Prologue to the Commentary on Acts

Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. AD 350–428)

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PROLOGUE TO THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

[Translated by Ernst von Dobschütz] I. Long ago, indeed very long ago, by the grace of God we finished the commentary upon the gospel of the most blessed Luke, and accordingly without delay sent to thee the book as thou didst request by letter, O most admirable Eusebius, of all bishops most dear to me, by that writing discharging my obligation to the blessed Eusebius who was at that time living, and who not only bore the same name as thou but had also the same zeal for virtue; and indeed he was also succeeded by thee in his ecclesiastical dignity. And you both have had like zeal for the sacred Scriptures, so that you manifested like desire for the labors of the blessed Luke which he expended in the writing addressed to Theophilus, dedicating to him both the gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. For he requested from us the commentary upon the gospel, intending, no doubt, later to ask also from us one upon the Acts of the Apostles; but thou prizing very highly the possession of the interpretation of the gospel, didst desire that the exposition of the Acts of the Apostles, still lacking, be undertaken by me.

II. Now that the blessed Luke composed this writing, it is not difficult for him who does not merely superficially glance over the sacred books to see; but it would be well that the scope of the book be set forth by us also; for the gospels afford us accurate knowledge of the economy (of salvation) and the (ideal of) conduct which are according to Christ; in what manner he was begotten, what were the circumstances which attended his birth, how submitting with great fidelity to the conduct prescribed by the law until he was thirty years of age, he came to his baptism, initiating the new covenant in prototype, the reality of which is the resurrection but the type of which is Christian baptism, as this symbolizes both death and resurrection according to the saying of the blessed Paul which saith, ”As many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death; we were buried therefore with him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with him by the likeness of his death we shall be also by that of his resurrection. For it is manifest that in the baptism with which the Lord Christ was baptized our baptism was accomplished;

with which therefore he commanded the apostles also to baptize men throughout the world, since indeed he himself having withdrawn from the conduct that is according to the law set forth the gospel way of life, having chosen disciples whom he thought adapted to his teaching, and having set forth the laws which were especially adapted to such way of life, and thus having by wonders and various words and deeds rendered them fully receptive of the grace of the Holy Spirit, by which grace now especially they received all knowledge with accuracy and were made competent for the instruction of the whole world, as the Lord himself saith in the gospels, " Yet many things I have to say but ye cannot bear (them) now; when he, the Spirit of truth shall come he will lead you into all truth," and in the Acts of the Apostles, "But ye shall receive power when the Holy Spirit is come upon |364 you, and ye shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and unto the ends of the earth. And to all these things as a crowning conclusion he added the resurrection, which is a token of the general resurrection of men, but above all of the new creation in which all creation is to be recreated with men----"If any man is in Christ he is a new creature. The old things have passed away, behold all things have become new. But this (i.

e., the resurrection, or perhaps the new creation) we learn perfectly from the gospels when the Lord Christ rising from the dead commanded his own disciples to transmit to all men the faith in him ---- "Make them disciples, baptizing into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit "----and to teach them that they should observe with carefulness all things which he has commanded. But it remained for us to learn in what manner it was possible for the disciples to bring these things to accomplishment, since it was a wholly new thing and altogether incredible that fishermen, born in the country, acquainted only with the language of the Syrians, altogether uneducated, twelve in number, should fill the world with a story so incredible that a man crucified in Judea rose from the dead, giving to all men assurance of the resurrection.

III. (1) On this account the blessed Luke, in addition to the writing of the gospel, composed this book for us, teaching how the Lord Christ has ascended into the heavens and how the Holy Spirit has come down upon his apostles, and in what way by his grace it became possible that the whole world should be filled with the teaching of Christ, and in what order God has wrought these things with much wisdom, having formerly brought Jews to piety (i. e., Christianity) in order that it might be evident that the way of life and the faith which are according to Christ are not opposed or hostile to the ordinance of the law or rather to the God who put forth the law; and having after this with mysterious dispensations sent forth upon the rest of men the instruction in piety in many and very various ways; and first by the scattering of many of the pious in consequence of the things that happened in respect to Stephen; as a result of which then Philip brought piety (Christianity) to the Samaritans and taught it also to the eunuch from Ethiopia; and certain Cyprians and Cyrenians came as far as to Antioch teaching the things of Christ not to Jews only but also to Greeks;

