

‘CERTAINLY THIS MAN WAS RIGHTEOUS’  
HIGHLIGHTING A MESSIANIC READING OF THE CENTURION’S  
CONFESSION IN LUKE 23:47

Matthew C. Easter

### Summary

*This essay expands on common readings of the centurion’s confession of Jesus as δίκαιος (‘righteous’, ‘innocent’) in Luke 23:47. Many interpreters take the centurion’s words in Luke as his recognition of Jesus’ political innocence. While not denying a Lukan insistence on Jesus’ innocence, this essay argues for a fuller reading of the centurion’s words that accounts for the christological potential in his calling Jesus δίκαιος. Whether historically-speaking he knew it or not, this centurion in Luke’s narrative world stands as one of the first people to recognise the crucified Jesus as the Christ.*

### 1. Introduction

Matthew, Mark, and Luke follow a similar passion narrative. All three depict Jesus as one who had been betrayed by a member of his own following; all three show Peter deny Jesus three times; all three portray Jesus crucified between two criminals; and so on. However, among other differences, each evangelist has a different account of the centurion’s reaction to Jesus’ death.

Mark has a solitary centurion standing in front of the cross who upon seeing how Jesus breathed his last breath said, ‘Truly this man was the Son of God’.<sup>1</sup> Matthew’s centurion says the same thing (minus ὁ ἄνθρωπος), but in Matthew’s account a group of people make this confession.

---

<sup>1</sup> All translations are my own.

Matthew 27:54

ὁ δὲ ἑκατόνταρχος καὶ οἱ μετ' αὐτοῦ τηροῦντες τὸν Ἰησοῦν

ιδόντες τὸν σεισμὸν καὶ τὰ γενόμενα ἐφοβήθησαν σφόδρα, λέγοντες: ἀληθῶς θεοῦ υἱὸς ἦν οὗτος.

But the centurion and the ones with him guarding Jesus,

when they saw the earthquake and the things happening, were very afraid, saying: 'Truly this was the Son of God.'

Mark 15:39

ιδὼν δὲ ὁ κεντυρίων

ὁ παρεστηκὼς ἐξ ἐναντίας αὐτοῦ

ὅτι οὕτως ἐξέπνευσεν εἶπεν: ἀληθῶς οὗτος ὁ ἄνθρωπος υἱὸς θεοῦ ἦν.

But the centurion

who was standing in front of him, when he saw how he breathed his last, said: 'Truly this man was the Son of God.'

Luke 23:47

ιδὼν δὲ ὁ ἑκατοντάρχης

Τὸ γενόμενον ἐδόξαζεν τὸν θεὸν λέγων: ὄντως ὁ ἄνθρωπος οὗτος δίκαιος ἦν.

But when the centurion

saw what happened, he praised God saying: 'Certainly this man was righteous/innocent.'

Furthermore, rather than witnessing the way Jesus died, in Matthew the centurion and the others around him are driven to fear by the earthquake and other happenings. Still, whether driven by corporate fear or by solitary observation, the centurion in both Matthew and Mark identifies this crucified Jesus as 'the Son of God'.

Luke's centurion, on the other hand, does not call Jesus υἱὸς θεοῦ ('Son of God'). In Luke, the centurion praises God and says, 'Certainly this man was δίκαιος'. In view of the likelihood that Luke knew of the υἱὸς θεοῦ reading in Mark,<sup>2</sup> and given that Luke is elsewhere not

<sup>2</sup> The Two-Source, Farrer, and the Griesbach hypotheses lend similar force to our present study. Under all three theories, Luke has used Mark, Matthew, or both and has changed υἱὸς θεοῦ to δίκαιος in 23:47. Likewise, under all three theories, Luke seems to have adopted motifs from another gospel for his own narrative, as I will develop in more detail below.

averse to speaking of Jesus as υἱὸς θεοῦ,<sup>3</sup> his alteration from υἱὸς θεοῦ to δίκαιος is curious. By calling Jesus δίκαιος, the centurion could either be calling Jesus 'innocent' or, as this essay argues, be speaking of a deeper christological significance.<sup>4</sup>

Doble offers by far the most extended treatment of δίκαιος in Luke-Acts.<sup>5</sup> He too argues against reading the centurion's comment as only a confession of innocence. Doble suggests δίκαιος with reference to Jesus is not as a messianic 'title' or 'name', but as a 'descriptor' for the Messiah.<sup>6</sup> His work on δίκαιος in Luke-Acts does much to prove the viability of reading δίκαιος as a christological statement. This essay largely agrees with Doble, but wishes to advance the case for a messianic tone to the centurion's confession in particular by focusing in on two of Doble's points while introducing three other points of evidence for reading the centurion's words as a climactic christological confession of this crucified Jesus.

