

THE MESSIANIC KINGDOM THEOLOGY IN LUKE-ACTS

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Abstract

The author of Luke-Acts presents a “messianic kingdom theology” – a synthesis of Christology and ecclesiology woven with the chord of soteriology. This theology has often been reduced in many a study by isolating Christology or some other aspect of Luke’s theology as his focus. Reading Luke-Acts from a language-in-life-situation hermeneutic reveals that Luke weaves the ideas of a people of God in unfavourable condition with those of a community messiah concerned with the wellbeing of his people in presenting the Jesus story. He projects two prongs of this theology: Prompted by his royal theology, Jesus Messiah challenged the dehumanisation and oppression of the vulnerable of his society through campaigns to create a new society built on respect for human dignity and the rights of the people (Luke). His commissioners after him continued his liberation and human rights advocacies and completed the formation of his messianic countercultural community (the ἐκκλησία), in spite of fierce opposition from a coalition of Jewish parties and Roman imperial officials (Acts). This article suggests and traces this synthetic theology of the messianic kingdom in Luke-Acts based on Luke’s motivation and goal in writing.

Keywords: Messianic kingdom theology, community wellbeing, ecclesiology, Christology

Introduction

Perspectives on the theology of Luke-Acts vary. There are isolated Christologies, some kind of ecclesiologies, and theologies of suffering. Most of these are standalone perspectives that have no unified view of Luke’s theology and so produce weak theologies of Luke-Acts. The theology in each of the perspectives surveyed in the following paragraphs is only a component of the Lukan eschatological theology of a messianic ecclesial kingdom. They are presented as isolated theologies seemingly because the various commentators have either missed or overlooked the thread with which Luke wove them. That is, Luke’s motivation in depicting Luke’s church as a messianic community and Jesus as the

community Messiah in the various dress colours twined with soteriological thread. This is the gap that this article intends to fill. A brief survey of some of these theological perspectives makes this point more poignant.

Brian Tabb finds in Luke-Acts a theology of suffering which becomes a catalyst for both Luke's community's understanding of its identity as "the suffering yet legitimate people of God" and its mission outreach.¹ Scott Cunningham understands that theology of suffering, somewhat narrowly, as persecution and a medium of demonstrating a Christian's determination and God's sovereignty in God's plan for followers of Jesus.² Relegating Christology, Hans Conzelmann's Luke depicts a Church that has continuity with Israel but becomes largely Gentile³ and is under persecution and is being exhorted "to endure the time of waiting." Jacob Jervell finds Luke preaching a theology of the Church as the people of God, Israel⁴ in a new phase of history, namely, that of Jesus" excluding the unbelieving Jews and the gentiles. But for Robert F. O'Toole, Luke-Acts has a theology of a people of God in society with little or no distinction between the people of God and the people of the world: for every political force is subject to God's plan and a tool in his hands.⁵ A few scholars, like Darrell L. Bock and Roger Stronstad see in Luke-Acts an inclusive theology of an ecclesiology with a Christology. In Bock's view, Luke-Acts is about God's plan of the salvation of his people through the work of Jesus and the inauguration of the church as God's new community which comprises Jews and gentiles in fulfilment of God's promises in the Old Testament.⁶ For Stronstad, Luke depicts Jesus as "the eschatological anointed prophet" and his disciples and their converts as "a community of prophets" with a changed vocation from priesthood (Exod. 19.6)⁷ to prophethood and a mission to take the good news of salvation to the ends of the world.

Others find in Luke-Acts some rather isolated Christologies as the book's theology. Paul W. Walaskay argues that Luke espouses a "majestic Christology" for the church, but "skewed the political nuances of his sources toward a *pro Roman perspective*" as in Luke 19:38-40 and Acts 1:6 where Jesus accepts lordship ascribed to him⁸ and yet bars his followers from confronting Rome with swords (Lk 22:49-51). For Severino Croatto Luke presents Jesus as "Prophet-Teacher like Moses" in Luke-Acts.⁹ The Gospel develops the prophetic dimension of Jesus while Acts develops the messianic dimension. In contrast, on the basis of the many Christological titles and descriptions in Luke-Acts, Douglas Buckwalter finds an exemplar, Saviour Christology central to which is the

imitation of Christ, but also a reassessment of the Parousia in view of its delay.¹⁰

The problem with these and similar theologies of Luke-Acts is that they ignore Luke's motivation with some focusing only on his goal in writing. From a language-in-life-situation hermeneutic,¹¹ motivation and goal necessarily determine an author's literary approach to the subject of discourse. On this approach indications are that Luke sewed a coat of many colours to clothe the Christ of the messianic kingdom of his book project. Luke's Jesus is at once the Christ, Lord, prophet, and Saviour of the new people of God, the ἐκκλησία. If one can discern the basis for Luke's selection of the various colours with which he dresses his Christ, then, a synthetic picture of his theology will be gained. My task in the next paragraphs is to trace the theology of Luke and then make an explanation of the basis for his theologising the way he does.

