Jesus, Barabbas, and the People: The Climax of Luke's Trial Narrative and Lukan Christology (Lk 23.13–25)

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Abstract

This essay argues that the nuance and function given to the Barabbas pericope in Luke's trial narrative differs significantly from that expressed by the other evangelists. It submits that Luke depicts Jesus' death to be the result of a substitution between the acquitted Jesus and the insurrectionist and murderer Barabbas. Furthermore, the third evangelist has crafted his trial narrative so as to highlight the representative nature of this death, and thereby develop Jesus' narrative identity as the Messiah. It is concluded that Luke's crafting of his trial narrative raises questions for the prevalent view that the third evangelist has not integrated the idea of substitution into his understanding of Jesus' death.

Keywords: Atonement in Luke, Barabbas, exchange, Jesus' death, substitution, trial

Introduction

Modern interpreters have long pondered, and not infrequently remained baffled, over Luke's apparent lack of interest in explaining the theological reason for Jesus' death or analyzing what it accomplishes.[1] In particular, the assessment that he is reticent to use

[1] As noted recently by Moffitt 2016: 550–51. Cf. Tyson (1986, 170): Luke 'seems uninterested in piercing through an understanding of the theological reason for the death [of Jesus] or in analyzing what it was intended to accomplish'; Jervell (1996, 98): 'The situation is that Luke clearly connects salvation with the death of Christ, but he does not say what the death is intended to accomplish.'

substitutionary categories to explain the theological import of Jesus' death or marginalizes them in his work remains a widespread consensus.[2] Indeed, not only does Luke eliminate the ransom saying (Mk 10.45) from his gospel, but he omits the substitutionary or atoning allusions in his quotations of Isaiah 53 in Lk 22.37 and Acts 8.32.[3] The few indicators of a sacrificial understanding of Jesus' death, such as the words of institution in Lk 22.19–20 or the allusion to blood in Acts 20.28, are thus usually considered to be 'hints' to an atoning death which remain undeveloped in Luke's theology,[4] or to be vestiges of traditions which do not reflect Luke's own perspective.[5]

This article presents an analysis of the climax of Luke's trial narrative which raises questions for this widespread assessment. As is well-known, the third evangelist's description of the legal proceedings against Jesus differs significantly from the narration found in the other Gospels. The same is true of his account of the Barabbas pericope (Lk 23.13–25) which concludes his trial narrative (Lk 22.66–23.25). Perhaps most perplexing is the fact that, unlike the other Gospels, Luke never mentions the

[2] Böttrich (2005: 413) summarizes: 'In der Diskussion um die Heilsbedeutung des Todes Jesu hat der Evangelist Lukas traditionell schlechte Karten. Seit gut 200 Jahren wird er dafür gescholten, dass der ganze Vorstellungskreis von Stellvertretung oder Sühneleiden in seinem Doppelwerk so gut wie keine Rolle spiele.' For a survey of the history of research on the soteriological significance of the cross in Luke, see Wilson 2016: 2–28. Among the few exceptions who argue for a substitutionary view in Luke, see Mittmann-Richert (2008), who identifies Luke's use of the fourth Isaianic Servant Song as the key to his view of atonement.

[3] This is the classic argument. For a recent discussion of it, cf. Sellner 2007: 409–12.

[4] E.g., Jervell 1996: 98; Sellner 2007: 405–12. Sellner speaks of 'eine unpolemische Marginalisierung des Motivs des stellvertretenden Sühnetodes'.

[5] E.g., Kodell: 1979: 223; Zehnle 1969: 439–40.

existence of a custom whereby a prisoner was to be released to explain the transaction, raising the question as to why he might have departed from what seems to be a much smoother account in Mark.[6] Indeed, many interpreters find Luke's narrative 'abrupt' or his sequence of thought difficult to follow.[7] This essay argues that the third evangelist has crafted this pericope to give it a nuance and function in his account which differ significantly from those expressed by the other evangelists. It further submits that Luke's composition of his trial narrative and its climax suggests that he uses narrative itself to show that Jesus's death is the result of a substitution between the acquitted Jesus and the insurrectionist and murderer Barabbas, and to develop Jesus' narrative identity as the Messiah who thereby dies as the representative of his people.

To demonstrate this proposal, the essay analyses Luke's Barabbas pericope within the broader context of his trial narrative, and in comparison with the way the other evangelists have crafted their own accounts.[8] In particular, it focuses on the way

[6] Even if Luke is here following an independent passion narrative rather than reworking Mark with the help of other sources, the way in which he has crafted this episode raises questions. In defence of Luke's use of an independent passion narrative, see Bovon 2012: 276–77; for the view that Luke is reworking Mark with the help of other sources, see Brown 1994: 64–75.

[7] E.g., Wolter (2008: 748): 'unvermittelt'; Büchele (1978: 36): 'sehr abrupt'; Tannehill (1996: 337): 'unclear'; Nolland 1993:1131.

[8] While some of the ironies and particularities of Luke's trial account have been noticed in the past, no study has examined in detail the relationship between them and the Barabbas pericope, and how the third evangelist uses the Barabbas pericope narratively in his trial account. For studies on the Lukan trial narrative which give special attention to redactional issues, cf. e.g., Heusler 2000; Légasse 1995: 349–91; Tyson 1986: 114–41, 159–65 (esp. 159–65 for a comparison with other gospel accounts); Neyrey 1985: 69–107; Büchele 1978; Walaskay 1975. Note that the present essay offers a comparison of Luke's narrative with the narratives of the other canonical Gospels, not a redactional analysis dependent upon a particular source theory.

the third evangelist has crafted three specific components of his account: the prelude to the exchange (vv. 13–16), the relationship between Jesus and Barabbas, and the relationship between the people and Barabbas. It then concludes with a brief discussion of the implications of this proposal for the current prevalent scholarly assessment of the third's evangelist's view of the meaning of Jesus' death.

