



Salvation in Luke-Acts

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I. DEFINING SALVATION IN LUKE-ACTS

The purpose of this article will be to describe Luke's concept of salvation in a more systematic fashion than Luke himself would ever have done.¹ The charts accompanying this article [at end of text] provide some of the data that needs interpreting. These charts examine the contexts in which the key words *soter* (savior), *soteria* (salvation), *soterion* (salvation), and *sozein* (to save) occur in Luke's writings. For each occurrence, we have identified the person or persons to whom salvation is offered, the content given to this salvation (what it means), the basis for this salvation (who or what brings it), and the means through which this salvation is to be received.

1. Persons to Whom Salvation Is Offered

Looking down the first column of the charts, we are struck by the great diversity of persons who are real or potential recipients of salvation in Luke's writings. Luke has intentionally included men and women, adults and children, Jews and gentiles, and persons representative of various social classes in his accounts of salvation. He wishes to emphasize that salvation is for all (Luke 2:31; 3:6; Acts 2:21).

2. The Content of Salvation

The second column on the charts reveals a similar diversity with regard to the content of salvation, which appears to be determined in each instance by the needs of the person or persons involved. Can we construct a definition of salvation in Luke-Acts that does justice to all of the possible applications listed on our charts? I

¹For surveys of the views of various scholars on this and other Lukan themes, see my *What Are They Saying About Luke?* (New York: Paulist, 1989) and *What Are They Saying About Acts?* (New York: Paulist, 1991).

propose the following: *Salvation in Luke-Acts means participation in the reign of God.* We can fill this out with three further observations:

a.) The reign of God in Luke-Acts is both a present (Luke 11:20; 17:21) and a future (Acts 22:18, 29-30) reality. Therefore, salvation has both present and future dimensions. A glance at column two on our charts, however, reveals that Luke emphasizes the present dimensions over the future ones. Luke recognizes that people are interested in receiving eternal life (Luke 10:25; 18:18), and he affirms the legitimacy of this hope (Luke 18:30; Acts 13:48); but, in general, he lays more emphasis on the life that God's reign makes possible here and now.

This is brought out by his repeated use of the word “today” in significant passages (Luke 2:11; 3:22; 4:21; 5:26; 19:5, 9; 23:43). Defined as “participation in the reign of God,” salvation means living life, even now, as God intends it to be lived.

b.) Participation in the reign of God may involve either the introduction of positive features (peace, blessing, eternal life) or the removal of negative ones (disease, demons, sin). By incorporating both elements into his concept of salvation, Luke does justice to both the Hebrew and Greek backgrounds out of which he

page 7

writes. The Jewish world typically associated salvation with deliverance from enemies, while Greco-Roman society thought of salvation more as the bestowal of various blessings.² Luke does not choose between these options, but presents Jesus as a Savior who is both Messiah *and* Lord (Luke 2:11; Acts 2:36). As Messiah, Jesus is the one who fulfills all of God’s promises to Israel (Luke 4:16-21; 24:27-41); specifically, he is the prophet like Moses promised in Deut 18:15-16, whose new exodus (Luke 9:31) establishes a new covenantal relationship between God and God’s people (Acts 3:17-26; 7:37).³ As Lord, Jesus is the one through whom God’s mercy is extended to all (Acts 2:21; 10:36); he meets and surpasses society’s expectations of a Hellenistic “benefactor” by bestowing such divine gifts as healing, peace, and forgiveness of sins (Acts 4:9-10; 10:38).⁴

c.) In presenting salvation as participation in the reign of God, Luke makes no

²Werner Foerster, “*sozo* and *soteria* in the Greek World,” in *TDNT* 7:966-80.

³Paul Minear, *To Heal and To Reveal: The Prophetic Vocation According to Luke* (New York: Seabury, 1976) 102-11.

⁴Frederick Danker, *Luke*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 28-46.

page 8

distinction between what we might describe as physical, spiritual, or social aspects of salvation (cf. Luke 5:23). God is concerned with all aspects of human life and relationships, and, so, salvation may involve the putting right of any aspect that is not as it should be.

In Luke 18:24-26, “entering the reign of God” and “being saved” are treated as synonyms. Participation in the reign of God is a present possibility, that involves liberation from anything that prevents one from living life as God intends (cf. Luke 4:18-19).

II. THE BASIS OF SALVATION IN LUKE-ACTS

In Luke-Acts, salvation is “of God” (Luke 3:6; Acts 28:28). God is Savior (Luke 1:46). As the third column on our charts reveals, salvation in Luke-Acts is frequently based simply on the inexplicable and unmotivated initiative of God.

But salvation is sometimes also linked to others, particularly to Jesus, who is also called Savior (Luke 2:11; Acts 5:31; 13:23). Luke does not expound any particular theory of the atonement, but he does believe there is something about Jesus that makes salvation possible. What is it?

