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Pro-Secular? Luke's Relationship with Roman Imperial System and Culture

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Pro-Secular? Luke's Relationship with Roman Imperial System and Culture

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

He has ... rescued [us] from the hands of our enemies, [so that] without fear we might worship him in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

- Luke 1:74-75

This statement, spoken by Zechariah at the birth of John the Baptist, serves as a forecast of where the story of Jesus and his early community will end up. Acts 28:30-31 reports its accomplishment when, talking about Paul's lodgings in Rome, it says, "He remained two full years in his lodgings. He received all who came to him, and with complete assurance and without hindrance he proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ." The narrative of Luke-Acts begins in Jerusalem (Lk 1:5-25), moves to Galilee (Lk 4:14-15), returns to Jerusalem (Lk 19:28), then ventures throughout Asia Minor and ends in Rome (Acts 28:14). The movement of the story is also the movement of the church, at least the movement of the church as Luke wanted to present it. With the Gospel of Luke terminating in the heart of the Roman Empire and the missionary call strong in the hearts of his main characters, the question arises as to how Luke reconciles the demands of the Christ event with the reality of imperial rule. It will be the goal of this paper to suggest that Luke-Acts presents a view of Christianity relating to the Empire in a way that is mutually beneficial. Luke does not maintain anti-imperial sentiments, nor does he see the church as diametrically opposed to the surrounding culture.

By looking at the Proverbs 31 woman in the context of the Persian period, this paper sought to emphasize the economic activities of the woman and her household. The Proverbs 31 woman gives a picture of elite economic values and activities in the Persian period. A better understanding of the historical context helps to explain the imagery and activities of the poem. An understanding of the historical context also shows some of the differences between modern values and concepts that sometimes inform contemporary readers' interpretations of this ancient text.

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Alumnus Essay

Pro-Secular?

Luke's Relationship with Roman Imperial System and Culture

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This statement, spoken by Zechariah at the birth of John the Baptist, serves as a forecast of where the story of Jesus and his early community will end up. Acts 28:30-31 reports its accomplishment when, talking about Paul's lodgings in Rome, it says, "He remained two full years in his lodgings. He received all who came to him, and with complete assurance and without hindrance he proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ." The narrative of Luke-Acts begins in Jerusalem (Lk 1:5-25), moves to Galilee (Lk 4:14-15), returns to Jerusalem (Lk 19:28), then ventures throughout Asia Minor and ends in Rome (Acts 28:14). The movement of the story is also the movement of the church, at least the movement of the church as Luke wanted to present it. With the Gospel of Luke terminating in the heart of the Roman Empire and the missionary call strong in the hearts of his main characters, the question arises as to how Luke reconciles the demands of the Christ event with the reality of imperial rule. It will be the goal of this paper to suggest that Luke-Acts presents a view of Christianity relating to the Empire in a way that is mutually beneficial. Luke does not maintain anti-imperial sentiments, nor does he see the church as diametrically opposed to the surrounding culture.

I will begin by assuming that the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles were written by the same author and can be taken together to constitute one unified narrative. This position has been convincingly argued by Luke Timothy Johnson⁶¹ and Robert Tannehill⁶² and it well accepted in scholarly circles. I will then investigate the reason Luke wrote a gospel, his background, and the sources he utilized to create his composition. Next, I will ask if Luke had a political project in mind when writing his story. Was it the case that Luke's intention was to suggest subversive practices that would undermine the Romans? Questions such as this one will be weighed against claims that Luke's desire was to present a politically harmless Jesus figure. Following, I will focus on how Luke actually understood the Empire and how it works to advance the Christian community toward its stated goal that, "repentance, for the

⁶¹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991).

⁶² Robert Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, vol. 1 & 2, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1986).

forgiveness of sins, would be preached in [Jesus'] name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Lk 24:47).

Luke: Citizen of the Greco-Roman World

Authorship of Luke-Acts has been attributed to someone who very well may have been a companion of Paul on his missionary journeys. Johnson relates that such a "supposition seems to find support in the so called 'we passages' of Acts...where the text shifts suddenly to first-person narration, suggesting the presence of an eyewitness to the events."⁶³ However, Luke does not seem to be aware of Paul's letters, or at least he never mentions them in his narration of events. This leads Johnson to conclude that Luke-Acts was probably written between 80 and 85CE. Powell, however, gives Luke more independence with regards to the non-use of Pauline theology or letters, when he suggests that, "there is no reason a companion of Paul's could not have been an independent thinker."⁶⁴ Luke, whether the "physician, a companion of Paul" (cf. Col 4:14; 2 Tim 4:11; Phlm 24) as church tradition informs, or somebody else, was most likely an educated Hellenized Gentile Christian, which is evidenced by the way he writes and his fluency with various styles of Greek.⁶⁵ This explains his desire to move the church toward a more inclusive stance vis-à-vis the Gentile Christians and Gentile culture.