Luke's Theology of Messianic Kingdom

Theology is understood in this study as man's thinking about how God thinks about and relates to man. On this basis two ideas apparently underlie and undergird Luke's theology, namely the house of Jacob (Lk 1:32-33) or the house of David (οἴκου Δαυὶδ (Lk 1:27), the בְּיַת דָּוִד of Isaiah 7:13 as a people for the Messiah (Lk 1:16) and Jesus' messianic rule over that house (Acts 5:31; passim). These two ideas pop up in God's promise to David: "And *your house* and *your kingdom* shall endure before me forever; your throne shall be established forever" (2 Sa 7:16 NAS). In Luke, Zechariah's prophecy depicts a people (the family of David) in bondage, combining the imageries of "darkness and the shadow of death" (Lk 1:68-79) to describe their miserable situation (v 69). He also talks about God visiting this people, redeeming them, and raising a messianic king for them (the horn of salvation Lk 1:68-69); a theme Luke revisits several times (cf. Lk 7:16; 19:41-44; Acts 2:36).

Luke presents these people of God throughout his gospel as the kingdom of God (Lk 4:43; 7:28; 10:9; 17:21; 19:11; Acts 1:3; 8:12; 19:8; 28:31), which the Jews understood as the kingdom of David (1 Chron. 28:5; 2 Chron. 13:8; compare 1 Chron. 17:14; 29:11-22). The kingdom of God comprises the people of God; God's kingdom of priests or his prized possession (Exo. 19:4-6). In Acts they are depicted as the remnant of Israel, the Messianic Community prophesied by Joel (Acts 2:16-21; cf. Joel 2:32) with the promise of salvation through faith in the name of the Lord whom Luke identifies as the Messiah (Acts 2:21). They are also

called the ἐκκλησία (23 times) with the connotation of a called out people (Acts 5:11; 8:1, 3 etc.) in the context of the apostles' proclamation of the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3; 28:31). This is understandable; the Septuagint translates לָהָרַץ, the Hebrew word for the "assembly" of God's people with ἐκκλησία (Lev 16:33; Num 16:47; Jdg 20:2; Ps 22:22; Joel 2:16). Luke probably built on this and espoused continuity of Israel in the Church as God's consummated people under the reign of his Messiah. Thus he connects the book about Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom of God (Lk 24:47-53) with the inauguration of the messianic kingdom people (Acts 1:1-9) during the Pentecost pilgrimage (Acts 2), which the rest of Acts expands.

By these indicators one can safely deduce that Luke-Acts is Luke's presentation of the one story of Jesus' messianic kingdom project. In Luke-Acts therefore is found a Messianic Kingdom theology. That is ecclesiology and Christology intertwined with soteriology. Luke demonstrates this by a number of literary devices. He wrote one prologue to the entire work (Lk 1:1-4), resumed in Acts 1:1-11, on "things fulfilled among us" which includes the events in Acts in which Luke participated (Acts 16:10,17; 21:1,18; 27:1; 28:16). The prologue indicates that Theophilus needed further clarification on things contained in the Gospel as Luke extended in Acts,¹² especially the polemic between orthodox and Christian Jews. Luke employed recapitulation to start volume two by building the resumptive prologue (Acts 1:1-11) on the closing scene of volume one (Lk 24:47-53). There is also his use of *inclusio*¹³ - the opening (Lk 1:33) and closing (Acts 28:31) of Luke-Acts with the messianic kingdom theme. Finally, the entire work is structured by the theological parallelism of kingdom proclamation (Lk 4:43; 8:1; 9:2; 10:1; Acts 8:12; 28:17-31).

The polemic Luke-Acts depicts between orthodox Jews and followers of Christ was apparently about which group has rights as the legitimate messianic kingdom. Whereas the populace clings to the son of David (Lk 3:31; 18:38-39) for pursuing the restoration of the people of God, Orthodox Jewish leadership rejects Jesus' messianic claims and, for Luke, unduly opposes his mission which his disciples continue after him (Acts 4:17ff). All this is better seen in separate analyses of Luke's ecclesiology, Christology, and their twining chord, soteriology.

Luke's Ecclesiology

Gerald L. Stevens well articulates this article's view of Luke's ecclesiology. He asserts that for Luke the Jesus story continues in the lives and works of the apostles; and the trajectory of that transition is the ascension/Pentecost sequence which explains how the church fulfils its mission and destiny which is the whole point of the story of Jesus.¹⁴ In the same vein, Luke Timothy Johnson says Acts is Luke's interpretation of the first part of his story of Jesus.¹⁵ In this view, Luke's Jesus transformed the hope of Israel for a national messiah into one who had universal mission. The story of Jesus is good news for Israel and the entire world. Jesus brings the people salvation which is not political or military but has universal implications as Simeon stated (Lk 2:32) and is fulfilled only in Acts. Thus, Luke goes beyond the other Gospels which end Jesus' story with his resurrection to detail how "the heritage and hope of Israel" became the Christian movement whose story is told in Acts. The story of Jesus then becomes the story of the church. The designation "church" for Stevens was Paul's innovation for "Messianic Israel," the new "Israel of God" (Gal 6:16) since the church is for him the "congregation of God" (Gal 1:13). Since in Acts Luke is focusing on the transition from Israel of God led by the Sanhedrin to the Messianic Israel started by Peter, but taken to the Gentile world by Paul, it is fairly certain that he was influenced by Pauline terminology for the Messianic Israel.

