ABSTRACT

Luke’s particular portrayal of Jesus’ crucifixion and its relationship to spectacle culture has received extensive scholarly treatment. Luke frames the crucified Jesus as a spectacle in a way that suggests his death is noble and Jesus himself is an athlete or martyr in the arena. Missing from these conversations is how we might interpret Luke’s resurrection and ascension in light of ancient spectacle culture and what impact these readings have upon the theology and soteriology of Luke–Acts. This paper argues that Luke shifts the reader's gaze from cross to ascension and in doing so firmly locates salvation in the ascension of Jesus, not his death or even resurrection. Comparisons with Greco-Roman understandings of benefaction and imperial apotheosis further highlight the unique locus of salvation in Luke’s gospel.
argue for Jesus as a Stoic Messiah. Whilst these two positions may seem contrary due to the fact that one points to a Jewish antecedent and the other a Greek philosophical one, the shared tradition here is that of noble death. Noble death was an ancient heroic ideal of bravery in the face of death, characterised by self-control and courage. Such bravery was most often on display in the arena and Luke’s text contains several references that suggest the influence of the spectacle culture of the arena on his framing of Christ’s death, including athletic and gladiator imagery.

The arguments for reading Luke’s passion as a noble death have been well rehearsed elsewhere and will not be repeated here. I have argued previously that the role of the crowd in Luke 23 is additional evidence for the influence of spectacle culture on Luke’s crucifixion. The implications of that reading are that Luke downplays the crucifixion in his gospel: it is an unsatisfying spectacle for the crowd who ultimately turn away and go home in remorse at what they have seen (23:48). As an ancient spectacle, the crucifixion fails to fulfil ancient expectations of entertainment or justice served, and thus fails to reinforce the aims of those who killed Jesus.

The goal of this paper is to discuss the theological implications of these readings of Luke’s passion narrative, particularly in relation to issues of soteriology. I propose that, when read in light of Greco-Roman culture, Luke’s passion shifts an ancient reader’s gaze from the cross to the ascension. In doing so, Luke makes the locus of salvation the ascension and rule of Jesus, not his

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2 Noble death in antiquity ranged from the quiet (Stoic) embrace of death, epitomised by Socrates, to the warrior-like gladiator in the arena. Both of these aspects have been argued for as present in Luke’s gospel. For a summary of noble death and the gospels see A. Y. Collins, “From Noble Death to Crucified Messiah,” NTS 40 (1994) 481–503.


6 Executions, like crucifixion, were the lowest form of violent entertainment in the ancient world. Fighting the beasts and gladiator fights were scheduled at peak times, whereas state executions were often held in the lunch hour and lacked some of the drama associated with other forms of violent spectacle. See Donald Kyle, Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome (London: Routledge, 1998) 92.

7 The guiding question throughout is how Luke’s text would have been heard by an ancient hearer-reader familiar with Greco-Roman culture.
death, and thus presents the reader with a remarkably different theology to that of the synoptic gospels.

SPECTACLE IN LUKE–ACTS

The influence of spectacle culture can be seen at various points throughout Luke–Acts, some of which I will outline briefly below. The first is Jesus’ crucifixion. Luke uniquely among the gospel writers refers to Jesus’ crucifixion as “this spectacle” (θεσμόματα ταύτην, 23:48). In doing so, he uses technical language of θεσμοί. Theoria denoted a wide range of visual activities in the ancient world such as athletic contests, gladiator fights, facing the beasts, theatre and religious-political activities such as visiting sacred sites to consult an oracle. In the oracular-centric culture of the Greek world, spectacles were frequently entertaining, but they also conveyed knowledge and reinforced political ideology.