The root reason for writing the Gospel of Luke is also a debated topic. "Hellenistic historiography" is often the label chosen for Luke-Acts as far as genre is concerned. Luke Timothy Johnson, while agreeing that Luke-Acts had some historical intentions, makes the case for "the first Christian *apologetic* literature."⁶⁶ He outlines the different opinions about how this apology could have been intended. One theory is that Luke-Acts served as "an apology for the Christian movement as such." This would mean that it was composed to prove to the Empire that the Way was not a political threat but really an ancient religion like Judaism (in like manner as Josephus in *The Jewish Wars*). Another way of looking at it finds that it was written as "an apology for Paul and his teaching, perhaps even for his trial."⁶⁷ As interesting as all of this is, Johnson reveals his own thoughts when he states:

To a possible outside Hellenistic reader, the Christian movement is presented as a philosophically enlightened, politically harmless, socially benevolent and philanthropic fellowship. But its more immediate purpose is to interpret the Gospel for insiders within the context of a pluralistic environment composed of both Jews and Gentiles...Luke's narrative, therefore, is expressly concerned with the fulfilment of God's promise up to his own day.⁶⁸

It must then be admitted that the main thrust of the Luke-Acts is its desire to fortify the faith of those who have been shaken by the recent event of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. A common question during that period must have been, "If this new God of ours has not fulfilled his promises to the Jews, how can he be trusted to be faithful to the promises of Jesus Christ?" If this was true, the reason given in the introduction to Luke's Gospel makes sense: "so that you may realize the certainty of the teaching you have received" (Lk 1:4). Tannehill notes, "Through revealing this sort of order in the narrative—an order which nourishes faith because it discloses a saving purpose behind events—the narrator sought to create 'assurance.'"⁶⁹ This being the case, the narrative itself, not historical accuracy, would have been the primary concern. In the course of the meaning placed behind the events, certain attitudes toward the Roman Empire must have also been implicitly or explicitly present. The

⁶³ Ibid., 2.

⁶⁴ Mark Allen Powell, *What Are They Saying About Luke?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 17.

⁶⁵ Johnson, *Luke*, 3.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 8-9.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁶⁹ Tannehill, *Narrative Unity*, vol. 1, 12.

assumption is that Luke is advocating for a more favorable view of Rome than the other Gospels. His lack of focus on the Parousia of the Lord leads Johnson to observe, “Luke-Acts is positive toward the world, not only God’s creation but also as the arena of history and human activity. It is perhaps the least apocalyptic of the NT writings, and the least sectarian.”⁷⁰ He goes on to suggest that, “Human symbols are adequate vessels of the Good News about God,” and, “The Roman Empire does not appear as the instrument of Satan, but as the condition for the safety and spread of the Gospel.”⁷¹ It is this point that the current project is concerned with.

Insofar as influences for Luke-Acts are concerned, there are the obvious ones from the two source hypothesis of Mark, the Q document, and other specifically Lukan material. There are, however, other sources that may not have contributed so much to the content as to the form of Luke-Acts that are seldom mentioned. Greco-Roman legends, religious myths, and literature have also influenced how Luke presents his material as a way of being more inclusive of the Hellenized world. Defending the opinion that one of Luke’s desires in writing a Gospel was to attract new Greco-Roman converts, Mark Kiley suggests that, “in a way unique to his work [Luke sees] that [the] good news of ‘the reign of God and the Lord Jesus Christ’ has an appeal for the Roman world as such.”⁷² Kiley sees parallels to the stories of Roman gods in Luke’s presentation of Jesus and his healing miracles. He states, “In the independent healing ministry of Jesus in Luke 4-8, we find him healing in twelve or thirteen settings....At the end of Jesus’ healings, the Twelve are sent on their mission. In these twelve labors, as well as in the sayings about fire and being constrained, we have clear parallels to Hercules.”⁷³ While some of what Kiley proposes is reasonable, he tends to stand on less firm ground when he makes other interpretations. An example of one that is particularly far-fetched is his comparison of Decius to Jesus:

