

A Story that Teaches: The Theology of Acts

BY HOLLY BEERS

What is Luke’s agenda, theological and otherwise, in the book of Acts? How is he shaping that agenda through the story he tells? How is he teaching the Church, from Theophilus to today? In the books reviewed here, three leading Acts scholars attempt an answer to these questions.

How do stories teach us? It is one thing to insist, as the Church often has, that the story narrated in the book of Acts teaches us; it is quite another to explain exactly how this teaching is done.

There is a growing consensus among Acts scholars that the old academic bifurcation between what is descriptive versus prescriptive in the New Testament (a dichotomy that prioritizes the scriptural epistles over the narrative books like Acts) is unhelpful. Also by the wayside is the modernist ideal of “neutral” texts; all texts have agendas. The central question, therefore, is: in the book of Acts, what is Luke’s agenda, theological and otherwise? How is he shaping that agenda through the story he tells? How is he teaching the Church, from Theophilus to today? In the books reviewed here, three leading Acts scholars attempt an answer to these questions.

In *A Theology of Luke and Acts: God’s Promised Program, Realized for All Nations*, Biblical Theology of the New Testament Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012, 495 pp., \$39.99), Darrell L. Bock offers, in line with the goal of the series (in which three of the eight volumes are completed), a volume that seeks to demonstrate “how Biblical Theology ought to be conducted” within an evangelical context (p. 19). The evangelical ethos is framed through assent to the authority of Scripture and a view of the New Testament as theologically unified, and not contradictory (though the language of “diversity” is also employed). More to the point, Bock’s offering,

while summarizing some recent and not-so-recent scholarly activity on Luke and Acts, ends up in predictable evangelical territory in his arguments for Lukan authorship (pp. 32-37), an early date of composition—in the late 60s (p. 41), and Luke's competence as an historian (pp. 43-44).

Bock's three-page section entitled "On Philosophy of History and Acts" (pp. 48-51) is particularly impressive, for this is where he engages some of the current (post)modern claims that, for example, "history itself (is) a construct" (p. 48) as opposed to a series of documentary events. This discussion would profit from being expanded, as it is a space where a self-defined evangelical approach to biblical theology can, and must, make a robust contribution.

The arrangement of the work is thematic, including such topics as "The Plan, Activity, and Character of God" and "Israel in Luke-Acts." This leads to an ease of use, though a possible weakness is the implied compartmentalization—separating what Luke presents as a whole story. However, Bock does often outline a brief "narrative order" before synthesizing material.

Bock's sweet spot is his ability to integrate relevant language (e.g., Greek) and historical issue (e.g., second temple Judaism) in a way that is accessible and yet nuanced. He appropriately places the language of Jesus sitting at God's right hand within the second temple Jewish and rabbinic textual milieu, illustrating the power of such a New Testament claim for Jesus (p. 181). He also rightly traces Acts' fondness for "the Way" terminology and image to its Old Testament provenance in Isaiah and Malachi, where it is tied to God's restoration (pp. 304-306).

This lengthy work carries the stamp of Bock's interest in the nation of Israel. For example, he is careful to present the kingdom of God as present, future, political, and spiritual (pp. 141 ff.), a move that serves his larger concern to deny any "rejection of Israel" motif (e.g., pp. 143, 375-381, and chapter 12). The "political" aspect of the kingdom is thus future for Bock, and it applies only to Israel (as opposed to the Church).

In line with much Lukan scholarship, Bock highlights Luke's stylistic preference for including (and often naming) women. Interestingly, his discussion of women is reminiscent of some modern feminist scholarship, where the women are emphasized only to be domesticated once again. In other words, it appears that from Bock's perspective, Luke mentions them only to put them firmly in their place: a restricted, gendered space. On this point, Bock does not exhibit real engagement with some of the more provocative arguments of scholars like Richard Bauckham (whose *Gospel Women* is listed in the bibliography).

In light of common evangelical insistence upon the Bible's relevance for the Church, the minimal "application" of Acts' theology is somewhat surprising. It is true, however, that application is not part of the stated intention of the series (p. 19) and, encouraged by Bock's occasional comments, a discerning reader may sense how Acts can apply today (for example, at

the end of the “wealth and possessions” section on p. 330, and in his discussion of the question of normativity on pp. 444-445). Still, it appears that the opportunity to give a decades-long specialist in Luke-Acts the space to shape evangelical embodiment of the theology of Luke-Acts has been missed.



