CHAPTER 3

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In the Gospel of Luke, the inner self of Jesus occasionally emerges. He feels compassion at the death of a widow’s son (Luke 7:13); he exults at the success of his emissaries (10:21); and he gets frustrated at his disciples’ lack of faith (9:41). In other instances, we can infer his feelings from the words that he speaks. If he ever became impassioned, it was probably when he heaped woes on the rich (6:24–26) or uttered scathing denunciations of the Pharisees and lawyers (11:39–52). It is hard to imagine that anyone could mount such verbal attacks calmly and without rancor. For the most part, however, the Gospel of Luke gives us little indication of Jesus’ inner life or personality. We are left therefore with other aspects of Luke’s portrayal, such as the designations that Jesus receives and the activities in which he engages.

The same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke also wrote the Acts of the Apostles, as the relation between their prefaces shows (Luke 1:1–4; Acts 1:1–2). We do not know for sure who wrote these texts, but ancient tradition attributes them to “Luke.” That name will do as well as any for our purpose. Luke describes his first volume as a narrative about what Jesus “began” to do and teach (Acts 1:1), implying that his story of Jesus continued in the second volume. To get Luke’s full story of Jesus, therefore, we must consider both volumes. In composing these texts, Luke probably drew on a number of different sources that had different ideas about Jesus. We may find therefore that not all of what Luke says about Jesus is completely consistent.

Studies of Jesus in Luke-Acts usually focus on its “christology,” that is, its teaching about the nature or identity of Jesus, especially as this affects his relation to God and his role in salvation. Our own study will examine not only the identity of Jesus, but also Luke’s story of his life and activities. This story encompasses five stages of Jesus’ life and career: his birth and childhood; his public ministry; his passion, resurrection, and ascension; his reign in heaven; and his anticipated reign on earth. We will examine Luke’s portrait of Jesus in each of these stages.
Jesus’ Birth and Childhood

Luke begins his story with the births of John the Baptist and Jesus (1:5–2:40). This starting point distinguishes Luke’s story from the Fourth Gospel, which portrays Jesus as a divine being who existed with God “in the beginning” (John 1:1). Unlike the Fourth Gospel, Luke never suggests that Jesus existed before his birth, as a divine being or otherwise.²

One function of Luke’s birth narrative is presumably to provide background information about Jesus. Like Matthew, Luke names Jesus’ parents as Joseph and Mary, his birthplace as Bethlehem, and his home town as Nazareth. Unlike any other source, Luke portrays Jesus and John the Baptist as related through their mothers. He names John’s parents as Zechariah and Elizabeth. The primary function of Luke’s birth narrative, however, is not historical but christological: to reveal what Luke considers significant aspects of Jesus’ identity and his role in the purpose of God. In particular, Luke portrays the infant Jesus as the Davidic Messiah and as the son of God.

Jesus as Davidic Messiah

Luke’s birth narrative has a primary emphasis on identifying Jesus as the Davidic Messiah or Christ (Strauss 1995, 76–125). Twice it refers to Jesus as “Christ”: once in the expression “Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11) and again in the expression “the Christ of the Lord” (2:26). The Greek term christos, meaning “anointed,” translates the Hebrew messiah. In ancient Israel, consecrated individuals, such as priests, prophets, and kings, were anointed with oil. This act involved pouring oil over the person’s head, which apparently symbolized God pouring out his Spirit on the anointed one. Certain passages of the Hebrew scriptures refer to Israel’s king in particular as “the anointed of the Lord” (e.g., 1 Sam 24:6, 10; 26:9, 11, 16, 23). In the southern kingdom of Judea, this king always came from the line of David, and, according to tradition, God promised that David’s line would never end (2 Sam 7:12–16). When the dynasty of Davidic kings did come to an end, at the Babylonian conquest of Judea in 587 BCE, Jewish prophets reinterpreted this promise to mean that God would raise up a new king from the line of David. As the “Messiah,” this king would be anointed with the Spirit of God, would defeat Israel’s oppressors, and would reestablish an independent kingdom for the Jewish people (Isa 11). In the time of Jesus, the Jewish people had various ideas about a messiah or messiahs, but many continued to hope that the Davidic Messiah would arise to deliver them from the Romans, who ruled over them at that time (e.g., Psalm of Solomon 17).

In referring to Jesus as the Christ, Luke’s birth narrative clearly means the Davidic Messiah. The angel Gabriel says of Jesus that “the Lord God will give to him the throne of David his father, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (1:32–33). Zechariah says of him that God “has raised a horn of salvation for us in the house of David his child” (1:69). The geneal-
ogy has the purpose of confirming that Jesus descended from David (3:23, 31), as does the story of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, the city of David (2:4, 11).

