

Geir Otto Holmås, *Prayer and Vindication in Luke-Acts. The Theme of Prayer within the Context of the Legitimizing and Edifying Objective of the Lukan Narrative* (Library of New Testament Studies 433; New York – London: T&T Clark 2011). Pp. xvi-300. \$103.60. ISBN 978-0-567-01756-7 (Hardback)

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Geir Otto Holmås' book is a revision of his Ph.D. thesis defended under the supervision of Reidar Hvalvik at MF Norwegian School of Theology in Oslo, Norway, where he also now serves as Associate Professor of New Testament. The subjects chosen by the Norwegian scholar is no doubt relevant, and indeed crucial. Holmås is correct when he sees in prayer a characteristic of the godly in biblical Israel, of Jesus' life and teachings and of the mission of the early church. Thus his effort to conduct major research on the Lukan perspective on prayer and on its relation to the overall aim of the double work is well-founded.

The somewhat obscure title of the book is explained only at the end of the author's work since he decided to first draw a full picture of the Lukan understanding of prayer and only later unfold for the reader what prayer has to do with vindication (p. 266).

The Norwegian exegete is aware that such an important subject is far from being untouched by previous works. In fact, even in the last fifty years many important studies have appeared, however there is no apparent consensus among the scholars, and their studies are either inconclusive or they fail to take into account the important links between prayer and other narrative threads of Luke-Acts. In the writer's opinion the existing analyses covered a relatively limited range of Lukan texts and thus the conclusions drawn from them are general in nature. The author does acknowledge the complexity and versatility of the Lukan concept of prayer, but he is convinced that it is both "explicable and substantially coherent" (p. 3). In his opinion the pragmatic and rhetorical aspects of prayer within the double work are also important, thus he offers an exploration of their *apologetic and educative* functions in the context of Luke's historical narrative.

Holmås mentions nine monographs he considers as having great impact on the study of prayer in Luke-Acts. The 1960s brought two important studies contributing to the subject. W. Ott, *Gebet und Heil: Die Bedeutung der*

*Gebetsparänese in der lukanischen Theologie* (1965) and O.G. Harris, *Prayer in Luke-Acts: A Study in the Theology of Luke* (1966). Ott decided to examine prayer as a redactional theme in Luke-Acts based on Jesus' didactic texts and the admonition in Luke 18:1 as its centre, a theme which according to the German scholar, is a sign of crisis caused by the delay of the Parousia. His study was in turn heavily dependent on the premises of H. Conzelmann and E. Grässer. The book by Harris concentrates on the relationship of prayer to the course of salvation history drawing on a significantly larger number of texts in Luke-Acts. According to Holmås, Harris succeeded in demonstrating that the prayer passages appeared at important moments in Luke's story, although that claim may be not so consistent at some points (p. 6).

In the next decade two other monographs were published. L. Monloubou's *La Priere selon Saint Luc: Recherche d'une structure* (1976) and L. Feldkämper's *Der betende Jesus als Heilmittler nach Lukas* by (1978). Monloubou arranges the prayer-texts according to four main types: the environment, community, Jesus, and Jesus' teachings. He also analyses the Lukan prayer vocabulary, placing the various prayers into four categories: supplication, 'seeking,' praise, and liturgy. However, this study is criticized by Holmås for its "inappropriately broad definition of prayer and his failure to appreciate the importance of plot development for interpreting Luke-Acts" (p. 7). Feldkämper, by contrast, limited himself to the texts in Luke's Gospel which present Jesus himself in prayer and compared them with parallel texts in Acts. He stressed three specific features of Jesus' prayers: *dialogical, soteriological and ecclesiological*, showing that in Luke's double work God's redemption comes through the praying Jesus. However, Feldkämper choose to ignore Luke's Infancy Narrative material and generally unduly narrows the field of research, both major deficiencies of this study.

Another two dissertations on Lukan prayer came out in the 1980s. C.M. Fuhman defended his thesis "A Redactional Study of Prayer in the Gospel of Luke" in 1981, while R.A. Mobley's "Structure and Significance in the Lukan Concept of Prayer" appeared two years later, in 1983. The first study contributed little to the discussion on the subject of prayer in Luke-Acts, however Mobley's dissertation is judged much more original and conclusive. The American scholar managed to produce a well-argued synthesis of relevant issues concerning prayer, pointing out especially a pastoral concern of Luke consonant with the perspective and purpose found in the preface of third Gospel (Luke 1:1-4). Holmås appreciates also Mobley's discovery of a twofold narrative perspective (theological and didactic) within Luke-Acts, even though the pragmatic aspect of it is missing.

