

## THE GOD WHO ACTS: LUKE'S PRESENTATION OF GOD

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**Abstract:** *The work of God and person of God must be considered together because his being is revealed through his work, and his work is motivated by his being. Luke writes of that which “has been accomplished,” prompting the question of what exactly had been accomplished and by whom. This article surveys Luke’s presentation of God’s self-revelation through both his work and his person and shows that the Gospel of Luke presents God as the God of Israel who has accomplished the New Exodus and established Davidic dominion through his divine Son by the Holy Spirit, resulting in salvation for the nations.*

**Key words:** *Luke, God, New Testament, Trinity, redemption, Christ, global salvation*

One could hardly overemphasize the drastic difference between the God of Luke’s Gospel and the gods of the Greco-Roman world.<sup>1</sup> Though the Greco-Roman pantheon was believed to be all-powerful, it was also described as passively inactive. Take, for example, Cicero’s description of the gods in his *De natura deorum*. He depicts Epicurus saying that “the gods do nothing and care for nothing, and that though they possess limbs like those of men they make no use of those limbs” (*Nat. d.* 1.3). Later in *De natura deorum* 1.51, he says that “god is entirely inactive” (*nihil enim agit deus*) and free from occupation (*nullis occupationibus est implicatus*). The Greco-Roman god(s) neither toils nor labors (*nulla opera molitur*). Instead, their activity is almost completely focused on their self-absorbed pursuit of carnal passions.<sup>2</sup>

This concept of powerful but inactive and self-serving gods runs counter to Lukan theology, which depicts the singular triune God actively intervening in the world to accomplish its redemption. According to Luke, the God of Israel has accomplished the redemption of the nations and has established a redeemed commu-

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<sup>1</sup> David W. J. Gill cautions that it is important to “recognise the diversity of cult and religious expression within the empire.” David W. J. Gill, “Religion in a Local Setting,” in *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting*, vol. 2, *The Book of Acts in Its Graeco-Roman Setting*, ed. David W. J. Gill and Conrad Gempf (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 80. That diversity granted, what follows are general descriptions of the Greco-Roman gods.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Knox, commenting on Euripidean tragedies, writes that the gods “project on to the enormous scale of the divine those passions which human beings struggle vainly to control in themselves; these passions, in the shape of the Olympian gods, self-absorbed, unrelenting, rule the life of men and women.” Bernard M. W. Knox, “Euripides,” in *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature: Volume 1, Greek Literature*, ed. P. E. Easterling and Bernard M. W. Knox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 73.

nity, the church, in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. This article seeks to show how Luke describes both God's work and his person. Luke's readers must consider these two concepts simultaneously because God's being is revealed through his work, and his work is motivated by his being. For Luke, the God of Israel is neither inactive nor self-absorbed, but instead, he is the God who has sovereignly intervened for humanity's salvation by sending his Son.

## I. THE GOD WHO ACTS

Luke's stated purpose is to write an orderly account of "the things that have been accomplished (τῶν πεπληροφορημένων) among us" (1:1) so that Theophilus would have certainty about the things he had been taught. The perfect passive of πληροφορέω leaves the reader asking an important question: *what has been accomplished and by whom?* Essentially, Luke's Gospel sets out to answer that question by telling of God's action and God's self-revelation as the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. The things that have been fulfilled have not been achieved by man but by God and his active work in the world through Jesus Christ and by the Spirit. In his intervening grace, God has brought his "salvation" (τὸ σωτήριόν), "a light of revelation (φῶς εἰς ἀποκάλυψιν) to the Gentiles," and "glory (δόξαν)" to his people, Israel (2:30–32).

This salvation was promised by "the mouth of [God's] holy prophets from of old" (1:70). Everything God does in Luke's Gospel is intended to fulfill what had been promised beforehand. In particular, Jesus's entire ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection seek to fulfill what is "necessary" (δεῖ, 24:26) for the accomplishment of God's ancient program of salvation.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, this salvation is described in terms that are reflective of God's past work but also describe something altogether new and escalated in cosmic significance.<sup>4</sup> The prophetic speeches in the infancy narratives demonstrate this clearly. Two themes that are prominent in this section are (1) an exodus-like redemption and (2) the establishment of Davidic kingship. These themes extend throughout the rest of Luke's Gospel in describing the ministry of Jesus.

1. *God's Redemption and the Prophetic Speeches of Luke 1–2.* God's redemptive work is announced through the prophetic speeches of four individuals: Gabriel, Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon (respectively, the *Annunciation*, *Magnificat*, *Benedictus*, and *Nunc Dimittis*). These speeches function as more than mere narrative about the

<sup>3</sup> "In Luke, God is orchestrating his plan, which matches predictions from angels, Jesus, and the Old Testament. The plan and events related to it are 'necessary' (Gk. δεῖ, sometimes translated 'must'), implying a *divine* necessity." Robert J. Cara, "Luke," in *A Biblical Theological Introduction to the New Testament: The Gospel Realized*, ed. Michael J. Kruger (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 104–105.

