

The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting

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The series

With Bruce W. Winter, the Warden of Tyndale House, Cambridge, as Series Editor, the first four of six planned volumes in the series *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting* have been published. And let it be said at once: the first four volumes fully live up to what the two publishers promise: “A stimulating new study that replaces older studies on Acts, including aspects of *The Beginnings of Christianity*”. This last title covers the five volumes published by K. Lake and H.J. Cadbury in the period 1920-1933, a work which has had an enormous influence on many students of the Book of Acts. I would not be surprised if the new series could likewise become a classic and inspire future generations well into the third millennium.

The contributors to this series complement each other, coming as they do from different areas of research. In the words of the publishers: “This new six-volume series presents the results of interdisciplinary research between New Testament, Jewish, and classical scholarship. Working to place the Book of Acts within its first-century setting, well-known historians and biblical scholars from Australia, the United States, Canada, Russia, Germany, France, Israel, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom have collaborated here to provide a stimulating new study that elucidates the Book of Acts in its literary, regional, cultural, ideological and theological contexts.”

It is only to be expected that a work written by various, independent contributors contains both overlaps and divergent conclusions concerning different ideas. More importantly, however, the contributors present a great number of historical data which they subject to thorough analysis and discussion before they draw their conclusions. A work of this nature does not require complete agreement regarding all the issues raised. Compared to many other theological works, it makes fairly easy reading; Greek words appear in the text now and then, and occasionally a Hebrew word, but not to the extent of barring the way for readers who are not skilled in Hebrew and Greek. The subject matter is relevantly treated all the way through.

Readers of *Mishkan* who are accustomed to recognizing the importance of the Jewish background material for a proper understanding of the New Testament message may be challenged by the treatment of the Graeco-Roman background. In the first centuries AD, Palestine was not an isolated island, unaffected by the hellenistic trends in the surrounding world. Without knowledge of the Graeco-Roman world, one’s understanding of the New Testament is inadequate. This is also — and especially — true of the Book of Acts, whether we are talking about events which took place inside or outside Palestine.

Volume 1: The Book of Acts in Its Ancient Literary Setting (eds.: Bruce W. Winter and Andrew D. Clarke), 1993, xii + 479 pages

It is to the editors' — and publishers' — credit that they begin the new series by placing the Book of Acts in its ancient literary setting, even if this topic is of least appeal to many readers. This fact may well reflect more on the readers than on the importance of the subjects treated, however!

In Volume 1, fourteen contributors deal with the questions of what kind of "history" Luke writes in the Book of Acts; how biblical history has influenced him; and the nature of the relationship between the Gospel of Luke and Luke II (Acts). Since large parts of the Book of Acts consist of speeches, chapters are included on "Public Speaking and Published Accounts", "Official Proceedings and the Forensic Speeches in Acts 24-26", and "Acts against the Background of Classical Rhetoric" — all subjects which are treated in a stimulating way and throw light on the issues in question.

David Wenham has undertaken to compare the Paul in Acts with the Paul of the epistles in a chapter entitled "Acts and the Pauline Corpus: II. The Evidence of Parallels". It is only natural that he should thoroughly discuss the difficult historical question of Paul's visit to Jerusalem, i.e., the relationship between Luke's information in Acts 11 and 15 and Paul's own information in Galatians 2. By way of summing up, Wenham says that "scholars have detected various specific contradictions between Acts and Paul's letter, but in very few cases is the evidence weighty. If Galatians 2:1-10 is identified with Acts 15, then there is a significant question-mark over the Acts account at that point; but the identification is insecure. Those scholars who consider the picture of Paul in Acts to be historically misleading must appeal to general impressions rather than to proven discrepancies with the epistles. Other scholars will judge that the cumulative evidence suggests that Acts is a well-informed historical narrative" (p. 258).

Finally, F. Scott Spencer provides a fine introduction to "Acts and Modern Literary Approaches". He says in his conclusion: "This is an exciting era in which, as Tannehil puts it, 'Methodological pluralism is to be encouraged, for each method will have blind spots that can only be overcome through another approach'" (p. 414). This is a refreshing viewpoint which gives incentive to collaborative efforts between scholars with different approaches to these subjects.

Volume 2: The Book of Acts in Its Graeco-Roman Setting (eds.: David W.J. Gill and Conrad Gempf), 1994, xii + 627 pages

In the preface to this volume, David W.J. Gill reminds the reader of Oswyn Murray's words: "Historians are supposed to write books full of facts". But he adds, with Murray: "... the discovery of facts ... is only a preliminary to a higher activity, that of understanding the facts" (p. xi).

In the first part of this volume, 14 contributors — historians and theologians — present a number of facts, and interpretations of these, regarding aspects of provincial life within the eastern Mediterranean, Italy, and Rome. Since great portions of Acts are about journeys, it is relevant to raise the question: How did people travel by land and by sea in the first century AD? What do we know about shipwrecks and Roman roads, of food shortages, of religion and imperial cults in the various regions, of urban 'lites and buildings? The last point is relevant to the question of where the first Jesus-believers met for worship.

