

**RITE FROM THE VERY BEGINNING: RITES
OF PASSAGE IN LUKE 1–4 AND THEIR
FUNCTION IN THE NARRATIVE
OF LUKE-ACTS**

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Half a century ago in his influential work, *The Theology of St. Luke*, Hans Conzelmann observed that “The three scenes which mark the main stages in Jesus’ ministry—the Baptism, the Transfiguration and the Agony in the Garden—are assimilated to one another. On each of the three occasions a heavenly revelation is depicted as the answer to prayer.”¹ While the details of Lukan stages have long been debated, Conzelmann’s observation about the significance of such scenes remains of interest. Indeed, as this paper will argue, such divinely visited transitional events are particularly prevalent in chapters 1–4 and serve several purposes in the third Gospel.

Over the past century, the events associated with life transitions have received considerable attention under the rubric of rites of passage. For the purposes of this essay, a rite of passage will be understood as a formal process rooted in tradition, which marks the transition of an individual or group from one culturally determined state or station in life to another. Such a rite often involves, to one degree or another, a separation from the old, a liminal or in-between stage, and a reincorporation into a new state or station.² As a modern construct, the application of rite-of-passage theory to ancient texts requires careful attention to similarities and differences between model

¹Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, trans. Geoffrey Buswell (New York: Harper, 1960), 180.

²This definition is created in dialogue with the works of Arnold van Gennep (*The Rites of Passage*, trans. M. B. Vizedom and G. L. Caffee [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960], 2-3, 10), Victor W. Turner (*Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967], 7; and “Forms of Symbolic Action: Introduction,” in *Forms of Symbolic Action: Proceedings of the 1969 Annual Spring Meeting of the American Ethnological Society*, ed. R. F. Spender [Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969], 94), and Catherine Bell (*Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1997], 138-169). Bell, 138-169, and Ronald L. Grimes (*Ritual Criticism: Case Studies in Its Practice, Essays on Its Theory* [Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1990], 12-14; and *Reading, Writing, and Ritualizing: Ritual in Fictive, Liturgical, and Public Places* [Washington, DC: Pastoral Press, 1993], 7-10) correctly point out that a particular ritual may not evidence all of these characteristics, and that there are in reality no precise lines separating ritual from nonritual. Ceremonial rites, in contrast, though regularly patterned and formal, are celebrated on a calendrical basis rather than at irregular societally ordained points of transition.

and literary account, yet bringing similar events together in this way allows for observations not easily gained by other means.³

Rites of passage have been widely observed in the lives and literature of diverse cultures across space and time. In the Jewish and Greco-Roman world of the first and second centuries C.E., little was done without proper ritual.⁴ Societally ordained rites of passage accompanied an individual's movement into each new stage of the human life cycle from infancy and puberty, to betrothal and marriage, to the final funereal good-byes.⁵ Transitional rites also marked changes in role, ushering individuals into offices of authority such as priesthood or governorship.⁶ In addition, men and women of broadly differing social levels often underwent voluntary rites such as initiation into a mystery religion or rituals promising healing from disease.⁷

The prevalence of rites of passage in Luke's time is well documented; yet, in fact, narrative literature of the period tends to generally ignore or gloss over "routine" passage rites unless there was some pressing reason for their inclusion.⁸ It is all the more remarkable, then, that the opening chapters

³See, e.g., Andrea Fisher, "The Relationship of Individual and Society in Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process*," *Journal of Anthropology* 1 (1978): 37-38; Jerry D. Moore, *Visions of Culture. An Introduction to Anthropological Theories and Theorists* (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira, 1997), 229; Victor W. Turner, "African Ritual and Western Literature: Is a Comparative Symbolology Possible?" in *The Literature of Fact: Selected Papers from the English Institute*, ed. A. Fletcher (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 45-81.

⁴In general in this essay, the term "ritual" will be used to refer to a generic type of ritual, while rite will refer to a specific instance of its practice.

⁵See, e.g., Gen 17:10-14; Josephus, *Ant.* 2.238-2.274; *C. Ap.* 2:205; Suetonius, *Nero* 6; Ovid, *Fast.* 3.771-790; Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* 10.116; Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical*, trans. J. Raffan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 262-263; Fanny L. Dolansky, "Coming of Age in Rome: The History and Social Significance of Assuming the *Toga Virilis*," (MA thesis, University of Victoria, 1999); Mary Harlow, and Ray Laurence, *Growing Up and Growing Old in Ancient Rome: A Life Course Approach* (London: Routledge, 2002), 3-4, 37-42, 60-64, 138-143; Nigel M. Kennell, *The Gymnasium of Virtue: Education and Culture in Ancient Sparta* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 38, 144-146; Paul Monroe, *Source Book of the History of Education for the Greek and Roman Period* (New York: Macmillan, 1902), 302.

⁶See, e.g., Exod 28-29; 40:13-16; Lev 8:1-9:24; Plutarch, *Num.* 7.3-8.3; idem, *Art.* 3.1-4; Suetonius, *Nero* 6.7-8.

⁷See, e.g., Dio Chrysostom, *Dei cogn.* 33; Hippolytus, *Haer.* 5.8; Clement of Alexandria, *Protr.* 2.21; Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987); Emma J. L. Edelstein and Ludwig Edelstein, *Asclepius: Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1998); Carin M. C. Green, *Roman Religion and the Cult of Diana at Aricia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 235-280.

