

"GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR": THE RHETORIC OF  
POVERTY AND POSSESSIONS IN LUKE-ACTS

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## INTRODUCTION

That Luke-Acts is especially concerned with economic justice is one of the givens of modern Lukan interpretation. The evidence for this Tendenz is clear and ubiquitous, for Luke's story fairly brims with material about the poor and the wealthy, the relations between them, their places in God's oikonomia, and their roles in the divine agenda. Firmly rooted in the prophetic tradition, Luke uses oracles, parables, proverbs, pronouncements, and episodes to engender in the minds of his readers a world in which poverty and wealth are issues of paramount importance.<sup>1</sup>

This unique emphasis on economic matters is well-tilled soil within the broader field of Lukan studies. Most of what Luke-Acts has to say on the matter has been identified and treated from one or another methodological perspective.<sup>2</sup> Much remains to be done,

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<sup>1</sup>Some of the more obvious and well-known examples follow. (1) Oracles. Luke 1:53 [in Mary's Song] "He [God] has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty;" Luke 4:18 [in Jesus' speech at Nazareth] "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." (2) Parables. The Rich Fool (12:13-21); The Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31). (3) Proverbs. "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (18:25). (4) Pronouncements. "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God; . . . Woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation" (6:20 & 24). (5) Dramatic episodes. The Rich Young Ruler (18:18-30); Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11).

I use the name Luke here for convenience only. By it I refer to the implied author, and make no claims concerning the identity of the actual author.

<sup>2</sup>Within the past three decades alone, a sizeable number of historical, literary, and sociological studies of this phenomenon have been published. See, e.g., H.J. Degenhardt, Lukas Evangelist der Armen: Besitz und Besitzverzicht in den lukanischen Schriften

however, on how the story persuades (or attempts to persuade) its audience to embrace a specific set of values regarding wealth and poverty, and on how those values relate to other narrative ideals and patterns of persuasion. That is, we need to adopt a pragmatic (reader-oriented) approach in order to illuminate the rhetoric of Luke-Acts concerning issues of economic justice.<sup>3</sup> This paper is a contribution to that effort.

What I propose is an analysis of one salient aspect of Luke-Acts, namely its characterization of the Pharisees as fraudulent, as unjust to the poor and marginalized members of society, and as "lovers of money" (philargyroi [Luke 16:14]). I will contend that Luke has purposely drawn a causal link between the ability to see and hear (=spiritual perception) and the proper attitudes towards

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(Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1965); L.T. Johnson, The Literary Function of Possessions in Luke-Acts (SBLDS 39. Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977); idem, Sharing Possessions: Mandate and Symbol of Faith (OBT 9, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981); R.J. Karris, "Poor and Rich: The Lukan Sitz im Leben," (Pp. 112-125 in C.H. Talbert, Perspectives on Luke-Acts [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1978]. W.E. Pilgrim, Good News to the Poor: Wealth and Poverty in Luke-Acts (Minneapolis: Augsburg Pub. House, 1981); B. Aymer, "A Socioreligious Revolution: A Sociological Exegesis of 'Poor' and 'Rich' in Luke-Acts," unpublished doctoral dissertation (Boston University, 1987); H. Moxnes, The Economy of the Kingdom: Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke's Gospel (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988). And, of course, critical commentaries have also contributed to our understanding of rich and poor in Luke's writings.

<sup>3</sup>Here the term rhetoric is not meant to refer to classical formal rhetoric (as in the Greek and Roman rhetorical handbooks), but rather, denotes the broader sense of the term as appropriated by W.C. Booth in his influential studies, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1961, rev. ed., 1983) and A Rhetoric of Irony (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1974). Booth successfully demonstrated the ubiquity of rhetorical strategems (e.g., various kinds of narration, control of distance, sequence, characterization, etc.) by which narrative texts exert a persuasive force on their readers.

poverty and possessions. In other words, the reader is led to the conclusion that one's ability to perceive--and therefore to grasp and take part in--the basileia tou theou is contingent upon one's orientation toward and handling of money and possessions within a social framework. Luke's Pharisees serve as negative paradigms in this sense, for they are the great observers who continually look but never see.

