



Overview of Session

2.1.2 Acts

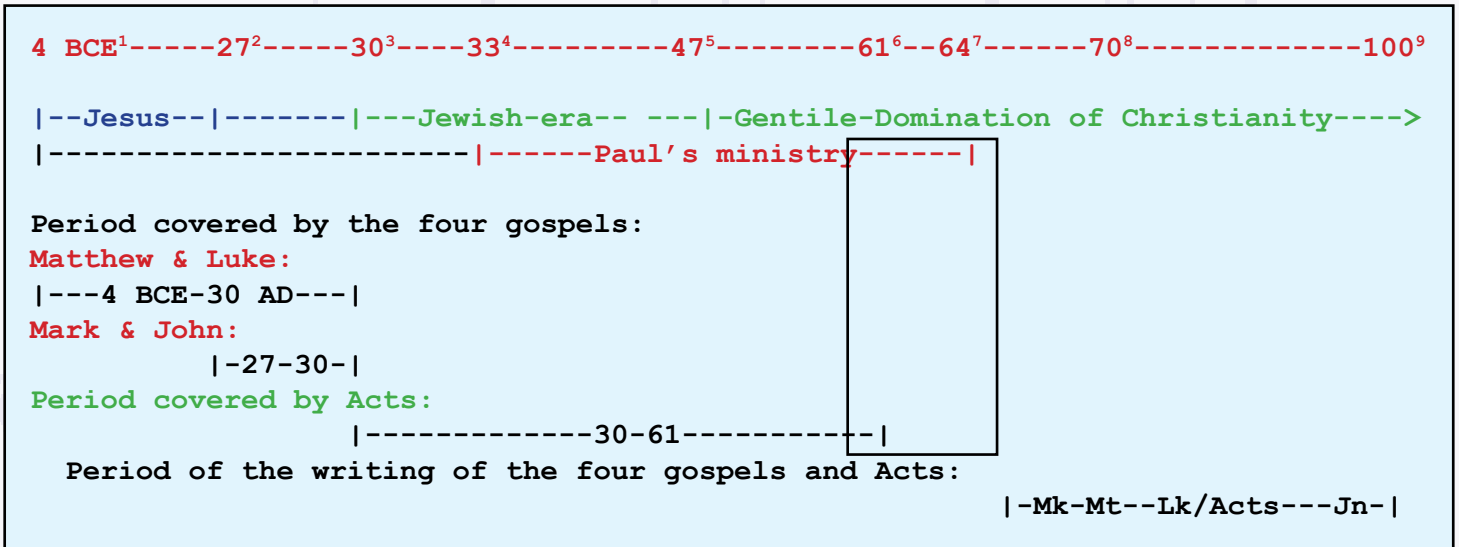
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Charting of First Christian Century: the Apostolic Era



Quick Overview:

From the above time line chart given in an earlier study, we note two basic points. The *compositional history* of Acts dates to the late 70s to early 80s of the first Christian century. This is closely linked to the dating of the Gospel of Luke, as volume two of Luke's writings.

But the *history described internally* by Acts dates from the early 30s to the early 60s of the first Christian century. It begins in chapter one with Jesus' ascension, and ends in chapter twenty-eight with Paul's house arrest in Rome. We have then a depiction of the beginnings of Christianity after Jesus' ascension to Heaven only for the first three decades of its existence. The focus is quite narrow with Peter and Paul as the two central characters of the story.

Realization of these basic facts is critical to proper interpretation of the document. Historical and literary sensitive methods of interpretation must give proper attention to the setting in which a document is written. Otherwise, the document taken on a fairy tale tone without historical rootage. The result is the loss of interpretive controls that impose critically important limits on the possible meanings to be derived from a text.

Detailed Study

2.1.2 Acts

The book of Acts stands as volume two of Luke's writings. This is made unquestionably clear from the prologues of both documents (see below for more details). Thus the dating of the writing of Acts is inseparably linked to that of the third gospel, since clearly Acts was written after the gospel according to the prologue in Acts 1:1, "In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning..."