There are thirteen occurrences of the number 10 in the Gospel. And this “Ten” is present in the dek-root of the name Decius. P. Decius Mus is famous for making a *devotion*, a vow to *sacrifice himself for the good of Rome*, before he went into battle. The first occurrence of ten in Luke, in chapter 14, involves Jesus imagining someone going into battle with 10,000 troops, and having to gauge the chance of success against a numerically stronger opponent. This saying is embedded in a series of reflections on ordering one’s priorities and denying one’s self as a disciple. I would suggest that the redaction of these sayings is guided in part by the memory of Decius.⁷⁴

He also see parallels between Titus Flaminius, Plutarch’s Cicero, and Paul the apostle. One of the more reasonable similarities is found when Kiley considers Maryann Bonz’s book *The Past as Legacy*⁷⁵ which explores the relationship of the journeys of Paul in Acts to the *Aeneid*. In drawing this comparison, he summarizes, “She asserts that they both contain a small *remnant who leave their homeland under divine guidance in order to form in Rome the nucleus of a universal community*.”⁷⁶ Other parallels include the journey to Rome by way of stops and adventures (cf. Ac 28:1-10). Although Aeneas and Paul did not follow identical courses, it seems as if some influences are probable here. Kiley, feebly, reverts to numerical “parallels” and states that the recorded number of people on the ship with Paul, 276, is a reference to *Aeneid* 2.76 which recounts a story of false accusation that Luke’s readers would have been able to pick up on.⁷⁷ This assumes that the *Aeneid* was numerated as we have it today when Acts was written which, unfortunately, it was not.

⁷⁰ Johnson, *Luke*, 21.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷² Mark Kiley, “Roman Legends and Luke-Acts,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 39 no. 3 (2009), 135.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Maryann Bonz, *The Past as Legacy: Luke-Acts and Ancient Epic* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000).

⁷⁶ Kiley, “Roman Legends,” 139.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 141.

Peter Scaer also finds interesting similarities in Luke-Acts and Greek culture but in a more responsible way than Kiley. Insofar as the *Aeneid* is concerned, Scaer also notes the journey motif as Paul travels to Rome and adds, “The climax of Luke-Acts is summarized in the simple words, ‘and so we came to Rome’ (Acts 28:14). As Aeneas finally brought his gods to the land of the Tiber (*Aeneid* 1), so also does Paul proclaim his unknown God to Rome.”⁷⁸

But Luke does not stop at general journey imagery that calls to mind Aeneas’ founding of the great civilization out of the ashes of Troy. More specifically, Luke actually bases some of the scenes from Acts on the well-known Greek literature of the time. Dennis MacDonald asks the question, *Does the New Testament Imitate Homer?* His book, subtitled *Four Cases from the Acts of the Apostles*, argues that in some scenes of Acts there are obvious imitations of Homer’s great epics. MacDonald proposes six criteria for determining if a Homeric source could have been used by New Testament authors. “Accessibility, criterion one, pertains to the dating of the proposed model relative to the imitation and its physical distribution and popularity in education, art, and literature.”⁷⁹ The *Iliad*, he claims, was one of the most widely distributed and taught classics of the ancient world. Even the Jews would not have been able to escape its influence. The “historian Josephus,” MacDonald says, “frequently imitated Homer when narrating Jewish themes.”⁸⁰ The next criterion is “analogy.” This “asks if other ancient authors imitated the same model.” Third is “destiny” which looks at the quantity of similarities between the works in question. Fourth, “order,” considers “the relative sequencing of motifs in the two works.” Fifth comes “distinctive traits.” This focuses on the distinctiveness of genre type in the possibly imitated section verses the work as a whole. Lastly, “interpretability” is understood as asking the question of whether or not an imitated section would have been able to be easily interpreted by its intended readers.⁸¹ MacDonald, utilizing these criteria, concludes that the Acts of the Apostles does in fact imitate Homer in four locations: Peter’s meeting with Cornelius (Ac 10:1-11:18); Paul’s farewell to the Ephesian leaders (Ac 21:7-14); the selection of Matthias to replace Judas (Ac 1:15-26); and Peter’s escape from Herod (Ac 12:1-23). All of these stories, MacDonald argues, are closely related to similar tales in Homer that would have been widely accessible. So widely accessible, in fact, that they would also be easily interpretable. This leads him to conclude that there can be no mistake in their being imitations of the great Greek author. The implications of such a claim include Luke being sympathetic to Greco-Roman culture to such an extent that he found it useful for conveying the new things of Jesus Christ. Such a situation is in some ways analogous to the way that the author(s) of the Noah story took ancient Near East mythology and reorganized it to serve as a vehicle for talking about YHWH. MacDonald puts it in the context of an ancient “culture war” saying:

