

THE ROLE OF EXPERIENCE IN THE INTERPRETATION OF MIRACLE NARRATIVES IN LUCAN LITERATURE

Biblical Studies

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Various rationalists of the past and present have viewed biblical and modern-day miracles as propaganda, superstition, and foolish contrivances of a premodern worldview.¹ The Gospels and Acts have been considered historically unreliable because of their numerous accounts of miracles.² A number of conservative evangelical theologians and scholars have similarly voiced their disbelief in modern miracles, signs, and wonders.³ However, a growing number of evangelicals are becoming aware of the importance of modern miraculous experiences in evangelism.⁴ An increasing openness to modern experiences of miracles has led to a reassessment of the role of experience in interpreting the Bible. A holistic hermeneutic is being developed that more fully appreciates the role of experience in the interpretive process. Traditional Christianity has often emphasized the importance of salvific experience in hermeneutics, while ignoring or denying the role of miraculous experiences. The experiential miracle narratives of Luke-Acts have become a sort of key to assessing the role of experience in biblical interpretation.

Developing a Holistic Hermeneutic

Advocates of modern miracles have developed a holistic hermeneutic which articulates a four-principle method of biblical interpretation: presuppositions, context (exegesis and explication), organization (biblical and systematic theological analysis), and application.⁵ When interpreting the miracle narratives of Luke-Acts, each of these four principles requires some sort of dialogue with experiences (both modern and ancient). Experience acts as a common language, context, infrastructure, and verifier between the first-century world and our own.

¹Antony Flew, "Miracles," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards, 5 (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 348–349.

²W. Ward Gasque, *A History of the Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989), 44–45.

³Thomas R. Edgar, "The Cessation of the Sign Gifts," *Biblio Sacra* 145 (October–December 1988): 371–386; Leon Morris, *Spirit of the Living God: The Bible's Teaching on the Holy Spirit* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1960); John Mark Ruthven, *On the Cessation of the Charismata: The Protestant Polemic of Benjamin B. Warfield* (Ph.D. diss., Marquette University Graduate School, 1989); and Benjamin B. Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1918).

⁴C. Peter Wagner, "On the Cutting Edge of Mission Strategy," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, rev. ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1992), 45–59.

⁵William W. Menzies, "The Methodology of Pentecostal Theology: An Essay on Hermeneutics," in *Essays on Apostolic Themes: Studies in Honor of Howard M. Ervin*, ed. Paul Elbert (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 1–14; and Roger Stronstad, *Spirit, Scripture, and Theology: A Pentecostal Perspective* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1995), 28–30.

Experience and Presuppositions

It has been argued that all interpreters approach scripture with experiential presuppositions that affect the outcome of their exegesis.⁶ The interpreter must be aware of his/her own theological, religious, cultural, exegetical, and experiential presuppositions before encountering the text and must be open to new presuppositional horizons uncovered in the text.⁷ French Arrington stresses that the relationship between personal experience and exegesis is dialogical: "At every point, experience informs the process of interpretation, and the fruit of interpretation informs experience."⁸ Bible study is an exploration of the "existential continuity" that exists between apostolic believers and modern experiences of the interpreter.⁹ Interpreting miracle narratives in Luke-Acts requires an ongoing and bibliocentric conversation between modern experiences of miracles and ancient experiences of miracles. Arrington rightly warns that if the experiences of the interpreter become the sole and unbridled starting point of interpretation "the perceived meaning of Scripture becomes easily susceptible to distortion by the presuppositions of the interpreter."¹⁰ When interpreting the miracle narratives of Luke/Acts, Luke's own presuppositions and those of his intended audience should remain foremost. In the first-century Jewish world there was a widespread (though not universal) presupposition that miraculous signs and wonders would occur in conjunction with the onslaught of the Messianic Age (Luke 11:29–32; Acts 5:35–39; 8:5–13; 1 Cor. 1:22). Expectations of supernatural manifestations seem to be common in the early church (Acts 2:17–20; 4:30; 15:12; 19:1–6). Openness to divine validation by miracles was also pervasive in the wider Greco-Roman world (13:11–12; 14:8–11; 28:6).¹¹

Contemporary miraculous experiences have an important role in interpretation. It may be argued that those who have experienced miracles are more open and understanding when exegeting biblical history concerning miracles.¹² Luke's narratives are understood in relation to the interpreter's personal history. Luke and the modern interpreter share a common language, experiential knowledge, and compelling understanding of pneumatic happenings. If the interpreter comes to the miracle narratives

⁶ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 71; and Gordon Fee, *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 27.

