

*Historical and Adventure Time in Luke's Gospel*  
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The Gospel of Luke presents an interesting narrative anomaly in its travel narrative, as has been frequently noted, most especially in David Moessner's work *Lord of the Banquet*.<sup>1</sup> What is the third evangelist doing in this large unit which ostensibly narrates Jesus' travel to Jerusalem, but which offers virtually no clear evidence of order or geographical reference? I am particularly intrigued by the rather odd combination of time constructions in Luke's gospel. On the one hand, Luke seems to pay more attention to "real world" time references, often viewed as signs of historical reference. And yet Luke departs from this most notably in his long travel narrative, in which time and place become very ambiguous, and the narrative structure becomes a series of rather disconnected episodes. Many approaches – both theological and literary – have been offered to explain the evangelist's purpose. It is my desire to examine this problem from the peculiar perspective that a study of narrative time might offer.

Paul Ricoeur, in his magisterial three volume work *Time and Narrative*, explores the relationship of time to the basic nature of historical and fictive narratives. A central question for Ricoeur is whether time construction differs fundamentally between narratives that can be called historical and those that are fictional. Another very different way of approaching the question of time in narratives is suggested by Mikhail Bakhtin most notably in a concept he calls the chronotope – the linkage of time and place in narratives. Bakhtin suggests that these linkages begin to form into categories that are suggestive of the very nature of the narrative.

These two very different approaches to viewing time in narratives, then, stand as the major conversation partners I have found helpful in a reading of time constructions in the

gospels, especially Luke.

### I. Time and Narrative per Ricoeur

Ricoeur's project seeks to explore the various uses of time in narratives, and the relationship between narrative time and real time. He approaches this from two major perspectives, that of historical time and that of fictional time.

A crucial foundation to his study of time, is his view of the central concept of emplotment, the term by which he translates Aristotle's concept of *muthos*. Emplotment for Ricoeur involves the organization, usually temporal, of a series of events in order to produce a particular representation of reality, that is to create a *mimesis*. Thus, following Aristotle in his Poetics, an emplotted narrative is marked by a sense of completeness, wholeness, and appropriate magnitude.<sup>2</sup> The plot, the central feature of a narrative account, moves through a temporal world arranging events relative to one another in such a way that the events ultimately make sense and are thus persuasive and pleasurable to a reader. Ricoeur defines the plot as "an integrating dynamism that draws a unified and complete story from a variety of incidents, in other words, that transforms this variety into a unified and complete story."<sup>3</sup> But the key issue is the ordering of events, the "doingness" of the narrative. And it is this sense of ordered eventness, this temporal quality, that particularly marks a narrative and allows it to construct meaning.

Building on the foundational role of emplotment, Ricoeur examines the relationship between the narrative world and the reality that it represents, which he discusses under the heading of imitation or *mimesis*. Importantly, Ricoeur distinguishes between three modes of mimesis:

1. Mimesis<sub>1</sub> is that narrative process that seeks to represent the real world. To the degree that a narrative portrays the real world of activity, the “what” of our lived existence, it imitates and recreates a perspective of the world as we experience it.

2. Mimesis<sub>2</sub> focuses on the creative role of the narrator. The narrative is ultimately a “poetic” or created world, and so imitation is ultimately an work of refiguration, of establishing a narrative world that creatively imitates reality. But it truly is the poetic perspective of the author.

3. Mimesis<sub>3</sub> focuses on the activity of the audience. It is the persuasive turn, that aspect of narration that understands that imitation is ultimately oriented toward developing a response from the audience, the reader. The represented actions are seen as ultimately being refigured again by the reader in his or her consciousness, and thus this completes the work of mimesis.

Now what becomes clear in this, and which Ricoeur develops at greater length, is that mimesis<sub>2</sub> has a mediating function between mimesis<sub>1</sub> and mimesis<sub>3</sub>. That is, that a narrative in its creative role of relating an ordered “emplotted” narrative serves to represent a given reality in such a way that the reader understands and refigures that reality into his or her own conception. But the narrative is not an exact copy of the real world. It has selected portions of that world, or created a vision of that world, and made it comprehensible and internally coherent in order that a reader can reconstruct a sense of that world through the mediating function of the narrative.

Based on these concepts of emplotment and mimesis, Ricoeur moves to consider the particular problematics of historical narratives and fictional narratives. What is distinctive about each kind of narrative, and in what way do they share some of the same concerns, especially in the way they treat time?

For historical narratives, the central issue is the attempt to remain true to the events that the narrative describes. As opposed to fiction, history is constantly concerned with “what actually happened.” But it must be said that the very act of relating a story challenges at some level the “truth” claim of history. “Indeed, the inserting of history into action and into life, its capacity for reconfiguring time, brings into play the question of truth in history. This question is inseparable from what I will call the interweaving reference between history’s claim to truth and that of fiction.”<sup>4</sup> I will return to this slippage or overlap between history and fiction below.

