
The Speeches in Acts

by Merle Bland Dudley

The editor has private reasons, arising out of a long-standing interest of his own, for welcoming this contribution. Dr. Dudley, who is a Presbyterian minister in Waynesboro, Virginia, received the Ph.D. degree from the University of Glasgow five years ago for a thesis on "New Testament Preaching and Twentieth Century Communication".

WITHIN the twenty-eight chapters of the book of Acts, some twenty-three principal speeches have been identified.¹ These addresses are attributed to various characters in the story and are so placed within the narrative as to indicate that the author felt them to be essential to his story. According to the calculations made by Haenchen, some three hundred of the approximately one thousand verses within Acts are found in the speeches.²

It was the custom of classical historians to insert speeches within their narratives. Cadbury has said:

Like the chorus in a Greek play they served to review the situation for the reader, and they brought out the inner thoughts and feelings of important persons.³

Thucydides, the chronicler of the Peloponnesian War, commented on his own historical methodology in these words:

I think my view sounder than one based simply on the untested statements and romantic tales of early writers, whether in verse or prose. I know that we are all inclined to think a war in which we are engaged must be the greatest; but I am convinced that the history of the events of this one will show I am right about its magnitude. (I have tried to relate these events as accurately as possible, both the speeches and the deeds done, difficult as this was. My work is intended for posterity, not to be a best-seller of the moment.)⁴

Thus, early in his history, Thucydides wants his readers to understand that his attempts have been at accuracy in all that he reports, both deeds and words.

Bruce quotes Thucydides on his literary procedures in these words:

- 1 Jackson, F. J. Foakes and Lake, Kirsopp, editors, *The Beginnings of Christianity*, Part I, Volume 5 (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1933). Note the article on "The Speeches in Acts," by Cadbury, H. J., for the identification of the twenty-three speeches, p. 403.
- 2 Haenchen's calculations are reported in Kummel, W. G., *Introduction To The New Testament* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1970), pp. 117-118.
- 3 Cadbury, Henry J., *The Making of Luke-Acts* (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1927), p. 184.
- 4 Gomme, A. W. *A Historical Commentary on Thucydides* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945), p. 157.

As for the speeches made by various persons either on the eve of the war or during its actual course, it was difficult for me to remember exactly the words which I myself heard, as also for those who reported other speeches to me. But I have recorded them in accordance with my opinion of what the various speakers would have had to say in view of the circumstances at the time, keeping as closely as possible to the general gist of what was really said.⁵

In this Thucydides is indicating an attempt at accuracy of spirit or intention, if not an accuracy with the exact words. It is not fair to draw the conclusion from this that all other classical historians used the same approach. Indeed, Bruce rightly comments:

The speeches of Thucydides are thus not merely rhetorical exercises, but may be regarded as giving a general impression of the sort of thing said on certain occasions. Later historians, however, tended to concentrate more on the rhetorical exercise, paying less attention to historical fact or even probability. Their speeches were deliberately composed as the most polished examples of their style.⁶

This same point of view is expressed about the great historians of Greece and Rome by Williamson:

A modern historian would not dream of composing speeches from imagination and putting them into the mouths of historical persons; but the ancients expected it: they thought in terms of speech, and Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon had set an example which Caesar, Sallust and Livy followed, and it was unthinkable that any writer should forsake the practice. Some of these, notably Livy, had overstepped the line between history and the historical novel, between factual record and imaginary reconstruction, two literary forms which we think it necessary to keep distinct.⁷

Cadbury speaks of writing in the Greek and Jewish tradition and says:

To suppose that the writers were trying to present the speeches as actually spoken, or that their readers thought so, is unfair to the morality of the one and to the intelligence of the other. From Thucydides downwards, speeches reported by the historians are confessedly pure imagination.⁸

While there is general agreement about historians after Thucydides using their speeches given to various characters as the opportunity to display the writer's oratorical skills, there is no uniformity of agreement with respect to Thucydides. As indicated above, Williamson and Cadbury would group Thucydides with other historians whose speeches do not reflect reliability.

In contrast to these opinions, Gomme expresses quite a different point of view. It is his feeling that while Thucydides is not renouncing the procedure of placing the speeches in the mouths of his speakers,

⁵ Bruce, F. F., *The Acts of The Apostles* (London: Tyndale Press, 1965), p. 18.

⁶ Bruce, F. F., *ibid.*, p. 18.

⁷ Williamson, G. A., *The World of Josephus* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1964), p. 287.

⁸ Cadbury, H. J., in *Beginnings*, Vol. II, p. 12.

he is attempting to reflect an accuracy for both deeds and speeches.