<sup>4</sup> Pao and Schnabel note that "the use of biblical language is complemented by the textual links between the time of Jesus and the history of Israel." David Pao and Eckhart Schnabel, "Luke," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 254. Bock comments, "There is a program of old that is being realized in Jesus. The new faith is really part of an old promise." Darrell L. Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts: God's Promised Program, Realized for All Nations*, Biblical Theology of the NT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 134.

births of John and Jesus. More precisely, these speeches set the tone for Luke's Gospel and give shape to the type of redemptive work the God of Israel was about to accomplish in Christ.<sup>5</sup> In these speeches, God reveals his plan to bring Israel's exodus-like deliverance and to exalt his eternal Davidic king. In this way, God's work in Luke parallels his past redemptive work in the OT but has a much greater, cosmic significance in bringing salvation to all nations.<sup>6</sup> It is beyond the scope of this article to deal with every OT allusion in these speeches; instead, the following looks particularly at the speakers' allusions to the exodus and the Davidic promise.

The first speaker that describes God's present redemption using past, OT terminology is Gabriel, the angel sent by God in Luke 1. It is noteworthy that Gabriel proclaims the forthcoming prophet of the Lord and the Messiah, as it was Gabriel who was sent to answer Daniel's prayer concerning Israel's return from exile (Daniel 8 and 9). Gabriel, then, is the proclaimer of God's promised, exodus-like redemption.<sup>7</sup> The theme of Davidic dominion is seen clearly in his message to Mary concerning a son born by God's Spirit. Gabriel highlights the fulfillment of God's promise to David by using terms found in 2 Samuel 7, Psalm 89:26–37, and Isaiah 7–9.<sup>8</sup> God's redemptive work involves giving Mary's son "the throne of his father David" (Luke 1:32).<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, the promise of a Davidic Son and of exodus-like deliverance come in the reign of Jesus.

In her *Magnificat*, Mary magnifies the Lord, God her Savior.<sup>10</sup> Embedded in her words is praise for the God who "has shown strength with his arm" and who "has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts" (Luke 1:51). The image of God's mighty arm (*βραχίονι*) scattering (*δισεκόρπισεν*) the proud parallels his work at the exodus.<sup>11</sup> Psalm 89:10 (88:11 LXX) sings of the Lord, who crushed Rahab, a metaphorical sea-serpent that symbolizes Egypt. Through this crushing, God "scattered (*δισεκόρπισας*) [his] enemies with [his] mighty arm (*βραχίονι*)." Additionally,

<sup>5</sup> Bock refers to the infancy narrative as an "overture" to the Gospel. Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts*, 150. Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles write, "This portion of the Gospel provides the foundation for Jesus and his messianic mission." Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 324.

<sup>6</sup> Beale and Gladd write, "The entire sweep of the Old Testament anticipates the person and work of Jesus (see Luke 24:27)." G. K. Beale and Benjamin L. Gladd, *The Story Retold: A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2020), 105.

<sup>7</sup> Pao and Schnabel, "Luke," 259, comment that the verb *euangelizomai* "evokes the Isaianic promises (Isa 40:9; 52:7) where the new exodus is in view."

<sup>8</sup> "The strong emphasis on the Davidic promise in the immediate context (1:32–33) and throughout Luke 1–2 ... makes it likely that the author also recognizes the hermeneutical significance of Isaiah 7–9 in explaining the role and identity of Jesus." Pao and Schnabel, "Luke," 260.

<sup>9</sup> This gift of a "forever" reign also echoes the Danielic visions of a dominion that encompasses and surpasses all other kingdoms of the earth (Dan 2:44; 7:14, 27).

<sup>10</sup> The phrase "God my Savior" may itself be an allusion to the exodus. The same phrase is used in Ps 106:21–22, in which the psalmist says, "They forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt, wondrous works in the land of Ham, and awesome deeds by the Red Sea."

<sup>11</sup> "In both the exodus (Exod. 6:1, 6; Deut. 3:24; 7:19) and new-exodus traditions (Isa. 51:5, 9; 53:1; cf. 30:30) one finds the use of the imagery of the arm/hand of God in reference to the power of God." Pao and Schnabel, "Luke," 261–62.

Exodus 6:6 depicts God with an “outstretched arm” ready to judge the Egyptians. In Numbers 10:35, the idea of God scattering his enemies is associated with the ark of the covenant, the symbol of divine presence, leading Israel through the wilderness.<sup>12</sup> The connection of God’s mighty arm scattering the arrogant with the work he did in the exodus seems important. From Mary’s perspective, the Redeemer of the exodus is at work once again in the birth of the Messiah.

