Jesus as Messiah in the Gospel of Luke: Discerning a Pattern of Correction

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The question of whether and in what sense Jesus was the awaited Davidic Messiah has clearly troubled all four NT evangelists. Each of them states, in his own way, that Jesus is the Messiah and then seems to add a clear qualification: “Jesus is the Christ, but . . .” (Matt 16:16, 21-23; Mark 8:29-33; Luke 9:20-22; John 20:31; cf 12:4).

Of course, any discussion of Jesus as Messiah in the Christian gospels inevitably raises the wider issue of the extent to which, if any, it is valid to speak of “messianism” in relation to Second Temple Judaism.¹ That at least some circles pinned their hopes on the rising of a royal figure of David’s line seems clear from such sources as the Psalms of Solomon (17:21-32); the Dead Sea Scrolls (4QFlor 1:10-13 [4Q174]; 4QPs1sa³ 3:11-25 [4Q161]; 1QSb 5:20-29 [1Q28b]; 4QpGen³ 5:1-6 [4Q252: Pesher on Gen 49:10]; CD 7:19 [Me 1A]) and targumic literature (Targum Jonathan to Ps 80:16b).² Whether one should go on to speak of such expectation as “messianic” is a far more contentious issue. Only a couple of texts


² To this might be added Jub. 31:18-20, though here it is Judah rather than David who is singled out for blessing in regard to one of his “sons” in whom shall be found Israel’s salvation. The “Anointed One” referred to in 4 Ezra 12:32 is said to “arise from the posterity of David,” though Davidic associations in the messianism of 4 Ezra have clearly receded in favor of a more transcendent idea dependent on Daniel 7, and the work dates from the period after 70 C.E. For a general review of

80
apply the term “anointed” to the Davidic ruler (4QpGen\(^a\) 5:1-6; Pss. Sol. 17:32; cf. 18:5-6), and, at least in the Dead Sea Scrolls (where the bulk of the evidence lies), it cannot be excluded that references to “an anointed one” (CD MS A 12:23-13:1; 14:19 [= 4QD\(^b\) frag. 18 III:1:2; 4QD\(^b\) frag. 13, line 2]; MS B 19:10-11; 20:1; IQSa 2:12; 4Q521 1; 11Q Melch (11Q13) 2:18 (probably) or “anointed ones” (1QS 9:11) have a broader or more general application. Clearly, then, scholars from a Christian background must be wary of attributing to Second Temple Judaism the existence of a pervasive Davidic messianism that is, in fact, largely the construct of Christian imagination.

That said, and exercising all due caution, one can say that there is sufficient evidence, at least from Qumran, to provide a credible historical basis for the gospel portrayal of Jesus’ life and ministry in the context of Davidic messianic expectation. Quite apart from the evidence of the gospels and other NT sources (for example, the credal fragment in Rom 1:3-4), there is good reason to believe that Jesus’ personal ministry and teaching took place in a context where messianic hopes of a Davidic cast were entertained at least by some groups and that at some stage—whether well before his death, in the last week of his life, shortly after his death, or some time later—he was recognized by some people as Messiah or at least as a messianic pretender.\(^3\)

Reading the gospels, however, conveys the impression that this “messianic issue” was a confounded nuisance with which the authors had to deal rather than a helpful lens through which to view Jesus. It was hard to reconcile the idea of Jesus as Messiah with the ignominious end of his public career. Moreover, it came loaded with dangerous political overtones, since messianic claims of a Davidic cast inevitably entailed royal status and authority.\(^4\)

According to both the Synoptic and Johannine traditions (Mark 15:26 and parallels; John 19:19), Jesus died on a cross bearing the titulus “King of the Jews.” This detail has a strong claim to historicity: besides the double attestation


\(^4\) This proposition seems to me to stand even if, as Meier argues (“From Elijah-like Prophet,” 62-63), the reverse was not the case, namely, that claims to being “King of the Jews” necessarily had a Davidic cast.
in the tradition, the title “King of the Jews” is never featured in a Christian confession of faith, and the custom of publicly indicating by this or other means grounds upon which a criminal was being executed conforms with reports from contemporary historians. The title suggests that the Roman authorities did, in fact, crucify Jesus on the charge of being a messianic pretender, something that would have placed his disciples post Easter before a sharp dilemma. They could deny that the title (“King of the Jews” [= Messiah, Son of David]) was rightly applied to him, or they could say, “Yes, he was/is the Messiah, but . . .”; he is Messiah in a very different way, one that made his execution a monstrous miscarriage of justice.

