

# **The Salvation of God**

Lucan Soteriology Then and Now

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Gospels – Luke (MB636)  
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## Introduction

Few themes, if any, are more significant for Luke than that of Salvation, which is “embodied in the messiah” and “in close connection with the person of Jesus”.

Therefore, inasmuch as Luke’s gospel is about Jesus, it is also about the Salvation He brings.<sup>1</sup>

Our analysis of Lucan Soteriology will consider four key Salvation terms, explore questions about the content, timing, reception and scope of Salvation in Luke, and consider the significance of Lucan Soteriology for the contemporary world.

## Lucan Salvation Terminology

It must be said that this theme is present throughout Luke’s Gospel, even where ‘Salvation’ terminology is absent.<sup>2</sup> Salvation is *expected* in the birth narratives (1:5-2:52), heralded by John the Baptist (3:1-4:13), *demonstrated* in the Galilean ministry of Jesus (4:14-9:50), *presented* in the preaching and teaching of Jesus (9:51-19:44), *resisted* by the religious leaders in Jerusalem (19:45-21:38), *accomplished* fully in the death & resurrection events (22:1-23:56) and *announced* in the post-resurrection narrative (24:1-53).<sup>3</sup> To encounter the Saviour is to encounter His salvation.

Nonetheless, appreciation of the ‘Salvation’ terms and their usage is essential for our task. Firstly, the verb σώζω (*sozo* – “I save”) is used 17 times in Luke.<sup>4</sup> It can

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<sup>1</sup> John Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary: Luke 1-9:20* (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1989), 120, 144; on 2:30-32 and 3:6 respectively.

<sup>2</sup> For example, the verb ρυομαι (*rhyomai* – ‘rescue’) in 1:74; denoting a ‘salvation’ (deliverance) from enemies.

<sup>3</sup> Luke continues the outworking of both the announcement and demonstration of this salvation in the book of Acts.

<sup>4</sup> I.H. Marshall, ‘Salvation’ in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Eds. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, Illinois / Leicester, England: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 720; John Reumann, ‘Save’ in *The Westminster Theological Wordbook of the Bible*. Edited by Donald E. Gowan (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press: 2003), 452-3; and Gerald G O’Collins, ‘Salvation’ in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary: Volume 5*. Ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 910-11; cf. also Luke’s usage in 7:3 of διασωζω[ση] *diasozo[se]*.

mean ‘to deliver’ (restore to a better state – 23:35, 37, 39), ‘to heal’ (rescue from physical unhealth, including demonic affliction – 6:9; 7:50; 8:36, 48, 50; 17:19; 18:42), or ‘to save’ (to undergo divine salvation; i.e. to ‘inherit eternal life’, ‘enter the kingdom of God’ – 8:12; 9:24; 13:23; 18:26; 19:10). Luke’s usage, however, often implies more than one meaning at once; for example when faith or belief accompanies the deliverance or healing (7:50; 8:12; 8:48, 50; 9:24; 17:19; 18:42).

Next, σωτήρ (*soter* – “Saviour”) is a pronoun denoting the agent of salvation. Compared to the wide usage of this term outside the New Testament, it is rare in the gospels; of its 24 New Testament uses, only 5 are in the gospels and Acts, and 4 of those are in Luke-Acts (2 each).<sup>5</sup> The apparent restraint in use might be explained as caution among writers regarding the pagan (Zeus, Isis, Asclepius and the Emperor Caesar were all called ‘saviours’) and nationalistic (linked to expectations of a military deliverer from Roman oppression) connotations the term carried.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the two Lucan usages identify Jesus as the true agent of the long-awaited salvation; over and against any other possible bearers of that title.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the nouns σωτηρία and σωτήριον (*soteria* and *soterion* – “Salvation”) refer to salvation itself; the former perhaps referring more to the “process of saving” and the latter to “the means by which people experience divine salvation.”<sup>8</sup> Lucan usage ranges from deliverance from enemies (1:69, 71), to forgiveness of sins (1:77)

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 1:47, 2:11; John 4:42 (the use of this term by Samaritans is of note!); and Acts 5:31, 13:23.

<sup>6</sup> For extensive background connotations, including usage in Greek (gods, men, philosophers, statesmen, emperor, etc. as ζωτήρ); Old Testament; Later Judaism; rest of New Testament; Post-Apostolic Fathers; Gnosticism and Primitive Christianity, see Werner Foerster, ‘ζωτήρ’ in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Volume VII* Σ. Ed. Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans: 1971), 1003-1024, esp. 1020-1 on infrequency of ζωτήρ; see also Reumann, ‘Save’ in *The Westminster Theological Wordbook of the Bible*, 449-455 (esp. 452-3 on use of ζωτήρ).

