

## **“That’ll Preach”: Rhetorical Features in Lukan Parables for Their Oral Performance**

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This paper argues that the author of Luke’s Gospel wrote not only to engage readers of his text but also the audience who would primarily hear the Gospel read to them. After noting how this was done by the author when composing speeches in Acts, I then explore indications in the Lukan parable of the builder (Luke 6:46-49) and parable of the great banquet (Luke 14:15-24) for evidence that these texts were composed for delivery to a predominately illiterate audience who likely anticipated rhetorical features that would aid hearing the text. Readers of these parables today often miss the creative ways that Luke provides for his audience material designed for performative speeches. Paying closer attention to the indebtedness Luke had to common, basic rhetorical strategies allows contemporary readers of Lukan parables to have ears to hear a tradition intended to be preached.

Keywords: Gospel of Luke, parable of the builder, parable of the great banquet, ancient orality, ancient rhetorical composition

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### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Jesus preached. By that I mean that Jesus was an oral performer. The Gospel traditions point to Jesus as someone known for his preaching (Mark 1:14, 38-39) and teaching (Mark 1:21-22; 2:13). But how did Jesus’ own oral performances come to be re-performed orally?

Nowhere is Jesus remembered as a scribe. There is a tradition in Matthew’s Gospel where Jesus commends a scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 13:52), but there is not a sound in the Gospels of Jesus writing down his own teaching or telling his disciples to do so. He expects them to remember his deeds (Mark 8:18//Matt. 16:9) and put into practice what he has taught (Matt. 28:19–20). In Luke’s Gospel, disciples are even portrayed as remembering his prophecy regarding his death and resurrection after encountering the risen Jesus (Luke 24:6–7). But the gospels are quiet

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is gratefully submitted in recognition of the lasting example and ministry of Lynn McMillon, who is not only a serious reader of Scripture but an eloquent proclaimer of it. It has been an honor to be his colleague and observe how, for many years, he has impressed upon his students and others the beauty and transformative power of God’s Word.

about Jesus instructing his disciples on how to preserve or perform for others his teachings, stories, and deeds.

Possibly, Jesus had no intention of doing so because he anticipated the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God and preserving his teachings for future generations would be unnecessary. Or, Jesus simply expected that his disciples would pass on his teachings through their own inventive oral performances. Regardless, there are no instructions on how they were exactly to go about repeating or performing what he taught. And yet, in the days following Jesus' ascension, the earliest disciples made some decision about how they would keep alive for others the impactful words of the resurrected Messiah and Lord.

Nothing in the gospels supports the conjecture that Jesus was literate enough that he wrote down his own teachings and expected his disciples to copy them and pass them on for future disciples to read. Jesus' literacy is currently an issue of considerable debate. It has been estimated that less than 10 percent of ancient peoples had the ability to read, and the majority of those who were literate belonged to the elites.<sup>2</sup> Since Jesus was an agrarian carpenter, it seems doubtful that he would have had any imposing need to read or write. In the Lucan version of Jesus' rejection in Nazareth (4:16–30), Luke states that the βιβλίον of Isaiah was given to him, and he found the place where Isaiah 61:1 was written (v. 17). This suggests a rudimentary-level ability to recognize a Hebrew text of Scripture and locate a portion of Scripture to recite. Curiously, Luke does not explicitly state “Jesus read what was written,” only that “he stood up to read” (ἀνέστη ἀναγνῶναι), insinuating, nevertheless, that was his purpose. However, since the Lucan text has several Lucan motifs in it, it is likely that Luke's audience is presented with Luke's portrait of Jesus' ability to read. Even if Luke is preserving an actual episode of Jesus “reading” from Isaiah, it should not be assumed that having the ability to “read” a text one might have learned/memorized from the oral performances of others is evidence that the reader could also write.

All the gospels attest to Jesus' frequent engagement in scribal debates on the correct interpretation of Torah.<sup>3</sup> These debates, some have contended, insinuate that Jesus must have been able to read Torah. But those arguing for a literate Jesus have not shown that an illiterate person would have been incapable of learning the words of Torah from oral performances, memorizing those words, and recalling them in debates with those who had read them. What if the scribes Jesus debated knew that written texts existed primarily as an aid for the oral transmission of their content and that others can

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Draper, “Jesus' ‘Covenantal Discourse’ on the Plain (Luke 6:12–7:17) as Oral Performance,” in *Oral Performance, Popular Tradition, and Hidden Transcript in Q*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 73.

