

DID GRECO-ROMAN APPARITIONAL MODELS INFLUENCE LUKE'S
RESURRECTION NARRATIVE? A RESPONSE TO
DEBORAH THOMPSON PRINCE

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In a recent issue of the *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, Deborah Thompson Prince argues that Luke deliberately draws on Greco-Roman literary models of apparitions in his resurrection narrative.¹ Prince examines four types of apparitions found in Greco-Roman literature: disembodied spirits, revenants, heroes and translated mortals. She then examines Luke's description of Jesus' resurrection appearances and notes that the appearances do not perfectly cohere with any of these models. Rather, whichever type of apparition one chooses as a comparison, Luke's description of the resurrected Jesus is both similar to and different from that type. From this, Prince concludes that Luke has intentionally incorporated all Greco-Roman models of apparitions into his resurrection narrative. According to Prince, Luke hopes that incorporating all models into his narrative will show 'the breadth and magnitude' of Jesus' resurrected presence, while the resurrection's differences from each model will show the reader that the resurrection cannot be confined to any one of the models familiar to Luke's Hellenistic readership.²

When Prince's argument is examined it becomes clear that the data she presents do not support her conclusion that Luke is interacting with Greco-Roman literary models of apparitions in his resurrection

1. Deborah Thompson Prince, 'The "Ghost" of Luke: Luke 24 in Light of Ancient Narratives of Post-Mortem Apparitions', *JSNT* 29 (2007), pp. 287-301.

2. Prince, 'Ghost', p. 297, writes, 'If, however, all possible models are incorporated, thereby displaying the breadth and magnitude of Jesus' resurrected presence, while at the same time the limitations of each model are highlighted, then the author is able to work within the parameters of the literary and cultural expectations of the audience to express a phenomenon that surpasses those expectations.'

narrative. Prince does show that the description of the risen Jesus in Luke is both similar to, and different from, the various types of apparitions found in Greco-Roman literature. Thus, for example, that Jesus enters a room unseen is consistent with disembodied souls, but inconsistent with revenant traditions; that Jesus ascends to heaven is consistent with translation/apotheosis stories and inconsistent with disembodied souls, heroes and revenants. However, Prince does not make a convincing case that these similarities and differences must be accounted for by positing that Luke has intentionally designed the similarities and differences. On the contrary, it is much more probable that Luke is not addressing Greco-Roman conceptions of apparitions at all; rather the similarities and differences are purely accidental.

Prince's argument is almost entirely dependent on the fact that the risen Jesus in Luke is consistent with some aspects of each Greco-Roman type of apparition but is in other respects different from each type. This fact is supposed to lead to the conclusion that Luke is consciously drawing on these models. However, it is essential to realize that any story of Jesus' resurrection, whether related by Matthew, Mark, Luke or John, or by any Christian at all in the first century, will be both consistent with and inconsistent with any given type of Greco-Roman apparition. This is because the notion of resurrection was not accepted among non-Jews,³ and thus by definition, any story of resurrection will bear some dissimilarity to any apparition story from the Greco-Roman world. However, because resurrection involves life after death, and the four types of apparitions examined by Prince also involve life after death, all five types (the resurrection plus the four types examined by Prince) address the same general topic (life after death) and thus, by definition, any story of resurrection will also bear some similarity to any apparition story from the Greco-Roman world. Hence, Prince's

3. I define resurrection, as distinct from other notions of the afterlife (such as immortality of the soul, resuscitation, translation and assumption), as the return to bodily life, on earth, in a body never to die again. Using essentially this definition, N.T. Wright (*The Resurrection of the Son of God* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003]), demonstrates thoroughly that resurrection was a Jewish idea rejected by the Greco-Roman world. Stanley E. Porter's attempt ('Resurrection, the Greeks, and the New Testament', in Stanley E. Porter, Michael A. Hayes, and David Tombs (eds.), *Resurrection* [JSNTSup, 186; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999], pp. 52-81) to make what he admits is the 'unorthodox' (p. 53) argument that resurrection is weakly attested in Judaism and accepted by some Greco-Roman writers is unconvincing and is essentially refuted by Wright's discussion.

argument appears dubious from the beginning, as it seems the same logic could be used to argue that all Christian accounts of the resurrection intentionally draw on Greco-Roman apparition types.