In addition to the visual language used to describe the crucifixion as a spectacle, Luke highlights the role of the crowd as viewers and Jesus as contestant or martyr on display. Whether Jesus is a martyr, as Dibelius argues, or an athlete engaged in battle does not really matter. Martyr and gladiator find common ground in the arena: both are the objects of the crowd’s gaze, both face death, and both are evaluated on the basis of their courage in the face of death. In Luke’s gospel the crowd gather to see the spectacle, increasing in size each time (22:47, 66; 23:1, 27). When the closest viewer, the centurion, declares Jesus innocent, this crowd turns away in grief or disappointment (23:48). Only Jesus’ closest friends remain, and they too watch (οπακού) at a distance (23:49). This repeated emphasis on the spectators who watch, who visually witness the crucifixion, and who respond to what they have seen highlights the crucifixion as a form of spectacle.

Several other elements point to Jesus’ death as a spectacle in Luke. Raymond Brown described Luke’s Jesus rising like an athlete who has been “readied” for trial by the angelic presence at the Mount of Olives (22:39–46). In doing so Brown noticed the language and imagery frequently associated with

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11 For the purpose of this argument is does not matter whether Luke is portraying Jesus as martyr or athlete. The resonances of both are present. Dibelius, From Tradition to Gospel 199–203; Clivaz, “The Angel and the Sweat like ‘Drops of Blood’ (Lk 22:43–44),” HTR 98 (2005) 419–40, especially 429.
great athletes. In 21:10–19 Jesus teaches that endurance (υπομονή) is the means by which one can gain life. In the scene on the Mount of Olives Luke describes Jesus entering a contest (ἁγωνία). Both are athletic terms. Even the confusing reference to “sweat like drops of blood” in Luke 22:44 finds resonance as an athletic image. Luke portrays an athlete-messiah preparing for his final test in the arena that is called “the Skull” (23:33).

Other resonances of spectacle culture and visual knowledge appear at key points in the narrative of Luke–Acts. Visual proofs and eyewitnesses are important for Luke. His entire narrative is introduced with a reference to the “eyewitnesses” (σωτόπτως) who delivered the account of events surrounding Jesus (Luke 1:2). His gospel includes the most extended narratives of resurrection appearances where Jesus is revealed firstly in bread and wine (24:30–31) and then in his physical presence among the disciples (24:39) so that they too might serve as eyewitnesses (μάρτυρες) to his resurrection (24:48). When choosing a new twelfth disciple the main precondition is that the person has met Jesus during his life and can witness to the resurrection (Acts 1:21–22).

In other places in Luke–Acts the witnesses themselves become the object of gaze and knowledge, though often briefly, and never quite in the way Jesus is the object of gaze. The elders, scribes and High Priest see (θεωρέω) and marvel at the boldness of Peter and John’s testimony and the signs they have performed (Acts 4:13–14). This seeing becomes a point of recognition and knowledge for the Jewish leaders and, indeed, for πᾶσιν τοῖς κατοικοῦσιν Ἰερουσαλήμ (“all the inhabitants of Jerusalem,” 4:16). As such Peter and John are a dangerous presence, a visual manifestation of something extraordinary that could not be contained despite the admonitions of the Jewish leaders (4:29–31).

Paul’s compatriots, Gaius and Aristarchus, are dragged into the theatre in Ephesus after the clash with the locals over handmade gods and goddesses like

13 Endurance (υπομονή) is frequently associated with the qualities of a gladiator in ancient literature. See Pope, “Spectacle Violence” 156–62.
Artemis (19:29–30). The theatre was a treacherous place in the ancient world. It was a place where spectators could become spectacles forced to fight for their lives or where the fervour of the crowd could demand life without fair trial. As such, Gaius and Aristarchus face the possibility of becoming spectacles in that arena when facing an angry crowd who seem to desire their blood. In this instance, the crowd is quieted and a bloody death is not demanded of the men. Stephen, however, is not so fortunate.

In Acts 7 Stephen faces his arrest, trial, and ultimately martyrdom before a council in Jerusalem. There are numerous resonances with the arrest, trial and death of Jesus, most notably Stephen’s dying words that ask God to forgive his killers and to receive his spirit (Acts 7:59–60). These similarities to the death of Jesus have led some scholars to call Stephen’s death a spectacle. Yet, whilst the scene opens with Stephen’s angelic face being gazed upon (ἀπευθύνεται) by the council member, Stephen’s death does not make him so much the object of view as the one to whom he points—the risen, exalted Christ. Luke redirects the gaze that falls upon Stephen to the risen Christ, reminding readers that their hope lies in the exalted status of Christ.

