

LUKE 7

Luke 7:1–10. Healing the Centurion’s Servant

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 361–362.

The setting for this miracle, of course, is the north end of the lake in the city of Capernaum, three or so miles east of where Jesus delivers His Sermon on the Plain. It seems apparent that Capernaum holds an ethnic mixture of people, as the presence of the centurion demonstrates (Luke 7:2, 6); it is not simply a Jewish enclave. To be sure, archaeological evidence has come to light showing that following the death of King Herod, Jews typically kept to their own towns and Gentiles to their own settlements. However, this story illustrates that in certain regions of Galilee, Jews and Gentiles lived side by side in neighborly goodwill.

In Luke’s hands, the story foreshadows the movement of the later church into Gentile lands. It is striking that according to Luke, the centurion does not meet Jesus personally, at least not on this occasion. Instead, the account underscores the Gentile official’s firm faith in Jesus’s authority and power to heal his servant. So it will be when Christian missionaries begin to carry their message into the larger Roman Empire and beyond. In that distant day, Jesus will no longer be available for people to meet in person. Rather, those who hear the preaching of His representatives have to exercise faith that what they are hearing is true. For those who do, wonders occur in their lives and in the lives of their loved ones, just as in the case of the centurion and his esteemed servant.

One of the important, pressing questions concerns the relationship between Luke and Matthew as seen through the eyes of this story. Luke’s possible connections with Mark’s record slip away with the report of the calling of the Twelve (Luke 6:13–16), and Luke will not potentially reconnect with Mark’s Gospel until Luke 8:4, where we find an account of Jesus’s mother and brothers coming to visit Him (Mark 3:31–35).

In the stories that parallel other accounts, chapter 7 of Luke resembles Matthew's record, though not in its order of events. In this light, some conclude that the two are following a common source, which is denominated "Q," the first letter of the German word *Quelle*, which means "source."

The contrast between the accounts in Matthew and Luke can be captured by two words: personal contact. According to Matthew's report, the centurion himself came to Jesus to beg for the life of his servant (Matthew 8:5–13). In Luke, as we have seen, the contact comes about through intermediaries. For some, this distinction indicates irreconcilable differences between the Gospel accounts. But that need not be the case. We can hold both reports in the same hand by observing that Matthew abbreviates the story, preserving only the key parts. What the centurion does through intermediaries can be seen as done by the man himself, as Matthew records it. This Gospel writer is interested chiefly in the man's faith. Luke, on the other hand, preserves the fuller details of the story and sees the messengers as an important element for understanding the broad, enlivening implications for Gentiles within the report.

Luke 7:11–17. The Widow of Nain

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 367–368.

The most striking dimensions of Jesus's actions are those not recorded. To the point, Nain sits almost thirty miles from Capernaum, much of it uphill, and Jesus and His followers traveled from one to the other in less than a day. On one day, Jesus healed the centurion's servant; the next morning He and His entourage reached the gate of Nain in time to meet the funeral procession of mourners escorting the unnamed widow and her deceased son to his burial spot. This means that Jesus and His disciples had to travel through much of the night in order to reach Nain. From the narrative, plainly, He knew of this woman's grave situation from afar and raced to her aid.

The narrative of Jesus raising the widow's only son at the edge of the town appears only in Luke's Gospel. At its center stands Jesus's compassion for this woman who evidently finds herself in the desperate condition of continuing to live without inheritance, income, or family support. As it is, only her son inherits the property of his deceased father, which allows him to support his bereft mother. At the son's death, the property goes back to his father's family. The wife brings to her marriage a dowry that, under normal circumstances, will still be intact and will support her for a time following her husband's death. We learn nothing more about her situation, whether her siblings are still alive or whether anyone from her husband's family still lives, any of whom could possibly offer support. In this woman's case, Luke's language strongly implies that her son is her solitary support.

Luke's words "he had compassion on her" (Luke 7:13) draw up the heart of the account. Notably, Jesus initiates the action, stepping toward the funeral procession without anyone requesting His aid. In fact,

no one in the town will know who He is because His activities have occurred in Nazareth, five and a half miles to the northwest, and in and around Capernaum, which lies about thirty miles away. To observers, especially His newly gathered disciples, His strong, abiding concern for the vulnerable in society will become immediately apparent. In a vivid sense, He fulfills the words of His mother when she declares that God pays attention to “the low estate of his handmaiden” (Luke 1:48; see the note thereon). Although His act of touching the dead brings ritual uncleanness upon Him, He sees the deeper need to bring relief and wholeness to the widow. Besides, as His actions show, the stain of ritual uncleanness does not adhere to Him as it does to others.

In a very real way, the story gives meaning to some of what the Savior will say to John’s disciples in the next scene: “The dead are raised” (Luke 7:22). To be sure, Jesus brings back the centurion’s servant from death’s door (7:10). But the number of witnesses of that event are limited to those who know the centurion well, although, to be sure, word will run rapidly throughout the city of Capernaum. In Nain, all in the funeral procession witness firsthand Jesus’s words, the raising of the dead man, and his restoration to his mother. The stunning character of the miracle underlies the spread of the “rumour of him . . . throughout all Judea, and throughout all the region round about” (7:17).