In this Gomme sees Thucydides identifying that the spirit of his writing reflect accurately the intention expressed. The question is at once raised, how does he guarantee accuracy if he does not quote the whole speech (as obviously he does not)? Gomme's answer is found in these words:

There was of course this important difference between the speeches and actions; if he was to give a speech as such at all, the *words*, the style, that is, the *literary* quality (as opposed to the historical content) must be his own, and to that extent he was substituting his own personality for that of the speaker; there was no such *substitution* in his account of actions, even though the style is still his own; for here his style takes the place of that of his informants, in the speeches it takes the place of that of the real performers. But that was inevitable when no verbatim reports were available, and even if there had been, Thucydides would have had to abridge them severely, which is a form of substitution; and he therefore frankly writes in his own style, making no attempt to imitate the oratory of the different speakers (though he may preserve one or two sentences or phrases actually used and remembered)—that would have meant falsifying the evidence, pretending that the speeches were closer to the originals than in fact they were.⁹

Here is expressed a point of view which may shed light on the question of form when one approaches the speeches of Acts. This secular commentator, writing on a secular document of history, indicates the necessity of the substitution of words, of abridgment of content, and yet retaining the spirit or intention of the speakers. This is a serious attempt to report content in different words, but not to create a pure fiction. Gomme has elaborated this point further in his *Essays*:

With the speeches, on the other hand, though all present heard the whole of what was said (including, in some cases, Thucydides himself), yet none would remember more than the general drift of the argument, or perhaps some sentence which stamped itself on the memory; and though it would be an advantage to confirm one man's record by another's, it would not be, as with actions, to learn further details or a different aspect; almost all accounts would be equally defective and defective in the same way. Thucydides had therefore either to confine himself to a brief statement of the general argument used, or to rewrite the speech.¹⁰

Gomme summarized his opinion about the speeches of Thucydides in this helpful paragraph from his study of the historian:

Note that Thucydides makes no defence of the general practice of introducing speeches into history. For him they were an essential part; only by use of them (in some form) could he show the emotions and motives of men, which were as important as their deeds. A modern author, writing the history of a contemporary war with a similar intent to Thucydides, would have at his disposal for the 'psychology' of the conflict, the printed reports (summary or in full) of hundreds of speeches, he would have newspapers and pamphlets; he would make his analysis, in his own words, from them, with

⁹ Gomme, A. W., op. cit., pp. 140-141.

¹⁰ Gomme, A. W., *Essays In Greek History and Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1937), p. 166.

some verbatim extracts; and such an analysis would be no less subjective and perhaps not more 'authentic' than Thucydides' speeches. A modern historian of the fourth century B.C. will include, in some form, the 'general sense' of Demosthenes' speeches; he will not include any single speech from beginning to end—that would throw his whole work out of balance, by throwing too much weight on one speech, emphasizing what is only momentary, 'using what is not usable in a history', he will summarize one or more . . . This much is to be conceded at once to those who think Thucydides' speeches his own; but it does not make them 'free compositions', nor mean that when he said he was keeping as close as possible to the general sense of the actual speeches, he was saying nothing.¹¹

Gomme's conclusions are particularly important for the question of the speeches in the Acts. That Thucydides could write secular history and include the spirit or intention of speeches in a dependable way is indicative of the fact that the same conclusions may be possible regarding the speeches in Acts.¹²

The discussion of classical historians and their use of speeches would not be complete without some mention of Josephus. It is generally agreed that his speeches are not written from the same perspective of accuracy which Thucydides claims. An example of this is found in these words:

Very different again, are the orations of Josephus. Perhaps the writer whom he most resembles in this matter is Herodotus. Like him he can provide speeches for all occasions, and is not in the least worried if a speech or conversation could not possibly have been recorded or reported.¹³

Cadbury gives several examples of how Josephus,

. . . who has occasion in his parallel works to deal twice with the same situation, puts two different speeches in the mouth of Herod.¹⁴

Thus Josephus stands in the larger group of historians who are in a different category from Thucydides. The question of the relationship, if any at all, between Luke and Josephus is indicated in most of the standard reference works.¹⁵ It is sufficient at this point to indicate that even if Luke had knowledge of the writings of Josephus, it is not likely that he followed the practice of inserting fictitious speeches into his narrative.¹⁶ Rather, Luke gives every evidence of the

¹¹ Gomme, A. W., *Historical Commentary*, pp. 147-148.

¹² An interesting discussion of the intention of Thucydides (in *History* 1.22) is given in Williams, C. S. C., *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1957), pp. 36-37.

