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Review of *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*

Submitted to Dr. Craig Price for the course BISR9302 NT Genre

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Keener, Craig S. *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012.

### Author Information<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Craig Keener earned a B.A. from Central Bible College in 1982, a M.A. (1985) and M.Div. (1987) from Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, and a Ph.D. from Duke University in 1991. Before coming to Asbury in July 2011, Dr. Keener was professor of New Testament at Palmer Theological Seminary of Eastern University, where he taught for 15 years; before that time he was professor at Hood Theological Seminary.

Dr. Keener has authored 17 books, four of which have won book awards in *Christianity Today*. His *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (1993), now in its 2nd revised edition (2014), has sold more than half a million copies (including editions in several languages, including more than fifty thousand copies in Korean). His recent books include *Acts: A Exegetical Commentary* (vol. 1, Baker Academic, 2012; vols. 3-4 are forthcoming); *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Baker Academic, 2011); *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Eerdmans, 2009); *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Eerdmans, 2009); *Romans* (Cascade, 2009); *1-2 Corinthians* (Cambridge, 2005); *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Hendrickson/Baker Academic, 2003).

He has written for various journals, both academic (e.g., *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*; *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*; *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism*; *Bulletin for Biblical Research*; *A.M.E. Church Review*) and popular (e.g., *Christianity Today*; *Charisma*; *Christian History*; regularly, *A.M.E. Zion Missionary Seer*; *Christian Trends*). He has published more than 70 academic articles and more than 170 popular ones. He wrote “2 Corinthians” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible One Volume Commentary*, the article on the Holy Spirit for *The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, and has published other popular materials with Abingdon, InterVarsity, and Zondervan. He is coeditor of the New Covenant Commentary Series and of *Global Voices: Reading the Bible in the Majority World*, is a consulting editor for the *Africa Study Bible*, and recently served as program chair for the Institute for Biblical Research (2010-12).

Craig is married to Médine Moussounga Keener, who holds a Ph.D. from University of Paris 7. She was a refugee for 18 months in her nation of Congo (her story is in process of becoming a book), and together Craig and Médine work for ethnic reconciliation in the U.S. and Africa. Craig was ordained in an African-American denomination in 1991 and for roughly a decade before moving to Wilmore was one of the associate ministers in an African-American megachurch in Philadelphia. In recent years he has taught in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and in connection with various denominations.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from “Dr. Craig S. Keener - Asbury Seminary,” February 18, 2015, n.p. Online: <http://asburyseminary.edu/person/dr-craig-s-keener/>.

## **Purpose**

The author begins this commentary with a section entitled, "Prolegomenon." In this section, the author explains the focus of his work with due attention given to its respective emphasis, methodology, and resources. On page 25, the reader is told that a socio-rhetorical approach will be employed by the author to study the book of the Acts of the Apostles. In terms of "primary interest," Keener states that he is most concerned with "the meaning of the text for the likeliest general first-century audience we can construct for Luke" (26). The questions surround the historiography of the book of Acts will be taken seriously and handled thoroughly. In the conclusion of this section, Keener writes plainly, "This commentary's primary focus is on the social, historical, and rhetorical dimensions of the text; it also seeks to examine (in view of Acts' apparent genre) the degree to which Luke's depiction of events coheres with the real world of the. He depicts" (40). This proposed approach will ultimately result in a four-volume work on the Acts of the Apostles. For this first volume, Keener goes to great lengths to provide ample introductory material for the scholar and student alike. The introduction alone consists of 18 chapters at a page count of over 630 pages.

## **Summary**

A full summary of the introduction is simply beyond the scope of this review. Therefore, this review will attempt to highlight the issues Keener addresses in his work by means of brief comment.

In Chapter 1, the author briefly addresses the writing and the publication of the book of Acts. This is the shortest chapters in the introduction. Chapter 2 moves from writing and publication to the question of genre. Keener surveys some of the speculations made by other scholars in the past, then concludes in Chapter 3 that the book of acts should be considered a work of ancient historiography. On page 89, Keener admits that while many of the previous proposals regarding the genre of acts carry some weight, the work best fits within his proposed category. Having argued for a particular understanding of Acts' genre, Keener spends the next four chapters fleshing out the details of ancient historiography and how one might approach Acts as a true account of history, especially in light of the storyline interaction between Paul's letters and Luke's story.

