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0521816505 - The First Christian Historian: Writing the 'Acts of the Apostles'

Daniel Marguerat

Excerpt

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HOW LUKE WROTE HISTORY

Was the first historian of Christianity a proper historian?

There is no doubt that Luke – for this is what we name the anonymous author of the third gospel and the book of Acts – intended to tell a story about the birth of Christianity. He was the first to have written a biography of Jesus followed by what was later given the title of 'Acts of Apostles' (Πράξεις ἀποστόλων). In antiquity, this would never be repeated. The two volumes of this grand work were divided at the time of the constitution of the canon of the New Testament, before the year AD 200; the first volume was grouped with Matthew, Mark and John to form the fourfold Gospel; the second work was placed at the head of the epistles, to establish the narrative framework of the Pauline writings.

It is here, at the moment when the corpus of Christian literature begins to emerge, that Luke's writing, dedicated to the 'most excellent Theophilus' (Luke 1. 3; Acts 1. 1), was broken in two. The length of the whole is impressive. These fifty-two chapters represent a quarter of the New Testament. Modern exegesis refers to this text as Luke–Acts in order to remind readers that Acts cannot be read without remembering the gospel as Luke has written it.

Luke, then, wanted to create a history, but was he a good historian? Exegetes continue to disagree on the answer. In order to take a position in this debate one must first of all clarify what is meant by writing history and what we mean by *historiography*. It has been shown that the expectations of the reader vary according to the type of historiography adopted by the author. Paul Ricœur helps us to clarify this point by proposing a useful taxonomy. Secondly, I shall investigate the ethical rules in use in the first century. A study of the work of historians in Graeco-Roman antiquity leads us to note that historiography did not wait until the Enlightenment to be conscious of itself. Among the Greek and Roman historians there is open discussion about the notion of *truth* in history.

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I intend to move forward, depending successively on the results of recent epistemological reflection as well as the deontological debates of 'the ancients' concerning historiography.

How does one write history?

Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the question of the historical reliability of Luke's work was not even an issue. Anyone who wanted to know how the Church was born had but one place to turn: the Acts of the Apostles. This document provided what was necessary and, even more, what was to be believed. The book of Acts was both a manual of the history of Christianity and (especially) the baptismal certificate of a Church born of God.

Doubts arise

Doubts arose, however, when the data of Acts were seriously compared with the rest of the New Testament. W. Ward Gasque designates the first critic of the reliability of Acts as Wilhem Martin Leberecht de Wette (1780–1849).¹ The problem emerged when the Lucan portrait of Paul was compared with the information given in the letters of the apostle (Acts 9. 1–30; 15. 1–35 compared with Gal. 1. 13 – 2. 21). De Wette argued that Luke's information is partly false, partly miraculous and partly incomplete.

But this was only the beginning. Not long after, de Wette was followed by the wave of Tübingen-school critics (*Tendenzkritik*) who imposed their reading of a conflictual history of Christianity, where Luke played the role of mediator. Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860), the brilliant initiator of this historical paradigm, situated the historian Luke at the critical moment when the state of Christianity required a synthesis between the Petrine tendency and the Pauline heritage. Baur saw in Acts

the apologetic attempt of a Pauline author to orchestrate the bringing together and the reunion of the two parties face to face. Luke makes Paul appear as Petrine as possible and Peter as Pauline as possible, by throwing as much as possible a reconciliatory veil over the differences that, according to the unequivocal statement of Paul in his letter to the Galatians, had without a doubt separated the two apostles, and by plunging into forgetfulness what troubled the relationship between the two parties,

¹ W. W. Gasque, *History of the Interpretation*, 1989, pp. 24–6.

