

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 2

Podcast Audio Overview

Genre and Historiography

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Okay, so we're diving deep into the Book of Acts and trying to figure out how historians view it. Right. We've got all your notes and articles here, even that lecture from Dr. Craig Keener.

Yeah. And it seems like you want to get to the bottom of whether Acts is reliable history or something else entirely. You've definitely hit on the big question surrounding Acts.

Yeah. Like, what kind of writing is this, really? Right. Some people say it's a novel; others say it's more like an epic poem.

Still others think it's a biography. But most scholars, including Dr. Keener, think it's something called historiography. Historiography.

Yeah. That sounds pretty academic. It is a bit of a mouthful.

What does that even mean? Basically, historiography is the way historians write history. Okay. It's about trying to give a true account of what happened.

But it also reflects the writing styles and conventions of the time it was written. I see. Think of it like a historical documentary, but from centuries ago.

Okay. I'm starting to get the picture. Good.

But a novel. Yeah. The Book of Acts.

I know. That seems a bit wild, doesn't it? It does sound strange at first. I mean, it's in the Bible.

But some scholars have argued that Acts reads like a novel with its exciting storyline and engaging characters. Okay. But Dr. Keener really digs into that theory and presents some pretty convincing counterpoints.

So what makes the Acts as a novel theory fall apart? Well, think about it this way. No. Novels usually center around fictional characters and events.

Okay. Right. Acts, on the other hand, focuses on real historical figures like Peter and Paul and is set within a very specific historical context.

Plus, Luke, the author of Acts, starts his book with a historical preface where he outlines his sources and methods. I see. It's almost like he's saying, hey, I'm a serious historian and here's how I'm approaching this.

That's a good point. Yeah. So if it's not a novel, what about comparing it to epic poems like the Odyssey? Couldn't Acts be something like that, but just written in prose? That's an interesting thought.

Yeah. There are definitely some dramatic elements to Acts, but the key difference lies in the historical context. Epic poems, especially in the ancient world, dealt with myths and legends from the distant past.

I see. Acts, however, deals with events that were relatively recent, even within living memory for many people. Okay.

So it's not a novel, and it's not an epic poem. What clues are scholars picking up on that point toward it being historiography? There are several things that stand out. For example, you'll notice that Acts includes these dramatic speeches by key figures, which is a hallmark of ancient historical writing.

Historians back then often tried to recreate important speeches to give readers a sense of what was said and how it may have influenced events. So those speeches, they aren't meant to be word-for-word transcripts. Exactly.

But more like a historian's attempt to capture the essence of what was said. Right. Okay.

And remember that historical preface we talked about? Yeah. That's another big clue. It's like Luke is giving us his historian's credentials right up front, telling us he's carefully investigated everything and consulted reliable sources.

You wouldn't find that kind of detailed methodology in a novel or an epic poem. And you mentioned that Acts is packed with historical details that match up with other sources from the time. That level of detail seems like a pretty strong indicator that Luke was aiming for accuracy.

You're absolutely right. Luke doesn't just tell a story. He grounds it in a specific time and place.

He gets the names of officials, the geography, even the political climate of the Roman Empire. Wow. That meticulousness suggests that he's not just making things up.

He's trying to document real events. That's a great point. Thanks.

But hold on a second. Okay. Didn't ancient historians have a tendency to embellish things a bit? You're not wrong.

I mean, I've heard some pretty outlandish stories from ancient Rome. Ancient historians definitely had their own perspectives and could sometimes play up the drama. Okay.

But here's the thing. Yeah. They were still expected to get the core events right.

They valued eyewitness accounts, preferred sources close to the events, and would often compare multiple sources to make sure they were telling an accurate story. So even if they added a bit of flair, their goal was still to be truthful about the main events. Exactly.

Oh. And that distinction between history and fiction was really important in the ancient world. They didn't see them as interchangeable.

Now, where it gets really interesting is when we compare Luke to another famous Jewish historian. Josephus. Josephus.

Yeah. I vaguely remember that name from a history class somewhere. How does he fit into all of this? Josephus was writing around the same time as Luke.

Okay. And like Luke, he had a specific purpose in mind. Both were trying to present their people, the Jews, in a favorable light to the Roman world.

They wanted to show that their culture and beliefs had value and deserved respect. I see. So they used storytelling techniques to make their histories engaging, but they still aimed to ground their narratives in actual events.

So it's kind of like they were doing PR for their people? That's a great way to put it. Yeah. But through the lens of history.

Right. And that's where we start to see how historical writing can be influenced by the author's perspective and purpose. That makes a lot of sense.

Good. But it also raises a question for me. Okay.

If Luke had an agenda, can we really trust his version of events? That's a really important question. I mean, was he just shaping the facts to fit his message? And it gets to the heart of how we approach any historical text. We'll dive into that more in the next part.

