Book Review:

The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption

Dennis E. Johnson

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May 31, 2007
1.1 Introduction and Book Summary

Most contemporary studies published on individual books of the Bible are either topical/thematic or follow the generally established format of a commentary. Dennis Johnson’s *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption* (hereafter *MOA*) is structured around the major themes of the book of Acts but always with an eye toward application. In chapter 1 Johnson lays out his approach and the reasons why the Church needs the message of Acts today. Chapters 2 through 12 each expost a particular theme in order to give the reader a broad overview of the message of Acts, while also providing an exegetical interpretation of relevant passages.

Chapter 2, entitled “The Acts of the Lord,” is meant to show the reader of Acts that Luke did not merely intend to record certain happenings and deeds that were decisive in the apostolic generation of the Church. Johnson argues that Acts is also an extension of the gospel of Luke as a book chronicling what Jesus continued to do after his days of walking among his disciples. He demonstrates from the text of Acts that Luke intended his audience to learn that the early church relied on the leadership of the risen Jesus for choosing church leaders, empowering his messengers, illuminating their listeners, and working saving miracles.

In chapter 3, entitled “The Spirit and the Servant,” Johnson traces the OT promises of the coming Spirit and Servant, especially how the prophecy of Isaiah lies in the background. The common purpose that the Spirit and the Servant share is that of witness, and Johnson argues that in Acts God is fulfilling the promises recorded in Isaiah to call his witnesses (Israel, Jesus, and Christians) in a lawsuit against the nations.

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Acts’s concept of time is the theme of chapter 4 (“Dawn of the Last Days”). Johnson presents the basic two-age model of redemptive-history and gives evidence of this construction using Peter’s Pentecost sermon and various signs/wonders that demonstrate that the last days are equivalent to the overlap of the ages.

Johnson focuses on what he calls “The Holy Community” in chapter 5. He suggests that Acts teaches us that heaven is like a city in true community rather than a holy garden offering isolated, disconnected peace. Evidence includes the early church’s intimate fellowship, sacrificial partnership in all things (including financial and material resources), and the seriousness of scorning the fellowship of the Spirit-led community. Chapter 6, “Diversity in Unity,” builds on this premise of community and adds that although the early church was not ethnically or demographically homogenous, it remained unified in purpose and spirit despite tangible problems stemming from the rich diversity present. Johnson draws out the sequence of events that led to this diversity and how the Church, led by the Spirit of Jesus, approached the difficulties and challenges it encountered.

Chapter 7, “An Enemy Conquered,” is a character study of sorts, but Johnson helps the reader to view Saul/Paul from the perspective of God’s actions and purposes for him. Johnson sees in Paul’s transformation from an enemy of God and the Church to a chosen messenger of God through the powers of conversion and forgiveness as a pattern for all Christians. Without subtracting from the special role that Paul played as the apostle to the Gentiles, we learn that God redeems those who are his enemies by first judging them with spiritual blindness before forgiving them, granting them spiritual sight, and turning them to be his witnesses (ambassadors) to the nations. Chapter 8, entitled “Illegal Aliens Welcome,” is a study of God’s workings that
led the early Church to take the message of the gospel to the Gentiles and how the Church was convinced to accept non-Jewish believers in Jesus into the Church.

Chapter 9 (“The Growing Word”) addresses the question of how the Church grows. Johnson’s thesis is that the Church did, always has, and always will experience true growth only as it preaches the gospel message, calling the unconverted to repentance and the Christian to continue to believe and trust in the Lord. His summary of the apostles’ truth-centered, revelation-centered, God-centered, and Christ-centered gospel as it is preached in Acts is succinct and valuable:

God has kept his promises by sending Jesus the Messiah to suffer in other’s behalf and to be raised to life and lordship. From his throne at God’s right hand, Jesus bestows the blessings of the kingdom and awaits his return to bring final restoration and final judgment. In the light of these truths, God calls on all who hear his good news to repent of their sins and turn to him in faith. Such a radical change of allegiance will be shown in submission to baptism in Jesus’ name and a lifestyle of joy, love, and holiness (p. 154).

In “The Master Versus the Magicians” (chapter 10), the theme is religious pluralism manifest in magic and the occult and how the early Church met these challenges with the message of the gospel. Johnson shows that in Acts the power of the occult was no match for the supernatural power of God displayed when the gospel collided with it. Chapter 11, “The Great King Above All Gods,” relates how the gospel met the challenge of first century Greco-Roman civil religions manifest in institutional polytheism. Brief synopses of Paul’s interactions with the Athenian philosophers and the Ephesian practitioners of the Artemis cult demonstrate how the proclamation of the gospel served as a “submissive subversion of the status quo” (p. 206).

