

REVIEW

LUKE-ACTS AND ‘TRAGIC HISTORY’

DooHee Lee, *Luke-Acts and ‘Tragic History’: Communicating Gospel with the World*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013. Pp. ix + 310. Paper, €79.00. ISBN 978-3-16-152551-3.

DooHee Lee’s study of the relationship between the so-called ‘tragic style’ and the writings of Luke (Luke and Acts) is a revision of his doctoral dissertation at Graduate Theological Union (Berkeley, USA) in 2009. With a background both in Classics and in New Testament studies, he explores with sensitivity the question of literary influence on Luke the evangelist. His main interest in this study is to place Luke’s writings in the stream of Greco-Roman historiography, and to a lesser degree in that of Jewish-Hellenistic historiography. His research contributes to other proposals for reading Luke and Acts through the lens of a particular ancient literary genre such as biography, novel, epic, and historiography.

Within the historiographical tradition, Lee seeks to demonstrate how the so-called ‘tragic history’ style influenced Luke’s writing and subsequently how this style sought to appeal to his readers’ emotions and literary tastes. The first aspect is clearly Lee’s main emphasis, but he consistently points out the pragmatic aspect regarding reception. This dual focus highlights not only how ‘the tragic style’ was used but also why it played a significant part in historiography in general and in Luke-Acts in particular.

As it will be noted elsewhere, the construction of Lee’s study evinces some difficulty regarding the amount of space dedicated to the two elements of comparison: documents illustrating ‘tragic style’ and Luke’s literary creation, Luke-Acts. For example, his treatment of Plutarch alone covers pages 117 to 178, while the whole chapter on Luke-Acts runs from page 202 to 280. This unevenness is striking and could have been rectified in the transition from dissertation to book. Following the front matter, the author provides a helpful introduction to discussion of ‘the tragic style’ in scholarly literature and to its pertinence to Luke’s writings, ‘The Genre Issue of Luke-Acts and Previous Scholarship about “Tragic History”’ (pp. 1–33). The author develops his argument in three main chapters: “‘Tragic History’ in Greco-Roman Historiographical Tradition” (pp. 34–178); “‘Tragic History’ in Jewish-Hellenistic Historiography: Flavius Josephus’ (pp. 179–201); and “‘Tragic History’ in Luke-Acts’ (pp. 202–80). Lee concludes his work with a

surprisingly brief conclusion (pp. 281–3). The bibliography is amply documented including works in various European languages. However, as Lee acknowledges in the Preface, he was not able to develop the bibliography beyond 2009, apart from a few references. He occasionally cites non-English texts, ancient and contemporary, without translation. Three indexes (sources, modern authors, subject) are useful for exploring various aspects of the study. Throughout the work, Lee provides ample illustrations from ancient sources as well as several long blocks of quotations.

In the introduction, Lee guides his readers through a brief discussion of the question of genre for Luke-Acts. It is surprising that he does not elaborate, at this point, on the debate concerning possible distinct genres for the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles and how this question relates to their alleged literary unity. He recognises the first element (see p. 1 n. 2); yet it would have been profitable to insert at least a paragraph that legitimates the treatment of Luke and Acts as one genre, and to indicate the relevant discussion in his treatment of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* (pp. 119–24). Therein, Lee explains his position (*contra* Arnaldo Momigliano), following Richard Burridge's work, that a rigid generic distinction between biography and historiography in ancient literature cannot be maintained.¹

Regarding the vexed notions of 'tragic history' or 'tragic-history style', Lee explores various proposals in the field of Greco-Roman literature. His general argument rests on the following definition: 'tragic history is a style of history writing popular in the Hellenistic period that seems to involve an emotive style, calculated to present moving scenes in a vivid manner, and shows both qualities associated with tragedy and one not so closely related to tragedy' (p. 16). He explores, but does not claim to resolve, the question of the origin of 'tragic history': Peripatetic, Isocratean, or the general Greek historiographical tradition since the fifth century BCE. His approach to the subject distinguishes itself from some previous works (both classics and biblical) in that he does not maintain that tragic history was a distinctive subgenre of historiography, and indeed maintains the general view that 'the concept of genre in the ancient period was not so clear and distinct' (p. 9). He does claim that a tragic style can be identified, with distinctive characteristics in historiographical works (pp. 4, 9), and that this allows for a fresh reading of Luke-Acts (p. 4), revealing Luke's awareness and employment of the style, and consequently allowing the conclusion that his writings can be situated within the Greco-Roman historiographical tradition (p. 202). It should be noted, however, that Lee uses 'tragic history' and

¹ A. Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography*, expanded ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1993); R. A. Burridge, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, 2004).

'tragic style' (and 'tragic-history style') as synonyms (see the book and chapter titles, etc.). This can lead to some confusion in the light of his claim that 'tragic history' cannot be classified as a literary subgenre but as a historiographical style (p. 9).

