



## Luke-Acts and a Theology of Creation

WALTER E. PILGRIM

Lutheran Institute for Theological Education, Tacoma, Washington

The global ecological crisis of our times has burst into the theological consciousness of the church from many directions. This article examines Luke-Acts for themes that may contribute to that discussion.

### I. GOD AS BENEVOLENT CREATOR

The fundamental biblical theme of creation offers a suitable place to begin. Both Luke and Acts underscore the witness to God as the creator and preserver of all creation. Twice in prayers God is addressed as such: Luke 10:21, "Father, Lord of heaven and earth"; Acts 4:24, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them." Most significant are Jesus' appeals to trust in a benevolent God. In the sayings on anxiety, we catch a glimpse into Jesus' knowledge of and delight in the created order (Luke 12:22-31 || Matt 6:25-34). The ravens neither sow nor reap nor store, yet a gracious God feeds them (v. 24). And the lilies neither toil nor spin, yet their beauty upstages Solomon in all his glory (v. 27). Although a qualitative distinction is made between the birds or grass and human beings (v. 24, 28), the main point is not the comparison of relative values but God's sure and generous provision for all. If God provides so outlandishly for the natural world, and God does, "how much more" will the Creator care for you. Similarly, the basis for Jesus' appeal to risk one's life for his sake is God's providential care for creation. If God does not forget one single sparrow nor one hair of our head, how much more will he remember us (12:4-7). Or Jesus' response to would-be followers alludes again to the generous Creator: "Foxes have holes, birds have nests" (Luke 9:58 || Matt 8:18).

In Acts the theme of a benevolent Creator finds expression in a surprising

natural theology articulated in two hellenistic missionary speeches. Luke intentionally models a kerygmatic approach to the gentile world. Luke resolves this hermeneutical problem by appeal to "our common humanity within our common world. Both are gifts of the benevolent Creator."<sup>1</sup> At Lystra Paul argues against the people's idolatry by testimony to the living God whose witness is evident in nature (14:8-20). This living God is the Creator of all (v. 15, "heaven...earth...sea"). After excusing their past ignorance, he testifies to the Creator's ongoing self-revelation within nature: "doing good" for humanity, rains, seasons, abundant food, and human joy (v. 17).

In the related speech at Athens, the approach is similar: from idolatry to the living God to the kerygma of Jesus (17:16-34). Thus the altar "to an unknown god" finds fulfillment in the one Creator of all (v. 24). Special attention is given to the relation between God and the nations. Their oneness derives from a common ancestry. Yet God determined their times (periods to

flourish) and boundaries (national). Above all, their search for God has divine origins. The living God is near—with two quotes from hellenistic poets confirming this truth: “in him we live and move and have our being” (Epimenides?) and “we are all God’s offspring” (Aratus). Yet despite their authentic groping, ignorance remains (v. 30). The speech concludes with the specific Christian kerygma.

How shall we evaluate this fascinating piece of natural theology? Whether it agrees with Paul may be argued. One cannot conclude that for Luke as a whole the witness of God in creation is sufficient for salvation. Yet one cannot deny that Luke holds a surprisingly “high” view of God’s revelation in nature and humankind. The living God left a witness in the creation and preservation of all things. Nature can lead to a recognition of the existence, power, and goodness of the Creator. Even the universal quest for God has a divine origin to be commended. And despite God’s transcendence as Creator, God is immanent—not pantheistically but interdependently. The whole created order bears the mind and purpose of its Maker. Luke’s view of God as benevolent Creator should also be viewed against the background of the universal mission of the church. Luke’s vision explicitly embraces the whole human family (Luke 24:47; Acts 1:7). In effect, the one God who created all the nations now wills their salvation. With almost breathtaking audacity, Luke links creation and redemption.

In the theology of Luke the whole created order bears testimony to the goodness of the Creator. While special emphasis is placed on God’s care for humanity, the natural world upon which humankind depends also shares in the divine benevolence. In the natural theology of Acts, not only is this witness to God in creation affirmed but it becomes the occasion for recognizing our common humanity. One can say therefore that a profound interdependence between humanity and nature is built into the creation. Disharmony occurs when the goodness of the creation is not respected or when the interdependence is abused. And if the creation is God’s good and lavish gift, then care and preservation of the creation would seem to be the heart and soul of our human stewardship.

<sup>1</sup>Gerhard Krodel, *Acts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986) 324.

## II. NEW CREATION THEMES

A variety of other themes touch upon creation theology in Luke-Acts; we can survey these only briefly.

