A Failed Spectacle: The Role of the Crowd in Luke 23

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Abstract

That Jesus’ death is uniquely portrayed as a spectacle of death in Luke’s Gospel is widely acknowledged. Most scholarship has focused on the figure of Jesus, his self-control and emotions, to debate how much it concurs with the ancient ideal of noble death. Little attention, however, has been given to the role of the crowd in Luke’s passion. This paper analyzes the role of the crowd in Luke’s passion to argue that Luke has framed the cross in a manner fitting of death in the arena. By emphasizing the crowd’s size, placement, and role in the drama, I argue that Luke presents Jesus’ death as a failed spectacle and suggest some political and theological ramifications.

Keywords

spectacle – crowd – crucifixion – gladiator – noble death

Lucan scholars have long recognized the importance of the Greco-Roman ideal of noble death for understanding Luke’s passion. However, noble death is only one aspect of a larger cultural phenomenon of death as a spectator sport in the ancient world. Spectacles of death ranged from gladiator fights, facing the beasts, public executions such as beheadings and crucifixions, and what Kathleen Coleman has termed “fatal charades” (where a condemned criminal was forced to act out his or her death in a mythic scene on stage).1 The

creativity of such lethal spectacles was gruesome, the tortures grotesque, and
death the inevitable conclusion to a long drama played out before the eyes of
the public.

None of these spectacles of death would be spectacles (θεωρίαι) at all with-
out a viewing public. To remind ourselves of the obvious, a spectacle requires
spectators. Therefore, crucifixions were conducted on the most heavily used
roads so that the greatest number of people could watch.2 Other condemned
criminals were forced to fight in the arena or act out their deaths upon stage in
front of thousands of spectators. Such public deaths were designed to deter
certain behaviors, entertain the masses, and reinforce the values of the Roman
Empire.

The crowd itself often played a very active role in these public spectacles.
Several ancient authors recount occasions where the spectators called for
someone’s death or demanded mercy for the condemned. Despite the impor-
tance and influence of the crowd in Greco-Roman spectacle culture, little at-
tention has been given to the role of the crowd in Luke’s passion narrative. This
paper examines the depiction of Jesus’ death in Luke’s Gospel as a form of an-
cient spectacle (θεωρία), arguing that Luke draws upon traditions associated
with gladiatorial shows and other violent spectacles in his shaping of Jesus’
crucifixion. I aim to extend and compliment the extensive body of scholarship
addressing the influence of noble death traditions on Luke’s passion by ac-
knowledging the pervasiveness of death as a spectator sport in the first century
CE. Yet, rather than focusing on Jesus’ words and actions, this paper will exam-
ine the crowd’s actions and gestures to demonstrate how they contravene be-
havioral norms and allow Luke to subvert imperial aims in killing Jesus.

Ancient Spectacles

In the Roman Empire, one locus of imperial power over the “other” was the
spectacle violence of the arena. Here, the bodies of the captured, the criminal,
or slave, were used for sport. The protracted and dramatic nature of these spec-
tacles of death served multiple functions in establishing and cementing Ro-
man power. They reinforced the god-like power the emperor had over life and
death, they confirmed social status and rank amongst the spectators, and they
served as a reminder of the consequences of crime or revolt. Moreover, the

2 Cicero, Verr. 2.5.169-70; H. A., Alex. Sev. 23.8; Josephus, J.W. 5.289; 5.450-51; Martial, De
Spectaculis Liber 9 [7]; Pliny, Nat. hist. 36.24.107-108; Polybius, Hist. 1.86.4; Quintilian, Decl.;
Quintilian, Decl. Mai. 274.13; and M. Hengel, Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of
public staging of death in various forms served to entertain the masses, allowing them vicariously to live out their emotions and, quite simply, kept them entertained. An entertained public is a passive public, disinclined to revolt!

What is of particular importance for locating and interpreting Luke’s portrayal of the death of Jesus is that these spectacles of violence were reflected upon in literature and affirmed in the artistic images of Empire that frequently portrayed broken, dehumanized victims in order to assert Roman power. The literature, as we shall see, not only described public spectacles of death but also attached virtues and values to the dying. When Luke’s Gospel is read alongside this extensive range of literature, we can more fully appreciate the manner in which Luke has uniquely shaped his passion narrative.