The role of the Davidic Messiah in Luke’s birth narrative remains what it was in traditional Jewish thought. As the Messiah, Jesus would sit on the throne of David and reign over Israel (1:32–33). He would bring “redemption” (1:68; 2:38) and “salvation” (1:69, 71; 2:30; cf. 2:11) to Israel and Jerusalem. Only Luke among the evangelists refers to Jesus as a “savior” and to his work as “salvation.” However, in the birth narrative this salvation is political. As the Davidic Messiah, Jesus’ salvation would be directed toward the Jewish people. And he would save them not from sin or hell, but from their oppressors (1:71, 74). The birth narrative does not mention the Romans by name but does refer to “our enemies” and “those who hate us” (1:71, 73). Mary’s song anticipates their defeat by God: “He brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted the humble” (1:52). Obviously the baby Jesus did not yet reign as the Messiah. In designating him as the Christ, the birth narrative indicates that he had been born to become the Messiah.

In Luke’s birth narrative, Jesus’ identity as the Messiah is no secret but is revealed to numerous individuals. The angel Gabriel reveals it to Mary (1:32–33; cf. 1:46–55), and both Elizabeth (1:43) and Zechariah (1:69) know it without being told. An angel reveals it to some shepherds (2:11). The old man Simeon realizes it when he sees Jesus (2:26, 30–32) as does the prophetess Anna, who “spoke about him to all those awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem” (2:38). This open announcement of Jesus’ identity as the Christ stands in sharp contrast to the “messianic secret” that appears later in Luke’s narrative.

Jesus as son of God

The second main emphasis of the birth narrative is to present Jesus as the son of God. This identification is related to Jesus’ role as the Davidic Messiah. In the same tradition that promised an unending dynasty to David, God proclaimed that David’s offspring would be God’s own son (2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:7). Originally this sonship was metaphorical or adoptive. Though David’s child came from David’s own body (2 Sam 7:12), God recognized or adopted him as his own son. Possibly the original version of Luke’s birth narrative presented Jesus as God’s son in this adoptive sense, which would not conflict with the view that Jesus descended from David through Joseph. In its present form, however, the narrative presents Jesus as the son of God in a more literal sense. Though Mary has never had intercourse with a man, she conceives when God’s Spirit comes upon her (1:34–35). This depiction does conflict with the view that Jesus descended from David through Joseph.

Nowhere in previous Jewish tradition does God have children through mortal women, though there is a story in which angels did (e.g., Gen 6:1–4). In Greek thought, however, gods or goddesses frequently mated with mortals to produce sons or, less frequently, daughters (Burkett 2002, 79–80, 529–535). Such sons of the
gods, or “demigods,” included not only mythical or legendary characters, such as Heracles and Achilles, but also historical figures, such as Plato, Alexander the Great, and Augustus Caesar. This tradition of sons born from one divine and one human parent seems to have influenced the way Luke thought of Jesus as the literal son of God. Luke’s account does differ in one respect from these Greek stories. In these, the gods appeared in human or animal form to physically mate with mortal women. The Jewish Law, however, forbade anyone to represent God in any such visible form (Exod 20:4–6). Luke respects these Jewish sensibilities in having the invisible Spirit of God come over Mary and overshadow her in the act of conceiving Jesus.

Jesus’ Public Ministry

Luke’s narrative skips from the twelfth year of Jesus to the thirtieth, from his boyhood to the second stage of his life, his public ministry (Luke 3:1–21:38). After Jesus is baptized, apparently by John the Baptist, and undergoes a period of testing, he becomes an itinerant preacher in Galilee. He goes through the cities and villages of Galilee, preaching and teaching in the synagogues, healing the sick, and casting out demons.

Luke’s Jesus breaks his ties with any form of settled existence. He has no home (9:57–58) and no job, relying on others to support him (8:1–3). He renounces his ties with his family (8:19–21) and makes no attempt to settle down and get married. He apparently lives this uprooted lifestyle for the sake of his ministry, not out of an impulse toward asceticism, i.e., renunciation of bodily appetites. While John fasted, Jesus eats food and drinks wine, to such a degree that his critics label him “a glutton and a drunkard” (7:33–34; cf. 5:33–34).

Along the way, Jesus attracts followers. Following Luke’s Jesus is no easy matter. He requires his disciples to adopt his own lifestyle. They must abandon home, family, and possessions to follow him (9:57–58; 14:25–33). He especially emphasizes the need to put following him ahead of family ties and obligations (8:19–21; 11:27–28; 12:51–53). He does not permit his followers time to bury their parents or to say goodbye to their families (9:59–62). They must hate their father, mother, wife, children, brothers, and sisters, and even their own lives (14:26).

Jesus has more to do with women in Luke than in any other gospel. They appear as his followers, as recipients of his healing, and as characters in the stories about him. Yet Jesus’ attitude remains patriarchal. When he chooses twelve apostles to exercise positions of authority, they are all men (6:12–16).

To get a better sense of Jesus’ public ministry, we will examine his message, his mighty deeds, and his identity.

Jesus’ message

Luke’s Jesus spends a good deal of time preaching and teaching. He proclaims “the kingdom of God,” which is “good news” (4:13; 8:1) and sends out emissaries to make
the same announcement (9:2; 6:10; 1:9, 11). The good news is that God’s reign over the earth has arrived or almost arrived. Such a kingdom would replace the empire of the Romans, whom the early Christians viewed as agents of Satan. In one instance, Luke’s Jesus portrays the kingdom as already invisibly present (17:20–21). In other instances, Jesus refers to the kingdom as coming visibly in the near future, when Jesus would return from heaven (9:27; 21:31–32). In yet other instances, Luke’s Jesus speaks as though his return, and thus the coming of the kingdom, would be delayed longer than expected (12:45; 18:1–8).

