

The Ethics of Valuing Others in the Gospel According to Luke

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Abstract

The Gospel according to Luke is well known for its moral teaching confronting prevailing attitudes about social standing and wealth. The Gospel does more, ethically. This study considers Luke's portrait of Jesus in its entirety. It aims to show how the Gospel's ubiquitous reversal moments and its kingdom orientation fuel a persistent challenge against people overvaluing themselves and devaluing others, with Jesus setting the pattern for proper valuation. Out of that emerges the strong concern always to treat people fully as people, regardless of who they are or what they have done. That sets the stage for all sorts of personal, and even community, ethical decision making. Activity that advances the full humanity of others is good; that which dehumanises is evil. These kinds of ethical reasoning patterns stem from divine programme, not divine command.

1. Introduction

Readers of the Gospel according to Luke have long recognised its moral concerns. Issues often mentioned include the Gospel's emphases on wealth and possessions,¹ and with those its bold challenge to social status, sometimes associated with Roman power and patronage.² Closely related is its regard for social justice, especially exhibited in the programmatic declaration of Luke

1. E.g. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Literary Function of Possession in Luke-Acts* (Scholars Press, 1977); Richard A. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Eerdmans, 2007), 261–264.

2. E.g. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1997), 23–24, <https://doi.org/10.5040/bci-000t>. Amanda C. Miller, 'Bridge Work and Seating Charts: A Study of Luke's Ethics of Wealth, Poverty and Reversal', *Int* 68 (2014): 416–427, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020964314540108>. See also her longer monograph, *Rumors of Resistance: Status Reversals and Hidden Transcripts in the Gospel of Luke* (Fortress, 2014).

4:18-19 in which Jesus announces ‘good news to the poor ... release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, [freedom to] the oppressed ... the year of the Lord’s favour.’³

Luke does more, ethically, than offer a moral agenda on specific, identifiable topics. The Gospel also fosters a rationale that makes its presentation of Jesus useful for issues not explicitly addressed by its moral teachings. Identifying and describing morally instructive material are important to probing Luke’s ethics. So is learning how to distinguish good and evil based on the writing’s reasoning patterns.⁴ Doing that helps clarify why, according to Luke, championing the poor is good, why a life focused on property accumulation is wrong, or why care for the socially marginalised matters beyond appeals to specific words and deeds of Jesus.

2. Some initial thoughts on methodology

This exploration in Luke prioritises literary issues related to genre and how those affect a work in its entirety. These advance a broader view of the implicit ethical rationale than one might be observing at the passage level.⁵ The process

3. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus*, 261; Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (HarperCollins, 1996), 116, 125–128. Frank J. Matera, *New Testament Ethics: The Legacies of Jesus and Paul* (Westminster John Knox, 1996), 75–76. All Bible quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible: Anglicised Edition, © 1989, 1995 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

4. On differentiating moral behaviour from ethical rationale, see Raziel Abelson and Kai Nielsen, ‘Ethics, History of’, in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (Macmillan, 1967), 3.81–82; Wayne Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality* (Yale University Press, 1993), 4–5.

5. Richard A. Burridge, ‘Ethics and Genre: The Narrative Setting of Moral Language in the New Testament’, in *Moral Language in the New Testament: The Interrelatedness of Language and Ethics in Early Christian Writings*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann and Jan G. van der Watt, WUNT 2/296 (Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 390; *Imitating Jesus*, 23–25. Similarly, deriving ethics from considering Acts as an entirety, see C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 6–7, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195377873.001.0001>. The approach in this study offers an additional option to what is urged in Ruben Zimmermann, ‘The “Implicit Ethics” of New Testament Writings: A Draft on a New Methodology for Analysing New Testament Ethics’, *Neotestamentica* 43.2 (2009): 399–423; see, also, Ruben Zimmermann, ‘Ethics in the New Testament and Language: Basic Explorations and Eph 5:21–33 as Test Case’, in *Moral Language in the New Testament: The Interrelatedness of Language and Ethics in Early Christian Writings*, ed. Ruben Zimmermann and Jan G. van der Watt, WUNT 2/296 (Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 21–45.

involves recognising repeated patterns, motifs, and vocabulary that, in their immediate contexts, contribute to a book-wide set of coherent messages.⁶ Since enacting good and resisting evil are common concerns within biblical texts, discerning relevant, book-wide messages offers a valuable metaethical step that can lead to broad contextual support for much of the moral teaching presented within a writing. The following study aims to show how ethical reasoning patterns emerge from exploring Luke as a kind of Graeco-Roman 'Life'.⁷

Considering Luke as a 'Life', or *bios*, places the spotlight on Jesus, not on other figures, with a wider audience than a specific community.⁸ It coordinates with the morally instructive purposes often associated with the genre,⁹ leading to a more controlled ethical focus than sometimes found in narrative-critical approaches to Gospels.¹⁰ Reading Luke as a 'Life' encourages attention to representative words and deeds of Jesus that display who Jesus is and why he is worth celebrating and learning from, especially relevant here when that

6. See Jan G. van der Watt 'Reading the New Testament from an Ethical Perspective: A Comprehensive Approach', in *Key Approaches to Biblical Ethics: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed. Volker Rabens, Jacqueline Grey, and Mariam Kamell Kovalishyn, BibInt 189 (Brill, 2021), 288–323, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004445727_014. While similar, the approach here emphasises the literary coherence of a writing in probing its ethics.