<sup>3</sup> In John 7:15, Jewish authorities are amazed by Jesus' teaching and ask, Πῶς οὗτος γράμματα οἶδεν μὴ μεμαθηκώς; (“How does this one know letters not having studied?”). While to “know letters” could certainly imply that the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem are recognizing that Jesus could read, this observation does not lead to the conclusion that they believed Jesus was literate to the degree that he could also write.

acquire knowledge of Scripture without ever having read them and are nevertheless received to debate their interpretation? Maybe their culture was similar to that of the early Greeks. If so, John Achtemeier has noted, “Writing itself in the earliest Greek period served simply as a reminder of oral pronouncements and even much later was still mistrusted as a vehicle for the transmission of cultural tradition.”<sup>4</sup> Additionally, Acts states Peter, James, and John were recognized as “unlettered” (ἀγράμματοί) who could surprisingly argue confidently on the basis of Psalm 118:22 that Jesus was the Messiah before rulers, elders, scribes, and members of the high-priestly family, many of whom were able to read (Acts 4:5–13). If they could argue before those men what they saw as the correct interpretation of the psalm, why isn’t it likely that Jesus too could argue with scribes about the correct interpretation of the law and still be “unlettered”?

It is certainly possible that Jesus had followers who could read and write and that they subsequently wrote down from memory what they heard Jesus say shortly after he preached to them. After all, if Matthew was a tax-collector, wouldn’t he have the ability to write what he heard? But even this scenario should not be adopted uncritically. Maybe the literary skills needed by a tax-collector were limited to what is only required for the collection of taxes. The scenario of any follower of Jesus writing down his words soon after hearing them is certainly not unimaginable; but again, the lack of any reference to those who followed Jesus engaging in such activity raises doubts.

What more likely transpired is that Jesus’ oral performances were re-performed orally by those who had memorized them.<sup>5</sup> The reason this scenario is more plausible is because Jesus lived in what some have called “a culture of high residual orality.”<sup>6</sup> The early disciples’ experiences within this culture would have resulted in keeping traditions stable but also allowing for variety in subsequent performances so that new hearers can hear the message. James Dunn has remarked that “the concept of *performance* allows a directness, even an immediacy of interaction, with a living theme and core even when variously embroidered in various retellings.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, when examining a tradition for its “performability” (that is, those features that a performer will utilize to aid in the listeners’ ability to engage and remember the tradition), it is necessary to identify not only which words or ideas likely originated with Jesus’ performance but also which features (words, structures, nuances, patterns, etc.) were provided to “embroider” or embellish the tradition so that it can play anew in a different context.<sup>8</sup> If it is true that the oral

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<sup>4</sup> John Achtemeier, “*Omne Verbum Sonat*: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity,” *JBL* 109, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 9–10.

<sup>5</sup> James Dunn remarks that the oral retelling of the Jesus tradition is what has been ignored in attempts to discover original Jesus material via form criticism and its confidence to be able to identify “layers” of earlier, more authentic material in the gospels. See James Dunn, *Christianity in the Making, Volume 1: Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 248.

<sup>6</sup> Achtemeier, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Dunn, 249.

<sup>8</sup> Dunn claims that the method of investigating the traditions of Jesus in the Gospels as “performances” encourages scholars to “see and hear the Synoptic tradition as the repertoire of the early

environment prioritized the oral performances to the extent that no writing occurred which was not also vocalized,<sup>9</sup> then what might be detectable in the written traditions are those attempts by the authors to guide readers in their oral performance of that tradition. In other words, what can be explored is not only how a tradition was redacted by a specific author but how the text's oral performance was shaped.

To illustrate what this investigation into features that aid in the oral performance of Jesus' tradition would look like, I will identify how two parables of Jesus in Luke's Gospel (the two builders and the great banquet) reflect such embroidering. But before I identify those particular features in these two specific examples, I want to briefly sketch what I see as the author's general rhetorical sophistication.