Ancient evangelism was, to a large extent, a *mythomachia*, a battle among competing factions. Luke was engaged in a literary battle on at least two fronts: Jewish scriptures in the rear, and Greek poetry up ahead. The principle virtues of his compositions reside not in his linear continuity with historical events or traditions but in his strategic transformation of ancient narratives.⁸²

With Luke’s sympathetic view of Greco-Roman culture and his ability to use it to say something true about God’s revelation in the person of Jesus Christ in mind, one must now consider how Luke actually related to the Roman Empire as an all pervasive cultural backdrop.

Luke’s Political Project

⁷⁸ Peter Scaer, “The Greco-Roman Savior: Jesus in the Age of Augustus,” *Logia* 21 no. 2 (2012), 8.

⁷⁹ Dennis MacDonald, *Does the New Testament Imitate Homer? Four Cases from the Acts of the Apostles* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 2.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸¹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 4-6.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 151.

The question of whether or not Luke-Acts is anti or pro Empire is one of great debate. Are there subversive texts and practices that go in the face of Imperial rule? Or is there more material that highlights the good points of the Roman system and laud its achievements? In looking at linguistic systems in Luke-Acts one notices the use of terms like “the Son of God,” “Lord,” and “Son of the Most High.” Adela Yarbro Collins writes about the understanding of such terms among Greeks when they are used in the Gospel of Mark. Being that Mark was also written for an audience under the same Imperial yoke, what she says in her article is directly related to the readers of Luke-Acts. The term “Son of the Most High” (υιος του θεου υψιστου) taken in non-Jewish, non-Christian contexts, “occurs as a divine name for Zeus.”⁸³ This leads her to conclude that, “For members of Mark’s audience familiar with [the cult of Zeus], the demon’s address of Jesus [Mk 1:24] is equivalent to ‘son of Zeus.’”⁸⁴ Collins traces the imperial use of “son of god” as it came to be used among the emperors. Beginning with Julius Caesar’s deification after his death, “it came to mean a god who had previously been a man.”⁸⁵ After Julius, both Augustus and Tiberius assumed the title υιος θεου in their addresses. Thus, when such titles are applied to Jesus in Luke-Acts, they would immediately recall imperial imagery. Is this what is intended when Peter is mistaken for a god in Acts 10:25 and Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14:11?

At first glance these mistaken identities might seem like a counter-claim to the ability of any human being to be worshiped as a god. Acts 10:25 has Cornelius “falling at his feet [and paying] him homage.” “Homage,” here, is one translation for the word προσεκυνησεν. Fitzmyer informs the reader that another possible translation is “adore, or worship.”⁸⁶ If it is the case that Luke wished to convey worship and then had his character respond by saying “Get up, I myself am also a human being (ανθρωπος)” (Acts 10:26), it is possible that this correction was meant for all human beings, none of them are worthy of “worship.” Paul’s experience of being worshiped yields similar themes. In Acts 14:11-18 the men (ανδρες) at Lystra want to offer sacrifice to Barnabas and Paul whom they have mistaken for Zeus and Hermes “in human form.” This assumption throws the two missionaries into a rage and they respond by saying, “We are of the same nature (ομοιοπαθεις) as you, human beings (ανθρωποι)” (Acts 14:15). While there is the possibility of anti-emperor cult sentiments here, neither Fitzmyer nor Johnson pick up on it.⁸⁷

Luke has used the titles “king” and “Lord” to describe Jesus more than any other Gospel. This is so much the case that John Navone notes, “Luke stresses that Jesus is ‘Lord,’ especially after the resurrection and also programmatically in the birth narratives (Luke 2:11), to the extent that we may see this as Luke’s standard way of describing Jesus’ present position.”⁸⁸ This, he thinks, evidences Luke’s desire to make “a counterclaim for Jesus over against Caesar.” Navone also cites the use of “king” and “savior” not only as language that echoed Caesar but as “an encouragement to Luke’s readers to keep trusting in God, confident that God’s purposes will come to fruition in spite of human oppression.”⁸⁹ Such a radical view of the intentions of such language is not universally shared. Christopher Bryan, for example, explores the possibilities and concludes:

⁸³ Adela Yarbro Collins, “Mark and His Readers: The Son of God among Greeks and Romans,” *Harvard Theological Review* 93 no. 2 (2000), 90.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁸⁶ Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 461.

