

Acts as Biblical History?

Steve Walton

St Mary's University, Twickenham (London)

1

Setting the scene

“History is the intellectual form in which a civilization renders account to itself of its past.”

J. Huizinga, ‘A Definition of the Concept of History’ in *Philosophy and History: Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer* ed. Raymond Klibansky & H. J. Paton (Oxford: Clarendon, 1936), 9

2

Setting the scene

“History is the intellectual form in which a civilization renders account to itself of its past.”

- an intellectual exercise
- a corporate exercise
- part of a group’s self-consciousness
- an interpretation of the past

3

Acts and Jewish historiography

- Brian S. Rosner. “Acts and Biblical History.” Pages 65-82 in *The Book of Acts in its Ancient Literary Setting*. Edited by Bruce W. Winter and Andrew D. Clarke. BAFCS 1. Carlisle/Grand Rapids: Paternoster/Eerdmans, 1993.
- Daniel Marguerat. *The First Christian Historian: Writing the “Acts of the Apostles”*. SNTSMS 121. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Loveday Alexander. “Fact, Fiction and the Genre of Acts.” *NTS* 44 (1998): 380-99.

4

Acts and Jewish historiography

- 35 citations of Scripture in Acts

“the influence, whether literary or theological, of the OT upon the Lucan writings...is profound and pervasive. It is safe to say that there is no major concept in the two books that does not to some extent reflect the beliefs and theological vocabulary of the OT”

C. K. Barrett, “Luke-Acts,” in *It is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture*, ed. D.A. Carson and H. G. M. Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 231-44, quoting 231.

5

Acts and Jewish historiography

- Darrell Bock—Christology
- F. F. Bruce—portraits of Paul in Acts and letters
- Bart Koet—scriptural interpretation key to (Luke-)Acts
- David Peterson—fulfilment theme
- Robert Brawley—voices of Scripture in (Luke-)Acts
- Kenneth Litwak—Scripture as framing Luke-Acts
- Yuzuru Miura—David in Luke-Acts
- Rick Strelan—Luke’s “authoritative” interpretation of Scripture
- David Pao—appropriation of Isaiah
- Peter Mallen—appropriation of Isaiah’s “story”
- Scott Shauf—historiography

6

Identifying the issue(s)

- How far is Acts’ approach to historiography Jewish (rather than Greek)?
- How far is the overall story of Acts written in continuity with the people of God in Jewish Scripture?

7

Mapping the discussion

- Brian Rosner

“Luke in Acts is not merely concerned to draw a link between the time of Jesus and the time of the early church, as is commonly noticed, but also between the time of Israel and the time of Jesus and His church. Acts insists that the God who was at work in the history of his ancient people, Israel, bringing them salvation, is the same God who is at work in the church.”

“Acts and Biblical History”, 82

8

Mapping the discussion

- Brian Rosner
- Loveday Alexander
 - use of LXX as model
 - Luke's authorial voice as a committed believer

9

Mapping the discussion

- Brian Rosner
- Loveday Alexander
- Daniel Marguerat
 - God's intervention
 - Acts not focused on political history
 - Luke as a committed believer
 - Luke at crossroads of Greek and Jewish historiography

10

Mapping the discussion

- Brian Rosner
- Loveday Alexander
- Daniel Marguerat
- Jacob Jervell
 - retelling of the story of Israel—God as key cause
 - Acts as *salvation* history
 - Luke's aim: "religious" development of readers/hearers
 - Acts as the last part of the history of God's people

11

Mapping the discussion

- Brian Rosner
- Loveday Alexander
- Daniel Marguerat
- Jacob Jervell
- Samson Uytanlet
 - God engages with history in continuity with Scripture
 - parallelism with Moses-Joshua and Elijah-Elisha narratives
 - apostles not conquering new territory, but journeying through territory which is already under God's rule

12

Mapping the discussion

- Brian Rosner
- Loveday Alexander
- Daniel Marguerat
- Jacob Jervell
- Samson Uytanlet
- Scott Shauf
 - portrait of “the divine” in Acts closer to Jewish historians
 - God’s engagement with humanity, especially his people
 - Acts is held together by divine causation

13

Considering key evidence

- Luke as a writer with a personal commitment to his topic

- Lucian, *How to Write History*

first and foremost, let [an historian] be *a man of independent spirit*, with nothing to fear or hope from anybody; else he will be a corrupt judge open to undue influences. (38, my italics)

There stands my model, then: fearless, incorruptible, independent, a believer in frankness and veracity; one that will call a spade a spade, make no concession to likes and dislikes, nor spare any man for pity or respect or propriety; *an impartial judge*, kind to all, but too kind to none; a literary cosmopolite with neither suzerain nor king, never heeding what this or that man may think, but setting down the thing that befell. (41, my italics)

14

Considering key evidence

- Luke as a writer with a personal commitment to his topic
 - limited use of authorial voice I:I + “we” passages
 - implied author presenting himself as participant
- “Luke does not have a historian’s intellectual autonomy; his reading of history is a believer’s reading.”

