

The Writings of Luke

by F.F Bruce

Luke's writings provide a reliable and accurate account of the early Christian church, demonstrating his commitment to historical context and attention to detail.

Scripture: Luke 2:1, Acts 1:1, Acts 18:12, Acts 19:38, Acts 28:7

Topics: "New Testament", "Biblical History"

Description

F.F. Bruce delves into the historical accuracy and reliability of Luke, the author of the third Gospel and Acts of the Apostles, highlighting Luke's meticulous attention to detail and accuracy in his writings. Luke's works provide a comprehensive historical account of Christian origins, bridging the gap between the time of John the Baptist and the early years of the Christian Church, offering valuable insights into the political and social contexts of the Roman Empire during that period. Through Luke's writings, we gain a deeper understanding of the significant figures, events, and locations mentioned in the New Testament, demonstrating Luke's commitment to presenting a factual and trustworthy narrative of the early Christian movement.

Transcript

Outside Paul's own letters, we have most of our information about him from the writings of his friend and companion Luke, the author of the third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. Luke was a physician by profession, and according to a tradition which can be traced back to the second century was a native of Antioch in Syria. Some support is given to this tradition by the internal evidence of his writings. So far as we can tell, he was the only Gentile among the New Testament writers. His two works are really two parts of one continuous historical work, carrying the history of Christian origins from the time of John the Baptist down to about the year 60.

Both parts of this work are addressed to an otherwise unknown person named Theophilus, who apparently had some previous knowledge of Christianity, and may have been a person of some official status, seeing that Luke gives him the title 'most excellent'-the same title as that by which Paul addresses Felix and Festus, the Roman governors of Judaea. In the prologue to his Gospel Luke explains the purpose of his twofold work in these words:

'Most excellent Theophilus!! Since many have undertaken to draw up a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, as they have been transmitted to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word, I too, having followed the whole course of events accurately from

the first, have decided to write an orderly account for you, in order that you may be sure of the reliability of the information which you have received' (Lk. 1 1- 4).

Luke inherited the high traditions of Greek historical writing, and had access to various excellent sources of information about the events with which he dealt, besides being himself present at some of the incidents which he narrated. We have already mentioned some of the sources, written and oral, on which he may have drawn.' The value of his work may be realized if we compare our relatively' ample knowledge of the progress of Christianity before AD 60 with our ignorance of it for many years after that date; indeed, after Luke there arose no writer who can really be called a historian of the Christian Church until Eusebius, whose Ecclesiastical History was written after Constantine's Milan Edict of Toleration (AD 313).

Whatever his sources were, Luke made good use of them. And he sets his story in the context of imperial history. Of all the New Testament writers, he is the only one who so much as names a Roman emperor. Three emperors (Augustus, Tiberius, and Claudius) are mentioned by name; the Emperor Nero is also referred to, but not by his personal name-he is the 'Caesar' to whom Paul appealed.' The birth of Jesus is fixed in the reign of the Emperor Augustus, when Herod the Great was king of Judaea, at the time of an imperial census.

The commencement of the public ministry of John the Baptist, with which the 'Kerygma' proper begins, elaborately dated by a series of synchronisms in the Greek historical manner,' reminding the classical student of the synchronisms with which, for example, Thucydides dates the formal outbreak of the Peloponnesian War in the beginning of the second book of his History. Names of note in the Jewish and Gentile world of his day appear in Luke's pages; in addition to the emperors, we meet the Roman governors Quirinius, Pilate, Sergius Paullus, Gallio, Felix, and Festus; Herod the Great and some of his descendants-Herod Antipas the tetrarch of Galilee, the vassal kings Herod Agrippa I and II, Berenice and Drusilla; leading members of the Jewish priestly caste such as Annas, Caiaphas, and Ananias; Gamaliel, the greatest contemporary Rabbi and Pharisaic leader.

A writer who thus relates his story to the wider context of world history is courting trouble if he is not careful; he affords his critical readers so many opportunities for testing his accuracy. Luke takes this risk, and stands the test admirably. One of the most remarkable tokens of his accuracy is his sure familiarity with the proper titles of all the notable persons who are mentioned in his pages. This was by no means such an easy feat in his days as it is in ours, when is so simple to consult convenient books of reference.