<sup>7</sup> And also (interestingly) presenting Jesus as sharing the Saviour title with God (2:11 “...to you is born... a Saviour...” → 1:47 “...God my Saviour”).

<sup>8</sup> I.H. Marshall, ‘Salvation’ in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 721 (quoting Louw and Nida on ‘soterion’).

and that which Jesus announces has visited the house of Zacchaeus (following his active demonstration of repentance – 19:9).

### **Key Questions**

Having considered the above terminology, we can now more clearly discern Lucan answers to questions regarding the content, timing, reception and scope of Salvation; all of which are within the over-arching question of ‘What does it mean to be Saved?’<sup>9</sup>

#### *The Content of Salvation*

The content – the concrete expression – of Lucan salvation is richly varied in form. Mary is blessed (1:42ff), Israel is rescued from enemies (1:69ff), the Lord’s people are forgiven (1:77), all ‘flesh’ is to ‘see’ the salvation of God (3:6), a man’s withered hand is restored (6:9), a woman’s sins are forgiven (7:50), a demonised man and a woman with an infirmity are healed (8:36, 48), Jarius’s daughter is raised to life (8:50), lepers are cleansed and a blind man receives sight (17:19, 18:42) and a tax-collector repents and is affirmed as a child of Abraham (19:9ff).

Salvation “appears to be determined in each instance by the needs of the person”, thus demonstrating its diverse reach.<sup>10</sup> However, there is also a striking difference between the multi-sided (‘physical’ and ‘spiritual’) salvation evidenced in the ministry, teaching and sacrifice of Jesus and the national deliverance (i.e. 3:8ff; cf. 24:21a) and self-justification (i.e. 10:29) of some of the religious leaders.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> These four questions reflect a combination and summary of the questions/categories addressed in O’Collins, ‘Salvation’ in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 907-913 (The *Recipients*, the *Agents*, the *Nature*, and the *Mediation* of Salvation); and Mark Allan Powell, ‘Salvation in Luke-Acts’, *Word & World* (12)1: (1992), 5-10 (The *Persons* to Whom Salvation is Offered; The *Content* of Salvation; The *Basis* of Salvation; and The *Means* of (reception of) Salvation); clearly, there is no ideal set of questions/categories.

<sup>10</sup> Powell, ‘Salvation in Luke-Acts’, *Word & World*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> O’Collins, ‘Salvation’ in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 911; and Powell, ‘Salvation in Luke-Acts’, *Word & World*, 7-8.

### The Timing of Salvation

The Lucan answer to the question of the ‘when’ of Salvation is: ‘Today’ and ‘Tomorrow’; or ‘Now but Not Yet’. The word ‘today’ rings throughout Luke, signifying the Lucan emphasis on the immediacy and “imminence of salvation.”<sup>12</sup>

Sweetland aptly summarises:

“The shepherds... are told... that a Savior is born to them ‘this day...’ (Luke 2:11). After reading the saving prophecies of Isaiah, Jesus announces that ‘today this scripture has been fulfilled...’ (4:21). It is ‘today’ that sins are forgiven (5:26) and ‘today’ that demons are cast out (13:32). Jesus tells Zacchaeus that ‘today salvation has come to this house’ (Luke 19:9...). And he says to the repentant thief, ‘Today you will be with me in paradise’ (Luke 23:43).”<sup>13</sup>

The Saving kingdom is present and powerfully active here and now, but the full consummation of final salvation remains future.<sup>14</sup>

### The Reception of Salvation

This powerfully present (yet still to be consummated) salvation is encountered in the word, ministry and presence of Jesus alone, and yet the entry into this singular salvation happens in different ways.

The saviour indeed is seeking those who need salvation (19:9-10), yet we also see the need to strive to enter through the narrow gate (13:23-24); which takes the form of trusting belief (7:50; 8:12, 48, 50) and the ‘loss’ (yet true finding) of life for Jesus sake (9:24). The conversion of Zacchaeus serves as a key example of the repentant and obedient faith which so often accompanies salvation in Luke.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Dennis M. Sweetland, ‘Luke the Christian.’ in *New Views on Luke and Acts*. Ed. by Earl Richard (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press: 1990), 57.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 57.

<sup>14</sup> See Brendan Byrne (S.J.). *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke’s Gospel*. (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press: 2000), 151; François Bovon. *Luke the Theologian: Fifty-Five Years of Research (1950-2005)*. (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press: 2006), 300-1; Powell, ‘Salvation in Luke-Acts’, *Word & World*, 5-6; and also D.G. Bock, ‘Gospel of Luke.’ in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Eds. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, Illinois / Leicester, England: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 505-6. The rest of the New Testament confirms the ‘Now but Not Yet’ tension.

<sup>15</sup> See Byrne (S.J.). *The Hospitality of God*, 151; Bock, ‘Gospel of Luke.’ in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 506-7.