⁷ David S. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in the Light of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992; reprint, Irving, TX: ICI University Press, 1999).

⁸ French Arrington, "Hermeneutics, Historical Perspectives on Pentecostal and Charismatic," in *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, ed. Stanley M. Burgess, Gary B. McGee, and Patrick Alexander, 376–389 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 384.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 383.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 384.

¹¹ Bultmann, Rudolph, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. Hans Bartsch, 1–44 (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 1–5; and William Mitchell Ramsey, *Luke the Physician* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908), 9.

¹² Stronstad, *Spirit, Scripture, and Theology*, 62.

of Luke-Acts already denying their validity for the contemporary church, these texts will lack their original power and significance.

Experience, Exegesis and Explication

In both historical-grammatical exegesis and literary explication, the primacy of authorial intent should be upheld, and the importance of a text's genre should be appreciated. The religio-historical context of first-century Jewish Christians included an expectation of supernatural phenomena. Miracles performed by Jesus (and those of His disciples) were signs of Christ's ministry, role, and identity, and were related to who He was and what He said historically. An exegetical analysis of the signs and wonders narratives in Luke-Acts (Luke 2:8–12, 34–35; 11:14–20, 29–32; 21:5–36; 23:8–11; Acts 2:1–41, 42–47; 4:1–22, 23–31; 5:12–16; 6:8–10; 7:35–39; 8:5–13; 14:1–3; 15:12) points to Luke's intentional establishment of a supernatural apologetic that is a corollary of the gospel.¹³ Signs and wonders prove the value, validity, and veracity of the kerygma.

Literary explication highlights the role of experience in hermeneutics. Readers of Scripture do not merely come into contact with the teachings or abstract substance found in the texts, but also experience the events in the story vicariously through the details in the story that the author has chosen to emphasize.¹⁴ Three basic ingredients of a story are setting, characters, and plot. The settings in the miracle narratives of Acts progress from Jerusalem into all the world (following the expansion of Christianity). The characters move from Jewish apostles, to Hellenistic Jews, to God-fearers and proselytes, to Gentiles. The miraculous experiences in Luke-Acts seem to be progressively universal in scope. The plot in Acts moves from several lengthy signs and wonders accounts (Acts 2 and 3) to short paradigmatic summaries, but continues to follow the miracle-explanation-response progression of chapter two. When stories are in an explicitly didactic context they often serve as illustrations of what is being taught.¹⁵ The narratives in Acts 2–3 are examples of miracle narratives (retellings of experiences) that serve as illustrations in a context that is explicitly didactic concerning miracles. The repetition of miraculous experiences followed by explanations in the narratives seems to point to the intentional establishment of normative patterns of experiences in Luke-Acts.

Experience, Analysis and Systemization

In a biblical theology of Luke-Acts, emphasis should be placed on Luke's distinctive kingdom Christology.¹⁶ Experiential miracles point to Christ's divinity and uniqueness.¹⁷ The miraculous Christocentric experiences of Luke-Acts are a part of the "already" of God's impending blessings and judgment, and the "not yet" of the total fulfillment of God's plan for the world. Also, Leo O'Reilly, points out that "every formal

¹³Robert R. Wadholm, "An Apologetic of Signs and Wonders in Luke-Acts" (M.A. thesis, Global University, 2005); and G. E. Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition: Josephus, Luke-Acts, and Apologetic Historiography* (Leiden: Brill, 1992).

¹⁴Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 62–63.

