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**Bovon, François**

***Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1-9:50***

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Hermeneia

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The publication of any study on the Gospel of Luke by François Bovon would be a much-anticipated event, given the longevity of his work and significance of his contribution to Lukan research. Generations of students have been ably guided through the first decades of Luke's emergence as a theologian by Bovon's *Luke the Theologian: Thirty-Three Years of Research (1950-1983)* (Pickwick, 1987). That this latest publication is a full-scale, critical commentary on the Third Gospel is all the more welcome.

Those of us familiar with Bovon's multivolume contribution to the Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas* (Zürich: Benziger; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1989–), will come to this first volume on Luke in the Hermeneia series with appetites whetted. The German commentary, which is now complete through Luke 19:27, has already demonstrated Bovon's gifts as a careful reader of Luke, along with the depth and breadth of his grasp of issues pertinent to the exegesis of this Gospel. It may be enough simply to celebrate the rendering of Bovon's original into English, but I must confess to my disappointment that what we have before us is just that, a translation of a 1989 publication. As Bovon admits in his preface, "I was not able or willing to 'look backward' (Luke 9:62!) to update this volume"—a defensible decision, to be sure, given how quickly one can be overcome by the torrents of secondary literature, but a regrettable one nonetheless. The consequence is that

the Hermeneia on Luke is already dated before it finds its way onto the shelves of our libraries, a fate reminiscent of the Hermeneia on Acts (written by Hans Conzelmann, a 1987 translation of a 1972 German original). There is much to appreciate in these pages, but the lack of interaction with scholarship subsequent to the late 1980s and engagement with interpretive approaches that have come into their own, especially involving narrative and sociocultural concerns, comprises a unhappy deficiency.

The tone of the commentary is aptly summarized in Bovon's own words describing the character of his work: "I wish to examine his Gospel with the sober reserve of a scholar and with the confidence of a believer. For I hope in this manner to arrive at genuine understanding. I also realize that this becomes possible only if God leads me into his Word." This is itself is a startling declaration in the preface to a contribution to a series that characterizes itself as "critical and historical." Where one would have anticipated assertions of scientific objectivity and scholarly neutrality, Bovon lays claim to his theological commitments and ecclesial location—not as hindrances to but as partners in the interpretive enterprise. Perhaps more significantly, it is precisely this combination of commitments, judicious care and trust, that we find in the pages of Bovon's *Luke*. Here is critical scholarship in the service of those communities of faith who turn to the Gospel of Luke as Scripture.

Bovon devotes a mere twelve pages to matters of traditional introduction. Luke and Acts together comprise a single "work," which is "more than a historical monograph and is reminiscent of Jewish historiography." Luke, mostly likely a Greek (perhaps a Macedonian) by birth, from early on a "God-fearer," has conformed his writing less to forms of rhetoric available in the Greco-Roman world and more to the style of the historical books of Israel's Scriptures. He thus underscored continuity from the LXX to his own narrative. For Bovon, the Third Evangelist views the Hebrew Bible as comprising books of prophecy alongside which he can place Luke and Acts as fulfillment. Luke's purpose was to address dangers from outside the church, troubled by the polemics of the Jews, by claiming that the Christian communities are the legitimate heirs of the divine promises found in the Scriptures. *Vis-à-vis* the Roman Empire, Luke presents a politically innocuous gospel; indeed, Luke advocates the acceptance of the Christian church among the Roman elite. With regard to sources, Luke has drawn on the Gospel of Mark (or, at least, a version of Mark that diverges only slightly from our canonical Mark) and on Q. Luke's narrative technique is largely episodic: "he strings together smaller self-contained stories, which are intended to instruct and to elicit a response."

My attempt to summarize some of the high points of the perspective from which Bovon operates functions in part to situate Bovon's work in the arena of current Lukan study but also to suggest areas where I find his approach less satisfying. Thus, for example, it seems to me that it is especially his lack of attention to sociocultural sensibilities that opens the door to a description of Luke's message as apolitical, in spite of the poignant ways in which Jesus and the good news call into question, or run afoul, of the Empire. Moreover, Bovon signals in his introduction what is likewise clear from his exegesis: he devotes scant attention to the progress of the narrative, to the question of how Luke "builds" the story, with one scene leading to another and to another. By and large, scenes are treated in relative (though not complete) isolation from one another.

The format of the commentary is not easy to summarize, since one section is not treated in the same way as the next. Common elements include bibliography (with a few additions made after the 1989 German original), translation, analysis, commentary, and conclusion, but other elements are sometimes introduced and play significant roles. In Luke's narration of "The Centurion from Capernaum (7:1-10)," "analysis" is subdivided into "form" and "genre," and a section devoted to the "history of interpretation" is introduced. Bovon's sensibilities as an exegete are well on display here. For example, he notes that the comment that the centurion "loves our people" has the character of an ironic (?) application of Jesus' earlier directive to love one's enemies; his concern to situate this scene within the larger Lukan project is also evident in his comparison of this centurion with another, Cornelius, in Acts 10. Socioreligious concerns are also on display in Bovon's treatment of 7:1-10, as Luke uses this scene to introduce the category of "God-fearer," so as to give insight into the positive response the Christian gospel attracted among Gentiles drawn to Judaism but unwilling fully to convert.

In the German original, the heading *Wirkungsgeschichte* was found where the English "History of Interpretation" seems more appropriate, at least in the case of 7:1-10. Bovon draws attention to the fate of this text at the hands of the Valentinians, for example, as well as Luther and Calvin, without delving deeply into the actual "effects" of this text within the Christian communities over time. Interestingly, elsewhere "History of Interpretation" can refer more narrowly to late-twentieth-century interpretations (as is the case in Bovon's treatment of Mary's Song, 1:46-55); in the same way, Bovon's "Conclusion" sometimes simply summarizes his analysis, while at other times it provides space for comments of a more theological, even homiletical, sort. As might be expected in a Hermeneia volume, footnotes are plenteous. Though not lacking in wide-ranging references to parallels in literature contemporary with Luke, they also testify to the wide-

ranging interaction Bovon has carried on over the years, both with especially Continental Lukan scholarship and with concerns of a philosophical and theological sort.

Bovon has provided a study of Luke's Gospel that would benefit a wide range of readers. Those involved in Lukan research cannot afford to neglect active engagement with his views. Even though Bovon is only rarely able to introduce the available interpretive options or enumerate the rationale behind his interpretive decisions, it remains clear that his choices are measured thoughtfully. Pastors and students may be put off by the sheer enormity of the project, and the consequent price tag—which seems set to expand into at least three volumes, with a price tag in excess of \$150. This is unfortunate, since these are the readers who may have most to gain from Bovon's craft. Even with the shortcomings noted above, this work should wear well on our shelves.