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 978-0-521-46932-6 - The Theology of the Gospel of Luke  
 Joel B. Green  
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## CHAPTER I

*“In the days of King Herod of Judea”:  
 the world of Luke’s Gospel*

Of the Song of Mary (Luke 1:46–55) the poet Thomas John Carlisle writes,

At our eternal peril  
 we choose to ignore  
 the thunder and the tenor  
 of her song,  
 its revolutionary beat.<sup>1</sup>

In doing so, Carlisle, perhaps paradoxically, brings to the foreground a distressing enigma. At least in this century readers of the Gospel of Luke *have* ignored “the thunder and tenor of her song.” Or rather, more often than not, we have wrapped it in antiseptic dress, spiritualized it, projected its message of redemption-by-social-transformation into the eschaton.<sup>2</sup> More often than not, the Song of Mary has been the focus of tradition-historical investigation: who first wrote it? From what community did it derive? In what form did it come to Luke? Mary’s Song has not often been read as integral to the narrative of Luke’s Gospel, as integral to Luke’s narrative theology, as deriving its meaning in *this* narrative co-text<sup>3</sup> and

<sup>1</sup> Thomas John Carlisle, “Revolutionary Carol,” in *Beginning with Mary: Women of the Gospels in Portrait* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986) 4.

<sup>2</sup> See David M. Scholer, “The Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55): Reflections on Its Hermeneutical History,” in *Conflict and Context: Hermeneutics in the Americas*, ed. Mark Lau Branson and C. René Padilla (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986) 210–19.

<sup>3</sup> By “co-text” we mean the sentences and larger textual units surrounding the text and relating to it so as to constrain its interpretation. “Context” refers to the socio-historical setting of the text. See Gillian Brown and George Yule, *Discourse Analysis*, CTL (Cambridge University Press, 1983) 46–50.

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thus from the larger theological program of the Third Evangelist. The same may be said of numerous other texts unique to Luke's Gospel: the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus' words of forgiveness from the cross, and so on.

The study of the Song of Mary in this century is a paradigm of the study of the Third Gospel more generally. Only since World War II has the prospect of Luke as *theologian* begun to be taken with seriousness. Redaction criticism, which examined Luke's deployment of his presumed sources,<sup>4</sup> highlighted the possibility of a Lukan theological agenda, but did not yet embrace the potential of reading Luke's narrative *as a whole* as a theological document. Although Luke's combined work, Luke and Acts, contributes some 28 percent of the total volume of the New Testament (compared with 24 percent in the case of Paul),<sup>5</sup> he has not normally been listed alongside Jesus, Paul, and John in studies of New Testament theology.

Wider currents in theological and literary studies have begun to rectify this deficiency. Specifically, greater recognition of the embeddedness of all thought in tradition and story has opened up the potential for reading the Gospel of Luke, along with other narrative texts in Scripture, in fresh ways. If Lukan theology is embedded in narrative, however, that narrative is itself embedded in the world of the first-century Greco-Roman Mediterranean.

## THE "WORLDS" OF LUKE

Despite its very different look, the Gospel of Luke shares a key similarity with the letters of Paul. Like them it is an *occasional* text. This encourages a reading of the Gospel that is sensitive, first, to the socio-historical circumstances within which the

<sup>4</sup> See especially Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960); and the later response to Conzelmann, I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Exeter: Paternoster; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1970; 2nd ed., 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Words in the New Testament (UBS<sup>3</sup>): 137,888; in Luke-Acts: 37,951; in the wider Pauline corpus (13 letters): 32,429.

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Gospel is set; and, second, to the more specific discourse situation giving rise to the narrative itself. The first concerns the world of the Gospel of Luke. The second is interested in exploring the purposeful communication of author and audience. Unlike Paul's letters, whose mode of argumentation has a more recognizably didactic and persuasive look, the Third Gospel presents its message in the form of a narrative. Its mode of persuasion is perhaps more subtle, but no less theological. In order to explore it a venture into its world is a necessity.

