

The Role of Prophets in Luke-Acts

All four Gospels report that Jesus raised people from the dead. Together, they relate a total of three incidents. In Matt. 9:18-26, Mark 5:21-43, and Luke 8:40-56, Jesus restores a twelve-year-old girl to life. In John 11:1-44, he calls Lazarus out of the tomb. In Luke 7:11-17, he raises a widow's only son.

This third miracle, found only in Luke's Gospel, evokes the story of the prophet Elijah and the widow's son as told in 1 Kgs. 17:17-24. Luke seems to emphasize the connection by quoting 1 Kgs. 17:23: Jesus "gave him to his mother." He reinforces the parallel by indicating that it is not lost on the people of Nain. "A great prophet has risen among us," they exclaim (Luke 7:16).

The story of Jesus' raising the widow's son is just one example of Luke's clear and consistent effort to portray Jesus the Messiah as a prophet. Luke draws his concept of prophetic identity and mission from Israel's Scriptures.¹ A biblical prophet starts his or her career when the Lord comes to the prophet, perhaps through the Holy Spirit or in a vision. The prophet then speaks God's word to the people. Salvation oracles proclaim God's faithfulness to the covenants with Abraham and David; judgment oracles accuse the people of breaking the Mosaic covenant and pronounce sentence on them. Sometimes the prophet illustrates the oracle with a parable, a story that tricks its listeners into condemning themselves by inviting them to judge among its characters. At other times, the situation calls for a prophetic action, a stunt that drives home the prophet's point. Prophets often demonstrate their supernatural power by performing miracles, reading minds, and predicting the future.²

1. For other summaries of prophetic characteristics in Luke-Acts, see Paul S. Minear, *To Heal and to Reveal: The Prophetic Vocation According to Luke* (New York: Seabury, 1976), 87-90; Luke Timothy Johnson, *Luke-Acts: A Story of Prophet and People* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1981), 25-26; David P. Moessner, *Lord of the Banquet: The Literary and Theological Significance of the Lukan Travel Narrative* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 48-50; Robert F. O'Toole, *Luke's Presentation of Jesus: A Christology, SubBi 25* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2004), 43-52.

2. For example, the "word of the Lord" comes to Jeremiah (Jer. 1:2, 4). Zechariah son of Jehoiada is possessed by the Holy Spirit (2 Chron. 24:20); Amos sees visions (Amos 7:1-9). Isaiah delivers a salvation

Luke lavishes these prophetic characteristics on Jesus, thereby distinguishing his work from the other canonical Gospels. This is not to say that the theme is absent from Matthew, Mark, and John. On the contrary, it is somewhat prominent in Mark. When Mark's Jesus gives offense in his hometown synagogue, for example, he compares himself to a dishonored prophet (Mark 6:4). Many believe that he is Elijah or one of the ancient prophets (Mark 6:15; 8:28). Like a prophet, he knows people's thoughts (Mark 2:8). He also foretells several events: his death, resurrection, and second coming (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34; 13:24-28; 14:62); Judas's betrayal (Mark 14:18-21); the disciples' desertion (Mark 14:27-28); Peter's denial (Mark 14:30); the Jewish War of 66-74 (Mark 13:1-24). Ironically, Roman soldiers mock Jesus' prophetic ability even as a second cock-crow heralds the fulfillment of one of his prophecies (Mark 14:62-72).

Matthew also portrays Jesus as a prophet. Like Mark, he includes the dishonored prophet saying (Matt. 13:57), the mind reading (Matt. 9:4), predictions of future events (Matt. 16:21; 17:22-23; 20:18-28; 24:1-44; 26:20-25, 31-34, 64), and the fulfillment of the prophecy about Peter (Matt. 26:67-75). He includes one of Mark's sayings about Elijah and the ancient prophets, adding that some people also believe that Jesus is Jeremiah (Matt. 16:14). When he enters Jerusalem, the crowds hail him as a prophet (Matt. 21:11).³ He implicitly compares his own execution to the murder of Israel's prophets (Matt. 23:29-36).

