

## Looking at Luke

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The first impression when reading the opening sentence of Luke's gospel is that we are about to embark on a sophisticated piece of literature which could match it with the best Greco-Roman works of the time. People would have been impressed by the long opening sentence. The dedication to a certain Theophilus ("literally, "lover of God") was typical: people named their patron or created a fictional one. Clearly Luke is not writing for a patron, but for Christian communities. His salute to Greco-Roman standards soon gives way to a very different acknowledgement, namely of his Jewish heritage. For his style soon echoes the Greek Old Testament and its copying of Hebrew paratactic syntax. So in short sentences with many "ands" we begin to hear stories of devout Jews, doing what the faithful had always done and doing it in the world of the temple.

Luke wants to show continuity between his communities and Israel of old and was probably doing so against the backdrop of other Jews questioning why this new Jewish movement with such a large non-Jewish constituency was claiming rights to their heritage. As Judaism entered a phase of resurgence in the decades following the destruction of Jerusalem, Luke's Christians might well have been embarrassed by such confrontation, especially where the first flush of mission had slowed. Luke will have none of it. Jesus came from the best of Jewish stock. His beginnings show this. Not only the pious Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph – and Anna and Simeon – but also the angels whom Luke weaves into the legends of Jesus' beginning and the deliberate echoes of OT stories. Mirroring miracles of conception by barren women, his story hails the even greater miracle of a virginal conception, an idea shared with Matthew though expressed quite differently in ways that defy harmonising.

Both Zechariah and Mary give voice to what at first appear to be very personal experiences, but soon articulate national hope. For these true Israelites long for change, the liberation of Jerusalem, the establishment of the Messiah's reign, the subversion of the powers that be, good news for poor Israel in its need. And so, amid complex datings which pin these alleged events into Roman imperial history, Luke recounts the birth of Jesus and has him laid in an animal's food trough (2:1-20). The language of Roman propaganda which hailed the emperor, Son of God, and the good news of Rome as bringer of peace to the world, now serves to describe the defiantly opposite: a helpless child born to be Israel's Messiah and Saviour of the world.

Luke puts all this before the account of Jesus' baptism by John, but matches up the two with parallel detail, already in the legends of their birth, throughout pitching Jesus higher than John. Accordingly John announces Jesus, but in the context of a call for all to repent, to change. That called for more than confessing sins; it entailed turning from injustice and exploitation, soldiers included (3:10-14). The acclamation of Jesus as God's Son at his baptism brought along with it all the hopes enunciated in the birth stories. Luke shares with Matthew the story of Jesus' three temptations, where he

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rejects for himself (and others) popular fantasies of success (4:1-13). Instead, bringing forward a scene he found six chapters down in Mark (6:1-6), he has Jesus appear before his home synagogue and present himself reading Isaiah 61 (4:16-30). Thus elaborating Mark's scene, Luke has Jesus announce himself and his mission. The Spirit equipped him to bring liberation, to proclaim good news to the poor.

Hearers of Luke at this point can easily become forgetful or at least dismissive of what came before. For Luke has us enter the vestibule of his gospel whose walls are covered in scenes of Israel's liberation, not as nostalgia, but as hope. Were they mere decoration? Was Luke about to treat them as symbols and metaphors? Is salvation now a message about forgiveness of sins instead? Or did Luke mean his hearers to see continuity here? Clearly Jesus was not about to topple the Romans or liberate Jerusalem. He was not about to bring down the mighty from their thrones. What did Luke intend?

Fortunately Luke gives us answers. He constructed his opening chapters so that what he announced as his mission (4:16-20) finds an echo in the scene where John the Baptist's disciples ask him this very thing: are you the Messiah we have been hoping for and whom John announced. Jesus replies: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them" (7:22). Indeed, in the intervening sections between 4:16-30 and 7:22 Luke has drawn on his resources, mainly Mark, to show Jesus doing all these things. What is more, in the middle of this section he has Jesus declare: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh" (6:20-22). These, the earlier form of the beatitudes which we find in elaborated form in Matthew, promise "good news to the poor". This is exactly what Jesus had said of his role in 4:16-20 and 7:22.

