



The Meaning of Jesus' Death in Luke

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Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension are the pivot point of salvation history as depicted by Luke: they enabled humans finally to be set free from the demonic forces long oppressing them. Luke has shaped both the gospel account leading up to Jesus' death and the book of Acts to anticipate and, in turn, comment upon these pivotal events. Hence, to understand the meaning of Jesus' death in Luke's gospel, one ought not focus narrowly on the passion narrative itself, but rather pay attention to passages scattered throughout the two-volume work. In this article, I will explore several revealing moments in the drama of salvation history as told by the third evangelist.

In studying Luke's view of Jesus' death, some scholars have tended to concentrate on Luke's divergence from the theology of Mark or Paul. Observing that, when reworking the passion materials taken over from Mark, Luke omitted Mark 10:45 ("For the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"), such interpreters have concluded that Luke does not believe in Jesus' death as atoning for sins. The problem with this approach is that it produces entirely negative results: it reveals what Luke does *not* say about the meaning of Jesus' death, but contributes nothing to our knowledge of what the evangelist *does* say. I will argue below that Luke employs two models other than that of atonement for interpreting Jesus' death: a model of Jesus as the "prophet like Moses," who through death and resurrection led an exodus from bondage to Satan; and one of Christ as the second Adam, whose death and resurrection removed the curse of death put upon the first Adam and his descendants. These alternate models ought not be ranked against that of the atonement for theological worth, but appreciated in their own right.

I. EXODUS FROM BONDAGE: LUKE 9:31

The transfiguration account in Luke 9:28-36 is one of several revelatory moments in Luke's gospel, when God's design for Jesus is revealed with special

clarity. Luke has placed the episode at an important juncture in Jesus' ministry, just before he commences the final journey to death, resurrection, and ascension in Jerusalem (see 9:51, which alludes to the ascension). This placement enables Luke to use the transfiguration account to comment upon the momentous events about to take place in the holy city. The link to Jesus' impending passion is further strengthened by one change that Luke has introduced into the material taken over from Mark: the evangelist tells us that, while on the mountaintop, Jesus was discussing with Moses and Elijah "his exodus that he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem"

(9:31 [trans. mine]; compare Mark 9:4; Matt 17:3). The Greek word *exodos* used here is the same one used by Jewish writers of Luke's day to refer to the exodus from Egypt, though the allusion to that event is obscured by many modern translations (for example, RSV, NRSV, NAS, NIV: "departure"; KJV: "decease"; NJB: "passing"). To be sure, such translations are not baseless: *exodos* is used by other ancient writers to mean "departure," or as a euphemism for death. But in this instance such a rendering is inadequate: Jesus is, after all, speaking to none other than Moses, the leader of the exodus from Egypt! Luke must surely have viewed the events that Jesus was "about to accomplish in Jerusalem" as parallel in some way to the exodus led by Moses. But what was the similarity? I suggest that in Luke's understanding, both Jesus and Moses *led the people out of bondage*. Moses had led them out of physical bondage to Pharaoh, but afterward (according to Luke's interpretation at Acts 7:39-43) the people reverted to idolatry, believed at the time to be a form of servitude to the devil. Jesus—the prophet raised up by God in Moses' stead (Acts 3:22-24)—then reenacted the exodus, this time leading the people out of their spiritual bondage. Thereby Jesus made them truly free. He also brought to fulfillment at long last the covenant promise to Abraham, that the people should "come out and worship me in this place" (Acts 7:7). Only when released from the devil's grip could the people worship God in the way that God requires.

This notion of Jesus' death as an exodus from bondage¹ to Satan complements the numerous Lukan passages indicating that already during Jesus' earthly ministry he began the work of undermining Satan's dominion over the peoples of the earth. This earthly dominion of the devil is first asserted in Luke 4:5-6, where Luke reports that Satan claimed to have been given authority over the kingdoms of the world (compare Luke 1:79; Acts 26:17-18). Luke may have supposed that Satan had held his role as ruler of this world ever since Adam and Eve succumbed to the serpent's temptation in the garden of Eden, thereby bringing the curse of death and decay on the human race.² Jesus' battle with Satan to regain lost territory began with the temptation (or "testing") in the wilderness (Luke 4:1-13), continued in Jesus' exorcisms and healings (Luke 11:14-23; 13:16; Acts 10:38), and reached its apex during the events surrounding the passion. The devastating effect on Satan of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension underlies another of this gospel's key revelatory moments, Luke 10:17-20.

