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Leading Characteristics of the Acts.

BY THE REV. F. G. GIVEN-WILSON, M.A.

IT is a commonplace to say that no books have ever been submitted to so rigorous and exhaustive an investigation as those of the Bible, and the reason for this is equally a commonplace. When so much that is vital to the Christian religion is bound up with questions of the authenticity and genuineness of its sacred books, it is inevitable that they should come under the severest criticism. Now the "Acts of the Apostles" affords a striking example of how a theory of its origin and purpose, which was put forward with all the weight of real learning, and under an attractive title which claimed to represent its underlying motive, has come to be recognized as untenable. The critics of the "Tendency school," as it has been called, who acknowledged as their leader the famous Tübingen professor, Ferdinand Christian Baur, held that the author of the "Acts" pursued his task of writing a history of the Early Church with a definite aim. His design was to reconcile the antagonism between the Jewish Christians and those Gentile Christians converted by the ministry of St. Paul. To accomplish this he purposely made his picture of the Apostle of the Jews similar to that of the Apostle of the Gentiles. Nor was it difficult for Baur and his school to show in support of their theory the many resemblances that were to be found in the ministries of St. Peter and St. Paul as recorded in the "Acts." Both perform miracles; both awaken the dead; both contend with a sorcerer; both are marvellously delivered from prison; and much more to the same effect. It is difficult indeed to believe that a book which betrays so simple and naïve a method should conceal so deep a design. If there are resemblances, the main features are quite distinct, and we cannot fail to see how widely different the two apostolic ministries are in circumstance and activity. Such coincidences as are undoubtedly to be found in the portraiture of St. Peter

and St. Paul may be explained by the fact that their lives were animated by the same faith, and exhibited the same spiritual power ; and, further, that the author was a literary artist, who took great pains in the selection of his matter, and wished to preserve some sort of unity out of the abundance of the material at his disposal.

It must not be understood that in consistently speaking of St. Luke as the author of the " Acts " the writer has taken for granted that the question is finally settled in favour of the Lucan authorship. He is aware that the view taken of the historical character of much of the first part of the book presents problems of great difficulty which cannot be ignored when the authorship is in question. At the same time he is satisfied that a strong case can be made in favour of St. Luke as the author of the Third Gospel as well as the " Acts," and that opinion has lately received the weighty support of so distinguished and careful a scholar as Professor Harnack of Berlin. The question of authorship is not involved—at least, directly—when we are discussing the subject matter of the " Acts "; though it is likely enough that the view we hold of the authorship will more or less influence the way in which we regard the book as a whole.

The object of this article is to bring together the leading characteristics of the " Acts "; and the first question to ask is, What was St. Luke's motive in writing his history ? What central idea filled his mind as he prepared himself for the task of writing an account of what passed among the disciples of Jesus when their Master was parted from them ? For a history this book is ; and those who are competent to judge do not hesitate to say that it is one of the most wonderful history books ever written. It is true that it is unlike all other histories : none the less it is a history—the only history we possess of the early days of the Church. The book has come down to us with the title " The Acts of the Apostles," or, more simply, " Acts." But it is doubtful whether St. Luke gave that or any other title to a book which was already intended to supplement his previous work, the Gospel which bears his name, and which records the life and teaching of Jesus. It

also seems certain that the Preface to his Gospel was meant to be an introduction to the whole book, of which the "Acts" is the second part; and perhaps the description of authorities given there refers to both parts of the work—the "eye-witnesses" being the authority for the life of our Lord, and the "ministers of the Word" for the history of the founding of the earliest Christian communities.¹

It will be noticed that in his second volume St. Luke does not set up any single personality as its central figure, for the simple reason that no one could compare with the unique character of the Master, Jesus Christ. The material that he has gathered together is not a collection of facts and incidents, but is grouped around, and chosen with great care to promote a single idea, which is "the power of the Spirit of Jesus in the Apostles manifested in history."² There we have the keynote of the "Acts," and that theme alone seemed to satisfy all requirements. Everything worthy of memory in the history of the early Christian communities could be ranged round this central idea. This method would alone supply the best standard of selection, and at the same time would connect the whole subject-matter with the first part, which recorded the words and actions of Jesus.