The methodology employed here is rather new to the field and so requires further definition before we turn to specific textual data. Following an analysis of salient passages, I shall conclude by drawing out some broader implications for our understanding of Luke-Acts, and by raising some questions for modern theology and praxis.

#### I. READING READERS READING LUKE-ACTS

A pragmatic (reader-response) approach requires that we take account not only of the text and its rhetorical patterns but also of the audience and the sequential, dynamic activity that we call reading. Meaning is not in the text, but rather, is produced when a reader engages the text and "actualizes" it, that is, brings it to life, fills in its gaps, and draws implications from it in the ongoing, dialogical process of reading. From this perspective, an interpreter's proper "object" is not the text itself, but rather, what happens when a text is read by a particular reader.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>The host of theoretical issues raised by these preliminary observations cannot be adequately addressed in this limited venue. For a fuller development of this hermeneutic, see my On Character Building: The Reader and the Rhetoric of Characterization in Luke-Acts (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), pp. 11-

For our purposes here three methodological phenomena require further emphasis and illumination. First, reading is a sequential cognitive activity and, as such, takes place over a specific time period. Second, reading is constructive. Characters, for example, are "built" by the reader as reading progresses and more and more narrative information about them accumulates. The reader-response critic's goal, then, is not to arrive at a static conception of a character, but rather to track the reader's successive construal and assessment of that character throughout the narrative. Third, while processing the text, the reader is influenced, manipulated, and affected in various ways. In other words, textual structures, which must be negotiated and processed by readers, are inherently rhetorical; they oblige the audience to take up particular points of view and envision another (narrative) world. If readers are to read successfully, they must look beyond their horizons, "suspend disbelief," and, at least temporarily, see things in a new way.

Luke-Acts is designed to maneuver its readers into alignment with the witnesses (autoptai and martyres) who are the "insiders" of the story. That is, the Lukan texts are structured to persuade readers to become perceptive, believing witnesses of and for "the things which have been fulfilled among us" (Luke 1:1). From start to finish, readers are urged to see, hear, and respond to these things in an appropriate manner (i.e., in accord with the value-system of the narrative). Many kinds of rhetoric are used in this

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59. For those who wish to locate this theoretical model within the field of modern literary theory, see *ibid*, p. 179, ftnt. 25.

overall strategy. Direct commentary by the Spirit-authenticated protagonist is one such ploy.

And turning to the disciples privately he said, "Blessed are the eyes which see the things that you see. For I say to you that many prophets and kings wished to see the things you are seeing but did not see, and to hear the things that you are hearing, but did not hear." (Luke 10:23b-24)

All of this is directed at the reader, who has been "seeing and hearing" (=reading) the host of wonderful happenings to which Jesus refers. That is, an implicit analogy is being drawn between the reader's reading and the characters' seeing and hearing. This rhetoric of perception is ubiquitous throughout the story. In the prologue, the emphasis is on witnessing and "carefully following" the story of the faith. And the narrative ends with Paul speaking to the Jewish leaders in Rome and quoting Isaiah.

"Go to this people and say,  
'You will keep on hearing,  
But you will not understand;  
And you will keep on seeing,  
But you will not perceive.'"  
(Acts 28:26-27=Isaiah 6:9-10)

Paul concludes that the Gentiles will listen even if many of the Jews do not (Acts 28:28b). Insiders and outsiders are clearly differentiated in terms of how they see and hear--perceptively or not perceptively--and the reader is being urged to be an insider, a perceptive observer/participant.

This rhetoric of perception is, however, most often and most clearly manifested in the interaction of the secondary characters with the protagonists. The narrative focuses attention on whether or not these secondary characters recognize and respond correctly to the divine will being manifested through the protagonists. The

text repeatedly foregrounds descriptions of the ways in which the intermediate and background figures do or do not rightly perceive and commit themselves to what confronts them in Jesus and other agents of the divine. The reader is thus forced to reflect on his or her own perceptions, and is encouraged to reject some ways of seeing and hearing, and emulate others.