This problem becomes more explicit when we consider the details of Prince's argument. Prince lists eight characteristics and actions applied to Jesus in Luke, and shows how each of them is consistent with some aspects of each of the four types of Greco-Roman apparitions under consideration, but different from other aspects of each type. These characteristics are:⁴ (1) Jesus is dead; his tomb is known; (2) the tomb is found empty; (3) Jesus disappears; (4) Jesus enters a room unseen; (5) Jesus offers a visual inspection of his hands and feet; (6) Jesus offers a tactile inspection of his flesh and bone; (7) Jesus eats in the disciples' presence; (8) Jesus is taken up bodily to heaven.

At least six of these characteristics are not, in fact, exclusive to Luke's description of the resurrected Jesus, but are also attested by one or more of the other three Gospels and in some cases the pre-Pauline creedal material of 1 Cor. 15.3-8.⁵ With regard to (1), Jesus' burial is explicitly mentioned by all of the Gospel writers (Mt. 27.57-61; Mk 15.42-47; Lk. 23.50-56; Jn 19.38-42) and Paul (1 Cor. 15.4), thus it is clear that this fact appears in all four non-Lukan sources. Regarding (2), the empty tomb is also explicitly mentioned by Matthew (28.1-10), Mark (16.1-8), and John (20.1-10). While it is probably overstating the case to say that Paul implies historical knowledge of the empty tomb in 1 Cor. 15.3-8, it is true that the very concept of resurrection—that is, of a physical body being raised from the dead—requires that, since Paul accepted Jesus' burial, he would have believed on conceptual grounds that Jesus' tomb was empty, even if he had no specific historical knowledge to this effect.⁶ And if we find the arguments for the historicity of the empty tomb convincing,⁷ it is highly likely that the discovery of the

4. For the sake of simplicity, I refer to Prince's 'characteristics and actions' as simply characteristics.

5. For a thorough discussion of 1 Cor. 15.3-8, see William Lane Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, rev. edn, 2002), pp. 3-62.

6. Whether the tomb really was empty then depends on whether the location of Jesus' tomb was known; if the location was unknown and thus not able to be checked, Paul could have believed that Jesus was buried and rose (thus leaving an empty tomb behind) even though the body actually remained in the tomb.

7. For arguments in favor of the historicity of the empty tomb, see Craig, *Assessing*, pp. 255-74; and James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids:

tomb would have been part of the material related to Paul shortly after his conversion to Christianity.⁸ Thus the other three Gospels claim the same historical knowledge of the empty tomb as Luke, and Paul either himself had historical knowledge to this effect (if the empty tomb is historical), or at least believed that the tomb was empty. Regarding (4), Jesus' entering a room unseen is explicitly attested by John (20.19). Moreover, in Matthew Jesus appears suddenly to the women leaving the tomb (28.9) and there seems to be no ontological difference between a sudden appearance indoors (Luke and John) and a sudden appearance outdoors (Matthew).

Finally, characteristics (5) to (7): the details that Jesus offers a visual inspection of his hands and feet, offers a tactile inspection of his flesh and bone, and eats in the disciples' presence are also attested by John.⁹

Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 828-41. For criticism, see Jeffrey Jay Lowder, 'Historical Evidence and the Empty Tomb Story: A Reply to William Lane Craig', in Robert M. Price and Jeffrey Jay Lowder (eds.), *The Empty Tomb: Jesus beyond the Grave* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2005), pp. 261-306; Peter Kirby, 'The Case against the Empty Tomb', in Price and Lowder, (eds.), *Empty Tomb*, pp. 233-60. For a balanced discussion see Dale C. Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and its Interpreters* (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2005), pp. 299-336. According to Gary R. Habermas's survey of over 2,000 publications on the resurrection from 1975 to 2005 ('Resurrection Research from 1975 to the Present: What Are Critical Scholars Saying?', *JSHJ* 3 [2005], pp. 135-53 [141]), of those scholars who have argued either way, approximately 75% have favored one or more arguments in favor the empty tomb as opposed to 25% favoring one or more arguments against it.