The exponents of the traditions lying behind the gospels appear to have opted for this second choice. While this is true in regard to all four gospels, the choice has left its most patent impression upon the Third Gospel. For Luke, Jesus is “the (Davideic) Messiah, but . . .”—and specific to that “but” is “but not in a political sense that would pose a threat to the established civic order.”

This is to recognize that, to some degree at least, Luke’s aim is “apologetic.” But such an apology was probably directed, in the first instance, to fellow believers to bolster a sense of identity and confidence before the wider nonbelieving world. The one they confess as Lord and Savior may have been crucified by Roman authority on the charge of being a messianic pretender. They must be “assured” (1:4) that this conclusion to his life was a miscarriage of justice based on a completely fabricated view of what he truly brought to his people and the world.

In this article, I propose to tease out a pattern in the Third Gospel whereby this double assertion is established. My thesis is that in the infancy story—

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specifically in the scene describing the annunciation to Mary (1:26-38)—Luke creates a pattern of “correction” that runs through the gospel. It can be seen in the episodes of the temptation (4:1-13) and the transfiguration (9:28-36) and emerges with particular strength in the chapters dealing with the closing events of Jesus’ life and career, especially the sequence describing his arrest, his trials before Jewish and Roman authorities, his death, and his appearances to the disciples as risen Lord.

In a recent article, John Kilgallen has argued that Luke’s presentation of the trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin presupposes the reader’s remembrance of the annunciation to Mary at the beginning of the gospel. Specifically, Kilgallen maintains that the angel’s “double message” concerning the identity and role of the child Mary is to conceive—double because intersected by Mary’s question (1:34)—is reflected in the separate and therefore double questions (“Are you the Messiah?” [22:67a]; “Are you the Son of God?” [22:70]) that are posed to Jesus in Luke’s account of the Jewish trial, the two questions being intersected by Jesus’ response to the first question (22:67b-69). My analysis will run parallel to that of Kilgallen to some extent. It differs from Kilgallen’s in refusing to see the distinction Luke is anxious to make reflected strictly in the two titles (“Messiah,” “Son of God”).

I. The Annunciation of Jesus’ Birth to Mary (Luke 1:26-38)

In the annunciation to Mary, the angel Gabriel’s description of the status and destiny of the child she is to conceive comes, as we have just noted, in two blocks (vv. 32-33 and v. 35), separated by Mary’s question, “How will this be, since I am not having sexual relations with a man” (v. 34). Within the flow of the narrative, the question serves to mark off firmly from each other the two descriptions of the status and destiny of the child. The first, vv. 32-33, tells Mary that her child is to be the Davidic Messiah.

32He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

What is described is Davidic messiahship of conventional expectation. The title by which the child will be called “Son of the Most High” need not of itself connote divine filiation of a unique or transcendent nature. Both in the gospels and in contemporary postbiblical Jewish literature, “Son of God” can have a “merely

9 For closer analysis, especially in relation to allusions to the Davidic traditions in 2 Samuel 7 and Psalm 89, see Strauss, *Davidic Messiah*, 88-89.
messianic’ meaning, implying nothing beyond ideal human status. The description would be as much at home in Qumran literature as in this Christian gospel.10

Mary’s question, asking how the conception is to come about since she is not at present having sexual relations with her husband,11 prompts an explanation that moves the description to an entirely new level:

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. (v. 35)

The explanation addresses precisely the problem posed by Mary: the absence of the possibility of physical paternity in her present marital situation. If she is to have a child, something must be done to remedy that lack—the most obvious course of action being to bring forward the time when she and her husband will consummate their marriage in the normal way. The explanation she receives, however, sweeps such a prospect away. The conception is to take place through the coming of the Holy Spirit and her being overshadowed by the power of the Most High—an unparalleled mode of paternity with extraordinary repercussions regarding the status of the child. He will be “holy” and “will be called Son of God,” not simply because he will be the Davidic Messiah, to whom such epithets may conventionally be applied, but because (note the causal δόμο in the middle of v. 35) divine filiation applies to him on a wholly new basis: because, conceived in this way, he is God’s Son.

The virginal conception of Jesus is, then, central to Luke’s presentation of his identity and status. To play down its significance in the narrative12 is to fail to reckon with the way in which the angelic explanation directly addresses the problem that Mary’s question explicitly raises in regard to physical paternity. It also undermines the step-parallelism apparent in the sequence of the two stages of announcement of the child’s status—as also the note of “going one better” (in a transcendent degree) in relation to the conception of John: the overcoming of barrenness and advanced age.13

To be sure, the actual epithets employed with reference to the child in the second description of his status—“holy,” “Son of God”—do not seem to reflect

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11 The NRSV translation “how can…” does not accurately convey the Greek πώς εστια…; (“how will this be…?”).

