

## The Choice for Barabbas in Luke's Passion Narrative

Brendan Byrne, SJ  
Jesuit Theological College  
Parkville, Victoria, Australia

All four canonical gospels in their accounts of Jesus' trial recount that the crowd opted for the release of a prisoner called Barabbas in preference to that of Jesus (Mt 27:15-23; Mk 15:6-14; Lk 23:[17]18-23 [cf. Acts 3:13-14]; Jn 18:39-40). The remarkable agreement between the Synoptic and the Johannine tradition in this detail has led to a great amount of scholarly discussion of the historical issues involved: Is there any independent evidence for the custom of releasing a prisoner at a time of festival? Who was Barabbas? Is there any historical basis to the tradition concerning his release in place of Jesus?<sup>1</sup> Notably lacking are studies of the literary, dramatic and theological function of the episode in the gospel narratives.<sup>2</sup>

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- 1 For a recent and comprehensive discussion, see R.E.Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave* (Anchor Bible Reference Library; 2 vols; New York: Doubleday, 1994) 1311-20. For further literature, see the Bibliography given by Brown on pp.672-73. A notable recent study is that of R.L.Merritt, "Jesus Barabbas and Paschal Pardon," *JBL* 104 (1985) 57-68; see also F.Matera, "Luke 23, 1-25: Jesus before Pilate, Herod, and Israel" in (F. Neiryneck, ed.) *L'Évangile de Luc; The Gospel of Luke* (Louvain: University Press, 1989) 535-51; M.J. Wilkins, "Barabbas" in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Ed. D.N. Freedman; 6 vols; New York: Doubleday, 1992) 1.607.
  - 2 The sole treatments of the episode in Luke from a literary/dramatic rather than a historical perspective that I am aware of are a few sentences in R.J. Tannehill's *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation: Volume One: The Gospel according to Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) pp.164-65 and a couple of pages (pp.82-84) in J.Neyrey, *The Passion according to Luke* (New York: Paulist, 1985), as part of a wider consideration of the particular emphases in Luke's description of the trial of Jesus.

My aim here is to remedy this lack with particular respect to Luke. I intend to bypass the historical issue entirely and concentrate solely upon the way the episode functions in Luke's account of Jesus' trial. Beyond this I propose to consider the choice for Barabbas within the overall framework of Luke's eschatology and the way in which historical events of a negative nature, such as the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE, function as harbingers and warnings of eschatological judgement. My thesis is that Luke presents Jerusalem's opting for Barabbas - the man of violence and revolt - over the innocent, peace - bringing Jesus as a fatal choice for violence that leads inexorably to the debacle of 70 CE, a calamity which in turn functions as a harbinger of the eschatological judgement in view of which repentance and conversion is being preached to the nations of the world. Readers of the gospel are being invited to contemplate the choice for Barabbas and the fate of Jerusalem within a wider purpose in which there is judgement, to be sure, but in which also the divine power to bring life out of death is stronger than human evil.

### **Luke's Presentation of the Barabbas Episode**

The presentation of the Barabbas stratagem (23:[17]18-23) is one of those instances where Luke departs notably in his Passion narrative from the other two Synoptics and, interestingly enough, also from John. The four column synopsis shows that the Fourth Gospel, though much briefer at this point (18:39-40), adheres to the basic skeleton of the accounts given by Mark and Matthew. This skeleton comprises: an indication of the custom of releasing a prisoner at the time of the feast; the governor's inquiry of the crowd as to whether Jesus is the one they want released; the crowd's clamouring for Barabbas and Pilate's surrender to their wish.

In contrast to this agreement between John and the first two Synoptics, the most striking feature of Luke's departure from the general pattern lies in the fact that in his account it is the Jewish leaders who first mention Barabbas and bring up in their demand the idea of releasing him in place of Jesus. The other three evangelists first mention the custom of releasing a prisoner at the time of the festival. Matthew (27:15-16) and Mark (15:6-7) draw attention to the fact that a prisoner called Barabbas is being held. John (18:39) has Pilate remind the Jews of the custom. All three then present Pilate as seizing upon this custom as a stratagem for achieving the release of Jesus. In Matthew (27:17) Pilate actually puts before them a choice between the

'Jesus<sup>3</sup> Barabbas' or 'Jesus who is called Christ'. Mark (15:9) and John (18:39b) agree that Pilate suggests the release of 'the King of the Jews', whereupon the crowd call for that of Barabbas.