Given history’s concern with the “truth” of “real events,” it would appear that the focus of the historical narrative would be on that aspect of mimetic activity Ricoeur calls *mimesis*<sub>1</sub> – the reflection and figuration of reality. And in the construction of narrative time, the temporal nature of this “real world” is frequently accounted for by means of some connectors between the world of the narrative and real lived time. One of these connectors is a reference to calendar time: a way of reconciling the world of the narrative to the cosmic structures – to risings of the sun, to months, to biological cycles. Such calendrical markings serve to anchor the narrative in an external and “objective” reality.<sup>5</sup> A second reference is to successive generations, which is a way of accounting for death and its place both in real time and in our perception of the orderedness and meaning of time.

But of course every narrative has a constructed quality to it. It does not just reflect real time, but it refigures time also. Hence, we must also recognize the importance of *mimesis*<sub>2</sub> in Ricoeur’s view of the narrative art. It is this mode which mediates between “real time” and the time as perceived by a reader where the interpretive work of an author is central.<sup>6</sup> And this work of meaning construction, this figuration, has a fictive sense to it – a poetic sense – in that the

author constructs a plot that weaves the events into a meaningful whole. The plot itself, the emplotment of the narrative, is imaginary in one sense, and borrows from the world of fiction and even makes sense of history through it: "...what history borrows from literature can by no means be limited to the level of composition, hence to the moment of configuration. What is borrowed also involves the representative function of the historical imagination. We learn to see a given series of events *as* tragic, *as* comic, and so on."<sup>7</sup>

And at the same time, fiction itself is not devoid of some element of mimesis<sub>1</sub>. While there may be few or no "real events" that are being related in a fictional narrative, such narratives rely on a sense of reality, a verisimilitude, in order to achieve the goal of persuading an audience to accept and enjoy the narrative, and to persuade them to believe in the "truth" that the narrative presents (here truth not in the historical verity, but of a view of reality).

So ultimately fictional and historical narratives overlap, or to use Ricoeur's term, interweave. History is based on real events in real time, but these events are made sense of by refigurations that are fictive, or rely on fictional ways of perceiving reality. At the same time, fiction, while it may not be based on "real events" is itself dependent on the real world and its persuasiveness will tend to depend in great part on the degree it tells the truth about the world. And time constructions in each kind of narrative will overlap.

## II. Mikhail Bakhtin and the Chronotope

Mikhail Bakhtin, in his attempt to understand how novels work and how to classify novels in a more dynamic way than structural approaches had allowed, works with concepts of genres in creative ways. Bakhtin's entrance into the sphere of narrative time comes by means of his concept of the chronotope, which is literally the linkage of time and place in literature.<sup>8</sup> He

suggests that the forms of the chronotope are meaningful ways of understanding the central elements and thrusts of narratives. “What is the significance of all these chronotopes? What is most obvious is their meaning for *narrative*. They are the organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events of the novel. The chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied. It can be said without qualification that to them belongs the meaning that shapes narrative.”<sup>9</sup>

In Bakhtin’s conception, “All contexts are shaped fundamentally by the kind of time and space that operate within them.”<sup>10</sup> Or to put it another way, ways of linking time and space (chronotope) are the ground for narrative activity and ultimately are explanatory of that activity. They are ways of “telling” about events that are themselves figurative and interpretive.

Bakhtin suggests a number of sample chronotopes as ways of seeing the development of the novel over time, and which move in some way from mythic to more realistic. The major chronotopes of Bakhtin’s that interest me in the study of Luke are Greek Romance, Adventure Novel of Everyday Life, and Ancient Biography and Autobiography. Certainly these are the forms that stem from the oldest period and are thus appropriate for our consideration.

In the Greek Romance, such as *Daphnis and Chloë*, there is a fairly formulaic plot involving a romance whose consummation must await an interval of testing. What is important, though, is that the time-place element of testing is “an alien world in adventure time.”<sup>11</sup> The major events of the story, the central plot, all takes place in an interlude between what might be called “real time.” In the romance, boy meets girl and falls in love, and in the end they marry and are happy. In between these two events is recounted the central story. But ultimately, as Bakhtin points out, the ending has already been anticipated by the beginning, and the events in

the middle do not change a thing. Moreover, the events in this “adventure time” have a certain unordered episodic nature. As a result, the episodes could theoretically be reversible; they could take place in any order. Bakhtin notes that the adventure time takes place as a “an extratemporal hiatus between the two points in biographical time.”<sup>12</sup>

Closely related, but distinctive in its own way, is the Adventure Novel of Everyday Life. The best example that Bakhtin adduces for this chronotope is Apuleius’ *Metamorphosis*, although he suggests that many early accounts of Christian martyrs, so called *crisis hagiographies*, take on aspects of this chronotope.<sup>13</sup> Once again adventure time is a key component, marked by a series of episodes that are entertaining in their own right. In this case, however, there is a key difference: time is actually marked by a major development, a crisis. In it the hero confronts a series of events that result in a change in character – a metamorphosis of some time. Thus the central function of this crisis and testing is to show “how an individual becomes other than what he was.”<sup>14</sup> The period of time between crises is adventure time, and often episodic, yet the result is crucial to the overall plot and has an affect on the hero.