Luke's theology of the church can also be traced through the many parallels in the two volumes. An important parallel is the kingdom mission and its geographical expansion in the two volumes. First, Luke's Jesus declared to the throng of miracle-seekers in Capernaum that his mission on earth was to "preach the kingdom of God" to all cities (Lk 4:43). And he embarked on this mission from one city and village to another, proclaiming and preaching the kingdom of God along with the twelve who were being trained on-the-job (Lk 8:1). Later, the twelve (Lk 9:2) and afterwards, seventy-two (Lk 10:1, 9) were empowered and they proclaimed the kingdom along with a healing ministry by themselves. As a parallel Jesus' community of disciples that we find in Acts, the same group that Luke depicts in his Gospel is the Church-in-Mission. It is this kingdom of God that the apostles were proclaiming throughout the book of Acts. Luke tells of Phillip going down to Samaria to proclaim Christ and preach "the good news of the kingdom" (Acts 8:12). At the end of Acts, Paul is under house arrest in Rome boldly proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ from morning to evening for

an indefinite period (Acts 28:17-31). Acts thus has the same missionary thrust concerned with Jesus' messianic kingdom as the Gospel of Luke.

Also, in the Gospel, Luke shows how Jesus started kingdom proclamation from Galilee, the northern outskirts of Israel, and moved into Jerusalem; in Acts his disciples continued this proclamation from Jerusalem and moved outward to the ends of the world (Acts 1:8). Luke frequently gives progress reports after the evangelisation of each major unit (Acts 6:7- on Jerusalem; 9:31 – Judea and Samaria; 12:24 Gentile Antioch [world Mission part 1]; 16:5 Asia Minor [world mission part 2]; 19:20 Europe) as Simeon had prophesied (Lk 2:32). It is also noticed that just as Jesus began his mission of kingdom proclamation after being empowered by the Holy spirit (Lk 4:9-51), so his Church community that was gathered in Jerusalem also began the kingdom mission following its in-filling with the Holy spirit (Acts 2).

From another perspective, as noted above, in Luke's Gospel, every single activity in Jesus' life and work was intended to extend the kingdom of God on earth. By Luke's presentation of the particulars, there is an *inclusio*. The theme of the messianic kingdom opens (Lk 1:33) and closes (Acts 28:31) the story of Luke-acts. This is to say that everything that happens in between is about the message of the kingdom. The term "kingdom" occurs forty-two times in Luke's Gospel and the book of Acts, which though uses "kingdom" only eight times, starts with Jesus proclaiming and teaching about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3).

Going by the biblical data, the kingdom of God is the same as Jesus' messianic kingdom that is identified in Acts as ἐκκλησία (Acts 5:11; 8:1, 3). Luke indicates this truth by depicting the House of Jacob (Stevens' Israel of God) in terms of a messianic kingdom. He refers to Jesus specifically as the messiah twelve times. To highlight some, Jesus is a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord (two important messianic titles, cf. Acts 2:36) born in the city of David (Lk 2:11; cf. Acts 13:23). This Davidic Messiah came to save for God a people from all the nations of the world beginning from Jerusalem (Luke 24:47). These people are the house of Jacob (Lk 1:32-33) or the house of David (οἴκου Δαυὶδ (Lk 1:27); and the people for the messiah (Lk 1:16) who were expecting a messianic rule over that house (Lk 24:21; Acts 5:31; passim). Luke clearly identifies the House of Jacob as the kingdom of the Messiah in the annunciation (Lk 1:33) and with the "kingdom of God" which the Messiah was commissioned to preach during his ministry (Lk 4:43). Thus the saved people are "the kingdom of God" or "the kingdom of the messiah" (Lk 7:22; cf. 4:18-19).

From Luke's presentation, Jesus' audience, at this time predominantly Jews, construed his kingdom proclamation in terms of the restored Davidic monarchy and him as a political messiah of a geo-political area and expected him to restore the Davidic throne to Israel (Lk 24:21; Acts 1:6). For Luke this is why Jesus' disciples were frequently disputing about leadership, that is, which of them would be the greatest in the messianic kingdom (Lk 9:46-48; 22:24-30). When relating Jesus' final journey into Jerusalem, Luke alone adds the note that because Jesus was near Jerusalem, the people *supposed* that the kingdom of God would appear immediately (Lk 19:11).

This construal led Cleopas and his friend to see Jesus as Israel's "redeemer" and to be badly angered by his murder (Lk 24:21). This ideology explains Cleopas' anger when an intruder questioned them about the things they were discussing along the way to Emmaus. There is a marginal gloss in Codex V which indicates that Cleopas was a cousin of the expected Messiah. It states, "ὁ μετὰ Κλεοπᾶ Ναθαναὴλ ἦν, ὡς ἐν Παναρίοις ὁ μέγας ἔφη Ἐπιφάνιος. Κλεοπᾶς ἀνέψιος ἦν τοῦ σωτῆρος, δεῦτερος ἐπίσκοπος Ἱεροσολύμων" (The one with Cleopas was Nathanael, as the great Epiphanius says in his Panarion [xxiii.6]. Cleopas was a cousin of the Saviour, the second bishop of Jerusalem).¹⁶ In that case, he was angry because Jesus' abrupt death truncated his plan and that of the likes of James and John to occupy top positions in the messianic kingdom.

