

*A paper by Dale presented at the Christian Scholars Conference, Lipscomb University, June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2017 to a largely academic audience but submitted here to give some further sense of the conference Greg Sterling, Brandon, Elaine and Dale participated in –*

## Major Book Review: Reading Acts in the Twenty-First Century: A Panel Review of Carl R. Holladay's *Acts: A Commentary*

When my friend Dean Sterling asked me to serve on this panel I rather ungraciously demurred. It's possible I said something like, "I don't like commentaries" – though surely not! That would not only be ungracious but also not smart. As one noted cultural analyst observed, "It's not cool to not know stuff." But still the notion of reading a commentary straight through did not appeal to me. My own academic interests track toward sociology, then theology and finally history. And the books I find fascinating these days are books like Edward Baptist's *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*, or Matthew Desmond's *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, or Patrick Kingsley's *The New Odyssey, The Story of the Twenty-First Century Refugee Crisis*. I take my limited time to say all this to put in context the unstinting praise I give to Carl Holladay's *Acts: A Commentary*.

This is a great book. It's a great read. It's solidly academic but with a commitment to truth that is nothing short of devotional. Its organization is pedagogically effective, broken as it is into larger sections of Acts and then units of thought with for each an overview, personal translation, textual analysis and then flowing, accessible commentary. Throughout it all Holladay stresses the fundamental importance of literary, rhetorical and historical context. His allusions, often found in his copious footnotes, lead the reader deep into apocryphal, intertestamental and classical sources reminding us that there may be value in reading Maccabean literature or 1 Enoch or for that matter Plato, Aristotle, Terence, Cicero or Homer.

Of particular interest is Holladay's encyclopedic grasp of mimesis, literary echoes and typological patterns. But always there is fascinating focus on people. Who knew of the rumored incestuous relationship between Agrippa II and Bernice! More often though it's Paul, Paul the hero, Paul vindicated by Roman authorities everywhere, with Acts 21-28 serving as a sustained apologia for Paul. On another level, Holladay captures the humor of the episodes involving the seven sons of Sceva or later Eutychus. And on still another level his translations frequently seem felicitous, for instance, his "hearts made clean by faith" (p. 297), though my personal favorite had to be his "one hell of a storm" for one particularly rough patch on Paul's voyage to Rome (p. 489). And then Holladay both reveals himself an heir of his own religious heritage, and a proper corrective to it, by suggesting that in Acts we find not one simplistic pattern but rather a diversity of baptismal experiences (p. 185).

Throughout this commentary one begins to sense absolute integrity, Holladay's willingness to follow the facts wherever they lead. This of course might be troubling to readers assured of their own "facts," alternative or otherwise, but I learned to relax into Holladay's honesty. If Holladay detects a literary pause in the writing, he says so. If something adds to the confusion of the story, he says so. If the reader is left in a quandary, he says so. If a section suggests literary license rather than historical realism, he says so. And it's this quality perhaps more than any other that

makes this a commentary for the twenty-first century, for readers who have learned to jubilantly trust and worship the God the text reveals rather than some more fear-based pseudo-worship of the text itself. Holladay's work will be gratefully received by generations now coming to faith who find the humanity of Scripture incontestable but whose receptive minds still find in Scripture truth and love and the way to the living God.

That being said, this is a book filled with impressive insights and thought-provoking queries: recognition of Lukan gender-inclusiveness; the relaxed acknowledgement of widespread traditions of deities appearing in human form; the frequently anti-Jewish and sometimes anti-female bias of the D-text; the way the early church resolved its conundrums on a case-by-case basis; the discernible pattern of Paul striving to persuade Jews of Jesus and Greeks of God; the oft-repeated understanding of "salvation" as healing, rescue and deliverance; the especially high literary quality of the depiction of the sea voyage in Acts 27; and then in the last chapter of Acts the gracious portrayal of the kindness and generosity of the "barbarian" inhabitants of Malta whose uncommon grace Paul simply receives gratefully, feeling no particular need to sermonize.

This commentary, I suppose, is not perfect. On a point or two, I could quibble. For instance I do not find Satan to be a familiar figure in Old Testament thought (p. 476). But I am only quibbling.

My own understanding of the book of Acts is that it invites the reader then and now into a world lit by resurrection and open to the Spirit of God, a world open to the loving intervention of God, where traditions were overthrown, and formulas were broken, and people were all the time surprised by joy and miracle. It draws us out of the world into which we were born into a larger and kinder world. And it invites us to be the continuation of its never-ending story.

Following then Holladay's pastoral direction we continue to declare what God has done both in Lukan times and in our own. We find in Holladay analysis of Luke's use of the Septuagint (pp. 301-302) support for expansive contemporary readings of the text and expansive understandings of its applications. So we bring to such matters as the equality of women and respect for the LGBT community of faith the same questions and answers as the early church did concerning the full admission of Gentiles to the church. We understand that Jesus is still "destined to cause the falling and rising of many, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed." We understand too that a sword will pierce our own souls (Luke 2:34-35). The Lukan pattern holds, first the suffering and then the glory. We advance only by "daily devotion to God ... motivated by the hope of the resurrection" (p. 473). We hold out to those who sit in darkness Christ as "the pioneer of transcendent Life for everyone else (p. 479). We remember always the recurrent Lukan motif, "Have no fear" (p. 493). And we carefully heed, in Holladay's words, the "prophetic oracle warning against those who resist seeing God at work in their own generation" (p. 274).

Yes, there is as Holladay notes a perennial puzzle to the ending of Acts. Perhaps because the story it tells is nowhere near ended. It continues on in what we will do about the restoration of all things – how we will respond to such matters as the tragic aftermath of slavery, the scandal of poverty in the richest nation in the history of the world, and the worldwide flood of refugees seeking shelter from unspeakable violence.

– Dale Pauls