There is a plethora of visual language in the final scene of Stephen’s martyrdom. As the council once looked at him, Stephen looks intently (ἀπευθύνεται) into heaven and, seeing a vision of the heavenly realm, seals his own fate when he testifies to his vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God (7:56). Despite a preceding long speech that enraged the hearers (7:54), it is the final declaration of Jesus’ exalted status that provokes the crowd to kill him (Acts 7:55–58). Stephen’s witness to the exalted Jesus points precisely to the shift in emphasis at play in Luke’s passion. The point of scandal is not the death of Christ but his exaltation to the right hand of God. It is scandalous precisely because it is a claim of power and, arguably, also the point of salvation in Luke’s theological narrative. It is to the resurrection and ascension that we now turn.

RESURRECTION AND ASCENSION IN LUKE–ACTS

Luke is the only New Testament writer to include extended resurrection appearances, such as the Emmaus road encounter, and the only one to narrate the ascension of Jesus. In addition to the two accounts describing Jesus’ ascension, it is prefigured in the transfiguration story of 9:28–36. There, Luke

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19 The ascension or ascended state of Jesus is assumed in Rom 8:34; 10:6; Eph 1:20–21; Col 3:1; 1 Tim 3:16, and is also referred to in the future tense in John 20:17. Luke is the only New Testament writer to give a narrative account of the ascension scene (Luke 24:50–53; Acts 1:6–11).
uniquely refers to Jesus’ imminent accomplishment in Jerusalem as a departure (ἐξοδος, 9:31), pointing to his ascension rather than the cross as the moment of fulfilment. In the narrative arc of Luke–Acts, both resurrection and ascension are arguably more important for Luke than the death of Jesus itself, an event often referred to simply as “suffering” (πάσχω). In contrast to his crucifixion, Jesus’ numerous resurrection appearances are referred to using the technical language of “proof” (τεκμηριον), indicating their function in Luke’s narrative (Acts 1:3).

Jesus’ resurrection is not the only resurrection in Luke. Both the son of the widow of Nain and Jairus’ daughter are raised from the dead (Luke 7:11–17; 8:40–56). Whilst the situations of their deaths differ and Jesus is the one doing the raising in the first two cases, the three resurrections share a common trait. All three, including Jesus’ resurrection, address an injustice.

In the widow of Nain story, Luke highlights Jesus’ compassion and emotion towards her using the emotive term σπλαγχνιζομαι (7:13). As a widow she is already without a husband in a patriarchal world and now risks great economic vulnerability without her only son. Rather than leave her in this potentially pitiful state, Jesus restores her son to her.

The second resurrection story in Luke has many themes in common with the widow of Nain scene. Jairus similarly has only one daughter, a fact that is emphasised in the narrative. He approaches Jesus with the posture of a desperate man: he falls at Jesus’ feet and implores (παρακαλεω) him to come to his house where his daughter is dying (8:41). That his daughter’s young life is being cut short is presented as an injustice for this synagogue leader who would otherwise be considered a righteous man due to his position in society. Jesus “saves” (σωζω) the twelve year-old girl by restoring her life just as he “saved” (σωζω) the woman who had bled for twelve years in the preceding scene (8:48, 50).