12 So Strauss, Davidic Messiah, 93.

the immense "promotion" involved. "Holy" does not seem to be all that much of an improvement on "great" in the earlier description (also said of John the Baptist in 1:15), nor does "Son of God" really seem to add to "Son of the Most High" of that same earlier description. This creates difficulty for a view such as that of Kilgallen, where the "promotion" in status is seen to be tied rigidly to the movement in titles. Kilgallen thinks that, whereas "Messiah" indicates simple messianic status of a conventional kind, "Son of God," when used by reliable characters (the angel, Jesus himself), as distinct from unreliable ones (demons [4:41] and the Sanhedrin at the trial [22:70]), designates the transcendent divine sonship that outstrips the merely messianic categories. This ignores the appearance of "Son of the Most High" in the angel's first description, which Kilgallen—rightly, to my mind—holds to be descriptive of conventional messianic status.

It is, in fact, interesting to note that the only other appearance of this form of the title of divine sonship, "Son of the Most High," is on the lips of the Gerasene demoniac (8:28; so also Mark 5:7; Matt 8:29 has simply "Son of God"). This would suggest that "Son of the Most High" is a simple messianic title for Luke. By the same token, it would also suggest that we have to be careful about attributing too much to the title "Son of God." This title, too, can have a merely messianic meaning—as seems to be the case when it appears on the lips of the devil at the temptation (4:3, 9), of demons in 4:41, and in the Sanhedrin's question in 22:70.14 For "Son of God" to have the more transcendent reference in Luke, it seems to require qualification in the immediate context that makes this clear—something clearly achieved in the present instance by Gabriel's explanation of the transcendent mode of Jesus' conception.

What I am trying to suggest here is that the annunciation of Jesus' birth inaugurates a pattern whereby Jesus is presented as "Messiah, but..." the "but" referring to what the reader knows from being aware of the mode of Jesus' conception: namely, that he is uniquely related to God in filial terms vastly outstripping any conventional expectation concerning the Davidic Messiah and that this drastically transforms the nature of his messianic mission and behavior.

II. "Son of Joseph"/"Son of God" (Luke 2:49; 3:23; 4:22)

An ambivalence concerning Jesus' filial status continues in several other episodes early in the gospel. The "plus," so to speak, in connection with Jesus' divine filiation reemerges sharply in the final episode of the infancy story, where Mary and Joseph recover their lost twelve-year-old in the temple (2:41-52). In response to Mary's complaint, "... your father [= Joseph] and I have been searching for you in great anxiety" (2:48c), Jesus replies, "Why were you searching for me?

14 Note also the seeming equivalence of "Christ" and "Son of God" emerging from the summary of Paul's preaching in Acts 9:20-22.
Did you not know that I must be about my Father’s [= God’s] business?” (2:49). What sounds on the surface like typical adolescent insouciance comes across to the reader who remembers the annunciation as a sharp jolt across the gulf between one understanding of Jesus’ filial status and another. It is also, as he enters upon his adult life, a harbinger of the mission that awaits him in view of that higher status and of the conflict and contradiction that will attend it, as Simeon’s oracle to Mary had foretold (2:34-35).

When later that mission gets under way, the genealogy (3:23-38) informs the reader that “Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work. He was the son, as was thought, of Joseph” (v. 23). The “as was thought” signals, again obliquely, the “more” in regard to his filial status. The list of ancestors itself reaches back to Adam, who in terms of the genitive construction in which the paternal line has been traced is simply dubbed “(son) of God.” As a whole, then, the list suggests that the birth of Jesus recapitulates the creative act on God’s part that stood at the very beginnings of the human race. This latter-day Son of God (cf. Paul’s description of the risen Lord as “last Adam” [1 Cor 15:45]) will reclaim for humankind the filial and familial relationship to God (cf. 8:19-21) that was ever the intention of the Creator.\(^{15}\)

Likewise, in the visit to Nazareth that inaugurates Jesus’ public ministry in Luke’s gospel (4:16-30), the scene in the synagogue begins to turn ugly when the Nazarenes, impressed by Jesus’ “gracious words,” fix him as one of their own. “This is Joseph’s son, surely” (4:22). Readers already aware of the inadequacy of the designation “son of Joseph” will not be surprised by the reaction this remark draws from Jesus. He taunts his townsfolk with a provocative appeal to biblical precedents (Elijah, Elisha) for a prophetic healing ministry that will break through merely local and indeed national bounds (vv. 23-27). No, he is not Joseph’s son. He is, in an exalted sense, God’s Son—with a mission to proclaim “a year of acceptance” and “release” (4:18-19) not only for Israel but for the world.