### *A. Spirit and Creation*

The centrality of the Spirit in Luke-Acts is well known. What interests us is the possible relation between *creator spiritus* and “Holy Spirit.” Some suggest that already in the birth narratives Luke intends a comparison between the first and second creation. Jesus’ conception by the power of the Spirit (1:35) “would be consonant with a theology of new creation wherein God’s Spirit, active in the first creation of life (Gen 1:2) was active again.”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the birth of Jesus, unlike John, is “totally God’s work, a new creation.”<sup>3</sup> And the Spirit that comes upon Mary is closer to the Spirit/breath that hovered over the water of creation than the prophetic Spirit that fills the Baptist (1:15,44). In the birth itself, the manger and the angelic announcement to the shepherds evoke the creation’s participation in God’s saving work. This same creative Spirit comes in fullness at Jesus’ baptism (3:21-22). From now on, all that Jesus says and does is

Spirit-empowered (Luke 4:1, 14, 18; Acts 1:2). Luke in particular puts the stamp of the Spirit upon Jesus' mission with his programmatic inauguration at Nazareth (4:16-31). Based on texts in Isaiah (61:1-2; 58:6), this sermon outlines Jesus' Spirit-anointed activity of justice and liberation. The new creation has begun.

In Acts, the Spirit gifts the new community. Both the designation of the Spirit as the "promise of the Father" (Acts 1:4; cf. Luke 24:49) and the stress on divine power point to the new creation. While the community's kerygmatic task is to preach "repentance and forgiveness of sins" in Christ's name to all nations (Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38), this includes all God's "deeds of power" (Acts 2:11) accomplished through the Spirit. In addition, Pentecost emphasizes the universality of the Spirit's activity (2:5; Genesis 11). With the use of Joel 3:1-5 to interpret the outpouring, Luke underscores his conviction that the advent of the Spirit marks the end-time (2:17). Now God pours out the Spirit on "all flesh"; observe the inclusive genders, generations, and social classes (2:17-18). Even the cosmos is affected (2:19-20). While Luke could not make a direct application to Pentecost, the Spirit's coming does herald the day of judgment and the upheaval of the cosmos (Luke 21:11, 25-26; Rev 6:12).

For Luke, the same Spirit of God at work in creation now empowers both Jesus and the faith community. The result is good news of liberation for all humankind. While we find no direct word about what this might mean for the non-human creation, we do hear that God's final purpose for the new creation involves the cosmos. For us, the link with the Spirit means that in some way we participate with God in the ongoing work of preserving and recreating the world. And this must include care both for the human and non-human creation.

<sup>2</sup>Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977) 299. Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to St. Luke*, vol. 1 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1981) 350, likewise emphasizes the link with the Old Testament concept of the creative Spirit of God.

<sup>3</sup>Brown, *Birth*, 314.

### *B. Christology and Nature*

Unlike Paul and other New Testament authors, the synoptic tradition has no pre-existence christology and no christological link with creation through wisdom traditions (1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:15; John 1:3; Heb 1:2). However, Luke's gospel does have two christological images drawn from nature. One is the image of a mother hen gathering her brood (Luke 13:34-35 || Matt 23:37-39). This "scriptural picture of divine protection" forms a lament reflecting Jesus' own ministry.<sup>4</sup> How often he desired to offer God's way of peace, but Jerusalem refused. Despite all that will happen, Jesus expresses his deep compassion for his people in this feminine image.

The other image is the familiar one of shepherd and sheep (Luke 15:3-7 || Matt 18:10-14), drawn from Ezek 34:11-16 and Isa 40:11. Luke preserves its original setting in Jesus' welcome to outcasts and sinners (15:1-2). Both the images of the mother hen gathering her brood and the lost sheep depict God's compassion at work in Jesus' ministry. Observing nature with a familiar eye, Jesus applied his insights in a fresh way to his own sense of divine calling.

### *C. Sabbath/Jubilee and Nature*

Concern for the creation is a part of the very fabric of the sabbath and jubilee. The weekly sabbath rest includes the land. Every sabbath year the land is to lie fallow (Lev 25:1-7). Despite

his strong criticisms, Jesus does not attack the sabbath *per se*. In Luke we find a reference to sabbath rest for animals within the story of Jesus' healing the crippled woman (13:10-17). In defense of his sabbath healing, Jesus cites the precedent of watering oxen or donkeys, despite sabbath taboos (Luke 13:15; cf. Matt 12:11). Jubilee themes form a special place in Luke's gospel, rooted in the programmatic announcement of his Messianic mission: "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (4:19; Isa 61:2). While we doubt Jesus proclaimed a literal jubilee, we do find jubilee motifs throughout the gospel. Recall its four requirements: every 50th year debts were to be remitted, prisoners released, land returned, the earth left fallow (Leviticus 25; Deuteronomy 15). No doubt the jubilee was a radical program of social/economic reform in Israel, so much so that it remained more vision than reality.

