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John the Baptist, social identity and imperial space in Luke 3:1–22

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This article sought to understand the presentation of social identities and spatiality in Luke 3:1–22. Here, John the Baptist preaches a sermon of repentance, warning his readers not to rely on physical descent from Abraham as their only identity marker. The article sought to understand the social identity of the Israelite people (largely with reference to Abraham) and how this relates to the space of the land of Israel. It also examined how Roman imperialism attempted to create a space of Roman imperialism inside the space of the Israelite homeland. The article examined how Israel functioned as a sacred space for the worship of the God of Israel and then analysed how the social group that was to occupy this space was affected by Roman imperial rule.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: Finally, this article sought to understand how the preaching of John the Baptist related to these social identities and their occupation of this space, and their attempts to transform the space into a more equitable space.

Keywords: social identity theory; social identity complexity theory; Gospel of Luke; spatiality; Gospels; Abraham; Roman empire; third space.

Introduction

This article seeks to understand the interplay between social identity and spatiality in Luke 3:1–22. The article strives to understand how these fit together in the preaching of John the Baptist as presented in Luke 3:1–22.[1] The article will look at 1st-century Palestine as a space of Israelite[2] homeland and as a space of Roman imperial rule. The article will also explore what it means to be a 'Child of Abraham' (see Lk 3:8). The article will analyse how the concept of 'Child of Abraham' was understood and will examine how the preaching of John the Baptist redefines what it means to be a 'Child of Abraham' in the spatial context of 1st-century Palestine, with reference both to its space as an Israelite homeland and its function as a space of Roman imperial rule.

The article will begin by introducing social identity theory (SIT), followed by an introduction to spatiality. It will then situate Luke 3:1–22 in its literary context and then introduce ancient Israelite perceptions of Abraham as an exemplar, with reference to roughly contemporary Israelite texts. Thereafter, the article will apply the concepts from SIT and spatiality studies to Luke 3:1–22, with reference to Abraham's role as an exemplar.

Social identity theory

Social identity theory is essentially a theory that attempts to explain the formation of social groups. Tajfel et al. (1971) performed a series of experiments in which they found that people who were grouped together favoured their own group, even if their reason for being part of the group was for a reason as seemingly arbitrary as the fact that their experimenter had grouped them together. In other words, there was strong ingroup bias between the groups, even if the groups formed for arbitrary reasons.

In non-experimental situations, it is often the case that people form groups with other people with shared characteristics that are perceived to be significant (Greene 2004:137). As a result, members of a group tend to minimise differences between themselves and other members of their own group, while maximising the significance of differences between themselves and members of other groups, which leads to members of the group favouring other members of their own group

1.This article does not intend to make any claims regarding the historicity of the passage. The article will examine the passage as Luke has written it. And 'Luke' will be used to refer to the author of the Gospel of Luke. No claim is made for Lukan authorship; the name 'Luke' is used as a short-hand.

2.I follow Esler (1998:21) in preferring to use 'Israelite' instead of 'Jewish' to avoid anachronistic understandings of what is considered 'Jewish'.

over members of other groups (Greene 2004:137). Examining the context of American political partisanship, Greene (2004:142–143) notes that strong partisan identities create more stratified social identities than 'independent' social identities, as more partisan identities offer a more concrete identity to members of the group, but 'independent' nevertheless functioned as a social identity on its own, albeit a less stratified one.

Hogg, Van Knippenberg and Rast (2012:261–263) talk about the 'prototype' of the group, which is essentially a set of characteristics that are believed to define the group. The characteristics that make up the prototype are believed to be the norms according to which a member of the group 'should' operate. Consequently, the way in which a person acts, behaves, speaks, and what they perceive as significant are heavily influenced by each member's perception of what makes up the prototype of the group (Hogg et al. 2012:261–263). Members who are perceived to conform to the prototype more than others are favoured over members who deviate from the prototype (Hogg et al. 2012:264). Kuecker (2011:49) refers to a person who exemplifies well the values of the prototype as an 'exemplar'.[3] This article will later argue that Abraham functions as an exemplar in 1st-century Israelite thinking.

