

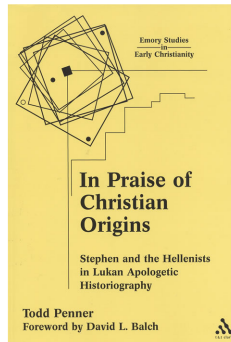
## ○ REVIEW OF TODD PENNER, *IN PRAISE OF CHRISTIAN ORIGINS*

Michael F. Bird

Highland Theological College/UHI Millennium Institute

Correspondence to Michael F. Bird: [Michael.Bird@ubi.ac.uk](mailto:Michael.Bird@ubi.ac.uk)

Michael Bird reviews Todd Penner's *In Praise of Christian Origins: Stephen and the Hellenists in Lukan Apologetic Historiography* (Emory Studies in Early Christianity; London: T&T Clark International, 2004. ISBN: 0-567-02620-5).



This volume is a revised version of the author's doctoral thesis submitted to Emory University in 2000. In Penner's own words the book argues that: 'Luke's work is a form of epideictic historiography: His goal is to write in praise of Christian origins' (288).

The volume commences with an extended forward by David L. Balch on 'Acts as Epideictic History'. Balch commends Penner's attempt to read the narrative of Acts rhetorically as 'progymnastic poetics' where history and theology are flip sides of the same enterprise. The epideictic rhetoric of Acts seek to praise Jesus as a prophet like Moses and eulogises the early church as bound together by the bonds of fellowship and service.

The opening chapter 'Hellenists and Historia' engages in the perennial debates of history and theology in the Book of Acts. Penner describes and analyzes the contributions of F.C. Baur, Martin Dibelius, Martin Hengel, and Craig Hill. In the process he points out that for these authors understanding the Hellenists in Acts 6.1-8.3 is crucial for their reconstruction of Christian origins. The challenge has been for scholars to sift this section of its redactional and traditional components and find a kernel of historical information. He writes: 'Scholars thus must choose between using the material in Acts to study Lukan theology or to reconstruct early Christian history. What scholars achieve through this particular method is nothing short of the bifurcation of *historia* itself' (23). Martin Hengel represents a post-Baurian approach that finds in the Hellenists a sure link between Jesus and Paul. Hengel was able to bypass the convictions of a previous generation of German scholars by arguing that all Judaism in the second temple period was 'Hellenistic Judaism' as opposed to a Judaism vs. Hellenism dichotomy. Penner also points out that even scholars who think that the information about the Hellenists in Acts 6.1-8.3 is largely Luke's invention (e.g. H. Räisänen and F. Vouga) can still postulate the existence of the Hellenists as 'historical' where the Hellenists provide the links between Jesus and the Pauline churches. Penner

supposes that for most scholars: 'It is historically impossible to conceive of early Christian history without a thread like the one that more liberal Hellenistic Jewish Christians in Acts provides' (39). The work of Craig Hill emphasises the unity of the early church, but never really wrestles with the nature of Lukan *historia*. Penner then outlines the theological approach to Acts typified by Dibelius. Acts 6-8 may have some historical reminiscence but its function is to be primarily a theological voice for the author of Acts. Those who have followed Dibelius have viewed Luke's narrative with grave historical suspicion. However, Penner is on the mark when he comments: 'Yet few scholars have readily identified the way in which theology and history are so intricately connected in Luke's narration of history' (50) to the point that history and theology in Acts cannot be neatly cordoned off from one another. In contrast, Penner unveils his own approach:

Whereas those scholars insistent on recovering the historical kernel of the text erred by reducing *historia* to that which is merely historical, scholars on this other side of the divide err by separating the tasks of theologizing and historical writing so thoroughly that Lukan theology becomes precisely that which does not advance the historical claims of Acts. It is clear by now that both of those emphases are wrong, as they do not account fully for the complexity of historical narrative in Acts 6:1-8:3. I believe that a better appreciation of the unitary conception of Luke's narrative can be gained and, subsequently, a fuller understanding of how one is to evaluate and assess the actual historical nature of Stephen and the Hellenists can be achieved, by turning to a more detailed analysis of *historia* in Acts 6:1-8:3 (pp. 52-53).

Penner perceptively highlights what is at stake in this debate for 'liberals' and 'conservatives' alike. The matter at hand is not merely the interpretation of Stephen's speech, but rather, 'fundamental matters such as the nature of historical knowledge and the role of history in divine revelation... at stake also is a particular version of Christianity itself: That which grounds earliest Christian theology and which is closest to the point of origin has theological priority' (56). Viewed this way, 'treatments of the Hellenists and Stephen in modern New Testament scholarship is a microcosm of the larger issues surrounding Acts interpretation as a whole ... The small narrative unit of Acts 6:1-8:3 has a direct bearing on how one interprets history, understands Christian origins, and grounds New Testament theology' (57). Penner's approach is to analyse the Stephen/Hellenist narrative in light of Acts as historiography and in view of Luke's perspective on *historia* itself. Thus, his objective is to understand more properly the relationship between theology and history in Acts (59).