Indeed, in narrating his story Luke<sup>6</sup> employs cultural and chronological markers that manifestly root the Gospel in the late first century BCE and first third of the first century CE:

“In the days of King Herod of Judea. . .” (1:5),

“In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus . . .” (2:1), and

“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea . . .” (3:1).

These geo-political markers, occurring in the early chapters of the Gospel, are some of the most obvious, but there are many others.

Some are quite subtle, including those that assume the cultural knowledge of an “insider.” For example, the preface of Luke (1:1–4) situates the author socially as one capable of writing learned Greek, who may have trafficked in technical or professional writing, and who generally had an appreciation for the labors of those who work with their hands.<sup>7</sup> Again, the

<sup>6</sup> Like the other Gospels in the New Testament, the Gospel of Luke is the work of an anonymous writer. Traditionally, Luke, the sometime companion of Paul, has been identified as the author of the Gospel (cf. the “we sections” in Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16; also Philem. 24; Col. 4:14). However, it is not clear that anything is gained for our reading of its *theology* by an unequivocal identification of its author. See the recent discussion of authorship in Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian: Aspects of His Teaching* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 1989) 1–26. Discussions of the Gospel have traditionally referred to “Luke” as the voice through which the story of Jesus’ mission and message has been related, drawing attention to Luke in a role that closely approximates contemporary understanding of the “narrator.” It is in this sense that “Luke” is used here. It is likewise difficult to determine with precision *when* the Gospel was written, though the most popular view is that it was written in the seventies or eighties CE.

<sup>7</sup> So Loveday C. A. Alexander, *The Preface to Luke’s Gospel: Literary Convention and Social Context in Luke 1.1–4 and Acts 1.1*, SNTSMS 78 (Cambridge University Press, 1993);

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opening of the narrative itself, in 1:5–7, posits a cultural enigma, claiming for Elizabeth and Zechariah a level of righteousness before God that stands in serious tension with “what everybody knows.” What everyone knows, or knew in the Judean world of antiquity, is that childlessness is a consequence of a blameworthy life and so a sign of God’s curse.<sup>8</sup> Such examples are easily multiplied.

Some are difficult to decipher. (Why did Elizabeth remain in seclusion for five months following her conception? [1:24]) Others present more far-reaching, historical problems. (What are we to make of Luke’s alleged census under Augustus? [2:1]) However troublesome these cultural and geo-political markers might have become for subsequent readings of Luke, they nevertheless demonstrate the degree to which this Gospel is rooted in a time and place. Luke’s *narrative*, then, presents a *theological program* deeply embedded in the cultural currents of the first-century Mediterranean world.

More fundamentally of course, all language is embedded in culture,<sup>9</sup> and Luke’s narrative provides no exception. In our reading of Luke’s theology in the world of Luke, however, we must grapple with this axiom at three levels. There is, first, the “world of Luke’s Gospel” understood in the sense noted above – that is, the world Luke’s Gospel assumes, the world his Gospel claims to represent. It must be admitted, though, that Luke’s account cannot capture the many and diverse ingredients of the real world of first-century Palestine. Hence, there is, second, the world *actualized* by Luke’s narrative – that is, the world as Luke portrays it.<sup>10</sup> For example, we know that the temple in Jerusalem had asserted itself as a major economic and political force within Second Temple Judaism and thus

Alexander, “Luke’s Preface in the Context of Greek Preface-Writing,” *NovT* 28 (1986) 48–74.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Gen. 16:4; 29:32; 30:1, 22–23; 1 Sam. 1:5–6; Pss. 127:3–5; 128; Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, OBT (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 34–38.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Stubbs, *Discourse Analysis: The Sociolinguistic Analysis of Natural Language*, LS 4 (University of Chicago Press; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983) 1–14.

<sup>10</sup> For this notion of actualized as distinct from virtual properties, I have borrowed from the discussion of the basic semantic properties of sememes in Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, AS (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979) 18.

