

A Strangely Familiar Gospel

Luke-Acts as a Literary Unity

This module presupposes that Luke-Acts is a literary unity. This presupposition is not undisputed but there is significant scholarly consensus which renders the unity of Luke-Acts a viable working hypothesis. Reasons for this presupposition will be given throughout the module where relevant. To begin with, I want to draw attention to some crucial aspects which are found at the very beginning of the two volumes and at the beginning and end of the entire narrative.

Verses 1:1 of both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts mention the same person to whom the work is addressed – Theophilus. In addition Acts 1:1 also explicitly refers to a prior work which is taken as a clear indication that the two parts are seen as connected to each other as narratives and historical sequels.

The Setting of the Narrative

The symbolic universe the reader enters upon entering the narrated world of Luke-Acts is indicated in the first few verses of the Gospel of Luke. It is stated that what is about to be unfolded in the narrative happened ‘In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah...’ (Lk 1.5). This sets the geographical and temporal scene – in Judea at the time of King Herod a priest with a clearly Hebrew, that is, prophetic name is introduced. At the end the narrative is framed again with reference to this same world, in a long citation from the Scriptures (Acts 28.26 ff.). There can be no doubt that the narrative of Luke-Acts is embedded in the symbolic universe of the Jewish Scriptures, that what the author is telling us has to do with the traditions of this particular people and its perception/interpretation of life. This means that the primary tradition this narrative is embedded in is not the symbolic universe of the Roman Empire although the latter has a huge impact on the lives of the earliest Christ-followers; it is not the philosophical world of the Greeks, although eventually Greek philosophy will have an influence on the early Christ-movement, and it is not the world of near Eastern mythology which is the primary context of this narrative. Of course Jews did not live in a vacuum and Judaism did not develop without interaction and influence from all these cultures, nor were the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts immune against such influences, but the primary reference of these two books, as for the early Christ-movement as such, is the Jewish tradition.

Authorship

Although there is an explicit introduction to both parts of the double-work (Lk 1.1-4 and Acts 1.1-5[11]) the author is not explicit about himself. He does not mention his name although he addresses one specific person – Theophilus. It is not known who this Theophilus was, and speculation ranges from an elite supporter or member of the Christ-movement to a exemplary name meaning any God-lover who may wish to learn more about Jesus.

The name of Luke is found at the end of the oldest surviving copy of the gospel according to Luke, Papyrus Bodmer XIV p75 dating from 175-225. Historically it cannot be decided whether this is accurate information or whether it has to do with the church’s desire to attribute gospels either to apostles or followers of apostles.

In Phlm 24 we find Paul referring to a certain Luke who is one of his fellow workers – and Col 4.14 refers to someone called Luke, the beloved physician. In documents from the end of the second century references to Luke as the author of one of the gospels can be found and this Luke is identified at once as the physician of Colossians and the fellow worker of Paul referred to in the letter to Philemon (Muratorian Canon, Irenaeus ‘Adversus Haereses’ and

gospel prologues commonly called anti-Marcionite prologues). The so-called 'We' passages in Acts have been taken as a clue to the author, who is perceived to be a travel companion of Paul who kept something like a logbook which was later incorporated into the narrative. The scholarly opinions on these passage are divided: Some scholars see in these 'we' passages sufficient evidence that the author of Luke-Acts actually was a travel companion of Paul; others see major problems in this perception and among these are points of apparent disagreement between the Paul of the letters and the Paul of Acts. One example is the fact that the number of Paul's journeys to Jerusalem in Acts, including the Jerusalem consultation in Acts 15, does not agree with Paul's own account of his journeys to Jerusalem in Gal 1.11-2.10.

The 'We'- passages could also be fictional and serve the purpose of adding historical credibility to the narrated story. But it remains unclear why this technique is introduced where it actually is, in passages which tell nothing of real significance but only mention place after place where the travel group apparently stayed for some time. These 'We' passages remain puzzling and a satisfactory hypothesis has not really been presented so far.

Despite problems with explaining the existence of the 'We' passages, it cannot be ruled out that the author of Luke-Acts was a travel companion of Paul. It is not necessary to envisage that he had been well informed about all aspects of Paul's life. He most likely was writing more than twenty years after the events, and appears to have been an independent thinker in the tradition of Paul. There seems to be more coherence between the image of Paul as presented in Acts and as is evident from Paul's own letters than has previously been seen, especially in earlier German scholarship. Perhaps the author chose to draw from themes of Paul – or the early Christ-movement of which Paul was part, themes which served his purposes and the situation of the communities for which he was writing, and he thus neglected other themes that may be regarded as more characteristic of Paul from a contemporary perspective.

