

**Postcolonial Reflections on Reading Luke-Acts from  
Cabo San Lucas and Other Places**

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Reading Luke-Acts in my study, in Bothell, Washington, looking east

Of all the documents in the New Testament, the two-volume work we call Luke-Acts seems most amenable to postcolonial interpretation.<sup>1</sup> Motifs of travel, numerous geographical references, diasporic and ethnic concerns, and issues of empire, mimicry, and hybridity, are central concerns of many postcolonial critics, and are vividly represented in Luke-Acts. Furthermore, these topics have played important roles in Christian Europe's missionizing, colonizing strategies of the past. In contemporary scholarly debates the battle continues to rage over the question of whether Luke-Acts is largely sympathetic to Roman imperial power and elite society or opposed to them.

The thesis of this essay will be that like many a "subaltern" living under imperial rule, the two-volume work reflects conflicting perspectives that are introduced in the first four chapters of Luke. Many times the author/narrator and "his" characters positively mimic the behavior of their Roman overlords. But at other times there is a powerful rejection of its imperial ethos. Likewise (Lukewise?) commentaries—even postcolonial ones—can easily end up replicating the totalizing power and authority of the very colonial empires they have dismantled, by being written in a rhetorical mode that silences

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<sup>1</sup> Some parts of this essay appeared in an earlier form in "Narrative Structure (Self-Stricture) in Luke 4:14-9:62: The United States of Luke's Story World" *Semeia* 72 (1995) 173-213.

conversation and dialogue. In light of this latter concern, I have chosen to write this essay from a variety of places and with alternating voices with the hope that readers will feel free to insert their voices into the postcolonial dialogue over these texts.

### Reading Luke-Acts in Cabo San Lucas, Baja Mexico

I have decided to take Luke-Acts along with me on my family's summer vacation, and I am reading it now, in the fierce desert landscape of Baja California. My family and I have flown nearly two thousand miles south from the rainy, overcast skies of the Pacific Northwest, to bask for a week in the June sun at San Jose del Cabo. We got suckered into one of those condo deals—"We'll give you a free week in Cabo—all you have to do is pay for your flight down there, and listen to a one hour sale's presentation. . . ."

Thanks to airline frequent flyer miles racked up by attending professional meetings with other biblical scholars, we only have to pay for two full-fare tickets. My youngest child and I fly free. My wife and I are taking advantage of the system, we think. We do not plan on buying a condo or a time-share. We carefully rehearsed our "nos" all the way down here, and we plan on keeping our noses out everyone else's business deals.

At home we had been telling people that we were going to Cabo San Lucas. But that is not really true. We are much closer to San Jose than to San Lucas. And there is an important difference between the two. San Jose—or Saint Joseph in English, is just two miles north of where we are staying. Guidebooks say that it is a colonial Spanish outpost, founded by eighteenth century Roman Catholic priests. San Lucas—or Saint Luke, is ten miles southwest of us, and is a neo-colonial town. Nothing was there fifty years ago except a quiet harbor for deep sea fishing boats, and a big rock with a hole in it. But now,

with the advent of cheap airline flights and air conditioning, Cabo has become a destination desert resort for sun-and-surf-starved North Americans like us.

If I could change the language buzzing around my ears and the flora and fauna I see just beyond the edge of the swimming pool where I am lounging, I could be at Eilat, Israel or somewhere on the edge of the Judean wilderness with Luke's John, "preparing the way of the Lord." But I cannot change the geography, and so I put on my sunglasses, dip my toes in the lukewarm pool, and prepare to read the Third Gospel.