In Jesus’s birth, Mary also sees a fulfillment of the “great reversal” theme, in which God humbles the proud and exalts the humble. Her words “he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty” (1:52–53) echo Hannah’s prayer in 1 Samuel 2:3–10.<sup>13</sup> In context, the great reversal, about which Hannah prays, displays the Lord’s sovereignty (“for the pillars of the earth are the LORD’s,” 1 Sam 2:8) and the hope that he “will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed” (v. 10). Jesus’s birth announces the fulfillment of the great reversal and the exaltation of the Davidic king.<sup>14</sup> All this is done in remembrance of God’s promises of mercy to Abraham and his offspring. The result of God’s remembered mercy, according to Psalm 98:3, is that “all the ends of the earth” will see the salvation of God—a theme that is central in Luke’s Gospel. According to Mary, God has delivered his promised exodus and raised up a Davidic king who will bring the Abrahamic blessing of salvation to the nations.<sup>15</sup>

Zechariah, filled with the Holy Spirit, continues this theme of a recognizable but new redemption as he blesses God for John’s birth.<sup>16</sup> In John’s birth (and implicitly Christ’s coming), God “has visited and redeemed his people” (1:68). Both words, “visit” (*ἔπεσκέψατο*) and “redeem” (*ἐποίησεν λύτρωσιν*), recall God’s exodus-like deliverance.<sup>17</sup> God “visited” his people in Exodus 4:31 because he had seen the oppression against Israel and had come to deliver them. Furthermore, the verb “redeem” summarizes God’s work of delivering his people (Exod 15:13; Deut 7:8; 1 Chr 17:21). Thus, in Zechariah’s Spirit-filled prophecy, the God of the exodus has once again visited and redeemed his oppressed people through the birth of

<sup>12</sup> David makes this connection in Psalm 68 when he says, “God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered” (v. 1) and goes on to speak of God going before his people in the wilderness.

<sup>13</sup> Pao and Schnabel, “Luke,” 262. Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 148.

<sup>14</sup> Jesus as the fulfillment of the great-reversal motif corresponds with his concern for the lowly: “Among the evangelists, Luke puts special emphasis on Jesus’s concern for those of lowly status in society—Gentiles, the poor, tax collectors and ‘sinners,’ the sick and disabled, women and children.” Köstenberger, Kellum, Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, 337.

<sup>15</sup> “The reference to Abraham in this verse paves the way for the role of Abraham in Luke–Acts. This symbol is used not only in reference to the promises of old (cf. Luke 1:72–73; Acts 3:13) but also in the redefinition of God’s people whereby through the use of the reversal motif the people of God are no longer defined on the basis of physical descent (cf. Luke 3:8–9; 13:28; 16:19–30; 19:9–10; Acts 3:25).” Pao and Schnabel, “Luke,” 262. See also Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2006), 347–48.

<sup>16</sup> Space does not permit dealing with every OT allusion in Zechariah’s prophecy. For the sake of brevity, only two instances are included here.

<sup>17</sup> Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 116.

John the Baptist and the soon-coming Lord.<sup>18</sup> This visitation and redemption are reminiscent of the exodus but are altogether a new work of God.<sup>19</sup>

Zechariah praises God, who has “raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David” (Luke 1:69). The horn is symbolic of strength and power and may have become a symbol of Messianic power (e.g., Ezek 29:21).<sup>20</sup> Psalm 132:17 brings together the image of a horn and Davidic kingship: “There [Zion] I will make a horn to sprout for David.”<sup>21</sup> In using the metaphor of a “horn,” Zechariah praises God for keeping his promise to raise up a Davidic king. By raising up a horn for David, God accomplishes what he spoke by the mouth of his prophets and has remembered the “holy covenant” and “oath” sworn to Abraham. In short, God has been faithful to do as he has said.

As a result of God’s redemptive work, “the sunrise” promised in Malachi 4:4 has visited Israel from on high. Malachi 4 describes the Day of the LORD, when Israel will “go out” (ἐξ), another term often used in connection with the exodus. The “sunrise” (ἀνατολή)—the “sun of righteousness” in Malachi 4—marks the beginning of Israel’s return and restoration.<sup>22</sup> John the Baptist is the Elijah-like prophet God has sent to herald this great day.

The final prophetic speech in the infancy narratives demonstrates that Simeon also understood that Israel’s God was at work in fulfilling his ancient promises. Luke introduces Simeon as a righteous man who was waiting for “the consolation of Israel (παράκλησιν τοῦ Ἰσραήλ)” (2:25). In other words, Simeon was waiting for God’s promise of comfort after the exile (Isa 40:1; 57:18). Once he met Jesus, Simeon declared that he had seen the Lord’s salvation prepared for all people (Luke 2:32). Darrell Bock notes, “The interesting feature of this verse is that seeing God’s salvation is linked directly to seeing Jesus, so that a strong tie exists between salvation and the one who personifies it.”<sup>23</sup> Another way to say this is that Jesus is the living manifestation of Israel’s comfort, salvation, and glory, and in him, God will reveal himself to the nations. Jesus is the long-awaited consolation of Israel.