Luke Timothy Johnson, in contrast to Bock, spends much of his energy in *Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church: The Challenge of Luke-Acts to Contemporary Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011, 198 pp., \$23.00) on the question of relevance for the Church, as his subtitle demonstrates. While he devotes most of each chapter to surveying the scholarly landscape on critical issues and arguing for prophetic readings of Luke-Acts, he includes substantial sections (filled with energetic language) entitled “Challenge to the Contemporary Church” at the conclusions of chapters four through eight.

Johnson’s methodological parameters are broader than Bock’s, as evidenced by his use of language such as “utopian imagination” (p. 5) to describe Luke-Acts, and his insistence that “Luke’s depiction of the church may or may not be based on facts from the past” (p. 6). For many readers of Acts, however, the question of whether or not this happened, or whether or not these early believers actually lived this way, cannot and will not be so easily cast aside.

Johnson’s first chapter concerns the literary shape of Luke-Acts, and he quickly navigates through terrain that includes source criticism and genre in a way that is accessible. The book gains momentum through chapters two and three – “The Prophetic Shape of Luke-Acts” and “The Character of the Prophet” – as he argues for prophecy not only as prediction, but “as-a-way-of-being-in-the-world” (p. 29). His argument that prophets *embody* God’s word – that is, they not only speak it verbally, but express it through their actions – rightly focuses not only on the text of Luke-Acts but on the Hebrew scriptures as the main source for prophetic precedent.

It is common in analyses of Luke-Acts to focus on the Spirit upon Jesus and the disciples, and Johnson follows suit in chapter four, “The Prophetic Spirit.” He is fairly sympathetic to the charismatic and pentecostal movements today that insist upon the Spirit’s continuing presence and active work (pp. 66-69). He insists that Luke-Acts challenges the Church today in its willingness to respond to what he calls “the movements of the spirit” (p. 70), adding that local, smaller communities will be most nimble.

Chapter five, “The Prophetic Word,” extends Johnson’s emphasis on prophecy as embodiment (though this is one of several places in the book where there is some redundancy), and here his critiques of the contemporary church find a sharp edge. In contrast to Bock, he emphasizes the present “political” dimensions of the kingdom of God as seen in “a people shaped

by shared convictions and practices" (p. 90) such as forgiveness of sins, both received from God and extended to others (pp. 93-94).

The heart of the book is found in chapters six and seven – "Prophetic Embodiment" and "Prophetic Enactment" – for it is here that Johnson argues for "Jesus' prophetic challenge [as] embodied in four interlocking dimensions of his ministry" (p. 96) that are continued by the disciples: poverty and the sharing of possessions, itinerancy, prayer, and servant leadership. An academic accent common to Johnson's scholarship occurs here, as he utilizes the "symbol of table service as the marker of genuine leadership" (p. 106).

Again, his most powerful commentary occurs in his challenge to the contemporary church, where he critiques both his own Catholic tradition, referencing reading the beatitudes "from gilded pulpits," as well as "suburban megachurches that stand as witness to the spirit of entrepreneurship more than to the spirit of evangelical poverty" (p. 126). In reference to itinerancy, he contends: "If the corollary of itinerancy is responsiveness to the movement of the Holy Spirit, the corollary of stability is concern for institutional preservation" (p. 127).

Chapter seven is Johnson's call for the contemporary church to enact the prophetic vision of healing, exorcism, and the embrace of the marginal in continuity with Jesus and the disciples. His argument for modern-day exorcism as the naming and resisting of evil systems and addictions is thoughtful (pp. 162-163), though believers with experience in what may be called "personal" demonic interactions may find him giving too much ground here to "rational" explanations.

In his final chapter, Johnson unsurprisingly cultivates a picture of witness as embodiment (as opposed to simple proclamation exclusively, though that is included) and stresses the resistance that faithful witness brings in Luke (for Jesus) and Acts (for his followers). How can the Church expect anything less?



C. Kavin Rowe's book, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 300 pp., \$24.95), is the only book reviewed here that focuses specifically on Acts as opposed to Luke-Acts. Its title does not begin to hint at the depths plumbed in this relatively short text. Rowe's thesis, that "Luke's second volume is a highly charged and theologically sophisticated political document that aims at nothing less than the construction of an alternative total way of life – a comprehensive pattern of being – one that runs counter to the life-patterns of the Graeco-Roman world," (p. 4), is supported by arguments from a range of scholarly perspectives (including political theory and constructive theology), making his book a truly interdisciplinary

work. His justification for this kind of project is based in the historical particularity of our own lives: “because we live interdisciplinary lives, we think in interdisciplinary terms” (p. 8).

