

Title: Luke's Historiography

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Session 3

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Abstract

This lecture examines the reliability of Luke's historiography in the book of Acts by analyzing the nature of oral tradition, eyewitness testimony, and historical correspondences in the ancient world. Dr. Craig Keener explains that mnemonic skills in antiquity were highly developed, supporting the preservation of accurate oral history, and suggests that Luke had ample opportunity to collect accounts during his two-year stay in Judea. He also presents substantial evidence of Acts' accuracy through its extensive alignment with known external historical details and the letters of Paul. Finally, Keener addresses the conventions of ancient speech writing, showing that the speeches in Acts are faithful summaries of historical messages rather than complete rhetorical inventions.

Outline

I. Introduction to Luke's Historiography

- A. Practical context of ancient history and teaching Acts at the doctoral level.
- B. Luke 1:1-4 as the key text detailing Luke's sources (written and oral), investigation, and thorough knowledge.
- C. Timeline of composition: likely written between 62 and 90 AD (with Keener proposing the early 70s AD).

II. The Nature and Accuracy of Oral Tradition in Antiquity

- A. Countering the "amnesia" hypothesis: four and a half decades is a short span for eyewitnesses and community-retained memories.
- B. Definition of "handed down" (paradidomy): a technical term for careful oral tradition.
- C. Examples of long-term memory in oral societies:
 - 1. American oral storytelling (Anna Gulick: family stories back to the 1700s verified by public record).
 - 2. African oral history (Mrs. Keener's PhD research on preserving family histories).
- D. Highly developed memory skills in antiquity:
 - 1. Illiterate traveling bards memorizing the entire Iliad and Odyssey (48 ancient books total).

2. Professional orators using memoria to deliver speeches hours in length without notes.
3. Elementary education focusing heavily on memorizing sayings of famous teachers.
4. Advanced education (disciples of Greek, Jewish, and philosophical schools) requiring accurate transmission of a teacher's teachings and deeds.
 - a. Pythagorean disciples repeating back everything they heard the previous day.
 - b. Extreme example of disciples observing a teacher's private deeds (e.g., disciple hiding under a rabbi's bed).

E. The use of memory aids and note-taking:

1. Jewish oral tradition and rabbinic focus on memory (comparison of a student to a water cistern).
2. Greek and Roman copyist/note-taking traditions (e.g., Quintilian's students publishing highly accurate lecture notes).
3. Practical possibility of disciples like Matthew (a tax collector with writing/notekeeping skills) recording Jesus' teachings early on.

III. Eyewitness Testimony and Internal Gospel Evidence

A. Early Christian reliance on eyewitnesses:

1. Eyewitnesses (Peter/Cephas, John, and James the Lord's brother) remained prominent leaders in Jerusalem and the diaspora through the mid-first century.
2. The willingness of apostles to die for their claims indicates their integrity.
3. The prominent role of women as resurrection witnesses, despite the low legal credibility of women's testimony in Roman and Jewish law (e.g., Josephus).

B. Aramaic rhythm and Semitic idioms in the Greek text:

1. Evidence that Jesus' sayings were bilingual but carefully translated from Aramaic.
2. Retention of Semitic idioms (e.g., "Son of the Man") and Judean/Galilean customs, which were not typical of the later Greek-speaking diaspora church.

IV. Luke's Personal Access to Eye-witness Information

A. Investigation and "thorough knowledge" (Luke 1:3).

B. The "We" travel narratives (Chapters 16-28):

1. Proximity of the author to the events in Acts is much closer than in the Gospels.
2. Luke's two years in Roman custody with Paul in Judea (Caesarea, Acts 24:27).
3. Opportunities to interview key figures:
 - a. Mnason (an "old disciple").
 - b. Philip the Evangelist (who hosted Luke in Caesarea).
 - c. James, the brother of Jesus, in Jerusalem.
 - d. Paul (who had ample visiting rights under Governor Felix).