1. Pilate and Herod's Verdict (23.13–16)

The first particularity of Luke's account of the Barabbas event is his insertion of verses 13–16. Although this paragraph is sometimes treated separately from verses 18–25, the unity of the whole pericope is suggested by the continuity of both characters and action throughout those verses.[9] Verses 13–25 depict the conclusion of a trial which included an interrogation before the Sanhedrin, another before Pilate, and a final one before Herod. After having gathered the chief priests, the rulers and the people, Pilate ceremoniously announces his verdict in verses 14–16.

> 14 προσηνέγκατέ μοι τὸν ἄνθρωπον τοῦτον ὡς ἀποστρέφοντα τὸν λαόν, καὶ ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ ἐνώπιον ὑμῶν ἀνακρίνας οὐθὲν εὗρον ἐν τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ τούτῳ αἴτιον ὧν κατηγορεῖτε κατ᾽ αὐτοῦ. 15 ἀλλ᾽ οὐδὲ Ἡρῴδης, ἀνέπεμψεν γὰρ αὐτὸν πρὸς ἡμᾶς, καὶ ἰδοὺ οὐδὲν ἄξιον θανάτου ἐστὶν πεπραγμένον αὐτῷ· 16 παιδεύσας οὖν αὐτὸν ἀπολύσω.
>
> 14 You brought me this man as one who was leading the people astray, and I have examined him before you and I have found no basis in this man for your charges against him. 15 Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us.

[9] Wolter 2008: 745; Cf. Bovon 2012: 274–75.

> And as you can see he has done nothing worthy of death. 16 Therefore, I will chastise him and release him.

For Pilate the result of the examination of Jesus is clear: Jesus is not guilty of the charges brought against him, and he has done nothing worthy of death. The innocence of Jesus is underscored by the mention that two judges—Pilate and Herod—have reached the same conclusion.[10] This then leads him to pronounce his verdict: he will release him after having 'disciplined' him (23.16: παιδεύσας οὖν αὐτὸν ἀπολύσω). As noted by several exegetes, in light of Pilate's conclusion, παιδεύω is probably to be taken less as a punishment than as a chastisement serving as a warning.[11] Indeed, the conjunction οὖν (v. 16) suggests a logical conclusion to Pilate's assessment. In Luke, then, Jesus' trial is *concluded*, at least in the first instance, by a verdict of non-guilt and the decision to release him.

In contrast to the third Gospel, neither Mark nor Matthew incorporate a verdict of innocence in their trial narrative. Rather, the account moves directly from Pilate's surprise at Jesus' silence to the mention of the festival during which he used to release a prisoner (cf. Mk 15.5–6; Mt 27.14–15).[12] It is then in the context of the Passover amnesty that Pilate finds an *opportunity* to suggest the release of Jesus. John does include an affirmation of Jesus' innocence by Pilate just before the Barabbas scene

[10] Although the elliptical expression ἀλλ' οὐδὲ Ἡρῴδης in v. 15 could be confusing, most exegetes understand it to mean 'neither did Herod'. Cf. Brown 1994: 792; Tannehill 1996: 336; Bovon 2012: 280–81.

[11] Bovon 2012: 281; Plummer 1951: 525.

[12] The innocence of Jesus is, however, affirmed implicitly several times in both Mark and Matthew (e.g., Mk 15.14 and Mt 27.23, where Pilate asks τί γὰρ ἐποίησεν κακόν;).

(18:38b),[13] but the declaration does not have the value of a verdict in his narrative.[14] Indeed, it is not followed by Pilate's judicial decision to release Jesus, but by his mention of the Passover custom which—as in Matthew and Mark—represents an opportunity to release him. The nuance is quite different from Luke, where the decision to release Jesus is presented as the result of an in-depth judicial procedure.[15] As Wilson (2016: 113) nicely puts it: 'For Luke, the matter has been examined, and Jesus is to be disciplined and then released (Lk 23.15–16). The release of Jesus intended by Pilate is a matter not of custom, but of justice'.[16] Verses 13–16 thus describe what must be considered a verdict upon Jesus: he is innocent and should be released.[17] It is at this point, however, that Luke inserts the Barabbas event.

[13] Καὶ τοῦτο εἰπὼν πάλιν ἐξῆλθεν πρὸς τοὺς Ἰουδαίους καὶ λέγει αὐτοῖς· ἐγὼ οὐδεμίαν εὑρίσκω ἐν αὐτῷ αἰτίαν.

[14] The verdict in John's Gospel follows 19:13, which depicts Pilate taking place on the judge's seat (ἐκάθισεν ἐπὶ βήματος).

[15] Only Luke includes the examination before Herod, thereby multiplying the number of judges involved in assessing Jesus' innocence.

[16] So also Heusler (2000: 155–56), who notes that Luke, unlike Mark, underscores the regularity of the judicial procedure: 'Mit der Vorstellung der Freilassung aufgrund erwiesener Schuldlosigkeit anstelle eines blossen Austausches, der die Schuldfrage nicht beantwortet, nähert Lukas eine Schilderung weiter einem ordnungsgemässen Verfahren an.'

[17] 'Overall, however, the main import for the reader from this preface that Luke places before the mention of Barabbas is not Pilate's shortcomings but his witness (and Herod's) to Jesus' innocence.' (Brown 1994: 793).

