The Acts of the Apostles

David G. Peterson
## Contents

**Editor’s Preface**  
xiv

**Author’s Preface**  
xvi

**Abbreviations**  
xix

**Bibliography**  
xxvi

INTRODUCTION  
1

I. Authorship and Date  
1

A. Authorship  
1

B. Date  
4

II. Genre  
5

A. The Unity of Luke and Acts  
6

B. Ancient Literary Models for Acts  
8

1. **Historical Monograph**  
8

2. **Biography**  
11

3. **Historical Novel**  
13

C. Acts and Biblical Histories  
13

D. Conclusion about Genre  
15

III. Sources, Rhetoric, and Historical Reliability  
16

A. Sources  
16

B. Rhetoric  
19

C. Historical Reliability  
23

IV. Character, Structure, and Purpose  
26
Contents

A. Character  
   1. A Theological History  26
   2. A Narrative Dominated by Speeches  27
   3. A Narrative of Fulfillment  29

B. Structure  
   1. The Progress of ‘the Word’  32
   2. Further Indications of Expansion and Church Growth  34
   3. An Expositional Outline  35

C. Purpose  36

V. Interpretive Issues  39

A. Literary Approaches to Acts  39

B. Some Editorial Techniques with Thematic Implications  42
   1. Editorial Summaries  42
   2. Inclusions  42
   3. Use of Key Terms  43
   4. Use of Scripture  43
   5. Speeches, with Patterns of Repetition  44
   6. Narrative Repetition  44
   7. Parallel Accounts  45
   8. Contrasting Accounts  46
   9. Some Significant Geographical, Cultural, and Social Indicators  46

C. Characterisation  47

VI. Textual Matters  49

THE THEOLOGY OF ACTS  53

I. God and His Plan  54
II. Jesus as Messiah and Lord  56
III. The Holy Spirit  60
IV. Salvation  65
V. The Gospel  70
VI. The Atoning Work of Jesus  75
VII. Witness and Mission  79
VIII. Miracles  83
IX. Magic and the Demonic  87
X. The Church  92
COMMENTARY

I. Introduction and Recapitulation:
The Mission Plan of the Risen Lord (1:1-14) 99
A. The Promise of the Spirit (1:1-5) 101
B. The Commissioning of the Apostles (1:6-8) 108
C. The Ascension of Christ and Its Aftermath (1:9-14) 113

II. The Word in Jerusalem (1:15–6:7) 118
A. Completion of the Apostolic Circle (1:15-26) 119
  1. The Fate of Judas (1:15-20) 120
  2. The Choice of Matthias (1:21-26) 126
B. The Restoration of Israel Begins (2:1-40) 129
  1. The Coming of the Spirit (2:1-13) 130
  2. Peter’s Interpretation of the Event (2:14-40) 138
     a. The Gift of the Spirit Is a Sign That the Day of the Lord Is at Hand (2:14-21) 139
     b. Jesus Is the Lord on Whom to Call for Salvation (2:22-36) 144
     c. Calling upon Jesus Involves Repentance and Baptism in His Name (2:37-40) 153
C. The Community Created by the Spirit (2:41-47) 158
D. A Particular Sign of the Messianic Restoration (3:1-26) 165
  1. Healing in the Name of Jesus (3:1-10) 166
  2. Peter’s Interpretation of the Sign (3:11-26) 171
     a. The Author of Life (3:11-16) 172
     b. The Appointed Messiah (3:17-21) 178
     c. The Prophet like Moses (3:22-26) 183
E. The Leadership of the New Israel (4:1-22) 185
  1. Proclaiming in Jesus the Resurrection from the Dead (4:1-12) 186
  2. Teaching the People in the Name of Jesus (4:13-22) 193
F. The Boldness and Generosity of the New Israel (4:23-37) 197
  1. Their Prayer for Boldness (4:23-31) 197
  2. Their Impressive Generosity (4:32-37) 203
G. The Awesome Presence of God (5:1-16) 207
  1. Judgment in the Church (5:1-11) 208
  2. Signs and Wonders among the People (5:12-16) 213
H. Conflict with the Authorities Again (5:17-42) 216
  1. The Apostles Are Re-arrested (5:17-33) 216
  2. The Moderating Influence of Gamaliel (5:34-40) 223
  3. The Ministry of the Apostles Continues (5:41-42) 227
I. Resolution of a Significant Conflict in the Jerusalem Church (6:1-7) 228
III. The Word Goes Out from Jerusalem (6:8–9:31) 237
  A. The Prophetic Ministry of Stephen (6:8-15) 237
  B. Stephen’s ‘Defence’ (7:1-56) 244
     1. The Foundational Promises to Abraham (7:2-8) 247
     2. Joseph Blessed with Grace and Wisdom for the Salvation of God’s People (7:9-16) 251
     3. Moses Blessed with Wisdom and Power, in Words and Deeds, for the Salvation of God’s People (7:17-38) 253
     4. Jesus Rejected as Part of a Continuing Pattern of Disobedience to God (7:39-53) 259
     5. Jesus as the Glorified Son of Man (7:54-56) 265
  C. Stephen’s Martyrdom (7:57-60) 267
  D. Persecution Leads to Expansion (8:1-3) 275
  E. The Word Goes to Samaria (8:4-25) 277
     1. Some Samaritans Find Their True Deliverer (8:5-13) 280
     2. Jerusalem Witnesses Samaria’s Reception of the Holy Spirit (8:14-17) 285
     3. A Pretender Is Exposed (8:18-25) 287
  F. The Word Goes to Ethiopia (8:26-40) 291
     1. A Divinely Arranged Encounter (8:26-31) 292
     2. Finding Christ in the Scriptures (8:32-38) 294
     3. Philip’s Continuing Ministry (8:39-40) 297
  G. Saul’s Conversion and Commissioning (9:1-19a) 298
     1. Meeting the Ascended Lord (9:1-9) 300
     2. Accepted into the Fellowship of the Persecuted Church (9:10-19a) 306
  H. Saul Preaches in Damascus and Jerusalem (9:19b-31) 311
     1. Proclaiming the Son of God in Damascus (9:19b-25) 312
     2. Disputing with Hellenists in Jerusalem (9:26-31) 315
IV. The Word Advances in Judea and Syria (9:32–12:25) 319

A. Peter’s Pastoral and Evangelistic Ministry in Western Judea (9:32-43) 319
   1. Healing Aeneas in Lydda (9:32-35) 320
   2. Raising Tabitha/Dorcas in Joppa (9:36-43) 321

B. Peter’s Role in the Evangelisation of the Gentiles (10:1-48) 323
   1. Two Significant Visions (10:1-16) 325
   2. Two Significant Journeys (10:17-29) 331
   3. Salvation for Gentiles in the Fellowship of the Spirit (10:30-48) 333

C. Peter’s Report to the Church in Jerusalem (11:1-18) 341
   1. Peter Is Called to Account (11:1-3) 342
   2. Peter Recalls God’s Direction and Control (11:4-17) 343
   3. The Church Acknowledges God’s Leading (11:18) 349

D. The Word Goes to Antioch in Syria (11:19-30) 350
   1. The Planting of a New Church (11:19-21) 351
   2. The Encouraging Ministry of Barnabas and Saul (11:22-26) 354

E. Peter’s Deliverance in Jerusalem (12:1-25) 359
   1. Persecution and Arrest (12:1-5) 360
   2. Unexpected Deliverance (12:6-19) 363
   4. The Word Continues to Grow (12:24-25) 370

V. The Word Goes to Cyprus and Asia Minor (13:1–16:5) 372

A. The Release of Barnabas and Saul from Antioch in Syria (13:1-3) 373

B. The Word in Cyprus (13:4-12) 377

C. The Word in Pisidian Antioch (13:13-52)
   1. Ministry in the Synagogue (13:14-43) 384
      a. The Election of Israel and the Election of David (13:17-23) 387
      b. Jesus the Fulfiller of the Promise to David (13:24-37) 389
      c. The Challenge Not to Miss Out on the Salvation Available through Jesus (13:38-43) 393
Contents

2. Turning to the Gentiles: Fulfilling the Servant’s Role (13:44-52) 396

Additional Note: A Gospel for the Jew First 400

Introduction to Acts 14 401

D. The Word in Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (14:1-20) 402
   1. Concerted Opposition in Iconium (14:1-7) 403
   2. Encountering Paganism in Lystra (14:8-20) 406

E. Revisiting the Churches (14:21-28) 412

F. The Jerusalem Council (15:1-35) 417
   1. The Need for the Council (15:1-5) 419
   2. The Proceedings of the Council (15:6-29)
      a. Debate (15:6-21) 424
      b. Resolution (15:22-29) 436
   3. The Result of the Council (15:30-35) 440

Additional Note: The Meaning and Application of the Council Narrative 442

G. Disagreement between Paul and Barnabas (15:36-41) 446

H. Revisiting the South Galatian Churches (16:1-5) 449

VI. The Word Goes to Europe (16:6–18:22) 452

A. Remarkable Guidance (16:6-10) 453

B. Salvation Comes to Philippi (16:11-34)
   1. Lydia and Her Household (16:11-15) 458
   2. A Fortune-Teller and Her Masters (16:16-24) 462
   3. A Jailer and His Household (16:25-34) 467

