

New Testament Session #4 The Acts of the Apostles: A Glimpse Into the Life of the Early Church

Authorship and Date of the Acts of the Apostles

There is not much controversy surrounding the identity of the author of Luke's Gospel. The same Luke wrote this work as wrote the Gospel of Luke. He was a Gentile, a now-Jewish convert to Christianity. He was a physician, as St. Paul tells us in Colossians 4:14. He accompanied St. Paul on some of his missionary journeys. (Acts 16:10-:17, 20:5-:15, 21:1-:18, 27:1-28:16).

Part of the reason that there is no controversy surrounding St. Luke's identity as the author of this book is that no one would bother to invent this figure. Luke is not an apostle, not an eyewitness to the ministry of Jesus, and not much else is known about him. There would be no particular advantage in claiming him as the author of this work if he did not actually write it.¹ This is very different from the situation which we found when we studied the Gospel of John, where John's authorship of the work needs to be defended against those who reject this belief. The consensus of modern scholarship reflects the views of leading figures from early church history, such as Irenaeus (180 AD), Clement of Alexandria (200 AD), and Eusebius (325 AD), who held to the belief that St. Paul's "fellow worker" (Philemon 24) wrote this book.²

There is debate about when this book was written. It is commonly accepted that St. Luke wrote his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles in the same relatively short period of time. The debate is over when this was. There are those who argue that because the burning of Rome in 64 AD, the martyrdom of Sts. Peter and Paul in the mid 60s, and the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 AD are not mentioned that the Acts of the Apostles must have been written in the early 60s.³ There are those who argue that for a variety of reasons the book must have been written later, with most scholars in this camp saying that this occurred in the mid 80s.⁴ Emory University's Luke Timothy Johnson is among those who holds to the theory that Acts was written at a later date, but does note that the first sources we have from the early church that refer to the dating of Acts argue that it was written prior to the martyrdom of Sts. Peter and Paul.⁵

Strong arguments can be made for both dates. I am not completely sure which one I would say is more likely. However, it is interesting to note the list of reasons proposed by Southern Evangelical Seminary's Norman Geisler as he argues for an earlier dating of the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles:

¹ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 56-57.

² Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, eds., *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Acts of the Apostles* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2002), 13.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *The Anchor Bible: The Acts of the Apostles* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 54-55.

⁵ <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/acts.html>

1. There is no mention in Acts of the crucial event of the fall of Jerusalem in 70.
2. There is no hint of the outbreak of the Jewish War in 66 or of serious deterioration of relations between Romans and Jews before that time.
3. There is no hint of the deterioration of Christian relations with Rome during the Neronian persecution of the late 60s.
4. There is no hint of the death of James at the hands of the Sanhedrin in ca. 62, which is recorded by Josephus in *Antiquities of the Jews* (20.9.1.200).
5. The significance of Gallio's judgement in Acts 18:14-17 may be seen as setting precedent to legitimize Christian teaching under the umbrella of the tolerance extended to Judaism.
6. The prominence and authority of the Sadducees in Acts reflects a pre-70 date, before the collapse of their political cooperation with Rome.
7. The relatively sympathetic attitude in Acts to Pharisees (unlike that found even in Luke's Gospel) does not fit well with in the period of Pharisaic revival that led up to the council at Jamnia. At that time a new phase of conflict began with Christianity.
8. Acts seems to antedate the arrival of Peter in Rome and implies that Peter and John were alive at the time of the writing.
9. The prominence of 'God-fearers' in the synagogues may point to a pre-70 date, after which there were few Gentile inquiries and converts to Jerusalem.
10. Luke gives insignificant details of the culture of an early, Julio-Claudian period.
11. Areas of controversy described presume that the temple was still standing.
12. Adolf Harnack contended that Paul's prophecy in 20:25 (cf. 20:38) may have been contradicted by later events. If so, the book must have appeared before those events.
13. Christian terminology used in Acts reflects an earlier period. Harnack points to use of *Iusous* and *Ho Kurios*, while *Ho Christos* always designates 'the Messiah,' and is not a proper name for Jesus.
14. The confident tone of Acts seems unlikely during the Neronian persecutions of Christians and the Jewish War with the Rome during the late 60s.
15. The action ends very early in the 60s, yet the description in Acts 27 and 28 is written with a vivid immediacy. It is also an odd place to end the book if years have passed since the pre-62 events transpired.⁶

