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Reading Luke

Joel B. Green

Contemporary study of the Gospel of Luke takes its starting point from the mid-twentieth-century publication of Hans Conzelmann's redaction-critical study, *The Theology of St Luke*.[1] In Conzelmann's hands, the distinctive voice of Luke the evangelist emerged, leaving in its wake earlier judgments of Luke as the voice of Paul (who sometimes misunderstood the Pauline message) or as one so slavishly devoted to his sources that he was incapable of any theological contribution of his own. Arguably, the pillars of Conzelmann's perspective on Luke – for example, his emphasis on the delay of the Parousia, his apology for Rome, or his presentation of Jesus' ministry as a Satan-free period – have been felled, one by one, by subsequent scholarship. Nevertheless, Conzelmann's work altered the course of historical study of the Third Gospel, paved the way for what would become first composition – and then literary-critical analysis of Luke – and set the interpretive agenda

[1] Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St Luke* (London: Faber & Faber, 1960).

For general introductions to the Gospel of Luke, see Mark Allan Powell, *What Are They Saying about Luke?* (New York: Paulist, 1989); and, more recently, F. Scott Spencer, *The Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles* (IBT; Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 2008).

For an abbreviated survey of contemporary study of the interpretation of Luke, see Anthony C. Thiselton, "The Hermeneutical Dynamics of 'Reading Luke' as Interpretation, Reflection and Formation," in *Reading Luke: Interpretation, Reflection, Formation* (ed. Craig G. Bartholomew, Joel B. Green, and Anthony C. Thiselton; SAHS 6; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1985), 3–52. For a more exhaustive account, see François Bovon, *Luke the Theologian: Fifty-five Years of Research (1950–2005)* (2nd rev. ed.; Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2006).

in ways that would open the door to a wide array of other, especially social-scientific and political, approaches to reading Luke.

If, in retrospect, Conzelmann was the catalyst for these new pathways in interpreting Luke, it is also true that he shared this role with many others in biblical studies more generally. Similar work on the other Synoptic Gospels dates to the same period, for example, with Günther Bornkamm and his students' work on the Gospel of Matthew and Willi Marxen's work on Mark.[2] Alongside the rise of redaction criticism, though, new winds were blowing – some from philosophical hermeneutics, such as the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, with its emphasis on understanding as the fusion of the horizons of the text with the horizons of the reader; and some from university-based literary theorists, whose navigation of the triad, author – text – reader, led to a proliferation of interpretive interests and reading protocols.[3] We may add to this three simple, but extraordinarily important, realities: (1) higher education – and with it both seminary education and graduate education in religion – has become increasingly accessible to people of myriad backgrounds, measured, for example, in terms of race and ethnicity, sex, and socioeconomics; (2) the church that sponsors and profits from major sectors of biblical studies has become increasingly ethnic in the United States and, globally, increasingly indigenous to the southern and eastern hemispheres; and (3) due to the geographical shifts in the church's populations and heightened ecumenical interests, the analogical style of biblical interpretation at home in Eastern Orthodoxy has begun to be heard in a western church and guild for which such interpretive protocols remain quite alien. Such broader realities as these have raised in recent decades and continue to raise serious questions for traditional biblical studies. The questions include concerns with the assumptions in which traditional biblical scholarship has been grounded, the methods it has accredited,

[2] Willi Marxsen, *Mark the Evangelist* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1969); Günther Bornkamm, Gerhard Barth, and Heinz Joachim Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (London: SCM, 1963).

[3] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2nd rev. ed.; New York: Crossroad, 1990); Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn, eds., *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1992).

and the curricula by which it has perpetuated itself. These sorts of considerations and currents often parade under the cultural heading of postmodernism.

