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Acts of Impropriety: The Imbalance of History and Theology in Luke-Acts¹

The historical method, once it is applied to biblical scholarship and church history, is a leaven which transforms everything and which finally causes the form of all previous theological methods to disintegrate. Give historical method your little finger and it will take your whole hand.

—Ernst Troeltsch

I

Jews and Christians both have Scripture. Likewise, they both have a number of different traditions of interpretation for these texts. And, unfortunately, they also use and have used their Bibles as history books so as to establish the historical foundations of their respective faith communities.

Even more upsetting is the fact that these biblical histories of faith communities continue to be taken more or less literally—even after the recent revolution in our understanding of historiography has enabled us to develop a new historical consciousness.

We know that written histories contain both truth and falsehood, that history can be distorted or even falsified, and that such manipulations are capable of being discovered. Eyewitnesses most easily distinguish truth and falsehood, of course. As we go further back in time and the number of perspectives from which events are perceived increases, it becomes more difficult to distinguish between objective reporting and wilful or even unconscious “management” of the facts. In more than a few cases it may be impossible to know precisely what

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happened. Since no one can write entirely objective history, we must be ever alert to identify ideology when it plays a recognizable role.

Since we are aware that history is manipulated even now in a world teeming with information, it seems to me entirely legitimate to begin with the assumption that in times when sources were few and less easily tested, history must have been even more commonly manipulated—and more thoroughly.

II

The history of Israel,² which has always provided much of the context for the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, is still seen by a majority of Christians to be more or less accurately represented by the Hebrew Bible, that is, the Old Testament. Such elements as the creation narratives and the story of the flood may be nuanced by a degree of modern sophistication, and it is generally agreed that the historical value of records predating David's United Kingdom is inferior to that of later accounts. But however "modern" or "radical" the history of Israel you choose, you will find the customary sequence of patriarchs, exodus, conquest, united and divided monarchies, exile and so forth. Then, after a rather obscure period, we emerge as if from a tunnel into the first century of our era, and suddenly—at least methodologically speaking—the accounts have lost the strait-jacket of biblical narrative and evince both a variety of sources and the leavening effect of classical history. But just as suddenly, the arrival on the scene of Jesus and the early church catapults us once again into the biblical framework.

The ample record of twentieth-century skepticism about the possibility of writing a life of Jesus has not prevented most historians from deriving their accounts of that life largely from the Gospel record and describing the spread of Christianity in close accordance with Acts. Unfortunately, this widespread reliance on the Old Testament, the Gospels and Acts has all but assured the adoption of a number of the value judgments either explicit or implicit in these texts. Consequently, one must pose a potentially embarrassing question: Is it possible to appropriate these histories and use them as the basis of *our* history of the periods concerned without falling victim to the charge that the result is not "real" history?

I shall first examine the "history" based on the Old Testament and next that based on Luke-Acts.

(a) Christianity has always seen itself as a religion based on the historical deeds of God as described in the Old and New Testaments. Up to now, most theologians could agree on the statement "God brought Israel out of Egypt and raised Jesus from the dead." But the resurrection of Jesus has always been a subject for critical comment, even in the public forum, whereas the question of Israel's exodus out of Egypt remained untouched. Recently, however, the Exodus story and its related theme of pre-state Israel have undergone an almost unnoticed radical reassessment.

More than two hundred years of historical-critical Old Testament research has resulted in a winnowing of all the books in that canon. Among other things, the study of Old Testament sources has led researchers to the conclusion, still deemed valid today, that the Bible begins with two irreconcilably different Creation stories. Yet scholars generally muffled their critical voices on one point: in the first books of the Holy Scripture they accepted the idealized picture of an Israel elected by the God Yahweh to be his people, a scenario fundamental to all other beliefs—the Egyptian captivity, Moses' role in receiving the Ten Commandments, and the conquest of the Promised Land. It remained historically unchallenged, despite criticism of aspects of these events. The situation changed, however, once it was recognized that the biblical picture of pre-monarchy Israel (before 1000 BCE) derived from the theological invention of post-exilic authors beginning in the sixth century BCE.

A combination of archeological research and careful textual analysis has helped this paradigm shift to gain rapid acceptance. By now it is accepted that the oldest mention of Israel, appearing on a victory-stela that Pharaoh Merenptah erected in 1208 BCE, provides a strong argument against the biblical history hitherto espoused. The inscription names Israel as a group of people and identifies them as predating later Palestinian residents. It thus contradicts the Old Testament picture of an Israel consisting of twelve affiliated but still distinct tribes who, according to biblical chronology, conquered Canaan at about this time. Moreover, we have an abundance of Egyptian documents from the fourteenth century BCE, the time of Israel's sojourn in that country; but not one refers either to Israel's presence in and subsequent flight from Egypt, or to Moses, who according to the Bible had contact with the royal dynasty of the Pharaohs. From all this evidence arises the intriguing likelihood that the Israelites themselves were originally Canaanites.

