

5.2 The Ending of the Gospel

The last chapter of the Gospel, Luke 24, and the first chapter of the Book of Acts, Acts 1, partly overlap. This indicates that they function as a bridge and thus form the important transition from the story of Jesus to the story of his witnesses, which includes the expansion of the mission from being a mission to Israel to include a mission to the nations/gentiles

The Ending of Luke's Gospel

Luke 24 is composed of 4 major scenes:

The Empty Tomb 1-12

On the Road to Emmaus 13-35

The Appearance in Jerusalem 36-49

The Departure of Jesus 50-53

The first three scenes are linked with each other in that they are referring back to earlier parts of the story – especially Jesus' death and his prophecies of his death and resurrection. They thus provide the audience with a continuous developing discussion of Jesus' death and resurrection. Thereby the disciples/audience are presented with a major commentary on the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection. Thus when the women who find the tomb empty are frightened they are reminded of Jesus' announcements of his death and resurrection (Lk 24.6-7).

In the third scene (Lk 24.36-49) this commentary on the past continues with a preview of major events to come and Jesus gives a new commission to his followers 47-49.

The length of the chapter indicates that there is a major problem involved in understanding the events of Jesus' suffering and death and resurrection. Luke here presents, in narrative form, the difficulties of understanding the meaning of the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. Those closest to Jesus, the disciples could not understand what had happened despite the fact that Jesus had prepared them not only with direct announcement of his death and resurrection but also through specific emphases of his ministry through sayings, parables and healings. This problem of understanding is not solved by the mere appearance of the risen Christ. Understanding the meaning of those things which had happened in Jerusalem involves a lengthy process for disciples.

On the Road to Emmaus(Lk 24.13-35)

The finding of the empty tomb and the message of the 'two men' are confusing rather than illuminating for the women who first arrive at Jesus' burial place. Nevertheless they tell the other disciples about this, but their report only produces amazement and unbelief. Thus, these findings and the words of the men are obviously not self-explanatory and Luke elaborates in the following scene explicitly about the process of understanding which these events require.

Two disciples are on their way away from Jerusalem, where all these terrible things had happened – they seem to leave the place of the end of all hopes, and even when Jesus joins them they cannot see ('their eyes are kept from recognizing him' 24.16). Jesus' leading question allows the disciples to present their level of understanding of what has been going on so far. Thus we have the disciples' perception followed by Jesus' teaching. The irony of

this scene in Lk 24.18-24 is that the disciples rebuke Jesus for his ignorance when they themselves do not understand. They try to explain to Jesus at some length what he knows better than they do.

Nevertheless, the disciples' understanding of Jesus' earthly ministry, prior to Jesus' teaching here, is accurate and in agreement with Jesus as he is presented in Luke-Acts prior to those events which had happened in Jerusalem.

Thus e.g. in 24.19 we find him described as 'a prophet powerful in work and word before God and all the people' which is a view of Jesus which is characteristic in Luke, where Jesus describes himself as a prophet in Lk 4.24 and 13.33, and of Acts where preachers present him as a prophet like Moses (Acts 3.22, 7.37). It is also interesting to note the characterization of Jesus' ministry in the combination of 'work and word' 24.19 which is identical with the summary of the first volume of Luke's narrative in Acts 1.1 as 'all the things which Jesus began to do and teach'.

In the summary of the passion story, those held responsible are 'our chief priests and rulers' not the people (24.20).

The fact that the disciples speak of their hope that Jesus was 'going to redeem Israel' should not be taken as an indication of a theological narrowness since this hope, as this is an emphasis which is found throughout Luke-Acts (cf. e.g. infancy narratives). Rather this refers to the implications the disciples seem to have drawn from the fact that Jesus died. They perceived this to mean that this hope that he was 'going to redeem Israel' had been disappointed, even that by this death it had become obvious that he could not be the Messiah.

What Jesus teaches them to see through reading their Scriptures is that, on the contrary, this hope for Israel was not flawed. It remains a hope throughout the book of Acts. But the hope is not fulfilled in a way which is obvious to everybody and the fact that not all Jews respond positively to the proclamation of Jesus as Messiah remains an issue the narrator addresses throughout Acts as well. But in Acts (e.g. 1.7) Jesus corrects the disciples' assumption that this hope for Israel will be fulfilled immediately, and directs them to their task as witnesses, but this does not mean that the hope for Israel itself is rejected.

The topic of 'not seeing' (their eyes were kept' 24.16) and 'seeing' (their eyes were opened 24.31) is a narrative image referring to the gradual process of understanding among the disciples. Thus only gradually are they beginning to understand that Jesus' death was in accordance with the Scripture indicates, and had to do with the fulfilment of God's promises. The strong assertions which are presented here may be an indication that this could be a stumbling block for the early Christ-followers.

It has been noted that the reference to the Scriptures is a reference specifically to 'Moses and the prophets'. This could be an indication that the understanding of the events which had happened in Jerusalem are seen as specifically related to aspects of the Torah and the Prophets. A similar particularity is found in Stephen's speech later in Acts (7.23-41).

