

“We” in Acts

E Bruce Brooks

University of Massachusetts at Amherst

(7 July 2014)



Among the perplexities of the Book of Acts are the “we” passages, which shift to the first person plural, as though the story at that point were suddenly being told by a companion of Paul.¹ Ignoring a suspect fifth passage in Codex Bezae,² there are four of these “we” passages,³ all of them in Acts II.⁴ They alternate with speeches of Paul to make up most of Acts II. The arrangement is as follows:

Ac 15:36–16:8. Preaching in **Asia**

We1 (**Ac 16:9-18**). Voyage to Philippi. Exorcising the slave girl

Ac 16:19–20:2. Released at **Philippi**. Thessalonica. Athens. Corinth

We2 (**Ac 20:3-16**). Voyage from Philippi to Miletus

Ac 20:17-38. Farewell to **Ephesian** elders at Miletus

We3 (**Ac 21:1-18**). Voyage to Caesarea. Journey to Jerusalem

Ac 21:19–26:32. Conflict at **Jerusalem**. Defense before Roman governors

We4 (**Ac 27:1–28:16**). Voyage to Malta and Puteoli. Arrival at Rome

Ac 28:17-31. Address to the Jews of **Rome**. Preaching for two years.

First, a question amenable to stylistic analysis: Do the “we” parts of Acts II differ significantly, as a group, from the “they” parts? If so, a “we” diary may be implied.

One aspect of similarity or difference in written texts is *stylistic* difference. If the four “we” passages resemble the rest of Acts, then it is unlikely that somebody else’s diary is being drawn on. Using the BIRD measure of stylistic difference,⁵ in which a D value of **0.50** or less indicates significant similarity, we get:

D (Acts “we” passages vs Acts “they” passages) = **0.43**

This significant similarity suggests that Luke himself has written the “we” passages. That tentative conclusion invites further questions.

¹Variouly thought to be Aristarchus, Barnabas, Epaphroditus, Silas, Timothy, or Titus.

²Bezae exaggerates many tendencies in Acts; see Williams **Alterations** 55-58.

³Definitions differ slightly. Harnack 1911 has 16:10-17, 20:4-16., 21:1-18, and 27:1-28:18; Fitzmyer 1998 has 16:10-17, 20:5-15, 21:1-18, and 27:1–28:1.

⁴For this division (between Acts 15:35 and 15:36), see Brooks **Acts-Luke**.

⁵See Brooks **Chinese**. BIRD is based on high-frequency connectives, and so is not affected by nautical or other subject-related terms in the “we” passages. The Greek text used is NA27.

Second, do the "we" passages resemble *each other*? The crosstable is:

	<i>We1</i>	<i>We2</i>	<i>We3</i>	<i>We4</i>
<i>We1</i>	~	0.39	0.40	0.35
<i>We2</i>	0.39	~	0.42	0.42
<i>We3</i>	0.40	0.42	~	0.26
<i>We4</i>	0.35	0.42	0.26	~

Answer: significantly. The last two (the Pauline captivity) are especially close.⁶

Third, are the "we" segments consecutive in Acts II context? That table is:

	<i>Asia</i>	<i>We1</i>	<i>Php</i>	<i>We2</i>	<i>Eph</i>	<i>We3</i>	<i>Jeru</i>	<i>We4</i>	<i>Rome</i>
<i>Asia</i>	~	0.33	0.40	0.34	0.49	0.36	0.64	0.36	0.50
<i>We1</i>	0.33	~	0.41	0.39	0.51	0.40	0.44	0.35	0.57
<i>Php</i>	0.40	0.41	~	0.50	0.61	0.46	0.36	0.32	0.70
<i>We2</i>	0.34	0.39	0.50	~	0.72	0.42	0.60	0.42	0.67
<i>Eph</i>	0.49	0.51	0.61	0.72	~	0.58	0.83	0.59	0.72
<i>We3</i>	0.36	0.40	0.46	0.42	0.58	~	0.60	0.26	0.63
<i>Jeru</i>	0.64	0.44	0.36	0.60	0.83	0.60	~	0.41	0.83
<i>We4</i>	0.36	0.35	0.32	0.42	0.59	0.26	0.41	~	0.64
<i>Rome</i>	0.50	0.67	0.70	0.67	0.72	0.63	0.83	0.64	~

Answer: Yes, but especially so at the beginning of Acts II; less so at the end.