According to earlier research, worship of Yahweh had always been associated with the First Commandment, which in fact did not dispute the existence of other gods but merely ordered exclusive loyalty to the one divinity. Consensus reigned in this state of affairs: neither Yahweh's claim of exclusivity nor even the assertion (implicit in what followed from the First Commandment) that there were to be no other gods but Yahweh could provide a starting-point for the Yahwistic faith. For Palestinian inscriptions during the eighth century BCE attest to a tolerant Yahwistic cult. Sources discovered only in the last century mention numerous local Yahweh-gods and thus bespeak a poly-yahwistic phenomenon. Furthermore, they name a divine couple—Yahweh and his spouse, Ashera. Thus an exclusive Yahweh cultus in the Mosaic sense was unknown to the biblical Israel and Judah of this time. It was not until the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE that resourceful theological minds bent on interpreting Israel's destiny conceived of the First Commandment. The regnant motto was that as long as Israel worshipped strange gods rather than exclusively Yahweh, they would suffer catastrophe. Thus the biblical tradition represents a minority literature that in the end prevailed.

(b) Luke-Acts³ purports among other things to be a historical account of Primitive Christianity, and it is Luke's clear intention to provide historical reportage. Indeed, the opening verse of Acts points back to the introduction to his Gospel, in which Luke, in a magnificently stylized Greek sentence, not only claims to be engaged in critical historiography based on a thorough evaluation of available sources, but certifies the accuracy of the result. "Since many have attempted to compose a narrative about the events which have come to fulfillment among us, as they have been handed down to us from those who from the beginning were themselves eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too have thought it good, since I have investigated everything carefully from the start, to write them out in order for you, excellent Theophilus, in order that you know the certain basis of the teaching in which you have been instructed" (Luke 1:1-4). In this introduction, which also functions as prologue to Luke-Acts, the author explicitly refers to previous accounts—some of which he implies are none too accurate in all respects—and vows to produce what we might term a reliable new critical edition. The opening words of Acts, "In the first book, Theophilus..." constitute a commitment only a little short of guarantee that the same intention guided his description of the mission and spread of Christianity in this second book. It is noteworthy, though, that Luke's most conspicuous historiographic claim appears not in Acts, but in his Gospel, which in the first two verses of chapter 3 announces God's initiation of the Christian chapter of salvation history with a sixfold synchronism.⁴

Luke conceives of the continuity of salvation as a "course" (in Greek, *dromos*) or "way" (in Greek, *hodos*). We see these metaphors in the sermon Luke attributes to Paul in Pisidian Antioch where he speaks of John the Baptist's entrance (in Greek, *eishodos*) into the world⁵ and says, "As John was finishing his course."⁶ Acts understands Christian existence in general as a "way,"⁷ and in the summary of his missionary activity in his farewell speech at Miletus,⁸ Paul describes the termination of his activity as the completion of his course.⁹

Luke's overarching theological reason for understanding and presenting the activity of Paul (the apostles, Jesus and John the Baptist) as a course arises from his conception of salvation history. The history of salvation is reflected in the path of the gospel from Jerusalem¹⁰ all the way to Rome.¹¹ The worldwide missionary activity, i.e., throughout the Roman Empire,¹² and the person of Paul form the focus of the presentation. Everything else—the beginning in Galilee, the crisis in Jerusalem involving the death and resurrection of Jesus, the church in Jerusalem, and the experimental mission of the Hellenists (in Luke's perspective)—leads toward this one goal. The Jerusalem Conference is located in the middle of Acts, chapter 15, as the pivotal point. It separates the primitive period of the church from the present and forms the presupposition for Paul's independent mission that begins after his separation from Barnabas.¹³ The Pauline era is meshed with, and legitimized by, the holy past of the primitive Jerusalem church.

