

INTERNAL EVIDENCE ON THE AUTHORSHIP OF ACTS OF APOSTLES

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The “we passages” in Acts provide the best indication of its authorship. They occur in a series of sections as follows:

16:10-17	(10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17)
20:5-15	(5, 6, 7, 8, 13, 14, 15)
21:1-18	(1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18)
27:1-28:16	(27:1 , 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 15, 16, 18, 20, 27, 29, 37; 28:1, 2, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16)

The phenomenon begins at Troas (**16:10**) and continues through Philippi (**16:11-40**). “We passages” do not appear in the subsequent mission south through Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth, which covers over a year and a half (**18:11**); nor does the author appear again during the rest of Paul’s second journey. Not until late in the third tour do the “we passages” resume—in Macedonia after the Ephesian mission, the swing north through Macedonia, down to Corinth, and back north to Macedonia. The next block of verses (**20:5-15**) covers events in Troas (**20:6-12**) and Miletus (**20:15-38**) as well as the final trip to Jerusalem (**20:13-14**; **21:1-18**). “We” occurs again at the end of the Caesarean imprisonment (**27:1**), although it is not certain that the writer stayed with Paul throughout the arrest in Jerusalem, the transfer to Caesarea, and the two-year incarceration there. He continues with the apostle on the fateful voyage to Rome (**27:1-28:16**), but the text gives no information about how long he remained with Paul during the next two-year imprisonment (**28:30-31**). The “we passages” give positive evidence, not restrictive evidence; that is, they indicate when the writer was present, but do not necessarily mean he was absent at other times.¹

On the assumption that the writer did stay in Rome, we can get a list of possible authors from the prison letters—particularly Colossians. Colossians **1:1**; **4:7-14** mention Timothy, Tychicus, Onesimus, Aristarchus, Mark, Barnabas, Jesus Justice, Epaphras, Luke, and Demas. We can set aside some of these names because they appear in the Acts **20:3-4** “we section”: Sopater, Aristarchus, Secundus, Gaius, Timothy, Tychicus, and Trophimus. The underlined names overlap those in Colossians; hence, the ten reduce to seven; the other four in Acts **20** fall out as well if by chance any of them was with Paul, though unmentioned, at the writing of Colossians.

“We” does not include Mark or Barnabas because they worked separately from Paul on the second tour (Acts **15:37-40**), where the “we passages” begin. Onesimus was not converted till Paul’s Roman (or Caesarean?) imprisonment (Philemon 10), but the “we passages” go back earlier. The same observation probably disqualifies Epaphras. He evidently originated around Colossae (Colossians **4:12**), an area Paul did not evangelize until the third journey as presumably part of the Ephesian mission (Acts **19:10**; though Paul himself may not have gone there—Colossians **2:1**). Again, “we passages” begin earlier than when Epaphras would likely have met Paul.

Of the remaining three, Demas is least likely because he *“forsook [Paul], having loved this present world”* (2 Timothy 4:10). Someone dedicated to Paul enough to sail with him to Rome does not sound like the sort of man that would run off in difficult times—or whatever was the reason for Demas’ departure. There is not much to say about Jesus Justus since he is not mentioned elsewhere; so there is not much to commend him as author either. Luke is most likely because he was a doctor (Colossians 4:14), whose presence with Paul may have been related to the apostle’s *“thorn in the flesh”* (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).² Luke’s presence with Paul fits with the fact that we do not see him among Paul’s circle of workers as one involved in the ministry of the word. The observation should not be overdone, because for two hundred years scholars have noted the prominence of medical vocabulary in Luke-Acts and the interest that the writer shows in healings—particularly in the gospel.

Up to this point we have tried to identify an author from names in the prison letters. It is easier to eliminate possibilities than propose them. No one named in the “we passages” wrote Acts, that is, Silas, Philip, Trophimus, and so on. Whatever prompted the author to conceal his identity in the “we passages” would have applied elsewhere too; so no one from the Pauline circle in Acts—indeed no one named in Acts—wrote the book.

¹We do wonder what besides his absence would explain not using first person. The absence of “we texts” between Macedonia in the second journey and Macedonia again toward the end of the third journey, could indicate that Luke stayed in Philippi and worked with the new Christian community for some five years or more (Acts 18:11 + 19:8-10 + 20:3 + travel times). Philippi was across the Aegean Sea from Troas, where Luke may have met Paul. Maybe he omitted first person references in the other two sections to avoid making the account seem too much about him. That is clearly the case in 20:16-38, which consists mainly of Paul’s discourse to the Ephesian elders: a brief time elapsed, and there was no change of location. The third break between “we segments”—from 21:19 to 26:32—involves a two-year span and a move from Jerusalem to Caesarea, but it forms a unit. Perhaps Luke remained with the apostle throughout that cluster of events and during that time did research for the gospel (Luke 1:1-4) and parts of Acts 1-12. He could have interviewed Mary in Jerusalem, Philip in Caesarea (Acts 21:8; 8:40), and so on. It is odd that just as Paul is about to embark for Rome, Luke would know to return to a locale so far from his home if he was back in Troas or perhaps Philippi.

²Compare Galatians 4:12-20? Poor eyesight has been suggested on the basis of Galatians 4:15 (*“you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me”*) and 6:11 (*“See with what large letters I have written to you with my own hand”*). Others have suggested from Galatians 4:13 that Paul had relapses from malaria contracted earlier in the lower coastal areas of Asia Minor during the first tour (*“because of an infirmity of the flesh I preached the gospel to you the first time”*). Maybe he had recurring difficulties like migraine headaches due to a concussion sustained in the stoning at Lystra (Acts 14:19-20). In 2 Corinthians 12:1-6 Paul juxtaposes being caught up to the third heaven (12:7-10) with the thorn in the flesh (12:7-10). The *“out of the body”/“near-death experience”* (?) may have occurred in connection with that stoning, which could account also for his saying rather early in ministry that he bore in his body the marks of the Lord Jesus (Galatians 6:17). (The stoning, however, may have happened too late in the Galatian mission to explain his remarks in Galatians 4:13.)

Luke’s serving with Paul as his personal physician can be somewhat qualified by periods of time when he may not have been with Paul, notably that possible five-year stretch in Acts

18:11 + 19:8-10 + 20:3 + travel times. On the other hand, the absence of “we” may not indicate absence from the apostle.

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