
Bodies Restored, Communities Fractured?

Luke and Salvation Revisited

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Salvation is a central concern of Luke and Acts. In these two books, Luke tells the story of God's decisive intervention in the world to bring salvation to Israel, and to the whole earth—all in fulfillment of ancient promise. That divine initiative focuses readers' attention on the role of Jesus as the Savior (*sōtēr*, 2:11), who conveys and embodies salvation (e.g., 2:30; 19:9–10; 23:35; cf. Acts 4:12; 5:31), but from what and for what does he save people?

The form deliverance takes depends on the condition or circumstance of need.¹ For those who are bound or oppressed (e.g., by demonic spirits), salvation means “release”; these persons are saved by being liberated. For those whose lives are marked as sinful (thus estranged from both God and community), salvation means forgiveness. For those who suffer from economic marginalization through accumulated debts, salvation means economic liberation. For those who experience disability (physical impairment together with its social-relational limitations) or who experience sickness and disease, salvation means bodily restoration or wholeness—healing. Salvation in these varying dimensions is a prominent concern in Luke's narrative (both the Gospel and Acts). It is personal, yet much more than an individual affair. Release—whether from demonic control, sin, impairment, sickness, or debt—carries with it restoration to community, to a fuller participation in the community and its relations.

At the same time, however, Luke's narrative also profiles ways in which varying forms of release can disrupt and destabilize—indeed, fracture—communities. When a person moves toward wholeness, there are effects on the larger social system (whether household, village, or synagogue) whose equilibrium has been affected. What, from the perspective of a person restored to health or fuller function, is a constructive change, something to be welcomed, may appear to others in that person's social system (e.g.,

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village or synagogue) to be an unwelcome change, something to be resisted.

It all starts at home: Jesus' inaugural mission statement at Nazareth

In the first public statement of Jesus' mission, he signals that his primary concern will be to bring release (*aphesis* in Greek)—liberation for the captive and oppressed, and restored sight to those who are blind. His core message: he has been commissioned to proclaim good news for the impoverished (Luke 4:18–19, citing Isa 58:6; 61:1–2). He will be the agent of God's Jubilee restoration in this “today” of the “year of the LORD's favor” (Luke 4:19, 21). The ensuing hostile exchange between Jesus and his fellow villagers highlights his boundary-transgressing interest in bringing help to outsiders, just as Elijah and Elisha had long ago stepped outside Israel to bring healing power to an economically distressed widow and a foreign army leader (4:25–27, recalling 1 Kgs 17:8–24; 2 Kgs 5:1–27). This version of Spirit-authorized “good news,” however, is not perceived as a good thing by the audience at Nazareth. In this opening act of the public career of Jesus, Luke's audience discovers that a prophet-physician who has resolved to bring help to persons beyond the boundaries of kin-group, village, and nation does not effect restoration in his own village but instead generates resistance and conflict—prefiguring the future course of Jesus' mission, which will culminate in his death on a Roman cross.

Already in the account of Jesus' childhood, a Spirit-tutored oracle by Simeon prepares readers for this narrative program.

1. See Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke*, NTT (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 78–79; John T. Carroll, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 160. For a helpful survey of salvation-related terminology in Luke, see Gert J. Steyn, “Soteriological Perspectives in Luke's Gospel,” in *Salvation in the New Testament: Perspectives on Soteriology*, ed. Jan G. van der Watt, NovTSup 121 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 69–72.

Simeon prophesies that the life of Jesus, the very embodiment of salvation, will mean glory for Israel but also revelation for the nations (or gentiles: *ethnē*)—yet, at the same time, he will provoke heart-rending division (2:30–32, 34–35). This narrative arc spans Luke’s two books, all the way to the open-ended conclusion of Acts, with Paul in Rome (Acts 28:16–31, esp. vv. 23–28). Divine visitation to bring liberation, deliverance, and peace—in a word, salvation—can go unrecognized and thus be rebuffed (Luke 1:68–69, 79; 19:41–44).

