

# Ideology in Luke-Acts: A Firmer Grasp of the Obvious

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One of Fred Wisse's challenging assertions was that the major elements of the study of early Christianity have long since been elucidated. What remains for us today is to sift through the "scholarly rubble" that is left over from the foundational work accomplished over the previous few centuries.

Although some of his colleagues delighted in posing the question of why then he bothered to remain a New Testament scholar, his views on the value of biblical research were in reality quite positive. The fact that so much had already been accomplished was cause for celebration and called for wide dissemination to an interested public, whether through lecture or sermon. What remained to be done, even if it would likely never alter significantly the overall framework of interpretation that had previously been constructed, was nonetheless as valuable a task.

By way of example, in his view, Rudolf Bultmann's single chapter on the historical Jesus said about all that could be said about Jesus in terms of generally accepted canons of historical research. However, despite this negative outlook on future discovery (Bultmann's portrait and his methodological conservatism was a frequent target of leaders of the Jesus Seminar), Bultmann's Jesus research was a solidly positive contribution that said much more about Jesus than could be said of many other historic figures in Antiquity.

Fred Wisse adopted a similar approach to the study of the primitive Christian movement and of Gnosticism. He did not employ New Testament or Gnostic texts to prove the existence of a multitude of early Christian or Gnostic communities and theologies. His aims were much more modest. His method was again not apt to produce any

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great change in the ‘big picture’ as it pertained to the study of these traditions. But it was certainly valuable in that what he asserted one could say about them was more reliable than the results of speculative efforts that pushed the available textual data well beyond its limits as historical evidence.

The concept of ‘ideology,’ part of the analysis of the poetics of biblical narrative of Israeli scholar Meir Sternberg, in my opinion likewise helps to strengthen our understanding of core beliefs of early Christians. Unlike the work of other literary critics of biblical narrative who seek the novel in their interpretations, Sternberg contented himself with exposing what could often be termed ‘commonplace’ observations about God and humanity. Yet even if they were not new, the fundamental characteristics of the Hebrew (and Christian in our case) religious mindset are worthy of continual exposition because of their central place in the thought-world of the Bible and its associated community of believers. As a bonus, the term ‘ideology’ has the value to NT interpreters of being broader in scope than ‘theology.’ It does not prejudge the issue of whether ‘theology’ was present in a developed form in the first century or if the term is anachronistic. And this in turn allows us to explain the ideas of early Christianity in terms of their social function as well as elements of a theological system.

### Aspects of Sternberg’s Literary Criticism

The breadth and depth of Sternberg’s critical efforts is daunting to any student of his work. By way of introduction, several aspects of his thought relevant to the subject at hand, drawn from the introductory chapter of *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* entitled “Literary Text, Literary Approach: Getting the Questions Straight” ([Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985], 1–57), may be helpful to review.

Sternberg strongly asserts that biblical narrative (for him in the Hebrew Bible) is an artistic production, an important purpose of which is to communicate a particular view of God and humanity. The Bible is “not just an artful work . . . but a literary work” (2). It is not a crude, unliterary retelling of folk stories interspersed with fragments of material representing the contributions of other schools of thought on religious and theological matters, even though its material may well have been derived from diverse sources. Nor is it a clumsily edited

collection of materials that often includes well-crafted and entertaining stories.

For Sternberg, the poetic function of biblical narrative dominates it to such an extent that there are few, if any, repetitions, changes of style, or antiquarian references that are not deliberate. Literary criteria which formerly served to identify source materials and editorial reworking, or were used to reconstruct the history and social setting of ancient Israel, are put to an entirely different use in narrative analysis of this kind—they serve as tools to communicate particular views about God and humanity.

Sternberg classifies the familiar approaches to the Bible “... under no more than two heads, which I shall call source oriented versus discourse oriented inquiry” (14). For him, the appropriate literary approach to biblical narrative is discourse oriented, since this best explained how the Bible communicated its message. In this regard, the poetic function was not simply another literary characteristic, it was the essential element of biblical narrative. “What determines literariness is not the mere presence but the dominance of the poetic function, the control it exerts over all the rest” (40). While not disparaging source-oriented criticism as an exercise in itself, in his opinion it could never hope to explain narrative purpose.

It must be said, however, that by ‘literary approach’ Sternberg means ‘reading,’ albeit a close and engaged reading. He writes: “Like all social discourse, biblical narrative is oriented to an addressee and regulated by a purpose or a set of purposes involving the addressee. Hence our primary business as readers is to make purposive sense of it, so as to explain the *whats* and the *hows* in terms of the *whys* of communication” (1).