7. This reflects the emerging consensus described in Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, 25th anniversary ed. (Baylor University Press, 2018), I.1–I.105, a consensus under refinement. See for example Jonathan T. Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction* (Baker Academic, 2012), 22–31; Justin Marc Smith, *Why Βίος? On the Relationship between Gospel Genre and Implied Audience*, LNTS 518 (Bloomsbury, 2015), 11, 24–28; Craig S. Keener, *Christobiography: Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels* (Eerdmans, 2019), 27, 33–38, 68–103; Helen Bond, *The First Biography of Jesus: Genre and Meaning in Mark's Gospel* (Eerdmans, 2020), 29–77. Even Francis Watson, *What Is a Gospel?* (Eerdmans, 2022), 13 and 293, in proposing Gospel as its own genre, notes a correlation between *bios* and the four Gospels of the New Testament.

8. See Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?*, 295–296, in contrast with, for example, Eben Scheffler, 'Compassionate Action: Living According to Luke's Gospel', in *Identity, Ethics, and Ethos in the New Testament*, ed. Jan G. van der Watt and François Malan, BZNW 141 (De Gruyter, 2006), 79–82. See also Richard Bauckham, 'For Whom Were Gospels Written?', in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Eerdmans, 1998), 27–29; David E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, LEC 8 (Westminster, 1987), 11–74.

9. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus*, 28–31.

10. This differs from locating ethics in narrative structures. Ruben Zimmermann, 'Is There Ethics in the Gospel of John?', in *Rethinking the Ethics of John: 'Implicit Ethics' in the Johannine Writings*, ed. Jan G. van der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann, WUNT 291 (Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 63–74.

spotlight illumines ethical messages and reasoning patterns. It also encourages a focus on how the story of Jesus ends,¹¹ not merely with his death as normal ‘Lives’ do, but with his resurrection and ascension.¹² These especially matter to the Gospel’s ethical patterns.

Luke, with other New Testament Gospels, significantly modifies the genre by connecting Jesus to concerns and hopes of Israel established in the Hebrew Scriptures, influenced by narrative elements in those writings.¹³ The story of Jesus in Luke begins with a declaration that Jesus is to ‘inherit the throne of his ancestor David’ (1:32), that ‘He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end’ (1:33). Near the end of the Gospel Jesus himself asks, “‘Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures’ (24:26–27). In between we find a variety of declarations about the ‘kingdom of God’, which is the subject of the good news proclaimed by Jesus and his disciples (4:43; 8:1; 9:2,11,60; 16:16), and said to be both near (10:9,11; 11:20; 17:21) and yet to come (11:2; 13:28,29; 17:20; 19:11; 21:31; 22:16,18; 23:51).¹⁴

In the Graeco-Roman world, one would expect a *bios* to advance a virtue ethic.¹⁵ Luke has elements of that with something stronger, related to the kingdom of God and what that means for the scriptural trajectory of Israel as the people of God.¹⁶ This, when combined with Luke’s presentation of Jesus as exemplar, points to distinct ethical reasoning patterns that help assess the

11. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?*, 192–193; *Imitating Jesus*, 24.

12. These events are less unusual for a writing with Jewish roots. For this kind of genre adaption, see Sean A. Adams, *Greek Genres and Jewish Authors: Negotiating Literary Culture in the Greco-Roman Era* (Baylor University Press, 2020), 9–16.

13. Loveday Alexander, ‘What Is a Gospel?’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Gospels*, 2nd ed., ed. Stephen C. Barton and Todd Brewer (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 27–28, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108595513.003>; Pennington, *Reading the Gospels*, 25–31. For how this can work in Mark, see Bond, *The First Biography*, 118. On the significance of the Gospel tradition based in the Hebrew Scriptures, see Simon Gathercole, *The Gospel and the Gospels: Christian Proclamation and Early Jesus Books* (Eerdmans, 2022).

14. See Karl Allen Kuhn, *The Kingdom According to Luke and Acts: A Social, Literary, and Theological Introduction* (Baker Academic, 2015), 26–45, summarising Second Temple Jewish kingdom expectations as ‘God is King; the world is misaligned; God will soon reorder creation’, 34. For an overview with ethical connections, see Joel B. Green, ‘Kingdom of God’, in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, ed. David H. Atkinson and David J. Field (Inter-Varsity Press, 1995), 529–532.

15. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?*, 305; Pennington, *Reading the Gospels*, 33–34.

16. Matera, *New Testament Ethics*, 65–69.

good or evil of activities. Those patterns emerge from the portrait of Jesus in its entirety, not merely from life principles extracted from isolated pericopes.¹⁷

At the centre of Luke's ethical reasoning patterns is reversal, when elements in the presentation are flipped around, for example 'For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted' (14:11).¹⁸ Clearly rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures,¹⁹ reversals abound in Luke, appearing in combinations of multiple, often mutually reinforcing devices: with declarations containing contrasting elements; changes in various life and story circumstances; challenges to expectations within an honour and shame framework; responses by characters to people in categories of social standing; descriptions of bodily posture; contrasts in varieties of directional verbs, adverbs, and prepositions; and specific vocabulary of praise and valuation.²⁰ The statement just quoted from 14:11 is the punchline of an account that itself has reversing moments both in the storyline (those seeking honour are shamed by Jesus's correction) and in its vocabulary (πρωτοκλισία, place of honour, vs. ὁ ἔσχατος τόπος, the lowest place). By considering Luke's Life of Jesus in its entirety,²¹ the cumulative effect of the pervasive reversal material encourages the ethical rationale, 'Do this because the kingdom to which you belong is reversing the wrongs of this world.' This invites an ongoing reconsideration of what, and who, matters in life.