⁸In the writings of Plutarch and Suetonius, e.g., the routine rites of passage are seldom mentioned, even though the ubiquity is well attested in other literature of the time.

of Luke contain such a heavy concentration of these rites, some of which reverberate through the remaining chapters of the whole two-volume work of Luke-Acts. In the remarks that follow, rituals in Luke 1–4 will be brought together and examined and their relation to Luke-Acts as a whole briefly considered. Rite-of-passage accounts in other narrative literature of Luke’s day will then be explored with a view to understanding the reasons for Luke’s particular interest in these rites.

Rites of Passage Highlighted in Luke 1–4

The Lukan narrative opens in the midst of a divinely visited ritual—not a rite of passage, but a regularly occurring ceremony of incense-burning conducted by Zacharias in the temple that takes on the meaning of rite. It is during this rite that Gabriel appears from heaven, promising the birth of a son who would “make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:16, 17; cf. Exod 30:7-8; 2 Chron 13:11). The scene portraying this son’s welcome is set in the midst of a full-fledged rite of passage, as joyful neighbors and kin gather for the traditional eighth-day-circumcision ritual, marking the transition of John’s birth and acceptance into the covenant people of God (Luke 2:57-59). Luke couples this divinely ordained Jewish rite (Lev 12:3) with the formal naming of the child, an important aspect of the Roman birthing rites familiar to Luke’s audience and performed here by divine command (Luke 1:13, 59-64).⁹ As in the transitions noted by Conzelmann, divine interaction accompanies the rite, for Zacharias is filled with the Holy Spirit and, blessing God, prophesies of his son’s future work (1:67-79; see **Figure 1**).

An eighth-day-circumcision rite, accompanied by a divinely directed naming (2:21; 1:31), is also noted in the account of Jesus’ birth. In Jesus’ case, however, these rites are overshadowed by a second pair of passage rites that receive greater attention. These, a purification rite and a rite of presentation, take place in the temple and, like the first two, reflect earlier traditions (Luke 2:21-24; Exod 13:2, 12; Lev 12:2-8; 1 Sam 1:24-28).

Luke 2:23 quotes Exod 13:2, 12, explicitly interpreting Jesus’ presentation at the temple as a response to God’s command at the first “Passover” that every firstborn male be set apart as “holy to the Lord.” According to the Pentateuch, while firstborn oxen, sheep, and goats were to be sacrificed, human first borns, who, like Jesus, were not of the tribe of Levi, were to be “redeemed” with a payment of five shekels (Exod 13:11-16; Num 3:47-48; 18:15-16). There is no specific requirement in the Pentateuch, however, for a formal presentation at the temple itself. Luke’s specific mention of a ritual presentation with no redemption price, therefore, may represent a

⁹Harlow and Laurence, 39-40. It is later also attested in Jewish literature. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I, 1–9*, AB 28a (New York: Doubleday, 1981), 380.

formal enactment of Gabriel's declaration that Jesus would be a "holy child," remaining sacred to the Lord.¹⁰ Indeed, although the purification law Luke cites specifically required purification only for the mother (Lev 12:1-8), Luke speaks in the plural of "their" purification [τοῦ καθαρισμοῦ αὐτῶν]. Such purification would have been appropriate for one being set apart as sacred. As François Bovon notes, a similar ritual was to be enacted in certain cases for the purification of the Nazirite set apart as holy to the Lord (Num 6:1-12).¹¹ These rites, too, become the occasion of divine in-breaking, as the Holy Spirit reveals to two righteous prophets the special nature of the child. As with Zacharias, Simeon and Anna, too, turn to God with words of praise.

The ritual account concludes with the statement that, when the family "had completed (ἔτέλεσαν) everything according to the law of the Lord," they returned to Nazareth (Luke 2:39). The use of τελέω in this verse appears to be the first of several related technical ritual usages in Luke-Acts, which, in common with many other Greco-Roman texts, note the successful performance of sacred ritual.¹²

The infancy narrative ends, as it began, with a regularly patterned temple ceremony. In this case, the ceremony is the Passover in Jerusalem, to which, "when He became *twelve* they went up according to the *custom* of the Feast" (2:42). This specific notice of Jesus' age raises the possibility that, in addition to the Passover ceremony, a ritual of transition to young manhood is in view here, for several early Rabbinic passages suggest that it was at the age of twelve that young men were considered to have reached the standing of full responsibility before God.¹³ The possibility that Luke either knew of a formal marking of this transition (which we no longer have witness to), or

¹⁰No requirement of a presentation at the Temple is recorded in connection with the exodus command in the Hebrew Bible, the LXX, or the Mishnah. See Raymond E. Brown, "The Presentation of Jesus (Luke 2:22-40)," *Worship* 51 (1977): 2-11; François Bovon, *Luke I, 1:1-9:50*, Hermenia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 99; Fitzmyer, 425-426. The English translations of biblical texts throughout are my own.

¹¹Bovon, 99.

¹²Luke 12:50. See also the use of συντελέω in Luke 4:2, 13 to describe Jesus' successful completion of the ordeals that followed his baptism, and in Acts 21:27 of the completion of the sacred time of Pentecost. Cf. Plutarch, *Art.* 3.1; idem, *Flam.* 2.1; Philo, *Spec.* 1.319; idem, *Decal.* 41; idem, *Contemp.* 25; τελέω, *BDAG*, 997; τελέω, *LSJ*, 1771-1772; Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 9. Mark does not use this term at all, while Matthew uses it with the more common usage "to finish, or complete."

