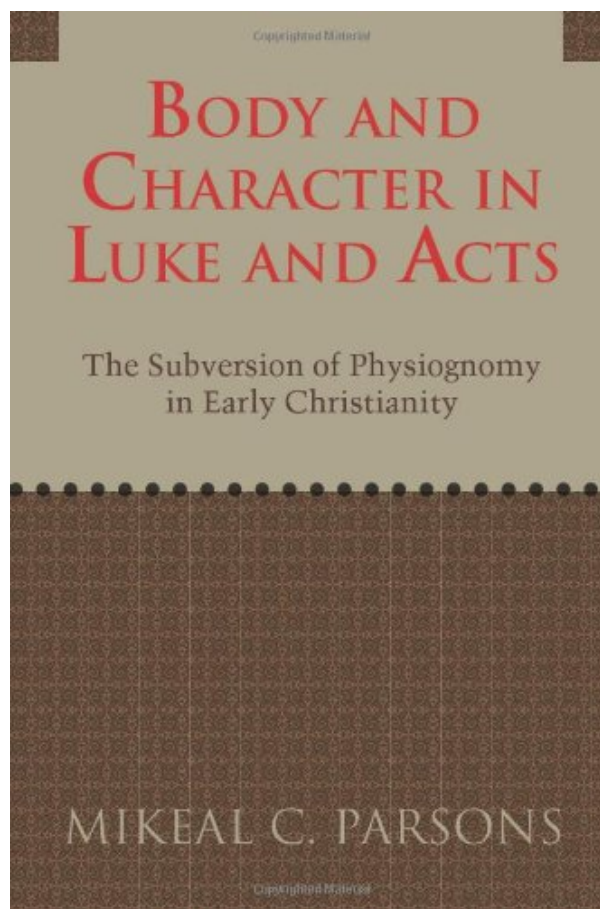
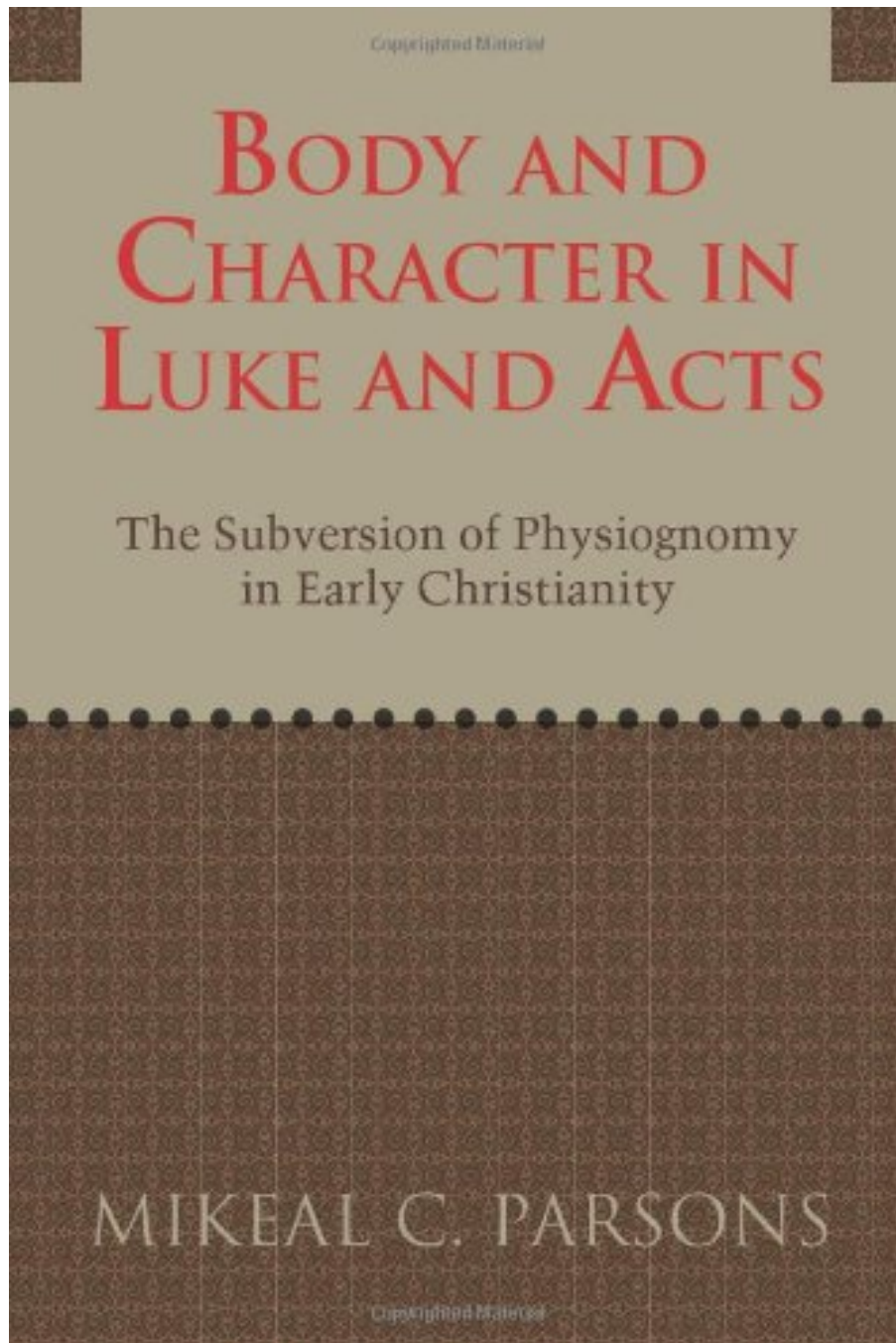


