

# Studying the Book of Acts

BY KATHY MAXWELL

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The student of Acts will find there is no shortage of commentaries. They often use different methodologies to achieve their varied purposes. Acts stands alone in the New Testament as a narrative account of the early years of those following The Way, a distinction that offers particular challenges. Scholars have debated the book's historical reliability, its rhetorical and literary nature, and its sociological and theological implications. The four commentaries reviewed here adopt different approaches and formats, but they share a common interest in theological application, carefully informed by the historical and literary context of Acts. For each volume I will identify the audience, purpose, and methodology of the series and commentary, introduce the author's hermeneutic, and briefly note the supplementary material provided. I will mention how the author treats some particular text in order to provide a sample of the author's approach.

Beverly Gaventa's volume *Acts* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003, 296 pp., \$31.99) appears in the Abingdon New Testament Commentaries series, which aims to produce "compact, critical commentaries" (p. 15) for upper level university students, theological students, pastors, and church leaders. The series focuses on the "literary, socio-historical, theological, and ethical dimensions of the biblical texts" (p. 15). The volumes follow a common format that reflects this concern: each passage is subjected to literary, exegetical, and finally theological and ethical analysis. Gaventa

chooses to focus particularly on the theological perspectives communicated in Acts. She writes, “The question that drives this volume concerns the order Luke posits on the chaotic and colorful realm of the world, an order he refers to as ‘the events that have been fulfilled among us’ (Luke 1:1)” (p. 59). Thus, it is not surprising that Gaventa spends relatively little time discussing traditional background issues such as authorship, audience, date, and genre. The conclusions she does draw regarding these questions tend to be based on narrative evidence from the text of Acts. Gaventa’s proposed structure of Acts also revolves around narrative development. Acts builds up to and then comes down from two climactic events: Cornelius’s conversion (Acts 10:1-11:18) and Paul’s final defense before Festus and King Agrippa (Acts 26), which highlight, respectively, the preaching to the Gentiles and the inclusion of Jew and Gentile in the people of God.

Gaventa’s commentary is less concerned with historical reconstruction, though she does engage such discussions when appropriate. For example, when treating the sea voyage of Paul (Acts 27), Gaventa avoids the debate of whether the account of the voyage is historically reliable, discussion regarding the geography that contributes to a “northeaster,” and lengthy explanation of how the crew members might “undergird the ship” (Acts 27:17). She focuses instead on the theological and narrative developments within the pericope, observing the well-seasoned nature of Paul’s travel advice and his place as “an agent of God who brings about the rescue of the ship” (p. 352). She notes the emotion of the “we” narrator as well, who seems to be just as hopeless as the rest of the passengers. Paul alone remains confident that God will preserve the travelers.

Gaventa’s fairly extensive table of contents doubles as a helpful outline of the text, making it easy to see a quick overview of Acts. The end matter includes a selected bibliography that provides plenty of sources pointing readers to further study. The commentary includes a subject index, but not a scripture index. The annotated entries for major commentaries are a nice addition, particularly for those wishing to build their theological library.



J. Bradley Chance’s volume *Acts* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007, 640 pp., \$60.00) is part of the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series. This series’ goal is to make “serious, credible biblical scholarship” available in “an accessible and less intimidating” multimedia format (p. xvii). The treatment of each passage is divided into two main sections, Commentary and Comments, which are supplemented by “sidebars” that provide the multimedia: in-depth topical discussion, word studies, maps, text critical information, and reflections on related fine art, among other materials.

Chance targets engaged, active Christian readers who are “seeking a word from the Lord for the church” (p. xviii). In fact, engaged readers are key to Chance’s hermeneutic. He defines biblical interpretation as a dynamic process that takes place at the intersection of the reader and the text. As readers change over time, their interpretations may change as well. Chance begins with the assumption that hearing Scripture necessarily involves interpretation, which leads to reflection, and finally results in the transformation of individuals and communities.

Chance’s introduction to the biblical text unfolds in a straightforward way. He deals with four main topics: introductory historical questions, the textual history of Acts, the historical reliability of Acts, and theological themes in Acts. Compared to the other commentaries reviewed in this essay, this one includes a more extended discussion of the history of scholarship, particularly in the areas of textual criticism and the speeches in Acts.

Four theological themes identified in the introduction – Christianity’s Connection with Judaism, the Community of Faith, the Providence of God, and Human Participation in the Divine Drama – play a continuous role in the exposition of the text. Chance summarizes the last two themes as the “relational partnership” in the unfolding of God’s will and purpose (p. 26). Chance’s hermeneutic is also woven throughout the book; it is often mentioned in the commentary proper (see, for example, the Connections section on Acts 15) and it also makes appearances in the sidebars (as in the one titled “Experience and the Believer” on p. 379). Chance finds support for his hermeneutic in Acts, pointing to James’s conclusions at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) as an example “from the Bible itself, that Scripture is not interpreted in a vacuum, free of the context – and experience – of the interpreter” (p. 255).

The supplemental material in an included CDROM sets Chance’s volume apart from the others: it contains a searchable PDF of the commentary and a “freebies” folder. The “front matter” of the PDF version of the commentary explains how most effectively to use the resource within copyright restrictions. The “freebies” folder is less useful than it was when the commentary was published (as it includes outdated Smyth & Helwys catalogs), but it does contain links to some teaching and study resources available at the publisher’s website.

