

Victor, not Victim

Luke 22:47-65

Gospels – like historical narrative in general – often do not state their point directly. Instead, their authors generally make the point implicit, weaving it through their narrative. That is the way the genre works. Many of us may be more comfortable with direct statements, and thus, with the epistles of Paul. Nonetheless, careful reading of narrative uncovers its point, and provides the added advantage of practical demonstration, as well as application to real life.

To avoid the boredom of repetition, any competent author varies narrative strategies from one passage to the next. So analysis necessarily proceeds inductively. One common technique for unraveling the point of a narrative is to look for recurring patterns, and for thematic continuities and discontinuities.

As it happens, that technique works particularly well with this passage. This section breaks down into two sub-sections: the arrest of Jesus and a pre-trial incident involving Peter. The first sub-section further breaks down into three vignettes, as Jesus successively interacts with: (a) Judas, (b) his own reactive followers, and (c) the arresting officials. The second sub-section focuses on Peter, culminating in a pregnant glance from Jesus.

The higher-level commonality between the two halves: Jesus engages with each of those involved in his arrest. On a more detailed level, within each individual unit, we find a recurring pattern of continuity and discontinuity. The continuity: each incident appears to establish that Jesus is a helpless victim of forces and events beyond his control. The discontinuity: as each incident develops, however, Luke reveals Jesus' actual control.

Day 1: Luke 22:47-48 Jesus and Judas

Two features of this incident suggest that events are spinning out of Jesus' control. For one, the arresting force comes 'suddenly', while Jesus 'is still speaking', interrupting him. The timing of his arrest, a reader could assume, takes Jesus by surprise, overtaking his plans and his ministry. For the other, Judas, one of his small band of closest followers, is complicit in his arrest; worse still, he identifies Jesus with a kiss, a greeting of affection and respect. Just as in any political crisis today, the defection of a key confidant provides obvious evidence that the regime is crumbling, and lacks both competence and integrity.

Luke anticipates and precludes such inference by quoting Jesus' response: "Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?" Three features of this short sentence reinforce Jesus' authority. First, he anticipates Judas' intent: Jesus recognizes the purpose of this encounter, without Judas ever stating it. Secondly, Jesus characterizes Judas' action as a 'betrayal', a pejorative which

brands him a traitor, the lowest form of human life. Thirdly, Jesus reaffirms his own identity as ‘the Son of Man’, the powerful heavenly figure of Daniel 7, sovereign over the whole world, whose dominion is everlasting, and whose kingdom will never be destroyed.

In short, at first glance, his arrest and Judas’ defection seem to indicate that Jesus is a helpless and hapless victim, deservedly unmasked as a pretentious and deceitful claimant to the prestigious role of Messiah. But for those with ears to hear, Judas is instead treacherous, and Jesus, a prophet and more, the divine Son of Man. Something surprising and despicable is going on here, but, contrary to initial appearances, it is clearly not the exposing of a false Messiah.

Day 2: Luke 22:49-51 Jesus and the disciples

The scene quickly shifts from Judas to the other eleven disciples, but the ethos remains much the same: their instinctive reaction reinforces the perception that Jesus has lost control of events and his own destiny (and perhaps, that he never actually had control over either).

The disciples clearly misunderstood Jesus’ previous comments about buying swords (22:36). Originally, he intended the proverb only to warn that crisis was at hand: a crisis so severe that it justifies pawning the most basic necessities of life, a crisis so severe that it could mean life or death. Instead, hapless as ever, they react to his sudden arrest by taking him literally, assuming that Jesus means for them to fight to the death (or, at least, to cut off some poor slave’s ear!). This failure of understanding implies not only obtuseness on their part, but also ineptitude on his part: choosing such incompetents to be leaders in his ragtag band of insurgents. But Jesus responds by reasserting his authority: he rebukes his foolhardy followers, and heals the man’s severed ear.

The disciples are out of their depth, and the police clearly do not have the situation under control; only Jesus has his wits – and his power – about him. Something very odd is going on here: someone with the power to perform miraculous healing is allowing himself to be taken captive. Why he allows this – and why his captors deem such good works to be worthy of punishment – is not entirely clear at this point. But one fundamental truth is apparent: Jesus *allows* his own arrest; he is not forced into it.

Day 3: Luke 22:52-53 Jesus and his captors

The scene quickly shifts again, this time to the police who make the arrest. Still, the ethos remains much the same: Jesus appears to have no control over the events befalling him, or over his own destiny. More than the previous two incidents, this one captures his impotence. A large posse (chief priests, temple police and elders) has come after him with swords and clubs. How can he resist

such an overwhelming force?

