

# Difficult texts: the Christology of the Centurion's words in Luke 23.47

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**Rob James**

Wells Cathedral, UK

## Abstract

The words uttered by the Centurion present at the death of Jesus in Luke's Gospel represent a deliberate change to Luke's inherited material. The choice of whether to understand the key word in Luke's phrasing as 'innocent' or 'righteous' has huge implications for the weight which we might give to this rephrased exclamation. It is suggested that Luke intended this word to be understood as 'righteous'. Understood in this way, the Centurion's words become a Christological statement about the divinity that is present in Jesus.

## Keywords

Centurion, death of Jesus, innocent, Luke's Gospel, righteous

The Centurion present at Jesus' death features in all three Synoptic Gospels. However, the words we hear from his lips are different in all three. There is a lot of similarity between the words found in Mark and Matthew, but Luke has something quite different. In this discussion, we consider how to understand Luke's text, which seems to represent a deliberate change to the tradition he inherited from at least Mark, and possibly from wider tradition too. We will see that the wording in Luke is used to make an important Christological point.

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## Corresponding author:

Rob James

Emails: [chancellorofwells@gmail.com](mailto:chancellorofwells@gmail.com); [rjames@vst.edu](mailto:rjames@vst.edu)

In Mark 15.39, the Centurion says, 'Truly, this man was God's son.'<sup>1</sup> In a similar, though shorter, manner, the same character in Matthew 27.54 says, 'Truly, this was God's son.' By way of contrast, at Luke 23.47, we find the Centurion saying, 'Certainly, this man was righteous.' If we accept the conventional wisdom that Luke copied material from at least Mark, then it is reasonable to compare at least these two texts. In doing this, we see two main differences – the identification of Jesus as 'God's son' or as 'righteous' and the adverb, 'truly' or 'certainly', that begins the phrase. This is in no way to suggest that Luke did not think that Jesus was God's son; this is made abundantly clear elsewhere in his text. However, the fact that an authorial choice has been made to use a different phrase indicates that this phrase is intended to be theologically meaningful. Exactly what this meaning might be depends heavily on how the reader is to understand the word δίκαιος (*dikaios*), which has been translated as 'righteous' above.

The NRSV translates Luke's Centurion as saying 'Certainly this man was innocent,' whereas the NIV is closer to the translation proposed here: 'Surely this was a righteous man.' The main point of difference is whether to use 'innocent' or 'righteous'. Other translations are also available, with the *New Jerusalem Bible* having 'Truly, this was an upright man,' which seems to obfuscate the change of adverb as well as hedging its bets on the key translation question, while arguably coming closer to 'innocent' than to 'righteous', which remain the main contenders for translation. In the first half of the twentieth century, the translation 'innocent' came to prominence and was heavily supported by G. D. Kilpatrick in an article in 1942. He suggested that the change from Mark's text was made so that Luke could emphasize Jesus' lack of guilt.<sup>2</sup> R. P. C. Hanson immediately published a rebuttal of this claim, pointing out that there is no other use in Luke of *dikaios* meaning 'innocent' rather than 'righteous'.<sup>3</sup> Hanson added that the realization that he had just executed a merely innocent man would hardly be an occasion of praise to God on the part of the Centurion, and yet this is just what he is said to do before his words are recorded. However, the realization of righteousness in the face of everything may well be an occasion for praise.<sup>4</sup> Robert J. Karris makes the point that 'innocent' is a rather narrow translation of *dikaios*. This word can convey 'innocence' but generally implies a broad concept of 'righteousness'. Indeed, Karris points out that it is used at verse 50 to mean just this of Joseph of Arimathea.<sup>5</sup>

It is the case that not all theologians who have written about Luke think that this verse is particularly significant. Robert O'Toole makes no mention of it in his book on Luke's Christology.<sup>6</sup> However, Peter Doble devotes much of a book on Luke to the question of how to translate *dikaios* in Luke 23.47. He looks at the history of the debate, including Kilpatrick and Hanson's disagreement,<sup>7</sup> and also analyses the other uses of *dikaios* in Luke.<sup>8</sup> The force of Doble's argument is that it is not that Jesus is 'innocent' – this is a rather thin interpretation. Instead, 'Jesus was obviously ... a δίκαιος [*dikaios*] in that his vindication was Luke's major theme'.<sup>9</sup> In other words, *dikaios* is a broad and far-reaching term, one that transcends the translation 'innocent'. Jesus was innocent, but that is really not the point. It should be noted that a word with a narrower meaning of 'innocent' did

exist and is used elsewhere in the New Testament ( $\acute{\alpha}\theta\acute{\omega}\varsigma$  (*athōos*) at Matthew 27.4 and 27.24). There is no reason to suppose that the very cultured author of Luke did not know this word and so we must assume that he chose a word with a wider meaning. Given this, the Centurion's words point towards a revelation of Christology whereby the divinity of Jesus is revealed in his death. Jesus is presented as 'righteous' in such a definitive sense that the pagan, non-Jewish Centurion can do no other than praise God. It is surely no accident on the part of the author that the first person to praise God having seen the death of Jesus is not Jewish. The Centurion's praise is in keeping with Luke's theme of unexpected individuals being part of Jesus' story. Think of the shepherds in Chapter 2 or the Samaritan who (against the crowd's expectations) is 'good' in Jesus' story in Chapter 10, or of Zacchaeus the tax collector in Chapter 19. In a similar way, it is the Centurion who praises God. The righteousness he sees is not about mundane guilt and innocence, but about something that transcends all human categories, even life and death. Jesus is 'righteous' without question or qualification. Jesus is 'righteous' in an absolute way.

