

I Introduction



This introduction explores what it means for Acts to be an ancient historical monograph, as well as its proposed date, authorship, audience, purposes, message, and narrative continuity with Luke's Gospel.

PROPOSED GENRES FOR ACTS

Genre provides the culturally conditioned, conventional expectations shared by authors and ideal audiences concerning how to interpret a particular sort of work. Acts is self-evidently narrative, and therefore a variety of narrative genres, from ancient novels to histories, shed some light on its literary characteristics. Nevertheless, it comes closer to some narrative genres than others. Ancient readers were aware of various categories of genre. They recognized major distinctions between genres that built on (insofar as possible) factual information, especially history, and those that addressed fictitious subjects, especially in epic poetry.¹

A very small number of scholars have argued that Acts is a prose epic. Since all major epics were poetic, however, the genre of prose epic did not exist. More often, some scholars have compared Acts with a novel.² Because ancient histories and novels often shared literary techniques, and Acts is a more popular-level work, the comparison offers some fruitful insights. Nevertheless, most scholars doubt that Acts is properly speaking a novel. The majority of ancient novels were romances, a feature notoriously lacking in Acts. Novels were also usually about fictitious characters, in clear contrast to Acts (as comparison with Paul's letter fully demonstrates).

¹ Besides Keener, *Acts*, 1:51–165, esp. 85–86, 119, 133, see also my *Christobiography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), 157, 205–6.

² See esp. Pervo, *Profit*.

A small minority of ancient novels, extraordinarily small compared to actual ancient biographies and histories, are novels about *historical* characters. These exploit and subvert biographic and historiographic conventions, but they rarely show signs of interest in genuine research into the times depicted. This is quite a far cry from Acts, which (as illustrated below) overlaps considerably with historical information, sometimes even fairly obscure historical information, that can now be documented from other sources.

The heyday of novels was the late second and early third century, from which most of the “apocryphal acts” and gospels hail. These works depend on earlier Gospels and Acts, but it would be anachronistic to read influence into the other direction. The literary features of Acts sometimes paralleled in novels, such as riots, also feature in many historical works. Indeed, Paul’s letters make clear that Luke has offered only a small sample of Paul’s actual adventures (2 Cor 11:23–33).³ Like novels, Luke-Acts has literary unity, but this also characterizes many biographies and historical monographs on particular subjects.

Because the first volume of Luke-Acts, Luke’s Gospel, is usually (and probably properly) deemed a *bios*, a life or ancient biography, of Jesus, scholars such as Charles Talbert have compared Acts with biographies, especially biographic succession narratives.⁴ This proposal has much to commend it, since Acts focuses on primary characters, especially Peter and Paul (with lesser roles for Stephen, Philip, and a few colleagues). In the first century, biography and historiography overlapped considerably, so that even historians focused on stories of leading figures. Ancient writers sometimes composed parallel biographies of two comparable figures, the second in some respects resembling the first; certainly the Jerusalem church apostles (exemplified in Peter) and the gentile mission apostles (exemplified by Paul) repeat many of Jesus’ works in the second volume.

Nevertheless, Acts includes multiple figures and most scholars find it closer to a historical monograph. Ancient multivolume histories could contain a volume focused on a particular figure that, if freestanding, would be a biography, but as part of the whole constituted a biographic volume in a multivolume history. (Note, for example, the focus on Alexander of

³ Good historians had to choose what to omit or treat briefly and what to develop (Lucian, *Hist.* 6).

⁴ For Acts as collected biography, see now helpfully esp. Adams, *Genre*, 116–71.

Macedon in Bk. 17 of Diodorus Siculus's history.) Luke's Acts, then, may be a biographic history and his Gospel a historically oriented biography.

ACTS AS HISTORICAL MONOGRAPH

By far the dominant view of Acts' genre today, earlier argued by prominent Lukan scholars such as Martin Dibelius and Henry Cadbury,⁵ is that Acts is a work of ancient historiography. A number of factors support this thesis, including Luke's use of speeches and the preface to his first volume. Luke's use of sources in his first volume (including Mark and probably what many scholars call "Q") fits historical interest that we would also expect to carry over into the second volume.