In keeping with his emphasis on explaining the communicative purpose of literary features in biblical narrative, Sternberg eschews the idea that a literary approach should consist largely in noting the presence and describing the function of formal literary features of the text. Not that he denies or ignores common elements of narrative style. He is quick to acknowledge their presence in all sorts of literature. But he does not attribute meaning to them in themselves. He speaks of

“... dimensions of biblical form which would (and, as will appear, do) play a central role in a poetics. For example: (1) temporal ordering; (2) analogical design . . . ; (3) point of view . . . ; (4) representational proportions . . . ; (5) informational gapping and

ambiguity; (6) strategies of characterization and judgment; (7) modes of coherence, in units ranging from a verse to a book; (8) the interplay of verbal and compositional pattern. Having pursued these techniques longer than most, I would be the last to slight their importance. The point is rather that this importance is even greater than it may seem: all these are features (and even some universals) of narrative, not differentiae of literary narrative. In varying combinations, they occur in discourse that nobody would regard as literary, including pure didacticism and unadorned history writing and the stories we tell one another in everyday life. It is precisely their availability to all and sundry that divests them of typological value" (38–39).

On its own, the cataloguing of formal literary devices is counter-productive to the task of interpreting what a text attempts to say. An interpreter must explain the communicative purpose of a given literary feature as it functions in its context, and not merely define it in terms of a textbook definition in a catalogue of formal literary devices. Indeed, it does not matter to Sternberg if a particular feature is found in only a single biblical text. It is how such techniques are used and combined with one another to accomplish a communicative purpose that is important.

Since a sense of coherence entails a sense of purpose, it is not enough to trace a pattern; it must also be validated and justified in terms of communicative design. After all, the very question of whether that pattern exists in the text—whether it has any relevance and claim to perceptibility—turns on the question of what it does in the text (2).

Sternberg offers his own comprehensive theory of the poetics of biblical narrative. He contends that three functional principles, ideology, aesthetics and historiography combine harmoniously to produce meaning in the Bible. History is shaped by ideology, and both are presented by means of the aesthetics of storytelling.

This brings us to the most comprehensive ground on which ideology and aesthetics meet to shape history, and with it the narrative as a whole. They join forces to originate a strategy of telling that casts reading as a drama, interpretation as an ordeal that enacts and distinguishes the human predicament. It is here that the three regulating principles merge into a single poetics, where their interests

and formations so coalesce that they can hardly be told apart in the finished message (46).

In Sternberg's view, Biblical narrative reflects the reality of everyday human life as its authors understood it. It is ambiguous and ambivalent, mirroring the fact that humans do not know the future, rarely have sufficient information upon which to base their judgments and actions, and quickly discover that their existence is filled with uncertainties. Biblical narrative, in respecting the human predicament, relates its history by means of an aesthetics of story telling that imitates that situation. Readers, in turn, experience the uncertainties of life as they struggle to make sense of what the narrator chooses to tell them. The ordeal of reading is a challenge in the same way that comprehending life's events is challenging.

Sternberg maintains that the limited, partial knowledge of humans is expressed in the Bible's ideology.

Within the Israelite reality model, briefly, God stands opposed to humankind not so much in terms of mortality—after the fashion of both Orientals and Greeks—as in terms of knowledge. . . . God is omniscient, man limited, and the boundary impassable (46).

Ideology expresses this absolute difference between the omniscience of God and the faulty knowledge of human beings in narrative terms. Only the 'infallible' biblical narrator is privy to God's knowledge. A narrator may speak the truth but not always the whole truth. The prevalence of such an unbridgeable gap is a leading ideological point of the Bible, and governs most of the historical accounts presented therein. It is a world view central to the Israelite conception of reality, and as a result is the point which frequently is driven home by the Bible's narratives. Sternberg employs forceful language to highlight the strong ideological agenda of biblical narrative, declaring that "ideology would above all establish a world view and, if militant, a consensus" (45).

Sternberg can readily be criticized because his approach is not open to validation in the ways usually expected in biblical studies. Factors external to the text, be they historical or anthropological, do not play much of a role in his interpretation. As for his literary agenda, it is not that of many recent critical interpreters. Mieke Bal, for example, a literary critic working on the same texts, sums up his work by charging that his approach is "counter-productive to critique"

and that “he ignores the bulk of biblical scholarship as bluntly as he ignores the last ten years of literary theory” (*On Story-Telling*, Sonoma, Polebridge 1991, 66–67). Yet Sternberg’s exposition of narrative in the Bible, being grounded firmly in a careful reading of the texts, challenges interpreters to pose the question of why their authors wrote as they did. It is the task of interpreters to explain in convincing fashion what it was that they were attempting to communicate. Assuming that his primary assumption is correct and the Bible had a message to transmit, his approach to literary criticism is one that can only assist us in explaining clearly what that message was.

