BOOKS I HAVE READ: THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

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The desire to force God to inspire the Bible in a way that our assumptions about the word are confirmed can be idolatrous.
Category: Reviews

Though I preach and teach the Bible a fair bit, I don't have a regular 'expository' ministry. More often than not, I'm asked to preach about 'mission'. Because of this, I often find myself buried in the book of Acts (as posts on this blog will show). I was delighted, therefore, when the nice people at IVP asked me to review Osvaldo Padilla'sÂ The Acts of the Apostles: Interpretation, History and Theology.

This is a large format paperback, stretching to 264 pages (including bibliography and indices) and will set you back around Â£20.

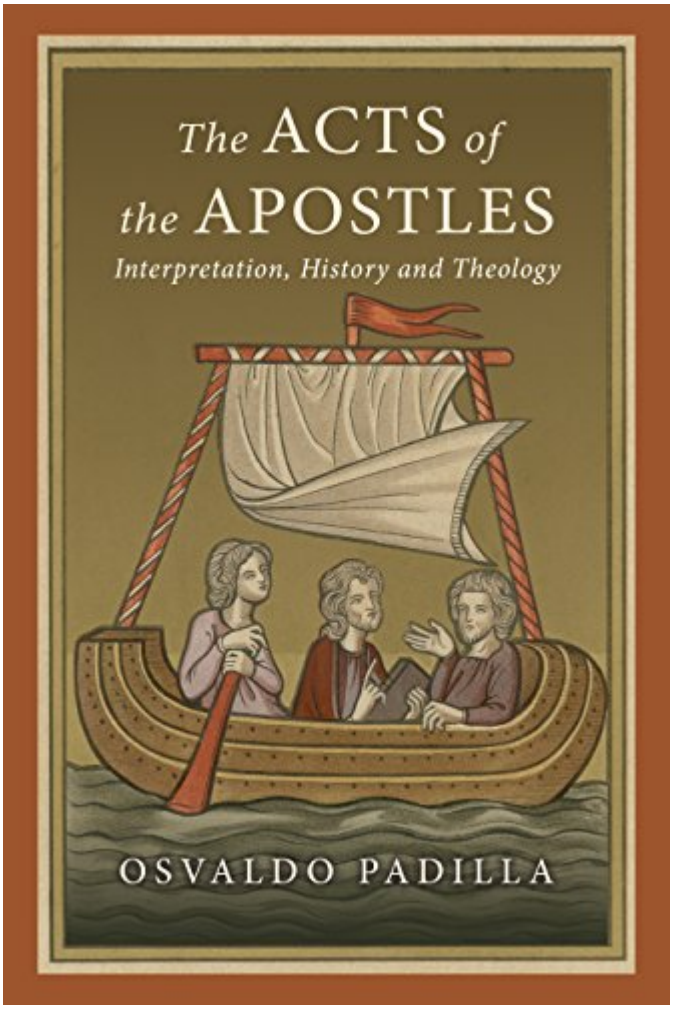
The first thing to notice is what this book is not; it is not a commentary. If you are looking for a verse by verse overview of the Acts of the Apostles, you need to look elsewhere. The book describes itself as an 'advanced introduction', which the author notes is a paradox. I suspect that for the average reader, who is not familiar with the literature on Acts, the word advanced would be more apposite than the word introduction. This is an excellent book, but you have to work at it.

The book consists of six chapters.

1. Who Wrote Acts?
2. The Genre of Acts
3. How Luke Writes History
4. The Speeches in Acts (Part One): The Speeches in Their Ancient Context
5. The Speeches in Acts (Part Two): The Theology of the Speeches
6. The Justification of Truth-Claims in Acts: A Conversation with Postliberalism

From my point of view, the book really took off in the second half. The historical and literary analysis of the first three chapters was thorough, well documented and convincing. However, this isn't where my interests lie and I'm generally happy to leave this sort of thing to the experts. I'm glad that someone is doing this sort of work, but I'm equally glad that it isn't me!

Things (from my point of view) began to pick up in chapter four where Padilla gives an overview of the developments in the way that Greek historians reported speeches in their work; showing how Luke fits into this tradition, but also illustrating areas in which he differs. This quote illustrates the issues addressed in this chapter:



> *It would be a hermeneutical mistake of the gravest type to force Luke's manner of speech reporting into our contemporary mold... as if God, in inspiring the Bible, was leapfrogging the original audience because the only audience that matters is the contemporary one, you and I! This is not the way the Bible is written. God addresses the original audience in its langauge, worldview and so on. It is our duty as biblical interpreters to understand the ancient context in order to actualize the meaning of the Bible for the present responsibly. If what emerges in uncomfortable for us, so be it. The desire to force God to inspire the Bible in a way that our assumptions about the word are confirmed can be idolatrous.*

In chapter five, the author gets to grips with the theology of some of the key speeches in Acts and from this draws some overall conclusions about the theology that Luke is presenting through the book:

> ***God.Â*** *Luke did not intend Acts to be a comprehensive metaphysical presentation of God!*

> *The person of God is not presented in abstraction; he is shown concretely by being narrativized into the storyÂ of Acts, a story that is about the salvific movement of the word from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). As such, it may not be surprising that the God of Acts is a universal God. He is the one God who created the heavens and the earth. He transcends the universe and is completely satisfied in himself.*

The final chapter is aÂ *tour de force* of engagement with culture and an excellent defence of the place of proclamation of the Christian message in a hostile environment. I will probably be stealing bits of this for years to come!

So who should read this book? Sadly, many of those that I feel would benefit most from it, people who teach the Scriptures without ever seriously engaging with them as ancient texts, are unlikely to do so. It's an expensive and relatively lengthy book which will rule it out for many people. It is also hard work for the non-specialist (which includes me). I would expect that undergraduate and post-graduate students who are studying Acts would make reading this book a high priority and I would be delighted if anyone preparing an expository series on Acts took the time to invest in what is a rich and informative work.

Please note that I was provided with a free copy of this book in exchange for a blog review. That being said, this is an honest review and not influenced by the generosity of the publisher. If I thought it stank, I'd have said so.