We may well regard it as a real inspiration which led St. Luke to produce such a wonderful result, and to preserve such a unity of purpose from the mass of details at his disposal. He tells us that he spared no pains to get information about "the things which have been fulfilled among us"; and such evidence as he obtained from those who were "eye-witnesses and ministers of the Word" he sifted with great care, while for a large part of his history he was in direct touch with the facts he records. But, alike in reproducing the evidence he had received from others, and in recording the facts which he himself witnessed, he shows a marvellous insight in choosing only those facts and incidents that best served his purpose—which was to demonstrate in the

¹ Von Soden, "History of Early Christian Literature," p. 211.

² See Harnack, "The Acts of the Apostles," Introduction, p. xviii.

ordered sequence of history "the power of the Spirit of Jesus in the Apostles."

The title "Acts of the Apostles" is somewhat misleading if the term "Apostle" is used in a restricted sense. Of the great majority of the Twelve, St. Luke apparently knew nothing; or, if we may judge from his silence with regard to them, that "there was nothing to tell about them which passed beyond the limits of a single uneventful history."¹ He describes the ministry of Stephen and Philip, of Barnabas and Apollos—men who do not properly belong to the Apostolic circle, but whose work of evangelization is recorded because of its distinctive character. These minor ministries circle round, so to speak, the work of the two great Apostles—St. Peter and St. Paul. Indeed, the book of the "Acts" is most naturally divided into a record of the work of these two dominating personalities: in the first part St. Peter is the central figure, in the second St. Paul is absolutely supreme. Yet we cannot describe the "Acts" as "the combination of two apostolic biographies." The writer's central idea alone forbids that. The controlling theme of "the power of the Spirit of Jesus in the Apostles" keeps the biographical element within certain limits. Our curiosity is left unsatisfied on many points. We are not told what was the end of either of the two great apostles—St. Peter and St. Paul. St. John, who is always mentioned in the early chapters as sharing with St. Peter the leadership of the Twelve, vanishes from the scene, and is heard of no more. The appointment of the "Seven" is described in detail, but nothing further is related of them, or how they performed their duties. It must appear strange indeed that there should be an almost complete silence as to the subsequent history of St. Peter after the detailed account of his deliverance from prison. We are left quite in the dark concerning the conversion of St. James, the Lord's brother, and how he came to occupy a prominent position in the Church. Equally obscure is the origin of the body of "elders," who appear to share with St. James the government of the Church at Jerusalem. The

¹ Harnack, "The Acts of the Apostles," Introduction, p. xix.

transition is a startling one to find St. James, and not St. Peter, presiding over the Council of Jerusalem without the slightest explanation of how he obtained that position of prominence and authority. But, as Harnack points out: "The very fact that St. Luke does not describe this revolution arouses our confidence."¹ It is characteristic of his method as a historian that he relates nothing, as he expressly states in his Preface, which had not been handed down to him, or about which he had received no information.

If the theme of the "Acts" may be correctly expressed, as Harnack maintains, by the phrase "the power of the Spirit of Jesus in the Apostles manifested in history," it is important to observe how St. Luke worked out his central idea. The power of the Spirit of Jesus manifested itself most impressively in the Mission of the Apostles. It is his aim, therefore, to describe the victorious progress whereby the proclamation of the Gospel was carried from Jerusalem to Rome. This simple solution of the problem shows his genius. Within little more than a quarter of a century the new religion has spread from Galilee and Judæa throughout the Empire. It has made disciples of Greeks and barbarians, bond and free, and has been proclaimed even before kings and proconsuls. That is the great fact St. Luke is intent upon describing. It is nothing else than this—the expansion of the Gospel—which at last has penetrated to the very heart of the Empire, Rome itself. At the very beginning of the "Acts" this object is most distinctly proclaimed—"Ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto Me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judæa, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth"; and (to quote from Harnack, who emphasizes this point so finely) "it is expressed yet more impressively in the great scene of the second chapter, which, in fact, anticipates the conclusion of the mighty drama, where, in words which sound like a triumphant conqueror's list of nations vanquished in a great campaign, we read: 'Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and dwellers in Mesopotamia,

¹ "Luke the Physician," p. 125.

