

The Question of the Historic Reliability of Acts

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Introduction

The Acts of Luke have often been severely criticized in the past as being out of agreement with the Pauline letters and as being historically unreliable.

Apparently Acts was held so much in discredit that Bultmann does not bother writing a commentary about Acts. This is hard to understand since he wrote commentaries concerning the synoptic Gospels, the Epistles of Paul and the Gospel of John and moreover a lot of writing concerning the "Urchristentum" (Early Christianity). A search in the Library produced no literature of him specially concerned about Acts. Many references to Acts were found through a Computer-Search, but were not of value for this paper.

Bultmann's Volume titled "Urchristentum"¹ is not especially concerned about Acts, but instead takes great lengths on philosophic topics.

Bultmann postulates the "Urchristentum" waiting for the coming rapture and in no need for something like history. The fact alone of Luke's writing history shows Luke's distance from the apostolic age and therefore Acts is not historically reliable for him².

In the last decade the discussion concerning the Historicity of Acts has been reopened. M. Hengels finds "Luke is no less trustworthy than other historians of antiquity".³

Acts contain many important events of early Christianity and its validity is of importance to the practice in our Churches today. The attempt has been made by many movements to go back to the experiences and practices of the early apostolic church.

The time of the apostles has often been idealized and a picture of a "pure" Christianity of the apostolic age was envisioned⁴. Often it was overlooked that there also were struggles and conflicts in that time.

Many denominations nowadays are claiming to be as the "first" Christians and have their own peculiar points that are seen in Acts⁵.

¹Bultmann, Rudolf "Urchristentum", Artemis Verlag Zürich, 1949

²Bultmann (different book see Bibliography) p.462/463 "Schon die Tatsache, daß er einen Bericht über die Entstehung und erste Geschichte der christlichen Gemeinde schreibt, woran ja die eschatologische Gemeinde gar kein Interesse haben konnte(!), zeigt, wie weit er sich von deren Denken entfernt hat. bestätigt daß er den ursprünglich kerygmatischen Sinn der Jesus Überlieferung preisgegeben ... hat"

³Marshall p.225

⁴Dunn p.80

⁵Dunn p.82

Luke's knowledge of the Apostolic Time

The political, geographical and historic details of Acts have been researched by many scholars. Sir William Ramsay performed archaeological research and found Luke to be very knowledgeable about the different political arrangements in provinces he mentions⁶.

For example Luke is able to use the correct title for Sergius Paullus. Philippi is correctly designated as a roman colony and the officials are referred to by their correct title. The Politarchs mentioned in connection with Thessalonica are confirmed by inscriptions found. In Malta another title is used for the "chief man". In Ephesus Luke refers to the government-officials correctly as Asiarchs⁷.

Luke has a detailed knowledge of the rights of Roman citizens. And he apparently understands Paul's reluctance to invoke it because it would be necessary to appeal to the registers of his home area. He shows detailed knowledge in describing the shipwreck in Chapter 27⁸.

C.J. Hemer has produced an archaeological backing for small details in Acts. He proposes to see Luke as a careful historian⁹.

Marshall holds that Luke's writings "can be demonstrated for the most part a reliable guide" in unity with a Roman Historian A.N. Sherwin White¹⁰.

Kee holds the Acts as a collection of short biographical passages as characteristic for that time. The same style of writing is found in early rabbinical material and in other writings of the Greco-Roman culture¹¹.

Date of writing

The problems with dating Acts are often the presuppositions of the ones approaching it and the fact that historic information about Acts outside of Acts is scarcely available. One wrong choice here can mean the development of uncountable theories to explain strange phenomena produced through that wrong choice. It is advisable to choose a dating that leads to the least possible of these.

Argumentation for a Date before AD 64

⁶Guthrie p.371

⁷Guthrie p.372

⁸Guthrie p.373

⁹Marshall p.226 G: Lüdemann criticized the lack of interest in the historicity of Acts and offers a historical commentary to Acts.

¹⁰Marshall p.69

¹¹Kee p.183

A) There is no reference to the extremely important events around the Fall of Jerusalem after AD64. It is hardly conceivable that Luke would have omitted an event of such importance for Christians and Jews (if they can be separated at that time) alike.¹²

B) Luke's narrative is centered around Jerusalem.

