READING AND INTERPRETING THE BIBLE SERIES

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

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Introduction

Books, like their authors and readers, may be said to have personalities. That is, they have their own characteristics, profiles, and even quirks. And this book is no different. On the one hand, it is part of the Reading and Interpreting the Bible Series from the Foundry Publishing, meaning that this book joins others in the series to assist readers in the understanding and use of appropriate methods of biblical interpretation. On the other hand, this book has a unique focus. Since the books in this series give attention to different genres, this work focuses on specific issues of the narrative genre in interpreting the book of Acts.

This volume is divided into two parts. The first part includes two chapters covering the general issues of reading and interpreting Acts. The second part includes nine additional chapters illustrating the interpretation of selected passages of Acts. These chapters are divided further by distinct characteristics: speeches, summaries, characterization, repetition, and differences between Acts and the Pauline Letters. Each of these characteristics is introduced by a brief introduction. The introduction offers some (not all) suggestions for the reading and interpretation of Acts before exploring the specific characteristic in a representative passage (or two).

Let me add a personal note to conclude this introduction. I have been blessed to have the book of Acts shape my life since Bible-quizzing days in high school. Little did I realize then that it would become my life's work, resulting in many articles on Acts, study notes about Acts for a study Bible, a translation of Acts

for the Common English Bible project, a commentary on Acts, and now this book. I am amazed how this one book has continued to offer fresh words about God's will for us as God's people, God's church. May these sacred words of Scripture truly be God's word for you as you read and interpret (and pray over) Acts!

—Richard P. Thompson
August 2023

PART I

READING AND INTERPRETING ACTS—SELECTED ISSUES

1

Influences in Reading and Interpreting Acts

The task of reading and interpreting the book of Acts never happens in isolation. Like other books of the Bible, readers of Acts have interpreted it alongside other biblical texts. But the book of Acts, which is also known as the Acts of the Apostles, has had numerous interpretive and literary companions since it first appeared among the earliest believers. Very early in its existence and prior to its inclusion within the collection of the New Testament canon, the book circulated with the collection of General Epistles. Thus Acts was associated particularly with writings that were attributed to Peter and James, two significant characters within its narrative and among the first leaders within the early church.

Later and more recently, because of its canonical position preceding the Pauline corpus, the book has often functioned as a historical introduction to those letters. For instance, readers have often understood the description of Paul's ministry in the Greek city of Corinth—found in Acts 18—as useful historical background for their interpretations of Paul's letters to the Corinthians. But in the process, such readings have sometimes inadvertently relegated Acts into a secondary role, since the book has been valued as offering mere historical background for other biblical texts that have been read and interpreted for their theology and biblical message but has not been valued *for its own theological contributions and message* for the church and the Christian faith.

But other developments have accentuated the place and importance of Acts within the New Testament. Because of a common addressee and other extensive similarities (vocabulary, style, characterization, themes, etc.) between the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, the use of the title "Luke-Acts" reflects a general contemporary consensus about these two New Testament books: that they were originally written as a single literary work of two separate volumes.[1] This view about the Third Gospel and Acts has been largely assumed for the better part of a century, despite the separation of these two books in the Bible and the lack of any surviving manuscript or canonical list that connects them together.

The canonical separation of Acts from the Lukan Gospel corresponds with the lack of external evidence (i.e., evidence outside of the text of Acts) that might indicate that these two books are companion volumes of a larger work by a single author. Early usage of the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles in the church shows these books were not read *together* but *separately*.[2] Despite their similarities, the differences in materials between these two books are significant and are reflected in their respective canonical locations. On the one hand, the Gospel of Luke focuses on the life of Jesus and is placed with two other similar (Synoptic) Gospels. On the other hand, the book of Acts focuses on the movements of the earliest believers, including Peter (chs. 1–12) and Saul/Paul (chs. 13–28). The canonical position of Acts before New Testament letters that largely address early Christian communities of faith corresponds with the general contexts described within that book.