Even John's Gospel, with its focus on Jesus as the messianic Son whom God sends into the world, indicates that Jesus is a prophet. When John's Jesus recapitulates the Samaritan woman's marital history, she replies, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet" (John 4:19). Jesus never denies this. Soon afterward, on his return from Samaria to Galilee, he remarks that "a prophet has no honor in the prophet's own country" (John 4:44).

Luke, too, reports a version of the dishonored prophet saying (Luke 4:24). In addition, he includes the two Elijah sayings plus the mind-reading scenes and most of the other predictions found in Matthew and Mark.⁴ This is consistent with the theory that Luke bases his narrative on Mark's story, interpolating

oracle in Isa. 2:1-4 and a judgment oracle in Isa. 1:1-20. Moses and Elijah perform miracles (Exod. 7:8-13; 1 Kgs. 18:30-39); Elisha reads his servant's mind (2 Kgs. 5:19-27); Micaiah predicts the future (1 Kgs. 22:5-23). Isaiah illustrates a judgment oracle by walking naked for three years (Isa. 20:1-6); Jeremiah, by smashing a clay pot (Jer. 19:1-13). Elijah and Elisha raise dead children (1 Kgs. 17:17-24; 2 Kgs. 4:32-37); Ahijah knows that Jeroboam's wife is pretending to be someone else (1 Kgs. 14:4-6); Samuel foretells Saul's encounters with three young men and a band of prophets (1 Sam. 10:3-6).

3. I am indebted to Charlene McAfee Moss for reminding me about this verse.

sayings from Q. As he edits Mark and Q, he retains most material that depicts Jesus as a prophet.

Luke does not stop there, however. He portrays a Spirit-filled Jesus who pronounces prophetic judgments, predictions, and supernatural insights not found in Mark or Q. What is more, Luke's Jesus often resembles one of Israel's prophets. His birth is similar to that of Samuel; he performs miracles like those of Elijah; he is rejected as were Moses and Jeremiah; he predicts the destruction of Jerusalem in the words of Hosea, Zechariah, Zephaniah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. All this leads other characters in Luke's narrative to recognize Jesus as a prophet.⁵

Moreover, Jesus is not the only prophet in Luke's two-volume work. Luke extends the motif to Jesus' forerunner John as well as to Jesus' followers—especially Peter and Paul—as portrayed in the Gospel's sequel, the book of Acts. According to Luke, those who bear witness to Jesus are prophets. They, too, are filled with the Holy Spirit. In the case of Peter and Paul, Jesus' Spirit is transferred to them just as the spirit of Elijah is transferred to his disciple Elisha. They experience prophetic calls, see prophetic visions, and pronounce prophetic judgments. Like Elijah and Elisha, they extend their ministry to Gentiles. And, like Moses and Jesus before them, they are rejected by their own people.

Luke thus makes it abundantly clear that Jesus and his witnesses are prophets just like the prophets in Israel's Scriptures. This has not been lost on New Testament scholars. Prophets and prophecy in Luke-Acts have attracted a good deal of interest over the last seventy years or so. From 1940 to 1957, commentators examined the parallels between Jesus and various biblical prophets. For example, Eric Burrows contemplated the Samuel parallels in Luke 1–2; P. Daback concentrated on Jesus' likeness to Elijah; C. H. Dodd laid out the allusions to Israel's prophets in Jesus' temple oracles; Howard Teeple explored Luke's portrayal of Jesus as a prophet like Moses.⁶ Adrian

4. Luke 5:22; 9:8, 19, 22, 44; 11:47–51; 13:34–35; 18:31–33; 21:5–36; 22:21–22, 31–34. The exceptions include predictions at the Last Supper of the disciples' desertion (Mark 14:27–28; Matt. 26:31–32) and at Jesus' trial of the second coming (Mark 14:62; Matt. 26:64).

5. For other summaries of Jesus' prophetic activity in the four Gospels, see Gerhard Friedrich, "προφήτης," *TDNT* 6:841–48; Morna D. Hooker, *The Signs of a Prophet: The Prophetic Actions of Jesus* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 55–67.