23 There are several literary parallels between Luke 7:11–17 and 2 Kgs 4:32–37 and/or 1 Kgs 17:8–24 (LXX), leading scholars to compare Jesus to Elisha and Elijah here. See John Carroll, Luke (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2012) 165. One of the key differences in Luke’s reshaping of Elijah’s miracle is that the widow in 1 Kings 17 had other children. If anything, Luke has emphasised her reliance on this only son by omitting reference to other children, thus heightened the drama and her vulnerability.
24 Carroll, Luke 197. In the parallel story in Matt 9:18 the daughter is described as “having died” using an aorist verb. By describing her with an imperfect verb, ἀπεθάνατον (dying), Luke heightens the drama.
Both Lucan resurrections foreshadow Jesus’ own resurrection as well as the promise of resurrection to all as a symbol of both divine favour (7:16) and salvation from death (8:50). Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, like that of the widow’s son and Jairus’ daughter, reverses an injustice. In Luke’s gospel, unlike Matthew and Mark, Jesus’ crucifixion is not the point where his status as “son of God” is revealed. Rather the cross simply reveals that an injustice has been done—an innocent man was crucified by the state (23:47). It is Jesus’ resurrection by God that vindicates him and rights the wrong of an unjust death. As Scaer writes: “Resurrection, for Luke, is primary justification.”

Despite the importance and even necessity of the resurrection, we shall see that for Luke, the ascension is what determines Jesus’ distinctiveness, his reigning power, and ultimately his ability to offer salvific benevolence. The ascension both concludes the Gospel of Luke and opens his second volume known as Acts (Luke 24:50–53, Acts 11:1–11). That the ascension is told twice, its placement and repetition, speaks to its importance for Luke. As mentioned above, the ascension is also foreshadowed in the Lucan Transfiguration where glory is associated with Jesus’ “departure” (ἐξοδοῖς) and fulfilment in Jerusalem (9:31). Indeed, the promise-fulfilment motif that runs throughout the gospel reaches its conclusion in the ascension rather than the death or even resurrection of Christ.

Jesus’ resurrection has been shared by others in Luke’s gospel and likewise is a gift promised to all believers. Stephen’s death in Acts is portrayed as being an imitation of Christ’s death, a possibility open to Peter, Paul and all the Christian martyrs who follow. But none of these people share in Jesus’ ascension: it cannot be imitated. Leif Vaage writes, “it is Jesus’ ascension that editorially defines the evangelist’s own view of Jesus.” It is in the ascension, I suggest, that the uniqueness of Jesus comes to the fore and his status as Saviour, ruler and God is revealed. So why might Luke have emphasised ascension over anything else? How might an ancient hearer have heard this

25 The statement, “surely, this man was innocent,” is astonishingly placed in the mouth of the centurion, a man emblematic of Roman Imperial power and thus forming a kind of acquittal. See Justin R. Howell, “The Imperial Authority and Benefaction of Centurions and Acts 10:34–43: A Response to C. Kavin Rowe,” JSNT 31, No. 1 (2008) 25–51, esp. 39.
27 There are several textual issues with the Luke 24 account of the ascension. Some manuscripts omit 24:51b “and was carried up to heaven” whilst others include “they worshipped him” in 24:52. See the discussion in Mikael Parsons, The Departure of Jesus in Luke–Acts (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987) 29–39.
28 Parsons, The Departure of Jesus 90.
30 Vaage, Religious Rivalries 263.
text? To answer this question we turn now to the ancient literature on imperial apotheosis.

**IMPERIAL APOTHEOSIS AND THE ASCENSION OF JESUS**

Imperial apotheosis was a practice that arguably began with Julius Caesar and went on to become so commonplace as to almost be a cliché in the Greco-Roman world. The apotheosis (or deification) of Julius Caesar is told in a now famous story recorded by the historian Dio Cassius. According to Dio, when Caesar died a very bright comet-star appeared during the games of 44 BCE and was interpreted as a sign of Julius’ soul rising to heaven.\(^{31}\) Over twenty-five ancient texts refer to the event and with it the common association of a star and divinity. Shortly after the appearance of the comet, the Senate confirmed Julius’ status as one who had now become a divine being.

