

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 2

Genre and Historiography

Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Study Guide, 4) Briefing Document, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Keener, Acts, Session 2, Genre and Historiography, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This lecture by Dr. Craig Keener examines the genre of the Book of Acts, addressing scholarly debates about its classification. Keener refutes arguments categorizing Acts as a novel or prose epic, highlighting its historical elements such as a historical preface, use of sources, and correspondence with known data. He instead proposes that Acts functions as **historiography**, a genre encompassing various forms of historical writing, and emphasizes its **biographical and apologetic** aspects, written to confirm the truth of events already known to its audience. Keener contrasts Acts' approach to history with the conventions and practices of ancient historians, demonstrating its position within the broader context of Greco-Roman historiography. Finally, he notes the work's popular yet accurate nature, similar to other contemporary works aimed at a wider audience.

2. 18 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Keener, Acts, Session 2 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (New Testament → Gospels – Acts → Acts).



**Keener_Acts_Session
n02.mp3**

3. Briefing Document

Okay, here is a detailed briefing document summarizing the main themes and important ideas from the provided lecture excerpts by Dr. Craig Keener on the Book of Acts:

Briefing Document: Dr. Craig Keener on Acts: Genre and Historiography

Introduction:

This document summarizes key arguments from Dr. Craig Keener's lecture on the Book of Acts, specifically focusing on its genre and historiography. Keener examines various scholarly proposals regarding the literary type of Acts (biography, novel, epic, etc.) and ultimately argues for its classification as a work of popular-level, apologetic, ethnographic *historiography*, emphasizing the author's commitment to historical truth while recognizing the existence of narrative techniques.

Key Themes and Arguments:

1. Rejection of the "Novel" Genre:

- **Pervo's Evolving Stance:** While Richard Pervo initially compared Acts to a novel, he now considers it "novelistic historiography," recognizing it as a popular-level work. Keener refutes the idea of Acts as a novel proper.
- **Caricatures & Polemics:** The presence of negative portrayals of opponents is a feature of polemics, not just novels, and this was common for historians. "Even if Luke is characterizing them, that wouldn't make it a novel, because that was characteristic of all polemic."
- **Rowdy Mobs:** The inclusion of rowdy mobs is not unique to novels; these also appear in historical accounts.
- **Later Christian Acts:** Similarities with later Christian acts (e.g., Acts of Paul and Thecla) are irrelevant since Luke's Acts is earlier. These later acts also belong to a time when novels were flourishing. "Virtually everybody agrees that Luke's acts is earlier, so we can't really read the later ones into that."
- **Novel Content:** Ancient novels were usually romances, rarely about historical characters, and never about recent figures. "Novels were only extremely rarely about historical characters, and never, so far as I've ever seen, about any recent characters."

- **Fiction vs. History:** Fictionalizing narratives was criticized by historians. "Fictionalizing in narratives was limited to tales and novels. That was criticized by historians."
- **Historical Prologue & Sources:** Novels lack historical prefaces and the use of sources found in Acts. "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."

1. **Rejection of "Prose Epic":**

- **Genre Absence:** Prose epics did not exist in antiquity. Epics were in verse/poetry. "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."
- **Time Period:** Epics typically deal with the distant past, while Acts concerns the recent past. "Also, epics normally dealt with the distant past. Well, Acts is dealing with the recent past, recent generations."

1. **Acts as Historiography:**

- **Majority View:** The consensus among scholars is that Acts is a form of historiography. "So the majority view of scholars today is that Acts is historiography of some sort."
- **Set Speeches:** Inclusion of set speeches is characteristic of ancient historiography. "One is that Luke includes set speeches, which appear very often in ancient historiography."
- **Historical Preface:** Luke's preface (1:1-4) is viewed as a historical preface by the majority of scholars. "The historical preface. The majority of scholars see the preface of Luke 1:1-4 as a historical preface."
- **Correspondence with Data:** Luke demonstrates awareness of and synchronizes his events with real historical data. "We have massive correspondences with known data. Novelists did not care about that."
- **Focus on Events:** Luke emphasizes the things "fulfilled among us" aligning with historiography's focus. "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."

1. Popular-Level Historiography:

- **Adventure:** While adventures exist in histories, Luke seems to have downplayed 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."
- **Storytelling Techniques:** Luke uses narrative techniques found in both histories and novels, suggesting a popular historiography. "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."
- **Focus on Storytelling, not Rhetoric:** Acts prioritizes good storytelling over elaborate rhetorical devices, which is a characteristic of more elite level writing. "But on a more popular level, they were just interested not in all these elite rhetorical techniques, but they were interested in good storytelling."
- **Selection and Focus:** Like other ancient writers, Luke selects specific details and events based on his purpose. "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."