¹³*M. 'Abot* 5:21; *m. Nid.* 5:6; cf. *m. Meg.* 4:6; *b. Ketub.* 50; Str-B 2.144-147; Frédéric Manns, "Luc 2, 41-50 témoin de la Bar Mitsva de Jésus," *Mar* 40 (1978): 344-349. See also I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978), 126-127; Fitzmyer, 440; contra Bovon, 111. There is, however, no extant evidence of such a formal "bar mitzvah" rite during the period.

was echoing well-known Greco-Roman puberty rites, is strengthened by the fact that the portrayal of Jesus shifts at this very point from the depiction of him in a passive and thus child-like role to a decisive leading role in the narrative.¹⁴ There is no explicit mention of prayer or divine intervention here, although Jesus, in his words to his parents following the completion (τελειώω) of the Passover, does assert his recognition of a special connection with the heavenly Father: “Did you not know that I must be in the house of my Father?” (2:49).¹⁵

These birth narratives of Luke 1–2 are not mentioned in any other canonical Gospel. The events of Luke 3–4, on the other hand, are recounted in all four Gospels; yet, it is in Luke-Acts alone that they are repeatedly referenced in ways that foreground them as pivotal within the entire two-volume work.

The significance of John’s baptism—in the Lukan account the first of two interlocked rituals—is attested by an elaborate dating formula, a device often used in Greco-Roman narrative to mark transition to a major new section of narrative. Such dating formulas are also used in Jewish prophetic literature to introduce divine declaration, and indeed the coming of the word of God (ῥῆμα θεοῦ) initiates and apparently prescribes John’s ritual work, for Luke (with Mark) states that John then began “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:1–3; Mark 1:4).¹⁶ Though Luke thus identifies God as the source for this new rite of baptism, in this work redolent with Septuagintal associations such a practice would also have recalled the various ritual purificatory dippings (βάπτω) commanded by God in the Law (Lev 4:6, 17; 9:9; 11:32; 14:6, 16, 51; Num 19:18).¹⁷ Further, ritual immersion practices are evident in Luke’s own time, including the presence of

¹⁴Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 156. It is the family that goes up to the feast, but Jesus who speaks independently with the teachers and, as Green notes, is said to act by going down to Nazareth and submitting to his parents.

¹⁵Interestingly, a Passover rite also stands at the end of Jesus’ ministry as the setting for the institution of the ritual of the Lord’s Supper. In contrast to the use of τελέω in 2:39, τελειώω in 2:43 most likely refers to the completion of the days of the Passover, although interestingly the related words τελέωσις and τελείουμα are often used in association with the attainment of manhood and the accompanying dedication (Τελειώω, LSJ, 1770).

¹⁶Thucydides 2.2; Polybius, *The Histories*, trans. W. R. Paton, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1922), 1.3; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. Rom.* 9.61; Dan 7:1; Ezek 24:1; Hag 2:10; Zech 1:7; 7:1; Conzelmann, 168.

¹⁷Cf. Sir 34:24, 29; Jdt 12:7, 8; Mark 7:4. By the Second Temple period these rituals were often referred to with the term βαπτίζω.

mikvaot spread across first-century Palestine, along with similar traditions of water purification often formed as a part of Greco-Roman ritual.¹⁸

In response, crowds come out “to be baptized by him” (Luke 3:7), symbolically enacting their transition from “brood of vipers” to “a people prepared for the Lord,” who have fled “from the wrath to come” (1:14; 3:7; 7:29-30).¹⁹ John also promises, in addition to this physical rite, a further baptism to come, accomplished with the Holy Spirit and fire—a metaphorical baptism that becomes, later in Luke-Acts, the basis for further ritual development (3:15-17; Matt 3:11; Mark 1:8).²⁰

Luke’s separation of the events at Jesus’ baptism from John’s preaching results, in part, in the separating off of Jesus’ unique ritual experience, which Luke alone associates with a second traditional rite of passage—the rite of anointing.²¹ In 3:21-22, the act of Jesus’ baptism is syntactically subordinated to the divinely initiated events following his prayer. This ordering could be understood as simply emphasizing the divine affirmation of Jesus if not for the ritual interpretation given it in subsequent narratives, for Jesus’ ministry opens with the declaration that the Holy Spirit has *anointed* him to preach

¹⁸Adela Yarbro Collins. “The Origin of Christian Baptism,” in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on Christian Initiation*, ed. M. E. Johnson (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995), 52-53. In the Greco-Roman world of Luke’s audience, ritual purification was practiced in connection with initiations into the mystery cults, such as that of Lucius in *Metamorphoses* 11.23 and the young man initiated into the Bacchic rites in Livy, 39.9.4, as well as in other traditions. See also Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 4.3.1; George F. Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 96, 224-285, fig. 70. Ritual cleansings are sometimes characterized as superstitious, as in Juvenal, *Sat.* 6.522ff.; and Plutarch, *Superst.* 166a. For other literature and also reliefs depicting ritual washings, see A. Oerke, “Βάπτω, Βαπτίζω,” *TDNT* 1:530-532. Other types of Jewish ritual cleansings in water at the time of Luke-Acts included the bathings at Qumran (1QS 3.4), Josephus’s mention of Bannus’s day and night washings (*Vita* 11), the Sibylline Oracles’s call to “wash your whole bodies in perennial rivers” in connection with repentance (4.165), and the cleansing/baptism of the Jewish proselyte (*M. Pesab* 8.8; *m. CEd.* 5.2).

