

The Greek motif of the cyclic journey

in the Gospel of Luke?

The motif of the cyclical journey appears not only in Greek works but is a motif that is often used by literature in general. Basically, the topographical or geographical composition of a work is such that the story ends in the same place as it began but with the characters changed by what transpired. Their consciousness is usually altered by occurrences that take place somewhere else than the starting/finishing locale. This motif is probably present in the Gospel of Luke in the very structure of the work. Apart from that, it also seems to appear in several pericopes whose geographical form is possibly modelled on Greek narrations of cyclical journeys. But does it really appear as a literary model?

The motif of the cyclical journey is based on the general assumption that the traveller comes back to their starting point enriched by the experiences of their journey. This type of a journey motif is thought by some to be an archetype that is present in every person and which, therefore, may be expressed using the language of myths. M. Eliade claimed that mythical topics and symbols can be found in every person's psyche. It turns out that everyone, regardless of their historical, racial or gender identity, spontaneously discovers archetypes present in primitive symbolism.¹ In this paper I would like to present some examples of the motif of the cyclical journey in Greek literature (1) and then I would like to show several pericopes in Luke where this motif could possibly be found in his Gospel (2). Observations made in (1) and (2) lead to the final conclusions (3).

I. THE CYCLICAL JOURNEY MOTIF IN GREEK LITERATURE

The Iliad and *The Odyssey* are, of course, the two main work by the poet referred to as Homer. Both belong to the group of the so-called Trojan myths. *The Iliad* concerns the war between the Greeks and the Trojans while *The Odyssey* deals with the main hero's return from Troy. Odysseus' journey presented by Homer takes the form: Ithaka – Troy – Ithaka. The hero sets off from his home in Ithaka to take part in the Trojan war and returns after many

¹ J. KUDASIEWICZ, *Biblia, historia, nauka. Rozważania i dyskusje biblijne*, Kraków 1987, 210.

adventures as a man enriched by the experiences he met on the way. There are the experiences on the journey which speak of the change in the hero's consciousness. During the ten-year-long return journey he is repeatedly in peril: he is attacked a number of times, is almost killed by a cannibal, fights against opposing winds. When he returns home in disguise he is recognised because of an old wound and because he recalls old events in which only he and those closest to him participated. Odysseus' return becomes possible only thanks to the intervention of the gods:

“But when, as the seasons revolved,
the year came in which the gods had ordained
that he should return home to Ithaca”²

All together, Odysseus spends twenty years away from his home in Ithaka. In short, this is the motif of the cyclical journey that, having been formulated by Homer, returned later in many classic Greek works and in Hellenistic literature. It is enough to mention the Orpheus and Eurydice myth: the main hero goes to Hades to meet his wife in hope to bring her again to life. His plan fails, but Orpheus makes his cyclic journey³. The cyclic journey motif was also used in historical literature. Diogenes Laertius in his work *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* tells the story of Plato's cyclic journey from Athens to Egypt, and then again to Athens⁴. The cyclical journey motif also appears in Luke's text.

² *Odyssey* I,19-21.

³ Eurydice was also known as Agriope. She ran into a nest of snakes which bit her fatally on her legs. Distraught, Orpheus played such sad songs and that all the nymphs and gods wept. On their advice, Orpheus travelled to the underworld and by his music softened the hearts of Hades and Persephone. They agreed to allow Eurydice to return with him to earth on one condition: he should walk in front of her and not look back until he had reached the upper world. But Orpheus broke his promise, and Eurydice vanished again from his sight.

⁴ Diogenes describes the journey of Plato in such words: “Afterwards, when he was eight and twenty years of age, as Hermodorus tells us, he withdrew to Megara to Euclid, with certain others of the pupils of Socrates; and subsequently, he went to Cyrene to Theodorus the mathematician; and from thence he proceeded to Italy to the Pythagoreans, Philolaus and Eurytus, and from thence he went to Eurytus to the priests there; and having fallen sick at that place, he was cured by the priests by the application of sea water, in reference to which he said: The sea doth wash away all human evils. And he said too, that, according to Homer, all the Egyptians were physicians. Plato had also formed the idea of making the acquaintance of the Magi; but he abandoned it on account of the wars in Asia” (*Filosofon bion kai dogmaton synagogē* III, 8).

