Introduction

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CHRISTOLOGY AND LUKE–ACTS

Introduction: the problem of ambiguity

For all of Luke's confessed concern to give his readers certainty about their knowledge of the beginnings of Christianity, it is not, perhaps, as reassuring to the modern reader. Not knowing what Luke's readers already knew, and thus the amount and kind of knowledge Luke was assuming, makes it difficult to understand Luke–Acts as his readers would have understood it.

We perhaps most sorely feel our distance from Luke in the area of christology. Luke–Acts is ultimately a story about Jesus. Luke records in his Acts preface that in the Gospel he has written about "all that Jesus began to do and to teach." This implies that Acts will continue the story. Luke details Jesus' life and career from birth to exaltation, adding in the Gospel a generous portion of dominical sayings not found in Mark and in Acts proclamation material not found in the gospel tradition. The Gospel and Acts are replete with christological titles, portraits, and descriptions. What is more, Luke professes to have given his readers a comprehensive, studied, orderly account of this two-part story to reassure them of what they had already known about Jesus and the Christian faith. But here too, in contrast to Luke's audience, the modern reader may not receive the same degree of confidence from the work itself.

We do not know enough about Luke's christological beliefs. What was his christology? How much of it did he hold in common with his readers? Were there any important christological suppositions on which he based his work but which he did not substantially develop in it, owing, perhaps, to his reasons for writing and to his belief that his readers could properly fill in the gaps?

Few would argue that Luke has given us his christology in full. But the omissions are nonetheless unsettling from our point of

view. Luke makes no clear reference to Jesus' preexistence and to the believer's union with Christ, and relatively little reference to the atoning significance of Jesus' death. Was he – or were his readers – simply not aware of these teachings? Did he disagree with them? Or did he merely sense no compelling need, for whatever reason, to feature them in his writings?

The problem of ambiguity deepens in that even some of Luke's recorded christology seems confusing, if not outright contradictory. Eduard Schweizer, e.g., notes that, in contrast to Mark (and Q), in Luke's Gospel the earthly Jesus is already called Lord, but according to Acts 2:36, God does not make him Lord until the resurrection/exaltation.[1] Are we to understand Luke as merely reading *ex eventu* Jesus' Lordship back onto the Gospel account, or is there more to it for him than this? And does Acts 2, for Luke, necessarily underscore a thoroughgoing subordination of Jesus to God, or is there a better way of understanding the event within Luke–Acts? Schweizer also points out that Luke seems to present Jesus as God's Son on the basis of his birth (Luke 1:35), reception of the Spirit (Luke 3:22), Adamic descent (Luke 3:23–38), and resurrection (Acts 13:33) (p. 702). But can all of these be true? What does sonship connote for Luke? Preexistence? Adoption? Or perhaps something else altogether? Schweizer concludes that "theoretisch bleibt die Christologie unklar" ("Theoretically the christology of Luke–Acts remains unclear") (p. 702).

On the other hand, even a cursory reading of Luke–Acts leaves little doubt that theological motives had decisively influenced what Luke wrote and how he arranged the material. His unique development of the Nazareth story, travel narrative, and resurrection and ascension accounts as well as the speeches in Acts especially calls attention to this point. But opinions differ broadly on exactly how we should understand the wealth of christological material embedded in Luke's depiction of the birth of Christianity.

Stephen G. Wilson, whose comments are fairly representative in this regard, argues that:

"Luke characteristically uses diverse, and often ancient, christological materials *without integrating them into any overall scheme*."[2]

[1] Schweizer, "Jesus Christus," *TRE* 16, p. 702.
[2] Wilson, *Pastoral Epistles*, p. 69 (my italic); also, e.g., Lampe, "Lucan Portrait of

