

50. Deification or Demonization: Jesus' Post-Resurrection Body in Luke

24:36-40

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Abstract

This paper seeks to flesh out the similarities between the portrayal of Jesus' post-resurrection body in Luke 24 and either apotheosis narratives or Greco-Roman ghost stories. The paper will examine the scholarly approaches to this question and evaluate pertinent evidence, such as vocabulary in vv 36-40 and narrative models of the Greco-Roman world, to determine whether the Lucan narrative aligns with either option. This paper will also use the theories of liminality and anomy to explain the possible ambiguity in the gospel's portrayal of Jesus' body. The paper concludes that Luke 24 is neither clearly a ghost story nor a deification story. Rather, the overlap in characteristics renders the narrative anomic, perhaps intentionally.

Composition, Date, and Audience of Luke

According to Fitzmyer 1985, as well as many other commentaries, the book of Luke has a possible date of c. 80-85 CE, as indicated by Luke's dependence on earlier books, such as Mark. Some, like Francois Bovon (2002), do not try to date an 'original' Luke. Instead, he notes that four copies of Luke circulated simultaneously, all of which differed slightly. The earliest of these dates to the second century, and the latest is the Caesarean text. The author of Luke also likely had access to a larger body of knowledge from Greek and Roman literature and oral tradition. Due to the concerns addressed in the gospel, the intended readers for the book of Luke are assumed to be Gentile Christians.

Context of Luke 24:36-40

Luke 24:36-40 (NRSV):

36 While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." **37** They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. **38** He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? **39** Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." **40** When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet.

Taking place after Jesus' resurrection but before the ascension, this section in Luke 24 was meant to establish the identity of the one who manifested himself and his acceptance among the living. Verse 37 depicts the disciples as terrified due to the apparition of Jesus' ghost. In v. 39, there was an effort to reclaim Jesus' identity by showing the mark on his hands and feet from crucifixion (Bovon 2002). According to Fitzmyer (1985), the term used for spirit in the text implies the disembodiment of the spirit. The challenge to show the hands and feet is meant to establish physicality. Marshall 1978 argues that the start of the passage, v. 36, is primarily included to link the episode with previous passages and argues that the portrayal of Jesus' hands in verse 40 may be evidence of a pre-Johannine tradition or a later addition.

Deification or Making Ghosts?

Does the description of Jesus' body in Luke 24 draw upon Roman categories of 'god' or 'ghost'? Ancient Romans categorized gods and ghosts similarly to the boundaries that separated the natural world from the divine (Levene 2012). Gallarte (2017) describes ghost stories by Greek and Latin authors, highlighting common characteristics that tie Luke 24:36-43 to ghost narratives. Gallarte argues that the typical ghost story includes an apparition appearing during times of high stress and describes the apparition taking place after dusk. Recognition by the living can occur, and/or there is a message from beyond the grave. Similarly, Prince (2007) concludes that the author of Luke can only describe Jesus using the literary models available to him; however, she also concedes that Jesus, in Luke's portrayal, does not occupy any one category, like ghost.

Others, like Kreitzer (1990), have relied upon the concept of apotheosis to explain Jesus' post-resurrection condition. Apotheosis is the raising of a person to a god or godlike state. However, this process took the approval of the Roman Senate, and was thus a political and religious process. Kreitzer traces apotheosis through Roman art and coinage (Fig. 1), concluding that the process of apotheosis had a profound effect on understanding the ascension of Jesus. Litwa 2014 highlights the powers Jesus has after death and notes that Jesus' wounds establish a continuity of identity, concluding that Jesus' disciples started to worship him as a god after his ascension. Whitaker 2017 notes the use of the verbs ἀναλαμβάνειν (assume, receive) or ἀναφέρω (carry, offer up) in the ascension narrative, heaven as the destination, and the presence of witnesses. It should be noted that many in the 'apotheosis school' focus on the Lucan ascension narrative rather than narratives describing Jesus' appearance after resurrection but before ascension, as in Luke 24.