C. Leaving Philippi Peacefully (16:35-40) 471

Introduction to Acts 17 475

D. The Word in Thessalonica and Berea (17:1-15)
   1. The Gospel Provokes Jealousy and Turmoil (17:1-9) 476

E. The Word in Athens (17:16-34)
   1. Responding to Idolatry (17:16-21) 487
   2. Establishing God’s Claim on All People (17:22-31)
      a. The Truth about God (17:24-25) 495
      b. The Truth about Humanity (17:26-29) 496
      c. The Truth about Divine Judgment (17:30-31) 501
   3. Founding a Church (17:32-34) 503
Contents

F. The Word in Corinth (18:1-17)
   1. Jews Together in Corinth (18:1-4) 506
   2. A New Centre for Ministry (18:5-8) 509
   3. An Encouraging Vision (18:9-11) 513
   4. Jews and Christians in Public Dispute (18:12-17) 515

G. Completion of the Second Missionary Journey (18:18-22) 519

VII. The Word in Ephesus: Climax of Paul’s Mission as a Free Man (18:23–20:38) 522

A. Priscilla, Aquila, and Apollos in Ephesus (18:23-28) 523
B. Twelve Disciples of John the Baptist Become Christians (19:1-7) 527
C. Teaching and Mighty Works in Asia (19:8-20)
   1. From Synagogue to Lecture Hall (19:8-10) 534
   2. Miracles and Their Impact (19:11-20) 536
D. Provoking the Idolaters (19:21-40) 542
   INTRODUCTION TO ACTS 20
E. Encouraging the Churches in Macedonia, Greece, and Troas (20:1-12) 554

F. Saying Farewell to the Ephesian Elders (20:13-38)
   1. Gathering (20:13-17) 561
   2. Recalling the Past (20:18-21) 563
   3. Facing the Future (20:22-35)
      a. Paul’s Future in Jerusalem (20:22-24) 565
      b. Paul’s Confidence in Saying Farewell (20:25-27) 567
      c. The Elders and the Future of the Ephesian Church (20:28-31) 568
      d. The Grounds for Confidence (20:32-35) 571
   4. Departing (20:36-38) 574

VIII. Paul’s Final Journey: To Jerusalem and Rome (21:1–28:31) 574

A. Following the Way of Jesus (21:1-16)
   1. From Miletus to Tyre (21:1-6) 577
   2. From Tyre to Jerusalem (21:7-16) 578
B. Captured in Jerusalem (21:17-40)
   1. A Well-Meaning Proposal (21:17-26) 583
   3. Arrested and Questioned (21:33-40) 591
   INTRODUCTION TO ACTS 22 593
Contents

C. Defending His Mission and His Gospel (22:1-21) 595
   1. Paul’s Former Life in Judaism (22:3-5) 596
   2. Paul’s Encounter with the Risen Jesus (22:6-11) 598
   3. Ananias and the Redirection of Paul’s Life (22:12-16) 600
   4. Paul’s Subsequent Vision in the Temple (22:17-21) 603

D. Claiming His Right as a Roman Citizen (22:22-30) 606

E. Appearing before the Sanhedrin (23:1-11) 611

F. Rescued from Death Again (23:12-35) 619
   1. Hatching the Plot (23:12-15) 620
   2. Exposing the Plot (23:16-22) 621
   3. Preventing the Plot (23:23-35) 622

G. Appearing before Felix (24:1-27) 627
   1. The Accusation of the Jews (24:1-9) 630
   2. Paul’s Defence (24:10-23) 633
   3. Challenging Felix and Drusilla Personally (24:24-27) 639

H. Appearing before Festus (25:1-22) 645
   1. Festus Meets Paul’s Accusers (25:1-5) 645
   2. Paul Appeals to Caesar (25:6-12) 646
   3. Festus Consults Agrippa (25:13-22) 650

I. Appearing before Agrippa (25:23–26:32) 654
   1. Festus Initiates the Proceedings (25:23-27) 655
      INTRODUCTION TO ACTS 25 644
   2. Paul’s Defence (26:1-23) 658
      a. His Jewish Credentials (26:1-11) 659
      b. His Calling and Mission (26:12-23) 664
   3. Paul’s Personal Appeal and the Outcome (26:24-32) 672

J. Journeying to Rome (27:1–28:15) 678
   1. From Caesarea to Malta (27:1-44) 680
      a. Sailing into Danger (27:1-20) 681
      b. Trusting God’s Word (27:21-38) 689
      c. Experiencing God’s Deliverance (27:39-44) 694
      ADDITIONAL NOTE: SALVATION TEMPORAL AND ETERNAL 696
      INTRODUCTION TO ACTS 28 697
   2. From Malta to Rome (28:1-15) 698
      a. Hospitality from Pagans (28:1-10) 699
      b. Hospitality from Christians (28:11-15) 703
Contents

K. Paul’s Ministry in the Imperial Capital (28:16-31) 706
   1. Reporting to the Jewish Leaders (28:16-22) 707
   2. Responding to Jewish Rejection (28:23-28[29]) 713
   3. Welcoming All with the Gospel (28:30-31) 720

Epilogue 723

INDEXES

I. Subjects 726
II. Authors 736
III. Scripture References 743
IV. Extrabiblical Literature 785
Commentaries have specific aims, and this series is no exception. Designed for serious pastors and teachers of the Bible, the Pillar commentaries seek above all to make clear the text of Scripture as we have it. The scholars writing these volumes interact with the most important informed contemporary debate, but avoid getting mired in undue technical detail. Their ideal is a blend of rigorous exegesis and exposition, with an eye alert both to biblical theology and the contemporary relevance of the Bible, without confusing the commentary and the sermon.

The rationale for this approach is that the vision of “objective scholarship” (a vain chimera) may actually be profane. God stands over against us; we do not stand in judgment of him. When God speaks to us through his Word, those who profess to know him must respond in an appropriate way, and that is certainly different from a stance in which the scholar projects an image of autonomous distance. Yet this is no surreptitious appeal for uncontrolled subjectivity. The writers of this series aim for an even-handed openness to the text that is the best kind of “objectivity” of all.

If the text is God’s Word, it is appropriate that we respond with reverence, a certain fear, a holy joy, a questing obedience. These values should be reflected in the way Christians write. With these values in place, the Pillar commentaries will be warmly welcomed not only by pastors, teachers, and students, but by general readers as well.

Anyone writing a commentary on the Acts of the Apostles faces several challenges unique to this book. On the face of it, this is volume 2 of a two-part work, and the first part is the Synoptic Gospel we call Luke — so suddenly the relationships Acts sustains with the life and times of Jesus become rich and intricate. Acts is also the only source we have that directly tells part of the history of the earliest decades of the church — and that means it be-
comes imperative to think through the relationships this book has with the New Testament letters written during the same period. In particular, Acts devotes more than half its length to the ministry of the apostle Paul, a fact that invites interaction with the sheaf of letters Paul has left us in the New Testament corpus. And finally, Acts is, by New Testament standards, a long book, so a commentator, while tackling the whole, must judiciously avoid exploring tangential warrens that seem excusable when writing on short books like, say, Galatians or Jude. That means that the commentator must first and foremost devote attention to Acts itself and not to all of the many relationships this book has with much of the rest of the New Testament — which of course puts severe limitations on how much space can be fairly devoted to the features of Acts I’ve already mentioned.

All these challenges David Peterson has met superbly. His commentary focuses on what the text actually says, and his judgments are invariably sane, even-handed, judicious. While unpacking exegetical details, Peterson is careful to keep scanning the horizon so as to establish the larger vision. Moreover, his own commitments as a churchman, lecturer in New Testament, and long-time Principal of Oak Hill Theological College mean that he knows what kinds of information pastors and students want and need. So it is a great pleasure to add this commentary to the Pillar series.

D. A. CARSON
Author’s Preface

It is an extraordinary privilege to live and work with any biblical book over an extended period of time, reading and re-reading the text many times, interacting with commentaries, articles, and monographs, while teaching and discussing the issues that arise with colleagues and students in a fellowship of learning and prayer. My most recent journey with Acts has lasted more than fifteen years. After teaching the book to a generation of theological students in Sydney, I was encouraged by the editor of this series to begin work on a commentary. Coincidentally, I was invited to contribute to the first volume of The Book of Acts in Its First-Century Setting (1993-96). In a rewarding partnership with Howard Marshall, I then became the editor of a book of essays on the theology of Acts, entitled Witness to the Gospel (1998). Working with Howard and the gifted contributors to that volume forced me to think in new ways about Luke’s theological method and intentions. The writing of the commentary slowed down as I engaged in these tasks, though inevitably the whole project was enriched by such opportunities for scholarly encounter.

In the midst of all this, I was appointed Principal of Oak Hill Theological College in London (1996), where I also taught New Testament for eleven years. This volume is consequently dedicated to the faculty, support staff, and students, who played such a formative role in its production. As well as teaching Acts in undergraduate and graduate classes, I managed to preach through much of the book in the College Chapel. I am greatly indebted to those who responded in various ways, with comments, suggestions, and criticisms, allowing me to benefit from their insights. I am particularly grateful to Chris Green and Matthew Sleeman, who have published their own helpful contributions to the study of Acts, and to Alistair Seabrook, who acted as my research assistant for a year.

