

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 2, Genre and Historiography 6-Min. Video Overview

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Hello and welcome. Today we're cracking open one of the most action-packed and honestly controversial texts from the ancient world, the Book of Acts. I mean, it is just jam-packed with daring escapes, huge speeches, and incredible journeys.

But all that action raises a really fascinating question we're going to dig into. What exactly is this book? So, imagine you come across a text like this. How are you supposed to read it? Should we treat it like a careful, factual, historical record, or is it more like an ancient adventure novel? The thing is, the answer to that question completely changes how we understand everything in it.

You know, the true genre of Acts is a pretty hot topic among scholars, so we're going to approach this like a detective case. First, we'll look at the main suspect for what this book might be, and then we'll dive into the evidence for what most experts now agree is its real identity. Alright, our first suspect is the historical novel.

This theory, which a scholar named Richard Pervo is really known for, basically suggests that Acts has all the signs of a fictional adventure story. The idea is that it was written more to entertain and inspire people than to record history word for word. So the case for this novel theory usually points to a few things.

You've got opponents who are kind of painted as one-dimensional bad guys, lots of angry, rowdy mobs, the main characters are undeniably heroic, and the whole story is just non-stop action. It definitely sounds like a page-turner, right? But does the evidence actually hold up? Let's do it. Let's put the novel theory on trial.

We're going to compare the classic features of an ancient novel directly with what we find inside the book of Acts. Okay, the first major piece of evidence against this theory is the subject matter. Ancient novels? They were almost always about romance or some distant legendary past.

They almost never talked about real historical people from, say, the last 30 or 40 years. But Acts? It's entirely focused on real, recent people like Jesus, Peter, and Paul. That is a huge mismatch right from the start.

And next, just look at how the book begins. The author of Luke-Acts kicks things off with this formal preface, saying his goal is to write an orderly account based on what he learned from eyewitnesses. This is a classic move for an ancient historian.

It's basically a claim that you're dealing with facts. You just don't find that kind of thing in ancient novels. Period.

And this wasn't just some small nitpicky detail. The ancients themselves saw a really clear line here. I mean, listen to the philosopher Aristotle writing centuries earlier.

He said history is about what did happen, while fiction is about what could happen. They were seen as two totally different things. Okay, okay.

I hear you. But what about that whole adventure argument? All the shipwrecks, the prison breaks, the riots? That stuff certainly feels like it's straight out of an adventure novel. Isn't that proof enough? Well, not exactly.

First of all, ancient histories were often filled with dramatic events. I mean, wars and political drama are naturally pretty adventurous. But here's the real kicker.

If the author of Acts wanted to write a sensational, action-packed novel, he actually did a pretty restrained job. For instance, in his own letters, the Apostle Paul says he was shipwrecked three times and beaten with rods three times, but Acts only describes one of each. If anything, the author was being selective with the facts, not inventing them for dramatic effect.

So when you look at the subject matter, what the author himself says his intention is, and how he selectively uses action, the case for Acts being a novel just really falls apart. The genres are just too different. So for our little investigation, case dismissed.

Alright, so with the novel theory off the table, we can finally turn to the real identity of the Book of Acts. What kind of book did its author actually set out to write? The overwhelming consensus among scholars today is that the Book of Acts fits right into the category of ancient historiography. Now, that's a fancy term, but in simple terms, it just means its author was writing history, at least as a person would have understood it.

And the truth is, Acts has all the telltale signs of this genre. We already talked about that historical preface. But it's also filled with these long, formal speeches.

That was a standard tool that historians like Thucydides or Josephus used all the time. The author also syncs up the story with real, verifiable people and events from the Roman Empire, and his whole stated goal is to narrate events. You know, it walks like a duck, it talks like a duck, it's ancient history.

But this brings us to a really important question. When we say history, what do we actually mean? Because what a historian in ancient Rome was trying to do is not exactly the same thing as what a modern history professor does today. Historiography is really the craft of writing history.

It's not just about dumping a list of facts on a page. It's about looking at sources, picking out what's important, and then weaving it all into a story that makes sense. And well, the rules for how you do that have changed a lot over time.

And this right here is the key to the whole thing. Modern historians, they strive for objectivity, you know, just the facts. And they want precision in every little detail.

Ancient historians? They had different goals. Their main goal was often to teach moral lessons or to persuade their readers. So having an obvious point of view or a bias was totally expected.

They cared about getting the gist of the story right, the substance. But they weren't obsessed with the tiny details like we are today. Okay, so we've cracked the case.

Acts is ancient historiography, not a novel. But why on earth is this distinction so important? Why does it matter? I know what you might be thinking. Okay, that's a neat academic debate, but why does it matter to me, just reading the book? And that's a totally fair question.

The answer, though, really gets to the heart of how we should read any text from the past. Here's the bottom line. Genre is like an unwritten contract between the author and you, the reader.

It sets our expectations. When you pick up a sci-fi novel, you don't expect it to be a literal account of something that happened. But when you pick up a biography, you do.

Genre tells us what kind of truth the author is trying to give us. So classifying Acts as ancient historiography means we should read it understanding that its author intended to report on things that actually happened. Now, he used the literary tools of his day, like creating speeches to summarize ideas and presenting a clear theological perspective, but his basic project was rooted in recording real events, not in inventing fictional ones.

Understanding that is the whole key. And that kind of leaves us with a bigger question to chew on, one that goes way beyond just this one book. When we tell stories about our own past, whether it's world history or just our own family history, how do we navigate that line between just reporting the facts and telling a compelling story? It's a challenge that every historian, both ancient and modern, has had to face.