

Reading Luke

A Literary and Theological Commentary

Revised Edition

Charles H. Talbert

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To T. Robert Mullinax
In friendship

Author's Preface

The following pages offer a revised, expanded, and updated edition of *Reading Luke* to upper level undergraduates, seminarians, pastors, and other interested parties who desire a fresh reading of the Third Gospel. In some respects this is a new book; in other ways, it retains the character, flavor, and perspective of the first edition. It is my hope that this version will be as helpful to its readers now as the first edition was a generation ago.

The work of revision was largely done while I was on sabbatical leave from Baylor University and serving as the Catholic Biblical Association's Visiting Professor at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome during the spring semester, 2001. The graciousness of the Rector, Robert O'Toole, S.J.; the Dean, Stephen Pisano, S.J.; the Director of the library, Henry Bertels, S.J.; and their colleagues, the wonderful library facilities, and the challenging students made my time both enjoyable and exciting. My academic efforts were also supported by my life at the Lay Institute of Foyer Unitas, whose able director, Dr. Donna Orsuto, helped make that community a home away from home for me.

Finally, without the sacrifices made by my wife, Betty, who added my duties at home to her own in spite of her heavy responsibilities as Director of Spiritual Formation at Truett Seminary, the sabbatical semester in Rome could never have been possible. True friend, I am indebted to you, in this as in so many other ways.

Charles H. Talbert
Rome, Easter 2001

Acknowledgements

Quotations from the Bible are taken from the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise specified. A quote from the Gospel of Hebrews comes from *Gospel Parallels* (RSV). Quotations from the early church fathers are from *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Citations from Greek and Roman authors are found in the Loeb Classical Library. Material from Jewish sources normally comes from James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1983–1985); Florentino Garcia Martinez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); and Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1934).

Getting Ready to Read the Gospel

Every reading of a Gospel is from a particular angle of vision. It is imperative at the outset, therefore, to understand the perspective assumed in this commentary. The following paragraphs are devoted to this end.

(1) Who was the author of Luke? If one works only with the internal evidence of the Third Gospel, one concludes the author is a Greek-speaking Christian who declines to identify himself/herself by name. If one credits early external data, then one identifies the author as Luke, a companion of Paul. Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 3.1.1) says Luke, a companion of Paul, recorded in a book the gospel preached by Paul. Tertullian (*Against Marcion* 4.2) says the Luke who wrote the gospel was not an apostle but a companion of Paul. The Muratorian Fragment indicates Luke, a physician and associate of Paul, as author. The Old Gospel Prologues name Luke, a Syrian of Antioch, a doctor and follower of Paul, as the author who wrote in the regions of Achaia. The earliest papyrus manuscript of the Third Gospel, P75 dated to the early third century, has the title “Gospel according to Luke.” Most New Testament scholars today, however, privilege internal evidence and so speak of an anonymous author.

(2) When was the Third Gospel written? If Acts is part of the story begun by the Third Gospel, then Luke could not have been written either before Paul’s imprisonment in Acts 28 (AD 60–62?) or before his martyrdom hinted at in Acts 20:25 (AD 64?). If, as most scholars think, Luke echoes the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in AD 70 (Luke 13:35a; 19:41-44; 21:6, 20-24; 23:29-31), then the Third Gospel must be after AD 70. By mid-second century, Marcion had made a mutilated form of Luke the centerpiece of his Pauline canon. Also by that time, Justin Martyr quotes the Third Gospel (e.g., *Dialogue* 76.6—Luke 10:19; *Dialogue* 103.8—Luke 22:44; *Dialogue* 105.5—Luke 23:46). Most scholars, therefore, date the Gospel AD 80–100.

(3) What exactly is Luke? The prologue (1:1-4) says it is a *diēgēsis* (account). The second-century rhetorician Theon defines *diēgēsis* as “an expository account of things which happened or might have happened.” Cicero (*De Inv.* 1.19.27) defines the Latin equivalent in virtually the same way. “A narrative is a setting forth of things as done or as might have been done.” The problem with this category is that it is as broad as the modern terms “account” and “narrative.” In antiquity the Letter of Aristeas, for example, bears the title *diēgēsis*. A narrative/account could encompass a letter of sorts, a novel, a history, or a biography—maybe more. The evangelist’s category does not help us much. Attempts to be more precise than Luke is have led to a variety of suggestions: Luke-Acts is a history (Sterling); it is a biography (Talbert 1977); it is an epic (Bonz); Luke is a biography and Acts is either a historical monograph (Strecker, 191) or a novel (Pervo). None of these suggestions for the genre of Luke-Acts as a whole has been compelling enough to command a decisive following among scholars. It is necessary, therefore, to state up front the position assumed in this commentary.

This commentary works with the hypothesis that all of the canonical Gospels are ancient biographies (Burrige), a position with broad consensus. For the sake of argument, we may leave the question of the genre of Acts in abeyance for the moment. The significance of this suggestion about genre is that Luke’s narrative/account is focused on Jesus; christology is the foreground of the Third Gospel. The evangelist’s aim is to say who Jesus was and is. Acts 1:1-2 specifically states that this first volume dealt with what Jesus began to do and teach. The background for Jesus’ story is the divine plan, but it is just that: background.

