

May 2021

Human Authorship of Scripture: Luke's Role in Establishing Paul as an Apostle in the Book of Acts

Stephanie L. Seltzer

Liberty University, slseltzer@liberty.edu

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Recommended Citation

Seltzer, Stephanie L. (2021) "Human Authorship of Scripture: Luke's Role in Establishing Paul as an Apostle in the Book of Acts," *Diligence: Journal of the Liberty University Online Religion Capstone in Research and Scholarship*: Vol. 8 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/djrc/vol8/iss1/4>

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Introduction

Approximately forty human authors contributed to the Bible and together they wrote the sixty-six books over a span of two millennia. These authors ranged in age, education, and background, from fishermen to kings. Despite the wide variety of human contributors and the length of time in history it took to complete the Bible, there is a unity to the Bible's message that could not have possibly been conceived by human minds. The only logical explanation to this unified narrative that delivers a coherent and consistent message throughout is that the Bible is ultimately authored by God.¹ The Bible is God's story and He used men to write His story.

The written word of God is the equivalent of the spoken word of God "knowing...that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20-22)². All scripture is "breathed out" by God (2 Tim. 3:16). Through divine inspiration, God authored the Bible by way of human writers while allowing the human authors He selected to maintain their own unique personalities within the text. The historian and theologian known as Luke was one such author. This paper will demonstrate how God used Luke to establish the apostolic authority of Paul in the book of Acts by presenting both Peter and Paul as equal in supernatural ability, apostolic gifting, and divine commission.

Background

The first place to begin is by identifying Luke's background and profession. Luke's literary contribution to the New Testament surpasses that of any other writer, including the

¹ James M Hamilton Jr., *What is Biblical Theology? A Guide to the Bible's Story, Symbolism, and Patterns* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 26.

² Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

Pauline letters.³ Although written anonymously, the available evidence for the authorship of Acts has been gleaned from the writings of the church from the first few centuries and scholars unanimously agree that the author was indeed Luke.⁴ Internal evidence, or evidence found within Scripture, reveals that Acts is linked closely with the Gospel of Luke, which indicates common authorship.⁵ It has been well-documented that “linguistically, stylistically, and structurally, the gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are so closely related that they have to be assigned to the same author.”⁶ Scripture discloses that Luke was Paul’s companion in Rome (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philem. 24) . “Acts is unique in that it contains ninety-seven verses during Paul’s journeys where the third person is replaced by the first-person plural— the so-called ‘we passages,’ which claim to be the observations of an eyewitness.”⁷ All of the available evidence combined establish Luke as the author of both works.

Another noteworthy detail is that Luke and Acts are addressed to the same person, a patron named Theophilus (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1). “Theophilus” means “lover of God,” and it has been suggested that this may in fact be a pseudonym. Authors John Stott and Stephen Motyer write that Luke was “perhaps addressing any who, like Cornelius (Acts 10:1– 2), were devout

³ John Stott and Stephen Motyer. *Basic Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017), 38. Accessed April 22, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=5761045>.

⁴ Ajith Fernando. *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI; Zondervan, 1998), 20. Accessed April 22, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=5397551>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Richard N. Longenecker, *Acts: The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids, MI; Zondervan, 2007), 70. Accessed April 21, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=5397618>.

⁷ Fernando, *Acts*, 20.

and God-fearing Gentiles, genuine seekers of the truth.”⁸ Other significant facts concerning Luke are that he writes in good literary Greek, which suggests he was well educated, and that Luke's culture and education are clearly communicated through his writings. For example, Luke has an extraordinary vocabulary. Luke and Acts contain “about 800 words which do not occur elsewhere in the New Testament.”⁹ Also, following Hebrews, Luke's Greek is “the most elegant in the New Testament.”¹⁰ Readers would be wise to also appreciate the skill with which Luke composes his books. He modestly refers to his work as “an orderly account” (Luke 1:3), and that order is “apparent in the beautiful way in which the story develops.”¹¹

Luke was most likely a Gentile, although this claim has been challenged.¹² However, scholars have long assumed that the author was a Gentile Christian “on the basis of the superior quality of the Greek language, the avoidance of Semitic words, the omission (in the third gospel) of traditions about Jesus' controversies with the Pharisees' understanding of the Mosaic law and about the distinction between what is unclean and what is clean, and other factors.”¹³ Paul refers to him as “our dear friend Luke, the doctor” (Col. 4:14). He describes Luke as a faithful friend who stayed with him during his second imprisonment in Rome (2 Tim. 4:11), during which time other Christians shunned Paul. Scholars have placed the date of writing of Acts from early to

⁸ Stott, *Basic Introduction to the New Testament*, 39.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Fernando, *Acts*, 21.

