

**Luke the Evangelizer: Identifying Luke's Themes in the
Emmaus Story (Luke 24:13-35)
An Exercise in Narrative Criticism**

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This essay will analyze Luke's "Appearance on the Road to Emmaus" story in 24:13-35 using the narrative critical method. It will also identify what motifs in this story correspond to the overall themes found in the gospel of Luke. The presence of these themes and the positioning of the story suggest, to me, that this story is a climax for the whole gospel of Luke, as read by the implied reader. The essay will suggest that the identified themes contain important messages, which the implied author wants to pass on to the implied readers in order to evangelize them, to set their hearts on fire, to elicit commitment from them as Jesus' followers, and to strengthen them on the journey. It will also share my own experiences with the Emmaus story.

Narrative criticism is a subset of literary criticism and a fairly new method of critical exegetical research, although some concepts of that method had been used in non-biblical literature studies for a while.¹ It attempts to study narrative sections of the bible by focusing directly on the text as a finished literary work, without trying to dissect it into layers of different sources, without focusing on the real author or the real community it was addressed to. Some knowledge of the social and historical circumstances might be necessary to the extent the narrative assumes that from the reader.² The focus of the method, however, is on the text itself "as communicating the message that the (implied) author would convey to the (implied) reader."³ The end goal of narrative criticism is really to discover the meaning of the message that the implied author wants to convey.⁴

¹ Mark Allan Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* (Guides to Biblical Scholarship, New Testament Series; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 1.

² Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?*, 86.

³ Jack Dean Kingsbury, ed., *Gospel Interpretation: Narrative-Critical & Social-Scientific Approaches* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997) 1.

⁴ Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?*, 29.

When talking about narrative criticism, Mark Allan Powell states that “every story encompasses three elements: events, characters and settings.”⁵ Those elements interact with and affect each other, and therefore it is sometimes difficult to separate them completely. The next several paragraphs will talk about those elements. In our story, the characters are two of the apostles, one of whom is named Cleopas, and Jesus. The setting for the events is the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus, a village located seven miles away. Most of the story happens on the road, with the climax occurring in the village itself. We are told, by the way of connection with the previous pericope, that the events are taking place on the same day that the women went to anoint the body of Jesus, but returned to the apostles claiming they had a vision of angels who announced that Jesus was alive. The apostles did not believe them, however, and the story begins with two of them walking on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus and talking about what had happened.

While they are debating the events, Jesus catches up with them and joins them on the journey, but the narrator tells us “...their eyes were prevented from recognizing him” (Luke 24:16).⁶ The use of situational irony in the next scene builds up the suspense in the story, since the reader is aware of a fact which is not known to the main characters.⁷ Jesus pretends he does not know what happened in Jerusalem, and they lay out the story for him, unaware of the fact that they are telling Jesus about Jesus. From what they say, it is evident that they feel disappointed by the final outcome of the exciting events. They were expecting that the great prophet would save Israel, but he was crucified instead. On top of that, they are confused by the account of the women about the missing body.

⁵ Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?*, 35.

⁶ Donald Senior, ed., *The Catholic Study Bible (NAB)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁷ Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?*, 30.

Jesus, still a stranger to them, reprimands their foolishness and their inability to interpret the scriptures that supposedly predicted a suffering Messiah.

Up to that point the story is narrated in real time, meaning that the discourse time and story time are approximately equal. The narrator then switches to a summary form when he states that Jesus interpreted to them all the scriptures as they pertained to him, but we are not given any specific examples. Here the discourse time is very brief, just one sentence, while the actual explanation must have taken a major part of their journey. We are then told that they approached the village, and Jesus acted as if he was going to continue his trip farther. The disciples, however, urge him to stay with them, and he agrees. When they recline at the table, Jesus changes from a guest to a host by blessing the bread, breaking it, and sharing it with them. Then, “their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight” (24:31). The suspense finally comes to a climax in their recognition of Jesus. This recognition causes them to reflect on what had happened on the road. They recall that their hearts were burning within them as they were listening to Jesus breaking open the real meaning of the scriptures for them. This experience is so moving for them that they decide to return to Jerusalem at once, despite the late hour, so they can share the news with the others. When they arrive to give their testimony, they find out that Jesus has also appeared to Simon.

