IN LIGHT OF REDACTION CRITICISM, WHAT ARE THE LEADING CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GOSPEL OF LUKE?

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Redaction criticism explores how a writer has edited different sources to produce their own work and how this editing reveals their own distinctive characteristics. Redaction criticism can be applied to the Gospel of Luke to reveal that its leading characteristics are a focus on God’s promised salvation breaking into history for all people and the importance of the Holy Spirit and prayer for believers.

Salvation

The key characteristic of Luke revealed by redaction criticism is the theme of salvation. As Marshall states ‘[salvation] is the central motif in Lucan theology’. This becomes apparent immediately when we consider Luke’s use of the salvation word group. His use of ‘saviour’ and ‘salvation’ are unique among the Synoptics, together occurring 8 times.

Salvation is prominent in the opening chapters of Luke’s narrative which are distinctive Lucan material chosen and crafted for the purpose of introducing his key message. Mary ‘rejoices in God [her] Saviour’ (1:47), Zechariah declares that God ‘has raised up a horn of salvation for us’ (1:69 ESV) and that the child to be born to him will ‘give knowledge of salvation to [God’s] people’ (1:77) and Simeon rejoices that his ‘eyes have seen [God’s] salvation’ (2:30). Right from the beginning of his narrative, then, Luke is making it clear that he is telling the story of a saviour who came to bring salvation.

We also find several examples in the Gospel where Luke has edited material from another source in order to emphasise the theme of salvation. For example, in Luke Jesus tells Jairus ‘Only believe and she will be saved’ (8:50) in contrast to Mark’s ‘only believe’ (5:36). Similarly Bartimaeus is told ‘your faith has made you well’ in Mark (10:52) but in Luke, ‘your faith has saved you’ (18:42). These alterations show that Luke wants his readers to understand that Jesus came to offer something more important than just physical healing. Marshall observes that for Luke Jesus’ healings are ‘seen

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2 Marshall, p.92
3 Unless otherwise stated, all Biblical references are NRSV.
as a part of his broader power to save’.\(^4\) It is this power to save which is a leading characteristic of the gospel.

Another set of unique Lucan material has been included to bring out this theme. The parables of chapter 15, the Lost Sheep, Lost Coin and Prodigal Son, all make clear the fact that Jesus came to save the lost. Luke 19:10, ‘For the son of man came to seek out and to save the lost’, makes this point explicit and its position within the narrative performs an important function of summarising the central message of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee as it comes to an end.

**Salvation as Fulfilment and Completion**

The second key aspect of this characteristic is that Luke is eager to declare that this salvation is part of the dawning of the new age promised in the Old Testament. Again, Luke’s inclusion of distinctive material in his early chapters displays this. Mary declares that God is acting ‘according to the promise he made to our ancestors’ (1:55) and Zechariah that it is ‘as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets’ (1:70). Luke is highlighting ‘the long-awaited intervention and determined activity of God to accomplish his historic purposes’\(^5\).

The same point is made throughout the Gospel and is an interesting example of Luke’s redaction. In contrast to Matthew who repeatedly uses a formula of prophecy and fulfilment to show Jesus as the Messiah, Luke is much more general in his references to fulfilment using ‘broader strokes of the brush’.\(^6\) His concern is not so much to prove who Jesus was but to show that what God promised has finally come. We see this, for example, in Luke’s editing of the third passion prediction where he adds that ‘everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished’ (18:31; cf. Mk 10:32-34). Luke’s editing is making clear that what is to happen in Jerusalem is the fulfilment of the Old Testament promises. The journey on the road to Emmaus, unique to Luke, affirms the same point, as do Jesus’ final words to the disciples (24:44-46).

Luke’s account of the baptism of Jesus and the start of his ministry also show that the new age has come. In the account of the baptism of Jesus Luke has inserted the story of John’s imprisonment, moving it from its Markan position. When he then gives an account of Jesus’ baptism John isn’t mentioned at all, again contrasting with Mark. Luke’s editing here suggests that he is removing John

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\(^4\) Marshall, p.96  
from the scene ‘[to draw] a distinction between the epochs of salvation...[so] the way is open for the story of Jesus’. The omission of a narrative about John’s death (Lk. 9:9) suggests the same.

More editorial activity emphasises this theme at the start of Jesus’ public ministry. Luke brings the account of Jesus in Nazareth (4:16-30) forward from its Markan position in order to place it at the outset of Jesus’ ministry and expands it with a quotation from Isaiah 61. The scripture Jesus reads is his ‘manifesto’, declaring again the age of salvation, a new era in which the promises of the old are being fulfilled. Drury observes that Luke then skips the call of the first disciples, adding it later (5:1-11), so that the stories of exorcisms and healings show the outworking of Isaiah’s prophecy immediately. All these examples of redaction highlight Luke’s desire to emphasise the dawning of the new age of salvation.

Salvation for All
A third element of this characteristic of Luke is that salvation is offered to all. All three Synoptics include a quote from Isaiah 40 about John the Baptist but Luke alone has extended it to finish with the statement ‘all flesh shall see the salvation of God’ (3:6) revealing his interest in declaring that this salvation is for all. Luke’s genealogy (3:23-28) also makes this point by tracing the line back to Adam (in contrast to Matthew who goes back to Abraham). In so doing, at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry Luke shows the ‘ultimate universal horizons of the story.’ The unique material in Luke 24 makes the same point as Jesus says that ‘repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed...to all nations’ (24:47).