The second part of this volume offers a relevant survey of the most important Roman provinces

and their forms of government, concluding with Rome and Italy and appendices on the Asiarchs and the Politarchs, mentioned in Acts 19:31, 19:29, and 20:4 respectively. A chapter is included on “Luke’s Geographical Horizon” as well as an appendix on “The ‘We’ Passages”. The much-debated question of whether the author hides behind the “we”, which crops up in 16:10-17, 20:5-15, 21:1-18, and 27:1-28:16, is treated by James M. Porter. Porter argues that the usage does not reflect an eyewitness or first-hand account. “More likely is the conclusion that the author of Acts has utilized a continuous, independent source probably discovered in the course of his investigation” (p. 573). Not all the contributors to this new work on the Book of Acts share Porter’s conclusion, not surprisingly given the complex nature of the problem.

Volume 3: The Book of Acts and Paul in Roman Custody (Brian Rapske), 1994, viii + 512 pp

Volume 3 is authored by a single contributor in contrast to most of the other volumes (see also Volume 5). Brian Rapske’s work is a revised edition of his Ph.D. dissertation.

Under the heading “Custody, the Legal System and Status in the Roman World”, Rapske provides a description of Paul’s citizenship and status: as a citizen of Tarsus, as a Roman citizen, and as a Jew. This chapter is followed by “Paul on Trial in Acts” and “Paul in Prison in Acts”. With great confidence and reference to a wealth of sources on prisons and imprisonment in the ancient world, Rapske takes his readers around the towns and prisons where Paul stayed or was confined for a shorter or longer periods of time: Philippi, Jerusalem, Caesarea, and Rome. He portrays the conditions of life in prison, prison culture, the shame of bonds, Paul’s helpers, etc. in order to give an impression of how prison life under different conditions influenced Paul’s work.

Rapske rejects the theory that Luke’s description of Paul in Acts as an imprisoned, suffering witness takes precedence over Paul the missionary. Rapske regards the dichotomy “either missionary, or prisoner” as false. His main thesis is that “Paul is indeed the missionary-prisoner for Luke; effective, appreciated and divinely approved in his free doings with all the struggles that attended in the earlier phase of his ministry as described in Acts and effective, appreciated and divinely approved in the tribulations of his bond in the latter phase of Acts” (p. 436).

Of special interest for the readers of *Mishkan* is the question of Paul’s identity both as a Roman citizen and a Jew. For Rapske, Paul remains a Pharisee after his conversion and never becomes an ex-Pharisee. “All that Christianity affirmed of his Pharisaism, Paul continued to embrace; all that in Pharisaism threatened the exclusiveness of Christ’s salvific provision, he emphatically rejected. In this sense only can Paul be said to remain a Pharisee according to Philipians. He elsewhere does not deny his Jewish birth or circumcision (Rom 3:1f.) and he apparently does not resist synagogal discipline despite its wrongful application (2 Cor 11:24). Hence, phrases such as ‘Paul’s renunciation of Judaism’ hardly deserves what is taking place at Phil. 3:2-16” (p. 99).

Rapske makes some interesting observations regarding Paul’s imprisonment in Philippi (Acts 16) and his apprehension in Jerusalem (Acts 21-22); he even speaks of Paul’s “un-Roman” behavior. In Philippi, Paul does not reveal his Roman citizenship until *after* his punishment; in Jerusalem he does so *before*. Why?

In Philippi, an early disclosure of Roman citizenship might have meant a time-consuming and prolonged process, which would have delayed the Jewish missionaries’ work. But an early “We are Roman citizens” in the mouths of the missionaries might have been construed, by Gentiles and

Jews, as a denial of their Jewishness, an impression which they are unwilling to create. An early disclosure might also have been misunderstood by the Jesus-believers in Philippi as encouraging them to rely on their Roman citizenship. The missionaries were wary of running that risk as well. They preferred to accept an unjust punishment in order to demonstrate solidarity with those lacking Roman credentials.

In Jerusalem, Paul discloses his Roman citizenship before the intended punishment (22:25). But Rapske has a keen eye for how, where, and to whom Paul presents himself in Jerusalem: "... whereas Paul presents himself *in Greek* to the Tribune as a *Jew* who is a *citizen of Tarsus* [Acts 21:37-40], to the Jews Paul presents himself *in Aramaic* as a *zealous Jew* who, though born in Tarsus, was raised in Jerusalem [Acts 22:1-3]" (p. 142). Not until he is in the Antonia Fortress and before the Romans does Paul disclose his Roman citizenship; not with a loud "I am a Roman" but in the form of a question: "Is it legal for you to scourge a Roman, an uncondemned man?" (Acts 22:25). Paul's insinuation of, rather than insistence upon, his rights leads Rapske to conclude that "Paul will not so stridently insist upon his Roman rights as to undercut his religious commitment to Judaism before Roman eyes. In other words, the fact that he is a Christian Jew affects the way he claims his Roman rights" (p. 143).

