Lecture 16: The Lukan Narrative

In concluding our exploration of Luke, I want to take the long view of his Gospel, focusing especially on the way he portrays Jesus. To this point we have isolated sources Luke used, probed how he used them, and have taken an especially close look at elements of his infancy narrative and what we can deduce about his composition of those chapters.

While Luke’s Gospel has its own narrative wrinkles (as we’ve already seen), for the most part it follows Mark’s order, which we explored thoroughly. And so the way I’ll approach this topic is by reviewing conclusions we have drawn previously about Luke’s distinctive themes and show how they shape the way Luke narrates his story of Jesus.

The most important feature of Luke that we have already detected (and Tuckett also addresses) is his portrayal of Jesus as the prophet par excellence. We’ve noticed, for example, Jesus’ response when, during his visit to Nazareth’s synagogue, his claim to be Isaiah 61’s prophet upon whom the Spirit of the Lord rests is rebuffed by those who have seen him grow up. His rejoinder, as you’ll recall, is, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.” This initial scene of Luke’s narrative – a homecoming that figures into Mark’s narrative only at a much later point – characterizes Jesus from the outset as a prophet. And what’s more, it establishes Jesus as a rejected prophet, which is equally important for Luke.

Indeed, that is how Jesus himself speaks of his eventual death, when told by the Pharisees of Herod’s intent to kill him: “32Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. 33Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’” He knows himself safe from Herod’s threats because he is a prophet, and therefore his place of death must be Jerusalem, as is the case with all prophets.

But in Luke’s schema, “prophecy” is not simply the lens through which he portrays Jesus, but the context in which Jesus is born, nourished and works, as is clear already in the infancy narrative. Thus, on the day John is circumcised and named, the crowd does not accept Elizabeth’s insistence that he be named John, and so they ask his mute father. As soon as Zechariah confirms in writing that John is to be his son’s name, he is released from his muteness, and Luke introduces the first words out of his mouth this way: “Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy…. And in the course of his prophetic speech, Zechariah addresses his infant son with the words, “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.” — While Mark and Matthew imply that John is a prophet,
especially in their comparisons of him with Elijah, this explicit characterization of him as a prophet is unique to Luke.

And Zechariah is not the only figure in the infancy narrative to speak prophetically. Luke reports that when Jesus’ parents brought him to the temple for circumcision on the eighth day after his birth, two elderly people were present. The first was a man named Simeon, of whom Luke reports, “this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him.” The phrase “the Holy Spirit” rested on him” ascribes to Simeon prophetic status.

In fact, Luke tells us that “It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.” Moreover, it was under the Spirit’s guidance that Simeon came to the temple that day so as to recognize the infant Jesus and utter a hymn of thanksgiving that he had seen the Messiah before his death.

Also in the temple was another person who appears only in the Third Gospel. This woman the evangelist describes as follows: “

36 There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. 38 At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.” – Notice that she is specifically labeled “a prophet,” even though Luke says nothing explicit about the Spirit. Indeed, calling someone a “prophet” and speaking of them having the Spirit are virtually synonymous in Luke’s vocabulary.

Indeed, you may recall that Luke has Peter saying, on the day of Pentecost, that the disciples’ speech in foreign languages was evidence that the Spirit had been poured out in fulfillment of words spoken by the prophet Joel: “

16 This is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 17 ‘In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. 18 Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.”

To have the Spirit poured out upon you is to act as a prophet. And thus, similarly, when Mary travels to Elizabeth’s house after receiving the angel’s word that she will conceive and bear a son, Luke reports her reception as follows:

41 When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is
she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” – For Luke, this is prophetic activity, even if he doesn’t label Elizabeth a prophet, because it is an utterance prompted by the Spirit. And this, by the way, might help to explain why Luke doesn’t speak of the Spirit more explicitly in connection with Jesus work. His portrait of him as a prophet implies what he states explicitly early on: Jesus has the Spirit resting upon him.

The role of the Holy Spirit is, of course, another distinctively Lukan motif. It’s important to remember, in this context, the strong indications that Luke composed his infancy narrative after he had written the book of Acts, where the lighting of the Spirit on diverse people is part of the era after Jesus’ ascension. In the gospel the Spirit descends “in bodily form like a dove” upon Jesus alone at his baptism, following which Luke reports (uniquely, as you’ll recall), that Jesus entered into his struggle with the Devil “full of the Holy Spirit.” And from that struggle, Luke says, Jesus returned to Galilee “filled with the power of the Spirit.” On no one else is the Spirit said to light in this way. Even when, in chapter 10, Jesus sends out the disciples on their mission among the cities of Galilee, there is no mention of the Spirit as aiding their work.


