



From Atheist to Theist (Part 39)

Archaeology and Acts

By

Mark McGee

I'm answering a question often asked of me by atheists – What would move a strong atheist to become a strong theist? In my case the answer was evidence for theism, specifically for Christian theism.

I started sharing the evidence that can lead an atheist to theism and Christianity several years ago ([click here to read the first article in this series](#)). We've recently been looking at evidence for the reliability of the New Testament writings.

So far we've looked at –

- The Gospel Accounts
- Paul's Writings
- James' Writing
- Peter's Writings
- John's Writings (1 John)
- John's Writings (2 and 3 John)
- John's Authorship of Revelation (Internal Evidence)

- John's Authorship of Revelation (External Evidence)
- Jude
- Luke's Authorship of Acts (Internal Evidence)
- Luke's Authorship of Acts (External Evidence)

We move now to the archaeological evidence concerning Luke's authorship of the Book of Acts.

[Just a reminder that I'm only revealing the evidence available in the early part of 1971 during my investigation. A future series will look at evidence that has been discovered since that time.]

I found researching archaeology fascinating in 1971. It was a way of looking at the past through what people had done during their lives: making pottery, tools, jewelry, clothing, coins, monuments, weapons, drawings, carvings, writings, building structures, etc. It was also interesting to compare ecofacts with artifacts to see what was going on with the environment surrounding human life in ancient times.

Dr. Edward Hindson introduced me to the study of archaeology during my investigation into the existence of God. He wrote a book that was part of the Baker Studies In Biblical Archaeology series. The title is The Philistines and the Old Testament (Baker Book House, 1971). It was the first book I read about archaeology and the Bible and is still available for sale online.

I also read *An Introduction to Bible Archaeology* by Dr. Howard Vos (Moody Press, 1956), *Archaeology and Bible History* by Dr. Joseph Free (Scripture Press, 1969), and was introduced to the writings of Sir William Ramsay. It was in Ramsay's writings that I learned about the rich archaeological support for the Book of Acts.

Ramsay, as it turns out, did something similar to what I was doing. He set out to demonstrate that Acts was filled with historical, geographical and archeological errors. Ramsay, who was a professor of Humanities at the University of Aberdeen, spent about 25 years retracing the apostles travels and declared that Acts was an accurate description of the 1st century world. Ramsay converted to Christianity and stated that Luke was one of the greatest historians of the ancient world. Ramsay wrote many books about Acts and the Apostle Paul in the years following. *The Cities of St. Paul*

(Baker Book House, 1949) is one of Ramsay's writings I've used in my research about cities in the Roman Empire in the 1st century AD. Another good book of his to read is *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1915).

Acts and Archaeology

It's important to remember that the claim of the New Testament is that Luke wrote a lengthy document to someone named Theophilus.

Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed.

LUKE 1:1-4

Luke's writing to Theophilus ended up being two scrolls, though the second was a continuation of the first:

The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen, to whom He also presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs, being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.

ACTS 1:1-3

Luke was apparently an educated man and physician by vocation (Colossians 4:14). Many scholars believe he was also an excellent researcher and historian. As I read through Luke's writings (Gospel of Luke and Book of Acts), I was impressed with Luke's meticulous detailing of people, events and environment (locations). The question before me was whether what Luke wrote was accurate.

I was a journalist at the time of my investigation and could see Luke's process of interviewing people about what they knew, then writing it in a way that would be understood by someone who was not involved in the research process. Journalists and historians do that every day. That's what Luke was apparently doing. Though Luke did travel with the Apostle Paul and wrote about what he saw from his own experience, he was not a personal witness of what we read in the first part of his writing to Theophilus (eg. life and ministry of

Christ, early days of the Church in Jerusalem, Paul's conversion and early ministry). Luke the researcher/historian interviewed people who were eyewitnesses of the days when Jesus walked and taught in Israel and the Apostles preached the good news of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem.

One of the benefits of archaeology is that it can confirm or deny information written about people, events and places centuries earlier. I had already done something similar in the Old Testament:

- [Old Testament Archaeology 1](#)
- [Old Testament Archaeology 2](#)
- [Old Testament Archaeology 3](#)
- [Old Testament Archaeology 4](#)
- [Old Testament Archaeology 5](#)

I proceeded to do the same thing for the New Testament, and specifically for Acts, since it contained so many truth claims that could be confirmed or denied through archaeology. Not finding something in archeology to support a truth claim doesn't mean a truth claim is not true. It just means nothing has been found to confirm or deny the claim. What I was looking for were archaeological findings that would support or reject the accuracy of Acts.

The sheer volume of facts in Acts that archaeology addresses is massive, and so I will share several examples of the process of confirming information through archaeology. First, we will look at the names, places and environments mentioned in the first five chapters of Acts to see what we can learn about them from archaeology. You can do the same thing and research every name, place, artifact and ecofact mentioned in Acts. It takes time, but is well worth the

effort. In the second part of this study, we will look at several of the most important archaeological finds pertaining to the Book of Acts.

