

## Artist to the Gentiles: Literary Theology in Luke-Acts

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**Περίληψη:** Οι Πράξεις του Λουκά προβάλλουν ένα θεολογικό ενδιαφέρον για τον Ιησού ως Λυτρωτή των περιθωριακών (είτε αυτοί βρίσκονταν εντός του λαού του Ισραήλ είτε ήταν εθνικοί), και ένα λογοτεχνικό ενδιαφέρον για ελληνορωμαϊκές μεθόδους παρουσίασης. Και από τις δύο αυτές απόψεις οι Πράξεις είναι μοναδικές μεταξύ των υπολοίπων κειμένων της Καινής Διαθήκης. Σε αυτό το άρθρο εξετάζω τις συγκεκριμένες ελληνορωμαϊκές λογοτεχνικές τεχνικές που αξιοποιούνται στις Πράξεις, καθώς επίσης και αποδεικτικά στοιχεία για τα θεολογικά τους ενδιαφέροντα. Εν τέλει σε αυτό το άρθρο υποστηρίζω ότι το μοναδικό λογοτεχνικό ενδιαφέρον των Πράξεων υπηρετεί το μοναδικό θεολογικό τους ενδιαφέρον: συγκεκριμένα, τα κείμενα προβάλλουν ελληνορωμαϊκές μεθόδους καλλιτεχνικής παρουσίασης, ιδιαίτερα επικές και ιστορικές, προκειμένου να θέσουν το θεολογικό ζήτημα της καθολικότητας του ευαγγελικού μηνύματος και της αιώνιας κυριαρχίας του Ιησού ως Βασιλέα, καθώς επίσης να παρουσιάσουν τον Χριστιανισμό με τρόπο που να είναι δελεαστικός για τους εθνικούς.

**Summary:** Luke-Acts demonstrates a theological concern with Jesus as Redeemer of the outcasts (whether they be within Israel or Gentiles), and a literary concern with Greco-Roman modes of presentation. In both these respects, Luke-Acts is unique among the rest of the New Testament. In this paper, I review the specific Greco-Roman literary techniques that Luke-Acts exploits, as well as evidences of its theological concerns. Ultimately, in this paper I assert that the unique literary concern of Luke-Acts serves its unique theological concern: that is, the texts demonstrate Greco-Roman modes of artistic presentation, especially epic and epic history, in order to make a theological point about the universality of the Gospel message and the endless dominion of Jesus as King, as well as to present Christianity so as to be compelling to Gentiles.

**Λέξεις κλειδιά:** Πράξεις του Λουκά, Καινή Διαθήκη, Λογοτεχνία, ευαγγελικό κήρυγμα, ελληνιστικός

**Key words:** Luke-Acts, New Testament, literature, evangelism, Hellenistic

Luke is unique among the Evangelists for his theological concern with Jesus as Redeemer of those who are far off (first the outcasts within Israel, then the Gentiles) and for his literary concern with artful composition<sup>1</sup>, which Marianne

Bonz identifies as specifically “Greco-Roman modes of artistic presentation.”<sup>2</sup> I assert that these two concerns are united: that is, Luke employs Greco-Roman modes of artistic presentation, especially epic, in order to present Christianity so

<sup>1</sup> Charles Talbert, *Literary Patterns, Theological Themes, and the Genre of Luke-Acts* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1987), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Marianne Bonz, “The Best of Times, the Worst of Times: Luke-Acts and Epic Tradition” (ThD diss., Harvard Divinity School, 1996), 177.

as to be compelling to Gentiles, as well as to make a theological point about the universality of the Gospel message and the endless dominion of Jesus as King.