In 1992 S.F. Plymale prepared a study on prayer entitled: *The Prayer Texts of Luke-Acts*. D. Crump followed a year later with *Jesus the Intercessor: Prayer and Christology in Luke- Acts*. The first author, Plymale, followed previous studies

(e.g. Harris) but with very little original investigation and only very general results. Crump, however offered much more detailed and cogent analysis. His Christological key to the subject of prayer is Jesus as the prophetic-messianic intercessor, who prayed on earth and keeps praying in heaven. Still, Holmås sees his work as substantially misinterpreting the evidence in several regards and his exegesis as stretched beyond credibility.

The last monograph covered by Holmås' *status questionis* was N. Förster's *Das gemeinschaftliche Gebet in der Sicht des Lukas* (2007), which juxtaposed Lukan theology with ancient the literary environment regarding corporate prayer. The Norwegian exegete highly values Förster's conviction that Luke's portrait of communal prayer relies on a heritage of Hellenistic Judaism present in ancient Jewish Diaspora literature. Nevertheless, he estimates Förster's work as "somewhat patchy and incomplete" and in some cases speculative.

On balance, while he acknowledges the significant ground covered by these previous studies, Holmås remains critical of the modest scale of their achievements. In his opinion the scholarly environment still waits for "a more convincing synthesis" not marked by the former tendencies toward either reductionism or fragmentation. He sets his own goal as demonstrating that prayer is tightly associated with the plan and plot of Luke's historical narrative (apologetic factor), along with his paraenetic aim of showing the need for persistent prayer.

The aim of the Scandinavian scholar is formulated as "a comprehensive reassessment of prayer as a literary theme in Luke-Acts" reached by careful examination of the Lukan prayer-passages, in the context of the structure and plotting of the double work as a whole. He also considers the pragmatic and rhetorical goals of Luke's narrative in the shaping of early Christianity.

While not abandoning redaction criticism entirely Holmås' focuses mainly on the development of the Lukan narrative. Thus he discusses the prayer-passages in relation to the main threads of Lukan narrative, their immediate context and their eventual repetitions. However, he wants also to explain them against the background of the models and understandings of prayer existing in the first century AD.

The book consists of three parts, of which last two are of similarly exegetical in nature. The first part is a preparatory study to the author's later investigations. Its first chapter (chapter 2) is devoted to a prayer definition of prayer and a systematic study of the terminology and phraseology of prayer. The groundwork laid here is crucial to his arguments about the selection of texts. In fact, Holmås limits his study to passages employing terminology for generic prayer (*προσεύχομαι/προσευχή*) or petitionary prayer (*δέομαι/δέησις κτλ.*). His conclusion of setting the perimeters of his study "neither very narrowly nor indiscriminately broadly" (p. 46) actually seems somewhat vague. Similarly debatable

is his decision to exclude most of the praise and thanksgiving passages (αἰνέω, δοξάζω, εὐλογέω, εὐχαριστέω, κτλ.), as well as those belonging to a context of liturgy and worship (προσκυνέω, λατρεύω, κτλ.). Chapter 3 shows the role of a prayer theme in relation to some main Lukan historiographical objectives and his literary-theological concerns. The author then identifies two main pragmatic goals of Luke's two volume work: giving legitimacy and identity to the early Christian community and also edifying the recipients through examples from salvation history (p. 262).

The rest of the book is a detailed exegesis of the chosen texts, divided according to the structure of the Lukan work. Part two deals with all of the Gospel texts, while part three focuses on the subject of prayer in Acts. The first section of part two (chapter 4) is a reflection on prayer in the Infancy Narrative (Lk 1–2). Holmås sees it as Israel's ages-old petition now answered by God's salvific initiatives (p. 76). The scenes presenting Zechariah, Anna and Simeon are good evidence in support of such a claim.

The following chapter analyses the meaning and significance of the prayer practices of Jesus himself (Lk 3–24). The whole Gospel narrative is filled with Luke's pictures of a praying Jesus: his baptism – 3,21-22; individual prayer time – 5,16; understanding his messiahship – 9,18.22; his transfiguration 9,28-36; choosing the twelve – 6,12; praising God's revelation to simple people – 10,21-22; before instructing his disciples to pray – 11,1-4; mediation for Peter – 22,32, and for his executioners – 23,34; accepting death as his Father's will – 22,42-44; and entrusting himself to the Father – 23,46). Further, the Christ's resurrection and His gift of the Holy Spirit are reliable signs of His vindication by God (2,22-24; 10,36-43) and are part of God's salvation act which includes all (Acts 2,23.36-38; 3,14-20). In the author's opinion, Luke featured the subject of prayer carefully, in order to cast Jesus as a model of prayer. His purpose was to stress the presence of God behind Jesus' actions and to encourage readers of these works to follow the Masters' example (p. 114).

