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## Foreword to Henry Cadbury's "The Book of Acts in History"

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## Foreword to the 2004 Edition

A favorite story recalls Henry Cadbury finishing a sidewalk in front of the Cadbury home at Haverford. In the process, a boy on his bicycle rode through the setting concrete. While Professor Cadbury was repairing the damage, the same boy came back the other way and rode through it again. At that point, the Professor leveled some rather uncharitable words toward the lad. An astonished onlooker commented, "Henry, I thought you were fond of children," to which Cadbury replied, "I *am* fond of children ... in the abstract, but *not* in the concrete."

The reprinting of *The Book of Acts in History* is of great value to scholarly and lay readers of Acts alike. First printed in 1955, this book reflects the seasoned work of an incisive scholar who has thought a great deal about the human and socio-religious aspects of Acts within its historical setting. Published over four decades after his first major work on Luke/Acts, and after writing over two dozen major books and articles on Luke-Acts,<sup>1</sup> one reaps in this book the benefits of the cumulated wisdom of one of America's finest New

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<sup>1</sup> Cadbury's Harvard dissertation was completed in 1914, printed in revised form in 1920 as *The Style and Literary Method of Luke*, and reprinted in 2001 by Wipf & Stock (Eugene, OR). His *The Making of Luke-Acts*, first published in 1927 (New York: Macmillan), was reprinted by Hendrikson (Peabody, Mass) in 1999, and over 50 of his other New Testament essays are in the process of being published by Fortress Press (Philadelphia ?) under the title "*The Eclipse of the Historical Jesus*" *And Other New Testament Essays by Henry J. Cadbury*. In the four bibliographies in this collection, and 160 books and articles on New Testament themes are listed as well as 250 of his book reviews, over 20 essays and books about Cadbury, and approximately 70 reviews of his New Testament works.

## FOREWORD TO THE 2004 EDITION

Testament scholars.<sup>2</sup> Cadbury here blends the best of his practical wisdom with some extremely valuable insights into the historical contexts out of which the book of Acts emerged. In doing so, Cadbury builds a bridge between classic literary analyses of Acts and the social-science analyses emerging in the second half of the twentieth century.

Another remarkable strength of this work is the combination of subtlety and directness with which it performs its historical analysis. Where many interpreters become overly concerned with demonstrating or challenging the historicity of Acts, Cadbury makes many historical-type connections without overstating their certainty or related implications. Such restraint and measured judgment fosters respect from the critic, while at the same time inviting the non-specialist to engage the text constructively. This of course was typical of Cadbury's brilliant approach to interpretation. Distinctive to this book is the way it provides an over-arching perspective of Acts, considering the relations of its content to four major socio-religious settings. There is no other work like it, in any language, and its reprinting will surely make a robust contribution, not only to studies of Acts, but also to relevant discussions on the character of primitive Christianity.

Early reviews of *The Book of Acts in History* were strikingly positive in their estimation of the importance of this book,<sup>3</sup> and appreciation of it has remained high. While Filson's point is well taken ("This book is too rich in concrete detail and historical data to summarize in a few paragraphs." p. 75), Amos Wilder (p. 185f.) comments valuably on the

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<sup>2</sup> This is certainly the conclusion of *Cadbury, Knox and Talbert; American Contributors to the Study of Acts*, edited by Mikeal C. Parsons and Joseph B. Tyson (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992). See also the fine treatment of his many contributions in Margaret Hope Bacon's excellent bibliography: *Let This Life Speak; the Legacy of Henry Joel Cadbury* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, reviews by Edward Blair, *Religion in Life* (Winter 1955, 152f.), Floyd Filson, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 75 (1956, pp. 74f.), and Amos Wilder, *Harvard Divinity School Bulletin* 21 (1956, p. 184-86).

## FOREWORD TO THE 2004 EDITION

implications of Cadbury's treatment of illuminating detail and helpful discussion of broader themes:

For such resourcefulness we are prepared. What emerges, however, is more important: namely, a cumulative sense of actuality, of concrete living reality, in this ancient period of the church. Here is something of the greatest importance for the modern student and not least for contemporary Biblical study. Almost as it were by indirection, through a mastery of ancient times, we are led to a vivid sense of the historical reality of early Christianity. That reality which is so often sought chiefly through intuitive identification and theological study within the writings needs this more external documentation. Otherwise it is likely to lead us into abstraction and unreality ....

Our highest admiration, as regards this book, goes therefore, over and beyond the mastery of detail to the probity of the historian. It is this kind of probity which lays the foundation of all historical and theological interpretation, and, to change the figure, bars the road to erroneous reconstructions.

In conjunction with Cadbury's epoch-making *The Making of Luke/Act* and his *The Style and Literary Method of Luke*, the reintroduction of *The Book of Acts in History* to a broad readership is certain to make a great impact on Luke-Acts studies—in the English-speaking world, and beyond.<sup>4</sup> The

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<sup>4</sup> Ward Gasque, in his *The History of the Criticism of the Acts of the Apostles* WUNT 17, later reprinted in America by Eerdmans (Grand Rapids, 1975) says, "It is difficult to do justice to the immense contribution of H. J. Cadbury to the study of Lucan writings. In addition to *The Style and Literary Method of Luke*, a study which set the tone for the American contribution to Lucan research, and the large part he had in the production in *The Beginnings of Christianity*, he also penned two important essays on the preface of Luke-Acts, a number of significant lexical and grammatical notes, and two valuable books.... The former of these [*The Making of Luke-Acts*] is

## FOREWORD TO THE 2004 EDITION

reader of the present volume will be treated to a delightful banquet of fascinating literary anecdotes, informative historical connections, and profound theological insights. A fresh reading of this book will undoubtedly make a *difference* ... in the abstract ... and also in the *concrete*.

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one of the most strikingly original studies of the Lucan writings ever conceived; the latter [*The Book of Acts in History*]... is not a less valuable complement to it." (p. 185, including note 65).