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# Rich Heroic Themes: Spirit, Kingdom and Prayer in Luke-Acts

ROLLIN RAMSARAN

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Luke's storytelling takes the previous Old Testament scriptural account of the people of God and advances it into the new key of the Spirit's work in Jesus—and then, the work of this “Jesus-shaped” Spirit in the early churches of the movement. In his Gospel, Luke teaches us to hear the scriptures of Israel resonate in the life and ministry of Jesus, thus providing rich heroic themes to be picked up in the Acts of the Apostles. The Acts of the Apostles cannot be disconnected from the Gospel of Luke; Luke presents a continuous story, intertwined by themes and structure.<sup>1</sup>

## HEARING LUKE'S GOSPEL IN LIGHT OF SCRIPTURAL WITNESS

Luke is familiar with the Spirit of God as God's purposive power to “rule.” He knows a larger story that starts with Genesis and moves forward into the time of Jesus (note his genealogy traced to its beginning with Adam, Luke 3.38). A gracious God “rules” through (1) creating, (2) sustaining, and (3) redeeming (as it becomes necessary) humanity within its world. Be that as it may, Luke is captured by the role of the “eschatological Spirit” of the latter prophets—this new release of God's purposive power to reclaim, energize and empower the new covenant people of God.<sup>2</sup> The latter part of Isaiah (chapters 56–66) presents this new “rule” of God following the exilic period: God's reestablished rule among the people of God specifically, and God's rule for all peoples and the nations of the world round about (Isaiah 56.3–8; 60.4–18). The bringing of this kingdom is via the Spirit through “prophetic impulse” (Isaiah 59.21; 61.1–6) that casts a vision of God's “kingdom” and “rule” apart from (1) external “human rulers” (Pharaoh and all “pharaoh-type” rulers), and (2) internal kings of Israel/Judah who were unable to establish representation of the true rule of God (also compare Isaiah 6.1–4 for imagery of the true rule of God). Rather, the purposive Spirit power of God casts its vision back to the liberation of the exodus event and the establishment of a righteous/faithful community.

So to hear Luke is to hear the long-standing tension between prophets and kings anew and to see that Luke stands firmly with the prophets.<sup>3</sup> The kingdom of God will be established by Spirit-led prophetic rule, not the coercive rule of “empire” or the “failed nationalist expectations of Israelite/Judean rule.” So simply put, God is at work anew to fashion God's kingdom rule on a basis far different than the power expectations of the world. The Spirit of God will shape God's rule and the kingdom of God that it brings.

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1. Most of our concern will be thematic, but the structural aspects, particularly with regard to parallels, are well known. See Charles H. Talbert, *Literary Patterns, Theological Themes, and the Genre of Luke-Acts* (Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series 20; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1974), and his later works.

2. What God has always done—create, sustain, redeem—is intensified in the new covenant promise from Jeremiah 31.31. Luke's knowledge of a “new covenant people” sanctioned by the life and death of Jesus is evident in his Last Supper account: “This cup that is poured out for you is the *new covenant* in my blood” (Luke 22.20).

3. Israel's prophets critiqued kings and the people alike for not doing righteousness. On Luke's special concern to portray Jesus and the apostolic leaders in the “prophetic role,” see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Sacra Pagina 3; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991), 17–24.

Power in human relationships must be defined *within human relationships*—that is God’s way. So the Spirit of God must be “embodied” in the prophet. A description of how that Spirit power will be shaped in the renewed post-exilic context can be given. Luke makes that clear with his use of the prophet’s call from Isaiah 61.1–2a:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free. (Luke 4.18)

Jesus, “The Final Prophet”<sup>4</sup> (spoken of by Moses—Deuteronomy 18.5; Acts 3.22–23), takes up the role of “embodied prophetic” figure and applies the Isaianic scripture to himself: “Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4.21). Now, Jesus does not simply fulfill a “role,” but his “role” “fills up” a broad description of the prophetic impulse in lived out/embodied life.<sup>5</sup> Jesus’ life/ministry gives full expression to God’s purposive power, God’s Spirit. We might simply say, the Spirit of God is “Jesus-shaped.” The power of God at work to recreate, to sustain, to redeem is fully consistent with what Jesus does and who Jesus is.