The passion announcement in Lk 13.33-34 also does not use titles such as 'Son of Man' or 'Messiah' but 'prophet' for the one who is to suffer at the hands of leaders. Thus prophet, messiah and son of man are not competing titles in Luke-Acts. Jesus is both the Messiah and the expected Mosaic prophet. Perhaps, as a result, his destiny as the Messiah is understood in light of the destiny of the prophets who speak God's word, are rejected and persecuted yet affirmed by God. For Moses and Elijah who have an important place in Luke-Acts – this affirmation includes being taken up to heaven (exalted).

The pattern of experiences rooted in the Scriptures applied to Jesus helps his disciples to make sense of their stories. The Scriptural pattern reassured them that what had happened in Jerusalem was not the result of chaos, and abandonment and thus meaningless. In the light of the Scriptures they are seen as part of God's work with his people in the world. This is reassurance despite evidence to the contrary, a perception of hope against hope. The listening to the stranger's interpretation of the Scriptures leaves a strong impression on the

disciples which is thus the beginning of understanding and recognition (cf 'burning heart' in v.32)

However, the full recognition happens at the table – when Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it and distributes it (24.30). Jesus takes on a role the disciples recognize as this is the role of Jesus during the fellowship at the table they had previously shared (feeding of multitude 9.10-17; also Last supper cf 22.19f). The remembering of previous table fellowship, and previous shared dimensions of life turns present and future shared meals into symbols of continuity with the fellowship with Jesus. Thus the Emmaus meal in particular becomes a symbol of restoration of a fellowship which seemed broken by the violent death of Jesus thereby anticipating the fellowship meals of Christ-followers in Acts. The presence of the risen Christ here also suggesting in an anticipation way that the meals in Acts include communion/fellowship with the risen Christ.

What should be noted in this remarkable narrative is the close link between the teaching and table-fellowship. This is characteristic for the whole of Luke-Acts. Neither is seen in isolation from each other- the teaching conversation and shared community at the table of the Lord are intrinsically related to each other. The feeding of the multitude is preceded by Jesus' instruction (9.11ff). Luke's Last Supper includes long instruction and discussion (22. In Acts the breaking of bread at the table is mentioned in close connection with the teaching of the apostles and Paul (Acts 2.42; 20:7,11). In the scene in Luke 24.13-32 the teaching through the Scriptures is similar to an act of teaching in other scenes prior to a meal. (Significantly in Acts 1.4-8 Jesus' final instructions to his followers is again set in the context of a meal [the Greek *sunalizomenos* actually means assemble to eat 'salt' together, a meaning which is lost in many English but maintained e.g. in most German translations])

The Appearance in Jerusalem and the Ascension of Christ

The appearance of the Risen Christ with all the disciples in Jerusalem is only mentioned relatively briefly here at the end of the Gospel (24. 44-49), which most likely has to do with the fact at the beginning of Acts a further appearance scene opens the sequel to the Gospel. The teaching found here does not add to the teaching on the road to Emmaus, it is almost a repetition of this teaching with one significance addition – now Christ explains that all these things happened so that 'repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.' (24.47). This only the second time that reference to the nations (non-Jews) is made after Simeon's prophecy in chapter 2. The mission is seen to spread from Jerusalem, which is Luke's peculiar difference of the perception of the centre of the mission (Mk and Mt focus on Galilee). The disciples are thus instructed to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit has been sent upon them (indeed after Jesus' ascension they are awaiting the coming of the Spirit in the Temple).

These verses (24.47-49) provide an important narrative bridge to the beginning of Acts. In Acts 2.1-13 we learn that what had been promised at the end of the Gospel happens, the disciples were filled with the Spirit and the mission spread to gentiles, although not to the exclusion of Jews.

The ending of the Gospel of Luke emphasizes that the story of God's purpose in the world has not come to completion with Jesus' resurrection. The preaching to the nations is an integral part of that purpose and almost naturally it seems the narrative cannot end here but must have a sequel – in the Book of Acts. In addition to this emphasis on the reaching of the gentiles the author is to the same extent concerned with Jewish people's reactions to Jesus. He has been rejected in Jerusalem but they are still God's elect! The story of the earthly Jesus is only part of a larger story, the story of how God's saving purpose is realized through the Messiah Jesus, but this story is incomplete even with Christ's resurrection and it does not come to completion even at the end of the Book of Acts as it is open-ended!

Essential Readings

Talbert Charles, *Reading Luke*, pp.257-262

- ** **5.2** Doble Peter, 'Luke 24.26,44 – Songs of God's Servant: David and his Psalms in Luke-Acts' in *JSNT* 28.3(2006):267-283.
- ** **5.3** Martin Thomas W., 'What Makes Glory Glorious? Reading Luke's Account of the Transfiguration Over Against Triumphalism' in *JSNT* 29.1 (2006), pp. 3-26.

Further Readings

Tannehill, Robert C., *Luke*, Nashville,TN: Abingdon 1996, pp.348-364.