6. Eric Burrows, "The Gospel of the Infancy: The Form of Luke Chapters 1 and 2," in *The Gospel of the Infancy and Other Biblical Essays*, The Bellarmine Series 6 (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1940), 1–27; P. Daback, "Siehe, es erschienen Moses und Elias," *Bib* 23 (1942): 180–88; C. H. Dodd, "The Fall of Jerusalem and the 'Abomination of Desolation,'" *JRS* 37 (1947): 48–52; Howard M. Teeple, *The Mosaic Eschatological Prophet* (SBLMS 10; Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1957), 86–88.

Hastings (1958) and Paul Minear (1976) then began the work of pulling these observations together. They concluded that Luke draws comparisons with Elijah and Moses in order to characterize Jesus as a prophet who ministers to Gentiles, brings God's salvation, and experiences rejection.⁷ Minear extended the prophet designation to John the Baptist and the apostles.⁸

Others have continued their work. Starting in 1977, Luke Timothy Johnson began to sketch a portrait of Jesus and his witnesses as prophets like Elijah and Moses. They do what God's prophets have always done: extend salvation to Gentiles and get rejected by Jews.⁹ David Tiede interpreted the Elijah and Moses parallels in light of Jesus' Jerusalem prophecies, understanding Gentile inclusion and Jewish rejection with respect to issues raised by the destruction of the temple.¹⁰ Joel Green argued that Luke introduces parallels with Samuel, Elijah, Moses, and prophets who lament over Jerusalem in order to illustrate Jesus' place in salvation history.¹¹

These and other scholars have not only explored the extent of prophets and prophecy in Luke-Acts but have also begun to address an important question. Why does Luke take a minor theme from his sources and embellish it, introducing elaborate allusions to the biblical prophets and then extending the theme through the Gospel narrative into its sequel in Acts? Why does Luke portray Jesus and his witnesses as prophets? For Odil Hannes Steck and David Moessner, prophetic parallels reiterate a Deuteronomistic pattern: God's people disobey; a prophet calls them to repentance; the people reject the prophet; God allows their enemies to prevail.¹² According to Johnson, the example of rejected prophets demonstrates God's faithfulness to a Gentile audience confused about

7. Adrian Hastings, *A Prophet and Witness in Jerusalem: A Study of the Teaching of Saint Luke* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1958), 63–75; Minear, *To Heal and to Reveal*, 97–120.

8. Minear, *To Heal and to Reveal*, 82–96, 122–47.

9. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Literary Function of Possessions in Luke-Acts*, SBLDS 39 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977); Johnson, *Luke-Acts; The Gospel of Luke*, SP 3 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991); Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, SP 5 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1992); Johnson, "The Christology of Luke-Acts," in *Who Do You Say That I Am? Essays on Christology*, ed. Mark Allan Powell and David R. Bauer (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999).

10. David L. Tiede, *Prophecy and History in Luke-Acts* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980).

11. Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 69, 381.

12. Odil Johannes Steck, *Israel und das gewaltsame Geschick der Propheten: Untersuchung zur Überlieferung des deuteronomistischen Geschichtsbildes im Alten Testament, Spätjudentum und Urchristentum*, WMANT 23 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1967), 63–64; David Moessner, "Paul and the Pattern of the Prophet Like Moses in Acts," in *SBL 1983 Seminar Papers*, ed. Kent H. Richards, SBLSP 22 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), 206; Moessner, "The Christ Must Suffer: New Light on the Jesus-Peter, Stephen, Paul Parallels in Luke-Acts," *NovT* 28 (1986): 246–47; Moessner, *Lord of the Banquet*, 84.