Before tackling the issue at hand, three preliminary comments are in order. First, this essay intends to highlight a messianic facet to the centurion's confession of Jesus as δίκαιος, but we should not assume that innocence and this messianic reading are mutually exclusive. Marguerat, for example, posits that Luke intended ambiguity with the

---

<sup>3</sup> Luke speaks of Jesus as υἱὸς θεοῦ 12 times: Luke 1:35 (on the lips of an angel); 4:3, 9 (on the lips of ὁ διάβολος); 4:41, 8:28 (on the lips of demons); and 20:13 (in a parable, implying Jesus as the son of the master); 22:70 (before the Jewish council, Jesus answers in the affirmative, that he is indeed the Son of God)—see also 1:32 (son of the Most High—on the lips of an angel); 3:22 (God speaking: 'You are my beloved Son'); 9:35 (God speaking: 'This is my Son'); 10:22 (Jesus speaking of others' knowing both the Son and the Father); and Acts 9:20 (Paul's proclamation about Jesus). See also Matt. 2:15; 3:17; 4:3, 6; 8:29; 11:27; 14:33; 16:16, 27; 17:5; 21:38; 24:36; 26:63; 27:40, 43, 54; 28:19; Mark [1:1]; 1:11; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7; 13:32; 14:61; 15:39.

<sup>4</sup> For 'innocent', see RSV, NRSV, ESV, NASB, NET, NLT. The AV and NIV are the only major English translations to use 'righteous'. The NJB uses 'upright'. In German, the Einheitsübersetzung, Schlachter, and Zürcher Bibel use 'gerecht', while the older Luther Bible and subsequent revisions use 'fromm'. In Spanish, the Nueva Versión Internacional and Reina-Valera Actualizada use 'justo', the Biblia de Las Americas uses 'inocente', and the Nueva Biblia de Los Hispanos uses 'inocente' with 'justo' in parentheses. See also Doble's engagement with proponents of δίκαιος as 'innocent' (Peter Doble, *The Paradox of Salvation* [SNTSMS, 87; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996]: 70-92).

<sup>5</sup> Doble, *Paradox*, 93-126.

<sup>6</sup> Doble writes, "'Title' suggests something more formal and consensual than is intended here; 'name' signifies a word proper to its referent, as Χριστός soon became in the Christian tradition. "Descriptor" was intended to identify a word or phrase which, by its metaphorical or associative roots in Jewish scripture, elucidated Jesus' ministry and person for his followers' (Doble, *Paradox*, 157).

confession, so that the meaning of Jesus' death would be understandable to both Greek and Jewish readers, who would recognise innocence and righteous sufferer implications respectively.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, as Beck posits, a translation of 'righteous' in 23:47 will 'include the notion of innocence, but imply something more positive'.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Schmidt reads δίκαιος as 'innocent' in service of a scriptural apologetic for the Messiah: 'Just as it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer, Scripture also required that it be innocent suffering.'<sup>9</sup> This essay, therefore, does not disagree with the messianic implications in 'innocent', nor does it argue that the centurion does not conceive of the crucified Jesus as 'innocent'. Rather, I highlight the messianic implications in play, lest interpreters miss a thrust of the centurion's confession by limiting its meaning to 'innocent' alone.

Secondly, I am associating the 'righteous sufferer' and the Isaian Suffering Servant with the Messiah. Marguerat reads the centurion's words in light of the suffering righteous one, but not christologically.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, Wolter finds a tradition of a suffering righteous one in δίκαιος in Luke 23:47, but he insists that no messianic title or attribute is in mind.<sup>11</sup> However, the Christ is clearly depicted as the sufferer in Luke-Acts (Luke 24:26, 46; Acts 3:18; 17:3; 26:23). Therefore, for our purposes here I read the righteous sufferer as a christological figure, as this seems to be the case in Luke-Acts.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, in arguing for the centurion's confession as a messianic declaration, this essay fits among the current dispute over the interpretation of δίκαιος in early Christianity.<sup>13</sup> Our primary focus here

---

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Marguerat, *The First Christian Historian: Writing the 'Acts of the Apostles'* (SNTSMS 121; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 69-70.

<sup>8</sup> Brian E. Beck, 'Imitatio Christi and the Lucan Passion Narrative' in *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament*, ed. William Horbury and Brian McNeil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981): 42-43.

<sup>9</sup> Daryl Schmidt, 'Luke's "Innocent" Jesus: A Scriptural Apologetic' in *Political Issues in Luke-Acts*, ed. Richard J. Cassidy and Philip J. Scharper (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983): 117.

<sup>10</sup> Marguerat, *First Christian Historian*, 69-70.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Wolter, *Das Lukasevangelium* (HNT 5; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008): 763.

<sup>12</sup> There is insufficient evidence prior to the NT to equate the righteous sufferer with the Messiah, but this association within the NT is clear.

<sup>13</sup> For treatments of a christological reading of δίκαιος, see Douglas A. Campbell, 'Romans 1:17 - A *Cruce Interpretum* for the Πίστις Χριστοῦ Debate', *JBL* 113 (1994): 265-85; Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11* (2nd edn; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002): 134-38; Richard B.

is with how δίκαιος functions in Luke-Acts, and not so much with whether or not δίκαιος was a messianic term prior to or contemporary with Luke-Acts. As such, this essay does not intend to suggest that Luke implies a messianic sense with δίκαιος each time. Indeed, 23:47 is the first and only time δίκαιος is connected with Jesus in Luke's Gospel.<sup>14</sup> However, in Acts, three of the six cases of δίκαιος are used in direct references to the Messiah.<sup>15</sup> These three cases in Acts have an article while Luke 23:47 does not, but the presence or absence of the article should not cause concern. Grammarians have shown that the presence or absence of the article is not an infallible signal to the definite or indefinite quality of the word it modifies.<sup>16</sup> Porter explains, 'In Greek the presence or absence of the article does not determine whether the substantive is particular or non-particular, categorical or individual. ... Context of usage must decide'.<sup>17</sup> Given the relatively small sample size of clearly messianic uses of δίκαιος in Luke-Acts, Porter's call for argument from context is even more important. This essay, therefore, is an effort at reading contextually the anarthrous δίκαιος from the lips of the centurion in Luke's narrative world.

