

8.22

Pagan Images for Jesus in the Gospel of Luke

Unlike the other Gospels, Luke seems to draw on a number of images from the pagan world to help his Roman readers understand who Jesus is.

Philosopher: Biographies of Greek or Roman philosophers often portrayed a wandering teacher instructing disciples on a journey, in a manner similar to the “journey to Jerusalem” motif that dominates Luke’s Gospel (see 9:51–19:40). Also, the latter half of such a biography often was about the school that continued the philosopher’s work after his death; when Luke-Acts is viewed as a single work, it resembles these books about philosophers and their students.

Benefactor: In Roman society, important public figures sometimes were proclaimed to be benefactors whose existence was a blessing to society. The decrees that bestowed such status on them emphasized matters of merit that Luke’s Gospel attributes to Jesus: congruence of word and deed (24:19; cf. Acts 1:1); bestowal of peace (1:79; 2:14, 29); granting clemency to enemies (23:34; 24:47); endurance of hardships and trials (22:28). In Luke 22:25, Jesus criticizes the so-called benefactors of the Roman world, but in Acts 10:38, Jesus is explicitly identified as one who “went about as a benefactor himself” (NRSV: “went about doing good”).

Immortal: Greek and Roman mythology contains stories of immortals, who are the offspring of male gods and human women (e.g., Dionysius, Hercules). Such characters have both human and divine attributes: they are able to perform remarkable deeds while on earth, but eventually they ascend to Mount Olympus to live with the gods; there, they retain an interest in human affairs and sometimes intervene on behalf of those who seek their aid. Luke's story presents Jesus as the offspring of some kind of encounter between the Jewish God and a human woman (1:35) and, likewise, presents him as ascending into heaven, where (in the book of Acts) he continues to intervene on behalf of humans (e.g., see Acts 9:1–9, where he confronts the man persecuting his followers).

Of course, Luke believes that Jesus is more than just a philosopher or benefactor, and he is quite clear that Jesus's divine origin does not involve any sexual relationship between God and Mary (in mythology, the immortals come into being when gods mate with women out of lust). Still, people familiar with the Hellenistic literature of the Greco-Roman world probably would have recognized some contact points that enabled them to connect Luke's story of Jesus with things they already knew: they might recognize that Luke's Jesus is something like a philosopher or a benefactor, or one of the immortals from mythology. Thus Luke seems inclined to provide his readers with a variety of entry points for obtaining a partial (if ultimately inadequate) understanding of who Jesus is.