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i.e. the hatred of the Gentile Christians against Judaism and the Jewish Christians' hatred toward paganism. This benefits their common hatred against the unbelieving Jews who have made the apostle Paul the constant object of irrepressible hatred.²

The advantages of the Tendenzkritik

I shall often return to the merits of the Tübingen school, which has wrongly been reduced to a Hegelian schema of thesis–antithesis–synthesis (now rejected in the historiography of ancient Christianity).³ The major achievement of the *Tendenzkritik* was to place the framework for understanding Luke–Acts in history, and to propose a historiographical goal which aimed to fix the identity of Christianity around the end of the first century. The *Tendenzkritik* intuition was to view Luke as seeking to reconcile competing, if not antagonistic⁴ values, within Christianity. This intuition should now be rethought, without oversimplification.

To return to Baur: his works functioned as a real detonator in the criticism of Luke's historiography. Many questions have arisen since then. Is it not wrong to present Peter and Paul, antagonists on the question of *kashrut* according to Galatians 2. 11–16, as like-minded? Why is no place in Acts given to Paul's virulent battle concerning the Law?⁵ Paul's version of the Jerusalem assembly in Galatians 2. 6–10 (an unconditional recognition of his mission) is constantly set against Luke's conciliatory reading (compromise obtained by means of a minimal code of purity, the apostolic decree of Acts 15. 20, 29). How is one to explain the silence of Acts concerning the confessional conflicts that the letters of Paul, as well as the Johannine epistles and the Pastorals, reveal? In other words, according to Paul, Christianity's search for its identity, from the 30s to the 60s (the period covered by the narrative of Acts), was a lively conflictual debate. Yet Luke paints a picture of (nearly) perfect harmony between the apostles. For Baur, there is no doubt that 'the presentation of the Acts of the Apostles must be regarded as an intentional modification of the historical

² F. C. Baur, *Über den Ursprung*, 1838, p. 142.

³ See especially chapters 2 'A narrative of beginnings' and 4 'A Christianity between Jerusalem and Rome'.

⁴ A presentation of the work of the Tübingen school relating to the Acts may be found in Gasque's *History*, 1989, pp. 26–54. Also C. K. Barrett's 'How History Should be Written', 1986, offers an interesting evaluation of F. C. Baur's argumentation.

⁵ To get an idea of the differences between Paul's account and the Lucan presentation, one should read synoptically Gal. 5. 3–6 and Acts 16. 3 (the circumcision); Rom. 3. 21–6 and Acts 21. 20–4 (the question of the Law); Phil. 3. 4–9 and Acts 23. 6; 26. 5 (the Pharisaic identity).

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truth (*geschichtliche Wahrheit*) in the interests of its specific tendency (*Tendenz*).⁶

A gaffe on a worldwide scale

Baur then, brings Luke before the tribunal of 'historical truth', but he allows him the mitigating circumstances of being captive to a historical and theological tendency (*Tendenz*). But the most provocative expression comes from Franz Overbeck, who in 1919 referred to the work of Luke as a 'gaffe on the scale of world history'.⁷ What was the mistake? According to Overbeck, Luke's sin was to have confused history and fiction, that is, to 'treat historiographically that which was not history and was not transmitted as such'. In brief, the author of Acts blended history and legend, historical and supernatural fact, in a concoction from which the modern historian recoils in distaste. Etienne Trocmé, in 1957, concedes that Luke is a 'capable amateur historian, but insufficiently formed for his task'.⁸ Ernst Haenchen adds that Luke was the author of an 'edifying book'.⁹

It is unnecessary to continue.¹⁰ The denunciation of Luke as a falsifier of history, at best naive, is forceful and scathing. Very generally speaking, the opinions of scholars are fixed along party lines: on one side the extreme scepticism of German exegesis concerning the historical work of Luke (Vielhauer, Conzelmann, Haenchen, Lüdemann, Roloff, with the exception of Hengel), and on the other side the determination of Anglo-American research to rehabilitate the documentary reliability of Luke-Acts (Gasque, Bruce, Marshall, Hemer, Bauckham).¹¹

⁶ F. C. Baur, *Paulus, der Apostel* [1845], 1866, p. 120.