¹The ideas expressed in this section are developed more fully in Susan R. Garrett, "Exodus from Bondage: Luke 9:31 and Acts 12:1-24," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (1990) 656-80.

²Compare Wis 2:23-24 (a text that may have been available to Luke). This passage clearly attributes the origin of death to the devil; the allusion to the Genesis creation story in v. 23 suggests that the author has identified the devil with the serpent in the garden of Eden.

II. SATAN'S FALL (LUKE 10:17-20)

The seventy missionaries return from their journey and report to Jesus, "Lord, in your name even the demons are subject to us!" (10:17).³ Jesus responds, "I watched Satan fall like lightning from the sky" (10:18). At first glance the use of a verb in the imperfect tense ("I watched," or "I was watching": Greek *etheoroun*) seems to indicate that Satan's fall has just occurred, during the very time when the seventy were preaching and healing. But this same verb form is used repeatedly in the book of Daniel to introduce prophetic visions (Dan 7:2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 11, 13, compare v. 21). Luke's use of this verb form probably indicates that he likewise

interpreted Jesus' remark about Satan's fall as the report of a prophetic vision. In other words, at this point in the narrative Satan's fall is anticipated, but has not yet taken place. I suggest that Luke supposed the *resurrection and ascension* to be the occasion when the prophetic vision would be fulfilled, and Satan would actually lose his authority over those who call upon Jesus' name.⁴ At that time Jesus' earthly work of healing sickness and exorcising demons would climax: the prince of demons would himself be "cast out" (compare John 12:31; Rev 12:10), and Jesus would assume his appointed place at God's right hand (Acts 2:33; 5:31; compare Rom 8:34).

After his report of Satan's envisioned fall, Jesus says that he has given the seventy "authority to tread on snakes and scorpions" (symbolic language for the forces of Satan) and "over all the power of the enemy" (10:19). The promise foreshadows the time of the church as depicted in Acts, when many others will harness remarkable power over satanic forces by calling faithfully upon Jesus' name. Jesus' declaration takes for granted that, during the time of the church, Satan ("the Enemy") is to remain active on earth: not until the end will God put *all* Christ's enemies under his feet (Acts 2:35; compare 1 Cor 15:24-26). But Satan's post-resurrectional activity on earth will not impede the work of Christians, who in Acts will time and time again prove themselves to be stronger than the devil or his human and demonic agents. The various healings and exorcisms, the punishment of Ananias and Sapphira, the conversion of Saul, and the repeated victory of Christians over magicians will all demonstrate that Jesus' death and resurrection have ended Satan's power to impede the progress of the word.⁵

III. SATAN'S CONTROL OVER THE PASSION EVENTS (LUKE 22:3, 31-32, 53)

Luke leaves no doubt that Satan initiated the events leading up to Jesus' death on the cross. In 22:3, prior to the account of the Last Supper, Luke reports that "Satan entered into Judas." Thus, Judas's betrayal of Jesus to the authorities happened in accordance with Satan's plan. Jesus knows that Satan is temporarily in control, and therefore a threat to the more vulnerable disciples; hence he prays that their faith may not fail (22:31-32). During the subsequent episode on the Mount of Olives (22:39-53), Jesus himself struggles with the temptation to desert his calling in the face

³Unless otherwise noted, all biblical translations are taken from the NRSV.

⁴Further exegetical grounding for this suggestion is given in Susan R. Garrett, *The Demise of the Devil: Magic and the Demonic in Luke's Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 46-57.

⁵For the argument that these incidents demonstrate Christians' authority over the devil, see Garrett, *Demise*, 61-109; also Garrett, "Lest the Light in You Be Darkness": Luke 11:33-36 and the Question of Commitment," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110 (1991) 104.

of certain death.⁶ The devil's control over the unfolding events of the passion is asserted again at 22:53: when Jesus is arrested, he declares to those who have come out against him that "this is your hour, and the power [or 'authority'] of darkness." "The power of darkness" is here a circumlocution for Satan's control (compare Acts 26:18). Jesus' assertion implies that the religious authorities are, like Judas, acting as agents of the devil. Luke is convinced that Satan orchestrated Jesus' death, but paradoxically the evangelist also insists that all events were ultimately in accordance with God's plan. It was "necessary," and foretold long ago in the

Scriptures, that Jesus should suffer and die and on the third day be raised (Luke 9:22; 18:31-34; 24:7, 26-27, 44-47; Acts 2:23). Only by dying and then allowing God to break the bonds of death could Jesus lead the way out of enslavement to Satan. The devil initiated Jesus' death, but, ironically, that death spelled for the devil the beginning of the end.