The formatting of the printed volume includes wide margins, allowing ample room for the author’s sidebars and the reader’s notes. The table of contents separates the chapter and verses in Acts from the section headings, making it a bit easier to locate a particular passage quickly. In addition to the usual indices, readers will appreciate the Index of Sidebars and Illustrations that gathers the sidebar topics into one convenient place of reference.



Mikeal C. Parsons writes his commentary *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008, 464 pp., \$30.00) as part of the Paideia series, which is intended for students “who have theological interest in the biblical text” (p. xi), upper-level and graduate students, and seminarians. The series title—from the ancient Greek term for rearing and educating citizens of the polis—points to the impact that Greek educational practices had on the New Testament and continue to have on the series’ own pedagogical goals. The series focuses on a literary approach, informed by what the editors call the “extratext” that colored the world of ancient composers and audiences (pp. xi-xii). Based on his study of Luke-Acts, Parsons concludes that “Luke’s literary skills in communicating his story are matched if not exceeded by the theological vision that undergirds that story” (p. xii). Luke’s theological vision and the means by which he communicates it serve as the foci of Parsons’s volume. Thus, after Parsons treats introductory material for each rhetorical unit, he moves to the study of the unit as it unfolds and then addresses theological issues in the text for a contemporary audience (p. xii).

Parsons’s work in ancient rhetoric no doubt contributes to the number of Greek and Latin rhetorical terms that are cogently explained in light of their function in Acts. The discussion of Acts’ rhetorical context contributes to a particular strength of this commentary: Parsons’s focus on *how* Luke communicates his narrative and theology. Close readings of the text and “extratext” reveal Luke’s considerable gift of the art of persuasion. For instance, after observing that the compositional question of the “we passages” in Acts “has proven intractable and unsolvable,” Parson turns instead to the passages’ rhetorical function, for which there are also several

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options. He concludes that the addition of first-person plural language added a third buttress to Luke’s persuasiveness: to the evidence of oral tradition and written witnesses, Luke now adds eyewitness testimony (pp. 238-239). Considering the ancient reception of Acts, Parsons notes that as early as Irenaeus the added first-person detail was persuasive. Irenaeus assumes that Luke joined Paul on his travels. Parsons points out, however, that the

narrative focus does not rest on the narrator's presence with the group but remains on the work of God's spirit (pp. 239-240).

The Paideia series makes good use of sidebars filled with context/outline reminders, explanation of rhetorical devices (usually employing the Greek or Latin vocabulary), minor language issues, cultural issues (especially regarding rhetoric and the audience), comparative and other extra-biblical literature, related theological content, and visual illustrations. The commentary's extensive bibliography provides a wide range of sources for readers of various levels. The indices also serve as helpful resources, particularly the Index of Scripture and Ancient Writings that offers information on the large number of ancient sources to which the commentary refers.



Michael Mullins's *The Acts of the Apostles* (Dublin, IE: Columba Press, 2014, 286 pp., \$47.00) is a sequel to his commentary on Luke. It is the only commentary reviewed here that is not part of a series. Mullins's goal is to compile academic-level scholarship and make it accessible to a broader audience of serious readers – preachers, students of theology, and others who wish to study the biblical text. He uses some technical terminology when necessary, but these words are contextually defined and explained. The impetus behind this volume is the increase in serious Roman Catholic readers of the biblical text as a result of the Second Vatican Council (p. 13).

Mullins succeeds in delivering scholarship on Acts in an accessible manner, as evidenced by examining the rather short Index of Modern and Ancient Authors at the back of the volume. Instead of making frequent reference to other scholars, Mullins provides a concise survey of scholarship for the reader. Throughout the commentary, Mullins exhibits a healthy appreciation of Luke as an author in his own right, not merely a compiler of traditions. For example, when Mullins treats the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), he ends the section by addressing the question of historical reconstruction in light of Galatians 2. He asks the pertinent questions, raising problems and possibilities for his readers. Mullins briefly offers solutions that consider the social and theological situation, and then concludes that Luke's account is likely a fusion of events. He takes into account the purpose of both Luke and Paul, pointing out that "Luke has the advantage of writing many years later than Paul and seeing the once heated issues in a cooler, more overall perspective made clearer with the passage of time" (p. 164).

As was the case in Gaventa's book, the table of contents here is quite extensive, serving as a helpful outline and overview of the text of Acts. The opening map is the only illustration in the volume, but marked on it are the key locations that appear in the book of Acts. Mullins uses footnotes sparingly, in keeping with his purpose, and the General Index is shorter than some, but helpful nonetheless.



The four commentaries reviewed here offer well-researched, clearly written treatments of the book of Acts. They are designed for the educated lay person or pastor and for the seminarian. Bridging the gap between academic scholarship and the interests of these readers is tricky at best, given that some will have theological training, or teaching and preaching experience, or a general curiosity that leads them to a more in-depth study Scripture. All four of the commentaries use transliterations and definitions of select Greek words. The commentaries by Chance and Parsons guide readers to different levels of information by using sidebars that do not interrupt the text of the commentary proper. This approach is largely successful, allowing readers to pick and choose the supplemental information they wish to engage. The volumes by Gaventa and Mullins do not use a distinctive format for additional information, but instead rely upon in-text definitions and descriptions to ensure that readers of all levels have access to pertinent information. Depending on personal interest and intended use, serious students from various contexts will find one or more of these commentaries to be reliable, effective resources for understanding and applying the book of Acts.



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