¹⁵Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 130.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁷James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 76.

reference to miracles, whether of Jesus, Moses, or the apostles" (i.e., every instance of *semeia* or *terata* in Acts) is in the context of the "word" (*logos*, *rhemata*) (Acts 2:14, 19, 22, 40–41, 43; 4:29–31; 5:12, 17, 20; 6:7–8; 7:35, 38; 8:4, 6, 13–14; 14:3; 15:7, 12).¹⁸ O'Reilly contends that signs and wonders in Acts authenticate the word and lead to faith in the word (or to opposition). In each signs and wonders narrative in Acts, references to the "word" surround references to signs and wonders on both sides (forming an *inclusio*), revealing a rhetorical literary pattern that highlights the centrality of the word in signs and wonders and the relationship between witness and works of wonder in Acts. Thus, an interpreter using a holistic hermeneutic would conclude that Luke intended his original audience to understand that miraculous experiences are a significant corollary and normal attendant of the *logos*.

The Bible as a whole, and Luke-Acts in particular, centers on God's purposes and actions in history, known as *Heilsgeschichte* (salvation history).¹⁹ Miracle narratives in scripture focus on manifestations of God's actions and purposes in salvation history and contribute profoundly to the Christology of Luke-Acts by validating Christ's role as the Messiah and Son of God.²⁰ The "resurrection-ascension-exaltation perspective" of the Christology of Acts is highlighted in the miracle narratives,²¹ and the Christocentric sign value of miracles is shared by Luke with both John and Paul in their writings (John 5:36; 7:3–8; 9:30–33; 10:25; 11:47–48; 14:11–14; 15:24; 20:30–31; 1 Cor. 1:22–24; 2:4–5; 2 Cor. 12:12; Gal. 3:1–5). For the writers of scripture, and Luke in particular, miracles (or references to miracles) normally attend the word of God. In the New Testament, the experience of miracles helped to validate the gospel message across cultural, chronological, geographical, and demographical settings.

Experience, Application and Verification

Exegesis and biblical theology must be verified in the life of the interpreter.²² Verification takes place through correct application. The applications made should cohere with the systematic and biblical theology and be based on the context and presuppositions of the text itself. How can the interpreter of Luke-Acts ascertain the normative value and the corresponding application of a particular narrative in Luke-Acts? Fee and Stuart dismiss the normative value of behavioral and experiential details based on their conclusion that the details are often incidental or ambiguous.²³ However, consistent patterns, clear divine approval, and positive models indicate Luke's intentions of

¹⁸Leo O'Reilly, *Word and Sign in the Acts of the Apostles* (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Universita Gregoriana, 1987), 187–206.

¹⁹Ryken, *How to Read the Bible*, 170; and Ben Witherington, III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

²⁰Gerd Theissen, *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 259.

²¹Stronstad, *Spirit, Scripture, and Theology*, 143.

²²Menzies, *Methodology of Pentecostal Theology*, 114.

²³Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 107.

establishing normative behavior and experiences.²⁴ The proper application of these passages will include experiential elements that are normative for all Christians. Luke's distinctive historiographical methods must be accurately assessed in order to more perfectly determine whether or not he intentionally established normative experiences.

Patterns, Precedents, Paradigms and Programs in Lucan Miracle Narratives

Luke writes intentionally didactic narrative that is experiential in nature using patterned, precedent-setting, paradigmatic, and programmatic elements.²⁵ An important cycle of events that is often repeated in Luke-Acts is: (a) God raises up leaders who preach the gospel; (b) they perform miracles; (c) crowds gather and many listeners are converted; (d) opposition and persecution arise against the leaders; and (e) God intervenes to rescue them.²⁶ Luke uses precedents in the signs and wonders narratives to establish the validity of Jesus' messianic ministry and the prophetic ministries of the disciples. He seems to deliberately repeat these precedents in order to instruct later readers on the importance of supernatural ministry in the presentation/defense of the gospel. Luke also presents readers with certain paradigmatic elements in his narratives. Witherington concludes that in Acts "the vast majority of the behavior of the *Christian* characters in the story are probably meant to be seen as exemplary (emphasis his)."²⁷ A cursory glance at Luke's characters reveals that Jesus, Peter, John, Paul, Barnabas, Stephen, and Philip all performed miracles. Luke also commonly uses an early event or episode to serve as a program for later developments.²⁸ The summaries in Acts 2:43–47 and 4:32–37 seem to act as intentional examples of normal Christianity.²⁹ These summaries include references to power, signs, and wonders that are a part of the kerygma and are programmatic for the supernatural ministries of main characters in the rest of the book (Acts 2:22, 42; 3:1–10; 4:29–33; 5:12; 6:8; 8:6, 13; 14:3).