On the other hand, in 11.13 Jesus promises that “the heavenly Father [will] give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” And yet, this remains something of an unfulfilled promise in the Third Gospel itself, inasmuch as no one is depicted as receiving the Spirit. That awaits the book of Acts, although it is foreshadowed at the end of Luke, where Jesus’ parting promise to the disciples is, “I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” Only in Acts 2 is that promise fulfilled, although it is reiterated by Jesus at the beginning of chapter 1, clarifying what Luke 24 means by “power from on high”: “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” – It is from there on that we hear of those in the church being “filled with the Holy Spirit” and accomplishing the same types of things Jesus did during his work, as reported by Luke’s gospel. While the Spirit distinguishes Jesus from the disciples in the Third Gospel, the Spirit forms the line of continuity between Jesus’ ministry and the early church, as reported in Acts.

But if, following Jesus’ ascension, his disciples also receive the Spirit and do what Jesus did, then what is distinctive about Jesus’ role for Luke?

You might recall that the angel’s explanation of the means of the conception of Jesus is, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High
will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.” From this statement, you would expect “Son of God” would be an important title for Luke in asserting Jesus’ distinctive relationship to God. And yet, Luke’s use of this title elsewhere raise questions about its meaning for him.

On the one hand, Luke’s genealogy in chapter 3 begins with Jesus’ putative father, Joseph, and works its way backwards, concluding with the sequence, “son of Enos, son of Seth, son of Adam, son of God.” Luke’s application of “son of God” to Adam suggests that, for him, the import of this phrase is that Adam owes his existence to God rather than a human father. And thus, when Luke says that because Jesus’ birth will be occasioned by “the power of the Most High” overshadowing Mary, he will be called the Son of God, what he seems to assert is that Jesus, like Adam, owes his existence to God rather than a human father.

Luke’s diminished use of this title is evident again in 4.41, which he constructs by combining Mark 1.34 and 3.11. Mark 1.34 reads, “And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.” Then Luke derives from Mark 3.11 what the demons were saying: “Whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and shouted, “You are the Son of God!” Luke conflates these, producing the report, “Demons also came out of many, shouting, “You are the Son of God!” But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew.” The blue and red colors show how Luke has composed this statement by conflating these two verses from Mark. But what makes this synthesis most striking is the way he expands Mark’s “because they knew him” into “because they knew that he was the Messiah.”

Luke’s dropping of the epithet “son of God” here in favor of “the Messiah” as the information to be kept secret reveals his conviction that this comes closer to expressing Jesus’ identity than “Son of God,” even though for Mark that was an important definition of Jesus.

You’ll recall Luke tells us that Simeon, the older man in the temple, had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. And, as you will recall, Simeon gives thanks that, having held Jesus, he had done precisely that.

Moreover, at the end of Luke’s Gospel, the risen Jesus, meeting with his disciples, teaches them regarding his death and resurrection “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day.” “Messiah” is a prominent title for Jesus in Luke.

In this connection I want to turn to the book of Acts and an intriguing statement about Jesus’ identity he attributes to Peter as part of his sermon on the day of Pentecost. Peter begins by expounding who Jesus was and what happened to him: “Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders,
and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know – this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.”

You’ll notice that Peter describes Jesus without any titles, referring to him simply as “a man” whom God empowered, the people had killed, but God raised from the dead. Notice, however, that Peter speaks of this resurrection as something inevitable, since “it was impossible for him to be held in [death’s] power.” Peter explains why in the verses that follow, quoting from a Psalm that vows the Lord will not abandon to Hades his Holy One (a title that came to bear messianic meaning, as Tuckett notes). Asserting that David knew the Lord had promised him a descendant on his throne forever, Peter says, “Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying, ‘He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption.’ And then Peter connects the dots, identifying the Messiah: “This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses.”

Peter then brings all this to bear on what the crowd has seen, with people speaking in languages they did not previously know: “Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear.” – It is the resurrected Messiah, now exalted to second in command (the right hand of God) who has poured out the Spirit the disciples have received, thereby producing the effects the audience has witnessed.

