

Review of Christina Petterson, *Acts of Empire: The Acts of the Apostles and Imperial Ideology*. Sino-Christian Studies Supplement Series 4. Chung Li: Chung Yuan Christian University, 2012.

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Just to be clear, this book does not stand in the tradition of Richard Horsley and Warren Carter styled “[insert topic here] and Empire” books, by presenting Acts as yet another anti-imperial tract within its first century context. Rather, Petterson’s study is concerned primarily with exploring the role of the Bible in the production of Western thought, through such topics as “writing and self, mastery and gender, class, ideology, grammar and abstraction”. She draws on a number of theorists, including Foucault, von Braun, Adorno, Horkheimer, Žižek, and others, to examine the complex relationship between Acts and empire. In this respect, Petterson’s brief (121 pages) monograph is also quite a contrast to Craig S. Keener’s recent and ambitious four volume commentary project on Acts, and, as many readers will appreciate, significantly different in its methodology and critical approach.

The first chapter, “Notes to Self”, begins with an exploration of the content and context of the original text: its physical medium and genre, as well as broadly defining the parameters of her study. Petterson draws on Michel Foucault to consider the process of writing as a subject-constituting process, and how this might relate to Acts. Finally, she integrates her discussion with the category of “empire”, drawing on Žižek’s threefold taxonomy of violence (subjective, systemic, symbolic) to assist in penetrating the deeper levels of imperial violence. In doing so, she argues that “western scholars — generally speaking — are blinded to the systemic and symbolic workings of empire in the biblical texts, because the levels of systemic and symbolic violence in the text are part and parcel of modern western categories of thought and their anchoring in rational, white middle class subjectivities” (p. 19). Utilizing Žižek, she maintains that the *objective* level of empire in Acts, which constitutes both the systemic and symbolic levels, involves what lies beneath the surface, for example, the systemic nature of the class system and practice of slavery of the Roman social order, and assumed gender differentiations. Alternatively, the *subjective* level of empire is constituted by the explicit references to Roman imperial structures and practices within the book of Acts.

The second chapter, “The Reign of the Phallus”, considers issues of gender and patriarchy. She begins by engaging with Jeffrey Staley’s postcolonial reading of women in Acts 16. In doing so, Petterson also returns briefly to the issue of writing, this time including the category of gender, which did not feature in Foucault’s analysis. Petterson argues that writing is phallogocentric in its mode of representation. Citing Christina von Braun, she suggests that as a tool of power and privilege, all writing is the creation of a separate sphere representing an elite (gendered and classed) image of reality. Following this, Petterson responds to the occurrence in some feminist scholarship of certain female characters being held up as examples of anti-patriarchy, for instance, Lydia, Sapphira, and the prophetic slave in Acts 16:13-18. She contends that while not unmoved by such arguments, she finds it difficult to view the texts as anti-patriarchal.

Chapter three, entitled “When in Rome...”, is probably the most exegetically engaged of the book. It considers a dichotomy in Acts between the Greek terms *chora* (countryside) and *polis* (city) originally developed by G.E.M. de Ste. Croix. Petterson employs critical spatial theory, building in particular on Halvor Moxnes’ work on spatiality and the gospels, to map this dichotomy as deeply rooted in Greco-Roman spatial ideology. *Polis* is constructed in Acts as the centre of evangelisation,

and the Lukan text is regarded as presenting an urban outlook. Petterson thus views the spatial representation of the binary *chora/polis* as naturalized within Acts; an oppressive “ideology of dominance and exploitation is given divine sanction” (p. 76). Petterson does a good job here of exposing the presence of systemic violence within the text’s ideological edifice, such as the divine violence of the earthquake in Acts 16:26 which sets Paul and Silas free, while no doubt causing the unacknowledged suffering of others. Similarly, Acts tends to exhibit a general disregard for the poor (with the exception of the brethren), which Petterson claims tends to represent an outlook of the *polis*.

The fourth chapter, “Dissecting Language Acts”, observes how the syntax and grammar of Acts constructs subjects and objects, but moreover, how it embeds aspects of gender and class ideology and is connected with imperial violence at the symbolic level. Petterson employs Aristotle’s criteria for points of character (goodness, appropriateness, likeness, and consistency) to the characterization of some of the actors of Acts. She contends that the male characters are generally portrayed according to these criteria in their representation as elite males. For example, even though the Roman authorities are occasionally devalued morally within the text’s point of view, they are still consistent in their actions and reflections. The chapter then shifts to an analysis of enunciation in Acts by observing different levels of speaking and the linguistic construction of subject positions.

The final chapter juxtaposes an analysis of “nature” in the narrative of Acts and the relationship between nature and reason in the Enlightenment. Drawing on Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Slavoj Žižek, Petterson sets out to demonstrate “how the bible and empire are part of Western subjectivity, and how abstraction, domination, and exploitation are endemic to this subjectivity” (p. 99). While Petterson introduced postcolonial theory in earlier chapters, it would have been interesting to reintroduce it here and explore some of the implications, especially given her analysis of the construction of “natives” in both the Lukan text and scholarship. She mentions in her conclusion, however, that postcolonial criticism does not produce the necessary tools to deal adequately with an analysis of how the Bible is itself implicated in the power structures we seek to combat (p. 120), one reason being that it has a tendency to evade matters of class and its complicity with global capitalism (cf. p. 30). While I largely agree with this point, I feel it could have been made more robustly by building on her analysis of postcolonial theory in Chapter 2 within the final chapter.

The critical theory aspect of Petterson’s study is dominant, and in this respect the monograph makes an important and valuable contribution to the current scholarly discourse on Luke-Acts. Moreover, for New Testament scholarship more broadly, it complexifies the “anti-empire” stream of interpretation by demonstrating just how deeply embedded imperial ideology is in both the text and its interpretation. Accordingly, although a short book, there is much material in Petterson’s study with which to engage and upon which to critically reflect. While the book generally reads lucidly with a conversational style, a number of errors (i.e., typos, inconsistent capitalization, subheadings at the bottom of the page, and so on) occasionally become distracting.



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