(4) To whom was Luke addressed? In 1992 I wrote these words that clarify my position here:

Traditional redaction criticism took its cue from the study of the Pauline letters. Just as a Pauline letter can be properly understood only if one can specify the particular problem(s) in the church that evoked its writing, so, it is assumed, grasping a gospel’s meaning is contingent upon one’s being able to determine the specific problem(s) in the community from which it comes and to which it was written as a response. The gospels, like the Pauline letters, are occasional literature best interpreted as arguments addressed to specific pressing problems *in the immediate community* at the time of writing. (Talbert 1992b, 229-30)

The traditional answer, therefore, has been that Luke-Acts was written for the Lukan community. A steady stream of scholarly criticism, however, has eroded the redaction critical assumption that Luke was written for a specific church (e.g., Allison; Moxnes; Riches; Lentz, 172; Bauckham). It does not seem likely that Luke-Acts was written for a single Lukan community in a particular locale. Its target audience may have been simply Gentile Christians in the Mediterranean world (Plummer, xxxiv) or even non-Christian Gentiles as well (Moule, 167; Lentz, 171). Even if it were written in a specific community, it would not likely have been designed for that locale only. Hermas (*Vision* 2.4.3) indicates that in the time Luke was written, even if one copy of a Christian writing was designed for a church in a local area, other copies would be sent to sister churches all over for their edification.

(5) Why was Luke written? Again, my language from 1992 helps to explain my position:

By 1982 I had begun to question the redactional critical assumption that the canonical gospels were occasional literature analogous to Paul's letters. Foundation documents like the canonical gospels (and Acts) seemed more analogous to systematic theology, albeit in narrative form. That is, they attempt to set forth the Christian position not only in light of problems present and pressing, but also real but past, and real but potential. Such narrative theology tells the story of the community's founder (and in Acts, of the early church) in a way that expresses the values of the group in a balanced way, not just in response to one or more immediate issues that clamor for attention in the community's present. . . . Luke-Acts offers a balanced presentation of the Christian position in narrative form. (Talbert 1992b, 230)

There is one qualification to add to this previously stated position. In Luke 1:4 the author says he is writing that his readers may have certainty (*asphalia*) about the Christian story. This is one of eight uses of *asphalia* or its cognates in Luke-Acts (*asphaleian*—1:4; Acts 5:23; *asphales*—Acts 21:34; 22:30; 25:26; *asphalōs*—Acts 2:36; 16:23; *esphalisatō*—Acts 16:24). Of these seven uses outside the prologue, only Acts 2:36 seems in any way relevant to Luke 1:4. There Peter concludes his sermon at Pentecost with the statement, "Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly (*asphalōs*, with certainty) that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." The certainty that Jesus is now the Messiah rests upon his having been raised/having ascended/having been exalted.

Attempts at legitimation by religious groups were the norm in antiquity. According to Berger and Luckman, legitimation is a process that is carried out often in the second and third generations after a social institution's origins. Legitimation is the collection of ways in which an institution is justified to its members. Techniques include showing that the movement is the manifestation of something that has existed already for a very long time. If we allow for the fact that legitimation techniques may possibly also appeal to persons outside the group as well as those inside it, then this is an appropriate way of looking at Luke-Acts. Certainly both the Third Gospel and the Acts attempt to show how the Jesus movement is linked to and is derivative of ancient Israel and its scriptures. Robert Brawley, moreover, has gathered together a list of legitimation techniques used by the author of Acts to undergird Paul's authority. He also notes that Luke uses many of the same devices in his portrayal of Jesus in the Third Gospel. They include but are not limited to fulfillment of prophecy, miracles, martyrdom, a divine commission (4:18-21), heavenly authorization (3:22; 9:35), avoidance of seeking personal gain (4:1-13; 23:35, 37, 39), being a childhood prodigy (2:41-52). The Third Gospel, then, is a biography written to provide certainty (to insiders and/or outsiders) by telling the story using numerous legitimation techniques.

(6) How should one read a gospel? First, one needs to do a close reading of the text. Werner Kelber's words are still to the point:

(E)ach gospel represents an intricately designed religious universe, with plot and character development, retrospective and prospective devices, linear and concentric patterning, and a continuous line of thematic cross-references and narrative interlockings. The art of interpretation consists in analyzing the complexities of the narrative construction and to comprehend [*sic*] individual parts in connection with the total architecture. (14)

This close reading will involve taking Acts into account when reading the Gospel and the Gospel into account when reading Acts (Tuckett, 75). It will also involve reading Luke alongside of the other Gospels to see each evangelist's distinctive development of the material. This may, but need not, involve a specific source theory. Comparison of the similarities and differences among the Gospels informs one's reading whether one is assumed to be the source of another or whether they are assumed to be independent, parallel accounts. Second, one needs to consider how the authorial audience would have heard what Luke wrote. This involves knowing something about the

presupposition pool of Luke's Mediterranean audience at the end of the first or beginning of the second century (Rabinowitz; Jauss). A close reading together with a concern for Luke's authorial audience will yield good fruit in reading the Third Gospel. Let us begin!