

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Lecture 2, Genre and Historiography

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This is Dr. Craig Keener in his teaching on the book of Acts. This is session 2, Genre and Historiography.

Scholars have proposed a number of genres or literary types for the book of Acts.

One that we have looked at is biography, and there are a number of useful elements in that proposal. Another proposal and this one has been much more controversial, has been the proposal that Acts is a novel, mainly proposed by Richard Pervo. Now actually, Pervo today would say no, he was never really saying that Acts was a novel.

He was just making comparisons with novels and recognizing Acts as a popular-level work rather than an elite historical work. So, he saw it more as a kind of novelistic historiography. But in any case, looking at the proposal of the novel, because a number of people have taken his original argument and have said, well, maybe Acts is a novel or we should read it as a novel.

One of his arguments is that Luke caricatures his opponents, and makes them look really bad. Well, some people do act really bad, but in any case, even if Luke is characterizing them, that wouldn't make it a novel, because that was characteristic of all polemic. I mean, Tacitus, if anybody in antiquity was a historian, it was Tacitus.

But you see how Tacitus treats Nero and Domitian. Anything bad that was rumored about Nero or Domitian ends up in Tacitus's work. People write from given perspectives.

Pervo cites rowdy mobs. He says, those appear in novels, but they also appear all over the place in ancient historiography. There were a lot of rowdy mobs in antiquity and we have them in historical works no less than we have them in novels.

Sometimes he appeals to later Christian acts, the Acts of Paul and Thecla, the acts of Peter, the Acts of John, which is my personal favorite, and a number of others. But that's derivative from the acts of Luke. Virtually everybody agrees that Luke's acts is earlier, so we can't really read the later ones into that.

In fact, those later ones come from the heyday of novels, the late second and early third centuries. The Gospel of Luke does not, and Richard Pervo himself does not date it that late. Moreover, ancient novels were usually romances.

You can say, well, the Acts of John wasn't, some of the others. Often some of these later acts, Christian acts, because writing in late antiquity there was more of a valuing of celibacy than of romance in some circles. Looking at these later acts, like the Acts of Paul and Thecla, the major female character there leaves her husband and becomes celibate. She follows Paul around, but she doesn't become his bride or something like that.

But ancient novels were usually romances. Novels were only extremely rarely about historical characters.

There are a few of them. Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* is one from an earlier period, and from a later period we have a work by somebody we call Pseudo-Callisthenes. It wasn't really Callisthenes, writing an Alexander romance. That was written about somebody who lived 500 years earlier. It's not dependent on historical information, at least 500 years earlier. But only rarely were they about historical characters, and never, so far as I've ever seen, about any recent characters.

When you're writing about recent characters, I mean, people didn't write novels about recent characters, past generation or two. So, you wouldn't have a novel about Jesus from the first century. You wouldn't have a novel about Paul from the first century, or even, if you want to date it that late, from the early second century.

In contrast to having history and biography, where history was considered best written by eyewitnesses or by contemporaries, not all of it was written that way, but history could be written about recent characters. Novels were not. Novels would not include the vast correspondence with history that we find in the Book of Acts.

And seriously, these are different genres. Fictionalizing in narratives was limited to tales and novels. That was criticized by historians.

Historians weren't allowed to do that. So, Lupian, Polybius, when he's criticizing Timaeus, slammed those who had a lot of error, even though many scholars today will say, well, Timaeus wasn't actually as bad of a historian, when we read between the lines, as Polybius accused him of being. Polybius may have been trying to get rid of some of this competition.

But in any case, that was criticized in historical works. Furthermore, you don't have in novels a historical prologue, historical preface like you do in Luke 1:1-4, or the use of sources the way we have here. I know of one novel, Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*, which seems to recycle an earlier storyline that's found in Lupian's *Lucius*.

But that's the one example that I know of using sources, and it was very freely rewritten. It was very obviously a novel. It was very obviously not a historical work, in contrast to what we have in Luke-Acts.

Also, with regard to Luke's drawing on a range of sources, he seems to be very careful in the way he puts his sources together. This isn't a course in the Gospel of Luke, but you can see using a synopsis of the Gospels. If you made a synopsis of other ancient biographies, you'd see that the synoptic Gospels are actually pretty close to one another by ancient standards, suggesting that they really did intend to draw on historical information.