¹⁹In fact, Luke states that “all the people” are baptized (Luke 3:21), apparently suggesting the successful carrying out of the task Gabriel had given to John to make “ready a people prepared for the Lord” (1:17; 3:4; cf. 7:29; Isa 40:3). In the re-incorporation phase of the ritual, this symbolic transition, John insists, must be actualized through appropriate acts of repentance (3:8-14).

²⁰“μετάνοια,” *BDAG* 640.

²¹This has been variously ascribed to (1) a historiographical device separating the period of the prophets from the period of Jesus (Conzelmann, 21, 26); (2) an avoidance of allowing the lesser John to baptize the mightier Jesus (Charles G. Dennison, “How Is Jesus the Son of God? Luke’s Baptism Narrative and Christology,” *CTJ* 17 [1982]: 6-25); and (3) the logical conclusion of John’s side of this final parallel (Marshall, 148-149).

the good news (Luke 4:16-21). In Acts 10:37-38, Peter makes this ritual connection more explicit, specifically stating that God *anointed* Jesus with the Holy Spirit “after the baptism which John proclaimed” (cf. Acts 4:27).

Traditionally, anointing rites were practiced at the commissioning of high priests and kings and even, occasionally, prophets.²² The act of *anointing* normally involved the pouring of oil on the candidate’s head; however, for David, the account also describes the coming of the Holy Spirit upon him (1 Sam 16:13). Thus, in addition to explicating Jesus’ title of anointed one (Christ/Messiah), this passage, by connecting the coming of the Holy Spirit to the rite of anointing, underlines the kingly connections to David already introduced in the birth narrative.²³

The significant shifts from previous tradition in the rituals of baptism and of anointing set them apart from those described in the birth narrative. Both are represented not simply as traditional ritual accompanied by divine visitation, but as a divine ritualization wherein God himself initiates a brand-new rite of passage out of the fabric of earlier traditions.

Ritual and Divine Interaction in the Rest of Luke-Acts

The beginning of Jesus’ ministry, initiated by his anointing, marks the climax of Luke 1–4’s particular emphasis on ritual beginnings, which is the main focus of this article. Viewing these early rites, however, in the context of two related and ongoing ritual patterns in the remainder of Luke-Acts will demonstrate the extent of such patterning in relation to both the baptism and anointing of Luke 3 and to divine interaction.

One ritual pattern occurring repeatedly throughout Luke-Acts is the commissioning of individuals for new roles, a pattern inaugurated by the commissioning of Jesus for his messianic role by means of the rite of anointing. The choosing of the twelve also becomes in Luke a specific appointment to apostleship to carry out a mission that, as with that of Jesus’, is gradually unfolded in the subsequent narrative (Luke 6:12-16; 24:46-49). As with the anointing of Jesus, this event, too, is set in the context of Jesus in prayer.²⁴

At the beginning of Acts, commissioning rites are described: a twelfth apostle is chosen to replace Judas (Luke 1:15-26) and, as the gospel spreads

²²For kings, see, e.g., 1 Sam 10:1; 1 Chron 11:3; 2 Kgs 11:12. For priests, see Exod 28:41 and Lev 16:32. For prophets, see 1 Kgs 19:16.

²³As with David, such expectations only begin to come to fruition later in Acts (e.g., 2:33) after Jesus’ own time of trials and suffering. In Luke, Jesus plays more of a prophetic role, as evidenced in 13:33; cf. 7:16, 26, 39; 9:8, 19; 24:19.

²⁴A different, more formulaic approach to commissioning is in view in the articles of B. J. Hubbard (“Commissioning Stories in Luke-Acts: A Study of Their Antecedents, Form and Content,” *Semeia* 8 [1977]: 103-126); and T. Y. Mullins (“New Testament Commission Forms, Especially in Luke-Acts,” *JBL* 95 [1976]: 603-614).

following Jesus' ascension, seven more are called to assist them in the work of serving (Acts 6:1-6). Paul and Barnabus, too, are commissioned at the direction of the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:1-3), at which time they begin appointing elders in every church (Acts 14:23). Finally, there is the handing over of the baton of leadership in a ritualized giving of Paul's last-will-and-testament rite with a paradigmatic group of elders from Ephesus (Acts 20:17-38).²⁵ In these more or less formalized commissioning rites, divine intervention is explicitly mentioned only twice, but subsequent events bear clear witness to the presence of divine blessing and empowerment. Prayer, on the other hand, duly noted in each case, reinforces the centrality of prayer at times of transition and ritual in Luke-Acts (see **Figure 2**).

By far the most pervasive ritual pattern in Luke-Acts, however, is the multivalent use of baptism as symbol. Mark may have pointed the way in this by placing John's baptismal preaching as "the beginning of the gospel" (Luke 1:1), but Luke-Acts goes far beyond Mark not only in portrayals of the baptism of believers in Acts, but also in the Gospel itself, where several key moments of transition in Jesus' life are linked to baptism through metaphor and verbal echo. Indeed the ritual of baptism is a major uniting factor in the entire work (see **Figure 3**).

