

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 3

Podcast Audio Overview

Luke's Historiography

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Hey everyone, and welcome back for another Deep Dive. Yes, welcome back. Today we're tackling a question that's been debated for centuries.

Yeah. Just how reliable IIS, the Book of Acts as a historical source? We're diving into a lecture by New Testament scholar Dr. Craig Keener to see what he has to say. Right.

By the end of this Deep Dive, you'll have a better understanding of how historians worked back then and why Keener gives Luke a pretty good grade on the accuracy scale. One of the things that might surprise you. Okay.

Is how differently history was recorded back then. Yeah, I bet. They didn't have Twitter threads.

Ha. Or instant fact-checking websites. Nope.

Instead, they relied heavily on something we often take for granted today. Memory. Yeah, I have to admit my memory isn't exactly photographic.

Really? I'd be lost without my to-do list app. Exactly. But in ancient cultures.

Wow. Storytellers could recite epic poems like the Iliad entirely from memory. Wow.

Keener even talks about his 96-year-old neighbor. Oh, wow. Who could accurately recount family stories from the 1700s.

Really? That were passed down orally through generations. That's amazing. It makes you realize that memory was like a highly trained muscle back then.

So if memory was so powerful, does that mean notes were never taken? Well, it's interesting because while Jewish tradition was largely oral, Keener notes that even rabbis sometimes jotted things down to help with large amounts of information. It wasn't strictly off limits. There's even a funny anecdote about a rabbi who found his disciple hiding under his bed.

Oh, no. What did the disciple do? The disciple was trying to learn everything from his teacher's example, even in his sleep. Wow.

Talk about dedication. But seriously, it makes you wonder about the disciples who followed Jesus. Did any of them actually take notes? It's certainly possible.

Yeah. Keener suggests that Matthew, being a tax collector, would have had the skills and probably did take notes. Makes sense.

Think about it. Managing accounts, keeping records. Yeah.

That's practically ancient data entry. Okay. So we've got these incredible memories.

Right. And the possibility of some note-taking. Yeah.

But how do we know if those memories were accurate, especially when it comes to the words of Jesus? That's where things get really fascinating. Okay. Keener highlights the Aramaic puzzle pieces embedded in the Gospels.

Aramaic puzzle pieces. Now, Aramaic was the everyday language that Jesus and his disciples spoke. Okay.

Kind of like how we use English today. Yeah. And many of Jesus's sayings in the Gospels have this Aramaic rhythm to them, even in the Greek translation.

So what did these Aramaic elements tell us about how Jesus's words were preserved and passed down? Well, they suggest that the sayings were carefully preserved and passed down accurately from the very beginning. It's like finding an original voice recording. Oh, I see.

Among a bunch of transcripts. Wow. That's really fascinating.

I never thought about it that way before. Yeah. So we've got memories, maybe some notes, and these Aramaic clues.

Right. But what about actual eyewitnesses? Were there people around when the Gospels were written? Yeah, yeah. Who could say, hey, I was there.

This is what happened. Absolutely. Eyewitnesses were still alive and well when the Gospels were being written.

Wow. Imagine if you could interview people who were actually at Pentecost. I can only imagine the stories they could tell.

Firsthand accounts of miracles, the early church. Right. It would be incredible.

And Keener backs this up with evidence from Paul's letters. Okay. Paul mentions key figures like Peter and John.

Right. And even James, Jesus's brother. Wow.

Who were leading the early church. I see. These weren't just names on a page.

Right. They were real people leading a rapidly growing movement. Okay.

So we've got memories, disciples, and eyewitnesses. Yeah. But let's get to the heart of the matter.

Okay. How does Luke himself stack up against actual history? We're talking about the Book of Acts here. The story of the early church.

Yep. Was he writing history or crafting a theological novel? That's the million dollar question, right? Yeah. Keener gets into some serious detail here.

Okay. He points out that Acts is packed with historical details. Like what? Names, places, events.

Okay. That can be cross-referenced with other sources from that time period. So we've got all these people who could have confirmed or denied Luke's account.

Right. But how do we know he actually checked those facts? Yeah. Give us some examples.

