

Introduction to Acts.

Luke 4:22-30

Acts 1:1-8

Responsive Psalm 138

This morning we are going to start our journey through the book of Acts. My intention for this morning is to spend our time just laying down the ground work for this book before we actually get into it. So today, might likely be a bit shorter than usual but I do think that such things are important to help us to have a greater understanding, and also to help us to interpret this book if we know the circumstances around it, and not only that, I find history interesting and also important especially when it comes to biblical history for it grounds this faith in reality, these stories, these accounts, these people are real people, with real experiences, and they have been recorded and these records have survived generations for our benefit.

This faith is not a faith rooted in mysticism, or tall tales, but it is real, and true, faith that is rooted in history itself. So the first question to always ask, is who wrote the book, and sometimes that can be controversial, or not have a definitive answer like the book of Hebrews which we just finished. But that is not the case here, there is no real controversy, it is widely accepted that Luke is the Author of the book of Acts. It would seem that Luke was a second generation Christian, and by that I mean he was not one of the original apostles, and instead came along later. We get a sense of this from his opening statements in his Gospel account, where he says, "Inasmuch as many have taken in the hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had a perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account most excellent Theophilus."

So by his own admonition, he is not recording his own personal account, but has rather compiled the accounts of others who were eyewitnesses and sent it to Theophilus, so as he says in verse 4 "that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed. Luke was an occasional travel companion of Paul's and was with Paul during his imprisonment in Rome. The earliest records of the Gospel according to Luke is dating around 175-225 AD, The Muratorian Canon, which lists the books recognized as Scripture describes the Author of the Gospel, and Acts, as Luke, the physician, and companion of Paul, who wrote in his own name but in the accordance with Paul's opinion.

Irenaeus, who was a Greek Bishop also mentions Luke as the follower of Paul and as the Author of both books and attaches Paul's authority to Luke in his writing. These are indeed important details if somewhat esoteric because they do speak to the legitimacy of Luke's writing. Not himself being an apostle, yet having the authority of one by having his writings to be included in scripture.

Luke, being a physician, was a well educated man, whose native tongue was Hellenistic Greek, who was well versed in the Greek translations of the Jewish Scriptures. At many times throughout the writing of the book of Acts, he refers to himself in the 1st person, it is believed that it is at these moments that he was actually present, and was himself a witness to these recorded events. Ben Witherington, a new testament Scholar wrote about Luke, saying,

“Our Author is a well traveled retainer of the social elite, well educated, deeply concerned about religious matters, knowledgeable about Judaism, but no prisoner of one subculture in the Empire. Rather he is a cosmopolitan person with a more universalistic vision and scope of the impact of his faith, but up and down the social ladder, and also across geographical, ethnic, and other social boundaries.”

And finally, the evidence for Luke as the author though he himself is unnamed in the book, is verse 1 which says, “The former account I made O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began to do and teach.” This book is not separate, but rather the 2nd part of a 2 part work by Luke, we see one is the Gospel account which he says in verse 3 “I have laid these out for you oh excellent Theophilus, and the 2nd part here in Acts is the history of the growing ministry and faith, he says, speaking of the gospel account, “the former account I made O Theophilus. So we see even in this the evidence of the authorship, and that these 2 books are indeed intrinsically tied together.

The first part being the Gospel, and this second part focusing on The last recorded words of Jesus was what are known as the Great Commission, he said, “You shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. This book is the story of those men and women who took that great commission seriously and acted upon it, spreading the gospel and the good news of a risen savior, of the Messiah who had come and fulfilled all that God had promised.

So, now that we got that controversy out of the way...and we have determined it is Luke who wrote this book, we must now look at the date of when it was written. Trying to determine the date that this was written is a little more difficult, for there is only a few evidences that give hints at possible dates and no real clear cut timelines. There are 3 main beliefs as to when this was written, some allege that both the Gospel of Luke, and the book of Acts were written in the late AD 80, or sometime in the 90s. But the problem with these dates is that it creates issues with its own internal evidences.

Being that is previously believed that Luke was indeed present for much of the events of the book of Acts, implied from the sections that are written in the first person, and also being that he was an occasional travel companion with Paul, those evidences would have to put the date no later than sometime in Early AD 80, not late. Then there is also the issue that the book ends with Paul's imprisonment, if it is a later date, then likely it should have also included his trial and death.

The 2nd date then argues that it must have been written a decade earlier, putting it sometime in the AD 70s. IT is believed that Luke used Marks Gospel account as a source for his own account, and the book of Mark was written around AD 70, which was the year of the fall of Jerusalem as well, which is mentioned in the Gospel account, prophesied by Jesus in chapter 21. So it is actually a bit more likely that Luke wrote both of these books sometime in the mid AD 70 and it seems to be mostly supported by the internal evidence of this book.

But...of course there is also a 3rd possibility, and that is that it was actually written earlier yet, dating back to the early 60's even. And the evidences for that are in the fact that there doesn't seem to be any notice or mention of Paul's letters, nor any reference to Nero's persecution of Christians, or again it ends at Paul's imprisonment, and not his trial or execution which was sometime in the early to mid 60s. So it seems that most of the evidences favor a earlier Authorship, likely sometime in the early 60's.