Luke’s Jesus announces the kingdom as good news specifically for the poor (4:18; 7:22). He is concerned about the inequities of society, about the disparity between rich and poor. He teaches that the coming kingdom will bring a reversal of status in society: the first will be last and the last first (13:30; cf. 1:51–53). The kingdom of God belongs to the poor (6:20). God will bless the poor, the hungry, and those that weep, but bring woe on the rich, the full, and those that laugh (6:20–21, 24–25; cf. 14:15–24; 16:19–31).

While Luke’s Jesus anticipates this reversal of society, he is not content to wait for it, but advocates a program of economic distribution. Even now, those who host a banquet should invite “the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind” (Luke 14:12–14). Creditors should reduce the debts of those who owe them (16:1–9). The rich should sell their possessions and give to the poor (12:33–34; 18:22–23; 19:8–9).

Since the kingdom would bring God’s judgment on sin, Luke’s Jesus preaches that his hearers should repent in order to receive forgiveness of sins. He states specifically that he came “to call sinners to repentance” (5:32). He warns his hearers that unless they repent, they will all perish (13:1–5). Apparently Jesus’ message goes unheeded for the most part, since he frequently castigates the unrepentant (10:12–15; 11:32; 13:6–9; 14:34–35).

In order to bring his message of repentance to those who need it most, Jesus eats and drinks with “sinners.” Chief among sinners in the gospels are the tax collectors, either because of their dishonesty or because they worked for the Romans. Jesus’ association with such people draws criticism from his critics on three separate occasions (5:27–32; 7:34; 15:1–2), moving Jesus to justify his actions (5:31–32; 15:3–7, 8–10, 11–32). Jesus not only preaches repentance to sinners, but also forgives their sins, another practice that draws criticism from the Pharisees (5:17–26; 7:36–38, 48–50).

As a Jewish teacher, Luke’s Jesus maintains that the Jewish Law remains valid (16:17). Twice he teaches that one inherits eternal life by keeping the commandments of the Law (10:25–28; 18:18–20). While he upholds the Law, his interpretations of Jewish Law and custom do not always agree with those of other Jewish teachers, the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus’ interpretations often offend the Pharisees (e.g., 5:17–6:11), but theirs seem to offend him even more. He attacks the Pharisees, lawyers, and scribes with scathing denunciations of their practices and motivations (11:39–54; 12:1; 20:45–47).

Luke’s Jesus teaches on a variety of other topics as well. He instructs his disciples how to pray (11:1–4) and teaches that God answers prayer (11:5–13; 18:1–8). In

**Jesus’ mighty deeds**

The Holy Spirit that fills Jesus at his baptism provides the “power” (*dynamis*) that enables him to perform miracles (4:14; 5:17; 6:19; 8:46). He heals people, he casts out unclean spirits “with authority (*exousia*) and power (*dynamis*)” (4:36), and he exercises power over nature (e.g., 8:22–25).

In one passage, Jesus addresses the significance of his healings. When John sends to ask Jesus if he is “the one coming,” Jesus instructs John’s messengers to tell John what they have seen and heard: “the blind recover sight, the lame walk, people with skin disease are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised, good news is announced to the poor” (7:18–23). Some of these events are mentioned in Isaiah 35:4–6 and 61:1, descriptions of the time when God comes to save his people. Jesus’ answer, though indirect, indicates that his ministry of healing is a sign that the time of God’s deliverance has come and that Jesus is the one through whom it has come. This explanation does not satisfy his critics, who charge that Jesus’ power over demons comes not from God, but from “Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons” (11:14–15).

**Jesus’ identity**

Luke gives Jesus certain designations that reveal his identity. These include “son of God,” “Christ,” “son of man,” “son of David,” “Lord,” and “prophet.”

**Son of God**  Luke’s Jesus is related to God as his son, but Luke explains this relation in two different ways. In the birth narrative, Jesus’ relation to God differs in kind from that of other people: the Holy Spirit “overshadows” Mary, making Jesus the literal son of God. One would thus expect Jesus to manifest the powers of God or the Spirit innately as a semi-divine being. This concept of Jesus as innately powerful does in fact appear in the non-canonical Infancy Gospel of Thomas, in which Jesus performs miraculous deeds as a child.

Luke, however, presents a different concept in his account of Jesus’ public ministry: Jesus receives the Spirit of God and its powers only at his baptism, at which time he is acknowledged as the son of God (3:21–22). In this account, Jesus’ relation to God differs not in kind, but only in degree, from that of other servants of God. Just as Jesus is filled with the Spirit, so were the prophets of ancient Israel. So are John, Elizabeth, Zechariah, and Simeon in Luke’s birth narrative (1:15, 41, 67; 2:25–27).
In fact, God, as a good father, gives the Holy Spirit to all of his children who ask for it (11:13).