3. Why just the Gospel and not Acts?

The relationship between the Gospel according to Luke and Acts is firmly established. A separate treatment of the Gospel does not challenge that:

17. See Richard B. Hays, 'Mapping the Field: Approaches to New Testament Ethics', in *Identity, Ethics, and Ethos in the New Testament*, ed. Jan G. van der Watt and François Malan, BZNW 141 (De Gruyter, 2006), 8–10.

18. York labels these 'explicit bipolar' reversals (John O. York, *The Last Shall Be First: The Rhetoric of Reversal in Luke*, JSNTSup 46 (Sheffield Academic, 1991), 42, 78–80).

19. E.g. 1 Sam 2:4–8; Pss 107:39–41; 145:14; Prov 29:23; Isa 2:11, 17; 40:4; 61:1–3.

20. This builds on York, *The Last Shall Be First*, who refines prior work by Larry Keith Drake, 'The Reversal Theme in Luke's Gospel' (PhD diss., St Louis University, 1985) and Friedrich W. Danker, *Luke*, 2nd ed., Proclamation Commentaries (Fortress, 1987), 47–57; consider more recently Amanda C. Miller, *Rumors of Resistance: Status Reversals and Hidden Transcripts in the Gospel of Luke* (Fortress, 2014) and 'Patron-Client Relations', along with Rachel L. Coleman, *The Lukan Lens on Wealth and Possessions: A Perspective Shaped by the Themes of Reversal and Right Response*, BI 180 (Brill, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004416345>. See, also, Matera, *New Testament Ethics*, 75–76; Hays, *Moral Vision*, 132–133.

21. Pennington, *Reading the Gospels*, 149–150; York, *The Last Shall Be First*, 166–173.

‘Literarily, Luke’s Gospel is more than “somewhat self-sufficient”; it is intelligible on its own.’²² Neither must the relationship between Luke and Acts require each work to reflect the same literary genre; the overall historical orientation of Luke-Acts is flexible enough to incorporate *bios* as a sub-genre.²³ These points matter especially when addressing ethics and reversal in the Gospel. Reversal combinations pervade the entire Gospel. They are less a phenomenon within Acts.²⁴ What we tend to see in Acts, with the arrival of the Spirit, are the strong by-products of reversal; for example the inclusion of women and gentiles in the Christian community or disciples severing themselves from possessions.²⁵ The Gospel’s more prevalent reversals offer multiple ethical possibilities, some of which begin to be realised in Acts with the arrival of the Spirit. That multiplicity merits its own exploration.

4. An overview

Luke persistently portrays moments that stimulate revaluation.²⁶ The Gospel begins with a type-story in which an angel brings a startling announcement to a righteous, honoured, elderly, male priest: his aged wife will conceive a son who will help advance God’s plans for salvation. In prior biblical accounts people are allowed to question such words.²⁷ Not so here. The story reverses type, with Zechariah struck with muteness for his question. In the next scene, however, an unimportant, young, virgin woman is visited by the same angel who also gives her a startling birth promise, expanding on the role of her son

22. C. Kavin Rowe, ‘History, Hermeneutics, and the Unity of Luke-Acts’, in *Rethinking the Unity and Reception of Luke and Acts*, ed. Andrew F. Gregory and C. Kavin Rowe (University of South Carolina Press, 2010), 46.

23. Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Baker Academic, 2012), 1.61, challenging the analysis in I. Howard Marshall, ‘Acts and the Former Treatise’, in *The Book of Acts in Its Ancient Literary Setting*, ed. Bruce W. Winter and Andrew D. Clarke, vol. 1 of *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting*, ed. Bruce W. Winter (Eerdmans, 1993), 178–180.

24. Though Danker, *Luke*, 47–57 has a wide sense of what qualifies as reversal, his list of reversing moments in Acts is considerably smaller than what he notes in Luke.

25. Hays, *Moral Vision*, 9, 132–133, Coleman, *The Lukan Lens*, 115–151.

26. On narrative development and conditioning, see C. Kavin Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology: The Lord in the Gospel of Luke* (Baker Academic, 2006), 9–15, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110921878>, and York, *The Last Shall Be First*, 166–172. On how Luke’s early chapters establish key patterns for the Gospel, see Coleman, *The Lukan Lens*, 2–5.