The accuracy of Luke's use of the various titles in the Roman Empire has been compared to the easy and confident way in which an Oxford man in ordinary conversation will refer to the Heads of Oxford colleges their proper titles-the Provost of Oriel, the Master , Balliol, the Rector of Exeter, the President of Magdalen, and so on. A non-Oxonian like the present writer never feels quite at home with the multiplicity of these Oxford titles. But Luke had a further difficulty in that the titles sometimes did not remain the same for any great length of time; a province might pass from senatorial government to administration by a direct representative of the emperor, and would then be goverened no longer by a proconsul but by an imperial legate (*legatus pro praetore*).

Cyprus, for example, which was an imperial province until 22 BC, became a senatorial province in that year, and was therefore governed no longer by an imperial legate but by a proconsul. And so, when Paul and Barnabas arrived in Cyprus about AD 47, it was the proconsul Sergius Paullus whom they met (Acts xiii. 7), man of whom we know a little more through inscriptions, and in whose family Sir William Ramsay

claimed at evidences of Christianity could be traced at a later date.

Similarly the governors of Achaia and Asia are proconsuls, as both these provinces were senatorial. Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia (Acts xviii. 12), is known to us the brother of Seneca, the great Stoic philosopher and tutor of Nero. An inscription at Delphi in central Greece, recording a proclamation of the Emperor Claudius, indicates that Gallio became proconsul of Achaia in July, AD 5 I. Achaia was a senatorial province am 27 BC to AD 15, and again from AD 44 onwards. is noteworthy that Luke, who generally calls countries by their ethnic or popular names rather than by Roman provincial nomenclature, and who elsewhere calls the province of Achaia by its more ordinary name Greece (Acts xx. 2), departs from his custom when giving a governor's official title, and so calls Gallio not 'proconsul Greece' but 'proconsul of Achaia'-his official title.

The reference to the proconsuls of Asia in Acts xix. 38 strange. There was only one proconsul at a time, and the town clerk of Ephesus says to the riotous concourse of citizens, 'There are proconsuls.' We might say that this is the 'generalizing plural', but would it not have been simpler to say, 'There is the proconsul'? An examination of the chronological data, however, reveals that only a few months before the riot in the Ephesian theater the proconsul of Asia, Junius Silanus, had been assassinated by emissaries of Agrippina, the mother of Nero, who had just become emperor (AD 54). A successor to Silanus had not yet arrived, and this by itself would account for the town clerk's indefinite reference, 'There are proconsuls'; but it is also tempting to take words as referring to Helius and Celer, the murderers Silanus, for they were in charge of the emperor's affairs in Asia and may well have discharged the proconsular duties during the interval between the death of Silanus and the arrival of his successor.'

The town clerk of Ephesus was a native official, who acted as the link between the municipal government of city and the Roman administration. The Asiarchs, who are mentioned on the same occasion (Acts xix. 31), were representatives of the cities of the province who presided over the provincial cult of 'Rome and the Emperor'. Principal Duncan suggests" that the riot took place at the Ephesian festival of Artemisia, held in March or April in honor of the goddess Artemis (the Diana of the English AV); the Asiarchs, as chief priests of the imperial cult, would naturally be present at such a festival to represent the emperor.

The city of Ephesus itself is given the title Neokoros, 'Warden of the Temple' of Artemis (Acts xix. 35). This word literally means 'temple-sweeper', but came to be given as a title of honor, first to individuals, and then to cities as well. (Similarly in our own day, the George Cross, instituted as an honor for individuals, has been conferred on the island of Malta.) Luke's ascription of the title to Ephesus is corroborated by a Greek inscription which describes this city as'TempleWarden of Artemis'.

The theater of Ephesus, in which the riotous assembly met, has been excavated, and, to judge by its ruins, it seated something like 25,000 persons. As in many other Greek towns, the theater was the most convenient place for a meeting of the citizen body. An interesting discovery in the theater was an inscription of AD 103-104, in Greek and Latin, telling how a Roman official, C. Vibius Salutaris, presented a silver image of Artemis and other statues to be set on their pedestals at each meeting of the ecclesia or citizen body in the theater. This reminds us of the interest taken in the cult of the goddess, according to Acts xix. 24, by the guild of silversmiths at Ephesus. The 'silver shrines' which they made for Artemis were small niches containing an image of the goddess with her lions beside her. Some of these miniature temples in terracotta have survived.