<http://www.bethinking.org/resource.php?ID=233>

The Chronology of Acts: The Geographic and Ethnic Expansion of the Church

The Gospel in Jerusalem (Acts 2:14-8:3)⁷

Pentecost (2:14-:47)

⁶ <http://www.bethinking.org/resource.php?ID=233>

⁷ The following outline is taken from Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, eds., *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Acts of the Apostles*, 15

The Gospel in Judea and Samaria (8:14-12:25)

Philips's Ministry in Judea and Samaria (8:4-:40)

All throughout Judea and Samaria, south and north of Jerusalem

Peter's Ministry in Lydda, Joppa, and Caesarea (9:32-11:18)

Three cities northwest of Jerusalem, Lydda and Caesarea were on the Mediterranean coast

Gentile conversions in Syrian Antioch (11:19-:30)

The Gospel to the End of the Earth (13:1-28:31)

Paul's 1st Missionary Journey: Cyprus and Asia Minor (13:1-14:28)

Set out and returned to Antioch, near modern day border of Turkey and Syria

The Council of Jerusalem (15:1-:35)

After much debate had taken place, Peter got up and said to them, "My brothers, you are well aware that from early days God made his choice among you that through my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness by granting them the holy Spirit just as he did us. He made no distinction between us and them, for by faith he purified their hearts. Why, then, are you now putting God to the test by placing on the shoulders of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they." The whole assembly fell silent, and they listened while Paul and Barnabas described the signs and wonders God had worked among the Gentiles through them. After they had fallen silent, James responded, "My brothers, listen to me. Symeon has described how God first concerned himself with acquiring from among the Gentiles a people for his name. The words of the prophets agree with this, as is written: 'After this I shall return and rebuild the fallen hut of David; from its ruins I shall rebuild it and raise it up again, so that the rest of humanity may seek out the Lord, even all the Gentiles on whom my name is invoked. Thus says the Lord who accomplishes these things, known from of old.' It is my judgment, therefore, that we ought to stop troubling the Gentiles who turn to God, but tell them by letter to avoid pollution from idols, unlawful marriage, the meat of strangled animals, and blood. Acts 15:7-:20

Burden of Mosaic law lifted off of Gentiles
Notice this applies to ritual, not moral, law

Few remaining ritual aspects probably should be seen as temporary measure to ease transition, easier for Jewish Christians to not give up everything they were used to at once⁸

Paul's 2nd Missionary Journey: Asia Minor, Greece, Ephesus (15:36-18:22)

Again started and ended in Antioch, visited Jerusalem near end of this journey

Paul's 3rd Missionary Journey: Asia Minor, Ephesus, Greece (18:23-21:15)

Set out from Antioch, ended in Jerusalem
Paul's speech to the leaders at Ephesus (20:17-:36)

Paul's Journey to and Ministry in Rome (27:1-28:31)

Believed that he was freed from this imprisonment, continued missionary work, imprisoned again, wrote 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus during this final imprisonment, was then killed

The Missionary Nature of the Church in the Acts of the Apostles

This expansion of the Church certainly shows the great missionary intensity of the first Christians. There are several incidents in particular that I believe help to show this to us.

Pentecost (2:14-:47)

Church grows greatly as those gathered for Jewish feast become Christians

When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven staying in Jerusalem. At this sound, they gathered in a large crowd, but they were confused because each one heard them speaking in his own language. They were astounded, and in amazement they asked, "Are not all these people who are speaking Galileans? Then how does each of us hear them in his own native language? We are Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya near Cyrene, as well as travelers from Rome, both Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans and Arabs, yet we hear them speaking in our own tongues of the mighty acts of God." Acts 2:1-:11.....You who are Israelites, hear these words. Jesus the Nazorean was a man commended to you by God with mighty deeds, wonders, and signs, which God worked through him in your midst, as you yourselves know. This

