

RBL 07/2006

McComiskey, Douglas S.

Lukan Theology in the Light of the Gospel's Literary Structure

Paternoster Biblical Monographs

Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004.

Pp. xviii + 388. Paper. £29.99. ISBN 1842271482.

Gert J. Steyn

University of Pretoria

Pretoria, South Africa 0002

Douglas S. McComiskey's *Lukan Theology in the Light of the Gospel's Literary Structure* is the publication of his Ph.D. thesis under the supervision of I. Howard Marshall, submitted in 1997 to the University of Aberdeen. The title creates an expectation of a contribution to Lukan theology, which could be misleading. The author states clearly at the outset of his work in the preface that the "focus of the work is on the literary structure of the Gospel of Luke and ultimately on theology that may be derived from its structure" (xv). The emphasis thus lies more on the literary structure of Luke's Gospel than on Luke's theology per se. His real focus is to address the fact that "confusion has always existed over the structure of Luke 4:14–24:53" (31), and his "primary concern is with the structure and composition of the Gospel" (76).

By the time that the reader reaches the introduction, some questions arise: How exactly does McComiskey intend to identify or determine this literary structure in Luke's Gospel? What method(s) does he intend to use in order to unlock the structure? Would synchronic approaches such as a narrative analysis, rhetorical analysis, and, even more important relating to literary structure, structural analysis be considered tools to unlock the Gospel's structure? And if these are not used, why not? Although the author refers to the fact that the "elements of our proposed structure are all narrative features" (7, 8), reasons why the accepted methodology for narrative and structural analyses are not used remain to a large extent unanswered during the course of the study. Furthermore, one wonders to what extent the source material from Mark and Q would, on a diachronic level, be accommodated by the author in his understanding of Luke's intentional cyclical parallelism. The place of the Markan material certainly is addressed, and the author

shows that Markan priority “offers a feasible mechanism for the composition of the proposed structure” (6).

The reader is soon introduced in the introduction to a series of eleven tests by which the underlying structure of the Gospel is determined. They are repeated time and again in the book, sometimes to the point of extremity when they are merely “reiterated ... for convenience” (89). These “tests for intentionality” (14) are described, explained, and initially applied to Luke 1:5–38 as a test case (14–27). With these tests McComiskey provides his own criteria in establishing an intended “cyclical parallelism” (5) structure. The series of tests certainly is a valuable contribution to scholarship and warrants on its own the publication of this work. McComiskey defines his approach as follows: “The methodology we will apply to our own proposed correspondences will involve rigorous testing and a development of the ways that Lukan interpretation of individual pericopes is different from the standard interpretations that do not demonstrate an awareness of or concern for these correspondences” (4). The Gospel is ultimately seen as a well-organized, intentional “cyclical parallel” structure compiled by the hand of Luke. This is done against the backdrop of the fact that “All too often proposals of specific types of correspondences and structure in Luke fail to demonstrate that such composition was actually known and practiced in Luke’s day” (4–5). It is thus important for McComiskey to establish and use these “objective tests for evaluating the *probability* of authorial intent behind proposed correspondences between passages” (8). With great caution McComiskey uses the words “probably” and its cognates (e.g., 8, 13, 164 n. 4) and “likelihood” (13, 192) in this regard. The developed tests are thus mere “indicators of probability” (14). The author claims that his tests “were devised logically and experimentally through the study of universally accepted correspondence patterns” (12) and that the “purpose of the tests is to make more certain which literary devices are more probably intentional” (13).

McComiskey presents a new proposal for the structure of Luke that consists of four cycles (4:14–9:50; 9:51–13:21; 13:22–19:27; 19:28–24:53) with a sequence of twelve strata that is successively repeated in each cycle (28–29, 206–7). It is not clear why McComiskey presents the table and its explanation twice (introduction and ch. 4), but it certainly emphasizes his proposal and the fact that he sees the table as “the heart of this book” (76). More important, what remains unclear are McComiskey’s criteria for arriving at this proposed structure. There seems to be very little syntactical information based on the primary text that would convince the reader of the author’s fourfold cyclical structure.

This publication consists of six chapters, three appendices, a bibliography, an index of scripture and ancient texts, and an author index. The first two chapters are largely an evaluation of the work of Tannehill and Talbert, on which the author focuses extensively. McComiskey suggests that “the reader who finds the detailed analysis of chapters one and

two a bit heavy going ... I recommend moving to chapters three through five and the conclusion (xvi). The core of the book certainly lies in chapters 4 and 5.

In chapter 1 McComiskey evaluates the work of Robert C. Tannehill on Luke-Acts. He sees him as “representative of scholars who study correspondences that are not strictly structural in nature” (xv). He considers Tannehill’s two-volume work, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, as “the most thorough analysis available of non-structural Lukan correspondences such as previews, reviews, echoes, parallels and type-scenes” (2). The value of Tannehill’s study for McComiskey lies in three directions: the fact “that Luke used a wide variety of correspondences and constituents to these correspondences”; “he reveals Luke’s strong predisposition to interconnect passages in various ways”; and he investigates the functions and purposes of Lukan previews, reviews, echoes, parallels and type scenes” (3). According to McComiskey, the main weakness of Tannehill’s contribution is “that he has insufficient controls to evaluate whether his observed interconnections are indeed of Lukan intent” (3). Nonetheless, when applying his tests for intentionality to Tannehill’s observations, it “largely confirmed the authorial intent behind Tannehill’s observations, though the presentation here has been restricted to a few” (74).

