

BOOK REVIEW

Loveday Alexander, *Acts in Its Ancient Literary Context: A Classicist Looks at the Acts of the Apostles* (LNTS, 289; New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2005). xi + 290 pp. Hdbk. US\$130.00.

This collection of essays, written by Loveday Alexander, attempts to relate Acts to its ancient literary context. Alexander says the goal of this compilation is to chart the development of some of the trajectories originally broached by her book, *The Preface to Luke's Gospel*.

The first article, 'On a Roman Bookstall: Reading Acts in its Ancient Literary Context', attempts to relate some of her previous book's work to the book of Acts as a whole. In doing this, Alexander responds to some of the critiques that certain scholars have brought against *The Preface to Luke's Gospel*. For the most part, Alexander dialogues with Todd Penner regarding issues of historiography and placing Luke's work within specific genre categories. As a result of this, Alexander proposes a change in approach towards the text of Luke–Acts to a more reader-oriented one. This proposal is interesting and, I believe, has a number of profitable avenues for further study. One of the negative features of this article is that most of Alexander's comments and responses to some of the critiques are rather brief, and do not adequately address the concerns of the other scholars.

Chapter 2, 'The Preface to Acts and the Historians', looks to evaluate the preface of Acts in its own right. Alexander begins by attempting to determine if Luke–Acts is one volume or two, and concludes that there is insufficient evidence to know if Luke initially had a two-volume work in mind. However, clearly Acts points the reader back to the first work, so Alexander returns to her assessment of prefaces in ancient histories, but also attempts to evaluate prefaces that occur at book breaks within the history itself. She concludes that the preface to Acts is not historical, but apologetic in nature. One of the strengths here is that

she moves away from rigid definitions of historical and scientific prefaces. On the other hand, most of the features used to define internal prefaces are developed from her work on prefaces that open a work. Accordingly, this affects how she interprets the relationship of the preface of Acts to internal prefaces found in other historical works.

In ‘Acts as Intellectual Biography’, Alexander explores Charles Talbert’s proposal of relating Luke–Acts to Diogenes Laertius’s, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers (Lives)*. After evaluating the similarities and differences, Alexander concludes that there are too many dissimilarities between Luke–Acts and *Lives* to form a solid connection. As a result, she looks to intellectual biographies that existed prior to Diogenes. Alexander then compares the life of Paul in Acts to the life of Socrates portrayed by Aristotle and Xenophon. This is intriguing, as she outlines the traditional characteristics of an intellectual biography and relates them to each work. The only concern I have for this section is that Alexander does not address the issue of eulogy, particularly when discussing the works on the life of Socrates.

Alexander’s fourth chapter, “‘In Journeyings Often’: Voyaging in the Acts of the Apostles and in Greek Romance’, compares Acts with two Greek romances, Chariton’s *Chaereas and Callirhoe* and *Ephesiaca* by Xenophon of Ephesus. The concepts of the importance of plot, development of mental maps and the significance of sea-travel are discussed with Alexander tentatively concluding that there are a number of connections between Greek romances and Acts. Although I agree with her that the concept of voyage does provide plot movement within the Pauline section of Acts, I feel that Alexander needs to further develop the significance of sea-travel within the Greek romances and Acts. As a side note, both this article and the following one have a series of maps that are interesting and helpful for visualizing her points.

Chapter 5, ‘Narrative Maps: Reflections on the Toponymy of Acts’, is a fuller development of Alexander’s discussion of mental maps in Chapter 4. Once again she compares Acts to Chariton’s *Chaereas and Callirhoe* and *Ephesiaca* by Xenophon of Ephesus. In assessing the names of places mentioned in these three works, Alexander finds that there is some overlap, but overall they are rather different. This is probably a result of different narrative goals and different personal knowledge of cities and places. This approach might be useful for understanding the perspective and origin of the author. In her conclusion, Alexander expresses that Luke might be more akin to the *peri-*

plous tradition, however, she does not develop this point in her article, nor does she relate Acts to any work from this genre.