2. *The ἐξοδον to be accomplished.* The exodus theme is seen again in the transfiguration of Jesus in Luke 9:31. On the mountain, Moses and Elijah appeared and spoke with Jesus “of his departure (ἐξοδον), which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.” The mention of the “exodus” that Jesus was about to fulfill (πληροῦν) seems to be an intentional allusion to the first exodus.<sup>24</sup> Jesus’s work in Jerusalem is described using terminology that recalls God’s previous work on Israel’s behalf. It is a work that reflects the first exodus and yet is new and decisive in its fulfill-

<sup>18</sup> For more on “visitation” see Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts*, 103.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King and His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 471.

<sup>20</sup> Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 1998), 400.

<sup>21</sup> Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman, 400.

<sup>22</sup> “As ‘Dawn,’ God’s agent of redemption will give light and guide ‘our feet.’” Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 119.

<sup>23</sup> Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts*, 102.

<sup>24</sup> Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 382.

ment.<sup>25</sup> Pao and Schnabel are correct in saying that Luke “considers Jesus’ death and resurrection/ascension to be an exodus.”<sup>26</sup> This discussion of the upcoming exodus leads to God’s own proclamation of Jesus as his Son, “my Chosen One,” to whom people must listen (9:35). Jesus is God’s Son, which speaks to his role as the royal Davidic king, and he is the prophet like Moses (Deut 18:15, 18–19), who has come to bring about a new exodus.<sup>27</sup>

The theme of exodus-like redemption is seen again and again in Jesus’s ministry. After he was accused of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebul, Jesus responds, “But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Luke 11:20). In this, Jesus connects his work of kingdom-building with the finger of God, which alludes to Exodus 8:19. As was true of the first exodus, God’s kingdom is established through the exodus-winning finger of God.<sup>28</sup> The God of the exodus is at work again through his glorious Davidic Son.

## II. THREE PERSONS, ONE GOD

The first half of this article considered what had been accomplished, while the second half will consider who has accomplished it. Though theological terminology such as “Trinity” or “triune being” is not used in Luke, it is clear that Luke portrays one God revealed in three persons. Luke remains faithful to the monotheism of the Hebrew Bible while proclaiming that this singular God has manifested himself in the redemptive work of three persons: Father, Son, and Spirit.<sup>29</sup> To understand Luke’s portrayal of God, one must understand how Luke’s Gospel describes each of these three persons.

From the beginning of his Gospel, Luke depicts God as a single sovereign being, and yet, Israel’s God is revealed in the redemptive work of (1) God, the Most High, (2) Jesus, the Son of the Most High, and (3) the Spirit, the Power from on high. Luke views God, Jesus, and the Spirit as distinct in roles, and yet, he also uses titles that are interchangeable in describing the three persons. For example, the title “Lord” (κύριος), the Greek equivalent of YHWH (יהוה), refers to God, who gives the throne of David to Jesus (1:32). The title can also refer to Jesus, the risen “Lord” (24:34).<sup>30</sup> Still more, 4:18 speaks of “the Spirit of the *Lord*” who rests upon

<sup>25</sup> “The ἐξοδος itself recalls the great OT event of salvation and suggests that Jesus is doing something not just equivalent, but even greater.” Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, 869.

<sup>26</sup> Pao and Schnabel, “Luke,” 311.

<sup>27</sup> Bryan D. Estelle, *Echoes of Exodus: Tracing a Biblical Motif* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic, 2018), 249–50.

<sup>28</sup> Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts*, 141.

<sup>29</sup> Rowe writes, “The question of the identity of God in the narrative of Luke-Acts compels us to speak in trinitarian terms.... The necessity of speaking of the one God in a threefold way is the response to the pressure exerted upon the reader by the biblical narrative itself.” Kavin C. Rowe, “Luke and the Trinity: An Essay in Ecclesial Biblical Theology,” *SJT* 56.1 (2003): 5–6.

<sup>30</sup> Wellum notes, “The New Testament authors often use ‘Lord’ to identify Jesus as Yahweh according to the storyline, promises, and expectations of the Old Testament.” Stephen J. Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 200.

Jesus and empowers him for ministry. The same can be said for the title “Savior” (σωτήρ). In the *Magnificat*, Mary magnifies “God my Savior” who has done mighty things in remembering his mercy. In 2:11, however, Jesus is the “Savior” (σωτήρ), who was born in the city of David.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, Luke presents these three persons—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—as existing and working simultaneously and having distinct roles.<sup>32</sup> This truth is seen most clearly in the baptism scene of Luke 3. Here, Luke portrays Jesus as the one baptized, the Spirit descending upon Jesus as a dove, and a voice from heaven—implicitly God’s—declaring Jesus to be his “beloved Son.” All three persons are present at the same time and yet are distinct in their actions (e.g., the Father is not baptized, the Son is).