Peter then leads the audience to extrapolate from these conclusions a still more profound affirmation: “Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.” – I.e. what they have observed should lead them to two conclusions: First, Jesus, whom they rejected and killed, was God’s agent. Second, his resurrection and exaltation demonstrate that God has made him “both Lord and Messiah.” The assertion that God has made him both Lord and Messiah through resurrection and exaltation is striking, since it suggests – as is echoed in other early Christian writings – that the confession of Jesus as “Lord and Christ” arose from belief in resurrection, not from the story of his life and work. It was only in the resurrection that Jesus attained the status accorded him in Christian preaching.

Let’s compare, for example, the early hymn Paul utilizes in Philippians 2, which concludes with the assertion that as a consequence of Jesus’ obedience that led him to death, “God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on
earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord [the name that is above every name] to the glory of God the Father.”

Luke’s similar acknowledgement (through Peter’s words) of Jesus’ appointed status as Lord and Messiah has an interesting consequence for the use of these titles in his gospel. In particular, the title of Messiah is applied to Jesus in Luke only guardedly. Even if we’re told that the elderly Simeon knew Jesus was the Messiah, the peculiar adjustment Luke makes in his conflation of the two passages from Mark about shushing the demons demonstrates that, for him, Jesus’ Messiahship was not something publicly announced during his ministry. And consistent with that, his version of Peter’s confession of Jesus as Messiah only within the group of disciples is followed (as in Mark) by a warning not to reveal his identity to any-one. And even though the disciples are not the dolts they are in Mark – in fact, Luke omits Peter’s rebuff of Jesus’ talk about suffering – Luke later reports that the risen Jesus “opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day.’” – Jesus’ identity as “Messiah” is accurately understood by the disciples and others only in retrospect and in light of the scriptures – which is precisely how Peter reasons in Acts 2, adducing passages in support of the claim that God has made Jesus both Lord and Messiah. Only in the infancy narrative do we find Jesus’ identity as Messiah acknowledged openly.

In fact, recall the angel’s forthright announcement to the shepherds: “But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

However, it is not just the open designation of the infant Jesus as Messiah that is striking, but the way “Messiah” and “Lord” are paired. As I mentioned previously, this pair occurs only here and in Peter’s statement of Acts 2.36 that God has made him both Lord and Christ. And as I also stated, that is one of the indicators that Luke’s infancy narrative stands closer in spirit to the book of Acts than to the body of his gospel.

Even more notable is the use of the title “Lord” by John’s mother, Elizabeth, upon Mary’s arrival for a visit: “When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.”

What’s remarkable is that Elizabeth speaks of Mary as “the mother of my Lord.” This is doubtless another result of the composition of the infancy narrative after Luke had completed the Book of Acts. In effect, he places this title, which in his
portrayal of early Christian preaching is linked with Jesus’ resurrection, on the lips of John’s mother due to a conviction that what came to be confessed about Jesus out of belief in his resurrection must have been true of him even in his earthly ministry, even as Luke infused his infancy narrative with the activity of the Spirit, which is much more prominent in his portrait of the early church.

And yet, even in the body of Luke’s gospel the title “Lord” is applied to Jesus much more frequently and significantly than in Mark and Matthew, who use it primarily in passages they cite from the Hebrew Bible or in some other reference to Israel’s God. For instance, Matthew twice introduces a quotation from the Hebrew Bible with the words, “All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet,” while five times he speaks of the “angel of the Lord” appearing to people. The vast majority of Matthew’s other references to the Lord” likewise refer to the God of Israel.

That summary applies equally to Mark, in whose Gospel the epithet “Lord” is typically in a passage from the Hebrew Bible, as in Jesus’ quotation from Deuteronomy of what he considers the paramount commandment: “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.”

The only time either Mark or Matthew perhaps apply the title “Lord” to Jesus is in Jesus’ instructions for how to secure a donkey for his entrance into Jerusalem: “‘If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’” – The reason I say the title “the Lord” perhaps refers to Jesus is that even here it is possible to understand this as meaning “the God of Israel needs it for his service through a particular person.” In that case, while Jesus would be claiming to do God’s work, he would not be applying the title “Lord” to himself. But even if it is a designation of Jesus, this is the only occurrence of that in the first two Gospels.