When Emperor Augustus died a similar set of events was recorded. As his funeral pyre was lit, an eagle, said to be bearing his soul (ψυχή), was seen flying up to the heavens.\(^{32}\) Again, this was interpreted as a sign of his deification or apotheosis, and Augustus was thereafter referred to as a “god” or “son of god.”\(^{33}\) This pattern would go on to be repeated. Almost 200 years later the historian Herodian wrote about the death of Septimius Severus that, “the Romans believe that this eagle carries the soul of the emperor from the earth up to heaven. Thereafter the emperor is worshiped with the rest of the gods.”\(^{34}\) Indeed the deification of an emperor upon his death became such a well-known *topos* that Seneca wrote his political satire, *Apocolocyntosis*, about Emperor Claudius’ ascent and reception into heaven. The routine nature of imperial deification is neatly summed up in Seneca’s line, “once, it was a great thing to become a god; but now you have made the distinction a farce.”\(^{35}\) Similarly, Dio records Vespasian joking on his deathbed “I am becoming a god.”\(^{36}\)

Several points are worth noting in relation to Jesus’ ascension in Luke. Firstly, Jesus’ ascension is described using the verbs \(\text{αναλαμβάνω}\) (assume, receive) or \(\text{ανάφέρω}\) (carry, offer up) combined with a reference to heaven as the destination. The phrase in Luke 24:51 is almost identical to that used in Dio’s account of the apotheosis of Emperor Augustus. In narrating the funeral of Augustus, Dio writes that Augustus’ soul (ψυχή) ἐς τὸν οὐρανὸν

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\(^{31}\) Dio, *Roman History* 45.7.1–2.

\(^{32}\) Dio, *Hist.* 56.42.3.


\(^{34}\) Herodian, 4.2.11.


\(^{36}\) Dio, *Hist.* 66.17.3.
&alpha;&omicron;φερ&omicron;w. &alpha;&omicron;φερ&omicron;w is language typical of an apotheosis or ascension to heaven in Greek literature, usually combined with the phrase “to heaven” as we have in both Luke and Dio.

Secondly, the first and only time Jesus is an object of worship (προσκυνέω) in Luke’s gospel occurs in 24:52, after his ascension into heaven. The use of the verb προσκυνέω specifically applied to him suggests his status is now that of a deity, as Luke clearly associates this word with worship of God alone. For example, in the Lucan temptation story Jesus himself had proclaimed to the devil that only God can be the object of worship (4:8). Hence, in the narrative logic of Luke, Jesus has now been raised to the status of God if he is deserving of worship. That the disciples return to the temple in Jerusalem and continue to bless God means Jesus has not replaced God but is now one and the same in deserving worship. A common assumption in Hellenistic rapture stories is that being taken up to heaven is tantamount to immortality and deification. Similarly in Luke Jesus’ assumption into heaven has exalted him to the status of a deity.

Thirdly, having eyewitnesses to attest to the spectacle of apotheosis was an essential element of imperial apotheosis. Before the Senate would confirm the apotheosis of an emperor, witnesses were required to testify they had seen the soul ascending to heaven (such as the comet-star or an eagle flying up). Suetonius records a man, “an ex-praetor who took oath that he had seen the form of the Emperor, after he had been reduced to ashes, on its way to heaven.” In Acts 1:8, the disciples at the ascension are explicitly told they are now the witnesses to Jesus. Whilst his whole life and ministry may be in view here, it certainly includes the ascension. It also serves to introduce what follows as an event witnessed primarily through the visual senses. Luke’s emphasis in the disciple’s seeing the ascension is apparent in the language used:

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37 Dio, 56.42.3.
41 Vaage, Religious Rivalries 264. Cf. Suet. Aug 100.4; Dio 56.42.2; 59.11.4; Justin I Apol 1.21; Tatian Ad Gr 10; Tertullian, Spec 30.3.
42 Suet. Aug 100.4.
1:9 While they were watching (βλέποντες) … a cloud took him from their eyes (τῶν ὄφθαλμῶν)

1:10 they were looking intently up to heaven … (ἀτενίζοντες)\(^{43}\)

1:11 why do you stand looking … (ἐμβλέποντες)

In the immediate narrative, two angelic messengers confirm that Jesus was assumed and is now located in heaven (1:10–11). Stephen serves as a further eyewitness to the ascended status of Jesus later in Acts. Towards the end of his pre-martyrdom speech Stephen “looks intently” (ἀτενίζω) up to heaven and sees (ὁρῶ) Jesus at the right hand of God.\(^{44}\) He verbally confirms this in a vision report that again emphasises the visual: “look, I see the heavens open” (7:55–56). Stephen’s testimony, or witness, to the ascended Jesus ultimately enrages the crowd and ensures his death.\(^{45}\) Why? Because his testimony that Jesus is standing at the right hand of God is a claim of Jesus’ divinity.