¹³ Schnabel, Eckhard J. and Clinton E. Arnold. *Acts: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 21.

mid-60s of the first century to much later in the century, some estimates going back as far as the late second century.¹⁴

The Book of Acts

Luke begins Acts with Jesus' final words to his apostles before he ascended into heaven: "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8)." These words provided Luke with an inspired outline to follow as he wrote the book of Acts and it is apparent that Luke arranged his historical material according to its divinely inspired theological purpose. The gospel message is the identifying message, the messengers are the apostles, and the location of delivery is Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and the ends of the earth.¹⁵ The geographical theme is developed as Luke provides readers with a historical account of every significant event necessary to understand the development of the early church. In the book of Acts, Luke documents the development of the early church in a geographical structure: the gospel is first delivered to the Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 1:1-8:4), then to Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:5-12:25), and then to the ends of the earth (Acts 13:1-28:31).¹⁶

Acts is also divided into two historical periods consisting of fourteen and a half years each, with each period focusing on the ministry of the apostles Peter and Paul respectively. Luke presents this biographical structure of Acts in order to develop a solid literary connection between Peter and Paul. Therefore, interwoven within the bigger story of the unstoppable growth and advancement of God's Church in the Book of Acts, Luke concurrently delivers the story of

¹⁴Fernando, *Acts*, 20.

¹⁵ Steven Ger, *The Book of Acts: Witnesses to the World* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2004), 10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

two of God's "leading men," the apostles Peter and Paul. This is important because it is in Acts, through the writings of Luke, that Paul is first introduced and established as an apostle of Jesus Christ.

The last essential detail in studying Acts is properly identifying the genre in which Luke writes. Acts belongs to the historical genre, yet it is necessary to be more precise since the ancient category of history is extremely broad and Acts is not simply historical, it is "unashamedly theocentric."¹⁷ Author Osvaldo Padilla describes Acts as a historical monograph with a Jewish influence. He observes that accepting Acts as a historical monograph invites the reader to expect Luke to be an eyewitness and/or interviewer of those who participated in the events he described.¹⁸ "In the most serious tradition of Greek historical writing, the qualification of the historian as a participant and interviewer of eyewitnesses is essential... Luke took the well-known form and structure of the Greco-Roman monograph and appropriated it to communicate an essentially theological message of salvation through Jesus Christ."¹⁹ Unlike Greco-Roman history, Acts is saturated with God's breaking into historical affairs and advancing His Church in the direction He desires. Padilla suggests that "Luke took the well-known form and structure of the Greco-Roman monograph and appropriated it to communicate an essentially theological message of salvation through Jesus Christ."²⁰

¹⁷ Osvaldo Padilla. *The Acts of the Apostles: Interpretation, History and Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 65. Accessed April 25, 2021. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=4427962>.

¹⁸ Padilla, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 62.

¹⁹Ibid., 65.

²⁰ Ibid.

Apostleship

The use of the word “apostle” in the Bible occurs seventy-nine times in the New Testament: ten times in the Gospels, twenty-eight times in Acts, thirty-eight times in the Epistles, and three times in Revelation.²¹ The English word transliterates the Greek *apostolos* and is derived from *apostellein*, meaning “to send.”²² The New Testament use of *apostellein* emphasizes the elements of commission, particularly the “authority of and responsibility to the sender.”²³ Therefore, apostles are sent on a definite mission in which they act with full authority on the sender’s behalf, to whom they are accountable.

In the New Testament, the title of “apostle” is applied in several different ways. First, in Hebrews 3:1 the term is used to describe Christ: “Jesus, the *apostle* and high priest.” This points to Jesus’ role on earth as the representative of the Father.²⁴ Next are the twelve disciples, with Matthias replacing Judas, who are called “apostles” (Matt. 10:2; Mk. 3:14; 6:30; Lk. 6:13; 9:10; 11:49; 17:5; 22:14; 24:10). These apostles were “primary witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus, and their task was to proclaim the gospel of God, establish churches, and teach sound doctrine (Acts 4:33; 5:12; 5:29; 8:1, 14-18).”²⁵ Lastly, Paul refers to himself as an apostle in Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus. Paul defends

²¹E. F. Harrison, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2017), 152. Accessed April 25, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=5188207>.

²²J. D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney. *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011). Accessed April 22, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=5188207>.

²³Harrison, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 152.

²⁴Douglas, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 97.

²⁵Ibid.

his apostleship (2 Cor. 11-12; Gal. 1), and he was also described as an apostle by Luke (Acts 14:14).²⁶

A few unique features of Paul's apostleship are that he was directly appointed by Christ (Gal. 1:1) to preach the gospel among the Gentiles (Gal. 1:16), and "he was able to bear witness because his call came from the risen Christ (Acts 26:16– 18; 1 Cor. 9:1). However, he never asserted membership in the Twelve (cf. 1 Cor. 15:11) but rather stood on an independent basis."²⁷