Many Scholars today do not believe that the book of Acts was written as a mere add on, or afterthought of the gospel of Luke, but rather it was intended to be included with, or rather a part 2 of a bigger story. It would appear that in the writing of these 2 books, Luke had a purpose and a plan and that the book of Acts here isn't just some mere followup, but was intended from the start. As we know the books of the bible are written in many different genre's, there are history books, poems, letters, and the gospels. These two books of Luke's are not similiar in style or genre, the Gospel of Luke falls into the same literary style of all the previous Gospel accounts, being a shortened account over the life of one person from birth, to death.

The book of Acts unfolds more smoothly as a continuous narrative featuring extended accounts of Jesus' followers and their discourse. The book of Acts has a broader scope in purpose, telling of a the larger story of the gospel spreading to the ends of the earth. Many Scholars believe that this was Luke's reasoning behind writing the Gospel account, for as he says in the first few verse of that book, he is writing an account of the things which have already come before even though they have been written by others. It would appear that Luke saw a need in telling a larger story, showing how the gospel narrative fits within the church, and the larger scope of the Christian life. The other accounts of the Gospel only focus on the gospel itself, where here with these 2 parts, Luke has encompassed the entirety, The Gospel message, and it's spread and impact on people, and the world.

The book of Acts is a historical account of these events, but it differs from other Greco-Roman historical or biographical accounts of its time. Ancient histories would contain biographical subjects, but their purpose was not for some moral lesson, or teaching. And likewise ancient historiography's focused more on events, then people, their purpose was to record significant happenings within a time period and explore the reasons or purposes of them. Luke's writing here in the book of Acts instead of being strictly of the biographical nature, following and telling the story of a few individuals, nor is it truly historiographical in nature focusing on the events alone, but blends these two to draw out a larger narrative. The focus here in this work, is the fulfillment of scripture itself, and the events that lead to the fulfillment of God's will and plan through individuals and events over a broad span of time.

Lukes concern throughout all of the book of Acts, is the progress of the gospel itself. The Gospel is the focus and foundation that flows through all of the recorded events and people. He shows throughout this book, that the word of God, the gospel continues to spread despite all of the opposition, and obstacles that arise to stop it. Even in the last chapters of the book where it is focused mainly upon Paul and his ministry, and imprisonment, it is all yet for the focus of the gospel ministry, and the spreading of the word and not just merely a historical biographical account of Paul.

We will see this at the end of the book which records Paul's final speech to the Jews of Rome, where he recalls events which concludes with the claim that it is because of the hope of Israel, because of Jesus Christ the Messiah that he is in chains, and again he reiterates his teachin to the Jews bringing to them a challenge of Isaiah's prophecy being fulfilled in their own stubborn resistance to the gospel and says therefore the Gospel has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen. Lukes own commentary and conclusion on this doesn't focus on Paul himself, but rather again on the word of God increasing, with all boldness and without hindrance, again showing that Lukes purpose in writing is that of historical and theological rather then biographical. It would seem that Luke was concerned with continuing the lineage and history of Gods chosen people, by linking the old testament with the events we find in the book of Acts, showing a continued fulfillment of all that which has come before.

The history of Israel, and the promises to Abraham didn't stop at the death of Christ, indeed that was just to fulfillment of those things, and the gospel exploded, the ministry of Christ flourished and spread to all the corners of the world. It was important to Luke to point this out, that connections between that which came before, and the current present time, to show that it was they, the followers of Christ who were the Heirs according to the promises, not the nation of Israel by lineage, but it was indeed the Nation of Israel by promise. Much of the writing style that he used reflects this, for he used many of the same literary techniques that were found in the historical books of the Septuagint, namely the book of Deuteronomy, and 2nd Kings. Luke connects all of the geo-political, biographical, and militaristic histories recorded in those books as the history of God working out his salvation plan, and the fulfillment of his purpose.

Luke also in his writing modeled many of the historical accounts found in the Old Testament, therefore it shows a close relationship with the Old Testament in dealing with matters of prophecies fulfilled, Jerusalem itself and also the Law. In doing so, it colors his writing with one empirical truth, that God is in control, despite human wickedness and rebellion. In the end, despite many's attempt to squash the followers of Christ, to eliminate those of "The Way" God used all of it to cause the gospel to spread across the world. Even in persecution, and hard times, it still is all within God's purpose and plan. Though it may seem bleak for us with our limited sight and understanding, to the all powerful, all seeing God there is always a purpose and an intention.

So I hope that didn't all find this to boring, I tried to keep it a bit shorter and not get bogged down in details as I was going through this, As you know, there is a never ending supply of Scholars who for generations debate these issues. That being said though, I do think that it is important to at least touch on some of these things, to help ground the bible in reality, to help it not be just a book of stories of long lost men and women. Even in our own relative historical events that happen within our own lifetime they seem to have faded in the human mind.

We don't even have to go back that far, and we already today.. not even 100 years since WW2 have those who argue that the Holocaust did not happen
This is why history is important, this is why I think it is worth spending the time going over some of this stuff this morning, so hopefully as we go through this book it will be more real to us, that it will feel more tangible. That these words, spoken, thousands of years ago, by these men hold the power of God, that the gospel that spread across the known world then, is just as viable, just as real, and just as potent today.