¹³ Williamson, G. A., *op. cit.*, p. 290.

¹⁴ Cadbury, H. J., in *Beginnings*, Vol. II, p. 14. See also pp. 16-29 for further examples of Josephus's style in writing.

¹⁵ For a review of the general considerations on this theme, see: Munck, Johannes, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1967), pp. xlvi-xlviii.

¹⁶ However, it is fair to say that in one sense each of these two men was an apologist for his own cause. Josephus slanted his materials to vindicate the Jews, and also perhaps to insure his good standing in the eyes of Rome. Luke had a strong apologetic and missionary intention in his presentation of the story and the speeches of the Acts.

meticulous restraint which is also reflected in Thucydides' aim, rather than the wanton verbosity of a Livy or a Josephus.¹⁷

In his early study of the works of Luke, H. J. Cadbury discussed the Speeches, Letter and Canticles in Luke-Acts¹⁸ He indicates that the author apparently conformed to what he saw as the custom of his day and age (by which he seems to mean, the invention of what the speakers might have said). However, when he is faced with the question of Jesus' sayings, he is forced to admit that the procedure was different.¹⁹ The use of earlier sources is admitted and generally follows the essential pattern of Semitic reporting. This is to say, the words of a speaker are seen as the essential vehicle of his thoughts. He then adds the following two paragraphs, which seem to present a constructive summary of his point of view:

The same impression is made by many of the numerous speeches in Acts, though one cannot speak more positively than in terms of impressions, or more inclusively than so as to leave the possibility that some of the speeches are closely dependent on written sources or oral information. Many of the addresses are, like that of Nazareth, sermons or defenses on the basis of Scripture texts or of history. Many are before constituted authorities and on prearranged occasions. Even more casual addresses are far removed in form and subject matter from the sayings of Jesus. Unlike their silent master in the gospels, the followers of Jesus in Acts are represented as making defences before governors and kings, the Jewish Sanhedrin or a Gentile judgment seat.

That the style of all these addresses is that of the evangelist no one can deny. How much if any of their contents has an earlier tradition, oral or written, Greek or Aramaic, is a question often debated, and in the absence of external evidence not settled with finality in the case of a single one of them. The supposition of some authentic written or oral information is most attractive in the case of Stephen's speech and of the speeches of Paul at Athens and Miletus. It must suffice to leave the matter here with a reminder that the editor's influence is probably to be estimated as more rather than less extensive than has often been our custom. The arguments by which the speeches in Acts are made to yield evidence of earlier origin, whether from the speakers themselves, or from prior documents, can be usually met by equally plausible considerations of a negative kind. In any case, more probable than the hypothesis of much direct recollection of words actually spoken is the surmise that the author has like other historians more or less successfully composed speeches suited to the speakers and occasions out of his own imagination.²⁰

However, writing six years later, Cadbury was to take the same theme with a slightly different point of view, in which he said:

17 Cf. Burkitt, in *Beginnings*, Vol. II, pp. 114-115. Especially the remark, ". . . what concerns us here is not that Luke has changed so much, but that he has invented so little," It seems a logical conclusion, as Burkitt has argued with regard to Luke's use of materials from Mark, that the same thing has happened with the speeches Luke reports in Acts. (Note particularly Burkitt's remarks on p. 115.)

18 Cadbury, H. J., *The Making of Luke-Acts*, pp. 183-193.

19 Cadbury, H. J., *ibid.*, pp. 186-187.

20 Cadbury, H. J., *ibid.*, pp. 189-190.

Even though devoid of historical basis in genuine tradition the speeches in Acts have nevertheless considerable historical value. There is reason to suppose that the talented author of Acts expended upon them not only his artistic skill, but also a considerable amount of historical imagination. Like Thucydides and the other best composers of speeches he attempted to present what the speakers were likely to have said. Probably these addresses give us a better idea of the early church than if Luke had striven for realism, better than if, baffled by the want of genuine tradition, he had forgone all efforts at portrayal of the apostles' preaching.²¹

More recent writers have tended to see an even more reliable foundation in the speeches than did Cadbury. For example, W. L. Knox deals with the speeches in two of his writings. In his earlier work he writes frankly with several critical issues relating to the speeches in Acts. While not overlooking inherent difficulties in the text of the speeches, he comes to this conclusion:

In general, the speeches suggest that we have occasional reminiscences of genuine Pauline utterances, worked into free compositions of the sort of thing which Luke regarded as appropriate for the occasion. The compositions may of course include reminiscences of speeches heard on other occasions, but it is probable that the greater part is Luke's own composition, which is on the whole remarkably successful.²²