The Spirit of God is not coercive and overbearing because God is not that way. The Spirit of God does not take away human freedom that allows the ability to enter into choice and relationship. The Spirit of God comes upon Jesus at birth, but the presence and the power of the Spirit is shaped in relationship—in the discipline of communication, longing, listening, asking, discernment and experience. This, for Luke, is the realm of prayer. It is Luke’s special interest. Jesus prays at all crucial intervals (baptism, transfiguration, Garden of Gethsemane, two prayers from the cross, prayer for disciples prior to ascension) and as he shapes the Spirit in life, he teaches his disciples (“prophets-to-be”) to keep prayer central and prominent (return of the Seventy in Luke 10.17–22 and teachings on prayers in Luke 11.1–13; 18.1–8).

To recap: Luke senses in Jesus the covenantal promise of Jeremiah 31.31—God is moving anew in an intensified way through the Spirit. This is a Spirit prophetic activity that critiques wrong rule and reestablishes the true rule of God—God’s kingdom rule (the “kingdom of God”). Spirit prophetic activity—legitimate power—must be given shape in human life. Jesus assents to the powerful movement of God’s power in the Spirit within and round about him through his prayerful relationship to God. Hence, Jesus’ life, ministry and teaching of disciples appropriately gives shape to the Spirit of God (the Spirit of God is “Jesus-shaped”) and brings about the kingdom of God in the present (Luke 17.21).

### **THE TRIAD OF SPIRIT, KINGDOM AND PRAYER IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES<sup>6</sup>**

Now we move to the Acts of the Apostles. Yes, Jesus is “*The Hero of the Story*.”<sup>7</sup> Heroic status is reached when one emulates the power of the gods, in some sense, or, in this case, God. Heroic themes abound in (1) Jesus’ assent to the power of God through prayerful relationship, (2) Jesus’ shaping of the Spirit in human life according to the perfect will of God for re-creating, sustaining and redeeming, and (3) Jesus’ teaching of disciples to recognize the true kingdom of God in the Spirit’s power and shape in their own community life. But life in the churches of Acts is different from a group of disciples gathered around Jesus in Luke’s Gospel. The ascension of Jesus stands in between—the Lord among them is destined to become the living Lord who rules from heaven—and he will rule through his Spirit.

4. David L. Barr, *New Testament Story: An Introduction*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2009), 69.

5. It is instructive to note that the use of the perfect form with the verb “to fulfill” indicates an ongoing action that continues (or its effect continues) into the present.

6. The seminal, underutilized and still helpful study is S. S. Smalley, “Spirit, Kingdom, Prayer in Luke-Acts,” *Novum Testamentum* 15 (1973): 59–71.

7. To place this paper in conversation with the theme of the 2010 Pepperdine Bible Lectures and this *Leaven* Symposium in particular.

In the Acts of the Apostles, the trio of “Spirit, kingdom and prayer” is immediately recognizable. The resurrected Jesus appears to his disciples and through forty days he is “speaking about the *kingdom of God*” to them (Acts 1.3). This kingdom is immediately connected “to the promise of the Father” which points to the “*Holy Spirit*” (Acts 1.4–5). Prior to Jesus’ ascension, his followers ask him a question, “Lord, is this the time you will restore the kingdom of Israel?” (Acts 1.6). If there is a political edge to the question, Jesus sidesteps it and answers with a resounding “yes.” This kingdom is restored with power by the coming of “the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1.7–8). These followers then met for *prayer*—leading to restoration of the symbolic number of twelve apostolic leaders of a restored Israel (Acts 1.15–26). The decision to elect Matthias is a result of *prayer* for the desire and culmination of faithful missional witness. *Spirit, Kingdom, Prayer*.