Names

- Theophilus .. common name in the 1st century for non-Jews .. It meant “friend of god” or “lover of god” .. The name has been found on inscriptions throughout the area of the old Roman Empire .. a 1st century high priest was named Theophilus according to an ossuary inscription and the writings of Josephus (Antiquities – Theophilus ben Ananus)
- Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus .. Joseph was a common Jewish name .. Barsabas was an Aramaic nickname (son of the Sabbath) .. Justus was a Latin name (may have been from Galilee because name is confirmed from Tiberias) ..
- Matthais .. common Jewish name of 1st century ..
- Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven .. Jews from the Diaspora traveled to

Jerusalem for feast days .. that included Jews from throughout the world .. the nations mentioned in Acts 2 existed in the 1st century AD and archaeological findings support there being Jews living in those countries during the 1st century AD .. many Jewish groups in various nations date to the 3rd century BC .. many of the Jews of the Diaspora changed to speaking the language of their new land over time, which is why they were surprised to hear the message of the disciples of Christ at Pentecost in their “own language,” the language “in which we were born” (Acts 2:5-12) ..

- Pontius Pilate .. mentioned in Luke’s Gospel and in Acts chapters 3, 4 and 13 .. archaeologists found the “Pilate Stone” at Caesarea Maritima ten years before my investigation .. the stone confirmed that Pontius Pilate was “prefect of Judea” from 26 – 37 AD ..

- Herod .. the Herodians descended from Esau rather than Jacob .. Herod the Great descended from Antipas who had been appointed governor of Idumaea by the Hasmonean king Alexander Jannaeus .. Antipas' son Antipater became governor after his father .. Antipater received the procuratorship of Judea from Julius Caesar .. Antipater appointed his son Herod to be governor over Galilee as a teenager .. Herod became tetrarch of Judea in 41 BC and following fierce fighting in 37 BC, Herod became King of Judea under Caesar Augustus .. Herod ruled Judea from 37-4 BC and was known for committing many atrocities against family and enemies .. Herod the Great (as he was known) rebuilt the city of Samaria and rebuilt and expanded the Temple in Jerusalem .. Herod the Great is the Herod we find in Matthew 2 and Luke 1 .. Herod the Great died in 4 BC and his son, Herod Antipas, became ruler over the

northern province of Galilee and Perea .. Herod Antipas ruled from 4 BC to 39 AD and is the same Herod we read about in most of the Gospels (he had John the Baptist beheaded) and early parts of Acts .. another son of Herod the Great was Herod Archelaus .. he ruled over Judea and Samaria until the Roman government removed him from office .. Herod Agrippa I was the grandson of Herod the Great and became ruler of Galilee and Perea after his uncle, Herod Antipas, was banished .. Herod Agrippa I killed James the Apostle in Acts 12 .. Herod Agrippa I died and his son, Herod Agrippa II, and was given rule over some territories when he became of age .. Herod Agrippa II eventually became the king who Paul addressed in Acts 25 .. some of what is known about the Herodians from archaeology includes building projects, coins, inscriptions, pottery, the writings of the 1st century

historian Josephus and, of course, the writings of the New Testament ..

- Captain of the Temple .. mentioned in Acts 4 .. we learn something about this position in the Talmud (Kodashim, Middot) .. the Captain of the temple was in charge of policing the Temple area ..
- Sadducees .. mentioned in Acts 4 .. the Sadducees was the Jewish party of the high priest's family and other wealthy families .. they rose to power during the Intertestamental Period and became politically powerful .. they claimed to be descendants of Solomon's high priest, Zadok .. even though they were in charge of the Temple and its services, the Sadducees were materialistic and didn't believe in angels, demons, or the resurrection ..
- Annas and Caiaphas .. mentioned in Acts 4 .. the 1st century historian Josephus wrote that Annas was high priest in the early part of the 1st century

and that Joseph Caiaphas became high priest in 18 AD and served until 36 AD .. Caiaphas was the son-in-law of Annas .. Annas and Caiaphas were involved in questioning Jesus after His arrest (Matthew 26; John 18) .. though only one person could serve as high priest at a time, former high priests were often referred to by the title, similar to how former presidents are still called by that title and former prime ministers are still called by that title .. [in 1990, almost 20 years after I became a Christian, 12 ossuaries were found in a tomb archaeologists believed belonged to the Caiaphas family .. one of the ossuaries contained an inscription that read Joseph, son of Caiaphas]

- John and Alexander .. mentioned in Acts 4 .. little is known about their identity .. they may have been members of the high priest's family ("John, and Alexander, and as many as were of the family of

the high priest”) or leading members of the Sanhedrin ..