One, somewhat startling and not infrequent topic for reflection was the gladiator. At least in the early period of the Republic, gladiators were from the lowest tiers of society in the Empire. They were marginal figures, simultaneously loathed and idolized. Badly behaved slaves, captives of war, and convicted criminals of the lower classes were often forced to fight to the death as gladiators. Surprisingly then, the gladiator was transformed into a model for virtue in much literature: he was a model of a manly and courageous attitude towards death and of a well-trained athlete in competition. In On Tranquility, for example, Seneca gives advice to the “mediocre man” by describing the actions and attitude of “the wise man,” describing him as one who lives as “one who has been lent to himself and will return everything without sorrow when it is reclaimed” (11.1-6). In a fascinating move, Seneca uses the image of the gladiator to make his point:

As Cicero says, we feel hostility to gladiators if they are eager to save their life no matter how; if they display contempt for it, we favor them. The same thing, you may know, applies to us; for often the cause of death is the fear of dying. Mistress Fortune, who uses us for her sport, says: “Why should I save you, you base and cowardly creature? You will be hacked and pierced with all the more wounds, because you do not know how to offer your throat. But you, who receive the steel courageously and do not withdraw your neck or put out your hands to stop it, shall both live longer and die more easily.” He who fears death will never do anything worthy of a man who is alive. (On Tranquility 11.1-6)

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5 English translations of all ancient Greco-Roman sources are taken from the Loeb Classical Library unless otherwise stated.
Seneca was not alone in appealing to the spectacle of the gladiator as an image of bravery, virtue, and honor. Cicero, Epictetus, and Pliny all appeal to the gladiator as a model of Stoic virtue and forbearance under suffering. If writers like Seneca can transform such a shameful death into an example of bravery and honor, then it is plausible that Luke can turn the shame of crucifixion into a noble or praiseworthy death. Indeed, centuries later John Chrysostom does just that when he uses several agonistic images to describe the death of Jesus, including one that explicitly links the crucifixion and the gladiator tradition.

For there was a gladiator match (μονομαχεῖον), as it were. Death wounded Christ but Christ, though struck, afterward slew death. The one seeming to be immortal was done in by a dead body. And what is more the world was watching. (PG 62.341)

It is noteworthy that even though Jesus’ adversary is Death itself, the battle is imagined as a gladiator fight between Christ and Death. Moreover, it is a battle that the world watches and hence the arena and its impact is vast.

Somewhere between Seneca and Chrysostom lies Luke’s passion, a text that has already been extensively discussed in light of the variety of noble death traditions. From Dibelius’ reading of Jesus as Jewish martyr in Luke,8 to Neyrey’s Stoic messiah,9 the nature of Jesus’ death in Luke as both noble and praiseworthy has received extensive scholarly attention.10 Of all the Gospels, Luke’s account of Jesus’ death aligns most closely with the noble death tradition.11

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6 Cicero, Tusc. Disp. 2.41; Epictetus, Diss. 1.29; Pliny, Pan. 33.1. See Pope, “Spectacle Violence,” pp. 93-106.
7 Translation here is my own. See also the discussion of this passage by John Chrysostom in M. Mitchell, The Heavenly Trumpet: John Chrysostom and the Art of Pauline Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), pp. 82-84. The gladiator image is only one of several “agonistic epithets” Chrysostom uses for Paul himself; these epithets include soldier and noble general. Chrysostom ultimately likens the preparation of gladiator and athlete to the preacher’s need to be ready to face death and slaughter (Laud. Paul. 286) and so it becomes one of the metaphors for Paul, who is to be mimicked in ministry.
While forms and notions of noble death varied in the ancient world, at its heart is a heroic ideal of bravery in the face of death. Such bravery could take the form of glorious fighting to the death with little regard for one’s own life, as exemplified by the hero in battle or the bold gladiator in the arena. Inversely, noble death was also embodied by the kind of quiet, Stoic embrace of death epitomized by Socrates or other martyrs. Lucan scholarship has tended to focus on this latter tradition, which is more passive and less agonistic in nature. More recently, however, scholars such as Claire Clivaz and Michael Pope have pushed the field further, challenging these traditional ideas of noble death and martyrdom by noting the resonances of athletic contest in Luke's passion.

Clivaz argues that the emotion and struggle inherent in Luke 22:43-44 is more indicative of an athlete preparing for contest, or a hero preparing for battle, than a Stoic or Socratic notion of noble death. For Pope, the rhetorical and moral literature that discusses the bravery, piety, and virtue of the gladiator offers us a new and “more fitting” agonistic image for discussing Jesus’ death in Luke, one that accommodates both Jewish martyrdom and Greco-Roman noble death traditions. The influence of both Clivaz and Pope will be apparent in my reading of Luke’s passion as I agree that Luke has introduced these agonistic and athletic aspects from the arena into his account of Jesus’ death.