In Luke's gospel, remission of debt is frequent. The parable of the two debtors narrates a jubilee action (7:40-43), likewise the injunction to "sell your possessions and give alms" (12:37); the Lord's Prayer may be translated "God forgive us...as we remit debts" (11:4, *aphiemi*=forgive, release; cf. 4:18). The call for social justice so prominent in Luke is also consistent with a jubilee perspective (6:20-25; 7:18-23; 16:19-31; 19:1-10; Acts 2:42-45; 4:32-35). Other jubilee motifs are infrequent. One commentator suggests that the original context for the sayings on anxiety over food and drink may be the approach of jubilee and the command to let the land lie fallow.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, no passage in the gospel speaks to land issues. Yet the sabbath-year practice of fallow land was observed, and allusions to the jubilee would include this practice.

The jubilee theme of liberation for humanity announced by Jesus finds clear echoes throughout Luke's gospel, especially in the concern for debt and good news

<sup>4</sup>David Tiede, *Luke* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988) 259. Cf. Deut 32:10-14; Isa 40:31.

<sup>5</sup>John Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 65.

for the poor. While sabbath rest for the soil and return of family lands lie unexplored, the needs of the poor who live from the land would indicate these jubilee motifs are compatible with the Lukan Jesus. Concern for proper stewardship of the land lies inherent in the sabbath principle of rest for the land.<sup>6</sup>

#### *D. Hospitality at Table*

Meal settings constitute an astonishing role in Luke-Acts.<sup>7</sup> Our interest focuses on the inclusive hospitality Jesus extends and the underlying symbol of sharing bread. Jesus' meals with "tax-collectors and sinners" are most familiar (5:27-32; 7:33-35; 15:1-2; 19:1-10). Jesus' offensive hospitality breaks down the traditional barriers and offers divine acceptance and renewed fellowship in the human family to the marginalized. Meal settings in the homes of Pharisees continue this teaching (7:36-50; 11:37-44; 14:1-24). Especially important is the nature of kingdom hospitality (14:12-14). The surprising guest list consists of those who cannot reciprocate: poor, crippled, lame, blind. This same list occurs elsewhere (14:21; 7:22; 6:20-21; 4:18). Luke intends it to command our theological attention, since it portrays the essential character of divine hospitality. Meals with those not on the world's guest list become the sign of kingdom table-fellowship. The sharing of bread also occurs in other settings. Luke's version of feeding the five thousand emphasizes human need (9:10-17). Jesus feeds the multitude with eucharistic-like action, and twelve baskets remain. The feeding symbolizes God's promise to

provide enough and God's desire that it be shared. Though one does not live by bread alone, one needs daily bread (11:3). The Lord's Supper sounds similar motifs (22:14-23). This meal is the primal place of remembrance and action for the new covenant community. As the loaf and cup are shared, the community gathers both for itself and for the world. And the action for the world involves the sharing of daily bread.<sup>8</sup> Meals also play a role in the post-resurrection traditions (24:13-35, 26-43). In the early church, the breaking of bread becomes a technical term for table-fellowship, both common meal and eucharist (cf. 1 Cor 11:17-34). What gets our attention in Acts is the relation between meals and sharing. Luke's summaries link breaking of bread in homes and sacrificial sharing of one's possessions (2:42-47; 4:32-35). Christian communities are to be models of hospitality for society. The Creator's abundance is not to be hoarded (5:1-11). Finally, there are a number of texts which offer glimpses of hospitality at table in the age to come (Isa 25:6, the eschatological banquet; Luke 13:28; 14:15-24; 15:7, 10, 23; 22:16, 18; 22:28-30). While these texts need not be interpreted literally, the image of table-fellowship in the kingdom becomes a powerful metaphor of the joy and abundance and fulfillment of creation that God intends (Rev 22:1-5).

For Luke, meals become sacraments of life for Christian communities and sources of service for others. Grounded in the eucharist and Jesus' own hospitality, these meals empower believers to welcome the hungry and the stranger. All creatures need daily bread. God promises enough for all. Yet we humans covet

---

<sup>6</sup>Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, "Reconciliation with Nature," *Word & World* 11/2 (Spring, 1991) 122; Moltmann argues persuasively for a return to a theology of sabbath rest for the land.

