

Excursus: Stories of Jesus in Luke

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The pervading themes running through the four literary compositions of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John are of a Christological nature. Messianic themes or motifs are found in the Gospels in the names or titles ascribed to Jesus in his sayings, his stories or parables, his discourses and debates, in the reactions of the people to him, in his miraculous deeds, and in the narrative comments of the authors of these compositions. The themes of greatest significance in the Gospels are those having to do with the messianic identity of Jesus of Nazareth. This is the primary emphasis of the stories found in this composition. This is demonstrated in the following excursus on the stories of Jesus in Luke.

The Gospels found in the New Testament Scriptures are titled under the names of their traditionally ascribed historical authors: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These names are not found on any of the older manuscripts of the four NT Gospels. How, then, do we know who wrote them? The second century church recognized them as such. The tradition being that when the apostles and their companions began to be executed, those who were the companions of the apostolic figures began to encourage them to write down everything they remembered that they had heard from the apostles with whom they traveled. Mark was the first given such encouragement, but given the nature of oral tradition within this culture it is hard to believe that there would not have been a large collection of such remembrances from a variety of sources. These four Gospels are considered canonical because the earliest Christians recognized them as the only universally recognized accounts of the story of Jesus, considered to have been inspired of God. Luke, being a

companion of Paul is considered to be an apostolic companion and thus a reliable source. These Gospels have been preserved through the centuries by Christians as treasures of messianic stories of the one they believe to be the Messiah / Christ - Jesus of Nazareth.

The Gospel According to Luke

Luke's Gospel is part one of a two-part writing addressed to someone with the Greek name, *Theophilos*, which means, "lover of God." Whether this is a real person or pseudonym for anyone who is a "lover of God" makes for a good discussion. Luke calls his Gospel a *logos* (Acts 1:1) that can mean anything from a single word to a whole collection of words, as in a story, composition, treaties, or collection of stories.

Luke's Gospel was believed to have been a record of the story of Jesus as taught and proclaimed by the apostle Paul. This is based on the fact that Luke was with Paul during his last days in prison in Rome (2 Tim 4:11) and is a part Paul entourage in the "we passages of Acts running from chapter 20 through Paul's return to Jerusalem. This is also strengthened by the fact that Acts of Apostles, the second part of the two-part collection, picks up where the Gospel of Luke leaves off and takes the movement of Christianity from Jerusalem to Rome and stops there, with the larger majority of the story dealing with the activities of Paul.

Luke is believed to have written his Gospel to a predominately Gentile audience after the death of Peter and Paul, somewhere in the late 70's, from somewhere in Macedonia, since that is where Luke joined Paul during his third missionary journey, as was likely the home of Luke (see Acts 20:1-6, where Luke switches from the use of "they" to the use of "we").

Luke's Gospel was, no doubt, intended for a Greek speaking, Gentile audience. The messianic stories and teachings of Jesus found in Luke would have been very easy for a Gentile reader to follow. There is an emphasis on the role of the poor, the concern of Jesus for the Gentiles and disenfranchised of his world, the nature of God as

the Creator of the whole human race, the emphasis on Jesus as Lord, and his emphasis on the resurrection of Jesus as the major event in the salvation drama, with no emphasis on Jesus' death as an appeasement made to God. To Luke the crucifixion was the result of the dark forces of evil at work in this world. In the last supper account, the emphasis on Jesus is on drinking with them anew when the reign of God has been made manifest, which occurred in the resurrection of Jesus from realm of death.

The resurrection appearances of Jesus are superbly developed in Luke. Jesus is portrayed as an otherworldly being who is able to appear and disappear at will. This emphasis clearly reflects Paul's story or "redemption drama," with its theme of divine reversal of man's condemned state in Adam, which was reversed in the resurrection of Christ resulting in the possibility of new creation for all men through belief in what Jesus had done. This whole development of the death, resurrection, and post resurrection appearances of Jesus would be themes clearly at home with a Gentile audience; perhaps more so than one with a Hebrew mindset.

