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A Closer Look: Luke 22:43–44 and Questions of Interpretation

Mike Pope

Review of S. Kent Brown. *The Testimony of Luke*. Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2013.

S. KENT BROWN'S TRANSLATION OF and commentary on the Gospel of Luke is massive (1,271 PDF pages). He is to be commended for undertaking such an ambitious project. For LDS audiences unaccustomed to the genre of academic commentaries, Brown's interaction with long-respected scholars like Alfred Plummer, Joseph Fitzmyer, and Raymond Brown should bring welcome amendment to familiar readings of Luke within the Latter-day Saint tradition. Kent Brown spent untold labors in producing such a work, and one rightly pauses before raising criticisms. Nonetheless, in view of the BYU New Testament Commentary's methodological aims, I see the volume as incomplete in spite of its length. Each commentary in the series is expected to "combine the best of ancient linguistic and historical scholarship with Latter-day Saint perspectives," but I am concerned that this standard is not met, specifically in regard to recent Lukan scholarship beyond the LDS tradition.¹ In fact, by relying heavily on LDS scholarship, Brown often simply reproduces LDS understandings of Luke rather than extending our understanding of the text

1. <http://www.byunewtestamentcommentary.com/about-us/the-project/>.

by employing the best scholarship available.² In this short review I aim to illustrate how drawing from recent scholarship, specifically regarding his discussion of Luke's "garden" scene, could have further enriched Brown's commentary. In particular, I will examine his treatment of the famous sweat-as-blood simile from the garden scene, arguing that his reading introduces significant interpretive difficulties for readers of Luke.

In his discussion of the garden scene from Luke 22:43–44, the angel-and-sweat-as-blood verses, Brown notes that the inclusion of the verses are controversial and that some scholars (e.g., Joseph Fitzmyer and Bart Ehrman) see them as interpolations. To countermand this position, Brown cites only two recent articles by Thomas Wayment (2008) and

2. Of the 301 total sources included in Brown's bibliography, nearly one-third of these (94) are LDS authored or LDS themed, and almost every LDS-authored source is also LDS themed, which is to be expected in a volume that aims to "combine the best of ancient linguistic and historical scholarship with Latter-day Saint doctrinal perspectives." Yet, by examining the bibliography further, we find that perhaps such a degree of engagement with these LDS-related sources is partly responsible for the incompleteness I see. As I tally it, 72 sources published from 2000 to the present are listed in the bibliography. Well over half of these (42) are LDS authored or LDS themed. The 30 remaining sources are, however, problematic in terms of breadth. Subtracting entries for encyclopedias and theological dictionaries, 26 articles or book-length studies published from 2000 to 2014 remain. Thus, from the last 15 years of Lukan scholarship, only 26 sources are referenced in composing a commentary exceeding 1,200 pages. Many important studies from the past decade and a half are, perforce, absent. As a general and rather startling example, not one of François Bovon's works on Luke is listed. Though he is a world-renowned Luke specialist, omission of his studies published in French is, perhaps, understandable (no non-English sources appear in Brown's bibliography). Much less so is the absence of Bovon's material translated into English, especially his three-volume *Hermeneia* commentary, the last volume having been published in 2012. Another example is Denaux and Corstjens's 2009 (Peeters) study, *The Vocabulary of Luke: An Alphabetic Presentation and a Survey of Characteristic and Noteworthy Words and Word Groups in Luke's Gospel*, a critical translation tool for a project like Brown's. As a final case in point, Brown makes a claim in his introduction about Luke's rhetorical training and historical writing: "Luke . . . is obviously an educated man skilled in composing his native language, Greek. Both of his books exhibit a finely attuned ability to communicate well and they form a genuine history." In regard to these very issues, Clare Rothschild's 2004 (Mohr Siebeck) monograph, *Luke–Acts and the Rhetoric of History: An Investigation of Early Christian Historiography*, would have been a natural and useful conversation partner at this point and elsewhere in Brown's study.

Lincoln Blumell (forthcoming). Citing these two peer-reviewed articles published in highly respected journals as evidence for the authenticity of verses 43–44 is, I assert unequivocally, legitimate. However, the fact that Wayment and Blumell are both Latter-day Saints and employed in the same department at Brigham Young University as Brown (now emeritus) points up the issue of narrowness in Brown's interaction with wider and recent scholarship on Luke. By limiting his treatment of a highly contentious issue to two papers from his departmental colleagues, Brown bypasses the greater, current academic conversation in which Wayment and Blumell are participants. Most notably, to make claims about the authenticity of verses 43–44 and to interpret these verses without any engagement with Claire Clivaz's monumental 2010 (Peeters) book, *L'ange et la sueur de sang (Lc 22,43–44) ou comment on pourrait bien encore écrire l'histoire*, is methodologically inadequate and, consequentially, deleterious to Brown's own arguments.

