

THE GREEK MOTIF OF THE CYCLIC JOURNEY
IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

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The motif of the cyclic journey appears not only in Greek works but is a motif that is often used by literature in general. Basically, the topographical or geographical composition of a work is such that the story ends in the same place as it began but with the characters changed by what transpired. Their consciousness is usually altered by occurrences that take place somewhere else than the starting/finishing locale. This motif is present in the Gospel of Luke in the very structure of the work. In addition, it also appears in several pericopes whose geographical form is possibly modelled on Greek narrations of cyclic journeys.

The motif of the cyclic journey is based on the general assumption that the traveller comes back to their starting point enriched by the experiences of the journey. This type of journey motif is thought by some to be an archetype present in every person and, therefore, may be expressed using the language of myths. M. Eliade claims that mythical topics and symbols can be found in every person's psyche.¹ It turns out that everyone, regardless of historical, racial or gender identity, spontaneously discovers archetypes present in primitive symbolism.² In this paper I would like to (1) present some examples of the motif of the cyclic journey in Greek literature and then (2) show how Luke uses this motif in his Gospel. Observations made in (1) and (2) lead to the final conclusion (3).

1. M. Eliade, *Historia wierzeń i idei religijnych. I. Od epoki kamiennej do misteriów eleuzyńskich* (trans. S. Tokarski; Warsaw: Wiedza Powszechna, 1988), pp. 17-25.

2. J. Kudasiewicz, *Biblia, historia, nauka. Rozważania i dyskusje biblijne* (Kraków: Znak, 1987), p. 210.

The Cyclic Journey Motif in Greek Literature

The Iliad and *The Odyssey* are, of course, the two main works by the poet referred to as Homer. Both belong to the group of the so-called Trojan myths. *The Iliad* concerns the war between the Greeks and the Trojans while *The Odyssey* deals with the main hero's return from Troy. Odysseus's journey presented by Homer takes the form Ithaka–Troy–Ithaka. The hero sets off from his home in Ithaka to take part in the Trojan war and returns after many adventures as a man enriched by the experiences he has met on the way. There are experiences on the journey that speak of the change in the hero's consciousness. During the ten-year-long return journey, Odysseus is repeatedly in peril: he is attacked a number of times, is almost killed by a cannibal and fights against opposing winds. When he returns home in disguise he is recognised because of an old wound and because he recalls former events in which only he and those closest to him participated. Odysseus's return becomes possible only thanks to the intervention of the gods:

But when, as the seasons revolved,
the year came in which the gods had ordained
that he should return home to Ithaca.³

All together, Odysseus spends twenty years away from his home in Ithaka. In short, this is the motif of the cyclic journey that, having been formulated by Homer, returned later in many classic Greek works and in Hellenistic literature. As an example, it is enough to mention the Orpheus and Eurydice myth: the main hero goes to Hades to meet his wife in hope of bringing her to life again. His plan fails, but Orpheus makes his cyclic journey.⁴ The cyclic journey motif was also used in historical literature. Diogenes Laertius in his work *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* tells the story of Plato's cyclic journey

3. *Odyssey* 1.19-21.

4. Eurydice was also known as Agriope. She ran into a nest of snakes that bit her fatally on her legs. Distraught, Orpheus played such sad songs that all the nymphs and gods wept. On their advice, Orpheus travelled to the underworld and by his music softened the hearts of Hades and Persephone. They agreed to allow Eurydice to return with him to earth on one condition: he should walk in front of her and not look back until he had reached the upper world. But Orpheus broke his promise, and Eurydice vanished again from his sight.

from Athens to Egypt and then again to Athens.⁵ The cyclic journey motif also appears in Luke's text.

The Cyclic Journey Motif in the Gospel of Luke

It is not only in the general structure of the Gospel that Luke uses the motif of the cyclic journey. This motif is also present in several pericopes: the mission of the Twelve (Lk. 9.1-11), the mission of the seventy-two disciples (10.1-20), the lost sheep (15.4-7), the prodigal son (15.11-32), the wicked tenants (20.9-19) and the Emmaus story (24.13-35). Let us consider first the general structure of Luke's Gospel, then two of the mentioned pericopes and finally the theological idea of the incarnation of the Son of God.

