



**Jens-Arne Edelmann**

***Das Römische Imperium im Lukanischen Doppelwerk:  
Darstellung und Ertragspotenzial für christliche Leser  
des späten ersten Jahrhunderts***

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Stephan Witetschek  
Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

In the course of the last twenty-five years, empire studies has become a distinct field of research in New Testament studies. Far from repeating the simple dichotomy of “Romans 13 versus Revelation 13,” scholars have reached new levels of discourse on the roles the Roman Empire can play in different New Testament writings, on the ways these writings react to the reality of empire, and also on the very concept of empire. These discourses, however, are mainly taking place in the English-speaking parts of the world, perhaps because the English word *empire* is particularly catchy and comprehensive in a way that, for example, the German “Imperium” (or even “Reich”) can hardly match.

The book under review is a distinctive contribution in German that touches this field of research. It is the published form of Jens-Arne Edelmann’s dissertation, supervised by Reinhard Feldmeier and submitted to the Faculty of Theology at Georg-August-Universität Göttingen in 2020. It is worth mentioning that Edelmann has completed this dissertation besides regular work in pastoral ministry.

The main interest of Edelmann’s study is articulated in the subtitle: it is not generally about the presentation of the Roman Empire in Luke-Acts but more precisely about the impact that the presentation of the Roman Empire in Luke-Acts presumably made on Christian readers in the late first century. The outline of the book follows from this precise research question.

Part 1 (1–12) is duly devoted to contextualizing this study in the landscape of research specifically on Luke-Acts and the Roman Empire (hence not in the wider field of empire studies). Part 2 (13–42) sets the framework for the analyses that follow in the next part: Edelmann attempts to reconstruct the contours of Luke’s intended readers. His most important point of reference is the Lukan version of the “Synoptic Apocalypse,” in particular Luke 21:12–19. This passage articulates the prospect of persecution and trials under “kings and governors” (Luke 21:12; see also the parallel in Mark 13:9: “governors and kings”). Edelmann puts his emphasis the possible confrontation with Roman governors, a prospect that would have been particularly disconcerting to provincials who would otherwise hardly have been facing a Roman governor as a representative of the Roman Empire. Their social status is deduced from what is otherwise known about Christians of the first two centuries CE: provincials, city-dwellers, mostly tradespeople or slaves, not members of the upper class (see esp. 26–29). It is Edelmann’s contention that the presentation of the Roman Empire and its representatives in Luke-Acts is meant to prepare the audience for such confrontations.

This thesis is put to the test in part 3 (43–201), the main part of the book. Here Edelmann analyzes many selected passages from Luke and Acts with regard to how the Roman Empire (mostly through its representatives) is presented and how this presentation could impress readers of Luke-Acts. The selection is conditioned by Edelmann’s specific research interest as articulated in part 2, so there is no reason for him to deal with Luke’s parable of the minas (Luke 19:11–27), a parable that says quite a lot about the working of Roman imperialism, but at a level that would hardly have been relevant to Luke’s audience as reconstructed by Edelmann. Otherwise, he casts his net widely and comes out with a considerable breadth of dimensions and appreciations of Roman rule as experienced by provincials (i.e., both the literary characters in Luke-Acts and the presumable audience of the work). Throughout this part of the book, Edelmann stresses the moral ambivalence of characters such as Pilate or Festus, which prevents him from putting his research in the simple dichotomy of positive versus negative presentation of a character. Rather, he acknowledges that the Roman Empire is presented in a number of roles or significations, which is systematized towards the end of part 3 (see esp. 189–96).

To begin with, the Roman Empire is simply a historical reality, as in the synchronism Luke 3:1–2. Luke does not deny that his story took place in this real world. In this real world, the Roman Empire receives some positive appreciation as a political order that provides protection from mob violence and embodies the rule of law (“Schutzraum und Rechtsinstanz”), as when Paul reclaims his Roman citizenship in Acts 16:37 and 22:25. The Roman Empire comes with a cultural dimension (“Kulturraum”), too. It is the world in which Hellenistic culture provides common standards and means of communication. On the other hand, however, Luke does not deny or diminish the misdemeanor of individual Roman officials such as the corrupt Felix or Pilate’s failure to pronounce just judgment (see Acts 3:13; 4:27; 13:28). The Roman Empire can even appear as the arena in which the devil exercises power (see esp. Luke 4:6), but in other places Luke can also see it in the

service of God, as the instance that brings Paul to Rome according to God's plan (Acts 19:21; 23:11).

So, according to Edelmann, is the Roman Empire good or bad in Luke's view? This is the wrong question, for two reasons: (1) The analyses offered in this book have yielded a fairly complex (and presumably quite realistic) picture of the Roman Empire and its representatives. This complexity challenges too-simple dichotomies, not vice versa. (2) Edelmann's interest lies less on a clear political position articulated in Luke-Acts than on the pragmatics, one could even say pastoral pragmatics, and the theological outlook of the work. If one expects a genuine contribution to empire studies, one may be disappointed. Edelmann quite consistently presents Luke as an author writing for fellow Christians with a very distinct concern.

Part 4 (203–17) articulates this pragmatic interest under the heading "Ertragspotenzial der Aussagen des Doppelwerks für die Leser," readers, that is, as reconstructed in part 2. This is, then, concisely summarized in the concluding part 5 (219–25: "Sicherheit für die Verunsicherten," or, reassurance for the puzzled). Then follow the rich bibliography (225–51) and indexes of references, modern authors, and topics (253–89).

Edelmann's study has a clear and logical structure that makes it easy to follow his reasoning, albeit at the price of some repetitiveness, for example, when Pilate is mentioned in several places. In other words, his study is painstakingly inductive (and quite untouched by overarching political theorizing). This can come with conflicting evaluations; one does not get *the* judgment about Pilate or Festus. That may be annoying for a reader who expects clear-cut positions; would some synthesis on individual characters have been possible? In sum, Edelmann's book is a worthy attempt to integrate insights gained from the increased sensitivity toward the presence of empire in the New Testament into the study of Luke's theological perspective: What did it mean to speak of God and God's kingdom within the ambivalent reality of the Roman Empire?