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Lukan Christology: Jesus as Beautiful Savior

Peter J. Scaer

Larry Hurtado's *Lord Jesus Christ* is breathtaking in scope, cataloguing and analyzing early devotion to Christ in material ranging from the earliest Christian documents to such later works as the infancy Gospel of Thomas and the Shepherd of Hermas.¹ Those of us who aspire to membership in the Early High Christology Club will forever owe a debt to Hurtado, whose work will surely serve as a touchstone and launch-pad for decades to come.² Naturally, even the most positive reviewer will indulge in a few quibbles. I would note that Hurtado privileges Pauline Christology, devoting to it the first full analytical chapter of his work. And if my math is correct, he includes 77 pages on Johannine Christology, leaving just 65 pages for the three synoptics, of which only seven are allotted to Luke. Given the fact that the Lutheran tradition has tended to privilege the Gospel of John and letters of Paul, many of us may feel right at home with Hurtado's presentation.

If, on the other hand, one or another Gospel predates Paul, then priorities should be shifted. Indeed, Hurtado's own scholarship points the way. If, as Hurtado maintains, devotion to Jesus emerged "phenomenally early,"³ there is less reason to think that the Gospels are themselves a later historical development. Who knows? We might just want to start an Early Gospel Club, as well as an Early High-Ecclesiology Club. In any case, the Jesus tradition certainly predates Paul, as does the confession of our Lord's chief disciple. As such, to discuss the Epistles before the Gospels seems like putting the cart before the horse, or robbing Peter to pay homage to Paul. Here is one instance where, I sympathize—I am almost embarrassed to say—with John Dominic Crossan, of Jesus Seminar fame, who states; "Start with Paul and you will see Jesus incorrectly."⁴ In one way or another, the life and teaching of Jesus must come first. Furthermore,

¹ Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2003).

² An informal group of NT scholars, of which Hurtado is a founding member.

³ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 2.

⁴ Hurtado quotes Crossan's, "The Birth of Christianity," xxvii, in *Lord Jesus Christ*, 85.

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recognizing the canonical and theological primacy of the synoptics in any presentation of Jesus, this study will, highlight and supplement Hurtado's discussion of Christology in Luke's Gospel.

I. Introduction

Confessional Lutheran piety, at least in its present form, tends towards the didactic. With a growing and welcome emphasis on catechesis, hymns such as "Salvation Unto Us Has Come" are enjoying a minor renaissance. Popular American Lutheranism, on the other hand, often gravitates towards hymns that are more easily accessible, and often not distinctively Lutheran. In its most mind-numbing and malignant form, this piety expresses itself in such songs as "Shine, Jesus, Shine." More benignly, many folks would rather sing "Rock of Ages" than "A Mighty Fortress." And Wesley's "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today" would easily win a popularity contest over Luther's, "Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands." As newly-minted seminary graduates soon discover, people are often less concerned with how Jesus saves, than with the fact that he saves. For some, this disconnect is a cause for consternation and hand-wringing. Happily, within the hymnal there is a place for teaching and adoration, liturgy for confession and exultation, a time for explaining the way in which Jesus' death merits our salvation and a time for simply basking in the cross's glow by gazing upon our Savior's beauty. In the end, hopefully, there is compromise and combination, with a diet of hymns that is varied in tone and intensity.

And so also it is with the Gospels. Each Gospel, varying in tone and intensity, makes a distinctive contribution in our understanding of Jesus. Matthew's Gospel serves as the indispensable foundation for the church of Christ. The scribal apostle organizes the teachings of Jesus into five sections, and in doing so offers the most orderly and catechetical presentation of the Christian life.⁵ From Matthew, we learn of the virgin birth and the truth of the resurrection. We are introduced to the atonement, the theological basis for our salvation. As the church's teacher, the first evangelist leads us to pray our Lord's Prayer, and name our Triune God. Understand Matthew on a basic level, and you are ready to be confirmed. Mark, on the other hand, is a bold preacher of the cross. As Richard Burridge puts it, Mark portrays Christ as an untamed lion; he is

