

Salvation ‘Today’ in Luke’s Gospel

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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).⁴

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,

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.

2. Twenty times each: Luke 2:11; 4:21; 5:26; 12:28; 13:32, 33; 19:5, 9; 22:34, 61; 23:43; Acts 4:9; 13:33; 19:40; 20:26; 22:3; 24:21; 26:2, 29; 27:33. Cf. Matt 6:11, 30; 11:23; [16:3]; 21:28; 27:8, 19; 28:15; Mark 14:30; Rom 11:8; 2 Cor 3:14, 15; Heb 1:5; 3:7, 13, 15; 4:7; 5:5; 13:8; James 4:13.

3. Luke 12:28/Matt 6:30; Luke 22:34/Mark 14:30, cf. Luke 22:61. Matthew has a tendency to use “today” language to refer to enduring validity (“until this day”): Matt 11:23; 27:8; 28:15.

4. All translations—here and throughout the essay—are mine. Underlines in this section are my additions.

5. Käsemann, “The Problem of the Historical Jesus,” in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, trans. W. J. Montague (Studies in Biblical Theology; London: SCM, 1964), 28.

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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 discipleship in the here and now.

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

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.

8. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX* (AB 28; New York: Doubleday, 1970), 234.

in eschatology. First, Luke’s writings retain a clear sense of eschatological hope. John Carroll notes that, amid a vast diversity of opinions on Lukan eschatology, the conventional reading of “un-eschatological Luke” hardly accounts for all things.⁹ More recently, interpreters have shown Luke’s eschatology is less focused on *timing* and more on the eschaton’s *nature*: its content, significance, and situation.¹⁰ Even more recently, conversation has centered on the nature of *biblical prophecy*—suggesting it is less linear and definitive than it is contingent on the attentive responses of those affected.¹¹ So, 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.

More importantly, Luke’s emphasis on “today” generates new narrative realities of their own. This language is not merely descriptive of God’s saving activity: at points it serves to actualize the salvation of which divine messengers speak. As a result, divine messengers (like Jesus) become bearers of a creative and transformative word, able to generate life and liberation by the very act of speaking. Further, this transformative word is not confined strictly to characters in the story. In the act of reading, the word of Jesus’ salvation is announced not just to narrative characters, but also to Luke’s audiences “today” in their own contexts. And in so doing, the narrative continues Jesus’ ministry of proclaiming the present reality of the Lord’s favor to new hearers (Luke 4:18–19).

I. Today as the time frame of salvation

Luke is not the first to emphasize a specific day as the temporal space for salvation. In fact, his emphasis has roots in the prophetic words of Second and Third Isaiah—words very formative to Luke’s

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 two 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, 1988), 28–29.

10. So Steven Leonard Bridge, “Where the Eagles are Gathered”: *The Deliverance of the Elect in Lukan Eschatology* (JSNTSup 240; London: Sheffield Academic, 2003). See also Carroll, Response, 29.

11. See Christopher M. Hays, *When the Son of Man Didn’t Come: A Constructive Proposal on the Delay of the Parousia* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016).

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notion of salvation.¹² These prophetic oracles depict God’s saving activity as taking place “in a time of favor,” “on a day of salvation,” and on “the day of vengeance of our God” (Isa 49:8; 61:2). These statements resonate with the prophetic vision that God is up to “new things,” in contrast to “the former things” of long ago: “See, the former things (*ta ap’ archēs*) have come to pass, and new things (*kainā*) I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them” (42:9; see also 43:18–19; 46:10; 65:17–25). All these statements depict God’s saving work from the historical context of a return from exile. And yet, they describe salvation as a sudden turn of events—sudden and succinct enough to be bottled into the time frame of a single day. Related to this, Second Isaiah suggests the most appropriate time to respond to God’s salvation is the present: “Seek the Lord while the Lord may be found, call upon God while God is near” (55:6; see also 42:9). Here and elsewhere in Second Isaiah, newfound immediacy characterizes God’s work and its implications for Israel. Whatever specific events are implied, they constitute a grand work of salvation transpiring here and now.

For Luke’s Gospel, although “daily” is the primary sphere of discipleship, “today” is the sphere of *salvation*—it is the time frame when God’s saving activity takes shape. Through a series of paradigmatic statements, Luke’s Gospel characterizes “today” as temporal space in which God generates an enduring reality of salvation.

- In the very first Spirit-inspired prophecy of the narrative, Zechariah associates salvation with the dawn of a new day: “the dawn from on high will break upon us” (1:78).
- At the birth of Jesus, the angel of the Lord draws attention to

12. See Tucker S. Ferda, “Reason to Weep: Isaiah 52 and the Subtext of Luke’s Triumphal Entry,” *JTS* 66.1 (2015): 28–60; Andrés García Serrano, “Anna’s Characterization in Luke 2:36–38: A Case of Conceptual Allusion?” *CBQ* 76.3 (2014): 464–480; Holly Beers, *The Followers of Jesus as the “Servant”: Luke’s Model from Isaiah for the Disciples in Luke-Acts* (LNTS 535; New York: T&T Clark, 2015); David W. Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus* (Biblical Studies Library; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002).

