THE FORM AND FUNCTION OF THE NATIVITY STORIES IN LUKE

James M. Dawsey

The purpose of this essay is to explore the form of Lk. 1:5 – 2:52 and its function in the Gospel. Although some good work has been done showing how the content of the first two chapters fits within the author's theological plan,[1] not much attention has been devoted to the relationship of the form of Lk. 1 – 2 to the author's purpose.[2]

As a point of departure, I will suggest that the author intended his gospel to be recited in worship, not piece meal, a few verses at a sitting, but as a whole, from beginning to end. Whereas many have suggested that Lk. 1 – 2 represents a translation of a Hebrew original, or on the other hand, the product of the creative spirit of the author, I will try to show that these chapters are best understood in connection with the worship of the Christian community – that the language and the form of the material is liturgical, and was intended to serve a special function in the recitation of the gospel.

As is well known, the language of Lk. 1:5 – 2:52 presents a puzzle to the New Testament reader. It is strongly Hebraic in flavour and notably different from the rest of the Gospel. The section represents a shift in style from the Lucan prologue (Lk. 1:1 – 4) which shows a construction and vocabulary fitting better with Attic Greek than with the remainder of the New Testament.[3] At the other end, the section is framed by the speech of

JAMES M. DAWSEY was born in 1947 at Spartanburg, South Carolina, U.S.A. He obtained his Ph.D. in New Testament Studies from Emory University in 1983. Since then, he has been Assistant Professor at Auburn University, Alabama. His works include, *The Lukan Voice*, Mercer University Press, (1986).

1. Notable examples are H.H. Oliver's "The Lucan Birth Stories and the Purpose of Luke-Acts," *NTS* 10 (1967): 202 – 26; and W.B. Tatum's "The Epoch of Israel: Luke i – ii and the Theological Plan of Luke-Acts," *NTS* 13 (1967): 184 – 95.

2. The exception is John Drury's, *Tradition and Design in Luke's Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1977), pp. 46 – 66.

3. For a complete study of the Attic qualities of Lk. 1:1 – 4, see Friedrich Blass, "The Poem of St. Luke," *"Philology of the Gospel* (Chicago: Argonatu, Inc., 1969, originally published in 1898), pp. 7 – 20. Also helpful are H.J. Cadbury, "Commentary on the Preface of Luke," in *The Beginnings of Christianity*, vol. 2, ed. F.J. Foakes – Jackson and K. Lake (London: Macmillan, 1922), pp. 7 – 29; and W.L. Knox, *Some Hellenistic Elements in Primitive Christianity* (London: Oxford University, 1944), Lecture I.

John the Baptist, which in several places betrays an Aramaic idiom. Thus, for example, the Semitic use of a relative pronoun at the beginning of a clause resumed by a reflexive at the end (οὗ το πτύον ἐν τῇ χειρὶ αυτοῦ, Lk. 3:17)[4] and the Semitic construction ἄρξησθε c. infinitive to indicate the future (Lk 3:8)[5] are probably Aramaisms and not Hebraisms.[6]

The nativity stories themselves, however, betray no trace at all of this Aramaic idiom,[7] and, as already mentioned, are full of Hebraisms. The contrast is so striking, in fact, that a number of Lucan scholars have contended that this section of Luke represents a translation from a Hebrew original.[8]

Especially interesting in this regard is Harald Sahlin's claim that part of Proto-Luke, Lk. 1:5 – 3:7a, was in Hebrew and shifted into Aramaic at Lk. 3:7b, precisely with the speech of John the Baptist.[9] The force of this argument lies in the quantity of non-Aramaic Hebraisms, few of which are exact replications of the Septuagint, present at the beginning of the third Gospel. Thus, Sahlin thought that behind such phrases as ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις Ἡρῴδου βασιλέως (Lk. 1:5), προβεβηκότες ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις αὐτῶν (Lk. 1:7), and ἔλαχε τοῦ θυμιᾶσαι (Lk. 1:9) could be found the Hebrew of late Judaism.[10] Since the idioms that Sahlin reconstructed were sometimes foreign to the Septuagint, he reasoned that they could not represent imitation Biblicisms.