Jesus’ reception of the Spirit is unique in one respect. When the Spirit comes upon Jesus, the perceptive reader will recognize that Jesus has been anointed with the Spirit, that he has become the anointed one, the Messiah, the Christ. And when the voice says to him, “You are my son,” the reader will recognize that God has adopted the Messiah, just as he promised to adopt the son of David whose kingdom would last forever (2 Sam 7:12–16). Thus in the account of Jesus’ public ministry, the designation “son of God” forms part of Luke’s portrayal of Jesus as the Christ.

Christ  John A. T. Robinson (1956) argued that Luke has included three inconsistent ideas about Jesus as the Christ: (1) that Jesus was the Christ already in his lifetime and therefore suffered as the Christ (Luke 24:26, 46; Acts 3:18; 17:3; 26:23); (2) that Jesus became the Christ only at his exaltation to heaven (Acts 2:33–36); and (3) that Jesus would become the Christ only when he came from heaven to rule on earth (Acts 3:19–21). These ideas are probably not three inconsistent conceptions, but three stages in a single conception of the Christ. This multi-stage understanding arose as early Christians adapted traditional Jewish ideas to the actual circumstances of Jesus’ life and death. First stage: the Christ or “anointed one” would be the one anointed with the Spirit of God. Jesus was anointed with the Spirit at his baptism, and in that sense became the “Christ” even during his public ministry. Third stage: but the Christ was also the one who would drive out the Romans and rule over Israel, an authority that Jesus did not exercise during his lifetime. In the early Christian conception, therefore, Jesus would rule on earth as the Christ at his return. Second stage: but since Jesus had not yet returned, there must be an intermediate stage as well, in which he reigned in heaven.

During Jesus’ public ministry, therefore, he is already the Christ in the sense of being anointed with the Spirit. However, he keeps this identity a secret, presumably so that no one will expect him to establish the messianic kingdom at this stage of his career. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all portray Jesus as keeping this “messianic secret.” In Luke’s story, Jesus never makes any public claim to be the Christ or the son of God, and the people never catch on to his identity. They regard him variously as John the Baptist raised from the dead, as Elijah returned, or as one of the prophets of old (9:7–8, 18–19). They do not suspect him of being the Messiah, probably because he does nothing that the Messiah was supposed to do, such as driving out the Romans and restoring independence to Israel.

While Jesus’ identity remains a secret to the people, it cannot be hidden from the Devil and his minions. The Devil knows that Jesus is the son of God (4:3, 9). The demons also know that Jesus is “the holy one of God,” “the son of God,” and the “Christ,” but Jesus prohibits them from revealing this knowledge to the people (4:34–35; 4:41; 8:28).

At first, Jesus’ disciples know as little as the people (8:25). Eventually, however, Peter recognizes Jesus as “the Christ of God” (9:20). After this, Jesus speaks more
openly to his disciples. On one occasion, he speaks of his relation to God in terms that would be at home in the Gospel of John (10:22). While Jesus does reveal himself to his disciples, he forbids them to reveal him to others (9:21, 36).

**Son of man** While Jesus avoids the designations “Christ” and “son of God,” he openly refers to himself as the “son of man.” This expression, a Hebrew or Aramaic idiom meaning “human being,” probably alludes to Daniel 7:13–14, where “one like a son of man” comes to God “with the clouds of the sky” and receives an everlasting kingdom. Early Christians identified this figure as Jesus and created a conception of the Messiah that served as an alternative to the traditional concept of the Davidic Messiah. In this conception, Jesus was the son of man who ascended to God in heaven in order to receive from him an everlasting kingdom (Luke 22:29; Acts 7:56). This conception explained why Jesus did not drive out the Romans and establish God’s kingdom as expected: he first had to ascend to heaven to receive it (Luke 19:11, 12, 15). It also explained why Jesus was not around at present (17:22). Once he received the kingdom of God in heaven, he would return to establish it on earth (12:40; 17:24, 26, 30; 18:8; 21:27) and to function as a judge (21:36).

In this conception, in order for the son of man to ascend to heaven, he first had to be on earth. Therefore, Jesus could be called the son of man during his lifetime, even before he ascended to heaven. Luke’s Jesus thus calls himself the son of man as he conducts his ministry (e.g., 5:24; 6:5; 7:34) and when he speaks about his suffering, death, and resurrection (e.g., 9:22, 44).

**Son of David** The birth narratives present Jesus as the Davidic Messiah, traditionally known as the son (i.e., descendant) of David. Likewise in Jesus’ public ministry, a blind man calls Jesus the son of David (18:38, 39). Jesus, himself, however, argues that the Christ is not the son of David, but one who is exalted to heaven as Lord (20:41–44). These two alternative conceptions stand side by side in Luke without harmonization.

**Lord** Luke’s Jesus is thus also “Lord” (*kyrios*). In numerous instances in Luke-Acts, this term clearly refers to God; in numerous others, it clearly refers to Jesus; and in still others, it is unclear whether it refers to God or to Jesus.