However, these differences in canonical placement, materials, and usage still do not conceal the obvious literary connections between the Third Gospel and Acts. Both books address a common recipient named Theophilus (see more under "Addressee or Audience," p. 18). The book of Acts reminds Theophilus

1. See Henry J. Cadbury, *The Making of Luke-Acts* (New York: Macmillan, 1927).

2. See Andrew F. Gregory, *The Reception of Luke and Acts in the Period before Irenaeus: Looking for Luke in the Second Century*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe 169 (Tübingen, DEU: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).

about the author's "first book" about Jesus (Acts 1:1, NRSVue), which is a likely reference to the Gospel of Luke. The extensive overlap in material between Luke 24 and Acts 1 links the two books together in multiple ways: "the promise of my [or the] Father" (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4, RSV), the description of Jesus's followers as "witnesses" and the declaration that they would soon receive "power" to be said witnesses (Luke 24:48-49; Acts 1:8), and the emphasis on Jesus's ascension (Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9-11), among others. Although some differences between the two chapters also exist (e.g., the stories of Luke 24 could have transpired within twenty-four to forty-eight hours in contrast to the forty days of Acts 1), the general emphases of these chapters parallel one another. Also, descriptions of characters in Acts (e.g., believers) often mirror characters in the Lukan Gospel (especially Jesus). The abundance of such internal (literary) connections between these two books provides sufficient reason for reading them *together* rather than *separately*, despite the shortage of external evidence for doing so.

Readers should read and interpret both Luke's Gospel and Acts differently because of their place and function within that larger work of Luke-Acts.

The decision to approach Acts as the second part of the larger, multivolume work "Luke-Acts" rather than treat it as a separate, distinct work leads to some important interpretive implications. First, readers should look for *primary* intertextual connections (i.e., connections *between* texts) between Acts and *the Gospel of Luke* rather than between Acts and *the Pauline Letters* (or the other Gospels). Because the broader literary world to which the book of Acts belongs includes the Lukan Gospel rather than the Pauline Letters, readers should remain cognizant of the ways *this* Gospel sets the literary or narrative stage for what happens in Acts.

Second, readers should read and interpret both Luke's Gospel and Acts differently because of their place and function within that larger work of Luke-Acts.

On the one hand, the reading and the interpretation of the Gospel of Luke are affected because *this* Gospel does not conclude with Jesus's resurrection (explicitly or implicitly; see Mark 16:1-8) or appearance among his followers, as do the other canonical Gospels (see Matt. 28:16-20; John 21:1-23). In fact, Luke's Gospel does not even end with Jesus's ascension, a unique feature among the New Testament Gospels (Luke 24:50-51). Rather, the hopeful description of Jesus's followers who returned in worship to Jerusalem anticipates something more (see vv. 52-53). On the other hand, the Acts narrative presumes the specific story of Jesus as it unfolds in the Third Gospel. That is, it is not just the *story of Jesus* but the *Lukan story of Jesus* that the book of Acts supposes to be on the minds of its readers as they themselves witness within the latter narrative those who serve as witnesses to Jesus's resurrection.

Third, the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles *together* create the largest *single* contribution to the New Testament. Such a work is noteworthy on several levels. This single work focuses on the longest time span of any New Testament work, extending from just before the announcement of Jesus's birth to Paul's house arrest and ministry in Rome (about sixty-five years). Thus, from a chronological perspective, it offers a more extended perspective of God's purposes through Jesus Christ and among God's people, both *(a)* in leading up to the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus and *(b)* in the aftermath or results of Jesus's resurrection, as the apostles and others serve as witnesses to the resurrection as the Spirit enables them (Acts 1:8; 2:1-13). As a whole, Luke-Acts comprises more than a fourth of the whole New Testament collection and is more than 15 percent longer than the entire Pauline corpus. The prominence and sheer size of Luke-Acts suggest that the distinctive Lukan perspective ought to find a greater place within New Testament theology and even Christian theology more generally (perhaps even out of the Pauline shadows!) than what has often been the case within the histories of Christian thought and biblical interpretation.

Authorship

Like the Gospel of Luke (and the other New Testament Gospels), the book of Acts is an anonymous text: the biblical text identifies no author. Most of what may be known about the author comes only from hints that the narrative discloses. Although persons often attempt to discover or defend the identification of the "real" or historical author with such textual evidence, the text itself only suggests what is commonly known as the "implied author." The implied author may be constructed from textual clues about that author's background, knowledge, point of view, and so on.