Luke's preface (Luke 1:1–4) identifies a historical subject: "*the events that have been fulfilled among us*" (1:1).⁶ The preface bears some similarities to prefaces of scientific treatises, suggesting that Luke writes more on the fact-based, scientific side of ancient historiography than on the more rhetorical side.⁷

Acts is clearly not an elite multivolume universal history; it is a historical monograph about a narrower topic (comparable to historical monographs by, say, Sallust). Scholars divide over the narrower historical topic, such as "ethnographic" or "political" history, and approach, such as "biographic" or "dramatic"; Luke may reflect a range of such features. His apologetic interest, at least, compares with interests and agendas also evident in ancient apologetic historiography, frequent in ethnographic historiography that defends minority peoples.⁸

Although some scholars find echoes of Polybius and Thucydides in Luke's work, his most obvious literary model, often directly cited in the early chapters of Acts, is the Greek version of the Old Testament, which contains much historiography. Nevertheless, Josephus and fragments of other hellenistic Jewish historians reveal the extent to which Greek historiographic principles shaped retellings of biblical history. Thus it

⁵ Dibelius, *Studies*, 123–37; Cadbury, *Acts in History*, passim.

⁶ With, e.g., Callan, "Preface"; D. P. Moessner, "Dionysius's Narrative 'Arrangement' (οἰκονομία) as the Hermeneutical Key to Luke's Re-vision of the 'Many'," pages 149–64 in *Paul, Luke, and the Graeco-Roman World* (ed. A. Christophersen et al.; JSNTSup 217; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2002; London: T&T Clark, 2003).

⁷ Alexander, *Context*, 12–13, 41–42; cf. discussion on *akribōs* in Luke 1:3 in E.-M. Becker, *The Birth of Christian History: Memory and Time from Mark to Luke-Acts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 103–4.

⁸ See Sterling, *Historiography*.

makes good sense that Luke, writing from and for Diaspora Christians, would have similar tendencies, even if, as is likely, he had not read the elite historians that provided models for some of the Jewish historians better known in his era.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR ACTS TO BE ANCIENT HISTORIOGRAPHY?

Modern historiography evolved from its ancient namesake, but there are distinctions. Certainly no amount of respect for Luke's achievement should lead us to suppose that he conformed his work to the expectations of a genre that did not yet exist in his day. Ancient historians were very conscious of their narrative format and committed to the literary character of their art; where details they thought necessary for a cohesive narrative were lacking, they thus sometimes supplied them, based on their likeliest inferences.

Ancient audiences allowed historians a range of flexibility on details, but would not expect historians to invent major events (such as Paul's abuse in Philippi or, I believe, Lydia's conversion there), and certainly not major, pivotal matters like Paul's Roman custody in Judea and transfer to Rome (which also appears in detailed "we" material, the material where the narrator implies his presence with "we").

History and Rhetoric

Historians used conventional rhetorical principles to produce cohesive and inviting narratives. Although Luke is not as sophisticated in rhetoric as many elite historians were, he employs some conventional features of historical rhetoric.

Some late twentieth-century debates as to whether to approach Luke-Acts historically or from a narrative-theological perspective reflect a false dichotomy. Ancient historians were not mere chroniclers, but narrative *writers*. Thus they used rhetorical techniques to make their histories persuasive; they deemed compatible a factual core and its narrativized presentation.⁹ One rhetorical handbook, probably from the first century,

⁹ See Rothschild, *Rhetoric*, 65–66; S. Byrskog, *Story as History, History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 213, 223.

teaches students early in their training how to abridge or amplify accounts by providing fuller description, paraphrase, or explanation.¹⁰ Although such adaptation did not require changing the basic gist,¹¹ some historians did flesh out scenes,¹² conversations,¹³ thoughts¹⁴ and (much more regularly) speeches.¹⁵ But other historians quickly complained if their peers went too far.¹⁶

We may take Josephus as one example, although he seems to take more liberties than many historians of his era. Josephus is often careless,¹⁷ and often had to depend on others' errant guesses for population estimates and distances and he composed speeches freely (including the same speech differently in different works). Nevertheless, archaeology more often than not confirms even many minor details in his topographic descriptions.¹⁸

The degree to which he adapts biblical accounts varies from one narrative to another, but he usually keeps close to the basic substance of the biblical story. He retells the same event in different ways in different books; yet this practice suggests not that the event never happened, but that he presents it from a different perspective. Like some of his contemporaries,

¹⁰ Theon, *Progymn.* 4.37–42, 80–82 Butts, on fables; later, cf. Hermogenes, *Progymn.* 3 (Chreia), 7.

¹¹ Theon, *Progymn.* 3.224–40; cf. 2.115–23; also Longinus, *Sublime* 11.1; Hermogenes, *Inv.* 2.7.120–21.

¹² Polybius complains about this (2.56.7, 10–11; 3.38.3; 15.34.1).