Okay. Because this idea of perspective is central to understanding Acts as a historical work. All right.

Sounds good. Yeah. All right.

So we're back, and we're digging deeper into this whole question of perspective in the book of Acts. Okay. It sounds like Luke definitely had an agenda when he was writing.

Yeah. He wanted to present Christianity in a positive light to a Roman audience. Exactly.

Yeah. He was writing within this tradition of apologetic history. Right.

Where the author is essentially defending their people or beliefs. I see. Think of it like writing a LinkedIn profile.

Ha ha. You're highlighting your best qualities while still being truthful. That's a great analogy.

Thanks. But it still makes me wonder how much we can trust what Luke is telling us. Sure.

If he's trying to make Christianity look good. Right. Wouldn't he be tempted to, let's say, stretch the truth a bit? That's a totally fair question.

Yeah. It's something historians grapple with all the time. And that's why understanding the historical context is so crucial.

Okay. Remember we talked about Josephus? Yeah. The other Jewish historian.

Right. And how he was doing a kind of PR for the Jews through his writing. Right.

He's trying to make the Romans see them in a better light. Exactly. So to understand Luke, it helps to look at how other historians of his time approached writing history.

And one figure who really laid out the ground rules for good historical writing was a guy named Polybius. Polybius. Yeah.

Okay. Refresh my memory. Who was this guy? Polybius was a Greek historian who lived a couple of centuries before Luke.

He was really obsessed with accuracy and objectivity in history. Wow. He even came up with a set of rules for historians to follow.

Rules for historians? Yeah. That sounds interesting. It is.

What kind of rules are we talking about? Okay. Well, first and foremost, Polybius was all about eyewitness accounts. He believed that the best historical accounts came from people who were actually there who saw the events firsthand.

That makes sense. Yeah. If you're going to tell a true story, you want to get it straight from the people who saw it happen.

Exactly. Right. And if you couldn't find an eyewitness, Polybius said, you should at least talk to people who lived during that time and heard about the events from reliable sources.

I see. He didn't want historians just relying on hearsay or rumors. So like a good journalist? Yeah.

Check your sources, right? Exactly. Okay. And Polybius didn't stop there.

Really? He also stressed the importance of comparing multiple sources. Hmm. Interesting.

If you have different accounts of the same event, you can compare them to see where they agree and where they disagree. That's smart. Right.

Yeah. That helps you get a more complete and accurate picture of what happened. So it's kind of like a historical fact-checking process? That's a great way to put it.

You're not just taking one person's word for it. Exactly. And if the sources contradicted each other, Polybius said you had to use your judgment to figure out which one was more likely to be true.

Right. You had to consider things like the author's biases, their motivations for writing, and the overall reliability of their account. So it wasn't just about blindly accepting what your sources told you.

Right. You had to think critically about the information and make some judgment calls. Exactly.

And that's one of the things that makes studying ancient history so fascinating, right? Oh, totally. It's not just memorizing dates and names. Right.

It's like being a detective. Yeah.

You have to gather evidence, analyze it carefully, and piece together the most plausible story. Okay. So Polybius was like the ancient world history detective laying down the law for how to do good history.

He was pretty influential. But how does all of this connect back to Luke and the Book of Acts? Well, that's where things get really interesting. Okay.

Dr. Keener argues that Luke was actually following many of Polybius' rules when he wrote Acts. Really? Yeah. But didn't Polybius live a couple of centuries before Luke? He did, but his ideas about history were really influential.

And if you look closely at Acts, you can see evidence that Luke was working within that same tradition. I see. Of careful, critical history writing.

Okay. I'm intrigued. What kind of evidence are we talking about? Remember how Luke mentions eyewitnesses in the preface to his gospel? Right.

He's basically saying, hey, I'm relying on firsthand accounts here. Okay. And he also talks about carefully investigating the events he's writing about, just like Polybius would have recommended.

So Luke was working within a tradition that valued accuracy and getting the facts straight, even though he had a specific purpose in mind. Right. And when you dig into the details of Acts, you see even more evidence of Luke's commitment to accuracy.

Like what? He gets the names of Roman officials, right? The geography, right? Okay. Even the political climate of the Roman Empire. Right.

Wow. So he really did his research. It's like he did his homework.

Yeah. But what about those speeches we talked about before? Okay. The ones by Peter and Paul that sound so dramatic and almost theatrical? Yeah.

Surely, Luke didn't record those word for word. You're absolutely right. Yeah.

And even Polybius wouldn't have expected that ancient historians were allowed some leeway in recreating speeches. Right. The idea wasn't to capture awe, but to convey the essence of what was said.

So Luke could use his literary skills to make the speeches more engaging and memorable, but he still had to stay true to the main point. Exactly. Okay.