From Acts, readers are able to conclude that the author had superior literary skills in comparison to most other New Testament writers and was masterful in dramatic storytelling. The extensive use of the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament), both in allusions to stories and in vocabulary from the Torah, suggests the author was quite knowledgeable of the Jewish Scriptures. Although the common assumption is that this work came from the hand of a Gentile, this noticeable familiarity with the Scriptures indicates that he was either *(a)* a Gentile with a significant prior interest in and knowledge of the Jewish religion and practices or *(b)* a Diaspora/Hellenistic Jew. If the former instance describes the author, such knowledge of and exposure to the Jewish faith would have likely occurred through association with the synagogue as a Godfearer, a Gentile attracted to the worship, practices, and ethics of Judaism without "formal" conversion to the religion (see, e.g., Cornelius in Acts 10). If the author was Jewish by birth or conversion, as the second option describes, an apparent lack of knowledge about some aspects of Palestinian Judaism suggests someone who was not from the Palestinian region but from a different part of the Roman Empire (e.g., a traditional location for the writing of Acts is Antioch in Syria, which is northeast of that region).

The most prominent aspect of Acts that has been cited when addressing the question of authorship is the surprising appearance of first-person narration in some seemingly random sections of the last half of the book. Most of Acts, like other biblical narratives, is narrated from a third-person perspective (i.e., the narrator offers stories to readers about others). But in Acts 16, that perspective abruptly changes to first person without warning: "After Paul had seen the vision, *we* got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called *us* to preach the gospel to them" (v. 10, NIV; emphases added). This first-person narration extends through verse 17, only to vanish from the story. It later reappears (20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1–28:16), only to disappear again. The earliest and traditional interpretation of this literary feature is that it indicates the author of Acts (and thus of the Gospel of Luke) was a ministry companion of the apostle Paul.

According to early church tradition from the late second century CE, Luke the physician and coworker of Paul wrote both the Gospel now attributed to him and the book of Acts. The early church father Irenaeus cites these "we" passages in Acts as evidence that the author of Acts was also one of Paul's ministry associates (*Against Heresies* 3.14.1; cf. 3.1.1; 3.13.3). This tradition is repeated by others, including Clement of Alexandria (*Miscellanies* 5.12), Tertullian (*Against Marcion* 4.2), and Origen (according to Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.25). Even the important manuscript $\mathfrak{P}^{75}$ (likely from the late second or third century CE) inserts the title "Gospel according to Luke" for the Third Gospel, thereby reflecting this tradition. But this information about Luke as the author of the Lukan Gospel and Acts depends on scarce New Testament references about this specific individual. Paul identifies him as a "fellow worker" (Philem. v. 24). Two other references identify him as "the beloved physician" (Col. 4:14, NRSVue) who still accompanied Paul as he was facing imminent death (2 Tim. 4:11). However, these references offer no actual support for Lukan authorship. Although the letters (whether or not from Paul's hand) may place Paul with

Luke from time to time, they do not definitely link them together during the specific "we" passages.

Differences in perspective, including differences between the depiction of Paul in Acts and Paul's self-depiction in the Pauline Letters, have led many Lukan interpreters to other conclusions, both about the first-person narration in Acts and about the authorship of the book. Some explain such shifts in narration to be the result of the author's reliance on a specific source for these parts of the work. But since other parts of the work indicate an author with advanced literary skills, it would seem unlikely that the same author who apparently was adept at editing other sources could not recognize and adapt such materials in these instances, even if other sources were consulted. Another possible solution is that the first-person perspective was inserted at strategic narrative points for rhetorical or literary effects to capture the reader's attention. Some downplay this possibility because the recipient of both Luke and Acts seems to have known the author (see the preface to each book: Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-5); yet the effects of this type of literary device should not be underestimated.

The scarcity of information and evidence about the person identified as Luke in the New Testament and his authorship of Acts (and more broadly Luke-Acts) suggests that an interpreter should use caution when drawing conclusions about such matters, especially if such conclusions may influence how he or she reads and interprets these texts. A couple of considerations about authorship should be noted here. First, more "traditional" views of the authorship of Acts, including attempts to defend Luke the physician as the author of Acts (and the Gospel of Luke) by insisting that the narrator's style and perspective reveal tendencies of a person from the medical profession, often misinterpret aspects of the work itself.[3] An interpreter should be cautious of any theory of authorship that "imports" or forces ideas into the textual/narrative world of the work in

3. See, for example, Henry J. Cadbury, *The Style and Literary Method of Luke*, Harvard Theological Studies 6 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920).

question. Second, the different explanations for the "we" passages in Acts suggest that a reader of Luke-Acts should not be quick to assume that this feature discloses authorial information. The divergences between Acts and the Pauline Letters raise questions about whether the pronoun "we" in Acts includes the author of Acts. These differences should cause an interpreter to reexamine whether the author accompanied or knew Paul or, at the very least, to consider the role of such differences within the book of Acts. However, for convenience most interpreters (including this one) still refer to the author of Luke-Acts as Luke, although the mystery of his identity remains. The anonymity of Acts implies that its interpretation does not depend on the resolution of authorship issues.[4]

The anonymity of Acts implies that its interpretation does not depend on the resolution of authorship issues.

