

“Acts” by Michal Beth Dinkler

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Michal Beth Dinkler’s commentary on the book of Acts begins with a concise introduction to the relation of Acts to the Gospel of Luke, authorship, the kind of narrative Acts is, the date of composition, the “we-passages,” the place of writing and the intended audience, the overall rhetorical purpose, the dominant theme, and a broad outline of the work. All these issues are addressed in an even-handed manner, acquainting the reader with the major positions taken on these issues by New Testament scholars.

The commentary deals with shorter passages than those of the broad outline, beginning with 1:1-26, defined as “Prologue and Introduction.” In each section, the text is first interpreted within its ancient context, paying attention to questions of form and function, as well as placing particular units in their cultural and literary contexts. In the first section, continuities and discontinuities with Luke are noted. Citations and allusions to Scripture are also noted, emphasizing their rhetorical purposes or effects.

With regard to cultural context, the many speeches in Acts are compared with those of Greek and Roman historians. Depending on the particular case, passages of Acts are compared with contemporary Jewish practices, for example, the care of widows in 6:1-7.

After addressing the ancient context, Dinkler then gives an overview of the text in the Christian interpretive tradition, discussing its doctrinal and theological use, as well as its artistic interpretation over the centuries. Depending on the particular part of Acts being discussed, various contributors to the interpretive tradition are discussed. In addition to those mentioned, other uses of Acts in this tradition involve reflection on virtues and vices. An example of this is the interpretation of Ananias and Sapphira as paradigms of greed. Another is the composition of panegyrics on Peter as a divinely appointed miracle-worker and defender of the faith.

Next the author treats the text in contemporary discussion oriented to important issues of our own time. These include interreligious dialogue, concerns of marginalized groups, implications for church leadership and structure, and gender. Disability studies are also included. In relation to these topics, Dinkler raises the question of whether an ancient narrative should be “a contemporary imperative” and, if so, how relevant or normative aspects may be discerned. Various Christian denominations are mentioned according to the importance of the passage for such groups. For example, Dinkler comments on the uses of the account of Pentecost by Pentecostals and members of the Holiness movement.

The commentary is accessible and comprehensive in discussing Acts in its ancient context, in the history of interpretation, and its contemporary context.