27. Note Abraham in Gen 17:15–22, Sarah in Gen 18:9–15, and Manoah in Judg 13:8–14. See Judith Lieu, *The Gospel of Luke* (Epworth, 1997), 4–6.

in God's saving programme.²⁸ The woman, Mary, is allowed to ask a question with no repercussions. Her faith-filled response to the answer she receives is commended as exemplary, despite her initial query (1:45).²⁹ Mary then replies with strong words of reversal:

[God] has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty. (1:51-53)

These opening moments prepare readers to understand Jesus and his kingdom. They signal that the life of Jesus will challenge valuation patterns both of people in Luke's account and, by extension, the readers.³⁰ Throughout we see social inversions in which those expected to be in are out, and those expected to be out are in.³¹ The living model of these reversals and inversions is Jesus himself, reversal embodied,³² whose way is prepared with words of dramatic reversal: 'Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth' (Luke 3:5, quoting Isaiah 40:4).

Jesus is introduced as the Davidic King who 'will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High ... [who] will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of [whose] kingdom there will be no end' (1:32-33). We see him initially as anything but: born to an unwed mother;³³ placed, newborn, into an animal feeding trough; visited as an infant by unimportant shepherds;³⁴ his mother purified with the poor person's sacrifice³⁵ (2:4-24). That disparity highlights two contrasting perspectives, the divine and the human. The angelic announcement to Mary discloses who Jesus is from the divine perspective,

28. For Mary as an opposite to Zechariah, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, SP 3 (Liturgical Press, 1991), 39.

29. Coleman, *The Lukan Lens*, 22-28, nicely contrasts Zechariah's honour with Mary's, though she sees Zechariah's question as bad and Mary's as good.

30. See Miller, *Rumors of Resistance*, 89-132.

31. York, *The Last Shall Be First*, 94-111, situates Luke's sense of this within its honour and shame worldview.

32. York, *The Last Shall Be First*, 171-172.

33. For the extent of stigma compare the following: Lynn Cohick, *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life* (Baker Academic, 2009), 153; John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, WBC 35A (Word Books, 1989), 49 and 104.

34. See James Malcolm Arlandson, *Women, Class and Society in Early Christianity: Models from Luke-Acts* (Hendrikson, 1997), 102-103.

35. See Lev 12:8.

even if his human status belies that. Soon after that announcement, Elizabeth augments the divine perspective by calling Mary's yet to be born child her 'Lord' (1:43).³⁶ Throughout the Gospel those who fail to acknowledge Jesus as the great one are pulled down. Those who accept his greatness are elevated. The 'righteous' and 'devout' Simeon forecasts this when he declares over the infant Jesus, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel' (2:34).³⁷

Jesus sets a behavioural pattern. He, though great, arrives in humility. More so than in any other Gospel, he persistently ministers to people in various shame categories:³⁸ the poor, the sick, tax collectors, marginalised women, gentiles, Samaritans, 'sinners'. Many of these people affirm his greatness. *Bioi* commonly portray the essence of their subjects' lives in their descriptions of their subjects' final days. Accordingly, Luke shows Jesus thoroughly humiliated in his crucifixion. But in the ultimate of reversals, Jesus first rises bodily from the dead, an event he himself relates as 'the Messiah ... enter[ing] into his glory' (24:26).³⁹ He then is taken up into heaven (24:51),⁴⁰ an event only Luke records. Throughout the Gospel he is the humble one who is to be exalted. That aligns with another aspect of Luke's portrait of Jesus, Jesus as prophet, and more than a mere prophet.⁴¹ Jesus lives out what he proclaims in two different scenes: 'For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted' (14:11; 18:14),⁴² with ultimate exaltation a final outcome determined by God.

36. Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology*, 39–49.

37. Johnson, *The Literary Function of Possessions*, 91. So also Coleman, *The Lukan Lens*, 38–40.

38. Arlandson, *Women, Class and Society*, 6–12, 22 and 113–116. John S. Roth, *The Blind, the Lame, and the Poor: Character Types in Luke-Acts*, JSNTSup 144 (Sheffield Academic, 1997), 215–220. Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations: 50 B.C. to A.D. 284* (Yale University Press, 1974), 138–141. David A. Neale, *None But the Sinners: Religious Categories in the Gospel of Luke*, JSNTSup 58 (Sheffield Academic, 1991).

39. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, 396, with implications for Jesus's kingly rule; pace John Nolland, *Luke 18:35–24:53*, WBC 35C (Nelson, 1993), 1204, who connects this to Jesus's ascension.

40. With recent translations, the reading of P75 appears more reliable. See Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (X–XXIV)*, AB 28A (Doubleday, 1985), 1590, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780300261653>; and Nolland, *Luke 18:35–24:53*, 1224.

41. Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology*, 120.

42. The statements are virtually identical in Greek, with καί for 'and' in 14:11 and δέ in 18:14.

Luke portrays not a mere example to imitate but a positive, life-setting pattern, an exemplar applicable to a variety of situations.⁴³ That exemplar is attached to the kingdom from the beginning, with the angelic declaration to Mary. As an aspect of the kingdom programme, it encourages ethical activity not overtly mentioned in the Gospel.

We can better observe such ethics if we probe three broad responses encouraged in Luke: 1) people must align themselves with Jesus by recognising his substance over his appearance, humbling themselves before him; 2) people must reject their culture's valuation systems in favour of the inversion of those systems by Jesus; 3) people must accept Jesus's pattern of valuing those whom others reject. Observing this threefold set of responses helps to identify a core kingdom ethic of always treating people with dignified personhood.

