

# Acts

[The entirety of the following material is found in the *ESV Study Bible* introduction to the Acts of the Apostles]

Acts is unique among the NT writings, in that its main purpose is to record a selective history of the early church following the resurrection of Christ. It is the second part of a two-volume work, with the Gospel of Luke being the first volume. Both books are dedicated to a person named Theophilus, and [Acts 1:1](#) explicitly refers back to Luke's Gospel.

## Author

Both the Gospel of Luke and Acts are anonymous, but the earliest discussions attribute them to Luke. The name "Luke" appears only three times in the NT: [Colossians 4:14](#); [2 Timothy 4:11](#); [Philemon 24](#). All three references are in epistles written by Paul from prison, and all three mention Luke's presence with Paul.

The earliest discussion of the authorship of Luke and Acts is from Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons in Gaul, writing in the late second century. He attributes the books to Luke, the coworker of Paul, and notes that the occurrence of the first-person narrative ("we") throughout the later chapters of Acts (starting at [16:10](#)) indicates that the author of Acts was a companion of Paul and present with him on these occasions. These "we" passages in Acts are the key to the authorship of both Acts and the Gospel of Luke.

[Colossians 4:14](#) indicates that Luke was a physician, and attempts have been made to bolster Lukan authorship by arguing that Luke and Acts use technical medical language. This does not seem to be the case, as Luke seems to have avoided technical language in order to communicate plainly to his readers, but his detailed description of illnesses perhaps reflects his interests as a physician (cf. [Acts 28:8](#)). In addition, all the external evidence refers to Luke as the author.

Other than the three NT references, nothing certain is known of Luke. Early traditions link him with Antioch, but that is probably based on the reference in [Acts 13:1](#) to "Lucius," which is a Latin name. "Luke" is a Greek name, and both books are written in excellent Greek. His thorough acquaintance with the OT may reflect that Luke was a converted God-fearer (a Gentile who attended the Jewish synagogue) or Jewish proselyte (convert), though he could have gained his biblical knowledge after becoming a Christian.

## Date

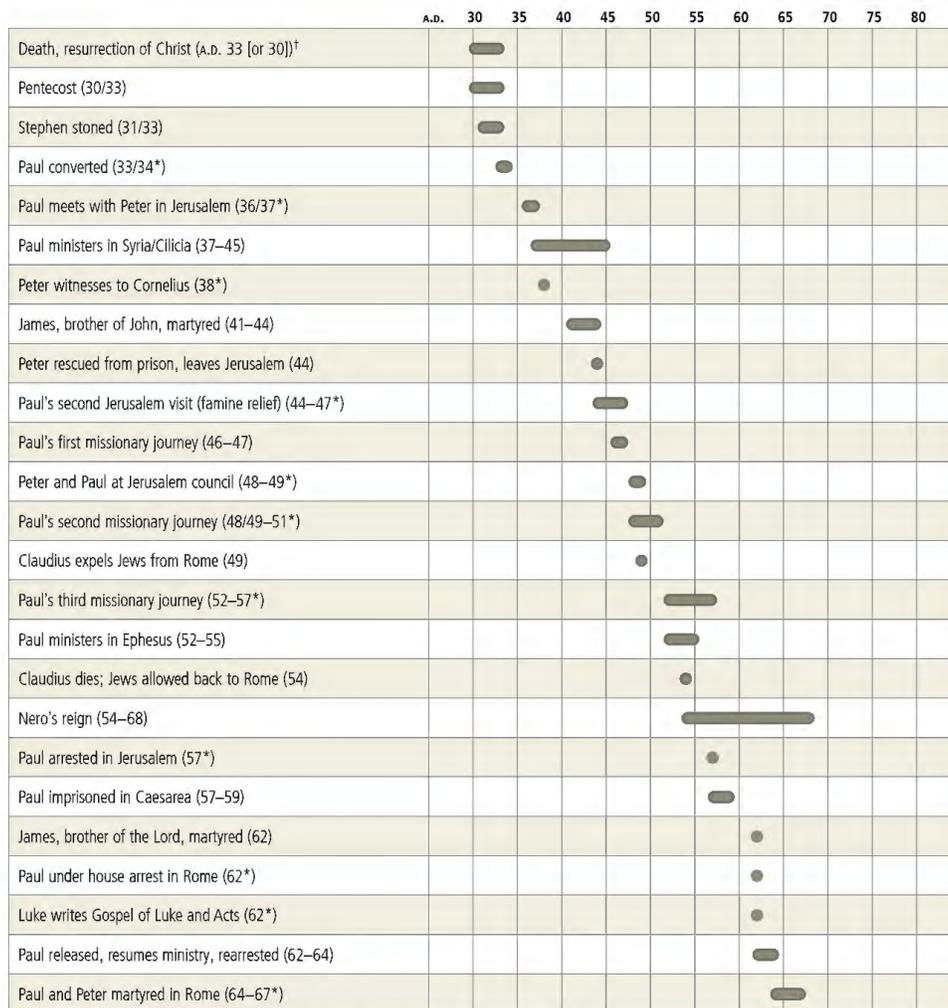
Some scholars date Acts c. A.D. 70. This assumes that Acts was written *after* the Gospel of Luke ([Acts 1:1](#)) and that Luke used the Gospel of Mark as one of his sources ([Luke 1:1–2](#)). (Early tradition has Mark's Gospel written after Peter's death, which most likely occurred in the mid-60s.) Others date Acts in the 70s or 80s. They hold that the primary purpose of Acts was to give an account of how and where the gospel spread, rather than to be a defense of Paul's ministry (thus accounting for the omission of the events at the end of his life). Thus the gospel spread to "the end of the earth" ([1:8](#))—that is, to Rome, which represented the end of the earth as the center of world power. But a number of scholars date Acts as early as A.D. 62, basing their view

