

5.1 Aspects of the Passion Narrative

The passion narrative in Luke's Gospel (Lk 22.1-23.56) is rich and unfolds in a sequence of scenes which the Gospel of Luke shares in most aspects (with the exception of the scene of the Mockery of Herod) with the other Synoptic Gospels, Mark and Matthew. This unit cannot deal with all aspects, historical and theological, of this narrative and will thus focus on a limited selection of aspects which are deemed important. Some of the aspects not touched upon here are covered by the essential readings. Those aspects of the Passion narratives not covered by this module are not of less significance but due to the limitations of the modules as a whole, not everything can be covered.

The scenes of the Passion narrative can be separated as follows (cf. Tannehill)

- Judas and the Plot 22.1-6
- Preparations for the Meal 22.7-13
- The Meal 22.14-23
- The Farewell Discourse 22.24-38
- The Prayer in Gethsemane 22.39-46
- The Arrest 22.47-53
- Peter's Denial 22.54-62
- Interrogation by the Council 22.66-71
- Interrogation by Pilate 23.1-5
- Mockery of Herod 23.6-12
- Death Sentence by Pilate 23.13-25
- The Crucifixion 23.16-49
- The Burial 23.50-56

The Meal and the Institution of the Lord's Supper Lk 22.14-23

As in the other Synoptic Gospels the Gospel of Luke presents the institution of the Lord's Supper in the context of the last meal Jesus shares with his disciples the night before his suffering and death. Disciples had been sent to prepare a room suitable for the group to share the meal. Luke clearly presents the meal they are about to share as a Passover meal. This is consistent with the narratives of Mk 14.17-25 and Mt 26.20-29, but differs from the narrative of John 13, which also refers to the context of the Passover festival but clearly states that the meal takes place the evening before the festival (Jn 13.1). Historically John is most likely to be the more accurate transmitter of the tradition as it is highly unlikely that the Romans would have executed a Jew on the day of the people's most significant festival. However, what is important to note is that all Passion narrative depict the events to follow in the context of the Passover festival. When the scene of the last supper in Luke is compared with the narratives in Mark and Matthew, and also the reference in 1 Cor 11.25 one aspect which is different in Luke's account is the presence of two cups, one is blessed by Jesus before the sharing of the bread and the meal. The formulation of the words over bread and over the second cup in Lk 22.19-20 are almost identical to Paul's reference to the tradition he had received from the Lord in 1 Cor 11.24-25, whereas there are significant differences in this respect to the formulation in Mt 26.26-28 and Mk 14.22-24.

The presence and blessing of the first cup prior to the meal has given rise to various interpretations. It is a tradition which is known from Jewish meal practices – on Shabbat as well as other days of celebration (although we do not know precisely to what extent later Rabbinic traditions were already adhered to during the first century). It seems to function as a symbol to strengthen the fellowship among the disciples. In addition it can be seen as a reminder that the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus although inaugurated by his coming,

has not yet arrived in its fullness and thus we find here a hint to the disciples that they should not forget that they do not live in the world to come but in this world.

The Institution of the Lord's Supper

The word over the bread 'This is my body which is given for you' refers forward to the immediate future, to Jesus' death. Jesus' action is to be repeated, and in the breaking and sharing of the bread the disciples shall remember him. Situated in the context of the Passover festival which is a festival of remembrance, this 'remembering' of Jesus relates the guidance to remember him in the context of a meal with the traditions of Israel.

The word over the cup after the meal 'This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood' is an expression of hope for a new/renewed covenant in the vein of Jer 31.31-34. Interestingly there is no guidance to share the cup in remembrance of Jesus. The reference to blood can be understood as an indication that the memory of the Mosaic covenant is alive among Jesus and his disciples and they Jesus alludes to the ceremony of covenant ratification and/or renewal in the course of which blood was sprinkled on the altar and on the people (cf. Ex 24.6-8)

In the context of Luke-Acts the reference to the new covenant is not a reference to a replacement of some 'old' covenant by a 'new'. There is no exchange of something previous which did not function as expected and thus had to be done away with and replaced but something better. The 'new covenant' is not a replacement but new in the sense of 'renewed', which means that in the renewal of God's covenant God's faithfulness and promises are **confirmed** in Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

Luke's narrative presents Jesus' death in the background of a sacrificial understanding but not in an atoning sense but as a **covenant-confirming** sacrifice (as in Ex 24.6-8).