1. *God, the Most High*. Luke makes many references to God and presents him as the one who is sovereignly directing the plan of salvation that “must” (δεῖ) be carried out (e.g., Luke 24:26). He hears his people’s prayers (1:13) and is active in sending angels to announce the coming redemption (1:19, 26). According to Gabriel, he is the Most High, who will give Jesus the throne of David and an eternal reign (1:33). In this, echoes of Daniel 7, in which the Ancient of Days gives the Son of Man an everlasting dominion, can be clearly heard. As incredible as the incarnation and barren women having children may initially seem, “nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37).<sup>33</sup> He is entirely sovereign and able to accomplish his will despite all obstacles.<sup>34</sup>

God is the Lord and Savior (1:46–47), who exercises his sovereignty by humbling the mighty and exalting the humble (1:52). He remembers his promises and shows mercy to Abraham’s offspring (1:54–55, 72–74). He is the Lord, “God of Israel,” who visited and redeemed his people and raised up a Davidic horn of salvation so that Israel would be saved from her enemies (1:68–69). It is to God “in the highest” that glory belongs as he provides *shalom* to those with whom he is pleased (2:14).<sup>35</sup> In Luke, the typical result of seeing God’s power is praise, glory, and fear (1:65; 2:20; 5:26; 7:17; 23:47).<sup>36</sup> His surpassing status as the “Lord of heaven and earth” (10:21) mandates his praise.

Wells adds, “To speak of Christ as Lord, then, is to identify him ontologically with Yahweh, to ascribe to him the worship which rightly belongs only to God, to acknowledge him as sovereign in his church and in creation, and to see him as the vindicator of God’s character in the world.” David F. Wells, *The Person of Christ: A Biblical and Historical Analysis of the Incarnation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1984), 77.

<sup>31</sup> Richard B. Vinson, “The God of Luke-Acts,” *Int* 68.4 (2014): 377.

<sup>32</sup> Contra the errant theology of modalism.

<sup>33</sup> Schreiner connects Gabriel’s words to Mary in Luke 1:37 with God’s words to Abraham in Genesis 18:14: “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 123.

<sup>34</sup> This concept of God’s all-encompassing power is consistent with the OT’s presentation of God. Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, 126.

<sup>35</sup> The restoration of eschatological *shalom* is in view in these angels’ praise. Graham A. Cole, *God the Peacemaker: How Atonement Brings Shalom*, NSBT 25 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 161.

<sup>36</sup> Cole, *God the Peacemaker*, 169.

As the Father, he exercises supreme authority and is the ultimate standard of good—as he gives good gifts to his people (11:13; 12:30, 32; 24:49).<sup>37</sup> One immediately thinks of the Father in the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11–32, with the further thought that it is essential to have caution when interpreting the depiction of God in the parables. Several characters in Jesus’s parables illustrate specific attributes of God (e.g., his justice, his mercy, his love). However, as Richard Vinson notes, “these characters are ambiguous, more certainly representing God’s purposes, less certainly God’s person.”<sup>38</sup> The parables, then, provide glimpses into God’s attributes, but the characters that depict his attributes do not fully encapsulate his being.

Luke presents God as the one who knows the hearts of man (16:15), and it is to him that ultimate obedience is due (10:25–27; 20:25). He is the God of the living, and “all live to him” (20:38). This obedience is tied directly to having faith in Jesus. Throughout Luke’s Gospel, it is implied that all will stand before God for the way they respond to his Messiah. In summary, Luke depicts God, the Most High, as completely sovereign in the accomplishing of his redemptive plan—working behind the scenes of history and interceding for humanity by sending his Son.<sup>39</sup>

2. *Jesus, the Son of the Most High.* Luke depicts Jesus as the promised Savior and the anointed Davidic King, who will reign forever. In Luke 1:32–33, Gabriel announces that Jesus will be great and will be called “the Son of the Most High.” While many assert that the title “Son” does not necessarily imply Jesus’s divinity but only his kingship, it is clear that Jesus is the unique Son of God who bears the title in a way no person had before nor any person would again.<sup>40</sup> As the Son of God, Jesus is the Davidic king; but as the unique Son of God, he wields authority as God himself. He is the Christ of God (9:20), to whom God has handed “all things” (10:21). Additionally, by describing Jesus’s miraculous and divine incarnation by the Spirit, Luke implies that “Son of God” is much more than a mere reference to Davidic kingship.<sup>41</sup>

Throughout the Gospel, Jesus enjoys a special relationship with God as his Father and has the authority to reveal the Father to whom he pleases. Twelve-year-old Jesus recognizes that he must be in his Father’s house (2:49). God himself affirms his paternal relationship with the Christ at Jesus’s baptism (3:22) and transfiguration (9:35).<sup>42</sup> He is the “beloved Son” with whom God is “well pleased.”<sup>43</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 131.

<sup>38</sup> Vinson, “The God of Luke-Acts,” 381.

<sup>39</sup> Köstenberger, Kellum, and Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown*, 335.