> This leads to *a certain lack of uniformity, a disjunction between different strands of material which stand side by side*. Thus there is a tension between the sequence of events in Acts 1 and the statements in Luke 24.1f.; Acts 2.32–3; 5.30–1. *The use of christological titles is somewhat haphazard*. They represent the terminology of Luke's day but, in many cases, the belief of the early Church as well. Some may have had an archaic ring and were for that reason deemed appropriate to the sermons of the early Church. (p. 79, my italic)
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> Luke, it appears, was a *somewhat indiscriminating collector of christological traditions* who transmits a variety of traditional terms and concepts *without reflecting upon them individually or in conjunction with each other*. (p. 80, my italic)

The issue before us is whether Wilson's view best explains the evidence or whether there is a *unity* or *coherence* to Luke's christology. Our objective here is not to defend any one of Luke's christological descriptions as his main christological concern, for these may vary and change as his writing progresses. Rather it is to discern through four studies some of Luke's personal christological convictions and why he writes what he does about Christ in Luke–Acts. The net result of these studies is that they will enable us to detect Luke's writing concern, which explains the character and purpose of his recorded christology in his two-volume work according to an intended unified overall scheme.

In this chapter I shall begin by surveying briefly the proposals put forth by Lukan scholars in defense of a "controlling" christology of Luke–Acts. I shall then explain in more detail the need for this study and my method for accomplishing it.

Christ," p. 160; Robinson, "Primitive Christology," pp. 177–89; Reicke, "Risen Lord," p. 162; Wikenhauser, "Christusbild," p. 129; Creed, *Luke*, p. 73; Moule, "Christology of Acts," pp. 181–82; Kränkl, *Jesus der Knecht Gottes*, p. 212; MacRae, "Christology," p. 154; Schneider, "Christologie der Apg.," p. 332; Ernst, "Christusbild," pp. 210–11; Marshall, *Historian & Theologian*, p. 157, n. 1; Conzelmann, *Acts*, p. xlvi; Schweizer, "Jesus Christus," *TRE* 16, p. 702; Schweizer, *Challenge*, pp. 1, 47.

Proposed controlling christologies of Luke–Acts

Prior to 1950, biblical scholars by and large saw Luke–Acts as a *historical* treatise – although its reliability as a historical document was often questioned – which Luke wrote either to defend Christianity before his Roman counterparts or to defend Paul before his antagonists.[3] In describing Luke's christology, many believed that it was primitive and traditional, especially as detailed in the speeches of Acts, with Luke faithfully transmitting it to his readers, at least as he understood it.[4]

But by the early 1950s, the scholarly contributions of Philipp Vielhauer, Hans Conzelmann, and Ernst Haenchen enlarged upon the work of Martin Dibelius to spearhead the now familiar tendency to perceive Luke–Acts as primarily a *theological* treatise. Since this time much effort has gone into the study of Luke's christology.[5] In view of this theological development, we shall take the Conzelmann era as our starting point.

Our purpose here is not to discuss everything in Luke–Acts that has to do with christology, or to mention everything that commentators have said about it. Rather we shall survey the christologies which scholars contend represent Luke's *controlling* christology – i.e., a christological portrait or description which centrally affects or controls what he says christologically throughout Luke–Acts. The other christological descriptions and portraits should be understood in light of it.

By classifying the material in this way I do not mean to suggest that the differing positions are necessarily mutually exclusive, but only to point out what some believe lies at the *center* of Luke's recorded christology. To avoid redundancy, at this juncture we shall merely summarize the positions; at more relevant points in the work we shall respond to the more important of these in considerable detail.

[3] See, e.g., the survey of Gasque, *Interpretation*. For more lit. on "the trustworthiness of Acts" prior to 1950, see Mattill and Mattill, *Classified Bibliography*, pp. 189–93.

[4] See, e.g., Knox, *Acts*, pp. 72–80; Martin, *Portrait of Jesus*; Stonehouse, *Witness*; Laymon, *Portrait of Christ*; see also German and French lit. cited in Bovon, *Luke the Theologian*, pp. 122–23.