In recent years, the Acts of the Apostles has attracted the interest of many scholars and preachers, and the number of relevant publications one could consult is enormous and growing steadily! I regret not being able to
read or refer to them all. Some commentaries major on textual issues, some on matters of historical and social context, some on theology and application. My own contribution attempts to be as comprehensive as possible, but with a bias towards theological analysis and an exploration of hermeneutical issues. The reason for this is twofold. First of all, monographs and articles on the theology of Acts are not normally accessible to the general reader. Wherever possible, I have tried to distil the insights of valuable scholarly work for the benefit of a wider public. Secondly, as I will argue, Acts was written primarily for the edification of the church and for the encouragement of gospel ministry. How, then, is this book to be understood and used with reference to the life and witness of contemporary believers?

Many pastors and teachers are uncertain about the way to preach from biblical narratives, but recent developments in the field of narrative criticism have offered important guidelines for interpretation. Luke has offered us more clues for understanding the purpose and meaning of various elements in his work than may first appear.

The problem of application is particularly acute with respect to Acts because of the divisions that exist among Christians over matters such as the ministry of the Holy Spirit, divine guidance, miracles, the nature of the gospel, priorities for mission, the character and purpose of Christian gatherings, the relevance of the Old Testament, and Christian attitudes towards Jews. These are just a few of the topics that surface in any evaluation of Acts, all of which are matters of great importance for the contemporary life and witness of believers. A number of these receive special attention in the section on the theology of Acts. Those who lead churches, teach the Bible regularly in any context, or engage in missionary activity are challenged to reevaluate their understanding of such matters through a fresh examination of Luke’s work. This commentary, incorporating the insights of so many others, is offered as an aid to this task.

I have followed the pattern of recent volumes in this series by using Today’s New International Version as the basis of the exposition. Where appropriate, I have offered a more literal translation or suggested a better way of expressing the Greek. Readers who are familiar with New Testament Greek will find relevant words and phrases transliterated in parentheses or footnotes, sometimes with comments about the grammatical and syntactical significance. Where appropriate, I have also compared different English translations. Sometimes these vary because they rely on alternative textual traditions. I have tried to summarise the issue briefly at the end of my Introduction, but detailed discussion of textual variants is provided in the body of the commentary when they give rise to different translations.

It is no formality to conclude this preface with an expression of profound thanks to my wife, Lesley. Her loving care has sustained me through the years in which this work has been an absorbing commitment alongside many other responsibilities that we have shared. She has never ceased to encourage me and to maintain personal interest in the project.
Author's Preface

should be aware of the significant role she has played! But together we would want to praise our heavenly Father for his constant provision, guidance, and enabling, which is the ultimate explanation for the successful completion of this endeavour.

David G. Peterson
Introduction

I. AUTHORSHIP AND DATE

A. Authorship

Early Christian tradition identifies the author of the Third Gospel and Acts as Luke, ‘the beloved physician’ mentioned in Colossians 4:14 (TNIV ‘our dear friend Luke, the doctor’), who was an occasional participant in the Pauline mission and was with Paul during his imprisonment in Rome (cf. Phlm. 24; 2 Tim. 4:11). The earliest extant manuscript of the Gospel (Papyrus 75), which is dated between AD 175 and 225, has at its end the ascription ‘Gospel according to Luke’ (Euangelion kata Loukan). The Muratorian Canon, which lists the books recognised as Scripture in the Roman Church in about AD 170-180, describes the author of the Gospel and Acts as ‘Luke the physician’ and companion of Paul, who ‘wrote in his own name but in accordance with [Paul’s] opinion’. 1 Luke’s authorship of both the Gospel and Acts is also confirmed by the so-called Anti-Marcionite Prologue to the Third Gospel, which is of uncertain date, but possibly belongs to the end of the second century. This document describes Luke as ‘an Antiochene of Syria, a physician by profession’. 2 About this time also, Irenaeus (Against Heresies 3.1.1; 3.14.1) mentions Luke ‘the follower of Paul’

Introduction

as the author of both works and attaches Paul’s authority to Luke’s writing.3 Witherington observes that the unanimity of this external evidence is striking when it is considered that ‘no one was contending that Luke was either an apostle or an eyewitness of much of what he records’.4

From the preface in Luke 1:1-4 it appears that the author was a second-generation Christian who was not personally involved in the ministry of Jesus, but who had contact with ‘those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word’. His native tongue was Hellenistic Greek, and he seems to have progressed ‘to the higher levels of Greco-Roman education’.5 At the same time, from the beginning of his narrative he betrays a great interest in Judaism, a knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures in their Greek translation (the so-called LXX), and some Semitisms in his Greek writing. When he refers to ‘the things that have been fulfilled among us’ (1:1) and the handing down of the testimony ‘to us’ (1:2), the implied author claims membership of the believing community formed around these events. When he describes himself as having ‘carefully investigated everything from the beginning’ (1:3), he could be claiming something more — at least some personal involvement in the events recorded in his second volume.6 The most important internal evidence in this connection is the use of the first-person plural at significant points in the narrative of Acts (16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16). Although some scholars have questioned whether these were actually the author’s firsthand account, the style, grammar, and vocabulary of the ‘we’ passages are very much the same as that found elsewhere in Luke-Acts.7

3. Bruce 1990, 2-3, details the evidence also from other writers at the end of the second century, showing how consistent was the testimony by that time. R. Maddox, The Purpose of Luke-Acts (Edinburgh: Clark, 1982), 7, observes that it is possible that this is a reliable tradition, but it is also possible that ancient scholars worked from the ‘we’ passages in Acts and settled on Luke as the most likely contender. Maddox offers a third possibility, ‘that there was indeed a sound tradition which named the author as “Luke”, but that it was only later supposition which identified him with “the beloved physician”’. 4. B. Witherington III, The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 56. 5. Witherington 1998, 52. He notes the author’s acquaintance with Greco-Roman rhetorical practices and historical conventions. 6. The participle parakolouthēkotai in Lk. 1:3 could mean ‘follow, accompany, attend’, ‘follow with the mind, understand, make one’s own’ or ‘follow a thing, trace or investigate a thing’ (BAGD). Maddox, Purpose, 4-5, argues that this verb cannot be taken to mean historical research from some distance. However, J. Nolland, Luke 1–9:20, Word Biblical Commentary 35A (Dallas: Word, 1986), 9, notes that the meaning ‘investigated’ can be argued by comparison with Josephus, Life 357; Nicomachus, Comicus 1.20. 7. Barrett 1994, xxv-xxx, takes up three ways of looking at the evidence. S. E. Porter, Paul in Acts (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001), 10-46, argues that the author of Acts used a previously written and continuous ‘we’ source that was not his own eyewitness account. However, Witherington 1998, 53-54, 480-86, convincingly argues that the ‘we’ passages are the author’s own record of events. Cf. C. J. Hemer, The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History, ed. C. Gempf, WUNT 49 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1989; repr. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 312-34; W. S. Campbell, The ‘We’ Passages in the Acts of the Apostles: The Narrator as Narrative Character, SBLSBL 14 (Atlanta: SBL; Leiden: Brill, 2007).
'Their most natural explanation is that the author himself was present during those phases of his story which he records in the 1st pers. — that the “we” of those sections includes the “I” of 1:1.” The ‘we’ passages reveal the occasions on which the author was the companion of Paul in his missionary activity and in the period of his imprisonment and trials.

Other characters are named in the text of Acts as travel companions of Paul at various stages of his ministry (Silas, Timothy, Sopater, Aristarchus, Secundus, Gaius, Tychicus, Trophimus). All except Silas and Timothy appear to have joined Paul after the period covered by the first ‘we’ passage (16:10-17). Significantly, Luke is not named in the text of Acts, even though the letters identify him among those present with Paul in the period of his imprisonment (Col. 4:14; Phlm. 24; cf. 2 Tim. 4:11). This lack of reference in Acts to one of the serious candidates for authorship is actually a strong pointer to Luke. Although reticent about naming himself, the author of the ‘we’ passages was with Paul on his final journey to Rome (Acts 27:1–28:16) and then presumably during his captivity there (28:17-31). However, since scholars are divided about whether the ‘captivity letters’ were actually written from Ephesus, Caesarea, or Rome, the argument linking Luke with Paul’s Roman imprisonment in this way is disputed.

It has sometimes been argued that there is distinctive medical language in Luke-Acts that supports the case for authorship by ‘the beloved physician’. However, Cadbury’s careful study concluded that the medical element in the language of these volumes is no greater than that which is found in the writings of educated first-century Greeks more generally. On the negative side, some commentators have argued that the differences between Acts and the letters of Paul are such that the author of Acts can hardly have been a regular Pauline travel companion. This issue is addressed below under the heading ‘Sources’.

Looking more broadly at what can be gleaned from Luke-Acts about the author’s social location, Witherington concludes:

Our author is a well-traveled retainer of the social elite, well educated, deeply concerned about religious matters, knowledgeable about Judaism, but no prisoner of any subculture in the Empire. Rather, he is a cosmopolitan person with a more universalistic vision of the potential

scope of impact of his faith, both up and down the social ladder, and also across geographical, ethnic, and other social boundaries.\textsuperscript{11}

Considering the strong, early Christian evidence for Luke as the author of the Third Gospel and Acts, and the appropriateness of this tradition with reference to the internal data of the NT itself, there are good reasons for concluding that the traditional solution is reliable and true.