Hogg et al. see this as highly significant when it comes to leadership of a group. A person who is perceived to conform closely to the group prototype (an exemplar) is seen as more invested in the group, and for this reason, such a person is seen as a natural leader for the group (Hogg et al. 2012:266; see also Sewell, Ballard & Steffens 2022:17). Being more invested in the group means that the leader's success will result in the group's success, and for this reason, members of the group will act as followers, trusting the leader even when the leader's reasons for acting may not make sense to them (Hogg et al. 2012:266; see also Sewell 2022:17).[4]

Social identity theory and the New Testament

Philip Esler is regarded as a pioneering figure in the application of SIT to the New Testament (Baker 2012:135). Esler (1998:55) views the social sciences as being important to the study of the New Testament, as these help modern readers to understand the social dynamics of the text. More concretely, Esler (1998:56–57) views SIT as beneficial to understanding the New Testament's various group identities in the more collectivistic context of the ancient Mediterranean.

Another fruitful application of SIT to the New Testament is that of Aaron Kuecker. Kuecker (2011:60–63, 150–153) argues that images of the Spirit are used to bring reconciliation between social groups that have previously been separated. Kuecker uses SIT to understand the reconciliation that takes place between groups in Luke–Acts through the work of the Spirit. Groups such as Israelites and Gentiles, groups previously separated because of having different social identities, are united with a superordinate identity.

Developing the application of SIT to the New Testament, Kok (2014:1) puts forth the concept of social identity complexity theory (SICT) for studying the New Testament. While acknowledging the usefulness of the use of SIT studies on the New Testament, Kok (2014:1) puts forth the idea that SICT is beneficial as it allows us to understand the various social identities of characters in the New Testament narratives. Kok (2014:2 5) is of the view that SICT acknowledges that people have multiple social identities, so SICT prevents us from oversimplifying the social identities of various characters in the narratives. In other words, SICT takes cognisance of the fact that people tend not to belong to more than one social group at a time, and using SIT without SICT is in danger of oversimplifying social identities. Kok (2014:2–5) refers to aspects such as intersection (the multiple social identities held by a person), dominance (which social identity is given more importance than others), compartmentalisation (one social identity in one situation and another social identity in another) and merger (when people who share any ingroup characteristic group themselves together). Kok (2014:6–7) then goes on to apply these to Galatians 2, using the model of compartmentalisation to argue that Peter compartmentalises his Jewish social identity around other Jews while acting in more Gentile ways when there are no other Jews around him.

This contribution will add the concept of spatiality to SIT studies. Also, while two of the three abovementioned contributions focus on Pauline texts, this contribution will focus on Luke 3:1–22.

Space

Spatiality

Spatiality will be looked at as an attempt to understand how the concept of space is used in Luke's Gospel, here specifically in Luke 3:1–22. While Luke did not have a developed modern understanding of spatiality, there is nevertheless relevance in studying how spatiality is used in Luke's Gospel.

A significant figure in the study of spatiality is Henri Lefebvre, whose work has subsequently been developed by Edward Soja. According to Lefebvre (1991:48), space exists, but it is also constructed by the people who live in the space. Lefebvre (1991:48) refers to 'absolute space', which includes the natural geography of a region, such as rivers and mountains, and states that as the space is developed for human use, it becomes more relativised. More specifically, humans move into the absolute space and construct a settlement, which leads to a politicised settlement that now controls the space that was once more natural (in the sense of being untouched by humans).

Lefebvre (1991:38) refers to three dimensions of space: spatial practice, representations of space and representational spaces. Simply put, 'spatial practice' refers to the practices of

3.'Prototype' refers to the values, while an 'exemplar' is a person who embodies well the values of the prototype.

4.While Sewell et al. (2022) agree that embodying the group values is good for leadership, they disagree that a sense of group cohesion contributes to a leader's perceived competence as a leader.

a society within its physical space. 'Representations of space' refer to space as it is conceptualised, as designed by urban planners, social engineers, and such. 'Representational spaces' refer to the space in which members of society live through the space's images and symbols, 'the dominated – and hence passively experienced – space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate' (Lefebvre 1991:39).