5. People humbly aligning themselves with Jesus

The scene with Simeon and the baby Jesus demonstrates this humble alignment. The Spirit has revealed to him that he will not die until he sees the Lord's Messiah. When the infant Jesus is brought into the Temple,

Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.' (2:28-32)

Simeon speaks about a baby, not a full-grown man. From his infancy Jesus is Saviour.⁴⁴ Luke attributes Simeon's words to the Spirit (2:27), portraying God's perspective. An older man is humbling himself before an infant. The devout widow Anna reinforces this response, aligning herself with the infant Jesus out of her humble attachment to God when she '[begins] to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem' (2:38).

Soon we see the adult Jesus gathering followers. After teaching crowds from a boat, he tells its owner, Simon, to head out into deeper waters to catch some fish. Though initially hesitant, Simon Peter complies, politely addressing Jesus as 'master' (ἐπιστάτα (5:5)). He is startled with a haul so great that both

43. Stephen E. Fowl, *The Story of Christ in the Ethics of Paul: An Analysis of the Function of the Hymnic Material in the Pauline Corpus*, JSNTSup 36 (JSOT Press, 1990), 92-95, in contrast with approaches to imitation found in Burridge, *Imitating Jesus*, 280-282, and in Capes' treatment of Mark, David B. Capes, 'Imitatio Christi and the Gospel Genre', *BBR* 13.1 (2003): 13-16, <https://doi.org/10.2307/26422777>.

44. See the useful summary in Burridge, *Imitating Jesus*, 235.

his boat and that of his partners begin to sink under the weight. In response, 'He fell down at Jesus's knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord [κύριε], for I am a sinful man!"' (5:8),⁴⁵ acknowledging Jesus as the great one before whom people should repent. Simon Peter humbles himself with his posture and his words. Jesus responds by elevating him as a partner in his kingdom work: 'Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people' (5:10). Simon Peter responds by leaving everything, including his boatload of fish,⁴⁶ and following Jesus. The pattern of lowering oneself before Jesus continues in the very next scene, when a leper 'bowed with his face to the ground and begged Jesus' to heal him (5:12).⁴⁷ Jesus responds by cleansing him.

A little later we see a wealthy, Roman, gentile, military officer enter into reversal by downgrading himself and then receiving similar, elevated acceptance. Though hailed as a 'worthy' (ἄξιος) benefactor who loves the people of the local synagogue (7:4-5),⁴⁸ he renounces that standing by declaring himself unworthy (οὐ ... ἱκανός ... οὐδὲ ἑμαυτὸν ἡξίωσα) even of Jesus's presence (7:6-7). He addresses Jesus as 'Lord' (κύριε)⁴⁹ and declares him to be the superior authority (7:6,8). Jesus elevates him not only by healing his highly valued (ἔντιμος) slave, but by commending his faith as a model for insider Israelites (7:2,9-10).

Elsewhere Jesus proclaims the necessity of disciples renouncing their self-importance in following him. Having announced his destiny to be killed and to rise from the dead, 'he said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me"' (9:23). A routine, daily taking up one's cross includes a willing association with shame and those whom others reject as shameful.⁵⁰ Those who live that way are in line with the exemplar of Jesus.

45. The movement from ἐπιστάτα to κύριε points to Jesus's divine status. See Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology*, 86–89. See, also, Burridge, *Imitating Jesus*, 235–236.

46. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus*, 262, notes the importance of the word 'everything' for the entire Gospel.

47. Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, 227.

48. Halvor Moxnes, 'Patron-Client Relations and the New Community', in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey (Hendrikson, 1991), 252–253.

49. For Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, 317, κύριε indicates more than politeness. Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology*, 115 attributes this to Luke's communicative strategies about Jesus's person.

50. Sverre Bøe, *Cross-Bearing in Luke*, WUNT 2/278 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 126–127.

People's acknowledgement of Jesus's superiority along with their own inferiority engenders appropriate moral behaviour. Consider Jesus's statement that his disciples should regard themselves as 'unworthy slaves' (δοῦλοι ἄχρειοι) for doing what is right (17:10). That comes on the heels of Jesus teaching his disciples to forgive their offenders relentlessly (17:3-4). Doing right should be normal for those who follow Jesus. Kingdom ethics demands that no one expect acclamation for doing what is normal. The repentant 'sinner' Zacchaeus exemplifies this normality of doing right. This 'rich' 'chief tax collector' (ἀρχιτελώνης) humbles himself by climbing a tree to catch a glimpse of Jesus (19:1-14).⁵¹ Jesus exalts Zacchaeus by inviting himself to dine with him. Zacchaeus declares his commitment to a pattern of generous restitution, with a strong regard for the poor (19:8).⁵² His response to Jesus displays a reversed life.

Accepting one's place before Jesus is key to acceptance from him, which is equivalent to acceptance from God. It is reinforced at the Gospel's end, when a dying criminal comes to Jesus's defence as both are being fully humiliated through crucifixion (23:39-43). He declares his own moral unworthiness, elevates Jesus, and begs to be remembered eventually in the kingdom. Instead, Jesus assures him of Paradise immediately after death,⁵³ a startling response that is typical in Luke, where common expectations are commonly overturned.