"Luke,"<sup>10</sup> as has been noted frequently, was rhetorically informed or trained at some level and used his knowledge of Greek rhetoric<sup>11</sup> in the construction of his two-volume work.<sup>12</sup> I say "at some level" because Luke does not appear to have received an advanced level of rhetorical training. Advanced rhetoricians Quintilian (*Inst.* 2.1.2–3) and Suetonius (*De Gramm.* 4) point to a frequent practice of teaching preliminary rhetorical exercises to younger students even before they entered the more primary rhetorical schools. Strabo even claimed that his grammar teacher taught him rhetoric (*Geog.* 14.1.48). What this evidence cautions is that one should not assume on the basis of some rhetorical features in his Gospel and Acts that Luke had advanced levels of rhetorical training. He may have only been exposed to some basic rhetorical skills (*chreia*, maxims,

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churches when they recalled the Jesus who had called their first leaders and predecessors to discipleship and celebrated again the powerful impact of his life and teaching" (Dunn, 249).

<sup>9</sup> Achtemeier, 15.

<sup>10</sup> I will use "Luke" to refer to the author or narrator of the originally anonymous narratives, the Gospel and Acts, without claiming that he is the "beloved physician" mentioned or referred to in Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11; and Philem. 24. For those who favor Lucan authorship for the two volumes, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 2–3; Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 21; Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 58–60. Bovon questions the traditional ascription of Luke-Acts to the "Luke" in Pauline epistles; see Francois Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 8–10. O'Neill argued for an early second-century date for Luke-Acts (thus rejecting Lucan authorship) because of its similarities to the theology, historiography, and style of Justin's *Dialogue*; see J. C. O'Neill, *The Theology of Acts in its Historical Setting* (London: SPCK, 1961), 1–28.

<sup>11</sup> For a general introduction to the rhetorical training received by Romans, see E. P. Parks, *The Roman Rhetorical Schools as a Preparation for the Courts under the Early Empire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1945).

<sup>12</sup> For a recent treatment on the level of rhetorical education Luke possibly had based on his use of the progymnastic handbooks, especially Luke's use of διήγησις and *synkrisis* (i.e., *comparison*), see Sean A. Adams, "Luke and *Progymnasmata*: Rhetorical Handbooks, Rhetorical Sophistication and Genre Selection," in *Ancient Education and Early Christianity*, ed. Matthew Ryan Hauge and Andrew W. Pitts, Library of New Testament Studies (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2016), 137–54.

fables and narrative, problems, paraphrases, addresses, and character sketches) at a secondary level.<sup>13</sup>

If, as it seems at a minimum, Luke was exposed to the basic rhetorical feature of the “fable” (the Greek *μῦθος*), what would he have been instructed to do with them? Maybe he learned, as Aelius Theon taught, that a fable is a “fictitious story giving an image of truth.”<sup>14</sup> Maybe he learned, as some rhetoricians taught, that the “fable” or *mythos* is particularly useful in the integration into larger literary compositions because of its malleability.<sup>15</sup> Maybe his grammar teacher taught him, as others taught their young students, by having them hear, recite, and write fables.<sup>16</sup> For one teacher, Aesop’s fables were assigned to students to paraphrase so that students could learn to write with simplicity and restrained language.<sup>17</sup> A rhetorical feature that was taught and is evidenced in the Matthean and Lucan parables is the conclusion of the fable/mythos with the *ἐπιμύθιον* — a summarizing commentary or moral.<sup>18</sup> What Luke likely learned was that the *meshalim* of Jesus were similar (but not identical) to the fables/myths he was taught to paraphrase and re-perform (both literarily and orally) for rhetorical effectiveness.

When it came time for Luke to write down Jesus’ parables, he would have known that nearly all believers first heard the gospel before ever reading about it. Even though a number of believers belonged to the elites and probably had various levels of education in rhetoric, the greatest number of Christians were “non-literate.” And yet for both literate and non-literate believers, the story about Jesus was primarily going to be experienced through an oral performance. Ancient authors wrote for oral performances. As Jonathan Draper notes, while observing the interaction between oral and written traditions, “Even in ‘literate’ societies in the ancient world, texts were largely performed aloud and received orally, rather than read individually in silence.”<sup>19</sup> Ben Witherington also observed that “the rhetorical school focused on both prose composition and elocution, and this in turn led to a concern about the *aural* dimensions of one’s prose.”<sup>20</sup> What this means is that it is unlikely that Luke wrote so his text would be quietly read. He would have been fully

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<sup>13</sup> For future evidence of rhetorical training occurring at earlier stages of education, see Adams, 140–41; T. Morgan, *Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds*, Cambridge Classical Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1998), 123; R. F. Hock and E. N. O’Neil, eds., *The Chreia and Ancient Rhetoric: Classroom Exercises*, Writings from the Greco-Roman World 2 (Atlanta: SBL, 2002), 5–49.