primarily on the abrupt ending of the book. Since Acts ends with Paul in Rome under house arrest, awaiting his trial before Caesar (28:30–31), it would seem strange if Luke knew about Paul’s release (a proof of his innocence), possibly about his defense before Caesar (fulfilling 27:24), and about his preaching the gospel as far as Spain (cf. note on 28:30–31), but then did not mention these events at the end of Acts. It seems most likely, then, that the abrupt ending is an indication that Luke wrote Acts c. A.D. 62, before these events occurred.

## Theme

In Acts, believers are empowered by the Holy Spirit to bear witness to the good news of Jesus Christ among both Jews and Gentiles, and in doing this they establish the church. In addition to this, Acts explains how Christianity, although it is new, is in reality the one true religion, rooted in God’s promises from the beginning of time. In the ancient world it was important that a religion be shown to have stood the test of time. Thus Luke presents the church as the fulfillment and extension of God’s promises.

## Timeline



\* denotes approximate date; / signifies either/or; † see *The Date of Jesus’ Crucifixion*, pp. 1809–1810

# Text

The early manuscripts of Acts have a greater variety of readings than any other NT book. This is reflected in the ESV footnotes that provide alternative readings, as well as the absence of whole verses in some instances ([8:37](#); [15:34](#); [24:7](#); [28:29](#)). The greatest diversity is shown by a group of manuscripts that scholars refer to as the “Western text,” an early version of Acts that is about ten percent longer than the other texts. Its main difference from the others is in providing additional detail and smoothing out the narrative. No standard English translation follows the Western text. Some of its more interesting readings are provided in the ESV footnotes, such as the note about the hours when Paul preached in the hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus ([19:9](#)).

## Distinctive Features

Though Acts has much in common with the Gospels, it has a number of unique features. One of these is its genre: it is the only NT book that tells about the ministry of the apostles, hence its traditional name, “The Acts of the Apostles.” It deals primarily with two of them, Peter and Paul. Often Luke shows how events in their ministries parallel each other and the ministry of Jesus as well.