⁵ Richard Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 33-64; see further David P. Scaer, *Discourses in Matthew: Jesus Teaches the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004).

like the Aslan of C.S. Lewis's *Narnia Chronicles*. For those asking themselves "What Would Jesus Do?" Mark is a shock to the system, reflecting the fact that Jesus' actions are often unpredictable, even strange. As we look for glory, Mark cautions us that the Lord often appears to us behind masks, and that our God is the crucified one. On the other hand, the Evangelist John furthers our understanding of Jesus by plunging us into previously unfathomed theological depths, and lifting us up, on eagles' wings, to uncharted spiritual heights. John depicts Jesus as an alien, who has come to us from realms of glory, and whose true identity is a mystery to be unraveled. John also offers an intimacy not found in the other Gospels. Here we meet Jesus one-on-one, as does his Beloved Disciple, and are attached to him as branches to a vine. With the woman at the well, we come to see baptism as Christ's living well that springs within us. We come to see that in Holy Communion we also rest our heads in the bosom of our Lord. John leads us into the mysteries, where we see that the Christ and the sacraments are one, and that through the sacraments Christ becomes one with us.

So also the Evangelist Luke offers a distinct and necessary contribution to our understanding of Christ. While Matthew teaches us, Mark preaches boldly, and John counsels us into quiet contemplation of deep spiritual matters, Luke the artist paints a pleasant portrait of our Lord. For Luke, Jesus is the prototype of a new humanity: the new and true Adam who fully expresses what it means to be created in God's image. Luke would have us know that Jesus has blazed a path to heaven on our behalf, and has presented himself as a model to follow.

I would like to build on what Larry Hurtado has to say about the third Gospel. He concludes, perceptively I believe, that "Luke is an endearing rendition of Jesus."⁶ The spirit of the Lukan nativity is better captured by "Away in the Manger" than "Of the Father's Love Begotten." The simple hymn "Let Us Ever Walk With Jesus" expresses much of the essence of Lukan Christianity. We are pilgrims, following in the footsteps of our Lord, joyfully taking up our crosses, always looking forward to our home above. Indeed, from the sweetness of the Lukan Christmas to the story of the prodigal son, and from Jesus' healing ministry to his saving the thief on the cross, Luke would have us know that the face of our Lord is one of compassion. To be sure, Luke recognizes that the Christian life is one of rigorous discipleship, of daily taking up our crosses and following in the

⁶ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 346.

footsteps of our Lord (9:23), but Luke would have us know that Jesus is indeed worth following. Though the way of the Christian life is not easy, we can live in joy. The path to heaven is now wide open, even as our Savior's arms are also. Therefore, we should take heart, and be of good courage. Even in dying, the clouds are parted, and the vision of Christ, now seated at the right hand of God, is placed before our eyes (Acts 7:55). To put it more simply, Luke's presentation of Jesus encourages us to sing "Beautiful Savior."

II. Jesus as Savior

In fact, it is striking to note that Luke is the only one of the synoptic Gospels in which Jesus is specifically called "Savior". In the Matthean infancy narrative, for instance, we are told that the child will be named Jesus, for "he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21), but the Christ-child is never given the title "Savior." From the perspective of the Matthean nativity, Jesus' salvation is depicted as a future event accomplished through the cross. Matthew, as teacher, wants us to understand how exactly the cross works. He leads us to the atonement.

Luke's lowly shepherds, on the other hand, are told, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (2:11). This is the stuff of which Christmas pageants are made! The angel's message is one of joy, as is the response of the shepherds. Explanation must wait for another time. Good news and doxology are the order of the day. We are invited to find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes. Not only will Jesus save his people through his death, but even now, the infant-child is the Savior. Upon seeing the infant, Simeon sings, "Now, release your servant, . . . for my eyes have seen your salvation" (2:29). Salvation is already here. Already today, we have reason to rejoice.