<sup>14</sup> George A. Kennedy, *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric*, Writings from the Greco-Roman World 10 (Atlanta: SBL, 2003), 23.

<sup>15</sup> Demetrius, *Eloc.* 3.157.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew Ryan Hauge, “Fabulous Parables: The Storytelling Tradition in the Synoptic Gospels,” in *Ancient Education and Early Christianity*, ed. Matthew Ryan Hauge and Andrew W. Pitts, Library of New Testament Studies (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2016), 101.

<sup>17</sup> Quintilian, *Inst.* 1.9.1.

<sup>18</sup> Matt. 18:32–33, 20:13–15, 25:12, 26–28; Luke 12:20, 13:8–9, 15:31–32, 16:30, 18:4–5.

<sup>19</sup> Draper, 73.

<sup>20</sup> Witherington, 52 (footnote 190).

aware as he composed his two volumes that some believers will “preach” (i.e., orally perform) his work.

**“Sermons”/Oral Performances in Acts are  
Arranged for Rhetorical Effectiveness**

A pioneer in the field of biblical rhetorical criticism was George Kennedy. In his book *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*, he demonstrates how Luke’s construction of speeches, sermons, and prayers in Acts parallel the practices of other ancient rhetors to illustrate Luke’s rhetorical knowledge.<sup>21</sup> Since the publication of that work, not a few commenters of Acts have agreed that Luke has shaped the oral performances of characters so that their speeches follow some basic rhetorical structuring techniques. Recently, in his rhetorical commentary on Acts, Witherington remarks, “It is no accident that Luke’s rhetorical skills are more in evidence in the preface and speeches than elsewhere in Luke-Acts.”<sup>22</sup>

Among ancient historians there was a range of judgments about how much the historian could shape the content of a character’s speech so that it reflected rhetorical features. Some historians felt freer than others to create or mold speeches for their characters that demonstrated rhetorical abilities. Other historians were more prone to represent a character’s speech as faithful to their sources without any embellishment for rhetorical effectiveness. Concluding her survey of the interaction between historiography and rhetoric, Helen F. North finishes by stating that “there were two essential elements in the ancient concept of history: fidelity to truth and perfection of style—*narratio* and *exornatio*.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, a faithful historian is not only responsible for representing the “facts” but for presenting the facts in ways that persuade audiences towards proper thought and behavior. There appears to be something akin to a “sliding scale” among those writing history. On one end of the spectrum, there is Cratippus who demanded *veritas* over *verisimilitudo*. There is also Polybius, who taught that while historians certainly attempt to teach and persuade, they can only do that if they select and arrange that which actually happened or was actually said.<sup>24</sup> On the other end of this spectrum, there is Livy, who allowed rhetorical concerns to dominate. After the time of Thucydides, there were even some who forbade the verbatim production of speeches if they impair the historian’s rhetorical style.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill, NC: North Carolina Press, 1984).

<sup>22</sup> Witherington, 44.

<sup>23</sup> H. F. North, “Rhetoric and Historiography,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 42 (1956): 242. Quoted by Witherington, 41.

<sup>24</sup> Polybius, *Hist.* 2.56.1–13. Quoted by Witherington, 42.

<sup>25</sup> North, 239.

Identifying Luke's position along this spectrum is a challenge. Some see him as a historian more like Polybius<sup>26</sup> while others contend that Luke was more inventive with the speeches. Since a "history" would generally be a story "heard" by an audience (and in most cases these audiences would have been educated in many aspects of rhetorical education), authors gave considerable attention to the aural impression their work would have.<sup>27</sup> It seems reasonable to see Luke doing the same. Whether or not Luke has invented any of the speeches, the texts as they now are have been crafted to be heard.

If Luke crafted sermons/speeches in Acts for rhetorical effectiveness, did he do the same things with speeches or parts thereof that Jesus delivered? Is there evidence for this crafting in the most popular of Jesus' oral performances, namely his parables? Were Jesus' parables shaped by Luke to contain rhetorical features that would make them more effective when performed orally?

Two parables that I will examine both come from the double-tradition: the two builders (Luke 6:46–49//Matthew 7:24–27) and the great banquet (Luke 14:15–24//Matthew 22:1–10).<sup>28</sup> The advantage of examining Lucan parables that also appear in Matthew is that the redactional/compositional features are more obvious.