Among the unique features of Acts are the frequent *summaries*, where Luke provides a broad generalization about the life of the church at a particular time or place, such as the common life after Pentecost ([2:42–47](#)), the early Christian sharing of goods ([4:32–35](#)), and the apostolic miracles ([5:12–16](#)). Sometimes the summaries are much briefer, such as the single verse that sums up Paul’s ministry of more than two years in Ephesus ([19:10](#)). Luke’s usual method of presenting the Christians’ ministry is more “episodic,” highlighting individual incidents that illustrate their work, giving it greater liveliness and interest. For instance, at Ephesus this includes the conversion of some disciples of John the Baptist ([19:1–7](#)), the “backfiring” exorcism of the sons of Sceva ([19:13–16](#)), and the riot occasioned by the silversmith Demetrius ([19:23–41](#)).

The most distinctive feature in Acts is the speeches or sermons, constituting nearly a third of the total text of Acts (see [chart](#)). Ten of these are major: three by Peter ([2:14–36](#); [3:11–26](#); [10:34–43](#)), one by Stephen ([7:1–53](#)), and six by Paul. Three of Paul’s are defense speeches in Jerusalem and Caesarea ([22:1–21](#); [24:10–21](#); [26:1–29](#)). The other three consist of one speech on each of Paul’s missionary journeys, each to a different type of assembly: to Jews on his first journey ([13:16–47](#)), to Gentiles on his second ([17:22–31](#)), and to Christians on his third ([20:18–35](#)). Many shorter testimonies run throughout Acts (e.g., [5:29–32](#); [14:15–17](#)). All are primarily a witness to Christ in one form or another. Much of the theological material of Acts is to be found in these speeches.

Another distinctive feature of Acts is its *journey narratives*. Often these are only lists of stopping places or ports that are passed by (e.g., [16:6–8](#); [20:14–15](#); [21:2–3](#)). These give the impression of the Christian missionaries being constantly on the move and are the main reason for giving Paul’s ministry the label of “journeys.” In fact, that label best applies to the first of Paul’s missions ([chs. 13–14](#)). The others consisted mainly of more lengthy stays in the major cities (e.g., Corinth, Ephesus).

# Key Themes

The major themes of Acts can be placed under the general category of “witness,” as set forth in the thematic verse ([Acts 1:8](#)).

1. The witness is worldwide—Judea, Samaria, the “end of the earth.”	<a href="#">1:8</a>
2. The witness is inclusive of all kinds of people: Jews, Gentiles, Samaritans, the physically handicapped, pagan mountain people, a prominent merchant woman, a jailer and his family, Greek philosophers, governors, and kings.	<a href="#">chs. 2–5; 8:4–40; 10:1–11:18; 14:8–18; 16:11–15, 25–34; 17:22–31; 24:24–27; 26:1–29</a>
3. The witness is guided by the providence of God, who preserves his witnesses for their testimony through all sorts of threats: murderous plots, angry mobs, storms at sea, and constant trials before the authorities, to name only a few.	<a href="#">4:5–22; 18:12–16; 19:23–41; 23:12–22; 24:1–23; 27:21–26</a>
4. On the other hand, faithful witnesses must be prepared to suffer, even to die for their testimony to Christ.	<a href="#">5:41–42; 7:54–60</a>
5. The power behind the witness is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is granted to all believers, both male and female, whom he empowers for witness. The Spirit guides witnesses in moments of special inspiration and is behind every advance in the Christian mission.	<a href="#">1:8; 2:1–13, 18, 38; 4:8; 7:55; 8:17; 10:44; 13:2–12; 19:6, 21</a>
6. In the early days, the witness was often accompanied by “signs and wonders,” the “wonders” being the miracles worked by the apostles, which served as “signs” pointing to the truth of the gospel. Miracles usually opened a door for witness.	e.g., <a href="#">ch. 3</a>
7. Effective witness demands the unity of the church.	<a href="#">2:42–47; 4:32–37; 5:12–14</a>
8. A key component of the witness is the resurrection of Jesus. For the Jews the resurrection demonstrated that Jesus was the promised Messiah. For the Gentiles it pointed to his role as judge and established their need to repent.	<a href="#">1:22; 2:22–36; 17:30–31</a>
9. Acceptance of the message borne by the witnesses depends both on human response and on the divine sovereignty behind the response.	e.g., <a href="#">2:47; 11:18; 13:48</a>
10. The OT Scriptures point to the death and resurrection of Christ, and the prophecies that point to Christ and to his followers must be fulfilled ( <a href="#">1:16</a> ).	(The numerous OT citations in the sermons of Acts illustrate this point.)
11. The witness to the gospel calls for a response. Most speeches in Acts end with some sort of invitation. Representative of this is Paul’s exchange with Agrippa II.	<a href="#">26:27–29</a>
12. The response called for is repentance of one’s sins in the name of Christ, which brings forgiveness of sins.	e.g., <a href="#">2:38</a>
13. Witnesses must always maintain integrity before the world. In Acts this is illustrated by the many remarks from the authorities about the Christians giving no evidence of any wrongdoing.	<a href="#">18:12–15; 23:29; 25:18; 26:31–32</a>
14. Christian witnesses continue the ministry that Christ “began” ( <a href="#">1:1</a> ). This is illustrated throughout Acts with the many implicit parallels between the experiences of the apostles and those of Christ: his miracles, the	<a href="#">20:36–21:16</a> (cf. <a href="#">Luke 9:22; 13:31–34; 18:31–34</a> ); <a href="#">21:36; 22:21</a> (cf. <a href="#">Luke</a>

