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## Interpreting the Book of Acts, Walter L. Liefeld

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## Book Reviews

Markus McDowell, Editor



Jerome H. Neyrey, ed. *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991). Reviewed by Susan G. Higgins.

*The Social World of Luke-Acts*, edited by Jerome Neyrey, makes an interesting comparison between the ancient world and present modern American social structure. The articles explore social values, family structures, personal psychology, and religious life by comparing those dimensions to the patterns that are the norm today. An example of this comparison is the article by the editor himself, which discusses the social dynamics of the Mediterranean world in light of the life of Christ, with specific regard to the rituals and ceremonial practices surrounding meals and "table fellowship":

A map of persons, then, gives us clues about the roles and statuses of participants at a meal: who sits and who waits on table, what specific actions one performs during the meal, who sits close or far from the host, what and how much food one eats, and when one eats, either first or last. (365)

An unusual feature of Neyrey's model is his claim that the "human body is a replica of the social body, a symbol and microcosm of it" (368); he expounds this by discussing the boundaries, structure, and margins of the body, physical and social. It should be noted that not all anthropologists would agree with the parallelisms that he constructs.

One important feature of the book is that the later articles presuppose the content of the preceding ones. Thus,

because the articles are not self-contained, the reader cannot selectively choose one or two areas in which s/he is most interested, turn to the selected articles, and hope to profit from them without having taken into account all the preceding information. For example, the article on honor and shame by Bruce Malina and Jerome Neyrey is fundamental to the understanding of several of the subsequent articles about personality, community, patron/client relations, household structure, and conflict.

In several of the chapters there are helpful visual charts that enable the reader to grasp quickly the differences between the social structures of the ancient world and those of the present. However, the fact that many of the most interesting arguments are couched in pedantic and repetitive verbiage detracts significantly from the book's value. Nevertheless, the book offers several suggestions for further study and models that can be useful in comparative social studies.

The preface is especially valuable for a book laid out in this fashion because it provides an outline of how the book is most effectively to be read and used. The better articles are Malina and Neyrey's "Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts," Richard Rohrbaugh's "The Pre-industrial City in Luke-Acts," and Vernon Robbins' "The Social Location of the Implied Author of Luke-Acts." This book is helpful as reference material for a theological school library; however, the scholar on a more limited budget may decide to invest his/her funds elsewhere.

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Joel B. Green. *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke*, New Testament Theology series, ed. James D. G. Dunn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 170 pages. Reviewed by Miriam Y. Perkins.

It was Sunday morning. I was teaching from Luke, and most of the lesson was given to sharing historical details and textual nuances that I had gleaned from reading several critical commentaries. The lesson went well, but I left feeling as if I had done a disservice both to those present and to the text itself. No pressing theological questions or discussion were provoked by the lesson, and this disturbed me. I thought, Why am I teaching from Luke? What is Luke trying to say about the nature of God and the person of Jesus? How do encounters with Jesus shape salvation in formation? What kind of people does Luke call us to be? Why is this Gospel important for the church and Christian formation? Critical commentaries are not always designed to answer these sorts of theological questions. Most New Testament theologies, by comparison, are integrative in nature and are, therefore, not generally text- or author-specific. Typically, these theologies also overlook narrative theologies such as the Gospels. Green's book is an effort to fill this gap by addressing the particular theology of Luke's Gospel.

Unlike Ulrich Luz's *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew* in the same series, Green's study is organized by topic rather than continuous narrative sequence. Green explores Luke's world, the continuing purposes of God, Jesus' identity, the nature of mission and salvation, life as discipleship, and the Gospel's relevance for the church today. Luke's understanding of the Spirit and eschatology is also given particular attention, and the continuity between Luke's Gospel and Acts is mentioned throughout. The depth of Green's reading can be recommended in its entirety. Two topics in the study, however, are of particular concern for those interested in the progressive thinking of sound conservative scholarship: Luke's social world and Luke's concept of Christian discipleship.

In his first chapter, Green maps out the cultural framework and world view of Luke's Gospel, giving special attention to sociological concerns. The social world of Luke's Gospel is characterized by a balance of political power, eschatological expectation, and social stratification. Jesus comes as savior and everlasting ruler over and against Octavian and Rome. He is the final fulfillment of Israel's eschatological hopes for a divinely appointed Messiah who

will save people from "political dominance and social oppression" (9). The salvation loosed by Jesus reverses social stratification; Jesus makes salvation accessible to everyone and includes those on the margins. Sociological as well as economic factors determine the classifications of poor and rich. Purity, physical health, ancestry, trade, and economic deprivation factor into determining the poor who stand in need of liberation. Jesus' instruction to lend and do good even to those who cannot repay, without expectation of return, shatters first-century systems of patronage. Luke works to shift a first-century social world view toward the purpose of God, which he believes is revealed by the Spirit in the person of Jesus. Green's social analysis makes Luke's counterculture message of good news come to life.

A full chapter is given to Luke's understanding of discipleship. In Luke, following Jesus is a journey involving faith, repentance, and mission. Discipleship involves praising God for his saving faithfulness and discerning God's will through prayer in imitation of Christ. Entering God's new community requires a changed outlook on wealth, power, and the need for status. This discussion leads well into the final chapter, which Green devotes to the significance of Luke for the church today. Green characterizes Luke's Gospel as a history of proclamation that calls for individual and community response. Luke invites the church, as he invited his first-century readers, to align itself with the purposes of God in a new social and cultural context. The invitation encourages Christians to become disciples of Jesus who discern together in community how faithfully to embody Luke's call for status reversal and mission to those on the margins. Discernment should be made following the example of Jesus and other Lukan characters; it must involve prayer and depend upon God's will revealed through the Holy Spirit. Such theological discernment in community is often sorely lacking in the life of many congregations. Green's portrayal of Lukan theology would have helped spur the theological questions and discussions that had been missing in my Sunday lesson.