We turn first to the case for reading the centurion's statement as a declaration of Jesus' innocence, and then to advance our claim that Luke's centurion sees the crucified Jesus as the Messiah.

## 2. 'Certainly This Man Was Innocent': Evidence for the Centurion Proclaiming Jesus' Innocence

Most commonly suggested rationales for reading the centurion's words as a confession of Jesus' innocence centre on an innocent martyr motif (often couched in political terms) in Luke's passion story.<sup>18</sup> Talbert

---

Hays, *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel's Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005): 119-42.

<sup>14</sup> For δίκαιος elsewhere in Luke see: 1:6; 1:17; 2:25; 5:32; 12:57; 14:14; 15:7; 18:9; 20:20; and 23:50.

<sup>15</sup> Acts 3:14; 7:52; 22:14 (more on these below). For δίκαιος elsewhere in Acts see: 4:19; 10:22; and 24:15.

<sup>16</sup> For this reason, 'definite article' is a misnomer. The article should be called simply the 'article'. See Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (2nd edn; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994): 103; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996): 209.

<sup>17</sup> Porter, *Idioms*, 105. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 243.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example: Hanz Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961): 83-87; Martin Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* (London: James

summarises the political perspective: ‘Whereas in the other synoptics the centurion was a christologist, in Luke he is an apologist.’<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Klein suggests that the centurion’s words in Luke intend to distance Jesus from accusations of wrongdoing: Jesus did not die as a *κακούργος* (‘criminal’; see Luke 23:32, 33, 39).<sup>20</sup> Dibelius highlights a number of martyrological themes in Luke’s passion narrative:

[T]he martyr was able by his attitude to convert opponents and the unprejudiced; Pilate asserts three times that he found no guilt in Jesus ...; the women, who as onlookers take no part, are informed by Jesus that all this affects themselves and that their own fate is to be deplored; the martyr prays for the executioners, and promises to the penitent thief who confessed Him that he would share His own blessed martyr lot. He dies with an expression of reliance upon God on His lips, and in this way convinces the centurion by His patience.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, Dibelius contrasts Matthew’s gospel, where the onlookers defiantly bring a curse upon themselves, with Luke’s ‘human and psychological presentation’, where the onlookers are ‘frightened by the martyr’s blameless suffering’, beat their chests, and go home.<sup>22</sup> In response, Karris names a number of features within so-called martyrological literature that are missing from Luke, such as the martyr’s condemnation of his killers and a description of the martyr’s

---

Clarke & Co., 1971): 201-203; Jerome Kodell, ‘Luke’s Theology of the Death of Jesus’ in *Sin, Salvation, and the Spirit: Commemorating the Fiftieth Year of The Liturgical Press*, ed. Daniel Durken (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1979): 223-25; Charles Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1982): 219-25; Charles Talbert, ‘Martyrdom in Luke-Acts and the Lukan Social Ethic’ in *Political Issues in Luke-Acts*, ed. Richard J. Cassidy and Philip J. Scharper (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983): 99-109. For a similar reading, but one that does not see Luke making a political apologist move, see Schmidt, ‘Luke’s “Innocent” Jesus’, 116-19.

<sup>19</sup> Talbert, *Reading Luke*, 225. Maddox calls into question the thesis of Luke as political apologist. He offers three reasons for doubting that Luke intended his work as a political apology: ‘First, Luke-Acts in general makes much more sense as a work addressed internally to the church than as one addressed to imperial officials. Second, the elements alleged to be apologetic are not prominent enough in the whole scope and plan of the work to make this suggestion persuasive. Third, Luke’s praise of the Empire and his promise that Christians will be obedient to it are not unqualified’ (Robert Maddox, *The Purpose of Luke-Acts* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982]: 91-99, here 96).

<sup>20</sup> Hans Klein, *Das Lukasevangelium* (KEK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006): 714.

<sup>21</sup> Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*, 202-203.

<sup>22</sup> Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*, 203.

physical pain.<sup>23</sup> Karris also suggests that the martyrological reading fails to account for the rest of Luke's gospel and other motifs in the passion narrative.<sup>24</sup>

To be sure, Luke's passion narrative certainly maintains Jesus' innocence. Kodell notes 'several alterations' in Luke's passion story that 'throw into sharp relief' Jesus' innocence: Luke includes Pilate's (23:4, 14-15, 22), Herod's (23:15), and the criminal's (23:41) acknowledgements of Jesus' innocence (in none of these cases does Luke use δίκαιος).<sup>25</sup> However, Luke is not the only gospel with this concern. Both Matthew and Mark picture the chief priests looking for a false testimony against Jesus, but finding none (Matt. 26:59-60//Mark 14:55-56). Both give strong indications that Pilate was uncomfortable with declaring Jesus guilty. While Luke's Pilate asserts Jesus' innocence three times, Pilate in Matthew and Mark knows that jealousy motivated the charges against Jesus (27:18//15:10), Matthew and Mark both have Pilate ask, 'Why, what evil did he do?' (27:23//15:14), and Pilate in Matthew washes his hands saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood' (27:24).

