Pelikan's "Acts: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible" (Book Review)

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Though this work has some praises, such as valuable biblical insights, conciseness, consistent organization, and readability, my primary objection is with its frustratingly low view of Scripture. For instance, the biblical text is variously described as “mythic” (p. 56), “legend” (p. 65, p. 94), “not strict fact” (p. 102), “a fictional story” (p. 155), “a fictional construct” (p. 194), “inaccurate” (p. 226), “false” (p. 228), “sometimes contradictory” (p. 233), “less interested in the hard facts” (p. 295), etc. In fact, in my analysis, 47 of the Bible’s 66 books (71%) have their historical and/or doctrinal claims questioned, or (many times) outright denounced. Genesis 1-11 is even compared to Little Red Riding Hood, because, the authors allege, it lacks historical and scientific trustworthiness (p. 56).

The authors’ conclusions are largely based on various scholarly trends and arguments. However, the astute reader should quickly realize that strong counter-arguments and reasonable biblical interpretations by other scholars were either overlooked or ignored by the authors. Further, as C. S. Lewis has argued, even if the authors’ viewpoints are shared by the majority of their colleagues, this does not ensure their correctness, for the vast majority of Lewis’ contemporary literary scholars wrongly identified the origins and intent behind his own writings, and that while living in the same culture and speaking the same language – two privileges that modern Bible scholars do not share with the authors they study.

For the Christian reader, however, a simple consideration of Jesus’ own beliefs should settle the matter. Consider that Jesus saw the Scriptures as God’s Word (Matt. 4:4; 19:4–5; Mark 12:35–37; John 10:34–35; etc.), and as “truth” (John 17:17) that “cannot be broken” (John 10:35). To Him, the Bible’s authority extended to the smallest written marks (Matt. 5:17–18; Luke 16:17), the Old Testament – including Genesis 1–11 – recorded straightforward history (Luke 11:51; 17:26–27; etc.), and the Scriptures were to be read and believed (Matt. 22:29–31), even when traditions and contemporary scholars said otherwise (Mark 7:1–13). Sadly, The Abingdon Introduction to the Bible rejects such notions. Therefore, the Christian librarian should direct students to more faithful and humble appraisals of God’s Word than this work.

Acts: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible,
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The introduction to Brazos Theological Commentary on Acts says that commentators were chosen not because they were biblical scholars with historical or philological
expertise, but for their expertise in Christian doctrine. This introduction might concern some who are not familiar with the author, Jaroslav Pelikan (1923–2006). After all, how could anyone competently write a commentary on Acts without some degree of historical or philological expertise? Pelikan, however, was known for his historical expertise, and his frequent quotations of ancient sources in the original Greek and Latin demonstrated his competence in philology as well.

Nevertheless, the introduction makes clear that “this commentary is intended to be primarily theological rather than philological” (p. 29). In this particular commentary on Acts, it soon becomes clear that this has more to do with historical theology than systematic theology. In other words, Pelikan constantly shows how passages in the Book of Acts have influenced later church councils in their decisions, or how those passages were interpreted by later church leaders and theologians. The sources for Pelikan’s quotations read like a who’s who of church history: Athanasius, Augustine, Calvin, Clement of Alexandria, Chrysostom, Cyprian, Eusebius, Irenaeus, Jerome, Justin Martyr, Luther, Origen, Polycarp, Tertullian, Thomas Aquinas, Wesley, et al. Pelikan also quotes such non-Christian philosophers and historians as Aristotle, Plato, Thucydides, Philo and Josephus.

The series’ editors for the Brazos Theological Commentary required that authors base their commentary on the final form of the Greek text. This is particularly complicated in the Book of Acts which, says Pelikan, has two distinct texts. He was referring to the eclectic text of Nestle-Aland on which virtually all modern translations are based, and the Western Text, which Pelikan calls the textus a patribus receptus, or TPR. Pelikan doesn’t mention the Byzantine text which is another late text type.

Although most modern scholars consider the Western Text or TPR to be later, secondary and not as reliable as earlier texts, Pelikan’s commentary is, as far as I know, unique among modern commentaries on Acts in that it is based on, and gives preference to, the Western Text. Pelikan justifies his use of this text because 1) he considers it to be the final form of the Greek text thus meeting series requirements, and 2) quotations from most of the earliest church fathers reflect the Western text. In practice, this isn’t as big an issue as it may sound. Most scholarly commentaries point out whenever there are significant variants between Nestle-Aland and the Western text, and Pelikan’s commentary is no exception.

Another distinguishing feature of this commentary is that it tends to use passages from the Book of Acts to explain or defend later Roman Catholic/Eastern Orthodox teachings found in the church fathers. For example, in Acts 16:4 Pelikan finds legitimacy for the idea of Canon Law, as well as for the idea that Scripture and later tradition are not separate, but one continuous line from Old Testament to New
Testament to the councils and creeds. That Acts 16:4 supports near biblical authority to post-biblical church proclamations is something with which most Protestants would dispute.

Another example is found in Acts 19:26 in which Pelikan defends the use, in worship, of images of saints, angels, and “Mary the Theotokos” (Mother of God). Similarly, in Acts 20:7, Pelikan finds “the still inchoate but already developing sacramental system” leading to ordination, penance, absolution, etc. (p. 217). In Acts 22:16 Pelikan defends the idea that the sacraments communicate grace \textit{ex opera operato}, or apart from the attitude of the one being baptized. He applies this specifically to the baptism of infants. Many Protestants may argue that Pelikan’s conclusions come not so much from an unbiased exegesis of the Book of Acts as from reading later church decisions back into the text.

Those in Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions may find this commentary exceptionally helpful. Although Evangelicals may disagree with some of Pelikan’s conclusions, the discussion is often fascinating and does not distract from the usefulness of the commentary as a whole.

Readers will learn much, not only about the Book of Acts but also about historical theology. Although the book is based on deep scholarship, it is easy to read and – with the exception of some occasional untranslated Greek and Latin quotations – it is generally understandable even on a layman’s level. This commentary is excellent for understanding the relation between the Book of Acts and historical theology. Those looking for the meaning of the original text of Acts in its historical context, however, may find other commentaries more helpful. The book contains a bibliography, subject index and Scripture index.

\textbf{Being Church, Doing Life:}
\textit{Creating Gospel Communities Where Life Happens},
ISBN 9780857214935

\textit{Reviewed by Rory Patterson, Associate Dean, Planning, Administration, & Operations, Jerry Falwell Library, Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA}

Moynagh has written or co-authored twelve previous works, all in Britain. This work illustrates how to join in an upcoming megatrend in Christianity: a serving-first journey of doing life and church together. This trend helps the church meet three top needs in current Western culture: competence, relatedness, and autonomy.