The evidence that he reproduced is extensive and includes discernible Hebraisms in almost all verses of Lk. 1 – 2:εἰς τόν ναόν (Lk. 1:9), πᾶν τὸ πλῆθος ἦν τοῦ λαοῦ προσευχόμενον ἔξω (Lk. 1:10), ἔσται with χαρά as subject, πολλοί, and γενέσει (Lk. 1:14), ἔσται γὰρ μέγας ἐνώπιον κυτίου , οἶνον και σίκερα and πνεύματος ἁγίου πλησθήσεται ἔτι ἐκ κοιλίας μητρός αὐτοῦ (Lk. 1:15), καὶ αὐτὸς προελεύσεται ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ, ἐν πνεύματι καὶ δυνάμει Ἠλίου,

4. Cf. J.M. Creed, *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (New York: St. Martin's, 1957, originally published in 1930), p. lxxx; A.T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (New York: George H. Doran, 1919), p. 120.

5. Cf. F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature,* trans. by Robert W. Funk, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961), p. 200; H.J. Cadbury, *The Style and Literary Method of Luke* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1920), pp. 162f.; J.H. Moulton, W.F. Howard, and N. Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957, 3rd reprint ed., originally published in 1908), p. 15.

6. J.M. Creed, *The Gospel*, p. lxxx.

7. H.G.D. Sparks, "The Semitisms of St. Luke's Gospel," *JTS* 44 (1943):135.

8. Among others René Laurentin, *Structure et theologie de Luc I, II* (Paris: Gabalda, 1957); C.C. Torrey, *Out Translated Gospels* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1930); Paul Winter, "The Main Literary Problems of the Lucan Infancy Story," *ATR* 40 (1958):257 – 264.

9. Harald Sahlin, *Der messias un das Gottesvolk* (Uppsala: Almqvist, 1945), pp. 70ff., 50, 320.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 70, 72.

ἐπιστρέφαι καρδίας πατέρων ἐπι τέκνα, ἐπιστρέφαι ἀπειθεῖς ἐν φρονήσει δικαίων and ἑτοιμάσται κυρίῳ λαόν κατεσκευασμένον (Lk. 1:17), και εἶπεν (Lk. 1:18), εὐαγγελισασθαί σοι ταῦτα (Lk. 1:19), ἐσῃ σιωπῶν καὶ μὴ δυνάμενος λαλῆσαι, and οἵτινες πληρωθήτονται εἰς τὸν καιρὸν αὐτῶν (Lk. 1:20), ἐθαθμαζον (Lk. 1:21), καὶ αὐτος ἦν διανεύων αὐτοῖς (Lk. 1:22), περιέκρυβεν ἑαυτην μῆνας πέντε nd λέγουσα (Lk. 1:24), οὕτως, κύριος ἐπεῖδεν and ὄνειδός (Lk. 1:25), etc.[11] Sahlin's point is especially well illustrated by this last example, as he followed Lagrange in seeing ὄνειδός (without the article) as a conspicuous Semitism avoided even by the Septuagint.[12]

The Form of the Nativity Stories

In spite of his ability to parallel Greek forms in Lk. 1–2 with the Hebrew language, Sahlin seems to have overstated his case in at least two ways. On the one hand, the so-called Hebraisms of Luke are not confined to the first two chapters of the Gospel. There are certain formulas used frequently in the Septuagint to represent the Hebrew, which also occur often in the narration of Lk. 3:7b–24:53. Thus, (καὶ) ἐγένετο with a following verb, ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν, και ἰδού, and ἐν τῷ c. infinitive following καὶ ἐγένετο might all be said to be Hebraisms.[13] On the other hand, as has often been pointed out since the time of Harnack, the theory of a Semitic original behind Lk. 1–2 does not adequately explain the multitude of specifically Lucan vocabulary and grammatical constructions that are found in this section of the Gospel.[14] In fact, these types of idioms are so

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 70–97.

