

J. HONG

## UNDERSTANDING AND TRANSLATING "TODAY" IN LUKE 23.43

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The problem of understanding and translating the word "today" in Luke 23.43 was first brought to my attention when I was helping with a translation project and did some checking with the local committee. Reviewers from the Adventist Church insisted that the Greek word for "today" *sêmeron* should be associated with the verb before it, "I say", and not with the following one "you will be". They objected to the translation "Today you will be with me in Paradise" because it would mean that the penitent robber's soul departed immediately from his body when he died on the cross to enter Paradise, thus lending support to the immortality and consciousness of the soul after death, a doctrine which the Adventists reject.

Luke 23.43 is part of the famous passage (23.39-43) about the two criminals crucified with Jesus. In NRSV we read:

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly; for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Obviously the textual problem in Luke 23.43 touches a number of important issues essential to Christian doctrine, on which different denominations may disagree with each other, issues such as the immortality of the soul, the coming of the Kingdom, the last things, and Paradise. Several articles have been published on the word "today" in Luke 23.43; there are many discussions as well in commentaries and books on Luke's Gospel. However it is important for us to be aware that a discussion of this sort may easily lead us to theological arguments and doctrinal disputes. Our main interest here is to find out exactly what Luke really intends to say with the word "today", and then to produce a translation which is faithful to that meaning and at the same time as acceptable as possible to all Christians. I will therefore try to approach the problem from the point of view of language and interpretation, and to concentrate on the text itself by comparing parallel texts written by the same author, or texts showing similar interests. Theological issues will only be touched on briefly when necessary.

### **A criminal with remarkable perception and faith**

As J. Dillersberger says in his book *The Gospel of St. Luke*, nobody

would question that the story of the penitent criminal is one of the chief beauties of Luke's Gospel. I.H. Marshall in his commentary calls this episode the core of the crucifixion narrative. What strikes us most is the changed attitude of the criminal and his remarkable faith at the critical moment. What is surprising about Luke's account is that he is the only gospel writer to report this incident and to highlight the penitent thief, among all the eyewitnesses of the crucifixion including Jesus' own followers, as the only person who really understands and believes that the dying Jesus is on his way to his power and glory as the Lord's Messiah.

This episode brings out again a theme which is dear to Luke: God's acceptance and love for all people, including the worst of humanity, and his salvation which is open even to the oppressed and people excluded from society. From the context we learn that the unrepentant criminal was following the example of the previously mentioned leaders (23.35) and soldiers (23.36) who ridiculed and mocked Jesus by challenging him to save himself.

We are not sure whether the two criminals were Jews or pagans, or in any way identified with a Zealot movement. We may think, however, that it is less likely for a pagan to recognize in Jesus the long-awaited Messiah. And the penitent criminal's acute sense of justice, his God-fearing attitude, and his sorrow for his own deeds seem to point to a sentiment nurtured in the Jewish traditions.

#### **A story found only in Luke**

As mentioned before, this story is found only in Luke. Although all the gospel writers tell of two men crucified with Jesus, only Luke makes a distinction between the different attitudes of the two. In fact, J.A. Fitzmyer observes in his book *Luke the Theologian* that regarding the crucifixion narrative, the four gospels have only two details in common: that there were two men crucified with Jesus, one on either side of him; and that there was an inscription announcing the charge against Jesus. Both Matthew and Mark record that the bandits kept mocking or cursing Jesus, but neither of them supplies the details of what the bandits actually said. John is even less informative and says nothing more than "and [were crucified] with him two others".