2. Jesus and Barabbas (23.18–25)

Luke's narration of the Barabbas event is quite different from that of the other Gospels, for, as already mentioned, he never indicates that this event happens in the context of a tradition according to which the governor would release a prisoner to the people during the festival.

Mt 27.15–21	Mk 15.6–11	Lk 23.18–19	Jn 18:39–40
Κατὰ δὲ ἑορτὴν εἰώθει ὁ ἡγεμὼν ἀπολύειν ἕνα τῷ ὄχλῳ δέσμιον ὃν ἤθελον. 16 εἶχον δὲ τότε δέσμιον ἐπίσημον λεγόμενον Ἰησοῦν Βαραββᾶν.[18]	Κατὰ δὲ ἑορτὴν ἀπέλυεν αὐτοῖς ἕνα δέσμιον ὃν παρῃτοῦντο. 7 ἦν δὲ ὁ λεγόμενος Βαραββᾶς μετὰ τῶν στασιαστῶν δεδεμένος οἵτινες ἐν τῇ στάσει φόνον πεποιήκεισαν.		ἔστιν δὲ συνήθεια ὑμῖν ἵνα ἕνα ἀπολύσω ὑμῖν ἐν τῷ πάσχα·
17 συνηγμένων οὖν αὐτῶν εἶπεν αὐτοῖς ὁ Πιλᾶτος· τίνα θέλετε ἀπολύσω ὑμῖν, Ἰησοῦν τὸν Βαραββᾶν ἢ Ἰησοῦν τὸν λεγόμενον χριστόν; 18 ᾔδει γὰρ ὅτι διὰ φθόνον παρέδωκαν αὐτόν. [v.19…[19]] 20 Οἱ δὲ ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ οἱ πρεσβύτεροι ἔπεισαν τοὺς ὄχλους ἵνα αἰτήσωνται τὸν Βαραββᾶν, τὸν δὲ Ἰησοῦν ἀπολέσωσιν. 21 ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ ὁ ἡγεμὼν εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· τίνα θέλετε ἀπὸ τῶν δύο ἀπολύσω ὑμῖν; οἱ δὲ εἶπαν· τὸν Βαραββᾶν.	8. Καὶ ἀναβὰς ὁ ὄχλος ἤρξατο αἰτεῖσθαι καθὼς ἐποίει αὐτοῖς. 9 ὁ δὲ Πιλᾶτος ἀπεκρίθη αὐτοῖς λέγων· θέλετε ἀπολύσω ὑμῖν τὸν βασιλέα τῶν Ἰουδαίων; 10 ἐγίνωσκεν γὰρ ὅτι διὰ φθόνον παραδεδώκεισαν αὐτὸν οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς. 11 οἱ δὲ ἀρχιερεῖς ἀνέσεισαν τὸν ὄχλον ἵνα μᾶλλον τὸν Βαραββᾶν ἀπολύσῃ αὐτοῖς.	Ἀνέκραγον δὲ παμπληθεὶ λέγοντες· αἶρε τοῦτον, ἀπόλυσον δὲ ἡμῖν τὸν Βαραββᾶν· 19 ὅστις ἦν διὰ στάσιν τινὰ γενομένην ἐν τῇ πόλει καὶ φόνον βληθεὶς ἐν τῇ φυλακῇ.	βούλεσθε οὖν ἀπολύσω ὑμῖν τὸν βασιλέα τῶν Ἰουδαίων; 40 ἐκραύγασαν οὖν πάλιν λέγοντες· μὴ τοῦτον ἀλλὰ τὸν Βαραββᾶν. ἦν δὲ ὁ Βαραββᾶς λῃστής.

[18] On the reading Ἰησοῦν Βαραββᾶν in Mt 27.16–17, see Moses 2011: 43–56.

[19] Καθημένου δὲ αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ τοῦ βήματος ἀπέστειλεν πρὸς αὐτὸν ἡ γυνὴ αὐτοῦ λέγουσα· μηδὲν σοὶ καὶ τῷ δικαίῳ ἐκείνῳ· πολλὰ γὰρ ἔπαθον σήμερον κατ᾽ ὄναρ δι᾽ αὐτόν (Matt 27:19).

Although some manuscripts insert an allusion to the custom either before v. 18 or after v. 19, those insertions are usually accepted as later explanatory glosses.[20] There is therefore no allusion at all to the tradition in the Lukan narrative. In light of the difficulty of finding historical support for such a custom, it has sometimes been suggested that Luke omits the allusion because he is sceptical about its historicity.[21] Such a conclusion remains speculative.[22] Furthermore, while the third evangelist does not mention the custom, he neither suppresses the Barabbas episode, nor does he clarify the procedure taking place, as might be expected if his concern was historicity or plausibility. Indeed, Luke does not, for example, recast the event as an instance of 'pardon' (*venia*) whereby the governor releases a prisoner.[23] Rather, as mentioned

[20] The *textus receptus* includes an additional verse, v. 17, which incorporates a reference to the festival: ἀνάγκην δὲ εἶχεν ἀπολύειν αὐτοῖς κατὰ ἑορτὴν ἕνα (because he had to release someone to them at the festival). But some of the best textual witnesses to Luke (including B, A, P^{75} and Sahidic) do not include the gloss. Furthermore, D, the Syriac Sinaitic and Curetonian translations add it after verse 19, an instability which suggests a later addition. Finally, it is easy to see why the sentence would have been added to clarify the sudden appearance of Barabbas. The gloss is thus widely accepted as unoriginal (Brown 1994: 794; Bovon 2012: 281–82).