Soja (1996:10), developing Lefebvre's ideas, categorises space into first space, second space and third space. First space deals with space as it is, the space as it can be geographically mapped. For example, this would include the features and buildings that exist on the ground (or 'real space'). Second space refers to the conception of space in the mind. It refers to the idea of space and how it is conceived, with reference to human spatiality (or 'imagined space'). Soja (1996:11) describes his idea of 'third space' as something of a synthesis between first space and second space in that it refers to both real and imagined spaces. It is in this space that the imagination attempts to bring about change in the spatial environment, although it can also be the case that members within this space, such as artists and ethnographers, attempt merely to describe the space rather than make any changes (Soja 1996:67–68). While some merely observe and record within this space, this is also the space in which ideologies of the dominant powers are questioned, and resistance to the dominant powers takes place within third space (Soja 1996:68).

Space and the New Testament

Moxnes (2000:158–160) expresses concern that the idea of 'space' has been left out of the study of the historical Jesus, and such a concern can be related to the study of interpretation of the Gospels.

It is certainly the case that the historical background of the New Testament has been referred to when studying the New Testament. Such study has been conducted via the historical-critical method since arguably the early 19th century (Esler 1998:18). Carter (2006) bases his book on discussing the New Testament in a way that is cognisant of the fact that the New Testament documents were written within the environment of the Roman Empire. Crossan (1991) devotes extensive lengths to giving a 1st-century Roman-occupied Palestinian Jewish background in his book on the historical Jesus. Marshall (1978:104) is careful to situate Luke's Gospel within Roman Palestine, detailing the political figures occupying various positions to give a political background to his Gospel. Study of historical background to the New Testament has certainly been beneficial in aiding our understanding of the New Testament.

However, historical background, by itself, does not complete the task of ensuring that we understand the New Testament fully (if understanding the New Testament 'fully' is possible). Moxnes (2000:158–160) expresses the need to look at the concept of space itself when studying the historical Jesus, or for other study of the Gospels. Moxnes (2000:160), for the study of Jesus or the Gospels, urges researchers to take seriously the geography of 1st-century Palestine. This is not merely the physical layout of the land; for Moxnes, this means taking seriously the human geography. It means taking seriously the aspects of space and the way it is constructed by powerful actors such as the Herodians and the Roman Empire. The space is formed by the powers that be, and it is formed in such a way that the powers that be are placed at the top of the power hierarchy. For our study of spatiality, we will use the concepts of spatiality discussed in our analysis of Luke 3:1–22 (see the section '*Spatiality*').

In our study of Luke 3:1–22, we will use the concepts of first space, second space and third space to analyse how Luke uses spatiality both to describe how things are and to create change. While the abovementioned studies fruitfully use the concepts of space and SIT to explain the New Testament in general or parts of the New Testament, our study here will focus on the use of these concepts specifically in Luke 3:1–22. The study will look at how the space of 1st-century Palestine functioned both as an Israelite space and as a space of Roman imperial rule. The study will look at the concept of 'Child of Abraham', examining how having the social identity of a 'Child of Abraham' related to one's position within this space.

Description of Luke 3:1–22

Luke 3 contains the preaching of John the Baptist as presented in Luke's Gospel. Luke begins by situating the preaching of John the Baptist during the reign of Tiberius Caesar, and he mentions other significant elite members of society (Lk 3:1–2). John then begins to preach, using Isaianic imagery to suggest that the purpose of his ministry is to prepare for the coming of the Lord (Lk 3:3–6). He then goes on to tell the crowd that there is a need for repentance, and he warns soldiers and tax collectors to take no more than they are allowed to take (Lk 3:7–14). When the people suggest that John is the Messiah, he denies it, saying that he is preparing the way for the Messiah to come (Lk 3:15–18). After this, John rebukes Herod, for which Herod has him killed.

Abraham as exemplar

Abraham functioned as an exemplar in Israelite thinking. In the *Apocalypse of Abraham* (1–10), Abraham leaves the idol worship of his father's house, even smashing one of his idols. He then struggles with and defeats the demon Azazel, and as a result, he becomes the person whose descendants will inherit the promised land (*Apocalypse of Abraham* 11–15, 18–23; Ludlow 2019:48). Philo, in *De Virtibus* 211–217, presents Abraham as one who has knowledge of what is most important, namely worship of God, hence his forsaking of his father's idols. Josephus, in *Anitiquities of the Jews* 1.81., records the incident of Genesis 12:10–20, where Abraham lies to Pharaoh that his wife Sarai is his sister. Unlike in the Genesis account, Josephus is careful to lay the blame on Pharaoh instead of Abraham, thus covering up Abraham's indiscretion.