The term “Lord” occurs in the New Testament in two different senses: an exalted sense and a normal sense. In the exalted sense, this title functioned as the name of God. Since the Jewish people felt that it was irreverent to pronounce the personal name of God (“Yahweh”), some of them substituted the title “Lord” (Fitzmyer 1979). In Luke-Acts, Jesus becomes “Lord” at his ascension, when he is exalted to the right hand of God (Luke 20:41–44; Acts 2:34–36). In this context, the term “Lord” probably has the exalted sense as the term that substitutes for the personal name of God (cf. Phil 2:9–11). This use of the term “Lord” for both God and Jesus enabled early Christians to transfer the functions of God to Jesus. Thus the celestial signs that originally accompanied the coming of God on “the day of the Lord” (e.g., Isa 13:6–13) were transferred to the coming of Jesus (Luke 21:25–28).
In other contexts, the term “Lord” has its normal sense: it is simply the equivalent of “master” (or “owner”) and may refer to any individual who has subordinates, such as slaves, servants, disciples, or petitioners. Luke frequently uses it to refer to other “masters” besides Jesus (e.g., Luke 19:33; Acts 10:4; 16:16, 19, 30; 25:26).

The term probably has its normal sense when characters in the story refer to Jesus as “lord” or “master” during his public ministry. Thus Jesus’ disciples address him as “Lord” (e.g., 9:54, 61; 10:17, 40) or refer to him as “the Lord” (19:31, 34; 24:34). Likewise others in the story who come to Jesus as subordinates address him in the same way (5:12; 7:6; 18:41; 19:8). From the perspective of these characters, Jesus has not yet ascended to receive the name of “Lord” in the exalted sense, but already they acknowledge him as their master in the normal sense.

The meaning of the term is more ambiguous when Luke himself uses it as the narrator (e.g., 7:13; 10:1, 39, 41). From Luke’s perspective, Jesus had already ascended to heaven to receive the exalted name of “Lord.” Therefore when Luke uses the term in his narration, he may well give it the more exalted sense rather than the normal sense that it would have for the characters in his story.

**Prophet**

Luke also designates Jesus as a “prophet.” In his sermon at Nazareth, Jesus identifies himself as a prophet, complaining that “no prophet is acceptable in his homeland” (4:24). He implies that, like the prophets Elijah and Elisha, he will be accepted only by those outside Israel (4:25–27). Yet Jewish people in the story do accept him as a prophet. When he raises a widow’s son (7:11–17), as did the prophet Elijah (1 Kings 17:8–24), it is Jewish people who conclude that “A great prophet has been raised up among us” (Luke 11:16). In fact, the people generally do regard Jesus as a prophet, either as the prophet John restored to life, as the prophet Elijah returned, or as one of the prophets of old (9:7–8, 18–19; cf. 7:39). It is only his disciples who finally recognize that he is the Christ (9:20). Despite the fact that the people accept his prophetic role, Jesus considers it the normal fate of a prophet to be rejected and killed, specifically in Jerusalem (11:47–51; 13:31–35). After his death, at least two of his followers continue to regard him as “a man who was a prophet” (24:19).

The tensions within these passages suggest that Luke has incorporated two different perspectives on the designation of Jesus as a prophet. One perspective regarded the term as an appropriate designation for Jesus, especially as one who was rejected and killed (4:24–27; 7:16; 11:47–51; 13:31–35). The other perspective saw the designation as inappropriate, because it was inadequate: it represented a misconception on the part of the people, who did not grasp that Jesus was the Christ (9:7–8, 18–20).

**Jesus’ Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension**

At the conclusion of his public ministry, Jesus enters the third stage of his career, in which he experiences his passion (suffering), resurrection, and ascension. This part
of the story occurs primarily in Luke 22–24, but a number of earlier passages help to prepare for it.

**Jesus’ passion**

In Luke, Jesus’ identity as the Messiah is openly known in the birth narrative, a well kept secret during Jesus’ public ministry, but once again openly known in the passion narrative. Luke has done nothing to harmonize or explain this inconsistency.

Though Jesus never reveals his identity, both the people and the authorities know it in the passion narrative. Up to this point, the people have been clueless about Jesus’ messianic identity, generally regarding him as a prophet. However, as Jesus nears Jerusalem, a blind man addresses him as “the son of David” (18:38, 39), and the crowd that accompanies him into Jerusalem calls him a “king” (19:38). At Jesus’ trial before the Sanhedrin, the authorities know to demand, “If you are the Christ, tell us,” and to ask, “So you are the son of God?” (22:67, 70), even though Jesus has kept these designations secret throughout his public ministry. When these authorities take Jesus to Pilate, they accuse him of “saying that he is Christ, a king” (23:2), though Jesus has never publicly made such a claim. Pilate then says to Jesus, “You are the king of the Jews?” (23:3). When Jesus is crucified, the rulers and the soldiers challenge him to save himself if he is “the Christ of God,” i.e., “the king of the Jews” (23:35–36), and the superscription over the cross reads, “This is the king of the Jews” (23:38). One of the criminals crucified with him demands, “Aren’t you the Christ?” while the other requests, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (23:39, 42).

