

The Historical Value of the Book of Acts : The Perspective of British Scholarship

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The Historical Value of the Book of Acts

The Perspective of British Scholarship

The serious student of the New Testament does not progress very far in his research before he becomes aware of the great variety of opinion which exists in the world of New Testament scholarship. What to one scholar represents 'the assured results of modern criticism' is regarded by another as 'a most unlikely and, indeed, untenable hypothesis of speculative scholarship'.

There are various reasons for these differences of opinion – e.g., differences in theological and philosophical presuppositions among the critics, the fragmentary and select nature of the historical data, and the use of differing historical methodologies. Some of the differences of opinion and approach (though by no means all) stem from the fact that scholars find themselves representing traditions of scholarship which have quite diverse historical roots.

On an earlier occasion I have attempted to trace the historical background of one aspect of German biblical criticism, *viz.* the very influential school of New Testament scholarship which finds its immediate inspiration in the personality of Rudolf Bultmann and which tends to take a very negative view towards the Book of Acts as a sourcebook of early Christian history.¹ The purpose of the present paper is to trace the roots of contemporary *British* studies of Acts in the nineteenth century and to indicate some of the reasons why British scholars have been almost unanimous – in spite of their awareness of the work of the radical German critics – in their defence of the historical reliability of the Book.

1.

The rise of *historical criticism* in the British Isles is in many respects a quite different story from that of the parallel movement in Germany². The word 'parallel' is used advisedly; because, although

¹ W. W. Gasque, *The Historical Value of the Book of Acts. An Essay in the History of New Testament Criticism: The Evangelical Quarterly* 41 (1969), pp. 68–88. Cf. also my Ph. D. thesis, *A Study of the History of the Criticism of the Acts of the Apostles* (1969), pp. 19–125.

² On the rise of historical criticism in Britain, see L. E. Elliott-Binns,

the best British scholars were in touch with Germany and were quite aware of the course criticism was taking there³, biblical criticism in the United Kingdom in the nineteenth century was to a large degree independent of Continental influence.

For one thing, the process in Britain was much slower than in Germany. One cannot really date the rise of criticism; it came to be accepted more or less imperceptibly. Although there were a few outcries when traditional views were challenged, there was no great crisis in the Church and in the theological colleges, as was the case in Germany. When one comes to the last couple of decades of the nineteenth century, the principles of criticism are simply there; one does not ask how or when they got there.

One of the factors which led to the acceptance of criticism in England without a fight, so to speak, was that, contrary to the situation in Germany, there was never a division between orthodox theology and criticism. There was no fundamentalist controversy, no conservative-liberal cleavage to any great degree. Historical criticism was accepted as a necessary and useful tool by scholars of orthodox and evangelical faith⁴. This important factor led to a somewhat different understanding of what is meant by the term 'historical criticism' in Britain from that which prevailed in some circles on the Continent⁵. And, one might add, this factor is of English Thought 1860–1900. The Theological Aspect (1956), especially pp. 93–174; and W. B. Glover, *Evangelical Nonconformists and Higher Criticism in the Nineteenth Century* (1954).

³ German books were reviewed regularly in such periodicals as *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review* and *The Contemporary Review*, and the most important books, by both liberal and conservative critics, were translated into English. A very important series of translations was T. & T. Clark's "Foreign Theological Library". Of the writings of the Tübingen scholars and their opponents, for example, the majority of Baur's writings and Zeller's "Acts" appeared in English translation, as well as those of conservatives such as Neander, Lechler, Baumgarten, and the like. In addition, many British theological students, especially Scottish and Nonconformists, studied in Germany.

⁴ Cf. Glover (n. 2). See H. D. McDonald, *Theories of Revelation. An Historical Study, 1860–1960* (1963), pp. 99–132, however, for an account of what controversy there was.

⁵ One need only compare the article by A. Kuenen on "Critical Method", appearing in *The Modern Review* 1 (1880), pp. 461–88, 685–713, with one by B. F. Westcott, "Critical Scepticism", 1 (1875), pp. 211–37, to see the importance of this observation. Cf. also the comments of J. B. Lightfoot, *Essays on the Work Entitled "Supernatural Religion"* (1889), pp. 23–26.

fundamental importance even today for understanding the different emphases of what, for lack of better terms, one may refer to as mainstream British and German criticism⁶.

An important feature of early British criticism is that it was rooted firmly in historical study. Those who became the leading New Testament critics had received their preparation for this task by a careful and minute study of the classics and ancient history. This underlined for them the importance of the true environment of the New Testament writings, *viz.* the Hellenistic world at large. It also prepared them to recognize the important contribution of archaeological research to the study of the New Testament as soon as this new science appeared on the scene.

In contrast to criticism in Germany, British biblical scholarship was never the handmaid of philosophy. In spite of their claims to the contrary, the Tübingen critics were and remained primarily philosophers and never really understood the true nature of historical research⁷. On the other hand, the early British critics were not even primarily theologians, but rather historians, philologists, and (a little later) archaeologists. Here one thinks especially of J.B. Lightfoot, the greatest of the early critics, a scholar who personifies the characteristic greatness (some would say weakness!) of British New Testament criticism⁸ (below, pp. 182–190).