In Luke, on the other hand, we find a very different situation. It is noteworthy how easily Luke interchanges the title “Lord” with Jesus’ own name. E.g. when Jesus responds to questions about why his disciples eat without washing their hands, Mark introduces his words with, “Then he said to them,” while Matthew has “And he answered them.” Luke, on the other hand, reads, “Then the Lord said to him.”

Let’s compare also Luke 7.18-19, a Q passage, with its parallel in Matt 11, which reads, “2 John…sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” – Luke reads, “18 John summoned two of his disciples and sent them to the Lord to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

Repeatedly Luke uses this title in narrating events involving Jesus. And while, as Tuckett observes, this can easily be accounted for in the same way one might
say, “Mrs. Thatcher left school at the age of 18,” it remains striking and significant that Luke alone regularly applies this title to Jesus in narrating his work.

And yet, it is intriguing to note that he places it on the lips of only one speaker after his infancy narrative, and that comes in the final chapter where the disciples are reported as saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” Only after the resurrection do the disciples refer to Jesus as “the Lord,” in keeping with Peter’s statement in Acts 2.36. And this makes stand out, again, Elizabeth’s address of Mary as “the mother of my Lord,” as well as the angel’s announcement, “to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord,” once again supporting the surmise that Luke composed his infancy narrative only after he wrote Acts.

In any case, it is evident that in narrating the story of Jesus, Luke was profoundly affected by the confession of Jesus as Lord, a title the book of Acts depicts as accorded to Jesus only in the wake of his resurrection and ascension, and then is used repeatedly thereafter.

Thus, while Luke casts Jesus as the quintessential prophet, the underlying tenor is that the risen Jesus was designated by God as something greater still: Messiah and Lord.

We’ve also noted that in composing his gospel, Luke writes with a strong apologetic concern for a new Roman convert named Theophilus. As we’ve seen, however, Luke’s apologetic concerns have less to do with “the brute facts of history” than with his characterization of Jesus and of those associated with the Christian movement.

We’ve noted, in particular, how Luke’s portrayal of Jesus’ death is geared to asserting that Jesus was innocent of the charges brought against him, especially in his modification of the centurion’s words upon Jesus’ death: “Surely this man was innocent!” But that isn’t the first time that Jesus’ innocence is proclaimed by a Roman in Luke.

As Ehrman told you, there are noteworthy differences between the stories of Jesus’ trial in Mark and Luke. Both report that, after Jesus’ arrest, he was led to trial before the high priest, the elders, and the scribes. According to Mark, witnesses brought trumped-up charges that conflicted. When they failed to produce a substantial charge they could offer Pilate, the high priest took over: “Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, “Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?” But he was silent and did not answer. Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” Jesus said, “I am; and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power,” and ‘coming with the clouds of heaven.’ Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “Why do we still need witnesses? You have
heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?” All of them condemned him as deserving death.”

Not surprisingly, Luke’s version of this trial is more concise. He eliminates the report of initial confusion and unsubstantiated charges, cutting to the chase: the high priest’s question of whether Jesus is the Messiah. Whereas in Mark Jesus answers unambiguously, “I am,” in Luke he is much more evasive: “If I tell you, you will not believe; and if I question you, you will not answer,” and then he speaks of “the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power.” The suggestion that he might be God’s right-hand man prompts the query, “Are you, then, the Son of God?” to which Jesus responds obliquely again: “You say that I am.”

Accordingly, while in Mark the high priest responds to Jesus’ admission that he is the Messiah and Son of God by tearing his robes and dispensing with the need for witnesses, Luke reports what, in his context, proves an irrational response: “Then they said, “What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips!” – If you pay attention to the course of the trial in Luke, you realize they haven’t heard anything from Jesus’ lips; he has sidestepped their questions.

Nevertheless, they take Jesus to Pilate.

In Mark, this scene begins with an interrogation: “2Pilate asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” He answered him, “You say so.” 3Then the chief priests accused him of many things. 4Pilate asked him again, “Have you no answer? See how many charges they bring against you.” 5But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.”

At this point, Mark informs us that during Passover, Pilate customarily released whatever prisoner the people asked for. Mark’s narrative continues with the report, “6So the crowd came and began to ask Pilate to do for them according to his custom. 7Then he answered them, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?”… 11But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. 12Pilate spoke to them again, “Then what do you wish me to do with the man you call the King of the Jews?” 13They shouted back, “Crucify him!” 14Pilate asked them, “Why, what evil has he done?” But they shouted all the more, “Crucify him!” 15So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.”