In Acts 2, Luke indicates that on Pentecost, “they were all in one place.” Luke has taught us to expect that when believers gather, they support one another and devote themselves to *prayer* (Acts 1.13–14). We should imagine prayer in play here. Immediately, the *Spirit* of power comes upon this group of believers. Just as Jesus was born of the Spirit, now the church is born of the Spirit. Just as Luke used a prophetic text to define Jesus’ place and ministry (Isaiah 61.1–2a), now he uses the prophet Joel (and King David as prophet!) to define the church’s place and ministry (Acts 2.17–21, 25–36). Gathered believers prophetically proclaim the salvation of God.

Strikingly, Peter’s speech in Acts 2 indicates that the power of the Spirit has vindicated and raised Jesus from the dead and this establishes a new “rule” and “*kingdom*”:

- “God had sworn with an oath to [David] that he would put one of his descendants *on his throne* [by resurrection],” (Acts 2.30–31)
- “Being therefore *exalted at the right hand of God*,” (Acts 2.33 [and also see, 2.34])
- “Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both *Lord and Messiah*,” (Acts 2.36)

This new king, Jesus, “pours out” what they see and hear—the Spirit. And this kingdom that will be guided by new prophetic leaders brings believers into a saved community marked by a “Jesus-shaped” Spirit. They live embodied life exactly as Luke portrays Jesus’ life among them in the Gospel of Luke:<sup>8</sup> sharing possessions, praying, teaching and eating together (Acts 2.42 with 2.44–46). *Spirit, Kingdom, Prayer*.

This “community of the resurrection,” marked by the Spirit of Jesus, has leaders who perform “many wonders and signs” (Acts 2.43). This is an eschatological mark of the kingdom of God, also strongly connected with the theme of Jesus’ healing in the Gospel of Luke.<sup>9</sup> This demonstrates God’s reclamation of creation from oppressive and evil forces—both human and extra-human. Of course, the eschatological kingdom is already marked by the coming Spirit as well—“*In the last days* it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh . . .”<sup>10</sup> The markers of this “kingdom of God” are God’s power through wonders and signs and the “Jesus-shaped” community of the Spirit.

Acts 3.1–10 opens up once again with *prayer* as marker and then the powerful healing of a lame man through the agency of Peter and John. God’s kingdom continues to expand through the evidence of God’s

8. Sharing possessions: The seminal study is Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Literary Function of Possessions in Luke-Acts* (SBL Dissertation Series 39; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977). Prayer: See Luke’s special emphasis on prayer in Luke 11.1–13 and 18.1–8 and Jesus’ constant example of praying throughout the Gospel. Teaching: See Luke’s special emphasis on teaching in the “journey” or “travel” narrative—Luke 9.51–19.27 and Barr, *New Testament Story*, 361–64. Eating: See the important study of Robert J. Karris, *Eating Your Way Through Luke’s Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2006).

9. Matthew Shepherd, “In the Name of Jesus, Be Healed: The Kingdom of God and Sickness in the Gospel of Luke” (MDiv thesis, Emmanuel School of Religion, 2010).

10. My italics. Luke has Peter “contemporize” the Joel text for his Pentecost audience with the addition of the words: “And in the last days it shall be, God declares.” For Peter and his audience, “the last days” are “today!”

reclaiming and reconciling power. The teaching of the apostles, Peter and John, proclaims a *kingdom* established through Jesus' death and then his vindication from death through resurrection (Acts 3.15). Human kingdoms neither recognize nor bear witness to Jesus, the "Author of Life," who remains for now in heaven, ruling among believers through his *Spirit* (Acts 3.12–16). The apostles, these "prophetic followers," proclaim boldly the coming judgment of God (foreseen by the earlier prophetic witness) and the need for repentance (Acts 3.17–26). *Prayer, Kingdom* and the implication that the *Spirit* has and will continue to reveal and guide God's purposes.