What all of these approaches to noble death have in common is an underlying assumption that there were literary models for describing the dying and death of a hero, and that there was indeed such a thing as a “good death” – a “euthanasia” – in the ancient world that was characterized by courage and self-control. Which particular texts and traditions most influenced Luke is harder to determine, but also unnecessary. Luke's Gospel reflects the cultural milieu of his time. It was a highly visual culture in which spectacles held massive attraction for the populace as well as political significance for the Empire. In the following section I will give a brief summary of the evidence to support reading Luke’s passion as an ancient spectacle, before turning to the role of the

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15 Pope, “Spectacle Violence,” p. 27.
crowd in Luke's narrative and, lastly, descriptions of crowds and crowd behaviour in Greco-Roman literature on spectacles.

Luke's Passion as Ancient Spectacle

The scholarly literature on Luke's portrayal of Jesus' death in light of ancient spectacles is vast and we will not be able give it full attention here. However, a few literary features are worth noting as evidence that Luke uniquely portrays the crucifixion as an ancient spectacle of death. The first clue to Luke's literary setting is the presence of spectacle language in his crucifixion account. Luke is the only Gospel writer to refer to Jesus' death as a spectacle, using the pointed language of θεωρία.16 He writes, “[A]nd when all the crowds who had assembled for this spectacle (θεωρίαν ταύτην) saw these events, beating breasts they turned away” (23:48). In specifying Jesus' death as a θεωρία, Luke places it in the context of a wide array of ancient visual activities ranging from athletic contests to the theatre, from festivals to political-religious activities such as visiting sacred sites or consulting an oracle.17 A spectacle was not simply about entertainment, although that may be present, but could also be a means of acquiring knowledge.18

Supporting the idea that Luke frames Jesus' crucifixion as a θεωρία is the cluster of language that highlights the visual. Luke uses verbs for seeing (ὁράω, θεωρέω) to emphasize that the crowd and centurion's responses are primarily to a visual experience.19 Furthermore, Luke has amplified the presence of crowds, staging the crucifixion as something that is seen by a variety of spectators. The centurion's response is to “what he saw,” as is the response of the crowd (Luke 23:47-48). The third group of watchers are the women and acquaintances who stand at a distance. They likewise primarily experience the crucifixion visually, as denoted by the participle ὁρῶσαι (23:49).

The specificity of viewing location for each of these three groups of viewers may well have brought the Roman amphitheater to mind for an ancient reader.

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19 This verb θεωρέω (“watching”) was frequently, though not exclusively, used for viewing games or theatre.
The custom in Rome was to seat spectators in a highly-segregated manner according to rank and gender and thus to maintain social order and distinction.\(^{20}\) The very front and best seats were reserved for the emperor (when present) as well as senators, equestrians, and elite citizens. These closest viewers represented imperial authority much like the centurion does in Luke 23:47. The centurion is not only physically closest to Jesus but also the one who assumes the authority to declare a verdict of guilt or innocence. Further back in the Roman amphitheater men of various rank were seated, much like “the crowds” who view the spectacle in 23:48. Women were relegated to the uppermost tier of the amphitheater.\(^{21}\) The distance from which Luke’s third group view the cross and the explicit inclusion of women in 23:49 suggests a similar arrangement is in mind here. Luke has staged the viewers around the cross as if spectators in the arena, each in their proper place and at an appropriate distance from the object of their gaze.

If we broaden our focus to look at the larger context of the crucifixion there are other markers of spectacle culture present in the text. Luke 22:44 refers to Jesus’ ἀγωνία in the garden, a term often translated as “anguish” and thus indicating a distressed emotional state. However, this term, a *hapax legomenon* in the New Testament, is usually synonymous with ἀγών in non-canonical texts. Ἀγών means “contest” and often refers to a battle, struggle, athletic or gymnastic contest, or rhetorical contest.\(^{22}\) While it is possible that the author intended ἀγωνία to suggest mental anguish, a more common translation would be struggle or contest.\(^{23}\) Hence Luke 22:44 could read, “and being in a struggle/contest, he prayed earnestly.”\(^{24}\)

\(^{20}\) Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, p. 130.

\(^{21}\) Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, pp. 26, 131. Wiedemann points to a rule, probably instituted by Domitian, that restricted women’s seats to the last rows on the top tier, although notes the practice might already have been in existence under Augustus. The epigraphic evidence suggests there were male concerns over women’s sexual attraction to the gladiators and anxiety about maintaining control over female viewers (pp. 26-27).