<sup>7</sup>Frederick Craddock, *Luke* (Louisville: John Knox, 1990) 175, comments: "Nothing can be for Luke more serious than a dining table." See also the excellent study by John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Monika Hellwig, *The Eucharist and the Hunger of the World* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1976).

more than enough. Injustices and waste abound, as Luke so vividly knows.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, the sharing of meals within the community is the place to confess our hoarding and abuse of the earth, and the place for a repentance that respects nature as God's irreplaceable gift and moves us toward more equitable sharing of our daily bread.

### *E. Parables/Sayings and Nature*

As one might expect from a Galilean rabbi, much of Jesus' teaching imagery reflects nature.

A brief survey shows a rich variety. The Lukan sermon concludes with two similes from nature: a tree and its fruit (6:43-45; both John and Jesus demand "good fruit," 3:9), and the houses built on different foundations (6:46-49). The parable of the sower and the interpretation of the four soils aptly describes the kinds of obstacles Galilean farmers would face (8:4-8, 11-15). In Luke 13, all three parables reflect nature. The barren fig tree represents Israel (a Lukan substitute—or origin?—for the cursing of the fig tree, 13:6-9). The twin parables of the mustard seed and yeast speak confidently about the kingdom's presence (13:18-19, 20-21). While Luke's version omits the mustard seed's comparative size (Mark 4:30), it agrees the growth is miraculous. The domestic image of the woman mixing yeast into flour assures hearers God's rule

is present, though unseen. The parable of the wicked tenants has a vineyard for its setting (20:9-19; cf. Isa 5:1-7). The Lukan apocalypse ends with another parable of a fig tree, whose sprouting leaves parallel signs of the end (21:29-31). And one saying of Jesus uses the imagery of a mustard seed to illustrate faith (17:5-6). To his surprised disciples Jesus claims that if they had mustard-seed faith they could command a mulberry tree to be uprooted and planted in the sea, and it would obey. Mulberry trees were noted for their extensive root systems, while to plant in the sea is unheard of. Mustard-seed faith can accomplish miracles.

Jesus' acquaintance with nature and agriculture is obvious. However, the imagery is never there for its own sake but as a vehicle for teaching the kingdom. What one finds remarkable, though, is the way Jesus can turn common-sense observations into radical insights about the ways of God. He draws lessons from nature in new and fresh ways. Perhaps we can also say that the frequency and kind of imagery shows how close he felt to the land and how easily it formed a natural background to his kingdom message.

#### *F. Miracles and Nature*

As with his teachings, all the mighty works of Jesus are related to the inbreaking of the kingdom. Of the three nature miracles in Luke, two demonstrate Jesus' benevolent power: the miraculous catch of fish at the call of Simon (5:1-11) and the feeding (9:10-17). In each Jesus is Lord of creation.

The stilling of the storm, however, belongs to those traditions related to Jesus' battle against demonic powers (8:22-25). Nature and the demonic are not one and the same, of course, yet the realm of the demonic can profoundly affect the forces of nature. Here the sea represents the abode of the demon world (Ps 65:7; 107:23-32; Job 41:1-11). Jesus confronts the powers of chaos that inhabit the sea and rebukes

---

<sup>9</sup>Walter Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981) ch. 5.

the wind and waves (cf. 4:35, 39). The christological question raised at the end of the story points to Jesus as the one who possesses divine authority over both nature and the demonic. Most of the other exorcism stories show the demonic world attacking humans and Jesus' counter-attack (11:14-23). Two need special comment. At the return of the seventy, Jesus sees Satan fall like lightning because of their success over demons (10:18). There follow the difficult words that the disciples now possess "authority to tread on snakes and scorpions" (10:19). Perhaps this is best understood as a promise of protection against evil powers (not literal snake-walking!).<sup>10</sup>

Viewed from the perspective of a concern for creation, the story of the Gerasene demoniac poses a problem with its surprise ending involving the drowning of the hapless herd of swine (8:26-39). Jewish folklore would not mind, nor would anti-Roman hearers (note the use of "legion"). Many interpreters dismiss any concern about swine as irrelevant.<sup>11</sup> It is true that Jesus does not command the herd into the sea; likewise, humans are more valuable than sparrows or pigs. Yet, even in the story, Jesus' action causes great fear. They beg him to leave, for their livelihood is threatened. Might one suggest that when Jesus sent the healed man back to declare what God had done for him, no more swine were destroyed?