Given the fact that these same themes are carried over and further developed in Acts of Apostles, where there is an emphasis on the development of Christianity in the Hellenistic or Gentile world, would lead one to see the primary reader of Luke's Gospel as more Gentile than Jew. It was most likely the same audience as those receiving the letters of Paul, which contained many of the same themes, that being the Greek speaking Gentile world.

The Jesus of Luke's Story

Luke says that in his Gospel he "wrote of all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven," (Acts 1:1-2). His collection of Messiah stories is very carefully laid out so as to do exactly what he said he had done. Luke's Gospel begins with a presentation of events designed to prepare the way for the dawning of the messianic age: the events concerning the birth of John the Baptist (the voice of one crying in the wilderness), the vision of the angel to Mary concerning the miraculous conception and birth of a

son, who this son was and was to be. Then follows those events associated with Jesus' birth, his presentation in the temple, his extraordinary understanding of Scripture at an early age, the appearance of John in fulfillment of the messianic prophecy of Isaiah, then the appearance of Jesus to receive John's baptism, and the messianic anointing of the Holy Spirit, followed by God's confession of him as his Son.

From these preparation events, Luke precedes to give his reader a collection of stories concerning Jesus' "doings" and "teachings." This scenario is an essential part of Luke's compositional scheme. Following his messianic anointing, Jesus immediately confronts the forces of darkness in the form of Satan himself. Jesus goes to the synagogue in Nazareth and claims himself to be the fulfillment of the messianic prophecy of Isaiah 40, which is followed by a series of miracle stories demonstrating that he was in possession of the very power of God.

This initial activity is followed by a series of stories showing the different reactions of the people to Jesus. Some see him as someone who filled them with wonder while others saw him as a threat. The theme of belief and disbelief is very subtly developed. Some people see what Jesus does and they react in belief while others see the same things and react in disbelief. Some respond to his stories and teachings as evidence of the presence of God in him while others see his acts and teachings as different from what they wanted to hear from someone who was believed to be the Messiah. This belief/disbelief theme is carried over into Acts of Apostles (Luke's second composition) with Jesus' apostles. Jesus had told them that what was happening to him would also happen to them and Luke, in his second composition, reveals to his readers that what Jesus said would happen did happen.

As with Mark and Matthew, Luke develops his Gospel with stories taken from Jesus' Galilean ministry and stories taken from the Judean ministry. The breaking point is the acknowledgment of his messianic identity to his disciples in Luke 9:18-27. This marks the turning point from Galilee to Judea, and specifically Jerusalem

and the confrontation with the Jewish establishment, which results in his death. The Galilean period is filled with a collection of stories of things that Jesus did (his miracles) and taught (his stories, sayings, and teachings). This move from Galilee to Judea occurs at chapter 9. From there he sets his face toward Jerusalem. Luke continues to present stories of his miracles and collections of his teaching as he moves closer and closer to Jerusalem. His acts and teachings are repeatedly met with controversy and opposition from those who do not believe in him. As he enters Jerusalem, he immediately sets in motion a series of deeds, which lead to a final confrontation with the earthly powers representing those who would withstand God's redemptive work that was to be accomplished in his death and resurrection.

As mentioned earlier, Luke's development of the death, resurrection, and post resurrection appearances of Jesus is done in such a way as to make clear that the death of Jesus was a self-sacrificial act on the part of God himself rather than a sin offering wherein God was in some way appeased. Jesus resurrection from death was a conquest over the powers of darkness, an event of cosmic proportions, which made new existence possible for the whole of mankind. All of this was in fulfillment of the words of the prophets found in the Hebrew Scriptures. It would appear that Luke wanted his "most excellent Theophilus" to be assured that the Christian claim that Jesus' death and resurrection was in fulfillment of the Scriptures was not an invention of the early church. This understanding was traceable to Jesus himself. This is evident from one of Luke's most beautiful stories, the story of the two disciples who meet Jesus on the road to Emmaus outside Jerusalem, found in Luke 24:25-32.

