

Approaching Luke: Glimpses of a Gospel

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Two writings in the New Testament have been ascribed to the same author, whose name in the early tradition of the church was said to be Luke: the Gospel which later tradition named after him, and the Acts of the Apostles. In spite of scattered attempts to prove the opposite, the two writings most likely belong together even if they never occur back to back in any known manuscript. Each of the writings has a formal preface dedicating both volumes to the same person, Theophilus. This is the only mention of him in the New Testament, and he may be the patron who sponsored the work or he may be “the ideal reader” from a literary perspective.

From Luke to Acts

The preface to Acts presents that volume as a continuation of a previous book, which is then summarized. There is, however, nothing to indicate whether the first volume was written with the intention that it be continued. But today most readings of the Gospel of Luke are influenced by its companionship to Acts, and we tend to speak not of Luke but of Luke-Acts.

Acts begins by reiterating the story which ends the Gospel. The risen Jesus withdraws into heaven and disappears from the disciples' sight, and this prepares for

the sending of the Holy Spirit from on high as the distance between heaven and earth is re-bridged and the disciples are empowered for their mission. As one book closes, another opens.

This close connection means that the Gospel of Luke is not open-ended like the Gospel of Mark, with its abrupt ending in fear and silence. Nor is it transparent in the same manner as the Gospel of Matthew, where the living Lord remains ever present with his disciples, implying that the story of Jesus and his disciples never becomes past tense but is as much a story about the Lord and the Matthean community.

For Luke the story of Jesus, his life, words and deeds, is brought to an end by the disappearance of Jesus into heaven. The Holy Spirit, who was exclusively attached to Jesus in his lifetime, is now poured out by Jesus on all of his disciples from his exalted place. Luke does not collapse the distinction between the story of Jesus and the situation of his community even though there is an interaction between the two. What had happened when he was still with them, assumes the character of remembrance—Jesus in the memory of the disciples.

It is therefore not incidental that the women at the empty tomb when Jesus himself is not there, are exhorted to remember

how he told them while he was still in Galilee (Luke 24:6–8). This may allude to a customary or almost technical term in the early church for the transmission of oral materials about Jesus, especially to introduce a word of the Lord. In Luke it has a specific function in recalling the instruction of Jesus entrusted to the disciples. Jesus and his words are to be remembered, while the words of the Scriptures are to be read, interpreted and expounded, opened up in the light of this remembrance. This is not simply a matter of balancing oral transmission/tradition with written sacred texts; it reflects, as the Emmaus story shows (Luke 24:13–35), a core task of theological hermeneutics.

What is Luke?

Language and style reveal that Luke was a well-educated author who mastered the literary conventions of his time. He corrects the Greek language of his sources such as Mark; he adopts several styles dependent on the character and circumstance of the narrative. The Semitic flavor of the infancy narrative in chapters 1 and 2, with its rich use of the language of the Septuagint, is characteristic of his narrative skills and does not necessarily reflect a Hebrew or Aramaic source. This does not mean that he did not use written sources, which in fact the preface (Luke 1:1–4) conveys he did and that with care. His purpose is to examine the reports already available in order to write an orderly account so that his reader (Theophilus) can be secure in his knowledge about “the events that have been fulfilled among us.”

The preface accentuates a theological as well as an historical interest and has stirred the question about the genre of Luke’s Gospel. Did Luke’s rendering of the memories about Jesus, as maintained

by eyewitnesses and servants of the word, assume any of the conventional literary forms of Hellenistic antiquity? What would this involve concerning the intention of the author on the one hand and the expectations of the readers on the other? The issue is much discussed. The position that “gospel” is a unique Christian invention and a separate genre is today regarded as an expression of Christian exclusivism and is counterbalanced by an emphasis on the cultural embeddedness of Christian witness. But no consensus has been reached on the various forms such as historiography, biography, apology, and even novel. Luke’s work seems to resist rigid classification, and a cautious assessment would be that Luke attests an historical orientation which does not preclude biographical and novelistic features or theological and edifying interests.

Luke and the Roman authorities

There is in Luke-Acts an apologetic attitude toward the Roman authorities presenting them in a favorable light. Herod, the client king, in whom Luke also elsewhere shows a particular interest, is introduced as a key player in the Passion narrative. Luke adds a hearing before Herod to the trial of Jesus (23:6–15), and even though Herod joins in the mocking of Jesus, he becomes, together with Pilate, a witness to Jesus’ innocence.