General Structure of Luke's Gospel: Judea–Galilee–Judea

Luke frames his Gospel geographically. The text begins by describing a scene that takes place in the Temple in Jerusalem (Zechariah receives news of the birth of John the Baptist in a vision) and that is also where it ends (the disciples maintain their prayer). In between the events that bracket the whole narrative, the Gospel contains the most significant events of Jesus' life described in the form of a journey. The geographical axis of the third Gospel has, therefore, the form Jerusalem–Galilee–Jerusalem:

5. Diogenes describes the journey of Plato in these words: 'Afterwards, when he was eight and twenty years of age, as Hermodorus tells us, he withdrew to Megara to Euclid, with certain others of the pupils of Socrates; and subsequently, he went to Cyrene to Theodorus the mathematician; and from thence he proceeded to Italy to the Pythagoreans, Philolaus and Eurytus, and from thence he went to Eurytus to the priests there; and having fallen sick at that place, he was cured by the priests by the application of sea water, in reference to which he said: The sea doth wash away all human evils. And he said too, that, according to Homer, all the Egyptians were physicians. Plato had also formed the idea of making the acquaintance of the Magi; but he abandoned it on account of the wars in Asia' (*Filosofon bion kai dogmaton synagogē* III. 8, in Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* [trans. C.D. Yonge]).

(Accessed at <http://classicpersuasion.org/pw/diogenes/dlplato.htm>).

Events in Jerusalem: 1.5–2.53

Jesus' life in Galilee: 3.1–9.50

The decision to travel from Galilee to Jerusalem: 9.51

Jesus' journey to Jerusalem: 9.52–19.27

Events in Jerusalem: 19.28–24.53.

The holy city is not just a historically significant city but takes on for the author and the readers an ideological meaning.⁶ It is in Jerusalem that Jesus first overcomes Satan when tempted, and it is also there that Jesus finally triumphs over the forces of evil by dying and being resurrected. The victory over Satan when he tempts Jesus foretells Jesus' final victory over the Lord of Darkness. By placing one of the temptation scenes in Jerusalem, Luke disrupts the form Jerusalem–Galilee–Jerusalem.

The idea of the road from Jerusalem through Galilee back to Jerusalem becomes very distinct in the ninth chapter: 'Now when the days drew near for him to be taken up, Jesus set out resolutely to go to Jerusalem' (Lk. 9.51). This decision is confirmed by Jesus during his journey: 'Nevertheless I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the next day, because it is impossible that a prophet should be killed outside Jerusalem' (13.33). Exegetical writers believe that the references to 'today', 'tomorrow' and 'the next day' refer to the three times it is mentioned that Jesus intentionally headed for the Holy City (13.22; 17.11; 19.28).⁷ One may ask: Why is Jerusalem so important in Luke's Gospel?

6. P. Borgman demonstrates, however, that in the center of the journey section (Lk. 9.51–19.44) Jerusalem represents the human kingdom. According to him, the structure of this section shows this clearly, because at the center of this journey is a hub of meaning for the two-part story: strive to enter God's kingdom, not the human kingdom (represented by Jerusalem) (*The Way according to Luke: Hearing the Whole Story of Luke–Acts* [Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2006], pp. 8–9).

7. L.T. Johnson, *Il Vangelo di Luca* (Sacra Pagina, 3; Turin: ElleDiCi, 2004), p. 147, writes, 'Nella trasfigurazione, Gesù parlava con Mosè ed Elia dell'exodos che egli era in procinto di compiere a Gerusalemme (9,31). Ora, con grande solennità, Gesù "si diresse verso Gerusalemme" dove "sarebbe stato tolto dal mondo" (9,51). Da questo momento fino all'arrivo di Gesù in città (19,28), viene continuamente ricordato al lettore che Gesù è "in viaggio" (9,52.56.57; 10,38; 13,33) e

It is known that the author of the third Gospel accompanied Paul in his missionary journeys for some time. It is possible that it was from him that he took over and developed the notion of Jerusalem as a symbolic city, the city of revelation and redemption.⁸ After all, it was Paul who explained to the Galatians: ‘But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother’ (Gal. 4.26).⁹ In other words, just as Jesus headed for Jerusalem so as to redeem humanity, so Christians head to the heavenly Jerusalem in order to be fully redeemed. When Luke was writing his work, Jerusalem was already in ruins, destroyed by the army of Titus, the future Roman Emperor. So this city could not have had only historical meaning for Luke. Since he stresses its significance so much it must be so as to make clear the symbolic, spiritual character of the place. It is the city of redemption and, since redemption is eternal, the new Jerusalem will also last forever. It is to that city that all those who believe in Jesus are heading.

