

Sunday, March 20, 2016—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
Lesson 25 External Evidence of Inspiration: The Historicity of the New Testament

Introduction

- Last week, in Lesson 24, we began our consideration of the External Evidence of Inspiration by looking at some things regarding the historical reliability of the Old Testament.
- This week, in Lesson 25, we want to do the same with respect to the historicity of the New Testament.
- As with our discussion of the historicity of the Old Testament, our purpose is not to exhaust the amount of available material on the historical accuracy of the New Testament. Rather, our purpose is to point out some extra-Biblical highpoints that provide external evidence that the New Testament was written by inspiration of God.
- Since the evidence for the historical reliability for the book of Acts is the strongest, we will focus our investigation on a consideration of the Acts of the Apostles.

The Historicity of Acts

- Acts 1:1-2—the book of Acts is the second part of a two part treatise addressed to Theophilus.
- Luke 1:1-3—speaks to the “former treatise” addressed to Theophilus spoken of in Acts 1:1.
- A careful reading of Luke 1:1-3 ought to highlight the following points: first, Luke interviewed eyewitnesses who were present from the beginning of the events recorded; second, Luke’s goal is to present a chronological record of the events as they were commonly believed. While the Gospel of Luke is written to present Christ as the son of man, it also doubles as a chronological history of the life of Christ. When coupled with Acts, the Gospel of Luke takes its reader from the annunciation of the Christ’s birth all the way through to Paul’s imprisonment in Rome in Acts 28. Considering that Luke did not write by his own will or in his own words, but rather the words of God under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the foolishness of doubting these events becomes clear.
- “The date and authenticity of the book of Acts is crucial to the historicity of early Christianity and, thus, to apologetics in general. If Acts was written before AD 70 while the eyewitness were still alive, then it has great historical value in informing us of the earliest Christian beliefs.” (Geisler, *ST*, 348)
- Furthermore, if Acts was written by Luke, the same author as the Gospel of Luke who was also the travel companion of the Apostle Paul; it would provide a point of contact between the narratives of the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ and the author of the majority of the New Testament.

- II Timothy 4:9-11—Luke was with Paul at the end of this life.
- “If Acts was written by AD 62 (the traditional date), then it was written by a contemporary of Jesus (who died in AD 33). And, if Acts is shown to be accurate history, then it brings credibility to its reports about the most basic Christian beliefs in miracles (Acts 2:22), death (Acts 2:23), resurrection (Acts 2:24, 3:29-32), and ascension of Christ (Acts 1:9-10). Further, if Luke wrote Acts, then his “former treatise” (Acts 1:1), the gospel of Luke, should be extended the same credibility manifested in the book of Acts.” (Geisler, *ST*, 348)

Evidence for an Early Date for Acts

- In his book *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, Roman historian Colin Hemer offers seventeen reasons for accepting the traditional early date for the authorship of the book of Acts. By extension, Hemer’s argumentation also indirectly testifies to the historicity of the book of Luke. Norman L. Geisler believes that Hemer’s first five arguments are sufficient to prove that Acts was penned before 62 AD.
 - “There is no mention in Acts of the crucial historical event of the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, which places the Acts before that event.
 - There is no hint of the outbreak of the Jewish War in 66 or of any serious deterioration of relations between Romans and Jews, which implies Acts was written before that time.
 - There is no hint of the more immediate deterioration of Christian relations with Rome involved in the Neronian persecution of the late 60s.
 - There is no hint of the death of James at the hands of the Sanhedrin in c. 62, recorded by Josephus (*Antiquities*, 20.9.1.200)
 - Since the apostle Paul was still alive (Acts 28), it must have been written before his death (c. AD 65).” (Geisler, *ST*, 349)
- “By comparison, claiming that Acts was written after AD 62 is like claiming that a book on the life of John F. Kennedy was written after 1963 (when he was assassinated) but never mentions his death; if the event had already occurred, it was too important to omit. In the same way, any book like Acts that was written after the death of the apostle Paul (c. AD 65) or the destruction of Jerusalem (AD 70) would surely have mentioned these momentous events.” (Geisler, *ST*, 349)

Luke Was a First-Rate Historian

- In addition to the arguments for early authorship of Acts, Colin Hemer demonstrates that the book was written by a careful historian. According to Hemer, Luke’s skill as a historian is demonstrated by his use of the following three categories of knowledge: 1) Common Knowledge,

2) Specialized Knowledge, and 3) Specific Local Knowledge. For our purposes we will consider examples of Specialized and Specific Local Knowledge.