It is somewhat speculative, but it may be that the use of 'innocent' rather than 'righteous' in some translations speaks to a particularly mechanistic understanding of salvation in some parts of the Church, whereby the innocent one takes on the sins of the faithful, an idea that has been developed in various ways. But such an understanding is alien to Luke, and Brian Beck points out that Luke chose not to include the saying of Jesus that is found at Mark 10.45. The NRSV translates this verse as: 'For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.' The words translated as 'for many' are  $\acute{\alpha}\nu\tau\acute{\iota}$   $\pi\omicron\lambda\lambda\acute{\omega}\nu$  (*anti pollōn*), which might be translated as 'instead of many', certainly implying an exchange of some sort. Instead of this understanding, Beck observes that Luke's idea of the death of Jesus is more that it is a necessary step in his resurrection.<sup>10</sup> When Jesus is resurrected, this affirms his vindication and demonstrates that true righteousness can be seen by looking to Jesus.

Before concluding, the adverb that begins the Centurion's exclamation should not be forgotten. Karris suggests that Luke's Centurion's use of the adverb  $\acute{\omicron}\nu\tau\acute{\omega}\varsigma$  (*ontōs*) – 'certainly' or 'surely' – may be intended to remind the reader of instances in the Gospel where righteousness is only apparent rather than real, such as the Pharisee in the parable in Luke 18.<sup>11</sup> This adverb is a change from the Marcan text, where we find  $\acute{\alpha}\lambda\eta\theta\acute{\omega}\varsigma$  (*alethōs*) – 'truly'. This seems an odd change. It is impossible ever to be completely sure whether Luke made a change such as this deliberately or incidentally. Luke uses *alethōs*, 'truly', three times in his text, at 9.27, 12.44 and 21.3, and on each occasion it is found in words said by Jesus. It may be that Luke thought that 'truth' was a word that only Jesus should utter. On the other hand, although Beck does not comment on why Luke may have chosen to change this word from Mark's account, he does note that *ontōs* is probably a deliberate choice of word to indicate that, although there have been examples of insincere or mistaken righteousness, 'in Jesus we see the genuine thing'.<sup>12</sup> This is a

minor point compared with the other change that Luke made to the Centurion's words, but it is an indication of the care with which Luke was choosing his words.

Given that the Centurion's words are a rewrite of received tradition rather than being copied verbatim, given that Luke appears to choose words with care, and given that there was a word available to the author with the narrow meaning of 'innocent', it is reasonable to presume that *dikaios* was a deliberate choice. If this is correct, then surely the most natural way to understand it is that it means 'righteous'. The Centurion sees what Luke hopes his readers will also see: that Jesus is not merely innocent, but that he is utterly, definitively, righteous. As such, these modified words that the Centurion utters in Luke are a deep Christological statement. The Centurion is pointing to Jesus for us and saying, 'Here is/was definitive and transcendent righteousness, in this dead man on the cross, such obvious righteousness that worship is the appropriate response.' The shorthand for this is: 'Here is/was divinity.' If anything, Luke's change to Mark's words present a stronger Christological statement than merely stating that Jesus was 'the Son of God'. In Luke's Centurion's words, we find so much more.

## Notes

1. Translations are my own unless otherwise stated.
2. G. D. Kilpatrick, 'A theme of the Lucan Passion story and Luke xxiii.47', *Journal of Theological Studies*, Vol. 43, no. 169 (1942), pp. 34–6.
3. R. P. C. Hanson, 'Does δίκαιος [*dikaios*] in Luke XXIII.47 explode the proto-Luke hypothesis?', *Hermathena*, Vol. 60 (1942), pp. 74–8, here pp. 75–6.
4. Hanson, 'Does δίκαιος [*dikaios*] in Luke XXIII.47 explode the proto-Luke hypothesis?', p. 76.
5. Robert J. Karris, 'Luke 23.47 and the Lucan view of Jesus' death', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 105, no. 1 (1986), pp. 65–74, here pp. 65–8.
6. Robert F. O'Toole, *Luke's Presentation of Jesus: a Christology* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2008).
7. Peter Doble, *The Paradox of Salvation: Luke's theology of the cross* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 70–92.
8. Doble, *The Paradox of Salvation*, pp. 93–126.
9. Doble, *The Paradox of Salvation*, p. 169.
10. Brian E. Beck, "'Imitatio Christi" and the Lucan Passion narrative' in William Horbury and Brian McNeil (eds), *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 28–47, here p. 34.
11. Karris, 'Luke 23.47 and the Lucan view of Jesus' death', p. 70.
12. Beck, "'Imitatio Christi" and the Lucan Passion narrative', p. 46.

## Author biography

**Dr Rob James** is Canon Chancellor of Wells Cathedral and author of the forthcoming book *The Spiral Gospel: intratextuality in the Gospel of Luke* (James Clarke, 2022). From July he will be the Professor of Anglican Formation and Studies at the Vancouver School of Theology.