Uncommon in New Testament studies are books that genuinely chart new territory. Rarer still are those “new” works that also integrate diverse insights and methodologies, and make contributions to multiple disciplines. Mikeal Parsons is to be credited on all of these fronts for his *Body and Character in Luke and Acts*—a book that is methodologically sophisticated, scholarly in character, and yet also straightforward and readable enough to be accessed by many. In this work Parsons investigates “physiognomy”—the “science” of using aspects of physical appearance to assess and determine one’s moral make-up—in Greek and Roman culture and then re-reads several stories in Luke and Acts in light of it. His thesis is that these stories not only belie a physiognomic awareness on Luke’s part, but also that Luke intentionally placed these stories in the narrative to subvert them as being foreign to the eschatologically dawning message of the gospel. Parsons hits his mark.

After a brief introduction, Parsons commences with a survey and introduction to the topic of physiognomy in Greek and Roman literature (chapter one) and early Jewish and Christian literature (chapter two). Underlying the former chapter is his effort to demonstrate that physiognomics, or at least physiognomic awareness, was pervasive in Greek and Roman culture. It was practiced and/or recognized by philosophers (e.g., Pythagoras, Aristotle, Zeno), astrologers, and physicians (e.g., Hippocrates). Additionally, Parsons notes that from as early as the third century B.C.E., physiognomic handbooks were developed that partitioned this pseudo-science into three main areas: the zoological method, the ethnographical method, and the anatomical method. The publication of these handbooks identifies physiognomy as being not only of interest to some but ubiquitous, even becoming an object of systematic study and a part of the rhetorical handbooks.

Turning then to early Jewish and Christian literature, Parsons contends that there is an awareness of physiognomic ideas in these writings, yet not without critique. He contends that, though these early Jews and Christians did not possess a formal knowledge of physiognomy, they were not unfamiliar with the association of inner qualities and external appearance. Prominent in the Jewish writings surveyed by Parsons are the language and context of temple, sacrifice, and holiness (e.g., Lev 21:16-18; 22:17-25), as well as listed qualifications (and exclusions) for worship and holding offices at Qumran (e.g., 4QD 171:6-9; 1QSa 2:409). Yet examples persist in Jewish literature throughout the Second Temple period and even on through the Middle Ages. For the early Christian writings, Parsons cites various examples, such as the challenges to Paul’s authority as an apostle based on physical ailment or weakness (e.g., Gal 4:13-14; 1 Cor 2:3; 2 Cor 10:1; 12:7)—challenges which also are of importance in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*—and texts from Clement of Alexandria, Ambrose, and other Patristic sources. The general physiognomic awareness in these Jewish and Christian writings, however, does not stand as a tacit endorsement of this strategy of moral determination. The Lord’s command concerning the make-up of the desired king (i.e., not the outward appearance but the heart) in 1 Sam 16:7; the lack of an attractive or desirable physical appearance of the suffering servant in Isaiah (52:13-53:2); and Paul’s courage in not omitting his own physical ailments when defending his authority...
as a servant of the Lord, all reflect not simply a rejection of physiognomic principles but rather a conscious subversion of the practice as a whole.

With this survey in tow, Parsons seeks to undertake a fresh reading of four stories in Luke-Acts: the bent woman (Luke 13:10-17) in chapter four; wee Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-9) in chapter five; the lame man (Acts 3:1-10) in chapter six; and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40) in chapter seven. In each of these instances Luke does not merely reflect a consciousness of the topic of physiognomy but inserts a teaching (though subversive) concerning it. Sandwiched between these four chapters and the earlier surveys, is a single chapter (three) where Parsons offers a more wide-ranging survey of instances of physiognomic awareness in Luke-Acts. Additionally in this chapter, Parsons argues that Luke's intentional subversion of physiognomic principles in Luke-Acts is connected to the broader theme of the Abrahamic covenant, in that external appearance has no bearing on whether or not one is a son or daughter or Abraham. Again, he contends that Luke has intentionally and strategically introduced these stories of physiognomic consequence to then subvert that understanding of persons.

In each of the four stories from Luke-Acts Parsons proceeds in the following manner: (1) an identification of the prominent physical feature in the account, (2) a recitation of what ancient sources relate physiognomically on that particular feature, (3) a presentation of Luke's subversive stance on that physical feature as a moral indicator, and finally (4) a location of its significance for Luke-Acts. An example of Parson's fresh reading of these texts can be seen in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. He notes that, of the three most prominent aspects of this figure—foreigner (Ethiopian), Gentile (non-Israelite), and physically deformed (eunuch), the first two typically receive the bulk of the attention for Luke's overall program. Yet, in light of ancient physiognomic awareness, Parsons provides a more sophisticated reading of the story based on him being a eunuch. His reading not only provides support for his thesis regarding Luke’s subversion of physiognomy, but also yields additional insight by refining a common understanding concerning the expanding geographical progression of Luke's gospel message. While some point back to the story of the Ethiopian eunuch as the onset of the Gentile expansion of the gospel—highlighting his foreigner status—Parsons notes that the account is never referenced later in the narrative that way. Instead, highlighting the significance of the comparatively neglected “eunuch” feature of the story, Parsons states, “Thus the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts is not so much the beginning of the Gentile mission per se as it is the culmination of Luke’s argument that those who are physically ‘defective’ by the prevailing cultural standards are in no way excluded from the body of the new Abrahamic covenant” (p. 123). In like kind, each of the four stories yields similar insights for the study of Luke-Acts.

Parsons’ book calls for a reading on a variety of fronts: the Luke-Acts specialist, the NT or Christian Origins scholar, persons who study ancient Greek culture and rhetoric, and still others. This writer’s contention is that the book is also necessary reading for those who lead Christians (i.e., clergy) as it at once puts us in touch with how the NT provides a subversive logic to certain inhumane cultural practices. Physiognomic-type practices are still alive and kicking today, therefore this message of Luke needs to be re-heard. Yet, such a subversion of discriminatory and stereotyping practices is not meant only for the ears of