⁸ Ibid, 42.

man, delivered up by the set plan and foreknowledge of God, you killed, using lawless men to crucify him. But God raised him up, releasing him from the throes of death, because it was impossible for him to be held by it. Acts 2:22-:24.....Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and they asked Peter and the other apostles, "What are we to do, my brothers?" Peter (said) to them, "Repent and be baptized,^z every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the holy Spirit. For the promise is made to you and to your children and to all those far off, whomever the Lord our God will call." He testified with many other arguments, and was exhorting them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand persons were added that day. Acts 2:37-:41

Peter, Cornelius, and the Gentiles (10:1-11:18)

Barriers between Gentiles and Jewish people beginning to disappear
This is what was affirmed by Council of Jerusalem

Now in Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Cohort called the Italica, devout and God-fearing along with his whole household, who used to give alms generously to the Jewish people and pray to God constantly. One afternoon about three o'clock, he saw plainly in a vision an angel of God come in to him and say to him, "Cornelius." He looked intently at him and, seized with fear, said, "What is it, sir?" He said to him, "Your prayers and almsgiving have ascended as a memorial offering before God. Now send some men to Joppa and summon one Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with another Simon, a tanner, who has a house by the sea." When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from his staff, explained everything to them, and sent them to Joppa. The next day, while they were on their way and nearing the city, Peter went up to the roof terrace to pray at about noontime. He was hungry and wished to eat, and while they were making preparations he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something resembling a large sheet coming down, lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all the earth's four-legged animals and reptiles and the birds of the sky. A voice said to him, "Get up, Peter. Slaughter and eat." But Peter said, "Certainly not, sir. For never have I eaten anything profane and unclean." The voice spoke to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you are not to call profane." This happened three times, and then the object was taken up into the sky. While Peter was in doubt about the meaning of the vision he had seen, the men sent by Cornelius asked for Simon's house and arrived at the entrance. They called out inquiring whether Simon, who is called Peter, was staying there. As Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said (to him), "There are three men here looking for you. So get up, go downstairs, and accompany them without hesitation, because I have sent them." Then Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for. What is the reason for your being here?" They answered, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, respected by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to summon you to his house and to hear what you have to say." So he invited them in and showed them hospitality. The next day he got up and went with them. Acts 10:1-:23....."Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people, who have

received the holy Spirit even as we have?" He ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Acts 10:47-:48

Side Note #1, Galatians 2:11-:16

Peter backsliding on this and being corrected by Paul

Perfect model of current understanding of Papal authority

Teaching authority guaranteed, not personal fidelity

And when Kephas (Greek form of Peter's name) came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face because he clearly was wrong. For, until some people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to draw back and separated himself, because he was afraid of the circumcised. And the rest of the Jews (also) acted hypocritically along with him, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not on the right road in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Kephas in front of all, "If you, though a Jew, are living like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" We, who are Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles, (yet) who know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. Galatians 2:11-:16

Side Note #2, Cornelius's profession

It was an issue that he was a gentile, not that he was a soldier

Paul's Speech to the Leaders at Ephesus (20:17-:38)

The failure to evangelize is equated with murder

From Miletus (city on western coast of modern Turkey, south of Ephesus) he had the presbyters of the church at Ephesus summoned. When they came to him, he addressed them, "You know how I lived among you the whole time from the day I first came to the province of Asia. I served the Lord with all humility and with the tears and trials that came to me because of the plots of the Jews, and I did not at all shrink from telling you what was for your benefit, or from teaching you in public or in your homes. I earnestly bore witness for both Jews and Greeks to repentance before God and to faith in our Lord Jesus. But now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem. What will happen to me there I do not know, except that in one city after another the holy Spirit has been warning me that imprisonment and hardships await me. Yet I consider life of no importance to me, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to bear witness to the gospel of God's grace. "But now I know that none of you to whom I preached the kingdom during my travels will ever see my face again. And so I solemnly declare to you this day that I am not responsible for the blood of any of you, for I did not shrink from proclaiming to you the entire plan of God. Acts 20:17-:27