12. Ibid., p. 97. Paul Winter also offered a list of Hebraic constructions in Lk. 1–2 that cannot be traced to the Septuagint ("On Luke and Lukan Sources," *ZNW* 47 (1956):217–242. Cf. "Two Notes of Lc. 1–2 With Regards to the Theory of 'Imitation Hebraisms'." *Studia Theologica* 7 (1953):158–165.

13. (και) ἐγένετο with a following verb, which is used frequently in the Septuagint appears about forty times in the narration of the Gospel; ἀποκριθεις εἶπεν, also frequent in the Septuagint appears about thirty-six times; και ἰδοὺ. likewise frequent, appears about fifteen times; and ἐν τῷ c. infinitive following καὶ ἐγένετο, which corresponds to the Septuagint's rendering of ב with the infinitive appears about twenty-four times.

14. As early as 1906, A. Harnack advanced the theory that the Semitisms of Lk. 1–2 were best explained by the author's desire to imitate the language of the Septuagint (cf. Luke the Physician: The Author of the Third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, trans. J.R. Wilkinson (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1907), pp. 96–105). See also A. Harnack, "Der Magnificat der Elisabeth (Luk. i. 46–55) nebst einigen Bemerkungen zu Luk. i und ii," in *Studien zur Geschichte des neuen Testaments, und der alkter kirche, I: Zu neutestamentlichen Textkritik* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1931), pp. 62–85; H.J. Cadbury, "Luke – Translator or Author?" American Journal of Theology 24 (1920):436–455; The Making of Luke-Acts (New York: Macmillan, 1927; reprint ed., London: SPCK, 1968), pp. 142f., H.F.D. Sparks, "The Semitisms of St. Luke's Gospel," pp. 129ff.; N. Turner, "The Relations of Luke I and II to Hebraic Sources and to the Rest of Luke-Acts," *NTS* 2 (1956):100–109; P. Benoit, "L'enfance de Jean Baptiste selon Luc 1," NTS 3 (1957):167ff.

pronounced, that in a recent dissertation on the unity of Lk. 1 – 2 and Lk. 3 – Acts 28, D.S. Tam claimed that "the concentration of Lucanisms in Lk. 1 – 2 is the highest in the gospel, and at least as high as that in Acts."[15]

As Tam correctly pointed out, the real linguistic difficulty of Lk. 1 – 2 is that this section of the Gospel is both strongly Semitic and Lucan. And actually, when the so-called Hebraisms and Lucanisms in Lk. 1 – 2 are regarded with care, one must admit the somewhat overlapping nature of the two groups. Thus, to look again at the first three examples above, where Sahlin described the phrases ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις Ἡρῴδου βασιλέως (Lk. 1:5), προβεβηκότες ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις αὐτῶν Lk. 1:7), and ἔλαχε τοῦ θυμιᾶσαι (Lk. 1:9) as Hebraisms, Tam described ἐγένετο ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις Ἡρῴδου (Lk. 1:5), ἀμφότεροι προβεβηκότες (Lk. 1:7), and τοῦ θυμιᾶσαι (Lk. 1:9) as Lucanisms.[16]

Tam theorized that Luke retained and in fact emphasized the Semitic quality of the sources behind Lk. 1 – 2 – the Magnificat, Benedictus, Gloria, and perhaps the Nunc Dimittis – which originated from the circles of Jewish Christians.[17] Unfortunately, Tam did not clearly specify a motive for this tendency on the part of the author to emphasize the Semitic character of his sources, but one can imagine that he might have been sympathetic to both John Drury's suggestion that Luke intended by his Old Testament language to woo the reader into the new story of salvation,[18] and to the implication carried by H.H. Oliver's work, that Luke intended by his Semitic language to indicate something of the theological plan of Luke-Acts.[19]

But, the real difficulty with these types of solutions is that they seem to assume a modern definition of the reading public. For example, it does not seem likely that the author had in mind to hook readers "coming to the book freshly" into the story.[20] In this regard, one only need think of the last phrase of the prologue,[21] or of the narrator's penchant for calling Jesus "Lord" to realize how he presupposes a Christian audience already familiar with the story. And certainly one should not think of the author primarily as a theologian.[22]

