
Christian Evidences

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THE HISTORICAL TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE BIBLE

The trustworthiness of the Bible's historical statements has been corroborated again and again both through archaeological discoveries and through close correlation of the Bible's content with other independent ancient sources. A comprehensive study of this topic would be far beyond the scope of these lectures, but for the purpose of illustration, it will be possible to examine briefly the accuracy of Luke as a historian.

Luke, the friend and companion of Paul, is the author of the third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, which may be two parts of one continuous historical work.¹ Luke mentions three emperors by name: Augustus (Luke 2:1), Tiberius (Luke 3:1), and Claudius (Acts 18:2 and Acts 11:28). The birth of Jesus is fixed in the reign of the emperor Augustus, when Herod the Great was king of Judaea, and Quirinius governor of Syria (Luke 1:5, 2:2). Luke dates by a series of synchronisms in the Greek historical manner the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry (Luke 3:12), just as the Greek historian Thucydides dates the formal outbreak of the Peloponnesian War in his History, book II.² Luke accurately names the Roman governors Quirinius, Pilate, Sergius, Paullus, Gallio, Felix, and Festus, Herod the Great and a few of his descendants, including Herod Antipas the tetrarch of Galilee, the vassal-kings Herod Agrippa I and II, Berenice and Drusilla, Jewish priests such as Annas, Caiaphas, and Ananias, and Gamaliel, the great Rabbi and Pharisaic leader. An author relating his story to the wider context of world history must be careful, because he affords the reader abundant opportunities to test the degree of his accuracy. Not only does Luke take this risk, but he stands the test admirably. F. F. Bruce writes:

One of the most remarkable tokens of his accuracy is his sure familiarity with the proper titles of all the notable persons who are mentioned in his pages. This was by no means such an easy feat in his days as it is in ours, when it is so simple to consult convenient books of reference. The accuracy of Luke's use of the various titles in the Roman Empire has been compared to the easy and confident way in which an Oxford man in ordinary conversation will refer to the Heads of Oxford colleges by their proper titles--the Provost of Oriel, the Master of Balliol, the Rector of Exeter, the President of Magdalen, and so on. A non-Oxonian like the present writer never feels quite at home with the multiplicity of these Oxford titles. But Luke had a further difficulty in that the titles sometimes did not remain the same for any great length of time; a province might pass from senatorial government to administration by a direct representative of the emperor, and would

then be governed no longer by a proconsul but by an imperial legate (legatus pro proetore).³

F. F. Bruce gives multitudes of specific examples of the incredible accuracy of Luke as a historian.⁴

Among the many supposed mistakes of Luke that have since been vindicated was the mention in Luke 3:1 of Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene in the fifteenth year of Tiberius (A.D. 27- 28). The only Lysanias of Abilene otherwise known from ancient history was a king who was executed by the order of Mark Antony in 34 B.C. We now have archaeological evidence of a later Lysanias who had the status of tetrarch. An inscription recording the dedication of a temple reads, "For the salvation of the Lords Imperial and their whole household, by Nymphaeus, a freedman of Lysanias the tetrarch." The reference to "Lords Imperial," which was a joint title given only to the emperor Tiberius and his mother Livia, the widow of Augustus, establishes the date of the inscription to between A.D. 14 and 29, the years of Tiberius' accession and Livia's death, respectively.⁵

In the book of Acts, chapters 27 and 28, Luke records a sea voyage from Palestine on which he was shipwrecked en route to Italy with Paul and his companions. H. J. Holtzmann describes this as "one of the most instructive documents for the knowledge of ancient seamanship."⁶ James Smith of Jordanhill, an experienced yachtsman who was quite familiar with the part of the Mediterranean Sea on which Paul sailed, bears witness to the remarkable accuracy of Luke's account of each part of the voyage.

He writes:

I do not even assume the authenticity of the narrative of the voyage and shipwreck contained in the Acts of the Apostles, but scrutinise St. Luke's account of the voyage precisely as I would those of Baffin or Middleton, or of any antient [sic] voyage of doubtful authority, or involving points on which controversies have been raised. A searching comparison of the narrative, with the localities where the events so circumstantially related are said to have taken place, with the aids which recent advances in our knowledge of the geography and the navigation of the eastern part of the Mediterranean supply, accounts for every transaction--clears up every difficulty--and exhibits an agreement so perfect in all its parts as to admit but of one explanation, namely, that it is a narrative of real events, written by one personality engaged in them, and that the tradition respecting the locality is true.⁷

Concerning the accuracy of Luke as a historian, F. F. Bruce writes:

Now, all these evidences of accuracy are not accidental. A man whose accuracy can be demonstrated in matters where we are able to test it is likely to be accurate even where the means for testing him are not available. Accuracy is a habit of mind, and we know from happy (or unhappy) experience that some people are habitually accurate just as others can be depended upon to be inaccurate. Luke's record entitles him to be regarded as a writer of habitual accuracy.⁸

Sir William Ramsay writes:

The present writer takes the view that Luke's history is unsurpassed in respect of its trustworthiness. At this point we are describing what reasons and arguments changed the mind of one who began under the impression that the history was written long after the events and that it was untrustworthy as a whole.⁹

Concerning Luke's accuracy as a historian, Henry J. Cadbury, a professor from Harvard University, writes:

The historical worth of the Acts of the Apostles is not to be expressed merely in such negative terms. In itself it often carries its own evidences of accuracy, of intelligent grasp of its theme, of fullness of information. Its stories are not thin and colorless but packed with variety and substance. There is reason for the modern scholar to ponder them carefully, to examine them in detail and to compare them point for point throughout the volume. . . . The data which throw light on the history in Acts are also the data which confirm its place in history. But there is a difference in the approach. To a large extent the material with which I shall deal is capable of an apologetic use. It can be cited to show that the author of Acts is dealing with facts and reality.¹⁰

¹ F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, fifth ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1960), p. 80.

² See *The Complete Writings of Thucydides*, trans. Joseph Gavorse (New York: Random House, 1934), Book II, Chapter VI, p. 84.

³ Bruce, p. 82.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 82-92.

⁵ Eduard Meyer, *Ursprung Und Anfange Des Christentums* (Stuttgart: J. G. Cotta'sche, 1962), pp. 46-49.

⁶ H. J. Holtzmann, *Hand-Commentar zum Neuen Testament* (Freiburg: Akademische Verlagsbuchhandlung Von J. C. B. Mohr, 1889), pp. 420-426.

⁷ James Smith, *The Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1848), pp. v-vi.

⁸ Bruce, p. 90. See Also Sir William M. Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915), p. 80.

⁹ Sir William M. Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915), p. 81.

¹⁰ Henry J. Cadbury, *The Book of Acts in History* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955), pp. 3, 4.

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