

PENRALLT BAPTIST CHURCH, BANGOR

ACTS 13-20: NOTES FOR THEOLOGY STUDENTS

Thirty years ago, Donald Guthrie wrote of Luke's intentions in the book of Acts ". . . his primary aim was historical".<sup>i</sup> At the time, it probably represented the dominant view among Evangelicals but I doubt if many Evangelical theologians today would sign up entirely to that assertion. Things have moved on and we are less inclined to spend our time defending the historicity of the text, choosing, instead, to concentrate more on the theology which underlies each Biblical author's writing. In this sermon series I will spend hardly any time analysing the history and geography which surround the story of Paul's missionary journeys, preferring to concentrate on the missionary lessons for my own church in the context of North Wales. I am on firm ground because the growth of the churches is one of Luke's main themes and he frequently finishes the sections of Acts with a phrase such as "and the Lord added to their number daily".<sup>ii</sup> Luke has a great passion for Mission. He chooses his illustrations with an eye to social status, religious background, ethnic origins and gender. He has other themes, of course, but I intend to pick out the thread of Church Growth and see how it applies to our own situation. I don't mean to imply that this the main theme and intention of Acts, but in any case that would be another question for debate.<sup>iii</sup>

I do have some sympathy with Guthrie's claim. Luke was sure of his history and his careful recording of political titles and arrangements in the provinces, including *politarchs* in Thessalonica (not confirmed outside Acts until recently), the *protos* in Malta, and the *Asiarchs* in Ephesus, is ample evidence of his convictions. However, like all Biblical writers he has a point or points to make and we must make it our first priority to discover them from the text itself. Luke believed the story of Jesus and the story of the Apostles, but he uses them to tell us what we should know for our own lives. Although addressed to *Theophilus*, we should not take the inscription too literally. Ancient histories would typically address a readership beyond the scope of the author's dedicatory introduction.<sup>iv</sup> Modern theology analyses Biblical Narrative as a literary genre which has much to do with story-telling around the world. "Telling a story involves "narrative rhetoric". The narrator controls a narrative world which readers are invited to inhabit imaginatively, a world constructed to certain values and beliefs. The values and beliefs are intended to be appealing and convincing."<sup>v</sup> Post-modern literature often chooses to acknowledge the subjectivity of story-telling. Two novels come to my mind straightaway. John Fowles, in his book *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, is so aware of his own twentieth century viewpoint that he writes himself into the nineteenth century romance as a shady character hovering around the periphery watching the events unfold.<sup>vi</sup> He even provides the book with two endings, leaving it to the readers to choose the one of their preference.<sup>vii</sup> The other book is *Life of Pi* in which Pi sets out to tell you a "story which will make you believe in God".<sup>viii</sup> His tale of a boy adrift in a boat with a Bengal tiger contrasts crudely with the more prosaic report of the Japanese insurance investigators, but the book assumes that you can tell two stories at the same time. Whether the spiritual version makes you believe in God or not, the hapless Pi cannot be blamed for trying. Much modern theology shares a similar viewpoint in which the Bible is the spiritual story aiming to make you believe in God, even while its grasp on history is ( supposedly ) slender. Evangelicals swim against the stream by upholding the view that the Bible is "trustworthy in all that it affirms" and we include its historical assertions in what is deemed trustworthy.<sup>ix</sup> However, Luke-Acts is one of the Biblical texts which provides fewer problems of that sort. His stories, like those of the other Synoptic Gospels are introduced creatively to suit his various themes, but underneath there is a movement from Jerusalem to Rome within a chronological order. He is certainly not "unhistorical", but it is important to keep in mind that his choice of material is not determined by the history but by the spiritual truths it imparts. To focus on the history would be to miss the point, so don't expect too many maps and archaeological asides from me. I see Luke-Acts as good theology moulded into a story rather than a story moulded into good theology. The "God thoughts" decide what is included and what is left out.

I will ignore any debate about the continuity of Luke-Acts. Most theologians accept the common authorship of the two books. Ancient historians usually used refined literary language, and often divided work into two nearly equal volumes. They would frequently leave unsatisfactory endings, and repeat principal events told in a different setting.<sup>x</sup> Luke's Greek is not literary, but it is written in good and well polished language. A two-volume work with a rather vague ending fits the genre nicely. There are plenty of shared themes between the volumes and a good number of similar characters appear in both. Whether the author is the companion of the Apostle Paul is another question and most modern theologians will argue that the author was not Luke. When they write Luke they really mean "Luke". However the Early Church hated a fake and they believed that Luke was the author. As there is not a shred of hard evidence to contradict their belief I will hold to the traditional authorship until it is proved otherwise.

