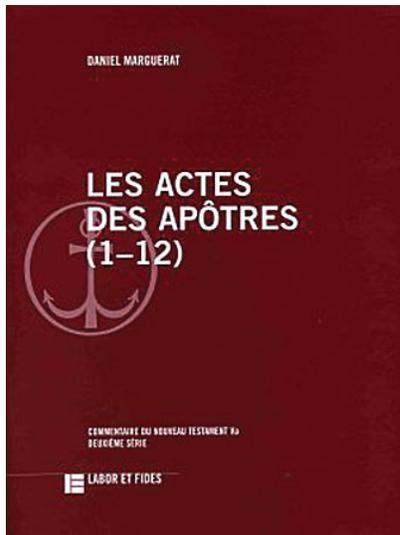


RBL 02/2009



Marguerat, Daniel

Les Actes des Apôtres (1-12)

Commentaire du Nouveau Testament 5a

Genève: Labor et Fides, 2007. Pp. 446. Cloth. €52.00.
ISBN 9782830912296.

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For anyone fearful that French-language biblical scholarship has lost some of its significance, the book under review is a piece of evidence to the contrary. It is the first volume of a large-scale commentary on the Acts of the Apostles, written by a renowned expert in the field of Luke-Acts and Professor of New Testament at the University of Lausanne.

The volume opens with a comparatively brief introduction (17–31), in which Marguerat outlines the basic assumptions that inform his exegesis of Acts: the Book of Acts is an integral part of the larger oeuvre “Luke-Acts,” written around 80–90 C.E. somewhere in the eastern Mediterranean region by a well-educated and skillful Gentile Christian who was not a companion of Paul; it is a particularly focused history of early Christianity that serves above all a theological purpose. This short introductory chapter makes clear that Marguerat has not written this commentary in order to propose some new, exciting, or even outrageous theory about Acts; it stands in the mainstream tradition of historical-critical exegesis (a malevolent reviewer might call it “conventional”), and presumably the great majority of New Testament scholars can happily agree with Marguerat’s basic assumptions. This commentary is, in the very first instance, what a commentary is supposed to be: a solid and reliable source of information about Acts, based on a balanced and well-reasoned scholarly position. The reflections on the genre and the historicity of Acts make this chapter particularly commendable.

The further structure of the commentary is indicated by the structure that Marguerat finds in the first twelve chapters of Acts. He extends the Prologue to include Acts 1:1–14, so that this passage serves as a transition from the Gospel to Acts (33–51).

The first main section comprises Acts 1:15–8:3, the account of the “apostolic” community in Jerusalem (53–280). Marguerat consistently refers to this period in Luke’s account as the “golden age,” and particularly his exegesis of the summaries (2:42–47; 4:32–35; 5:12–16) justifies this designation; nevertheless, conflict and dangers are to be faced. This part is divided up into three sections: “Foundation of the Community” (1:15–2:47); “Life of the Community in Jerusalem” (3:1–5:42); and “Crisis” (6:1–8:3).

The second main section (Acts 8:4–12:25) is about the opening of the community to the Gentile world and the way of the gospel from Jerusalem to Antioch (281–444). It is divided up into two sections: “Shocks and Success beyond Jerusalem” (8:4–9:31); and “Opening to the World of the Nations” (9:32–12:25).

The commentary proper is broken down into subsections of different lengths, from the short summary of 5:12–16 (179–85) to the elaborate narrative of Peter and Cornelius in 10:1–11:18 (359–406). However, the structure is always the same. First is the translation with notes on translation and textual problems, followed by a rich and up-to-date bibliography. The next point is titled “Analyse”; here one finds a discussion of questions that concern the passage as a whole, from its structure to the thorny question of historicity. After that comes the verse-by-verse commentary proper (“Explication”), followed by a brief outline of theological perspectives connected with the passage in question. In addition to this exegetical scheme, Marguerat has added thirteen excursions on topics of special interest, ranging from the old question whether the Seven of Acts 6:1–7 were deacons (210) to the motif of *παρρησία* (156). Five maps provide further illustration of the scenarios.

It may suffice to point only to a few especially remarkable passages in this commentary (the selection is, of course, most subjective). Marguerat devotes considerable space to the list of peoples in Acts 2:9–11 (76–80); he carefully discusses different interpretations and even adds a map to illustrate the list’s geographical outlook. Eventually he interprets the list as expressing a claim to universality that is intended to challenge Roman imperial claims.

The exegesis of Acts 5:1–11 (164–68, 172–78), part of a subsection titled “*Idéal communautaire et péché originel*,” reveals a great sense of theological responsibility. Marguerat is well aware of the literary brutality of this episode and carefully delineates what this story is about: ethically, the main issue is truthfulness; ecclesiologically, the

story makes clear that the church is by no means a circle of the pure, especially when money is at stake. Eventually Marguerat comes to a conclusion that Luke would have been happy to affirm: “L’argent peut tuer” (178).

When dealing with Acts 9:1–31 (314–46), Marguerat does not too explicitly discuss the question whether this is a conversion or a vocation; he just speaks of Saul’s conversion and rejects the parallels to Old Testament vocation stories. It is rather Ananias’s vision (9:10–16) that shows the characteristic features of an Old Testament prophetic vocation account (331–32). Moreover, Marguerat does not interpret the Damascus experience as a single event but as a longer process that comprises Saul’s integration into the community in Damascus and his transformation, including the less-than-glorious escape from the city. This reading is supported by the narrative unity of the section Acts 9:1–31, which Marguerat carefully elaborates. Moreover, he does not interpret Saul’s Damascus experience in isolation but as one element in the sequence of Acts 8–11, where, one after the other, a magician, a eunuch, a persecutor, and a pagan are won for the Christian faith (322–23).

Throughout the commentary the reader notes that Marguerat, though admirably well-versed in contemporary scholarly literature, is particularly fond of quoting John Calvin. Yet these quotations by no means replace his own exegetical judgment. On the other hand, and rather unusually in a commentary, Marguerat makes quite frequent use of the first-person singular, even when he does not pronounce his personal opinion on “interpretative knots” (7), as he puts it in the preface. One may find this surprising, but it certainly makes the commentary livelier, and indeed it makes clear that the author’s background, convictions, and concerns do influence the result, even in such a balanced and well-researched piece of work— and sometimes it is simply good to realize that there is a human being behind the book. Generally, Marguerat’s prose is fairly easy to read for a foreign speaker of French.

It is, in fact, hard to find anything to criticize in this magisterial commentary. Well-reasoned and up to current research, obviously written by a responsible academic teacher in unobtrusive subjectivity, it will be a leading reference for a long time to come. We may look forward to the second volume.