15. David S. Tam, "The Literary and Theological Unity Between Lk. 1 – 2 and Lk. 3-Acts 28" (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1978), p. 327.
16. Ibid., p. 108.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 327, 169.
18. J. Drury, Tradition and Design.
19. H.H. Oliver, "The Lucan Birth Stories."
20. J. Drury, *Tradition and Design*, p. 46.
21. To my mind κατηχήθης (Lk. 1:4) prohibits Drury's interpretation.
22. Oliver attempted to show that Lk. 1 – 2 fit within the overall purpose of Luke-Acts gleaned from H. Conzelmann's *The Theology of St. Luke*, trans. Geoffrey Buswell (New York: Harper and Row, 1961). He did not claim, however, as strong a theological motive for Luke as did Conzelmann, who thought of Luke's scheme of salvation history as an answer to the problem of the delay of the parousia.

A much more appropriate solution to the special language of Lk. 1–2 has been offered by Paul Minear, who almost in passing drew attention to the liturgical nature of these chapters.[23] Thus, he indicated the prevalence of such words as δοξάζω, εὐλογέω, and ἀγαλλίασις; of such themes as worship, the temple, fasting, prayer, joy and peace; the reliance in this section upon epiphany and angels; and the use of hymns as "programmatic entrances." He also pointed out that prophecy in this section of Luke is a communal response in the Spirit to the fulfillment of God's promise, and in this way shows a close kinship to the Pentecost event.

This insight into the tone of Lk. 1–2 seems to fit nicely with Fred Horton's position that the Lucan Septuagintisms do not indicate a Hebrew source or a conscious attempt at imitation-Biblicisms but rather a specialized language of worship.[24] The Semitisms of Lk. 1–2 would have been then, a type of "Synagogue Greek" paralleling the "mixed style of Hebrew" discovered by C. Rabin for the religious vernacular at Qumran.[25] Thus, the language of Lk. 1–2 might well have originated and had its life in Greek worship. There is no consensus yet that Horton's view is correct, but at least the theory gives an explanation that accounts for both the Lucanisms and the non-Septuagintal Hebraisms of the Gospel.

A liturgical setting also makes sense out of the poetic form of much of the material in Lk. 1–2. It is common to refer to the Magnificat, the Benedictus, the Gloria in Excelsis, and the Nunc Dimittis as early specimens of Christian hymnody[26] – and their liturgical use can in fact be traced back as far as the 6th century and probably goes back to the earliest

23. Paul S. Minear, "Luke's Use of the Birth Stories," *Studies in Luke-Acts*, ed. L. Keck and J. Martyn (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980, reprinted from Abingdon, 1966), pp. 101–130.

24. F.L. Horton, "Reflection in the Semitisms of Luke-Acts," *Perspectives on Luke-Acts*, ed. Charles H. Talbert (Edinburgh: T & T Clark Ltd., 1978), pp. 1–23. H.LK. MacNeill's view of corporate authorship for Lk. 1–2 is supportive of a liturgical setting ("The Sitz im Leben of Luke 1:5–2:20," *JBL* 65 (1946):126) and perhaps the connection that S. Aalen discovered between Luke and I Enoch can also be traced to a common language of worship ("St. Luke's Gospel and the Last Chapter of I Enoch," *NTS* 13 (1967):1–13). The difficulty presented by the language of Lk. 1–2 has oftentimes been made more difficult by critics who limited the possible explanations to two. Thus, for example, Paul Winter wrote: "There seem to be two possibilities only to account for the frequent occurrence of Hebraistic phraseology in the Lucan Nativity and Infancy narrative: the first is, that the compiler, while freely composing the story in his own language, chose to offend against grammar and linguistic feeling simply because he wished to show that he could write as bad Greek as that of the Septuagintal authors; the other explanation is that a document written in Hebrew formed the basis of this part of the Third Gospel and that the compiler – out of respect for his source and in an endeavour to deviate as little as possible from it – retained the flavour of the original even at the price of suppressing his qualms as an author" ("Birth and Infancy Stories of the Third Gospel," pp., 112f.; Cf. 'The Main Literary Problem of the Lucan Infancy Story," pp. 257–264).