Indeed, one of Luke's favorite words from Jesus' ministry is *today*. In his inaugural sermon at Nazareth, Jesus said, "Today, scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). When Jesus healed the paralytic, the amazed crowd responded, "We have seen extraordinary things today" (5:26). Again, when Jesus meets Zacchaeus, he expresses urgency in saying, "I must stay at your house today." He further interprets his visit to Zacchaeus's house, saying, "Today salvation has come to this house" (19:9). Finally, and most famously, he comforts the thief of the cross: "Today you will be with me in paradise" (23:43). For those of us frustrated by the purgatory of waiting and delay, Luke is our Gospel, and Jesus is our Savior.

III. Jesus as Holistic Healer

We live in a therapeutic culture, characterized by what some have disparaged as the "Oprahfication" of society. Feelings trump facts. Holistic medicine is the order of the day. As many people visit psychiatrists, therapists, and counselors as frequent the physicians. As is often the case, society has a point. Life is greater than the sum-total of its biological components. People naturally seek not only eternal salvation, but liberation from all that ails them physically, spiritually, mentally, and emotionally. To the person who is suffering here and now, the thought of eternal life can seem distant. Luke's Gospel speaks to the heart of a world such as ours.

Mary's song captures this notion of holistic salvation, and sets the theme for the entire Gospel: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46). God the Savior will now work through the Son who, to borrow a phrase from Richard Bauckham, shares his identity as Savior.⁷ And as Savior, he comes to reverse all that has gone wrong. The God who comes in Christ has not come simply to save our souls, but he is the one who favors the lowly, shows mercy to his servants, scatters our enemies, exalts those of low estate, and fills the hungry with good things. This is the simple yet profound theology of the great reversal in Luke.⁸ Those who weep are encouraged to laugh (6:21), and those who place their head at Jesus' feet are lifted up, and given a life of peace (7:50). Indeed, when Jesus defines his own ministry, he describes it in holistic terms. Quoting from Isaiah, he says that he has been anointed "to preach the good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, and to release the oppressed" (Luke 4:18-19). Jesus' words offended the people of Nazareth, yet when read to us today, his message sounds almost like a campaign speech. Luke would have us know that Jesus comes not only to forgive sins, but to make everything right. He comes to seek and save those who are lost. Matthew would have us know that Jesus has offered his life as a ransom for the many (Matthew 20:28). Luke, realizing the implications of this theological data, wants us to know that because he died for the many, our Savior cares for each and every one of us. Indeed, this Savior shows partiality to those in distress, leaving behind the 99 sheep (the many) in order to recover the

⁷ For Bauckham's discussion of divine identity Christology, see *God Crucified: Montheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

⁸ For discussion of this Lukan theme, see Arthur A. Just, Jr., *Luke 1:1-9:50*, *Concordia Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1996), 85-86.

one (Luke 15:1-7). He not only has mercy upon the multitudes, but he singles out the widow who has lost her only son (7:12), and pays special homage to another poor widow who has only two copper coins to put into the plate (21:2). Jesus has a soft spot in his heart for the helpless infant (Luke 18:15). The poor, maimed, and blind are received into the hospitality of the heavenly banquet (14:21). Tellingly, while Matthew teaches us that the poor in spirit are blessed, Luke cuts through the theological jargon, and states more directly, "Blessed are the poor" (6:20). The Christian community, as we see in the book of Acts, continues this work. The apostles offer not only the forgiveness of Christ, but all Christians sell their goods for the sake of the poor (Acts 2:44; 4:32). Through the apostles, Christ continues his works of healing and restoration.

Thus, Luke's notion of salvation is thoroughly holistic. As Ben Witherington summarizes, "Luke's concept of salvation has social, physical, and spiritual dimensions."⁹ That is to say, Luke preaches a type of full-gospel salvation which involves not only the forgiveness of sins, but all the benefits that come with it. To turn a phrase, Jesus helps those who cannot help themselves.