Jesus’ death is one that is imitated firstly by Stephen (Acts 7) and arguably in later scenes of Paul’s arrest and trials in Acts too. His resurrection is prefigured and shared by the widow of Nain’s son and Jairus’ daughter. Yet his ascension is the one thing Stephen, Paul or any of the later martyrs cannot imitate. It is unique to the Christ and does some important theological work in Luke–Acts in establishing Jesus’ rule and sovereignty.

SALVATION AND BENEFACiON

Contemporary readers are so familiar with the association between Jesus’ death and salvation that we may not notice how disconnected those two ideas are in Luke’s presentation of salvation and the related activity of release from sin. Luke does not appear to assign any particular soteriological significance to the death of Jesus, although obviously his death is a necessary part of a larger redemptive story.\(^{46}\) Rather than the cross, the resurrection and ascension become the locus of soteriology in Luke. Salvation will be the focus here. However, forgiveness of sin is a closely related, yet distinct, category in Luke’s gospel and so we will address that too as is pertinent.

It is not that Luke is disinterested in salvation: he frequently uses salvific language (σωτηρία, σωτήριον and related verbs such as σωθίζω, διασωθίζω). Rather, Luke configures salvation differently to the other canonical gospels. Talbert argues that the resurrection functions as “a means by which

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\(^{43}\) ΑΤΕΝΙΖΩ conveys a certain intensity—to gaze earnestly, look intensely (LSJ).

\(^{44}\) This same visual language is used to describe the council looking at Stephen in 6:15.

\(^{45}\) Wilson, “Hearing the Word and Seeing the Light” 13.

salvation may flow from Jesus’ in Luke’s gospel.\textsuperscript{47} He is partly right. To focus solely on the resurrection, however, risks marginalising the ascension and overlooking the Greco-Roman context of the gospel. Green moves a step further in arguing that the salvific event in Luke–Acts is Jesus’ “exaltation,” something he defines as both resurrection and ascension.\textsuperscript{48} I concur with Green but would place the emphasis upon the latter of these two. As I have argued above, the resurrection is shared by other human beings both in the gospel and in the promised eschaton, whereas the ascension belongs to Jesus alone. Jesus’ ascension and exaltation to rule at God’s right hand are precisely what give him the power to offer salvation to the people. It also best explains Luke’s selective use of salvation language and his Christological titles in Luke–Acts.

Strikingly, all except one reference to salvation (σωτηρία, σωτήρων) are found in the infancy narratives of Luke where salvation is associated with a new era marked by release from sin and enemies.\textsuperscript{49} New eras are the hallmark of new rulers in the ancient world. The function of Luke’s prophetic and miraculous birth stories is to introduce Jesus as both Davidic Messiah and Son of God—that is, as an incoming great leader.\textsuperscript{50} A Greco-Roman hearer would likely have recognised the similarities to the way various bioi describe the portents that accompany the birth of heroes, Hellenistic kings or Roman emperors.\textsuperscript{51} Plutarch, for example, describes the dramatic dreams that preceded the conception of Alexander and the visions and signs that accompanied Olympias’ pregnancy.\textsuperscript{52}

It is Mary’s who first uses the word σωτηρία in Luke’s account. She uses it as an honorific title for God (1:47), but it is shortly thereafter applied to Jesus by an angelic being where it appears alongside another important Lucan title for Jesus, ὁ κύριος (2:11).\textsuperscript{53} In Mary’s song the honorific title is combined with political elements: the powerful are dethroned, the wealthy made poor, and Israel is remembered (1:52–55). Nothing less than an astonishing reversal of power is imagined to flow from the baby Mary carries.\textsuperscript{54} A similar emphasis occurs in Zechariah’s prophetic utterance where salvation is framed in terms of