Reading from the big "Rez"—mapping the plot of Luke-Acts

The place where I grew up was not too much different than Eilat, Israel, the Judean wilderness, or the arid land around Cabo San Lucas where I am now lounging, thinking about reading the Third Gospel. My childhood was formed largely by the geography of the southwestern United States, where I was raised in a high desert region known as the "Four Corners." There is, however, no such thing as the Four Corners, even though a U. S. National Monument bears that name. At least with Cabo San Lucas, there was a landmark—that giant of a rock poking its head out of the roiling waters of the Gulf of California a few miles down the beach from where I am now reading. But with the Four Corners there isn't even an observable landmark. It is a place of pure geometry, a place invented by the colonialist dreams of United States presidents, government surveyors, and creative cartographers. It is a typographical construct on a map, not a topographical constant.

The first time I visited the Four Corners—the spot near the San Juan River where the states of Utah, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico meet—was much different from this, my first visit to the tip of Baja California. I was young then, and I had to beg my

parents to turn off the newly finished highway bisecting the Navajo Reservation and drive up a six mile, unmarked dirt trail from Teec Nos Pos Trading Post. I was forced to endure my parents' stony "I told you so" looks as I stared at the four-inch square, one-foot high concrete post and asked incredulously, "Is that all there is to it?"

I toured the town of Cabo San Lucas yesterday and repeated the same words I said at the Four Corners forty years ago: "Is that all there is to it?" Like the Four Corners, Cabo San Lucas is also the invention of colonialist dreams—or better put, it is a neocolonialist nightmare—with its "Planet Hollywood," outlet stores, and every other hybrid fast food and hotel chain that North Americans desire when traveling.

A few years ago my children and I visited my childhood home on the Navajo Reservation. On the way to the place where I grew up, we stopped at the Four Corners. I was surprised to find that this time I had to slow down for a tollbooth a short distance from the monument. The Navajo Nation was charging each tourist a tithe of \$1.50 to enter the sacred bilagháana (white man's) site. As we approached the ceremonial grounds I saw a large, three-tiered plaza emblazoned with the insignias of the four hallowed states, and above the plaza a scaffold rose like a postcolonial prayer in an azure sky. Faithful pilgrims quietly lined up below that rood-loft, waiting their turn to take a sacramental photograph of family members straddling all four states. On the perimeter of the plaza Indians in sticky Denver Bronco tee-shirts hawked native foods and crafts. A Navajo woman I met at one of the craft stalls told me the tribe was thinking of building a motel and RV campground at the shrine overlooking the San Juan River. Planet Hollywood can't be far behind.

Like those hot and sweaty pilgrims queued at the Four Corners a few years ago—or like those of us passing quietly through customs at the airport in Baja California a few days ago—I feel that I have lived my life in lines marked on the shifting sands of literary theory and biblical criticism. And I continually am trying to balance on the political borders of these oft-times contradictory worlds. So it should come as no surprise that as I open Luke-Acts at poolside in Cabo San Lucas and begin to plod through it, I find myself making lines in the margins of the text. I am now dividing the story into nine major narrative states (four for Luke and five for Acts); divisions that inadvertently mimic the colonialist cartography of my childhood on the big Rez.

These nine states, as the Lukan prologue rather obliquely puts it, are directly related to “those events that have been fulfilled among us” (1:1; cf. Acts 3:18; 13:32; 15:13-15); or as Jesus later says (quoting Isaiah 61:1-2), they are related to the proclamation of “the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:9). The “fulfillment of events” is repeatedly connected to a “salvation” (liberation, rescue, restoration, jubliation—pick your favorite word) that is present in Jesus’s words and deeds (Luke 2:30; 24:19, 21; Acts 1:6); a “salvation” that spreads topsy-turvy from Jerusalem to the “ends of the earth” (Acts 1:9). In the first book, Luke 4:14, 10:1, and 20:1 mark major turning points within this general plot movement, as Jesus faces rejection and moves toward his martyrdom in Jerusalem. In the second book, however, Acts 8:4, 15:36, 21:1, and 27:1 mark major shifts in this plot movement, with Jerusalem functioning centripetally against the centrifuge of Paul’s ever expanding Gentile mission.

