

Commentaries on Acts

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It is widely held that the work of Martin Dibelius constituted a watershed in the study of the Acts of the Apostles. From 1923 until his death in 1947 he produced a series of essays and lectures which were published together in one volume in 1951, under the editorship of Heinrich Greeven: an English translation of this volume. *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, appeared in 1956 (SCM Press). The main emphasis of Dibelius's studies lay on the importance of stylistic criticism, which he applied both to the narratives and to the speeches in Acts. Whereas, for example, in studying the voyage and shipwreck narrative of Acts 27. 'the older school of criticism', he considered, 'thinks only of the event and not of the account', he himself insisted on the positive lessons which can be learned through close attention to the literary affinities of the passage. His work has been strongly influential, especially among German scholars, some of whom indeed say 'Dibelius has proved' at times when all that the situation justifies is 'Dibelius has suggested'.

About the same time as the Dibelius volume appeared, another veteran student of Acts, Henry J. Cadbury, who himself had paid no little attention to the style of the book, redressed the balance with *The Book of Acts in History* (A. and C. Black, 1955), in which he examined it successively in its Greek, Roman, Jewish and Christian settings. If we draw simultaneously on the insights of Dibelius and Cadbury, we may be saved from lopsidedness in our approach to Acts.

The first commentary on Acts in English to be published after the translation of the Dibelius volume was that by C. S. C. Williams in Black's New Testament Commentaries (1957). Williams paid proper attention to Dibelius's work but was not over-influenced by it: his commentary is in the best tradition of British biblical learning, scholarly and judicious. He dates Acts before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, and meets the argument that Luke's Gospel (to which Acts is the sequel) cannot be dated so early as that by maintaining that the 'former treatise' to which Acts is the sequel is not Luke in its final form but an earlier and shorter draft, popularly called Proto-Luke. (Older readers will recall how vigorously and ably the existence of Proto-Luke was defended by Vincent Taylor, of blessed memory.) Some reviewers observed that Williams's work was a commentary for the student rather than the preacher: that is no doubt true, but there is every reason why the preacher should continue to be a student. Williams's untimely death only a few years after the appearance of his commentary may have something to do with the fact that it receives less attention nowadays than it deserves: I consult it frequently, and never without profit.

Much better known is the commentary by Ernst Haenchen, which replaced earlier titles in the 'Meyer' series in 1956 and ran through several editions between then and the author's death in 1975. The German edition of 1965 was translated into English by Bernard Noble and Gerald Shinn under the supervision of Hugh Anderson; the work was then revised and brought up to

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date by R. McL. Wilson before it was finally published (Blackwell, 1971). It is as magisterial a volume in its English dress as in the German original: in both it runs to more than 700 pages.

Haenchen takes account of earlier studies in Acts in other languages than German. He finds indeed, that in England 'scholarship is governed by the spirit of conservatism'. If this judgment surprises those who recall that the two editors of *The Beginnings of Christianity* (Macmillan, 1920-33) were both English by birth and education, it suggests that Kirsopp Lake and Foakes Jackson, radical as they were held to be (especially Lake) by the standards of their own day, appear positively conservative by more recent standards. Haenchen acknowledges that the 'rich abundance' of linguistic and historical information contained in this great work ensures its abiding value 'even on the Continent' but judges that in critical matters it represents little advance on Adolf Harnack. So far as concerns much later British work on Acts, thinks Haenchen, Dibelius might never have written for all the notice that is taken of him: an exception is made in the case of C. S. C. Williams, who 'assembles practically everything which with any shadow of justification can be brought against Dibelius'. He concedes that, while 'Dibelius is not of course refuted by these arguments', yet the objections are well worth thinking 'over'.