Pontus, and Asia'—and the rest. As far as the Roman Emperor rules, and farther still beyond the bounds of his Empire, the world now hears the Evangelic message and accepts it!"¹

It is remarkable that even those scholars who do not admit the Lucan authorship are coming more and more to agree on this point—that in this central idea is to be found the key-note of the "Acts." And it is certain that from this point of view the whole course of the book not only becomes plainer and more instructive, but the reader is caught in the dramatic spirit which the author has imparted to his history, and is borne along in the onward sweep of the invincible progress of the Gospel, which it is his task to describe. Everything that might be held to hinder or obscure the reality of this progress is cut short. The second journey through Asia Minor is recorded with the utmost brevity. And if we accept the South-Galatian theory, here surely is a further proof for it, because St. Paul was traversing old ground ; and if on this journey he had founded new churches, we might reasonably expect that some description would be given of them. This fact also explains why the greater part of the third missionary journey is passed over in silence. But as the end draws near, and the goal is in sight, the narrative becomes fuller and more precise. The particular stages of the trial of St. Paul, and the details of the last voyage to Rome, are told at length ; because, as Harnack justly says, "that trial is a grand confession of Christianity before the whole world and its rulers, represented by the Roman governor and King Agrippa ; while the voyage and shipwreck tend to intensify the suspense of the reader as he wonders whether after all the Gospel will be proclaimed in the metropolis of the world through the preaching of St. Paul."² "And so we came to Rome." With these words the conclusion of the book is introduced, which closes with this brief record. "And Paul abode two whole years in his own hired dwelling, and received all that went in unto him, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness, none forbidding him."

¹ Harnack, "The Acts of the Apostles," pp. xxi., xxii. ² *Ibid.*, p. xxii.

Why, it may be asked, does the book end so abruptly? Why is there no mention of St. Paul's martyrdom and death? Simply because, with the bringing of the Gospel to Rome, the author considers that his purpose is fulfilled. He has shown how the work of introducing the Gospel of Jesus to the world has been accomplished by the first generation of Christian believers. "All that happened since those days was nothing new, but only the natural continuation of a development then set going."¹

This great work was not done, could not be done, except in the face of the greatest trials and difficulties. Yet it is not the perils by the way, the hardships of travel, or the cruel discouragements which every pioneer of the Gospel must expect, that St. Luke is concerned to dwell upon. It is characteristic of him that he records the sufferings and persecutions of the Apostles without comment, his aim being to show how the "good news" was brought from city to city along the great trunk roads of the Empire. His attention is absorbed by the fact of its triumphant progress. But if he passes over the experiences of the Apostles and the treatment they met with, the way in which their message was received greatly interests him. And that brings us to another characteristic of the "Acts"—the relation of the Christian religion to Judaism. It is part of St. Luke's intention to prove that the Gospel of Jesus does not stand in opposition to the Jewish religion, but is its fulfilment. The speeches of St. Peter are designed to show that Christ is the fulfilment of prophecy. St. Paul, he is careful to remind his hearers, always makes a point of going to the Jews first. Whatever town or city he visits, he goes first to the synagogue of the Jews, and expounds to them their Scriptures to prove that Jesus is the Christ. Only when the Jews reject him and his teaching does he turn to the Gentiles. There is a very interesting incident recorded in the "Acts" which brings out St. Paul's anxiety, in the face of the strongest personal conviction, not to wound Jewish susceptibilities. When the

¹ Von Soden, "History of Early Christian Literature," p. 216.

Apostle came to Jerusalem to present the offerings he had collected for the mother-church as a token of respect and love from the new churches he had founded, it was represented to him how strong was the opposition to one who had taught that it was not necessary for Gentile converts to conform to Jewish customs and traditions. Accordingly, in order to remove the suspicions urged against him by the Judaizing Christians, who were doubtless especially prominent in Jerusalem, he submitted to the suggestion of St. James and the "elders" of giving some striking demonstration that he was a faithful observer of the Law. Joining four of the disciples, who had taken upon them the vow of a Nazarite, he allowed his head to be shaved, and, defraying their expenses, took part with them in the customary ritual purifications. When these were accomplished he presented himself in the Temple courts to offer the sacrifice which signified the fulfilment of the vow. The plan seems to have had the desired effect, and to have satisfied the scruples of the Jewish Christians of Jerusalem, for we read that it was unbelieving Jews from Asia who set upon him, and raised the cry that he had polluted the Temple by introducing uncircumcised persons within its sacred precincts.