Now, in terms of historical preface, novels didn't have those. Sometimes some scholars have cited one exception, and that exception is a novel by Longus, Daphnis, and Cloet. But if you read the preface to that novel, it's not a historical preface at all.

It says this is how I made the story up. So, very different genres. Richard Pervo has also pointed out you have many adventures as in novels.

Well, you have adventures also in histories. I mean, read Josephus' autobiography. Certainly, it's full of adventure.

Read Josephus' war or Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War. Obviously, there are adventures there because it's writing about war. Now, admittedly, when I first tried reading Thucydides' Peloponnesian War, I think I was 14 years old, and I did not find it as interesting as I do now.

But I did find some other works. I found Tacitus quite interesting when I was 12. So, histories also could include interesting adventures.

Maximus of Tyre says that histories are pleasurable and could even be read at banquets in lieu of other forms of entertainment, at least if you had intellectuals present. Now, this would be especially true in popular historiography. And here's where I think Richard Pervo has a valuable insight because it is written in a more adventuresome way with less tedious other kinds of details than what you have in the elite historiographies.

Historical monographs even had plots so that they had a common theme, a common story that they were telling. Aristotle talked about the value of a plot for any kind of narrative. This interest in adventure was a trait of all ancient literary narratives, although you find it more in some kinds than in others.

But how much should there have been in Acts? How much should there have been in recounting Paul's adventures? Well, if you read 2 Corinthians 11, if anything, Luke toned down Paul's adventures because Paul had a whole lot more than Luke takes space to recount. He merely gives samples. One of the key adventures in the book of Acts, Paul is let down from a wall to escape.

Paul mentions that in 2 Corinthians 11. Paul mentions shipwrecks that nowhere appear in Acts. Acts recounts one shipwreck later than 2 Corinthians was written.

But Paul talks about being shipwrecked multiple times. He talks about being beaten in synagogues multiple times. He talks about being beaten with rods multiple times, even though Acts narrates only one of those.

So, Acts is not accentuating Paul's adventures. It's actually, if anything, recounting less of them, although it recounts some in greater detail than Paul would have reason to do. Richard Pervo talks about, well, there's a hero like you have in Hellenistic novels.

Well, but you also have a hero in positive biographies. Biographies could be positive or negative. Usually, they were mixed.

They had positive and negative features. But if you were writing about somebody you really respected, like when Tacitus writes about his father-in-law Agricola, well, then it was very positive. But you often had a hero.

You certainly had a protagonist in many biographies. There's a useful element in what Richard Pervo has pointed out, and that is that Luke uses interesting storytelling techniques. But you can use similar narrative techniques in historiography, especially at a popular level.

My wife was a war refugee for 18 months, and we've written a book. It's not out yet, but at the time that this is being filmed, it may be out by the time you're watching this. But we wrote a book about it.

The book has a lot of adventure, a lot of action, and some romance. It's my wife. But none of it is fictitious.

There were a few points where, for the sake of space, just a couple times, I blended things that happened chronologically at different points. I blended them together into one scene. That was just a few points.

But these things were taken directly from her journal and from my journal. These were actual events. But the way you tell them, I left out a whole lot of things that were in the journal to focus on the things that readers would be most interested in.

My journals for some of that period can fill up two drawers of a file cabinet. And this book was supposed to be small so it could be sold cheaply. That's what the publisher asked for.

So only a very small amount of the information is in there, but I could select the information based on our interest. Well, that doesn't make it a novel. It's still biographic.

It's still historically true. But the interests shape the way it's written. And that was true in antiquity no less than it's true today.

In fact, I could have written it in a much less popular historiographic style. We had all the dates and everything from the journals, but it's all right. Others have suggested that the Book of Acts is an epic.

Marianne Bontz suggested that it's a prose epic. The problem with comparing Acts to a prose epic is that such a genre did not exist. Epics were written in poetry, not in prose.

And you don't have to read much of Luke's Acts in Greek before you recognize that, as in English, Acts is not written in poetic form. It's prose. Also, epics normally dealt with the distant past.

Well, Acts is dealing with the recent past, recent generations. Distant past would be centuries earlier. Often these were legends, and sometimes they were pure myth, the epics in the Roman Empire.

You do have, like later in the first century, although this is not the primary appeal in Bontz's work. She appeals primarily to Virgil's Aeneid. But you do have some more recent wars, even civil wars.

You have Lucan, for example, or others, putting a war into poetic form and then making it like an epic, and exaggerated features with the giant war goddess standing above the army, and so on. But Acts is nothing like that. Acts, again, is not written in poetic form.