The entire passion narrative thus proceeds as though Jesus had claimed to be the Christ. His own statements, however, are less direct. When the Sanhedrin asks if he is the Christ and the son of God, he does not give an unqualified “I am” as in Mark, but replies ambiguously, “You say that I am,” and identifies himself instead as the son of man who will sit at God’s right hand (22:67–70). When Pilate asks if he is the king of the Jews, he gives a similarly ambiguous reply (23:3). Thus in the passion narrative, Jesus resists being identified with traditional conceptions of the Messiah and presents himself as Messiah in the new Christian sense, in which he first had to ascend to heaven to receive the kingdom before he could return to establish it on earth.

As in all the gospels, Jesus has complete foreknowledge concerning his fate. At his transfiguration, Moses and Elijah speak to him about his “departure” (*exodus*) to heaven, which will occur in Jerusalem (9:30). Three times in his public ministry he predicts his death and resurrection (Luke 9:22; 9:44; 18:31–33). He knows who will betray him (22:21–23) and who will deny him (22:31–34). In short, he goes not as a victim, but as one who willingly drinks the cup that God has given him (22:41).

Like the Jesus of Mark and Matthew, Luke’s Jesus presents his passion as a necessity for the son of man: he affirms that the son of man “must” suffer and be raised
(9:22; 17:25; cf. 9:44; 18:31–33). This necessity is grounded in the scriptures: “all that is written through the prophets about the son of man” must be completed (18:31). Only Luke’s Jesus presents the passion as a similar necessity for “the Christ.” The Christ too “must” suffer and be resurrected in order to fulfill the scriptures (Luke 24:25–27; 24:44–47; cf. Acts 3:18; 17:2–3). It is not clear to what scriptures Jesus is referring, since no passage in the Hebrew Bible explicitly states that either the Messiah or the son of man would suffer and be raised from the dead.

Luke’s Jesus gives two different interpretations of the significance of his death. In traditional Christian theology, God sent Jesus to die to atone for the sins of others. This idea occurs only once in the Gospel of Luke. When Jesus institutes the Lord’s Supper, he speaks of the bread as his body “that is given for you,” and of the wine as his blood “that is shed for you” (22:19–20). Elsewhere in Luke, Jesus dies because he is a prophet, because it is supposedly the normal fate of a prophet to be rejected and killed in Jerusalem (13:33–34; cf. 11:47–51). Jesus expresses this idea in the parable of the wicked tenants (20:9–19). This symbolically portrays the idea that God sent Jesus not to die, but for the same reason that he sent all the other prophets: to deliver a message. Jesus also died for the same reason as all the other prophets: those to whom he was sent rejected his message.

**Jesus’ resurrection**

Jesus differs from other prophets, however, in that he does not stay dead. On the first day of the week a group of women find his tomb empty (Luke 24:1–12). While in the other gospels the resurrected Jesus appears first to Mary Magdalene or a group of women, Luke’s Jesus appears first to Peter and to two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35; cf. 1 Cor 15:5). He then appears to the eleven and others with them (Luke 24:36–49). This appearance occurs in Jerusalem, whereas in Matthew it occurs in Galilee (Matt 28:16–20). Though the risen Jesus in Luke assures his disciples that his body consists of “flesh and bones” (Luke 24:39), he changes his appearance and appears and disappears at will, demonstrating powers beyond the normal abilities of flesh and bone.

**Jesus’ ascension**

After his resurrection, Luke’s Jesus ascends to heaven. Luke gives two different accounts of this ascension. At the end of Luke, after Jesus appears to his disciples, he leads them out to Bethany and, as he blesses them, is parted from them and borne up into the sky (Luke 24:50–51). At the beginning of Acts, Jesus stays with the disciples for forty days, talking about the kingdom of God, before a cloud takes him into the sky (Acts 1:1–11).

In a popular Christian conception of today, souls of good people “go to heaven” when they die. That conception had not yet become dominant at the time that Luke
wrote. In his day, most people, whether good or bad, expected that at death their souls would enter an underground domain, known to the Jews as “Sheol” and to the Greeks as “Hades” (cf. Luke 16:22–23). Only a few elite individuals ascended to heaven. In Jewish tradition, these included Elijah (2 Kings 2:1–12) and Enoch (1 Enoch 71). In Greco-Roman tradition, they included Romulus, Heracles, and many of the Roman emperors. At least in the Greco-Roman tradition, such special individuals ascended not only to dwell with the gods, but also to become gods themselves, thus undergoing apotheosis or deification (Burkett 2002, 80–81, 536–538). Though Luke does not refer to Jesus’ ascension as an apotheosis, it results in something similar to a deification of Jesus: he is enthroned at the right hand of God and becomes “Lord” (Acts 2:33–36). That is, he now has the same name as God and the authority to act in that name.