Volume 4: The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting (ed.: R. Bauckham), 1995, xii + 526 pp

The 15 contributors to this volume cover subjects related to the Palestinian setting of the Book of Acts and the cross-cultural situation in 1st-century Roman Palestine. Most of the contributions are new, although a few earlier published studies are also included, e.g., Martin Hengel's "The Geography of Palestine in Acts". Treatment of the speeches of Peter and Stephen has been deferred to the forthcoming Volume 6 of the series.

Among the questions discussed in volume 4 are: Jew versus Greek, Roman policy in Judaea, geography, personal names, and politico-religious groupings. Subjects of a more theological character include: "Jewish Prayer Literature and the Jerusalem Church in Acts" and "The Palestinian Cultural Context of Earliest Christian Community of Goods".

Rainer Riesner writes about "Synagogues in Jerusalem" and reaches the conclusion that there "is nothing anachronistic in Luke's and the other evangelists' picture that there were many synagogues in Galilee and Jerusalem" (p. 214). In an article entitled "The Composition of the Jerusalem Church", David A. Fiensy argues that "Jerusalem in the 1st century AD was a moderate-sized urban centre with a socially and culturally pluralistic population ... The church seems to have been a microcosm of the city" (p. 213). The question of Jerusalem's size is subject to detailed examination in the chapter "The Population Size of Jerusalem and the Numerical Growth of the Jerusalem Church", written by Wolfgang Reinhardt. In contrast to Joachim Jeremias' low estimate of the population of Jerusalem (25,000-30,000), Reinhardt suggests that "A figure of 60,000 to 120,000 seems realistic, and even the higher end of this scale not impossible for the 30s of the 1st century" (p. 237). This background forms the proper context regarding the question of whether Luke's information in Acts 2:41 and 4:4 about the size of the Jesus movement can be regarded as historically reliable. Reinhardt's answer is affirmative, since "the dominant argument against the historical plausibility of Luke's figures — the alleged small population of Jerusalem at the time — can no longer be considered valid" (p. 238).

Several of the other articles in this volume also deserve mention but I shall restrict myself to drawing attention to Richard Bauckham's article on "James and the Jerusalem Church". All chapters are prefaced by a summary. As an example of this, and as an appetizer to the last and important chapter of volume 4, Bauckham's summary (pp. 415-416) is quoted in full below.

This chapter focuses on the Jerusalem church especially in the period after the persecution by Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:1-17), which was the point at which the Twelve ceased to be the leadership of the Jerusalem church and James the Lord's brother began to reach a position of pre-eminence in the Jerusalem church. The historicity of the portrayal of the Jerusalem church is assessed by relating it to that church's context in 1st-century Judaism and by checking it against other available evidence, so that an account which critically integrates the evidence of Acts with other evidence emerges. It is argued that the centrality of Jerusalem for the 1st-century Jewish worldview and experience provides the essential background for understanding both the way in which the leadership of the Jerusalem church was constituted and the role of the Jerusalem church in the early Christian movement. The Jerusalem church's authoritative oversight of the whole Christian mission, which was widely acknowledged, is seen most importantly in the decisions of the Jerusalem council (Acts 15).

Careful study of the speech Luke attributes to James (Acts 15:13-21), in the light of Jewish exegetical practice, shows that Luke has here preserved, in summary form, the exegetical basis on which James and the Jerusalem leaders argued that Gentile believers belonged to the eschatological people of God as Gentiles, without having to become Jews and observe the Law, but also that the Law of Moses itself makes provision for them in the form of four commandments to which alone they are obligated (the prohibition in the apostolic decree). This authoritative ruling on the relationship of Gentile Christians to the Law of Moses was promulgated by the Jerusalem church leaders for the whole Christian movement, and evidence down to the 3rd century shows that it was very widely accepted as such. It was accepted not least by the majority of Jewish Christians.

The common assumptions that the Jerusalem church under James, or at least an influential faction in it, continued to maintain that Gentile Christians must be circumcised, and that this view was held by much of later Jewish Christianity also, have no basis in the evidence. It appears that Luke's presentation of the Jerusalem council as an event which decisively affected the whole development of early Christianity by authoritatively discrediting the view that Gentile Christians must be circumcised is historically accurate. The Jerusalem church under James was not, as is often supposed, progressively marginalised as the Gentile mission developed in opposition to its allegedly conservative Jewish stance. On the contrary, the Jerusalem church remained central.

The two forthcoming volumes

There is every reason to look forward to the publication of the last two volumes in this series, namely *The Book of Acts in Its Diaspora Setting*, by Irena Levinskaya, and *The Book of Acts and Its Theology*, edited by I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson.

Those who want to keep abreast of the issues preoccupying modern scholars and students of Acts would do well to acquire this series. Although certain conclusions can be disputed the series is full of data and discussions which challenge the reader and, not least, inspire him.

All volumes are in hard-cover and beautifully printed — apart from an dreadfully small map of Palestine in volume 4, so small that it serves no purpose whatsoever. The price is very reasonable: \$ 37.50 per volume.

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