Learning and teaching Luke-Acts

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At the 2001 conference of the British New Testament Society (Hulme Hall, University of Manchester), two of its nine seminar groups met together for a session on 'Learning and teaching Luke-Acts.' These nine seminar groups are substantially the heart of each BNTS conference, and seminar time is at a premium, so the coming together of 'The Book of Acts' and 'The Synoptic Evangelists' groups to consider three short presentations by scholars on learning and teaching in their area is a significant move. Three people were to present papers; in the event one, Dr Loveday Alexander, Sheffield University, was unavoidably absent, but replaced by one of her former undergraduates, Katie Edwards, who spoke to Dr Alexander’s paper from a learner’s perspective. Most of the material below is drawn directly, with permission, from the handouts offered by the presenters.

Dr Steve Walton, of the London Bible College, reflected systematically on his co-authoring of Wenham, D & Walton, S, *Introducing the Gospels and Acts: Exploring the New Testament, Vol. 1*, SPCK, 2001, ISBN 0 281 05433 9. Those teaching introductory courses on Gospels and Acts will welcome this volume. Its authors have taken seriously students' needs, addressing students' learning rather than tutors' teaching. They highlight student engagement with the text, with their learning the 'tools of the trade'; they seek to help students understand how critical skills and approaches may open up ways of reading a text.

Dr Walton explained the process he brought to writing the material on Luke-Acts in *Introducing the Gospels and Acts*. His experience as a tutor had left him with the impression that too many introductory books simply told students about the New Testament; his experience of students was that on the whole they entered on courses with a great ignorance of the contents of the Gospels and Acts. Reflection on these experiences suggested his priorities: he wanted to engage students in reading the texts for themselves; to engage them in developing reading skills; to engage them in developing the New Testament scholar's tools of the trade. So, basic to his writing was his engaging of students in the learning process.

Central to this engagement is a 'walking through' each of Luke's books, a section by section overview. This allows students to probe the narrative for character, plot and development. This 'walk through' overview is accompanied by the provision of learning resources within the text: 'boxes' containing translations of extra-biblical texts, e.g.,
Josephus, Contra Apion; 'boxes' concerned with specific issues - such as Luke's portrayal of time; annotated book lists; a glossary of key terms. There are also boxes offering questions for student exercises and others stimuli for seminar topics. The 'tools of the trade' are acquired largely as and when they are needed, although material at the beginning of the whole volume offers thoughtful presentations of such critical approaches and tools. Only towards the end of Walton's process relating to the text of Luke-Acts does one find the 'usual' introductory material.

Katie Edwards gave a vivid account of a student's experience of being engaged in reading a text. Part of her experience was a recognition that arriving at a session without having done the preparatory work was not a good thing! Accenting student learning placed large responsibilities on the learners also. Clearly, she appreciated Dr Alexander's commitment to engagement with a text and was deeply involved in its consequent process.

Dr Alexander's presentation focused on a student handout providing a process for one day in a course on 'The Bible and The Grand Narrative of Christendom.' This day's work considered 'Women as characters in Gospel and Tradition', and specifically Mary Magdalene via Luke 8.1 - 3. Students were invited to engage with this text, to discover what is said of the women and of Mary, and to identify their role and function in the narrative by exploring what more one learns of them elsewhere in Luke's work. The next stage of the process is to discover what is said of Mary Magdalene in the co-texts, the other synoptists. Given the authors' uses of scripture, what may be the pre-text, that is, what biblical prehistory may there be for this Mary? But this story needs then to be explored in the post-texts, those places where conflation and gap-filling led to the portrayal of Mary Magdalene as the repentant prostitute. Then follows a study of Mary and Martha...

Clearly, this structured, reflective and systematic engagement with the text within the grand narrative, under Loveday Alexander's watchful eye and scholarly prompting, had seized the imagination and engagement of the presenter.

Dr Alistair Wilson of the Highland Theological College presented his work on 'Developing a module on Luke-Acts' which, because the institution's students live across a very wide area, needed to be available also in Distance Open Learning format. He focused first on the word 'developing,' rehearsing some of his basic reflections on student feedback from previous years; on tutor's perceptions of 'how it went;' on experiences of peer review; on recent and relevant research; on the availability of new resources and on external regulations (e.g., QAA benchmarking). Dr Wilson briefly discussed the character of aims, intended learning outcomes (ILOs), and the personal and professional capabilities (PPCs) to be developed - and assessed.

For this module the ILOs were to be that a student would be able to trace theological themes across Luke-Acts, demonstrating a sensitivity to literary structure and style; to discuss the relationship between history and theology in these ancient texts; to discuss and evaluate the relationship between these canonical writings and non-canonical literature of the same period.

For the DOL mode an open learning package is to be supported by tutorial support in a variety of forms: writing, personal tutorials, video-conferencing and telephone. This material is also available to support students attending in full- or part-time mode.

Discussion was among the three presenters, who formed a panel, and members of the seminar. Exchanges were numerous and perceptive.

- The question of how these texts may be studied without student knowledge of Greek bothered many.
- A number of members of the seminar drew attention to the conferences held by the Classics Subject Centre for those teaching Koine Greek at introductory level.
- Student participation or, more precisely, non-participation was an issue for others. Katie Edwards's point that there was no point in attending an active learning session without having done the preparations was forcefully made and strongly supported.
- For many, the most pressing question was: how might one deal at reasonable depth with so much that was so unknown in the short time allotted for a module?
Might not 'straight delivery' be the solution to this time problem?

In spite of these issues, overwhelmingly, the accent of comment and question was on the primacy of student learning.

**Comment**

In the light of current talk of 'a scholarship of learning and teaching', this proved a fascinating joint seminar, for here were scholars deeply, even passionately, concerned for their students' learning and for their own still-maturing teaching. Reflection on this seminar extends this simple observation in the following directions:

- here were scholars concerned that 'their' students should acquire and develop skills constitutive of this specific scholarship so that they might enter into, enjoy, and hold dialogue with others in an area of common concern (Luke-Acts);
- here were scholars reflecting thoughtfully on how best to sustain or improve a helpful relation with 'their' students, probing the presenters of papers through civilised and sharp questions and comments;
- here were scholars (the presenters and, clearly, many of the seminar participants) already well-skilled in and further developing their scholarly dialogue with students.

One concludes that 'a scholarship of learning and teaching' is most likely to be developed in communities of scholars already engaged with 'their' students in a focused area of common interest and concern. Is there a distinction which needs to be made between 'scholarship reflecting on learning and teaching' and 'a scholarship of learning and teaching'? Is not the former the substantive scholarship?

**The British New Testament Society**

**The QAA Benchmark Statement for Theology & Religious Studies**

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