In Chapter 8, a lengthy chapter on the rhetoric of the speeches found in the book of Acts, Keener explores the reliability of Luke's account. On page 318, Keener writes, "From a literary standpoint, those who claim that the speeches are Lukan compositions are correct. From a historical standpoint, however, and Luke could well have generally preserved the substance of what was said on the various occasions, when this information was available to him. Virtually no mainstream scholars have argued that the speeches, especially those early in acts, are verbatim compositions." This statement, like many other made by Keener throughout the commentary, is a helpful reminder to the modern reader that ancient historiography is unique to its time. Interpreters of the book of Acts would do well to remember this fact and guard against the practice of anachronism in interpretation and expectation. In Chapter 9, another extensive chapter on signs in ancient historiography, Keener again shines in providing detailed analysis of

Luke's account of miracles. For those interested in exhaustive treatment of miracles, Keener's two-volume work on the subject is highly recommended.

In Chapter 10, the reader can sense of movement toward more traditional elements of the New Testament introduction to a particular book. In this comparatively brief chapter, Keener explores the different possibilities of dates, then makes his “best guess” as some time in the early 70s AD (400). The reason for this proposed date is grounded in matters that will be explored in Chapter 11, which covers the issue of authorship. Given the introductory material found in both the Gospel according to Luke and the book of the Acts of the Apostles, is impossible to consider the authorship of one without considering authorship of the other. After briefly exploring the matter of authorship (which Keener concludes is most likely Luke the physician, companion of the Apostle Paul), he moves on in Chapter 12 to weigh the evidence that suggest a particular audience. While admitting that Theophilus is the “designated narratee” (424), Keener concludes, “Luke's ideal audience consists of mixed but predominantly Gentile congregations” (434). Chapter 13 rounds out the traditional elements found in introductions with a discussion of the purpose of Acts. Obviously, there is a degree of speculation inherent whenever a purpose is not clearly stated. Keener concludes that Luke most likely has “more than one agenda” in mind with Luke and Acts (458). However, even with this conclusion suggested, Keener states that “Acts probably offers the apostolic model for the church’s continuing mission rather than only a recitation of past history vindicating the church's foundation” (458). The implication of Keener's comment here is rather significant. Previous generations of scholars have tended to suggest that the book of Acts is more descriptive than prescriptive. Keener, on the other hand, seems to suggest that the church in acts is a church to be imitated, not simply studied.

In chapter 14, Keener challenges some of the modern assumptions regarding the relationship of the book of Acts to first century Judaism. Keener argues that Luke is true to the facts regarding a large number of Jews’ rejection of Jesus while recognizing that there is still “hope for their future” (491). Given the shared authorship between the Gospel according to Luke in the book of Acts, one should expect to find what Keener calls “Lukan emphases.” Chapter 15 is given to exploring these themes in depth. Chapter 16 and 17 provide a structural in geographical overview to help the student/scholar grasp but the literary and topographical location of the respective study. Chapter 18 concludes the introduction with rather oddly placed discussion of Luke's perspective on gender.

### **Critique**

How does one begin to critique a work of such magnitude? The breadth and the depth of study are unparalleled for the Acts of the Apostles. There is so much to commend about this work. First, his handling of historiographical matters is both thorough and clear. Prior to reviewing this work, the reviewer rarely encountered a work that engaged in serious historiographical analysis without getting lost in the details. Keener writes with great clarity, fairness, and understanding, making such a scholarly work accessible to a broad audience. While it might be difficult to offer this is an introductory class on certain levels, his material on historiography should be read by all. Second, his section on rhetoric, which dealt with the speeches found the book of Acts, is equally profitable.

As for critique, while recognizing that there is more to come, this reviewer is hesitant to suggest a normative understanding of much of what is found in the book of Acts. Given that Keener possesses two master's degrees from Assembly of God seminaries, this reviewer would imagine that as the commentary progresses there will be less agreement with the conclusions that Keener makes, especially as it relates to the Holy Spirit's work in the life of the church. Admittedly, though, Keener's commentary is tremendous. One cannot imagine any serious student of the New Testament neglecting such a profound work on such an important New Testament document. This review highly recommends this work to any and all who would desire to study the Acts of the Apostle with the guidance of a master teacher like Keener.

### Synopsis of Reviews

In *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, J. Bradley Chance states that Keener's work is "without peer or parallel." Apart from summarizing the book, Chance raises minor concern about the possibility of Keener's work pursuing some details (tongues or wine and excessive drinking) to far and distracting from "what *readers* need to know to be immersed in the cultural world of Acts."

In *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Joseph D. Fantin provides a favorable review of Keener's work stating, "This work deserves to be one's main commentary on Acts." He does, however, note that the sheer size of the volume may be a weakness for the work.

In the *Westminster Theological Journal*, Brandon D. Crowe provides a thorough and favorable review of Keener's commentary, stating, "Although I would not agree with Keener on every issue, I am grateful for his labors which have yielded an impressive and erudite commentary on the Book of Acts in its ancient context." Crowe takes minor issue with Keener's postulation that Acts be read normatively as opposed to descriptively.