


ARTICLE

## Reading the Gospel of Luke's Walk to Calvary as a Funeral Procession: A Study of Luke 23.27–8

Wendy E. Closterman 

Department of History and Social Sciences, Bryn Athyn College, Bryn Athyn, Pennsylvania, USA  
Email: [wendy.closterman@brynathyn.edu](mailto:wendy.closterman@brynathyn.edu)

### Abstract

This study offers a fresh explanation for the characterisation of the women in Luke 23.27 as mourning. It argues that the uniquely Lukan material of women mourning on the walk to Calvary subtly fashions that walk into a funeral procession. The phrase *μη κλαίετε* in the following verse, Luke 23.28, recalls accounts of Jesus bringing the dead to life earlier in the Gospel, thereby evoking the concept of resurrection. Luke 23.27–8 works in conjunction with material later in Chapter 23 about the ritual preparation of Jesus' body, to portray funerary ritual for Jesus conducted in reverse (the funeral procession precedes rather than follows the preparation of the body). This inverted order of funeral allusions adds extra resonance to the endpoint of the Gospel, casting it as the logical culmination of a reverse funeral—the resurrection of Jesus from death to life. The interpretation in this paper highlights one way that lived ritual experiences among the Gospel's readers, in this case, the paradigm of funeral ritual, informed the narrative technique in the Gospel of Luke, complementing other well-recognised uses of Greco-Roman rhetorical devices and literary themes.

**Keywords:** Luke; passion; Calvary; funeral procession; mourning women; funeral ritual

### 1. Introduction

The Gospel of Luke's account of Jesus' walk to Calvary after Pilate sentenced Jesus to death contains material not found in other passion narratives. The exclusively Lukan text in 23.27–31 identifies mourning women as part of the crowd that follows Jesus on his walk and to whom Jesus addresses a prophetic statement. While the women beat their breasts and wail, Jesus, calling them 'daughters of Jerusalem', directs them not to mourn for him, but to grieve instead for themselves and their children because dire things would befall them in the future.

While the author of Luke (hereafter 'Luke') is indebted to the Gospel of Mark as a key source for the passion narrative, these verses are among those that do not find any parallels in Mark. Scholars disagree about the origin of the non-Markan passages. Are they Luke's original creation or do they derive from materials that Luke reworked? This paper generally follows Raymond E. Brown's view: '[a]s to whether there was a preLukan tradition about women lamenting for Jesus as he went to die or Luke has used a common motif to supply context for the macarism in v. 29, I see no way of telling. What is clear is that whether we have creative composition or adaptive reuse, Luke's hand

and mind-set are apparent in almost every line'.<sup>1</sup> Whether invented or adopted from elsewhere, these verses contribute to Luke's own narrative strategies.

Using an analytical lens that examines Greco-Roman rhetorical devices in Luke's passion narrative, as well as the ways that Luke changed material adopted from Mark, Heather M. Gorman has shown the degree to which Jesus' address to the daughters of Jerusalem 'overflows with rhetorical figures'.<sup>2</sup> Assessments of the rhetoric's implications for the meaning of the mourning women varies, however. Gorman, for example, argues that Jesus' rhetoric-rich statement contributes to Luke's portrayal of Jesus' innocence by contrasting Jesus with guilty Jerusalem, embodied by the mourning women.<sup>3</sup> Agreeing that the rhetorical strategies are employed to defend Jesus while condemning Jerusalem, Peter Rice, on the other hand, understands the mourning women in 23.27 differently, as a means of evoking pity for Jesus and as standing in contrast with the negatively portrayed leaders.<sup>4</sup> For Rice, Jesus' speech to the 'daughters of Jerusalem' is a way of 'connect[ing] Jesus' immediate sufferings with the destruction of Jerusalem....'<sup>5</sup>

In a different interpretative thread drawing on Greco-Roman literary themes, several scholars have argued that Luke's apologetic presentation of Jesus' death was modelled on characteristics of a good death found in Greco-Roman literature, especially in association with the death of philosophers.<sup>6</sup> In the pericope of the walk to Calvary, Jesus' calm demeanour and deflection of the grief for him expressed by the mourning women have received particular emphasis as contributing to Luke's depiction of Jesus' death as noble.

This article considers a different element in Luke's portrayal of the walk to Calvary that also has Greco-Roman resonance, namely funeral ritual. The argument here interprets the literary function of the mourning women in Luke 23.27 by examining the funerary vocabulary and imagery associated with them, and it understands Jesus' initial response to them by considering its allusions to resurrection stories in Luke 7 and 8. The analysis concludes that Luke 23.27–8 portrayed Jesus' walk to Calvary as if a funeral procession that transported the body of the deceased to the gravesite. This characterisation, I propose,

<sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* (2 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1994) 2.930. See also Heather M. Gorman, *Interweaving Innocence: A Rhetorical Analysis of Luke's Passion Narrative (Luke 22:66–23:49)* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2015) 7–10, 129; Jerome H. Neyrey, *The Passion According to Luke: A Redaction Study of Luke's Soteriology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985) 109; and Marion L. Soards, 'Tradition, Composition, and Theology in Jesus' Speech to the "Daughters of Jerusalem" (Luke 23, 27–32)', *Bib* 68 (1987) 221–44, at 240. For citations of scholars who argue this section was derived from a pre-Lukan source, see Gorman, *Interweaving Innocence*, 123–4. For the view that Luke 23.27–28a was a Lukan construction while the following verses in the pericope drew on earlier material, see Hans Klein, *Das Lukasevangelium* (KEK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 704. For summaries of various pre-Lukan allusions proposed for this text, see Dennis Ronald MacDonald, 'The Breasts of Hecuba and Those of the Daughters of Jerusalem: Luke's Transvaluation of a Famous Iliadic Scene', *Ancient Fiction: The Matrix of Early Christian and Jewish Narrative* (ed. Jo-Ann Brant, Charles W. Hedrick, and Chris Shea; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005) 239–54 and Michael Wolter, *Das Lukasevangelium* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008) 755–6 / Michael Wolter, *The Gospel According to Luke Volume II (Luke 9:51–24)* (trans. Wayne Coppins and Christoph Heilig; Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017) 522–3. MacDonald includes his own argument that Luke 23.27–31 is drawn from *Iliad* 22.

<sup>2</sup> Gorman, *Interweaving Innocence*, 117.

<sup>3</sup> Gorman, *Interweaving Innocence*, 118–22.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Rice, 'The Rhetoric of Luke's Passion: Luke's Use of Common-place to Amplify the Guilt of Jerusalem's Leaders in Jesus' Death', *BibInt* 21.3 (2013) 355–76, at 367 and 369.

<sup>5</sup> Rice, 'Rhetoric of Luke's Passion', 371.

<sup>6</sup> Both Kloppenborg and Sterling argue that Luke particularly drew on the death of Socrates tradition in his passion narrative: John S. Kloppenborg, 'Exitus clari viri: The Death of Jesus in Luke', *TJT* 8.1 (1992) 106–20 and Greg Sterling 'Mors philosophi: The Death of Jesus in Luke', *HTR* 94.4 (2001) 383–402. Scaer argues for the influence of Greek rhetoric and Hellenistic Jewish martyr accounts, as well as Greco-Roman concepts of the good death derived from the death of Socrates: Peter J. Scaer, *The Lukan Passion and the Praiseworthy Death* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005) 90–134.

formed part of a motif in which Luke evoked the stages of funerary ritual in an inverted order, subtly casting moments in the passion narrative as a funeral for Jesus that unfolded in reverse. By doing so, Luke enhanced the more dominant narrative leading up to the culminating event of the Gospel: Jesus's resurrection from death to life.

## 2. Luke 23.27: The Walk to Calvary as a Funeral Procession

As noted above, Luke's version of Jesus' walk to Calvary adds the presence of mourning women. Luke 23.27 reads 'And a large crowd of people was following him, including women who were striking themselves in mourning and singing a dirge for him'. (Ἡκολούθει δὲ αὐτῷ πολὺ πλῆθος τοῦ λαοῦ καὶ γυναικῶν αἱ ἐκόπτοντο καὶ ἐθήρηνον αὐτόν.<sup>7</sup>)

Commentators on this verse have reached various conclusions about the role these women play in the narrative, and interpretations can generally be divided between those who see a negative portrayal of the women and those who see a positive one. For example, Jerome Neyrey has proposed that the women symbolise the unbelieving people of Jerusalem who reject Jesus; thus he construes Jesus' subsequent words as a 'prophetic oracle of judgment' on the women.<sup>8</sup> Building on Neyrey, Barbara E. Reid and Shelly Matthews see the women as 'representing the subjugated city'.<sup>9</sup> Arguing against Neyrey's interpretation of the women's identity, Marion Soards, on the other hand, argues that the women mourn sympathetically for Jesus.<sup>10</sup> For Soards, these women tally with Luke's favourable presentation of women throughout his Gospel.

Interpretations also vary about what the mourning activity is intended to convey. Some see the women's behaviour simply as a vivid portrayal of grief over the impending crucifixion.<sup>11</sup> Others view these details as a conscious allusion to Zechariah 12.10–1, in which Yahweh describes widespread mourning in Jerusalem.<sup>12</sup> Still others seek to identify the actions as the type of grieving done for a criminal condemned to death.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup> All Greek text is from UBS<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Neyrey, *The Passion*, 108–28. An earlier presentation of this argument can be found in Jerome H. Neyrey, 'Jesus' Address to the Women of Jerusalem (Lk. 23. 27–31)—A Prophetic Judgment Oracle', *NTS* 29 (1983) 74–86. Gorman concurs with this view (*Interweaving Innocence*, 121).

<sup>9</sup> Barbara E. Reid and Shelly Matthews, *Luke 10-24* (Wisdom Commentary 43B; General editor, Barbara E. Reid; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2021) 601.

<sup>10</sup> Soards 'Tradition, Composition and Theology', 229–30. Bovon, Brown, Melzer-Keller, and Neagoe also view the women positively: François Bovon, *Luke 3: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 19:28–24:53* (ed. Helmut Koester; trans. James Crouch; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012) 302; Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* 2.910–20; Helga Melzer-Keller, *Jesus und die Frauen: Eine Verhältnisbestimmung nach den synoptischen Überlieferungen* (Freiburg: Herder, 1997) 299–300; and Alexandru Neagoe, *The Trial of the Gospel: An Apologetic Reading of Luke's Trial Narratives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 94. Wolter argues against Neyrey's negative assessment, but understands the women in a more neutral fashion as prompt for Jesus' statement (*Lukasevangelium*, 754–5; *Luke II*, 521).