Daniel Marguerat, *First Christian Historian*, 21

15

Considering key evidence

- Luke as a writer with a personal commitment to his topic

- the focus of the history

- Greek history primarily political and military

- *πράξεις* e.g. Arrian, *Anabasis*; cf. Josephus, *Jewish War*

- biblical history focuses on a small people

- Acts presupposes and recapitulates the history of Israel 7:2-53; 13:17-25; 15:16-17 (Amos 9:11-12)

Luke did not think of Christianity as “an integral part of the world” but saw the story of Acts as “the final part of the history of the people of God of Israel”.

Jacob Jervell, “Future”, 125

16

Considering key evidence

- Luke as a writer with a personal commitment to his topic
- the focus of the history
- the reading of Scripture
 - language and syntax as semitic, esp. chs 1–15
 - storytelling techniques
 - use of formulae

“then X slept with his ancestors and was buried with his ancestors + location, and Y succeeded him as king” in 1–2 Kings; cf. Acts summaries

17

Considering key evidence

- Luke as a writer with a personal commitment to his topic
- the focus of the history
- the reading of Scripture
 - language and syntax as semitic, esp. chs 1–15
 - storytelling techniques
 - speeches of major characters to sum up a section or transition to next

e.g. Josh 23:1–16; 1 Sam 12:1–25; 1 Kgs 8:22–53; Acts 4:24–30

18

Considering key evidence

- Luke as a writer with a personal commitment to his topic
- the focus of the history
- the reading of Scripture
 - language and syntax as semitic, esp. chs 1–15
 - storytelling techniques
 - writing narrative through major characters

“the account of history to be found in the Old Testament and Judaism, which to a large degree are composed of ‘biographical’ sections...One common feature of most of these biographical complexes of Old Testament and Jewish tradition is that they are composed of individual narratives which contain particular striking scenes or anecdotes.”

Martin Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*, 30–31

19

Considering key evidence

- Luke as a writer with a personal commitment to his topic
- the focus of the history
- the reading of Scripture
 - language and syntax as semitic, esp. chs 1–15
 - storytelling techniques
 - writing narrative through major characters
 - Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, Elijah, Elisha
 - Peter, Paul, Stephen, Philip
 - and God

20

Considering key evidence

- Luke as a writer with a personal commitment to his topic
- the focus of the history
- the reading of Scripture
 - language and syntax as semitic, esp. chs 1–15
 - storytelling techniques
 - the fulfilment of Scripture
 - Deut 28–30 fulfilled in exile 2 Kgs 21:10–15; and return Neh 1:4–11; cf. Dan 9:2
 - promises unfulfilled within OT narrative, e.g. return from exile in Isa 40–55

21

Considering key evidence

- Luke as a writer with a personal commitment to his topic
- the focus of the history
- the reading of Scripture
 - language and syntax as semitic, esp. chs 1–15
 - storytelling techniques
 - the fulfilment of Scripture
 - Joel 2:28–32 in Pentecost speech 2:17–21
 - Amos 9:11–12 in James' speech 15:16–17

22

Considering key evidence

- Luke as a writer with a personal commitment to his topic
- the focus of the history
- the reading of Scripture
 - language and syntax as semitic, esp. chs 1–15
 - storytelling techniques
 - the fulfilment of Scripture
 - “the present is encouraged to become part of biblical history...by describing current events, from as it were, the Bible's perspective”

James L. Kugel, *Early Biblical Interpretation*, 47

23

Considering key evidence

- Luke as a writer with a personal commitment to his topic
- the focus of the history
- the reading of Scripture
 - language and syntax, esp. chs 1–15
 - storytelling techniques
 - a biblical understanding of history

24

“The idea of a personal and sovereign God who purposes to fulfil his covenant promises for his people and metes out punishment for moral failure (common to the Old Testament and Acts) is to be distinguished from that of fate in Greek historiography where judgement is more capricious and individualistic.”

Brian Rosner, “Acts and Biblical History”, 78

25

“The idea of a personal and sovereign God who purposes to fulfil his covenant promises for his people and metes out punishment for moral failure (common to the Old Testament and Acts) is to be distinguished from that of fate in Greek historiography where judgement is more capricious and individualistic.”

