

TITLE:

Why, according to Luke, was Jesus crucified?

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1 *The Crucifixion – a significant death?*

Rudolph Bultmann said:

This execution can hardly be understood as the necessary consequence of [Jesus'] work; it happened rather through a misunderstanding of his work as political action. Historically speaking, therefore, it was a fate without significance¹

It will be argued that such a negative assessment of the significance of Jesus' death cannot legitimately be drawn from Luke's Gospel as we have it, for the evangelist presents a cogent case for both its historical and theological importance. Furthermore there is good evidence that both of these aspects go back to the time of Jesus himself, rather than being the interpretation of Luke or the early Church.

That Luke saw Jesus' death as more than '*a fate without significance*' is clear, as in the other Gospels, from the attention he devotes to it. The passion narrative itself occupies two long chapters, but in truth the whole of the thrust of the Gospel from 9.21 onwards is towards Jerusalem and his forthcoming death there. In particular the Lord's three warnings to his disciples (9.18-22, 9.44, 18.31-33), though less prominent in the narrative than their Markan equivalents, nonetheless repeatedly focus our attention on his death.

Like birth pangs signalling a delivery, they point to Jesus' inescapable mission awaiting him in Jerusalem.²

But even before this, in the very introduction to his Gospel, Luke hints at the Passion in his quotation of Simeon's prophecy (2.29-35). There Jesus is '*to be a sign that will be spoken against*', and Mary is told that '*a sword will pierce your own soul too*', implying that it will first have pierced Jesus'.

Simeon's words qualify the divine proclamation of Jesus as Christ in Luke's introduction, just as Jesus' sobering words to his disciples qualify their recognition of him as Christ in ch9, thus establishing the overall theme of the book as 'Jesus, the Christ who must suffer'.

Other passages also prepare us for this theme of suffering and death: the arrest and execution of John (3.19-20, 9.9), the rejection of Jesus at Nazareth after his Messianic manifesto (4.14-30), the death of the son in the parable of the tenants (20.13-15), and the teaching to the disciples on suffering (e.g. 21.12-19). To Luke, the death of Jesus was of central importance.

2 *Historical reasons for the crucifixion*

Despite Bultmann's conclusion, Luke presents a very clear case for Jesus' death being of historical significance in relation to the Roman authorities and their Herodian underlings, the Jewish religious hierarchy and the nation of Israel as a whole.

The Sanhedrin (encompassing the aristocracy, the Sadducean temple authorities and the scribes, 23.66) delivered Jesus up to Pilate on a charge of sedition, and it was on this charge that Pilate, albeit unwillingly, condemned him³. In their deposition they accused him of subverting the nation, opposing Roman taxation, and claiming kingship (23.3). Pilate, in turn, described the charge as '*incitement to rebellion*' (23.14), and the ironic notice on the cross read '*This is the king of the Jews*'.

The plausibility of this charge, and its leverage on Pilate, are shown in the Gospel itself and in other historical sources, particularly Josephus. Palestine was a land groaning under the yoke of Roman occupation. Jesus

himself was born in Bethlehem because of a Roman poll-tax (2.1), and taxation and oppression are never far from the surface (e.g. 3.12-14, 20; 5.27-30; 6.29; 13.1; 15.1; 18.10ff.; 19.2-8, 12; 20.20-26; 23.26).

In such a social context, political insurrection was an ever-present possibility, rendered more likely by the fanatical zeal for the law and the cult of very many Jews. Soon after his arrival, Pilate had to cope with a popular riot when he brought images of Cæsar into Jerusalem⁴. Luke 13.1 seems to suggest a similar seditious riot amongst Galilean worshippers.

Heard⁵ lists several different kinds of first-century Jewish revolutionary. Not all of these existed in Jesus' lifetime, but many did. There had, for example, been a tradition of *social banditry* during Herod's reign. The two crucified thieves may have been such bandits, on the basis of Mark's term *λησταις*, and of course Barabbas was under arrest for urban insurrection (23.18).