Surprisingly, Luke does not link salvation to Jesus’ death on the cross (except, perhaps, in Acts 20:28). There is no reference in Luke to Jesus giving “his life as a ransom” (cf. Matt 20:28;

Mark 10:45) or shedding his blood “for the forgiveness of sins” (cf. Matt 26:28). Instead, Luke finds the basis for salvation to be manifest in Jesus’ life and in his resurrection/exaltation.

Luke presents Jesus as one who is born a Savior (Luke 2:11) and who brings salvation to people throughout his earthly life. In fact, the whole reason he has come is to “seek and save the lost” (Luke 19:10). The life of Jesus has saving significance for Luke because it is in the life of Jesus that God’s reign is inaugurated and made manifest on earth (Luke 4:43; 8:1; 9:11; 10:9-11; 11:20; 17:21). Through encounters with Jesus, people are set free from things that prevent them from living life as God intends and, so, are enabled to participate in God’s reign.

If salvation is readily available to people while Jesus is on earth, what happens after he is “carried up into heaven” (Luke 24:51)? The entire book of Acts may have been written to answer this question, for from start to finish this book demonstrates that Jesus is not really absent. Jesus’ ascension is presented as an exaltation to the right hand of God (Acts 7:56) where he remains accessible and continues to save people.⁵ The current distance between Jesus and his followers is easily transcended in various ways.⁶ First, Jesus is still capable of actually appearing on earth, as he does to Saul on the Damascus road (Acts 10:3-7; 22:6-10; 26:13-18). Second, Jesus’ words to Saul, “Why are you persecuting *me*?” (Acts 9:5) identifies Jesus as present in the lives of the Christians whom Saul has persecuted (cf. Luke 10:16). Third, Jesus continues to guide and enable his followers through the Holy Spirit, who is called the “Spirit of Jesus” at one point (Acts 16:7). Fourth, Jesus continues to remain active and present through his name, which is invoked continuously for baptisms (2:38), healings (3:6), exorcisms (16:18), forgiveness

⁵Helmut Flender, *St. Luke: Theologian of Redemptive History* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967).

⁶George MacRae, “‘Whom Heaven Must Receive Until the Time’: Reflections on the Christology of Acts,” *Interpretation* 27 (1973) 151-65.

(10:43), and so on. Salvation is mediated through the name of Jesus in Acts (2:21; 4:12) as surely as it was through the person of Jesus in Luke’s gospel. Finally, Jesus also remains present in the preaching of the gospel, which is called “the message of salvation” (Acts 11:14; 13:26).

Luke knows that salvation is “of God,” and he believes it is God’s prerogative to give salvation if and when God wishes to do so (Acts 2:39; 11:18). This belief is based on the Scriptures, where God may simply choose, for instance, to forgive sins, without offering any rationale for the decision to do this (Jer 31:34). But Luke also believes that this divine prerogative has now been transferred to Jesus,⁷ who is able to grant people admission to God’s reign (Luke 23:42-43). Jesus is Messiah and Lord on earth during his life (Luke 2:11), and he is officially installed as Messiah and Lord in heaven by virtue of his resurrection and exaltation (Acts 2:36). As such, he has the right to bestow salvation on whomever he chooses.

III. THE RECEPTION OF SALVATION

The final column on our charts reveals that Luke is often content to portray salvation as a divine gift without any further consideration of how this gift is appropriated by individuals. At other times, however, Luke makes it clear that salvation can be either accepted or rejected. When he does specify a means through which salvation is received, that means is usually faith or a faith-related activity. In Luke-Acts, faith is typically generated in response to the proclaimed word, which Jack Kingsbury has described as the “locus of salvation” in these writings (cf. Acts

11:14; 13:26).⁸ This proclaimed word is the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20:24), and it is by God's grace that people come to faith (Acts 18:27).

Faith does, however, seem to imply a willingness or desire on the part of the person to be saved. If salvation means participation in the reign of God, then some people may not want to be saved. Rich people in Luke-Acts typically exclude themselves from participation in the reign of God (cf. Luke 18:24-25). This is because, just as the blind must be saved from blindness and lepers from leprosy, the rich must be saved from riches. Luke's gospel presents riches as a false master that enslaves people (16:13) and prevents them from living life as God intends (e.g., from being rich toward God, 12:21; from hearing Moses and the prophets, 16:28-30; or from following Jesus, 18:22-23). But while lepers (Luke 5:12; 17:13) and blind people (Luke 18:41) want to be set free from that which inhibits them, rich people usually do not. Of course, nothing is impossible with God, and, so, some rich people can be saved (Luke 18:27). This is illustrated in the story of Zacchaeus, whose (partial) renunciation of possessions demonstrates that he has been set free from slavery to mammon and now participates in the reign of God as a true child of Abraham (19:9). Luke tells this story in deliberate contrast to that of another man, whose riches cause him to be excluded from the reign of God and separated from his father Abraham (Luke 16:22-26).

Actually, Luke seems to vary in the extent to which he attributes responsibility for the appropriation of salvation to the person being saved. This may be seen in the three parables told in chapter 15 of his gospel. All three stories illustrate

⁷I. H. Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970) 169-70.