Mission is certainly not the only major theme in Luke-Acts, and you will find me leaning heavily on a few other themes which I consider to be indispensable to a correct understanding of the text, especially the "purpose of God". Throughout the two volumes there is heavy emphasis on God's control of history. He "consciously understood that the story is unified by the controlling purpose of God and wants readers to understand it in the same way."<sup>xi</sup> The phrase "Boule tou Theou" (purpose of God) is repeated in Luke 7:30, Acts 2:23 4:28 5:38-9 13:36 20:27 and demonstrates that events take on meaning because they reveal the purpose of God at work. In the Gospel, Jesus submits to God's will, becoming the Saviour of the lost ("not my will but thine" Luke 22:42). In the Acts of the Apostles, Paul is appointed to know the will of God in Acts 22:14 and submits to it in Acts 21:14. Squires comments: "Luke defends and justifies Paul's involvement in the Gentile mission' as "an integral and inevitable part of the plan of God."<sup>xii</sup> This is the very heart of Luke-Acts because

- God is the primary actor throughout Luke-Acts.
- God directed the life of Jesus and the mission of the Church.
- Epiphanies of God occur in the life Jesus and the Church, directing events.
- The life of Jesus fulfilled prophecy, especially concerning mission to the Gentiles.
- There is a destiny to be fulfilled. Something must happen of necessity ( The word  $\delta\epsilon\iota$  occurs frequently in the book).

Apart from moments of Epiphany and the general guidance of prophecy such assurance can only be had after the event, as the Church grows. The Apostle Paul, like us, seems to progress by groping forwards a step at a time, improvising in almost every situation and being surprised by God frequently. How comforting! God rescues Paul and the Apostles ( usually ) from danger and difficulty. Like many other ancient histories, God ( the gods in pagan works ) provides the help needed for the task. God is the hero of every Biblical narrative, nowhere more so than in Acts.

What does the Good News mean when it hits the streets of a city? Luke tells us. The kingdom of God breaks into the Jewish synagogues and pagan worship centres, into the Jewish Diaspora and Roman colonies, and in so doing it turns the world upside down for those who suddenly find themselves on the inside. Such people, Philip Francis Esler argues "needed strong assurance that their decision to convert and to adopt a different lifestyle had been a correct one."<sup>xiii</sup> They were people under pressure, firstly, because the God-fearers and Jews who had been converted were treated with disregard and eventually excommunicated from synagogues by the council of Jamnia in AD 90. Luke responds by arguing that Christianity is the fulfilment of the Jewish tradition, not a threat to it. Secondly, the church itself was divided by the practise of Jewish converts sharing table-fellowship with Gentiles; a practice which still had not been accepted by all. Luke counters by demonstrating that it was Divine intervention which made the practise permissible. Thirdly, pressure came from social differences. Some converts came from the higher strata ( e.g. Roman officials. ) but most were low castes: slaves, day labourers, etc, and it is for this latter social group that Luke shows a preference. The final stress point came from the increasing

danger of State persecution and Luke infers that Paul was innocent and should have been released, Christianity offers no threat to the State, and Roman justice will prevail. The Acts of the Apostles is unfulfilled at the end because there is still a field to harvest, Jewish rejection intensifies and the wheels of Roman justice turn slower than those on the wrong end of it would like.

I think the biggest difficulty this book presents for Evangelicals is the question concerning the accuracy of the Speeches in the Acts of the Apostles. Almost one quarter of the book is taken up with them. How accurate are they? Do they faithfully reproduce the words of the speakers? Do they *exactly* reproduce the words of the speakers? F. F. Bruce divided the speeches into four types: evangelistic, deliberative, apologetic, and hortatory.<sup>xiv</sup> They all find literary parallels in the Ancient world and this leads us to wonder if Luke wrote them as a literary genre rather than an exact record of the time. The writer Thucylides is often mentioned in this context because in his *History of the Pelopannesian Wars*, i, 22, I he admitted that he could not always recall the speeches word for word but that he presented their speeches in a way which seemed to him to be demanded by the occasion, although “of course, adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what was actually said.” He was, however, not typical of ancient historians in this respect and in any case we should not compare Luke exclusively with Greek practices. But does our Evangelical “high” view of Biblical trustworthiness demand an exact word-for-word rendition of the speeches even though Luke was not present for most of them? He admits to using several sources and it is not beyond the bounds of credibility that written notes were taken at the time by someone, neither would we wish to diminish the power of the Holy Spirit in inspiring Scripture, but still, it does seem unlikely that we have a word-for-word account. When one reads through them in the Greek, the style is so Lucan and the content so formally suited to the occasion it is impossible to shake off the impression that we have Luke’s account of what must have happened rather than a stenographer’s record. My own experience of taking minutes is that I rarely quote verbatim what the speakers say, yet the meeting is happy to approve what I have written as being a true and accurate account of the arguments and decisions. Equally, as a speaker I have been pleasantly surprised to read how well my sermons sound when passed through the mind of a good meetings’ secretary. Although the words were not the exact ones I used I am happy to agree that it was the sermon I preached. Or let me take a Biblical example. Did Jesus say “I am the Light of the World?” No, he didn’t speak English. But neither did he speak Greek most of the time ( although a Galilean small businessman would have had a working knowledge of the language). The New Testament accounts are not a literal report of Jesus’ words because they have been translated from Aramaic to Greek. Nevertheless we accept them as the Word of God because the scriptures were inspired by the Holy Spirit. The words are not the literal words of Jesus but the authoritative words. Similarly, it seems to me, the speeches of Acts are the authoritative words of the apostles, but not necessarily the exact ones. I may be slightly to the edge of the Evangelical spectrum at this point, but I believe that Luke, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, has reconstructed the speeches based on his original sources ( whatever they were ) in order to make a theological point for his readers. I do not imagine that Luke would have claimed more than this, and I cannot see any fundamental problem for an Evangelical belief. The content is true, the words are Luke’s own. To put it another way, while the Bible is trustworthy in all that it affirms, it does not affirm that these are the exact words of the apostles, but, rather, a true record their content. I acknowledge, however, that some of you may beg to differ.