A clearly defined "hierarchy of perspectives," graded by the narrator and other authoritative voices, thus develops as reading progresses. This arrangement of carefully graded perspectives, in turn, is the means by which the narrative unfolds its fundamental catalog of norms and values. In Luke-Acts, what determines whether a character will recognize and respond correctly is the quality of that person's "heart," their moral orientation or proclivities. At its root, therefore, Luke's rhetoric of perception is designed to shape the character of the reader, to persuade the reader to adopt certain values in order to be an ideal witness of and to God's salvific initiative.<sup>5</sup>

## II. LUKE'S PHARISEES AS "LOVERS OF MONEY"

In the sixteenth chapter of Luke, the reader's attention is focused on wealth and its relation to spiritual well-being. Jesus tells a few parables to the effect that one cannot simultaneously serve "God and Mammon" (16:13b). The Pharisees' response to these

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<sup>5</sup>The notions of graded perspectives and a catalog of norms are based on W. Iser, The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University, 1978), pp. 100-101. For more on Luke's rhetoric, see Darr, On Character Building, pp. 49-59 and 91-92.

lessons, and the narrator's and Jesus' sanctions of the Pharisees are striking.

Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money (philargyroi), were listening to all these things, and they were ridiculing him. And he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is valued highly among men is detestable in the sight of God." (16:14-15)

The narrator's claim that the Pharisees were lovers of money (Luke 16:14) has startled some commentators, especially those who (perhaps in the just pursuit of better Jewish-Christian relations in the modern day) have tried to build a case for Luke having had some admiration for this Jewish leadership group. To downplay the accusation, one such critic even claims that it "is without basis in the Gospel or the Acts."<sup>6</sup> When viewed from a reader-response perspective, however, the narrator's negative assessment of these Jewish leaders is hardly surprising, for it has been signalled in a number of ways prior to chapter sixteen.

The reader has built the Pharisees as a group character from their initial appearance in Luke 5:17-26 right up to the striking assertions of 16:14-15. What this means is that group traits have been imputed to individual Pharisees and, reciprocally, traits of individual Pharisees have been attributed to the group as a whole. This tendency to "build consistency" among members of groups is a natural aspect of reading; but Luke encourages this proclivity by

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<sup>6</sup>J.T. Sanders, "The Pharisees in Luke-Acts," in The Living Text: Essays in Honor of Ernest W. Saunders, ed. D. Groh and R. Jewett (New York: University Press of America, 1985), pp. 155-56. For another unconvincing attempt to ameliorate the charges against the Pharisees in this passage, see R.L. Brawley, Luke-Acts and the Jews: Conflict, Apology, and Conciliation (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1987), p. 86.

reporting that Pharisees "from every village of Galilee and Judea and Jerusalem" were part of the initial meeting between Jesus and the Pharisees. This is not just "Lukan hyperbole," as one critic would have it, but a signal to the reader the Pharisees are to be construed as a unified and consistent character group. Throughout the territory of Jesus' ministry (Galilee, Judea, Jerusalem), the Pharisees act as one.<sup>7</sup>

Audience construction of the Pharisees in the mid-section of the Gospel is complex and we cannot hope to treat all of it here. We can, however, trace some of the major lines of development in this process. Within two short chapters of their first appearance in the story, the Pharisees have already exhibited several traits that will characterize them throughout the narrative. They are (or consider themselves to be) authorities on Israel's law. But they disagree strongly with Jesus' interpretation of that law, and (implicitly as well as explicitly) reject his claim to superior interpretive authority. They oppose Jesus by "dialoguing in their hearts" (5:21-22) and "murmuring" (5:30) against him. The former is a freighted clause in that Simeon's oracle (2:34-35) has primed the reader to look for those in Israel who will oppose Jesus, "so that the thoughts (dialogismous) of many hearts may be revealed." The latter is also fraught with significance for it recalls the murmuring (egoggyzon) of the people of Israel against God and

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<sup>7</sup>This point must be emphasized, for some critics have held that individual Pharisees or small groups of Pharisees (and their actions) are to be distanced from the group as a whole. For more on this debate, see Darr, On Character Building, pp. 93-94.