Restoration for some, fracturing of community: six episodes

Jesus is divinely sent and Spirit empowered to bring release: forgiveness, physical and social restoration, and liberation from oppressive forces. Yet his acts to restore wholeness often result in conflict. I will illustrate this recurring plot element in Luke’s narrative by pointing to six episodes: Jesus’ encounter with (1) a tax collector who answers the call to follow Jesus, then hosts a celebratory banquet (5:27–39); (2) a man whose right hand is impaired (6:6–11); (3) a woman whose participation in her village has assigned her the label of *sinner*, for her perceived deviance from communal norms of conduct (7:36–50); (4) a tomb-dwelling Gerasene man dominated by an army of demons (8:26–39); (5) a woman impaired by a severely bent back (13:10–17); and (6) a wealthy tax collector whose quest for a more meaningful life leads him up a tree, and back down into the company of the saved (19:1–10).

For whom the bell no longer tolls (taxes): A tax-collector welcomed, detractors incited (5:27–39). Levi, summoned to follow Jesus, leaves everything to join the growing ranks of the disciples, then hosts a banquet at his home. The guests number Jesus, his disciples, and evidently a mixed company that includes fellow tax collectors but also Pharisees and scribes affiliated with them. Speaking to disciples, guests identified with the latter groups indirectly criticize Jesus’ practice of entering into meal fellowship with “tax collectors and sinners” (v. 30). He responds with another mission statement: his purpose is to bring a physician’s care to the sick—a metaphor for the mending of life, imaged here as repentance (v. 32)—whom Jesus is inviting into fellowship with him. An outsider (tax collector-sinner) finds welcome, and villagers of impeccable reputation register their (understandable) protest. Restoration and inclusion for some threatens rupture to the community. This pattern will be repeated often.

You have to hand it to him: A body restored, critics emboldened (6:6–11). This is the first of three healings on the Sabbath, each one resulting in conflict (also 13:10–17; 14:1–6). Jesus is teaching in a synagogue, and a man with an impaired *right* hand is present. Pharisees have sparred with Jesus in the last three episodes (5:17–6:5), and in this synagogue setting they watch to see if Jesus will heal the man on the Sabbath. Their motive is hostile (6:7). Jesus, aware of their hostile intent, positions the man in the center of the scene and then poses a rhetorical question to his detractors. Which is conduct consonant with the commandment

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to keep the Sabbath as a holy day: doing good or doing evil, saving life or destroying it (v. 9)? Jesus’ either-or question does not leave space for refraining from action, when something must be done to preserve life. Action to heal is faithful Sabbath-keeping. So he proceeds to restore the man’s hand, and the outcome is rage on the part of Jesus’ opponents (vv. 10–11). Once again, restoration for one person threatens communal rupture, and this time the conflict has greatly intensified.

Guest vs. host: A sinful woman restored, a reputable host rebuked (7:36–50). Role reversal dominates the first of three meals hosted by Pharisees, at which Jesus is an invited guest (7:36–50; 11:37–54; 14:1–24). Each of these meal scenes becomes an occasion for a vigorous contest between divergent notions of fidelity to the purposes of God and of the social character of the community of God’s people.

In the Pharisee Simon’s house, a woman whose reputation in her village distinguishes her as a “sinner” appears. The label *sinner* identifies someone as an outsider whose behavior deviates from the norms of the social group.² So when this woman approaches Jesus and proceeds to bathe his feet with myrrh-ointment and with her own tears, then dry them with her unbound hair, the host is indignant. In his perception, the fact that Jesus permits physical contact from this woman disconfirms his status as a prophet (7:39). Before the episode has ended, however, Jesus has defended the woman’s honor, disparaged his inhospitable host, and framed her lavish expression of devotion as love answering to the receipt of the gift of forgiveness (another instance of *aphesis*, release)—presumably in a prior encounter with Jesus not previously narrated. Jesus has the last word, dismissing the woman in “peace” and affirming that it is her faith that has “saved” her—brought her deliverance and wholeness (v. 50). The narrator does not record the banquet host’s response to Jesus’ rebuke or his grace-filled words to the woman, so the outcome is suspended. Will community rupture again occur, or will Simon align himself with the vision of divine mercy and answering human love that Jesus has enacted in this encounter? This undetermined ending invites Luke’s audience to discern and enact a constructive, community-restoring conclusion.