- Sanhedrin .. mentioned in Acts chapters 4 and 22, in addition to Matthew, Mark and Luke .. the Sanhedrin was the ruling council in Israel, started during the Intertestamental Period .. we might think of it as a Supreme Court that met daily, sometimes as a Great Sanhedrin with all 71 members present or a Lesser Sanhedrin with 23 members present .. the Sanhedrin included members of the Sadducees and Pharisees .. the Apostle Peter addressed the Sanhedrin as “Rulers of the people and elders of Israel” ..
- Multitude who believed .. thousands of Jews were responding to the apostles’ powerful preaching about the resurrection of Jesus .. none of the new disciples lacked anything because people who had land or houses sold them and brought the

proceeds to the apostles .. the apostles distributed to each as anyone had need (Acts 4)

- Barnabas .. Joses, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated ‘Son of Encouragement’), a Levite of the country of Cyprus” .. Joses was a common Jewish name that was a form of the name Joseph .. Barnabas was the Greek form for an Aramaic name .. it meant “son of consolation, encouragement” .. he was a Levite (Hebrew tribe of Levi) who came from Cyprus, a large island in the Mediterranean Sea .. a community of Jews on Cyprus was known from at least the 2nd century BC .. the primary archaeological information about this Barnabas comes from the Book of Acts .. Barnabas owned land and sold it and brought the money to the apostles so they could distribute to people in need ..

- Ananias .. common Jewish name in the 1st century .. three different Jews with the name Ananias mentioned in Acts ..
- Sapphira .. common Jewish name in the 1st century .. archaeological find of several ossuaries with inscriptions of the name Sapphira ..
- Gamaliel .. Acts 5:34 describes Gamaliel as a member of the Sanhedrin, a Pharisee and teacher of the law held in respect by all the people .. we learn in Acts 22 that the Apostle Paul had been a student of Gamaliel many years earlier .. Josephus mentions Gamaliel as do the Talmud and Mishnah .. Gamaliel was the son of Simeon ben Hillel and grandson of Hillel the Elder ..
- Theudas .. Josephus mentioned a man named Theudas who was a Messianic pretender about 40-44 AD, which would have been after the Sanhedrin council .. the Theudas mentioned by Gamaliel led a revolt with 400 men and was

killed .. this may have been a different Theudas than the messianic pretender Josephus described in Antiquities ..

- Judas of Galilee .. common Jewish name in the 1st century .. Judas of Galilee mentioned by Josephus in Antiquities as a man from Gamala (Gamla) who led a rebellion during the time of the census of Cyrenius ..

Places

- Jerusalem .. confirmed 1st century city name ..
- Judea .. confirmed 1st century regional name ..
- Samaria .. confirmed 1st century regional name ..
- Galilee .. confirmed 1st century city name ..
- Mount Olivet .. confirmed 1st century mountain name (near Jerusalem) ..
- Akel Dama .. confirmed 1st century location (traditionally located on southern side of Hinnom Valley where it meets Kidron Valley) ..
- King David's tomb .. Josephus, historian living during 1st century AD, wrote about David's tomb and how John Hyrcanus and Herod the Great plundered the tomb for money and other valuables .. the tomb may have been destroyed by the Roman army during the Bar Kokhba revolt in the early 2nd century .. exact location not known, but some archaeologists think it to be on Jerusalem's

southeastern hill, some near the southern end of Hezekiah's Tunnel ..

- The Temple .. the Temple that existed during the 1st century was known as the Second Temple (Solomon's being the first) .. the Second Temple (built by Zerubbabel and expanded by Herod) was destroyed by the Roman army in 70 AD (Josephus was present at the destruction and wrote about it in The Jewish War and Jewish Antiquities) .. the early Jewish followers of Christ would have had access to the Temple complex
- Gate of the temple which is called Beautiful .. some archaeologists and scholars believe the gate called 'Beautiful' was the same as Josephus' Nicanor Gate (also called Corinthians Gate) .. others think it was more likely a different gate, possibly the Shushan Gate in the Eastern Wall of the Temple Mount or the Double Gate on the Southern Wall ..

- Solomon's Porch .. the healing of the lame man in Acts 3 at the Beautiful Gate was apparently close to Solomon's Porch from Luke's description of the healing event .. Josephus wrote about Solomon's Porch being on the east side of the Temple complex ..

Environment

- Sabbath's Day Journey .. rabbis interpreted Mosaic Law to mean travel on foot not to exceed two-thousand cubits (about 3,000 feet) .. distance disciples traveled from Mount Olivet to Jerusalem was at the maximum of the Sabbath's Day journey ..
- Cast lots .. one of three ways Jews used to discern God's will during and prior to 1st century ..

Next eBook

In the next part of this report we will look at several of the most important archaeological finds pertaining to the Book of Acts.

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