It is tempting to believe that Luke must have had at his disposal an account unavailable to the other gospel writers. Scholars are also inclined to see in this episode an expansion of Mark's brief account thanks to a private source known only to Luke or thanks to a later recollection of details, edited by Luke himself and written in his own style. For instance, Marshall observes that the Greek word *apolambanomen* ("we are getting what we deserve") is characteristic of Luke's special source. Some scholars observe certain similarities with other stories, like the story about the two sisters Martha and Mary, the conversion of Zacchaeus, and the parable of the praying Pharisee and tax collector. We will turn to these and other passages of similar interest in Luke's writings in order to find out whether they reveal particular characteristics of this gospel,

and whether they shed any light on the understanding of Luke 23.43 and the word “today”.

### “Today” in the Old Testament

Before considering Luke’s use of “today”, it is worth taking a brief look at the word as it is used elsewhere in the Bible outside of Luke’s writings. In the Old Testament the simple Hebrew word for “day” (*yom*) occurs about 1800 times, of which some 286 are rendered as *sêmeron* in the Septuagint; these are mostly occurrences of the fixed expression *hayyom* (“the day”) or *hayyom hazzeh* (“this day”). The term refers to the span of time between the present and sunset and a reality which is not just time at people’s disposal, but which also embraces all the activities and dealings between God and his people. The word is thus found particularly in the narrative books to signal momentous occasions.

The most conspicuous and frequent use of “today” in the Old Testament is in the Book of Deuteronomy, with at least 66 occurrences. In Deuteronomy “today” comes up repeatedly and solemnly to mark the great day of Moses’ farewell, a day of memory and expectation as Israel waits on the threshold of the promised land. In Deuteronomy 26.16-18 the word is repeated three times to highlight the actual time of decision between God and his people.

E. Fuchs in his contribution on *sêmeron* in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* says that “today” in the Old Testament announces the reality of what takes place or is obtained from God, whether on the one side as

- command (Exo 32.29; Deut 6.24)
- promise (Exo 14.13; Deut 1.10)
- blessing (Deut 11.26)

or on the other side as

- judgement (Deut 4.25-26; 8.19)
- curse (Deut 11.26)

It is “today” when what is decisive comes about (Gen 24.12, 42; 1 Kgs 2.3, 5) or comes to light (Gen 50.20; Deut 9.3). “Today” is fulfilment (Deut 2.18; 5.3; 26.3; 1 Sam 4.16) and revelation (Gen 40.7; Exo 14.13-14; 19.10-11; Lev 9.4), whether as salvation or disaster. When pronounced solemnly on a particular day, the word usually associates that day with the making of an oath or covenant.

### “Today”: a favourite word of Luke

A brief count reveals that among New Testament writers Luke is the one who uses “today” the most. The Greek word for “today” occurs in the New Testament 41 times, of which 20 are in Luke’s writings – almost half of the occurrences. Of these 20 occurrences, eleven are found in the Gospel (including one doubtful text) and nine in Acts. By comparison the word occurs eight times in Matthew, once in Mark, once in Romans, twice in 2 Corinthians, eight times in Hebrews, and once in James. The occurrences in Luke and Acts are as follows:

*Luke* 2.11; 4.21; 5.26; 12.28; 13.32; 13.33; 19.5; 19.9; 22.34; 23.43; 24.21

*Acts* 4.9; 13.33; 19.40; 20.26; 22.3; 24.21; 26.2; 26.29; 27.33

If we focus our attention on the occurrences in Luke's Gospel, we can see that of the eleven instances, eight are in sayings of Jesus, with the remaining three referring to the episodes of the angel's announcement to the shepherds, the exclamation of the onlookers about Jesus healing the cripple lowered from the roof, and the two men walking to Emmaus.

If we turn to Acts, we see that of the nine instances, seven are in the words of Paul, the remaining two being spoken by Peter and the Ephesian town clerk. Of Paul's sayings, one (*Acts* 13.33) is in fact a quotation from *Psalm* 2.7: "You are my son; today I have begotten you."

### **Two approaches to solving the problem**

Our concern is to determine whether "today" in *Luke* 23.43 is associated with the verb "say" before it, or with the following verb "will be". The early Greek manuscripts were written with no separation between words and no punctuation to mark division between phrases and clauses. Therefore it is possible, from a purely grammatical point of view, to take the word "today" in either way. To help resolve this problem, we will divide our following discussions into two approaches – language usage and interpretation of the text.

