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Luke’s Gospel has a distinctive interest in “today.”¹ The author of Luke and Acts (“Luke”) uses the word sēmeron (“today”) as many times as the rest of the New Testament writings combined.² And although a couple instances may reflect inherited tradition more than distinctive usage,³ most of the occurrences in Luke’s Gospel are significant statements associated with God’s saving activity:

- “to you is born today,” the angel of the Lord says, “in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord (Luke 2:11).
- “Today,” Jesus states in his inaugural words at a Nazareth synagogue, “this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (4:21).
- “Today” Jesus says regarding Zacchaeus, “salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham (19:9).
- And “Truly I tell you,” Jesus tells a man crucified next to him, “today you will be with me in Paradise” (23:43).

These are only the most significant examples. Each one refers directly or indirectly to a significant event of God’s saving activity.

Historically, many interpreters have credited Luke’s emphasis on “today” to a diminished eschatology. Ernst Käsemann put it this way: “You do not write the history of the Church if you are expecting the end of the world to come any day.”⁵ Indeed, interpreters have noticed how Luke’s narratives reflect a shift in orientation from an imminent eschatology to a focus on present realities. Luke often uses the language “daily” (kath’ hēmeran), for instance, to characterize the ongoing condition of individual disciples and the Jesus-following community (Luke 9:23; 11:3; 16:19; 19:47; 22:53; Acts 2:46–47; 3:2; 16:5; 19:9).⁶ This shift gives the day at hand (“today”) a natural emphasis. Whatever Luke’s eschatology timeline, his narratives certainly draw attention to the here and now of faithful living.⁷ Joseph Fitzmyer summarizes:

Luke’s desire [is] to shift the emphasis in many of Jesus’ sayings from the eschaton to the sēmeron to show that they are still valid guides for conduct in his generation. . . . This subtle shift directs Christian attention from the following of Christ in view of an imminent reckoning to an understanding of Jesus’ conduct as an inspiration and guide for Christian life in the Period of the ecclesia pressa, the church under stress. Admittedly, Luke has thus dulled the eschatological edge of some of the sayings of Jesus to make of them a hortatory device for everyday Christian living.⁸

In short, like Fitzmyer, many readers credit Luke’s infatuation with “today” primarily to a shift in focus toward everyday disciple-ship in the here and now.

But Luke’s interest in “today” reflects more than a mere shift

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¹ My thanks go to the “Gospel of Luke” section at the Society of Biblical Literature conference (San Antonio, November 2016) for their constructive feedback to an earlier version of this essay.
⁴ All translations—here and throughout the essay—are mine. Underlines in this section are my additions.
⁶ Interestingly, Luke differs from Matthew’s version of the Lord’s Prayer by replacing the word “today” (sēmeron, so Matt 6:11) with “daily” (kath’ hēmeran): “give us daily our daily bread” (Luke 11:3).
⁷ Hans Conzelmann writes: “Whereas originally the imminence of the End was the most important factor, now other factors enter. The delay has to be explained. . . . As the End is still far away, the adjustment to a short time of waiting is replaced by a ‘Christian life’ of long duration, which requires ethical regulation and is no longer dependent upon a definite termination. The virtue of hypomonē [endurance] comes to the fore.” The Theology of St. Luke, trans. Geoffrey Buswell (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 131–132.
Whatever Luke's intentions with “today” language, it does not simply stem from a shift in orientation away from the future. At some level, it reflects a distinctively new emphasis in the vision of God’s saving activity, bringing the present hour into greater coalescence with the ultimate reality of the eschaton.

9. Carroll writes: “Luke is seen to be both an advocate (Mattill, Hiers, Francis) and an enemy (Conzelmann, Haenchen, Grässer, Zmijewski) of imminent hope. The balance between present and future in the structure of Luke's eschatology tips now toward the present (Farrell, Fitzmyer, Maddox), now toward the future (Mattill, Hiers). Many scholars regard Luke and Acts as consistent with respect to the role of eschatology (Francis, Smith, Farrell), but others drive a wedge between the two volumes (Wilson, Gaventa; cf. Schneider). The weight of Luke’s eschatological emphasis falls in some cases on the Parousia (Mattill), in others on the ascension (Flender, Franklin, Kränkl), and in others still on the history that stretches out between these two moments (Conzelmann, Zmijewski). Finally, the setting that prompted Luke’s formulation of future hope varies from discouragement and doubt induced by Parousia delay (Franklin, Kränkl), to an outbreak of apocalyptic enthusiasm (Haenchen, Ellis), to a combination of these doubts induced by Parousia delay (Franklin, Kränkl), to an outbreak of apocalyptic enthusiasm (Haenchen, Ellis), to a combination of these factors in a war waged on two fronts (Wilson, Mattill, Farrell, and Gaventa), to gnostic absorption of the Parousia into Jesus’ resurrection/ascension (Talbert, Bartsch).” “Response to the End of History: Eschatology and Situation in Luke-Acts” (SBL Diss 92; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 28–29.


