

BOOK REVIEWS

Stevens, Gerald L., <i>Acts: A New Vision of the People of God</i> , 2nd ed. (Dindo C. Paglinawan)	137–43
Brown, Jeannine K., and Kyle Roberts, <i>Matthew, The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary</i> (Anatolii Simushov)	143–47

Stevens, Gerald L., *Acts: A New Vision of the People of God*, 2nd ed. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019. 694 pages. Hardcover, \$104.00. Paperback, \$76.00. E-book, \$72.00.

Gerald L. Stevens’s *Acts: A New Vision of the People of God* was first published in 2016 and subsequently updated with a second edition in 2019. Alongside the refinement of discussions and correction of typographical and other technical errors, the second edition introduces an epilogue and conducts a thorough investigation into the historical narratives surrounding the death and burial of Paul. A noteworthy inclusion in this section is Stevens’s reference to the excavation of the sarcophagus at the Church of Saint Paul Outside the Walls, which unveiled bones estimated to date back to the first or second century, a dating verified through carbon analysis (p. xxiv).

In this volume, Stevens presents a new reading of the book of Acts, departing from the traditional verse-by-verse analysis commonly adopted by many commentators. Instead, he adopts a partly thematic but predominantly narrative approach. Stevens identifies Pentecost, Hellenists and Antioch, and the Saul-Paul character, as pivotal themes that propel the development of plot in Acts (p. 34). However, he contends that these themes are intrinsically tied to a more profound overarching narrative: the spread of the gospel by the eschatological messianic Israel, led by Peter (chaps. 1–7), Stephen and Philip (chaps. 8–9), and ultimately Paul (chaps. 13–28), which permeates throughout the entire book. Stevens suggests that Luke’s intention in composing Acts is to illustrate the seamless transition from the story of Jesus to the narrative of the emerging Christian church, as he puts it: “Luke’s purpose is to show that the story of Jesus becomes the story of the

church” (p. 32). Additionally, he asserts that “Acts is a new vision of the people of God” (p. 34). How is this vision understood? Stevens fundamentally points out two pivotal transformations that unfold within Acts. Firstly, Jesus transformed the national Israel into a messianic Israel, positioning them as his eschatological people. Secondly, he endowed them power with the impetus for a global mission, a narrative arc that finds its apex in the mission of Paul to the Gentiles.

After addressing the preliminary aspects, Stevens organizes the subsequent content of the volume into three distinct parts with an epilogue. Part 1 lays the foundation by exploring the thematic elements underlying the narrative, providing detailed insights into character development and plot intricacies. Part 2 delves deeper into the narrative, focusing specifically on the theme of the Spirit’s empowerment within the context of the emerging messianic Israel (Acts 1–12). Finally, Part 3 addresses the broader scope of the Spirit’s empowerment, particularly in the context of the global mission (chaps. 13–28). Then the book closes with an epilogue on the death and burial of Paul.

In Part 1 of his book, Stevens delves into pivotal themes in Acts. Firstly, he extensively addresses the significance of Pentecost, a topic often only briefly touched upon by other scholars. He offers an in-depth exploration, providing a profound background of Pentecost and its encompassing impact on the narratives of Acts. He argues that Pentecost serves as a foundational theme shaping the trajectory of Acts, both in the first and second half of the book. At the narrative level, Stevens identifies Barnabas as the Pentecost facilitator, while the subsequent world mission led by Paul embodies the fulfillment of Pentecost’s destiny (pp. 69–71).

Secondly, Stevens discusses the emergence of the Hellenist movement and the pivotal role of Antioch within it. Drawing parallels to Luke’s portrayal of Peter’s involvement in the original mission of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, Stevens highlights the continuation of this mission by Hellenists such as Stephen and Philip, endorsed by the disciples. He underscores the significance of Antioch as a hub for believers from Jerusalem, emphasizing its unique historical context that promotes social inclusiveness, thereby enhancing the spread of the gospel.

Thirdly, Stevens addresses the complex figure of Paul, integrating insights from Stephen’s speech regarding themes of “God active” and “God resisted” to elucidate Paul’s role. Notably, Stevens goes beyond merely recognizing Paul’s prominence in the mission to the Gentiles, acknowledging

that the apostle was not completely obedient to God's will. He cites instances such as Paul's seemingly aimless mission trip at the onset of the second missionary journey (Acts 16:1–10) and his detour to Jerusalem instead of proceeding directly to Rome (19:21) as evidence of his internal struggles with obedience. Stevens astutely observes Luke's nuanced portrayal of Paul, presenting him not as a monolithic figure, i.e., Paul as a stable character all the way through the second half of the book, but as a dynamic character, namely Saul-Paul (p. 143).