There's a possibly useful element in Bontz's argument, though, and that is that Acts is a foundation story. It may not be about the distant past, but it is talking about the legacy that was left by these first apostolic leaders. So, it's not to say we can't learn something from that, but prose epic didn't exist.

We talked about the thesis that it's biography. Maybe the closest parallel would be Diogenes Laertius, who, writing later, has biographies of a number of people. You also have Philostratus's Lives of the Sophists, having biographies of a number of people strung together.

You also have parallel lives, where you have multiple volumes, where one volume deals with one figure, another volume deals with another figure, and to narrow

down the information you were going to talk about, you would compare them with one another. So, you have Jesus, Peter, and Paul. But what do you do then with Acts 6-8, which focus on Stephen and Philip, or even 9-12, where it goes back and forth between Peter and Paul? So, I've argued that it's really a biographic approach to history.

History dealt with people's praxis or acts. That's where we get the word acts from the title praxis. You have some of this with biography, but you also have it in history.

The exception would be Pseudo-Calisthenes, written at least 500 years after Alexander the Great. So the majority view of scholars today is that acts is historiography of some sort. That was held by Debelius, by Cadbury, by Eckhart Plumaker, by Luke Timothy Johnson at Emory, and by Martin Hengel.

History could get some details wrong, yet still, it would convey historical events, as opposed to a novel where a person just made everything up. Here are reasons why scholars—and these are scholars from a range of perspectives. These are not scholars who say—well, some of the scholars would say, you know, Luke was a superb historian.

Some would say, well, he's a so-so historian. But the majority of scholars today realize that Luke is writing historiography. Reasons for that.

One is that Luke includes set speeches, which appear very often in ancient historiography. It was characteristic of ancient historiography. When Josephus rewrites parts of the Old Testament in his Antiquities, he even adds in speeches to make it better historiography.

Sometimes he makes some Greco-Roman speeches. He's very interested in rhetorical historiography, Josephus is. But we'll talk more about that at another point.

But you have these set speeches. Someone has objected, well, you know, set speeches, you have speeches in novels too. Yes, you have discourse, and you have people talking in novels, but it's not the same as having these set speeches, the way you have, so dominant in historiography.

Although they're shorter in Acts, because Acts is shorter, it's one volume. The historical preface. The majority of scholars see the preface of Luke 1:1-4 as a historical preface.

Loveday Alexander argued at length, well, this looks more like the kind of preface you have in scientific treatises. But when she was critiqued by people saying, well, this is not a scientific treatise, she responded, I never was saying it was a scientific

treatise. I agree that it's a work of ancient historiography, but of the more scientific kind, the kind that maybe a physician or someone like that would write.

We have massive correspondences with known data. Novelists did not care about that. Novelists did not go back and research things, even when they were writing about historical characters.

Occasionally, Luke includes synchronization, which was more characteristic of elite historiography. Luke couldn't have that much synchronization with external history, because, for the most part, the reports he got didn't tell him, this happened in this year, this happened in that year. But he has it sometimes.

Luke 2:1.2 and Luke 3:1.2 name the rulers at the time that these events were happening. Acts 18.12 mentions Galio. Even Acts 11:28, talking about the famine period under Claudius.

Also, there's a focus on events, and you see that in the preface, where it says, now concerning the things that were fulfilled among us. Well, focus on events, that was the focus you had in historiography. And, you know, the alternative to this, historical novels, is quite rare.

Edward Meyer, perhaps the 20th century's most famous historian of Greco-Roman antiquity, concluded that Luke was a great historian and that Acts, in spite of its more restricted content, bears the same character as those of the greatest historians of Opulebius, Olivi, and many others. Personally, I wouldn't put Luke in the same category as Bolivius or Libby. I don't think he would have wanted to have written as long as they wrote.

But the point, nevertheless, is that Luke was writing historiography. Well, what kind of historiography? There were different kinds of sources that we might group together as history. Genealogy, mythography, horography, which was local history or annals of a local place, chronography, which was trying to just arrange the events of world history.

But usually, we're talking about history proper. History proper was dealing with historical events, and it was in narrative form, unlike annals. And when I say historical events, I'm like mythography, which could be recycled myths.