In the Gospel of Luke, the divine origin of John's baptism receives additional affirmation in a narrative aside asserting that the Pharisees and law-experts, by not being baptized by John, had thereby "rejected God's purpose for themselves" (7:29-30).²⁶ The Lukan Gospel also includes two indirect links to this baptism. The first is embedded in the transfiguration account, which, as Conzelmann notes, marks the transition to Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, a pivotal stage in Luke's Gospel.²⁷ Here a heavenly voice again speaks, as it had in the original baptism-anointing account, to affirm Jesus as God's Son and prepare him and his followers for the next phase of his ministry (9:34-35).²⁸

²⁵Each of these new beginnings contains echoes of the past in the choice and reconstitution of twelve (Josh 3:12; Luke 22:29-30; Acts 7:8), in the ritual appointment of elders to assist in carrying on the work (Num 11:16), and in the laying-on of hands (Num 8:10; 27:18-23).

²⁶This is in contrast to "all the people and the tax collectors," who, Luke says, had been baptized and who acknowledged God's justice. This passage, unique to Luke, is, in addition to the inclusion of the standard Synoptic pericope in which Jesus reinforces John's baptism by answering the question from the chief priests and elders regarding the source of his authority, pushes them to identify the source of John's authority (20:1-8).

²⁷Luke 9:28-36.

²⁸Indeed 2 Peter uses the term ἐπίπτης (initiates) of the disciple-witnesses of the transfiguration (1:16-18), suggesting a possible early Christian interpretation of the event using the language of mystery-religion initiation.

Figure 1. Ritual and Divine Interaction in Luke 1–4

<i>Ritual</i>	<i>Lukan Passage</i>	<i>New Beginning</i>	<i>Divine Manifestation</i>	<i>Prayer</i>
Burning of incense at the Jerusalem Temple	1:5-22	Of “the things accomplished among us” (1:1)	“An angel of the Lord appeared” to Zacharias (1:11)	The “people are in prayer outside” (1:10); Zacharias’s “petition has been heard” (1:13)
Circumcision (and Naming)	1:57-79	Of John’s life	“Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied” 1:67	“Praised be the Lord God of Israel” (1:68)
Circumcision (and Naming), Purification, and Presentation	2:21-39	Of Jesus’ life	Simeon “came in the Spirit into the temple”	Simeon “praised God” (2:27); Anna “was serving with fastings and prayers night and day” (2:37)
Passover at the Jerusalem Temple	2:42-51	Of Jesus’ young manhood		(Jesus “must be in the house of [his] Father” 2:49)
John’s baptism	3:1-18	Of “a people prepared for the Lord” (1:17; 3:3–4)	“the word of God came upon John” (3:2)	
Jesus’ baptism-anointing	3:21–4:15	Of Jesus’ public ministry	“heaven opened, the Holy Spirit descended, . . . and a voice came out of heaven” (2:21–22)	This all takes place “while Jesus was praying”

Items in bold on the charts are not found in the other canonical Gospels

Figure 2. Rites of Commissioning in Luke-Acts

<i>Ritual Action</i>	<i>Passage</i>	<i>New Beginning</i>	<i>Prayer</i>	<i>Explicit Divine Intervention</i>
Anointing with the Spirit (Baptism, Wilderness Ordeals)	Luke 3:21-4:13	Of Jesus' public ministry	Prayer	Heaven opens; The Holy Spirit descends; A heavenly voice speaks
Formal naming to the role of apostle	Luke 6:12-16	Of the special role of the Twelve	Prayer	
Drawing of lots; Formal naming to role of apostle	Acts 1:15-26	Of Matthias's apostleship	Prayer	
Laying-on of hands; Formal naming to be in charge of the serving of food	Acts 6:1-6	Of Seven to serve food	Prayer	
(Fasting) Laying-on of hands; Formal naming to their mission	Acts 13:1-3	Of Paul and Barnabas for their divinely appointed mission	Prayer	Holy Spirit speaks
Fasting; Formal naming to eldership	Acts 14:23	Of elders in new churches	Prayer	
Last Will and Testament	Acts 20:17-38		Prayer	
<i>Items in bold are found only in Luke among the Gospels</i>				

Figure 3 Ritualization Linked in Luke-Acts to the Primary Ritual Paradigm of Baptism

<i>Event</i>	<i>Passage</i>	<i>New Beginning</i>	<i>Interaction with the Divine</i>	<i>Connection to Baptism</i>
John's baptism	3:1-21	Of a people prepared for the Lord (Of Jesus' ministry)	Jesus' prayer , the word of God came (the promise of a Holy Spirit baptism)	Foundational baptism story
Transfiguration	9:28-36	Of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem	Jesus' prayer, glory , voice, visit from Moses and Elijah	Voice from cloud echoes voice from heaven at baptism
Jesus' Passion in Jerusalem	12:50; 22:39-47	Of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension	Jesus' prayer and the ministration of the angel opens the passion account in 22:39-43	Jesus speaks of his passion as a distressing baptism with which he must be baptized
Baptism of Believers	Acts 2:37-41; cf. 8:12-16, 36; 9:18; 10:47-48; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 19:5; 22:16	Of a people devoted to the Lord	An outpouring of the Holy Spirit is sometimes noted	Physical enactment of baptism/dipping; interpretation of its meaning in Luke-Acts overlaps with that of John's baptism
A Baptism with the Holy Spirit	Luke 3:16; Acts 2:1-4; (1:5,8,14) 11:15-17; (10:30, 31, 46)	Of the spread of the gospel by Jesus' witnesses	Prayer, sound from heaven, tongues as of fire, speaking with other tongues, exalting God	Direct verbal links to John's promise of a Holy Spirit baptism

