

Dr. Robert A. Peterson, The Theology of Luke-Acts, Session 19, Marshall, The Historicity of Acts, Luke's Portrait of Paul

This is Dr. Robert A. Peterson and his teaching on the theology of Luke-Acts. This is session number 19, I, Howard Marshall, The Historicity of Acts, Luke's Portrait of Paul.

We continue our studies in the theology of Luke and Acts with the latter, and let us seek the Lord.

Gracious Father, thank you for sending your Son to be the Savior of the world, even our Savior. Thank you for sending the Holy Spirit into our hearts, that we might call you Father, Father. Teach us, encourage us, lead us in the way, everlasting we pray, through Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen.

We're studying Howard Marshall's good book, Commentary on the Historicity of Acts, and we're up to the Historicity of Acts overview subheads. Historical skepticism is the first subhead, then the historical background in Acts, the problem of sources, Luke's theological motivation, the speeches in Acts, and fifth, Luke's portrait of Paul, the Historicity of Acts. In the preceding section, we have seen some of the theological interests which are apparent in the composition of Acts.

Their presence has led an increasing number of scholars to question the historical value of Acts. Ward Gaskue, an evangelical scholar, has written a book on Acts, the History of the Criticism or Scholarly Investigation of Acts. Ward Gaskue, G-A-S-K-U-E.

In the 19th century, the so-called Tübingen School of Criticism regarded Acts as a late attempt to varnish over the conflict between Peter and Paul, which it was alleged had dominated the early years of the church. Acts presented a picture of smooth compromise and glossed over the harsh realities of the conflict. Toward the end of the century, the researchers of Sir William Ramsey, in particular, did much to discredit this interpretation of Acts and to reaffirm the high historical quality of Luke's work.

William Ramsey, St. Paul, the Traveler and the Roman Citizen, 1895, and then 1920, again another issue, another edition. Ramsey no doubt put the point much more strongly than many of his contemporaries would have been prepared to accept, and he was capable of making assertions about Luke's historical accuracy, which went beyond what could be shown by the available evidence. Essentially, the same point of view was presented more moderately in the major work of Anglo-American scholarship on Acts in the early 20th century, The Beginnings of Christianity.

The contributors to this work came from various schools of thought and most certainly displayed no blind adulation toward Luke. On the contrary, they estimated his work by the standards of liberal scholarship and, in general, recognized Acts as a historical work of considerable value. This verdict was endorsed in the post-war commentaries by F.F. Bruce and C.S.C. Williams.

Meanwhile, a powerful response was developing. In Germany, a much more skeptical attitude to the historical value of Acts was expressed in a series of essays by Martin Debelius, who applied the methods of form criticism to the book. Then came the development of redaction criticism, in which the function of the New Testament writers as creative theologians, working freely on the traditions available to them, was emphasized.

Although Hans Conzelman's major study of Luke's theology, published in 1954, concentrated attention on the gospel, it established for many readers that Luke was primarily a theologian and cut a poor figure as a historian. Two years later, there followed the first edition of a mammoth commentary on Acts by Ernst Haenchen. Anyone who may have thought that Rudolf Bultmann represented the ultimate in historical skepticism as regards the New Testament was in for a rude shock.

Haenchen's method was to ask at every point in Acts, what was Luke trying to do? He found that he could explain most of Acts in terms of Luke's producing an edifying account of the early church that owed nothing to written sources and was based on the scantiest of oral traditions. The result was that Luke's historical accuracy was apparently torn to shreds. The narrative was claimed to have little basis in tradition, to be full of historical inconsistencies and improbabilities, and to be basically the product of the fertile mind of a historical novelist, with little or no concern for such tiresome things as facts.

Essentially, the same line was taken in a somewhat later commentary by H. Conzelman, although the brevity of his treatment means his historical skepticism appears much more arbitrary and ill-founded than that of Haenchen. For the moment, the Haenchen Conzelman approach appears to be dominant and largely uncontested on the continent. Most recently, in a footnote, Marshall says, Martin Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*, 1979, has strongly defended Luke and affirmed that he was no less trustworthy than other historians of antiquity.