The last section of the second part (chapter 6) examines the role of prayer in the lives of Christ's followers, as elicited by Jesus' teaching and exemplary actions in the Third Gospel. Luke concentrated most of his material of this type in two major sections belonging to the travel narrative (Lk 11,1-13; 18,1-8). There, his disciples are encouraged to pray confidently and steadfastly in expectation of God's certain answer. Such an attitude functions also as an antidote to disbelief and earthly anxieties. The force of the argument is strengthened by Jesus' own example, followed by the prayerful attitude of apostles in Acts. Asked by his followers to teach them how to pray (11,1), Jesus gives them the "Our Father" prayer, as a model of addressing God (11,2-13). He also encourages them to stay vigilant in prayer (18,1-8; 21,36) even though the disciples will fail to fulfill the

will of their Master in a time of great peril (22,40-46). Their behavior changes only after Christ's resurrection, when they continually pray to God in the temple (24,52-53). However, the real change comes when the Holy Spirit is granted to the disciples, who are immersed in prayer (Acts 1,14; 2,1-4; 4,24-31). Just as they were taught by their Master they keep praying for their adversaries to be forgiven (Acts 7,60; 26,29; cf. Luke 6,28) and for their new co-workers in proclaiming the Gospel (Acts 6,4-6; 13,2-3; cf. Luke 10,2).

The prayer-texts in Acts are divided into two groups. Chapter 7 focuses on the role of prayer in the young Christian community, gathered mainly in Jerusalem (Acts 1–12). The Jerusalem community remains constantly devoted to prayer after the apostles exemplary example (1,14; 2,42.46; 3,1). The continuity of the prayer narrative thread from the Gospel is obvious. The key events are all immersed in prayer and in many cases prayer is an important attribute of Lukan characters in Acts. Every time that the proclamation of the Gospel is hindered (4,24-31), or the young Church needs assistance (1,24), or a healing is to be performed (9,40) – the followers of Christ turn to Him in prayer (4,24-31; 7,59; 12,5.12; 14,23.26) and are answered. It is in prayer that the Holy Spirit is given (1,14; 2,1-4) and the Twelve are brought back to their full number (1,24-25), and so they will continue in future hardships (6,1-6). Prayer accompanies the Samaritan and Gentile Pentecosts (8,15-17; 10,1-48) and the conversion of Saul (9,11-17).

Throughout the proclamation of the Gospel by Paul (Acts 13-28) a narrative prayer-thread appears as well (chapter 8). Here again, God's actions follows the supplications of the apostles, thereby legitimizing their efforts. Obstacles and sufferings in the lives of missionaries serve as an additional impetus encouraging Luke's readers to pray persistently (16,16-25). The section opens with the prayer of the church leaders who appoint Paul and Barnabas for the mission (13,2). Places of prayer are the starting points of their evangelization (16,13), and at a time of prayer, in a vision, Paul is guided by the Lord (22,17-18). Paul prays in the course of performing miracles (28,8) and entrusting church leaders and other believers to the Lord (14,23; 20,32-36). The apostles follow the example of Jesus in accepting God's will in their lives (20,22-25.36-37; 21,4-6.13-14).

A summary of the author's analysis and conclusions is given in a concluding chapter, divided into three sections: prayer in the background of Luke's narrative, the apologetic character of Christian prayer, as both compared and contrasted with OT and Jewish figures, and prayer as a vehicle of realizing eschatological as experienced by Lukan the readers of Luke-Acts. In the very last paragraph of his study the author finally explains that the "vindication" coupled with prayer in the title of his book relates to the newly established community of Jesus' followers, who are recognized by the God of Israel as his true people prayerfully gathered around Jesus Christ.

The book is also supplied with an extensive bibliography on the subject followed by indexes of biblical references and scholars' names.

Holmås' study is no doubt of great value. It contains both deep textual analysis and consideration of previous exegetical efforts. It relies on existing studies and yet presses on to forge its own original contributions. The author is also consistent throughout the entire work in emphasizing apologetic and paraenetic aspects of the researched prayer texts. However, the biggest issue of his book is the definition of prayer and the selection of texts that flows from it. Even though the author maintains that he "has chosen breadth over depth" in his study (p. 17), his choice of prayer-texts still seems to be limited. There is no real reason for dismissing so many prayer texts, just because they are characterized by praise, thanksgiving or a liturgical function. The Scandinavian exegete is well aware that distinctions about the many prayer texts of Luke-Acts could not be sharp, but he nevertheless separates them quite arbitrarily. For example, in the section devoted to the Infancy Narrative Simeon's song is chosen for analysis while the other hymnic prayers there (*Magnificat*, *Benedictus*), which are clearly complementary, are left aside. Thus, one cannot agree that the phenomenon of prayer in Luke-Acts has been fully covered in his book.

One of the most important observations of the study is the thorough research done on the function of prayer within the Luke-Acts narrative. It is the author's claim that Luke uses prayer texts very deliberately, to fit the early Church into the larger course of salvation history and to encourage Christ's disciples to follow His example in the practice of prayer.