The magistrates of Philippi, which was a Roman colony, are called 'praetors' in Acts, and they are attended by 'lictors' (the 'serjeants' of the AV), by whose rods Paul and Silas had so many stripes inflicted on them (Acts xvi. 12, 20 ff., 35 ff.). The strict title of these colonial magistrates was 'duumvirs'; but they affected the more grandiloquent title of praetors" like the magistrates of another Roman colony, Capua, of whom Cicero says: 'Although they are called duumvirs in the other colonies, these men wished to be called praetors.'

At Thessalonica the chief magistrates are called 'politarchs' (Acts xvii. 6, 9), a title not found in extant classical literature but occurring in inscriptions as a title of magistrates in Macedonian towns, including Thessalonica.

The ancient court of the Areopagus appears in the narrative of Paul's visit to Athens (Acts xvii. 19, 22). It was the most venerable of all Athenian institutions, and had lost most of its ancient power in the fifth century BC with the growth of Athenian democracy, but it regained much of its prestige under the Roman Empire. In particular, there is evidence that at this time it exercised a certain control over public lecturers, and it was therefore natural that Paul, arriving in Athens with his new doctrine, should be invited to propound it 'in the midst of the Areopagus' (not, as the AV says, on 'Mars' hill', for though that was the place where the court had met in primitive times, and from which it received its name, it no longer assembled there, but in the Royal Colonnade in the Athenian marketplace).

The chief official in Malta is called 'the first man of the island' (Acts xxviii. 7), a title vouched for in both Greek and Latin inscriptions as the proper designation of the Roman governor of Malta.

When Paul arrived in Rome, he was handed over, according to one textual tradition, to an official called he 'stratopedarch' (Acts xxviii. 16), identified by the German historian Mommsen with the princeps peregrinorum, the commander of the imperial couriers, of whom the centurion Julius (Acts xxvii. 1) appears to have been one.

Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee in the time of our Lord, seems to have been given the courtesy title of 'king' by his Galilaean subjects (cf. Mt. xiv. 9; Mk. vi. 14), but unlike his father Herod the Great and his nephew Herod Agrippa I he was not promoted to royal status by the emperor, and had to be content with the lesser title 'tetrarch'. Luke therefore never calls him king, but always tetrarch (e.g. Lk. iii r, 19).

The reference in Luke ii. 2 to Quirinius as governor of Syria at the time of the birth of Christ (before the death of Herod the Great in 4 BC) has frequently been thought to be an error, because Quirinius is known to have become imperial legate of Syria in AD 6, and to have supervised in that year the enrolment mentioned in Acts v. 37, which provoked the insurrection led by Judas of Galilee. But it is now widely admitted that an earlier enrolment, as described in Luke ii. i ff., (a) may have taken place in the reign of Herod the Great, (b) may have involved the return of everyone to his family home, (c) may have formed part of an Empirewide census, and (d) may have been held during a previous governorship of Quirinius over Syria.

a) Josephus informs us that towards the end of Herod's reign (37-4 BC) the Emperor Augustus treated him more as a subject than as a friend,' and that all Judaea took an oath of allegiance to Augustus as well as to Herod. The holding of an imperial census in a client kingdom (as Judaea was during Herod's reign) is not unparalleled; in the reign of Tiberius a census was imposed on the client kingdom of Antiochus in eastern Asia Minor.

(b) The obligation on all persons to be enrolled at their domiciles of origin, which made it necessary for Joseph to return to Bethlehem, has been illustrated from an edict of AD 104, in which C. Vibius Maximus, Roman prefect of Egypt, gives notice as follows: 'The enrolment by household being at hand, it is necessary to notify all who for any cause whatsoever are away from their administrative divisions to return home in order to comply with the customary ordinance of enrolment, and to remain in their own agricultural land.'