<sup>11</sup> For example, David E. Garland, *Luke* (Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament 3; General editor, Clinton E. Arnold; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011) 918. The mourning is described as 'signs of remorse' by Kevin L. Anderson 'But God Raised Him from the Dead': *The Theology of Jesus's Resurrection in Luke-Acts* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006) 30.

<sup>12</sup> Bovon, *Luke*, 302 is a recent supporter of this view. Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, 919 n.18 presents an argument against this reading.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Anton Büchele, *Der Tod Jesu im Lukasevangelium: Eine redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zu Lk 23* (Frankfurt am Main: Josef Knecht, 1978) 43 and Walter Käser, 'Exegetische und theologische Erwägungen zur Seligpreisung der Kinderlosen Lk 23<sub>29b</sub>', *ZNW* 54 (1963) 240–54, at 241. Sabine Bieberstein, *Verschwiegene Jüngerinnen—vergessene Zeuginnen. Gebrochene Kozept im Lukasevangelium* (NTOA 38; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag and Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998) 208–13 calls attention to the risks in showing such public

While the text may well contain at least some of these meanings, the ritual implications of the vocabulary Luke uses in this verse have been under-emphasised. Luke 23.27 does not present generic grief, but instead specifically employs the language of funeral ritual to describe the women who walk with Jesus to Calvary.<sup>14</sup> The two verbs that convey the women's actions, *κόπτομαι* and *θρηνέω*, were widely used funerary terminology describing ritualised mourning. *κόπτομαι* means the physical action of striking oneself in grief, and so also comes to apply to mourning more broadly.<sup>15</sup> *θρηνέω* refers to the keening singing done to mourn the dead.<sup>16</sup> These two types of ritualised mourning—dramatic gestures of grief and dirges sung for the dead—are attested as typical components of funeral ritual in a range of time periods and cultures in the ancient Mediterranean. Although the details of burial practices varied in different times and places, these two elements of ritualised mourning were well established in Israelite, Jewish, Greek, and Roman funerary practices, all cultures with which this Roman imperial text had connections.<sup>17</sup> So important a part of funeral expectations were these ritual components that professional mourners frequently ensured their presence.

The use of the words *κόπτομαι* and *θρηνέω* as funerary terminology had a long history in Greek literature, starting as early as Homer in the eighth century BCE and continuing in widespread use through the Hellenistic and Roman imperial periods. The enduring use of these terms in literary evidence across centuries and cultures in the ancient Mediterranean suggests that the features of funerary ritual they depict were seen as paradigmatic in the *longue durée* of Mediterranean antiquity. Alongside variations in the details of funeral practice as it actually occurred in a given era and culture, there existed prevalent normative concepts of funerary ritual, that is, ideas of the ritual as it should be, of its most essential components. One pervasive normative feature was the image of women engaging in the two emotionally expressive acts of mourning represented by *κόπτομαι* and *θρηνέω*: beating the chest and keening.

Although in actual practice men might lament in these ways as well, in literary evidence expressive female mourning, rather than male mourning, was a quintessential part of idealised funerary ritual.<sup>18</sup> The way ancient authors characterised women's lament

---

solidarity with someone condemned to death and compares the women's mourning in Luke with other ancient examples of women's protests or resistance.

<sup>14</sup> Bovon, Untergassmair, and Bieberstein also emphasise the ritual nature of the verbs used to describe the women's actions: Bovon, *Luke*, 301; Franz Geog Untergassmair, *Kreuzweg und Kreuzigung Jesu: Ein Beitrag zur lukanischen Redaktionsgeschichte und zur Frage nach der lukanischen „Kreuzestheologie“* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1980) 17; Bieberstein, *Verschwiegene Jüngerinnen*, 206–7. Pace Neyrey, *The Passion*, 112, who asserts that 'the daughters of Jerusalem are not now weeping over Jesus...' and identifies their crying as akin to that 'occasioned by God's judgment on sinful Jerusalem (Jer 9:13–16)'.

<sup>15</sup> BDAG s.v. *κόπτομαι*; LSJ s.v. *κόπτομαι*; G. Stählin, 'κοπετός, κόπτω, ἀποκόπτω, ἐγκοπή, ἐγκόπτω, ἐκκόπτω', *TDNT* 3.830–60.

<sup>16</sup> BDAG s.v. *θρηνέω*; LSJ s.v. *θρηνέω*; G. Stählin, 'θρηνέω, θρῆνος', *TDNT* 3.148–55.