In sum, Jesus’s action restores more than life to the widow’s son. Now the young man will be able to support his mother in her advancing age. Now he can marry and continue the posterity of his mother and father. Now the inheritance will stay among their descendants and thus their names will live on in their grandchildren.

Luke 7:18–35. John the Baptist

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 376–379.

The chief focus of these verses turns onto John the Baptist. Before this section, John the Baptist’s message and mission have lain only in Luke’s earlier report about the Baptist’s words and activities (Luke 3:1–20). Now Jesus Himself weighs in on His distant cousin. The account, of course, ties back to John the Baptist’s arrest, first mentioned in Luke 3:19–20. Evidently, during much of these inaugural weeks of Jesus’s ministry, the Baptist languishes within the prison of Herod’s Machaerus fortress, a site that overlooks the east shore of the Dead Sea, far from the crowds who earlier came to John to be baptized and to hear both his stern message and his testimony of the Coming One.

People have emerged from the crowds to follow John the Baptist, an observation that becomes evident in the visit of the two devoted disciples. In fact, the movement surrounding the Baptist continues to flourish after his death, an event still in the future and one that will inject glue into the nascent movement that is gathering about him. The Baptist’s followers will, in time, form their own community loyal to John the Baptist and his memory.

According to Josephus, both the strength and numbers of John the Baptist's followers frighten Herod Antipas and lead him to imprison and execute John, even though he holds the Baptist in highest regard. Josephus repeats the widespread belief that Herod's army suffers a later defeat because he unjustly kills John the Baptist. Luke, though he does not narrate Herod's execution of the Baptist as other Gospels do (Matthew 14:3–12; Mark 6:17–29), draws attention to it by quoting the words of Herod (Luke 9:7–9) and writes that one reason for Herod's death penalty against the Baptist is his criticism of Herod's unacceptable act of taking his brother's wife (Luke 3:19–20). Others in the society must have privately censured Herod. But the fact that Herod arrests John the Baptist for openly criticizing his adultery illuminates an unusual relationship between these two men—one a ranking government official and the other a fiery, itinerant preacher. Herod must have been well acquainted with John the Baptist, watching his career with interest, respecting his views, and then coming to fear his movement. Apparently playing on that fear, Herodias, Herod's newly acquired wife, schemes against the Baptist and finally sees him executed (see the notes on Luke 3:19–20). We readily sense that Herod, surrounded by fawning courtiers who speak to him in only the most flattering tones, finds in John the Baptist someone who is brutally honest with him, blowing a breath of fresh air into the palace.

During John the Baptist's final days, his two disciples bring important news to him. We ask, Does John experience some confusion and discouragement while imprisoned? After all, rumor must have carried differing messages about Jesus's activities to him (Luke 7:18). But because Jesus sends angels to minister to him weeks earlier (Joseph Smith Translation, Matthew 4:11), he is likely not seeking clarity and reassurance for himself about Jesus as "the coming one." Rather, it appears that he wants to expose his disciples to the Savior (Luke 7:19–20).

John the Baptist's disciples arrive at a fortuitous moment: when the Savior is about to heal several sufferers. The subsequent manifestations of power must have been breathtaking to them, as it has been for Jesus's disciples who have been near him for the past few weeks. The experience probably convinces the Baptist's disciples in strong, palpable ways that Jesus, "the coming one," is not a politically motivated person but instead concerns Himself with delivering people from debilitating illness and affliction, from incorrect traditions and doctrines (Luke 7:21–23). This clear realization contrasts with the later political and religious motivations dishonestly imputed to Jesus so that authorities seek Jesus's death (see 23:2, 5, 14).

After John the Baptist's disciples depart, it is Jesus's turn to offer His assessment of His desert-dwelling cousin. In His elevated and elevating praise, Jesus draws attention to prophecies about the Messiah's forerunner that are embedded in the books of Exodus and Malachi: "This is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee."¹ As we have seen, these passages point both to Jehovah leading His people through the desert and to the Messiah's forerunner, anchoring John the Baptist's ministry firmly within the Old Testament era and prophetic tradition: "The law and the prophets were until John" (Luke 16:16). But the Baptist is also situated firmly within the era of the Messiah, as Jesus's words, repeated by Peter, affirm, bringing the old and the new together:

“John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost” (Acts 11:16; see the comments on Luke 3:7–20).

Further, Jesus’s high assessment of John the Baptist confirms the fulfillment of prophetic words spoken under inspiration a generation earlier. From the lips of the angel who finds Zacharias in the sanctuary comes this lively promise: “Many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord” (Luke 1:14–15). Zacharias himself, in speaking to his infant son on the day of his circumcision, utters words brimming with expectation: “Thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways; to give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins” (1:76–77).