the “today-ness” of the event; “to you is born today a Savior who is Christ the Lord” (2:11).

- At the inaugural event of his ministry, Jesus reads portions from Isaiah about liberation in “the year of the Lord’s favor” and follows it up with the decisive statement: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:19–21; cf. Isa 61:2).

- After an opening series of Jesus’ wonderful deeds, eyewitnesses react verbally: “we have seen incredible things today” (5:26).

- In response to a threat from Herod, Jesus characterizes his ministry as taking place “today”: “I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. But today, tomorrow, and the next day it is necessary for me to continue my journey, since it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside Jerusalem” (13:32–33).

- In the story of Zacchaeus—a story most theologically significant for the narrative—Jesus twice emphasizes “today” as the time of action: “for today I must stay at your house” (19:5), and the concluding word: “Today salvation has come to this house” (19:9).

- At the cross, finally, Jesus responds to the thief’s request: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise” (23:43).

Every one of these statements is entirely unique to Luke’s narrative. No other evangelist has such a regular, distinctive emphasis on “today.” Even more, all the above statements uttered by Jesus draw visible attention (in Greek) to the word “today” by placing it first or among the very first words of the sentence. Clearly “today” matters to the author of Luke-Acts.

Together, these statements become definitive declarations about the arrival, fulfillment, and realization of God’s salvation in Jesus’ ministry. In this ministry, God’s saving power is present and active right now. Along the same lines, elsewhere in Luke’s Gospel Jesus associates his arrival with the time or season (kairos) of God’s visitation (19:44)—an event foreseen and foreshadowed early in the narrative (1:68, 78; 7:16). Jesus also associates his ministry with “the present time” (ton kairon touton, 12:56), showing that the present hour is both a profound opportunity as well as a moment for fateful decision. A bit to our surprise, Luke’s narrative omits Mark’s opening description of Jesus’ message—a description that emphasizes the present time: “the time is fulfilled and the reign of God has drawn near” (Mark 1:15; cf. Matt 4:17). But here it seems Luke’s narrative has a slightly different emphasis, characterizing the reign of God as not just “drawing near” but already arrived in Jesus’ ministry. For this reason, elsewhere Luke’s Jesus emphasizes that “the reign of God has come to you” (11:20), and “see, the reign of God is in your midst” (17:21). Thus, for Luke, God’s reign has not just drawn near, it stands right before us “today” in Jesus’ ministry.

For related reasons, Luke shifts his use of “today” language in the book of Acts. He no longer associates it with Jesus’ earthly ministry—events now past—but instead with the unfolding task of his followers: bearing witness (Acts 1:8). The word “today” (sēmeron) appears nine times in the narrative of Acts, always in public speeches, nearly always spoken by Peter or Paul, and in most cases in major defense speeches. One of the most representative is Paul’s concluding word to his extensive speech before King Agrippa, Bernice, and Porcius Festus: “Whether quickly or not, I pray to God that not only you but also all who are listening to me today might become such as I am—except for these chains” (26:29). Whereas in Luke’s Gospel “today” is the time frame for God’s saving activity in Jesus, in Acts it is the time for bearing witness regarding this salvation—and responding to it.

In contrast to these qualities of God’s saving activity, evil forces in Luke’s Gospel hold power only in passing. Their reign is a temporary one, comparable to the “hour of darkness” Jesus names in


15. Luke 11:20 (“But if by the finger of God I cast out the demons, then the reign of God has come to you”) also occurs in Matt 12:28 (substituting “Spirit” for “finger”).