From the prologue, Luke makes clear that his goal differs from those of the other Gospels. Though he is likely working from Mark, as well as various oral accounts that were circulating in the early church, he declares that his Gospel has a more comprehensive approach that engages history in a deeper way,<sup>3</sup> owing to his understanding of how the events in Jesus' life and the history of the early church are part of God's plan for the salvation of humankind.<sup>4</sup> Luke presents Christianity as an "enfleshed," social phenomenon, narrating not "the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1, AT), but "the things which have been accomplished among us"<sup>5</sup> (Luke 1:1). Moreover, the fact that the prologue is written in "irreproachable literary Greek"<sup>6</sup> indicates Luke's intention to engage with a broader audience than just Christian faithful. Rather, he is rising to what Bonz calls the "epic occasion" in order to present a coherent, comprehensive history of the life of Jesus and the early church, made suitable for a universal<sup>7</sup> (which, in the somewhat provincial Jewish context of early Christianity, means specifically Greco-Roman) audience in order to evangelize them.

Bonz makes the case that Luke's identification of his work as an "orderly account" (Luke 1:3) is in line with Aristotle's definition of epic, and Luke-Acts can therefore be read as a "prose epic,"<sup>8</sup> even though a need to evoke the

style of Israel's Scriptures precludes a hexameter composition.<sup>9</sup> In the *Poetics*, Aristotle asserts that epic ought to "uncloud one's vision by representing history as an orderly typology"; historical epic in particular ought to be concerned with transforming historical facts into universal poetic myth.<sup>10</sup> As the most ecclesiological of the Evangelists, Luke is concerned with the body of Christ as an enfleshed phenomenon in the world, and so of necessity engages with history. However, for Luke, history is guided by divine providence: this is clear from the abundant references to fulfillment of prophecy, from the birth narratives of Jesus and John to Paul's success in preaching the Gospel to the ends of the earth. Luke-Acts therefore fulfills the Aristotelian criterion of epic as an orderly typological history rather than a mere collection of historical facts.<sup>11</sup> The attention that the author draws throughout Luke-Acts to repeated motifs also leads the reader to consider the story as an ordered whole. For example, Stephen is not just the first martyr – this is a historical fact – but also, in his death, somehow reiterates or echoes Christ's own passion. Luke draws our attention to this through his authorial decision to include Stephen's last words, which echo Jesus' own words on the cross. Thus he uses the literary technique of the repeated motif (which, as it is employed here, only makes sense under the Aristotelian notion of epic history as an ordered typology) to make a theological point: namely, that Christ is present in the members of His body – as Dr. Fagerberg puts it, "it is in the members of His body that Christ now suffers and saves."<sup>12</sup> In the same way, Virgil

<sup>3</sup> Bonz, "Luke-Acts," 221.

<sup>4</sup> Bonz, "Luke-Acts," 166-7.

<sup>5</sup> All Scripture citations are from the RSV unless otherwise noted.

<sup>6</sup> Talbert, *Literary Patterns, Theological Themes, and the Genre of Luke-Acts*, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Bonz, "Luke-Acts," 20.

<sup>8</sup> Bonz, "Luke-Acts," 166.

<sup>9</sup> Bonz, "Luke-Acts," 221.

<sup>10</sup> Bonz, "Luke-Acts," 23.

<sup>11</sup> Bonz, "Luke-Acts," 23.

<sup>12</sup> Fagerberg, David. "C.S. Lewis on Sin, Sanctification and Saints." Class lecture, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN, October 9, 2017.

repeats motifs to reinforce his political point in the *Aeneid*: for instance, Book 2 features Iulus with a fire about his head, and Book 8 features Augustus with a fire about his head,<sup>13</sup> in order to draw attention to how the divine call reposes on both Iulus and his descendant Julius – this reinforces the legendary prestige and divine honor of Augustus. Thus both Virgil and Luke use the literary device of repeating a single motif (whether of forgiveness in martyrdom or a flame on the head) with different characters (one of whom is the successor of the other), which is only coherent under the Aristotelian assumption of epic history as an ordered typology rather than a mere collection of events, in order to illustrate their views which transcend literary composition.

