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Specificity of Luke’s description of the mission of John the Baptist. An analysis of Luke 3:3–9,16–17

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to highlight Luke’s editorial work in Luke 3:1–20, when he refers to John the Baptist. Undoubtedly, in his Gospel, the activity and teaching of the son of Zechariah are subordinated to Jesus, whom John the Baptist calls “the mightier”, the one who “is coming”. One can surely notice that the Evangelists look at John and his ministry in various ways. While telling the story of John the Baptist and Jesus, Luke selects and “edits” the materials available to him in order to emphasise the significance of Jesus and His mission. He focuses not so much upon the truth that the last of the Old Testament prophets is the predecessor of the Messiah, but rather upon God’s salvation that is drawing near. It could well be that he did this to contribute to a proper relationship between John’s disciples and the community of the early Church.

Keywords

Jesus, Messiah, Christological titles, community of John the Baptist, St. Luke

St. Luke's actual narrative begins with the description of the activity of John the Baptist.¹ The Evangelist considered it important to give a short account of the life and teaching of Zechariah's son.² By editing the source material, Luke emphasises the role and significance of Jesus and His mission. We will briefly discuss the tradition and editing of the narrative with respect to the activity of John the Baptist in the Gospel of St. Luke. Subsequently, we will demonstrate what Luke did in order to outline, specifically, the mission of Zechariah's son.³ It seems that his intention was to emphasise the significance of salvation and the Messiah who brings it.

1. The tradition and editing of Luke 3:1–20

The message regarding Zechariah's son opens with a historical background.⁴ The narrative with respect to the activity of John the Baptist begins with the characteristic phrase: *egeneto hrēma theou epi Iōannēn ton Zachariou*⁵, which refers to the Old Testament texts.⁶ In this way, Luke emphasises that God assigns John, similarly to the prophets of the Old Covenant, a special task, thus situating him among the prophets of the Old Law. Another part of Luke's Gospel, in which the focus shifts from John to Jesus,⁷ starts with the words *egeneto de*. This is to emphasise the beginning of a new message.⁸

¹ The historical background and the figure of St. John the Baptist in Luke 3:1–20 are, as it were, independent of the events described in Luke 1–2. Cf. J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke (I–IX)*, New York 1981, Doubleday, p. 450 (The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries, 28).

² Luke 3:1–20.

³ More on this issue in P. Łabuda, *Eliasz w chrystologii Łukasza*, Tarnów 2012, Biblos, pp. 143–201.

⁴ Luke uses a synchronism in 3:1–2 to create a literary background for introducing John at the beginning of Jesus's time in which salvation will occur. See J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke (I–IX)*, pp. 452–453; J. Nolland, *Luke (1–9,20)*, Dallas 1989, Word Books, p. 137 (Word Biblical Commentary, 35a); F. Bovon, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas 1. Teilband Luke 1,1–9,50*, Zürich–Neukirchen-Vluyn 1989, Benzinger–Neukirchener, p. 165 (Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament, III/1).

⁵ Luke 3:2.

⁶ Jer 1:1 LXX, Cf. Isa 38:4.

⁷ Luke 3:21.

⁸ See A. Malina, *Chrzest Jezusa w czterech Ewangeliach. Studium narracji i teologii*, Katowice 2007, pp. 277–330 (Studia i Materiały Wydziału Teologicznego w Katowicach, 34).