Another apologetic feature is the reassurance that Jesus and his followers are not a subversive group indulging in clandestine activity. Luke asserts the *public* character of Jesus’ ministry; what Jesus says and does takes place openly for everyone to hear and see. This is reaffirmed in the first speech in Acts at Pentecost (Acts 2:22). The assertions about public openness shows

similarities to the way in which philosophical movements might defend themselves, and Jesus himself and also the protagonists of the apostolic times are featured by Luke to resemble the ideal image of a "sophos." Jesus' teaching often takes place in the setting of meals that resemble "symposia"; he does not give in to emotion and desire, and even in times of trial and suffering there is self-control and fortitude. His last word is not the scream of Godforsaken desolation as in Mark. After he has forgiven his executioners and promised paradise to a repentant criminal, he utters a loud proclamation as he, in the words of Ps 30:6 (LXX), commends his spirit to God (23:46).

Luke, Judaism, and the Hebrew Scriptures

Luke represents a Christianity deeply embedded in Jewish tradition as well as defending itself on Greco-Roman grounds. The work most probably stems from an urban environment, perhaps Syrian Antioch or somewhere in Asia Minor. It represents an interesting case of religious and cultural hybridization, already well prepared through Hellenistic Judaism. Luke's interest in the group of so-called God-fearers has nurtured the suggestion that he might be one of them himself. The term itself occurs only in Acts. But it has been suggested that the Roman centurion, who according to Luke has close connection with the Jewish elders and had sponsored the building of a synagogue (7:1–10), is portrayed as a God-fearer as well as the centurion at the foot of the cross who glorifies God (23:47). Attempts at proving that "God-fearers" is a Lukan construction and that there never was such a group of people has now been defeated especially by new epigraphical evidence in Asia Minor. The God-fearers probably were well-

off citizens who were attracted to the Jewish way, especially its monotheism; they were affiliated with the synagogue, attended the services, and supported it financially. But they stood back from becoming proselytes, which in the case of males involved circumcision. Because they were not obliged to follow the full set of Jewish requirements, they could uphold their public responsibilities to the city. Women also belonged to this intermediary group.

Luke repeatedly appeals to the ancient history of the Jews. The infancy narratives, which are permeated by biblical phraseology and resonant of well-known biblical stories, place Jesus into this history, and there is never any secrecy concerning his messianic significance, which is proclaimed especially in the many hymns. Apologetically, this serves to legitimate the Christians as adherents of a religion with old roots since the seniority of a tradition was a test of truth in Greco-Roman society. Theologically, Luke interprets history as salvation history, marked by a constantly recurring pattern of prophecy and fulfillment. Through history the divine promises are successively fulfilled, and the prophecies support the conviction that the historical events happen according to the will of God.

This pattern in Luke has been characterized as "proof from prophecy," though that may be a misleading term. It is not primarily a matter of proving exact correspondence through a logical exercise. The story of the two disciples on their way to Emmaus (24:13–35) may exemplify how expectations based on Scripture may lead to nothing but disappointment and frustration because when fulfillment comes it is not recognized as such. The Scriptures need to be reopened—and the eyes of the disciples as well. It is not so much a listing of specific proof texts as it is all of Scripture

that is fulfilled. Fulfillment is portrayed as something at the same time old and new, predicted and yet unpredictable. It is not easily recognized; it involves elements of surprise and of overcoming opposition and misinformed expectations, human objections and prejudices.

When fulfillment is recognized, experience blends with the reading of Scripture, and present history is made to encounter the past. The issue addressed is one of theodicy. It is a search for God, a groping for consistency in God's words and acts, for how God remains faithful to Godself. Ultimately, it represents an insistence on God's unswerving authority beyond all human manipulation.

Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecies as well as a prophet himself. This means that in him and by him new promises are made, so that the pattern of promise and fulfillment continues. His divine mission is to restore the people of God, even if he does so in divisive ways. Most interpreters think that the work of Luke is directed to Gentile Christians in a situation where the mission to the Jews has failed. The life of Jesus is "die Mitte der Zeit," the dividing line in the midst of salvation history. Because the Jews would not receive the good tidings, a church of Gentiles who do receive it becomes their replacement, although it is open to Jewish Christians also.

