

Acts and the Letters of Paul

The Acts of the Apostles

The Acts of the Apostles is both a particularly interesting book, and a particularly problematic one in many ways. It is essentially “volume 2” of Luke’s writings (“volume 1” being the Gospel of Luke). It essentially follows the story of the apostles after the resurrection of Jesus, and then turns most of its close attention to the ministry of Paul—logical enough, since we know that Luke was a traveling companion of Paul. One striking characteristic is that in certain sections, the author writes in the first person—sort of a “first-hand account” of the events he is narrating. Does this mean that these sections were Luke’s own account, inserted into a larger narrative? Or did some later editor of the book have some other first-hand source that he utilized? We just don’t know. Also problematic for scholars is the fact that there are two primary manuscript “families” that have come down to us, and they are more different than is usually the case with different manuscripts (one is about 10% longer than the other). We don’t know which is older, or which is the “original.” So there are lots of puzzles. Nevertheless, Acts is the very best source we have for the very earliest Christian church, so it is incredibly valuable to us.

Author:	Luke, a Gentile physician who was a companion of Paul.
Date:	About 70-80 A.D..
Audience:	Possibly a Roman community (in Rome or elsewhere).
Purpose:	To depict the life and witness of the apostles after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, and particularly to trace the conversion and then the missionary work of Paul.
Characteristics:	(a) Tells lots of stories about the “acts” of the apostles—things they did. (b) Often includes long speeches (of Peter, Stephen, Paul) (c) Particularly interested in the story of Paul, who becomes the central figure in the last half of the book. (d) As with the gospel of Luke, a concern to show Jesus as the Savior of the entire world, so an emphasis on the mission to the Gentiles. (e) Also in common with Luke, an interest in social relationships—emphasis on outcasts, oppressed, women, children, etc. (f) An unsatisfyingly abrupt ending, with Paul in Rome but no indication of what happened to him.

The letters of Paul

Paul’s letters are among the oldest books of the New Testament. Most of them were actual letters, addressed to churches or individuals to discuss some specific issue or item of business. There is some indication that some of them were intended to be shared among the churches. After Paul’s death such letters as still existed were collected and shared with all Christians because of their obvious usefulness and importance.

There are many scholarly disagreements of one kind or another about most of the letters. The dating of most of them is uncertain, since Paul himself seldom refers to events that we can define with certainty. In some cases, Paul is answering specific questions raised in letters to him that we don’t have, so we must try to reconstruct what the issue was from his answers—rather like trying to interpret a phone conversation when you are only hearing one side of it.

There is also controversy about whether all thirteen of the letters were actually, in their present form, written by Paul. About seven of them, there is no question about Paul's authorship. About the other six, scholars are very much divided. Some are particularly suspicious of the letters to Timothy and Titus, because of differences in language, vocabulary and style. Others reply that in letters written over a fairly long period and in different circumstances, such differences don't really amount to much.

The summaries below are listed in approximately the order of the most widely accepted dating of the letters.

1 Thessalonians

Date: Probably about 50 A.D., making it the earliest book in the New Testament.
Recipient: Church at Thessalonica, a good-sized city in northern Greece, capital of the Roman province of Macedonia. The church there was founded by Paul on his 2nd missionary journey, and was predominately Gentile, though there was a large Jewish community in the city. Paul likely wrote the letter from Corinth.
Purpose: The Thessalonians were concerned about the end of the world. Would Christ return soon? And what would happen to Christians who died before he returned? Paul tries to give some reassuring answers.
Summary: 1 Thessalonians 4.13-5.11

2nd Thessalonians

Date: Disputed, as some scholars doubt that Paul actually wrote this one. But if he did, it is probably dated about 50-51 A.D.
Recipient: See 1 Thessalonians
Purpose: Similar to 1 Thessalonians. Those scholars who argue that it is a genuine letter of Paul see it simply as a follow-up to the first letter. Those who think it was not actually by Paul generally see it as a more "up to date" answer to the same kinds of questions answered in 1 Thessalonians in light of the passage of several years.
Summary: 2 Thessalonians 2.1-12

1 Corinthians

Date: About 54 A.D.
Recipient: Church at Corinth, a provincial capital and trading city in Greece, not far from Athens. It was a notoriously licentious city. The congregation was founded by Paul on his second missionary journey, and the letter was probably written from Ephesus.
Purpose: Paul wrote in response to a number of specific issues raised with him by the church (in letters we do not have), including: factions in the church, sexual immorality among Christians, social relationships between Christians and pagans, role of women in church, "speaking in tongues."
Summary: 1 Corinthians 1.10-17; 5.1-2; 12.4-11; 13.1-13.

