

HUMAN STONES IN A GREEK SETTING:  
LUKE 3.8; MATTHEW 3.9; LUKE 19.40

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How might newly converted or interested Greeks in Luke's real audience hear lines like the following?

God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham! (Lk. 3.8  
//Mt. 3.9)

If these [my followers] fall silent [from hailing me], the stones will cry out! (Lk. 19.40).

As we shall note, both of these sayings (and others like 'living stones' in 1 Pet. 2.5) make sense against a Jewish and often midrashic background. This Jewish background better informs Luke's sources (such as Q in Lk. 3.8) and theology than a Greek mythological background would. Commentators have, however, discussed that subject more fully, so I wish to explore here also the question of how the image could strike newly converted Greeks in light of their own traditions. Nevertheless, lest readers misconstrue my purpose, I will also explore the Jewish setting that undoubtedly informs the earliest use of these sayings. At the very least, the hyperbole would be intelligible to all hearers, both Jewish and Gentile.

*Active Stones*

Greek mythology supplied many stories of active or even human stones. For example, pagans had stories of people formed from stones<sup>1</sup> or dragon's teeth (especially in the stories of Jason and Cadmus).<sup>2</sup> After the

1. E.g. Ovid, *Metam.* 1.393-394, 400-415.

2. Aeschylus, *Sept.* 412-413; Apollonius of Rhodes 3.1355-57; Apollodorus, *Bib.* 1.9.23; 3.4.1; Ovid, *Metam.* 3.101-130; 7.121-130; *Her.* 6.33; Valerius Flaccus 7.76; Seneca, *Med.* 169, 470.

primeval flood, the earth was repopulated by Deucalion and Pyrrha throwing stones, which sprang into people.<sup>3</sup>

They also had many stories of people turned into stones by gods.<sup>4</sup> In addition, fear could transmute people into stone;<sup>5</sup> the majority of such stories are associated with seeing the Gorgon Medusa.<sup>6</sup> Other creatures also were changed into stone.<sup>7</sup> (Many of these stories come from Ovid, not surprising in view of his subject matter.)<sup>8</sup> Such stories were not uniquely Greek; a twelfth-century BCE Egyptian manuscript portrays Horus transforming his mother Isis into a statue of flint;<sup>9</sup> other cultures also have the original humans being formed from rock as well as various other substances.<sup>10</sup>

Such stories also belonged to a wider environment in which sorcerers were believed to be able to transform one substance into another (cf. Lk. 4.3//Mt. 4.3). Magicians typically sought to transform one substance into another to demonstrate their power over nature.<sup>11</sup> Such

3. Apollodorus, *Bib.* 1.7.2; Statius, *Thebaid* 8.305. Apollodorus's Greek includes a wordplay not unlike the Aramaic one probably employed by John the Baptist: people (λαός) from stone (λίθος), which is λίθος.

4. Homer, *Il.* 24.611; *The Great Eoiae* 16; Ovid, *Metam.* 2.696, 705-707, 830-832; 4.276-278, 551-560; 10.241-242.

5. Ovid, *Metam.* 9.224-225 (probably adding this twist, with or without a source, to Sophocles, *Trach.*); 10.67-68.

6. Pindar, *Pyth.* 10.47-48; Apollodorus, *Bib.* 2.4.2; Ovid, *Metam.* 4.180-209, 230-235, 248-249, 655-660; Lucian, *Dom.* 19; *Imag.* 1; 14; probably Pindar, *Dithyramb* 4, frg. 70d.41 (from *P. Oxy.* 2445). See further Jan N. Bremmer, 'Gorgo', in Hubert Cancik et al. (eds.), *Brill's New Pauly: Encyclopedia of the Ancient World* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002-), V, pp. 937-38. (938). Viewing the Medusa's head could also transmute other creatures into stone, such as a monster Perseus opposed; see Lucian, *Dialogues of Sea-Gods* 323-324 (14, *Triton and Nereids* 3); Philostratus the Elder, *Imag.* 1.29.

7. *Epigoni* frg. 3 (Photius, *Lex.*, *Suda* s.v. Τευμησία); Ovid, *Metam.* 11.59-60, 404; 12.22-23; 14.72-74.

8. Given Ovid's subject matter (*Metam.* 1.1-2) he probably does introduce some of these 'metamorphoses' into tradition; but he had little reason to *choose* this subject matter if some metamorphoses did not already appear in his sources.