16. Some see in Luke’s introduction to the Parable of the Pounds (19:11–27) a voice contrary to this emphasis (“As they heard these things, he proceeded to tell a parable, because he was near to Jerusalem, and because they supposed the reign of God was about to appear immediately,” v. 11). But a closer read shows differently. Luke emphasizes the theme of kingship and that king’s rejection (vv. 12, 14, 27), setting the stage for Jesus’ rejection as king by the Jerusalem leaders (19:37–23:56). Thus, Jesus’ parable responds to the question (19:11) by emphasizing he does embody God’s reign here and now, even though many in Jerusalem will scorn him. See J. Carroll, Response, 97–103.

17. Italics mine. The other eight occurrences of “today” are Acts 4:9; 13:33; 19:40; 20:26; 22:3; 24:21; 26:2, 29; 27:33. Only 19:40 is not spoken by an apostle (but by the town clerk in Ephesus). Those delivered in defense speeches are 4:9, 22:3, 24:21, 26:2, and 26:29.
For Luke, salvation is a multi-dimensional reality that entails healing, forgiveness, life, restoration, redemption, and social reversal, among other things.

the Garden of Gethsemane (22:53). Evil’s sphere of influence is associated with temporary powers like worldly kingdoms (4:5–7) and crippling illnesses (13:16). Evil forces may arise to challenge God’s purpose at an “opportune time” (kairos, 4:13; also 22:3–6), but their influence will not finally last. Only God’s purpose in Jesus can generate a salvation with enduring results.

For Luke, salvation is a multi-dimensional reality that entails healing, forgiveness, life, restoration, redemption, and social reversal, among other things. This dynamic reality hinges less on a particular event of “ransom” (i.e., the cross) and more on the whole of Jesus’ ministry: from his birth (2:11) to his death (23:43), from the start of his public ministry (4:21; cf. 5:26; 13:16) to his arrival among tax collectors and “sinners” (19:9). Although the cross and eternal life are significant, Luke’s Gospel generally emphasizes the here and now of salvation that God’s reign makes possible through Jesus’ ministry.18 For this reason, “today” is not simply the sphere of faithful response, more importantly it is where God’s saving power takes shape. As Joel Green words it, “Luke is fond of using the word ‘today’ to emphasize the present as the time of eschatological fulfillment, now as the time of God’s gracious deliverance (4:21; 5:26; 19:9; 23:43).”19

David Pao describes the vision of salvation in Second Isaiah as “a new period” that places Israel at a “historical turning point” in salvation history.20 Pao argues this same vision of salvation is fundamentally adopted and adapted by Luke in his narrative of Acts, and more broadly Luke and Acts together.21 This idea of a “new period” of salvation history reflects the general vision of Luke’s Gospel, but it would more accurately be described as a “new day” of salvation—namely, “today”—taking shape in the person and work of Jesus. In the words of Saint Bede the Venerable, Luke’s use of “today” language implies that “the night of ancient blindness is past and the day of eternal salvation has arrived.”22

II. “Today” as performative speech and transformative reality

Some of Luke’s statements about salvation “today,” in fact, are not just descriptive. They are performative statements—words that shape and transform reality. This is yet another dynamic of Luke’s artistry that has origins in Second Isaiah.

A prominent theme in Second Isaiah is that the “word of God” alone is capable of achieving enduring realities: “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever” (40:8). In several prophetic statements, God generates “new things” (42:9; 43:18–19; 46:10; also 65:17–25) and even declares them beforehand (42:9).23 Even though declaring beforehand is an act distinguishable from the foretold events themselves, Second Isaiah suggests the declaration itself plays a significant role in bringing these “new things” to pass (42:9; 46:10; cf. 65:17–25).

In fact, the relationship is so close that the declaring becomes almost indistinguishable from the event itself:

You have heard; now see all this; and will you not declare it? From this time forward I make you hear new things, hidden things that you have not known. They are created now, not long ago; before today you have never heard of them (Isa 48:6–7, emphasis mine).

So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it (55:11).

Here in Second Isaiah, deliverance and salvation not only come into being by God’s initiative, they take place here and now by the transformative power of God’s word.24

In similar ways, at several points in Luke’s Gospel Jesus speaks words of salvation that serve not just to describe, but to actualize specific occasions of deliverance.

• “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Jesus declares regarding the Year of Jubilee and the various forms of liberation associated with it (Luke 4:21).


21. “The entire Isaianic New Exodus program provides the structural framework for the narrative of Acts as well as the various emphases developed within this framework. The national story of the ancient Israelite tradition provides the foundation story through which the identity of the early Christian movement can be constructed” Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus, 250.


