

Reading Acts as History

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Unless instructed otherwise, the average person who picks up the book of Acts probably reads it as the history book of the Early Church.¹ Most scholars, however, do not read Acts in this way. The main interest of recent scholarship has been in the theological teaching of Acts rather than in its historical information.

Still, Acts remains the only record for much of what happened during this formative period and a number of Lukan scholars maintain that Acts should be given more credit for its historical contributions. The title of I. H. Marshall's book, *Luke: Historian and Theologian*, indicates his opinion that Luke deserves to be taken seriously in both of the capacities named.²

Two questions are of significance in reading Acts as history: (1) How does Luke compare with other historians of his own day? (2) How can the book of Acts be used as a source for writing church history today? We will first examine answers that have been given to both of these questions and will then survey the views of scholars who have attempted to read the book of Acts as history.

LUKE AMONG THE ANCIENTS

Some scholars believe Luke never intended to write history. Richard Pervo regards Acts as a work of fiction, an ancient novel designed to entertain and to edify, but not to convey historical information.³ Many scholars, however, believe that Luke at least wants to be taken seriously as a historian. Attention is drawn to features of his writings that give them the appearance of historical accounts: the stereotypical prefaces in Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1-5; the claim to rely on eyewitness testimony (Luke 1:2; Acts 1:3; and the "we" sections of Acts); and the numerous speeches presented in Acts. All these give the book "the stamp of a historical writing."⁴

Of course, Acts is not a work of history in the modern sense. Luke does not identify his sources and he fails to maintain a critical distance from his

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subject matter. Still, it would be unfair to decide whether Luke deserves to be respected as a historian on the basis of modern expectations. The question is, what were the expectations of historians in antiquity? Bertil Gärtner answers this in part by comparing Acts to other Hellenistic Jewish writings, especially the books of 1 and 2 Maccabees.⁵ These works show that it was acceptable for a historian of this age to interpret all events, as Luke does, from a religious standpoint. Victories and defeats are ultimately traced back to the intervention of God. Eckhardt Plümacher takes a different approach in his monograph, *Lukas als hellenistischer Schriftsteller*. He compares Acts to Greek authors, especially Livy.⁶ He notices many similar tendencies, including the use of an archaizing style for speeches and of a dramatic episode style for narrative. Plümacher concludes that, in many ways, Luke's work may be regarded as typical of ancient Hellenistic historiography.

W. C. van Unnik explores this theme from another angle in his article, "Luke's Second Book and the Rules of Hellenistic Historiography."⁷ He draws up a list of rules historians in Luke's day were expected to follow, according to two ancient writings: the Roman Antiquities of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, written between 30-7 B.C., and an essay by Lucian of Samosata, written between A.D. 166-168. Dionysius evaluates a number of historians according to certain standards that he thinks they should meet. Lucian gives outright instruction on how to write history. Since the book of Acts was written between the times when these two works were composed, it can be evaluated according to their criteria to determine what Luke's contemporaries would have thought of his work.

Dionysius thinks the first task of any historian should be to choose a "good subject of a lofty character" that will be truly profitable to its reader. He criticizes one ancient writer, Thucydides, for writing of a single war, which "should not have happened or (failing that) should have been ignored by posterity and consigned to silence and oblivion." Likewise, Lucian says that the subject should be "important, essential, close to home, or of practical utility." In short, history should be useful. Van Unnik thinks Acts fulfills this criteria, for Luke makes it clear that what he reports has lasting significance for all the earth (1:8; 10:36-42; 13:46-48; 26:26). Furthermore, his writings are intended to fulfill the practical need of offering their reader certainty concerning what has been heard (Luke 1:4).

Both Dionysius and Lucian are concerned with how a work of history should be structured. Lucian emphasizes that there should be a clear sequence to the order of presentation. Dionysius stresses that the work should begin and end appropriately. Van Unnik thinks Luke passes this point with honors. The book begins with a commission to the apostles to be witnesses to the ends of the earth (1:8) and then proceeds, sequentially, to trace the progress of the gospel to new areas: Jerusalem, Samaria, Caesarea, Antioch, Asia Minor, Greece, Rome. In this light, the ending, too, is appropriate. We may want to know more about what happened to Paul after he reached Rome, but Luke's simple report of his preaching there indicates that the goals of mission as set forth within this work (19:21) have been fulfilled.