and when they that were in Judea learned these things they were astonished at that which had taken place, and sent Barnabas, who by his own words confirmed what had previously

been taught them, and taking along Paul as a fellow-helper of the word, by his assistance brought it about by further teaching that at Antioch the disciples were first called Christians, for the manifestation of the law then in force, and that they renouncing all others chose to cleave to Christ only. And in the midst of these things the divine grace of the Holy Spirit brought Cornelius and those with him from the Gentiles, through the blessed Peter, to the doctrine of piety (Christianity), by clear and very fearful manifestations, making it plain to all that this even had been decreed by God concerning the |365 Gentiles in order that no place for gainsaying might be left for those who from among the Jewish Christians wished to strive against these things.

(2) Many ways, therefore, as I said, God used to this end, not all of which there is now time to enumerate, but we shall learn about them when we come to details: as last and greatest, however, this, that with all force he drew from the law itself its most zealous advocate and the one most hostile to the teaching of Christ----I mean the blessed Paul ----and led him to the knowledge of himself so that he became the most zealous herald of Christ throughout the whole world, and exceeded all in his zeal for him, and with great eagerness chose to do and suffer anything whatever so that he might teach all men that, relinquishing all others, they should regard Christ both as Savior and as the author for them of all things which are good; for the Gentiles had need of such a teacher, who being plainly rescued by grace from an opinion godless and contrary to law, was then ready to transmit piety (Christianity) to the Gentiles that were to be saved by grace.

(3) Therefore the blessed Luke has composed a detailed narrative of many things very necessary to know and a teaching useful to those who are zealous to devote themselves to piety; but above all things through his present writing he taught us this especially, how by the mysterious dispensations and ordinances of the Holy Spirit it came to be necessary that among all men the Christian conduct and way of life should prevail apart from all legal observance. Now this doctrine the blessed Paul represented according to the grace of the Holy Spirit which was given to him; for since through the apostles Jews were brought to piety (Christianity) for the demonstration of the relation of Christians to the law, as I said, and it was necessary for them to continue in the legal way of life lest abandoning the former teaching they should lead those who were proselytes from among the Jews away from piety (Christianity), the divine grace was constrained to appoint the blessed Paul to this work, that wholly apart from legal observance he should preach piety (Christianity) to the Gentiles; and the Holy Spirit caused that the apostles also, together with all those (Christians) who were in Judea should with befitting readiness (or perhaps: obligation = the contribution for the poor of Jerusalem) agree with him.

For precisely this made him in his task of teaching most worthy of credence, that having been formerly a persecutor and having spoken against the disciples of Christ, he had turned to piety (Christianity), who indeed having ventured so much formerly on behalf of the law against piety (Christianity), would not have chosen now to teach these things instead of those, viz., to separate Christian discipleship wholly from the legal conduct, if he had not

been compelled by the truth itself and so abandoned the former things and went over to this doctrine. Therefore also Luke set forth first his (former) opinion which was against Christianity and in favor of the law, and after this he relates in order his calling and the things which were done by him on behalf of piety (Christianity), and how, having gone even to Rome, he delivered piety (Christianity) to the Gentiles. |366

IV. But having used no small part of the book for the narrative concerning these things and having thus composed the whole writing in order that we might be able to learn from it how the preaching of piety (Christianity) began among the Jews, and how from them it passed over to the Gentiles, they having without the observance of the law received piety (Christianity)----with this purpose, then, he put forth the book before us; which purposing to interpret we shall now try as the grace of God shall grant us, to give the necessary attention not only to clearness but also to brevity. On this account we shall on the one side investigate everything, in order not to mutilate the body of the book which is to be explained, and on the other hand shall not copy out all the sentences adding thereto the detailed interpretation, lest we unduly extend the writing; but recalling in many places also the explanations of the apostolic men which they have made, whether to their opponents or else also to their own people, and in many places also the narratives (we will be satisfied) to give only the meaning of the sentences, so that together with clearness there may also be brevity in the writing.

Now the blessed Luke makes the beginning of the book of the Acts of the Apostles as follows:...

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