forebodings of his journey to Jerusalem, the cry of the angry Jewish mob for his death, and his trial before the governor and the king.	<a href="#">23:18</a> ); <a href="#">24:1–26:32</a> (cf. <a href="#">Luke 23:1–25</a> )
15. Faithful witness brings great results. Acts is all about the victory of the Christian gospel. The witness brings results among both Jews and Gentiles. The book ends on this note, with Paul bearing his faithful witness to “all” who came to him in Rome.	<a href="#">4:4</a> ; <a href="#">11:20–21</a> ; <a href="#">13:48–49</a> ; <a href="#">17:4</a> ; <a href="#">18:6–11</a> ; <a href="#">21:20</a> ; <a href="#">28:30–31</a>

## Purpose, Occasion, and Background

Luke’s stated purpose for both of his books is provided at the beginning of the first ([Luke 1:1–4](#)). He had a historian’s interest in providing an “orderly account” of “the things that have been accomplished among us.” One would assume the latter statement applied both to the ministry of Jesus (the gospel) and to that of the early church (Acts). Dedicating the work to Theophilus, he wanted him to have “certainty” (a firm foundation) for what he had been taught. The exact nature of Luke’s purpose depends on how one identifies Theophilus. He evidently had already been instructed in the Christian way and may have been a new convert or a seeker on the verge of commitment. Since “Theophilus” means “lover of God,” it is also possible that Luke is challenging the devotion of his readers rather than addressing his book to just one of them.

Luke probably had a number of purposes for writing Acts. These are best determined through the emphases or themes found throughout the book.

## History of Salvation Summary

After his ascension ([1:9](#); cf. [Ps. 68:18](#); [Eph. 4:9–10](#)) Jesus sends the Holy Spirit ([Joel 2:28–32](#)) to empower the apostles as witnesses ([Acts 1:8](#)), to spread the message of the gospel ([Isa. 52:7](#)), and to draw to himself people from the nations ([Matt. 28:19](#)). (For an explanation of the “History of Salvation,” see the [Overview of the Bible](#).)

## Literary Features

The book of Acts is a small anthology of individual literary genres. The list includes hero story, adventure story, travel story, conversion story, and miracle story. Drama also figures prominently: there are 32 speeches in Acts.

Following the story line becomes easy when one realizes that the book of Acts is structured on a cyclic principle in which a common pattern keeps getting repeated: (1) Christian leaders arise and preach the gospel; (2) listeners are converted and added to the church; (3) opponents (often Jewish but sometimes Gentile) begin to persecute the Christian leaders; and (4) God intervenes to rescue the leaders or otherwise protect the church. While this pattern is most obvious in the first half of the book, it extends in modified form to the journeys of Paul, whose repeated buffetings are followed by the expansion of the church.