To see an example of how Brown's disregard for Clivaz's work undermines his claims, we can examine his reading of the sweat and blood in verses 43–44. Brown takes great interpretive pains to place actual blood in this scene even though the blood is taken by most specialists as a comparison in a simile. The simile construction notwithstanding, scholarship has shown that grounds do exist for a more complex reading of the verse's sweat and blood. Most recently in her book, Clivaz builds on previous research and provides fresh evidence that the phenomenon of *haimatidrosis*, or the sweaty secretion of blood, was well known in ancient literature and plausibly known by Luke as well. By ignoring Clivaz's work, Brown misses a potential buttress to his interpretation of those verses. In regard to this same issue, the same can be said of Brown's failure to consult François Bovon's *Hermeneia* commentary on Luke. First, Bovon also discusses the issue of *haimatidrosis*. Second, Bovon, like Brown, often appeals to apocryphal and later Jewish literature in his explication of Luke. Had Brown engaged with Bovon's analysis of a passage from the *Testament of Abraham*, for example, he would have garnered ancillary justification for reading actual blood into the sweaty tableau. In addition, had Brown fully investigated the entry

for sweat in Adalbert Denaux and Rita Corstjens's *The Vocabulary of Luke*, he would have been directed to further articles that would have substantially supported his reading of blood. Unfortunately, neglect of these three recent publications has the effect of rendering Brown's claims more tenuous and, at the same time, less cautious than necessary.

The danger of interpreting a text in the absence of current critical literature also seems to be at issue in Brown's treatment of the term ὡσεῖ, "as if, as though, like," which launches the sweat-as-blood simile of verse 44.

The force of the Greek particle *hōsei* is difficult to judge. Some scholars propose that it means "like" and thus they translate "his sweat became like drops of blood" or "the sweat was falling like drops of blood," thus discounting that Jesus actually sheds blood in Gethsemane. The other sense for *hōsei* is "as" (see 24:11; Rom. 6:13), that is, "his sweat came to be as drops of blood."³

Serious problems undermine this argument. First, the supposed difficulty of interpreting the Greek particle ὡσεῖ/*hōsei* is largely mitigated based on general use of the term in Greek literature, other New Testament instances (e.g., Matthew 3:16), Luke's own usage elsewhere (Luke 3:22), entries for the term in lexica like BDAG and LSJ,⁴ and common scholarly acknowledgment of the term's use in similes. The term ὡσεῖ is not so mysterious that it eludes the understanding of those analyzing this verse. It is widely seen as introducing a simile, regardless of how one then interprets the simile. In this regard, Brown's claim that "some scholars propose that it means 'like'" seems to me to be a rhetorically unfair understatement. Challenging the *status quaestionis* is basic to scholarly inquiry, but one cannot simply dismiss it as though it were a matter of minority opinion made by "some." This leads to the second problem. In contesting the

3. Brown, *Testimony of Luke*.

4. Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); and Henry G. Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry S. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968).

status quo and bolstering his interpretation of ὡσεὶ as meaning “as” in the sense of “equating to,” Brown relies on citations to the well-known commentaries of Alfred Plummer and Raymond Brown and an entry in Friedrich Blass and Albert Debrunner’s grammar.⁵

However, these citations cannot be used to support Kent Brown’s claim. Plummer, who does not directly address the meaning or force of ὡσεὶ, is duly cautious about seeing actual blood in the simile construction.⁶ Although Raymond Brown acknowledges that actual blood *could* be suggested by the ὡσεὶ construction, he is forced to conclude—after weighing the arguments, including the use of ὡσεὶ elsewhere in Luke and Acts—that “there is no surety, therefore, that the passage means that Jesus’ sweat became bloody. . . . In the narrative Jesus does not appear to have been weakened by this sweat, and there is no indication of pain.”⁷ More awkward is Kent Brown’s citation of Blass and Debrunner. The section he cites, 157(5), does not deal with the ὡσεὶ construction of verse 44 but with issues of predication and oblique predication (accusative of object and a predicate accusative). How might this mistake have been made? Section 157(5) is the first entry listed in the index for ὡσεὶ, and 157(5) does in fact contain an example from Luke. From this it would be easy enough to draw a hasty but unfounded connection to the grammatical question in 22:44. However, the example in section 157(5) concerns the use of ὡσεὶ with φαίνεσθαι and is from Luke 24:11, where the reported words of the women who were witness to the empty tomb appear “as if” (ὡσεὶ) nonsense to the apostles. Even if we were to (mis)apply the grammatical principle of 157(5) to the ὡσεὶ of 22:44, the salient feature of the ὡσεὶ from 24:11 is that Luke (and his audience) know that the women’s words are expressly *not* nonsense; hence the “as if” indicates the nonactuality of the situation. This is hardly compelling

