



PREFACE

1.0 AUTHORS-COLLABORATORS

In 1986 a group of scholars, who call themselves *The Context Group*, formed a seminar to apply the social sciences for interpretation of biblical texts. Although trained in the contemporary historical-critical method of biblical studies and working with the standard texts, they chose to do something quite different. Far from abandoning the historical-critical method, they enlarged it by calling attention to the use of the social sciences in the task of understanding biblical texts in their full cultural context. This book is the result of that collaboration.

Why this new approach? In the last twenty years we experienced a complexity in the fields of scholarship unforeseen during the years of university training when scholars mastered languages, archeology, texts and the like (see Laszlo 1972; Capra 1983). It seemed that the ideal of scholarship was to learn more and more about less and less. This manner of investigation, which attends to the linear uncovering of the relations between separate facts, has become outmoded with our appreciation of a different dimension, which notes that "wholes" are typical of all groups of interacting parts. Attention must be paid to "wholes" as well as "parts," to "totalities" as well as "facts." Limiting oneself to the atomistic parts of biblical studies leaves the serious reader of the Bible inadequately prepared to deal with more apparent structures, the "wholes," which arise from the interactions of all the parts (see Malina 1981; 1982; 1983; Rohrbaugh 1978; 1987a). Biblical studies

requires a restructuring into a larger, more total framework, which is elsewhere called a “systems approach.” *The Context Group* was formed to address this need.

In their use of the social sciences for interpretation, the members of this group aimed to produce a comprehensive volume of Luke-Acts studies that might serve as a representative collection of materials and models needed for understanding biblical texts within the cultures of the people who produced them. The members have collectively authored the book and served as its editorial board. Close team work has been the hallmark of the essays by single authors as well as those articles which have been co-authored. The results are individual essays reflecting the many shared conversations that went into the critical review and revision of each draft. As a consequence, this book is not a paste-up of individual essays but a coherent volume born of close collaboration.

2.0 LUKE-ACTS

Luke’s two-volume work comprises a third of the New Testament. It ostensibly talks about Jesus and his Palestinian society (the Gospel), as well as about Peter, Paul, and other disciples and their society of Jerusalem, Antioch, Asia Minor, Greece, and Rome (Acts of the Apostles). Furthermore, Luke-Acts itself adopts a perspective on Jesus and the early church explicitly concerned with the social dimensions of the gospel. The scope of Luke’s work, both in terms of time periods described and geography covered, offers a complex and diverse world for the investigation of the cultural world of the New Testament. Luke-Acts, moreover, remains a popular text today, one which seems to have particular relevance to our contemporary situation because of, among other things, its concern with rich and poor, roles of women, and inclusiveness of outsiders.

Although the focus in this book is on Luke-Acts, the models and methods presented here can be employed with insight and profit for the interpretation of other New Testament documents. Focussed on Luke-Acts, this volume can serve as a handbook which covers both the interpretation of a specific text and the presentation of an adequately broad historical-critical method of interpretation.

3.0 A DIFFERENT KIND OF BOOK

What is this book? It is not just another collection of exegetical essays on Luke-Acts. Nor is it another attempt at historical reconstruction

or social description. The authors aim to discover the meanings implicit in Luke–Acts through attention to the values, social structures and conventions of Luke’s society which determine and convey those meanings. Thus *The Social World of Luke–Acts* is a historical-critical reading of a first-century, Mediterranean, biblical document. From start to finish, *The Social World of Luke–Acts* is about the interpretation and meaning of sources from the past. It begins with the assumption that the people of Luke’s time, along with their values, attitudes, and behavior, would be extremely strange to modern Western readers (or should be). Because we read Luke’s writings in translation, we presume to recognize certain words, such as “mother,” “father,” “family,” and the like. But the meaning of those words in a first-century Mediterranean context is by no means evident. The hands may be the hands of Esau, but the voice is the voice of Jacob—and it should be quite strange to our ears, unless we suffer from anachronism and ethnocentrism.

How do we arrive at such historical-critical understanding and interpretation? First we are required to focus on the particularity of both the people of the past and contemporary readers. For example, a simple awareness of the distance and difference between the people addressed by the text and its modern reader is crucial for any historical-critical interpretation. This involves an awareness of differences in perception, expectation, values, social institutions, and modes of social interaction. We live in two different worlds, as the song goes. The difference is cultural.

How do we begin as modern readers to understand a different cultural world? When we interpret texts, we all work with some model of the way the world works, usually an implicit one drawn from socialization into our own culture. Yet that model, because implicit, is never examined or its adequacy tested. This book is about another set of models, explicit, clear, and tested—scenarios adequate for a different cultural world.