What kind of details is Keener talking about? Well, one example is the mention of the Sergii Poli. Okay. A real family we know existed.

Luke also accurately describes Lystra as a place that kept its local language. Okay. Which was unusual for most towns at the time.

I see. And get this, he even gets the title of the chief officer in Ephesus, right? Right. Calling him the grammatis.

Grammatis. A term specific to that city. It sounds like Luke really wanted to get his facts straight.

Yeah. But there's one thing that always makes me wonder about historical accounts. Yeah.

Especially ancient ones. What about the speeches? Hmm. How can we know if those are accurate or just made up by the author? You've hit on one of the trickiest parts of how history was written back then.

Really? It was common practice to write speeches for historical figures to represent their views. I see. Think of it like a playwright putting words in a character's mouth.

So are Luke's speeches in Acts trustworthy or just clever writing? Keener says it's not so black and white. Hmm. He argues that Luke likely had access to at least the main points of many speeches.

Okay. Remember, speeches were major events back then. Right.

Things people remembered. Yeah. Plus, Luke's speeches in Acts are actually pretty short.

Okay. More like summaries than the elaborate show-off kind you see in some historical works. That makes sense.

He was a historian, not a novelist. Exactly. He had a responsibility to his sources.

Exactly. And that's what's so important about this deep dive. We're not just looking at a dusty old book.

Right. We're looking at a window into the past. Right.

A glimpse into the lives and beliefs of people who lived in a very different time. Right. It's not just about the words on the page.

It's about understanding a whole different world. Exactly. Now, I know we've covered a lot of ground already.

Yeah. But there's still so much more to uncover about Luke's methods and the reliability of Acts. So stay tuned.

Yes. Because we're just getting started. Absolutely.

We'll be right back. Right after this. And what's even more intriguing is how this all connects to a bigger question.

Yeah. How do we approach ancient historical accounts in general? Are we holding them to an impossible standard? Yeah. A standard that didn't even exist back then.

That's a great point. Yeah. It's easy to forget that our modern ideas about history are all modern.

We expect footnotes, citations, fact-checking websites. Exactly. But ancient historians worked within a different framework.

Right. They were concerned with accuracy. Yes.

OK. But they also used literary techniques like speeches to craft compelling narratives. It's not about choosing between truth and fiction.

Yeah. It's about understanding the conventions of the genre. OK.

I'm starting to see the bigger picture here. OK. But let's zoom back in on Luke and the Book of Acts.

All right. We've talked about memories, eyewitnesses, speeches. Yeah.

What about Luke's OWN methods? How did he gather his information? Yeah. That's a good question. Was he just relying on secondhand accounts? That's where Luke's own words in the Gospel of Luke are helpful.

OK. Remember at the beginning, he's writing to a guy named Theophilus. Right.

And he says he carefully investigated everything he was writing about. So he wasn't just passively listening to stories. OK.

He was actively seeking out information. So he was like a first-century investigative journalist. Exactly.

And we have clues about how he did this. Have you ever noticed the we sections in Acts? The we sections? It's where Luke shifts from talking about Paul to talking with him. OK.

Like they're traveling together. Wait, so Luke was like an embedded journalist. Right.

Traveling with Paul and witnessing these events firsthand. It certainly seems that way. Wow.

And those we sections include a period of up to 200 years when Paul was under Roman house arrest in Caesarea. Oh, wow. That means Luke had tons of time to talk to Paul.

To hear his stories. I see. To get firsthand accounts of the early church.

Yeah. It's like having exclusive access to a key figure in history. Wow.

Talk about primary sources. Right. But wasn't Paul under arrest? Yeah.

Wouldn't that have limited Luke's access to other people and information? Well, prisoners back then were allowed visitors. And in Paul's case, he had some freedom to move around and receive guests. I see.

Plus, Caesarea had a large Jewish and Jewish Christian population. Luke could have easily connected with people who knew Paul, who had witnessed events, who could corroborate his stories. So Luke had access to Paul, to other eyewitnesses.

And he's telling us he carefully investigated everything. Yeah. But is there anything, Ellisie, that supports the idea that he was trying to be historically accurate? Here's a point that Keener really emphasizes.