8. In particular, we can assume that during the two weeks Paul spent with Peter, at which time he also saw James, the resurrection appearances and related matters (e.g. the empty tomb if there was one) were a frequent topic of conversation; it could hardly be otherwise for someone who had joined a movement centered on Jesus' resurrection, and who himself had experienced a resurrection appearance. C.H. Dodd (*The Apostolic Preaching and its Development* [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1944], p. 16) is right to remark that 'we may presume they did not spend all the time talking about the weather'.

9. In John, Jesus shows his hands and side (Jn 20.20), rather than his hands and feet, and a tactile inspection of his hands and side (20.27) rather than his 'flesh and bone', but the difference is hardly consequential for Prince's argument. Jesus eats in Jn 21.12-13 (although Jesus is not explicitly said to eat, the fact that Jesus prepares breakfast and invites the disciples to eat strongly implies that he ate as well).

Thus six of these characteristics apply not only to Luke's resurrection appearances, but in varying degrees, to the appearances in Matthew, Mark, John and Paul as well; John in fact attests to all six of them. Prince's argument, again, is that the presence of these characteristics in Luke indicates that Luke is intentionally evoking Greco-Roman apparition models. Thus, if her argument is applied consistently it leads to the conclusion that Matthew, Mark, John and Paul were intentionally evoking these models as well, unless there is some special significance to the two characteristics (3 and 8) which are exclusive to Luke; this will be addressed below. I presume that since Prince argues only for Luke's interaction with these models, she concedes that the other Gospel writers and Paul are not interacting with these models. But then, in the case of these four writers, the similarities and differences are merely accidental, not designed. What basis is there for thinking Luke is any different?

What of the two characteristics (Jesus disappears; Jesus ascends to heaven) that do appear to be exclusive to Luke?¹⁰ Is interaction with Greco-Roman apparitional models necessary to account for their presence? This is hardly so. There are Jewish traditions describing sudden disappearances of angels (e.g. Judg. 6.21), and Jesus' ascension, while similar to some Greco-Roman stories, also has plenty of Jewish antecedents. Jewish texts describe angels ascending to heaven (Tob. 12.21), Elijah's ascent in a chariot (2 Kgs 2.11), and the assumption of the bodies of Job's children (*T. Job* 40.3).

In fact, the Jewish parallels to the ascension raise a further point. Prince briefly mentions (p. 288) the fact that Judaism produced its own literature on post-mortem apparitions. However, she apparently does not realize how detrimental this is to her thesis. The four types of Greco-Roman apparitions enumerated by Prince are not, in essence, a distinctively Greco-Roman phenomenon. Disembodied spirits were clearly known to Jews (Deut. 18.11; 1 Sam. 28.4-19), as indeed they have been to virtually all cultures.¹¹ Revenants per se are not paralleled

10. However, one should not rule out the possibility that John's reference to a potential ascent of Jesus (Jn 20.17) does refer to the cessation of earthly appearances, just as in Luke (see Craig, *Assessing*, pp. 184, 222).

11. See Ronald C. Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead: A Cultural History of Ghosts* (London: Junction Books, 1982). On the general issue of ghosts in the ancient world, in addition to those works cited by Prince, 'Ghost', p. 288, n. 4, one may also wish to consult Sarah Iles Johnston, *Restless Dead: Encounters between*

in Jewish literature, but what Prince calls the closely related idea of dead persons returning to ordinary life certainly is (2 Kgs 4.18-37; Lk. 7.11-17; Jn 11.38-44). Likewise, Jews had their own stories of heroes appearing after death: not the mythical heroes of the Greco-Roman world, but exalted patriarchs (such as Jeremiah in 2 Macc. 15.13-16, and Job in *T. Job* 52.7). And translation stories were also known to Jews (Elijah in 2 Kgs 2.11; Job's children in *T. Job* 40.3). Thus, even if we were to grant the supposition that the overlap between the characteristics of Jesus in Luke and these four types of apparitions is intentional rather than accidental, that still would not establish that Luke was interacting with Greco-Roman literature. Since these four types of apparitions also appear in Jewish literature, one could just as easily argue that it is the Jewish literature with which Luke is interacting.¹²

