In this revised version of her doctoral dissertation, Calpino examines the stories of Tabitha (Acts 9:36–43) and Lydia (16:11–15) in order to provide insight into the role of women and the nature of discipleship in Acts. Calpino states that these two stories invite analysis as a pair due to the similar descriptions of these women as independent (i.e., identified without connection to a husband, other male relatives, or children) and active in a trade within a cooperative network of fellow workers, as well as shared literary elements within each narrative (2–3). This emphasis on the social situations of the women raises the question of how the characterizations of Tabitha and Lydia spoke to the text’s original audience and challenges the tendency of scholars to generalize about women’s lives in the ancient world, as well as to conclude that Tabitha and Lydia’s stories function to promote the power and authority of the male characters, Peter and Paul. She does not claim that either woman was a historical person but argues that their characterization in Acts provides a plausible picture of women within that sociocultural setting. According to Calpino, this verisimilitude functions within the rhetorical strategy of Acts to provide a positive example for the audience that reflects their own social and economic situations or aspirations. (185). In this process, Calpino succeeds in shedding new light on the values praised by the text in regard to discipleship, which she concludes
is to associate discipleship with the use of one’s “resources as a means of service to others” (228).

Chapter 1 provides a review of scholarship that focuses on the history of interpretation from Irenaeus to the present. The chapter provides snapshots of the ideas of key theologians and scholars, including contemporary scholars who represent various methodological approaches to the text (e.g. “new” literary criticism and feminist scholarship). According to Calpino, the history of scholarship shows that “the stories of Tabitha and Lydia have been generally overlooked and undervalued” and have been interpreted “based on the biased understanding of the roles that women were allowed to inhabit in the second century” (53). These conclusions are important, but the individual presentations of the writings of early church and Reformation figures seem unnecessary and more appropriate to the dissertation stage. A briefer summary of these theologians would have allowed Calpino to broaden her discussion of the contemporary scholarship on Acts that relates more directly to her own approach to the text (i.e., the cultural and rhetorical analysis that she pairs with reconstructions of ancient life based on external sources, 53).

Chapters 2 and 3 provide a summary of the literary, epigraphic, and archaeological evidence on the lives of women in the Greek East (ch. 2) and the Roman West (ch. 3). Calpino is particularly interested in outlining the social, legal, and financial situations of women, including their roles in business. A significant contribution of these chapters is the caveat they provide concerning the dependence on the elite literature of the Greco-Roman world to uncover the reality of women’s lives. Calpino marshals the work of other scholars who have shown that such literature often presents a stereotyped and idealized picture that strives to undermine and control the place of women in society (100–104). On the contrary, Calpino concludes that an examination of nonliterary sources demonstrates that women in both the Greek East and the Roman West had greater autonomy, financial resources, and involvement in the business and social world of the time than is commonly thought (59–61). Although Calpino does acknowledge the difficulty of providing a complete picture of women’s lives from the available evidence (227), these limitations are at times lost in her conclusions. Overall, these chapters provide a very accessible review of primary sources and contemporary scholarship on women’s lives in the ancient world.

Chapters 4 and 5 provide a “phrase-by-phrase analysis” of the stories of Tabitha (ch. 4) and Lydia (ch. 5), “with particular attention to the linguistic and narrative elements of the text” (4). Calpino discusses each phrase individually and highlights issues of vocabulary, geography, inter- and intratextual relationships, and the rhetorical interests of the author. Of particular value are the explicit connections made between the narrative descriptions
of Tabitha and Lydia and their social setting and the evidence from the wider Greco-Roman world regarding the realities of women’s lives in the public sphere, which was summarized in the previous chapters. This is the heart of Calpino’s argument, and she offers the greatest service to the study of Acts through her reassessment of the characters of Tabitha and Lydia as independent women who are praised within the biblical text for their leadership within a working community.

Tabitha’s identification as a “disciple,” or μαθήτρια (the only woman so designated in the Bible), is highlighted, as is her role as a benefactress for her community in Joppa. Calpino draws this conclusion from the description of Tabitha’s work in the cloth trade and the dependence of the widows on Tabitha (9:39b) and the direct and unquestioning manner in which Peter responds to the two male messengers (which Calprino identifies as fellow workers in the cloth business, not male relatives) who are sent to bring Peter to Tabitha after her death (9:38–39a). She argues that the text distinguishes Tabitha from the widows, which counters the thought of many that Tabitha was herself a widow. But of greatest concern for Calprino is the focus on the work of Tabitha in this passage and her characterization as a disciple who is “devoted to good works and acts of charity” (9:36b).

Lydia stands out as the only woman who is both portrayed positively and given a voice in Acts. Although Lydia is not identified as a disciple, her pious devotion to God is seen in her presence at the place of prayer where Paul first meets her and her description as a “worshiper of God” (16:13–14a). Like Tabitha, Lydia is presented as an independent woman engaged in a trade and domina of her household. Lydia’s bold speech and insistence in showing hospitality, which Calpino emphasizes was the result of the call of the risen Christ that opened Lydia’s heart (16:14c), are what identify her as an ideal follower of Christ (224).

Calpino concludes that the stories of Tabitha and Lydia function within the text to provide the audience a model of discipleship. The piety of both women is emphasized (9:36b; 16:13–14a), and they are valued for their service to others through their work and financial independence. As women, Tabitha and Lydia are models of female discipleship in particular. Calpino points to the stories of married women that “bookend” the stories of Tabitha and Lydia (220–21). In Acts 5 Sapphira serves as a “negative example for following her husband in his deception of the community.” In contrast, Tabitha and Lydia both act independently as benefactors of the community. In Acts 18 Priscilla and Aquila provide a positive example of married disciples who work together in a trade. Although married, Priscilla is characterized as an equal partner with her husband (Priscilla is even named before her husband on two occasions). The exemplary character and actions of Tabitha and Lydia do not speak to women only, however. Calpino argues that together, and when compared to other women in Acts, the stories of Tabitha and
Lydia make clear the values of discipleship that the text applauds: “wealth was meant to be shared, and work was meant to be cooperative” (222).

This book makes an important contribution to the scholarship on Acts and on women in the early Christian community. There is merit in the argument that Tabitha and Lydia serve the author’s purpose to reveal and instill the values of Christian discipleship. But Calpino hints at an expansion of this idea that holds even greater significance. She states that the values of discipleship presented here support the values of the Roman world. Specifically, the stories of these women support Roman values “with a particular interest in demonstrating how Christians embodied these values in ways that were either equal to or surpassed others” (49). This suggestion warrants further consideration in conversation with those who argue for the lower status of these women and the subversive nature of the author’s rhetorical strategy. What would this mean for current discussions of Acts as an apologetic text? This question highlights another missing piece of the conversation: a broader discussion of the audience of Acts. Throughout her analysis of the text Calpino draws conclusions about the sociocultural context of the audience, but a sustained discussion of this central issue would have helped place her conclusions more clearly into the scholarly conversation regarding the rhetorical audience of Acts. There is always more to be done, however. Calpino has reoriented the discussion of Tabitha and Lydia and contributed vital insights to current thinking on the relationship between women (both as literary characters and as early hearers) and Acts.