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HOW WAS ACTS WRITTEN?

TYPOLOGY is most often used in support of faith: if the patterns of the Old Testament are repeated in the New, it is because it is God's plan to predict and to fulfil. It is less often used as a tool of radical criticism. This is done by M. D. Goulder in *Type and history in Acts* (SPCK, 27s. 6d.). The author is principal of the Union Theological College in Hong Kong.

He argues that the mind of the author of Luke and Acts worked according to a pattern, so that historical detail was sometimes fitted into a predetermined scheme, and sometimes distorted and suppressed by it. The shape of the story of Israel has to be repeated in the beginnings of Christianity, and the early Church has to live over again the life of Christ. "The story of Acts is a re-enactment of the story of the Gospel. It consists of a catena of parallels covering all the major incidents of Jesus' incarnate life. Christ lives on in his Church, and continues from the ascension all that he had begun from the beginning of the Gospel." In the Gospel, the details of the end repeat the details of the beginning—Jesus, for example, is wrapped in swaddling clothes at his birth and his death. Mr Goulder brings out many remarkable correspondences of events, words and phrases.

The Book of Acts has a fourfold structure, as the faith spreads outwards from Israel to the Hellenist fringe, to the Gentiles and to Rome. Paul's own mission repeats a pattern four times. The whole book is cyclical, with a sequence of nine steps in each stage. Each section moves from a descent of the Spirit to a death and resurrection. And behind the pattern of the New Testament story is the pattern of the Old Testament. In an appendix Mr Goulder suggests that the author of Luke-Acts was influenced by certain numbers, such as four, and seven, and

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forty, and saw a symbolic meaning in names.

This method of criticism, through typology, was suggested more than sixty years ago, by R. B. Rackham in his Westminster Commentary on Acts (1901); and the parallels, both in the incidents and in the words in which they are told, between the biographies of Jesus and Paul, as well as other apparent coincidences in the New Testament stories, have often been noted. "This is because the Church is the body of Christ, and each movement of her life is a reliving of his life."

But if this is so, how far can we rely on Luke-Acts as factual and historical? Mr Goulder concludes that the Book of Acts is "not straightforward history but typological history". "St Luke never intended to write a 'true' account of the Church's early years at all, in the sense that his book should include any story for which he had no evidence in Christian tradition. Symbol was a factor of weight at least comparable to fact with him; and it is clear that sometimes the existence of a type in the life of Jesus, or in the Old Testament, or elsewhere in the life of the Church, has a determining influence on the record he has left us." Where a story is apparently typological, it is not likely to be factually true; conversely, where facts are mentioned which have no typological significance, it is probable that the event actually happened.

This leads Mr Goulder to some radical conclusions. The story of the ascension, for example, is almost wholly symbolic: "St Luke had overwhelming reasons for inventing a story describing the ascension if one did not exist". Similarly with his story of the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost: "the New Testament writers before St John cold-shoulder his Pentecost with a silence so universal as to deepen our suspicion that the story is composed from the types and nothing else". The birth stories also are typological rather than factual; they play no further part in the New Testament.

And what really happened at the death of Jesus? Possibly an empty tomb, followed by apparent visions, leading to excitement and speaking with tongues, and then a gradual decline. "St Luke abolished the uninspiring vagueness and gradualness of

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this story by composing myths out of scripture which should illuminate the meaning of what actually happened, even if they were not themselves actually true. He closed the list of appearances with an imaginary visible ascension to heaven, recalling Moses and Elijah . . . His completed story was simple, memorable and attractive. It presented the spiritual truth in a form which the uneducated could grasp. There were few Christians, half a century and more after the event, to deny that this is what occurred, and if there were they very likely understood what St Luke was doing, and saw no more reason to object to his myth than he to writing it."

The Book of Acts, written with typological prepossessions, has probably hidden the real truth about the beginning of the Church, which was not originally Jewish, led by the Apostles, expanding later to the Hellenists. The Church really began among the Hellenists: "it looks more probable, we can say no more, that Stephen was the leader of the Church in Jerusalem than that Peter was, since it was Stephen who was martyred . . . Peter's primacy was due partly to his ability to survive, partly to his obedience to the Lord's command to travel, and partly to his follow-up missions to the Hellenist churches".

When we reach the story of Paul, we are nearer to historical fact. Luke tells the truth about him, "but in a limited and stylised way, and some occasional distortions where he thought proper". The earlier part of the story is suspect—the famine-visit and the Council of Jerusalem never happened—but the later part is full of actuality.

What did the author of Luke and Acts believe himself to be doing? We must remember that he did not have our critical and historical point of view. He was, says Mr Goulder, a fundamentalist and a poet, and he did not realise the contradiction between the two. "The third Gospel and Acts form the bridge between the first and fourth Gospels. St Matthew believed that things for which he had no evidence, and which were in fact untrue, came to pass that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets. St Luke believed this too, but he was not content to write about them in two or three lines as did his predecessor. And

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as he wrote, his method made plain to him subconsciously that he was selecting, taking a sentence from this type and a phrase from that, writing an account of an ideal incident, the birth, or the ascension of the Saviour, or the coming of his Spirit. And it was in this gift that he excelled. It is the myths of St Luke which dominate the Christian calendar.”

A DIFFERENT APPROACH, also with radical results, is found in *The structure of Luke and Acts*, by A.Q. Morton and the late G.H.C. Macgregor (Hodder & Stroughton, 21s.). Mr Morton is co-author of *Christianity and the computer*, already mentioned. In this second book he again claims that some of the problems of New Testament criticism can be solved objectively, by counting and measurement.

Since Luke and Acts are compilations, not original works, questions of authorship cannot be answered by computer-calculations of details of literary style. But something can be deduced, say the authors of this second book, from the fact (for which they give some evidence) that papyrus was sold, whether as roll or as codex, in standard sizes. Matthew, Luke and Acts are almost exactly the same length and John three-quarters of the same measure. They conclude that a full ‘book’ would consist of 240 columns. To reduce two or more earlier sources into a work of this size would require calculations which, using Roman figures would be difficult; so the editor would simplify his task by taking blocks of material from each of his sources in turn. If we accept Streeter’s theory, our present gospel according to Luke is compiled in this way from two sources, Proto-Luke (incorporating Q) and Mark, in alternating blocks. A large section of Mark was omitted, through lack of space. A new preliminary section was added, and the passion story at the end combined the two sources more closely. But it all had to be brought to a close before the papyrus gave out. The authors give their reasons for certain modifications of Streeter’s theory.

Was the Book of Acts compiled in the same way? No source of Acts has survived, as Mark has survived as a source of Luke. But the book seems to consist of a simpler narrative, into

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which a number of long paragraphs have been inserted. Are these Proto-Acts and another source or sources, which have been combined? The authors show reason for thinking that Proto-Luke, Proto-Acts and Mark are all about the same length. The insertions also are surprisingly similar in size. Like the gospel according to Luke, Acts has had a new beginning added.

For the elaborate calculations on which this theory is built, reference must be made to the book itself, which ends with an analysis of the subject matter of Acts, paragraph by paragraph, showing where the writer has moved from one source to another. Then, in a long appendix, follow the complete text of both Luke and Acts, with the transitions marked.

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