V. Acts' Correspondences with External History (Chapters 13-28)

A. Specific regional and historical details:

1. Sergius Paulus' family attestation.

2. Ethnological and linguistic details (Iconium as Phrygian, Lystra's local language, local pairing of Zeus and Hermes, local road sequence from Derbe to Lystra).

3. Local titles of officials:

- a. Thessalonian free city council (Deimos) and officials (Polytarchs).
- b. Ephesian city clerk (Gromatus) and local title of Artemis as he-the-as (the god).
- c. Governor holding court in specific Roman Asian districts.

4. Roman administration and topography:

- a. Claudius' expulsion of Jews in Rome (c. 49 AD).
- b. Jerusalem temple topography and military barracks (Porta Centonia, soldiers rushing down stairs).
- c. Roman citizenship acquisition under Emperor Claudius (Claudius Lysias' dialogue).
- d. Correct identifications of High Priest Ananias and Felix's tenure.
- e. Felix's marriage to Jewish princess Drusilla (sister of Agrippa II and Bernice).
- f. Antipatris road and the strategic dispatch of infantry back to Jerusalem.
- g. Roman provincial boundaries (Syria and Cilicia under the same governor).
- h. Porcius Festus' short tenure and his character's alignment with Josephus' account.
- i. Joint travels and visits of Agrippa II and Bernice.
- j. Nautical accuracy of Paul's voyage to Rome in Acts 27-28 (weather conditions, sailors' actions, ship's path, days elapsed).

VI. Corroboration by the Letters of Paul

A. Adolf von Harnack's 39 examples of Paul's letters corroborating Acts:

- 1. Jerusalem as the origin of the gospel.
- 2. Persecution of Judean churches by other Judeans (1 Thessalonians 2).
- 3. Judean churches keeping the law (Galatians 2:12).
- 4. The leadership of the Twelve, with Peter and John as pillars.
- 5. Barnabas, Mark (relative of Barnabas), Silas, and Timothy as companions.
- 6. Specific historical events: Paul escaping Damascus in a basket, converting near Damascus, and his subsequent travels in sequence (Antioch, Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, Troas, Macedonia, Rome).

B. Chronological alignment (Thomas Campbell's study).

C. Theological coherence:

- 1. Speeches in Acts 13:38-39 mirroring Paul's teaching on justification by faith.
- 2. Similarity in natural theology between Acts 17 and Romans 1.
- 3. Acts 20 containing wording and phrases extremely close to Paul's personal style (since Luke was present).

D. Rebuttal of Fielhauer's theological objections:

1. Standard Greco-Roman practices where students' emphases differed slightly from their teachers (e.g., Keener's relationships with Sanders, Charlesworth, and Smith).
2. Misreadings of Paul's view on the law; Paul himself accommodated Jewish law when interacting with Jews (1 Cor 9:19-23) and kept vows or circumcised Timothy.

VII. The Speeches in Acts (Approx. One-Quarter of the Book's Content)

A. Categorization of Speeches:

1. Apologetic: Defending the faith against Jewish charges (Acts 7, Paul's defenses in Acts 22, 24, 25, 26).
2. Evangelistic: Synagogue sermon (Acts 13), nature-focused sermon to farmers (Acts 14), philosophical sermon to Greeks (Acts 17).

B. Speeches as a Standard Convention of Ancient Historiography:

1. Use of prosopopoeia (writing speeches in character when direct transcripts were missing).
2. The range of accuracy among ancient historians:
 - a. High-end: Thucydides, Polybius (aiming for the general gist of what was actually said).
 - b. Low-end: Josephus' Masada speech by Eleazar (which used Platonic language about immortality, likely showing off rhetorical skills).
3. Paraphrasing as standard practice even when transcripts were available.

C. Speeches in Acts as Summaries:

1. Speeches in Acts are remarkably short and non-elaborated compared to elite Greco-Roman histories.
2. Luke 2:40 indicates Peter spoke "with many other words" (proving these are summaries).
3. Luke edits to highlight core themes while remaining faithful to the historical message and apostolic consensus (C.H. Dodd).
4. High level of reliability compared to other ancient historians.