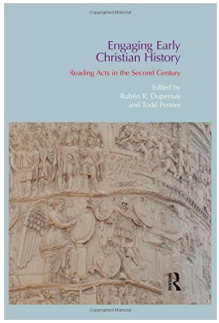
Engaging Early Christian History: Reading Acts in the Second Century, edited by Rubén R. Dupertuis and Todd Penner



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This collection of articles on Acts in the context of second-century history and culture is an expertly edited, meticulously copy-edited and beautifully produced book. It consists of twelve well-written chapters which together make up a coherent whole—which, as anyone who has attempted to edit knows, is no easy task.

When beginning this review for *Relegere*, which emphasises reception history, I did puzzle slightly as to how to proceed. Combining the aims of the journal with the subtitle "Reading Acts in the Second Century" produced in my mind an almost unconscious expectation of the book as reflecting on how Acts was read in the second century. I'll just dispel that expectation right here and now: the articles deal with "Reading Acts [as though it were written] in the Second Century," with the exception of the last contribution, that of Claire Clivaz, to which I shall return. In the acknowledgements the editors emphasise that the point of this collection of articles was precisely not

what I had first assumed. They note that "conversations related to the second century might take place in more productive and inclusive ways if the point of composition of the book were considered to be a peripheral rather than central concern. What would it look like simply to read Acts in the second century? What might we learn both about Acts and also Christianity in the second century by doing so?" (ix).

The collection does indeed suspend arguments over dating, and instead relegates issues of dating to the assumptions from which the various arguments proceed. After an introductory reflection to the debates over and ideological issues at stake in the dating of Acts by Todd Penner, the articles proceed as follows—and I am following the careful order of the articles in the collection here. The first article analyses the historical results of an assumed dating in the second century: Milton Moreland's article on the destruction of Jerusalem and Acts. The second article, Joseph B. Tyson's contribution on Acts, apostolic authority and Marcion, I see as a bridge between the historical section and the following articles which concern themselves with the historical engagements which such a dating makes possible: David M. Reis's contribution on optics, vision and Acts; David R. McCabe's piece on the ascension as counter-imperial discourse; and John Moles's article on the inductive and textually imperialising nature of the text (I personally found the title misleading). The next group is the largest, and concerns reading Acts alongside or against various other cultural productions of the time, be it the production of identities in contrast with Plutarch (Marianne Bjelland Kartzow); the construction of Paul's Christian identity as group identity in the face of Pliny and Trajan (Christopher Mount); the concept of *parrēsia* in Dio Chrysostom, Musonius Rufus, and Lucian (Rubén R. Dupertuis); the relation to Jews and empire in Acts and Justin Martyr (Andrew Gregory); or the narrative of Acts as a reaction to and negotiation of sophistic discourse within the Second Sophistic (Ryan Carhart). Finally, saving the best for last, is Claire Clivaz's contribution, which treats the reception of Acts in second-century Alexandria. While this is the only strictly reception-oriented article of the collection, its implications are historical, not, however, in the same way as the first two articles. To get to this point, I need to engage with Todd Penner's reflections on method, history, and desire in the opening article.

Beginning with the various investments that inform our choices of dating Acts in the first or the second century, Penner moves on to examine the first-century versus second-century divide and the assumptions of historicity and fiction that undergird these acts of dating. After describing the history

of scholarship on Acts as oscillating between the desire for stability and instability, he then asserts that dating the text is more than just determining its timeline; it concerns not only the writing of history or theology, but also our place in the larger scheme of things (6). Thus, we tend to use the first and second centuries less as time frames, and more as conceptual categories, with ideas of consistency, coherence, and other equally stable terms mapped onto the former, over against the plurality, compexity, and heterogenity of the latter (6–7), enshrining one as canonical and stable, and the other as inventive and delightfully unstable. An important observation is that after granting the second century this lively and creative identity, it is then read back into the first century as being present in an embryonic form, the traces of which may be found in the canonical texts, thus stabilizing, as it were, instability.

On the background of this discussion, we then get the following statement: "The discussion in this volume aims to move beyond the usual divisions and derivatives thereof that arise within the binaries above, bringing to the forefront potentially new avenues of historical engagement as a result" (9).

Ambitious, indeed; bold, yes. Does the volume deliver? Perhaps. Initially I thought not, but after reading through Penner's article again, I reconsidered, especially due to the wording in the quote above, which refers to historical engagement rather than "history." Historical engagement seems less committing, more encompassing; less canon, more discourse. There seems to be a disciplinary angst about history in New Testament studies which certainly has not quietened down or been dispelled after the linguistic turn. The whole issue of dating may be seen as synecdochal to the questions of history and the relationship between the texts and reality. Only two articles in this collection deal with this issue—in my opinion—while the others stay within the comforts of the textual realm. And while all of these nine articles are well argued and conceptualised, the methodology simply does not excite me. It is either being argued that the agenda of Luke-Acts is similar to the agendas of Dio Chrysostom, Lucian, and Justin Martyr or dissimilar to that of Plutarch, imperial discourse, and Marcion. There is a predictability in this approach which makes the articles seem very similar, in spite of their diversity in content. The articles that stand out from this intertextual buffet are Moreland's article on Jerusalem and Clivaz's article on Alexandria.

Milton Moreland's contribution, "Jerusalem destroyed: The setting of Acts," rubs the narrative setting of Jerualem in Acts against Aelia Capitolina and sets off sparks of thought. Moreland insists that Luke's relationship to

the Judean heritage "needs to be better understood within a Roman imperial context in which Jerusalem was not, in fact, a Jewish city" (39). Although phrases like "narrative setting," "Jerusalem," "destruction of the temple," are well known and have become blunted over time, the way Moreland presents them and argues his point seems to lend these phrases a fresh urgency. Add to this sentences like "Luke does provide us with a story that was (and still is) extremely influential in the way some Christians imagine their history" (18), an allusion which makes one long for an extra layer of the role of Acts in influencing the image of Jerusalem in the current Christian imagination.

Claire Clivaz's "Reading Luke-Acts in Second-Century Alexandria: From Clement to the Shadow of Apollos" makes you want to raise your arms and shout, "Yes!" Clivaz wants to consider the reception of Luke-Acts from an Alexandrian point of view with traces of the figure of Apollos the Alexandrian in Acts. This is not only due to the fact that the earliest manuscripts of Acts are mostly of Egyptian origin, but also due to the observation that Clement has some original insights that are worth examining. Clivaz shows how pervasive Irenaeus has been in shaping our thinking of Acts as singular truth over against other non-canonical acts and early Christian memories. She takes us through the manuscript evidence and traditions, and shows how certain lists have taken precedence over others to present a certain context for the text of Acts. She then proceeds by judiciously bringing forth possible receptions of Acts in the *Excerpts of Theodotus* and the *Gospel of Judas*, as well as the more explicit use by Clement, to uncover some of these voices. In fact, when I read Clivaz, I realised how "canonical" most of the other contributions were—in terms of early Christian literatures, that is.

All in all, I find that the volume as a whole has done what it set out to do: set me thinking about what history is and isn't, can and cannot do, and startling me in the last pages by summoning forth the shadow of Apollos.

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