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## Review

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Early Christianity developed in a world where moral significance was often judged based upon physical appearance alone. Exploring the manifestations of this ancient "science" of physiognomy, Parsons rightly shows how Greco-Roman society, and by consequence the author of Luke and Acts, was steeped in this tradition. Luke, however, employs these principles in his writings in order to subvert the paradigm. Using as examples the bent woman (Luke 13), Zacchaeus (Luke 18), the lame man (Acts 3-4), and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8), Parsons shows that the Christian community?both early and present-day?is established only in the image of Jesus Christ.

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God penetrates outward appearances to see the heart

By Craig de CrossWise

It has been said that one should not judge a book by its cover, meaning one should not judge a man's character by his outer physical features. Yet, according to the research of Mikeal Parsons, assessing a person's morality based on their physical attributes is precisely what was done in ancient Greece and Rome, as there was an assumed correlation between the two. For example, according to third century AD writer Pseudo-Aristotle, "soul and body react on each other; when the character of the soul changes, it changes also the form of the body, and conversely, when the form of the body changes, it changes the character of the soul" [p 22]. There was also geographic ('you are where you live'), and zoological (equating traits in animals to humans) stereotyping. This practice is known as physiognomy.

The author traces the methods of physiognomy in ancient Greco-Roman tradition, Jewish culture (to include OT and extra-biblical, pseudepigraphical works), the church "fathers", Pauline NT texts, and other works, before illustrating its contrary usage in the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. If you want to know, among other things, what Paul likely meant in his reference to those whose "god is their belly" (Phil 3:19; cf. Rom 16:18) [pp 50-51], or what Matthew meant by "be wise as serpents" (Matt 10:16), considering the term "serpents" had a negative connotation [p 75], then this book is for you.

But, as the title of this work indicates, the bulk of this book finds Parsons explaining how the Lukan material works as an apologetic over against the conventional understanding and use of physiognomy in the milieu of first century Greco-Roman culture (Luke/Acts has been the primary focus of his professional literary career). The author illustrates how Luke the NT writer, in particular, deftly subverts this pseudoscience of physiognomy:

"...It is noteworthy that nowhere does Luke provide any extended physical description of the main

protagonists (Jesus, John the Baptist, and the disciples) or antagonists (religious and political leaders)...This is especially striking in the case of John the Baptist...its inclusion might lead Luke's readers to draw moral inferences based on physical characteristics - the very kind of thing Luke is bent on breaking..." [p 81].

However, Luke does specify physical descriptions of Zacchaeus, the Ethiopian eunuch, and others - those who, by their respective appearances, would be prejudged in the larger culture as individuals possessing undesirable character traits. Yet despite their outward physical appearances, these individuals are worthy (or, perhaps more accurately, made worthy) of His Kingdom, as God knows the heart (Luke 16:15) and "shows no favoritism/partiality" (Acts 10:34).

While scholarly and detailed, this book is a relatively easy read, rather short due to its focus. Unlike many new works, this one breaks new ground. Undoubtedly, future commentaries on Luke and Acts will source Parsons' work here. Very highly recommended.

(My copy is the first edition by Baker Academic from 2006. It appears the Baylor University Press is a straight reissue without any sort of revision.)

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Excellent!

By M. Bagwell

One of the best books on this unusual subject that I've ever read.

I recommend it to anyone studying Luke-Acts.

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