Perhaps not a ringing endorsement, but surely much better than the radical skepticism. Historical skepticism is our first subhead. What factors have led to this estimate of Acts? First, there's the general background of historical skepticism associated with form criticism and redaction criticism.

It is commonly assumed that the circles in the church, which preserved and handed on traditions and then incorporated them in writing, were theologically motivated and therefore uninterested in what actually happened and or incapable of checking up to see what the historical facts were. The early church, we are told, was not interested in history, but this general conclusion is logically unjustified. The, therefore, italicized that we have emphasized above has no probative value and is, in any case, inherently unlikely.

It has been shown time and again that theological motivation does not exclude interest, particularly when a writer like Luke deliberately states that his theological purpose led him to produce a historical account of the beginnings of Christianity. It should perhaps be added that form criticism and redaction criticism are perfectly legitimate approaches, and there's no need for them to be characterized by historical skepticism. Historical background in Acts.

One of the major contributions of Ramsey to Lucan's study was his demonstration that on matters of detailed historical background, Luke shows remarkable accuracy. Indeed, it was precisely this observation which led Ramsey to abandon his earlier acceptance of the Tübingen view of Acts as a second-century romance, but the evidence needed to be reconsidered, and today, we are in a better position to affirm the essential reliability of Acts in this area. The major work here is that of A.N. Sherwin-White and his approach is currently being carried further by Colin J. Hemer.

Sherwin-White writes cautiously and does not claim more than is justified by the evidence. He is quite prepared to admit that Luke makes mistakes, but the main thrust of his book is to demonstrate that, for the most part, Luke portrays the first-century Roman scene accurately. The conclusion to be drawn is that if Luke is right about the details of the story, he is likely also to be right about the main episodes.

The fruits of this approach can be seen in the brief but helpful commentary by R.P.C. Hansen, who attributes to Luke a far higher level of historical accuracy than is customary in German-speaking scholarship. German-speaking scholars seem, in general, either to ignore Sherwin-White or to argue that even if a writer is accurate on background, it does not necessarily follow that he's accurate on the main plot. A historical novelist, it is argued, can go to great pains to get his background authentic.

This suggestion is totally unconvincing. It assumes that Luke wrote like a modern novelist striving for verisimilitude. This is sheer anachronism.

It also ignores the fact that Luke's accuracy extends to trivial details of the sort that a writer would be hardly likely to research. The very casualness of the accuracy suggests it is not artificial. Further, we should need some good evidence to show that Luke was writing a historical novel before we put on one side his own claim to be writing reliable history and the evidence of his accuracy.

Third, the problem of sources. One big problem with Acts is the difficulty of discovering any sources used by the author. Even if we assume that the book was written by a companion of Paul, he himself does not appear on stage until chapter 16, and he must, therefore, have been dependent on information from other people for what happened in the earlier sections.

Writing in 1964, J. DuPont commented, quote, it has not been possible to define any of the sources used by the author of Acts in a way that will meet with widespread agreement among the critics. Close quote. DuPont, a book summarized by the title Sources, page 166.

Nothing has happened subsequently to alter this estimate in any significant way. The general view is that Luke has successfully managed to conceal whatever sources he used beneath a uniform editorial style. Moreover, the fact that some stories can be analyzed form-critically may imply that the author was not dependent on direct eyewitness accounts of what happened, and redaction-critical analysis of others indicates that they can be explained at least partly in terms of his own composition.

If we cannot trace the sources of an alleged historical work, we can have little grounds for confidence in the reliability of the information that it contains, even if the author was well-intentioned and careful. The difficulty of the problem must be admitted, but it is not insuperable. First, in an important essay on the problem of traditions in Acts, Jervel has argued that there is independent evidence that the activities of the apostles and the establishment of congregations were events that formed part of the missionary proclamation of the Church, and thus conditions were favorable to the preservation of traditions about the history of the Church.

