

INTRODUCTION TO THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

by

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Note: Author's introduction in *The Acts of the Apostles* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1916). The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.

Acts is the chief source of information concerning apostolic Christianity in its first forms and efforts, and an unfailing spring of inspiration and a constant standard of appeal for method and aim in Christian effort for extending and organizing the work of the kingdom of God. It is well therefore, first of all, that we briefly summarize its main features.

1. *Authorship.* In common with every other book of our Bible, Acts has been subjected to the most searching investigation in the century of critical Bible study. Twenty-five years ago one held to the "traditional view" of Luke's personal authorship on peril of his standing as a respectable scholar. Fortunately those who have never found sufficient reason for serious doubt that Luke wrote Acts now find themselves in the distinguished company of Harnack, Ramsay, Moulton and many another whose careful learning commands fullest respect. To be sure, Harnack still feels called upon to say in the "Introduction" to his *The Acts of the Apostles*, wherein he defends fully the Lukan authorship and the historical accuracy of Acts: "In an age wherein critical hypotheses, once upon a time not unfruitful, have hardened themselves into dogmas, and when if an attempt is made to defend a book against prejudice, misunderstanding, and misrepresentation, scornful remarks are made about 'special pleading,' it is not superfluous to declare that the method which is here employed is influenced by no prepossession of any kind. It is of course disgraceful that the circumstances of criticism at the present day make such a declaration necessary."

Its claim of identity of authorship with the gospel by Luke is supported by marked similarity in style in many respects, as has been illustrated by numerous examples cited by various students, and by the unanimous opinion of early Christianity. That it has one author, and not several as advocated by critical scholars for a time, is successfully shown by the unity of the work, by the correspondence of vocabulary and style in the various parts into which the effort has been made to analyze the book, by its early acceptance as a unit and the uniform opinion to this effect down to the modern critical period when this theory of multiple authorship has been applied by its adherents to every writing of the Bible.

It is not, of course, to be supposed that Luke, or any other author, wrote without use of any sources. That some of these sources were written is quite what would be expected, and in the Introduction to his gospel this author has made it perfectly clear that it was his method to use, with discriminating care, all available sources of information, oral and written.

From the fact that Peter is the so-called "hero" of the first chapters and Paul of the later chapters, it has been wrongly inferred that two separate documents have been combined. It is natural to suppose, however, that Luke would find written accounts of the early doings in Jerusalem and the

rest of Palestine. While in this region with Paul he would also have opportunity to consult many who shared in these experiences. Certain Hebraic expressions in these chapters reflect the sources from which Luke derived information for this part. He came to be associated with Paul probably on the second missionary journey, and from him and his other associates he would be able to add to his own direct observation. The sections in which the events are narrated in the first person--the "we sections"--have come to be referred to by the analytical critics as "travel documents." Such they are, to be sure, but they do not at all indicate that they constitute a separate document used by some second century writer along with other material. Neither do they at all conclusively show that Luke was with Paul only at the times and places indicated by the use of "we" in the narratives.

That the writer really was Luke has the support of all the earlier "fathers" who refer to the writing at all, a considerable body of testimony, and by the relations revealed in Paul's writings between himself and Luke. Among all Paul's companions it can be shown that only Luke can easily be believed to be the author. The fact that he and Titus alone of these companions are not mentioned in the Acts suggests one of them as author. It is impossible in the light of 2 Timothy 4:10 to identify Titus with Luke. So Luke is left with no rival for this signal honor.

When and where did Luke write? This question has been stubbornly contested. It is not one of vital importance. That no hint of the destruction of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) is found in it has been used as evidence that it was completed prior to that time. But there is no compelling reason in the book itself for such mention even if the event had already occurred. It cannot have been prior to Paul's arrival in Rome A.D. 62. That no event later than this imprisonment in Rome is hinted at has commonly been taken as evidence that the work was completed at that time. Personally, I think that during the more than two years of Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea (24:27) Luke completed his Gospel, or at all events got together all his materials for it, and wrote much of Acts, and that soon after reaching Rome he put this in final form, and its circulation in a limited way began. The earliest certain reference to it, by Clement, shows it to be known in Rome in A.D. 95.

2. *Concerning Luke, himself*, we know for certain very little save what can be learned from his writings, and we have seen that he never mentions himself except in his introductions, and then not by name. Assuming that he is included in the "we" of 16:10-17; 20:4-21:18; 27:1-28:16, we have further [in addition] Paul's reference [to him] in Colossians 4:14, to "Luke the beloved physician"; in Philemon 24 where he is included in Paul's "fellow-workers"; and in 2 Timothy 4:11 where Luke alone was with Paul in his final imprisonment, faithfully attending and helping. A strong case can be made out also in favor of Luke as "the brother" of 2 Corinthians 8:18f, "whose praise in the gospel is spread through all the churches," and who was especially appointed by some churches to travel with Paul in collecting and disbursing funds for the poor Christians of Jerusalem. Indeed, we seem almost shut up to Luke as this "brother," or to Erastus.