The Emmaus story is one of the most vivid and breathtaking events in the overall narrative of Luke’s gospel. It is not only beautifully told, but it also describes one of the most important events: the first appearance of the resurrected Son of God. We can definitely call it a kernel story, since it literally turns things around and changes the flow of events. The two downcast apostles are changed into witnesses who turn around and

run back to share their joy and the good news. Since they made it back to Jerusalem the same day, despite the late hour, they had to be returning at a much faster pace than when they were going to the village. Because of the way the story is told, this excitement spills over from the apostles to the implied reader who shares the joy and can easily identify with them after making this long journey of discovery towards the end of Luke's gospel.

The main characters of the story, the two apostles, are not easily identifiable. One of them is named Cleopas, but that name does not appear anywhere else in Luke's gospel. The other one is completely anonymous. We can only guess that they might be somehow related, or know each other very well, since they entered the same house in the village, to which house they have invited Jesus, so it may have been their own dwelling. They are not part of the twelve, or at this point really eleven, closest apostles of Jesus, since at the end of the story they return to the eleven to share the good news with them. Perhaps the implied author made them anonymous on purpose, while at the same time identifying them as Jesus' apostles, "...two of them..." (24:13), or followers from a wider circle. They stand for the followers of Jesus in general and this makes it easier for the implied reader to identify with them.

The two witnesses of Jesus' appearance have recognized their master in the blessing, breaking, and sharing of the bread. These gestures must have been familiar to them. Where did they see them before? Since they were not part of the twelve, they were probably not present at the Last Supper (22:19), and could not have witnessed it there. They might have observed it during the Feeding of the Five Thousand (9:16) or during Jesus' other meals if it was his practice to do those gestures more often. But, then again, if the implied writer has composed his Emmaus story so that the implied readers

can identify with the two, we have in fact been already exposed to those familiar gestures of Jesus, including the account of the Last Supper. The implied readers were possibly also familiar with these rituals from their own community's Eucharistic practices. In any case, the story clearly suggests that the two disciples were familiar with these gestures and identified them directly with Jesus, and that is really all that matters in our narrative criticism.

We learn about the main characters first from the narrator who describes them as conversing and debating about all that happened, while they are walking towards their destination. This first glimpse already makes them similar to the implied reader, although the reader might not be conscious of this. Are we not all on a journey towards our destination, and are we not all conversing and debating with others or with ourselves about all that happens around us, about the ultimate meaning of our lives? Then, we learn about their outlook on the "ultimate" by listening to their conversation with Jesus, although he appears to be just a stranger to them. They share their feelings of excitement and disappointment, followed by their total confusion over the story of the women and the missing body. They cannot make sense out of all that happened on their journey of following Jesus, on their journey of life. Is not that something that the implied reader is going to identify with, and for that matter all of us?

Jesus, the stranger, responds by opening up the Jewish scriptures for them, by making them realize that the answers to their dilemma were always right there in front of them, in all their sacred tradition that they had access to, all that time. Their eyes of faith, however, were blinded, because they were looking at it all as humans do, not as God does. The implied reader might again easily identify with the two, and the reader's heart

might be burning within as they approach the destination. It seems from the story that this is what the implied author is aiming for, and he succeeds.

What does the author expect from the reader? What kind of response does he anticipate from the reader? If we have established so far that Cleopas and his companion stand not only for the wider circle of Jesus' followers, but also for each and every implied reader of the story, then obviously the reader is supposed to react in exactly the same way that the two main characters did. Once the reader recognizes that Jesus is present in his/her life through the presence of many strangers that journey with him/her, the reader is supposed to run back with joy to the community of believers to share this great discovery with them, and be a witness of Christ's real presence among all who believe in him. The next set of directions, for the community of disciples, will come in Acts of the Apostles. For now, the implied reader of the Emmaus story is expected to be joyful, not gloomy or confused, and ready to share his/her personal "appearance" story.

We have concentrated almost exclusively on the disciples as the main characters in the story, characters with whom the reader identifies. Of course Jesus was all along present in the story and in our analysis. We could say that he appears and intervenes in the story, because the two disciples, all Jesus' followers and the readers do not really understand it yet. They are looking and judging using only human standards. Jesus, the stranger, represents God's point of view in the story, and he comes to reveal the real truth to them, the way that God sees things. Once he succeeds in accomplishing that mission, he disappears.

Several motifs present in the Emmaus story correspond to themes present in other parts of Luke's overall gospel narrative, as well as in the Acts of the Apostles. We can

notice them when we step out of our featured story, and look at the themes of Luke-Acts. B. P. Robinson identifies four such themes that are common to Emmaus and Luke-Acts.⁸ He lists them as: Journey, Fulfillment of Prophecy, Recognition, and Hospitality. For our purpose of looking at the two disciples as representing the implied readers, I would suggest just three themes: Journey, Scriptures/Tradition, and Hospitality. What Robinson calls the “Recognition” theme, for me is really a subset of both Hospitality and Scriptures/Tradition theme.

