

## REVIEW

## THE RHETORIC OF DIVINE TESTIMONY

James R. McConnell, *The Topos of Divine Testimony in Luke-Acts*. Eugene: Pickwick, 2014. Pp. xii + 322. Paperback, €25.00. ISBN 978-1-620-32755-5.

*The Topos of Divine Testimony in Luke-Acts* is the result of James R. McConnell's dissertation, supervised by Mikeal Parsons at Baylor University. The title clearly reflects the purpose of this study: to examine the rhetorical device of divine testimony, via words and deeds, in the works of Luke the evangelist (*Luke-Acts*) in light of this topos in Greco-Roman narratives. McConnell argues that this topos was one of the most authoritative elements that orators evoked in order to persuade their audiences. The opening lines of Luke's second volume (*Acts*) reveal that the author might have had a similar strategy: 'In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach' (*Acts* 1.1). This dual focus in Luke's first book, on Jesus' deeds and teachings, might be the same approach in his second book, focusing on Jesus' disciples.

The plan of McConnell's book is logical and easy to follow, as well as balanced regarding the length of the chapters. Following the Introduction (1–22), the first chapter provides background information about the topos of 'divine testimony' as used in ancient speeches and treatises (23–73). Chapters 3–6 are composed of two pairs. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on utterances in Greco-Roman narratives, and then on those in *Luke-Acts* (74–120; 121–76); chapters 5 and 6 examine deeds in the same order (177–226; 227–64). The concluding chapter summarises the results and proposes further avenues of research (265–78). Reference materials complete the volume through an extensive bibliography, a scripture index, and an index of ancient authors.

Chapter 1 provides a summary of *Toposforschung* in New Testament literature. The focus is on divine words and deeds in New Testament literature, namely Old Testament citations and references, and especially on the miraculous. McConnell finds an unexplored path: topos was an ancient source of proofs, and the divine testimony was regarded as a powerful, external proof in forensic and deliberative situations (18). This line of inquiry is fully justified given the probability that Luke had received at least basic rhetorical training via *progymnasmata* (20). Therefore, this rhetorical-critical work aims to elucidate Luke's techniques based on the premise that his audience was able to grasp these rhetorical signals, through their literary and cultural 'repertoire' (W. Iser) and 'horizon of expectations' (H. R. Jauss) (21).

Chapter 2 seeks to provide a clearer picture how the notion of topos was understood in the art of rhetoric. McConnell examines various sources and he confirms the consensus that topos was used differently in antiquity. This ambiguity remains, he says, even in modern literary theory (26). It is not clear to me, however, why McConnell begins with a history of research in the field of Biblical literature. Why not begin with research in Classics and then move on to Biblical literature? In fact, there is little indication that he benefitted directly from research on topos or locus by classicists. In the area of New Testament research, McConnell especially builds on Johan Thom's article, "'The Mind in Its Own Place': Defining the Topos".<sup>1</sup> Despite a wide spectrum of meanings, Thom finds a common idea for topos, which is the notion of an 'ordered cognitive space' (566; 26). Three categories of this notion can be identified: (1) logical or rhetorical topos, as a method of argumentation; (2) literary topos such as themes and motifs; and (3) moral or philosophical topoi that are similar to the literary topoi but are the object of extended treatments (27). McConnell expands on these definitions through a more precise reading of Theon's uses, and especially by including Cicero's reflections in *Topica* on *locus* in various works (which Thom neglected). The understanding and use of topoi are culturally dependent and as such reveal something of the object of discourse and the receiving audience, which is susceptible to persuasion.<sup>2</sup> Thus, McConnell seeks to ground his analysis of topos in ancient sources, beginning with Aristotle, then focusing mainly on Cicero and Quintilian. Cicero's discussion in *Topica* then functions as the main backdrop for McConnell's identification and treatment of individual occurrences of divine testimony in ancient sources and *Luke-Acts*.

Consequently, Chapter 3 examines various examples of divine testimony through utterances, first via direct speech of the gods, then through intermediaries, and finally through oracles (83). An introductory section (75–83) justifies the author's research on divine testimony in narratives rather than in speeches or treatises. This section could have been placed in Chapter 1, and a short reference to that material would have sufficed to commence the discussion. As a heuristic tool, McConnell's approach is justified owing to the argumentative and didactic nature of historical narratives. Diodorus and Livy are cited as primary examples of this perspective.

The title of the chapter ('The Topos of Divine Testimony through Utterances in Hellenistic Narratives') is a mistake. He in fact means 'Greco-Roman narratives', as indicated in the introductory sections. In fact,

<sup>1</sup> In J. T. Fitzgerald et al., edd., *Early Christianity and Classical Culture: Comparative Studies in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe* (Novum Testamentum Supplement Series 110; Leiden, 2003) 555–73.