In other matters, Dionysius and Lucian offer advice that might be rejected by historians today. Both advise historians to write with rapidity, omitting information that is not central to the significant points. In addition, the historian should write with a vividness that arouses the reader's emotions to compassion or anger. Luke does all this in Acts, sometimes to the chagrin of modern critics. Today's scholars consider his lack of detail concerning the organization of the Early Church and his omission of information concerning other apostles to be major gaffes. Likewise, the lively appearance of his stories and the skillful variety with which they are told lead some to believe he is more interested in achieving dramatic effects and pathos than in presenting an account of history. Yet van Unnik argues that in these matters Luke is doing precisely what would be expected of a historian in his own day.

Other items noted by van Unnik include Luke's paucity of topographical details and his introduction of speeches designed to fit both the speaker and the occasion. These considerations convince van Unnik that Luke must be regarded as a competent historian within the framework of his own age. Luke "knew the rules of the game and was capable of applying them with propriety."

To say that Luke was a competent historian for his own day does not necessarily imply that his work holds any merit by today's standards. Some scholars would say that, granted Luke's integrity as an ancient historian, the lack of concern for truth that characterized modern historiography disqualifies Acts as history today.⁸ Van Unnik, however, contests this point. Another feature that both Dionysius and Lucian emphasize in their "rules for Hellenistic historiography" is a commitment to telling the truth. Historians who are easily swayed by flattery or bribery, for instance, are to be rejected. Historians, even in ancient times, were expected to be honest.⁹

ACTS AS A RESOURCE FOR CHURCH HISTORY

In his work *Luke the Historian*, C. K. Barrett describes the dilemma faced by modern interpreters who wish to use Acts as a resource for church history.¹⁰ For Luke, history could not be divorced from preaching. Luke relates the history that he believes contains the gospel, and in doing so he offers us two pictures of the church. He sets out to depict the church of the first decades, but unconsciously depicts also the church of his own time. He does this by selecting and arranging materials that he believes will proclaim the message he wants his church to hear. He does so also by reading back into the past the assumptions and presuppositions of his own time. Thus, his work gives us the "impression of a screen upon which two pictures are being projected at the same time—a picture of the church of the first period, and, superimposed upon it, a picture of Luke's own times."

Barrett emphasizes that it is not to Luke's discredit that he has done this. Nevertheless, historians who are interested in the picture of the earliest church must work to distinguish what Luke offers concerning that period from what actually reflects his own period. Gerd Lüdemann has produced a

commentary on the entire book of Acts that attempts to do this.¹¹ He calls his book *Early Christianity according to the Traditions in Acts*. Lüdemann's method, widely accepted among scholars,¹² begins by separating what he calls "tradition" from what he calls "redaction." Tradition here refers to that which derives ultimately from Luke's sources, oral or written. Redaction refers to that which derives from Luke's own editorial activity. Since Lüdemann believes Luke was not a witness to any of these events (including those reported in the so-called "we" passages), the question of the historical value of Acts is in reality a question of the historical value of the traditions incorporated into Acts. That which can be identified as redaction can be dismissed for historical purposes—it reflects Luke's own perspective.

The task of separating tradition and redaction is difficult. Lüdemann admits that Luke has integrated his sources so carefully into his work that linguistic and stylistic peculiarities are only rarely fruitful in identifying source material. Most of the time Lüdemann identifies as redaction that material which seems to serve Luke's own particular purposes. For example, in Acts 18:12-17, the mention of Paul's preaching every sabbath in the synagogue probably derives from Luke's interest in presenting Paul as an exemplary Jew. The positive portrait of Gallio reflects Luke's interest in demonstrating how Romans ought to behave toward Christians. These concerns are recurring themes in Luke's Gospel and in Acts—the sort of themes that Luke might have introduced for the benefit of the church in his own day.

Even traditional material might be historically worthless. After separating tradition from redaction, Lüdemann evaluates the tradition according to certain historical criteria. He rejects as historical all reports of the miraculous or supernatural. The healing of the lame man in 3:1-10 is no doubt traditional, but "those who are lame from their childhood are (unfortunately) not made whole again."