IV. WORDS FROM THE CROSS (23:39-43)

Luke's account of Jesus' words from the cross differs from the accounts of the other evangelists. First, only Luke reports a conversation between Jesus and the thieves on the crosses alongside him, culminating in Jesus' stunning declaration to the repentant thief that "today you will be with me in Paradise" (23:43). Second, only Luke has Jesus cry out the words "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit!" (23:46, quoting Ps 31:5). What does each set of sayings disclose to us about the evangelist's view of Jesus' death?

The first, unrepentant thief echoes the mocking of the rulers and soldiers, saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" (23:39). As other scholars have noted,⁷ the several occurrences of the verb "to save" in this section of the narrative (23:35, 37, 39) point to Luke's conviction that Jesus' death does indeed effect "salvation"—though not in any way imagined by the thief and other scoffers. Like Satan at the testing in the wilderness, the scoffers suppose that "salvation" means dramatic escape from physical death (compare 4:9-10). They fail to comprehend that it is spiritual, not physical, death that is to be feared (see Luke 12:4-5). Jesus knows that his own salvation—and in turn, his power to save others from spiritual death—derives from his obedience unto death (compare Phil 2:8).⁸

The second thief, who "fears God" and knows that he deserves to die (23:40-41), rebukes the scoffer and entreats Jesus to "remember me when you come into your kingdom" (23:42). Jesus responds, "Today you will be with me in Paradise" (23:43). The declaration is, as Jerome Neyrey has observed, not an expression of hope but a judicial pronouncement: Jesus here acts as the judge with authority to forgive the repentant man's sins and promise him access to God's presence.⁹ The reference to "today" underscores Jesus' confidence that very soon God will save him from the corruption of the grave, enabling him to free others from the grip of sin and

⁶For the view that this episode is a renewed satanic assault in fulfillment of Luke 4:13, see Jerome Neyrey, *The Passion According to Luke: A Redaction Study of Luke's Soteriology* (New York: Paulist, 1985) 60-62, 177-79.

⁷See for example, the discussion in Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "'Today You Shall Be with Me in Paradise' (Luke 23:43)," in *Luke the Theologian: Aspects of His Teaching* (New York: Paulist, 1989) 203-23, esp. 210-13.

⁸The importance of Jesus' obedience for Luke's view of the meaning of Jesus' death is developed in Neyrey, *Passion According to Luke*, 156-92.

⁹*Ibid.*, 139-40. Compare Acts 10:42; 17:31.

the spiritual death which is its consequence (compare Acts 13:37-39). Salvation from sin and death is likewise implied by Jesus' reference to "paradise" (Greek *paradeisos*). This is the same term used in the Greek version of Genesis to designate the garden of Eden, in which the tree of life was found (Gen 2:8-16; 3:1-24). When Adam and Eve succumbed to the serpent's temptation, God put the curse of death upon them and cast them out of "paradise," barring them from the way to the tree of life (Gen 3:19, 22-24). According to some Jews and Christians of Luke's day, when God consummates the kingdom the way to the tree of life found in the midst of paradise would once again be opened (see, for example, Rev 2:7; 22:2, 19). In having Jesus

declare to the thief that “today you will be with me in Paradise,” Luke is saying that this hope for life eternal is about to be fulfilled.¹⁰ Just as Adam’s unfaithfulness when tempted by the serpent led to death for many, so Jesus’ own demonstrated faithfulness in the face of satanic temptation leads to forgiveness and life (compare Rom 5:18-19).

Jesus’ faithfulness is amply demonstrated in his final, dying word from the cross: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (23:46). The sentence is a quotation of Ps 31:5. In this psalm the speaker declares his absolute trust that God will rescue him from the brink of death. Jesus’ cry as reported in Matthew and Mark (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”) is likewise a quotation from a psalm in which a suffering righteous person declares confidence in God’s salvation (Psalm 22), but the alternate passage quoted in Luke’s version of the story makes the point about Jesus’ trust in God much more straightforwardly. Luke wanted to stress that Jesus’ obedience unto death emerged from his own absolute confidence that God would save him. Jesus is “the saved savior.”¹¹ In Acts, Christians will demonstrate a like faith in the saving power of Jesus’ name (2:21; 9:14, 21; 22:16).