Jewish unbelief.¹³ Green agrees with Craig Evans and Robert O'Toole: Luke's prophet parallels portray Jesus as the Messiah who brings salvation.¹⁴ Thomas Brodie theorizes that the text of Luke-Acts is based on a prototype that patterns Jesus' story on the Elijah-Elisha narrative.¹⁵ J. Severino Croatto argues that parallels with Elijah illustrate Jesus' healing miracles while parallels with Moses illustrate his teaching.¹⁶

I take a somewhat different view. As I see it, the portrayal of Jesus and his witnesses as prophets constitutes an important part of Luke's overall agenda: to assure his audience of "the certainty of the things [they] have been taught" (Luke 1:4). Although they have received Christian instruction, Luke's audience seems to be questioning some of its central claims.¹⁷ This is perhaps understandable, as their times did not much resemble the expected messianic age. They believed that the messianic age had been inaugurated with the advent of Jesus the Messiah, the Anointed One eagerly awaited by many first-century Jews. Most Jews, however, were not expecting a messiah like Jesus. They were looking for a Davidic king who would conquer his Gentile enemies (in their case, the Romans) and rule in Jerusalem.

The foundation for these expectations lies in 2 Samuel 7. Here the prophet Nathan explains to King David that God will establish the kingdom of David's "offspring" forever (2 Sam. 7:12-13, 16).¹⁸ "He shall build a house for my name," says God, referring to the temple (2 Sam. 7:13). "I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me" (2 Sam. 7:14). Other Scriptures pick up the motif. Psalm 2, for example, depicts a king enthroned by God in Jerusalem. The psalm identifies this king as the Lord's "anointed," to whom God decrees, "You are my son; today I have begotten you" (Ps. 2:2, 7). Although the Gentiles conspire against

13. Johnson, *Literary Function of Possessions*, 122; Johnson, *Luke-Acts*, 21.

14. Craig A. Evans, "Luke's Use of the Elijah/Elisha Narratives and the Ethics of Election," *JBL* 106 (1987): 77; Robert O'Toole, "The Parallels between Jesus and Moses," *BTB* 20 (1990): 28; O'Toole, *Luke's Presentation of Jesus*, 52; Green, *Gospel of Luke*, 69, 381.

15. Thomas L. Brodie, *Luke the Literary Interpreter: Luke-Acts as a Systematic Rewriting and Updating of the Elijah-Elisha Narrative in 1 and 2 Kings* (Rome: Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas, 1988); Brodie, *Proto-Luke: The Oldest Gospel Account: A Christ-Centered Synthesis of Old Testament History Modelled Especially on the Elijah-Elisha Narrative* (Limerick: Dominical Biblical Institute, 2006).

16. J. Severino Croatto, "Jesus, Prophet Like Elijah, and Prophet-Teacher Like Moses in Luke-Acts," *JBL* 124, no. 3 (2005): 461.

17. Donald Juel, *Luke-Acts: The Promise of History* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1983), 15-16; Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 1:12; Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 22; John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 6.

18. The following quotations from 2 Sam. 7, Ps. 2, and Isa. 11 are NRSV translations.

God's king, he will subdue them. He will "break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel" (Ps. 2:9). A third prophecy about a coming king is found in Isaiah 11. It concerns "a shoot . . . from the stump of Jesse"—that is, a descendant of Jesse's son David (Isa. 11:1). "The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him," making him a righteous judge (Isa. 11:2-5). He will gather dispersed Jews, cease hostilities with northern Israelites, and rule over a peaceable kingdom (Isa. 11:6-12).

By 63 BCE, when Pompey's Roman legions marched into Jerusalem, these prophecies had yet to be fulfilled. David's progeny had indeed ruled for many generations after his death. His dynasty had come to an end, however, with the Babylonian conquest in 587 BCE. Since then, Jerusalem had been under the sway of several successive Gentile powers: Babylonians, Persians, Alexander the Great, Ptolemies, Seleucids. Starting with the Maccabean Revolt in 167 BCE, Jews had enjoyed some measure of independence and home rule. Their Hasmonean leaders, however, were most certainly not Davidic kings. Now, with the Romans in charge, it seemed high time for God to send the Messiah.