Luke Presents Peter and Paul

Understanding Luke's background, the theme and structure of Acts, and the meaning and use of the term "apostle" in the New Testament sets the stage for Luke's presentation of Peter and Paul. In *The Book of Acts: Witnesses to the World*, author Stephen Ger writes, "Time and again, example upon example, the record of Acts reveals that whatever Peter was empowered to do, Paul was so empowered as well."²⁸ Ger's observes that Luke's biographical structure of Acts divides the book into two parts that are mirror images of each other (1:1-12:25 and 13:1-28:31).²⁹ He notes that the second half of Acts is longer in verbal content, but both halves are chronologically equal.³⁰

Luke's account of Peter's speech at Pentecost (Acts 2:14-41) displays Peter as speaking with prophetic authority. He stood with the Eleven, lifted his voice and "addressed" the crowd

²⁶Douglas, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 97.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ger, *The Book of Acts*, 10.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

(2:14). Luke does not use the regular term for “addressed” in this passage. Instead, Luke employs a verb that appears only three times in the New Testament, “apophtheggomai,” which translates “to speak forth.”³¹ This is not a word of everyday speech, but one “belonging to dignified and elevated discourse.”³² Luke employs this verb to communicate this as prophetic speech inspired by the Holy Spirit, portraying Peter as speaking with prophetic authority, and conveying the message that Peter’s arguments from prophecy are meant to carry the utmost weight.³³ The second time Luke uses this verb is in Acts 26:25 when Paul addresses King Agrippa.³⁴ One of the “striking features of the speech of Peter was the manner in which Luke introduced it. He did not simply say that Peter ‘spoke’; he implied that Peter spoke with prophetic authority—that is, as guided by the Holy Spirit.”³⁵ This suggests that Peter’s speech is “programmatic for the rest of Acts” and “when the Twelve, their followers and Paul speak, they do so with the same authority of the Spirit as Peter’s.”³⁶

Luke’s historical account of Peter and Paul’s ministry in the book of Acts share striking similarities. Luke provides the reader with numerous examples of this. Similarities in their ministry include the fact that Peter and Paul were both commissioned apostles. Peter’s ministry

³¹ George Abbot-Smith, *Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York, NY: T&T Clark LTD, 2005), 56. Accessed May 8, 2021. ProQuest *Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=5982302>.

³² *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. Accessed April 25, 2021. <https://biblehub.com/greek/669.htm>.

³³ Padilla, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 155.

³⁴ *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. Accessed April 25, 2021. <https://biblehub.com/greek/669.htm>.

³⁵ Padilla, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 157.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

focused mainly on the Jews, though he also witnessed to Gentiles. Paul's ministry concentrated on the Gentiles, though he also witnessed to Jews. Luke documents that both men healed a man who was lame from birth (3:1-11, 14:8-10) and were gifted with unusual means of healing (5:15-16, 19:11-12). Peter and Paul experienced Jewish opposition (5:17, 13:45). Acts records them both opposing a sorcerer (8:18-24, 13:6-11), raising the dead (9:36-41, 20:9-12), and bestowing the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands (8:14-25, 19:1-10). Peter and Paul were both miraculously released from prison (12:1-19, 16:16-34) and they were both mistakenly worshiped (10:25, 14:11-13). Both men rendered swift judgment (5:1-11, 13:6-11), received an angelic visitation (12:7-11, 27:23-24), heard the voice of God (10:13-16, 9:4-6), were filled with the Spirit (2:1-4; 4:8; 9:17; 13:9), and preached with boldness (4:13, 31, 9:27-29).

Another literary connection that Luke details in Acts is that Peter and Paul preach the same gospel. One of the most interesting things to observe in this passage is how much alike Paul and Peter sound and how the closeness of their vocabulary stands out.³⁷ Both of the apostles preached the following: (1) forgiveness is on the basis of Jesus Christ, who was crucified and raised; (2) the Scriptures bear witness to this; (3) all can be saved by belief in Jesus.³⁸ Both Peter, the apostle to the Jews, and Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, proclaim that salvation is given by God through belief on the basis of the risen savior Jesus Christ. "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Luke drives home this message over and over again throughout Acts and it is

³⁷ Padilla, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 173.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

through this theological message of salvation he presents Peter and Paul as equals, confirming Paul's apostolic authority.

Conclusion

Through divine inspiration, God authored Acts by way of the unique perspective and divine gifting of the historian and theologian known as Luke. God used Luke to establish the apostolic authority of Paul in the book of Acts by presenting both Peter and Paul as equal in supernatural ability, apostolic gifting, and divine commission. The authority of Paul's apostleship cannot be called into question without first raising the question of the authority of Peter's apostleship. And Peter's apostolic authority cannot be questioned as Jesus himself blessed Peter and promised he would build His church on Peter, the "rock-man" (Matt. 16:17-20). Luke's historical record proves the apostolic authority of Paul by repeatedly comparing the ministry of these two very different men who devoted themselves to proclaiming the same gospel message, both to the Jews and the Gentiles. The message both men proclaimed was prophetic speech inspired by the Holy Spirit and remains relevant and just as true to today's Christians as it was to the Believers of the early Church: Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. The only way to the Father is through Him (John 14:6).

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