The four plot sequences in the Gospel of Luke roughly correspond to the geographic movements of Jesus. The introductory sequence centers upon events related

to the births of Jesus and John, and these men's initial public appearances in Judea (Luke 1:5-4:13). The second sequence centers upon Jesus's Galilean ministry (Luke 4.14-9.62). After Jesus reaches adulthood and has proven his divine parentage in a test with the devil (Luke 4:1-13), this section focuses upon Jesus's growing reputation and activity as a prophet, and the increasing opposition to him. There is also an important progressive development in Jesus's Galilean ministry—a particular “order” (“kathexses,” Luke 1:3) that moves from city to countryside, synagogue to house, from Jew to Gentile, and ultimately, from Jerusalem to Rome. I think this order is constructed largely to parallel the author's conception of Paul's missionary activity in Acts, where hybrid characters like the Ethiopian eunuch, Timothy, and Lydia inhabit the borders of transgressed geographic and ethnic boundaries.

The third narrative sequence in the Gospel of Luke is the well known, highly artificial “travel section” (like my artificial travel vacation in Baja California), where Jesus purposely journeys toward Jerusalem and death (Luke 10:1-19:48; see especially 9:51; 13:33-35; 18:31-33). Finally, the fourth sequence centers on Jesus's Jerusalem ministry with his subsequent arrest, trial, death, and resurrection (Luke 20:1-24:53). Me? I'm here in Cabo San Lucas, looking for a little rest and resurrection, without all that other negative stuff.

After a brief prologue that echoes Luke 1:1-4, the book of Acts falls into five general plot/geographical sequences. The first sequence focuses on how the apostles and their associates announce God's Christ to and in Israel (Acts 1:6-8:3). The second sequence is clearly transitional, for the bearers of the message of God's imperial reign (euangelizomai, Acts 8:4,12, 25, 35, 40) travel beyond the boundaries of Israel, going as

far west as Pisidian Antioch and coming in contact with a wide range of hybrid characters (Acts 8:4-15:35). In the third sequence, Paul journeys into Macedonia and Achaia where he has increasing contact with Roman officials and power (15:36-20:38). In the fourth sequence Paul journeys back to Jerusalem and Judea, defending his message before Jewish and Roman officials (Acts 21:1-26:32). Finally, the fifth geographic sequence of Acts confirms Paul as the primary witness to God's promised universal "salvation" as he travels the dangerous, watery road to the imperial city of Rome where he defends his message (Acts 27:1-28:31). A lot of traveling for a man without any frequent flier miles.

Like the Navajo Nation's ironic, postcolonial manipulation of the Four Corners National Monument, or the neo-colonial Mexican destination resort of Cabo San Lucas, the plot progression of Luke-Acts can be seen as one of (ironic?) colonial mimicry and triumphalism. In Acts, Paul, the diaspora Jew, mimics Roman imperial power when he appeals, as a Roman citizen, to its courts of justice. Similarly, Jesus, the apostles, and Paul, having been rejected by their Jewish forebears, turn around and "conquer" the pagan Roman empire with their "euanggelizesthai" (good news—a verb that occurs twenty-five times in Luke-Acts and is drenched in the ideology of empire). In many ways, the Western church has been a living testament to Luke-Acts's double-pronged, colonialist ideology. But the geographical movement from Jerusalem to Rome with its strategy of colonialist mimicry can also be construed differently in this two-volume work—as perhaps part of a larger tragic plot that God (fantastically) uses for some positive end (Acts 28:25-28). I wonder, lazily, whether Cabo San Lucas can be saved from Planet Hollywood. Or if the craft stalls at the Four Corners, overlooking the San Juan River, can overcome the world.

