

The Revolution of the Intimate: Reading Acts with Willie Jennings

Thomas J. Millay

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The simple goal of the following paper is to get you to want to read Willie Jennings's commentary on Acts. In order to do so, I'm going to be describing some of the features of the commentary, such as its style and its conceptual abundance. But it should be kept in mind that the goal of all these descriptions is to turn you to the text itself.

Willie James Jennings is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and Africana Studies at Yale, having previously served as a professor and dean at Duke Divinity School. Those who have read his 2010 book *The Christian Imagination* know that reading Acts with Willie Jennings is a privilege, for it is to read Acts with someone who is not only a great theologian but an excellent writer. For a reading hedonist such as myself, that is an important fact. Here are some examples of Jennings's style, all taken from his commentary on *Acts*, published in 2017: speaking about the meaning of Jesus' resurrected body, present at the beginnings of Acts, Jennings writes: "Love bound in bodies can now continue through death: touch can be eternal" (15); then writing about Pentecost, Jennings says, "This is God's doing: no one helped, no one assisted, everyone only tarried" (28)—how wonderful is that, "everyone only tarried?" And how many of our lives, not to speak of our congregations, does it describe? There are more: when he comes to the scene in Acts 3 where Peter looks at and heals a man lame from birth, Jennings speaks of a "necessary optical reciprocity" (41) between God's disciples and those in need. And when murder-breathing Saul is confronted and converted by divine presence in Acts 9, Jennings trenchantly concludes: "There is no rationale for killing that remains intact in the presence of God" (91).

I could go on all day with these, but I'll have to stop there because I want to get to some other features of this commentary. I trust that I've communicated that this commentary is a joy to

read and that Jennings has written sentences that will not only strike you while reading, but haunt you as you go about living daily life.

The introduction to Jennings's Acts commentary is a remarkable document. It is 12 pages long, and in these pages Jennings makes no effort to set Acts in its historical context. Compare this to Craig Keener's commentary. In Keener's 638 page introduction, he gives full coverage to dating, genre, rhetoric, comparative historiography, linguistics, and narrative criticism. Jennings's commentary has none of that. Instead, what we find in his introduction is the elaboration of a rich series of concepts, as follows: disruption, repetition, history, witness, irrevocability, colonial epistemology, archive, diaspora, empire, struggle, imagination, fantasy, storytelling, loss, expansion, diasporal concern, imperial desire, divine pleasure, divine desire, joining, isolation, and—last but not least—the revolution of the intimate. In that long list, I did mention “history,” but its placement there is illustrative of Jennings's overall approach. In this category, instead of developing Acts historical context, Jennings asks how Acts can inform and reform our idea of what history *is* and what it *is for*. From this, it is apparent that the goal of Jennings's introduction is the creation of concepts with which to read Acts, or, rather, there are concepts which originate in Acts, are drawn through the prism of Jennings's mind, and are presented to us in this introduction so that we can then read Acts with Willie Jennings. As a side note, this makes me wonder if we can propose a new standard for excellence in commentary introductions: namely, conceptual abundance rather than historical comprehension.

At any rate, out of this wealth of concepts, I've chosen the one I consider to be most central to the commentary: the revolution of the intimate. I must immediately mention another concept, though, which is closely tied to the revolution of the intimate: that of joining, which brings to mind a visceral image of two friends grasping hands and walking down a path together—it is a wonderfully physical image, like that of Ananias *touching* Brother Saul, and the scales falling from his

eyes. In short, this second concept, joining, is what the revolution of the intimate looks like, in practice.

In order to see in further detail what this concept, the revolution of the intimate, means to Jennings, it is best to see it in action. In order to do so, we will look at three scenes from Acts alongside Jennings commentary on them.

The first place to go is what Jennings considers the most decisive turning point in Acts—namely, Chapter 10, which depicts the interaction between Peter, Cornelius, and Cornelius’s household. This is the moment the Gentiles join the Way.

In the story of Acts 10, Peter, a Jew, and Cornelius, a Gentile, are brought together by a paired vision. Cornelius’s vision instructs him to invite a “certain Simon who is called Peter” to visit his household. Peter’s vision shows him an unfurling sheet on which unclean animals are displayed, and he is instructed to “kill and eat”. It is the latter vision on which Jennings zeros in for special comment.

According to Jennings, Peter’s vision is not just about the permissibility of eating unclean meat. Instead, it has to do with the joining of two peoples. The revolution of the intimate is already present here, in the falling of the sheet. This is because animals are not just animals. Animals play a fundamental role in constituting a people. A people’s identity is not separate from its animals. This is not our usual way of viewing animals. As Jennings puts it, “For so many of us, animals are for the most part utility, natural resources, and sites of consumption. There was, however, a time that revealed a different way of viewing animals, and there are yet people in this world that hold to these old ways. The old way of viewing animals bound them to us as extension of family, faith, memory, and body. We and our animals were one, our identities encircling and being encircled by them (106).”

In this old way, the joining of a people is simultaneous with touching and eating that people's animals:

Thus [Jennings writes] to eat the animals that were associated with a people was to move into their space of living, a space of people and animals. To take hold of their animals was to join them and imagine the flourishing of life through participating in the community of creatures that surrounded their bodies. A sheet of animals descended from heaven, and the Creator of the world granted to Peter permission to eat. In so doing, God placed Peter in the midst of the world and said to him, "Join it, join them" (107).