C) The first persecution under Nero (around 70 AD) is not mentioned. This would be another significant event for Christianity in this time¹³. The significant death of James is also not mentioned.

D) The narrative stops abruptly and does not tell of the death of Paul¹⁴.

E) The dominant theme of Acts is the Jewish-Christian controversy. This was of vital significance before the fall of Jerusalem¹⁵.

F) Luke's terminology is seen to be primitive. He is speaking of "The Son of Man", "Servant" and of "disciples". There is a positive attitude towards the Romans in Acts¹⁶.

G) Luke seems not to know the Epistles of Paul¹⁷.

Reasons for a later Date

Especially the old Tübingen-School upheld a very late date in the second century¹⁸. The criticism of this school is generally not accepted any more and most scholars seem to accept a date late in the first century.

A) It is reasoned that the reconciliation of the clash of Paul and Peter mentioned in Galatians required time.¹⁹

B) The interest in the infancy stories, the resurrection, and the doctrine of the spirit. In primitive miracles and glossolalia. This is postulated to be already a development that needed time.

C) It is inferred from the prophecy in Acts 20:25,38 that Paul is already dead. The assumption is that prophecy will only be mentioned if it is already fulfilled.

¹²Guthrie p.355

¹³Guthrie p.356

¹⁴Guthrie p.356

¹⁵Guthrie p.359

¹⁶Guthrie p.360

¹⁷Guthrie p.361

¹⁸Guthrie p.363

¹⁹Guthrie p.363

D) A relationship to Josephus is seen, since Luke as Josephus refers to an uprising under Theudas (5:36). The conclusion is that Luke used Josephus as a source. Therefore Acts must be dated after 94 AD.²⁰

E) There are affinities to the writings of the Church-Fathers.²¹

Relationship to the Epistles of Paul

Often contradictions between Paul's letters and Acts are seen because the dualism of early Christianity in Jewish and Gentile believers is overlooked²². Dunn sees a whole spectrum in first century Christianity²³. The connecting link between all of these was the emphasis on sole sufficiency of the grace of Christ for all²⁴.

The Jerusalem-Visits of Paul

The basic problem here in relationship to Galatians is that Acts mentions three visits (9:26;11:30;15:2) while in Galatians only two (1:16;2) are mentioned. Therefore it has often been concluded that Acts and the Paul's letters are incompatible. There are two reasons which would solve this incompatibilities²⁵:

First Paul might have written Galatians before the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem. The third visit had not occurred so far.

Second Paul might not mention all visits. He may only mention visits when he met the apostles. Since he had relatives in Jerusalem and was educated in Jerusalem this would be natural.

The council decree is not mentioned in Galatians. If the letter was written before the council this again would be no problem.

Paul and the Jewish Law

A contradiction between the Paul in Acts and the Paul in the letters is seen because Paul in Acts is observing Jewish laws but in his letters seems to be ferociously against the law. In Acts Paul circumcises Timothy and especially in Galatians Paul preaches against circumcision²⁶.

²⁰Guthrie p.363

²¹Guthrie p.364

²²Dunn p.88

²³Dunn p.90

²⁴Dunn p.91

²⁵Guthrie p.373, Marshall p.75

²⁶Guthrie p.374

In 1 Cor 9:20- Paul explains his adapting to the cultural background. He accepts the surrounding culture as a basis for his work. Since he usually started his work in a town in the synagogue it was necessary not to immediately cause a disturbance because he had an uncircumcised person in his group. Especially if that person was widely known as of Jewish heritage like Timothy. Therefore Timothy was circumcised. In the same way Paul adhered to his native culture and observed the Jewish laws. This was no way of gaining favor with God for him.²⁷

Confrontation between Paul and Peter in Galatians

The confrontation of Peter in Galatians is thought to be strange since the council should have already decided this issue. Again if Galatians was written before the council this would not be strange at all. Actually this incident might have led to see the necessity of a council²⁸.