In respect to Luke’s account of the temptation (4:1-13), it is commonly assumed that the devil tempts Jesus not so much as Messiah but as God’s Son (cf. 3:22).\(^{16}\) I would argue, however, that “Son of God” here, as elsewhere in the speech of demons (4:41), has its merely conventional sense. All three temptations bear upon the way in which Jesus should carry out his messianic role and the

\(^{15}\) Similar Adamic overtones may be present in Jesus’ assurance to the repentant criminal, “Today, you will be with me in paradise” (23:43), discussed below.

powers it brings. Jesus’ swift dismissal of the three, citing Scripture in each case, is an indication of a divinely guided choice for a messianic path that goes beyond or corrects the merely conventional understanding, which all three suggestions would in some way endorse. In particular, Luke’s notably elaborate form of the second temptation (contrast the Matthean parallel, Matt 4:8) and the introduction of the term “authority” (ἐξουσία) intensify the sense that for Jesus to seek worldly power at this point would be to yield to demonic seduction. He will indeed enter into messianic “glory,” but only after suffering in accordance with the divine will indicated in the Scriptures (24:26).

In the prelude to the transfiguration, Jesus asks the disciples who they say he is (9:18-20). Peter identifies him as “the Messiah of God” (9:20; cf. Mark 8:29: “the Messiah”; Matt 16:16: “the Messiah, the Son of the living God”). Jesus does not dispute this, suggesting that it is accurate so far as it goes; but he immediately commands silence concerning it (9:21) and goes on to make the first prediction of the passion (9:22). This already severely qualifies a conventional understanding of messiahship. However, much more is soon to follow.

In the transfiguration itself (9:28-36), the heavenly transformation that Jesus undergoes and the appearance in similar glory of Moses and Elijah are probably best understood in messianic terms—that is, as an anticipatory glimpse of the heavenly messianic enthronement that awaits Jesus following the “exodus” that he is “to fulfill in Jerusalem” (9:31). Only in the Lucan account are we told that this “exodus” forms the subject of the conversation between the three glorified figures. Both Elijah (on the basis of his heavenly ascension recorded in 2 Kgs 2:11) and Moses (on the basis of postbiblical development of his several ascents to converse with God at Sinai) were figures well qualified to converse with Jesus on this topic of departure from the earth. Both also featured significantly in messianic expectation: Elijah, that he would return before the “day of the Lord” (Mal 4:5); Moses, that “a prophet like” him would be raised up, and to him the people should listen (Deut 18:15).

The appearance of these two figures convinces Peter, on the basis of conventional expectation, that the “messianic moment” is at hand. This accounts for his proposal (9:33a) to make “booths” for each of the heavenly figures. The annual feast of Booths or Tabernacles, celebrated as a joyous end-of-harvest festival, had long since become, in popular imagination, an anticipation or symbol of the messianic age (see already Zech 14:16). As the Lucan narrator points out (9:33b: “not knowing what he was saying”), Peter’s suggestion is misguided. In

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18 Also operative in the case of Moses may be the postbiblical tradition of the “assumption of Moses” (on the basis of the report in Deut 34:6 that his burial place is unknown); on this see Dewey M. Beegle, “Moses,” ABD, 4, 917b.
all likelihood, this is because it implies the basic equality of the three figures. To correct this impression and convey a sense of what the "conversation" has really been about, the action moves to a distinct second stage (9:34-36).

The disciples are "overshadowed"—the same verb was used with the "power of the Most High" as subject in respect to Mary's conception (1:35)—by a cloud, indicating the presence of God (Exod 24:15-16a). Terrified as they enter the cloud, they hear a voice identify Jesus: "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him" (9:35). Here, I would suggest, we have the same two-stage process whereby a conventional messianic understanding is drastically "upgraded," so to speak, in a more transcendent direction to indicate unique filial relationship to God. Far from being incompatible with a destiny to suffer and die, this transcendent sonship is, in fact, the reason why the Messiah must tread the path he has just outlined. It is why the disciples must "Listen to him!"—listen, that is, to the instructions he has been giving concerning the journey to Jerusalem (9:22; cf. 9:43b-45; 18:31-34) and the "exodus" he must there undergo before finally entering his messianic glory (cf. 24:26).

IV. Before the Arrest: Jesus' Last Days in Jerusalem

Before considering at some length Luke's presentation of Jesus' condemnation and death, I should like to draw attention briefly to Lucan features in three episodes leading up to this climax. Each of the three shows at least some measure of correction of Davidic messianic expectation in respect to Jesus.