It is true that Mark and John cohere with Luke in the respect that the suggestion that Barabbas be released comes first from the crowd (in Mark from the chief priests inciting the crowd). However, the thrust of Luke is actually quite different from that of the other three. Or at least it is, if the brief sentence occurring in some manuscripts as 23:17 ("Now he was obliged to release someone for them at the festival") is not original, which on text-critical grounds appears to be the case.<sup>4</sup> On the short text, the Lukan account makes no explicit mention of the custom of releasing a prisoner. It could well be argued that the account at least implies the custom but this is not necessarily the case if the Lukan version be read strictly within its own terms without 'interference' from the reader's knowledge of the other gospels.<sup>5</sup> Whereas in all the other accounts the existence of the custom is presented as giving Pilate a God-sent opportunity to escape his judicial dilemma, without v. 17 Luke's account focusses attention much more sharply on the double contrastive choice made by the crowd:

Away with 'this man' (Jesus);

Release to us Barabbas (v. 18b).<sup>6</sup>

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3 This is to accept as original the longer reading of several mss. of the Caesarean text which includes 'Jesus' before Barabbas in both v. 16 and v. 17; for this, see B.M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Corrected edition; London/New York: United Bible Societies, 1975) pp. 67-68; Brown, *Death of the Messiah* 1.798-99.

4 The longer reading appears in Codex Sinaiticus. Awarding the shorter text a firm 'B' rating, the UBS Committee comments: "The secondary character of the verse is disclosed not only by its omission from such early witnesses as p<sup>75</sup> A B it<sup>a</sup>.. but also by its insertion, in slightly different forms, either here or after ver.19... (so Beza, etc.) Although homoearcton (anagken...anekragon) might account for its omission in one family of witnesses, such a theory is unable to explain its widespread omission and its presence at two different places. The verse is a gloss, apparently based on Matt 27:15 and Mark 15:6" (*Textual Commentary* p. 179); see also Brown, *Death of the Messiah* 1.794.

5 Cf. J. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke X-XXIV* (AB 28A; New York: Doubleday, 1985) 1486.

6 Matthew (27:17b), of course, makes the same point by having Pilate place the choice explicitly before them. However, whereas Matthew simply characterises Barabbas as a 'notorious prisoner', Luke twice (v. 19 and v. 25) makes the point that, in contrast to Jesus, Barabbas is being held for insurrection and murder.

The enormity of the rejection of Jesus is highlighted by the contrastive choice of Barabbas.

Significantly, it is at this point (v. 19) that the Lukan account – also the Johannine in a much briefer aside (“Now, Barabbas was a robber” [18:40b]) – gives a description of Barabbas: “a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection (*stasis*) that had occurred in the city and for murder.” Matthew and Mark provide this sketch of Barabbas’ unsavoury career earlier on: after the mention of the general custom of releasing a prisoner at the feast. Matthew (27:16) simply states that he was a ‘notorious prisoner’; Mark is much fuller: “And among the rebels (*stasiastēs*) in prison, who had committed murder (*phonos*) in the insurrection (*stasis*), there was a man called Barabbas” (15:7). Luke’s pen-portrait is clearly based on that of Mark.<sup>7</sup> But whereas in Mark the description applies collectively to whole lot of the prisoners, Luke fastens solely upon Barabbas, making him the ringleader of the insurrection and a murderer.

Not content with this, when eventually Pilate gives in to their demand and sentences Jesus (v. 24), Luke cannot refrain from a comment (v. 25) which describes Barabbas in precisely the same terms (less ‘started in the city’) and points up again the stark preference: “He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder (*dia stasin kai phonon*), whom they asked for; but Jesus he delivered up to their will.” Inescapably, Luke is underlining the choice for the one over against the other.<sup>8</sup>

But even this is not the end. A third and final Lukan allusion to the choice for Barabbas appears early in Acts. The second of Peter’s sermons to the citizens of Jerusalem (3:12-26) alludes to their part in the events leading up to Jesus’ death:

(13)... his servant, Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him (14). But you rejected the holy and just one and asked to have a murderer given to you (15) and you killed the author of life, whom God raised from the dead.

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7 This study assumes Markan priority, in accordance with the ‘Two Source’ theory of relationships between the Synoptic gospels.

8 Cf. Neyrey, *The Passion according to Luke*, 82-84.

In the context of Pilate's judgement of Jesus' innocence and decision to release him, the citizens of Jerusalem ('you') decided to reject him in favour of a murderer. Opting for a destroyer of life, they became the murderers of the 'author of life', though God has reversed this suppression of life by raising him from the dead. Once again, the stress upon choice stands out very starkly - save that here the emphasis upon 'rebellion' has receded in order to highlight, in the post-resurrection context of Acts, the 'death/life' theme.