Figure 1: Example of coinage minted to commemorate apotheosis. The coin is for Antiochus IV the inscription on the coin says: BASILEUS ANTIOCHUS THEOS EPIPHANES: ΘΕΟΥ ΕΠΙΦΑΝΟΥΣ ΝΙΚΗΦΟΡΟΥ / ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΑΝΤΙΟΧΟΥ (King Antiochus, God made manifest).

Anomy and Liminality

What is the best way to understand Jesus' body before his ascension and why is the Lucan account so ambiguous? Berger (1967) famously describes the process through which people create their own realities by grouping or categorizing the world into "nomos," or order. For a nomos to be considered adequate, the person should be able to take the nomos for granted. The opposite is a lack of categorization or "anomy." Berger often compares anomy to chaos. From this perspective, the ambiguity in Luke may be a response to the anomy of Jesus' post-resurrection but the pre-ascension body.

Alternatively, we could investigate the account of Luke 24 from the perspective of Victor Turner's liminality (1977). If the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus was essentially a rite of passage, Jesus' body in Luke 24 is in the liminal phase of the ritual. In Turner's theory, the first phase of the ritual is separation, which is characterized by behaviors that signify a detachment. The next phase is the liminal period when the characteristics of the ritual subject are ambiguous. The final phase would be reintegration into a higher status than previously. The theory also proposes a type of community, called communitas, in which those who go through the ritual together form a community bond; this might include the disciples on the Emmaus Road or the divine (i.e. God).

To address which of these theories is the most salient, the paper must return to the relationship between Roman mythological categories and Jesus in Luke 24:36-40. Within which Roman mythological categories, if any, does Jesus fall? Are there links between the narrative models of apotheosis or ghost stories when compared to Luke 24:36-40? Is there a purpose for the language used to describe Jesus in Luke 24:36-40?

Πνεῦμα as human essence	Πνεῦμα as divine essence	Πνεῦμα as references to demons/harmful or unclean spirit	References to Δαιμόνιον	Reference to φάντασμα
1:17, 1:47, 1:80, 8:55, 23:46, 24:37, 24:39	1:15, 1:35, 1:41, 1:67, 2:25, 2:26, 2:27, 3:16, 3:22, 4:1, 4:14, 4:18, 10:21, 11:13, 12:10	4:33, 4:35, 6:18, 8:2, 8:29, 9:39, 9:42, 10:20, 11:24, 12:12, 13:11	4:33, 4:35, 4:41, 7:33, 8:2, 8:26, 8:27, 8:29, 8:30, 8:32, 8:33, 8:35, 8:36, 8:38, 9:1, 9:42, 9:49, 10:17, 11:14, 11:15, 11:18, 11:19, 11:20, 13:32	24:37 (in one outlying ms)

Table 1: References to Πνεῦμα in Luke in comparison with Δαιμόνιον and φάντασμα

Pneuma, Phantasma, and Daimonion/ Unclean Spirits

Terms for spirits appearing in Luke include πνεῦμα, roughly translated as "spirit," φάντασμα also translated as spirit but used only in Codex Bezae, and δαιμόνιον (used interchangeably with πνευμάτων ἀκαθάρτων [unclean spirits]) meaning "demon." Tables 1-2 analyze the appearance of πνεῦμα and related terms, what types of spirits they reference, and the percentage breakdown of all the terms. Sometimes, these terms are used interchangeably as in Luke 4:33-36. The analysis of terminology in Luke as a whole, and in Luke 24 in particular, suggests that the author used very ambiguous language to describe Jesus's post-resurrection body, perhaps intentionally. This may indicate that, by design, the passage will not fit neatly into any known category from the Roman world.

