

BOOK REVIEW

Bale, Alan J., *Genre and Narrative Coherence in the Acts of the Apostles* (LNTS, 514; London: T. & T. Clark, 2015). xviii + 241 pp. Hbk. \$114.00.

Bale's work takes a fresh approach to the issue of the genre of the book of Acts. Numerous proposals concerning the genre of Acts have been put forth over the past few decades, including assertions that Acts belongs to the genres of Hellenistic historiography, ancient biography, historical monograph, Greek epic, novel and others. So many views continue to compete in the field that, as a result, scholarship on Acts has yet to come to a general consensus. In this current state of affairs, Bale has offered a new approach to the problem of the genre of Acts, one that is not preoccupied with classifying Acts into a generic category, but rather one that interprets Acts in light of the intertextual relations it shares with the literature of its Greco-Roman literary environment.

The volume is separated into two parts. The first part, 'Methodology', makes up a little over half the length of the book and contains the first four chapters. In the first chapter, Bale orients himself within the wider discussion of Lukan studies on matters relevant to the genre of Acts, articulating his views on such topics as the unity of Luke-Acts, the role of the Lukan prefaces, the 'we' passages in Acts and the dating of Acts. The second chapter then reviews and assesses several major genre proposals for Acts that argue that the book should be interpreted in light of a particular genre's conventions. Bale challenges the assumptions inherent in the practice of assigning Acts to a single genre, because if Acts were only interpreted in light of one genre's conventions, then many of the narrative components of Acts could not be accounted for. In other words, if one privileges one genre's conventions over all others, Acts can only be partially understood. The problem of classification, then, necessitates a shift in focus, and this orients the approach taken in the volume.

Bale articulates his own theory of genre in the third chapter, arguing that genre has more to do with ideological systems than with actual texts. This notion is supported mainly by the literary contributions made to genre theory by Mikhail Bakhtin. According to Bakhtinian theory, the most important concept in the nature of genres is the notion of dialogism—that is, the notion that all texts are intertextual and are complexly related to the other texts in their literary environment. Additionally, texts use prior texts to accomplish their own goals, so genres are always in a process of changing, but their similarities and differences remain intertextually related to other texts. In the multicultural literary environment in which Luke wrote, it is often difficult to discern how Acts is intertextually related to the other genres of its time, which creates a problem for modern interpreters. As a result, Bale incorporates into his genre theory Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson's relevance theory, which explains that people assume the relevance of communication and so attempt to find the context that maximizes a text's relevance. For Bale, this means seeking out the cognitive literary environment in which Luke wrote, which includes both Jewish and Greco-Roman influences.

Chapter 4 addresses the issue of whether Acts is written in the mode of fiction or of history. Scholars have interpreted Acts according to both modes, and this has influenced how they have understood the relationship between the genre of Acts and the historical accuracy of Luke's narration of events and Luke's means of making truth claims. Bale approaches the issue of the historicity of Acts by deprioritizing the 'truth' principle associated with historical writing, replacing it with the principle of relevance. Seen in this way, Acts can be interpreted in light of the conventions it follows, which is important because Bale argues that 'Acts contains elements of both fictional and historical modes, and to make a classification that excludes or minimises one type of effect reduces interpretative resources dramatically' (p. 108). This approach allows the narrative logic of Acts to be interpreted in light of its own conventions, which in turn permits the rhetorical devices characteristic of non-historical modes of writing to be brought into dialogue with the elements of historiography that Acts also displays.

It is somewhat puzzling why the name of Part 1 of this volume is titled 'Methodology', because nowhere in the first half of the book is an actual method ever outlined. Rather, the first part of the book

addresses critical issues and literary theory. Despite the misleading title, the handling of genre theory, narrative theory and their appropriation for the literary environment of Acts is done quite expertly. Bale explains the deficiencies of other scholars who have tried to identify the genre of Acts and addresses the poor handling of genre theory in New Testament studies more generally. Bale's approach to genre theory is indeed much more up to date in the field of literary theory than most of his predecessors, so if the theoretical principles he has gathered together were filtered through a self-critical method, then more confident assertions could be made about the generic qualities of the book of Acts. However, in moving to the second part of the book, titled 'The Studies', one finds a large gap separating the two sections; there is no bridge showing how one moves from theoretical principles to analysis.

In the introduction of Part 2, Bale, acknowledging his lack of a methodological procedure, qualifies his approach:

Before going any further in this study it is worth briefly justifying my method (or more accurately, my lack of it) in these studies. After more than a hundred pages of methodology the reader might feel she deserves at least some understanding of the process by which I arrive at my outcomes ... I would rather admit from the outset that the method largely relies upon the application of literary instinct and is developed by reading as much of the appropriate literature as possible ... The only rule is that the narrative has to make some sort of sense (pp. 124-25).