And if you compare Luke's speeches to other examples from ancient historians, you'll find that he's actually quite restrained. Interesting. He's not putting words in people's mouths or making up elaborate monologues.

He's trying to capture the spirit of what was said. But he highlights that her eyes are selecting details, crafting narratives, and highlighting certain themes to fit his overall message. Yeah.

It seems like a tricky balancing act. It is. Being both a storyteller and a historian.

You've hit on a key point. Yeah. And this is where the conversation gets even more nuanced.

Okay. Because Luke isn't just trying to tell a neutral, objective account of events. He's writing from a particular perspective with a particular purpose in mind.

I was back to that detective work again. We have to weigh the evidence, consider the context, and ask ourselves why Luke might have written what he did. Absolutely.

And that's what makes studying ancient history so rewarding, don't you think? For sure. It's not about finding simple answers. It's about engaging in a dialogue with the past.

Yeah. Trying to understand the world through the eyes of people who lived in a very different time. I'm totally with you on that.

Good. But there's still one big question nagging at me. Okay.

What is it? We've talked about accuracy and objectivity. Right. But what about the miracles in Acts? How do those fit into a historical approach? That's a good question.

I mean, can we really take those as factual events? Ah, yes. The miracles. Yeah.

That's a question that has puzzled scholars for centuries. I bet. And to be honest, there's no easy answer.

Okay. It really depends on your perspective and how you interpret those accounts. Okay.

So walk me through the different perspectives. What are the main ways people approach the miraculous elements in Acts? Well, some scholars argue that the miracles should be understood symbolically as literary devices meant to convey theological truths rather than literal events. For example, the feeding of the 5,000, instead of being about literal bread and fish, might be about Jesus' ability to provide spiritual nourishment.

So it's more about the deeper meaning behind the miracle. Exactly. Rather than whether it literally happened.

It's about the message, not necessarily the mechanics. Okay. I can see that.

Good. But what about those who take the miracles at face value? What's their argument? They argue that ancient people genuinely believed in miracles. And there's no reason to assume that Luke was making them up.

They point out that Luke was writing within a culture where supernatural events were considered possible, even commonplace. So Luke might've genuinely believed these things happened. Precisely.

Yeah. Just like he believed the historical events happened. Right.

And if we accept that Luke believed in the possibility of miracles, it adds another layer to how we read Acts. Exactly. Right.

We're not just dealing with a dry historical account. We're dealing with a story about divine intervention. About God working in and through human history.

Which brings us back to that whole question of genre, doesn't it? It does. Is Acts just a historical account? Right. Or is it something more? That's the million-dollar question.

It's probably a blend of history, theology, and even spiritual inspiration. Okay. And that's what makes it so fascinating to study.

It speaks to our heads and our hearts, challenging us to wrestle with big questions about faith, history, and the nature of reality itself. I like that. Yeah.

It's a book that keeps you thinking. Right. Keeps you questioning.

Exactly. Yeah. It's not meant to be a simple read.

Right. It's meant to engage us on multiple levels. This has been super helpful in starting to unpack all the different layers of Acts.

I'm glad to hear that. We've talked about historical methods, the importance of perspective, and even touched on those tricky miracles. Yeah.

Definitely a lot to think about there. But before we wrap things up, I'm curious to hear more about Luke's specific biases. I mean, we've talked about his overall agenda, but what were his personal motivations for writing Acts? And how might those have shaped his presentation of events? That's a great question.

Yeah. And something we'll delve into in our final part. Okay.

We'll explore Luke's background, his relationship with Paul, and how his own experiences might have influenced his writing. Sounds like a perfect way to round out our deep dive. I think so.

Can't wait to hear more. Looking forward to it. All right.

We're back for the final part of our deep dive into the book of Acts. Okay. We've covered a lot of ground.

We have. From genre debates to historical methods to those fascinating miracles. But now I'm really curious to learn more about Luke himself- who was this guy who wrote one of the most influential books in history?

It's a great question to consider. It's easy to get caught up in the events and arguments of Acts, but ultimately it was written by a real person with his own background, beliefs, and motivations. And understanding those things can give us a deeper appreciation for what he was trying to achieve.

Exactly. So let's dive into the man behind the curtain. Okay.

What do we actually know about Luke? Well, unfortunately, we don't have a full-blown biography of Luke, but we can piece together some clues from tradition, from Acts itself, and from Paul's letters. The traditional view is that Luke was a physician, a companion of Paul, and a Gentile convert to Christianity. And Dr. Keener seems to agree with that traditional view.

He does. And he brings some interesting evidence to the table. Like what? For example, you've probably noticed those passages in Acts.

Yeah, yeah. It's like Luke is saying, hey, I was there when this happened. Exactly.

Those wee passages suggest that Luke was physically present for some of the events he describes, which would make sense if he was a traveling companion of Paul. And those passages actually line up with details we find in Paul's letters, which further supports the idea that they knew each other well. So those wee passages are like little historical timestamps.