Acts 15 paints a picture of intense polemic between some members of the messianic community who were dragging their feet in recognising the expanded community as true people of God and those who so recognised it. This is Luke's way of preparing his audience to better appreciate the ἐκκλησία as God's new community. In Acts therefore, Luke treats this theme of God's new community in connection with the people's struggles with defining their self-identity. Luke variously calls them "synagogue of the freed men" (Acts 6:9); "the way" (Acts 19:9, 23; 22:4); a "sect" in the sense of a separatist Jewish Christian community that would not want to be seen as a Jewish sect (Acts 28:22);¹⁷ and ultimately "Christians" (Acts 11:26; 26:28), a derogatory identity as members of the "ἐκκλησία" (Acts 5:11; 8:1, 3; 9:31; *passim*) in contrast to the other existing political groups like the Herodians, Pharisees, Zealots, and the Sadducees.

Luke's Christology

Luke's Christology is multidimensional (e.g., as prophet, messiah, etc.) and aspectual. Each dimension has a number of aspects. For instance, some studies of Luke's Christology take the dimension of Jesus' messiahship and explore various aspects of Jewish messianism; the "diverse messianic expectations within Judaism"¹⁸ or messianic job descriptions by which to measure how Jesus meets them. There is also the aspect of the use of messianic titles that may be compared to messianic images in Judaism, or any other that Luke might have adopted. A synthetic approach seems more plausible since Luke combines several dimensions and aspects in depicting Jesus.

A number of elements point to Luke's utilisation of Jewish messianism in theologising about the person and work of Jesus relative to his new countercultural messianic community. Luke's Jesus is the messianic prophet in Jewish circles (Lk 4:24; 7:16, 39; 13:33; 24:19). His messianic qualification is revealed in his character as Davidic messianic saviour (Luk 1:31). He will be ... called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David (Luk 1:32-33; Cf. 2 Sam 7:11-14; Isa 9:6-7; Ezk 37:24-25; Amos 9:11). For Luke, Jesus qualifies as Jewish messiah because he is at once son of God (Lk 1:35; the issue in the Devil's temptation story Lk 4:3, 9)¹⁹ and son of David (Lk 1:32). Luke quotes the second Psalm, "you are my son; today I have begotten you" to validate this position in Acts 13:23, 33. For him this is what Jesus meant when he said "My Father has granted me a kingdom" (Luke 22:29).

Luke apparently built his messianic Christology from the Old Testament and Second Temple messianic prophecy of "the ideal king" (Gen 49:9-10). The Testament of Levi 24 talks about a star that shall "arise to you from Jacob in peace, and a *man*²⁰ shall arise like the sun of righteousness... (v 1) ... This Branch of God Most High and this Fountain giving life unto all" (v 4). The Testament of Judah 24:1-6 similarly paints this portrait: a star shall arise from Jacob (TJud 24:1a, as in Num 24:17; TLev 18:3); a branch or shoot (TJud 24:4, see also Isa 11:1; Jer 23:5; 33:15; Zech 3:8; 6:12) of God, Most High (24:4, = Gen 1:16-22; Dan 7:27) arising from the root of Judah (24:6, = Isa 11:1,10; cf. Rev 22:16). Luke probably used this imagery of "star" (Lk 1:78-79) as a metaphor for the light the prophets fore-announced would shine on those in the dark, "To open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon" (cf. Isa 9:2; 42:6-7// Lk 4:18-19) in presenting Jesus' messianic agenda.

In Luke, Jesus is also Lord. Jesus is identified as Lord twice in the birth-infancy narrative (Lk 1:43; 2:11). This bespeaks his concern for continuity with the Old Testament promises. Kavin Rowe explains the basis for this application well. For Luke, the divine identity, θεος means to be κύριος ὁ θεὸς τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ “Lord, the God of Israel”, (Lk 1:16, 32, 68), or simply, ὁ κύριος (1:6, 9, 11, 17, 25, 28, 38, 45, 46, 58, 66, 76· 2:9 [2], 15, 22, 23, 24, 26, 39).²¹ In this light, Rowe opines that Jesus is frequently called Lord, even in contexts that originally referred to God (Lk 1:76; Acts 2:25), because he is the God of Israel who fulfils his purposes in the new dispensation. For instance, in Luke 1:43 Elizabeth refers to Jesus as Lord because the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Power of the Most High, constitutes “the human life of the holy baby in Mary’s womb.”²² In the same vein, Luke has Peter declare Jesus as having been made “both Lord and Christ” indicating the accordance of lordship to Jesus at the inception of his life (Acts 2³⁴⁻³⁶). This hints at Christians’ early recognition and worship of Jesus as Lord (Lk 5:8, 12; 6:5, 46; 7:6, 13; Acts 1:6, 21;) that is observed in several other New Testament books (e.g., 1 Cor 16:22; Phil 2:5-11; Rom 10:9, 13; 1 Cor 12:3; 2 Cor 4:5 etc.). Very important uses of the divine identity, Lord, with Jesus are in contexts of his saving activities as the next section details.