\(^{22}\) For example: Herodotus, *Hist.* 5.102, 6.127, 7.11; Homer, *Il.* 23.258;


Supporting the notion that Jesus is like an athlete preparing for contest in Luke’s passion is the presence of the word “endurance” (ὑπομονή) in the eschatological teaching of 21:10-19. ὑπομονή is a word frequently associated with athletic feats and is one of the virtues of a gladiator often remarked upon by ancient authors. Here Jesus uses ὑπομονή to describe the necessary qualities of disciples in facing opponents. When confronted with the possibility of future arrest, imprisonment, and potential death, Jesus’ teaches that endurance is the means by which “you will gain your ψυχὰς» (21:19).

That Luke’s portrayal of Jesus’ death as a spectacle is not a new or particularly bold claim. Yet it has not heretofore been made entirely clear what kind of spectacle Luke had in mind, what role the crowd plays, nor how the reader is supposed to respond. Is Luke wanting the reader to marvel at Jesus’ courage and therefore be inspired by his death? Are we to see it as an example to follow or be angry at an unjustified death of an innocent man? How we interpret Luke’s framing of this spectacle has implications for interpreting his theology and rhetoric, and ultimately what meaning he gives to the cross.

The Crowd in Luke 23

As discussed above, Luke mentions the crowd several times in his account of Jesus’ death (Luke 23:4, 14-15, 22). Their presence similarly underscores a context of spectacle. Whilst various crowds appear in other passion accounts, the crowd in Luke are so pervasive that the chief priests and scribes are afraid of them (22:2) and Judas looks for a chance to betray Jesus “when no crowd was present” (22:6).

As the passion narrative unfolds, the crowd (ὄχλος) or people (λαός) (Luke uses both terms) change from being hearers to being watchers. Just before the last supper narrative, Luke records that “all the people would get up early to listen to him teaching in the temple” (21:38). Yet as the passion narrative continues the actions of the crowd shift: they will appear, they will shout for his death, they will watch, they will see, they will beat breasts and they will turn away. They will transform from people who listen to Jesus as to a teacher into spectators who participate in his condemnation and death.

The crowd first appear in the passion narrative at Jesus’ arrest (Luke 22:47). They appear “suddenly” (out of nowhere), led by Judas who greets Jesus with a
kiss.\textsuperscript{27} It is noteworthy that the crowd is the object of gaze here as the narrator guides readers to note their startling appearance and to see them as the disciples do, as people threatening to Jesus. Whilst the armed crowd in Mark’s Gospel are described as members of the temple hierarchy equipped with weapons to arrest Jesus (Mark 14:43-44), the crowd’s role in Luke’s Gospel is initially less clear.\textsuperscript{28} At first then, they appear to be observers rather than agents of the court or temple. Their appearance prompts the disciples to ask if they should strike with a sword, a question that immediately introduces the idea of violence and combat (22:49) but this idea comes from Jesus’ followers.\textsuperscript{29} Yet the possibility of combat is thwarted by Jesus’ act of healing and refusal to fight (22:51). It is possible that the crowd themselves are a manifestation of the desire to see violence and bloodshed. If so, it is a desire that is frustrated. Regardless, they now become active participants in this story, playing a role typical of crowds in literature about spectacles.

The crowd next appear in the public trial of Jesus, joining their voices to those of the leaders and chief priests in crying “crucify him” several times over (23:4). Here we see the bloodlust so typical of crowds in the arena who participate in calling for death (see examples below). This time Luke refers to the crowd with the plural ὄχλους, indicating an unspecified collection of different people and inferring a larger group than before. They become the collective accusers of Jesus, demanding his condemnation and the release of Barabbas (23:5, 18, 21) until we are told “their voices prevailed” (23:23).\textsuperscript{30} The politically astute Pilate concedes to their wishes, just as emperors have yielded to vocal crowds before him, and the bloodlust of the crowd is satisfied.\textsuperscript{31}

The “crowds” of 23:4 soon transform into “a great multitude” (πολύ πλῆθος) who follow the cross out of Jerusalem (23:27). Again we have an increase in the size of the crowd. This time they are joined by a more specific group, women “mourning and lamenting.” The presence of mourners, signified by typical fu-

\textsuperscript{27} While there are several actors and viewers throughout the passion, I am distinguishing between those instances where a cluster of identified individuals might interact with Jesus (e.g., the assembly, or chief priests) and where “the crowd” function as a generic group.