- Examples of *Specialized Knowledge* include:
 - Acts 1:12, 19; 3:2, 11—shows knowledge of the topography of Jerusalem.
 - Acts 4:6—Annas is pictured as continuing to have great prestige and to bear the title ‘high priest’ deposition by the Romans and the appointment of Caiaphas.
 - Acts 12:4—gives details on the organization of a military guard.
 - Acts 13:7—he correctly identified Cyprus as a proconsular (senatorial) province at this time, with the proconsul resident at Paphos (v. 6)
 - Acts 16:8—he acknowledges the part played by Troas in the system of communication.
 - Acts 17:1—Amphipolis and Apollonia are known as stations (and presumably overnight stops) on the Egnatian Way from Philippi to Thessalonica.
 - Acts 27 & 28—contains many details in the geography and navigational details of the voyage to Rome.

- Regarding *Specific Local Knowledge*, Luke manifests an incredible array of knowledge regarding local places, names, conditions, customs, and circumstances that befit only an eyewitness contemporary of the time and events recorded. Hemer identifies eighty-four facts in the last sixteen chapters of Acts that have been confirmed by extra-Biblical historical and archeological research (*Please note that I reproduced this information without alteration from its source. Any differences in spelling or terminology found in this list when compared against the KJB are the sources not my own*):
 - 1) the natural crossing between correctly named ports (Acts 13:4-5)
 - 2) the proper port (Perga) along the direct destination of a ship crossing from Cyprus (13:13)
 - 3) the proper location of Lycaonia (Acts 14:6)
 - 4) the unusual but correct declension of the name Lystra (14:6)
 - 5) the correct language spoke in Lystra—Lycaonian (14:11)
 - 6) the gods known to be so associated—Jupiter and Mercurius (14:12)
 - 7) the proper port, Attalia, which returning travelers would use (14:25)
 - 8) the correct order of approach to Derbe and then Lystra from the Cilician Gates (16:1, cf. 15:41)
 - 9) the proper form of the name Troas (16:8)
 - 10) the place of a conspicuous sailors’ landmark, Samothracia (16:11)
 - 11) the proper description of Philippi as a Roman colony (16:12)

- 12) the right location of the river (Gangites) near Philippi (16:13)
- 13) the proper association of Thyatira as a center of dyeing (16:14)
- 14) correct designations for the magistrates of the colony (16:22)
- 15) the proper locations (Amphipolis and Apollonia) where travelers would spend successive nights on this journey (17:1)
- 16) the presence of a synagogue in Thessalonica (17:1)
- 17) the proper term “politarchs” used for the magistrates there (17:6)
- 18) the correct implication that sea travel is a most convenient way of reaching Athens, with the favoring east winds of summer sailing (14:14-15)
- 19) the abundant idols in Athens (17:16)
- 20) the reference to the synagogue in Athens (17:17)
- 21) the depiction of the Athenian life of philosophical debate in the Agora (17:17)
- 22) the use of the correct Athenian slang word for Paul, a babbler (*spermologos*, 17:18) as well as the court Areopagus (17:19)
- 23) the proper characterization of the Athenian character (17:21)
- 24) an altar to the “unknown god” (17:23)
- 25) the proper reaction of Greek philosophers, who denied the bodily resurrection (17:32)
- 26) Areopagite as the correct title for a member of the court (17:34)
- 27) The Corinthian synagogue (18:4)
- 28) the correct designation of Gallio as proconsul, resident in Corinth (18:12)
- 29) the bema (judgment seat), which overlooks Corinth’s forum (18:16)
- 30) the name of Tyrannus as attested from Ephesus in first-century inscriptions (19:9)
- 31) well-known shrines and images of Diana (19:24)
- 32) the well-attested “great goddess Diana” (19:27)
- 33) that the Ephesians theatre was the meeting place of the city (19:29)
- 34) the correct titled grammateus for the chief executive magistrate in Ephesus (19:35)
- 35) the proper title of honor neokoros, authorized by the Romans (19:35)
- 36) the correct name to designate the goddess (19:37)
- 37) the proper term for those holding court (19:38)
- 38) use of the plural anthupatoi, perhaps a remarkable reference to the fact that two men were conjointly exercising the function of proconsul at this time (19:38)
- 39) the “regular” assembly, as the precise phrase is attested elsewhere (19:39)
- 40) use of precise ethnic designation, beraiaios (20:4)
- 41) employment of the ethnic term Asianos (20:4)
- 42) the implied recognition of the strategic importance assigned to the city of Troas (20:7)
- 43) the danger of the coastal trip in this location (20:13)
- 44) the correct sequence of places (20:14-15)
- 45) the correct name of the city (21:1)
- 46) the appropriate route passing across the open sea south of Cyprus favored by persistent northeast winds (21:3)