At this point, we would do well to ask just what Luke's resurrection narrative should look like if in fact Prince is correct. The claim that Luke is interacting with Greco-Roman apparitions in the extensive manner suggested by Prince would be more plausible if there were large aspects of Luke's narrative that have parallels only in Greco-Roman apparitional literature and not in Jewish literature. For example, if Luke wrote that rather than leaving the tomb permanently upon returning to life, Jesus rose, appeared once, returned to the tomb again, and then rose permanently, here we would have a fact (the temporary return of the risen Jesus to the tomb) which makes no sense if viewed as an attempt to tell Jesus' story in traditional Jewish terms. However, it would make sense as an attempt to recall revenant traditions, for revenants typically return to the tomb after appearing. Likewise, it

the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); and Daniel Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A Sourcebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

12. The suggestion that Luke is interacting with the Greco-Roman models rather than their Jewish equivalents would be probable if one accepted the hypothesis, which was rather popular in older scholarship, that the resurrection narratives evidence a Hellenistic *Gattung*. However, this suggestion has little to commend it. See John Alsup, *The Post Resurrection Appearance Stories of the Gospel Tradition* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1975). One might also appeal to the fact that Luke is writing for a Greco-Roman audience as a basis for suggesting that, when in doubt, we should assume he has Greco-Roman conceptions in mind rather than Jewish ones. But, this is not a safe way to reason, for while Luke wrote for a Greco-Roman audience, it is fairly obvious that he still had access to plenty of materials originating in Jewish-Christian circles.

would be impressive if Luke had a number of clear allusions to specific Greco-Roman apparitional accounts. For example, if Luke related that Jesus appeared to a vinedresser four or five times in the forty days between his resurrection and ascension, this would seem a clear allusion to the story of Protesilaus's appearing to a vinedresser four or five times a month.¹³ If examples like these permeated Luke's resurrection narrative, that would be strong evidence that Luke did design his narrative as an attempt to interact with Greco-Roman apparitional literature. Are there any such indications in Luke? There appears to be only one, which takes us into Prince's handling of Lk. 24.36-43.

Luke 24.36-43

The title of Prince's article alludes to her opening discussion of Lk. 24.36-43. Prince uses this passage as support for her general thesis. The passage presents Jesus eating and offering his hands and feet to be touched, and as Prince concedes, most exegetes hold that Jesus' purpose for doing so is to prove that he is not a ghost. However, Prince argues that this interpretation is incorrect because (p. 288): '[Gregory] Riley clearly demonstrates that these proofs could be, and were, interpreted by early Christians to indicate the very opposite position: Jesus' resurrection was not a bodily resurrection.' When the page numbers from Riley that Prince cites are consulted, it appears that the only 'early Christian' who understood Jesus' offering his hands and feet to be indicative of a non-bodily resurrection was Marcion.¹⁴ Riley does not specifically mention any particular early Christians who understood Jesus' eating to be compatible with being non-bodily, but Riley implies that some Christians would have understood it as such because some stories of ghosts present the ghosts eating,¹⁵ and thus Jesus' eating does not clearly separate him from non-bodily ghosts. Thus, when Prince's argument is put in syllogistic form it looks like this:

1. Luke 24.36-43 is usually interpreted to mean that Luke has Jesus eating and offering his hands and feet to show he is not a ghost

13. Philostratus, *Heroikos* 11.3, cited by Prince, 'Ghost', p. 294.

14. Gregory J. Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered: Thomas and John in Controversy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

15. Riley, *Resurrection*, 67.

2. Some (relatively) early Christians (Marcion and unnamed others) interpreted this passage otherwise.
3. Therefore, the usual interpretation of Lk. 24.36-43 is wrong.