From his lecture delivered at Oxford in 1946, Knox said:

Thus there is no reason to doubt Luke's veracity within the limits which he sets himself; he is not a great historian or biographer by modern standards but by the standards of his age he has given a fresh and interesting account of the vital part of Paul's missionary career, which has preserved on the whole an accurate account of the development of Christianity.²³

In another place, Knox concluded the chapter on "Acts and History" with this rather positive statement:

Within these limitations he appears to be a truthful recorder of the facts available to him. He has chosen the form of the travel-story because the form appealed to public taste and also probably to his own, but also because it suited the actual facts. The result is a very vivid picture of the faith of the early Church; we shall see that there is every reason to regard it as reliable.²⁴

C. H. Dodd, whose study of the *kerygma* has been of such great help in the understanding of the speeches of the Acts, has seen these coming out of a genuine tradition. He has written:

In short, there is good reason to suppose that the speeches attributed to Peter in the Acts are based upon material which proceeded from the Aramaic speaking Church at Jerusalem, and was substantially earlier than the period at which the book was written.²⁵

²¹ Cadbury, H. J., in *Beginnings*, Vol. V, pp. 424-427.

²² Knox, W. L., *Some Hellenistic Elements in Primitive Christianity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 29.

²³ Knox, W. L. *The Acts of The Apostles* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1948), p. 61.

²⁴ Knox, W. L., *ibid.*, p. 68.

²⁵ Dodd, C. H., *The Apostolic Preaching And Its Developments* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1967), p. 20.

C. H. Rieu has recognized the practice of historians of inserting speeches into the narratives they wrote. His analysis of this in the case of the Acts is helpful:

It was the accepted custom of ancient historians to put speeches into the mouths of the main figures, and sometimes these had no basis of fact but were imaginative creations of the historians. Luke follows the practice, but there is good evidence that he was indebted more to his researches than to his imagination.²⁶

Fuller strikes the same theme when he says:

While these speeches in their finished form are, like all the speeches in Acts, the products of the author, they nevertheless can be safely regarded as enshrining primitive liturgical and kerygmatic formulae as well as traditional testimonia or proof texts.²⁷

It thus seems reasonable to draw the general conclusion that Luke used the technique of speeches to tell a part of his story. This methodology does not, of itself, imply that the speeches are non-historical. Rather the more reasoned conclusion is that they represent the core of a genuine tradition which is older than the work of Luke and upon which he must have drawn.

F. F. Bruce makes reference to the studies of Rendel Harris in the primitive 'testimonia' or proof texts. He says:

It will be observed that these instances which we have been studying are taken from speeches, of Paul and the other Apostles, and that there is nothing of the kind in Luke's ordinary narration. He, at all events, does not turn aside to tell us that "Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by the prophets." If Luke does not use the method of *Testimonies* on his own account, he is quite clear that it was the Apostolic method. It was either what they actually said or what they ought to have said. But if we concede that the *Testimony Book* was behind Luke, the historian of the Acts, it seems absurd to deny that it was behind the speakers with whom he had intercourse and whom he professed to report. The natural consequence is that we have a report of speeches which cannot be very far from their actual utterance.²⁸

Kümmel surveys the studies on the speeches and comes to the reasoned conclusion that:

Therefore, the speeches of Acts originate with the author, even if in one or the other instance he has worked up reports or units of tradition. Dibelius, however, correctly emphasized that the author of Acts does not express his personal opinions in the speeches, but he wants to preach:

"He has found a new method of presenting material which has not yet been dealt with in literature; in doing so he has made new use of the traditional art of composing speeches, an art which had already been employed in many different ways. He used this device not only to illuminate the situation but also to make clear the ways of God; he

²⁶ Rieu, C. H., *The Acts of the Apostles by Saint Luke* (Edinburgh: R. and R. Clark, Ltd., 1957), pp. 23-24.

²⁷ Fuller, R. H., *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament* (London, Gerald Duckworth and Co., Ltd., 1966), p. 126.