Chapter 1 is the longest chapter of the book in which Lee illustrates the tragic-history style in Greco-Roman historiography from a variety of sources: Herodotus, Thucydides, Duris of Samos and Phylarchus of Athens (treated together), Polybius, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Plutarch, and Livy. Although Lee does not signal to readers what types of tragic scenes and description they should anticipate in the treatment, they do become clear through the examples based on the working definition of 'tragic style' in the Introduction. The general emphasis falls more on the choice of tragic patterns (or situations that recur and attract attraction) rather than examples of 'vivid description'. Yet Lee succeeds in balancing a synchronic and a diachronic approach to the analyses of these writers. The close readings provide more than cursory evidence for tragic patterns that link the various types of historiography considered, even, for example, in authors so different as Polybius and Thucydides ('scientific historians') and Duris of Samos and Phylarchus of Athens ('tragic historians' in the derogatory sense). For a future edition, especially owing to the length, it would be beneficial to provide a final conclusion for the entire chapter, restating the main points for the study of the target texts (Luke and Acts), as well as the implications for the question of 'tragic history style' in the field of Classics.

Chapter 2 is a brief chapter that focuses on Jewish-Hellenistic historiography. Flavius Josephus is the sole example here with illustrations from his works *Bellum Judaicum* and *Antiquitates*. Yet Josephus's works are significant for the evaluation of Luke-Acts because of the closeness in time of their redaction and their joint interest in Israel's history. This point leads to the following suggestion: given that the metahistory of Israel is one of the greatest presuppositions embedded in Luke-Acts and given also that the Greek translation of the biblical texts (the fruit of the Hellenistic Jewish community) was one of Luke's chief sources, should Lee not have included other examples of tragic style that were available in Greek in Jewish historiography? Along with 1 and 2 Maccabees, should there not have been consideration of other books of Jewish historiography, translations in their own right or original works in Greek, as being possible influences of tragic style on Luke? Although the literary influence of the Septuagint on Luke has been studied in depth, more work could certainly be done on the 'tragic style' in Jewish-Hellenistic historiography.

Chapter 3 builds on the results of the two preceding chapters in seeking to highlight five points of the tragic-history style in Luke-Acts: (1) tragic language and allusion to Greek tragedy; (2) tragic disasters due to 'greed for

more'; (3) tragic style in the portrait of King Herod (Acts 12); (4) emotional language for effect in Paul's farewell journey to Jerusalem (Acts 20:1–21:16); and (5) the tragic portrayal of the Israelites in their failure to receive Jesus as Messiah as a result of the apostles' teaching. These points are now briefly discussed.

First, given the popularity of Euripides' *Bacchae* in the Hellenistic period, Lee examines the lexical and thematic affinities between the former work and Luke's use of the expression 'to kick against the goad' (Acts 26:14), the notion of 'god-fighting' via *θεομάχοι* in Acts 5:39, and the prison-escape scenes in Acts 12 and 16. Based on this evidence, Lee argues for the plausibility of 'Luke's conscious and creative allusion to, and partial use of Euripides' *Bacchae*' (p. 213). By doing so, Luke appeals to his Hellenistic readers' tastes in order to communicate more effectively his message.

Second, in a significant section (pp. 214–36), Lee examines the tragic pattern of 'greed for more' against the backdrop of Luke's emphasis on possessions. This diachronic motif in historiography was amply highlighted in Chapter 2, which allows the reader to explore two main tragedies of this type: Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:15–20) and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11). In this light, Lee also considers the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31). Through these examples, Luke has pragmatic aims: to warn the Christian community of greed and to inculcate an ethic concerning possessions (p. 236).

Third, Lee briefly discusses Luke's tragic style in recounting the story of Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12) focusing on the pattern of reversal of fortune due to arrogance. Since Josephus also tells about the incident of Herod's death (*Antiquities* 19.343–52), Lee compares the two versions, observing traces of the tragic style in each. Both indicate Herod's corruption in accepting the flattery of divine honours, which is a sacrilegious act in Israel's religious ethos. Luke's choice to highlight Herod's death rather than James' martyrdom reveals something of Luke's interest in this character as a tangible demonstration of punishment for those who oppose God and ignore divine warnings, in contrast to Peter, Paul and Barnabas who refused praise for their miracles.

Fourth, Lee's study then sheds light on Paul's journey to Jerusalem (Acts 20:1–21:16). Here the focus is on Luke's vivid description of various scenes—Paul's meeting with the elders in Miletus, the disciples in Tyre, and then in Caesarea—in order to prepare readers for Paul's arrest in Jerusalem and to give them a sense of the emotional intensity in these scenes. Again, these scenes are compared diachronically to other types of 'farewell address', as well as to the theme of conflicting causes in ancient literature. In Paul's case, his conviction that he must go to Jerusalem is starkly contrasted with human tears (20:37–8; 21:13–14) and divine warnings through prophecy (21:4, 11).

