

WOMEN AND ANGELS. . . WHEN THEY SPEAK, IT'S TIME TO LISTEN!

A Study of the Structure of Luke 23:50 - 24:12

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Parts of Scripture have proven troublesome to human understanding over time, with richest meanings deeply buried under shallow attempts at study. In some cases the attempts at understanding have caused scholars to jump to false conclusions about the intent of the author or the veracity of the text. This can be seen in the early writings of Christianity, where textual variants were sometimes created by well meaning scribes attempting to clarify a difficult text.

Luke 24:12 is a good example. It is a textually difficult verse in that it is missing from some of our most dependable manuscripts (e.g. D, Marcion, et. al.). As a result, some translations have simply removed it from the text and placed it instead in a footnote, suggesting that it was a later interpolation (e.g. RSV). Curtis argued that Luke 24:12 "stands uneasily in its context . . . has the appearance of an appendage," and "breaks the transition from the Easter morning story to the Emmaus Road story."¹

On the other hand, Neiryuk has argued for its textual authenticity and has suggested that "for all recent commentators, the verse is a genuine part of the text."²

The authenticity of the verse is further strengthened by the form of the passage in which it is located. Luke's choice of form was a fundamental method of writing which was popular in both the Roman and Hellenistic worlds and was "in use at least as early as the writing of Homer and the Iliad."³ The form he chose has been variously termed inversion, inverted parallelism, chiasmus, or ring composition.

Ancient Greek pottery illustrates the method. Circular friezes were arranged above and below a panel, on which a scene was depicted, in the center of a vase. "The circular friezes both framed the scene and gave balance to the whole."⁴ In literature, closely related statements were used at the beginning and end of a section to help frame the elements in a single "ring".

While there were many variations of this form of writing, Luke chose one wherein lines were inverted in an A B C D E D' C' B' A' pattern. His focus is found at the center of the inversion, between the parallels. Knowing that Luke (or any author) has used this form is important for a number of reasons. Bailey has suggested that the structure may:

1. identify the climactic center;
2. show how the author is relating the center to the outside;
3. make clear the turning point of the passage and alert the reader to look . for a significant shift of emphasis in the second half;

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4. provide a crucial key to understanding by enabling the reader to see what words, phrases, or sentences are matched with what other words, phrases, or sentences in the structure;
5. demonstrate where newer material has been fitted into an older piece of literature;
6. mark off the literary unit itself with clarity (the beginning and the end are usually distinct and thus the unit is identified);
7. provide crucial evidence for textual problems.⁵

Before examining the structure of this passage, one must note some important difference between the Lucan narrative and the other three gospels. The synoptic problems are quite real and equally diverse. While a number of harmonies have attempted to eliminate them, problems persist. The major differences between Luke's account and the others can be summarized rather quickly. Fitzmyer encapsulates seven:

1. resting of the women on the Sabbath;
2. lack of concern regarding who rolled the stone away;
3. explicit statement that the women did not find the body;
4. two men instead of one young man;
5. reformulation of the message of the angels to the women;
6. delayed mention of the women's names;
7. Peter's verification of the empty tomb.⁶

The key that unlocks part of the mystery surrounding his reporting of the burial/resurrection narrative is found in three main ideas:

1. Preparation, found in both 23:56a and 24:1b;
2. Jesus' words in Galilee as reported by the angels, in 24:6-8;
3. "Wondering" as evidenced by the women in verse 4 and Peter in verse 12.

Why would Luke make these redactions? What is his hidden agenda? Why does Luke alone speak of "sinful men" in relation to the passion narrative (24:7)? Similarly, why is he the only one to include "be crucified?" His structure provides the only insight into his rationale for including these words.

Luke distinctly uses an inversion in this narrative, which accounts for at least a part of his redaction. His skill as a wordsmith is evident in the way he carefully weaves the drama through synonyms and parallel ideas. His structure has avoided detection in this passage partly because his inverted parallelism was missed when modern chapter divisions were defined. He used at least two different, discernible patterns.

The first begins with 23:50 and goes to 24:3.

(50) Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, (51) who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea and he was waiting for the kingdom of God.

- A. (52) Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body.
- B. (53) Then he took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid.
- C. (54) It was Preparation Day, and the Sabbath was about to begin.
- D. (53) The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it.
- E. (56) Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment.
- D' (1) On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, [they went to the tomb]⁸
- C' the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb.
- B' (2) They found the stone rolled away from the tomb,
- A' (3) but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus.⁹

Verses 50 and 51 serve as a historical introduction to the main thrust of the chiasm. Both 23:52 and 24:3 refer to the body of Jesus. In the former, Joseph is seen going before Pilate to inquire regarding the body. In the latter, "the women" enter the tomb, looking for the body.

Verse 53 tells of a body being placed in a tomb cut in the rock, while 24:2 describes that a stone has been rolled away from the tomb. Why was the detail of the tomb being cut into the rock included? Perhaps to match the stone?

Verse 54 tells us that it was the Day of Preparation. In 24:1b we find the women taking with them the spices they had prepared. Clearly, in this passage, preparation is one of Luke's major themes.

Verse 55 reveals a trip by Joseph and the women to the tomb. 24:1a records a return trip by the women. Verse 56a shows us that the women went home and worked preparing spices, while verse 56b has them resting on the Sabbath.