To provide an exhaustive treatment on Abraham in Israelite thought could take an entire book, so for our purposes, we can see that he is treated as an exemplar in that he turned from idolatry, and from Josephus' text, we learn that the image of Abraham as an exemplar had to be preserved, as Josephus makes sure to suggest that Abraham is not at fault for his misdeed with Sarai and Pharaoh. So, Abraham functions as an exemplar for the Israelites.

Spatiality of 1st-century Palestine

Thiessen (2020:23–26) draws attention to the fact that 1st-century Palestine contained both sacred and 'profane' space ('profane' referring to items or space that are reserved for everyday, non-holy use, not to refer to something that is actively dirty or unholy). An example of a holy space is the Jerusalem Temple. In 1st-century Israelite eyes, there needed to be a strict separation between what was holy and what was profane. It is not necessarily the case that something 'profane' is sinful, as 'profane' things can include natural bodily functions such as menstruation, so while a person considered 'profane' could not enter the Temple, they were not necessarily seen as sinful if they did not persist in their state of profanity.

Spatially, this tells us that 1st-century Palestine was divided into spaces that were considered holy and others that were considered profane, and these two spaces were to be kept separate.

In Genesis 17:1–9, God promises Abraham that he will be a father of many descendants. In Genesis 12:2–3 (NRSV), God promises Abraham that he will be the father of a 'great nation'. It was therefore seen as significant that God made a promise to Abraham that his descendants would live in the land of Israel (Xeravits 2019:35). Spatially, this tells us that Israel was seen by the Israelites as the space that was designated and set aside by God for the descendants of Abraham to live in. The space was constructed by God as a place for Abraham and his descendants, according to an Israelite worldview.

In addition, Dunn (1991:30–31) has argued that the land of Israel represents the land centred on the Temple. In the second space imagination of this space, this means that the land was meant to exist as the land around the Temple, and the resources of the land were to be used to benefit the Temple. While people of the land could exist in a 'profane' manner, as abovementioned, there was something of an obligation to cleanse oneself of profanation without undue delay. So, while the land of Israel functioned as something of a holy land for the Israelites, this did not necessarily entail that all the people living in the land became sinful when they engaged in acts that would have rendered them profane.

Thus, we see that, within the borders of 1st-century Palestine, there were spaces designated for holy use and spaces dedicated to profane use, and these two were to remain separate. The land was designated for the Israelite people to live in as the descendants of Abraham, who were the people of God. The land was centred on the Temple, but this did not necessarily render a person sinful if they became profane for a limited period.

However, there was a spatial conflict. The Roman Republic, and later Empire, expanded, and by the time of Jesus, Rome had taken over the rule of Palestine.[5] Rome viewed itself as the 'civilised' centre of the world (Stewart 2012:143–144). Generally, Greek and Roman societies viewed themselves as the centre of the world that had been inhabited by humans and therefore 'civilised', while places further away from Greece or Rome's 'civilised' centre of the world were viewed as more 'uncivilised' (Stewart 2012:143–144). A third space transformation, in a Roman view, involved expanding outward to spaces away from the centre in the hopes that these areas could become 'civilised' (i.e. Roman) spaces (Stewart 2012:144).

Regarding Rome's attempt to transform Israelite space into a space of Roman imperial rule, it should be mentioned that Rome did not always respect the Israelites' wish to keep their sacred spaces sacred. For example, Pilate introduced Roman standards into Jerusalem, an unpopular decision met with protest (McLaren 2015:83). In this case, Pilate relented. However, this represents a difference in the spatial values between Rome and the Israelites. Jerusalem, and significantly the Temple, is a holy space, but Rome (Pilate) attempts to transform this holy Israelite space into a space of Roman imperial rule without regard for the fact that it is seen as an Israelite holy space.

Children of Abraham

In the previous section, we mentioned that the land within Palestine's borders was seen by the Israelites as the land in which God had promised to their ancestor Abraham that they would live, as it was the space assigned for the descendants of Abraham. As the people who were part of the social group 'Children of Abraham', they held the group entitlement of being able to live in the land promised to their ancestor Abraham, as they were the 'Children of Abraham'.