#### *1) A study of language and structure*

Since our problem arises from the word's relationship with its context, it is necessary to see whether its linguistic and grammatical context may help us reach a solution. I suggest using two features: the position of "today" in relation to the event it describes, and the verb tense used to refer to the event.

Our problem here is made more difficult by the flexibility of Greek word order – unlike English or French where word order has to be carefully observed because it is the position of each word which determines its grammatical function. What word order in a Greek text may reveal is where the writer places the stress or focus of the discourse. In other words, what is placed first in a unit of text is what the author wants to emphasize.

Since the word "today" is grammatically classified as an adverb which gives the time of a certain event, the word most closely related to it grammatically is usually a verb. If "today" is taken as related to "Truly I tell you", it then stands only at the end of the first clause and plays a merely informative and unstressed role of marking the time of telling. On the contrary, if it is associated with "you will be with me in Paradise", it acquires a prominent role of beginning the clause, and it highlights the theme that what Jesus is promising is immediately available.

We may be interested in studying the word-order relationship between "today" and its verb in the other occurrences, especially in Luke's writings. Curiously the findings reveal that apart from 23.43 Luke places "today"

before the related verb five times (Luke 4.21; 19.9; Acts 4.9; 13.33; 26.2 – of which one, Acts 13.33, is just a quotation from Psalm 2.7), after the verb twelve times, and once (Acts 27.33) in a structure without a directly related verb but with “today” placed toward the beginning of the clause. The remaining occurrence (Luke 24.21) is from a doubtful text and may be disregarded.

It is worth noting that of the five instances of the structure **Today + Verb** which are related directly to our problem, only two have the obvious structure of beginning the clause or sentence with “today” playing the emphatic role. (The others have “today” before the related verb but after other words such as a subject pronoun.) These two instances, which tend to support associating “today” with “you will be” in Luke 23.43, are:

Lk 4.21 Then he began to say to them [people in the synagogue in Nazareth], “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Lk 19.9 Then Jesus said to him [Zacchaeus], “Today salvation has come to this house ...”

In these two cases the Greek text itself is quite clear, because both occurrences follow the conjunction *hoti* which is the marker for the beginning of a statement. However there is no *hoti* in Luke 23.33.

If we take all the occurrences into consideration, we find that the structure **Verb + Today** outnumbers **Today + Verb**, especially in the Gospels and Acts; most instances of the structure **Today + Verb** are in the epistles, especially in the books of Hebrews and 2 Corinthians where it comes in quotations from the Old Testament or references to Old Testament text. Altogether there are 19 instances of **Verb + Today** against 16 instances of **Today + Verb**.

We may also be interested in considering the tenses of the verbs, and in knowing how often “today” is used in connection with a present event (as in the case “Truly I tell you today”), a future event (as in the case of “today you will be me in Paradise”), or even a past event. The findings reveal that, of the 38 instances where the tense of the event can be clearly identified or assumed from the context, the Greek present tense is used 19 times. Of the tenses which are used to refer to completed events, the Greek aorist tense is used 10 times and the perfect tense 5 times. And there are just 4 instances of the future tense.

As a preliminary observation we can say that as a rule “today” is placed after the related verb, but its occurrences in the New Testament are almost equally shared between both structures of before and after the verb, since there are in epistles such as Hebrews quite a number of Old Testament quotations which introduce statements with “today”.

The use of particular tenses does not seem to shed any more light on the relationship of “today” with its verb. If anything the findings seem to be in support of associating the word with a present event rather

than with a future one, though how immediate and instant this future event may be is yet to be defined.

