**Ben Witherington 111, The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary, Michigan/Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1998; pp. xlviii+875, Paperback, $ 50.00.**

The Acts Of the Apostles, A Socio-rhetorical Commentary by B. Witherington Ill is something unique and exceptional in so far as it breaks fresh and new ground in providing a detailed social and rhetorical analysis of the book of Acts. Presenting a detailed bibliography of 36 pages in the very beginning itself, the author familiarizes the readers with the recent developments in the analysis of the Acts, and sufficient attention is paid to comparative studies in ancient historiography in terms of methodology and contents. The author maintains that Luke and Acts together must be seen as some sort of a two-volume historiographical work. Hence, Luke's Gospel must be evaluated in the light of its sequel, but importantly Acts must be evaluated in the light of its literary predecessor. Luke in his second volume is writing a continuous narrative about the growth and development of a remarkable historical phenomenon, early Christianity, which he believed was the result of a divinely initiated social change. The manner in which Luke writes this narrative is from a theological point of view, for he was fully convinced that it is God, and Godls salvation plan, which is the power that drives and connects the various facets of his accounts. Luke tried to write about salvation history, God's saving eschatological acts, and fulfillment of scriptural promises and prophecies that does not by and large come to pass by means of political or military means, but rather by the preaching and activities of the disciples of Jesus. In this respect Luke is more a theologian than a historian.

At the same time, the author maintains that Luke-Acts bears some strong resemblances to earlier Greek historiographical works in form and method and in the general arrangement of material, as well as regarding some simlarities to heJJenjzed Jewish historiography in content and general apostolic aims. What is characteristic of this work is Luke's ability to transform historiography to a new level of narrating the mighty acts of God that were performed on the stage of history by and through Jesus and his immediate followers. Luke claims that he has received the crucial tradition about these events and he has closely investigated "everything" (Lk 1:1-4) from the beginning until the time when the narrative closes at the end of Acts with Paul proclaiming the Word in Rome. According to the author, "Luke'S accomplishments in writing the Acts of the Apostles are numerous". Writing the Acts between the 70s and 80s, several years after the martyrdom of Paul, Luke concludes his narrative with a reference to the preaching and teaching of Paul during his house arrest in Rome, a proof that Luke wanted to see Paul still active in his ministry. "In a single stroke Luke provided early Christianity with a sense of definition, identity, and legitimization, things Theophilus presumably needed reassurance or more certainty about" (p.76). Thereby Luke has provided us with the social aims in writing the Acts of the Apostles.

An interesting aspect of this work by Ben Witherington Ill is his efforts to present Luke-Acts as rhetoric in so far as this work of Luke was meant to be heard primarily and read only secondarily, and this meant that considerable attention had to be given to the aural impression a work would leave on the audience. Early Greek history writing as embodied in Herodotus and Thucydides was affected by the earlier genres of Greek drama and epic poetry. The art of persuasion, otherwise known as rhetoric, was essential in history writing. This point becomes very clear when we refer to the many speeches in the Acts of the Apostles which constitute almost one fourth (about 365 verses) of the entire Acts of the Apostles. Theophilus, the addressee of Luke-Acts, was a socially significant recent convert whom Luke, the beloved companion and coworker of Paul (Phil 24: Col 4:14), wants to instruct with the power of his rhetoric about the sacred tradition that was handed down. However, Theophilus is more a representative reader of this work and Luke wants his Hellenistic readers to understand the course God has chosen to bring about his plans in history. Luke intends us to see the movement in his story from Jerusalem to Rome, the former as the centre of Jewish Christianity and the latter as the centre of Gentile Christianity. God's plan of spreading the good news about Jesus from Jerusalem (1:1-6:7), to Judea and Samaria to the Gentiles then to Asia  Europe and Rome is the overall schema that manifests this purpose. Thereby Luke has provided us with a legitimization for the Christian movement by demonstrating the Jewish origins Of Christianity and by emphasizing the divine providence which was reflected in every aspect of the development and expansion of the early Church.

The entire work is an excellent, elaborate and lucid exposition of the book Of Acts which scholars, students, pastors and educated laypersons (p.97) can very well make use of with considerable profit. A missing aspect of this otherwise scholarly commentary seems to be the author's lack of readiness to dwell on the crisis perspective of the early Church. Hence he writes: "Luke was right not to portray James and Peter and Paul as always at odds with one another. Though there was much initial tension and much ongoing problems, at least at the level of early Christian apostolic leadership there was, by and large, a meeting of the minds as a result of the Jerusalem conference about what would and wouldn't be required of Gentiles as they beeame followers of Jesus" (p.96). Consequently, the author identifies the meeting in Jerusalem referred to in Galatians 2 with the visit mentioned in Acts 11:30 and 12:25 and not in Acts 15. Consequently, the letter to the Galatians, with its criticism of Judaization, was written by Paul before going up to Jerusalem for the third time for the apostolic council (Acts 15). But a closer analysis of the dynamics of the growth of the early Church, as reflected in the many events described in the Acts as well as in the letters of Paul reveal that it was through a series of crises and polarizations regarding ideologies that a pro-Jewish Church centered in Jerusalem had to emerge as a universal phenomenon embracing the Gentiles. This is also the impression we get when we study several of the Pauline letters.

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