John, however, makes a shocking statement. He tells an unspecified crowd that there is a coming wrath (Lk 3:7–9). He warns members of the crowd not to trust in their physical descent from Abraham, as God is able to raise up Children for Abraham from the stones (Lk 3:8).

This would have been a shocking statement to one who believed that they were a member of the social group 'Children of Abraham', a group favoured by God over the other non-Israelite nations. However, John the Baptist calls them to repent, as their behaviour should represent the

5.'Israel' and 'Palestine' are used with some interchangeability in this article, but not as entirely the same. When referring to the geographical area, the land will be referred to as 'Palestine'. When the land is discussed with reference to the promise made to Abraham and his descendants, the land will be referred to as 'Israel'. None of the usage of either 'Israel' or 'Palestine' relates to modern geopolitics.

values of the ingroup 'Children of Abraham', as reliance on mere physical descent from Abraham is not sufficient (Brawley 2020:56). Abraham functions as an exemplar for the group 'Children of Abraham', and so the members of a group should, according to the group's standards, act according to the example left to them by Abraham.

Such was the expectation of being a 'Child of Abraham'. In the section 'Social identities', we will discuss how members of the various social groups mentioned in the text are distanced from the 'Children of Abraham' and ways in which Luke, through John, suggests that they can be members of the group once again.

Unlike in the Matthean parallel (Mt 3:7), Luke does not restrict this dialogue to the Sadducees and the Pharisees. In Luke, it is a crowd made up of undefined members, whereas in Matthew, the crowd is said to have been made up of Sadducees and Pharisees. In other words, it is not merely the most powerful groups within the Israelites that Luke criticises; the group being criticised could potentially contain people from all levels of Israelite society.

Social identities

Tax collectors

Tax collectors are mentioned in the passage (Lk 3:12–13), being told that they should not collect any more money than they are legally allowed to. Tax collectors were essential to the third space transformation of Palestine into a Roman imperial space because of their collection of resources from the local populace (Carter 2006:30; See also, Soo Seo 2015:55). The money collected by the tax collectors was important to Rome when it came to exercising control over their empire (Soo Seo 2015:55).

Significantly, tax collectors tended to be locals acting in collaboration with Rome (Carter 2006:30; See also, Brawley 2020:164; Soo Seo 2015:69–72;). This, of course, made them rather unpopular with their fellow Israelites, as they not only took resources from their own people on behalf of Rome, but they also took more than even Rome stipulated that they should take (Naseri 2021:77). Such an idea takes us back to Kok's (2014:3) notion of compartmentalisation within SICT: tax collectors would have taken on the identity of their fellow Israelites when they were in the company of other Israelite people (should they ever be accompanied by their fellow Israelites), and taken on the identity of the Romans whenever they were in the company of Romans.

Soldiers

Soldiers are also included (Lk 3:14), being told that they are not to participate in extortion. Like tax collectors, soldiers function in a role that supports the Roman Empire, namely with keeping the order of the empire (Brawley 2020:57; Carter 2006:42, 46).

Soldiers could be either local Israelites or Romans, as they could be either Roman soldiers, Herodian soldiers or the local Temple Guard (Brawley 2020:57). For Israelite soldiers, this brings us back again to SICT, as these Israelite soldiers would likely act more Roman when interacting with Romans but bring out their Israelite social identity more when interacting with their fellow Israelites.

A common element between tax collectors and soldiers is that they both collected resources from those at lower rungs of the social ladder. The soldiers do this regardless of whether they are Israelite or non-Israelite soldiers (Brawley 2020:57). It would be expected that Gentile (i.e. Roman) soldiers would act in such a way, but it would not be expected for the Israelite soldiers to act in such a way, as they were supposed to be fellow Israelite 'Children of Abraham'.

In this way, the tax collectors and Israelite soldiers act against those who are supposedly their fellow 'Children of Abraham'. They take the resources away from them and transfer these resources to the Roman rulers, who exercise oppressive rule over the 'Children of Abraham'.