The first is, in fact, negative: the "suppression" in the Lucan narrative of any reference at all to David in the account of Jesus' festal entry into Jerusalem (Luke 19:28-38). Where Matthew has the preceding and following crowds shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" (Matt 21:9), and Mark, "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!" (Mark 11:10), Luke has simply "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in highest heaven!" (19:38). For Luke, the moment of Jesus' entry into the city of the Messiah is not the time to emphasize Davidic associations and the kind of hopes in a worldly, political rule that such associations, uncorrected, would raise. Jesus is Messiah, but what he brings—or would seek to bring—is peace. Moreover, in contrast to what the angels had announced at his birth—"Peace on earth" (2:14)—now the cry is "Peace in heaven." Luke seems to be at pains to stress that all that Jesus does, including this royal entry into the Holy City, is designed to have no impact at all in an earthly, sociopolitical sense; its aim is to bring about peace (reconciliation) between human beings and God (1:77-79). Jesus, in fact, goes on

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20 This detail about "entering the cloud" is peculiar to Luke. The echo of Exod 24:18 suggests that what the disciples experience repeats Moses' unique access to God.
to weep over the city (19:41-42) because it is soon to make a fateful and ultimately destructive choice for armed rebellion rather than the kind of peace his "visitation" (19:44) would bring.

A more explicit instance of the pattern is to be found in Luke's version of Jesus' question to the scribes concerning David's Son (20:41-44). Whatever might be the case in the Matthean (22:41-46) and Marcan (12:35-37) parallels and in the pre-Marcan tradition, there can be no question of a denial of Jesus' Daviddic sonship on the part of Luke.\footnote{For a comprehensive summary of the main lines of interpretation of this pericope, see John Nolland, \textit{Luke 18.35–24.53} (WBC 35C; Dallas: Word, 1993) 971.} Jesus' descent from David has been made clear in the annunciation (Luke 1:32; cf. 1:69; 2:3) and in the genealogy (3:31); it will be prominently featured in the early preaching of the church as recorded in Acts (2:30-35).\footnote{See Christoph Burger, \textit{Jesus als Davidssohn: Eine traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung} (FRLANT 98; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970) 115.} As Luke's slight but significant alteration of the Marcan formulation ("how" [πός], not "whence" [πόθεν], 20:44) makes clear,\footnote{Matt 22:45 also has πόθεν, constituting thereby with Luke 20:44 a "minor agreement" against Mark 12:37. The NRSV translation masks this difference.} the issue is not whether the Messiah is David's son or not, but how he can be both "son" \textit{and} "Lord," as Ps 110:1 suggests. The question is left hanging at this point—it cannot be answered until Ps 110:1 has been fulfilled in the resurrected Jesus' exaltation to God's right hand (Acts 2:34-36);\footnote{See Burger, \textit{Jesus als Davidssohn}, 115-16.} but already it serves to "correct" and enlarge, once more, the messianic category that Jesus is to fulfill. Jesus is David's son; his resurrection will show him to be David's "Lord" in a way and following a sequence of events unforeseen in the conventional hopes concerning the Messiah, Son of David.

A detail peculiar to Luke early in the passion narrative has further bearing on the theme we are pursuing. At the conclusion of Jesus' discourse at the supper, the disciples misunderstand a metaphorical remark he makes concerning the onset of a time of trouble: "the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one" (22:37). They remark, "Lord, look, here are two swords" (22:38a). In a resigned manner, without further explanation, Jesus simply says, "It is enough" (22:38b).\footnote{See Ferdinand Hahn, \textit{Christologische Hoheitsstitel: Ihre Geschichte im frühen Christentum} (FRLANT 83; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966) 167-68; Brown, \textit{Death of the Messiah} 1. 270-71.} Later, on the Mount of Olives at the moment of the arrest (22:47-53), they ask, "Lord, should we strike with the sword?"—and one of them actually does, cutting off the ear of the high priest's servant. Jesus sharply rebukes this behavior, touches the ear, and heals it. While the cutting off of the ear is mentioned in all four gospels and, in each version, receives a rebuke, only in Luke is the disciple's action elaborated in this way, and only in Luke is it reversed by Jesus' healing touch. The
combined force of the two “sword” episodes serves to reinforce the impression that Jesus’ way is not that of physical violence, let alone armed revolt. The officers of the chief priests and elders have come out to arrest him with swords and clubs as though he were a bandit (λῃστής, 22:52). But every word and act of Jesus demonstrate that such is not the case.