## Luke 1

Several preliminary questions can be posed concerning the communicative purpose of the first chapter of Luke’s gospel. One may ask, for example, why is this chapter here at all? The book could easily have begun with the so called Christmas story: “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus” (2:1). Or it could have commenced with the adult appearance of John the Baptist as a preacher as does Mark’s gospel.

Following a brief prologue, chapter 1 relates the story of an annunciation to the priest Zechariah that he and his wife would have a son (John the Baptist). Zechariah questions the prediction because of his and his wife’s advanced age, and is punished for his doubt by being struck dumb. The figure of Zechariah quickly disappears from the account, which continues with the conception of John, and an angelic prediction to Mary concerning Jesus. This latter annunciation, parallel to Zechariah’s, features a similar puzzled questioning by Mary, in this instance how she could conceive if she is not yet married. In Mary’s case, however, unlike Zechariah she is offered an explanation and accepts it with the words “let it be with me according to your word” (1:38).

After the visit of Mary to Elizabeth and John’s birth, the priest Zechariah reappears. Upon acknowledging his son’s God-given name at John’s circumcision, his power of speech is restored and he praises God in a prophetic song.

A great deal of effort has gone into source analysis of Luke 1, particularly with respect to its songs, some for example arguing that much of this material derives from a circle of followers of John the Baptist who sought to honour their master. This despite the account

being as uncomplimentary to John's father as it is. Surely a little editing would have brought more praise to the Baptist.

It is equally unlikely that the song material, whether derived from sources or not, was included by Luke in an effort to honour Mary as a popular figure in the early Christian community. The inclusion of so much about John's family could in this case be seen as a deliberate formal device, parallel recounting, by which the lives of the two families are set in close parallel. In many ways the two families are portrayed positively, but Mary's superiority in faith is lauded by its being set against Zechariah's doubt. Yet a careful reading of the text hardly supports the contention that the chapter was intended to honour Mary. Zechariah questions Gabriel's message and so does Mary. Zechariah is offered no explanatory comfort for his legitimate query and is punished. One would expect the same to befall Mary when she questions the angelic messenger—but it doesn't. Mary's response to the angelic herald is no better than the priest's, yet she is led to a position of faith and he is not.

It has been suggested that Mary was somehow more receptive to the message of the Lord, despite her questioning. The text, however, does not indicate that her piety was any greater than that of Zechariah, who was described as righteous and blameless in 1:6. There is no reason given in the chapter to doubt Zechariah's willingness to serve the Lord, and therefore no grounds for the claim that the parallel structure in this chapter was designed to demonstrate Mary's superiority to him.

Their equality of piety and devotion within the parallel formal structure appears instead to highlight the sovereign nature of God's actions. Mary is preferred because she is preferred, not for any other reason. God, as in the Hebrew Bible, acts in a surprising way here, overturning the usual expectations of humans concerning what is fair and proper. In Sternberg's analysis of biblical narrative in the Hebrew Bible, he found that this sort of assertion of God's freedom is often brought home with great force, as it is here.

That, however, does not seem to be the only ideological point being made in Luke 1. Another literary strategy in this chapter, an interlude, makes an even stronger ideological statement than does the parallelism. The story of Zechariah could have been sharply abbreviated or told in a more matter of fact manner. As it stands, Zechariah is struck dumb by Gabriel and then left to stew until much later in the chapter during a relatively lengthy interlude lasting until the birth

of his son. The reader must wait to find out what happened to this righteous and blameless man (1:6). As Sternberg has pointed out, in biblical narrative positive epithets of this kind regularly signal that the character will be vindicated in the end. Will it be so as well for John's father?

The ideological point communicated by Zechariah's punishment and highlighted by the subsequent dramatic interlude before restoration seems clear: "Questioning may be hazardous to your health!" Of course, doubt may be passed over, as it was for Mary. But even the pious should not presume on God's magnanimity and run the risk of questioning divine oracles. As it applies to the prophecies and accounts in Luke-Acts to follow, the story of Zechariah serves as a blunt declaration of danger. Its is reminiscent of the graphic health warning one sees on the cover of a cigarette pack, the warning in Luke's case being accorded a prominent place at the opening of the book, on the front cover as it were. The admonition that the Apocalypse of John accomplishes with its maledictions in its final few verses (its 'back cover'), Luke brings about in his initial narrative account.