Addressee or Audience

The prefaces of the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts both address these works to the same individual: Theophilus. The name literally means a "friend/lover of God" or "beloved of God." Thus the focus can be on (1) the addressee's love of God, (2) God's love for that person, or (3) both. This individual is mentioned nowhere else in the New Testament or early Christian literature, even though the name itself is commonly attested in writings since the third century BCE. The honor with which Luke addresses Theophilus in the two prefaces (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1) hints that he is a person of prominent social standing. A common view is that he was a wealthy patron who sponsored Luke's research and writing of these two volumes. Another popular view, because of

4. Thus, for purposes of this work, several different references will be used for the author of Acts, including "the Lukan author," "the Lukan narrator," and also "Luke." In the latter case, the name is a convenient label for the author or narrator of this work and should not imply an endorsement of the traditional view that Luke the physician was the author of Acts.

the meaning of Theophilus's name, is that this is a pseudonym, which either protected the actual recipient of the work or addressed all believers who are "beloved of God." Since the use of a name for symbolic reasons was uncommon in ancient literary practice, it is more likely that the original addressee was a specific believer (although other believers probably would have gathered together to hear the work read aloud to them).

Yet the materials of the work of Acts suggest that it was written not only for one individual but also for a more expanded audience characterized as those "beloved of God." Like authorship, the identity of this broader Lukan "implied audience" may be constructed from textual hints in Acts. Thus, like the author, the audience not only would have understood the Greek language (specifically Koine or common Greek) but also would have shared the author's knowledge of the Septuagint and its orientation for faith and life. This extensive familiarity with the Septuagint should challenge the common assumption that the implied audience (like the implied author) was completely pagan (and therefore Gentile) in background. At the very least, such an audience was probably much more diverse, both in background and origin. Given the issues that arise in Acts, it may have included both Jewish and Gentile believers, perhaps dealing with similar questions about diversity. The references to a variety of groups—Jews and Gentiles, men and women, wealthy and poor, citizens and slaves, prominent and marginal—suggest the possibility of a diverse social composition within this implied audience too.

Date of Composition

Three viable options exist for the date of composition of Acts. The oldest and traditional date is associated with the end of the book, which describes Paul's house arrest in Rome (in the early 60s CE). Some as early as Jerome (late fourth century to early fifth century CE) maintained that Acts (as well as the Gospel of Luke) was written during the short span between Paul's custody in Rome and his death a few years later. This dating of the Lukan corpus

continues to have some contemporary advocates who typically offer three main reasons for their position. First, the abrupt ending to the book of Acts offers no information about Paul's release or subsequent death, which they interpret as a sign that the author wrote prior to Paul's tragic demise. Second, Luke mentions nothing about two important events: the persecution of Christians by the emperor Nero in 64 CE and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE. Third, there is no mention in Acts of any of the Pauline Letters, which would have been collected and circulating among the earliest churches a few decades later. Despite the fact that such reasons may seem convincing at first glance, few Lukan scholars hold to this view today.

A more prominent view with Lukan and New Testament studies is that Luke-Acts was written as a two-volume work after the destruction of Jerusalem (70 CE), most likely in the 80s. Behind this view are passages in the Third Gospel where Jesus apparently alludes to the fate of Jerusalem (Luke 13:35; 19:43-44; 21:20-24; 23:28-31). Although such words could have been written prior to that catastrophic event, they would have had much greater significance after the city's destruction and demise. However, this position also underscores the significance of passages in Acts that refer to the closing of the temple gates in Jerusalem behind Paul after he was forcefully removed from the premises by an angry, violent mob (Acts 21:30). Like those passages citing Jesus's words about Jerusalem in the Lukan Gospel, this passage describing a distinctive act of hostility against one of the Christian movement's leaders would take on more significance after the subsequent breach between Judaism and the followers of Jesus. The later date proposed here also precedes the likely time when the Pauline collection of letters would have been gathered together and circulated, thereby explaining what many perceive to be a lack of knowledge about them as reflected in the Acts narrative. An advantage of this option for dating Acts (and the Gospel of Luke) is that it does not force historical explanations for the book's ending that may have better rhetorical or literary explanations.