### **“Preaching” the Parable of the Two Builders (Luke 6:46–49)**

In both Matthew and Luke's Gospels, this is the first narrative parable Jesus delivers.<sup>29</sup> Both Gospels locate the parable at the conclusion of the sermon on the mountain/level place. The presence of the parable at the end of a sermon fits a pattern that can be found in hortatory material (especially farewell addresses) where listeners are urged to take obedient action.<sup>30</sup> In the Lucan version, Jesus introduces the parable by stating “I will show you” (ὑποδείξω ὑμῖν) what a person is like who acknowledges Jesus as “Lord” but does not follow his instructions. Frequently in Hellenistic ethical instructions, an example follows a set of teachings to illustrate the importance of the speaker's instructions.<sup>31</sup> Rhetorically, this parable is in the form of a “synchrisis,” since it juxtaposes two similar yet different experiences.<sup>32</sup>

The few differences in the narrative between the Lucan and Matthean versions are not substantial. Unlike the situation envisioned in the Matthean version, where the

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<sup>26</sup> Witherington, 43.

<sup>27</sup> Witherington, 41.

<sup>28</sup> For the arguments that Matthew's marriage banquet and Luke's great feast originate from the same source, see John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus: Volume Five, Probing the Authenticity of the Parables* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 253–78.

<sup>29</sup> In Luke 6:39, the saying “Can a blind man lead a blind man?” is introduced as a *parabolē*.

<sup>30</sup> Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 332, who points to examples in Deut. 30:1–20; Josh. 24:14–24; *1 Enoch* 108; *Testament of Moses* 12:10–13.

<sup>31</sup> Green, 281.

<sup>32</sup> Snodgrass, 327.

building occurs at two different locations (the first upon rock and the second upon sand), in Luke's version the contrast is made between two builders in the same location, but the first builder was one "who dug down deep" (ὃς ἔσκαψεν καὶ ἐβάθυνεν) while the second one foolishly built his house on the ground. Also, Matthew's version has a tri-fold action of the moment of testing: "rain fell," "floods came," and "the winds blew and beat upon the house," while in Luke there is no mention of rain falling or winds blowing. Finally, while Matthew and Luke both describe the fall of the second house as "great," Luke additionally notes that the house fell immediately.

While the differences in the basic narrative are not significant, Luke has embroidered the parable in two ways to enhance its oral performance so that it can be more easily remembered. First, Luke has included the parable in an aurally balanced unit (6:39–49). Draper has argued that in the entire discourse of Luke 6:12–7:17, there are several balanced structural features which point to its composition for ritual oral performance.<sup>33</sup> In particular, he focuses on the presence of alliteration and assonance, couplets and triplets, and rhythm, which all point to the sound balance in the text that functions for their oral performance and memorization. I will not repeat here how Draper shows the entire text follows these patterns, which he sees as necessary in order to capture the concept of "covenant renewal" as its theme. While there are merits to Draper's reconstruction of the unit, Joanna Dewey's critique is probably on target: it is more difficult to see the entire framework remembered from an oral experience than simply verses 20–49.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, instead of laying out how Luke has structured for rhetorical purposes the entirety of 6:20–49, I will focus only on those mnemonic features serving an oral performance that are present in verses 39–49.

The *inclusio* of "falling" frames this unit which takes up the theme of foolish behavior represented in three parables. In the first parable, Jesus asks if a blind man can lead another blind man safely. The obvious answer is "no" since they both "fall" (ἐμπεσοῦνται) into a pit (v. 39). Jesus is insinuating that to think that the blind can lead the blind safely would be foolishness. The second parable notes that no one is so foolish as to think that trees they know to be in good health will produce inedible fruit, nor that those trees they know to be in poor health produce edible fruit. Like the first parable, the audience easily accepts and visually "sees" clearly what the foolish actions are. At the end of the third parable, a house builder builds with no solid foundation and when a river

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<sup>33</sup> Draper, 86ff. Draper's contention that balance structures in texts indicate an intended oral performance (*geste*) is dependent upon the work of Marcel Jousse, *The Anthropology of Geste and Rhythm: Studies in the Anthropological Laws of Human Expression and Their Application in the Galilean Oral Style Tradition*, ed. and trans. by E. Sienaert and J. Conolly (Durban: Centre for Oral Studies, University of Natal, 1997) [originally *L'Anthropologie du Geste*, 1931–50] and *The Oral Style*, trans. E. Sienaert and R. Whitaker (New York: Garland, 1990) [originally *Le Style oral rythmique et mnémotechnique chez les verbo-moteurs*, 1925].

