



What Kind of King? What Kind of Kingdom? A Study of Luke

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The following discussion of Luke is the result of an effort to read this gospel holistically as a continuous narrative. This requires us to ask how the beginning sets up expectations and how these initial expectations are realized, not realized, or modified through a process of struggle and conflict. To understand fully any scene within this narrative, we must understand its relation to the rest of the narrative and its function within the whole.¹ When Luke is approached in this way, interesting insights are possible, and aspects of Luke that have been largely ignored take on new importance. Only a few of the results of this approach can be suggested here.

I. LITERARY CONNECTIONS

This approach requires us to ask how the birth narrative prepares for the rest of the story. The birth narrative establishes a horizon of expectations for the rest of the story by telling readers in advance what John the Baptist and Jesus should accomplish to fulfill God's saving purpose. In this way the story sets up its own criteria for the success of Jesus' mission. It will be successful when God's purpose as defined in the birth narrative (and in Jesus' announcement in the Nazareth synagogue) is accomplished.

This way of reading Luke, however, may seem doubtful as soon as we recognize that Jesus in the birth narrative is primarily presented as the royal

¹For a detailed attempt to read Luke-Acts in this way, see Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986, 1990).

Messiah who fulfills the scriptural promises to the Jewish people. Although inclusion of the gentiles is anticipated in Simeon's prophetic hymn (2:30-32), the main focus is on the Jewish people and their Messiah. Furthermore, the birth narrative seems to conflict with the actual course of events. Gabriel tells Mary that Jesus will inherit "the throne of David" and "reign over the house of Jacob forever" (1:32-33). Zechariah expands on this by blessing God for the "horn of salvation" that God has raised up "in the house of David" (1:69). Through this "horn of salvation" God will bring "salvation from our enemies" (1:71; see 1:74) and "guide our feet into a way of peace" (1:79). The theme of peace will be repeated in the birth narrative (2:14, 29), as well as later (see especially 19:38, 42). It should be understood in the broad sense of prosperity and harmony, a harmony both within Israel and between it and its neighbors. But this is not what actually happens to the Jewish people. The catastrophe of the Roman-Jewish war is only a few decades ahead. The reference to "salvation from our enemies" has often been understood vaguely by interpreters, who believe that it could not really indicate foreign oppressors like the Romans.

But this vague interpretation requires removing these words both from the historical context in which they have been placed by the narrator and from the literary context of Luke, for the related reference to Israel's enemies in 19:43 (a prophecy of the Roman conquest of Jerusalem) shows that the Romans are indeed in view.

The Lukan scene of Jesus' approach to Jerusalem (19:37-40), followed by his words of lament over the city (19:41-44), should be understood in connection with the birth narrative. This passage looks back to the promises and expectations of the birth narrative and repeats a number of its key words. Jesus is again presented as the messianic king (19:38), and the accompanying celebration of peace recalls the angels' words to the shepherds (see 19:38 with 2:14). Now, however, Jesus laments Jerusalem's failure to recognize its opportunity for messianic peace (19:42). Instead of the anticipated "salvation from our enemies," the Roman "enemies" will destroy Jerusalem, because it will not recognize "the time of your visitation" (19:44; in 1:68 Zechariah also spoke of God's visitation). The scene of Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem looks back to the expectations of the birth narrative and indicates that these hopes will not now be fulfilled for Jerusalem because of its blindness. The hopes for the Jewish people and for a kingdom of peace under Messiah Jesus have taken a tragic turn away from the anticipated realization.

II. TRANSFORMED EXPECTATIONS

What is the effect of these developments on the hopes and expectations of the birth narrative? They are not simply canceled, nor are they lost to the old Israel and transferred to a new Israel. Nevertheless, a significant transformation takes place. Luke affirms that Jesus does become king, being exalted to the right hand of God as ruling Messiah (see Luke 22:69; Acts 2:33-36). Yet his kingship is acknowledged on earth by a limited community. This community remains subject to persecution and extends itself not by the power of earthly kings but by a mission of repentance and conversion.

Narratives permit transformations of expectations. Resisting forces cause twists and turns not anticipated at the beginning. Yet the angels and prophetic men and women of the birth narrative were speaking of the saving purpose of God rooted in Scripture. Their understanding of God's saving purpose reaches to the

theological core of Luke and cannot be simply laid aside because the way is hard. Expectations are transformed, but basic hopes persist.