¹³ E.g., 1 Macc 6:10–13; 2 Macc 3:37–39; Josephus, *Ant.* 19.38–45, 53–58, 78–83; for Tacitus, see M. Hadas, “Introduction,” pages ix–xxiii in *The Complete Works of Tacitus* (ed. M. Hadas; trans. A. J. Church and W. J. Brodribb; New York: Random House, 1942), xx–xxi; for biographers, T. Hägg, *The Art of Biography in Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3; for Plutarch specifically, see M. De Pourcq and G. Roskam, “Mirroring Virtues in Plutarch’s Lives of Agis, Cleomenes and the Gracchi,” pages 163–80 in *Writing Biography in Greece and Rome: Narrative Technique and Fictionalization* (ed. Koen De Temmerman and Kristoffel Demoen; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 167, noting on 178 that this practice in biography was little different from ancient historiography.

¹⁴ E.g., Tacitus, *Hist.* 2.74; *Ann.* 4.38, 39; 12.4; cf. Arrian, *Alex.* 7.1.4.

¹⁵ See Keener, *Acts*, 1:258–82; A. B. Bosworth, *From Arrian to Alexander: Studies in Historical Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 94–95; M. R. Licona, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels? What We Can Learn from Ancient Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 11.

¹⁶ C. W. Fornara, *The Nature of History in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 134–36.

¹⁷ Contrast, e.g., Josephus, *Ant.* 18.252 (the fuller account) with *War* 2.183.

¹⁸ See, e.g., T. Rajak, *Josephus: The Historian and His Society* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1984); D. Syon, “Gamla: Portrait of a Rebellion,” *BAR* 18 (1, 1992): 20–37, 72.

Josephus seems to have viewed his “translation” task as including interpretation and adaptation for his audience.¹⁹

Luke obviously does not go to the extremes of the most lavishly rhetorical historians: he never provides elaborative descriptions of sites or artwork as in many historians;²⁰ his set speeches remain summaries rather than extensive reconstructions.

Modern historians may try to press behind hard data to infer likely reasons for various outcomes; ancient historians often did the same, but unlike modern historians sometimes wrote their inferences into the narrative itself. (This difference becomes especially acute in reports of speeches, as noted further below.) Whereas modern academic historians often cite their sources, ancient historians often cited them only when reports about events diverged significantly, a problem arising much less frequently when writing about recent or contemporary history.

Given such differences, it is no surprise that Luke’s reports appear most vulnerable to modern critique with respect to Quirinius’s census (Luke 2:2) and the date of Theudas in Gamaliel’s speech (Acts 5:36–37). The former report involves a putative incident a full generation before the bulk of Luke’s material, and the latter a speech to which none of the apostles claim to be privy.

In general, however, and by the usual standards of ancient historiography, Luke’s treatment of history fares quite well: he normally writes “contemporary history,” that is, about recent events, and external sources regularly confirm most of his information that can be tested. More recent history was considered more verifiable than the distant past,²¹ and especially the earliest, mythical period.²² Sources closer to the events were also recognized as more apt to be accurate.

Occasional minor variation on details (e.g., Acts 17:14–16; 1 Thess 3:1–2) suggests the independence of the sources that corroborate Luke’s more basic claims, and such minor variations would have disturbed neither ancient historians in general (among whom they were pervasive) nor Luke

¹⁹ S. Inowlocki, “‘Neither Adding Nor Omitting Anything’: Josephus’ Promise Not to Modify the Scriptures in Greek and Latin Context,” *JJS* 56 (1, 2005): 48–65.

²⁰ Contrast, e.g., Fronto, *Ad Ant. Imp.* 2.6.4–15.

²¹ E.g., Thucydides 1.21.1; Livy 6.1.2–3; 7.6.6; Diodorus Siculus 1.6.2; 1.9.2; 4.1.1; 4.8.3–5; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 1.12.3; *Thuc.* 5; Pausanias 9.31.7; Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 1.15, 24–25, 58.

²² E.g., Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Thuc.* 5–7; Plutarch, *Thes.* 1.1–3; Justin, *Epit.* 2.6.7; 11.3.11.

in particular. Luke allows for variation even in his own presentation. (Compare for example Luke 23:50–53 with Acts 13:28–29; Luke 24:40–51 with Acts 1:3–9;²³ Acts 10:3–6 with 10:30–32; or Acts 9:5–6 with 22:8, 10; 9:15–16 and 22:10 with 26:16–18; 10:5–6 with 11:13–14.) For ancient historiography, getting the story right meant getting its gist; since sources are always incomplete and might already include inferences anyway, writers might try to harmonize their sources. Apart from external polemic and responding apologetic, however, most did not find minor variations a matter of concern.