<sup>40</sup> Bock is right to note that in contemporary Judaism, “the phrase ‘Son of God’ could describe a special human being without necessarily requiring ontological overtones.” Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts*, 151.

<sup>41</sup> Steven Wellum writes about the virgin birth: “The conception of Christ is a divine intrusion—the last great culminating eruption of the power of God into the plight of humanity as the first man of the new creation now arrives in fulfillment of all Old Testament expectations.” Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*, 238.

<sup>42</sup> Schreiner notes that the declaration of Jesus as the beloved Son with whom God is pleased echoes the Suffering Servant passage in Isaiah 42:1. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty*, 480.

When Jesus speaks of his ministry, he says that “he was sent” to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God (4:43), with the passive ἀπεστάλην suggesting that God himself sent Jesus. Even the demons recognize Jesus as “the Holy One of God” and “the Son of God” to whom belongs the power of judgment over evil (4:34, 41; 8:28).

Because the Father sent Jesus, whoever rejects Jesus also rejects the one who sent him (10:16). God sent his Son and judges all based on their response to him (12:8–9). Perhaps the best statement of God’s unique relationship with Jesus is found in 10:22, “All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”

Not only is Jesus the means by which the Father makes himself known, but he is also the one who restores God’s *shalom* in the fallen world (1:78–79). After forgiving the sinful woman, Jesus says, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace,” demonstrating the close connection between *shalom* and forgiveness (7:50).<sup>44</sup> Later in 8:43, he proclaims the same *shalom* over the hemorrhaging woman, demonstrating once again that such peace can be found only by having faith in him.

Jesus’s authority is often depicted as an authority that, up to this point in redemptive history, belonged only to Yahweh. He holds the authority to baptize with the Holy Spirit those who repent (see also 24:49) and to baptize with the fires of judgment those who do not repent (3:16).<sup>45</sup> Jesus stands in the role of Yahweh as the “bridegroom” of Israel (5:35). He stands as the “lord of the Sabbath” (6:5), placing him on the same level as God. The winds and the water obey Jesus (8:25), as they obey God (Ps 65:5–7; 77:19; 89:9; 107:29). Jesus offers forgiveness (Luke 7:36–50)—an authority attributed to God alone.<sup>46</sup> After driving out Legion, Jesus commands the former demoniac to return to his home and “declare how much God has done for you” (8:39). Interestingly, the former demoniac obeys this command by “proclaiming throughout the whole city how much Jesus had done for him.” Bock is certainly correct in saying, “The man cannot speak of what God did without telling what Jesus did for him.”<sup>47</sup> In Luke, Jesus’s work is God’s work.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>43</sup> The phrase “My beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” is a combination of Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1 and demonstrates that Jesus is “the Son-King who will bring justice and righteousness to all the nations through the sovereign and saving reign of the Creator-Covenant Lord himself.” Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*, 151–52.

<sup>44</sup> “‘Go in peace’ is a common farewell formula in Judaism ... which here takes on deeper significance in the context of the coming of eschatological salvation.” John Nolland, *Luke 1:1–9:20*, WBC 35A (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 360.

<sup>45</sup> “There is simply NO analogy for an exalted human (or any other creature) becoming so integrated with God that such a person may be said to ‘commission’ God’s Spirit, and through that to extend that exalted person’s own ‘presence’ and activity to people on earth. For the Jew, such relationship to, and activity in or through, the Spirit appears to be necessarily, inalienably, and so distinctively, God’s” (emphasis original). Max Turner, “The Spirit of Christ and ‘Divine’ Christology,” in *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ: Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology*, ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 423.

<sup>46</sup> “Declaring who will be forgiven is a divine prerogative, and thereby Luke testifies to Jesus’ divine status.” Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 189.

<sup>47</sup> Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts*, 105.

This connection between Jesus's and God's work explains why Jesus's actions lead to God's glorification throughout the Gospel.<sup>49</sup>

When the ruler calls him a "Good Teacher," Jesus calls attention to the man's ignorance of his true identity: "No one is good except God alone" (18:19). If Jesus truly is good, then he is God. Along with being the good God, he is David's son, but he is not inferior to David. Quite the contrary, Jesus is the Lord to whom David overhears Yahweh saying, "Sit at my right hand" in Psalm 110:1 (Luke 20:41–44).<sup>50</sup> Jesus takes up Daniel 7's description of the Son of Man and applies it to himself saying that the Son of Man will come in a cloud "with power and great glory" (21:27) and will be seen sitting "at the right hand of the power of God" (22:67–69). After his resurrection, he receives worship, which to a monotheistic Jew is blasphemy, unless Jesus truly is the God of Israel (24:52).<sup>51</sup>

Jesus, then, is the Son of the Most High who wields the authority of God as he carries out his Father's redemptive plan. Just before his arrest on the Mount of Olives, Jesus recognizes that it is God his Father who has handed him the bitter cup of wrath (Ps 75:8; Isa 51:17) and confesses that it is God's will that must be done (Luke 22:41). Jesus says that it was necessary for him to "suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (24:46–47; cf. 9:22, 44; 24:26).<sup>52</sup> The one who bore the name and authority of God died so that God's forgiveness could be extended to sinners. His resurrection served as definitive proof that he is indeed the Son of God (Rom 1:4). In conclusion, Jesus is the divine implementer and finalizer of God's plan to redeem the nations.