Having delineated the historical background, Luke includes a narrative emanating from his own materials or from a source similar to Mark's message.⁹ The next passage¹⁰ may have originally been the beginning of the Q source. The subsequent texts: a general reference to John's activity, his arrest, and the baptism of Jesus,¹¹ seem to have functioned as one in the Q source. Luke added an introduction to the baptismal speech¹² and the baptismal preaching of John.¹³

While writing about the activity of John the Baptist, Luke complements the material from the Q source with texts borrowed from Mark's source and other traditions. Perhaps while imparting information with regard to John and his activity, these texts revealed his relationship with Jesus. It seems that they were well-known to the community of the early Church.¹⁴ Luke arranged them according to his theological ideas. Individual *logia* might have been expanded by him and attributed to the historical John. For Zechariah's son likely spoke only about the fire of judgement, not the fire of the spirit, and the term "the mightier" referred rather to God than to the Messiah. It seems that John's speeches were expanded due to the Christian outlook on the relationship between him and Jesus.¹⁵ This may be part of Luke's intention to shape the readers' understanding of the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus, and even more so, to contribute to a proper relationship between the community of the Baptist's disciples and the community of the Church.

It is difficult to determine who the recipients of John's instructions were. According to the third Gospel, his teaching is directed to the crowds.¹⁶ In the parallel text by Matthew, the speech is addressed to the Pharisees and Sadducees, while in Mark, it refers to the inhabitants of Judea and Jerusalem.¹⁷ Commentators acknowledge that the interpretation of the first Gospels is more original and find it hard to understand Luke's narrative in which those who come to the

⁹ Luke 3:3–6.

¹⁰ Luke 3:7–9 as well as 3:16–17.

¹¹ Luke 3:18–22.

¹² Luke 3:7–9 Cf. Matt 3:7–9.

¹³ Luke 3:10–14. See F. Mickiewicz, *Ewangelia według św. Łukasza, rozdziały 1–11*, Częstochowa 2011, Edycja św. Pawła, p. 216, 222 (Nowy Komentarz Biblijny. Nowy Testament, III/1). Others indicate that Luke might have combined Mark's material with those from the dual tradition and his own source. See J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke (I–IX)*, p. 464.

¹⁴ See Acts 10:37–38.

¹⁵ See F. Bovon, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas*, p. 167.

¹⁶ See Luke 3:7.10.15.18.

¹⁷ See Matt 3:7; Mark 1:5.

Jordan to be baptised are called “the brood of vipers”.¹⁸ However, we must remember that John accuses them of being full of venom that cannot be washed simply by immersion in the waters of the Jordan. He finds the radical *metanoia* of the interior to be indispensable.¹⁹

The entire message, which consists of *logia* with one common theme (John the Baptist’s teaching), is related to the Old Testament historiographies or the description of God’s intervention through a prophet. The entire narrative regarding John the Baptist seems to contain essentially historical accounts. Some of them emanate from the tradition of John’s disciples, some from the Christian tradition.

2. The beginning of John the Baptist’s activity (Luke 3:3–6)

Biblical exegetes still reflect upon the origin of the narrative containing “John’s sayings.”²⁰ Some of them believe that Luke must have drawn on the Q source.²¹ Others see the prevailing influence on Luke in the Gospel of the Mark.²² It seems that the latter opinion is more justified, as there is a similar order of events in both narratives (John the Baptist’s activity – baptism – temptation). However, while adopting the tradition of Mark, Luke passes over the quotation from the Book of Malachi²³ while extending the quotation from Isaiah.²⁴ Thus, the Evangelist seems to explain the character of the baptism and the message of John and underscore the theme of God’s salvation. Similar to the Qumran literature, while referring to the prophet Isaiah, Luke interprets historical events considering salvation. Undoubtedly, he considers John’s administering baptism and

¹⁸ See Luke 3:7.

¹⁹ See A. Paciorek, “Wydajcie godny owoc nawrócenia...” *Janowe głoszenie nad Jordanem (Mt 3,7–12)*, in: *Ku liturgii nadziei*, edited by R. Biel, Tarnów 2005, Biblos, p. 142.

²⁰ Luke 3:3–6.

²¹ Similar to Matt 3:1–6. See E. Lohmeyer, *Das Evangelium des Markus*, KEK 1, Göttingen 1967, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, p. 34; H. Schürmann, *Das Lukasevangelium. 1. Teil: Kommentar zu Kap. 1,1–9,50*, Freiburg–Basel–Wien 1969, Herder, p. 161 (Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament, 3.1).

