

CHAPTER V

SYMPOSIA IN LUKE AND THE ANCIENT NOVELS

For every symposium can be better understood by comparison and contrast to the others.

(Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, v. 177)

Luke's Symposia In Comparison With Other Symposia Imbedded In Novels

We have just seen how Luke's use of the conventions of literary symposia clearly demonstrates that his work is firmly rooted in Greco-Roman culture in general, and in the intellectual ethos of the sophistic movement in particular. Now we shall see what distinguished Luke's Christian symposium ethos from the symposium ideologies of the other examples of Greco-Roman sophistic literature I discussed. Thus, I will show that the stylistic way Luke integrates his symposium ethos and his world view distinguishes his ideology from his literary contemporaries'. Luke's meal scenes link a symposium ethos with a distinctively Christian salvation-historical world view. In addition, Luke's ethos and world view mutually reinforce one another in his work more strongly than do the ethos and world views in the literary symposia of most of the other Greco-Roman sophists.

Though Luke's symposia represent a distinctively Christian ethic fit for a distinctively Christian world view, they nevertheless are both like and unlike the symposia imbedded in the novels discussed earlier. Luke's symposium settings are like

other examples of the genre of symposia imbedded in novels in that they are figures of a social ethos and are set in a travel narrative which represents a "world" of significant shifts of place and time. However, Luke's integration of symposia in a travel narrative differs from the others in three important ways: what drives his plot, his use of first person point of view, and his literary combination of myth and ritual. First, unlike the comic and erotic novels, Luke emphasizes destiny rather than love as the primary motivating factor in the plot. According A. Cizek's recent critical study of the ancient novels, that destiny rather than love motivates the unfolding of plot is precisely what distinguishes historical from erotic novels.¹ Luke characteristically subjects the course of events in his plot to divine necessity, as evidenced by his frequent use of the impersonal verb "*dei*" ("it is necessary").² This would warrant defining Luke's Gospel as a historical novel according to A. Cizek's criteria for distinguishing between ancient novels which we adopted above.

Thus, one need not exaggerate the significance of the literary differences between the Gospel and Acts, as those scholars who question the unity of Luke-Acts do. For example, Richard Pervo, calls Luke's Gospel a "biographical novel," while he classifies only Acts, the second volume of Luke's two-volume work, as a historical novel.³ This returns us to the extensive debate over whether the genre and unity of Luke's two-volume composition. is a history or a novel, some combination of the above, or something else, like an historical epic?⁴ But as I already stated in my Introduction, the debate is ultimately a theological one, based on the interpreters' different commitments to the

factuality of the Gospels. At one end of the spectrum of Lukan scholarship is the opinion that "Christian faith is based on history," whose most articulate proponent is perhaps I. Howard Marshall. Luke's theology is rooted in his dependence upon reliable historical traditions.⁵ Pervo represents the other end of the spectrum by maintaining that fiction and entertainment can be theologically significant. Therefore, Luke was a "historical novelist ... engaged in an activity at least partly frivolous and he did not always tell the truth."⁶ What seems indisputable is that Luke indeed makes historical truth claims, as in the prologue.⁷ The question to my mind is whether or not he does so disingenuously.

This brings us to the second significant difference between the way Luke integrates his symposia in a travel narrative from the way other ancient novels do. The comic novels - Petronius' *Satyricon*, Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, and Achilles Tatius' comic erotic novel *Leucippe and Cleitophon* - subject the story to the first-person point of view of the narrator, to undermine the reliability of the account. Unlike the comic novels we have analyzed, Luke's Gospel recounts the travel story in the third-person voice of an objective omniscient narrator. The obvious exception of course occurs with the first-person point of view in the preface Lk 1:1-4. In a sense, this is an exception that proves the rule. Just as in another example of a third-person account of a novel framed by a first-person preface, Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*, the "I" is intended to confirm the reliability of the account. The "I" steps in to say the narrator is telling the story exactly as he experienced it, whether he saw it in a painting in Longus' case, or heard it from other eyewitnesses in Luke's case.