To conclude, I hope we warm to the tapestry which Luke weaves for us. It narrates the tale of a Gospel which emerges from a Jewish homeland into a Gentile, pagan world. It does so because it was destined to do so. There is nothing accidental here, although the human players in the spiritual drama might well feel at times that it’s unpredictable and chaotic. The Church grows because it is meant to grow, not because the toil is easy or the fruits of the harvest ready to fall in bulk into the hands of the labourers. The human race does its best to resist God, but in the end begins to work out how to proceed. “The story emerges as a dialogue between God and a

recalcitrant humanity, rather than God's monologue."<sup>xv</sup> The driving interface between them is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, a wild, exciting experience of God which brings the kingdom of God into reality. It is a world in which the poor become the object of God's grace, women step out of the shadows to become key players in the unfolding drama and the "Way of the Lord" turns out to be nothing like anyone had predicted. Around this swirling spiritual vortex tempers get frayed, jealousies erupt, and a backlash unleashes violence on some of God's finest people. But the Church grows. Despite all the tensions it grows. The lessons it learns as it does have been written down for us by Luke. Acts is his sermon to us. We do well to sit at his feet and learn.

Peter James Cousins  
October 2004

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<sup>i</sup> Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed., revised* (London: IVP, 1974), p. 349

<sup>ii</sup> See also 4:31; 5:16; 5:42; 6:7; 8:4ff; 9:31; 11:19ff; 12:24; 13:49; 16:5; 17:12; 17:34; 19:20; 28:31

<sup>iii</sup> All the commentaries carry such a discussion in their introduction. Is it an Apology to Gentiles? Or Jews? Is it a defence of Paul's apostolate? etc.

<sup>iv</sup> H.J. Cadbury *The Making of the Luke-Acts*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: SPCK, 1958) pp. 194-209. The addressee is just a formal way of introducing the book and not likely to affect the contents

<sup>v</sup> Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) p 8.

<sup>vi</sup> John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (London: Jonathan Capes, 1967)

<sup>vii</sup> Leading to some editions of the book having a disclaimer on the flysheet informing its readers that there is no misprint in the last chapter, the author intended there to be two endings and please do not return the book for a refund!

<sup>viii</sup> Yann Martel, *Life of Pi*, British Edition (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2002) p. x

<sup>ix</sup> Martel would, presumably, argue that both stories are equally true. Post-modern theologians would argue the same, alleging that the spiritual story told by the Bible is just as valid as the physical ( or mythical ) events on which it is loosely based. Why we should believe the spiritual story more than any other is, of course, the whole point. All views tend to be seen as equally true in this world view. While I have a certain sympathy with the argument it seems to me that cutting Biblical narrative loose from the physical events it describes leaves me wondering why I should believe it at all. I guess I am somewhere in the middle ground arguing that some Bible texts build creatively on ancient stories, some should be read as parables rather than a report, but my faith demands that the bulk of the events really took place pretty much as the Biblical version describes.

<sup>x</sup> Aune, D. E. *The New Testament in a Literary Environment*. Library of Early Christianity 8 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987). pp. 116-9.

<sup>xi</sup> Tannehill, p.2.

<sup>xii</sup> John T. Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts*, Society for New Testament Studies 76 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 35.

<sup>xiii</sup> Philip Francis Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: the social and political motivation of Lucan theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) p.16.

<sup>xiv</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Speeches in the Acts of the Apostles* (London: Tyndale Press, 1942) p.5, and see also his "The Speeches in Acts Thirty Years Later," in *Reconciliation and Hope: New Testament Essays on Atonement and Eschatology*, ed. Robert Banks (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1974).

<sup>xv</sup> Tannehill p.2