Reading Luke-Acts in my study in Bothell, Washington, looking east—

literary mimicry and heteroglossia in Luke 1:1-4

From the commentaries lining my refurbished desk in Bothell, Washington, I have learned that the elevated Greek of the Lukan prologue has fascinated biblical scholars for over a hundred years. In this single complex sentence, the author-narrator seems consciously to emulate the prefaces of ancient Greek historiographers such as Diodorus and Dionysius of Halicarnassus. But as soon as the preface is done, the narrative style abruptly changes. For the next two chapters the narrator will mimic the Semitic syntax and vocabulary of the Septuagint. The style changes so dramatically that many commentators have argued the author must have borrowed heavily from a collection of Maccabean hymns in Hebrew, or an Aramaic account of Jesus's birth. However, since the same Septuagint style also dominates the first five chapters of Acts, it is more likely that the author is simply an adept storyteller, one who is able to mimic a variety of narrative styles with ease.

From a postcolonial perspective, the radical juxtapositioning of literary styles reminds one of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia,<sup>2</sup> where two different dialects create a narrative dialogue and decenter the narrative's power centers. Here in Luke-Acts, the double-voicing may initially seem to connote a narrator who is seeking to legitimate his account by utilizing the literary codes of the colonizer. The elegant style of the prologue, coupled with the evocation of the patron, Theophilus (whether he is a real person or a fictive character is hotly debated) adds a further note of legitimacy to the subsequent narrative. Regardless of where the narrator's sympathies lie (is he pro-empire or anti-empire?), he is able to move about in elite society and mimic the voice and tone of

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<sup>2</sup> Simon Dentith, Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader (New York: Routledge, 1995) 195-224.

colonial powers. Like Esther, he seems adept at passing.<sup>3</sup> That is, he can so mimic the colonizer that he can “pass” as the colonized when he want to. When it suits his fancy.

#### “Nativism” in Luke 1:5-4:13

According to John Oliver Perry, “nativism” can be defined as a militant, aggressive assertion of one’s native cultural heritage. As a literary movement, it aspires to counterbalance the homogenizing cultural effects of colonialism,<sup>4</sup> and thus has a share in the multivocal world of postcolonialism. Luke 1:5-4:13, the first major plot sequence of the Gospel, could be described as nativist under this definition since it focuses on the Jerusalem temple with its ancient priestly purity codes, incorporates songs that recall the glory days of Israel’s Davidic monarchy (Luke 1:51-55, 68-73), and mimics a Septuagintal narrative style (e.g. “in those days,” “righteous before God,” “answering, said”). All this in the face of the homogenizing power of Roman imperialism (Luke 2:1; 3:1), and in a text written most likely no more that ten to fifteen years after Roman legions had destroyed the Jewish temple and decimated the traditional land of Israel.

But after a general prologue (1:1-4) the story proper begins—and what a proper story it is. The plot sequence is set off from what follows in 4:14ff in two important ways. First, there is a geographical change between Luke 1:5-4:13 and 4:14ff. Almost all of the action in 1:5-4:13 takes place in Jerusalem or Judea (1:26-38 is the only exception), the center of Jewish temple politics and economics. By way of contrast, all the stories of 4:14-18:35 take place outside of Judea and away from the temple. Secondly, although Jesus will become the main character in the Gospel, he is only a passive

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Maldonado, *SBL* Annual Meeting, Toronto, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> John Oliver Perry, “World Literature in Review: India” *World Literature Today* Summer 1998 ([http://www.britannica.com/magazine/article?content\\_id=73095&query=brahman](http://www.britannica.com/magazine/article?content_id=73095&query=brahman)).

character at the beginning—even when he is clearly the focus of attention (2:41-52; 3:21-4.13). However, in 4:14ff Jesus’s public activity begins to be the focus of attention, as he becomes an active participant in fulfilling his divine purpose.

In the opening narrative sequence, Jesus is the subject of nativist songs and prophecies, the object of his parents’ frantic three-day search, the person baptized, the beginning point of a genealogy, and the person “led by the Spirit, tested by the devil.” His only original lines in the entire opening sequence are the two questions he asks of his parents in 2:49, and in 4:4-13 he simply quotes Scripture in a defensive posturing with the devil. In this opening sequence, minor characters like the angel Gabriel, old righteous Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon, and Anna; and a young Mary and John are much more active participants in the plotted events than is Jesus.