The topical structure within Green's six chapters organizes Luke's theology in ways that appropriately reflect Luke's narrative design. The purpose of God in Luke, for example, is grounded in the older story of the Old Testament Scriptures and God's overarching and unfolding divine plan. Green's understanding of Luke's christology includes narrative issues such as the role of the Pharisees and other Jews, Jesus as healer and table fellowship, as

well as issues of Sonship, crucifixion, and exaltation. Luke's narrative structure is also paralleled in Green's treatment implicitly; several chapters and sub-topics begin with the birth announcements and continue in narrative sequence. Chapter four on mission, for example, begins with the birth announcements and ends with the hope of Jesus' return. The topical approach, however, does make it more difficult to use this book as a companion to critical commentaries that address the text in narrative sequence. A helpful Scripture index alleviates this problem somewhat, but many gospel pericopes are mentioned only briefly or not at all. Green instead offers a framework for understanding the theological implications of any particular passage.

Green's reading is appropriate for upper-level undergraduate and graduate study of Luke. A working knowledge of the contents of Luke as well as familiarity with critical scholarship from various perspectives is assumed. Historical critical study and sociological study, as mentioned above, undergird Green's analysis of Lukan theology. Literary studies also contribute to Green's study (discipleship, for example, is a journey along "the way"). The lay reader may need to rely on additional readings; notes and references, though not extensive, are helpful in this regard. As the series editor suggests, Green's volume is best used as a companion and supplement to critical study. An excellent list of resources for further study as well as Scripture, subject, and modern author indices are appended. I recommend this reading without hesitation to students of Luke, and especially to those teaching or preaching from this Gospel.

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Walter L. Liefeld. *Interpreting the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1995) 141 pages. Reviewed by Paul R. McReynolds.

Ministers and teachers who want a succinct but well-rounded introduction to the literary, historical, and cultural backgrounds of the book of Acts as a preface to detailed

study will be greatly rewarded through a study of *Interpreting the Book of Acts*. This book is in the Guides to New Testament Exegesis series, edited by Scot McKnight for Baker Book House.

While nowhere as extensive as the Foakes-Jackson and Lake massive five-volume work, this book introduces the essential issues for exegetical study of the book of Acts. One of the excellent characteristics of the book is the fact that the author does not do all the work for the reader, but rather raises and asks questions for the reader to answer. After the introduction, Liefeld discusses the variety of purposes that have been proposed for Acts. The last theory concerning purpose will be especially interesting to readers of *Leaven* from a Restoration background: Is Acts to be interpreted and applied normatively or descriptively? Liefeld's answer is descriptively. For example: "So Acts describes a changing pattern of leadership and authority due to the nature of the church as 'emerging' rather than static" (97-98). Restorationists, having emphasized Acts as normative for the church polity and growth, might like to have seen a further discussion of this issue.

The chapter on structure is novel in that there is a discussion of several types of structural patterns. This is especially helpful in the attempt to determine the purpose of Acts. Discussion of geographical expansion, ethnic and cultural spread, parallels between Peter and Paul as well as Luke and Acts, the summary colophons, and a sample outline are included in this chapter.

Because so much of Acts is narrative, Liefeld devotes a chapter to "narrative as theology" and briefly discusses the dangers of responding to the narrative as the audience in the narrative. For example, after the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, Acts relates that no one dared join them (the Christians). The readers are not being urged to stay away, but to be respectful of a group where God is actively involved in judgment.

No book on Acts would be complete without a discussion of the speeches in Acts. Herein lies the problem with a succinct book. While there are introductory discussions of the issues of speeches, including a summary of each of the speeches, there is not space for a detailed discussion concerning their historicity. The book does, however, make suggestions for additional research.

No one would expect a chapter of the major themes to be anything other than introductory. The author is well aware of that perspective. "We hope that providing a sketch

of the evidence will encourage the student of Acts to dig deeper and to frame a personal perspective and opinion on the material” (80).

The chapter on the background of Acts uses Acts 16 as a model of how an understanding of backgrounds helps the exegete. Here the author demonstrates his broad knowledge of background materials and even includes a special but limited bibliography concerning backgrounds at the end of the chapter. There is also an excellent up-to-date bibliography at the end of the book, which includes not only commentaries and edited collections but an extensive listing of articles. It is somewhat peculiar that very general volumes like the Anchor Bible Dictionary are included in the bibliography.

The chapter that concludes the book shows the author’s adeptness not just at exegesis, but at application. Here

again the author is concerned about the issue of whether Acts functions as normative or descriptive. Issues like women in leadership (for example, Priscilla), the communalism of early Acts, the reception of the Holy Spirit and baptism at Pentecost and Samaria, and even missionary strategy are discussed briefly to demonstrate the problems of applying the text entirely as normative.

This is an excellent though limited introduction to the central interpretation issues for the book of Acts. The book does not pretend to be exhaustive, but it does thoroughly cover the range of matters of which an exegete, preacher, or teacher should be aware when preaching or teaching from the Acts.

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