

THE BOOK OF ACTS

A good case can easily be made for dating the book of Acts around 62 AD. In his commentary on Acts, F F Bruce gives a list of early writers who allude to passages in Acts. These include 1 Clement (AD 95), the Epistle of Barnabas (about AD 100), Hermas (AD 100-110), Ignatius (about AD 115), and the Letter of Polycarp (about AD 120). These are long before the end of the second century. However, people who argue that these allusions are doubtful have much more to go on in the Book of Acts itself.

One interesting fact that supports an early date of writing is that, although Luke was a close associate with Paul, the Book of Acts makes surprisingly little mention of the letters of Paul. After the letters of Paul began to be collected, a later writer about the times that Acts has covered could hardly have ignored them.

The Book of Acts ends with Paul in Rome, under house arrest, but free to speak to whoever would listen. It seems that he was freed in the court after his appeal to the Emperor. In all likelihood he then went to Spain (AD 61-62). From there he returned to countries around the Aegean Sea, including Crete, Ephesus, and Macedonia. The pastoral letters of Paul seem to fit into this period. Then Paul was again arrested and taken as a prisoner to Rome. There was another delay in the hearing of his case, but from 2 Timothy we know that he was expecting his death soon. In the terrible persecution under Nero in AD 64, sources agree, he was put to death. Any account of Paul's life, even after about AD 80, could certainly be expected to include the circumstances of his death. The Book of Acts leaves us wondering what happened in Paul's first appeal in Rome and what happened to him afterwards. Just a few sentences would have supplied this information. The silence, especially after such a detailed description of the voyage to Rome and his arrival there, speaks loudly against any claim that Acts was written after Paul died.

When Paul spoke to the elders from Ephesus, he said that he did not expect to see them again. His expectation was not a prophecy. He knew that he would be taken prisoner if he went up to Jerusalem. However, Acts gives no hint in advance of Paul's death. When Paul wrote Romans, (probably in about AD 58) he was planning to go to Spain. If Paul went back to Ephesus and other places in the Aegean after his first trial at Rome, it seems reasonable that Acts had been completed before that. The fact that has to be explained is that the Books of Acts does not mention Paul's condemnation and execution, in about AD 64.

Furthermore, the attitude to the Roman government in Acts makes it hard to imagine that the persecution under Nero had begun when the book was written. According to Acts, the imperial representatives, with the exception of governor Felix, were behaving impartially, and Paul confidently expected favourable treatment in Rome. If Luke wrote the Book of Acts after the persecution under Nero, his mention of Roman authorities would have been far less optimistic.

From AD 66 to 70 the Jewish War took place in Palestine, and it ended after the dreadful destruction of Jerusalem, which the Jewish historian Josephus records so graphically. There is no hint of it in Acts. If Luke had written after AD 70, we might have expected Luke to add that Jewish opposition, which he often emphasises, met with God's deserved punishment, from which Peter urged his hearers to save themselves in his address on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:40).

The Book of Acts treats topics that were of special interest before the destruction of Jerusalem. These subjects lost their practical importance after that. They included the use of the temple at Jerusalem by the early Christians for worship, the conditions for the admission of Gentile converts to Christianity, the request to Gentiles to avoid meat with blood in it (Acts 15), and relations of Jews and Gentiles within Christian congregations.

In addition, there are many examples in the Book of Acts of forms of expression that were discarded later. The work of a later writer might have been expected to use expressions that were closer to Paul's later writings. However, in Acts "the Christ" is still a title, meaning "the Messiah", and "Christ" has not yet become a proper name. In Acts Jesus can still be referred to as the "Servant" of God (Acts 3-4), mirroring the language of Isaiah, and "the Son of Man" (Acts 7). There is also the expression "His (namely, God's) own blood" (Acts 20:28). Acts still refers to Christians as "disciples" and "followers of the Way", expressions that later drop out of use. The term "people" is still used for the Jewish nation in Acts (except in Acts 15:14, and 18:10 where it is used of the Gentiles). The references to the church as the new people of God that we find in Paul's letters do not appear in Acts. Sunday is still called "the first day of the week", as in the Gospels and in 1 Corinthians 16:2. Later it became known in the church as the Lord's Day (Revelation 1:10).

Since Luke also wrote the Gospel according to Luke, a date for the writing of Acts in about AD 62 would demand that the Gospel according to Luke was also written before then. Certainly Jesus predicted the destruction of Jerusalem very explicitly in Luke (Luke 19:27, 19:41-44, 21:20-24, 23:27-31). We should dismiss the cynical and unbelieving the assumption that Luke altered Jesus' words about this because of what he knew after the events, or that Jesus had really made no prophecy about this at all

In short, there is enough evidence for the view that Luke gathered and arranged much of the material for Luke and Acts in Palestine between AD 57 and 59, perhaps at the time when Paul was in prison in Caesarea (AD 56-58), and that he added other material in Rome. We can imagine that Luke sent his first book (the Gospel) to Theophilus in about AD

61, and his second book (Acts) to him not long afterwards.