\textsuperscript{28} Luke delays Mark’s description of the crowd as armed and does not mention their weapons until Jesus’ speech in 22:52-53. The effect is that they are portrayed as spectators of the dialogue between Judas and Jesus.

\textsuperscript{29} Again, contra Mark 14:43-44, where the weapons and hence suggestion of violence are associated with those who come to arrest him.

\textsuperscript{30} The verb κατισχύω, translated here as “prevailed,” suggests the domination of one thing over another and thus furthers the agonistic imagery.

nereal language, is surprising and exclusive to Luke. They seem to be a prophetic presence who, like the anointing woman in Luke 7, hint at the turn about to come. The crowd have demanded blood and now they follow to watch the spectacle of death.

In 23:35 the crowd finally become spectators, watching (θεωρῶν) as Jesus is mocked and hung on the cross. Their work as participants in calling for condemnation seems complete, marking a shift in their role. Unlike Mark’s account, the mockery of Jesus does not transpire in a courtyard with the military cohort, but in a public location where all can see. However, the multitude do not participate in his ridicule but rather participate as silent watchers of his public humiliation.32

The final mention of the crowds is an all-encompassing one. Once Jesus’ death is narrated, Luke narrates that “all the crowds” saw the spectacle that had taken place (23:48). Again we see an increase in the crowd size: πάντες οἱ συμπαραγενόμενοι ὄχλοι is plural and presumably includes the aforementioned multitude as well as the mourning women and any other previously specified group. Only Luke refers to the crowd in this way and it is significant that they are not passersby but an assembled crowd who have come specifically for the spectacle of death: “all the crowd having gathered for this spectacle” (23:48). Their rather surprising response to viewing Jesus’ death is to beat their breasts and turn away (23:48). Instead of applause or jeering at their demands being met, we have silent gesture and movement. What are we to make of their response? How are we to interpret it?33

Most commentators and major studies on Jesus’ death in Luke interpret the crowd’s action in 23:48 as one that suggests either a remorseful or repentant state.34 Indeed, “remorse” and “repentance” are the two most frequently used words to describe the crowd in the major Luke commentaries.35 However, to

32 See, in comparison, Mark 15:16-20.
33 There are three separate groups of spectators who see “the happening” or the event of Jesus’ death: the centurion who responds verbally with praise and a declaration of Jesus’ innocence (Luke 23:47), the large crowd who beat their breasts and turn away (23:48), and the acquaintances of Jesus who view from a distance but whose reaction to viewing is intriguingly not narrated (23:49). Whilst all of these are significant, it is the crowd’s gesture that is the focus here.
prioritize these words is to let two previous Lucan verses dominate and potentially cloud the translation. The first of these is Luke’s earlier reference to the women who mourn and lament in the crowd as they watch Jesus carry his cross (23:27). There, however, the Greek is quite different. Luke describes their action with two verbs associated with grief: κόπτω (“wail, cut, mourn”) and θρηνέω (“lament, sing a dirge”) and, additionally, indicates that they are a separate group to the whole.

The other verse that casts its shadow on the interpretation of 23:48 can be found in Luke 18:13. Here, Jesus describes a tax collector as “beating his breast” (ἔτυπτεν τὸ στῆθος) whilst raising his eyes to heaven and praying “God, have mercy upon me, a sinner.” It is the only other place in Luke where τύπτω and στῆθος are used in combination and one can see how scholars might regard this as an important parallel. However, in this earlier scene, the man who beats his breast is clearly depicted in a remorseful state, made explicit by his verbal request for mercy and his self-designation as a sinner. No such verbal indicators accompany the crowd at the cross and to read their turning away as an act of repentance seems like a considerable assumption given the narrative context. For what are they repenting? For watching a spectacle? Or for demanding Jesus’ death? Neither of these actions are unusual, immoral, nor outside the norms of crowd behaviour in the ancient accounts. Furthermore, if the crowd are repentant, why not make it explicit?

The most we can conclude about the actual gesture of the crowd is that it is a gesture of grief. While there are only a few extant examples of τύπτω and στῆθος being used together, the combination suggests an action of grief or mourning. Whilst not an unusual reaction to the death of a loved one, it is surprising given that this same crowd demanded Jesus’ death against the will of Pilate the governor. They received exactly what they asked for yet end up grief-stricken rather than satisfied. Their movement homeward reinforces that no more pleasure is to be had at the spectacle, or rather that this spectacle of death no longer holds pleasure for them. Something has shifted, but exactly what they have reacted to is less clear.