V. Jesus on Trial

A. Before the Sanhedrin (22:66-71)

As is often noted, the trial of Jesus before the Sanhedrin in Luke’s gospel (22:66-71) concentrates very narrowly on the issue of messiahship. There are no witnesses brought forward, no charges about destroying and rebuilding the temple. The religious charge of blasphemy is not the conclusion, as in the other Synoptics. Everything appears designed simply to get Jesus to admit that he is the Messiah. In Mark and Matthew, that “messianic” question is put by the high priest as a final bid when the other charges have had no success. It is put in terms of a single, double-barreled question in which the two titles are run together: “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One” (Mark 14:61); “Are you the Messiah, the Son of God” (Matt 26:63). Luke, as we have already noted, distributes the two titles across two separate questions put by the entire assembly: “If you are the Messiah, tell us” (22:67), and “Are you, then, the Son of God?” (22:70). They are separated by Jesus’ response, “If I tell you, you will not believe; and if I question you, you will not answer” (22:67b-68), and by the mysterious added remark, “But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God” (22:69).

26 The primary meaning of λῃστής would seem to be that of an armed person who commits robbery with violence—a “brigand,” “bandit” (Luke 10:30, 36; 2 Cor 11:26; Matt 27:38, 44; Mark 15:27 [thieves crucified with Jesus]; Matt 21:13 and parr. [quotation from Jer 7:11]). In John 19:40 the term is used of Barabbas, who in the Synoptic tradition is associated with rebellion and insurrection (Mark 15:7; Luke 23:19, 25). It is by no means certain, however, that the term of itself has the extended sense of “insurrectionist”; see the careful discussion of Brown, Death of the Messiah 1. 283-84, 686-88, who reviews in particular the evidence from Josephus on which the claim for the extended sense chiefly rests. Brown concedes (p. 688) that, in the wake of the Jewish revolt of 66–70 C.E., the writers of the gospels may have understood and used the term in reference to the revolutionaries of that time, from whose ilk they were greatly at pains to distinguish Jesus.

27 The two “sword” episodes, with their (for Jesus) false suggestion of physical violence, “frame” the real combat he undergoes at this point: the spiritual struggle with Satan on the Mount of Olives (22:39-46).

28 The Lucan form of the response omits “you will see” (Matt 26:64; Mark 14:62) in favor of a simple assertion of the reality of Jesus’ messianic enthronement that will begin “from now on,” that is, following his “exodus” to heaven (9:31). Luke omits the phrase “coming with the clouds of heaven” (Matt 26:64; Mark 14:62 ["on the clouds"]) and the allusion to Dan 7:13 the phrase implies. The allusion, then, is solely to Ps 110:1—which may imply a more strictly messianic focus distancing itself from the Danielic associations of “Son of Man.”
Joseph A. Fitzmyer, followed by Kilgallen, sees a genuine christological progression in the move from one title ("Messiah") to another ("Son of God"). That is, "Messiah" has the merely conventional messianic meaning, while "Son of God" moves to the new, transcendental plane so frequently indicated in the gospel. For Kilgallen, the Sanhedrin at this point would be understanding even the title "Son of God" in the purely messianic sense, though the reader, remembering the distinction and the progression introduced earlier, at the annunciation, recognizes beyond this the more transcendent sense. As I have indicated before, however, it is by no means clear that the meanings can be so tightly attached to the titles. It is preferable to see the merely messianic understanding operating in both questions, that is, including the question about Jesus as "Son of God." This would explain better Jesus' throwback response, "You (ὑμεῖς) say that I am" (22:70b); he is not endorsing the kind of messiahship they are anxious to pin on him.

Nonetheless, the members of the Sanhedrin triumphantly conclude that they now have the admission they want (v. 71). They can haul Jesus off to Pilate as a self-confessed messianic pretender, with all the alarming overtones for civic order that such a charge will sound in the ears of the one responsible for its preservation.

B. Before Pilate (23:1-25)

Consonant with this, the charges Jesus' captors subsequently make before Pilate expand on this single theme: "We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king" (23:2). Later (v. 5) they add: "he stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place" (cf. also Pilate's summary in v. 14). That is, they are portraying Jesus as a violent, revolutionary messianic claimant—though the reader is well aware, from earlier episodes in the gospel, of the falsity of each charge (20:20-26; 23:66-70). When Pilate remains firm in his conviction of Jesus' innocence (23:4; 23:14-15; 23:22)—confirmed by Herod's similar inability to extract anything incriminating out of him (23:6-12)—the crowd introduces the name of Barabbas as a substitute person to be released instead of Jesus (23:18).