1. Apologetic and Ethnographic Focus:

- **Apologetic Emphasis:** Luke's work serves an apologetic purpose, similar to Jewish historiography showing the noble history of a people. "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."
- **Mission of the Church:** Luke is not simply writing a history of the church, but rather the history of its mission. "He's not even writing the Acts of the Apostles because he doesn't deal much with most of the apostles. [...] He's writing the history of the mission of the church."
- **Precedence and Toleration:** Luke highlights historical precedents for the toleration of the church, similar to Josephus. "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."

1. Ancient Historiographic Practices:

- **Biases & Tendencies:** Ancient historians had biases, perspectives, and tendencies that shaped their writing. "Ancient historians did have biases, or what scholars call tendencies. They had certain tendencies, and certain perspectives."
- **Moral Lessons:** Historians believed in providing moral lessons through historical examples. "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."
- **Divine Hand:** Historians often looked for divine providence and patterns in history. "Historians looked for the divine hand in history. They looked for patterns in history, as we've mentioned, and thus parallels."
- **Accuracy:** While they had some flexibility on details, historians aimed for accuracy in substance and events. "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."
- **Use of Sources:** Historians cited varying sources, especially where there were disagreements. "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."
- **Preference for Eyewitnesses:** Historians preferred earlier sources and eyewitnesses to the events being described. "The sources they preferred were the earlier sources, nearest the events, especially eyewitnesses."
- **Goal of Objectivity:** Despite biases, objectivity remained a goal for ancient historians, and they did have methods of testing sources and identifying potential issues in reporting. "Their goal was objectivity, and they could be very critical in how they handled their data."

1. **Luke's Methodology & Accuracy:**

- **Thorough Investigations:** Luke conducted thorough investigations and used both written and oral sources, according to his own preface. "Luke has thorough knowledge or confirms this with his own investigations, verse 3."
- **Confirmation:** Luke's narrative aimed to confirm what his audience (especially Theophilus) already knew, not to invent new stories. "And he writes according to verse 4 to confirm what Theophilus had learned about such events."

- **Careful with Sources:** Luke is meticulous in how he uses his sources, as demonstrated by his use of Mark's gospel. "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."

Conclusion:

Dr. Keener argues that the Book of Acts should be understood as a work of *popular-level, apologetic, ethnographic historiography*. He rejects the novel and prose epic categories, emphasizing Luke's commitment to conveying real events and historical substance, while acknowledging the influence of ancient historiographical conventions, and that the presentation of such information can be impacted by focus and narrative preferences. Luke's methods were also consistent with those of other ancient historians who valued truth and accuracy, but also had tendencies and biases that influenced their presentation of information.

4. Acts Study Guide: Session 2, Genre and Historiography

Acts: Genre and Historiography Study Guide

Short Answer Quiz

1. What is the main argument against classifying Acts as a novel?
 - Ancient novels were primarily romances, rarely focused on historical characters, particularly recent ones, and did not include the vast historical correspondence that is present in Acts. Additionally, novels lacked the kind of historical prologues and source usage seen in Acts.
1. How does the presence of adventures in Acts relate to historical narratives of the time?
 - Adventures were not exclusive to novels; they were a common feature in historical works, especially those depicting war or travel. The level of adventure in Acts is actually toned down in comparison to the accounts given by Paul himself.
1. What is the significance of Luke's historical preface in Luke 1:1-4?
 - Historical prefaces were characteristic of historical works, not novels, and Luke's preface indicates that he is writing a historical account, carefully researching and organizing events to confirm what Theophilus already knew. The preface also speaks of the sources that Luke used in his writing.
1. How does Luke's use of sources and synchronization fit with ancient historiography?
 - Ancient historians often used sources and included synchronizations with external history. Luke's careful use of multiple sources and his inclusion of synchronizations, such as naming rulers, is consistent with historical, rather than novelistic, practices.
1. What does Keener mean when he says Acts is written at a "popular level"?
 - Acts is written using more engaging and less tedious detail than elite works of historiography. It is designed to be widely accessible while still maintaining historical accuracy, emphasizing storytelling and moral lessons.