Luke’s Soteriology

Luke presents Jesus as the Lord and Christ to highlight his character as God’s Anointed to save the house of Jacob (Lk 1:32-33) or house of David (οἴκου Δαυὶδ Lk 1:27), from their sins and their enemies and make a new people for God. Emphasis is on the salvific function of the messiah. Luke, alone of the Synoptics, specifically calls Jesus “Saviour”. This identity is demonstrated by Jesus’ acts such as his healing ministry, show of compassion to individuals (like the widow who lost her only son Lk 7:12) and groups (like “the poor and maimed and blind and lame” Luke 14:21) and his offer of salvation to those dying, like the robber on the cross (Lk 23:42-43) and Stephen (Acts 7:55). Luke has Peter surmise that “He went about doing good and healing all under the power of the devil, because God was with him” (Acts 10:38). In Acts, this work of salvation is continued by the church, led by Jesus’ apostles. Indeed, all members of the Christian community sold their properties and put the proceeds into the common treasury “for the sake of the poor” (Acts 2:44-45).²³ Luke’s Jesus does not save his people only through his death as implied in Matthew 1:21; “as Savior, he comes to reverse all that has gone

wrong. ... This is the simple yet profound theology of the great reversal in Luke.²⁴ Zechariah talks about God's caring visitation (ἐπεσκέψατο Lk 1:68) for the down-trodden, the poor and vulnerable. Elizabeth is consequently favoured and removed from disgrace (Lk 1:25). Mary's humble state is replaced with that of a blessed woman through whom the messiah would come (Lk 1:48). Conversely their God "brought down rulers from *their* thrones, and has exalted those who were humble" (Lk. 1:52-55 NAS). This was the much-craved social justice in Israelite national life.

This concern for the people's wellbeing seems to explain the statement of Luke's Christ-child about the necessity of his being "in the things of his father" – the idea of "the programme of his father" which most English versions confuse with the idea of, and so regrettably render as "his father's house." The Greek versions have (ἐν τοῖς τοῦ πατρὸς μου δεῖ εἶναί με "I must be in the things of my father" (Lk 2:49 BGT and GNT). The neuter τοῖς of the Koine Greek meaning "the things" with the connotation of "business" (KJV) or "affairs" (CJB) does not warrant the rendering "house" (οἶκος) which is masculine. By "my father's affairs" or "business" therefore, Luke is understandably referring to the divine programme of redeeming and saving a people for God, thrust into the hands of the Christ-child. Luke's soteriology therefore indicates that in his ecclesiology and Christology, Luke projects two prongs of the social wellbeing of this people of God, namely respect for human dignity and the rights of the people. But why was Luke interested in all this? His motivation and goal bear the answer.

Motivating Factors and Goal of Luke's Theology

Every utterance is motivated by certain circumstances and is geared towards a specific goal or goals in response to that situation. It thus follows that any proposal of Luke's theology that is made apart from his life situation and that of his audience is asymmetrical. One has to demonstrate that purposes, themes, or tendencies "arise from a concrete situation within Luke's community."²⁵ Luke's stated purpose for its composition (Lk 1:1-4) and social setting (the first century Mediterranean social context which probably shaped Luke's perspective, message and writing) show that he was responding to some situation of his church community. The question then is what was the life situation of Luke's community that made him to embark on his writing agenda? What were his and or his audience's needs or problems that he set out to address?

Luke's church was initially predominantly Jewish (comprising Jews and Jewish Christians), but Luke sees it as becoming a community of cross-cultural fellowship, (*κοινωνία* Acts 2:42; 4:32-35); perhaps the true people of God that the Old Testament spoke about as a multiracial, multicultural, and multinational people who transcend ethnic Israel (Acts 10:34-35; 15:13-19; cf. Gen 12:1-3; Ps 2:8-12; Isa 2:2-4; 9:1-7; 11:10-12; Am 9:11-12). This is reflected in its leadership which comprised people from a wide circle and therefore reflected broad concerns. Barnabas was a Levite from Cyprus (4:36); Symeon, also called Niger (black), an African – probably the Symeon from Cyrene who helped carry the cross of Jesus for him (Lk 23:26); Lucius of Cyrene (Acts 13:1) was evidently a North African; Manaen – brought up by Herod Antipas – (i.e. had some relation with him), maybe a foster brother (Acts 13:1); and Saul, a Jewish Pharisean convert to Christianity (Acts 13:1). This scenario created serious tensions among its membership (Acts 15), prompted by Jewish zeal for Jesus as the Davidic king of national Israel.