B. Date

Although Acts cannot be proved by quotation or allusion in other writings to have existed before about AD 150, ‘its circulation in the churches from the second half of the second century onward is amply attested’.\textsuperscript{12} Moreover, a first-century date for its composition can be argued from the evidence of the work itself. For example, Barrett observes that the book appears to have been written ‘at a time of both inward and outward peace, and there is evidence in remarks about Roman provincial administration and provincial officers that suggests a date within the first century’.\textsuperscript{13} He then follows a fairly standard line, dating Luke’s two volumes in the late 80s or early 90s. However, there are two problems associated with this conclusion. First, if the ‘we’ passages were written by a travel companion of Paul, Luke-Acts could not have been composed much later than the early 80s, unless the author was quite young at the time when he first met Paul. Secondly, it is difficult to explain the end of Acts, which describes only Paul’s two-year imprisonment and ministry in Rome (28:30-31), if a late date is proposed. Why does the author not take the story up to the point of Paul’s trial or death? The longer the time gap, the more the need to fill in the details for the next generation of believers.

Barrett acknowledges that the simplest solution is to insist that the work was written earlier and that it tells no more of Paul because there was no more for Luke to tell. Like many scholars, however, Barrett considers this to be an unconvincing argument. He contends that Luke used Mark as a source for his Gospel and that Mark was written about AD 70. Furthermore, Luke 21:20-24 is said to imply the fall of Jerusalem, which took place in that year.\textsuperscript{14} But even if these presuppositions are accepted, it is not diff-

\textsuperscript{11} Witherington 1998, 56. Witherington, 63-65, evaluates the presumed audience of Acts by considering Theophilus as Luke’s patron, who might publish the work for those from a similar background. Theophilus is regarded as a fairly recent convert to Christianity from a synagogue context. At the same time, Luke’s method of writing suggests ‘an audience with a Hellenistic education in at least some rhetoric and Greek history prior to coming to Christian faith, and surely prior to becoming a synagogue adherent as well’.

\textsuperscript{12} Bruce 1990, 11-12. Like Bruce, Barrett 1994, 34-38, lists traces of the knowledge and use of Acts in various early sources.


\textsuperscript{14} Barrett 1998, xliii. However, J. A. T. Robinson, Redating the New Testament (Lon-
cult to imagine that Luke published his work in the mid 70s. He could well have been at work consulting witnesses, assembling his sources, and writing them up when he first came into contact with Mark’s Gospel. Knowing that he had more to offer and having his own distinctive purpose in writing, Luke could have achieved his goal in only a few years. Why must there have been more than a decade between the publication of Mark and the appearance of Luke-Acts? A date in the 70s seems entirely reasonable and consistent with the evidence from the documents themselves. However, a good case can be made for a date as early as 62-64, given Luke’s apparent ignorance of the letters of Paul, his portrayal of Judaism as a legal religion, and his omission of any reference to the Neronian persecution of Christians, let alone his failure to say anything about the outcome of Paul’s imprisonment in Rome.

II. GENRE

Genre can be defined in terms of the content, form, and function of a particular text. Considering the genre of a book can be an important preliminary in the process of interpretation. With regard to the Acts of the Apostles, it is first necessary to investigate the relationship between this work and the Third Gospel. It is then instructive to consider the character of Acts itself, in comparison with other forms of literature in the ancient world. A Christian writer with a desire to influence people in the first-century, Greco-Roman environment may well have reflected some of its literary trends, though the critical question is ‘how closely or consciously’. A great deal of scholarly work has taken place in this area in recent decades, and there are conflicting views which need to be examined and assessed.

don: SCM, 1975), 86-92, argues that there are no allusions to the fall of Jerusalem in Luke-Acts and that the work was written before AD 70. Cf. Bruce 1990, 15-17.

15. Bruce 1990, 17-18, argues for the publication of both Luke and Acts ‘in the period following AD 70’. In support, he notes the attention to subjects in Acts which were of urgent importance before AD 70, but which were of lesser moment after that date, the fact that Acts is true to its ‘dramatic’ date (the date of the events and developments which it relates), political, geographical, and social references appropriate to the pre-70 era, and the authorial perspective of one who was involved in the events but reviews them from some temporal distance. Witherington 1998, 61-62, agrees with this conclusion.


A. The Unity of Luke and Acts

Many contemporary scholars would agree with Cadbury’s proposal that ‘Acts is neither an appendix nor an afterthought. It is probably an integral part of the author’s original plan and purpose.’ Since Cadbury’s foundational work, a variety of publications regarding the generic, narrative, and theological unity of Luke-Acts has emerged. However, Parsons and Pervo have offered a significant challenge to this approach. Acknowledging the common authorship of the two volumes, they insist that it is neither necessary nor helpful to force one to fit the pattern of the other. Indeed, Luke and Acts are sufficiently different to suggest two distinct genres. Parsons and Pervo examine various contemporary proposals for the generic unity of Luke and Acts and find them wanting.

If Mark was one of his sources, Luke clearly modified the Gospel form by more than doubling its length and increasing the time span of the story. But his first volume still broadly resembles the other Synoptic Gospels in structure, character, and style. The Gospel genre was a unique creation of Christian writers, determined partly by the realities of Jesus’ life and ministry and partly by the exigencies of the Christian mission. Structurally, Luke’s Gospel provides an ‘episodic series of events punctuated by numerous aphorisms and parables of Jesus’, whereas Acts ‘unfolds more smoothly as a continuous narrative featuring extended journeys and developed discourse by Jesus’ followers’. After its introductory chapters (1–3), the Gospel focuses on the public ministry of Jesus (4:1–9:50), his final journey to Jerusalem (9:51–19:44), and then the events of his last week in Jerusalem, culminating in his death and resurrection (19:45–24:53). It covers a limited period of time and portrays Jesus moving from Galilee, through Samaria, to Judea and Jerusalem. Acts deals with the expanding geographical and cultural outreach of ‘the word’ about Jesus, in an outward movement from Jerusalem corresponding to the prediction in 1:8. The gospel is first proclaimed by the apostles Peter and John in Jerusalem (1–5), and then by prophetic figures such as Stephen, Philip, and Paul, in Judea, Samaria, and ‘to the ends of the earth’ (6–20). The final section focuses on the trials of
Paul and his journey to Rome as a prisoner (21–28). Acts appears to be a highly selective history, carried forward by a number of significant speeches from some of the main characters, covering a period of thirty or more years after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. Luke’s innovation is to show that ‘the gospel-story is incomplete without the church-story’.22

Analysing Luke and Acts from a literary perspective, Parsons and Pervo first conclude that, at the discourse level, it is inappropriate to speak of a narrative unity. ‘The two works are independent narratives with distinct narration, that is, they each tell the story differently.’23 The narrative unity exposed by writers such as Tannehill is said to be almost exclusively at the level of the story and ‘does not reckon adequately with the disunity at the discourse level’.24 But Tannehill’s approach has been poorly assessed by Parsons and Pervo, and its implications inadequately considered. More will be said about this below. Even more questionable is their glib treatment of the theological coherence between Luke and Acts.25 They rightly suggest that, where theological unity between Luke and Acts can be established, it should not be ‘a brush with which to efface particularity’.26 They also rightly argue that Acts is a sequel to the Gospel rather than a simple continuation. But they obscure the literary, stylistic, and thematic links between the two volumes. In short, Parsons and Pervo have offered an important caution in the ongoing debate about the relationship between Luke and Acts, but they have overstated their case. These two volumes may be different in genre, structure, and style, but it is necessary to explain the links between them at the level of story, themes, and theology.

Assessing a variety of theories about the relationship between the Gospel and Acts, Marshall notes that the options commanding the most serious scholarly support are that they were either two separate works by the same author or a two-part work (whatever the process by which this two-volume work came to its present form).27 Marshall’s preference for the latter alternative is based on three lines of argument. There is first the evi-

22. Maddox, Purpose, 10.
23. Parsons and Pervo, Rethinking, 82.
25. For example, Parsons and Pervo, Rethinking, 84-114, seriously misread the anthropology of Acts by identifying it with contemporary Greco-Roman perspectives. Luke is said to use ‘elements of a common Greco-Roman anthropology as a means for forging unity between God and humankind, the histories of Israel, Jesus, and the Church, and thus between Jews and Gentiles’ (125).
26. Parsons and Pervo, Rethinking, 126.
vidence of the two prologues (Lk. 1:1-4; Acts 1:1), linking the works in terms of subject matter and purpose. Secondly, some material in the Gospel appears to have been either adapted or excluded because of what is found in Acts (e.g., Mt. 15:1-28/Mk. 7:1-30 finds no parallel in Luke, presumably because the theme of true purity and healing/salvation for Gentiles is addressed so fully in Acts 10–11). Thirdly, the overlap between the ending of the Gospel and the beginning of Acts is significant (Lk. 24:36-52 is recapitulated in Acts 1:1-14 and its predictions are shown to be fulfilled in subsequent narratives). Marshall concludes that ‘Luke’s justification for his fresh attempt to give an account of “the things that have taken place among us” was in the fact that his predecessors had treated only the material contained in the Gospel and not gone on to present the other, comparably important material about the spread of the gospel. Their story was incomplete.’

His approach is persuasive and suggests that Acts is best interpreted as the intended sequel to the Gospel. Witherington similarly concludes his assessment of the evidence by saying, ‘Luke planted some seeds in his Gospel that he did not intend to fully cultivate and bring to harvest before his second volume. In short, the first volume was likely written with at least one eye already on the sequel.’