A third theory for the date of composition is that Acts was written during the first half of the second century. The classic formulation of this view was offered by Ferdinand Christian Baur, a prominent New Testament scholar in the first half of the nineteenth century who contended that Acts played a pivotal role within early Christianity. According to Baur, the early church was comprised of two competing factions: the Jewish Christians (first led by Peter), who held to a strict observance of the Torah, and the Gentile Christians (first led by Paul), who considered the Torah to be ineffective. Baur interpreted Acts as a work seeking conciliation and concessions between both sides as the conflict continued into the second century.[5] Few contemporary scholars would accept Baur's view without substantial modification.

More recent proposals for a second-century dating of the composition of Acts consider other features of the work. One suggestion is that the vocabulary of Acts, its possible intertextual links (e.g., Josephus, whose last volume dates around 93 CE), and Luke's depiction of "the other" (such as the Jews)—all point to an early second-century date, perhaps 110-20 CE.[6] Another related view suggests that Acts may have been written as a response to the heretic Marcion.[7] The suggestion is that the author of Acts amended and edited a pre-Marcionite version of the canonized Gospel of Luke to serve as the first volume before Acts, or Acts's "prequel." In turn, Acts was written to "save" Paul from the distortions of false Marcionite teachings. This would date the composition of the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts no earlier than the 140s and would correlate with Irenaeus's first references to both books.[8] Such later dates for the composition of Acts may also explain the existence of possible allusions

5. See Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Paul, the Apostle of Jesus Christ, His Life and Work, His Epistles and His Doctrine: A Contribution to a Critical History of Primitive Christianity*, 2 vols., trans. E. Zeller, ed. A. Menzies (London: Williams and Norgate, 1876), 1:1-145.

6. See Richard I. Pervo, *Dating Acts: Between the Evangelists and the Apologists* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2006).

7. See John Knox, *Marcion and the New Testament: An Essay in the Early History of the Canon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942).

8. See Joseph B. Tyson, *Marcion and Luke-Acts: A Defining Struggle* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), and Shelly Matthews, *Perfect Martyr: The Stoning of Stephen and the Construction of Christian Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 27-53.

to Pauline and deutero-Pauline letters in the Acts narrative. They also provide some rhetorical explanation for differences between the Lukan portrayal of Paul in Acts and the self-portrayal of Paul in the Pauline Letters.

Sources and Intertextual Issues

The specific questions about sources behind Luke-Acts focus on different issues because of what the two volumes themselves suggest about their sources. On the one hand, the preface of Luke's Gospel (Luke 1:1-4) explicitly describes the author's consultation of other sources, which various similarities shared with other Synoptic Gospels seem to confirm. For instance, the "two-source hypothesis"—a contemporary explanation for the so-called Synoptic problem, which identifies the similarities among the three Synoptic Gospels as well as shared (even verbatim) teachings of Jesus in the Matthean and Lukan Gospels that differ with the version found in Mark's Gospel—contends that Matthew and Luke appropriated two main sources for much of their respective Gospels: (1) Mark's Gospel and (2) a written source containing Jesus's teachings, known as "Q" after the German word for source, *Quelle*.

On the other hand, the book of Acts indicates nothing explicitly about sources behind the work. As mentioned earlier about the author, some contend that the passages that offer first-person narration (rather than the typical third-person perspective) in Acts reflect the perspective of a distinctive source that may have been written by a ministry companion of Paul or someone else who was present during those narrated times. However, other plausible explanations make that specific argument less than appealing. Yet there is little doubt that Luke had sources in hand for writing Acts. The problem lies in determining what those sources may have been and what they contained, since Luke the writer and storyteller was masterful in shaping the final text with his own style and vocabulary. One common view is that Luke had at least two sources: one that originated from Jerusalem and another from Antioch of Syria. The basic

reason behind this proposal is the shift in action from the Holy City (Acts 1–7) to the latter as the narrative focus moves from the early church and Peter's ministry to Paul's ministry (Acts 13–21).