This opening sequence falls into three carefully plotted segments, each of which is composed of two finely paralleled sub-units. These sub-units are the appearances by an angel of the Lord 1:5-56; a series of fulfillments related to John’s and Jesus’s births (1:57-2:52); and a second series of fulfillments that confirm John as a prophet and Jesus as God’s son (3:1-4:13). Ironically, imperial power functions as the background against which these nativist fulfillments take place. For example, a Roman taxation is the circumstance that gets Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, and John the Baptist has tax collectors and soldiers in his audience as he preaches repentance beside the Jordan.

Just prior to Jesus’s decision to go to Jerusalem (9:51), the reader will find a cluster of scenes similar to those encountered toward the end of this first major plot sequence. Prayer (3:21; 9:18, 28), the disclosing of divine status (3:22; 9:20, 35), and the

multiplication of loaves (4:3-5; 9:12-17) will all reappear, as if to confirm the proximity of a new turn in the narrative's plot.

Unique to Luke-Acts among the four gospels is the special attention given over to the ancient Jewish temple and the royal city of Jerusalem as the proper center of God's renewed activity on behalf of Israel. Corresponding to this, the Gospel's opening scene overdetermines nativist purity and honor codes in a number of ways. It does so by describing Zechariah and Elizabeth's proper pedigree (priestly order of Abijah, descendant of Aaron); their moral status (righteous before God); the highly significant ritual time and action (incense offering); and a most holy place in Judaism (inside the temple, near the altar of incense). The role of the Jewish temple is accented further by the fact that Mary and Joseph bring the baby Jesus to Jerusalem for "their" purification (2:22), and by the family's subsequent journey to Jerusalem when Jesus is twelve (2:42-52). Thus, the hybrid characters and distant lands that appear later in Acts (e.g. the Ethiopian eunuch, the Samaritans, the Greek-fathered Timothy, and assorted Gentile God-fearers) will stand in bold contrast to the nativist, priestly characters Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John who begin the story. Do the characters and lands in Acts function as a critique of the nativist claims that open the two-volume work, or do they simply present the reader with an alternative, minority voice? Paul's closing words to the Jews living in Rome appear to answer this question unequivocally: "Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God ("soterion tou theou," cf. Luke 2:30; 3:6) has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen" (Acts 28:28).

### Reading Luke-Acts in Cabo San Lucas, Baja Mexico

I tip the Mexican waiter at poolside for bringing me another drink without my asking. I turn a page in Luke's Gospel, shade my eyes from the bright sun, and wonder absentmindedly where the waiter learned his impeccable English, and where he goes at night, when his work at our resort is through.

This resort near Cabo San Lucas is built in the style of a seventeenth century Spanish mission—faux adobe bell tower and all. And even though I have never spent any time in a real Catholic mission, I know that missions are not resorts. No matter how hard I try to imagine that I am somewhere else, I am reading Luke-Acts at a US-owned resort in Mexico, not at a Catholic mission on the imperial Spanish frontier; nor at the Four Corners on the Navajo Reservation. I am not at a freedom fighters' fortress in the Judean desert; or at the Jerusalem temple with Simeon and Anna; and I am not with John, who baptizes soldiers, tax collectors, and a hodge-podge of representatives of imperial rule in the Jordan River.

The sign above the resort swimming pool reads "Life has its Rewards." But this is not a reference to rewards beyond this world. There are none of the "desert's indifference"; none of its "lowered expectations" here in Cabo.<sup>5</sup> People flee to the tip of Baja California to get away from the self-imposed hardness and harshness of the work-a-day world. They come here to unwind in the sun, like mummified monks discovered by unsuspecting Egyptian dirt farmers. "Life has its Rewards." Unlike the fierce landscapes of the Judean wilderness that John inhabits, Cabo San Lucas offers a "private therapeutic place for solace and rejuvenation."<sup>6</sup> "Life has its Rewards." Here, what you see is what

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<sup>5</sup> Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 227.

