

Book Review

***F. Scott Spencer, Journeying Through Acts: A Literary-Cultural Reading* (Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, 2004): 278 pp.**

This “updating” (9) of Spencer’s 1997 *Acts* volume offers a commentary on the Acts narrative inspired by literary and social-scientific criticism. A brief introduction addresses the typical concerns of authorship, genre, and audience. Spencer writes “for a broader audience” with no desire “to proselytize readers into some form of modern Acts-style disciple” but simply to convince that Acts makes for a “good read” (14). He also notes that he comes to Acts with “suspicion” inspired by contemporary feminist criticism (29). The challenge is “to reclaim and (where necessary) to resist a book such as Acts in ways that promote the full equality, dignity, and integrity of women and men, Jews and Gentile” (31).

Next, Spencer plunges into the text. His postmodern-style does not offer verse by verse analysis but, instead, literary unit by literary unit commentary. Perhaps most novel is his contention that Acts 13:1-21:36 contains two expeditions rather than the traditional reading of Paul’s three missionary journeys. In Spencer’s view, Acts 18:22-23 forms a “brief interlude” in the second journey rather than necessitating a distinct third journey (140).

The author proves to be an insightful guide to the Acts narrative. Among many striking observations are his analysis of Simon the Tanner (Acts 10-11) and Lydia the purple merchant (Acts 16) as holding “marginal status” (175) because of their engagement in scorned professions and his attention to Luke’s Paul as a prophetic figure.

Some aspects are, however, less appealing. Spencer’s constant search for themes of gender and social egalitarianism is often distracting. Any appearance of a woman in Acts, for example, is accompanied by an analysis of some meaning as to her role in public ministry, or her exclusion therefrom. This also leads to some offbeat conclusions, such as Spencer’s observation that the casting of lots for Judas’ apostolic successor suggests “a more inclusive, less hierarchical model of leadership and ministry,” since “anyone can draw a lucky number” (39). Likewise, in his analysis of the selection of the seven ministers in Acts 6, Spencer chastens the apostles for “their reluctance to become personally involved in table-service” which “suggests that they still have not fully accepted Jesus’ holistic model of ministry” (77). Was this really Luke’s intention, or is it still appropriate to ask that question?

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