⁸⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, 532; and Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 249.

⁸⁸ John Navone, “Luke-Acts and the Roman Empire: God and Caesar,” *Bible Today* 42 no. 4 (2004), 233.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Thus, as we have already observed, Romans spoke of living emperors as “son of god,” “lord,” and “savior.” Paul and other Christians did the same for Jesus. Does it follow, as Crossan and Reid claim, that for Christians “to proclaim Jesus as Son of God was deliberately denying Caesar his highest title, and that to announce Jesus as Lord and Savior was calculated treason”? No, it does not.⁹⁰

He continues to say that even though the words used are the same, their context is different and they cannot be understood to be about the same thing. Seyoon Kim identifies this mistake as “parallelomania.” Indeed, he says very clearly that in the application of these words to Jesus, “there is neither an anti-imperial polemic nor any intent to subvert the Roman Empire.”⁹¹ This, however, is only when Kim is speaking about how Paul has used the words in questions in his letters. Coming to Luke-Acts, Kim sees a different story. He constructs his theory around the *inclusio* of Luke 2:1-14, the birth narrative, and Acts 28:30-31, Paul proclaiming the kingdom of God without hindrance. Within this he claims:

Luke deliberately contrasts Jesus the Messianic king/lord to Caesar Augustus, and implicitly claims that Jesus is the true *kyrios* and *sōtēr*, the true bearer of the kingship of God, and that he will bring true *pax* on the earth, replacing the false *pax* brought by the military conquests of Caesar, a false *kyrios* and *sōtēr*.⁹²

Focusing on the use of *κύριος* in Luke-Acts, C. Kevin Rowe makes helpful observations when taking on the interaction of Peter and Cornelius in Acts 10. He notes that the Roman official, his Gentile audience, and the whole scene taking place in a city “founded in honor of Augustus” creates such a situation that “an ethos in which the presence of the Roman Empire is keenly felt.”⁹³ He continues saying that, “It is into this setting that Peter introduces the crucified Jesus—*οὗτος*—as the *κύριος πάντων*.” This must, however, be held in contrast with the other times Luke uses *κύριος* in reference to temporal lords. Acts 25:26, when Felix is writing to King Agrippa about Paul, reads, “But I have nothing to write about him to our sovereign (*τῷ κυρίῳ*.)” If Jesus is “Lord” and temporal rulers can be “lord,” is it the case that the same use of the word is meant in all situations? Rowe would say no. At the very end of his study he states, “Put in Lukan language, Christians may refer to the *κύριος καίσαρ* as *κύριος*, as indeed Luke himself does (Acts 25:26), but Jesus *κύριος* is the *κύριος πάντων* (Acts 10:36).”⁹⁴ Thus the different uses of “lord” are not necessarily contradictory because they are talking about different ways of being “lord.” In this estimation, Luke does not see Jesus as taking over the temporal lordship of the Roman leaders but as the background to all creation as “lord of all.”

But what did this mean for how Luke envisioned the political potency of the Jesus movement? While one scholar has gone so far as to suggest that the whole of Luke-Acts is aimed as a threat against Rome which holds the destruction of the Temple as an example of what God (Jesus) does against his enemies, more mainline views tend to find that Luke’s presentation of Jesus and his followers takes pains to come off as non-political.⁹⁵ An instance of debate in this area is the story of Jesus healing a demonic at Gerasene in Luke 8:26-39. This story has been adapted from Mark and has only undergone slight changes in language and structure when adapted by Luke. Norman Beck interpreters an anti-Roman cryptogram in the account given the use of “Legion” to name the demonic presence. He says, “Perhaps the use of the

⁹⁰ Christopher Bryan, *Render to Caesar: Jesus, the Early Church, and the Roman Superpower* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 90-91.

⁹¹ Seyoon Kim, *Christ and Caesar: The Gospel and the Roman Empire in the Writings of Paul and Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 30.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 81.

⁹³ C. Kevin Rowe, “Luke-Acts and the Imperial Cult: A Way through the Conundrum?” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27 no. 3 (2005), 292.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 300.

