

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

You may recall that I have often said that we tend to underestimate the skill of the writers of the Gospel accounts. In creating narratives which convey meaning in an artful way and by combining intentionality with literary skill these writers stand out as truly remarkable. Certainly, this is true of Luke. Let's look for a moment at chapter 20, a portion of the gospel containing debates whose meaning goes beyond the telling of a story alone. For example, the first of these debates raised the question of authority when Jesus made a dramatic entrance into Jerusalem and riled people in the Temple by overturning the tables of the traders. This prompted his critics to ask: *Who are you? Who do you claim to be? By what authority do you do these things?*

When Jesus asked them a question about John the Baptist, they refused to answer for fear he would catch them in a trap. And then he told them the *Parable of the Tenants* in which it would have been clear to any audience that the vineyard owner represented God, the farmers stood for Israel, and the messengers were metaphors for the prophets. And God keeps sending his messengers to no effect. Finally, he sends his own son, representing the rightful king; the farmers throw him out and kill him. So, the parable is questioning the authority and judgment of Israel's religious leaders. This is the kind of story that would have enraged them, because in a nearly identical way, Jesus would go up to Jerusalem and be rejected and imprisoned and killed, and they would bear the responsibility.

Then comes the question about whether or not we owe taxes to the authorities (in this case, the Romans). Had he answered incorrectly, he would have been handed over immediately to the Temple police and charged under Roman law, but he was so skillful that he once again eluded their effort to catch him up.

Finally, in today's passage we have a question about resurrection and its corollary about how David's son could also be David's lord. But all of this is completely intentional and follows a line of reasoning that leads to a foreshadowing of Jesus' upcoming arrest, trial and execution. Thus, all of this has finally to do with whether or not Jesus is the Messiah. And this issue leads directly into a prediction about the fate of Jesus in Jerusalem precisely because the authority question remains unanswered.

But the overall point here is that Luke is telling us the whole story of Jesus in this one chapter of his gospel. It is all there in miniature. It is all there in advance of the story that will unfold in succeeding chapters. Jesus emerges from John's prophetic ministry and is anointed as the Messiah. Thus, in this short but skillful summary of the entire gospel account, all of the key issues are laid out for us to see in a way that stands above and beyond the narrative itself. It provides a kind of overarching context that embraces and envelopes the telling of a simple story in a straightforward way

The Sadducees' question about the resurrection points forward to the resurrection of Jesus after crucifixion while also serving as another example of the effort to discredit him by luring him into a trap.

His enemies want to generate opposition to Jesus and use it as a way of undermining and ultimately destroying his movement. In this case, as in the question about John's baptism, Luke is contrasting the "determination and freedom" of the Messiah and the "prescribed, legalistic way" of interpreting the tradition made by the leaders who opposed him.

The answer Jesus gives to the question raised by the Sadducees points to its absurdity (after all, with death abolished, there will be no need for sexual relations or for continuing a particular family line) but it also converts that question into an argument for resurrection, a concept which the Sadducees found unacceptable.

In his response, Jesus provided a meaningful contrast between "life after death" in the Greek understanding (a disembodied spirit continuing beyond death) and the more orthodox Jewish conception of a general resurrection at the end of time which will be characterized by new life in an altogether new bodily form. Jesus points to the Book of Exodus (whose testimony the Sadducees seem to reject despite accepting the book itself as authoritative) to demonstrate that God is "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," a position supported by the Pharisees with whom Jesus sides in this instance. There are only infrequent appearances of the Sadducees in the New Testament. So, it is fair to ask: what do we really know about them?

According to Josephus, a secular witness, the Sadducees did not accept the idea of the immortality of the soul, attributed all activity to free will, and none to fate, and rejected most notions held by the Pharisees.

They were influential among a small group of wealthy families while the Pharisees tended to have the support of the general population. They are said to have been "boorish" in their social interactions and encouraged conflict with, rather than respect for, their teachers. They tended to be more harsh in their recommendations for punishments for crimes and they aroused the suspicion of Herod because they supported a rival family claiming the throne. They may have come from largely priestly families and other wealthy, powerful community leaders who sat in the Sanhedrin, the Jewish court. They are also believed to have been heavily Hellenized (that is, to have taken up Greek language and culture and used them in ways which replaced their native Palestinian tradition).

They cultivated good relationships with the Romans which would have made them suspect among patriotic Israelites. It is likely that they operated largely in opposition to the Pharisees, and their animosity toward one another seems to have been related to the Pharisees' acceptance of the oral

tradition in Judaism as a natural extension and a proper interpretation of the Law, while the Sadducees did not. The Sadducees appear to have largely disappeared after 70 A.D. because of the destruction of the Temple aristocracy which occurred with the burning of the city and the temple. Also, their belief that maintaining the Temple cult would suffice to stave off real disaster had proven false, undermining their credibility and reputation.

Jews had long believed that as long as Israel obeyed the Law of God, then God would rule over them and reward the righteous while punishing the wicked.

Belief in the resurrection was linked to the belief that the present age was in the grip of dark powers, so that in this life the righteous would suffer, even if God would ultimately vindicate them. Those who had died would be raised so they could receive their due reward. To reject belief in the resurrection as well as in demonic powers who controlled this world in the present was also to reject the belief that this age was radically corrupted. From the Sadducee point of view, those who argued the contrary view may have appeared to deny the continued existence of the covenant between God and Israel, which would also explain their denial of fate. They believed Jews were able to influence their destiny if they obeyed the Law and repented and made restitution for their sins.

However, it is equally plausible that the answer to the puzzle of the Sadducees is simpler: they were, after all, “anti-resurrection,” which meant that as far as Luke was concerned, *outside of* the family of Israel. And, of course, this was a doctrine held by Jesus, so that in uncomplicated terms, this gave the Sadducees a way to discredit him among their followers. By maintaining the sanctity of marriage and family in denying that there is life beyond the grave, they ridiculed the ideas of others because the implication seemed to be that “*polyandry* (a form of polygamy in which a woman takes two or more husbands at the same time) was the only solution” and that a belief that leads to such an immoral outcome must itself be false. This places the Sadducees in the camp of those who tried to trap Jesus into saying something which was in opposition to perceived righteousness.

And thus, Luke has given us much more than a simple description of debates which were of interest at the time. He has directly addressed the question of Jesus’ authority and has presented us with a plausible outcome for the narrative of his life of in the context of the times in which he lived and the political realities he confronted. He is indeed going up to Jerusalem and there he will come directly up against an overarching reality. The rest of the story will be the almost certain logical result of the growing conflict between Jesus and his enemies. And Luke makes it clear that he believes Jesus to be the true, long-expected Messiah.

In the words of today’s collect, “O God,....grant that, having the hope of inheriting eternal life, we may purify ourselves as he is pure; that, when he comes again with power and great glory, we may be made like him in his eternal and glorious kingdom. Amen

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