Although Jesus connects His lofty praise of John to the positive response by “the men of this generation” who are drawn out of their homes “to see” a “prophet” (7:26, 31), that generation will not be the last to be graced by the presence of John the Baptist. To be sure, he will soon die at the hands of Herod’s henchmen, and his mark will embed itself chiefly within the words and deeds of his followers. But John the Baptist’s ministry does not end with his death. First, he will appear on the Mount of Transfiguration with Moses and Elijah (see Joseph Smith Translation, Mark 9:3). Second, approximately 1,800 years later he will appear to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, conferring on them the Aaronic Priesthood, which will allow divinely authorized baptisms to resume (Joseph Smith—History 1:68–72).

Luke 7:36–50. The Woman at the Pharisee’s Meal

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 387–389.

At base, this account underscores how Jesus responds to women, no matter their position in society. The report thus stands as a benchmark to followers and detractors alike about how they are to treat women: all women are to receive respectful treatment.

More than any story that Luke has narrated thus far, this report brims with symbolism. Much of this symbolism centers on the feet and head. The Savior’s three references to His feet cement this observation, as well as His three references to the head. The feet come into play because in acts of adoration, a suppliant grasps or pleads at the feet of the master.² The feet are also the body parts that turn a person from a path of sin onto a path of righteousness, as a host of scriptural passages show. The woman has come seeking forgiveness, an act that illustrates her repentance as well as her deep desire to turn her life onto a different path. The evident fact that she breaks social custom to reach the Savior underscores her steely determination.

Because Jesus is reclining with the other guests, the woman enjoys easy access to His feet. She bathes and wipes them dry, she kisses them, and she anoints them with an expensive perfume (Luke 7:44–46).

On one level, her actions can represent the cleansing that a person goes through in the repentance process (washing), in the embracing of a life free of sin (kissing), and in the sweet, clean aroma of knowing that one's sins are permanently forgiven (perfuming). On another, her attention to Jesus's feet draws a reader metaphorically to her feet that turn an important corner and now rest on the good path.

The head also plays an illuminating role in the story. First, the Savior notices the woman's acts of weeping and wiping with her hair, acts that come from her head. Next, He speaks of kissing, another act that involves a person's head. Finally, He draws attention to the custom of anointing the head. These three references to the head, of course, balance the three that have to do with the feet, an observation that suggests Jesus is purposely marking the moment by making balancing observations so that His audience remembers what happens and what He says in response.

Symbolism also attaches to the feet and head in another way. Simon and his friends represent the head, as does the Savior, but they differ from one another. Simon and his guests stand for the better, more well-off parts of their human society. In contrast, Jesus represents the loftiness of the divine, the one element that all in the room strive for. Of course, Jesus's sacred status floats above any other prestige that a mortal person might achieve or inherit. In a word, as in many other stories that Luke reports, the contrast highlights the difference between the worldly and the heavenly.

The richer set of contrasts lies in the woman. She clearly personifies the bottom rung of her society. She is the outcast, the despised, the one whom others not only separate from their company but also reproach (Luke 6:22). The reasons for the spiteful response of others toward her lie in her past actions, her past life. But by turning to the Savior with her own feet, she now will join those who rejoice "in that day, and leap for joy" with their feet (6:23). The woman, who pays attention to Jesus's feet, thus represents the feet of her society—the parts of the society that are always in the dust and dirt, that are always in need of cleaning. Notably, personified in her, those at the bottom of the social scale recognize more readily what Jesus can offer and, in a way, who He is, answering the guests' unspoken question, "Who is this . . . ?" (7:49). Her desperate seeking of Jesus, more than any other element in the account, answers this question. Her desperation highlights His lofty status, His real position as the Head.

In another vein, the Savior's willing association with a "sinner" ties to other elements in Luke's Gospel. Almost from the moment of Jesus's call of Levi, a public perception grows up that Jesus associates with despised "publicans and sinners" (Luke 5:30). Within a few weeks, that judgment solidifies into a saying about him: "A friend of publicans and sinners" (7:34). The story of the woman confirms this perception, at least in the minds of Simon and his guests (7:39). Beyond this story, which draws up one of Luke's main messages, his Gospel continues to feature not only Jesus's sayings about sinners but also His associations with such people.³

Because this story exhibits similarities with reports in the other Gospels, some see Luke's narrative as simply a variant account of the story of the woman who anoints Jesus's head in the house of Simon the leper in Bethany (Matthew 26:6–13; Mark 14:3–9), or of Mary, sister of Lazarus, who anoints Jesus's feet

in their home in Bethany not long before Jesus's death (John 12:1–8). But the differences among the accounts are decisive and nod toward an independent story in Luke. None of the other stories carry the same rich symbolism that is woven into Luke's account. Hence, we conclude that he obtains his narrative from an independent source.

Notes

- 1 Luke 7:27; Malachi 3:1; also Septuagint Exodus 23:20.
- 2 Luke 8:28, 41; John 11:32; Revelation 1:17.
- 3 Luke 15:1–2, 7, 19; 18:13; 19:7.

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