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978-0-521-49520-2 - History Literature, and Society in the Book of Acts

Edited by Ben Witherington, III

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These seminal essays introduce the reader to the interdisciplinary approach of recent New Testament scholarship which is affecting the way the Book of Acts is studied and interpreted. Insights from the social sciences, narratological studies, Greek and Roman rhetoric and history, and classical studies set the Acts of the Apostles in its original historical, literary, and social context. These methods of interpretation have only recently been applied to biblical study in a systematic way, and the discussions from a shared general perspective range over genre and method, historical and theological problems, and issues of literary criticism. *History, literature, and society in the Book of Acts* is an interesting and valuable overview of new work being undertaken on some of the chief preoccupations of current biblical studies with contributions from leading scholars in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the history of antiquity.

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HISTORY
LITERATURE, AND
SOCIETY IN
THE BOOK OF ACTS

EDITED BY

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This collection of essays is dedicated to the memory
of F. F. Bruce and C. J. Hemer

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It is a strange, but nonetheless true, fact that the only chronicle we have of the life of the early church from about AD 30–AD 60 has gone through long periods of relative neglect in twentieth century NT scholarship, especially in the English-speaking world. A testimony to this fact is that there has been no major commentary on Acts written in English since the work of F. F. Bruce a generation ago, and before that one must go back to the seminal contributions of H. J. Cadbury and his collaborators in *The Beginnings of Christianity*. All of this, however, is now changing. As I write, the first volume of what is likely to be a landmark study by C. K. Barrett on the Acts is about to appear in the prestigious ICC commentary series. One may add to this the recent helpful commentaries of L. T. Johnson and J. B. Polhill,¹ several important studies in the SNTS monograph series,² the detailed work of C. J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*,³ a crucial monograph by C. C. Hill,⁴ and finally a projected series of volumes emanating from Cambridge including *The Book of Acts in its Literary and Regional Settings*, *The Book of Acts in its Diaspora Setting*, *The Book of Acts in its Prison Settings*, *The Book of Acts in its Theological Setting*, *The*

¹ L. T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, 1992); J. B. Polhill, *Acts* (Nashville, 1992).

² See J. C. Lentz, *Luke's Portrait of Paul* (Cambridge, 1993), and the forthcoming monograph by Prof. L. Alexander on the prologue in Lk. 1.1–4 (cf. her chapter below, pp. 73–103).

³ Published in the US by Eisenbrauns (Winona Lake, IL, 1990).

⁴ C. C. Hill, *Hellenists and Hebrews: Reappraising Division within the Earliest Church* (Minneapolis, 1992). This volume, while achieving its main aim of putting Baur to rest once and for all, nonetheless has some problems. See my review in the *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 44, 2 (1993), 289–291.

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Book of Acts in its Graeco-Roman Setting, *The Book of Acts in its Palestinian Setting*, and finally a commentary on the Greek text of Acts.⁵

This book, however, seeks to do something none of the above volumes will do – *introduce* the reader to a sample of some of the major and recent trends of NT scholarship that are affecting and in some cases changing the way we study the Acts of the Apostles. All the scholars contributing to this volume are concerned to help us understand and set the Acts of the Apostles in one way or another in its original historical setting. The book is deliberately eclectic by nature, intending not to argue for the validity of one particular point of view but to give the reader exposure to the variety of the pertinent current discussion, with sufficient bibliographic resources that one may pursue further study in an area of interest.

In part I chapters by W. J. McCoy, C. K. Barrett, C. H. Talbert, L. C. A. Alexander, and J. Jervell help the reader begin to assess Acts in the context of other ancient historical, biographical, and scientific works. Barrett and Talbert need no introduction to this audience, but it needs to be pointed out that Professor McCoy is a historian specializing in ancient Greek history, particularly in Thucydides, while Dr. Alexander comes to the study of the NT by way of a background in classics. It is my own conviction that progress in understanding the Acts as a historical document can be made only as NT scholarship takes more account of the long history of work by ancient historians and classicists on the Greek and Roman historians, biographers, and other ancient writers. Too often statements by NT scholars have been made, for example about Thucydides and the composition of speeches, in an attempt to draw analogies with Luke's practice, without an adequate knowledge of either the primary classical sources or the detailed research done upon them by classicists and Greek and Roman historians.

Dr. McCoy's chapter provides the reader with the proper

⁵ This is all undertaken under the editorship of B. W. Winter, a disciple of E. A. Judge, and his collaborators in Cambridge, and will be published by Eerdmans. The first two volumes have already appeared, and the third is in the press.