⁷ F. Overbeck, *Christentum und Kultur*, 1919, p. 78: 'Es ist das *eine Taktlosigkeit von welthistorischen Dimensionen*, der grösste Excess der falschen Stellung, die sich Lukas zum Gegenstand gibt' (italics mine). For understanding Overbeck and his time, one book stands out: J. C. Emmelius, *Tendenzkritik*, 1975.

⁸ E. Trocmé, *Livre des Actes*, 1957, p. 105.

⁹ E. Haenchen notes that the Lucan preface (Luke 1. 1–4) inaugurates a work in the style of Xenophon, if not a Thucydides, but the author 'lacked two requisites for such an undertaking: an adequate historical foundation – and the right readers. Any book he might conceivably offer his readers – especially as a sequel to the third gospel – had to be a work of *edification*' (*Acts of the Apostles*, 1971, p. 103). This however, does not prevent Haenchen from honouring the historiographical capacities of the author (*ibid.*, pp. 90–103)!

¹⁰ A detailed state of research can be found in F. F. Bruce's 'Acts of the Apostles', 1985, see pp. 2575–82 or E. Rasco's 'Tappe fondamentale', 1997.

¹¹ The edition, in the making, dedicated to the historical roots of Acts demonstrates the Anglo-American effort to render the historicity of the Lucan narrative credible: *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting*; 5 vols. have appeared since 1993.

An aporia

The doubts about Luke's historiographical work have created an embarrassing aporia. On the one hand, even if it is acknowledged as incomplete,¹² the information given by Acts is indispensable for anyone desiring to reconstruct the period of the first Christian generation; no biography of the apostle Paul, for example, can leave aside chapters 9 to 28 of Acts. On the other hand, suspicion about the historical reliability of the Lucan narrative inhibits a serious consideration of Luke's information.¹³ Frequently the historians of early Christianity begin by questioning the historical value of Acts, only to go on, quite pragmatically, to use the data of the Lucan narrative in their research.¹⁴

If we wish to escape this impasse, there must be reflection on the very concept of historiography. It is symptomatic that neither Baur nor Overbeck appeals to a theory of history; both, in the direct line of positivism, identify historical truth with hard documentary facts.

Historiography and postmodernity

Since Overbeck's rationalism, in which it was thought possible to separate clearly the true and the false, reflection on the writing of history has progressed. We have become more modest and less naive over the definition of truth in history. This shift has taken place, in my opinion, in the following manner.

First, the works of Raymond Aron on the philosophy of history, Henri-Irénée Marrou on historical epistemology, and Paul Veyne on the notion of plot have destroyed the distinction between history and historiography.¹⁵ There is no history apart from the historian's interpretative mediation

¹² Historians of early Christianity reproach the author of Acts for two weaknesses: (1) an exclusive attention to the creation of the communities to the detriment of their duration; (2) a fixation on the expansion of the Pauline mission toward the west (from Jerusalem to Rome) to the detriment of the other *tendencias* (especially Johannine) and the expansion toward the south (Egypt). For example, see W. Schneemelcher, *Urchristentum*, 1981, pp. 37–8.

¹³ F. C. Baur was perfectly aware of the aporia: the book of Acts is 'eine höchst wichtige Quelle für die Geschichte der apostolischen Zeit, aber auch eine Quelle, aus welcher erst durch strenge historische Kritik ein wahrhaft geschichtliches Bild der von ihr geschilderten Personen und Verhältnisse gewonnen werden kann' (*Paulus* [1845], 1866, p. 13).

¹⁴ A recent example is Etienne Trocmé in *L'enfance du christianisme*, 1997 (compare pages 70, 90, 96, 105–6 and 116).

¹⁵ R. Aron, *Philosophie de l'histoire* [1938], 1957. H. I. Marrou, *De la connaissance historique* [1954], 1975. P. Veyne, *Comment on écrit l'histoire* [1971], 1996. Neither can one overlook the works of P. Ricœur concerning temporality and intentionality in a historical narrative: *Time and Narrative*, I, 1984.