This argument is clearly a non-sequitur. From the fact that Marcion and other Christians believed Lk. 24.36-43 is compatible with non-bodily resurrection, it does not follow that the passage really is compatible. By the same logic, one could say that because Eusebius believed one could plausibly harmonize the resurrection narratives by postulating the existence of two Mary Magdalenes, therefore such a harmonization is plausible.¹⁶ That Marcion and others *believed* this passage is compatible with non-bodily resurrection is irrelevant to the question of whether it really is compatible. The question, then, is whether there is any legitimate exegetical basis for thinking that Luke does not understand Jesus' eating and showing his hands and feet to be evidence of Jesus' bodily resurrection against the disciples' idea that he was a ghost.

The only evidence Prince presents in this conjunction is to note that while most ancient texts agree that ghosts cannot eat, there are some exceptions. She then argues that because there are such exceptions, some readers would consider Jesus' eating compatible with Jesus being a ghost, and so Luke could not have intended Jesus' eating as a proof that he was not a disembodied spirit (p. 297). However, this is also a non-sequitur. From the fact that the proof Luke offers would not have convinced all readers, it does not follow that Luke was not trying to give a proof. If, as Prince admits, most writers believed that ghosts could not eat, then all that is necessary to suppose in order to maintain the standard interpretation is that Luke is among that majority who believed ghosts could not eat. The fact that not all readers would have found this evidence persuasive means at best that Luke has not presented a convincing refutation, not that he was not attempting to give a refutation. Hence, this argument is no reason to abandon the customary exegesis of Luke. In addition, Prince admits that ghosts are insubstantial and cannot be grasped or touched (pp. 290, 300). Thus, Jesus' offering his hands and feet to be touched seems a clear attempt to

16. See David Laird Dungan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem: The Canon, the Text, the Composition, and the Interpretation of the Gospels* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), p. 109.

correct the disciples' notion that he is a ghost, and Prince offers no evidence to contradict this.

We need, however, to return to the question of whether Luke contains any indications of non-Jewish Greco-Roman ideas about apparitions. This passage does seem to provide one such example. Since the ability or inability of ghosts to eat is a question addressed in Greco-Roman literature, this together with Luke's reference to Jesus' flesh and blood as a possible allusion to Homer's *Od.* 11.204-22, can be taken as evidence that Luke is indeed interacting with Greco-Roman ideas of apparitions in this passage. However, there should be two caveats here. First, Judaism had its own stories of ghosts, and Palestine, while avoiding outright syncretism with pagan religious beliefs, was still significantly influenced by Greco-Roman culture.¹⁷ Thus one cannot be sure the notion of ghosts not having flesh and blood and being unable to eat was confined to Greco-Roman conceptions of ghosts. But granting for the sake of argument that this notion was confined to Greco-Roman conceptions, and thus Luke is here utilizing Greco-Roman conceptions, this would only lead to the conclusion that Luke utilized Greco-Roman conceptions in addressing the specific issue of the disciples' mistaking Jesus for a ghost. But Prince's thesis is much broader than this, as she claims that Luke is interacting with all types of Greco-Roman apparitions in order to show how Jesus' resurrection goes beyond these types. Thus although Luke may be interacting with this one particular aspect of Greco-Roman conceptions of apparitions to address one particular issue, this is insufficient to support Prince's broader hypothesis. Hence, we have only one possible example of Luke using a concept related to Greco-Roman apparitions that has no parallel in Jewish literature. We do not find the numerous such examples we should expect to find on Prince's thesis.

In conclusion, Prince's thesis is untenable without satisfactory answers to three questions:

1. How can the similarities and differences between the risen Jesus in Luke and Greco-Roman apparition models be indicative of Luke's intentional evocation of these models, when the same sorts of similarities and differences are also found in Matthew, Mark, John and Paul, who are clearly not interacting with these models?

17. See Martin Hengel, *The 'Hellenization' of Judaea in the First Century after Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1989).

2. Even if Luke was intentionally evoking the four types of apparitional models enumerated by Prince, why should we think he was evoking the Greco-Roman forms of these models and not the Jewish equivalents?

3. Why, with one possible exception, is there nothing in Luke's account that makes sense only in relation to Greco-Roman apparitional literature, and not in relation to traditional Jewish ideas?