Secondly, it so happens that in the Gospel, we can, to a considerable extent, check Luke's use of his sources. If we grant he made use of Mark and also of a lost source that he shared with Matthew, we can see how he used these sources. It emerges that although he employed a certain measure of editorial freedom and did not simply retail his sources verbatim, he was remarkably faithful to them.

“What concerns us here,” said F.C. Burkitt, “is not that Luke has changed so much, but that he has invented so little. Close quote. It is reasonable to assume, until the contrary has been proved that he acted similarly in Acts.”

Thirdly, DuPont's somewhat pessimistic conclusion does not mean that some theories regarding the sources of Acts may be more plausible than others. In the second part of Acts, certain sections have been written in the first-person plural form. Acts 16:10-17, Acts 20:5-21.18, and Acts 27:1-28.16. The most natural explanation of this phenomenon is that these sections are based on material

composed by a participant in the events described and that the author of Acts has not changed the style to the usual third-person narration.

Many efforts have been made to explain these passages otherwise. It has been suggested that the use of *we* is a literary device used in the context of sea voyages or to claim that the author is a far-traveled and hence competent writer. Such an explanation says little for the writer's honesty, but in any case, the parallels that have been induced do not prove the point.

It is more convincing that the first-person style points to the use of eyewitness material and that this is how Luke's readers would have evaluated it. As for the earlier chapters of Acts, the most likely hypothesis is still that Luke obtained information from the various churches and possibly from some of the chief actors in the story. The possibility that he obtained information from such places as Jerusalem, Caesarea, and Antioch is strong.

Indeed, it is almost inconceivable that a writer on the early church would not have done so. But it must be admitted that Luke has so thoroughly worked over his sources that it is impossible to distinguish them stylistically. The verdict of F.J. Fulks Jackson is especially true of Acts.

“We should constantly remember that source criticism in the New Testament is largely guesswork.” Cited in Bruce, F.F. Bruce, *Acts*, page 21.

In individual passages, the critic may be able to detect places where the author is using tradition. But it must be remembered that an author can rewrite a source so completely in his own words that it is almost impossible to recover its original form. In Acts, there is constant danger that the all-pervading presence of the author's own style may tempt scholars to conclude he was not dependent on sources.

This temptation must be resisted. Within the scope of this commentary, Marshall writes, source analysis is not practicable and it must be left to larger works to entertain this task. Four, Luke's theological motivation, the speeches in Acts, they deserve more attention than we have given them thus far in this course.

So, this is welcomed. We've already mentioned the question of the presence of Luke in theology in Acts. The chief medium through which this is believed to have happened is the spoken matter.

British scholarship has, in general, defended the view that the various speeches placed in the mouths of Peter, Paul, and others, or if not verbatim, accounts of what was actually said, at least compositions based on tradition and expressing the structure and the details of the earliest Christian preaching. C.H. Dodd, *the apostolic preaching and its developments*. F.F. Bruce, *the speeches in the Acts of the Apostles*.

Another trend in scholarship, represented especially by Martin Dibelius and Hugh Wilkins, claims that the speeches had little, if any, basis in tradition and were almost entirely the composition of Luke himself, reflecting his own theological outlook. The basis for this skeptical verdict lies in an analysis of the speeches themselves. It is argued that their contents do not correspond with the fragments of early preaching which can be detected elsewhere in the New Testament, that the speeches follow a common structure with individual variations to suit the occasion, that their language and style is Lukan, and that together they offer a compendium of Lukan theology, each speech making its own contribution to the total effect.

These arguments are less forceful than they may appear. First, it is noteworthy that in the most recent edition of his book, Wilkins had to make some important qualifications of his earlier statements, and admits that there was more of a traditional basis to some of the speeches than he had previously allowed. The extent of this change of mind must not be overestimated, but it is of some significance.

Secondly, a number of scholars have drawn attention to the presence of primitive elements in the speeches, especially Jewish patterns of use of the Old Testament. The style of the speeches is not as polished as one would expect if these were careful literary productions. They are, in fact, the kind of redundancies and minor incoherences that mark the incorporation of traditions into a redactional framework.

