The present state of Lucan studies

I. Howard Marshall

Professor Marshall of Aberdeen University is author of numerous articles and books on Lukan studies, including the newly revised Luke Historian and Theologian, the New International Greek Testament Commentary and the Tyndale commentary on Acts. His commentaries (which he forbears to mention in his article) rank among the most important and valuable works available on Luke and Acts.

Although Luke’s two-part work amounts to just over 25% of the whole NT and makes him its major contributor, it is only in recent years that his work has begun to receive the amount of attention which it deserves. Since it is virtually impossible to discuss his gospel in isolation from Acts, there is a vast amount of material to be surveyed, and our discussion of it is necessarily selective.

Introductions and surveys

For the scholar the indispensable guide to Lucan scholarship is the survey by F. Bovon who summarizes under appropriate thematic headings research between 1950 and 1983. This work is of great value because Bovon offers a critical survey of scholarship. Yet its usefulness is to some extent limited by the fact that Bovon deliberately restricts his attention to Luke as a theologian and does not consider literary and historical questions. This is a justifiable limitation because the discovery of Luke as a theologian is the most outstanding feature of contemporary scholarship.

Commentaries on Luke
Our period has been marked by the production of numerous commentaries on Luke and Acts. So far as Luke is concerned, the major work is the two-volume contribution by J. A. Fitzmyer to The Anchor Bible. Extending to 1640 pages, it is a detailed and comprehensive, but readable and lucid, work, and the student who can cope with it will not need to spend much time on other aids to study. Fitzmyer's own position is a moderately critical one; he gives good coverage to the variety of views on every topic, and his judgments are generally well-founded.

But not all readers will wish for so detailed a work. The new trend in Lucan studies was introduced to English readers by E. E. Ellis. His work assumes some basic knowledge on the part of readers and concentrates on the theology and literary structure. Originally written for the Tyndale series, it proved to be somewhat too up-market in character, but it is the best middle-length work in English.

At a more basic level help is available from G. B. Caird's excellent and stimulating mutum in parvo and from L. Morris who gives a useful verse-by-verse explanation but has very little to say on the structure and theological significance of the whole. That aspect is taken up by C. H. Talbert who draws out the structure and theology of Luke in broad lines and demonstrates abundantly the importance of structure for understanding the whole. The same approach is adopted by D. Gooding in his recent exposition; this is an interesting work which combines a traditional type of evangelical application of the text with a carefully wrought rhetorical analysis that searches for parallels between different incidents and pieces of teaching and shows how Luke develops the impression which he wishes to give of Jesus.

It may be interesting to refer to Talbert's review of Fitzmyer in which he argues that 1974 constituted a watershed in Lucan studies and that Fitzmyer is a throwback to the past: (1) His approach is atomistic, looking at short pericopes rather than larger thought-units; (2) He studies the text by comparing it with its sources instead of reading the text as a finished product using 'rhetorical criticism or modern narrative criticism'; (3) He looks for a history of the tradition used in the gospel instead of looking for the message of the text in its canonical form; (4) He dialogues with H. Conzelmann and his colleagues and has the better of the debate, but he works within the same frame of reference instead of dialoguing with Greco-Roman literature and modern literary criticism. Talbert thus sees Fitzmyer as gathering up the scholarship of a previous generation and himself as representing a 'new approach'. It can surely be argued that both approaches will continue to be necessary.

E. Schweizer's work is part of the author's trilogy on the synoptic gospels and suffers somewhat from paying less attention to the passages with parallels in Matthew and Mark. Elsewhere (in his commentary on Colossians) the author explains that he has written 'theologically' in that 'no section was written up without being preached on previously'; and certainly in this commentary he is at pains to bring out the theological significance of the text for today. Nevertheless, I must confess that I find some of his other works more exciting than this one. I have a considerable affection for Fred Danker's exposition which brings out, as no other work does, the radical call to discipleship in the gospel.

