

General Aspects of the Book of Acts

AUTHOR: Probably Luke, author of the gospel. Reputed to be a “physician,” probably a “God fearer,” i.e., a gentile attracted to Judaism and perhaps participating in worship, but not formally initiated, like Cornelius (10:2), a soldier serving him (10:7), Lydia (16:14) or Titius Justus (18:7).

DATE: various scholarly attempts to narrow the date; the earliest would be mid-60s, latest about 120s (in response to Emperor Trajan); probably late first century, after Jerusalem destroyed but before the deutero-Pauline letters.

GENRE: Luke *adapts and combines* several traditional genres from his culture to develop a unique narrative:

Greco-Roman historiography: more like Greek than Roman; as opposed to *biography*. Thus, key persons are not important for their own sake, as much as to reveal the work of the Holy Spirit throughout the story.

Greco-Roman popular “novel”: intended for moral edification of educated class through fictionalized, dramatic stories, adventure and humor.

Historical “novel,” Greco-Roman, Christian or Jewish: using historical characters and/or situations to teach a point relevant to the author’s audience, e.g., Greco-Roman: fictional portrayals of political heroes; Jewish: biblical book of Esther or Job; Christian: various apocryphal “Acts,” such as *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (2nd century).

TEXT: Three major text traditions exist, differing substantially in places. The most important are the *Alexandrian* and the *Western*; the third is the *Byzantine*, sometimes called *koine* or Syrian. Watch translation footnotes for places where the English represents a choice among these, or an amalgam of them.

STYLE:

Elegant Greek, using many (more than 200) Greek words not found elsewhere in the New Testament, plus numerous places and people not mentioned elsewhere in New Testament. The Greek text is 18,374 words, second in length only to Luke (19,404) in New Testament.

Unique to Acts is the **mixed narrative stance**: the usual third person narrative is intertwined with “we” sections in which the narrator appears to participate in the story (16:10-17, 20:5-15, 21:1-18, 27:1-28:16).

Humor and adventure play an important role in making both the story entertaining and the prospect of discipleship sound like a fun adventure!

AUDIENCE: educated, upper class persons, probably in early adulthood, as exemplified by Theophilus (1:1) and those around them.

KEY THEMES:

1. **The Holy Spirit is leading the Way**, fulfilling God’s *boule* (“plan”: Acts 2:23, 4:28, 5:38, 13:36, 20:27, 27:12, 27:42) first announced in the gospel of Luke (e.g., Lk 7:30).
2. **First the apostles, then other disciples, are empowered by the Holy Spirit to continue the work of proclaiming and practicing jubilee begun by Jesus** at Luke 4:16-21: 1) healing, e.g., 3:1-8; 9:32-43; 2) preaching the Good News, e.g., 2:12-41; 3:12-26; 3) casting out demons, e.g., 13:6-12; 4) forgiving debts/sins, e.g., Acts 2:37-40, 3:19-21, 5:31-32 and 5) practicing covenant economics, e.g., Acts 2:42-47, 4:32-37, 11:29-30.
3. **Women are equal co-workers in ministry** (e.g., Tabitha [Dorcas], Lydia, Priscilla) **but not in leadership** (only men make speeches and formal decision-making)
4. **The Good News (=resurrection of Jesus as inauguration of jubilee) is intended for all people, not just ethnic Israel, yet needs “translation” into “other languages”** (both literally [e.g., 2:1-47, 14:8-18] and figuratively [e.g., 8:27-39, 17:15-34]).
5. **Persecution strengthens the community**, rather than weakening it (e.g., 4:3-4, 8:1ff, 11:19, 14:5-6).
6. **Jesus followers serve Roman society by providing a moral example grounded in torah and gospel** as a substitute for the dominant culture’s “patronage system” (e.g., living jubilee-in-community; Paul’s trials before elite officials).