

○ **REVIEWS OF A FEMINIST COMPANION TO LUKE AND A FEMINIST COMPANION TO THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES**

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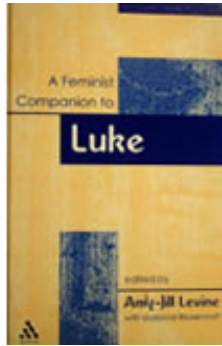
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Deborah Bower reviews:

A Feminist Companion to Luke (Amy-Jill Levine, editor. Cleveland, Ohio: T & T Clark International, 2001); and

A Feminist Companion to the Acts of the Apostles (Amy-Jill Levine, editor. Cleveland, Ohio: T & T Clark International, 2004).



Of all the New Testament writings Luke/Acts is perhaps the most divisive, in that while one may argue for a positive reading of the role of women in the Lucan narratives as in a very real sense offering a liberationist view of women, there are also those who call for an unmasking of the patriarchal framework of the text. On this reading, rather than liberating women, the text seeks to silence them by relegating them to the periphery of Luke's narrative world. These two volumes offer contributions representative of feminist scholarship over the past quarter century, contributors based in North America gaining the majority voice with only six of the articles coming from outside the US, in this case Europe. As is to be expected with a volume that promises to remember women's absences in the field of biblical studies as either participants or subjects for analysis, the diverse methods used from those within biblical studies as well as those who offer contributions from other disciplines attests to the healthy state of feminist studies in a new millennium. Amy-Jill Levine's timely caution that without transparency in the sharing of diverse perspectives our 'studies risk ossification, the silencing of certain voices, co-optation by those who insist they speak for everyone', steers the reader through the ensuing 'storm-centre' (p. 21).

Interpretations of Luke/Acts (or any text for that matter) will always depend upon both the methods applied in analysing the narrative, and the presuppositions and experiences readers bring to the text. Rather than restricting the narrative to a dichotomy of good or bad news regarding gender roles, the commentators in these volumes present the growing awareness of both

the multiple messages and bias of each reading. The mix of 'classic' works frequently cited by later studies, along with those that have been revised from earlier influential works appear beside new studies which in turn expand and develop these earlier studies, which the editors hope will broaden the possibility of exposure to an audience unfamiliar with feminist critical theory.

Opening the volume on the Gospel of Luke is Robert Karris' essay in which he identifies the dichotomy in feminist studies of Luke/Acts as a new storm centre. His critique of the literature from 1970 through to the 1990s, insists that the earlier and all too often optimistic conclusions concerning the role of women failed to recognise the various contextual issues inherent in the text. However, the next wave of studies tended to reject this overtly optimistic view in their estimations of the Lucan narrative, instead identifying a systemic silencing of women's voices. Karris identifies the complexity of the mixed messages of the Lukan narrative and reminds those who are engaged in this 'storm-centre' that 'it is not the Lucan text which has changed over the years, but it is we, its interpreters, who have changed, who will change, and who should change as new times and new methods challenge us to "re-vision" our look at Luke's view of women' (p. 43).

Karris cites Mary-Rose D'Angelo's 'Women in Luke-Acts: A Redactional View' (D'Angelo 1990) in which she argues that Luke's redaction severely restricts women in light of Hellenistic mores. This study has been of enormous influence as noted by the various articles in this volume that cite her work. In this volume she offers a study on imperial masculinity which expands upon her earlier work. Grounding her reading in the historical contextualisation of Augustan family values of the early second century she argues contra Karris that Luke writes with an eye to elite-male readers. For D'Angelo Jesus epitomises 'imperial' masculinity, albeit in terms that are intelligible to Luke's Greco-Roman audience. Women therefore conform to the imperial mores that elevate rather than threaten the kyriarchal status quo.

The editorial decision to follow D'Angelo's article with Brigitte Kahl's presses the issue of multiple interpretations and interpretative authority. Kahl proceeds from a socio-rhetorical analysis which advocates a feminist-critical counter-reading, in which the authority of the text is upheld. Viewing the matrix of Luke/Acts from the perspective proposed by D'Angelo, Kahl argues for a narrative that has been exposed to imperial censorship. Employing a hermeneutics of conspiracy enables the text to be read from divergent perspectives as a 'coded' message. She identifies the infancy narratives as running counter to the restrictive mores of imperial/ kyriarchal time and sees the chronology of pregnancy binding the beginning of messianic time to the rest of the gospel. "Lydia" and her sisters and brothers read Luke against Luke as "resisting readers" and in memory of Elisabeth and Mary, then this counter-reading is "from the very first" and on principle Scripture based' (p. 88).

Following on from Kahl and influenced by her study Turid Karlsen Seim sees yet another reading of the infancy narrative. For Seim Luke's desire to remove Mary from physical motherhood into spiritual asceticism liberates her, and others, from gendered roles. Unlike D'Angelo, Seim sees ascetic discipleship, represented by celibacy, as a rehearsal of eschatological life to come rather than the reinforcement of Augustan family values, and therefore Luke's narrative opens the way to include rather than restrict women to biological reproduction. 'The ascetic women bear the fruit of God's word implanted in them, and a scenario of ascetic discipleship framed as alternative and, in the end, spiritual motherhood is introduced' (p. 105).

