

REVIEW

ENCOUNTERING IMAGES OF
SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION

James M. Morgan, *Encountering Images of Spiritual Transformation: The Thoroughfare Motif within the Plot of Luke-Acts*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2013. Pp. xviii + 236pp. Paper, \$28.00/£22.00. ISBN 978-1-61097-980-1.

The Book of Acts provides a unique source into the earliest period of the Christian church. Among its contributions is a focus on the early Jesus movement characterised as ‘the Way’. Both Acts and its prequel, the Gospel of Luke, pick up on Old Testament prophetic descriptions of ‘the way of the Lord’ and apply such hopes to Jesus’ earthly ministry and its immediate after-effects. For both theologians and for historians seeking to understand the impact of Christianity within the ancient world, this terminology is an important element of this testimony that requires careful consideration. In this revised doctoral thesis, James Morgan examines this theme in new and helpful ways.

Crucially, central though it is to his argument, Morgan does not limit his consideration to *hodos*, the term typically translated ‘way’. Instead, he locates it within what he terms the ‘thoroughfare motif’, adopting a wider consideration of this term within its semantic domain, its associational cluster. This allows him a different purchase on the term than that achieved by previously published investigations.¹ Bringing other terms such as *tribos* (‘path’), *plateia* (‘broad street’), *rumé* (‘narrow street’) and *fragmos* (a path along a fence, wall, or hedge) into consideration enables Morgan to work widely with this motif across Luke and Acts.

Morgan follows William Freedman’s understanding of motif as a literary term, and helpfully unpacks what this means in theory and practice. This is indicative of Morgan’s approach, which characteristically combines a narrative sensibility with a keen sense for the theology conveyed by Luke and Acts. He sees these two ancient texts as written to provide certainty and assurance to Theophilus and their other original hearers (cf. Luke 1:1-4), amidst both the reception and the rejection of the Christian message within

¹ E.g. Paul Trebilco, *Self-Designations and Group Identity in the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 247–71, who restricts attention to *hodos* and its uses in Acts.

the first century AD. Morgan provides an insightful and helpful reading of a theme, enriching our appreciation of Luke and Acts.

There are two areas where I think Morgan's thesis can and should be extended further. Both are a testimony to the usefulness of this motif, and to the suggestive nature of this book.

First, Luke and Acts form a real but a relative unity. They are *two* texts, albeit closely connected: at every turn, Morgan treats them as a unity. He is far from alone in this treatment, but he is somewhat extreme, even uncritical, in its assumption and application. While the idea of a unity infuses his thesis, it is not necessarily inherent to it, and it might be useful and illuminative if, at times, Morgan was willing to loosen the hyphen between Luke and Acts, and explore each text on its own terms, as well as within the perceived diptych. Certainly the motif sits across both volumes, but also it sits informally and possibly distinctively within each text. Considering Luke's Gospel on its own terms, for instance, might heighten appreciation of *exodos* in Luke 9:31, which Morgan excludes from his analysis. Morgan too quickly assumes that *exodos* here forms merely a reference to Jesus' death. Instead, combined with Jesus' pivotal move towards Jerusalem (9:51), this mention of *exodos*, which is not found in the accounts of the transfiguration given in Matthew's or Mark's Gospels, appears to be a Lukan emphasis worthy of proper integration within an appraisal of the thoroughfare motif. Comparing Luke 9:51 with Acts 1:2, 22, the reference to *exodos* at the transfiguration in Luke 9:31, as I have outlined elsewhere,² adumbrates Jesus' ascension. This consideration suggests that the thoroughfare motif reaches a climax to Luke's Gospel in its own right, precisely at Jesus' ascension. Incorporating this insight would also augment Morgan's insightful treatment of Acts as a text about Jesus' continuing influence on earth from heaven. Understanding Acts within this framing is correct, but is often missed by commentators. Morgan's insights are helpful confirmation for a growing scholarly opinion that Acts represents some form of the *bios* genre. Such insights regarding the specificities of Luke and Acts indicate the variegated usefulness of the thoroughfare motif and will, also, ultimately strengthen Luke-Acts connections rather than excise them.

Second, as his title suggests, Morgan is concerned with *spiritual* transformation. This term is slippery, and deserves careful consideration and probable extension. Certainly Luke and Acts assume, and appeal to, the transformative work of the Holy Spirit, which is inscribed across the narratives as God. At times, however, Morgan appears to use the adjectival ascription 'spiritual' as a step back from considering any physical or political implica-

² Matthew Sleeman, *Geography and the Ascension Narrative in Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 64–5.

tions of the thoroughfare motif. Issues of Israel's political hope for restoration do not come into focus within Morgan's 'spiritual landscape' of Luke-Acts, whereas the texts themselves seem much more willing to engage such matters, even via the thoroughfare motif. The mission projected by Jesus in Luke 10, especially through the use of *plateia*, intimates a more holistic, public-sphere, confrontational encounter with the worlds of the first century, something which (to cite one example) the extended Ephesus narrative in Acts 19 would affirm. Luke and Acts restructure more than merely inner spirituality. Against such narrative framings, it would be regrettable if the thoroughfare motif became quietistic or non-material in its implications. Morgan's work would benefit from engagement with biblical scholarship exploring understandings of space,³ areas which are also being fruitfully explored within classical studies.⁴

In this and other areas, biblical and classical studies can find fruitful interchange. Morgan anticipates this interaction, even if he does not fully inhabit it. His theological reading should provoke further readings of these significant texts and their motifs and forms, from classicists as well as from biblical scholars.

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³ E.g., *inter alia*, Bart B. Bruehler, *A Public and Political Christ: The Social-Spatial Characteristics of Luke 18:35-19:43 and the Gospel as a Whole in its Ancient Context* (Eugene, Oreg.: Pickwick, 2011).

⁴ E.g. Michael Scott, *Space and Society in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Richard Jenkyns, *God, Space & the City in Roman Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).