[5] See, e.g., lit. cited in Fitzmyer, *Luke I–IX*, pp. 263–65; Rese, "Lukas," p. 2322; Bovon, *Luke the Theologian*, pp. 109–19; Schweizer, "Jesus Christus," *TRE* 16, pp. 704–705; Hultgren, *NT Christology*, pp. 253–66; Radl, *Lukas*, pp. 81–83; van Segbroeck, *Luke*, pp. 222–24.

Christologies emphasizing Jesus' humanity and exemplary functions

This relatively minor position contends that Luke concentrates on the "man" Jesus for mainly apologetic and exemplary reasons.[6]

Anti-gnostic christology

Charles H. Talbert argues for an anti-gnostic polemic as the central focus of Luke's christology and purpose in writing.[7] Talbert believes that "Luke was faced by someone who wanted to separate spirit and flesh in Jesus Christ by means of an interpretation of his baptism as the moment of the descent of a spiritual reality upon Jesus and the ascension as the moment of the spiritual reality's ascent prior to any suffering of death" (pp. 269–70).

The way Luke emphasizes the corporeality of Jesus' passion–resurrection–ascension and the eyewitness testimony of the disciples who followed him in Galilee – meaning that the Ascended One is to be identified with the one who ministered to them there – indicates, Talbert believes, that Luke was combating some docetic tendency. The continuity which Luke draws between Jesus' passion–resurrection and the ascension on the Mount of Transfiguration (Luke 9:31) and the goal of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51) he thinks further endorses this writing interest.

Luke's presentation of Jesus' baptism signals a similar concern. The corporeal character of the Spirit's descent upon Jesus in the form of a dove was meant to contradict the docetic tendency of separating the spirit and flesh in Jesus. Talbert believes that the surrounding context strengthens this idea. Luke, e.g., establishes Jesus' sonship as "the only begotten of God" at birth, reinforces Jesus' humanness as the Second Adam via the genealogy and

[6] Adebola, "Christology" thinks that Luke distinctively stresses in his two-volume work Jesus' *manhood* (pp. 78–91) to show how Jesus appears as the man through whom God reveals his final saving plan in redemptive history (pp. 106–25, 165–69).

[7] Talbert, "Anti-Gnostic Tendency," pp. 259–71; Talbert, *Luke and the Gnostics*; followed with qual. by Radl, *Lukas*, p. 91. See also our discussion of Talbert's anti-gnostic purpose on pp. 49–51 below. For another polemical approach to Luke's christology, Martini, "Riflessioni sulla cristologia," pp. 525–34 proposes that Acts 1–10 indicates that Luke was combating a one-sided attitude coming out of Galilee that focused almost exclusively on Jesus as wonder-worker and on an intense apocalyptic expectation of his imminent return, at which time he would miraculously transform the world.

temptation narratives, and in the Nazareth story stresses what Jesus' work as God's servant will entail. Hence, Luke attempts to make clear in his version of the baptism story that (1) the Spirit's descent in bodily form means that the Spirit cannot be divorced from matter at Jesus' baptism; (2) Jesus' baptism is his anointing for service, not his being begotten as God's Son, which happened at birth; and (3) God's declaration of Jesus as his Son at the baptism means primarily that Jesus shares our full humanity.

Thus, for Talbert, Luke focuses on Jesus' baptism and ascension both to fend off a gnostic move to separate spirit and flesh in Jesus and to endorse the church's belief in the full humanity of Jesus.

Exemplar christology

G. W. H. Lampe sets out to discover whether Luke–Acts bears "a distinctive presentation of the person and work of Jesus," i.e., "a peculiarly Lucan portrait of Christ." He finds such a portrait in Luke's emphasis on *the imitation of Christ* – although he leaves it largely undeveloped.[8]

Lampe qualifies his discussion by observing that unlike Paul, Luke does not think in terms of a mystical or personal union of the exalted Jesus with his followers. No "body of Christ" concept is evident. But the concepts of the Holy Spirit and the name of Jesus establish a close bond between Jesus and his church. Luke's main christological interest is explicating this bond: "The experience of Jesus, his mighty works, wonders and signs, his sufferings and his mission of salvation, repentance and remission of sins to the end of the earth are exactly reproduced in his people, first in the Church's mission to Israel under Peter's leadership, then in the wider sphere of Paul's carrying of the gospel to Rome" (p. 175).