Besides allusion and orderly typology, Luke's principles of literary composition bear striking similarity to the Alexandrian-influenced epics of Apollonius Rhodius and Virgil. Virgil's masterful construction of the *Aeneid* reflects both a bipartite and tripartite division of the 12 books, where corresponding books in each part bear similarities and resonances of each other.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Charles Talbert notes that Luke-Acts as a literary whole, composed with attention to aesthetic harmony, is organized according to the "law of duality," whereby each element of the work is balanced by a corresponding element.<sup>15</sup> Thus, for instance, in Acts, Peter's mission to the Jews is balanced by Paul's mission to the Gentiles, to demonstrate the unity of the people of God; elsewhere, Luke contrasts Jesus and John in parallel fashion. However, I see no reason to stop short of the conclusion that the law of duality

draws Luke to consciously engage with Greco-Roman literature somewhat similarly to how he engages with the Septuagint. Just as Luke crafts his literary composition to make a theological or ecclesiological point in that he balances Peter with Paul to demonstrate the unity of the people of God, I assert that he engages with Greco-Roman literature to make a theological point: namely, that Jesus' message is for everyone. The Gospel's reach in Luke-Acts is universal, and Luke illustrates this not just through programmatic statements (like the Great Commission in Acts 1), or even just through the narrative (where the Gospel begins in Nazareth and ends in Rome, the capital of the οἰκουμένη), but through the very composition of the story. What DooHee Lee says of Luke's reference to Euripides' *Bacchae* is helpful here: he claims that Luke "employed [Greco-Roman literary ideas] to appeal to the taste of his audience as well as to be more effective in the communication of his message with the Hellenistic readers."<sup>16</sup> I assert that it is precisely this greater efficacy in preaching to Greeks that illustrates Luke's theological claim that the Jesus message is for everyone, not just Jews. Through the literary technique of making the Gospel accessible to Greeks, Luke is proving the theological point of the universality of the Gospel. Nor is this concern for form unwarranted: Talbert notes that for the Greeks, "the form of what was said was regarded as more important than what was said."<sup>17</sup> From the prologue, Luke clues us in to the fact that his work is written in the Greco-Roman literary register in which this relative valuing of form and substance applies, so we conclude that his composition is itself laden with the theological meaning of his actual message.

<sup>13</sup> Talbert, *Literary Patterns, Theological Themes, and the Genre of Luke-Acts*, 68.

<sup>14</sup> Talbert, *Literary Patterns, Theological Themes, and the Genre of Luke-Acts*, 67-68.

<sup>15</sup> Talbert, *Literary Patterns, Theological Themes, and the Genre of Luke-Acts*, 1.

<sup>16</sup> DooHee Lee, "Luke-Acts and 'Tragic History'" (PhD diss., Graduate Theological Union, 2009), 300.

<sup>17</sup> Talbert, *Literary Patterns, Theological Themes, and the Genre of Luke-Acts*, 69.

However, Luke is also making a theological statement about dominion and rulership by means of his use of Greco-Roman literature: he is not merely demonstrating the compatibility of the Gospel and Greco-Roman literary conventions, but actively challenging the ideas expressed in Greco-Roman literature in their own symbolic language. He is demonstrating not only the availability of Jesus to the Gentiles, but also the superiority of Jesus to Gentile heroes (This also is a theological point: just as Jesus came as a human into the world – and the uniquely Lucan birth narrative places special emphasis on Jesus’ humanity – and then condemned the world from within, so Luke-Acts enters the Greco-Roman literary world, and then condemns paganism from within. So Luke as an author parallels, in a small way, the redemptive Incarnation of the Lord Jesus). Dennis MacDonald, in his study on epic mimesis in Luke-Acts, notes a number of correspondences between Odysseus’ shipwreck in Book 5 of the *Odyssey* and Luke’s shipwreck in Acts 27.<sup>18</sup> I have reproduced some of the more reasonable and fruitful parallels:

escape	escape so as to stand before Caesar
Odysseus did not trust Ino and trusted to themselves	The sailors did not trust the angel and trusted to themselves

Throughout the narrative, Luke selects such details to retell as to associate Paul with the powers of the divine Calypso and place the actions of the Greek hero Odysseus in the hands of the incompetent sailors. This is a clear indictment of Greek heroism, issued in the Greek symbolic and literary vocabulary, in favor of a new Christian heroism: hoping in the mercy of the true God and serving Him as king.