<sup>17</sup> On mourning in the Hebrew Bible: Stählin, *TDNT* 3.150–1; Stählin, *TDNT* 3.836–40. For the practice in Second Temple Period Judaism: Rachel Hachlili, *Jewish Funerary Customs, Practices and Rites in the Second Temple Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2005) 205, 326–7; S. Safrai, 'Home and Family', *The Jewish People in the First Century* (eds. S. Safrai and M. Stern; Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1976) 2.775; Stählin, *TDNT* 3.151–2; Stählin, *TDNT* 3.841–4. For Greek practice from the Archaic period through the Late Antique: Margaret Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (rev. Dimitrios Yatromanolakis and Panagiotis Roilos; Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002<sup>2</sup>) 6–13, 27–31. For Roman practice: Valerie M. Hope, *Death in Ancient Rome: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 2007) 177–8. For an overview of women's lament in the eastern Mediterranean more broadly: Angela Standhartiger, "What Women Were Accustomed to Do for the Dead Beloved by Them" ('Gospel of Peter' 12:50): Traces of Laments and Mourning Rituals in Early Easter, Passion, and Lord's Supper Traditions', *JBL* 129 (2010) 559–74, at 560–3.

<sup>18</sup> On the distinctions between idealised and actual gender roles in Roman funerary ritual: Darja Šterbenc Erker, 'Gender and Roman Funeral Ritual', *Memory and Mourning: Studies on Roman Death* (ed. Valerie M. Hope and Janet Huskinson; Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2011) 40–60.

can be divided into two general types.<sup>19</sup> On the one hand, female mourning was frequently positioned as central to and necessary for the rites of burial.<sup>20</sup> On the other, texts might articulate a recurring anxiety that female mourning rites were too extreme and needed to be reined in.<sup>21</sup> In both types of commentary, however, whether positive or negative, the image of women striking themselves in mourning and singing laments features persistently as a stereotypical component of funerary practice. The particular verbs chosen to describe the women in Luke 23.27, then, specifically evoke this ritual funerary mourning.

Some scholars, who also identify Luke's language in this verse as specifically funerary, see the verse as portraying general funerary mourning conducted in advance of Jesus' death.<sup>22</sup> In contrast, Untergassmair notes that elsewhere in the New Testament these terms are only used for grieving after death.<sup>23</sup> I suggest that the allusion in Luke 23.27 is to a specific moment of ritualised grief after death. Women's lament of the type portrayed here was particularly emblematic of two stages in funerary practice: first, during the preparation of the corpse for burial and, second, in the procession transporting the corpse to the grave. In ancient Mediterranean funerals, it was common practice for female relatives of the deceased to lament around the corpse while it was laid out for visiting and again later when the corpse was ritually moved to the burial location. The image in Luke 23.27 of women taking part in a procession while mourning, by beating their chests and singing a dirge, specifically evokes the ritual mourning during the second stage of the funeral, the procession that transported the corpse to the tomb. The details in Luke 23.27, then, draw on a widespread paradigm for funerary behaviour in the ancient Mediterranean to create an image of a funeral procession.

G. Stählin has similarly interpreted the walk to Calvary as calling to mind a funeral procession.<sup>24</sup> He regards it as a 'distinctive prolepsis', prefiguring the funeral for Jesus that would soon follow his crucifixion.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, I argue in what follows that, although Jesus had not yet been crucified, Luke presents Jesus here as a figurative corpse in a funeral procession to the tomb not to allude to his impending death but to reference funerary ritual for Jesus in reverse order in order to call attention to Jesus' resurrection.

<sup>19</sup> Šterbenc Erker, 'Gender and Roman Funeral Ritual', 57.

<sup>20</sup> Epic tradition portrays mourning in this way, e.g. in Homer (*Il.* 24.719–24), Vergil (*Aen.* 12.604–7), and Lucan (*Bell. civ.* 2.21–8), as does Greek tragedy (e.g. Aeschylus, *Cho.* 423–8 and Euripides, *Suppl.* 71–9) and the satirist Lucian (*De luctu* 12). Greek and Roman funerary iconography uses images of women mourning as a way of epitomizing a funeral scene (see, e.g. the Louvre prothesis pinax (Louvre 905), the tomb of the Haterii (Hope, *Death*, 3.19), and a relief from Aquila (Hope, *Death*, 3.21)). For further examples of women mourning in Hellenistic and Roman literature: Stählin, *TDNT* 3.835. In the Hebrew Bible: Stählin, *TDNT* 3.150–1; Stählin, *TDNT* 3.838. On professional female mourners in early Judaism: Stählin, *TDNT* 3.151–2 and Stählin, *TDNT* 3.842–3. Stählin notes that in early Jewish ritual women 'were mainly in evidence on the way from the house to the place of interment, and esp. during the breaks in the procession...' (*TDNT* 3.843). He describes more prominent mourning roles for men rather than women among members of the family in early Jewish practice.

<sup>21</sup> A number of legislative restrictions are known in the Greek world from the Archaic through Hellenistic period. Second Sophistic author Plutarch emphasises concern about women's mourning in his discussion of Solon's sixth century BCE Athenian funerary legislation (*Sol.* 21). Hope, citing Plutarch's account of Cleopatra's dramatic mourning of Antony in *Ant.* 77, notes that '[b]y the late Republic overly melodramatic displays were not seen as the norm or ideal for a Roman lady' (*Death*, 178). Alexiou *Ritual Lament*, 28–31 discusses the continuation of this concern in Christian texts going into the Byzantine era. Philosophical texts also promote the ideal of restrained mourning (e.g. Socrates not wanting his wife present in Plato *Phaed.* 60a; Stählin, *TDNT* 3.835).

