



[Luke 1:67-80](#)

The Benedictus of Zechariah

Date: 1st CE

Language: Greek

Category: New Testament

Title of work: The Gospel According to Luke

Reference:

1.67-80

Commentary:

John the Baptist is an important figure in the Gospel tradition, notably for his role as the forerunner to Jesus Christ. Mark's Gospel, for instance, opens with a reference to the prophecy in Isaiah 40 that a figure will appear before the Lord to announce his coming and "prepare the way" for him, which John fulfils before baptising Jesus in advance of the start of his ministry (Mark 1:2-11). John's teaching is also elaborated upon by the Lukan author, drawing on the same Isaiah text in 3:1-20. Moreover, Mark 6:14-29 narrates the execution of John the Baptist by Herod Antipas in such a fashion that it is argued by some scholars that the author intends to parallel his martyrdom with that of Jesus. In this passage, the birth of John has just occurred, and his father, Zechariah, is imbued with the holy spirit, causing him to prophesy regarding his son's important role in God's grand scheme to redeem his people both from their sin, and from their enemies. Zechariah's speech, often referred to as the Benedictus, mirrors the so-called Magnificat of Mary, Jesus's mother, in Luke 1:46-55, which identifies Jesus's birth as the fulfilment of eschatological hopes, during which the powerful will be brought down from their thrones and the lowly lifted high (1:52). For focused discussions of the form and structure of Zechariah's speech, see François Rousseau, "Les Structures du Benedictus," and Albert Vanhoye, "Structure du 'Benedictus,'" the latter of whom is perhaps too intent on proving the original unity of the speech, and exaggerates the significance of certain features. Regardless, Zechariah's prophecy as we have it brings together the important work of both John and Jesus in God's salvific plan.

Pyung-Soo Seo (*Luke's Jesus in the Roman Empire*) argues that one of Luke's overall intentions is to present Jesus as holding a God-given authority that elevates him above all others, in particular, above the authority of Rome. This line of argument sees Luke's Jesus present a subtle, yet subversive challenge to the emperor's authority. For Pyung-Soo Seo, this picture of Jesus is made clear from the very beginning of Luke's narrative, in the comparison of Jesus's birth narrative to that of John. John's birth narrative is set in the days of "King Herod of Judea" (Luke 1:15), whereas we are told that Jesus's birth comes during the time that Quirinius was governor of Syria, and a census was taken by order of Augustus ([Luke 2:1-7](#)). There have been many scholarly discussions over the issues of date and historicity associated with Luke's references to this census, but these are less important here than how these authority figures are used by Luke. While John's authority is limited to the Judean territory of Herod, Jesus's authority is figuratively linked to the wider influence of Augustus, through the association of the census carried out by Quirinius under Augustus's instruction (see Pyung-Soo Seo, *Luke's Jesus in the Roman Empire*, p. 23-27). Andrew Clark highlights in this regard that while John's mission is directed only to Israel (seen at the end of this passage in verse 80), Jesus's mission is for all people, both Jew and Gentile (Luke 2:10, 32) (see Andrew Clark, *Parallel Lives*, p. 106).

All this becomes relevant for the present passage when we consider Jesus, the saviour to whom Zechariah's speech refers, in relation to the enemies that he will deliver God's people from. Verse 74 reaffirms the "negative definition of salvation" that is given in verse 71 (John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20*, p. 88) – i.e. salvation as the absence of oppression from enemies. Of course, the language of the speech draws heavily on that of the Hebrew Bible, opening with a familiar formula of praise: "Blessed is the Lord" (see 1 Samuel 25:32; 1 Kings 1:48; 8:15), and the notion of the "horn of salvation" (Luke 1:69) (and indeed salvation from enemies in general) bearing strong resemblance to 2 Samuel 22:3 and Psalms 18:2, for instance. However, Jesus as this peace-bringing, salvific victor has also been interpreted as suggesting an imperial propaganda parallel, with Jesus presented as comparable to the Roman ideological image of the emperor, in that he brings a universal peace, which knows no physical boundaries (see recently Pyung-Soo Seo, *Luke's Jesus in the Roman Empire*, p. 164-165, but also Gary Gilbert,



“Roman Propaganda,” p. 241). For portrayals of Augustus as the bringer of a new “Golden Age” of peace and prosperity for Rome, one only need look to Virgil’s *Aeneid* in the first instance (see, for example, [VI.791-794](#)) or his [fourth Eclogue](#) which looks forward to the coming of a Roman “Messiah” figure (although whether Augustus is actually who Virgil has in mind here is debated). Jesus is not referred to as “saviour” (?????) in Mark’s Gospel or Matthew’s (see Joseph Fitzmyer, *To Advance the Gospel*, p. 258), and Allen Brent (*Imperial Cult*, p. 92-93, 105) maintains that it is a possibility that part of Luke’s intention in applying this term to Jesus was to mirror the common images of Augustus and those who followed him as ceasing war and ushering in peace in the figure of Jesus. There is an important difference, however. Jesus is not a conquering warrior, but rather a different type of “hero.” Granted, both the imperial ideology of the emperor/empire bringing stability and peace (even if this at first requires bloody war) and the Gospel image of Jesus as the bringer of peace and redemption to God’s people (now defined as anyone who wants to follow Jesus) forward the promise of a new era bound up in a God-given leader. However, ultimately, Jesus did not provide the expected Messianic figure for the Jewish people of his day – he did not bring them peace and freedom from their oppressors, and in many ways subverts the portrayal of the emperor, because unlike him, he requires not physical earthly conquests - he does not need to “earn” respect from the people and authority through war and other achievements, but rather has a divine right to it anyway, and offers something unique that no Roman authority can offer - forgiveness of sin.

There is no need to understand Luke in this passage as drawing more influence from either the Hebrew Bible or imperial ideology over and against the other. Rather, perhaps the imagery and hopes expressed in the Scriptures gain a new dimension in the socio-political environment in which Luke’s Gospel was composed, where Jesus can be both the long-awaited saviour anticipated by the ancient prophets, and a challenge to the emperor’s authority.

Bibliographical references: John Nolland, [Luke 1-9:20](#) (Dallas: Word Books, 1989)

Pyung-Soo Seo, [Luke’s Jesus in the Roman Empire and the Emperor in the Gospel of Luke](#) (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2015)

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