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which supplies meaning: history is narrative and, as such, constructed from a point of view. Over the multitude of facts at his/her disposal, the historian throws a plot, retaining certain facts that are judged significant, while excluding others, and relating some to others in a relationship of cause and effect. The crusades, for example, told from a Christian or Arab point of view are not the same history. Therefore historiography should not be regarded as descriptive, but rather (re)constructive. Historiography does not line up bare facts (what Baur and Overbeck called *geschichtliche Wahrheit*), but only facts interpreted by means of a logic imposed by the historian. In this operation, as Raymond Aron recognizes, 'theory precedes history'¹⁶ or, if one prefers, point of view precedes the writing of history. The 'truth' of history does not depend on the factuality of the event recounted (even though the historian is required to keep to the facts), but, rather, depends on the interpretation the historian gives to a reality that is always in itself open to a plurality of interpretative options.¹⁷

Second, the works of Arnaldo Momigliano allow us not only to distinguish between Greek and Jewish historiography, but also to consider the goal of identity pursued in all historiography.¹⁸ The past is never (at least in antiquity) explored for itself, but is recorded with a view to constituting a memory for the present of its readers. I would add that the history which any social group chooses to retain is, generally speaking, that which is required by its present, a present often fragile or in crisis. (The current revision of the theory of the sources of the Pentateuch, bringing the literary fixation of the texts down to the period of the exile will not contradict this point!¹⁹) The history that a social group retains is rarely the history of its mistakes or its crimes, but rather the epic of its exploits and the evil of the 'others'²⁰ (see the Jewish-Christian relations in Luke-Acts). Such a history is the intellectual instrument by which an institution fixes its identity by considering where it has come from.

Consequently, Lucan historiography is not to be judged on its conformity to so-called *bruta facta* (always ambiguous). Rather, it must be evaluated according to the *point of view of the historian* which controls

¹⁶ *Philosophie de l'histoire*, 1957, p. 93.

¹⁷ There is a useful reflection on the spirit of the historian by P. Gibert, *Vérité historique*, 1990.

¹⁸ Especially, A. Momigliano, *Fondations du savoir*, 1992.

¹⁹ A. de Pury, ed., *Pentateuque*, 1991.

²⁰ M. Douglas describes the process by which institutions provide themselves with a historical memory: 'Institutions create shadowed places in which nothing can be seen and no questions asked. They make other areas show finely discriminated detail, which is closely scrutinized and ordered' (*How Institutions Think*, 1986, p. 69).

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the writing of the narrative, *the truth* that the author aims to communicate and *the need for identity* to which the work of the historian responds.

What credentials?

This reorientation concerning historiography faces two objections.

First, what are we to do with the contradictory readings of the same facts, for example the Lucan and Pauline versions of the Jerusalem assembly (Acts 15 and Gal. 2) or the 'un-Pauline' concerns on the observance of the Torah (23. 6; 26. 5–7; 28. 17; cf. 16. 3)²¹ which Luke attributes to the apostle? Are we not forced to choose between one version and the other? In the case of the Jerusalem assembly, let us avoid deciding too quickly, since we know that Paul's account in Galatians 2 is rhetorically oriented²² and therefore one cannot claim objectivity for it. As to the theology attributed to Paul, divergence cannot be denied. We should consider that Luke's work evidences the development of Paulinism within Lucan Christianity. The book of Acts offers us privileged access to the reception of the apostle's thought in the milieu of a Pauline movement in the 80s.²³

The second objection to the postmodern questioning of historiography can be formulated in the following manner: if historiography must be judged from a point of view that the author defends, what credentials of credibility can still be accorded to historians? How does history differ from a purely imaginary reproduction of the past? Marrou, in asking this question, leaves us with only one criterion: 'the character of reality'.²⁴ Although vague, this criterion is useful in distinguishing ancient historiography from the Greek novel. Contrary to what Richard Pervo

²¹ It seems hardly compatible with the language of the apostle in his epistles that Paul declares in the *present tense* that he belongs to the Pharisaic party (Acts 23. 6), that he considers himself in conflict with Jewish theology on the question of the resurrection (26. 5–7), that he affirms that he did nothing against Jewish customs (28. 17) or that he forces Timothy to be circumcised because of fear of the Jews (16. 3).