9. Cyrus H. Gordon, *The Common Background of Greek and Hebrew Civilizations* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1965), p. 126.

10. E.g. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophies* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), p. 71.

11. E.g. Homer, *Od.* 10.239-240; Ovid, *Metam.* 14.414-415; *p. Hag.* 2.2, §5; *Sanh.* 6.6, §2.

magical practices might be understood as usurping or manipulating divine prerogatives, for in pagan tradition it was most often deities that metamorphosed a substance<sup>12</sup> or person<sup>13</sup> into something else, or sometimes transformed themselves.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, magicians sometimes were thought to metamorphose themselves or others, especially into animals,<sup>15</sup> an idea associated with witchcraft in some other traditional cultures known today.<sup>16</sup> At least in fanciful tales, witches were also thought able to turn a person into stone.<sup>17</sup>

Greek mythology could also accommodate images such as stones crying out (Lk. 19.40). Orpheus moved even trees, rocks and stones, often inspiring them to follow him.<sup>18</sup> Even stones hurled at Orpheus were charmed and fell at his feet, unable to strike, so long as they could hear his music.<sup>19</sup> The walls of Thebes were formed as rocks voluntarily came together, obeying a divine command.<sup>20</sup> Jewish apocalyptic

12. Homer, *Od.* 13.162-163.

13. Besides references above, see e.g. Hesiod, *Astronomy frg.* 3; *Aegimius* 3, cited in Apollodorus, *Bib.* 2.1.3.1; Euripides, *Bacch.* 1330-1332; Longus 1.27.

14. Homer, *Od.* 4.417-418; Ovid, *Metam.* 1.548-552.

15. Ovid, *Am.* 1.8.13-14; Lucian, *Asin.* 4, 12, 54; Apuleius, *Metam.* 1.9; 2.1, 5, 30; 3.21-25; 6.22; Pseudo-Callisthenes, *Alex.* 1.10; Barry L. Blackburn, 'Miracle Working ΘΕΙΟΙ ΑΝΔΡΕΣ in Hellenism (and Hellenistic Judaism)', in David Wenham and Craig Blomberg (eds.), *The Miracles of Jesus* (Gospel Perspectives, 6; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986), pp. 185-218 (190, 193). Some may have been skeptical of such alleged metamorphoses (Pausanias 1.41.9). Some later rabbis believed they themselves had harnessed God's creative power (e.g. *Ab. R. Nat.* 25 A; *Exod. Rab.* 52.3), or portrayed God's activity on the analogy with magicians (Peter Hayman, 'Was God a Magician? Sefer Yesira and Jewish Magic', *JJS* 40 [1989], pp. 225-37); in another later source with magical tendencies some harnessed demons to do their bidding (e.g. *Test. Sol.* 7.8).

16. E.g. Mbiti, *Religions*, pp. 256-58; John Anenechukwu Umeh, *After God is Dibia* (London: Karnak House, 1999), p. 132; Andras Zempleni, 'From Symptom to Sacrifice: The Story of Khady Fall', in Vincent Crapanzaro and Vivian Garrison (eds.), *Case Studies in Spirit Possession* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1977), pp. 87-140 (99).

17. Lucian, *Asin.* 4.

18. Apollodorus, *Bib.* 1.3.2; Ovid, *Tristia* 4.1.17-18; Dio Chrysostom, *Cel. Phryg.* 35.9; Menander Rhetor 2.17, 443.3-6. Similarly, though not on the same level, Hermes gave Amphion a lyre, and the stones followed it (Apollodorus, *Bib.* 3.5.5; Menander Rhetor 2.17, 443.6-9). In a probably etiological tale, Orpheus gave rocks in a particular area a special sound (Philostratus, *Hrk.* 33.28).

19. Ovid, *Metam.* 11.10-13.

20. Statius, *Thebaid* 7.665.

sources also portray stones speaking<sup>21</sup> or bleeding,<sup>22</sup> presumably reflecting the broader context of Roman prodigies in which statues would speak,<sup>23</sup> weep,<sup>24</sup> turn,<sup>25</sup> bleed<sup>26</sup> or sweat.<sup>27</sup> But the genre of neither the Gospels nor Palestinian Jewish prophets' speech fits Greek mythography,<sup>28</sup> and probably neither fits the genuine apocalyptic genre with its heavenly revelations, though there are clear apocalyptic elements in both.