The portrait of Paul in Acts²⁹

Acts shows Paul as a wonder worker. This is deemed to be out of touch with the Epistles by some scholars since Paul's letters are not especially concerned with them. Paul mentions his "signs of an apostle" as "wonders" in 2 Cor 12:12. There is a continuity between Acts and the letters here. The problem might arise from humbleness of Paul in not boasting or the insignificance of wonders for the subjects covered in the letters.

Acts shows Paul as a convincing speaker, but in his epistles Paul is not so convinced of his speaking abilities. A different view of capabilities of a person by himself and by others is nothing unnatural.

Acts gives no hint that Paul needed to affirm his equality with the other apostles. In the letters he seems to fight about his recognition as an apostle in some churches. Acts does not seem to be concerned about conditions in early churches, but tries to give a broad picture. Therefore this might have been a minor problem with some churches.

Speeches

The question is how the speeches in Acts were composed. Are they invented by Luke, do they exactly reflect what was said or how does Luke bring them into the narrative?

M.Dibelius asserted that the speeches were invented by Luke because of their similarities. This opinion has been challenged by others. Recently M. Hengel has compared the principles used by Greek historians with Luke's in Acts. Luke comes out very favorably in this comparison.³⁰

²⁷Lecture notes.

²⁸Guthrie p.376

²⁹Guthrie p.376

³⁰Guthrie p.380

Luke's method of giving the speeches is seen to be like Thucydides, who describes the method of including speeches in a narrative as "adhering as close as possible to the general sense of what was actually said" while on the other hand giving the reader insight to the issues involved at that point.³¹

His style may also be compared with Jewish Historians.³²

Another important aspect was discovered by C.H. Dodd who emphasized that the speeches in Acts contain a primitive kerygma thereby attesting their early date.³³

Other scholars find that many speeches are adapted to their respective audiences and seem to contain personal reminiscences.³⁴

This becomes also evident in a change in the Greek-Style of Luke. His Greek seems to become "crude" when the apostles speak. Luke seems not to be concerned about rhetoric elegance at these points³⁵.

Sources and the "We"-Problem

There is no agreed upon theory by scholars for the sources of Acts. This is especially difficult because of the uniform style of Luke³⁶.

The We-Passages are introduced without explanations into the narrative going on in the third person. The following theories have been used to explain this phenomenon:³⁷

1. Obviously in these passages the Author himself was involved. He also uses the first person singular in 1:1 to refer to himself.
2. The We-Sections form a diary.
3. The We-Sections were taken from somebody else's diary.
4. The author wanted to give the impression of an eyewitness.

The author himself claims in his preface (to his Gospel) that he has followed the events that happened and collected evidence from others about these events. This leads to the conclusion that the author belonged to that same period and clarifies the meaning of the "We"-use. The author himself was involved³⁸

One of the problems with the text of Acts is that our "Western" text differs from other early texts. It was suggested that there were two editions of Acts³⁹

³¹Guthrie p.379

³²Marshall p.55

³³Guthrie p.381

³⁴Guthrie p.382

³⁵Marshall p.56/57

³⁶Marshall p.67

³⁷Guthrie p.387

³⁸Guthrie p.385

³⁹Guthrie p.398

Conclusion

There are a lot of factual details in Acts. To my judgment the main interest is historical but the history is viewed from a Christian point of view since Luke belongs to that group too⁴⁰.

A good witness for the accuracy is Sir William Ramsay who deemed Luke as trustworthy as a result of archeological studies. He changed his opinion that Luke did a "tendentious production" to holding Luke as an accurate historian⁴¹.

On the scholarly side there is a tendency (good word) of expecting Luke to measure up to nowadays standards. Luke should be compared to contemporary Jewish and Hellenistic historians⁴².

Kümmel rejects Acts as unhistoric by the failure to fulfill his criteria of "completeness of material, exactitude of historical detail, consistent chronology, biographical interest"⁴³.

It seems that more space is needed to cover this subject better. I seem just to have scratched the topics.

⁴⁰Guthrie p.365

⁴¹Marshall p.53,p.69

⁴²Marshall p.54

⁴³Kümmel, Werner Georg, "Introduction to the New Testament", English Ed., Abingdon Press 1975, p.162

Scriptural
quotations.

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