Sometimes they did use sources for that, but they're talking about people many, many centuries earlier if people at all. By topic, some people have said, okay, well, this is history proper, but what kind of history? Is it institutional history, writing the institution of the early church? Is it political history, viewing the church as kind of a political entity? Is it philosophic, biographic history, focusing on teachers, on sages?

We have some of that. Is it ethnographic, the history of a people? You have that sometimes in antiquity as well.

We can draw insights from each of these kinds, but most people who wrote historical monographs weren't trying to shove it into just one category. These are kind of artificial categories that we come up with, and so none of these have actually caught on and commanded a consensus among scholars. In terms of ethnographic history, when people did write ethnographic history, the history of a people, often it was a minority group who felt marginalized by the way that history was normally being written by the Greeks, who pioneered the major form of historiography used in the Roman Empire.

Greeks viewed other peoples through a Greek lens. They were ethnocentric, as peoples usually are, and so they were interested in things from a Greek view. Many of them looked down on some other civilizations.

Herodotus was a bit fairer, but many of them looked down on non-Greek civilizations, non-Roman civilizations. So, you have the *Babyloniaca*, which was written. Barossus wanted to show that the Babylonians had a noble history.

Manetho wanted to show in his *Aegyptiaca*, probably back then it would have been pronounced *Aigyptiaca*, that Egyptians had a noble history, which in fact they did. And Josephus does that to some extent with his *Jewish antiquities* to show that the Jewish people had a noble history, a history that went back far earlier than Greek civilization. Greeks may not have liked that, but anyway, he was writing an apologetic.

And that brings us to another way of viewing Acts, and that is by motive. You can have different topics, but what is the motive? What are the driving forces behind writing the historiography? Well, one possible motive for Luke-Acts is also one that we find for these ethnographic historiographies, these ethnographic histories that were written about a particular people, a minority group within the empire or outside the empire. And Gregory Sterling, who at the moment is the dean at Yale Divinity School and at the time was at the University of Notre Dame, Gregory Sterling has argued very, I think very strongly, very convincingly, based on ancient Jewish historiography, that much of this was written with an apologetic emphasis.

And I think the parallels with Acts are very informative. So, the Jewish people weren't responsible for these anti-Jewish riots that took place and so on. Also, you can classify history from another perspective.

I mean, these are not mutually exclusive. You can classify by topic, you can classify by motive, or you can classify by form. Well, in form, it's a monograph.

It's not a multi-volume history. Eckhart Plumacher and others have argued that it's a historical monograph, like Psalms' historical monographs. But, like Richard Pervo points out, it's on a popular level.

It's not on the elite level. Well, sometimes with the Gospels, there was a period when people were speaking of the Gospels as *kleinliteratur* as opposed to *folkliteratur*, by which they meant the Gospels were folk literature. They're common people's literature as opposed to *kleinliteratur*, as opposed to high-level elite literature.

Well, certainly, Luke-Acts is not elite, but neither is it just folk literature. It's not something like the life of Aesop. So, you've got to focus on intriguing narrative, but it's nonetheless history for that.

Today, it depends on where you are in the world, and what things will appeal to you, but just some of the things that I've appreciated and read, like *The Hiding Place*, *The Cross and the Switchblade*, Jackie Pullinger's story in Hong Kong, our book, *Impossible Love*, and other things like this, not trying to place us necessarily in the same category, but that you can have works that are generally true, but they're told in a popular-level way. And I think that that is what we have with the Book of Acts. Apologetic ethnographic history, in this case in a monograph form.

Greeks tend to caricature others, so others often responded by producing works that showed, no, we have a noble history. And Josephus does that. Some people have said Josephus tries to show that Judaism is a *religio licita*, a legal religion.

It wasn't officially a legal religion, but it didn't need to be. Its antiquity and the precedence of toleration that Josephus brings out and likes to emphasize as opposed to maybe some other things he doesn't mention. We know that happens sometimes because there was a decree of Claudius and he told the Greeks in Alexandria to stop persecuting the Jewish community he also told the Jewish community to stop agitating and Josephus only reports the part where he reproved the Greeks.

That's understandable. He's writing from a particular perspective for a particular purpose. But in any case, he appeals to precedence for toleration, just like Acts does.

He shows that the church has an ancient history, and an ancient heritage. Goes back, to Volume 1, you can see Jesus is embedded in the history of Israel. There are all these allusions to, I mean, you have Zechariah and Elizabeth alluding back to Abraham and Sarah and so many other things.