II. THE CYCLICAL JOURNEY MOTIF IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE?

It is not only in general structure of the Gospel, where Luke seems to use the motif of cyclical journey. This motif is possibly present in several pericopes: the mission of the Twelve (9,1-11), the mission of the seventy-two disciples (10,120), the lost sheep (15,4-7), the prodigal son (15,11-32), the wicked tenants (20,9-19), the Emmaus story (24,13-35). Let us consider first the general structure of Luke's Gospel, then two of the mentioned pericopes and finally the theological idea of the incarnation of the Son of God.

General structure of the Luke's Gospel: Judea – Galilee - Judea

Luke framed his Gospel geographically. The text begins by describing a scene that takes place in the Temple in Jerusalem (Zechariah sees the birth of John the Baptist in a vision) and that is also where it ends (the disciples maintain their prayer). In between the events that bracket the whole narrative, the Gospel contains the most significant events of Jesus' life described in the form of a journey. The geographical axis of the third Gospel has, therefore, the form: Jerusalem – Galilee – Jerusalem:

Events in Jerusalem: 1,5-2,53

Jesus' life in Galilee: 3,1-9,50

The decision to travel from Galilee to Jerusalem: 9,51

Jesus' journey to Jerusalem: 9,52-19,27

Events in Jerusalem: 19,28-24,53.

The Holy City is not just a historically significant city but takes on for the author and the readers an ideological meaning⁵. It is in Jerusalem that Jesus first overcomes Satan when tempted, and it is also there that Jesus finally triumphs over the forces of evil by dying and being resurrected. The victory over Satan when he tempts Jesus foretells Jesus' final victory over the Lord of Darkness. By placing one of the temptation scenes in Jerusalem, Luke disrupts the form Jerusalem – Galilee – Jerusalem.

⁵ P. Borgman demonstrates however that that in the center of the journey section (9,51-19,44) Jerusalem represents the human kingdom. According to him the structure of this section shows this clearly, because at the center of this journey is a hub of meaning for the two-part story: strive to enter God's kingdom, not the human kingdom (represented by Jerusalem); *The Way according to Luke. Hearing the Whole Story of Luke-Acts*, Grand Rapids – Cambridge 2006, 8-9.

The idea of the road from Jerusalem through Galilee back to Jerusalem becomes very distinct in the ninth chapter: “Now when the days drew near for him to be taken up, Jesus set out resolutely to go to Jerusalem” (9,51). This decision is confirmed by Jesus during his journey: “Nevertheless I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the next day, because it is impossible that a prophet should be killed outside Jerusalem” (13,33). Exegetical writers believe that the references to ‘today’, ‘tomorrow’ and ‘the next day’ refer to the three times it is mentioned that Jesus knowingly headed for the Holy City (13,22; 17,11; 19,28)⁶. One may ask: Why Jerusalem is so important in Luke’s Gospel?

It is known that the author of the third Gospel for some time accompanied Paul in his missionary journeys. It is possible that it was from him that he took over and developed the notion of Jerusalem as a symbolic city, the city of revelation and redemption.⁷ After all, Paul explained to Galatians: “But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother” (Gal 4,26).⁸ In other words, just as Jesus headed for Jerusalem so as to redeem humanity, so Christians head to the heavenly Jerusalem in order to be fully redeemed. When Luke was writing his work, Jerusalem was already in ruins, destroyed by the army of Titus, the future Roman Emperor. So, this city could not have just had historical meaning for Luke. Since he stresses its significance so much it must be so as to make clear the symbolic, spiritual character of the place. It is the city of redemption and, since redemption is eternal, the new Jerusalem will also last for ever. It is there that all those who believe in Jesus are heading to.

Concluding, the structure of Luke’s Gospel is possibly modelled on the cyclical journey motif. It starts in Jerusalem and it ends in Jerusalem, and in between the most important events of redemption take place. The unanswered question is: why Luke should use this motif only in his Gospel and not in Acts?

The prodigal son: the father’s house – the pagan land – the father’s house

⁶ “Nella trasfigurazione, Gesù parlava con Mosè ed Elia dell’exodos che egli era in procinto di compiere a Gerusalemme (9,31). Ora, con grande solennità, Gesù ‘si diresse verso Gerusalemme’ dove ‘sarebbe stato tolto dal mondo’ (9,51). Da questo momento fino all’arrivo di Gesù in città (19,28), viene continuamente ricordato al lettore che Gesù è ‘in viaggio’ (9,52.56.57; 10,38; 13,33) e specificamente ‘in viaggio verso Gerusalemme’ (14,25; 17,11; 18,31.35; 19,1.11.28)”; L.T. JOHNSON, *Il Vangelo di Luca*, Sacra Pagina 3, Torino 2004, 147.