Much messianic expectation before 70 CE was based on prophecies like 2 Sam. 7:12-14; Psalm 2; and Isa. 11:1-12, if extant Jewish literature is any indication.¹⁹ Perhaps the best example is found in the *Psalms of Solomon*. This noncanonical collection of Jewish psalms seems to reflect anti-Roman sentiment in the wake of Pompey's invasion. It therefore includes two psalms about the coming Messiah, one of which alludes to all three prophecies (*Pss. Sol.* 17-18).²⁰ Wielding "an iron rod" and "the word of his mouth," the "son of David" will "destroy the unlawful nations" and place them "under his yoke" (*Pss. Sol.* 17:24, 30).²¹ He will "purge Jerusalem," rallying righteous Jews and restoring the holy city to its original splendor (*Pss. Sol.* 17:22, 26, 30-31). The "Lord Messiah" will then rule as a righteous king and a wise judge (*Pss. Sol.* 17:26-29, 32). Such was the vision for the messianic age.

Luke's Christian audience, probably living in the 80s CE, was experiencing a very different scenario. Their Messiah, Jesus, was no warrior. He had not led a Jewish army to defeat the Romans. He was an artisan from Nazareth whom the Romans had crucified. Some of his most prominent followers, including Peter and Paul, had already shared his fate. Most Jews—especially Pharisees—rejected

19. See, e.g., 4QFlor; 4QpIsa^a 8-10 III, 11-25; 1Q28b V, 24-46; 1 Enoch 48:8; 49:3; 62:3, 8; T. Levi 18:5; 7; T. Judah 24:6.

20. *Pss. Sol.* 17-18.

21. Quotations of the *Psalms of Solomon* are taken from the translation by Robert Wright (*OTP* 2:651-70).

Christian claims, while many Samaritans and even uncircumcised Gentiles had become Jesus' followers. Moreover, Jerusalem and its temple had not been restored by the Messiah. They had been destroyed by the Romans.²²

“AN ORDERLY ACCOUNT”

Luke's story focuses on these anomalies. He highlights them by using various characters to raise the relevant issues. John the Baptist, a crucified criminal, a disciple named Cleopas, and various apostles all voice questions about Jesus' messianic identity and mission. Pharisees accuse Jesus of blasphemy and doubt his ability to forgive sins. The disciples, an Ethiopian eunuch, and Peter wonder about Samaritan and Gentile inclusion, while Jesus himself puzzles over Jewish rejection. When bystanders admire the beautiful temple, one can almost hear Luke's audience mourning their loss.

In order to explain the anomalies, Luke uses three basic strategies—strategies that will shape our discussion in the following chapters. First, he structures his “orderly account” (Luke 1:3) around the Messiah's death, acceptance by Samaritans and Gentiles, rejection by Jews, and activity in the Holy City. He introduces these motifs right away. The story begins in and around Jerusalem with the birth of Jesus, acclaimed as the Messiah who will save his people from their sins. Even as the prophet Simeon announces the advent of God's salvation, he foreshadows Gentile inclusion, Jewish rejection, and Jesus' crucifixion.

Themes of a crucified Messiah, salvation from sins, Jewish rejection, Gentile inclusion, and Jerusalem continue to shape Luke's story of Jesus' ministry in Galilee (Luke 4:14–9:50). The sermon in Nazareth—his first public act—involves an implied messianic claim, a foreshadowing of Gentile inclusion, and rejection in his own hometown. True to his mission “to bring good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18; cf. Isa. 61:1), Jesus ministers to the disabled. To fulfill Joel's prophecy about God's salvation for “young” and “old,” “both men and women” (Acts 2:17–21; cf. Joel 2:28–32), he heals boys, girls, men, and women, all the while gathering male and female followers. He stays away from Gentiles. He does, however, minister to unclean Jews, forgiving sinners and associating with tax collectors. This raises the hackles of scribes and Pharisees. Near the end of Jesus' time in Galilee, Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus' response: the Jerusalem elders, chief priests, and scribes will reject him and kill him.

Jesus' Galilean ministry is followed by a long journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51–19:44)—a journey that he knows will lead to the cross. On the way,

22. Juel, *Luke-Acts*, 117–20.

Jesus continues his ministry to disabled people (male and female), tax collectors, and sinners. This leads to more conflict with Jewish leaders. Luke punctuates the journey with two laments over the holy city. In the first, Jesus identifies Jerusalem as “the city that kills the prophets” (Luke 13:34); in the second, he foretells the coming devastation.