The principal means for seeking confirmation of traditional material, however, is comparison with other sources. Sometimes, of course, the information is unique and then a final judgment of its veracity might have to be suspended. Much of the time, however, we are able to ask whether the tradition Luke preserves "fits" with what we know about the Roman world from other writings or with what we know about Paul from his own letters. Lüdemann does not expect exact correspondence. If that were the case, Acts would, by definition, tell us nothing we don't already know. Rather, he asks whether this information is compatible with the general picture gained elsewhere. For example, Acts 21:21 mentions a hostile rumor to the effect that Paul taught Jews to forsake Moses. This is certainly to be classed as tradition, since Luke's own concern is to present Paul as a law-abiding Jew who gets along well with other Christians. The tradition, furthermore, is probably historical because some statements in Paul's letters (Gal. 2:11-19; 5:6; 6:15; 1 Cor. 7:19) make it easy to see how such a rumor could have started.

It has become axiomatic in Pauline studies to treat Acts as subservient to the epistles. As Richard Jeske puts it, "The proper procedure is to begin with

the data from Paul and to utilize the data from Acts, after critical assessment, alongside the Pauline scheme."¹³ Günther Bornkamm notes in the introduction to his highly respected biography of Paul that he draws on Acts only with "great restraint."¹⁴

Lüdemann's similarly restrained approach discovers much in Acts that is historical. In general, though, he finds Luke is better at preserving individual facts than at chronology or synthesis. Luke often brings various stories about one geographical place together in the narrative without regard for their historical sequence. Still, once a chronological framework has been devised through analysis of Paul's epistles, information derived from the traditions incorporated into Acts can be used to augment our understanding of early Christianity.

Colin Hemer, in his study *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, follows a methodology different from that of Lüdemann.¹⁵ Because Hemer regards the author of Acts as a companion of Paul and, therefore, an eyewitness of much that he reports, there is little need to distinguish "tradition" from "redaction." The bigger question is whether Luke is telling the truth. We should check his accuracy on those matters where it can be checked and thus gain a perspective for evaluating claims that cannot be verified. Following this approach, Hemer finds himself able to affirm the historicity of Acts to a much greater extent than can Lüdemann.

THE HISTORICAL VALUE OF MATERIAL IN ACTS

Whichever methodology is used to gain a historical reading of Acts, scholars end up comparing the material in Acts to evidence drawn from other sources. In general, three different types of material are discerned: that which is confirmed historically by other sources; that which is unparalleled by other sources; and that which contradicts or is in tension with other sources.

Material Confirmed by Other Sources

Adrian N. Sherwin-White, an historian of the Roman empire and a specialist in matters of Roman law and administration, recognizes that the book of Acts is a "propaganda narrative," liable to distortion. Nevertheless, he finds that in matters related to geography, politics, law and administration, "the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming."¹⁶ For example, Acts correctly identifies the chief magistrates of Philippi as "praetors" who are attended by "lictors" (16:35), while at Thessalonica, the city authorities are identified as "politarchs" (17:6). Sherwin-White thinks it absurd for biblical scholars to question the historicity of Acts with regard to such details. Roman historians, he avers, have long taken the book's accuracy on these matters for granted. Similarly, Gordon Hewart regards the book of Acts as offering the best available "picture of the *Pax Romana* and all that it meant—good roads and posting, good police, freedom from brigandage and piracy, freedom of movement, toleration, and justice."¹⁷ A recent study by Harry Tajra

focuses specifically on the details of Paul's trials before Roman officials in the second half of Acts and confirms the essential accuracy in the treatment of such matters as legal terminology, penal procedure and state institutions.¹⁸ Martin Hengel notes further that many obscure details about the Roman world as described in Acts are confirmed in the writings of the Jewish-Roman historian, Josephus.¹⁹ An example would be the references in Acts to certain obscure rebels (5:36-37; 21:38), whose deeds are also mentioned by Josephus.

In matters of background, then, Acts is deemed remarkably accurate.²⁰ This, as W. Ward Gasque notes, is even more noteworthy when it is remembered that Luke did not have access to all of the research tools available in libraries today.²¹ He manages to give correct information regarding the historical details of an age before his time and of geographical regions not his own. How? He must have had access to reliable information (either through written sources or through personal experience) and the inclination to convey this information faithfully.

Acts also offers a number of details about the life of Paul that agree with information provided by Paul's own letters. Gerhard Krodel gives the following list:²²

(a) Paul persecuted Christians prior to becoming a Christian himself (9:1-2; Gal. 1:13; 1 Cor. 15:9).

(b) Paul had been a Pharisee "zealous for the traditions" of his Jewish ancestors (22:3; 23:6; Phil. 3:4-8; Gal. 1:14).

(c) Paul was once smuggled out of Damascus by being lowered over the wall of the city in a basket (9:23-25; 2 Cor. 11:32-33).