Thirdly, while a common structure can be traced in the speeches, it shows considerable variety in individual application, and there is some agreement between the speeches and the admittedly meager evidence of early preaching that can be gleaned from elsewhere in the New Testament. One may justifiably ask, what sort of things would Peter have said to the Jews if he did not say the things that Luke ascribed to him? It is very difficult to imagine him taking a line very different from that which he is alleged to have taken. These points indicate that the speeches and acts are based on traditional material, although they are insufficient to demonstrate that all the speeches were actually delivered on the occasion specified, a point which probably lies beyond historical proof in any case.

In fact, there are a number of points that indicate that the speeches were never meant to be verbatim reports. First, it would take only a few minutes to read out loud any of the speeches. It is wholly improbable that, in reality, the speakers were so brief, as chapter 20 and verse 7 indicate, where we read that, oh no wonder, looking at Luke, good grief, I'm pretty sure this is where Paul, yes, Paul talked with them intending to depart on the next day, and he prolonged his speech, Acts 20 and verse 7, in Macedonia until midnight.

The little words we had, the few words here, or a summary, that's what we have. We have nothing of the sermon. At best, then, we cannot have any more than summaries of the kind of things that were said.

Yes, there is no speech there, just the words that Paul spoke for a long time. Secondly, while it's very probable that the teaching of Jesus was especially remembered by his disciples, and indeed that they specifically learned some of what he taught them, it is much less likely that audiences remembered what early Christian preachers said or that the speakers themselves kept full accounts of what they said. Paul did not speak from a prepared manuscript at Lystra, 14 verses 15 to 17, or write up his sermon afterward. At most, a general account of what was said will have been passed on to Luke.

Third, in some places it can be demonstrated that Luke was not concerned to give a word-for-word account of what was said. The brief message of the angel to Cornelius appears in slightly different forms in 10:4 to 6, and 31, following in chapter 10.

But from 10:22, and 33, it is plain that the angel said more to Peter than is contained in the two reports just listed. It follows that Luke was not attempting to give more than the general sense of the message. The same is true of the various versions of what was said to Paul at his conversion by the heavenly voice and by Ananias.

Fourthly, there are occasions where it is inherently impossible that Luke could have known what was said. Luke could hardly know what Festus and Agrippa said to each other in their private apartments, 25:13 to 22, 26, 30 to 32. Nor could the Christians learn exactly what the members of the Sanhedrin said in closed session, 4:15 to 17, 5:34 to 40.

In the former case, Luke could express the kind of thing that the public behavior of the rulers indicated that they had probably said in private. And in the latter case, some sympathizers from the Sanhedrin may have given the Christians the gist of what had been said about them. But in neither case is a word for word reproduction of the conversations at all likely.

The effect of these comments is to show that Luke could and did compose appropriate remarks for his speakers and that we do him an injustice if we expect from him verbatim accounts of each and every speech. This does not mean that the speeches are his own undisciplined inventions. We have already seen they are based on source material of various kinds.

In the speeches, Luke has done his best to report what was said by preachers in the early church. It is still most reasonable to believe that his practice was similar to that of Thucydides, also he who was quoted, but Polybius as well could have been

quoted. Thucydides said, "it was in all cases difficult to carry the speeches word for word in one's memory."

So, my habit has been to make the speakers say what was, in my opinion, demanded of them by the various occasions. Of course, adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really said. Thucydides in his History 1.22.1. Finally, Luke's portrait of Paul.

Number five. Heading five, Luke's portrait of Paul. There we go.

Finally, some mention must be made of Luke's portrait of Paul, his activities, and his theology. It is this point, perhaps more than any other, which has led to skeptical estimates of the historical value of X. The case against Luke is summarized in an essay by P. Wilhauer, which argued that Luke's presentation of Paul's attitude to natural theology, to the Jewish law, to Christology, and to eschatology was quite inconsistent with the picture that we get from Paul's own letters. This article has had an extraordinary influence in persuading scholars of the unhistorical character of X. In fact, however, the case has been strongly criticized and, in our opinion, convincingly destroyed in a brief discussion by E. Earl Ellis.

