

## BOOK REVIEW

C.K. Barrett, *Acts: A Shorter Commentary* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2002). 519 pp. Pbk.

This commentary is an abbreviated version of C.K. Barrett's two-volume work on Acts in the International Critical Commentary series. The first volume appeared in 1994 covering Acts 1.1–14.28. It was followed in 1998 by volume two, which included a longer introduction, an analysis of the book as a whole, and commentary on the balance of the treatise. The preface of this shorter volume makes clear that the publishers of the original works requested a shorter volume in order to serve a constituency who found the larger book unsuited to their needs. Thus, foreign language quotations are eliminated and arguments for certain conclusions are either eliminated or considerably shortened (Barrett himself expresses some concern over this, as he fears that it may leave the shortened work with an overly 'Dogmatic flavour, which I prefer to avoid'). The introduction also contains modifications for the sake of concision.

Despite these changes to the original, Barrett's work in the shorter commentary remains characteristically careful and detailed. Employing a historical-critical approach that closely considers the source material employed by the author of Acts, Barrett produces a lucid and readable commentary on a New Testament book that is highly important to those interested in what the New Testament can offer to the study of Christianity in its Greco-Roman context.

The commentary includes a short section on the development of the text itself, noting especially the editing process that leads Barrett to assert a later date of acceptance for Acts as a sacred text. His discussion of the acceptance of Acts within the Church is interesting as he traces the possibility that Acts was not considered part of the divine literature of the Church until the time of Irenaeus (mid-second century).

Barrett's evaluation of Luke as a historian is quite enthusiastic. He extols Luke's virtues as a trustworthy recorder of history in several places. Barrett writes: 'Luke, then, was in general well informed about persons, events, and institutions in the Graeco-Roman world of the first century, probably better informed than most of his contemporaries, than most of his readers... Where he agrees with other historical sources his evidence is confirmed; where he disagrees, or where evidence is lacking, he must at least be taken seriously' (p. lxxxix).

On the other hand, he decries the biblical author's ability to write in a chronologically coherent way. Also, he is not sure about Luke's acumen as a theologian. He declares this opinion clearly when he states that Luke 'was not so good at theology' (p. lxxxii). What Barrett means by this is that while Luke desires to portray Paul and his interpretation of the Gospel faithfully, there are places where he fails to do so. One place where this is noted by Barrett is Acts 13.38-39, where Paul is depicted preaching in Pisidian Antioch. In the above-mentioned verses, Paul speaks about the doctrine of justification, a theme that is crucially important to Paul's interpretation of Jesus, but Barrett sees the presentation in Acts 13 as highly truncated. He asserts that it belies Luke's complete grasp of Pauline theology. This does not mean that Barrett is completely dismissive of Luke and his contribution to the theology of the Christian Church, just that he sees deficiencies in Luke's ability to fully convey the richness of Paul's teachings.

Despite Barrett's sense that Luke lacked a well-developed understanding of Christian theology as it stood in the first century, the consistent enthusiasm that he shows for Luke's helpfulness as a historical source is significant. He states that 'Acts is a most valuable historical source for the history of ancient Christianity' (p. lxxxv). In the introduction (pp. xl-xli), he lists seventeen items in Acts that offer help to the student of first-century history. These include issues of topography and chronology in the ancient world. He also takes time to develop the importance of these items in his commentary on the text itself. Further, throughout the commentary he notes many sociologically-helpful insights on things like the Law, the Temple, Roman government and relations between rich and poor.

Of further significance is Barrett's perspective on Luke's sources. He devotes a lengthy section of the introduction to this important question. He sees a minimum of four sources behind Luke's work: they include Philip the evangelist, Christians in Caesarea, Christians in Antioch and

the apostle Paul. Barrett is skeptical about the author being a genuine eyewitness to the events he reports. Referring to the famous 'we' sections of the book, which are written as if the author were physically present with the apostle Paul during some of his missionary travels, Barrett sees them as being derived from an eye-witness source other than the author himself.

Barrett's development of historical issues and the sources Luke employed for the writing of Acts are the strength of the commentary. If these are what a reader is interested in, however, they may well be better served to look to the original two-volume set, which develops these themes with more detail. This is not to say that there is a lack of historical-critical insight in the volume under review. For example, in his analysis of Paul's speech in Athens in Acts 17, Barrett weighs the matter closely and considers a number of ancient, historical factors as well as New Testament evidence to conclude that the speech is the work of Luke, not Paul.

As a commentary the volume is concise and helpful; however, while Barrett is definitely interested in Luke's theology and its relationship to the apostle Paul's, he is not prone to offer applicational considerations to the contemporary setting. This is a commentary dedicated to analyzing the content rather than the meaning of the text. This does not mean that Barrett fails to provide helpful insights; indeed the pages of this book contain many of them. However, his careful verse-by-verse analysis is mostly interested in linguistics and source analysis, questions implicit in the text and Luke's theology. The book does not take time to provide lengthy analysis of the import of the text or its application in today's world. Rather Barrett looks for the historical development of the text and seeks to cull from it insights into life and faith in the ancient world in which Christianity initially grew up. An example of this is Barrett's comments on Acts 4.12. While Barrett exposites the text well, he does not in any way seek to interact with its implications on religious life in the ancient world or in today's world where Christianity's relationship to other religions is a major theological issue.

Further, while Barrett's emphasis on historical criticism proves helpful to those seeking historical insight, he sees very limited value for the use of literary criticism on the book of Acts. Specifically he writes of literary-critical methodologies, 'These have more to do with hermeneutics than with history and find more scope in other parts of the New Testament than in a matter of fact work such as Acts' (p. xlvi). Having said this,

Barrett proceeds to briefly discuss the potential for understanding things like the ‘implied reader’ and ‘narration’ for studying Acts. This hints at the possibility that perhaps literary-critical techniques may indeed have a place in the study of Luke’s second volume after all. For now, however, those interested in literary methods will find that this commentary will offer extremely modest input.

It may be assumed that this ‘shorter commentary’ is designed for those who preach and teach, but who lack the knowledge, interest or time to deal with the finer points of New Testament language, culture and history. For such an audience, this commentary is a very helpful resource for the study of Acts. Its concise format and thorough introduction would be an invaluable aid to any busy pastor preparing to preach or teach from the book of Acts who wants to have a reliable guide to aid their exegesis. At 519 pages, it is hardly a ‘short’ commentary, though for the specialist it may be that the original two-volume set deals with the more technical aspects of Acts more fully and thus helpfully than the shorter volume is designed to. Nonetheless, for any student of the book of Acts who desires to wrestle with Luke’s work in its original context, this commentary is an extremely viable resource.

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