The first missionary journey, placed before the Jerusalem Conference, serves a preparatory and transitional function. On the one hand, Luke uses this journey to illustrate the problem that will be the concern of the Jerusalem Conference, which immediately follows in Acts 15. It is as if the fact and the success of the proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles in Antioch in Acts 11:20–21 were projected onto the map and emphasized by this geographical exaggeration. On the other hand, the journey is consciously stylized by Luke to present the well-known transformation of Saul into Paul¹⁴ and to replace Barnabas with Paul as the great missionary to the Gentiles.¹⁵

In the second part of Acts, Paul is alone at the centre of the stage. The depiction of the course of the Pauline mission extending all the way to Rome thus rests on theological motives, and its chronological placement *after* the Jerusalem Conference serves to demonstrate the continuity of the Lukan church with the primitive church in the history of salvation. The reasons for this placement are *not* primarily chronological. Luke observes no distinction between chronological and theological significance. He is a man of faith and not a secular historian. When he has discovered the theological significance of an event, he can go on to deduce from it the correct chronology—and this means, among other things, that he can begin to modify Mark. We would do him an injustice by examining a statement of his on the basis of historical research alone; the litmus test must always be theology: How does this or that fit into the history of salvation?

These findings indicate that we should see Paul's journeys in the context of Luke's theology of salvation history. Moreover, what has just been said about the relationship of salvation history and history raises a fundamental question concerning the employment of secular historical data gathered from Luke's two volumes in any valid history of early Christianity.

As was noted earlier, no historian is free from bias; the question that must be asked at this point is whether and to what degree Luke's particular biases have led him into the business of fabricating facts. Let me deal with one specific aspect of the issue—*Luke's use of apologetics toward the Roman state*—one that may be illustrated by Luke's depiction of members of the Roman military.

Roman military personnel play an amazingly important role in Luke-Acts. Until about 175 CE there were, as far as we can tell, no Christian soldiers and, therefore, no related questions that called for the attention of Christians. From the end of the second century, however, it became more and more frequent for soldiers to come into contact with the Christian mission and to be converted. Could they, then, as Christians, remain in their former calling? Note that in Luke 3:10–14—a passage clearly composed by the Evangelist—John the Baptist addresses publicans and soldiers, two supporting pillars of the Roman Empire. Upon their asking how they should behave, the Baptist urges them to carry out their profession with a sense of duty. As if this were not enough, Luke

in Acts 10 makes the Roman centurion Cornelius the first Christian from the Hellenistic Roman Gentile world. All this shows how far ahead of his time Luke is, and what a special standpoint he has adopted.

This preparation for the positive image of Roman military personnel in Luke's church and beyond corresponds to the positive portrayal of Roman soldiers in connection with the trial and execution of Jesus. Comparison with the report by Mark makes Luke's intention clear: he is at pains to make the Roman soldiers seem relatively uninvolved. According to Luke, it was Jews who executed Jesus—not the Romans. In his gospel¹⁶ Luke omits the scourging scene,¹⁷ so that Jesus is handed over immediately after being led away. Accordingly, the text is to be understood as follows: Pilate handed Jesus over to the will of the Jews (verse 25), who led him away (verse 26) and crucified him (verse 33). From this it follows that those who call for Jesus' death also judge and condemn him. A corroborating account appears in Luke 24:20: two disciples on the Emmaus road encounter the Risen Jesus, unrecognized in the figure of a traveller, and explain to him that the chief priests and authorities handed Jesus over to be executed and crucified him. Yet the lack of any mention of the people here can hardly lead to the assumption that according to Luke the responsibility for the death of Jesus is to be limited to the Jewish elite. For guilt is clearly assigned to the people in Luke 23:4, 13–16, and this same group is explicitly burdened with guilt in Acts 3:15 (compare verse 12).

Not only that, but Luke has so toned down the negative action of the Roman soldiers portrayed in his sources that he can depict them in a markedly positive way in the arrest of Paul in Jerusalem and the subsequent negotiations. In Luke's account, Paul's arrest by the Roman garrison seems essentially a protective measure in a threatening situation.

Indeed, the ending of Acts is little short of bizarre. Although Luke knows that the Roman state executed Paul, he not only fails to report the fact but, in the book's final verse, stresses that Paul was privileged by the Romans to preach the gospel without any hindrance. Note also that the presence of a Roman guard is mentioned only once (in verse 16), while succeeding verses make no reference to him. These details are interrelated. For one thing, Luke omits the end of the story of Paul—his violent death—not only because it was not edifying but also because he is eager to underline Paul's freedom to engage in unhindered preaching. He creates a theologically grounded (but deliberately unhistorical) picture of the Roman state in order to secure present and future privileges of unhindered preaching. While this is entirely understandable, it casts serious doubt on the credibility of this account and on Luke's veracity in general. Luke again turns out to be a propagandist with a theological bias.