### *Figurative Usage*

Although such mythological images may have remained in the back of Gentile hearers' minds, they probably would have rightly understood the image figuratively. By the early empire, many understood such stories of metamorphoses as nothing more than harmless entertainment, except where cities associated with some stories insisted on them as matters of local pride.<sup>29</sup>

21. 4 *Ezra* 5.5.

22. Rocks in *Sib. Or.* 3.804.

23. E.g. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 8.56.2 (in David Aune, *Revelation* [3 vols.; WBC, 52, 52b, 52c; Dallas: Word Books, 1997], p. 762); Valerius Maximus 1.8.3-4; Plutarch, *Cam.* 6.1; for Memnon's statue, see Callistratus, *Descriptions* 9; Philostratus, *Hrk.* 26.16; cf. Rev. 13.13-15; Steven J. Scherrer, 'Signs and Wonders in the Imperial Cult: A New Look at a Roman Religious Institution in the Light of Rev 13:13-15', *JBL* 103 (1984), pp. 599-610. Some, like Lucian, ridiculed such accounts (see Lucian, *Alex.* 26; D. Felton, 'The Animated Statues of Lucian's *Philopseudes*', *Classical Bulletin* 77 [2001], pp. 75-86).

24. Livy 43.13.4; Lucan, *C.W.* 556-557.

25. Plutarch, *Cam.* 6.3; Aune, *Revelation*, p. 762, cites Dio Cassius 41.61; 54.7. Cf. also spears moving in a temple (Aulus Gellius, *Noct. Att.* 4.6.2).

26. Livy 27.4.14; Appian, *Bell. civ.* 4.1.4; or part of the statue could fall (Livy 27.11.3; Suetonius, *Galb.* 1).

27. Julius Caesar, *C.W.* 3.105; Appian, *Bell. civ.* 2.5.36; 4.1.4; Plutarch, *Cam.* 6.3; Philostratus, *Hrk.* 19.4; Aune, *Revelation*, p. 762, cites here Cicero, *Div.* 1.43.98. Hair growing on a statue also constituted an omen (Livy 32.1.10).

28. See, e.g., Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (SNTSMS, 70; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992); Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 16-34; Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), pp. 3-34 (esp. pp. 8-9).

29. Lucian, *Philops.* 2-5 (esp. 2).

More significantly, others had already adapted such mythological images for the service of hyperbole. Both before and after this period, one could use such language figuratively,<sup>30</sup> a usage possibly sufficiently familiar as to be recognized. Thus, for example, Cicero charged that Verres' cruelty was so terrible that if he told this account even 'to the stones and rocks of some lonely desert waste, cruelty and injustice so awful as this would rouse sympathy even in the world of mute and lifeless things'.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, a second-century orator declared that the Nile's seven mouths would cry out, if it could speak like Homer's portrait of the Scamander.<sup>32</sup>

Scholars have previously cited other examples, such as a person unable to reply adequately being said to be 'thus dumbfounded into stone',<sup>33</sup> or one promising another that a stone would reveal his secrets sooner than the promiser would.<sup>34</sup> In a form particularly relevant for Lk. 19.40, such hyperbole appears in Cicero, where eloquence could move even stones to weep<sup>35</sup> and, most helpfully, one's arrival to a city might be celebrated not only by people but even by the city's 'walls, build-ings, and temples'.<sup>36</sup> A Gentile audience could have recognized the hyperbole, even if mythology unconsciously shaped their mental images of it (as images of Orpheus may have informed even Cicero's depiction of eloquence moving stones).

Other potential Greek explanations seem less likely to have been in the forefront of most hearers' thoughts. Being sprung from a stone or an oak may have also been an ancient Mediterranean idiom for not being well-born;<sup>37</sup> this image might be more relevant, except that it is not clear how widely the idiom circulated outside classical and literary Greek. Some also mocked Stoic syllogisms, portraying them as treating

30. Later, e.g. Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 8.345b (of the Medusa turning people to stone).

31. Cicero, *Verr.* 2.5.67.171.

32. Aelius Aristides, *Defense of Orat.* 351, §117D.

33. Plato, *Symp.* 198C.

34. Ovid, *Metam.* 2.696-697 (the man is lying).

35. Cicero, *De or.* 1.245.

36. Cicero, *Pis.* 52, cited by Brent Rogers Kinman, "'The stones will cry out'" (Luke 19,40)—Joy or Judgment?', *Bib* 75 (1994), pp. 232-35 (235). In the article, Kinman treats several views of Lk. 19.40 and favors the celebration interpretation over the judgment interpretation.