⁸*Jesus Christ in Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) 126-28.

Jesus' representation of his own mission as being to seek and to save the lost, but the role played by that which is lost varies in them. In the first two parables, the lamb and the coin have a completely passive role and are only found because of the initiative taken by the one who seeks them. In the third parable, however, the son who is lost "comes to his senses" and returns home on his own. Accordingly, Luke thinks that salvation can occur solely as a result of God's initiative, or as a result of God's gracious response to the initiative of one who wishes to be saved. For this reason, Peter can urge people to "save themselves" in one instance (Acts 2:40), and yet claim that people are saved "by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ" in another (Acts 15:11).

IV. SUMMARY AND EVALUATION

Salvation, according to Luke-Acts, is available to all. Salvation is broadly conceived in these writings as participation in the reign of God, and, thus, as a present experience of life as God intends. This salvation is available because God has granted the Lord Jesus Christ the right to bestow salvation on whomever he chooses. People who wish to participate in the reign of God and desire to live as God intends receive this salvation when, through God's grace, they respond to the proclaimed word about Jesus with faith.

Once we come to understand the concept of salvation presented in Luke-Acts, we should ask ourselves whether we believe it. Luke has often been accused of harboring a "theology of glory" and of painting an unrealistic portrait that ignores the inevitable failures and sufferings of

life.⁹ In this regard, Luke-Acts can and should be compared to other biblical witnesses that offer different perspectives on the theme of salvation.¹⁰ Luke's account, I would say, is intended to encourage. Luke urges us to believe that the possibility of living as God intends may be greater than we imagine. He does not speak the final word on the topic of salvation, but he does offer a vital contribution to consideration of this subject from a wider biblical/theological perspective.

⁹Ernst Käsemann, "Ministry and Community in the New Testament," in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 92. I have noted three objections to this charge in *What Are They Saying About Acts?*, p. 67.

¹⁰See Arland Hultgren, *Christ and His Benefits* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

USE OF *SŪTER*, *SŪTERIA*, *SŪTERION*, AND *SŪZEIN* IN LUKE

<i>Verse</i>	<i>Who is to be saved?</i>	<i>What does salvation mean?</i>	<i>Who, what brings it?</i>	<i>How received?</i>
1:47	Mary	blessedness (1:42, 48)	God	faith (1:45)
1:69, 71	Israel	rescue from enemies	God	_____
1:77	the Lord's people	forgiveness	John (1:76)	_____
2:11	shepherds	peace (2:14)	Christ the Lord	_____
2:30	all people	revelation, glory	Jesus (1:27)	_____
3:6	all flesh	forgiveness (3:3)	John	baptism
6:9	man with infirmity	healing	word of Jesus	_____
7:50	sinner (7:37)	forgiveness (7:48)	word of Jesus	faith
8:12	ones along the path	_____	word of God	faith
8:36	demoniac	exorcism	command of Jesus	_____
8:48	woman with infirmity	healing	power of Jesus	faith
8:50	Jairus' daughter	resurrection	word of Jesus	faith
9:24	whoever	_____	_____	self-denial
13:23	a few	feasting in God's reign	_____	effort
17:19	leper	being made clean	Jesus	faith
18:26	who?	entering God's reign	God	_____
18:42	blind man	reception of sight	word of Jesus	faith
19:9, 10	Zacchaeus	being child of Abraham	Jesus (19:10)	renunciation

USE OF *SŌTER*, *SŌTERIA*, *SŌTERION*, AND *SŌZEIN* IN ACTS

<i>Verse</i>	<i>Who is to be saved?</i>	<i>What does salvation mean?</i>	<i>Who, what brings it?</i>	<i>How received?</i>
2:21	everyone	escape from apocalypse	the Lord's name	calling
2:40	Jews from many nations (2:36)	forgiveness, Holy Spirit	exalted Jesus (2:33)	repentance, baptism (2:38)
2:47	numbers	_____	the Lord	_____
4:9	lame man (3:2)	being made to walk (3:8)	name of Jesus (3:15)	faith (3:16)
4:12	people	_____	name of Jesus	_____
5:31	Israel	repentance, forgiveness	exalted Jesus	_____
7:25	Israel	rescue from enemies	Moses	_____
11:14	gentiles	Holy Spirit (11:15) repentance (11:18)	God (11:17)	faith (11:17)
13:23, 26	Israel, godfearers (13: 17, 26)	forgiveness, freedom (13:38-39)	risen Jesus (13:32-39)	faith (13:39)
13:47	gentiles	eternal life (13:46)	_____	_____
14:9	lame man	being made to walk	word of Paul	faith
15:1, 11	Jews, gentiles	_____	the Lord Jesus	grace
16:30, 31	jailor, family	_____	the Lord Jesus	faith
27:20, 31,34, 43	sailors, Paul	survival (27:23, 34, 44)	God (27:23)	obedience (27:31)
28:28	gentiles	(spiritual) healing	God	listening
