

Fall Meeting 2006

Report on the Acts Seminar

Dennis E. Smith, Chair

The Acts Seminar has approached Acts from a number of perspectives—in terms of its sources, its date, its historical context, its genre, and its theological and rhetorical tendencies. In his paper for the October 2006 meeting, Joseph B. Tyson made a case for Acts as a myth of Christian origins, as a story written to present an idealized account of Christian beginnings, not a historical account. As myth, it should not be confused with history, and therefore should no longer be read as a historical source for earliest Christianity as many scholars are still wont to do. The Fellows agreed with this argument and so voted red on ballot items 1 and 2.

Ballot Six Acts Seminar Acts and Christian Beginnings Joseph B. Tyson		Vote	%R	%P	%G	%B
Q1 The Acts of the Apostles is best understood as a myth of Christian origins.	Fellows	.96 Red	96	0	0	4
	Associates	.86 Red	70	23	2	5
Q2 The Acts of the Apostles should not be employed as the basis for a historical study of Christian origins.	Fellows	.93 Red	87	9	0	4
	Associates	.87 Red	70	23	5	2
Q3 The Acts of the Apostles is not a primary source for Pauline biography or Pauling chronology.	Fellows	.99 Red	96	4	0	0
	Associates	.84 Red	63	30	2	5
Q4 The use of Acts in historical investigation must include a consideration of the context within which it was probably composed.	Fellows	.96 Red	91	4	4	0
	Associates	.86 Red	68	23	9	0
Q5 The author of Acts used some ancient reliable traditions in the composition of the book.	Fellows	.55 Pink	9	52	35	4
	Associates	.67 Pink	28	51	16	5
Q6 It is possible for critical historians to identify ancient reliable traditions that were used in the composition of Acts.	Fellows	.54 Pink	13	43	35	9
	Associates	.53 Pink	16	35	40	9
Q7 Historical data about first-century Christianity can be derived from Acts only where a credible case can be made for the existence of reliable underlying tradition that was used and perhaps modified in Acts.	Fellows	0.81 Red	65	22	4	9
	Associates	.62 Pink	32	36	18	14
Q8 The Acts of the Apostles is more valuable for second-century Christianity than for first.	Fellows	0.87 Red	74	17	4	4
	Associates	.79 Red	57	29	10	5

Of course, as Tyson noted, mythological accounts can also contain some history; the problem is how to identify it. Here Tyson raised four caveats, all of which were affirmed by the votes of the fellows:

1. Acts is a secondary source for the story it tells and should no longer be treated as if it is a primary source (see the red vote on item 3).
2. Acts must be interpreted in terms of its historical context (see the red vote on item 4).
3. Since the historical context of Acts is the early second century, Acts may be considered a primary historical

source for that period of Christianity rather than for first-century Christianity (see the red vote on item 8).

4. Historical data in Acts can only derive from ancient traditions that can be established as having been used by Acts and from which data can be extracted that can be clearly identified, established as reliable, and definable as historical (see the red vote on item 7 and the pink votes on items 5 and 6).

As the Acts Seminar continues its work, it will be guided by the perspective laid out by Tyson and confirmed by the Fellows.