In chapter 2 McComiskey considers the work of Talbert, who “offers the most numerous and rigorously supported collection (of structured parallels in Luke-Acts) in his book, *Literary Patterns, Theological Themes and the Genre of Luke-Acts*” (3). Talbert demonstrates for McComiskey “that detailed, patterned structure was normative in the ancient world and that Luke constructed such correspondence sets in Luke-Acts” (4). In the application of McComiskey’s tests of intentionality, he found that several of the correspondences “are probably valid, but a few are not very certain” (157), such as that of Luke 9, which would correspond to Acts 1 (161).

Chapter 3 presents and evaluates some representative examples from the Old Testament, the New Testament, and relevant Greco-Roman literature. These serve to “demonstrate that this particular structure was well known and used” (163). The insights from the Greco-Roman literature relies, justifiably, mainly on the *imitatio*-hypothesis of Thomas Brodie (202) “as a viable compositional method that could achieve the observed structure” and that is then labeled by McComiskey as “cyclical parallelism (sometimes called step-parallelism or regular parallelism)” (5, 163). This assists McComiskey in his quest for a “viable mechanism for Luke’s adoption of a structure from literature with which he was familiar” (163). But it remains unclear what *criteria* McComiskey applies to determine this structure. It seems to be based partially on the observations of previous scholars and partially on his own observations. But how exactly did he arrive at the correspondences that he identifies? Nonetheless, after the collection of examples in this

chapter, McComiskey is convinced that it “firmly establishes the precedent for Luke to use multifold cyclical parallelism and the likelihood that he was familiar with it” (192).

In chapter 4 McComiskey provides a detailed explanation of his structure of Luke’s Gospel and applies the eleven tests for intentionality to the fourfold cyclical narrative pattern. It certainly is a sign of good scholarship that McComiskey submits his own identified structure rigorously to these tests. He finds “flexibility in the number of occurrences of a specific feature” but “little flexibility in the relative location of a feature in relation to the others” (210). His conclusion is that “Such a phenomenon involving eighteen narrative features forming strata in identical order must be intentional, especially when each is corroborated by Lukan redaction” (210). McComiskey even determines that cycle four is the primary one that “served as the pattern for the other three, that cycles one and four are based on Markan material, and that “The relationship of the four cycles to one another is more obvious in a feature-by-feature discussion” (211). In this chapter McComiskey provides a wealth of interesting information and detail based on his fourfold cyclical pattern. He discusses each of the twelve strata and concludes that “few passages appear to have any difficulty with conformity to the feature that defines their strata” (225). After having applied his tests for intentionality to the cyclical narrative structure of Luke 4:14–24:53, McComiskey unequivocally states that the proposed narrative structure of this section “should be accepted confidently as of Lukan design” (267). A by-product of McComiskey’s analysis is a “new and irreversible” argument for Markan priority: Luke’s introduction to episodes are “nearly all heavily Lukan” with “certain formulae ... present in these introductions” and with “strong correlation between these formulae and the relationship of Luke to the Markan order of episodes” (273). Therefore, “Most satisfying and consistent with the data is the conclusion that Luke consciously or subconsciously employed the formulae to maintain continuity after the majority of shifts to or from the order of episodes in Mark” (284).

Chapter 5 assumes that, if Luke composed the Gospel “by arranging material according to a detailed pattern, there would be more than aesthetic purposes behind it” (6). Apart from the fact that Luke’s “use of such parallelism provides a remarkably controlled mechanism for plot development” (293, 323), the chapter searches for theological purposes behind the literary purposes. Moving through the Christology, salvation, discipleship and ecclesiology of the book, McComiskey concludes that “salvation is the central motif of the Gospel’s content” (319). Chapter 6 summarizes McComiskey’s results and insights into the conclusion.

From a technical point of view, some typing errors slipped through, such as “thorough” instead of “through” (4), “in a passages” (21), “is more rare the greater” (21), “to describe most any Gospel material” (31 n. 51), and “Unfortunately, most every argument” (269).

Furthermore, lists of footnotes in which the same source is referred to consecutively could have been presented using *ibid.* or *idem.*, instead of listing the same author and title repetitively. Some sources referred to (Du Plessis, 342 n. 2) are not listed in the bibliography. Also, the grave accent on the Greek *kai* is not substituted with an acute in any of the cases where the word is quoted outside its syntactical context (274–83), as Greek accent custom requires.

In line with the nature of the Paternoster Biblical Monograph Series, which “stands within the broad evangelical tradition of Christianity” (v), chapter 5 concludes that Luke is “patently and unabashedly evangelistic” (319) and refers to Luke as “the Evangelist” (322).

Although a technical work dealing with literary patterns in Luke’s Gospel, the book reads easily, is well-structured, logical, and easy to follow. I would recommend it to scholars particularly, although students in more advanced studies on Luke’s Gospel will also certainly benefit greatly from it. Scholars ought to take note of the author’s tests for intentionality, the additional argument on Markan priority, and the fourfold cyclical narrative structure.