The book of Acts is noteworthy for its narrative qualities. It is the report of an adventure, replete with arrests, imprisonments, beatings, riots, narrow escapes, a resurrection from death, a shipwreck, trial scenes, and rescues.

Places play a key role in Acts. The places that matter most are the great cities of the Mediterranean region in the first century. Geography assumes a symbolic as well as literal importance, as Jerusalem, where the story begins, symbolizes the Jewish religion from which Christianity emerged, and Rome, where the story ends, symbolizes the Gentile world to which Christianity gravitates as the early history of the church unfolds.

Out of a large body of available data, storytellers select the details that fit their design and purpose. It is a plausible premise that sometimes Luke chose to give *representative examples* of categories of experiences: examples of miraculous healings that were no doubt duplicated many times (e.g., [3:1-10](#); [19:11-12](#)), a specimen of preaching in the temple ([3:11-26](#)) and preaching to Greek intellectuals ([17:16-34](#)), an example of a martyrdom ([ch. 7](#)), and instances of individuals being converted (e.g., a Jew in [9:1-19](#) and an Ethiopian in [8:26-38](#)) and of groups being converted (e.g., in Jerusalem in [2:37-41](#) and in Greek Ephesus in [19:17-20](#)).

## The Setting of Acts

c. A.D. 30-60

The book of Acts records the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, thus fulfilling the risen Christ's words to his apostles in [Acts 1:8](#).



# Outline

- I. Preparation for Witness ([1:1-2:13](#))
  - A. Jesus prepares the disciples ([1:1-5](#))
  - B. Jesus ascends ([1:6-11](#))
  - C. Matthias replaces Judas ([1:12-26](#))
  - D. The Spirit descends at Pentecost ([2:1-13](#))
- II. The Witness in Jerusalem ([2:14-5:42](#))
  - A. Peter preaches at Pentecost ([2:14-41](#))
  - B. The Christian community shares a life in common ([2:42-47](#))
  - C. Peter heals a lame man ([3:1-10](#))
  - D. Peter preaches in the temple square ([3:11-26](#))
  - E. Peter and John witness before the Jewish council ([4:1-22](#))
  - F. The Christian community prays for boldness in witness ([4:23-31](#))
  - G. The community shares together ([4:32-5:16](#))
  - H. The apostles appear before the council ([5:17-42](#))
- III. The Witness beyond Jerusalem ([6:1-12:25](#))
  - A. Seven chosen to serve the Hellenist widows ([6:1-7](#))
  - B. Stephen bears the ultimate witness ([6:8-8:3](#))
    1. The arrest of Stephen ([6:8-15](#))
    2. Stephen's address before the Sanhedrin ([7:1-53](#))
    3. The martyrdom of Stephen ([7:54-8:3](#))
  - C. Philip witnesses beyond Jerusalem ([8:4-40](#))
    1. Witness to the Samaritans ([8:4-25](#))
    2. Witness to an Ethiopian eunuch ([8:26-40](#))
  - D. The conversion of Saul ([9:1-31](#))
    1. Saul's encounter with Christ ([9:1-9](#))
    2. Saul's encounter with Ananias ([9:10-19a](#))
    3. Saul's witness in Damascus and Jerusalem ([9:19b-31](#))
  - E. Peter preaches in the coastal towns ([9:32-11:18](#))
    1. Healing of Aeneas and Dorcas ([9:32-43](#))
    2. Conversion of Cornelius ([10:1-48](#))
    3. Peter's testimony in Jerusalem ([11:1-18](#))
  - F. The Antioch church witnesses to Gentiles ([11:19-26](#))
  - G. The offering for Jerusalem ([11:27-30](#))
  - H. The Jerusalem church is persecuted ([12:1-25](#))
    1. The death of James ([12:1-5](#))
    2. Peter's deliverance from prison ([12:6-19](#))
    3. The death of Herod Agrippa I ([12:20-25](#))
- IV. The Witness in Cyprus and Southern Galatia ([13:1-14:28](#))
  - A. The Antioch church commissions Paul and Barnabas ([13:1-3](#))
  - B. Paul and Barnabas witness on Cyprus ([13:4-12](#))
  - C. Paul preaches in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch ([13:13-41](#))
  - D. Paul turns to the Gentiles ([13:42-52](#))
  - E. Paul and Barnabas are rejected at Iconium ([14:1-7](#))
  - F. The two missionaries witness in Lystra ([14:8-23](#))
  - G. Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch ([14:24-28](#))
- V. The Jerusalem Council ([15:1-35](#))
  - A. The circumcision party criticizes the Gentile mission ([15:1-5](#))
  - B. Peter defends Paul ([15:6-11](#))