Brian Rosner, “Acts and Biblical History”, 78

26

Considering key evidence

- Luke as a writer with a personal commitment to his topic
- the focus of the history
- the reading of Scripture
 - language and syntax, esp. chs 1–15
 - storytelling techniques
 - a biblical understanding of history
 - P history, Gen–Num
 - Deuteronomistic history Deut–2 Kgs
 - Chronicler's history

27

God's control of human history

- the plan (βουλή) of God
- the will (θέλημα) of God
- “it is necessary” (δεῖ) 22x in Acts
- key verbs
 - ὀρίζω “appoint in advance” 2:23; 10:42; 17:31
 - προορίζω “predestine” 4:28
 - προοράω “foresee” 2:31

28

God's control of human history

- the plan (βουλή) of God
- the will (θέλημα) of God
- “it is necessary” (δεῖ) 22x in Acts
- key verbs
- key events narrated as the action of God
 - pouring out of Spirit chs 2, 8, 10 (note 10:47; 11:17; 15:8)
 - missionary movements 16:6-7, 10
 - angelic direction 5:19; 8:26; 10:30; 12:7-10, 23; 27:23

29

God's control of human history

- the plan of God
- the will of God
- “it is necessary” 22x in Acts
- key verbs
- key events narrated as the action of God
 - communication through angels or dreams
 - the growth of the believing community
 - transformation of Saul of Tarsus
 - “divine meetings”, e.g. Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch
 - freeing believers from prison
 - striking down enemies of the gospel

30

God's control of human history

- the plan of God
- the will of God
- “it is necessary” 22x in Acts
- key verbs
- key events narrated as the action of God
 - “wonders and signs” as “real events of supernatural origin” (Loveday Alexander, *Context*, 158-59)
 - direct intervention of God in stories

31

Conclusion and comparison

“Our author conceived of his work as the *continuation* of the LXX. His deliberate composition in Septuagintal Greek and the conviction that his story was the fulfillment of the promises of the OT imply that as a continuation, Luke-Acts represents *sacred narrative*.”

Gregory Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition*, 363
(his italics)

32

Conclusion and comparison

“The narratives of...the birth of the church are marked by the revival of the gift of prophecy, brought about by the coming of the Spirit upon individuals, and thus suggest that the time of silence in Israel is now ended and that it is time for the story of redemption to be resumed. These observations lead most writers to conclude that the author is continuing the story of Israel where it left off. That is to say, he is intending to write *biblical narrative*.”

W.Ward Gasque, “A Fruitful Field”, 120 (his italics)

33

Greek historiography

- caution about “supernatural” phenomena: “it was told”
- Dionysius of Halicarnassus 1.48.4; 2.20.3; 2.74.5

34

Dionysius of Halicarnassus

Others say that he chanced to be tarrying at that time at the station where the Trojan ships lay; and others that he had been sent with a force into Phrygia by Priam upon some military expedition. Some give a more fabulous account of his departure. *But let the case stand according to each man's convictions.* (1.48.4)

But, though I am as well acquainted as anyone with these matters, nevertheless *my attitude toward the myths is one of caution.* (2.20.3)

35

Dionysius of Halicarnassus

For they look upon these boundary stones as gods and sacrifice to them yearly, offering up no kind of animal (for it is not lawful to stain these stones with blood), but cakes made of cereals and other first-fruits of the earth. But they ought still to observe the motive, as well, which led Numa to regard these boundary stones as gods and content themselves with their own possessions without appropriating those of others either by violence or by fraud; whereas now there are some who, in disregard of what is best and of the example of their ancestors, instead of distinguishing that which is theirs from that which belongs to others, set as bounds to their possessions, not the law, but their greed to possess everything—which is disgraceful behaviour. *But we leave the considerations of these matters to others.* (2.74.4b-5)

36

Greek historiography

- caution about “supernatural” phenomena: “it was told”
 - Dionysius of Halicarnassus 1.48.4; 2.20.3; 2.74.5
 - Josephus’ critique of miracles
Ant. 3:25, 32; 4:45-53; 8:349; 10:260-63
- chance or fate, rather than a directly intervening G/god
- aimed at moral or political education

37

Conclusion

- Luke at the crossroads of Jewish and Greek historiography
 - confessional history *versus* “objectivity”
 - quest for human causes *versus* divine causes
 - Acts closer to Jewish than Greek historiography
- Is Jervell right?
Luke “obviously has the idea that he is contributing to the Scriptures”
 - (Luke-)Acts as a continuation of the story of Scripture
 - Luke-Acts as “the first New Testament”? (C. K. Barrett)

38

To get these slides, visit...

Acts and More

<http://stevewalton.info>

39