THE FIRST NEW TESTAMENT?

by

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Since van Unnik described Luke-Acts as a "storm-centre"\(^1\) of New Testament study, and indeed long before that, the question of the purpose of Luke-Acts, and the closely related question of the category of literature in which the work should be placed, have been vigorously discussed. If we knew what purpose the author had in mind we should be helped in the task of interpreting his book; and if we knew what model—if any—he had before him we should have taken a long step towards evaluating his purpose. Unfortunately, at least within the New Testament, Luke-Acts is unique; that is, there is no New Testament category in which it can be placed. That the two books were written by the same author is a proposition that is hardly disputed today.\(^2\) That they were written in relation to each other is made clear by the opening clauses of Acts; it could even be argued that the often noticed absence of a α in Acts 1:1 helps to bind the two together: the first book deals with all that Jesus began to do and to teach and the second is not so much a contrast as a continuation. If however the fundamental theme of the work of God in and through Jesus is continued it is continued in a new form as Jesus works through the activity of his witnesses. This means that biblical analogies for Luke-Acts fail us. The double books of the Old Testament are simply continuous. There is a sense in which the figure of David, whose story is told in the first part, persists in a different form, as a standard of excellence, in the second: good kings followed in his steps and bad kings departed from them. But this is a very distant analogy. The expression "succession narrative," with its Old Testament echoes, is

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sometimes used of Acts, but the apostles are never regarded as successors of Jesus, who is not only an exemplary ruler but a continuing ruler. They are his agents, not his successors. The same consideration applies when non-biblical books that describe first the life and teaching of a philosopher and then, in a second part, his influence and his followers, are adduced. There is a partial analogy in Philo’s two books on Moses, for the first deals in fairly straightforward fashion with the story of Moses’ life, whereas the second (according to Moses 2.1) is concerned περὶ τῶν ἐπομένων καὶ ἀκολούθων, with the consequences that followed from his life. What Philo means however (2.2) is that he will now write περὶ νομοθεσίας, περὶ ἀρχιμορφίας, and περὶ προφητείας, aspects of Moses’ life and work that were additional to the philosophical and kingly roles dealt with in the first book. Josephus’ two books Against Apion furnish, so far as I can see, no parallel to Acts. Howard Marshall’s conclusion seems to be correct. “It would seem so far that no proposal to account for Luke-Acts in terms of known genres has been successful. Even within the Christian context there is nothing corresponding to it. Christians produced apocryphal Gospels and apocryphal Acts, but not apocryphal Gospels-cum-Acts. The whole work demonstrates affinities both to historical monographs and to biographies, but it appears to represent a new type of work, of which it is the only example, in which under the shape of a ‘scientific treatise’ Luke has produced a work which deals with ‘the beginnings of Christianity.’” My essay might seem to be a development of this conclusion, though I had in fact planned it before I had read Dr. Marshall’s words. But I am very happy to have his support up to this point.

So Luke-Acts, viewed as a unity, appears to stand on its own. The problem of categorization is of course much easier if we separate the two parts. As far as the gospel is concerned we may for the present purpose be content to confine our observations to the New Testament, within which Luke had not merely a precedent but a source, Mark; and we need not ask on what model, if any, Mark based his work. That the Second Gospel constitutes the base of the Third I find it impossible to doubt, and I see no need to reproduce old and familiar arguments. The non-Marcan parts of the Third Gospel are more open

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4 Apart from the opening words of 2.1, Διὰ μὲν οὖν τοῦ πρώτου βιβλίου, τιμώτατε μοι ἐπαφρόδιτε, οὐ̣ ἀφήνω δὲ τ... Setting (note 2). Vol. I, pp. 179f.