⁹⁵ As an example of proponents of the “threat to Rome” theory, see Charles Giblin, *Destruction of Jerusalem according to St. Luke’s Gospel*, *Analecta Biblica* (Rome, Italy: Biblical Institute Press, 1985).

word ‘Legion’ here...was a cryptic way to communicate that the reason this man was so thoroughly deranged was that he was cooperating totally with the Romans, he was ‘living among the dead.’”⁹⁶ The use of “pigs” is also, according to Beck, a sort of insult against the occupying Roman forces. In discussing the risk involved in publishing such cryptograms, he says, “Within such cryptograms, if they were well crafted, it was possible even to express triumph over the Roman forces.”⁹⁷ Joseph Fitzmyer, on the other hand, does not see anything in this passage beyond the meaning that, “Demonic force in the world is brought to an end by Jesus’ word.”⁹⁸ H. Preisker likewise notes that, “in the NT the word *λεγιων* is not used for the military world, as elsewhere. It is used to denote transcendent forces.”⁹⁹ Johnson also agrees when he states, “One must, however, strain to find a political statement embedded in the name.”¹⁰⁰ Thus, in the case of the use of “Legion” to name the demonic presence in Luke 8:30, implicit anti-imperial rhetoric simply is not there.

In point of fact, Kim finds nothing in the Gospel that would indicate a call to be anyway involved in politics. “Evidently Luke,” Kim remarks, “does not think that the redemption that Jesus has brought has to do with overthrowing the Roman imperial system or replacing it with a politically independent government of Israel.”¹⁰¹ Bryan falls in line with this thinking and observes:

Luke’s Jesus is not a rebel seeking to replace one *polis* with another, nor is he a Gandhi, counseling nonviolent noncooperation with imperial authorities. On the contrary, when confronted with a Jew who collects taxes for the Romans, Jesus rejoices in the man’s almsgiving and his acts of penitence for extortion, but notably does *not* tell him to stop working for the empire (Luke 19:1-10).¹⁰²

One of Bryan’s most convincing arguments for this is the way that Mary and Joseph behave vis-à-vis the Empire when the census is called. He states, “Luke here shows Mary and Joseph loyally obeying Caesar Augustus’ decree, and in so doing, *identifying* themselves with the Roman Empire...Mary appears to see no contradiction between God’s power over such ‘mighty ones’ and her own obedience to Caesar’s decree.”¹⁰³ Also at the scene of the Last Supper, Jesus makes a seemingly revolutionary statement about the purchase of swords for those who do not already have them (Lk 22:36). Those present locate two swords in the room to which Jesus says, “It is enough!” (Lk 22:38). Most commentators find it clear that Jesus was here talking in “a symbolic sense.” The apostles “miss the point of what he was talking about” which is evidenced by Jesus’ harsh reaction to one of them still being armed in the garden in vv. 49-51.¹⁰⁴

The Lukan View of Empire

If Luke does not present overly anti-imperial themes in his Gospel, the next inquiry must be as to his outlook towards the Empire. Ultimately, “coming to terms with the Empire is part of the reality of dealing with the delay of the Parousia.”¹⁰⁵ The world of the ever-present Empire was the one in which Christianity was born. Luke realized this and tried to demonstrate how it was not such a bad situation.

⁹⁶ Norman Beck, *Anti-Roman Cryptograms in the New Testament: Symbolic Messages of Hope and Liberation*, The Westminster College Library of Biblical Symbolism (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 107.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁹⁸ Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 739.

⁹⁹ H. Preisker, “*λογιων*,” in *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), 69.

¹⁰⁰ Johnson, *Luke*, 137.

¹⁰¹ Kim, *Christ and Caesar*, 95.

¹⁰² Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, 99.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁰⁴ Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 1432-1433.

¹⁰⁵ Navone, “Luke-Acts and the Roman Empire,” 232.

The Roman system ensured the *Pax Romana* which included the security and infrastructure to travel freely. Saul of Tarsus would not have become Paul the apostle to the Gentiles without the achievements of the Roman Empire. Navone, however, observes, “Luke never explicitly mentions the benefits of the *Pax Romana* or the Roman road system. If this is a significant sign of Luke’s positive view of the Empire, he has not gone out of his way to draw attention to it.”¹⁰⁶

One aspect of Luke-Acts that is noteworthy is that Luke never blames Rome for the death of Jesus or any of the misfortunes that befall the Christian community. For him, it is always the Jews who stir up trouble, not the Romans. The Romans who are somehow implemented in the mistreatment of Jesus or his followers only do so because they are not being true to their own consciences, are persuaded by others, or are not following their own laws. “Luke,” Bryan states, “wants to suggest that hostility to the Christians invariably arises from one of two causes, ‘pagan greed’ or ‘Jewish jealousy,’ and *not* from imperial suspicion or disapproval.”¹⁰⁷

