



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Class Notes

Introducing Acts, 2

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Type of Writing (Genre)

Why it matters

1. At first glance, we recognize that Acts is a narrative and may assume that we can interpret it as we do other narrative sections of Scripture. Closer examination reveals that the situation is more complex.
2. Does it really matter or are we just being overly curious?
 - a. Ascertaining a more specific identification of the type of writing we find in Acts helps us know what to expect as we study the writing.
 - 1) When we read some literature types, we have little or no expectation that they will be factually trustworthy or historically accurate (e.g., a fairy tale, allegory, or novel).
 - 2) Others may be “factually accurate” in a different way; e.g., poetry, which expresses real feelings and sometimes makes factual statements, but often does so in figurative ways; or an illustrative story that, like a novel, uses real lifelike details, but makes no claim to have “really happened.”
 - b. So whether Acts was written as a collection of legends (as some have contended) or a serious historical narrative matters for how we understand its purpose and value (cf. Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles 2009, 338).

More difficult than it first appears

3. Determining the literary genre of Acts is difficult.
 - a. First, because, unlike other literature types used in Scripture, we have few (if any) works of a similar nature prior to the publication of Acts.
 - b. Also, as with the Gospels, several apocryphal “Acts” were written in imitation of the canonical book (e.g., The Acts of Paul and Thecla; The Acts of John; The Acts of Peter; The Acts of Pilate; et al.)
4. The term “Acts” is not original to the New Testament, however.
 - a. In literary circles, “Acts” (πράξεις, *praxeis*) “referred to the heroic deeds of mythical or historical figures, but this kind of writing was most likely not an established literary genre (even less was the term used in titles) when Luke penned this volume” (Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles 2009, 338; cf. Carson and Moo 2005, 301).

Acts and the Gospels

5. As Luke’s second volume, Acts has naturally been compared to the Gospels.
 - a. They have been identified as a specialized form of ancient biography, with Jesus’ words and deeds at

- the center (cf. Acts 1.1 – “all that Jesus began to do and teach”).
- b. But Acts (volume 2) does not seem to fit that description, since it features deeds of more than one person: Peter, Stephen, Philip, Paul, and so on.
 - c. Also, while several people are mentioned, the major agent whose actions are central to the book’s plot is the Holy Spirit (πνεῦμα, *pneuma*, appears seventy times in the book, in 20 of 28 chapters).¹ Thus, many refer to the book as the “Acts of the Holy Spirit.”
6. But while Acts is not exactly the same kind of writing as the Gospels, Luke–Acts develops a unity of theme; that is, Acts is continuing the story begun in Luke.
- a. “I wrote the first narrative, Theophilus, about *all that Jesus began to do and teach* ² until the day *he* was taken up, after *he* had given instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles *he* had chosen” (Acts 1.1–2).
 - b. This is the common idea in Luke’s Gospel and Acts (with emphasis on several other sub-themes also repeated, e. g., prayer, signs and wonders, and the Spirit; cf. Keener 2014, 317).
 - c. In light of this, Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles ask, “So is Acts a sort of ‘biography’ of the Holy Spirit, or perhaps a ‘biography’ of the ascended Christ conducting his work through the Holy Spirit and the apostolic church? If so, this would need to be understood within the larger framework of God’s salvation-historical purposes” (Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles 2009, 338 n. 18).