It is agreed on all hands that he was a Gentile, and he is thus the only Gentile writer of the New Testament (unless Hebrews). The grounds for this are that he became associated with the missionaries in Asia Minor, probably in Galatia; that he is, evidently from his writings, a man of first-class Greek culture and one whose normal, if not native, language was Greek; the form of some of his references to Jews and Jewish matters; his name, which is Roman and may indicate the dignity of Roman citizenship.

He was a physician, and among the Greeks this required thorough education in the schools and

gave honor and standing. That Luke had marked appreciation of culture is clear from the recognition he gives to the winning of people of the better classes to Christianity, and from the dedication of his works to Theophilus. His interest in women and their place in the kingdom is also evident in both his works. It is he who tells of the organized society of women who attended Jesus and the Twelve (Gospel 8:2f); and in Acts at almost every turn the part played by women appears.

How Luke came to be a Christian we are nowhere told, nor whether he was already a proselyte worshiper of the true God. That he was a man of the finest spiritual insight, of deep experience, and of humble yet enthusiastic and joyful obedience in the gospel breathes on every page of his writing. He is emphatic and clear in attributing all religious experience and work to God as its source. In this he was a congenial spirit to associate with Paul. And it was his contact with Paul, humanly speaking, that gave him his position in Christian history. It is not improbable that his being a physician is the primary reason for his attending Paul. That Paul was in a large sense his hero seems evident. His devotion to him and unfailing loyalty make one of the most beautiful features of his personality and work. He and Paul were used of God to give us--and the race--more than half the New Testament, and the bulk of the contribution by each of them is almost exactly the same, crediting Paul with all the Pastoral Epistles.

That they influenced each other greatly can be seen by careful comparison of their vocabularies and ideas. Luke is remarkable for his accuracy. Sir W. M. Ramsay began as an extreme critic of Luke as an historian. After half a century of study, in which he has come to be the foremost authority on Paul's history, not only in this generation but in all time, Prof. Ramsay is an ardent defender of Luke's ability and authenticity. Much the same can be said of Harnack, for although he has given place in one of his books to a very extended list of "instances of inaccuracy and discrepancy" in Acts, they serve, in the end, rather to confirm than to weaken Luke's reputation for careful exactness. Some detailed illustrations of this will be indicated in our studies.

3. *Purpose.* Luke's purpose he indicates in the opening sentence as being to complete the story of the deeds of Jesus begun in his Gospel. The two books were, in his thinking, parts of one whole. He wanted to tell how Jesus, the Christ, had won and was now so rapidly extending his hold on men. He wanted to have a share in that extension, and his pen was his most facile instrument to that end. He would tell the story of the beginning of Christianity, for in it he saw a new force in history, the supreme force for redeeming humanity and realizing the purpose of its creation. With the instinct of an historian and with the inspiration of the Spirit of God, he recognized that Jesus was the supreme Maker of history, and he would tell his story.

It was given Luke to see this story in two parts with two Persons creating them. In Jesus he found God coming into the life of humanity "to guide our feet into the way of peace" and to "save his people from their sins;" and he wrote the gospel of the Saviour of men. He saw also this Saviour realizing his work through the Holy Spirit. In the early successes of the gospel in Palestine and in its later conquests in all sections of the Roman world, Luke saw God in the Holy Spirit enduing men for witnessing, and witnessing with these men to Jesus as the Christ. Thus alone could the wonderful facts be explained. Thus had Jesus planned and provided. So Luke wrote the gospel of the Holy Spirit. The two gospels made up for him, as for Paul, "the glorious gospel of the blessed God." They were equally important.

It is, I believe, no mere fancy that Acts can be interpreted thus, but it is the formative idea in

Luke's structure of his work. And it is from this standpoint that this commentary proceeds. God, present in his Holy Spirit, is felt and revealed in the entire story. The title by which the book is commonly known, "*The Acts of the Apostles*," is not found in the oldest manuscripts. Its oldest title is simply "Acts," but this is not found earlier than the fourth century. Only three of the Twelve are mentioned at all after the first chapter. It was not to tell the story of men, not even of apostles that Luke wrote; not even of Peter the great leader, nor of Paul the mighty herald and teacher. He would rather show how the Holy Spirit carried forward the work Jesus began. In this work men are agents, but the Spirit is the Power and the Mind. Luke selects for record those "acts" which reveal and illustrate the plan and method of the Holy Spirit. In this plan the full story of no man finds place. And he emphasizes results. At every section we find him eager to tell of believers won to the Lord.

4. *Outline of the Book.* I think that Luke's own plan was to construct a narrative of how the Holy Spirit took the plan of Jesus and put it into operation in the disciples of Jesus. In the commission at the ascension, which is recorded only in Acts (1:6-8), a geographical plan is given; and this is the key to the logical analysis of the book. The missionaries were to witness (1) "in Jerusalem;" (2) "in all Judæa and Samaria," where the word "all" and the article occur only once, showing the Judæa and Samaria are to be thought of as parts of a unitary division; (3) "unto the uttermost part of the earth." After an introductory section, six chapters tell of witnessing in Jerusalem, five of the work in Judæa and Samaria, gradually leading to the wider world to which the last sixteen chapters are devoted.

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