THE “WORD OF GOD” AND RETRIBUTION THEOLOGY IN LUKE-ACTS

Scott Shauf

It is widely accepted that Luke wrote his two-volume work to be a continuation of biblical history.1 Two of the many features that link Luke-Acts with OT historiography are his use of the phrase “the word of God/the Lord” as a part of his depiction of the ministry of Jesus and the Christian movement and the idea that divine retribution plays a role in the flow of historical events. These themes are connected via their relationship to the prophetic character of OT historiography and of Luke-Acts. The main point to be explored here is how these themes get reconfigured in Luke’s work, especially in Acts. This reconfiguring, I will argue, is primarily due to the changed place of the people of Israel in Luke-Acts vis-à-vis the OT narratives and to the emphasis on the eschatological nature of God’s retributive action in Luke-Acts.

DIVINE RETRIBUTION AND THE DIVINE WORD IN THE OT

The centrality of divine action in OT historiography is obvious even to the most casual reader. As Millar Burrows writes:

The basic, distinctive presupposition of all ancient Hebrew ideas about history is the conviction that in human history the one eternal, living God is working out his own sovereign purpose for the good of his creatures, first for his chosen people, and through them for the rest of mankind.2

---


It is also easy to recognize that throughout the OT, as well as in other Jewish historiographical works like 1 and 2 Maccabees, this working out of God’s purpose among humankind takes the form of retribution, reward for obedience to God, and punishment for disobedience. This principle is spelled out in places like Judg 2:11–23 and 2 Kgs 17:7–23, so that it is clear that Israel’s fortunes as a nation rise and fall in accordance with the people’s submission to God’s commands. Even where it is not spelled out, the plot generally makes it clear that the principle is operative. The skepticism of Qohelet never seems to make its way into the historiographical works.

The key role of prophecy and the prophets in retribution is once again not hard to fathom in OT historiography, especially in the works covering the period of the kingdoms. As 2 Kgs 17:13–14 (NRSV) puts it regarding the fall of Israel:

Yet the Lord warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, “Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the law that I commanded your ancestors and that I sent to you by my servants the prophets.” They would not listen but were stubborn, as their ancestors had been, who did not believe in the Lord their God.

Frequently in the books of Samuel and Kings we see God speaking directly to the prophets, who then convey God’s words to their intended target (e.g., 1 Sam 3:10–14; 2 Sam 7:1–17; 1 Kgs 21:17–19); earlier Joshua also acts as a prophet in this regard in the book devoted to his accomplishments (e.g., 20:1–6). In Chronicles, while the prophets themselves play a more peripheral role (primarily due to the removal of the northern kingdom from the spotlight, and hence the key characters of Elijah and Elisha), prophecy remains central in the delivery of God’s commands (e.g., 1 Chr 17:3–15; 2 Chr 12:5–8; 28:9–11).

Linked to this is the central role of the concept and term “the word of the Lord” (Heb. דבר יהוה; the LXX terms will be discussed below). Indeed, the reception and possession of the divine word is the

---