The first theme, which is probably most obvious to everyone, is the motif of a “Journey,” since most of the action in our story occurs “on the way.” The whole gospel of Luke is happening while on a journey. At first, it is Mary, the mother of Jesus, that is on the road to visit Elizabeth. Then, Mary and Joseph go to Bethlehem, where Jesus is born, to Jerusalem for the presentation in the temple, back home to Nazareth in Galilee, and back to the temple when Jesus is 12. Jesus’ ministry starts first as a trek around Galilee, and then transforms in 9:51 to one long journey towards his final destination of Jerusalem. Jesus is determined to go there, even though he anticipates what his fate will be when he gets there. In the second part of Luke’s writings, the Acts of the Apostles, Paul, the main protagonist, is also constantly on the road to or from Jerusalem, around various communities in his mission to the gentiles, and then on his final journey through Jerusalem to Rome, where he as well anticipates the same fate as Jesus did, and just as in the case of Jesus it does not stop him. What is common about those journeys of Jesus and Paul is that the main characters are always going where the spirit of God is leading them. Our two apostles from the Emmaus story, with whom the implied reader strongly identifies, are at first feeling lost and confused, so they journey back home, in a way

⁸ Bernard P. Robinson, “The Place of the Emmaus Story in Luke-Acts,” *NTS* # 30 (1984) 481-497.

abandoning their original mission. Once the Spirit manifests its presence, however, through the appearance of resurrected Christ, they regain their sense of the mission and rejoin their community of Jesus' followers. We can assume from the story that the implied author wants the reader also to join the community of the followers with joy and a sense of a newfound mission. He probably envisions every Christian as walking on his/her journey of faith with the sense of purpose and determination, being guided by the Spirit, just like Jesus and Paul were.

The second theme, called "Scriptures/Tradition," is just a little more inclusive for me than what Robinson calls "Fulfillment of Prophecy." The Jewish Scriptures are very present in Luke's gospel and the Acts. Luke often quotes from them to indicate a fulfillment of prophecy, like for example in 3:4-6 when he claims that John the Baptist is preaching in the spirit of Isaiah 40:3-5, or in 4:18-19 that shows Jesus as fulfilling another Isaiah prophecy, or in 24:25-27 of our story when Jesus points to the prophets and "all the scriptures" as explaining about the true messiah. Although Luke in fact concentrates most of all on the prophets and shows Jesus himself more often than other evangelists as a mighty prophet, Luke also uses the Jewish scriptures in a little wider context. They are, as well, a source of wisdom, guidance, and revelation, a source of sacred Jewish tradition that one can lean on for support to interpret the current events. Luke leans on the psalms, for example, when he describes Jesus' entry into Jerusalem in 19:38 or when Jesus talks to the scribes about David in 20:42. It is in this context of prophetic and rich overall scriptural tradition that the implied reader can interpret Jesus' reference to the scriptures in our story. It seems that the implied author conveys a message to the disciples, and all implied readers, that they should lean on the sacred

tradition at times of despair to find the words of wisdom and consolation in the scriptures. He seems to suggest that if the main characters of our story did that, they would not be so gloomy walking towards Emmaus, and perhaps it would have been a little easier for them to recognize Jesus in the stranger.

The last theme of “Hospitality” is very important in our story, in Luke’s writings and in all Jewish traditions. Starting with Abraham, his and Lot’s visitors in Genesis chapter 18, the virtue of hospitality was always admired and promoted by the Jewish culture. It was really often a matter of life or death in an era when hotels, motels, or fast transportation were not present, and travelers relied heavily on someone else’s hospitality for their very survival in often-hostile territories. For the Jews, meals were also very important. It mattered how the food was prepared, what they ate, and with whom they ate it. Meals meant more than feeding oneself; they were social events and celebrations of God’s providence. Luke, more than any other evangelist, exploits this motif of hospitality in his gospel. His Jesus compared the kingdom of God to a heavenly feast (14:15-24) and had abundant meals or hospitality motifs in many of his parables, in addition to directly participating in many meals. In our story, the virtue of hospitality is what causes the disciples to invite the stranger in when they reach their destination. One can say that if they were not hospitable to the stranger, they would never have had a chance to recognize Jesus in him, and their whole lives from then on would have been completely different.