Although the term *Messiah* is rare before the revolt of 66AD, it seems probable that there were already widespread, if vague, expectations of a nationalist-religious revolutionary leader. Several royal pretenders were suppressed in the time of Archelaus⁶. In addition to these, there were seditious movements centred on revolutionary prophets, who usually appeared in the desert like Moses or Elijah. Although the first of which we know is *The Samaritan* (c. 36AD)⁷, it is significant that Josephus cites the reason for John the Baptist's execution as the fear that '*such eloquence could lead to rebellion*'⁸.

Given, then, Jesus' wide following, his tendency to teach in desert places, the popular idea that he was John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets (9.19), and most of all the claim of his supporters that he was the Christ, sedition was an easy charge to make.

Whether the Jews believed this charge is another matter. Bultmann's assertion of a 'misunderstanding' is not sustainable, certainly as far as the Sadducees were concerned,

...seeing they subsequently promoted the persecution under Herod Agrippa I and still later saw to the execution of James, the Lord's brother. For them it was probably a case of deliberate denunciation.⁹

Why was this? Certainly it was not because the accusation was true, as Pilate quickly saw. They could not have believed the charge after Jesus' words at his arrest (22.52-3). Luke presents the trial before the Sanhedrin as principally establishing the basis for the sedition charge. He does not refer directly to the religious charge of blasphemy mentioned in the other three Gospels, but nevertheless hints at it in their incriminating him as Son of God, rather than as Christ (*cf.* Jn. 19.7-8).

But Luke makes it clear that their real motive was not religious sensibility but fear. Though Jesus had already antagonised the Pharisees and scribes, the plotting of the religious authorities began only after the cleansing of the temple (19.45-48). They were afraid of his greater popularity ("...*all the people will stone us...*" 20.6). They were afraid that he had spoken against them (20.19). Most of all they were afraid of the people, and this Luke gives as their motive for eliminating him (22.2).

This is consistent with the historical context. The temple authorities and aristocracy owed their wealth and position to their collaboration with the Romans. They had little popular support, the Pharisees rather embodying the spiritual ideals of the people¹⁰. Jesus' messianism, untainted by political self-interest and hostile to their spiritually compromised position, threatened their existence. If his messianic aspirations were successful, they were liable to be ousted by the people. If unsuccessful, Roman recriminations were equally likely to destroy their position.

To the Pharisees, and perhaps the scribes, the threat from Jesus was religious. It undermined the basis of their legalistic holiness, and so their self-righteousness, replacing it with a holiness based on love and mercy. Their hatred was exacerbated by the focus of his teaching on his own central role, as Luke often demonstrates. No doubt, as Matthew and John record, they supported the authorities' cause, and in all probability it was they who stirred up the people (23.13). But their absence from Luke's later chapters is historically understandable. The Pharisees would have loved to stone Jesus for blasphemy. But in the event, the hierarchy's political self-interest brought him to trial, and Pilate's political cowardice led to his crucifixion.

3 *Theological reasons for the crucifixion*

Luke records the above with a historian's care, but it is peripheral to his interests except insofar as to show that

Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles
and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against
your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed (Acts 4.27).

But his main concern is the theological importance of the passion.

The most noticeable aspect of Luke's attitude to this is its *necessity*.

Bultmann (and others) might argue that

...Whether or how Jesus found a meaning in [his death]
we cannot know¹¹,

on the basis of his rejection of Luke's historicity. But it cannot be concluded from the Gospel itself. As Jesus first introduces his coming sufferings, he says, '*The Son of man must suffer many things...*' (9.21), and repeats that '*must*' (*δεῖ*) often thereafter. What does it signify? Three nuances are more or less uncontroverted¹², and a fourth (but probably most important) more contentious.

- The first aspect is *apocalyptic necessity*, on the basis of the apocalyptic nature of Jesus' *Son of Man* predictions, compared to, say, Dan. 2.28.
- '*Less dogmatically*'¹³ is *eschatological necessity*: God has decreed it, so it must be (22.22).
- Most commonly is *scriptural necessity*: as it is written, so it must happen (24.25-27).
- The fourth aspect is *soteriological necessity*, that Jesus had to die to bring salvation. This has been hotly debated.