²² See J. Ernst, *Johannes der Täufer. Interpretation – Geschichte – Wirkungsgeschichte*, Berlin–New York 1989, W. de Gruyter, p. 90 (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft, 53); F. Mickiewicz, *Ewangelia według św. Łukasza*, p. 209.

²³ Mal 3:1; por. Mark 1:2.

²⁴ Isa 40:5.

preaching to be the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy (unlike Mark who thought it to be the fulfilment of the prophecies of Malachi and Isaiah).

In Luke 3:6, the evangelist relies entirely upon the Septuagint, from which he elicits the excerpt Isa 40:5. Luke uses the term "salvation" (Greek *sōtērion* – "healing", "rescue", "salvation"), which is characteristic only of the Greek Old Testament.²⁵ Interestingly, he borrows only a fragment of the text from Isa 40:5 and makes several lexical alterations. Perhaps he does this to emphasise the universal character of salvation. Luke does not want to emphasise God's glory and connect it with the coming Messiah. To him, God's glory is not a characteristic trait of Jesus' public activity,²⁶ but the result of His suffering²⁷ and an element of His Parousia.²⁸

It seems that Luke omits the excerpt from the prophet Malachi, which was most probably present in Mark's text or pre-Mark materials, because he wants to limit the too far-reaching identification of John the Baptist with Elijah. Some commentators claim that Luke might have wanted to correct the mistake the Mark made when he attributed Malachi's quotation to Isaiah. Also, unlike Mark, Luke fails to mention what the Baptist wore and ate.²⁹

Undoubtedly, while focusing on Isa 40:5, Luke shifts the emphasis from the mission of Zechariah's son to the salvation that all people will see. Luke stresses that John is a herald who proclaims the necessity of baptism if sins are to be forgiven.³⁰ He also claims that one's consent to be baptised is a sign of one's decision to submit one's entire life to God's judgement while waiting for forgiveness. In so doing, he draws attention to the individual's responsibility.³¹

The reference to Isa 40:3 and the background of the entire narrative does not mean, as some claim, that John was a member of the community in Qumran from which he set out on a mission to prepare the way for the Lord. Some

²⁵ Cf. M. Rese, *Alttestamentliche Motive in der Christologie des Lukas*, Gütersloher 1969, Gütersloher Verlagshaus G. Mohn, p. 170 (Studien zum Neuen Testament, 1).

²⁶ See Luke 9:32.

²⁷ See Luke 24:26.

²⁸ See Luke 21:27; J. Nolland, *Luke*, p. 144.

²⁹ See Mark 1:6. Some commentators claim that Luke intended to introduce information about John's asceticism in subsequent parts (Luke 7:25.33); J. Ernst, *Johannes*, p. 83.

³⁰ Luke 3:3b; Mark 1:4b.

³¹ Emphasising the eschatology of an individual is a characteristic trait of Luke's entire work. See more on this issue in P. Łabuda, *Śmierć i życie po śmierci wg Ewangelii św. Łukasza*, Tarnów 2007, Biblos; F. Bovon, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas*, p. 170.

commentators also suggest that the tradition of this community was the origin of John's administering baptism.³² While there may be some analogies, there are also distinct differences between the activity of John and the baptismal practices and rules of the Qumran. A thorough analysis questions the connection between John and the Dead Sea community, or John's dependence on it.³³

Surely, Luke's account of the activity of John the Baptist, set in a specific historical framework, emphasises primarily not the truth that John is Jesus' predecessor, but the truth that God's salvation is drawing near. Luke writes that John's cry was heard in the wilderness, and perhaps he alludes to the symbolical association of the wilderness and sin while emphasising the necessity of repentance and baptism. Undoubtedly, this is also an encouragement to watch while waiting for the Lord. John is a voice in the wilderness, a prophet of the salvation to come. His task is to prepare people for the coming of the Messiah, that is, Jesus. Those who believe the Good News will see salvation, which in the Semitic culture means they will "experience" it.³⁴