An important question about available sources for the book of Acts has to do with the Pauline Letters. Was the collection of these letters available to Luke as a source? It would seem as though the differences between Paul's letters and materials in Acts would be evidence against the availability of that collection for the author. It is also quite surprising that if such a collection was available, Luke never mentions Paul writing letters to the local churches within the narrative that he started. Yet as important as these issues are, one may also offer explanations other than Lukan unfamiliarity with the Pauline Letters. That is, there may be evidence of Lukan familiarity with specific Pauline Letters (e.g., Galatians, as seen perhaps in Acts 15 or 21, and Ephesians in Acts 20:17-38). One must be careful not to assume such familiarity a priori. But if such evidence emerges out of the careful study of the text of Acts, this would indicate the use of the Pauline Letters as a source. If Acts was written during the first half of the second century (see the previous section, "Date of Composition," p. 19), it is much more likely that the Pauline Letters as a collection was available to Luke as a source.

One additional source that was influential in the composition of Acts was the Septuagint. Luke borrows stylistic features and means of telling good stories from various sources. But he both makes use of the biblical mode of storytelling and echoes the Septuagint's vocabulary to shape and tell the narrative found in the Third Gospel and Acts.[9] These intertextual connections between the Septuagint and Acts may be seen in a couple of ways. First, Luke offers scriptural quotations (from the Septuagint) at strategic points within the Acts narrative. For instance, Peter's explanation of the Pentecost event includes a quotation

9. See Craig A. Evans and James A. Sanders, *Luke and Scripture: The Function of Sacred Tradition in Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), and Kenneth D. Litwak, *Echoes of Scripture in Luke-Acts: Telling the History of God's People Intertextually*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplemental Series 282 (New York: T. and T. Clark, 2005).

from the prophet Joel (see Acts 2:17-21). Also, early proclamations about Jesus as the Messiah include quotations from Psalm 16 (Acts 2:25-28), Deuteronomy 18 (Acts 3:22-23), and Psalm 118 (Acts 4:11). Second, Luke's storytelling and vocabulary often connect to themes and stories from Israel's Scriptures. There are scriptural echoes throughout Acts, as these materials draw on Israel's story to show that it continues among Jesus's followers and successors. In other words, the Lukan author appropriates these intertextual links to tell the ongoing story of God's purposes of salvation as told in Israel's Scriptures.

Textual-Critical Issues

Like other New Testament books, there are variations among Greek manuscripts of the text of Acts, although most are relatively minor. Such differences may be attributed either to copying texts by hand or to attempts at clarifying instances of textual ambiguity. However, notable differences exist within the Lukan corpus between two major textual traditions, commonly known as the Alexandrian and Western traditions. The Alexandrian tradition includes copies of both the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts from as early as the fourth century, with the oldest papyrus copy of Luke's Gospel, $\mathfrak{P}^{75}$, dating from 175 to 225 CE. The Western tradition includes parchment copies of both books from as early as the sixth century, as well as papyrus fragments and citations from early patristic writers (e.g., Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine) that date back to the third century.

The comparison of the texts of the Third Gospel and Acts from these two textual traditions reveals a major difference between them. The Western tradition omits or excludes materials from Luke 22–24 that are found in the Alexandrian tradition (Luke 22:19*b*-20; 24:3*b*, 6*a*, 12, 36*b*, 40, 51*a*, 52*b*), and yet the Western texts typically *expand* Acts when compared to the Alexandrian texts. These expanded Western materials of the Acts narrative amplify some stories, explain selected textual ambiguities, emphasize the apostles' authority,

underscore Jewish rejection, and highlight the role of the Holy Spirit in a literary style that is notably different from the rest of the book. The result is an expanded version of the Western text of Acts that is about 10 percent longer than the Alexandrian one. Thus biblical translations of Acts are based on the Alexandrian version, due to the consistent editorial revision through the expansion of the text of Acts that the Western tradition reflects. Nonetheless, the Western text sometimes offers helpful clarification about some aspects of textual ambiguity, so interpreters should note textual variations when they exist.