[21] So Berenson Maclean (2007: 310); Evans (1990: 856) also lists scepticism as a possible reason for Luke's omission. The historicity of the custom has long been debated. Among the scholars questioning the authenticity of the *privilegium*, cf. e.g., Légasse (1994: 109–11); Brown (1994: 818); Niemand (2007: 423–24); for a defence of the authenticity of the custom, cf. e.g., Nolland (1993: 1129–30); see also the nuanced assessment of Davies and Allison (1997: 3.583), who consider diverse possible scenarios (custom or misinterpreted occasional affair). For more references and a discussion of the sources relevant to amnesty and *acclamatio populi*, see, most recently, Chapman and Schnabel (2015: 255–69).

[22] Cf. Brown 1994: 794; cf. 819.

[23] Cf. the examples of amnesty discussed in Chapman and Schnabel 2015: 256–62.

earlier, many exegetes find the way he introduces the episode abrupt and awkward. What is suggested here is that the third evangelist has crafted this episode in this manner to give it a different nuance in his narrative. Indeed, Luke depicts an *exchange*, a substitution, between the guilty Barabbas and the innocent Jesus. This interpretation is highlighted by the way the narrator has crafted the event and its consequences for both Barabbas and Jesus.

Most importantly, in Luke's account the liberation of Barabbas is not presented as the result of a special act of grace or tradition, but is causally linked to the verdict of innocence pronounced upon Jesus. As Brown (1994: 800) notes:

> In Luke 23:18 (without any reference to a festal privilege) the Jewish authorities and the people whom Pilate has called together show initiative, responding to Pilate's offer to release Jesus (23:16) by demanding that a substitute be released.

Brown, however, fails to eliminate totally the festival background from his interpretation. Indeed, Pilate is not *offering* to release Jesus. This is not a suggestion. This reading presupposes the custom of the festival. But as discussed above, Pilate's *decision* to release Jesus is based on a verdict: Jesus is innocent and there is no reason to put him to death. At this point, the crowds bring up the name of Barabbas. Interpreters frequently find this introduction of the personage to be abrupt, sometimes even challenging the coherence of the account.[24] The logic suggested by Luke's account is that the crowds make a suggestion in light of Pilate's decision to release Jesus: they

[24] Wolter 2008: 748; Tannehill 1996: 337; Nolland 1993: 1131; Büchele 1978: 36.

audaciously request that Pilate releases somebody else: Ἀνέκραγον δὲ παμπληθεὶ λέγοντες· αἶρε τοῦτον, ἀπόλυσον δὲ ἡμῖν τὸν Βαραββᾶν. Ἀπόλυσον in v. 18 echoes ἀπολύσω in v. 16, suggesting that the crowds are requiring Pilate to set somebody else free instead of Jesus.[25] In Luke's Gospel, then, Barabbas is not released because of a custom, nor because of the *choice* of the Jewish people.[26] Rather, Barabbas is allowed to go free because he is released *instead of* Jesus. If the Lukan narrative is read without any knowledge of another account of this event, the reader is likely to conclude that Barabbas is set free because Jesus was about to be released, and instead, the crowds ask that Barabbas be released. There is no sign that Barabbas could have been set free without the verdict upon Jesus.

At the same time, the appearance of the person of Barabbas also significantly influences the fate of Jesus in Luke's narrative. Indeed, at this crucial point Jesus is about to be released by Pilate, having been emphatically declared to be not guilty. Precisely at this time, however, the crowds cry out: take Jesus and release Barabbas to us. In light of Pilate's firm decision to release Jesus and the crowds' desire—even determination, as the rest of the narrative shows (vv. 22–23)—to condemn Jesus, their request sounds like the suggestion of an arrangement whereby Jesus could still be condemned despite the verdict of his innocence. In other words, in Luke's account

[25] Fitzmyer, 1985: 1489.

[26] Many exegetes, even when they notice the nuance of substitution, still speak of the event in Luke 23 as a choice. It is clear that, implicitly, the people *are* choosing Barabbas over Jesus, but this is not the emphasis of the text, as it is in the other gospel accounts (cf. Mt 27.17: τίνα θέλετε ἀπολύσω ὑμῖν, Ἰησοῦν τὸν Βαραββᾶν ἢ Ἰησοῦν τὸν λεγόμενον χριστόν; Mk 15.9: θέλετε ἀπολύσω ὑμῖν τὸν βασιλέα τῶν Ἰουδαίων; Jn 18.39: βούλεσθε οὖν ἀπολύσω ὑμῖν τὸν βασιλέα τῶν Ἰουδαίων;). *Contra* Neyrey (1985: 83) who sees the choice of the people as a distinctive feature of the Lukan account.

Barabbas seems to be providing a rationale to execute Jesus, with Barabbas being liable to the death which is implicitly requested for Jesus. This reading is reinforced by the narrator's immediate clarification of Barabbas' capital crimes, apparently providing an explanation for the crowds' request.

> Ἀνέκραγον δὲ παμπληθεὶ λέγοντες· αἶρε τοῦτον, ἀπόλυσον δὲ ἡμῖν τὸν Βαραββᾶν· **ὅστις ἦν διὰ στάσιν τινὰ γενομένην ἐν τῇ πόλει καὶ φόνον βληθεὶς ἐν τῇ φυλακῇ** (Lk 23.19).

