

Introduction to Acts of the Apostles

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Author: In Blomberg's text, *From Pentecost to Patmos*, he writes, "Comparing the prefaces of Luke and Acts, along with the style of the two narratives overall, has convinced virtually all scholars that the author of these two volumes must be the same person" (10). Though an author's name does not appear in the book, the earliest church Fathers unanimously agree that the author of Acts, a sequel to the Gospel of Luke, was indeed written by Luke, the "Gentile disciple, Paul's beloved physician...and Paul's companion for several portions of his missionary journeys" (10). Additionally, numerous passages in Acts, called the "we-passages" describe the companionship of Paul and Luke, as does Paul's closing affection in Colossians 4:14 mentioning him saying, "Luke, the beloved doctor, sends his greetings..." (10).

Audience: Theophilus, a Greek name meaning "lover of God," is the specific individual named in the beginning of the Gospel of Luke and of Acts as the stated addressee of both books. One common theory, supported by contemporary theologians, suggests that "the most excellent Theophilus" could have been a privileged Greek official who was Luke's patron or publisher for his writing project (14). The NIV Study Bible suggests that Theophilus was more than a publisher, but one who was receiving instruction through Luke's Gospel, as well as through the theological history from the book of Acts. Though Luke's two-volume works had a specific addressee, it did not diminish the scope of its reach. In fact, in Blomberg's text, *From Pentecost to Patmos*, he suggests that the early Christian communities understood (1) Luke's Gospel was written and circulated to benefit the church at large, and (2) the book of Acts, because it included numerous references to wealth and material possession, might have been written to a "slightly more well-to-do Christian community somewhere in the predominately Gentile and Greek speaking eastern half of the empire" (14).

Date: Two periods have been suggested as to the dating of Acts: either after AD 70 and before mid-90s (which is the consensus of the more liberal commentators and some prominent evangelical scholars) or, as most conservatives date it, between AD 62 and 64 (12-13). Blomberg's assessment and research concludes that "if the early church tradition is accurate that Paul was freed...only to be arrested and martyred later in the decade, this almost certainly must have occurred before Nero began persecuting Christians in 64" (13). The NIV Study Bible, as well, states both options of either "AD 63, soon after the last event recorded, and AD 70 or even later."

Location/Circumstances: The NIV Study Bible suggests that the book of Acts "provides a bridge for the writings of the New Testament. As a second volume to Luke's Gospel, it

joins what Jesus ‘began to do and teach’...with what he continued to do and teach through the apostle’s preaching and establishment of the church.” Further it describes Acts as providing a link between the Gospels and the apostolic letters, as well as giving a detailed account of the life and ministry of Paul. Considered the theological history of the early church, Acts geographically spans between Jerusalem, where the church began, and Rome (17). Clearly, the book of Acts is historical with archaeological support surpassing the Gospels (14). It is also theological, with its primary agent being the Holy Spirit who “causes the events of the book to unfold” (15). Finally, it appears to have a literary purpose in which stories, sermons, and speeches are recorded “in keeping with completely acceptable historical and literary practice of the day” (16).

"Big-Picture" Structure: In Acts 1:8, Jesus’ prophesies, and thus, Luke uses His words to introduce the purpose and structure of the book of Acts: “the disciples will be his witnesses, beginning in Jerusalem, moving out to Judea and Samaria and ultimately reaching the ends of the earth” (17-18). Most simply, a two-part structure unfolds, showing (1) how the Gospel spread and (2) how similar parallels occurred between the ministries of Peter and Paul, such as supernatural releases from prison, healings and miracles (18):

- I. The Christian Mission to the Jews through Peter (1:1-12:24)
- II. The Christian Mission to the Gentiles through Paul (12:25-28:31)

The NIV Study Bible describes the design of Acts as “Luke weaving together the expansion of the early church through (1) key persons: Peter and Paul, (2)...the role of the Holy Spirit... (3) significant problems: conflict between Jews and Gentiles...and other hardships in the ministry, and (4) geographical advances.”

Finally, Blomberg highlights the uniqueness of the book of Acts as “ the only book to treat the period between Jesus’ crucifixion (probably around AD 30) with the end of Paul’s ministry” (9).

Major Theological Themes: The main theological themes of the book of Acts (compiled from the NIV Study Bible and Blomberg’s *From Pentecost to Patmos*), include:

The Theological History of the Church: The NIV Study Bible touts, “The significance of Acts 1:8 as an historical account cannot be overestimated.” While the Gospels serve as theological biographies for the Christian faith, the book of Acts serves as a theological history (17). From the founding of the church to the spread of the Gospel, the book of Acts coordinates and corroborates the beginning of the church.

The Apologetic Defense of the Gospel: Commentary on the book of Acts in the NIV Study Bible suggests that one of the major themes of the book is the defense of Christianity that is made to both Jew and Gentiles, showing how the early church “coped with pagan and Jewish thought, the Roman government and Hellenistic society.” Blomberg refers to the theological treatment of Acts (by theologians Peterson and Marshall) as contributing such topics as “salvation history, eschatology, God as Savior, the need for salvation, salvation and health...” (15). Blomberg concludes, “centrally related to Luke’s theological purpose is his apparent apologist motive—defending the faith against critiques of various kinds” (15).

Guidance for the Church through all Generations: The NIV Study Bible suggests that *if* the book of Acts was most likely written while Paul was in prison awaiting trial in Rome, “Luke had no idea how the church would continue on earth, but as long as it pursues its course, the book of Acts will be one of its major guides.” From the onset, though a Pentecostal package is preached to (1) repent of sin, (2) be baptized, (3) receive forgiveness, and (4) receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, no normative formula for salvation is required, but transformation is expected (28). Additionally, communal sharing is exhorted and repeatedly described, and though not required, it is strongly encouraged by voluntary means (29). Finally, the NIV Study Bible suggests that the principles taught in the book of Acts continue to be the basic principles that can be applied to problems and persecutions “until Christ returns.”

The Triumph of Christ Amid Persecution: Persecution remained a strong theme within the early church. The NIV Study Bible suggests that from the first chapter of Acts through to the last, the “triumph of Christ in the face of bitter persecution,” was a main reason for the successful ability of the church to carry the Gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, as well as plant churches in new locations, revealing that Christianity was not “a mere work of man. God was in it.”

Blomberg, Craig L. *From Pentecost to Patmos: An Introduction to Acts through Revelation*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006