Genre of Acts

Unstated assumptions and expectations accompany any conventional literary form or genre. Since different genres naturally function differently, their identification and assessment contribute significantly to the reading and interpretation of any text, including the book of Acts. Two general issues tend to complicate the precise identification of genre for Acts. One issue is the association of the Third Gospel with the book of Acts as a two-volume work. This raises the question about whether the unity of Luke-Acts requires "generic" unity.[10] On the one hand, one work might seem to necessitate one genre. On the other hand, the differences in subject and materials between the two books might make two genres more likely, however interpreters may understand the connections between them. Second, ancient literary conventions often obscured lines of delineation between different genres. Although such tendencies would not have made generic distinctions unimportant, shared characteristics among genres were the result. Since the study and imitation of different forms of literature were prominent means of learning composition within Greco-Roman education, readers should not be surprised to find such literary techniques and traits across generic lines. Such is the case in the book of Acts, with literary features

10. See Mikeal C. Parsons and Richard I. Pervo, *Rethinking the Unity of Luke and Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 20-44.

of different genres found there. As a result, numerous proposals about the genre of Acts have been offered,[11] which may be grouped into two general categories.

One category identifies the genre of Acts (or Luke-Acts) as *biography*. The genre of biography is typically associated with the New Testament Gospels, with parallels noted between these works (each written as a "life of Jesus") and other Hellenistic biographies.[12] However, Luke-Acts has also been compared to works such as Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (third century CE), which provides biographies of founders of religious movements or schools.[13] A significant feature of works such as Laertius's *Lives* is a dual focus on both the lives of those "founding fathers" and stories about the disciples or successors of those founders who followed in their footsteps. According to such proposals, this characteristic may be identified generally within Luke-Acts: the Gospel of Luke depicts the life of Jesus, and the book of Acts depicts stories of some of Jesus's leading successors (notably the apostles, especially Peter, in the first half, and Paul, in the second half). This understanding helps one in reading Luke-Acts more holistically. But the category of biography as a generic category is more convincing for the Gospel of Luke separately than it is either for Luke-Acts collectively or for the book of Acts separately.

A second category identifies the genre of Acts (or Luke-Acts) as *history* or *historiography*. Proposals regarding the book of Acts as some form of historiography often recognize the preface of the Third Gospel (Luke 1:1-4) and the opening of Acts (Acts 1:1) as consistent with prefaces that appear in Greco-Roman historiographies, either in basic form or in vocabulary and themes reflecting that tradition. For instance, Luke's description of his own inquiry and consultation of sources behind his work compares with what the Greek

11. See Thomas E. Phillips, "The Genre of Acts: Moving toward a Consensus?" *Currents in Biblical Research* 4, no. 3 (2006): 365-96.

12. See, e.g., Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, 2nd ed., The Biblical Resource Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

13. Charles H. Talbert, *Literary Patterns, Theological Themes, and the Genre of Luke-Acts*, Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series 20 (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1974).

historians Herodotus (*Histories* 1.1) and Thucydides (*History* 1.20.3; 1.22.2) stated about their own histories. Luke's specific depiction of his work as "accurate" (*akribōs*; Luke 1:3, AT) echoes how other historians described their work to their readers (e.g., Thucydides, *History* 1.22.2; Polybius, *Histories* 1.14.6; 16.20.8; 34.4.2; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 1.1.2; 1.5.4; 1.6.3; and Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.2, 6, 9). Luke's portrayal of his work as an "orderly account" (Luke 1:3) corresponds with themes of other historiographical works, where historians underscore their own hands in the arrangement and unification of their respective works (see, e.g., Polybius, *Histories* 1.3.4; 1.4.2-3). Thus, in the case of Luke-Acts, Luke as both author and historian was responsible for connecting the stories of Jesus and the church to the story of Israel and to the broader story of human history. He does this by referring to events and persons from both the Old Testament and the Greco-Roman world.

There are several overlapping variations within the general category of historiography for the genre of Acts as interpreters attempt to deal with distinctive aspects of the work. Some view Acts as a popular form of *general history*, which focuses on the identity and rise of a particular people.[14] Others understand Acts to be a type of *historical monograph*, which is shorter than the typical historiographical work in part because it focuses on selected narrated events in a more confined time frame than do its longer historiographical counterparts.[15] Still others give more specific attention to the didactic or rhetorical purposes behind Acts, since discussions within Greco-Roman historiographical circles often raised concerns about such issues. Thus some have classified Acts as *apologetic history* because of its concerns to defend the Christian movement and

14. See David E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, Library of Early Christianity 8 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 77-157.