By its very nature, postmodernism defies classification and definition, but surely one of the characteristics of our postmodern age is our awareness that acts of interpretation are by their very nature efforts to constrain meaning. Critical study, whatever shape it might take, shares an interest in articulating and deploying canons for adjudicating among various and competing readings of the same text. Why do we prefer this reading over that one? What reasons can we muster to support this interpretation or exclude that one? Another prominent feature of our current cultural situation would be not only the presence of multiple interests but our recognition of the multiple interests that shape our interpretive agenda and influence the interpretive boundaries we draw and/or are willing to allow.

In important and perhaps unanticipated ways, these myriad interests seem to comport well with some key ingredients of the biblical materials and our study of them. Let me give examples.

(1) How we got our Bible is a lengthy, dusty process, significant points of which are empirically lost to us. We can imagine the movement from various historical events to the crafting of word-accounts to the formation of written accounts gathered and redacted into the "final form" of the Bible sitting on our desks and bed stands. We can discern within the text itself seams and features of orality suggestive of these procedural actions and their settings. The point, of course, is that both the final form of the text and each step in its formation invite study, with different methods more appropriate to one formative stage than another.

(2) The Bible is an aggregate of multiple genres – for example, historical narrative, poetry, letters, prophetic oracle, and apocalypse. Because each genre is "a specific way of visualizing a given part of reality,"[4] it represents specific social interaction and a particularized vision of reality, and resists easy integration into a reader's (or a

[4] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Theory of Genres," in *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (ed. Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson; Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990), 271–305 (275).

readerly community's) theoretical system. The pluralism of the Bible's literary forms, then, invites a corresponding pluralism of interpretive protocols.

(3) The Bible has been and is today read in multiple settings, in relation to more-or-less circumscribed "publics." Reading the Bible within the church invites gestures and protocols that in some societies are not acceptable in a university or other nonreligiously oriented education setting. A statement published jointly by The Bible Literacy Project, Inc., and the First Amendment Center and endorsed by such organizations as People for the American Way Foundation, the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, and the Society of Biblical Literature documents the widely shared view that study about the Bible can be an important part of a comprehensive education in literature and history courses. "Knowledge of biblical stories and concepts contributes to our understanding of literature, history, law, art, and contemporary society."[5] Public schools, then, might develop curriculum relative to the Bible and literature, the Bible and history, or the Bible and world religions. These contexts for reading the Bible might support a variety of methodological approaches, and some of these might also be at home in an ecclesial context. But an ecclesial context for engaging the Bible would likely encourage additional sensibilities and interpretive procedures judged unsavory and even ruled out of court by The Bible Literacy Project and the First Amendment Center. These might include, for example, a commitment to the theological coherence of the canon of Scripture, a commitment to the Rule of Faith as a lens through which to read the message of Scripture, or a vision of the work of interpretation as self-involving, as a willingness to be taken in by the text.[6]

[5] "The Bible and Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide" (Nashville, Tenn.: First Amendment Center, 1999), p. 5. The Society of Biblical Literature Council added its name to the list of organizations endorsing the statement on April 29, 2006.

[6] See, for example, Richard B. Hays, "Reading the Bible with Eyes of Faith: The Practice of Theological Exegesis," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 1 (2007): 5–21; Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008); Joel B. Green, *Seized by Truth: Reading the Bible as Scripture* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 2007).

(4) This last point regarding the multiple settings of biblical interpretation deserves expansion in another direction, one that takes seriously not only the major contextual categories of church and university. Because we find more and more diversity among the peoples engaging in disciplined study of the Bible we should not be surprised by the corresponding diversity in the interpretive interests and needs people bring with them to the Bible – and, then, the concomitant diversity of approaches by which the biblical materials are accessed. If African-American interpretation today focuses on such concerns as responding to racist interpretations of biblical texts, recovering and analyzing the African presence in the Bible, and intercultural interpretation of biblical texts from the perspective of African-American readers, for example, we need not look far to understand why this is so. They grow out of the complex history of African Americans and the Bible over the last two or three centuries. What motivates us to engage with biblical texts, what we go searching for, and what we find are determined at least in part by where we stand. And where we stand entails any number of features – some theological, some sociological, some philosophical, some geographical, and so on.