Johnson concludes his survey of the major redemptive-historical themes in Acts with a study on “Suffering and Vindication” (chapter 12). Here he confronts the modern idols of the West—security, comfort, and pleasure—by demonstrating that just as Christ suffered, so also must his people. The portrait of suffering and the path through it that Acts pictures helps the
Church today to see the necessity, the various sources, the different varieties, the proper responses, and the Christian hope in suffering.

1.2 Basic Hermeneutical Approach and Application

MOA consistently follows a particular hermeneutical approach. Johnson calls himself a bridge-builder following the pattern of God’s bridge-building. He identifies these “bridges” (pp. ix-x) as spanning (1) between God’s word of promise to Israel in the OT, and his word of fulfillment to Israel and the nations in Jesus Christ in the NT; (2) between Jew and Gentile in God’s plan of salvation; and (3) between the apostolic events as narrated in Luke-Acts and the acts of the risen Jesus in our own day as he continues to build his Church. Furthermore, Johnson assumes that the events of Acts are neither completely normal nor completely abnormal for the Church today. He writes, “Certainly the foundational, apostolic period may have some unique features about it, just because it is foundational, but the foundation also determines the contours of the building to be constructed on it” (5). With these assumptions set forth, Johnson enumerates five guidelines (pp. 5-12) for interpreting Acts: (1) We must read Acts in the light of Luke’s purpose, which is to narrate the climax of God’s acts in salvation history; (2) We must read Acts in the light of the NT epistles because of their didactic nature; (3) We must read Acts in the light of the major OT themes; (4) We must read Acts in the light of its first volume, the gospel of Luke; and (5) We must read Acts in the light of its narrative structure. All of these guidelines are accepted standard Reformational principles as applied to Acts. But one surprising way that Johnson applies these principles is in his preference for searching for similar grammatical constructions in Acts and the LXX. He rightly concludes that most (if not all) of the NT writers used the Greek translation of the OT as their Bible, and thus he makes almost sole use of it when building OT-to-Acts bridges while almost completely ignoring the Hebrew text (MT). In terms of applying the themes in MOA, Johnson reveals his pastor’s heart and a keen eye
toward modern American culture. Each thematic study reads somewhere on the spectrum between a commentary and a sermon (but not quite either one), perhaps so that specific applications may be drawn by others who use his book to prepare lessons and sermons.

1.3 Strengths and Weaknesses

*MOA* is a very useful book. It fills a gap in the literature as a serious thematic study of Acts geared toward pastors, Bible study leaders, and teachers. Its stated purpose of building various bridges is its greatest strength as it repeatedly sheds Biblical light on passages that have tended historically to divide the Church. For example, no one can read this book without a new appreciation for Isaiah’s pervasive influence on the theology and narrative of Acts. Johnson’s treatment of Isaiah’s servant songs as fulfilled in Israel, Christ, and the Church as witnesses for Christ, and his section on Paul as a pattern for Christian conversion, are powerful in the way they point to reader to the glorious and merciful God. Also, the way each chapter begins with an introduction rooted in the present, and concludes with applications for the modern reader greatly facilitates the journey from the now, back to the world of the text, and finally back to the world today. The application section concluding each chapter effectively presents Acts to Christians today much like the original audience would have received it—as a story recounting the exciting and real deeds and words of God and his people, and as a challenge to every thought, idol, and stronghold that sets itself up against the advancing and explosively growing kingdom of God.

There are a number of minor weaknesses that bear addressing. First (and perhaps least significant), the publishers choice to include endnotes at the end of each chapter greatly hinders the ease of reading. Footnotes would be much more appropriate, considering the intended audience is not popular and thus would not be intimidated by footnotes. Second, there is either too much Greek in the body or in the notes. If the intended audience includes informed lay
people and students without knowledge of the original languages. Greek should be kept to the notes (or at least accompanied with an English transliteration in the body). Third, Johnson occasionally seems to be a little anxious to find thematic bridges. For example, he cites several speculations of Philo (the first century Hellenistic Jewish philosopher) on the Torah that connect the giving of the Law at Sinai with the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost. It would have been wiser to ignore Philo and demonstrate the bridge clearly from the OT itself, and ignore these points altogether if they only come from Philo. Finally, a possible weakness regarding the theme addressing the gospel and the Spirit going to the Jews and Gentiles, Johnson quotes approvingly from James D. G. Dunn (one of the major proponents of what is known as “The New Perspective on Paul”) as he describes circumcision, Sabbath, and ritual/purity laws as “boundary markers” or “badges” identifying those who were Jews (p. 123). While not explicitly condoning everything Dunn and the New Perspective on Paul say (especially regarding the doctrine of justification by faith alone), Johnson would have been wise to include a clear statement (perhaps in the notes) on where he stands on this very controversial new teaching. But despite these minor weaknesses, MOA is a landmark study on Acts that should prove useful to the church for years to come.

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2 According to the back cover, it is “written for students, pastors, Bible teachers, and thoughtful laypeople.”