Yeah, you could say that. Connecting Luke directly to Paul and the events unfolding in Acts. Right.

That's pretty cool. Yeah. But let's get back to Luke himself.

Okay. We've got a physician, a traveling companion, a Gentile follower of Jesus. What does all that tell us about his potential biases as a historian? It's a great question.

It's essential to recognize that every historian, even the most meticulous ones, is shaped by their background and experiences. It's like looking through a lens. What you see is influenced by where you're standing.

So let's consider Luke's lenses. Okay, let's break it down. First up, the physician.

How might that background have influenced Luke's writing? As a physician, Luke would have been trained to observe carefully and to pay attention to detail. He would have been used to gathering information, assessing evidence, and forming conclusions based on what he saw and heard. Makes sense.

And I think you see that reflected in his writing style in Acts. Okay. He's very specific, very detailed, and he seems to have a knack for storytelling.

Always the doctor, even when he's writing history. Right. He brings that same carefulness and attention to detail to his work as a historian.

And then there's his perspective as a Gentile Christian. Right. That's a crucial point.

He wasn't writing just for a Jewish audience. He was writing for a much wider world. Exactly.

And I think that's why he emphasizes the fact that Christianity is for everyone, not just Jews. He's trying to show that the message of Jesus transcends cultural and ethnic boundaries. I see.

And this fits with what we talked about earlier, that idea of apologetic history. Right. He's presenting Christianity in a way that would be appealing and accessible to a wider audience.

So it's not just about defending Christianity. It's about making it relatable to people who might be skeptical or unfamiliar with it. He's building bridges, so to speak.

That's a great way to put it. Yeah. And then, of course, there's his relationship with Paul.

It's clear from Acts that Luke admired Paul deeply and believed in his mission to spread the gospel. So we can expect a somewhat positive portrayal of Paul in Acts. Definitely.

But remember, even a positive portrayal can still be accurate. Luke doesn't shy away from Paul's flaws or the controversies he sparked. He presents Paul as a complex human being who was passionate about his beliefs and willing to face persecution for them.

So it's not a sugar-coated saint's life. Not at all. It's a nuanced and compelling portrait of a man who changed the course of history.

And I think that's one of the things that makes Acts so enduringly popular. It's full of real people wrestling with real challenges, making difficult choices, and ultimately trying to live out their faith in a complex world. Okay, so we've talked about Luke's background and his potential biases.

But what about his specific motivations for writing Acts? What was he hoping to achieve? Well, Dr. Keener outlined several key aims. First, he believes that Luke wanted to provide a reliable account of the origins and spread of Christianity. He wanted to show that it was rooted in Jewish history and tradition, but also that it had a universal message that extended beyond those boundaries.

And he wanted to demonstrate that Christianity was a legitimate and respectable religion within the Roman Empire. So there's that apologetic purpose again. He's defending Christianity and trying to make it more understandable to a Roman audience.

Exactly. But there's more to it than that. Dr. Keener also argues that Luke wanted to inspire and encourage his fellow Christians who are facing persecution and challenges.

It's almost like he's saying, hey, look at how much we've accomplished despite the obstacles. Don't give up hope. I think that's a great way to read it.

It's a message of resilience and perseverance in the face of adversity. And finally, Luke wanted to challenge his readers, both Christian and non-Christian, to think about their own lives and how they were living out their beliefs. He wanted to inspire them to be active participants in spreading the message of Jesus and making a positive impact on the world.

So Luke has his biases, his agendas, his hopes for his readers. But does all that mean we can't trust him as a historian? Not necessarily. OK.

Remember, all historians have perspectives. It's impossible to be completely neutral or objective. The key is to be aware of those perspectives and to read critically.

We need to ask questions about Luke's sources, his methods, and his potential motivations. But we also need to remember that he was working within a tradition that valued historical accuracy. And as we've discussed, there's a lot of evidence to suggest that he took that responsibility seriously.

So it's not about throwing out Acts because Luke had a point of view. It's about engaging with it thoughtfully, recognizing both its historical value and its potential limitations. You've got it.

And I think that's ultimately what makes studying the Bible, and especially a book like Acts, so enriching. It challenges us to think critically, to wrestle with complex issues, and to see the world through different lenses. This whole deep dive has been such an eye-opener for me.

That's great to hear. I feel like I have a much better understanding of how to approach Acts as a historical work, but also as a book that has so much to say about faith, courage, and the human spirit. Absolutely.

Well, this has been fantastic. It has been fun. Thanks for joining me on this deep dive into the book of Acts.

My pleasure. And for all of you listening out there, remember, this deep dive is just a starting point. There's so much more to discover in Acts.

Keep digging, keep asking questions, and keep those historical lenses polished. Who knows what insights you might uncover? Happy reading.