5. Friedrich Blass and Albert Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. Robert W. Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); hereafter BDF.

6. Alfred Plummer, *A Critical Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to S. Luke*, 5th ed. (Edinburgh: Clark, 1922), 510–11.

7. Raymond Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 1:185.

evidence to support Brown's reading of ὡσεὶ in 22:44 in which he wants the ὡσεὶ to indicate the actual presence of Jesus's blood.

If we continue to follow Brown's grammatical argument on this verse, further consequences arise. Brown seems so determined to see actual blood in the ὡσεὶ construction that he goes as far as to reverse the constituent parts of the simile in 22:44. Thus, in regard to the question of authenticity for verses 43–44, Brown asks rhetorically, "Does the angel really come and does Jesus bleed as if he is sweating?" This is a violent and grammatically untenable overhaul of the ὡσεὶ construction. Suddenly actual blood is being compared to figurative sweat. It is as though in misapplying BDF 157(5), Brown has turned the ὡσεὶ construction into a simple predication in which nouns on either side of the copula (the ἐγένετο, in Brown's reading) stand in the nominative. But this is not how the verb γίνεσθαι forms predicates. Rather, the predicate of γίνεσθαι stands in agreement with the case of the subject without additional words like ὡσεὶ. When γίνεσθαι does form a predicate in conjunction with another word, it may do so with the preposition εἰς followed by the predicate-like noun or substantive in the accusative case as the object of εἰς, as in the clause ἐγενήθη δέ μοι εἰς γυναῖκα, "And she became my wife," from Genesis 20:12 (LXX). This is not what is happening grammatically with the ὡσεὶ in verse 44. To return to the BYU New Testament Commentary's statement on methodological aims, Brown's idiosyncratic and grammatically tenuous reading of ὡσεὶ cannot be seen as an example of employing "the best of ancient linguistic and historical scholarship."

Brown's decision to read actual blood in verse 44 leads him to make further claims that unfortunately remain unexamined and unsubstantiated. In the closing paragraph of his analysis of the garden prayer pericope, Brown declares that Jesus "bleed[s] into his clothing, staining his garments." The onus is on Brown to make such a statement stick. Weighted against Brown's claim is the fact that no mention of Jesus's clothing being stained exists in verses 43–44; rather, the specified destination of the descending bodily fluid is the ground (ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν). Further, if Jesus's clothing was drenched with coagulating blood, one would

expect someone in the text to have pointed this out. However, nobody at the arrest scene or the nighttime mocking scene says anything about Jesus's blood-soaked garments. More to the point, the Sanhedrin, Herod, and Pilate in their daytime interrogations of Jesus do not comment on or question any blood-stained clothing. Indeed, at junctures where the topic of Jesus's clothing does intrude on the narrative and where observations about its blood-stained state would naturally fit (such as in 23:11 when Herod's soldiers dressed Jesus in bright clothing or in 23:34 when Jesus's clothing is divided), Luke is silent. Moreover, one might expect that Pilate would have specific interest in how one of his subjects came to be so bloodied, particularly one reputed to have a stake in local power politics. These are all reasonable, text-based objections to Brown's claim, and it is his responsibility to preclude or answer them. As with his treatment of the sweat-as-blood question, Brown could have avoided these problems had he engaged with the best of current Lukan scholarship in accordance with the stated aims of the BYU New Testament Commentary.

The editorial aims listed earlier appear on the BYU New Testament Commentary project website and do not belong solely to Brown, of course (though he also sits on the board of editors); it is the editors' duty to ensure that each volume in the series meets their standards through review processes. Though I am not privy to the editors' pre-publication practices, it seems to me that Brown's commentary did not have the benefits of external peer review. External review, I am positive, would have remedied the difficulties discussed above and aided Brown in producing a commentary that, to borrow again the language of the BYU New Testament Commentary project's description, profits from the "rapidly growing number of studies on the New Testament."

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