**Jesus’ Reign in Heaven**

Luke’s Gospel ends with Jesus’ ascension to heaven, but Acts carries the story forward into the time of Jesus’ sojourn in the heavenly realm. This fourth stage of Jesus’ story represents an interim period between Jesus’ ascension and his expected return. Luke marks off these two limits in the introduction to Acts. Here Jesus ascends to heaven in the clouds, and, as the disciples watch, two men tell them that Jesus will return from heaven in the same way (Acts 1:9–11). The rest of Acts is Luke’s story of what transpires in between. During this period, the exalted Jesus appears occasionally in person, but is more often proclaimed in the preaching and actions of his followers.

**Jesus at the right hand of God**

Luke provides no narrative description of what happened when Jesus arrived in heaven. He does, however, reveal this through the preaching of Peter, who interprets Jesus’ ascension to heaven in light of Psalm 110:1: “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies a stool for your feet’” (Acts 2:34–35). Originally this passage relayed a message from God to the Davidic king at his enthronement in Jerusalem. Early Christian interpreters, however, took it as a message from the Lord God to the Lord Jesus, a reference to the enthronement of Jesus in heaven. Thus when Jesus arrives in heaven, he sits at God’s right hand.

In Luke’s account, Peter presents this enthronement as a change in Jesus’ status: “God has made him both Lord and Christ” (2:36). As “Lord,” Jesus receives the same name as God, an indication that he acts in the name of God. The functions of God have been transferred to him (Tuckett 1996, 77; Dunn 1998, 252). As “Christ” or Messiah, he receives authority as king of the kingdom of God in heaven.
However, his authority as Christ would not be fully manifested until he returned to rule on earth.

**Testimony to Jesus**

Once Jesus ascends to the right hand of God, he pours out the Spirit on his disciples at the festival of Pentecost (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4–5; 2:1–5, 33). Once he empowers them with the Spirit, they have the task of being his “witnesses” (Acts 1:7–8). In their preaching, the disciples occasionally refer to Jesus’ public ministry (2:22; 10:36–38) or to the ministry of John (13:24–25; 19:4). Far more often they preach about Jesus’ death and resurrection (e.g., 2:23–32; 10:39–41; 13:27–37) and sometimes mention his exaltation (2:33–35; 3:13; 5:31; 7:55–56).

They also testify to the identity of Jesus: he is Lord (2:36; 7:59–60; 11:20–21; 20:21; 28:31), Christ (e.g., 2:36; 3:20; 4:26–27; 5:42), the servant or child (παίς) of God (3:13, 26; 4:27, 30), the holy and righteous one (3:14; 7:52; 22:14), the author of life (3:15), the promised prophet like Moses (3:22–23; cf. 7:37), the one to whom the prophets bear witness (3:24; 10:43; 13:27; 26:22; 28:23), the cornerstone rejected by the builders (4:11), leader (5:31), savior (5:31; 13:23), the son of man (7:56), a sheep led to the slaughter (8:32–35), the son of God (9:20; 13:33), judge of the living and the dead (10:42; 17:31), and David’s posterity (13:33).

The disciples also testify to the role of Jesus in salvation: in his name one receives forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and salvation on the day of the Lord (e.g., 2:20–21, 38–40). Yet Luke does not clarify in what way Jesus is actually necessary for any of these benefits (Tuckett 1996, 91–92), which in Jewish thought God himself could provide without any help.

As witnesses of Jesus, the disciples not only testify about Jesus, they act in his name. Though Jesus himself is absent, the disciples carry on his ministry in his name. In his name, they speak his message (4:17–20; 5:27–29, 40; 9:27, 29), baptize (2:38; 8:12, 16; 10:48; 19:5), heal the sick and infirm (3:6, 16; 4:7–10; 9:34), cast out demons (16:18), perform other signs and wonders (4:30), and suffer imprisonment and dishonor (5:41; 9:16, 21; 21:13).

**Jesus and Gentiles**

Luke’s Jesus is concerned about Gentiles as well as Jews. In the birth narrative, Simeon predicts that Jesus will be “a light for revelation of Gentiles” (Luke 2:32; cf. Isa 42:6; 49:6). This does not happen during Jesus’ ministry, though he does praise a Gentile centurion’s faith (7:9) and hint that others besides the invited Jews would enter God’s kingdom (13:28–29; 14:23–24).

After his resurrection, Jesus commissions his disciples to preach to “all the nations,” i.e., Gentiles (Luke 24:7), but in Acts the disciples act as though they had
never heard such a thing. It takes a special vision from God to Peter to get them to realize that he wants them to preach to Gentiles (Acts 10:1–11:18). However, it is not until Paul comes along that the Gentile mission gets into full swing, and in this the exalted Jesus plays a major role, as we shall see next.

**Appearances of Jesus**

While Jesus’ disciples represent him on earth, Jesus himself also puts in a personal appearance from time to time, once to Stephen and several times to Paul. For the martyr Stephen, the heavens open, enabling him to see Jesus as the son of man standing at the right hand of God (7:55–56). Jesus seems to take a special interest in Paul. While God, the Holy Spirit, and angels communicate with various individuals, the exalted Jesus speaks only to Paul or someone that he sends to Paul.