Ancient historians saw their basis as factual and generally disclaimed bias (even though their biases are often evident to other observers). Even those who accused others of extensive embellishment rarely accused them of inventing events (battles, deaths, and so forth).

History and Moral Lessons

Mainstream ancient historians did not compose mere chronicles to display antiquarian knowledge. Those who wanted a broad audience expected their accounts of the past to be useful sources for speeches and moral instruction. Even more concretely than invented stories (which speakers also used), accounts from the remembered past provided potential lessons and models. The Roman emphasis on honor also contributed to a greater valuing of memory, honoring positive models from the past and shaming negative ones, as an incentive for subsequent generations' honorable behavior.²⁴

Although historians today naturally find unappealing extreme postmodern nihilism about historical knowledge, most recognize greater value in the postmodern critique of modernism's self-assured "objectivity." Different modern biographies of Churchill or Lincoln will display different perspectives,²⁵ and ancient historians were no less subject to varying perspectives than we.²⁶ They were, in fact, sometimes more

²³ Unless Acts' forty days are postascension as in H. J. de Jonge, "The Chronology of the Ascension Stories in Luke and Acts," *NTS* 59 (2, 2013): 151–71.

²⁴ See, e.g., Pliny, *Ep.* 5.8.1–2.

²⁵ Writers today also use history for sociopolitical purposes; see, e.g., J. Rüpke, *Religion: Antiquity and Its Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 50.

²⁶ Cf., e.g., J. D. Chaplin, "Conversations in History: Arrian and Herodotus, Parmenio and Alexander," *GRBS* 51 (4, 2011): 613–33; J. Beneker, "The Crossing of the Rubicon and the Outbreak of Civil War in Cicero, Lucan, Plutarch, and Suetonius," *Phoenix* 65 (1–2, 2011): 74–99; J. A. Kelhoffer, "The Maccabees at Prayer: Pro- and Anti-Hasmonean

straightforward about stating theirs (except when framing it negatively as bias, an accusation they more often leveled against their competitors).

Although the historical ideal was objectivity, ancient historians often had national or ethnic biases clearer to us than they were to them. Roman historians might respect powerful figures from other peoples, such as Alexander or Hannibal, but they often viewed the Roman Empire as a force for good (though many also viewed it as a moral decline from the glorious republic). Herodotus respected other peoples, but Greek historians inevitably wrote from a Greek-centered perspective, provoking alternative historiographies from Egyptians, Jews, and other colonized peoples. Mainstream historians often wrote to inculcate “good citizenship”;²⁷ one frequent agenda was the value of the state and honoring those so patriotic as to die for it.

The emphasis on patriotism, however, is part of a wider emphasis on moral lessons as a whole. For example:

- Polybius (second century BCE) begins his multivolume history by observing its utilitarian value: people “have no more ready corrective of conduct than knowledge of the past.”²⁸
- Dionysius of Halicarnassus (first century BCE)
 - felt that historians should choose a noble subject, so their work would contribute to good moral character as well as providing information;²⁹
 - includes among major purposes for writing history: that the courageous will gain “immortal glory” that outlives them, and that their descendants will recognize their own roots and seek to emulate their virtue.³⁰
- Livy (first century BCE to first century CE): historical knowledge offers models to imitate and shun (Livy pref. 9–10).³¹

Tendencies in the Prayers of First and Second Maccabees,” *Early Christianity* 2 (2, 2011): 198–218.

²⁷ T. Penner, “Civilizing Discourse: Acts, Declamation, and the Rhetoric of the *Polis*,” pages 65–104 in *Contextualizing Acts: Lukan Narrative and Greco-Roman Discourse* (ed. T. Penner and C. Vander Stichele; SBLSymS 20; Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2003), 73–77.

²⁸ Polybius 1.1.1 (LCL); for lessons, cf., e.g., 1.35.1–10.

²⁹ Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 1.2.1.

³⁰ Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 1.6.3–5; cf. Diodorus Siculus 15.1.1; 37.4.1.

³¹ A. M. Gowing, “Memory as Motive in Tacitus,” pages 43–64 in *Memory in Ancient Rome and Early Christianity* (ed. K. Galinsky; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 46.