Even if Luke is more explicit about Jesus' innocence than the other Synoptics, the other two gospels certainly leave readers with no doubt that Jesus is an innocent man. We may ask, then, whether a desire to establish further Jesus' innocence in Luke adequately accounts for his change from υἱὸς θεοῦ to δίκαιος in Luke 23:47. If Luke were only trying to highlight Jesus' innocence with the centurion's words, then Luke's modification of '[a] son of God' to 'innocent' reads like an anticlimactic statement of the obvious,<sup>26</sup> while abandoning a theme by which he is not embarrassed (namely, Jesus as the Son of God). Therefore, a christological reading of δίκαιος may be in order.

---

<sup>23</sup> Robert J. Karris, 'Luke 23:47 and the Lucan View of Jesus' Death', *JBL* 105 (1986): 65-74, esp. 69.

<sup>24</sup> Karris suggests one such motif is Jesus' relationship with the Father (Karris, 'Luke 23:47 and the Lucan View of Jesus' Death', 69).

<sup>25</sup> Kodell, 'Luke's Theology of the Death of Jesus', 224. Kodell also suggests parallels between Stephen's martyrdom (Luke 23:34, 46 and Acts 7:54-60). For further reflection on this comparison, see also Talbert, 'Martyrdom in Luke-Acts and the Lukan Social Ethic', 100.

<sup>26</sup> So Beck: 'With the rest of the Gospel before us we hardly need reassurance that Jesus was innocent' (Beck, *Imitatio Christi* and the Lucan Passion Narrative', 41-42).

### 3. 'Certainly This Man Was Righteous': Toward a Messianic Reading of the Centurion's Confession

We turn now to five points that suggest a messianic reading, the second and last of which I develop alongside Doble. The other three observations are additional indications that Luke uses the centurion's confession to make a messianic statement.

#### 3.1 Centurions and Luke's Narrative

This reading of δίκαιος in Luke 23:47 is a literary-theological proposition rather than a historical assertion. The historical plausibility is not the concern of this essay, but rather the meaning of δίκαιος in Luke's presentation. Nevertheless, the question still remains whether a centurion in Luke's narrative world could confess this Jesus as Messiah.

In addition to the centurion at the cross, two other important centurions appear in Luke-Acts.<sup>27</sup> These three centurions form a 'narrative chain' linking people of exemplary faith.<sup>28</sup> The first centurion appears in Luke 7:1-10, in the story where Jesus heals the centurion's slave from a distance. The Jewish elders whom the centurion sent spoke highly of him as one who cared for the nation and built a synagogue (7:5). This centurion claimed to be unworthy for Jesus to come under his roof (7:6). Whether the centurion's comment in this case was motivated by his understanding of Jewish purity codes is not the main question. Luke is concerned to highlight the centurion's faith, and Jesus' reaction solidifies that point: 'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith' (7:9). While this centurion does not explicitly confess Jesus as Messiah, Jesus' words about the centurion in Luke 7:9 are a strong indication of this centurion's faith.

The other major centurion outside of the passion narrative is Cornelius in Acts 10. Cornelius is depicted as a God-fearer whose prayers to God and charitable gifts to others 'ascended as a memorial before God' (Acts 10:2-4). Cornelius is the key figure who helps Peter

---

<sup>27</sup> These are not the only centurions to appear in Luke-Acts, but the three who have the most significant implications for our study. Outside of Luke 7, Luke 23, and Acts 10, centurions appear in Acts 22, 24, and 27. All of these centurions appear in the Pauline captivity narrative. Still, even these centurions who accompany Paul are put in a positive light, as they 'constantly play the role of protectors to the apostle who is threatened' (Marguerat, *First Christian Historian*, 53 n. 27).

<sup>28</sup> Marguerat, *First Christian Historian*, 52-53.

realise God's wider mission. Upon meeting Cornelius, Peter says, 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him' (10:34-35). This final major centurion in the narrative of Luke-Acts culminates the chain that, according to Marguerat, has three effects: '(a) it creates the continuity between the meeting of Peter and Cornelius and an action of Jesus; (b) it legitimates the favour of God towards Cornelius by the positive construction of the character of the "centurion"; (c) it prepares for the shock of the opening up of salvation to the Gentiles'.<sup>29</sup>

As with the centurion in Luke 7, Cornelius does not explicitly refer to Jesus as the Messiah; but more so than the story in Luke 7, this centurion in Acts 10 is swept into the widening move of the Spirit. While Peter is speaking to Cornelius and the other Gentiles with him, the Holy Spirit comes over those listening (10:44). This event offers a sure sign to the circumcised onlookers that the Spirit had been poured out even among the Gentiles (10:45). Recognising this movement of the Spirit among the Gentiles, Peter advises them to be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ (10:48). This baptism implies a messianic association, given that the baptism is in the name of Jesus *Christ*. Therefore, both the centurion in Luke 7 and Cornelius in Acts 10 function as prime examples of faith.