For his own part, Haenchen is deeply indebted to Dibelius but he does not follow him slavishly. Dibelius was content to go along with the tradition that makes the author of Acts a companion of Paul: Haenchen finds this impossible to maintain. He differs from Dibelius with regard to the 'we' narrative: whereas Dibelius, with many others, saw in it evidence for an itinerary on which the author of Acts drew, Haenchen, from 1959 onwards, rejects the itinerary hypothesis and explains the 'we' as a literary device by which the author made his record more vivid, giving his readers the impression that they too are present at the events recorded.

As a historian, Haenchen finds, the author enjoyed a freedom which is granted today only to the writer of the better-class historical novel: this appears, for example, in his technique of scene-writing, his composition of speeches for leading characters, his simplification of the course of events so as to bring out his own theological perspectives. At times Haenchen exaggerates the extent of this 'simplification': thus when he says that 'Luke had to suppress the fact that long before Paul reached Rome the Christian mission had got a foothold and created a community there', he does insufficient justice to Luke's implication in Acts 18:2 that Christianity reached Rome before Claudius's expulsion decree, not to speak of his explicit mention of the brethren from Rome who walked south along the Appian way to greet Paul and escort him on the remainder of his journey to the city.

Another important German series—Lietzmann's *Handbuch*—was enriched in 1963 by a new commentary on Acts, the work of Hans Conzelmann (Mohr, Tübingen). This is a much more compressed commentary than Haenchen's: Conzelmann had dealt with the theological teaching of Acts nine years previously in the work translated into English under the title *The Theology of St Luke* (Faber, 1960), the conclusions of which are presupposed in the commentary. The commentary has not been translated into English.

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In Conzelmann's view, the original perspective of an imminent parousia has been replaced in Luke-Acts by a salvation-history schema. But while the commentator expresses his judgment

clearly where the evidence seems to him to be sufficient, he is content both in the introduction and in the commentary proper to present the evidence, together with other basic material, so that the reader may prosecute his own study and reach his own conclusions. An appendix presents the text of a number of relevant quotations from Lucian, Achilles Tatius, Josephus, Aristobulus, the *Apostolic Constitutions* and a couple of imperial edicts. The work is one more for the student than for the general reader, to an even greater extent than C. S. C. Williams's work.

In historical scepticism Conzelmann's commentary outdoes Haenchen's, to a point where Richard Hanson was stimulated to apply his treatment of Paul's voyage in Acts 27 to Thucydides's account of Nikias's voyage from Piraeus to Catana in Sicily in 415 BC, in order to provide, as he hoped, a *reductio ad absurdum* of Conzelmann's methodology ('The Journey of Paul and the Journey of Nikias: An Experiment in Comparative Historiography', *Studia Evangelica* 4, Berlin, 1968. pp. 315-318). Professor Hanson contributed his own commentary on Acts to the New Clarendon Bible (Oxford, 1967). The treatment is confined within the limits of the series to which the volume belongs. but within these limits it is an admirable commentary, another worthy representative of the best British tradition (if 'British' he stretched to include Irish'). By comparison with Haenchen and Conzelmann it is conservative, yet not conservative for conservatism's sake but conservative because of the evidence as Hanson assesses it. Acts is dated firmly within the first century, and not too late in the first century. For the earlier part of the book the author had to make do with scanty and floating sources; the continuous narrative in which they are woven together is a testimony to his literary skill. In particular, the Council of Jerusalem of Acts 15 is Luke's 'imaginative reconstruction' of the situation which produced the apostolic decree of verses 28f., the decree being the one firm historical datum which was available to him at this point. He was much better placed for the rest of his narrative: Hanson believes, like many before him, that the best explanation of the 'we' passages is that the author was personally present at the events which they narrate. He recognizes the difficulties presented by the ending of Acts, but argues that Luke intended his readers to understand that Paul was released at the end of his two years' house-arrest in Rome.