The fifth and final section in Chapter 3 (pp. 258–80) explores the tragedy of Israel in Luke-Acts. Indeed, this is not a new subject in Lukan research. Yet given the focus of this study, it is entirely justifiable that Lee should explore this question. He constructs his argument by examining tragic features in the speeches of Peter and Paul in Acts, the Jerusalem narrative in Luke 19:28–24:53, and the repeated rejection of Jesus' missionaries in Acts (especially Stephen and Paul). Because Jesus' story is so closely linked to the story of the people of Israel, Luke-Acts represents not only Jesus' victory over opposing forces, but also the failure of his people to recognise him as Messiah (in Luke) and to receive the message of Jesus' disciples (in Acts). Through these readings and the lens of tragic style, some key concepts come to the fore in this section: ironic fulfilment of the divine will (see pp. 261, 280); the theme of ignorance or lack of understanding (pp. 262, 268, 271, 278); and such dramatic description of rejection scenes, against the backdrop of jealousy and rivalry among Jewish kinsmen, as Stephen's martyrdom and Paul's journey to Rome as an innocent prisoner. This final section on Jesus and the Jewish people represents the highpoint of Lee's book, especially because of the very short general conclusion that follows. The culmination of Luke's narrative from Jerusalem to Rome is seen through two questions: the inclusion of the nations in salvation and Israel's (partial) ironic rejection of it.

I mention now a few points that could have been discussed with profit in order to show Luke's attentiveness in preparing his readers for the tragedy of Israel. Simeon's prophecy clearly predicts Jesus' effect on Israel: the fall and the rising of many in Israel as a sign to be opposed (see Luke 2:34). Luke repeatedly demonstrates this Jewish hostility in both volumes, through examples of rejection scenes concerning Jewish individuals and groups. In addition, and perhaps above all, there is Jesus' rejection in Nazareth (Luke 4:16–30). The irony of Jewish rejection begins in Jesus' hometown, where Jesus applies Isaiah's prophecy to his own mandate (vv. 17–22), and he stirs jealousy in his kinsmen by evoking examples of God's mercy on people among the nations (vv. 25–7). Jesus then miraculously escapes the wrath of his own people (vv. 28–30). Understandably, it is difficult to include discussion of so many passages, but the rejection in Nazareth would have provided the basis for the ensuing examples of Luke's tragic portrayal of Israel's rejection of Jesus. In addition, I suggest other examples of vivid and emotional description that could be explored: (1) rejection scenes by religious leaders due to arrogance and greed (Luke 5:17–26; 18:18–30); (2) Jesus' prophetic lament over Jerusalem in Luke 13:31–35 and 19:41–44; (3) individual and collective Jewish rejection of Jesus' missionaries, for example, in Cyprus (Acts 13:4–12), Lystra (Acts 14:8–20), Thessalonica (Acts 17:1–9), and the Jewish tumult leading to Paul's arrest (and rescue) by the Roman guard in Jerusalem (Acts 21:27–22:29).

As already stated, Lee's conclusion is too brief, given the amount of evidence that he has produced. It would have been helpful to pull the various strands together, clearly stating the main and minor contributions as well as new avenues for research (e.g., tragic style in Jewish historiography). As throughout the study, Lee is cautious and modest in his claims for his contribution. Not excluding other Greco-Roman genres (epic, novel, biography, etc.) for reading Luke-Acts, Lee proposes that the tragic style evidenced in Greco-Roman and Jewish Hellenistic writings sheds light on the literary milieu of Luke and his manner of writing history, and consequently that Luke can be identified, and read with profit, as being within the Greco-Roman historiographical tradition.

As already mentioned, I suggest another contribution that Lee does not signal explicitly in his conclusion, but that recurs throughout his study: namely, that the phenomenon of tragic style adds to the plausible reconstruction of Luke's readership, which is also a hotly debated issue in Lukan research. Lee's findings provide evidence that could be useful for projects of historical and rhetorical narratology. The author's choice of subtitle, 'Communicating Gospel with the World', suggests his interest in the rhetorical aspect. Since the text is an intersection between author and reader, it reveals, presumably, what was interesting to both. Consequently, the multiple illustrations of 'tragic-history style' illustrate both 'the what' and 'the how' of narration. Lee often draws attention to the tragic patterns that caused authors to dwell on a subject and to describe it with more or less vivid detail for the aesthetic pleasure and moral instruction of their readers (p. 282). This procedure elucidates both Luke's literary influences and his readership's appreciation of these thematic and lexical allusions. Thus, occasionally, Lee indicates what Luke is trying to accomplish with his readership, and this in the light of their knowledge and appreciation of the tragic style in historiography. Luke sought also to provide an experience, a sense of what it was like to be there, putting his readers within the 'tragic drama' of the events.

In conclusion, although more material could have been explored within Luke's two volumes to validate the literary influence claimed, this factor by no means diminishes the questions pursued and the research offered in this book. By placing the production and reception of Luke-Acts in a plausible literary milieu, Lee's research is attractive, well balanced, and pertinent to biblical and historical research.