Models make explicit a reader’s ways of assessing cultural differences as well as the specific social and cultural properties of Luke’s audience. Such explicit awareness of what one is doing in interpretation is the hallmark of the modern historical-critical method. Thus we examine features which include economic relations, basic social patterns such as patron-client relations, institutions, especially the kinship group, first-century personality, peasant society, rituals and ceremonies, conflict, and pivotal values such as honor and shame. We consider these aspects of Luke’s society with the aim of understanding how the social dimensions of Luke’s texts and context shape the author’s perspective, compositional strategy, and message.

For this reason the authors consider this book a type of *handbook*, a desk reference which contains basic social scientific perspectives re-

quired by any truly historical-critical method. Hence we chose the models needed for an adequate critical reading of Luke or Paul or any other biblical author. This volume should serve adequately as a basic textbook for historical-critical interpretation of the New Testament and early Christian documents.

4.0 SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HISTORICAL CRITICISM

Historical criticism, the gift of the Enlightenment, has served biblical scholars well as the necessary perspective from which to avoid both allegorical interpretation of the Bible and dogmatic distortion. This volume, while fully “critical,” is not limited to historical concerns for presenting biblical meanings of the past as directly relevant for today.

Such historical concerns are usually rooted in a historian's own approach to the sources. Objective history is itself a myth, for the historian's approach is itself controlled by specific questions with a view to locating the information generated by those questions within some theoretical framework of concepts and hypotheses. Our approach seems similar, but in practice differs in two main ways.

The first is that the historian's conceptualization tends to be implicit, arbitrary, and unsystematic, whereas the social scientist's is explicit and systematic. The second is that the historian's tendency, because his sources usually provide him with some sort of loose narrative pattern to which the facts can be related, is to evade so far as possible the theoretical issues, and also to deal for preference less with the underlying structure than with events and personalities, which are usually far more sharply delineated in historical records than in the materials anthropologists and sociologists commonly use (Barraclough 1978:49–50).

Our concern, then, has been with the examination of the social and cultural patterns and processes, manifest and latent, that were of primary concern to those who first heard the Lukan narrative.

History is about the story line and the sequence of events of the past as relevant to the historian's contemporaries. History is “. . . the study of human societies, with the emphasis on the differences between them and on the changes which have taken place in each over time” (Burke 1980:13). The social sciences, in contrast, look to typical, repeated patterns of social interaction characteristic of a given group of human beings in a specific time and place.

Typical? Particular? The authors of this book are concerned with the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation. Yet, unlike historians, they seek what is *typical* in Luke's society in order to highlight all the better the *particular* and distinctive, for the social sciences focus on general patterns of perception and behavior, not on unique and particu-

lar events and persons. Yet without some testable grasp of the general and typical, it is quite impossible to verify whether one's presumed attention to the particular is really about that. As Peter Burke notes, the social sciences are concerned with ". . . the study of human society, with the emphasis on generalizing about its structure" (1980:13).

Hence in their quest for the *particular*, the authors ask about the *typical* institutions of Luke's society: the family, politics, the city, the countryside, patron-client relations, and the health care system. They ask questions from the perspective of social psychology about *typical* viewpoints, values, and behavioral scripts in Luke's society: honor and shame values, conflict, and first-century personality types, etc. They inquire about the prevailing worldview of the people in Luke's historical setting. They examine their births, marriages, coronations, meals, and trials in terms of rituals and ceremonies.

The primary focus here, therefore, is not on the unique, occasional, or particular events in Luke's society, but on common, recurrent patterns of conceptualizing, perceiving, and behaving. Since our task here is one of historical criticism, the common features thus generated will allow the particular to stand out all the more clearly. Our goal, then, is to propose culturally appropriate scenarios for interpreting the Lukan narrative, to see and understand historical particulars within a more encompassing social framework.

5.0 SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC PERSPECTIVE AND LEVELS OF ABSTRACTION

Historical criticism usually examines discrete data, specific actions, times, places, and events. Social scientific criticism looks to the broader, more encompassing social system and the coherence and interrelation of its component parts. This more inclusive perspective, focused on common patterns of perception, organization, and behavior, requires a more comprehensive and therefore higher level of generalization. It necessitates greater abstraction.

This volume pursues such questions as:

- What common values pervade the Mediterranean society of Luke and what characteristic structures result?
- What is the typical economic system in a peasant society? How does it work in general?
- What are the features of patron-client relations, their dynamics?
- What basic institutions organize and regulate social life?
- What is the relationship between city and countryside?
- What characterizes the relation of elites and non-elites in peasant society?