<sup>2</sup> McConnell credits Wilhelm H. Wuellner, 'Toposforschung und Torahinterpretation bei Paulus und Jesus', *New Testament Studies* 24 (1978): 463–83.

McConnell provides evidence of divine testimony from the works of Latin authors such as Suetonius, Livy, Tacitus, and Quintus Curtius. The same observation is valid for Chapter 5 ('The Topos of Divine Testimony through Deeds in Hellenistic Narratives'). Oddly, then, Chapters 3 and 5 rarely discuss examples from the earliest Greek historians. Certainly, Herodotus could have been mined for multiple examples of divine activity, whether via speech or deeds. Instead, McConnell uses Plutarch as his main source of examples, as is also the case for Chapter 5.

Through his analysis of various types of 'utterances', the author indicates several rhetorical uses: they often occur with expressions of religious practices and in conjunction with other types of divine testimony (i.e., deeds) in order to portray characters, often in key moments of the narrative. McConnell claims that ancient auditors would have been able to interpret these rhetorical devices as positive or negative descriptions of characters vis-à-vis the gods. Similar to the rhetorical uses of this topos in ancient trials, this type of characterisation aims at persuading auditors to accept the authors' argument, albeit in this case via narrative.

Chapter 4 follows the same method as in the preceding chapter by analyzing examples of divine testimony through utterances in *Luke-Acts*. The three main categories are employed: direct divine speech, speech through intermediaries, and finally the use of Jewish scriptures as an equivalent of the Greco-Roman oracles. Here McConnell, I find, promises too much: 'each passage in which the topos occurs will be considered in its narrative context in order to ascertain its function with the greater narrative context in which it is found' (121). Given the brevity of treatment, the author does not often provide a 'close reading' (21), covering both the immediate and larger context. Approximately a half page covers each occurrence. For example, brief parts of pages 148 and 149 discuss a 'highly significant' passage (*Luke* 4.16–30). Typically, much of the exegetical discussion, in interaction with other scholars, takes place in the footnotes, which at times are extensive (e.g., 154, 164, 166, 170, 205, 234[!]). Given that McConnell does not provide a translation of the Greek texts, his envisaged reader appears to be proficient in Greek. Why then is relevant technical discussion relegated to *extensive* sections in the footnotes?

To orient the discussion on the auditors' understanding and reception of the rhetorical uses of divine testimony in *Luke-Acts*, it would have been helpful to have a general profile of Luke's auditors or readers (e.g., Theophilus, and perhaps others like him). This, of course, is hypothetical, but even a brief discussion on their competency as auditors would have been constructive in or-

der to discern how Luke is inviting his readers to respond to his rhetorical cues.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of each section, the author helpfully summarises the results emerging from the discussion of occurrences in *Luke-Acts*. The chapter is, however, dominated by the third section on divine testimony through reference to Scripture (140–74). In some ways, not much is new here, since Luke's use of Jewish writings has been amply studied elsewhere. What is new is that McConnell claims that the auditors of *Luke-Acts* would have readily recognized the divine testimony through God and the Holy Spirit, inspired characters, and through cited Scripture as analogous to oracles in the Greco-Roman tradition. On the narrative level, this topos, he claims, 'often occurs in significant moments in the narrative and serve to explain moments in the plot' (174–5). Divine utterances provide guidance, warnings, and persuasion concerning the validity of an action, offering at times an explanation of a divine act evoked earlier in the narrative. Their main rhetorical function is the characterisation of protagonists and antagonists, either as pious or impious individuals.

Chapter 5 (177–226) explores occurrences of the divine testimony through deeds in Hellenistic narratives, but also as many in Latin works (especially Suetonius). As mentioned above, certain aspects in this chapter parallel Chapter 3 in its method, presentation following Cicero's categories, exegetical discussion in the footnotes, and a preference for sources (e.g., Plutarch). McConnell discusses occurrences in all of the categories of divine testimony: objects and events manifested in the heavens; birds; sounds and fire (also from heaven); dreams and visions; signs and portents in creation; and examination of entrails. The examples are manifold and the discussion is instructive, but often space is too limited to appreciate their rhetorical force. Nonetheless, there are several examples of excellent commentary on the narrative level, for example, concerning Plutarch's discussion of Numa (185) and then Timoleon (193–4). McConnell summarises the contexts in which divine deeds occur (much in common with those related to testimony through utterances): significant moments in the plot, often linked to religious expression, and with multiple testimonies in the same context. Their functions are also similar to divine utterances: warnings, commands, encouragement, prophecies, and approval or reproach of characters. On the narrative level, the overarching function is characterisation, so that auditors are able to interpret characters with respect to the gods' favour or displeasure. There is, however, not a one-to-one relationship between a divine manifestation and a particular function. This must be understood from the context, which is normally evident.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Gerald Downing, 'Theophilus's First Reading of *Luke-Acts*', in C. M. Tuckett, ed., *Luke's Literary Achievement* (Sheffield, 1995) 91–109.