B. Ancient Literary Models for Acts

1. Historical Monograph

The term ‘historical monograph’ is a modern one, ‘commonly applied to ancient historical writings which deal with a limited issue or period without regard to the length of the books themselves’. The Greek historian Polybius (2nd cent. BC) distinguished between a universal history and a particular history, but prior to the work of the Roman writer Sallust (1st cent. BC), ‘single-volume historical monographs were rare, if they existed at all’. Sallust’s contemporary, Cicero, had ‘no specific term for the historical mono-

29. Witherington 1998, 8. M. F. Bird, ‘The Unity of Luke-Acts in Recent Discussion’, JSNT 29 (2007), 425-48, surveys a number of scholarly responses to Parsons and Pervo, concluding that they have failed to convince the majority due to ‘the success of Cadbury, and others like Tannehill, who have constructed arguments that are both persuasive on the textual level and that resonate with the current interests of scholarship in literary-critical studies’ (435). However, Bird goes on to discuss challenges to the consensus raised by ‘reception history’, namely the way Luke and Acts were received and circulated in the second century AD.
31. Palmer, ‘Monograph’, 14. Palmer, 26, concludes that ‘the fragmentary evidence for numerous Greek monographs and one in Latin confirms the existence of the genre, but does not give a picture of what an individual example looked like’.
Genre

graph; but his correspondence provides evidence for his concept of various features of the genre'. Palmer contends that, ‘while Acts may be allowed an implicit function of apology or self-definition, its length, scope, focus and formal features fit the pattern of a short historical monograph’. Palmer also discusses Hellenistic Jewish historiography and concludes that 1 Esdras (2nd cent. BC) and 1 and 2 Maccabees (1st cent. BC) share many of the features of Greek and Roman historical monographs, though their religious perspective is influenced by earlier Jewish writings. In many ways, they correspond to the theory and practice of Cicero and Sallust. They are earlier than these writers, 'but they perhaps point to the Graeco-Roman heritage which lies behind Cicero and Sallust on the one hand and to the milieu of “biblical history” on the other. Indeed, they provide a link between this double background in the past and the future composition of Acts.'

Witherington argues from the preface found in Luke 1:1-4 that Luke intended both his volumes 'to be compared to other ancient works of Greco-Roman historiography'. However, reviewing various Greek and Roman models, Witherington argues that 'Luke’s work stands much closer to Greek historiography than to the Roman sort'. A particular hallmark of true history for the Greeks was ‘personal observation (autopsia) and participation in events, travel inquiry, the consultation of eyewitnesses’. Acts also has a broad ethnographical and geographical scope, which is the pattern of the Greek histories, with a message about salvation for the nations being announced in the earliest chapters of the Gospel (Lk. 2:29-32; 3:1-6). Luke’s presentation of the impact of Christianity on the ancient world contains a surprising lack of ‘broadscale polemics against either Jews or Romans, though both are portrayed as persecuting or causing problems for Christians at various points in the narrative’.

33. Palmer, ‘Monograph’, 18. Palmer includes the notions of apology and self-definition in his evaluation because he has compared Acts with the Jewish Antiquities of Josephus.
35. Witherington 1998, 381. Witherington, 4-24, discusses the prefaces at some length and suggests that Luke is ‘closer to Polybius than to various other ancient historians in his understanding that his job is to instruct and reassure Theophilus about the nature and meaning of the events (both words and deeds) that had happened “among us”’ (11).
36. Witherington 1998, 27. He notes that Josephus, ‘by limiting himself to the chronicling of developments among one people (the Jews rather than the Romans) and attempting a “universal history” of this one people, much more closely approximates some of his Roman predecessors and contemporaries.’
37. Witherington 1998, 27. Cadbury, Making, 220, concluded from the style of Luke-Acts that the author must have been ‘for his time and station a gentleman of ability and breadth of interest, whatever his past reading and training may have been’. D. Mealand, ‘Hellenistic Historians and the Style of Acts’, ZNW 82 (1991), 59, concluded that Luke ‘is a skilful literary artist who can use varieties of style for effect’.
38. Witherington 1998, 29. ‘Were Luke-Acts a Roman apologetic work, we might ex-
Witherington contends that Luke’s work is most like that of Polybius, and, to a lesser degree, that of Thucydides. However, Luke differs from these Greek historians in at least two significant ways. First, he is ‘not in the main concerned about the political or military history of the larger culture, but about the social and religious history of a particular group or subculture within the Empire. Luke believes it is a group which can and should continue to have a growing and ever broader impact, for they proclaim a universal savior and salvation.’ Second, Luke includes many visions, prophecies, and amazing events in his narrative, to highlight God’s involvement in the story, whereas Polybius can only write about ‘the operations of the laws of Fortune’ (1.1-4) on the events he records. However, Luke does not present the amazing and the supernatural in a way that suggests any immunity from historical scrutiny, ‘unlike some of the literature about the “fabulous” in antiquity’.

Witherington further observes a notable similarity between Acts and the work of the historian Ephorus with respect to the arrangement and presentation of his material. In a given book or section, Ephorus would ‘only deal with matters in a particular geographical or major cultural region, usually proceeding with it in a chronological order’. In Acts, the geographical movement from one region to another is culturally and theologically significant in terms of the prediction made in 1:8. Geographical advance is broadly linked to chronological development in the unfolding of Luke’s story, which only selectively records the ministry of the apostles and other early Christian leaders. Moreover, a number of theological agendas influence the way the narrative is constructed and presented. Although there is much evidence pointing to Luke’s accuracy as a historian, the work demonstrates a literary artistry and rhetorical style that makes it more than a chronicle of remarkable events.

39. Witherington 1998, 32. Polybius 1.1-4 proclaims the uniqueness and importance of the events he records, believing that they have come about because of some larger guiding force or Being. He criticises those who invent speeches, contending that it is important for them to be accurately recorded and used as ‘summaries of events and as the unifying element in historical writing’ (12.25a-b; cf. 36.1). Cf. M. Soards, The Speeches in Acts: Their Content, Context and Concerns (Louisville: John Knox/Westminster, 1994), 199ff. Polybius 36.12 also highlights his own personal involvement in the story from a certain point by using the first-person narrative form.


2. Biography

Talbert proposed that ‘Luke-Acts, to some extent, must be regarded as belonging to the genre of Greco-Roman biography, in particular, to that type of biography which dealt with the lives of philosophers and their successors’.44 More recently, Alexander has argued that Acts cannot be forced into a biographical mould, but she insists that ‘the reader of Acts has much to learn from the study of ancient biography; and Talbert’s proposal makes a good starting-point in a number of ways’.45 She notes the succession structure of Luke’s double work: the narrative of Acts is focused on the ministry of a number of key disciples who carry on the work of Jesus, with Paul being the dominant figure in the latter half of the book. ‘Acts is not just a biography of Paul but it contains a Pauline biography in the same way that the books of Samuel contain the Davidic “succession narrative”, or Genesis contains the story of Joseph.’46 Alexander then explores a particular comparison with ancient ‘intellectual biography’, namely ‘biography of individuals distinguished for their prowess in the intellectual field (philosophers, poets, dramatists, doctors) rather than in the political or military arena (kings, statesmen, generals)’.47 She argues that ‘if we broaden our definition of biography to include not only the fully-fledged biographical texts but also the underlying traditions and patterns of thought, it is not difficult to see many points of interest for Acts’.48 She finally sketches a Socratic paradigm, which does not exist in any known biography of Socrates but was ‘a narrative pattern familiar to a wide range of writers in the first century AD’.49 At this point, however, the discussion


46. Alexander, ‘Biography’, 34. R. A. Burridge, What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Greco-Roman Biography, SNTSMS 70 (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992), 245, has argued against making rigid genre distinctions between biography and other sorts of ancient history writing, contending that ‘they are only differentiated by internal features such as subject or focus’. The Third Gospel is best viewed as an ancient biography because of the way it reveals the character of Jesus. Witherington 1998, 16-24, disagrees, insisting that neither Luke nor Acts is truly biographical, and that both together must be seen as ‘some sort of two-volume historiographical work’.


49. Alexander, ‘Biography’, 63. She suggests that ‘this Socratic paradigm was available to Luke’s readers and offered them the possibility of fitting Paul’s story — and by im-
has clearly moved beyond any proposal for a specific genre or literary model for Acts.

Ancient histories contained biographical elements or passages, but the purpose was not characterization for some didactic or moral purpose, as in biographies. Ancient historiography ‘foocussed on events more than on persons and personalities, and was concerned not only to record significant happenings but to probe and if possible explain the causes of these happenings’.50 This agenda can be discerned in Luke-Acts, where there is a regular stress on the fulfillment of Scripture and an interpretation of the events in terms of the fulfillment of God’s will and plan.51 There are certainly ways in which key figures in Acts are presented as model disciples, but it is not helpful to classify Acts as a form of biography, nor to view Luke-Acts primarily in terms of the succession model. Theological and apologetic concerns are prominent in the narrative of Acts, where the progress of ‘the word’ in the face of various forms of resistance and opposition is a major interest for the author.