In developing this relation between Christ and his followers, Luke wrote his Gospel, according to Lampe, to illustrate through Jesus' life and teaching the sort of things that his followers could imitate. Luke pays considerable attention in his Gospel to Jesus' choice of his successors, their training and preparation, and to the contrast of Jesus and his followers to unbelieving Israel. As Acts then demonstrates, after Jesus' ascension, the church is to *follow* and *imitate* him in his life.

[8] Lampe, "Lucan Portrait of Christ," pp. 160–75, esp. pp. 167, 172–75; also Voss, *Christologie*, p. 171 (with qual.); Edmonds, "Luke's Portrait of Christ," pp. 7–14; O'Toole, "Parallels," pp. 195–212; O'Toole, *Unity*.

Christologies emphasizing Jesus' subordinate relation to God

A more dominant christological position, which many scholars now take as axiomatic in Lukan studies, holds that Luke deliberately subordinates Jesus to God's plan of saving history, largely in hopes of injecting new life into a church shaken by the parousia's delay. Not all scholars who see a subordination christology in Luke accept the latter premise. But defense of this premise has moved this position into the limelight as Luke's chief christological concern.

Subordination christology

Scholars broadly support, to differing degrees and for various reasons, the idea that Luke consciously and uniformly stresses Jesus' subordination to God. The standard passage is Acts 2:36.

Herbert Braun, in a brief but influential essay,[9] argues that Luke further signals this stance with his unique preference for the term ἀνίστημι when describing God's act of raising Jesus from the dead (cf. Acts 2:24, 32; 13:33–34; 17:31). "Im gezielten Gebrauch der Verben," he contends, "liegt die subordinatianisch gefüllte Explikation der ἀνάστασις" ("Luke's deliberate use of the verb brings out the subordinationist idea implicit in ἀνάστασις") (p. 533).[10]

In more encompassing terms Hans Conzelmann, whose statement now represents a major school of thought in Lukan studies in this regard, believes that Jesus' thoroughgoing subordination to God is traditional and is entwined part and parcel with Luke's primary christological concern.[11] Luke's view of salvation history not only presupposes it but demands it. The divine plan of salvation belongs exclusively to God; Jesus appears only as God's instrument within it. On the basis of God's intervention in redemptive history through Christ, Luke assures the church in view of the parousia's delay that God is still at work carrying out his program of salvation history. The theological cornerstone of Luke–Acts is God, not Jesus. For this reason, whether in relation to God, the Spirit,

[9] Braun, "Terminologie," pp. 533–36; taken up in more detail by Wilckens, *Missionsreden*, pp. 137–40; followed by, e.g., Conzelmann, *Theology of St. Luke*, p. 175; Kränkl, *Jesus der Knecht Gottes*, pp. 130, 162–63. See the fourth section of chapter 8 for more lit. supporting the subordination and adoption positions and our critique of them.

[10] But see Marshall, "Resurrection in Acts," pp. 101–103.

[11] Conzelmann, *Theology of St. Luke*, pp. 173–79, 184.

angels, the cosmos, or world history, God consistently appears in Luke–Acts as superior to Jesus.

Christology adapted to the parousia's delay

Hans Conzelmann popularized this position with the publication of his dissertation under the title *Die Mitte der Zeit* (1953; ET: *The Theology of St. Luke*).[12] Building on the radical critical methods of Dibelius and Bultmann, he sees the controlling factor lying behind Luke–Acts as the problem of the parousia's delay. Luke attempts to reassess positively the proper place of the post-apostolic church in God's plan of saving history since it does not look as if Jesus will be returning anytime soon. For this reason, he intentionally shifts Jesus' parousia to a distant point in the future and gives the existence and function of the church new meaning for the present.