6. Value systems turned upside down

Let's consider a random sampling of Luke's reversals and inversions, in the order in which they appear. Jesus's inaugural reading from Isaiah in Luke 4:18-19, along with his announcement that he fulfils those words (4:21), signals that the kingdom he preaches (4:43) is to reverse significant wrongs in the world. The poor receive good news; the captives are to be set free; the blind are to see; the oppressed are to be liberated. The message of reversal is amplified in the Sermon on the Plain (6:20-49) with the 'poor', the 'hungry', and those who 'weep' to be blessed (6:20-21), and the 'rich', those who are 'full', and those who 'laugh' to receive woe (6:24-26). The context signals more than economic revaluation. Even attitudes about enemies and others whom one might naturally reject must be reversed, with 'good' to be done to all (6:27-35). People should extend mercy to everyone, just as the 'Father' does (6:36).

51. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 669-670.

52. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 671-672.

53. Nolland, *Luke 18:35-24:53*, 1152-1153; Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, 378, 380.

When Jesus tells his disciples to renounce themselves and take up their cross daily, he declares that ‘those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it’ (9:24), reversing normal expectations of self-preservation. When Jesus’s disciples argue with each other about who is greater (μείζων (9:46-48)), Jesus reminds them that ‘the least’ (ὁ μικρότερος) is the greater, using children as an example. Then he reverses their views against those not part of their group when they try to prevent an outsider from exorcising demons in Jesus’s name (9:50). In the next story Jesus rebukes disciples for desiring a fiery vengeance against Samaritans who refuse to welcome them (9:51-56), reversing the pattern of Elijah and his encounter with ‘Samaria’.⁵⁴

The Travel Narrative (9:51–19:28) exhibits striking ethical reversals. Jesus’s parable about the Samaritan who shows mercy to a helpless victim of robbers reverses social categories throughout (10:25-37). An honoured priest and Levite are shamed for protecting their temple duties by avoiding potential corpse contamination instead of offering aid.⁵⁵ The socially despised Samaritan, by contrast, teams up with an equally despicable innkeeper⁵⁶ to care for the needy victim, heedless of that person’s background. He is acknowledged as the one who ‘showed ... mercy’ (not as the ‘Samaritan’) by the now shamed ‘lawyer’ who had ‘tested’ Jesus in the first place. In the very next story, Jesus commends a woman, Mary, who sits in the customary male disciple position, over her sister Martha, who requests help to perform her customary female servile duties (10:38-42).⁵⁷

Soon after, Jesus urges the crowds, some of whom are challenging him, to ponder how their own values need to be reversed: ‘Therefore consider whether the light in you is not darkness’ (11:35). Elsewhere, when someone asks Jesus to help divide a family inheritance, he promotes richness toward God over material riches (12:21). That leads to Jesus urging materially anxious disciples to seek the kingdom first (12:31) and to aid the poor (12:33). Two chapters later Jesus asserts boldly to his fellow dinner guests and rudely to his host,⁵⁸ all of them Pharisees, that honour comes from God, not people: ‘For all who exalt

54. Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology*, 123–126, sees a reversal in expectations of what one means by power.

55. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (X-XXIV)*, 883.

56. Bruce W. Longenecker, ‘The Story of the Samaritan and the Innkeeper (Luke 10:30-35): A Study in Character Rehabilitation’, *BibInt* 17 (2009): 422–447, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156851509X447645>.

57. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 434.

58. R. Alan Culpepper, ‘The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections’, in *NIB*, ed. Leander E. Keck, et al. (Abingdon, 1995), 9.286.

themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted' (14:11).

Pharisees' attitudes about wealth receive correction after they scoff at Jesus's remarks about money (16:13-14). Jesus asserts that 'what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God' (16:15) and then links that false valuation to their acceptance of divorce (16:18) as one more area in which they are inconsistent with the Torah.⁵⁹ He continues the challenge with a parable in which a main figure is a poor beggar who is actually named – Lazarus (16:19-31). His poverty is reversed with blessing after death, unlike the unnamed rich man from whom Lazarus had begged. Two chapters later, Jesus again declares that the humble will be exalted. The statement summarises a parable in which a Pharisee who regards himself as righteous is criticised, in contrast to a commended tax collector who acknowledges his sinfulness and calls on God for mercy (18:10-14).

This selective overview highlights how reversals both correct improper valuation and inform the proper valuation of others necessary for those connected to God through Jesus. Nothing in this Gospel subverts the basic sense of good and evil established in the Torah.⁶⁰ Sometimes the reversal underscores people's inconsistency in living out Torah's morality: 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them' (16:29).⁶¹ The acceptance of social standards that skirt Torah's morality requires a prophetic calling out. That denunciation extends to Luke's readers. Knowing one's place before Jesus begins with humbling oneself before him, acknowledging personal deficiencies. The reversals stir readers to consider where their own lives need realignment with Jesus's perspective. Jesus challenges his own disciples to do just that at their final Passover supper. When they argue over who is the greatest, Jesus responds,

The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. (22:25-27)

In a grand, summarising moment Jesus advances his own reversing exemplar as a model for those who associate with him, an exemplar rooted in the cross and

59. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 602–604.

60. Matera, *New Testament Ethics*, 87–88.

61. Hays, *Moral Vision*, 124; Johnson, *Literary Function of Possessions*, 142–143.

resurrection he is about to experience (22:19-22).⁶² It leads to beneficial service to others in submission to Jesus, not to powerful self-aggrandisement and the attendant scorning of those whom people might consider beneath them.