30 Kilgallen, "Jesus' First Trial," 404-7, 408-11.
31 Luke may be splitting the Sanhedrin's interrogation, not, as Kilgallen claims, with respect to the annunciation, but to highlight and emphasize the councilors' persistent eagerness to wring the messianic claim out of him. The ὅτων at the beginning of their second question suggests that they are taking Jesus' statement about the Son of Man's being seated at the right hand of the power as a messianic claim (an inference from its allusion to Ps 110:1; cf. the controversy about David's Son in 20:41-44).
It is noteworthy in this connection that, whereas in Mark and Matthew the question of releasing a prisoner at Passover according to custom is introduced more generally, in Luke’s account, before the mention of the custom, the members of the crowd petition directly for the release of Barabbas and demand the opposite fate for Jesus. In this way, Luke highlights their choice of Barabbas, noting, following Mark, that Barabbas was “a man who had been put in prison for an insurrection (στάσις) that had taken place in the city, and for murder” (23:19). When Pilate eventually gives in, Luke underlines this choice in favor of the man of violence by again reminding the reader of the reason that Barabbas had been put in prison: for insurrection and murder (v. 25).

What Luke is bringing out is the fact that the crowd, incited by their leaders, have opted for the man of violence and revolution (στάσις), while they insist that Jesus, the one who would bring peace (19:41-44; cf. 22:38, 47-51), should be crucified as a dangerous and inflammatory messianic pretender. Their choice will fatefully redound upon them when Jerusalem is sacked by the Roman armies in 70 C.E., precisely as a result of στάσις—in the twofold sense of the term: revolt against authority and disunity.

Luke, then, portrays the choice of Barabbas as a choice in favor of the kind of violent course the accusers are trying—totally unjustly—to pin on Jesus. For the reader, the irony is unmistakable. Jesus may have been condemned by a Roman governor on a charge of sedition—more specifically, as a seditious and violent “King of the Jews”—but this has been a miscarriage of justice, involving a total distortion of the facts. The Roman governor, against his better judgment (several times avowed), crucified the man of peace and released the man of violence and sedition. The well-known fate of the city of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. shows now (in Luke’s day) where the impulse to violence and sedition really lay: not with Jesus of Nazareth but with those leaders of his people who brought about his death—and ultimately the destruction of their city—by portraying him as the

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33 In the broader narrative of Luke-Acts, the choice for Barabbas will yet again be recalled for the reader when Peter reminds the crowds in Jerusalem that they had “rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to them” (Acts 3:14).

34 In the works of Josephus the word στάσις, together with its cognate forms (στασισάτο, στασάτο), functions virtually as a technical term in reference to the insurrection and those chiefly responsible for it; see A.J. 20.10.1 §227; J.W. 1.1.4 §10; 1.1.9 §24; 1.1.11 §27; 2.17.10 §449; 2.19.6 §538; 5.1.1 §4; 5.1.5 §33; 5.3.1 §898, 105; 6.1.2 §13; 6.4.5 §251, etc.

opposite of what he really was.\textsuperscript{36} The words of Jesus to the daughters of Jerusalem en route to his crucifixion (23:27-31) bring out the same connection.\textsuperscript{37}

VI. Jesus’ Exodus

A. Calvary (23:33-49)

Narrating the crucifixion and death of Jesus at the place called the Skull, Luke makes everything revolve around the idea of “saving.”\textsuperscript{38} He has transferred the mockery of the soldiers from its place immediately after the Roman trial in the other gospels to the time after the actual crucifixion. This means that three parties mock Jesus in turn: the leaders (23:35b), the soldiers (23:36-38), and one of the criminals crucified with him (23:29). In each case, the mockery is in the terms, “Save yourself if you are the Messiah.” (The soldiers address him by the non-Jewish title, “King of the Jews” [23:37], the title affixed to the cross [v. 38].) The implication is that the Messiah should not have ended up in this way: that he ought to be able, even at this extreme point, to save himself (and the other criminals) from this death. The repentant criminal, by contrast, after defending Jesus’ innocence, turns to him for help (23:39-43). He does not use the word “save”—a term now thoroughly debased; he simply requests that Jesus “remember” him when he comes into his kingdom.

There is perhaps a messianic recognition here, but it is of a different kind: the repentant man is not seeking escape from death. He acknowledges that even Jesus will die, but he understands that, though he will die, Jesus will, nonetheless, proceed to his kingdom; and he simply asks to be “remembered” at that point. In return, he receives the majestic assurance: “Today, you will be with me in Paradise” (v. 43). Why does Jesus respond in terms of “paradise” rather than take up the man’s reference to his “kingdom”? The allusion is obscure, and many suggestions have been made about it.\textsuperscript{39} But again, it is not fanciful to see a correction of messianic understanding in relation to Jesus. In contrast to those who have mocked Jesus as a failed messianic “savior” in conventional terms, this repentant one has turned to him for a salvation of a more transcendent kind; and


\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 129-42, esp. 132.