In chapter two, 'Textualizing the Hellenists, Contextualizing Interpretation' Penner maps the exegetical terrain of the Stephen narratives but also looks at those features of the narrative that have been shaped by and in turn shape the metanarrative of scholars in their reconstruction of the Hellenists. The first textual marker that Penner outlines in Acts 6.1-7 is the identity of the Hellenists. He notes the juxtaposition of internal and external conflict as integral to the setting of Acts 6 and follows others in asserting that the 'Hellenists' are most probably those Jews who spoke Greek. Penner points out how the Hellenists have become a funnel used to reach into the earliest history of Christianity and although Luke presents the debate as being about the daily distribution of food, scholars frequently assert that that this is a smokescreen for the real issue

being the Hellenist's liberal attitude towards the law, temple and gentiles. In the second textual marker, Acts 6.8-7.1, 7.54-8.2, Penner examines the function of Stephen in the Lukan narrative. Penner tracks the debate as to whether or not Luke has diluted the more radical account of Stephen, or has Luke invented the charges against Stephen. Both understandings of Stephen are resultantly plugged into pre-existing theories about the role of the Hellenists in the early church. The third textual marker analyzed is Stephen's speech in Acts 7.2-53. Penner notes the debates about whether a mob lynching has been turned into a trial scene by Luke, the extent to which Luke represents the viewpoint of the Hellenists, and Luke's role in creating/shaping the speech. In any event, Penner thinks that it is impossible to peel a historical core away from the narrative or to account for the literary features purely with Luke's theological interests. Instead he proposes that, 'the way forward is to reassess the rhetorical strategy of the speech in terms of the Lukan historiographical purpose of the Hellenist narrative as a whole' (100).

In chapter three, Penner covers 'Writing History in Antiquity' and seeks to establish the sociocultural ethos of historical composition by authors in Greek, Roman and Hellenistic contexts. For Penner all history is overlaid with a sheet of rhetoric and ideology of some form thus it is impossible to 'move beyond the framework, order, characterization, and style of the narrative to a concrete bedrock of assured reliable and verifiable data' (111). Concerning the Greek context of history writing he challenges whether the historical style and ethos of Thucydides and Polybius was truly a realistic history and whether the ethos was widespread. The Greek attempt to separate poetry/tragedy from history was not always successful or even prescribed. In the Roman context of historiography it is often supposed that the Romans bastardised the art established by its Greek predecessor. But in Penner's view this is not quite true since Roman authors (like Cicero) merely distinguished history as a collection of events (something like a mere history) from history written with a particular rhetorical and panegyric flair so as to promote certain causes or cultivate certain virtues. In which case, and this is important to Penner, the lines between epideictic and deliberate rhetoric 'were not hard and fast' (127). When it comes to historiography in the wider Hellenistic context of the Mediterranean, Penner notes that it was fluid and somewhat eclectic. Jewish historiography may well have been shaped by apologetic interests, but in this Hellenistic environment the lines between history, biography and novel were blurred. Writing historiography in antiquity was an intentional literary creation devoted to interpreting events and actions. Some authors, like Thucydides, may have attempted to reflect actual events more so than others but one cannot argue that it was the norm or all that all writers had a similar consciousness. It is also wrong to evaluate ancient histories against the backdrop of modern standards since the genre of ancient historiography did not neatly divide history from fiction. As such Penner thinks it more valuable to understand the purpose of historiography rather than be concerned with its veracity (179).

Penner then investigates the contours of historiography in terms of plot, characterisation, and *topoi* in chapter three and then in chapter four he outlines the features of Jewish apologetic historiography where numerous Jewish authors, like their Graeco-Roman counterparts, had a tendency to articulate history in terms of national, communal or personal achievements – in other words, in terms of epideictic rhetoric where authors present a certain aspect of the history as being particularly praiseworthy. Hellenistic Jewish authors were particularly concerned to praise Judaism and denounce outsiders and in the process contribute to Jewish self-identity and self-perception within a wider sociocultural context. In chapter five, Penner proceeds to apply

this epideictic lens to Acts 6-8 and so present an alternative to more traditional historical or theological readings. Central to Luke is his quest to show that Christians embody true *philia* and *philathropia* and praising them for such a virtue. That is evident in the Christian community's handling of divisions within its constituency, there is a progressive openness where the church embraces a diversity of Jews and then gentiles, Stephen remains noble and courageous in the face of unjust opposition, and Stephen's speech is not a judicial discourse but an act of invective polemics against his opponents. When the narrative about the Hellenists and Hebrews is understood in this framework it is apparent that these groups, however endeared they are to students of Christians origins, are in fact tropes of Luke's creation. In a concluding epilogue, Penner offers some final comments about 'Historiography, History, and the Academy' where he urges that study of Acts should shift from the history-theology matrix and be situated in the context of Graeco-Roman discourse instead.