I conclude that the structure of Luke’s Gospel is modelled on the cyclic journey motif. It starts in Jerusalem and it ends in Jerusalem, and in between, the most important events of redemption take place.

The Prodigal Son: The Father’s House—the Pagan Land—the Father’s House

The idea of a cyclic journey is clearly present in Luke’s story of the prodigal son (Lk. 15.11-32). The first part, telling how the son left his father’s house, wasted his fortune and returned home, is based on the following geographical form:

In the father’s house: 15.11-12

Journey and time in pagan lands: 15.13-17

Decision to return: 15.18-19

Return from pagan lands: 15.20a

In the father’s house: 15.20b-24.¹⁰

specificamente “in viaggio verso Gerusalemme” (14,25; 17,11; 18,31.35; 19,1.11.28).’

8. Luke mentions the city of Jerusalem 31 times in his Gospel.

9. M. Rosik, *Trzy portrety Jezusa* (Tarnów: Biblos, 2006), pp. 35-36.

10. For a more elaborate proposal for the structure of this pericope, see C.E. Carlston, ‘Reminiscence and Redaction in Luke 15:11-32’, *JBL* 94 (1975), pp. 368-

Thus stated, the central element of the story is the son's decision to return to his father (Lk. 15.18-19).¹¹ Thus, it is a similar motif to that which is central to the whole of Luke's story: Jesus' decision to go to Jerusalem (9.51).

Recognising the Resurrected Christ: Jerusalem–Emmaus–Jerusalem

The motif of the cyclic journey is skilfully included in the story of the christophany on the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24.13-35). The disciples' journey to Emmaus has the very significant trait that it leads from Jerusalem to Jerusalem. Some think that the disciples are setting out from Jerusalem, the city in which the most significant parts of the redemption story take place, for Emmaus, a city that is meaningless and not described in any detail. That would have been the theological sense of the journey: going on pilgrimage without recognising the resurrected Christ does not lead anywhere.¹²

Two of Jesus' disciples leave the city where redemption took place, and head for an unknown place that has not previously appeared in Luke's work. When they are joined by Jesus, they are still headed away from the holy city (Lk. 24.13), leaving behind the places where the dramatic events that caused them to become troubled (24.17-24) took place. Their imagination does not go beyond the cross and the grave. There is no place for hope—it is better to say farewell and return home (24.21). The evening comes as they are on their way from Jerusalem to Emmaus (24.29). They decide to stop for the night since 'the day is almost done'.

It turns out, however, that the setting sun is shining strongly once again in the hearts of the travellers who have understood the old prophecies. Speaking with Jesus means that the setting sun brings to them his light. The consequence of this discovery is immediate—the disciples recognise the mysterious fellow-traveller as the resurrected

90; and J. Jeremias, 'Tradition und Redaktion in Lukas 15', *ZNW* 62 (1971), pp. 172-89.

11. The parable of the prodigal son is preceded by the parables of the lost sheep (Lk. 15.1-7) and the lost coin (Lk. 15.8-10). This context has an influence on the interpretation of the prodigal son story. Sheep and coins cannot will themselves to be found, but the prodigal son must choose to turn around (repent) and come home. He has to take on the responsibility of his own repenting.

12. J. Drury, 'Luke', in R. Alter and F. Kermode (eds.), *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (London: Fontana Press, 1987), pp. 418-39 (424).

Christ and return to Jerusalem without delay to find the other disciples. The community that was to have ceased to exist is formed once again. After Jesus' death his disciples could have gone their ways. After the burial, the temptation to return to their old life, leaving behind the three-year adventure with the Master, must have been very powerful. Maybe this was what the travellers to Emmaus were doing. Discovering the resurrection becomes the event that brings the community back together. When Jesus appears to the gathered disciples, it is soon after the community has come together again. In this way he shows that he is always present when his disciples come together as a community. He intervenes when disciples distance themselves from the community to lead them back to Jerusalem where their common mission is to begin.