Fourth, how consecutive are the "they" segments taken separately?

	<i>Asia</i>	<i>Php</i>	<i>Eph</i>	<i>Jeru</i>	<i>Rome</i>
<i>Asia</i>	~	0.40	0.49	0.64	0.50
<i>Php</i>	0.40	~	0.61	0.36	0.70
<i>Eph</i>	0.49	0.61	~	0.83	0.72
<i>Jeru</i>	0.64	0.36	0.83	~	0.83
<i>Rome</i>	0.50	0.70	0.72	0.83	~

Answer: As before, but these passages are more consecutive at the beginning than at the end. If from this table we remove the aberrant Jerusalem segment, we get:

	<i>Asia</i>	<i>Php</i>	<i>Eph</i>	<i>Rome</i>
<i>Asia</i>	~	0.40	0.49	0.50
<i>Php</i>	0.40	~	0.61	0.70
<i>Eph</i>	0.49	0.61	~	0.72
<i>Rome</i>	0.50	0.70	0.72	~

⁶Compare the Iliad 20-21 example in Brooks Chinese 36.

The later segments, though unlike each other, *are close to the first of them*: Asia. Perhaps the Asia segment (to which alone Luke of Antioch is likely to have been an eyewitness) served as a model, indeed a template, for the others.⁷ As for “Jerusalem,” it is the one part of the story for which Paul’s letters (which Luke knew)⁸ give no hint, and where Luke, exceptionally, was working entirely without a precedent..

Fifth, what of the “we” portions? It will be seen from the crosstable for all of Acts that *they too are close to the Asia segment*. If we extract that data, we get this picture:

	<i>Asia</i>	<i>We1</i>	<i>We2</i>	<i>We3</i>	<i>We4</i>
<i>Asia</i>	~	0·33	0·34	0·36	0·36
<i>We1</i>	0·33	~	0·39	0·40	0·35
<i>We2</i>	0·34	0·39	~	0·42	0·42
<i>We3</i>	0·36	0·40	0·42	~	0·26
<i>We4</i>	0·36	0·35	0·42	0·26	~

And we may regard the “we” portions, which strongly resemble each other, to be also slices off the narratively initial Asia (or Antioch) template.

Conclusion. What does this suggest about the nature and purpose of Acts II? The climax of the work (“Be it known therefore unto you that this salvation of God is *sent unto the Gentiles*,” Ac 28:28), though not in a “we” passage, gains authenticity by the implied eyewitness of Luke. Its message, the turning to the Gentiles, was prepared by previous rejections in Achaia (“From henceforth I will go unto the Gentiles,” Ac 18:6 at Corinth) and Asia (“Lo, we turn to the Gentiles,” Ac 13:46 at Pisidian Antioch).⁹ It reverberates with the Old Testament in Ac 28:26-27; the only such quote in Acts II.

Acts II thus looks like a composition, not a diary. It is based on Luke’s memory of Antioch, linked by invented “we” passages (all similar because all equally invented) and narrative “they” passages (not mutually similar, but all modeled on the “Asia” or Antioch segment), ending with an impressive, and again, an invented, scene at Rome – a scene that defined and legitimized the Gentile future of Christianity.

Works Cited

- E Bruce Brooks. Acts-Luke. Alpha v1 (2017) 143-157
 E Bruce Brooks and A Taeko Brooks. Stylistic Difference in Chinese and Greek. Alpha v2 (2022) 19-34
 William Sanger Campbell. The “We” Passages in the Acts of the Apostles. SBL 2007
 Morton S Enslin. “Luke” and Paul. JAOS v58 (1938) 81-91
 Joseph A Fitzmyer. The Acts of the Apostles. Doubleday 1998
 Adolf Harnack. The Date of the Acts . . . Williams & Norgate 1911
 C S C Williams. Alterations to the Text of the Synoptic Gospels and Acts. Oxford 1951
 Keith L Yoder. Nine Matthean Parables. Alpha v2 (2022) 190-194

⁷For another example of “template” in stylistic analysis, see Yoder **Nine**.

⁸Once assumed as obvious; more recently denied. I follow Enslin **Luke**.

⁹For the design of Acts II and its extension back into Acts I, see Brooks **Acts-Luke** 150f.