Paul Wilhauer on the Paulanism of Acts in S.L.A., pages 33 to 50. Ellis, the Gospel of Luke, pages 45 to 47. Some general observations by F.F. Bruce confirm the point.

F.F. Bruce is the Paul of Acts, the real Paul. B.J. R.L., page 58. This is not to say that there are no points of tension between Luke's portrait of Paul and his own writings.

It is to affirm that, in our opinion, they are not so substantial as to make us dismiss Acts as unhistorical. Other points might be brought into the discussion of the historical value of Acts, but these are probably the most important. The effect of our admittedly brief comments is to show that there is a strong case regarding Acts as an essentially reliable account of what it reports.

But it must be observed that arguments of the kind that we have been using cannot prove its historicity in detail, nor should we expect more from Luke than what he claimed to offer. He could not be expected to give the kind of report that might be obtained by a news person present at every incident with a tape recorder. And even such a report could be said to be one-sided and misleading.

He has given us an account of the history of the early church, which deals only with certain aspects of its development and ignores others, and which is based on the sources available to him and written up in a sympathetic manner. If we approach it for what it is, we shall appreciate it better than if we demand from its author what he did not try to provide. I at least want to give some outlines of the origins of Acts.

Authorship. Throughout the preceding discussion, we have been content to refer to the author of Acts by his traditional name of Luke. But was the author, in fact, the in the New Testament by this name? The physician, friend, and colleague of Paul, Colossians 4:14, Philemon 24, 2 Timothy 4:11. Two lines of argument favor this identification. First, there is the internal evidence of Acts. Certain passages are written in the first-person plural, and the most plausible interpretation of them is that they come from the pen of a companion of Paul and that they were incorporated in Acts without change of style because the author of this source was himself the author of the book.

When we ask who this companion of Paul was, we can eliminate various persons who are mentioned by name in X, such as Timothy, Aristarchus, among the various persons whom Paul mentions in his companions in Rome or in Caesarea, if that be the place of origin of the prison letters. Luke stands out as an obvious name. Secondly, there is external evidence from early church writers.

The clearest evidence is that of Irenaeus around AD 180, who claims Luke as the author of the third gospel in Acts. From this point forward, the tradition is firmly attested. It is to be found in the moratorium canon, in the so-called anti-Marcionite prologue to the gospel of Luke.

The evidence of other writers shows that from the beginning of the third century, the tradition is undisputed. It can probably be traced back to earlier in the second century. Marcion, who was a fanatical follower of Paul and his New Testament consisted only of the Pauline letters and one gospel, chose the gospel of Luke as his gospel.

This very probably implies that he regarded it as being written by a colleague of Paul and expressing a Pauline outlook. Marcion did not include Acts in his canon, so-called canon, but his probable recognition of the Lukan authorship of the gospel can be used to strengthen the case for the Lukan authorship of Acts. There's also a variant text of Acts 20:13 in an Armenian source, not Armenian, but from Armenia, which in turn rests upon the old Syriac version of Acts.

It reads, quote, but I, Luke, and those who were with me went on board, close quote. This has no claim to be the original text of Acts, but it does indicate how an early scribe interpreted the wee passages. There's some reason to believe that this interpretation may go back to the time of the compilation of the so-called Western text of Acts 11:28, which can be dated early in the second century.

It would not be wise to place too much weight on this evidence from the Western text. The important question is whether the verdict of Irenaeus and others who shared his outlook is merely an intelligent deduction from the wee passages in Acts

or rests, at least in part, on some independent tradition regarding the authorship of Acts. Here, two points are valid.

The first is that the tradition which we have outlined is uncontested. There is no evidence for any other identification of the author of Acts. The second is that if the tradition was merely a deduction from the New Testament evidence, it is possible that some other companion of Paul might have been named.