In line with the positive characteristics ascribed to other centurions in Luke-Acts, Luke's centurion at the cross serves as another Gentile who recognises something significant in Jesus, a significance that perhaps reaches beyond political innocence.

### 3.2 *Jesus as the Messianic Δίκαιος in Acts*

Doble treats δίκαιος in Acts, and a few additional comments press further for a messianic reading of the centurion's confession in Luke 23:47.<sup>30</sup> As mentioned above, Acts has three explicit cases where Jesus as Christ is connected with δίκαιος. Assuming an ongoing narrative in Luke-Acts, the centurion at the cross could be the first to use δίκαιος as a messianic confession about Jesus. Although readers of Luke have not yet encountered Acts' uses of δίκαιος, these later uses in Acts demonstrate retrospectively the import of the centurion's confession in

---

<sup>29</sup> Marguerat, *First Christian Historian*, 53.

<sup>30</sup> Doble, *Paradox*, 127-60.

Luke 23:47 and help illumine the possible christological nuance in the words from the centurion at the cross.

In Acts, the first use of δίκαιος of Jesus appears in Acts 3, where Peter calls Jesus the Holy and Righteous One:

The God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, after he had decided to release him. But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One (τὸν ἅγιον καὶ δίκαιον) and asked for a murderer to be given to you. But you put to death the pioneer of life whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses. (3:13-15)

Peter depicts Jesus as God's servant who was handed over. The irony of an innocent man's being exchanged for a murderer is not to be missed, but the force of Peter's rebuke goes deeper than this ironic observation. That δίκαιος in this case is more than 'innocent' is suggested by the collocation with ὁ ἅγιος ('the holy one') and the subsequent description of τὸν ἅγιον καὶ δίκαιον as the 'pioneer of life' who was raised. This language in Acts also has hints of an Isaian Suffering Servant narrative, which is addressed below. For now, we see Peter's speech in Acts 3 as a clear connection between δίκαιος and Jesus as Messiah.

Second, Stephen in Acts 7 calls Jesus ὁ δίκαιος: 'Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They also killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One (τοῦ δικαίου), whose betrayers and murderers you have now become' (7:52). The close association between 'coming' and Jesus in Stephen's speech is another christological theme in Luke-Acts which may suggest a messianic reading of δίκαιος. In Luke 7, John the Baptist's messengers are sent to ask Jesus, 'Are you the coming one (ὁ ἐρχόμενος) or should we wait for another' (7:19, 20; see also Matt. 11:3)? Likewise, Jesus is lauded as 'the King who comes (ὁ ἐρχόμενος) in the name of the Lord' in Luke 19:38 (see also Matt. 21:9; Mark 11:9). Given this messianic appropriation of 'the coming one', Luke's close connection between 'coming' and δίκαιος in Acts 7 is another factor supporting a christological reading of Luke 23:47.

Finally, the third use of δίκαιος in reference to Jesus appears in Acts 22:14. Paul is recalling his commissioning, and he describes coming to Ananias after meeting Jesus on the Road to Damascus. Ananias said to (then) Saul: 'The God of our ancestors has appointed you to know his will and to see the Righteous One (τὸν δίκαιον) and

hear a voice from his mouth' (22:14). Jesus is unequivocally called ὁ δίκαιος, and once again with a fuller connotation than politically innocent. Here ὁ δίκαιος is depicted as the God-sent one who will speak, as the Christ is so described (Luke 24:19, 26-27; perhaps also Acts 3:22-23; 7:37).

These three cases in Acts show a definite messianic sense behind δίκαιος. Δίκαιος in these cases carries a stronger connotation than mere innocence. Furthermore, especially with the first two examples, δίκαιος is mentioned along with other christological motifs (the Suffering Servant and the coming one). While we need not backload all of the significance of δίκαιος from later in Acts onto the centurion's words in Luke 23:47, the messianic appropriation of δίκαιος in the three places in Acts suggests that the centurion's confession in Luke 23:47 may be the first in a building association between Jesus and δίκαιος as Messiah in Luke-Acts.

### ***3.3 Parallels with an Isaian Suffering Servant Motif in Luke's Passion Narrative***

A martyrdom motif—as many supporters of the 'innocent' reading find—may be in Luke's passion story, but Jesus as an innocent martyr is not the only motif in play. Luke's passion narrative has hints of an Isaian Suffering Servant motif, where the servant is called δίκαιος (Isa. 53:11).<sup>31</sup> Beck and Doble both understand Wisdom (especially 2:12-20) and the Psalms (Doble only) as the model from which Luke derived his use of δίκαιος, but here I argue that Isaian parallels are stronger for our consideration of δίκαιος than Beck and Doble grant.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, in pressing for the presence of Isaian Servant parallels, we need not deny the presence of echoes from the Psalms or Wisdom. Indeed, it is quite possible that all three backgrounds informed Luke's narrative.<sup>33</sup> Here I highlight only Isaian Servant parallels in the Lucan

<sup>31</sup> To be sure, innocence and the Isaian Suffering Servant are not mutually exclusive, given that the Servant in Isaiah is clearly innocent (Isa. 53:9). On Jesus' innocence as further evidence of the Isaian Servant motif in Luke, see Robert F. O'Toole, 'How Does Luke Portray Jesus as Servant of YHWH?', *Biblica* 81 (2000): 328-46, esp. 331-32. Once again, therefore, I am not arguing that the centurion in Luke 23:47 does *not* think Jesus is innocent, but that he thinks he is *more than* only an innocent victim.