⁷ Luke mentions the city of Jerusalem 31 times in his Gospel.

⁸ M. ROSIK, *Trzy portrety Jezusa*, Tarnów 2006, 35-36.

The idea of a cyclical journey is probably present in Luke's story of the prodigal son (15,11-32). The first part, telling how the son left his father's house, wasted his fortune and returned home, is based on the following geographical form:

In the father's house: 15,11-12

Journey and time in pagan lands: 15,13-17

Decision to return: 15,18-19

Return from pagan lands: 15,20a

In the father's house: 15,20b-24⁹.

Thus stated, the central element of the story is the son's decision to return to his father (15,18-19)¹⁰. *De facto*, it is a similar motif to that which brackets the whole of Luke's story: Jesus' decision to go to Jerusalem (9,51). However it is not clear if Luke uses this motif as literary scheme or he uses it because the nature of the conversion story demanded it.

Recognising the resurrected Christ: Jerusalem – Emmaus – Jerusalem

It seems that the motif of the cyclic journey was skilfully included in the story of the christophany on the road to Emmaus (24,13-35). The journey to Emmaus that the disciples set out upon has the very significant trait that, *de facto*, it leads from Jerusalem to Jerusalem. Some think that the disciples are setting out from Jerusalem – the city in which the most significant parts of the redemption story take place – for Emmaus – a city which is meaningless and not described in any detail. That would have been the theological sense of the journey: going on pilgrimage without recognising the resurrected Christ does not lead anywhere.¹¹

⁹ For more elaborated proposition of the structure of this periscope, see: C.E. CARLSTON, "Reminiscence and Redaction in Luke 15,11-32", *JBL* 94 (1975) 368-390 and J. JEREMIAS "Tradition und Redaktion in Lukas 15", *ZNW* 62 (1971) 172-189.

¹⁰ The parable of the prodigal son is preceded by the parables of the lost sheep (15,1-7) and of the lost coin (15,8-10). This context has an influence to the interpretation of the prodigal son story. Sheep and coins can't will themselves to be found, but the prodigal son must choose to turn around (to repent) and to come home. He has to take on the responsibility of his own repenting.

¹¹ J. DRURY, „Luke”, in: *The literary guide to the Bible*, red. R. Alter, F. Kermode, London 1987, 424.

Two of Jesus' disciples leave the city where redemption took place headed for an unknown locale whose name had not previously appeared on the pages of Luke's work. When they are joined by Jesus, they are still headed away from the holy city (24,13) leaving behind the places where the dramatic events which caused them to become troubled (24,17-24) took place. Their imagination does not go beyond the cross and the grave. There is no place for hope – it is better to say farewell and return home (24,21). The evening comes as they are on their way from Jerusalem to Emmaus (24,29), they decide to stop for the night since “the day is almost done”.

It turns out, however, that the setting sun is shining strongly once again in the hearts of the travellers who have understood of the old prophecies. Speaking with Jesus, means that the setting sun brings to them his light. The consequence of this discovery is immediate – the disciples recognise the mysterious fellow traveller as the resurrected Christ and return to Jerusalem to find the other disciples. The community which was to have ceased to exist is reformed once again. After Jesus' death his disciples went their ways. After the funeral the temptation to return to the old life, leaving behind the three-year adventure with the Master, must have been very powerful. Maybe this was what the travellers to Emmaus were doing. Discovering the resurrection becomes the event which brings the community back together. When Jesus appears to the gathered disciples, it is soon after the community has come together again. In this way he shows that he is always present when his disciples come together as a community. He intervenes when disciples distance themselves from the community to lead them back to Jerusalem where their common mission is to begin.

The concentric structure of the narration communicates two ideas: the central idea of Jesus' resurrection set within the journey from Jerusalem to Jerusalem. The disciples recognise the resurrected Jesus through a process described in terms of visual perception: at first “their eyes were kept from recognizing him” (24,16) only to be opened in the end (24,31). The individual elements of the concentric structure were constructed in the face of the kerigmatic truth – He is alive (24,23b). The structure can be described in the following way:¹²

Journey from Jerusalem: 24,14-15

Revelation – eyes kept from seeing – lack of recognition: 24,16

Dialogue and interaction: 24,17-18

¹² J.B. GREEN, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, Grand Rapids 1997, 842

Description of “these things”: 24,19-21
Empty grave – vision: 24,22-23a
Jesus is alive: 24,23b
Empty grave – no vision: 24,24
Interpretation of “these things”: 24,25-27
Dialogue and interaction: 24,28-30
“Eyes opened” – recognition – disappearance: 24,31-32
Journey to Jerusalem: 24,33-35.