\textsuperscript{48} Green, \textit{The Gospel of Luke} 95.
\textsuperscript{49} Luke 1:47, 69, 71, 77; 2:11, 30; 3:6. One later reference appears in the Zacchaeus story where Jesus declares that “salvation has come to this house” in response to Zacchaeus’ pledge to repay the poor he has defrauded (19:9).
\textsuperscript{51} For example see Suetonius Aug. 94, Tib.14, Claud. 1–2, Nero 1–6; Plutarch \textit{Num.}7.1–3, \textit{Alex} 3.1; Philostratus \textit{Vit. Apoll.} 1.4–5; Quintus Curtius \textit{Alex.} 1; and Josephus \textit{Ant.} 2.9.2–3.
\textsuperscript{52} Plutarch, \textit{Alex.} 2.2–4.
\textsuperscript{53} C. Kavin Rowe, “Luke–Acts and the Imperial Cult: A Way through the Conundrum?” \textit{JSNT} 27 (2005) 279–300, writes that κύριος is the most important title for Jesus in Luke–Acts and one that clearly has imperial resonances (294).
\textsuperscript{54} Carroll, \textit{Luke} 48.
communal rescue from enemies by means of a “horn of salvation” (1:69–77). The salvation envisaged in the birth narratives is communal and socio-political in its liberating power as well as “religious” in encompassing the forgiveness of sins.  

Twenty-one further references to salvation are found in Acts, several of which associate salvation with Jesus’ name, and some of which simply refer to “rescue” from danger rather than anything specifically cosmic or spiritual. Luke could be interpreted as being frustratingly vague about what one is being saved from—sins are a recurring theme but certainly not the only association—or we could acknowledge that for Luke salvation is holistic, encompassing the physical, social, and spiritual. The key theological emphasis in Acts is that the salvation heralded at the beginning of the gospel is now extended beyond Israel to the whole earth and is therefore universal in scope.

Forgiveness (ἀφίνεσις) of sins is also prophesied in the song of Zechariah as a key aspect of the new era ushered in by God’s visitation and redemption (1:68–79). It is first associated with John the Baptist as his core proclamation (1:77; 3:3) but Jesus himself does not forgive sins until his encounter with the paralytic man whom he heals (5:11–20), and thus begins a series of healing miracles described in terms that are either salvific (σωτηρία) or have a resonance of release (ἀφίματι) from fever, affliction or sin. It is worth noting that in only two instances—the paralytic man and the anointing woman—is ἀφίματι associated with sin, therefore carrying a more spiritual connotation (5:20–24; 7:47–49). The more typical usage of ἀφίματι implies release from a range of things that bind or oppress individuals or communities and thus fits with Luke’s broad conception of the effects of salvific activity.

Jesus’ departure speech in Luke 24:46–47 sums up Luke’s theological themes succinctly. Despite mentioning the suffering and resurrection of the Messiah only just prior, forgiveness is proclaimed “in the name” (τῷ ὄνοματι) of Jesus rather than on the basis of his death or resurrection. The disciples are now witnesses who must proclaim forgiveness of sins “in my name” (Luke 24:47). They will be able to do this once Jesus has ascended and they receive the “power from high” (24:49) a promise reiterated and clarified in Acts (1:5, 8). The inference is that they will not be able to do anything, including forgiving sins, until such time as they receive the Father’s power.

58 For example, Luke 5:20–24; 7:48; 8:40–42, 49–56; 17:19. Ἀφίματι is also used numerous times as a verb meaning “permit,” “release” and “go,” with no connection to sin (e.g. Luke 9:60; 18:16).
In Acts, Peter and Paul pick up this message of Christ’s and preach release from sins as a core part of their message (Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18). Forgiveness, like salvation, is presented as a reality now available to all due to Christ’s exaltation. Acts 5:31 makes explicit that salvation is predicated on resurrection and exaltation, not the death of Jesus. Luke writes, “the God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as leader and saviour that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins” (see also 26:23, 4:10–12, 10:40–43, 13:30–39). God performs the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus in Luke.