3. John's calling (Luke 3:7–9)

The passage Luke 3:7–9 can be seen as a threat that announces the coming judgement. John's message is a stern warning against God's coming wrath. This wrath is the primary element of the historical preaching of John the Baptist. It draws upon the Old Testament tradition to connect the eschatological God's judgement with the Day of the Lord.³⁵ John preached the imminence and inevitability of wrath and judgement. Salvation can be found only in conversion.³⁶

John's message the Baptist is consistent with the message of the prophets in which the threat of judgement and calling to conversion are one.³⁷ In John's

³² See e.g. IQS 5:8.13.

³³ See H. Stegemann, *Esseńczycy z Qumran, Jan Chrzciciel i Jezus*, Kraków 2002, Enigma Press, p. 264 (Biblioteka Zwojów, 9); F. Mickiewicz, *Ewangelia według św. Łukasza*, p. 213.

³⁴ See F. Bovon, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas*, p. 170.

³⁵ See Isa 13:9; Zeph 1:14–16; 2:2; Ezek 7:19.

³⁶ Some think that the fruit of conversion is baptism. See H. Merklein, *Die Umkehrpredigt bei Johannes dem Täufer und Jesus von Nazaret*, "Biblische Zeitschrift" 25 (1981), pp. 36–37. Others claim that one's ethical attitude and behaviour is the fruit of conversion. See J. Ernst, *Johannes*, p. 45.

³⁷ See e.g. Mal 2:3; 3:24.

calling to repent, there is yet another Old Testament motif: the rejection of the nation that should not count on avoiding wrath and punishment just because it is the chosen nation.³⁸ The author of the third Gospel, through John's message, emphasises that on the Day of Jahweh, this choice may not apply because God can raise his children even from stones and they will be more faithful than Israel.³⁹ Some commentators claim that in John's preaching, one can discern the influence of Christian teaching and its dispute with Judaism. One of its main topics was the question of the rejection of Israel, Abraham's descendants.⁴⁰

John the Baptist's words from Luke 3:9 refer to Luke 3:8a and emphasise the approach of the time of wrath. This reference may confirm the assumption that the excerpt about rejecting those who say "we have Abraham as our father" was⁴¹ added secondarily within the Christian community. The announcement of cutting down the tree and throwing it into the fire means that the judgement may come at any time and cannot be stopped.⁴²

In the second part of the ninth verse, the Evangelist introduces another image that may be a Christian gloss to the Baptist's saying.⁴³ John says that bad trees that do not bear good fruit will be burnt. The Greek term *pyr* "fire" connects Luke 3:7 with Luke 3:9. The first excerpt speaks about God's wrath that is coming and that is described as fire in Luke 3:9.⁴⁴ This entire eschatological narrative is in the prophetic spirit of the Old Testament: punishment may be avoided, but the good fruit of conversion is necessary.

³⁸ The Israelites emphasised that God was faithful to His covenant with the patriarchs, which was confirmed by the prophets (Cf. Isa 41:8–11; 51:2–3; Jer 33:23–26; Dan 3:35). It seems they believed that on the Day of Judgement, the fact that they belonged to the chosen nation would save them, regardless of their deeds. (See Testament of Levi 15:4). See F. Mickiewicz, *Orędzie Jana Chrzciciela o Królestwie Bożym (Mt 3,2.7–12; Luke 3,7–9.6–18) i jego wypełnienie w działalności Jezusa*, in: *Ewangelia o Królestwie*, edited by A. Paciorek et al., Lublin 2009, Wydawnictwo KUL, pp. 136–137.

³⁹ See Luke 3:8.

⁴⁰ Cf. John 6:26nn.; 8:31n.; Acts 3:25; Rom 4; 9:8; Gal 3:6–29; J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke (I–IX)*, p. 465.