The immediate background to Lightfoot's work on Acts⁹ is the study entitled, 'Supernatural Religion. An Inquiry into the Reality

⁶ Cf. Elliott-Binns (n. 2), pp. 118, 173–74; Glover (n. 2), pp. 25–30, 36–70, 97–104, 283–84; and W. Robertson Nicoll, *The Church's One Foundation: Christ, and Recent Criticism* (1901). This difference of perspective can be seen very clearly by comparing the two histories of New Testament criticism by W. G. Kümmel, *Das Neue Testament. Geschichte der Erforschung seiner Probleme* (1958) and S. Neill, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861–1961* (1962).

⁷ Baur's early studies and lectures were in philosophy, and his major emphasis was always the philosophy of religion; his disciples, Schrader, Schweigler, and Zeller later gave up theological study for philosophy.

⁸ Cf. Elliott-Binns (n. 2), p. 119.

⁹ British works of significance related to the study of Acts prior to Lightfoot include the monograph by James Smith of Jordanhill, *The Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul* (1848; 4th ed. 1880); Henry Alford, *Greek Testament*, 2 (1848; 7th ed. repr. Chicago, 1958); William John Conybeare and John Saul Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul*, 2 (1852; 4th ed., 1864; one-vol. ed. 1892; repr. Grand Rapids, 1959).

of Divine Revelation'¹⁰, which was published anonymously in 1874, and became an immediate *succès de scandale*, virtually the 'Honest to God' of the Victorian Era. Its author was *Walter Richard Cassels* (1826–1907)¹¹, a thinker of little originality whose name would not belong to the history of New Testament criticism except for the widespread popularity his opinions achieved and – even more important – the reply they elicited from Lightfoot.

The major thesis of Cassels' work is that the ethical and supernatural content of Christianity can easily be separated, and that it would be of advantage to the Christian faith to be everlastingly rid of the latter. The view was, of course, not new; its roots lay deep in the Deism of an earlier age. But Cassels added a new twist to the argument by seeking a scholarly foundation for his thesis in the reconstruction of early Christian history which had been advanced by F. C. Baur, who, incidentally, would have agreed with his major thesis, but would have been much more sophisticated in his approach and infinitely more careful in his handling of his material.

Cassels' work comprises three main parts. In the first, following the suggestions of the philosopher, David Hume, he seeks to prove that miracles are not only highly improbable, but antecedently incredible; so that no amount of evidence can overcome the objections to them. In the second part he examines the actual witnesses themselves, i.e. the four Gospels, Acts, and the Pauline letters, in order to give the *coup de grâce* to the supernatural claims of Christianity. He concludes with a discussion of the heart of the matter, the resurrection and ascension of Christ.

In the historical section (i.e. the second part) his purpose is to demonstrate that the Gospels and Acts, as well as most of the Pauline epistles, are entirely devoid of evidence which is sufficient to demonstrate their first century date and traditional authorships. Here he concerns himself chiefly with examining the external witnesses to the authenticity and genuineness of the writings.

As for his treatment of Acts, following an attempt to prove that there is no evidence for the book's existence prior to the middle of the second century, the author draws at random from the writings of the Tübingen critics, and any others who are thought to support his views, in his attack on traditional opinion. He points to such familiar items as the (mis-)use of Josephus by the author, the tendentious parallelization of Peter and Paul in both their actions and sermons, the (false) picture of primitive Christianity given in the early chapters of Acts, the 'contradictions' between Acts and the

¹⁰ [W. R. Cassels,] *Supernatural Religion*, 1–2 (1874; 2nd–4th eds. 1874; 5th–6th eds. 1875; "Complete ed. in 3 vols." 1879; "Popular edition" (abridged), 1902. The 1902 ed. is cited below.

¹¹ Cassels is wrongly given the initials "J. A." by Neill (n. 6), p. 36.

letters of Paul, and so forth. His conclusion concerning Acts is indicative of the tone of the book as a whole:

The phenomena presented by the Acts of the Apostles becomes perfectly intelligible when we recognize that it is the work of a writer living long after the occurrences related, whose pious imagination furnished the Apostolic age with an elaborate system of supernatural agency, far beyond the conception of any other New Testament writer, by which, according to his view, the proceedings of the Apostles were furthered and directed, and the infant Church miraculously fostered. On examining other portions of his narrative, we find that they present the features which the miraculous elements rendered antecedently probable. The speeches attributed to different speakers are all cast in the same mould, and betray the composition of the same writer. The sentiments expressed are inconsistent with what we know of the various speakers, and when we test the circumstances related by previous or subsequent incidents and by trustworthy documents, it becomes apparent that the narrative is not an impartial statement of facts, but a reproduction of legends or a development of tradition, sharpened and coloured according to the purpose of the pious views of the writer.

Written by an author who was not an eye-witness of the miracles related; who describes events not as they really occurred, but as his pious imagination supposed they ought to have occurred; who seldom touches history without distorting it by legend, until the original elements can scarcely be distinguished; who puts his own words and sentiments into the mouths of the Apostles and other persons of his narrative; and who represents almost every phase of the Church in the Apostolic age as influenced, or directly produced, by supernatural agency – such a work is of no value as evidence for occurrences which are in contradiction to all experience. The Acts of the Apostles, therefore, is not only an anonymous work, but upon due examination its claims to be considered sober and veracious history must be emphatically rejected. It cannot strengthen the foundations of supernatural religion, but, on the contrary, by its profuse and indiscriminate use of the miraculous, it discredits miracles, and affords a clearer insight into their origin and fictitious character¹².