One major reversing activity scattered throughout the Gospel is repentance, a personal reversal in which one turns away from evil to enact what is good. It is the foundation of a new lifestyle, the only proper response from someone whom a prophet has accused of wrongdoing. John the Baptist calls for repentance (3:3,8), with behavioural specifics aimed at wealth and property matters (3:10-14). Jesus, prophetically, also promotes repentance (5:32; 10:13; 11:32; 13:3,5; 15:7), but open-endedly, with no behavioural specifics attached to it.

Coordinating with such calls to repentance are moments when we see declarations of sinfulness without specifics of what people repent from. Recall, for example, Simon Peter confessing that he is a 'sinful man'; he does so without stating what he has done that could be considered sinful (5:8). Elsewhere Jesus declares that a 'sinner' who anoints his feet has 'many' sins, but we are not told what any of them are (7:47). Such open-ended examples invite reader self-examination.⁶³ Though overtly addressing wealth and status matters, these stories of Jesus push readers to consider other unnamed issues requiring repentance. People throughout the Gospel, and hence the readers, are continually encouraged to discover how their ways are not God's. One significant area for revaluation lies in attitudes toward others whom one's social world would lead to diminish and devalue.

7. People being valued as people

The Gospel encourages the reversal of any diminishment, devaluation, or objectification of others. Throughout we see striking moments when people rejected by others are accepted by Jesus. He reverses both social conventions and core attitudes that devalue others. This happens vividly, though not exclusively, with the category of 'sinner', which functions in Luke more as a shame label than a pointer to specific, immoral activity.⁶⁴

The first time we see 'sinner' in the Gospel is when Jesus invites a tax collector named Levi to follow him. Jesus proceeds to his house for a party with other tax collectors and 'sinners'. When criticised by Pharisees, Jesus responds,

62. For a discussion of this imitative pattern elsewhere in the NT, see Capes, *'Imitatio Christi'*, 11-13.

63. See Neale, *None But the Sinners*, 152-154.

64. For a similar point, see Neale, *None But the Sinners*, 75-97.

‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance’ (5:31-32). Physicians tend the sick as people, instead of cutting themselves off from contaminating sources.⁶⁵ ‘Sinners’ need the same treatment.

In the next chapter, as Jesus teaches on the Plain, he humanises enemies and antagonists (6:27-36). All people should receive good, without reciprocation. Disciples should treat all people the way they themselves would want to be treated. Just as God shows even-handed mercy to all, so must they. All people are worthy of receiving kindness. Unsurprisingly, we see this happen throughout the Gospel with Jesus, whom the Gospel portrays in table fellowship with tax collectors and ‘sinners’ (5:27-32; 15:1-2; 19:1-9) as often as with antagonistic Pharisees (7:36-50; 11:37-52; 14:1-24).

The striking story of the ‘sinner’ who anoints Jesus underscores the human dignity of this woman (7:36-50).⁶⁶ It also upholds the humanness of Jesus’s host and critic, even though he receives a prophetic correction. Luke carefully recounts the scene by disclosing important story elements in surprise fashion.⁶⁷ At just the right time we learn the necessary details: the woman’s strange acts of love and devotion; the host’s criticism of Jesus; the host’s actual name, spoken first by Jesus in the middle of the story, not by the narrator at its beginning; the host’s barely adequate hospitality;⁶⁸ the woman’s prior encounter with Jesus.⁶⁹ The incident reverses with the words: ‘Do you see this woman?’ (7:44). Having first personalised Simon by naming him, Jesus leads Simon to consider the humanness of the woman by asking him to look at her and then by comparing her extravagant love to Simon’s aloofness.

Those present, and the readers by extension, must then respond to Jesus’s public declaration of forgiveness (7:48). The woman is no longer a ‘sinner’ from Jesus’s perspective. Will the onlookers persist in seeing her with their shame label? Only those who lower themselves, metaphorically, before Jesus would see her as Jesus urges Simon to see her, a repentant, forgiven woman excessively adoring him.

65. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, 99.

66. Substituting the word ‘prostitute’ for Luke’s word ‘sinner’ weakens the effect of the story.

67. James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (Baker Academic, 2005), 34–36.

68. Nolland, *Luke 1–9:20*, 357.

69. Implied by ‘hence’ in 7:47. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 313–314; Neale, *None But the Sinners*, 146.

We see more moments of reversal that point to the humanising of the belittled. Consider again the parable of the Samaritan who helps a victim of robbers. It answers the question ‘Who is my neighbour?’, the one to be loved in accord with the commandment (10:29). Jesus’s implied answer is everyone, regardless of their social reputation (10:37). Consider, likewise, the ‘bent over’ (συγκύπτουσα) woman whom Jesus causes to ‘[stand] up straight’ (ἀνωρθώθη) on the Sabbath (13:10-17). When the synagogue ruler complains, Jesus notes first how the ruler and those with him show more mercy to animals than they are willing to show to a fellow human. Then he asks, ‘And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?’ (13:16). She is a daughter of Abraham, one of them. The Sabbath is the perfect moment for restoring the health of a fellow Israelite. Jesus shames his detractors and elicits joy from the crowds (13:17). A similar comparison between people and animals appears soon after, in 14:1-6, when Jesus, again on the Sabbath, heals a man with ‘dropsy’. All people in need are worthy of receiving mercy, especially on the Sabbath.