\textsuperscript{39} See the full survey in Brown, \textit{Death of the Messiah} 2. 1010-12. Jesus’ assurance in terms of “paradise” rather than the “kingdom” may mean that, even though Jesus will not enter immediately into his messianic kingdom, he will, as Son of God and New Adam, be present with God in filial intimacy as the earlier “son of God,” Adam (cf. 3:38), was in the original paradise (Gen 2:8-10, 16 LXX).
beyond even his expectation, Jesus’ response makes him the prototype and model recipient of the salvation that Jesus has come to bring: nothing less than what the Creator originally intended for human beings, symbolized by the status and life of Adam and Eve in the garden (Genesis 2–3). “Paradise,” in this sense, can refer back to the original state of bliss lost by sin and also to the goal of human existence in an eschatological sense.40 Whereas the man’s hopes are pinned simply on an indefinite future, the great “Today” sweeps him up into the salvation being opened up right now through Jesus’ “exodus” (death, resurrection, and ascension) to the exalted station at God’s right hand. The penitent—and all those who manifest a faith like his—will be “with” Jesus in the full messianic glory now inaugurated in heaven and soon to be palpable on earth through the gift of the Spirit.

Similar reasons of “messianic correction” may be operative in the Lucan feature whereby, after Jesus’ death (23:46), the centurion does not confess Jesus as “Son of God” (contrast Matt 27:54; Mark 15:39) but simply as “innocent” (23:47). A confession in terms of the “Son of God” could bear the “merely messianic” overtones that Luke wants to avoid. More important for the evangelist is to get from this further representative of Rome, a witness to the last moments of Jesus’ life, a final acknowledgment of what Pilate and Herod had already admitted: that Jesus was totally innocent of the charge of stirring up the people in the way of political revolution.


The final stage in the correction of messianic understanding comes in the way Luke depicts the risen life of Jesus. As is often pointed out, for Luke it is not enough that the disciples meet the risen Lord and are convinced that he is not a ghost but is truly the Jesus they have known. They must also come to understand, through his instruction, that all that had occurred—his suffering, death, and resurrection—fulfilled a divine plan for the Messiah that was foretold in the scriptures.41 Hence the centrality of Jesus’ scriptural catechesis of the disciples en route to Emmaus (24:25-27), a catechesis he repeats for the larger community in Jerusalem (24:44-48). The experience the two disciples later describe as of their “hearts burning” within them (24:32) expresses the overcoming of the gap between what they had been expecting on the basis of their conventional messianic hope and the reality that had actually occurred. The plaintive remark of the as-yet-uncatechized Cleopas, “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (24:21), neatly expresses that hope: that is, that Jesus would have brought

40 Cf. esp. Rev 2:7; also 2 Cor 12:14. For further biblical and postbiblical references in the Jewish tradition, see Johnson, Gospel of Luke, 378-79.
about the kind of political and civic liberation that was expected from the Davidic Messiah. The catechesis they receive from the risen Lord leads them to a fresh understanding of messiahship, one that envisages an entrance into glory following upon suffering and death, in accordance with the divine plan foretold in the scriptures.

VII. Conclusion

This study has attempted to trace a pattern according to which Luke addresses the messianic issue concerning Jesus in his gospel. At key points, beginning with the annunciation to Mary and following a pattern of correction established there, the evangelist insists that Jesus is indeed the Davidic Messiah but goes on immediately to qualify and redefine this role as it pertains to Jesus. As Christopher Tuckett aptly remarks, “It is Jesus who determines what messiahship means; it is not messiahship that determines Jesus.” Though he may have been crucified by a Roman governor as a dangerous political rebel inspired by messianic delusions, this is a total misrepresentation created by his enemies, as the governor himself several times acknowledged. He was a leader who abjured violence and sought to bring peace; the movement gathered in his name and impelled by his Spirit is a movement of conversion and salvation, prophetically critical of, but not fundamentally hostile to, the prevailing civic authority and order. In Luke’s view, as I read it, the effective communication of this view was essential to the “assured” establishment of Christian (especially Gentile Christian) identity (1:4) and to the success of the gospel in the wider Greco-Roman world.

42 Specifically, by delivering Israel from the Roman occupation; see Fitzmyer, Luke X–XXIV, 1564; also Luke I–IX, 432.