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Christology in Luke - Acts

Abraham J. Malherbe

I. Introduction

The Gospels and Christology

In the last few decades it has been a catchword in New Testament studies that nothing can be known about the historical Jesus. This view has lately been supported on two main bases. Bultmann,¹ working on the Form Critical hypothesis of the fragmentary nature of the Gospel sources, is of the opinion that we can know just about nothing of the personality and life of Jesus, since the Christian sources were not interested in Jesus' life or personality, and since they are fragmentary and overrun with legend. Bultmann is also the prime example of those New Testament theologians who allow the person of the historical Jesus to recede into the background because of their modern existentialist theology. Jesus as the man in history is not important for them. What is important is the Divine Message, the Eternal Word, which reaches man through the Gospel and requires decision of him.

Happily, a change in attitude is taking place. Sjoeborg² decries this scepticism, using the example of the study of the life of Socrates, which is generally regarded as rewarding, although it is parallel to the study of the person and ministry of Jesus. Stauffer,³ who calls his book an "ice-breaker," feels great optimism about finding out exactly what happened in the life of Jesus. He draws on a vast amount of extra-Biblical sources to substantiate the events of the Gospels and makes especially fruitful use of Jewish polemic against Jesus to prove that the Gospel events really had happened. Stauffer is even bold enough to construct a careful chronology of Jesus' life, thus breaking all rules of twentieth century scholarship! The ship of the Form Critical approach has by no means been given up, however. Bornkamp⁴ still regards the Gospels as collections of isolated periscopes which do not give a biography of Jesus, but only impressions of His life. According to him, the Gospels were not written from an objective point of view, but in the light of the church's post-resurrection experience.

In liberal scholarship, not enough attention has been given to the purposes for the writing of the individual Gospels. The authors did not collect literary fragments because of an antiquarian spiritual interest, but their compositions were made with definite purposes in mind. Luke, for example (Lk. 1:1-4), explicitly states that he intends to give an historical account of the beginnings of the Chris-

¹Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus*, p. 12.

²Erik Sjoeborg, *Der verborgene Menschensohn in den Evangelien* (1955), pp. 214-220.

³Ethelbert Stauffer, *Jesus: Gestalt und Geschichte* (1957).

⁴Gunther Bornkamp, *Jesus von Nazareth* (1955).

tian Faith.⁵ Hans Conzelmann's book, *Die Mitte der Zeit* (1954), however, has begun to turn the tide to a more favorable direction. He emphasizes in this study of the Gospel of Luke that the theology and purpose of Luke are clearly discernible in the Gospel and that Luke is concerned with presenting a definite picture of the person and ministry of Jesus. This approach, in which the theology of the Gospel writers is seen as the factor which gives cohesion and point to their writings, is becoming high fashion in the study of the Gospels and of Christology.⁶

These convictions have long been held by conservative scholars. It has always been believed by the conservative that the Gospels are trustworthy accounts of the ministry and person of Jesus and that the differences in the four Gospels are to be ascribed to the different purposes of the writers. These purposes were attained by the description of different parts of Jesus' ministry, or of different parts of conversations, or of more complete or less complete accounts of events or conversations. Alleged contradictions can be explained by the different aims of the authors and the approaches made by them to reach those aims. The principle which guided John can be said to have guided the other three Evangelists also. Although there was a superabundance of material, only that was used which would bring the readers to believe (John 20:31), and it is clear from the Gospels that the events were truthfully related in a manner that would commend itself to the readers.

Suffering and the Messianic Mystery

It is a well-known fact that of the Gospels, Luke is the most Greek in outlook.⁷ The Greek ideal was the perfect human personality, and Luke therefore sets out to present Jesus as a person who realized his ideals and in doing so excelled the Greek ideals. While emphasizing his perfect humanity, he also emphasizes his perfect divinity. In describing Jesus in this manner for his readers, Luke was conscious of a problem that would immediately present itself to them when they read the Gospel. It would be incongruous to the Greek mind that the Redeemer of mankind, the perfect Son of God, would be subject to suffering and that he should die on the cross. The Greek thought of the divinity as being different from the kosmos exactly in that it was free from suffering. Outside of God, life was not conceivable without suffering.⁸

⁵Notice the similarity between Luke's Prologue and the opening words of the historian Arrian's *Anabasis of Alexander*: "If any one wonders why, after so many historians this work of history occurred also to me, when such an one has read through all their works and perused also this of ours, so let him wonder." Quoted by H. J. Cadbury, *The Meaning of Luke-Acts*, p. 303.

⁶Recent works using this method are, J. R. Robinson, *The Problem of History in Mark*, and Willi Marxsen, *Der Evangelist Markus: Studien zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Evangeliums* (1956).

⁷Cf. Norvel Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, pp. 43-45; Fr. Hauck, *Das Evangelium des Lukas*, p. 10f.

⁸Hans Jonas, *Gnosis und spaetantiker Geist I*.