In addition, Luke uses the sympotic frameworks in his narrative both to reinforce the “objectivity” of the “I” of his *character* Jesus, as well as to mitigate the impersonality of the third-person account. When Luke interrupts the course of the story to frame a meal setting in which Jesus speaks as an "I" to tell stories (Lk 14:16ff) or to give instructions (Lk. 14:7-14; 22:15-38), the voice of the narrator either drops out or is merged with the voice of the character Jesus (most notably Lk 14:24). The authority of the "I" point of view of the speaker Jesus is heightened, as it is generated by and merged with the stable objective point of view of the third-person narrator. Conversely, in the comic novels the *Satyricon* and the *Metamorphoses*, and in Achilles Tatius' erotic novel, the authority of the "I" is diminished by the admitted fallibility and unreliability of the narrators who are characters engaged in the plot of the story. The literary subordination of Jesus' first person point of view to an objective third-person narrative point of view, and then the merging of the two in the table talk of the symposium settings, quietly privileges the point of view of Jesus vis a vis the ideologies represented by the other characters (e.g., the Pharisees) in the story. Mary Ann Tolbert has argued similarly about the relationship between the narrator and the character Jesus in Mark's Gospel. Hence, what she says about Mark's Gospel applies to Luke's Gospel as well, "What other characters do and say and the way they respond to Jesus are all judged by the reader from the single dominant perspective established by the narrator-Jesus alliance."⁸

Nearly all the most recent studies of Lukan narrative take for granted that the narrator's voice is reliable. This narrator casts God and Jesus on the side of good, the

Pharisees on the other side (so they *must* be bad, right?!), and we have no reason to question the omniscient narrator's characterizations. The Pharisaic symposia scenes pretty much allow the implied reader to draw the moral conclusions him- or her-self - that Jesus is consistent, generous, smarter, and good; that the Pharisees are hypocritical, reserved, silenced, and bad - without much interference from the narrator, except for a few editorial comments about the Pharisees plotting or murmuring. But by putting Luke's use of parodic symposia in the context of a comparison with parodic symposia in comic novels of his sophistic contemporaries, it becomes very clear that Luke made a choice in making his narrator reliable. He's going against the norm of comic novels.

In this light, even the historical prologue takes on a new connotation. The subjective "I" opening Luke-Acts "protests too much" for its reliability, and then completely drops out of sight until the first verse of Acts, and then the "we" passages. It's a strategy that renders the whole story as if were the objective "gospel truth." But what if I were a hostile, ornery, or just skeptical first century reader reading Luke according the cultural codes of the comic novels? How clever of this possible picaro to drop so quickly out of the picture, lulling me into taking everything as if it happened the way he said. How much the more so is this reading plausible for a twenty-first century Jewish "resistant reader" of Luke-Acts?

Yes, Luke is making historical claims, truth claims. But the importance of that can be seen precisely because there are other cultural codes out there, the "comic codes" of the novels that take a very different tack. Scholars like those in *Jesus and the Heritage*

of *Israel* volume who play down the relevance of the comparison of Luke-Acts to novels, don't like calling the Scripture fiction. And yet I agree with Bonz et al. that there is a big difference between novels that don't make a truth claim, and historical epics that do, like the *Aeneid*. Luke is much more like the latter than the former. But the fact is, there is a lot of overlap between the conventions used by ancient first and second century novelists, historians, and composers of foundational epics. One of Pervo's great contributions in his romance theory is the recognition of the importance of comic elements in Luke's composition. Luke-Acts is funnier than the *Aeneid*. Luke-Acts manipulates point of view more ironically (in the meal scenes), too. Ignoring the novels would have us miss that. I compared Luke to the novels to contextualize him among the cultural choices he could have, but didn't make! Still, now I agree that Bonz's theory that Luke-Acts is a foundational epic is probably a better identification than my labeling it a historical novel. The explicit, non-ironic truth claims of Luke's work clinches it for me. That being said, there is still something very distinctive about Luke's composition of symposium scenes in his prose epic foundation myth, that brings me to my last point about how his use of symposium scenes differs ideologically from other ancient novels with meal scenes imbedded in them.

So lastly, Luke legitimates the particular ethical and ritual practices advocated in the symposium settings with a foundation myth, the biography of Jesus, in a way more explicitly mutually reinforcing than the relationship between myth and ritual in other examples of symposium literature -- with the possible exception of Apuleius'

Metamorphoses. In other words, Luke's rhetorical strategy is more "religious," in the sense that Clifford Geertz defines religion. As we saw before, Geertz characterized the religious perspective (in contrast to other cultural perspectives, like the scientific or aesthetic) as one where

a group's *ethos* ... represent[s] a way of life ideally adapted to the actual state of affairs the worldview describes, while the *worldview* is ... presented as an image of an actual state of affairs peculiarly well arranged to accommodate such a way of life. [emphasis mine]⁹