23. “See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them” (42:9).

24. Second Isaiah also characterizes God’s salvation as lasting “forever” (51:8), in contrast to God’s abandonment and wrath which are “for a (passing) moment” (54:7–8). For more on the power of the Word of God in Isaiah and in Acts, see David W. Pao, Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus, 147–180.
• “Today” Jesus declares regarding Zacchaeus, “salvation has come to this [Zacchaeus’s] house,” publicly announcing Zacchaeus’s participation in the reign of God (19:9).

• “Truly I tell you, today” Jesus tells a thief, “you will be with me in Paradise,” effectively promising the man eternal life (23:43).

These statements do not merely describe things already in place. They generate new realities, based on the transformative power of Jesus’ word. Several times elsewhere in the narrative, Jesus is shown as one able to heal and transform by merely speaking a word (5:13, 24–25; 7:7–10; 7:48; 8:24, 48, 54; 18:42). Likewise, in these cases, Jesus speaks a word of salvation “today” that has the power to generate divine redemption—for the oppressed, for a tax collector, and for a thief. The result portrays Jesus as a bearer of God’s word, who by merely speaking is able to generate life.

Even more, Jesus’ declarations are not just for characters in the narrative. The force, narrative placement, and distinctive language of his declarations all suggest they intend not merely to describe for readers but to address them: and in doing so, to show that “today” salvation is an existential reality for them as well. Robert H. Smith summarizes:

By means of the repeated utterance of “today” in his gospel (2:11; 3:22; 4:21; 13:31–33; 19:5, 9; Acts 13:32–33), Luke does not intend to describe the words so qualified as belonging to past history. Luke is rather addressing his readers and saying to them that they “today” stand confronted with the same affirmations and offers by means of the word of his testimony.25

In this way, the prevalence of “today” language throughout Luke’s Gospel resonates with his overarching interest in fostering certainty among hearers concerning his story of salvation and its immediate consequences for their lives: so that you may know the certainty of the things in which you have been instructed” (Luke 1:4).

Deborah Thompson Prince has recently argued that Luke’s use of rhetorical questions, especially in his Ascension narratives, served originally to address crucial issues of debate among his audiences regarding the resurrection.26 I suggest Luke’s statements regarding salvation “today” performed a similar function for his first hearers: to address them with words that, in Luke’s mind, proclaimed the good news of salvation directly to them.27

25. Robert H. Smith, “Paradise Today: Luke’s Passion Narrative,” Currents in Theology and Mission 3.6 (Dec 1976): 330. 26. Deborah Thompson Prince, “‘Why Do You Seek the Living among the Dead?’ Rhetorical Questions in the Lukan Resurrection Narrative,” JBL 135.1 (2016): 123–139. 27. François Bovon concurs: “The ‘this day’ of the occurrence [Luke 2:11] underscores both the fulfillment of prophecy and its present relevance. If God is acting for us, we should hear his voice today. Neither the transitory nature of sêmeron (“this day”) nor its perennial present in the deuteronomistic sense should be stressed one-sidedly. It belongs to the past, because salvation history is history, but this past remains present for us when we keep salvation in our sight. Luke is both a historian and an evangelist; his identity as a historian is a means to accomplish his task as herald.” Luke 1, trans. Christine M. Thomas;
Luke’s concept of salvation “today” is not just application to the present—it is a rhetorical strategy, aimed at bearing witness to audiences of all times and places regarding the saving power of Jesus.

Luke’s intentions appear to be that his hearers may know firsthand the salvation announced by Jesus in the Third Gospel. Those to whom Jesus announces salvation “today” (like Zacchaeus, 19:9a) are complex characters, whose understanding and responses are difficult to pin down. Regardless, in reading, performing, and hearing Luke’s story, the narrative bears witness—and like characters in Acts, Luke the author bears witness—in ways aimed at rhetorical persuasion of audiences, so that “whether quickly or not … all who are listening to [the narrative] today might become such as [Paul is]” (Acts 26:29)—a follower and witness of Jesus. Just as in Acts, “today” is the time frame for extending and responding to the salvation announced by Jesus’ witnesses, so also for Luke’s audiences of all times and places: in hearing and reading Luke’s story, “today” transpires here and now as the day of salvation and the time for responding to the good news being declared.