- Who benefits from labelling another person as a deviant, how and why?
- How do ceremonies and rituals of status transformation mark social boundaries and socially situate people?
- What are some of the distinctive features of first-century Mediterranean personality? Of the first-century Mediterranean worldview?
- How are the characteristic aspects of first-century Mediterranean people and their societies reflected implicitly and explicitly in the biblical texts?
- How is Luke–Acts in particular both a reflection of and a reaction to these features of Luke’s environment?

The questions are legitimate and urgent. But in asking them, we commit ourselves to working at a higher level of abstraction than is required by contemporary biblical scholarship. Some readers may be uncomfortable with such abstraction, while others may be quite at home with it. This is basically a matter of intellectual aesthetics. Yet it is good for readers to be aware of their biases before they read.

6.0 WHY SUCH A HANDBOOK?

Several years ago *The Ugly American* premiered. Describing the ambassadorial relations of the U.S. with Vietnam, the film made the obvious point that Westerners simply do not understand the countries of the Orient. If such was the case with contemporary U.S. and Oriental cultures, it should be worse with ancient cultures. Readers from the U.S. and other Western cultures generally lack the wide range of adequate scenarios for imagining and understanding the alien culture of a first-century eastern Mediterranean people, most of whom were peasants.

Nurtured on capitalism and individualism, we tend to read our economic conditions and systems back into the society of Jesus and Luke. As individualists, we imagine that the people in Luke and Acts are individualists as well, not group-oriented, dyadic persons. Belonging to nuclear families in which there is increasingly less and less gender differentiation as to status and role, we make a serious mistake when we imagine the family of Luke’s society to be like ours or when we neglect to attend to the pervasive gender-based differentiation of roles and status characteristic of that culture. All too often the people in Luke–Acts and their values and behavior are presumed to be the same as that of North Americans and northern Europeans. A conscious attempt to find useful, valid ways of discovering how people in another culture think and act is necessary. The Scylla and Charybdis of biblical scholarship are named anachronism and ethnocentrism. How does one safely avoid these twin dangers?

We need a method for advancing beyond historical eisegesis (ethnocentrism) to historically attuned exegesis informed by social scientific input. A method for understanding the specific meanings imparted by Luke to his first readers requires attention to the social realities shared by the Luke and his fellow Christians. Failure to understand Luke's culture on its own terms imprisons us as "ugly Americans."

7.0 WHAT ARE WE LOOKING AT? THE RIGHT LENSES

It is a commonplace that critical historical reading of the Gospels regularly attends to at least three chronologically successive social settings (*Sitze im Leben*). That is, there are three distinct stages in the history and development of the gospel narratives. First came Jesus himself and his Palestinian society. A second stage involved the early church which remembered his words and interpreted him. Finally, at some time removed from Jesus and his first apostles, the evangelists edited the earlier traditions about Jesus for their later, first-century fellow Christians, producing the Gospels as we now have them. This, of course, is a strictly chronological perspective: it is concerned with proper sequence (Jesus, apostles, evangelists) and with distinctive places (Galilee, Palestine, Syria, Rome, Egypt). Concern for the distinctiveness and particularity bound up with process through time, i.e., with chronology, is characteristic.

While assuming this schema, our concern is not simply with the explicit dimensions of chronology, but equally with the explicit dimensions of meaning that undergird interpretation. We wish to lay bare the matrices of meaning which support our historical-critical conclusions. It will become apparent in the first chapter on reading theory that scholars who use the social sciences do not presume that Western modern readers can easily or accurately understand documents from a foreign culture, much less from a culture two millennia ago. The authors are acutely sensitive to the problems of anachronism and ethnocentrism, or any claim to immaculate perception or "objective study" of historical stones and people and documents.

The authors therefore are aware of the obligation to explain to themselves and their readers the theoretical and methodological lenses through which they are looking as they examine their sources. Hence, each chapter begins with an abstract, general perspective (i.e., a social-science model) appropriate to the subject matter to be investigated. The aim of the model is to explicate at the outset the data to be examined, the set of social properties to be investigated, and the relation of these properties to be analyzed.

With such models, evidence will be gathered, examined, and probed, with a view to the social meaning and significance of the texts

under consideration. The models have been derived from anthropologists and sociologists concerned with cross-cultural comparison. Since every historical interpreter approaches the biblical texts with some model of society and social interaction in mind, the advantage of explicitly setting out one's model at the beginning is that it clearly lays bare the presupposed model of social relations and makes it possible for the reader to see how the model organizes and explains the data. This allows for the explicit test of the model in terms of its fit and heuristic power. To proceed otherwise is to proceed with hunches and conclude with guesses. As with a microscope, one needs to know the magnitude of the lens through which one looks. We offer a series of lenses for viewing the cultural world of Luke-Acts.