2.1.2.1 Compositional History

Consequently, the external history of Acts is tied to that of the Gospel of Luke. Our earlier discussion in regard to the gospel will be repeated here. This gospel document is linked to the book of Acts through the

Prologues of each:

| Luke 1:1-4 | Acts 1:1-5 |
|---|--|
| <p>1 Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, 2 just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, 3 I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.</p> | <p>1 In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning 2 until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3 After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. 4 While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."</p> |

The first words of Acts 1:1 make it clear that the gospel was written first. The author intentionally links Acts back to the gospel with his depiction of the final scenes of the gospel in Lk. 24. The two volume "set" then attempts to tell the story of Jesus, followed by the first three decades of the Christian community of faith that Jesus left behind. In that sequel, Peter and Paul are the two central figures described from about 30 to 60 AD. Whether Luke intended to add a third volume to this set is debated among scholars. We will address that question in our overview of the book of Acts.

Quite popular for the last half century is the view that Luke intended to write a Heilsgeschichtliche Historie (Salvation History) that focused on three eras of God's redemptive activity: 1) The Old Testament is the story of God's activity with the covenant people of Israel; 2) the gospel is the transition of that salvation history to the redemptive accomplishment in Jesus, the new covenant, with John the Baptist as the transitional figure from the old to the new; 3) the book of Acts is the climax of that salvation history that shares how the new covenant community began sharing the witness of salvation to the entire world. Professor Hans Conzelmann first set forth this proposal in the 1950s with his study of Luke-Acts titled *In der Mitte der Zeit*, and later translated into English as *The Theology of St. Luke*. For a thorough evaluation of Conzelmann's proposal see W. C. Robinson, Jr., "Luke, Gospel of," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary volume.

We can confidently conclude that we have a common author between these two documents in the New Testament. Should they be studied jointly, or should they be studied separately? New Testament scholarship is divided on that question. The impact of literary analysis in interpretation plays a role at this point. Unquestionably, the gospel and Acts are two separate, distinct literary forms. The gospel stands with the other two Synoptic Gospels with a common literary form, gospel. binding them together. Acts, on the other hand, is a form of ancient history, very distinct from gospel, which followed some traits of the ancient biography, or bios, literary form. Typically, scholars with a strong literary focus in their interpretive methodology separate these documents into different studies. In contrast, scholars with a dominant historical orientation to their interpretive approach tend to exegete these two documents together as volume one and volume two of a early two volume account of the beginnings of Christianity.

2.1.2.1.1 External History.

Once the question of a common authorship between the gospel and Acts is settled, then the issue of who stands behind the composition of both these documents needs to be explored. Here the material presented for the Gospel of Luke in the earlier study will be repeated with slight adaptation for the Acts study.

The article in Wikipedia does a pretty good job of summarizing the early church tradition about this gospel's author:

Nowhere in Luke or Acts does it explicitly say that the author is Luke, the companion of Paul. The earliest surviving witnesses that place Luke as the author are the Muratorian Canon (c. 170), the writings of Irenaeus (c. 180), and the Anti-Marcionite Prologue (second half of the 2nd century). [1][2] According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, the evidence in favor of Lucan authorship is based on two main things: first, the use of "we" in Acts chapters 16, 20, 21 and 27 suggests the writer traveled with Paul; second, in the opinion of the Roman Catholic writers of the encyclopedia, the "medical language" employed by the writer is "identical with those employed by such medical writers as Hippocrates, Arctæus, Galen, and Dioscorides". [3] According to this view, Paul's "dear friend Luke the Doctor" (Col 4:14) and "fellow worker" (Phm 24) makes the most likely candidate for authorship out of all the companions mentioned in Paul's writings.

Modern scholarship does not unanimously agree on these points, stating that the author of Luke was anonymous. A number of theories exist regarding the first person ("we") passages. According to V. K. Robbins, the first

person narration was a generic style for sea voyages. Robbins goes on to discuss why the book of Acts also uses first person narration on land and why it is absent from many other sea passages. It is also possible a first person travel diary could have been incorporated into Acts from an earlier source or the author could simply have been untruthful about being a companion of Paul. Additionally, the thesis that the vocabulary is special to a physician was questioned by H. J. Cadbury in his dissertation *The Style and Literary Method of Luke*, which argued that some of the vocabulary is found in non medical works as well.