37. Homer, *Od.* 19.163; cf. LCL 2.246-247, n. a (citing Homer, *Il.* 22.126; Hesiod, *Theog.* 35; Plato, *Apol.* 34D; *Resp.* 544D).

a human like a stone (identifying both as substances);<sup>38</sup> but this satire against Stoics was probably not widespread enough to come to hearers' minds the way the mythological images would.

### *The Jewish Setting*

John the Baptist's warning about God raising up children to Abraham from stones makes good sense in its literary context and Jewish cultural setting. John has just declared that his hearers are offspring, not of Abraham, but of vipers.<sup>39</sup> Jewish people believed they were chosen in Abraham (cf. Neh. 9.7; Mic. 7.20),<sup>40</sup> but John responds that this ethnic chosenness is insufficient to guarantee salvation unless it is accompanied by righteousness (cf. Amos 3.2; 9.7).<sup>41</sup>

But John's words make the best sense in his own setting in Jewish Palestine: prophets were not above using witty wordplays at times (Amos 8.1-2; Mic. 1.10-15; Jer. 1.11-12), and 'children' and 'stones' probably represent a wordplay in Aramaic, as commentators frequently observe.<sup>42</sup> (Some suggest that the 'stone' rejected by the 'builders' in

38. Lucian, *Vit. auct.* 25.

39. This declaration probably plays on the image of parent-murder in antiquity; see Craig S. Keener, "'Brood of Vipers' (Matt 3:7; 12:34; 23:33)", *JSNT* 28 (2005), pp. 3-11.

40. See further E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), pp. 87-101; Marcus J. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (SBEC, 5; New York: Edwin Mellen, 1984), p. 207.

41. That this passage repeats the Targumic image of Abraham making converts (Matthias Delcor, 'La portée chronologique de quelques interprétations du Targoum Néofyti contenues dans le cycle d'Abraham', *JSJ* 1 [1971], pp. 105-19) seems less likely. Jewish people regularly viewed themselves as 'the children of Abraham' (e.g. *4 Macc.* 6.17, 22; 18.1; *b. Ber.* 6b).

42. E.g. T.W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979; reprint of London: SCM Press, 1957), p. 40; A.W. Argyle, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), p. 36; Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on his Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 47; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13* (WBC, 33a; Dallas: Word Books, 1993), p. 50.

the passion narrative might reflect a similar wordplay behind Mk. 12.10.)<sup>43</sup>

If God created humanity from earth (Gen. 1.24; 2.19-22), creation from stones would not be a problem;<sup>44</sup> even with this background, the wordplay would offer incentive to speak of stones rather than dust. Given the connection with Abraham, however, John's language undoubtedly primarily evokes other symbolic uses of stones associated with the people of God. Scripture had long used stones to symbolize God's people (Exod. 24.4; 28.9-12; Josh. 4.20-21; 1 Kgs 18.31) or covenants (Gen. 31.46; Josh. 4.20-24); John's hearers thus should have understood his language clearly. Other early Jewish Christian texts echo this view that God is so sovereign that he can choose the elect even on a basis that contradicts Israel's view of the covenant (cf. Rom. 9.6-29).<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, Jews would not question God's 'power' to raise up stones. In Nehemiah's day, Israel's enemies mocked the Judeans building the wall; could they 'bring stones to life'? (Neh. 4.2; MT 3.34). They spoke of reusing the rubble of Jerusalem to build something new (an image perhaps relevant to Luke 19; see discussion below). Nehemiah's larger narrative inverts the challenge: as Jerusalem's walls did in fact rise, so God is able to do anything.

Likewise, the image in Lk. 19.40 fits its context. In the scene immediately following, Jesus warns that not one stone will remain on another in Jerusalem (Lk. 19.44). Moreover, soon after these words Jesus warns that not one stone will remain on another in the temple (Lk. 21.5-6). Between these references, Jesus implies that he is the key stone for God's building (Lk. 20.17-18; cf. Acts 4.11), using explicit Scripture (Ps. 118.22) and probably a biblical allusion as well (Dan. 2.44-45). The image of Jesus' followers as a new temple is pervasive enough in early Christianity (1 Cor. 3.16-17; 6.19; Eph. 2.18-22; 1 Pet. 2.5-7; Rev. 3.12) to suggest an early and authoritative source behind them.