<sup>6</sup> Lane, 165.

you get . . . right here, right now—if you have stored up enough stuff in your barns to last awhile (Luke 12:13-21; cf. 3:17) and don't have to worry about a snoopy apostle discovering your secret financial transactions (Acts 5:1-11; cf. Luke 3:13).

Reading in my study, in Bothell, Washington, looking east—

the genealogy of Jesus, Luke 3:23-38

Unlike the Matthean genealogy of Jesus, Luke's rendering of Jesus's pedigree is pure and undefiled. It runs backwards from Jesus, to David, Judah, Jacob, and Abraham, and finally to Adam who is "son of God." There are no women's names in this list, no outsiders, no worrisome borderland characters (cf. Mat 1:2-17).

While colonialism is founded upon the principles of radical difference and unequal power relations, postcolonialism speaks to the hybrid realism of imperial power. And thus Luke's genealogy mimics the very colonial power it challenges elsewhere (cf. 2:10-11; Acts 4:12). Here there is no genetic creolization marking the borders of Jesus's prophetic career. In Luke-Acts, the border between Jesus's childhood and public life is marked by a genealogical perfection that will not appear again until Jesus's apostles seek the ideal replacement for the traitor, Judas (Acts 1:15-26). So why the perfection of pedigreed borders here? Why should the author care so much about Jesus's ancestral purity when the baptizer's God can turn desert stones into children of Abraham (Luke 3:8), or when Gentiles can participate in the new community apart from certain purity taboos (Acts 10:1-48; 15:1-22)? Ultimately, the test of God's perfect son (Luke 4:1-13) appears as an unnecessary footnote to his pristine parentage; a pandering to the very imperial hero stories that are destabilized elsewhere by Jesus's crucifixion and Paul's imprisonments.

### Reading Luke-Acts in Cabo San Lucas, Baja Mexico

This resort makes no sense. Or should I say, the sense that it makes is a farcical exaggeration of Luke's "passing" interest. The social and economic gains from passing can be enormous. Take my creolized children, for example. Half Chinese, half yer basic English-Swedish-Scotch-mongrel European-American. They pass for Chinese, most of the time—or here in Cabo, they could pass as Mexican. But if they were living in San Francisco at the beginning of the twentieth century, as their great grandmother was, I know they would more likely pass as Cacusian. Jesus, in Luke's rendering, passes as an upper class Jew—born in a "polis," he can read, is known in king's courts, has wealthy patrons, and frequents banquets where he tells entertaining stories about big money (15:1-2, 16:1-13; 19:1-27). Passing can be made easier by creolization, or cultural hybridity, or in Jesus's case, by hiring Luke the spin-doctor.

Unlike Luke's desert locales where only Jesus, God, and the devil are present (1:80; 3:2-4; 4:1-13, 42; 5:16; 9:12), Cabo San Lucas passes itself off as a desert place. But there is nothing here of the stark, Zen-like emptiness of the Judean wilderness, or the bizarre perpendicular angularity of the American Southwest where I grew up. This is a resort that exists solely for the sun. It turns burnt stone into thick-crust panier. Mud into chocolát. "Life has its Rewards."

There is an ocean beach nearby, forty feet from the resort property. But hardly anyone goes there to explore its sensuous curves. The waves are crunchers, and the beach slopes down steeply toward them; the physical evidence of fierce undertows and demonic baptisms. Only the local Mexican peddlers venture out on to the blazing beach sand and pass near the water, ambling from resort to resort selling their colorful wares just beyond

the roped-off border signs that warn, “No unauthorized sales on the premises.” Step across the line and someone is sure to be strung up. Trespassers. Dead meat.