<sup>34</sup> Joanna Dewey, "Response to Kelber, Horsley, and Draper," in *Oral Performance, Popular Tradition, and Hidden Transcript in Q*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 103.

beats against it, it immediately falls in a devastating way.<sup>35</sup> Again, the insinuation is that everyone can recognize that the second builder has acted foolishly without ever having to label him as a fool.

Between the *inclusios*, Luke brings together three parabolic teachings. The first is metonymically represented with seeing (vs. 39 and 41–42), with a tradition inserted in the middle about the relationship between teacher and disciple (v. 40). This structuring helps to equate sight with knowledgeable teachers and blindness with teachers lacking the necessary insight or knowledge. The second piece of tradition is metonymically represented with fruit-bearing trees (vs. 43–45). Again, the metaphor highlights the importance of identifying the correct kind of teacher. This time, instead of inspecting whether they have insight or not, they are to examine the behavior they produce in their own lives. An evil teacher behaves according to his own evil while the good teacher is able to draw from “the good treasure of his heart” to behave in ways that demonstrate he should be followed. Luke’s audience should look at the behaviors of those who would teach them. If their actions are not those expected of a person loyal to Jesus, their teaching should be rejected. The third piece of tradition is metonymically represented in the parable of two types of builders (vs. 47–49) that is introduced with a question: Why address Jesus as “Lord, Lord” but disobey him (v. 46)? Luke has brought these traditions together to form a simple unit that employs clear metonyms of visually outlandish behavior so that when it is performed orally, the audience will be able to hear, recall the images, and quickly agree.

A second feature I would briefly point out is the alliteration that the Lucan version has included in verse 48: ὅς ἔσκαψεν καὶ ἐβάθυνεν καὶ ἔθηκεν (“who dug and went deep and laid”). Alliteration is a well-known rhetorical device that when employed aids the audience’s hearing and recalling of the oral performance. Luke has added this feature to the parable so that when it is performed the hearer will be aurally influenced to remember the actions of the wise builder.

### **“Preaching” the Parable of the Great Banquet (Luke 14:15–24)**

Luke has Jesus delivering the parable of the great banquet on a Sabbath when Jesus is again dining at a Pharisee’s home.<sup>36</sup> This setting will be familiar territory for Luke’s audience. The last meal at a Pharisee’s home provided an opportunity for Jesus to deride Pharisees for their hypocrisy (11:37–44) and lawyers for binding heavy burdens they do not help others to bear and for killing those God sends to Israel to teach them (11:45–52). Jesus uses biting criticism to ridicule their duplicity. The first time Jesus is invited to dine at a Pharisee’s home, a woman who is a “sinner” washes and anoints his

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<sup>35</sup> Draper, 90.

<sup>36</sup> Luke uses the expression *τινος τῶν ἀρχόντων φαρισαίων* (v. 1), which could mean a certain ruler who was a Pharisee, but more likely means a certain ruler over Pharisees or one who is a “prominent Pharisee” (NIV).

feet (7:36–38). After his host Simon says to himself that Jesus cannot be a prophet and allow such a woman to touch him, Jesus quizzes him with a parable about two debtors (7:39–43). The irony is obvious: if Simon thinks a prophet should know what each person is really like, Jesus will show Simon he knows what Simon is like. While immediately prior to this third dining occasion some Pharisees appear to be concerned for Jesus' safety (13:31), the majority of the time in Luke, Jesus' conversations with Pharisees are moments of irony and ridicule. This episode will prove to be no different.

The larger rhetorical unit is of course the travel narrative (9:51–19:27), where Jesus explains the nature of discipleship as he is headed to give himself into the hands of the powerful in Jerusalem. The more immediate rhetorical unit is most likely verses 1–35 for three reasons. First, it is a section that begins with a confrontation with a Pharisee before the next unit, where he confronts them again (15:1–32). Second, it is a balanced contrast between teachings to the Pharisees (vs. 1–24) and teachings to the great multitudes who might consider following him (vs. 25–35), which is a pattern that can be found in Luke. Third, the unit ends with the *exordium*: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (v. 35b).