The third chronotope from Bakhtin’s discussion is that of Ancient Biography and Autobiography. What is important for Bakhtin is that while the biography is linked to the real life of the hero, it also is not interested in character development; it is instead encomiastic. The character of the hero is already established at the beginning, and the series of words and deeds that are recounted are meant to display the hero’s character. So here also, the events are often also theoretically reversible since there is no real progress. In practicality they are not reversible because they are tied in some way to external events. But time has no critical role as progression.

### III. Luke's use of Time

Luke presents some very interesting issues in terms of its use of time, especially when considered in light of Ricoeur's and Bakhtin's approach to the role of time in narrative construction. To what degree is Luke attempting to reflect the actual reality of Jesus' life, mimesis<sub>1</sub>, as he received it from sources and investigation, and how much, and how, has he shaped that reality in his own creative process of mimesis<sub>2</sub>, especially in the travel narrative? And, of course, how has this creative function of mimesis<sub>2</sub> been influenced by his rhetorical motives, his attempt to influence his audience in their reception of the story of Jesus?

As has been noted by many, Luke is perhaps more concerned than other gospel writers to situate his story against historical time.<sup>15</sup> He often uses explicit time markers, the kind of calendrical and genealogical markers that Ricoeur notes are ways of conceptualizing cosmic time, of connecting narrative time to "real time." So Luke begins his story "in the days of King Herod of Judea...." (Lk 1:5). And this calendrical calibration is repeated at 2:1 ("In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.") And the birth narrative transitions to Jesus' active ministry with a very careful and extended attempt to calibrate the narrative of Jesus against historical time: in the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, etc. (Lk 3:1-2) The beginning of Jesus' ministry is also linked to historical time by means of the genealogy found in Lk 3:23-38.

Indeed other time markers in the beginning of Jesus' ministry suggest a fairly careful interest in chronological progress:

- Jesus is circumcised on the eighth day
- Jesus is brought to Jerusalem annually, but special note is given to a trip when Jesus was 12.
- Jesus is said to be about 30 years old when he begins his active ministry.
- The narrative of his early ministry is fairly precise in terms of geographical progress: the Jordan, Nazareth, Capernaum, Gennesaret, etc.

In the passion narrative, too, we find a relatively careful attempt to relate his story against a chronological structure. From his entrance to Jericho (Lk 19:1) to his death, the narrative slows down and becomes more precise in terms of geographical references (Bethpage, Bethany, the Mount of Olives), and in time references, especially the feast of Passover. All of these suggest a concern for chronology and time references, even if there is little of the objectively “historical” reference inserted.

What is curious about Luke’s narrative, though, is that perhaps the largest segment of the gospel is virtually a-temporal and non-geographically specific. The travel narrative, which begins at least by 9:51 as he sets his face to go to Jerusalem and extends to just before his arrival in Jericho (18:31), is remarkable for its virtual absence of concern for precise time and place markers. Indeed nowhere in this travel narrative do we find any specific references to a place, or to any specific reference to time relative to the beginning of the ministry or his passion. Does this period of travel take a few months? A year? A few years? Is it winter? Or fall or spring? None of this is related. He is simply “on the way.”

Time and place markers in this travel narrative are, in fact, made deliberately indefinite. Consider these transition phrases that contain deliberately indefinite references:

10:38 As they went on their way they entered a certain (τινα) village..

11:1 He was praying in certain (τινι) place...

13:22 Jesus went through one town and village after another...

14:1 On one occasion (kai egeneto)...

It is also interesting that this travel narrative of Luke's contains much of his teaching, especially his use of parables, many of which are themselves extended stories unique to Luke. Thus this section takes on the character of narrative space that is set aside primarily for Jesus' teaching to be established.

The question that is raised by this interlude, this space in time in Luke's narrative, is how we are to make sense of it? What does this shift from historically oriented time, or at least chronologically linked time, to travel time suggest about Luke's overall thrust?

