

Whose Acts?

And does it matter?

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Hunting the Woozle

A.A. Milne, *Winnie the Pooh*, ch. 3



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‘Silly old Bear’, [Christopher Robin] said, ‘what were you doing? First you went round the spinney twice by yourself, and then Piglet ran after you and you went round again together, and then you were just going round a fourth time —’

‘Wait a moment’, said Winnie-the-Pooh, holding up his paw. He sat down and thought, in the most thoughtful way he could think. Then he fitted his paw into one of the Tracks... and then he scratched his nose twice, and stood up.

‘Yes’, said Winnie-the-Pooh.

‘I see now’, said Winnie-the-Pooh.

‘I have been Foolish and Deluded’, said he, ‘and I am a Bear of No Brain at All.’

How far is knowing the author of Acts necessary for good interpretation?

- review of some scholarly discussion of Acts' authorship
- the place of authorship in discussion of Acts' historical value
- the formal anonymity of Acts
- how important is authorship? Scholars' views
- what do we need to interpret Acts well?
 - at a global level
 - in particular examples: Pentecost and Philippi

Setting the scene: past studies

Why discuss authorship?

- the patristic period
- authorship linked to inspiration and authority (and canonicity)
- authorship and (historical) reliability

Why discuss authorship?

Debate over the historical value of Acts

- Place of authorship in such debate
- Note Dibelius
- Dating Acts
 - 60s
 - 70s–80s
 - 115+

Why discuss authorship?

Linking authorship with date and historical value

- interconnected questions
- the 'we' passages
16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:8-18; 27:1–28:16
- claim to personal presence?

Why discuss authorship?

The 'anonymity' of Acts

- OT parallels of anonymous historical books
 - Judges, Samuel, Kings
- Ezra-Nehemiah
 - first person narrative in places
- likely that the author of (Luke-)Acts was known

‘Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.’ Luke 1:1-4

‘In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.’ Acts 1:1-2

Why discuss authorship?

The 'anonymity' of Acts

- OT parallels of formally anonymous historical books
- Ezra-Nehemiah
 - first person narrative in places
- likely that the author of (Luke-)Acts was known
 - Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1
 - so Gathercole (with Bauckham and Hengel)

Why discuss authorship?

The (lack of) impact of authorship on interpretation

- I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* (TNTC), p 49

‘Identification of the author, date, and place of composition of Acts does not offer us much help in understanding the book unless we know something independently about each of these factors which can be used to shed light on the book...Fortunately **the intelligibility and value of the book are largely independent of a knowledge of the precise situation in which it was written.** While the finer points of the interpretation of Acts can still cause intense discussion among scholars, the essential themes of the book are basically clear and simple.’

Why discuss authorship?

The (lack of) impact of authorship on interpretation

- I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* (TNTC), p 49
- Darrell Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts*, p 42
- N.T.Wright & Michael F. Bird, *The NT in its World*, chapter 3
- Luke T. Johnson, *The Writings of the NT*, p 198
 - ‘The question of authorship does in any case greatly help us in interpreting the work [Luke-Acts].’

What do we need to interpret Acts aright?

What kind of 'interpretation'?

- concerned with
 - scholarly exegesis
 - pastoral preaching
- what do we need to know to understand the message of the book for Luke's first readers and for Christians engaging with this book today?

What do we need to interpret Acts aright?

Three things to recognise

- Acts as volume 2 to Luke's Gospel
 - 'all that Jesus began (ἤρξατο) to do and teach' (Acts 1:1)
- the historical and theological claims Acts makes
 - the 'we' sections
 - worship of Jesus alongside the Father
- the story Acts tells
 - narrative criticism's impact
 - the continuing importance of social, cultural, geographical and historical context for interpreting Acts

What do we need to interpret Acts aright?

What kind of narrative does Acts present?

- The story Acts tells
 - how a Jewish movement centred on Jesus, a Galilean prophet, became a worldwide movement worshipping the exalted Jesus
 - God as the driver of the believers embracing gentiles

Two examples

Pentecost Acts 2:1-41

- Pentecost as Jewish 'harvest festival'
- Pentecost associated with giving of the law

‘9 Count off **seven weeks** from the time you begin to put the sickle to the standing grain. 10 Then **celebrate the Festival of Weeks** to the LORD your God by giving a freewill offering in proportion to the blessings the LORD your God has given you. 11 And rejoice before the LORD your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name —you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, the Levites in your towns, and the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows living among you. 12 **Remember that you were slaves in Egypt, and follow carefully these decrees.** Deut 16:9-12

‘On **the third new moon** after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai.’ Exod 19:1

Two examples

Pentecost Acts 2:1-41

- Pentecost as Jewish ‘harvest festival’
- Pentecost associated with giving of the law
 - the Spirit and the torah
- Pentecost prepares for the Spirit’s coming on others
 - Cornelius’s household 10:44-48; 11:17-18; 15:7-11
- Peter’s speech
- the events: the crowd and the baptisms

Two examples

Philippi Acts 16:6-40

- the Spirit preventing mission vv 6-7
 - the introduction of the 'we' character vv 10
- detail about the city and Lydia vv 12, 13-15
- the slave girl
 - δοῦλοι 'slaves' cf. παιδίσκη 'slave girl', 'lords' κυριοί v 16
 - ὁ θεός ὁ ὑψίστος 'the most high god' v 17
 - ὁδὸς σωτηρίας 'a way of salvation' v 17

Two examples

Philippi Acts 16:6-40

- the Spirit preventing mission vv 6-7
 - the introduction of the 'we' character vv 10
- detail about the city and Lydia vv 12, 13-15
- the slave girl
- Paul and Silas's imprisonment and release vv 19-35
 - the disappearance of the 'we' character
 - Paul and Silas's declaration of Roman citizenship

Implications for studying and preaching

For (Luke-)Acts

- don't get too worried about the authorship of Acts
- recognise information about the author which helps interpret Acts

You can get these slides at:

Acts and More

<http://steve walton.info>