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introduction to Thucydides and the relevant secondary literature. He offers a basis for meaningful discussion of the bearing the writings of Thucydides have on the assessment of historical methodology and the use of speeches in ancient Greek historical works. In addition, he provides a sampling of both the ancient and modern critique of Thucydides. Of especial importance is the way this chapter stresses how much later Hellenistic historians, and indeed Roman and later western ones as well, stood in the shadow of Thucydides. Thucydides set a standard and provided a model for many if not most later historians writing in Greek, who sought either to follow in his footsteps or to set out on their own path, but not without one eye either on the master or on later disciples of his such as Polybius.

Professor Barrett's chapter offers us clear evidence that at least some of the ancients, such as Lucian, knew what critical historiography *ought* to look like, however far short the attempt to achieve the ideal might fall. At the same time he shows how two highly influential nineteenth-century scholars (F. C. Baur and J. B. Lightfoot) have shaped the contours of the modern discussion of early Christianity in both its diversity and its unity. This chapter is a crucial one and we reprint it here with minor emendations because the scholarly discussion of Acts today is often still concerned with the issues raised by Baur and Lightfoot, especially in regard to the tensions between Jewish and Gentile Christians in the early church. One need look no further than Dr. C. C. Hill's chapter in this volume, which strongly critiques the viability of the old Baur hypothesis about the radical divisions between the "Hebrews" and the "Hellenists", and between James and Paul, to see how the history of the interpretation of Acts still strongly affects how we view the text (see below).

C. H. Talbert has spent many years studying Luke–Acts from a variety of angles, and in his clear and helpful chapter he provides us with a further argument for his view that both Luke and Acts should be seen as biographies rather than historical monographs, if one is asking about the genre of this material. This conclusion is not unimportant because in

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antiquity there could be a considerable difference in method and character between historical and biographical works. The latter focused mainly on issues of character and characterization of the major figure(s) in the narrative, while historical monographs were concerned with matters of historical causation and dwelt especially on crucial events and deeds. The biographer might record a trivial incident that was nonetheless revealing of the character of the subject of the narrative, whereas the historian concentrated on “historical” events that caused important social changes. Then, too, ancient biographical literature tended to use historical examples for certain clear moralistic aims, as is certainly the case in Plutarch’s famous *Lives*, while historical monographs tended to be more concerned with informing the audience about things that had transpired and their historical significance. Obviously, if Acts is some kind of *bios*, this must affect the way we view the historical data in this text.

Dr. L. Alexander’s chapter seeks to help us better evaluate the preface to Acts as a means of getting a handle on the genre classification of the Book of Acts as a whole. She points out that the preface to Acts does not make clear whether Luke intended from the outset to write a two-volume unified composition, or whether Acts should be seen as an independent monograph which begins by simply reminding the reader that it is a sequel to the Gospel. She also points out that dedication of a work in its preface does not necessarily signal to the reader that this is a work of ancient historiography, though there are certainly examples of dedications in historical works. The reference back to the content of the first volume in the preface in Acts at least suggests that the reader should expect what follows to be a continuation of what has been offered in the Gospel. The lack of a prospective remark in the Acts preface means that one cannot say that this preface itself clearly suggests that some sort of history writing will follow. Dr. Alexander finally suggests that perhaps the genre of Acts may be seen as residing somewhere on the border between certain kinds of ancient history writing (archaeology? ethnography? apologetic historiography?) and the ancient scientific tradition.

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Another related area of interest is the study of the Acts in light of what may be called a salvation historical perspective informed by OT historiography and Hellenistic Jewish literature such as the LXX, the Maccabean corpus, and even Luke's contemporary Josephus. Many scholars are convinced that this is the primary matrix out of which Acts should be interpreted. J. Jervell reprises and advances the discussion of these matters in his chapter on Luke's view of salvation history. He even goes so far as to suggest that Luke may have seen himself as writing Scripture, seeing not merely the content but the form of what he was writing as a continuation of what we find in the LXX. He demonstrates the considerable thematic links between Luke and Acts, centering on the revelation and enactment of God's βουλή (plan or counsel) for the people of God. For Luke, the sort of history that was worth recording was the record of God's intervention and saving actions in space and time for Jew and Gentile alike. There is a certain similarity of approach to and discussion of the plan of God to be found in D. P. Moessner's chapter in this volume, and the reader will do well to compare the two discussions carefully.