What is shocking, in light of ancient spectacle culture, is that the crowd grieves at all. While a crowd may admire the gladiator who fights bravely to his death or the martyr who calmly accepts her fate, Wiedemann claims there is “only minimal evidence for concern about cruelty against criminals.” In fact,
spectators who could not stomach watching the bloodshed were often criticized for being weak.38 Certainly, a few enticing stories of audience sympathy exist: one well-known moment records the crowd’s protests against the presider of games when the elephants were slaughtered. Cicero credits it to compassion (misericordia) for the animals.39 Condemned criminals, on the other hand, were generally viewed as expendable and the crowds depicted as blood-thirsty in the extreme.40

Crowd Participation at Ancient Spectacles

If we read Jesus’ death in Luke as a spectacle, we can examine Luke’s narrative alongside other narratives describing spectacle cultures and practices to inform our reading of the crowd in Luke. The crowd’s response to viewing a spectacle was incredibly important in the ancient world. Spectator viewing was not relaxing work, however. Crowds came to be seen and to see, to act and interact. Spectacles of death provided entertainment, the opportunity to see unusual animals, and even to receive favors or prizes.41 Indeed, in certain circumstances the spectators themselves became actors of sorts, required to display their support for the emperor or the emperor’s favorite.42 The line between viewer and the viewed was thus often blurred and being a viewer could be dangerous work.

When watching death in the arena, one source of danger to the crowd was the theatres and actors themselves. Several thousand people were crushed to death at a munus in Fiderae in 27 CE, leading Tiberius to restrict these events to taking place outside Rome.43 Pliny describes the new technology of a revolving theatre that almost crushed the crowd with the words: “[W]hat a contempt for life this showed.”44 On yet another occasion Dio Cassius records the populace’s fear at a report that the actors would actually shoot arrows into the

38 Wiedemann, Emperors and Gladiators, p. 139.
39 Cicero, Ad fam. 7.1.
40 Kyle, Spectacles of Death, pp. 91, 245. Grief over the deceased became a theme in later Christian martyrologies; see Eusebius, Hist Ecc. 59-62.
41 Dio, Suet. 66.25 recounts a 100-day spectacle where wooden balls inscribed with words were thrown into the crowd. Whatever item was named on the ball (e.g., a food item, silver, gold, clothing, an animal, or even slave) was something the recipient could claim.
43 Wiedemann, Emperors and Gladiators, p. 131.
crowd in imitation of Hercules. The story was believed because there had been previous instances of the crowd being appropriated to act a role and had ended up meeting their own deaths.

If the theatre structure or drama being enacted was not a danger to spectators, then imperial power could be. Emperors Gaius, Nero, Domitian, and Tiberius were all known for watching the crowd for the appropriate response at games and festivals. Gaius and Domitian in particular were renowned for having spectators dragged away if they failed to show the requisite level of enthusiasm. Dio writes:

\[T]\he people could do nothing but talk and show something of their feelings by their gestures whereas Gaius would destroy his opponents, dragging many away even while they were witnessing the games and arresting many more after they had left the theatres. The chief causes of his anger were, first, that they did not show enthusiasm in attending the spectacles (for he himself used to arrive at the theatres now at one hour and now at another, regardless of previous announcement, sometimes coming before dawn and sometimes not until afternoon, so that they became tired and weary waiting for him), and again, that they did not always applaud the performers that pleased him and sometimes even showed honor to those whom he disliked (Dio, Hist. 59.13)

In contrast, Pliny praises Emperor Trajan for his “impartiality” in allowing spectators to enjoy the show and express their feelings and preferences freely.

How freely too the spectators could express their enthusiasm and show their preferences without fear! No one risked the old charge of impiety if he disliked a particular gladiator; no spectator found himself turned spectacle, dragged off by the hook to satisfy grim pleasures, or else cast to

45 Dio Cassius, Epit. 73.20.
46 Bartsch, Actors in the Audience, pp. 1, 33-34. Bartsch traces the relationship between imperial power and the populace and the pressure on spectators themselves to “put on a show” in support of the emperor’s games or particular champion. This dynamic became particularly problematic under Emperor Nero, who famously fancied himself a bit of a performer. When he himself took the stage, he effectively transformed the audiences into actors whose very lives depended upon their ability to express the appropriate delight and appreciation for the emperor’s performance. I am not talking here about mere social pressure, but rather a scenario where planted spies mingled with the crowd and arrested anyone whose response did not express absolute support for the emperor.
the flames! [Domitian] was a madman, blind to the true meaning of his position, who used the arena for collecting charges of high treason, who felt himself slighted and scorned if we failed to pay homage to his gladiators, taking any criticism of them to himself and seeing insults to his own godhead and divinity; who deemed himself the equal of the gods yet raised his gladiators to be his equal. (Pliny, *Pan.* 33.3-4)