How did Jesus make the transition from one requiring salvation to one who saves others? Luke does not explicitly tell us how he would answer this question, though one can speculate based on hints given in Acts. In Acts 2:24-28, Peter speaks of God “freeing Jesus from death,” and then quotes Ps 16:8-11, that God “will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption.” The statements may indicate that Luke thinks Jesus did indeed descend to Hades, from whence he was rescued on Easter morning, before corruption of the flesh could set in (compare Rom 10:7; 1 Pet 3:18-19). Perhaps Luke thought that Jesus encountered Satan directly during this interim period, whether in Hades or in heaven.¹² In any case, it is clear that in Luke’s understanding, God raised Jesus from death to a new position of undisputed authority over Satan, able to forgive (Greek *aphienai*, literally “release from”) sins and to pour out the Holy Spirit on those whose hearts have been made pure (Luke 24:49; Acts 2:33).

¹⁰For a fuller discussion of the meaning of “today” in this passage, see *ibid.*, 138-39. Neyrey points out that Luke elsewhere uses “today” to refer to immediate salvation (2:11; 4:21; 5:26; 13:32; 19:9); “Luke’s Gospel, then, insists that salvation is not simply a radically future experience but a thing of the present” (138). For a fuller discussion of the meaning of “paradise” in the first century, see *ibid.*, 181-84; also Fitzmyer, “Today You Shall Be with Me in Paradise,” 209.

¹¹The expression is used by Neyrey in *Passion According to Luke*, 129-55. In *ibid.*, 165-84, Neyrey explores in detail Luke’s notion of Jesus as a second Adam.

¹²A passage such as Zech 3:1-5 could have provided a biblical precedent for belief in an encounter between Jesus and Satan in heaven (note that in the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures, which Luke would have used, the names “Joshua” and “Jesus” are identical). The association of Satan with death and Sheol (or “Hades”) is very ancient, having roots in the myths of the ancient Near East; still, one must be careful not to retroject medieval views of Satan and Hell onto the biblical text.

V. CONCLUSION

A review of passages pertaining to Jesus’ death in the remainder of the gospel and in Acts drives home several of the points made in the preceding analysis of passages from Luke.

First, all the events surrounding Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension happened in full accordance with God’s plan as disclosed in the Hebrew Scriptures. As the risen Lord tells the assembled disciples, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on

the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46-47). Even if Luke holds Satan or the Jewish leaders responsible for bringing about Jesus’ death, he assumes also that, in a mysterious and paradoxical way, their actions conformed to God’s will for the Christ. The death of the Christ was integral to God’s plan of salvation for humankind. Therefore accusations that Luke does not attribute saving significance to Jesus’ death (based on the gospel’s omission of Mark 10:45) are mistaken.

Second, the resurrection of Christ fulfilled the promises made to the patriarchs and matriarchs (Acts 7:7; 13:23, 32-34; 26:6-7). Central among these is the promise to Abraham that God would judge those who enslaved the Hebrews, and that afterward they would “come out and worship me in this place” (Acts 7:7; compare Luke 1:54-55, 68-75). Such authentic worship of God did not occur after the first exodus, when the people came into the promised land, but it does occur now that Jesus has accomplished a second exodus from spiritual oppression by Satan. Those who confess faith in Christ have been released from all the bonds that the law of Moses could not break (13:37-39; compare Heb 2:14-15). Having turned from the dominion of Satan to God, they have obtained forgiveness of sins and a place among those sanctified by faith in Christ (Acts 26:18). It is in this “place”—the Christian community—that they are truly able to “serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him” all their days (Luke 1:74-75).

Third, Jesus’ own faithful obedience to God has reopened the way to paradise, and hence to “life.” Because he has been exalted to God’s right hand, Jesus is able to forgive sins and grant the Holy Spirit to all who repent and call upon his name (Acts 2:33, 38-39; 5:30-32; 10:40-43; 13:37-38). Christians will one day take part in the general resurrection and the judgment to follow (17:31; 24:15), but they need have no fear, for Christ himself will be the judge (10:42; 17:31), and believers have already been ordained to eternal life (11:18; 13:48).

In his effort to explain how Jesus’ death effects salvation, Luke views Jesus as both the second Moses and the second Adam. Neither model for salvation is made explicit in the text, but Luke has left important clues, including the reference to Jesus’ “exodus” and the assurance of access to paradise. Luke may well have known other models for explaining the meaning of Jesus’ death, including that of the atonement. One need not decide among these different Lukan interpretations; they complement rather than contradict one another. However explained, the important point for Luke is that the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus fulfilled God’s promises by making it possible to obtain release from sin, and by guaranteeing resurrection and eternal life for all who believe.