CHAPTER SIX

PHYSIOGNOMY AND BLINDNESS IN LUKE-ACTS

To this point, we have explored the presence of physiognomy in the Greco-Roman world, the Old Testament and Jewish traditions, and the early Christian writings. What remains is to examine Luke-Acts. Having seen physiognomics at work in the literature of the milieu of Luke-Acts, it is no surprise that Luke-Acts would also reflect some knowledge of physiognomic conventions. Indeed, Luke knows these conventions and, among biblical writers, is probably the most rhetorically adept at using them. As we shall see in this chapter, Luke uses and often subverts them. When it comes to blindness, we shall see that Luke uses the conventions concerning blindness in a programmatic way that offers at least one key or heuristic for reading the Gospel. Let us begin with physiognomics in general.


Whereas in previous chapters we have rehearsed a number of examples of physiognomics, no such exercise is needed here; an excellent treatment specific to physiognomic scenes in Luke-Acts has already been written recently by Mikeal Parsons.¹ What follows is mostly a distilled summary of that work.

That Luke knows the conventions of physiognomics is clear, as he uses examples from all three categories of physiognomics—zoological, racial/ethnographical, and bodily features. In zoological terms, two examples will suffice. In 3:7, John the Baptist refers to the crowds as a “brood of vipers,” and the meaning here is self-evidently negative and insulting.² Polemo, for example, says the viper is characterized by such thing as being dangerous, quick to run away, and hypocritical or inconsistent in character.³ In this same verse, we find that the crowds

² For a discussion of “brood of vipers,” see Parsons, *Body and Character*, 73–76.
³ Foerster 1.188.
are apparently “fleeing the coming wrath,” exactly the sort of behavior that the physiognomist might expect from a brood of vipers. The crowds are likewise fickle and inconsistent in their character. A second example is 13:32, where Jesus is warned that Herod is out to get him. Jesus answers, “Go and tell that fox…” (13:32). Polemo’s characterization of the fox is primarily that of being cunning and deceptive. Certainly Herod rules in such a manner, and the physiognomic convention is very much at work in this text to add a layer of meaning that is often unnoticed.

Racial or ethnographical physiognomics are also present in Luke-Acts. Whether or not all geographical designations are significant to characterization is yet to be demonstrated. One might think of references like Jesus the Nazorean, Peter of Galilee, Simon of Cyrene, or Saul of Tarsus. Yet some indeed carry great ethnographical significance. The parable of the Good Samaritan takes as the hero of the story a man who is unnamed, known only by his geographical designation—he is a Samaritan. The audience expects for a Samaritan to behave in a certain way, and assumptions are made about his character based solely on his geographical designation as the audience has no other information with which to work. The shock of the parable, of course, is that the Samaritan is the only one who behaves mercifully, something that was not expected based on his ethnic characterization. A second example would be the Ethiopian Eunuch of Acts 8. He also lacks a name and is known only by his two characteristics—he is Ethiopian, and he is a eunuch. As an Ethiopian, he is quite literally from the farthest corner of the earth. He is also a descendant of Ham (Gen 10:6), which would carry negative connotations in the Jewish world. Ps-Aristotle lists the Ethiopians specifically, labeling them wooly and cowardly (812a), and thus the ethnographical characterization is far from positive. Yet it is just such a person who comes to receive the gospel and is baptized.

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4 See Parsons, Body and Character, 69–71. See also John Darr, Herod the Fox: Audience Criticism and Lukan Characterization (JSNTSup 163; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998). Darr’s work is a study of the characterization of Herod in the Gospels, and that characterization as a fox includes both the wily nature of the fox as well as effeminacy. The effeminacy angle has been captured even as recently as Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ.

5 Foerster 1.174.

6 Most ancient Greeks and Romans considered themselves to be the center of the world, and when the so-called four corners of the earth were labeled, Ethiopia was typically the southern corner. Consider for example Herodotus, Hist. 1.134.