In Mark’s portrayal, Jesus’ death is a miscarriage of justice in which Pilate, Rome’s appointee, finds himself outwitted by the high priests. They orchestrate events so that even Pilate’s question for evidence of Jesus’ crimes is overwhelmed by calls for his crucifixion. Pilate accedes because, according to Mark, he wanted to please the crowd – which, by the way, hardly fits Pilate’s cold-blooded sensibilities reported by other sources.
However that might be, when we turn to Luke we find a much more involved legal process. When Jesus is brought to Pilate, he is asked whether he is the king of the Jews, and he answers evasively with “you say so,” just as he does in Mark. But in contrast to Mark, Pilate is quickly satisfied and tells the crowds, “I find no basis for an accusation against this man.” – Then Jesus’ accusers make the tactical blunder of referring to his activity in Galilee, prompting Pilate to send Jesus to Herod Antipas, who is Rome’s client King in Galilee and who happens to be in Jerusalem at the time.

In a five verse unit, Luke reports Herod’s interrogation of Jesus, with Jesus making no reply. Into this scene (found only in the Third Gospel) Luke places the mockery of Jesus, dressed in royal attire. By attributing this mockery to Jesus’ treatment by a client King, Luke removes any suggestion that Jesus was treated disrespectfully while in the hands of a Roman governor – mockery that Mark asserts took place in the governor’s quarters after Jesus had been condemned.

Indeed, the fact that Herod, unable to pass verdict on Jesus, sends him back to Pilate, even though Pilate had sent Jesus to him because he was under Herod’s jurisdiction, indicates that the referral to Herod is a Lukan device that enables him to take the mockery of Jesus out of explicitly Roman hands.

Now that the case is back in Pilate’s hands, the governor delivers his verdict:

“13 Pilate then called together the chief priests, the leaders, and the people, 
14 and said to them, “You brought me this man as one who was perverting the people; and here I have examined him in your presence and have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him.”

Pilate thus restates his earlier verdict, and then he adds Herod’s conclusion, of which we weren’t informed earlier and for which no ground was laid in the report of Herod’s inquest: “15 Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us. Indeed, he has done nothing to deserve death.” The sentence Pilate is thus prepared to pass is simply one typical for your garden variety troublemaker: 16 I will therefore have him flogged and release him.”

Only here does Luke show points of contact with Mark’s narrative once again, although with notable differences: “18 Then they all shouted out together, “Away with this fellow! Release Barabbas for us!” – Luke doesn’t give Mark’s explanation that the release of a criminal was a customary concession by the Roman governor during Passover; he simply informs us that Barabbas was an insurrectionist. As a result, this would sound to Roman ears like an anarchic demand, showing the unruly character of the crowd. Luke then tells us of Pilate’s noble intent: 20 Pilate, wanting to release Jesus, addressed them again; 21 but they kept shouting, “Crucify, crucify him!”

I.e. the crowds are presenting a significant challenge to Pilate’s attempts at justice. So Pilate tries to reason with them again: “22 A third time he said to them,
“Why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no ground for the sentence of death” – Notice that Luke underscores Pilate’s efforts to see justice done with the phrase “A third time.” And he again proposes a moderate course of action: “I will therefore have him flogged and then release him.” Luke’s Pilate is a voice of moderation in the face of a frenzied, unreasonable crowd. He is a very level-headed ruler – much more so than in other reports we have about Pilate.

But even this reasonable procurator cannot hold off an unreasonable crowd:

“\[23\] But they kept urgently demanding with loud shouts that he should be crucified; and their voices prevailed. \[24\] So Pilate gave his verdict that their demand should be granted.” – In contrast to Mark, where Pilate gives in to the crowd’s demands rather easily in order to please them, in Luke he does so after arguing strenuously that Jesus is innocent. Throughout the story of Jesus’ trial in Luke, Jesus is pronounced innocent three times by a Roman ruler and is treated reasonably in Roman hands. Not only is Jesus innocent, but the Roman ruler tried everything he could to keep the blood-thirsty crowd at bay. So Jesus’ innocence is a theme Luke develops rather strongly as part of this apologetic biography he pens for Theophilus.