The position with regard to Acts is less satisfactory. The major work at present is the English translation of E. Haenchen's commentary, the work which pioneered the (perfectly proper) approach of asking at each point 'What was Luke trying to say?' but which couples this with a historical scepticism about the text which out-Bultmanns Bultmann. The great merit of Haenchen is that he continually provokes conservative readers with his sharp criticisms of Luke and forces them to come up with better answers.

Much more satisfying are the two complementary volumes by F. F. Bruce. Originally produced in the 1950s, both volumes have now been revised and updated. The one is on the Greek text and is much concerned with textual, syntactical and historical matters, while the other is on the English text and offers more of a theological and practical exposition. Bruce emerges as the most outstanding defender of Luke as a competent historian.

On a smaller scale R. P. C. Hanson offers a moderate post-Haenchen approach characterized by sound common sense. Most recently D. J. Williams gives a very full, detailed exposition presented at a simple level. Like his fellow-Australian, Leon Morris, Williams is not so good on looking at the 'larger thought-units'.

Sources
The question of Luke's sources for the gospel remains controversial. The majority of scholars accept the two-document hypothesis (use of Mark and Q supplemented by other traditions and possible written materials), and a few would elaborate on this with some form of the Proto-Luke hypothesis (according to which material from Q and L was first joined together, possibly to form a 'gospel', and possibly forming the framework into which Marcan material was subsequently inserted rather than vice versa). But M. D. Goulder and J. Drury argue that Q never existed and that Luke was dependent upon the previously composed Matthew which he rearranged for his own purposes; Goulder originally developed this theory in relation to the hypothesis that Luke (like other biblical writers) structured the gospel to fit in with a Jewish lectionary, and he promises a detailed defence of his theory of dependence on Matthew.

The sources of Acts are also a puzzle. While Haenchen pressed scepticism about the use of written sources to the
limit, more recent writers have been more open to their use; this is especially true of G. Lüdemann whose discussion of the historicity of Acts depends on a careful separation of tradition from redaction.28

Authorship
The authorship of the two-part work is still a matter of controversy. The majority of scholars deny that Luke ‘the beloved physician’ was the author, mainly on the grounds that he commits historical errors which a companion of Paul could not have committed; but an important new exception to this consensus is J. A. Fitzmyer. I will stick my neck out and say that in this controversy one thing is certain: whoever wrote Luke–Acts was not the author of any other books on the NT, whether the Pastoral Epistles25 or Ephesians.26

Historicity
The prior question, therefore, is the one of historicity. M. Hengel has put forward a strong case on general grounds that ‘Luke is no less trustworthy than other historians of antiquity’.27 G. Lüdemann has criticized the general lack of interest in the question and has written a detailed historical commentary on Acts. He claims to find a remarkable amount of reliable tradition in Acts, but he takes it for granted that the speeches ascribed to the various actors are one and all Lucan compositions; he dismisses accounts of the miraculous with such statements as ‘People lame from childhood onwards are (regrettably) incurable’; and he advocates a chronology of the early church which is seriously at odds with that of Luke. In a series of essays C. J. Hemer has produced archaeological backing for the historicity of small details in the narrative, and at the time of his much-lamented early death (June 1987) had all but completed a full-scale study of the topic, which is being prepared for publication by Conrad Gempf.

Redaction and theology
But the major interest of scholarship is in Luke the theologian. Monographs have been produced on virtually every aspect of this topic. Luke–Acts is a particularly promising field for the redactional analysis necessary for investigating this subject because we can compare the gospel with the other synoptics and also with Acts. Over-all treatments of Luke’s theology include a full-length discussion with thematic bibliography by J. A. Fitzmyer28 and a very readable account by R. F. O’Toole.29 O’Toole rightly identifies the central theme of Luke–Acts as the way in which God continues to bring salvation to his people, and he expounds this topic simply and clearly.