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.¹³ 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 mo-

13. “To you is born today a Savior” (*Etechthē hūmin sēmeron sōtēr*, 2:11); “Today is fulfilled” (*sēmeron peplērōtai*, 4:21); “Behold, I am casting out demons and performing cures today” (*idou ekballo daimonia kai iaseis apostelō sēmeron*).... But today... it is necessary for me” (*plēn dei me sēmeron*, 13:32–33); “Zacchaeus, hurry down, for today I must stay at your house” (*Zakchaie, speusas katabēthi, sēmeron gar*, 19:5); “Today salvation (*Sēmeron sōtēria*) has come to this house” (19:9); “Truly I tell you, today. . .” (*Amēn, soi legō, sēmeron*, 23:43). James Boice points out that the wording of Luke 2:11 (*sēmeron sōtēr*) and 19:9 (*Sēmeron sōtēria*) are close parallels: “More clearly in the original Greek than in translation, the words here are almost a mirror image of the angel’s announcement to the shepherds in 2:11.” Boice, “For You Today a Savior: The Lukan Infancy Narrative,” *Word & World* 27:4 (Fall 2007): 379.

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ment for fateful decision.¹⁴ 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),¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

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).¹⁷ 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

14. Noted by Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 1:68.

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).

22. In Arthur A. Just Jr., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament III, Luke* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 40.

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.

18. Mark Allan Powell writes: “Luke recognizes that people are interested in receiving eternal life (Luke 10:25; 18:18), and he affirms the legitimacy of this hope (Luke 18:30; Acts 13:48); but, in general, he lays more emphasis on the life that God’s reign makes possible here and now. This is brought out by his repeated use of the word “today” in significant passages (Luke 2:11; 3:22; 4:21; 5:26; 19:5, 9; 23:43). Defined as ‘participation in the reign of God,’ salvation means living life, even now, as God intends it to be lived.” Powell, “Salvation in Luke-Acts,” *Word & World* 12.1 (1992): 6.

19. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 132. Emphasis original.

20. Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus*, 41 (see also pp. 37–59). Pao derives the language of “historical turning point” from Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40–66* (IBR; Louisville: John Knox, 1995), 20.

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.

- “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 *sēmeron* (“this day”) nor its perennial present in the deuteronomic 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;

The Third Gospel itself is a narrative act of bearing witness: it testifies to audiences of various times and places about the saving work of Jesus in the here and now, wherever and whenever that may be.

That these statements all appear in direct speeches by narrative characters only further supports this notion. That they are all spoken by divine messengers supports it even further. And the fact that these statements appear at such critical junctions in the narrative, finally, supports this idea even more. Whatever Luke’s rhetorical strategies to his “today” statements, they are definitive declarations regarding God’s saving activity that have immediate relevance for Luke’s hearers and readers. Although using the medium of a self-contained narrative, the story of Luke’s Gospel reflects a dynamic capacity, based on the authority of Jesus’ word, to generate salvation for Luke’s audiences “today” in their own contexts. In this way, the Third Gospel itself is a narrative act of bearing witness: it testifies to audiences of various times and places about the saving work of Jesus in the here and now, wherever and whenever that may be.

Conclusion

In his teaching and writing, Donald Juel frequently emphasized: texts do not simply convey information—they *do* things to readers. “As is the case with other art forms, the Gospel must be *experienced*; study prepares hearers to listen for themes, for invention, for irony and surprise.”²⁸

Juel’s emphasis gets after what we readers and hearers experience in Luke’s statements of salvation “today.” Whether we hold to specific idea of speech-act theory or performative language, all of us must admit: words have performative functions. Narratives—whether ancient or modern—*do* things to readers. And some narrative statements achieve this to a much more profound degree.

Luke’s Gospel builds upon the legacy of Second Isaiah’s salvation story—specifically the way God’s saving activity is now taking shape for a new day and time. In doing this, Luke claims Israel’s historic story of salvation as part of his own story. More importantly, he claims God’s historic saving activity has transpired anew in Jesus. But that is not all. Luke’s Gospel also declares to listening audiences that this salvation is at work and accessible to

ed. Helmut Koester (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 88.

28. Donald Juel, “A Disquieting Silence: The Matter of the Ending,” in *The Ending of Mark and the Ends of God*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 4; emphasis added. Friends of mine who had Juel as a professor also attest to this emphasis in his classroom teaching.

them “today.” In so doing, Luke is not simply updating outdated eschatological interests. He instills and presumes in the words of his narrative a performative power to address the hearer, to confront her with God’s saving activity, and to generate salvation in her day in new ways. In short, 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. In the words of François Bovon, “the sēmeron becomes ‘today’ for each hearer and reader to the extent that they rightly understand the proclamation.”²⁹

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.

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.

29. Bovon, *Luke 1*, 154.