(d) Paul went to Syria and Cilicia after his first visit to Jerusalem (9:30; Gal. 1:21).

(e) Paul worked with Barnabas in Antioch (11:25; Gal. 1:21, 2:1).

(f) Paul met with persecution in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra (13-14; 2 Tim. 3:11; cf. 2 Cor. 11:25).

(g) Paul did not require Gentile Christians to be circumcised (15; Galatians 1-2).

(h) Paul took Silas and Timothy with him on a missionary journey after quarreling with Barnabas in Antioch (15:39-40. 16:3; Gal. 2:13; 1 Thess. 1:1).

(i) Paul established churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth and Ephesus (16-19; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2:2; 3:1 and the other Pauline letters), was treated shamefully in Philippi and met with opposition in Thessalonica (16:22; 17:5; 1 Thess. 2:2).

(j) Paul supported himself financially by working with his own hands (18:3; 20:33-35; 1 Thess. 2:9; 1 Cor. 4:12; 9:18).

(k) Paul met Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth and Ephesus (18:1-3, 18; 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Tim. 4:19; Rom. 16:3).

In addition to these aspects of Paul's own biography, details about other persons in Acts are sometimes confirmed by information in Paul's letters:

e.g., the ministry of Apollos in Ephesus and Corinth (18:24-28; 1 Cor. 16:12) and the role of James in leading the Jerusalem church (15; 20; 21:17-26; Gal. 2:9).

Though this list is impressive, some scholars note minor discrepancies with regard to these matters. In his letters, Paul speaks of his life as a Pharisee in the past tense (Gal. 1:13-14; Phil. 3:4-8), but in Acts Paul claims he still is a Pharisee (22:3; 23:6). In 2 Cor. 11:32-33, Paul describes the basket episode in Damascus as an escape from "the governor under King Aretas," whereas Acts 9:23-25 describes it as an escape from "the Jews." The reason for the quarrel between Paul and Barnabas given in Acts 15:36-40 is quite different from that offered by Paul in Gal. 2:11-13. Still, it can be said that, in many ways, Luke's account of Paul's life can be confirmed by information provided by Paul's own epistles.

Material that is Unparalleled

The vast majority of information offered in the book of Acts is neither confirmed nor contested by other sources. Scholars disagree widely as to how to regard this material with respect to historicity. F. F. Bruce says that since Luke usually gets the facts straight in those instances where he can be checked, he has earned "the right to be treated as a reliable informant on matters...not corroborated elsewhere."²³ Likewise, I. H. Marshall thinks that "a writer who is careful to get the background right may be expected to tell a reliable story as well."²⁴ Hans Conzelmann, however, objects to this reasoning, according to what he calls his "Karl May rule." An accurate description of milieu, Conzelmann says, "proves nothing at all relative to the historicity or 'exactness' of the events told."²⁵ For on that basis, "one can prove even the historicity of the stories of Karl May" (a German novelist who wrote about American Indian culture).²⁶ Similarly, Henry Cadbury admits that what we read in Acts generally conforms to what we know of the history and culture of the first-century world, but he also notes that Greek and Latin novels are often as full of accurate and local contemporary color as are historical writings.²⁷

The unparalleled material in Acts is of different types. First, as Gerhard Krodel points out, Luke offers a great deal of incidental information that is otherwise unknown to us.²⁸ Outside of Acts, we would never have heard of Matthias (1:23-26), Aeneas (9:33), Tabitha (9:36), Agabus (11:28; 21:10), Rhoda (12:13), Lydia (16:4), Jason (17:7), Damaris (17:34), or of the three different persons named Ananias (5:1; 9:10; 23:2). Acts also offers detailed information regarding the times and places for Paul's visits to various locations. Although it is impossible to verify such details, many scholars find the concrete nature of the information convincing in itself. It is not the sort of material a writer would invent. In addition, Krodel notes that such details are not found everywhere. The account of Paul's first missionary journey (13-14) lacks the precise references that are found later in the "we" sections. This indicates that Luke only cited names and places "when he knew them."