Whether or not the narrative of the Book of Acts is marked by an all-pervasive *Tendenz* may remain debatable, but it is certain that the author of ‘Supernatural Religion’ is no unbiased historian! Under normal circumstances the work would neither have deserved nor gained the serious attention of a scholar of the stature of J. B. Lightfoot. However, unfortunately for its author, it achieved just that, and thereby attained immortal notoriety¹³.

¹² Cassels (n. 10), pp. 750–52.

¹³ J. B. Lightfoot reviewed the work for *The Contemporary Review* in December 1874, and followed this up with a series of articles criticizing the

2.

The reputation of *Joseph Barber Lightfoot*¹⁴ (1828–89), who still casts his long shadow across the well-worn path of British New Testament criticism, does not depend on his response to ‘Supernatural Religion’, but is altogether independent of it. Lightfoot was never one to seek out controversy. One of the impressive features of his commentaries is the courteous and dispassionate way he deals with the views of those scholars with whom he disagrees; there is no emotional oratory, no sophistical formulae, no negative pigeon-holing of his opponents and their views. Ordinarily he would have thought it unnecessary to raise his voice in opposition to the extreme views of a critic like Cassels. However, two factors compelled him to speak out, in spite of his natural reluctance to do so.

First, the anonymous author of ‘Supernatural Religion’ had made the grave mistake of going out of his way to impugn the honesty of B. F. Westcott, Lightfoot’s friend and former tutor, charging him with ‘what amounts to a falsification of the text’. This, coupled with the fact that a half dozen or so reviewers had been taken in by the author’s pretensions to great learning and had written reviews which were quite positive, was just enough to cause him to put pen to paper in reply to Cassels. (The reviews called forth the sarcastic comment from Lightfoot that the reviewers must have been ‘dealing with some apocryphal work, bearing the same name and often using the same language, but in its main characteristics quite different from and much more authentic than the volumes before me’!)¹⁵

Lightfoot had no difficulty in exposing the shallowness of Cassels’ assumed scholarship. He began by pointing out numerous gross errors in the work which indicated quite clearly the inadequacies of

major premises of Cassels’ critical theories (1875–77); he limited his criticism solely to the allegedly historical part of the work, rather than the philosophical. His essays were reprinted as a separate volume, *Essays* (n. 5); this work is cited below.

¹⁴ On the significance of Lightfoot, see G. R. Eden and F. C. MacDonald (eds.), *Lightfoot of Durham* (1932); Neill (n. 6), pp. 33–57; P. H. Richards, *J. B. Lightfoot as a Biblical Interpreter: Interpretation 7* (1954), pp. 50–62; and L. W. Barnard, *Bishop Lightfoot and the Apostolic Fathers: Church Quart. Rev.* 161 (1960), pp. 423–35.

¹⁵ Lightfoot (n. 5), p. 3.

the author's knowledge of the basic elements of Greek and Latin grammar. Moreover, the author, whose name Lightfoot neither knew nor cared to learn, was guilty of the devious practice of lifting groups of references from the pages of other people's works and quoting them to back up his various speculations¹⁶. All too often the opinions of the authors cited by Cassels were the exact opposite to his own, thus demonstrating that he had not even read them.

The details of Lightfoot's devastating criticism of the work entitled 'Supernatural Religion' need not concern us here, since they are so well-known. Cassels' work is mentioned primarily because it was the major attempt to establish the respectability of the Tübingen conception of Christian origins on British soil; and Lightfoot's criticism, as the main reason the attempt was singularly unsuccessful.

However, Lightfoot's book written in controversy with the author of 'Supernatural Religion' was not his main contribution to New Testament research and the debate concerning the nature of primitive Christianity. His main contribution was made through his non-polemical works – his commentaries on the Pauline epistle¹⁷ and his studies of the Apostolic Fathers¹⁸. And it was in this context that he demonstrated most clearly the unhistorical nature of the Tübingen theory.

The overall effect of Lightfoot's work was to show that Baur and his followers had simply built a castle in the sky, basing their interpretation of early Christianity mainly on a prior understanding of the pseudo-Clementine literature and forcing the other early Christian writings into a mould of their own making. In his monumental studies of the Apostolic Fathers, Lightfoot established the genuineness of the First Epistle of Clement (written ca. A. D. 96) and the seven letters of Ignatius of Antioch (written between A. D.

¹⁶ The author judiciously removed most of the references to the scholarly literature from the one-volumed edition of his work.

¹⁷ J. B. Lightfoot *Galatians* (1865), many editions; repr. most recently Grand Rapids (1962); *Philippians* (1868), many editions; repr. Grand Rapids, (1963); *Colossians and Philemon* (1875), many editions; repr. Grand Rapids (1961).

¹⁸ J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 1–5 (1885–90); includes only Clement of Rome, Ignatius, and Polycarp. An earlier edition of Clement was published in 1869 and 1877, but this was thoroughly revised in 1890.

98 and 117)¹⁹, in which there is not the slightest trace of even the remnant of the Petrine-Pauline conflict which the Tübingen criticism had supposed. On the contrary, both Paul and Peter are held in honour by Clement and Ignatius²⁰. Thus a major prop was knocked out from under the arguments of the Tübingen critics, who found it necessary to deny the authenticity of these two groups of documents.