15. Eckhard Plümacher, "Die Apostelgeschichte als historische Monographie," in *Les Actes des Apôtres: Traditions, rédaction, théologie*, ed. J. Kremer, Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologicarum lovaniensium 48 (Leuven, BEL: Leuven University Press, 1979), 457-66; and Darryl W. Palmer, "Acts and the Ancient Historical Monograph," in *The Book of Acts in Its Ancient Literary Setting*, ed. B. W. Winter and A. D. Clarke, The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 1-30.

its leaders from charges or accusations against them.[16] The Lukan tendency to draw parallels between biblical (notably Deuteronomistic and prophetic) traditions of the Septuagint and narrated events has led some to describe Acts as *biblical history*.[17] Yet the similarities between Acts and *political histories* of the Greco-Roman era, which connect founder, ancestors, and successors through a shared common story, suggest the possibility of some generic influence in this area as well.[18]

All these different variations of historiography attempt to address specific characteristics of the book of Acts. Yet there are also some aspects of the narrative that do not coincide with some of the more formal or technical characteristics of the Greco-Roman historiographical tradition. The prefaces of both the Gospel of Luke (Luke 1:1-4) and Acts (Acts 1:1-5) contain some vocabulary reflective of Greco-Roman historiographical emphases. However, rather than reflecting the literary style and conventions that conform to the standards of *formal* Greco-Roman historiography, these prefaces were composed in more accessible forms. These materials were more suitable for persons of the "professions" or trades.[19] Although these qualities would not detract from their historiographical nature, they would make these two works more comparable to other New Testament texts in their accessibility, even though they display greater literary style than most of their New Testament counterparts. This "popular" style of history writing would locate the book of Acts on the fringes of the historiographical genre rather than within the mainstream of that tradition. Nonetheless, Acts would still be recognized as history.

16. Gregory E. Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition: Josephus, Luke-Acts, and Apologetic Historiography* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 1992).

17. See, e.g., Brian S. Rosner, "Acts and Biblical History," in *The Book of Acts in Its Ancient Literary Setting*, ed. B. W. Winter and A. D. Clarke, The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 65-82, and Thomas L. Brodie, "Luke-Acts as an Imitation and Emulation of the Elijah-Elisha Narrative," in *New Views on Luke and Acts*, ed. E. Richard (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1990), 78-85.

18. See David L. Balch, "The Genre of Luke-Acts: Individual Biography, Adventure Novel, or Political History?" *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 33, no. 1 (Fall 1990): 5-19.

19. Loveday C. A. Alexander, *The Preface to Luke's Gospel: Literary Convention and Social Context in Luke 1.1–4 and Acts 1.1*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 78 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

The popular form of the book of Acts increases the likelihood that different features from different genres may have contributed to the work. Since literary education in the ancient world typically employed the stylistic imitation of classic writers, works such as Acts have been studied to assess such literary, creative, and compositional aspects alongside their historiographical qualities. Increased focus has been given to Luke's concerns for dramatic effect and good storytelling, both reflecting a desire to hold an audience's attention or interest.[20] But similarities between ancient epics and some episodes in Acts suggest these Lukan stories were told in familiar ways so that readers would *(a)* hear these latter accounts in light of those epochal events and *(b)* thus receive them in a way that accentuated their impact.[21] An author like Luke would have used such means of telling stories in more popular forms of history, such as the book of Acts (and the Third Gospel), in order to compose a work that would accomplish its purposes effectively (see Luke 1:1-4).

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Questions for Consideration

1. What issues stand out for you as most significant within the interpretive process? How so?
2. What are some key arguments about the authorship of the Acts of the Apostles? What might be the importance of such considerations for interpreting this book or other books of the New Testament?

20. See Richard I. Pervo, *Profit with Delight: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

21. Dennis R. MacDonald, "The Shipwrecks of Odysseus and Paul," *New Testament Studies* 45 (1999): 88–107; and Dennis R. MacDonald, "Paul's Farewell to the Ephesian Elders and Hector's Farewell to Andromache: A Strategic Imitation of Homer's *Iliad*," in *Contextualizing Acts: Lukan Narrative and Greco-Roman Discourse*, ed. T. Penner and C. V. Stichele (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 189-203.

3. What do you understand to be the major arguments behind contemporary trends that associate the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles together as a two-volume work called "Luke-Acts"? How convinced are you that these two books are related or to be read together?
4. What are the different possibilities for the genre of the book of Acts? How does the consideration of genre influence how a biblical book such as Acts is read and interpreted?