Historically speaking, the fact that Paul was not set free but rather was sent as a prisoner to Rome was solely the result of Roman actions; Luke, however, has turned this into a tragic complex of circumstances. In his account, Romans often appear as those who save Paul's life; in reality Romans eventually executed him. Most amazing is the elimination of the brutal expression of Roman rule in

the report of Jesus' execution, which in view of the existing tradition must be described as a violent one. Luke could not simply ignore the death of Jesus as he did that of Paul. As he wanted to write a Gospel, he had to portray this death. In literary terms, the way he uses others to relieve the Roman authorities of responsibility for the condemnation of Jesus and the actual crucifixion is a *tour de force*; in historical and theological terms, it is a *monstrosity*. Indeed, historical truth comes in a distant second to the evangelist's zeal in promoting his ecclesiastical program.

Arguments have long raged over how much of Acts is historically verifiable, but I wish to suggest that even more important to an understanding of the book is recognizing the *framework* within which the events are set. The significance of a reported happening, however authentic or fictitious, can be completely altered by changing its historical context. Consider, for example, the "Apostolic Council": Paul suggests a date that is quite different from that proposed in Acts 15—one that could considerably change its significance.

We clearly know one thing about the arrangement of Acts: the narrative proceeds in a straight line. From beginning to end it lacks interruptions and subplots. But since the arrangement clearly oversimplifies the actual order of events, we see that it cannot furnish the basis for a valid history of early first-century Christianity. Further, the story is filled with loose ends that even Luke could not hide and poses obvious questions he did not bother to answer. And we find puzzling characters like Apollos who, we are told, knew only John's baptism,¹⁸ and the Ephesian disciples who had never heard of the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ Stranger yet, we are told nothing about how Christianity came to Rome! What are we to make of these things?

Luke's account of the triumph of the gospel employs carefully selected figures. There are good guys and bad guys: the good are the disciples, Christian teachers and martyrs; the bad are heretics, namely the fierce wolves that will come after Paul's departure,²⁰ and—sad and distasteful to say, but an inevitable development—the Jews. Through it all, the way ahead remains simple and direct. To be sure, such narrative lines are easily remembered, easily passed on, and therefore likely to be highly influential. The trouble is that by avoiding the nuances and complexities of real historical events, such simplistic dramatization inflicts grave violence on the truth. If we begin by gathering the abundant evidence about the diversity of Christianity in the early period, we then see Acts in perspective and recognize how much Luke has left out. And we may not be so ready to accept his basic presuppositions concerning Jews and other disreputable groups existing on the margin of what he considers Christianity. The good/bad, orthodox/heretic distinctions are now recognizable as judgments after the event by the winners.

To put all this in a sharper perspective, let me first sketch Luke's theological presuppositions and, second, the historical value of his two-volume work for the

study of Christian origins. As for the first, one can induce from Luke's work the following assumptions:

1. The Holy Spirit is instrumental in salvation history.
2. All things are predetermined by the will of God.
3. The spread of the Primitive Christian mission is unstoppable.
4. Roman power is sympathetic to Christianity. (A corollary of this is that any pro-Roman traits or characterizations in Acts and the third Gospel are open to historical doubt.)
5. The unbelieving Jews will go to any lengths to thwart Christian goals and purposes. (As with the previous statement, any negative statement about them is likewise open to historical doubt.)

Concerning the issue of historical value, one must conclude that

1. Luke has misrepresented Paul's relationship to the Jerusalem community.
2. Luke has misrepresented Paul's theology.
3. Luke's description of Paul's actions is in part miraculous, in part false, and deceptively incomplete.
4. Luke makes Peter appear Pauline and Paul appear Petrine.
5. Luke places Paul's major mission immediately after the Jerusalem Conference (Acts 15), whereas in reality it had started before the Jerusalem conference—at least a decade earlier.
6. Even granting Luke's unbalanced narrative about the various mission sites, it is a striking omission that he fails to say anything about the real beginnings of Christianity in Galilee, Northern Galatia, Rome and Egypt. Instead he spends sixty verses—most of them the purest fiction—on the sea-voyage to Rome.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, one must grant Luke's correctness on two points:

1. At the beginning of Primitive Christianity, the Jerusalem community played an important role.
2. Paul was a key figure in the proclamation, expansion and shaping of Primitive Christianity. Luke rightly devotes more than half of Acts to him.