This statement on its own welcomes a host of objections to Bale's interpretative approach. First, what is literary instinct? What set of criteria does one use to identify 'appropriate literature'? Also, how can simply claiming to have attuned ears that can detect the intertextual relations Acts shares with other texts meet the standards of critical scholarship? Such an approach is entirely subjective and cannot claim to be critical of itself in any sense. Further, there are essentially no constraints governing the kinds of relations Acts can be said to have with other literary works, except that some sense must result from making the link. Such an approach is a license to be as creative as one wants and opens the door to all kinds of interpretations. Bale's work, then, which began with much promise in Part 1, ultimately fails to provide any convincing arguments based on its own lack of methodological rigor. More should be said, however, about the particular aspects of his individual studies in Part 2.

Chapter 5 argues the thesis that Acts 1.6 functions as an ‘ambiguous oracle’, a literary device that establishes the plot, ‘configures the narrative[,] and generates interest’ (p. 152). Oracles were used in Greek tragedy and epic as well as the novels representative of Luke’s literary environment. An important aspect of the oracle is that it was expected to occur in temples and be made by a priest. Bale, acknowledging this, undermines his own argument with the following admission: ‘Of course, the oracle of Acts is not actually an oracle at all; it does not occur in a temple and is not given by a priest’ (p. 148). It would seem, then, that Bale has gone out of his way to connect Acts to the genres of novel and Greek epic, even introducing the term ‘ambiguous’ to account for the lack of literary conventions that the text exhibits. Later, he contradicts himself again by first stating that ‘this [ambiguous oracle] is perhaps as close to a genre indicator as Acts is likely to provide, and it is not suggestive of the historiographical mode’, but then in the next paragraph he says, ‘The ambiguous oracle has precedent in Hebrew historiography’ (p. 152). Bale’s argument, then, is probably best diagnosed as a case of special pleading, but the contradictions in this chapter invite the question as to why Bale has gone to such great lengths to explain Acts in terms of fiction, especially given that he has argued in the first part of his book that it is unwise to try to ascribe Acts to any one genre. This inconsistency is perhaps due to this chapter being a previously published article (‘The Ambiguous Oracle: Narrative Configuration in Acts’, *NTS* 57 [2011], pp. 530-46); the argument is not developed with the first part of the book firmly in mind.

Chapter 6 explores the construction of Paul’s apostolic status, arguing that Paul, rather than Matthias, was the divinely appointed twelfth apostle. The device that Bale believes leads the audience to come to this conclusion is the pervasive hero characterizations of Paul, which are reflective of the way both Greek and Hebrew literature portrayed characters as divinely chosen to overcome impossible odds and to show great courage in the midst of various struggles. This is then contrasted with the fact that Matthias does not factor into the book of Acts at all after his appointment by the eleven apostles, which Bale interprets as divine rejection of the apostles’ decision. At face value, this is an argument from silence; there are no indicators in the narrative that the apostles’ means of appointing Matthias were questionable or negatively evaluated by the narrator. To support his argument, Bale attempts to

downplay details in the narrative that contradict his thesis. For instance, Peter cites Scripture in Acts 1.20 as Matthias is being appointed. This would seemingly lend support for the legitimacy of the appointment, at least from the perspective of the audience, who would understand a citation of Scripture as a legitimate appeal to authority. Bale tries to explain this away, claiming that this is the only action Peter performs in Acts without the help of the Spirit. However, Bale neglects to mention that the apostles are all in agreement about the criteria necessary to appoint a twelfth apostle. Overall, the argument in this chapter is unconvincing.

The last chapter attempts to show how humor functions as a device in certain parts of Acts to contribute to the entertainment value of the narrative. Bale focuses on Paul's speech at Miletus (Acts 20.17-38) to argue that scholars' general failure to recognize the humor in this passage has been the cause of much confusion surrounding it. Bale argues that Luke portrays Paul as immodest in his speech, a portrayal that is accomplished by imitating Homer's heroism motif. Other parallels with ancient literature and various rhetorical devices also help Luke to create 'a gentle parody of Pauline style' (p. 192). Such an argument has the important implication that Luke knew Paul's letters, a major point of debate in scholarship on Acts. Despite the intriguing aspects of this thesis, the chapter does not seem to factor into the stated purpose of the volume, which is to address the narrative coherence of the book of Acts. Bale acknowledges this, but this leaves the book with only two chapters that address the stated topic of the book, so it is questionable whether Bale has provided a significant contribution to the questions of genre and narrative coherence, especially given the inconsistencies found in those two chapters.

The way one answers the question of genre greatly influences interpretation. The first part of Bale's work does much to bring genre theory up to date for scholarship on Acts and will therefore be useful for researchers engaging this question. However, problems of method hinder the arguments made in this book. Bearing this in mind, Bale's work can be used to continue to push scholarship forward on this issue.

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