- 47) the suitable distance between these cities (21:8)
- 48) a characteristically Jewish act of piety (21:24)
- 49) the Jewish law regarding Gentile use of the temple area (21:18)
- 50) the permanent stationing of a Roman cohort at Antonia to suppress any disturbance at festival times (21:31)
- 51) the flight of steps used by the guards (21:31, 35)
- 52) the common way to obtain Roman citizenship at this time (22:28)
- 53) the tribune being impressed with Roman rather than Tarsian citizenship (22:39)
- 54) Ananias being high priest at this time (23:2)
- 55) Felix being governor at this time (23:34)
- 56) the natural stopping point on the way to Cesarea (23:31)
- 57) whose jurisdiction Cilicia was in at the time (23:34)
- 58) the provincial penal procedure of the time (24:1-9)
- 59) the name of Festus, which agrees precisely with that given by Josephus (24:27)
- 60) the right of appeal as Roman citizens (25:11)
- 61) the correct legal formula (25:18)
- 62) the characteristic form of reference to the emperor at the time (25:26)
- 63) the best shipping lanes at the time (27:5)
- 64) the common bonding of Cilicia and Pamphylia (27:4)
- 65) the principal port to find a ship to Italy (27:5-6)
- 66) the slow passage to Cnidus, in the face of the typical northwest wind (27:7)
- 67) the right route to sail in view of the winds (27:7)
- 68) the locations of Fair Havens and the neighboring site of Lasea (27:8)
- 69) Fair Havens as a poorly sheltered roadstead (27:12)
- 70) a noted tendency of a south wind in these climates to back suddenly into a violent northeaster (27:13)
- 71) the nature of a square-rigged ancient ship, having no option but to drive before a gale (27:15)
- 72) the precise place and name of this island (27:16)
- 73) the appropriate maneuvers for the safety of the ship in its particular plight (27:16)
- 74) the fourteenth night—a remarkable calculation, based inevitably on a compounding of estimates and probabilities confirmed in the judgment of experienced Mediterranean navigators (27:27)
- 75) the proper term of the time for the Adriatic (27:27)
- 76) the precise term (Bolisantes) for taking soundings, and the correct depth of the water near Malta (27:28)
- 77) a position that suits the probable line of approach of a ship released to run before an easterly wind (27:39)
- 78) the severe liability of guards who permitted a prisoner to escape (27:42)
- 79) the local people and superstitions of the day (28:4-6)
- 80) the proper title Publius (28:7)
- 81) Rhegium as a refuge to await a southerly wind to carry them through the straight (28:13)

- 82) Appii Forum and Tres Tabernae as correctly placed stopping places on the Appian Way (28:15)
- 83) appropriate means of custody with Roman soldiers (28:16)
- 84) the conditions of imprisonment, living at his own expense (28:30-31) (Hemer quoted in Geisler and Turek, 256-259)