Yet Acts cannot profitably be read without the authentic letters of Paul, for

1. Acts presents an inaccurate chronology of Primitive Christianity between 30 and 70 CE.
2. The routes reported in Acts are partly inventions, partly duplications, and commonly misplaced in time. Paul's letters allow us to reconstruct the real chronology of his missionary journeys and to integrate the valuable itineraries of Acts into an orderly account.
3. In many cases Acts not only fails to provide solutions to the enigmas of the letters but further complicates these enigmas.

Some would argue, however, that ancient canons of historicity differ so radically from those of today that any judgment must be invidious and thus anachronistic. Yet such urgings are irrelevant, deceptive or as false as the occasionally advanced claim that the ancients were not concerned about false attribution of writings.²¹

Among comments of other contemporary authors, note those of Lucian of Samosata,²² a second-century theorist who bases his judgment on Thucydides, promoting him above all others as the paradigm of what a historian should be.

(41) That, then, is the sort of man the historian should be: fearless, incorruptible, free, a friend of free expression and the truth, intent, as the comic poet²³ says, on calling a fig a fig and a trough a trough, giving nothing to hatred or to friendship, sparing no one, showing neither pity nor shame nor obsequiousness, an impartial judge, well disposed to all men up to the point of not giving one side more than its due, in his books a stranger and a man without a country, independent, subject to no sovereign, not reckoning what this or that man will think, but stating the facts.²⁴ (42) Thucydides laid down this law very well: he distinguished virtue and vice in historical writing, when he saw Herodotus greatly admired to the point where his books were named after the Muses. For Thucydides says that he is writing a possession for evermore rather than a prize-essay for the occasion, that he does not welcome fiction but is leaving to posterity the true account of what happened. He brings in, too, the question of usefulness and what is, surely, the purpose of sound history: that if ever again men find themselves in a like situation they may be able, he says, from a consideration of the records of the past to handle rightly what now confronts them.²⁵ ... (47) As to the facts themselves, he should not assemble them at random, but only after much laborious and painstaking investigation. He should for preference be an eyewitness, but, if not, listen to those who tell the more impartial story, those whom one would suppose least likely to subtract from the facts or add to them out of favor or malice. When this happens let him show shrewdness and skill in putting together the more credible story. When he has collected all or most of the facts let him first make them into a series of notes, a body of material as yet with no beauty or continuity. Then after arranging them into order, let him give it beauty and enhance it with the charms of expression, figure and rhythm.²⁶

Since Luke places his two-volume work in the context of ancient historical writings, it deserves to be assessed on the basis of the ancient standards. As the following discussion will make clear, ancients whose education permitted were interested both in what really happened and in whether a document carried the correct name of the writer. Thus my paper on Luke-Acts is directly related to their interest and to the goal of modern enlightenment—and ultimately to Luke himself. Despite his glaring inaccuracies, he was without doubt the first Christian historian,²⁷ and he was part of the Greco-Roman tradition—a careful study of which indicates that historiography did not wait until the Enlightenment to become a self-conscious form of literary art.

A number of Greek and Roman historians engaged in an ongoing discourse about historical truth, including the issues of intellectual deception and falsification. Moreover, those of the Greek and Roman intelligentsia, though lacking the sophistication of modern critics, had developed clear criteria by which to

uncover fraud. Let me first offer the example of the great physician Galen of Pergamum, and after that two further citations. All three will demonstrate that if writers of literary works intended for an educated audience knowingly employed false attribution or deliberately falsified a text, they were considered guilty of an act of wrongdoing.²⁸ In “My own books,” Galen (131–201 CE) reports the following incident:

I was recently in the Sandalarium (= sandal-makers’ street), the area of Rome with the largest concentration of booksellers, where I witnessed a dispute as to whether a certain book for sale was by me or someone else. The book bore the title: Galen the doctor. Someone had bought the book under the impression that it was one of mine, someone else—a man of letters—struck by the odd form of the title, desired to know the book’s subject. On reading the first two lines he immediately tore up the inscription, saying simply: “This is not Galen’s language—the title is false.” Now, the man in question had received only the basic education that Greek children were always given by teachers of grammar and rhetoric.²⁹

A little later Galen complains, “My books have been subject to all sorts of mutilations, whereby people in different countries publish (literally, “read”) different texts under their own names, with all sorts of cuts, additions and alterations.”³⁰ Concerning false attributions, Galen’s report allows us to draw three conclusions:

1. People of even moderate education learned enough of what we would call style-criticism to enable them to distinguish genuine from false writings.
2. Plagiarism, i.e., spreading someone else’s ideas under one’s own name, was considered wrong.
3. Pseudepigraphy, i.e., publishing one’s own ideas under someone else’s name, was not acceptable.