In his commentaries – each one a model of careful scholarship – Lightfoot pushed his opponents back even further against the wall by arguing that the Pauline epistles too showed no evidence of a division of opinion between Paul and the *Urapostel*. He has no axe to grind, no apologetic aim in view. His aim is strictly positive – to understand the text of the New Testament writings. The underlying presupposition of his work is that ‘the only safe way to the meaning of a great writer lies through faith in his language, and therefore through exact investigation of grammar and vocabulary’.²¹ In pursuing this objective Lightfoot arrives at an alternative interpretation of early Christian history which has always impressed the world of British scholarship as being so much more historical than the arbitrary views advanced by the Tübingen critics²².

Lightfoot had looked forward one day to writing a commentary on Acts; but this wish, along with many other ambitious plans of this great scholar was to remain unfulfilled. Two items, however, give us a partial glimpse into what it would have contained if it had been written.

The first of these is his essay entitled, ‘Discoveries Illustrating the Acts of the Apostles’, which was first published in 1878 and later added as an appendix to his Essays on... “Supernatural Religion” (pp. 291–302), in which he surveys some of the recently published findings of archaeological research in Cyprus and Ephesus.

Lightfoot begins the essay by drawing attention to the great difficulty of a writer’s being accurate when writing about the government of the Roman provinces. From the time of Augustus’ reorganization of the empire, there were two types of provincial

¹⁹ F. J. A. Hort, *Dict. of Nat. Biogr.* 33 (1893), p. 237.

²⁰ Cf. especially 1 Clem. 5 and Ign. Rom. 4. 3.

²¹ Hort (n. 19), p. 238.

²² His most important contribution in this connection is his commentary on Galatians, especially the lengthy essay on “Paul and the Three”.

governors: 1) Provinces which were administered by the Senate, because they did not require a standing army, were ruled by a proconsul (ἀνθύπατος). 2) The representatives who ruled a province on behalf of the Emperor bore the name of proprætor (ἀντιστράτηγος) or legate (πρεσβευτής), a usage quite different from that of republican times. Moreover, the original subdivision of the provinces between the Emperor and Senate underwent constant modifications. Thus 'at any given time it would be impossible to say without contemporary, or at least very exact historical knowledge, whether a particular province was governed by a proconsul or proprætor.'²³

The province of Achaia is a case in point. A few years before Paul's visit to Corinth, and some years after, Achaia was governed by a proprætor. At the time of his visit, however, it was ruled by a proconsul on behalf of the Senate, just as it is represented in the Book of Acts.²⁴

Cyprus is another example. Earlier scholars, basing their views on Strabo, accused Luke of an incorrect use of terminology in referring to Sergius Paulus as ἀνθύπατος (proconsul) when Paul visited that island (Acts 13. 7). Contemporary records, mainly inscriptions and coins, make it clear that Cyprus was under the rule of the Senate and was therefore governed by a proconsul during the time of Paul's visit, even though at a later date the situation was quite different. Lightfoot calls attention to a newly discovered inscription, dated 'in the proconsulship of Paulus', which may refer to the Sergius Paulus of Acts 13.²⁵

Discoveries at Ephesus by J. T. Wood and others brought to light even more illustrative matter. The main feature of the narrative of Acts 19 is the manner in which the cult of the Ephesian Artemis dominates the scene, a fact to which there is abundant inscriptional

²³ Lightfoot, *Essays* (n. 5), p. 292.

²⁴ Even more important than this was to be the Delphi inscription, first published in 1905, which mentions L. Junius Gallio (Acts 18. 12–17), the brother of Seneca the philosopher, which offers one of the virtually certain dates for Pauline chronology. Cf. F. J. Foakes-Jackson & K. Lake (ed.), *The Beginnings of Christianity*, 5 (1933), pp. 460–64; A. Deissmann, *Paul*, 3rd ed. (1927), pp. 261–86.

²⁵ Lightfoot was probably wrong in this identification; cf. *The Beginnings* (n. 27), 5, pp. 455–57; B. Van Elderen, *Some Archaeological Observations on Paul's First Missionary Journey: Apostolic History and the Gospel*, ed. W. W. Gasque and R. P. Martin (1970), pp. 151ff.

evidence. Some of the inscriptions almost form a running commentary on the excited appeal of Demetrius and the concern of the crowd. Important references include the description of Artemis as 'the great goddess Artemis', as in Acts, as well as to the fact that the theater was the recognized place of public assembly. Nor is Luke less careful in his reference to the governing officials. Ἀνθύπατος (the Roman proconsul)²⁶, γραμματεὺς (the chief magistrate of the city), and Ἀσιαρχαί (deputies of the κοινὸν Ἀσίας, the league of cities of the province of Asia)²⁷ – all appear again and again in inscriptions. In addition, there is inscriptional evidence for the use of ἱερόσυλος, sacrilegious (19. 37), for one who is guilty of certain offences against the goddess, for the description of the city as νεωκὸρος (guardian) of the temple of Artemis²⁸, and for the technical use of ἔννομος ἐκκλησία to refer to assemblies which were held on stated days already pre-determined by the law (as opposed to those which would be called together on account of emergency situations).