Superficially, the most prominent aspect of Luke's soteriology, both in the Gospel and *Acts*, is Christ's glorification as Saviour and Lord. Having been raised from death, and elevated to kingly power at the right hand of God, Jesus now has all power to dispense salvation through the Holy Spirit. This concept of Jesus' sovereign authority to save underpins much of *Acts*, whether

in the preaching (*e.g.* Acts 4.11-12), in the conversion accounts (Acts 9.5-6; 11.42-44) or in predestinarian references like Acts 13.48; 18.9-10.

But important though this theme is, to forbid Luke any further understanding undermines the stress he places on the ‘*δει*’ of Jesus’ death. It becomes just an inconvenient pre-requisite of his resurrection and ascension. But one must then ask whether an apotheosis like that of Enoch or Elijah would not have been more suitable, and whether the ignominy of crucifixion can be more than a profound embarrassment to the gospel.

Even so, many critics fail to find any concept of *atonement* in *Luke*, such as is found in the other Gospels and Paul. Vögtle¹⁴ for example argues that in his ministry Jesus taught forgiveness and life to all who repent. He asks why teaching on atonement is absent, or if Jesus realised its importance later, why his teaching did not change. But as Beasley-Murray points out:

An emancipation for the whole world was needed if the Son of man was to be the means of a sovereignty that would *deliver* from evil as well as *judge* evil.¹⁵

The bases on which Luke is felt to omit atonement are, apart from the positive emphasis on glory noted above:

- his failure to include Mark 10.45, the ‘ransom statement’, at 22.27,
- his restriction of Christ’s atonement in *Acts* to one quotation from Paul (Acts 20.28),
- and particularly the exclusion, on text critical grounds, of Luke 22.19b-20.

But the first is accounted for by Luke's context of discipleship, rather than of Jesus' own suffering. In any case it is more than balanced by his inclusion (against Matthew) in 12.49-50 of conjoined references to fire and his baptism. These are clearly allusions to Old Testament expressions of God's wrath, so that they express the idea that Jesus can only bring God's judgement by first suffering it himself. We may note here the similar concept of *the cup* in his prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, which is another common OT metaphor for God's judgement.

The second point is clearly a red herring. Luke is hardly likely to disagree on a major theological issue with his main protagonist and apostolic mentor; and if he did, would scarcely quote what he disagreed about.

This leaves only the third, and in recent years scholarly opinion has overwhelmingly swung in favour of the longer rendering of Luke 22. We must therefore treat this passage carefully, since Luke presents it virtually as Jesus' manifesto of his forthcoming death.

Despite various other suggestions,

There are several weighty arguments which favour the view that the Last Supper was associated with a Passover meal.¹⁶

If this is so, the significance of Jesus' words depends on this context, especially in Luke's Gospel where, it has been argued, the two are directly compared:

Luke presents [the meal] in two panels: the old Passover meal, characterised in vv15-18 and destined for fulfilment in the kingdom of God, gives way to the new supper of the Lord, which is characterised in vv.19-20.¹⁷

The Passover was instituted in anticipation of, and for remembrance of, the salvation of Israel from the wrath of God. It involved the sacrificial slaughter of a lamb, and the shedding of its blood. Jesus having in vv15-17 celebrated this past deliverance in anticipation of his imminent death, and of his celebration of it at the *παρουσια*, is described as taking one of the ceremonial unleavened loaves and saying *'This is my body, given for you'*. This phrase, only in Luke,

adds a vicarious dimension of meaning to his 'body', and probably also a sacrificial nuance...the reference to Jesus' death and the connection with it of this reinterpreted Passover in the Lucan account is unmistakable, even though implicit.¹⁸

After supper he takes the cup (possibly the third Passover cup) and, against the usual custom prescribing individual cups, distributes it to all with the words *'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you'*. This is accepted as an allusion to Exod. 24.8, where Moses took the blood of burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, and sprinkled it on the people to seal them into the Sinai Covenant. The rabbis understood this to be an atonement for the people's sins¹⁹. This line of thought is clear in Jesus' words.