Reasonable pilgrims like me lounge at poolside; or, barely moving, sip margaritas at the swim-up bar. The pool is cruciform-shaped, and the bar is at one end of its transept. At the opposite end of the transept is a spirit-stirred jacuzzi. The faithful can swim leisurely from one sacrament to the other: Holy Communion at one end, baptism at the other. No deadly crunchers here, no demand for “fruits worthy of repentance” (3:8)—unless you count the cool slices of mangoes and tart, ripe pineapples that are brought to us at poolside. Here, anyone can “Take up their cross daily, and doggie-paddle after me,” says the San Lucas Jesus (9:23). And if you want to learn to fish, you can learn that, too (5:1-11). Deep-sea fishing boats can be chartered by the half-day for about fifty dollars a person. Catches are almost guaranteed.

Reading in my study, in Bothell, Washington, looking east—

Jesus’s first of three imperial proclamations and the plot of Luke 4:14-9:62

Luke’s second narrative sequence (4:14-9:62) can be divided into three segments that are distinguished from the preceding sequence by the ways in which it develops Jesus’s prophetic activity in new directions. Jesus’s inaugural proclamation in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-30) mimics the grand imperial edicts of Rome (Luke 2:1; Acts 16:7), ancient Babylon (Dan 2:13; 3:10), and Persia (Est 4:8; 9:1; Dan 6:8-10); and generates three narrative sequences (Luke 4:14-6:11; 6:12-7:50; 8:1-9:62), each of which also begins by mimicking imperial proclamations. The first of the three proclamations (4:16-30) is most like an imperial edict, since Jesus begins by reading from a written document and then interprets it for his audience. It is also a purely Lukan construction. The second

proclamation (6:20-49) is formed from Q material, and the third (8:4-21) is a shortened version of Mark 4. But neither of these latter two proclamations by Jesus begins with Jesus reading a text (cf. Acts 15:22-33). Has he forgotten how to read? Or is he just less tied to his notes as he becomes more comfortable with working the crowds (9:12-17)?

The three proclamations and their introductory frames (4:14-15; 6:12-19; 8:1-3) summarize early plot developments by describing Jesus's ever-expanding spheres of influence and by introducing new emphases in his activity. A similar programmatic strategy structures the early part of Acts, where a series of narrative summaries describe the geographic expansion of the early Christian communities (Acts 2:43-47; 8:1b-8; 11:19-26). There, however, the mimicry of imperial power is more obvious since the expansion takes place on a grand territorial scale, not just in terms of movements from city to countryside as here in Luke.

By tracing the ways in which the "imperial edicts" of Jesus bear immediate fruit in his powerful deeds, one can see how they are interconnected with the powerful deeds that follow them. These interconnections allow the author's ideology to function covertly, working to convince the reader that Jesus is truly "a prophet mighty in deed and word," a divinely chosen emissary who has the authority to announce God's imperial rule (Luke 24:19, 21; Acts 2:22; 13:24-26). However, the opening proclamations in Acts function differently. There, only one powerful deed follows a proclamation (Acts 3:1-10), and there—as elsewhere—Jesus's name itself becomes the good news; a powerful agent of healing and the source of provocation (cf. Acts 3:6; 4:7; 5:28, 40; 8:12).

Say the name "Homi K. Bhabha" or "Gayatri C. Spivak" and it will get you into high places around the University district of Seattle. But it won't help in Cabo San

Lucas. Just before we left the resort, I passed our maid in the hall. I thought she had a subaltern look about her, so I tried asking her if she had read Homi or Gayatri. She looked at me peculiarly, and asked me what kind of guitar I had left at home. Did I want to buy another? I thanked her for her help, gave her a big tip, and hurried on down the fall.

“Adios, Baja.”

Status mimicry, “passing,” and Jesus as a literary character in Luke 4:16-30

Mimicking the grand style of imperial emissaries, Jesus and I have returned to our “cities” (“polis”) of Nazareth and Bothell, Washington where we are well-known (Luke 4:16, 22; cf. 1:26; 2:4, 39, 51), after having defeated our desert demons (4:1-13).

Curiously, the word “polis” seems to function more as a rhetorical term in the narrative world of Luke-Acts than as a specific historical reference. Sort of like Bothell, Washington, the Four Corners, and Cabo San Lucas in this essay.