²⁸ Harris, Rendel, quoted in Bruce, F. F., *The Acts of the Apostles* (Greek Text), p. 19.

did not desire to testify to the capabilities either of the speaker or of the author, but to proclaim the gospel."²⁹

It is this unique nature of the speeches in the Acts which strikes the careful reader. These are not effusive speeches created to impress the readers. Neither are they mechanical essays put into the speakers' mouths. They are, rather, witnesses to the life-transforming experiences which had come to the participants in the events. They are in essence, both a statement of an experience and a call to faith.³⁰

Luke gives evidence, in his introductory paragraph of the Gospel, of an excellent grasp of the classical forms of writing and his good use of literary Greek. Further, in the materials which he adopted from Mark, within the Gospel of Luke, one finds often that he has made literary improvements in the wording used by Mark. Such literary emendations usually serve to improve the somewhat crude Greek forms of Mark.³¹

Thus, while it seems that Luke evidently both knew and at times used a good literary form of Greek,³² it must not be assumed that he would necessarily follow the speech composition forms of classical writers. Dibelius' conclusion that the author desired to preach the

²⁹ Kümmel, W. G., *Introduction To The New Testament*, p. 119. The quotation included by Kümmel is taken from Dibelius, Martin, *Studies in the Acts of The Apostles*, p. 183. It should be noted that Dibelius identifies the speeches as a unique form of literature. This is probably a valid distinction. The danger inherent in such a point of view is that it be seen as so unique that it is not subjected to a fully critical analysis. Something of this kind of thing happened to Biblical Greek prior to the work of Johann Winer, whose *Grammar of the Greek New Testament* first appeared in 1824. Before his work, New Testament Greek was thought of as 'a special Holy Ghost language.' Winer established rather that Biblical Greek was the ordinary colloquial tongue of the day. See *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, by Dana, H. E., and Mantey, J. R., New York, Macmillan and Co., 1948, pp. vii-ix.

³⁰ Foakes-Jackson, F. J., *The Acts of the Apostles* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1931), concludes regarding the speeches: "Whatever these speeches may be, it cannot be disputed that they are wonderfully varied as to their character, and as a rule admirably suited to the occasion on which they were delivered. Luke seems to have been able to give us an extraordinarily accurate picture of the undeveloped theology of the earliest Christians, and to enable us to determine the character of the most primitive presentation of the gospel. However produced, the speeches in Acts are masterpieces, and deserve the most careful attention." p. xvi.

³¹ On the subject of Luke's changing the wording of Mark, see: Creed, J. M., *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1930), pp. lxi, lxxxvi ff.; Cadbury, H. J., in *Beginnings*, Vol. II, p. 15; and Knox, W. L., *Some Hellenistic Elements*, pp. 8-9.

³² Cf. Luke 1: 1-4.

gospel becomes the governing factor in Luke's writings; not the form or pattern of the secular writers of Classical literature.³³

If one looks at the first-century writers of history, there is little with which to make comparisons to the works of Luke's pen.³⁴ However, if one wishes to make meaningful comparisons, these can be reached by both an internal study of the text of the book of Acts itself, and a comparative study of Acts with other works in the New Testament. Such a study will confirm the reality that the speeches bear witness to an authentic and consistent awareness of purpose. That purpose was nothing less than to report an authentic knowledge and witness of the meanings conveyed by the speakers.

One may conclude that while the record of the speeches does not give the full text of the particular speeches as given, or record the full details of a travel episode, the intention behind each record is an accuracy of reporting. As a bookkeeper's ledger may show, in summary form, the resources of a given financial account, without the cash being present, so it seems that Luke's attempt to report a given speech is a valid attempt to produce in a summary form the actual themes and intentions of his various speakers. With this intention, the full text of the speech is neither necessary nor essential.

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³³ The question of accepting the point of view of the author is of vital importance. To see Luke's aim as any other than to promulgate the good news is to miss the very point of his work. Henderson, in his monograph on Bultmann presents this existential choice of accepting a 'point of view' for the understanding of his remarks in Bultmann's study. He writes: "There is a real sense in which he [Bultmann] and Barth agree with Kähler, or at any rate, at one point did agree with him, namely that behind the kerygma you cannot go. You must accept it or reject it and that is that." See Henderson, Ian, *Rudolf Bultmann* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1965), p. 18.

Gomme, A. W., in his *Historical Commentary*, p. 28, says much the same thing about Thucydides' methodology, ". . . He tells us that he began to make notes of events from the first, and then he got information from both camps and especially, after his exile, from the enemy's; that he himself witnessed some events and heard some speeches, but about others he had to collect his information from elsewhere. But he does not specify; he never says which speech he heard or at what event he was present, nor what in any one case his sources of information were, how long after the event he was able to make inquiries, what care he took to test what was told him, what battlefields he visited. There is only one event at which we know he was present—when he was in command, and there are a large number which we know he did not witness; but that is all. We are in his hands; we can only judge him by the results, by our own sentiments as we read him and by the testimony of others."

³⁴ Josephus, of course, stands in a quite unique place among the historians of this period. Yet even a cursory review of his work will indicate that the point of view from which he writes, and his obvious Jewish bias, greatly reduces the value of his work for this kind of comparative study.