Indeed, 'poured out' is even more connotative of death than 'given'.²⁰

It is possible that the words of institution in Luke are from a liturgical source more specific than Jesus' original words. But Schürmann has pointed out that even if the words are inauthentic, the deeds themselves show Jesus' understanding of his own sacrificial death: *'they are a sign of the meaning of his death.'*²¹

But Jesus goes further than this association of his death with atoning sacrifice, in establishing his death as the foundation sacrifice of the *new covenant* mentioned in Jer. 31, Ezek. 16 (linked with ‘atonement’), 34 (linked with the Davidic Messiah) and 37 (linked with the restoration of Israel), and other passages. The key passage, Jer. 31.31-34, contrasts this new covenant with the broken covenant of Sinai. It brings holy obedience and fellowship with God (33), knowledge of God and forgiveness (34). Without doubt, Luke here understands Jesus to subsume all the benefits of the kingdom he has announced throughout the gospel – repentance, forgiveness, holiness and eternal fellowship with God – in his forthcoming death as an atoning sacrifice for the subjects of the kingdom, who break bread in remembrance of him.

His own body and blood will replace the Passover lamb as the sign of the way God’s kingdom will be realised from now on, even though its fullness will not be achieved until the eschaton.²²

Once we have this understanding of Luke’s soteriology, we are better able to notice other allusions to the atonement. Space does not permit a full assessment of these, but for example, the brief quotation from Isa. 53.12 in 22.37 can be seen to allude to the whole of Isa. 53, and show that Luke’s Christology takes full account of the ‘*suffering servant*’ motif, despite its lack of prominence elsewhere in the Gospel.

4 *Conclusions*

Luke establishes in his Gospel a very clear historical explanation of the death of Jesus at the hands of the Jewish religious rulers. At the same time he takes some pains to implicate as well the Herodians, the Pharisees and the

people themselves (that is, the whole Jewish nation); but also in Pilate and the Roman soldiery the Gentiles. This symbolic involvement of the whole of mankind in responsibility for Jesus' death, made more explicit in Acts 4.27, suits his theology well, for it enables him better to present Jesus as the Saviour from sin of all mankind (*cf.* 2.32, 3.38).

But Luke also has a clear idea of how this salvation is won not through Jesus' teaching alone, but through the suffering and death which are integral to his messiahship (9.22). Through death, Jesus is vindicated by God, raised and has ascended to God's right hand. By this glorification, he is able to dispense salvation sovereignly to a people drawn from all mankind.

This salvation, though, comes only through his death as a propitiation for the sins of his people. He dies on their behalf, for and instead of them, becoming both their Passover lamb (and so effecting a new exodus, 9.31), and the sign of their new covenant.

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(2858 words)

References

- ¹ Bultmann, 1962, p.12.
- ² Bayer, in Green *et al.* 1992, p.630.
- ³ 'It remains beyond doubt that Jesus was crucified as a supposed messianic pretender', Hengel, 1968, p.39.
- ⁴ Josephus, *Antiquities*, XVIII.55.
- ⁵ Heard, in Green *op. cit.*, pp.688-698.
- ⁶ *ibid.* p.691.
- ⁷ Josephus, *op. cit.*, XVIII.85.
- ⁸ *ibid.*, XVIII.130.
- ⁹ Hengel, 1968, p.39.
- ¹⁰ Josephus, *op. cit.*, XVIII.3.
- ¹¹ Bultmann, *loc. cit.*
- ¹² Beasley-Murray, 1986, p.237.
- ¹³ *ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Vögtle, *Todenankürstigungen und Todesverständnis Jesu*, quoted in Beasley-Murray, *op. cit.*, p.268.
- ¹⁵ Beasley-Murray, *op. cit.*, p.270.
- ¹⁶ Stein, in Green *op. cit.*, p.446.
- ¹⁷ Nolland, 1993, p.1041.
- ¹⁸ Fitzmyer, 1985, p.1391.
- ¹⁹ Stein, *op. cit.*, p.448.
- ²⁰ Fitzmyer, *loc. cit.*
- ²¹ Schürmann, *Jesu Ureigener Tod*, pp.58-9, quoted in Beasley-Murray *op. cit.*
- ²² Fitzmyer, *op. cit.*, p.1392.

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