	Πνεῦμα as human essence	Πνεῦμα as divine essence	Πνεῦμα as references to demons/harmful or unclean spirit	References to Δαιμόνιον	Reference to φάντασμα
% of occurrence of all terms	12.24 %	25.74%	18.94%	41.04%	2.04%
% of occurrence for πνεῦμα	21.2%	45.5%	33.3%		

Table 2: Percentage of Total References to πνεῦμα in Luke

Apotheosis or Ghost Story?

Returning to apotheosis, as Whitaker points out, the steps for apotheosis may be represented in the ascension account of Luke 24:50-52. However, apotheosis is as much a function of the state as it is an ascension ritual and, as Kreitzer notes, it was usually predicated on the high economic and political status of the individual. Often, coins were minted to commemorate the ascension through official currency. An example of this is Augustus, who reigned from 24 BCE to 14 CE; coins circulated in his honor often depicting his temple and the inscription "ROM ET AVGVSTVS Rome and Augustus" (cf. Fig. 1). The deification of an emperor was also ratified through the Senate, which is another essential facet indicating the apotheosis model may not strictly apply. Nor does apotheosis normally have a period of time between resurrection and ascension or describe a physical body of the apotheosized as described in vv 36-40.

In Luke 24:36, both Gallarte and Prince highlight Jesus as an apparition when he appears after disguising himself and then disappearing in Luke 24:31. This trait is similar to the category of disembodied spirits who can appear and disappear at will. However, the attempt to establish physicality by showing his hands and feet link better with two other categories: heroes and revenants (Luke 24:39). Still, the category of hero does not fit perfectly either. As Prince points out, heroes had established followings, their gravesite was known and worshipped, and had temples erected in their memory. Additionally, the ghost narrative model has a critical failing: the time of day is not established in Luke, nor is Jesus recognized unless he chooses to be (24:3133). In Gallarte's model, the action of recognition was not typically in the hands of the ghost. Another weak point includes Jesus not disappearing until the ascension. Apparitions, in Gallarte's model, disappear after either recognition or passing along their message from beyond the grave.

Summary and Conclusion

Due to the weaknesses in the other arguments and the prevalence of the ambiguous term πνεῦμα in Luke, one can conclude that the Lucan author gave Jesus' body an anomic status. The reliance on anomy becomes more salient if the author was intentionally remaining ambiguous in his description of Jesus' post-resurrection, pre-ascension body. The author tries to connect Jesus somehow to the Holy Spirit (one of the most common uses of πνεῦμα). However, it is also possible that πνεῦμα, outside of references to the Holy Spirit, is used because the author does not know what category Jesus' post-resurrection body would occupy in the minds of the disciples. The author only uses δαιμόνιον and πνευμάτων ἀκαθάρτων to distinguish between an apparition and an apparition with intent to cause harm, typically through possession. However, πνεῦμα also appears in similar passages. It is interesting the author did not portray the disciples as mistaking Jesus for a 'demon' or an 'evil spirit,' but rather chose the most ambiguous and multifaceted of his terminological options.

In sum, the goals of this paper were to identify whether Luke's portrayal of Jesus falls into any Roman mythological category, namely apotheoses or ghost stories, and to evaluate whether liminality or anomy provided a more helpful theoretical model. An investigation of terms from 24:36-40 demonstrates the use of ambiguous language, combining words for fear that are typical responses to ghosts or evil spirits (cf. Mark 6:49 and Matthew 14:26) but using πνεῦμα (rather than 'demon' or 'evil spirit'), which can refer either to the Holy Spirit or a spirit wishing harm. Finally, there is some speculation about the purpose of the anomic Jesus in Luke. The anomy of language seems to be purposeful, either to put Jesus in a category closer to God or to avoid classifying Jesus, or the disciples' perception of Jesus, as a ghost. This might contrast with modern conceptions of Jesus, which lie closer to the opinion of David Litwa, in which Jesus is treated as fully divine at every step of the story. As this paper has pointed out, that is not the case when considering the Lucan narrative in 24:36 – 40. The anomic Jesus is everywhere present but nowhere categorized.

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