Luke, however, portrays Jesus as fulfilling his role in two stages. During his ministry he was a bringer of liberation through healing (thus addressing one of the main causes of poverty), reaching out to the marginalised and self-marginalising, affirming and including those whom others excluded. But beyond that he proclaimed good news about the future. The reign of God, the kingdom of God was in part becoming a reality among people, but something much more than that was expected. The dreams of Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph, Anne and Simeon, also needed to come true. So when his disciples asked him after his resurrection whether at that time he would restore the kingdom to Israel, he in no way distances himself from that hope, but instead instructs them that the timing is not their issue (Acts 1:6-7). Like Joseph or Arimathea (23:51) they harboured hopes of liberation (24:21). Jesus had assured the people of Jerusalem that the day would come when they could lift up their heads see their liberator coming (21:27-28; 13:35). For Luke, Jesus has a future messianic role and that is one day to be the messianic king ruling from Jerusalem, which in the meantime was to be trampled by Gentiles (21:24).

The Jewishness of Luke's two volumes and his formulation of hope has scholars increasingly wondering whether he may not be a Christian Jew, rather than a Gentile. For, though very different from Matthew, he shares with Matthew the belief represented in their common source, "Q", that the Law, Torah, is to remain intact (16:17), and distances from Mark's view which declares some of it

as not making sense, in particular food and purity laws. While Matthew corrects Mark 7:1-23, Luke goes further, omitting it altogether (indeed the whole block, 6:45 - 8:26) and will allow for setting aside the command to circumcise and to avoid regular meals with non-Jews only on the basis of heavenly intervention (Acts 10). Even Paul, according to Luke remained Law observant to the end of this days (Acts 21:21), a stance hard to reconcile with the historical Paul of the letters who declares that believers are no longer under the Law. Paul is Luke's hero, but his stories of Paul are based on traditions which have rendered Paul more acceptable to conservatives and best suit Luke's concern to depict harmony among the first believers.

Luke's good news, as presented in the speeches which he composes for key figures in Acts, stresses that Jesus went about doing good (Acts 10:35-43) and that God vindicated him after his execution and appointed him judge to come. Notions of the cross as an act of atonement are strikingly absent. Faith means believing in Jesus and his way of interpreting the Law, depicted in the encounter with the rich ruler (18:18-23) and most impressively in the parable of the Good Samaritan, which still speaks powerfully to the present day (10:25-37).

Otherwise Luke's image of the future, with its strongly Jewish nationalist tone, remains for Christians of our age a peculiarity which we do not preach. Indeed, it belongs to those aspects of hope with which we need to come to terms and which we need translate into something which can still be meaningful. For we can no longer sustain the widespread expectation that Jesus would soon come again. We can, however, sustain the vision that salvation must mean something more than good news for the individual, let alone, something just about people's souls. Like Jesus, whom he arguably represents very well, Luke understands salvation as entailing a change to community structures in such a way that a caring community created and the priorities of divine compassion rule. We can embrace that vision without its first century predictions and contours. We can take Luke's affirmation of women, albeit confining them to traditional roles, and let the compassion implicit in his gospel push beyond those roles and affirm a wider acceptance, a move we have taken centuries to make and which had come to inform our abandoning not only of sexism but also of racism and discrimination against same-gender oriented men and women. Luke's future vision, taken as a goal rather than a prediction, can continue to inform our agenda in the present and Luke's view of the Spirit continue to inform ours, as the source and inspiration which can generate our involvement in being good news in the present.

Luke was very concerned with continuity, especially the people of God of old. At the beginning Acts we find that concern again, represented in his typological creativity in having Jesus makes appearances over 40 days, recalling the 40 years in the wilderness, and giving the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, significantly the feast celebrating harvest but also the giving of the Law at Sinai represented by tongues of flame which come to settle on Israel. But the concern for continuity extended also to showing how his own day was linked through heroes like Paul and ordered apostles to the beginnings of the church. For us continuity also matters, as we reappropriate these ancient witnesses with a sense of their strangeness and remoteness, yet with the conviction that they preserve in essence what is just as much good news in our own day. Our myths and rituals preserve the link at one level; our actions confirm or otherwise that continuity at the level that matters most.