So, his story embeds the story of the church in the ancient story of Israel. He also is full of precedence, favorable precedence that, you know, the church should not be persecuted, its mission should not be silenced because this is not something that is against Roman law. Pilate, Jesus was really innocent.

Sergius Paulus, Galileo, Festus. Felix just kept Paul in jail because he wanted a bribe and so on. So, Acts is doing something like what Josephus was doing with apologetic ethnographic history.

Not just ethnography apart from apologetic. He's actually not writing the history of the church. He's writing the history of the mission of the church.

He's not even writing the Acts of the Apostles because he doesn't deal much with most of the apostles. You've got Peter, John, and Paul, and then James, the Lord's brother, who wasn't one of the twelve. You have rhetorical sophistication in some ancient historiography that was demanded by elites, especially in the heyday of the second sophistic and afterward.

By the second century and later, you had people who looked down on the New Testament because it wasn't rhetorically sophisticated enough. And certainly, they looked down even more on the Old Testament because it wasn't sophisticated by Greek rhetorical standards because it wasn't written for them. These historians allowed adjustments of detail to make the narrative cohesive.

They also emphasized vividness. And one of the ways that historians often emphasized vividness was through an exercise called ekphrasis, where they would describe something in detail. It goes back to... rhetoricians look back, especially to Homer.

Homer was sort of the rhetorical canon of the Greeks, just like the Old Testament was the canon of the Jewish people and the Christian movement. So, they looked back to a whole long description of Ajax's shield, just giving you every possible elaboration. So, that was common among rhetorically oriented historians.

Luke lacks that. As Paul and Silas are leaving Philippi, he could have described the aching of their wounds. He could have described the hundred-petaled flowers that the hills around Philippi were famous for.

He could have described the gold mines near Philippi. He could have described the river Strumon. He could have described the ancient lion statue that was outside on the road that they undoubtedly passed by.

Luke doesn't describe any of those things. That's not his interest. Luke is writing on a more popular level than that.

It's fairly popular, but higher literary level than Mark. Literate, but not as sophisticated as Paul. Not elite, but closer to the elite than he was to the papyri.

Now, Luke also has speeches. Rhetoric was important in history, especially for the elite, less so for Luke. You see the narrative cohesiveness of Luke's acts.

It's a whole story. It fits together. Golder, Talbert, and Tannehill all emphasize this.

Golder, in the 1960s, kind of overdid the parallels, but Talbert and Tannehill have done it from a much more sober, literary, narrative-critical perspective. And so, we see how it all fits together. We see patterns in Luke's acts.

Now, the patterns don't mean it's unhistorical. Historians believed that Providence created these patterns, and so they would highlight things that looked to them like parallels. You have that in Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who appeals to Providence.

You have it in Josephus. You have it in the Roman historian Appian. It's not uncommon.

They believed that Providence created those patterns, and so you may say, well, they were in the eyes of the beholder, but anyway, they weren't inventing the details in those cases. Parallel lives. Plutarch tells us that he looked for existing parallels.

That's why not everything is parallel, but he looked for existing parallels when he wrote his parallel lives. He didn't obliterate the differences in doing so. In biography, you could have an element of praise and blame, but according to Polybius, it had to be assigned according to just merit.

That is, you couldn't just make up stories. You had to use the stories that were actually there in assigning praise and blame. It's distinct from, say, a funeral speech, where you just say nice things about the person.

Some historians, although Polybius attacked this viciously, some historians were sensationalistic, and the examples Polybius cites of sensationalism were where historians really played on pathos. You even have Antacidus playing on pathos. But what he's talking about is when a city is conquered and people are being led out as slaves.

He says, well, this historian is a bad historian because he describes all the women lamenting and weeping and so forth. Well, my guess is that as they were being led out as slaves, they probably were lamenting and weeping and so forth. What Polybius doesn't like is focusing on that.

Not all historians agreed with him. Luke has some pathos, but he doesn't have much. In fact, he may have less than Tacitus does.

And the pathos that he has is not like inventing events. It's like people weeping as Paul leaves, which shows how much they love Paul. Elite historians would elaborate on scenes.

As we mentioned, that's not in Luke-Acts. Josephus does that. Those kinds of things were considered necessary for a book to sell among people who could afford to buy it.

But on a more popular level, they were just interested not in all these elite rhetorical techniques, but they were interested in good storytelling. And again, you can do that without inventing things. Did historians have ancient biases? Well, from what we've already said, you know that they did.