Two episodes from “The Lives of Eminent Philosophers” by the Greek writer Diogenes Laertius in the third century CE shed further light on the general disapprobation of false attribution and plagiarism.

Aristoxenus the musician asserts that Heraclides also composed tragedies, inscribing upon them the name of Thespis. Chamaeleon complains that Heraclides’ treatise on the work of Homer and Hesiod was plagiarized from his own. Furthermore, Autodorus the Epicurean criticizes him in a polemic against his tract *Of Justice*. Again, Dionysius the Renegade, or, as some people call him, the “Spark,” when he wrote the *Parthenopaeus*, entitled it a play of Sophocles; and Heraclides, such was his credulity, in one of his own works drew upon this forged play as Sophoclean evidence. Dionysius, on perceiving this, confessed what he had done; and...the other denied the fact and would not believe him.(5.92–93)³¹

Furthermore, the examination of both the authenticity and completeness of writings was a daily task for the librarians of such great libraries of antiquity as Pergamum and Alexandria, to mention only these two. Athenodor, the head librarian of the library of Pergamum, got himself into trouble by altering Stoic writings.

Diogenes Laertius gives this report in *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*: “Isidore of Pergamum... likewise affirms that the passages disproved by the school were expunged from his works by Athenodorus the Stoic, who was in charge of the Pergamene library; and that afterwards, when Athenodorus was detected and compromised, they were replaced”(7.34).³²

When compared to the literary meticulousness of the Greco-Roman world, Hebrew literature shows a lack of concern in such matters as awareness of intellectual property, commitment to historical truth and sense of authorial individuality. In fact, the literature of what later became the Old Testament was for the most part tradition-literature rather than author-literature. Even the books of the prophets were constantly reworked by their disciples and by later theological schools. And not only is the same true for the panoramic history that stretches from 1 Samuel to 2 Kings, but the Chronicler’s account is ultimately a further commentary on those narratives, for he is engaged in the same task as that of his prophetic and historical predecessors: rewriting earlier proclamations or accounts to suit the needs of the present generation. To be sure, it sometimes appears that when the reworking of earlier accounts produced contradictions too obvious to overlook, the author-redactor felt obliged to observe some elementary literary scruples.

That suspicion gains credence especially if, as is widely accepted, the original text of Deuteronomy (= Ur-Deuteronomy) was discovered in the Temple as the report in 2 Kings 22–23 suggests. For that can mean only that priests had written it and then either staged or simply claimed its discovery before handing it on to King Josiah.³³ In this same vein, one may reasonably wonder why this particular piece of Old Testament literature repeats the so-called “canon formula” of Deut 4:2a at 13:1,³⁴ which resurfaces in Rev 22:18–19 with its dire threats against any who add to or subtract from the received words (of God). Obviously two canons of truth, the religious and the intellectual, collide here. Yet most parts of the Old Testament and many Jewish sources recognize only one of these principles and remain oblivious to or unaware of the other. That basic fact makes it extremely difficult for the critical scholar to relate to these writings, let alone establish meaningful dialogue with people who take seriously the historical accuracy of these “holy” texts.

Be that as it may, the necessity of arriving at interpretive conclusions concerning falsely attributed documents cannot be avoided, even when their authors may be lacking in historical reliability or truthfulness. This is especially the case because many of these very authors are in the habit of asserting their own truthfulness while warning against the forgeries of others. Thus their reliability is doubly undermined, for they not only show themselves untrustworthy but also hypocritically proclaim the untrustworthiness of others who are playing the same game.

In the course of employing the available historical-critical tools, one might do well to adopt a methodological stance that precludes an a priori denial of miracles, or the absolute position described by Colin Hemer: “[that] miracles do not happen, and that *all* alleged instances must accordingly be either rejected or re-explained.”³⁵ Nevertheless, I both recognize and posit that the three-storied universe of the ancients is an outmoded concept and that anything in Luke-Acts and elsewhere that presupposes it must be rejected insofar as we are committed to dealing with representations of fact. For the rest, I examine every miracle story of Luke-Acts for its historical veracity and do not base my judgment on preconceived notions as to what can or cannot happen.