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throughout the “land of the Jews” with which Luke’s Gospel is concerned. On the other hand, Luke’s presentation of the temple almost completely sidesteps this historical reality. Instead, Luke *actualizes* other important aspects of the place of the temple in the life of the Jewish people. He portrays the temple as the locus of God’s presence, a place of prayer, and an institution that served to perpetuate distinctions between Jews and non-Jews, priests and non-priests, men and women, and so on.

Third, “the world of Luke” signifies the world as Luke wants it to be, the world which, according to his theological perspective, God purposes. Thus, Luke is not content to present the world “as it really is,” but purposefully shapes the story in such a way that some of its facets are undermined, others legitimated. To return to our earlier example, although it is a truism that the Jerusalem temple functioned as a vital economic center in the world of Jesus, Luke has very little to say on this matter. This is because, on the one hand, the economic issues Luke wants to address are far bigger than the temple; in fact, as we shall see, questions of economic exchange and economic power were integral to the Mediterranean world of which Jerusalem was a part; these Luke will work to undermine in his account, but not by a broadside against the temple.

On the other hand, Luke does not elaborate on the politico-economic power of the temple because for him the primary importance of the temple rests elsewhere, on its role as a “cultural center” (to use Clifford Geertz’s terminology). Cultural centers are the active centers of social order: “essentially concentrated loci of serious acts, they consist in the point or points in a society where its leading ideas come together with its leading institutions to create an arena in which the events that most vitally affect its members’ lives take place.” They “mark the center [of the social world] as center and give what goes on there its aura of being not merely important but in some odd fashion connected with the way the world is built.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Centers, Kings, and Charism: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power,” in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York:

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Luke's narrative undermines this key role of the temple first by acknowledging it, and then by means of a slowly evolving, increasingly negative characterization of the temple, transforming the initially positive conception of the temple in Luke 1–2. In the Third Gospel, finally, at Jesus' death, Luke narrates in proleptic fashion the eventual and thoroughgoing theological critique of the temple to follow in Acts 7.<sup>12</sup> So, although it is helpful to know as much as we can about Luke's world (in the first sense), it is just as critical if not even more so to see how that world fares at the hands of the Evangelist *in the world of the narrative itself*.

If we are concerned with the world of Luke, then, we must attend to how his narrative *represents* and *challenges* the world of the first-century Mediterranean. Consequently, we will be interested above all in reading the Third Gospel on its own terms, albeit against the backdrop of what we otherwise know about the first-century world it purports to portray. The text is thus given a chance, as it were, to speak back to, and within, its own world. At the same time, in grappling with how Luke embraces and critiques the commonly held views and respected cultural institutions of his day, we may well find our own conventional wisdom brought under suspicion, our own prior understandings and pet convictions assailed.<sup>13</sup>

Basic, 1983) 121–46 (122–23, 124). Cf. the very similar comments in Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think*, the Frank W. Abrams Lectures (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University, 1986).

<sup>12</sup> See Joel B. Green, "The Demise of the Temple as 'Culture Center' in Luke–Acts: An Exploration of the Rending of the Temple Veil (Luke 23.44–49)," *RB*, forthcoming.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, AS (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 25: "A text is not simply a communicational apparatus. It is a device which questions the previous signifying systems, often renews them, and sometimes destroys them." On the importance of allowing social analysis to bring into question one's own world view – an issue often neglected by those who have seconded social analysis into New Testament studies – cf. George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

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## LUKE'S JESUS IN CULTURAL CONTEXT

What are the key features of the cultural context of Luke's story of Jesus?<sup>14</sup> In subsequent chapters we will outline in more detail some of the following as it bears directly on our understanding of the socio-historical realities within and to which Luke is addressing the "good news." Here, though, we may begin to describe the mural of Luke's world painted large.