A look at the character of Pilate will help to illustrate this point. In the account of Jesus’ trial, it is the Jews who bring charges against him, not the Roman official Pilate. The Sanhedrin bring Jesus to Pilate and tell him that “he opposes the payment of taxes to Caesar and maintains that he is the Messiah, a king” (Lk 23:2). At this point, the reader knows that Jesus does in fact approve of the payment of taxes to Caesar because he has no problem with Zacchaeus’ profession in 19:1-10 and said so himself in 20:25. As to the accusation of being a Messianic king, Pilate asks him for confirmation, gets it, and then declares him innocent. He repeats his ruling of “not guilty” three times and even has it reaffirmed by Herod (23:15). In the end, however, Pilate allows “their voices [to prevail]” and hands down the verdict “that their demand should be granted” (23:23-24). Pilate was known in the ancient world as being a violent man. Earlier in Luke, there is a story about having “mingled [the blood of Galileans] with the blood of their sacrifices” (13:1). Josephus reports that Pilate had a potential riot put down by disguising his soldiers in the crowd and then giving them the order to use lethal force when the crowd became rambunctious.¹⁰⁸ On another occasion, Pilate killed a number of Jews on pilgrimage to Mount Gerizzim whom he had forbidden to go. This resulted in him being called back to Rome and Marcellus being put in his place “to take care of the affairs in Judea.”¹⁰⁹ Pilate, then, was a known offender of good Roman conduct and his allowing of Jesus to be killed can be seen as another example of what happens when those in power abdicate their responsibilities.

In the case of Paul, Roman law never actually convicts him of anything. He is arrested only once in Philippi because he cast a fortune-telling spirit out of a slave, which caused her masters to lose their source of profit. The imprisonment only lasted a day and the magistrates released them saying, “Now then, come out, and go in peace” (Acts 16:36). Bryan observes that Paul is “*once* taken into protective custody by the Romans, without which it seems likely he would have been lynched (21:27-40).”¹¹⁰ Bryan continues to summarize Paul’s interactions with Roman authorities:

The quotation from Acts that is offered as Roman “grounds” for arresting the apostles is actually presented by Acts as a summary of *Jewish* charges, which the “Roman officials,” for their part, pretty well ignore (17:8-9). The last part of Acts (24-28) shows Paul being repeatedly examined by Roman tribunals and repeatedly acquitted, so that the climax, with Paul teaching in Rome “without hindrance,” is not unexpected (Acts 28:31).¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 231.

¹⁰⁷ Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, 104.

¹⁰⁸ Josephus, “The Antiquities of the Jews,” in *The Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987), 480.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 482.

¹¹⁰ Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, 104.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

In fact, the chance to be questioned in a court situation the way Paul was at the end of Acts was not a disaster but “an unrivaled opportunity to ‘go public,’ to make a definitive statement of [his] beliefs before the wider world.”¹¹² It was a risk, no doubt, but “Luke the narrator...makes sure that readers know the charge was unfounded....This assessment is endorsed by the judgement of Festus and Agrippa: Paul has not committed any offense under Roman law, and could have been released if he had not appealed to Caesar (25:18; 26:31-32).”¹¹³ Loveday Alexander does not view this as a wholesale acceptance of the Empire on the part of Luke or Paul but rather envisions Paul as one who knows his way around the complex legal system of the Empire and is “streetwise” enough to use it for his own purposes.¹¹⁴

Luke-Acts can also be seen as a critique of the Roman use of power. Whereas Rome is a large military superpower, Christianity presents a model of authority that does not share the same thoughts on power. It has been stated that both Rome and Christianity have similar goals of “conquering” the world by “negotiating happiness with insiders and outsiders....Both develop a presence everywhere and both extend citizenship to new groups.”¹¹⁵ Where they differ is in how this is accomplished and what the authority structure looks like. “It is remarkable,” Richard Cassidy exclaims, “that Luke’s Jesus repeatedly instructs his disciples on the topics of service and humility.”¹¹⁶ These teachings consistently come up as juxtapositions to temptations to power on the part of the disciples (cf. 9:48; 22:24-27). When Jesus is tempted in the desert, Satan offers him control of the “kingdoms of the world” (4:5-6) if he but worship him. Here Kim, resisting the temptation to interpret this as meaning that Satan’s power is what lies behind the kingdoms of the world (the Romans), states:

So Jesus saw Caesar and other pagan rulers exercising their authority in a Satanic way and for the Satanic purpose, i.e., for the kingdom of Satan. But having rejected at his temptation by Satan the exercise of his authority for his own good as a diabolic temptation and having resolved to follow only God’s word, Jesus embodies ‘as one who serves’ the conception of leadership befitting the Kingdom of God (cf. also Luke 12:37).¹¹⁷