The interplay between the episodic symposium scenes and the overall biographical narrative superimpose the single scheme of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection the Christian story and the Christian ethos. Luke articulates a coherent religious world view by exploiting the mirroring effect of symposium frameworks on both the narrative/dialogues they frame (the technique of blurring temporal perspectives) *and* on the narrative that frames them. That is, on the one hand, in the Last Supper, Luke (1) *compresses* his three-part salvation-historical time scheme into a single symposium setting. The Last Supper alludes to the meals of Jesus' ministry as precedents, prescribes meal behaviors for the current in-between-time, and anticipates the future eschatological meals upon Jesus' return. On the other hand, Luke (2) *disperses* symposium settings throughout a linear narrative shaped according to the three periods of salvation history. Thus, depending upon where they occur in Luke's Gospel, the symposium settings symbolize (a) the past meals of Jesus' lifetime (e.g., the Pharisee and tax collector

symposia), (b) the "in-between-time" meal of the present period beginning with Jesus's death (e.g., the Last Supper and the Eucharistic meals prescribed by Jesus then), and (c) the "end-time" meals when Jesus returns in glory to break bread with his disciples (e.g., the meals with the resurrected Jesus on the road from Emmaus to Jerusalem).

Thus, the hermeneutic implicit in Luke's combination of these structures suggests that the ordering structures of Jesus' life and a particular salvation-historical scheme are the predominant figures for order in reality. At the same time, the dominant symposium itself competes with them as a figure of social order. The scheme of Jesus' biography - his life, death, and resurrection - is the root metaphor of Luke's perspective. It generates his threefold scheme of salvation history: Jesus-time, in-between-time, and messianic end-time. The story and the reality to which it refers is linear and sequential. However, in the densely packed table talk of the Last Supper, the scheme seems to be turned on its head. The Last Supper account collapses the three types of meal and the three salvation-historical time periods attached to them into the course of one meal with Jesus - to eat with Jesus at one of these meals is to eat with him at all of them. Hence, Luke's Gospel uses three figures of order to overcome the destabilizing power of change. It transforms chaotic change when it

1. sacralizes change by seeing *the kingly activity of God* in the changing circumstances of Jesus' career: his life, death, and resurrection;
2. historicizes change, by seeing in the disconcertingly unstable circumstances of the early church (i.e., the death of its leader, its rupture from the

Jewish people, and its turning toward the Gentile world) an orderly pattern that conforms to the same God-revealing scheme of Jesus' life-death-resurrection; and

3. socializes change, by seeing in widely diverse gatherings of Jesus and his followers for table fellowship a symposium ideal order adaptable to the other structures of Christian order.

Thus, Luke's Gospel shares with the reflective comic novels the view that change is a fundamental structure of reality. Change's surface social, political, economic, historical, and personal psychological manifestations often seem unpleasant, but if discerned from the proper philosophical perspective and lived out accordingly, are not as bad as they seem.

That is not to say that the other novels with symposia like the *Satyricon* and the *Metamorphoses* do not express coherent ideological perspectives – world views. Rather, I assert that Luke's Gospel differs from the *Satyricon* and the *Metamorphoses* in the particular choice of philosophy it advocates - not popular Epicureanism, nor a synthesis of Platonism and Isianism, but the way of Jesus. Moreover, the role of the figure of symposia in Luke's Gospel is more prescriptive than in the other novels. The ideology of the Jesus movement advocated neither a flight from the world of disturbing change (the Epicurean approach) nor a mystical psychological interiorization of change (Apuleius' Platonic Isianism), but rather the concrete embodiment of a distinctive view of change in specific communal structures, Christian communities. Luke makes his symposium figures of social order prescriptive by framing within them rules for conducting Christian

symposia (especially in Lk 14:7-11 and 22:15-38). Though the erudite symposia of Plutarch and Athenaeus also have a prescriptive dimension, they frame the entire cultural enterprise within the Greek social order - the dominant intellectual culture - symbolized by the symposia which circumscribe their variegated and diverting encyclopedia of human experience. But Luke subjects the social order implied by symposia to geographical and historical contingencies in the framework of the travel novel. Thus, Luke implicitly contrasts his option for a particular ethos, Christianity, to the dominant culture, the Roman empire. By representing his ideal of Christian life with the literary structures of the intellectual world around him, namely the symposium *and* novel conventions, Luke presented the problem for which he offered the option (*hairesis*) of Christianity as a solution in the same ideological terms as his contemporary client/scholar/writers offered their options.