In the terminology of narrative criticism—a recent development in gospel studies—Zechariah is a "reliable character" because his Spirit-inspired hymn (Luke 1:68-79) accurately conveys the perspective of the "implied author," i.e., the views and values affirmed in the writing as a whole. Nevertheless, as Robert Brawley has recently emphasized,² narrative commonly works by progressive discovery involving the revision of initial expectations and interpretations. The whole truth is not revealed at the beginning. Although we are expected to take Zechariah's words seriously as an accurate statement of God's saving purpose, they do not fully tell us what kind of king Jesus will be nor what kind of kingdom he will bring. They do not reveal the difficulties that must still be faced by Jesus and his witnesses in establishing this kingdom in a resistant world.

III. PERSISTENT HOPES

We should try to define with some care what initial expectations are transformed and what initial hopes persist. The hope that the Jewish people will acknowledge Jesus as Messiah persists throughout Luke-Acts, in my opinion, although this view is contested by other scholars.³ More central to the present essay is the contention that the social hope represented in the birth narrative by references to messianic peace for the Jewish people, including freedom from foreign oppressors and from the oppression of poverty (1:53), has continuing significance.

There is a problem here that should not be ignored. If the messianic kingdom does not arrive through massive acceptance of Jesus as Messiah by his own people nor by force of arms, does it not lose its social effect? In Luke Jesus' disciples are portrayed as having a problem at this point. The narrative emphasizes strongly that they are unable to understand Jesus' announcements of his coming rejection and death (see 9:44-45; 18:31-34). The travelers on the Emmaus road show that, for them, Jesus' death cancels the possibility that he would "redeem Israel," as anticipated in the birth narrative (24:21; see 1:68). The resurrection restores hope, but it does not complete Jesus' task, for the kingdom has still not been restored to Israel, as Jesus' followers remind him in Acts 1:6. The disciples, however, are expected to learn something important from the risen Messiah. They are expected to learn that it was "necessary that the Messiah suffer these things and [thus] enter into his glory" (Luke 24:26). Partly through a new understanding of Scripture (see 24:27), they are expected to learn God's way of working in a resistant world, namely, through allowing God's messengers to be defeated and then creating a victory that humans could not anticipate. They must learn that God works by irony; therefore, God's power is different than human power.

Moreover, the kingdom Jesus is establishing does not retain the structure of other kingdoms, with simply a change in the management. In its portrait of Jesus,

²See Robert L. Brawley, *Centering on God: Method and Message in Luke-Acts* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990) 44-51.

³See Robert Tannehill, "Israel in Luke-Acts: A Tragic Story," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (1985) 69-85; Joseph B. Tyson (ed.), *Luke-Acts and the Jewish People* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988).

Luke reveals a different view of community and of authority within it. Much of this is applied either to Israel or to the original disciples, yet it is significant also for the interim community that arises through the apostles' mission, the church. Therefore, Jesus' kingdom has a social realization even though hopes of social transformation for Israel and the world are largely unrealized.

The relevance of Jesus' teaching for the continuing life of the church is indicated by the fact that an apostle, according to Acts 1:21-22, must be prepared by teaching and experience to transmit the tradition of Jesus' life and teaching to the church. This tradition is not to be forgotten, for it provides the outline of the hidden Messiah's kingdom, the patterns and guidelines by which he intends to rule his community.

IV. FEATURES OF THE KINGDOM

According to Luke, how does Jesus' vision of community differ from the usual patterns? What kind of kingdom is he establishing in the church, and through it, in the world?

First, the kingdom over which Jesus wants to rule must stretch to include people excluded by the holy people as previously defined. Those marginalized by poverty, gender, and purity rules must be included. Jesus brings sinners and tax collectors into his fellowship. This is part of the restoration of Israel to wholeness, as illustrated by someone like Zacchaeus, who, Jesus insists, is “also a son of Abraham” (19:9), a person who rightly belongs within the community of promise, the Israel that the Messiah will rule. This vision of restored Israel also provides guidelines for the church.

Second, the new kingdom requires a new economy. A persistent concern with the poor and a persistent call for a radical change in the rich are widely recognized as strong characteristics of Luke. Most interpreters would probably deny that this constitutes an economic program, but Halvor Moxnes has argued that the material on rich and poor in Luke does present an incipient “economy of the kingdom.”⁴ The command to “sell your goods and give charity” in 12:33 is part of this program. It may sound like an ordinary charity ethic of limited value. In Luke, however, charity is radicalized, for Jesus is not talking about the surplus that the rich can spare and still maintain their standard of living. According to Moxnes, Jesus in Luke is talking about “outright redistribution,” and Jesus’ commands to the wealthy are further radicalized by insistence that there be no expectation of return from the recipients (see 6:30, 34-35).⁵ The last point is important in light of the prevalence of patron-client relations in ancient Mediterranean culture. The generosity of the patron bound the client indefinitely to be the patron’s grateful supporter. Patronage was a way of gaining honor and a loyal retinue. Lukan thought assumes the social patterns of its time in picturing God as the supreme patron and benefactor of humanity, who should be God’s loyal clients, but this patron-client relation is used to free persons from the patron-client relations that rich and powerful people use to maintain their status.