IV. Jesus as Benefactor

Having uncomfortably agreed earlier with a statement by Crossan, I am now happy to say here a word against him. As Hurtado notes, Crossan's 1991 work *The Historical Jesus*, "portrays Jesus as proclaiming a 'brokerless kingdom' of unmediated divine acceptance, who intended no special role or significance for himself."¹⁰ In other words, Crossan would have us believe that the essence of Jesus' teaching is that each of us has direct access to God, apart from any middle-man, including himself. To the contrary, the third evangelist would have us know that Jesus is the unique broker and mediator through whom God works.

Tellingly, Peter summarizes the ministry of Jesus in this way, "He went about doing good and healing all under the power of the devil, because God was with him" (Acts 10:38). Jesus is the one who does good, because he is the one through whom God works. The key words here are "doing good" (εὐεργετῶν). This is the language of benefaction. The moniker *benefactor* (εὐεργέτης) was a technical term in the Greco-Roman world.

⁹ Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles A Social-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 143.

¹⁰ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 58.

Benefactor was an honorary title, given to those whom we might call today civic-minded. For the Greek orator Demosthenes, the term *savior* is synonymous with such words as benefactor and friend. He calls King Philip of Macedon, for instance, "The Friend, Benefactor, and Savior" of the Thessalonians (*On the Crown*, 43). Benefactors built bathhouses, aqueducts, temples, and synagogues. They provided food and festivals for the poor. Amid violence, benefactors offered protection to widows, orphans, and all those who could not defend themselves. They provided legal help and medical care to those who could not otherwise afford it.¹¹ Of course, nothing comes without a price, and every gift has strings attached. Among equals, people invite friends over for dinner with the thought of having the invitation reciprocated (Luke 14). So also, in return for their largesse, wealthy benefactors expected honor, praise, and glory. Even as today, the rich have buildings named in their honor; few public structures in West Virginia do not bear the name of Senator Robert Byrd.

In Luke-Acts, Jesus presents himself as the ultimate benefactor and mediator of God's gifts. As God's broker, he has the authority to forgive sins and make the paralyzed to walk (Luke 5:24). By raising the dead, the people come to see that through him "God has visited his people" (7:16). In his exalted state, he sits at God's right hand (2:34). As Peter preaches, "There is salvation in no one else" (Acts 4:12).

Closely related to the word benefactor, is the term *friend*. Thus, for example, the centurion in Luke 7 is a friend of the Jews, for he built a synagogue for them. Again, we are told that during the trial of Jesus, Herod and Pilate became friends (Luke 23:12). Here, the term does not mean buddy, or companion. As Halvor Moxnes writes, "Friendship was not so much an emotional attachment as a form of social and even political contract based on reciprocity. Well-placed members of the elite in the center could provide their "friends or clients in the province with access to the central administration."¹² A friend is one who can do favors for you. And the scandal is that Jesus becomes a friend of tax-collectors and sinners (6:34; 15:1-2; 19:1-10). In Luke, Jesus brokers the gifts of God to those who cannot offer him anything in return. In the book of Acts, the apostles play

¹¹ For a discussion of beneficence see Jerome Neyrey, *Render to God: New Testament Understanding of the Divine* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), esp. 82-106.

¹² Halvor Moxnes, "Patron-Client Relations and the New Community," *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (ed. Jerome Neyrey: Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 245.

the role of broker, doing good works of healing, in the name and by the power of Jesus (Acts 4:10-12).

V. The Lord's Supper as Benefaction

It has been said that Luke does not have a theology of the atonement, omitting Christ's claim that he would offer his life as a ransom for many. However, it is interesting to note that in the words of institution, it is only Luke who includes the words "for you" in respect to both the bread and wine. In Luke, Christ says, "This is my body, given for you" (22:19). And again, he says, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (22:20). Though Luke may not explain the inner-soteriological significance of the Supper, he wants the hearer to know that the Supper is the ultimate gift from the true benefactor.