Lightfoot sampled only a small part of the material which was then beginning to be brought to light by archaeologists and historians who were concerned with Asia Minor and Greece. In this brief essay, however, he indicated the area where the student of early Christian history might expect to receive more light in the future for an accurate understanding of the narrative of Acts. He expressed the conviction concerning the Book of Acts which was to become even clearer in the next three decades of research: 'No ancient work affords so many tests of veracity; for no other has such numerous points of contact in all directions with contemporary history, politics, and topography, whether Jewish or Greek or Roman.'²⁹

²⁶ The plural ἀνθύπατοι in Acts 19. 38 may be a generalizing plural, reflecting the fact that the proconsul of Asia had recently been assassinated (October A. D. 54) and his successor had not yet arrived on the scene; or it may even refer to the two assassins, who were at that time in charge of the emperor's affairs in Asia.

²⁷ There is evidence that the term "Asiarch" is a rather broad term, including many men of wealth and public influence, religious leaders and civic benefactors; thus there would be a number of Asiarchs in a city like Ephesus at any given time.

²⁸ The term is normally used, in Ephesus or elsewhere in Asia, in reference to the imperial cult.

²⁹ Lightfoot, *Essays* (n. 5), p. 291.

Lightfoot's second contribution in lieu of his commentary on Acts which failed to appear is in the form of an article contributed to the second edition of Smith's 'Dictionary of the Bible'.³⁰ Here we have the mature conclusions of the *doyen* of nineteenth century British exegetes and patristic scholars on our subject.

His conclusions are, generally speaking, traditional, though his judgment is marked by careful criticism and historical investigation, rather than by a simple assumption of traditional views. He argues forcefully for an identification of the author of the 'we'-narratives with the author of the book as a whole³¹, and that he is probably the traditionally recognized Λουκάς ὁ ἰατρός ὁ ἀγαπητός (Col. 4. 14). Lightfoot dates the time of writing as probably sometime in the early seventies, although he rejects the (to him, false) interpretation of Acts 8. 26 and Luke 21. 20–24 as demanding a date of this time (i.e. post A. D. 70).³²

What about the objections of the Tübingen critics and their critical offspring that the author of Acts presents a very unhistorical picture of the early Church when he portrays Peter and the *Ur-apostel* as being in essential agreement with Paul? Does this not demonstrate conclusively that the author could not have been a friend and former travelling companion of the Apostle? Lightfoot's opinion is forthright:

We can only say that to ourselves such passages as 1 Cor. i. 12 *sq.*, 23; Gal. i. 18, ii. 6 *sq.*, 14 *sq.*, seem to indicate a substantial harmony in principle between the two supposed antagonists; that they are placed on the same level by the two earliest of the apostolic Fathers (Clem. *Rom.* 5; Ignat. *Rom.* 4), and are quoted as of equal authority by the third (Polyc. *Phil.* 2, 5, 6 & c.); that the main stream of Christian history betrays no evidence of this fundamental antagonism as the substratum of the Catholic Church; and that the first distinct mention of it occurs in an obviously fictitious narrative, which cannot date before the second half of the second century, though doubtless even from apostolic times there were some extreme men who used the names of the two Apostles as party watchwords³³.

A number of items are adduced as evidence in favor of the essentially trustworthy character of the Book of Acts. First, there are the incidental points of contact between the narrative of Acts and the

³⁰ Lightfoot, *Dict. of the Bible*, 1 (1893), pp. 25–43.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 31–33.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 40–41.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

epistles of Paul which Paley had pointed out a hundred and three years earlier³⁴. Secondly, a comparison of the speeches ascribed to the different apostles in Acts – James, Peter, and Paul – with the epistles attributed to them betray striking and unexpected similarities of thought and diction³⁵. However, the most significant evidence comes from the recent researches concerned with geography, history, and archaeology.

If, for instance, we confine ourselves to geography, we accompany the Apostle by land and by sea; we follow him about in Jerusalem, in Palestine and Syria, in Asia Minor, in Greece, in Italy. The topographical details are scattered over this wide expanse of continent, island, and ocean; and they are both minute and incidental. Yet the writer is never betrayed into an error...

When we turn from geography to history, the tests are still more numerous, and lead to still more decisive results. The laws, the institutions, the manners, the religious rites, the magisterial records, of Syria and Palestine, of Asia Minor, of Macedonia and Greece, all live in the pages of this narrative³⁶.

To the material relating to Cyprus, Corinth, and Ephesus, which he had cited in his earlier essay, he adds further data concerning the historical situation at Philippi, Thessalonica, and Athens, as well as additional material concerning Corinth and Ephesus³⁷.

Paul's visits to the two Macedonian cities of Philippi and Thessalonica, neither of which had political constitutions following the normal type of Greek city, are illustrative. Philippi was a Roman colony (16. 12); accordingly, we find all the apparatus and coloring of a colony, which was a miniature reproduction of Rome itself. There are the local magistrates, the *duumviri*, who in typical fashion arrogate to themselves the title of στρατηγοί (16. 20, 22, 35–36, 38)³⁸ and their *licttores*, ῥαβδούχαι (16. 35, 38). The majesty of Rome is appealed to again and again (16. 21, 37–38).

But, turning to Thessalonica, the picture is changed, for Thessalonica was a free city with a magistracy all its own. Here the magistrates are called πολιτάρχαι (17. 6, 8), a designation which was unknown in the whole of Greek literature³⁹ before the discovery of inscriptions

³⁴ Ibid., p. 34. Cf. William Paley, *Horae Paulinae* (1790).