Another motif we have noted that is equally part of Luke’s apologetic concern is the way he makes Jerusalem central to his story. On the one hand, as I have suggested, the origination of the early movement from the storied city of Jerusalem would have been more pleasing to Roman ears than a movement arising out an obscure area like Galilee. But there is more going on with the theme of Jerusalem than this.

Recall that in the scene of Pilate finally giving in to the demands of the crowds, the people are portrayed as anarchists, demanding the release of an insurrectionist and the death of an innocent man. Throughout Luke, Jerusalem’s ripeness for judgment is high-lighted, such as in his characterization of it as a city that always mistreats God’s servants.

You’ll recall Jesus’ bold response to news of Herod’s threats against him, dismissing them on the grounds that “it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem,” after which he utters this lament: “\[34\] Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” Jerusalem is a recalcitrant city with a history of killing those messengers God sends to it. And Luke’s Jesus expands upon this after his entry into Jerusalem.

You’ll recall that while the Synoptics follow a similar narrative order in the Passion Narrative, they vary in their reports of what follows Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem. Luke’s wrinkle here is a lament Jesus utters as he approaches the city. Like the lament we just read in chapter 13, this one appears nowhere else in the
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Synoptics: “\(^{41}\) As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, \(^{42}\) saying, “If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. \(^{43}\) Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. \(^{44}\) They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.”

Notice that this lament goes beyond simply sorrow over what Jerusalem has done to pronouncing judgment via an attack of its enemies. You might recall that in assigning dates to each of the Synoptics I noted Luke’s unique language about the domination of Jerusalem by Gentiles: “\(^{20}\) When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. \(^{21}\) Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those inside the city must leave it, and those out in the country must not enter it; \(^{22}\) for these are days of vengeance, as a fulfillment of all that is written….\(^{24}\) and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.”

Note the characterization of this assault as constituting “days of vengeance,” in concert with Jesus’ lament that Jerusalem will be assaulted for its persistent recalcitrance. Moreover, as you’ll recall, we encounter Luke’s deterministic belief in the assertion that “Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.”

By the way, Luke’s explanation for the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans is similar to what we find in Josephus, who likewise writes for a Roman ears (the emperor’s household). Like Luke, Josephus exonerates the Romans for their destruction of Jerusalem, since this was a punishment decreed by God himself.

What’s more, Luke asserts that Roman domination of Jerusalem has been decreed for a specific period: Rome is God’s chosen power. That’s a strong argument for an author writing an apologetic interpretation of Jesus and the early Christian movement. Rome has done nothing wrong, even as Jesus did nothing wrong.

Of course, we have noted also that Luke’s apologetic concern affects his portrayal of the disciples. He discards the image of bumbling, dense disciples that we find in Mark, and diminishes their culpability. He eliminates scenes in which the disciples embarrass them-selves by debating which of them is more important or rebuffing Jesus’ assertions about his upcoming suffering and death.

There are numerous ways Luke accomplishes this cleaning up of the disciples’ image, but in the moments left I want to return our attention to a passage we looked at before. Prior to Jesus’ ascension, according to the Third Gospel, Jesus said the following: “\(^{44}\) These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you – that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and
the psalms must be fulfilled.”  

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, 

and he said to them, “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. 

You are witnesses of these things.”

Not only are the disciples trustworthy fellows, as Luke characterizes them in his narrative, but they also receive Jesus’ personal interpretation of his life and work, which they, in fact, have witnessed. Accordingly, the message Theophilus has received is trustworthy, because it has been transmitted from Jesus to his trustworthy disciples, and then to the rest of the world.

And this receives renewed emphasis in the beginning of Acts. Peter specifies as the essential criterion for selecting Judas’ replacement that he be “one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us.”

It is only a person with this sort of first-hand experience that can be a witness, the very language Jesus applies to the disciples in Luke 24. And recall Luke’s preface to his Gospel: “Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word….” – It can hardly be coincidental that these eyewitnesses who provide the foundation for confidence in the story of Jesus receive a more august pedigree in Luke’s story, for they form part of Luke’s reassurance to Theophilus of the trustworthiness of the faith he has embraced.

By these means, then, Luke seeks to reassure Theophilus of the validity and respectability of his new-found faith. And it is this reassurance – or apologetic – that undergirds the way Luke tells his story of Jesus and the way he characterizes his rejection by his own people and the embarrassing issue of why Jesus was executed by the Roman government.