Peter initially resists God's urging, which is a further confirmation that a revolution, a turning around, is at stake here when it comes to whether or not one should touch another people's animals. What Peter must go through is a schooling in divine aesthetics; as Jennings puts it, "God's tastes are much wider than Peter had imagined until this moment" (111). What Jennings is so good at highlighting in his commentary is that this schooling is not simply some sort of ideational transfer, revealed by God to Peter, a proposition like: 'You thought it was improper to eat unclean animals, but I am telling you that now it is permissible.' Rather, God is teaching Peter the *physical* truth of joining; the revolution of the intimate happens in embodied moments of togetherness.

Acts 10 serves as a kind of ideal paradigm for Jennings of what the revolution of the intimate looks like, i.e., people of great difference sitting down at table and eating the same animals and even living together in peace, harmony, and shared worship. But this ideal does not mean that Jennings has a monolithic view of intimacy as sheer good; in fact, he uses other passages in Acts to explore the ambiguity of the concept of intimacy, for—as Jennings is the first to admit—moments of intimacy within this world can often go wrong.

Two pericopes in particular lend themselves to Jennings's exploration of both the promise and the peril of intimacy: Ananias and Sapphira and the Ethiopian eunuch.

The story of Ananias and Sapphira is told in Acts 5. This couple is important to Jennings because they present a simulacra of intimacy that points to an ecclesial problem that is all too contemporary: the sovereignty of the couple. Ananias and Sapphira band together to support each other, and in so doing they achieve a kind of intimacy. But that intimacy is achieved at the expense of the larger community. Jennings does not mince words here:

Here is the energy that drives the most powerful forms of cultural, social, or economic boundaries. Here is the fortress that resists the new order most consistently. Here is where the worship of possessions and money come fully to life: in the two made one flesh. Together they imagine they can do anything. Together they believe in their sovereignty (54).

So when Ananias and Sapphira die, it is not just the death of two individuals; it is the death of the sovereign couple.

Jennings indicates that he believes the narrative of Acts 5 speaks perhaps even more powerfully to its contemporary rather than its ancient audience. He writes, in the present tense, “We have not had the courage to face the idolatry of the couple,” and continues “Modern coupling is an energy-draining vortex that seeks to capture all our imaginative capacity for intimacy” (55). This deformation of intimacy is what the Spirit works to defeat in the deaths of Acts 5:

The Holy Spirit will take back from the couple what rightly belongs to God and to the community formed in and through the resurrected Jesus. No longer will the couple be the keeper of the secret, the owner of the intimate, or the custodian of the closed field of dreams, both personal and private. The community of Jesus confronts the couple with a new truth: you belong to us. We do not belong to you (54).

In short, alongside the first sense of the revolution of the intimate that we saw in Acts 10, where those who are distant are made close, there is also this second sense: the revolution of the intimate must revolutionize the way intimacy is usually practiced.

The story of the Ethiopian eunuch unfolds in Acts Chapter 8. While Philip, an early deacon of the church, is traveling along the wilderness road to Gaza, he comes across a eunuch from Ethiopia who is returning home upon his completion of a journey to Israel. When he sees the Ethiopian, Philip receives a verbal divine command: “Go over to this chariot and *join* it” (Acts 8.29). Philip then hurries to catch the chariot and explains the gospel to the Ethiopian eunuch through interpreting a passage from Isaiah for him, one that the Ethiopian had been reading. The Ethiopian eunuch then asks to be baptized, is baptized, and then, all of a sudden, Philip is ‘spirited away’.

Jennings describes the encounter as an intense but brief moment of intimacy, and the brevity is key. Here Jennings puts post-colonial theory to brilliant use as he explains why it was important that Philip was spirited away after the Ethiopian’s baptism. When Philip is disappeared, the Ethiopian eunuch is

left free in his joy. Disciples do need direction and guides, [Jennings continues] but first disciples must know their freedom in Jesus Christ. The church has often been too impatient and sometimes downright fearful of that freedom, choosing instead to quickly impose an image of the true, the good, and the beautiful example on those who have been made free by the Spirit. God would have none of this for the Ethiopian. There will be no correct or proper image of a disciple, no bodily model by which to pattern himself, and no one to begin a process of erasure or eradication of his differences. Philip will not be allowed to stay to tell him who to be or how to be, how to see himself or receive a preloaded life script in Christ (86).

The Ethiopian eunuch is joined to Philip, but he is not controlled by him. Philip gives just enough of an answer to the Ethiopian’s questions and Philip performs just enough of a sacrament for the Ethiopian to be joined, but no more—Philip’s authority is intentionally limited by the work of the Spirit. Here we see intimacy revolutionized again; it does not come with its usual price-tag of control.

I hope these three periscope have been enough for you to get a taste of the richness of reading Acts with Willie Jennings. If it has, then I have succeeded in my aim.

To conclude, I would like to reflect on the fact that Jennings's commentary has a conclusion. I have found this to be very rare when it comes to biblical commentaries. But the omission of a conclusion means that there is no space left for the reader to, after her reading, reflect on that reading and gather together the work that has been done. Instead, commentaries tend to end abruptly with the last verse of the biblical book, as the scientific labor of explaining the text has presumably been completed. I cannot imagine this helps retention of the commentary's content. Jennings's closing meditations on diaspora and the counter-volitional work of the Spirit give the reader time for the most important themes of his commentary to solidfy and thereby become something that can linger with the reader. In part because of this book's textual architecture, then, we readers feel at the end that we have become intimate with Willie Jennings. We are now able to read Acts with him at our side, as our companion along the way. //