I note that Luke-Acts, as inspired Scripture, cannot rightly be said to “borrow” or “copy” from pagan works. Rather, the more likely explanation for these correspondences is that perhaps Luke “does not fail to see the formal similarity”<sup>19</sup> of certain contours in the history of the church to episodes in pagan works, and so selects which details to record and which to omit so as to present the history of the life of Jesus and the early church as an ordered whole, rendered in a symbolic register comprehensible to his audience, and at the same time still firmly rooted in the actual historicity of Jesus and the church. There is, therefore, no question of Luke’s copying from uninspired works; rather, he is speaking to a Gentile audience in a language familiar to them in order to reveal the truth of Jesus’ message.

Of Paul’s ability to take charge during the sea voyage, Loveday Alexander writes: “there is a theological claim implicit in the shipwreck narrative... God dominates and controls the sea crossing for [Paul] just as [pagan deities] do for

Calypso predicted disaster	Paul predicted disaster
Odysseus abandoned hope	The sailors, but not Paul, abandoned hope
Odysseus expected to die at sea	The sailors, but not Paul, expected to die at sea
Calypso’s prophecy came true	Paul’s prophecy came true
Ino appeared to Odysseus	An angel appeared to Paul
Odysseus was fated to	Paul was fated to

<sup>18</sup> MacDonald, Dennis, *Luke and Vergil: Imitations of Classical Greek Literature* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015) 143-144, Google Books.

<sup>19</sup> Otto Bauernfeind, “μάχομαι, θεομαχός, θεομαχέω” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, cited in Lee, “Luke-Acts,” 290.

the [Greek literary heroes]... the narrator is implicitly laying claim to a cultural territory which many readers, both Greek and Judaeo-Christian, would perceive as inherently ‘Greek.’”<sup>20</sup>

I assert, moreover, that this literary illustration of the dominion of Christianity and its messengers is not just incidental to Luke-Acts, but is, to the author, an integral part of Jesus’ mission throughout. The programmatic statement of Gabriel’s annunciation that “of His kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:33) and Jesus’ paradigmatic statement about His own mission in Luke 4:18-19 (which episode, incidentally, precedes Jesus’ rejection by the Nazarenes which launches His mission in Judaea generally – this pattern of preaching-rejection-outreach is echoed in the beginning of Acts with the rejection of the Apostles in Jerusalem as the occasion for the preaching to the Gentiles) together form a “Lukan pair” that clues the reader in to mission of Jesus. From the very first, then, Jesus’ mission consists in the Lukan pair of endless dominion and endless outreach.

I note that the message of universal kingship that Luke addresses specifically to the Gentiles (because he couches it in the language of Greco-Roman literature – as the messengers of the Gospel taking control of the sea uses Greek cultural symbols and language<sup>21</sup>) is merely the obverse of the message of the inclusion of the Gentiles that Luke addresses specifically to the Jews, which he couches in the language of the Septuagint. It is precisely because Jesus’ kingdom has no end that the Gentiles must be included in

His rule. So here again is the artistic principle of duality: Luke announces A to the Jews, and its necessary correlative B to the Gentiles.

It is clear that Luke-Acts is concerned both with artful composition on a literary level, and the outreach to the Gentiles, which is a consequence of the endless nature of Jesus’ kingdom, on a theological level. I have endeavored to demonstrate the unity of these two concerns: that is, that it is precisely by means of artful composition – use of the genre of epic history and its assumptions about history as an ordered whole with resonances to be highlighted, as well as strategic allusion to Greek texts and employment of the symbolic vocabulary of Greek literature, that Luke not only asserts, but illustrates, his theological message of Jesus’ kingdom as endless and His message as universal.

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<sup>20</sup> Loveday Alexander, “‘In Journeyings Often’: Voyaging in the Acts of the Apostles and in Greek Romance,” in *Luke’s Literary Achievement: Collected Essays*, ed. C.M. Tuckett (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 37.

<sup>21</sup> Alexander, “Voyaging,” 36-37.

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