Okay. Luke appeals to common knowledge within the early church. Okay.

Remember, he was writing to Theophilus. Right. So that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Uh-huh. He wasn't presenting brand-new information. I see.

He was confirming what was already known and believed. That's a good point. Yeah.

But couldn't some people have just accepted whatever they were told, even if it wasn't true? That's possible. Yeah. But this is one of Keener's strongest arguments for Luke's reliability.

Okay. It shows Luke wasn't just inventing things. Right.

He was working within a community that could fact-check him. Imagine if you tried to make up stories about your family's history. Yeah.

Someone would call you out pretty quickly. Yeah, that's true. Okay.

I'm starting to see why Keener is so impressed with Luke as a historian. Uh-huh. But before we wrap up.

Okay. I have to ask. Hmm.

What about the critics? Oh, yeah. Good point. Aren't there scholars who challenge Luke's accuracy? Of course.

No historical account is without its critics. Right. And Luke is no exception.

One of the main critiques focuses on the speeches. Okay. Especially those that happen behind closed doors.

I see. Critics argue that Luke couldn't have possibly known what was said in those private conversations. I can see why that would raise some eyebrows.

It's one thing to report on public speeches. Right. But private conversations are a whole different ballgame.

Right. And that's where the debate gets really interesting. Okay.

Keener acknowledges the challenges. Yeah. But points out that even with these speeches.

Okay. There's evidence that Luke was working with sources. Right.

And trying to represent different viewpoints fairly. So it's not a simple true or false issue. Exactly.

It's more about understanding the limitations of the sources. Right. And how history was written back then.

Exactly. And that leads to a really important takeaway. Okay.

For anyone engaging with historical accounts. Yeah. Whether it's the Book of Acts or any other text.

Mm-hmm. We need to be careful about imposing our modern expectations on ancient writers. Mm-hmm.

We need to understand the historical context. Uh-huh. The literary techniques.

Yeah. The limitations of the evidence. That's a great point.

It's a reminder that history is complex. Absolutely. And there are always multiple perspectives to consider.

Absolutely. And that's why it's so important to dive deep. Yeah.

To engage with the sources. Right. To wrestle with the questions.

It's how we learn. Mm-hmm. How we grow.

Yeah. How we develop a more nuanced and informed understanding of the past. Well said.

Thank you. And speaking of diving deep. Oh.

I think we've only scratched the surface of this topic. Yeah. There's so much more to unpack.

There is. So much more to explore. So much more.

So as we wrap up our deep dive into the Book of Acts, what are some key takeaways you think our listeners can walk away with? I think there are three big ones. Okay. First, we have to remember that memory and oral tradition were incredibly important and accurate in the ancient world.

Right. They're not like our forgetful brains today.

Right. Second, Luke wasn't just making things up. Okay.

He had access to eyewitnesses, early sources, and he really did his research. Yeah. And finally, when we compare the Book of Acts to what we know from other historical sources, it lines up surprisingly well.

Those are some great points to remember. Yeah. It's like we need to adjust our modern expectations to really appreciate how history was written back then.

Exactly. But before we let our listeners go, I have one final thought-provoking question for them to ponder. Ooh.

I love a good challenge. What do you have for them? Here it is. Knowing how carefully Luke seems to have worked, is there a specific event in Acts that you now want to dig into further? Maybe it's Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus.

Yeah. Or Peter's sermon at Pentecost. Or the shipwreck on the way to Rome.

Pick an event that intrigues you, and see what happens when you approach it with this newfound understanding of Luke's methods. That's a fantastic challenge. Yeah.

It's like we've given them a new set of lenses to view these familiar stories, and who knows what they'll discover. It reminds us that history is an ongoing conversation, a constant process of discovery. Absolutely.

There's always more to learn, more to explore, and more to understand. Well said. And hopefully this deep dive has given our listeners a new appreciation for Luke as a historian, and for the historical context of the Book of Acts.

Absolutely. So to all of our amazing listeners out there, thank you for joining us on this deep dive into the world of Luke and the Book of Acts. Yes, thank you.

We hope you've learned something new, and that you'll keep those minds curious and keep asking questions. Until next time on The Deep Dive, keep exploring.