

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 1, Authorship, Date, Genre 6-Min. Video Overview

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Okay, so let's jump right in. We're looking at a historical document that is absolutely foundational to the story of early Christianity. I mean, it is packed with action, with travel, high-stakes drama, but it has this one massive secret.

We don't actually know who wrote it. So today, we are putting on our detective hats to solve one of the biggest and most important literary mysteries in the New Testament. Right, so the book is called the Acts of the Apostles.

It literally picks up where the story of Jesus ends and tells us how this tiny backwater movement just exploded across the entire Roman Empire. It is our single most important historical source for that period, and the author never ever signs their name. So who was this anonymous historian? Let's start looking for some clues.

First things first, let's open up the case file. The thing you have to understand is that Acts is actually part two of a bigger story. The Gospel of Luke, that's part one.

Acts is the sequel, showing how the mission of Jesus was carried on by his followers. And we're not just talking about a collection of letters or some abstract teachings here. This is a story, a history that covers about 30 years of the church's first mission.

It gives us the backstory for pretty much everything else in the New Testament. And yet the one person who's so carefully stitched it all together stays completely in the shadows. This anonymity is our central problem.

Okay, now for our first huge break in the case. This is maybe the most important clue we have. The we passages.

See, for most of the book, the author is writing in the third person. You know, they did this, or Paul went there. But then all of a sudden, the narrator switches to we, which really seems to imply they were right there in the middle of the action.

These we passages are our best shot at figuring out the author's identity. The narrator says things like, we set sail from Troas, or we stayed in Philippi for several days. The implication is pretty clear, right? The author is claiming to be an eyewitness, a travel buddy of the apostle Paul.

And what's more, the level of detail in these sections is way, way higher than in other parts of the book, which just reinforces that feeling. So this has sparked a massive debate among scholars. On one side, you have people who say, look, it is what it is.

It's the journal of someone who was there. But then other scholars will point to ancient sea voyage novels, which sometimes used a fake we narrator just as a literary trick to make the story feel more immediate. So which is it? Is it real? Or is it a storytelling gimmick? Well, here's where that fictional device theory hits a major snag.

The consensus is that Acts is a work of ancient history. It's not a novel. And as the famous Harvard classicist, Sir Arthur Darby Nock, pointed out, in ancient historical writing, when an author uses I or we, they're making a claim.

They're telling their readers, I was there. I saw this. It was a claim of eyewitness testimony.

And here's something else that just feels weird for the fiction theory. Think about it. If you were just making this up to sound exciting, wouldn't you insert yourself into the most famous scenes, like at the Pentecost? But the we passages are so specific.

They'll pop up. Then they stop when Paul leaves the city of Philippi. And then years later, they pick up again when he goes back to that exact same city.

It's not a grand dramatic choice. It's almost mundane. It feels way more like a real person's travelogue, a person who just happened to stay behind in Philippi for a while.

So if we run with the idea that the author was a real companion of Paul, well, then our investigation gets a whole lot more interesting. It's time to line up the suspects from Paul's inner circle and see who really fits the evidence. The method here is a classic process of elimination.

We know the names of a bunch of people who traveled with Paul, so we can just check their known locations against the we passages in Acts and see who could have actually been there. If they don't match up, they're off the list. First up, Aristarchus.

He was with Paul in Rome, so that's a good start. But Acts chapter 27 says Aristarchus was with us. See that? He's part of the group, but he's not the one writing the sentence.

So Aristarchus is ruled out. Okay, next up, Epaphras. Also in Rome.

But his home turf was the Lycus Valley, a region the Book of Acts completely ignores. Seems pretty strange that an author wouldn't mention his own hometown, right? So he's very unlikely. How about Demas? Well, he was there for sure.

But Paul's later letters tell us Demas abandoned him. It's really hard to imagine that someone who deserted the mission would then turn around and write its definitive, glowing history. So yeah, Demas is out.

Alright, this brings us to Titus, and he is a very, very strong candidate. He was Paul's right-hand man, and he's never actually named in Acts, which could be a subtle sign of authorship. But here's the problem.

The letters Paul wrote from Rome during the time of the we passages, they don't list Titus as being there. The timing just doesn't quite work. So close, but we have to take him off the list.

So after eliminating all the other key suspects, we are left with one name. One name that fits all the evidence, both inside the book and outside of it. So let's take a look at the case for our prime suspect, Luke.

When you look at Luke, the evidence just lines up perfectly. First, Paul's letters do list him as being in Rome when the we narrator was there. Check.

Second, there are no internal contradictions that rule him out. Check. Third, just like Titus, he's never mentioned by name in Acts, which makes perfect sense if he's the author, humbly including himself in the we.

And finally, as a physician, he would have been a highly educated man, more than capable of writing a sophisticated historical work like this. It all just fits. But you know, the single most powerful piece of evidence isn't even inside the book.

It's what's not out there. When we look at all the writings from the early church, I'm talking about the first few centuries after Acts was written, you know how many alternative authors are ever suggested? Zero. Not one.

From the very earliest mentions we have, the tradition is completely unanimous. Luke the physician wrote the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. And what's so compelling is that Luke, well, he wasn't a famous figure.

He wasn't an apostle. He wasn't an original eyewitness to Jesus. If the early church was just going to make up an author to give the book more street cred, they would have picked a superstar like Peter or John.

The fact that they all named this relatively minor character strongly suggests they weren't inventing it. They were just preserving an authentic memory. So, we have our author.

But to really close this case, we need to figure out a time of writing. When did Luke put pen to paper and why? Well, there are basically three main theories. A few folks argue for the 60s AD, right after the book's events end.

But the vast majority of scholars today, including Dr. Keener, place it in the 70s or 80s AD. And there are two big reasons for this. One, Luke's gospel seems to talk about the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD like it already happened.

And two, it's pretty clear Luke used Mark's gospel as a source. And you have to leave enough time for Mark's book to be written and start circulating. But you know, maybe the strongest argument for a 70s date is the book's purpose.

I mean, the last quarter of Acts is just obsessed with Paul's legal trials. Over and over and over again, Luke makes the point that Paul was innocent of the charge of sedition. This intense defense of Paul's legacy makes the most sense in the years right after his execution, when those charges were still fresh and were really damaging the reputation of the church he had founded.

So, this isn't a legal brief, and it's not a novel. The genre, the type of book it is, is best understood as a historical monograph, basically a work of ancient history. And like a lot of ancient histories, it tells its big story by focusing on the smaller biographies of its main characters.

In this case, Peter and especially Paul. So, the verdict of our investigation is in. The evidence points overwhelmingly to Luke, the physician and companion of Paul, as our author.

He most likely wrote this incredible two-volume history sometime in his 70s AD, not just to document the spread of the Christian mission, but to defend the very controversial legacy of its greatest champion. And that leaves us with one final thought. This isn't just some anonymous chronicle.

It is a carefully crafted defense, and it was written by someone who was there for the shipwrecks and the riots. Someone who knew Paul personally and felt this deep need to set the record straight. So, how does knowing that change the way we read this pivotal story of the early church?