Barabbas was in prison after being accused of insurrection and murder, charges for which he could justifiably be crucified.[27] Luke is the only evangelist who unambiguously attaches those charges to Barabbas himself. According to Mark, Barabbas was in prison with those who had committed insurrection and murder (Mk 15.7: ἦν δὲ ὁ λεγόμενος Βαραββᾶς μετὰ τῶν στασιαστῶν δεδεμένος οἵτινες ἐν τῇ στάσει φόνον πεποιήκεισαν), Matthew only comments that Barabbas was a famous criminal (Mt 27.15: εἶχον δὲ τότε δέσμιον ἐπίσημον λεγόμενον Ἰησοῦν Βαραββᾶν), and John calls Barabbas a brigand (Jn 18.40: ἦν δὲ ὁ Βαραββᾶς λῃστής). Furthermore, only Luke's trial account spells out in detail the charges against Jesus, creating a parallel between the charges against Barabbas and those brought against Jesus. These accusations, which are repeated three times in the narrative, are summarized at the beginning of the Barabbas pericope in v. 14: προσηνέγκατέ μοι τὸν ἄνθρωπον τοῦτον ὡς ἀποστρέφοντα τὸν λαόν. As the trial narrative has made clear, this accusation points to an attempt by Jesus to bring the people into sedition through his teaching and messianic claims (cf. Lk 23.2, 5).

[27] On the charges which could lead to crucifixion by the Romans, see Chapman and Schnabel (2015: 532–653; esp. 532–33, 602, and 640–53).

> Lk 23.2: Ἤρξαντο δὲ κατηγορεῖν αὐτοῦ λέγοντες· τοῦτον εὕραμεν **διαστρέφοντα τὸ ἔθνος ἡμῶν** καὶ **κωλύοντα φόρους Καίσαρι διδόναι** καὶ λέγοντα **ἑαυτὸν χριστὸν βασιλέα εἶναι**.[28]
>
> Lk 23.5: οἱ δὲ ἐπίσχυον λέγοντες ὅτι **ἀνασείει τὸν λαὸν** διδάσκων καθ᾽ ὅλης τῆς Ἰουδαίας, καὶ ἀρξάμενος ἀπὸ τῆς Γαλιλαίας ἕως ὧδε.

Only Luke explicitly associates Jesus with sedition. The other Gospels simply report that Jesus was interrogated by Pilate as to whether he was 'the king of the Jews' (Mk 15.2; Mt 27.11; Jn 18.33), John adding the vague accusation that Jesus was an evildoer (18.30: κακὸν ποιῶν). In this light, the fact that the Jewish leadership brings up the name of a person for release who has been charged with murder and sedition (v. 18) strongly suggests that what is intended here is some form of *exchange*, whereby not only does Barabbas become the beneficiary of the consequence of the verdict about Jesus' innocence, but Jesus can also be put to death by taking the place of Barabbas. That this is the rationale is also suggested by the fact that the request to crucify Jesus becomes explicit and bold after Barabbas is introduced into the narrative (v. 21). Before this event, Jesus' examination turns on the question of whether he is guilty of the charges or deserves death (vv. 4, 14, 15). The case is weak, as Pilate and Herod conclude, and the question of a crucifixion is never raised. After the request for the exchange, however, the people boldly ask for Jesus' crucifixion (v. 21). Unlike the other Synoptic accounts (Mk 15.12; Mt 27.22), Pilate never needs to ask what he should do

[28] The relationship between the three parts of the charge is not entirely clear, but it is likely that the charge of misleading the people is the main accusation, which is exemplified through the other two charges. This reading seems to be supported by Pilate's summary of the charge in Lk 23.14.

with Jesus if Barabbas is released. Rather, the people directly ask for his crucifixion after they request the exchange, without any further attempt to demonstrate Jesus' guilt.[29]

These elements suggest that Luke's narrative presents the Barabbas event as the request to exchange Jesus and Barabbas in the wake of the verdict of Jesus' innocence and the decision to release him. The two verbs used in the request emphasize the dynamic of the transaction: '*Take* [αἶρε] this one, *release* [ἀπόλυσον] Barabbas to us [ἡμῖν]'. While Barabbas is put forward as a substitute for Jesus' release, Jesus is suggested as a substitute for the penalty that Barabbas should endure. Although several exegetes note that Luke is describing an exchange or a substitution here, the particular nuance that the third evangelist has given this exchange is often missed. Indeed, this is not an exchange between two prisoners or two criminals.[30] Such a reading reintroduces some of the logic provided by the context of the festival. Rather, what Luke describes is an exchange between the non-guilty Jesus, who is about to be released, and the seditious and murderous Barabbas, who should rightly be crucified. This is underscored by the conclusion of the pericope, where ἀπέλυσεν (v. 25) echoes Pilate's judgment (v. 14), showing that the verdict on Jesus in v.16 is applied to 'the one who had been thrown in prison because of stasis and murder' (v. 25).

In the third Gospel then, the verses concerned with Barabbas (vv. 18–25) play a key role which dramatically changes the course of the trial narrative. Concretely, they

[29] The request to crucify Jesus also comes spontaneously from the chief priests and their officials in John (19.6), but it is not connected with the Barabbas event. Barabbas is only briefly alluded to in John (a single verse—18.39), when the 'Jews' reject Pilate's suggestion to release Jesus in virtue of the Passover custom and ask instead for the release of Barabbas.

[30] *Contra* e.g. Conzelmann 1961: 87; Fitzmyer 1985: 1489:

describe the Jewish request to exchange Barabbas and Jesus in light of the Roman verdict, a proposal which—after some hesitation (vv. 20–22) —is finally ratified by the Roman authority figure, Pilate (vv. 24–25). Indeed, unlike Mark and Matthew's account, where the pericope concludes with Pilate releasing Barabbas and delivering Jesus to be crucified, either to satisfy the crowd (Mk 15.15) or because he has washed his hands of what will happen to Jesus (Matt 27.26), verses 24–25 in Luke's account read like the endorsement of a final *sentence*.