- C. James proposes a solution ([15:12-21](#))
- D. A letter is sent to Antioch ([15:22-35](#))
- VI. The Witness in Greece ([15:36-18:22](#))
  - A. Paul and Barnabas differ over Mark ([15:36-41](#))
  - B. Timothy joins Paul and is circumcised ([16:1-5](#))
  - C. Paul is called to Macedonia ([16:6-10](#))
  - D. Paul witnesses in Philippi ([16:11-40](#))
    - 1. Conversion of Lydia ([16:11-15](#))
    - 2. Imprisonment of Paul and Silas ([16:16-24](#))
    - 3. Conversion of the jailer ([16:25-34](#))
    - 4. Release of Paul and Silas ([16:35-40](#))
  - E. Paul witnesses in Thessalonica ([17:1-9](#))
  - F. Paul witnesses in Berea ([17:10-15](#))
  - G. Paul witnesses in Athens ([17:16-34](#))
    - 1. Witness in the marketplace ([17:16-21](#))
    - 2. Witness before the Areopagus ([17:22-34](#))
  - H. Paul witnesses in Corinth ([18:1-22](#))
- VII. The Witness in Ephesus ([18:23-21:16](#))
  - A. Priscilla and Aquila instruct Apollos ([18:23-28](#))
  - B. Paul encounters disciples of John ([19:1-10](#))
  - C. Paul encounters false religion at Ephesus ([19:11-22](#))
  - D. Paul experiences violent opposition at Ephesus ([19:23-41](#))
  - E. Paul completes his ministry in Greece ([20:1-6](#))
  - F. Paul travels to Miletus ([20:7-16](#))
  - G. Paul addresses the Ephesian elders at Miletus ([20:17-35](#))
  - H. Paul journeys to Jerusalem ([20:36-21:16](#))
- VIII. The Arrest in Jerusalem ([21:17-23:35](#))
  - A. Paul participates in a Nazirite ceremony ([21:17-26](#))
  - B. An angry mob attacks Paul ([21:27-39](#))
  - C. Paul addresses the Jewish crowd ([21:40-22:21](#))
  - D. Paul reveals his Roman citizenship ([22:22-29](#))
  - E. Paul appears before the Sanhedrin ([22:30-23:11](#))
  - F. Zealous Jews plot against Paul ([23:12-22](#))
  - G. Paul is delivered to the governor Felix ([23:23-35](#))
- IX. The Witness in Caesarea ([24:1-26:32](#))
  - A. Paul appears before Felix ([24:1-27](#))
  - B. Paul appeals to Caesar ([25:1-12](#))
  - C. Festus presents the case to King Agrippa II ([25:13-22](#))
  - D. Paul witnesses to Agrippa II ([25:23-26:32](#))
- X. The Witness in Rome ([27:1-28:31](#))
  - A. Paul journeys to Rome by sea ([27:1-44](#))
  - B. Paul witnesses on Malta ([28:1-10](#))
  - C. Paul arrives in Rome ([28:11-16](#))
  - D. Paul witnesses to the Jews in Rome ([28:17-31](#))