The disciples journeying to Emmaus decide to return to Jerusalem having recognised the resurrected Jesus in whom God’s power to bring back to life and God’s wisdom to explain the Holy texts are both revealed. The decision to return is immediate: So they got up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem (24,33). The determination with which it is made is stressed by the gospel as it is mentioned that the disciples are not delayed by the late hour as “it is getting toward evening and the day is almost done” (24,33).

Cleopas and his fellow traveller set out from Jerusalem, the city which is central to Luke’s text, for a nondescript town called Emmaus, about which the reader finds out only that it is sixty stadia away from the Holy City. The name of the place only appears in relation to that episode, the other New Testament texts never mention it. Considering the concentration of events related to the redemption in Jerusalem and Luke’s conception of the road one can be tempted to interpret the disciples’ journey symbolically: they are going to a place of no significance and their journey has no determinate goal; they are headed nowhere. Discovering the resurrected Jesus in the mysterious traveller makes them turn around and return to Jerusalem. Jesus’ disciples make a journey which is analogous to that which their Lord had gone along. Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem was a journey toward death. Death, in itself, seems to have no sense. However, Jesus goes through death to return to life and to create the paradigm of a return in which meaning is found.¹³ But just like in the prodigal son pericope we can not be sure if Luke really uses here the motif of cyclical journey as literary scheme or maybe he only registered the historical facts, that the disciples finished their journey in the started point.

¹³ „La via di Gesù verso la croce è stata determinata dalla volontà di Dio, rivelata nelle Scritture. La sua morte in croce non manifesta il suo fallimento, ma la sua incondizionata fedeltà a Dio. Il suo cammino non finisce con la morte, ma attraverso di essa conduce alla gloria, alla comunione eterna con Dio”; K. STOCK, *Gesù. La bontà di Dio*, Bibbia e preghiera 10, Roma 1991, 170-171.

The incarnation model: the kenosis of the Son of God

More broadly, it is possible to look at this paradigm of the cyclical journey in terms of incarnation: by becoming incarnate the Son of God becomes a human, accepts death of the cross and, thereby, resurrection and ascension to return to live heavenly glory¹⁴. So, the journey ends where it began – at his Father’s right hand – but its goal of redemption has been achieved. We should however be conscious that in this case it is not Luke the first one who uses this paradigm; it is present in all the four Gospels and in other New Testament writings which show this incarnational model in which Christ’s kenosis that leads to the cross becomes the breakthrough point – the point of redemption.

III. CONCLUSIONS

As noticed above, Luke seems to use the cyclical journey motif in the structure of his Gospel, probably in three parables (the parable of the lost sheep, the story of prodigal son, the parable of the wicked tenants), in two pericopes about disciples (the mission of the Twelve and the mission of the seventy-two disciples), in the Emmaus story and maybe also in his theological idea of incarnation. It is hard, however, to be sure whether the writer of the Gospel took this motif consciously from Greek literature. It is better to point out that the motif of the cyclic journey appears in the ancient Greek-Hellenistic literature and it seems to appear in Luke. The motif could have been developed in parallel in those cases and does not necessarily indicate the direct influence of ancient literature on the Gospel of Luke. Until now we can not point out any direct influence of the Greek works that use the cyclical journey motif on the Luke’s Gospel.

What is important is the statement that the motif of cyclical journey which possibly is used by Luke was known among the Greek readers of his Gospel. It was known among them because it was present in their literature. So the possible use of the motif of cyclical journey

¹⁴ It is important to notice that the ascension took place in Jerusalem. “Luke 9:51 introduces the journey which underlines the remainder of the gospel and defines that journey in terms of its destination, namely Jerusalem. Jerusalem, however, is no mere geographical locus. Luke presents the city which in fact marked the journey’s end as the place where Jesus would ‘be received up’, an expression which refers to the ascension. Jesus’ journey is thus a journey to God”; E. LaVERDIERE, *Luke*, New Testament Message 5, Collegeville 1990, 142.

by Luke probably made easier (facilitated) the reception of the Good News about salvation in Hellenistic world.

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