<sup>32</sup> Beck, 'Imitatio Christi and the Lucan Passion Narrative', 45-46; Doble, *Paradox, passim*; Peter Doble, 'Luke 24.26, 44 - Songs of God's Servant: David and His Psalms in Luke-Acts', *JSNT* 28 (2006): 267-83.

<sup>33</sup> So Green in his review of Doble: 'it is not evident why Luke's notion of "the Righteous One" must have been informed by only one source of [sic] model' (Joel

passion narrative that may (perhaps alongside the Psalms and Wisdom) elucidate our reading of the centurion's confession.<sup>34</sup>

Isaian Servant parallels appear in all three Synoptic Gospels.<sup>35</sup> Luke is also not unique in his appropriation of this servant theme, and may have adopted it from Mark and/or Matthew. To illustrate this point, we follow Marcus' findings with respect to Isaian Servant parallels in Mark's Gospel:<sup>36</sup>

<u>Mark</u>		<u>Isaiah</u>
14:10-11, 18, 41-42, 44; 15:1, 10, 15	handing over	53:6, 12
14:24	blood poured out for many	53:12
14:61; 15:5	silence before accusers	53:7
14:65	spitting, slapping	50:6
15:5, 39	amazement of nations and kings	52:15
15:6-15	criminal saved, innocent man delivered to murder	53:6, 12

Although Marcus does not press these parallels into Matthew, each of the Isaian parallels that he highlights in Mark also appears in Matthew's gospel:

<u>Matthew</u>		<u>Isaiah</u>
26:14-16, 21, 45-46, 48; 27:2, 18, 26	handing over	53:6, 12
26:28	blood poured out for many	53:12
26:63; 27:14	silence before accusers	53:7
26:67	spitting, slapping	50:6

---

Green, 'Review of Peter Doble, *The Paradox of Salvation: Luke's Theology of the Cross*' in *RBL [bookreviews.org]* [2000]).

<sup>34</sup> A number of interpreters understand Luke to be portraying Jesus as the Isaian Servant. See, for example: David Seccombe, 'Luke and Isaiah', *NTS* 27 (1981): 252-59, esp. 255-59; Joel Green, 'The Death of Jesus, God's Servant' in *Reimagining the Death of the Lukan Jesus*, ed. Dennis D. Sylva (Frankfurt am Main: Anton Hain, 1990): 18-28; O'Toole, 'How Does Luke Portray Jesus as Servant of YHWH?', 328-46; Peter Mallen, *The Reading and Transformation of Isaiah in Luke-Acts* (LNTS 367; London: T&T Clark, 2008): 123-31, 152-53.

<sup>35</sup> Stuhlmacher has argued that Jesus understood himself in light of Isaiah 53, and so the christological appropriation of Suffering Servant themes may not be the gospel-writers' invention (Peter Stuhlmacher, 'Isaiah 53 in the Gospels and Acts' in *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, ed. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004): 147-62).

<sup>36</sup> Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992): 189.

27:14, 54	amazement of nations and kings	52:15
27:15-26	criminal saved, innocent man delivered to murder	53:6, 12

Assuming Markan priority, Matthew appears to have adopted from Mark each of these Isaian parallels into his passion narrative.

Similarly, Luke has adopted this motif, albeit not at every point. Luke has one or two significant omissions. Adapting Marcus' table to Luke, we see that Luke does not include an explicit reference to Jesus' expiatory blood sacrifice at the supper<sup>37</sup> and he does not include the image of Jesus' mockers spitting at him.<sup>38</sup>

<u>Luke</u>		<u>Isaiah</u>
22:4-6, 21-22, 48; 23:1, 25	handing over	53:6, 12
[?]	blood poured out for many	53:12
23:9	silence before accusers	53:7
22:63-64	(beating only) spitting, slapping	50:6
23:47	amazement of nations and kings	52:15
23:18-25	criminal saved, innocent man delivered to murder	53:6, 12

Luke's gospel includes two particular elements that are absent in Matthew and Mark. First, Jesus in Luke 22:37 alludes to Isaiah 53:12: 'For I tell you that it is necessary for this Scripture to be fulfilled in me, namely: "And he was reckoned with transgressors." For what was written about me has its completion.' Green suggests that Isaiah 53:12 in Luke becomes 'a general allusion to Jesus' passion'.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Jesus is in fact 'reckoned with transgressors' both in his switch with Barabbas and in his death between two criminals.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Although Luke does not mention Jesus' expiatory sacrifice at the Supper, διακονῶν ('serving') occurs three times in the scene (22:26-27), where Jesus tells his disciples, 'I am among you as the one who serves (ὁ διακονῶν).' This service entails Jesus' suffering, as the bread and cup he serves are his body given and his blood poured out (22:19-20) (O'Toole, 'How Does Luke Portray Jesus as Servant of YHWH?', 337).

<sup>38</sup> Jesus in Luke does, however, expect to be spat upon: 'For he [the Son of Man] will be handed over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and mistreated and spat upon (ἐμπτυσθήσεται)' (18:32). On points of connection between Luke 18:32-33 and Isa. 50:6, see O'Toole, 'How Does Luke Portray Jesus as Servant of YHWH?', 330.