3. *The Spirit, the Power from on High.* The Holy Spirit plays no small role in Luke's Gospel.<sup>53</sup> In Luke, the Spirit is the means by which people are empowered to serve God or to speak about his redemptive work.<sup>54</sup> For example, Gabriel tells Zechariah that his son "will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb" (1:15). This Spirit-filling is crucial to John's role as the forerunner of the

<sup>48</sup> Bock adds, "For Luke, to see Jesus act is to be in the presence of God's power." Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts*, 105.

<sup>49</sup> Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts*, 106.

<sup>50</sup> Green writes, "Within the Lukan narrative, Jesus' puzzle cannot be resolved by denying that the Messiah is a Davidide; rather, 'Son of David' must not be the 'ultimate category' for understanding the identity of the Messiah in Luke's narrative." Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 724.

<sup>51</sup> Schreiner is correct in writing, "The disciples of Jesus were monotheists well schooled in OT devotion, and yet they worship Jesus (Luke 24:52). Such worship of Jesus, however, does not contradict their devotion to monotheism and the one God of Israel and of the world, for the next verse informs us that they blessed and praised God (Luke 24:53). Apparently, the early Christians did not think that worshipping Jesus contradicted praising and worshipping the one God, and hence in some sense Jesus was divine, without excluding the deity of the Father." Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 189–90.

<sup>52</sup> "Jesus himself understood and taught that both Scripture and God's plan of salvation are Christocentric." Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*, 25.

<sup>53</sup> "Luke places greater emphasis on the Holy Spirit than does either Matthew or Mark." Gregg R. Allison and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit, Theology for the People of God* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020), 62.

<sup>54</sup> Schreiner highlights the close connection between "filling" (*pimpleni*) and prophecy. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 442–44. See also Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts*, 128, 133, 144.

Lord. This empowering work of the Spirit is foreshadowed as Elizabeth who “was filled with the Holy Spirit” proclaimed Mary’s baby as Lord (1:41–45) and as Zechariah, also being filled with the Holy Spirit, prophesied about God’s redemption and John’s future work as a prophet of the Most High (1:67–79). It was the Spirit who led Simeon to go to the temple, where his eyes would behold God’s salvation (2:25–32).

The Spirit is instrumental in the work of the incarnation as he is “the one to effect the virginal conception.”<sup>55</sup> Jesus would have no human father; instead, he would be born through the work of the Spirit. The angel explained to Mary, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God” (1:35). The Spirit’s coming upon Mary and God’s power overshadowing her emphasize God’s powerful presence. The word “overshadow” (ἐπισκιάσει) describes God’s *shekinah* glory that “covered” or “overshadowed” the tent of meeting (Exod 40:34–35).<sup>56</sup> This word is also used later in describing the transfiguration and the cloud that “overshadowed” Jesus and his disciples (Luke 9:34). The Holy Spirit’s role in the incarnation shows that Jesus truly is God’s own Son.

John the Baptist understood that coming after him was a mighty one who will “baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (3:16). In other words, the one coming after John would have the authority to pour out God’s Spirit upon God’s people. This authority to give the Spirit was due to his own unique relationship with the Spirit. Not only was he born of the Spirit, but he was also the unique bearer of the Spirit.<sup>57</sup> At the Jordan, the Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove and remained with him (3:22), just as the Spirit rested upon David during his ministry (1 Sam 16:13). The Spirit’s anointing of Jesus acknowledges his Sonship—he is the Davidic King, highlights God’s presence and blessing on his ministry, and also equips him to fulfill his ministry.<sup>58</sup>

The Spirit’s empowerment of Jesus’s ministry must not be overlooked. From the baptismal waters of the Jordan, Jesus, full (πλήρης) of the Holy Spirit, was led to the wilderness where he defeated Satan’s temptations, proving himself to be the

<sup>55</sup> Allison and Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, 351.

<sup>56</sup> Walter L. Liefeld, “Luke,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8: *Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 831–32. See also Pao and Schnabel, “Luke,” 260. Letham notes that this word might be a subtle reference to new creation. He writes, “The angel compares the Spirit’s role in Jesus’s conception to his work in creation, where he brooded over the primeval waters (Gen. 1:2). Jesus is to be the author of a new creation, begun, as the first, through the overshadowing action of the Spirit of God. In turn, the holiness of the child is the result of his conception by the Holy Spirit.” Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 57. See also Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate*, 238.

<sup>57</sup> Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 441.