He [Jesus] said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for

it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us."

Names and Titles of Jesus in Luke

The scenario developed above is reinforced by Luke's use of the names or titles ascribed to Jesus. The historical name "Jesus" is the most frequent in occurrence, found 184 times. The designation "Jesus of Nazareth" is found 3 times. He is also called "a prophet," "a great prophet," "a Galilean," "a man" or "this man," and "a righteous man." He is also referred to as "Joseph's son," "the child," "the baby," and "the boy," all in reference to his human existence. With this collection of titles it is clear that Luke is writing about a historical figure.

The title "Lord" occurs 37 times, along with "Master" and "Lord of the Sabbath." He is a figure recognized as having authority and is highly esteemed. The self-designation of "the Son of Man" is found in 24 occurrences, 20 of which occur after he sets his face toward Jerusalem, and is used by Jesus to speak of himself as one who is to be glorified by God. Luke uses the title "son" in a variety of ways: Jesus is spoken of as "a son," "the son" "my Son," "the Son of the Most High," and "God's Son" in 14 occurrences, all in reference to his role as the Son of God. He is called "Teacher" (rather than Rabbi) in 13 occurrences.

He is called "the Christ" 12 times, "the Christ of God" twice, "the one who was to come" twice, "Jesus, the son of David" 3 times, "the king who comes in the name of the Lord" once, "the king of the Jews" once, and "the Chosen One" once, "the Holy One" once, "the Holy One of God" once, "the Savior" once, and "God's Salvation" once. Luke is presenting his readers with a portrait of a messianic figure who is human and more than human. He is thisworldly and yet he is otherworldly. He is the son of Joseph and Mary, who experienced

human birth, childhood, and manhood, yet, he was the Messiah sent from God, the Chosen One. The wonder of who he was, however, went beyond his messianic identity. He was more than the Messiah of Judaism; he was the Son God, a Savior, God's salvation, not only for Israel but for the whole of mankind. Perhaps, the most significant title in Luke's portrait of Jesus is the title Jesus used when he spoke of "the Son of Man," who came to experience human death in order that the human race may experience new human existence.

This is the portrait of Jesus developed so beautifully in the teaching and preaching of Paul the Apostle of Christ, with whom Luke was so closely connected in the last 8 to 10 years of Paul's life. Paul writes from prison in Col 4:14, "Our dear friend Luke, the physician, and Demas send greetings," and in 2 Tim 4:11, his last letter before his death, "Only Luke is with me." There can be little question as to the influence of Paul on Luke in his understanding of Jesus. One does not see all of what Luke reveals to us of Jesus in the writings of Paul, but one does see the Christ of Paul in the writings of Luke.

Conclusion

This presentation of Luke's Gospel as a development of messianic stories should help set the stage for a study of any of the Gospels as stories. To approach them as theological compositions only sets the reader at a distance from them. To approach them as stories gives the reader an ease of access that is possible only by seeing them for what they are, stories.

Everyone loves a story, anyone can listen to a story, and everyone enjoys hearing or reading a story. Most of us enjoy telling a story, whether a story about ourselves or someone else. We love hearing and telling jokes or funny stories. The beauty of this is that most everyone knows what a story is and how to recognize a good story. It is just one step from this to see how easy it can be to analyze a story; or, perhaps, we should say, "take a story apart." That is what story analysis is all about.

The gospel is simply "God's story." The Gospel of Luke is simply a story of stories making up a "God story" - a story of God. The collection of articles under *Storycraft and Bible Study* will introduce the reader to a method of Bible study in which the book being studied is considered from the age-old art of story craft. Then the reader can enter into the stories, make the story their story, then become themselves a storytellers of the greatest and most wonderful story ever told.

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