25. C. Rabin, "Hebrew and Aramaic in the First Century," *"The Jewish People in the First Century*, vol. 2, pp. 1007–1039.

26. F.W. Beare, *The Earliest Records of Jesus* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), pp. 33–35.

church.[27] Drury actually indicated that there are thirteen psalms in the opening chapters of Luke,[28] and R.A. Aytoun discovered ten hymns of the nativity.[29] Aytoun's work, however, is especially intreresting because he tried to show that these hymns, when translated into Hebrew "with as much literalness" as possible, betrayed a regular Hebrew metre. Aytoun's purpose was to prove that there was an original Hebrew document behind Lk. 1–2, but his findings with the Gloria in Excelsis actually suggest an original Greek rather than Hebrew hymn. According to Aytoun's own testimony, his Hebrew reconstruction of Lk. 2:14 proved of exceedingly clumsy metre. From this, he concluded that εὐδοκίας had been added interpretively to ἀνθρώποις.[30] The truth, however, is that in the Greek, it is the couplet without the εὐδοκίας which is rhythmically clumsy. Thus, Δόξα ἐν ὑψίστοις θεῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς εἰρήνη ἐν ἀνθρώποις εὐδοκίας is formed with two repeating feet, followed by a chiastic construction of short and long elements.

The rhythmic patterns of Lk. 2:14 in Greek indicate a liturgical setting for the Gloria exactly as it stands in Luke.[31]

Again, the hymns in Lk. 1–2 are of poetic form, which seems to indicate a proper setting in public worship. There are many poetic features in the speech of the characters in Lk. 1–2. Robert Tannehill, in a recent analysis of the form of the Magnificat enumerates several.[32] Some which he mentions are the synonymous parallelism including the extensive use of "coupling" in the rest of the hymn; the rhythm developed by the repetition of action verbs in the first position clauses; and the repetitive strophic pattern which binds the hymn into a unity. These kinds of characteristics recur in all of the hymns in Lk. 1–2.

Finally, a liturgical setting for Lk. 1–2 also makes sense of the familiarity that it must be assumed that Luke's early audience had with Jewish conventions and customs. In this, Paul Winter was right. It is not feasible that an outsider could have been expected to understand the meaning of such story elements as "the priest of the course of Abijah," "the drawing of lots for liturgical assignments," "the burning incense," "the angel of the Presence," "the fête after John's birth," "the shepherds keeping watch," and "the calendar division of day night."[33] It is not

27. H.T. Kuist, "Sources of Power in the Nativity Hymns: An Exposition of Luke 1 and 2," *Interpretation* 2 (1948):288–298.
28. J. Drury, *Tradition and Design*, pp. 187f.
29. R.A. Aytoun, "The Ten Lucan Hymns of the Nativity in Their Original Language," *JTS* 18 (1917):274–288.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 286.
31. This is not to say, however, that there was no Hebrew original behind the hymn (cf. Ernest Vogt S.J., " 'Peace Among Men of God's Good Pleasure' Lk. 2:14," in *The Scrolls and the New Testament*, ed. K. Stendahl (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), pp. 114–117).
32. R.C. Tannehill, "The Magnificat as Poem," *JBL* 93 (1974)263–275.
33. Paul Winter, "The Cultural Background of the narrative in Luke I and II," *JQR* 45 (1954):160–67, 230–42.

necessary, however, to jump from this conclusion to a setting in Southern Palestine. The inside view could just as well come through the cultic repetition of the story.[34]