Moses during the exodus and wilderness wanderings (e.g., Numbers 14:26-30a LXX).<sup>8</sup>

What is most striking about the Pharisees, however, is their penchant for observation. Not only are they the great observers of the law, they are also the most persistent observers of Jesus and his activities. The attentive audience cannot help but note their obsessive watchfulness, indeed, their scrutinization of Jesus and those who follow him. Lest there be any mistaking this particular proclivity, however, the narrator draws direct attention to it by applying to the Pharisees the forceful and somewhat unusual verb, paratereo (6:7), meaning observe closely, scrutinize. This strong word (in its morphological variations) becomes a convenient "tag" for the Pharisees in the rest of the story (see 14:1, 17:20). The Pharisees are the observers par excellence of this narrative.

The irony, of course, is that the great observers--those who guard tradition and watch Jesus most carefully--repeatedly fail to perceive in Jesus' person, proclamation, and astonishing activity the inauguration of "the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:19). By the end of Luke 6, the reader has already begun to ask why the Pharisees are so blind, and has begun to supply the answer. Their "hearts" are not right. Reduced and set into formal sequence, the dialogue between text and reader goes like this:

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<sup>8</sup>On the significance of Simeon's oracle about "dialoguing in the heart," see R. Tannehill, The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation; Vol. 1, The Gospel According to Luke (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 40-44.

Text: The Pharisees see and hear the divine revelation in Jesus and others; indeed they observe it carefully.

Reader: Do they respond appropriately?

Text: No.

Reader: Why not?

Text: Because they consistently fail to recognize it.

Reader: Why?

Text: Because their hearts are not right.

Reader: In what sense(s)?

Text: They are prideful, complainers, self-righteous, unrepentent, unjust, lovers of money, and so forth.

In short, the Pharisees come to manifest a veritable catalog of the anti-values of Luke's story. Once again, the audience is being urged to shun these faulty attitudes and practices and the spiritual blindness they engender.

Prominent among the spiritual deficiencies attributed to the Pharisees are the related faults of injustice to the marginalized (the sick, the powerless, the sinful, the poor) and love of money and possessions. The reader must make this attribution indirectly through retrospection on the message of John the Baptist. In Luke chapter seven, Jesus delivers a short discourse on John's role in the divine plan. He was the designated forerunner who prepared the way. He was the greatest individual born of women. And yet, "the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he" (7:28). These words galvanize the crowd. The narrator's interpretation of the crowd's response is important for the reader's construction of the Pharisees.

When they heard this, all the people and the tax collectors--having been baptized with the baptism of John--justified God. But the Pharisees and the lawyers--not having been baptized by him--rejected the purpose [boulen] of God for themselves. (7:29-30)

The crucial criterion for inclusion in the Kingdom of God is clearly the baptism of John. But what was this baptism and why is it so significant? The reader will remember that John preached "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (3:3). His job was to ready the hearts of the people so that they would be able to "see the salvation of God" (3:6) when it appeared. Repentance is not an end in itself, but rather, is a necessary pre-condition for perceiving God's salvation when he confronts them. Thus Jesus and the disciples go on preaching repentance even as they proclaim the advent of kingdom of God. But this repentance is more complex than simply feeling sorry for one's wrong-doing. John the Baptist not only delivers a threat of divine judgment and a challenge to repent, but also adds teeth to the message by exhorting people to "bring forth the fruit" of repentance. The nature of this "fruit" is defined in three vignettes of John's interaction with those to whom he preaches. These scenes are posed as typical (rather than specific) as seen by the repeated use of the imperfect tense. The upshot of all this is that the fruit of repentance is defined as concern for the welfare of others, especially those who are less fortunate. The main stumbling block to genuine repentance and the fruit-bearing that results from it is the abuse of privilege and power. Disregard for the welfare of others may be rooted in one's religious elitism ("We are the descendents of Abraham [3:7-11]), or one's participation in a tax system that defrauds a vulnerable

populace (3:12-13), or a military system that permits soldiers to extort unarmed civilians (3:14). That all three of these examples involve matters of economic justice cannot be lost on the reader.