### The Scope of Salvation

The Lucan picture of those who (at least somehow) encounter the Salvation of God is well-mixed.<sup>16</sup> Special emphasis is given to the saving activity among the marginalised in Luke, including women, the poor, the sick and the ritually impure.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, those who think they do not need saving, often the religious experts, continually fail to respond with the repentance and faith which accompanies Salvation in Luke (11:29; 12:1ff; 13:34ff; 19:47; etc.).

Through Jesus the Saviour, Salvation seeks out and saves those who know they need it, regardless of their heritage (Jewish or Greek), gender (male or female), or social standing. In its reach to all kinds of people everywhere, the scope of Salvation is nothing short of universal.<sup>18</sup> Salvation is good news for all people (2:10) – even if some reject it and fail to enter into it (13:24).

### **Contemporary Implications**

Modern understandings of Salvation are often fragmentations and distortions of what we've seen in Luke. The rich variety of meaning seen in the Salvation terminology itself is enough to broaden many narrow views of Salvation. But a look at our four key questions will prove a fruitful corrective method.

### The Nature of Salvation

Modern understandings of the concept of salvation are often very narrow and singular. Sometimes, the focus is *only* on “saving souls” to determine the post-mortem destination of the “soul” of each individual. Other times, the focus is *only* on

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<sup>16</sup> Mary (1:46ff), the house of David (1:69), the Lord's people (1:77), Gentiles and Israel (2:32), all flesh (3:6), the man with the withered hand (6:9), the sinful woman (7:50), the demon possessed (8:27ff), the haemorrhaging woman (8:43ff), the blind man (18:42), and a tax collector (19:9) give a good cross-section of those who encounter the Salvation of God (at least in some way).

<sup>17</sup> On the contrast between the inclusion of these kinds of people in Luke and their exclusion in the Dead Sea community, see J.B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 79-83.

<sup>18</sup> See also Sweetland, 'Luke the Christian.' in *New Views*, 60-61.

what “blessing” salvation brings now; in spiritual highs, financial blessing, physical healing or a mixture of all three. However, as we have seen, Lucan Salvation is not divided by soul/body, spiritual/physical or here/here-after distinctions.<sup>19</sup> Whilst all of these Lucan dimensions of Salvation can be seen around the modern world, the challenge to broaden mission concepts and actions is a strong one.<sup>20</sup>

### *The Timing of Salvation*

Again, modern concepts of salvation are often overly singular in focus. Often, the point is “where you will go after you die”, and little or no concern is shown for what happens *until* death. Again, the Lucan picture is of an immediate and imminent salvation. The saving kingdom of Jesus is powerfully present “Today”, and is lived out in transforming mission in the world until the consummation “Tomorrow”.

### *The Reception of Salvation*

Modern views concerning the reception of salvation all too often emphasise belief without due emphasis on obedient repentance. The “once saved always saved” view is one side of the coin. Luke’s gospel reminds us that it is self-denying, responsive and persistent faith that accompanies salvation. The initiative remains God’s and God’s alone, but our response to this initiative demonstrates the reality of the saving activity of God in us.

### *The Scope of Salvation*

Modern tendencies regarding the reach of Salvation can sometimes mirror the exclusive shape of the religious leaders and experts self-assurance concerning their

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<sup>19</sup> On the need for a 'total person' concept of salvation (body, health, demonisation, daily needs, societal well-being) especially in an African context, see S.O. Abogunrin, “The Lucan View of Jesus Christ as the Savior of the World from an African Perspective”, *Journal of Religious Thought* 54/55: (1998), 30-31.

<sup>20</sup> For example, soul-winning mission must be accompanied by care for hunger, sickness and poverty; activity through 'practical' mission agencies must continue (as they often do) to include care for spiritual needs; and western Christians influenced by secular naturalism must re-appreciate (with careful balance, nonetheless) the reality of demonic influence and the power of God's Salvation to rescue from this kind of oppression.

right standing with God. The picture of Salvation we see in Luke, however, is one which surprised and shocked these 'insiders'. The universal scope of salvation does not equal 'universalism', but it does remind us of the reach of God's salvation to 'outsiders' whom are deemed unfitting by religious experts.<sup>21</sup>

In sum, the Salvation authored by and sourced in God and achieved by Jesus Christ, is *encountered* in many rich and diverse expressions, is powerfully *present* now, but yet to be completed, is *received* through repentant and obedient faith, and is good news for *all* people in *all* places and circumstances.

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<sup>21</sup> Obviously, there is no space here for engagement with the inclusivist/exclusivist debate, regarding what conscious knowledge is or is not required for 'salvation'; and in light of the richness of saving activity seen in Luke, it is worth noting that unfortunately this debate is often had without defining the kind of saving activity for which the conscious knowledge is or isn't required for.

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