Why should we be interested in *method*? Our interests arise precisely because of the nature of the biblical materials and the varying interests and needs of the Bible's readers. If our situation has the potential for generating a cacophony of readings, then *method* surfaces as a way of bringing some discipline to our interpretive work. By "discipline" I do not mean to refer to *technique*, as though interpretation could be reduced to an objective, paint-by-the-numbers or step-by-step procedure, a machine into which texts might be poured and out of which "meaning" might be drawn. A method might be known by the steps comprising its rules of engagement, but method can also refer more to the sensibilities and commitments by which we engage texts. Here, then, I am more concerned with discipline in terms of the transparency with which one practices a particular form of biblical interpretation: What assumptions about meaning are central? What are the aims of this pathway to interpretation? What protocols are followed? In other words, as with research methodology more

generally, by discipline I am referring both to one's willingness and ability to show how this reading was achieved, and to the openness of interpreters to have their approach to interpretation and the results of their reading queried in relation to their coherence with the text being read.

From this perspective, none of us who engage in disciplined reading of the Bible can regard ourselves as neutral observers of a textual object. We have our reasons and our cultural histories, and this disqualifies whatever claims we might have wanted to make about our practices of dispassionate exegesis or our indifference to the outcomes of our interpretive work. If neutrality is not an option, however, the same could not be said of objectivity, which can and must be the hallmark of disciplined study of the Bible. Following the useful distinction made by Thomas Haskell, I am capable of objectivity even though I have no ledge on which to stand and from which to operate as a neutral interpreter. By "neutrality," then, I refer to preconceptions, hunches, biases, and aims that guide my interpretive work. By "objectivity," I refer, with Haskell, to the capacity for self-overcoming, for considering readings and arguments counter to our own, for honesty and fairness in our representation of the views of others – that is, to those habits and practices that make public discourse possible.[7]

New Testament (NT) studies today offers a veritable smorgasbord of interpretive methods, four of which are on display in the chapters that follow. The astute reader will recognize that, although only four approaches are sketched and illustrated, in their own ways these four are representative of major currents in the field. Clare Rothschild's chapter on historical criticism, for example, articulates much of what we now regard as traditional biblical studies, occupied as it has been for the last two centuries with the prehistory of the text: the history of the text's formation, the history presumed by the text, and the history to which the text in its redacted form bears witness. At the same time, however, Rothschild demonstrates how historical criticism has begun

[7] Thomas L. Haskell, "Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Rhetoric versus Practice in Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream*," in *Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 145–73.

to account more fully for less traditional concerns such as literary art and persuasion. Her chapter thus demonstrates what is also true of the other three – first, that these methods continue to evolve and, second, that the direction of their development is influenced by considerations often associated with other methodological commitments.

Turid Seim's chapter sketches the state of the art in feminist criticism of the NT, demonstrating especially how the term "feminist criticism" actually refers not to one methodological approach but to a plethora of criticisms. In this case, "feminist" refers to a set of commitments and sensibilities that pervade other interpretive interests, be they historical, textual, readerly, or more broadly hermeneutical. With Seim's chapter we have a parade example of the distinction I have drawn between neutrality and objectivity in NT study. On the one hand, one of the most powerful and enduring lessons of feminist criticism has been its rejection of the idea of an uninterested, presuppositionless reading of Scripture. On the other, feminist criticism of Luke's Gospel, as Seim articulates it, explores the role of women in the Lukan narrative without distorting the textual evidence in one direction or by participating in wishful thinking.

In his chapter on narrative criticism, Green attempts to break narrative study out of the side room in which it is often placed, as though it were interested merely in the Gospels and Acts as self-contained reservoirs of literary artistry. Instead, he argues, narrative criticism of these NT texts cannot escape these texts' historical dimensions and must account for those whose reading helps to construct how and what these narratives mean. Today, narrative critics are developing the discipline so as to account for how narratives are implicated in cultural criticism as well as how they engage, and are engaged by, their manifold readers. In this way, narrative study increasingly blurs the lines between author, text, and reader.