As far as the point about Abraham and wealth extraction goes, in Genesis 18:1–15, Abraham is visited by three men, and he is quick to bring out the best calf he has to feed his guests before they continue their journey (see also Van Groeningen 2024:100). In this way, Abraham functions in the exact opposite way to Israelite tax collectors and soldiers. While the tax collectors and soldiers take resources away from those who need them, Abraham uses his resources to provide food for people who need it.

Herod Antipas

Herod Antipas (hereafter 'Herod') is also mentioned in this passage. Like the tax collectors and soldiers, he is also someone who takes part in the Roman occupation of the Israelites, as he rules the Israelites on behalf of Rome (Brawley 2020:57). Herod is a king who rules the Israelite nation with the intention of ruling under the rule of Rome (Jensen 2010:221–222). There was something of a symbiotic relationship between Rome and Herod, as Rome could save Herod if he found himself in a crisis, and Herod helped Rome to rule over Palestine (Jensen 2010:222). Historically, it appears that Herod was something of a mixed bag, as he could be oppressive in certain instances, but in other ways he acted more benevolently, such as when he gave parcels of land to former slaves and tenants (Jensen 2010:230). Regardless, Herod participated in Roman rule over the Israelites.

As a king within the Israelite social group, he should conform to the example of his exemplar, Abraham. He should be something of an exemplar in his time, but he rather sides with a non-Israelite group, in this case Rome, to help them rule over the Israelite group.

He exercises his authority as king, according to Luke 3:19–20, by putting John in prison and later to death (see also Lk 9:9).

There was the potential for a political rivalry, in that King Aretas IV of Nabatea was a rival of Herod, and he found local allies (Keener 2014:188). Aretas IV was angry with Herod for marrying Herodias, his brother's wife, which was exactly what John had also preached against Herod for (Keener 2014:188). It could therefore be the case that Herod sees John as a potential enemy for political reasons, as he criticises Herod for the same thing that his major political enemy, Aretas IV, has criticised him for.

Herod here is attempting to keep the space of Palestine as a place of Roman imperial rule. An intense rivalry, which could perhaps even result in an all-out war, would not have worked in the interests of keeping Palestine as a Roman imperial space. Herod, then, from his point of view, resists the third space transformation of Palestine from a space of Roman imperial rule to a space of Nabatean conquest.

Other social groups

Other than these, there is little other explicit mention of any particular social group. Luke merely tells us that John is talking to a crowd that has come to hear his preaching and be baptised by him (Lk 3:7). It is therefore difficult to make any further concrete suggestions with regard to the social identities of those present in the crowd. It is likely that they were Israelis, as it is doubtful that non-Israelites would have been concerned with seeing themselves as a 'Children of Abraham'. While Matthew's parallel explicitly mentions Pharisees and Sadducees as members of the crowd coming to be baptised, Luke excludes this explicit mention. Luke's exclusion of an explicit mention of these groups makes it speculative to suggest that Luke also had the Pharisees and Sadducees in mind in this context.

Civil servants and institutions

While we have established precedingly that Luke, through John the Baptist, is severely critical of those in institutional authority, this does not lead to the view that Luke rejected these institutions as evil in and of themselves. Naseri (2021:86–89) suggests that Luke calls tax collectors and soldiers to avoid illegal activity while carrying out their duties. Luke does not say that these duties are bad in and of themselves. Rather, with the coming of the Kingdom of God, soldiers and tax collectors should act in accord with the values of the Kingdom in the performance of their duties.

In Naseri's (2021:87) view, the corrupt actions of the soldiers and tax collectors, namely their taking more resources from people than they are legally allowed to take, result in the resources not being available to the rest of the community, even though they should be available to the rest of the community. In other words, if the resources are collected in a more just and equitable manner, then, as far as Luke is concerned, there will be enough resources for everyone.

What we see is that Luke does not promote a grassroots revolution, one where the people revolt against an elite. Rather, Luke suggests that people who are in positions of power use their power more justly and equitably. The power of the powerful should be used to empower the average citizen, not used for the benefit of themselves to the exclusion of other citizens.[6]

In spatial terms, there is a suggested third space in that those who are agents of those in power should use their power to create a space in which everyone is treated with dignity. Within third space, tax collectors and soldiers are encouraged by Luke to transform the first space and second space into a more equitable space through their actions of acting equitably towards everyone. In Luke's view, as presented through John the Baptist, this will contribute towards transforming the space in which the people live from an oppressive space of imperial domination into one in which there is no longer oppression.

