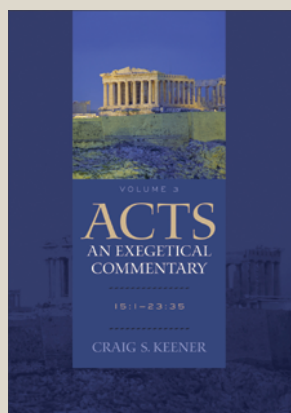


Books

Matthew Sleeman examines two recent books on Acts, both raising important questions for how we see the scriptures arising in a historical setting and influencing that setting



Acts: An Exegetical Commentary

Craig S Keener
Baker Academic, 2012

Weighing in at 6.75kg and occupying 20cms of bookshelf space, Craig Keener's commentary on the Acts of the Apostles is by any measure a mammoth project. And it's only three-quarters complete; a fourth and final volume is due for publication later this year. Keener by name, keener by nature, perhaps, but the obvious first question is why? What does a commentary of this size add to existing scholarship or, for that matter, to the work of church ministers? Other than, perhaps, a lot of reading?

First things first: the work is very readable, with clear sectioning and engaging content. So far I've read up until Acts 18, and I'm persuaded to keep reading and to keep bringing Keener's insights into my teaching, both at College and in the pulpit. Perhaps few will follow me on the reading, but Keener's insights will serve and benefit preachers and pastors, and not

just scholars. They deserve to be more widely known and more widely read.

I can see two broad areas where we owe a debt to Keener. First, he is committed to the historicity of scripture. For many evangelicals, we claim the Bible as historical, but this history still remains somewhat captive to the scepticism of the critics. So often they seem to know the first century context better than we do. Too often, we wonder how to bridge what Gotthold Lessing claimed is the ugly great ditch existing between the first century 'Jesus of history' and the 'Christ of faith' subsequently proclaimed by the church.

Often, we can oscillate uneasily between thinking there is too much to know, or no need to know, about the historical context in which scripture arose. Some of us have bracketed out history in more merely literary readings of scripture, and perhaps

some of us even fear historical inquiry. And we are not helped in this by too few of us, these days, being schooled in ancient history. We need a faithful, knowing tutor in such things.

Enter Keener, asserting that 'a fuller understanding of antiquity can provide a fuller appreciation for Luke's picture' presented in Acts. He claims and demonstrates that the historical distance between us and the events of scripture is both crossable and informative for theology. In these volumes, Keener often serves as tour guide, offering informative, even filmic, descriptions of the ancient world beyond the briefer pen pictures typical of other commentators. Taking history seriously, Keener takes us deeply into the world within which Acts erupted, seeing its theological light as shining in a real world of action and reaction.

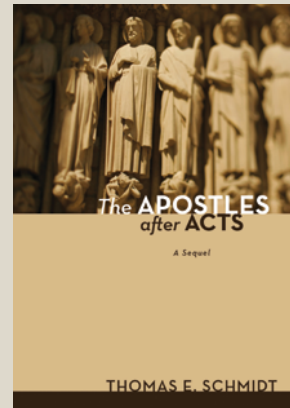
Certainly his project's size alone does not prove a point, but Keener is far from a casual engager with history. Size

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can introduce a risk of self-fulfilment or circularity, but this only means that the claimed ancient parallels and contrasts need case-by-case appraisal. And Keener has completed much of the spade-work required for such appraisals. I hope this will gain converts for Keener's historical confidence, as well as followers.

Second, Keener is committed to locating scripture within mission in particular places. He is conservative in historicity and adventurous in application. As well as exploring the first-century world behind Acts and addressed by it, Keener also probes its missional and cross-cultural outworkings within our day and age. Having already written a two-volume scholarly examination of the miraculous claims of the gospel, Keener is well placed to attack unwarranted scepticism regarding miracles and signs and wonders, and raises serious questions for narrowly cessationist readings of Acts. For some readers of Commentary this part of his project will be less comfortable than his commitment to historicity, but it forces us to consider what the gospel means in action in our particular contexts.

This is not the only Acts commentary I would want to have at hand (I'm not sure I'd know what volume would fulfil that role), but it is an indisputable contribution to our reading of Acts. Keener digs out treasures old and new, and works various and multiple angles on the text which often render helpfully refreshing views.



The Apostles After Acts

Thomas E Schmidt
Wipf & Stock, 2013

One thing Keener isn't doing, unless the fourth volume contains a surprise, is writing a sequel to Acts. In a volume much smaller than Keener's, that is exactly what Thomas Schmidt offers in his *The Apostles After Acts*. Not in any way pitched by Schmidt as scripture, this is a self-consciously imaginary exercise in 'what-iffery', positing what Luke might have written in a possible third volume to Theophilus. Does Schmidt succeed? I think his is a Marmite book: some will love it, others will hate it. On both counts, it deserves attention.

At his best, Schmidt captures well Luke's style and theological trajectory