While the first few chapters in this collection deal with questions of genre and historical method, in part II the reader will find several chapters dealing with particular historical and theological problems in Acts. The first of these is by Dr. C. C. Hill and deals with Luke's portrayal of early Christianity and early Judaism in the crucial material found in Acts 6.1–8.4. Through a careful and probing argument Dr. Hill shows that on the one hand, Luke portrays the Jewish authorities as being at odds with both the Hebrews and Hellenists among the early Christians, and on the other hand, Luke does not portray early Christianity, including even Stephen, as being anti-Law or anti-Temple. Rather the gist of the Lucan critique is leveled against the Jewish people, perhaps in particular their authorities, not merely because they had not lived up to the requirements of the Law, but because they had not seen that it pointed forward to a particular messianic figure, namely Jesus of Nazareth. Hill's essential argument is that both early Judaism

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and early Christianity were complex, not the least in the way they related to each other. Furthermore, the theory that tries to pit early Jewish (conservative) Christianity over against early Hellenistic (more liberal and universalistic) Christianity, in the persons of James and Stephen and their supposed “parties,” does justice neither to Luke nor to the historical data that lie behind his account.

R. Bauckham is well known for his careful and persuasive work on early Jewish Christianity. In this volume he tackles the thorny problems of the speech of James found in Acts 15, a speech regularly assumed to be composed by Luke since it cites the LXX and is clearly a speech composed in Greek. Prof. Bauckham shows that the evidence is considerably more complex than this, that in fact the citation involves the conflation of the Hebrew text with elements of the LXX, and that a pesher technique of handling the text is used. These and other factors lead him to the conclusion that while Luke is surely responsible for the final form of this text, he likely had a source or sources for both the event and the speech given by James. This conclusion is significant, as the speech material in Acts 15 is widely thought to provide the clearest evidence that Luke engaged in the invention and free composition of his speeches. His conclusions comport with my own as they are presented in my chapter on Luke’s editorial techniques (see below). In a further chapter, Prof. Bauckham deals with the problem of the speeches in general. He argues at length that these speeches are neither transcripts of speeches nor free compositions of Luke, but rather that Luke follows a form which may be called a kerygmatic summary of early Christian preaching. Bauckham’s work is distinguishable from the earlier work by C. H. Dodd and others along this line in that he draws not merely on patterns found in Paul (e.g. 1 Cor. 15.1–7), but on kerygmatic summaries in the *Ascension of Isaiah*, a much-neglected early Christian work, in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch, and in other early Christian sources. The net effect of this argument is to reveal a kerygmatic summary pattern that was adopted and adapted with some flexibility by Luke and others.

The fourth chapter in the second part of this volume is by a

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scholar who is a specialist on Luke–Acts. Dr. D. P. Moessner deals with one of the thornier historical problems confronting the reader of Acts, namely where and what is Luke’s theology of the cross? It has not infrequently been argued that Luke has no such theology, and this is thought to count strongly against his having any personal knowledge of Paul, his preaching, or his letters. Moessner shows that such a caricature of Luke’s theology will not do, for in fact Luke has a good deal to say about Jesus’ death, tying it closely to one of his major themes, the plan of God, while drawing on the Suffering Servant material to interpret Jesus’ death. For Luke the basis of release from sins and forgiveness is Christ’s death, which stands at the heart of God’s salvation plan, as the fulcrum of salvation history. Moessner in fact argues that the death, resurrection, and proclamation of these events by the early church are seen as providing the basis and key to “release from sins,” as was foretold by the prophets (see Acts 10.43). This benefit, which is appropriated through faith in the kerygmatic message and its content, is accompanied by purification of the heart of the one responding in faith (see Acts 15.9). By paying attention to the echoes of the Hebrew Scriptures, especially Isaiah in Acts, one discovers that Luke has more of a theology of the cross than is often thought.

Increasing attention in all of biblical studies is being paid to the light that the disciplines of sociology and cultural anthropology can shed on the biblical texts. This is sometimes coupled with broader studies by classicists and Roman historians about the shape of the Greco-Roman world.⁶ Prof. J. H. Neyrey has been a leader in discussing sociological, anthropological, and rhetorical matters as they have a bearing on the Acts of the Apostles.⁷ In his chapter he focuses on the issue of portrayal of the social location of Paul in Acts. His conclusion, that Paul is

⁶ See, for example, the older study by A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford, 1963). On Roman social relations see the important work by R. MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations 50 B.C. to A.D. 284* (New Haven, 1974).

⁷ See the volume he edited and contributed to *The Social World of Luke–Acts* (Peabody, 1991).