⁴See Halvor Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom: Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke’s Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

⁵*Ibid.*, 154-57.

A third distinctive feature of the new kingdom appears in the way that community leaders are to function. In Luke the disciples have several persistent failings that bring them into conflict with Jesus. One of these appears in their disputes over who is the greatest. This problem surfaces in 9:46-48. It has not been solved even at the Last Supper, for in 22:24 the same sort of dispute occurs. This is a crucial problem, for the apostles gathered with Jesus on that solemn occasion will be the leaders of the new community. The way that they exercise their role will shape the community as a whole. In correcting them, Jesus first makes clear that the standard pattern of kingship in the world will not do in his kingdom. “The kings of the nations are lords over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors” (22:25), but Jesus insists that authority in his kingdom must be different. Kings may present themselves as generous benefactors, but they are using generosity and power as ways to the highest honor. They want to be *acclaimed* as benefactors. Jesus says, “Let the one among you who is greater become as the younger, and the leader as one who serves,” for Jesus himself has taken this servant role (22:26-27). He is speaking specifically of those who wait on tables, as women and servants were expected to do. The point is not merely that the church’s leaders should act for the community’s benefit rather than using their authority for selfish purposes. Jesus’ words disconnect the leadership role from

the special honor that customarily goes with it. The leader is to have no more honor in the community than those who perform the lowliest functions. As Moxnes writes, “There is, then, a break with the patron-client relationship at its most crucial point: a service performed or a favor done shall *not* be transformed into status and honor.”⁶ Jesus also accepts the status of servant. This is demonstrated by his death in faithfulness to his mission, but that is not the end of the matter. The servant role is permanently inscribed in his identity, so that when the heavenly Lord returns to his faithful servants, he acts as he did before, assuming the role of servant to his servants (12:37). This is a distinctive kind of king and kingdom.

Finally, there is the area of foreign relations. Here, too, Jesus’ kingdom is distinctive, for he insists on love of enemies. This theme is forcefully developed in 6:27-36. It is, perhaps, hard for us to imagine the author of Luke thinking that, had the people of Jesus’ time actually accepted him and his surprising policies, the oppression of Jews by Romans and of the poor by the rich would have given way to the peace of the messianic kingdom. Our cynicism may be justified, but it may rest in part on a misunderstanding. Turning the other cheek is not a policy of submission to the oppressive status quo.⁷ Those following this policy will be thorns in the flesh of the powers that be. Turning the other cheek is distinctly different than doing nothing or running from danger. Those who keep presenting their cheeks leave the oppressor no peace. They are testing how far the oppressor will go, at great cost to themselves. Eventually they rob oppressors of all legitimacy, even in their own eyes. Especially for the powerless, this is more likely to produce the “salvation from our enemies” of which Zechariah spoke (1:71) than taking up arms.

⁶See Halvor Moxnes, “Patron-Client Relations and the New Community in Luke-Acts,” *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, ed. Jerome Neyrey (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991) 261. Emphasis by Moxnes.

⁷Walter Wink has recently made this point. See “Neither Passivity nor Violence: Jesus’ Third Way,” *Society of Biblical Literature 1988 Seminar Papers*, ed. David Lull (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988) 210-24.

Our tendency toward passivity receives another jolt when we recognize what a missionary document Luke-Acts is. Luke presents God’s saving purpose being realized through the mission of Jesus, as announced in the Nazareth synagogue (4:18-19). At the gospel’s end Jesus tells his followers about their mission (24:47), and Acts focuses on crucial steps and central figures of that mission (not on the established church). The church that we know is a provisional arrangement, a group that will be transformed as the Messiah’s task is accomplished. If God’s purpose is defined as it is in Luke 3:6 (“All flesh will see the salvation of God,” quoting Isaiah), God’s primary concern is with the world, not the church. A church that has turned inward upon itself is unproductive. Luke-Acts presents a vigorous mission by prophetic figures who continually challenge the world to repentance and conversion. That mission is conducted “in the name of” Jesus (Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38), that is, under his authority and as a sign of his ruling power. But the missionaries must not forget what kind of king they serve and what kind of kingdom he wishes to found. These are defined by Luke’s story, which vividly presents the unrecognized king revealing through his words and actions the distinctive character of his kingdom.