<sup>22</sup> Scaer, *The Lukan Passion*, 113, for example, sees funerary mourning as part of what characterises Jesus' death as noble. Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, 2.920 understands the funerary mourning as a 'dramatic touch'.

<sup>23</sup> Untergassmair, *Kreuzweg und Kreuzigung*, 17.

<sup>24</sup> G. Stählin: Stählin, *TDNT* 3.153 and Stählin, *TDNT* 3.845–6.

<sup>25</sup> Stählin, *TDNT* 3.146. Untergassmair, *Kreuzweg und Kreuzigung*, 17–8 has observed that these funerary terms and the actions they describe do not appear after the crucifixion, where they might be expected.

Jesus is as if a dead man undergoing a funeral on the road to Calvary—a dead man who will soon come back to life.

### 3. Luke 23.28: Allusions to Resurrection Stories in Luke 7 and 8

Luke 23.28 presents the beginning of Jesus' response to the mourning women who were walking with him on the road to Calvary: 'And turning to them Jesus said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, don't weep for me. Instead, weep for yourselves and for your children..."' (στραφείς δὲ πρὸς αὐτάς [ὁ] Ἰησοῦς εἶπεν, Θυγατέρες Ἰερουσαλήμ, μὴ κλαίετε ἐπ' ἐμέ· πλὴν ἐφ' ἑαυτάς κλαίετε καὶ ἐπὶ τὰ τέκνα ὑμῶν,...). Jesus goes on to give the reason: the coming days will cause people to call barren women and those who have not given birth or nursed blessed. People will beg for the mountains and hills to cover them.<sup>26</sup> There is a lack of consensus about the meaning of Jesus' words to these 'daughters of Jerusalem'. Were they condemnatory or compassionate?<sup>27</sup> While scholarship on these verses discusses the bigger question of the meaning of this prophecy for the daughters of Jerusalem, this paper focuses on a smaller and less discussed aspect of Jesus' speech—his initial exhortation—because it is related to the funerary imagery in verse 27. Jesus' first response to the women's ritual mourning is μὴ κλαίετε, 'Don't weep' (Luke 23.28). The phrase μὴ κλαίετε is significant. By alluding to two earlier pericopes in the Gospel of Luke—the stories of the widow of Nain's son and Jairus' daughter—these words link Jesus's funeral procession on the walk to Calvary to the concept of resurrection.<sup>28</sup>

Both of these earlier narratives recount tales of Jesus bringing the dead back to life. Chapter 8.40–56 includes two intertwined miracle stories. A synagogue leader named Jairus sought Jesus' aid for his ill twelve-year-old daughter who was near death. As Jesus set out to help the girl, he was delayed by the touch of a woman sick with a flow of blood. After Jesus healed the woman, he and Jairus learned from a messenger that Jairus' daughter had died. Nevertheless, Jesus promised that she would be well, and they went to the house where she was. Inside the house, Jesus found people there weeping (ἐκλαιον) and ritually mourning (ἐκόπτοντο) (Luke 8.52). The latter verb is also one of the two used in Luke 23.27. Interestingly, the word κόπτομαι does not appear in the parallel accounts of the story of Jairus' daughter in the Gospels of Matthew (9.18–26) and Mark (5.22–43). Its use in this story is unique to Luke. The two verbs κλαίω and κόπτομαι suggest grief that was both the emotional response to a recent death and also the initial ritual mourning for the dead.

<sup>26</sup> Compare Jesus' discussion of the coming days in Luke 17.22 and 21.6.

<sup>27</sup> For overviews of various interpretations see Darrel L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996) 1844–5; Käser, 'Exegetische und theologische Erwägungen'; Neyrey, *The Passion*, 108; and Soards, 'Tradition, Composition, and Theology', 221–4. For an interpretation of Jesus' injunctions as apocalyptic asceticism, see Brant James Pitre, 'Blessing the Barren and Warning the Fecund: Jesus' Message for Women Concerning Pregnancy and Childbirth', *JSNT* 81 (2001) 59–80.

<sup>28</sup> Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, 921; Soards, 'Tradition, Composition and Theology', 232; Untergassmair, *Kreuzweg und Kreuzigung*, 19; and Wolter *Luke II*, 521 also note the allusions to Luke 7 and 8. Untergassmair even makes the interesting suggestion that *klaiein* is technical funerary terminology. None of these studies, however, bring out a connection with the theme of resurrection. Brown, for example, concludes that '[i]n the previous cases Jesus was about to remove the cause for mourning by resuscitating the dead; here he is turning away the grief from his own death toward the death of the city and its inhabitants'. Shelly Matthews makes a very different argument for the significance of this phrase, suggesting that it is part of 'this author's attempt to suppress traditions highlighting women's roles in creating gospel': Shelly Matthews, 'The Weeping Jesus and the Daughters of Jerusalem. Gender and Conquest in Lukan Lament', *Doing Gender—Doing Religion. Fallstudien zur Intersektionalität im frühen Judentum, Christentum und Islam* (eds. Ute E. Eisen, Christine Gerber, and Angela Standhartinger; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck) 381–403, at 381.