Acts 4 plays as repetition of Acts 3, with intensification on kingdom authority. Who has claim on God's people? Is it earthly rulers who neither recognize the plans and purposes of God nor the scriptural witness of prophets of old, or these new apostolic prophetic interpreters? These prophetic interpreters, like their older counterparts, now threaten the present ruling orders. So Peter and John are jailed for teaching the resurrection from the dead. They are interrogated by the highest rulers with the implication that their authority is baseless. But the Holy Spirit moves Peter with boldness to speak and he bears witness to the ways in which God through resurrection power shaped in Jesus is setting things right: healing, salvation, Jesus' powerful name and proclamation (Acts 4.8–12). Yet the authorities/rulers remain threatened by this new message, power and way of life—so they threaten in turn. The missional activity must stop. Persuasion of the people through teaching must cease. In true prophetic (and heroic!) style, Peter and John flat out refuse either to join another order (forsaking God) or to lay aside their prophetic calling to speak and bear witness to God's work in Christ: "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4.19). In Acts 4.23, the text says, "After they were released . . ."—and we might add as a recap:<sup>11</sup> released after affirming, in the boldness of the *Spirit*, the *kingdom* of God over the "so-called" rulers of the world—"they raised their voices together to God [in prayer]." *Spirit, Kingdom, Prayer*.

The insight into this key *prayer* passage in Acts 4.23–31 is that the *kingdom* of God involves proclamation despite resistance and persecution from the various kingdoms of the world (Acts 4.25–28). The petition of the disciples is that they are willing to do this—"grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness" (Acts 4.29). The answer to the petition is an indwelling of the *Spirit* that allowed them to do so—"[they] spoke the word of God with boldness" (Acts 4.31). Luke has a didactic purpose in mind when he constructs this passage. Luke is attempting to teach the direction and openness of prayer that leads to action on the part of believers. Believers are to desire the control of the Spirit, the rule of God's kingdom, in their lives. This is perfectly compatible with the prayer example set by Jesus and the early disciples. They are to recognize that God moves *as they are open to move with God* in missional activity. In Acts 4.23–31, the believers' prayer expresses an openness to speak with boldness; the Spirit fills them, and they then speak with boldness the word of God—which is the word of God's kingdom over all other kingdoms and a word to be proclaimed to others. *Spirit, Kingdom, Prayer*.

### BRINGING THE HEROIC INTO THE PRESENT

If we stick with the idea that "the heroic" is being drawn to the divine through action and deed,<sup>12</sup> then speaking of the rich heroic themes of Spirit, Kingdom and Prayer in Acts seems appropriate. Jesus was heroic because he prayed and listened to God. Jesus was heroic because his prayer energized the Spirit of God in a way that his life was shaped by power—and that power was in turn shaped through his life and actions. Jesus' life echoed and brought forward the great Spirit themes of scripture and the prophets—God's care for all, righteousness, liberation, love, sufficiency and even plenty at times. Jesus manifested these "Godly actions" in concrete situations of accepting the less valued, eating with others, healing, teaching,

11. Interestingly, this quoted prayer recaps again the elements of Spirit, kingdom and petition within it, particularly verses 24–26 and 29.  
12. This idea of "heroic" has already been noticed in Luke's account of Jesus' passion and death—note Barr, *New Testament Story*, 367–69.

comforting, touching, worshipping and praying. Jesus' life was "Spirit-shaped" and the ongoing presence of the Spirit of God became recognized as "Jesus-shaped."

Believers long to draw near to God—to experience a shape of life that might be deemed "heroic"—in the sense of worthy to attain to the presence of God. Luke suggests that Christians follow in discipleship to Jesus, with heroic actions empowered by his Spirit:

- *Believers pray for opportunity* to be part of the missional movement of God with boldness. It is the express desire to align with God's kingdom program and to leave behind or not be drawn into other worldly pursuits and powers. While prayer is many things, it is not less than offering ourselves to God for the establishment of true community and its expansion within the world.
- Believers *watch for and open themselves up to the Spirit's leading*—and "true Spirit" has a distinctive shape, a "Jesus-shape." The shape of Jesus' life matters (so much that Luke wrote a whole first volume!) because it helps us identify and align with the true Holy Spirit of God (and not something less). We continue to tell the story of Jesus; we continue to study the story of Jesus.
- Believers long to *share and celebrate life in* the Spirit-empowered, "Jesus-shaped," *kingdom community* marked by praying, teaching, eating together, and sharing of possessions (Acts 2.42).

Luke's "pattern for the people of God" is richly shaped in the heroic themes of *Spirit, Kingdom and Prayer*.

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