The concentric structure of the narration communicates two ideas: the central idea of Jesus' resurrection and the journey from Jerusalem to Jerusalem that encompasses it. The disciples recognise the resurrected Jesus through a process described in terms of visual perception: at first 'their eyes were kept from recognizing him' (Lk. 24.16) but in the end, their eyes were opened (24.31). The elements of the concentric structure are constructed in the face of the kerigmatic truth—He is alive (24.23b). The structure can be described in the following way:¹³

Journey from Jerusalem: 24.14-15

 'Eyes kept from seeing'—lack of recognition: 24.16

 Dialogue and interaction: 24.17-18

 Description of 'these things': 24.19-21

 Empty grave—vision: 24.22-23a

 Jesus is alive: 24.23b

 Empty grave—no vision: 24.24

 Interpretation of 'these things': 24.25-27

 Dialogue and interaction: 24.28-30

 'Eyes opened'—recognition—disappearance: 24.31-32

Journey to Jerusalem: 24.33-35.

13. J.B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 842.

The disciples journeying to Emmaus decide to return to Jerusalem, having recognised the resurrected Jesus in whom God's power to bring back to life and God's wisdom to explain the holy texts are both revealed. The decision to return is immediate: they get up that very hour and return to Jerusalem (Lk. 24.33). The Gospel stresses the determination with which the decision is made, as the disciples are not delayed by the late hour ('it is getting toward evening and the day is almost done', 24.29).

Cleopas and his fellow-traveller set out from Jerusalem, the city that is central to Luke's text, for a nondescript town called Emmaus, about which the reader is told only that it is sixty stadia away from the holy city. The name of the place only appears in relation to that episode; other New Testament texts never mention it. Considering the concentration of events related to the redemption in Jerusalem and Luke's conception of the road, one can be tempted to interpret the disciples' journey symbolically: they are going to a place of no significance and their journey has no determinate goal; they are headed nowhere. Discovering the resurrected Jesus in the mysterious traveller makes them turn around and return to Jerusalem. Jesus' disciples make a journey analogous to that which their Lord had made. Jesus' journey to Jerusalem was a journey toward death. Death, in itself, seems to have no sense. However, Jesus goes through death to return to life and to create the paradigm of a return in which meaning is found.¹⁴

The Incarnation Model: The Kenosis of the Son of God

More broadly, it is possible to look at this paradigm of the cyclic journey in terms of incarnation: by becoming incarnate the Son of God leaves heaven, becomes a human, accepts death on the cross and, thereby, achieves resurrection and ascension to return to live in heavenly glory.¹⁵ So the journey ends where it began—at his Father's right hand—but its goal of redemption has been achieved.

14. 'La via di Gesù verso la croce è stata determinata dalla volontà di Dio, rivelata nelle Scritture. La sua morte in croce non manifesta il suo fallimento, ma la sua incondizionata fedeltà a Dio. Il suo cammino non finisce con la morte, ma attraverso di essa conduce alla gloria, alla comunione eterna con Dio' (K. Stock, *Gesù: La bontà di Dio* [Bibbia e preghiera, 10; Rome: Edizioni ADP, 1991], pp. 170-71).

15. It is important to notice that the ascension took place in Jerusalem. E. LaVerdiere, *Luke* (New Testament Message, 5; Collegeville: Liturgical Press,

It seems that the motif of the cyclic journey used several times by Luke is meant to bring out the incarnational model in which Christ's kenosis that leads to the cross becomes the breakthrough point—the point of redemption.

Conclusion

As noticed above, Luke uses the cyclic journey motif in the structure of his Gospel, in three parables (the parable of the lost sheep, the story of prodigal son, the parable of the wicked tenants), in two pericopes about disciples (the mission of the Twelve and the mission of the seventy-two disciples), in the Emmaus story and in his theological idea of incarnation. It is hard, however, to be sure whether the writer of the Gospel took this motif consciously from Greek literature. It is better to point out that the motif of the cyclic journey appears in ancient Greek and Hellenistic literature just as it does in Luke. The motif could have been developed in parallel in those cases and does not necessarily indicate the direct influence of ancient literature on the Gospel of Luke.

What is important is the statement that the motif of a cyclic journey used by Luke was known among the Greek readers of his Gospel, since it was present in their literature. So Luke's use of the motif of a cyclic journey probably facilitated the reception of the Good News about salvation in the Hellenistic world.

1990), p. 142, notes, 'Luke 9:51 introduces the journey which underlines the remainder of the gospel and defines that journey in terms of its destination, namely Jerusalem. Jerusalem, however, is no mere geographical locus. Luke presents the city which in fact marked the journey's end as the place where Jesus would "be received up", an expression which refers to the ascension. Jesus' journey is thus a journey to God.'