Finally, Justo González provides a Latino perspective on reading Luke. He articulates from a Latino perspective the wrongheadedness of an enterprise focused on method *per se*, then shows how biography – including both autobiography and the story of one's interpretive community – shapes interpretive interests. González does not attempt

to speak for Latina readers of Scripture, no more than he tries to speak for the entire Hispanic world. Nevertheless, for those willing to follow him, he navigates a hermeneutical path for which we have multiple parallels in other interpretive communities (African-American, African, Asian-American, etc.) seeking to take seriously how their stories shape, or might shape, their practices of reading. Throughout these chapters, we learn that what we see in these texts depends a lot on where we are standing, and what we are looking for.

Each of the chapters that follow has two major sections. The first is a presentation of a particular method and its relevance for the Gospel of Luke. The second provides a hands-on analysis of one of two set texts – either Luke 16:19–31 (the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus) or Luke 20:45–21:4 (Jesus' Warning about the Scribes and the story of the Woman and Two Small Coins) – in which the author places that method on display.

2

Historical Criticism

Clare K. Rothschild

The historical–critical method encompasses a variety of strategies for eliciting meaning from a premodern literary text. The most prominent of these subspecies are text, source, form, redaction, rhetorical, and social-scientific criticism.[1] Although distinctive, each approach prioritizes comparative analysis of a text in its literary and historical contexts – involving cultural, social, political, religious, and other aspects. An investigation of early Christian texts from a historical–critical perspective implies close examination of a passage using any or all of the pertinent critical techniques listed previously.

In this chapter I sketch the emergence of the historical–critical method in the field of biblical studies and describe its suitability for understanding the Gospel of Luke. Following this background, I analyze Luke 20:45–21:4 by means of this method, showing how manipulation of traditional source material, in this case the author's version of Mark, best explains the author's narrative strategy, which in turn helps to reveal the author's first goal: to write the first credible history of early Christianity.

[1] Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2002 [1975]). Cf. also Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer* (New York: Macmillan, 1966).

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE HISTORICAL–CRITICAL METHOD

"Higher criticism" was the name given to study of the Bible as any other fancient text, that is, as composed by human beings during particular phases in history.[2] In contrast, "lower criticism" was the attempt to understand biblical texts on the basis of internal evidence alone. The Dutch scholar Erasmus (1466–1536) might be credited as the first to study the Bible critically, although many of his methods are identifiable in the work of earlier scholars and theologians. "Higher criticism" developed in Europe from the mid-eighteenth century to the early twentieth century. Representatives include Jean Astruc (1684–1766), Johann Salomo Semler (1725–91), Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752–1827), Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860), and Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918). Today higher and lower criticisms together constitute what is commonly referred to as the historical–critical method. Lower criticism is now designated text criticism, and higher criticism takes the form of source, form, redaction, rhetorical, and social-scientific criticism. A brief summary of each approach clarifies its usefulness for understanding the New Testament (NT).

Text Criticism

Textual criticism seeks to establish the Greek text in the absence of autographs. None of the surviving Greek manuscripts of the NT was handwritten by its author. Rather, all of the earliest surviving NT manuscripts are copies.[3] As one would expect, the copying process

[2] In this section I rely on the following introductory textbooks: Dennis C. Duling and Norman Perrin, *Proclamation and Parenesis, Myth and History* (3rd ed.; New York: Harcourt Brace, 1974), esp. 5–26; Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (4th ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Krentz, *Historical-Critical Method*; Werner Georg Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1972); Mark Allan Powell, *Fortress Introduction to the Gospels* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1998); Udo Schnelle, *The History and Theology of the New Testament Writings* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1998).

[3] See Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (3rd ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).