We can deduce the problems of that community from references to its social and political situation in Luke-Acts in comparison with similar references in other New Testament church documents. With the spread of the church into the Gentile world it was frequently challenged, usually with opposition from groups. Christians were often publically slandered for their faith in Christ (2 Tim 4:14-15; Heb 10:32-33; Rev 2:9; 1 Pet 4:4) and oppressed by Gentiles (Rev 12:3-13:18; 17:6; 18:24; 19:1-2) and by Jews (Rev 2:9; 3:9) for abstaining from non-Christian practices. They suffered confiscation of property (Heb 10:34), imprisonment (Eph 3:1; 2 Tim 2:8-9) and martyrdom (Rev 6:9-11; 16:5-6; 17:6; 18:24). As part of the Christian community, Luke's church apparently experienced all these and even more of the problems. However, the more pointed issue that excited Luke's interest in writing seems to be sectarianism; questions about which group in the church was the legitimate messianic community. Luke appears to be trying to reorient this mixed community's thinking about Jesus and his countercultural mission. In Luke 24:1-26 for instance, one "might think that Luke had such a strategy in mind when the disciples call Jesus a prophet and Jesus responds by referring to himself as Messiah."²⁶

Judging from the warmth of the polemic in Acts, it is likely that the "Church" had just declared itself a separate organisation from Judaism. The problem began when the larger Jewish community refused to recognise Jesus of Nazareth as their messiah (Lk ; Acts 4:17; 5:28) and

were persecuting those who believed in his messiahship to abandon that faith (Acts 4:1, 5; 5:18; 6:8-7:58). This sectarian persecution²⁷ grew in intensity and metamorphosed into official imperial persecution first at the hands of Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:1-25) and then Claudius (Acts 18:2). This Jewish mindset was impeding Jesus' global ecclesial mission. Jewish leadership had Jesus executed on trumped-up charges of treason to truncate his new government of God project (Lk 11:54; 20:20, 26). But the rise of Jesus' disciples to continue and consummate the countercultural project set the Jewish leadership off balance (Acts 4:17; 5:28). They then resorted to campaigns of calumny with which they intended to spoil the minds of all who were in positions of authority to decide the fate of the Jesus movement (Lk 20:22; 23:2; Acts 17:6-7). Luke wanted to replace their distorted version of the Jesus story with a more authentic version (Lk 1:4); probably to equip his audience to speak for the Church at opportune times. He makes it clear that the Christian movement is only a global countercultural project aimed at reorienting human behaviour to acknowledge God's sovereignty in all human endeavours (Acts 1:6-8; 10:34-35).

The Jewish leadership's antagonism to the Jesus movement was understandably dictated by 700 years of domination by their pagan overlords. The Jews of first century AD were expecting a restored Davidic dynasty (Lk 19:11; 24:21; Acts 1:6) with its associated promises of the citizens' wellbeing (cf. Ezk 34; Zech 8:13). This is reflected in Luke's narrative theology of salvation in which, according to Joel B. Green, Luke presents Jesus as "Saviour, Lord, the one through whom peace comes to the world"²⁸ (Lk 2:11, 14) while discussing Octavian, the celebrated saviour of the Romans. This is Green's idea of "redemption-by-social-transformation"²⁹ a socio-political reversal to end political dominance and social oppression (cf. Acts 1:6).³⁰ Despite Jewish dispersion beginning with the Assyrian expansionist campaigns in 721 BC, it was widely believed that the ten lost tribes must ultimately be restored. That "restoration" initially occurred under the Persian emperor, Cyrus, but was incomplete without reinstating the monarchy,³¹ and its eschatological expectations remained, involving a radical change in current conditions.

By the time of Jesus there were series of revolutionary movements led by messianic pretenders—the supposed deliverers of the Jewish people who had appeared in Israel after the Exile. They were protesting the oppression and dehumanisation of Jews by their rulers. As reported by Luke (Lk 13:1; Acts 5:34-39; 21:38) and Josephus, by 4 BC many of their

factions were trying to take over the leadership of the nation by violent overthrow of the Romans, for example those led by Judas, the son of Ezekias (*Ant.* 17.10.5 §§271–72; *J.W.* 2.4.1 §56); Simon, servant of King Herod (*Ant.* 17.10.6 §§273–76); and Athronges (*Ant.* 17.10.7 §§278–85). Josephus clearly states that they aspired to be Israel’s king (*J.W.* 2.4.1 §55; *Ant.* 17.10.8 §285). Thus, Jewish eschatology may be seen as always including messianism that is associated with a reigning anointed king.³²

According to Luke, Jesus contrasted himself with false messiahs, and showed that he was the only legitimate messianic leader of the people (Lk 4:18-19, 21; cf. Jn 10:1-8). By the time of Jesus, the biggest Jewish problem was the Roman patronage system or clientelism. This trend in various ways violated at once Jewish royal ideology and the royal theology of their prophetic party, led in earlier times by Samuel, Nathan, and during the Hellenistic period by the so-called apocalyptic prophets. Luke’s Jesus, as messianic prophet, took over from John the Baptizer as the last leaders of this prophetic party. Jesus was by far, the most popularly accepted of all its leaders in that line-up; probably because he launched a messianic kingdom campaign with a captivating manifesto (Lk 4:16-22). And so he threatened Jewish leadership. His message was simple, but politically charged: “The kingdom of God has come near to you” (Lk 10:9, 11). “Kingdom” and “kingship” are no doubt, political terms. Jesus was so understood by those in power, having been born son of David, in a royal line and accorded the title, “King of the Jews” (Lk 23:3, 37). Moreover, Jesus’ mission succeeded that of John the Baptizer, which had a “pronounced political character”.³³ The crowds the Baptizer pulled around him by his kingdom-proclamation threatened Herod’s political equilibrium and probably became the real cause of his execution.³⁴ Josephus clearly associated John’s imprisonment with Herod Antipas’ fear of a possible insurrection by his activities (*Ant.* 18.5.2).