> 24 Καὶ Πιλᾶτος ἐπέκρινεν γενέσθαι τὸ αἴτημα αὐτῶν· 25 ἀπέλυσεν δὲ τὸν διὰ στάσιν καὶ φόνον βεβλημένον εἰς φυλακὴν ὃν ᾐτοῦντο, τὸν δὲ Ἰησοῦν παρέδωκεν τῷ θελήματι αὐτῶν.

ἐπέκρινεν in v. 24 suggests a judicial procedure. Although the verb can mean simply 'to decide' or 'to determine', it is also used in formal contexts such as sentences or decrees (cf. 2 Macc 4.47; *3 Macc.* 4.2).[31] Furthermore, and as already mentioned, ἀπέλυσεν in v. 25 echoes the earlier sentence of v. 16. At the same time, the conclusion emphasizes the role played by the people's 'request' in the procedure (cf. τὸ αἴτημα αὐτῶν; ὃν ᾐτοῦντο; τῷ θελήματι αὐτῶν). Although this is sometimes interpreted as highlighting Pilate's capitulation to the pressure to thwart justice as brought by a seditious and malign populace, this only partly reflects the nuance that Luke has given to this account. Rather, Pilate is endorsing the proposal of an exchange between an innocent man and a seditious and murderous man requested by the people of Jerusalem. Verses 18–23 thus present an interlude whereby a judicial arrangement is suggested and finally agreed upon between Pilate and the people. This reading differs noticeably from the accounts in Mark and Matthew, where the governor attempts to use a Passover

[31] On the judicial overtone, cf. Tyson 1986: 162; Heusler 2000: 173; Walaskey 1975: 91–92.

tradition in order to release Jesus, and the chief priests stir up the people so that they rather *choose* Barabbas to ensure that they can get rid of Jesus.

3. The People and Barabbas

The last point to examine in Luke's crafting of this pericope concerns his characterisation of the people. As often noted by commentators, in this climatic episode of his trial narrative Luke introduces, for the first time, the whole people (λαός) as siding with the chief priests and the Jewish leaders in their accusation of Jesus and their request for Barabbas (cf. v. 13: Πιλᾶτος δὲ συγκαλεσάμενος τοὺς ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ τοὺς ἄρχοντας καὶ τὸν λαὸν).[32] The use of the term λαός rather than ὄχλος (cf. Mk 15.8; Mt 27.15) is particularly interesting in light of the Lukan propensity to use this term with reference to the Jewish people in their distinctiveness as God's people and the recipients of his promises.[33] A group representing the whole people are thus assembled to hear and, as suggested above, participate in, the ultimate decision concerning Jesus. The cry for the 'exchange' in v. 18 is thus described as a spontaneous unanimous request rather than as the result of a shrewd manipulation by the chief priests and the elders suggested by the other gospels (Mk 15.11; Mt 27.20). The effect of the people's insistent request for the liberation of Barabbas is to align them with him.[34] Indeed their shout—'Release

[32] Cf. Tannehill 1996: 335.

[33] Cf. e.g. Lk 1.68, 77; 2.32; 3.15; 7.16; so Tannehill (1996: 335): 'This term, which sometimes alternates with 'crowd' in Lukan usage, becomes especially frequent from 19:47 on and has a special connotation. It designates the Jewish people in their distinctiveness, that is, in light of their scriptural heritage, including the promises that give them a special place in God's purpose (cf. Tannehill 1986 143–44). At this point a group that represents the 'people' becomes involved in Jesus' death'. On Luke's use of this term, cf. Kodell 1969: 327–43.

[34] Conzelmann, 1961: 87; Cf. Green 1997: 808.

Barabbas *to us*' (23:18: ἀπόλυσον δὲ ἡμῖν τὸν Βαραββᾶν)—underscores their solidarity with him and their willingness to protect him. The whole people is depicted as supporting and protecting the insurrectionist and murderer. From a Roman legal point of view, this makes them liable to the same punishment as him, for those supporting 'robbers' in any way could be identified with them.[35] Thus, the Roman jurist Julius Paulus writes:

> *Receptores adgressorum itemque latronum eadem poena adficiuntur qua ipsi latrones* (Julius Paulus, *Sent* 5.3.4)
> Those receiving (or sheltering) assailants or brigands will be afflicted with the same punishment as the brigands themselves.[36]

Similarly, concerning first-century Palestine, Josephus reports how Felix inflicted punishment on both the brigands from Eleazar's group *and the common people who supported them*.

> οὗτος τόν τε ἀρχιληστὴν Ἐλεάζαρον ἔτεσιν εἴκοσι τὴν χώραν λῃσάμενον καὶ πολλοὺς τῶν σὺν αὐτῷ ζωγρήσας ἀνέπεμψεν εἰς Ῥώμην· τῶν δ' ἀνασταυρωθέντων ὑπ' αὐτοῦ λῃστῶν καὶ τῶν ἐπὶ κοινωνίᾳ φωραθέντων δημοτῶν, οὓς ἐκόλασεν, ἄπειρόν τι πλῆθος ἦν (Josephus, *Bell*. 2. 253 [LCL]).

[35] Hengel 1989: 31. The two examples which follow are mentioned in his study (translations are my own).