Immediately after recounting the Last Supper, Luke alone records a dispute that arose among the disciples concerning greatness. Jesus, the supreme benefactor, proceeds to redefine benefaction, saying, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as the one who serves" (22:25). In the old world, the rich give money to be honored by the poor. In the new age, the poor are honorable. Now that Christ has turned the world upside-down, it is the duty of the rich to give to the poor, and to make friends with the weak. And in making friends with the poor, they will be honored not by the poor, but by God. Even so Christ was honored by God for making himself a servant and thus offering his benefits for us.

VII. Christ, the New Adam

In the hymn "Beautiful Savior," the congregation acclaims Jesus as the "Son of God and Son of Man." Admittedly, calling Jesus the "Son of Man" is awkward, for Jesus applies it to himself in the state of humiliation. Still, the hymn rightly wants to say that Jesus is both fully God and fully man. So also, Lukan Christology proclaims Jesus to be the true Son of man (namely, Adam).

Now, when most of us think of Christology, we think of the climactic moment when Jesus asked Peter, "Who do you say that I am?" To this Peter responded, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). Or else, we recall the centurion at the foot of the cross concluding, "Surely, this was the Son of God" (Matthew 27:54). For those of us in the Early High Christology Club, these moments represent the pinnacle of

confession. Strangely, Luke does not make hay of either of these christological confessions. In Luke, Peter does not call Jesus "the Son of God," but simply confesses that he is the "Christ of God" (Luke 9:20). Likewise, the centurion at the cross does not specifically confess Jesus as "the Son of God," but instead exclaims: "Surely, this man was righteous" (Luke 23:47). Does this mean that Luke soft-played Jesus' divinity? No, he simply has other fish to fry.

Some would say that Luke wishes to emphasize the humanity of Jesus. Of course, to say that Jesus was a man is in itself a necessary statement, especially when in debate with Docetists, in whatever guise they may take. Indeed, the Lukan narrative takes pains to show that the resurrected Christ is no disembodied ghost. Most of Jesus' opponents, however, had no problem ascribing humanity to the person of Jesus. His enemies relished referring to him as a carpenter's son, unlike them, and as "Jesus of Nazareth," an earthly citizen of an undesirable town.

Luke makes a higher theological point. Luke adds to our christological wealth by demonstrating that not only was Jesus a man, but he was also the true, representative, and righteous man. As the man, Jesus represented and embodied all mankind. When we think of Adamic Christology, we usually turn first to St. Paul, and to such passages as Romans 5:12-21, where Paul compares and contrasts the one man Adam, by whose sin death entered into the world, with the one man Jesus Christ, through whose death many will be made righteous. Or else, we recall what Paul has to say in 1 Corinthians 15; namely that death came into the world through one man, so also the resurrection of the dead comes through one man. We should note, however, that this Pauline theology is built on a foundation shared by Luke. While Matthew traces his genealogy back to Abraham and David, thus emphasizing Jesus' Jewish credentials, Luke's genealogy is traced back to the first man (Luke 3:38). As Hurtado notes, Luke's genealogy stresses "the universal significance" of Jesus.¹³ Genealogically, Jesus is the Son of Adam, the Son of God.

Adam through his disobedience showed that he was not truly God's son. Jesus is the true Son of God, not simply ontologically, but because he actually fulfills the will of his Father. Immediately following the genealogy, Luke records the story of the temptation in the wilderness, underlining the point that this second Adam has indeed been obedient and

¹³ Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 343

righteous on our behalf and in our stead (Luke 4:1-13). Time and again, Jesus is faced by temptation and trial, and each time he overcomes. Throughout his life, he serves as the prime exemplar of righteous living, devoting himself to prayer. In willing obedience, he faces the cross with courage and purpose. On the Mount of Olives, where Jesus is victorious over temptation, he once and for all turns back Satan (Luke 22:39-46). On the cross, he offers his life in willing obedience to the Father, into whose hands he commends his Spirit (Luke 23:46). The centurion rightly calls Jesus "righteous," for as the righteous man, he is both our substitute and example. He is the true Adam. Paul makes all of these points by theological argumentation; Luke makes these points by telling the story of Jesus.