The Eucharist in the Acts of the Apostles

Need to also look at Eucharistic language in Luke's Gospel, see foundation that was built on in Acts

Breaking of bread in Luke's Last Supper account

When the hour came, he took his place at table with the apostles. He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer, for, I tell you, I shall not eat it (again) until there is fulfillment in the kingdom of God." Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and said, "Take this and share it among yourselves; for I tell you (that) from this time on I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." Then he took the bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which will be given for you; do this in memory of me." And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you. Luke 22:14-:20

Breaking of bread in Emmaus Road story

And it happened that, while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight. Then they said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning (within us) while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?" So they set out at once and returned to Jerusalem where they found gathered together the eleven and those with them who were saying, "The Lord has truly been raised and has appeared to Simon!" Then the two recounted what had taken place on the way and how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread. Luke 24:30-24:35

Breaking of Bread in the Acts of the Apostles

They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. Acts 2:42

Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people. 2:46-:47

We sailed from Philippi after the feast of Unleavened Bread, and rejoined them five days later in Troas, where we spent a week. On the first day of the week when we gathered to break bread, Paul spoke to them because he was going to leave on the next day, and he kept on speaking until midnight. There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were gathered, and a young man named Eutychus who was sitting on the window sill was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. Once overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and when he was picked up, he was dead. Paul went down, threw himself upon him, and said as he embraced him, "Don't be alarmed; there is life in him."

Then he returned upstairs, broke the bread, and ate; after a long conversation that lasted until daybreak, he departed. Acts 20:6-:7

“The breaking of the bread”

Simple language but even Protestant Witherington sees links to Last Supper, refers to “primitive way of alluding to Lord’s Supper”⁹

“Primitive” not an insult, just means early/basic

Not developed Eucharistic language of later Church, but same reality still there

Jesuit priest Fitzmeyer sees Eucharist more clearly in Acts than Witherington does¹⁰

Baptism in the Acts of the Apostles

Peter (said) to them, "Repent and be baptized, ^z every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the holy Spirit. For the promise is made to you and to your children and to all those far off, whomever the Lord our God will call." He testified with many other arguments, and was exhorting them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand persons were added that day. Acts 2:38-:41

Now, why delay? Get up and have yourself baptized and your sins washed away, calling upon his name. Acts 22:16

Baptism removes sins, fits with what we find in Paul’s letters (Rom 6:3-:4, Col 2:12), John’s Gospel (3:5), and why this is part of Christ’s Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-:20)

Possessions, Money, and Charity in the Acts of the Apostles

Great care shown for the poor

Dramatic step of all possessions in common not seen as binding on all Christians at all times

One way of living out Christ’s command to love their neighbor

Fact they were willing to go so far shows seriousness of this command

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need. Acts 2:44-:45

There was no needy person among them, for those who owned property or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds of the sale, and put them at the feet of the apostles, and they were distributed to each according to need. Acts 4:34-:35

⁹ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 114-115.

¹⁰ Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *The Anchor Bible: The Acts of the Apostles*, 268-271, 667-669.

Some set aside for particular form of service to the poor

At that time, as the number of disciples continued to grow, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. So the Twelve called together the community of the disciples and said, "It is not right for us to neglect the word of God to serve at table. Brothers, select from among you seven reputable men, filled with the Spirit and wisdom, whom we shall appoint to this task, whereas we shall devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." The proposal was acceptable to the whole community, so they chose Stephen, a man filled with faith and the holy Spirit, also Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas of Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid hands on them. 6:1-:6

Even these individuals not to neglect work of preaching

Stephen is shown as a preacher prior to his martyrdom (Acts 6:8-8:1) and Philip preached as well (Acts 8:4-:40)¹¹

Same pattern as those with primary responsibility of teaching/preaching still being called upon to care for the poor

Different patterns of service show primary call (caring for the poor or preaching), not an exclusive call which rules out other forms of service

Church Structure and Authority in Acts

Understanding of church leadership and structure, apostolic succession, and authority are all very important in Acts

Will discuss further during Session #7 which will focus primarily on 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus

¹¹ See footnotes to New American Bible, available here <http://www.usccb.org/nab/bible/acts/acts6.htm>