Ancient historians did have biases, or what scholars call tendencies. They had certain tendencies, and certain perspectives. Not necessarily, when we use the term bias in this way, not necessarily negative, but they had certain perspectives.

Modern historians have the same thing. Postmodernists do like to point this out. Everybody writes from a perspective, which non-postmodernists will say doesn't justify distorting things.

But in any case, I won't get into all that debate. But you can contrast biographies on Lincoln or Churchill. Some are more positive; some are more negative.

Also, there can be an explicit focus. You can write about church history. That doesn't mean you're making things up.

It means that your focus is on the history of the church. Although, Western historians have tended to focus on Western church history, and more recently, scholars have been pointing out, well, actually, what about the history of the church in East Africa? What about the history of the church in Asia and some other places? Actually, those things are coming more to the fore now. So, there was a certain perspective from which people were writing, certain interests that dictated what they primarily covered.

But church history, political history, women's history, so your interests will also dictate your focus, but that doesn't mean it's not history. But this was more overt in antiquity. Sometimes they would give explicit narrative asides.

Well, this person did this because they're a jerk. Sometimes you would have, well, often you would have very clear nationalistic biases. You have a lot of people writing from a very pro-Roman tendency, and that may be one reason those histories have survived.

Plutarch really did not like Herodotus. He had a whole essay on the malice of Herodotus. What did he have against Herodotus? Herodotus said something negative about Boeotia, where Plutarch was from.

You know, you don't mess with my town. I'm going to write something bad about you if you write something bad about my town. So, Plutarch took on Herodotus and called him malicious.

People had various nationalistic biases, although sometimes some of them wrote so objectively that historians today debate which side they were really on. Moral lessons. Responsible historians believed that you didn't just put the history out there and let people do what they want with it.

You gave them some direction. They knew that people were going to use these historical examples in speeches. They would use them in political arguments and so forth.

So, the question was, if people are going to use these, we want to make sure they use them rightly. So often at the beginning of their work, they would say, I'm writing this to provide for moral examples so you can look for good and bad examples from the past when we try to persuade people in the present. Now, they didn't always tell you which examples were good and which examples were bad because sometimes that was taken for granted in the culture.

But you do have that also in the Gospels, in the Book of Acts. You have certain morals communicated by the behavior of the people. You have certain groups that are focused on positively or negatively.

The selection of facts for a purpose is not the same as fabricating facts. It's just the way history is written and certainly the way ancient historiography was written. Theological perspectives also appeared.

Historians looked for the divine hand in history. They looked for patterns in history, as we've mentioned, and thus parallels. And that's not just Greek historians.

I mean, you look at 1 Samuel, Chapter 1, and you have the comparison between Hannah and Eli. You have the comparison that goes on in the next chapter between Samuel and Eli's son, Hophni and Phineas. You have the comparisons between Saul and David.

That was just characteristic of a lot of the way historiography was written and it was formalized in Greek rhetoric. Divine providence. Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Josephus looked for this in history.

They mentioned that this was done by providence. Jewish writers, when they were updating biblical history, like the Book of Jubilees, had particular theological emphases, even though Jubilees sticks fairly close to the information that we have in Genesis, augmenting it some with some subsequent Jewish tradition. Josephus even, he's using the same stories, although you can see his slant.

Sometimes his slant is just to make it palatable for a Hellenistic audience by using proper biographic narration techniques. Well, what about accuracy in ancient historiography? That varied some by the historian. Tacitus, Thucydides, or Polybius were more accurate than Herodotus, Strabo the geographer, or Plutarch.

Josephus is unreliable on population estimates and distances, but then again, he probably didn't count the people, nor do we expect that he paced out the distances from one place to another. He didn't actually measure them. But for smaller things that he could measure, like pillars, like monuments, like the architecture in the harbor at Caesarea Maritima, he often was quite precise in those measurements.

He was reliable on most architectural data, and so far as we can tell, on most events. Sometimes he would forget things. Where was Herod Antipas banished? He was banished to Gaul, but to another place than Josephus, he's banished somewhere else.

Well, at least we know he was banished. But Josephus, is not the most careful of ancient historians, but sometimes his information is so precise that archaeologists are astonished by it. Historians had a wide degree of latitude on details.

They had to get the bulk of the story right, insofar as their sources were accurate. They used the criterion of coherence with historical setting. They preferred writers closer in time to the events, especially eyewitnesses.