Purpose and Sitz im Leben
An important basic question is the general character and aim of Luke–Acts. But it has proved virtually impossible for scholars to identify a specific setting for the gospel or for its sequel. ‘All attempts to tie Luke–Acts to one community and to its concerns have failed’ writes R. F. O’Toole.30 Therefore the work must be placed in a more general situation. The prologue to Luke has been particularly studied, since it is obvious that a writer’s own statement of his purpose should be the starting-point for enquiry. The view expressed there that Luke wrote to provide confirmation for Christians like Theophilus of the truth of the Christian message which they had heard or read should be accepted as the basis for more detailed elaboration. Luke writes to tell again the story of Jesus, based on the accounts of ‘eyewitnesses and ministers of the word’, to substantiate what was taught about Jesus in the preaching and teaching heard by Theophilus; he narrates the story of the foundational period of the early church to show how the mission took place in accordance with prophecy and at the direction of the Lord, and to confirm that the establishment of the church of believers, both Jewish and Gentile, was part of the divine plan; thus he demonstrates that the gospel really does bring salvation. The story is obviously incomplete in that it is concerned with the church’s mission and says next to nothing about the kind of inner-church problems reflected in the Pauline correspondence and other NT writings.31

Eschatology
What, then, are its characteristics? First, there is the question of Luke’s eschatology. H. Conzelmann, who has the credit for being the first to direct attention to Luke as a theologian, argued that Luke was coming to terms with the delay of the parousia which was calling in question the early Christian belief that the coming of Jesus had inaugurated the last days and that the end of the age was imminent. Luke reacted to this changed situation by replacing the scheme of ‘age of promise’ and ‘era of fulfilment’ with the three-stage scheme of ‘age of promise’, ‘the middle of time (Jesus and the early church)’ and the ‘final age’.32 Despite the support given to this scheme by (e.g.) Fitzmyer, it has become evident that the idea of salvation-history is older than Luke, and that he shares the two-stage scheme: the coming of Jesus is still the inauguration of the last times. Nevertheless, Conzelmann is right to establish that, for Luke, the coming of Jesus and the establishment of the church belong together as the foundation of Christianity. Conzelmann further argues that for Luke the parousia is shifted off into the distant future and the role of the imminent expectation of the end is, so to speak, replaced by the presence of the Spirit who takes the place of the awaited Lord. But here too Conzelmann seems to have pushed his point too far, and more recent writers have insisted that the expectation of the end is by no means dead in his writings.33

Christology
Within this framework the question of Luke’s understanding of Jesus arises. The current tendency is to stress the prophetic character of Jesus.34 E. Franklin has drawn attention to the central importance of the ascension and the character of Jesus as Servant and Lord.35 The importance of the OT for Luke’s christology is the theme of a dissertation by D. L. Bock in which he argues that Luke presents a unified portrait of Jesus as ‘Messiah-Servant’ who is seen, as the story progresses, to be a ‘more than Messiah’ figure in that he is the Lord. This offers a corrective to an over-stress on the prophetic elements in Luke’s picture.36 What emerges is that Luke’s christology is complex and is not to be reduced to one single, simple category.

The death of Jesus
Clearly Jesus is the Saviour, but how does he save? The lack of reference in Acts to the death of Jesus as a means of atonement or as a sacrifice for sins has led to the suggestion that
Luke does not see it as a saving event in the manner of, say, Paul. But the discussion of this topic has been conducted mainly in German. But, whatever be the final verdict on this point, C. K. Barrett has rightly shown how Luke has a clear *theologia crucis* as his own practical equivalent to Paul's doctrine of dying with Christ.

The Holy Spirit
Luke's understanding of the Spirit was taken up by J. D. G. Dunn who stressed the enthusiastic, charismatic nature of the church's beginnings, as presented somewhat one-sidedly by Luke, and who argued that the Spirit functions as the sign of the new age in Jesus whose experience is paradigmatic for the church. Various aspects of this thesis have been challenged by M. M. B. Turner who interprets the Spirit in Jesus as the Spirit of prophecy rather than the sign of the new age. Discussion continues on whether Luke understands the Spirit in Acts as the gift of salvation (as in Paul) or as the prophetic equipping of the church for its mission.