Even in the last chapters of Acts, Luke’s concern is to chart the progress of the gospel, not to complete a character study of his hero. Paul’s penultimate speech to the Jews of Rome (28:17-20) recalls events in the preceding narratives and concludes with the claim that it is because of ‘the hope of Israel’ that he is in chains. His final speech (28:23-28) reiterates the pattern of teaching to Jews evidenced earlier in the book, bringing a challenge about Isaiah’s prophecy being fulfilled in their stubborn resistance, and proclaiming that ‘God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen’. Luke’s editorial conclusion (28:30-31) leaves the reader with little indication of the outcome for Paul personally. The focus is on his continuing ministry of the gospel ‘with all boldness and without hindrance’. In effect, Luke makes another statement about the word of God increasing and spreading, despite the opposition or difficulties encountered (cf. 6:7; 12:24; 19:20). In other words, Acts 28 is a significant indicator of Luke’s purpose in writing, and it suggests that his interest is historical and theological rather than strictly biographical.


3. Historical Novel

More controversial is the evaluation of Acts as a type of historical novel, involving both history and fiction, and following the conventions of certain ancient romances. This approach is championed by Pervo, who attempts to broaden the literary classification of novel to fit the case, and who likens canonical Acts to the apocryphal Acts in this connection. Witherington, however, raises a number of serious objections, including the fact that there is no romance in Acts properly defined, the book is not a tale of two parties long separated and then reunited, there is no happy ending since Paul’s fate is left untold, and the book is full of speeches, which is not characteristic of ancient romances. At the same time, Witherington says, ‘Pervo is right to point out that the humor, wit, irony, and pathos in Acts have been underappreciated by scholars. These features, however, are often found in historiographical works during the Empire due to the influence of Greco-Roman rhetoric on the genre, not due to the influence of the novel.’

C. Acts and Biblical Histories

Rosner has argued that Acts is ‘consciously modelled on accounts of history found in the Old Testament’. It has long been recognised that there is a Semitic colouring to some of Luke’s language, particularly in Acts 1–15, though scholars debate the extent to which this is the result of deliberately imitating the Septuagint (LXX). Thematically, Acts shows a close relationship with the OT in dealing with matters such as promise and fulfillment, Jerusalem, the law, and the Jewish people. Characters such as Peter, Stephen, and Paul are presented to some extent as prophetic figures, following OT models. Furthermore, certain narratives in Acts appear to be patterned on biblical precedents. Together, these characteristics suggest that the author intended to create ‘a “biblical effect” for those readers familiar with the Bible’.


54. Witherington 1998, 378. Witherington, 756, thinks that Pervo is right to propose that Luke ‘as a rhetorical historian had some interest in giving his audience pleasure as well as information’. However, ‘this was as a secondary interest and not the one that determined the genre or historical substance of the work’. Witherington, 39-51, discusses the influence of ancient rhetorical conventions on Luke-Acts.


A number of literary techniques found especially in the so-called Deuteronomistic history (Deuteronomy–2 Kings) have parallels in Acts. Rosner observes the repetition of verbal formulas to mark the end of one section of narrative and the beginning of another (he compares Acts 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:31, to 1 Ki. 14:19-20, 31; 15:8, 24, etc.). Speeches by major characters or editorial comments are used to introduce or sum up the theme of a unit (he compares the literary function of prayer in Acts 4:24-30 and 1 Ki. 8:22-53). The narrative of Acts progresses by telling the stories of key characters, using a technique found in the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomistic history. Rosner notes that ‘caution must be exercised in assessing the significance of these common features’, since ‘such literary devices were widely used both in the ancient near East generally and in early Greek prose, not to mention Greek historiography contemporary with Luke’.\(^\text{57}\) However, there are good reasons for seeing the LXX as a primary influence on the style and character of Acts.

Rosner finally investigates the extent to which the OT may have provided Luke with his understanding of the nature of history. As in those biblical precedents, God is in control — despite human wickedness and rebellion — with key terms being used to draw attention to the will and purpose of God and his direction of human history. Events are narrated as the action of God, and there is great stress on the fulfillment of divine promises in what is recorded, sometimes using specific quotations from Scripture to make the point. The LXX thus appears to have influenced the language, form, content, and presuppositions of Luke’s work. Rosner concludes that Luke was consciously writing a history following biblical precedents, and he agrees with Sterling that ‘our author conceived of his work as the continuation of the LXX’.\(^\text{58}\) Luke was concerned to reflect upon sacred history for the benefit of the believing community, drawing a link between the time of Israel, the time of Jesus, and the time of the early church.

Witherington acknowledges the strength of some of these arguments, but he contends that ‘the sort of history Luke chooses to write about is different in crucial respects from the sort found in the OT, or in the Maccabean literature, or in the Hellenistic Jewish historians’.\(^\text{59}\) Luke is writing about salvation history and the fulfillment of God’s purposes through preaching rather than through political and military means. He is writing a sequel to the OT not merely in terms of historical development, but in terms of ‘the dramatic and surprising intervention of God in Jesus’.\(^\text{60}\) Luke’s view of the people of

---

God is also ‘much more inclusive and universal than one finds in the LXX or in early Hellenistic Jewish historiography’. Witherington therefore concludes that Luke-Acts should be ‘evaluated on its own terms as a two-volume historical work about a particular religious and social movement’.

D. Conclusion about Genre

Having surveyed the options, I find myself largely in agreement with Witherington’s conclusion:

Luke-Acts bears some strong resemblances to earlier Greek historiographic works in form and method and general arrangement of material, as well as some similarities to Hellenized Jewish historiography in content and general apologetic aims. Furthermore, the echoes and quotes of the OT in Luke-Acts as well as the stress on fulfillment reveal a vital link to the biblical promises and prophecies of the past. Luke’s work follows no one model, but clearly enough it would not have been seen as a work like Roman historiography, Greek biography, or Greek scientific treatises. It would surely, however, have been seen as some sort of Hellenistic historiography, especially by a Gentile audience.

However, I find it difficult to put the Third Gospel into exactly the same category as Acts, as Witherington does. Comparison with the other Synoptics shows how Luke used the gospel genre to fulfill his purpose. He included certain historiographical features such as synchronism with events in the wider world (cf. Lk. 2:1-3; 3:1-2), but these are not sufficient to warrant a classification of the Third Gospel as a historical monograph like Acts. Witherington tends to play down the differences between Luke’s two volumes in form, style, and function. Two distinct genres are developed by Luke, and these are linked together in textual and thematic ways to achieve a remarkable degree of narrative unity. Although there are other ancient examples of literary compositions in two parts, Marshall observes that even within the Christian context there is nothing corresponding to it: ‘Christians produce apocryphal Gospels and apocryphal Acts, but not apocryphal Gospels-cum-Acts’.


64. Marshall, ‘Former Treatise’, 180. He concludes that ‘the whole work demonstrates
III. SOURCES, RHETORIC, AND HISTORICAL RELIABILITY

A. Sources

As already indicated, it is likely that the Prologue in Luke 1:1-4 applies to both volumes of this work, though some of its claims may have a more direct reference to the Gospel. The author first speaks about the many who have ‘undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us’. The expression anataxasthai diēgesin (TNIV ‘to draw up an account’) implies a completed narrative rather than a loose collection of sayings or stories. It presumably included Mark’s Gospel, which appears to have been a major source for Luke’s first volume. The accounts that the author mentions were themselves based on evidence transmitted by ‘those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word’. So he does not denigrate his predecessors or question their reliability, but he still feels the need to offer more to Theophilus, to give him appropriate ‘certainty’ (asphaleia) or assurance about the things he has been taught. Doubtless there were other sources in more fragmentary form that he discovered and wanted to incorporate in his first volume (special Lukan material that appears in no other Gospel, as well as some material in common with Matthew, but not Mark). Nevertheless, having himself ‘carefully investigated everything from the beginning’, he also wished to write about events subsequent to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and to tell about the people who were involved in those events. Luke mentions ‘servants of the word’ (hypēretai tou logou) and summarizes their subject matter in ‘fulfillment’ terms (tōn peplērophorēmenōn en hēmin pragmatōn, ‘the things that have been fulfilled among us’). By implication, Luke will also present a theological way of viewing things.

When he claims to write ‘in order’ (kathexēs; TNIV ‘an orderly account’), the reference could be to chronological, geographical, or logical order, incorporating the diverse and extensive material in Acts to give a more complete and convincing picture of ‘the things that have been fulfilled among us’. The use of similar terminology in Acts 11:4 might suggest that

affinities both to historical monographs and to biographies, but it appears to represent a new type of work, of which it is the only example’.  

65. Hemer, Book of Acts, 327, wisely observes that ‘the thrust of the clauses in this carefully structured sentence is cumulative rather than antithetical’. Against the view that katēchēthēs (‘instructed’) implies hostile misinformation and that Theophilus was an influential non-Christian, Hemer, 325, says that this is ‘a nuance that is due more to modern arguments about the purpose of Acts than it is to the first-century usage of the term’. Maddox, Purpose, 12-15, considers different ways of interpreting Luke 1:1-4.

66. Cf. Peterson, ‘Fulfillment’, 83-104. As ‘servants of the word’, the eyewitnesses presumably became interpreters of the events they reported.

67. Witherington 1998, 50, rightly observes that ‘Luke’s concern is with a community’s history; it is microhistory, not macrohistory, for it is about what has happened
he means ‘an account written in such a fashion and order that one can make sense of or discern the truth in the maze of events’. As noted above, Luke’s Gospel seems to have been written so as to anticipate and prepare for the wider perspective presented in Acts. While the latter follows a certain chronological and geographical order, there are gaps and dislocations because the author is to some extent driven by a desire to order his material thematically. So logical, thematic, or theological order may be the primary meaning of the expression in Luke 1:3.