Chapter 6 (227–64) follows the methodology of Chapter 5 by exploring occurrences of divine testimony through deeds in *Luke-Acts* according to Cicero's categories. McConnell finds examples of all these categories, except for divination via animal entrails. The point again is that first-century audiences would have understood these rhetorical signs and interpreted them correctly along with other contextual cues. The author admits that the examples of divine deeds could be classified otherwise. Yet, using Cicero's classification, as a heuristic model, it allows one to ground the discussion in a historical situation, with an idea of what an ancient audience or readership could grasp, whether implicit or explicit references to divine activity (e.g., the manifestation of the Holy Spirit as in the image of a dove or through the flames above the disciples). In this section, the author helpfully recalls previously mentioned literary parallels. Here, accordingly, he resumes the use of 'Greco-Roman' from the first chapter to describe his sources, even in a subtitle ('Summary of Findings from *Luke-Acts* and Comparison to the Data from Greco-Roman Narratives', 262). Many of the results are identical to the previously mentioned ones. One difference is that some important occurrences are found in speeches, which allows one to explore their functions in reported rhetorical situations. Over all, as in the previous chapters, McConnell finds that the main function of this aspect of the topos is characterisation.

His description of the lack of examples of extispicy in *Luke-Acts* is sketchy (264). That sacrifices were offered in that period of time is undeniable (examples are found in *Acts*); yet, the use of entrails for divination is quite another thing. Why there is no mention of this type of divination in *Luke-Acts* is not easy to ascertain, but it does not qualify as a 'minor disagreement' between *Luke-Acts* and Greco-Roman narratives. The material is simply absent in Luke's writings, either because it was unavailable in Luke's sources (written or oral) or it was not pertinent to his narrative.

The concluding chapter summarises the aforementioned results emerging from the Greco-Roman narratives and *Luke-Acts*. Although there is much repetition, the section at 269–75 helpfully recapitulates in narrative order the main occurrences of divine testimony of speech and deeds. This allows for a greater appreciation for the cumulative effect of the topos. At this point, or perhaps earlier, it would have been helpful to indicate the occurrences in a chart. McConnell is certainly right in placing *Luke-Acts* in the light of argumentative communication, whether written or oral (276). The two-volume work, as do the other Gospels, has its own narrative argumentation, working progressively to achieve certain effects on readers and auditors. Thus, the analogy with forensic and deliberative situations provides a constructive backdrop to the analysis.

The author also indicates potential avenues of research: expanding the notion of divine testimony beyond the limits of Cicero's categories; similar

investigation of other New Testament documents; and finally increasing the depth of research by building on Alexandru Neagoe's thesis on the trial motif in *Luke* and *Acts*. It is not clear to me why McConnell did not make use of Neagoe's study in this present work, since it would have provided additional evidence in support of his own thesis without having to modify the approach or structure of his research. Perhaps he became aware of Neagoe's book too late in his project.

In addition to previous comments above, I close with a few general observations. I find the thesis question very suggestive and instructive. Nevertheless, the dual focus on divine utterances and deeds is too broad for *Luke-Acts*. In fact, given that the volumes are theological narratives, they are absolutely saturated with both types of divine testimony, especially if one includes more of Jesus' acts and teachings (which is the starting point for McConnell's inquiry in reference to *Acts* 1.1!). This does not diminish the initial exploratory question; yet more focus on one aspect or another would have allowed for closer readings from a rhetorical perspective. Indeed, typical of the treatments on each occurrence is brevity. Thus, historians and biblical exegetes will find this study useful as a survey of examples of the topos of divine testimony (admittedly not meant to be exhaustive, 82). In addition, at times the discussion does not clearly make a distinction between the levels of action and narration. How do the authors use this technique to orient and influence the auditors' or readers' interpretation and experience? How are the auditors of *Luke-Acts* being invited to respond in light of the work's pragmatic aims? (89). As is true of other studies focusing on the reception of ancient texts, one can only propose the probability of certain types of receptivity. Often McConnell claims that occurrences of this topos are significant to the plot development, but it was not always clear to me what makes them particularly relevant to the auditors' understanding and experience of *Luke-Acts*.

The author is successful in fleshing out the rhetorical uses of divine testimony in *Luke-Acts*; thus, this book is a valuable survey that underlines another literary influence on Luke's style. The text reads very well, with helpful summaries throughout. Besides the error in the titles ('Hellenistic' for 'Greco-Roman'), I found only one mistake ('part [of] one's defense', 115). Along with other rhetorical or narrative studies, this research underscores the categorical nature of *Luke-Acts*, that is, the positive and negative portrayal of characters vis-à-vis the God of Israel and divine revelation in and through Jesus.