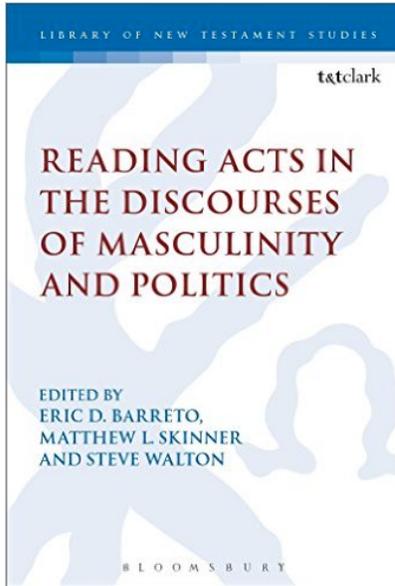


RBL 01/2018



**Eric D. Barreto, Matthew L. Skinner, and Steve Walton, eds.**

***Reading Acts in the Discourses of Masculinity and Politics***

Library of New Testament Studies 559

London: Bloomsbury, 2017. Pp. xvii + 186. Cloth.  
\$114.00. ISBN 9780567668127.

Christy Cobb  
Wingate University

It is unusual in the field of biblical studies to find a collection of essays analyzing gender alongside empire. However, in *Reading Acts in the Discourses of Masculinity and Politics* readers discover essays containing astute analysis of gendered language and constructs of masculinities as well as scholarship on the role the Roman Empire plays in Acts. For this reason, the essays in this book are significant to Acts scholarship and the future trajectory of inquiry especially concerning gender, masculinity, and politics. Structurally, the book is divided into two parts, the first addressing discourses of masculinity and the second discourses of politics. Many of these essays were a part of the Book of Acts section at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meetings held in 2013 and 2014.

Following a introduction written by Eric Barreto outlining the topics of the book, the opening chapter is “The Language of Gender in Acts,” by Christina Petterson, who reads through Acts with attention to the ideology of language in the text, specifically its use of direct (first-person) or indirect (third-person) speech, a strategy that results in new insights for understanding masculinity in the narrative. When direct speech is used in Acts, it is often connected to an elite male, and this forms the basis for Petterson’s argument that Acts “presents a narrative of socially stratified men and through this narrative participates in the ideological obliteration of its producers” (16). Overall, this analysis of language in Acts as it relates to the performative nature of masculinity is fruitful.

Colleen Conway's "Taking the Measure of Masculinities in Acts" questions the basic foundation on which masculinity studies has stood relating to New Testament studies. According to the typical measures of masculinity in the Greco-Roman world, Peter and Paul, it has been argued, are the manliest of men. Yet other scholars, using the same measures, reveal the unmanliness of these same characters. As a result of this problem, Conway focuses on the numerous violated male bodies within Acts. As she rightly observes, men in Acts are mistreated, beaten, and killed, yet they seem not to be affected by the pain. Thus, another form of masculinity is constructed as a result of these men who withstand emasculating violence. Conway concludes with a "passionate" reading and admits that "there is little appeal in a type of masculinity that is conceived as a divinely given power over others" (26).

Appropriately following Conway's essay, Brittany Wilson addresses similar questions concerning the masculinity of Peter and Paul in Acts with "Contextualizing Masculinity in the Book of Acts: Peter and Paul as Test Cases." Like Conway, Wilson admits that the constructed masculinity of Acts is not easily deciphered, especially when considering Peter or Paul, the subjects of Wilson's essay. Instead, Wilson concludes that Luke "reconfigures—or refigures—ancient norms to serve his larger theological purposes, namely his understanding of God's power" (47). Unfortunately, this does not erase the andocentric nature of the text, as God places this power in the hands of men.

Christopher Stroup's "Making Jewish Men in a Greco-Roman World: Masculinity and the Circumcision of Timothy in Acts 16:1–5" addresses one of the puzzles of Acts: Why does Paul insist upon Timothy's circumcision in Acts 16? The bulk of this essay outlines the ancient views, both Greco-Roman and Jewish, on the act of circumcision. Greco-Roman sources conceive circumcision to be effeminate, yet for Jews circumcision was the way a Jewish man became male. At the end of this summary, Stroup turns to Timothy's circumcision in Acts 16:1–4. Even though Timothy's circumcision is not required, Paul decides it is best for Timothy in Acts. In this case, the effeminization that usually accompanies circumcision is reversed, with the result that Timothy is made more masculine through his circumcision. This ultimately leads Stroup to conclude, similarly to Conway, that Acts includes a "new masculinity" that is a combination of Greco-Roman and Jewish masculinities (71).