Luke’s Jesus however failed or refused to buy into the prevailing Jewish royal ideology. This left his fellow Jews disillusioned and excited their leadership’s jealous antagonism to his messianic mission (Lk 4:18-22; Acts 5:17-18’ cf. Jn 6:14-15; 11:45-48). In the long run this Jewish leaders’ attitude threatened the existence of Jesus’ messianic mission. Continued unrest due to their activities endangered the security of the Roman Empire and caused Roman authorities to join action against the Christians. Luke gives a number of clues: as the earliest recorded official persecution of the church, Herod Antipas executed the Apostle James (Acts 12:1-2), later, Emperor Claudius expelled all Christians from Rome

because of frequent disturbances resulting from clashes with orthodox Jews (Acts 18:2); and Paul and Silas were unduly accused before the leadership of the city for engaging in revolutionary activities, “acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus” (Acts 17:6-7; cf. Jn 19:12).

Karl P. Donfried finds these passages in Luke-Acts as indicating that Luke’s book is an anti-imperialism document.³⁵ This, however, does not seem to reflect the reality in Luke-Acts. My analysis of the passages whose result is presented in this article finds not a Roman imperial ideology, but Jewish leadership’s efforts to manipulate the Roman authorities and truncate Jesus’ global messianic kingdom mission which they saw as antithetical to their own royal ideology. Luke was motivated in the spirit of the Greco-Roman “school leader” to educate his audience to reject such moves and hold on to, and promote, the messianic ekklesia kingdom so that the project will succeed. This was Luke’s goal in his messianic kingdom theology.

Conclusion

The foregoing established that the theology of Luke-Acts has been seen differently by different people over time. The predominant perspectives include those espousing a theology of suffering, a theology of the church, as well as those championing some isolated Christologies. As argued above from a language-in-life-situation hermeneutic, however, a stand-alone theology of Luke-Acts cannot stand. Theology as man’s thinking about how God thinks about, and relates to, man is always a rhetorical discourse with a specific goal in mind. Luke discourses on Jesus’ global messianic kingdom, a political entity without power politics for the control of geopolitical territories, but depicting God’s sovereignty over creation. It is a reorientation exercise to correct Jewish leadership’s depiction of Jesus and their propaganda against his movement as rebels. Luke overwrites the Jewish aristocracy’s charge of treason against Jesus and his apostles. With broad strokes he paints on the same canvass that the Jewish authorities painted, a portrait of Jesus exonerated by Roman authorities, Pilate and Herod (Lk 23:13-15) as were the apostles by Felix (Acts 24:22-27) and Festus (25:18, 25; 26:30-32). Luke’s goal was to confirm the faith of his audience in Jesus’ messiahship and his global messianic ecclesial kingdom.

Thus, Luke’s theology is two-pronged: ecclesiology intertwined with Christology with the chord of soteriology. Over and against the picture of

a political rebel, Luke's Jesus came in fulfilment of Jewish scriptures and saved and organised a new Israel for God, a community of cross-cultural fellowship, (κοινωνία); a multiracial, multicultural, and multinational people as the true people of God that the Old Testament spoke about. Although the Jewish leadership tried to truncate this project by securing Jesus' execution by a Roman governor, his disciples completed it with the aid of the Holy Spirit. The people so organised express God's sovereignty by respecting the dignity of the human person by the way they organised themselves communally under apostolic superintendence.

Notes and References

- 1 Brian J. Tabb. “Salvation, Spreading, and Suffering: God’s Unfolding Plan in Luke-Acts.” *JETS* 58/1 (2015) 43–61, 50-52.
- 2 Scott S. Cunningham, “Through Many Tribulations”: *The Theology of Persecution in Luke-Acts*. JSNTSup 142, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 14, 337.
- 3 Hans Conzelmann. *The Theology of St. Luke*. (New York: Harper, 1961), pp. 95-120, 209-210.
- 4 Jacob Jervell. “God’s Faithfulness to the Faithless People: Trends in Interpretation of Luke-Acts” *Word & World* 12/1 (1992) 29-37, pp. 31, 34 and 35.
- 5 Robert F. O’Toole. ‘Luke’s Position on Politics and Society in Luke-Acts.’ *Political Issues in Luke-Acts*. (eds.)
- 6 Darrell L. Bock. *A Theology of Luke and Acts: God’s Promised Program, Realized for All Nations*. (Biblical Theology of the New Testament). Editor: Andreas J. Kostenberger. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, (2012), 3-5.
- 7 Roger Stronstad, *The Prophethood of All Believers: A Study in Luke’s Charismatic Theology*. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 14, 54, 56-59, 115.
- 8 Paul W. Walaskay, “*And So We Came to Rome*”: *The Political Perspective of St Luke* (SNTSMS) 49; (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 15-16.
- 9 J. Severino Croatto. “Jesus, Prophet Like Elijah, and Prophet-Teacher like Moses in Luke-Acts.” *JBL*124/3 (2005) 451-465, 451-452.
- 10 H. Douglas Buckwalter. *The Character and Purpose of Luke’s Christology*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 4-8.
- 11 The language-in-life-situation hermeneutic is the present author’s attempt to interlink literary, historical, cultural, and ideological approaches in searching for meaningful language of the text. The approach sees “language” as a symbol system and a communication instrument because language configures words (mental symbols) into an “utterance” to convey intent. The “utterance” which of necessity has a generative social milieu is the fundamental unit of communication, which always involves a speaker and a listener in dialogue in a historical situation and social context. This is because language is interactive; each utterance is created in a context of discourse (a contextual configuration of words used in a specified