43. Brad H. Young, *Jesus the Jewish Theologian* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), p. 219, suggests a play among 'sons' (*banim*), 'builders' (*bonim*), and 'stones' (*avanim*).

44. Although the biblical tradition lacked stones turned into people, the biblically literate could have thought of something like the reverse in Lot's wife becoming a pillar of salt (Gen. 19.26).

45. Others also note this comparison, e.g. Klaus Haacker, *The Theology of Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 105.

Because the marked quotation (Ps. 118.22) belongs to the Hallel, I have argued that the gospel tradition rightly places these words at the Passover season, and that the tradition is early.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, there is little dispute today that the image of a new temple fits an early Jewish setting, given this image and analogous ones in Qumran texts.<sup>47</sup> Although the specific image in Lk. 19.40 is not attested more than once, neither is it at all inexplicable in a Jewish setting.

The tradition of Jesus' sayings supplies a ready example for stone hyperbole in his own teaching: in the time of the temple's destruction, not one stone would be left on another (Mk. 13.2, used in both Lk. 19.44 and 21.6). Some stones were in fact left on others, but the language provided a graphic (though not in this case personified) hyperbole. Stones are so common in Palestine that they provided an obvious image, one that also leaves its mark occasionally elsewhere in the gospel tradition (e.g. Mt. 4.3, 6//Lk. 4.3, 11; other texts noted above).<sup>48</sup>

### *Conclusion*

As I have noted, my purpose in this article is not to claim that the Greek traditions above reflect the original sense of the sayings. Given Luke's explicit interest in narrating his story as part of Israel's larger story,

46. Keener, *Matthew*, pp. 490, 509-10, 515, and sources noted there.

47. E.g. 1QS 8.5, 8-9; 9.6; CD 3.19A; 2.10, 13B; 4Q511 frag. 35, lines 2-3; more fully, Bertril Gärtner, *The Temple and the Community in Qumran and the New Testament: A Comparative Study in the Temple Symbolism of the Qumran Texts and the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), pp. 20-46; David Flusser, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1988), pp. 37-39; F.F. Bruce, 'Jesus and the Gospels in the Light of the Scrolls', in Matthew Black (ed.), *The Scrolls and Christianity: Historical and Theological Significance* (London: SPCK, 1969), pp. 70-82 (76); Max Wilcox, 'Dualism, Gnosticism, and Other Elements in the Pre-Pauline Tradition', in Matthew Black (ed.), *The Scrolls and Christianity*, pp. 83-96 (93-94); E.P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE-66 CE* (London: SCM Press; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), pp. 376-77; but cf. suggested qualifications in André Caquot, 'La secte de Qumrân et le temple (Essai de synthèse)', *RHPR* 72 (1992), pp. 3-14. The claims for 4QFlor (e.g. Gärtner, *Temple*, pp. 30-42) have proved less persuasive. See Allan J. McNicol, 'The Eschatological Temple in the Qumran Peshet 4QFlorilegium 1.1-7', *OJRS* 5 (1977), pp. 133-41; Daniel R. Schwartz, 'The Three Temples of 4QFlorilegium', *RevQ* 10 (1979), pp. 83-91.

48. Perhaps Mt. 7.9, if this is not Matthew's own adaptation of Q (Lk. 11.11-12 differs).



indicated by many marked quotations and biblical allusions, Luke himself presumably was interested primarily in biblical rather than Greek mythological traditions here. When we ask how early auditors may have heard Luke's story, however, we must consider the possibility that stories of rocks literally becoming human may have informed the images in some of their minds, although they probably understood such images metaphorically. Luke's ideal audience was biblically literate, but given the likely continuing success of the Gentile mission, this ideal probably did not reflect every member of his work's actual audience.<sup>49</sup>

Greeks and Romans had many stories of metamorphoses, including of rocks and similar substances being turned into people, as well as people being turned into stone. Although probably less often heard than the stories themselves, the application of such images for hyperbole was probably common enough that it would be understood figuratively in this case.

49. Given the biblical literacy of the church fathers, one would not expect such a reading to have left much of an extant mark in early reception history (e.g. Augustine, *Tract. Ev. Jo.* 42.5.2, associates the stones with idols worshiped by Gentiles). But I can offer one example of mythology informing a biblically illiterate first reader of the text: in my first reading of the Gospels in 1975, I knew much more about Greek mythology than about Scripture, hence intuitively (not deliberately) imagined the text accordingly.