Jesus is not cowed. Instead, he rebukes their cowardice, abuse of power, and evil character, while affirming his own innocence and integrity. With their swords and clubs, they are treating him like a guerilla, the leader of a rebel force. All he has done is to teach in the temple, in broad daylight. "Yet you come after me in secret, under cover of darkness." The timing is spiritually significant: dead of night, dark of heart.

From a third angle, something very odd is going on here: a well-known preacher, secretly arrested like a dangerous criminal. What exactly is going on is not yet clear, but this much is obvious: this arrest is a travesty of justice, and an abuse of power. Might does not make right: they may have the might, but he has the right.

Day 4: Luke 22:54-62 Jesus and Peter

The bulk of this vignette is about Peter, not about Jesus: about Peter and a servant-girl, Peter and a stranger, Peter and a third person. Not about Peter and Jesus. First, a servant-girl recognizes Peter, or his attire, or perhaps just his demeanor, and realizes that he is an associate of Jesus. A little later, someone else draws the same conclusion. An hour later, a third person. Just like the first and second episodes above, Peter's failure is also Jesus' failure. After all, Jesus chose this disciple, and appointed him one of his top lieutenants. Yet now Peter is afraid of a slave, a female slave, a young female slave, at that. However badly this reflects on him, it reflects all the worse on Jesus.

How does Luke counter this negative perception of Jesus? A rooster crows. Though too far away to hear Peter's denials, Jesus turns around and makes eye contact. He knows what has just happened. More than that, he knew ahead of time that it would happen. It is exactly what he earlier predicted. Why he does nothing to prevent it, and why Peter does it, is not entirely clear at this point. Yet one fundamental truth is clear: Jesus is no helpless victim of circumstances beyond his control; he knows what is coming before it ever happens.

Day 5: Luke 22:63-65 Jesus and the soldiers

Only now at the end, as this portion of the narrative reaches its climax, do we learn what prompted Luke's emphasis in retelling the story. This vignette provides the most dramatic evidence of Jesus' impotence: his captors mock him, they beat him, they heap insults upon him. He is like any other captured criminal, subject to the perverse whims and sadistic cruelties of his captors.

Or, perhaps not. Because Luke clearly intends a strong irony here: the soldiers blindfold Jesus, beat him, and then mock: "Prophecy! Who is it that struck you?" Prophecy is exactly what Jesus could do, any reader realizes. Just

in the previous vignette, we read the precise fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy that Peter would deny him three times. And this wider section, 22:47-65, begins on a similar note: Jesus' prophetic insight into Judas' motivation and intention. Why he allows this, and why Peter does it, is not entirely clear at this point. But one fundamental truth is clear: Jesus is not a helpless victim of circumstances beyond his control; he is a prophet of God, with power to foresee the future.

Day 6: John 10:17-18 Victor, not victim

Jesus is in control even in the course of his own arrest (and execution): why does Luke consider it important to make this point?

This question must be answered from the Gospel of Luke. Each Gospel tells the story of the same Jesus. But each shapes his telling of that story to address the needs of its own church and its own context. So if we want to know what Luke intends by how he develops his story, we search for the answer in his own narrative, not in one of the other Gospels. Generally speaking, it is dubious methodology to impose meaning from one Gospel onto another.

So that is not what I am proposing to do here, reading the Gospel of John into the Gospel of Luke. If we simply read the Gospel of Luke sensitively, we realize that the issue in his day is that same as in ours. When a brutal, feared, and hated dictator is deposed – someone like Saddam Hussein or Moammar Gadhafi or Hosni Mubarak or Bashar al-Assad – what commonly happens? Whatever else befalls them, they are generally publically mocked, humiliated, and disgraced, to underscore their present powerlessness. This is what the soldiers do to Jesus.

Yet Jesus has claimed to be the divine Son, commissioned and empowered by the sovereign God. His capture and execution transparently appear to negate that claim: if Jesus really were the sovereign son of God, he would have triumphed, he would not have suffered ignominious defeat and execution; so Jesus' claims must be false and pretentious. That logic may be valid in most circumstances, Luke implies, but it does not work in this case: even as his entire world crashes down around him, Jesus remains in control. This is Luke's point, though he makes it implicitly, in the structure and content of his narrative.

As in many other instances, John agrees, but is more explicit about it. He quotes Jesus directly, "I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again" (John 10:17b-18a). Jesus is not just another of many failed messianic wannabes. Something else is going on in his death. He is no helpless victim, but a voluntary sacrifice.

Jesus dies, not because he is unable to save himself.

He dies in order to save us.