- Valerius Maximus (early first century CE) insists that it is helpful to know history “so that a backward look . . . may yield some profit to modern manners” (Val. Max. 2.pref. [LCL]).
- Tacitus (early second century CE), one of our most reliable historical sources for the early empire
 - emphasizes that the study of history promotes virtue (*Agr.* 1), offering models for moral imitation (46);
 - notes that he freely omitted material not of value to history’s primary, moral objective (*Ann.* 3.65).
- Lucian (second century CE), a stickler for historians’ historical accuracy, allows for history’s edifying value, i.e., moral lessons, provided they flow from truth (e.g., *Hist.* 59).
- The intellectual orator Maximus of Tyre (late second century) opines that history preserves the memories of humanity and so “guards its virtues” (Max. Tyre 22.5 [trans. Trapp]).

Among first-century Jewish authors in Greek, Philo of Alexandria, Paul, and Josephus all concur that Scripture records earlier actions to provide models for imitation or warnings.³²

One of history’s moral lessons was sometimes the importance of piety toward the gods.³³ Although gentile historians had special interest in practical human models, they also worked from particular assumptions about the gods. Hellenistic Jewish and many gentile historians even sought to interpret the divine will in some patterns in history.³⁴ Luke highlights the theological agenda more than do many gentile historians, but biblical historiography provided ready models.³⁵

Historical Information in Ancient Historiography

Historians wrote to provide moral and political instruction, but in contrast to writers using some other genres, they sought to provide such instruction

³² Philo, *Abr.* 4; 1 Cor 10:11; Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.204.

³³ Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 8.56.1.

³⁴ See Squires, *Plan*, 15–20, 38–51; K. Crabbe, “Being Found Fighting against God Luke’s Gamaliel and Josephus on Human Responses to Divine Providence,” *ZNW* 106 (1, 2015): 21–39.

³⁵ See, e.g., the theodicy of Kings, explaining the exile as judgment (2 Kgs 17:7; 21:11–15). Comparing Luke and Josephus, note, e.g., Sterling, *Historiography*; idem, “The First History of Christianity Constructing Christian Identity from a Jewish Historiographical Tradition,” *Pneumatika* 4 (2, 2016): 3–22; H. W. Attridge, “Josephus, Luke, and the Uses of History,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 41 (4, 2014): 335–48.

by using what they understood as the genuine past. The interpreted past provided moral models or illustrations, and historians thus defined their art as factual, despite their rhetorical embellishments:³⁶

- History is supposed to be truthful.³⁷
- The historian must provide unmixed truth.³⁸
- Historians therefore harshly criticized other historians whom they accused of promoting falsehood, especially when they believed that they exhibited self-serving agendas.³⁹
- To a lesser extent, they critiqued those who unknowingly got their facts wrong.⁴⁰
- More damagingly, a writer who consistently presented the least favorable interpretation, ignoring the diverse views of his sources, could be accused of malice.⁴¹
- Polybius argues that the goal of history, unlike myth, is purely truth.⁴²
- Even a particularly rhetorically focused, pre-Christian historian, writing essays on earlier historians' rhetoric, might emphasize the importance of truth-telling,⁴³ that a careful historian's literary skill "does not excuse history from such exaggeration,"⁴⁴ and that that history involves truth rather than legends, and that one should pursue facts, "neither adding to nor subtracting from" them.⁴⁵
- In the early empire, Tacitus warns against comparing his sober history with implausible rumors and fictions.⁴⁶

³⁶ I borrow the following list from Keener, *Christobiography*, 205–6, which in turn mostly condenses material from Acts (vol. 1) and from *Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009). See also now Baum, "Verhältnis der Apostelgeschichte."

³⁷ E.g., Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 1.26; *Ant.* 20.156–57; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Thuc.* 8.

³⁸ Josephus, *Ant.* 8.56.

³⁹ Josephus, *Life* 336–39; Diodorus Siculus, 21.17.1; Lucian, *Hist.* 24–25.

⁴⁰ Diodorus Siculus, 1.37.4, 6.

⁴¹ So Plutarch, *Mal. Hdt.* 3–7, *Mor.* 855C–856B; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Pomp.* 3.

⁴² Polybius 34.4.2–3. For further discussion of Polybius's high ideal standards, see Keener, *Acts*, 1:124–26.

⁴³ Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Thuc.* 55; cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 8.56; 20.156–57.

⁴⁴ Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Thuc.* 19 (LCL 1:513); see Thucydides 1.1.1–2; 1.21.2; 1.23.1–2. Most did allow occasional hyperbole; see, e.g., Thucydides 8.96.1 (cf. 2.94.1); Polybius 1.4.5; Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.2.

⁴⁵ Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Thuc.* 8 (LCL 1:479), an ideal, however, that Dionysius himself did not always achieve. Dionysius wanted to explore events' causes (*Ant. rom.* 5.56.1).

⁴⁶ Tacitus, *Ann.* 4.11.