In 'Fact, Fiction and the Genre of Acts', Alexander revisits the classic debate regarding the historiographical nature of Luke–Acts by comparing it to the historical works of Thucydides, Herodotus, Lucian and Dionysius of Halicarnassus. Alexander begins by stating that Acts appears to fall within the margins of history, however, she revises this view to say that Luke–Acts falls outside the history genre because of some atypical characteristics. Although Alexander does not make a definitive statement regarding the historical nature of Luke–Acts, she does make some helpful comments regarding the need to look beyond literary features to other criteria to determine veracity.

Chapter 7, 'New Testament Narrative and Ancient Epic', attempts to provide a definition to the term 'epic' and see if that genre is a viable conversation partner with Acts. Alexander rightly concludes that Acts does not have the necessary features to be classified as an epic and that there needs to be a more nuanced approach for articulating the way narrative works in different cultural worlds and genres. My only critique of this article is that Alexander spends too much time on Virgil's *Aeneid* and little on Homer's *Odyssey* or *Iliad*.

'The Acts of the Apostles as an Apologetic Text' evaluates the different apologetic motivations that might have affected Luke's writing of Acts, and how Acts relates to other apologetic texts in the Greek world. Alexander states that Acts is not an apologetic text because of its use of narrative and other episodes. However, it does have apologetic features within it, specifically the speeches given by Peter, Stephen and Paul. Overall, Alexander states that Luke's choice of vehicle (narrative) brings him closer to the world of 'popular' prose than to 'higher' forms of rhetorical discourse.

In the penultimate chapter, 'Reading Luke–Acts from Back to Front', Alexander sets out to determine the relationship between the abrupt ending of Acts and the prologue (chs. 1–4) of Luke. After evaluating the geographical location, communal setting, hermeneutic matrix, and the act of proclamation, she concludes that there is no way to determine if Luke had the second volume in mind while writing the first. However, it is clear that they are a two-volume set because of the insight into Luke and its prologue that is gained by reading the second book. Overall, there is a good discussion regarding Luke's prologue and Acts

28, however, Alexander does not conclude whether Acts 28 provides the climax or the closure to the book of Acts and the two-part series.

The final chapter, '*Septuaginta, Fashprosa, Imitatio*: Albert Wifstrand and the Language of Luke–Acts', examines two of Wifstrand's articles, 'Luke and Greek Classicism' and 'Luke and the Septuagint' to determine Luke's relationship to Greek classicism and biblical Greek. In this article, Alexander provides a strong discussion regarding the development and concept of Atticism and diglossia and concludes that Luke's ability to code switch between standard Hellenistic prose and biblical Greek implies an education in both Greek and Jewish literature. Alexander's conclusion is based on the idea that Luke's dialect and linguistic social register are based on his educational access to biblical Greek and Jewish Greek literature as well as to standard Hellenistic texts. Although what Alexander proposes is not new, she does not take the time to fully develop and support her conclusions.

One of the strengths of this book is that it succeeds in bringing Acts into conversation with its larger literary context. Alexander recognizes that deeper understanding of and greater insight into a text comes from an awareness of the literary culture that shaped its author and influenced its design.

Another strength is Alexander's desire for clarified definitions. Throughout this work, Alexander has continued to engage with elusive definitions of genre and literary characteristics and has made some important challenges to the scholarly community regarding this area.

One concern that I have about some of Alexander's articles is that she often interacts with only a particular section of Acts. Usually this would not be a problem; however, when she is discussing genre issues and comparing Acts to different literary forms, it is important that the whole of Acts is incorporated and addressed, not just specific sections.

Overall, *Acts in its Ancient Literary Context* is a book that asks needed questions for those who are involved in Acts or ancient literary studies. It is full of interesting and useful insights into the literary background of the New Testament and its connection to the larger Greco-Roman world. In conclusion, *Acts in its Ancient Literary Context* is an important work for better understanding and interpreting the literary environment of Acts.

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