The Trial(s)

It is necessary to distinguish between theological narrative presented by Luke's Gospel and what can be asserted as historical facts. This issue has been raised in unit 1 of this module and it is of particular importance in relation to the passion narratives. Although they do relate to historical facts their focus is the theological rather than historical in a modern sense. Thus similarly to the narrative of Luke-Acts as a whole the events of the passion of Jesus are presented by Luke in the vein of a theological narrative.

It is beyond any historical doubt that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified under Pontius Pilate. From this it can be concluded that he must have been arrested and that some sort of trial took place which must have been a Roman 'trial' since crucifixion is a Roman means of execution. Historically speaking all else is unclear.

One major issue concerning the Passion narratives is the involvement of Jews in the arrest, trial and execution of Jesus. This is a sensitive issue as the blaming of the Jews for the death Jesus has had a devastating impact on the Jews over centuries. Thus, a critical reading of the Passion narratives needs to ask what is the purpose of specific emphases made, in our case by the narrator of Luke, and what is the possible historical scenario. In addition to this it is also important to pay attention not only to this distinction between theological narrative and historical reconstruction but also to take contextual factors at the time of the narrated events as well as at the time of the narrator into account.

In Jerusalem the confrontation between Jesus and Jewish authorities is escalating to the point of lethal opposition. This intensification of conflict with some Jews has been prepared for

throughout the Gospel since again and again it was announced that there will be tragic conflict (cf Simeon in the Temple 2.4; Jesus in Nazareth 4.14-30). However, in the explicit Passion announcements the role of Jews is hardly mentioned (8.31ff; 9.31ff; 10.3-34; 18.31-34). It is most likely that here Luke presents Jesus as viewing himself and his role in the tradition of Jewish prophets and martyrs. The role of Jewish authorities in Jesus' trial and death should to be seen in a similar vein, that is, as representing an inner-Jewish conflict. This is not the same as perceiving this conflict as an indication of a general rejection of Jesus by the Jews, but as a non-acceptance of him as the Messiah by some Jews whereas others (the disciples) confessed him as the Messiah.

Thus, Jewish authorities are depicted as involved in Jesus' arrest and a first interrogation takes place conducted by Jewish representatives. But this interrogation is not a trial as there are no witnesses involved here and no verdict is spoken. The most important accusation brought against Jesus is that he is supposed to have declared himself to be the Messiah-King. Although the readers/hearers know that this is not so, Luke has Jesus confirming that he is the messianic King indirectly by his reply but without making a politically dangerous claim of an usurpation of lordship. Upon this confirmation those who were involved in this interrogation hand him over to the Roman authorities, that is, Pilate.

Three accusations are brought forward against Jesus which would make him a dangerous suspect in the eyes of the Roman authorities: he is said to mislead the people, to forbid them to pay Roman taxes, and to claim to be the messianic King. These accusations do not concern religious issues but are related to the claims of Roman imperial rule according to which there can be no King and Lord but Rome's Caesar; the payment of tax is an expression of acceptance of Roman domination, whereas the refusal to pay tax is rebellion against such domination and would instigate Roman military intervention. Thus what is brought forward here are political accusations rather than anything which would be blasphemous in the eyes of Jews. But a historical scenario can be envisaged where some Jewish authorities may have been concerned with keeping law and order during the major Jewish pilgrim festival of the year when thousands of pilgrims were present in Jerusalem and the slightest sign of a rebellion would most likely have triggered a violent intervention on the part of the Roman army. The historical context of Jerusalem and Judea under direct Roman rule cannot be ignored in a critical reading of the Passion narratives.

Luke is careful not to depict Jesus as claiming to be the Messiah-King in his own words. It is always someone else who either asks or accuses him of claiming this title whereupon Jesus does not negate the claim. Nevertheless, there is no affirmation from Jesus' lips that he misleads the people or stirs them up against paying the tax imposed by Rome. In doing so Luke's emphasis is to depict Jesus as innocent, rather than Rome or of Pilate (as is claimed by some interpreters).

It is not clear from the narrative what the purpose of the involvement of Herod is. It is possible that Luke wants to indicate that there was cooperation between this ruler and the Roman governor, as in 23.12 we learn that Pilate and Herod became friends.

After the brief intermezzo at the court of Herod, chief priests, rulers and the people are assembled by Pilate. A threefold interaction between Pilate and this group, chief priests, rulers and the people, follows. Pilate proposes to release Jesus, and the people, the chief priests and the rulers ask for his death.

Pilate is depicted as prepared to discuss; it seems he wants to maintain law and justice, and argues for Jesus' innocence. This image sharply contrasts with historical accounts of this governor of Judea where he is reported to be a rather tyrannical ruler, who used to oppress any riot by force and who repeatedly issued death sentences without trial (cf Philo *legatio ad Gaium*). Despite this image it seems unlikely that Luke wanted to be apologetic over against the Roman involvement in Jesus' death, since in Acts 4.27 he holds Herod and Pilate responsible for Jesus' death.