Luke draws attention to his own eyewitness material by casting it in the first person plural. Although some have doubted the authenticity of the ‘we’ passages, most scholars view these as evidence of the author’s participation in the events recorded. Apart from these passages and Luke’s possible contact with Paul’s mission companions in other places, what might have been his sources for the rest of Acts? Meeting Philip the Evangelist in Caesarea (21:8) presumably gave Luke the opportunity to hear stories about his early ministry and that of his fellow worker Stephen (6:5–6), providing the basis for the material in Acts 6–8. Other Christians in Caesarea could also have told Luke about the strategic visit of Peter to the household of Cornelius and the spread of the gospel in that region (10:1–11:18). Acts 21:10–11 further mentions that Luke met the prophet Agabus in Caesarea, who could have given him information about the early life of the churches of Judea and Antioch (11:27–30). On the way to Jerusalem, Luke stayed with Paul and his team in the house of Mnason (21:16), ‘a man from Cyprus and one of the early disciples’, who could have been another source of vital information. Contact with the believers in Jerusalem and then with James and the elders is recorded in 21:17–25. Such people must have been able to supply Luke with information about the growth and development of that church from the beginning. Barrett argues in connection with 11:19–15:35 that ‘it is certain that Luke received traditional material from Antioch, and that the account that the Antiochenes gave of the origin of their church included the claim that almost from the beginning the Gentiles had been included’. Bruce also suggests that if John Mark of Jerusalem is identical...
with the second Evangelist and Luke had direct contact with him (cf. Col. 4:10, 14), 'then perhaps it was not only to his Gospel that Luke was indebted for information, but also to his spoken recollection'.

Ellis contends that the evidence points to a cooperative relationship between Luke and 'colleagues involved with the Jacobean mission based in Jerusalem; with the Petrine mission which was active in Caesarea and with which Mark was associated; and with the Johannine mission, which before AD 66 was also active in Judea'. Somewhat speculatively, Ellis describes the situation in the fifties and sixties of the first century, when Luke was gathering his information, as follows:

At that time, the four apostolic missions of James, Paul, Peter and John worked cooperatively, though not without tensions, to promote the messianic person and teaching of Jesus. Each mission made available its respective traditions for the use of others, and all four showed in other ways a unity in the midst of the diversity that characterized this major sector of first-century Christianity from which our New Testament came forth. Each mission produced a Gospel, initially for use in its own congregations. Luke’s Gospel and Acts were published initially for use in the congregations of the Pauline (Gentile) mission, as the structure and development of Luke-Acts show.

If Luke was a companion of Paul on some of his journeys, he doubtless learned much from him personally about his conversion and early ministry, and even possibly gained something of Paul’s perspective on the development of Christianity in Jerusalem before he was converted. One of the most vexed questions for many scholars, however, concerns the degree to which the Paul of Acts differs from the Paul revealed in his letters, especially with reference to key theological issues. How well did Luke know Paul, and how well did he represent him and his teaching when writing Acts? Allied to this, there are questions about whether Luke used any of Paul’s letters as source material, and whether the chronology of Acts can be reconciled with evidence from the letters about Paul’s movements. Where conflict between Acts and the letters is discerned, how should this be resolved?

Wenham has shown how frequently the Pauline letters and Acts intersect. But he concludes that ‘much of the story of Paul in Acts has no basis in the letters and some of the strongly emphasized features of the letters are

---

view that there was a written Antiochian source, though he suggests that written inquiries to the great centres of Christian growth may have supplied Luke with written replies.


74. Ellis, Making, 404-5.
not in Acts (e.g. the collection), so that it is highly probable that Luke had other sources of information about Paul (as may in any case be inferred from the “we” sections of Acts). Although there are many points of contact — and there is value in comparing the evidence of Acts with the letters where possible — Luke offers a different perspective on Paul’s ministry. Some have taken this to mean that Luke was misinformed, or deliberately misleading, or presenting an ideal or legendary Paul. But it is important to remember the occasional nature of Paul’s letters, the limited scope of Luke’s description of Paul, and his own distinctive agenda in writing. Witherington has rightly suggested that ‘if Luke’s account is tendentious and apologetic in character, Paul’s letters, especially in the biographical remarks are equally so’. Both sources must be read critically and consulted carefully to make a proper evaluation of all the evidence. Luke’s interests are not primarily biographical but historical, ‘and so he chronicles the part Paul plays in the advance of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, his roles as evangelist, teacher, preacher, rhetorician, and missionary, giving only brief mention to his pastoral roles’. Bruce concludes his examination of the issues by claiming that the Paul whose portrait Luke paints is nevertheless the real Paul. It is the real Paul viewed in retrospect by a friend and admirer, whose own religious experience was different from Paul’s, who expresses a distinctive theological outlook, who writes for another constituency than that for which Paul wrote his letters.

B. Rhetoric

‘Rhetoric has to do with persuasion, specifically the persuasive powers of words, spoken or written.’ In the first century AD, some works which claimed to be history ‘often owed more to declamation and Greco-Roman rhetoric than to careful historical study of sources and consulting of wit-

79. Satterthwaite, ‘Classical Rhetoric’, 338. He distinguishes between ‘primary rhetoric’, which was the art of persuasive public speech, and ‘secondary rhetoric’, which was ‘the use of “primary” rhetoric in literature whose main focus was not a public speech; for example, historical accounts, philosophical treatises, drama and poetry’.
nesses’. There was actually a debate among historians about how much rhetorical material should be included in their writings, with a special concern about the use of speeches. The debate was specifically over ‘whether distortion or free invention was allowable in a historical work in the service of higher rhetorical aims’. Luke appears to be on the side of those who were cautious about the use of rhetorical techniques. Even in the speeches, his concern for style seems to have been subordinated to his concern for faithfulness to his sources. However, given that ancient historical works were meant to be heard primarily and read only secondarily, ‘if Luke wished for Theophilus to give ear to the case he was making, he would almost certainly have had to give attention to the rhetorical properties and potentialities of his composition’.

Ancient historians did not record speeches in their works as mere commentary on events, nor simply as transcripts or accompaniments to events. Gempf insists that ‘speeches must be seen as events in their own right’. Since these historians regularly used their own vocabulary and style in recording speeches, the question about the authenticity of the process has often been raised. Gempf acknowledges that ‘the write-up of a speech in an ancient history does call for rhetorical skill simply because the author must, while being faithful to the main lines of the historical “speech-event”, adapt the speech to make it “speak to” a new audience in a different situation’. But he contends that, ‘just as a writer was expected to represent faithfully the strategies, tactics and results of a battle, but not necessarily all the fine movements of each combatant, so a writer was expected to represent faithfully the strategies, tactics and results of a speech, without necessarily recording the exact words used on the day’. Just because a speech is in line

80. Witherington 1998, 40. He cites Livy and Tacitus as two different examples and says that ‘some ancients even considered history and history writing a subset or part of the science of rhetoric’.
83. Witherington 1998, 42.
85. Gempf, ‘Public Speaking’, 264. Gempf, 265, insists that speeches had to fit in stylistically and thematically with the author’s work, but they also had to fit ‘the speaker and the reported historical situation’. This, of course, does not establish the historicity of a given speech unless sources were faithfully used. Gempf, 291-94, critiques the scepticism of Cadbury and Dibelius regarding the historical dimension of the speeches in ancient histories and in Acts.
86. Gempf, ‘Public Speaking’, 264. Gempf, 266-85, goes on to discuss the practices
with what the author of a book is known to believe is not sufficient ground for dismissing the record of that speech as invention. Gempf concludes:

In determining historical *faithfulness*, the most important clues are likely to come in weighing whether a speech shows 1. traces of the alleged situation into which it was purported to have been delivered and 2. traces of the personality and traits of the alleged speaker. If discontinuities appear, then there is reason for questioning the faithfulness of the speech to the event.

But there may be more than ‘traces’ in Luke’s work. Witherington is convinced that ‘Luke’s use of the art of persuasion is more like that of the serious earlier Greek historians such as Polybius than it is of a Livy or a Dionysius of Halicarnassus’. Luke’s Greek style does not involve an indulgence in rhetorical excess. He even varies his style to be more Semitic in the early chapters of the Gospel and Acts, where the focus is on Jerusalem and the temple. There are obvious stylistic differences between narrative and speeches, with Luke’s rhetorical skills ‘more in evidence in the preface and speeches than elsewhere in Luke-Acts’. Witherington notes few moralizing asides or other sorts of intrusions or digressions in Acts. Apart from a few aspects of the final travel narrative, most of the narrative ‘could not be said to be intended for entertainment. The tone and purpose of the account seem far too serious for that.’

Nevertheless, Luke’s choice and arrangement of his material shows him to be operating ‘according to conventions similar to those outlined in classical rhetorical treatises’. Satterthwaite evaluates Luke’s narrative method in the light of a proposed apologetic aim: ‘to show that Jesus and the church he founded were God’s fulfillment of his promises to Israel, thereby assuring both Jewish and Gentile believers of the reliability of the message they have heard, and of God’s faithfulness’. He notes that there

---

and views of several famous Greek and Roman historians. He then deals with Jewish practice and precedents in history writing.