The parable itself is framed with the familiar feature of the *inclusio* that remarks about eating bread in the kingdom of God (v. 15) and in “my banquet” (v. 24). The parable's basic meaning is not as obvious as what some commentators believe it is once they have allegorized the text.<sup>37</sup> I do not see anything in the parable that would indicate Jesus is telling his host and guests that they might think they will eat bread in the kingdom of God but will not. Nor is there any indication in the text that Jesus' host or others were offended by the parable. The Pharisees themselves could have easily shouted a hearty “Amen” at the conclusion, for they, too, would have believed that some Israelites will not eat in God's kingdom, because they were making excuses for why they were not doing what is necessary to enter in. But even if the parable's primary message is elusive, there are rhetorical features which would not have escaped the ear of those who heard it performed.

What many commentators note is that the three excuses that are offered by those who will not attend the banquet after they had already been invited (v. 17a) are also the same excuses that are given for why a man may need to delay military service. But what few scholars have observed is the humor that is utilized, particularly in the way the third excuse is structured.<sup>38</sup> As Bruce Longenecker has noted, Luke has so structured the

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<sup>37</sup> Willard Swartley stresses the salvation-historical, theological, and eschatological significance of the parable's meaning. Reading it allegorically, Jesus is the host who graciously invites others to join him now in preparation for the messianic feast in the age to come. Willard Swartley, “Unexpected Banquet People (Luke 14:16–24): The Parable of the Great Feast,” in *Jesus and His Parables: Interpreting the Parables of Jesus Today*, ed. V. George Shillington (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 187.

<sup>38</sup> Those who have noted the humor in the excuses that are given are H. Palmer, “Just Married, Cannot Come,” *NovT* 18 (1976): 248; Bruce Longenecker, “A Humorous Jesus? Orality, Structure and Characterization in Luke 14:15–24, and Beyond,” *Biblical Interpretation* 16 (2008): 186–89.

delivery of the three excuses so that when it is orally performed, there will be a silence that is rhetorically charged for the audience.<sup>39</sup>

The primary structure of this parable is a “3+1” pattern.<sup>40</sup> This is a familiar pattern in oral story-telling and in Jesus’ parables (Mark 4:3–8, 13–20; Matt. 13:3–8; Luke 8:4–8, 11–15). In the plot of the parable, a man needs to have attendees for his banquet. Three different rejections impede the plot’s resolution until a fourth remedy is pursued. The humor occurs within this pattern when it utilizes a “moment of knowing silence.”<sup>41</sup>

Note that in the parable with the first two invitees there is an identical structure and a similar phrase included in their response. First, the situation is described: bought a field, bought five oxen. Second, an explanation is given: I need to “see it,” I’m going to “test them.” Third, a request to be excused: “I pray you have me excused.” But when the audience hears the third invitee, a change takes place in the tri-fold structure. The situation is described (i.e., “I have married a woman”) and the invitation is rejected (“I cannot come”), but no explanation is given. The audience is required to fill in what is missing in the pattern. The third invitee will have to “see” or “test” her. What Luke has provided for the hearer is a sexual innuendo (though seen as sexist today), which if delivered with a “pregnant pause” would have allowed the humor to be heard. Since nothing of this third invitees’ scenario occurs in the Matthean version of the parable (Gospel of Thomas 64 mentions the marriage but has no pattern for the sexual innuendo), it is more likely that this feature is part of Luke’s effort again to reshape a parable for its rhetorical effectiveness.

### Conclusion

Luke (as most ancient writers did) wrote for the ears. When he composed his texts, he was not oblivious to the likelihood of his text being orally performed. If that is indeed the environment in which he wrote, there should be evidence of composition of texts for their delivery to a predominately illiterate audience who would have anticipated rhetorical features to aid in the hearing of a text. In two parables of Jesus, this fashioning of a tradition for its oral performance can be detected. When we literate people read parables, we are inclined to miss the creative ways authors provided for their communities material for performative speeches. Paying closer attention to the indebtedness Luke had to common, basic rhetorical strategies allows the reader of parables to have ears to hear a tradition intended to be preached.

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<sup>39</sup> Longenecker, 184.

<sup>40</sup> Sometimes a parable’s plot will have a “2+1” pattern (e.g., the parables of the Samaritan and the talents).

<sup>41</sup> Longenecker, 184.

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