The impetus for his study is found in what he calls “the dominant trend” in Acts studies for the past three hundred years: the view that Acts “argues for the political possibility of harmonious existence between Rome and the early Christian movement” (p. 3). His book disputes that claim, but not in a black-and-white manner. Incidentally, Rowe often makes comments about scholarly discussions of issues in Acts, especially as they are connected to the history of scholarship. This not only shows Rowe’s awareness of the historical shape of Acts studies, but gives the reader a sense of the depth of various questions or topics.

This book requires a good deal of effort to read well, and it assumes a fairly high level of pre-understanding. Greek, Latin, and German vocabulary is sprinkled liberally throughout his five chapters, and English translations are given only sometimes. However, the patient and sensitive reader will most likely find this reading experience worth the effort.

In chapter two, “Collision: Explicating Divine Identity,” Rowe argues that the life patterns of the Jesus community provoke “cultural destabilization” (p. 5). By this he means that conversion from pagan (that is, non-Jewish and non-Christian) culture and religion entail not simply a slight adjustment of routine, but entrance into a new culture as embodied in the practices of the Christian community. The transfer, in other words, is total, and it subverts existing ways of living in the world. Acts 16, the episode with Paul and Silas exorcising the mantic girl in Philippi, is one of his textual warrants, as he claims that “the vanquishing of the pythonic spirit is a tear in the basic fabric of pagan popular religion.... Inasmuch as such religious life was woven together with material gain, such a tear means the unraveling of mantic-based economics as well (v. 19)” (p. 26).

Back to the three-hundred-year trend in scholarly interpretation of Acts: if Christian culture collides with pagan culture, how can Rome and Christianity exist on friendly terms? In chapter three, “*Dikaios*: Rejecting Statecraft,” Rowe admits to the tension, stressing that outsiders could “construe Christianity as sedition or treason,” and that “Luke explicitly raises these and related charges and repeatedly narrates the course of events so that the Christians—here in the mold of Jesus himself—are found ‘innocent’ of seditious criminal activity” (p. 5). He says here what he repeats elsewhere: “New culture, yes—coup, no” (p. 5). The disruption is real, but it is not illegal. His textual proof includes episodes with Gallio, Claudius Lysias, Felix, Festus, and Herod Agrippa II, arguing that these leaders lack the hermeneutical paradigm or cultural story to understand truly the debate surrounding followers of Jesus (e.g., p. 84). Such ignorance, however, is not forgiven, as “the state” is idolatrous and kills Jesus even after declaring him innocent (with the narrative expectation for a similar fate for Paul) (p. 88).

In chapter four, “World Upside Down: Practicing Theological Knowledge,” Rowe asks how we might think through the tension of: “New culture, yes – coup, no” (p. 91). His answer includes a focus on the kind of tension produced: it “is a *lived* tension” (p. 102). Because it is lived, a focus on life patterns is appropriate, and here he emphasizes “three mutually interdependent ecclesial practices...: the confession of Jesus as *Lord* of all, the *universal* mission of light, and the formation of Christian *communities* as the tangible presence of a people set apart” (p. 92, emphasis mine). They are interdependent because the *Lordship* of Jesus is *universal*, thus calling all to embody this reality in cultural (and thus *communal*) ways.

Rowe ends his book with a chapter that scholars with a different methodological paradigm might call “application,” though he rejects a “from-then-to-now linear movement” (p. 9). He sees this piece not as an extra, but as part-and-parcel of his book that has delineated Luke’s view of the universal Lordship of Jesus. He admits that “in a crucial way, the vision of Acts is profoundly intolerant” (p. 170), which means that much of our culture will be inhospitable to its claims. However, in a chapter filled with philosophical language and discussion across disciplines, his conclusion is that the truth claim about Jesus’s Lordship in Acts does not lead to a narrative blueprint for the need to coerce others for their own good, but to a mission that rejects violence as a way to ground peaceful community and instead witnesses to the Lord’s life of rejection and crucifixion by living it in public communities derisively called Christian. The claim to universal truth is not thin but thick, or enfleshed – shown to be what it is in the living out of the person’s life about whom the claim is made. According to Acts, therefore, to be the community that claims to know the Lord of all is to be in the world the way the Lord himself was. Theologically said, ecclesiology is public Christology (p. 173). The question for and the critique of the Church today is clear: is Christian embodiment proclaiming Jesus’ universal Lordship?

In short, between these three texts there is something for everyone. From the introductory and accessible to the philosophically nuanced and interdisciplinary, the scope of Luke’s distinctive contributions is trumpeted. Read on; read well.



HOLLY BEERS

is Adjunct Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California.