According to Conzelmann, Luke's theological emphasis is God's saving plan in history. Therefore, Luke's christology must be seen "primarily from the standpoint of the sequence of redemptive history, as are all the central themes in Luke's thought" (p. 184). Luke portrays Jesus as *an instrument of God*, both in his earthly life and in the memory of him after his removal from the earth: His death is understood as martyrdom, his resurrection as symbolic of the believer's hope, and his life as symbolic of God's program of universal mission. But because of the parousia's delay, his imminent role as coming Judge is moved to the distant future and his earthly ministry is now perceived as irretrievably time-locked in past history. His continuing activity for the church comes via the Spirit and his position as Lord in heaven.

Conzelmann additionally asserts that Luke never considers Jesus as Lord of the universe or as God's equal; instead, Luke consistently classifies Jesus as *subordinate to God*, making no distinction between the status of the earthly and the exalted Jesus. In both cases, Jesus remains subordinate to God. He asserts, furthermore, that a titular study would not be particularly beneficial in establishing Luke's christology: It would merely reflect Luke's "preference for traditional terminology" rather than assist in pointing out

[12] Followed by, e.g., Schulz, *Stunde der Botschaft*, pp. 284–91; Wilckens, *Missionsreden*; Gräßer, *Problem der Parusieverzögerung*; Schneider, "Christologie der Apg.," pp. 331–35; Schneider, "Lukanische Christologie," pp. 95–98; see also Lohse's contemporaneous contribution in 1954 in "Heilsgeschichte," pp. 145–64, but with some qualification.

any special traits in his reformulation of salvation history for theological reasons (pp. 170–72).

Servant-mediator christology

In his book *Jesus der Knecht Gottes* (1972), Emmeram Kränkl similarly stresses Jesus' mediatorial role, but in terms of a servant christology. Although he defends Jesus' servanthood as Luke's main christological interest, in comparison to other theological themes in Luke–Acts, he readily admits that it plays a secondary part. Luke develops it to buttress his primary soteriological concerns.

Accepting much of Conzelmann's thesis on Luke–Acts, Kränkl attempts to discern Luke's christology through an evaluation of the speeches of Acts. The speeches, he believes, are not pure fiction; Luke fashions them according to some diverse pieces of early church tradition. Nonetheless, the speeches theologically reflect a later orientation to second- and third-generation Christianity, the leading idea being salvation history conditioned by a delayed-parousia consciousness.

The christological center of the speeches is Jesus' ascension/exaltation. The significance of this event, he believes, uniformly stands behind Luke's depiction of Jesus' earthly career and heavenly session. In particular, Luke presents Jesus as subordinate to God. God is exclusively the creator of the plan of salvation; Jesus functions only as its mediator. The "Servant of God" title, which Luke ascribes to Jesus, Kränkl thinks best describes how Luke understands Jesus' mediacy: "So ist in diesem Prädikat die heilsgeschichtliche Stellung, wie sie Lukas auch in seinem gesamten Werk dem irdischen Jesus und dem erhöhten Christus zuweist, kurz und treffend umrissen" ("Luke's salvation-history position is briefly but strikingly depicted in this title; it uniformly expresses the way he perceives in both volumes the earthly Jesus and the exalted Christ") (p. 127, also pp. 210–11). It designates Jesus as culminating the line of OT servants of God, i.e., Moses, David, the prophets, even Israel, but not Isaiah's suffering servant (pp. 125–26). Therefore, the exalted Lord now stands, according to God's plan of salvation history, as the continuum between Israel and the church.[13]

[13] Apart from these general observations, Kränkl does not think that Luke's christology reveals a controlling christological concern (*Jesus der Knecht Gottes*,