1. What arguments are there against classifying Acts as an epic poem?
 - Epics were written in poetry, while Acts is clearly written in prose. Additionally, epics typically dealt with the distant past and were often filled with myth, while Acts focuses on recent events.
1. How does Keener describe the use of speeches in ancient historiography, and how does it relate to Acts?
 - Set speeches were a common characteristic of ancient historiography, and their presence in Acts is another indication that it's meant to be a historical work. These speeches were often inserted or even created to enhance the historical narrative, not unlike what Josephus did.
1. What does Keener mean when he refers to "apologetic ethnographic history" in reference to the Book of Acts?
 - Apologetic ethnographic history is a type of writing in which the author showcases a marginalized group's noble history, defending it against bias or negative portrayals. Luke, like Josephus, presents a noble heritage of the Christian movement and argues it has legal precedence within the Roman Empire.
1. How does Luke's lack of vivid detailed descriptions fit into the idea of it being "popular-level" writing?
 - Elite historians used ekphrasis, detailing a scene, as a literary technique. Luke does not take the time to embellish scenes in this way because he wrote for a more popular level, focusing on good storytelling.
1. What is the purpose of including moral lessons in ancient historiography?
 - Ancient historians believed they should give their audience direction so that they would use historical examples rightly. Including moral lessons, therefore, did not diminish their work's historical nature but enhanced its didactic purpose.

Answer Key

1. Ancient novels were primarily romances, rarely focused on historical characters, particularly recent ones, and did not include the vast historical correspondence that is present in Acts. Additionally, novels lacked the kind of historical prologues and source usage seen in Acts.

2. Adventures were not exclusive to novels; they were a common feature in historical works, especially those depicting war or travel. The level of adventure in Acts is actually toned down in comparison to the accounts given by Paul himself.
3. Historical prefaces were characteristic of historical works, not novels, and Luke's preface indicates that he is writing a historical account, carefully researching and organizing events to confirm what Theophilus already knew. The preface also speaks of the sources that Luke used in his writing.
4. Ancient historians often used sources and included synchronizations with external history. Luke's careful use of multiple sources and his inclusion of synchronizations, such as naming rulers, is consistent with historical, rather than novelistic, practices.
5. Acts is written using more engaging and less tedious detail than elite works of historiography. It is designed to be widely accessible while still maintaining historical accuracy, emphasizing storytelling and moral lessons.
6. Epics were written in poetry, while Acts is clearly written in prose. Additionally, epics typically dealt with the distant past and were often filled with myth, while Acts focuses on recent events.
7. Set speeches were a common characteristic of ancient historiography, and their presence in Acts is another indication that it's meant to be a historical work. These speeches were often inserted or even created to enhance the historical narrative, not unlike what Josephus did.
8. Apologetic ethnographic history is a type of writing in which the author showcases a marginalized group's noble history, defending it against bias or negative portrayals. Luke, like Josephus, presents a noble heritage of the Christian movement and argues it has legal precedence within the Roman Empire.
9. Elite historians used ekphrasis, detailing a scene, as a literary technique. Luke does not take the time to embellish scenes in this way because he wrote for a more popular level, focusing on good storytelling.
10. Ancient historians believed they should give their audience direction so that they would use historical examples rightly. Including moral lessons, therefore, did not diminish their work's historical nature but enhanced its didactic purpose.

Essay Questions

1. Analyze the arguments presented by scholars who have attempted to classify the Book of Acts as a novel. Evaluate Keener's counter-arguments and explain why he ultimately rejects the novel classification for Acts.
2. Discuss the various genres proposed for the Book of Acts, including biography, epic, and historiography. Explain why Keener concludes that Acts is a form of historiography, detailing specific evidence from the text and historical context.
3. Explore the concept of "popular-level" writing in ancient historiography. How does this category help us understand Luke's approach in Acts, and how does it differ from elite historiography?
4. Examine the role of historical accuracy in ancient historiography, contrasting it with modern standards. How does Keener argue that Luke's approach to historical accuracy aligns with the standards and practices of ancient historians?
5. Evaluate the concept of "apologetic ethnographic history" as it relates to Acts. How does this motive influence Luke's selection and presentation of events, and how does it compare with the approaches of other ancient historians like Josephus?

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Historiography:** The writing of history; the study of how history is written and interpreted.
- **Genre:** A category of artistic composition, characterized by similarities in form, style, or subject matter.
- **Biography:** An account of someone's life, especially one that is published.
- **Novel:** A long fictional narrative, typically in prose, that is often considered to be a type of entertainment.
- **Epic:** A long narrative poem, often about heroic deeds and events significant to a culture.
- **Praxis:** The practical application of a theory or concept; action as opposed to theory.
- **Monograph:** A detailed study of a single specialized subject or aspect of a subject.