⁴¹ Luke 3:8b.

⁴² See H. Schürmann, *Das Lukasevangelium*, p. 166; J. Nolland, *Luke*, p. 149.

⁴³ See F. Bovon, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas*, p. 173.

⁴⁴ Cf. Isa 9:18; 66:15–16.24; Ezek 21:36; 22:21.31; 38:22; 39,6; Amos 1:4.7.10 etc.; PsSal 15:4–5; 2Bar 37:1; 44:15; F. Mickiewicz, *Orędzie Jana*, pp. 138–141.

4. Announcing the Messiah (Luke 3:16–17)

In the second part of his speech,⁴⁵ John announces the coming and activity of the Mightier One, who is superior to John in everything – John finds himself unworthy to serve Him as a slave serves his master. This excerpt is an example of the messianic or Christological teaching of the Baptist in which we may find three titles that refer to Jesus: “Messiah,” the one who “will come” and who is “more powerful”.

According to commentators, the narratives from Luke 3:7–9 and Luke 3:16–19 are historical messages regarding the Baptist. They share the theme of judgment and its terminology.⁴⁶ Moreover, they correspond to the tradition in the fourth Gospel, which poses the question regarding the messianic and prophetic identity of John connected with words about baptism and “the Mightier.”⁴⁷ In the Gospel of St. John, the Baptist explicitly states that he is not the Messiah.⁴⁸ In the Gospel of St. Luke, John does not say it directly, but alludes it in Luke 3:15. Luke might have found the trace of the idea of the chosen nation waiting for the “Coming of the Mightier” (very vivid in its tradition) in accounts also known to John. Perhaps the words from Luke 3:15 refer to the messianic outlook on John by his community.⁴⁹

The beginning of John’s message,⁵⁰ which is addressed to the whole nation, reveals the manner in which conversion may occur. It begins with water baptism, which is the external sign of conversion. John compares the baptism he administers to baptising with the Holy Spirit and fire. Thus, he connects his own mission with the mission of the “Mightier”. Perhaps the excerpt in which John speaks of the Holy Spirit comes from the Christian tradition, in which the experience of the Holy Spirit was a particularly important motif.⁵¹ How-

⁴⁵ Luke 3:16–17.

⁴⁶ See M. Öhler, *Elia im Neuen Testament. Untersuchungen zur Bedeutung des alttestamentlichen Propheten im frühen Christentum*, Berlin–New York 1997, Walter de Gruyter, p. 49 (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft, 88).

⁴⁷ See John 1:19–27.

⁴⁸ John 1:20.

⁴⁹ See H. Schürmann, *Das Lukasevangelium*, p. 170.

⁵⁰ Luke 3:16. Luke seems to follow the Q material, which he compares with Mark’s material. See F. Mickiewicz, *Ewangelia według św. Łukasza*, p. 223.

⁵¹ See P. Pajor, *Znaczenie chrztu Duchem Świętym i ogniem*, “Roczniki Teologiczno-Kanoniczne” 14 (1967) no 1, pp. 49–64.

ever, the question of whether baptising with the Holy Spirit can be understood as judgement is problematic. If we assume that in the Greek term *pneuma* we have the equivalent of the Hebrew *ruach*, then we might say that what the Baptist means is the judgmental breath that comes from the mouth of a judge.⁵² If this is the case, the term *hagios*, which describes the Spirit, must have been added by the community of Christ's disciples. It seems more justified to assume that for Christians, Jesus was the announced "Mightier" whose coming was connected not so much with baptising with fire, but with the Holy Spirit. Then, the entire expression *en pneumati hagiōi* may be considered as a Christian addition.⁵³ The parallel in Luke 3:16a supports this assumption. In the third Gospel, John juxtaposes the baptism with the water that he gives to the coming baptism of fire. John expected that judgement and Christian interpretation that spoke about the baptism with the Spirit would draw attention to salvation. For the Spirit of God was to be the gift of messianic times.⁵⁴