The Stoics in particular were important for their view of man. It is becoming increasingly evident to what great extent their thought was accepted as the ideal and how much the New Testament writers had points of contact with them.⁹ For them the ideal for man was *apatheia*, insensibility to suffering. When he attained this, he was in a state of *ataraxia*, quietude.¹⁰ The distresses of life, *ta thlibonta*, of which death is the last, were to be overcome by the philosopher.¹¹ The Cross did indeed later become a stumblingblock to the Greeks in Corinth, 1 Cor. 1 and 2 (cf. Gal. 5:11; 1 Pet. 2:8). The problem was never far away in the history of Christianity. The suffering of Christ was repugnant to the Gnostics in the late first and second centuries. The Docetists sought to solve what was a problem to them by stating that Christ did not really have a human body and did not therefore suffer. It just seemed (*dokei*) as if Christ's body were real.¹²

Jesus did suffer, however, and his suffering was also a problem to His Jewish followers, who did not think of the Messiah as suffering. In describing the place of suffering in the life and teaching of Jesus, Luke could anticipate some of the problems that would confront the Greeks when they read his history of Jesus. There was a belief in Judaism in expiation by the suffering of the righteous, especially of the martyrs,¹³ but the idea of the Messiah as suffering for sinners was foreign to the Judaism of Jesus' time.¹⁴

During His ministry, Jesus used the element of suffering in order to show a different view of Messiahship from that held by the populace. In this sense His messiahship was hidden. This "messianic mystery" has been the source of much understanding in the past. Whenever it was denied that Jesus had made any messianic claims, the messianic hiddenness was always advanced as an argument to prove it.¹⁵ It also caused Wrede to arrive at the conviction which

⁹Cf. C. A. Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament*.

¹⁰R. Liechtenhahn, "Die Ueberwindung des Leidens bei Paulus und in der zeitgenoessischen Stoa," *Zeitschrift fuer Theologie und Kirche* NF 3 (1922), p. 372, 390ff.

¹¹Epictetus, *Diss.* IV,1,45; I,27,2f.; I,25,17; III,13,8; cf. Heinrich Schlier, *Theologisches Woerterbuch* III, p. 139.

¹²Cf. Ignatius of Antioch, *Smyrn.* II,1. The apocryphal Gospels and Acts betray many Docetic tendencies: *Gospel According to Peter*, *Acts of Peter*, *Acts of John*.

¹³Strack-Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* II, pp. 275-282; W. Bousset, *Die Religion des Judentums*, 3rd ed., p. 198f.; G. F. Moore, *Judaism*, I, pp. 547-549; Erik Sioeberg, *Gott und die Suender im palaest.* *Judentum* (1939), p. 124f.

¹⁴G. Dalman, *Der leidende und der sterbende Messias der Synagoge*; W. Staerk, *Soter* I (1933), pp. 178-184; Strack-Billerbeck II, pp. 273-299; G. F. Moore, *Judaism* I, p. 551f. For a different opinion, see J. Jeremias, *Jesus als Weltvollender* (1930).

¹⁵W. Wrede, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien* (1901), pp. 65ff., 114f.

has become commonplace that while Jesus was alive he was only the *Messiah designatus* and that he looked ahead to the time when he would become the Messiah in reality. The *Messiah designatus* concept was present in Jewish apocalyptic, in which Enoch was thought of as being made the Son of Man after his translation and exaltation.¹⁶ Justin Martyr also presents evidence that the view was held that the Messiah would live on earth without knowing his own messiahship until he was anointed by Elijah.¹⁷ In the light of this, the statement that God made Jesus Lord and Christ in the resurrection (Acts 2:36) would appear to substantiate Wrede's claim. The passage would be adoptionistic and would prove that Jesus was not the Messiah during His life on earth, but only become this through God's adopting Him in the resurrection. The evidence from the context does not corroborate this view, however. The use of Psalm 110 (Acts 2:34f.) shows that Peter is substantiating the messianic claims that Jesus had made. He actually affirms the identity of Jesus with the Messiah before the resurrection, for only in this way can the exposition of Psalm 16, which is given in Acts 2:24ff., be intelligible. The Messiah could not be held by death.

In the description of Jesus and His ministry, Luke makes clear how central a position the theme of suffering occupied in the nature and teaching of Jesus. In the Gospel, Luke shows how the true nature of Jesus' sonship and messiahship were hidden from the crowds and his disciples by His statements on the necessity of His suffering. He then continues to show how that the problem that this posed for the Jews, and would naturally pose for the Greeks, was solved by the Passion and the revelation of the Resurrection. In Acts he then recounts how that the message that was preached was the message of the resurrection, the solution of the problem of humanity.

The investigation of the Christology of Luke in the Gospel and Acts and the place of Jesus' suffering in it will be conducted on the basis of the trustworthiness of the writings as presenting historical events. It is also affirmed that Luke used events and statements in a particular manner to present the view of Jesus that would most readily be understood by his Greek readers. The method of approach in this study will be to consider the Christological terminology used, with incidental reference to theological terminology to illustrate the points under discussion. Despite opinions to the contrary, this method offers the advantage of objectivity which is not

¹⁶I Enoch 71; cf. R. Otto, *Reich Gottes und Menschensohn* (1934), p. 175ff.; E. Sjoeborg, *Der Menschensohn im aethiopischen Henochbuch* (1946), pp. 168-189.

¹⁷*Dial. c. Trypho* 49:1; 110:1.

always easy to attain in theological discussion.¹⁸ The titles used during the period before the ministry of Jesus will be surveyed in order to ascertain the purpose of Luke-Acts and to obtain a correct perspective of the whole work. The titles that are used of Jesus during His ministry will then be surveyed: Son of God, Christ, and Son of Man will be seen to be in keeping with the concept of the Servant of the Lord in early Christian preaching. Finally, the title Lord will be viewed as the expression which came to take over the position of the earlier titles in the thinking of the church.

¹⁸Conzelmann, *op. cit.*, p. 146ff., thinks that Luke's acceptance of the traditional way of speech and his adherence to the Septuagint invalidate any analysis of his Christological terminology, since these factors would make him unconscious to the peculiarities of the titles. The objectivity of the method is illustrated by Benjamin Warfield, *The Lord of Glory*, and Vincent Taylor, *The Names of Jesus*. Cf. also Oscar Cullmann, *Die Christologie des Neuen Testaments* (1957), who adapts this approach.