Part 2 begins with a reprint of an important article to the discourse of politics in Acts, Steve Walton's "The State They Were In: Luke's View of the Roman Empire." This essay outlines the various scholarly analyses concerning Luke's view of the Roman Empire. The five possibilities listed by Walton include: "Acts is a political apology on behalf of the church addressed to Roman officials; Acts is an apology on behalf of the Roman state addressed to the church; Acts is providing legitimation for the church's identity; Acts is

equipping the church to live with the Roman Empire; and Acts is not interested in politics at all” (76). Ultimately, Walton sees potential in the idea that Acts is legitimizing or equipping the church to live within the empire. These conclusions, according to Walton, can include the imperial references found in Acts as well as the anti-imperial language.

Matthew Skinner’s “Who Speaks For (or Against) Rome? Acts in Relation to Empire” nicely follows Walton’s essay, as it continues the trajectory of scholarship on the role of empire in Acts since the publication of Walton’s essay. Skinner begins by declaring the scholarship to be in a “messy” state, one that he does not intend to clean up per se. Then he outlines Walton’s options and proposes that Walton’s own analysis consists of a sixth: Walton allows the pro-imperialist language to remain alongside the anti-imperialist language, yet emphasizes that theology is the central focus of Acts. Skinner’s own work on Paul’s trial adds to this by suggesting that Luke’s theology “presents the Christian gospel as a corrosive force, one potentially destabilizing to Roman interests” (115). Postcolonial biblical critics add much to this discussion by showing the ambivalence, mimicry, and hybridity within Acts. Skinner then offers suggestions for future of scholarship in this area.

Bruce Winter’s “Paul and Roman Law: ‘The Luck of the Draw?’” analyzes the places in Acts where Roman law is administered and evaluates whether Luke’s account matches Rome’s description of the processes of law. Winter ultimately argues that the Roman law as described in Acts was not administered properly according to the custom of Rome, with one exception—the events in Corinth (Acts 18:12–16). The cities where Roman law appears to be breached as described in Acts are Philippi, Thessalonica, and Caesarea Maritima. Finally, Winter suggests that the final word of Acts (“without hindrance”) is a legal phrase and that the writer is insisting there were no laws against being a Christian in the Roman Empire.

Two responses follow these three essays, the first of which is by Mikeal Parsons: “Empowering, Empire-ing or Engaging? Acts in the Discourse of Politics: A Response.” Parsons addresses the essays by Walton and Skinner and advances the discussion on where the future of Acts scholarship lies. Parsons adds to Skinner’s outline of the scholarship by citing the recent work of Warren Carter. He then relies on Carter to suggest that the ultimate force in Acts is God’s sovereignty. Barbara Rossing’s “Turning the Empire (οἰκουμένη) Upside Down: A Response” briefly highlights the essays in part 2, but its major contribution is the argument that the word *οἰκουμένη*, usually translated “world,” should be translated as “empire” in Acts. This stems from Rossing’s work on Revelation, as the word is similarly used in that text. Rossing traces the use of *οἰκουμένη* in various important classical texts in order to show its imperial context.

The “Afterword,” by Matthew Skinner, strives to connect the two themes of the book: masculinity and politics. While these topics are inherently connected, the essays themselves do not always make those connections clear, especially in the second part. Petterson, Wilson, Conway, and Stroup write with the understanding that masculinity and political power are interconnected, especially in Acts, yet the essays found in part 2 do not reveal this interconnectedness. However, if the reader were to read the essays in order, as this reviewer did, the gender ideology present in Acts remains in the foreground throughout part 2, even though the authors do not address it directly. For this reason the essays flow well together. Overall, this is a volume that will be considerably beneficial to Acts scholars, especially for future work. As Skinner notes, its importance lies in the “need for Acts scholars to bring a wide angle of methodological and cultural vision to their exegetical labours” (156). This book sets the foundation for this vision. To use Skinner’s metaphor, one hopes it will aid in the creation of even more constructive “messes.”