<sup>58</sup> Allison and Köstenberger argue, “It was not because he was the fully divine Son of God that Jesus worked miracles, but due to the enablement of the Spirit: ‘God was with him,’ empowering Jesus to perform miraculous acts.” *The Holy Spirit*, 358.

perfect Holy One of God.<sup>59</sup> He returned “in the power of the Spirit to Galilee” (4:14). There, Jesus read Isaiah 61, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me (*πνεῦμα κυρίου ἐπ’ ἐμέ*), because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18–19). This text explicitly highlights the Spirit’s role in Jesus’s ministry. The Spirit resting upon Jesus empowered him for the work of proclamation, healing, and liberation.<sup>60</sup> Though Luke does not record the Spirit’s role in much of his Gospel’s healing and teaching narrative, Luke 4 compels readers to understand the Spirit’s implicit role throughout Jesus’s ministry.<sup>61</sup> This would, of course, include the Spirit’s implicit role in Jesus’s atoning death (Heb 9:14).<sup>62</sup>

In addition to empowering Jesus for ministry, the Spirit also testifies to Jesus’s identity as the saving Son of God. To reject this testimony is an ultimate rejection of God and is an unforgivable blasphemy (Luke 12:10). In this, Luke emphasizes the importance of accepting the Spirit’s testimony by believing in Jesus as God’s Son. This theme of the Spirit’s role in testifying to the truth about Jesus is seen in Luke 12:11–12 and Luke 24 and will continue on into the book of Acts.

After his resurrection, Jesus instructs his disciples to remain in Jerusalem until they “are clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). The phrase, “power from on high” is saturated with OT anticipations, including the anticipation that humanity’s wilderness will become a fruitful forest (Isa 32:15)—an analogy of restoration.<sup>63</sup> The promise of the Spirit’s outpouring, which will be accomplished in Acts 2, suggests that God’s eschatological work of making a new creation has begun.<sup>64</sup> In his *Die Mitte der Zeit*, Hans Conzelmann argues that Luke “de-eschatologizes” his Gospel in order to “give a rationale for the continued existence and mission of the church after the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry.”<sup>65</sup> When it comes to Luke’s presentation of the Holy Spirit, however, it is clear that Luke is

<sup>59</sup> “Jesus does not repel temptations as the Son incarnate apart from the Holy Spirit, who indwells Jesus without measure. Rather, it is the God-man filled with the Holy Spirit who faces down Satan and defeats all the temptations thrust at him.” Allison and Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit*, 356.

<sup>60</sup> “Luke is telling his readers that Jesus himself was governed and directed by the Holy Spirit in all that he did. His ministry as the Christ, the Anointed One, was empowered by the Spirit. Behind that, Jesus from his earliest days was in all his human development (cf. Luke 2:40–52) under the immediate leading of the Spirit.” Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 57.

<sup>61</sup> Schreiner rightly notes, “Every dimension of [Jesus’s] work depended upon the anointing power of the Spirit. Every good work detailed in Luke stems from the Spirit himself.” Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 442. Legge adds, “Christ can never be without his Spirit. What is more, Christ as a man relies on—indeed, cannot do without—the Holy Spirit in accomplishing the work given to him by the Father.” Dominic Legge, *Trinitarian Christology of St Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2017), 132.

<sup>62</sup> Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 359.

<sup>63</sup> Pao and Schnabel, “Luke,” 402.

<sup>64</sup> Turner notes that both Luke 1 and Luke 24 allude to Isaiah 32:15. The parallel between incarnation and the soon-coming Pentecost suggest that “Pentecost involves elements of Israel’s new creation or new birth through the Spirit (Luke 1:35), as well as empowering.” Max Turner, *Power from on High: The Spirit in Israel’s Restoration and Witness in Luke-Acts* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 434. See also Cara, “Luke,” 105–6.

<sup>65</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 238.

not “de-eschatologizing” his Gospel; instead, he is “eschatologizing” the present.<sup>66</sup> The eschatological promise of the Holy Spirit will be poured out in this evil age, showing that God’s end-time kingdom and restoration has broken into the present, but is not yet fully consummated.<sup>67</sup>

### III. CONCLUSION

In summary, Luke presents the God of Israel as he who has accomplished the New Exodus and established Davidic dominion through his divine Son by the Holy Spirit, resulting in salvation for the nations. In describing the triune God’s work of redemption, Luke shows that God is not a “sterile God of isolated attributes but an engaging God.”<sup>68</sup> He is the covenant-keeping Lord who redeems for himself a people from all nations through the salvific atonement of Jesus. In this way, Luke proclaims that God, the OT *gō’el* of Israel, is at work once again. This time, however, he is bringing a conclusive fulfillment to his promises in Jesus, the eternal Davidic king. To appreciate Luke’s portrayal of God, it is incumbent upon Luke’s readers to see him as the God who fulfills his ancient promises.

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<sup>66</sup> Max Turner, “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts,” *WW* 23.2 (2003): 151–52.

<sup>67</sup> Beale and Gladd, *The Story Retold*, 107. Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts*, 129.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.