Luke the Sophist

Luke's use of symposium meal scenes to idealize his Christian group's structure and to parody other groups is typical of a class of scholar-writers dependent on wealthy imperial or provincial patronage for writing their novels, parodies, and encyclopedic works - in other words, the sophists of the Second Sophistic movement and its first century precursors from the age of Nero. I follow B. Reardon and Graham Anderson's definition of the Second Sophistic as a rather broad intellectual movement.¹⁰ The

sophists were a social type, clients of patrons in the Roman imperial bureaucracy, sometimes officials themselves. They were professional teachers who brought honor to their patrons by their publications and fame. As an aesthetic movement, second sophistic writers valued archaizing, literary variation and versatility (*poikilia*), encyclopedic knowledge, atticizing, literary imitation of classic models, Menippean satire, among other things. First and second century rabbis -"sage/bureaucrats"- an indigenous Jewish expression of the same intellectual movement, according to Henry Fischel.¹¹ Reardon and Anderson stress that many sophists were non-Greeks (Lucian, Apuleius, etc.) whose adoption of ancient Greco-Roman literature and rhetoric moved them from the periphery to the center of Roman imperial culture. They were literary traditionalists who "innovated" by selecting and recombining old models in new ways - like the novels, Latin epic, encyclopedic anthologies, Menippean satire, the Gospels. As intellectuals dependent on wealthy and powerful patrons often with far less learning, there were natural tensions between them. They often had a "We know better than you do" attitude toward their patrons. I see the symposium convention of host -guest rivalry and intellectual quarrels as the sophists' ideological expression of such tensions. E. Cizek's analysis of Roman intellectuals like Petronius and Seneca under Roman Neronian imperial rule has also influenced my position regarding these tensions.¹² Luke's use of symposium conventions that articulate this and the other values and experiences I suggested above set him well within the intellectual movement of the Second Sophistic.

What we know of the composer of Luke-Acts fits the social type of those who belonged to this movement. He wrote for a patron, Theophilus, to whom he addressed both parts of his work (Lk 1:1-4; Acts 1:1).¹³ Luke represents Jesus frequently at table with his rivals, the Pharisees, so as to imply that Jesus was not at odds with the fundamental social structures of Roman Imperial culture, namely the patron-client system underlying hospitality in Greco-Roman table fellowship groups.¹⁴ He uses the conventional symposium *topos* of host/guest tensions to caricature as hypocrisy the ethos of hospitality of Jesus' philosophical/religious rivals, the Pharisees. He idealizes a Christian model of patron-client relations both in Jesus' instructions at the Last Supper (e.g., Lk 22:24-27) and in the role of the wandering charismatic teacher who expects bed and board from sympathizing communities in return for teaching.¹⁵ Luke does, however, represent Jesus as calling for a new ethic of self-sufficiency in the more dangerous time of his absence (Lk 22:35-38). Nevertheless, the disciples are still promised the reward of being hosted for a meal - either by Jesus at present eucharistic meals, or by Jesus at the side of God in the messianic Kingdom to come (Lk 22:30). Like his literary and philosophical contemporaries, Luke uses the symposium setting as an easily adaptable model of social order for "living as is fitting" in a world characterized by seemingly chaotic change. In other words, since the composer of Luke's Gospel employs the same literary strategies that distinguish the Greco-Roman sophists as a class, it is reasonable to conclude that he too belongs to that class.

Nevertheless, Luke's choice of genre distinguishes his particular ideological option from other sophists who composed literary symposia. Luke differed from his contemporaries who wrote erudite symposia because their choice of genre imagined only one Hellenistic cultural ethic. By setting symposium scenes within the historical travel narrative form, Luke relativized the Hellenistic cultural ideal of learned conviviality *as an option among other options*. Moreover, by contrasting Jesus' way of table fellowship to that of the Pharisees, Luke asserted that a distinctively Christian interpretation of the more general cultural ideal of the symposium was the best ethic of the possible options. If one accepts Bonz's theory that Luke-Acts is a sort of historical epic, its symposium conventions help transform its hero from the warrior-founder of foundation epics like the *Aeneid* into the teacher-founder of Luke's Gospel. What else would one expect from a Christian sophist? Luke also differed from the other novelists who represented symposia in historical travel narratives. The symposia they represented were at most only implicit programs for organizing their readers' communal life. Luke in contrast, made his Christian symposia explicitly prescriptive for his present and future audiences, with a command to them to "do this in my memory." Moreover, a single scheme, Jesus' biography, stamps both the meal scenes and the development of the narrative so that they mutually reinforce one another quite emphatically. Thus, Luke explicitly integrated the worldview scheme of his overall narrative and the social ethos of his symposium setting in a much more exaggerated and obvious manner than other

novels with symposium scenes. To repeat, in this sense Luke's Gospel is *more* "religious" than the other novels.

Meals in Luke's Gospel are a "continuity-creating symbol" in the face of a rather drastic experience of changes in the early church's historical experience: the execution of its first leader, Jesus, and the transformation of its social composition from a predominantly Jewish to a predominantly Gentile group. Luke's choice of the genre of symposium scenes imbedded in a narrative addresses the issue of change.