Also, there will no longer be a need for the tax collectors and soldiers to compartmentalise their social identities. As we have discussed earlier on, there would have been a need for Israelite soldiers and tax collectors to present themselves as belonging to an Israelite social group when interacting with their fellow Israelites and to present themselves as more Roman when interacting with their Roman authorities. If the soldiers and tax collectors act more equitably in the fulfilment of their duties, they will be fellow 'Children of Abraham' along with their fellow Israelites.

Space and social identity in Luke 3:1–22: Findings of the research

The land of 1st-century Palestine was seen as a space in which the descendants of Abraham were to dwell. Rome, however, attempted a third-space transformation of the space of the 'Children of Abraham' into a space of Roman imperial rule, in part through ruling through local client kings, the Herodians.

There is also a conflict of social identities: those of an Israelite social identity see themselves as being allowed to live in the space assigned to the descendants of Abraham, while the Romans believe that they are the group who should be allowed to rule their empire, including the space of Palestine, thus creating a space of Roman imperial rule (Carter 2006:83). The Israelites saw it as part of their group entitlement as 'Children of Abraham' to live in the space assigned to the descendants of Abraham. Several ethnic Israelites cooperated with the Roman side, with tax collectors and soldiers being the ones relevant here. Tax collectors and soldiers, although ethnically Israelites and 'Children of Abraham', nevertheless cooperated with the non-Israelite ruling group and in a way took on the identity of this group. They took part in the non-Israelite oppression of the Israelites, who were supposed to be their fellow 'Children of Abraham'.

6.Here I am using the word 'citizen' with more modern connotations. In Rome, not everyone who lived within the borders of the Roman Empire was a citizen (see for instance Gardner 1993:2–3).

In spatial terms, the tax collectors and Israelite members of the Roman military worked with the non-Israelite group, in this case Rome, to transform the space assigned to the 'Children of Abraham' into a space of Roman imperial rule.

Herod similarly works against his people to transform Palestine from a space assigned to the 'Children of Abraham' into a space assigned for Roman imperial rule. He thus tacitly affirms that the Romans are the group with the group entitlement to rule over their empire, over against the view that the land of Palestine was to be the land assigned for the descendants of Abraham and the space centred around worship in the Jerusalem Temple.

For this reason, the tax collectors, soldiers, and Herodians are not 'Children of Abraham'. They act in accord with the values of the imperial power that rules over the land and attempt to transform it into a space of imperial rule.

Through John the Baptist, Luke attempts to transform this space of imperial rule into a more equitable space. He attempts to transform the space into a space in which all the members of the group 'Children of Abraham' can live together without oppression. He encourages the members of the Israelite social group who cooperate with the imperial power not to partake in oppression by collecting more resources than they are allowed to collect. In third space, Luke encourages those who partake in oppression to cease acting in their oppressive ways, and thus to transform the space from a space of Roman imperial rule into a space with more just and equitable ways. If they act more equitably, they can be reconciled with their fellow Israelites as 'Children of Abraham'.

It is difficult to talk about other classes of people from 1st-century Palestine in this text, as they are not explicitly mentioned in Luke's account. It is speculative to suggest that, because the Pharisees and Sadducees are mentioned in Matthew's parallel (Mt 3:7), Luke also has them in view.

Conclusion

Using the lenses of spatiality and SIT, we have seen that Luke attempts to transform imperial oppressive space into a more equitable space. Rather than a space in which members can participate in oppression, even against their fellow Israelites, those with power are not to collect more resources than they are allowed to collect, and this is to ensure more equitable access to resources more generally.

From SIT, we suggested that conformity to the prototypical values is important. Those participating in the oppressive ways of Rome, thus transforming the space into a Roman imperial space, are not acting in ways that are consistent with the ultimate exemplar of the prototypical values, Abraham. Those who do not follow Abraham's example are not 'Children of Abraham'.

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D.R.v.G. is the sole author of this research article.

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Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting this study, and its findings are available within the article and its references.

Disclaimer

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