When Jesus finally enters the temple (Luke 19:45), the conflict comes to a head. Jerusalem’s religious leaders have Jesus sentenced to death. As he dies, he saves one last sinner. God raises Jesus from the dead, but the religious leaders reject the eyewitness testimony of Peter and the apostles. The Gospel then spreads from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth, leading to the inclusion of Samaritans and Gentiles. The result: more Jewish rejection.

Luke supports this “orderly account” with a second narrative strategy: the frequent introduction of God’s own testimony. Sometimes God speaks through heavenly messengers, the angels who announce Jesus’ birth and instruct the apostles. God’s written word consistently testifies to God’s ongoing work of salvation. Often, God speaks through characters who prophesy and see visions. Nine times, God acts directly through the Holy Spirit. Twice, a voice from heaven is heard. In these ways, Luke affirms that a crucified Messiah, salvation for sinners, Jewish rejection, Gentile inclusion, and the destruction of the temple have always been part of God’s plan.²³

Third, and most importantly for our purposes, Luke characterizes Jesus and his witnesses as prophets. He thus reminds his audience of the precedents set by the biblical prophets—prophets like Samuel, Moses, Elijah, Elisha, Hosea, Zephaniah, Zechariah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. They were sent to Gentiles; they were consistently rejected in Israel; they foretold enemy invasions brought on by Israel’s disobedience. Therefore, first-century Christians should not be surprised at acceptance by Gentiles, opposition from Jews, and the loss of the temple. Even though their times do not much resemble the expected messianic age, they do look remarkably like the age of the prophets.

“SO THAT YOU MAY KNOW THE CERTAINTY”

An author’s skeptical audience; his need to legitimate his protagonists; his use of prophets to set precedents for them: this comprehensive theory about Luke’s agenda rests largely on circumstantial evidence. Luke wants his audience to know with certainty. He is indisputably preoccupied with Gentile inclusion,

23. Henry J. Cadbury, *The Making of Luke-Acts*, 3rd ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 34–40, 301–8; Brigid Curtin Frein, “Narrative Predictions, Old Testament Prophecies and Luke’s Sense of Fulfillment,” *NTS* 40 (1994): 22–37.

Jewish rejection, and the temple. He likens his protagonists to prophets, mostly by implication, and the activities of those prophets cohere with his major themes. The theory is a likely explanation for all this internal evidence. Still, is there any outside evidence that might support it?

There is indeed. The strategy of using biblical heroes as precedents for protagonists was not invented by Luke. It is also favored by at least one other ancient historiographer: the anonymous author of 1 Maccabees, written about two hundred years before Luke-Acts. First Maccabees relates the history of the Maccabean Revolt (164–167 BCE) led by the priest Mattathias and his sons Judas “Maccabeus,” Jonathan, and Simon against the Seleucid king Antiochus IV. It recounts how the victorious brothers consolidated their power when Antiochus’s son Alexander appointed Jonathan to the high priesthood (1 Macc. 10:18–21). Upon Jonathan’s death, his brother Simon succeeded him in that office. In addition, Simon acted as governor and ethnarch, thus uniting religious and political leadership in one ruler (1 Macc. 14:35–49). The story ends with the death of Simon and the succession of his son John Hyrcanus—that is, with the establishment of the Hasmonean dynasty that governed Jerusalem until Pompey’s invasion in 63 BCE (1 Macc. 16:23–24).

Although the Hasmoneans instituted self-rule in Jerusalem for the first time since the Babylonian conquest in 587 BCE, many Jews opposed them. Some never accepted their claim to the high priesthood. The Hasmoneans, after all, were not a high priestly family. Even more offensive were the royal trappings they assumed. Their authority in the temple, their control of Jerusalem, their purple garments and gold ornaments—all seemed like a bid for power by a family of upstart priests from Modein.²⁴

Writing sometime during or shortly after the reign of John Hyrcanus (134–104 BCE), the author of 1 Maccabees champions the Hasmonean rulers and seeks to legitimate their authority. He therefore portrays Mattathias and his sons as heroes of the revolution; defenders of the law who rescued Jerusalem from the profanities of the Gentiles. To this end, he draws comparisons, both implicit and explicit, between his protagonists and biblical heroes who kept God’s law in the face of opposition, even at the risk of their own lives.