The evangelist does not claim to have been an eyewitness of Jesus' life, but to have "investigated everything carefully" and "writ[ten] an orderly account" "of the events... just as they were handed on... by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses" (Luke 1:1-4). According to the two-source hypothesis, the most commonly accepted solution to the synoptic problem, Luke's sources included the Gospel of Mark and another collection of lost sayings known as Q, the Quelle or "source" document. The more traditional theory, advocating Matthew as the earliest Gospel, which the two-source hypothesis usurped as favourite, is known as the Augustinian hypothesis.

The general consensus is that Luke was written by a Greek for gentile Christians. The Gospel is addressed to the author's patron, the most excellent Theophilus, which in Greek simply means Friend of God, and may not be a name, but a generic term for a Christian. The Gospel is clearly directed at Christians, or at those who already knew about Christianity, rather than a general audience, since the ascription goes on to state that the Gospel was written "...so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:3-4).

The early church is very united in its designation of Luke the physician, mentioned in Col. 4:4 and Phm. 24, as the source of both Luke and Acts. To be sure, various explanations can be given for the "we" sections in Acts and their relationship to the question of author. But still very common is the older view that these sections reflect the writer of Acts joining the missionary group as it came into Macedonia on the secondary missionary journey. At this point the writer of Acts essentially shifts from telling his story from a "they did this; they did that" to a "we did this; we did that" perspective. As a physician Luke would have been a slave, since the vast majority of lawyers and doctors in that Roman world were slaves. One should remember that many slaves in the first century Roman world were among the most highly educated of that time. Every large estate needed highly educated slaves to take care of the health of the family and legal experts to interpret legal matters in the Roman court system. Very possibly Theophilus could have been Luke's owner who loaned him out to Paul because of Paul's ongoing health issues mentioned a few times in the letters of Paul. The understanding is that Luke then remained with the apostle until his martyrdom in Rome in the mid 60s. Sometime after that Luke completed the writing of these two documents after collecting data during his travels with the apostle for over a decade.

Early church tradition also uniformly links the two documents together under common authorship, as is noted in the Wikipedia article on Acts:

The view that Luke-Acts was written by the physician Luke was nearly unanimous in the early Christian church. The Papyrus Bodmer XIV, which is the oldest known manuscript containing the start of the gospel (dating to around 200 AD), uses the title "The Gospel According to Luke". Nearly all ancient sources also shared this theory of authorship — Irenaeus,^[18] Tertullian,^[19] Clement of Alexandria,^[20] Origen, and the Muratorian Canon all regarded Luke as the author of the Luke-Acts. Neither Eusebius of Caesarea nor any other ancient writer mentions another tradition about authorship.

Thus a strong, unified position from the early church fathers asserts that Luke, the physician and traveling companion of the apostle Paul, is responsible for both the gospel and Acts.

2.1.2.1.2 Internal History.

An assessment of the contents of Acts reflects an author who first of all is the same as that of the gospel. Both documents reflect an above average knowledge of and skill in using ancient Koine Greek.¹ Most con-

¹Luke writes Koine. Elements of literary Greek are more pronounced in his work than elsewhere in the New Testament (with the exception of Hebrews), but one still cannot describe the language as literary.⁵³ The vocabulary is considerable and exhibits points of contact with Josephus,⁵⁴ Plutarch, Lucian,⁵⁵ and most of all with the LXX. The last is not by chance—Luke makes a conscious effort to write in a devotional and biblical style.⁵⁶