The honorific titles given to Jesus in Peter’s speech associate his ascension with his status as “ruler and Saviour” (ἀρχηγόν καὶ σωτήρα, 5:31). Luke is the only gospel writer to call Jesus “Saviour,” the importance of which cannot be overstated. In Greco-Roman society a saviour is synonymous with friend and benefactor. That is, a saviour, like a benefactor, is someone in a position of power or privilege who is able to bestow favours upon others. Jesus can now bestow salvific favours because he is in an exalted position at God’s right hand.

An awareness of ancient benefaction might help to explain the resonances for an ancient hearer. An ancient benefactor (ὑπαρχήττης) could be human or divine and was often referred to with a range of terms, including saviour, and other divine titles such as king, father, sovereign and creator ( demiurgos). Titles for benefactors were often strung together. For example, Plutarch cites a Stoic who says “Zeus, the saviour and Sire, the Father of Right and of Peace” and Demosthenes describes Phillip as “friend, benefactor, and saviour” of the Thessalonians.

Notably, Luke is also the only biblical author to use the Hellenistic term “benefactor” (ὑπαρχήττης). He uses it once in negative sense to describe the difference between Hellenistic kings and his leadership (Luke 22:25) but, more significantly, it is used to describe Jesus himself in Acts. As part of Peter’s long

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62 Benefactors bestow favours on the polis such as food, construction projects, community games, military defence and cult provisions. There was often with an expectation of reciprocity, and public benefactions were acknowledged with honours from the city such as inscriptions or statuary. It was understood that when it came to the gods, the expectation of reciprocity might be lessened and the favour given more freely. A sense of reciprocity was however retained in the expectation of honour and praise. See Seneca Benefits 4.
64 Plutarch, Moralia 470:531; Demosthenes, On the Crown 43.
speech to Cornelius, a centurion, Peter describes Jesus as someone who behaved as a benefactor (εὐργέτων) and healer (Acts 10:38). Similarly, after Cato (the Younger) kills himself in order to save the city from civil strife and thus save lives, Plutarch claims the people of Utica unanimously call Cato τὸν εὐργέτην καὶ σωτήρα. 65

Additionally, Lord (κύριος) is the most frequent title used for Jesus in Luke–Acts and one with overwhelmingly Greco-Roman resonances of master, patron, and god. 66 Jesus is prophesied as Lord (1:47), remains Lord throughout, and is even proclaimed “Lord of all” (Acts 10:36). As Lord and Saviour who now reigns from the godly sphere of the heavens, the exalted Jesus has the power and authority to bestow favour, such as forgiveness, upon his people. As Michael Peppard writes with regard to the benefaction of Julius Caesar and Augustus, “as with the worship of the Emperor, the worship of Jesus Christ began by proclaiming his divine power to save.” 67 For Luke, that power is located in Jesus’s resurrection and ascension as the particular events that reveal his divinity and thus his power to save.

CONCLUSION

That Luke locates the salvific power of God in the person of the ascended, heavenly Christ has often overlooked by biblical scholars and modern protestant theologians alike. This is in part due to the strong association of salvation and crucifixion in most satisfaction views of atonement theology since Anselm and in part a result of synoptic scholarship that groups Luke with Matthew and Mark. 68 Yet, it is the ascended Jesus, as both Christus Victor and one of the gods (in imperial terms), who has the power to bestow favour, benefaction, peace and ultimately forgiveness upon his people. In his particular theological portrayal, Luke communicates the significance of the Jesus event in Greco-Roman terms, painting Jesus as an imperial deity, wrongfully killed, but ultimately vindicated by God and restored to a place of power from whence he can dispense forgiveness and salvation.

65 Plutarch, Cato Minor 71.1.
67 Peppard, The Son of God 40.
68 One recent corrective theological voice has been that of Douglas Farrow, Ascension Theology (London: T&T Clark, 2011) 122–23.