### **The Charges against Jesus in Luke**

I shall return to Acts briefly later. At this point it will be helpful to consider the choice for Barabbas in the broader context of the nature of the charges brought against Jesus in the Lukan account of his trial. By way of preliminary, we may note that at the informal morning arraignment in the High Priest's house (22:66-71), which in Luke replaces the evening 'trial' before the whole council, the more strictly religious issue of 'blasphemy' never arises. Jesus is simply asked to state whether he is the Messiah. Following his ambiguous response to this (22:69), he is asked to state whether he is the Son of God (v. 70a). He throws the question, which on their lips is really an accusation, back at them: "You say that I am" (v. 70b). They conclude that this is enough to justify hauling him off before the governor but make no mention (as in Matthew [26:65] and Mark [14:64] of blasphemy. One has the impression that, in contrast to the other two Synoptics, Luke is playing up the 'political' at the expense of the religious aspects of accusations against Jesus.

The accusations the leaders subsequently make before Pilate are fully in accord with this: "We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a King" (23:2). When Pilate makes the first of his three declarations of Jesus' innocence (v. 4), they add a fourth charge: "He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place" (v. 5). All together the four charges make up a perfect recipe in the Roman mind for the lawlessness prone to grow into the kind of major insurrection that did in fact break out in 66 CE.<sup>9</sup>

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9 For the social, economic, political and religious conditions leading up the revolt, see R.A. Horsley, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular Movements at the Time of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) 48-189.

Pilate's second declaration of Jesus' innocence comes as a comment upon the failure of the stratagem of remitting him to Herod (vv. 14-15). The third occurs just before he finally gives way (v. 22). Roman authority, then, in the persons of Pilate the governor and Herod the Roman appointed king, is totally unconvinced that Jesus is guilty of the charges of political subversion brought against him. In their view Jesus is everything that Barabbas is not. By stating that Jesus is innocent of the charges brought against him, Pilate implies that he is a person of peace.<sup>10</sup> Jesus is no threat to the stability of the *pax Romana*. Barabbas, as we have been twice told (v. 19, v. 25; cf. Acts 3:14), is a man given to insurrection (*stasis*) and murder (*phonos*).

### The Crime of 'Stasis' and the Fate of Jerusalem

As we have noted, Luke draws his description of Barabbas as a man of *stasis* from Mark, who, curiously, refers to 'the insurrectionists' and 'the insurrection' as though to something so well known as to require no explanation. Luke, however, with regard to *stasis* is at once moral general and more precise: "a man who had been thrown into prison for an insurrection that had occurred in the city and for murder" (*dia stasin tina genomenēn en tē polei kai phonon* [v. 19]). The generalising note ('an insurrection') and the particular reference to 'the city' render the description more apt to put readers in mind of the fate of Jerusalem in 66-70CE.

That we have here, particularly in the use in *stasis*, an allusion to this calamity is very much of a piece with the fact that in the works of the Jewish historian Josephus the word *stasis*, together with its cognate forms (*stasiastēs*, *stasiazein*), functions virtually as a technical term in reference to the insurrection and those chiefly responsible for it.<sup>11</sup> Josephus in fact seems to have consciously modelled his description and analysis of the events upon Thucydides' famous analysis of the Corcyrean *stasis*.<sup>12</sup> *Stasis* was a particularly apt term to employ with reference to the revolt because it held together both the

10 Note also the similar verdict of the Roman centurion on seeing the death of Jesus: "Certainly, this man was innocent" (23:47). Luke suppresses the more christological verdict 'Son of God' appearing in Mark (15:39) and Matthew (27:54) in favour of the simple declaration of judicial innocence.

11 Cf. *Ant.* 20.227; *War* 1.10, 24, 27, 2.449, 538; 5.1, 4, 33, 98, 105; 6.13, 251; etc.

12 Cf. J.J. Price, *Jerusalem under Siege: The Collapse of the Jewish State 66-70 CE* (Leiden: Brill, 1992) 177-78.

sense of insurrection against established authority and the forming of parties and divisions within a community.<sup>13</sup> Josephus in fact regarded the calamities of the (Jewish) people, culminating in their defeat, as attributable respectively "to the war, the *stasis* and the famine" (War 1.27). Here *stasis* almost certainly refers principally to the murderous strife that occurred between the parties struggling for leadership within the besieged city.<sup>14</sup> While the situation of *stasis* in this sense undoubtedly led directly to the defeat according to a natural chain of events, Josephus also saw God's hand at work: the fall of the city and destruction of the Temple was divine retribution for the murder and civil strife that prevailed amongst the insurgents (War 2.538-39; 5.19; 6.250; 7.271),<sup>15</sup> a harsh theological judgement reflected in other Jewish works of the time,<sup>16</sup> as well as in the Christian gospels (e.g., Mt 27:25<sup>17</sup>).

