

I am in the middle of a thread dealing with the New Testament book of Acts, the first account that we have of the history of the Christian church at its very beginnings - starting with the events happening right after the resurrection of Jesus and covering the spread of the Christian faith through the Roman world up until the time Paul reached the city of Rome, presumably in the early 60s CE. And so this is an account of the first three decades of Christianity. It's the only one we have of this period. That's one reason it is so important to know if it's historically reliable or not - if it's not, we have very restricted access to what was happening in these most critical years of the early Christian movement.

Before I discuss the issue of Acts' historical reliability (the subject of my debate with myself in front of my class two weeks ago), I need to provide a bit more background. In my textbook on the New Testament I provide two brief discussions of the literary artistry of Luke, the alleged author of Acts; these discussions are relevant to the question of whether he means to present (a) a disinterested historical account of what happened in early Christianity or, instead, (b) a more artistic literary representation in which historical information has been shaped for literary (or theological) reasons, or, possibly, (c) some kind of combination of the two, both a historical and a literary account.

First it is important to see how Luke makes certain events in the book of Acts parallel events that he earlier described in vol. 1, the Gospel of Luke, in the life of Jesus; then one should see how he establishes parallel events within Acts itself (say, between Peter in the first part and Paul in the second).

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Readers of the New Testament have long noticed ...

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