<sup>39</sup> Green, 'The Death of Jesus, God's Servant', 22-23.

<sup>40</sup> Mark L. Strauss, *The Davidic Messiah in Luke-Acts* (JSNTSup 110; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995): 331.

Second, Jesus is (mockingly) called ‘the Chosen One’ on the cross in Luke 23:35, when the onlookers sneered at Jesus saying, ‘He saved others; let him save himself, if this is the Christ of God, the Chosen One (ὁ ἐκλεκτός).’ Jesus is also called ὁ ἐκλεκτός in Luke 9:35, but this time from the lips of God in the transfiguration. Matthew and Mark do not include this language in their accounts (Matt. 17:5; Mark 9:7). Jesus as ὁ ἐκλεκτός may recall Isaiah 42:1, where God’s servant is described as God’s chosen one (ὁ ἐκλεκτός μου).<sup>41</sup>

Luke also connects Jesus to the Suffering Servant in Acts 3:13-16 and 8:32-33.<sup>42</sup> As noted above, Doble discounts any allusion to Isaiah’s Servant in Acts 3, arguing instead for δίκαιος in Wisdom as the source text,<sup>43</sup> but we can allow both passages as potential backgrounds.<sup>44</sup> Although Doble has questioned it, parallels to the Isaian Servant are striking. As Strauss writes, ‘The whole conceptual framework of the [Acts 3] passage points in this direction, with verbal parallels present in the glorification (ἐδόξαζεν, v. 13; Isa. 52:13), the “delivering up” (παρεδώκατε, v. 13; Isa. 53:6, 12) and the righteous suffering (δίκαιον, v. 14; Isa. 53:11) of God’s “servant” (τὸν παῖδα αὐτοῦ, v. 13; Isa. 52:13).’<sup>45</sup> The Isaian Suffering Servant is even clearer in Acts 8, where Luke employs a Suffering Servant text in the encounter between Philip and an Ethiopian eunuch.<sup>46</sup> Luke leaves his readers with no doubt that the slaughtered sheep in Isaiah 53:7-8 and Acts 8:32-33 is Jesus the Christ.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Strauss, *The Davidic Messiah in Luke-Acts*, 331.

<sup>42</sup> See also Acts 3:26; 4:27, 30, where Jesus is called God’s servant (παῖς).

<sup>43</sup> For his treatment of Acts 3:14 in particular, see Doble, *Paradox*, 151-56.

<sup>44</sup> So Seccombe, who understands Acts 4:27, 30 as referring to the messianic son of Ps. 2, but nevertheless emphasises, ‘This, however, only serves to illustrate an important point: unlike us the NT writers were not interested in clearly differentiated OT title-themes. They believed in the essential unity of OT theology so that ultimately the messianic son of Ps. 2 and the suffering παῖς of Isaiah are identical’ (Seccombe, ‘Luke and Isaiah’, 255-56).

<sup>45</sup> Strauss, *The Davidic Messiah in Luke-Acts*, 331. See also Green, ‘The Death of Jesus, God’s Servant’, 20-21; and Mallen, *The Reading and Transformation of Isaiah in Luke-Acts*, 126-27.

<sup>46</sup> For a response to Hooker with respect to the Suffering Servant in Acts 8, see Mikeal C. Parsons, *Luke: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007): 95-107.

<sup>47</sup> So Koet: ‘In Acts 8 Luke makes quite explicit what is hinted at in Luke 22: Jesus is modelled after the Suffering Servant’ (Bart J. Koet, ‘Isaiah in Luke-Acts’ in *Isaiah in the New Testament*, ed. Steve Moyise and Maarten J. J. Menken (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2005): 89). See also O’Toole, ‘How Does Luke Portray Jesus as Servant of YHWH?’, 328-46.

Therefore, Luke knows of a Suffering Servant narrative both in his passion story and in Acts. The Suffering Servant is innocent, but he is more than an innocent martyr. This messianic Suffering Servant in Luke-Acts is called δίκαιος in Isaiah 53:11, and our reading of the centurion's confession in Luke 23:47 can reflect this christological notion of δίκαιος.

### ***3.4 The Other Crucified Criminals in Luke's Passion Narrative***

Another significant variation between Luke's passion narrative and the narratives in Mark and Matthew involves the criminals on the cross. All three gospels picture Jesus between two robbers (ληστές in Matthew and Mark) or criminals (κακοῦργος in Luke). Luke is the only one who depicts a messianic challenge from the criminals. Mark's gospel features the robbers in only one verse (15:27), and they offer no insulting words.<sup>48</sup> Instead, in Mark, the only insults come from those passing by. In Matthew 27:44, both robbers hurl insults at Jesus, but readers do not know what they say.<sup>49</sup>

In Luke's account, Jesus as Christ is a central question. The scene in Luke depicts bystanders sneering at Jesus saying, 'Let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, the chosen one' (23:35). One of Luke's criminals on the cross derides Jesus: 'Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us' (23:39). The other criminal, however, appears to recognise that Jesus is indeed the Christ. He sees that Jesus is innocent (he says that Jesus did nothing wrong), but he sees in Jesus something more than mere innocence, as evidenced by his confident request: 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom' (23:42). Luke's readers are left with a sense of something larger than the death of an innocent person when Jesus answers, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise' (23:43).<sup>50</sup> Luke is the only gospel that includes this interchange between Jesus and the criminal. As Moessner writes, 'Coupled with the "evil doer's" confession from the cross, the

---

<sup>48</sup> The strongest manuscript evidence suggests the fulfilment of messianic prophecy as told in 15:28 is a later scribal addition.