### The Fate of Jerusalem elsewhere in Luke's Gospel

Luke's preoccupation with the fate of Jerusalem is patent in several other episodes in the gospel. First, there is Jesus' lament over Jerusalem in Lk 13:34-35, which has a parallel in Mt 23:37-39. Where the Matthean version has "See, your house is left to you desolate", Luke has simply, "See, your house is left to you". The Matthean description 'desolate' seems to be a clear allusion in a prophetic sense to the destruction of the city and Temple. The Lukan version doubtless

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13 Cf. W. Bauer, W.F. Arndt, F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957) 771-72; see also L.T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Sacra Pagina 5; Collegeville: Glazier-Liturgical Press, 1992) 350, who in comment on Acts 19:40 observes that *stasis* has its 'original sense of forming a party for the sake of revolt or sedition'.

14 Cf. the apt phrase occurring in War 5.4: 'a faction bred within a faction' (*stasei stasis*).

15 Cf. Price, *Jerusalem under Siege*, 176.

16 E.g., Sib. Or. 4.115-18. 4 Ezra also sees the divine hand at work but wrestles with the theological problem: Israel may have been sinful and merited chastisement on that account but surely her wickedness was nothing compared to that of the nation (Rome) that God allowed to be victorious (3:28-36; cf. 5:21-30).

17 Matthew's notorious 'blood' charge ("His blood be upon us and upon our children"), which has legitimated so much Christian persecution of Jews down the ages, almost certainly refers to the fate of Jerusalem in 70 CE and to that alone. 'Our children', then, refers precisely and solely to the next generation that will be alive to suffer the events of that time. In no way are all subsequent generations of Jewish people in view.

intends the same but is more subtle. "(L)eft to you" conveys the sense that *Jesus* is abandoning the city to its fate because it will not receive *him*. It has made a choice against him.

The prophetic oracle peculiar to Luke in 19:39-44 is more explicit. Jesus weeps over the city and laments: "If you ... had only recognised on this day the things that make for peace." There follows (vv. 43-44) the very literal description of the coming siege and eventual destruction, with the final comment that this was all "because you did not recognise the time (*kairos*) of your visitation (*episkopē*) from God." In the unfolding drama of the gospel the highpoint of that non-recognition will come when the citizens of Jerusalem opt for Barabbas over against Jesus, the one through whom God is 'visiting' his people (Lk 2:68, 78).

Jesus' eschatological discourse in Luke (21:5-36) includes what appear to be very detailed descriptions of the siege (21:20-24):

(20) When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near... (23b) For there will be great distress on the earth and wrath against this people; (24) they will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken away as captives among all nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

As the discourse proceeds, however, the focus shifts from the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem to the worldwide cataclysm that will herald the eschatological event of the coming of the Son of Man (21:25-28).

Finally and again peculiar to Luke, there is Jesus' oracle to the women of Jerusalem on the way to the cross (23:27-31):

(27) A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. (28) But Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. (29) For the days are surely coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed'. (30) Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us'. (31) For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"

The fact that the women are specifically addressed as 'Daughters of Jerusalem' suggests that it is primarily the fate of the city in 70 CE that the oracle has in view.

In all these passages Luke seems to be presenting the historical fall of the city, predicted by Jesus, as a direct outcome of the people's choice of violence, murder and *stasis* symbolised in the deliberate preference of the insurrectionist murderer Barabbas over against the man of peace, Jesus.

That Luke can see historical calamities in this way is clear from the comment Jesus makes when told of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices (13:1). Jesus responds (vv. 2-4) by pointing in addition to another calamity, one that occurred in Jerusalem itself, the collapse of the tower of Siloam, resulting in the death of eighteen people. He refuses to speculate on whether the calamities constituted punishment for the sins of those who perished, thereby rejecting the idea that suffering or misfortune allows conclusions to be drawn as to who is guilty and who innocent. Instead he insists that the calamities be taken as general warning of the destruction that would fall upon all who fail to repent. In similar fashion but on larger scale, the fall of Jerusalem (a future event in the drama of the gospel but one in the recent past for its readers) is presented as a harbinger of the judgement that the Son of Man will institute for those who do not first repent and then remain watchful and awake (21:34-36).

