

BOOK REVIEW

Loveday C.A. Alexander, *Acts in its Ancient Literary Context: A Classicist Looks at the Acts of the Apostles* (LNTS, 298; ECC; London: T. & T. Clark, 2006; pbk edn, 2007). xi + 285 pp. Pbk. US\$49.95.

Acts in its Ancient Literary Context provides a valuable compendium of previously published articles and essays by one of the most significant contemporary scholars working with the Greco-Roman literary backgrounds within which Luke–Acts was forged. The volume represents a career of reflection upon the intersection between Luke’s literary achievements and classical culture. The publication of this important work in paperback will make it more accessible to students and scholars who want access to the material but do not want to pay the steep price of a hardback LNTS monograph. The bindings and overall quality of the new T. & T. Clark paperbacks also mark a substantial improvement on previous offerings.

The first chapter, ‘On a Roman Bookstall’, is the only previously unpublished chapter, and serves as a helpful introduction to the book in a number of ways. It not only canvases the sequence and content of the chapters in the volume, and Alexander’s various contributions to Lukan scholarship and ancient literary criticism over the last few decades, it also offers a brief response to a number of criticisms raised concerning her published doctoral dissertation, *The Preface to Luke’s Gospel: Literary Convention and Social Context in Luke 1.1–4 and Acts 1.1* (SNTSM, 78; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), and sets up her agenda for future scholarship. These comments would probably have fit more neatly into two chapters, and a more extended response to Alexander’s critics would certainly have been welcome.

A discussion of ‘The Preface to Acts and the Historians’ occupies the second chapter. This compares distinct features of Greco-Roman historical prefaces with what is found in Luke–Acts. Alexander begins by dealing with the obvious preliminary question raised by her project: can Luke–Acts be considered a two volume work? After briefly

surveying some of the issues involved, she attempts to side-step this problem by setting out to treat the prefaces in Luke and Acts independently. Her analysis seeks to allow ‘equally for both possibilities’ (p. 27). Alexander then identifies five features in the preface to Acts and assesses these in relation to the broader historical enterprise of the Hellenistic world. Of these five features, only ‘authorial first person’ (p. 29) is widely represented in the Greek historians. The other four—dedication, recapitulation, subject matter, transition—she insists, do ‘not conform to the conventional etiquette of [traditional] Greco-Roman historiography’ (p. 36). She briefly entertains the possibility that the preface might better parallel the ancient historical monograph or apologetic historiography before suggesting what seems to her to be the more likely possibility: that the Acts preface is closest ‘to the scholarly, scientific side of the Ionian *historia*-tradition’ (p. 41). In many ways this chapter clarifies and re-emphasizes some of the distinctive features mentioned in Alexander’s original publication on the prefaces in Luke–Acts, elucidating some of key differences between Lukan and contemporary Greco-Roman historical prefaces and suggesting a possible alternative within the broader historical-scientific enterprise.

In the third chapter, ‘Acts and Intellectual Biography’, Alexander takes her starting point from Talbert’s thesis that there are significant parallels between Acts and ancient intellectual or philosophical biography. She emphasizes the school setting as the social context out of which these works arose and suggests a similar context for the origin of early Christian literary production, especially Acts. Her contribution to this discussion is really found in her comparison of the narrative structure of Acts to that of Diogenes Laertius’s *Lives of the Philosophers* from the third century AD. Although it is not suggested that *Lives* functions as Luke’s literary model, it is often seen as representative of a larger intellectual biographical tradition that dates back to the classical era.

Chapter 4 introduces a number of initiatory suggestions regarding ‘Voyaging in the Acts of the Apostles and in Greek Romance’. Alexander’s conclusions are cautious and tentatively stated. After briefly surveying journey motifs in Chariton’s *Chaereas and Callirhoe* and Xenophon’s *Ephesiaca*, Alexander notes points of contact and deviation between Acts and these two works of Greek romance. She attempts to make the mental maps assumed by all three authors explicit

through a creative implementation of cognitive geography. Alexander concludes with a several reconstructed maps based on her analysis.

The fifth chapter, originally published in a Festschrift for John Rogerson, further explores the value of cognitive geography for reconstructing the implied narrative maps created for readers through the text of Acts. It focuses, in particular, upon toponymy in Acts: ‘the selection and distribution of geographical names’ (p. 98). She argues that consistent use of regional designations in Acts has distinct geographical, spatial, political, emotional and narrative functions, much like those in Greek novels of the ancient world. Her results are summarized in a helpful appendix and collection of maps.

‘Fact, Fiction and the Genre of Acts’ is the title of the sixth chapter. Alexander begins by surveying a number of Greek literary forms, including history, geography, paradoxography, biography and novel, and shows that the distinction between fact and fiction was quite blurred in Greek literature and is in many ways an anachronistic classification of the data. It is still legitimate, however, to ask whether a piece of literature records and would have been read by ancient readers as fact or non-fact, even if these do not represent literary designations. In line with recent consensus among scholars studying the genre of Acts, Alexander argues that the determination of historicity cannot be reduced to the issue of genre. Nevertheless, given its literary cues, she asks, would ancient educated Greek readers have read Acts as a record of facts or primarily as a non-factual document? Although she believes that a number of indicators would have suggested to the educated Greek reader that Acts was intended to be read as factual material, many would probably have understood it as fiction. However, Alexander insists that it must be kept in mind that ‘Acts is a narrative which both implies and creates the presumption of a shared religious experience: and that is something difficult to accommodate within the standard fact/fiction grid of Greek literature’ (p. 163).