The observation that Luke employed narrative with or without historical source-material to make a point is admittedly not original. At the end of his thorough study entitled "Luke's Use of the Birth Stories" (in *Studies in Luke-Acts*, ed. L Keck and J.L. Martyn [Philadelphia, Fortress, 1966, 1980], 130), Paul Minear concludes as much, concluding that the key to the successful interpretation of Luke-Acts is to carefully follow how Luke himself expounds his tale. But Minear's conclusions are chiefly theological in nature. In terms of the broader concept of ideology, Luke can be seen to promote and to reflect that prophecy was central to the early Christian experience. Based on the model of the fulfillment of the prophetic Scriptures, the community took the prophetic function seriously in the regulation of its internal order. God's word was to be respected in community life as much as it was in story.

An analysis of Luke-Acts in ideological terms may reveal little that is new about the views of early believers, but it is nonetheless valuable in that it reinforces what we do know 'for certain' about them. And this in turn permits us to draw contrasts and comparisons between their primary concerns and those of Christians in other eras of Church history. For example, was this particular element of Christian ideology unchanged in later periods of Church history? Prophecy as it touched

on the oracles of Scriptures and on the ordinary Christian experience does not appear to have played as important a role in the mind of later believers.

## Acts 12

Acts 12 records the conflict between King Herod and leaders of the early Church, primarily Peter. After gaining popular acclaim by executing James brother of John, Peter is arrested and imprisoned under guard. While the Church prays for him, an angel appears to release him from prison. He immediately returns to the gathered believers who do not believe it is actually he who is asking for entry. His persistent knocking finally moves them to welcome him and they praise the Lord for his release. When the escape is discovered, Herod has the guards executed and Peter departs for another region. In a historical digression, the death of Herod for usurping the glory of God is related. The story concludes with the comment “but the word of God continued to advance and gain adherents” (12:24).

The theological point of the chapter is clear. God’s people cannot be restrained by human authority—God is sovereign. The ideological purpose is more interesting. It seems that Luke is reflecting, if not promoting the view that Christians should normally view political authority in positive or at least neutral terms. King Herod is thwarted in his attempt to impede the progress of the gospel, but does not immediately suffer for it. He loses face and some of his guards pay dearly for that, yet neither Christians nor God are active in opposing him. It is only when, in the historical account near the end of the chapter and seemingly unrelated to what has gone on before, he oversteps his bounds and presents a direct challenge to God that he experiences a horrible death.

Is this short digression, which has no particular connection to the incident of the escape, meant to reinforce the idea that governmental authority was a positive force in the world as long as it did not claim divine status for itself? It would seem so. Christianity, as reflected in the letters of Paul and elsewhere, was definitely conservative and respectful in its politics. Criticism of ruling powers was muted at best and despite serious conflict with them at times there was more commendation than confrontation. Throughout Acts, encounters with political power were just the arena in which the contest of the gospel

was enacted. Political power was neither an opponent to be mastered nor a prize to be sought after by believers. And even when rulers arrogated divine standing for themselves it was God and not Christians who inflicted appropriate punishment.

Once again the narrative exemplifies an aspect of the ideology of early Christianity that is obvious in that it is already well known from other sources. In doing so, however, the narrative demonstrates just how prevalent this view was at that time. When surveying Christian history, it is apparent that the same outlook on worldly authority is operative as far as the vast majority of believers is concerned.

It would not be right to leave this chapter without commenting on the joy that comes with its reading. Luke cannot be accused of lacking a sense of humour in the relating of his story. It is hilarious to think of the scatter-brained Rhoda forgetting to unlock the front door to admit Peter, despite his miraculous release. And even more laughable was the Christian community who steadfastly refused to believe that the miracle that they had just been praying for (12:5) had been granted. If there is an ideological point here concerning the all-too-common pitiful lack of faith among Christians it is made with ironic humour.

## Conclusion

Meir Sternberg's approach to biblical narrative represents a helpful contribution to the study of biblical narrative. His contention that ideology, aesthetics, and history work harmoniously to produce meaning for attentive readers is particularly valuable. An examination of the communication function in the Luke 1 and Acts 12 validates Sternberg's views, yielding important results for the interpretation of these chapters. Moreover, such analysis provides a window through which can be seen important elements of the worldview of early Christianity. If that ideology is judged to be pedestrian and obvious, one can only say that a firm grasp of the obvious is often as elusive as common sense is uncommon.

Beyond his contribution to interpretation, Sternberg, despite his use of terms such as the 'struggle' and 'ordeal' of reading, is clearly enjoying the exercise. It is this immense pleasure in reading biblical text and in the discoveries that come with it that he, and Fred Wisse to be sure, commend to the rest of us.