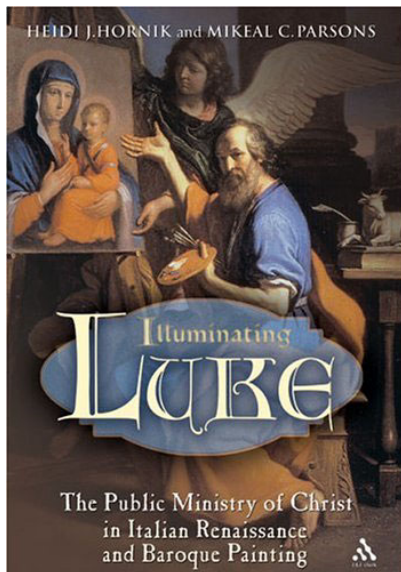


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Hornik, Heidi J., and Mikeal C. Parsons

Illuminating Luke: The Public Ministry of Christ in Italian Renaissance and Baroque Painting

London: T&T Clark, 2005. Pp. xiii + 177. Paper.
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I cannot wait to the end of my review to say how much I enjoyed reading this book. In this review I want to turn the traditional structure of a review upside down and start to mention all the factors that contributed to the pleasure that I experienced when I read the book: the contents is of high academic quality; the topics are interesting; the writing is clear; the arguments are solid and persuasive; the material is well structured; even the paper on which the book is printed is of high quality, and the plates with examples of art work are colorful (one should, of course, expect an art book to also be attractive!). But most important of all, this book is not merely an academic enterprise with little practical value, as is often the case with research projects. The hermeneutical reflections at the end of each chapter are extremely valuable and helpful. The latter remark should not be surprising, because the authors state in the very first pages of their book that they decided to select scenes from the life of Jesus that may appeal to modern-day Americans.

But let us now start with the review by saying what this book is about. This book is the second volume of a projected trilogy entitled *Illuminating Luke*. It deals with subjects from Christ's public ministry that were painted by Italian Renaissance and Baroque artists. Hornik and Parsons say that they paid much attention to the question posed by Margaret Miles when she asked what features of Christ's life contemporary Americans might select for imitation. Miles suggested that twenty-first-century Christians would

perhaps be less interested in depictions of Christ's suffering, since our society has more capacity to relieve suffering, or at least to keep suffering out of sight, than did historical societies (this is, of course, not true of many countries in Africa). But Christ's ministry episodes, such as his commitment to the poor and needy, might remind contemporary Christians of Christ's passionate commitment to living lovingly.

These remarks of Miles prompted Hornik and Parsons to select two scenes from Jesus' Galilean ministry, namely, his baptism (Luke 3) and the miraculous catch of fish (Luke 5). They also selected stories taken from the material in the journey narrative, namely, the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10), the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16), the account regarding Jesus in the house of Mary and Martha (Luke 10), and the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15). These selections represent both the words (parables and sayings) and deeds (baptism and miracles) of Christ. The five artists whose works of art they selected are Michele Tosini, Raphael, Jacopo Bassano, Alessandro Allori, and Guercino.

Each of these artists is discussed in a separate chapter in the book. The structure of each of these chapters is very similar: it consists more or less of an overview of the biblical text, followed by a brief history of interpretation; thereafter information is given on the life and work of the artist, followed by an iconographical analysis; then the chapter concludes with hermeneutical reflections.

Let us briefly look at how the authors treated one of these scenes as a typical example of their treatment of the other scenes as well. Chapter 5 deals with *Christ in the Home of Mary and Martha* (Luke 10:8–42) and focuses on the painting of Alessandro Allori as an example of his interpretation of this account. The authors first of all give an overview of the biblical text in which they show that this account is told in a linear fashion and that it is part of a larger travel narrative. Thereafter they discuss the function of hospitality in the ancient world, arguing that Martha was not criticized for showing hospitality, although the duties of hospitality were not to prevent one from hearing Jesus' message.

In the next section of this chapter, the focus is on how this account was interpreted in subsequent centuries. Many of the discussions by ancient theologians revolved around the identity of the one called "Mary" in this scene. Many church fathers used this account to commend a contemplative life, without criticizing Martha. By the time of the Counter-Reformation, Mary simultaneously symbolized conversion, contemplation and asceticism.

This is followed by a detailed biographical sketch of Alessandro Allori, who was born into a family of painters on 31 May 1535. The authors also tell us where Allori studied

and what other works he produced; they further describe the style of his works and tell us who influenced Allori and under whose patronage he worked.

The next section on the chapter deals with the painting as such. We hear that Jacopo Salviati hired Allori from 1574 to 1580 to do a series of projects in the renovation of his palace. Part of this renovation included the creation of a family chapel dedicated to Saint Mary Magdalene within the palace. The painting *Christ in the Home of Mary and Martha* is the altarpiece and the focal point for this program. The other frescoes in this chapel are also described. Comments are also made on the precedents and sources for *Christ in the Home of Mary and Martha*.

The authors conclude the chapter with hermeneutical reflections. They concede that the Christian church is called to action and to engage in compassionate acts that contribute to the mending of a broken world. Like Martha, the church should engage in specific acts of hospitality and concrete acts of kindness. But we should never neglect our theological reflection on God. Hornik and Parson say that, as Allori evocatively suggests in his painting, hospitality and contemplation are complementary: the “life of discipleship requires both action and meditation, but the action should be examined; thoughtful action and the meditation are rigorous activity. Therefore, let us choose the ‘better part.’”

Heidi Hornik is Professor of Art History at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, while Mikeal Parsons is Professor of Religion at the same university. This book is evidence of what can happen when two specialists join forces and write on the same subject from different perspectives!