(c) There is scattered evidence of the holding of enrolments in various parts of the Empire between 11 and 8 BC, the papyrus evidence in the case of Egypt being practically conclusive.

(d) There is good inscriptional evidence that when Quirinius took up office in Syria in AD 6 this was the second occasion on which he served as imperial legate. The first occasion was when he commanded an expedition against the Homanadensians, a mountain tribe of Asia Minor, some time between 12 and 6 BC. But our evidence does not state expressly in which province he was imperial legate at this earlier date. Sir William Ramsay argued that the province was Syria. We have, however, a continuous record of governors of Syria for those years, which leaves no room for Quirinius; Ramsay suggested that he was appointed as additional and extraordinary legate for military purposes. On the other hand, a good case has been made out for believing that his first term of office as imperial legate was passed in Galatia, not in Syria. The question is not yet finally decided, but it may be best to follow those commentators and grammarians who translate Luke ii. 2 as 'This census was before that which Quirinius, governor of Syria, held'.

Another supposed mistake has been detected by some in Luke iii. 1, where Lysanias is said to have been tetrarch of Abilene (west of Damascus) in the fifteenth year of Tiberius (AD 27-28), whereas the only Lysanias of Abilene otherwise known from ancient history bore the title of king and was executed by order of Mark Antony in 34 BC. Evidence of a later Lysanias who had the status of tetrarch has, however, been forthcoming from an inscription recording the dedication of a temple 'for the salvation of the Lords Imperial and their whole household, by Nymphaeus us, a freedman of Lysanias the tetrarch'. The reference to 'the Lords Imperial'-a joint title given only to the Emperor Tiberius and his mother Livia, the widow of Augustus-fixes the date of the inscription between AD 14 (the year of Tiberius' accession) and 29 (the year of Livia's death). On the strength of this and other evidence we may well be satisfied with the verdict of the historian Eduard Meyer, that Luke's reference to Lysanias is 'entirely correct'.

We may mention one out of several instances of the light which ancient coins can throw on the New Testament narrative. The date at which the procurator Felix was replaced by Festus (Acts xxiv. 27) has been much debated by historians. But there is evidence that a new coinage was introduced in Judaea in Nero's fifth year (which ended in October of AD 59), and the most natural occasion for its introduction would be just such a change of procurator. With the above mentioned inscription from Delphi, fixing the date of Gallio's proconsulship of Achaia (and therewith the chronology of Paul's evangelization of Corinth, recorded in Acts xviii and this numismatic evidence for dating Festus' arrival as procurator of Judaea in AD 59, we are in a position to date some of the most crucial landmarks in Paul's career. The framework thus provided is one into which the statements of Acts fit perfectly.

The accuracy which Luke shows in the details we have already examined extends also to the more general sphere of local colour and atmosphere. He gets the atmosphere right every time. Jerusalem, with its excitable and intolerant crowds, is in marked contrast to the busy emporium of Syrian Antioch, where men of different creeds and nationalities rub shoulders and get their rough corners worn away, so that we are not surprised to find the first Gentile church established there, with Jews and non-Jews meeting in

brotherly tolerance and fellowship. Then there is Philippi, the Roman colony with its self-important magistrates and its citizens so very proud of being Romans; and Athens, with its endless disputations in the marketplace and its unquenchable thirst for the latest news a thirst for which its statesmen had chided it three and four hundred years earlier.' Then there is Ephesus, with its temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the world, and so many of its citizens depending for their living on the cult of the great goddess; with its reputation for superstition and magic - a reputation so widespread in the ancient world that a common name for written charms or spells was Ephesia grammata ('Ephesian letters'). It was no doubt scrolls containing these spells that were publicly burnt as Paul powerfully proclaimed a faith which set men free from superstitious fears (Acts xix. 19).

Three sections of the Acts are commonly known as 'we sections', because in them the writer suddenly passes from a narrative in the third person to one in the first person plural, thus unobtrusively but adequately indicating that at certain periods he himself was present at the events described. Of these 'we sections' perhaps the most interesting is the last, which contains the great story of Paul's voyage and shipwreck as he and his companions sailed from Palestine to Italy. This narrative has been called one of the most instructive documents for the knowledge of ancient seamanship.' The standard work in English on the subject is *The Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul*, published in 1848 (4th ed., 1880), by James Smith of Jordanhill, himself an experienced yachtsman who was well acquainted with that part of the Mediterranean over which Paul's ship sailed, and who bears witness to the remarkable accuracy of Luke's account of each stage in the voyage, and was able to fix, by the details given by Luke, the exact spot on the coast of Malta where the shipwreck must have taken place.