### **Luke's Scheme of Salvation**

The action of Luke's gospel, following the Prologue (1:1-4), may appear to begin with the Annunciation to Zechariah that stands at the head of the Infancy Narrative. It soon becomes clear, however, that the drama that is to unfold rests upon expectations of salvation stemming from divine promises made to Israel long before and recorded in Scripture. The story of Jesus' childhood (Lk 1-2) acts as a kind of bridge between this era of promise and that of the events which actually fulfil it: the Spirit-empowered ministry of Jesus bringing the promised salvation. Jesus inaugurates his ministry in the synagogue at Nazareth (Lk 4:16-21), proclaiming a great 'Today' of salvation that fulfils the 'year of acceptance' promised by Isaiah (Isa 61:2). This 'day' of divine acceptance lasts right up to his dying moments upon the cross, when he gives the thief dying on his right hand an assurance of entrance 'today' into paradise (23:43).

Contrary to what one might expect, the 'day' does not come to an end with Jesus' death in Jerusalem. Luke's second volume, *The Acts of the Apostles*, makes clear that the Spirit which had empowered Jesus now rests upon his chosen witnesses (Acts 2:1-4; 4:31), empowering them to continue proclaiming the divine acceptance, not merely in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, but to 'the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8). The 'Today' of acceptance and salvation extends beyond the 'day' of Jesus to the 'day' of the Church, a 'day' which will continue right up to the return of Jesus in glory at the end of time. Only then, in the indefinite future, will occur the time of judgement associated with the coming of the Son of Man (Lk 17:23-37; 21:25-36).

We can set it out schematically as follows:

Era of Promises	Today of Acceptance/Salvation		Judgement
	'Day' of Jesus	'Day' of the Church	

The task of the Church is not to act or preach as if judgement had already been given but, like Jesus in the time of his historical ministry, to summon all to repentance and conversion in view of the *present* offer of acceptance and the *future* threat of judgement. In this context the historical event of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Jewish state functions, as the more minor historical event of the fall of the tower of Siloam functioned, as a harbinger or portent of the eschatological judgement that will one day come upon the world. The readers of the gospel and specifically of the passion narrative are invited to contemplate the choice of Barabbas on the part of the citizens of Jerusalem and the fate to which it led (the historical destruction of the city in 70 CE) as a paradigm of the fate awaiting those who opt for all that Barabbas stands for instead of embracing the message and values of Jesus.

## Conclusion

Undoubtedly, Luke's handling of the Barabbas episode is a significant element of his wider reflection upon the fate of the Jewish people and his endeavour to incorporate the largely negative response of that people to the preaching of Jesus as Messiah into a credible account of the divine scheme of salvation. Into this vast and

controversial issue it is not possible to enter within the scope of this present study.<sup>18</sup> It is important, however, to point out that, when one takes Luke's second volume, Acts, into account, the destructive choice for Barabbas at the trial of Jesus is not necessarily the last word. A consoling feature of Luke's presentation of the gospel is the way it shows people being given a 'second chance'. This occurs for the citizens of Jerusalem in the two speeches of Peter early in Acts (2:14-35; 3:12-36). Peter unambiguously reminds them of their responsibility for the death of Jesus, a reminder which, as we have seen, includes in the second speech an explicit allusion to the fateful choice for Barabbas (3:14-15). But he also insists that by raising Jesus from the dead God has converted their choice for murder and death in the person of Barabbas into a triumphant victory for life (3:16); he summons them to repentance and conversion in view of this triumph of God. This not wholly unsuccessful appeal to Israel (cf. Acts 3:41; 4:4) continues throughout Acts along with the ever wider proclamation of the gospel to the Gentile world.

Thus, while Luke presents the choice for Barabbas and the Fall of Jerusalem to which it leads as an instance of a destructive pattern presaging final condemnation at the judgement, the choice once made need not necessarily have the final word. In Luke's scheme of salvation God can incorporate even the most heinous human choice into a wider saving plan. Right up to the (indefinitely delayed) judgement there is 'space' for conversion as the great 'Today' of acceptance first proclaimed by Jesus continues in the mission and ministry of the Church.

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18 For the state of the question and indication of some key literature, see M.A. Powell, *What are they saying about Luke?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989) 51-58; see further: R.E. Brown, *Death of the Messiah* 1.389-90; J.Jervell, *Luke and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972); J.T. Sanders, *The Jews in Luke-Acts* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); J.B. Tyson, (ed) *Luke-Acts and the Jewish People: Eight Critical Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988); R. Tannehill, *Narrative Unity: Volume One* 34-44; D.L. Tiede, "Fighting against God: Luke's Interpretation of Jewish Rejection of the Messiah Jesus" in (C.A. Evans and D.A. Hagner eds.) *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity: Issues of Polemic and Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 102-112; J. A. Weatherly, *Jewish Responsibility for the Death of Jesus in Luke -Acts* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994).