<sup>49</sup> Matthew says that the robbers were using the same words as the other onlookers, who challenge whether Jesus is in fact 'the Son of God' (27:39-43).

<sup>50</sup> If there be any doubt, the whole land goes dark (23:44) and the temple veil is ripped in two (23:45) immediately following Jesus' promise.

linkage for Luke's auditors with the suffering righteous of the Psalms and *the* righteous servant of Isaiah 40-55 could hardly be missed'.<sup>51</sup>

Read alongside Mark and Matthew, the extent to which Luke's gospel employs the criminals in his story to make christological claims becomes that much clearer. In keeping with what the others say in challenge to and response to Jesus as Messiah, it is more likely that Luke's centurion uses δίκαιος christologically. In agreement with the criminal who asked Jesus to remember him, the centurion recognises Jesus as more than an innocent victim.

### ***3.5 The Centurion's Reaction in Luke: 'He Praised God'***

Finally, Luke's centurion is the only one said to react with praise. Mark's centurion says, 'Truly this man was the Son of God' after seeing how Jesus breathed his last breath. Matthew's centurion says 'This man was the Son of God' after being driven to fear by the earthquake and other things happening. Luke's centurion notices a singular happening (ἰδὼν ... τὸ γινόμενον),<sup>52</sup> but then praises God (ἐδόξαζεν τὸν θεόν)<sup>53</sup> and says, 'Certainly this man was δίκαιος.'

By 'praising God' (ἐδόξαζεν τὸν θεόν), the centurion reacts in the same way as others before him upon seeing God at work (Luke 2:20; 5:25-26; 7:16; 13:13; 17:15; 18:43; Acts 4:21; 11:18; 13:48; 21:20). Marshall finds theological import in the reaction, but he still opts for an innocent martyr reading: '[T]his is a favourite Lucan reaction to a revelation of divine power and mercy, and the estimate of Jesus which follows can be regarded as praise to God for the way in which Jesus died. In the death of Jesus the centurion sees the sacrifice of a martyr who has perished innocently.'<sup>54</sup> Marshall's conclusion, however, appears disconnected from his observation. After all, as Beck asks,

<sup>51</sup> David P. Moessner, 'Reading Luke's Gospel as Ancient Hellenistic Narrative: Luke's Narrative Plan of Israel's Suffering Messiah as God's Saving "Plan" for the World' in *Reading Luke: Interpretation, Reflection, Formation*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew et al. (Scripture and Hermeneutics Series, 6; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005): 125-54, here 146 (italics his).

<sup>52</sup> It is unclear what Luke's centurion noticed, but as Stenschke notes, he 'surely a) perceived the three hours of darkness during the brightest hours of the day [Luke 23:44], b) witnessed Jesus' manner of suffering this most cruel punishment and c) heard his *loud* cry before his death: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46)' (Christoph W. Stenschke, *Luke's Portrait of Gentiles Prior to Their Coming to Faith* (WUNT, 2.108; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999): 136, italics his).

<sup>53</sup> On ἐδόξαζεν τὸν θεόν in Luke-Acts, see Doble, *Paradox*, 25-69.

<sup>54</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978): 876.

'How could he [the centurion] consciously praise God for the execution of the innocent?'<sup>55</sup> In view of how ἐδόξαζεν τὸν θεόν is used elsewhere in Luke, the centurion sees more than the death of an innocent martyr, but 'recognizes the salvific hand of God at work in Jesus'.<sup>56</sup>

Therefore, a messianic reading of the centurion's words makes good sense of his praising God. The centurion's doxological reaction probably does indeed flow from observing the way Jesus died, but probably not from observing the death of an innocent victim. This centurion recognises Jesus as the messianic δίκαιος, and in expressing such faith he joins the ranks of the centurion in Luke 7, of whom Jesus says, 'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith' (7:9); and the centurion Cornelius in Acts 10 who helps Peter acknowledge God's wider mission to the Gentiles. This centurion's confession at the cross signals for Luke's readers the death of the messianic righteous one (δίκαιος) that warrants praise to God.

#### 4. Conclusion

This essay has attempted to highlight the messianic implications in the centurion's confession of Jesus as δίκαιος in Luke 23:47. Jesus as 'innocent' and Jesus as Messiah are not mutually exclusive; but for this centurion in Luke's narrative world, Jesus is more than simply politically 'innocent', but the Christ. Luke's centurion recognises something much more than the death of an innocent man caught in the gears of a political or religious machine. Instead, in Jesus, readers see the death of the messianic δίκαιος, the Suffering Servant of God, an event that should evoke praise to God. Whether the centurion knew it or not, in Luke's narrative world he is one of the first characters to recognise this crucified Jesus as the Messiah.

---

<sup>55</sup> Beck, 'Imitatio Christi and the Lucan Passion Narrative', 42.

<sup>56</sup> Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997): 827.