³⁵ Lightfoot (n. 30), pp. 34–35.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 35.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 35–36.

³⁸ This term, though not quite officially correct, occurs in a number of inscriptions with reference to Philippi.

³⁹ Lightfoot notes that πολιτάρχος appears, in a general sense, in an obscure passage of Aeneas Tacticus.

found at Thessalonica itself⁴⁰, a discovery which illustrates the careful accuracy of the author of Acts. The references to a popular assembly (δῆμος, 17.5) is likewise in keeping with the special character of the city.

Luke's precision is further illustrated by his careful individualization of Athens, 'the most Hellenic of all the cities, the heart and citadel of Greece', and Ephesus, where there was a strong mixture of oriental ideas and institutions with the mainstream of Hellenism. The difference between the two cities can be seen in the conflicts of Paul with the populace of either.

One is inquisitive, philosophical, courteous, and refined; the other fanatical, superstitious, and impulsive... At Athens... we are confronted with some of the main topological details of the city – the Areopagus and the agora. There are the representatives of the two dominant philosophical schools, the Stoics and Epicureans. There is the predominant attitude of inquiry in this metropolis of newsmongers, and here even the characteristic Athenian term of abuse (σπερμολόγος) finds its proper place... There is the reference to the numerous images and temples which thronged the city; to the boastful pride of the citizens in their religious devotion to the gods, consistent as it was with no small amount of theological scepticism; to their jealousy of the introduction of strange deities, as manifested in the case of Socrates and at various points in their history; to their practice of propitiating the offended powers after any plague or other infection, by erecting an altar to «an unknown god» or «unknown gods»; to their custom of deifying attributes of character, frames of mind, and conditions of body, so that «Resurrection» (Anastasis) would seem to them to be only another addition to their pantheon... Lastly, there is an appropriate allusion to τὸ θεῖον, an expression which would commend itself to [Paul's] philosophical audience, but which occurs nowhere else in the New Testament; and an equally appropriate appeal to the sentiment of the Stoic poets Aratus and Cleanthes (τῶν καθ' ὑμᾶς ποιητῶν), who had proclaimed the universal fatherhood of Zeus⁴¹.

Although the historical materials are not so plentiful in regard to the situation in Jerusalem and Palestine, Lightfoot argues that where it can be tested the picture drawn by the author is faithful to the historical reality.⁴²

⁴⁰ Inscriptions have been found also in connection with a number of other cities in Macedonia, from which it appears that the term was the special designation of members of the city council of Macedonian towns.

⁴¹ Lightfoot (n. 30), p. 36. The local color of Ephesus is discussed in his "Discoveries Illustrating the Acts of the Apostles".

⁴² Ibid., pp. 36–37.

Lightfoot laid the foundation for future British study of early Christianity and particularly the Acts of the Apostles. Although he founded no 'school' in the German sense, he gave to other scholars an example to follow. In contrast to the speculative criticism of Baur, Lightfoot's work was historical in the fullest sense of the word. Instead of attaching his ideas to various isolated passages in the New Testament and early Christian literature, he emphasized the importance of both the immediate and larger contexts. Rather than forcing the New Testament into the mould of a prior understanding of the nature of primitive Christianity derived from a study of writings far removed from the mainstream of both canonical and post-canonical Christian documents (as in the case of Baur), Lightfoot sought to gain a clear understanding of what primitive Christianity was really like from a study of the minute details of exegesis. Thus British scholars who followed in the Lightfoot tradition were saved from the extravagancies which result from trying to discover what was in the mind of the writer, instead of what he put down on papyrus.

3.

Next to Lightfoot, the man who was most responsible for this positive approach to the Book of Acts on the part of British scholars was Sir *William Mitchell Ramsay* (1851–1939.)⁴³

Ramsay was primarily a classical scholar and archaeologist, 'the foremost authority of his day on the topography, antiquities, and history of Asia Minor in ancient times'.⁴⁴ Although his major contribution to the world of scholarship was in this area, he made

⁴³ Other significant contributions by British scholars to the study of Acts between Lightfoot and Ramsay are William Kirk Hobart, *The Medical Language of St. Luke* (1882; repr. Grand Rapids, 1954); Thomas Ethelbert Page, *The Acts of the Apostles* (1886); Richard John Knowling, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Expositor's Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, 2 (1900), pp. 1–554; and Richard Belward Rackham, *The Acts of the Apostles*, *Oxford Commentaries = Westminster Commentaries* (1901). The article by A. C. Headlam on Acts in J. Hastings, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 1 (1898), pp. 25–35, provides a good summary of the major conclusions of nineteenth century British scholarship on the subject.

⁴⁴ J. C. G. Anderson in *Diet. of Nat. Biogr.* 1931–1940, p. 727.

an almost equally significant contribution to New Testament research.⁴⁵

When he first began his work in Asia Minor, Ramsay accepted, in general, the views of the Tübingen scholars concerning the Book of Acts. 'I had read a good deal of modern criticism about the book', he later wrote,

and dutifully accepted the current opinion that it was written during the second century by an author who wished to influence the minds of people in his own time by a highly wrought and imaginative description of the early Church. His object was not to present a trustworthy picture of the facts in the period of about A. D. 50, but to produce a certain effect on his own time by setting forth a carefully coloured account of events and persons of that older period. He wrote for his contemporaries, not for truth. He cared naught for geographical or historical surroundings of the period A. D. 30 to 60. He thought only of the period A. D. 160–80, and how he might paint the heroes of old times in situations that would touch the conscience of his contemporaries. Antiquarian or geographical truth was less than valueless in a design like this: one who thought of such things was distracting his attention from the things that really mattered, the things that would move the minds of men in the second century⁴⁶.

