

*Acts in its ancient literary context: a classicist
looks at the Acts of the Apostles*
(Library of New Testament studies 298)

Alexander, Loveday C. A.

London: T & T Clark, 2007, xi + 290 pp., £29.99,
pb, ISBN 978-0-567-08219-0

Acts

(Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New
Testament)

Bock, Darrell L.

Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007, xxi + 848 pp., £22.75, hb,
ISBN 978-0-8010-2668-3

Acts

(Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, NT
series V)

Martin, Francis (ed)

Downers Grove: IVP, 2006, xxvi + 368 pp., £17.95,
hb, ISBN 978-0-8308-1490-9

SUMMARY

Of the three books on Acts discussed, Bock's is a lengthy and very good but not groundbreaking commentary which will serve a large public. Both Martin's compilation of ancient commentaries and Alexander's essays on the genre of Acts are very specialist. Alexander does break new ground in showing that Acts is not historiography but still potentially factual.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Von den drei besprochenen Büchern zur Apostelgeschichte ist das Buch von Bock ein ausführlicher, sehr guter, wenn auch nicht Bahn brechender Kommentar, der einer größeren Öffentlichkeit dienen wird. Sowohl Martins Zusammenstellung antiker Kommentare als auch Alexanders Artikel zum Genre der Apostelgeschichte sind sehr fachspezifische Beiträge. Alexander eröffnet neue Perspektiven, indem sie zeigt, dass die Apostelgeschichte zwar keine Historiographie, aber dennoch potentiell tatsachenbezogen ist.

RÉSUMÉ

Le commentaire de Bock sur le livre des Actes est développé et très bon, sans apporter de grande nouveauté; il sera utile à un large public. La compilation de commentaires anciens par Martin et les travaux d'Alexander sur le genre littéraire du livre des Actes sont des ouvrages très spécialisés. Alexander a une approche nouvelle en ce qu'elle montre que le livre des Actes, tout en n'étant pas historiographique, peut cependant contenir des données factuelles.

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In a recent issue of this Journal I reviewed three recent books on John's Gospel and this time I have been sent three recent publications on Acts. I must say that these

three are so different that a comparison would not be meaningful and they have to be dealt with individually.

Pride of place goes to Darrell Bock's commentary on Acts in the Baker series. Bock is best known for his various works on Luke's Gospel: the massive two volume commentary in this same Baker series, the NIV Application Commentary and the IVP New Testament Commentary. He now turns his skills to Acts but only uses one volume to do the job. The commentary proper still fills over 700 pages; it is preceded by 50 pages of introduction and followed by the bibliography and several indexes. As usual in the Baker series, at the beginning of each passage there is an introduction which already states its key elements and its message; at the end of the expositions there are no further conclusions or applications. The notes are full, fair and useful.

Bock focuses on historical questions and for a more narrative approach he refers to Gaventa and Spencer. This is regrettable as a major commentary like this should be able to cover all aspects of the book. And when it comes to historiography, Loveday Alexander and Daniel Marguerat are almost absent from the discussion so that the discussion is not fully up to date. Otherwise the discussion partners are as one would expect. Bock carefully argues for a date of origin pre-AD 70 and identifies Acts 11 with Galatians 2. Overall he defends the historicity of the narrative.

Among my students this is already is the most popular commentary on Acts, I presume because they find it accessible and full. To those who can only afford one commentary on Acts I would say: If you have Bruce, Marshall, Witherington, Johnson or Fitzmyer, no need to trade yours in. Bock is on a par with them and we are grateful for another sound Evangelical commentary.

The second book is the volume on Acts in the IVP series *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* which is now nearly complete. This volume contains a short modern introduction and modern headings but is of course largely devoted to selected patristic comments. The only two complete extant ancient commentaries on Acts, by Chrysostom and Bede, dominate the scene – and the 8th century Brit Bede is not really a Father of the Church. In the Introduction the Roman Catholic background of the editor shines through quite clearly. This volume raises the same issues as the rest of the series. The approach has a fragmented feel about it because there is no real continuous argument. Entire verses and lines of thought get no attention. Secondly, the English text printed is the RSV not the NRSV, and the footnotes are in very small print indeed which is unnecessary in a large-size volume like this.

For those who do not buy the entire series, this beautifully produced volume will have to compete with Pelikan's 2006 SCM Theological Commentary which majors on the history of interpretation and is similar in price.