Some have, however, contested this and insist that Luke-Acts defends the Jewish people as the people of God and does not at all support a supersessionist position. Luke supports the privileged position of Israel in salvation history, and at the last supper the twelve apostles are charged to be rulers and judges over the twelve tribes (22:28-30). This is what effectively happens in the first part of Acts when the fallen dwelling of David is restored (cf. Acts 15:14-18) preparing the way for all other

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peoples to seek the Lord. The Jews may divide over Jesus, but they remain the people of God and are not replaced by a church of the Gentiles. The Jewish believers therefore play a crucial role without which the universal mission is futile. Luke-Acts is an account of how God in faithfulness ascertains that the history of the people of God continues toward its universal purpose. Salvation of all people was God's plan from the beginning and part of God's promises to Israel. This is clear already with the words of Simeon, who recognizes in the child Jesus the salvation God has prepared for all people (Lk 2:31-32). This is the guiding principle for Luke's universalism.

Geography and history

The plan of salvation is reflected in the geographical outline of Luke-Acts. The Gospel narrative has an orientation toward Jerusalem. It begins in the Jerusalem temple where Zechariah is serving. A substantial part of Jesus' public activity happens while "his face is set to go to Jerusalem" (the so-called travel narrative in Luke 9:51-19:19). In the Passion narrative the disciples do not flee but stay in Jerusalem, which is also the

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place where the risen Lord appears to his disciples. The Gospel ends in the temple where the disciples continually bless God. This geographical design strengthens the sense of purposeful movement, and the self-designation of the Christian group in Acts is a metaphor of mobility, The Way (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23).

In Acts the movement continues from Jerusalem to “the ends of the earth” (1:8)—in fact it ends in Rome, the capital and center of the Roman Empire. Another aspect of universalism, which also reflects the historiographical interest of Luke, is the way in which salvation history is placed in the context of world history, using chronological references to key events, most famously in 2:1–2.

Luke’s historical orientation means that the end of time is no longer perceived as imminent. Compared to the other Synoptic Gospels, Luke weakens the apocalyptic elements and “stage props” and reinforces a parenetic thrust aimed at conversion and perseverance. In this sense Luke-Acts is an early reflection of how Christians accommodate themselves to a prolonged life in a world whose termination is suspended. As the believers are sustained by the memories of God’s action in the past and guided by

the Spirit in the present, eschatological excitement is tempered by parenetic reasoning and philosophical discourse.

Ascetic discipline

This does not mean that the Gospel of Luke entertains an ethos marked by worldly compromises and a convenient lifestyle. Luke shares the tradition common to all the gospels about family conflict and the transfer of traditional family ties and kinship terms to the community of “those who hear the word of God and keep it.” This Synoptic ethos of abandonment is not easily reconciled with the reinforcement of conventional household virtues in some of the Pauline and post-Pauline letters. Luke’s version (8:19–21) may be more inclusive of Jesus’ mother and brothers, but even they are redefined by virtue of changed requirements.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is in fact cast both as a prophet and as an exemplary disciple. Motherhood is shaped by discipleship and discipleship by motherhood. She is among the small ones, the lowly on whom God has looked with favor (1:48); in response to the messenger’s word about the overshadowing of the Spirit (1:35), Mary presents herself as the maidservant of the Lord and a prototype of those obedient to God’s will. This is further marked by the way in which she listens to the divine messages, treasures them up in her heart, and ponders on them (2:18–19; 2:51). Mary’s role is converted prototypically from the conventional rights of a mother to a motherhood constituted by the fruitful reception of the word of God (8:21; 11:27–28). This is not limited to her but becomes a possibility for all women followers who receive the seed of God’s word and bear its fruit.

In Luke the common Synoptic ethos of voluntary abandonment is intensified to an

ascetic discipline where sexual renunciation is essential. The philosophical influence of a form of Stoicism in the literary characterization of main figures was already mentioned above. But there is in Luke a remarkable absence of common philosophical terms. Passion or desire is not how Luke would name the evil. The evil is rather named in mythological terms. Only by the intervening action of Jesus, his healing touch, can people in bondage be released from sin and enslavement, that is, from the power of Satan and the demons. In Luke's Gospel the healing narratives typically involve exorcism so that they take on the character of a liberating act. This reflects a worldview marked primarily by cosmological dualism rather than anthropological dualism, and it corresponds to a relocation of the role of asceticism in Luke's adaptation of a Stoic paradigm. Well-being is not achieved by personal discipline but by divine intervention. Such discipline is transferred from playing a role in the achievement of salvation to becoming an ongoing care for the soul. By means of daily exertion the Christian may counter the many threats to perseverance. The list of remedies include prayer, alertness, and breaking the grip of desire for possessions, for family, even for life itself.