VII. Christology of Resurrection

In Luke-Acts, the death of Jesus is necessitated by the Scriptures, and the resurrection is brought about by the power of God. The resurrection in particular is depicted as an act of vindication by God on behalf of his servant. At Pentecost Peter preaches, "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up loosing the pangs of death" (Acts 2:24). Again, in Acts 5:30, Peter declares, "The God of our fathers raised Jesus whom you killed by hanging him on the tree." Likewise, Paul preaches: "They asked Pilate to have him put to death . . . but God raised him from the dead" (Acts. 13:29-30).

Considering the fact that Luke was a companion of Paul, there is strikingly little talk about justification by faith in Acts. Instead, the topic, again and again, is the resurrection. Peter preaches the resurrection, as does Paul. The closest link to the book of Acts we may find in Paul's letter to the Romans is where he introduces his gospel by saying that Jesus was "declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection of the dead" (Romans 1:4). We may also consider Romans 4:25, where Paul states that Christ was "raised for our justification."

The point to note is this: Luke does not, as does the Evangelist John, emphasize Jesus' power to raise himself. Instead, he notes that God has raised him, thus vindicating him. This does not mean that Luke has a lower Christology; instead, he is emphasizing a Christology which undergirds his soteriology. The one who is raised is precisely Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified one. And because God acts on his behalf, he will

act on ours. As N.T. Wright puts it, "God's raising of Jesus from the dead is the sign that salvation is found in him alone."¹⁴ Resurrection, for Luke, is primary justification. Justification by faith may be the heart of the Christian faith, but Luke would have us know that the resurrection of Jesus is the foundation. Subjective justification rests upon the objective justification accomplished in Christ's resurrection.

VIII. Christology of Ascension

The Gospel of Matthew ends tying up all the loose ends. Jesus rises from the dead, and then promises to remain "Emanuel, God with us" unto the end of the age. Luke, however, finishes telling the story of the Apostles' Creed by recording Jesus' ascension into heavenly glory. The glory that Jesus possesses is given by the Father. As Peter says, "The God of our fathers glorified his servant Jesus whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate" (Act 3:13). Even Jesus' heavenly title and status is a gift from God. In Acts 2:36, for example, Peter says, "God has made this Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Christ." In light of such formulations, some have attributed to Luke a kind of naive adoptionism or subordinationism. Those schooled in Nicene theology rightly ask: But wasn't Jesus Lord and Christ before the ascension? Of course, the answer is yes. Yet again, Luke has another point to make. The one who reigns at the right hand of God is not simply the second person of the Trinity, but Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus, the representative man, is raised into heavenly splendor. From his place of exaltation he comforts Stephen, calls Paul, and watches over his entire church. Through his ascension, the clouds of heaven are opened, not simply for God to speak or descend, but for man to rise heavenward. Luke's Gospel, then, is not more primitive or simplistic, but it is actually an exalted theology of man's nature that has been assumed by Christ.

IX. Conclusion

And so it is, that the Gospel of Luke is a Gospel of encouragement for all of us who are members of the human race. Hank Williams concluded, "No matter how I struggle and strive, I'll never get out of this world alive." Or, if you prefer, the preacher offers an equally pessimistic word of discouragement: "All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all

¹⁴ N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 454.

return. Who knows whether the spirit of man goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down into the earth?" (Ecclesiastes 3:21). Who knows? Luke knows. And he tells us that someone has indeed made it out of this world alive and helps us to see that Jesus is our Beautiful Savior.