Another type of unparalleled material in Acts involves information that is similar to but more specific than information found elsewhere. Paul claims to belong to the tribe of Benjamin (Rom. 11:1; Phil. 3:5); Acts says his given name was "Saul" (7:58), the name of the most illustrious member of that tribe. Paul says he was trained as a Pharisee (Phil. 3:5; Gal. 1:14); Acts says his teacher was Gamaliel, one of the greatest Pharisees of the day (22:3). Paul says he persecuted the church violently (Gal. 1:13); Acts says he had Christians put to death (22:4; 26:10). Paul speaks of the gospel as the power of God for salvation "to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16); Acts depicts Paul as always preaching first to Jews in synagogues and only subsequently turning to Gentiles (13:44-46; 28:23-28). Some scholars regard these statements in Acts as partially verified by the information in Paul's letters and, therefore, as likely to be accurate.²⁹ Others, however, suspect that Luke is developing traditions that he knew only in vague or fragmentary form: He "spins off" new details and even entire stories from bits and pieces of data available to him.³⁰

A third type of unparalleled material in Acts includes accounts that strike many scholars as inherently nonhistorical, such as tales that are overly literary, adventurous or miraculous. Ernst Haenchen notes Luke's dramatic technique of "scene writing." When he is "untrammelled by tradition," he enjoys a freedom that we would grant only to the historical novel.³¹ A good example is the extended account of Paul's sea voyage and shipwreck in Acts 27-28. Although the details of the route may be historical, and although Paul himself says in 2 Cor. 11:25 that he was shipwrecked (three times!), the story told here may be a literary construction. Even F. F. Bruce, who thinks it is based on the author's personal recollection, admits that the form of the story goes back to Homer's *Odyssey* with some dependence on the Old Testament voyage of Jonah.³² As for stories involving the miraculous, judgments regarding historicity usually depend on the predispositions of the interpreter.³³ Lüdemann, we have seen, excludes the supernatural from historical consideration outright.³⁴ Many scholars regard the miracle stories in Acts as a crude attempt to represent the power of the Spirit as operative in the apostles. Others see the miracle tales as Lukan spin-offs of statements like that of Paul in 2 Cor. 12:12. Some, of course, have no a priori reason to doubt that such events happened just as Luke describes them.

In conclusion, material that is unparalleled in Acts is generally tested by scholars to determine its probable historicity. Concrete detail is usually rated high while especially literary accounts tend to be rated low. Partial correspondence with other traditions is interpreted positively by some scholars but negatively by others. The overriding consideration for evaluating the historicity of unparalleled material, however, is the question of whether the material appears to serve Luke's own agenda. If it does, its historicity is immediately suspect. On this basis, the identification of Paul as being from Tarsus (21:39; 22:3) is usually accepted as historical for it serves no redactional purpose. The identification of Paul as a Roman citizen (16:37-

39; 22:25-29) is more likely to be questioned, since this serves Luke's purpose of furthering peaceful relations between Christians and Rome.³⁵

Material in Tension with Other Sources

Some material in Acts appears to contradict what is expressed elsewhere, such as in Paul's epistles. An obvious example of such a contradiction can be seen by comparing Paul's own account of his visits to Jerusalem in Galatians 1-2 with that offered by Luke in Acts 9, 11 and 15.³⁶ Paul insists in Galatians 1:15-24 that he did not visit Jerusalem until three years after his "call" (conversion) and that he saw no apostles except Peter and James at that time. He was not "known by sight to the churches in Judea" and he did not return to Jerusalem for fourteen years (2:1). This is a matter of great importance for Paul, probably because he wants to make it clear that his ministry was not in any way authorized by or under the authority of the apostles in Jerusalem. He swears, "in what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!" In Acts, however, Paul is presented to the apostles by Barnabas (9:27). He goes "in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly" (9:28-29). He appears to have a close relationship with the Christians there, and they appear to play some role in determining his movements. They "bring" him to Caesarea and "send" him to Tarsus (9:30).

Even greater discrepancies become apparent when Paul's account of a later meeting with the apostles in Jerusalem (Gal. 2:1-10) is compared with Luke's account in Acts 15:1-35. To begin with, Paul insists that this is only his second visit to the city, but according to Acts it would be his third (11:30; 12:25). In any case, both Galatians and Acts describe the purpose of the meeting as being to settle the question of whether Gentile converts must be expected to obey the law of Moses. In Galatians, Paul reports that "nothing was added" and that he was encouraged to continue his law-free mission to Gentiles. In Acts, however, the council decrees that Gentiles must keep certain requirements and Paul is given the task of promulgating these restrictions.