Of Luke's narrative of their stay in Malta (Acts xxviii. 1-10), Harnack says 'that it may be concluded with great probability from xxviii. 9 f. that the author himself practised in Malta as a physician', and after an examination of the language of the passage he declares that 'the whole story of the abode of the narrator in Malta is displayed in a medical light.'

Now, all these evidences of accuracy are not accidental. A man whose accuracy can be demonstrated in matters where we are able to test it is likely to be accurate even where the means for testing him are not available. Accuracy is a habit of mind, and we know from happy (or unhappy) experience that some people are habitually accurate just as others can be depended upon to be inaccurate. Luke's record entitles him to be regarded as a writer of habitual accuracy.

Sir William Ramsay, who devoted many fruitful years to the archaeology of Asia Minor, testifies to Luke's intimate and accurate acquaintance with Asia Minor and the Greek East at the time with which his writings deal. When Ramsay first set out on his archeological work, in the late 'seventies of last century, he was firmly convinced of the truth of the then fashionable Tubingen theory, that Acts was a late production of the middle of the second century AD, and he was only gradually compelled to a complete reversal of his views by the inescapable evidence of the facts uncovered in the course of his research.

Although in his later years Ramsay was persuaded to don the mantle of a popular apologist for the trustworthiness of the New Testament records, the judgments which he publicized in this way were judgments which he had previously formed as a scientific archaeologist and student of ancient classical history and literature. He was not talking unadvisedly or playing to the religious gallery when he expressed the view that 'Luke's history is unsurpassed in respect of its trustworthiness'; this was the sober conclusion to which his researches led him, in spite of the fact that he started with a very different opinion of Luke's historical credit. His mature verdict was pronounced in the following terms:

'Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statement of fact trustworthy; he is possessed of the true historic sense; he fixes his mind on the idea and plan that rules in the evolution of history, and proportions the scale of his treatment to the importance of each incident. He seizes the important and critical events and shows their true nature at greater length, while he touches lightly or omits entirely much that was valueless for his purpose. In short, this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians.'

It is not every scholar who would endorse Ramsay's judgment on Luke's technical expertise as a historian; but his detailed accuracy is something which can be checked time and again. Research in the field which forms the historical and geographical background to Luke's narrative has not stood still since Ramsay's heyday, but our respect for Luke's reliability continues to grow as our knowledge of this field increases. Whatever may be said of Ramsay, no one will be inclined to charge the veteran American scholar Dr. Henry J. Cadbury with being an apologist. But when Dr. Cadbury, after a long and distinguished career in which he made contributions of the highest quality to the study of Luke and Acts, delivered the Lowell Lectures for 1953 on The Book of Acts in History, he produced a fascinating work which can but enhance the reader's admiration for Luke's achievement. Dr. Cadbury's volume may indeed be hailed as a worthy sequel to Ramsay at his best.

The historical trustworthiness of Luke has indeed been acknowledged by many biblical critics whose standpoint has been definitely liberal. And it is a conclusion of high importance for those who consider the New Testament from the angle of the historian. For the writings of Luke cover the period of our Lord's life and death, and the first thirty years of the Christian Church, including the years in which Paul's greatest missionary work was accomplished and the majority of his extant letters were written. The two parts of Luke's history really bind the New Testament together, his Gospel dealing with the same events as the other Gospels, and his Acts providing the historical background to the Epistles of Paul. The picture which Luke gives us of the rise of Christianity is generally consonant with the witness of the other three Gospels and of Paul's letters. And he puts this picture in the frame of contemporary history in a way which would inevitably invite exposure if his work were that of a romancer, but which in fact provides a test and vindication on historical grounds of the trustworthiness of his own writings, and with them of at least the main outline of the origins of Christianity presented to us in the New Testament as a whole.

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