Jesus addressed the mourners, telling them not to weep—*μὴ κλαίετε*—because the girl was sleeping rather than dead (Luke 8.52). He then brought her back to life. It is important to note that the phrase *μὴ κλαίετε* is also found only in Luke's account of this story. In Mark, in contrast, Jesus asked, 'Why are you making a commotion and crying?' (*Τί θορυβεῖσθε καὶ κλαίετε*; 5.39). There is no equivalent statement in Matthew's version. Luke's insertion of the phrase into this narrative heightens its significance within Luke's Gospel.

The story of the resurrection of Jairus' daughter in Chapter 8 is preceded in Chapter 7 by another miracle in which Jesus brought the dead to life. This entire story appears only in the Gospel of Luke. In Luke 7.11–17, Jesus encountered a funeral procession underway just outside of the town of Nain. A crowd of people from the town and the bereaved mother, a widow whose only son had died, were transporting the dead man out for burial. Jesus' first response here, too, was to exhort the mother *Μὴ κλαῖε*, 'Don't weep' (7.13). He then raised the widow's son from the dead and reunited them.

Luke 7 and 8 present two instances in which Jesus tells people mourning a death not to weep. The only other place in his Gospel where Luke uses the phrase 'don't weep' is in Luke 23.28. On the walk to Calvary, Jesus tells the women not to weep for him, just as he directed the grieving mother in Nain and the mourners of Jairus' daughter not to weep for their dead. Although in Chapter 23 Jesus went on to tell the women that they should weep for themselves and their children because of the dire circumstances coming, Jesus' first words—don't weep—recall the only other places where Jesus speaks this phrase in the Gospel of Luke: stories in which the dead return to life. By means of this allusion, Jesus' words in Luke 23.27 hold a promise. Jesus, who is currently undergoing a symbolic funeral, will return to life, too.

In addition to the exhortation not to weep, other elements of the walk to Calvary recall these earlier pericopes. The use of the verb *κόπτομαι* in Luke 23.27 evokes the ritual mourning for Jairus' daughter, which is described with the same verb. Further, the processional setting of Luke 23.27 calls to mind the story of the widow of Nain's son. Jesus encountered the widow of Nain just outside of the city gates when she was in the company of a crowd transporting her son's body. Both stories, then, take place during the ritual funerary procession that transports the corpse to the gravesite.

The evocation of these earlier narratives introduces the concept of resurrection into the walk to Calvary. Jesus would return to life, just as the widow of Nain's son and as Jairus' daughter had. Although in Luke 23 Jesus is the one who says not to weep, he is likewise the one being ritually mourned, and so is also parallel to the dead in the previous stories. And like the dead in those narratives, Jesus will return to life.

#### 4. A Funeral in Reverse

Reference to funerary ritual in Luke's passion narrative is not limited to Luke 23.27–8. At the end of the same chapter, after recounting Jesus' crucifixion, Luke presents another scene containing funerary imagery when women visit Jesus' tomb. These representations of funerary ritual for Jesus are interleaved into the dominant narrative that follows the events of Jesus' death, moving from his trial to his crucifixion and burial. In this section, this paper argues that the funerary allusions present a funeral for Jesus in reverse order, developing a secondary theme that moves from death to life, culminating with the resurrection of Jesus.

Luke 23.55–24.1 describes how the women who had accompanied Jesus from Galilee prepared spices (*ἀρώματα*) and perfumes (*μύρα*) after they had seen the tomb and the disposition of Jesus' body. After the Sabbath, the text explains, the women returned to

the tomb with their spices. Spices and perfumes are also found in Mark and John's accounts (Mark 16.1 and John 20.40).

There is some disagreement about which funerary ritual action the women are initiating with these spices and perfumes in Luke. One reading understands the women as bringing tomb offerings to leave for the dead after burial and carrying out post-burial funerary ritual that was typically the responsibility of female relatives.<sup>29</sup> The other interpretation sees the women as preparing the materials needed for anointing Jesus' body, an action that was part of the care for the corpse at the beginning of funerary ritual and a task for which women traditionally had primary responsibility.<sup>30</sup>

Deborah Green presents evidence that Jewish burial practice likely employed spices and perfume in different ways during all three stages of the funeral, namely preparing the body, the funeral procession, and burial.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, she links the mentions of spices and perfume that the women bring to Jesus' tomb in the different Gospel accounts to the preparation of the corpse for burial, explaining the unusual location of the ritual (at the tomb rather than at home) as the result of the particular circumstances of Jesus' death.<sup>32</sup>

The broader narrative context of the visit to Jesus' tomb provides details that also correlate well with the initial phase of funerary ritual, making it the more likely interpretation. In the Gospel of Luke, as in the other canonical gospels, Joseph of Arimathea asks for the body of Jesus (Luke 23.50–3; also Matt 27.57–60; Mark 15.42–6; John 19.38–40). He wraps Jesus' body in linen and places it in a tomb. Dressing or wrapping a corpse in a cloth is a standard part of initial burial preparation in Greek, Roman, and Jewish practices, and it is accompanied by washing and anointing the corpse.<sup>33</sup> This ritual typically took place at home prior to the procession to the tomb site.

Carrying out ritual care for Jesus' body makes chronological sense at this point in the narrative. Jesus had just been crucified, and his body needs to be prepared for burial. Luke is not alone in including these details. The Gospels of Mark and John also refer to spices (ἀρώματα) in this scene. The Gospel of Mark describes Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome buying spices for anointing the body (Mark 16.1). In the account in the Gospel of John, Joseph of Arimathea, together with Nicodemus, not only wraps Jesus's body with cloth, but these two men also include myrrh and aloe, referred to collectively as spices (John 19.39–40).