First, from the opening verse of the Gospel, we are aware that Luke is concerned with *the political world* and *the balance of power* in Greco-Roman Palestine.<sup>15</sup> In fact, Luke's opening phrase, "in the days of King Herod of Judea" (1:5a), is far more than a vague chronological marker. Instead, it serves to draw attention to the social setting of these events in a particular period of political tension. Herod came to power despite strong anti-Idumean feelings and, in particular, resistance to him among the Jewish elders in Jerusalem. His power base was purely secular, with no claim to God having chosen him for service as king of the Jews. This, together with problematic economic and cultural affairs associated with his reign, must be factored into any reading of "the days of King Herod." That these realities would not have been far from the minds of the narrator and his Greco-Roman audience is suggested not only by the notoriety of Herod's ignominious reign, but also by the pervasiveness of socio-political concerns throughout Luke 1–2.

The same can be said, for example, of the census, mentioned four times in the space of five verses (2:1–5). The prosperity and peace for which the Roman Empire is now known was

<sup>14</sup> See Henry J. Cadbury, *The Book of Acts in History* (New York: Harper, 1955); Marion L. Soards, "The Historical and Cultural Setting of Luke–Acts," in *New Views on Luke and Acts*, ed. Earl Richard (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical, 1990) 33–47; Jerome H. Neyrey, ed., *The Social World of Luke–Acts: Models for Interpretation* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1991); Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 279–413.

<sup>15</sup> See the sometimes extravagant claims on socio-political affairs in Luke 1–2 in J. Massyngbaerde Ford, *My Enemy Is My Guest: Jesus and Violence in Luke* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1984) 1–36; Richard A. Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas: The Infancy Narratives in Social Context* (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 23–52.

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produced through initial conquest and plunder, and maintained through subsequent taxation of a conquered people. And a census such as that named by Luke had as its purpose the preparation of tax rolls. Moreover, the explicit naming of Emperor Augustus in 2:1 is of interest, for this refers to Octavian, who had been recognized as “the divine savior who has brought peace to the world.”<sup>16</sup> That in this very context Jesus is presented as Savior, Lord, the one through whom peace comes to the world (2:11, 14), can hardly be accidental.

Furthermore, Mary's son, she is told, will have an everlasting kingdom, the throne of David (1:32–33). The Song of Mary portrays God's mighty acts of salvation as socio-political reversal, with the powerful brought down from their thrones and the lowly uplifted (1:52). The Song of Zechariah employs images of exodus while prophesying how “we would be saved from our enemies” (1:71; cf. 1:73). Simeon and Anna, in their respective hopes for “the consolation of Israel” and “redemption of Jerusalem,” must also have in mind the cessation of foreign occupancy and subjection, the renewal of Israel as a nation under Yahweh (and not under the Roman emperor).

Luke thus makes his audience aware at the very outset that the narrative of “the events that have been fulfilled among us” (1:1) is set squarely in the midst of the political turmoil of the Roman occupation of Palestine. Other data underscore the importance of this aspect of Luke's world. The presence of a centurion in Capernaum is recorded in a matter-of-fact way (7:1–10) as is the execution of Galileans by Pilate (13:1–2). Within the Gospel narrative, Jesus himself predicts the destruction of Jerusalem by opposing armies (e.g., 21:20–24) – an event that, presumably, would have been remembered in the past by many of Luke's audience. That the Gospel of Luke moves forward to a *Roman* act of execution, the crucifixion of Jesus as a pretender to the throne (see esp. 23:2–5, 38), urges us to refuse any suggestion that the Roman political world is a mere “backdrop” to Luke's narrative.

Secondly, the social world which Luke represents is one in

<sup>16</sup> Horsley, *Liberation*, 28.