In this connection we may note a further point which St. Luke had in view, though it serves only a subordinate purpose, and is a matter of incidental comment rather than of direct statement. Throughout his book he seeks to defend Christianity against the reproach of being a danger to the State. Almost without exception the Roman officials appear in a favourable light. It is the Jews who are the persecutors of the Apostles. It is they who represent St. Paul and his companions as rebels, who are turning the world upside down, and doing contrary to the decrees of Cæsar; while the Roman magistrates by their justice and clemency testify to the sincerity and law-abiding character of the Christians. At the same time it would hardly be right to suppose that St. Luke had a political motive in writing his book. The "Acts" is no apology for the Christian religion like those which were addressed in later times to

the Roman Emperor. In tracing the progress of the Gospel, till at last it was planted in Rome itself, the historian could not fail to notice, and so indirectly to record, the contrast between the behaviour of the Roman authorities and that of the Jews.

There is a further characteristic still to notice, which is a marked feature of the Third Gospel as well as of the "Acts," and makes for the unity of authorship of these two books. The Gospel of St. Luke is above all the gospel of joy and gladness.¹ With that note it begins and ends. The son promised to Zacharias shall bring him joy and gladness, and "many shall rejoice at his birth" (i. 14). The announcement of the angel to the shepherds of Bethlehem is, "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy . . . for unto you is born this day a Saviour" (ii. 10, 11). At the return of the "Seventy" Jesus "rejoiced in the holy Spirit" (x. 21), in giving thanks to the Father for the success of their mission. "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth" is the note of the three parables of the 15th chapter, peculiar to St. Luke. The people "rejoiced for all the glorious things that were done by Him" (xiii. 17); and Zacchæus received Jesus "joyfully" (xix. 6) at the prospect of entertaining Him at his house. When our Lord entered Jerusalem in triumph, "the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works which they had seen" (xix. 37). After the Ascension, the disciples "worshipped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy: and were continually in the temple, blessing God" (xxiv. 52, 53). With these words the Gospel closes.

It is the same with the "Acts." Not trials and sufferings, but joy and gladness, is the prevailing note. The first disciples took their food "with gladness and singleness of heart" (ii. 46). The Apostles departed from the presence of the Council "rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for the Name" (v. 41). There was "great joy" in the city of Samaria

¹ See Harnack, "Acts of the Apostles," Excursus III., "St. Luke and Christian Joy."

(viii. 8) when the word was preached there ; the baptized eunuch goes "on his way rejoicing" (viii. 39), after he had been instructed by Philip. Barnabas was "glad" when he had seen the work of God's grace among the Gentiles at Antioch (xi. 23) ; so were the Gentiles of Antioch in Pisidia, when St. Paul preached to them the word of salvation—"they were filled with joy, and with the Holy Ghost" (xiii. 52). At Lystra St. Paul declares the proof of God's gracious providence in that He gives them "rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling your hearts with food and gladness" (xiv. 17) ; and when he and Barnabas report their success in Asia Minor, as they passed through Phœnicia and Samaria "they caused great joy unto all the brethren" (xv. 3). Also the jailor at Philippi "rejoiced greatly, with all his house" (xvi. 34) when he believed and was baptized. If we want to see how unconquerable was the gladness of heart, and unflinching the outlook of faith, which were the result of the power of the Spirit of Jesus in the Apostles, we have only to watch St. Paul's conduct during the storm and shipwreck of his voyage to Rome. Though in the humiliating position of a prisoner, his courage and self-control, as well as a practical insight into the needs of the moment gathered from a wide experience in the most varied situations of life, compel the respect of those around him, until they finally defer to him as their natural leader. It is he who exhorts his companions "to be of good cheer," when they had given up all hope, and it is by obeying his directions that they all get safe to shore. A courage and devotion so sublime and unearthly, which nothing could weaken nor depress, was quickly recognized as a characteristic of the disciples of Jesus. When first the Apostles came into prominence, St. Luke records how the Sanhedrin observed "the boldness of Peter and John" ; and now that the goal is reached, and the Gospel has been triumphantly carried to Rome itself, he brings to an end this unique and wonderful history with a sentence which almost leaves us bewildered by its sheer simplicity, "And Paul taught the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness, none forbidding him."