2. Green, *Theology of the Gospel of Luke*, 85; for an especially helpful study, see Greg Carey, *Sinners: Jesus and His Earliest Followers* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2009).

From social death to evangelist: A demon-tormented man restored, a village terrified (8:26–39). From the Gospel's opening chapters, Luke has left unmistakable clues that in the story he is telling, God's salvation will ultimately come not only to Israel but also to all peoples, including Gentiles (2:30–32; 3:6, 38; 4:25–27; 7:1–10; cf. 13:29). Apart from a couple of episodes, however, this hope remains unfulfilled within the Gospel narrative and will become a major item of unfinished business (signaled explicitly in Luke 24:47) that Luke will take up in the second book (Acts). Nevertheless, in addition to the healing of a Roman centurion's slave (a scene in which Jesus praises the Gentile soldier's remarkable faith, 7:9), Luke narrates in 8:26–39 a dramatic confrontation between Jesus and a man dominated by an army of malevolent spirits in what is clearly Gentile (specifically, Gerasene) territory.

One could scarcely imagine an individual in greater need of *release* than the Gerasene man who has assumed the name Legion because many demons have “entered him.” Domination by a demon army has left the man with uncontrolled and uncontrollable behavior; he has taken up residence among the tombs, naked and isolated from human company (8:27)—his alienation from the village is total. His existence is an extreme instance of *social death*.³ Until, that is, Jesus arrives. Overpowered by Jesus' commanding word, the demonic “legion” flees the man and—ironically, seeking to avoid destruction in “the abyss” (v. 31)—enters a herd of pigs, driving them off the cliff into the lake (vv. 32–33). The outcome of this dramatic confrontation between evil spirits and the one they recognize as the Son of the exalted God (v. 28) is remarkable. The pig herders flee to the village and report what has just happened, and when the villagers arrive at the scene they discover the formerly uncontrollable, demon-tormented man sitting calmly with Jesus, restored to his senses and clothed (vv. 34–35). The narrator then records their reaction: “they were afraid” (v. 35b). After eyewitnesses recount how the demon-possessed man had been “saved” (v. 36), the whole crowd of people from the Gerasene region beg Jesus to leave. Fear has won out.

Or has it? As Jesus departs, he denies the restored man's request to accompany him but sends him back to his own household to report what God had done for him. Yet the man expands his role as evangelist considerably, telling everyone in the town what Jesus had done for him (v. 39). What will be the result of that witness, spoken by a man whose life had been restored through an encounter with Jesus? Will he be reintegrated within the wider community? Will they come to acknowledge the benevolent, life-giving power that God had sent among them? The story's ending remains to be (re)written by Luke's audience in their own witness.

3. The concept of social death is developed in a series of articles in *Contemporary Social Science: Journal of the Academy of Social Sciences* 10.3 (2015); cited in the discussion of Luke 8:26–39 by John T. Carroll, “Disability and Dis-ease: Body, Restoration, and Ethics of Reading in Luke's Gospel,” in *Anatomies of the Gospels and Beyond: Essays in Honor of R. Alan Culpepper*, ed. Mikael C. Parsons, Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, and Paul N. Anderson, BIS (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 211–225 (222).