Despite the obvious rhetorical and political bias in Pliny’s comparison of the two emperors, that he could use spectatorship as an issue in praise of Trajan suggests a known practice and widely accepted phenomenon. In fact, in state executions the emperor’s power extended even to mourners. According to both Suetonius and Tacitus, Tiberius did not allow relatives and friends of the condemned to come near the bodies nor to view them or weep over them. Sentries guarded the deceased from their loved ones and their bodies were often disposed of in the river Tiber without proper burial or cremation. Such a context highlights the bravery of Joseph of Arimathea in asking for Jesus’ body (Luke 23:52).

Inversely, whilst it was often dangerous to be in the crowd, particularly in Rome when the emperor was present, the crowd themselves could exert enormous power over spectacles. We have seen hints of this in some of the examples already quoted. David Potter writes, “[W]hether it jeered, snorted at, or incinerated those who did not appeal to it, there could be no worse beast than an uncontrolled *demos* in the political demonology of the high empire.” Potter is recognizing the kind of fear that a crowd could evoke in a ruler, particularly when they did not participate in an expected manner.

If we return to Dio’s description of Gaius in the arena (cited above), we can see that despite the threat of physical violence and even death, the crowd is a source of frustration to Gaius precisely because they defy control. The crowd express themselves with speech and gestures in such a way that antagonizes him and they refuse to applaud or show sufficient enthusiasm for his games. Where Gaius responded to what he perceived to be the crowd’s lack of support for him by arresting and killing spectators, Suetonius records Caligula leaving the arena in frustration, driven out by the crowd’s applause for a freed slave. That the populace could drive out an emperor speaks to their impact.

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51 Suetonius, *Cal.* 35.
Similarly, Luke’s narrative demonstrates the power of the crowd to influence and affect the outcome of Jesus’ trial. Three times Luke records Pilate declaring Jesus’ innocence and three times the crowds demand his death (23:18-23). Their voices ultimately “prevailed” over that of the authorities and Pilate acquiesces to their demands. Luke has significantly adapted Mark’s narrative at this point. In Mark, the crowd ask for the fulfillment of a festival custom where a prisoner is released. Whilst they do twice demand Jesus be crucified, Mark places the blame on the chief priests who “stirred up the crowd” (Mark 15:11). In Luke, the accusation is that Jesus “stirs up people” (23:5). Yet despite this charge Pilate declares Jesus not guilty and presses the matter several times before the crowds prevail. Luke’s wording of 23:24 is telling for the way it depicts a ruler making a politically astute decision to give in to the will of the crowd: “and Pilate decided to grant them their demand.”

Likewise in the arena, the crowds at times influenced the decision of the emperor. For example, they might persuade the emperor to grant missio to a worthy gladiator and thus decide whether he might live or die after fighting well. Sometimes the crowd called for mercy, but equally they were capable of demanding to see more graphic and gruesome forms of death. It was a standard trope to praise leaders for providing the crowd what they wanted for it suggested a ruler capable of showing mercy and at one with the will of the people.

Hence the crowds’ participation and active role in Luke’s passion is entirely within ancient norms. Yet, we are still left with the matter of how to interpret the crowds’ gestures in response to seeing the events of Luke 23. Here a turn to the philosophical tradition might be helpful. According to Andrea Nightingale, one of the innovations of the fourth century BCE was that philosophers increasingly associated θεωρία with philosophical knowledge. For Plato, θεωρία created an opportunity for the philosopher to see behind the spectacle to the true beauty. Whilst Aristotle’s conception of the usefulness of θεωρία differs, he likewise describes humanity’s desire for knowledge in terms of the senses, prioritizing sight:

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52 The crowd in Luke is arguably even responsible for forcing Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross (23:26), although Luke’s Greek is ambiguous.
53 Kyle, Spectacles of Death, p. 76.
54 Petronius, Sat. 45.6; Passio Perpet. Et Felic 21.7.
All people by nature strive for knowledge. A sign of this is our esteem for the senses; for we esteem them for their own sake apart from need, and most of all the sense of sight (ὀμματων). For not only with a view to action, but even when no action is about to happen, we seize hold of sight (ὁραν) over all the other senses. The reason is that of all the senses sight most makes us know things and reveals (δηλοῖ) many distinctions. (Aristotle Metaph. 980a)

At the heart of θεωρία is the notion that something foreign or unusual is encountered in the spectacle and, therefore, somehow known. The viewer is taken beyond physical seeing to actual perception and ultimately knowledge. Verity Platt argues that the visual sense as a means of perceiving truth is so important in Greek epiphanic literature that the visual sense dominates even where other senses may also be evoked.57 Similarly, Philo considers vision (ὄψις) essential to religious experience and the first of the senses in discerning the true spiritual path.58 Ideally, spectatorship or θεωρία leaves the viewer changed through the encounter and invites response, often in the form of cultic activity.