²² G. Betori attempts to demonstrate that the rhetorical construction of the speech, which is argumentative in Paul and narrative in Luke, destroys the statute of objectivity improperly attributed to Gal. 2 from the Tübingen school: 'Opera storiografica', 1986, pp. 115–21.

²³ If we limit ourselves to a true/false alternative, the analysis of the relationship between the Paul of Luke and the Paul of the epistles is truncated; it is the phenomenon of the reception of Paulinism that is to be evaluated in its similarities and its differences (see the subject below, pp. 56–9; 84). See also my article 'Acts of Paul', 1997. It is the same concerning the study of the Christian Apocrypha, according to E. Junod's article ('Créations romanesques', 1983, pp. 271–85), which shows that the alternative novelistic fiction/historical truth leads to a dead end.

²⁴ 'L'histoire se différencie de ses falsifications ou de ses sosies par ce caractère de réalité qui pénètre tout son être' (*De la connaissance historique* [1954], 1975, p. 225).

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argues, it is not the narrative processes that allow us to distinguish ancient historiography from the Greek novel.²⁵ Rather, it is the relationship of the narrative to the *realia*. I therefore propose that we adopt the 'character of reality' as a criterion for distinguishing Lucan historiography from novel. What I mean by this is the textual presence of realities (topographical, cultural, socio-political, economic) of the world described by the narrator. I shall apply this later.

Three types of historiography

Paul Ricœur has moved the discussion one step forward by distinguishing three types of historiography.²⁶

First, he identifies a *documentary* history, which seeks to establish the verifiable facts (example: how Titus took Jerusalem in the year AD 70). He then speaks of an *explicative* history, which evaluates the event from a social, economic or political horizon; it answers the question: what were the consequences of Titus' conquest of Jerusalem for Jews and Christians? Finally, Ricœur speaks of a historiography in the strong sense, which rewrites the past in the founding narratives that people need in order to construct their self-understanding. We find here again the function of memory in forming identity. It corresponds to the work of the historian who interprets the capture of Jerusalem by Roman troops as a divine sanction against the infidelity of the chosen people.

Ricœur calls this *poetic* history (in the etymological sense of *poiein*, as it appears in founding myths). Poetic history does not conform to the same norms as the other types and does not fit the criterion of true/false verification (like *documentary* history). Neither does it weigh up the diverse evaluations of an event (like explanatory history). Rather, its truth lies in the interpretation it gives to the past and the possibility it offers to a community to understand itself in the present.²⁷ In other words, what historiography in the strong sense recognizes as trustworthy is the self-consciousness that it offers to the group of readers.

The taxonomy is fascinating, because *it puts an end to a totalitarian definition of historiography that would allow only one sort*. Hence, there

²⁵ R. I. Pervo has defended the affiliation of Acts with the novelistic genre on the basis of the narrative procedures of the author, without noticing that almost all of these procedures are common to novelists and Hellenistic historians (*Profit with Delight*, 1987).

²⁶ P. Ricœur, 'Philosophies critiques', 1994. See also his *Critique et la conviction*, 1995, pp. 131–2.

²⁷ P. Ricœur defines poetic history as 'celle des grandes affabulations de l'auto-compréhension d'une nation à travers ses récits fondateurs' (*Critique et la conviction*, 1995, p. 312).

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are several ways to do history, each one as legitimate as the other. If one is to do justice to the historian, one must investigate his/her historiographical aim. In particular, the recognition of the poetic dimension is very important. By validating symbolic expression in history, it frees the historian from suspicion of the symbolic as improper or deviant with regard to the ethics of historiography. On the contrary, Ricœur says, the symbolic (and I add: whether theological or not) is intrinsic to a poetic historiographical aim. Historiography, in this sense, as it lays out founding narratives, rightly derives from a need to symbolize and imagine.

