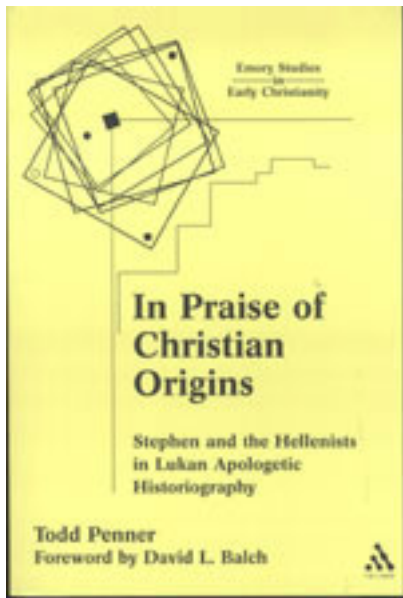


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Penner, Todd

In Praise of Christian Origins: Stephen and the Hellenists in Lukan Apologetic Historiography

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This dissertation is written by an author who is now establishing himself as a very competent scholar and student of the writings of Luke-Acts. As in several articles, some recently published and some forthcoming, this book demonstrates a scholar with an impressive grasp of scholarly literature on Acts as well as of relevant literature from the contemporary Greco-Roman world. The author has also, together with Caroline Vander Stichele, edited another volume on Acts (*Contextualizing Acts: Lukan Narrative and Greco-Roman Discourse* [ed. Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele; SBLSymS 20; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003]).

The present volume, *In Praise of Christian Origins*, represents a revised version of his doctoral dissertation, submitted to Emory University in 2000. The author organizes his presentation in five chapters and an epilogue. The book is well organized and well indexed and contains an extensive bibliography, the latter comprising thirty-six pages.

The first chapter, "Hellenists and *Historia*: Constructing Christian History and Theology in Modern Scholarship" (1–59), deals with what the author finds as central and important lines in the history of research on Acts, especially on Acts 6:1–8:3, starting with F. C. Baur. To Penner, the study of Acts still remains a storm center in recent research, and this is especially evident in the question of its genre and with respect to the nature of Acts as

historia. These issues soon turn out to be fundamental in Penner's work, as he finds they are closely related. Penner's own thesis is that "by analysing the Stephen/Hellenists narrative in light of the goals and aims of ancient historical writing, Luke's perspective on *historia* and the role of the Hellenists in Acts will be both tempered and illuminated as a result" (59). Hence in this chapter Penner comments on a vast assembly of issues and scholars.

In the next and closely related chapter ("Textualizing the Hellenists, Contextualizing Interpretation" [60–103]), Penner continues his presentation of recent research, but here within a closer reading of the texts, delineating the most crucial issues that have been (and still are) debated, focusing especially on the Hellenists (Acts 6:1–7); Stephen in the narrative sections (6:8–7:1; 7:54–8:2) and Stephen's speech (7:2–53). Confronting the facts that many scholars find that aspects of the history and theology of the early church can be discovered in these sections, Penner suggests that both the narrative and the speech have been largely misunderstood. The procedure of trying to discover a historical "core" is futile. One rather has to focus on and scrutinize further what is really involved in writing *historia*.

The third chapter ("Writing History in Antiquity: Identity, Rhetoric, and Compelling Narration" [104–222]) is—both by number of pages and research—the largest. It seeks to examine the rhetorical strategies and the sociocultural emphases that influenced and formed the process and the product of historical composition in antiquity. The chapter focuses on the three major areas of Greek, Roman, and Hellenistic contexts or environments, the latter receiving the greatest emphasis. The contents of this third chapter represent comprehensive reading by its author and exhibit an impressive knowledge of contemporary research in these vast areas of Greek, Roman, and Hellenistic literature, including works of Jewish authors. Working through this material, Penner tries to substantiate his thesis that ancient historiography had a much different aim and goal than our own post-Enlightenment historical concerns. He suggests that, if our focus is primarily on the historical core, such a reading may be too narrow to account for the data at hand. Penner's own view is stated quite early (111); he considers it "very difficult, if not impossible, to move beyond the framework, order, characterization, and style of the narrative to a concrete bedrock of assured reliable and verifiable data." The aim and goal of the ancient historians were primarily to be persuasive, that is, not so much to inform the readers about what really happened but to produce a well-plotted narrative, useful and beneficial to the reader. The emphasis falls much more on the narrative as such, hence the great focus on narrative strategies and features as plot, characterizations, speeches, comparisons, and the like. The main purposes of writing history in these times became *epideictic*. Hence, epideictic history, with its emphasis on praise and blame, according to

Penner, became the history of choice in Luke's days. The chapter closes with a section that leads over to a closer study of the Lukan Acts.