Another passage whose aim may be to subordinate John to the coming Messiah might be the one that speaks about *Ischyroteros*, who is coming after John. In Luke 3:16a and Luke 3:16b, we have a juxtaposition not so much of the two kinds of baptism, but of those who baptise. The relationship between John and "Mightier than he" is shown differently in the Gospel of St. Matthew, which⁵⁵ strongly emphasises John's role as the predecessor. Luke seems to juxtapose the two figures. Even though, chronologically speaking, Jesus is coming after John,⁵⁶ He does not follow him in the same way that a disciple follows his master. Luke's expression *ischyteros mou* is reinforced in Luke 3:16c when John speaks of himself as being unworthy of the role of a slave to this "Mightier". The one who is coming is much greater than John. His superiority is the superiority of the baptism with fire to the baptism with water, of judgement to prophetic warnings.

We should understand the term *erchomenos* in the same vein as *ischyteros*. This seems to emanate not so much from the teaching of John the Baptist, but rather from the Christian reference of this term to the Baptist's saying. In Biblical texts and extra-biblical traditions, the term *erchomenos* appears many times and

⁵² Cf. Isa 29:6; 30:27–28; 66:15; 4 Ezra 13:10–11; 1 QS 28b; 2 Thess 2:8; J. Nolland, *Luke*, p. 153.

⁵³ See H. Merklein, *Die Umkehrpredigt bei Johannes dem Täufer und Jesus von Nazaret*, p. 32; J. Nolland, *Luke*, p. 147.

⁵⁴ See Isa 32:15; 44:3; Ezek 36:26; Joel 3:1; Zech 12:10, Testament of Levi 18:26–28; Testament of Judah 24:2–3; See M. Öhler, *Elia im Neuen Testament*, p. 53.

⁵⁵ See Matt 3:11 that is taken from Mark 1:7.

⁵⁶ See Acts 13:24–25.

denotes, apart from the ordinary “coming”, also reaching one’s aim, a pilgrim’s arriving in Jerusalem,⁵⁷ the coming of the King expected by Daughter Zion,⁵⁸ or the coming of the prophet like Moses or the Messiah.⁵⁹ Also, in the Book of Daniel, the Son of Man is called *hōs hios anthrōpou erchomenos*.⁶⁰ In the New Testament texts, the term *erchomenos* refers to Jesus, for He is the one to be the judge, one who will baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire. In the Gospel of Luke, John is the one who announces the coming of the “Mightier” who is arriving soon. Undoubtedly, John is “more than a prophet”,⁶¹ but his role is diminished by Luke. The Evangelist offers a general account of the subsequent activity of John, alludes to his imprisonment,⁶² and then definitely concludes the story of Zechariah’s son. He begins Jesus’s story, “the One who is to come.”⁶³

Luke’s narrative 3:1–20 is a testimony that Luke, apart from being a true and reliable historian, is primarily a theologian of salvation. That is why, perhaps, bearing in mind certain false convictions prevalent in the communities close to John the Baptist, Luke presents carefully selected parts of the Baptist’s life and activity. He focuses not so much upon the mission of John, but on the figure of the One who is coming, who is Mightier and more important in every respect than Zechariah’s son. The task of John, which is powerfully stressed by Luke in the infancy narrative, is to prepare the way of the Lord, the time when people will see God’s salvation. What matters is the coming Salvation, not John, who is to prepare for its coming.

⁵⁷ See Ps 117:26 (118:26).

⁵⁸ See Zech 9:9.

⁵⁹ See John 6:14; 1QS 9:11; 4Q 252:3; 4Q 775:1–8; Cf. Deut 18:15–18.

⁶⁰ See Theodotius’ version of Dan 7:13.

⁶¹ See Luke 7:26.

⁶² Luke 3:19–20.

⁶³ See Luke 16:16; See J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke (I–IX)*, p. 466.

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