The reader assumes that there is a logical connection between the Pharisees' rejection of God's will (boulen) and their failure (or refusal?) to undergo John's baptism. That is, the reader will now attribute the anti-values of John's message to the Pharisees: they are unrepentant, and their lack of repentance has to do with religious elitism (which they have already manifested in relation to the tax collectors), injustice toward economically or socially disadvantaged groups, and an unhealthy focus on possessions. Each of these negative traits will, in fact, be attributed directly to them as the story unfolds.

The most succinct and overt denunciation of the Pharisees as practicing economic injustice is voiced by Jesus during a meal at the house of a Pharisee (11:37-54). Among other criticisms that Jesus levels at the group are that (1) they are full of extortion (harpages [11:39]), and (2) they neglect justice (krisin) and the love (agape) of God. It is very clear that Jesus' condemnation is not about moral abstractions, but rather targets concrete economic and social ills. According to Luke's Jesus (a fully authoritative voice), the Pharisees take advantage of others. They extort money (i.e., steal from the vulnerable), neglect justice, and set aside the love of God (agape tou theou here connotes a self-giving love patterned upon and motivated by God's gracious, wholly unmerited

salvific actions toward humanity). Such abuse of power virtually defines the narrative's perspective on evil.<sup>9</sup>

Jesus' next meal at the house of a Pharisee also becomes the occasion for criticising the Pharisee's unhealthy attitude toward money and concomitant neglect of the poor and marginalized of society. At 14:12-14 Jesus excoriates his host (the leader of the Pharisees) concerning his guest-list and the motivation behind it.

When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind . . .

The strong implication is that the Pharisee has invited friends, relatives, and wealthy neighbors in hopes of reciprocation. If he were to invite the poor, there would be no such doubt about his intentions. Once again, readers encounter strong evidence that the Pharisees' "heart problems" have to do largely with bad attitudes concerning social status and wealth.

It comes as no surprise to the reader, then, that in chapter sixteen the narrator refers to the Pharisees as "lovers of money" (philargyroi), and depicts them as ridiculing Jesus for his ideas about economic justice. From their rejection of John's message, to Simon the Pharisee's failure to provide Jesus with the provisions due a guest (7:36-50), to Jesus' observation that the Pharisees extort money and give alms for the wrong reasons, to the harangue

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<sup>9</sup>For suggestive applications of social categories to these accusations against the Pharisees, see H. Moxnes, The Economy of the Kingdom: Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke's Gospel (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 109-126.

about inviting only rich guests to dinner, the Pharisees have been depicted as exchanging love of God (11:42) for love of money.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The Pharisees are the observers par excellence of God's will as manifested in Jesus and others. Nevertheless, they continually fail to recognize it. They therefore embody the theme of "seeing but not seeing, and hearing but not hearing." The cause of their spiritual obtuseness is the condition of their "hearts." Many of the anti-values of the story--particularly those having to do with economic justice--are demonstrated in their thoughts and actions. The rhetorical thrust of this characterization is to urge readers to embrace God's will and to reject unjust economic behaviors.

Luke's rhetoric of poverty and possessions, like that of the prophet Isaiah, is not an abstract bid for charity, but is rooted in the summons to participate in a redeemed world order. Norbert Lohfink chides those who would mistake the former for the latter: "Anyone who interprets the central texts of the Bible concerning the poor as meaning some kind of aid for the poor that is possible without faith and without transformation of the world within the believing community, is misusing these texts and is not doing them justice."<sup>10</sup> Recognizing and responding to the basileia tou theou are not possible so long as economic injustice clouds our vision; but doing economic justice does not--in and of itself--constitute participation in the reign of God.

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<sup>10</sup>Option for the Poor: The Basic Principle of Liberation Theology in the Light of the Bible (Berkeley, CA: Bibal Press, 1987), 78.