I have tried to clarify only certain aspects of Luke's religious worldview by comparing and contrasting his idealization of table fellowship with other Greco-Roman idealizations of table fellowship. An important question, however, remains open: How does Luke's religious strategy differ from other strategies to adapt the religious tradition of Israel to the Hellenistic cultural situation? Is the community modeled in Luke's idealized Christian symposia a "new Israel" replacing the old unbelieving Israel, or a "reconstituted Israel," including both Jews and Gentiles who believe that God revealed his will through Jesus Christ?¹⁶ Luke's stress of inclusiveness in his table ethics tends to confirm the views of those who hold that Luke envisions the ideal Christian community as an Israel reconstituted from believing Jews and Gentiles. Brawley for example points to Luke's relatively sympathetic representation of the Pharisees, and especially Jesus' table fellowship with the Pharisees as evidence that Luke advocated the early Christian community of believing Jews and Gentiles as a model for the "reconstituted Israel" of the church.¹⁷ Whatever the case, to demonstrate Luke's distinctive interpretation of his own

community as a continuation of "Israel" requires a comparison of Luke-Acts to other contemporary texts that claim that their community is a continuation of ancient Israel - e.g., other Christian texts, Qumran texts, and Tannaitic literature. Such a wide-ranging comparative study would require another book. Moreover, my modern situation as a Jew directs my interest to the ancient Jewish traditions that have had a formative effect on Judaism as practiced today comparable to the influence of the "canonical" text of Luke's Gospel on subsequent Christian communal ideals. Thus, in the following chapter I will narrow my focus to a comparison of Luke's Christian symposium ethos to the symposium ethos idealized in the Passover seder preserved in the Mishnah *Pesahim 10*. Luke represents a Christian claim, and the Mishnah a Tannaitic interpretation of the Pharisees' claim, that their particular (and competing) forms of table fellowship embodied the ethos of the Israel redeemed by God according to the Hebrew Bible.

¹A. Cizek, "Les Structures," 110.

²Fitzmyer, *Luke I-IX*, pp. 179-80

³Pervo, *Profit with Delight*, 131-35, 185.

⁴ For a general introduction to the problem of the Gospels' genre(s) and a survey of the options, see Charles H. Talbert, *What is a Gospel? The Genre of the Canonical Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977). For the more recent discussion, see Parsons and Pervo, *Rethinking the Unity of Luke and Acts*; Moessner, ed., *Jesus and the Heritage of Israel*; and Bonz, *Past as Legacy*.

⁵ I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), 32, 216.

⁶ Pervo, *Profit with Delight*, 138, and 66,103.

⁷ See Pervo and Marshall's contributions in Moessner, ed., *Jesus and the Heritage of Israel*, as well as the essays discussing the prologue (Alexander, Schmidt, Robbins, Moessner) and Luke's use of Hellenistic Jewish historical conventions (Kurz, Holladay, and Sterling).

⁸ Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's World in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 125, and see 95ff.

⁹ Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," 89-90.

¹⁰ Reardon, *Courants littéraires grecs*; Anderson, *Lucian: Theme and Variation in the Second Sophistic and Eros Sophistes*.

¹¹ Fischel, *Rabbinic Literature and Greco-Roman Philosophy*.

¹² Eugen Cizek,, *L' Epoque de Neron et ses Controverses Ideologiques*, Roma Aeternae 4; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972.

¹³F. Danker, *Jesus and the New Age*, p. 25.

¹⁴Luke's account of early Christian protestations of innocence to any charge of insurrection against Jewish or Roman authorities (i.e., by Jesus, Stephen, or Paul) in Luke-Acts has also been offered as proof that Luke intended to make Christianity seem politically and socially innocuous. However, in those cases, as in the case of Luke's

representation of Jesus at table with his enemies, Luke idealizes the situation as being more amicable than he knows it really to be.

¹⁵Theissen, "Itinerant Radicalism, " p. 65.

¹⁶ This of course is the main theme of Moessner, ed., *Jesus and the Heritage of Israel*, indicating that the questions raised over one to two decades earlier by the Lukan scholars in the next note are still unresolved.

¹⁷E.g., Brawley, "The Pharisees in Luke-Acts;" and Earl Richard, "The Divine Purpose: The Jews and Gentile Mission (Act 15)," in *Luke-Acts: New Perspectives from the Society of Biblical Literature Seminar* [ed. Charles Talbert; New York, NY Crossroad, 1984] pp. 188-209), following the work of Jacob Jervell, *Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke-Acts* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972]) and A. George, "Israël dans l'oeuvre de Luc," *Revue Biblique* 75 [1968], pp. 481-425.