Items in bold are found only in Luke among the Gospels

The Gospel's second indirect link to baptism in Luke 12:50 is likewise associated with the journey to Jerusalem. After a discourse calling his servants to care for others and prepare for their master's coming, Jesus remarks, "I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish that it was already kindled, but *I have a baptism to be baptized with* and how distressed I am until it is completed (τελεσθῆναι)." Again τελέω is used in association with ritual, though in this case clearly in a metaphorical sense.²⁹ As with Mark's similar query, "Are you able to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" (10:38), this statement utilizes the polyvalent character of ritual symbolism to speak figuratively of an experience Jesus was yet to undergo, most likely his suffering and death, the last stage of his ministry to which he was journeying in this section of Luke.³⁰ While experiences of suffering are often symbolized in the OT by overwhelming waters (e.g., 2 Sam 22:5; Ps 69:1-2), Jesus connects his experience to a use of water as a rite of passage, thereby implying also a new beginning on the other side of his passion experience. Thus baptism is used in Luke to interpret, and be itself interpreted by, each of the three main transitions referred to by Conzelmann: the baptism, the transfiguration, and the passion.

John's literal repentance-baptism comes again to the fore at the opening of the book of Acts, being not only repeatedly referenced as the beginning of Jesus' ministry (Acts 10:37; 13:23-25), but also identified as an essential qualification of the candidates for apostleship (1:21-22). As in Luke, repentance continues to be coupled with baptism, as attested by Peter's words, "Repent . . . and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (2:38; cf. 22:16). This ritual in Acts, however, gains additional layers of meaning, becoming above all a baptism "in the name of Jesus," entered into by those who believed the apostles' witness of him (e.g., 2:17-41; 8:12; 16:14-15, 30-33; 18:8).³¹ Thus Christian baptism comes to represent in Acts

²⁹Interestingly, the remaining three uses of τελέω in Luke-Acts are also in reference to the distressing events Jesus must "complete" in Jerusalem (Luke 18:31; 22:37; Acts 13:29). See also the use of the term τελειόω with a similar meaning in Luke 13:32 and Acts 20:24). Philo uses both τελέω and τελειόω to describe initiations into the mystery cults and also to metaphorically speak of the initiation of an individual to the "mysteries" of God (*Abr.* 1.122; *Mos.* 2.150; *Spec. Laws* 1.319, 323). These metaphorical uses of ritual terminology seem to assume that the intended audience would recognize such allusions and illustrates the diverse and flexible ways in which shared rite-of-passage experiences could be used in ancient literature (cf. Plutarch, *Fam.* 10.323).

³⁰Duncan M. Derrett, "Christ's Second Baptism (Luke 12:50; Mk 10:38-40)," *ExpTim* 100/8 (1989): 294-295. Possibly in the context of the symbol of fire in 12:49, the figurative reference to baptism is also meant to recall the baptism of fire promised by John (Luke 3:16).

³¹G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1962), 100; Joel B. Green, "From 'John's Baptism' to 'Baptism in the Name of the Lord Jesus': The Significance of Baptism in Luke-Acts," in *Baptism, the New Testament and the*

the pivotal act in a new believer's transition to allegiance to Christ, as well as a welcome into fellowship in the Christian community.³² The further baptism of the Holy Spirit, earlier promised by John (Luke 3:16), is recalled here in Jesus's prophecy of the initial coming of the Spirit upon his Jewish followers (Acts 1:8; 2:1-4), and in Peter's description of how the Spirit first fell upon the Gentiles in the household of Cornelius (11:16).³³ John's own baptism is, in Acts, considered incomplete (19:1-5; cf. 18:24-26).

*The Function of Rituals in the Narrative
Literature of Luke's Day*

Because authors of the day rarely gave attention to routine rites of passage, their occasional mention signals the likelihood that their inclusion functioned toward some purpose. Five purposes can be hypothesized for Luke's unusually concentrated attention to ritual: (1) the addition of drama and interest, drawing audiences into the work; (2) the recounting of an unusual occurrence at the time of the rite; (3) the foreshadowing of future greatness; (4) the grounding of new practice in proper ritual tradition; and (5) a pivotal transition point for the text as a whole. Such hypotheses can be constructed by a close reading of the Lukan text itself, but additionally it is valuable to consider the use of ritual in other narrative literature of the time in order to confirm those narrative functions of ritual that might have been familiar to the writer of Luke-Acts.

At times *the curious nature of the rite itself* can be seen to add drama and interest, drawing audiences into the work. This is evident in Lucius's initiation into the mystery religion of Isis in Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*, in which Apuleius tantalizes his audience with suspenseful hints and details regarding this most secret of rites (*Metam.* 11.22-24). Such also is the case in Plutarch's portrayal of the royal initiation of the Persian priests that Artaxerxes received upon his accession to kingship (*Art.* 3.1-4). In this rare *Greek* description of a "barbarian" rite, Artaxerxes enters the sanctuary of a warlike goddess, donning the robe of the great Cyrus the Elder, eating and drinking strange and symbolic substances, and engaging in other doings unknown to outsiders.