The New Clarendon Bible is designed for candidates for A-level Scripture and for students of New Testament in universities and colleges of education. The same kind of public is aimed at by the Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible, for which the volume on Acts was written by J. W. Packer (Cambridge, 1966). He has had actual experience of preparing candidates for A-level Scripture, and knows exactly the kind of commentary they need. 'In one sense', he says, 'Acts is not a scholar's book to dig and probe and select. It is a book of vital contacts and lively recollections that Luke has culled from friends and acquaintances and with consummate skill has ordered and written down.' While Luke is recognized as one of Paul's companions, some features are noted which could point to a date for Acts later in the first century, when memory had had time to play tricks. As for the purpose of the book: 'Whenever a reader has finished Acts and thought

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about it carefully, and then says with Paul. "I am a follower of the new way" Luke has achieved his purpose.'

Volume 31 in the Anchor Bible, *The Acts of the Apostles*, by Johannes Munck (Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y., 1967), was published two years after the author's death. His last illness

overtook him while the book was in its closing stages; it was completed by American colleagues, and equipped with a series of eccentric appendices, expressing viewpoints which he himself did not share. As readers of his major work, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (1959), know very well, Munck was a scholar of independent mind, and his independence is evident in this last work, though it is not the work it would have been if his health had not failed. He was a doughty opponent of the Tübingen school of F. C. Baur and his associates, whose influence he thought had survived too long, and his anti-Tübingen crusade was still being carried on when this commentary was being written. But it is going too far to blame the Tübingen school for the view that the author of Acts was a Gentile Christian: for those who identify the author of Acts with 'Luke the beloved disciple' (Col. 4:14), this is a natural inference from the context in which that phrase occurs. The author of Acts, whoever he was, was in Munck's view a friend and fellow-worker of Paul: 'One who could so describe Paul must have known him intimately and loved him.' He favoured an unusually early date for the work—'at the beginning of the sixties', that is to say, before Paul's appeal came up for hearing in the imperial court. Acts could be understood in relation to that hearing—not as a legal defence, but as Luke's testimony. relating to the charge that Paul's Gentile mission presented a threat, or at least a challenge, to the Roman Empire. Munck provides a select bibliography of twenty-one titles: it includes Conzelmann's *Theology of St Luke* (a work which, it is said, reflects the somewhat unexpected marriage between existentialism and neo-Hegelianism') but (significantly) omits Dibelius's *Studies*.

Another work by an independent thinker is *The Acts of the Apostles*, by Arnold Ehrhardt (Manchester University Press, 1969). This is not a commentary: it is a series of ten extramural lectures, delivered to members of the general public interested in biblical subjects. In 1958 Ehrhardt had published in the Scandinavian journal *Studia Theologica* an essay on 'The Construction and Purpose of the Acts of the Apostles' which was one of six studies selected for examination by C. K. Barrett in his *Luke the Historian in Recent Study* (1961). Ehrhardt insisted that he was an amateur in New Testament studies: his specialist fields were (first in point of time) Roman Law (in which he had held a chair in Frankfurt until he was evicted by the Nazis) and (after that) Ecclesiastical History (in which he lectured in Manchester University). From those other interests he was able to illustrate the New Testament with material not so readily at the command of every theologian. In dealing with the story of Cornelius, for example, he illustrated the spiritual hunger which must have afflicted serious-minded members of the Roman army by a military calendar of feast-days found at Dura-Europos on the Euphrates: 'We see from this calendar that the Roman army kept its Church parades with the same punctiliousness and drabness as any other army.'

Luke is described by Ehrhardt as 'a glutton for documentary evidence' who knew how to use it to best advantage. Luke's twofold history he regarded as

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the earliest example of a genre for which we have to wait 250 years before we come upon it again—in the writings of Eusebius. Luke was contemporary with at least the later events which he records, and an eyewitness of some of them. By the time he wrote, Jerusalem had fallen, James the Just and his successor Simeon were both dead, and 'much animosity, so it seems, had also died with them'. Luke could therefore ignore conflicts which, as Paul's letters show, seemed very important while they lasted. Indeed, 'the apostle might have frowned at various things which he is supposed to have said in Acts'.