It is not that Satan = Roman but that the present Roman way of exercising authority is antithetical to the correct way of God which focuses on service and humility. Thus Luke’s intention is not to overthrow Roman rule or even to replace it. Luke is rather interested in offering a critique of how power can be abused and voices the concerns of the poor and lowly who he sees as ones needing special care. Thus Navone can say, “The Christian stance is twofold: to call the state back to its former ways, and to be a faithful witness to Jesus.”¹¹⁸

Luke’s critique, however, has a limit. When given the opportunity to condemn violence to the level of pacifism, Jesus passes it up. Luke 3:10-14 recounts a crowd of people asking Jesus who each should do to live like repentant believers. Some in this group are soldiers who receive only the instructions “Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages” (3:14). From this, one can reasonably conclude that Jesus did not see the occupation of being a soldier as an obstacle to Christian life. Beyond that, Luke 19:11-27 has Jesus telling a parable about a nobleman lending coins to his servants that were meant to be invested. One of the servants simply kept his share stored in a handkerchief which resulted in his being stripped of what was entrusted to him. 19:27, the last verse, seems strange here. It goes: “Now as for those enemies of mine who did not want me as their king, bring them here and slay them

¹¹² Loveday Alexander, “Luke’s Political Vision,” *Interpretation* 66 no. 3 (2012), 284.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 287.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Navone, “Luke-Acts and the Roman Empire,” 234.

¹¹⁶ Richard Cassidy, *Christians and Roman Rule in the New Testament: New Perspectives*, Companions to the New Testament (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 2001), 20.

¹¹⁷ Kim, *Christ and Caesar*, 90.

¹¹⁸ Navone, “Luke-Acts and the Roman Empire,” 234.

before me.” Such a case is spoken of by Josephus in *Antiquities of the Jews*. Here Herod has a number of people murdered because “they did not want me to rule...over them.”¹¹⁹ This, as Johnson points out, demonstrates “the *realpolitik* of the ancient world.”¹²⁰ As much as Luke desires to distance himself from the abuses of power typical in the Roman Empire, he is still, to some extent, a product of his environment. Indeed, Warren Carter, who here speaks about a similar passage in Matthew, finds just the words to convey this reality:

The word of God comes to the gospel’s readers, as it always does, in cultural garb. There is no language for this gospel to employ other than the one that pervades and dominates its world. The gospel attests, then, the power of the imperial paradigm, the deep level at which it has been internalized, absorbed, and assumed by this gospel’s traditions, communities, and author—members of the imperially-controlled society who nonetheless criticize...it!¹²¹

Conclusion

In conclusion, while Luke-Acts cannot be claimed as a 100% pro-Roman document or apology, there are several instances where the Empire is viewed in a positive light. At the end of the day, the Empire composed the reality in which Christianity existed and the government structure with which the church had to contend. Luke-Acts avoids easy temptations to pit the Jesus movement against the dominating imperial power of Rome. In fact, if one read Acts, it is *because* of the Roman Empire that the church survived the first few decades. While it does critique the way in which Rome uses its power, it nowhere suggests that the Empire is on its way out, or that it must be (actively or passively) subverted by Christian believers. Bryan offers the conclusion that “in Luke’s view, nothing that comes from *outside* the church can really damage the church. But the church *can* be damaged from within, when it fails to listen to the call of God’s grace.”¹²² He justifies this position with the accounts of what befalls Annas and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11 when they lie about the funding they provide to the common pot.

Even the way in which Luke has chosen to write his two-volume work demonstrates his acceptance of imperial rule. By allowing “lord” to take on different meanings, he is able to respect temporal leadership while maintaining the absolute Lordship of God. Luke has found a way to be both citizen of the Empire and citizen of heaven. This is also evidenced by his incorporation of Homeric style into Acts. Luke truly must have been a very educated man, educated enough not to fall into the sectarian temptation of reducing the world to “us versus them” or “secular versus religious” understandings. Luke sees the Empire not as an enemy but as a structure that Christians can cooperate with and participate in.

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¹¹⁹ Quoted in Johnson, *Luke*, 291-292.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 291.

¹²¹ Warren Carter, “Resisting and Imitating the Empire: Imperial Paradigms in Two Matthean Parables,” *Interpretation* 56 no. 3 (July 2002), 272.

¹²² Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, 101.

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