Numerous theories have been proposed to resolve these tensions.³⁷ Colin Hemer favors a popular view suggesting that Galatians 2 and Acts 15 do not refer to the same event—the council described in Acts 15 took place at a later period, after the letter to the Galatians had been written.³⁸ Martin Hengel points to evidence for such dating in what appears to be a variant tradition incorporated into the book of Acts itself. In Acts 21:25 Luke portrays Paul being told about the decree in a way that implies he has not heard of it before.³⁹ Whatever reconstruction is given, however, historical problems remain. F. F. Bruce, who has a very high regard for the historical accuracy of Acts, decides that the accounts in Galatians and those in Acts are "impossible to harmonize."⁴⁰ Paul Achtemeier regards these discrepancies as evidence that the purpose of Acts and its value for us today do not lie in its detailed historical accuracy but in its theological points.⁴¹

Philipp Vielhauer alleges that Luke misrepresents Paul not only biographically but also theologically.⁴² For example, in the Areopagus speech of Acts 17:22-31, Paul is represented as espousing a friendly attitude toward pagan religion and as proclaiming the gospel in terms derived from Stoic philosophy. He does not mention the cross but appeals to his Greek audience with words of human wisdom. The real Paul, Vielhauer insists, would have preached Christ crucified (1 Cor. 1:22-24). Here, the gospel is forsaken for "natural theology." As Albert Schweitzer puts it, the Pauline emphasis on being in Christ by grace is replaced by a pagan emphasis on being in God by nature.⁴³

Bertil Gärtner, however, argues that the Areopagus speech is not incompatible with Pauline theology.⁴⁴ Paul is merely represented as seeking points of contact in order to gain a hearing. The basic ideas of this speech are the same as those presented in Romans 1-3, the essential difference being that in Romans Paul is writing to Christians and in Acts he is addressing pagans.

Vielhauer also objects to Luke's representation of Paul's attitude toward the law. The historical Paul, Vielhauer says, waged polemic against the law, declaring that Christ was the "end of the law" (Rom. 10:4). But in Acts, Luke portrays Paul as utterly loyal to the law. The Paul who wrote in Galatians, "If you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you" (5:2) is actually described in Acts as circumcising Timothy (16:3). Gasque, however, defends the Lukan portrait.⁴⁵ Paul was not anti-law, but anti-legalism. The argument in Galatians is directed toward persons who teach circumcision as necessary for salvation.

Vielhauer makes two further objections to the Lukan portrait of Paul's theology. With regard to Christology, Paul in Acts does not make reference to either the preexistence of Christ or to the saving effect of Jesus' death on the cross (except for 20:28). And, finally, with regard to eschatology, Paul is not presented in Acts as one who lives in the imminent expectation of the end. Gasque accepts these points as essentially valid, but thinks them less devastating to the historical veracity of Luke's narrative than Vielhauer imagines. Acts presents only a few representative sermons of Paul, not an exhaustive account of his theology. The fact that he omits certain major motifs should not call into question the accuracy of what he does present.

F. F. Bruce approaches the differences between Paul in his own letters and Paul in Acts from another perspective.⁴⁶ In Acts, Bruce says, Paul is consistently depicted as more adaptable than he appears to be in his letters. In the Areopagus speech he strives to be accommodating to Greeks, and in circumcising Timothy he strives to be accommodating to Jews. This tendency appears somewhat exaggerated in Acts, but Paul himself does say in 1 Corinthians that he has become all things to all people: "To those under the law, I became as one under the law...that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law, I became as one outside the law...that I might win those outside the law" (9:19-22). So the Lukan concept of an adaptable Paul is not entirely without warrant.

Like Gasque, Bruce also stresses that the Lukan Paul is distinctive mainly due to omissions. The quarrel with Peter in Antioch (Gal. 2:11-14) is absent here, as is any reference to the painful relations Paul had with the church in Corinth. Acts "tends to pass over fundamental controversies in silence and to emphasize the things that make for peace."

Bruce also explains the distinctive portrait of Paul in Acts with reference to two other points. First, echoing Gärtner, Bruce stresses that letters addressed to Christians should not be expected to represent Paul in the same way as speeches addressed to unbelievers. The differences in genre and audience are significant. Only once in Acts is Paul described as speaking to Christians (20:18-35) and, notably, it is in this address that his words come closest to what we expect of him in the epistles. He speaks of faith and grace (20:21, 24, 32) and he refers (only here) to the saving efficacy of Christ's death (20:28).