If we acknowledge that Luke is constructing a theological narrative, or at least a narrative about a religious figure, then sight may be functioning as a means of true and higher knowledge or true perception. Here we find common ground in the various spectating groups in Luke’s passion. The centurion sees and praises God by uttering his conviction that Jesus was just or innocent. The crowd’s reaction is a gesture of grief rather than praise but points to the same conclusion. A righteous man has been killed in a humiliating way and no joy can come from viewing this event. Their non-verbal gestures of beating chests and turning away signify their rejection of Jesus’ condemnation as a criminal. This is less an act of repentance and more an act of grief and transformation. By seeing clearly, by watching the spectacle, they have grasped new insight into the nature of Jesus as he dies on a cross.59

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57 Platt, Facing the Gods, p. 11.
58 Philo, Spec. 3.185-89.
59 The difference between physical seeing and the visual discernment of a deeper truth becomes even more apparent in Luke’s resurrection narrative. There, two disciples “see” Jesus on the Emmaus road, but are kept from really seeing – that is, recognizing him (24:15-16). Paradoxically, at the very moment of recognition, Jesus vanishes from their sight (22:31).
Conclusions

Luke’s narrative does not make it clear precisely what the crowd respond to when they turn away and beat their chests. He simply states that they saw “the happenings” (τὰ γενόμενα). Somewhere between leaving Jerusalem and Jesus breathing his last the crowd’s attitude reverses. His death is now dissatisfying to them as a spectacle. One plausible explanation is that the crowd is struck by the nobility of Jesus’ death and his stoic forbearance in the face of suffering. This is the view in the traditional noble death interpretation. However, it is also possible that the moment of the crowd’s transformation is the same as the centurion’s – that is, the realization that a politically innocent man had died. If so, then Luke is participating in a well-known theme of rhetorical invective: the unjust condemnation of an innocent man.  

Reading the various crowds and groups of spectators in Luke’s passion alongside ancient literature about spectacles both complicates and challenges current understandings of Luke’s passion. First, I have questioned whether we can interpret the crowd as repentant in Luke and have suggested their gestures signify grief and new insight into Jesus. Second, whilst this study firmly locates Luke’s passion in the context of spectacle culture, it has sought to broaden that horizon to include the kind of athletic contests typical of the arena. This neither necessarily supports nor challenges the view that Jesus’ death was noble, but does suggest that more work remains to be done in this area.

Luke’s first hearers, steeped in spectacle culture, would likely have recognized the failure of the crucifixion as a form of spectacle death that reinforced the values of the empire. Instead of rejoicing at the power of the empire to put a rebel to death, the crowd grieve that an innocent man has died. There is no pleasure in such a death. Politically, Luke has undercut the power of the empire by portraying it as unjust. In doing so he may be paving the way for future unjust deaths (like Stephen’s in Acts 7) and thus giving Christian readers a model for martyrdom. The unorthodox behavior of Luke’s re-imagined spectators undermines any possible reading of Jesus’ death as a victory for the empire and simultaneously signifies to the reader that this is not the ordinary death of a condemned criminal but one that, if viewed correctly, reveals a deeper truth about the identity of Jesus.

Theologically, we might ask whether Luke wants the reader’s gaze to remain on the cross or if he is shifting it away from this failed spectacle. Is the reader, like the crowd, to turn away from the cross and back towards Jerusalem?

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60 The unjust conviction of an innocent man was a topic in rhetorical invective and one that could be influencing Luke here. See Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, pp. 140-41.
Jerusalem is, after all, the place where the disciples will encounter the risen Jesus and begin again (24:33). If so, then Luke could arguably be shifting the focus away from the cross and towards the resurrection. His is the Gospel, after all, with more detailed resurrection and ascension stories than the others. Paul, who is equally well-versed in spectacle language, preached a gospel of “Christ crucified,” but Luke may just be shifting our gaze towards a gospel of Christ resurrected.