Luke-Acts, in contrast to *Metamorphoses* and *Artaxerxes*, gives little attention to the details of the rituals mentioned, which suggests that the purpose for their inclusion in this work goes beyond the factor of curiosity.

Church, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Anthony R. Cross, JSNTSup 171 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

³²Those who participated are spoken of as being "added" to the group of believers (2:41, 44). An interesting similarity in Greco-Roman ritual practice is the reenactment of a foundational story and the identification of the participant with the protagonist of the story in the initiation rituals into some mystery religions. See Collins, 55.

³³The actual arrival of the Holy Spirit is at times associated with the act of baptism in Acts, though never as its direct result (8:14-17; 9:17-18; 10:44-48; 19:5-6).

One additional aspect noted in the ritual account of Artaxerxes's initiation does, however, evidence a second similarity to the Lukan use of ritual. Here, as in Luke's account of Jesus' baptism and anointing, Plutarch takes the opportunity to speak not only of the initiation, but of *an unusual occurrence which took place at the time of the rite* when Artaxerxes's brother was accused of attempting to waylay and kill him. Such a recounting of unusual occurrences taking place in connection with a rite is a frequent function of ancient rite-of-passage accounts. At times these occurrences represent obstacles to be overcome (cf. Suetonius, *Cal.* 4.10), but at others they are positive occurrences that are manifestly supernatural in nature.

Portents foreshadowing the future destiny of an individual are a third function that is often depicted in the context of ritual. For example, Plutarch's Numa, before accepting the kingship of Rome, shows proper piety in insisting on the enactment of a traditional rite, which involved observing the flights of birds in order to obtain a portent of future success. Numa's search is rewarded when the auspicious species appears, approaching appropriately from the right (*Num.* 7.3–8.3). Suetonius, too, at the time of Galba's *toga virilis* rite, marking his transition from childhood to young manhood, portrays the future emperor dreaming that the goddess Fortuna was speaking to him, announcing "that she was tired of standing before his door, and that unless she were quickly admitted, she would fall a prey to the first comer" (*Galb.* 7.4–5; cf. also *Nero* 6.7–8).³⁴

As with these other narrative accounts, Luke-Acts portrays rites of passage, during which humans are seeking the blessing of the gods, as particularly appropriate for such heavenly manifestations. Charles Talbert has noted numerous portents in Luke 1–4, a number of which are set in the context of ritual, including Zacharias's incense-burning, during which an angel appears to announce John's birth; the infancy rites of both John and of Jesus, at which the Holy Spirit fills a bystander, who gives revelations about the child's future; the Passover, at which Jesus demonstrates his precocious understanding; and Jesus' anointing, in which the Holy Spirit and a voice of affirmation descend upon him from the open heavens.³⁵

While the highlighting of an unusual occurrence and the foreshadowing of future greatness further elucidate several of the ritual accounts in Luke 1–4, these do not fully explain the concentration of divinely attended rites in this section nor explain the later presence of rites with no association to such

³⁴For information on the *toga virilis* rite, see J. Albert Harrill, "Coming of Age and Putting on Christ: The *Toga Virilis* Ceremony, Its Paraenesis, and Paul's Interpretation of Baptism in Luke-Acts," *NovT* 44 (2002): 252–277.

³⁵Charles Talbert explores these Lukan portents ("Prophecies of Future Greatness: The Contribution of Greco-Roman Biographies to an Understanding of Luke 1:5–4:15," in *The Divine Helmsman*, ed. J. L. Crenshaw and S. Sandmel [New York: Ktav, 1980], 129–141).

portents. In this category, for example, is John's baptism of the people, during which no divine manifestations are reported to occur, as well as the ongoing patterns that echo from this baptism all the way to the end of Acts. These aspects of the Lukan use of ritual are more fully explained by a fourth function of ritual accounts, observable in the narrative literature. In these cases, ritual accounts can be seen to respond to the cultural reverence for tradition evident in both the Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures by *demonstrating that what was newly begun had its origins in properly enacted ritual tradition*.

Josephus, in his brief *Vita*, a work which leaves out significant periods of his life, notably takes the time to portray a ritualized transition from boyhood (ἀντίπαις) to public adult life (πολιτεύομαι). In this passage, he appeals to traditions his audience knew and even expected in association with such a life transition in order to provide appropriate foundations for his depiction of himself as a heroic Jewish general and a worthy representative of the ancient heritage of Judaism (*Vita* 10–12).³⁶ Thus Josephus claims that at the age of 16—the traditional time of transition to adulthood in Greco-Roman culture—he devoted himself to rigorous training under the three main Jewish sects, just as young men on the verge of adulthood in Greco-Roman narrative literature often became disciples themselves to the various philosophical schools. Still unsatisfied, Josephus says, he apprenticed himself to a hermit in the wilderness, immersing himself in an isolated environment reminiscent of that of Moses before his deliverance of Israel, and noting also the similarity of his training to the young men of classical Athens and Sparta during their military initiation to adulthood.³⁷ Philo, referencing a different ritual transition, augments, for his Greco-Roman audience, the impressiveness of Moses' transition to leadership by describing it in terms of the well-known and respected initiation into the secrets and priesthood of a mystery cult (*Gig.* 53–54).