Perseverance makes sense only if it leads somewhere, and in Luke ultimate survival is the willingness to give up life to gain life immortal. The ascetic ethos of abandonment in Luke represents a way in which the goal itself may be proleptically reflected and even realized. The ascetics already live according to the requirements of the life to come, they are "the children of the resurrection." In this perspective, some ascetic features are especially important as a sign of the heavenly life, that is, of immortality. What did Noah's generation do wrong (17:20–37)? There is nothing to

indicate heedlessness; they were engaged in normal, everyday activities aiming at preserving life and securing their future. If this is subject to judgment, the implication must be that the usual strategy for survival is inadequate. In the parenetic exhortation Luke has included a special variant of the logion about keeping life by losing it (17:33). Human beings can ultimately not secure their life; only those willing to lose it will keep it.

The Lukan version of Jesus' dispute with the Sadducees about the resurrection (20:27–40) is developed into a treatise on the ethos of resurrection and immortality. Abstention from marriage is a specific sign of an angel-like immortality, and is as such a state of constant eschatological readiness. The eschatological focus in Luke is transferred from the future to the present, but this present life is marked by an assimilation to the life of the eschaton. Asceticism becomes a way of life whereby the eschatological excitement is both suspended and maintained. To Lutheran ears these may be very disturbing words given our traditional emphasis on marriage and family. But it does explain why the Gospel of Luke was favored among later ascetics in the church, and a later Anti-Marcionite prologue to the Gospel alleged that Luke himself died childless and without a wife.

Women in Luke-Acts

In the early church many women were attracted by an ascetic life, as it offered an alternative to their submission in marriage and family. It is therefore not surprising that the most ascetic gospel has more material about women than any other New Testament writing. Whether this is another expression of Luke's concern for the poor and marginalized, or of his universalism, or an example of the success of Christian

preaching among the noble and well off, is a matter of debate. All these aspects are present in the stories. However, most of the women appear to be peculiarly independent, acting and speaking in their own right.

This has led interpreters to think these women must be widows, since Luke shows an interest in widows that is matched only by the Pastoral Letters. We catch a glimpse of how the early church, inspired by Judaism, established a system of providing for widows (Acts 6:11; 9:39ff.). But while the Pastoral Letters are concerned about limiting this privilege and its costs, Luke is supportive. In his Gospel the term "widow" itself has kept a traditional denotation of devastation, poverty, and vulnerability. But the interest in widows is not narrowly determined by motifs of care and compassion. They appear to form a special and respected group always portrayed in a positive light. They transcend the role of victims and recipients and act in such a way that they become prominent examples of faith and piety—of prayer, sacrifice, and perseverance. The ideal widow is Anna (2:36–38), who is also a prophetess.

One of Luke's compositional features is parallel patterns, part of which are "gender pairs" in discourse and narrative material. Typical and dense examples are the parable of the man who sows a mustard seed, which is paired with the parable of a woman who hides leaven in the dough; the parable of the shepherd with the lost sheep corresponds to the parable of the women with the lost coin. In the infancy narratives Mary and Zechariah constitute such a gender pair, as do Simeon and Anna. The gender complementarity of epic material is consistent with the explicit mention of both men and women among those who follow Jesus. Perhaps this might reflect the social organization of the Lukan community in that it retained a gender divide where each

group kept to its own sphere of life. The men went public, the women stayed (with a few exceptions) in the private sphere.

However, there is no doubt that in addition to the Twelve, a group of women also followed Jesus (Lk 8:1–3). The continuous presence and witness of the "women from Galilee" constitute the link between Jesus' ministry, his crucifixion, and the initial message of his resurrection at the empty tomb. But as the story of the empty tomb clearly states (24:9–11), the women's witness is met with men's disbelief and mistrust. In Acts women appear merely on the margin of a narrative that occupies itself primarily with the Christian witness in a public realm where visibility and accountability were a male prerogative.

This intrinsic ambiguity in Luke-Acts with regard to the place of women has made it a battleground for feminist discussion. Some claim that Luke included more traditions from women than most New Testament writers and gave them a rare visibility in a variety of roles. Others claim as strongly that his strategy was to silence and subordinate women, thereby effectively contributing to the oppression of women in the church.

