of the apostles and elders was necessary to discuss and settle the question of the Gentiles (15:1-29).

In the end, they were in full accord and announced the results of their conference.

## ***Contents***

One of the longest books in the New Testament, Acts understandably contains many important lessons for us. Being the only inspired history of the early church, we have the record of what the Lord wants us to know. Here are some things to watch for:

- ***The coming of the Holy Spirit.*** For hundreds of years the prophets predicted the New Covenant that God would one day make with his people. Part of this New Covenant

would be the giving of God's own Spirit to his people (Ezekiel 36:24-27). This was again predicted by John the Baptist (Mark 1:8), and promised by Jesus (John 14:15-17). On the day of Pentecost, described in Acts 2, these promises came to pass. The rest of Acts then records how the risen and ascended Christ built his church through his Holy Spirit in them.

- ***The effective preaching of the apostles.*** Beginning on that day of Pentecost, the apostle bore powerful witness to the resurrection of Christ (e.g., 2:32-36). Thousands were converted, moving outward from Jerusalem. As the book continues, the gospel converts people to faith “in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (1:8).
- ***The conversion of Paul.*** After the resurrection of Jesus, one of the most powerful evidences of the reality of Christ is the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. This event is seen as so important that it is described on three different occasions in the book. What could cause one of the most vicious, committed opponents of the Christian movement to change sides and become its greatest proponent? As an apologetic (“a logical proof”), it is extremely hard to explain on natural terms. Paul himself gives the only true explanation: “. . . and last of all [Christ] *appeared to me also*, as to one abnormally born” (1 Corinthians 15:8).

## ***Conclusion***

The Book of Acts is a rich and exciting study. Within it can be found Christian theology, both taught and lived. There are remarkable accounts of faith, heroism, and courage in the face of persecution.

Its traditional title for many centuries has been “The Acts of the Apostles.” Many have suggested that it should really be called “The Acts of the Holy Spirit.” In truth, it's not either/or. Since he ascended to the Father's right hand, Jesus Christ has dwelt in his people through the Holy Spirit, so that when we are faithful, he does his work through us. We are still living in the age of Acts, and every day we who believe are adding to its history.

T.L.S.