The following elements characteristic of literary Greek may be observed. First there is the use of the optative, rare in the New Testament: (1) potential optative in an independent clause (26:29*); (2) in a direct question (8:31*; 17:18*); (3) in an indirect question (5:24*; 10:17*); (4) after εἰ, "whether" (17:27*); (5) in a hypothetical protasis (20:16*); and (6) without ἄν for the subjunctive of the direct discourse with ἄν (25:16*).⁵⁷ Next is the use of the future infinitive with μέλλειν (11:28*; 27:10*), and the future participle to indicate purpose (8:27*; 10:22*).⁵⁸ Rhetorical devices may be observed, especially in the speeches: litotes (12:18* and often), paronomasia (17:30*; 21:28*; 24:3*), and parechesis (17:25*; 18:18*). Only Luke continues to use indirect discourse to any considerable degree. Words are repeated (5:2*, 3*; 5:5*, 10*; 19:35–36*), but also may be varied: κτήμα (5:2*), χωρίον (5:3*, 8*). Further, their forms may be altered: ζήτησις and ζήτημα (15:2*); τῆς θεᾶς (19:27*), τὴν θεόν (19:37*); ἡ ἐπαρχία (23:34*), ἡ ἐπάρχειος (25:1*).

On the other side of the ledger Hellenistic forms may be noted: first-aorist endings on second-aorist verbs such as

temporary scholars will claim that Luke - Acts, along with Hebrews and James, represent the highest literary quality of Greek found in the entire New Testament. The writer of these two documents had extensive training in the Greek language of his day. Additionally, a distinctive tone can be traced in these two documents as well. Not only was there high level skill with Greek, the writer also was deeply steeped in the very distinctive phraseology of the Septuagint and incorporated much of this style in his writing of the gospel and of Acts.

Additionally, as is noted in the following section on contents, the writer knew well accepted Roman and Greek standards for writing history in his own time. He followed quite well the guidelines for good history as laid out by Dionysius of Halicarnassus in the middle of the first Christian century.

From a modern perspective then, the comparison between the external and internal author profiles raise the question of how a first century slave could have gained such skill with the Greek language? The simple answer to this question is that slaves, particularly those placed in significant positions of responsibility in ancient households, were among the most highly educated individuals of that time. Luke, as a trained doctor, would have received substantial education in order to take care of the health of the household members of his owner. In recent times, the debate among scholars has flourished over whether this signals the Gentile heritage of Luke, or whether he may have been a Jewish slave. The obvious penchant toward the LXX seems to favor the Jewish view, but not conclusively since many non-Jews of that time were quite interested in the scriptures of the Jewish people.

2.1.2.2 Contents

We need to first assess the writing strategy of Luke. That is, what was he trying to accomplish through this history? Then we can give a somewhat detailed analysis of the contents of Acts.

2.1.2.2.1 Writing Strategy

The contents of this book of the New Testament reflect several perspectives by the author, that allow for different understandings. The strategy is to cover the first thirty years of the Christian movement established by Jesus and left behind with His ascension back to Heaven. Two phases of the Christian movement are traced: the initial Jewish Christian era in chapters one through eleven in which Christianity is comprised almost entirely by converted Jews. Peter is the central character of these chapters and stands as the leader of the movement which is based mainly in Jerusalem. The second phase in chapters twelve through twenty-eight focus on the expansion of Christianity into the non-Jewish world of the eastern Mediterranean world. The apostle Paul, as the leader of this expansion movement, is the central character of this section. The dividing point which both brings the issue of how non-Jews can be saved is the Jerusalem Council in the late 40s. This event receives the most detailed description in chapter fifteen of any single event outside of Pentecost in chapter two. Luke recognized these two events as pivotal turning points for the movement.

Another writing strategy present in Acts relates to widely held standardized patterns of history writing in the first Christian century. In an essay (*On the Character of Thucydides*) about proper standards of history writing, Dionysius of Halicarnassus (60 BC to after 7AD) claimed that one of the criteria of a good history was to take the reader from one pivotal event to the next pivotal event and show how history moved from point A