## 2) *Interpretation in context*

The understanding of the word "today" in relation to its context in Luke 23.43 entails a number of presuppositions which are difficult to reconcile. Almost all English, French, and other major language versions take "today" as the beginning of the statement "you will be with me in Paradise" and not as the end of the previous one "Truly I tell you". A few commentators mention the possible acceptance of "Truly I tell you today", but they also underline the support for the first understanding by the majority of scholars. For instance, Plummer in his commentary says that to take "today" with "I tell you" is to rob it of almost all its force, whereas it is full of meaning when taken with what follows.

Although most scholars seem to agree that "today" refers to being in Paradise rather than to the action of telling, this view is not altogether free from difficulty. E.E. Ellis, for instance, notes that to take the text as referring to a person's soul journeying to heaven upon his death is apparently not in accord with Jesus' teachings elsewhere or with the general New Testament view of man and of death. Aside from such theological difficulties, there is also the difficulty of explaining how Jesus, who was still to be raised on the third day and to ascend to heaven only forty days later, could speak of himself being in Paradise on that very same day. And that is not to mention the problem of the apparent conflict with 1 Peter 3.19-20 where some people see a reference to Jesus' "descent to Hades" between his death on the cross and his resurrection three days later, preaching to the people who lived in the time of Noah. We should also consider the extent to which Luke had a theological intention in his use of "today", beyond the merely literal meaning which most people readily accept.

### **Paradise – a Persian walled garden**

Since "Paradise" is the other word essential to the understanding of the story, we should look at what it means here. The word "Paradise" itself is borrowed from Middle Persian meaning "a walled garden". It is thought to be a place of blessedness. When a Persian king wanted to show a special favour to one of his subjects, he made him a companion of the garden, to walk there with the king. W. Barclay points out in his commentary that we may understand that Jesus promised the penitent criminal more than immortality, he promised him the honoured place of a companion of the garden in the courts of heaven.

According to H. Bietenhard and C. Brown in the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, "paradise" is found 47 times in the Septuagint, mainly as the translation of Hebrew *gan* or *gannâh* "garden". Of these occurrences, thirteen are in Genesis 2 & 3, four in Ezekiel and three in Isaiah. In each case the reference is to the garden of God. In other instances like Nehemiah 2.8, Ecclesiastes 2.5, Song of Songs 4.13, it

has the meaning of “orchard” or “forest”. In time the word came to have a sense of referring to the end of time, as in Isaiah 51.3 where it refers to future bliss for God’s people. In later Judaism the word is thought to have been influenced by the Greek concept of the immortality of the soul and to be associated with the idea of an intermediate dwelling place for the righteous after death. In Jewish literature after the Old Testament period the term refers to the dwelling place of persons who had left the earth without dying, such as Enoch, or the righteous in the after-life.

The word “Paradise” occurs only at two other places in the New Testament: 2 Corinthians 12.4 where Paul boasts of his experience of the “third heaven” or “Paradise”, and Revelation 2.7 where reference is made to “the tree of life which is in God’s paradise” (thinking of Genesis 2.9 and especially Ezekiel 31.8). Since neither of these two other usages comes from Luke’s writings, their meanings do not shed any more light on the understanding of the word on the lips of Jesus in Luke’s Gospel. Nevertheless it is possible to think that Luke might have been influenced by the later Jewish usage, and that he might have adopted the term for his own account of Jesus’ unusual promise without necessarily taking it in its literal meaning. We may note that along the same lines in Jesus’ parable about the rich man and Lazarus (12.16-20) which only Luke records, he uses other terms – “bosom of Abraham”, “torment in Hades”, “chasm” – that are not intended to be taken in their literal meanings. Therefore regarding the understanding of “Paradise” in Luke 23.43, W.J. Harrington in his commentary says that the term offers no more than an image.