The theme of Salvation, then, is the leading characteristic of Luke, presented as the key aspect of the new age breaking in as the fulfilment of God’s promises and which is to be offered to all people.

The Holy Spirit
Another leading characteristic in Luke is the importance of the Holy Spirit. Again an examination of the number of references to the Spirit reveals this. Luke mentions the Spirit 17 times in contrast to

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10 Squires, p.163
Matthew's 12 and Mark's 6.\textsuperscript{11} Green identifies two purposes of the Spirit in Luke: Revealing and celebrating the plans of God and empowering the completion of those plans.\textsuperscript{12} Several examples of the former can be found in Luke's prologue. Mary is told that the Spirit will come upon her (1:35), Elizabeth and Zechariah are ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’ (1:41, 67) and Simeon is marked as one for whom the Spirit plays an important part (2:25-27). This concentrated activity of the Spirit at the start of Luke’s narrative introduces the importance of the Spirit in the new age of salvation (cf. Joel 2, Acts 2). It is both a sign that something new is happening and a foretaste of what the age of the Spirit will be like.

As already observed Luke edits his account of Jesus’ baptism in order to remove John (3:21-22) and in so doing emphasises the Spirit’s anointing of Jesus. This emphasis couples with two editorial additions at the start of Jesus’ ministry referring to his being ‘full of the Holy Spirit’ and ‘filled with the power of the Spirit’ (4:1, 14). This close repetition suggests one should imagine such an empowerment to be present throughout the narrative.\textsuperscript{13} Bock observes that the Spirit’s empowering presence here mirrors the same at the beginning of the church (Acts 2).\textsuperscript{14} Such an observation probably points us towards the reason the Spirit is a leading characteristic for Luke; he wants believers to see the importance of having the Spirit to fulfil what God has called them to.

**Prayer**

Prayer is another leading characteristic revealed by redaction criticism. Luke presents prayer as a central part of Jesus’ life not revealed in the other Synoptics. He adds a reference to Jesus praying when he is baptised (3:21), adds the fact that Jesus ‘would withdraw to desolate places and pray’ (5:16) and places the calling of the twelve after a night of prayer (6:12). Jesus is found praying before the confession of Peter (9:18), the Transfiguration takes place in the context of prayer (9:28-29) and we’re told that Jesus had actually prayed for Peter that his faith would not fail (22:32). In addition, in Gethsemane the disciples are told not just to wait for Jesus but to pray themselves (22:40). All of these references to prayer are additions by Luke to his sources and reveal that he sees prayer as highly significant. Green observes that ‘it is in prayer that Jesus solidifies his relationship with God.

\textsuperscript{11} Marshall, p.91
\textsuperscript{12} Green, *Theology*, p.41
\textsuperscript{13} Green, *Theology*, p.45
and receives guidance and empowerment from God.’ As with the Spirit it seems Luke chose to emphasise this characteristic of Jesus’ life in order to call believers to do the same.

**Eschatology**

Luke’s eschatology has long been debated and seen as a leading characteristic revealed by redaction criticism. From the time of Conzelmann’s work on redaction in Luke it has been argued that Luke responds to a delay in the Parousia by replacing it with an interim age for the church, where the Spirit replaces the importance of the Parousia. Redactional activity in the introduction to the Parable of the Pounds (19:11), the change from a return of Jesus to his being seated with God (Mk. 14:63; Lk. 22:69) and the omission of ‘come with power’ in 9:27, along with other minor changes, have been cited as evidence.

However, I disagree that there is sufficient evidence for these conclusions and don’t consider a unique eschatology to be as prominent a characteristic as those already considered. Luke still includes several items from his sources which expect a sudden Parousia. For example the parables of chapter 12, of the thief at night and of the servants, warn that Jesus could come at any moment. Most importantly Luke retains, from Mark 13:30, the fact that ‘this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place’ (Lk. 21:32). These examples are a helpful reminder that a consideration of an author’s redaction must include what they chose to retain as well as what they edited. As Tuckett concludes ‘[t]here is...a substantial body of material...which seems to be not the slightest bit embarrassed about affirming a hope of an eschatological climax which is about to come’.

As with the other Synoptics, then, Luke can be seen to recognise that Jesus could return at any moment.

**Conclusion**

We have seen that redaction criticism can be profitable applied to the Gospel of Luke to isolate some of its leading characteristics. These characteristics are a particular focus on salvation and specifically salvation as the fulfilment of Old Testament expectation and as an offer available for all.

In addition, we have seen that Luke gives the Holy Spirit and prayer a more prominent position than

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16 Conzelmann, op.cit.  
17 Tuckett, p.41
the other synoptic in order to emphasise their importance for the church. Finally we have concluded that contrary to much scholarly work on Luke over the last half century, Luke does not have a significantly different eschatology from the other synoptics. Rather, he follows their view that the time of Jesus’ return is unknown and could be at any moment.
Bibliography