[36] Hengel (1989: 30) also refers to *Dig*. 1, 18, 13 Prol (from Ulpianus, Lib VII *De officio proconsulis*): *(praeses) sacrileges latrones plagiarios fures conquirere debet et prout quisque deliquerit in eum animadvertere, receptoresque eorum coercere, sine quibus latro diutius latere non potest*.

> And he [Felix] took captive the chief brigand Eleazar, who had plundered the country for twenty years, with many of his associates, and sent them to Rome. Of the brigands whom he crucified, and of the commoners convicted by association whom he punished, the number was infinite.

The request of the people for Barabbas' release casts them as his *receptores*. By claiming their support of Barabbas, the crowd associates itself with the insurrectionist and murderer, thus casting an unmistakable shadow over their loyalty to Rome and becoming liable to the same punishment. Furthermore, this association between Barabbas and the people is strengthened by the way the third evangelist characterizes the people and its leaders throughout his trial narrative. Indeed, the leaders and then the people are described as turning into what appears to be a seditious mob. This is hinted at already during the first examination, when Pilate declares Jesus to be innocent but the leadership becomes insistent, trying to rebel against and overthrow Pilate's judgment: οἱ δὲ ἐπίσχυον λέγοντες ὅτι ἀνασείει τὸν λαὸν (23.5). It is further suggested by the accumulation of verbs expressing increasing tumult in the climactic pericope: Ἀνέκραγον (v. 18), ἐπεφώνουν (v. 21), the double cry σταύρου σταύρου (v. 21), and the culmination of insistent shouts in v. 23: οἱ δὲ ἐπέκειντο φωναῖς μεγάλαις αἰτούμενοι αὐτὸν σταυρωθῆναι, καὶ κατίσχυον αἱ φωναὶ αὐτῶν. The scene suggests that the people are in rebellion against Pilate's judgment (and justice!), thereby threatening to move into sedition.

The riotous attitude of the people is further highlighted by another ironical dimension in Luke's narrative. Indeed, from the examination by the Jewish council (22.66–71) through the hearings before Pilate (23.2–5; cf. v. 14), the trial of Jesus centres on his messianic claims and it is because of their rejection of this claim that the

leaders bring Jesus before Pilate (22.71–23.2) and grow seditious against his judgment (23.5; with the whole people: 23.21, 23). Although Jesus' answer to the Jewish council (22.66–71) and Pilate (23.3) when he is questioned about his messianic identity is sometimes interpreted as ambiguous or as a rejection of the royal title, the narrative has made it clear that, for Luke, Jesus is the messiah and that he embraces this identity.[37] From Luke's authorial perspective then, the trial narrative is also a depiction of the people's rebellion against its own king—indeed against God's anointed. This interpretation is confirmed later in Acts 4.25–27, which refers to the alliance of Herod, Pilate, the nations and the people of Israel against the Lord's messiah.

The final and climactic piece of irony in the characterisation of the people and another sign of its solidarity with Barabbas is that they are also committing murder by handing over a man who has clearly been declared unworthy of death. The crowd is thus not only seditious but murderous, an attitude underscored by the frenzy with which they ask for Jesus' crucifixion (23:21, 23). This reading is confirmed in Acts 3.15, where the people of Jerusalem are clearly identified as those who 'killed' the author of life (ἠτήσασθε ἄνδρα φονέα χαρισθῆναι ὑμῖν, τὸν δὲ ἀρχηγὸν τῆς ζωῆς ἀπεκτείνατε) and in Stephen's speech which denounces his audience as 'murderers' (φονεῖς) of the Righteous One (7:52). Throughout the trial narrative, then, the people are depicted as a rebellious and murderous crowd—a characterization which, significantly, echoes the description of Barabbas. While there is a partial parallel between the charges against Jesus (sedition) and Barabbas (sedition and murder), the true parallel lies between the

[37] See, for example, Lk 2.11, 26; 4.41; 9.20. For Jesus' messianic self-consciousness in Luke, see his answer to the Baptist's question (Lk 7.20–23), his entry into Jerusalem (19.28–40, esp. v. 40), his action in the temple which many interpreters consider to be a royal action (19.45–48) and Lk 24.26.

people and Barabbas. They not only side with him and want to protect him, they are in fact a seditious and murderous crowd.[38]

Throughout his trial narrative then, Luke develops a characterization of the people which in several ways demonstrates its solidarity with Barabbas. This, I suggest, shows that for Luke, Barabbas is to be understood as *the representative* of the people of Jerusalem. He is the one with whom the people identify, the one whom they want to have released for them, and the one who reflects their character and actions: sedition and murder. The importance of Barabbas' representative status is highlighted at the end of the trial narrative, when, instead of using Barabbas' name, Luke concludes by writing that Pilate released 'the one who was in prison because of sedition and murder' (τὸν διὰ στάσιν καὶ φόνον βεβλημένον εἰς φυλακὴν), and handed Jesus over to their will (23:25).