The People

Surprisingly the people who are involved in the events leading to the death of Jesus are seen as turning against Jesus although previously they were seen as favourably disposed towards Jesus, a support which until now had protected Jesus. It is difficult to reconstruct the historical scenario but it could well have been that 'the people' are not the same throughout the narrative and different people were present at Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and upon his arrest. However, whatever the historical scenario but the people's changing attitude serves important purposes in the theological narrative:

- The people who had been strong supporters of Jesus somehow become persuaded to call for his death – but then at his crucifixion turn round and realize their tragic mistake. The crowd as a whole or in part demonstrate grief and regret for sharing in Jesus condemnation (Lk 23.27; 48).
- There is an interesting parallel between Peter's threefold denial after which he wept bitterly Lk 22.4-62 and the threefold denial of Jesus before Pilate by the people and their leaders and the regret of the people which comes to expression in their attitude of mourning.
- By this depiction openness of the audience of the Gospel towards 'the people' is sought. Thus e.g. Jesus' prayer of forgiveness in 22.34 is consistent with what he told the disciples to do earlier in the Gospel : 'pray for those who abuse them' (6. 28) ; he also prayed for Peter who was about to deny him (22.1-34).
- Thus in Acts Peter will say to the people of Jerusalem that they acted in ignorance (cf. 3.17; 13.27) and calls them to repentance offering them forgiveness.

The Jewish authorities involved in Jesus conviction (note these are not the Pharisees and the priests but the chief priests and the rulers!) and the people are depicted as acting as God's tools. They are involved in bringing to fulfilment the divine purpose of Jesus' mission, the events which happen happen according to God's will, so Luke keeps on insisting. The involvement of some particular groups of the Jewish elite and of the people has no further negative consequences according to Luke. Throughout the following narrative the openness towards the Jewish people has not come to an end but rather persists in the Gospel and throughout the book of Acts as well.

Luke's narration of the passion has a number of focal points:

- Jesus was executed on a Roman cross which necessarily would be understood by hearers as an indication that he was the leader of a rebellion against Roman domination. Luke emphasises that there was nothing in Jesus' action or behaviour to substantiate such a perception, and that he was thus innocent.
- Jesus violent death could be mistaken as a failure and thus as a sign for the failure of his entire mission
- Against this misunderstanding Luke's depiction of the passion emphasizes that this is not the case but Jesus despite his death on a Roman cross is the messianic King.
- The emphasis on Jesus' suffering and innocent death sets him in the context of the suffering of the righteous ones and of Jewish martyrs, a tradition for which there is ample evidence in Second Temple Judaism. The Roman centurion at the cross does not call Jesus 'Son of God' as in Mk 15.39//Mt 27.55 but confesses that 'this was a righteous man' (23.47). The role of others who are referred to as 'righteous' has already been mentioned earlier: Elizabeth and Zechariah (1.5), Simeon (2.25) and

Joseph of Arimathea (23.50). These references are clear evidence that Luke understands the Passion of Christ from within Jewish traditions.

The 'King of the Jews'

Luke depicts Jesus' mission as that of the expected Messianic king. As such it carried with it overtones of concrete hopes of release from oppression which had concrete implications for the Jewish people. This specific character of the messianic kingship is not relativized in Luke's narrative. Three times Jesus is designated as 'King of the Jews' (entrance to Jerusalem 19.38ff; accusation 23.2; crucifixion 23.37f.) and there is no indication of any Lucan objection to this designation which certainly resonated with political issues. There is no de-politizing tendency of this dimension in Luke's Gospel. Only in so far as such political expectations refer to immediate contemporary events Luke corrects these expectations. The audience learns that despite the impression to the contrary in his lifetime, and possibly during the lifetime of Christ-followers whom Luke addresses, too, Jesus is the Messiah. But the completion of salvation, that is, the salvation of all Israel and of the world, are not seen as having happened during Jesus' earthly ministry, nor through his death and resurrection, nor during the time of his exaltation. The final redemption is in God's hands and is related to the 'second coming' of the Messiah. However, Luke is not interested in his second coming but in Christ's exaltation.

Essential Readings

Talbert Charles, *Reading Luke*, pp.219-254

** 5.1 Matera Frank, 'The Death of Jesus according to Luke: A Question of Sources', *CBQ* 47/1985, pp.469-485.

Further Readings

Tannehill, Robert C., *Luke*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon 1996, pp.310-348