

Faculty of Humanities and Performing Arts

Graduate Diploma in Bible and Theology

TRDL6022 Independent Project - **Proposal Form**

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Please indicate the semester during which this module is being taken

~~Semester 1 / Semester 2~~ / Semester 3

NB This proposal counts for 20% of the final mark for this module. It should be 1000 words in length, excluding the bibliography.

Proposed Title:

Jesus' portrayal in Luke's gospel: a blank canvas for future Christological imaginings.

Aim(s), Methodology and Objectives:

I propose to research the lack of a physical and ethnic description of Jesus in Luke's Gospel. Combined with the is gospel's emphasis on Jesus message being for "all nations" (24:47), I will argue that Jesus' portrayal creates a blank

canvas onto which all peoples, regardless of race or ethnicity, can develop their own Christological images. Plenty of diverse Christological images have already been developed, but the gospel writer seems to give permission to hearers/readers to imagine Jesus for themselves in their context and situation and in accordance with their own physical appearance. I will research this through exegesis of biblical texts and critical engagement with secondary sources.

Abstract:

1. Jesus: A blessing to all nations

a. The Abrahamic promise

Luke's gospel is framed by two sections where the Abrahamic promise plays an important role. In Genesis 12:3 God promises that "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" through Abraham. This promise is alluded to three times in Jesus' birth narratives: by Mary (Luke 1:54-55), by Zechariah (1:72-73) and by Simeon (2:30-32). Echoes of this promise are also heard in Jesus' last words to his disciples where he sends them to proclaim repentance and the forgiveness of sins "to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem." (24:47). Luke's gospel is keen to connect Jesus with the fulfilment of the Abrahamic promise.¹

b. The Samaritans and other "outsiders"

Between these two "bookends", the author of Luke's Gospel uses encounters with "outsiders" to illustrate that, in Jesus, salvation has come for "all nations". Luke's Gospel includes three episodes that feature Samaritans. It is important to note the enmity that existed between Jews and Samaritans. In 9:51-56, Jesus rebukes two disciples for wanting to call down fire on a Samaritan village. In 10:25-37, Jesus teaches the parable of the Good Samaritan. In 17:11-19, a Samaritan is the only leper to return to thank Jesus after being healed. Another

¹ Daniel Hays, *From every people and nation: A biblical theology of race*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/971165/0> [accessed 18 June 2021]

example is the Roman centurion in Luke 7 whose faith Jesus praises as greater than Israel's (7:9). It seems that, in Luke's Gospel, not only is Jesus' message directed at "outsiders" but these might also be better able to receive it.

c. The universal scope of salvation in the Gospel of Luke

All the canonical gospels address matters of race and ethnicity, but none as much as Luke. Bock goes so far as to suggest that the central question of the gospel (and its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles) is: "How did the hope of God open up to include all races [...]?" The broadening of the scope of salvation and the inclusion into God's people from Israel to "all nations" will form the background of my research into Luke's portrayal of Jesus.

2. Jesus' portrayal in the Gospel of Luke

a. Physical appearance

Luke's Gospel – like the three other canonical Gospels – offers no description of Jesus' physical appearance. This is surprising because, then as now, people liked to know what other people looked like. Scholars have advanced several reasons for this omission that revolve around the exact nature of a gospel – is the emphasis on history or theology? I will advance that the lack of a physical description of Jesus is not an omission but rather a literary device.

b. Ethnic identity

The trial of Jesus in Luke 23 raises some interesting questions about the gospel author's handling of Jesus' ethnic self-identification. Pilate raises two questions that could address Jesus' ethnicity. First, in 23:3 Pilate asks if Jesus is "the King of the Jews". Jesus deflects the question by answering: "You say so". Jesus' principal aim here is to not incriminate by taking on the mantle of a competing King to the Roman authorities. It is nonetheless interesting to note that Jesus' answer distances him from his people. More revealing perhaps is 23:6 where Pilate asks if Jesus is a Galilean. The narrator refuses to engage with this

question instead relaying that Jesus comes under the Herod's jurisdiction. It seems that in this episode the author is refusing to tie Jesus too closely to any specific ethnic identity that might weaken the universal scope of his message.

3. Jesus as the physical embodiment of the universal message of the Gospel of Luke

a. The theological significance of Jesus' lack of physical and ethnic identity

Are these two features of Luke's gospel – the universality of the gospel message and Jesus' lack of a physical and ethnic identity – connected?

Maurice Casey would say that they are not. On a historical level, Casey would argue that the authors of the gospels had not seen Jesus in the flesh, so they simply were not able to relay what he looked like.² Theologically, Casey argues that Jesus' physical appearance has nothing to do with "salvation for the Gentiles". As I stated before this omission may have theological significance.

Stephen Moore takes another view on the physical appearance of Jesus.³ He argues that Jesus is not described physically in the canonical Gospel because he was ugly. This ugliness was in contrast with the expected depiction of a leader (especially the Son of God). But, for Moore, Jesus' ugliness was the fulfilment of the prophecy of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53: "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." (53:2) Moore exposes plenty of evidence for this theory in the writings of early Christians, but no evidence for it is to be found in any canonical gospel.

²Maurice Casey, *Jesus: Evidence and argument or mythicist myths?* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), <https://archive.org/details/jesusevidencearg0000case/page/n5/mode/2up> [accessed 15 June 2021], p. 110.

³Stephen Moore, *God's Beauty Parlor: And Other Queer Spaces in and around the Bible* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002) <https://archive.org/details/godsbeautyparlor0000moor/page/90/mode/2up> [7 June 2021], p. 90-130.

Nevertheless, Moore points to the fact that Jesus' physical has theological/eschatological significance. He argues that Jesus' ugliness contrasts with "the miraculous makeover of crucifixion combined with resurrection."⁴

b. An invitation to develop Christologies: Jesus as a blank canvas

In addressing the issue of the lack of a physical description of Jesus in the gospels, Joan Taylor states that "People could apparently imagine Jesus any way they wanted."⁵ This would certainly allow "all nations" to imagine Jesus as being like them. In addition to this, Küster states that all engagements between the Jesus related by the gospels and its readers/hearers forms a "hermeneutical event" where "[biblical stories] must develop their relevance to the situation of those who hear them."⁶ The author of Luke's gospel seems to leave plenty of space for readers/hearers to develop a personal vision of Jesus.

Conclusion

The author of Luke's gospel portrays Jesus in such a way that his physical appearance cannot be associated with any ethnic group. As such, Jesus, in his very physicality, embodies the hope and salvation for "all nations" that Luke's Gospel emphasises. In addition to this, I contend that the author of Luke's Gospel presents Jesus as a blank canvas onto which "all nations" can develop their own Christological imaginings.

Short Introductory Bibliography:

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⁴ Moore, p. 126.

⁵ Joan Taylor, *What did Jesus look like?* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), p. 2.

⁶ Volker Küster, *The many faces of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1999), p. 29.

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Proposed Supervisor:

Dr Catrin H. Williams

Please indicate whether ethical approval is required – ~~YES~~/NO

Please indicate whether sufficient resources are available for the project – YES/~~NO~~

The above topic, proposal, and supervisor have been agreed:

Signed: Programme Director

Date:

Please return this form to the Programme Director