The Function of the Form of Lk. 1–2

The form of the birth narratives seems to link Lk. 1–2 to public worship. A liturgical tone explains both the so-called Hebraisms and Lucanisms of these chapters. But the key question concerns the author's purpose in the special language of Lk. 1–2. As demonstrated in the prologue, and in many other places in the Gospel,[35] the author of Luke was a writer who could control his style. Even if he appropriated the form of Lk. 1–2 from his sources, he did so consciously. But why then, did he choose to begin his Gospel with hymnic material? It seems to me that the author must have wanted to set the proper mood for the story of salvation.[36] However, we must not be led astray by a modern concept of "private readers." Rather, we should think in terms of a community of Christians who heard the Gospel read in worship. Instead of a literary device, it seems to me that the form of Lk. 1–2 served as a liturgical device.[37] The form of the chapters indicates that they functioned liturgically to establish the atmosphere of joyous praise to God for his saving activity which is told by the Gospel story.

This matter of the function of Lk. 1–2 intended by the author is not one that can be settled conclusively. Let me, though, offer a modern parallel to what I think accounts for the language and the form of these chapters. In modern religions songs often serve to allow the congregation to make the transition from secular to sacred time at an emotional level, thereby facilitating participation in the sacred event. Elizabeth Fernea gave us a good example of this use of hymnic material in her first-hand account of the recitation of the story of the killing and betrayal of the martyr Hussein during the Muslim fast of Ramadan:

> Finally, when it seemed that not a single person more could be jammed into the court, the mullah stood up and clapped her hands to

34. So E.D. Burton, "The Purpose and Plan of the Gospel of Luke," *Biblical World* 16 (1900):258. Douglas Jones has argued convincingly that the Psalms in Lk. 1–2 are Christian and not Jewish Psalms ("Background and Character of the Lukan Psalms," *JTS* 19 (1968):19–50.

35. Cf. H.J. Cadbury, *The Style and Literary Method of Luke.*

36. So also J. Drury, *Tradition and Design*, pp. 46–66. C.T. Ruddick's attempt to show a connection between Lk. 1–2 and Genesis is also helpful ("Birth Narratives in Genesis and Luke," *NT* 12 (1970):343–48.

37. This is especially clear to the student of the relationships of poetry to the Jewish cult. Two points should be remembered. The universal custom at that time was to deliver poetry in musical tone and not in a speaking voice; and there was no separation of music or poetry from liturgy (cf. Edward Dichinson, *Music in the History of the Western Church* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), pp. 20–30.

38. Elizabeth Fernea, *Guests of the Sheik* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1965), pp. 115f.

quiet the crowd. The two young women who sat near me took their places on each side of her (they were novices, I later found out, in training to be mullahs themselves) and the kraya began.

The mullah sat down and the two young girls stood to lead the congregation in a long, involved song with many responses. Gradually the women began to beat in time to the pulse of the song, and occasionally joining in the choruses, or supplying spontaneous responses such as 'A-hoo-ha!' or a long-drawn-out 'Oooooh!' This phase lasted perhaps ten minutes, the girls sank down into their places, and the mullah rose to deliver a short sermon. She began retelling the story of the killing and betrayal of the martyr Hussein, which is told every night during Ramadan and is the beginning of the important part of the kraya. At first two or three sobs could be heard, then perhaps twenty women had covered their heads with their abayahs and were weeping; in a few minutes the whole crowd was crying and sobbing loudly. When the mullah reached the most tragic parts of the story, she would stop and lead the congregation in a group chant, which started low and increased in volume until it reached the pitch of a full-fledged wail. Then she would stop dead again, and the result would be, by this time, a sincere sobbing and weeping as the women broke down after the tension of the wail.[38]

Even though an early Christian setting would have been different from Ramadan in many ways (and certainly the mood which is one of great sorrow in the Shi-ah representation is very different from the joy demanded by the christian story), one can imagine that the function of the hymnic material in drawing the congregation into the story might have been the same, then as now.

The peculiar combination of literary and liturgical elements in Luke does not disturb me. If the story of Jesus was an integral part of early worship, kept alive and repeated orally on special cultic occasions by the "eyewitnesses and ministers of the word," and not simply a literary form created by Mark, then Luke, in writing his Gospel, might well have filled out the narrative and made it more literary, while at the same time attempting to capture and pass down some of the formal characteristics of the recitation.