The author first deploys this strategy when describing the initial act of rebellion in which Mattathias assassinates a Jew about to sacrifice to Gentile gods (1 Macc. 2:23–26). He likens the zeal of Mattathias to that of his priestly ancestor Phinehas, a grandson of Aaron who murdered an Israelite for defying God’s command by marrying a Gentile woman (Num. 25:6–9). God rewards

24. For arguments about the political nature of 1 Maccabees, see David A. deSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha: Message, Content, and Significance* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 249–50.

Phinehas with “a covenant of perpetual priesthood” “for him and his descendants after him” (Num. 25:13). The implication of this parallel for Mattathias and his descendants is obvious.

The author goes on to make further comparisons with other Israelite heroes. The initial stages of the rebellion evoke David’s sojourn in the Judean wilderness, while the battles of Judas Maccabeus resemble the battles of Saul’s son Jonathan (1 Macc. 2:29–30, 42–43; 3:18–19; 5:40–41; cf. 1 Sam. 22:1–2; 23:14; 14:6, 8). As he prays for victory, Judas explicitly invokes the God of David and Jonathan (1 Macc. 4:30). Finally, in his deathbed speech to his sons, Mattathias mentions several of Israel’s heroes. Each was faithful to God and the law. Accordingly, each was rewarded: Abraham with righteousness; Joseph, Joshua, and David with rule; Phinehas with “the covenant of everlasting priesthood” (1 Macc. 2:54); Caleb with land; Elijah with heaven; Hanaiah, Azariah, Mishael, and Daniel with salvation from execution by Gentiles.²⁵ If Judas, Jonathan, and Simon display similar zeal, presumably they will receive similar rewards (1 Macc. 2:51–64).²⁶

In the end, of course, they do. “How shall we thank Simon and his sons?” ask the Jewish people. “For he and his brothers and the house of his father have stood firm; they have fought and repulsed Israel’s enemies and established its freedom” (1 Macc. 14:25–26). Anyone persuaded by parallels with Israel’s heroes has a ready answer: Simon and his sons should be rewarded with high priesthood and royal power.

Why does the author of 1 Maccabees draw these parallels? It would seem that he addresses a skeptical audience. They are torn between the claims of their high-priestly rulers and the criticisms of the opposition party. Therefore, in order to legitimate the Hasmonean dynasty, the author of 1 Maccabees compares them to biblical heroes—mainly priests and rulers—who kept God’s law, saved Israel from Gentile oppressors, and were rewarded with power and authority. As David deSilva puts it, “The choice of intertexture . . . makes the implicit, yet unmistakable, claim that the Hasmonean household’s occupation of the high priesthood and the de facto leadership of Israel . . . is a legitimate one, the family having risen to that status in precisely the same way as had Phinehas and David: through zeal for the law and through military virtuosity.”²⁷

Similarly, Luke’s choice of intertexture makes the claim that Jesus and his witnesses, even though they have not yet brought about the expected messianic

25. Quotations from 1 Maccabees are taken from the NRSV.

26. Daniel J. Harrington, “1 Maccabees,” in *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, ed. Harold W. Attridge, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 1484.

27. DeSilva, *Introducing the Apocrypha*, 259–60.

age, are nonetheless carrying out God's purposes. Like Israel's prophets before them, sent by God and full of the Holy Spirit, they extend God's offer of universal salvation, prophesy against Jerusalem, and meet with resistance from their fellow Jews. Luke thus assures his skeptical audience that the Christian message of a rejected messiah who saves both Jews and Gentiles is in fact the truth, and that even the unexpected destruction of Jerusalem is part of God's plan.