This is an interesting place for the chiasm to intersect, for it is at a point which is clearly Lucan. Devout Jewish women are the center of Luke's burial/resurrection record. Not the tomb, not Joseph, not the disciples, but devout, Jesus-following, God-fearing, Jewish women. Luke's major themes can be demonstrated as follows:

- A. Body of Jesus
- B. Tomb in the rock
- C. Preparation
- D. They went to the tomb
- E. Preparation and Sabbath rest
- D' They went to the tomb
- C' Preparation
- B' Stone at the tomb
- A' Body of Jesus

The second inversion begins in 24:4 and concludes in verse 12. Note that verse 12 provides the outer frame for the whole inversion pattern. It seems unreasonable that a later editor could have added it with such sublime precision.

- A. (4) While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them.
- B. (5) In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground,
 - C. but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? (6) He is not here; he has risen!
 - D. Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee:
 - E. (7) 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.' "
 - D' (8) Then they remembered his words.
- C' (9) When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others.
 - 1. (10) It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles.
 - 2. (11) But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.
- B' (12) Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Stooping down, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, A' wondering to himself what had happened.

Verse 4 reports that the women were wondering about the angels, while verse 12b shows Peter wondering about the empty tomb. Verse 5a describes the women bowing their faces to the ground, looking down. Verse 12a gives us a glimpse of Peter bowing down to look inside the empty tomb. Verses 5b and 6a record part of the message of the two angelic men, while verses 9-11 report the message the women gave.

Luke expanded the story at this point to give a short — but meaningful — digression. In verse 10, the believing women are listed and then contrasted with the unbelieving apostles in verse 11. He was careful to record both the first people to witness the resurrection and those who were first to refuse its veracity! Perhaps the listing of the mother of James was designed to underscore the importance of the devout Jewish women, who were the theme of the previous inversion.

Verse 6b encourages the women to remember the words spoken to them in Galilee and verse 8 reports they did just that. "They remembered!"

Verse 7 is the apex of the story. It is the basic kerygma of the gospel message, perhaps presented in its early catechetical form: A sinless man is crucified by sinful men. Only Luke records this truth. To him it was the essential truth about the resurrection and as such was reported at the center of the resurrection story.

Many have argued that the focus of the Lucan narrative is on what has been called the *praeconium paschale*: “He is not here, but has been raised.”¹⁰ While other gospel writers may peak with this idea, the structure we have outlined here would argue against it as the central point for Luke. His themes might be outlined as follows:

- A. Wondering
- B. Bowed down
- C. Men speak
- D. Remember
- E. Catechetical prophecy
- D’ Remember
- C’ Women speak
 - 1. Believing women
 - 2. Unbelieving men
- B’ Stooping down
- A’ Wondering

Once we have identified the structure Luke used we can clearly see that verse 12 stands easily in its context. Furthermore, Walther has shown that the Emmaus Road story is built around an inversion as well.¹¹ Hence we have three chiasms placed back to back with incredible artistry and skill. As we study Luke, we should never be surprised by the discovery of another well camouflaged inversion.

Some have suggested that Luke was dependent on John because of the number of similarities to his account, as well as several Lucan shifts in vocabulary that are difficult to explain. However, in light of his apparent skill with a variety of writing forms, it is conceivable that Luke’s change in vocabulary was by design. An examination of the Greek text would show that many of his structural themes were managed through the use of synonyms. Therefore, it is just as reasonable, to argue for a common source rather than dependence on the other writer’s work.

As a follower of Christ, Luke was secure in his beliefs, even in the midst of doubt that was all around him. Those who had lived and walked with Jesus even, could not at first accept the idea of the resurrected Christ. Yet, Luke had searched all things well and his conclusions were that Jesus Christ had “been delivered into the hands of sinful men,” was “crucified, and on the third day” he was “raised again.” The Lucan distinctives cannot be ignored.

When the angel announced John the Baptist’s birth, Elizabeth believed and Zechariah didn’t. When the angels announced the resurrection, the women believed and the disciples didn’t. Luke’s message is clear: Women and angels . . . when they speak, it’s time to listen!

END NOTES

¹K.P.G. Curtis, "Luke 24:12 and John 20:3-10," *Journal of Theological Studies* 22 (1971) 515.

²Frans Neirynk, "John and the Synoptics: the empty tomb stories (relationship between Jn 20:1-18; Mt 28:9-10; Lk 24:12)," *New Testament Studies* 30 (1984) 164.

³Kenneth R. Wolfe, "The chiasmic structure of Luke-Acts and some implications for worship," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 22 (1980) 62ff.

⁴Wolfe, 62.

⁵Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*. Combined Edition (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983) 74-75.

⁶Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke, Volumes 1 and 2, The Anchor Bible*. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1981-1985) 1541.

⁷The words of Jesus in Galilee are found in Luke 9:22 and 44. However, they are a general recollection and not an exact quote. It's form here may be an early catechetical formula.

⁸In the Greek text, travel to the tomb comes prior to the repetition of the "preparation of spices." It is bracketed here to show the balance found in the Greek text. We have not removed it from its place in the NIV and can be found repeated in its proper place in what we have called "C'."

⁹Scripture, throughout this work, is quoted from the New International Version.

¹⁰Fitzmyer, 1542.

¹¹O. Kenneth Walther, "A solemn one way trip becomes a joyous round-trip! A study of the structure of Luke 24:13-35," *Ashland Theological Journal* 14 (1981) 60-67.

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