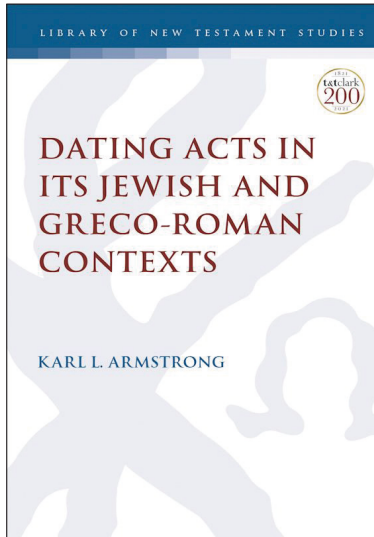


## DATING ACTS IN ITS JEWISH AND GRECO-ROMAN CONTEXTS




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IN *DATING ACTS IN ITS JEWISH AND GRECO-ROMAN CONTEXTS*, Karl L. Armstrong argues for an early date for *Acts of the Apostles*, around 64 CE. Engaging protracted debates regarding the dating, for middle range (70-90 CE) or late (after 90 CE), Armstrong seeks to demonstrate that scholars upholding these dates have used flawed methodologies and have not adequately considered the Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts that underlie the text. He employs a historiographical approach, along with textual criticism and linguistics, asserting that the combination of these methods corrects the inadequate empirical methods and assumptions of other scholars. His understanding of historiography is post structural and thus chiefly concerned with the self-conscious selection and interpretation of sources. Given that Armstrong is arguing for a date for Acts within only a few decades of the late date assigned by

other scholars, his approach requires careful parsing of the claims of other scholars, which he accomplishes, albeit with the notable exception of serious engagement with a range of scholars using literary theory or narrative criticism, such as, for narrative criticism, John A. Darr and William S. Kurz.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Armstrong offers a sound case for careful reconsideration of the historicity of elements within Acts that are often glossed over, most notably, the truncated ending and unresolved fate of Paul and the omission of references to the destruction of the Temple and the fire of Rome.

In the first chapter Armstrong presents the primary flaws of the arguments for later dating of Acts. This is a fairly brief chapter that outlines the positions of previous scholars, with an emphasis on Henry J. Cadbury's statement that either early or late dating is "improbable", and thus a new method is necessary to make inroads on this question of dating, a method Armstrong will use himself with his historiographical approach. He includes helpful tables with dates relating Acts to the early Roman imperial period and others featuring scholars and their respective dating of Acts. Focusing on the work of Richard Pervo because of his widespread influence on the late date of Acts that is the majority view, Armstrong emphasizes that the late dating by him and others is based on intertextualities and presuppositions regarding the concerns of Marcion and the early church. While he acknowledges the validity of some of their observations, he argues they are better understood as emerging before Marcionite Christianity, not least because in his assessment the manuscript evidence does not support such a view.

In the second chapter, Armstrong presents his historiographical approach. He explains that the historical context of any text is inexorably tied to its date and therefore profoundly influences subsequent interpretations. His main criticism of the late dates concerns the parallels these scholars find between Acts and the literary environment of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. These scholars rely on a comparative study of the texts, and Armstrong argues they do so at the expense of textual criticism and recent advances in grammar and linguistics, along with no serious consideration of the epistemological debates among philosophers and historians after the "linguistic turn" (p. 29). After identifying the differences between empiricist historiography and post-structural historiography, he justifies his choices of sources, facts, and events, emphasizing that his approach addresses the manuscript record in addition to the historiographical and archaeological evidence, offering a more comprehensive approach than previous studies.

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1. Kurz, 1993; Darr, 2020.

In the two chapters that follow, Armstrong continues his critique of other scholars, beginning with the debates around dating the sources, to Paul's letters and the works of Josephus, to the vexing ending of Acts. On whether the author of Acts was dependent on the letters of Paul, Armstrong carefully examines Pervo's assessment that he was, focusing on the parallels Pervo cites between Acts and 2 Corinthians and Galatians. As support for his early dating, Armstrong calls into question some of Pervo's assumptions, showing that the parallels suggest a common tradition in circulation during the lifetime of both writers and therefore not "ironclad" proof of a late date. Again, looking to Pervo, Armstrong refutes his claim that the author of Acts relied on the works of Josephus, stating that "even a casual reading of the two accounts shows the vast differences in detail" (p. 87). While some scholars explain these differences as inaccuracies on the part of one author or another, Armstrong argues that Luke relied on his own memory of the events described. Furthermore, if he is using sources, we cannot assume that Josephus was the only available source he had, and we do not know which other sources he may have used. Listing ten reasons why Luke did not rely on Josephus, mostly concerning the lack of precise parallels, Armstrong rules out completely Luke's use of *Antiquities*, which would support a late dating.