- **Kleinliteratur:** German term meaning "small literature" referring to literature written on a lower, popular scale.
- **Folk Literature:** Literature that is orally transmitted and appeals to a general audience
- **Apologetic:** Defending a cause or belief, often in a formal or reasoned way.
- **Ethnographic History:** A type of history that examines the history of a particular people or culture, often a minority group.
- **Religio licita:** Latin term meaning "permitted religion"; a religion that is allowed by law within the Roman Empire.
- **Second Sophistic:** A period in the Roman Empire (1st-3rd centuries AD) characterized by a revival of Greek rhetoric and culture, often with elaborate and showy displays.
- **Ekphrasis:** A detailed and vivid description of a work of art or a scene, often used to enhance the impact of a narrative.
- **Tendencies:** The proclivities or biases that shape one's views or approach to a subject.
- **Pathos:** A quality that evokes pity or sadness; an appeal to emotion.
- **Providence:** The protective care of God or of nature as a spiritual power.

5. FAQs on Keener, Acts, Session 2, Genre and Historiography, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions about the Book of Acts

1. **What are the main proposed literary genres for the Book of Acts, and which one is most widely accepted by scholars?** Scholars have proposed several genres for Acts, including biography, novel, prose epic, and historiography. While elements of biography are present and some scholars have drawn comparisons to novels, the consensus leans towards **historiography**, particularly a popular-level, apologetic, ethnographic form. This means Acts is viewed as a historical account written to defend and promote the early Christian movement within the context of its time.
2. **Why is the idea of Acts being a novel largely rejected?** The idea of Acts being a novel, while once argued for by Richard Pervo, is now largely rejected for multiple reasons. Ancient novels were primarily romances, rarely focused on recent historical figures, and didn't include the kind of detailed historical prefaces or source material engagement found in Acts. Furthermore, they did not prioritize truth or accuracy in the same way that even popular-level historical writing did. Fictionalization was limited to tales and novels, not considered appropriate for historical works.
3. **How does Luke demonstrate his commitment to historical accuracy in Acts?** Luke's commitment to historical accuracy is evident in several ways. He includes a historical preface (Luke 1:1-4), indicating his intent to provide an orderly and reliable account. He uses sources, carefully synthesizing them. He sometimes provides synchronizations with external historical events (like mentioning rulers, as in Luke 2:1-2; 3:1-2; Acts 18:12; 11:28), and focuses on "things fulfilled," signifying a focus on actual events. Though some details might be left out for the sake of storytelling, the core substance of events is consistent.
4. **How does the Book of Acts differ from elite historical writing of the time?** While Acts is considered historiography, it is not at the elite level of works by historians like Tacitus, Thucydides, or Polybius. Luke doesn't delve into the same level of rhetorical sophistication, doesn't focus on detailed descriptions (ekphrasis), and generally adopts a more popular style. Luke is focused on good storytelling, but this was a hallmark of popular history, not just fiction. Luke's work is accessible to a broader audience rather than the elite intellectual class.

5. **What does it mean for Acts to be considered an "apologetic" work?** The apologetic nature of Acts refers to its purpose in defending the early Christian movement. It aims to show that the church has an ancient history rooted in the heritage of Israel and that its actions and mission do not violate Roman law. By highlighting figures like Pilate, Sergius Paulus, Gallio, and Festus, Luke demonstrates favorable precedence for the church and its message, suggesting it should not be persecuted or silenced. This is similar to what Josephus did with his Jewish history.
6. **What are the 'tendencies' or perspectives present in ancient historiography, and how do they apply to Luke?** Ancient historians often had 'tendencies' or perspectives shaped by their cultural, nationalistic, or religious biases. They often wrote from a pro-Roman bias, for example. Luke, like other ancient historians, writes from a particular perspective—as an advocate for the Christian faith— but he does not overtly fabricate events to suit this purpose. He selects and emphasizes particular elements of the story that promote his message and align with his theological perspective, in the same way other historians prioritized certain topics or morals.
7. **How do ancient historians handle the inclusion of speeches in their works, and what does this mean for understanding the speeches in Acts?** Ancient historians commonly included set speeches in their narratives, often adding them to historical accounts to make them better. Josephus added them when rewriting the Old Testament. This was not just to represent direct quotes but to capture the essence of what was said and the ideas exchanged. The speeches in Acts, while possibly not word-for-word records, are representative of the views and arguments presented during the period, which is a normal approach in historiography.
8. **What are the key lessons and considerations when interpreting the Book of Acts as an ancient historical work?** When interpreting Acts, it's crucial to recognize it as a work of ancient historiography with its own conventions and purposes. This means:
 - We should not apply strict modern historiographical standards. Ancient historians valued accuracy in the substance of events but had latitude with details and sometimes used artistic license in telling stories.

- We should not assume that because it was an engaging story, it is not a true story. Ancient historians used engaging stories to make their works appealing.
- We should understand the author's perspective. Luke had an apologetic purpose.
- We should appreciate that Luke used careful investigation of sources.
- We must recognize the value that ancient historians and even other figures placed on accurate information and truth.