In the Gospel of Luke, however, the proximity of this scene, in which Jesus' body is wrapped in a shroud and spices are prepared, to the allusion to a funeral procession

<sup>29</sup> Standhartinger, 'What Women Were Accustomed to Do', *JBL* 129, 3 (2010) 564. Standhartinger suggests that the funerary actions in the resurrection narratives of the four canonical Gospels and the Gospel of Peter 'refer to different phases, from the preparation of the corpse (Mark) to delayed rituals for the dead (*Gospel of Peter*), mourning at the tomb (John), watching at the tomb (Matthew), and finally care for the tomb after burial (Luke)'. See also Angela Standhartinger, 'Words to Remember—Women and the Origin of the "Words of Institution"', *lectio difficilior* 1 (2015) 1–25, at 6.

<sup>30</sup> Bieberstein, *Verschwiegene Jüngerinnen*, 235–6; Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 2.1257–8; Deborah Green, 'Sweet Spices in the Tomb: An Initial Study on the Use of Perfume in Jewish Burials', *Commemorating the Dead: Texts and Artifacts in Context* (eds. Laurie Brink and Deborah Green; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008) 145–73, at 162; Klein, *Lukasevangelium*, 720; Carolyn Osiek, 'The Women at the Tomb: What are They Doing There?', *HTS* 53/1&2 (1997) 103–18, at 111; and Safrai, 'Home and Family', 776.

<sup>31</sup> Green, 'Sweet Spices', 160–9.

<sup>32</sup> Green, 'Sweet Spices', 162–3. She specifically discussed the accounts in Mark and John and does not directly discuss Luke.

<sup>33</sup> Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament*, 5; Green, 'Sweet Spices', 159, 161; Hachlili, *Jewish Funerary Customs*, 480–1; Hope, *Death*, 97; Byron R. McCane, *Roll Back the Stone: Death and Burial in the World of Jesus* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003) 31. The author of the Gospel of John explains that the wrapping and the spices are part of Jewish burial custom. Indeed, the Mishnah discusses the practice of anointing bodies in preparation for burial (*Šabb.* 23.5). McCane *Roll Back the Stone*, 32 notes that Rabbinical texts indicate men could wrap male corpses, but women could wrap both male and female.



earlier in the same chapter adds an additional layer of meaning. Widely normative in ancient Mediterranean funerary practice was a two-staged ritual structure preceding burial that began with wrapping and anointing the corpse, followed by a procession of the corpse to the tomb.<sup>34</sup> The funerary terminology and imagery in Luke 23 evoke these paradigmatic stages of a funeral in reverse order, first presenting Jesus' funeral procession and then the preparation of his body for burial.

A further suggestive piece of evidence for interpreting the evocations of funerary ritual as a reverse funeral may be found in Luke's rendition of the pericope of the woman who anoints Jesus, recounted in Luke 7.36–50. In contrast to Mark, Luke disconnects this story from the passion by locating it much earlier in his Gospel. Also notable is his removal of any reference to funerary ritual from it.

Mark places the story of the woman anointing Jesus at the beginning of his passion narrative, just prior to the account of the Last Supper. Mark 14.3 describes a woman pouring a container of perfumed oil (ἀλάβαστρον μύρου) over Jesus' head. In response to objections to the woman's actions, Jesus says in Mark 14.8, 'She has acted in advance to perfume my body for burial' (προέλαβεν μυρίσαι τὸ σῶμα μου εἰς τὸν ἔνταφιασμόν). Jesus here interprets the woman's actions as funerary in nature, part of the preparation of his body in the first stage of the funeral, and this proleptic funeral ritual launches the events of Mark's passion narrative.<sup>35</sup> Matthew's account (26.6–13) is similar. It includes the pericope in the same location in the narrative as Mark and includes Jesus' identification of the perfumed oil as funerary (26.12).

Luke's account of this story does neither of these things. Instead, in a pericope placed much earlier in the Gospel in 7.36–50, Jesus makes no statement interpreting the anointing (this time of his feet) as prefiguring the funerary ritual for him. These changes mean that the first mention of perfumed oil in a funerary context in Luke is when the women visit Jesus' tomb at the end of the Gospel. This modification that removes any reference to the first stage of the funerary ritual from the beginning of the passion narrative aligns with the interpretation proposed here, that Luke's allusions to funerary ritual for Jesus take place in reverse order.<sup>36</sup>

The uniquely Lucan material in Chapter 23.27–8, then, not only looks earlier in the text to recall stories of resurrection from death to life but also works with the material that follows to augment the narrative of Jesus' resurrection. A few verses later, in Chapter 24, the women attempting to carry out the first stage of funerary ritual for Jesus by anointing his body encounter two men with radiant clothing at the tomb who tell them that Jesus is living, not dead. Through evocations of funerary ritual, Luke deftly hints at a funeral for Jesus unfolding in reverse, moving in the space of a little more than a chapter from a funerary procession back to the preparation of the corpse for burial, and then to Jesus' transition from death to life.