88. Witherington 1998, 43. Polybius 2.56.1-13 was notably cautious in proposing that ‘it was the task of the historian to teach and persuade, but to do so by a selection of events and speeches that record what really happened or really was said, however commonplace’. (Witherington, 42). Witherington, 46-49, goes on to discuss the approach of Thucydides to the recording of speeches in historical narrative settings.
89. Witherington 1998, 44.
90. Witherington 1998, 45. However, see R. P. Thompson, Keeping the Church in its Place: The Church as Narrative Character in Acts (New York/London: Clark, 2006), 9-17, on ancient narrative texts, readers, and the reading process.
are patterns and themes that run through Acts and unify it. The book falls into four sections of roughly equal length, each of which records a further spread of the gospel message and of the community of believers. Luke arranges the proportions of his narrative within this broader framework, so as to underscore his theological themes. His repetition and amplification of certain events is entirely in line with classical rhetorical ideals, not simply by multiplying words but by using ‘heightened diction and striking presentation of events’.  

In addition to the summarising comments and evaluations of people and events which occur in the narrative of Acts, Satterthwaite further observes what he calls ‘implicit commentary’. Techniques such as simple juxtaposition of events, analogical patterning of events, and interplay between narration and dialogue are used to give meaning and significance to the developing narrative, following the practices of classical writers. Such writers also had much to say about style. Luke’s word usage, sentence construction, and verbal artistry are compared with ancient discussions on these matters, showing the extent to which his narrative conforms to classical requirements.

Satterthwaite concludes his very helpful comparison of Acts with the rhetorical treatises of the Greco-Roman world by drawing attention to the persuasive qualities of Acts. In some contexts there is overt persuasion, as in the speeches, recurring summaries, and explicit evaluative or interpretative comments (e.g., 10:2; 11:24; 12:23; 13:48; 16:14; 17:11). Covert persuasion comes with the presentation of the character and behaviour of apostles and other believers in a positive light. Those who oppose them emerge in a less favourable light. Then there is the treatment of opposing viewpoints (e.g., 5:34-39; 6:13-14; 16:19-21; 17:6-7; 18:12-13; 19:35-40; 24:5-8), where readers are challenged to compare these views with the recorded events and the beliefs of Luke’s main characters. Luke appears to have been given ‘the kind of (rhetorical) education one would expect in a Graeco-Roman writer of this period who embarked on a work of this sort’. However, he was no slave to classical conventions, as his use of the OT and Semitic patterns of speech would indicate. A reader with some rhetorical appreciation would be alert to the significance of many of the techniques highlighted above. Such a reader might therefore be impressed by ‘the care with which Luke

---

93. Satterthwaite, ‘Classical Rhetoric’, 353. Summary statements and other linking devices are used to demonstrate progress and development in the narrative. Cf. ‘Literary Approaches to Acts’ and ‘Some Editorial Techniques with Thematic Implications’ below.  
94. Satterthwaite, ‘Classical Rhetoric’, 360-67. Recent scholarship has highlighted such techniques in OT narratives as well, so that Satterthwaite is prepared to conclude that Luke may have been influenced by either or both of these bodies of literature.  
presents his account, and the seriousness with which he takes possible objections’. 98

C. Historical Reliability

For a variety of reasons, many writers have expressed distrust in Luke’s historical method and scepticism about the historical value of Acts. Some of the reasons have already been listed or implied: uncertainty about Luke’s sources and the freedom with which he handled them; doubts about Luke’s knowledge of Paul, his letters, his theology, and details of his ministry; and concern about the degree to which Luke’s theological and apologetic agenda has distorted his constructing of speeches and narratives. Hemer contends that ‘opinion about the book of Acts has become polarized, and often between those who differ profoundly on the matter of historicity, but this aspect of their disagreement is often implicit rather than explicit’. 99

Hemer has provided the most comprehensive recent study of these issues, arguing that it is important ‘to judge Luke by the standards of his own day, whether or not we conclude that he was consciously influenced by them or measured himself by them’. 100 The sources for Hemer’s contextual study of Acts are literary works which are roughly contemporary with Luke’s publication, together with inscriptions and other archaeological evidence. Comparing Luke’s work with the practices of ancient historians and their views about the historian’s task, he observes among them ‘the existence of a distinctive and rigorous theory of historiography’. 101 This involved a stress on the value of eyewitness participation and the importance of interviewing eyewitnesses; ‘the limitation of coverage to material where the writer has privileged access to evidence of guaranteed quality’; mention of the value of travel to the scene of events; ‘the prospect then (and for us) of checking details with contemporary documents’; ‘the occasional in-

99. Hemer, Book of Acts, 1. He goes on to give a brief overview of scholarship on the historicity of Acts in the century before he himself writes and considers why it is important to revisit the issue (pp. 3-29). Later he provides a brief selection of opposing views on Luke’s historical reliability (pp. 101-2). Cf. Marguerat, First Christian Historian, 1-5.
100. Hemer, Book of Acts, 43. Hemer, 47, therefore seeks to establish ‘whether Luke is habitually and in general a trustworthy source by the standards of his day, whether he exhibits accuracy or inaccuracy of mind, a general conscience for, or a general disregard of, historical fact’.
Hemer explores in some detail the types of knowledge displayed in Acts. This involves the correlation of external, especially documentary, sources with inconsequential details in Acts, where the issue of theological bias can hardly be raised. He first investigates ‘items of geographical detail and the like which may be assumed to have been generally known’. He then goes on to consider ‘more specialized details, which may still have been widely known to those who possessed relevant experience: titles of governors, army units, major routes, etc., which may have been accessible to those who travelled or were involved in administration, but perhaps not to those without such backgrounds’. After this he turns to ‘specifics of local routes, boundaries, titles of city magistrates, and the like, which may not be closely controllable in date, but are unlikely to have been known except to a writer who had visited the districts’. The latter two categories of evidence suggest that the author of Acts had at least travelled to many of the places mentioned in his narrative.

Hemer then attempts a correlation of the dates of known kings and governors with ‘the ostensible chronology of the Acts framework’. This is followed by a study of details in the narrative of Acts which are broadly suggestive of date, correlations between Acts and the letters attributed to Paul, latent internal correlations within Acts, details involving differences between Alexandrian and Western texts of Acts, unstudied allusions in Acts to geographical and other factors, together with several other categories of research.

Hemer admits that ‘there is no simple correspondence between the confirmation of individual details and the overall historicity of a book’. After all, it is possible to have a fictional narrative with accuracies of locality and background included! However, his research shows how strikingly careful Luke was about such details, and he contrasts the carelessness of the Jewish historian Josephus in this regard. To suggest that ‘the historical components are there to give topicality or verisimilitude to Paul as a lay-figure of Lukan theology seems forced beyond all probability.

102. Hemer, Book of Acts, 100. Bruce 1990, 34, concludes that Luke’s purpose was didactic and religious, but this necessitated ‘no falling away from the standards expected in ancient historians’. He notes that history writing in antiquity had a confessedly didactic quality and purpose that could ‘co-exist with the strictest canons of accuracy’.
103. Hemer, Book of Acts, 104. These are itemised on p. 107.
104. Hemer, Book of Acts, 104. These are itemised on p. 108.
105. Hemer, Book of Acts, 104. These are itemised on pp. 108-58 and form a considerable list, even though the comparisons are drawn exclusively from Acts 13–28. Many of the contextual items have only recently come to light with the publication of new collections of papyri and inscriptions from the Greco-Roman world of the first century AD.
106. Hemer, Book of Acts, 104. These are itemised on pp. 159-75.
Even to treat Acts as a theological treatise or polemical document which incorporates historical traditions from a diary or itinerary-source seems to risk making a difficult mixture of a book which appears to have a more integrated unity of character. Hemer rightly concludes that a more satisfactory view must explore how history and theology work together in Acts.

Marguerat begins his helpful discussion of Luke’s historical method by saying that it is not to be judged on its conformity to so-called ‘brute facts’, but ‘according to the point of view of the historian which controls the writing of the narrative, the truth that the author aims to communicate and the need for identity to which the historian responds’. He follows Ricoeur in identifying three types of historiography: there is documentary history, which seeks to establish the verifiable facts, explicative history, which evaluates events from a social, economic, or political perspective, and poetic history, whose truth lies in ‘the interpretation it gives to the past and the possibility it offers to a community to understand itself in the present’. Acts is sometimes documentary and sometimes ‘poetic’, meaning in this case that there is a theological dimension to the story, whereby God is constantly presented as intervening, saving, or consoling his people.

A documentary approach is evident in the extraordinary attention Acts gives to topographical and sociopolitical details, as noted above. However, this documentary realism is not simply ‘the narrative clothing of a fiction created by the author’. All historical work is driven by ‘a choice of plot, a narrative setting and the effects of (re)composition. Once the necessary subjectivity of the historian in the construction of the plot of the narrative is recognized, we must abandon the factual/fictional duality as the product of unhealthy rationalism.’ Marguerat concurs with the sort of conclusion reached above, that ‘Luke is situated precisely at the meeting point of Jewish and Greek historiographical currents. His narrative devices are heavily indebted to the cultural standard in the Roman Empire, that is, history as the Greeks wrote it. However, contrary to the ideal of objectivity found in Herodean and Thucydidean historiography, Luke recounts a confessional history.

110. Marguerat, First Christian Historian, 6-7 (his emphasis).
113. Marguerat, First Christian Historian, 12. Bock 2007, 4-5, is unhappy with Marguerat’s approach, but he does acknowledge that ‘it is possible for ideology and historical data to be combined in a way that reflects an appropriate historical perspective’. Cf. Bock, 10-12, on creativity in Acts and other ancient historical works.