Chapter 4, however, focuses on "Jewish Apologetic Historiography" (223–61). Here Penner deals with some Jewish authors in order to provide a closer view of Luke's Jewish historiographical context. Discussing the nature of Jewish apologetic works, he emphasizes that these were not only written with regard to those outside the Jewish fold, that is, being defensive. They were also aimed at Jewish readers in order to strengthen their own Jewish identity; that is, they had an edifying purpose. Apologetic literature is, according to Penner, epideictic by nature. To substantiate his view, Penner deals with Jewish works as the *Letter of Aristeas*, some works of Philo and Josephus (*Antiquitates*), and some others. Finally, he focuses the exodus tradition as an important issue in Jewish apologetic literature and as important for understanding the speech of Stephen. Penner here concludes that Hellenistic Jews like Philo and Josephus were concerned to rewrite central parts of their native traditions in light of Greek values and perspectives.

In the fifth and last chapter ("In Praise of Origins: The Hellenists, Stephen, and the Christian Foundation Narrative" [262–330]) Penner tries to demonstrate that Luke also belongs in this apologetic tradition of historiographical writing. Penner here rereads Acts in light of the material worked out in the preceding chapters, a rereading that results in several illuminating viewpoints. His reading is offered as an alternative reading of the Hellenists, compared to those readings carried out by scholars looking for "what really happened," and as a model that reflects a different view of *historia* in Acts. The search for a core of historical "truth" is avoided, or sometimes criticized. Penner reads Acts as a work of *epideictic* historiography, setting forth Luke's view of the foundations of the Christian communities and the struggle for *philanthropia*. Luke deliberately models his stories on Hebrew Bible parallels and shapes his narratives in light of current values "so as to praise the subject being delineated and to establish a convincing, plausible, and edifying narrative" (267). Dealing with the speech of Stephen, Penner strongly argues that it is not a forensic speech, in spite of its judicial context. It is a speech crafted to further the epideictic themes. It is an invective against Stephen's opponents, an epideictic invective. In this way, the whole of Acts 6:1–8:3 demonstrates the main features of historiographical composition presented in chapter 3.

This work has several merits. First, it demonstrates in chapters 1 and 2 that much of the results of the more traditional readings of the Lukan Acts, looking for "what really happened" or a "core" of historical truth, often were heavily influenced by a preconception of and/or by certain strategies of proving some preconceptions of what really happened. Furthermore, his presentation in chapter 3 of history writing in antiquity is valuable in

itself. I also find the reading of Acts 6:1–8:3 in his last chapter extremely interesting and valuable. Here is much worthy of further consideration.

I was, however, sometimes a little frustrated over how lightly he could deal with some of the viewpoints from those carrying out a more traditional reading of Acts. First, I would have expected a more thorough presentation of some of these scholars. Several names are missing; C. Hemer, for example, is mentioned only in passing, and the book edited by B. W. Winter and A. D. Clarke (*The Book of Acts in Its Ancient Literary Setting* [vol. 1 of *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting*; Carlisle, 1993]) is not mentioned at all. Hemer's view on what ancient history entails is briefly mentioned on page 216, but his viewpoints are not really dealt with. I also find the viewpoints of S. Byrskog (*Story as History—History as Story* (Leiden, 2002), who deals with much of the same classical texts as Penner, too little discussed.

Second, I wonder if he sometimes overinterprets the more “creative” historians of antiquity and thus likewise “underinterprets” historians as Thucydides and Polybius. Third, accepting the fact that works of history, then and now, might well strive to exhibit literary qualities to please the reader, to edify and even to carry out some sort of apology, they may nevertheless try to promote a further knowledge and understanding of what “really happened.” The reading carried out by Penner has some similarities to the older *redaktionsgeschichtliche* readings of Acts. The profit of Penner's reading is that it is more informed by ancient historiography, by relevant ancient strategies and *topoi* of presentation available to the authors. But I am still not convinced that our ways of studying the literary procedures of an author such as Luke should retreat into a complete agnostic attitude to the more traditional ways of searching for a plausible presentation of “what really happened.” These disagreements notwithstanding, Penner has written a highly well informed work that all who study the book of Acts hereafter cannot afford to ignore.