ἀνεΐλαν (10:39*; etc.); ἐδίδουν, ἐτίθουν (4:33*, 35*); ἡμην (10:30*); ἡμεθα (27:37*). The Attic ἴσασι in 26:4* is unusual. The distinction between comparative and superlative is disappearing; note ἀκριβέστερον (24:22*) and κάλλιον (25:10*). The genitive is replaced with a κατά construction in 17:28* and 26:3*. Of the prepositions the Hellenistic ἐνώπιον, among others, is prominent (cf. LXX). The distinction between ἐν and εἰς is blurred (8:40*; 19:22*). ἐάν is used with the indicative in 8:31*, as is ἵνα in 21:24*. The use of periphrastic constructions is characteristic of the times.⁵⁹ The genitive of the articular infinitive is used with much more than normal frequency.⁶⁰ The typical Hellenistic loosening up of sentence structure is evident in the increased use of the genitive absolute (cf. 21:34*; 22:17*) and the infinitive with subjective accusative; also where the subject of the main verb and of the infinitive are identical (25:4*; 5:36*).⁶¹ Solecisms are found in 23:20*; 27:10*; and 26:20*. A disregard for congruence occurs alongside carefully worded statements (cf. 26:2ff*). The following are a few Lukan peculiarities: μὲν οὖν; γίνεσθαι with the infinitive; καί after a relative pronoun; relative clauses which are really main clauses.⁶²


The extent and character of “Semitisms” has been particularly debated. Many see these as an indication of Aramaic sources.⁶³ But they are also found in sections which are clearly redactional, and upon closer examination prove to be LXX Greek; for example: the pleonastic ἀνιστάναί (8:26–27*; 22:10*); ἐν μέσῳ (1:15*; 17:22*); ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό (2:1*); periphrasis with πρόσωπον (3:20*); χεῖρ (7:35*). These are consciously chosen stylistic devices.⁶⁴

The fondness for double expressions⁶⁵ is also a characteristic of many parts of the LXX, particularly 2 Maccabees. Note also the style of inscriptions,⁶⁶ of Dionysius Halic. (*Ant. Roma* 2.23.3; 2.24.2ff), and finally of the Latin of ancient Roman prayers (Livy 29.27.1–4).

[source: Hans Conzelmann, “Acts of the Apostles, *Hermeneia Commentaries*, Logos Systems]

to point B. Those points could geographically based, or have other foundations. Given that standard of the first century, one would judge that Luke carefully followed it by tracing the movement of Christianity from the Jewish religious center of the world (Jerusalem) in the beginning chapters to the political capital of Rome in the last chapter of Acts. The implication of this understanding is that most likely Luke intended only two volumes, rather than having in mind additional volumes after the book of Acts. His so-called “sudden ending” of Acts, leaving Paul imprisoned in Rome, wasn’t brought about by his “catching up with time” at the ending of Acts and needing to get the two volumes in circulation rather than waiting for more time to pass so that more could be included in Acts. Rather, this view of history provides a clear explanation as to why Luke, writing over a decade after the time frame at the end of Acts, didn’t keep the story going further. By tracing the movement of Christianity from Jerusalem to Rome he achieved the widely held first century standard of history writing. Thus he wisely terminated his story with that important goal achieved.

2.1.2.2.2 Outline of Contents

The outline listed below was first published in my *Study Manual of the New Testament* in the late 1970s, and represents a fairly traditional approach based on the geographical angle of Luke’s writing strategy 

Introduction (1:1-26)

1. Preface (1-5)
2. Final appearance of Christ (6-11)
3. Picture of the church in the period between ascension and Pentecost (12-26)

I. Witnessing in Jerusalem (2:1-8:3)

A. The day of Pentecost (2:1-47)

1. Outpouring of the Spirit (1-13)
2. Preaching of Peter (14-41)
3. Summary of the life of the new converts (42-47)

B. The healing of the lame man (3:1-4:31)

1. The miracle (3:1-10)
2. The message (3:11-26)
3. The arrest (4:1-4)
4. The trial (4:5-22)
5. The sequel (4:23-31)

C. The sin of Ananias and Sapphira (4:32-5:11)

1. The originating circumstances (4:32-37)
 - a) The general condition of the church (32-35)
 - b) The generous example of Barnabas (36-37)
2. The sin (5:1-11)

D. The growing power of the apostles (5:12-42)

1. The evidences (12-16)
2. The effect (17-42)

E. The appointment of “The Seven” (6:1-7)

1. Occasion (1-2)
2. Method used (3-5)
3. Qualifications (3)
4. Nature of their work (2-4)
5. Ordination (6)
6. Result (7)