Last but not least there are collected essays on Acts by Loveday Alexander, professor in Sheffield. Like Bock she

first became known for her work on Luke, in this case her dissertation on the preface of the Gospel in which she argues that it is not the typical preface of a piece of historiography. On Acts she has so far published a fine small commentary (in *The People's Commentary*) as well as numerous essays and she announces that she will write a new edition of Black's NT Commentary to succeed C.S.C. William's work. The essays have now been gathered in one volume. The first chapter was written specifically for this collection and shows what Alexander's long term research project is and where each essay fits in. She is studying (Luke and) Acts against the background of the secular literature of the time; more specifically she investigates the genre and the generic characteristics of Acts.

Throughout Alexander defends and develops her view that Luke and Acts are not to be classified as ancient historiography but she explains that this does not necessarily imply that they are therefore fictional writings. She patiently takes the reader by the hand and shows how Acts does not fit the definition of historiography in the tradition of Herodotus and Thucydides which in Hellenistic times had become a genre dominated by rhetoric. Not only does the common preface point in a different direction, so does the register of the Greek Luke writes: his is not the atticising Greek of the elite but a simpler yet educated language. Perhaps surprisingly, from the point of view of Luke's reliability his severance from historiography is not a bad conclusion for Alexander shows that in the second century historiography had a pretty bad reputation. On the other hand, although Acts has some similarities with the ancient novel such as an interest in travel, in particular travel by sea, it also differs from the novel in fundamental ways. Luke consciously writes about a very recent past in which the Roman Empire plays a large role, not about a distant romanticised past as we find in the novels. There are some affinities with the genre of the intellectual biography although this too is not a close fit. Alexander shows that the portrait of Paul resembles what readers would have known about Socrates in at least eight major respects. The nearest parallels, however, are with the Old Testament which has clearly served as Luke's model in several ways. Luke writes the kind of Greek that cultured Jews would have appreciated most. Alexander does not develop this line of thought very far but others have written extensively about it. The conclusion is that an ancient reader who took up Acts would probably expect a factual not a fictional work, a piece of 'technical literature', at the level of popular culture. Of course factuality does not exclude selectivity and the use of particular perspectives.

Alexander's work is very focused. She hardly touches other issues such as place and date of Acts, or Luke's background, although she does hint at a late origin and at the likelihood that Luke was Jewish. The book can be read without knowledge of Greek; one essay, however, contains much untranslated French. It is well-produced but at an official price of £32.99 for the paperback it

is still not cheap. It is a must-have for libraries and all subject specialists, though.

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The Cambridge Companion to the Gospels

Stephen C. Barton (ed.)

Cambridge: CUP, 2006

p/b; £15.99; ISBN-13: 9780521807661

SUMMARY

This volume is a collection of introductory essays on the canonical Gospels. The papers pay specific attention to historical background, literary and theological content, and the impact of the Gospels on Church life and modern society. The collection is useful as it combines theological, historical, and literary approaches together and deliberately tries to avoid a faith versus academy approach to the Gospels.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieser Band ist eine Sammlung einleitender Artikel zu den kanonischen Evangelien. Die Artikel widmen ihre besondere Aufmerksamkeit dem historischen Hintergrund, dem literarischen und theologischen Inhalt und dem Einfluss der Evangelien auf das kirchliche Leben und die moderne Gesellschaft. Die Sammlung ist nützlich, da sie theologische, historische und literarische Ansätze verbindet und bewusst zu vermeiden versucht, dem Glauben verpflichtete Ansätze gegen akademische Ansätze in Bezug auf die Evangelien auszuspielen.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet ouvrage contient un ensemble d'articles d'introduction aux Évangiles canoniques. Ils s'intéressent particulièrement à l'arrière-plan historique, au contenu littéraire et théologique des Évangiles et à leur influence sur la vie de l'Église et la société moderne. L'ouvrage associe des approches théologiques, historiques et littéraires en s'efforçant d'éviter d'opposer la foi et la recherche académique.

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This volume in the Cambridge Companion Series looks at the canonical Gospels with a special emphasis on the canonical context of the Gospels and Christian life as a continued performance of the Gospels. The book is divided into three parts: (1) Approaching the Gospels – Context and Method; (2) The Gospels as Witnesses to Christ – Content and Interpretation; and (3) The Afterlife of the Gospels – Impact on Church and Society.

The 'Introduction' by Stephen Barton draws attention to the dichotomy of interpretation of the Bible in academic universities that stands 'over' the text and the interpretation of the Bible in the church that stands 'under' the text. According to Barton the present volume seeks to go beyond this divide by incorporating historical, literary, rhetorical, theological, and aesthetic approaches to the Gospels which does better justice to