One could criticize Ricœur in that the divisions between these three categories are rarely neat and tidy. This will be confirmed when I investigate the parameters to which the book of Acts responds. An attentive reading of the narrative does not lead to the understanding that there is any one pure type of historiography. Acts is sometimes historiographically poetic, while at other times it is documentary.

A poetic history

The affiliation of Acts with poetic history is attested by the way the narrator constantly has God intervening, saving or consoling his people: God communicates with the apostles through dreams or angels (5. 19; 7. 55; 9. 10; etc.); God causes the community to grow miraculously (2. 47; 5. 14; 11. 24; 12. 24); God overturns Saul on the road to Damascus in order to make him the vehicle of the Gentile mission (9. 1–19a); God provokes the meeting of Peter and Cornelius through supernatural interventions (10. 1–48); God opens the doors of prisons for his imprisoned messengers (12. 6–11; 16. 25–6) or strikes down the enemies of believers (5. 1–11; 12. 21–3), and so on. From chapter 1 where the Twelve are reconstituted after the shameful death of Judas (1. 15–26), the narrator unfolds the account of the birth of the Church, in which the principal agent in this narrative is the powerful arm of God.

A brief analysis of Acts 16. 6–10 will concretize this primary aim of the narrative. This short passage tells how the missionary itinerary of Paul and Silas was violently deflected to Macedonia. The messengers 'went through the regions of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia'; the same Spirit 'does not allow them' to go to Bithynia, but reroutes them to Troas where, in a vision, a Macedonian begs them: 'Come over to Macedonia and help us!'²⁸ Such a version of the facts would be inadmissible in a documentary

²⁸ These verses are interesting to analyse from the point of view of the language they use for God. For this, see pp. 86–92.

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history, in which concrete information about the why and how of these constraints would be required. This kind of history, however, is legitimate in a founding narrative whose goal is to show how the Spirit gave birth to the Church by miraculously guiding the witnesses of the Word.

The 'poetic' of Luke's narrative is to be found in the demonstration of this divine guidance in history. Narrating the lives of the apostles then consists in reconstituting them under this sign. It means both repeating what happened (mimesis) and reconstructing it in a creative manner.

A documentary interest

On the other hand, the narrative of Acts regularly – and to our surprise – offers topographical, socio-political or onomastic notations whose narrative usefulness is not apparent on a first reading. Such a concern for detail has no equivalent in Luke's gospel. But Acts gives extraordinary attention to the area of Paul's mission, the routes followed, the cities visited, the people met, and the synagogues. For example, Luke's three verses that recount the voyage from Troas to Miletus (20. 13–15) enumerate the stops in Assos, Mytilene, Chios, Samos and Trogyllium with quasi-technical accuracy, without mentioning any missionary activity in these cities. The narrator can be incredibly precise when he describes the itinerary of the missionaries (13. 4; 19. 21–3; 20. 36–8), the choice of routes (20. 2–3, 13–15), the length of the voyage (20. 6, 15), the lodging conditions (18. 1–3; 21. 8–10), the farewell scenes (21. 5–7, 12–14), and so on. The superb chapter 27, with its account of the shipwreck, where Luke lets himself go with novelistic effects, is, at the same time, famous for the astonishing precision of its nautical vocabulary. This mixture of fiction and realism is striking when compared to the Greek novel. The latter strictly limits the presence of toponymic details or indications to their narrative potential. The apocryphal *Acts* of apostles in this respect resemble novelistic fiction rather than the documentary history of the canonical Acts. After Luke, apocryphal literature rapidly abandons historical realism.²⁹

The same documentary realism applies to Luke's description of Roman institutions. The narrator seems to have perfect information concerning the administrative apparatus of the Empire. Philippi is correctly called a colony (κολωνία: 16. 12) and its *praetores* receive the name of στρατηγοί

²⁹ This is shown below, pp. 238; 249–53.