In his search for information bearing on the geography and history of Asia Minor, Ramsay at first paid slight attention to the early Christian authorities. He had the impression that these were quite unworthy of consideration by a historian; anything having to do with religion belonged to the realm of the theologians, not to that of the historians. When he spent time copying early Christian inscriptions in his earliest years of travel and exploration, he felt the time to be wasted – even though a sense of duty compelled him to make copies of them. Finally, in a desperate search for any information throwing light on the geographical and historical situation of that part of Asia Minor which scholars refer to today as 'South Galatia', he began to study the journeys of Paul in this region as described in the Book of Acts. He hardly expected to

⁴⁵ W. M. Ramsay's most important works for the study of Acts are *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (1897); articles in *Hastings* (n. 43), 1–5 (1898–1904); *Pictures of the Apostolic Church* (1910); *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (1915). See the complete bibliography and indexes of major subjects, passages of Scripture, and Greek words dealt with by Ramsay in W. W. Gasque, *Sir William M. Ramsay. Archaeologist and New Testament Scholar* (1966).

⁴⁶ Ramsay, *The Bearing* (n. 45), pp. 37–38.

find any information of value regarding the actual situation in the time of Paul. Rather he thought he would find material bearing on the second half of the second century of the Christian era, i.e. the age in which (he thought) the author of the Acts lived and wrote.

In his book, 'The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament', Ramsay tells how he came to change his mind.⁴⁷ The first thing that caused him to begin to doubt the conclusion he had assumed was a careful study of the narrative of Acts 14, which he discovered to be meticulously accurate in regard to its professed historical setting.⁴⁸ This, in turn, led him to ask the further question: If the author of Acts proves to be carefully accurate in a matter of one detail, would it not be likely that he would prove to be the same in regard to others?

There is a certain presumption that a writer who proves to be exact and correct in one point will show the same qualities in other matters. No writer is correct by mere chance, or accurate sporadically. He is accurate by virtue of a certain habit of mind. Some men are accurate by nature; some are by nature loose and inaccurate⁴⁹.

His attitude toward the Book of Acts was now radically changed. Instead of assuming the book to be untrustworthy in regard to its avowed historical situation, he began to approach Acts with an open mind that it might after all prove to be accurate in any given detail. He now realized, as F. F. Bruce has stated, that if an author's trustworthiness 'is vindicated in points where he can be checked, we should not assume that he is less trustworthy where we cannot test his accuracy'.⁵⁰ Ramsay would at least give the author of Acts the benefit of the doubt.

Over the years the opinion gradually forced itself upon him that Luke's history of early Christian origins was unsurpassed for its accuracy. After more than thirty years of close study of the milieu of first century Christianity, he penned these words:

The more I have studied the narrative of Acts, and the more I have learned year after year about Graeco-Roman society and thoughts and fashions, and organization in those provinces, the more I admire and the better I understand. I set out to look for truth on the borderland where Greece and Asia

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 39–52.

⁴⁸ Cf. Gasque (n. 45), pp. 25–26.

⁴⁹ Ramsay, *The Bearing* (n. 45), p. 80.

⁵⁰ F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (1951; 2nd ed. 1952), p. 17.

meet, and found it here. You may press the words of Luke in a degree beyond and other historian's, and they stand the keenest scrutiny and the hardest treatment, *provided always that the critic knows the subject and does not go beyond the limits of science and justice*⁵¹.

It is a great pity that the reputation of Ramsay was tainted by his willingness to don the mantle of a popular apologist in his later years, and particularly by his unwise controversy with James Moffatt.⁵² However, it should be remembered that the judgments he popularized were

judgments which he had previously formed as a scientific archaeologist and student of ancient classical history and literature. He was not talking unadvisedly or playing to the religious gallery when he expressed the view that «Luke's history is unsurpassed in respect of its trustworthiness»; this was the sober conclusion to which his researches led him, in spite of the fact that he started with a very different opinion of Luke's historical credit⁵³.

And the majority of British and American New Testament scholars and historians of Greek and Roman antiquity – indeed, it may almost be said, *all* scholars who have studied Ramsay's work closely – have agreed that his major thesis has been proven.⁵⁴

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The work of Ramsay provides the immediate background for the work of F. F. Bruce⁵⁵, author of the most recent full-scale commen-

⁵¹ Ramsay, *The Bearing* (n. 45), p. 89. The emphasis is mine and is very important.

⁵² See Gasque (n. 45), pp. 56–59.

⁵³ F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents. Are They Reliable?* (5th ed., London, 1960), pp. 90–91.

⁵⁴ See Gasque (n. 45), pp. 23–37, for a discussion of the major points bearing on the historical value of Luke-Acts. I am aware that the above summary has been extremely brief and has merely stated conclusions, rather than offered proof. Conviction concerning the rightness of Ramsay's conclusion – or, for that matter, the rebuttal of it – can only come through a careful study of his writings or the use made of his work by F. F. Bruce and more recent British commentators. I have done this and can only state my conviction that Ramsay's conclusion concerning the historical reliability of the Book of Acts can be defended. Cf. the view of A. N. Sherwin-White, the most recent classical historian to study the problem of the historical value of Acts: "Any attempt to reject its (i.e., Acts') basic historicity even in matters of detail must now appear absurd": *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (1963), p. 189.