As God's unique representative, Jesus possesses power over both nature and supernature. As Lord of creation, he exercises power to do good and to protect from the demonic realm. While

nature as God's creation is good, it can fall under demonic influence or represent dangers for humanity. Faith in Jesus, however, frees one from the fear of nature and any evil powers that may control it.

### *G. The Passion and Nature*

Even the passion history involves nature. Jesus enters Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives upon a young colt, symbol of royal humility (19:29-40; Zech 9:9). After the disciples cry out their praises for all of Jesus' mighty works, he replies to his Pharisaic critics: "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out" (19:40). God can cause even inanimate nature to speak (cf. 3:8). The death of Jesus also impacts nature. According to the evangelists, darkness and the rending of the temple veil accompany Jesus' death (23:44-49). It was typical of hellenistic historians to emphasize the magnitude of an event, either birth or death, by describing spectacular signs. So Luke would show that "this extraordinary moment of history is accompanied by an extraordinary celestial phenomenon."<sup>12</sup> Luke attempts to explain the darkness as an eclipse, even though the Passover was the season of full moon. But its theological meaning is profound. The darkness is a sign of divine displeasure. The Creator of the world responds to the death of the Son by withdrawing the source of life (Acts 3:15). For a brief moment in eternity, God weeps with the creation in pain. And then out of the darkness the Son cries to the Father and in full trust breathes his last (23:46).

Luke's depiction of Jesus' death shares with the other gospels a sense of the whole creation groaning in travail (Romans 8).

<sup>10</sup>See Susan R. Garrett's essay in this issue of *Word & World*.

<sup>11</sup>Fred Danker jokes, "But observations of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals are irrelevant and contribute little to the understanding of Luke's account" (*Jesus and the New Age*, rev. ed. [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988] 183).

<sup>12</sup>Danker, *New Age*, 379.

### *H. Apocalyptic and Nature*

At one time, Jesus complains that his contemporaries know how to interpret the weather but not the present (12:54-56). In Luke's discussion about the arrival of the kingdom, Jesus states the end will come like a "flash of lightning" (17:24). The remainder of the discourse draws upon the biblical stories of Noah and the flood and Sodom's volcanic destruction to argue the unexpectedness of the end (17:26-32).

The Lukan apocalypse further amplifies the end-time scenario (21:5-38). The first section names signs that precede the end, including cosmic signs (earthquakes, famines, plagues, portents; v. 11). In the description of the parousia, the powers of the whole cosmos are shaken: sun, moon, stars in heaven, and roaring of sea and waves on earth (21:25-28). Panic ensues among earth's inhabitants as the old heaven and earth pass away. When the Son of Man comes on a cloud in power and glory (Dan 7:13; Rev 19:11-21), Luke adds the triumphant words, "Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (v. 28). One interpreter writes perceptively that this moving scene depicts "the whole creation awaiting redemption."<sup>13</sup> After the dissolution of the present world, the coming of Christ inaugurates the new. While the primary object of redemption is always humanity, there are hints that the whole

cosmos will share in it as well.

Luke draws upon Jewish-Christian apocalyptic to associate Jesus' coming at the parousia with the upheaval of the cosmos (2 Pet 3:10-13; Revelation 20-21). In some sense, the old heaven and earth will pass away. While Luke does not say so explicitly, the collapse of the old world seems to imply the birth of a new one. If so, the Pauline hope for the creation's "liberation from bondage" (Rom 8:19-23) and the imagery of the "new heaven and earth" in the Apocalypse (Revelation 21-22) correspond to Luke's own view of God's ultimate plan for creation. From a creation perspective, this means that this old earth does matter to God, even though it must be created anew.

## CONCLUSION

It may be that the best result of this kind of survey is to alert us to those texts in Luke-Acts that relate to nature and to begin to incorporate them more deliberately into our reflection and preaching. We need encouragement to read nature with the eyes of the psalmists or Jesus or a St. Francis. While we have omitted some themes, perhaps enough has been said to indicate the direction we can go. Creation and redemption need to be brought into closer partnership with one another. Here Luke-Acts can be a biblical resource. The goodness of God in creation and the grace of God in redemption complement each other. As recipients of God's grace in Christ and in creation, we are called to be good stewards of these gifts. Our human problem remains our innate tendency to take the gift and do with it as we please. The beginning of biblical stewardship is to recognize the Giver and to let God's will shape our response. Then perhaps we will approach some kind of vision of *shalom* in which our purpose and destiny as redeemed creatures of God is to live in harmony with one another and with all of God's creation.

<sup>13</sup>Craddock, *Luke*, 247.