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978-0-521-60949-4 - The First Christian Historian: Writing the 'Acts of the Apostles'

Daniel Marguerat

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THE FIRST CHRISTIAN HISTORIAN

As the first historian of Christianity, Luke's reliability is vigorously disputed among scholars. The author of the Acts is often accused of being a biased, imprecise and anti-Jewish historian who created a distorted portrait of Paul. Daniel Marguerat tries to avoid being caught in this true/false quagmire when examining Luke's interpretation of history. Instead he combines different tools – reflection upon historiography, the rules of ancient historians and narrative criticism – to analyse the Acts and gauge the historiographical aims of their author. Marguerat examines the construction of the narrative, the framing of the plot and the characterization, and places his evaluation firmly in the framework of ancient historiography, where history reflects tradition and not documentation. This is a fresh and original approach to the classic themes of Lucan theology: Christianity between Jerusalem and Rome, the image of God, the work of the Spirit, the unity of Luke and the Acts.

DANIEL MARGUERAT is Professor of New Testament at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Lausanne, Switzerland, and a leading scholar on the book of *Acts*. He is the author of numerous books and articles, including *Le jugement dans l'évangile de Matthieu* (2nd edn, 1995) and *How to Read Bible Stories* (in collaboration with Yvan Bourquin, 1999).

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DANIEL MARGUERAT

Université de Lausanne, Switzerland

Translated by Ken McKinney, Gregory J. Laughery and Richard Bauckham



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In memory of Dom Jacques Dupont (1915–1998)

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PREFACE

Luke, not Eusebius of Caesarea, was the first Christian historian. In antiquity, he was the first to present a religious movement in a historiographical manner. As for all historians, the aim of Luke is identity. When he recounts the birth of Christianity, its undesirable rupture with Judaism, and then the universal adventure of the Word, the author of Acts offers the Christianity of his time, an understanding of its identity through a return to its origins.

My reading of the historiographical work of Luke combines two procedures of investigation: historical criticism and narrative criticism. I am convinced that the understanding of a biblical writing requires that it be immersed in the historical milieu of its production (this is the epistemological credo of the historical-critical method). Constantly, in the course of the study, I shall be examining the culture and codes of communication of the ancient Mediterranean world to which Luke and his readers belong. However, the author of Acts is also a storyteller; the tools of narrative criticism help to identify the strategy of the narrator, the organization of the story, and the programmatic clues for reading that he has sown in his text.

One of the insights defended in this book is that we cannot reach the theology the author has written into his work without adopting the itinerary he imposes on his readers; this itinerary is the twists and turns of the narrative. I think that narrative reading makes it possible to do justice to the thinking, often scorned by scholars, of this talented storyteller. Because he tells his story well, Luke's thinking is not systematic. In rediscovering the hidden architecture of his work, one discovers the mastery and coherence of this great historian and theologian, without whom Christianity would be ignorant of most of its origins.

This book is the translation of eleven chapters of my work *La première histoire du Christianisme (Actes des apôtres)* (Lectio Divina 180; Paris, Cerf and Geneva, Labor et Fides, 1999). Chapter 10 has been published in a slightly abridged form in David P. Moessner, *Jesus and the Heritage of Israel* (Harrisburg, PA, Trinity Press International, 1999), pp. 284–304.

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Begun in November 1992 at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley (where I was an invited scholar), the French version was completed in June 1999 at the University of Lausanne (Switzerland). Its argumentation has profited from the questions and suggestions of countless colleagues, students and friends, many of whom are cited in the footnotes. The preparation of the book owes much to my assistant Emmanuelle Steffek, whose work was invaluable, checking the references, the bibliography, and the multiple re-drafts. The English version depends on the talent of three translators, Ken McKinney, Gregory J. Laughery and Richard Bauckham, whom I congratulate on their patience in understanding my French. I am particularly indebted to Richard Bauckham for having reread and corrected the English text, and to David Alban and Valérie Nicolet, whose competencies were precious in checking the final version. The English translation was made possible through a grant of the 'Société Académique Vaudoise', and the generosity of a donor.

I wonder if Luke benefited from as much support. I hope so.