



Bovon, François

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

Translated by Christine M. Thomas

Hermeneia

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Robert C Tannehill
Methodist Theological School in Ohio
Delaware, OH 43015

This is the first volume of a multi-volume commentary originally published as *Das Evangelium nach Lukas* (EKKNT III/1. Zürich: Benziger Verlag & Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1989) and now available in English in the Hermeneia commentary series. François Bovon is widely recognized as a leading Lukan scholar. He was formerly Professor at the University of Geneva and is now Frothingham Professor of the History of Religion at Harvard Divinity School. Two further volumes have been published in German, carrying the commentary through Luke 19:27. In the Preface to the English edition the author comments, “I was not able or willing to ‘look backward’ (Luke 9:62!) to update this volume. . . . It would have distracted my energy from my goal: to finish the commentary in the next few years.” All scholars who have undertaken large writing projects can sympathize with this decision. However, this comment points to a major limitation of the first volume of the Hermeneia commentary on Luke. Although some items have been added to the bibliographies, this volume is basically a publication of 1989, not of 2002. It does not interact with recent scholarship on Luke nor make use of some of the new methodologies of New Testament scholarship.

There is a short Introduction, in which I particularly note the lack of an adequate discussion of the genre of Luke. (The continuation of the narrative in Acts, which may or may not fit the same genre as Luke, complicates the genre issue.) Each section of Luke is discussed under three headings: Analysis, Commentary, and Conclusion. In the Analysis Bovon typically discusses the formal structure of the passage and divergences from Mark and/or Matthew (often in detail). The Conclusion (usually brief) attempts to bring into focus the significance of the passage for Christian life and thought or the theological issues that arise from the passage. There are also occasional discussions of the history of interpretation of certain passages (a feature of the *Evangelisch—Katholischer Kommentar* series, where the heading *Wirkungsgeschichte* is used). Most of these

sections are brief notes on the treatment of the passage by one or more figures of church history, with no pretense of providing a full history of interpretation. The most extensive and helpful of these summaries of Christian interpretation concerns the issue of war in light of the commands to renounce resistance in the Sermon on the Plain and elsewhere (243-245). (In the subsequent volumes of the German edition the sections on history of interpretation have been significantly expanded.) There are numerous footnotes. Many of them cite ancient literature or the opinions of modern scholars (with the unfortunate omission of the most recent work on Luke). There is a bibliography for each section of Luke, as well as a historical list of commentaries on Luke (with the latest item published in 1998). The Index for this volume covers only citations from the Bible and other ancient literature. There are four excursuses, which discuss the virgin birth, the devil, the word of God, and forgiveness of sins. The frequent citations in Greek are followed by English translations in order to make the commentary useful to more people.

Commentaries are both multiplying and diversifying, not only because of the diverse kinds of readers for which they are intended but also because some authors wish to emphasize a particular interpretive method, resulting in social-science commentaries, narrative commentaries, etc. According to the older model, an ideal commentary offers a compendium of scholarship, assessing the various opinions of scholars on each interpretive issue while presenting the author's own views. François Bovon is well equipped to write this kind of commentary because of his long years of study of Luke and Lukan scholarship. His commentary on Luke 1:1—9:50 is a valuable guide to scholarship through the mid 1980s and shows mature judgment in dealing with the many issues.

This type of commentary, it seems to me, should provide brief statements of the reasons why one option of interpretation should be preferred to the others. A commentary cannot provide exhaustive discussion of any particular point. An extensive scholarly commentary, however, should provide brief reasons for the choices that its author makes. Bovon does this some of the time. A good example is his discussion of Luke 2:32, where, in a short paragraph, he gives three reasons why “for the peoples” should be taken with “light” rather than with “revelation” (103). One may still debate the issue, but the author helps us by enabling us to assess his view. I would like to see more of this in commentaries.

At times Bovon writes as if a particular narrative episode could serve only one purpose, or, if more than one purpose, then only one purpose at a time in successive stages of its history. Thus in discussing the temptation scene he asks whether it is “intended to defend Jesus against Jewish critique (that he is a charlatan or false messiah), or to offer Christians an encouraging example” (140). He chooses the former purpose. But stories that are not limited by attached applications may serve more than one purpose, and probably did so from a very early time.

Bovon provides a good discussion of Luke 6:27-38, the central section of the Sermon on the Plain that begins with the command to love enemies. He pays careful attention to the formal structure of this passage, which, he says, is “well planned” (231). It is possible to be clearer, however, about the way that all parts of this passage fit together as a rhetorical argument in support of the initial command to love enemies. It is

also helpful to note the type of language being used, which is suggestive rather than limiting, offering, for instance, an open ended series of four commands (6:27-28) that tend to make the initial command specific. The series is open ended because it encourages us to imagine other specific instances of similar behavior that fit the same pattern. The placement of the Golden Rule in Luke 6:31 links it to love of enemies. Although it is built on the principle of reciprocity, the standard for action is not the way that others treat us but the way that we wish they would treat us, which makes a big difference in responding to enemies.

The comprehensive commentary of the future will need to incorporate newer developments missing from Bovon's work on Luke 1:1—9:50, such as narrative criticism and social-science criticism. These are not alternatives to previous critical methods but aspects of a total interpretation of the text. Narrative criticism will contribute greater awareness of the function of parts within the whole narrative. It can also clarify the hierarchy of emphasis that the text creates through literary devices. Repetition with development in the shaping of plot is one of these literary devices. Bovon, like many others, describes Jesus' announcement in the Nazareth synagogue (4:18-19) as "programmatically" (157). It is important to explore the implications of such a claim. The announcement is programmatic, in my view, because it reveals a commission or mandate that the central character will seek to fulfill in the subsequent narrative. The exact sense in which 4:18-19 is programmatic can only be determined by studying how parts of the Isaiah quotation connect with other parts of the Gospel narrative through repetition with development. On this score, Bovon's comments are insufficient, and there is a similar deficiency in treating other key passages. As in previous scholarship, there is a strong tendency to consider a passage as a discrete entity rather than as an episode in an unfolding narrative that determines the special meaning of each of its parts.

This volume is only the first of a multi-volume commentary. The German edition of part two (on Luke 9:51—14:35) was published in 1996, and in 2001 part three (on Luke 15:1—19:27) appeared. I presume that these volumes will appear in English as soon as possible. The development of Bovon's thought in the years subsequent to writing the first volume will do much to enhance the value of this major commentary on Luke.