Their goal was objectivity, and they could be very critical in how they handled their data so that at one point, I believe it was Thucydides perhaps, who criticizes the stories of the great Achaean Empire, the stories that you have in Homer, because if you go back to Mycenae, there are just ruins there, and it doesn't look like it was a very large place. Well, excavations have shown it was larger than he thought, but he was being a critical historian. He was trying to look at the data available to him, and today we have more data available to us, and actually, we're not saying that the Iliad or the Odyssey are historical, but some of the things that they presupposed actually do go back to some information more than maybe Thucydides even thought.

Objectivity was the goal, and sometimes it was achieved to such a degree that scholars debate which way Sallust, for example, in his historical monographs leaned. Chronology was not always available. You have chronology used in Polybius and Thucydides and Tacitus because they have military sources available to them.

They have annals that were written because that's the kind of thing that they're writing about. You don't have that with oral sources. People are not always going to be able to tell you this happened at this date and this happened at this date, and you may not always have things in the precise sequence even, and that wasn't expected.

Certainly, in biography it wasn't expected. In historiography you were to get it as close as possible, but even there sometimes they had to make compromises because you follow something geographically from one year to the next, even if some other events are happening over here before these later events at this site, or do you switch over to here because it happened the same year and then switch back geographically? And different historians had different techniques for that, and some of them criticized some of the others' techniques. The use of sources.

Rarely did historians have omniscient narrators. Usually, they cited varying sources. Sometimes you'd have seven on one side and four on the other, and the historian would say, seven said this, but the majority of historians say this, and they'd cite four, letting you know that there were more than seven, but they just gave you the names of a few of them.

The exceptions. They didn't always cite the varying sources, but they cited them especially where they disagreed. So, when you're talking about recent sources, they were less likely to name their sources because they didn't have so much disagreement among them.

In the case of Arrian, Arrian writes a very respected biography of Alexander the Great, but Arrian is writing toward the end of the first, early second century, and Alexander the Great died in 323 B.C., lived 356 to 323 B.C. So centuries have passed, but in this case, Arrian has a lot of works that have been lost to us today. He had a number of early works about Alexander the Great, and he could draw on those, and so scholars really respect this because he had early sources to work with. But sometimes those sources contradicted one another, and he had to say, well, here are the different views.

Normally if you're writing in the first or second generation, you don't have as much contradiction among the witnesses. You may have a little bit. But what's the case of Luke? Well, Luke was meticulously careful with his sources that were available to him in the Gospels.

How do we know? Just compare Luke and Mark for one thing. My observation from working through ancient histories is that ancient historians covering the same period retold the same events. They often filled in detailed scenes where they lacked access to information, especially where you have private scenes and none of the people had survived.

They all died from it. Josephus does that sometimes. Even Tacitus does it on occasion.

But the substance had to be correct. But they rounded out scenes for good storytelling. So, we've got a couple of dangers in the way people approach ancient historiography.

One is to assume that ancient historiography is the same as modern historiography. So, you judge it by modern rules. You are judging ancient historiography by a genre that technically didn't exist yet, namely modern historiography.

And so, you have ultra-conservatives and you have some skeptics complaining, well, you know, by our very strict standards, we're going to throw out any reliability in this. But ancient historians normally valued accuracy in substance and in events, but not necessarily in all fleshed-out details like conversations that you've got exactly the wording or anything like that. The other danger is assuming that ancient historiography had nothing to do with historical information.

I mean, modern historiography did develop from ancient historiography. Many of the rules we use today were composed by Polybius, who wrote before the New Testament was written. So, assuming, trying to separate ancient historiography from historical information and say, well, it's virtually the same as a novel, that's throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

Novels in history were quite distinct genres in antiquity. Lukian pointed out that good biographers avoid flattery. It falsifies events, and only bad historians invent data.

Pliny the Younger, both of these are writing in the second century, although Pliny is writing earlier in the second century. Pliny the Younger says that what's distinctive about history is its concern for accurate facts. Also, Pliny said history's primary goal was truth and accuracy, not rhetorical display.

Sometimes people say, well, of course, historians would tell you that they wanted to write accurately, but no, that was just a convention. They didn't really mean it. Pliny is not a historian.

Pliny is an orator and a statesman, but he recognizes that history has to be accurate. And you could use rhetoric provided your basis was facts. He wrote to his friends, Tacitus and Suetonius, who were historians.