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portrayed as being in the company of the elite of the Greco-Roman world as one of their retainers, has considerable importance for the discussion of whether or not Luke portrays the “historical Paul,” or one who is at variance with the portrait we find in Paul’s letters. Neyrey argues at length that one must attend to Luke’s rhetorical strategy in presenting Paul in this fashion. I would suggest that Paul’s letters must *also* be evaluated in terms of their rhetorical strategy, and when this is done the portrait that Luke gives us of a Paul who is a Roman citizen, rhetorically adept, in contact with patrons, and a person of considerable honor is not significantly different from the Paul one finds in the capital Paulines, even though from time to time Paul chooses to portray himself as a weak enslaved sage for rhetorical purposes.⁸

The various forms of literary criticism, including redaction criticism, of Acts continue apace, spurred on by detailed and comprehensive works such as R. Tannehill’s *The Narrative Unity of Luke–Acts*.⁹ The last four chapters in this volume can be grouped together under this heading. The first is by Dr. J. B. Green, a specialist in Luke–Acts who deals with the issues of intertextuality and narratology as they impact our understanding of Acts. He shows that the internal repetitions in the text, as well as the echoes in Luke–Acts of the Hebrew Scriptures, point to Luke’s historical purposes. Like other historians such as Thucydides, Luke seems to have believed that while history did not simply repeat itself, nevertheless there were persons and events in the past that bore striking similarities to persons and events in the present. It could be said that there were certain patterns that recurred in history. Hence there was a good deal to learn about the present from studying the past, and Luke was convinced that the present was in fact the continuation, indeed even the fulfillment, of the past. As Green sees it, the story of the church is inscribed into the story of

⁸ See my discussion in *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, 1994), and also in my socio-rhetorical commentary on Philippians entitled *Friendship and Finances in Philippi* (Valley Forge, 1994).

⁹ Published by Fortress Press (Minneapolis, 1986).

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Jesus, which in turn is inscribed into the story of Israel found in the Scriptures.

The second chapter in part III, by Dr. B. T. Arnold, a scholar of the OT with a special interest in its use in the NT, works through a series of passages where the OT is alluded to in speech material. This work shows the subtle ways in which certain major figures such as Stephen, Peter, and Paul are portrayed as speaking Scripture, or speaking with the voice of God by using biblical language to suggest that what was now happening was like, and in some cases a fulfillment of, things God had spoken or done before. Of importance for the purposes of this volume is his conclusion that this approach reveals that Luke, like other ancient historians, used the technique of *imitatio*, which has as one of its basic assumptions the continuity of the present with the past so that the former can be expressed in terms of the latter. This conclusion comports well with some of those that arise from J. Jervell's chapter in this volume. Dr. Arnold also makes clear that the use of the LXX in this way shows that the earliest Jewish Christians are being depicted as standing in the Old Testament tradition, critiquing Israel by drawing on the earlier Mosaic and prophetic critiques of Israel. Salvation history goes on, but its advocates draw on earlier stages in that history to illuminate the present. Dr. Arnold is not optimistic that we shall soon discern which version or versions of the Greek OT Luke used, since the issue is exceedingly complex.

The third chapter in part III of the volume deals with the matters of source and redaction criticism as it sheds light on Luke's composition of Acts. I have sought to show in this piece that we can learn a great deal about the character and nature of Luke as an editor in general by looking specifically at the way he handles Mark and Q, and then also the way he handles the three different accounts of Saul's conversion in Acts. What we learn from such an exercise is that Luke did not likely engage in free composition of his material, even the speech material, but rather drew on and edited sources according to his various purposes and agendas.

This volume concludes with the intriguing study of canonical

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books that are apparently without endings (Mark and Acts) by Dr. W. F. Brosend. Here we come full circle back to some of the concerns discussed in several of the first few chapters in the volume – namely the issues of the genre and purpose of Acts. Brosend ably shows how scholars' readings of Acts 28 have often been determined by their views of the purpose(s) and genre of the book. For example, if one sees this work as an *apologia* for the Gospel then the ending is seen as appropriate, for the book concludes with the Good News being proclaimed unabated for two years at the heart of the Empire. There might also be the further implication that it was to be seen as a legitimate part of the life of the Roman world for it was not proscribed by Roman authorities.

Brosend also points out some of the difficulties in explaining the ending of Acts if one reads it as an ancient biography, a romance, or a biographical or romantic novel. In Acts the main character's end is not reported – indeed his fate is left unresolved. This is quite different from what happens in the aforementioned works, especially since it was a widespread belief in antiquity that the end of one's life revealed much about one's true character and its divine evaluation. Furthermore, as Brosend stresses, ancient romances were characterized by sex, romance, and happy endings for the main character with loose ends all tied up, all of which are in short supply in Acts. Brosend goes on to suggest that the abrupt ending of Mark's Gospel may have suggested to Luke a way to resolve his narrative, or rather a way to force the reader back to the text, even to its beginning to look for clues to explain such an ending. Whether one finds this last proposal convincing or not, it is hoped that all these chapters will force the reader back to the text of Luke–Acts once more to see how it can and ought to be read in its own day as well as in ours. The Acts of the Apostles should not merely be subject to the acts of the historians, whether ancient or modern.

BEN WITHERINGTON, III

Christmas 1995