A further note of qualification is in order at this point: one’s belief in God or the gods should play no role in the historical investigation. The Acts of the Apostles must be investigated as all other religious or nonreligious texts are examined. And the rule that applies for historical science should also apply for theological study when it comes to the investigation of the historical records of Christianity. The presupposition that history has to be reconstructed as if God is not the cause of the occurrences popularly termed “miraculous” should find common agreement among twenty-first-century scholars.³⁶ As Van Harvey has rightly insisted, “[W]hat we call historical inquiry is really the formalization by professional historians of our modern, Promethean desire to know, a desire that is actually rooted in everyday life. Historical reasoning is merely the formalization of one method that has, over time, proved to be our best guarantor of achieving this desire and of holding in check the special pleading, obscurantism, and tendentiousness that are omnipresent in human existence.”³⁷

History, then, is directly related to scientific knowledge as “public knowledge of public facts.” By “public knowledge” I mean, following Don Wiebe,³⁸ “non-idiosyncratic knowledge mediated through intersubjectively tested sets of statements”; and by “public facts” I mean “states of affairs in the world.” Scientific students of religion and of its history, therefore, seek “neutral” knowledge of religious phenomena expressed in statements that transcend “self-involving” language—just as physicists, chemists, biologists and social scientists express their knowledge of states of affairs in the world in as neutral a fashion as possible.

Yet, for whatever reason, Christian scholars are sometimes chary about heeding this protocol in all respects. Instead, they resort to philosophical reflections destined to protect the believer against history. Two examples may suffice. Ben Witherington remarks, “These stories [of Acts] will no doubt continue to create problems for some moderns who rule out in advance the supernatural, including supernatural events such as miracles, and dismiss all history writing that includes such tales as pre-critical and naive in character. I would suggest that such an *a priori* approach to miracles is equally uncritical and naive, not least because science has hardly begun to plumb the depth of what is and is not possible in our universe.”³⁹ And Joseph A. Fitzmyer opines, “If one is philosophically convinced that miracles do not happen or that God does not so intervene in human history, then all such narratives immediately become unhistorical or nonhistor-

ical. If, however, one accepts the possibility of such divine intervention [i.e., equates these unexplained physical phenomena with divine causation], judgment is then open to their historical validation. Clearly, Luke reckoned with such possibility, for he did not hesitate to include such items in his narratives in Acts.”⁴⁰

But despite the open-ended pleadings of Witherington and Fitzmyer, we can entertain the possibility of supernatural events only if the historical analysis of a specific case—with concomitant absence of satisfactory scientific hypothesis—admits of no other explanation. At any rate, one ought not to begin with the assumption that miracles occur. Such a methodology would be inappropriate and in fact dishonest when measured against the historical criteria admirably enunciated by Lucian of Samosata and cited above (see above, p. 73).

Conclusion

By interweaving history and legend, Luke confused facts, fiction and faith. He blended historical and supra-historical fact, thereby falsifying history for the sake of piety, politics and power. Like his Old Testament models, he employed two canons of truth, the historical and the religious, with an emphasis on the latter. Thus he paved the way for two thousand years of fiction and confusion about the real origins of Christianity. If we are seriously dedicated to the discovery of truth and to founding religious commitments on reality rather than myth, we should spare no pains in the search for what really happened in the earliest days of the Christian movement and for the real reason for its rapid growth.

Notes

- 1 In the process of writing this essay I have benefited from John Bowden, “Appendix: Ideologies, Text and Tradition,” in Gerd Lüdemann, *The Unholy in Holy Scripture: The Dark Side of the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 146–161. I thank my good friend Tom Hall for editing the manuscript.
- 2 For all matters in this essay that concern the history of Israel and Old Testament studies see Gerd Lüdemann, *Altes Testament und christliche Kirche: Versuch der Aufklärung* (Springe: zu Klampen, 2006).
- 3 For all matters in this essay that relate to Luke-Acts see Gerd Lüdemann, *The Acts of the Apostles: What Really Happened in the Earliest Days of the Church* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2005).
- 4 “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysias tetrarch of Abilene, and in the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.”
- 5 Acts 13:24.
- 6 Acts 13:25.
- 7 Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22.
- 8 Acts 20:18–35.
- 9 Acts 20:24.
- 10 Luke 24:47.