Suetonius was more a biographer. But he writes to Tacitus, and he says, now I know you're writing a history now of the Roman Empire, and I want to make sure that you don't leave out this very important prosecution, this very important case that I

prosecuted. We don't know if Tacitus listened to him or not because that particular part of Tacitus is missing, but it was barely worth recounting by the standards that Tacitus normally used.

However, what Pliny says is, now I know that you can only include the exact truth, but this is the exact truth. He also gave an account from his father, sorry, not his father, his uncle, Pliny the Elder, who died with the eruption of Vesuvius. He wrote natural history.

So, he was very interested in lots of encyclopedic information about nature and so on. And while everybody else was fleeing Pompeii, he wanted to go find out more about what was going on there, and that was the end of him. But there were some survivors who were able to talk about what happened, and Pliny the Younger provided that information very happily for Tacitus.

But it's true information, and they said, you know, it has to be true information. Aristotle, writing, he was a tutor of Alexander the Great, a student of Plato long before. Aristotle, the difference between poetry and history is not their form, because one could write history in verse, and that was proved later on, but their content.

History must deal with what happened, not just with what might happen. So, there was a heavy emphasis, history is supposed to deal with real events. And people who mix them up today, novels and historiography, take basically some historical novels or some very poorly written histories, but those were, again, a very minute number of them.

You still have the mainstream of both genres being very separate. Critical historiography, contrary to modern ethnocentric bias. Ancients did practice critical historiography.

Much of the modern practice, I said, was from Polybius, as he was critiquing Timaeus, probably just because Timaeus was a rival and he wanted his own history to survive and not that of Timaeus, and he succeeded in that, not very politely. Historians often questioned their sources. They would examine writers' biases.

They tested consistency with geography, ruins, internal consistency, and so on. The sources they preferred were the earlier sources, nearest the events, especially eyewitnesses. They preferred those least apt to be biased.

They compared multiple sources. In other words, ancient historians did care about getting the facts straight. Even Josephus.

Josephus rewrites biblical narratives. Sometimes, as I mentioned, he creates new speeches for these narratives. He elaborates rhetorically.

He omits the golden calf. You know, I mean, you can understand some apologetics for the golden calf, but no, he just doesn't even want to talk about it. But he retains the basic substance of the biblical stories.

And again, in his own period, archaeology confirms him in great detail. So, Josephus wasn't the most accurate historian. He was one of the more careless of them.

And yet, we get so much information from Josephus, and if you have to take his word for it or assume that he's wrong, I, for one, would be more apt to take his word for it unless I have good reason not to. Most importantly, historians of ancient events admitted that much of the ancient past was shrouded in fiction. But when historians were writing about recent events, they valued eyewitness testimony.

They gathered oral reports, just like Luke talks about eyewitnesses in Luke 1.2. We know Suetonius and others, they consulted witnesses. Sometimes they mention them, the witnesses that they consulted. Sometimes they mention works that were written almost immediately after the events on which they depend.

They recognized that they had to be reliable on events. Is acts entertaining? Yes. But historians sought to write in entertaining ways.

The difference, again, between novels and histories was not that only one sought to entertain, but that only one also sought to inform. Ancients believed that one could use truth to teach moral lessons and entertain as well. You test Luke's own case.

What was Luke's method? Well, Luke actually makes that available to us in his preface to his first volume. And we also can test Luke by comparing what he does with Mark. So, Luke's method in his preface.

A preface was supposed to announce what was to follow. Luke's promised content, Luke 1:1-3, speaks of an orderly narrative of the things fulfilled among us. And he writes according to verse 4 to confirm what Theophilus had learned about such events.

So what Luke is telling us is that he's going to be writing about historical information and he's going to be writing about it to confirm things that Theophilus already knew about. What I'm going to be covering soon, we're going to look at this preface in somewhat more detail, Luke 1:1-4. It tells us a lot about the sources available to Luke. Written sources, oral sources, going back to eyewitnesses.

Luke has thorough knowledge or confirms this with his own investigations, verse 3. And also, Luke couldn't fudge. Luke couldn't just be making things up, certainly not on a very large level, since the material was already known in the early church and he was simply confirming what members of his audience already knew. In the next session, we will look at each of these points in detail.

This is Dr. Craig Keener in his teaching on the book of Acts. This is session 2, Genre and Historiography.