Using Riceour's framework, it would appear that Luke in the travel narrative is signaling that he has a greater interest in his own creative construction of the narrative than a realistic presentation of the real world. In other words, Luke's interest in the *diegesis* of Jesus life in the travel narrative is focused more heavily on the move from or intersection with *mimesis*<sub>2</sub>, the poetic or created world imagined by Luke, and *mimesis*<sub>3</sub>, the aspect of the representation of the narrative world that will be constructed in the readers' imaginations. Luke seems to be seeking a way of depicting Jesus as a teacher, or as a prophet like Moses, and creates a narrative space between the 2<sup>nd</sup> prediction of his passion, in Luke 9:43-45, and the final days in Jerusalem. Situating much of his teaching in this period of movement toward Jerusalem is a creative act, a way of describing and explicating Jesus' character (though not letting that character develop) and Jesus' didactic emphases, as part of an overall plan that makes greater sense of his life and

ministry.

Is the travel narrative fictive? On the one hand it would appear that this mechanism of the travel narrative is clearly fictive in its construction. And, indeed, Luke seems to be indicating that it is an interpretation or a rendering of Jesus that is creative, by the rather abrupt shift, the encapsulation of the teaching in this “time between time.” And yet Luke of all the gospels has gone to greater lengths to establish links to real time, to establish a historical-type narrative structure within which the travel narrative is nestled. Here in this combination of both historical markers and travel narrative, we see most clearly the overlap between historical time and fictive time. Narratives, as indicated earlier, are created – they report events as imagined by an author, with linkages in emplotted time that develop the meaning that only an author can construct. And yet Luke anchors this narrative creation in “real time” especially at the beginning and end of the gospel.

Bakhtin’s idea of adventure time is helpful in understanding what Luke is doing in this section. In many ways this travel narrative seems to be carving out a chronotope of some kind of adventure time.<sup>16</sup> While many of the features of the Greek Romance or Adventure Novel of Everyday Life do not appear in the gospel, still the issue of adventure time that Bakhtin noticed in these genres is useful for approaching Luke’s travel narrative.

The travel narrative, as with other adventure time, delineates a time “between times” in which no forward movement in the plot seems to occur. The basic plot of the story has already been established, since Jesus has already predicted his death. In fact the starting point of the travel narrative, “Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem” is implicitly linked with the larger plot of the story: “when the days drew near for him to be received up...” (Lk 9:51). And what happens

within this interlude is truly episodic and reversible. We learn nothing really new about Jesus; we learn more, in more detail, but there is no character change and nothing is really add to the plot. The various events are presented as a chain of disconnected events. There is no real emplotment in this section of the narrative – no causality, no inherent linkage.

Of course in this feature of working out the pre-ordained character of Jesus, Luke's travel narrative follows a similar pattern to what Bakhtin describes as a central feature of the ancient biographies as well. The travel narrative, then, has an encomiastic feel in that Jesus is allowed to speak words and perform deeds that exemplify the character that has been established in the very beginning. So adventure time is a vehicle by which Luke fulfills the basic features of ancient biography. While Bakhtin's concept of adventure time is connected with the Greek Romance and with the Adventure Novel of Everyday Life, it seems here to be accommodated within a broader framework of biography, and still supports the basic thrust of that genre.

By wedding the adventure time, the "time between times," rather explicitly within a narrative that pays attention to historic time, Luke has heightened the encomiastic nature of biographical writing. Luke would appear to be using variations and combinations of narrative time in order to recreate, in an explicitly subjective way, the story of Jesus he has inherited from others, and to interpret intertextually with other scriptures. It may well be that Moessner's suggestion that Jesus is being characterized as a prophet greater than Moses by means of an exodus toward Jerusalem makes sense of the theme or content of the travel narrative. But what also seems certain is that Luke has intentionally suspended time and space, has created a contrast to his previous efforts to link Jesus to real time, indeed has created an adventure time, in a very creative attempt to further describe the character of Jesus.



## Notes

1. David Moessner, *Lord of the Banquet: The Literary and Theological Significance of the Lukan Travel Narrative*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989.
2. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (University of Chicago Press, 1983), Volume 1, p. 38
3. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Volume 2, p. 8
4. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1, p. 92.
5. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol 3, 104.
6. It would be good to note that it is this level which Gerard Genette focuses in his discussions of narrative time: length, etc....
7. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Volume 3, 185.
8. Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel"(FTC), p. 84.
9. Bakhtin, FTC, p. 250.
10. Morson & Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*, p. 367.
11. Bakhtin, FTC, 89
12. Bakhtin, FTC, p. 90.
13. Bakhtin, FTC, p. 115
14. Bakhtin, FTC, p. 115.
15. See, for instance, I. Howard Marshall's treatment in *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Zondervan, 1971), esp. p 69 ff. And see also Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, (Doubleday, 1981) 172-179.
16. One should note that Richard Pervo, *Profit with Delight*, has emphasized the "adventure" aspect of Acts, using a Romance model. Similarly Loveday Alexander in an essay "In Journeying Often."