A specific kind of history

7. We gain insight into the identification of the genre of Acts from the early church fathers who were familiar with the different literary genres of the ancient world and referred to the book as a “history.”²
8. Luke does not say that he was writing “history,” but “there is good evidence that he set out to write a historical account” (Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles 2009, 339).
- a. Though he reflected the style of Attic Greek and Roman legal language (see [part 1](#)), he largely wrote in the style of the LXX, resembling Old Testament narrative. It appears he saw himself writing sacred history.
 - b. The prefaces of Luke and Acts also provide a clue. In ancient historiography, prefaces exhibited seven features; Luke’s writings include four (Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles 2009, 339; cf. Aune 1987, 89–90).³
9. If the preface to Luke is intended to cover both volumes, and the summary fashion of Acts 1.1–3 indicates that is likely, “then Luke claimed to have written an account that is trustworthy, emphasizing the veracity of his research” (Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles 2009, 339).
10. But it is also evident that his work charted a general linear course.
- a. It is tied to other historical events (cf. Luke 3.1–2; Acts 12.20–23 [Herod Agrippa I]; 18.12 [Gallio], 23.26 [Felix]; 24.27 [Festus]).
 - b. But the orderliness (Luke 1.3; καθεξῆς, *kathexēs*) of the account is not always chronological; rather, “in line with Greek historiography, [he] arranged his work geographically” (Köstenberger, Kellum,

¹ πνεῦμα (*pneuma*) does not appear in chapters 3, 12, 14, 22, 24–27.

² See, for example, Jerome’s (4th cent.) epistle to Paulinus, where he writes, “The Acts of the Apostles seem to relate a mere *unvarnished narrative* descriptive of the infancy of the newly born church; but when once we realize that their author is Luke the physician whose praise is in the gospel, we shall see that all his words are medicine for the sick soul” (Jerome, *Epistles* 53.9; my emphasis). Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles (2009, 339 n. 22) translate and define the italicized words, “unadorned history”; Lat. *nuda historia*, which is lit. ‘naked history.’” They also cite Clement, *Stromateis* 5.12 as another reference to Acts as history.

³ The four are: (1) requests and dedications; (2) mention of predecessors; (3) use of appropriate methodology; (4) reasons for writing.

and Quarles 2009, 339) or thematically.⁴

11. The above takes us part way to identifying the type of writing Acts is, it does not take us all the way. From what is known of ancient historical writings, it is evident that Luke incorporates other styles into his “orderly sequence” (Luke 1.3).
 - a. Like Plutarch’s *Lives*, Acts features the lives and works of multiple people (Peter, Stephen, Paul, etc.).
 - b. At the same time, the book shifts from person to person, only briefly mentioning many of them.
 - 1) Stephen is important only in Acts 6 and 7.
 - 2) Philip is the focus of Acts 8.
 - 3) After Acts 15, Peter is never mentioned again.
 - 4) Paul, introduced as Saul in Acts 7.58, is the main character from chapters 16–28.
 - c. But it is apparent that the different people were featured to serve a purpose other than simply telling about their lives (the above summarized from Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles 2009, 340).
12. Acts also resembles Old Testament historical writings and the Gospels.
 - a. Like the latter, the history in Acts is “theological history” (Blomberg 2006, 17).
 - b. That does not mean that the historical record is inaccurate; it does mean that it aims to take a God-centered approach to history, to shed light on what God is doing to advance the salvation history that is the theme of the entire Bible (see Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles 2009, 340).

While other works were utilized (see below) these notes essentially follow the direction of the discussion of the genre of Acts in Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles 2009, 338–340.

Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Scripture in these notes are from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB). Italics have been added by the author.

August 30, 2026

Works Cited

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⁴ See, for example, Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem in Luke 9.51–19.44. The point of empathizing that Jesus “determined to go to Jerusalem” (9.51) was to stress that it was in that city that he, as a prophet, had to complete his mission by perishing (13.33; 18.31). But 9.51–19:44 does not depict a straight-line journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. Instead, Jesus moves south, returns to the north, appears just outside Jerusalem, and then goes back to the north before finally going to Jerusalem (cf. 9.51–52; 10.13–15, 38–42; 17.11; 18.35; 19.1, 29, 33). Establishing a timeline for his “journey” is not possible from Luke’s account. But it does depict him as moving relentlessly toward his destiny which will be fulfilled in Jerusalem (9.51, 53; 13.22, 33; 17.11; 18.31; 19.28, 41).