- manner) and every discourse is oriented on concrete dialogue, which could be oral or written. This implies that every utterance is created by a motivation and is geared toward a goal in an audience and so the essential meaning of an utterance lies in its motive and goal.
- 12 John H. Niemelä, “The Case for the Two-Gospel View of Gospel Origins,” *Three Views on the Origins of the Synoptic Gospels*, (Ed. Robert L. Thomas, Kregel Academic), 130-131.
 - 13 This is a technique whereby the author ends a text in a manner reminiscent of its beginning. It is a device which gives the impression of circularity, of a narrative coming full circle.
 - 14 Gerald L. Stevens, *Acts: A New Vision of the People of God*. (Eugene: Pickwick, 2016), 5, 6, 10 and 15.
 - 15 Luke Timothy Johnson, “The Christology of Luke-Acts.” *Who Do You Say that I Am?* (Eds) Mark Allan Powell and David R. Bauer, (Westminster: John Knox, 1999), 49-65, 53.
 - 16 Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Second Edition, (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft/German Bible Society, 1994), 158.
 - 17 As Donald A. Hagner argues in “Matthew: Christian Judaism or Jewish Christianity?” *The Face of New Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Researches* Eds. Scot McKnight and Grant R. Osborne. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004). 263-282, 264; Contra Anthony J. Saldarini, “Reading Matthew without Anti-Semitism”. *The Gospel of Matthew in Current Study: Studies in Memory of William G. Thompson* S.J. Ed. (David E. Aune. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). 166-184, 167.
 - 18 Luke Timothy Johnson, “The Christology of Luke-Acts” 49.
 - 19 Contra O’Toole in whose view Luke with step parallelism (1:32-33, 35; 9:7-8. 18-20. 35; 22:61-71) establishes a separation between the assertions that Jesus is “the Christ” and that he is “the son (of God)” p. 115. His demonstration of this position with Lk 9:1-50 however argues stronger for the opposite view. Following Herod’s question about the identity of Jesus (v9), he is identified by ordinary people as a prophet, by Peter as the Messiah of God” (v20) and by a voice in the cloud as “my chosen son” (v 35).
 - 20 This statement is obviously taken from Numbers 24:17. There, the Hebrew has “a ‘sceptre’ shall arise” whereas the LXX has “a man

shall arise.” The LXX reflects Jewish thought of the time which was conditioned by the socio-political situation of the Jews that excited it. Although the editors of the *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* led by R. H. Charles see verse 4 as a marginal gloss, it reflects Jewish thinking during the time we are studying and so serves our present purpose.

- 21 C. Kavin Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology: The Lord in the Gospel of Luke*, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 2006), p. 34.
- 22 Kavin Rowe, 39.
- 23 Peter J. Scaer, “Lukan Christology: Jesus as Beautiful Savior,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 69/1 Jan 2009. 63-74, 67.
- 24 Peter J. Scaer, 67.
- 25 Douglas Buckwalter, *The Character and Purpose of Luke’s Christology*, 60.
- 26 Luke Timothy Johnson, 50.
- 27 This is also the view of Phillip F. Esler in his *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lukan Theology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). He points out that, Luke designed his book to legitimise his Christian community because of the community’s attitude to society and the church out of which it originated which betrays several political and social tensions underlying the most prominent features of Luke’s theology, 46.
- 28 Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke*. (New Testament Theology). (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 8.
- 29 Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke*, 1.
- 30 Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke*, 9.
- 31 Frederick J. Murphy, *Apocalypticism in the Bible and Its World: A Comprehensive Introduction*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 2-3.
- 32 Johannes Tromp argues that the source of Jewish expectations of a Davidic messiah was their adaptation of Hellenistic eschatological expectations of a future king to restore their land to its past glory, “The Davidic Messiah in Jewish Eschatology of the First Century BCE,” *Restoration: Old Testament, Jewish, and Christian Perspectives*, Editor: James M. Scott (Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism Vol. 72), Editor: John J. Collins, Leiden: Brill, 2011. 179-201, 187. But this is hardly the case.

- 33 Yoder, John Howard. *The Politics of Jesus*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 23.
- 34 Alan Storkey. *Jesus and Politics: Confronting the Powers*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 61-64.
- 35 K. P. Donfried, "The Imperial Cults of Thessalonica and Political Conflict in 1 Thessalonians," in *Paul and Empire*, ed. R. A. Horsley (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997), 215-19, 215, 217.

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