His first appearance to Paul is on the road to Damascus. Paul is blinded by a light and hears the voice of a speaker, who identifies himself as Jesus (9:3–9; 9:27; 22:6–11; 26:12–18). On the same occasion, Jesus appears in a vision to a disciple named Ananias in Damascus, sending him to restore Paul’s sight (9:10–19; cf. 22:12–16). Jesus confides to Ananias his interest in Paul: “He is a vessel of my choosing to carry my name before Gentiles and kings and sons of Israel” (9:15). Subsequently, when the Jews in Jerusalem do not accept Paul’s message, Paul falls into a trance as he is praying and sees Jesus (22:17–21). Jesus warns him to leave the city, saying, “Go, because I will send you far away to Gentiles” (22:21). Jesus appears several more times to Paul, each time giving encouragement or instruction concerning his mission (16:7; 18:9–10; 23:11). Jesus thus intervenes directly in the story to ensure that his name is carried to the Gentiles through Paul.

**Jesus’ Reign on Earth**

From Luke’s perspective, the future would bring the fifth and final stage in the story of Jesus: his reign in the kingdom of God on earth. Chronologically, Luke would have placed this part of the story after the story of Acts, but since it had not occurred, he devotes no separate narrative to it. We must therefore construct a description of this stage from predictions about it in the previous stages of the story.

This stage would begin with the return of Jesus. Certain eschatological events would lead up to that return (Luke 21:5–24). Then Jesus, who had gone away to receive a kingdom, would return to exercise its authority (Luke 19:12). He would return accompanied by the celestial signs traditionally associated with the day of the Lord (Luke 21:25–26; cf. Isa 13:9–10, 13). He would return in a cloud as the son of man, the one to whom God had given great power and glory (Luke 9:26; 21:27; Acts 1:9–11). His coming would be unexpected, like the coming of a thief (Luke 12:39–


At that time, Jesus would restore an independent kingdom to Israel, over which he would reign (Acts 1:6–7). As the Davidic Messiah, he would rule over the Israelites in a kingdom that would have no end (Luke 1:32–33). He would regather the twelve tribes of Israel and place his twelve apostles on twelve thrones governing them (Luke 22:28–30). Jesus’ other followers would also share in his reign (Luke 12:32). He would put some of his faithful servants in charge of five cities and others in charge of ten (Luke 19:15–19; cf. 12:42–44). While this kingdom would be a restoration of the fallen kingdom of David over Israel, it would include Gentiles as well, all those called by the name of the Lord (Acts 15:14–17).

If this stage of the story had occurred, Luke’s story of Jesus would have come full circle back to the beginning. All of the hopes and expectations placed on the newborn Jesus in the birth narrative would have been fulfilled. Jesus would have sat on the throne of David reigning over Israel. He would have become a “horn of salvation,” bringing the Jewish people deliverance from the Romans. He would have brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted the humble. Unfortunately for Luke, he never saw these hopes fulfilled. Consequently, Luke’s story of Jesus remains incomplete, ending in Acts with Jesus’ disciples still awaiting his return.

Notes

1 Buckwalter (1996, 6–24) surveys a number of previous attempts to describe what is central in the christology of Luke-Acts.

2 Buckwalter (1996, 192) thinks that Luke and his readers “firmly believed that Jesus was by nature as much God as God the Father was.” Luke fails to mention this belief because “such knowledge was already common to his readers.” However, Luke explicitly states that he wrote in order to confirm what his readers had already been taught (Luke 1:4). If they had been taught that Jesus was a pre-existent divine being like God, this would seem an important teaching for Luke to confirm.

3 Dunn (1998, 245–251) seeks to determine when “Lord” refers to God and when to Jesus in Acts. Rowe (2006, 27) thinks that Luke uses the term “Lord” in such a way that God and Jesus are inseparable in the narrative: the narrative establishes for them a shared identity.

4 Johnson, among others, has argued that “Luke’s Jesus is fundamentally a prophetic figure,” specifically the prophet like Moses promised in Deuteronomy 18:15–19.
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This assertion probably overstates the case (Tuckett 1996, 84–85; 1999, 145–148).


Zwiep (1997, 145–166, 196–197), among others, thinks that Luke’s Jesus is enthroned at the right hand of God on Easter Sunday before the resurrection appearances, so that in these appearances Jesus had already been exalted to heaven. But Luke mentions only one ascension of Jesus to heaven, and he places this after the resurrection appearances in Luke 24:50–51, in Acts 1:1–11, and in Acts 2:32–36. It is more likely then that Luke’s Jesus is not enthroned at the right hand of God until his ascension (Franklin 1975, 29–41).

According to Tuckett, when Jesus’ disciples ask him when he will restore the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6–7), he brushes the question aside as irrelevant and unimportant (Tuckett 2001, 143), because he does not intend to restore a this-worldly kingdom to Israel (Tuckett 1999, 162–164; 2001, 142–143). However, in the context, Jesus has been teaching his disciples about the kingdom for forty days (Acts 1:3). Presumably therefore their question develops out of Jesus’ teaching and does not represent a misapprehension on their part. Jesus does not tell them that they have the wrong idea; he only tells them not to worry about the timing (Franklin 1975, 40).

References