In the next chapter scribes and Pharisees complain that Jesus ‘welcomes sinners and eats with them’ (15:2). Jesus reverses the devaluing of tax collectors and sinners with three parables illustrating heavenly joy at the repentance of sinners. In the final parable a repentant, wayward son receives extraordinary beneficence from his father. At the end of the story the son’s older brother debases his father’s liberality toward ‘this son of [his]’ (ὁ υἱός σου οὗτος (15:30)). The father, in response, elevates ‘this brother of [his]’ (ὁ ἀδελφός σου οὗτος) who ‘was dead, and has come to life’ (νεκρὸς ἦν καὶ ἔζησεν (15:32)). In Jesus’s story, the older brother shames his father by vilifying the father’s son, depersonalising his own brother. The father then personalises his brother, declaring that his brother’s condition is now reversed. The complaining Pharisees should take heed.

Jesus must instruct his disciples that children have worth (18:15-17), another lesson in personhood. And when Jesus allows the tax collector Zacchaeus to entertain him, we see an overturning of values that again emphasises the humanness of one whom others diminish as a ‘sinner’.⁷⁰ Jesus identifies Zacchaeus as a ‘son of Abraham’ (19.9), just as are his detractors.⁷¹

Though other interpersonal interactions can be viewed similarly in Luke, these show how Jesus’s elevation of alleged inferiors is facilitated by an appeal

70. Labelling Zacchaeus as ‘sinner’ makes ‘tax collector’ more a dehumanising shame category than a political or moral tag. MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations*, 138–141, pace Neale, *None But the Sinners*, 92.

71. Cp. 3:8. Culpepper, ‘The Gospel of Luke’, 9.359.

to their humanness. They reflect the exemplar of Jesus, who lowers himself as a servant to all. One key to participating in the kingdom of God is to join Jesus in reversing the devaluation of others and in so doing, to humanise the maligned.

8. Conclusions

Reversals in Luke shape the core of Jesus's ethics. By declaring the imminence of the kingdom with the language of reversal, Jesus in Luke signals that the wrongs of the world will be completely reversed when the kingdom comes in its fullness. Those who align themselves with the King commit to reversals now because that is what the kingdom brings.

The Gospel's presentation of Jesus pulls its readers into the world of reversal, challenging their standards of valuation. Unquestionably the writing demands a major rethink on issues of wealth and status. Luke does more. It has an open-endedness that fosters repentance from anything out of step with God's valuations. Reversal begins when disciples lower themselves beneath their Lord and King, Jesus, which also means lowering themselves beneath others without regard for personal gain.

To do so is also to embrace the exemplar of Jesus, who embodies the message of reversal – the great King born into lowliness, associating with the lowly, thoroughly humiliated in his crucifixion ... and then rising from the dead and being taken up into heaven. This pattern encourages activity that persistently dignifies the humanity of all. For Jesus in Luke, that happens regularly with people whom others write off, especially 'sinners'. 'Sinners' who repent must likewise receive total, joyful acceptance from those who belong to Jesus. Even enemies are to be loved, consistent with Jesus's table fellowship with contentious Pharisees and his forgiveness of those crucifying him (23:34).⁷²

The cumulative effect of the Gospel's stories points to a life pattern that elevates people as people. That pattern reverses personal tendencies to overvalue oneself while diminishing others. Allegiance to Jesus undoubtedly requires disciples to sever their attachment to possessions. That should lead to a concern for the poor as valued people however, not as a mere cause. The kingdom programme reverses dehumanising tendencies now, in view of their total reversal at the kingdom's full arrival; the King, though humiliated, has reversed death and ascended to heaven. He will return to complete the establishment of that kingdom, making everything now wrong with the world right.

72. Textual matters notwithstanding; see Matera, *New Testament Ethics*, 89.

Recognising the intrinsic value of others also points to the ethical norm that people should always treat others in ways that are appropriate to their full humanity, consistent with the exemplar of Jesus. It reverses the common tendency to depersonalise. It encourages questions such as the following: Does this activity lower others or elevate them? And in elevating some, does it lower anyone? Am I using this person to advance my own privilege or am I treating this person well, out of sincere self-renunciation? Those kinds of questions should be bathed in the awareness that the coming kingdom is also now here. Reversal of wrongs is at its heart. Developing and asking these kinds of questions may not solve every ethical dilemma, but doing so can help shape a variety of ethical decisions. The questions emerge from the divine programme launched by King Jesus, not from divine command, tracking with the biblical text's portrayal of the life-affirming ways of the kingdom for those who remain in humble connection with the King.

People who come under the rule of God established by Jesus commit themselves to righting wrongs in the world. That begins with wrongs in their own lives based on tendencies to overvalue themselves, their communities, and what they deem important, and on tendencies to undervalue others and their needs. It leads to treating others as fully human, renouncing what depersonalises others. For those with ears to hear, this would all suggest a wider ethical challenge beyond the commonly, and appropriately, recognised specifics of wealth, status, and power.

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