4. Conclusion: The Messiah and His People

As has been highlighted, in his trial narrative Luke has given the Barabbas event a nuance and function which differ significantly from the other Gospel accounts. Rather than portraying the event in the context of a tradition of amnesty whereby the people *chooses* Barabbas instead of Jesus as the object of a special grace, Luke depicts an *exchange*, indeed a *substitution*, between the acquitted Jesus and the insurrectionist and murderer Barabbas. Consequently, unlike in the other Gospels where the Barabbas pericope represents a potential *opportunity* for Jesus's release, in Luke it represents a

[38] This parallel is strengthened in light of the possibility that Barabbas acted violently against his own compatriots during the sedition. Indeed, there is no indication that Barabbas murdered a Roman person during the sedition or the riot. Insurrection, even against the occupiers, could obviously imply the murder of members of one's own people if necessary. Brown (1994: 797) remarks: 'Both Mark and Luke indicate that killing (*phonos*, 'murder') had marked the riot; but neither suggests that Roman soldiers were the victims, as some scholars in their attempts to make this a major insurrection'.

dramatic reversal which changes the course of Jesus' trial and leads to his execution. Indeed, Jesus experiences Barabbas' death in his place, whereas Barabbas is released *because* of Jesus' innocence. Furthermore, throughout his trial narrative, Luke characterizes the people of Jerusalem as murderous and seditious and in solidarity with Barabbas, a description which suggests that Barabbas is to be understood as the representative of the people. For Luke, then, Jesus' condemnation and death is the result of a substitution between the murderous and seditious representative of the people and the acquitted Jesus. His trial narrative thus climaxes with the one whom his story has identified as the Messiah being handed to death instead of the representative of his people.

The significance of this presentation for Luke's Christology is suggested by the centrality of the debate concerning Jesus' messianic identity in his trial narrative (cf. 22.67–71; 23.3). Throughout the trials, both the Jewish leadership and Pilate display unbelief regarding this identity and reject Jesus' (implicit) messianic claims.[39] The trial narrative thus becomes a scene of rebellion - a rebellion against God's anointed king (cf. Lk 1.32–33; 2.11). Yet ironically, through the people's rejection and their decision to substitute Jesus for Barabbas, Jesus is finally treated as a king, albeit the king of a rebellious and murderous crowd, who dies as the representative of his people. The trial narrative thus concludes with the picture of Luke's Messiah being handed over by his own people under the charge and enduring the punishment which should fall upon them.

[39] Jesus' answer to the questions concerning his messianic identity during the trials (σὺ λέγεις [23.3]; ὑμεῖς λέγετε ὅτι ἐγώ εἰμι [22.70]) are sometimes interpreted as his rejection of the messianic title. But as pointed out in n. 37, Jesus embraces his messianic identity in Luke.

Luke's Messiah thus takes on a representative role in his very death, thereby shedding light on the nature of his much disputed messianic identity.[40]

Such a nuance at this crucial point of Luke's passion narrative raises questions about the widespread consensus that the third evangelist does not hold to an 'atoning' or 'substitutionary' significance of Jesus' death, or that he downplays or marginalizes it.[41] Indeed, the present analysis suggests that Luke has crafted his trial narrative so as to heighten the nuance of substitution in comparison to the other Gospels. Discussions of Luke's understanding of Jesus' death rarely mention the Barabbas event. A few exegetes have suggested that the exchange is a 'theological pointer' or a 'symbol' of the substitutionary significance of Jesus' death.[42] But, as has been highlighted, the careful way Luke has crafted his trial narrative and its climax suggests that he is doing more than providing a possible 'symbol' or 'pointer' disconnected from the rest of his narrative. His whole trial narrative builds towards this climactic confrontation between the messianic pretender and the people, using characterisation, irony, and plot to highlight the representative status of Barabbas and to depict an exchange which leads to the death of the one he as identified as the Messiah.[43]

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[40] While Jesus' messianic claims remain implicit in his words and actions during his lifetime, he speaks more directly of himself as the messiah after his death and resurrection. Cf. Lk 24.26: οὐχὶ ταῦτα ἔδει παθεῖν τὸν χριστὸν καὶ εἰσελθεῖν εἰς τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ; see also Acts 2.36.

[41] Cf. n. 2.

[42] So, for example, Hooker (1994: 88); Green (1988: 288 [but Green makes no allusion to such an understanding in his later commentary (1997)]; Wilson 2016: 112. These exegetes do not, however, analyse the relationship between the Barabbas event and the trial narrative as a whole, and how Luke recrafts his narrative to highlight the relationship between Jesus, Barabbas and the people.

[43] The crucial role of this event for Luke is underscored by the reference he makes to it in Acts 3.14.

That the third evangelist would 'show' narratively the substitutionary nature of Jesus' death should come as no surprise in a narrative work: in fact, this is precisely what we should expect. As Marguerat and Bourquin (1999: 22) point out with respect to narrative works, 'the way in which an episode is related (the discourse) is as important as the events related (the story), if not more so. […] If we want to grasp the theology of the narrator, we must essentially question his narrative strategy'.[44] Scholarship has already highlighted the importance of Luke's narrative strategy to illuminate his Christology.[45] The present essay suggests that the third evangelist uses characterization and plot to communicate the categories of representation and substitution which have often been regarded as absent from Luke's understanding of Jesus' death, and to shed light on the nature of Jesus' messianic identity.

The meaning of Jesus' death in Luke's work is, of course, a much broader topic beyond the confines of this essay. But if the third evangelist has crafted his climactic account to depict the very *cause* of Jesus' death to be a substitution with his people's seditious and murderous representative, it becomes much more difficult to say that he has not integrated the idea of substitution implied in the words of institution (22.19–20) into his own theology.

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[44] Cf. Marguerat and Bourquin (1999: 106): 'By the explicit commentary, the narrator speaks directly; the reader hears his voice. But communication can be established indirectly: then the narrator speaks "tacitly" through the words and actions of the characters, through the plot.'

[45]See especially Rowe 2006. Ricoeur (1990: 241) writes: "It is one of the functions of the narrative art, through the combined interplay of plot and character development [. . .], to answer the question 'who?' by indicating what we may call the narrative identity of the character, that is the identity produced by the narrative itself."

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