The fact that Luke has included those three important themes in one single story means that the story must be carrying some very important messages. This pivotal kernel story is not only the first story that describes Jesus’ appearance, but also a climax story

for all of Luke's gospel narrative as far as the implied reader is concerned. On one hand it proves Jesus' resurrection, and therefore gives meaning to all of Jesus' story, and on the other, it contains important clues for all prospective disciples of Jesus, clues that are woven into those three themes throughout the whole gospel narrative, and succinctly presented at the end in the Emmaus story. They remind all the readers that they are on a journey, and the spirit of God should always guide the destination of that journey. They give the readers some important support to lean on when that journey seems long or when problems and confusion creep in. That support is the tradition epitomized especially in the scriptures, which helps the readers reinterpret their experiences. And last, but not least by any means, is the reminder about the need for displaying hospitality towards strangers, not only to help the others, but also to open ourselves to the unexpected, to different points of view, so that we can start looking at the world through another set of lenses and recognize the gems that might be hidden there. Besides the important two elements of confirming the resurrection and giving the potential disciples clues on how to live, the Emmaus story contains one other very important element. It sets the reader's heart on fire; it energizes and evangelizes the implied reader. It has the potential to effect a conversion of heart, or metaphorically speaking a resurrection of the disciples and the reader. That is probably why this particular story, along with the John's story about the Samaritan Woman at the Well (John 4:4-42), is used very often in Christian evangelization efforts. This tells us something about the implied author of our story. If the story is being interpreted by the implied readers as having a potential for effecting conversion, the implied author is painted as an evangelizer, as someone on the mission to convert people to Christ. This is of course not very surprising, since we can assume that

each of the gospel writers was on a mission to convert people to Jesus. But what might be surprising to some of us is that this particular, and relatively short, story carries so much power. It is really very artfully written by the implied writer to accomplish a specific mission.

As I was reading my sources in preparation for this research paper, I was contacted by my old high school classmate whom I ran into last year while vacationing in Poland. He wanted me to help him buy a Global Positioning System in the US, on eBay, for his sailings on the Mediterranean Sea, and to bring the GPS for him to Poland when I go there this summer. At first I was a little annoyed, stressing over the paper that I had to write. I did not refuse to help him, but I indicated that I am busy studying at the moment. He asked me what I was studying, and when I told him, he was amazed. Knowing me from the old high school years, the last thing that he would expect was to find me in the middle of the deacon formation program. He shared with me that he is envious of people who have faith, for it is easier for them to live. I responded that for me everyone has faith; it's just a matter of what one really believes in. I also said that in my personal experience people who declare themselves as "unbelievers" often are very sensitive to the needs of others and they practice the love of neighbor, since they usually have high ethical standards. Those high standards, however, make it difficult for them to accept the instances of injustice afflicted by those who claim to be the people of faith. Again, he was very amazed, for I have described him perfectly without knowing him. He is so sensitive that the thoughts of people's sufferings caused him to fall into a depression a while ago. He also shared with me a story about a homeless alcoholic, afflicted with lung cancer, whom he had met on the street, cared for, and had watched him die at a hospice

that he found for him. He could not understand why his family did not take care of him. We had a couple more conversations, and he told me that this is all very overwhelming for him. He asked for help with the GPS so he could find his bearings on the sea, but received instead the bearings for his life. It was a changing experience for both of us. In a way, we both felt like walking with a stranger who ultimately revealed some greater truth to us. For him, it was the realization that some of his actions towards others might have been inspired by the Spirit, and that he might have been closer to God all this time than he ever realized. For me, it was a confirmation of a long developing thought in my heart that specific acts of love and hospitality are more important than just being very prayerful. The first time I read and meditated on the Emmaus story years ago, it moved my heart and was a part of my conversion process. This time it moves me to be more hospitable and to look for support in the scriptures and traditions of my faith during the difficult moments of my journey. I wonder; how else this story will come into my life in the future?

This essay has analyzed Luke's "Emmaus" story using the narrative critical method, and it has found that the main characters of the story, the two disciples, represent all potential followers of Jesus. The implied author aims to emotionally bond the implied reader with the characters in the story, and he hopes the reader will follow their example. The essay identified three important motifs in this story: Journey, Scriptures/Tradition and Hospitality, which correspond to some of the most important themes found in the gospel of Luke and in Acts. The presence of these themes and the positioning of the story suggest that this is a climax story for the whole gospel of Luke. The identified themes contain important lessons, which the implied author wants to pass on to the

implied readers. He also wants to evangelize them, to set their hearts on fire, and to elicit a commitment from them as Jesus' followers. The Emmaus story is beautifully written and skillfully constructed to fulfill its purpose.

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