Addressing the dichotomy between good and bad, authority versus admiring silence, and service/discipleship defined by gender, as it pertains to relationships between women, is Veronica Koperski's essay, the first of four in this volume, on Martha and Mary. She surveys feminist apologetic and feminist-critical approaches and responses to various interpretations, paying particular attention to the diversity of readings from recent scholarship.¹ For her the sisters are a message of comfort, without denying both the complications and potentially negative messages of the text and asks insightfully, 'Is it really the text many of us have reacted against, or the centuries of interpretation that for some of us have become almost inseparable from it' (p. 189). Loveday Alexander, like Koperski, is motivated by her mature student's reflections regarding this pericope and seeks a new critical approach she labels 'popular exegesis' to investigate the Mary and Martha story in which she asks what particular stereotypes do for men and women. The strategy she finds most suitable to the integrity of her own textual reading is the critical principle of 'attentiveness'. For Alexander this story offers a choice between two 'good' types of behaviour and therefore is not about 'women's business', rather the themes relate to the common experience of discipleship. She states that to 'insist that this is a story "about women" is to risk confining it to the ghetto: "women's stories," notoriously, are felt to have nothing to teach men' (p. 213).

A concern expressed by both these articles is the need to hear the voices of 'real' readers with respect to their particular social location. Carol Schersten LaHurd's essay on Luke 15 combines traditional biblical scholarship with sociological and anthropological information from Arab women. LaHurd's own social location in Yemeni culture prompted her to interview Christian and Muslim Arab women in an attempt to capture their distinctive contribution. There is, as many of the essays in this volume demonstrate, a disconnection between what feminist critics in the academy and lay, non-professional readers conclude from a biblical text. LaHurd emphasises that a hermeneutic of suspicion not only allows for an acknowledgement of the androcentric character of the Bible, but it also allows one to observe that perhaps 'women and men socialised and educated in the industrialised West may not be the best judges of what constitutes oppression' (p. 256).

It is with the same penetrating self-evaluation that Janice Capel Anderson opens the volume on the Acts of the Apostles with a reprint of her essay on the feminist reception history of Acts 9:30-42. Although aware of the limitations of her methodology she nevertheless forges ahead with her 'dual hermeneutic' of revision and suspicion to celebrate the legacy of feminist diversity. She urges that this dual hermeneutic be employed in reading beyond 'women' to encompass new interests: 'If we are concerned about the pragmatic effects of interpretation on women, we must be concerned about the pragmatic effects of all sorts of interpretations on all sorts of women and men' (p. 48).

Homeric models, one of the new interests Anderson suggests, assist readers and analysts alike in the practice of reading Luke against the backdrop of 'classical' literature. Kathy Chambers' reading of Acts in light of Greco-Roman comic conventions is sobering and not at all funny. Noting that comedy is an ideal genre for instructing the elite she argues that Luke initially introduces Rhoda as a mechanism for critique, but by the end of the episode she is dismissed and trivialised. Chambers elaborates on Albert Harrill's identification of Rhoda as the comic conven-

tion of the servus currans, the ‘running slave’ (Harrill 2000) who rather than be proclaimed as an apostle becomes, in Luke’s narrative, a grasping slave hoping for release.

Robert Price’s present essay develops upon his earlier work regarding Luke’s suppression of women (Price 1997). His reading of the Prodigal Son in light of Homer’s *Odyssey* echoes the question raised by the Arab women in LaHurd’s essay; where is the mother? For Price Luke, borrowing heavily from Homer, has replaced the loving, faithful wife and mother Penelope, with a faithful, loving father. The connection with Rhoda becomes apparent, if the mother did proclaim the return of the son, who would have believed her? He finds a parallel between the disbelief of Rhoda’s testimony and the women’s testimony of Luke 24 – women’s testimony is ‘unbelievable’. Both the mother of Luke 15 and the apostle Rhoda proclaim the ‘unbelievable’ to their respective communities, but rather than be proclaimed as important, these women are erased or censured and trivialised by Luke’s redactional pen.

The relationship between classical literature and its influence raises yet another area of interest: the interconnectedness between Luke’s sources and their significance for the question of historicity in Acts. Dennis MacDonald argues that Euripides’ *Bacchae* is the model Luke employs for the character of Lydia and the mantic slave girl of Acts 16. He sees no support for the historical validity of Lydia when read against the *Bacchae*. MacDonald’s reading does have legitimacy when compared with the numerous correspondences between Acts and the *Bacchae*; however he perhaps overstates the case by rejecting the possibility that the stories reflect ‘historical’ traditions. Shelly Matthews essay agrees with MacDonald, although working independently of his work, that Lydia and her sisters are modelled on Euripides’ women. However rather than a dichotomy between Dionysius and Jesus, and their effect on women, Matthews identifies a positive assessment of women. These women, rather than resembling the elite of Roman society, resemble the patrons of Luke’s own community. She concludes by stating that the task of the feminist commentator ‘is not to take such texts at face value. It is, rather, to read them against the grain in order to reconstruct the counter discourse that Luke’s ideologically driven apologetic history is attempting to mask’ (p. 133).

The conclusion of Acts is open-ended; it offers neither a happy nor a definitive ending. It does however invite the reader to engage with its ongoing story. I have to confess that the impression I was left with after nearly 600 pages was that the ongoing conversations feminist critical theorists offer to the study of Luke/Acts is only just developing into an anticyclone. Living on an island I am aware of both the delights and hazards unpredictable weather brings, so it is with these two volumes whether you plunge right into the full force of the storm or just look from the vantage point of your window – enjoy the experience for each storm brings its own delights.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ She includes studies from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Stevan Davies, Adele Reinhartz, Turid Karlsen Seim, Barbara Reid, and Robert Price.

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