One of the most fascinating passages in Ehrhardt's hook deals with the Simon Magus episode in Acts 8. He feels that 'Simon comes out much better from his encounter with the apostles than the tempestuous St Peter', who indeed 'trampled down the new plantation of St Philip' and thus lost for the church a man who might have been retained within it for its enrichment. Enough has been said to indicate that this popular but erudite work, entertaining and provocative as it is, is one which no serious student of Acts ought to neglect.

The volume on Acts for the New Century Bible was the work of William Neil (Oliphants, 1973). Like many others in this country written for the general Bible student, this work belongs to the middle-of-the-road British tradition. His introduction opens with a brief survey of the study of Acts since J. V. Bartlet wrote his commentary on the book for the old Century Bible in 1901. His own conclusion about the character of Acts is that it is 'a basically accurate account of what happened, recorded by a man whose evidence we have good cause to trust'. Luke, he insists, was both a theologian and a historian—a theologian in his own right, not a pale reflection or carbon copy of Paul, and a historian with a wide-ranging knowledge of the Mediterranean world, whose 'meticulous recording of detail in matters which we can verify would lead us to believe that, in other matters on which we have only his evidence, we are dealing with a reporter on whom we can rely'. William Neil had the gift of communicating the findings of scholarship to a non-specialist public, but he formed his own judgment on those findings, and expressed it lucidly.

The latest work to demand our attention is *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, by I. Howard Marshall (Inter-Varsity Press, 1980). This is a new title in the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, replacing an earlier commentary by an older scholar, E. M. Blaiklock (1959). It is the third volume in a trilogy which Howard Marshall has given us on the writings of Luke, following *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (1970) and *The Gospel of Luke in the New International Greek Testament Commentary* (1978). The commentary on Acts is neither so massive nor so technical as that on Luke: being intended (like the Tyndale Commentaries as a whole) for 'the general reader in his study of the Bible', it works from the RSV and not from the Greek text. But the same well-informed, up-to-date and accurate scholarship as was manifested in the larger work is no less evident here. Acts, he holds, was written (with the Third Gospel) as an account of Christian beginnings 'to strengthen faith and give assurance that its foundations are firm'. Evangelistic and apologetic motifs are discernible, but these do not represent Luke's primary purpose. The history is reliable; as for the theology, its main emphases are on the continuance of the divine purpose in history, the mission and the message, progress in the face of opposition, the inclusion of the

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Gentiles in the people of God, and the life and worship of the church.

Among earlier commentators on Acts, the one with whom Marshall interacts most vigorously is Haenchen. He acknowledges Haenchen's commentary as 'an outstanding piece of scholarship' but regrets its historical scepticism: those who thought that Bultmann was the last word in historical scepticism as regards the New Testament were in for a rude shock' when Haenchen's *Acts* appeared. Only one who was himself a master of the whole field could properly exercise the right to criticize Haenchen as Marshall does; but he is indeed a master of the whole field. In one place he goes so far as to speak of Haenchen's 'desire always to credit Luke with the worst motives'. I have sometimes got that impression myself in reading Haenchen, though I should be more reticent in voicing it. Let this be said: of all the

commentaries on Acts at present available to the student whose only language is English, Marshall's is the best, and even those who have access to the Greek text will learn much from him.

In conclusion, two works come up for mention which in different ways survey the study of Acts. One is a symposium: *Studies in Luke-Acts*, edited by L. E. Keck and J. L. Martyn in honour of Paul Schubert (Abingdon, Nashville and New York, 1966). Here are nineteen essays by seventeen scholars from many different countries, representing many different points of view, giving a fair picture of the state of the question as it was fifteen years ago (and it is not all that different today).

The other is *A History of the Criticism of the Acts of the Apostles*, by Ward Gasque (Mohr, Tübingen, 1975), which, after a brief account of the pre-critical study of Acts, gives a detailed assessment of the course of criticism from the early work of the Tübingen school to the later 1960s. He leaves the reader in no doubt of his own views on controversial issues, but his survey of the subject over the past 150 years is comprehensive, trustworthy and informative.

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