Theological Implications of Luke's Accuracy

- The accuracy of the preceding list is quite astounding when one considers that Luke recorded these details without the aid of modern GPS, maps, or nautical charts. Can there be any doubt that Luke was an eyewitness to the events he records or at least possessed access to eyewitness testimony, not to mention the knowledge of the Holy Spirit Himself? In short, Luke's use of geographical details, specialized knowledge of nautical details, and specific local knowledge testify to the historical reliability of his writings.
- “The historicity of the book of Acts is confirmed by overwhelming evidence. Nothing like this amount of detailed confirmation exists for any other book from antiquity. Acts is not only a direct confirmation of the earliest Christian belief in the death and resurrection of Christ but also indirectly of the gospel record, for the same author (Luke) wrote a gospel as well. Further, substantially the same basic events are recorded in two other gospels (Matthew and Mark) and, for that matter, the gospel of John provides the same picture of the most crucial events, namely, the death and resurrection of Christ.” (Geisler, *ST*, 353)
- Simply stated, the historicity of the Book of Acts is confirmed by overwhelming evidence. As one might expect, this reality makes skeptics rather uncomfortable. In the same book that Luke reports eighty-four historically-confirmed details, he also records a total of thirty-five miracles. To make matters worse for the skeptics, many of these miracles are recorded in the second half of the Book of Acts within the same historical narrative that has been verified extra Biblically. For example, Luke records the following Pauline miracles:
 - temporarily blinded a sorcerer (13:11)
 - cured a man who was crippled from birth (14:8)
 - exorcized an evil spirit from a possessed girl (16:18)
 - performed many miracles that convinced many in the city of Ephesus to turn from sorcery to Jesus (19:11-20)
 - raised a man from the dead who had died after falling out a window during a long-winded lecture (20:9-10)
 - healed Publius' father of dysentery, and healed numerous others who were sick on Malta (28:8-9) (Geisler and Turek, 260)

- Dr. Norman Geisler offers the following assessment of the situation, “in light of the fact that Luke has proven accurate with so many trivial details, it is nothing but pure anti-supernatural bias to say he’s not telling the truth about the miracles he records.” (Geisler and Turek, 260)

Conclusion

- Nothing from antiquity compares with the amount of detailed confirmation that exists for the historical reliability for the Book of Acts. Not only does this offer direct confirmation of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, it also indirectly proves the historical reliability of the Gospel of Luke. Paralleling Matthew and Mark, the evidence suggests that all three of the so-called synoptic Gospels were written before 60 A.D., within thirty years after the death of Jesus. (Geisler, *BECA*, 8)
- Much more ink could be spilt here covering the historicity of the rest of the New Testament i.e., the Gospel accounts and the epistles of Paul but, alas, we have neither the time nor the space. Suffice it to say that the historical reliability of the New Testament has been established to such a degree that even the most “ultra-liberal” scholars have been forced to acknowledge that the following points concerning Jesus and Christianity are actual historical facts, according to Dr. Gary Habermas:
 - Jesus died by Roman crucifixion.
 - He was buried, most likely in a private tomb.
 - Soon afterwards his disciples were discouraged, bereaved, and despondent, having lost hope.
 - Jesus’ tomb was found empty very soon after his interment.
 - The disciples had experiences that they believed were actual appearances of the risen Jesus.
 - Due to these experiences, the disciple’s lives were transformed. They were even willing to die for their belief
 - The proclamation of the Resurrection took place very early, from the beginning of church history.
 - The disciple’s public testimony and preaching of the Resurrection took place in the city of Jerusalem, where Jesus had been crucified and buried.
 - The gospel message centered on the preaching of the death and resurrection of Jesus.
 - Sunday was the primary day for gathering and worship.
 - James, the brother of Jesus and a skeptic before this time, was converted when he believed he also saw the risen Jesus.
 - A few years later, Saul of Tarsus (Paul) became a believer, due to an experience that he also believed was an appearance of the risen Jesus. (Habermas, 9-10)
- It is only a foolish heart attitude that would doubt the historical reliability of the Bible. As we have seen, “if Christians can demonstrate that the Bible is truthful in all areas in which it can be validated, we have before us the most powerful and compelling evidence for the truthfulness of

Christianity.” (Story, 34) After weighing the evidence, any reasonable person must accept the Bible as God’s chosen medium for revealing spiritual truth to humanity. The Bible alone can sustain its truth claims in any area in which it can be investigated; therefore, it is reasonable to trust the Bible in the arena of spiritual truth.

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