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which *eschatological anticipation* is rampant. If we recall that eschatological hope in its myriad forms focused preeminently on the coming of God to rule in peace and justice,<sup>17</sup> then we may also remind ourselves that eschatological hope within the Lukan narrative must be read against a socio-political backdrop. This is true inasmuch as the coming of God would bring an end to political dominance and social oppression. The appearance of Gabriel in Luke 1 indicates already the eschatologically charged atmosphere in which the birth narrative is set, for he is known to us in part as an interpreter of end-time visions (Dan. 8:16–26; 9:21–27). The association of John with the figure of Elijah, particularly against the backdrop of Mal. 3:1–2; 4:5–6 (cf. Luke 1:16–17, 76), continues this motif, as does the regularity with which the Holy Spirit appears in Luke's Infancy Gospel. The litany of references to the Spirit brings to mind the old prophecies about the eschatological coming of the Spirit (1:15, 35, 41, 67; 2:25, 26, 27; cf., e.g., Isa. 44:3–5; Ezek. 26:24–32; Joel 2:28–32). Differences of viewpoint about the sort of Messiah anticipated (and questions about how widespread in antiquity such expectation might have been) aside, the birth narrative repeatedly speaks of the coming of the Christ, and this advances even further the sense of eschatological anticipation in the narrative. Moreover, the eschatological visitation of God is noted in Luke 1:68; 2:38, signifying the appearance of divine help and deliverance. Finally, Mary, Zechariah, Simeon, and Anna each give expression to an expectation of God's end-time deliverance.<sup>18</sup> In these ways, the world into which Jesus was born in Luke is shown to be rife with eschatological anticipation – an anticipation with clear ramifications for the cessation of Israel's subjection to its Herodian and Roman overlords.

Third, it is immediately clear in the Third Gospel that the narrative to unfold will be concerned with issues of *social status and social stratification*. This is not to say that Luke is especially

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., George R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1986) 3–68.

<sup>18</sup> See J. Bradley Chance, *Jerusalem, the Temple, and the New Age in Luke-Acts* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1988) 48–56.

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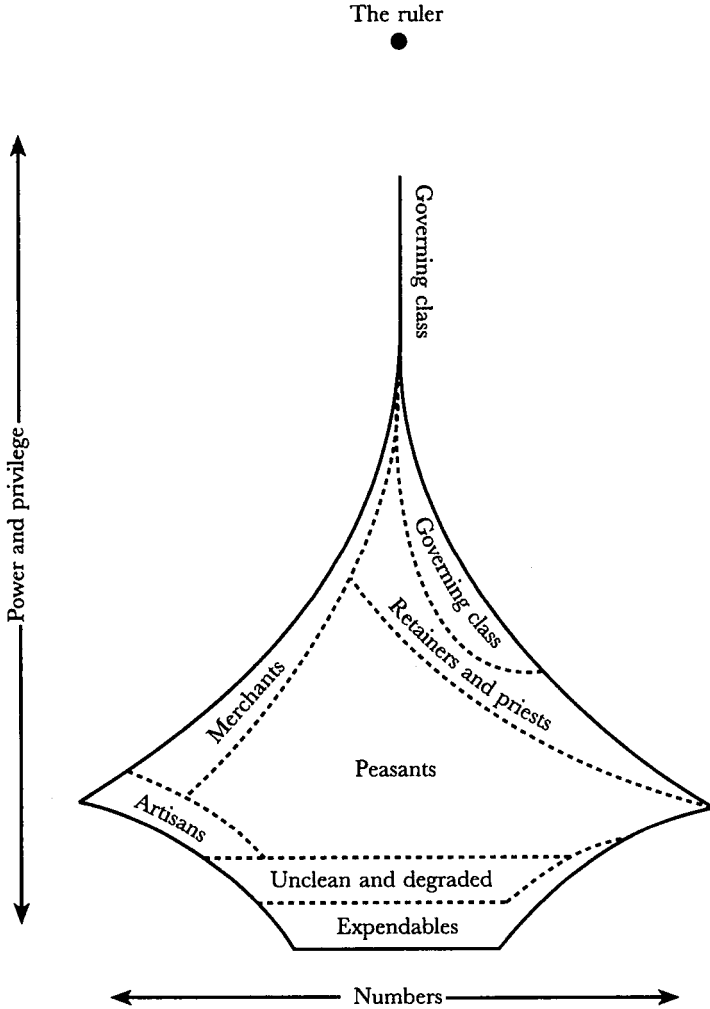
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Figure 1 A graphic representation of the relationship among classes in agrarian societies (from Gerhard Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification*, 2nd ed. [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1984] 284).