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Synagogue worship unbound: A bent-back woman restored, a community leader enraged (13:10–17). A second Sabbath-day healing episode restores bodily wholeness but in the process disrupts social harmony. Jesus is teaching in the synagogue, and a woman who for eighteen years has suffered from a debilitating condition—a severely bent back—happens to be present. She does not speak and does not take the initiative in seeking help, a meaningful detail in that the synagogue head will react to Jesus' straightening of her back by sternly admonishing the crowd not to come looking for healing on the Sabbath (v. 14). Six other days are available each week for bodies to be made whole. The woman does find voice to praise God for her restoration (v. 13). Responding to the indirect criticism of his action, Jesus employs a lesser to greater argument: if his detractors would not think twice about leading an animal out to drink on the Sabbath, why should this woman not be freed from her burdensome condition on the same day (vv. 15–16)? It is another divine intervention to give *release*, reversing an impairing condition that Jesus ascribes to the malevolent power of Satan. Jesus confers honor upon the woman as a “daughter of Abraham”; she belongs not only in the space of the synagogue assembly but also as a full member in the company of God's covenant people (v. 16).

The narrator characterizes the synagogue's influential men as opponents of Jesus (notice that Jesus addresses them, not just the head of the synagogue, as hypocrites, in v. 15), and describes the outcome of the event as public shame for them (v. 17a). Yet everyone else (“all the crowd”) expresses delight (*echairein*) because of all the remarkable things Jesus has done (v. 17b), with the woman's physical restoration as the most recent focal instance. Is the final outcome of the episode a permanent rupture in the community, in this case between men of stature, on the one side, and the public sympathetic to Jesus' healing mission, on the other? Or might the public shaming of the powerful eventually move them to align themselves with Jesus' divinely authorized mission of release?

The impossible realized: Salvation for a wealthy tax collector, complaint from a village (19:1–10). In 18:18–25, Jesus dismisses as virtually impossible the ability of a wealthy person to enter the realm of God, the company of the saved. This less than

sanguine prospect for the rich grieves the rich elite man who has come to Jesus on a quest for eternal life, or at least assurance of an eventual share in it. It would be easier for a camel to navigate the eye of a needle, Jesus warns, than for a person of wealth to find entry to the dominion of God. So why not jettison burdensome wealth, share generously with the poor, and take up the mantle of discipleship (18:22)? It is a lot to ask. Will the rich man opt to disinvest of his wealth so as to answer the call to follow Jesus? As is often the case in Luke, the ending of the story remains open—a gap Luke’s readers are invited to fill with their own sense of a faithful response.⁴ Fast forward to Jericho, just a couple of scenes later, and another wealthy man on a quest for something better.

Zacchaeus fuses conflicting character traits and associated expectations. Because he is a man of great wealth, readers do not expect a favorable outcome for him. However, because Zacchaeus is a tax collector, Luke’s audience may anticipate that, as a person on the social margins, an outsider, he will be welcomed into companionship with Jesus (as, e.g., in 5:27–32; 15:1–2). It is the latter outcome that comes to pass: Zacchaeus embodies the impossible possibility of an extremely rich man gaining entrance to God’s realm.⁵

The route to that blessed company does not bypass rigorous demand, however. When Zacchaeus has moved from being a tree-nested spectator of the Jesus parade to the host of such a distinguished guest, he commits his abundant resources to generous compensation of anyone his business practice has cheated (restorative justice), and to care of the poor—to the extent of half his possessions (19:8). Jesus’ response to this declaration of Zacchaeus highlights the theme of restoration: salvation has come to this household; like the bent-back woman of 13:10–17, this is a true child of Abraham (19:9). But does anyone else in the village know it? Their complaint was loud at Jesus’ willingness to receive hospitality from Zacchaeus, a notorious sinner (v. 7). Will they recognize now the reordered life, the transformation that has resulted from the lead tax collector’s encounter with Jesus? Will Jericho embrace a distrusted, marginalized outsider, or will their deeply entrenched bias against him prevail, leaving unended the tear in the social fabric that Jesus’ mission to seek out and save the lost has caused (v. 10)? Once again in this episode, restoration of one person disrupts customary and comfortable patterns of social relation and interaction.