F. The martyrdom of Stephen (6:8-8:3)

1. The arrest (6:8-15)
2. The defense (7:1-53)
3. The death (7:54-8:3)

II. Witnessing in Judea and Samaria (8:4-12:25)

A. The witness of Philip (8:4-40)

1. Planting the gospel in Samaria (4-25)
2. Explaining the gospel to the Ethiopian (26-39)
3. Preaching the gospel from Azotus to Caesarea (40)

B. The apprehension of Saul of Tarsus (9:1-31)

1. His conversion (1-9)
2. His baptism and commission (10-19a)
3. His first preaching (19b-22)
4. His return to Damascus (23-25)
5. His first visit to Jerusalem (26-30)
6. Effect of his conversion (31)

C. The labors of Peter (9:32-11:18)

1. At Lydda (9:32-35)
2. At Joppa (9:36-10:23a)
3. At Caesarea (10:23b-48)
4. At Jerusalem (11:1-18)

D. The work of Barnabas (11:19-30)

1. The mission to Antioch (19-26)
2. The report to Jerusalem (27-30)

E. The persecutions of Herod (12:1-24)

1. The execution of James (1,2)
2. The attempt on the life of Peter (3-19)
3. The outcome (20-24)

F. Barnabas and Saul return to Antioch (12:25)

III. Witnessing to the Uttermost Part of the Earth (13:1-28:31)

A. The call of Paul and Barnabas to Missionary service (13:1-3)

B. The Missionary Journeys of Paul (13:4-21:16)

1. The first missionary journey (13:4-14:28)
 - a) The outward trip (13:4-14:20)
 - b) The return to Antioch (14:21-28)
2. The Jerusalem conference (15:1-35)
 - a) Occasion of the conference (1-5)
 - b) Deliberation of the conference (6-21)
 - c) Decision of the conference (22-29)
 - d) Report to Antioch (30-35)
3. The second missionary journey (15:36-18:22)
 - a) The contention between Paul and Barnabas (15:36-40)
 - b) The work in Syria and Cilicia (15:41)
 - c) The work at Lystra and Derbe (16:1-5)
 - d) The work in Phrygia, Galatia, Mysia, and Troas (16:6-10)
 - e) The work in Philippi (16:11-40)
 - f) The work in Thessalonica (17:1-9)
 - g) The work in Beroea (17:10-14)
 - h) The work in Athens (17:15-34)
 - i) The work in Corinth (18:1-17)
 - j) The journey back to Antioch (18:18-22)
4. The third missionary journey (18:23-21:16)
 - a) The trip through Galatia and Phrygia (18:23)
 - b) The meeting of Apollos with Aquila and Priscilla (18:24-28)
 - c) The work in Ephesus (19:1-21:1)
 - d) The visit to Macedonia (21:1-2a)
 - e) The trip to Greece (20:2b-3a)
 - f) The trip to Jerusalem (20:3b-21:16)

C. The captivity of Paul (21:17-28:31)

1. At Jerusalem (21:17-28:35)
 - a) Paul's meeting with James and the elders of the Jerusalem church (21:17-26)
 - b) Paul's seizure (21:27-39)
 - c) Paul's defense (21:40-23:11)
 - (1) Before the mob (21:40-22:29)
 - (2) Before the Sanhedrin (22:30-23:11)
 - d) Paul's removal from Jerusalem (23:12-35)

2. At Caesarea (24:1-26:32)
 - a) Under custody of Felix (24:1-27)
 - b) Under custody of Festus (25:1-26:32)
3. On the voyage to Rome (27:1-28:15)
 - a) To Crete via Myra (27:1-8)
 - b) From Crete to Malta (27:9-44)
 - c) At Malta (28:1-10)
 - d) From Malta to Rome (28:11-15)
4. At Rome (28:16-31)
 - a) Paul's arrival (28:16)
 - b) Paul's meeting with the Jewish brethren (28:17-29)
 - c) Paul's continuing ministry (28:30-31)