Philippians

Date: About 54 A.D. (though some would date it as late as 62 A.D.)
Recipient: Church at Philippi, a Roman military colony in what is today northern Greece. Paul founded the church on this second missionary journey. Paul presumably wrote it while he was in prison in Ephesus (or, if later, in Rome).
Purpose: To thank the Philippians for a gift they have sent
Summary: Philippians 1.3-11; 4.4-20

2 Corinthians

Date: About 56 A.D., but there are a number of problems. Many scholars argue that 2 Corinthians is actually composite of two or more letters to the Corinthians, and obviously that would imply two or more dates..
Recipient: Same as 1 Corinthians; probably written from Ephesus,
Purpose: Paul's relationship with the Corinthians had been rather stormy, and there were some in Corinth who were quite critical of him. Much of this letter is his defense of himself against their charges.
Summary: 2 Corinthians 1.12-14; 10.1-11; 11.1-6; 13.11-14

Galatians

Date: Very controversial. Some date it as his earliest letter, ca. 48 A.D.; others as one of the latest, perhaps in the 60s. The majority view is probably that it is about the mid-50s.
Recipient: Again, controversial. Addressed to "churches in Galatia," but Galatia was both a region in northern Asia Minor, and also a much larger Roman province. It is as if one were to address a letter to "New York"—would that be intended for Manhattan or Albany or someplace in between?
Purpose: Paul has heard that some of the Galatians have started to believe that Christians must keep the Jewish law; he wishes to argue against that teaching.
Summary: Galatians 3.23-4.7; 5.1-13

Romans

Date: About 57 A.D.
Recipient: Church at Rome, the capital of the empire. Paul did not found this church, and apparently had not yet been to Rome when it was written.
Purpose: The most theologically "weighty" of Paul's letters, this was apparently a letter of introduction sent ahead by Paul to announce his plans to visit Rome. It is essentially a summary of his thought, with emphasis on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity.
Summary: Romans 1.8-15; 5.1-5; 7.21-25; 8.1-27; 13.1-7.

Philemon

Date: About 60 A.D.
Recipient: Philemon, a private citizen who apparently lived in Colossae.

Purpose: Onesimus, slave of Philemon, has run away and through meeting Paul has become a Christian. Paul sends him back to Philemon, asking Philemon to forgive him and welcome him as a Christian brother.

Summary: Philemon 8-22.

Colossians

Date: About 60 A.D.

Recipient: Church at Colossae, a rather insignificant little town in Asian Minor. Paul did not found the church and had not been there.

Purpose: The church had been threatened by a strange heresy which combined Judaism with a pagan emphasis on angels and other semi-divine beings. The Colossians have pretty much rejected this heresy, but Paul writes to reinforce their faith. Some scholars maintain that Paul himself did not write this letter, but most continue to argue that it dates from Paul's time and was perhaps written by a secretary or associate of the apostle in his name.

Summary: Colossians 2.1-15

Ephesians

Date: About 60 A.D.

Recipient: Disputed. Some of the oldest manuscripts do not include the name of the city of Ephesus. Some scholars believe "Ephesians" was originally addressed to Laodicea, but that it was intended to be a general letter to the Christians of Asia Minor.

Purpose: The theme is the church—how it was God's purpose to unite diverse people into one body. Scholars are divided on whether Paul is the actual author of the letter, but most maintain that it faithfully expresses Paul's thought in most respects.

Summary: Ephesians 2.1-10; 4.1-16

"Pastoral Epistles"

These last three letters are known as the "pastoral epistles" because they reflect the writer's pastoral concern for the church and its leaders. A majority of scholars today believe that the letters in their present form are not directly from Paul's hand. The arguments are rather complicated, but center around the fact that the letters speak of "bishops" and "presbyters," two church offices which don't seem to have appeared in the church until several years after Paul's death. Other scholars disagree, and argue that Paul could and did write the letters; still others suggest that these are edited versions of letters that Paul originally wrote. Part of the problem is that we don't really know just when Paul died. Tradition suggests he was put to death in Rome about 60 A.D., but there is no strong evidence for that assumption. The Scottish Bible scholar William Barclay argues that Paul could not have written the letters in their present form, but then adds: "In the pastoral epistles, we are still hearing the voice of Paul, and often hearing it speak with a unique personal intimacy, but we think that the form of the letters is due to a Christian teacher who summoned the help and the spirit of Paul to his aid, when the church of his day needed the guidance which only Paul could have given."

Titus

Date: About 62 A.D., if written by Paul. Many scholars would set a date for the letter as we have it very early in the second century.

Recipient: Titus, a young friend and companion of Paul, is the named recipient of the letter. Scholars who believe the letter is not Paul's would see it as a more general letter written for publication across the church.

Purpose: To explain how Christians ought to behave in a number of situations.

Summary: Titus 1.7-9; 2.1-10.

1 Timothy

Date: Same as Titus

Recipient: Timothy was another young friend of Paul. See comments on Titus.

Purpose: Paul offers advice in the area of church administration and general ethics.

Summary: 1 Timothy 3.1-7; 5.3-8; 5.17-23

2 Timothy

Date: Same as 1 Timothy

Recipient: Same as 1 Timothy

Purpose: General letter of advice and encouragement

Summary: 2 Timothy 1.3-14; 3.1-7; 4.9-18