

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 3, Luke's Historiography 6-Min. Video Overview

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Today, we're launching a historical investigation. We're diving deep into a document that's nearly 2,000 years old, the Book of Acts, and we're going to be using the research of historian Dr. Craig Keener to ask a really fascinating question. You know, the Book of Acts is just packed with incredible stuff.

Shipwrecks, riots, dramatic prison breaks, and some seriously pivotal speeches. But here's the big question. Is it a reliable record of what actually happened? Or is it more of a creative legend? So how on earth do you even begin to test the historical reliability of a document this old? Well, the first thing we have to do is get one thing straight.

We can't judge an ancient text by our 21st-century standards. It just doesn't work. We have to step back in time into the world of 1st-century Greek and Roman historians and ask ourselves, how would they have seen this work? Luckily, the author gives us a little clue right at the very beginning.

So the author, whom tradition calls Luke, comes right out and tells his readers, hey, I didn't just make this up. He claims he did his homework. He says he gathered sources, and he actually talked to the people who were there, the eyewitnesses.

Now that is a bold claim. So let's see if we can check his work, starting with those all-important sources, the people who saw it happen. Okay, and this is where we immediately run into a major hurdle, and it's our own modern bias.

See, we tend to think of human memory as, you know, super fragile and unreliable. But that is absolutely not how the ancient world saw it. Not at all.

Think about it. We've basically outsourced our memory to our phones, right? To the internet. In the ancient world, though, memory wasn't this passive thing that just happened.

No, it was a disciplined skill. It was highly valued, and it was rigorously trained from the time you were a kid. And the capacity for recall that people had was frankly astonishing.

And get this, this wasn't just for the super educated elite. You had these traveling storytellers, bards, many of whom couldn't even read, who could perform epic poems like the Iliad and the Odyssey, which take hours to recite, word for word, completely from memory. And that was just considered normal.

And the scale of this trained memory could be just immense. Take the Roman orator Seneca. He could apparently hear 2,000 names one time and then recall them in the exact same sequence.

And if that's not crazy enough, he could listen to 200 lines of poetry and then recite them backward. I mean, that's the level of mental discipline that was possible and even celebrated back then. So for students, like the disciples of Jesus, this was basically their job description.

In some philosophical schools, students were required to repeat the entire previous day's lectures verbatim before they were even allowed to get out of bed in the morning. So accurately remembering and passing on what a teacher said wasn't some casual thing. It was their number one responsibility.

There's this old rabbinic saying that just captures the cultural ideal perfectly. A great student was like a cistern that never loses a single drop of water. The goal was perfect retention.

So when Luke says he talked to eyewitnesses, he was tapping into a culture where memory was seen as a powerful, reliable tool for preserving history. Okay, so the oral sources, the eyewitnesses, they might be way more reliable than we'd think. But what about the hard, verifiable details? Let's put Acts to the test and see how it holds up when we check it against stuff like archaeology and other historical records.

First stop on our fact-checking tour: Cyprus. In Acts chapter 13, the Roman governor is named Sergius Paulus. That's a super specific claim.

And what's amazing is that archaeologists have actually found inscriptions from Cyprus confirming that, yep, a man named Lucius Sergius Paulus was indeed the proconsul there right around that exact time. Boom. That's a direct hit.

Okay, next up, Thessalonica. Acts caused the city leaders there polytarchs. Now this was a real head-scratcher for historians for a long time because that title doesn't appear anywhere else in classical literature.

Skeptics pointed to it as a clear error. But then they started finding inscriptions, over 30 of them, in and around that city using that exact rare title. Another direct hit.

How about local politics? In the city of Ephesus, Acts identifies the main official as the grammateus. Now, in most cities, that was just a minor scribe, a clerk. But in Ephesus? You guessed it.

Inscriptions show that uniquely, the city clerk was in fact the chief magistrate. This is the kind of obscure local detail that an outsider just making things up would be incredibly unlikely to get right. So look, it's not just about these individual little details.

We can also zoom out and compare the broad sequence of events. When you piece together the travel itinerary from Paul's own letters, which are a completely independent source, right, and you lay it next to the journey described in Acts, the correspondence is remarkable. The cities he visits, the sequence, it all just lines up.

In fact, there was a scholar in the early 20th century, Adolf von Harnack, and he was no conservative, by the way. He identified 39 specific, concrete, historical correspondences between Paul's letters and the book of Acts. 39.

Let that sink in. This isn't just a coincidence. It really suggests the author of Acts was working with some very, very good information.

But that brings us to the elephant in the room. The speeches. They are long, they are detailed, and they are absolutely central to the story in Acts.

So how could anyone possibly remember them so precisely? And just to give you a sense of the scale here, speeches make up roughly a quarter of the entire book. So yeah, their historical basis is a critical question. If they're just invented, the reliability of the entire work is kind of thrown into question.

And it turns out ancient historians actually had a specific technique for this exact situation. It was a practice called *prosopopeia*. Basically, when a historian didn't have a word-for-word transcript, it was totally acceptable practice for them to write a speech that captured the substance, the gist, of what a person would have said in that situation.

It wasn't about verbatim reporting. It was about historical plausibility. So that leads to the key question, right? Knowing this practice was common, should we just assume that Luke simply made up these speeches to fit his narrative? Well, Dr. Keener points to some really compelling evidence that suggests, no, that's probably not what was going on here.

For one thing, Luke himself pretty much tells us he's summarizing. After a major speech, he writes, and with many other words, he exhorted them, which is basically him saying, hey, this is the short version. The speeches are also surprisingly short and direct.

They're not these long, flowery rhetorical masterpieces. And most importantly, Luke had access to sources: the apostles for the early speeches and for the later ones, Paul himself. In fact, one speech that's given when Luke was actually present is just filled with unique themes and language that you find all over Paul's own letters.

So when we put all of this evidence together, the cultural value placed on memory, all those verifiable details, the approach to the speeches, a pretty clear picture of the author's method starts to emerge. The author of Acts seems to have acted like a careful historian of his time. He gathered sources, both written and oral.

He leaned on the trained memories of eyewitnesses. He included a ton of specific verifiable details about geography, politics, and local customs. And he summarized key speeches, most likely based on reports from his sources.

And look, let's be really clear. This conclusion isn't about whether you believe the theology or the miracles. This is purely an analysis of methodology.

The research shows that the author operated with a consistent, demonstrable concern for historical accuracy. He built his entire narrative on a solid framework of real people, real places, and real events. And all of that leaves us with one final, pretty provocative thought.

When an author shows this much care, this much precision with all the small details that we can check, what does that imply about their faithfulness to the bigger, more significant parts of the story that we can't? That's a question worth thinking about.