Within such generalized perspectives, we then consider the specific evidence of Luke-Acts. In most cases, at the end of their respective chapters the authors are careful to set out the meanings conveyed by Luke in terms of the chosen models. This procedure attempts to identify the common perceptions and social patterns that Luke and the Jesus movement groups were seen to reflect or challenge.

8.0 CONTENTS OF THE BOOK

What does one need to know to understand another culture? What areas of social life should one investigate? What points of view should one adopt about self, others, nature, time, space, and the like? A simple answer would be to take the index of chapters from any textbook on cultural anthropology. This list would typically include issues such as self-definition, personality, social institutions, rites and ceremonies, conceptions of sickness and healing, and value dimensions. Inasmuch as we are investigating the Mediterranean society of Luke-Acts, we think it also relevant to examine types of values and social relations characteristic of the Mediterranean region (e.g., honor/shame; patron-client relationships). Furthermore, Luke-Acts invites the reader to examine what a "city" means in that ancient culture, and what "the countryside" involves; these entail economic, political, religious, and other issues.

This social-science approach takes into consideration several of the typical topics and issues found in any basic textbook on sociology and anthropology. The book has three parts: (a) basic societal institutions, (b) social psychology, and (c) mediations of culture.

Institutions. All societies have institutions, i.e., fixed forms of social life. In the society of Luke-Acts, two institutions dominated, the family and politics. Elliott's essay will compare and contrast both. Luke's society was made up of "cities" and countryside. The essays of Rohrbach and Oakman examine each respectively. Of great concern in Luke's

society were issues of illness and healing, and so Pilch's essay focuses on the health care system and its cultural implications. Finally, since at this time the dominant form of social interaction in the spheres of both kinship and politics was patronage and clientelism, Moxnes' essay addresses these dimensions of social relations.

Social Psychology. From the perspective of social psychology, Malina and Neyrey examine the pivotal value in Luke's culture, the assessment and perception of persons and life in terms of honor and shame. In keeping with this, these authors show how first-century personality types differ from modern, individualistically centered personality. Finally, given the intensely agonistic nature of Luke's society, we must attend to conflict and so to the pervasive way people interact with and label each other in the endless challenges which make up that agonistic society.

Value Clusters. A third group of essays deal with specific forms of behavior that mediate values and worldviews in a highly intensive and focused form. The essays by Neyrey and McVann in this volume look to questions dealing with shared perceptions of the way the society works and of its symbolic universe. Likewise, the values and patterns of Luke's social system are expressed constantly in the many rituals and ceremonies which structure the lives of people, namely, their births, rites of passage, marriages, meals, baptisms, trials, and burials.

9.0 HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

The authors consider it essential that a reader begin with chapter 1, the reading theory on which the whole enterprise rests. Then, the sequence is a matter of preference and interest. The chapters dealing with social psychology were purposely placed early in the book because they are distinctly Western and American concerns, and might serve as a useful entry into the use of social science models for biblical interpretation. Next, the chapters on the institutions of Luke's society provide the reader with information about the social structure and dynamic of Luke's society as well as their symbolic representation. Finally, the reader will find materials which deal with the social behaviors that mediate the basic meanings of Luke's society in symbolic form, that is, its rituals and ceremonies.

The book is equipped with an index of biblical passages as well as with an index of topics and authors. It may be that readers will use these tools for ready access to a complete reading of a specific passage from a variety of perspectives. Such a project would be profitable, for it will give readers a sense of the manner in which the various essays and their specific foci provide a coherent and complementary understanding of common text-segments or issues.

10.0 THE BENEFITS

What advantages are to be gained? First of all, a reader will have a repertoire of scenarios necessary for reading Luke on his own cultural terms. Such readers will truly be able to eavesdrop on Luke and his exotic and foreign society, and to do so with greater accuracy. They will be aided in becoming culturally respectful and perceptive visitors to foreign terrain, not “ugly Americans.” The conceptual models employed here encourage the reader to test them personally on his/her own, to “go and do likewise” with other biblical texts. With the models and perspectives of this book a reader will be well equipped to read other New Testament texts and classical documents from the ancient Mediterranean society. By sensitizing themselves to another culture and its social structures, careful readers inevitably learn more about their own society by way of contrast (see Malina and Neyrey 1988:145–51).

This book, moreover, provides a limited introduction to some of the basic issues in cultural anthropology, with bibliography for further reading. Since theology, whether biblical or modern, depends upon analogies that are quite culturally specific, this book will enable the reader concerned with theology to appreciate the theological dimensions in Luke-Acts articulated by Luke with analogies drawn from his social experience.

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