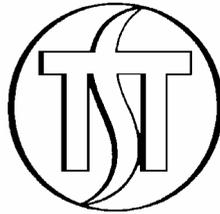
- 11 Cf. Acts 1:8 and the end of Acts.
- 12 See Luke 2:1.
- 13 Acts 15:39–40.
- 14 Acts 13:9.
- 15 See Acts 13:13, 16, 43, 45, 50; 14:20.
- 16 Luke 23:26.
- 17 Mark 15:16–20.
- 18 Acts 18:24–28.
- 19 Acts 19:1–7.
- 20 Acts 20:29.
- 21 For the following compare Gerd Lüdemann, *Intolerance and the Gospel: Selected Texts from the New Testament* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2007), 233–241.
- 22 See Daniel Marguerat, *The First Christian Historian: Writing the "Acts of the Apostles"* (Cambridge and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 13–20.
- 23 Aristophanes or Menander.
- 24 In Greek, *ti pepraktai legōn*.
- 25 Lucian, translated by K. Kilburn, Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann and Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 6:57. Chapter 42 is a free paraphrase of Thucydides 1.22.4: "And it may well be that the absence of the fabulous from my narrative will seem less pleasing to the ear; but whoever shall wish to have a clear view both of the events which have happened and of those which will some day, in all human probability, happen again in the same or a similar way—for these to adjudge my history profitable will be enough for me. And, indeed, it has been composed, not as a prize-essay, to be heard for the moment, but as a possession for all time." (Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, translated by Charles Foster Smith, Loeb Classical Library [London: William Heinemann and New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1928], 1:39, 41.)
- 26 Lucian 6:61. Chapter 47 is based on Thucydides 1.22.2–3: "But as to the facts of the occurrences of the war, I have thought it my duty to give them, not as ascertained from any chance informant nor as seemed to me probable, but only after investigating with the greatest possible accuracy each detail, in the case both of the events in which I myself participated and of those regarding which I got my information from others. (3) And the endeavor to ascertain these facts was a laborious task, because those who were eye-witnesses of the several events did not give the same reports about the same things, but reports varying according to their championship of one side or the other, or according to their recollection" (*History of the Peloponnesian War*, 39).
- 27 Robert L. Wilken, *The Myth of Christian Beginnings: History's Impact on Belief* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Anchor, 1972), 33–51; Marguerat, *The First Christian Historian*, xi.
- 28 Cf. with this the statement in Annette Merz's thorough study, *Die fiktive Selbstausslegung des Paulus. Intertextuelle Studien zur Intention und Rezeption der Paulusbriefe* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 198: "An acceptance of pseudepigraphy can be found in antiquity only and sporadically among physicians and philosophers (e.g., Pythagoreans and Epicureans) who justify writings of pupils in the name of the master. Yet, I would stress more that this is according to the sources already a reaction to the results of investigations of authenticity which in turn reinforces the general reservations to writing with a false name."
- 29 Translation following P.N. Singer, *Galen: Selected Works: Translated with an Introduction and Notes* (Oxford and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Translation based on Diogenes Laertius, translated by R.D. Hicks, Loeb Classical Library, (London: William Heinemann, 1925), 1:547.
- 32 Translation based on Diogenes Laertius, translated by R.D. Hicks, Loeb Classical Library, (London: William Heinemann, 1925), 2:145.
- 33 For the details of Deuteronomy's discovery under Josiah in 622 BCE and parallel discovery-accounts of other sacred books from antiquity to modern times (e.g., the book of Mormon), see my *The Unholy in Holy Scripture*. In recent times some scholars tend to ascribe the composi-

- tion of 2 Kgs 22–23 (on the basis of Deuteronomy!) to exilic or postexilic circles who wanted to connect King Josiah with a radical reform of the cult in Jerusalem (see Reinhard Gregor Kratz, *Die Propheten Israels* [Munich: Beck, 2003], 73).
- 34 For the Old Testament see Prov 30:6 (cf. Eccl 3:14; Sir 18:6; 42:21).
- 35 Hemer, *The Book of Acts*, 438.
- 36 All this has less to do with a “materialistic worldview” than with common practice among professional historians.
- 37 Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Urbana/Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1996), xx–xxi.
- 38 The terms I quote here are employed in more than one place in Professor Wiebe’s work, and quite recently in his “An Eternal Return All Over Again: The Religious Conversation Endures,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, 3 (September 2006): 691. In that article Wiebe refers helpfully to an elaboration of the concepts in four of his essays, “A Positive Episteme for the Study of Religion,” *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies* 6 (1985): 78–95; “Why the Academic Study of Religion? Motive and Method in the Study of Religion,” *Religious Studies* 24 (1988): 403–413; “Dissolving Rationality: The Anti-Science Phenomenon and Its Implications for the Study of Religion” in *Rationality in the Study of Religion*, edited by J.S. Jensen and L.H. Martin, (Aarhus: University of Aarhus Press, 1997), 167–183); and “Appropriating Religion: Understanding Religion as an Object of Science” in *Approaching Religion*, Part 1, edited by Tore Ahlbäck (Åbo and Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1999), 253–272.
- 39 Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 223–224.
- 40 Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Anchor Bible (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1998), 126.

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