Penner has written a stimulating, provocative, and challenging volume. The opening chapter about the history of scholarship on the Hellenists is well worth reading in its own right. Furthermore, if Penner's thesis is correct it has serious implications not only for Lukan scholarship but also for the entire science of ancient history itself. But I want to suggest that there are several reasons why Penner's view of Lukan historiography is problematic.

First, although Penner has an excellent command of the primary sources, especially Graeco-Roman writings, at times his application of texts like Aristotle's *Poetica* to Acts looks a lot like 'parallelomania'. It is one thing to say that Aristotle, Cicero, or Thucydides has a certain view of historiography, it is quite another to demonstrate that Luke shared their perspective or was even aware of it.

Second, in Penner's view certain forms of historiography possess no actual referent beyond the rhetorical purpose of the text, so that historiography becomes more a matter of aesthetics than reality. In the case of Luke, the Hellenistic narrative in Acts 6.1-8.3 does not necessarily refer to actual historical figures nor is it merely the theological perspectives of a 'Lukan community'. The Hellenists and Hebrews become 'artificial historiographical structures that enable the historian to make a particular argument with respect to the progress of events and characters' (329). In which case, there is no possibility of looking beyond the text since the text is an artificially constructed reality designed to preempt certain sympathies or reactions. The lines between history and fiction are blurred (179). But I would be prepared to argue that the ancients were perhaps more 'modernist' in their thinking than he gives them credit for since notions of extra-textual reality (i.e. a reality beyond the world of the text) and the possibility of false historiography indicate that historical texts were meant to signify something external to the textual construction. The charges of inaccurate or false historical information that Josephus responds to in *Against Apion* shows that a concern for history as something that actually transpired in the temporal space of human existence is something that many of the ancients were concerned to represent (whether they did so, however, is another question).

Third, Penner's skepticism and indifference to using Acts as a historical source is based on his view that the study of ancient history as it is presently carried out is really about the construction of or imposition of meta-narratives in relation to ancient texts. His deconstruction of scholarship on the Hellenist narratives eschews the rigorous historical approach as exemplified by Colin Hemer and others. But if one adds to literary history also numismatics, epigraphical, inscriptional, and archaeological evidence then surely this will affect our understanding of Luke

as a historian if the text of Acts exhibits correspondences between his text and the ancient world. By this I mean that a historical approach to Luke-Acts is more than trying to excavate historical details from a text, it means orienting the text into the world of empirical history and that affects in varying ways how one understands Luke as a historian.

Fourth, that Acts can be regarded as a form of epideictic rhetoric is by far the most contestable point of Penner's argument. Epideictic rhetoric was used predominantly in oral discourse and functioned in the public arena, frequently at ceremonial events like festivals or funerals. Acts and Jewish historiography are essentially forensic, perhaps deliberative rhetoric, and both writings may contain epideictic traits at certain conjunctions, but it is not the controlling factor. To merely consider something praiseworthy, as Josephus does the magnanimity of the Jewish people in admitting outsiders into their communities (*Against Apion* 2.261), is an apologetic ploy towards a forensic or deliberative end (i.e. defend a past action or to change someone's opinion about something) rather than a piece of epideictic rhetoric. Penner has taken one literary device known from Jewish apologetic literature and tried to make it into the controlling paradigm of Acts. The failure of this approach is demonstrated all the more in Paul's three time repeated conversion story in Acts which are overwhelmingly apologetic and evidently concerned to assuage doubts or accusations about his character and message (for Jews, Christian-Jews, or the Roman elite?). Penner reiterates a number of times that Stephen's speech is not judicial since it does not answer the charges introduced in the narrative (295, 325, 328, 330). But Stephen's response is a genuine riposte to his accusers that meets the charges by engaging in a dramatic and provocative retelling of Israel's history. He responds with a counter-accusation that his opponents are law breakers (Acts 7.53) and they have made the temple into an idol (Acts 7.48). Understood this way, Luke's construction of Stephen's speech looks far more like *apologia* than it does a piece of epideictic narration.

*Michael F. Bird*