Armstrong builds upon these claims to address the so-called enigmatic ending of Acts. By situating the ending of Acts in its historical context, Armstrong aims to show that Luke only wrote what he was aware of, and that he did not know of Paul's fate; thus he ends the narrative with Paul under house arrest for two years. This ending prompts questions for generations of readers about why Luke does not address Paul's martyrdom and the systematic destruction of Christians under Nero that is attested in Roman sources. Armstrong looks to ancient sources for an explanation, such as the writings of Clement, Eusebius, and John Chryostom, finding that all these writings do not offer any clues about what happened to Paul after what is described in Acts. Armstrong then outlines literary approaches of modern interpreters to account for Luke's silence with theories of foreshadowing and intentional ambivalence, finding them lacking clear evidence. He concludes this section with a brief statement of his own position, which is that the reason scholars find the ending of Acts enigmatic is that they uncritically accept a late dating.

Armstrong begins the constructive part of his project in the remaining chapters. He first addresses the ending of Acts and Jewish responses, presenting the scholarly positions on the ending as a picture of either tragedy and rejection of the gospel or one of hope. To reinforce the case for a hopeful picture that supports his early date, Armstrong adds a discussion of Isaiah 6:9-10, which appears in Acts 28:26-27. He then attends briefly to the Jewish background of Paul to correct the Christian biases

in other scholars who favor the tragic view of the end of Acts. In Armstrong's reading, the reference to a "fattening of the heart" from Isaiah signals not a condemnation of the Jews, but rather a "deprivation in wisdom" that reflects the experience of the apostles and the Pauline mission in particular and a promise of future redemption. In terms of Paul's Jewish identity in Acts, Armstrong sees Paul as a Jewish hero whose mission was "quite substantial" in Rome (p. 137). He cites this as further evidence for the early date of Acts, as tensions between Jews and Christians emerge at a later date.

To remedy the lack of attention to textual variants of Acts, Armstrong looks to Western and other textual variants outside the Nestle-Aland to explore how these contribute to the social history and theological challenges of early Christianity. He concludes that the Western variants do not present any major theological, social, cultural, or historical differences when compared with the Alexandrian text. Because the Western scribes tend to expand on Acts, that they do not do so at the end of Acts points to a collection of variants of the same period in history, around 64 CE. Given the combined silence on Paul's fate and the catastrophic events in the Roman empire during the 60s and 70s CE, Armstrong concludes the early dating is the simplest explanation. He writes, "No credible historian, whether ancient or modern, much less the 'first Christian historian', could invent such an ending if these events had already passed. If such a fabricated ending can be justified by popular literary theories then the book of Acts should be relegated to a fictional class of literature that ignores the historical context" (p. 155).

The most compelling chapter of the book is chapter eight, in which Armstrong situates Acts within a pre-70 CE social-historical context. Centering on events in Rome and Jerusalem, Armstrong argues that the great fire of Rome of 64 CE and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE are not mentioned or developed because they had not yet occurred when Luke is writing. Evaluating the linguistic evidence, he sees any references to the siege of Jerusalem in Luke or Acts as reflecting the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. Moreover, he states the entire narrative of Luke-Acts depicts a city functioning according to business as usual, including an active Sanhedrin and office of the High Priest. He acknowledges that the gospel narratives, too, do not describe the destruction of the Temple other than in the form of prophecies, nor do they mention the fire of Rome, which seems only to further Armstrong's aims in asserting that the most logical explanation is that these events had not yet happened. He devotes considerable attention to Roman historical accounts of the fire by Tacitus and Suetonius. However, he does not engage scholarship on ancient

historiography for these sources, nor for Josephus, and thus uncritically accepts the details of these reports as historically factual.<sup>2</sup>

*Dating Acts in Its Jewish and Greco-Roman Contexts* contributes to long-standing and unresolved debates centered on the historicity of Acts in its careful parsing of claims by scholars dominating the majority view. Too often New Testament scholars neglect to revisit claims by 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars whose views are taken as self-evidently true. Armstrong's work revisits this earlier work and that proceeding from it to demonstrate that many open questions remain with not just the dating of Acts but its accompanying level of historical detail about the early Christian movement. The thrust of his argument tends to be critical of other scholars' work rather than constructive of his own interpretation, and his focus is a bit narrow at times with respect to the merits of literary and narrative criticism and the impact of new methods such as social memory theory. Nevertheless, Armstrong's work takes seriously the historical content of Acts and persistently pursues the difficult problems that are too often dismissed as intractable.

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2. For instance, Becker considers of the role social memory theory and Hellenistic literary tradition in the formation of early Christian texts. Cf. Becker, 2017.