Lucan Historiography and Miracle Narratives

Some scholars deny the role of contemporary experience in the interpretation of historical narrative.³⁰ Patterns in Luke-Acts are seen as unrepeatable, particularized historical accounts that set no precedents for contemporary experiences of supernatural phenomena. The didactic and theological aims of Lucan historiography are denied, ignored, or subsumed under Johannine or Pauline theologies.³¹ In this view, Luke

²⁴ Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 100–101.

²⁵ Roger Stronstad, *The Charismatic Theology of St. Luke* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1984); and Roger Stronstad, "The Biblical Precedent for Historical Precedent," *Paraclete* 27 (Summer 1993), 1–10.

²⁶ M. D. Goulder, *Type and History in Acts* (London: S.P.C.K., 1964); and Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

²⁷ Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 99.

²⁸ Stronstad, *Spirit, Scripture, and Theology*, 44–45.

²⁹ Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 99.

³⁰ Fee, *Gospel and Spirit*; Edgar, *Cessation of the Sign Gifts*; Morris, *Spirit of the Living God*; and Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles*.

³¹ F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 2d ed. (London: Tyndale, 1952).

intended to convey a sense of wonder and awe at the early miraculous experiences, but did not explicitly intend for miracles to be seen as normative for all Christians of all time (or even for his original audience).³² This approach to historical narrative tends toward reductionism of: (a) the interpreter's task, (b) the original author's intent, and (c) the theological value of biblical historiography.

Other scholars take what might be called a "complex" approach to Lucan historiography. These scholars take an approach that is termed "complex" for the following reasons: (a) they recognize the value of experiential presuppositions in the hermeneutical task (increasing variables in interpretation); (b) they stress the importance of theological and didactic purposes in historical narrative; and (c) they view Luke's writings through the grid of Old Testament and intertestamental historiography. Most classical Pentecostals and many charismatic evangelicals view Luke's historical narratives as establishing normative experiences and behavior that are to be applied to the contemporary church. Their approach is pragmatic and experiential but is often unsystematic in its analyses of texts and is overly devotional and subjective.

Recently, Pentecostal scholars have sought to make a more scholarly, objective, and systematic case for the "complex" approach.³³ They view Lucan historiography as theological and didactic, and have identified and analyzed the biblical precedent for historical precedence utilizing a holistic hermeneutic.³⁴ This approach seems to be congruent with Luke's original intent (Luke 1:1–4), the genre of Luke-Acts, and Luke's use of patterns, precedents, paradigms, and programs. The holistic hermeneutic of the scholarly complex approach is properly analytical, synthetic, and existential in its interpretations of the miracle narratives, and seems to fit best with the presuppositions and intent of the original author and audience of Luke-Acts.

Conclusion

A holistic hermeneutic not only opens up experiential elements in the miracle narratives of Luke-Acts, but may also affect the interpreter's experience of the Spirit. The interpreter may exegete what is declared, implied, or described in the miracle narratives of Luke-Acts and come to a realization that for Luke, Spirit-filling results in prophetic functions and the power of the Spirit comes on individuals to perform miracles. The interpreter may then verify this interpretation through the behavior of prayer for Spirit-filling, and through seeking the experiences of the Spirit. When interpreters are filled with the "Spirit of prophecy" and witness modern miracles they will know that their hermeneutic has been applied correctly (because it has been verified by real life). This, in fact, is how the Pentecostals of last century came to experience the Holy Spirit's outpouring in the modern era. Experience and behavior followed and informed belief. A holistic hermeneutic of the miracle narratives in Luke-Acts can be life changing. May it be so for us today.

³² Gordon D. Fee, "Hermeneutics and Historical Precedent—A Major Problem in Pentecostal Hermeneutics," in *Perspectives on the New Pentecostalism*, ed. Russell P. Spittler (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 118–132.

³³ Arrington, *Hermeneutics*; Menzies, *Methodology of Pentecostal Theology*; and Stronstad, *Spirit, Scripture, and Theology*.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

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