The apostle Paul, for example, is from Tarsus, “an important city” (Acts 21:39), and so Jesus, a much more important person than Paul, becomes a city person in the prequel to Acts. Bethlehem and Nazareth are also cities in Luke, apparently because Jesus is from them. Likewise, Bethsaida, Capernaum, Chorazin, and Nain are cities primarily because Jesus visits them (just as Paul visits cities [e.g. Acts 13:50; 14:19]). Cabo, the Four Corners, and Bothell are not particularly important cities on the map of the world. But because I have been in all three places, they have become for me symbols of empire and neocolonial displacement; places of politically intertwined interdependency.

Jesus's public activity begins in a "city" with a public speech in a synagogue. And so Paul and I, later followers of Jesus, will mimic Jesus's prophetic actions by beginning our own emissary-like activity—Paul, in the synagogues of Asia's cities, near his own native territory (Acts 13:14-44; 14:1); and I in Pacific Northwest regional SBL meetings. But unlike Jesus or Paul, no one has chased me out of a professional meeting for something I have read or said. Thankfully, prophets of postcolonialism are still accepted in their hometowns. I think most biblical scholars hope we are just a passing fancy, and believe that if they don't object too strenuously to anything we say, we will quietly leave town under our own power.

Of all the four gospels, only Luke portrays Jesus as able to read. Only Luke refuses to call Jesus a carpenter or the son of a carpenter. He is a full-time prophet and emissary of God's imperial rule. Not an adjunct, part-time professor like me. Coupled with Jesus's status of being "city born and bred," he seems to mimic the social position of Luke's implied audience. Like second generation immigrants today (for example, my Chinese-American wife's father) who assimilate and try to "pass" in the dominant colonial or neocolonial culture, Luke's Jesus is a model for upper class, late first century Christians. Like me, Luke's audience can read and write, and may even be patrons or patronesses (cf. Luke 1:1-4; 8:1-3; Act 1:1); like me, they have the means to care for the poor (Luke 11:39-41; 12:13-21; 14:13, 21; 16:19-26; 18:22-30; 19:8; 21:1-5; Acts 3:1-6; 6:1; 9:36; 16:14; 19:23-27; 20:33-35); and like me, they encourage women to serve with grace and decorum in the patriarchal structures of their Christian communities (Luke 4:38-39; 8:47; 10:38-42; 21:1-5; 23:55-13; Acts 1:14; 9:36; 11:13-15; 16:14; 21:9), biding their time ("kairos," Luke 21:8, 24, 36; Acts 1:7; 3:20).

After reading Isaiah 61:1-2 (Luke 4:18-19), Jesus and I roll up our scrolls, hand them back to the subalterns, and sit down. We look at each other, waiting for the other to speak. Then we both blurt out, “Let the postcolonial displacement begin! He yells, “Salmaaaaaan Rushdieeeeeeee!” I shriek, “Sheeeerrrrman Aleeeeeeexie!” And both of us hightail it out of town.

### Conclusion

While there is much I like about Luke’s retelling of the Jesus story, the more I read it, the more I am conflicted by its own confictions. Today, I am not so sure that Luke-Acts is particularly good news for a postcolonial or neocolonial world. For my tastes, there is in it too much staged mimicry, too much unreflected passing, and too much fawning to forms of imperialism. Too little space is left open for serious postcolonial critique. It is not without reason that Luke-Acts became the model for imperial mission movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Nevertheless, I believe that reading Luke-Acts from multiple places—social, political, economic, and geographical—can open up spaces for postcolonial and neocolonial conversation. But the challenge for the postcolonial and neocolonial New Testament critic will be to find dialogue partners within Luke-Acts and without, in the broader diasporic Christian community, who will challenge and undermine Luke-Acts’ imperial passing. Perhaps my reading from Cabo San Lucas, from the Four Corners overlooking the San Juan River, and from my study in Bothell, Washington can be an impetus to that undermining venture.