The work of Marianne Bonz and Denis MacDonald is discussed in Chapter 7, ‘New Testament Narrative and Ancient Epic’. Both Bonz and MacDonald have suggested significant points of contact between New Testament narrative and Greco-Roman epics. While Alexander appreciates the vital role of epic in the cultural script of the world of the New Testament authors, she is skeptical of understanding Luke’s literary achievements as imitations of Homeric epics.

Chapter 8, ‘The Acts of the Apostles as an Apologetic Text’, begins with a helpful classification of the five predominant audiences typically identified as the groups to whom the *apologia* was directed: (1) the inner-church, especially regarding controversies related to Christian–Jewish–Gentile debates; (2) Judaism; (3) Greeks; (4) Rome, especially regarding the political charges against Paul/the church; and (5) Christians, for the purpose of self-definition in the tradition of ‘apologetic historiography’. According to Alexander, these approaches all have in common the view that Acts addresses, in a somewhat forensic fashion, a ‘dramatic situation’. She argues that the debate thus far has been in many ways misguided due to the lack of attention to ‘surface matters of genre and discourse mode’ (p. 190), rightly crediting this neglect to the fact that ‘*apologia*’ did not function as a genre-description in the literary world of the first century. Although Sterling tackles the genre issue directly, identifying Acts as ‘apologetic historiography’, Alexander finds his analysis unconvincing since Acts does not share many of the literary features of this genre—at least as identified by Oden. She then turns to criticize the other four types of apologetic readings. Essentially, her argument is that none of the proposed apologetic situations can account for the diverse audiences addressed throughout the narrative. Strictly in terms of the narrative time spent addressing the respective audiences, Alexander points out that types 2 and 4 are most prominent, but insists on reading Acts in light of an apologetic scenario that can take into account the wide range of issues that Luke seems to be addressing.

The ninth chapter examines the mysterious ending of Luke–Acts in relation to the question of unity: ‘Reading Luke–Acts from Back to Front’. Alexander helpfully redirects the attention in the debate on unity to similarities between the Lukan preface/prologue and the closing of Acts. She identifies four distinct similarities: (1) the introduction of Rome as a location where the word is being proclaimed; (2) the community setting; (3) hermeneutical matrices based in the Jewish Scriptures; (4) the act of ‘proclamation’ foregrounded. On the basis of these ‘echoes’ Alexander concludes ‘that a case can be made out for the proposition that Luke conceived of his work from the outset as a two-volume set in which the Gospel story would be balanced and continued with the stories of the apostles’ (p. 223), although it is unlikely that ancient readers would have been able to predict this unity from the outset. Her analysis in this chapter is convincing and the theological and

narrative implications of her research help solidify the value of the chapter in broader discussions of Luke–Acts and its theological narrative strategy.

The last chapter of *Acts in its Ancient Literary Context*, ‘Septuaginta, Fachprosa, Imitatio: Albert Wifstrand and the Language of Luke–Acts’, was originally published for Eckhard Plümacher. Although Alexander evaluates two of Wifstrand’s essays in this chapter, she does so in light of the work of Eduard Norden, C.A. Ferguson and M.A.K. Halliday, the latter two authors working in the field of socio-linguistics. Wifstrand’s ‘Luke and Greek Classicism’ is the first essay Loveday considers. She favors Wifstrand’s conclusion—that Luke was probably not influenced by classicism, but does evidence Atticistic influence and seems to be more in line with Standard Hellenistic Prose—but attempts to recast it in a more socio-linguistically based framework. Alexander’s agenda in dealing with the second essay, ‘Luke and the Septuagint’, is to reconcile how Wifstrand’s conclusion that Luke intentionally introduces septuagintal translation Greek into his narrative with the linguistic style of Luke established by Wifstrand in his ‘Luke and Classicism’. She concludes that Luke’s familiarity with biblical Greek (as a Gentile) is too impressive to have been learned after his conversion, insisting that Luke’s biblical Greek was probably a broader (high form of) Jewish Greek (despite recent terminological difficulties with this description) that incorporated many biblical Greek elements, probably learned by Luke in the Greek-speaking synagogues.

While the value of this volume as a compilation of years of important and cutting-edge research cannot be questioned, readers will find that a few of the essays make a subtler contribution, often being concerned mainly with review and evaluation of previous research. These essays typically provide new angles on older issues.

This book is invaluable as a graduate level textbook for courses on Acts since it situates Acts in its literary world like no other book currently available. Many of the essays make a substantial contribution and will continue to be a valuable resource to the scholarly community.

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