

Book Report

Title: After Acts: Exploring the Lives and Legends of the Apostles

Author: Bryan Litfin

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“According to tradition.” Litfin’s purpose is to explore what is meant by “tradition” and what tradition says about the lives of notable disciples apart from/after the close of Acts.

Litfin describes himself as a conservative and there is some evidence of that in his comments about inspiration. However, his assumptions regarding “Q” as a source for the gospel writers Matthew and Luke don’t fit a conservative viewpoint (“Unfortunately, the hypothetical collection called Q has not survived today as a separate text, so we cannot say exactly what was in it – or even for certain that it existed” – indeed!). Litfin would describe himself as an evangelical and readily identifies “traditions” that find their source in Roman Catholic Church doctrine (the chapter on Mary is an excellent example of this).

He begins his discussion of the information regarding each individual considered with the details found in Scripture. In my opinion, he does a good job of accurately summarizing this information, without drawing fanciful conclusions.

Litfin includes the early church fathers and the New Testament apocrypha among the sources of tradition. He does a good job of giving references for the quotations that he takes from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers so that the quotations can be confirmed. He identifies the history of Eusebius of Caesarea as “the most important voice among the orthodox church fathers” and gives great credence to the testimony of the historian. Although he rejects the Gnostic writings, he does draw some conclusions about the apostles in their writings.

Despite the title of the book, Litfin discusses what tradition has to say about some disciples besides the apostles and covers Andrew, James the son of Zebedee, Philip, Bartholomew, James the son of Alphaeus, Judas Thaddeus, and Simon the Zealot in a single chapter. He devotes entire chapters to the traditions surrounding Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Mary, Thomas, James, Peter and Paul.

At the conclusion of each chapter, Litfin “grades” the various traditions surrounding the person considered in that chapter (in chapter 8, the “report card” covers several individuals). The report cards are a good summary of the material in each chapter.

Analysis: Litfin’s book (I read it in the Logos digital format) is an enjoyable read. I believe that Litfin deals fairly with the traditions surrounding the disciples that he includes. He also doesn’t appear overly anxious to accept traditions unless there is early and reliable witness to substantiate them.