Whether the author of Luke-Acts was a travel-companion of Paul, and/or the Luke identified as author in second century sources or somebody else cannot be decided conclusively but that he was a writer who was familiar with Pauline tradition can be assumed with much historical likelihood. In this module 'Luke' will be referred to as the author of Luke-Acts without claiming that the Luke of tradition was the actual author.

There is a debate in current scholarship as to whether 'Luke' was a highly educated gentile Christ-follower who writes to or for a wealthy patron (this has been a majority view for a long time) but some recent studies indicate that the author cannot have been a trained rhetorician and does not indicate knowledge of expected Greek literature. Thus it has been argued that given the excellent knowledge of, and clear interest in the Greek scriptures (LXX) it is more likely that 'Luke' was a Greek speaking Jewish Christ-follower.

Audience and Setting

Except for Theophilus there are no direct references to the audience of these narratives. There are no specific issues or particular problems addressed which would allow us to come to conclusions concerning a clearly identifiable group of Christ-followers as in Pauline letters. Nevertheless some characteristics of the narrative could be taken as indications to the composition of a possible audience. The people mentioned in the course of the narrative are of diverse social background and include people from different ethnic and religious traditions, social status and wealth. They are Jews and gentiles, men and women, poor and relatively wealthy people, maybe also a few members of the elite or retainer class.

It is worth noting that Luke-Acts pays significant attention to issues relevant to 'poor people'. This raises questions: the teaching about poverty and wealth in Luke and Acts makes more sense if they were directed to people who actually had some wealth. Acts in particular provides evidence of such persons – there are references to the conversion of 'leading' people or people of 'high standing' particularly women (17.4,12), and there are specific converts with varying degrees of status and wealth such as Cornelius the centurion

(10.1), Sergius Paulus the proconsul of Cyprus (Acts 17.3), Dionysius the Areopagite (17.34) and Crispus the synagogue ruler (18.8). Lydia probably had some wealth as well (16.14).

Halvor Moxnes thus concludes that 'We can envisage Luke's community as a group of nonelite persons who are culturally and ethnically mixed but who also include among them some who come from the elite periphery.' (Moxnes 1994:387)

Another important issue throughout Luke-Acts is the relation to Jews and Judaism. Luke-Acts has commonly been regarded as a document of a gentile church. But the kind of knowledge Luke-Acts actually presupposes in its audience and the kind of people who dominate the narrative particularly in Acts leaves no doubts that there must have been significant numbers of Jews and Godfearers (Gentiles who participated in the synagogue and learned about Jewish matters) who were influential in the Lucan communities. Such people are honoured and the work is written in such a way as to be persuasive to them. There are a number of characteristics which indicate that Judaism and its Scriptures are not merely a negative foil over against which the emerging Christ-movement is depicted:

References to the Scriptures are not mere proof texts to support a statement previously made. There are also allusions and echoes not introduced as citations from the Scriptures and someone without considerable knowledge of these will miss completely what this message and this story is all about. Acts also insists that Paul was and remained a faithful Jew., and the leaders of the early Christ-communities according to Acts were all Jews (or God-fearers if we include Cornelius, Lydia, Titius Justus)

Date

Luke-Acts was probably completed around one or two decades after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

A number of issues point towards this: Lk 1.1 mentions previous accounts of the events which indicates that Luke knew and most likely used some of these. The hypothesis proposes that he knew the Gospel of Mark and had some other 'special Luke' traditions at hand and maybe shared another source with the author of the Gospel of Matthew.

Since Mark's Gospel seems to reflect on events of the Jewish War, and Luke knew it, his Gospel must have been written at a later time. Lucan accounts clearly refer to a military siege (Lk 19.43-44; 21.20-24) and Luke also puts an emphasis on the destruction of Jerusalem (13.32-35; 19.41-44; 21.5-6,20-24; 23.27-31) which seems to indicate that he was aware of its destruction.

Indications of the most likely latest date of completion can be taken from Acts: Luke does not seem to know of a collection of Pauline letters – such a collection was known however at the beginning of the second century as 2 Peter 3.15 f demonstrates. The fact that the Roman rule is not depicted too negatively is an additional indicator for a date of origin somewhere between the writing of Mark (around 70) and prior to the beginning of Domitian's rule in 90CE.

Geographical Location

There are no indications which would allow scholars to identify a place where Luke-Acts may have been written and where the community it probably was embedded in, and for which it was written down, actually lived. It seems to be outside of Judea/Galilee.

Essential Reading

- ** I.1. Shillington, V.George, *An Introduction to the Study of Luke-Acts*. London, New York: T&T Clark 2007, pp. 1-38
- ** I.2. Tannehill, Robert C. *Luke*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press 1996, pp. 19-31.

Further Reading

Any introduction of a recent commentary on Luke, or Luke-Acts will provide an overview on the issues addressed in I.1