The interpretation of the story about Martha and Mary (10:38–42) exemplifies this conflict. The active and serving Martha contrasts with her sister Mary who listens in silence to the words of the Lord. Some interpreters read this story as a rebuke of Martha and thereby of women's leadership functions in the house churches, especially at the Eucharist (*diakonia*). Instead, the silent and passive Mary is commended by Luke as the ideal female disciple. Clearly, the story sets a priority in a situation of conflict. But the conflict is not between hearing and serving but between hearing and agitated, troubled toil attempting to meet the demands of hospitality. The

cause of the problem is not Martha's service but her wish that Mary should assist her, thereby challenging Mary's choice. The implication is that, when conflicting interests develop, devotion to the word has priority over menial preoccupation. Indeed, the general requirement of a disciple, man or woman, is to "hear the word of God and do it" (8:21).

Diakonia

Another key issue in Luke-Acts is *diakonia*. Recent research has convincingly shown that the root meaning of the term in the Greek language is not to humbly serve at tables but rather to be a go-between, a messenger, someone with a commission to say or do something. The lowliness or honor of the task will vary according to the status of the sender and other circumstances.

However, in the Gospel of Luke, the service at table or providing for the needs of others seems to be the key connection (4:39; 8:3; 12:25–48; 17:7–10)—perhaps also reflecting the fact that food and meals are important in this Gospel. First, women are described as serving and then slaves/servants who wait on their master. But finally, in 22:24–27, Jesus waits on his disciples at the Last Supper. Leaders in the people of God should take a lead from those who serve rather than from those being served. Jesus sets himself as an example for his disciples: he is among them as one who serves.

The implications for Christian leadership are not that servants now should rule. Luke rather advocates a pattern of value reversal: the leaders should be like those who serve. The small word "like" modifies a potential social revolt and introduces a long and difficult rhetorical tradition in the Christian churches when the exercise of power has cloaked itself in the guise of

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service. But in the Lukan context there is always a resonance of the radical reversal, initially voiced in the Magnificat (1:46–56), where Mary prophetically proclaims a divine turnover of social order, distinctions, and status. Luke struggles to modify this into a *modus vivendi*. Yet the initial programmatic proclamation is maintained in the Gospel as the sounding board or normative test point for any modification.

The poor and the outcast

There is no doubt that Luke has a special compassion for the poor and outcast. The Magnificat makes this clear, but Jesus' public ministry begins programmatically with a speech (4:16–30) in the synagogue at Nazareth, proclaiming good news to the poor, release to the captives, and freedom to the oppressed. In liberation theology this has become a key passage. Both Mary's Magnificat and Jesus' keynote speech are citations from Scripture now being implemented, and yet many find them hard to accept.

Does the Gospel according to Luke primarily speak to the poor to comfort and reassure them of their worth for God and their right to their fair share? If Theophilus is the first reader, he would most probably be a man of means. It seems more convinc-

ing that the gospel conveys a message to both rich and poor. It may comfort and encourage the poor, but the primary target group is the rich. They are confronted with the indispensable requirement to provide for the need of all. Poverty as such is not an ideal, despite Luke's asceticism; the issue is rather one of solidarity and justice. Some

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Ultimately, however, the benefactor will be repaid by God, who is the great benefactor and source of all gifts. In this manner God is the protector of the poor and the needy, and all gratitude is to be directed toward God. God's benefaction balances the accounts so that practices of reciprocities within the community no longer make sense. One main characteristic of the first, ideal community in Jerusalem is a sharing of possessions where everyone receives according to need (Acts 2:44ff.; 4:34ff.). This is an implementation of the divine reversal where benefaction happens without expecting a return from those who benefit. Because of God's compassion and justice, human community can change.

passages confront the practice of bad leaders (11:42–44; 21:45–47), who show off in the eyes of people, claim honor, and then exploit others when they cannot control their greed.

Luke's Gospel envisages a redistribution of goods. Meals are not simply about nourishment but about social interaction and community. The Gospel relies on Jewish traditions about the messianic banquet, and eating is a metaphor for the joy, justice and satisfaction of the realm of God. The teaching about meal etiquette and hospitality (14:7–24) presupposes a practice of reciprocity. Nothing was given without the expectation of a return. Against this Jesus insists on an inclusive practice, where hospitality is offered to those outside the social boundaries of polite society without expecting a return from those invited—not even in the form of gratitude and praise.

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