Israel, the Gentiles and the law
One of the major areas of discussion is the place of the Gentiles in Luke's theology. Nobody doubts now that this topic is of central importance in Luke's thought. J. Dupont has demonstrated very effectively that it is a conscious aim of Luke to show how the conversion of the Gentiles and their incorporation into the people of God is in line with OT prophecy. But the question of whether Luke essentially sees the Gentiles as being brought into an existing Israel which for its part keeps the law or whether he regards the church as the new Israel composed of believing Jews and Gentiles remains a question of debate. J. Jervell strongly denies that Luke thought of a new Israel. S. G. Wilson denies that Luke had a carefully thought-out theology of the Gentiles and holds that he took a pragmatic approach to this (and other) problems. In a later work Wilson argues that Luke's position on the law is not completely clear or consistent; basically he seems to say that it is natural enough for Jewish Christians to continue to keep the law, but Gentiles do not need to do so although they are in some way bound by Mosaic principles. These conclusions are convincingly challenged by C. L. Blomberg and M. M. B. Turner, who see in Acts the slowly developing recognition of the implications of the new covenant.

At the opposite pole from Jervell stands J. T. Sanders, who in a thoroughly researched and meticulously detailed book argues that Luke is guilty of a sustained and bitter polemic against the unbelieving Jews and against Christian Jews for their opposition to the inclusion of Gentiles in the church. In Luke's opinion, the world will be much better off when "the Jews" get what they deserve and the world is rid of them. Sanders makes some interesting points, but he spoils them by exaggeration and harsh language, and his work can be convincingly challenged at many points.

Social and political issues
Older writers drew attention to Luke's concern for the outcasts of society. The current trend is to explore his attitudes to the problems of the poor and politics. J. D. Yoder is responsible for popularizing the hypothesis that in Luke 4:16-30 Jesus was proclaiming a 'Year of Jubilee' with social and economic as well as spiritual consequences. An exegetical foundation for this hypothesis is offered by R. B. Sloan who stresses that the Jubilee concept is primarily religious; but while the presence of the motif cannot be doubted, my feeling is that it is much less prominent and decisive in Luke than Sloan suggests. The view that Jesus adopted a revolutionary political stance is developed on a popular level by R. J. Cassidy, but again, while the social concern of Jesus is rightly expounded, it is a far cry from concern to social and political activism aimed at some kind of political revolution. From Luke's emphasis on loving and forgiving one's enemies J. M. Ford draws out implications for non-violence today, although her argument that Jesus acted contrary to the expectations expressed in Luke 1-2 and in the preaching of the Baptist is unconvincing. It is more likely that Luke intended the Magnificat and Benedictus to be interpreted in the light of the story that he goes on to narrate.

The specific question of Luke's teaching on poverty and riches has attracted numerous studies. We may mention the work of L. T. Johnson who argues that possessions have a symbolic function in Luke, of W. E. Pilgrim, who offers a well-balanced and readable exposition of the Lucan material and stresses how Luke is warning the wealthy Christians of his day of the danger in which they find themselves, and of D. P. Seccombe who offers a scholarly dissertation on the topic in which he refutes ideas that Luke sees poverty as an ideal or encourages asceticism for its own sake.

Conclusion
We have by no means considered all the themes of current Lucan scholarship. In particular, we have not looked at detailed monographs on specific passages. The interested reader will, however, find plenty of indications in the works cited above for further study. Nor have we attempted to indicate whether any kind of consensus is emerging from current Lucan study. While the general lines of Luke's thought may seem clear enough, there is still plenty of scope for discussion on matters both major and minor.

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7 On an even larger scale R. E. Brown offers what is in effect a commentary on Lk. 1-2 in *The Birth of the Messiah* (London, 1977).
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<th>Abbreviations used</th>
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<td>CBQ</td>
<td>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</td>
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<td>Exp. T</td>
<td>Expository Times</td>
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<td>Int.</td>
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<td>JSNT</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</td>
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<td>RTP</td>
<td>Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie</td>
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<td>TLZ</td>
<td>Theologische Literaturzeitung</td>
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<td>TR nf</td>
<td>Theologische Rundschau (neue Folge)</td>
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<td>Tyn.B</td>
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