⁵⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Acts* (n. 50); *Commentary on the Book of Acts*, New

taries on Acts by a British scholar⁵⁶. Although Bruce's conclusions are more conservative than some British scholars, his defence of the essential historicity of the Book of Acts is representative. It would be difficult indeed to find a British scholar of stature, no matter how 'left-wing', who would take anything approaching the sceptical stance of Ernst Haenchen or Hans Conzelmann concerning the historicity of Acts.

Bruce's contributions are too recent and too well-known to necessitate comment.⁵⁷ Suffice it to say that he comes to the study of the New Testament with a similar background to that of Lightfoot and Ramsay, trained in the classical tradition of historical research, and that his reasons for viewing Acts as a historical document standing 'in the line of descent from Thucydides'⁵⁸ (i.e. representing the best tradition of Greek historical writing) are historical rather than theological. He does not pre-judge the issue as one who is committed to a 'conservative' approach; rather, it is

International Commentary on the New Testament = New London Commentary (1954). It is not always recognized that these are two different commentaries. The first is a strictly critical commentary and limits itself to linguistic, textual, and historical matters; the second, although based on a careful exegesis of the Greek text, is an exposition of the English text of Acts (the American Standard Version of 1901). The second volume is not simply a re-hash of the material of the previous volume, but adds considerably to it. Those who have the patience to work through both volumes – a combined total of more than a thousand pages – will be richly rewarded. A convenient summary of Bruce's mature conclusions will be found in *The New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas (1962), pp. 10–12.

⁵⁶ Cf. also W. L. Knox, *St. Paul and the Church of Jerusalem* (1925); *St. Paul and the Church of the Gentiles* (1939); *Some Hellenistic Elements in Primitive Christianity* (1944); and *The Acts of the Apostles* (1948); C. S. C. Williams, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (1957); R. P. C. Hanson, *The Acts*, *The New Clarendon Bible* (1967).

⁵⁷ Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that there has been a notable neglect of the writings of Bruce among the more radical German critics. Some time ago I sat in shocked amazement through several sessions of a New Testament seminar which were led by a young "Privat-Dozent" who appeared to be totally ignorant of the most important work on Acts in English since *The Beginnings of Christianity* volumes edited by K. Lake and F. J. Foakes Jackson, and who treated the highly controversial views of Haenchen and Conzelmann with a reverence formerly reserved for Holy Writ. One would hope that such ignorance – or is it arrogance? – is rare.

⁵⁸ Bruce, *The Acts* (n. 50), p. 15.

because he is thoroughly familiar with Greek historical literature that he judges the work of Luke in this fashion. Luke's method is that of the ancient historians (allowing for a difference of religious point of view, of course); and tested by the same standards whereby scholars test the historical accuracy of other ancient writings, his reputation as a historian comes through unscathed.

My paper has shown, then, that the acceptance of the essential historicity of the narrative of the Book of Acts by the vast majority of British scholars (and probably the vast majority of scholars of other nationalities as well) is not based on theological prejudice but rather on sound historical research. It simply will not do to ignore the conclusions of these scholars, or to dismiss them with the insinuation that they have not understood the nature of the historical method. It is, of course, the privilege of one scholar, or group of scholars, to disagree with the views of other scholars – if good reasons can be given for doing so. But it is contrary to all the principles of good scholarship to neglect the conclusions of any serious scholars.

Although space does not permit me to demonstrate this thesis in the present context⁵⁹, I am of the opinion that the current school of New Testament criticism which follows E. Haenchen and H. Conzelmann in taking a very dim view of the historical value of the Acts of the Apostles has, in general, tended to overlook the important contribution of British scholarship⁶⁰ and, more important, the reasons which those who have followed Lightfoot and Ramsay have put forward in favour of the general reliability of the picture of early Christianity contained therein. When the representatives of the Haenchen-Conzelmann point of view begin to interact with the issues raised by those who take a radically different stance from their own, they will, no doubt, find their views taken more seriously outside of their own circle of disciples and friends.⁶¹

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⁵⁹ But cf. the article in n. 1, and also my thesis (n.1), pp. 192–95, 242–376.

⁶⁰ The same scholars have also tended to reject out-of-hand the important contributions of Harnack, Wikenhauser, and Eduard Meyer. Cf. my thesis (n. 1), pp. 174–95.

⁶¹ Since the above essay was written, a very important monograph has been published: I. Howard Marshall, *Luke Historian and Theologian* (1970;

repr. Grand Rapids, 1971). The title is significant. Marshall argues that it is important to give due emphasis to Luke's dual role of historian and theologian, and that there is no necessary contradiction between the two. Although the author stands squarely in the Lightfoot-Ramsay-Bruce tradition, he gives rather more stress to "Luke the theologian". The early chapters offer an interpretative survey of contemporary Lucan research and grapple with the relation of history and theology in Luke-Acts. The larger part of the book (pp. 77-215) attempts to analyze the fundamental theological themes of Luke-Acts, which are organized under the heading of "salvation" (not "salvation-history").