In Part 2, Stevens explores the empowerment of the Spirit within messianic Israel (Acts 1–12), asserting that it commences with the reconstitution of the twelve disciples as representatives of the national Israel. He emphasizes the pivotal role of Pentecost, noting that Pentecost serves as the moment when God's renewed people are commissioned for their mission both locally and globally, akin to Jesus's baptism that ushered him to his public ministry. Furthermore, Stevens highlights the pervading impact of the disciples' experience of the Pentecost, underscoring its transformation into a permanent reality in their lives (p. 181). At the narrative level, he observes a continuation of the Pentecostal theme in the subsequent chapters of Acts 2. For instance, in chaps. 3–5, he identifies key characters crucial to the plot's development. Barnabas emerges as a facilitator of Pentecost fulfillment in chap. 4, while Ananias and Sapphira pose a threat to the realization of Pentecost promises in chap. 5. Additionally, he highlights the significance of Gamaliel in chap. 5, whose counsel regarding "fighting against God" holds particular relevance to the character development of Saul, later known as Paul. Chapters 6–10 witness the emergence of Hellenists Stephen and Philip as prominent figures within the narrative. Stevens identifies chap. 6 as a pivotal moment in the narrative trajectory (p. 229), signifying a notable shift in focus. What distinguishes Stephen and Philip within the Acts narrative is their profound impact on subsequent events. Stevens underscores the importance of Stephen's speech, highlighting God's active empowerment of his agents but at the same time, his opposition to redirecting them to accomplish his purpose catalyzes the development of subsequent plotlines (p. 140). The mission in Judea and Samaria, spearheaded by the Hellenist movement, reached its peak when the gospel was introduced to the Gentile regions, with the conversion of Cornelius playing a significant role. Thus, Stevens contends that chaps. 11–12 mark a definitive shift in focus, with Antioch becoming a pivotal center for the realization of Pentecost (p. 284). Antioch's significance lies in its inherent social inclusiveness, which fosters the advancement of the gospel within its diverse social fabric.

In Part 3, Stevens delves into the pivotal role of the Spirit in empowering world missions (Acts 13–28), which begins with the selection of Barnabas and Saul for this purpose. Acts 13:2 serves as a good example of the Spirit's indispensable role in spreading the gospel among the Gentiles. Stevens asserts that Barnabas and Paul operated under the guidance of the Spirit in the first missionary endeavor. As the journey progressed, Saul underwent a transformation into Paul, ultimately eclipsing Barnabas in prominence. Their preaching often centered around synagogues in the regions they visited. Stevens mentions some challenges during this journey, including the Jerusalem council. He notes that the departure of Mark from the group during the first missionary journey reveals the complexity of Paul's personality. On the other hand, the Jerusalem council addressed pertinent issues stemming from the first journey, notably the insistence on circumcision by some factions, which was contrary to the will of God. The insistence on this practice as essential for salvation underscores the social sensitivity surrounding the integration of Gentile converts. Stevens contends that such opposition was tantamount to resisting God's divine plan (p. 336).

In contrast to his focused efforts during the first missionary journey—though marred by a rift with Barnabas, leading to their eventual separation—Stevens asserts that Paul initially embarked upon the second journey without a clear direction, characterizing his early endeavors as aimless (p. 345). Thus, he claims that Paul was fighting against God, with a pivotal shift back on track occurring only after a visionary experience (pp. 341–49). At the narrative level, Stevens observes a correlation between Paul's resistance to divine guidance and the emergence of narrative sections written in the first-person plural "we," a pattern evident during both the second and third journeys (p. 349). Stevens mentions some changes that occurred here. Firstly, having been separated from Barnabas, Paul now took Silas and Timothy with him. Secondly, the paradigm for gospel proclamation shifted from the synagogue to the market (p. 373). Paul's zeal persisted after the Spirit's redirection, continuing into his third missionary journey. This time, the paradigm for the gospel was the church (p. 436, especially the chart). Paul's boldness at Ephesus was remarkable, yet Stevens considers his decision to journey to Jerusalem instead of to Rome, as described in Acts 19:21, a detour from his destiny (p. 449). Thus, towards the end of the third missionary journey, Stevens claims that Paul was once again fighting against God (p. 454). From a narrative perspective, Stevens views the lengthy chapters dealing with Paul's trial in Jerusalem as a delay of God's plan (p. 469). However, God intervened by granting Paul two visions, one in Jerusalem

and the other during his voyage to Rome for trial. Only after this, Stevens asserts, did Paul cease fighting against God, embracing the divine destiny chosen for him (p. 573), and proclaiming God's kingdom even from a house prison.

In the epilogue, Stevens addresses not only the potential historicity of Paul's death and burial but also the aftermath of his imprisonment in Rome. The scarcity of evidence regarding these matters has led to various narrative trajectories, each claiming its own interpretation. Stevens asserts that Paul died during the reign of Nero, with indications pointing to the involvement of synagogue leadership in Rome in the events leading to his death. While some narratives suggest that Paul was released from his Roman imprisonment as described in Acts 28, others contend that his story ended tragically and abruptly (p. 606). Regarding his burial, speculation persists regarding whether he was interred "outside the city" or "outside the walls." With no conclusive evidence to support these claims, Stevens cautiously adheres to the account presented in Acts 28 regarding Paul's fate. However, his exploration of the various viewpoints on these matters in the epilogue offer more alternatives from which one may view Paul's death and burial.