#### **The promise of an immediate salvation – echoes in Luke’s writings**

When we check through Luke’s writings, particularly his Gospel, we realize that salvation is a theme which occurs many times; and as far as Luke is concerned, salvation is available in the present and takes effect immediately. It seems that for Luke, any person being granted salvation is already enjoying it as a well-deserved right, without having to wait for it to become a reality. Dillersberger notes that Jesus’ promise to the criminal amounts to a full assurance of the complete bliss of heaven, without any period of waiting for cleansing and purification.

The two other similar passages recorded by Luke already mentioned above (4.21; 19.9) seem to confirm this view of salvation – that the era of salvation has already begun. In fact Jesus’ words to the penitent criminal can be taken as identical in content to his own confirmation of the fulfilment of the Scriptures, or to his promise to Zacchaeus: “Today salvation has come to this house.” Marshall identifies two other passages with a similar usage of “today” – the angel’s announcement of Jesus’ birth (2.11) and the amazement of the crowd on seeing Jesus heal the cripple (5.26). Both episodes point to the coming of Jesus’ reign and the fulfilment of his salvation.

There are other passages also in Luke which echo the writer’s eagerness to see an immediate fulfilment of Jesus’ promise of salvation without having to wait for his coming in glory in the future. The story

about the mission of the twelve disciples (10.1-12), also found only in Luke, shows the author's emphasis on the hastening of the coming of God's Kingdom. The parable of the rich fool (12.13-21), which is again found only in Luke, highlights the immediate consequence of a person's choice; the verdict "this very night you will have to give up your life" sounds strangely like Jesus' words to the criminal.

In 17.20-37 Luke focuses on the theme of God's Kingdom in Jesus' conversation with the Pharisees; and Luke's perception of this Kingdom is not bound by time or by space ("for the Kingdom of God is within you"). In this same conversation we are also impressed by the positive-negative contrast which is typical of Luke's teaching style: One will be taken away, the other will be left behind (17.34-36). Although this way of seeing God's saving power is not unique to Luke, it is found many times throughout his Gospel: the two house builders (6.46-49), the two sisters Martha and Mary (10.38-42), the faithful and the unfaithful servants (12.41-48), the praying Pharisee in contrast with the humble tax collector (18.9-14), and finally our hard-hearted criminal and his penitent companion.

#### **Luke's view of time: the present and the future merge**

In view of the apparent conflict or tension between the "already" and the "not yet" in Luke's writings (for instance, between "now" and "then" in 22.35-38), theologians try to understand Luke's view of time in terms of his concern for history. Luke is thought to be less concerned with history as a sequence of events which happen in a certain order than with history as a record of significant events. H. Flender in *St Luke: Theologian of Redemptive History* affirms that Luke has no notion of any redemptive history extending in time; for this gospel writer Christ being raised, that is, his resurrection, is already seen as the "consummation of salvation in heaven". Likewise Marshall thinks that Luke has "broadened out the time of the End" because he does not want to push this End into the distant future. Ellis, on the other hand, observes that Luke's view of the end of history ignores the "Platonic contrast of time and eternity"; likewise for Luke, the opposition between heaven and earth is not an occasion for speculation about the nature of the universe. What this opposition reflects is the contrast between the "seen" and the "unseen". Luke's view of heaven and earth is thus compared to two television channels showing different segments of the same car race. The action in one segment happens at the same time and is related to that in the other segment but the viewers of channel 1 do not see the action of channel 2.

In conclusion, it is quite possible to see in Luke's writings an intention to present God's salvation as a fusion of the present with the future. Marshall comments that "today" in Luke 23.43 is to be understood as referring to the "now" of salvation which people actually experience, rather than to a particular "today". As Ellis has hinted, Luke's usage of *sêmeron* "today" here does not necessarily refer to a 24-hour period or the particular calendar day when the crucifixion took place; it may be viewed as a technical expression for the accomplishment of Jesus' saving death



and his being glorified on the cross. In fact Luke seems more concerned about Jesus' exaltation than about the exact timing of his resurrection or its place in history. Fitzmyer suggests that Luke's writings seem to equate Jesus' death with an immediate entrance (24.26) into his glory or a raising up to God's right hand at that very time (Acts 2.33; 5.31) – an equation which is free from any concern about the distinction between body and soul and from any limitation as to time. So we have the expression “he became invisible from their sight” in 24.31 or “he appeared standing in their midst” in 24.36. According to Fitzmyer this view which takes no account of the elements of time and space could have been influenced by an early Christian tradition which plays down the earthly aspects of the resurrected Jesus but upholds the belief that Jesus passed directly from his humiliating death to his place of glory in heaven (see Philippians 2.6-11).