## 5. Conclusion

Discussions of the Gospel of Luke frequently note its literary characteristics. Luke's grammatical structures and range of vocabulary are more sophisticated than those of other

<sup>34</sup> Greek: Robert Garland, *The Greek Way of Death*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001) 23–34; Jewish: Green, 'Sweet Spices', 159–60; McCane, *Roll Back the Stone*, 31–2, 94; Roman: Hope, *Death*, 97–104. One feature particular to Jewish practices is an emphasis on burial as soon as possible after death, often on the same day, so preparing the corpse for burial and processing to the tomb typically happened quickly (McCane, *Roll Back the Stone*, 31, 94).

<sup>35</sup> On the funerary anointing of Jesus in Mark 14 and 16, see Luise Schottroff, 'Maria Magdalena und die Frauen am Grabe Jesu', *EvTh* 42 (1982) 3–25 at 14–16.

<sup>36</sup> See Matthews, 'The Weeping Jesus', 398–9 for a different interpretation of Luke's modification of the anointing story.

Gospels; its opening preface exhibits conventions typical of Hellenistic and Roman historical writing; and various narrative elements in Luke's Gospel make use of different genres of the period.<sup>37</sup> Given the literary nature of this work, it is not surprising to find subtle metaphors woven into Luke's text. One such motif, this article argues, is funerary ritual.

This study differs from much of the work uncovering the literary strategies that Luke employed in that it does not argue for the use of a particular genre. Instead, it aims to complement the work on genre influences by highlighting how the text evokes the paradigm of a widespread lived experience among the Gospel's readers: funeral ritual. On the whole, people in the ancient Mediterranean world likely experienced death and the rituals surrounding it more frequently and more directly than many in the modern industrialised world do.<sup>38</sup> Mortality rates were higher, and, although professional services existed, typically, family members themselves prepared the bodies of loved ones for burial, carried out the interment and tended graves after burial. It may be, in part, because many people were quite conversant with the experience of death and its rites that funerary ritual is a potent, recurring theme in ancient literature.

This study offers a fresh explanation for the characterisation of the women in Luke 23.27 as mourning. It argues that the uniquely Lukan material of women mourning on the walk to Calvary fashions that walk into a funeral procession. The next verse, Luke 23.28, recalls accounts of Jesus bringing the dead to life earlier in the Gospel, invoking the concept of resurrection. These verses also work in conjunction with the material about the ritual preparation of Jesus' body for burial later in the chapter to evoke the image of a funeral in reverse. This narrative strategy adds extra resonance to the endpoint of the Gospel, casting it as the logical culmination of a reverse funeral: the resurrection of Jesus from death to life.

**Acknowledgements.** I am grateful to the Paul Carpenter Fund for support. The idea that allusions to funerary ritual for Jesus took place in reverse order emerged during a class at Bryn Athyn College. I thank Ben Cole and Rev. Hannah Olan for their contributions to the discussion, and Hannah Olan for her assistance during the initial research. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2013 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. I have benefited from feedback I received there as well as from the peer reviews of this article.

**Competing interests.** The author declares none.

<sup>37</sup> For example, David E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985) 77–157; Gary Gilbert, 'Luke-Acts and Negotiation of Authority and Identity in the Roman World' *The Multivalence of Biblical Texts and Theological Meanings* (Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series 37; ed. Christine Helmer with the assistance of Charlene T. Higbe; Leiden: Brill, 2006) 90–4; Gorman, *Interweaving Innocence*; William S. Kurtz, 'Luke 22:14–38 and Greco-Roman and Biblical Farewell Addresses', *JBL* 104.2 (1985) 251–68; Keith A. Reich, *Figuring Jesus: The Power of Rhetorical Figures of Speech in the Gospel of Luke* (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Rice, 'The Rhetoric of Luke's Passion'; Scaer, *The Lukan Passion*; Daniel Lynwood Smith and Zachary Lundin Kostopoulos, 'Biography, History and the Genre of Luke-Acts', *NTS* 63 (2017) 390–410; Denis E. Smith, 'Table Fellowship as a Literary Motif in the Gospel of Luke', *JBL* 106.4 (1987) 613–38, at 613–4, including n. 1–4; and John T. Squires, 'The Gospel according to Luke', *The Cambridge Companion to the Gospels* (ed. Stephen C. Barton; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 158–9.

<sup>38</sup> Studies of the history of funerary ritual often note how the processes of death and burial have become increasingly segregated from many people's daily life and how ritualised responses to death have become more muted in the modern industrialised world, for example, Gail Holst-Warhaft, *Dangerous Voices: Women's Laments and Greek Literature* (London: Routledge, 1992) 14 and Valerie M. Hope, 'Introduction' *Memory and Mourning: Studies on Roman Death* (ed. Valerie M. Hope and Janet Huskinson; Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2011) xi. This change seems to be due, in part, to a growth in professionalised burial services and the medicalisation of death (Georganne Rundblad, 'Exhuming Women's Premarket Duties in the Care of the Dead', *Gender and Society* 9.2 (1995) 173–92).

**Cite this article:** Closterman WE (2024). Reading the Gospel of Luke's Walk to Calvary as a Funeral Procession: A Study of Luke 23.27–8. *New Testament Studies* 70, 51–60. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688523000243>