Plutarch, too, in his *Parallel Lives*, pauses to demonstrate that Theseus's pious travels to Delphi to offer some of his hair to the god was a practice that remained in his day as a custom for youth who were coming of age (*Theb.* 5.1). Immediately following this rite, Theseus successfully undergoes various ordeals, journeying through wilderness areas on his way to Athens, conquering the wicked creatures that lived there. (Such a facing of ordeals is an aspect common in certain rites of passage and can be seen in Luke's

³⁶A convincing discussion of Josephus's purposes in the *Vita* can be found in *Life*, vol. 9, *Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary*, ed. Steve N. Mason (Leiden: Brill, 2001), xlvii–l; cf. Per Bilde, *Flavius Josephus between Jerusalem and Rome: His Life, His Works and Their Importance* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1988), 110–113; and Jerome H. Neyrey, "Josephus' *Vita* and the *Encomium*: A Native Model of Personality," *JSJ* 25/2 (1994): 177–206. Steve Mason also discusses this passage as a transition to public life ("Was Josephus a Pharisee: A Re-Examination of *Life* 10–12," *JJS* 40 (1989): 40.

³⁷Exod 2:15; 3:1; cf. Philo, *Ant.* 2.255–256, 264–278.

depiction of Jesus' overcoming of the wilderness temptations following his baptism.)

For Luke, the addition of the infancy narrative to Mark's portrayal of the baptism at the beginning of the Gospel leads the audience, as in the examples above, to understand that the lives of John and of Jesus grew out of a devoted observance of ritual—of incense, infancy, and Passover—stipulated by God himself, as recorded in the Law. These unimpeachable foundations for ministry are further confirmed by the divine visitations at the time of their ritual enactments.³⁸

John's baptism in Luke 3 does not fit as obviously into this pattern, for it was not performed along the lines of any single anciently prescribed ritual, although baptism did have strong traditional ritual connections, as noted above.³⁹ Most important in Luke-Acts, however, is that John's baptism, with its roots in older ritual practices and its initiation and visitation by God, is portrayed as the traditional practice, repeatedly recalled, which itself gives authority to the Christian baptism central to the narrative of Acts.

Finally, both direct references and metaphorical links to John's baptism in Luke-Acts highlight its importance as *a pivotal point in the Lukan text as a whole*. Although rites of passage by their very nature stand at the transition between one stage and the next in the lives of an individual or group, in Luke and certain narrative literature of his time they also function as significant turning points for the narrative as a whole. This is evident, for example, in the events surrounding the mystery initiation of Lucius in the *Metamorphoses*, beginning with his transformation from donkey back to man, during which his ill-fated wanderings are replaced with a blessed life of devotion to Isis. Luke-Acts similarly presents John's baptism as a pivotal transition not in the narrative of a single individual, but in the summing up of history as a whole. This can be seen not only in Jesus' statement that "The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since that time the gospel of the kingdom of God has been preached" (Luke 16:16), but also in Peter's statement to Cornelius in Acts 10:37: "You know what has happened throughout all Judea, *beginning* in Galilee after the baptism of John" (cf. Luke 7:18-35; 20:1-8).⁴⁰

³⁸This powerful ritual grounding stands together with the piety of the two families, so important in the ancient evaluation of character, which has been already noted by Luke in the description of the blameless Zacharias and Elizabeth (1:6). See, e.g., Fitzmyer, 316.

³⁹Indeed Luke's use of the term βαπτίζω in Luke 11:38, with regard to the Pharisee's insistence on the ritual cleansing of hands (the LXX uses the verb βάπτω) may recall these ancient Jewish practices.

⁴⁰While Conzelmann, 22, 57, 146-149, overemphasized an exact moment for his theorized transition from a period of Israel and the prophets to a new era in salvation history, which he called the period of Jesus, this does not negate the pivotal place given to John and his baptism in the reconstruction of history portrayed in Luke-Acts.

Conclusion

With the institution of John's baptism and the associated anointing of Jesus, reports of traditionally grounded ritual, so central to Luke 1–4, largely cease. Ritual connections continue to be important, however, above all, in the reinforcing and enriching of the newly woven tradition of baptism, for which John's divinely initiated and traditionally rooted baptism forms a foundation and pivotal point.

It is evident that Luke-Acts gives unusual attention to rites of passage in comparison with the other canonical Gospels and other narrative literature of the day. By considering uses of ritual accounts in the narrative literature of the day, five functions have been discovered that help to explain the various ritual uses in Luke-Acts: (1) the addition of drama and interest drawing audiences into the work, (2) the recounting of an unusual occurrence at the time of the rite, (3) the foreshadowing of future greatness, (4) the grounding of new practice in proper ritual tradition, and (5) a pivotal transition point for the text as a whole.

There is much rich work yet to be done in the study of ritual in Luke-Acts, including further exploration of the meanings and associations evoked for ancient audiences by the various aspects of these ritual accounts. What is provided here is the recognition that the prevalence of rites of passage in Luke-Acts is not just happenstance, but that, above all, through ritual, Luke-Acts demonstrates, that the pivotal events of this new era both for the church of Christ and for individual believers are properly begun and grounded in tradition. In the case of baptism and Jesus' anointing, these traditions have been further demonstrated to be rewoven to their new and particular purposes by the ritualizing activity of God himself.