### Conclusion

After examining the context of the term “today” in terms of language and interpretation, it may be good to summarize the discussions above before we come up with any recommendation regarding the difficult term “today” in Luke 23.43. Our observations are as follows:

- From a strictly textual point of view, it is impossible to determine which of the clauses before and after it the word “today” should be associated with.
- A large majority of commentators prefer to associate “today” with “you will be with me in Paradise”. And almost all translations reflect this understanding, supported mainly by the simple argument that it is more logical and more natural to refer “today” to the fulfilment of Jesus' promise than to the time of telling. This explanation, however, leads to other complications in the understanding of death and of the nature of the universe.
- It undeniably makes more sense to associate the word with the following clause, rather than with the previous one. As far as the essential meaning is concerned, the core of the message lies in the second clause; the first clause “Truly I tell you” plays a somewhat supplementary role. Therefore to leave out “Truly I tell you” would not have altered the central message of the whole discourse and it would have said: “Jesus replied, Today you will be with me in Paradise.”
- The position of “today” in the order of words does not clearly help to indicate its place in the structure of the sentence, although the word is more often used in connection with a present tense and seems to favour an association with “I tell you”.
- Compared with all the other occurrences of “today” we have strong evidence of its use in conjunction with the idea that God's saving power is immediately available. This is particularly true within Luke's writings where the theme of the instant availability of salvation is in

focus. This usage agrees with the traditional sense attached to the solemn meaning of "today" in the Old Testament.

- It is worth noting that in Luke's writings, references to time may not have to be taken literally. Luke's view of the end has a particular sense in which it is not bound by conventional understanding of time and space. Just like the "today" in Luke 23.43, when Luke puts on Jesus' lips the words "from now on the Son of Man will be seated on the right of Almighty God" (22.69) uttered during the trial before the Sanhedrin, he is well aware that Jesus is still physically on earth and is yet to be condemned and crucified.

If translators and reviewers, after going through the observations outlined above, cannot agree on a translation acceptable to all because some of them reject linking "today" with "you will be" on the ground of their denominational position on the question of death and the soul, there may be one possible solution. That is to leave the question of the relationship of "today" open, put a comma both before and after "today", and omit the inner quotation marks. In English the translation may look like this:

He replied, "Truly I tell you, today, you will be with me in Paradise."

This is not an ideal solution, especially as it maintains ambiguity and goes against the normal usage of punctuation in English, but it may be acceptable in some other languages and help to break the deadlock.

It is undoubtedly important to be aware of what people think "today" in Luke 23.43 means. When working with Christian translators who reject any reference to the immortality of the soul, it may be helpful to remind them of the strong evidence within Luke's writings that favours linking the difficult word to the fulfilment of Jesus' promise and not to the time of telling. However it is also necessary to explain to them that references to time in Luke's writings, especially in connection with the theme of salvation, do not necessarily have to be understood in a literal sense. Just as Schweizer has noted, there is reason to believe that when Luke wrote this passage, no detailed thoughts about a life after death were intended.

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## THE SEVEN "OTHER" READABILITY TESTS

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*What makes a book readable? Not even your reading specialist knows for sure. And there is no completely reliable way to measure readability. But misconceptions about readability are so common, especially at the nontechnical level, that it might be useful to examine what readability is – and what it isn't.*

– Allen M. Blair