A second point Bruce makes is that allowance should be made for the differences between first-party and third-party perspectives when comparing the Paul of the epistles and the Paul of Acts. Likewise, I. H. Marshall notes, "a man's self-portrait will not necessarily agree with the impression of him received by other people."⁴⁷

In consideration of points like these, Jacob Jervell has challenged the basic tendency in New Testament studies to evaluate Acts from the perspective of Paul's epistles but not to make judgments the other way around.⁴⁸ Acts offers us a glimpse of an otherwise "unknown Paul." In the epistles, Paul is always arguing or dealing with the particular questions or problems of a specific church. "What about the unpolemical Paul?" Jervell asks. "What about all those aspects of his preaching that nobody objected to?" If there is one thing Paul's letters make clear, it is that Paul was a complex personality. Luke's view of Paul is admittedly one-sided, but that does not mean it is incorrect. Luke records a side of Paul that Paul himself sometimes displayed—a Jewish, law-observant Paul who is also a visionary, charismatic preacher, healer and miracle worker. In short, "that which lies in the shadow in Paul's letters Luke has placed in the sun." The picture of Paul in Acts is a completion, a filling-up of what we have in the epistles. In order to get at the historical Paul, we cannot do without Acts.

OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

We have observed that, although today the book of Acts is studied primarily for its theology, interest in reading it as history is still alive and well. Even scholars who view Acts as a history book, however, differ in their methodological approaches to evaluating the history it contains. These differences are often a product of varying views concerning matters such as authorship and sources. A scholar who believes the author of Acts was a companion of Paul and, so, an eyewitness to some of the events will naturally treat the book differently than scholars who cannot accept this.

Scholars also reach different conclusions regarding the reliability of what is reported in Acts. Lüdemann believes the book contains numerous facts, but is frequently mistaken in its chronology. Krodel thinks Luke is good on detail but sometimes misses the big picture. Bruce and Gasque admit that Luke leaves out much that is significant, but stress the accuracy of what is reported.

In 1978, A. J. Mattill discerned three contemporary views among scholars as to the use of Acts as a source for the study of Paul.⁴⁹ Some scholars downplay discrepancies and argue that the Paul of Acts is basically consistent with the Paul of the epistles; some contend that both the epistles and Acts present one-sided views of Paul and that both are therefore necessary for historical completeness; some insist that Acts is unreliable and must be constantly tested and corrected by the epistles. We have seen examples of all three of these views.

Mattill also noted what he believed was a tendency for scholars who espoused the first and the third views cautiously to accept the second. In other words, he believed there was increasing acceptance of the idea that Acts offers important, though incomplete, information of a historical nature. Jacob Jervell is one scholar we have noted who has made such a move.

Finally, we should note that the subject of this article has been finding history in Acts, not placing Acts in history.⁵⁰ Space does not permit discussion of the numerous archeological⁵¹ and social-historical⁵² works that enhance our knowledge of the world in which Luke's story of the Early Church transpires.

Notes

1. I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 17.
2. I. H. Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).
3. Richard I. Pervo, *Profit With Delight: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).
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35. But Lüdemann accepts it as historical (*ibid.*, pp. 240-241).
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37. Charles H. Talbert lists seven in "Again: Paul's Visits to Jerusalem," *NovT* (1967): pp. 26-40, esp. 26, n. 3.
38. Hemer, *Book of Acts*, pp. 261-307.
39. Hengel, *Acts*, p. 117.
40. Bruce, "Historical Record," p. 2580. He thinks the private meeting referred to in Gal. 2:1-2 probably matches the visit in Acts 11:30 rather than that in Acts 15, but even so Gal. 1:18-20 does not square with Acts 9:26-29.
41. Achtemeier, *Quest for Unity*, p. 75.
42. Philipp Vielhauer, "On the 'Paulinism' of Acts," in *Studies*, ed. Keck and Martyn, pp. 33-50.
43. Albert Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (New York: Macmillan, 1955; German original, 1930), p. 6. Cf. Bruce, "Historical Record," p. 2586.
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45. Gasque, "Book of Acts," 64; Gasque, *A History of the Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 2d ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989), p. 288.
46. Bruce, "Historical Record," pp. 2579-2582.
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48. Jacob Jervell, *The Unknown Paul: Essays on Luke-Acts and Early Christian History* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), pp. 13-25, 52-95. Hemer likewise considers the preference scholars give to information provided by Paul over that provided in Acts to be based on an unwarranted assumption (*Book of Acts*, p. 24).
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