In reflecting on the content of the present volume, it is evident that there are points of agreement with Stevens's analysis as well as areas of divergence. One aspect I concur with is his assertion regarding Peter's continuation of Jesus's ministry. The accounts of healing and resurrection within Acts indeed echo the characteristics of Jesus's own ministry. Additionally, I align with Stevens's emphasis on the themes of "God active" and "God resisted" as articulated in Stephen's speech, recognizing their pervasive influence throughout the book of Acts. I appreciate the author's perspective on the theme of "fighting against God," particularly in the context of Paul's obedience and resistance to God's will. This disposition places Paul with Saul and the many in the book, who not only opposed the gospel but also determined to kill the bearer of the gospel. Moreover, the linkage between the "we" sections in Acts and Paul's contradiction with the leading of the Spirit is a compelling observation, highlighting the nuanced narrative techniques employed by Luke. Also, I agree with Stevens's observation regarding the incorporation of visionary sections in passages depicting Paul's insistence on pursuing his own agenda. Lastly, Stevens's narrative reading of Acts 28, noting particularly the absence of characters compared to the trial of Paul in Jerusalem—implying support for Luke's overarching purpose of portraying the spread of the gospel even in Rome—also deserves mention.

Indeed, such an observation can be achieved better with a narrative approach.

Furthermore, I concur with Steven's emphasis on the theme of Pentecost, acknowledging its significance as a transformative event that empowered and emboldened the disciples throughout the book of Acts. However, I diverge from his assertion that the theme of Pentecost singularly shapes the development of the plot. While Pentecost undoubtedly permeates Acts, usually characterized by feasting on abundance and social inclusiveness, I contend that these characteristics are not exclusively tied to Pentecost, as they are also present in other parts of the NT, particularly the gospels. Therefore, Pentecost may not be as prominently featured as suggested.

Furthermore, I hold reservations regarding the characterization of Barnabas as a Pentecost facilitator. Although he undoubtedly played a significant role in the early Christian community, attributing his actions solely to Pentecost may oversimplify his contributions. Similarly, I feel the same way about the author's portrayal of the paradigm of the gospel proclamation delivered by Paul during his missionary journeys. While the author suggests a shift from synagogues to markets and then to church, I argue that Paul's engagement with synagogues remains consistent throughout his journeys, indicating a more conventional approach to his preaching locations. Moreover, I disagree with Stevens's view of conflict stories within Acts, particularly those involving Paul. While the author attributes these conflicts to Paul's contradiction to God's will, I believe that conflict is a recurring theme in Acts that extends beyond Paul's actions. For instance, Peter and Stephen also encounter conflicts with religious leaders in Jerusalem despite their obedience to God's commands.

In my evaluation of Stevens' book, I find that he has made a significant contribution to the study of Acts. A blend of partly thematic but dominantly a narrative approach employed throughout the book itself constitutes a noteworthy contribution to Acts scholarship. Particularly insightful is his emphasis on key themes such as Pentecost, "God active" and "God resisted," and "fighting against God," which shed light on crucial aspects of the narrative, although there may be points of contention among scholars. As to the feature of this volume, it is enriched by a wealth of visual aids including maps, images of archaeological artifacts, and other relevant photographs. These visual elements enhance the reader's understanding by providing additional context, particularly regarding the geographical locations visited by Paul and his companions. Another notable contribution of Stevens in this volume is the detailed exploration of Paul's extended journey

in Rome and his eventual martyrdom, which Stevens provides with thoroughness and insight. This aspect in the updated edition of his book adds depth to the understanding of Paul's later life and contributes to a more comprehensive view of the historical and literary contexts of Acts. Thus, I recommend this volume to scholars, pastors, and laypeople, particularly those interested in a narrative approach to the book of Acts. Going through the book will benefit the reader immensely, offering a nuanced understanding of Stevens's interesting observations beyond what can be gleaned solely from the limited lens of this review.

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Brown, Jeannine K., and Kyle Roberts. *Matthew*. The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018. xiv + 576 pages. Paperback \$51.99. E-Book, \$51.99.

This volume continues Eerdmans' The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary series, whose distinguishing feature is the accent upon theological exegesis and theological reflection. Written by the experts in their areas (Brown is a biblical scholar and Roberts is a systematic theologian), it is the result of the interdisciplinary dialogue led by them for over five years. The book consists of three main sections, only one of which, the first, represents a commentary in the strict sense of this word. The other two parts deal with the theological interpretation of the First Gospel. Nevertheless, as the authors acknowledge themselves, "The assumption that Matthew's Gospel is thoroughly theological permeates our commentary from beginning to end" (p. 3).

The exegetical section begins with a short consideration of introductory issues (chapter 1). If to summarize their view, the Gospel of Matthew has three main parts (1:1–4:16; 4:17–16:20; 16:20–28:20) and was written in AD 70–90 by a Jew (Matthew, a disciple of Jesus) to Jewish house churches in various locations involved in an intramural debate with other branches of Judaism and being at the initial stage of a mission to gentiles. To present all exegetical observations of the commentary part (chapters 2–8) here is impossible and, in fact, unnecessary. More important is to note the authors' general approach both in this section and throughout the book. Although, as it was said, Brown and Roberts consider Matthew's Gospel first of all as a theological project, they do not ignore its narrative form. On the contrary,