In fact, the tradition in favor of Luke's authorship of the gospel in Acts is as good as that for any other of the gospel writers. The argument against it essentially rests on the alleged incompatibility of Paul's portrait with the historical Paul. We've already seen that this argument is lacking in force.

Concerning the date of composition, I'm going to read Howard Marshall's conclusion. If, however, it is reasonable to hold that Luke could attain to a nuanced picture of the early church comparatively soon after the events which he records, then an early date seems possible. We have seen the evidence is ambiguous.

On the one hand, Luke-Acts betrays no knowledge of any events after Paul's two years in Rome, except perhaps his death. On the other hand, it looks back on his career with a certain sense of perspective. There's, therefore, much to be said of the view of F. F. Bruce that the composition of Luke-Acts may have taken place over an extended period of time, and the completed work may have been issued towards A.D. 70.

On this view, Luke brought his story up to a significant point, the completion of the process of bringing the gospel to Rome, as symbolized by Paul's unhindered preaching there for two years. This was a fitting climax to the story, and here Luke was happy to terminate his account. Place of composition? If the date of Acts is uncertain, the place of its composition and the location of its intended readership are even more uncertain.

It must be confessed that we simply do not know the answer to this question. Conclusion. Identification of the author's date and place of composition of Acts does not offer us much help in understanding the book unless we know something independently about each of these factors, which can then be used to shed light on the book itself.

Certainly, if Luke was written at an earlier date, if Acts was written at an earlier date by Luke, the companion of Paul, it is likely to have a better basis in history than if it were composed by an unknown author in the early second century. Again, it would be helpful to know if there was some specific historical situation in the church which led to the composition of the book. There is, however, no evidence that Luke was attempting to cope with some specific crisis in the life of the church.

His motives were less sharply defined. Fortunately, the intelligibility and value of the book are largely independent of a knowledge of the precise situation in which it was written. While the finer points of the interpretation of Acts can still cause intense discussion among scholars, the essential themes of the book are basically clear and simple.

We conclude our treatment of Marshall's theology of Acts with the permanent value of Acts. The particular problems in the church that concerned Luke have, in some cases, disappeared. No longer is the church concerned with the problem of Jews and Gentiles and all the subsidiary questions that arose out of this basic one.

Yet the book retains its value for the church of today in many ways. One or two samples may suffice. First, Luke himself is seen to be a writer with a pastoral concern.

He writes in order to help and aid the church. He demonstrates once and for all that church history is not a cold academic discipline but can be the means of encouraging the people of God. Secondly, Luke makes it clear that, in his view, the essential task of the church is mission.

He says remarkably little about the inner life of the church and concentrates most of his attention on this aspect of the church's task. Moreover, for Luke, mission means evangelism, the proclamation of the good news of Jesus, and the challenge to repentance and faith. Thirdly, Luke demonstrates in the purpose of God there can be no racial discrimination within the church.

The church is called a witness to all people, and salvation is offered to all on the same terms. Fourthly, Luke stresses the place of the spirit in guiding and empowering the church for its mission. The mission is no mere human achievement.

The gifts of the spirit are given for the purpose of mission and not for the private edification of the church or its individual members. Fifthly, all this is summed up in the fact that Luke sees the church as raised up and directed by God so that it will achieve his intended purpose. In this sense, Luke can be said to believe in a theology of glory, *theologia gloriae*.

He believes in the ultimate triumph of the gospel. At the same time, however, he's well aware that the triumph of the gospel is achieved only through suffering and martyrdom. In this sense, he most emphatically believes in a theology of the cross, *theologia crucis*.

Twenty years ago, I visited the town of Kassel in Germany. Much of it was still a devastated ruin after the battering it had received during the Second World War. But amid the wrecks of old buildings, there still stood the broken-down shell of a church.

Only fragments of the building had survived, but at one end, a spire still pointed to the sky, and an inscription remained carved in stone over a doorway. But the word of God abides forever. Luke would have appreciated the symbolism.

That is what he has to say to us.

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