In Luke the destabilizing of the social system reintegrates some persons at the margins but in the process thrusts some who have been at the village center to the outside. The community fractures, but is this the end of the story? Because Zacchaeus and Jesus have the last words in this scene, Luke’s audience does not

4. Luke does not end the encounter with the rich man departing in sorrow (as in Mark 10:22). See Matthew S. Rindge, “Luke’s Artistic Parables: Narratives of Subversion, Imagination, and Transformation,” *Int* 68 (2014): 403–415 (411); John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary, NTL* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 364.

5. I have developed the image of impossible possibility in connection with Luke’s treatment of wealth and poverty in Carroll, *Luke*, 364–366, 373.

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learn what the social impact of Zacchaeus’s encounter with Jesus will be in Jericho. However, insofar as the narrative is coaching readers toward a constructive moral vision in their own place and time, they are well positioned to craft a polity and a practice befitting Jesus’ salvation-bestowing praxis of the reign of God.

Reading Luke from our place(s)

We have seen that the mission of Jesus in Luke’s narrative often destabilizes social systems and fractures communities. This is not the end of the story, however, but instead a step on the way to a more expansive and encompassing restoration of community. This larger vision finds partial realization—though only partial—in the narrative of the mission of Jesus’ followers in Acts, with its inclusion of Judeans, Samaritans (Acts 8), and Gentiles (Acts 10:1–11:18)—all the way to Rome and beyond (28:17–31), to the “ends of the earth” (1:8). It is a communal vision of joining across well-established boundaries and cultural difference.⁶ The continuation, and ever more expansive and inclusive realization, of this vision of the people of God is a daunting task delivered by Luke’s narrative to its readers.

Signs of the present, though partial, fulfillment of the divine purpose of salvation for all humankind engender hope that this is not a lost cause. Here the meaningful “today’s” of salvation in Luke’s narrative are especially important (Luke 4:21; 19:5, 9; 23:43; cf. 13:16). Readers are invited to enter a world being reconstituted by the present operation of the boundary-transgressing, relationship-altering, script-revising reign of God. It is in process but far from complete. Individual lives are mended, in some cases challenging established social structures. Jesus’ mission to seek and save the lost (19:10; cf. 5:32) has this critical edge, captured in his provocative, sobering statement of vocation: “I came not to bring peace, but division.” Even families and households will be torn apart (12:51–53).

In Luke’s social world, loyalty and moral obligation are primarily located within, and circumscribed by, one’s own household and kin-group. If the community that Jesus is gathering around him is to make room for all, as an inclusive, welcoming, hospitable community that transgresses boundaries of status, ethnicity, and

6. Willie James Jennings, *Acts, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), e.g., 10–12, 32, 254–256.

culture, community members will need to be pried loose from the household and kin-group as the primary determinant of identity and allegiance. The path to that more inclusive community must pass through resistance and conflict. The narrative leaves Luke's audience on this side of that larger vision of beloved community, even as it charts the course toward it. So Luke's readers find themselves in the same position as the hearer of the parable about a father who becomes estranged from both his sons, both of whom are estranged from each other (15:11–32). In the plot of that story, restoration of one son provokes the other—the very pattern we have seen occurs again and again in the narrative. Will the father's effort to reconcile the two sons succeed? The parable leaves resolution with the listener: reconciliation between the two brothers is a still-elusive hope. So also for Luke's twenty-first century readers: an inclusive, boundary-shattering, beloved community remains an elusive hope.

One more thing: the salvation script undergoes rewriting in Luke's hands in another sense, one that again leaves readers a crucial role in faithful praxis of the vision presented in the narrative. Zechariah's Spirit-animated speech after the naming of his son (John, the baptizing prophet) expects that the coming of God's mighty deliverer will mean rescue from enemies (1:71, 73). In Jesus' mission, however, salvation assumes a different form, as we have discovered. Indeed, Jesus radically revises that initial expectation, in a speech that profiles life defined by the norms and commitments of God's rule. Enemies are not vanquished but, instead, loved, prayed for (6:27–28, 35). There is much—and exceedingly challenging—unfinished business for Luke's readers in our own conflict-riddled world.

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